



#AfricaToTheWorld: Economic emancipation and identity affirmation in the age of global digital media

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Abstract

The thesis explores a particular historical moment: the integration of Nigerian music into the global flows of popular culture, popularly referred to as the “Africa to the world” movement by professionals and fans alike. The research is based mainly on ethnographic data from what is commonly referred to as the “Nigerian music industry,” a fluid network of structures and mobile agents organized around hubs all along the Nigerian ethnoscape, with Lagos its key nod. Data collection involved a year of physical ethnography in Lagos, several months of participant-observation and interviews in Istanbul, London, Dubai, and Paris, as well as four years of digital ethnography.

Through the individuated mode of cosmopolitan success that Nigerian artists embody, the thesis explores the articulation of mobility, identity, and future-making in the age of global digital media. In particular, it takes seriously the popular hopes associated with the symbolic inclusion of “Africa” in the transnational commercial landscape in order to interrogate how imaginative, discursive, and affective practices interact with political economic processes. As masses of youths across the continent and diaspora root for music professionals who work tirelessly to hijack the structures of global capitalism and become “billionaires,” the thesis questions the empirical relevance and analytical power of seemingly entrenched and stable power dynamics inscribed in conceptualizations such as global/peripheral or capitalist/informal. It aims to move beyond categories that have limited emic resonance in order to analyze emancipatory world-making projects deployed by a postcolonial and post-privatization generation that appears to have internalized the flexible condition.

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Table of contents

Glossary.....	6
Introduction.....	9
Definitions.....	21
Methods and positionality.....	42
Outline of the chapters.....	51
Interlude.....	56
Producing “New Afrika” amidst the new scramble for Africa.....	59
Setting the stage.....	65
The global turn.....	73
Musical flow and flows of meaning.....	84
Conclusion.....	91
Dancing to the capitalist tune.....	94
Branding relations as an everyday practice.....	98
Corporate appropriation in perspective.....	108
Morality and meaning-making in a branded universe.....	118
Conclusion.....	126
Hyperconscious dreaming.....	129
A nationally mediated experience of suffering.....	135
Death as an internalized experiential reference.....	141
Reinvesting citizenship.....	150
A vehemently “apolitical” political protest.....	156
Conclusion.....	166
The sonic infrastructure of capitalism.....	169
Nigerians and Nigerian music in Dubai.....	175
Why Dubai?.....	183
Reconceptualizing citizenship through a non-progressive lens.....	190
Conclusion.....	203
Entrepreneurialism as a salvation project.....	207
Repositioning Blackness in racial capitalism.....	213
The case of gender.....	221
Conclusion.....	231
Conclusion.....	234
Bibliography.....	247

Glossary

#EndSARS	A social movement against police brutality and bad governance in Southern Nigeria that started online and resulted in mass protests in October 2020.
APC	All Progressive Congress, the current ruling party in Nigeria.
Ashawo	Prostitute in Nigerian slang. It is used towards women in its literal sense or as an insult. It can be used to describe men who are willing to do anything for money, in which case it is connotated positively.
Blow	A Nigerian slang term that refers to gaining access to visibility, especially to unlock a virtuous cycle of monetization through brand partnerships.
Fem	A Nigerian slang for “shut up.” It was popularized by a song by Nigerian superstar Davido originally addressed to his rival Burna Boy and was reappropriated by young people as the protest anthem of the #EndSARS movement.
Hustle	Working hard to succeed, which takes an ideological dimension in the Southern Nigerian context.
IMF	International Monetary Fund
Japa	A Nigerian slang for running swiftly out of a dangerous situation, commonly used to refer to moving out the country.
Koroba	“Bucket” in Yoruba. It was used by singer Tiwa Savage to refer to a metaphorical bag that women should proudly carry to collect money.
Naija	A youth slang for “Nigeria”
NEPA	National Electric Power Authority or, as Nigerians commonly refer to it, “Never Expect Power Always.”
PDP	People’s Democratic Party, the leading opposition party in Nigeria since 2015
SAP	Structural Adjustment Program
Soro Soke	A Yoruba term for “speak up,” which was used as the slogan during the #EndSARS movement.
Street-hop	A popular hybridized music genre that bridges the outward-looking “indigenous rap” or “Naija hip hop” of the 2000s and the Yoruba-centered genre from the second part of the 20th century, Fuji. “Street-hop” is a component of Afropop that is associated with the overcrowded

suburbs of Lagos. Like Afropop in general, it is highly versatile and incorporative, and its sonic and dance elements constantly mutate.

Video vixen

A female model who appears in music videos and who is not a dancer.

“What a time to be alive!

Never been a better time to work in the Nigerian music industry.

Afrobeats is definitely going to get bigger and better.

We will do billions of streams effortlessly.

The biggest music companies will continue to invest millions of dollars in Nigeria's pool of local talent.

We will have more internationally recognized superstars.

Our superstars will sell out the biggest stadiums and arenas in the world.”

Akinyemi Ayinoluwa,
Music lawyer

Introduction

After “Africa to the World” defined the 2010s as the slogan and prayer uniting the efforts of professionals and fans to project Nigerian music outwards, the current era is characterized by a constant sense of wonderment at an international success that is emically enacted as a national, African, and racial achievement. The current decade indeed opened under the auspices of what is constructed as “global” recognition of Nigerian popular music. With cosmopolitan Nigerian artists gracing its cover, leading music industry magazine *Billboard* asserts in 2020 that “Africa [Is] Now,”¹ just as the New York Times proclaims that “the Whole World [Is] Listening.”² Experienced by its proponents as a watershed moment in Africa’s trajectory within the history of capitalism, the rise of what is now known as Afrobeats reflects a configuration of capital, ethnicity, and ideology that feeds aspirations to inclusive global popular culture, and, more deeply, to categorical and substantive equality in a decentered world. In a postindustrial society where “everyone becomes an audience all the time” (Abercrombie and Longhurst 1998: 68), the Other’s gaze functions as a key intermediary in economic relations (Adkins 2005; Goldhaber 2006), reconfiguring interpellations by the racializing look born out of the colonial encounter (Fanon 1991; hooks 1992) as commercial attention to actively win over. Discursively constructed around milestones that involve symbols of a “global economy” dominated by the West, the commercial success of Afrobeats music—which yet reaches every continent³—is popularly enacted as a yardstick of postcolonial emancipation, reframing Blackness through a self-portrayal to an ever present “global ‘Other’s’ gaze” (Wilk 1995: 130), real or imagined.

¹ May 23, 2020

² Aug. 5, 2020

³ Several Nigerian songs have for example reached the top of the Indian Music Industry (IMI) Singles Chart.

This celebrated market-mediated visibility has involved topping European singles charts⁴ and dominating airplay on American urban radios,⁵ performing in Western capitals' most prized venues, from New York's Madison Square Garden to London's Olympic Stadium, and featuring in the marketing campaigns of the world's most famous brands, such as Coca Cola, Burberry, or Guinness.⁶ In 2016, with the headline: "Why Africa's Musicians Are a Marketing Goldmine,"⁷ leading fashion industry magazine *The Business of Fashion* already identified the potentially fruitful convergence between Nigerian Afrobeats stars' universalizing ambitions and marketers totalizing ideology. Behind the scenes, Nigerian music professionals have also focused on broadening revenue generation opportunities by securing publishing rights in high-grossing productions. This is the case with blockbuster movies such as Marvel Studio's *Black Panther 2* or the Rocky series' Creed III, with Nigerian artists, producers, and/or recording engineers credited on multiple songs of the soundtracks; or with features on popular video games, such as the world's best-selling sports video game, FIFA,⁸ and the fifth highest-grossing video game franchise of all time, Grand Theft Auto.⁹ Nigerian music professionals have been actively pursuing international corporate sponsorship and music licensing opportunities, not only as a survival strategy in a context where the dollar is worth about 400 times the value of naira, but also as part of an attempt to shape broader political economic processes.

The popular aspirations around Afrobeats build on the vestiges of "Africa Rising," a market-mediated Pan-Africanism carried by highly educated cosmopolitan Africans, and later

⁴ Burna Boy's "Jerusalema," CKay's "Love Nwantiti," and Fireboy's "Peru" hit the number one position in multiple European countries between 2020 and 2022.

⁵ Wizkid' "Essence" topped the Billboard R&B/Hip-Hop Airplay chart in 2021.

⁶ These were global campaigns, which were featured respectively Tems, Burna Boy, and Wizkid. For the Nigerian market, Afrobeats artists regularly take part in campaigns for Samsung, Pepsi, Hennessy, Martell Cognac, among many others.

⁷ <https://www.businessoffashion.com/articles/news-analysis/why-africas-musicians-are-a-marketing-goldmine/>

⁸ <https://www.givemesport.com/1655769-fifa-madden-football-manager-what-are-the-best-selling-sports-games-in-history>

⁹ <https://www.denofgeek.com/games/grand-theft-auto-sales-figures-best-selling-video-game-franchises/>

hailed by Nigerian scholars as “Africapitalism” (Amaeshi *et al.* 2018; Edozie 2017). By mobilizing the performative dimension of investment capitalism, its proponents sought to redefine the global terms of financial engagement with “Africa” as “a category through which a ‘world’ is structured” (Ferguson 2006: 5). As Anna Tsing explains, “the possibility of economic performance must be conjured like a spirit to draw an audience of potential investors” (2000: 118). Turning the economic gaze to its “next frontier,” “Africa Rising” reenchanting capitalism and temporarily assuaged anxiety over its future at a time when the global investor community was reeling from the 2008 financial crisis (Gabay 2018; Mizes and Donovan 2022; Roitman 2021;). The entrepreneurial efforts of Nigerian music professionals to plug Lagos artists into the cogs of multinational corporations have similarly relied on imaginative, affective, and discursive world-making. Responding to a construction of the “global economy,” in which “Africa exists only as an absent object” (Mbembe 2001:242), the Nigerian music industry claims to “put Africa on the map.” This is one of the instances in which, as Paulla Ebron (2008: 22) explains, “Africa” is produced at the intersection of policy debates and aesthetics, with “performance” as the interface. It is important to note that the 2008 financial crisis and the “Africa rising” narrative produced the very subject position occupied by several key players driving the “Afrobeats” movement. This historical conjunction indeed convinced them to leave the United States or the United Kingdom, where their parents or themselves had migrated to, and to move (back) to Lagos, where they brought a strongly afro-optimist vision, racially expressed identity politics, and entrepreneurial ambitions infused with neoliberal ideology.

The popular understanding that representations associated with the category “Africa” are directly linked to questions of investment and equality must be understood in light of the pathos (Fassin 2009) that characterized the moral economy of the 1990s-early 2000s. International humanitarian efforts have articulated with local “conscious” music in a way that has not had a

perceptible effect on overcoming inequality, and have come to define a crisis era (Mbembe and Roitman 1995) that people actively seek to put behind. Marginalization and exclusion (and the coterminous poverty alleviation initiatives) are associated with abjection in the continent's experience of neoliberal globalization (Ndjio 2018), plunging it into further dependency (Bayart 2000; Mizes and Donovan 2022). For a generation whose lifeworld has been shaped by the global offensive of corporate media at the turn of the millennium, it cannot be stressed enough how deeply and widely the internalized, yet contested, the (in)visibility of the continent is felt. Every day, in Lagos, I would hear the same exclamations of joy after describing my research to taxi drivers, restaurant employees, shop keepers, or random passengers in the bus enquiring about my presence: "Ah yes! With our entertainment industry now Nigeria matters," or "Our music industry, yes this is our national pride!" The fact that international music (mainly American, British, and Jamaican hits) was blasting throughout Lagos two decades ago is something people like to recall—and probably exaggerate—to contrast it to the situation today. Across the continent, any American superstar is now eclipsed by Nigerian artists; and pirate mixtape sellers (when they still existed) would describe how no longer even bothered to add foreign songs to their compilations. In that context, business-oriented values gained increased moral consecration within music spaces (as they did throughout society), with economic resourcefulness being seen as the condition for cultural sovereignty.

In this thesis I focus on the Nigerian music industry to analyze its function as a vehicle for collective aspirations. In its materiality, the "Nigerian music industry" refers to a fluid network of structures and mobile agents organized around hubs all along the Nigerian ethnoscape, which, increasingly, spans every continent, with Lagos its key node (see "Definitions" below). A symbol of Africa's claim to categorical equality (Wilk 1995) through its pursuit of "international standards" (Ekeh 1975), it has taken a life of its own, abstracted from any particular genre of music. Some music business entrepreneurs are indeed more famous

than many artists (and many artists are famous for their business skills). As stated by Audu Maikori, founder of the oldest record label in the current Nigerian music industry and a widely respected public figure: “Music is not the end anymore, it’s more or less the means to the end.”¹⁰ Indeed, in the absence of robust commercial and legal infrastructures (Nzeaka *et al.* 2021), musical genres in Nigeria have come and gone at the speed of viral trends, constrained by an economic environment still dominated (at the time of writing) by corporate sponsorship that links monetization to visibility. The “Nigerian music industry,” on the other hand, is a popular discursive object that refers to a situated two-decade old industry, and has increasingly become an autonomous sign for self-sufficiency, entrepreneurialism, success, and cosmopolitanism. Tied to an essentialized category of “the youths” that resonates with the American “hip hop generation” (Kitwana 2002), its sense of self is resolutely grounded in a transnational cultural sphere (Ebron 2008; Matlon 2016). As such it is socially constructed in relation—and in opposition—to the much-resented political gerontocracy, understood as parochial, ineffective, and morally bankrupt (R. Marshall 2009; Obadare 2010; Yékú 2022).

Through the case of the Nigerian music industry, the thesis explores notions of individual and collective sovereignty in the context of the contemporary global mediascape—from the vantage of a widely popular, wildly ambitious, and self-described as resolutely “apolitical” Africa-based movement. Nigerian music professionals’ deeply reflexive approach to world-making and future-making—partly a consequence of the dramatic effect of privatization in Nigeria (Federici 1992, Ifeakachukwu 2020)—makes it a particularly salient case study of contemporary agency and citizenship in global capitalism. Acknowledging academic literature’s common denunciation of the corporate takeover, or recolonization, of African

¹⁰ <https://www.linkedin.com/pulse/how-nigerian-music-did-why-nigerias-economy-needs-follow-immanuel/> Though Maikori made that statement in 2016, at a time where few avenues of revenue generation existed for artists to survive, he reiterated that idea in 2022, even as Nigerian music is increasingly generating steady streams of royalty income. See: https://www.instagram.com/p/Ckicou9unIH/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link

cultural industries associated with platformization, the thesis complements it by examining the phenomenon from below. Taking a bottom-up approach to issues of power and inequality, it looks at how the digital artist-entrepreneur has come to embody popular aspirations (Banégas and Warnier 2001; Ebron 2008; Matlon 2016; Olusoji 2014) against “a gerontocratic culture of perpetual corruption and political excess” (Yékú 2022). How does the entertainment industry’s focus on individuated modes of success articulate conceptually and practically with notions of social emancipation and economic development? In the age of commodification of identity, how are power dynamics and control over postcolonial cultural representation negotiated by the different actors? These are some of the questions that drive the inquiry throughout this thesis.

The positioning of the musician as a digital entrepreneur has recently received particular attention in Western scholarship (Hesmondhalgh and Meier 2018; Klein, Meier and Powers 2017; Meier 2011; Moore 2016; Morris 2014; Taylor 2012). With growing autonomy from major record labels afforded by online distribution platforms and the boom in sponsorship opportunities, artists indeed increasingly develop a “brand” that can be monetized through various corporate deals. This phenomenon is conventionally described as the extension of the neoliberal capitalist logic to music, with academics denouncing the creeping push for dominance of “an industry that spends a great deal of its time masking the fact that it exists at all” (Turner 2014: 29), that is, advertising. Yet, in Lagos, the entanglement of music and advertising is anything from hidden. Publicized on countless blogs and fan pages, corporate endorsements are seen as a measure of an artist’s value and of the industry’s progress. Musicians and dancers are prompt to indicate “paid partnership” on their social media posts—not to comply with consumer protection laws that, if in existence, would hardly be enforced, but to signal their achievement in being a party to transactional relationships. While consumer brands have been so influential in the Lagos music ecosystem that artists often serve as proxies in

corporate rivalries (in the case of beverages, telecom operators, or banks), the sponsorship economy has never been the subject of academic scrutiny by Nigerian scholars. Rather, the flourishing academic community that analyzes the Lagos music scene celebrates the patronage by multinational corporations as a testimony to the dynamism and relevance of Nigerian cultural production in the global economy.

What is presented in Western scholarship as a loss of music's values of personal authenticity in neoliberal capitalism, as "recording artists' music is being strategically deployed as a marketing 'vehicle' intended to speak to consumer 'identity'" (Meier 2011), is in fact strikingly reminiscent of the political economy of Lagos popular music in the 1970s. Afolabi Alaja-Browne has described Nigerian juju musicians' eulogizing of wealthy patrons who were competing with one another in paying juju musicians to have their names, businesses, etc., waxed on records, and explains that in the 1970s lyrics shifted from "paying tribute and commemorating events for juju fans to the praise and adoration of so-called rich and powerful people in society", as musicians began to "respond to both the aspirations and the identity and social needs of their audience" (1989: 238). Thus, when Media and Communications scholars Bethany Klein, Leslie Meier and Devon Powers (2017) establish a general trajectory of commercialism:

If the 1990s were punctuated by charges of selling out (prompted by, for example, the mainstream popularity of bands like Green Day and Nirvana), and the 2000s marked by ambivalence about commercial affiliation given the insecurity of traditional revenue streams, then the current decade is one where the relevance of values associated with selling out is questioned and disregarded (2017: 223),

they implicitly circumscribe their analysis to white music in the liberal democracy. Looking at the history of commercial popular music from the vantage of the postcolonial world reveals a very different moral economy. One can think of Nigeria, where, in the wake of the oil boom-induced "instant development" (Apter 2005), artists were already strategizing to reap fast profits by mediating the values of a materialistic society in the 1970s (Alaja-Browne 1989: 237;

Waterman 1990), or Jamaica, where the entrepreneurial ethos of the dancehall's predominantly black lower class hurled the rigid class structure rooted in colonial respectability (Hope 2006)—both are buoyant music scenes, which have irrigated global music networks. But more strikingly, the excerpt above comes from an analysis that seems to focus on the United States, yet it does not reflect the experience of commercialism in African American music. With urban African American communities the first and most acutely affected by post-industrialization and neoliberalism, by the end of the 1990s hip hop had “hijacked” the market as a vehicle for empowerment (Rose 1994: 82; Neal 1997) and embraced the political aesthetic of entrepreneurship (Neal 2004; Dyson 2007). And while hip hop's unabashed commercialism seems to have made many white music critics wish it simply did not exist—case in point, high-profile music journalist Simon Reynolds' article for the Guardian unsubtly titled: “When will hip-hop hurry up and die?” (2009), hip hop was not a marginal phenomenon that could be neutrally ignored. Indeed, it dominated the Billboard Hot 100 charts throughout the 2000s, to then become the most consumed genre in the United States in the 2010s (Nielsen 2017)—its rise thus coinciding with the trajectory of commercialism drawn by Klein, Meier and Powers above (2017). Moreover, since the very inception of commercial popular music, the experience of racial marginalization has been one of its driving forces, with Jewish studies scholars demonstrating the crucial role played by Jews in the rise of American mass entertainment at the turn of the nineteenth century (Karp 2018; Lavitt 1999; Melnick 2001).

In Timothy Taylor's eponymous book on music and capitalism (2016), with one chapter meant as a beacon of hope: “Singing in the Shadows of Neoliberal Capitalism,” Taylor acknowledges the sociology of the Los Angeles indie rock musicians that he presents as the embodiment of resistance to corrupting economic forces. While several pages are devoted to their working- and lower-middle-class background, and how it shapes their opposition to commercialism (173:175), Taylor does mention in passing that all are “WASPs” and that they

“do not seem to view themselves as being oppressed by a dominant culture, victims of symbolic violence” (173), though the latter assertion seems to refer to the hierarchical structure of tastes identified by Bourdieu, rather than to a hierarchy of people. Yet precisely, a wide section of the world’s population does feel the weight of oppression very self-consciously, and contemporary commercial music can hardly be understood outside of that framework. Music and the music industry are a privileged receptacle of the desire for recognition and the economic aspirations that drive people who feel or experience marginalization, including artists and music professionals, as well as those who identify with them.

Capitalism then, as a historical process that generates exclusion and desire, is not something that can be conveniently disentangled from popular music for ideological or analytical purposes. It is inscribed into the very artistic texture of many contemporary creative forms produced by the most deprived sections of the world’s population. For example, Bongo Flava, the hugely successful popular music from Dar es Salaam since the 1990s privatization process, draws its very name from the slang term *bongo*, which refers to the ability to survive (make money) in the harsh economic environment of post-SAP Tanzania (Ntarangwi 2009; Perullo 2011: 8; Stroeken 2005). Multiple studies have described with intricate detail the dynamic cultural practices underpinned by entrepreneurial values that have flourished throughout post-privatization Africa (Meintjes 2003; Perullo 2011; Shipley 2013; Steingo 2016; Stroeken 2005; Weiss 2009). Informed by the knowledge of deep historically grounded circumstances, they are empirically based, reflecting locally inflected cultural practices in their full complexity. This strength has however limited their resonance with more general theories of music and capitalism, implicitly and unintentionally perpetuating the view that there would be a “global” music industry in Euro-America, and “local” scenes that can only be studied for their particularity everywhere else. Analytically, this distinction is increasingly problematic.

The “global” music industry is generally identified through a particular commercial infrastructure, sales numbers, and a “global” reach and influence.

For example, in sharp contrast to Taylor’s rock musicians who can afford to be indifferent to the commercial structure of the music industry and *choose* not to have a cell phone, the image repeatedly associated with musicians in Lagos is that of “hunger.” Not the hunger of the bohemian artist who embraces a frugal lifestyle, but in the sense consecrated by American entrepreneurship guru Steve Jobs of “Stay hungry” (which also resonates with the vernacular conception of “eating” (“chop”) in “chop money,” “chop life”). A renowned rapper explained in the clearest terms how artists make music in Lagos during an informal advice session in the Northern Nigerian town where he is originally from: “Someone will emerge from a shack in Ajegunle or Ikorodu [overcrowded suburbs of Lagos], he’s 16, you didn’t even see him coming. He will have used the studio for an hour when the producer is sleeping. These guys don’t sleep. He will record track after track after track, so when he blows, he already has an album ready to drop. BAM. And the following year, another one. BAM. You don’t even understand what’s happening, but you have to keep up.” Smartphone use is also a crucial expression of this “hunger.” Aspiring artists and music professionals (just like many other sectors of the Lagos population) have jumped on the opportunity that social media represents to exist on a larger scale than the limited prospects they face in their direct environment.

Before delving into the definitions that circumscribe this thesis, it is important to note that the processes described herein are by no means unique to the music industry, nor to Nigeria. Following a cultural period dominated by utopian socialism and visionary anticolonial struggle (Appiah 2007; Blommaert 2014; Piot 2010), the historical moment of late capitalism, and its prevailing condition of flexibility, largely precludes grand theories and long-term plans among those the most affected by it. The focus on “work and money” offers a conceptual treatment of social and individual problems circumstantially adapted to a period in which economic and

psychological survival is the priority for many, with structural problems requiring reconfiguration as daily challenges susceptible of resolution for one to simply find the strength to remain alive. The contemporary Nigerian music industry thus strongly resonates with other socio-expressive movements invested with emancipatory power and moral regeneration that rest essentially on the self. Such movements include the charismatic churches, whose grasp on West African subjectivities has received significant scholarly attention (R. Marshall 2009; Mbembe 2002; Meyer 2007; Obadare 2016, 2018; Piot 2010; Wariboko 2014). Though the Nigerian music industry has now largely severed its ties to the church¹¹—in the words of Nigerian music journalist Joey Akan: “the church to secular music artist pipeline, or industrial complex, is dead now”—the neo-Pentecostal focus on self-making and its legitimization of individual wealth inform the lifeworld of contemporary music professionals. However, across the world, similar trends define the evolution of entertainment industries (D. Marshall 2014), thus precluding any interpretation of the Nigerian case as grounded in a linear and self-contained historical trajectory.

The case of the Nigerian music industry is thus of global heuristic value, which does not, however, negate its specificity. The celebration of innovative strategies that mobilize limited available resources to achieve material success have been part of the socialization of urban Africans throughout a history shaped foreign exploitation and forced urbanization (Ferguson 1999; Monteith and Miremba 2021; Perullo 2011; Stroeken 2005; Waterman 1990). South-Western Nigeria in particular, where the center of the contemporary Nigerian music industry is located, has been described as “traditionally” open to new ideas and practices, as long they are efficacious (Waterman 1990). In Yoruba society, Karin Barber noted, the pursuit of self-

¹¹ In the 1990s, with the growing hegemony of Pentecostal churches in Southwestern Nigeria (Ukah 2004), many popular artists turned towards religious music (Kalu 2010). It is also common for artists in the current generation to have learnt music in church. Yet, this is no longer the case for the rising generation, as music has developed acceptance as a self-standing industry. A large part of Lagos music professionals, especially in the now mainstream “street music” genre (a descendant of Fuji music) are also Muslims.

aggrandizement through the acquisition of wealth was always a fundamental dynamic (1982: 434; 448), which functioned as a key driver of musical development in twentieth century Lagos (Alaja-Browne 1989; Boluwaduro 2020; Waterman 1990). Despite objective inequalities in income and access to education reinforced by the privatization process, most urban Yoruba, including elites, small-scale traders, craftsmen, and the mass of urban unemployed, continued to believe that status advancement results from individual effort, and that anyone may rise to prominence (Waterman 1990)—a sociohistorical context conducive to the contemporary confluence of celebrity culture with the neoliberal requirement that everyone be an enterprise for themselves (Foucault 2008; Gershon 2011). The advent of digitization and the avenues of monetization offered by the new economy have allowed current Nigerian popular musicians to identify as “entrepreneurs,” when their predecessors already often dreamt of becoming ones (Waterman 1990: 217).

The specificity of the Nigerian music industry is also to be considered in a broader analytical and discursive context, with the “privileged insight” that the Global South affords into the workings of the world at large (Comaroff and Comaroff 2012). Alessandro Jedlowski describes indeed how “African media entrepreneurs have been able to come up with original solutions that have, in many ways, prefigured transformations in other parts of the world” (2016: 187). Nigerian lawyer Oyeniyi Immanuel similarly explains how “[t]he government’s light handedness on the music industry has culminated in a nimble and thrusting industry . . . [which] allows for testing practical commercial arrangements and if one doesn’t work, one can remodel at almost no cost” (2016). Intertwined with these material realities, it is important to remain aware of how both “Africa” and the music industry have been separately constructed as spaces for social experimentation. After serving as an actual battleground for the Cold War, the perception of “Africa” as the last frontier of neoliberal participation has resulted in a scholarly tendency to turn it into a proxy for ideological battle, onto which the hopes and anxieties

surrounding the future of capitalism can be projected (hooks 1992; Ebron 2008; Gabay 2018). Rachel Spronk and Thomas Hendriks write that “Africa is first and foremost a place from where to think, read, write, talk and disturb” (2017: 31). Music, on the other hand, is understood to serve a “prophetic” function, anticipating broader social changes by offering a testing ground in which alternative arrangements of society and culture can be temporarily taken on, as Nick Seaver (2015) and Georgina Born (2022) have recently reminded us in their respective studies of digitalization. The music business was indeed “the first major sector of cultural production to confront the challenges and opportunities offered by the internet” (Hesmondhalgh 2009: 58). Finally, at the intersection of these two spaces to “think from,” “Africa” and “music,” lies an additional construction that comes with its specific assumptions, the prism of “African music,” with Paulla Ebron arguing that “‘Africa’ and ‘music’ create each other so forcefully” (2003: 30) in popular understanding.

The thesis does not aim to critically appraise those constructions, nor does it seek to actively disentangle itself from them—rather it acknowledges their existence, as they come to bear upon the very processes that the thesis describes. In the following sections, I will first situate the object of the study by precisely defining the terms and context that circumscribe it; I will then describe the methods used and my positionality as a researcher that informed their deployment; finally I will situate the current research in the academic context of prior studies of African popular music as a site for thinking through broader political themes.

Definitions

The “Nigerian” or “Lagos” Music Industry

As the country’s commercial and entertainment capital, the Southwestern coastal city of Lagos, located in Yorubaland, can be considered Nigeria’s center of music business (Boluwaduro 2018; Eromosele 2022). It is enacted as the gateway to the world in the Nigerian

music industry's "Africa to the world" movement. There are, however, important music hubs in other regions that operate to a varying extent independently from Lagos. For example, Jos in the North, Abuja in the center of the country, and Port Harcourt in Nigeria's South-South Region have all supplied Lagos with a steady stream of talents, singing mostly in English and Pidgin; while an almost entirely separate Hausa music industry exists in the North, with Kano and Kaduna as capitals, radiating across the transnational Hausa-speaking region, where cultural difference and the strict application of Sharia law limit the distribution and performance of Lagos music. The Southeastern cities of Awka, Owerri, and Enugu are home to a dynamic Igbo music industry, which occasionally intersects with the Lagos music industry. Rather than a difference in scale—with Lagos a national and international center, while other cities would act only as regional hubs—the articulation of Nigeria's music networks is largely based on historically constructed and institutionalized ethnic, regional, and religious divisions, reinforced by economic processes (Larkin 2008; Olutayo 1999; Waterman 1990). The Igbo music industry, though functioning mostly in parallel to the Lagos music industry, is embedded in diasporic networks that are no less commercially oriented and transnational in reach, stretching as far as Kuala Lumpur or Guangzhou, with private performance fees that can reach US\$20,000. But the music that currently reaches the airwaves of the world's radio stations and the top of global digital platforms' charts can always be traced back to the "Lagos music industry," which includes its nodes in the West and the Middle East.

The constructed division between a self-contained conservative North and outward-looking and future-oriented Southerners (especially in Lagos) is largely premised on a differential impact of colonial capitalism. Pre-existing social structure was indeed economically and politically subordinated to Western capitalism to varying degrees (Olutayo 1999), entrenched by colonial institutional decisions. Prior to the formation of Nigeria in 1914 through the amalgamation of the Northern and the Southern Protectorates for the convenience of the

British colonial administration, Southern Nigerians had a history of extensive economic, political, and cultural contact with Europeans, long predating British colonization, leading to a class of Western-educated and professionally trained Nigerians with a nationalist political consciousness that the colonialists perceived as a threat. This prompted the colonial administration in Northern Nigeria to actively further cultural isolation through the preservation of the Hausa-Fulani's customary structure organized around emirates—including through reinforcing the authority of emirs even over local populations that had long resisted it (Yabuku 1996: 83-115). This history finds an echo in cultural and business practices today, reinforced by recent mass migration patterns. People in the Lagos music industry, plugged as they are to diasporic networks and global popular culture indeed feel much more closely connected to their counterparts in the United States, the United Kingdom, or the Caribbean than to their compatriots in the country's Northern half. The Igbo music industry relies on a strong private trading diaspora whose development can also be traced back to colonial incentives (Forrest 1994; Olutayo 1999), while its enduring communitarian logic can be understood in the context of recovery after the civil war and continued exclusion from political power.

The contemporary term “Nigerian music industry” typically refers to the Lagos-based industry, which includes professionals from the full range of southern Nigerian ethnicities (see Jedlowski 2011 and Haynes 2016 for a discussion of a similar process within the Nigerian film industry, Nollywood). While the distribution side of the industry was controlled by Igbo marketers for over a decade—the period between the collapse of Nigeria's music infrastructure and the expansion of digital technologies—and its origins are arguably steeped in Yoruba culture (Adedeji 2010), its sense of self is assertively post-ethnic (Shonekan 2013) or “transethnic” (Olusegun-Joseph 2014).¹² This stands in contrast to the previous music genres

¹² Yomi Olusegun-Joseph (2014) argues that the current music, born out of the adoption of hip hop by urban Yoruba youths, in fact gives a transethnic expression to Yoruba culture through its assertion within the frame of

popular in Lagos, such as Apala, Sakara (Sunday 2013), Juju (Alaja-Browne 1989; Waterman 1990) or Fuji (Barber and Waterman 1995; Odetade and Olusegun 2021; Samuel and Ogunrinola 2018), which were strongly affiliated with a communal Yoruba identity (Adedeji 2010; Omojola 2012; Yussuf 2018; Waterman 2000). The terms “Lagos music industry” and “Nigerian music industry” will thus be used interchangeably throughout the thesis—not as an analytical category, but to refer to the contemporary ideological trope wielded by music professionals and the general public, both in Lagos and outside of Nigeria. The term “Nigerian music industry” indeed captures the broad popularity of the particular brand of music that comes from Lagos and the diaspora, while projecting these achievements as a reflection of the whole country.

As such, the term also participates in a self-conscious Afro-nationalist politics, obscuring the fact that a significant proportion of the work involved in the production, distribution, and marketing of a “Nigerian” hit song is, to varying degrees, conducted outside of the country. The Nigerian music industry indeed relies on the collaboration of music professionals based all along the networks that map out the Nigerian ethnoscape, and increasingly beyond. A song’s beat can be produced in Lagos, while the artist records the vocals in London, which are mixed and mastered by an Atlanta-based engineer, with the video then shot in Ghana, after which an international promoter will take the artist on a showcase tour across the diaspora in Dubai, Cyprus, Cairo, and Istanbul. It is now also increasingly the case that a whole song may be created in a Los Angeles studio or a Portuguese hotel. From record label owners to lawyers and promoters, Nigerian music professionals tend to be extremely mobile, often wielding multi-year visas or residence permits—if not citizenship—in several countries. Wizkid, one of

the nation-nation, thus establishing the Yoruba world as open to multicultural adaptations and self-critical interrogations of ethnic heritage.

Nigeria's—and Africa's—foremost stars, thus recorded his Grammy-nominated fourth studio album at a time when he was mostly living and traveling abroad.

Yet, symbolically charged discursive practices constantly re-center Lagos in these creative and commercial processes. Wizkid chose *Made in Lagos* as the title for his fourth album, as well as for his clothing line, which was ironically sold in London before it became available in Lagos. Gina Neff *et al.* (2005) described how creative industries cluster in urban centers where economies of symbolic capital thrive. These industries, the authors argue, help “brand” the cities they are associated with, potentially creating positive externalities of growth. Nigerian music professionals display an intuitive understanding of these dynamics as part of an Afro-nationalist politics that mobilizes the symbolic power of global capitalism. An explicit orientation of the Nigerian music industry is indeed to shape the perception of a symbiotic relationship between Lagos and creativity, harnessing music's multiple mediations (music videos, social media content, photo shoots, interviews, live performances...) to disseminate the coded signifiers of an entrepreneurial and cultural hub. Acknowledging popular music's power to project “an image of creativity-driven growth” (Neff *et al.* 2005: 311) around places underrepresented in the “global imagination” (Erlmann 1999), these efforts aim to ground representations of capitalist modernity in the physical landscape of Lagos. Wizkid thus explains his sense of responsibility toward his homeland in the following terms:

“I don't see Wizkid as a musician, Wizkid is a brand ... When you talk about Wizkid, you talk about Lagos, you talk about Africa ... so that's why I treat it as a brand ... I am very very very serious with it.”¹³

In a similarly self-conscious way, students at the University of Lagos argued during a panel on “Musical Culture and Identity Formation”¹⁴ that:

¹³ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ycTMFcTN2r4&t=133s&ab_channel=StarBoyTV

¹⁴ Lagos Studies Association Conference, June 2018, University of Lagos

New media relies on iconic visual cues and Lagos can provide that—the Lekki-Ikoyi Bridge, the Banana Island mansions, the visual elements that exist in Lagos should be harnessed more effectively.

Through its symbolic investment in Lagos, the Nigerian music industry acts as a vehicle for a wide range of Afrocentric strategies, blurring the distinction between the personal and professional, and the commercial and political. The Dubai-based Ugandan head of Spotify Sub-Saharan Africa thus writes about “The Nigerianification of the World: Why Lagos is now a Global Tastemaker City.”

By purposefully locating its commercial center on the continent, the Nigerian music industry inverts the representational dynamics governing Africa’s place in the global economy. Literature on the neoliberal world order has mostly featured Africa as a site of resource extraction by foreign actors, with a focus on those enclaves that are purposefully removed from local entanglements. Hannah Appel describes, for example, the efforts deployed by oil companies operating in the Gulf of Guinea to “allow Equatorial Guinea to recede into the distance, framing the production process—subsea to market—as ‘offshore’” (2011: 692). In contrast, the Nigerian music industry firmly writes Africa within the “new, de-centered but global, history” (Mbembe 2016: 322), feeding the aspirational horizon of an Africa-based project of modernity and globalization.

“Nigerian music”

The music produced by the current Nigerian music industry has received substantial scholarly attention, which is likely to only expand and intensify in the coming years, in light of its increasingly global reach. Scholars have analyzed contemporary Nigerian popular music in respect of the linguistic, cultural, and social dynamism that feeds its influence and wide circulation—often through the lens of cultural nationalist celebration (see most notably, Adedeji 2010; 2013; 2017; Adeniyi 2020; Chukwuma and Atelhe 2018; Fasan 2013; 2015; Forchu 2009; Gbogi 2017; 2019; Inyabri 2013; Nzeaka 2021; Oikelome 2012; 2013; Ojukwu

et al. 2016; Okuyade 2011; Olusegun-Joseph 2014; 2020; Olusoji 2015; Omoniyi 2009; Onanuga and Akingbe 2020; Osiebe 2016; Shonekan 2012; 2013), and also sometimes to denounce its negative impact on societal values (Akpan 2006; Eze 2020; Lazarus 2018; Oikelome 2013; Onanuga 2017; Onanuga and Onanuga 2020; Oniwon and Salami 2020). For institutional reasons linked to the colonial history and academic organization of Nigerian universities (where most have been conducted), these studies are in their majority a product of English Literature departments. Coupled with the structural limitations that affect resources available to Nigerian researchers, this means that they include virtually no empirical inquiry into the people and processes behind the music, leaving a gap that this thesis aims to fill. The content analysis that dominates the scholarly approach to Nigerian popular music is all the more insufficient since, as award-winning Nigerian music journalist Oris Aigbokhaevbolo colorfully explains:

By now everyone knows that Nigerian pop music is not literary art. The Nigerian pop beat is a canvass for the fitting of patterned items. If words go on exile, these artists would find something else for use in the inexhaustible jigsaw that is the contemporary Nigerian pop sound. The idea, above anything else, is to fit in pieces to create something pleasing to the ear, and whoever seeks meaning does so at her own risk. Words are not tools to be worked with in Nigerian pop—but obstacles to be worked around.¹⁵

In an effort to complement existing research, this thesis consciously foregrounds the Nigerian music industry—considering music not through its contents, but as the result of situated processes of production, distribution, and marketing. This approach aligns with the popular understanding of Nigerian music, which situates the music from the new millennium in a historical continuity on the basis not of an idiosyncratic sound, but of its affiliation with the “new Nigerian industry” (see Chapter 1). Scholars unanimously trace the roots of the current popular music back to hip hop (Adedeji 2010; 2013; Adedeji 2017; Fasan 2015; Gbogi 2019; Inyabri 2013; Künzler 2011; Liadi 2012; Okuyade 2011; Olusegun-Joseph 2014; Olusoji 2015;

¹⁵ <https://www.musicinafrica.net/magazine/tekno-pana>

Omoniyi 2009; Oniwon and Salami 2020; Osiebe 2016; Shonekan 2012; Strong and Ossei-Owusu 2014), yet even such a basic musical characterization is considered increasingly problematic among the Nigerian public, with a much more popular practice consisting in tracing origins to people rather sounds. The Nigerian music industry under consideration in this thesis started off producing what was then known as Afro hip hop or Naija hip hop, with several of the Nigerian stars still active today—as well as virtually all the music business professionals—starting off as rappers. A significant number of them were even part of the hip hop scene in the United States or the grime scene in the UK, before moving to Nigeria and building the current industry (see Chapter 1). Examining the phenomenon critically, Professor of Afro-American Studies Stephanie Shonekan went as far as to claim that “there is a complete take-over of the psyche of young Nigerians [by U.S. hip hop]” (2013: 190) and predict that “the continuation of this cultural/psychic occupation seems inevitable (2013: 195). But as Nigerian music evolved away from hip hop toward an asserted idiosyncratic “Afro” artistic identity that found global resonance, “aesthetic cosmopolitanism” is reconfigured to become the vehicle for “ethno-national cultural uniqueness” (Regev 2007) and this history is discursively erased to center Nigerian roots instead.

The popular music produced by the Lagos music industry had already become “Afropop” when I formally started my research. Yet, the actual sound covered by this terminology evolved dramatically even during the course of my fieldwork. While the commonplace understanding of Afropop in the 2010s was that it was a sound most suitable for dancing, characterized by drumbeat-driven intoxicating percussions, Nigerian artists have recently gone on to gain their most important recognitions with soulful ballads. Melancholic slow songs that have notably resonated with the African American community and across the Middle East and South Asia, while carrying the anxieties and longing of Nigerian youths. However, the up-tempo South

African Amapiano sound¹⁶ was adopted across the spectrum of Nigerian artists virtually overnight in 2020, illustrating the pitfalls of aiming to define Nigerian music sonically, given how fast, and multi-directionally, it evolves. Finally, it is important to understand that in a thinly capitalized industry, there is little creative autonomy. The music produced by the Nigerian industry directly is affected by the business model presiding over its participants' survival. With the past few years bringing significant foreign investment and a multiplication of opportunities for monetization, Nigerian popular music has already begun to dramatically expand its creative horizon. Existing stars as well as emerging artists are offering a sonic and lyrical diversity hardly witnessed before in an industry, which, for a large part of its existence, had to rely on the distribution network of commercial entrepreneurs known as “marketers” (for their affiliation with the Alaba market, the largest electronics market in Nigeria) and the commercial patronage of telecom companies, banks, and mainstream consumer brands, as well as the largesse from flashy cyber fraudsters—all implicitly shaping the music in their image.

By considering music through its social and economic embeddedness, the thesis embraces a definition of music that is functional rather than substantive, in resonance with academic findings on West African musical culture. Indeed, the processes that lead to the development of West African popular music have been shown to “blur” conceptual dichotomies between traditional and commercial, or local and global, to instead tie “cultural creativity and economic participation” (Waterman 1990:9), as newly urbanized populations had to make a place for themselves in an environment shaped by global forces. “By linking the past to the present, merging African and non-African musical styles, and highlighting artists who reside in multiple localities and manage a mosaic of cultural resources” (Salm 2010: 1328), West African music evades essentialist definitions. These cultural dynamics are probably heightened in Lagos, a

¹⁶ Amapiano is a hybrid of deep house and jazz characterized by synths and wide percussive basslines that emerged in Johannesburg in the past decade, and became internationally popular in 2020.

cosmopolitan urban center expected to become the world's most populated city over the coming decades, and the cultural interface with one of the largest diasporas. Lagos musicians of the past century have been described as "master syncretizers of modern Africa" (Waterman 1990:9), interpreting different cultural codes and value systems to the point that being open to new practices and ideas, as long as they are efficacious, has become the very "tradition" associated with the city. More recently, Yomi Olusegun-Joseph (2014) describes "the global transcultural gaze energized by the imperatives of late capitalism" as the "combustible impulse" informing developments in Nigerian music, thus defying "ethnic heritage" and "conventional cultural boundaries."

"Afrobeats" or "Afropop"

The term "Afrobeats," though controversial, captures this sonic indeterminacy and will be used interchangeably with "Afropop" throughout the thesis. Rather than a music genre, "Afrobeats" is a functional category for commercial music produced by the Nigerian music industry. It refers to a hybridized cultural production that initially circulated along Nigerian migration flows, which the portmanteau word aims to situate, as the genealogy of the term makes clear. It indeed emerged at the turn of the 2010s in response to a marketing need, as the circulation of the music from Lagos, Accra, and Nigerian and Ghanaian diasporic communities intensified to the point of reaching the mainstream British radio Choice FM in 2011, with a dedicated weekly show. To name the show, the Ghanaian DJ hosting it coined the term "Afrobeats," thus (contentiously) appropriating the name of the music genre created by 1970s Nigerian star Fela Kuti, "Afrobeat," and adding an "s" to indicate the sonic plurality covered by the new concept. Among his Nigerian colleagues of the time, rumor has it that he tried to register the term as a trademark, with the goal of monetizing its future use.

The term met a lot of resistance in Nigeria, offering a first glimpse into the political issues at stake in the rationalization and naturalization of difference required for the integration of

Nigerian music into the circuits of global popular culture. “Afrobeats” was initially resented for its generalization of Nigerian musical production under an abstract umbrella term, and the very need for a *sui generis* category was questioned. It indeed ran the risk, on the one hand, of grouping all African popular music under a category initially designed specifically for a certain form of Nigerian and Ghanaian popular music, and, on the other, of erasing the diversity of Nigeria’s rich musical repertoire. Indeed, the new categorization was accused of detaching the recent form of commercially successful music from its cultural roots—which include genres such as Juju, Palm Wine, Sakara, Highlife, Afrobeat, Fuji, Naija hip hop, among others—to bring it under an empty term devoid of historical or social value. Separately, creating a category specifically for this music was understood as a manifestation of a systemic process that ensures that African artists remain confined to an exotic sub-segment of the global music market. A widely shared feeling was that this new and exogenous category robbed Nigerians of the sovereignty to define themselves and contribute to defining global mainstream. Alessandro Jedlowski described a similar reaction to the Nigerian film industry’s “Nollywood” moniker, with the imposition of a foreign label experienced as “an act of symbolic control, a semiotic violence that the history of colonialism had made intolerable to many” (2011: 229). Renewed debate surrounded the launch by the UK’s Official Charts Company and U.S. Billboard of their respective Afrobeats singles chart, as well as the rumored creation of a Grammy Award category, all pointing to the reification of Nigerian musical production under an autonomous international brand. The commercial success that it signified was unanimously celebrated, yet the term also generated “a sense of loss, a sense of distance” (Jedlowski 2011: 230). The future of Nigerian music increasingly appeared abstracted from Nigerian realities, carried by a proud and vocal diaspora with access to the central nodes of global media flows. Finally, “Afrobeats” was criticized for misleadingly echoing Afrobeat, a politically conscious and acoustically

orchestrated music genre of the 1970s associated with Nigerian star and anti-imperialist activist Fela Kuti.

In different ways, these internal debates revolve around denied historicity, problematizing the transnational entanglement of culture and power in the ahistorical “performance of Africa” (Ebron 2003). As Paulla Ebron explains, “because Africa is the geopolitical ur-site of performance from the perspective of the West, ‘African’ performance and ‘Western’ conventions of representation of the continent are always intertwined” (2008: 16). In Nigeria, there is popular awareness of the global significance of “African music,” precisely because it is within the reach of “international standards,” which historically refer to the political, economic, and ideological systems associated with an imposed European “modernity” (Ekeh 1975). Through Western consumers craving for the resources of an imagined homogeneous and timeless society, the global circulation of “African” culture has systematically merged ethnic and cultural distinctions to form a uniform continental identity that informs “Africa’s” place in those systems. As a result, music in Nigeria is wielded as a tool of world-making that carries the potential of historical, social, and economic transformation. Establishing Nigerian music as a symbol of cosmopolitan style and business savvy would indeed constitute a break with entrenched representations, and, as such, carries a promise of redemption from the past. This context is necessary to understand the trajectory of the “Afrobeats” categorization, and why the term eventually won over professionals and the public, who pragmatically rallied behind its power to promote both the music and the country.

The ultimate acceptance of the term serves to illustrate the commercially inflected ethics of responsibility that, this thesis argues, governs the Nigerian music industry, and fuels its constant momentum at the speed of digital capitalism. I asked a sample of music professionals how they felt about the term “Afrobeats” for the first time in 2018. The unanimous response was a vehement rejection, accompanied by a discussion along the argumentative lines described

above. By the closing of the decade, the same people had all taken up the use of the term. When asked about their change of heart, they would invoke the broader goal of advancing Nigerian popular music on the global scene that the term can serve, as exemplified by this response from a digital platform executive: “Look, I’m fine with it. If it can help us get where we want to be, that’s what I see. I think there could have been a better term, but since this one has caught on, we should use any tool we have to get our artists the recognition they deserve.” A general consensus emerged that the new “Afrobeats” category allowed Nigerian popular music to stake out an identifiable niche in a crowded international market, a necessary step in the quest for “categorical equivalence” (Wilk 1995).

In the ambivalent pursuit of emancipation through categorical equivalence, some of the Afrobeats movement’s poster children distance themselves from the term, without challenging it and the system that it stands for directly. Artists indeed claim their own singular genres while benefiting from the visibility afforded by the term’s marketing power, including playlisting opportunities under the “Afrobeats” category on digital streaming platforms and foreign radio shows. The past few years have thus seen a proliferation of portmanteau terms, with Afro-fuji, fuji-hop, fuji-pop, Afro-fusion, Afro highlife, Afro-R&B, emo-Afrobeats, Afrorave, and even Afro-life, all claimed by individual artists as the name of their respective genre, even as they insist on accepting Afrobeats as an umbrella category. This dynamic can be situated within the sociological logic that Motti Regev (2011) calls “expressive isomorphism,” which refers to the proliferation of musical genres as variants of global institutional patterns of cultural value in response to structural power relations. As claims “for equal participation and for fully acknowledged modern actorhood in contemporary world society,” these initiatives “do not resist the structure but, rather, by expressing a quest for gaining a better position within it, in fact accept its logic” (2011: 570). This echoes Richard Wilk’s observations with respect to the construction of Belizean national culture, which, he argues, developed along standardized

channels for the expression of difference, with “Hollywood creat[ing] the space within which Belizeans are ‘free’ to define themselves” (1995: 123). Similarly, the global music industry has created the space for Nigerian cultural actors to create and adapt institutional fields on the basis of model categories, with this understood as the way in which one performs “cultural uniqueness” in late modernity.

The Nigerian Music “Industry”

The above brings us to the most important notion in the pursuit of categorical equality that the Nigerian music industry stands for: the structuration as an “industry.” A vehicle for legitimation, the “industry” is the paradigmatic expression of the widespread popular understanding that cultural difference is connected to material inequality and stratification. While the content it produces might be—and, in recent years, should be—“Afrocentric,” the adoption of “international business standards” introduces universalized norms of difference according to what is understood as a rationalized logic that can bring emancipation. In the past 15 years Nigeria has seen an explosion in privately sponsored talent shows, regional music competitions and award ceremonies, and, increasingly, the normalization of Nigerian pop stars’ participation in the world’s most visible music and fashion industry events. While the intensification of celebrity culture is a global phenomenon under post-Fordism (Hearn 2008), it takes another dimension when it serves as a channel for aspirations to global membership. The emergence of pop stars who are featured in global charts and present at international events indeed asserts categorical equality on the international scene, which is independent of the music they produce. The industry, in this respect, is a particularly powerful lens to examine such aspirations and how they play out against structural discrimination. The professionalization of the Nigerian music sector is indeed a focal point in the symbolic processes of representation on which the global imagination feeds.

Beyond the advancement in representation that a structured industry affords, building an industry is also widely understood as a step towards achieving substantive equality, this time in contrast to the formal equality ushered in by decolonization and democratization. Highly aware of capitalist appropriation and extraction of value along North-South relational lines, Nigerian music professionals seek to create corporate structures that ensure control over the value they produce within a globally connected system. In the current neoliberal context, foreign corporations have come to perceive Nigeria's "new retail market" as "Africa's growing giant,"¹⁷ a dynamic and promising market yet to be exploited. After the rapid expansion of the telecom and banking industries in the past two decades, business experts expect the retail sector to be the next chapter of emerging middle-class growth. Music, a vehicle for social interaction, plays a crucial role in mediating corporate brands and values. This is particularly true of African popular music, which was traditionally a means by which Africans related to the world and forged communities through performance (Waterman 1990, Osumare 2014), and, increasingly, is the primary mode through which African youths establish connections and imagine more enduring linkages through online interactions (Shipley 2017). While music in Lagos was always embedded in power relations, with foreign corporations involved in these networks since the beginning of the twentieth century (see Chapter 1), the current context is a departure from the condition of the popular arts scene that prevailed until the late twentieth century, when Karin Barber argued that there was "no doubt" that artists dealt with "themes and issues that the people themselves consider important" (1982: 432; 1997). Today, multinational companies from all over the world¹⁸ have direct and indirect control over what millions of people in Nigeria will hear through private TV and radio stations, their mobile phones, concerts, and the digital

¹⁷ McKinsey & Company, *Africa's growing giant: Nigeria's new retail economy*, 2013

¹⁸ Radio stations and TV channels such as Soundcity (Nigeria), MTV (US), AIM Group (Lebanon), or Trace (France); telecom operators, such as MTN (South Africa), Globacom (Nigeria), Etisalat (United Arab Emirates), or Airtel (India); digital streaming platforms, such as Boomplay (China), Spotify (Sweden), UduX (Nigeria), Audiomack (Nigeria) and, to an extent, the various brands that sponsor artists, such as Indomie (Indonesia), Pepsi (US), Puma (Germany), Tecno (China) or Samsung (South Korea).

streaming platforms that keep gaining ground. In this context, the goal of leading music professionals is to consolidate and restructure the industry to allow for institutional investment and bank lending, thus rendering it less dependent on volatile international interest and ensuring its sustainability.

The case of dance in Nigeria is enlightening in that respect. It serves as a foil to understand the importance of building an industry to meet participants' basic needs in a capitalist system. Indeed, while street dance is highly influential on popular culture and a ubiquitous part of Nigerian social life, it barely exists as an industry, thus confining its practitioners to adaptive survival strategies. Professional dancers are compelled to carve out a place for themselves within the popular music industry, where structures for money-making exist. Yet, as mere participants, they are treated as disposable and remain largely excluded from its upside potential. A dancer who performed in one of Burna Boy's music videos thus had her image covering a building in New York's Times Square as part of a YouTube billboard, with no attached benefits since the advertisement was promoting only the musician. She posted the capture on her social media story with the caption: "When ur picture gets to Times Square before u..." Dancers' lack of control over income streams also translates into limited say over artistic choices, to the point of being dictated which dance style to perform by musicians and music video directors. While the most prominent contemporary Nigerian dancers were virtually all trained in hip hop, they have had to adapt to "Afro" dance, whose relationship to Nigerian popular music took a particularly symbiotic turn in the 1990s, catapulting it across global digital networks from the 2010s (see Shipley 2013 for the Ghanaian Azonto). Dance crazes have been redefined as a central element of Nigerian music's aspirational cosmopolitanism, influencing artists to construct more songs around dance moves—a dynamic only intensifying as artists are increasingly rewarded, and actively courted, by foreign short music video-sharing apps that strategically rely on the virality of Nigerian content globally. Thus, Nigerian dancers are

indispensable and extremely visible; yet, at the tail end of the music industry's value chain and, so far, unable to build effective structures for themselves, they navigate a particularly precarious situation of multi-level dependence.

Another helpful case to understand the stakes that surround industry-building—this time on a symbolic level—is Nollywood. The Nigerian film industry evolved into an internationally recognized discursive object earlier than its music counterpart, yet the latter's sense of self developed very much in opposition to the former. Nollywood indeed long served as “a synonym of cheap contents and poor production values” (Jedlowski 2011: 246), which Nigerian music professionals tried to demarcate themselves from by seeking to meet what they call “international standards.” The transnational background of many of the current Nigerian music industry's pioneers (see Chapter 1) means that, from the start, its development was informed by an internalized external gaze, prompting music professionals to work in reaction to exoticizing and condescending interpretations of the continent's cultural practices, which the reception of Nollywood very much embodies. Nollywood indeed became known outside of the continent as “an interesting phenomenon (or worse, a curiosity), whose important aspect was its trajectory of success within a continent humiliated by poverty and corruption” (Jedlowski 2011: 233). Pioneer music video directors thus reflexively distance themselves from what is remembered as the subpar quality and the locality of Nigerian films of the time, usually citing MTV, instead, as a key source of inspiration. This discursive opposition expresses a rejection of the form of “postcolonial exotic” that Nollywood has found itself reduced to (Jedlowski 2013). Jedlowski describes how the Nigerian film industry's recognition in Euro-America has been mediated by a “fascination for non-Western declinations of modernity . . . [that] takes the place of the fascination for the archaic, the traditional, and the tribal” (2013: 157). Outside of Africa, it indeed “acquire[d] value as an ‘art’ object exactly through its displacement from the sphere of . . . popular culture to which Nollywood originally belongs” (Jedlowski 2013: 166), thus

robbing its participants (both the Nigerian cultural producers and the public that is so heavily invested in this popular culture) of the agency to write themselves into the global mainstream.

Vocal about the commercial orientation of their work, Nigerian music professionals thus aim to claim the position they deem to deserve in global popular culture: one characterized by terms such as “success,” “wealth,” “chart-topping,” or “billionaire”, rather than “alternative,” “interesting,” “exotic,” or “resistance.” As he was gaining prominence in Lagos, I asked a young Nigerian beat-maker if he sometimes considers accepting collaborations that have less commercial potential, if they yet offer innovative artistic value. His response was clear: “If it’s not commercial, why the fuck are they calling me?” The notion of urgency shaped by the sociopolitical and economic circumstances that prevail in Nigeria leads to constant injunctions to working hard and getting results fast. “We don’t have time to waste” is thus a recurring refrain among music professionals, which resonates with similar moral frameworks governing the music industries built by Afro-descendants and others in precarious situations across multiple geographies.¹⁹ With this disposition informing normative processes, the dominant concern among Nigerian music professionals is to build industrial structures that maximize their commercial impact. The thesis focuses on these structures, both as socio-material assemblages and as an aspirationally constructed horizon that guides people as they navigate their everyday life.

Nigerian Music Industry “Professionals”

This thesis is primarily concerned with those who are strategically placed in the socio-economic configuration that constitutes the Nigerian music industry, holding the most power to define its contours and orientations. However, the ethnography covers people at every level of the industry, including those who can only aspire to join its formal ranks. As Hermes *et al.*

¹⁹ Examples include Niska, PLK, Spice (Forbes).

(2017: 91) describe with regards to the Netherlands, “many of those working in the creative industries are neither artist nor entrepreneur. Many are ‘bricoleurs’, cobblers, picking up work where they can while trying to develop long-term work relationships with those they work for.” This is particularly true in the case of Nigeria, at a time when people joke that everyone has a brother or cousin trying to enter the music industry. The industry’s lack of institutional structures makes the delineation of its boundaries a highly subjective endeavor. In this thesis, the term “Nigerian music industry professional” is self-referential, as I choose to apply it to anyone who feels part of the industry, regardless of formal occupation in it or any income they derive from it. This intentionally broad definitional scope acknowledges how countless anonymous youths contribute to shaping the music industry narrative—feeding it with their struggle, determination, and frustrations. Furthermore, beyond the symbolic economy, those who do not derive income from their “music hustle” yet provide all forms of unpaid labor, most importantly through their online activities, thus significantly contributing the dynamism of the Nigerian music industry. Rather than existing “outside” the sphere of work, as the term “unemployment” suggests, those who seek to join the industry are engaged in constant mobilization of their limited resources (such as YouTube training videos and social media platforms), cultivating their technical skills, physical appearance and social connections in a way that problematizes the disjuncture between insiders and outsiders.

By grounding analysis in empirical cases that straddle the industry’s value chain and social spectrum, the thesis reflects the diversity of actors whose efforts articulate to carry the contemporary industry. As Tom Forrest (1994) showed in respect to the advance of private enterprise in Nigeria generally, the origins of entrepreneurs are diverse—ranging from petty traders with limited formal education to professionals, graduates and MBAs, who have entered business relatively recently. These different trajectories have frequently intersected in the Nigerian music industry, with the very foundation of the industry built on the articulation of

corporate structures steered by young entrepreneurs returning from American and British universities and the trading networks of Igbo “marketers” centralizing national and international music distribution at Alaba market. As such, the thesis pushes against the exceptionalist reading of inequality offered by much of the public and academic discourse on Sub-Saharan Africa. Depicting societies devoid of middle classes, neatly divided up into an “elite”—with representations of old paunchy “big men” who have access to the (rentier) state—and everyone else as the “masses,” or the “people”—mostly young and stuck in “waithood” (Archambault 2015; Honwana 2014; Masquelier 2013; Turner 2015)—these accounts erase the everyday efforts of variously situated actors to move towards what they collectively see as capitalist modernity. Jedlowski indeed described in the context of the Nigerian film industry how Alaba marketers and formal corporate structures, despite operating on different scales and occupying opposite ends on the pyramid of capital accumulation, adhere to similar principles, i.e., “mistrust of state intervention, a belief in the economic benefits of deregulation, and an ideology that sees market exchange as being ‘an ethic in itself’, and which considers ‘competition and self-interest’ to be fundamental values” (2017: 688). Postcolonial scholars have often pointed out that the Western scholarly obsession with applying a morally inflected framework of complicity/resistance proves inappropriate in societies where the majority of people are still reeling from the upheaval of their cultural, political, and economic systems, struggling to rebuild a coherent sense of self in a new, forever transformed, social order (Adejunmobi 2007; Cooper 2004; Mbembe 1992; Ong 2011).

Nigerian urban cultural practices especially have confused and complicated a priori models based on center/periphery capitalist expansion and class struggle (Barber 1987; 1997; Hannerz 1987; Larkin 2008; Waterman 1990). While it is common to contrast the experience of “politicians and managers on the one hand and ordinary people on the other” (Wade in Haynes 2007: 133), Karin Barber explains that “‘the people’, ‘the masses’, and the ‘grassroots’

are phrases lavishly used by the press and politicians . . . but the categories represented in this rhetoric remain out of focus” (1997: 4). In “Nigeria at least, everybody except the innermost core (or cores) of the elite regards themselves as a member of the excluded majority” (Barber 1987: 22)—a phenomenon which finds particular expression in the music industry, inspired as it is by the hip hop idiom of succeeding against racist, classist, and generational stigma (see Chapter 1). Indeed, even for Nigerian music professionals who describe themselves as “middle class”—and in many cases could be considered part of the “new elite” (Barber 1997: 3) due to their foreign education and connections to power networks—“what endures is a pervasive sense of ‘us’ and ‘them’” (1997: 4).

The above hints to the Nigerian music industry’s strong sense of self, which feeds an ethic of self-reliance inflected by a generational consciousness that rejects other forms of social affiliation. In an overcrowded urban environment plagued by the lack of wage labor opportunities, framing oneself as a “professional”—be it as an “entrepreneur,” a “hustler,” or a member of a specific professional category—carries claims to belonging, dignity, and agency. The industry’s very premise—“your entertainment is our work”—allows music professionals to self-fashion as spearheads of African twenty-first century capitalism regardless of their social position. The homogenously work-centric discourse in and from the industry indeed delineates the contours of a moral and material project whose potentialities are embodied by its participants, with “hardworking” pop stars ranging from former bus conductors to billionaire children, who share stages and collaborate in a way barely imaginable in most other sectors of society. The language of professionalism/business must therefore be understood through the lens of work both on the self and in the world, in the continuity of other efforts orientated towards access to individual and African sovereignty (R. Marshall 2009; Mbembe 2002).

The inequalities that pervade and structure Nigerian society—not sparing the music industry—are well documented (Adebanwi and Obadare 2010; Apter 2005; Archibong 2018;

Barnes 1986; Lawuyi 1991; Lewis 1996; Mann 1985; D. Smith 2001; Xiao 2022). The objective of the thesis is not to add to these political economic analyses, but to build upon them by investigating an expressive and pragmatic movement that has thrived in such a context of entrenched inequality. The Nigerian music industry indeed cuts across class, ethnicity, and gender, however fraught issues of inclusivity and representation do remain among music professionals. On that basis, the thesis analyzes how the imaginative and affective resources of professional capitalism are mobilized by variously situated agents for an aspirational project that aims to precisely deconstruct traditional forms of affiliation in order to reach social and political emancipation. The investment in capitalist self-fashioning can thus be understood through the notion of *illusio*, which Pierre Bourdieu defined as “the enchanted relation to a game that is the product of a relation of ontological complicity between mental structures and the objective structures of social space” (1998: 77). The strongly morally inflected discourse that circulates in and from the Nigerian music industry—mediating its interactions with professionals and fans across the Black Atlantic and beyond—relies on the belief that capitalism is “worth the candle,” or more simply, that playing is worth the effort” (1998: 76-77). Underpinning the Nigerian music industry is indeed a shared conceptual treatment of the social and individual predicaments that frame the Nigerian experience. A project of individual and collective reconstruction in an environment enacted as oppressive and corrupt, the industry articulates a concrete and actionable vision through the adoption of professionalism, efficiency, and commercialism. On these grounds, I conceptualize belonging to the Nigerian music industry as a subjective disposition and refer to its members broadly as “professionals.”

Methods and positionality

The descriptions and debates sketched above begin to delineate the contours of the representation of the world in which my presence would fit—as a white French researcher with

a legal and business background and an affiliation to Oxford University. As I started interviews of Nigerian music professionals by the end of the 2010s (with personal knowledge of Nigerian popular music from over a decade), my presence was not only unsurprising to my interlocutors, but it was even expected. The reactions that I received mostly came along the lines of: “Why did it take you guys so long to come?” The fact that I am not related to Africa through any kinship or ethnic ties meant that I fit perfectly within the narrative—still mostly performative and aspirational at the time—that the Nigerian music industry was “going global.” Repeated like a slogan or prayer, “Lagos to the world” and “Everyone wants our music” indeed punctuated my field work. I was often introduced from one person to another as “someone from Oxford who has come to study our industry.” “Study” here did not refer to the colonially charged study of the Other as a curiosity, but to the study of a successful model in order to learn from it and replicate it. My interlocutors’ confident self-representation as upwardly mobile professionals of an industry of global dimension made them very willing to engage with me—both to assert their position as knowledgeable experts who can “teach” an Oxford scholar, but also as part of their constant efforts toward self-actualization, at a time when the industry’s export trajectory was being drawn, yet data was still scarce. As a white fan of Nigerian music and an academic, I was indeed enacted also as a source of information—with my consumer habits and my analysis of the Nigerian music industry from an external perspective all potentially relevant to professionals.

While I would introduce myself as an anthropologist, the term’s historically charged power dynamic was not understood by my interlocutors to apply to them. Instead—as William Mazzarella described about his ethnography of Indian professionals—“in each others’ eyes, [we were] occupants of categories . . . that were translatable (if not quite equivalent) across our respective life-worlds.” My interlocutors would indeed usually focus on my corporate background as a business lawyer (with MTN Nigeria as former client, which at a point was the

single largest source of revenue for Nigerian artists) and the fact that I had worked in New York and London, thus sharing cultural references with them. The Nigerian music industry indeed straddles the Black Atlantic, with many professionals based, or with experience studying or working in, the United States and/or the United Kingdom. While I considered ethical issues related to the ambiguity of my perceived role to be a potential challenge—to the extent that some informants who had known me in a different capacity might have held expectations of confidentiality or misunderstood my goals—they easily grasped how one moves from corporate law to the academic world and spontaneously made sense of the motivations, objectives, and utility of such move. They welcomed social research on the Nigerian music industry from a former lawyer and did not perceive any contradiction—unlike in the West, where dominant epistemologies are informed by the culturally constructed ideal of music as disembedded from social and economic relations (Salomos 2005).

A significant part of one's work in the Lagos music industry is devoted to creating and entertaining social ties, which considerably facilitates the anthropologist's task of establishing connections with informants. Music professionals and those who aspire to join the industry attend conferences, concerts, parties, music video shoots, studio sessions, club nights and other occasions that cut across the professional and social spheres, while constantly interacting on social media. I quickly became embedded in the hectic dynamic of the music industry and enacted this spatio-social network as my research field, my home, and my social life. Though from the beginning it was clear that the "field" was open-ended—reaching not only all through Lagos, but also across Europe, North America, and the Middle East—it was also internally coherent and totalizing. With the distance between production, products, and consumption disappearing, the new economy—to which Nigerian music professional enthusiastically claim belonging—is organized by the cultural principles of the brand (Adkins 2004). In contrast to Western societies, where the entrenched conception of the corporate form as a separate,

bounded entity led to considerable resistance against the contemporary phenomenon of self-branding, in Lagos the concept and practice smoothly integrated into the dominant model of sole proprietorship and “building oneself up.” Quickly absorbed into this logic, my private life (to the extent that such a thing could be clearly distinguished) was fully imbricated with the same people, the same places, and the same technology that made up my “work.” As a member of the community, my presence progressively found an autonomous *raison d’être*, as I was building my profile as well as my research. As someone who had the time and means to interact with a wide range of participants in the music industry, I was indeed increasingly asked for contacts. Reciprocally, I tried to use my connections—or sometimes simply my whiteness—to introduce struggling artists to established professionals and to help as much as I could in any way I was asked—which gave me a sense of purpose, where long-term research provided an inadequate horizon for the environment that I was in.

The research environment was indeed very fast paced, requiring me, as an ethnographer, to be flexible, ambitious, and to seize opportunities, just like Nigerian music professionals and aspiring artists constantly do. I would meet my interlocutors at random hours of the day or the night, follow up regularly, accept last minute changes and commonly wait for them for several hours. During the pilot project I conducted a year prior to the actual field work, my interlocutors had frequently expressed surprise at my determination to come back to Lagos for a full year. While I explained that I would be conducting research and would have funding for it, they were suspicious of my lack of ambition to work or make money for such a long period. The situated long-term ethnographic approach appeared contradictory to the dominant values in the Nigerian music industry, which revolve around continuous self-enhancement, movement, and enrichment, or at least the idea that one should display these values.

In order to understand the entrepreneurial and deterritorialized subjectivity universally deployed in the Nigerian music industry, I needed to experience these conditions myself. I was

rapidly faced with visa issues, as Nigeria does not allow stays of over 30 days regardless of the duration permitted by the business visa and research permits obtained. Since only three African countries allowed visa free travel to French citizens—and I could not apply for a visa from Nigeria since I was not a permanent resident—I initially made monthly trips to Benin Republic by shared car and negotiated for a visa stamp with border agents. That option however disappeared as the Nigeria Federal Government closed its land borders in 2019. I then found myself having to frequently travel to Dubai, Europe, and other destinations between which Nigerian music professionals commonly navigate. This visa predicament allowed me to experience a fraction of the constraints faced by Nigerians with no Western citizenship during their own travels, and thus fed countless discussions on circulation, identity, and the state. It offered a glimpse into my interlocutors' existential condition of restless hustling for connection and travel, shaped by restricted movement and access.

Depending on the person I was interacting with, my location on the respective axes of race, gender, and professional status weighed differently on how they would situate me. In many cases, my position as a woman—and at the time young-looking (I was often assumed to be a master's student)—made me appear non-threatening. In a largely male-dominated industry, I was usually able to simply tag along and follow professionals in their work, traveling with them, attending events and informal meetings in clubs and private residences. As the only woman in the room most of the time, I comfortably occupied the role of “fly on the wall.” Largely excluded from the discussions, I had time to observe the dynamics at play and make mental notes of what was being said. As a white professional woman, I was the beneficiary of protection and access, where Nigerian women who seek to make it in the industry must constantly engage in negotiation and are exposed to potentially dangerous power dynamics. My Western professional qualifications and experience afforded me specific access in some cases, as Nigerian music professionals were actively seeking international investors and partnerships

with media and music companies in the late 2010s. A strong feeling prevailed at the time that a window of opportunity had opened to compete on a global level, and thereby realize the ultimate ambition of overcoming the exclusion faced by Africans as a whole. In that process, international partners appeared as a key lever to put in place the required structures to secure a “cleaner,” more institutionalized and profitable value chain, and thus ensure the industry’s future independence before it might be too late. I was approached by Nigerian music company Aristokrat Group for my experience working on corporate restructurings, as the company was preparing to conclude a joint venture with the French entity of the world’s largest music group, Universal Music. Reciprocally, Western companies were starting to collectively turn their gaze onto the Nigerian music industry, and I was asked by American AI-powered music video platform Triller to represent them to Nigerian entertainment professionals. In my interaction with aspiring Nigerian artists and other struggling youths at the margin of the industry, I was perceived as an opportunity to be seized for social mobility, and therefore also afforded easy access.

Though relations with research participants were framed by the structural location that I was embodying (or that was projected onto to me), their nature should not be understood as purely instrumental. Respective benefits were derived or expected from asymmetrical relationships in which my interlocutors all provided me with invaluable “data,” while some saw me as a potential “blesser,” if not a “mugu” (a white person who can be financially exploited); yet the notion of affect and exchange were entangled rather than opposed.²⁰ In the day-to-day ethnography, interactions were largely guided on both sides by personal preferences and emotional attachment—undergirded by shared passion for Nigerian popular music and contemporary Black culture. With established music professionals, the information they

²⁰ See Cole and Thomas (2009) for an in-depth analysis of the co-constitution of affect and exchange in African contexts and Ferguson (2016) for a discussion on how cultural representations of dependence and emancipation shape social ties in South Africa.

provided is best interpreted as a gift. The generosity and selflessness they demonstrated indeed cannot be measured against my mostly hypothetical contribution to the institutionalization of contemporary Nigerian popular music (which did not require any outside contribution anyway, as the countless publications and documentaries by Nigerian professionals make clear by the day). Rather, as a gift, it initiated a cycle of social exchange, entertaining the sociality at the core of the Nigerian music industry through the deep sense of indebtedness (Graeber 2011) that it created in me. As Africanist literature has shown with respect to contemporary forms of intimacy (Cole and Thomas 2009; Ferguson 2016; Hunter 2002; Machikou and Perseil 2008; D. Smith 2015; Mensah 2020) and artistic practices (Olusoji 2015; Perullo 2011; Pier 2015; Shipley 2009; Shonekan 2013; Stroeken 2005), the very conceptualization of “interested relationship” is analytically problematic. Jesse Shipley (2014) describes how, across the continent, young people recognize that “entrepreneurial capitalism has become a way of life and personal philosophy that blurs the distinctions between commerce and pleasure.” This observation was echoed throughout my fieldwork. The slogan that dominated the Nigerian music industry and youth culture at the time—applying equally to intimate and professional relationships—was indeed: “If it’s not for money or enjoyment, don’t call me.”

One of the main difficulties during fieldwork was to deal with what I perceived as the discrepancy between the hopes that were projected on me by marginalized and aspiring artists, and what I felt able to actually offer, thus dealing with the guilt that comes with privilege. While I routinely sought to bring about new connections through the network I was building, what would eventually come out of it for the people I was trying to help was largely outside of my control. Despite my self-presentation as an anthropologist, I was often assumed to be linked to the professional music scene in Europe, which at the time was not the case. Thus, while these projections largely benefited me, they were also a source of constant pressure, anxiety, and guilt. My efforts seemed ridiculously inadequate in contrast to the tireless hard work I witnessed

all around me. The feeling of unfairness was reinforced by the general awareness that I would one day just leave the country—which eventually happened with 24-hour notice, during the Covid-19 pandemic.

These are precisely the emotions felt by established Nigerian music professionals, as they are the interface to success in the eyes of the masses of youths who see music as a way out of poverty. Constantly navigating between spaces of extreme lack and despair and the projected glamour of hard-working Nigerian music professionals, I rapidly internalized the coping mechanisms of the people around me to block empathy and remain optimistic. To be able to deal with the structural limitations that beset life in Nigeria for the majority of its inhabitants, one has to emphasize the achievability of personal success. When people's horizon barely extends beyond a few decades (life expectancy in Nigeria is 54 years,²¹ and most people do not even hope to survive for that long), only a discourse that promotes work on the self can be felt as empowering, since it emphasizes the transformation of what one has control over within one's life span, reconfiguring structural forces as individual and cultural challenges capable of resolution. Daily life made it rapidly apparent that the reflexive management of appearances constitutive of self-branding afforded both a path to potential recognition and material success and the freedom to perform the life one aspired to. The vocabulary of entrepreneurial capitalism functioned as an idiom, conferring meaning to individual lives otherwise treated as disposable, and to individual efforts that would rationally appear absurd in light of the surrounding challenges.

Yet, while following the dominant norm of hustling and “manifesting” success, many people were simultaneously highly ambivalent about their work on the self, and the power associated with it. Understood under a quasi-religious framework as forces attributed to either instincts, evil, or other people's negative energy, “inner demons” prevented them from

²¹ <https://www.vanguardngr.com/2021/03/life-expectancy-in-nigeria-now-54-years-doctors/>.

deploying the confidence, hope, optimism, and resiliency that constitute positive psychological capital (Luthans and Youssef 2004)—which is a life-or-death resource in contemporary Lagos. The “West,” of which I was enacted as a representative, featured ambiguously in this morally inflected worldview. A common representation among my interlocutors was that Westerners are less materialistic than Nigerians, allowing for the kind introspection and romanticism that young people in Lagos do not have the privilege of indulging in. As a result, my younger and less successful interlocutors would sometimes use the opportunity to meet with a white woman to express feelings and frustrations that their direct environment offered no space for. The fact that I was considered an outsider also resulted in people being more likely to perceive my views of them as relatively inconsequential to the unfolding of their career, and therefore allowed them to confide about their experience or feeling of failure. With women, conversations would systemically veer towards sexual violence and harassment, a determining factor of their life in the music industry. Yet, embracing a strong businesswoman subject position, these female professionals often vehemently rejected any feminist affiliation to instead embrace market-based emancipation strategies—enacting financial success and sexual emancipation as mutually reinforcing, and victimization narratives as their opposite (see Chapter 5). Similarly, men I had spoken with would sometimes regret voicing doubts and opening up about their “weaknesses,” feeling that our conversations had only undermined their determination to succeed, in an environment in which one cannot afford to waste precious time away from the hustle. Indeed, responsibility for their own survival, that of their families and other dependents, for the future of their country and the pan-African community that they identify with, would often be considered worth sacrificing one’s emotional wellbeing.

The thesis aims to reconstitute the embodied ethnographic knowledge gained during my time among Lagos music professionals and the years that followed—during which I have remained in touch with the music industry every day, through social media engagement, private

discussions and participation in group chats with music professionals, and various business initiatives that I was associated to from time to time. Rather than critically analyze the realities that I had access to—which would presuppose a “position of mastery” (Rancière 2004: 49)—the thesis will shed light on the processes that underpin these realities, in an attempt to render their internal logic intelligible to an externally positioned reader. On that basis, it rejects the facile approach that would consist in overstating the importance of “acts of resistance,” conveniently erasing why the dominant logic became dominant in the first place. The lack of interest shown by Western academia in the most commercially successful cultural forms indeed raises several issues, both ethical and empirical. When anthropology or ethnomusicology is prone to celebrate the “alternative” (romanticizing survival strategies while ignoring the capitalist advances that are emically enacted as “progress”), rather than carrying the voice of the voiceless, they are often suppressing the very message that a majority of the people we are purporting to give a voice to are working hard to project out. There is a form symbolic violence in (at best) ignoring, or outright mocking (Comaroff and Comaroff 2009), what for many constitutes the source of a sense of agency, of dignity, and a medium for hopes of future-making in a world order historically stacked against them: the ability to wield as an “asset” the culture that was once (and to some extent still is) instrumentalized to dehumanize. This is one of the main pitfalls around which this research aims to navigate.

Outline of the chapters

The thesis examines the integration of Nigerian music into the global flows of popular culture to understand how mobility, identity, and future-making articulate in the age of global digital media. Taking seriously the individuated mode of cosmopolitan success that Nigerian artists embody, and the popular hopes associated with the symbolic inclusion of “Africa” in the transnational commercial landscape, it shows how imaginative, discursive, and affective

practices interact with political economic processes. The different chapters are based on data collected during a year of physical ethnography in Lagos, several months of participant-observation and interviews in London, Dubai, Istanbul, and Paris, as well as four years of digital ethnography. The first two chapters provide a broad understanding of the Nigerian music industry by foregrounding the different dynamics that delineate its institutionalization process, and the tensions underlying it. The subsequent chapters situate the industry in its direct material and political environment and examine the wider geopolitical and ideological configurations that it both is a product of and, increasingly, contributes to shaping.

Drawing on ethnographic portraits and multi-sited history, the first chapter, “Producing ‘New Afrika’ amidst the new scramble for Africa,” introduces those who are strategically placed in the socio-economic configuration of people, technology, and corporations that constitutes what is popularly known as the “Nigerian music industry.” Straddling the whole social spectrum and self-described as “hustlers,” these music entrepreneurs and corporate managers (often inhabiting these two identities simultaneously) work passionately toward the creation of “New Africa”—which could be described as the postcolonial self-assertion of the continent on the global stage through neoliberal transformation. The chapter will situate the emergence of the current Nigerian music industry materially and symbolically at the junction of various Black Atlantic contexts, with the intensification in the 1990s of circulations, financialization, and the media’s concentration of power resulting in black aspirations and despair being channeled to a commercial media arena with global reach (Ebron 2008; Kitwana 2002; Neal 1997; 2004; Rose 1994). Amidst a scramble for the new “Afrobeats” market by multinational companies steered by highly educated diasporic Nigerians, the music has stylistically evolved away from hip hop toward an asserted idiosyncratic “Afro” artistic identity, which obscures the structural and ideological convergence on which the industry is built. By tracing these connections, the chapter shows how the current music industry emerged from the

privatization era, shaped by globalization and a temporal subjectivity premised on the sense of living in a crisis, which undermines a commonly assumed narrative of the current moment as the takeover of a local industry by transnational capitalism.

The second chapter, “Dancing to the capitalist tune,” brings in the perspectives of more peripheral, yet crucial, actors of the Nigerian music industry, namely dancers and marketing professionals. The chapter explores how corporate brands weave the sociocultural texture of Afropop through their economic, symbolic, and affective functions. With descriptions of the everyday practices that produce interactions between people, brands, and music, it shows how, through various levels of encounter, a system of meaning-making and value is enacted and circulated. From serving as a proxy for “African” emancipation to offering a safeguard of respectability in a context of institutional breakdown, the chapter argues that corporate brands are harnessed as an expressive medium for appropriating and interpreting the late capitalist postcolonial condition and imbuing it with meaning. Through branding as a moral and material practice, the music industry guides a generation in navigating global neoliberal capitalism, while shaping Nigeria’s place in it.

The third chapter, “Hyperconscious dreaming,” grounds the Nigerian music industry through the notion of citizenship. The chapter argues that the industry’s world-making project can only be understood by paying attention to the ruins of the failed postcolonial experiment where it emerged from. Music professionals actively participate in the formation of a new, politically productive, sense of citizenship, wrought in a latent conflict of legitimacy at the national level and expressed in generational terms. Yet, while they feel invested with the responsibility to build functioning structures to fill in for collapsed institutions, the pressure from an environment not only unconducive, but also perceived as an active threat, is often unbearable.

The fourth chapter, “The sonic infrastructure of capitalism,” describes how the embodied subjectivity described in the previous chapter articulates in African youth-driven circulations. The chapter uses Nigerian music in Dubai as a heuristic and ethnographic entry point to argue that the postcolonial and postmodern condition delineates the contours of a regime of instantaneity, instability, and illiberalism that calls for a renewed analytical framework around selfhood, citizenship, and government. With the hyper visibility of Nigerian artists and Nigerian music in Dubai’s commercial spaces decentering historically grounded routes of the “Black Atlantic” (Gilroy 1993) in the construction of globalized modernity, the chapter shows how a political consciousness that shapes expectations for Nigeria’s development path is circulated.

Finally, the fifth chapter, “Capitalist excess and artistic austerity,” integrates the insights from above into an attempt at theorizing the moral economy that governs the Nigerian music industry. As old forms of sociality are increasingly experienced as oppressive through the unrealistic demands they place on young people, their corruption, and their failure to tackle poverty, the music industry is hailed for its capacity to offer a prospect of salvation. The chapter argues that the idiom of individuated modes of hard work and conspicuous success is wielded as a common currency in the self-conscious move to bestow objectivized and universalized “value” on otherwise denigrated atomized identities. The aesthetic-cum-entrepreneurial project of the Nigerian music industry offers an expressive and performative praxis in the service of willful ignorance of economic inequality as the needed way forward *for now*. First and foremost, it hides the violence and inequality which permeates it, as a precondition for action. The deconstruction that often presides to the analysis of African cultural strategies, exposing them as “politically ineffective” or “complicit” (Comaroff and Comaroff 2009; Matlon 2016; Obadare 2016) are therefore largely beside the point here. Already, the content of Nigerian music is changing at breakneck speed, as the major impediment that is access to funding is progressively eased through the foreign investment that Nigerian music professionals prayed

and worked for, bringing a diversity of sounds and narratives that did not exist in the previous decade dominated by telecom-sponsored mass shows. This will surely translate into major ideological shifts whose directions are yet unknown.

Interlude

“You know, I have thought about it, and I do, I definitely want to be a millionaire. And I will,” a Lagos professional dancer, Mo, told me in the course of a personal conversation. Money is a major focus for anyone in the Lagos music industry—especially for the masses of aspiring artists pushing at its door, aspiring to escape poverty—but it hangs particularly ominously over dancers, who at the time were faced with a near-complete lack of avenues for social mobility. Mo and I had often discussed the topic privately. While money is a fixture of informal industry chats, openly questioning the relevance of pursuing it generally seemed off-limit. Being seen as lacking ambition would indeed amount to writing oneself off. An expectation that I had to navigate myself during fieldwork, as my research participants often reminded me that: “It’s time you start making money here.” Being a white woman, having international degrees, all open doors for profitable relationships, and not making the most of available opportunities risked decreasing my reputational capital. Beyond the economic reality, chasing money is a means of relating, of identifying with different kinds of people, irrespective of tribe or social class. My friend had shared his frustration with me about the lack of spaces—both within the industry and his intimate relationships—to question the model of quick and conspicuous wealth that is widely understood as a moral compass in a thinly capitalized industry. He had even taken his distance from the opportunities offered by the music scene, lamenting its overwhelming focus on competition and virality in the absence of adequate commercial structures. He was trying to create a separate dance industry with more artistic autonomy.

He had recently travelled to Ghana for a dance festival, which invited him to teach a class and give a talk. In Accra, the dance community gave him a welcome befitting an international star, with scores of young people chanting his name and asking for selfies every time he entered

the festival grounds. But being the recipient of such respect brings a sense of responsibility. He learnt that the young dancer who organized his stay was facing eviction for unsanitary housing conditions, and every night he was presented with young women; yet he was not able to provide financial help to alleviate his host's predicament and had no money to give to the girls. Little could the Ghanaian fans imagine that the Nigerian dancer they were looking up to had only been able to make the trip from Lagos to Accra by shared car after begging family and friends for money for weeks. He had also needed to set aside extra cash for bribes at the border, to get his passport stamped. Indeed, while informal public transporters advise passengers to simply walk around the West African borders to avoid paying the bribe, my friend was hoping that already having stamps on his passport would help him obtain a French visa to attend a dance festival that invited him to Paris. But how could he ever get an international visa with about US\$100 in his bank account...

After he came back from Ghana, my friend fell into depression. The contrast was too painful between the sense of possibility generated by his successful trip abroad and his inability to fully enact the leadership role expected of him, talk less of enjoying himself, due to financial limitations. This is the context in which he made the above statement. Adding that: "It would be unfair towards the people who look up to me, towards my family and my girlfriend, most importantly it would be unfair towards me to not push myself to try to be rich, it would be so selfish." To aim to be rich was, after all, the best way to fulfil his purpose—and the mission statement in his Instagram biography—"to make the world a better place."

As a dancer, Mo consistently chased commercial opportunities by trying to call the attention of consumer brands such as Coca Cola or Red Bull on social media; and it had sometimes worked, with a Guinness-owned Nigerian liquor brand sponsoring him during six months N50,000 (approx. USD 120) for posting three dance videos a month on his Instagram account, which he would have posted anyway—it was such a good deal that he "almost felt like

[he] was cheating.” As I suggested that he was now a brand ambassador, he responded: “Yea it’s almost something like that,” barely believing it himself, and adding: “It allowed me to pay rent, I lived well.” But only pursuing cash through his passion and talent yet felt irresponsible in an environment plagued by poverty. He refused to pursue crime or money rituals for moral reasons, and because it was incompatible with the reputation or “brand” he sought to establish. And while he had at a point converted from Islam to Christianity, like many in the entertainment industry his relationship to organized religion crumbled following the experience of sexual harassment and the shaming that comes with working at the intersection of “immorality” (the entertainment industry) and poverty. Therefore, while he still believed in God (most of the time), he had little faith in the prosperity gospel.

He thus started to invest his efforts into “business.” “I’ve come to it late, but now I’m enlightened,” he explained, “You know that drummer we saw last time? I asked him: ‘What do you want to achieve with that?’ I see us getting excited, but it doesn’t make sense. If we can’t convert it financially, what’s the point? We are kept ignorant here, it makes me sick. If I go to France, it’s to get a corporate sponsor. See SPAN [the Society for Performing Arts in Nigeria, set up by a Lebanese woman to “empower Nigerian youths through performing arts education and expression”], with this white woman who thinks she knows better than us what is good for us. The dancers go to London and what not, meanwhile they come back and they’re still dirt poor.” On this new-found path, his friend Felix was an important resource. Felix was also a dancer (but worked as a video director to make money). However, he had studied engineering in the UK. His parents were university lecturers, which made him an *ajebutter*, a rich kid who is “more exposed.” Mo had purposefully associated with Felix (as he had done with me), knowing that he could benefit from hanging around someone with “a different mentality.” They now watched YouTube videos together on how to be better business-minded, by American, Chinese, and Emirati coaches. But Mo still had difficulty fully espousing an entrepreneurial

subjectivity, which resulted in repeated fights between them, with Felix blaming him for not being serious and “enjoying poverty.”

Mo’s girlfriend, also a dancer, had always expressed the desire to become a millionaire. A hard worker, she accepts music jobs back-to-back, often stretching her workdays past 24 hours. On her opportunities to rest, during the tedious waiting hours on music video sets and backstage at clubs and concerts, she scrolls through social media. Posts from artists and influencers take her from roadsides to mansions, alternating between Lagos, London, and Dubai—a lifeworld populated by designer brands and private jets. She would describe her activity on social media not as consumption, but as investment. Learning how to market yourself as a content creator is indeed the key for any artist, or perhaps, in a society with limited opportunity, for anyone in general. Her tireless work ethic has allowed her to save, with the prospect of opening a dance studio with Mo, one day. But he explained to her that she would never become a millionaire by teaching dance classes, that she has to start investing on the financial markets. After Felix told them that mutual funds, with their yields of a few percentage points, were useless to get rich, Mo and his girlfriend now considered using her savings to do online trading on the Forex market. Many Lagos creatives indeed venture on the Forex market as part of their hustle, also trading Bitcoin, in which Nigeria has become the global leader even as the government has officially banned it since 2017.

Yet, only a few years after these scenes took place, the “Nigerian music industry” itself has become a viable vehicle for prospects to become a millionaire, following its spectacular integration into the global economy.

Producing “New Afrika” amidst the new scramble for Africa: Transnational circulation and meaning-making in the Nigerian music industry

Introduction

In the early 2020s, Nigerian popular music is taking the world by storm, catapulting to the top of streaming platforms’ charts in what even those most skeptical of Pentecostal claims about thaumaturgic power would describe as nothing short of a miracle. With number one hits from Norway to India,¹ and massive corporate support from Amazon to Google,² what is now known as “Afrobeats”³ is circulating around the world at the speed of digital capitalism. Yet in Lagos, in the midst of celebration, many professionals echo the sentiment of a leading music producer who explained to me: “It’s like a snow globe, from the outside you look at it and it’s all pretty, and we’re in the snow globe, we’re celebrating that everyone is looking at us, not knowing that we are in a snow globe and it’s not real.” Far from basking in the newfound attention, Nigerian music entrepreneurs are focused on the next move: turning the latest fad into sustainable profit locally. In this quest, the word “structure” is ever-present, both a distant horizon and the object of nostalgic longing, as multinational record labels that had supported world-reknown acts such as Fela Kuti, King Sunny Ade, or Majek Fashek, closed their Lagos

¹ “Love Nwantiti” by Ckay was No. 1 in the official singles charts of France, Portugal, the Netherlands, Norway, and India, among others, and reached No. 2 on the Billboard Global 200, while “Essence” by Wizkid was the most played song on Urban Radios in the United States in 2021 and Jerusalema by Burna Boy topped the singles charts in several countries across Europe in 2020.

² Amazon, YouTube (owned by Google), and Spotify, among others, regularly include Nigerian artists in their marketing campaigns, erecting billboards across the worlds’ major commercial and cultural hubs (Time Square in New York City, Shoreditch in London, Century Boulevard in Los Angeles, etc.) to promote Afrobeats releases. These companies have also set up various programs to put the spotlight on new artists, which Nigerian artists have significantly benefitted from. Increasingly, established Nigerian artists also provide platforms with exclusives, such as online concerts, interviews, or documentaries.

³ “Afrobeats” and “Afropop” are used interchangeably in this chapter and throughout the thesis (see Introduction-Definitions).

offices in the wake of Nigeria's economic collapse at the end of the past century.

Born out of privatization and technological innovation, the booming Lagos⁴ music industry is the result of a two-decade grassroots effort to survive and rebuild on socioeconomic ruins. After the structural adjustment program (SAP) and devaluations wreaked havoc on an already devastated Nigerian economy (Anyanwu 1992), the "hip hop generation"⁵ set out to grow what would become the contemporary Nigerian music industry. The style and discourse it produces has since evolved towards an asserted idiosyncratic "Afro" identity, even interpreted sometimes in contrast to what is viewed as hip hop's corrupted relation to Western capitalism.⁶ Yet American hip hop continues to provide the ideological reference and the concrete junction point for Nigerian music's commercial success internationally.⁷ As a music and digital technology executive put it during a round-table discussion in Lagos: "You know how hip hop evolved and was the first Black genre to go global, so Afrobeats is the next thing like that."⁸ In the 2000s, anthropologist Paulla Ebron argued with regard to hip hop that "Black social and political aspirations . . . can no longer be separated from corporate globalization itself" (Ebron 2008: 328); reciprocally, the large-scale commercialization of Afrobeats cannot be understood without considering the pursuit of emancipation that it carries.

⁴ "Lagos" and "Nigerian" will be used interchangeably in this chapter and throughout the thesis (see Introduction-Definitions).

⁵ Both practitioners and scholars consensually acknowledge that what is today referred to as the Nigerian music industry emerged through the appropriation of American hip hop (most notably, Forchu 2009; Omoniyi 2009; Adedeji 2010; Künzler 2011; Okuyade 2011; Liadi 2012; Shonekan 2012; Adedeji 2013; Inyabri 2013; Olusegun-Joseph 2014; Strong and Ossei-Owusu 2014; Fasan 2015; Olusoji 2015; Osiebe 2016; Adedeji 2017; Gbogi 2019), with all the pioneer music professionals I interviewed self-identified as members of the "hip hop generation."

⁶ Ethnography reveals a common perception by the African American public that Nigerian music is less misogynistic and materialistic than American hip hop. See also Ebron (2008).

⁷ Through countless collaborations and informal referrals, as well as cross promotions. Nigerian artists and music professionals have also plugged themselves to more artist-centric distribution networks built by the American hip hop community. Even though Afrobeats is increasingly linked to global pop, the initial crossover was allowed by support from the African American community.

⁸ Oye Akideinde, at the online round-table discussion "Comparative perspectives on the Nigerian film and music industries: African creative industries and international platforms", organised on the 28th of April 2022 as part of the FASOPO research project "La fabrique des communautés imaginées : liens sociaux, filières économiques et enjeux politiques des industries culturelles en Afrique."

At this new historical conjuncture, the window of opportunity offered by Nigerian music's international circulation delineates a trajectory for young Nigerians to invest their efforts towards socioeconomic progress, in an environment providing otherwise very limited prospects. Grounded in generational fault lines, there is a drive to seize upon the performative power of digital tools to materialize aspirations to independence and self-assertion when traditional politics seem locked by a prebendalist gerontocracy. Navigating between multinational corporations and masses of aspiring artists who see music as a way out of poverty, music professionals have a heightened awareness of the political stakes associated with the entertainment industry in a discredited institutional context. As liminal agents who increasingly serve as an interface to world-making projects, they trade in hope locally while propelling a carefully packaged Afro-optimist vision into the commercial channels that shape globally dominant representations. Indeed, beyond discursive practices that foreground a rhetorical "Africa" and "youth," the goal of changing the perception of the African continent and its place in transnational flows of capital, images, and symbolic meaning has become embedded in everyday activities.

In this chapter, I will situate the Nigerian music industry's recent engagement with international capital and digital tools in the social and historical context of a generation that came of age in the wake of crisis and privatization to show that, even as—or precisely because—most Nigerians feel stuck and intensely longing for an "elsewhere" synonymous with better life, circulation and integration into transnational commercial networks have defined the Nigerian music industry through its creation of new subject positions. Shaped by globalization and a temporal subjectivity premised on the sense of living in a crisis, young Nigerians have rebuilt a functional music ecosystem in a context of devastation—ultimately inserting themselves into the circuits of global pop music without the structures that had supported the stars of the previous century. The Nigerian music industry's historical development shows that

young cosmopolitan entrepreneurs who navigate the migration and commercial flows of globalization provide a main heuristic entry point to grasp the industry's underlying dynamics. Through a dual empirical grounding that straddles geographically and socially distinct locations, the ethnography that informs this chapter reflects the diversity of actors who carry the contemporary industry. It relies namely on the case study of a partnership between indigenous record label Aristokrat Records and the French entity of the world's largest music conglomerate, Universal Music, on the one hand, and the "hustle" of two young entrepreneurs who negotiate migration constraints and economic opportunities along the Nigerian ethnoscape to serve as intermediaries in Nigerian music's independent transnational economic networks, on the other hand.

In a first section, I will provide a brief overview of recent historical forces that have shaped the emergence and development of what is commonly referred to as the "new" Nigerian music industry. The economic system and ideological paradigms born out of Nigeria's experience of boom and bust followed by the global neoliberal reform context of the 1980s and 1990s indeed remain key to understanding the current (neo)internationalization of the Nigerian music industry. With marginalization and exclusion (and the coterminous humanitarian/development initiatives) associated with abjection in the African continent's experience of neoliberal globalization, yearnings for convergence with an imagined global cultural standard—or engagement with it through what Wilk calls "categorical equality" (1995)—even under initial conditions of inequality and dependence, rather than the assertion of "independence" or "cultural difference," have constituted the most compelling political demands (Ferguson 2006; Weiss 2009; Piot 2010; Perullo 2011; Burrell 2012; Matlon 2016; Piot 2019). In the pursuit of participation in the global ecumene and economic emancipation, music professionals have adopted strongly entrepreneurial subjectivities and are eager to

establish and harness technologies and relationships even if they are steeped in power differentials.

In a second section, I will show that as Lagos music professionals' world-making project certainly fantasizes participation in global capitalism, it has to provide more benefits than nominal membership. The export potential of Nigerian music that became evident in recent years is seen as an opportunity to convince outside investors and partners and unlock resources to develop an ecosystem enabling sustained and broader revenue generation locally. As the ethnography shows, the goal of music professionals is indeed to consolidate and restructure the industry to render it less dependent on volatile private wealth and corporate endorsements, thus ensuring its future independence. After being largely funded by untraceable wealth, the industry in the 2010s grew on the back of extreme intertwinement with consumer brands, in the absence of an adequate royalty collection system. Despite conflicting artistic visions and timelines, Nigerian corporate managers⁹ shared in the moral economy that presented the commercialization of Nigerian music as a project of historical significance, shaping a national demand at the same time as opening new avenues for Nigerian creativity, all contributing to firmly embed Nigeria into "global modernity" (Dirlik 2007). "Global" here is not a euphemism for Euro-America, and must be understood instead as the refusal of passive dependence on a metropole, with local players firmly writing themselves in a new, decentered world (Mbembe 2016). I will show how several Western music corporations recently learnt that the hard way, with the empirical cases departing from conceptualizations of power dynamics as a dichotomy between powerless local entrepreneurs and hegemonic multinational corporations grounded in cultural imperialism, to foreground instead cosmopolitan, highly educated youths who steer the

⁹ Telecom companies were particularly influential on African popular culture in the 2010s, when the Nigerian music industry was booming, then progressively replaced by banks and fast-moving consumer goods. It can further be argued that the commercial development of the (new) Nigerian music industry really started through the involvement of British American Tobacco-owned brand Benson & Hedges' with popular music at the turn of the millennium.

internationalization process, drawing on local sociability networks while using foreign resources, especially digital tools.

The third section will shift the focus from the structures that act as the flagships of the Nigerian music industry in its integration into the global economy to “hustlers” who work in parallel to corporate capitalism, operating on the fringes and interstices deemed unprofitable or out of reach to large corporations, contributing to Nigerian music’s transnational ubiquity. I will ultimately bring these socially and geographically distinct locations in conversation to situate the music industry in the shifting paradigms that shape new political subjectivities, and discuss its consequences for political movement. A product of neoliberal reform, the music industry represents and neutralizes the contestation of various power dynamics. While globalization and privatization have increased inequality (Ifeakachukwu 2020), music has provided a prominent cultural vehicle for the ideological convergence between, on the one hand, the new neoliberal values of the middle-class: flexibility, entrepreneurialism, postcolonial self-assertion and self-invention (Freeman 2007), and, on the other hand, a form of being-in-the-world grounded in “hustling,” which is a conceptual frame originally deployed to characterize the urban poor’s everyday management of uncertainty in Lagos and other African megacities (Di Nunzio 2015; Thieme 2018). Following a diasporic, fluid, and fluctuating network of mostly young men who harness music for social and geographic mobility, I will show that the “particular culture of circulation” (Shipley 2013: 364) that emerged in Africa following liberalization has created a “transnational consciousness” (Vertovec 2009) in reverse, where millions at home analyze their own situations and conceptualize progress in spatial terms. Dubai, especially, has emerged as a discursive space for the formation of ideas of both selfhood and government through online platforms, constructing expectations for individual and developmental trajectories. Situated at the intersection of two defining tropes of contemporary capitalism, the black male performing artist (Dyson 2007; Ebron 2008; Hill Collins 2005;

Matlon 2016; Neal 2004; Rose 2008; Shipley 2013; Smith 2003) and the autocratic neoliberal city-corporation (Davis and Monk 2007; Kanna 2010; Buckley 2013; Kathiravelu 2015; Kanna *et al.* 2020), the early success of Nigerian music in Dubai decenters the historically grounded routes of the “Black Atlantic” (Gilroy 1993) to suggest a renewed epistemological framework for the study of the contemporary process of internationalization through South-South interactions.

Setting the stage: Economic transformations and the emergence of new ideological paradigms

The 1980s and 1990s in Lagos were marked by crisis, as the oil-fueled euphoria of the previous decade abruptly came to an end with money drying up and the state withdrawing from social and developmental fields. That dramatic period’s effects continue to be felt more than any other in living memory, with the ensuing trauma informing much of the motives and cultural representations deployed in the contemporary structures of popular culture. The economic collapse was “productive” in the Foucauldian sense (Piot 2010: 3), giving rise to new modes of being-in-the-world, built on “hustling” and rooted in a moral economy of survival. In this section, I will first provide a brief overview of the crisis and privatization era and its direct consequences on the Nigerian music industry of the time, as well as the more far-reaching consequences on the national psyche that linger even in the contemporary moment of booming cultural production. I will then describe how the current Nigerian music industry emerged from the global neoliberal reform context of the 1980s and 1990s, with its practices and cultural representations embedded in both the Nigerian context and the transnational network spawned by that era’s mass migration.

Nigeria gained independence from the United Kingdom in 1960, ushering to Lagos a period of optimism grounded in the reappropriation of colonial positivist teleologies (Apter 1996; Adebani and Obadare 2010; Piot 2010). The postcolonial vision of utopian

modernization and welfarist development was boosted by the discovery of oil in commercial quantity in the late 1960s (Frynas 2000; Ekanade 2014). Many average Nigerians were carried by the state-driven enthusiasm, as “the government built new highways, doubled government salaries in the famous Udoji Reform, and expanded the public sector with new hospitals, schools, and parastatal industries” (Apter 1996: 443). This spectacular growth was mirrored in the arts, with the emergence of the first superstar musicians in the 1970s. In addition to the governmental administrative class that rose to prominence through its control of oil resources, the oil economy also fueled a private sector bourgeoisie involved in finance, trade, construction, and investment; both of which showered musicians with cash, who in turn also invested in real estate, record labels, consumer goods, among others, making some of them millionaires (Alaja-Browne 1989, Waterman 1990).

This context gave a boost to the Lagos music industry that had emerged in the interwar period. In the continuity of the colonial order, it was organized around a few European companies that held control over the manufacturing of records, and indigenous entrepreneurs mediating access to local musicians and audiences. In the wake of the oil boom, flourishing popular music genres such as Juju and Fuji relied on a symbiotic relationship with elite members of society, with the broader public only playing an indirect role. Music indeed functioned as a key instrument in what Andrew Apter calls the “rational investment in symbolic and social capital,” the main outlet for the privately appropriated proceeds of oil (2005: 39; Ellis 2016: 100). Lavish private parties sprang up as arenas for the display of newly acquired wealth, with the aim of building alliances and assert one’s reputation as a “big man” (Alaja-Browne 1989). The professional trajectory of artists first involved popularity among elites, which gave access to recording opportunities, leading to a popularity among the growing class of wealthy Africans who could afford to purchase gramophones, in turn offering opportunities to perform at private celebrations, the major source of income for artists. This preserved

Western companies' structurally key position through their monopoly over the physical infrastructure of mass-reproduced music. While several Nigerian-owned record labels blossomed in the 1970s, multinationals also considerably increased their presence in Lagos. Sony Music¹⁰, for instance, would go one to nurture some of Nigeria's biggest stars in a variety of genres, such as Shina Peters for Juju, Adewale Ayuba and Abass Obesere for Fuji, Lagbaja! for Afrobeat, Majek Fashek for reggae.

By the 1980s the turnaround in the oil markets had exposed the fragility of the Nigerian economy, shrouded in endemic corrupt practices. This ushered in an ever-unfolding political and economic crisis, consecrated by International Monetary Fund mandated SAP (Anyanwu 1992). One of the immediate consequences for the Lagos music industry was the withdrawal of foreign companies. Sony Music relocated to South Africa, while EMI, which had launched the career of music icon Fela Kuti, transferred its regional headquarters to Abidjan (Servant 2003: 34, Adedeji 2010). Political uncertainty, rampant piracy, and currency plunge upended the internationally ordered structure that had supported the rise of Lagos popular music as a feature of modern Nigeria. This led to the collapse of the local music ecosystem by the end of the decade. The implementation of the SAP from 1986 further decimated the local scene by paving the way for mass importation of foreign music. In 1992, regulatory control of broadcasting and telecommunications was transferred from government ministries to two new regulatory bodies, whose powers were extended in 1998 and 1999 to further liberalize these sectors.¹¹ Private TV and radio channels proliferated, hungry for content, resulting in a flow of Western sounds, images, and narratives (Barber 1997: 7). Wilson Akpan (2006) describes how in the 1990s, mediated by a South African broadcasting company, the Nigerian public sphere was inundated

¹⁰ Sony Music Nigeria was originally a subsidiary of the American CBS Records, which was later bought out by Sony International.

¹¹ Accessed on 24 August 2018, http://www.africa.upenn.edu/ECA/aisi_inftl.html

by content from American media conglomerate Viacom, in particular music videos (2006: 99-100; see also Shonekan 2013).

The collapse of the Lagos music industry thus coincided with dramatic changes in the lives of Nigerians, tying extreme privation and the erosion of political and cultural sovereignty to the brutal severance of neocolonial ties. Western companies scrambled to disinvest from Nigeria, in what can best be described as “rats leaving the sinking ship.” As the crisis put an end to the ideological hope and postcolonial optimism that prevailed in the decades following independence, the ensuing time is usually evoked through the affective registers of loss and trauma. The loss of prospects above all, as the absorption capacity of strong states had meant, until then, that education led to jobs. But contemporary Lagosians also fondly remember the international brands that populated the landscape of the “lost” era seeped in nostalgia. Thus, suffering, at the turn of the twenty-first century, came to be associated with exclusion from the international economic order. This collective experience marks a subjective reordering away from the value of independence traditionally deployed by African nationalism, as often taken for granted in postcolonial theory, and remains crucial to understand contemporary Nigerian society—in particular, the music industry.

As Lagos music professionals had to rebuild a functional system in that context of marginalization, the industry’s trajectory has involved progressively inserting Nigerian music into the transnational circuits of pop music without the structures that had supported the stars in the previous decades. A process culminating in the contemporary moment, with multinational companies—from record labels to digital platforms and luxury brands—now vying for access to Nigerian artists. This is the result of the entrepreneurial efforts of post-liberalization generations of Nigerian youths. In the following paragraphs, I will describe how the current music industry emerged from the privatization era, shaped by globalization and a temporal subjectivity premised on the sense of living in a crisis. Beyond the music and culture, people

also circulated, bringing back new ideas and values, business practices, professional equipment. In doing so, they emphasized their flexibility and adaptability, in opposition to a decaying authoritarian leadership and old forms of sociability experienced as increasingly oppressive and corrupt.

Transnational in reach and hybridized in nature, the new Nigerian music industry was shaped through the interactions of actors evolving in different environments traditionally examined separately, embedded in larger economic and social conditions of flexibility. The historical conjuncture of African Americans' socioeconomic exclusion in the wake of deindustrialization and privatization (following their prior exploitation) and corporate media's new concentration of power resulted in black aspirations and despair being channeled to a commercial media arena with global ambitions (Rose 1994; Neal 1997; Kitwana 2002; Neal 2004; Ebron 2008). In *The Hip Hop Generation*, Bakari Kitwana explains that "powerful and pervasive technological advances and corporate growth" (2002: 7) mean that mass-mediated musical expression became a vehicle to reconstitute the black community at the turn of the century (see also Neal 1997: 126; 131). As a consequence of deregulation in the entertainment and media sector, corporate-backed African American culture achieved a high level of circulation and homogeneity that allowed for easy appropriation, at the same time as African economies were being forcefully liberalized to receive it. This resulted in the forging of a generational "imagined community" across national boundaries (Osumare 2005; Ebron 2008; Weiss 2009; Perullo 2011; Shonekan 2012; Shipley 2013).

African Americans and Nigerians were simultaneously experiencing the steady growth of the black middle class coming to an end following two decades of intense hope to overcome a shared, though distinct history of racial capitalism¹² (Matlon 2016: 1033). The emerging hip hop culture provided a way to work through the new conditions of economic and social

¹² Through the civil rights movement and decolonization, respectively.

insecurity, with the contradictions encapsulated in flexible accumulation—the intersection of lack and desire—not only reflected in it, but functioning as its driving force. Hip hop could indeed repurpose the places, people, and social institutions that postindustrial neoliberalism rendered useless (Rose 1994: 71). As the historical elements below will show, the current Nigerian music industry was built literally, materially, at the junction of various Black Atlantic contexts, with hip hop as its main frame of stylistic and ideological reference.

The renaissance of the Nigerian music scene through the appropriation of hip hop has been the subject of countless studies (most notably, Forchu 2009; Omoniyi 2009; Adedjei 2010; Künzler 2011; Okuyade 2011; Liadi 2012; Shonekan 2012; Adedjei 2013; Inyabri 2013; Olusegun-Joseph 2014; Strong and Ossei-Owusu 2014; Fasan 2015; Olusoji 2015; Osiebe 2016; Adedjei 2017; Gbogi 2019). In the two doctoral theses devoted to the music industry, the Nigerian authors emphasize the centrality of American hip hop’s influence through their own biographical accounts: “I noticed the influx of American rap that changed the way we perceive music during the arrival of independent F. M. radio stations . . . and also felt a connection with the genre as a culture that had a lot to offer,” Adewale Adedjei explains from the outset (2010: 15); while Tosin Gbogi evokes the stylistic community around American hip hop that shaped his childhood,¹³ concluding: “All these, of course, point in one direction: the ubiquity of American hip hop music and culture was inescapable and dotted the 1990s Nigerian noisescapes and muscapes in large measures” (2019: 56). Examining this phenomenon critically, Professor of Afro-American Studies Stephanie Shonekan claimed that “there is a complete take-over of the psyche of young Nigerians [by U.S. hip hop]” (2013: 190). The hyper-visibility of African American success in the new configuration of global capitalism that had brutally excluded Nigerian youths fed a need for belonging and positive identification. The key figures

¹³ “In our town, I remember that high school students formed small notorious gangs that were meant to replicate the sorts in Los Angeles . . . who of course would dress in the manner of their favorite artists” (2019: 56).

who laid the foundations of the current Lagos music industry at the turn of the century all identify as members of the “hip hop generation.” Virtually all gained their initial experience abroad, with a sense of self rooted in a transnational cultural sphere. Indeed, just as the global offensive of U.S.-based mass media and consumer brands was propelling African American entertainers’ visibility to new frontiers, the aggressive Nigerian austerity measures from the 1980s also triggered a process of mass emigration to the United States and the United Kingdom (Mberu and Pongou 2010; Odoemene and Osuji 2015).

One of the structures most widely acknowledged as the foundation to what is now called the “Afrobeats” industry is the Nigerian record label Kennis Music (Adedeji, 2010: 120; Inyabiri, 2013: 3). Thanks to a strategic position at the end of the 1990s, its founders, Kehinde “Kenny” Ogungbe et Dayo “D1” Adeneye, were able to harness the reach of the emerging private mass media on the one hand, and to insert music into the budding sponsorship economy on the other—thus paving the way for the commercial circulation and cultural impact that would come to define Afrobeats. Kenny Ogungbe and D1 both studied abroad, in historically black public universities in Louisiana. They were gaining their first experiences in media in Los Angeles at the onset of West Coast hip hop’s airwave dominance when Nigeria initiated the privatization of the audiovisual sector under the leadership of military dictator Ibrahim Babangida. The very first license was awarded in 1994 to DAAR Communications, owned by Raymond Dokpesi, who launched the radio station RayPower FM. It was followed, two years later, by the first satellite TV network, with the license also being granted to Dokpesi, allowing him to launch African Independent Television (AIT). As Kenny Ogungbe became Raymond Dokpesi’s brother-in-law, he and D1 landed leadership positions within the rising Nigerian media empire upon their return from the United States. This is the platform that they would use to support the new Nigerian music, known as “Afro hip hop” or “Naija hip hop,” that was emerging at the time: first via a TV show, “AIT Jamz,” showcasing the new scene, then through

the heavy rotation of the songs produced by their record label, Kennis Music, and later harnessing corporate relationships with DAAR's advertisers to create stars.

This context is all the more important that, stylistically, Nigerian music has now evolved away from hip hop toward an asserted idiosyncratic "Afro" artistic identity,¹⁴ obscuring the structural and ideological convergence it is built on.¹⁵ Yet to this day, when music industry professionals are asked about their main inspiration, the response is unfailingly either Jay-Z or P Diddy—the quintessential American hip hop capitalists. In 2022, the Headies, Nigeria's leading music awards show (itself originally an extension of Hip Hop World Magazine), will no longer be held in Lagos, but in Atlanta. What binds actors whose claimed locations straddle distinct cultural and geographical spheres, then, is aspiration—a shared subjective orientation that empowers the individual in the face of institutional failure. While previous generations had already been influenced by African American music genres since the 1950s (Shonekan 2013: 183), the metanarrative offered by the "hip hop mogul" figure in the 1990s indicates a paradigmatic shift in the moral economy of black music (Smith 2003; Neal 2004). The "aesthetic of entrepreneurship" deployed by hip hop stars now became posited as a political act itself that has resonated with marginalized communities internationally (Neal 2004: 160; Shipley 2009)—with the emerging "empires" shaping both collective aspirations and the way in which people pursue them. A visual signifier for the "good life," these personal displays of extreme wealth acquisition are imbued with utopian political meaning that have rendered the impassioned speeches of past civil rights or anticolonial figures largely irrelevant (Kitwana 2002: 7; Smith 2003: 81–82; Neal 2004: 173–179).

¹⁴ With artistic influence increasingly going in the other direction, from Nigerian music towards American hip hop and beyond.

¹⁵ The new Nigerian music industry used to be known as the "Afro hip hop" or 'Naija hip hop' industry, before evolving towards "Afropop" / "Afrobeats".

The global turn: “Africa to the world”

Over the past decade, Nigerian artists have invested the global pop scene, proclaiming to “take Africa to the world.” As described above, this is the result of the entrepreneurial efforts of now successive generations of educated and cosmopolitan youths who first laid the ground infrastructure for a new indigenous music industry following the departure of Western labels from Africa in the late 20th century, and, more recently, have been plugging Lagos artists to the cogs of multinational corporations. In the first section, I showed that the concern with (re)building Nigeria’s ties to the international economy through cultural participation has been an implicit driving force of the Nigerian music industry, as it carries the historically situated world-making aspirations of a generation that has experienced oppression as exclusion. In this section, I will describe how this ideological and economic orientation shapes the contemporary dynamics of the industry, as players seek to redirect flows of capital through international partnerships. Nigerian record label Aristokrat Records will serve as an ethnographic entry point, with the label entering into a joint venture with the French entity of the world’s largest music conglomerate, Universal Music, in 2020.

The story of Aristokrat Records started in the late 2000s, spanning three continents both simultaneously and successively. It links cosmopolitan youths destined for bright corporate careers, able to mobilize resources in Nigeria through kinship networks. This was the time when digital platforms were emerging, such as social media website MySpace (2003), the video sharing platform YouTube (2005), and the Nigerian diasporic music download website NotJustOk (2006). Piriye Isokrari founded Aristokrat Records upon his return to Nigeria after studying economics in Oklahoma, enrolling other Nigerians he had met in the United States, online or offline, as business partners. As students, they had become involved in the music scene through the Caribbean music infrastructure thriving across America. Piriye envisioned that African music could ultimately enjoy a similar international expansion. As he formally

founded Aristokrat Records in 2009 in the oil-rich Nigerian city of Port Harcourt, family ties provided revenues and later a space to sustain his music venture, at a time when Nigerian music was still largely sponsored by dirty money.¹⁶ The record label started off by discovering and developing Burna Boy, who had just returned from the United Kingdom with strong Jamaican influences, and who would go on to become arguably Africa's biggest global pop star.

Piriye recalls the sponsorship deal between Burna Boy and Nigerian telecom operator Globacom in 2013 as a key milestone in the artist's and the label's trajectories. In addition to being one of the few financial opportunities at the time, Burna Boy's collaboration with the telecom operator served as a vehicle for national promotion, as the artist's face now appeared on recharge cards sold at every street corner across the country. Nigerian music professionals have kept on building new avenues of monetization through partnerships with a wide array of corporations looking to harness artists' star power and hyper consumption for their marketing campaigns. Ten years after it was set up, in 2019, Aristokrat Records was still barely turning a profit and had to remain backed by real estate and oil revenue derived from Piriye's family business. In the absence of a functioning royalty collection system, and with the slow penetration of legal streaming platforms, music itself has indeed hardly been generating profit for Nigerian record labels—especially as artists often leave the structure that invested in them once they reach success. Consumer brands, then, have functioned as the backbone of legal income. Through a consulting services subsidiary, Aristokrat Group provides content creation and experiential marketing solutions to global brands such as Coca Cola, Hennessy, or Uber, leveraging its music expertise and connections for the multinationals' marketing campaigns in Nigeria. Nearly all public shows in Nigeria also rely on corporate sponsors (often accounting for more than half of the budget), and artists must perform back-to-back to make up for the financial uncertainty they otherwise face. During the December 2019 concert season, Burna

¹⁶ Accessed on 18 April 2020, <https://atavist.mg.co.za/dancing-to-the-beat-of-the-419/>

Boy, accompanied by Piriye, was often juggling 3-4 shows a night, flying private jets between locations when needed.

The success of Nigerian music has generally been discursively constructed around milestones that involve symbols of the global economy, from the first major corporate sponsorship deal with a pop artist, 2face Idibia with Guinness in 2005, to Wizkid walking the runway for Dolce & Gabbana in Milan in 2018, or the countless billboards sponsored by Amazon, YouTube, or Apple promoting Nigerian artists in New York's Times Square. The case of Aristokrat Records helps understand the structural role of consumer brands, and why they have come to shape the contours of collective aspirations. Far from being the preserve of corporate cosmopolitans, the concern with Nigerians' inclusion in the transnational capitalist landscape is widely understood as directly linked to the conditions of existence of the population at large. A perfectly legitimate view, given how of much Nigeria's reality has historically been, and still is, determined by external forces. Endorsements by large corporations are thus viewed as markers of professionalization and progress—celebrated in blogs and the popular press—and widely resonate with the public in an economy plagued by the lack of consistent revenue streams.

Beyond one-off deals with multinationals that provide a source of cash flow and marketing support, music industry professionals have actively sought to conclude structural partnerships with international players. There is a widely shared sense that the industry has been ushering in a new phase, with the full internationalization and corporate restructuring of Nigerian music. The export potential of Nigerian music that has become evident in recent years has prompted every established local actor to rush to convince outside investors and partners in an attempt to secure a “cleaner,” more sustainable and profitable value chain that would allow for capacity-building at scale. The goal of leading music professionals is indeed to consolidate and restructure the industry to allow for institutional investment and bank lending, thus

rendering it less dependent on volatile private wealth and corporate endorsements, but also, in what may appear as a paradox, to ensure its future independence. Lagos artists and music professionals indeed feel very strongly that they have a window of opportunity to compete on a global level, and thereby realize the ultimate ambition of overcoming the exclusion faced by Africans as a whole. This is seen as a step towards achieving substantive equality, beyond the formal equality ushered in by decolonization and democratization. The historical elements presented in the previous section help situate the widely held view that active participation in neoliberal globalization is the only path forward. Highly aware of capitalist appropriation and extraction of value along North-South relational lines, Nigerian music professionals seek to create structures that ensure control over the value produced by the industry within a transnationally connected system. With a view that wealth accruing to Nigerian players will trickle down to local communities, their capitalist outlook is steeped in nationalist politics.

This posture, however, is not a clearly delineated path. Rather, it is a self-conscious journey of constant negotiation, and a matter of heated internal debate. The responsibility that Nigerian music professionals feel for the industry's development involves significant anxiety, as they find themselves without protection or guidance by government authorities—and even in defiance of the government, as the case of the #EndSARS protests detailed in chapter 3 shows. After two decades building a functional, though fragile, music industry off the ground, the concern is that foreign players would come and reap the profits—potentially sabotaging what has been achieved in the process. Multinational music and media corporations, both the traditional players and the flagships of the new economy, have indeed signed partnerships, opened offices, or invested equity in the Nigerian music scene. Aristokrat Records offers an insight into the subjective experience and concrete efforts of Lagos music professionals as they attempt to establish sustainable and efficient “structures” amidst intense competition and global corporate interest. One ongoing concern is to strike a balance between the entrepreneurial

inclination for competition that has driven the industry to this day, and the recognition that at this historical conjuncture cooperation is required to defend the Nigerian music industry's interests.¹⁷

Several years before the “major” record labels¹⁸ invested in Nigeria, a Dubai-based venture capital fund, steered by a Jamaican-born law and business graduate of an American university, saw the commercial potential of growing Nigerian music to the next level. Contrary to the later attempt by multinational companies to recreate their business structure in Nigeria, the investment fund supported the consolidation of existing indigenous record labels under an overarching corporate group to create a globally competitive entity. Aristokrat Records was a member alongside the record label founded by pioneer Afrobeats artist 2Face Idibia, and Piriye took a senior executive position at the helm of the newly created entity, itself co-founded by 2Face's widely respected manager. The experiment failed to bring together enough industry players, at a time when Nigerian music had not yet achieved enough traction outside of Africa. It remains seen as a missed opportunity for Nigerian music professionals to develop a more sustainable and internationally integrated business model on their own terms. Such an opportunity came again in 2019 for another Nigerian record label, Mavin Records, which secured investment from one of the world's leading private investment firm, after a two-year due diligence process.

The question of internationalization—on which (and whose) terms—is problematized in a very self-aware and political manner within the Lagos music industry. Artists and music professionals are largely cognizant of the power dynamics at play, and the associated risks. They make decisions based on the optimization of the resources available, locally and

¹⁷ Accessed on 23 July 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zEkDIR-MweE&t=927s&ab_channel=TEDxTalks

¹⁸ The Association of Independent Music defines a “major” as a multinational company which (together with the companies in its group) has more than 5% of the world market(s) for the sale of records or music videos.

internationally. After Burna Boy's contract with Aristokrat Records ended in 2016, the artist met the New Zealander and Nigerian American music entrepreneurs who had just started a joint venture with multinational Atlantic Records that would take him all over the world. The deal that Burna Boy signed specifically excluded Africa, at the strong request of his mom (who also acts as his manager). Her reasoning was that no company from outside Africa could possibly bring any added value to her son's business on the continent. Remaining in charge of the African side of the business would also give Burna Boy's team access to direct cash, making the artist *de facto* free to pursue projects unconstrained by the timelines and budgets of big corporations. Furthermore, the artist's "brand" and career defining decisions remained in the hands of a Nigerian trusted circle, including his mom as manager, his sister as creative director, a Lagos-based Press Relations guru as marketing strategist, among others, with ongoing business relations with Aristokrat Records, with Piriye now acting as consultant.

Due to their social position, artists are seen as responsible for far more than their individual success, mediating North-South relationships through the decisions they make for their careers. Though there had been prior instances of international deals in the new Nigerian pop industry (P-Square, D'Banj, Tiwa Savage), such negotiations became a structural question starting in 2016, when Sony Music (re)opened an office in Lagos—paving the way for what would be a scramble for the new "Afrobeats" market by multinational companies, steered by highly educated diasporic Nigerians. The renewed presence of a major record label in Lagos was initially widely celebrated.¹⁹ At the time, the two most prominent stars in Nigeria (and arguably Africa), Davido and Wizkid, quickly signed deals with Sony Music International, through the brokerage of a prominent Nigerian music entrepreneur based between Atlanta and Los Angeles, and with the support of a Nigerian American senior level executive, respectively.

¹⁹ In the past, Sony Music Nigeria (originally a subsidiary of the American CBS Records, until it was bought out by Sony International) had indeed nurtured some of Nigeria's biggest stars in a variety of genres, such as Shina Peters for Juju, Adewale Ayuba and Abass Obesere for Fuji, Lagbaja! for Afrobeat, Majek Fashek for reggae.

The photos of the signings flooded social media feeds and news sites. Though, technically, Davido and Wizkid's contracts were with the American entity, the moves were part of Sony Music's strategy to signal its entrance on Nigeria's booming "Afrobeats" market. But unlike the Sony Music Nigeria structure of the twentieth century, which had a national chain of distribution through branch markets across the country, the new Sony Music presence in Nigeria involved minimum investment. It was a one-man shop led by a British Nigerian music entrepreneur and former investment banker, who was developing his own company on the side. Three years later, as he left his position at Sony Music, his personal company had opened one of the most state-of-the-art music facilities in West Africa, a multipurpose space of stunning architectural design, while Sony was barely existing in the Nigerian music landscape.

The initial projects released by Davido and Wizkid under their Sony Music deals both flopped, and the artists blamed it on the major record label. The consensus within the industry was that Nigerian brokers/label executives had pushed the deals to pocket the commission/meet their corporate targets, but the label had no strategy or support available for the new Nigerian signees. Both artists quickly bounced back, with Wizkid taking advantage of a contractual loophole to release a string of hits through his personal label, and Davido renegotiating his contract to bring back his original manager, a 26-year-old super connected childhood friend, with whom he went on to take the United States by storm through an independent public relations offensive, spending his own funds and relying on the newly found interest of African Americans for contemporary African culture. Western record labels' attempts at organizing intercontinental collaborations for Nigerian artists have indeed often proved fraught with the labels' own notoriously poor relations with American and European "urban" artists, revealing the complex entanglement of race, class, and nationality as players navigate internal power dynamics across the different markets of the "Black Atlantic" (Gilroy 1993). Nigerian professionals have thus found it more efficient to rely on interpersonal relationships with well-

connected individuals of African descent to reach international stars. It is also a way to foster independence and a sense of community even as large corporations *de facto* mediate the growing interactions between diversely situated postcolonial youths.²⁰

The empirical reality of the internationalization of the Nigerian music industry thus transcends a conceptualization of power dynamics as a dichotomy between powerless local entrepreneurs and hegemonic international corporations, foregrounding instead cosmopolitan, highly educated youths, who can draw on local sociability networks while using foreign resources, such as education or corporate capital. A year after Sony Music had entered the Nigerian market, its competitor Universal Music also opened an office in Lagos. There was hope, and tangible signs, that Universal Music was taking a more thorough approach to its investment, deploying a whole team of local professionals, led by a 30-year-old Princeton-educated Nigerian American with years of experience in the Nigerian music industry. Yet, less than two years later, he would leave amid rumors of misappropriation of corporate funds and breach of trust that nearly ran the major's local subsidiary into the ground—in the meantime, his own label had gained pace and he would go on to lead an international digital distributor's West African operations. During his tenure, Universal Music had signed the two most prominent female artists in Nigeria at the time, Tiwa Savage and Yemi Alade, with the former being brought to the label through the same Nigerian broker who had brought Davido to Sony. Like their male counterparts at Sony, Tiwa Savage and Yemi Alade signed international deals, with American and French entities respectively—the former of which prompted the following reaction from Burna Boy: “I feel so sorry for all you Nigerian artistes jumping into these international deals. You guys don't know what you're doing. I will forever be grateful and thankful to my manager/mother for making sure I will never be an international victim. I feel

²⁰ Social media platforms as well as streaming platforms and major record labels regularly organize podcast discussions and international conferences that bring together artist and young music professionals across North America, Europe, and Africa.

bad for every single one of you. I'm hearing some really crazy sh*t out here. I'm so sad for you all."

Back at Aristokrat Records, it is in this charged context that Piriye was initially approached to become the new head of Universal Music Nigeria. The debacle suffered by majors was not lost on anyone, both within the industry and among the public. As these historical structures were attempting to tap and compete in an ecosystem that is extremely cosmopolitan and yet governed by its internal logic, they were proving too unwieldy to accommodate the entrepreneurial mentality that dominates the Lagos music industry. Even when Warner Music Group—the third “major”—ultimately entered Nigeria with a seemingly more locally tailored strategy, which consisted in investing in an existing label rather than opening a subsidiary, the enthusiasm was short-lived. While the local label selected by Warner had been among the most prominent music structures on the continent for ten years, its CEO and long-time signee, a legendary rapper, was rumored to have been pushed out only a few months after the deal got signed. The label had already been losing momentum before the investment, raising further questions about the kind of due diligence that multinational firms are really able to conduct in Nigeria. Yet the industry badly needs external resources, and Piriye knew that firsthand.

Aware of these experiences, Aristokrat's CEO had to maneuver carefully to protect the interest and independence of the local company he had set up already a decade ago, while taking advantage of the opportunities offered by the proximity to the world's largest music group. His experience of the international market with Burna Boy makes him attuned to the necessity of structuring deals in a way that maximizes access to foreign resources that fit into locally designed strategies, while avoiding reliance on corporate budgets and timelines decided thousands of miles away. Piriye soon realized that beyond the junction of the Nigerian entrepreneurial scene with transnational corporations, the negotiations he was part of were

situated within a complex dynamic of hegemonic power struggles—in this case between the French and British entities of the Universal Music Group, competing to extend their spheres of influence in Africa. The structures of neoliberal capitalism are indeed heterogeneously made through processes of aligning multiple projects (Tsing 2005), with Universal Music France here attempting to counter Anglo-American hegemony by foraying into Anglophone Africa, and deploying the rhetoric of shared structural oppression in its pursuit of an alliance with a Nigerian entity. Aristokrat Group eventually entered into two agreements with the French subsidiary, one covering label services and one covering publishing opportunities. Structured as two joint ventures, the strategic partnership allows Aristokrat Group to remain fully independent, with equity deals expected to follow with private investors in Nigeria, so as to keep capital in local hands.

As part of the partnership, Aristokrat Records identifies local artists with “global” potential (negotiating distribution rights with artists’ local teams on behalf of the international joint venture), who will then benefit from the marketing resources and connections of the French entity. This gives the Nigerian label a *de facto* role as gatekeeper, and power over the representation of “New Afrika,” around which the collaboration is discursively constructed. The concept of “New Afrika” is frequently deployed by liminal agents, whose activities, frames of reference, and ambitions straddle social, geographic, and economic cleavages. Achille Mbembe defines it as a continent firmly writing itself within a new, decentered but global world (2016: 322). Characterized by hybridity, transnationality, and mobility, Mbembe argues that, increasingly, the term “Africa” tends to refer to a “geo-aesthetic category.” The educational and cultural backgrounds of Aristokrat’s executives and employees makes them intuitively aware of the multipolarity at play in the definition of “Africanness” in the 21st century. Yet, these same credentials have mostly hampered them from mobilizing a local community to support a

sound or style alienated from the “street” ethos underlying the rise of Nigerian popular music following liberalization.

Aristokrat’s leadership also hopes to leverage its newly acquired French connections to strengthen the institutional environment back in Nigeria. As they are bombarded with corporate attention following two decades of do-it-yourself approach, Lagos music professionals must juggle opportunities to create inter-generational wealth through commercial opportunities, with the ambition to leave a legacy by setting up a functioning revenue generating system at home. Indeed, Nigeria’s main collection society²¹ has since many years frozen royalty payments due to a governance dispute, making it even more attractive for artists to turn to foreign markets. This institutional deadlock is experienced by current Nigerian music professionals as a concrete manifestation of a generational conflict. Arising from the cancelled electoral victory of the manager of Afrobeats pioneer 2face Idibia²², the crisis pits the new music industry that had rallied behind him in hopes of change against an older establishment that they deem corrupt and complacent, desperately clinging on to political rent to hide its incompetence. Aristokrat’s executives therefore works with the leading French collection society²³ to gain its material and institutional support for the initiative of one of the founders of the contemporary music industry, Banky W,²⁴ to set up a new collection society. The heightened awareness of the pressing challenges facing the industry and the subsequent attraction held by “the abroad” is a source of considerable stress for seasoned music professionals, who are the face of hope for a large swath of youths. 2face Idibia, who sang the first international Afrobeats hit in 2004,²⁵ expressed on social media this anxiety generated by the current scramble for Africa: “Dem go soon start to

²¹ The Copyright Society of Nigeria (COSON).

²² Efe Omoregbe, the manager of Afrobeats pioneer 2Face Idibia, was elected Chairman of COSON in 2018 with broad support from young Nigerian music industry professionals.

²³ Société des auteurs, compositeurs et éditeurs de musique (SACEM).

²⁴ Pioneer Nigerian record label owner and artist Banky W.

²⁵ “African Queen.”

dey dictate our music for us based on the the company wey u sign with. Na dem go dey select who dem want for us because dem get structures and their banks dey support dem.”

Musical flow and flows of meaning: Producing new subjectivities through circulation

The new music of the early 21st century has often been celebrated as the rise of “the street” (Shonekan 2012; Fasan 2013; Gbogi 2017), or “the popular,” following Karin Barber’s taxonomy (1987; 1997). Yet the previous sections show that those who shape the configuration of labor, technology, and capital that constitutes the Nigerian music industry would probably fall under what Barber has called a “new elite,” defined by “its proximity to an outside power, but nonetheless bound up with local populations by innumerable ties of kinship, language, community membership and patronage” (1997: 3). The “rise of the street” can be seen, then, as the expression of a shift in meaning—rather than the growing control over dominant popular culture by the masses, it translates as the growing identification of the middle-class with “the streets.” This is what Jonathan Haynes also describes with regard to Nigerian film, noting that Nollywood emerged at a time when middle class youths “were in the mood to identify with the suffering broad masses and to criticize the wicked elite” (Haynes 2018: 13). With prospects restricted by the economic crisis, exposed to racialization through mass emigration to the West, the narrative told by the underdogs of American hip hop fully resonated with members of the Nigerian middle class who would become leading music professionals. Ever since the liberalization process of the 1990s, a cultural phenomenon of ideological convergence can be observed between, on the one hand, a form of being-in-the-world grounded in “hustling,” which is a conceptual frame originally deployed to characterize the urban poor’s everyday management of uncertainty in Lagos and other African megacities (see Thieme 2018 for Nairobi and Di Nunzio 2015 for Addis Ababa), and, on the other hand, the new neoliberal values of the middle-class: flexibility, entrepreneurialism, postcolonial self-assertion and self-invention (Freeman 2007).

The music industry fits and feeds this ideological evolution. Itself a product of privatization, it has generated pop stars ranging from former bus conductors to billionaire children, who share stages and collaborate in a way barely imaginable in most other areas of society. Music has been invested by highly educated cosmopolitans, but remains a crucial source of hope and opportunity for young Nigerians excluded from traditional career trajectories circumscribed by social, educational, and economic capital. Following the previous section that discussed the corporate structures that act as the flagships of the Nigerian music industry in its integration into the global economy, this section will provide ethnographic insight into the “hustle” of small-scale entrepreneurs who are often invisibilized in the grand narrative of these processes, while yet playing a key part in it. I will describe the case of individuals who navigate migration constraints and economic opportunities along the Nigerian ethnoscape to serve as intermediaries in Nigerian music’s independent transnational economic networks. Following diasporic communities in places such as Cyprus, Cairo, Malta, Istanbul, and Dubai, they organize concerts, group tours, club appearances, and other opportunities abroad for independent artists and labels. In the career of a Nigerian popular music artist, the first trip to Dubai, in particular, is discursively constructed as a rite of passage. For those known as “street” artists,²⁶ it is generally their first corporeal experience of technologically advanced, cosmopolitan postmodernity. Thus, these private entrepreneurs also function as gatekeepers. Working in parallel to corporate capitalism, they articulate with its logic and infrastructure in a way that ensures constant circulation of Nigerian music. Taking flexibility and mobility to the extreme, this diasporic, fluid, and fluctuating network of mostly young men operates on the fringes and interstices deemed unprofitable or out of reach to large corporations, contributing to Nigerian music’s transnational ubiquity.

²⁶ Which refers to music resonating with the local masses, also known as “street hop”, a localized form of hip hop that also blends influences from Nigerian Fuji music.

Prior to the 2020 Covid pandemic, I heard multiple times in Lagos music circles that “Dubai is easy.” Meant in comparison to humiliating experiences of state authority in Europe and the United States, the comment referred to the possibility for young Nigerian men to obtain a tourist visa and move freely in the Emirate—and, crucially, to make money. Most Nigerian artists and music entrepreneurs who work in Dubai do so under tourist visas, which only require them to exit the country every three months, and they are not liable for taxes. 35-year-old event organizer, travel consultant, and promoter Fly-Boy²⁷ is one of the self-made entrepreneurs who plays a key role in the Nigerian music industry by taking “street” artists and emerging Afropop stars on club tours across a network that spans the South of the Mediterranean Sea and the Gulf region. One song trending in Lagos clubs is often sufficient to open such opportunities, given the diaspora’s cohesion around Nigerian music. During the Covid-19 pandemic, concert activities were largely redeployed to Dubai, to the point that in December 2020 “Wahala for who no dey Dubai”²⁸ became a popular slang on Nigerian social media. Adapting to travel bans and immigration restrictions affecting Nigerians in real time, Fly-Boy was always able to quickly fall back on locations allowing travel and public events. In the music industry since age 16, he also uses his informal connections and own experience of extreme mobility to sell relocation opportunities to young Nigerians who would not be granted visas through the official route.²⁹

Through content produced by musicians and music professionals, millions of aspiring artists and ordinary fans in Africa inhabit a cosmopolitan subjectivity. With its reservoir of visual cues for social media (Kathiravelu 2015: 34) and its geographic and political-economic position as a hub of international travel for the Global South (Al-Rasheed 2005), Dubai occupies a central position in the dual processes of physical migration and migration from

²⁷ Name has been changed.

²⁸ It translates as: “trouble for those who are not in Dubai.”

²⁹ With posts on his social media profile such as: “Cyprus 1 year student visa and flight NON APPEARANCE – Travel in 3 weeks from anywhere you are.”

offline to online (Wang 2016). Artists, who draw heavily on both forms of circulation with live performances and online fame building, have enacted the Emirate as a key node in the transnational networks that map the Nigerian music industry. With a lower barrier to entry than Europe or North America, these informally organized trips allow artists to embody the transnational, entrepreneurial, and consumerist subjectivity enacted in most of Nigerian popular music. Intensely relayed on social media, images of personal trajectories grounded in the physical landscape of Dubai's flashy infrastructure essentialize it as a marker of modernity, success, and, ultimately, emancipation from social and racial determinism. The constant back and forth between Nigeria and the Emirate is organized by self-described "hustlers" who themselves deploy Dubai's symbolism as an embodied utopia in their communication, thereby harnessing the city's sense of possibility for their own activities through the appropriation of its hyper-capitalist codes.

The case of 30-year-old Adebayo, who organizes packaged group tours around Nigerian artists, offers an example of how music is harnessed for social (and physical) mobility. After Adebayo finished school in a neighboring state to Lagos, he became close to Lagos music networks, which at the time were often tightly entwined with cyber-fraud gangs. Adebayo was determined to escape poverty and had an opportunity to relocate to Kuala Lumpur, a hub for Nigerian entrepreneurial networks as well as criminal operations. He recalls facing hostility from the Malaysian government as well as racism from the local population, while witnessing Nigerian gangs' grim activities. He had to leave Malaysia under unclear circumstances and tried to obtain gainful employment in Lagos. Unresolved to accept the harsh circumstances that life had thrown at him and unwilling to attempt the life-threatening journey to Europe, he set off for Dubai with a tourist visa, like many other young Nigerian adventurers. In Dubai he was able to find employment with an Indian company in the tourism sector. After networking with Nigerian restaurant owners, club promoters, hotel workers, and sex entrepreneurs, he started

informally organizing Nigerian artists' visits. Five years later, Adebayo is working full time on his own business, organizing visits of prominent artists traveling alongside groups of Nigerian "tourists." He mobilizes music's socioeconomic power to reconfigure the notion of tourism in the age of digital self-branding, with the blurring of leisure and work at the core of the new (hustling) economy. The tourists are indeed young Nigerians who see the trip as an investment, using the proximity with artists—as ultimate of symbols of aspiration—to market themselves online. Some are sponsored by independent record labels, with more or less clean funding, while others have launched their own consumer brand or hope to make it as model/influencer.

Young men like Fly-Boy and Adebayo operate at the postcolonial convergence of a music genre based on aspiration and a city constructed as a trope of utopia through hyper-consumption. Arguably the most popular avatars of the hybridity, transnationality, and mobility that define the contemporary "African" identity (Eze 2014, Balakrishnan 2016), Nigerian popular music artists' decentering of the historically grounded cultural routes of the "Black Atlantic" (Gilroy 1993) suggests a renewed epistemological framework for the study of postcolonial processes. Ethnographic insights from below reveal that a Global South "hub" is a relevant vantage point, as cultural and commercial networks traditionally centered in Euro-American "metropolises" are being reconfigured. Indeed, before Nigerian songs became a staple of the world's music charts distributed by multinational companies, they were already blasting from ice cream stalls along Dubai's most famous beaches, playing in the background at the world's largest mall, used as dancers' soundtrack in front of the highest tower in the world, and even became an infrastructural element of the World Expo.³⁰ All across the Emirate's emblematic sites of globalized consumption and ostentatious modernity, one can hear the latest hits from Lagos, as young Nigerians invested global commercial spaces as migrant workers, entrepreneurs, dancers, corporate managers, deploying their music through their work so as to

³⁰ The 2020 universal exhibition, known as Expo 2020, was hosted by Dubai from October 2021 to March 2022 following postponement due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

create a seamless sonic scape. Provincializing Euro-America and its exoticizing gaze on Africa, the early success of Nigerian music in Dubai offers a glimpse into the future of capitalism through South-South interactions.

In the age of global (social) media, the symbolic inclusion of Nigeria in the transnational commercial landscape through sound carries significant imaginative potential that is crucially deficient in a country where three quarters of the population say they plan to emigrate within three years.³¹ This is evident from the videos that Nigerians enthusiastically take when hearing the latest music from home in spaces associated with the power of international capitalism, posting them online to relay a message of nationalistic pride and hope. Service workers playing Lagos hits in Dubai indeed do so consciously, investing political meaning in the use of their position for spreading Nigerian culture. Fully reflexive about the stakes of the “symbolic economy” (Zukin 1996; Neff *et al.* 2005), they position the mall and the spaces where people are being addressed as consumers as central bastions of contemporary politics (Dávila 2012: 10).

Celebrity culture holds intrinsic educative power (Marshall 1997), and African popular culture particularly so (Barber 1997; Masquelier 2009). The representation of the music and individuals themselves fluidly moving across social and geographic boundaries offered by contemporary Nigerian stars shapes a certain political consciousness. In *Migrant Dubai*, Laavanya Kathiravelu described how the discursive space of Dubai is foregrounded as important to the formation of neoliberal ideas of selfhood among Indian workers (2015: 95). Here, it constructs expectations for Nigeria’s development trajectory. For example, when concerts, street parties, and other events were banned by Lagos State government on the grounds of Covid-19 prevention, the rant by a famous Nollywood actor addressing Nigerian politicians from a Dubai entertainment park went viral on social media: “Dubai is still making

³¹ African Youth Survey 2022, <https://ichikowitzfoundation.com/ays2022/>.

money, you sons of bitches, motherfuckers, you will drain in your own blood, you will choke in your blood, you motherfuckers, you see how clean this [city] is.”³² The Emirate’s willingness to let businesses operate at the height of the pandemic was drawn as a contrast to Covid prevention measures’ disproportionate impact of on Nigerians’ livelihood,³³ constructing an analytical framework around government action that likens it to nuisance, an obstacle on the path to self-realization. It drew responses from other Nigerians in Dubai, such as:

“Infact sir, I’m also in UAE for past a year now... I always crying for our Nigeria with what have been seeing since I’m here... God need to intervene in Nigeria matter... The qualities of good leaders making dubai great like this... I’m always envy this country”

The majority of the audience was yet in Nigeria, and comments expressed the extent to which Dubai features in the collective subjectivity:

“Is like all Nigerians are now in Dubai now”

“E be like say I dey there already,³⁴ all these things am seeing ehn chiiiiii, I wish I can go to Dubai oo [crying emoji]”

“Make we get our own Dubai na [crying emoji]”

The “particular culture of circulation” (Shipley 2013: 364) that emerged in Africa following liberalization has created a “transnational consciousness” (Vertovec 2009) in reverse, where millions at home analyze their own situations and conceptualize progress in spatial terms. What Charles Piot has called a “virtual exile” (2010) is often referred to in Lagos as “mental secession,” with imaginaries of migration feeding public consciousness. Musicians constitute a pole of signification in this moral economy, as the ultimate realization of the ideal of self-creation through movement and consumption, but also as an effective force shaping globalization from the South and from below. Populating the lifeworld of African youths who

³² Post by Aremu Afolayan, accessed on 20 January 2021, <https://www.instagram.com/tv/CKRSul0JVuF/?igshid=YmMyMTA2M2Y=>.

³³ Nigerian artists’ livelihood was disproportionately affected compared to the rest of the world, with performance fees their main source of income, due to the freeze in royalty payments in Nigeria.

³⁴ It translated as: “It feels like I’m already there.”

often feel stuck in what many in Lagos refer to as an “open-air prison,” musicians successfully performing across the globe offer a horizon, both spatial and socioeconomic. Even Aristokrat Records, whose branding is constructed around being proudly “African” and building “New Afrika,” illustrated this conflicting dynamic when it celebrated Nigeria’s 60 years of independence—a bittersweet moment for a young generation that never got to share in the hopes of the post-independence era. While Independence Day is generally filled with live performances and artists’ promotion, the restrictions linked to the Covid-19 pandemic made the 2020 celebration a more susceptible time for reflecting on the state of the country, and the record label released a video on social media in which the staff answered various questions about Nigeria. Meant to be a lighthearted promotional video, the message was however heart-felt. When asked about “the best part of being Nigerian,” employees mentioned the different aspects of “faaji,” the form of enjoyment characteristic of “Lagos life”: the “vibes,” the food, the men, “we are pure cruise in this world.” But in response to “What is the worst part of being Nigerian,” one employee opened with: “Being inside the country.” The responses that followed from his colleagues were similarly despondent, to the point that the segment was released as a stand-alone viral video. Finally, when asked if they would “japa” (a street slang that means to run swiftly out of a dangerous situation, here referring to leaving the country), all employees said that, if given the chance, they would not think about it twice.

Conclusion

This chapter has shown how power dynamics that structure Nigerian society as well as its position in the wider world order unfold within the music industry, notably through the prominent role played by a cosmopolitan educated elite in its emergence and development. Yet the Nigerian music industry remains seen as a powerful social equalizer, a tool of economic and political accumulation potentially accessible to all (Inyabri 2013; Gbogi 2017; Olusola and Onyesiku 2019). It would be naive to interpret this paradox as false consciousness. Quite to the

contrary, a constant work on the self is performed to entertain this faith by those who are supposed to embody it, and, all the more so, by those, excluded, who require it to face their everyday suffering. The formidable affective investment that the music industry receives is precisely tied to the value it places on the individual, which it constructs as a sovereign agent, with the power to move fluidly beyond social and ethnic barriers, freely across borders. This vision holds emancipatory promise in an alienating context of institutional collapse, legitimizing the aspirations of Nigerian youths commonly dehumanized in daily experience and in an international order that often denies them basic dignity. As old forms of sociability are increasingly experienced as oppressive through the unrealistic demands they place on young people, and corrupt in their failure to tackle poverty,³⁵ the music industry is hailed for its capacity to offer a prospect of salvation.

The sense of self of the contemporary industry thus revolves around the mission that professionals feel invested with: to save themselves and thereby save a rhetorical “African youth.” This world-making project is expressed through discursive practices, with the ubiquitous “Africa to the world” slogan, which subsumed the various levels of stratification permeating the African continent into an intentionally claimed cultural essentialism. Rather than something to deconstruct, this rhetorical performativity is where the stakes currently lie. Just like other institutions that once offered a hopeful horizon through a set of ideologically grounded future-making practices, it is probable that the music industry will become discredited once the limits of the social mobility it affords can no longer be ignored. Classed, gendered, and raced dynamics are embedded in interactions with foreign players and also intersect with the fault lines running through the markets that Nigerian artists are reaching, thus mutually reinforcing hierarchies, but also creating new and unpredictable opportunities for minorities.

³⁵ As is the case for religious, political, family, educational, and even neo-traditional institutions, with pastors extorting churchgoers for personal enrichment, government officials involved in all forms of corruption, intimate relations tainted by economic needs, professors coercing students into sex, or traditional rulers exacting exorbitant chieftaincy title costs from entrepreneurs and even criminals.

For the time being, for lack of viable alternative to a widespread numbing anxiety caused by the absence of prospects, countless youths cling on to the possibility of “blowing”—that is, gaining access (through a viral song, dance, or skit) to popularity that can be monetized overnight. Analyzing the music industry and the discourse it produces solely through a political economic lens, then, would be missing the point. Its strength does not derive (exclusively) from economic rationality, but from the affective and imaginative potential it carries. A more relevant analytical framework, perhaps, is Mbembe’s characterization of Christian redemption through its “ability to enchant,” which he defines “magico-poetic” (2002: 52).

Dancing to the capitalist tune: Branding as an aesthetic, symbolic, and moral practice

Introduction

“Last month Wizkid walked the Dolce & Gabbana runway in Milan!” a student exclaimed to general applause during a “Musical Culture and Identity Formation” panel at the University of Lagos.¹ “Twenty years ago, the most famous artist, Daddy Showkey, was showing us the ghetto, bare chest... We have come a long way,” she added, carrying the public’s enthusiasm. Daddy Showkey belongs to the 1990s generation of artists hailing mainly from the overcrowded Ajegunle suburb of Lagos, whose music, inspired by reggae, owed its popularity to its relatability. In the wake of economic crisis, it evoked average Nigerian realities, while the realm of aspirations was the prerogative of foreign artists. In contrast, the Nigerian stars who have emerged since the late 2000s mobilize a glamorous dreamscape that embraces a globalized world, outlining a self-consciously “international” path to success presented as resolutely “African”.

As the quote above illustrates, these social, cultural, and affective dynamics unfold within a regime of meaning-making that draws largely on the expressive power of global brands. Dolce & Gabbana functions here as a pole of signification, conveying meaning, and symbolically positioning artists in the social landscape. As such, luxury and high value consumer brands permeate social discourse—both popular culture content and the commentary around it, delineating the contours of a market-based communicative sociality. European designer names, in particular, are patterned items that artists and other creatives generously

¹ The Lagos Studies Association (LSA) 3rd Lagos Conference, 19-23 June 2018, Faculty of Management Sciences, University of Lagos.

deploy, fitting seamlessly into songs and visuals. The lead single “Don’t dull” from the album that launched Wizkid’s career—then a 20-year-old boy from the overcrowded Lagos neighborhood of Surulere—opened with: “See you sitting in the corner; Wearing Dolce & Gabbana; Our boys don hammer; We wearing all Prada” (2010). Used as metaphors for interpersonal relationships, luxury fashion brands convey love and power, at the intersection of which most Nigerian pop songs operate. Rapper Blaqbonez and pop singer Joeboy’s “Fendi” (2021) offers a typical example of the way in which luxury brands have been embedded in pop songs over the past decade, with their discursive charge expressing and reinforcing gendered dynamics: “Girl I like the way you bend it; Bend it, bend it, bend it; I fit buy you Fendi; Bend it, Fendi, Fendi. . . The Fendi, Ferragamo I’m put up on you; Dior and LV with Louboutin shoes; Anything you want say I get am for you”. Female artists also wield European brand names as part of claims to agency and power, but also to simply draw on the positive associations that the brands evoke, positioning them in a moral framework. When “Queen of Afrobeats” Tiwa Savage sings: “Mofẹ ra versa, Mofẹ ra versace [I want to buy Versace, I want to buy Versace]; Mofẹ ra buga, Mofẹ ra Bugatti [I want to buy Bugatti, I want to buy Bugatti]” (2019), she explains that it should be understood as:

a metaphor, again. It’s like, yo, I could’ve said anything else. I could’ve said Ferrari . . . But it’s just basically, I want to do good. I want to be successful in whatever field it is. It’s not even just about a lot of money, it’s about affecting people’s lives. It’s about making a change, making an impact, whether it’s worldwide or your immediate community. I want to leave behind a legacy. I want to live good. I want to be a good person.²

Yet, the introductory quote also shows that Nigerian artists’ association to global brands is not simply allegorical, a case of symbolic invocation from the margins. It is part of a very real system of value exchange. Large corporations’ marketing budgets have in fact been an essential source of funding for the Nigerian music industry for over two decades. But where music sponsorship was initially built around a strategy of local penetration, with the aim of

² <https://genius.com/videos/Tiwa-savage-breaks-down-the-meaning-of-49-99>.

pushing products and services to Nigerian consumers while artists gained access to resources and a “modern” identity, recent partnerships point to Nigerian musicians’ integration into a global system of production of meaning. When popular icon Wizkid features in a leading fashion world event, representing in Milan the Dolce & Gabbana brand that he aspirationally sang about a decade earlier from Surulere, the imaginaries conveyed by the brand are invested for a world-remaking project. A few months later, Wizkid collaborated with Nike to release a limited-edition sports jersey, with “Lagos” emblazoned on the lower back. The collaboration found massive resonance even as the vast majority of Nigerians would not be able to afford the actual item, which sold out in ten minutes anyway. The redrawing of the symbolic cartography of the world was considered no less “real” by his millions of fans. The artist, who enjoys semi-god status across the Nigerian ethnoscape and rarely gives interviews, later reflexively evoked his worldview and goals organized by the principle of the brand:

I like doing something for a purpose . . . It’s bigger than that, I’m here for the culture you know. . . I don’t see Wizkid as a musician, Wizkid is a brand you know. . . When you talk about Wizkid . . . you talk about Surulere, you talk about Lagos, you talk about Africa. . . so that’s why I treat it as a brand . . . I am very very very serious with it.³

Similarly, when other Nigerian superstar Davido sang “D&G”, while the chorus was a typical claim to the Italian brand’s prestige in relation to women (“She lookin’ through my eyes and she’s seein’ designers, Gucci, Dolce & Gabbana, Dolce & Gabbana”), its impact was not to be found in musical aesthetics, but in the studied power reversal signaled by its marketing. Davido indeed announced that he was donating the proceeds of the music video to Dolce & Gabbana’s philanthropic efforts around coronavirus research. Following decades of humanitarian aid flowing from Europe to Africa, this positioned the Nigerian artist’s brand in relation to the Italian fashion house in a way that unsettles “‘Africa’ as a category through which a ‘world’ is structured” (Ferguson 2006:5).

³ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ycTMFcTN2r4&t=133s&ab_channel=StarBoyTV.

As “African Giant” Burna Boy points out in his song “Another story”: “To understand Nigeria, you need to appreciate where it came from”. He reminds us that “Nigeria started off as a business deal for [the British], between a company and a government. Incidentally, the Niger Company is still around today, only it is known by a different name... Unilever” (2019)⁴. Access to “modernity” in Nigeria has been rooted in corporate imperatives, with as a consequence that commercial representations permeate the sociocultural texture of modern life. One of the main sponsors of the Nigerian music industry today, Nigerian Breweries, is the result of a partnership between European trading companies led by the United Africa Company (later absorbed into Unilever) meant to build the Nigerian colony as an internationally profitable alcohol market (Heap 2008). It led to the creation of the local beer brand STAR in 1949. 70 years later, a high point of the music video for Burna Boy’s Grammy-winning “Way too big” (2020) shows the artist sitting atop a huge STAR beer billboard, with Lagosians admiring him from below. An Indian youth music radio described the video as “one powerful message” that “is sure to motivate his fans and viewers”⁵. Its expression of the artist’s success—notably through brand partnerships—was celebrated also across the Black Atlantic. With those at the receiving end of imperialism and global capitalism viscerally aware of corporate power, brands serve as a common language, the currency of a global popular culture that is no longer a top-down product of the Anglo-American music industry (Taylor 1997; 2016; Stokes 2004: 55), but a multidirectional flow across transnational postcolonial networks (Oh 2013; Chen *et al.* 2021).

This chapter explores corporate brands’ material, symbolic, and affective functions in contemporary Nigerian popular music, asking how their interplay shapes the sociocultural landscape that Afropop both frames and is a product of. I show that corporate brands are

⁴ Through a sample of Jide Olanrewaju’s documentary *Naij - A History of Nigeria* (2010).

⁵ Indigo Music (Indigo 91.9 FM).

harnessed as an expressive means of appropriating and interpreting the late capitalist postcolonial condition, imbuing it with meaning—with political and moral implications. Through artists’ metaphorical and material interactions with corporate brands, the music industry guides a generation in navigating global neoliberal capitalism, while shaping Nigeria’s place in it. The first section of this chapter describes the everyday practices that produce interactions between brands, music, and people. It will show how, through various levels of encounter, a system of meaning-making and value is enacted and circulated. The second section focuses on the dynamics of aspiration and exclusion associated with the logic of the brand. It traces back these mechanisms to colonial times and examines how contemporary actors of the music industry respond to unequal power in their dealings with corporations. The third section looks at the ways in which brands feature in and co-produce the moral fabric through their relationship to music. From serving as a proxy for “African” emancipation to offering a safeguard of respectability in a context of institutional breakdown, corporate brands are embedded in moral considerations, providing an expressive means of interpreting socioeconomic reality and imbuing it with meaning.

Branding relations as an everyday practice

After meeting a struggling 34-year-old movement artist at a concert backstage in Lagos, the first video that caught my eye when going through his social media profile was a bright and simple dance routine featuring an abundance of special effects. The colors were those of a prominent Nigerian commercial bank, the audio and moves described the various financial products offered by the bank. Though surprised, I felt happy that my new friend was affiliated with such a powerful and respected commercial institution, as corporate sponsorship is considered a primary marker of success. Yet it turned out that he was not. This was one among several videos on his profile meant to attract the attention of large corporations whose marketing

budgets Nigerian creatives generally hope to tap into. He had self-choreographed, directed, and painstakingly edited the full one-minute commercial in pursuit of a cash prize. Failing to win, the video remained on his profile as free advertisement for the bank, next to the concept dance videos about social issues such as police killings and drug addiction that were close his heart.

When I then met, Toheeb, a recently appointed marketing manager at multinational energy drink company Red Bull, part of his new job involved creating ties to the Lagos hip hop dance community. The brand is associated with extreme and urban sports across the world, and the multinational sought to retain this specificity even in Nigeria, where these scenes are marginal. Toheeb described fumbling through social media to identify Nigerian hip hop dancers, unconvinced that such a category even still existed, given the overwhelming visibility gained by Afropop in recent years. The professional who had started his career as a corporate finance analyst at a bank proceeded to message dancers on video-sharing apps, yet worried that he might not master the digital platforms' codes, and apprehensive about the perception his interlocutors would have of his affiliation with the energy drinks giant. Yet, his fears were quickly dispelled, he explains. "I was shocked", he recalls, "it was as if they had been waiting for me, they were all like: 'Oya let's work'!".

And indeed, they had. Lagos dancers typically practice on the abandoned grounds of the National Stadium, sharing space with the small community of bicycle motocross (BMX) riders who were featured in a documentary produced by Red Bull's global media arm in 2018. Starring BMX riders with names directly inspired by the music industry's successes—Starboy, KK Money, and S King—the corporate-sponsored film was viewed by over ten million people across the world at a time when Nigerian media and brands had no knowledge of, let alone interest in, that community. Despite the omnipresence of dance in Nigerian popular culture, dancers as a constituency share the socioeconomic marginality of BMX riders. They have largely been disregarded by Lagos-based companies, with the social stigma of poverty limiting

their inspirational potential in the eyes of the public, and in turn their opportunities for sponsorship. Red Bull “finding” the BMX riders had thus redrawn the bounds of the situated imagination of young people self-training in the shade of the dilapidated stadium.

Lagos dancers peripheral to the music industry’s sponsorship economy also gather monthly to showcase their skills in various styles. The event aims to bring together a range of dancers from different impoverished parts of Lagos. Some have jobs, like the bodyguard of international star Yemi Alade: “Yes, I’m also a dancer you see! I need this, or I’ll go mad, I come here to let it all go”, he explains, noticing my surprise to run into him so far from the glitz he normally has access to. But most do not. They hope to eventually make a living with dance, though such path barely exists as of yet in Nigeria. The goal is to develop a sense of community amidst the struggle, which is why some feel that having an entrance fee—strategically set at a bottle of Coke in hopes of getting noticed by the brand—defeats the purpose. One girl who is part of a local area crew complained: “You ask me to pay to watch my fellow dancers, what kind of nonsense is this?”. That night, the sound keeps cutting due to issues with the electric generator—a necessary equipment in an area supplied with only a few hours of electricity daily. The young organizer takes the mic for a public announcement: “Guys, you see why we need this money—to pay rent for the place, to buy fuel for the gen, or we can’t even get sound! So people, don’t forget to keep tagging Coke, Red Bull, Nike, everyone on your posts—we will get there, they should see us nau!”

These ethnographic scenes evoke both the contingency and ubiquity of relations, actual or desired, to corporate brands. Like the financial institution’s marketing campaign seamlessly embedded in a conscious artist’s gallery of creative projects, corporate brands permeate the lifeworld of those even most marginalized from the commercial circuit, such as dancers in the shadows of the Nigerian music industry. Sponsorship opportunities structure an aspirational path for creatives, where other forms of support barely exist. The trajectory of the National

Stadium where Lagos dancers train, a 1970s monument embodying post-colonial state-led modernity, itself offers a stunning demonstration of why these young Nigerians place their future hopes in corporations—with the state going from development actor to a nuisance that needs to be overcome. Indeed, after leaving the stadium to decay since the end of the 20th century, in 2020, the Nigerian government would demolish without notice the small shops and refreshment spots catering to the various communities that had grown on their own in the ruins of the building once meant to inspire. Access was limited for dancers and other users who used its grounds to nurture dreams fueled by the videos of inspirational Nike ads they watched on YouTube during their breaks.

The path that corporate brands offer is summarized by the popular Nigerian pidgin phrase “E don blow.” “Blowing” refers here to gaining access to the visibility that unlocks the virtuous cycle of monetization, in particular brand partnerships. A concept from the music industry, it is omnipresent in Lagos and structures much of youth imaginaries around survival and success. Understood as sudden and unpredictable for those far from the corporate offices where decisions are made—almost an “overnight” process—the phenomenon of “blowing” evokes that of miracles and is a source of hope for many youths who perceive no other opportunities for their future. With a moral dimension grounded in the bible verse from Mark 11:24: (“whatever you ask in prayer, believe that you have received it, and it will be yours”), it involves “claiming” what is “rightfully” yours by tagging companies on social media, mentioning them in songs and other creative content. The quasi-religious terminology around brand sponsorship is not particular to Nigeria, and circulates through “inspirational” social media clips shared across the Black Atlantic, in which stars explain how they “manifested” their corporate deals. This provides a conceptual and concrete framework for negotiating everyday life. The organizer of the monthly dance event has been tagging Coca Cola on his social media posts for over a year. He believes that the marketing team is following his community-building

efforts, just waiting for more growth before they reach out for a partnership. Having dropped out of school for lack of job prospects and struggling with severe depression, the imagined sponsorship opportunities give him the strength to create motivational social media content every day. This hope is then passed on to his 13,000 followers, mostly young aspiring dancers and artists, in packaged representations shaped by the perceived opportunities offered by corporations.

The discursive potential of corporate brands has long been wielded performatively and strategically by popular artists seeking to harness the prestige and economic opportunities that they conjure. The first corporate endorsement of a black hip hop act in the United States, Run D.M.C.'s deal with Adidas in 1986, was the result of a coordinated communication strategy by the rap group to attract the attention of the sneaker brand; it included a song, an acapella video, and call-and-response performances praising Adidas. Once the company agreed to the deal, the collaboration was hailed as a milestone for the emerging musical genre in the African American community (Warnett 2016). In Nigeria, music professionals recall throwing references to foreign brands into songs and music videos in the late 2000s, initially without a particular intention, inspired by American hip hop and what is understood as "the good life". Moët champagne and Hennessy Cognac in particular (both owned by French luxury conglomerate LVMH) became fixtures of Black urban music, with songs such as "Hennessey" by legendary American rapper 2pac or "Moët" by gangsta rap pioneer Snoop Dogg released in 2004. Both brands featured in the Nigerian hits that won "Song of the Year" at The Headies, Nigeria's leading music awards show, in 2007 and 2008⁶. With these songs celebrating social mobility (by all means), the brands served as aesthetic symbols of achievement before they became part of a symbiotic business relationship.

⁶ "Yahooze" by Olu Maintain and "Gongo Aso" by 9ice.

During the late 2000s, the synergy between music and advertising indeed took an intensified turn, durably transforming Nigerian music's business model and anchoring brands as part of its very aesthetic. Before the rise of social media, music videos played an instrumental role in fashioning artists' glamorous image that corporate brands could leverage on, also allowing advertisers to blur the line between art and commercials through product placement in music videos. Pioneer music video director DJ Tee recalls that since he was frequently shooting close-ups of bottles of Hennessy cognac and Moët champagne, a representative from Nigerian beer brand STAR approached him—if DJ Tee could get an artist to sing about the local brand and include it in the video, he would receive payment from the STAR beer manufacturer, Nigerian Breweries. While the director succeeded, he explains that the video was eventually censored by the Nigerian Broadcasting Commission for promoting alcohol consumption—an ironic turn of events, since the censors had allegedly never been bothered by the broadcasting of the French alcohol brands. A decade later, as Burna Boy was shooting a music video in the middle of the night in an overcrowded Lagos neighborhood, I ran into an executive from the Nigerian office of French leading advertising group Publicis—he was carrying crates of STAR beer, now a leading sponsor of the music industry alongside countless other alcohol brands. He explained that Publicis represents STAR and Pepsi, which have both endorsed Burna Boy as brand ambassador. As the Grammy-winning singer was breezing through his home country, the executive could not let the opportunity pass his brands by. Before entering the corporate world, this key player of the Nigerian advertising industry was a conscious rapper and a leading graffiti artist, working as set designer in the 2000s with iconic music video director Clarence Peters, who was also shooting that night's video for Burna Boy. The connection for the product placement therefore happened naturally. And Burna Boy, like the other artists of his generation, is always welcoming of financial opportunities.

The rise of visuals has mediated the relationship between music and brands to make it one of reciprocal interaction. Given the importance of music videos to an artist's "brand"—or, literally, image—artists were incentivized to make music translatable into the kind of glamorous visual discourse that would raise their "aspirational" profile. Nigerian music video directors indeed recall explaining to their clients that their lyrics needed to match the desired visual identity, with the standard narrative of struggle and the tongue-in-cheek humor that characterized much of hip hop at the turn of the millennium incompatible with the opulent music videos that artists were asking for. Musicians were expecting the consumerist visual aesthetic to give them currency among the masses of youths whose desires have been shaped by global consumer capitalism, but who yet lack the means to participate in it other than as spectators—themselves belonging to that generation. Increasingly, consumerism also became a way to unlock much-coveted endorsement opportunities in an ecosystem in which corporate sponsors emerged as a viable source of revenue for artists (as well as a major status enhancer in the eyes of the public). Artist Mr. Real, for example, explained that his 2018 street anthem "Legbegbe", in which he repeats the word "iPhone" 24 times⁷, was designed to catch Apple Inc.'s attention.

Corporate managers have been very willing to play the role of patrons of the arts. Generally young, they hold the view that private initiative and aspirations to social mobility are tied to a broader movement of African emergence. Though they occupy cultural and symbolic locations that straddle many of the cleavages that define Nigerian society, corporate managers and music professionals are bound by their shared belonging to "Naija". A nickname for Nigeria "[c]oined by the country's youth as a way of distancing themselves from the old guard who

⁷ "iPhone 1 legbegbe yeh, iPhone 2 legbegbe yeh, iPhone 3 legbegbe yeh, iPhone 4 legbegbe yeh, iPhone 5 legbegbe yeh, iPhone 6 legbegbe yeh, iPhone 7 legbegbe o ma lo, iPhone 8."

they blame for Nigeria's woes,"⁸ "Naija" (or "9ja") encapsulates the "cool" of Nigerian life, foregrounding creativity and flexibility in opposition to bureaucratic and military hierarchy. Companies have seized on the term as they engage in building the national market, using it to assert a "proudly Nigerian" selling point on the basis of values compatible with neoliberal flexibility. This manifests, for example, in a dancer gaining a corporate sponsorship from local drinks company Orijin, owned by British multinational Diageo, when using the hit song "Omo Naija" (2009) for a concept video celebrating Nigerian pride, hard work, and financial success in the face of adversity. Under the Orijin deal, the dancer was paid NGN 50,000 (approx. USD 120) for six months in exchange of posting three videos per month on social media. This corporate involvement with local popular culture has been supported by the new direction taken by marketing in the late twentieth century. When earlier marketing techniques used the rhetoric of development to present the potential consumer with a "civilizing" trajectory, new marketing taps into existing cultural diversity with the aim of increasing exposure to a brand (Pier 2011; Bradshaw and Zwick 2016). Companies operating in Nigeria thus established relations with local youths who bring their uniquely fashioned identities to corporate sponsors. "Talented Nigerians were given an opportunity for the first time", explains 33-year-old Temitope, a former marketing manager at Emirati-owned telecom operator Etisalat, whose slogan is: "Here for you, here for 9ja."

When I met Temitope at the office of a British telecommunications company where she now handles enterprise accounts, she warned me that she only had 30 minutes to devote to our interview, between two meetings. But after quickly dismissing her current job from our conversation—"Here you know, we only have corporate clients..."—she immediately lit up when delving into her previous experience as brand specialist in charge of events and

⁸ Peter Okwoche in "Nigeria at 50: What does Naija mean?" BBC News Africa, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-11447252>.

sponsorship at Etisalat. “We were creating cultural platforms to develop African culture”, she asserts, describing the various projects she worked on during the early 2010s. This was the time when Afropop was catapulted to 21st century social phenomenon, in no small part due to telecom companies’ then seemingly infinite marketing budgets. As they were fighting for market share, telecom operators used artists as proxies, with sponsorship contracts reported to amount up to half a million dollars, fueling the vision of music as an avenue of social mobility. Every operator active in Nigeria was sponsoring its own music talent TV reality show⁹. They were also touring campuses, where a large part of Nigeria’s present and future consumers were concentrated, full of dreams but with no prospects. The corporate managers I spoke to who worked with telecom companies all showed the same enthusiasm when recalling these times. They felt that they had engaged in a project of historical significance, shaping a national demand while opening new avenues for Nigerian creativity, both contributing to firmly embed Nigeria into “global modernity” (Dirlik 2007). By the end of our conversation, Temitope noticed all the missed calls on her work phone, as two hours had already gone by. A few months later, she would go on to join The Coca Cola Company’s marketing communications department, where she says she can be part again of “a bigger plan for Naija.”

As postcolonial hopes remain a driving cultural force in the twenty-first century, they have been reconfigured into a currency that circulates across the artistic and corporate worlds. In the liberalized economy, the national vision weaving aspirations and patriotism is incarnated in corporate-sponsored messaging rather than the state, and even against the state. The ad released by Belgian multinational ABInBev for its beer brand Trophy on Nigerian Independence Day 2019 drives the point home. It features rapper Falz, whose *Moral Instruction* would go on to win “Album of the Year” a few days later,¹⁰ drawing heavily on samples from

⁹ MTN sponsored the acquisition of the franchise *Star Academy*, while Etisalat sponsored *Idol*, Airtel sponsored *Got Talent*, and Glo sponsored *X Factor*.

¹⁰ At The Headies 2019, Nigeria’s leading music awards show.

the 1970s musician and government critic Fela Kuti. The ad opens with Falz, himself the son of a renowned human right lawyer who had defended Fela Kuti, explaining that: “You know it’s crazy how they’ve said a lot of funny things about us when they really don’t even know us, they don’t know the Naija feeling and what it means; it means that we keep on pushing for greater heights and when it’s dark we search for the light,” while showing an officer from Nigeria’s Special Anti-Robbery Squad extorting a bribe from a private bus driver. The same idea of Nigeria’s youths flourishing despite the government’s hurdles underpins the ad for a Cyprus-based foreign exchange trading platform that a music promoter shared on social media with the caption: “Naija is so beautifully represented in the new Octa FX ad.” Showing BMX riders, dancers, street sellers, tailors, models, among others, the ad conveys a sense of pride and possibility in the interstices of the failed nation-state project where forex trading prospers. Many Lagos creatives indeed venture on the Forex market as part of their hustle, also trading Bitcoin, in which Nigeria has become the global leader even as the government has officially banned it since 2017 (BBC 2021).

Perhaps no episode better illustrates the current dynamic configuration between the music industry, corporate brands, and the state than the #EndSARS movement of October 2020, a decentralized and youth-led social movement against police brutality and bad governance that led to mass protests, “the scale and ferocity of which arguably had not been witnessed in Nigeria since the 1989 student-led ‘anti-SAP’ riots” (Obadare 2021). Its first instance of publicized physical collective action was organized by a 22-year-old brand strategist, a sit-in protest in front of Lagos police headquarters and the State House of Assembly, with pop stars then calling for mass demonstrations across Southern Nigeria and diasporic capitals such as Accra or London. The whole Nigerian music industry mobilized in the protests, which ended in a bloodshed, causing popular DJ and winner of telecom operator sponsored *X Factor* show DJ Switch to flee the country overnight. Throughout the movement, a reflex for artists was to seek

the support of corporate brands in their political struggle. The most explicit expression of this was an Instagram live session viewed over a million times, in which Tiwa Savage, visibly distressed, laid out her views on the required next steps: “If the government is not helping or they’re not being fast, we can do it ourselves, we can get private companies,” suggesting that corporations could paint and rebuild army and police barracks, and donate uniforms and equipment. She called specifically on Nike, Apple, and Amazon, among others, to lend their support to the movement—thereby laying the terms of a “zone of awkward engagement” (Tsing 2004), where the very symbols of global capitalist oppression are reconfigured as vehicles for emancipation from the margins.

Several corporations did indeed sponsor the protests. A Nigerian multinational financial institution (in)famously distributed branded water bottles, while many other companies, such as American multinational Pepsi, fast food chains, and countless local small businesses offered logistical help in a manner that was largely celebrated by protesters. For example, what became the *de facto* logo of the protest was designed by a Lagos-based fintech startup, while online payment company Flutterwave set up an internal fundraising project, amassing 2 million naira to cover medical bills for those injured in the protests. Estonian ride-hailing app Bolt offered a 50 percent discount to passengers using the code “SOROSKE,” the slogan of the protests. More generally, the movement was celebrated locally to the extent that it demonstrated young people’s capacity for collective organization in the face of an oppressive state, using corporate brands as levers in the pursuit of emancipation, much like the music industry itself does.

Corporate appropriation in perspective

The role of corporate brands in Lagos popular artists’ aesthetic and political expression can be traced back to Nigeria’s historical place in a global system of racial capitalism. Like other aspects of contemporary Nigerian popular culture, its tangled relationship to consumer

capitalism was shaped through the legacy of the colonial economy, in parallel and in interaction with black diasporic cultural expression built on the trauma of the slave economy (Ebron 2008; Matlon 2016). As meanings and practices travel across time and space, this section aims to contextualize the current manifestation of music and corporations' nexus by putting it into historical perspective. I will describe how music in Lagos was always embedded in power relations, with foreign corporations functioning as both intermediary and driving force since the beginning of the twentieth century. In this cosmopolitan coastal environment, people came face to face with the full force of colonial capitalism, negotiating status by navigating between different cultural signifiers for over a century. Consumer capitalism has thus inserted itself into social structures, co-constituting cultural values, in a historical trajectory that yet should not be misunderstood as linear. In the following paragraphs, I will invoke circumstances that provide a local and historical grounding to the contemporary phenomena discussed in this chapter, without implying that this unfolding of events is self-contained, as the influences affecting Nigerian popular culture are complex and their contingent interplay is precisely the productive force behind its dynamism.

The symbolic and material entanglement of cultural creativity with economic participation has been a crucial force behind the development of popular music in Lagos throughout the twentieth century (Waterman 1990, Boluwaduro 2018). Lagos as a social and geographic space is defined by migration, and shared culture articulates around the need to create a place for oneself in a deeply segregated and unequal environment shaped by the slave trade and European colonialism. From its roots, urban popular music was therefore embedded in dynamics of status negotiation, inseparable from socioeconomic considerations and value systems imposed from the outside. Artists, in their marginal and self-conscious condition, were particularly well situated to interpret different cultural codes, thereby styling new cosmopolitan urban identities grounded in aspiration.

This reality took a new dimension in the 1970s, in the wake of Nigeria's oil boom (Alaja-Browne 1989; Waterman 1990). Music functioned as a key instrument in what Andrew Apter calls the "rational investment in symbolic and social capital", the main outlet for the privately appropriated proceeds of oil (2005: 39; Ellis 2016: 100). Lavish private parties sprang up as arenas for the display of newly acquired wealth, with the aim of building alliances and assert one's reputation as a "big man". Generous "spraying"—the practice of throwing or sticking banknotes on someone, especially a musician—was a central element of these performances of status. In his groundbreaking "Diachronic Study of Change in Juju Music", sociologist Afolabi Alaja-Browne (1989) describes the most respected Juju¹¹ artists of that era as astute strategists, who redefined praise-singing in a way that allowed them to benefit from the inequalities and aspirations permeating Nigerian society. As participants and active contributors in the prestige economy of 1970s, Lagos-based superstar musicians became millionaires (Waterman 1990: 116).

This history of Juju, with its patron-client relationships between members of the African elite and musicians, already hints to another key dynamic: the patronage of music entrepreneurs by international capital. The first recording of pioneer Juju star Tunde King in the 1930s was a praise song in honor of one of the two major African distributors of gramophone discs in Lagos, who acted as middleman between United Africa Company, which imported and distributed discs from England, and local musicians and retail outlets (Waterman 1990: 77). The structural role of transnational firms as intermediaries in processes of fame-building has historical roots that can thus be traced to the interwar period. While urbanization in Lagos intensified after World War II, and commercial mass reproduction and dissemination techniques developed, the flourishing of Juju yet continued to rely on a symbiotic relationship with elite members of society mediated by international companies' monopoly over the physical infrastructure of

¹¹ [Describe Juju and influence]

mass-reproduced music, with the broader public only playing an indirect role in the popularity of the genre. At the height of Tunde King's career, the share of the artist's earnings derived from the sales of his recordings always remained minuscule (Waterman 1990: 77). Opportunities to record were only available to a few artists, generally those with strong ties to influential patrons, particularly merchants who were connected to international companies, since the pressing facilities were all based abroad. The developmental trajectory of professional artists in Lagos first involved popularity among elites, which gave access to recording opportunities, leading to a wider popularity among wealthy Africans who could afford to purchase gramophones, in turn offering opportunities to perform at private celebrations, the major source of cash for artists.

This structure led to a highly unequal access to resources among musicians, with most Juju musicians being seen as "low-class ragamuffins" (Whiteman 2013: 118), while those who reached fame were able to enter the virtuous circle of monetization. The other dominant popular music genre in Lagos in the second half of the twentieth century, Fuji, similarly thrived on socioeconomic differentiation (Waterman 1994; Barber and Waterman 1995; Adeniji 2018). Alan Waterman explains that "to the elites who support him [the fuji superstar] is a praise-singer; in the eyes of the wider public he is akin to a chief". Already, the audience engaged with fuji music through music videos, with Waterman explaining that "people talk almost continuously, a running commentary which is often less about the music than the bandleader (his wealth, his costumes, his fancy car, his sunglasses, his girlfriends)". Fuji musicians mediated the masses' intimate encounter with consumption and its avatars—brands—while reinforcing the prestige of the powerful. Through local popular music, the "masses" and the "powerful" were thus constructed as separate constituencies, but also as part of one social continuum organized by and around consumption, especially of foreign brands.

Since the interwar period, one category of consumer items in particular has been explicitly tied to questions of culture and social stratification as part of its marketing strategy: liquor brands. Between the end of the slave trade and the beginning of oil export, the liquor trade was the largest economic sector in Nigeria (Heap 2008: 2), laying the groundwork for mass marketing and consumer culture. The relationship between modernity, globality, and prestige, and their connection to questions of morality was established. This was particularly visible with the launch of STAR beer in 1949, the first locally produced Western-style alcohol. Historian Simon Heap describes how “[N]o matter the foreign ownership on Nigerian Breweries Limited, the patriotic appeal of STAR – which was ‘Made in Nigeria’ – propelled it into the economic and social life of the country” (2008: 16). The drink was associated with modern lifestyles and prosperous careers thanks to strategic advertisement and events sponsorship. Capturing “the optimism and the expectations of prosperity and modern development”, it spoke “not just to the existing members of the middle classes, but also to the aspirations and dreams of those who were hoping to join them” (Van den Bersselaar 2007: 208), thus laying an accessible path to modern self-making through consumption.¹²

While faith in modernist development was stalled by the economic crisis and structural adjustment program of the 1980s, corporations subsequently reinforced their grip on “collective horizons” (Appadurai 2004: 67). With the spiral of dropping oil prices, corruption, military coups, and austerity giving way to what Piot describes across Africa as “a future without a telos” (2010: 20), a new form of marketing could thrive. The return to democracy in a post-liberalization environment in 1999 indeed coincided with the emergence globally of “biopolitical marketing” (Bradshaw and Zwick 2016), which draws on ideas of governmentality to penetrate an atomized lifeworld. Rather than seek to impose new modes of relating that rework lived experience—as modernist ideology had attempted—it harnesses cultural diversity

¹² [Add ref to Timothy Burke *Lux Women*; Emmanuel Akyeampong *What's in a drink?*;

to insinuate itself into existing social structures and capture attention, inserting strategically placed corporate signs. Through their association with average youths' cultural pursuits, large corporations drew new populations into global capitalism as potential consumers, in the midst of economic devastation and ideological shambles. In the newly liberalized economy, multinational companies took over the construction of "national unity out of 'ethnic' diversity" (Apter 2005: 457) for the purpose of market building, making a mockery of the earlier teleological project grounded in state-led development by re-centering instead grassroots aspirations and everyday survival. Steered by educated middle-class youths themselves disenchanted by the career paths once offered by the state, corporations captured the form of being-in-the-world that associates national pride with "hustling".

Arguably the most impactful such development was achieved by British American Tobacco-owned brand Benson & Hedges through its involvement with music at the turn of the millennium. The cigarette brand's local music-based marketing was so successful that a team of public health experts from the United Kingdom, the United States, and Australia warned of the "scale of the challenge" posed by the power of music sponsorship in a study on "British American Tobacco and music sponsorship in sub-Saharan Africa", with Nigeria as case study (Patel *et al.* 2009). The report notes that British American Tobacco "did not associate the concerts with any particular type of music or artist but sought 'the services of those musicians identified as relevant to individual markets to "front" and play in [the] Golden Tones concerts'" (2009: 6). Several pioneer musicians of the contemporary Nigerian music industry are associated with these marketing campaigns. The current president of the Performing Musicians Association of Nigeria, a member of the duo that spearheaded the code and language switching at the root of what would become Afro hip hop and then Afrobeats, Okafor Petty of Junior & Pretty (Adedeji 2010: 154; Gbogi 2019: 120), was responsible for the production of the era-defining Gold and Tones "Grab da Mic" competitions. These marketing events, which reached

all Nigerian states and local governments, “blew” some key artists who would lay the foundations for the emerging national industry. Conscious rapper Sound Sultan won the 1999 edition and recalls getting his career started through Benson & Hedges “taking [him] around the country” as a host for the concerts¹³, while the duo P-Square who would go on to become the face of Africa’s rise in global pop emerged as the winners of the 2001 edition, with Benson & Hedges sponsoring their debut album through a music production arm, Benson & Hedges Music Co. The success of the campaigns¹⁴ led the brand to bring a Nigerian artist, reggae singer Ras Kimono, to perform at promotional concerts in Papua New Guinea in front of packed stadiums¹⁵. A “very unforgettable” experience for the artist’s band, who would recall it as its “biggest tour”¹⁶, and a precursor to Nigerian popular music’s corporate-supported “Africa to the world” movement of the late 2010s.

The groundwork for the current Nigerian music industry was laid during that time¹⁷, in a context of infrastructural and promotional support from multinational consumer brands. While the most recent interest in Nigerian popular music by international music and media corporations is receiving much attention and praise, the geometry of encounter between the new Nigerian music and global capital is historically complex. The development of the industry’s structures, sound, and culture took place precisely in the vacuum left by the departure of international record labels from Lagos in the wake of crisis in the 1980s, which had ended a near century long presence (Waterman 1990; Adediji 2010). Yet its entanglement with multinationals is nothing new. The successive corporate links over its two-decade history trace

¹³ Personal communication 26 Dec. 2019.

¹⁴ The Nigerian music-based advertising was so successful that the Golden Tones concerts were replicated across Asia and the Caribbean (Pattel et al. 2009: 8).

¹⁵ “Nigerian Golden Tones star, Ras Kimono, was a huge success in PNG”, American British Tobacco internal documents would describe. BAT, ‘B&H SF consumer product test, Nigeria, June/July 1997’, 18 February 1998, Bates No: 321867233/321867237, at <http://bat.library.ucsf.edu/tid/lhp53a99>.

¹⁶ Fred Iwenjoram February 8, 2020 <https://www.vanguardngr.com/2020/02/ras-kimonos-bassist-umar-baba-ahmed-relieves-good-bad-times-with-him/>.

¹⁷ See documentary *Afrobeats : The Backstory* by industry veteran Ayo Shonaiya.

a map of Nigeria's embeddedness within webs of power. While influencing the music and musicians' trajectories, the various non-music actors that successively backed the emerging Nigerian music industry have also shaped the values and lifeworld that governs it. After the turn of the millennium saw British American Tobacco's "Grab the mic" competition and several beverage-sponsored shows and talent hunts¹⁸ successfully link a national musical identity to ideas of individual aspiration, competition, and consumption, a string of music talent TV reality shows emerged in the late 2000s under the auspices of telecom operator brands,¹⁹ which quickly became the dominant brands in Africa.²⁰ In the 2010s, Nigerian commercial banks also became involved with the creation and sustenance of music stars—building pan-African champions.²¹ By the start of the 2020s, Nigerian artists were actively supported by digital platforms and could expect deals with luxury and consumer brands on a global scale.

With the synergy between the new Nigerian music industry and consumer capitalism grounded in the history of privatization, music professionals and corporate managers have exerted reciprocal influence (sometimes even overlapping); yet the historically exploitative dynamic that continues to unfold is not devoid of tensions. A site of friction in the sense of Anna Tsing (2005), the entanglement between the music scene and the advertisement world is based on the productive encounter of separate pursuits, and also prone to clashes. See for example the frustration expressed by an event production manager, Scot, himself a former dancer: "You have all those ideas on how you want to do things, the artist is on board, you're all hyped up. Then you meet with the corporate sponsor, and by the end of the meeting the vision is dead." Scot does not bemoan the importance of advertising; he warmly welcomes the

¹⁸ Such as "STAR Quest" by STAR beer or Peak Talent Hunt by Peak milk.

¹⁹ Project Fame, Nigerian Idol, Nigeria Got Talent, and X Factor, each respectively sponsored by one of the four competing telecom operators.

²⁰ The leading telecom operator in Nigeria, MTN, is repeatedly ranked most valuable brand in Africa.

²¹ First Bank sponsored The Voice Nigeria and Access Bank later partnered with STAR beer to create the Access the STARS talent show, while superstar Wizkid started a highly visible partnership with United Bank for Africa (UBA).

financial support and visibility it provides. Rather, like other music professionals, he advocates for a more “business-minded” approach in marketing. Instead of raucous billboards bearing no relation to the artistic performance, the goal would be to design more creative ways to increase the sponsors’ touchpoints with concert goers and tailor campaigns to the artist’s identity, thus foregrounding the artistic vision to make it a driver for more effective campaigns. Indeed, while the concerts of established stars rely on large crowd numbers, less commercially successful artists have their whole stage background plastered with huge electronic billboards, rotating ads from Hennessy Cognac to Domino’s Pizza.²² Music professionals deplore that the corporations operating locally do not invest to develop the local market, skimping on innovation in a logic reminiscent of the colonial-based extractive model.

The predatory logic deployed by local consumer brands in their interactions with the music industry is all the starker the lower the participant is situated in the value chain. A 22-year stylist who had dropped out of high school to launch a successful career working mostly for artists and music video directors explained that, to her, “corporations are the worst”. While she cannot refuse opportunities to work on ads for famous brands, such as banks or beverage companies, she feels that due to her age and gender she is not taken seriously by corporate actors, with payment delays and contractual breaches the norm in their interactions. Emphasizing the link between financial capacity, foreignness, and legitimacy, she keeps on musing about plans to go abroad (anywhere): “I will come back and charge them in Dollars, then they will understand, they will never disrespect me again.” A striking illustration of corporations’ extractive disposition towards the lower rungs of the music industry occurred when Nigerian financial institution Zenith Bank created an ad based on the evolution of dances associated with Afrobeats. The bank had hired well-known dancers who commonly work with

²² Rising Afropop artists or artists in less mainstream genres, such as Blaqbonez’ concert in Muri Okunola Park in December 2019 or Alternate Sound’s concert at Terra Kulture in January 2020.

musicians to reenact the popular dances of the past two decades, with the latest one being the Shadia dance, created by prominent Afrofusion dance group Westsyde Lifestyle. Yet, in the ad, the Shadia dance was renamed “996 dance”, in reference to the new phone banking service that the bank was launching. This symbolic act of corporate appropriation was the last straw for a profession dealing with extreme levels of precarity and exploitation, and drew collective resistance from the dance community rarely observed before. Yet, in most cases, dancers prefer to stay silent in the face of corporate abuse, lest speaking out would reduce their limited pool of opportunity even further. In the absence of organized avenues to challenge brands’ dominance, aspiring professionals resort to micro-resistance practices, such as the case of a dancer who had posted on his social media profile an elaborate dance video praising a yoghurt brand and blurred the brand name after not winning endorsement from the company, explaining: “I don’t want to delete it, I’ve invested so much in it, but it’s unfair that they would still benefit.”

While the elements of context laid out in this section have situated contemporary trends in Lagos’s historical trajectory, they are not meant to frame locally grounded history as an interpretive key, setting Nigeria apart from global dynamics. On the contrary, the exacerbated position that Lagos has had in globalization processes makes it an illustrative case of the way in which capitalist structure operates through racialized frameworks to shape culture across the world. With the conjunction, since the late 20th century, of Nigerian mass emigration, the rise of African American entertainers as “embodiments of neoliberal capitalist ideals” (Matlon 2016: 1016; see also Ebron 2011), and the global offensive of U.S.-based media and consumer brands, the relationship between music, corporations, and race has been a driving force for the cultural processes through which “collective horizons” (Appadurai 2004: 67) are shaped, or, as Paulla Ebron puts it, “Black social and political aspirations . . . can no longer be separated from corporate globalization itself” (2011: 328). This section has shown how the diffusion process from the United States to the world since the 1990s (Kitwana 2002; Adedjeji 2010; Shonekan

2013; Akpan 2016; Gbogi 2019) relies on deeper historical foundations, allowing today's consumerist moral economy of popular music to fuel a multi-party dialogue across postcolonial and diasporic spaces.

Morality and meaning-making in a branded universe

In this section I will show that relations with multinational brands operate as a primary site for the contest over meaning and the power struggle that popular artists and their fans are engaged in. As symbolic markers, brands are vehicles to be harnessed in the individual and collective pursuits embodied by Nigerian music professionals: to claim social mobility, legitimacy, and agency in a postcolonial context. As artists transcend the symbolic and material limitations that have come to define "African" identity, association with global brands is understood to revalue such identity by indexing it to an objectified and universalized corporate value. Inscribed into the very artistic texture of Nigerian music and incorporated into the rituals and rites of passage established by popular culture, brands are thus a part of the fabric of social life, but they are also woven tight into personhood as young Nigerians reflexively write themselves as subjects within an imposed capitalist history presented as "universal". The practice of branding therefore calls for an understanding of the moral framework it co-produces, which will be the central theme of this section. From serving as a proxy for "African" emancipation to offering a safeguard of respectability in a context of institutional breakdown, corporate brands are embedded in moral considerations, providing an expressive means to navigate an oppressive socioeconomic reality and imbuing it with meaning.

Celebrity studies have shown how pop stars teach generations to recognize the value of consumer products for themselves, guiding young people through the consumption process, and, even more importantly, teaching them that consumption is the path to "make" oneself (Marshall 2010: 36). The pedagogical role of popular culture is particularly marked in Africa,

with Karin Barber (1997b) defining the continent's popular culture by its capacity to rework imported genres and concepts for the purpose of moral instruction (see also Masquelier 2009; Nwamara *et al.* 2019). Foreign brands are similarly integrated, with a Lagos-based public relations professional explaining about Nigerian pop stars: "they often wear a locally made dress, but then they will accessorize it with a Gucci bag". Barber already described how the advent of videos in Nigeria meant that the youth were able to witness their own activity of conspicuous consumption writ large, to the extent that in consuming video dramas, they were mimicking the process of big men's self-creation displayed for them (1997: 359). The "presentational" (Marshall 2010) dimension of online culture has exacerbated this feature, as the celebrities' capacity to embody the audience is reinforced by the relatability created by social media, with users resorting to strategies of self-presentation similar to those of the celebrities whose successful path they hope to emulate.

The role of brands in the making of the self in Nigeria is thus closely intertwined with the notion of foreignness. Inherited from colonial status hierarchies, the value conferred to "the abroad" is grounded in the present reality of global inequality and migration. Artists, who embody the capacity to fluidly move beyond borders, intertwine the prestige derived from association to foreign brands with their own travels, reinforcing the perceptions that construct the path to self-making as an actual geographical trajectory. This productive entanglement is particularly evident in the career milestones projected by Nigerian "street" artists. Due to Nigerian music's success in Dubai and the ease of getting visas, their first trip outside of the continent is usually to the emirate, during which they flood social media with images and videos of their personal trajectory grounded in the physical infrastructure of the luxury stores of Dubai Mall, itself an architectural manifestation of the "Dubai brand" (AbiFarès 2005; Kanna 2010; Kathiravelu 2015). Such trips constitute rites of passage, allowing the artist to fully embody the consumerist and transnational subjectivity enacted in subaltern dreamscapes (Smith 2003: 81).

This initiatory nature is well illustrated by the first trip to Dubai of 19-year-old artist Lil Frosh, from Lagos's famously overcrowded Agege neighborhood. The young artist was brought out by Nigerian superstar Davido, who treated him to shopping sprees at the Gucci and Fendi stores. Nigerian media reported on the trip with headlines such as: "Up and coming indigenous rapper, Lil Frosh, is currently being taught to live the 30 [billion gang] way"²³ or "Lil Frosh is getting tutored on how to be a real 'big boy' in Dubai."²⁴ A particularly symbolic scene involved Davido taking Lil Frosh's wrist watch and throwing into the sea to his team's shouts of "No fake watches here". The episode was heavily relayed on social media, with Davido the most followed Black African on social media²⁵, thus extending the reach of the moment's educative power across vast communities of youths.

African music professionals who plug Lagos artists to the cogs of multinational corporations are both a driving force and witnesses to the social dynamics of branding. Aware that the stakes of corporate deals reach far beyond their industry, closely watched by scores of African and diasporic youths, they are mediating agents in a complex system of meaning-making. See this excerpt from a conversation between the Head of Music for Sub-Saharan Africa at Swedish music streaming platform Spotify, based in Dubai, and a New York-based music blogger of Liberian descent who has consulted for Nigerian artists navigating the American music business ecosystem:

In my experience, when it comes to the online fanbases of international stars, it is unmatched. Almost immediately, every post or tweet gets attention from thousands of people and may become headline news in the local online publications. When an African artist receives support from major companies outside of their region, it translates as "I am going in the right direction" and keeps them motivated to continue.²⁶

²³ <https://tooxclusive.com/lil-frosh-reveals-the-price-of-shoe-davido-bought-for-him-says-its-1-2-million-naira/>.

²⁴ <https://theinfong.com/2019/11/lil-frosh-shows-off-the-n1-2million-gucci-shoe-davido-bought-for-him/>.

²⁵ His following reached close to 25 million people on the Instagram platform alone in May 2022.

²⁶ Richardine Bartee is of Liberian descent and Phiona Okumu was born in Kenya to Ugandan parents, both women describe working toward the "empowerment of the continent."

Like many agents of the Nigerian music industry, the two African women having the exchange above occupy liminal positions, straddling different continents and value systems, subject to complex geometries on the axes of power and inclusion. Identity operates across constituencies through the shared recognition of being on the receiving end of a historically denigrated “African” assignation. The mobilization of global brands then functions as a pan-African rallying cry, allowing for the encounter and alignment of projects from heterogeneous actors. Professionals at multinational companies indeed wield the vocabulary of postcolonial inclusion all the more passionately that an increasing number identify as oppressed minorities themselves, with their corporate achievements grounded in the morality of self-assertion similar to that claimed by the artists who they deal with.

In a challenging environment and thinly capitalized industry, affiliations with consumer brands represent indeed key steps on the trajectory to self-sufficiency and legitimacy for artists and their teams. The music executive who launched Burna Boy’s career, as they were both in their early twenties looking to make it in the Southeastern Nigerian city of Port Harcourt, recalls the sponsorship from Nigerian telecom operator Globacom as a defining milestone. That is when even Burna Boy’s mother, he explains, understood that her son was “now really an artist”. As the singer continued his rise to international stardom to become the “African Giant”, the brands he associated with mirrored that evolution—signaling and co-producing the success that would eventually endear his controversial personality to the Nigerian public. Styled by his sister, the singer is indeed always spotted conspicuously wearing Western luxury fashion brands, in a calculated move to appropriate the status symbols of colonial powers and deactivate their racially oppressive charge.²⁷ Claiming Fela Kuti’s legacy, with his grandfather acting as

²⁷ With Chicago rapper Polo G, “Want it all”. Chorus: “I got every Louis V collection from Virgil”. Louis V as a status symbol, but reworked as a pan-African statement through Ghanaian as designer and Nigerian as customer. “Now my life a fashion show, no rehearsal”. Recognition of the parallel with racial capitalism as experienced in African American communities through the collaboration with an American rapper.

Fela's very first manager, Burna Boy appeals to the hunger for the branded commodity that constitutes the rallying cry of the grassroots of his generation (Smith 2003: 81). Reconfiguring activism at a time of exclusion and marginalization, Fela Kuti's resistance is inverted to become the active fight for a place in the global capitalist system, of which consumer brands are the most eloquent proxy. In fact, superstar Wizkid is often dubbed the "Fela Kuti of our time" by Nigerian youths, due to his success in the United States and countless collaborations with prestigious foreign brands.

Fans indeed scrutinize the luxury references wielded by artists in music videos, lyrics, social media, concerts, etc. Remarks such as the following post on Nigeria's leading online forum, Nairaland²⁸, are a typical feature of popular commentary: "Haba see wizkid's kicks now!! Matching [Gucci] sneakers with sweater he dey look like bag of money! [heart eyes emoji]". It is common for fans to justify their artist preferences based on the value of the brands the artist is associated with, instituting corporations as authorities in a discursive field. In a 2006 thread on Nairaland, a discussion centered on the lack of brand sponsorships of a star of the time, pioneer Afrobeats artist 2face Idibia. Commenters lamented what they considered the artist's failure to capitalize on his fame, arguing that it positioned Africa at a detriment compared to the rest of the world. Bob Marley was mentioned as an example to follow, in light of the extensive merchandizing initiatives he has been associated to.

This logic is not limited to international stars and reaches every level of the music industry. Gaining the support of a corporation, even at the local level, is understood as a legitimizing step, framed in moral terms. Dancers and emerging musicians, for example, are prompt to indicate "paid partnership" on their social media posts, not to comply with consumer protection laws that, if in existence, would hardly be enforced, but to signal their achievement in being a party to transactional—i.e., valuable—relationships. See below the excerpt of a

²⁸ An online forum credited as the Nigerian website most visited by Nigerians (Dike 2018: 495).

conversation with a dancer in Lagos who was invited to a Paris dance festival (which he would eventually fail to attend due to lack of sufficient funds to obtain a visa):

I've come to it late, but now I'm enlightened. You know that drummer we saw last time? I asked him: 'What do you want to achieve with that?' I see us getting excited, but it doesn't make sense. If we can't convert it financially, what's the point? We are kept ignorant here, it makes me sick. If I go to France, it's to get a corporate sponsor: Nike, Red Bull, whatever they have there. See SPAN [the Society for Performing Arts in Nigeria, set up by a Lebanese woman to "empower Nigerian youths through performing arts education and expression"], with this white woman who thinks she knows better than us what we is good for us, the dancers go to London and what not, they come back and they're still dirt poor."

Beyond their direct connection to material opportunities, brands function as a communication system that aspiring artists have learnt to reflexively wield. For example, a struggling Lagos beat-maker explained that it is crucial to dress in a way that exhibits knowledge of brands when trying to get noticed by established artists. He described buying knockoffs of the latest Dior sneakers from the market, before the original ones were even available in Nigeria. Thus, he fully abstracted the expressive dimension of designer brands from the underlying objects to make it a part of a symbolic repertoire of tools to be deployed. An extreme manifestation of the communicative power conferred to European luxury brands was the case of prominent Nigerian cybercriminal and disgraced social media icon, Hushpuppi. The influencer who lived in Dubai and was arrested with US\$40 million in cash had become a popular culture phenomenon through showcasing his branded items to his millions of online followers. Closely linked to Nigerian music, his whole public life revolved around European fashion houses and Nigerian pop stars, receiving shout-outs on songs from the former and special guest invitations from the latter, and using both as communication tools with his followers, mostly Nigerian youths. The following caption from his post about being invited to a Fendi event in Dubai provides an example:

the fact that people of my kind . . . can get here on this level, not only make it out of the hood but also be able to integrate from the streets to the cooperate [*sic*] world . . . I know I was not created to be a champion in a local market and I know for a fact I have been inspiring a lot of people not just from Africa but every part of the world on how to live life better and more greatly in the fashion world, I have been able to expose a lot of people to see the light (You all

are welcome lol). . . Being the only black person that was invited there last night, I hope to see many of you black kings and queens in this type of gatherings next time²⁹

Association with powerful brands is indeed widely conceptualized as a tool available to underdogs to subvert social scripts. Both a means of achieving financial freedom and a marker of respect, brands map the field of social aspirations that Nigerian artists themselves tread. For example, when “street” sensation Zlatan Ibile became the face of a Coca Cola campaign in 2019, after being linked to rumors of cyber-criminality and often reduced to his social and geographic origin (coming from Lagos’s overcrowded Ikorodu suburb), it felt like a victory. Being endorsed by a “respectable” and international brand indeed transcended his assignation as an “indigenous rapper”.³⁰ The amount of the deal disclosed by the artist and Coca Cola was highly inflated, as is frequently the case with corporate sponsorships, and did not even match up to what the artist used to receive from local companies commonly affiliated with “street” artists, such as betting companies; yet the collaboration afforded both parties what they sought: legitimacy³¹. The advertising agency manager who brokered the deal also took it personally. Self-made, while his mom was working as a nanny in England, he explained that negotiating an opportunity with Coca Cola for “someone like Zlatan felt a bit like [his] own revenge” on social stratification. Similar legitimization stories abound from the margins of the Nigerian music industry. Denrele, a gender-nonconforming personality, and Kaffy, the first female dance household name, both recall how their careers took off with leading African telecom operator MTN taking them around Nigeria, building acceptance around their identities in the eyes of the public; while pioneer rapper Sound Sultan, openly critical of the government, remains grateful to cigarette brand Benson & Hedges for lending him visibility as the face of its nationwide Golden Tones concerts.

²⁹ <https://www.instagram.com/p/BquBjndAFrR/>.

³⁰ Rapping in Yoruba.

³¹ Coca Cola sought to gain currency among the masses to compete with local competitor Big Cola on that segment.

While scholarly literature consistently points the flaws of market-based visibility as an emancipation strategy, Shuaishuai Wang observed that “in China one is often faced with a choice between either making partial gains or a total loss” (561)—an observation that echoes the situation of many groups even in today’s “official” democracies or “democratic oligarchies”, and of whole populations in states where the notion of citizenship is deprived of any actual content (Balibar 2008), such as Nigeria. With the collapse of other normative structures in the wake of privatization, consumer brands have increasingly emerged as a moral compass to fill the void. They offer a form of safeguard at a historical conjuncture where many young people are thoroughly disillusioned with the institutions traditionally supposed to provide guidance. In an environment where professors coerce students into sex, pastors extort churchgoers for personal enrichment, traditional rulers exact exorbitant chieftaincy title costs from entrepreneurs and even criminals, and government officials are involved in all forms corruption, the market principles that appear to govern corporations offer a form of phenomenological certainty.

As both custodians of the status quo and vehicles to be seized upon in the quest for credibility for otherwise denigrated identities, corporate brands are instituted as *de facto* moral authorities in a contested social field. For instance, as British Nigerian singer Naira Marley built a huge success from his controversial lyrics about sex and drugs and his vocal support to “Yahoo boys”, his arrest by the Nigerian Economic and Financial Crimes Commission (EFCC), the censorship of his songs by the Nigerian Broadcasting Commission (NBC), and his ban from performing at the University of Lagos only reinforced his appeal to young Nigerians. Corporations, then, were seen as last line of defense, with a group of struggling dancers who placed their faith in consistency and hard work telling me: “He can never get sponsorships, companies just won’t allow this nonsense.” Yet the singer’s message denouncing already discredited norms of respectability was resonating with corporate managers, who were

personally eager to endorse him, as a marketing manager of a Chinese phone brand explained to me: “We’re just waiting for someone to do it, and then we’ll all unleash our marketing budgets on him. But you know, we can’t be seen as the first ones to make that move”.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have shown how, in response to capitalism’s globalizing project, the assertions of global membership that Lagos artists carry are explicitly formulated on the basis of corporate symbols, weaponized against marginalization and thus imbued with moral power. The historical configuration of external forces that has shaped Lagos as a cosmopolitan megalopolis plagued by highly segregated development, and more generally, led to the association of “Nigeria” with upheaval and oppression, has deeply impacted individuals’ sense of self. With the site of sovereignty designated as an “elsewhere” (Marshall 2009: 198) and personal trajectories mapped by a center-periphery logic, people have learnt to define themselves in reference to the driving force behind their collective destiny: foreign corporations. Nigerian music professionals, at the vanguard of youth aspirations, wield the discursive power of brands to rehabilitate the worth of a socio-economically sacrificed generation, tying the respect they command to objectified and universalized market metrics.

While unique in some ways, the case of the Nigerian music industry is obviously far from being isolated. It articulates with other situations grounded in racial capitalism and, increasingly, in a universally accepted principle of branding, in a more or less fluid process. Nigerian music professionals and fans wield “Drake”, “Beyoncé”, or “Justin Bieber” as brands names to be seized upon on the way to recognition and success. Case in point, when Wizkid released a remix of his hit song “Essence” that now featured Justin Bieber, a white Canadian pop singer with a fraught past around racial issues, it drew widespread condemnation from the African American community; yet the outrage barely found any resonance among the Nigerian

public or in the Nigerian music industry. Global household names such as Justin Bieber are considered interchangeable, as long as they serve the function of increasing Nigeria's visibility. A leading Lagos-based music journalist addressed African American criticism by explaining: "The number one thing you need to look at is this: capitalism does not care about your emotions. Capitalism does not care about your needs. . . for Afrobeats to be big in America, there needs to be a breakout record that's going to chart us as high as possible and crack the door open for the genre, and to usher in a lot of Afrobeats stars"³²—to which aspiring Nigerian artists added comments such as: "You are a wonderful music critic, no sentiments", or "Capitalism reminds me of me."

When the principle of the brand governs personhood, then everyone is commensurable, competing for a subset of the same attention pool. A research pitfall would be to look at the Nigerian music industry as a bounded structure with its internal logic, while, as a world-making project, its scope encompasses all of us, requiring a self-reflexive approach. During the Covid-19 pandemic, the social media post of a Spanish epidemiologist complaining that society has invested more resources into football players than researchers was widely shared among Nigerian music professionals, with one music marketer commenting: "Branding rights are everything these days. Even creatives that don't understand this are under paid. So researchers can and should look into brand collaboration and explore that resource too." As Nigerian music professionals have rapidly and aggressively seized upon the self-branding possibilities offered by the near-universal reach of social media, they challenge the world to rethink how hegemonic structures operate through marginality. I was helped in this approach by the public relations manager of 14-year-old gospel singer, who, to thank me for promoting his artist in a short-form video offered to now record a video for my own social media profile, prompting my naïve response and the following conversation:

³² Motolani Alake, on the Facts Only episode of 18 August, 2021 <https://www.instagram.com/reel/CSxTxhldiX/>.

“Oh it’s ok, I have nothing to sell.

- But we all have something to sell, you have to sell yourself.

- Yea maybe, but in my industry [academia] it’s not as reliant on the phone.

- Of course, over there you have so many opportunities... Here, all we have is the phone, so we have to invest everything in the little we have...”

Hyperconscious dreaming: Instantaneity and survival in the ruins of the failed postcolonial experiment

Introduction

The ambition, success, and excess that characterize the Nigerian music industry as a contemporary world-making project cannot be understood without giving proper consideration to the environment it arose from. Around the globe, the concept of “Nigeria” increasingly evokes warm rhythms and colorful fashion. Yet the people bound by its material reality look at it through a very different lens. The country is indeed commonly referred to as an “open-air prison” or a “hell experiment” by those within its territorial boundaries. The hip and cool Nigeria that radio stations from Moscow to New York celebrate as a purveyor of “certified bangers” and “summer hits” is no less real. It coexists alongside mass suffering, is intertwined with it, and, in fact, springs from it. Artists and music professionals work extremely hard to project the confidence and enjoyment that resonates with a local population tired of their chaotic lives buffeted by market forces and political greed. Ultimately, they strike the same chord across the world. Harri Englund reminds us that “cosmopolitan vision transcends . . . social and spatial boundaries, but it gains its force from . . . an uneasy relation to the home that imposes itself on the subject (2004: 293). Indeed, while the Nigerian music industry rode the early 2010s wave of international optimism towards Africa¹ and contributed itself greatly to changing the

¹ Many Nigerian music professionals working or studying in Europe or North America returned to Lagos in the wake of the financial crisis, pushed by Western economic decline and attracted by the description of business opportunities on the continent that dominated the media at the time. In addition, telecom companies, financial institutions, and fast-moving consumer brands poured money into the Nigerian music industry at a time when the economy was growing, supported by high oil prices.

imaginary associated with the continent, its cosmopolitan aspirations remain grounded in a sense of urgency that calls for the assertion of one's humanity to the world.

Even as the perception of "Africa" went from "the hopeless continent" at the turn of the millennium to the "Africa rising" narrative a decade later,² structural conditions on the ground have barely improved. Crucially, these conditions shape the way in which people conceptualize their own environment, with "themes of insecurity" and "precarity" piecing together "a phenomenology of Lagos life" (Agbibo 2022: 124). Contemporary popular artists barely address inequality and deprivation explicitly (Ugor 2021), and their fierce pursuit of individual advancement contributes to defusing the subversive potential of class consciousness. Yet the Nigerian music industry's whole disposition is informed by a lifeworld dominated by the menace of poverty and untimely death. The Lagos-based artists and music professionals who entertain and inspire Africa's youth come from a wide range of backgrounds, and several have achieved (or were born into) a high level of material comfort. "No amount of money, however, can buy complete segregation from ambient misery and danger" (Haynes 2007: 142). Lagos' patchy infrastructure and institutional development has led to a heterogeneously-organized urban population, with a fragmented and precarious new elite linked to the masses by enduring and contested ties of kinship, community membership, and patronage (Barber 1987: 23; 1997a: 3). Ostentatious wealth and extreme poverty are intimately linked in a way that hinders conceptualizations of a class struggle (Alaja-Browne 1989; Barber 1997; Haynes 2007; Waterman 1990). As this class struggle remains latent, it finds expression in interpersonal manifestations of the palpable tensions. The music industry, in particular, functions as an arena where great wealth rubs shoulders with extreme precarity; celebrity narratives often read like

² Compare the May 11, 2000 and the December 3, 2011 covers of *The Economist*: <https://www.economist.com/leaders/2000/05/11/hopeless-africa>; and <https://www.economist.com/leaders/2011/12/03/africa-rising>.

scripts of social relations, following the media tropes of house helps who brutally kill their employers.

While the Nigerian music industry does not mobilize social stratification as an empirically operative lens (with the hope to become a billionaire being widely shared, including among the fans), artists and music professionals have actively participated in the formation of a politically productive generational consciousness, opposed to “elders” who block that pursuit. This deep-reaching generational conflict was already eloquently articulated a decade ago in artist and record label owner Banky W’s powerful response to a diatribe of the Chairman of the Editorial Board at The Guardian Newspapers against Nigerian popular artists. As the venerable journalist decried “the age of meaningless” that the contemporary music industry allegedly embodies, Banky W, one of its pioneer figures, then aged 28, wrote:

The truth of the matter is we have worked very hard to create the industry we have now, and some people choose to criticize and lambaste most of us, instead of helping and teaching us . . . We want to learn but your generation has to teach. We want to read but the government must provide libraries. We want to go to school but the lecturers keep going on strike. We want to travel but previous generations messed up so they won’t give out visas³

The journalist, who would soon join Nigeria’s governing political party, castigated Lagos popular artists for not speaking proper English, not showing proper deference towards the name of the country and its colonial history, for reappropriating the national anthem, and for their interest in “commerce.” Banky W, after clearing the journalist’s several mistakes and misspellings, conceded that:

You were right on some counts. We ARE businessmen and women, and we ARE interested in extending name recognition and brand extension. You were also right in that we look up to people like Jay-Z, who took their music and created multimillion-dollar empires.

After suggesting that the veteran journalist still had to educate himself about contemporary Nigerian music, the artist closed with: “Naija Till We Die. Yes Boss.”

³ <https://thenet.ng/my-response-to-reuben-abati-article-in-the-guardian-newspapers/>.

Many youths feel indeed they belong less to Nigeria as an official entity than to “Naija.” A nickname “coined by the country’s youth as a way of distancing themselves from the old guard who they blame for Nigeria’s woes,”⁴ “Naija” (or “9ja”) encapsulates the “hustling” ethos that defines contemporary “Nigerianness,” foregrounding creativity and flexibility in opposition to bureaucratic and military hierarchy. The generation that came of age in the wake of the Structural Adjustment Program (SAP) supervised by the World Bank and International Monetary Fund refuses both the critic’s traditional deference to elders and the colonial norms of respectability. At the same time, it has also faced suspicion for its supposed allegiance to a new form of imperialism, with scholars denouncing how “impressionable Nigerian youth have received hip hop and ingested it to such an extent that much of the indigenous pop music that is created there has the overwhelming taste of American hip hop” (Shonekan 2013: 182), and predicting that “the continuation of this cultural/psychic occupation seems inevitable” (2013: 195).

This chapter explores the conflict of legitimacy over citizenship that the young generation of Nigerians feels engaged in, as they respond to Nigeria’s entrenched system of oppression, marginalization, and delegitimization with a form of flexible citizenship and pragmatic patriotism. With less than one in ten Nigerian youth ever contemplating a career in government or political office,⁵ the prebendalism that was long considered to delineate access to resources in Nigeria (Joseph 1983; Lewis 1996; Ogundiya 2009; Uwazurike 2013; Smith 2001; Adebani and Obadare 2013; Mbalisi 2018; Bello 2022) is no longer seen as a relevant avenue of social mobility. For the generation that grew up in the post-1999 age of democracy (which accounts for over three-quarters of the Nigerian population), the government is perceived neither as a resource, nor as an incarnation of their sense of citizenship. They mock

⁴ Peter Okwoche in “Nigeria at 50: What does Naija mean?” BBC News Africa, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-11447252>.

⁵ African Youth Survey 2022, <https://ichikowitzfoundation.com/ays2022/>.

the older controlling generation for desperately clinging on to their political rents. When “street-hop”⁶ star Zlatan Ibile was asked by a BBC journalist what he would do if he was president, the artist explained that he would first legalize cannabis to turn it into a money-making industry for Nigeria and then: “I go embezzle money, carry all the whole money, because na wetin our presidents and governors dey go do be that,⁷ embezzle, embezzle money, carry my own money and I go japa [leave the country].”⁸ Nigeria’s youth have reappropriated the forced self-reliance of the privatization era as a matter of pride—and paradoxically—of patriotism. “Our country has not yet given us steady electricity, adequate education, safety from armed robbers or standard healthcare, yet artistes have risen like the roses that grow from concrete... and these very artistes love and represent their country proudly on a global stage,” Banky W explained. In this process, popular musicians have emerged as representatives of the potentialities of a new mindset.

In the first section, I will discuss how Lagos music professionals experience citizenship through nationally mediated forms of suffering and a tragic sense of responsibility. The conditions of poverty and abjection that afflict Lagos have received much attention (Agbiboa 2022; Folarin 2015; Gandy 2005; Koolhaas *et al.* 2000)—with evocative titles such as “Lagos: Surviving Hell” (Subirós 2001), and the use of Lagos as key illustration for Robert Kaplan’s influential “The Coming Anarchy” (2000). These discussions often rely on dichotomies that contrast the experience of “politicians and managers on the one hand and ordinary people on the other” (Wade in Haynes 2007: 133). Yet, as Karin Barber explains, “‘the people’, ‘the masses’, and the ‘grassroots’ are phrases lavishly used by the press and politicians . . . but the categories represented in this rhetoric remain out of focus” (1997: 4). In this section, I will

⁶ A popular hybridized music genre that bridges the outward-looking “indigenous rap” or “Naija hip hop” of the 2000s and the Yoruba-centered genre from the second part of the 20th century, Fuji. “Street-hop” is a component of Afropop that is associated with the overcrowded suburbs of Lagos. Like Afropop in general, it is highly versatile and incorporative, and its sonic and dance elements constantly mutate.

⁷ “Because this is what our presidents and governors do”

⁸ <https://www.bbc.com/pidgin/tori-55155782>

describe specific ways in which the “Nigerian factor,” as it is popularly known, comes to bear on Nigerian music professionals despite their social mobility. Indeed, even for those who describe themselves as “middle class,” and in some cases could be considered part of the “new elite” (1997: 3), “what endures is a pervasive sense of ‘us’ and ‘them,’” (1997: 4) with “everybody except the innermost core (or cores) of the elite regard[ing] themselves as a member of the excluded majority” (Barber 1987: 21). Music professionals, however successful or connected they are, constantly resist the temptation to shed their Nigerianness and take the easier routes available to them abroad.

The second section will show how the deep consciousness of an omnipresent threat of impending doom shapes Nigerian music professionals’ relation to their futures and their communities. While popular discourse often recasts the structural dynamics of Nigerians’ intimate relationship to death through anthropomorphic or spiritual forces, it also reconfigures the contingency involved in living in a failed state into an individualized condition in which individuals they *could* have direct power—provided that they engage with such negative forces. I will show that the pervasive conceptualization of the Nigerian environment as fundamentally corrupted corruption is the backdrop against which Lagos music professionals seek to project a progressive future.

The third section will explore the concept of citizenship that emerged “from the ‘ground up’” (Studemeyer 2015: 571) among music professionals, as a result of the circumstances described above. Approaching the nation-state and its institutions through a subjective lens, I will describe how the neoliberal and deterritorialized citizenship embodied by music professionals is a product of historical constructions mediated by the contemporary socioeconomic moment. Neither colonial heritage nor essentialized tradition, this form of Nigerianness in this worldview is dynamically negotiated. It reflects the contingency and uncertainty that shape the shifting practices, attitudes, and coping mechanisms of its Nigeria’s

diverse citizens both inside and outside the country. Citizens are united not by culture or even by choice, but instead through a shared destiny sealed by history and—above all—through their conscious reappropriation of this assignation.

The fourth section will delve into the #EndSARS mass demonstrations of October 2020, in which young Nigerians in Lagos developed the most remarkable expression of their reconfigured citizenship. The movement started with demands to disband the Special Anti-Robbery Squad (SARS), which was set up in 1992 to battle rising levels of violent crime following the implementation of the SAP. SARS routinely exceeded its mandate, with operatives stopping and harassing people suspected of cybercrime simply based their dress and use of electronic gadgets, making it a source of constant fear for Nigeria's youth, especially in the music industry. Over time, SARS became a symbol of colliding political economies discursively mediated through the concept of generation, a simmering conflict that boiled over during the social movement.

A nationally mediated experience of suffering

When the executive team of Nigerian music and entertainment company Aristokrat Group went to Paris to finalize the negotiations of a joint venture with Universal Music France, the last day was bittersweet despite successfully closing the deal. After meeting with representatives of France's main collection society⁹ and with the director of a world-leading music trade convention¹⁰ to discuss the Nigerian music ecosystem and what can concretely be done to build up its infrastructure, it was time to go back to Lagos. Getting acquainted with the resources available in Europe for music production, marketing, and distribution had produced an overwhelming mix of emotions. The enthusiasm and amazement at the seemingly

⁹ Société des auteurs, compositeurs et éditeurs de musique (SACEM)

¹⁰ Marché International du Disque et de l'Édition Musicale (MIDEM)

“functioning” system that the Nigerian label could finally be plugged to was closely tied to a disheartening sense of injustice through its inaccessibility to most African entrepreneurs. This is a common experience for Lagos music professionals traveling abroad. As prominent producer and label owner Don Jazzy posted a few months earlier from Berlin: “I normally feel this way when ever [*sic*] I leave the country. No matter the country I go to. Small or big, I just get ashamed for us.” Addressing his millions of followers, mostly African youths, he described his thoughts when facing global inequality: “You will have money set and you will just be seeing people suffering and your money no go sweet you spend. Our standard of living in Naija is sad o ahhhh. It’s not fair. . . No matter the amount of money you have, you will still ball mediocre balling in that Nigeria.”¹¹ On our last night in Paris, my teammates from Aristokrat Group felt similarly ambivalent. Committed to going back and building from the ground up, it was hard to ignore the temptation of a convenient life in the West. They were apprehensive of catching up with reality once they would reach Lagos, of facing employees thinking the label had “arrived”¹² while everything was yet to be done. In fact, just transiting from the airport back to the office would take hours due to bad roads and lack of public transportation.

All these constraints weigh on Nigerian music professionals now that they are part of global networks. Not only do they have to perform according to “international standards,” they are also expected to prove themselves amidst deep-seated prejudice. And indeed, just a few days after being back in Lagos, as Aristokrat Group coordinated with multiple Universal offices across different time zones to launch a promotional campaign for an emerging Nigerian artist, infrastructural deficiencies led to the perfect storm—following a routine power cut that lasted eight hours, the enormously expensive generator broke down, the new Internet service (the third provider on trial period that month) failed to connect, and our mobile phone hotspot networks

¹¹ https://twitter.com/DONJAZZY/status/1183843453710618624?ref_src=twsrc%5Etfw.

¹² Slang meaning “reach success”.

(some of the least affordable in the world)¹³ failed to support the size of the files to be transferred... It was simply impossible to send the marketing assets. How does one explain to professionals sitting in Paris and Los Angeles in 2020 that email is inaccessible without reinforcing damaging stereotypes about Africa? Aristokrat's Chief Operating Officer joked at me: "You better not write that in your report!" Also the founder's wife, she had been with the label since its early days, when it consisted of a group that lived together in a single house. As the only woman of the team, she cooked and cleaned for the dozen artists, producers, and hangers-on who shared the space. With the Aristokrat brand now standing for corporate respectability, courted by the world's largest multinational companies, she is understandably proud of its path. Yet I have recorded these remaining difficulties, because this episode reveals the myriad obstacles that Nigerian music professionals face on a daily basis. As such, it is a testament to their resilience and creativity as they manage to project music created in the streets of Lagos to the airwaves of the world's radio stations and to the top of global digital platform charts.

Like Aristokrat's management, the Nigerian music industry's leading figures who in the country are deeply conflicted. As the face of hope for countless African youths, they are nonetheless subject to considerable anxiety and habits of self-denial. While they feel invested with the responsibility to build functioning structures on the continent and project optimism for the next generation, the pressure from an environment that is not only unconducive, but also perceived as an active threat, is often unbearable. Expressed in half-jokes—"if you're trying to build, the government here might just set out to scatter it," or "it's probably because the government hasn't cared about entertainment yet that the industry has done so well"¹⁴—there is fatigue at the thought that their efforts could all be in vain in the face of colossal institutional

¹³ 2021 Digital Quality of Life Index, <https://surfshark.com/dql2021>.

¹⁴ The first quote comes from an established beat-maker during a personal discussion, while the second quote was heard multiple times, including from a struggling artist manager and from a record label owner.

obstacles. The multiple levels of reading of music professionals' position appeared clearly in the context of Ayo Shonaiya's groundbreaking documentary: "Afrobeats: The Backstory," eventually distributed by Netflix after chaotic negotiations with Universal, and support from Chinese-owned platform Boomplay. A veteran entertainment lawyer and producer who has been involved in the Nigerian music industry since its roots in the past century, Shonaiya shares a close bond to its key players and historical figures. When he interviewed one of Nigeria's most respected artists, the conversation lasted close to three hours, celebrating the path traveled and the bright future ahead for the industry. Yet after the camera stopped rolling, the artist drew closer to Shonaiya, himself of British and Nigerian citizenship and a U.S. green card holder, and asked: "Look I need your help, I need you to hook me up with a green card. This country... I want to be able to leave before it's too late." A backstory to the backstory told by the film, this illustrates how music professionals entertain a dual subjectivity, projecting confidence not only as celebrities, but as the main beacons of hope in a bleak sociopolitical and economic environment while ridden with fear of impending doom.

Music professionals are barely different from the rest of population in entertaining such dualistic thoughts. The majority of Nigerians are contemplating exit moves, with three quarters of the population surveyed in 2022 saying they plan to emigrate within three years.¹⁵ In a country where positive imaginative potential is crucially deficient, celebrities must yet perform optimism, confidence, and enjoyment. This requires considerable emotional labor in an environment where less than five percent of the population believes that Nigeria is moving in the right direction.¹⁶ One way to negotiate this fraught equilibrium is to emphasize the achievability of personal success. At every echelon of the music industry a performative discourse is circulated that postulates the enterprising, commodified, and branded self as a force

¹⁵ African Youth Survey 2022, <https://ichikowitzfoundation.com/ay2022/>

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

that can transform its circumstances, and, in doing so, contribute to changing Nigeria's—and Africa's—prospects. And indeed, despite their despondency towards collective structures, Nigerians overwhelmingly believe that their individual situation will soon improve.¹⁷ The salvatory power of private enterprise and the belief in individual potential appear necessary in a context where the state is perceived as incurably passive and predatory.

The hyper-individualistic, often obscene, display of pleasure and success by Nigerian music professionals is indeed the expression of a subjectivity that is orientated towards the needs and desires of an audience which is omnipresent, either real or imagined. Extending theories from the cultural sphere (Lury 1993) towards the general condition of living under neoliberalism (Adkins 2005; Gershon 2011), sociologists Celia Lury and Lisa Adkins argue that the effects produced on an intended audience are central to the neoliberal self, which are therefore organized externally. The authors emphasize the need to develop frameworks that shift the focus from the cultivation of the self to its performative possibilities. As I naively asked a friend who has been working in the Lagos music industry since the age of 16 why there were so few “socially conscious” songs these days, his response was clear: “Do you really think we *need* to be reminded of the situation we’re in?” (emphasis added). The personal assistant to pioneer rapper Eedris Abdulkareem when Abdulkareem penned the reality check of Nigeria’s abysmal socioeconomic situation after the return to democracy, “Jaga jaga” (which has since become a sadly evergreen classic), my friend also grew up with Nigeria’s icon of political rap, Sound Sultan (who died prematurely at age 44), even featuring in the music video for Sultan’s “2010” call to revolution over the government’s failure to meet basic infrastructure promises. He is therefore well versed in Nigeria’s visionary history of political music. Yet today, two decades after the country formally transitioned to a democratic regime in 1999, the general sentiment is that the situation has only gotten worse despite countless songs “denouncing”

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

everyday suffering—in these circumstances, he derives his only hope from seeing the young artists he works with at least saving themselves and becoming icons of hard-earned individual success across the world.

This social reconfiguration of oppositionality through individualistic optimism was notably illustrated by the protest anthem of the #EndSARS movement, which rocked Nigeria with the largest protests in decades in October 2020 (Obadare 2021). The movement that started as a denunciation of police brutality to soon become a generalized indictment of bad governance had as its main hymn the braggadocious “Fem” by the son of an energy magnate, Davido. A striking departure from the uncompromising realism of the thumping “2010,” and played next to Eedris Abdulkareem’s ever-so-topical “Jaga jaga”, the trumpet-led hymn was originally meant as a snub to fellow superstar Burna Boy, who accused Davido as a talentless product of nepotism. Opening with Davido stepping out of a private jet with his wealthy friends, the song is an unabashed celebration of winning—whatever the means. It was appropriated by youths across the social spectrum as an empowering response to structural oppression, asserting that they too can win—despite the government, rather than by making claims on it. This reconfiguration of subjectivity articulates with the neoliberal conception of individual agency as supported by positive psychology, a transformative work on emotions that Samuel Binkley has described as a “work of governmentality” (2014: 48). Optimism and confidence thus become means of achieving success (or just surviving) that the neoliberal subject can choose to strategically deploy by working on herself.

This performative work is made harder, but also even more necessary, by the fact that the Nigerian music industry, despite the success and material comfort that it has been able to generate, is not shielded from the omnipresence of untimely death that afflicts the country. Several famous young artists, producers, dancers, and radio hosts have died of preventable accidents or illnesses that resulted from the deficiency of local infrastructure. Every so often,

older artists who once enjoyed godlike status launch appeals for philanthropic donations from their younger peers to pay their medical bills. Largely underreported—as they barely make the news and remain taboo—are the suicides among the scores of aspiring music professionals who never “blow.” One case that did receive some attention was a young rapper who had documented his depression and the last days leading up to his suicide on social media, eight years after signing to one of Nigeria’s most prominent record labels. Still living in one of the infamously overcrowded neighborhoods of Lagos,¹⁸ he had failed to see any material improvement after his label deal and his hopes were dashed as the years went by. Even in death, his country failed him one more time, as the police took almost a day to come and collect his body from his friends.

Death as an internalized experiential reference

Experiencing life as “surplus time” (Ralph 2006) due to a sense of imminent demise structures Nigerian music professionals’ relation to future and community. Music video director Clarence Peters explains how the common practice among Nigerians to celebrate each new month with prayers and well wishes can be traced back to the trauma of the Civil War. The recent explosion of “Happy New Month” messages, Peters argues, reflects the ubiquity of death that grips the country once again (personal communication, August 2019). Regardless of the historical value of such claims, they illustrate how “the trope of death” shapes the subjective experience of Nigerian music professionals who “imagine they share a particular existential predicament” (Ralph 2006: 75). This precariousness coexists in the social imagination with notions of self-renewal and possibility (Cooper and Pratten 2015). Indeed, the “punctuated time” of calendar months, constructed as “signal . . . moments in near-future time at which the whole world could change” (Guyer 2007: 417), fills the gap between an instantaneous and

¹⁸ Ikorodu.

unbearable present and a long-term prospect of salvation. By celebrating still being alive at the start of every month, Nigerian youths institute a regime of periodic rupture at the subjective level, blocking any “cumulative momentum” (2007: 416) to allow for the “ordinariness of extraordinary aspirations” (Weiss 2009:38).

27-year-old videographer Jay Star never fails to indeed send me his wishes on the first day of the month. His portrait here will offer an insight into music professionals’ individualistic sense of urgency shaped by an unforgiving environment. Coming from Nigeria’s troubled South-South Region (Iwilade 2020; Pratten 2007) to Lagos at 18, Jay Star did several odd jobs, such as bricklayer and gateman, as he tried to move closer to his dream of becoming an artist. When he eventually landed a job with a media production company favored by Lagos record labels, he inserted himself into the heart of the Nigerian music industry, following prominent artists on club tours, promotional events, and any other occasion that required media coverage. He has earned the kind of access and connections that most Lagos youths dream of. When I walk with him in the area where he rents bedspace at the border of the neighboring Ogun State, residents hail him like a celebrity and ask him for news of their favorite artists. Yet, at 27, he continues to live from hand to mouth, sleeping at the company’s office or on nightclub couches most nights. There is no room for conceptualizing the near future, when assignments that often last up to 24 hours can run back-to-back, with the possibility to be sent home any time that forces him to pay for yearly accommodation that he never uses. Like other Nigerian music professionals, he barely sleeps anyway. During his limited free time, he obsesses about the passing of time—a concern reinforced by a hyper-awareness of the risk of death. He indeed witnessed multiple fatal accidents and has himself closely escaped death at the hands of SARS officers once, with his music industry looks and the expensive equipment that he carries putting him at heightened risk of violent robbery or extortion. He recurrently evokes the prospect of turning 30 and the fear of not having “the time” to reach success. “People die young nowadays,”

he explains, “If I die tomorrow, I will have nothing to leave behind, it will be like I was never here at all.”

This locally grounded configuration of death and future-making found a stark expression during the Covid-19 pandemic. While the uncertainty surrounding the new virus initially prompted Lagos music professionals to proactively institute social distancing practices across the industry, attitudes were rapidly reconfigured after the realization that the threat of imminent death was low. The government’s preventive measures were then widely seen as out of touch with local realities, if not as outright cruel. In obstructing people’s efforts to better their condition by blocking economic activity in the face of a disease that mostly affects the elderly, while over three quarters of the population are under 35¹⁹ and life expectancy is less than 55 years,²⁰ the gerontocratic Nigerian government was considered to be focusing once again on its own elite minority.^{21 22} As in-person activities were coming to a standstill, my videographer friend Jay Star moved in with me so as to remain close to any opportunity that might still arise (and also wishing to avoid being locked down in his cramped room share). Soon, a former boss from his construction days called—with many migrant employees leaving Lagos in the wake of the lockdown order, the constructor urgently needed workers. They would work at night to escape social distancing rules. Excited, Jay Star agreed right away. As even those opportunities later dried up and I had to move out of Nigeria, he went back to his bedspace and joined his roommates in online fraud activities. Nigerian music professionals’ hustling during the Covid-19 pandemic took a tragic turn when, in April 2020, at the height of lockdown, renowned dancer Love Divine²³ died of a work-related accident while shooting a music video.

¹⁹ <https://worldpopulationreview.com/countries/nigeria-population>

²⁰ <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.DYN.LE00.IN?locations=NG>

²¹ Amidst the widely held belief locally that the Nigerian government was inflating Covid-19 figures in order to gain access to funding from international institutions.

²² Research furthered showed that the priority with regards to fighting Covid-19 for was to reopen the economy for 70% of Nigerians surveyed, while only 20% thought the priority was to prevent the spread of the virus.

²³ Known professionally as Picture Kodak.

With a full crew of make-up artists, stylists, and other creatives present at the scene, it was impossible to ignore that the music industry was following its own rules rather than the government's directives.

These professionals have little faith in their country's ability to protect them, a view that was vindicated by the circumstances surrounding Love Divine's death. Even as the dancer was on the verge of claiming international success by traveling to France to perform at the George Pompidou National Centre for Art and Culture,²⁴ she needed to ensure day-to-day survival much like other Lagos creatives. The palliative packages that the Nigerian government was supposed to distribute to ease the pressures of lockdown only rarely made it to their intended recipients. Foodstuff packages were discovered months later during the riots that followed #EndSARS protests, hoarded in warehouses and politicians' residences. The general understanding that the goods had been appropriated by politicians led to even more astonishing defensive statements, such as the claim by the Majority Leader of Lagos State House of Assembly that the palliative packages found in his house were to be distributed on his birthday.²⁵ More directly, Love Divine's death was the result of infrastructural deficiency, as the move that killed her was simply to grab her phone with her sweaty palms while rehearsing. She died from electrocution as the phone was plugged into a faulty electrical system. The professionals on set attempted to rush her to the hospital, but two different establishments turned them down, on the grounds of the bizarre yet sadly familiar requirement that a police report must be provided before admitting accident victims, along with fears of the Covid-19 virus. She died upon reaching a third hospital.

²⁴ She had been selected to join the dance company set up by internationally-renowned contemporary danse choreographer Qudus Onikeku and was working on a piece called *Re:incarnation* that her colleagues would go on to perform in Paris in June 2021.

²⁵ <https://www.qed.ng/how-hoodlums-stole-my-familys-passports-foodstuff-lagos-lawmaker/>

The structural dynamics of Nigerians' intimate relationship to death are often recast in popular discourse to involve anthropomorphic or spiritual forces. In the face of extensive systemic failure, social media frequently redirects popular anger arising from tragedy to an identifiable individual—in this case Clarence Peters, who was the director for that shoot, and was already devastated by the death of a highly respected and cherished figure of Nigerian music videos. Official institutions contributed to this distractive and cathartic process. The Lagos State police spokesperson even fed false information to local media outlets, fueling suspicion and the wildest rumors around the music video director, who was thrown into the spotlight for the first time. Until then, Peters had little time for public relations. With his house above his studio (which had created the initial confusion about the location of the dancer's death), his life was entirely spent at work. As shoots generally last up to 24 hours and are scheduled back-to-back, he spent most of his time either carrying the camera for hours in sweltering heat or editing in the rooms upstairs. Even as his social media profile once showed him comfortably drinking a glass of Hennessy in a luxury hotel in Atlanta, he had only gone for the pictures as part of a Hennessy sponsorship deal, flying back the same night. Yet, in a context where all forms of sociality are experienced as deeply corrupted (Apter 2005; Marshall 2009; Smith 2010), hard work and success are hardly taken at face value. Nigeria's ubiquitous dynamics of exploitation are personalized through sensational stories that link money and power to death through occult and dark forces—a phenomenon extensively studied throughout the continent (Bonhomme 2012; Comaroff and Comaroff 1993; 1999; Ellis and Ter Haar 2004; Geschiere 1997; Moore and Sanders 2001; Niehaus 2002; Rowlands and Warnier 1988) and in Nigeria in particular (Smith 2001).²⁶

²⁶ A vast body of Western anthropological literature has examined how various African popular beliefs use allegorical interpersonal relations involving occult forces to make sense of success ("occult economies"), to the point that this academic interest itself has been called into question for its exoticizing assumptions about Africa (Ranger 2007; Meyer 2009).

Individual success is indeed difficult to come to terms with in an industry that has a crushing rejection rate at a time when Lagosians joke that everyone has a brother or cousin trying to enter the music industry. It is common to associate famous figures of the Nigerian music industry to dark practices, even among industry insiders who fail to reach the same level of success as some of their more talented, wealthy, or connected peers. A friend who works as a “marketer” for artists in Lagos—some of whom have famous rags-to-riches stories—laments the messages that he receives on social media platforms from young people who present themselves as “ready to do whatever it takes” to succeed. While they refer to sordid ritual practices, the only thing that my friend requires to promote an artist is cash—a resource however only available to a few. Navigating a two-axis moral framework of money and propriety in a reflexive process, people make sense of their failure to achieve prosperity by holding on to the knowledge that they never engaged in objectionable practices, thus reconfiguring the contingency involved in living in a failed state into an individualized condition on which they have direct power—but also conceptualizing their environment as fundamentally corrupted.

For all the motivational talk about the potentiality of “hustling” and “consistency” circulating from and around the Nigerian music industry, there is indeed limited faith in it. To meet contemporary socio-economic demands in Lagos, “fast money” is not only “a temptation for lazy youths” (as public discourse frequently denounces it), but a condition for survival and the most visible path to respectability. The paths to “fast money” have fluctuating yet well-defined contours in the collective consciousness, and the young people who aspire to success in the music industry make sense of their environment—and of their position in it—through reference to specific tropes. Framed through hetero- and gender-normative paradigms, these tropes paint women’s access to wealth as mediated through their relations to men, while men’s fast track to wealth involves becoming a “Yahoo boy” (someone who commits scams online,

or fraud more generally) or practicing “money rituals” (understood in this context as the ritual sacrifice of human body parts, generally those of a girlfriend), with a growing entanglement of the two. Ironically, one of the main vehicles for this representation of the world has been Nigerian popular culture itself, with the entertainment industries consistently asserting the power of hard work on the one hand, while producing films that center narratives of questionable wealth (Okome 2012; Udomisor and Sonuga 2012; Elegbe 2017), and songs that celebrate money obtained through morally ambiguous means (Lazarus 2018; Adeduntan 2022).²⁷

This shows how a dysfunctional system can rob even those who embody individual strength of their agency. Love Divine had sought to challenge those stereotypes. Yet they partly caught with her in her death. The 23-year-old woman who fought to reclaim female sexuality in a deeply patriarchal and conservative society, consciously channeling her creative energy into sexualized performances²⁸ while refusing the shame and disposability socially constructed into the role of a “video vixen,”²⁹ was recast as a victim by tens of thousands of anonymous commenters following her death. The conceptualization of a social sphere governed by pervasive and secret forms of power limits the potential scope of effectual collective action. Even as power differentials do lead to casual abuse, they are indeed rarely challenged as such. For example, some leading Nigerian music video directors had previously been called out on social media for sexually extorting video vixens. The cases will never go to court, and the dancers themselves never came forward, with their predicament being used only for another man’s social gain. The allegations were indeed made by a nightclub owner and social media celebrity who had himself previously been accused of rape. Though the factuality of these

²⁷ See, for example, “Am I a Yahoo Boy” by Naira Marley and Zlatan Ibile, “Able God” by Chingko Ekun, Lil Kesh, and Zlatan Ibile. Older prominent examples include “Living Things” by 9ice, “Yahooze” by Olu Maintain, or “Maga don pay” by Kelly Handsome.

²⁸ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ya136RxZIZE&ab_channel=Blaqboney

²⁹ A female model who appears in music videos and acts seductively.

claims were not questioned, they were treated as entertainment by the public, with commenters celebrating the show-businessman's "boldness" in "dropping" the names of the vixens and directors involved. In the face of ubiquitous injustice, people have learnt to reorder their subjectivities to optimize survival, with humor as a main coping mechanism (Obadare 2017). Several female dancers explained to me in private conversations how the system of predation operates—they first receive casual advances from video directors, but if they do not respond favorably the director will stop offering them jobs. Yet, even the closest witnesses—male dancers—do not necessarily see the pressure to have sex coupled with moral stigmatization that their female colleagues experience as a form of hardship. The notion of sex as transactional is so embedded in the social norms born out of the prevailing conditions of precarity that, despite feminist initiatives such as "#MenAreScum" and growing denunciation of "sex for grades," it has so far gone largely unchallenged. Rather, the social, physical, and emotional burden carried by women in the industry is seen as mitigated by the earning potential that sex as an "inherent resource" supposedly affords them. Conversely, the transactional nature of intimate relationships also affects male dancers, who, due to their limited earning potential, generally find it difficult to attract women in Lagos—leading some of them to harbor feeling resentment towards their female counterparts (see also Ralph 2006). The generalized condition of precarity thus creates a climate of jealousy that manifests along gender, sexual, and tribal fault lines, among others, and is perceived as a significant obstacle to the potentiality of collective action.

"For the state to become a development actor, we would first need a revolution," the manager of an aspiring Lagos artist casually mentioned. Revolution is yet seen a distant prospect in contemporary Lagos, with most people lamenting that their countrymen are exclusively focused on their individual issues and "hustle"—and scared of death. Even as the music industry consistently promotes individuated modes of wealth acquisition, its professionals privately commonly invoke the selfishness and lack of civil sense that plague

Nigeria. For example, a music promoter who was a record label assistant when popular singer Goldie died in 2013 reminisces how the artist's father refused the record label's money, describing: "He was the last man to not take dirty money."³⁰ Highly aware that entrepreneurialism and "hustling" cannot provide the foundations for an inclusive and well-functioning society, music professionals can only encourage people to save themselves in what they see as a transitory phase in a "secular time [that] has become effectively dispensational" (Guyer 2007: 418). In this context, the particular respect that Clarence Peters has earned in music video production, like other figures in different aspects of the Nigerian music industry, has to do with him precisely reinvesting the near future by building a sustainable corporate structure.³¹ In an ecosystem constituted by a nimble set of transitory relations that relies almost entirely on independent contractors (with or without contracts), Peters' orientation toward a progressive future that offers a form of security and vision breaks with an essentially millenarian faith in struggling until success suddenly manifests.³² This work of building a progressive future step by step is what an entertainment lawyer referred to on social media when he wrote: "Honestly, we are [at] war. An aggressive war against poverty, lack, a clueless political class, and a stifling environment. It is hard to escape the shithole, but we stay resolute. No one will save Nigerians."

³⁰ While academic literature documents this attitude towards wealth and its source since at least the 1970s.

³¹ Clarence Peters' CAPital Dreams Pictures trains and employs in-house staff, including stylists and make-up artists who are on payroll, while dancers are provided accommodation, transport, and food prior, during, and after the job. They are paid twice the market rate to cover for rehearsals and sometimes multi-day shoots, thus curtailing the extreme uncertainty that otherwise characterizes music video production. Peters ultimately hopes to provide pensions and some form of insurance to his employees.

³² Referred to in the Nigerian music industry as "blowing". One successful appearance or social media post is seen as having the capacity to change one's life by attracting the attention of the right person or company, and for many people that can be the difference between starving or not.

Reinvesting citizenship

Ahead of the Nigerian 2023 presidential election, the music industry is invested in mobilizing the youth vote. Riding the mass youth politicization that actualized in the #EndSARS movement two years earlier, music professionals aim to channel the trauma of the massacre it ended in towards electoral politics. Concerts are organized with a voting card as an admission pass, electoral registration points are set up at venue entrances, food is distributed to young people registering, and artists and other music professionals regularly post updates on youth registration statistics on social media. The excitement that surrounds this period of electoral anticipation stands in sharp contrast to the stifling sense of the *status quo ante* that otherwise defines much of the music industry's relationship to politics. Historically, the Nigerian music industry that emerged in the late 1990s has placed little faith in the political process. Long in the blind spot of government, or viewed only with suspicion, its strength came from self-organization, including association with criminal networks that provided much-needed funding.

Even when artists receive money from political parties, they typically clarify that it is just business, in line with the music industry's "hustling" ethos. "Street-hop" singer Portable, who virtually all Nigerian music professionals refuse to work with due to his fights, drug use, and sex scandals, became the only artist to endorse the governing party's candidate for the 2023 elections, Bola Tinubu. Portable justified his decision as follows:

If they pay you, do your job, no ripping. When I was asked to insult Tinubu [during the #EndSARS protests], I collected my money and did my job. Now Tinubu is the next. They're the ones that gave me money, and I must do the work for the money I collected" (translated from Yoruba)³³

Another way for the music industry to distance itself from politics has been to reappropriate and reinterpret artists' performance as a subtle form of resistance. For example, the DJ hired for the

³³ <https://punchng.com/apc-paid-me-to-endorse-tinubu-singer-portable/>.

governing party's 2023 presidential primaries³⁴ played a Nigerian pop song's repeated line "Wake up, collect your money" when the party's 70-year-old kingmaker and future presidential candidate stumbled his way to the stage. The DJ became an online sensation, bringing the youths' voice right into the core of the much-resented political gerontocracy. Similarly, following his performance during President Muhammadu Buhari's reelection campaign in 2018, "street-hop" artist Small Doctor was hailed as "a legend" by superstar Davido.³⁵ Small Doctor, who would go on to lead a protest in the notoriously overcrowded Agege neighborhood during the #EndSARS movement, sang "Buhari, ye ma sun," meaning "Buhari, stop sleeping," while facing the 75-year-old sitting president, who he had nonetheless endorsed.

A metaphorical lens deployed by music industry professionals to conceptualize Nigerian problems is indeed that the country is governed by old remnants of a sluggish past, elderly rulers unable to cope with the demands of a transnational, digital and connected world. Common jokes involve rhetorically wondering whether President Buhari is able to send an email, or even to read English. Far from the signifier of colonial respectability that the Guardian journalist was yearning for, it is "the English language as the infrastructural mechanism for bringing change" (Larkin 2008: 33) that is referred to here. What is questioned is the leader's capacity to get business done and stand up to external powers, which requires mastery of modern means of communication.

This perception is reinforced by historically constructed and institutionalized divisions along ethnic, regional and religious lines that date back to colonial structures. The wedge between a conservative North and an outward-looking and future-oriented South—especially in Lagos—was the object of colonial constitutional engineering (Babalola 2019). It resonates up to these days, with President Buhari a member of the Hausa-Fulani tribe of Nigeria's

³⁴ The All Progressives Congress (APC) party.

³⁵ Davido was supporting the opposing party, the People's Democratic Party (PDP).

historical Northern Region, with military training as his sole educational credential and military dictator as his sole professional experience. For the decades following independence, the Northern elite held control over the central government, whose concentration and centralization of power increased astronomically during military rule (Babalola 2019:6; Agbu 2004: 26), alongside what Southerners describe as a form of anti-intellectualism. The Northern Region's stranglehold on central government is generally viewed as the result of the colonial government's deliberate effort to devolve political power to the Hausa-Fulani, who were considered more amenable to British influence (Agbu 2004: 32).

Prior to the formation of Nigeria in 1914 through the amalgamation of the Northern and the Southern Protectorates for the convenience of the British colonial administration, the Protectorates had indeed been governed according to very different colonial approaches. Southern Nigerians had had extensive economic, political, and cultural contact with Europeans long before British colonization, leading to a class of Western-educated and professionally trained Nigerians with a proto-national political consciousness that the colonialists perceived as a threat. This prompted the colonial administration in Northern Nigeria to actively further cultural isolation (Agbu 2004: 32; Babalola 2019: 51; Larkin 2008: 28). Through the political system of indirect rule that aimed to preserve the Hausa-Fulani's customary structure organized around emirates, the British reinforced the authority of emirs even over local populations that had long resisted it (Yabuku 1996: 83-115). A Northern district officer³⁶ painted a critical picture of the Northern colonizers' approach, who "discouraged, sometimes they banned, the teaching of English and of modern trades and techniques and who insulated the people from all outside contacts and knowledge in the Holy Name of Indirect Rule" (as cited in Larkin 2008: 31). Stereotypes from that era—"Northerners (British and Nigerian) look[ing] down on

³⁶ W.R. Crocker.

Southerners as ‘black Europeans,’” while “Southerners derided the North as backward and poorly educated” (Larkin 2008: 30)—continue to inform popular views.

People in the Lagos music industry today, plugged in as they are to global popular culture—regardless of status and whether or not they ever left Nigeria—feel much more closely connected to their counterparts in the United States, the United Kingdom, or the Caribbean than to their compatriots in the country’s Northern half. Ebenezer Obadare argues that the missing sense of citizenship can be attributed to the “particular shenanigans of the Nigerian state and the overall failure of governance” (2010: 2). Legal citizenship has indeed little or no value, to the extent that is “neither respected nor linked to civil, political and social rights”, leading to a deep crisis over the “ontological status of membership” in the political community (2010: 62). The youths connected to the Lagos entertainment scene know firsthand the Nigerian government’s disregard for the lives of its citizens, as their peaceful #EndSARS demonstration was met with live fire from the Nigerian military on 20 October 2020. Northern politicians and supporters of President Buhari even framed the youth social movement along regional fault lines, playing up existing divisions by claiming that a political agenda to topple the current Northern political administration motivated the young protesters in the South (Ayandele 2021).

This context explains why, historically, the Nigerian music industry has placed little faith in the political process. Music professionals see themselves as more legitimate representatives of the country’s interests than Nigerian official institutions, invoking a sort of pragmatic patriotism. In his response to the Guardian journalist, Banky W stressed that “Everything from the t-shirts and jeans rappers wear, to the shoes and suits are made by young Nigerians, where in previous years people preferred to shop in London.” In a similar way that many music professionals reject the church for its perceived corruption, but consider themselves “truly” religious, there is a claim to an unmediated relationship to Nigeria that bypasses representative institutions blamed for adulterating its concept. As rapper Vector put it

in 2022: “I’m more interested in Nigeria now more than ever. . . I’m just more patriotic now more than ever, but in the real idea of what it means to be patriotic.” Vector’s “real” patriotism stands in opposition here to that of the “ruling elite whose personal gains might frequently be camouflaged as ‘state interest’” (Obadare 2010: 2).

Neither colonial heritage nor essentialized tradition, Nigeria in this worldview is a dynamic construct that reflects the fluid and shifting practices, attitudes, coping mechanisms, and survival strategies of its diverse citizens, both inside and outside the country. They are united not by culture or even choice, but through a shared destiny sealed by history and the conscious reappropriation of this assignment. British imperialism brought together “peoples of diverse ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic backgrounds in one large political unit now known as Nigeria” (Babalola 2019: 46). Nigeria, as conceptualized by these self-identified patriotic youths, is firmly embedded in global economic and cultural systems. The debate surrounding the international marketing of Nigerian popular music indicates a subtle understanding of the dynamics of global capitalism that Nigerian professionals intend to deploy with respect to their cultural production. They embrace the promise of universal recognition embedded in a neoliberal discourse that allows for the misrecognition of structural realities (see Gershon 2011). At the same time, they refuse to serve as the foot soldiers of global capitalism in a hierarchical world-system. “Conversant with hegemonic trends” (Ossei-Owusu and Strong 2014: 194), “Nigeria” as marketed by the music industry is progressively integrated in, and reshaping, globally dominant systems of cultural production, creating new structures of culture and political economy. Furthermore, with one of the most active diasporas in the world, Nigeria’s cultural representations and social values are produced across a spatial network that spans Houston, Atlanta, London, Dubai and other metropolises of the world economic system, making Lagos only one of the places whose impact significantly bears on the definition of Nigerian culturally mediated citizenship.

As Englund reminds us with respect to what he calls the “cosmopolitan predicament,” its crucial aspect is “situatedness” (2004: 312). Cosmopolitanism is defined in “relational and historical terms” (2004: 311) and shaped by the “economic and social conditions that constitute the ‘home’ in which cosmopolitans pursue their variable projects” (2004: 297). The lack of hope in the country’s leadership and the longing for a more conducive “elsewhere” among young Nigerians explain the “virtual exile” (Piot 2010), or “mental secession” as it is referred to in Lagos, that attaches to their deterritorialized citizenship. One of its manifestations is the emotional investment in leaders of foreign countries. On social media, more Nigerian music professionals follow the ruler of Dubai, Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, than the Nigerian President, Muhammadu Buhari. Young Nigerians commonly wish the Sheikh a happy birthday, congratulate him on Dubai’s achievements, and thank him for his nuggets of motivational wisdom couched in the language of entrepreneurship. When the long-ailing President of the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan, passed away in May 2022, several Nigerian music “hustlers” operating between Dubai and other locations had to announce cancellations of club tours due to the UAE’s three-day suspension of work for mourning. It is normal among Nigerian youths to lament any loss of income opportunity in public, as was commonly the case during the Covid-19 pandemic; yet this time, people responded to the announcement—which itself described the passing of a “great leader”—by sharing condolences, with some expressing heartfelt loss. As an electronic gadget reseller in Lagos commented: “Do good so shall good come back to u. If any of these people I don’t want to mention kpain today, the citizens will celebrate thier dem!se [sic]. Learn from this. RIP Sheikh Khalifa Bib [sic] Zayed.” In a 2019 global survey, Nigeria was also the country where Donald

Trump, then President of the United States, received the fourth highest approval rating, with Nigerians placing much more confidence in him than Americans themselves ever did.³⁷

The fact that Emirati rulers and Donald Trump are all in their seventies complicates Lagos youths' explicit framing of Nigerian leadership's illegitimacy in generational terms. These dynamics shed light on the fluctuating contours of concepts such as generation, ethnicity, religion, region, and class and reveal the limits in using informants' referential fault lines as analytical categories. In this context, what transpires is the need to have elders to look up to. This is illustrated by the giant painting titled "Inspiration" in the office of Tega Oghenejobo, the widely respected Chief Operating Officer of Nigerian record label Mavin Records, who graduated from the University of Port Harcourt in Nigeria's South-South Region only 10 years earlier. The painting features images of famous multi-billionaires, such as Warren Buffet, Jack Ma, and Jeff Bezos, among others; black global icons, from visionary politician Mandela to TV mogul Oprah Winfrey and hip hop's first billionaire Jay-Z; political leaders, such as Dubai's Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum; as well as other icons of success, including Tega's older cousin, the founder and CEO of Mavin Records, Don Jazzy. Don Jazzy started his music career in London while working as a security guard at a McDonald's restaurant, and is hailed as an exemplary leader among Nigerian youths. Tega and every other Lagos music professional work very hard to ensure that the next generation could be inspired by Nigerian role models.

A vehemently "apolitical" political protest: #EndSARS

#EndSARS is a social movement against police brutality and bad governance self-described as "youth-led," "decentralized," and "apolitical," which resulted in mass protests "the scale and ferocity of which arguably had not been witnessed in Nigeria since the 1989 student-

³⁷ Pew Research Center, Spring 2019 Global Attitudes survey, <https://www.pewresearch.org/global/2020/01/08/trump-ratings-remain-low-around-globe-while-views-of-u-s-stay-mostly-favorable/>

led ‘anti-SAP’ riots” (Obadare 2021: 184). Like its 1989 antecedent in the wake of privatization, the #EndSARS movement pertains to a reordering of citizenship, with Nigerian youths essentially expressing a historically situated conceptualization of their relationship to the state. The generation protesting in 2020 came of age during the three post-liberalization decades and, therefore, has internalized the very flexible condition that its predecessors were protesting against. Entrepreneurship is its way of life, as well as the language in which it expresses its political sentiments. Thus, unlike its 1989 antecedent, #EndSARS in Lagos started fundamentally as a demand for *less* government. Instead of making claims on the government, the movement expressed the irrelevance of government towards a constituency for whom political citizenship had become *de facto* meaningless.³⁸

While the hashtag #EndSARS first surfaced in 2017 to call for the disbanding of SARS in the wake of their recurring abuse of power, #EndSARS as a social movement took shape through a series of physical protests in October 2020. SARS was set up to battle the rising levels of violent crime that followed the implementation of the SAP. It had since widely exceeded its mandate, with SARS operatives frequently stopping and harassing people suspected of cybercrime, making it a source of constant fear for youths. Indeed, the vast majority of crime suspects arrested by SARS are between the ages of 15 and 25 years (Surajo and Karim 2016: 4924). SARS, in this configuration, had come to stand as a superfluous relic of a state-centric authoritarian system, an obstacle on the path to self-realization that directly conflicts with the “hustle” deployed by Nigerian youths in a context of socioeconomic dislocation. A song released by an aspiring artist a few months before #EndSARS illustrates how the state’s failings and the policing institution’s abuses articulate systematically with the political and moral economy of survival that has come to define Lagos life for young people:

See dem no [they don’t] teach us how to make money from school

³⁸ This would evolve as the movement progressed, as I will discuss further below.

So we got to learn am [it] from the hood
 Blood in the eyes
 Of a ghetto youth
 No be who no book na by who know you [It's not about how educated you are, but how
 popular/connected you are]
 It's all about the money
 This is true
 Na the only way to make my dreams come true
 Was born in the hood with no damn spoon
 Or little food
 See our government bad oh
 Them no want give a ghetto man job oh
 So we dey find a way
 To survive oh
 And now SARS don dey threaten [are threatening] our lives oh (2 times)
 . . .
 Leave us alone
 Say make we hus[t]le oh
 Say make we dey our own [stay in your lane/let us take care of ourselves]

 (Tega Starr, Jungle)

In this section, I will first provide an overview of key moments in the development of the #EndSARS movement, with a particular focus on the role played by the music industry. This factual information gives a sense of the speed and intensity at which events unfolded and

highlights the spectrum of music industry actors involved. In many ways, popular artists, embodied this “leaderless” movement, and I suggest that, ideologically and structurally, #EndSARS was coterminous with the Lagos music industry. This will lead to an analysis of the underlying socioeconomic dynamics. I argue that among “a population of marginalized young men and women who navigate a neoliberal world order in which they create a sense of belonging through shared aspirations” (Smith 2011: 536), Nigerian artists have emerged—involuntarily—as the credible representatives of a contemporary sense of citizenship.

Chronology of events

In the wake of multiple alleged murders committed by SARS officers during interactions with young Nigerian men, superstar Wizkid first expressed the frustration of the country’s youths on October 5, 2020. Addressing the Nigerian President Muhammadu Buhari in an exasperated response to the latter’s official Twitter account, he broke the conventional deference to elders and politicians in a move that prompted the ruling party’s official page to publish the following statement:

A Glorified baboon like Wizkid thinks he became rich and famous just to insult his Elders. Well, That's how wizkid addresses his father at home, so I don't blame the little idiot from Ojuelegba.³⁹

Through this spontaneous move of verbal violence—emanating from its most visible figure—the music industry was signaling a breakdown in the moral pact that had previously governed the relations of the country’s leaders to its disaffected youths. While inequality and injustice are a part of daily experience in Nigeria, the sudden recurrence of unjustified loss of life and the dismissal of the victims as “thugs” by the authorities was unbearable, making the verbal subversion of the generational order a legitimate response.

The first instance of publicized physical collective action in connection to the October 2020 #EndSARS movement was during a 72-hour sit-in protest organized by Rinu Oduala, a

³⁹ The post has since been deleted.

22-year-old brand strategist, in front of Lagos police headquarters and State House of Assembly. The mass demonstrations then took off with calls by popular artists, in particular pop music artist Runtown, rapidly followed by rapper and comedian Falz and the Nigerian music industry's *enfant terrible* Naira Marley. Embodying a wide range of backgrounds and very different "brands," these artists reflect the broadly shared sentiment that animated the movement, an "apolitical" stance that cut across social cleavages such as ethnicity and religion. After Naira Marley backed out of the protest he had called for, he replaced it with a live chat with a Nigeria Police spokesman over the social media app Instagram. With the artist at home lying on his couch, the police representative used the live chat to call out to "the corporate world and billionaires," asking for private-sponsored equipment to help resolve a conflictual policing situation that he attributed to lack of public funding—a call that leading Afrobeats female singer Tiwa Savage would reiterate on her social media page a week later. Naira Marley asked his millions of Instagram followers to give the government one week to propose changes—adding that, in the absence of satisfactory measures, mass protests would ensue. Two days later the protest led by Runtown and Falz took place on the Island, the more upscale part of Lagos, drawing many popular artists and music professionals. The success of this initial street protest, and its echo across media platforms through the presence of celebrities—such as Tiwa Savage, who was live on Instagram throughout the protest—set the mass movement in motion.

The next day, on October 9, Small Doctor led another protest from Agege, an overcrowded residential neighborhood on Lagos Mainland, where he grew up. A paradigmatic contemporary "street" artist, Small Doctor calls his music Fuji-pop; Fuji is a heavily percussive and improvisational popular music genre with deep roots in Yoruba Muslim communities. The son of a school proprietress and a former bus conductor himself, Small Doctor has cultivated the image of speaking for the average Nigerian and pledges allegiance to the "street." He is a brand ambassador for a local lottery company, which is common for artists whose image is not

polished enough in the eyes of traditional corporate sponsors. He is also close to the Lagos State Police Public Relations Officer to the point of being ironically called a “Police brand ambassador.” Small Doctor had even formally endorsed Nigerian President Muhammadu Buhari for his second term.

The same day in Dubai, the daughter of a Nigerian billionaire oil magnate, the singer DJ Cuppy, addressed her 6.5 million Instagram followers to lend her support to #endSARS. She apologized for her slow response and explained that she was “going against the advice of those around [her].” With very few music accomplishments, the artist is admired for her lavish lifestyle and business-minded, yet light-hearted, display of enjoyment. Following in the footsteps of capitalist heiresses such as Paris Hilton or the Kardashians, she builds on her privilege by constantly working—“hustling.” Her luxury lifestyle, which includes an Oxford University education, is what she monetizes. After spending the Covid-19 period in London, where she had flaunted a pink Ferrari that her dad gifted her, she interrupted her getaway in Dubai to fly back to Lagos to join the protests.

The next day, October 11, a protest took place in front of the Nigeria High Commission in London with several Nigerian artists in attendance. The protest was technically organized by Dipo Awojide, a Senior Lecturer at Nottingham Business School and a personal development coach with close to a million followers on Twitter, and Karo Omu, a UK-based founding member of the Feminist Coalition, a group championing equality for women in Nigerian society. Yet it was superstar Wizkid’s image and eloquent words that were widely shared, with the general understanding rapidly becoming that “Wizkid led a protest in London.”

The next day, on October 12, rising star Oxlade participated in a protest in the crowded Surulere area and was beaten up by the police. His manager was dragged in the street, arrested, and tortured at the police station. On the same day, superstar Davido, the son of an energy tycoon and heir to a political family himself, met with the Inspector General of Police under

pressure from protesters who had designated him as a credible representative. Davido is the person with the highest number of social media followers in Nigeria. His celebratory and braggadocious “Fem” song had become the anthem of the protests. The following day, the music industry’s celebrities from Nigeria’s Eastern region, Phyno, Flavour, and Zoro, organized a protest in Enugu, while “street” sensation Zlatan Ibile and his lawyer led a protest in Accra, Ghana, where they happened to be for a show.

This momentum continued, drawing virtually all professionals from the music industry into a political dynamic that most of them could have never imagined only a few days or weeks earlier. The movement then ended abruptly on October 20, when tanks with live ammunition fired against protestors who were sitting in peaceful defiance at the Lekki toll gate. In the same way that the Nigerian Civil War in the previous century was the first war to be broadcast live on TV through the innovative Biafran use of public relations agents (Heerten 2017), mass street protest was taken to the next level by social media savvy Nigerian entertainers. An audience that ranged from diasporic youths to American hip hop mogul P Diddy and Hillary Clinton were able to witness the killing of peaceful protesters in real time through an Instagram Live video by popular musician DJ Switch. DJ Switch had to flee the country the next day, going from the winner of the telecom-sponsored *X Factor* and the official DJ of Afropop duo P-Square to a human rights activist on the run.

Analysis

#EndSARS was situated at a particular historical conjuncture in the wake of weeks of protests by African Americans against police brutality across the United States—a movement closely watched by the digitally-connected, transnationally-minded youth that famously protested at Lagos’s Lekki Toll Gate—and a few days after the celebration of Nigeria’s 60 years of independence—a bittersweet moment for a young generation that never got to share in the hopes of the post-independence era. While Independence Day, October 1, had in recent years

been filled with live performances and artist promotion, the restrictions linked to the Covid-19 pandemic made it a more susceptible time for reflecting on the state of the country.

Entertainment and media professionals, especially musicians, were central to the #EndSARS movement. Beyond the obvious fact that they held a large social media following and mobilized the first mass protests (see timeline above), this leaderless movement was in several ways embodied by popular artists. First, while many of them may have not related to the other hardships that punctuate Nigerian everyday life, they experienced police brutality in a very personal way. Their extravagant looks, their possession of the latest gadgets, and, for the most successful of them, their display of wealth despite their young age automatically turned them into suspects for SARS—that is, prime targets for extortion. Secondly, artists and entertainment professionals symbolize the aspirations of large swaths of Nigerian youths. Seen as entrepreneurs who move beyond social and geographic limitations, they voice and incarnate the dream for a better future—the very dream that SARS officers crush under their feet when they destroy phones and laptops, which are often the only investment young people have. Finally, musicians speak to a broad social spectrum, representing and neutralizing power dynamics. Many of the most exposed #EndSARS protesters came from the middle class. In the name of unity, class dynamics were left out of the main narrative and most visible parts of the protest, until after the Lekki Toll Gate massacre, when riots erupted. The music industry fits and feeds this ideological positioning. Itself a product of privatization, it has generated pop stars ranging from former bus conductors to billionaire children, who share stages and collaborate in a way barely imaginable in most other areas of society. As Richard Wilk described in his work on beauty pageants in Belize, attempts to organize and domesticate differences provides a common code for the expression of ethnic, class, and political differences. In the Lagos popular music industry, “street” and “good” music are different standards within a single framework (Wilk 128, 131). What binds actors whose structural locations straddle huge wealth and

opportunity gaps, then, is aspiration—a shared ideological orientation that empowers the individual in the face of institutional failure.

The traditional markers of respectability encapsulated in the trivium of law, medicine, and engineering have become inadequate amidst a crumbling higher-education system with limited public funding, and the prebendalism that traditionally defined access to capital is no longer seen as the main path to quick wealth among young people. But as the life of young urban Africans at the onset of the 21st century is frequently described as “waithood” (Masquelier 2013; Honwana 2014; Archambault 2015; Turner 2015)—a state defined negatively by reference to absence and inability—Ferguson has drawn attention to the fact that “people in fact work quite hard at what [we] call not working” (2016). Rather than existing “outside” the sphere of work, as the term “unemployment” suggests, the state of constant mobilization of one’s limited resources (sexual appeal, social media, family ties etc.) erases the disjunction between work and leisure, between production and consumption, in a way that is characteristic of the new economy—and highly confusing to a policing institution whose main function is to preserve vested interests. The generation that came of age in the post-privatization era has naturally invested its hopes for a better life in this new economic regime, with its focus on creating opportunities for oneself through transnational connections, digitally mediated self-branding and a form of entrepreneurship that blurs the conceptual contours of “work” that is barely accessible to them anyway. Whether through legal or illegal channels, “chasing the good life” more often than not involves self-fashioning and electronic gadgets—yet both are considered a cause for reasonable suspicion in an encounter with the police. From artists, designers, or dancers trying to “blow” in order to find sponsors; bakers, traders, or hairdressers building their online “brands” to find clients and partnerships; to “Yahoo boys” who use dating websites to trick American women into sending money; and even amputated beggars developing the social media image of a “hustler” to encourage donations; it has become a

professional requirement to appear “fresh” through a unique look. For a generation that largely considers that it has been sacrificed by its elders’ choices to build a political economy solely based on oil (Apter 1996), in addition to the bodily violence and violation of human rights, harassment by the police is a constant reminder of the ways that the state intentionally crushes their opportunities.

It is indeed important to note that while #EndSARS could be analyzed structurally as a consequence of inegalitarian neoliberalism, it was certainly not the expression of a revolt against it. While mass protests generated a growing social consciousness about political questions surrounding the role of the government and the legitimacy of claims for public services, #EndSARS in Lagos fundamentally started as a demand for *less* government, not more. For the young people who grew up in the post-military era of privatization, entrepreneurship is a way of life and, thus, the language in which they express their political sentiments. The police in this historically situated worldview represent a superfluous relic of a state-centered authoritarian system and an obstacle on the path to self-realization. Indeed, self-reliance is not just a necessity, but has become the mainstay of the moral economy that developed in large part as a coping mechanism, developing in parallel to and influenced by African American visibility in hyper-capitalism. While, as the #EndSARS movement was progressing, a consensus grew among protesters that the underfunding of public services was the underlying problem to tackle, political transformation is a horizon much too remote to offer a compelling prospect of positive change. In a 20-minute Instagram Live session viewed over a million times, leading Afrobeats female singer Tiwa Savage, visibly distressed, laid out her views on the required next steps: “If the government is not helping or they’re not being fast, we can do it ourselves, we can get private companies,” suggesting that private companies could paint and rebuild army and police barracks, and donate uniforms and equipment. She called specifically on Nike, Apple, and Amazon, among others, to lend their support—thereby laying

the terms of a “zone of awkward engagement” (Tsing 2004) where the very symbols of global capitalist oppression could become vehicles for emancipation from the margins.

Several corporations did indeed sponsor the protests. A Nigerian multinational financial institution (in)famously distributed branded water bottles to protesters, while many other companies, such as American multinational Pepsi, fast food chains, and countless small and medium enterprises offered logistical help in a manner deemed more appropriate. What became the *de facto* logo of the protest was designed by a Lagos-based savings and investment startup. An Estonian ride-hailing app offered a 50 percent discount when passengers used the code “SOROSKE,” a slogan of the protests. More generally, the movement was considered a success because it demonstrated young people’s capacity for collective organization—thus making it a social experiment in self-management, but one firmly grounded in capitalism. To a large extent, this is what the Lagos industry itself is.

Conclusion

Like virtually everyone in Lagos, music professionals grapple with the temptation to leave everything behind. They feel the inadequacy of the democratic political timescale in light of the urgency of lived experience in a visceral way. The differing notions of citizenship between Nigeria and the Western countries to which many consider relocating translates a deep conflict of experience. While contemporary Western middle classes are beginning to be subjected to stifling inequality, authoritarian government tactics, and the environmental anxieties linked to the Anthropocene for the first time in their lifetime, they approach it from the privileged position of those who are used to shaping the world. Living in Nigeria, on the other hand, means surviving in externally defined conditions. The historical legacy that informs young Nigerians’ lifeworld indeed includes military dictatorship, the loss of public services, mass migration in life threatening conditions, human trafficking, police brutality at home and abroad, xenophobia and discrimination, and now the Lekki toll gate massacre as a reminder that

the formally democratic government is still ready to kill indiscriminately when people come together to ask for individual freedom. This feeling of powerlessness and hopelessness was captured by leading music journalist Joey Akan, who grew up as an orphan in Nigeria's Eastern Region and owes his social ascension to his hustle in the Lagos music industry:

And finally, don't die for Nigeria o. Today's state of the nation confirms that labours of our heroes past were made in futility. Heck, some of our past heroes are top villain material already. Die for Shawarma, or the dribbling last drop of Orijin. Nigeria is an unwise investment. . . All the one Fela do, country no change at all

In this configuration, much is projected onto "the abroad" as a space of possibility. The highest-grossing Nigerian film of all time, *The Wedding Party 2*,⁴⁰ starring Banky W, is but one example of how popular culture mediates the sense of hope and freedom that traveling out is associated with. With an "opening scene [that] zooms from Lagos to London and lands us in Dubai,"⁴¹ the boisterous romantic comedy is about both self-definition and the re-assertion of Nigerianness that new spaces are supposed to afford. After a disastrous traditional engagement ceremony in Lagos, the couple takes the reluctant British aristocratic family of the bride and the Nigerian Igbo family of the groom to Dubai, where cultural rigidities and racial prejudice can be overcome under the auspices of extravagant capitalist postmodernity.

Paradoxically, Banky W was born in the United States, studied there, but relocated to Nigeria in the early 2000s to contribute to the emerging music industry at the time. Today, he chooses to still live in Lagos. He even went on to campaign for a political seat, running as an independent and losing to one of the two leading parties. He later campaigned again under the PDP banner, Nigeria's oldest current political party. After winning the primary election, his victory was robbed from him by conspiring established party members. Each time, Banky W's venture into the political arena generated considerable enthusiasm among young people in Lagos, even as expectations that change could be brought from within are regularly frustrated.

⁴⁰ As of January 1, 2020.

⁴¹ <https://esosaomousoh.medium.com/movie-review-the-wedding-party-2-destination-dubai-613dcf509a2a>.

These contrasts and paradoxes delineate the complex negotiation that music professionals, as “young Nigerians” are constantly engaged in.

The sonic infrastructure of capitalism: A Nigerian world-making project in Dubai

Introduction

In article titled “How Afrobeat [*sic*] took over the Middle East,” the Dubai-based edition of American lifestyle magazine Esquire describes:

The [Afrobeats] genre has become so ubiquitous in some Middle East cities that it is not uncommon to be dining at a five-star Japanese restaurant with the background music being a playlist by [Nigerian pop singers] Phyno or Mr Eazi – new soundtracks adding an African flavour to the typical “Izakaya” dining experience.¹

Before even reaching Dubai, the government-owned flag carrier Emirates Airline sets the tone. In the late 2010s, before Afrobeats started gracing global hit charts, passengers of the world’s largest international airline² were stared at by Banky W’s promotional face as they took their seats, with the default in-flight entertainment screen advertising a “Two-part music documentary exploring the global phenomenon that is Afrobeats.” After take-off, they would be treated to an in-flight playlist by Emirati DJ Bliss meant to, the airline claimed, “define the sound of Dubai.” From the first minutes, the playlist smoothly mixed Nigeria’s Afrobeats with Puerto Rican reggaeton, African American hip hop, and French pop by Malian singer Aya Nakamura and Congolese rapper Maitre Gims. Unlike in Europe and America, where it is bound to remain symbolically secondary despite its impressive newfound success, in Dubai Nigerian Afrobeats is a dominant music genre. Giving rhythm to the most emblematic spaces of consumerism, such as shopping malls, swanky nightclubs, and luxury hotels, it has become the

¹ Esquire Middle East, 14 April 2022 <https://www.esquireme.com/brief/how-afrobeat-took-over-the-middle-east>.

² <https://www.emirates.com/media-centre/emirates-airport-innovations-facilitate-safe-resumption-of-travel-and-further-enhance-customer-experience/>.

soundtrack to hyper-capitalist experiences in a place that defines itself through “consumer citizenship” (Christopherson 1994).

Laavanya Kathiravelu has argued that Dubai’s built environment functions as a “vehicle through which cultural identity and values are negotiated.” With the entry of architecture into the realm of mass media, it “can no longer be isolated from its representations in a global economy dominated by public media” (2015: 34)—a phenomenon only reinforced by the ubiquity of the short-form videos of contemporary social media. In “Sounds like the Mall of America,” Jonathan Sterne innovatively foregrounded the importance of music as an infrastructural element of consumer space, arguing that in places like malls, “music becomes a form of architecture” (1997: 23). Despite the conspicuous attention that Dubai’s built commercial environment has received in Western media and academia, there is barely any account of its acoustical features. With Dubai Mall the world’s largest mall, receiving over 100 million visitors yearly³ and fueling youth cultures internationally through social media, such omission itself calls for examination.

Ahmed Kanna, Amélie Le Renard, and Neha Vora (2020) have argued that Dubai is epistemologically constructed as mostly a trope, rather than a lived space, in public discourse. In a similar vein, Kathiravelu pointed out that the emirate occupies a metaphorical space (see also Walonen 2016), signifying alternative values through inter-linked yet competing discursive representations by migrants’ narratives (“hope”), Western media (the “mirage”), academic discussions (the “neoliberal city”), and state communication (the “global city”), among others (2015: 28). What they denounce as “Gulf exceptionalism” relies on a “reversal of Orientalist ideas,” with cities such as Dubai invoked to represent “hypermodern laboratories of urban formal experimentation” (Kanna *et al.* 2020: 20; see also Moghadam 2013). According to these scholars, the categories naturalized in academic and media spheres to understand and explain

³ <https://thedubaimall.com/en/about-us/about-the-dubai-mall>.

the dynamics of the Arabian Peninsula are based in genealogies of empire (Kanna *et al.* 2020: 126; Kathiravelu 2015: 50). The “liberalist mythologies” (Vora and Koch 2015) that implicitly inform much of the commentary on Dubai perhaps find their most blunt expression in Mike Davis’ chapter on Dubai in the edited collection *Evil Paradises*, in which he describes the emirate’s “feudal absolutism” as the “stage of hypercapitalism,” concluding that “the future [that Sheik al-Maktoum] is building in Dubai . . . looks like nothing so much as a nightmare of the past.” Challenging dominant Western ontologies that locate all power and agency in Dubai with its ruler, scholars who have conducted ethnography within the emirate’s various communities (Elsheshtawi 2010; Kanna 2010; Kathiravelu 2015; Khalifa 2006; Ngeh 2022; Pelican 2014; Vora 2013) advocate for an approach that situates Gulf societies within a postcolonial context and allows for the identification of interconnections through the circulation of people and cultural practices.

This epistemological background helps understand why Africans’ contributions to Dubai’s contemporary commercial environment have generally remained both invisible in the emirate’s metaphorical existence and largely ignored in scholarly accounts of the city-state. Indeed, they do not fit in the neat tripartite analyses that construct Dubai as the socially engineered configuration of a privileged group of Western tourists and “expatriates,” a rentier class of financially indulgent citizens, and a mass of exploited Asian laborers (Davis 2006; Davis and Monk 2007; Harris 2013). Kanna *et al.* ground these dominant representations in “British imperialism’s racialized capitalist logics and social science apparatus,” which, “along with ruling elites produced bounded groups” and “justified a stratified system of employment as well as proxy rule,” reinforced by “American oil interests,” which imported “their legacies of forced labor and racial segregation to the Arabian oil fields.” As Jonathan Ngeh and Michaela Pelican write, “African migrants. . . are not clearly positioned in the UAE labour market” (Ngeh and Pelican 2022: 174) and “flexibly use their intersecting positionalities. . . to. . . seek upward

professional and social mobility” (2022: 171). In an analytical system constructed around “natives” and nonwhite foreign workers, West and Central Africans, who are mostly “hustlers”, using visitor visas rather than participating in the Emirate’s much written about *Kafala* system (Ngeh 2022)⁴—but also excluded from the “tourist” or “expatriate” category due to their racial location outside of whiteness—appear as matter out of place. With no historical connection to the Arabian Peninsula (unlike East Africans (Ali 2011; Keshodkar 2014; Khalifa 2007; Willis 2016)), they challenge “imaginative mappings and academic logics” (Vora 2013: 11), forcing us rethink postcolonial routes and the dynamics global capitalism.

Entertainment capitalism functions as a significant vehicle for the self-definition of young Nigerians in Dubai, who, as a racially and ethnically defined group, remain largely socioeconomically marginalized. Analyzing citizenship and belonging through the lens of Nigerian music in Dubai foregrounds a deterritorialized and neoliberal subjectivity that finds expression in concepts such as “flexible citizenship” (Ong 1999) or “Afropolitanism” (Balakrishnan 2016; Eze 2014; Mbembe 2016). Ong defines “flexible citizenship” as the “cultural logics of capitalist accumulation, travel and displacement that induce subjects to respond fluidly and opportunistically to changing political-economic conditions” (1999: 6). The Nigerian music industry itself is the product of people, capital, and sound and images in motion. With its transnational digital platforms, partnerships with multinational companies, worldwide concert tours, and exotic music videos,⁵ its professionals and structures enact the globe as an infinite source of opportunities to be capitalized upon. The worldview conveyed to African youths, then, presents “survival” and “success” (which are often conflated in popular discourse) as inherently tied to circulation and mobility. Yet this dynamic negotiation of place should not

⁴ An “employer-led, large-scale guest worker program that is open to admitting migrant workers, but at the same time restrictive in terms of the rights granted to migrants after admission” (Ruhs, 2013: 98).

⁵ These practices can be documented since the mid-2000s and are coterminous with the Nigerian music industry.

be misunderstood as an orientation towards becoming “citizens of the world.” Performing “Nigeria” across borders is precisely a means to reclaim substantive Nigerian citizenship. When music professionals and fans alike claim that artists are taking “Nigeria to the world,” they are celebrating the fulfillment of the very sense of imagined community that is lacking within the country’s territorial borders. “Nigerianness” becomes invested not only with symbolic and affective meaning, but also with tangible content—in other words, the capacity to “live.”

The political, cultural, and imaginative dimensions of migration between Africa and Euro-America have been extensively documented, including in the context of contemporary popular music (Ayimpam and Tsambu 2015; Mbembe 2005; Shipley 2013; Trapido 2017). In fact, Hannerz’s seminal text “The World in Creolisation” (1987) made a special mention of Nigerian musician Fela Kuti, the creator of the Afrobeat genre influenced by jazz and soul music in the 1970s, precisely because the artist moved fluidly along what was then described as a center-periphery axis of the “world system”—with Nigeria one of the peripheries. Fela Kuti indeed studied in London and was politicized (“Africanised”) while living in California, thus embodying the notion that African popular culture is the product of “local” artists’ “dialogue” of with a “metropolitan culture” (1987: 556). Because the majority of writing on African music’s international connections focuses on the West, it comes with, and reaffirms, certain assumptions about liberal-democratic notions of identity, space, and time, which increasingly call for reexamination.

In this chapter, I purposefully leave aside the privileged migration route from Nigeria to North America and Western Europe to explore a form of movement associated with an ontologically different subjectifying process. I will indeed draw on the Nigerian music industry’s engagement with the Emirate of Dubai to address discourses of citizenship circulated among young Africans yet to be conceptualized. By foregrounding a postcolonial hub of the Global South governed by a self-described antiliberal political logic, I seek to move beyond

“US-dominated imperial narratives and Eurocentric histories” (Kathiravelu 2015: 24), which are losing empirical credence. In their groundbreaking work on “global African entrepreneurs,” Mahir Şaul and Michaela Pelican indeed note that “novel destinations are more accommodative of African migrants’ entrepreneurial aspirations, such as seems the case for Turkey and Dubai, than the classical migration destinations in the North” (2014: 14). African youth-driven circulations increasingly delineate the contours of an analytical framework that centers instantaneity, instability, and illiberalism, for which Dubai provides a relevant heuristic entry point. The early and extraordinary success that Nigerian music has achieved in the emirate indeed points to new articulations of embodied subjectivity grounded in a postcolonial and postmodern condition, which should inform scholarly understanding of selfhood, citizenship, and government.

While a reason commonly invoked for the lack of attention to African migration to Dubai is that it is a rather recent phenomenon, official data shows that at the opening of the 2010s the number of (non-Arab) African expatriates employed in the emirate already matched that of Europeans (Pelican 2014: 266).⁶ By the end of the decade, Nigeria ranked among the top fifteen sources of visitors to Dubai and was the fastest-growing.⁷ Vora has shown how the emirate’s official “technologies and rhetorics” present “certain expatriates [as] welcomed. . . while others are deemed insignificant and invisible to the fabric of the city-state” (Vora 2013: 4). Given that the Gulf Region is mostly constructed through the trope of authoritarian state capitalism, the state-centric approach deployed to analyze it tends to presume totalizing power structures, leaving little room to explore the strategies of those who negotiate paths to self-actualization and social mobility within these structures (Kanna *et al.* 2020; Kathiravelu 2015;

⁶ Given their informal migration and employment patterns, the actual number of African migrants in Dubai may have been considerably higher.

⁷ Dubai Tourism Annual Visitor Report 2020, <https://dubaitourism.getbynder.com/m/7f196b0de4dd40a8/original/DTCM-Annual-Visitor-Report-2020.pdf>.

Ngeh 2022). Nuanced ethnographic accounts allow us to challenge such dominant discourses, which are inadvertently reinforced by reified media representations and academic taxonomies. In this chapter, I will first describe how variously positioned Nigerians in Dubai carry the Nigerian music industry's project to "take Africa to the world," reinvesting their role in transnational economic migration with empowering cultural nationalism while navigating ethnoracial stratification. Secondly, I will provide background to understand the historically situated convergence between the Nigerian commercial, hybridized expressive form that is "Afropop" and Dubai's performative infrastructure of utopian capitalism. This convergence will shed light on the epistemological tension besetting the study of the ideological underpinnings to discursive and material spaces like "Dubai" or the "Nigerian music industry." By denaturalizing the construction of Dubai as a simultaneously recent and "backward" artefact, we can understand the dynamics and practices in which Nigerians have inserted themselves, and which they contribute to co-creating in the present. Finally, I will show that using Dubai as framing for Nigerian music's world-making project allows for an understanding of its values and worldviews that are hardly legible in frameworks informed by liberal-democratic notions of citizenship. With mobility towards "fortress Europe" increasingly criminalized (Aas and Bosworth 2013), the "social contract" model and the assumed desire for permanence that informs it increasingly recede into the distance. The resonance of Nigerian Afrobeats in a place such as Dubai, which defines itself through "consumer citizenship" (Vora 2013), then, affirms a form of non-progressive citizenship derived from the global market's own subjectifying process.

Nigerians and Nigerian music in Dubai

Africana Restaurant is a small Nigerian eatery in the Naif working-class neighborhood of Dubai. Open until at least 2:00 A.M. every day, it has catered to the needs of the West African

migrant population—mainly concentrated in this area—for the past 30 years. A regular customer, I enjoyed the restaurant’s playlists of Lagos hits and the staff’s engagement with each song. One kitchen employee in particular would often dance his way into the dining room, singing word for word the songs that just had come out and performing the latest dance steps. I was dazzled that someone working a demanding job for such long hours (from 12:00 P.M. until closure, 6 days a week) would exhibit perfectly up-to-date knowledge of the latest trends, and therefore asked him if he was a musician. He laughed: “Me? No! I just support my brothers as much as I can. Those artists, they always make me proud.” As Lagos music, from Afrobeats hits to obscure street songs,⁸ blasted in the most unexpected places across Dubai—along famous touristy beaches, at the family-oriented local theme parks, at the Filipino workers’ residential area’s food courts—I always received the same reflexive answer. The Nigerian workers who were engineering this soundscape behind the scenes felt a sense of solidarity and shared destiny with the musicians whose songs they were actively promoting.

Entrenching the obsolescence of a division between the rational sphere of politics and the commercial sphere of entertainment (Davila 2012), these service workers invest political meaning in the use of their low-skilled job for spreading Nigerian commercial culture. Against the “limited and exclusionary constructions of the low-wage migrant” (Kathiravelu 2015: 115) by both the Emirati state and Western popular and academic discourse, they harness their professional resources to shape the space they are in. Active participants in a political project, Nigerian migrants can thus “interpret their position as transnational agents in empowering ways” (2015: 95). The “global communicative media” that the Comaroffs described as “designed to evade control exercised by states over flows of images and information” (2000:

⁸ This is distinct from the songs by Nigerian superstars who are played across upscale consumer spaces as part of playlists of “global hits.”

304) is reinvested by these average “ethno-entrepreneurs” to precisely reconstitute a political community outside state institutions.

In contrast to the rigid and cold logic of ethnoracial stratification generally associated with Dubai, “Nigerianness” produced from below inserts itself into the thickness of life across the city. Palatable and detachable, it delineates the contours of an identity distinct from that assigned by political economy. Through music, a citizenship otherwise so often denigrated is consciously and proudly affirmed. Similarly to how Gavin Steingo explained that Kwaito music frames sensory experience by ignoring actual social conditions” of South Africa’s daunting inequality (2016: 10), Nigerians do not let their socioeconomically marginal position determine their public standing. The material conditions that shape their experience in Dubai are an expression of contingent social relations, which they actively seek to rework by imposing their presence far beyond the structural position they occupy. Music’s function as a conduit for other forms of interaction (Erlmann 1999) makes it a vehicle of choice to circulate new affects and thereby redefine social identity. Through Nigerian music’s ubiquity, the public understanding of people’s “place” is destabilized, challenged by an affective and sensorial cartography.

In parallel to, and articulating with, the individual efforts of atomized workers comes the organized endeavor of the Nigerian music industry to project its sound into the global commercial spaces “from the top.” Drawing on transnational distribution and marketing strategies as well as a fluid and highly mobile network of individual entrepreneurs, Nigerian music professionals have imposed Afrobeats into global charts while embedding themselves at the heart of digital platforms’ circulatory mechanisms, thus making it impossible for radio stations, DJs, and the other intermediaries involved in the production of commercial soundscapes to ignore it. These variously situated and uncoordinated efforts are united by a shared reflexivity about the stakes of the “symbolic economy” (Zukin 1996; Neff et al. 2005). Both low-skilled workers and music professionals position the mall and the spaces where

people are being addressed as consumers as central bastions of contemporary politics (Dávila 2012: 10).

Since they do not have a pre-defined position within Dubai's racialized employment structure, the way in which Nigerians are perceived is very much defined by direct interactions. Racial stereotypes thus give way to new representations highly inflected by symbols of wealth and individual achievements—a process in which Nigerian musicians play a foremost role. While many messages circulate on Asian migrant workers' social networks warning against sophisticated ambushes set up by "Africans" to commit violent robberies, this representation is challenged by the growing familiarity with Nigerian music stars. Most Asian workers who I told about my research expressed shock that I would be close to Nigerian people based on testimonies they had heard from their compatriots, yet on several occasions the reaction was very different. For example, a Filipina woman working for a catering company was impressed that I would have access to Nigerian music professionals. Her job had taken her to several events featuring performances by Nigerian artists, and she had been dazzled by their flashy styles and the enthusiast reception from the crowds. "Dubai people really love Nigerians," she said, starry-eyed. Similarly, an Indian employee of a security company told me of a concert that had just happened in Dubai Mall, in which all the performers were Nigerian. Confused to see black stars who did not speak in an American or British accent, he had asked around, and, upon learning that they were Nigerian, had posted it on social media. Still stunned, he kept showing me videos of the event, as if trying to convince me of how popular Nigerian performers are, in the same way that he had tried to convince his Indian friends.⁹ A similar newfound enthusiasm colored the discourse of a Filipino videographer who had been sent to film a birthday party on a yacht with a Nigerian artist. When he initially researched the performer and understood that it was going to be a Nigerian party, he had considered refusing the assignment, worried that he

⁹ This was before several Nigerian songs reached the top of the Indian Music Industry (IMI) Singles Chart.

would get robbed. Scared of losing his job, he yet reluctantly went. Appearing still dumbfounded, he admitted that not only did everything go well, but he was impressed by the lavishness of the party and had to reconfigure his prior racist assumptions.

The framing offered by Dubai, as a “place perhaps where the entire globe can be encompassed and experienced” (Kathiravelu 2015: 41), is particularly conducive for efforts to rework commonplace understandings of Nigerians as a “people” and a “culture” (Dávila 2012). Kathiravelu argues that, with its “cultural expansionism” and “desire for coloniality,” Dubai “attempt[s] to bring Dubai to the World . . . by bringing the world to Dubai (2015: 42), thus intersecting with Nigerian efforts to “take Africa to the world.” With difference an intrinsic feature of the global economy of music (Erlmann 1999), the sonic ethnoscape becomes an infrastructural element of the pervasive consumer experience that Dubai offers. While in China, for example, replicas and recreations are also frequent features the cityscape (Weiler 2016; Su *et al.* 2019), they remain geographically bounded—in the same way that theme parks or festivals are functionally, and often temporally, circumscribed—in Dubai, however, “the creation of themed spaces encompasses leisure, residential and work environments.” Nigerian ethno-entrepreneurs, in all their diversity, have seized upon the opportunity to insinuate cultural production from Lagos into every level of social life in the emirate. From the Nigeria pavilion at the 2020 World Expo to the most mundane aspects of the everyday, the symbolic inclusion of “Africa” in Dubai’s cosmopolitan landscape through sound carries significant imaginative potential. This is perhaps most noticeable from the short-form videos that Nigerian migrants and visitors enthusiastically post online when Afrobeats resonates in emblematic sites of globalized consumption.

The projection of “Nigerianness” through Lagos music in Dubai complicates the analytical distinction between “thick” ethnicity, which one would simply “live,” and “thin” ethnicity, in which cultural identity would be “reduced to a utility function” (Comaroff and

Comaroff 2009: 44). Popular music has been embedded in racial dynamics of status negotiation ever since the dawn of the U.S. commercial music industry (Lavitt 1999; Melnick 2001; Karp 2018). In the late 19th century, with African and European music already circulating and cross-fertilizing, the former started to serve the latter as fetish, spectacle, in a representational regime that defined the colonial gaze as the only active force, with “the lives and thinking of large numbers. . . beginning to be wholly enclosed, structured, and even governed by the images [it] had created for [itself]” (Erlmann 1999: 176). The entanglement of cultural creativity and the negotiation of economic participation was the crucial force shaping the development of popular music in Lagos throughout the twentieth century (Alaja-Browne 1989; Waterman 1990, Boluwaduro 2018). Lagos was defined by migration and the need to create a place for oneself in a deeply segregated and unequal environment shaped by European colonialism and the slave trade. Music emerged from a marginal and self-conscious condition, interpreting different cultural codes and value systems in order to style new cosmopolitan urban identities grounded in aspiration.

Today, with one of the largest and most active global diasporas, Nigerians navigate various flows of meaning and power as they negotiate their place, and the place of “Africa,” in the world. Intense reflexivity continues to define Nigerian popular culture as a lived phenomenon in the postcolonial condition, offering a view of how producers as well as consumers see themselves, and how they would like their lives to evolve (Hannerz 1987: 554). Therefore, while Nigerian migrants and music professionals in Dubai are conversant with the predefined categories of otherness that have “prompt[ed] readings of Dubai as empty simulacra” (Kathiravelu 2015: 42), they harness these spaces to promote a dynamic version of “culture,” reflecting its syncretism and constant innovation. Against the reified version of what the Comaroffs call the “simulacra of ethnicized selfhood” (139), they emphasize the flexibility and adaptability that precisely constitute their lived experience, as they negotiate belonging.

The Lagos music industry's recurrent claim that it is "taking Nigeria/Africa to the world" thus finds a particular expression in the case of Dubai. Celebrities' performative embodiment of "Nigerianness" becomes embedded in the emirate's performative infrastructure, generating new registers of globalized identities. Ultimately underpinned by the same objective, performance here allows for the anticipation of full economic and cultural participation. As Lagos artists are paving the way for Nigeria's insertion into the global economy, inviting foreign investment and creating a market for exports other than oil, they avail themselves of Dubai's public infrastructure, which serves as a conduit for the emirate's similar objectives (Kathiravelu 2015). With a shared reliance on branding discourse, Nigeria's commodified artist and Dubai's commodified architecture are respectively postulated as a force that can transform broader economic circumstances, contributing to changing postcolonial hierarchies of a world system in which "the possibility of economic performance must be conjured like a spirit to draw an audience of potential investors" (Tsing 2000: 118). Nigerians, as a constituency that has historically lacked access to public venues of self-representation, are thus hijacking the symbols that Dubai erected to gain public standing.

In that process, interactions with state institutions in Dubai are rather limited. There is no official practice of interviewing migrants or visitors before or upon their arrival, or of conducting police stops (Le Renard 2021: 37; Malit and Martin 2017: 117). Nigerian music professionals pay no tax on profits made in the emirate, and even those whose work is mainly based off Dubai often do not inquire into immigration matters. They enjoy the flexibility and anonymity provided by visitor visas, which also suit their work, as they often shuttle between the emirate and Nigeria, as well as other destinations according to opportunities. During the ethnography, the main lens through which the relationship to Dubai authorities was raised (and complained about) was through the emirate's "strict laws," which refers to the draconian prohibition or regulation of alcohol, drugs, and prostitution. In contrast to Nigeria, the

possibility of the law being enforced shaped a certain awareness of the state. Yet, music professionals deploy a flexible approach to the emirate's officially conservative mores. The case of two Nigerian female artist managers on their first trip to Dubai to accompany an aspiring artist offers an illustration. As they visited a local family-oriented theme park in mini-shorts and bikini tops, the security stopped them and asked that they cover. With the park only selling traditional local clothing, the two women bought black abayas. They continued to wear the covering garment during the rest of their trip—leaving it open with skimpy bodysuits underneath. By transforming the abaya into an element of style, they defied the original injunction to “modesty” that had made them buy it in the first place. More generally, migrants and music professionals (who are overwhelmingly male) consume alcohol, drugs, and prostitution relatively casually. Nigerians sex workers are particularly visible as, from observation, they make up the majority of street-based sex workers in the working-class neighborhoods¹⁰ and also visit labor camps on weekends. Among women related to the Nigerian music industry who migrated to Dubai in search of material and gender emancipation, some have also become entrepreneurs operating at the junction of music and sex (see also Machikou and Perseil 2008 on female agency and capitalization of the body in the context of African migration).

The case of Nigerian aspiring artist Swaggaboy,¹¹ who had initially come to Dubai in the hope of finding a job, is illustrative of how migrants commonly negotiate a lived experience that straddles illegality. I first came across his music through a low-quality video heavily featuring alcohol, drugs, and sex workers, filmed in Dubai. Swaggaboy grew up in the Lagos residential estate of Satellite Town, which started off as a visionary state project for low-income families in the 1960s to then turn into a slum at the turn of the century, as a result of the mass

¹⁰ In “Race, space, place,” Pardis Mahdavi (2010) indicates that the majority of street-based sex workers are women from sub-Saharan Africa.

¹¹ Name has been changed.

layoffs in the wake of economic crisis and the withdrawal of state services in the fields of education and social housing. Satellite Town features prominently in the history of the contemporary Nigerian music industry, as the area's devastation and cultural heritage¹² fueled creativity and the quest for informal income in the industry's early stages. Like every other boy in his street, Swaggaboy started rapping. Yet unable to see a promising avenue out of poverty within Nigeria, he set off for Dubai as soon as he gathered enough savings. Upon arrival he failed to find an entry-level job, which he attributes to discrimination in a migrant economy largely controlled by South Asians, and he had to explore illicit avenues to make a living. Earning enough money from his involvement in Nigerian cybercriminal networks, he was able to sponsor his music and its promotion, thus bypassing the structural constraints of the Lagos music industry, though making constant back and forth trips to avail himself of its resources. Years later, he remains on a visitor visa. Even as he is based in Dubai, his music falls within the "street" music class according to Nigeria's indigenous music categorization, as a result of its vulgar lyrics and unsophisticated production values, as well as the artist's background. Yet, the money he has earned in Dubai, and which he conspicuously showcases during his trips to Lagos, has afforded him an undeniable degree of social mobility.

Why Dubai?

Located at the intersection of two defining tropes of contemporary capitalism, the black male performing artist (Dyson 2007; Ebron 2008; Hill Collins 2005; Matlon 2016; Neal 2004; Rose 2008; Shipley 2013; Smith 2003) and the autocratic neoliberal city-corporation (Davis and Monk 2007; Kanna 2010; Buckley 2013; Kathiravelu 2015; Kanna *et al.* 2020), Nigerian artists' symbolic appropriation of Dubai decenters historically grounded routes of the "Black

¹² Satellite Town is next to Festac Town, where the Second World Festival of Black Arts and Culture (Festac77) was held in 1997.

Atlantic” (Gilroy 1993) in the construction of globalized modernity, suggesting the need to develop new epistemological frameworks.

Historically situated, this convergence is the result of long-term processes. Appreciating the role of contingency and allowing historical developments to inform our understanding of the contemporary moment helps denaturalize the tropes that have come to define popular (and sometimes academic) knowledge about certain places and people (Ebron 2008; Kanna *et al.* 2020, Tsing 2005; Vora 2015). Thus, against common assumptions of “Middle Eastern states, especially oil economies, as illiberal nonmodern outgrowths of primordial tribalism due mostly to the ‘accident’ of oil discovery” (Vora 2013: 9), Vora suggests analyzing the UAE not primarily as an oil or rentier state that is “markedly different in its structure than other countries in the West or even the Global South, but rather as a modern state deploying multiple logics of governance and forms of belonging as a means to interpellate several groups of differently positioned subjects” (2013: 4). Indeed, the notions of immaturity and illegitimacy commonly tied to Dubai ignore its shift from a mode of governance marked by “ethnic pluralism” in the 19th century to the more recent “Arab ethnocracy” (Kanna 2011; Le Renard 2021; Vora 2015). The emirate indeed began its emergence over a century ago as a trading center via its position as a stopover for boats headed to and from Persia, India, China, and East Africa (Keshodkar 2014: 111). Dubai’s historical multiculturalism is obscured by territorially bound, state-scale research, which reproduces categories established by the British colonial administration and leaves little room to understand the self-definition that can take place in such space.

Dubai’s longer history shows that cosmopolitan practices and political struggle have laid the groundwork for contemporary interactions, including with the Nigerian music industry, though according to a different trajectory than that followed in Western Europe and North America. As early as the ninth century, ivory, pearls, leather, slaves, mangrove wood, sugar, textiles, and other commodities were traded between East Africa and the littoral communities

along the Persian Gulf (Keshodkar 2014: 110). During the 19th century and well into the twentieth century, East African slaves and the Baluch Persian community played a significant role in Dubai's economy, which was based mainly on the city's coastal industries at the time¹³ (Abdullah 1978; Heard-Bey 1999; Khalifa 2006). The social and legal tradition within Islam of children not following the status of their mothers, and of a child's ethnicity being determined by that of the father, meant that African slaves could assimilate into local tribes (Ali 2011), becoming "an element of the local population, indistinguishable in dress or speech" (Khalifa 2006: 228). Historian Aisha Bilkhair Khalifa discusses the role played by African music in the cultural history of Dubai, noting that "unfortunately the African music contribution has been largely neglected, even though it is clear that music of African origin still plays a role in the social fulfilment of the day-to-day needs of the local community and tourist industries" (Khalifa 2006: 234). At the turn of the 20th century, Dubai's tax policies attracted mass migration from Iran, already turning the emirate into the trading hub of the whole Arabian Peninsula, as well as the base for the exportation of Indian products to Iran (Moghadam 2013). Le Renard notes that "by 1939, Dubai was the most populous city of the coast, numbering around 20,000 inhabitants, a quarter of whom were foreign (2021: 28). Notably, until then, while under British protection, the Dubai family-state had deployed an "ethnically pluralist mode of governance," in which Persian and South Asian merchants made equally legitimate claims on the market and political protection of the state (Kanna 2011: 46).

British colonization favored the increased presence of foreigners in Dubai, while simultaneously establishing well-circumscribed territories and ethnic distinctions, where borders and communities had once been much more fluid. Initially using the Gulf emirates as a gateway to India in the face of competition from other colonial powers, the British administration encouraged the importation of labor from other regions of the British Empire,

¹³ In particular, pearl diving, fishing, and boat construction.

but it differentiated among the trader communities by assigning them distinct statuses and discouraged workers from mixing with local people (Abdullah 1978; Kanna 2011; Le Renard 2021). By territorializing power, the British turned a few local chiefs—who they chose and “protected”—into absolute, hereditary rulers over new populations (Le Renard 2021: 27), much like what they did in Northern Nigeria (Yabuku 1996).¹⁴ By the 1930s, the Great Depression and the collapse of the pearl trade¹⁵ led local notables to contest the power of the ruling family and its dependence on the British, with their demands framed in terms of political rights and rent sharing (Abdullah 1978; Kanna 2011). Despite violent repression, “demands for reform continued and radicalized” (Le Renard 2021: 28). During the 1950s, a new reformist challenge informed by the larger context of anti-colonial political activism in the region, began to assert a notion of participatory citizenship. Faced with these challenges, the family-state began constructing an ethnocratic conception of Arabness to justify its power. Appropriating only one aspect of the demands—Arab nationalism—it reframed the modernist agenda into a European-style ethnic nationalism, even as the majority of Dubai citizens are ethnically Iranian (Kanna 2010: 104). British protection and the oil wealth of the late 1960s and 1970s allowed the family-state to coopt the reformists and secure the hegemony of an ethnically purist and politically absolutist nationalism, which persists today.

Denaturalizing the construction of Dubai as a simultaneously recent and “backward” artefact renders more legible the dynamics and practices in which Nigerians have inserted themselves, and which they contribute to co-creating in the present. Indeed, by moving beyond the categorization as non-liberal rentier state, which implies that non-citizens exist “solely to furnish the managerial and service labor for the country’s day-to-day functioning, and thus . . .

¹⁴ See chapter 3.

¹⁵ The introduction of Japanese pearls and the economic depression of the 1930s significantly decreased demand, and the trade eventually faded away shortly after the Second World War, when the newly independent Government of India imposed heavy taxation on pearls imported from the Arab states of the Persian Gulf (Abdullah 1978; Heard-Bey 1999; Khalifa 2006).

are not usually considered beyond their role in the economy” (Vora 2015:), we begin to see the competing discourses, projects, demands, and ethical registers that collide and make up a place such as Dubai. Provincializing liberal democratic citizenship—as Nigerian music professionals do when they compare their experiences with state power in Dubai and in Euro-America—allows us to better appreciate the aspirations and projects reflected in the engagement of the Nigerian music industry with the emirate. Indeed, beyond notions of desired permanence and citizenship rights implicitly projected on migration to the West, Nigerian music professionals’ cultural emphasis on freedom and flexibility (which extends much beyond the music industry through the central motif of “hustling”) finds expression in a space that has been defined by circulation and search for opportunity.

A result of historical contingency, the articulation of the Nigerian music industry within Dubai’s public infrastructure is underpinned by an alignment of political and moral economic structures. The particular configuration of oil, postcoloniality, and a desire for emancipation feeds their respective aspirations to transform an entrenched social order and assert one’s place. In the 1980s political scientist Abdul Khaleq Abdulla said of the UAE: “As a periphery, its narrow specialization was to produce and export crude oil and import goods manufactured in the advanced capitalist countries of the center” (cited in Kanna 2011: 54). Yet while “Abu Dhabi has built its wealth on oil exploitation, Dubai has benefitted only indirectly from its oil operations, seeking rather to make the city an essential nexus of world business” (Le Renard 2021: 30). In this quest, Dubai has tightened its ties with global companies from Britain, but also diversified its partnerships. Dubayyans take pride in asserting that “they have ‘a completely different mind-set’ from their neighbors both in the UAE and the region,” claiming they “‘are not laidback and relaxed’ [and] do not depend on the government” (Kanna 2010: 111). While privileged and included in some ways (most importantly through citizenship), the young Dubayyans who steer the “city-corporation,” who Kanna calls the “flexible citizens,” do not

regard themselves as part of the Emirate's governing elite, nor as its dependents/clients. The majority of those who manage the flagship state-owned companies are indeed "linguistically, culturally, and often physically mobile, but often socially marginal." As a result of their lack of "pedigree," they are invested in neoliberal values of "individual merit, entrepreneurialism, work ethic, and willingness to self-improve." This subjectivity orientated towards postcolonial self-assertion and self-invention, which yet relies on partnerships with international brands that carry a colonial legacy of symbolic and material hierarchies, fully resonates with the Nigerian music industry.

Indeed, with its gerontocratic dynamic, Nigeria's political leadership is largely considered stifling and out of touch by youths in the country's cosmopolitan and bustling Southern coast, who seek an environment conducive to self-actualization. In the face of structural and operational limitations, the Lagos music industry has invested transnational circulation and sought to attract the attention of global corporations "rather than rely on the government."¹⁶ With oil in Nigeria accounting for less than ten percent of gross domestic product, but generating two thirds of the federal government's revenue,¹⁷ the state appears disembedded from social reality and oblivious to the breadth of youth aspirations fueled by access to the world through media and Internet. Three quarters of the population are indeed under 35,¹⁸ and many citizens feel they belong less to Nigeria as an official entity than to "Naija." A nickname "coined by the country's youth as a way of distancing themselves from the old guard who they blame for Nigeria's woes,"¹⁹ "Naija" (or "9ja") encapsulates the "hustling" ethos that defines contemporary "Nigerianness." Foregrounding creativity and flexibility in opposition to bureaucratic and military hierarchy, it finds full expression in Dubai,

¹⁶ This is how Lagos music professionals commonly frame their action.

¹⁷ KPMG, "National Budget 2020." Feb 2020, <https://assets.kpmg/content/dam/kpmg/ng/pdf/tax/2020-national-budget.pdf>.

¹⁸ <https://worldpopulationreview.com/countries/nigeria-population>.

¹⁹ Peter Okwoche in "Nigeria at 50: What does Naija mean?" BBC News Africa, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-africa-11447252>.

where Nigerians are often “self-starters who have explored unconventional and at times illicit avenues” (Pelican 2014: 297). Finally, similarly to Dubai’s state-owned neoliberal corporations, the Lagos music industry is largely steered by educated and connected youths, who yet feel marginalized in Nigeria’s entrenched system of power.²⁰

The lack of hope in the country’s leadership and the longing for a more conducive “elsewhere” have created a “virtual exile”²¹ (Piot 2010), or “mental secession” as young Lagosians refer to it, with one of its manifestation the emotional investment in leaders of foreign countries. On social media, more Nigerian music professionals follow the ruler of Dubai, Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, than the Nigerian President, Muhammadu Buhari. Young Nigerians commonly wish the Sheikh a happy birthday, congratulate him on Dubai’s achievements, and thank him for his nuggets of motivational wisdom couched in the language of entrepreneurship. When the long-ailing President of the UAE, Khalifa bin Zayed Al Nahyan, passed away in May 2022, several Nigerian “hustlers” operating between Dubai and other locations had to announce cancellations of club tours due to the UAE’s three-day suspension of work for mourning. It is normal among Nigerian youths to lament any loss of income opportunity in public, as was commonly the case during the Covid-19 pandemic; yet this time people responded to the announcement—which itself described the passing of a “great leader”—by sharing condolences, with many expressing heartfelt loss. An electronics gadget reseller in Lagos commented: “Do good so shall good come back to u. If any of these people I don’t want to mention kpain²² today, the citizens will celebrate thier dem!se [*sic*]. Learn from this. RIP Sheikh Khalifa Bib [*sic*] Zayed.”

Like Dubai’s “flexible citizens,” who consist of “disproportionate numbers of nonelites—individuals whose extraction is considered, locally, to be non-noble, non-pedigreed,

²⁰ See chapter 3.

²¹ Charles Piot coined the term in relation to Togo, but it applicable to Nigeria as well.

²² “Dies.”

or even “foreign”—as well as women” (Kanna 2010: 110) yet invest legitimacy in the patrilineal ruler of Dubai, who they “regard as [the city’s] visionary, paternalistic chief executive” (2010: 106), Nigerian “youths” emotional and political investment in Emirati rulers, who are all in their seventies, complicates the explicit framing of Nigerian leadership’s illegitimacy in generational terms. It reveals the constructed dimension of generation, ethnicity, religion, region, and class as analytical categories, often wielded as obvious interpretive keys to analyze Nigerian society—including by Nigerians themselves. Here we begin to see that there a more ideological dynamics is at play, with the term “youth” not to necessarily be taken at face value, but rather understood through its association with entrepreneurialism, risk-taking, cosmopolitanism and vision.

Reconceptualizing citizenship through a non-progressive lens

By centering the experiences, narratives, and affects of Nigerians commonly invisibilized in Dubai, we can identify their fluid negotiations of citizenship and space, as they evade and remake the structures that stem from top-down modes of planning meant to exclude them. Through Nigerian musicians’ experience in Dubai, millions of aspiring artists and ordinary fans back at home and physically “stuck” now indeed inhabit a cosmopolitan subjectivity, constituted through daily engagement online. “e be like say na Nigerians dem dey own Dubai nau”²³—this comment seen under the social media post of an artist posing in front of a luxury boutique in Dubai is but one example of the popular way in which Nigerians’ relationship to Dubai is discursively reworked through the lexical field of property. Implicitly alluding to politically exposed Nigerians’ “voracious” appetite for Dubai real estate (Page 2020: 14), it refers more directly to Nigerian cybercriminals who double as social media icons, followed online by millions of youths as they showcase their opulent lifestyle in Dubai,

²³ “It’s like Nigerians own Dubai now.”

conspicuously interlinked with Nigerian musicians and silently operating networks of young “entrepreneurs”, who set off for the emirate “driven by the desire for adventure and self-enrichment” (Pelican 2014: 268).

The empirical ontology deployed by Nigerian youths is indeed that “compared to Europe and North America, acquiring a work, business or tourist visa to enter the GCC²⁴ countries is relatively easy. . . for nationals from countries in the Global South” (Ngeh and Pelican 2022: 172). While the African diasporas in Euro-America far outnumber those in Dubai, the main factor that has slowed down Nigerian music’s success along postcolonial routes is the limitations imposed on music professionals’ physical mobility. Even the most respected artists, managers, and music executives who grew up in Nigeria have routinely experienced visa denials from Western countries. One usually needs commercial or institutional recognition as well as multiple previous visas to be afforded freedom of movement in the “free world,” resulting in a winner-takes-all system, in which the cosmopolitan middle-class is overrepresented. Complicating things further, the visa application process for Europe and North America often takes up to several months, during which passports are held at the embassy.²⁵²⁶ Even when artists are granted a visa, it is often without their teams, dancers, and musicians. The pains that music professionals go through to access the West explains that, once there, they will often stay for extended periods of time²⁷—a logic at odds with the extreme emphasis on flexibility and adaptability that governs the Nigerian music industry, whose slogans include “we move.”

²⁴ The Gulf Cooperation Council, a regional union that consists of Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates.

²⁵ In the case of the Schengen visa.

²⁶ A configuration hardly conducive for musicians, whose situation requires constantly chasing opportunities across the continent and beyond.

²⁷ Especially as the visas generally do not allow multi-entry.

In contrast, a song trending in a suburb of Lagos is generally enough to open the opportunity to perform in Dubai. A fluid network of mostly young men, highly mobile, operate on the fringes and interstices deemed unprofitable or out of reach by large corporations, between Dubai, Istanbul, Malta, and Cyprus, among others. They will organize visas online in 72 hours and take the artist on a promotional club tour just as his²⁸ career is taking off. This is how a Nigerian artist who had only had one song go viral on social media, for example, was noticed for the enthralling performance he put up with his three dancers from Lagos in a club of Downtown Dubai. Universal Music executives from South Africa approached him there, eventually leading to a deal between the artist's record label (a one-man shop owned by the artist's relative) and Universal Music France, with an upfront payment of over a hundred thousand euros.²⁹ While such "global" opportunities now increasingly reach Lagos directly, the subjectivity premised on circulation that defines the Nigerian music industry has convinced many aspiring artists that "only by . . . moving around, could they steer their lives towards a potential future away from marginality and exclusion" (Di Nunzio 2015: 156).

As a result of the fluid approach to time and space linking Lagos and Dubai, the emirate occupies an ambivalent position in young Nigerians' lifeworld. The symbol of fantastic future-making ambitions, it is simultaneously apprehended through a sense of proximity. Describing how Dubai has "entered public space and discourse" in Cameroon, Pelican explains that "[w]ith so many traders shuttling back and forth," Dubai "has increasingly become perceived as an extension of Africa" (2014: 295-296). Indeed, as opposed to "fortress Europe," Dubai is considered as not really "the abroad," even as it is geographically farther. "Dubai is easy," I often heard in Lagos music circles, with a trip to the emirate enacted as almost a rite of passage

²⁸ Artists who emerge from the "streets" are generally male.

²⁹ Lagos music professionals have learnt to not expect too much from marketing and other support offered by major labels, but funding remains the main issue in the industry. Therefore, local consultants know how to negotiate deals that keep control of distribution and African income streams within Nigerian hands, while maximizing the resources (financial and otherwise) that they get access to from abroad—as happened in this case. For more information on this topic, see chapter 1.

for young artists. An initiation into performing the “global,” it is usually their first corporeal experience of technologically advanced postmodernity, and for many, the only one they would ever have.

The subjective relationship of Nigerian youths with the emirate shapes their material engagement with its public and commercial infrastructure. Pelican noted, as she accompanied “several [Cameroonian] traders and migrants on their stroll through upscale shopping malls in the New Dubai,” that they “understand themselves as part and parcel of Dubai’s public, and as entitled to enjoy its amenities,” (2014: 290). Similarly, Nigerian migrants have “adopted a rather bold and self-reliant perspective on their role and entitlement as UAE residents, distinct from most low-wage laborers” (2014: 297), as the following ethnographic example will illustrate. Indeed, in order to understand the specificity of embodied experience in Dubai’s ideological and demographic configuration of postcolonial modernity, we need to draw on concrete situations.

As I was traveling to the emirate with Nigerian music professionals for the first time, I attended a “yacht party” organized around singer Davido.³⁰ This type of event is common and emblematic of Dubai’s discursive logic that mobilizes an imaginary of Western luxury to make it accessible to new populations (Le Renard 2021: 36). Indeed, “yacht party” refers here to evening cruises on regular ferry-style boats whose seats have been removed to allow for dancing, but it carries a symbolic charge of privilege. With many people eventually entering for free, average Nigerians get to flood the social media feeds of their connections back at home with the dreamscape of the “good life.” Widely publicized among Nigerian migrants, the party intersected with the transnational sociability of Nigeria’s violent secret societies (Ellis 2016; Cohen 2021) and interpersonal migrant conflicts, as frequently happens in the emirate. A fight involving the throwing of bottles of alcohol broke out on the boat, and the police was called.

³⁰ Attendees pay for the opportunity to be within close distance of a star.

Having lived in France and the United States, the prospect of an interaction between the police and a group of young black men “in legally precarious situations or engaged in illicit activities” (Pelican 2014: 260) conjured assumptions of tension and danger that I carried with me to Dubai. While being the only attendee to enjoy the privilege of whiteness, I seemed to be the most scared, as—with the group fight now carrying on the road—the other partygoers patiently waited for the police. The Emirati officers rapidly arrived and calmly addressed the belligerents in a discussion that lasted no more than a few minutes, after which everyone went their separate ways. Highly puzzled, I immediately recounted the experience to a friend in Lagos, who laughed at my reaction: “Oh you didn’t know? Dubai is not Europe!” he said unfazed. My friend, who grew up in one of the Lagos areas most directly affected by the crisis in the 1990s had built a way out of poverty through music, which had taken him to over a dozen countries. As is common among self-made music professionals, his first trip outside of Africa had been to Dubai. But his first experience of racialization had happened in France. There, he had called me already from the airport, anxious about the weapon-carrying police officers staring at him—a single young black man—before he even reached passport control. During his stay in Paris, he would go on to be stopped by the police while just walking in the street.

His perception of Dubai, and how he contrasted it to Europe, thus relied on lived experience and an imaginary of racially motivated police brutality, rather than a conceptual frame of democracy vs. authoritarianism. After being refused a visa to the United States twice, my friend had also decided that he was not interested in visiting a country where his presence was so unwelcome and grounded his decision in the fear of police violence. Indeed, the transnational imaginary that informs the Lagos music industry, with its strong connection to African American culture and media, is notably colored by the vivid denunciations of violent interactions with the police faced by Black people in the West. I had to reconfigure my own representations accordingly, shaped as they were by social democratic discourses that situate

Dubai only through its illiberal political regime. I later witnessed several occurrences of fights between Nigerians prostitutes in the Naif migrant housing area that required the police to intervene. With crowds of South Asian “bachelors” (Rajan *et al.* 2018)³¹ enjoying the entertainment, the officers would defuse the situation and leave. These episodes reflect a certain level of “trust in the police. . . displayed by. . . African women in the bed-space community” that Ngeh documented (2022: 15). Through these ethnographic scenes, we see that Nigerian migrants’ “engagement with public spaces has been rather relaxed” (Pelican 2014: 290). Just like the Nigerian film industry took over Dubai’s landmark Atlantis The Palm to make *The Wedding Party 2: Destination Dubai*, its highest-grossing film of all time,³² young Nigerians are easily identifiable from their confident attitude both in the Deira migrant housing areas and in the glitzy malls.

Through the combined familiarity and fantasy framed by the emirate, success—which is used by young Nigerians as a metonymy for escaping poverty—appears accessible. Celebrities who “hustle” their way up in Dubai belong to the “new figures of success and power” that Richard Banégas and Jean-Pierre Warnier (2001) have described as the poles of identification structuring African youth’s social imaginaries. The authors argue that these new figures, through their cultural practices, ethical discourse, and ostentatious consumption, convey both a moral economy and a corporeal lifestyle, shaping new subjects. Indeed, the fluidity with which they navigate the flows of globalization reconfigures political subjectivities and delineates the contours of an alternative morality. The now infamous case of Dubai-based billionaire “hustler” Hushpuppi, regularly parading with Nigeria’s most famous artists despite his widely known illicit activities, is an extreme yet relevant example of what young Nigerians in the music industry are confronted with, as they scroll social media daily from Lagos. For

³¹ Those who do not earn enough to sponsor their families are referred to as “bachelors” in the Gulf parlance, even if they are married.

³² As of 2020.

those at the bottom of the industry in particular, mobile data is often their largest expenditure. Aspiring artists, dancers, producers, music video directors mobilize Internet access in the hope of transcending geographic and economic limitations (Burrell 2012), wandering on social media for networking, education, and benchmarking purposes, and posting regularly to garner attention. As the works of their colleagues as well as their own are intertwined with images of fancy locations and inspirational quotes, social media also offers them escapism and motivation. As is commonly expected in Nigeria, Hushpuppi would frame his personal case in moral terms. With circulation featured as foundational to the notion of utopian capitalist personhood that he embodied, he nevertheless wanted to be—and, to some extent, was—a national hero. The following caption shows how his success enacted movement and temporal organization as moralized fields. Posted alongside a picture of cars and mentioning “The Palm Jumeraih Island, Dubai” as location, it read:

. . . today I’m proud of the success of a lot of young people that were raised in the slum/hood and made beyond the middle class level. . . . There’s a major shifting now in the wealth sharing, a lot of rich kids now work under CEOs who had less resources than them while growing up. I want anyone out there to know where you come from or how u are raised is not a factor to determine how far you can reach in life³³

As is common in Africa, “progress and futurity”, here, “are not mere descriptors of economic circumstance; they are assertions of values” (Weiss 2017: 205). Such emphasis on movement and transformation stands in contrast to a reified precolonial life crystallized in “the village,” imagined to be characterized by a “sense of continuous time and an inalienable connection to the past” (Piot 2010: 20). Replacing the UAE in a postcolonial context, its “physical landscape and environment” are similarly meant to ground “Dubai as a space of

³³ https://www.instagram.com/p/B0qQMfKggK_/?hl=en.

possibility” (Kathiravelu 2015: 48). In her ethnography of Indian low-wage migrant workers, Kathiravelu describes how the emirate’s infrastructure and amenities “act as symbols of social mobility” that “permeate and colour everyday conversations” (2015: 48). The materiality of Dubai’s “progress” thus functions to reinforce “its lure” as a “space that inspires hope that success is possible even when starting from “nothing.”” Kathiravelu explains that for her informants, who were often from rural and illiterate backgrounds, “Dubai, in this way, offers a real possibility of escape” (2015: 44). Observed from Lagos, a similar lens is applied, as Nigerians share in a postcolonial condition fundamentally characterized by a “perceived temporal disjuncture, with postcolonial. . . societies imagined as ‘behind’ or ‘belated’ in developmental time” (Ferguson 2006: 190), seeking to quickly “catch up.” The highly individualized trajectories of the “global African entrepreneurs” (Şaul and Pelican 2014) above are thus embedded in a moral-political framework that articulates personal and national aspirations.

The conspicuous success stories by young cosmopolitans, grounded as they are in images of Dubai’s own material achievements, indeed circulate a political consciousness that shapes expectations for Nigeria’s development path. Entertainment professionals explain, both to their followers and in informal interactions among themselves, that going to Dubai fills them with hope and sadness at the same time.³⁴ The general idea is that if Dubai could “get where it is now” in 50 years, then there is no reason that Nigeria could not do the same, “if only it can have the right leaders.” Put in contrast with Nigeria, Dubai as another postcolonial and oil-producing political entity thus serves as a popular foil and reference point. Spectacular, fast-tracked infrastructural development does not only resonate with the young professionals in the entertainment industry, but informs a broader popular sentiment on development, which finds

³⁴ Post by Aremu Afolayan, accessed on 20 January 2021, <https://www.instagram.com/tv/CKRSul0JVuF/?igshid=YmMyMTA2M2Y=> .

echoes in academic conversations as well, in Lagos,³⁵ and beyond on the continent. South African Professor of Development Studies Paul Thompson thus argues that with “the state itself. . . becoming the economy’s chief capitalist. . . the Dubai miracle with all its shortcomings” has “saved Dubai’s domestic economy from a path of underdevelopment” (Thompson 2016a: 168-169).

Exploring critically the popular idea of “a ‘Dubai model’ that poor countries are attempting to leverage to catapult themselves into first-world levels of affluence” from North Africa to South Asia, Yasser Elsheshtawy described as “Global Dubai or Dubaization” the “phenomenon of spectacular developments based on the construction of megaprojects” (2010: 251; 256). Often locally initiated, these projects are articulated within the discursive field of “development” and “visionary future,” even as they seldom hold progressive potential, and may, rather, reinforce existing social inequalities (2010: 271). In Lagos, such Dubaization is clearly visible in the Eko Atlantic project, a highly ambitious offshore city meant to accommodate skyscrapers for residential and office use, luxury boutiques, and entertainment venues. It is unclear if what the official website describes as “a visionary project on a huge scale,” “a marvel of modern engineering and technology, and a testament to the rise of Nigeria on the world stage” will ever give rise to anything. But the concept and rhetoric at least make clear the references informing its developmentalist agenda. Indeed, the project’s stated objective is “to solve the chronic shortage of real estate in the world’s fastest-growing megacity. . . As Nigeria continues its unstoppable trajectory to become the financial capital of Africa,”³⁶ thus repackaging the superlative-rich descriptions that Dubai has become known for, while the media gallery opens with an image of an “Eko Marina,” which at first sight is easily mistaken

³⁵ At the Lagos Studies Association Conference held annually at the University of Lagos, discussions have often referred to China, Dubai, and Singapore as inspirations from a development perspective, with discussions centering on how these models can be emulated.

³⁶ <https://www.ekoatlantic.com/>.

for Dubai Marina. Currently an empty stretch of reclaimed land, Eko Atlantic's dunes of sand have been appropriated and repurposed by the Lagos music industry, which uses the ruins of this urban mirage for Mad Max-like post-apocalyptic music videos and sprawling sponsored concerts in an otherwise overcrowded city.

Like Dubai's infrastructure itself, these projects that were not meant for the music industry, yet become its playground, inform the broader questions of citizenship and political subjectivity that popular artists mediate, as "agents of hybridity" "bridging the gap between global and local" (Peterson 2010: 226). Indeed, "while Dubai claims that it is nonpolitical in its outlook," with this even arguably the "main tenet of the Dubai model" (Elsheshtawy 2010: 262), such de-politization is precisely at the heart of the consciousness circulated by the Nigerian music industry. The industry's ambitious discourse proclaiming to take "Africa to the world" is grounded in notions of what is "good" that are assumed to be universally agreed, even if the constant appropriation and repurposing at play would suggest otherwise. With concepts such as "international standards" constantly mobilized, and rarely defined, artists and music professionals invest consensual political meaning in rankings and commercial performance. As "successful agents of modernization" (Peterson 2010: 225) guiding "Africa" into the 21st century, they operate in a discursive space that articulates conductively with Dubai's material and ideological framework, even if it is constantly reworking it. With business and policy news publications trumpeting: "How Nigerian Music Did It: Why Nigeria's Economy Needs to Follow the 'Music Model,'"³⁷ the music industry is a future-making project, proceeding from the logic that Charles Piot described in West Africa, where "futures are replacing the past as cultural reservoir" (2010: 16). As such, it resonates with Dubai's orientation as "visionary, but without the pesky obligation to be revolutionary," or as Kathiravelu's low-income migrant

³⁷ <https://venturesafrica.com/features/how-nigerian-music-did-it-why-nigeria-needs-to-follow-the-music-model/>.

informants put it, “it is a model that is ‘best’” (2015: 44). As “models,” structures that are just “becoming,” both the Nigerian music industry and Dubai’s infrastructural framework are “space[s] of almost unrestricted experimentation” (2015: 45).

The temporal orientation governing Lagos music professionals’ subjectivity found expression in our respective experience of non-Western modernity, vividly illustrated in everyday ethnographic interactions in and about Dubai. For example, in a discussion with a music promoter who travels frequently to Dubai and Kuala Lumpur, as I was trying to convince him to extend his interest to Chinese cities (this was in 2018), I got carried away by my own love for China and started praising its heritage theme parks, at which point my interlocutor cut me short: “Ok cool, but do they have modern stuff as well? Because look, I’m not interested in all that historical shit; we Nigerians, we like new things, big buildings, fast roads, you know that.” This disposition could be seen as comically typical Igbo entrepreneur (Olutayo³⁸) of living in the high-density areas of Old Dubai—in part due to cost, but mainly because of what Elsheshtawy describes as the “urban informality” resulting from “location next to public transport, intense levels of commercial activity, and location within, or in close proximity to, poor areas.” “Characterized by a very active and vibrant street life, to the extent that they are main gathering points for low-income residents,” (2010: 978; see also Moghadam 2013) these areas host most low-income migrant workers—including newly arrived West and Central African migrants, until they climb up the social ladder and move to newer residential districts. A Nigerian friend who was working as driver and guide for Nigerian artists in Dubai ³⁹ it’s like the village for you,” he analyzed, linking this preference to my identity as a French national

³⁸ Living in Deira is rarely a choice, especially for women, who, in that area, are almost exclusively African prostitutes, along with a few young Chinese female merchants. It is therefore a racial and class privilege to be able to live there without experiencing the challenges that comes with it.

³⁹ One of Dubai’s oldest and most transient districts, situated at the entrance to the Dubai Creek. With narrow and twisted alleyways, it is one of the poorest areas with the highest density, closely associated with low-income migrants mostly from the Indian subcontinent (Afghanistan, India, Pakistan and Bangladesh), and increasingly populated by African merchants from all over the continent (Pelican 2014: 255, 283; Elsheshtawy 2008: 974).

with an interest in Africa. Nigerian music professionals therefore implicitly mobilized colonial and capitalist history by deploying the conceptual framework of “imperialist nostalgia” (Rosaldo 1989) to make sense of our differing interests.

Indeed, as noted above, scholars have suggested that Dubai is often apprehended as a metaphor, evoking a phantasmagorical future (Davis 2006) connoted differently depending on the group one belongs to. Kathiravelu described how “migrants are drawn to Dubai largely because of its significations of a mode of post-colonial, non-Western modernity” (2015: 23). Similarly, for Nigerian music professionals, Dubai offers an aspirational horizon and material space to define themselves as “modern” without the pressure to conform to Western cultural expectations. During my ethnography, I often heard: “In Dubai, they respect money.” Meant as a positive observation, it celebrates the fact that capitalism can be abstracted from the Euro-American cultural context that gave it meaning in the first place. Using the emirate as framing, modernity thus appears accessible through alternative routes and can take different forms (Elsheshtawy 2010; Kanna *et al.* 2020; Kathiravelu 2015; Vora 2013). In particular, the “rapidity and boldness with which [Dubai] has undertaken change” (Kathiravelu 2015: 41) very much resonates in Lagos, especially within the music industry, which, within the space of two decades, has asserted itself as a major player in global commercial culture.

This convergence begins to shed light on the epistemological tension besetting the study of the ideological underpinnings to discursive and material spaces like “Dubai” or the “Nigerian music industry.” Participant-observation with Lagos music professionals, both those who go to Dubai regularly and those who only dream of “the abroad,” reveals that the emirate is celebrated precisely for the reasons that make it detestable to Western commentators⁴⁰, that is, its aggressive and extravagant developmental path. Kathiravelu notes indeed that “the speed, scale and sheer audacity of this attempt to create such an ‘instant city’ amount to “post-colonial

⁴⁰ See coverage of Dubai in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis and during the Covid pandemic.

‘showing off’ to the developed West,” and, as such, is “seen. . . as an endeavour that deserves to fail” (51), while Neha Vora describes how the emirate's development is often painted by Western scholars as attributable to “the ‘historical accident’ of oil discovery, instead of to a natural evolution of economy and state as supposedly occurred in Europe and the United States during industrialization” (2013: 8). Dubai’s modernity, which delineates an inspirational postcolonial trajectory seized upon by young entrepreneurs such as those who steer the Nigerian music industry, is simultaneously denied “reality” by Western intellectuals and journalists, for whom it “connotes fakedness and artificiality” (Elsheshtawy 2010: 251). Both academic and popular discourse indeed commonly “discuss the unsustainability of an urban form that is the ‘instant post-industrial city’” (Kathiravelu 2015: 51), thus indirectly dismissing the “subaltern dreamscapes” (Smith 2003: 82) embedded in it. The “reluctance to see Dubai’s modernity as serious and salient” (Kathiravelu 2015: 50) here resonates with the absence of recognition of “typical grassroot. . . songs and their music video corollaries’ utopian imagination’s insatiable hunger for the capitalist commodity. . . as the stuff of ‘real politics’” (Smith 2003: 81).

Using Dubai as framing allows us to see that at the core of the values and lifeworld mediated by the Nigerian music industry lies the question of citizenship, shaped by a situated relationship to time. Scholars of American hip hop (Ebron 2008; Kitwana 2002; Neal 2004; Rose 1994; Smith 2003) and African popular music genres (Osumare 2014; Perullo 2011; Pierson 2021; Shonekan 2012; Steingo 2016) have grappled with the challenge of conceptualizing contemporary subaltern music’s “generic fixation with commodity culture and upward social mobility” (Smith 2003) as anything else than escapism, exploitation, or false consciousness. This epistemological difficulty, I argue, is largely the result of “unquestioned assumption of a shared understanding of citizenship” (Vora 2013: 30). Indeed, the teleological underpinning of the progressive “social contract” model naturalizes a desire for permanence, grounded in a notion of citizenship that extols the achievement of middle-class status and

respectability (Freeman 2007). However, for my Nigerian interlocutors—like for most migrants in Dubai, but also many other populations experiencing the condition of flexibility across the world—“ephemerality was a constant, enduring, and even expected part of their daily lives” (Vora 2013: 32). Achille Mbembe has described how, for Africans, “survival, both in rural areas or in popular parts of main cities, is to a large extent dependent on the capacity to move and to move constantly” (Balakrishnan 2016: 35). “Geographies of flexibility,” embodied in spaces like Dubai, are then “characterized in positive terms because they are spaces within which individuals and groups can manifest the adaptability needed to successfully navigate daily lives” (Studemeyer 2015: 567). This form of non-progressive citizenship derived from the “global market’s own subjectifying processes” (Karam 2001: 45) is hardly legible in frameworks informed by liberal-democratic values.

Conclusion

“I am working, in Dubai I am working”⁴¹ sings Algerian superstar Soolking in his 2020 summer hit song “La kichta” (a French slang for money or drugs), dressed all in Fendi, driving a sports car.⁴² Countless French artists of African descent have similarly used Dubai as the backdrop to their utopian rags-to-riches stories, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic when, like their Nigerian counterparts, lockdowns pushed them to the emirate to continue working.⁴³ Hanging out in the same Dubai landmarks and recording in hotels that they transform into home studios, Nigerian artists cross paths (and sometimes collaborate) with global superstars from the whole African diaspora. Like the infrastructure of global media and digital platforms, the

⁴¹ Translated from French, « J’suis au travail, à Dubai j’suis au travail ».

⁴² Soolking ft. Heuss L’enfoiré, La kichta, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EzDCuEDG8A8&ab_channel=SoolkingOfficiel.

⁴³ For example, Ninho ft. Leto, Vie de star, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iJiuEDERtbw&ab_channel=Rec.118, Kodes ft. Zola, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hymXYUDmmVw&ab_channel=Kodes, Rohff, Doub Bail, 2021, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=e6zH7nJWq7c&t=2s&ab_channel=Rohff, Kekra, Dubai, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cwEjs5WDohM&ab_channel=Kekra.

emirate's cityscape serves as a conduit for interactions between postcolonial youths, fostering a form of sociality grounded in global capitalism. Fabienne Darling-Wolf (2008) described how, over a decade ago, a new generation of French rappers weaponized the uneasiness of France's political and cultural elite with the effect of American imperialism on a national ideal of "authentic" French culture, self-consciously asserting their solidarity with American rappers through the adoption of their style. Similarly, a new generation of popular Afro-diasporic artists have learnt to capitalize on the West's fears of the "emirate's form of cultural expansionism [that] is representative of an idiosyncratic post-Western modernity" (Kathiravelu 2015: 28).

Beyond the dehumanized and "cold" nature of contemporary neoliberal capitalism widely decried by scholars, popular artists have ritualized the sensuous, incarnate dimension of the new dangling prospect of extreme wealth accumulation. Music and social media indeed have the capacity to recognize and project the potentiality of an abstraction such as "billionaire" through form, with the power to effectuate feeling. Asserting the legitimacy of a desire to participate in the hegemonic cultural economy, artists and influencers enact Dubai as a place where "they only respect money"—thus free from the historical institutions and culture of respectability experienced as oppressive "at home," grounded as they are in the racial state (Tshimanga *et al.* 2009) and the legacies of colonialism.

As with the rest of the capitalist utopia that young Nigerians choose to invest in, they are fully aware its ontological instability. The conflict over the meaning citizenship expressed in the question of temporal processes is also played out among Nigerians, and within the music industry itself. As described in chapter 3, the notion of rapid success can be an ambivalent one in Lagos, as it is across Africa. Musicians who suddenly "blow" epitomize the ultimate dream of changing ones' circumstances for youths with no prospect of formal employment, yet their singular path of seemingly "overnight" upward mobility raises suspicions. The very concept of "fast development"—or "fast business" (Weiss 2017)—which Dubai embodies, is at once

seductive and scary. Its reality and legitimacy can be questioned, making it both a source of hope and of fear, condemnation, and resentment. Some female music professionals in Lagos tell me, for example, that the Thursday night flight to Dubai is filled with well-dressed women who will do “horrible things.” These interlocutors, since they “know” what happens in Dubai, claim not to be impressed by the opportunities there. Yet in everyday interactions, they repeatedly express longing for any chance to travel out, as they can no longer bear the suffering associated with living in Nigeria.

The contradictions and conflicts encompassed in the notion of citizenship as “a multifaceted concept construed in dynamic terms” (Studemeyer 2015: 567) found particular expression in a public dispute between Hushpuppi and two Nigerian artists. While Hushpuppi lived abroad and constantly praised and exhibited foreign brands, he nevertheless saw himself as a national hero. As he attacked famous artists Phyno and Ice Prince for wearing fake watches, the dispute gave rise to an explicit problematization of citizenship as a social, political, cultural, economic, and legal construction. Phyno indeed responded to the attack with:

Ulive and die for Gucci... I will live and die for my pple... The hunger is different here man. .
 . I represent a full continent, nation, tribe, brands, streets... Wat do u represent... #hushpuppi.
 Gucci? Lol..

While singer Kcee stepped in to ask:

You have no credibility, no known source of income and yet you come on social media to attack hard working Nigerian musicians with traceable wealth. . . We want to know your source of income since you now have the nerves to come on social media and call out a brand. Who is your father, Are you OBO, (Davido)? Are you a taxable Nigerian.?. . . We need to start asking questions and the EFCC @officialefcc needs to start paying more “Attention To detail.”

In these exchanges, the artists target the notion of illusion, the mirage, that the “instant-city” or “instant-wealth” represent. Yet they themselves, as artists, flaunt and praise material wealth in their music and lifestyle, precisely mediating a system of signification that makes success accessible overnight.

In 2020, Hushpuppi's arrest on charges of fraud in the amount of US\$ 400 million was documented by the Dubai Police in a four-minute video whose style did not pale in comparison to Nigerian music videos. A few months later, in the wake of restrictions imposed by Western governments in the name of Covid-19, Dubai started targeting Nigerians with travel bans, leading to a tit-for-tat saga with the Nigerian government that lasted over half of 2021. It could have been viewed as the dissipation of the mirage. Yet, as a Nigerian road manager in Lagos told me matter-of-factly: "Nigerians will still go." Indeed, in the middle of Covid restrictions and travel bans, Africana Restaurant was still working at full capacity and every night young Nigerian men were bustling around cargo shipments in the narrow streets of Dubai's Deira neighborhood, preparing containers to be sent to Lagos, Abuja, and Kano, while blasting the latest Nigeria hits. The most popular song at the time was Bella Shmurda's "Cash App," with its lyrics "For money I never sleep . . . Every day I am chasing good life."

Entrepreneurialism as a salvation project: Capitalist excess and artistic austerity

Introduction

“Doctor Business or Mister Cool? . . . what if Mr Eazi’s cool was hiding a Doctor Business,”¹ asked a white French journalist in an article about the Nigerian artist’s early European success. Expressing a naturalized view that divides—even opposes—a sphere of capitalist rationality viewed with suspicion on the one hand, and a sphere of affect that ought to be autonomous from business calculations on the other, the journalist’s line of interrogation offers a foil to analyze the norms and values that prevail within the Nigerian music industry. Indeed, far from “hiding” his economic ambitions, Mr Eazi has always been explicit about his motivations, plainly stating in another interview: “I just wanted to be rich.”² In Lagos, his name is evoked with admiration among artists and music professionals—not for his music, but for his business acumen and strategic vision, which command respect. A music programmer at a TV channel in Lagos, for example, noted: “The one I truly admire is Mister Eazi, because he’s the only one, when I met him, he had a plan.” The plan—which included strategically scheduled promotions and release dates, a carefully crafted visual brand featuring a straw-hat from Ghana (where Eazi was a gold miner before going into music), and an early understanding of digital platforms’ algorithms—earned him commercial revenue from Europe that allowed him to set up a fund to identify and promote new African talents.

In a historical configuration in which postcolonial societies remain at the exploited end of the commodification process, “commercial culture cannot be easily reduced to sheer pleasure

¹ <https://www.jeuneafrique.com/mag/645008/culture/musique-les-bonnes-affaires-de-mr-eazi/>

² <https://www.musicbusinessworldwide.com/mr-eazi-on-the-global-success-of-afrobeats/>

or commercial manipulation” (Dávila 2012: 10). Like other aspects of transactional postcolonial life, it carries claims to belonging, dignity, and agency, calling for a phenomenological approach that acknowledges the co-constitution of exchange, identity, and affect. The following excerpt of an informal three-hour exchange between highly respected rapper M.I. Abaga and a leading Nigerian music journalist outlines how the Nigerian music industry’s commercial ambitions reach far beyond Nigeria, music, and commerce. Following a negative album review, the rapper indeed went to harangue the journalist at the office of the entertainment news outlet, explaining:

Naija music industry, bro... America came, they gave us money, it wasn’t working, they wrapped everything up, they shut it down. We started, Kenny and D1, 2face. Ah! How can you critique 2face. This n***a did the shit by himself! He put a whole country on his back. How can you... You can’t ever say anything bad about him. Ever! For the rest of his life! If he releases a song that is not good, just say: “this is what 2face likes...”, that’s it, that’s all. . . We’re at critical period bro, if Nigeria fails, black people fail. They hate black people everywhere in the world, they hate black people in Asia, they hate black people in America, in South America, we are the hope of the black nation, *we*. Let’s put our best foot forward, together.

With the 1990s privatizations progressively reconfiguring pan-African liberation as an entrepreneurial project (Shipley 2009: 634), young Nigerians have imbued individuated modes of success with a political meaning that often sits uneasily with traditional Western ideological dichotomies. Defined as a postcolonial, racial, and generational project, the vision held by Nigerian music professionals and fans is embedded in larger social and political conditions of socioeconomic marginalization and flexibility, as described in chapter 3.

Achille Mbembe and Janet Roitman point out how economic attributes were used already as the basis for the construction of national identity by Africans after independence (1995: 339). Writing from Cameroon they explain that, at a time of strong economic growth, an economic mode of imagining offered a positive sense of self and a horizon with “infinite possibilities.” The ideology of postcolonial Nigeria was similarly predicated on the manifest acceptance of colonial norms and principles (Ekeh 1975), such as the promise offered by the

African city—as the locus of the colonial project—that “wage labor would propel African men into modernity” (Matlon 2016: 1031). The 1980s economic collapse and consecutive “slimming-down” of the state suddenly led to the “end of the salary,” causing an “immense sense of anguish among an entire generation of young, educated persons” (Mbembe and Roitman 1995: 350). This existential anxiety was compounded by the fact that the structural adjustment programs “in many respects enhanced the depth of Africa’s insertion into the world . . . [in] an aggravation of its dependence” (Bayart 2000: 238)—a phenomenon particularly felt in the realm of popular culture. As local cultural industries collapsed, the private TV and radio channels that proliferated following the liberalization of the media sector relied on the massive importation of foreign content (Barber 1997; Akpan 2006; Larkin 2008; Endong 2021), allowing young Africans to envision new ways of life steeped in consumption and pleasure, just as their means to achieve it eroded. In parallel, the “humanitarianization” (Watts 2011: 78) of Africa deepened the continent’s asymmetrical relationship to the world system (Bayart 2000; Ferguson 2006), “open[ing] the floodgates to a host of novel agents and agencies,” in particular transnational non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and churches—who, Charles Piot argues, “are remaking the face of African humanity. . . deciding who to support and who not to support, who will live and who will die” (Piot 2010: 4-12).

As economic development became governed by the register of pathos (Fassin 2020)—entrepreneurship, success, and consumption took a moral and affective dimension of resistance, with Nigerian music professionals a prime illustration of this mechanism. To understand this shift in moral economy, we need to go back to the post-independence era described by Peter Ekeh (1975). Following the colonizers successful “implant[ation of] a new concept of legitimacy” (1975: 104), Western standards became synonymous with “high standards” for the African ruling class. Therefore, the positivist perspective of both colonial and post-independence developmentalism could invoke abstract and universal “reason” as the basis of a

civilizational project. Even “traditional culture” was “rationaliz[ed]. . . into state-regulated categories of space and time” (Apter 1996). This configuration of political economy based on a modern bureaucracy crumbled in the 1990s, giving way to a public sphere saturated with emotions. The representation of “Africa” became the reified object of daily transactions. Piot described how—in West African villagers’ ordinary “attempt to attract NGOs through performatively staging their need—drama, affect, and storytelling fill the everyday lives” (Piot 2010: 19). With online fraud also exploding from the 1990s (and Nigeria becoming its infamous poster child), Basile Ndjio argues that scammers similarly exploit “the clichés of horror and tragedy that pervade most western media when it comes to depicting the Black continent” to convince the victims that “they are dealing with naive and unfortunate Africans” (2008: 16-17). The global imaginary fed by these regimes of representation has informed the self-construction of both Africans and Afro-descendants on a deep level, with people in the Nigerian music industry—especially those who grew up abroad—consistently citing the trauma of growing up amidst negative images of Africa as the main motivation in their job. In this context, refusing poverty and reaching for “international standards” of success is indeed posited as a political act of resistance against a hegemonic world order that relies on the pathologizing of the continent.

While it would be tempting to particularize the current values and ideology governing the Lagos music industry by grounding them in this situated historical evolution, they are the product of complex global dynamics, which explains their current resonance across the world. Linked by cultural exchanges and migration flows, variously situated communities share aspirations for extraordinary wealth, when ordinary security is no longer an option. Many of the pioneer figures who built the current Nigerian music industry at the turn of the century were raised or educated in Western Europe or North America, at a time when Nigeria was awash with American commercial culture, imported values constitute an equally valid heuristic entry point into the moral economy expressed through the Nigerian music industry. M.I. Abaga, for

example, the son of a pastor, studied business in the U.S. just as hip hop began to dominate the Billboard Hot 100 charts. In making hip hop an object of empirical analysis for the first time in the late 1980s, Africana scholar Tricia Rose was intricately documenting a political moment of transnational significance. “Life on the margins of postindustrial urban America is inscribed in hip hop style, sound, lyrics and thematics” (1994: 71), she asserted, thus re-centering the analysis of cultural practices in the understanding of the emerging socioeconomic system. A response to increasing poverty and the deterioration of life conditions, hip hop repurposes the places, people, and social institutions that postindustrial neoliberalism rendered useless. As a cultural form that “[e]merg[ed] from the intersection of lack and desire in the postindustrial city” (1994: 71), its affective practices were directly embedded in economic dynamics, shaped (though not dictated) by commercial structures, and reshaping them in the process. Rose describes how the subjective experience derived from material exclusion is thus in turn reinscribed in the socioeconomic landscape, creating new structures of political and moral economy:

It is a common misconception among hip hop artists and cultural critics that during the early days, hip hop was motivated by pleasure rather than profit, as if the two were incompatible. . . rather, many of the early practitioners were unaware that they could profit from their pleasure. Once this link was made, hip hop artists began marketing themselves wholeheartedly . . . riding the currents that are already out there, not just for wealth but for empowerment (1994: 82)

Similarly, in the African city, the project of general social betterment through salaried work gave way to a reality of “localized over-exploitation” (Fassin 2020: 1250), framing emancipation as the prospect of belonging through the corollary form of extreme wealth accumulation. Lagos music professionals, like their African American counterparts, work tirelessly to hijack the structures of global capitalism and become “billionaires.”

This chapter addresses the reflexivity built in the performativity of entrepreneurship and consumerist enjoyment, as mediated by race and gender, respectively. It argues that the efforts

to imbue capitalist excess with meaning through proactive business discourse and devotion to pleasure should be understood as a reflexive way to counter the deep consciousness of the ever-present threat of impending doom described in chapter 3. The contradictions encapsulated in racial and patriarchal capitalism as reconfigured by the flexible condition are not only reflected in the Nigerian music industry, but function as its driving force, with music providing those most affected by the new conditions of economic and social insecurity a way to work through them. These dynamics are of course symptomatic of a “cruel relation” (Berlant 2011). The pursuit of the “good life” through entrepreneurship is atomizing agents in a way that further obviates the radical transformation of political economic structures. That pursuit wears out the pursuers—even when, such as in the case of famous Nigerian celebrities, it is successful. Yet it constitutes the very condition of possibility for survival through the hope it allows for. The erasure of scale and structural factors denounced by scholars as characteristic of neoliberal capitalism (Gershon 2011) is precisely the reason why Nigerian youths seize upon entrepreneurship of the self as a vehicle for empowerment. Self-enhancement values restore dignity and a sense of agency that were robbed by colonization, failed post-independence state-led development, and the humanitarian discourse that followed it. Emphasizing what the agent has control over, neoliberal agency and the self-branding built into it (Gershon 2016) allow for the performative anticipation of full participation in the world. It thus provides an expressive and conceptual treatment of the deep-seated socioeconomic and political problems that Nigerian youths are faced with that allows for practical solutions to be articulated. The vocabulary of entrepreneurial capitalism functions as an idiom that confers meaning to individual lives otherwise treated as disposable, and to individual efforts that would rationally appear absurd in light of the surrounding challenges. Notions of economic opportunity and ostentatious consumption are wielded as a common currency in the self-conscious move to bestow objectivized and universalized “value” on otherwise denigrated identities. The

deliberate faith invested by Nigerian youths into individual success thus functions as “a scene of negotiated sustenance that makes life bearable as it presents itself ambivalently, unevenly, incoherently” (Berlant 2011: 13-14).

Inspired by Laura Bear, Karen Ho, Anna Tsing, and Sylvia Yanagisako’s *Feminist manifesto* for the study of capitalism (2015), which articulates a comprehensive approach to the study of capitalist inequality, this chapter uses the lens of racial and gender oppression to emphasize the communicative dimension of the Nigerian music industry’s pursuit of commercial success, even as it is productive of inequality and embedded in—maybe even reinforcing—power dependency networks. The authors of the *Feminist manifesto* indeed contest the distinction between the “instrumental action of economic production” and the “communicative action of human relation” (Hardt and Negri 2000: 293), which “erroneously attributes inherently different creative energies and communicative powers to these forms of labor” (Ho et al. 2015), thus challenging the discursive representations of “the economic logic” as an analytical concept.

Repositioning Blackness in racial capitalism

Rap veteran Ice Cube laid out explicitly the vision that ties commercial ambitions to Black liberation when—to justify advising Donald Trump’s 2020 presidential campaign as part of his racial advocacy—he explained that the issue of racial justice is beyond political parties: “Once we get some capital, we’ll get treated better. This is a capitalistic society . . . Dollars bring dignity, everybody in America knows that” (CNN 2020). It may be surprising to open the analysis of the ideological tenets governing the Nigerian music industry with a quote from an American rapper about American society—especially at a time when heated public sentiment surrounds any mention of the contribution of Black American music to Nigerian Afrobeats,

amidst (legitimate) fears of appropriation.³ The snippet above was yet widely shared by music professionals in Lagos, representing but one recent example of how—beyond music—meaning, values, and discursive practices travel and delineate fluid geometries of identity and belonging within global capitalism. Implicit in the intense circulation of popular culture across the Black Atlantic (Gilroy 1993) in Afro-modernity (Hanchard 1999) is the idea of a transnational political community mediated by a racial idiom. “The derogation of blackness, though varied from nation-state to nation-state, has been and remains global and transnational” (Hanchard 1999: 248). While hip hop in Nigeria has become a “relegated culture. . . fighting for its dear life”⁴—the routine use across the Nigerian music industry of the historically charged N-word, “something purely social, something made in the United States” (Wright in Gilroy 1993: 149), is an illustration of the Afro-diasporic consciousness that grew out of the nation-state’s neglects and exclusions, even as Nigerian artists become fully embedded in production and distribution circuits that reach far beyond cultural and racial Blackness. In this section, I argue that the shared contemporary orientation towards the “hyper-commodification of black . . . culture and material conditions” (Neal 2004: 170) functions as an expressive and material non-state-based affiliation.

As “entrepreneurs and consumers from the bottom,” African Americans came to “embody the possibilities of global capitalism for everyone,” Paulla Ebron argues, predicting fifteen years ago that the “hip hop generation” (Kitwana 2002) could “even help define the new ‘generations’ of entrepreneurial consumers that would mark the aspirations of a newly unfettered global capitalism” (Ebron 2008: 327). And indeed, in the office of Tega Oghenejobo, the widely respected Chief Operating Officer of Nigerian record label Mavin Records, hangs a

³ As The Recording Academy learnt the hard way, even as it is considering introducing an Afrobeats category to its Grammy Awards. <https://odunews.com/2022/07/knocks-trail-grammys-reference-to-afrobeats-as-black-american-music/>

⁴ <https://www.highsnobiety.com/p/best-nigerian-rappers/>

giant painting titled “Inspiration,” which features images of black entertainment icons such as TV mogul Oprah Winfrey and hip hop’s first billionaire Jay-Z, alongside Elon Musk, Jeff Bezos, and other billionaires. A key motivation among Nigerian music professionals has been to build the kind of entrepreneurial success that would replace American role models for the next generation of Africans. Don Jazzy, the founder and CEO of Mavin Records—and only African musician to feature in the “Inspiration” painting—is widely seen as role model among professionals and average African youths, who are over 20 million to follow him across social media platforms. Don Jazzy started his music career in London, while working as a security guard at a McDonalds restaurant, thus echoing the narrative told by hip hop’s underdogs of American capitalist society, even as his music is resolutely “African.”

Underpinning this “master narrative of ‘blackness’” (Apter 1996: 454) is the shared consciousness of having to fight for recognition in a global system built on the dehumanization of Blackness. R. A. Lawson showed how already during the Jim Crow era, African American blues singers abandoned a “‘me’-centered mentality . . . that preached an antiwork ethic” in favor of an increasingly “‘we’-centered . . . praise[d] hard work” to claim full American citizenship (Lawson 2010: x-xi). Thus, subsuming ethnic difference and class formation, the mobilization of market identities to “affirm participation as capitalist subjects” in both West Africa and the United States is not “coincidental but a consequence of racial capitalism” (Matlon 2016: 1031-1033) in a globalized world. Indeed, while the condition of disposability manifests itself under different forms in various material and institutional contexts, these contemporary forms are networked historically and symbolically. Nimi Wariboko argues that “low levels of economic development in Africa” lead to “black persons’ greater vulnerability to death and shame,” effectively marking them as “surplus population of unworthy lives” (2014: 225). Treating the “legacies of the colonial economy as separate from those of the slave economy,” Matlon (2016: 1033) argues, would then “present a false dichotomy,” insofar as it

would obscure the origin of what is Black people's response to a hegemonic system that they did not choose. Echoing Ice Cube's words at the scale of the African continent, Wariboko explains that the "racially weighted world is felt acutely as the burden of poor economies," with racism feeding "on levels of gross national product (GNP)" (2014: 225).

"Blackness" as a "master trope" (Apter 1996: 454) through which people understand their condition, and construct the strategies to improve it, is part of the history of postcolonial Nigeria. Following the 1960s oil boom, the Nigerian State mobilized it as a universalizing identity to place the country at the center of "Black Civilization," unifying "different communities, cultures, and nations into a common heritage and program for future development" under capitalist modernity. The cultural trajectory charted by the oil-rich Nigerian government differed from the stance taken by some of its postcolonial counterparts, such as Léopold Sédar Senghor's Senegal, with its socialist humanism derived from the *Négritude* movement. While both approaches promoted the radical inclusion of black people within pan-Africanism based on a universalizing black nationalist ideology, the former aimed primarily, according to Andrew Apter, at emerging as a significant player in global capitalism. Under the auspices of the oil-rich Nigerian government, then, Black cultural production started to be considered a resource to be exploited for participation in a cosmopolitan marketplace. This conversion of cultural difference into depoliticized pan-Africanism found its ultimate manifestation in the "spectacle of culture" put together in Lagos in 1977: the Second World Black and African Festival of Arts and Culture (Festac '77), described by Apter as the staging of "global Africa" (1996: 441). In order to link the continent's past to its aspired future, Apter argues, identity and tradition were rationalized by the Nigerian government to fit global commercial flows, with cultural production being reproduced and marketed to a broad international audience. Much like in today's international award ceremonies, "Africanness" under Nigeria's postcolonial development State was abstracted from ethnic identity, with this

process widely understood as constitutive of modernity itself. Since the privatization of broadcasting media and the shrinking of cultural policy, the production of a fluid and fungible Blackness has continued beyond—if not against—the State. “Like the movement of capital within the international political economy,” Afro-modern movements treat “national-state boundaries and territorial sovereignty as secondary considerations of their imagined community” (Hanchard 1999: 267).

The economic crisis and ensuing structural adjustment programs that afflicted African countries at the end of the twentieth century indeed opened the way for an avalanche of corporate-packaged African American culture (see chapter 1), which became a vehicle to reject racialized colonial narratives all the way from West Africa (Matlon 2016) to East Africa (Weiss 2009) and even among postcolonial minorities in Europe (Darling-Wolf 2008), to the point that anthropologist Paulla Ebron argued that “Black social and political aspirations . . . can no longer be separated from corporate globalization itself” (Ebron 2008: 328). In Côte d’Ivoire, yet a francophone country, Jordanna Matlon identified African American celebrities as “the source location for tropes of blackness” (Matlon 2016: 1033) that lower-class young men mobilize to navigate daily life (see also Weiss 2009 for Swahili-speaking youths in Tanzania). This sense of “generational alliance across national boundaries” (Ebron 2008: 328) was felt particularly acutely in Nigeria (Akpan 2006; Adedjeji 2010; Shonekan 2013; Gbogi 2019), especially among those who set out at the beginning of the new millennium to build what is now known as the Nigerian music industry. As described in chapter 3, the transnational identification that Nigerian music professionals promote does not translate an aspiration to become “citizens of the world.” In fact, a form of pragmatic patriotism, its nonterritorial character stems from “the recognition that people of African descent in various parts of the world [a]re stateless subjects” (Hanchard 1999: 249), even in the world’s largest Black nation.

While the contemporary prominence of Afrobeats is eclipsing the “hip hop generation” (Kitwana 2002) that started it (see chapter 1), ideological, stylistic, and material connections remain key to make sense of the Nigerian music industry’s dynamics. When, for example, the Aristokrat Brunch, organized by Lagos-based entertainment company Aristokrat Group, responsible for *The Sound of New Afrika* compilation, brought together leading Nigerian music professionals in Lagos in 2021, it was conspicuously inspired by Roc Nation Brunch 2020 in Beverly Hills. Dubbed “the black billionaires’ brunch,” the American record company’s event consecrated “hip hop moguls” (Smith 2003; Neal 2004) and the power of “black style to represent the future of capitalism” (Ebron 2008: 330). While regarded with some suspicion in the U.S. (where popular views linked it to dark occult practices and exploitation),⁵ the toast to “Black excellence” by Sean (P. Diddy), with Jay-Z on his side, was widely celebrated and relayed in Nigerian music circles—where the two quintessential hip hop capitalists are consistently referred to as leading inspirations for their capacity “to build empires.”⁶ It is noteworthy that when Burna Boy gained global recognition, he had P. Diddy executive produce his next album (which went on to win a Grammy Award, an achievement that the Nigerian star expressly valued as important). Yet over the past fifteen years, the Nigerian sound has evolved away from “Afro” hip hop (Omoniyi 2009; Adedeji 2010; Shonekan 2013; Olusegun-Joseph 2014; Adedeji 2017; Gbogi 2019; Ngobili 2022) towards the idiosyncratic “Afrobeats,” as it is now known for international marketing purposes (see chapter 1). Increasingly, the “Afrobeat” genre of 1970s anti-imperialist singer and activist Fela Kuti are brandished as its main

⁵ As revealed by digital ethnography of social media pages and discussion forums where African American debated around this event.

⁶ Source: Music Business Academy at Tenstrings Music Institute on 9 October 2019 in Lagos, where students were asked for their main inspiration; interviews with music professionals and aspiring artists in Lagos.

reference, in an attempt to retrospectively cleanse its genealogy in a case of “fantasy echo” (Scott 2001), freeing it from external influences.⁷

No Nigerian popular artist has claimed Fela’s legacy more than Burna Boy, whose international breakthrough with the album *African Giant* owes much to samples from the iconic artist. Burna Boy’s first global hit, “Ye,” is saturated with references to Fela Kuti, even as it spells out an individualistic and materialistic dreamscape, with the chorus asking: “G-Wagon or the Bentley?” The song has become an African anthem for powerfully expressing the aspirations and hustling culture that most youths relate to, while evoking what Christopher Smith (2003: 82) called the “rites of passage” of the hip hop mogul, namely “jealousy, envy, and hatred from the crowd.” Smith explains that “the mogul may lament the plight of the black masses,” but his vision of liberation does not involve a communal blackness and he would not “sacrifice his own quest for the American good life on their behalf.” Similarly, “Ye” opens with an allegorical reference to the condition of black youths, whose looks (here, dreadlocks) render suspicious and do not fit the dominant image of success and respectability, before celebrating Burna Boy’s own material achievements. The song alternates between general considerations—such as average Nigerians’ pursuit of comfort over political engagement, in a nod to Fela Kuti—and the glorification of competition and opulence. Nigerian popular music’s juxtaposition of the iconic figure of activism with capitalist utopia has caused much perplexity among Western and older African commentators⁸—culminating in a middle-aged white British journalist describing Burna Boy and Zlatan Ibile’s dance hit “Killin dem,” with ego trip lyrics such as: “We making money rush rush like indomie [fast like instant noodles],” as “a polemic about

⁷ Fela Kuti and his music were themselves of “creolization” (Hannerz 1987), but function as symbols of a national identity.

⁸ <https://www.france24.com/en/20171013-nigerian-pop-music-shadow-fela-kuti>
<https://theconversation.com/e-macron-au-new-afrika-shrine-le-president-des-riches-chez-le-black-president-1-108479>
<https://theconversation.com/2022-grammys-what-fela-kuti-has-to-do-with-west-africas-growing-pop-fame-179899>
<https://theconversation.com/why-has-protest-music-dried-up-in-nigeria-147929>

Nigerian politics”⁹—much to the amusement of the Nigerian public. With superstar pop singer Wizkid popularly dubbed “Fela back,” the contradictions obvious to the external observer indeed have little empirical relevance. A Nigerian music professional who has ardently pushed the Nigerian sound to international audiences from London, for over a decade, offers insight into this contemporary articulation: “I’ve always said ‘WE’ in the Afrobeats community MUST learn from hip-hop & what the greats have done to empower themselves, ownership, build brands, equity and an industry.”¹⁰ The capitalist motive and Nigerian music’s visionary history are thus not competing ideological orientations, rather, black capitalist structures operate through Nigerian cultural norms and heritage.

An example of how this logic works in practice is the project by Aristokrat Group to monetize Fela’s Kuti’s back catalogue. While the founder of Aristokrat Group was responsible for discovering Burna Boy, who was developed by his record label for the first five years of the artist’s career, the entertainment company and the artist have had radically different trajectories. Like most Nigerians who invested in music, he never made his money back (see chapter 1), yet he continued to tirelessly work to build sustainable structures for the Nigerian music industry, even if he had to derive profit from other sectors of the economy. In order to generate revenue for the Nigerian music industry and relocate the profits of the commercial exploitation of national icon Fela Kuti to the continent, the entertainment company sought to buy out licensing rights for the world from Sony Music (the rights for the African continent had already been bought out by a Nigerian businessman). The record labels’ ideas included licensing Fela Kuti’s image rights to Puma or Adidas, creating a biopic to sell to Netflix/Canal+/Universal Pictures, producing remixes with major Nigerian DJs and artistes, so as to own rights in the masters and thus be able to distribute and exploit them globally. Finally, the label considered auctioning

⁹ <https://www.billboard.com/music/rb-hip-hop/burna-boy-african-giant-interview-8520544/>

¹⁰ https://www.instagram.com/p/Ci_Jz-dNlvX/?hl=en

rare items linked to 1970s musician and activist at Afro-centric events, such as the One Africa Festival in Dubai. The label's goal was to enter the virtuous cycle of monetization following the Bob Marley model: consolidate Fela's status as an icon and educate the new generation, so as to create renewed demand that will allow for revenue generation from new masters, eventually allowing for publishing and synchronization opportunities (using Fela's music in films and advertising), which in turn would reinforce the "brand." See chapter 2).

The process of economization thus brings a feasible pathway to Black and African visibility, with the prospect for Nigerian music professionals to find dignity, pleasure and income in the process. As capitalist identities have become ends in themselves, they are enacted as claims towards variegated ends. Jordanna Matlon (2016) described how, in Abidjan, entrepreneurship and money are no longer viewed as a means to foster social relationships. In the next section, using a gendered perspective I will show how they are celebrated precisely as a means to (at least discursively) gain emancipation from these relationships. Through the dimension of gender and how it both intersects with and undercuts other dynamics of empowerment, we can see how the entrepreneurial/consumerist subjectivity is used to subvert a variety of established structures (kinship obligations, gender relations, political loyalty, colonial mentality...), delineating a general avenue of resistance beyond the claim to belonging as a reaction to the exclusion wrought by neoliberalism, following exploitation in racial capitalism, which Matlon labels as "complicit masculinity."

The case of gender

The smart city girl using men for social advancement has long been a pervasive figure of Nigerian popular culture (Beier 1964; Okome 2012; Barber 2018), "recycle[ed]. . . from one historical period to another, and from one medium to another" (Okome 2012: 181). Either the embodiment of the moral perils of urban life, or indirectly motivated by family values—such

as the Nollywood character of Domitilla in the eponymous 1997 film, who engages in prostitution to pay for her sick father's hospital bills and siblings' school fees (Okome 2012)—representations of female sexuality have been consistently used for the “surplus meaning” that they generate about modernity. Karin Barber points out that the moral field in which this “long-standing habit of thinking of urban wealth and women's sexuality as parts of a single equation” has however evolved. From being the subject of “outright condemnation” in colonial era forms of popular culture, women's instrumentalization of sexuality came to be offered “a more accommodating view” in Nollywood cinema (2018: 151). Yet, in these more recent forms, the trajectory of a young urban woman has continued to carry an imaginary beyond her own—even if, as Barber notes, “the film. . . does not seem to distance itself from her desires” (2018: 150). “Today's women are represented as wayward, troublesome, and avaricious: women who are out for what they can get,” Andrea Cornwall (2002: 963) writes from the hinterland of metropolitan Lagos in the early 2000s, further adding that: “Amidst the discussions on women's misbehavior that are so prominently a part of social life . . . there is rarely a dissenting voice” (2002: 964). Against these assignations, the current section discusses how female entertainment professionals reclaim the meaning of their own actions through the empowering trope available to them, that is, a capitalist identity. By adopting an entrepreneurial self-presentation, women can assert individualized pursuits and aspirations that they are otherwise denied.

The public discourse that morally justifies the pursuit of wealth by its relational function—the version of greed stripped of its threat to social cohesion—is indeed increasingly juxtaposed, if not challenged, by the affirmation of a fundamental right to the “finer things in life” (Hyde 2012) rooted in human dignity. An illustration is the song “Money Bag” by emerging Nigerian artist Ria Sean. The artist does not feel compelled to offer other justifications for her pursuit of wealth expressed throughout the song—with a chorus that goes: “Tell me where the money dey [is], I dey [am], Hey, gimme the update, Anywhere the money dey [is], I

dey [am]”—than: “I paid my dues, man I deserve to cruise.” Similarly, the song “Koroba” by leading Afrobeats singer Tiwa Savage opens with “I no come this life to suffer,” as the justification for what follows: “If I follow politician, You go hear am for paper, Them go call am prostitution,” thus explicitly tackling the contradiction of a system ordered around access to consumption while simultaneously denying legitimacy to women’s “hustle.” Indeed, “representational economies rich with unashamed enthusiasm for display, belongings, acquisition, and ownership” (Jones 2010: 627) yet invoke a specific notion of respectability when it comes to women’s participation in it. Asserting the legitimacy of a desire to participate in the hegemonic cultural economy, Tiwa Savage’s opening verse continues with: “Who no like enjoyment?” The hit song “Billionaire” by female pop artist Teni, while not referring to sexualization, also claims access to a consumption-driven system understood as universal, as she proceeds to invoke its symbols: “I wanna wake up in a Lamborghini, I wan chop [want to enjoy] life on Santorini, Make money touch the ceiling oh ah.”

The symbolic reframing of the female “hustling” ethos among music industry professionals appears clearly in the recent use of this trope by household names. “Queen of Afrobeats” Tiwa Savage indeed went from her 2010 hit “Kele kele love,” which opened with: “Only serious candidates should come and holla, You don’t impress me cause you drive a Hummer,” to: “If you want to touch my body oh, You gat to spend the money” in “Tiwa’s vibe” a decade later. A divorced single mother in her 40s, sporting tattoos and diamond chains, she is yet barely perceived as transgressive, and rather described within the industry as a female role model for African youths. Her growing confidence in asserting financial success has found resonance across a broad spectrum of young women, who openly express their support online along the lines of: “You see that statement Tiwa made: ‘Girl I am made, girl I have Money!’ That statement here is a powerful statement! It’s motivating!!” or “The way Tiwa said ‘I have money!!’ Father Lord!! I love itttt [heart eye emojis].” This, in turn, has led men to commonly

acknowledge that “Nowadays everyone is materialistic with their chest.” This symbolic shift is even more notable that it does not necessarily reflect a change in the underlying dynamics governing gender relations. From the administrative staff at the offices of record labels to the make-up artists, stylists, and dancers backstage and on music video sets, the most common way to talk about men during my ethnography in female-dominated settings was to deny any romantic involvement with them, foregrounding instead purely instrumental relationships. Though often made in jest, the recurrence of these comments signals an implicitly acknowledged shared disposition. Yet many of these same women were in fact involved in a heterosexual relationship, and most (though not all) expected emotional fulfilment from it, even as gendered power dynamics often made it impossible. Therefore, these discursive practices must be situated as part of the entertainment industry’s aspirational dynamics, in which the figure of the ruthless hustler offers a salvatory horizon through the individualism and agency that it allows for.

By constructing men as no more than a means to a financial end, entertainment female professionals discursively reconfigure the everyday reality of sexual harassment, objectification, and religious and cultural stigma attached to their profession by appropriating the codes of tough and ambitious independence generally associated with entrepreneurial masculinity. The patriarchal context in which they evolve indeed involves recurring obstacles, that often end up cutting women’s careers short. Considered expensive to invest into, female artists are often shunned by record labels, who fear the costs associated with the maintenance of an image as a sexual object. Hair, lashes, and cosmetic procedures are professional requirements in the music industry that small labels (which, at the time of writing, constituted the largest part of the Nigerian music ecosystem) are often unable or willing to meet up with. Even beyond artists, female music professionals consistently experience sexual harassment and discrimination, to the point that many decide themselves to leave the industry. Corollary, those

who make it are widely assumed to have granted sexual favors on their path to success. It is important to note, however, that several professional women in the music industry have made a name for themselves outside of the standard norms of femininity, embracing—out of preference or necessity—a completely masculine style. Yet, their contributions as female professionals are widely ignored, and their public recognition remains far below that of their male counterparts, even as their achievements are sometimes far greater. As women, Nigerian female music professionals thus convey particular anxieties about social change and are held to a higher standard than men in their self-presentation, social behavior, and professional performance. With sexuality already socially treated as an inherent resource that women possess, its strategic deployment by women on their own terms now allows for the assertion of autonomy and restores dignity in the face of often harsh conditions.

Constructing themselves as entrepreneurs of their body allows young Nigerian women to further participate in a transnational subjectivity built around female empowerment, adding a gendered dimension to the notion of “international standards”¹¹ commonly invoked in the Nigerian music industry. Short video clips of “Western,” “Middle Eastern,” “Chinese,” or “Indian” women invoking sexuality through the lens of consumerist aspiration indeed permeates the texture of the gendered social media experience. Shrouded in a more or less joking tone to subvert, deconstruct, and engage (Obadare 2009) with the capitalist patriarchy, the clips refer to female sexuality through the injunction of “not giving it cheap,” invoking notions of “value,” “worth,” and “standards” couched here in explicitly financial terms.¹² On the domestic scene, music radio host and leading African female influencer Toke Makinwa has

¹¹ Notion inherited from colonial times (see Ekeh 1975).

¹² Online, young Nigerian women are indeed treated to a transnational assemblage of humorous poetico-moral statements, which can include: a “white woman” claiming that she is “cashsexual,” i.e., only attracted to men with money or to money itself; a “Muslim woman” presenting her covering clothes as a tangible manifestation of her “value,” since a man willing to pay good Mahr will be able to get access to their bodies; an “Indian” woman enacting a wedding scene in which the bride grudgingly follows the groom to the bedroom while claiming she is doing it only for the wedding gifts, and so on.

used a similar tone to assert that her love language is “cash,” and that only “broke men” would blame women for pursuing money. Makinwa, a 37-year-old divorcée who grew up as an orphan, espouses the slogan “BabyGirl 4 Life” and encourages her audience to similarly chase the good life, including through investment in their bodies, presenting “plastic surgery” as “the best thing [she has] ever done.”¹³ Tellingly, Makinwa’s views were mostly dismissed by men as “feminist.”

As ethnographies of African women’s instrumental use of sex have pointed out before, these practices are not emically framed as an expression of gendered oppression, but rather as an agentive response to it. Women reject victimization narratives to subversively foreground female capitalist and consumerist desires instead. Owning their sexuality—as a commodity that can be monetized—has been presented as a form of self-actualization by African female (aspiring) migrants to Europe (Machikou and Perseil 2008), Nigerian professional women (Mensah 2020), or Zimbabwean students (Masvawure 2010)—an agentive way to gain access to “modern,” successful lifestyles, according to “international standards.” A forceful illustration was provided when American pop star Cardi B came to Lagos in 2019, with all the symbolic and affective charge that accompanied her journey. Every minute of her trip was indeed documented by blogs and music professionals online, to the point that many of us in the music industry, exhausted of following her news, eventually almost felt a relief when she left the continent after her stop in Ghana. The particular excitement that Cardi B’s presence in Lagos generated can only be understood in light of her particular brand of femininity. Fun, independent, she loves money and asserts it on every occasion that she gets. Indeed, a few months before her arrival in Lagos, she was advised to postpone concerts to allow her body to recover from plastic surgery, yet she explained: “I shouldn’t really be performing because moving too much is gonna fuck up my lipo [liposuction]. But bitch, I’m still gonna get my

¹³ <https://dailypost.ng/2020/11/12/why-i-had-plastic-surgery-done-on-my-body-toke-makinwa-opens-up/>

motherfucking money back, let's go.” A few days later, she made the cancellations, still asserting: “I hate canceling shows because I love money. I'm a money addict. . . And I get paid a lot of money, a lot of money for these shows. A lot of money. I'm canceling millions of dollars in shows.”

By asserting economic ambition autonomous from social obligations and affective relations, women reclaim the surplus meaning that has been assigned to them in the patriarchal society and hold a mirror up to what Matlon (2016) calls “complicit masculinity.” Matlon describes complicit masculinity among black men as a form of masculinity defined by participation in capitalism, arguing that gender relations in that configuration are mediated by men’s relationship to capitalism, rather than the other way around (see Connell 1995). While wage-labor provided a “means to an end: masculinity via marriage and family” (Matlon 2016: 1032; for Nigeria specifically, see Cornwall 2002 and Daniel Smith 2017), “capitalist identities are [now] ends in themselves” (Matlon 2016: 1032). I argue that as they are being disconnected from the gendered “producer-provider” model, capitalist identities then also become available to women. With masculinity achieved via participation in capitalism, women can lay claim to the entitlements of men in a patriarchal society on the basis of the entrepreneurial subject position that they occupy. Furthermore, with money no longer viewed in relation to its ability to foster social relationships, I draw attention to how the adoption of a capitalist orientation become a means to (at least discursively) gain emancipation from precisely these relationships. In the same way that men foreground an entrepreneurial self-definition to emancipate themselves from institutions such as kinship obligations, political loyalty, or colonial respectability, women weaponize their “hustle” to consciously and intentionally subvert gender relationship.

The “patriarchal bargain” (Kandiyoti 1988) that traditionally governs Nigerian gender relations is well documented (Cornwall 2002; Izugbara 2005; Smith 2017; Akanle 2018).

Centered around the “husband-as-provider,” it offers an entrenched normative pattern as social reference, even as everyday reality has long been more nuanced (Cornwall 2002). Chimaraoke Izugbara describes how “men and women enter national imaginaries differently: the men as actors, leaders, providers for their families, and natural household heads, and the women as spectators, followers, housekeepers, and submissive bodies” (Izugbara 2005: 25), while Mensah and Nkamigbo (2016) show that this “traditional notion . . . informs an ideal male-female romantic relationship which makes the man the subject and the woman his object of sexual pleasure” (2016: 191). The concept of “provider love” (Hunter 2010), founded upon the mutual constitution of “material provision and emotional attachment” (Cole and Thomas 2009), has been widely documented across the African continent (Cornwall 2002; Helle-Valle 2004; Cole 2010; Hunter 2010; Smith 2017) and Afrodiasporic contexts (Rebhun 1999; Cooper 2004). Yet, the idea of love is deliberately evacuated from the dominant narratives told by Nigerian music industry women. When conferred moral affective value at all, relationships with men are rather evoked through the lens of revenge. Explaining the meaning of “Koroba,” Tiwa Savage for example claimed that she was encouraging women to “get [their] bucket[s],” framing the act of having sex with politicians for money, as a way to, in her own words, “get the power back or the money back.” “Hustling” thus serves as a form of revolt against inequality and injustice that collapses gender, class, and generation.

Caught in multiple double binds, women resolve these contradictions through resorting to a “hustler” self-identification normally only available to men. Sex is indeed central to the traditionally male “hustler” figure, with its quintessential contemporary incarnation being the cybercriminal pursuing Western women online. As part of the active role associated with men in general, agentive use of the body is framed as just another deployment of the entrepreneurial spirit. A male marketing professional operating at the junction of artists and corporate brands was thus proud to tell me how he had slept with a client for money before (only making sure to

specify that the client was female). “That’s how much I love money, you understand? I will do anything it takes for a deal,” he said, to fully establish his “hustling” ethos. Male artists are also sometimes called “ashawo” (prostitute), ridding the term of its derogatory sense to celebrate the lengths that artists will go for money—usually followed by male fan comments such as: “Me sef be ashawo, I too like money!” Even the most successful artists continue to assert this ethos, which functions as the basis for their “authenticity.” Burna Boy, for example, once responded to a fan questioning his sincerity online that: “If there was money in social media for me, I’ll live and die on social media,”¹⁴ which is consistent with his lyrics: “Show me where the money dey [is], I dey [am] where the money dey [is].”¹⁵ Yet the celebration of entrepreneurship by any means is mixed with anxiety around control over female bodies in a way that denies women the paths available to them to reach what is socially valued. The trajectory of music industry women’s relationships with men—from relatives to university professors to industry professionals to boyfriends—is often one in which their sexual agency was negated at every stage through the gendered reality of sexual harassment, rape, and cheating. Furthermore, like in many other places, the “feminization of poverty” is a stark reality in Nigeria (Mensah 2020: 544). Yet women are expected to spend much more money than men to uphold their very objectification—on which much of their presence in entertainment spaces is premised.

In the face of these contradictory injunctions, the collective trauma of gendered violence is expressed mostly through its denial and the assertion instead of a “bad bitch” ethos that weaponizes male-centered agentic discourse. While unanimously condemned by music professionals as a by-product of the corrupt institutions they look down upon, gender-based violence and harassment are nevertheless far from absent from the music industry. “The

¹⁴ <https://twitter.com/burnaboy/status/1244976230958608384>.

¹⁵ “Money Play” by Burna Boy.

inequality and injustice experienced on a daily basis” can thus be conceptualized as “the source of the rupture of a kind of moral pact”—not the just the patriarchal bargain, but the ideal of formal equality and emancipation that young Nigerian women in most cases grew up with. “Men will disgrace you,” “men are the worst,” “Men just dey lie” are recurring pronouncements, which do not just concern individual men, but the condition of masculinity and the entitlement to control the narrative that comes with it. Nigerian female music professionals are vocally uninterested in being educators for men their age, rather “focusing on their hustles” as a defiant response to oppression. During a heated debate with one of the few visible¹⁶ businesswomen in the music industry, who strongly rejected any feminist affiliation, my interlocutor asked me rhetorically: “Look, I was raped at 14, what do you do when that happens?” After expressing surprise to learn that I had never experienced rape (a reaction I would get more than once in the course of the ethnography), she went on: “You promise yourself that it will never happen again. I knew I would be a CEO from that day, I knew I would never allow anyone to disrespect me again.” Dismissing feminism in the same way that many Lagos music professionals dismiss Western anti-racist movements for promoting a “victim mentality,” Nigerian industry women embrace market-based emancipation strategies. Similarly, a 20-year-old female stylist who started in the industry at 16, had already experienced recurring harassment by male artists and music video directors in the course of her work on sets, prompting her to perceive financial autonomy and sexual emancipation as intersecting, and men as a resource on this path. She was hellbent on going abroad in anticipation of the “respect” that she would gain upon return, when she would be able to “charge in dollars.” After trying dating several white men, she placed her hopes in a Nigerian diplomat working with the European Union, to the extent that the visa is the main obstacle to most Nigerians’ plans abroad and she had no time for the long and fastidious marriage route.

¹⁶ While women contribute significantly to the music industry, they are rarely featured as the “face” of it.

Conclusion

In “Raising righteous billionaires,” Ebenezer Obadare (2016) calls attention to the fact that the prosperity gospel in the Nigerian context is widely seen to offer a cogent formula for economic development in Africa; yet, “because of its emphasis on the individual believer’s direct, unmediated relationship with God, Pentecostalism is liable to ignore social structure,” (2016: 2) and thus “offers no realistic path out of the economic crisis in Africa” (2016: 7). The celebrity culture upon which the Nigerian music industry is thriving operates in a similar way by creating a seemingly unmediated relationship between the celebrity and the market, allowing anyone to convert one’s image, hard work, and faith in capitalism into tangible consumer items. It is thus no surprise that, as Paul Ugor recently noted, “cultural critics are beginning to rail against [the Afrobeats] genre of popular music” (Ugor 2021: 136). It is all the more notable that hip hop was criticized for similarly “def[y]ing the progressive political frameworks that prioritize civic, educational, and legal meritocracies” (Smith 2003: 81) over two decades ago, with Christopher Smith describing:

Fancying themselves as moral crusaders against the evils of capitalism’s “false consciousness,” the members of political coalitions from the New Deal and Great Society heydays want the hip-hop generation upstart to reform his or her behavior relative to the contemporary commodity culture (Smith 2001: 81)

As scholars have started to increasingly articulate the study of popular music in relation to economic considerations, both material and ideological (de Beukalaer and Eisenberg 2018; Guilbault 2007; Neal 2004; Shipley 2013; Perullo 2011; Weiss 2009), James Butterworth warns that such turn risks presenting musical performance as “a tool orientated towards broader economic goals” (2014: 213). I argue that the opposite should be the case. Recognizing the discursive centrality and institutionalization of economic aspects in certain musical genres does not imply that music would be simply an accessory to economic pursuits. Rather, the disposition to take our research participants’ expression of the importance of money and entrepreneurship

to them seriously (which Butterworth also recounts in his ethnography of Huayno musicians in Peru) calls attention to the fact that political economic processes are the stuff of musical creation. By this, I mean that the pursuit for money—a common expression of agency in the face of different forms of marginalization—should be examined as an important source of inspiration and a means to relate to an audience that artists actively deploy in their creative practices.

How else to understand, for example, the lyrics of Nigerian stars Davido and Patoranking's song "Confirm"—"As I wake this morning, The first thing wey [that] come my mind na [is] how to make this money, As I wake this morning I tell myself say omo na to make this money" (2019)—given that Davido is the son of one of the richest business magnates in Nigeria. The artist even explained in an interview: "All my brothers and sisters, they are richer than me o. If I don't do music today, I will go work for my popsy's office. . . I'm doing music because I love the craft." Here, the discursive practices foregrounding hyper-individualistic material pursuits thus clearly fall under artistic expression. Similarly, the comments under Afrobeats songs, which almost invariably include: "Whoever is reading this will become a billionaire this year" or some variant of it, use the language of individuated success as the basis for social connection. Such comments often draw the highest number of likes. The reality of these discourses should not be disregarded or minimized in the name of writing against neoliberalism; on the contrary, they require thorough examination as a mode of expression conveying the meaning-making practices of a generation that has only ever lived in a privatized political economy.

“I didn’t see the impact of being in partnership with a major. I don’t think they understand how to market the artists and I don’t think they utilized their network or machinery that should come with being a major. I think they thought Africa would be cheap and it was downhill from there. There were a lot of issues...”

Nigerian record label executive

“So I think [the major] is just good with dropping money, they don’t know... they are not good with planning. Or with, you know, having a project planning. That is all: “let’s just give them the money”. That’s why we are happy they’re giving us Nigeria to be able to handle our Nigeria ourselves. Rather than for them to say they want to handle Nigeria on our behalf. We don’t even want [the] Nigeria [office] to handle anything, because we don’t trust the Nigeria guys. They are fond of just, you know, taking money and not doing work.”

Nigerian music consultant

Conclusion

Anthropologists have extensively documented the deindustrialization and neoliberalization processes of the 1980s onwards across various contexts, both in the Global North and the Global South. In “Dark Anthropology” (2016), Sherry Ortner identifies two vast bodies of such work, with one focused on neoliberalism as a system of economic policies, and the other analyzing it as a specific form of governmentality. The Nigerian music industry that is the object of analysis of this thesis has required me to draw from multiple of these works to reflect the complex cultural exchanges from which its empirical reality emerged. Indeed, this industry exists literally, materially, at the junction of various post-industrial/post-SAP contexts. Transnational in reach and hybridized in nature, it is shaped through the interactions of actors evolving in different environments traditionally examined separately, embedded in larger social and political conditions of flexibility.

This thesis complements the main corpus of studies on the formation of neoliberal subjectivities in developing countries by examining actors whose connections to governmental and developmental institutions are, at best, precarious and contingent. It is especially timely, as many Western institutions have steered away from the neoliberal model, ostentatiously questioning, if not outright rejecting, the claims that it has the capacity to lift masses of people out of poverty. Therefore, it is crucial for analysis to move beyond a conception of neoliberal governance as a technocratic process driven by nation-states (or the development institutions and consultancies increasingly substituting for them [Piot 2010]), which has been the focus or assumption of most studies on neoliberal governmentality in Africa (Comaroff and Comaroff 2009; Dolan and Rajak 2016; Ferguson 2010; Harrison 2003; Honeyman 2016; Owusu 2003; Roitman 2021; Wiegratz 2016). While a wealth of ethnographies account for the complexity of the motivations driving private actors to

willingly embrace and push neoliberal ideology in the Americas (Neff, Wissinger, and Zukin 2005; Ho 2009; Dávila 2012; Freeman 2014), or across Asia (Ong 1999; Mazzarella 2003; Wang 2016; Yanagisako 2019), the role of the “corporate intellectual” in Africa has remained obscured by the primacy given to politics as an explanatory key to the making of African modernity. Largely grounded in the assumption that African processes of accumulation are dominated by strategies of straddling between private and public domains (Bayart 1993), this view has steered scholars’ inquiry of institutional practices towards political structures rather than corporations (Haynes 2018). Yet, in the case of Nigeria at least, the logic of straddling is neither pervasive nor dominant (Forrest 1994). The thesis, then, has built on research in other postcolonial contexts, including by Laavanya Kathiravelu on Indian migrant workers in Dubai (2015) and by William Mazzarella (2003) and Arlene Dávila (2012) on advertising executives in India and the U.S. Latino community, respectively, to offer a Nigerian perspective on the moral agents of visionary capitalist utopianism.

From its inception at the turn of the millennium, the “new” Nigerian music industry was driven by a few transnationally mobile, highly educated young people, who could draw on kinship and patronage networks stretching into the political, economic, and religious spheres. This configuration itself is not necessarily new (or particular to Nigeria). The Nigerian music icon of the 1970s Fela Kuti himself was part of a prominent Yoruba political and religious family, left for London to study medicine (eventually graduating from Trinity College of Music), then lived in Ghana and the United States before founding the emblematic political and recording space Kalakuta Republic in Lagos. The major change since Fela’s time is the moral economy governing oppositional political representations in which much of music is embedded, and which it in turns refracts. While the Pan-Africanism advocated by Fela Kuti (and by many other African elites and African American activists of the time) was grounded in a socialist worldview, the new generation of African popular artists and music

professionals invokes a market-mediated Pan-Africanism, in conversation with the African and Black diasporic efforts globally to use capitalist tools to overcome historical marginalization.

The popular Lagos artists who were Fela Kuti's less cosmopolitan contemporaries often praised the figure of the "entrepreneur" (Alaja-Browne 1989) and admitted in private that they wished they could be one too (Waterman 1990: 217); today, artists from across the genre and social spectrum publicly claim to be entrepreneurs themselves. With neoliberal morality encouraging traits and strategies such as grit, bravado, creativity, promiscuity, and the aggressive juggling of multiple economic pursuits (Freeman 2007: 257; Sukarieh 2016; Matlon 2016), the symbolic signifiers of "hustling" are no longer associated to "low-class ragamuffins" (as most Juju musicians used to be seen [Whiteman 2013: 118]). Redeployed for the middle-class objectives of self-invention, economic development, and postcolonial self-assertion, "hustling" is decoupled from its negative connotation. Music, then, has progressively become an acceptable career choice for young people from the middle and upper classes, while shining a beacon of hope to countless average Nigerians who invest their future in the success trajectory paved by the entertainment industry in the past two decades.

While the privatization process was largely achieved through nepotism and enduring links to political power, the new music industry grew, in the context of Lagos at least, on the back of informal entrepreneurship and, later, mostly foreign-earned Internet fraud money, with limited reliance on old power structures. Far from being a grassroots movement, however, it can be traced back to a few dozen individuals, who had resources (education, family support, international access) and the dream to build something new rather than take their socially assigned position with the professional-managerial structure of oil and finance. Unrepresentative of Nigerian society at large, this idiosyncratic constituency has yet had a significant impact on it. In the absence of political leaders of any sort or socially engaged

artists to look up to, entertainment entrepreneurs are among the rare figures to command respect, due to their work ethics and their ostentatious disconnection from political life. Although such connections do exist (a few scandalous personalities are notably involved with fraud, politics, and entertainment), most music business personalities can afford to be critical of the government because their profits do not derive from it.

Where in other African contexts, the valorization of entrepreneurship and private initiative has been linked to the state and collective ideas of progress being overtaken by neoliberalism (Ntarangwi 2009; Perullo 2011; Pier 2015; Shipley 2013; Stroeker 2005; Weiss 2009), music professionals in the Nigerian case mobilize these concepts precisely in opposition to the state and other institutions, which they consider to remain governed by traditional ideas of progress incompatible with participation in the global economy. In contrast to Rwandan youths who, Catherine Honeyman describes, are required to undergo classroom training in “entrepreneurship” for six years in secondary school, many Nigerian music professionals have dropped out of school (and I would expect an even larger number in the coming generation to do so), precisely because Nigerian education is widely deemed to stifle the entrepreneurial spirit needed in the current world (Haynes 2018). To make up for a state-sponsored education that Nigerian music professionals consider hopeless at fostering a culture of entrepreneurship, many of them have set up private programs, with the leading one uncoincidentally called “MBA course” (which stands for Music Business Africa). Set up by Nigerian artist manager Godwin Tom, the program has sought to partners with private actors ranging from local entrepreneurs and successful indigenous record labels to multinational corporations and Western and Asian start-ups. Aristokrat Group, a Nigerian record label, also set up a training course for aspiring music professionals, and, similarly, spontaneously sought support from the corporate world, in the form of sponsorship and mentorship by leading Chinese music streaming platform in Africa, Boomplay. When it interacted with a

government agency, it was to seek funding from the private sector arm of the French Development Agency, Proparco, which has been described as precisely an example of the subordination of state finance to market logic (Ducastel 2019).

In many ways, the Nigerian music industry serves as an extreme model of what the entrepreneurial/neoliberal society is supposed to look like. With its development in the wake of privatization, in an ecosystem devoid of functioning public services, it fits so neatly with the early 21st century ideological orientations of globally dominant institutional structures that the MIT Sloan School of Management published a case study on it as part of its Regional Entrepreneurship Acceleration Program (Flatter *et al.* 2018), while the Ventures Africa website, founded by the CEO of the Africa Center in New York and son of former Managing Director of the World Bank, stated: “How Nigerian Music Did It: Why Nigeria’s Economy Needs To Follow The ‘Music Model.” The Nigerian music industry is indeed constituted only of “gig workers” (Neff *et al.* 2005), with no semblance of safety net, pension, or health insurance (even famous artists ultimately need to rely on crowdfunding and the philanthropic donations of their younger peers to face medical challenges). Professional associations and other collective bargaining organizations have very little traction, to the extent that everybody aspires—and to an extent needs—to project the image of individual success. Those who wield the most influence are therefore unwilling to (at least publicly) identify with an oppressed group. Furthermore, human and business qualities are entangled to the point of becoming barely separable.

Throughout this thesis I have shown how Nigerian music professionals count on (and need) the resources that multinational corporations can bring to their industry, while framing these commercial practices in a broader world-making project. Highly reflexive of the risk of serving as foot soldiers of global capitalism, they are yet collectively governed by locally pressing objectives and a sense of responsibility defined outside of the entrenched academic

conceptualizations of complicity and resistance. As it stands at a global juncture at the beginning of the 21st century, a strong sense of possibility permeates the Lagos music industry; but the opportunities offered by increasingly multipolar mediascapes come with a feeling of responsibility, in light of Africa's past, to generate accurate, beneficial representations, and, above all, a sustainable and independent business model. This posture is not a clearly delineated path, rather a self-conscious journey of constant negotiation. It involves significant anxiety, in the absence of protection or guidance by government authorities, and has in the past few years since my field work led to disappointments and frustration, as shown by the quotes above from Nigerian music professionals who have entered into partnerships with major music corporations demonstrate.

However, far from discouraging them from finding their place in the networks of global capitalism, these experiences of the international market make Nigerian music professionals all the keener to professionalize and build capitalist structures viable in a competitive and potentially exploitative environment. Now attuned to the necessity of structuring deals in a way that maximizes the resources that foreign players can provide, they avoid reliance on corporate budgets that would be decided thousands of miles away and instead make sure that capital accumulates in Africa. More than ever, the key to a new-found sovereignty is understood to lie in the capacity to attract investment capital and develop legal and financial expertise, thus further pushing political concerns into the market. Furthermore, the Nigerian state continues to be seen as the biggest logistical threat to the music industry. The efficiency and nimbleness built into the industry from its roots in a context of deep-reaching crisis are considered largely incompatible with the gerontocratic and wasteful logic of the state. More recently, the state has emerged as a threat *tout court*. In the years following my field work, music professionals have suffered repeated (and often violent) setbacks, as they were putting their bodies on the line in attempts to mobilize social movements and

electoral participation. These encounters with state-sanctioned violence have further eroded the hope in collective action and the political process. Faced with political dead ends, empowering the individual to navigate through institutional failure remains seen as the only way forward.

Exclusion from full participation in consumer capitalism has led to processes of similar radical investment in its potentialities across widely differing sociohistorical contexts. Indeed, while the “American dream” is facing increasingly polarizing existential challenges in the wake of widening inequality, finite resources, and border securitization (Ortner 2016; Hart 2017); since the end of the Cold War the promotion of entrepreneurialism and consumerism as moral and spiritual activities has thrived increasingly at its periphery (Ong 1999; Comaroff and Comaroff 2000; Mazzarella 2003; Piot 2010; Shipley 2014; Kathiravelu 2015; Pier 2015; Dávila 2016). From Chinese migrant factory workers massively purchasing virtual goods to construct an online life of luxury consumption (X. Wang 2016) to the investment bankers joining Goldman Sachs—nearly half of whom since the late 2000s belonged to racial minorities (while, at the same time, the Occupy Wall Street movement was over 80% white [Norén 2011])—the “innumerable multitude of those who seek to throw off their original condition” that struck Tocqueville (2010: 1116) during his trip to America in 1831 now largely defines those originally denied a subject position in the original capitalist expansion.

In his ethnography of Chinese gay men’s pursuit of money and fame through the performance of sexuality online, Shuaishai Wang (2020) acknowledges the vast literature on the flaws of market-based visibility as an emancipation strategy, yet he explains that the process of economization has brought a feasible pathway to gay existence, since “in China one is often faced with a choice between either making partial gains or a total loss” (561). This observation echoes the situation of many groups even in today’s “official” democracies or “democratic oligarchies,” and of whole populations in states where the notion of

citizenship is deprived of any actual content (Balibar 2008), such as Nigeria (Obadare 2010). In the wake of profound erosion of social structures, hopes for a better future often take the form, in a mimetic circularity, of individuated strategies of wealth acquisition. As music entrepreneurship flourishes in Lagos, it is embedded in a self-branding discourse that postulates the commodified individual as a force that can performatively gain emancipation, and thus operate as a model for society at large. David Marshall notes that the entertainment industry articulates agency at “a super-individual level” (2021). Because of their visible trajectories of individual success, celebrities “exemplify the exact and valued way that agency” operates in contemporary society (Marshall 2021: 168). As such, they are widely enacted by youths in Lagos and across the diaspora as resources on a symbolic, economic, and political level.

The self-awareness built in the contemporary Nigerian music industry is indeed structured around the feeling of being invested with a salvatory mission. The project of broader transformation that it carries is visible on several levels. Firstly, in discursive practices, with the recurring slogan “Africa to the world,” which subsumes the various modes of internal stratification on the continent into a cultural essentialism with a claimed political aim. This mobilization by 21st-century artist-entrepreneurs of their cultural production for the purpose of reconfiguring the global order does not fundamentally differ from the Pan-African affirmation strategy deployed by the military government in the 1970s against the backdrop of the oil boom, notably through the World Festival of Black and African Arts and Culture FESTAC '77, to which Andrew Apter dedicated an entire book (2005). According to Apter, FESTAC '77 aimed to stage “global Africa” (1996: 441), which can be understood as “universal Africa,” whose Africanness has been abstracted from ethnic particularities to signify its modernity; but also as “globalized Africa,” a continent that takes its revenge on

colonization by inserting itself into the exchange relations of international trade from the top, through art and culture, to which it now sets its own terms and conditions.

As an illustration, in recent years the music industry has reinvested the majestic infrastructure of the National Theatre, which had hosted FESTAC'77. Shaped as a military hat, the concrete building of 23,000 square meter built for the festival by the authoritarian Nigerian government, had gone from symbol of state glory to evidence of material and cultural decline. As Nigerian music professionals hustled to use it for music video shoots, I was able to witness the mixture of pride and frustration that its aura elicited from participants (from the music video director to the dancers and technicians). Through their use and enhancement of a place that they consider “a symbol of modernity,” they felt engaged in reigniting a past national ambition—thus directly challenging the inaction of the current democratic government. When, in 2021, Burna Boy became the first Nigerian artist to have the opportunity to perform at the Grammy Awards, his pre-recorded performance¹ opened with a 20-second sequence of panoramic views of the National Theatre.

However, Afrobeats is also steeped in references to anti-imperialist musician and fierce opponent of the military government, Fela Kuti, to whom both artists and professionals claim direct lineage. Burna Boy himself, whose grandfather was Fela Kuti's first manager, frequently uses samples and the image of the pan-African artist-activist, who had yet boycotted FESTAC'77. This mixing of genres was particularly evident during the 2018 visit of French president Emmanuel Macron to Lagos, which brought together entertainment professionals, business people and politicians for an event organized by the French Caribbean media group Trace TV and the pan-African bank Ecobank at the New Afrika Shrine, an iconic nightclub that replaces the Shrine founded by Fela Kuti. It would be tempting to see these historically paradoxical evocations as a cynical way for dominant players in the cultural

¹ Due to Covid-19 restrictions.

industry to re-appropriate a visionary anti-imperialist pan-Africanism, neutralizing its political content for personal gain. In fact, the political subjectivity of current popular music artists and professionals seems to align them more with the Nigerian government's historic oil capitalism that Fela Kuti opposed (music itself has been referred to as "the new oil"), than with the romantic socialism of the Kalakuta Republic he founded.

Associating Fela's name to an event organized by two neoliberal companies hosting the head of state of a former colonial power can indeed be seen as a way to neutralize and reappropriate Fela's legacy, signaling a new form of pan-Africanism which embraces the market and re-writes history. With a fashion show, performances from pop stars, and even the live enactment of a Nollywood scene, the event for President Macron at the Shrine was a nod to history; in particular to Festac '77. Apter described about Festac '77 that the use of "identity" and "culture" for capitalist purposes marked the creation of a self-standing African subject (1996: 460). By gazing at itself through a self-fashioned program of capitalist modernity, the African postcolonial subject at Festac '77 was invited to own and celebrate the imposed hybridity, the transnational and unstable identities, even as they may be the result of external forces. Fela Kuti boycotted the event and hosted performances at the Shrine, in a defiance of the Nigerian government that led to a violent police raid which left his mother dead. To organize an official event "celebrating African Culture" at the Shrine, with Femi Kuti singing songs previously described by popular media as "advocating self-empowerment, national and continental pride, and hard work," and "damn catchy, in front of the French president and the Lagos State Governor—as well as an audience of entertainment professionals and business people—marks a shift that cannot be reduced to individual strategies.

The generational shift was also symbolized by President Macron's youth, which was highly emphasized during the event and in its local media coverage. I was invited to a popular

call-in radio show prior to the event and most of the callers (who were not pre-screened) focused on the possibilities signaled through this biographical detail. Unconventional in its form and politically controversial, the French President's visit elicited much critical commentary in the West and among Western educated African elites, yet very little interest was shown to how it was actually received by Lagosians, especially the youth, who constitute the majority of the city's population. As to the groups of young men who commonly hang out around the Shrine, on the night of the event they were mostly curious. Frustrated to have been pushed aside by official security early in the day, while they were getting ready to come into contact with a host of celebrities and maybe try their luck, they were rather indifferent to the object of the tumult itself: the visit of the French president, and the Lagos State Governor who would be by his side. It was quite a contrast with the frenzy that took place, on the exact same road a few months earlier, when chart-topping rapper Zlatan Ibile decided to stop around the Shrine in the middle of a random afternoon—getting out of his black G-Wagon to take a stroll and interact with fans who ran to him chanting “President! President!” Calling himself “World President,” Ibile indeed gathered scores of youths within minutes, trying to approach him with bedazzled faces. Among the different Lagosians I interacted in the days leading to the event, while some had concerns about the road blockages, most were impressed with the achievement of the Nigerian music industry in “putting the Shrine on the world map.” “Na our own pikin [children] Wizkid and Davido dem dey do this one,” a lady told me in the bus.

In France, the world's sixth economic power, with no collective memory of oppression, a relatively well functioning state, and a system of redistribution embedded in a long history of centralization, Macron's discourse on entrepreneurship and privatization, and everything he himself embodies, is met with considerable resistance. The French people's legitimate suspicion morphed into violent disgust only a few months following his first election victory, as, through the overt unravelling the social fabric that public services

underpin, he started taking away the rights in which our sense of self is rooted. In contrast, his visit to Lagos to launch the French “African Culture Season” mostly resonated with Lagosians precisely for its brazenness. Though vehemently criticized by Western intellectuals and African artists based in France—who are either unknown or controversial (coincidentally for their perceived attempt to “impose foreign values”) within Lagos popular culture industries—their vision centered on the French state did not trickle down to Lagosians. Through its deliberate erasure of scale (a young French president discussing music business with young Nigerian stars), the event was, on the contrary, reinterpreted through an agentive lens—as the successful overcoming of victimizing narratives towards which virtually all of Nigerian celebrity culture is geared.

Thus, if cosmopolitan individualism is, as Halifu Osumare claims in her denunciation of the corporate recolonization of Africa through youth music, “the antithesis of Africa’s traditional communalism” (2013: 202), it is important to understand why it is yet so widely embraced. By treating the African orientation to “communalism” as a stable cultural resource, Osumare ignores the fundamental appeal of change and self-definition for a generation that has come of age in the midst of socioeconomic devastation. The resonance of corporate-sponsored success stories derives precisely from their rejection of exceptionalizing narratives about Africa, which have defined the continent as victim of forces and histories beyond its control. In this thesis, I have shown how neoliberal entrepreneurship, with its negation of scale (Gershon 2011) and performative potential (Adkins 2005; Lury 1993), is widely seen as a feasible way to recover agency against essentializing and rationalizing political, scholarly, and humanitarian representations.

During one of the interminable debates opposing Davido to Burna Boy that I had with West African migrants who came to Europe through Libya in search of “better things” (all working as Uber Eats couriers or street touts in Paris), one of them explained: “Trying to

change the system will just cause you pain, believe me others have tried. We have suffered too much to put ourselves through that stress. Let us just find our money” (translation from French). While their life in search of enjoyment is far from exempt of suffering and stress, Davido’s pervasive demonstrations of extreme wealth that he mainly inherited (and displays to the 40 million people who follow him across online platforms) offers a counter-narrative to their structural condition, breaking historical trajectories through utopian black generational wealth. The basic idea is that money can numb the pain, and the focus on it offers a conceptual treatment of social and individual problems circumstantially adapted to a period in which economic and psychological survival is the priority, with structural problems requiring reconfiguration as daily challenges susceptible of resolution for one to just find the strength to remain alive. The aesthetic experience of Nigerian music offers an expressive and performative praxis in the service of willful ignorance of economic inequality as the needed way forward for now. The deconstruction that often presides to the analysis of African popular cultural strategies, exposing them as “politically ineffective” (Comaroff and Comaroff 2009; Obadare 2016) or “complicit” (Matlon 2016), are therefore largely beside the point, to the extent that they foreground a truth that is already painfully obvious to all those affected.

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