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On Monday May 6 of 2013 I stood at the front of the stage at the Larimer Lounge in Denver Colorado to watch R&B duo THEEsatisfaction as well as the subsequent headliner, experimental hip hop duo Shabazz Palaces. Some of the music playing in between performances was none other than Fela Anikulapo-Kuti. I was in the process of completing the first year of my graduate degree in global history, preparing to submit a research paper on Fela Kuti entitled, Colonialism: The Lyrics of Fela Anikulapo-Kuti, and the Delineation of Cultural Identity, Modernization, and the Colonial Description. As I was watching THEE Satisfaction who are Africana women, and Shabazz Palaces who are Africana men, and contemplating the research I was about to submit, I realized that there was a glaring void in my analysis. The amalgamation of hearing Fela Kuti’s Afro-Beat, among the music of Catherine Harris-White and Stasia Irons, with the ensuing sounds of Ishmael Butler and Tendai Maraire, provided an extensive essence of Pan African aesthetics and Kuti’s Afro-Beat. I realized although Afro-Beat music is the creation of Fela Kuti, hitherto I failed to consider that women as well as men are instrumental to the foundations of Afro-Beat as well as Pan African aesthetics.

Introduction and the Blueprint of Afro-Beat

The initial explosive rhythm and melody of the song “My Lady Frustration” by Nigerian musician and activist Fela Anikulapo-Kuti begins with a throbbing bass line that quickly culminates into a captivating surge of drums, percussion, brass horns, jangling guitar, and Fela’s bellowing voice. Fela’s band is in full-driving force within fourteen seconds of the song’s more than seven-minute length. Listeners unfamiliar with Fela Kuti, may be tempted to believe they are hearing a funk/soul anthem by James Brown, or one of Miles Davis’s jazz-funk fusion ensembles. The cadence and character of Fela’s vocalization suggest a familiar but sometimes unrecognizable dictum that conjures thoughts of language creolization, musical hybridity, and musical unification of varied cultures. The music in question is regarded as “Afro-Beat.” Afro-Beat was coined by Fela Anikulapo-Kuti describing his newfound consciousness associated with his art, to illustrate the struggles of Africana people...
globally, and to discuss world-altering events of the past and present, such as the African slave trade, the African diaspora, government corruption within his own locality, and the European colonization of black and brown bodies universally. More importantly, Afro-Beat music is one of the first incarnations of what is designated as Pan-African aesthetics.

Pan-African aesthetics is an intrinsic element of music, performance, literature, and visual art, played and performed by Africana folk articulating, through artistic expression, essential ideas found in Pan African liberation, revitalization, and social, cultural, and political values and reflections. Pan-African aesthetics are manifested in Reggae, Hip Hop, Ghanaian Highlife, African American Jazz, African American Soul and R&B, and Kuti’s Afro-Beat. Nigerian Author and Professor Tejumola Olaniyan describes Afro-Beat music by stating, “Afro-Beat interpolates you as a member of the oppressed lower classes, insistently reminds you of the harshness of your life, and now and then shows you in a very bad light those who profit from the harsh system, so that you can confront them; its horizon is simultaneously transcultural, transnational, and transcontinental.”

It is the most multicultural of Nigerian popular musics.

Fela’s devised Afro-Beat expression operates as a Pan-African aesthetic and essential soundtrack of Pan-Africanism, and is founded on the political, social, and cultural events of women and men of Africana descent, offering platforms of resistance to globalized-hegemonic repressions and ideological state apparatuses.

Lemi Ghariokwu, the artist for many of Fela’s most compelling album covers, is shown in Philip Alexander Gibney’s 2014 documentary Finding Fela, characterizing Fela as a courageous combatant of oppression ever ready to face the consequences authoritarianism. Fela’s life and work demonstrates the complexities involved in Pan Africanism as well as the aesthetic value of one of its designated art mediums, music. The various definitions of Pan-Africanism delineated particularly but not exclusively by William B. Ackah and P. Olisanwuche Esedebe ought to be addressed as a point of departure to summarize the significant epistemologies that have informed Pan Africanism since 1776. I find it especially vital to reference Paul Gilroy’s The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness Chapter Three entitled “Jewels Brought from Bondage: Black Music and the Politics of Authenticity,” to demonstrate the ways in which African diasporic music and Pan-African aesthetics are performances of what I deem “audio intersectionality,” and prominent countercultures of modernity.

Ghanaian Highlife music, regarded as a precursor to Fela’s creation of the Afro-Beat musical form, requires engagement. Highlife music is a prime example of the cultural transferences resulting from the African diaspora, and a demonstration of European and American musical influences fundamental to Afro-Beat expression and expansion. Addressing Ghanaian Highlife will nuance and contextualize the roots of Pan-African aesthetic and Afro-Beat by gendering arguments, presenting the claim that women were integral to Highlife music and Afro-Beat’s formulation, utilizing Nana Abena Amoah-Ramey’s text Female Highlife Performers in Ghana: Expression, Resistance, and Advocacy. Nana Amoah-Ramey argues, during Highlife’s golden age especially in the 1960s, 1970s, and beyond, “more than thirty records featuring over twenty female artists” were significant in female Highlife artist’s continuous participation in mainstream African music. Although men were much more visible in the historically patriarchal music business, female Highlife artists such as Awurama Badu and Paulina Oduro contributed to Pan African aesthetics similarly to E.T. Mensah’s Tempos Band that would later influence Afro-Beat.

Equally vital to a historical structuring of Pan Africanism and Ghanaian Highlife, genealogical analysis of Fela Kuti’s life is necessary to display Afrobeat’s chronological past, and its cultural and stylistic reciprocation with respect to African American Jazz, and Funk/Soul musics. The theoretical ideology that I designate “audio intersectionality,” will be engaged as
a method of analyzing varied musical styles, and experiential soundscapes of people of Africana descent functioning as an aural and corporeal dialectical praxis to frame their race, gender, and sexuality within artistic performance and platforms of activism. Queer of color critique as a methodological analytic, particularly the philosophies of Roderick A. Ferguson and José Esteban Muñoz, informs audio intersectionality. Fela Kuti’s concerts involving song, dance, traditional African attire, multi-gender performance, political and social orotundity, and distinct deconstruction reconstruction of traditional musical form encapsulates the utilization of creative production, corporeal awareness, and love and anger, allowing one to contemplate fresh theoretical ideas. Michael Veal proclaims, “Blaring from record shops throughout Lagos, its stabbing horn lines, aggressive jazz solos, and irresistible rhythm—all united under Fela’s coarse, hemp-smoked voice—came to be heard as the sound of rebellion itself.” Veal’s description of self-conscious exploration when hearing and feeling Kuti’s compositions summoning one’s ability to interrogate and agitate antagonistic realities, applies to the corporeal engagement of audio intersectionality.

I will engage in Fela’s relationship with African American activist Sandra Izsadore who is credited with introducing him to 1960s and 1970s African American social movements, such as the Black Panther Party of Self Defense, influencing Fela’s self-explorations of black consciousness, and the politicizing of his music, furthering my argument that women are central to Ghanaian Highlife thus Afrobeat. Fela biographer Carlos Moore’s tape-recorded interviews translated into first person accounts chronicles Fela’s intimate feelings of Sandra, “She’s the one who spoke to me about … Africa! For the first time I heard things I’d never heard before about Africa! Sandra was my adviser.” Sandra’s added perspective regarding Africana thought was supplementary to the growing tradition of diasporic ideologies that undoubtedly fueled the aesthetic and radical reevaluation of Fela’s musical philosophies. Equally essential is addressing the importance of Fela’s mother, Funmilayo Anikulapo-Kuti as the ideological heart of his political and anti-establishment inspiration. In the course of Jean Jaques Flori and Stéphane Tchalagadjieff’s documentary Fela Kuti: Music Is The Weapon, a scene depicts Fela at a local YMCA gathering, passionately exclaiming to his community that only Ghanaian Revolutionary Kwame Nkrumah and “his mother” possessed enough power and charisma to lead followers down the street. Funmilayo Anikulapo-Kuti led a life of dedicated activism that few could rival in the role of founder, or vital participant of organizations and civil services that included the Abeokuta Women’s Union, Abeokuta Grammar School, Abeokuta Society of Union and Progress, Federation of Nigerian Women’s Societies, and the Abeokuta Market Women’s Movement.

A content analysis of select lyrical passages will be employed and interwoven throughout the chapter to illustrate the artists’ statements of Pan-African aesthetics that communicate processes of colonization, racism, religion, cultural identity, and cultural tradition, while showing Fela’s evolution of consciousness as a result of Pan-African political and social movements. Similarly Lemi Ghariokwu’s graphic design work gracing the covers of many of Fela’s groundbreaking albums will be analyzed, illustrating deeper comprehensive connotations of Pan-African aesthetics employed in visual arts.

**Race, identity, and formations of aesthetics**

The multiple ideologies regarding Pan-Africanism speaks to the nuanced-complexities of Kuti’s art and life-narratives, or more broadly, to the narratives of all Africana descended folk navigating societies administrated by white-hegemonic heteropatriarchal rhetoric and domination. P. Olisanwuche Esedebe’s record of foundational tenets of Pan Africanism framing

Paul Gilroy’s critique of Zygmunt Bauman’s “counterculture of modernity” is an interpretation of the phrase centered on methods of living that are diverging or altering from prevailing social norms customarily decided upon by hegemonic men of white European descent. Gilroy positions the essentialness of what he calls “Black musical cultures” by declaring, “The vitality and complexity of this musical culture offers a means to get beyond the related oppositions between essentialists and pseudo-pluralists and between totalizing conceptions of tradition, modernity, and post-modernity on the other.” Gilroy is offering Africana musical forms, or Pan-African aesthetics, as nuanced-cultural events working against Eurocentric avowals of modernity, which proposes modernity aligning with European standards of existence regarding values, occupation, community, self-expression, and more importantly race, gender, sexuality, and class.

The commonalities of artists resembling Fela Kuti, Bob Marley, or James Brown’s lyrical output can be further delineated theoretically in Paul Gilroy’s Black Atlantic. Gilroy offers separate definitions for ideas concerning the politics of fulfillment and the politics of transfiguration by degrees Pan African strategic resistances that lies within countercultural frameworks. “The politics of fulfillment practiced by the descendants of slave demands, as Delany did,” contends Gilroy, “that bourgeois civil society live up to the promises of its own rhetoric.” Fela’s shift in consciousness in the United States, initiated by Sandra Izsa-dore’s inspiration, offered a declaration demanding the self-determination and liberation of African people. Gilroy extends his theory on fulfillment declaring, “Though by no means literal, it can be grasped through what is said, shouted, screamed, or sung.” Gilroy’s statement is an ideological trajectory through the history of using Pan-African aesthetics as strategies of resistance executed by African descended folk from their origins in Africa, through the Atlantic Slave Trade, to Jim Crow, to the colonization of African countries, through Civil Rights, and contemporary social justice movements.

Fela and Afrika 70’s 1974 release “Alagbon Close,” according to album cover designer Lemi Ghariokwu, “was the first song that he (Fela) took direct attack of the government.” The song was written after Fela’s imprisonment on suspicion of Indian hemp possession. Lemi Ghariokwu’s album cover designs offer an essential component of Pan-African aesthetics by combining the elements of Fela’s live shows interspersed with visual representations of political spectacles, in addition to imagistic exemplifications of Pan-African ideologies. Lemi’s graphics of “Alagbon Close” was his first illustration exhibiting Alagbon Close, an actual detention center, as a decaying jailhouse in flames, flanked by Fela’s house, the Kala-kuta Republic, sitting sturdily upon a cliff made of stone that appears over the ocean. A triumphant Fela has broken the chain and dances over a capsized police patrol boat. Ghariokwu’s illustration demonstrates both the tenacity required to battle government corruption, and that authoritarians should not underestimate an individual’s desire to be liberated.

Fela’s lyrics in “Alagbon Close” speak specifically about the repressive “police state” of Nigeria under the rule of Military Head of State General Yakubu Dan-Yumma Gowon.
Fela structures police and military investigations as events of legitimated violence. Fela, via Pan-Africanist-aesthetic expression is in many respects pronouncing Pan-African scholar’s hope for solidarity and a glorious African future cannot come into fruition with the cultural schizophrenia executed by law enforcement, but through global Africana solidarity.

Fela Kuti, like West African musicians Francis Bebey, Manu Dibango, and Fela Sowande was formally educated in United Kingdom and France. In 1958 at the age of twenty, Fela was sent to London to study medicine. He instead decided to study music at the Trinity College of Music in London. It was through these diasporic journeys in search of education that Fela and other aspiring African musicians began cultivating further African identities. Fela’s instrument of choice at Trinity became the trumpet, although piano was his first instrument. Fela discusses his early musical experiences during a 1965 radio interview mentioning as a child he led the school choir and his parents required him to play the piano.

Fela’s initial forays into music cultivated his abilities as a multi-instrumentalist performer, and positioned establishments of Pan-African aesthetics, requiring adeptness in leading people, and personal–conceptual artistic and intellectual précises to fruitfulness. Fela’s education in London granted exposure to African-American jazz particularly the influence of trumpeters Miles Davis and Louis Prima, and saxophonists Charlie Parker and John Coltrane. Kuti frequented London hot spots the Flamingo, the Marquee, and Ronnie Scott’s, sitting in on late-night jam sessions, a formality for any serious up and coming jazz player.

Fela began developing the musical “chops” necessary for creating his jazz-Highlife fusion band, Fela Ransome-Kuti and the Koola Lobitos that became the aesthetic flavor of his music upon returning to Nigeria in 1963. In many respects, the cultural transferences intrinsic of African-American jazz and Ghanaian Highlife Fela refined in London, was his first instance of Pan-African aesthetics. Fela was attempting to develop a Pan-African identity via aesthetics, through musical hybridity discovered during his higher education.

Many African musicians were formally educated in western nations. Artists educated in France for instance, were immersed in European cultural order in what can be described as a francophone world. Formal education in a foreign country, particularly westernized countries can instigate crisis of identifying with one’s native country, host country, or both. The education of Africans in western countries is a catalyst for diasporic-artistic aesthetics, thus the influence of African music in Europe, the United States, and contrariwise. Cameroonian Saxophonist and Author Manu Dibango, discusses European education and African identity in his biography Three Kilos of Coffee. Dibango, who was formally educated in France, speaks of how his father viewed Europe as paradise. Manu Dibango voices his idolization of American and French musicians like Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Claude Luter, and chanteuse Juliette Greco. Once in westernized schools, African students often grappled with identification to their African traditions, or the traditions resulting from western education. Fela’s Africana/Pan-Africanist identity development, flourished during his educational and musical advance in London, regurgitating and expanding deep-rooted knowledges passed on by his prominent familial structure, principally Funmilayo Anikulapo-Kuti.

The lyrics of Fela Kuti and Afrika 70’s “Colonial Mentality” touch upon the effects of slavery and colonialism on African culture, suggesting the detrimental mindset of African people causing further issues in post-colonial structures. African people were released from the clutches of colonization, but found difficulties fully disassociating themselves from hundreds of years of domination. The inability to fully detach from the mindset of being dominated by Europeans connects to residual effects of cultural influences and exchanges over the centuries between Great Britain and West Africa, influencing corruption in Nigeria’s

Kuti’s final ensemble Egypt 80 created the song “Perambulator,” describing overall past and present political, social, and economic conditions of Nigeria, voicing strong opinions concerning education. Professor and Author Tejumola Olaniyan professes in his book Arrest the Music!: Fela and His Rebel Art and Politics that a particular section of the song addresses the goal of Africans to reeducate themselves, stripping away the purposeless education imposed by the colonists, and African student’s parents who ascribe to Eurocentric education. Fela’s lyrics in “Perambulator” connect education and identity. However, the contrast to keep in mind is that musicians such as he developed modern forms of hybrid music resulting from European education. Fela ends “Perambulator” singing lyrics that conjure a strong Pan-African stance striking at British colonial authority with intensity, again stressing the pointlessness of European education as a whole. Fela alludes to premises of cultural transferences that exist in colonial environments by stating that it was Africans who civilized the British. The cover art for “Perambulator,” displays Fela in traditional African spirituality and culture. A shirtless Fela plays a percussion instrument seemingly in performance. The album’s heading states “The Black President,” and “Chief Priest.” Fela’s picture is bordered by silhouetted images of African Kings and Queens, animals, and artistic vestiges. The cover demonstrates Kuti’s multidimensional characters as a spiritual shaman, a trickster, a performer, and a political leader. Africana folk who are proponents of Pan-Africanism must wear various hats taking on multiple roles of leadership and instruction within societies. The album’s color scheme is traditional red, black, yellow, and green referencing Pan-African, Rastafarian, and Ethiopian connotations of the blood of African people, the gold and natural resources of the African continent, and green African landscapes. Fela’s sound emanates not only from the actual audio, but also from the aesthetics of the album artwork.

Lemi Ghariokwu’s work on “Coffin For Head of State” recurrently utilizes the collage-style of artistic expression underscoring an aesthetic of transcultural, transcontinental value. Africana folk are often left to use societies’ scraps to create viable creative, political, and familial structures. The cover shows the photo of Fela and various comrades carrying Funmilayo’s symbolic coffin to Dodan Barracks. A scrawled caption reads “FELA’S—MOTHERS COFFIN ARRIVING AT DODAN BARRACKS GATE SEPT 30–79,” under Fela’s name bold in red. It is my opinion that Lemi’s use of red represents the anger and rage of the moment, motivated by bloodshed. Fela’s name in red, hovering over the black and white photographs and newspaper clippings, may signify the fury over injustice.

Gendering Afro-Beat

Britain in the 1950s and 1960s,” argues Highlife must be considered a factor of Ghana’s decolonization and emancipation rather than solely deducing it as a factor of transcultural-artistic expression.24 Ghanaian Highlife, Fela’s Afro-Beat, and African American Jazz and Funk/Soul are most advantageous according to Veal as, “The consolidation of these diasporic-African musical worlds functioned as a sonic analogue to the conscious reconstruction and reintegration of Africa as a cultural symbol into the psyche.”25 The amalgamation of these musical forms is similar to the variance of Africana cultures that endured the middle passage during slavery as well as the diaspora. African slaves created hybrid forms of communication, activism, and spirituality as platforms of resistance to racialized domination that were inherited by future generations as tools to challenge and counter colonization and racialized violence and discrimination. In this instance, artist’s implementation of Pan-African aesthetics becomes a performance of Pan-Africanist’s solidarity for people of African descent. Equally Africana musical forms aforementioned operate within audio intersectionality as methods of musically “recycling and rethinking”26 systems of intersectional dominance for the subjugated.

Men are commonly the focus of scholarly works considering the significance of Africana contexts particularly Pan-Africanism, Afro-Beat, or Highlife. In the case of Ghanaian Highlife, it is important to recognize women’s influence in Highlife and Afro-Beat music. Fela’s sound and stage presence would not have possessed the consistent transcendent exhibition without the dancers’ visceral-flawless movement and attention to vocals. Ghanaian women involved with Highlife’s musical output often undertook similar background roles; however, women in Ghanaian society were involved in every facet of Ghanaian societal events.27 Ghanaian women’s social responsibilities were imperative to their country’s ability to operate. Africana descended women used music or Pan-African aesthetics to voice their struggles in conjunction with their political and social perspectives focusing family, Pan-African feminist ideology, and social justice on behalf of all African descended folk. Ghanaian women were involved in every aspect of Highlife’s production including songwriting and group promotion during and after Ghana’s independence in 1959, and into Highlife’s 1960s to early 1970s peak popularity.28 Fela began playing a version of Highlife and African American Jazz while attending Trinity College of Music from 1958–1963 with his band Highlife Rakers, eventually renamed Koola Lobitos. Female Highlife performers were establishing their own aesthetic contributions to the male-centered groups they supported, providing instrumentation, composition, and vocalizations that directly and indirectly influenced Afro-Beat. Awurama Badu is one of several female Highlife artists who began backing male bands, and eventually created hit songs “Komkom” and “Emelia.” Amoah-Ramey states, “Women used music to revolutionize the way Ghanaians think about their musical compositions.”29 Ghanaian female Highlife performers were influential to the artistic palates of West African music that are submerged in creating Pan-African aesthetics.

Funmilayo Anikulapo-Kuti, formerly Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti was born in Abeokuta in 1900. She married Reverend Israel Oludotun Ransome-Kuti on January 20, 1925. Both were educators at the Abeokuta Grammar School. Funmilayo founded kindergarten classes in Ijebu-Ode, and again upon moving back to Abeokuta. The Ransome-Kuti family’s involvement with education set the tone for the success of their five children, three of which achieving prominent careers in medicine. Funmilayo used foundations as an educator to initiate a career from the 1940s on, as a champion for African women’s rights, anti-colonialism, gender relations, and challenging theories fueling racism.30 Funmilayo’s activism garnered her role as founder of the Abeokuta Women’s Union, in addition to several other social justice organizations, engendering Nigerian women of all walks of life with
Funmilayo’s (AWU) tenure culminated into a series of revolutionary protest songs later impelling Fela’s propensity for confronting corrupt Nigerian government and military with fierce lyrical output. Stephanie Shonekan’s research regarding the Abeokuta Women’s Union protest songs demonstrates the familiarity between Funmilayo’s and Fela’s lyrical strategies and ideologies. Fela and Afrika 70’s song “Coffin For Head of State” was written after his mother’s death following a vicious government-led raid on his Kalakuta Republic compound. The militia threw Funmilayo from a second story window resulting in injuries she was unable to recover from. Fela constructed and executed a plan to deliver his mother’s “symbolic” coffin to General Obasanjo at Dodan Barracks Gate on September 30, 1979. Fela’s “Coffin For Head of State” narrates the symbolic exhibition of Funmilayo’s coffin. Fela announced to his followers, “We are going to place it on the steps of the capital, show the world what a real leader looks like.” Fela’s lyrical content in “Coffin” appears to call out the heads of states’ hypocritical religious affiliations. The Abeokuta Women’s Union often used the subject of religion in their songs. The (AWU), particularly in Song no. 3 and Song no. 135, take a more deferential angle on religion, according to Stephanie Shonekan, Fela and his mother’s organization, however, realize the impact of utilizing religion as a platform of activism. Funmilayo’s devotion to Pan-African feminism and the use of song cultivating Pan-African aesthetic uplifted her people and created a stage for Fela’s future.

Fela was born in Abeokuta, Nigeria, October 15, 1938 in a family that championed education and activism. Fela’s mother confronted colonialism directly as one of Nigeria’s first feminist activists, and a well known-purveyor of anti-colonization. Funmilayo Kuti was likewise involved with women of the Nigerian markets who fought unfair taxation by colonialist administrators capitalizing on Abeokuta women’s trade markets. Professor Stephanie Shonekan’s examination entitled, “Fela’s Foundation: Examining the Revolutionary Songs of Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti and the Abeokuta Market Women’s Movement in 1940s Western Nigeria,” argues that Funmilayo and the market women’s songs of protest was one of the foundations for Fela’s future activism within song. It is important to demonstrate Fela’s exposure to human rights movements at an early age, although during Fela’s earlier music production with Koola Lobitos and Nigeria 70, he admits to very little political participation. Fela declared, “I wasn’t politically minded at all … I was just another musician, playing with Koola Lobitos and singing love songs, songs about rain, about people… What did I know?” Fela, through the leadership and influence of Funmilayo Anikulapo-Kuti, was being groomed as a purveyor of Pan-Africanism and activism.

Fela’s Pan-Africanist identity was profoundly realized and grounded by his serendipitous encounters and subsequent relationship with young African-American activist Sandra Izsadore. Fela returned to Nigeria from England in 1963. His band at the time Koola Lobitos performed what Fela called Highlife-jazz. “I eventually dropped the name’ Cause my mother had told me: Start playing music your people understand, not jazz,’” “So those were years of experimentation, man ….”. Funmilayo and Fela demonstrate essential characteristics of Pan-Africanism and Pan-African aesthetics that preferences open-mindedness and ground-breaking philosophical action.
The musical climate, particularly in Nigeria and Ghana was shifting during the Biafran War, culminating in Fela’s exodus to America ultimately meeting Sandra Izsadore. I will pose the argument that Sandra Izsadore was foundational to the construction of Afro-Beat’s Pan African political responsiveness, and African American Funk/Soul-aesthetic infusion. African-American Funk/Soul music made its way to Africa in the mid 1960s. Fela witnessed Sierra Leonean musician Gerald Pino perform his version of James Brown’s funk/soul anthems with never before seen equipment and amplification. Pino was mimicking aesthetics of African-American Funk/Soul including intense volume, the latest amplifiers and PA equipment, and repetitive mantras and blaring horn sections. “Everybody was playing soul man, trying to copy Pino; I said to myself: This James Brown music … This is what’s gonna happen in Nigeria soon-o.” James’s 1968 call and response anthem, written by bandleader Alfred Ellis charges “Say It Loud: I’m Black and I’m Proud!” Interestingly similar to Fela Kuti, James Brown exhibited little Africana nationalism prior to 1968. James’s turning point was his band’s collective creation of Say It Loud; saying it, is feeling it, and living it. The importance of the song is publicly expressed bitterness towards white-European hegemony, particularly in the United States. In an interview, Fela tells biographer Carlos Moore the aforementioned statement admitting to his lack of political awareness, and proclivity constructing inconsequential, mundane songs. Fela expressed “What did I know? That’s when I split to America.”

This analysis opened describing the beauty of Fela Kuti’s composition “My Lady Frustration” recorded on The ’69 Los Angeles Sessions delineating his complicated relationship with Sandra Izsadore and her family. Sandra Izsadore was born Sandra Smith in Los Angeles California. Sandra conjured a passion for social justice and Africana knowledge. She became involved with the Black Panther Self-Defense Party and the Nation of Islam, also spending time in jail for assaulting a police officer during the 1967 Los Angeles riots. Sandra and Fela met at a Koola Lobitos performance in Los Angeles and quickly betrothed each other. Sandra introduced Fela to The Autobiography of Malcolm X, whose life and philosophies had a profound effect on him. “The philosophies of black nationalism and Pan-Africanism held particular relevance for the younger generation of jazz musicians,” declares Veal, “and through Sandra Smith Fela also became familiar with more recent developments in jazz.” In the mid to late 1960s, musicians such as Miles Davis, Sun Ra, John Coltrane, and Thelonious Monk established new directions in jazz based on free-improvisational composition, concepts Fela implemented. Through Sandra’s introduction to Africana nationalism and the Pan African aesthetic of free-jazz composition, Fela’s band was renamed “Nigeria 70,” and his lyrical content became a space to analyze the plights and conditions of Africana folks’ lives. Sandra’s interview with Carlos Moore states, “There were so many things I shared with Fela: novels, poetry, politics, history, music … Poems by Nikki Giovanni, The Last Poets (‘Niggers Are Afraid of Revolution’), Angela Davis, Martin Luther King, Stokely Carmichael, Jesse Jackson, Nina Simone’s ‘Four Women’, Miles Davis …” Sandra’s initial instruction for Fela was explaining the importance of using music for education, epistemology, and activism. Fela’s Ambrose Campbell-inspired song “My Lady Frustration,” would be his first composition of Pan-African motivation and aesthetic. During Moore’s interviews Fela admitted, “I said to Sandra: Do you know what? I haven’t been playing AFRICAN music. So now I want to write African … for the first time.” Fela and the Nigeria 70 returned to Nigeria with Sandra in 1970 where over the next decade his band would shift from Nigeria 70, to Afrika 70, to Egypt 80 creating dozens of compositions operating within the frameworks of Pan-Africanism, Pan-African aesthetics, and audio intersectionality.
Audio intersectionality and the complexities of Africanisms

Fela’s life experiences and artistic productions mimic the complexities of Pan Africanism and Pan African aesthetics while informing the parameters of audio intersectionality. The application of audio intersectionality and its associated subfields, “audio racialization,” “audio confrontation,” “trans-audio,” and “audio assignment (ing),” as theoretical, sound-transmission, and performance-based principles critiquing racialized, gendered, and sexualized normativity, is founded on “queer of color analysis” used as an analytic of interrogation into normativity and heteronormativity. Roderick Ferguson addresses queer of color critique as an intervention into state-sanctioned normativity regarding the intersections of race, gender, sexuality, and class including the presumption that “liberal ideology occludes the intersecting saliency” of these contexts. The intricacies involved in scholarly development of Pan African philosophies illuminates congruencies in developing Pan African aesthetics like Afro-Beat. Fela’s excessively complex lifestyle that included twenty-seven wives can be voiced within the frameworks of his music and addressed within the parameters of audio intersectionality.

Fela’s Afro-Beat aesthetic communicates principally with audio racialization and audio confrontation. Audio racialization comprises two variant applications. First, it functions as the aural experience of being racialized in a white heteropatriarchal society that uses racist language and racist epithets to dehumanize and disempower the disempowered. Dominant societal configurations, or societal factions guided by hegemonic ideology, employ media to disseminate racializing rhetoric as an apparatus of fear and control. Fela Kuti, in contrast, applies audio racialization as a tactical instrument of confrontation and opposition to racializing mechanisms. Fela’s music is constructed to celebrate and empower Africana culture, Africana ethnicities, and disenfranchised races. Audio racialization now functions as a “disidentification” of racialized antagonism; according to José Esteban Muñoz “[s]urvival strategies the minority subject practices in order to negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere that continuously elides or punishes the existence of subjects who do not conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship.” Importantly, Fela’s music also emits love and compassion that are direct interrogations of racialized negativity. Afrika 70 and Egypt 80s live performances become audio confrontations, or performance-based oppositions to racialized dominance. I employ audio confrontations to Fela’s performances illuminating music, dance, and lyrical output as performances of activism directly challenging ideological and repressive state apparatuses that control social stratifications of race, gender, sexuality, and class.

Trans-audio and audio assigning (ment) are employed to address Fela’s music regarding sexuality and gender respectively. Trans-audio symbolizes the complex idea of sound utilized as a method of disidentification in queer of color analysis, or the “queering” of musical interpretation that traverses across or beyond considered normativity of musical composition that is intrinsic of many Africana aesthetics particularly African American Jazz, Ghanaian Highlife, Hip Hop, and Afro-Beat. According to José Esteban Muñoz, “[h]ybridity is meant to have an indexical use in that it captures, collects, and brings into play various theories of fragmentation in relation to minority identity practices.” Aforementioned Africana musical styles are hybrids, leftover particles of the diaspora, reconstructed into artistic forms that communicate innovative politics of identity, sexuality, and gender. Fela’s stage performances often combine “performances of excess,” highly sexualized transmissions of hybrid sound, movement, and corporeal engagement. Audio assignment conceptualizes the submission of sound and music to contexts of gendering. Fela’s dancers are using their gender, and corporeal movement and consciousness as a way to be centered in a male-dominated band. In this instance audio does
not merely refer to analog signals, but to the spiritual sounds of one’s physical self that can activate bodily movement performed as dance illustrating a narrative, or shielding an individual from destructive-heteropatriarchal dynamisms. Fela’s band engaging in Afro-Beat music with female dancers creates an alternative community that is positioned as transmitters of intersectional contexts shaping and emitting identities simultaneously.

Fela’s sexuality can be perceived as provocative, multifaceted, and challenging, mirroring qualities of his performances or Lemi Ghariokwu’s accompanying album designs. Audio confrontation frames Fela’s sexuality as performances of excess and hypermasculinity, as a strategy of empowerment while simultaneously experiencing disempowerment. Fela expressed, “African system says, women have their duties, men have their duties … Women must know their place in society, as soon as you’re at your family’s house, whether you are the president of the country or not, the husband can kick your ass.” This attitude towards women emulates the historic violence directed at men and women of Africana descent by white-hegemonic power structures. Fela was a powerful musician, orator, and performer whose greatest mentors were women. However, Fela was not a man in power; he exhibited great effort to embody power. Fela’s sexuality and promiscuity can be observed as performances of hypermasculine overindulgence, or exaggerated versions of masculinity utilized as audio confrontations and trans-audio mechanisms of survival. Fela’s final years before his death of apparent AIDS-related complications was marked by production of the song “C.S.A.S (Condom Scallywag and Scatter), denouncing safe-sex and pronouncing AIDS as a “whiteman’s” disease, with frequent bouts of incarceration.” Female dancers, and Pan African feminisms instructed by Funmilayo Anikulapo-Kuti and Sandra Izsadore, enlightened Fela Kuti’s music and stage performance. Kuti’s sexuality is framed by audio confrontations of hypermasculine performance employing women as his shielding against his own societal subjugation.

Closing encore

The opening cinematic sequence in Finding Fela begins with the master of ceremonies introducing Fela as an African musician “fighting for justice, suffering, and progress for his people.” Fela takes the stage adorned in a brightly patterned jumpsuit that at once exemplifies the colorfulness of the African continent, but also exudes the style of many African American performers during the nineteen seventies, such as Labelle, Funkadelic, Ohio Players, or Sly and the Family Stone. His band uniformly wears all yellow jumpsuits in a fashion reminiscent of established-militant organizations of the Black Power Movement. Fela steps to the microphone in front of an audience that appears to be predominantly people of white-European descent. Before any music is presented, Fela expresses he wants to be represented as an African, particularly to his audience who has no real knowledge of Africa. Afrika 70 has yet to play one note, nevertheless, Pan-African aesthetics of the global Pan-African movement have been compellingly displayed. Fela and Afrika 70 demonstrate Edward W. Blyden’s coined “African Personality,” as well as Pan Africanist pride in African culture. Fela’s musical compositions dedicated to the construction of intricate-rhythmic compositions centered upon repetition, leitmotif, and call and response, are at its essence founded on traditional African aesthetics. Ethnomusicologist Kofi Agawu asserts, “Fela Anikulapo Kuti’s masterpiece, Zombie, for a similarly unpressured creation of musical time by means of harmonic trajectories that spiral and embody sameness even as they support the nonsameness of melodic narrative and (eventually) Fela’s biting verbal critique.” These and other descriptions of Fela’s work elucidate the narratives of working-class Africana descended
people globally. Whether it is working-class Africans or African Americans, the recurrence of daily tasks for survival are interspersed with moments of change that include love and happiness, or hatred and contention, while often being placed in the position of teaching and informing.

Fela and Afrika 70 perform “Opposite People” at his famed performance space Afrika Shrine in the working-class area of Lagos, exuding unity, and utilizing an African space for African people. Afrika Shrine was a space purely devoted to performing Pan-African aesthetics, and disseminating Pan-African theory. The Afrika Shrine was not only a nightclub, but also a center of learning and knowledge with a wide variety of books, articles, and pamphlets from leading scholars of Africana history and philosophy. Fela’s female dancers, dressed in astonishing African apparel and face paint that is often beyond words or description, evoke a spiritual energy as Afrika 70 reverberates rhythm and melody. The dancers provide visual stimuli, additional repetition, and backing vocals, delivering the vital call and response mechanism to Fela’s key phrases and choruses. The dancers involvement with Fela’s vocalizations creates resonating chants that bring the entire ensemble together. I concur with Kofi Agawu that the ensemble is a reflection of African communal life. Futa’s concerts are performances of African community played-out on global stages. Africana folk, for centuries, have created ensembles and variants of community in order to transmit Pan-Africanism, Civil Rights, and Black Power. Michael E. Veal explains, “On stage, Fela combines the demanding-band leading style and dancing agility of James Brown, the mystical inclinations of Sun Ra, the polemics of Malcolm X, and the harsh, insightful satire of Richard Pryor.” Veal’s characterization of Fela involving multiple intensities from various iconic figures communicates the diasporic transfers of cultures and concepts structuring Pan-Africanism and Pan-African aesthetic. Adding to Veal’s analysis, Afrika 70’s performances demonstrate the mutually inclusive contexts of race, gender, and sexuality informing audio intersectionality.

The design on Fela and Afrika 70’s 1977 release “Opposite People” is a subdued Ghar-Iokwu creation that depicts a cunning ambiguity. The song lyrics explain how corrupt people; particularly political figures will eventually show their true character. They will show themselves as opposites of people adhering to true social justice, soulful character, and conscientious dispersion of joy, love, and respect. The cover illustrates Fela’s joyous face holding a microphone, skirted with images of Fela playing his saxophone transporting love and music to a hypothetical audience. Ghar-Iokwu demonstrates Fela as the opposite, of “Opposite People.”

Notes


10 Ibid., 37.

11 Ibid.

12 This album is a piece of my personal record collection.


15 Ibid.


20 Ibid., 16–17.


23 This album is a piece of my personal record collection.


28 Ibid.

29 Ibid., 30.


31 Ibid., 73.


34 Ibid.


38 Ibid., 74.

39 Ibid., 75.

40 Ibid., 77.


The term “media” is used to illustrate the ways in which medial platforms such as news, literature, music, and social media platforms are direct tools in nation-state racialization, sexualization, gendering, and classing.


Ibid., 31.

Ibid. 31.

Ibid., 10.

Ibid., 10.

Ibid., 4.

This album is a piece of my personal record collection.