

THIRTEEN WAYS OF READING AFRICAN POPULAR CULTURE¹

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From as far back as the second half of the twentieth century, different disciplines of African studies have turned their attention to African popular arts and cultural productions as major sites of meaning-making. This is in recognition of the influential role these forms and practices play in shaping people's thoughts, values and aspirations. Although scholars prioritise specific disciplinary investments, there is broad consensus that popular cultural formations convene valuable platforms for working through questions of everyday life, while mapping futures, desires and aspirations.

In her foreword to *Popular Culture in Africa: The Episteme of the Everyday* (2014) edited by Stephanie Newell and Onookome Okome, to mark the twenty-fifth anniversary of the publication of "Popular Arts in Africa," Karin Barber notes her reluctance to propose fixed boundaries in determining what forms, genres or artistic practices constitute popular art forms: "what I found more congenial was to think of this emergent field precisely as a terrain – open, stretching out in all directions, with no marked boundaries, but with centres of activity, hot spots, sites of generativity" (Barber 2014, p. xvi). This handbook adopts a similar ethos. It resists the temptation to secure the perimeters of the field with fixed prescripts. Instead, it is curious about African popular cultural imaginaries – in reference to interactions between cultural productions, contexts, consumers, producers, platforms, and the material, affective and discursive resources they circulate – as seen from different disciplinary locations. Collectively, the chapters assembled in this handbook index the genres, methods, mediums, questions and encounters that preoccupy producers, consumers and scholars of African popular cultural forms across a range of geohistorical and temporal contexts, without aspiring to representativity.

A useful entry point in making sense of African popular cultural imaginaries is to ask: What do these imaginaries enable? For George Ogola, the popular provides "a window through which to witness change differently, to learn about alternative narrations and histories and to revise some of the problematic generic frames that characterize the reading of the African state" (2017, p. v), and by extension, African societies. If we think of the popular as a way of accessing and understanding culture and society, then this handbook convenes conversations about the worlds, real and imaginative, made possible or undermined by African popular imaginaries; and the forms of material, socio-political, affective and cultural labours performed by popular cultural forms and their stakeholders. The ambiguities and promises unleashed by the production, circulation, consumption, remediation and critique of forms such as newspaper columns,

televised English Premier League football, genre fiction, comic genres, cinema, self-help books and digital genres, criss-cross the chapters collected here, forming a dazzling network of resonances. Among the questions explored across these essays are the freedoms and constraints of popular genres; the forms of self-making, pleasure and harm these imaginaries enable; the negotiations of multiple moral regimes in everyday life; and, inevitably, the fecund terrain of contradictions definitive of many popular forms, which variously enable and undermine world-making.

The thirteen ways of this chapter's title is an intertextual nod to two texts that celebrate multiple perspectives, sensations and experiences: American poet Wallace Stevens's 1923 poem, "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" and Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s *Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Black Man*, which profiles the life stories of eight iconic black men, and takes its title from Stevens's poem. My title nods to these two precursors' shared concern with multiple perspectives; but my particular twist in the discussion below is inspired by a children's game called cha'mawe. This game features thirteen pebbles and a hole or a circle drawn on the ground. At the start of the game, twelve pebbles are placed in the hole or circle, and the player tosses up the thirteenth pebble, then moves the remaining twelve pebbles in, then out of the hole or circle, before catching the pebble when it drops back. The game tests dexterity, multi-sensorial acumen, concentration and basic arithmetic. It is played in levels. At level one, the player takes the pebbles in and out, leaving one out, until the last pebble is moved out and back; then all twelve pebbles are placed back in the hole or circle for level two, leaving two pebbles out, and continuing in this vein until level twelve, when a round is completed, and the player can start again at level one. The game can be played alone, or by many players taking turns, each resuming play at the level at which they "failed". A player fails if the thirteenth pebble which is tossed up falls down, if they take out fewer pebbles than the level they are playing, or if they don't leave the correct number of pebbles outside the circle or hole for the level they are playing. As the game unfolds, players swap news, gossip, jokes and random thoughts.

Cha'mawe showcases the principles of creativity, play, pleasure, learning and sociality, all of which are key coordinates of African popular cultural imaginaries, as I discuss below. Additionally, the random mathematical combinations of pebbles at each turn of the game are a generative metaphor to think with, in contemplating the permutations of features foregrounded or otherwise, in different facets of African popular cultural imaginaries; from different stakeholders' vantage points. For instance, depending on what aspect we align our gaze with, live stand-up comedy shows are about creativity, entrepreneurship, artists' networks, socio-political commentary, leisure, edutainment, social order, sociality, self-making, etc., with each of these features fanning out to yet more layers of priority concerns for different actors, contexts and platforms. Borrowing from cha'mawe's thirteen pebbles, I propose thirteen ways of reading African popular culture as a way of framing the primary coordinates that have been foundational to the field, and of signalling the many combinations possible with these thirteen nodes. Like cha'mawe, African popular culture is vital and fluid; its production and experience blend together planning and serendipity; and different elements will be foregrounded in different contexts of production and circulation. Far from being cast in stone – pun semi-intended – the categories explored in this volume are dynamic, and take different hues in different contexts; in much the same way cha'mawe enables different combinations of the thirteen pebbles at each turn of the game.

I recognise the eccentricity of using cha'mawe as my frame metaphor. It is an intentional eccentricity, in the hope of capturing the spirit of play, experimentation and imagination that is indispensable to African popular cultural imaginaries. Like these imaginaries, cha'mawe is about encounter and exchange. It generates a wide array of affects, including pleasure, irritation, joy, amusement, envy, outrage and conflict over ambiguous play scenarios. It is a pedagogical site

on fairness, strategising, and navigating relationships. It presents opportunities for character formation, relationship-building and conflict resolution; and it sharpens many skills, including arithmetic, logic and dexterity. And while it may preclude money, which is a central resource in popular imaginaries, it partakes in the generation and circulation of social currencies relevant in children's worlds, because they build networks held together – or broken – by intimate knowledge of each other's skills, deficits and personalities.

In what follows, I offer abbreviated snapshots of thirteen strands I find useful for reading African popular cultural imaginaries. The order of these strands is non-hierarchical because they weave into each other and form a porous cluster of elements, rather than fenced-off categories. Further, in keeping with the fluidity and innovativeness of African popular cultural imaginaries, the list of thirteen may well be different from another writer's perspective. This chapter models one possible way of reading these cultural imaginaries.

Bodies || Affects

Many genres in African popular cultural imaginaries are defined by their capacity to generate, sustain or diffuse particular affects. In fact, affects have material effect: for Brian Massumi, “the ability of affect to produce an economic effect more swiftly and surely than economics itself means that affect is itself a real condition, an intrinsic variable of the late-capitalist system, as infrastructural as a factory” (1995, p. 106). Live performance genres, audio-visual forms, social media and the experience economy broadly, are examples of nodes that depend on affect as a currency of exchange circulated through cultural practices and popular genres. These exchanges are anchored in what Tero Karppi et al theorise as affective capitalism, in reference to the intersection between emotions, value production and everyday life (2016, p. 5). For them, affective capitalism describes a distinct mode where “resonances between bodies – both human and non-human alike – enter systems of value and value production” by appealing to our desires and transforming our emotional capacities into different modes of capital (Karppi et al. 2016, p. 9). In thinking through affective capitalism, we recall Eva Illouz's earlier observation that modern capitalism emerged in a twentieth-century context in which “emotional and economic discourses and practices mutually shape each other” (2007, p. 5). Illouz underlines the development of therapeutic discourse embedded in self-help literature and similar cultural products meant to facilitate workers' self-understanding, and by extension, productivity (ibid.). In addition to the proliferation of self-help genres across all media, many genres and practices of everyday life are strongly attuned to the role of affect in subject formation, world-making and public life. Peter Tirop Simatei gives the example of the *Heshimu Ukuta* radio programme on a Kalenjin language radio station in Kenya, which relies on “the activation of nostalgia for the past as a strategy of convening its audiences” (Simatei 2014, p. 270). Still in Kenya, Eddie Ombagi demonstrates how Nairobi's queer communities animate spaces such as the nightclub, the tavern and the cruising spot, creating queer legibility in an otherwise hostile public landscape. In another context, Danai Mupotsa (2019) interprets the Ghanaian web-series *An Africa City* as showcasing the forms of affective ambivalence that continue to frame modern African women's negotiations of modernity and its promises.

Performance genres – music, dance, theatre – are equally defined by their activation of particular affects. Joyce Nyairo and James Ogude have shown the expanse of political mobilisation made possible by the affective power of popular music (2003, 2005). In a similar vein, Barber describes songs sung in protests, rebellions, boycotts and uprisings as unleashing affects that outlive immediate outcomes, living on in popular memory as latent sparks for future resistance projects (Barber 2018, p. 100). Popular song is a signature genre of collective political

mobilisation, owing to its inbuilt capacities to galvanise collective affects, and its memorability, which facilitates circulation of memory across time (Barber 2018, p. 101). Maria Suriano's (2020) work on pan-African networks of solidarity forged between Tanzanians, South Africans and Namibians in 1970s Dar es Salaam's music scene exemplifies this power of music to generate and nurture affective networks.

Despite scepticism about their reach in addressing systemic challenges, affects hold significant potential for subversion. Barber offers the example of South African composer and thespian Gibson Kente, whose plays often pushed a message of patience, endurance and Christian hope, but the music articulated a different, more radical energy: "the thrilling sound of the songs . . . went beyond the ostensible verbal message and stirred collective defiance" (2018, p. 112). This example points to the generative ambiguity of popular forms and the adaptability of the affects they evoke. Elsewhere, Johannes Fabian traces the use of love songs lamenting loss and humiliation as veiled comments about colonial relations in colonial Zaire and, later, postcolonial Zaire (Fabian 1998, p. 107).

Snapshots

Affects figure variously in the chapters gathered here. Maëline Le Lay tracks how resilience, largely associated with trauma studies, transitional justice debates and the NGO complex in post-conflict regions, has seeped into both social discourse and literary imaginaries, becoming a mark of survival and aspiration to national recovery. Interestingly, resilience sits side by side with calls for resistance against unjust national and global power politics. At the same time, hope underwrites artistic celebrations of national identity – a remarkable phenomenon considering the dwindling fortunes of nationalism across the continent. On its part, Nikitta Dede Adjirakor's chapter on crowdfunding for arts in Tanzania reveals how these initiatives make particular claims of community by mobilising discourses of shared passion for art, activism, responsibility and intimacy. Alert to the grip of affective networks on online communities, these fundraisers tap into a mix of live performances, activist rhetoric, neoliberal market logics, social codes of charity and evocations of religious tithing to persuade publics to financially support hip hop and spoken word poetry.

Intermediation || Transmediation

The ongoing development of new media technologies, Henry Jenkins reminds us, enables "the same content to flow through many different channels and assume many different forms at the point of reception" (2006, p. 10). While it is tempting to think about these developments as erasing earlier forms, the reverse is the case:

History teaches us that old media never die – and they don't even necessarily fade away. What dies are simply the tools we use to access media content . . . delivery technologies become obsolete and get replaced; media, on the other hand, evolve . . . old media are not being displaced [instead], their functions and status are shifted by the introduction of new technologies.

(2006, p. 13)

To be sure, while audiences may change and the social status attached to a medium may rise or drop, for as long as the medium responds to certain communicative needs, it remains a communication option in a larger system of varied options (Jenkins 2006, p. 13). This dynamic

interaction between genres, platforms, producers and prosumers recalls Fabian's earlier observations about the integrative trends in Shaba Copperbelt painting styles. Fabian terms popular painting in Shaba "an art of memory" for urban residents (1998, p. 13). His work demonstrates that what is now theorised as intermediality and transmediality is far from a recent development inspired by electronic media. The artists and publics on the Shaba Copperbelt were attuned to the conventions of intermediation and transmediation: "songs citing proverbs, painting evoking songs, religious movements cultivating drumming and dancing, political speeches assuming religious registers, historical accounts citing contemporary songs of traditional fables, and so forth" (1998, p. 16). Decades later, Ato Quayson's work on inscriptions on public transport vehicles in Accra would note similar patterns of intermediality that counted on publics' familiarity with the referents embedded in pithy texts (2010). In the Tanzanian context, Matthias Krings identifies yet another approach to remediation in the case of anglophone Nollywood films mediated for Swahili-speaking Tanzanian audiences, using the photo novel and oral narrative (Krings 2015, p. 154). In these cases, the mediator not only translates, but actually interprets and significantly shifts the audience experience of the film, with recontextualisation, commentary and emphasis, through the photo novel or the video jockey. In the latter case, the video jockey's commentaries and translations – whether narrating live or dubbed over the film – displace images from their primary storytelling function, turning them into supporting illustrations accompanying their oral performance, and effectively flipping the hierarchy between the original and the copy (Krings 2015, p. 161). Along similar lines, Dina Ligaga's work on the Kenyan super-heroic figure Makmende (2012) and James Yékú's exploration of digital fan fiction in response to the classic African novel, *Things Fall Apart* (2017), both point to the affordances of digital platforms for remediating earlier artforms by prosumers.

Snapshots

In his chapter, Joseph Oduro-Frimpong reads the #ObinimStickerChallenge as a rich portrait of satirical prosumer practices by Ghanaian publics, in response to charismatic religious figure Angel Daniel Obinim. Obinim's claims to supernatural powers are framed by the intensely contested religious landscape in Ghana, where religious leaders compete for authority and legitimacy among overlapping Christian publics. In a context in which direct critique of spiritual leaders is socially tabooed, as Oduro-Frimpong demonstrates, satirical parodies facilitate public articulation of suspicion without breaching social taboo. Turning to early twentieth-century West African newsprint cultures, Stephanie Newell's chapter hones in on three regular contributors to the *Gold Coast Leader* newspaper and their bombastic linguistic flourishes, soaked in thick layers of allusion to canonical English literature. Newell demonstrates how offhand dismissals of these writers' extravagant citational practices as derivative mimicry blocks from view what their playful delight in the English language and its canonical literatures can tell us about local print and reading cultures.

Entrepreneurship

Money and how to make it forms both a catalyst and question that informs many African popular cultural imaginaries. Here, Quayson's (2014) work on Salsa in Accra provides an excellent example of the intricacies of cultural entrepreneurship that sustain these imaginaries. By interweaving the histories of dance for leisure in Accra's history and the vectors of cultural mobility between the expatriate community, diasporic Ghanaians and local Ghanaians, Quayson examines the entrepreneurial forces behind a popular cultural phenomenon that brings together

different players in contemporary Accra. The matrix of factors that resulted in the popular radio channel CitiFM collaborating with Coconut Grove, a popular dance spot in Accra, and securing corporate sponsorships for Salsa Night is instructive for thinking about similar forms of cultural entrepreneurship in African cities, particularly relating to dance and comedy nights.

In the video-film industry, Barber describes the evolution of Nollywood as an entrepreneurial response to local audience appetites for local film, and the availability of video cameras and VCRs in the 1980s, initially intended for the production of souvenir recordings of significant life events such as weddings and funerals (Barber 2018, p. 148). This entrepreneurial spirit in the Nigerian entertainment landscape has deep roots. Colonial urban leisure activities such as cinema, sports, dance halls and concerts which attracted urban populations with money and time to spend were initially “sponsored by colonial authorities anxious to regulate urban behaviour, but it was popular enthusiasm, local appropriations and entrepreneurial innovation that made them thrive” (Barber 2018, p. 79).

Similar entrepreneurial impulses have been foundational to the popular music scene in South Africa. When confronted with marginalisation by a mainstream corporate infrastructure, black youths built a “parallel but commercially viable alternative economy [which] lay grounds for cultural networks that facilitated the circulation of their world views” (Mhlambi 2014, p. 221). Interestingly, as Innocentia Mhlambi finds, corporates would subsequently piggy-back on this dynamism by investing in local language radio stations, entertainment products and advertising. In no time, the government would embrace youth countercultures and popular music as a powerful vehicle to popularise its policies and programmes (Mhlambi 2014, p. 228). This would be a paradoxical embrace, where, Mhlambi writes, the government claimed the entrepreneurial success of young musicians “as examples of the transformative potentials of the growth, employment and redistribution (GEAR) policies” adopted in 1996. But enthusiastic celebration of mergers between these youths’ independent production outfits and mainstream record labels as markers of success overlooks one concern: these mergers not only came at the cost of toning down the “radical stance of their music but also affected the entire informal and unofficial cultural networks of production, circulation and reception of their music and culture” (Mhlambi 2014, p. 229).

In the East African different context, T Michael Mboya (2020) explores patron-client patterns that unfold in live band music performances at which an informal gift-exchange format takes shape between audience members and performers as a contemporary form of patronage to fund musicians. The entrepreneurial dimension of African popular imaginaries is further meshed with donor, government and development agencies’ turn to the creative industry as a solution to youth unemployment, civic education and popularisation of policy initiatives.

Snapshots

Katrien Pype takes us into the folds of Kinshasa’s technology entrepreneurs’ community, tracing the flows of creativity, opportunities, ideas and money across the formal and informal economies, which in turn map onto a national and ultimately global ecosystem. Opportunity, aspiration and achievement as analytic lenses make visible the historically gendered and uneven distribution of these elements, while the richly ethnographic immersion into the world of technology entrepreneurs inspires new ways of understanding digital entrepreneurship, by granting us a rare behind-the-scenes look at the forces, desires and imaginations that animate the digital infrastructures which are increasingly indispensable to everyday life. In neighbouring Tanzania, Adjirakor’s chapter draws on the notion of the literary hustle as theorised by Laura Murphy and Mukoma wa Ngugi, to discuss the use of digital crowdfunding platforms, live performances and

personal resources to fund popular culture. What emerges strongly is these initiatives' bold recognition of their work as both art and commodities in the marketplace and the need to socially engineer desire for this commodity.

Public Pedagogies || Techniques of Self || Self-Making

In Rhodesia, government and religious groups chose to screen particular films for African audiences because "they were thought to be morally redemptive and educational [or] to pacify audiences and thereby prevent resistant or revolutionary modes of dissent" (Burns quoted in Saint 2013, p. 209). These edutainment cultures are colonial precursors to contemporary marshalling of performance arts for behavioural change in response to public health crises such as HIV/AIDS, Ebola and more recently COVID-19, as well as civic education campaigns. Here, Christopher Joseph Odhiambo's (2008) work on theatre for development is instructive, shedding light on the intersecting development discourses articulated by governments, civil society organisations and funding bodies.

However, Lily Saint finds that, in Rhodesia, "the cowboy model for imitation and emulation, permitted the exploration of polyvalent and often conflicting identities and relations, allowing those who chose to don the emblematic hats, boots, stogies and bandanas, to experiment with identity" (2013, p. 210). This scope for play and exploration of conflicting identities mirrors Barber's observations about the range of possibilities opened by the West African concert party, which offered audiences an opportunity to navigate modernity with some degree of freedom: they were able to "select from and combine the conflicting and contradictory elements of social experience" across the "western" – "tradition" dichotomy, and "simultaneously to mock and admire the same things, to discard while endorsing them, to try out allegiances in a disloyal way" (Barber 1997, p. 355).

One cluster of popular genres that actively intervene in shaping people's senses of self is advice genres. These socialise audiences into curricula of self-management aligned with social convention by prescribing appropriate norms of conduct. Following Michel Foucault, Nikolas Rose uses the phrase "techniques of self" to describe the "languages, criteria and techniques offered to us, to act upon our bodies, souls, thoughts, and conduct in order to achieve happiness, wisdom, health and fulfilment" (Rose 1989, p. 11). Rose describes how these self-management practices have changed our interactions with ourselves and people in our lives: "our thought worlds have been reconstructed, our ways of thinking about and talking about our personal feelings, our secret hopes, our ambitions and disappointments [and] managing our emotions have been reshaped" (1989, p. 3).

While on the surface of it these genres of self-making tend to reinforce behavioral modes that maintain the status quo, Angela Phillips suggests that the porousness of advice columns makes them "instrumental in challenging norms" in addition to the non-expert position of agony aunts and uncles, which gives them significant scope for "recasting of discursive boundaries – they are the lightning conductors of social unease" (2008, p. 97). By listening to "what has been unsayable" and "reproducing these forbidden discourses, they bring them into the realm of the 'normal' and sayable" (ibid.). Tsitsi Jaji's work on the French West African magazine *Bingo* displays this scope of some popular cultural platforms, to both police and recast discursive boundaries. Jaji reads women's magazines as "offering a new experience of self-recognition in the act of reading [thus providing] an important staging ground for various experiences in modern African gender formation" (2014b, p. 113). Over in 1950s Nigeria, Onitsha pamphlets and Christian literature performed a similar role, where, by distilling and applying lessons drawn from reading these, "new subjectivities or new types of selfhood are constituted through the

activity of reading as readers make use of printed material to redefine themselves in relation to the world” (Newell and Okome 2006, p. 114). Consistent with the polysemic nature of popular cultural imaginaries, Newell notes, there was a strong dissonance between these Christian advice pamphlets’ admonition to women to be submissive wives and the reality of West African women’s independent-mindedness (Newell and Okome 2006, pp. 117–118).

Through creative forms of self-making using textual and visual media, different constituencies craft versions of themselves that project their desired identities, while others create space for themselves in hegemonic scripts on their terms. For instance, with increasing urbanisation of colonial West Africa, women had to “not only maintain hygiene of the body and home, but also in the broader sense of hygiene, to foster and guide their domestic units towards the health of society” (Jaji 2014b, p. 114). This responsibility for the different levels of hygiene in the family and society demanded new literacies, which women developed. Jaji theorises the trans-sensory interpretive practices across textual, visual and other forms of media literacy catalysed and maintained by women’s magazines as “sheen reading”, in a nod to African beauty cultures that place a high aesthetic value on the sheen of glowing skin and glistening hair associated with modern beauty products and black female glamour photography. “Women’s engagements with inter-articulated forms of media – film, radio, records and magazines”, Jaji writes, can be thought of as acts of “reading sheen, interpreting reflective surfaces whose distortions provided generative openings for improvisations of new identities in the face of increasing racialized restrictions on freedom” (Jaji 2014b, p. 114). In contrast to the clearly demarcated lines of sanctioned feminine dispositions on the streets, “in the pages of *Bingo*, readers could flip between various performances of tradition and modernity, and collate their own collages of such possibilities” (Jaji 2014b, p. 112).

In more recent timeframes, the existence of book clubs dedicated to reading and discussing self-improvement books in Dar es Salaam is a fascinating development in book consumption practices in Africa, as Zamda R. Geuza and Kate Wallis (2021) demonstrate. For instance, they describe the Umoja Book Club as a female-curated aspirational space that brands itself as a network of women who set out to “support each other and create space for self-care and professional or intellectual development outside of the constraints of family life” (Geuza and Wallis 2021, p. 8). The pedagogical and self-development impulse behind these book clubs sets them apart from earlier clubs invested in reading for pleasure.

Snapshots

Alessandro Jedlowski examines what happens when Africa gazes back at Europe, through representations of Euro-Americans in African video films from Nigeria and Ethiopia. Jedlowski notes the imprint of the conditions of production on these filmic portrayals of Euro-America, where budget constraints and low-end production technologies impose particular aesthetics and narrative constructions on the filmmakers. Ironically, these resource gaps produce highly abbreviated, surface-level portraits of Euro-America that recall similarly abbreviated portraits of Africa in Hollywood films about Africa. Jedlowski argues that these films set out to convene important reflections on encounters between Africa and Euro-America which, while somewhat ahistorical, are nonetheless interested in African self-reflexivity on encounters, perceptions and assumptions about relationships with Euro-America. Another dimension of public pedagogies and techniques of self is offered by Dina Ligaga’s chapter, which examines Kenyan socialite, musician and businesswoman Esther Akoth aka Akothee’s innovative use of social media platforms to stage a hyperfeminine model of success for her publics, and share her perspectives on gender inequality, freedom and, broadly, self-management. The chapter teases out Akothee’s

postfeminist self-presentation as enabling her to articulate provocative gender politics, even as these insights remain framed within an intensely neoliberal capitalist framework of success and the good life.

Value || Ambiguity|| Transgression

Regarding anthropology, Fabian has commented that “disciplinary constraints reflecting fascination with stable culture (in American cultural anthropology) or with stable social structure (in British social anthropology) were one reason popular culture went more or less unnoticed” (1998, p. 11). These patterns played out slightly differently in African literary studies. Newell describes scholarly hostility towards popular fiction in east and southern Africa partly owing to strong investment in Marxist literary criticism, and a prioritisation of protest literature and theatre-for-development over genres considered individualist mimics of American popular culture (Newell 2012, p. 1011). Added to this were attempts to domesticate the discipline of literary studies in line with decolonisation debates.

Fabian extends this debate to pose questions about the analytic grammars with which we read African popular culture: “thinking, talking, and writing, as we seem to do, with the concepts and terms of established high culture, how can we avoid having our inquiries informed by control interests that characterize relations between elitist and popular culture?” (1998, p. 27). Popular culture demands acknowledgement of “contradiction, contestation and experimentation” as definitive features of popular imaginaries (1998, p. 32). The glossy women’s magazines Jaji studies are an excellent example of this transgressive nature of popular cultural genres, in upending hierarchies of value. Jaji finds that these magazines’ adverts “invited African women to participate in the process of consuming modern selfhood through consumption of goods ranging from Aspro to Kodak film, while editorial content regularly featured both gender-stereotypical pages [and] full length stories about women in new careers” (Jaji 2014b, p. 111). Remarkably, Jaji emphasises, *Bingo* seemed to implicitly acknowledge that both the institution of marriage and the question of gender roles were in a state of flux and open to debate (2014b, p. 112). Over half a century later, a similar polyphony of ideologies would prevail in *True Love* magazine, as Pumla Gqola’s work on Lebo Mashile’s feminist column in a magazine conventionally associated with conservative gender discourse shows (2016). These examples sound a cautionary note against rigid assumptions about genres’ conservatism or radicalism, inviting us to be attentive to contradictions and their promise.

Fabian insists that “genre – much like value, norm, standard – embodies cultural injunctions to know what belongs and what doesn’t, what is proper and what isn’t” (1998, p. 42). Genre has to do with authority and order, which in turn evoke power “through acts of distinction and imposition, and power suffered through denial of recognition and through submission to criteria of distinction” (ibid.). Contestations of genre boundaries lend popular culture its edge of constant innovation, its sense of ongoing process in which “power is constantly established, negated and reestablished [thus] working against the accumulation and concentration of power, which, when institutionalized, cannot be without victims” (Fabian 1998, p. 133).

These debates on genre and value are thrown into sharp relief when we turn to what Ashleigh Harris and Nicklas Hallen categorise as African street literature that “registers its situatedness, and as such its location as co-constitutive of the literary text” (2020, p. 1). In their critique of the unequal infrastructures of literary production and circulation, they note the exclusion of these forms from the circuits of legitimation that underwrite the world literature category: “the infrastructures of world literature are largely closed to texts that successfully register the pressures and shifts in the rapidly changing world around them” (Harris and Hallen 2020, p. 5).

Snapshots

In her chapter, Doseline Kiguru seeks to widen the normative assumptions of value in mainstream literary studies by thinking through the implications of plagiarism scandals for literary awards. Kiguru examines how plagiarism scandals disorient the principles of prestige, consecration and honour that attach to literary awards as part of the literary infrastructure of legitimation. Still on questions of value, Ranka Primorac's chapter demonstrates that literary studies' framing of African popular literature as a negatively defined category in sharp distinction from literatures coded as "elite" or "canonical postcolonial" imposes hierarchies and value judgements that undermine the rewarding possibilities of reading these bodies of literature as interlocking rather than polar opposites on a hierarchical scale. Primorac reveals the falseness of these hierarchies by tracking the intertextual figure of the weeping woman in Zambian and Kenyan literary texts which would be deemed to belong in different sides of the popular–canonical binary; showing how this value-laden binary "occludes textual/social processes and resonances that merit scholarly attention". Newell's chapter too considers a related face of these politics of value. African literary history looks considerably different, Newell writes, when we expand our boundaries of the literary to include the massive archive of creative genres published in newspapers, pamphlets and other forms of what she terms ephemeral literatures. Newell proposes that despite their ephemerality – as small print runs, circulating outside conventional institutional archives and defying genre categories, without taking root as influential artistic trajectories – a second glance at these ephemeral outliers poses productive questions about what has now solidified as the parameters of the literary in African letters and African literary history.

Politics || Power || Agency

The thorny issue of agency and textures of freedom made possible by popular imaginaries has been a tenacious one in scholarly debates. Wendy Willems and Ebenezer Obadare consider agency and resistance to be "practices dialogically produced in the interaction between the state and society situated within a global system of power relations" (Willems and Obadare 2014, p. 7). Important to them is an acknowledgement that often, "agency is fragmented and dispersed into individual acts of 'accommodation' and 'getting by'" (2014, p. 6). For Newell and Okome (2014), the episteme of the everyday in popular culture opens up spaces for marginalised voices to interrogate issues in the ways that are transgressive, unruly, untidy and risk-taking, but also life-affirming and pleasurable.

Related to this polysemic inclination are the communities convened by popular cultural imaginaries. In part because of their receptiveness to responses, popular cultural forms convene communities of dialogue around the issues with which they grapple. Nowhere is this sense of community livelier than on social media and, broadly, online texts. The advent of social media has de-closeted hitherto closeted perspectives, ideas, aspirations and prejudices through the democratisation of access, anonymity and the sense of collective dialogues and exchanges.

In the unruliness of popular cultural productions and modes of consumption, lies the elasticity and openness to experimentation necessary to shift the terms of public discourse; even as they also contain the seeds of conservative values. It is in this spirit that the discussions in this book heed Isabel Hofmeyr's caution that these forms often resist our attempts to impose a dichotomy of oppression and resistance, by opting for slippery, ambivalent, often contradictory, perspectives (Hofmeyr 2004, pp. 130–131). Still, the relatively less-policed terrain of popular culture allows it scope for constant innovation, experimentation, boundary-pushing and contestation of taken-for-granted protocols and social values.

Often, the political dimension of popular genres demands contextualised reading to be legible. For instance, while women's magazines are often presumed to be highly apolitical, Jaji's reading of *Bingo* magazine in 1950s French West Africa maintains that the magazine form "allowed for a critique of Senegal's decolonizing process which seemed to maintain close ties with French capitalism even as it advocated cultural nationalism and transnational black negritude" (Jaji 2014b, p. 114). Further, the anticipated political shifts of post-independent Africa produced anxieties about "how to fashion a self that was both modern and African" in the face of rapid urbanisation and shifts in gender roles (Jaji 2014b, p. 114). Popular music played a similarly political role for leaders of newly independent nations across the continent, including "the consolidation of national identity, arbitrarily carved out in diverse, multilingual territories; the promotion of rapid development – education, cash crop farming, industrialization; and not least, the desire to maintain themselves in power" (Barber 2018, p. 120). Patrick Monte's work on the uses of patriotic music in Moi-era Kenya (2017) makes resonant observations on the political role of popular music in consolidating political power in post-independent Kenya. Despite anxieties about the forms of agency made possible by popular forms in Africa, their engagement with political questions is beyond question; the real debate is to what ends, and by whom, these political capacities are mobilised.

Snapshots

Femi Eromosele's chapter reads selected Nigerian music videos whose artistic genealogies and aesthetics make them politically textured texts, exceeding conventional understandings of the music video as a promotional tool. Eromosele's context-sensitive reading of the music videos teases out the dynamic relationship between popular art, historical contexts, audiences and shifts in technological possibilities, depicting how this combination of factors untethers some music videos from charges of consumer fantasies stereotypically associated with Nollywood film. Still in Nigeria, James Yékú's chapter turns to Debo Adedayo's use of Instagram comedy to convene topical debates on police brutality in Nigeria, as part of digital activism. Yékú theorises what he terms performative citizenship, in reference to the use of digital platforms and performance genres to enact political subjectivities that reject, counter and unmask the pretensions of state institutions such as the police. Through practices of performative citizenship, Yékú demonstrates, cultural producers such as Instagram comics seek to defamiliarise normalised violent institutional practices that have entrenched abuse and injustice as standard practice. Lastly, Corinne Sandwith's chapter turns to the symbolic and political valence of Ethiopia and the Italian invasion in the mid-1930s, in South African print cultures. Sandwith shows how the Ethiopian conflict became a revolutionary trope that was regularly reconfigured to articulate anticolonial debates in black South African newspapers through letters and newspaper cartoon strips. These debates gave shape to radical forms of political consciousness, while re-affirming multiple internationalist affiliations and imaginaries.

Digitalities

In recent decades, the proliferation of cell phones has thrown open a massive digital canvas, catalysing the generation of new genres and remixes of older forms. The result is what Yékú terms an African digital imagination, enlivened by new genres "whose publics, thematic currents and textual impulses are facilitated by digital technologies" (Yékú 2017, p. 271). Considering that African futures will be defined by what Marc Prensky (2001) calls digital natives – in reference

to generations born into a world of digital technologies – African digital worlds and their influence demand our attention.

Digital platforms have expanded the scope for debate, play, creativity and encounters, all of which have implications for practices of freedom, self-making and negotiation of everyday life. Perhaps the most visible aspect is digital activism, with the #MeToo, #BlackLivesMatter and #EndSARS movements staging robust activist interventions both online and offline against sexual violence, anti-blackness and police brutality respectively. Nanjala Nyabola (2018) and Awino Akech (2021) explore feminist digital activism against gendered violence in Kenya and South Africa. Ogola too salutes Twitter's follower-followee networks and hashtags for creating "pockets of 'indiscipline' that insert marginalised voices into otherwise exclusionary debates" (Ogola 2019, p. 124). Despite this, Ogola concedes that social media has limited reach for long-term change: "their tendency to deinstitutionalise politics and fragment communication . . . may undermine the coherence of the public sphere" (Ogola 2019, p. 134 citing Bimber, pp. 323–333). Tavia Nyong'o also urges tempered optimism about the promise of digitality for marginalised communities: "we cannot disconnect the democratic and humanist messages disseminated across networks from the hierarchical and anti-humanist infrastructure of capital-intensive information technology that carries them" (Nyong'o 2012, pp. 42–43). Nyong'o further underlines the "highly increased surveillance capacities these technologies endow repressive state apparatus" (Nyong'o 2012, p. 43), in addition to the commodification of this data for capitalist and political ends.

Jodi Dean's theorisation of communicative capitalism is particularly pertinent in qualifying our optimism about the promise of digitalities. In communicative capitalism,

values heralded as central to democracy [such as] access, inclusion, discussion and participation come to be realized in and through expansions, intensifications and interconnections of global telecommunications; [but] instead of leading to more equitable distributions of wealth and influence, instead of enabling the emergence of a richer variety in modes of living and practices of freedom, the deluge of screens and spectacles undermines political opportunity and efficacy for most of the world's peoples.

(2005, p. 55)

The danger of communicative capitalism lies in the fantasies it grooms: the fantasy of abundance which produces "a massive stream of content, losing their specificity and merging into the data flow" (Dean 2005, p. 58) without necessarily translating to greater understanding and action; and the fantasy of participation, where digital action absolves users of responsibility for active engagement offline.

A different dimension of the limits of digitalities emerges from Bhakti Shringarpure's insistence that "computational technology has its roots in the Cold War's race for nuclear power" (2019, p. 138). In her assessment, the utopian discourses about how digital publishing has radicalised publishing by creating space for independent publishing of previously marginalised narratives are not borne out by the scale of control wielded by digital giants such as Amazon, Google and Wikipedia, which demonstrate how "technology is designed to satisfy and sustain national political agendas" (Shringarpure 2019, p. 138).

Running parallel to these critiques is the view that digital platforms have revolutionised publishing and accessibility of literature for African writers and readers alike (Bgoya and Jay 2013; Diegner 2018; Nesbitt-Ahmed 2017). Perhaps the most fruitful digital platform for African writing has been the blog. Hoda Elsadda describes literary blogs as a *mélange* of forms that defies both genre and social boundaries; in the process allowing intimate exchanges between

authors and their virtual audiences (2010, p. 328). On his part, Keguro Macharia describes how queer Kenyan bloggers' use of mixed signifiers – the encounter frame in romance genres, the attractive man in uniform trope from gay porn, allusion to recognisable global cultural icons – facilitates legibility across local and global readerships alike, while Sheng (Swahili-English slang) lends their writing a distinctive Kenyan flavour that hails local readerships with shared quotidian lexicon (2013, p. 104).

Despite this lively landscape, Yékú insists that a print consciousness endures in African digital imaginaries, and many writers approach the digital as an experimental “testbed for the imagination” (Yékú 2020, pp. 2–9). This persistent print imaginary may be tied to perceptions of the digital realm as unstable and impermanent. In the process, an aesthetic of contingency emerges as online writing embraces revisions, commentary, feedback and critique of the experimental work (Yékú 2020, p. 9); before it transitions to the seeming permanence of print. Building on Yékú's insights on the tyranny of the print imaginary, Shola Adenekan gives the example of writer and digital entrepreneur Joy Isi Bewaji's online project, *Story of my Vagina*, which brought together writers working in different genres, reflecting on different dimensions of women's reproductive and erotic worlds. This project moved across different social media platforms before transitioning into a book, and later still, a play staged at a Lagos theatre (Adenekan 2021, p. 133). Similar patterns of a return to print have been noted by Stephanie Bosch Santana in her work on South African Facebook fiction (2018).

Snapshots

Adwoa Opoku-Agyemang and Kwabena Opoku-Agyemang turn to a fairly young literary genre in Africa: digital flash fiction in Ghana. Through a careful contextualisation of the genre and its practice in Ghana, they demonstrate how online literary forms make visible the continuum between written and oral literary practice on one hand, and on the other, between the author and the reader; the latter offers feedback and suggestions on the work, producing a co-creative mode conventionally associated with African performance practices. A second crucial insight is that our assumptions about the global legibility of digital forms might be exaggerated. In their example, while Ghanaian flash fiction is widely accessible online, it anticipates a Ghanaian public – both local and diasporic – familiar with shared social and cultural codes, which other readers are likely to interpret denotatively. Still on matters literary, Steven Almquist's chapter is concerned with the multiple publics and platforms Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie occupies, as a renowned novelist and as a popular celebrity who shares her ideas on blogs, TED Talks, fashion magazines and public lecture circuits across the world. Almquist proposes a holistic approach to Adichie's oeuvre that attends to the continuities between the questions, genres and ideas she explores on different platforms, rather than reading her fiction as sealed off from her engagements on digital and other popular platforms.

Global || Local || Modern || Traditional

The influence of Euro-American genres and cultural practices on African lifeworlds has been codified by a distinct lexicon in scholarly debates – mimicry, globalisation, glocalisation, cultural imperialism, appropriation, adaptation – and a host of others. Often, this lexicon takes binarised shapes, which simultaneously insist on their fluidity: “the popular” versus “the canonical”; “the popular” versus “the elite”; “the modern/Western” versus the traditional”; and intermeshed across these categories, notions of the urban. Barber (2014, p. xvi) underscores the difficulty of holding on to these binaries, in part because popular art forms are constantly mutating and often

remix older forms into newer permutations that respond to new sets of realities and technological affordances. What often slips through the cracks of disappointment with these borrowings is the extent to which indigenous artistic practices actually form the core ingredient in what, on the surface, appears borrowed. In his social history of boxing in Ghana, De-Valera NYM Botchway (2019) demonstrates that what is now widely recognised as Ghana's boxing culture has its roots in an indigenous boxing practice called *atwo ale*, which preceded British colonial contact and subsequent formalisation of boxing. Over in East Africa, Kenyan stand-up comedy practices may seem to mimic Euro-American comic genres, but they have a distinctly local DNA drawn from earlier *mchongogano* practices, some of which are explored by Miriam Maranga-Musonye (2014). Julie Denomme (2019) similarly discusses the emergence of a uniquely Ivorian genre of television dramas in the early 2000s, whose popularity can be tracked back to their embedded core of indigenous Ivorian theatrical sketches. Denomme's ethnography of television production practices in Côte d'Ivoire demonstrates "intersections between globalized genres and endogenous popular traditions" (2019, p. 243). An important note she makes is that "mere exposure to a global genre cannot stir up genre innovation if the foreign genre has no resonance with popular traditions shared by producers and audiences" (ibid.).

In historicising these innovative interpretations of resonant foreign genres, Barber describes the double-edged implications of the neoliberal policies of the late 1980s in Africa: although they worsened unemployment and undermined social services, these policies simultaneously

brought new goods, new connectedness, new access to international media technologies, which enabled the predominantly youthful urban population to occupy, if only provisionally and precariously, a kind of virtual global space. Since the youth often had access only to images of consumer goods and not the things themselves, performing the self in this space involved a kind of make-believe.

(Barber 2018, p. 159)

Elsewhere, Will Rea points to 1960s debates on African art as provoking anxieties of authenticity that inform the tradition/modernity binary. Glossing Ulli Beier and Karin Barber's work, Rea writes that the prevalent forms of African modernisms at the time "were regarded as disruptive categories that reordered long-established notions of authenticity [which] relied upon the identified relationship between the work of art and its ethnic genesis, a purity that modernity threatened to interrupt" (2014, p. 49). Rea raises concerns about rigid understanding of the concept of tradition, whose Latin roots reference cross-generational shifts that signal openness to change. This rigidity produces perceptions that "the traditional is premodern, a throwback to the past," occluding a multitude of traditions that are generated in the present temporal frame (Rea 2014, pp. 50–51).

In fact, contrary to throwbacks to distant pasts, fertile contemporary conditions incubate practices coded as local or ethnic. Barber gives the example of mine compounds in early twentieth-century South Africa, where deliberate emphasis on ethnicity by the mine authorities, and miners' nostalgia for home, resulted in ethnic capsules within an otherwise ethnically heterogeneous set-up: "many of the organisational structures they developed to perform 'traditional' culture were actually new inventions, modelled on bureaucratic or military forms and potentially therefore supra-ethnic" (Barber 2018, p. 51). The "tribal" dancing in these and other mining sites presents an example of a cultural practice that articulated the double impulse "to both affirm 'home' culture and transcend it" (Barber 2018, p. 51). Close to a century later, a similar nostalgia among urban elites would produce contemporary inventions of tradition in the

shape of themed “ethnic” nights, in upmarket entertainment spots in Nairobi and Addis Ababa as Ogude’s (2012) essay shows.

It is worth remembering that borrowings are not always one-directional. Harris and Hallen describe the example of the chapbook aesthetic adopted in the *New-Generation African Poets* series, which, though “marketed as chapbooks, an ephemeral form that is popular for self-publishing and is common in African emergent print, they are actually produced by a professional publishing house” (Harris and Hallen 2020, p. 11). In similar tones, scholars draw our attention to the continental circulation of popular cultural forms and the ways in which these pan-African circuits generate local interpretations and expansions of popular genres. This has been most visible with Nollywood, whose movement across anglophone African markets and audiences inspired local variants, in Tanzania and South Africa (Shule 2011).

A useful approach to the interface between the local and the global is to historicise these exchanges while paying close attention to the fresh genres, practices and interpretations that blossom at these points of cultural encounter. This is the approach modelled by Newell’s exploration of Onitsha market literature, whose roots she traces to the circulation of Indian pamphlets in English in 1950s Nigeria, which in turn came on the back of three points of connection between the two countries: growing anticolonial sensibility that had the West African press following developments in India keenly; the return of World War II veterans who brought with them cosmopolitan ideas and cultural productions; and a growing connection between West Africa and India, facilitated by print media advertising and circulation (Newell and Okome 2006, p. 103). Collectively, these factors would germinate what would become a distinctly Nigerian print culture that blended together many roots and flavours, both local and borrowed. Equally, Tejumola Olaniyan considers highlife music to be a musical genre created by fusing local dance melodies with European brass, wind and string instruments, which in turn would lay the foundation for Fela Kuti’s afrobeat (Olaniyan 2004, pp. 7–8).

Snapshots

David Kerr immerses us into the creative, discursive and intellectual environments that shaped Tanzanian hip hop artist Hashim Rubanza, whose artistic and intellectual biography provides crucial pointers to his distinctive Swahili linguistic practice. Kerr considers Swahili traditions of linguistic play, paired with African American practices of multiple interpretative possibilities or what Henry Louis Gates, Jr. theorises as signifying, useful in decoding the linguistic play in Hashim’s hip hop texts. In view of the cultural specificity of everyday life in Tanzania, where subtlety, metaphor, the double entendre and verbal ingenuity are a source of quotidian pleasure, Hashim’s skilful use of the multiple meanings of Swahili words has earned him special recognition by fans and fellow musicians alike. Kerr’s chapter is invested in redirecting scholarly engagements with African hip hop music from the predominant concern with the politics of youth, to what it tells us about these musicians’ ecologies of textual practice and conceptual work. The chapter comes with recorded samples of the music tracks analysed, accessible with the electronic version of the chapter. Across the continent in West Africa, Rotimi Fasan uses Nigerian stand-up comic Ayodeji Richard Makun aka AY’s comic practice to model what a deeply historicised reading of contemporary popular art forms might look like. Fasan demonstrates that AY’s performance practice “has its avatars in a mesh of traditional and neo-traditional forms such as the Efe-Gelede and Agbegijo Alarinjo theatre”, blended together with a parodic mimicry of the performance genres of Pentecostalist and indigenous Aladura modes. Fasan’s method facilitates a textured excavation of the multiple genres and registers embedded in AY’s

performance practice, demonstrating distinctly indigenous roots of what is often consumed in the framework of stand-up comedy as a global cultural form.

Audiences || Publics || Addressivities

Jessie Forsyth et al note that across Africa, “new collectivities and connections are being forged that are shifting the terms within which access to economic opportunity, social belonging and political agency have historically been understood” as demonstrated by recent waves of civic mobilisation including the Arab Spring and the student movements in South Africa (2016, pp. 107–108). Regarding the multiple temporal and spatial sites of production and circulation of affects in Africa, Forsyth et al emphasise the value of keeping the question of access and the kinds of sites produced by patterns of who is granted or denied access in sight. Yet they nonetheless hold that “the multi-locatedness of communities, at once blurring the categories of local, national, and global on the one hand, and on the other, past, present and future, can only attest to the porosity of these constructed boundaries” (2016, p. 110). These contoured patterns of access and porous boundaries are particularly emphasised by the advent of digital media. For instance, publics excluded from freshly published content eventually gain access when such material finds its way to open-access platforms online, via semi-legal channels. Equally, online platforms like YouTube make it possible for audiences to take walks down memory lane, often exploring audio-visual content that preceded their birth. These dynamics muddy assumptions about distance and proximity, while raising new sets of questions about the temporalities of popular cultural texts’ production and consumption, at a time when audiences place a premium on immediacy. The editors retain a measured optimism about the potential of these contradictions of digital access to recalibrate the distances between subjectivities and communities, because “the overlapping of experiences, places, and positions of those who may come into contact with each other in virtual and non-virtual spaces can challenge ideas, identities and attachments” (2016, p. 113).

Ugandan consumers of Latin American telenovelas offer a glimpse of these webs of affects and attachments produced across geohistorical spaces. Dominica Dipio’s study of telenovela audiences in Uganda points to these shows’ generation of desires associated with elsewhere precisely because “desire and fantasy are transcultural” (2019, p. 5). Dipio’s respondents explained their preference for Latin American telenovelas as inspired by “the fantasy the stories evoke, the exotic and familiar in the story, the role models they can identify with, and the aesthetic advantage of the telenovelas over local productions” (2019, p. 2).

Online Nigerian poetry presents yet another dimension of artist-text-audience interactions: such poetry on networking sites like Facebook and Twitter reprises “real-time collaboration between poets and their audiences [just as] traditional poets and musicians try out their new work before a live audience prior to going to print or the recording studio” (Adenekan and Cousins 11). Writers gauge audience responses, “altering textual expression, tone and temper to meet the situation created in relationship with the online audience” in a process that mirrors oral performers’ collaborative engagements with their audiences, thus rendering cybertexts’ meanings “unfixed and subject to multiple interpretations” (ibid.). Meanwhile, in a discussion on Tanzania’s video industry’s adaptation of Nollywood aesthetics and tropes for video-films targeted at local audiences, Krings describes them as “appropriating the ‘aura’ of Nigerian video film”, and sometimes featuring Nigerian directors and actors, counting on their brand recognisability to Tanzanian audiences (Krings 2015, p. 151).

Regarding African flash fiction, Harris and Hallen note the tendency towards shorthand thematics that reference social realities as “an economical metonymy that gestures toward larger

realities” (2020, p. 15) to sidestep the limitations of length that attend to microfiction because they anticipate readers’ shared frames of reference: “their elliptical content – whether violent, humorous, or romantic – also presupposes a situated reader who does not need further explanation to understand the text” (ibid.). At a time when there is much debate about the post-nation in African literature, this seeming turn to short-hand, cultural referents, in-jokes and shared narrative frames is interesting for its dependence on certain frames of local legibility, even as they address ostensibly global networked publics.

Snapshots

Añulika Agina’s chapter tracks film consumption patterns that took shape following the advent of view-on-demand platforms on the internet. Her findings point to a growing uptake of view-on-demand film consumption in Nigeria, but this audience remains largely fragmented, and previous platforms retain a significant audience share. This fragmentation is partly explained by Nollywood’s ubiquity offline, audience socio-economic status, the cost implications of smartphones, internet data costs and the quality of online content as well as film-makers’ perceptions about consumption patterns. While the varied costs on different platforms loosely correlate to the quality of content offered, it simultaneously enables a qualified democratisation of viewing options, for now, by mitigating against monopolies.

In the East African context, Solomon Waliaula’s ethnographic study of female fandom and spectatorship of televised English Premier League Football (EPLF) in Eldoret, Kenya, takes us to a unique example of what has been termed the experience economy: public consumption of televised live English football in Eldoret’s bars, restaurants and clubs. His chapter tracks the emergence of EPLF spectatorship as an important cultural practice, which enterprising leisure industry businesspeople were able to fuse into a recognisable leisure package that now holds a significant spot in the grid of Kenyan urban sociality.

Lastly, Susanne Gerhmann’s chapter on Togolese genre fiction explores the question of audiences, publics and addressivity from a print culture perspective. Gerhmann showcases small Togolese publishers in Lome which have found a vibrant market for their genre fiction, managing to compete with the widely consumed Brazilian telenovelas, for audiences. The appeal of these texts is their readability, local cultural referents and their reasonable pricing. Gerhmann further notes how these series buck trends: the romance fiction features more male than female authors; it is openly eroticised; it resists the happy ending associated with the form; and it often blends together elements of crime thrillers into texts marketed as romance.

Innovation || Repetition’s Pleasures

Arjun Appadurai’s declaration close to three decades ago that “the imagination is now central to all forms of agency, is itself a social fact, and is the key component of the new global order” (1990, p. 5) remains true today, if not resoundingly so. Central to African popular imaginaries is the sense of play, experimentation and restlessness which catalyses perpetual innovation. Despite this inventiveness, popular genres are often contradictory in their insistence on both upholding and disrupting rigid frameworks of meaning-making. The popular, as has been theorised by Barber (1987), is about change born out of a need to engage with the reality of everyday life. She draws connections between the precarity unleashed by the neoliberalisation of African economies, which triggered greater global connectivity, and the forms of creativity that accompanies this period: “dire conditions of uncertainty, which mean hustling to survive, generated a ferment of inventiveness; and for the first time, many young people had the means to express

this creativity to a potentially wide audience through access to media” (Barber 2018, p. 160). Harris and Hallen, too, draw connections between the emergence of new African literary forms such as flash fiction and infrastructural changes across the continent, in form of rapid growth in access to mobile technology: “emergent forms have an ambivalent and often unpredictable relationship to the commodity and consumption cycle . . . emergent literature often occurs as a response to new technological innovations and the new markets that technology co-creates and participates in” (2020, p. 11). Indeed, on the back of these shifts in technology, there has been a boom in online literary forums, blogs, e-zines, fiction, and a multitude of other imaginative subgenres.

Umberto Eco (1985) observes that producers of popular genres such as popular music, genre fiction and popular film invent new details for new versions of their work but “these details only serve to reconfirm the permanence of a fixed repertoire of *topoi*” whose pleasure lies in the opportunity for audiences to “continuously recover, point by point, what they already know, and what they want to know again [inviting them to] focus on an *instant*, which is loved precisely because it is recurrent” (1985, p. 164). Part of the appeal of these repetitive, predictable narrative frames is in their “indulgent invitation to repose, a chance of relaxing” in a context in which real life is perpetually punctuated by social change (Eco 1985, p. 165). In effect, the novelty lies in “making the expected appear unexpected” (*ibid.*). Eco develops what he terms “the dialectic between repetition and innovation” to describe the play between originality and reiteration in artistic productions (1985, p. 175).

Eco’s observations resonate with Fabian’s commentary on repetitiveness and predictability as crucial features in popular culture (1998, p. 62). Beyond the taken-for-granted logic of popular arts’ subversiveness, their continued survival relies on their attentiveness to genre conventions “without allowing genre to take on the kind of power that would make it impossible to remain creative” (1998, p. 69). Elsewhere, in an essay on Moustapha Alassane’s film *Le Retour d’un Aventurier* as an instance of the fascination of the cowboy figure in African film-making, Saint foregrounds “the agential nature of cultural appropriation” (2013, p. 203) in which artists appropriate aesthetic genres for contextually specific purposes that sidestep the frames of speaking back, and instead focus on different orders of knowledge production and pleasure (2013, p. 212).

Innovations with genres are also evident in the phenomenon of the internet scam. The origins of this scam lie in the sixteenth century, when it was known as the Spanish prisoner scam, deployed by fictitious captives of Phillip II of Spain pleading for bail monies in letters posted to England; and subsequently adapted to the French Revolution and World War I (Krings 2015, p. 202). Digital technologies created scope for updating these fraud schemes with greater, speedier rewards for scammers: “experienced scammers were able to transfer and adapt their knowledge to the new communicative environment, which was made up of computer-savvy newcomers whose numbers grew by the day” (Krings 2015, p. 204). Further, Krings (2015, p. 207) writes, new narrative formats have emerged in the fraud scheme, including lottery, charity and romance scams, pointing to the reframing of the advanced-fee fraud scheme to evade detection, while responding to contemporary dynamics that would enable the con-artists to hook their targets.

Snapshots

Drawing inspiration from the three concepts at the core of the waste hierarchy – reduce, reuse, recycle – Nedine Moonsamy shows that speculative imaginaries showcase artists’ innovative reinscription of the inheritances of waste – both literal and discursive – in ways that point to

other possibilities that lie outside dominant frames of waste management in the face of ongoing ecological crises. The chapter proposes a conceptual and methodological approach to African speculative imaginaries and makes a compelling argument for the promise they hold in their openness to yet-to-come epistemic and aesthetic approaches, their artistic vigour and refusal of linearity and hierarchies of value. Kiguru's chapter also engages with the question of innovation by demonstrating that when we set aside the judgemental lens of plagiarism, and read Okafor's borrowings within a popular culture framework, a different understanding of originality comes into view as popular arts embrace borrowings, reinvention, and fashioning new flavours off old narrative frames.

Class || Access || Consumption || Aspiration

The class question in African popular cultural imaginaries is tied to the politics of access and taste formation on one hand; and on the other, the centrality of the category, "the people" to early conceptions of the popular. The category of "the people" not only posed questions about who constitutes the people, and what holds such a collective together, but its indeterminate boundaries were further complicated by the blurred class lines in African societies, because "in the mutable rhizomatic structures of clientelism in Africa there may be no discernible cut-off point where the elite ends and the non-elite begins" (Barber 2014, p. xvi). At another level, in many African societies, the different variants of capital – economic, social, cultural and political – do not always neatly coincide.

From an access perspective, in the Nigerian context – one of the largest economies on the continent – Adenekan and Cousins emphasise that despite increased access to cellphones, stable access to the internet is largely limited to middle-class individuals owing to data costs. Under these conditions, much of the online literary production in Nigeria is a largely middle-class affair that "champion[s] the world view of a minor, but powerful section of contemporary African society" (2014, p. 10). In his subsequent monograph, Adenekan (2021) identifies similarly classed patterns of access in the Kenyan literary landscape.

Regarding consumption as an aspirational template, Mehita Iqani and Bridget Kenny suggest that consumption "as a set of material and discursive practices in which individuals and collectives exercise their agency and construct their identities" points to the meanings of freedom in post-apartheid South Africa and "the problematics of new ways of participating in public life organised around the market rather than the polis" (2015, p. 97). Consumption is political not only owing to its intersection with questions of participation and visibility, but also because "it operates as a nexus of narratives about aspiration, questions of expenditure and identities, and debates about equality and inequality" (2015, pp. 97–98). The correlation between consumption and freedom poses provocative questions when we consider the role of neoliberal capital in the production of intense forms of immiseration across the continent.

Noteworthy for our purposes is the influential power of aspiration in shaping African audience tastes, particularly in relation to print and audio-visual materials. Dipio's work on Ugandan audience responses to Latin American telenovelas demonstrates a delicate balance between recognisability and aspirational fantasies in audience assessments of these telenovelas (2019). Her findings echo Krings' insights on South African audience perceptions of photonovel characters – Son of Simon, an African superhero; Fearless Fang, a black Tarzan; The Stranger, a black Lone Ranger cowboy; and Lance Spearman, a suave African urban detective. Of the four, Spearman resonated most with readers. Krings speculates that a black Tarzan and the jungle scenery mirrored rural environments too closely, for urban audiences hungry for modern

worlds, while the superhero and cowboy were too alien for everyday urban life in 1960s South Africa, making Spearman a perfect node of aspirational reception (2015, p. 60).

Underpinning debates on class in Africa is the myth of non-hierarchical communalism in early African societies. Contrary to these perceptions though, these communities had their own patterns of social stratification, and, inevitably, inequality, but class boundaries were rarely neat. Rather, then as now, intersecting social layers struggled for hegemony (Barber 2018, p. 20). While the much-cited fragility of the African middle classes – infamously a pay check away from poverty – is often assumed to be a recent phenomenon, Barber discusses similar class instability in seventeenth-century coastal West African societies, where “steep differences in status went hand-in-hand with a fluidity which allowed people to move up the hierarchy or forced them to move down it, according to their economic success”. In effect, “differences in status had to be continually asserted and reinforced” (Barber 2018, p. 23). These assertions included public displays of wealth, opulent clothing and lifestyles, which would seem to be one precursor to contemporary Instagram cultures, and other performative displays of affluence. Currently, the pressure to showcase opulent consumption has generated a new practice of “renting” bottles of champagne at upmarket lounges in Johannesburg, for Instagram photographs, which attest to extravagant lifestyles. This practice evokes the earlier Izikothane phenomenon that Megan Jones terms conspicuous destruction (2014), in which young people bought luxury goods then publicly destroyed these in a spectacle of supposed affluence.

Ultimately, consumer practices laid the groundwork for what Sanyu Mojola terms the “entwinement of intimacy with money” in Africa. Far from being an African peculiarity, this is part of a globalised pattern in which consumption is marketed by making “modernity and romance synonymous with consumption” (Mojola 2014, p. 32). Ligaga’s research on the good-time girl in Kenya (2020), Mupotsa’s work on Ghanaian femininities (2019), Gqola’s conceptualisation of the new South African woman (2016) and Simidele Dosekun’s work on spectacular femininities in contemporary Nigeria (2020), variously trace different manifestations of this nexus between consumption and gendered self-making.

On the flip side, those excluded from the circuits of consumption have borne the brunt of mocking laughter in many genres. The figure of the country bumpkin – indexed as Jim comes to Joburg in South Africa, Johnny just come in Nigeria or mshamba (rural) in Kenya – remains a vibrant trope in African comedy genres as the recent volume by Izuu Nwankwo (2022) shows. An earlier exception to this classist imaginary is Fela’s Afrobeat music. Olaniyan writes that Fela took the ordinary urban masses – whose prior textualisation was as caricatured or criminalised precariat – and turned their quotidian social lives into musical monuments in their own language; which they, in turn, embraced enthusiastically (Olaniyan 2004, p. 38). Afrobeat was more than a new musical genre, it was “a new way of looking at the world in which repressed, marginalised or tabooed themes, figures and desires were freely acknowledged, debated and even frequently affirmed in a musically memorable manner” (Olaniyan 2004, p. 38). Fela’s focus on the underbelly of the city as a source of inspiration for his music, paired with theatrical and humorous modes of presentation, earned his music association with a fresh, revolutionary spirit (Olaniyan 2004, p. 47). Yet, despite his class solidarity, Fela considered gender inequality to be the “natural” order: “the radical who could imagine and campaign at great personal risk for social inequality between the lowly and the high found it difficult to envision gender equality” (Olaniyan 2004, p. 120).

Snapshots

Pype’s chapter here shifts the lens of popular cultural analysis from questions of aesthetics, publics and representation to the pursuit of economic opportunities. Here, the urban environment

is approached as a source of inspiration and opportunity by technology entrepreneurs, who code the city of Kinshasa in terms of zones of opportunity, with reference to physical and digital environments that hold the promise of commercial reward. Meantime, Oduro-Frimpong's chapter reads the afore-mentioned visual parodies of Obinim's supernatural powers against their grain, as exhibits of the coordinates of desires that inform contemporary Ghanaian notions of what the good life looks like. Parodies of the Obinim stickers as delivering physical beauty, high-end vehicles, protection against violent robbery and excellent performance in school examinations point to the aspirational currencies of the desirable life, pleasure and success in Ghanaian public life. Similarly, Ligaga's chapter demonstrates how Akothee's self-fashioning of neoliberal subjectivity is firmly tethered to the grammars of conspicuous consumption and accumulation as the definitive frame of success and modern subjectivity in contemporary Kenya.

Gender || Sexuality || Moral Regimes

Questions of morality – both ordinary people's and elite figures' – are a central preoccupation of popular imaginaries. We see the robust contradictions emblematic of popular forms when multiple moral regimes scuffle for legitimacy; and are embraced simultaneously with little anxiety about the tensions between opposing moral worlds. In recent years, some of these morality tales – powerfully explored in Ligaga (2017) – have been remediated through short text and video tales circulated on WhatsApp groups, often bearing a kernel of moral injunctions about ethical values to live by. The values range from prescribed sexual mores to tips on parenting, all the way to entrepreneurial wisdom spreading the neoliberal gospel that a can-do attitude is always bound to yield capitalist rewards.

The circulation of narrative frames and aesthetics across cultural landscapes inevitably triggers anxieties around dissonant gendered moral logics. Krings examines this regarding religious moral panics sparked by Hausa video film appropriations of Indian cinematic trends (2015, pp. 121–123). Following the introduction of Sharia law in Northern Nigeria in 1999, there was increased policing of women's bodies in public: “the radicalness with which the female body was turned into an index for the moral condition of society at large added a new dimension to older ideas about the female body as the primary domain for the articulation of notions about religious piety, morality and respectability” (Krings 2015, p. 122). Mixed gender dance sequences in Hausa video films – a trope borrowed from Bollywood – were censored; their supposed link to Hindu religious worship was interpreted as encouraging idolatry among Muslim Hausa audiences (Krings 2015, p. 123). At the same time, Krings speculates that film censorship may have been tied to how the film industry indirectly challenged Hausa gender cultural scripts through the economic resources young women and divorcées accumulated, enabling them to delay marriage or remarriage; while interacting with men on film sets, where protocols were relaxed. What is notable here is that Indian films were acceptable, because they portrayed Indian culture, but their appropriation into Hausa filmic practice was unacceptable (Krings 2015, p. 147).

Still, the regulatory labour performed by popular cultural scripts remains as fractured as ever. Often, the same forms endorsing patriarchal gender frames contain cracks of opportunity for subversion. For instance, while the Dear Sis Dolly advice column in *Drum* magazine in the 1950s maintained rigid ideas on gender, Kenda Mutongi finds that young women read the column surreptitiously, borrowing romantic vocabulary for letters to their boyfriends; such letters allowed them to articulate their feelings in ways that spoken language could not accommodate (2009, p. 86). Elsewhere, Sophie Feyder explores popular photography in 1950s Johannesburg

as enabling “the crafting of multiple urban femininities” in sharp deviation from the protocols of respectability that were the norm in popular photography (2014, pp. 227–239).

Beyond audio-visual genres, blogging represents another vibrant platform for challenging hegemonic moral regimes. Elsadda’s work on Egyptian women bloggers emphasises the role of literary blogging in the creation of “new forums for subversive or alternative literary genres, languages and styles that are adjacent or parallel to mainstream literary centers” (2010, p. 315). In the Egyptian context, the blog platforms are far more accessible than the salons and coffee houses that preceded them, which were largely invitation-only spaces. The accessibility of digital spaces, coupled with their scope for anonymity, has made them attractive to women writers. Further, blogging allows these women to contravene cultural protocols that frown upon women’s self-disclosure in public, while retaining some degree of privacy behind the screen (2010, p. 318). Sani Aliyu identifies a similar freedom in northern Nigeria, where women storytellers’ transition to radio created scope for women to honor Islamic and Hausa cultural codes that forbid public engagements while affording these women voice and public audibility (1997).

In addition to cultural norms that govern women’s presence and voices in public forums, Elsadda describes a widely-held assumption that women’s creative writing is autobiographical – a view grounded in two connected prejudices: “that women’s experiences and worldviews are too restricted and hence they are incapable of understanding the wider public sphere; and second, that women’s creative imagination is not as developed as men’s imagination” (2010, p. 320). In a public discourse poisoned by these prejudices, we see how public censure attaches to women’s writing, which is read as autobiographical and therefore morally compromised, when it explores taboo topics.

These affordances of blogging are mirrored in Macharia’s exploration of queer blogging in Kenya (2013) where he argues that, beyond homonormativity, “the Afro-pessimism that directs the ‘genre’ of Africa, that stamps stories of African despair and deprivation as authentic, also authenticates queer narratives: a genuinely African queer narrative must detail loss, deprivation, homophobia, and exile to a more liberating space in Europe or North America” (2013, p. 104). In a literary landscape where ordinary stories of queer desire and love that do not “traffic in the spectacular” hold little appeal for mainstream publishers, “the aesthetics of blogging: an attention to the particular, the idiosyncratic, the quotidian and the ordinary” prove to be the perfect platform for queer writers’ “pursuit of ordinariness” (Macharia 2013, p. 104).

Still, prior to the digital turn, newspaper columns targeted at women readerships engaged some of these questions in otherwise mainstream print media. The anonymously authored newspaper column “Treena’s Diary” in the Nigerian newspaper *Vanguard* in the 1990s is a revealing example. The column lacked “the squeamishness about sexuality, the sense of moral burden and the self-effacement of much of Africa’s more morally presented women’s writing”, Jane Bryce writes, while achieving what this more formal writing aspires to do: “destabilise the reader’s sense of where ‘truth’ ends and fiction begins, crossing the boundary between reality and fantasy” (Bryce 1997, p. 48). This brings to mind similar genre-bending experiments with erotic fiction on Facebook by writers such as Stella Nyanzi. Bryce further comments on the gendered frames of value that attach to these genres: “however simplistic and non-progressive the overt content of popular writing may appear to be, we need to pay attention to its sub-textual messages, to the ways in which formula and genre are manipulated and reshaped to accommodate alternative points of view” (Bryce 1997, p. 54). Sometimes, these sub-textual messages are pressed into service of mainstream, patriarchal projects. Oluwakemi M Balogun’s (2020) work on beauty contests demonstrates the political role of beauty pageants in performing what she terms beauty diplomacy, by articulating contested ideas on Nigerian nationalism and its aspirations to coherence.

Snapshots

In a deeply heteropatriarchal context like Kenya, where women's bodies, lives, thoughts and public presence is "either ridiculed, spectacularized, invisibilized, or framed within a developmental agenda," Ligaga demonstrates, women like Akothee's robust and innovative self-inscription in digital platforms and their entrepreneurial capacities to unlock financial and cultural capital lay the foundation for change; even if their interventions are aligned with neoliberal subject formation. Such interventions craft "new subjectivities that crack open small but meaningful locations of conversation about gender and social justice". In similar lines of argument, Ryan Poinasamy considers the Mauritian LGBTQ+ community's use of linguistic and visual semiotic resources in pursuit of queer livability in a heteronormative society. Poinasamy argues that the queer community in Mauritius envisions a queer utopic future that reimagines the nation-state by reframing its recognisable codes, chiefly ethnicity, to claim hope, the possibility of belonging and liveable futures. The chapter demonstrates how popular cultural practices index the affective experiences of the LGBTQ+ community while facilitating queer utopic-world-making by subverting marginalising identity documents, reframing dominant nation-state tropes to include marginalised queer identities; and exploring cosmopolitan world views framed around relationalities that exceed the limits of the nation-state.

Networks || Platforms || Communities

Paul Onanuga reflects on the Nigerian LGBTQ+ community's use of digital platforms as sites for queer agency through civic engagement with both queer and non-queer communities to widen the spectrum of normative sexuality (2021, p. 20). Sidestepping some of the normative gate-keeping that sometimes informs mainstream platforms, social media's affordances allow sexually minoritised people to create networks online, which often move on to offline community-building, while also "raising awareness and providing education on equity, diversity and social inclusion [and] attempting to reinvent the narratives surrounding homosexuality and queer practices within hostile environments" (Onanuga 2021, p. 5). Crucial to online community-building are the affective networks that unfold through liking, sharing, commenting, etc.: this "contributes to a conversational ecology in which conversations are composed of public interplay of voices that give rise to an emotional sense of shared conversational context" (Boyd, Golder & Lotan 2011, p. 1 cited in Onanuga 2021, pp. 495–6). Onanuga's commentary resonates with Jenkins's observations about knowledge communities convened by media consumption and shared interests (Jenkins 2006, p. 20). A similar pattern of queer networking online and offline emerges with the Strictly Silk network, a feminist initiative based in Kenya, with a strong presence on social media as well as offline, where it organises feminist sites of sociality, including dance parties and self-development webinars, all of which prioritise women and the queer community.

Still on the question of shared interests, digital technology has been central to building and sustaining networks and communities of artistic practice and consumption, as Geuza and Wallis's (2021) work on Dar es Salaam book clubs demonstrates. Geuza and Wallis note the role of book clubs in the generation and sustenance of reading communities in Dar es Salaam through a combination of regular social media updates and physical monthly meetings (2021, p. 2). Significantly, these book clubs connect readers, book distributors and publishers. Geuza and Wallis's work builds on earlier scholarship by Bosch Santana, Adenekan, Cousins, Yékú and others, on the role of digital platforms in building and sustaining networks of production, critique and marketing of African popular cultural productions. Both Geuza and Wallis's (2021) and Nikitta

Dede Adjirakor's (2020) work demonstrates that the major players in the Tanzanian literary circulation scene (poetry clubs, book clubs and book salons) are either expatriates or Tanzanians who studied abroad. This points to the networks of exchange and cross-fertilisation of ideas opened up by exposure beyond the national borders.

In a different context, Moradewun Adejunmobi reminds us of the role of small literary magazines such as *Black Orpheus* and *Transition* – edited from Nigeria and Uganda, respectively – in the 1950s and 1970s in “creating a platform for publication for previously unknown African writers, as well as a forum for conversation among critics and between critics and creative writers” (2020, p. 72). These magazines form the cultural bedrock for contemporary literary magazines such as *Kwani*, *Chimurenga* and *Farafina* among others, all of which have been influential in shaping African literary ecologies, as Christopher Ouma and Madhu Krishnan (2021) demonstrate. Adenekan extends these debates on print networks to conceptualise digital literary networks and the insights they offer into the workings of class in African literary circles (2021, p. 25).

Snapshots

Lynda Gichanda Spencer and Erik Falk's chapter focuses on the Uganda Women's Writers Association initiative, FEMRITE, tracing its unique self-positioning as a local writers' network committed to creating a robust feminist literary production landscape, and at the same time, a pan-African, transnational sensibility that facilitates circulation of its publications beyond the national borders. Farther south, Rangoato Hlasane and Bhekizizwe Peterson showcase the assemblage of forces, institutions, agents, communities and energies that are the soul of Kwaito music in South Africa. Their chapter contextualises the roots and routes of Kwaito, carefully mapping its political, aesthetic, affective and commercial itineraries, before honing in on questions of intergenerational apprenticeship, gender logics, consumption and the range of moralities the genre mediates. Along similar lines, Adjirakor's chapter showcases the intersections between digital technologies, spoken word and hip hop artists, and the financial imperatives that underpin sustainable artistic production in neoliberal time. In the process, as the chapter shows, transnational networks become central to non-institutionalised production of popular arts, with the digital landscape of crowd-funding enabling these networks of shared interest to congregate and support the arts, while diasporic and expatriate communities become a core resource that further unlocks the forms of solidarity and funding needed to support the arts.

Admittedly, my exploration of the thirteen elements I flag here is highly abbreviated; there is much more to be said about each. Further, as mentioned, these thirteen elements are in ongoing conversation with each other, forming different patterns when paired in different permutations, ultimately guarding their porosity against locked off boundaries in much the same way that the pebbles in cha'mawe combine and recombine at each turn of the game. As is hopefully evident from the snapshots offered above, the chapters and case studies assembled here, too, speak to each other in a lively exchange of resonances, tensions and overlaps that honours the vital spirit of African popular imaginaries.

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