




## 'We Were On Top of the World': Fela Kuti's Queens and the Poetics of Space

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## 'We Were On Top of the World': Fela Kuti's Queens and the Poetics of Space

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### ABSTRACT

The Afrika Shrine, Fela Kuti's night club, and Kalakuta Republic, the urban commune over which he presided, were iconic spaces in the Nigerian postcolonial imagination. However, these spaces only acquired countercultural stature when in the early 1970s young women began inhabiting them in pursuit of a life in the performing arts. The Queens, as the women were fondly known, became indispensable symbols of the Afrobeat movement. Yet, their contributions to Afrobeat have enjoyed no sustained research. This essay argues that a historiography of the Queens as social agents need account for the ways in which they navigated and aestheticized everyday social spaces beyond the Afrika Shrine. I suggest the concept of 'stretching out' space (to Kalakuta's everyday life) as critical to developing both a nuanced understanding of the Queens' contributions to Afrobeat as well as their quests for individual and collective agency. I draw on a combination of personal interviews and theories of everyday life performance to argue for a more dynamic engagement with spatiality. This essay not only rethinks the Queens' contributions to the Afrobeat subculture, but it also reconstitutes the everyday as a dialectical space of contestation around gender and agency for working-class women.

### KEYWORDS


Fela Kuti; Afrobeat Queens; spatiality; everyday performance

"We are Fela... Wherever Fela goes, we are there."  
Queen Olaide Babayale<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction: before and beyond the stage

Before any performance at Fela Kuti's night club, the Afrika Shrine, each of his wives spent about one hour transforming herself into a 'Queen.' The germinal 1982 documentary *Fela: Music is the Weapon* by Stephane Tchall-Gadjieff and Jean-Jacques Flori captures this transformation ritual.<sup>2</sup> As the documentary's narrative touches on Fela's famed Queens, Kevwe, a prominent singer in his *Africa 1970* band, is seen wearing a flush of white powder around her eyes as she looks blankly beyond the camera. Aduni, a dancer, draws a delicate pattern of black lines onto her left wrist using an eye pencil. A deep red blush covers Fehintola's cheeks, while she works a pastel of metallic blue onto the areas around her left eye. Ihase's process is

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nearly complete. She delicately places tiny green, yellow and white plastic discs around her eyelashes. Alake has finished her own process. So, she casually smokes a wrap of marijuana. Her face is an intricate network of lines, dots and blushes. The voice of Fehintola, another of his singers, soars across these edited camera shots. She croons a more melodious version of Fela's 1976 'No Buredi.' Each woman holds up a mirror to supervise her own transformation. The documentary cuts to the women performing a dance routine on the stage of the Afrika Shrine. The documentary excels at capturing the delicate process of the women's individual transformation. However, it only hints at the ways that the women stood behind the exotic figure of the Afrobeat Queen to navigate spaces beyond the stage.

The Queens were a group of young women (only a few are mentioned above) who worked with Fela Kuti to popularize his Afrobeat music in the 1970s. The dancers among them performed go-go style routines in four cylindrical cages to the delight of an overwhelmingly male audience. Their emergence on the Nigerian popular music scene, especially their erotic performances and marijuana-smoking, sparked controversy. Behind the 'Queen' makeup, the singers crooned some of Nigeria's most politically charged songs till date. Along with the erotic politics of their performances, their collective invention of the exotic 'Queen' makeup illustrates their visual creativity and its impact on Afrobeat. Being mostly teenagers at the time of meeting Fela only exacerbated the public's concerns. In many ways, their involvement was instrumental in Afrobeat's transformation into a subculture. As Fela popularized themes such as class discrimination, the malaise of the postcolonial condition and racial redemption, the women's erotic performances made these deeply political themes tantalizing for popular tastes (Olaniyan 2009, 169–170). Also, the controversies sparked by their choice to live with Fela played a role in generating public interest in the musician's work.

The makeup has been said to express each woman's highest self (Goldman 2003, 108). Mostly undereducated and from working-class backgrounds, it enabled them to perform a dignified sense of themselves in a deeply class-stratified society. Besides their stage performances, their transformation into Queens gave them latitude to navigate everyday life spaces. Additionally, regardless of the physical and aesthetic configuration of the spaces they occupied, the makeup marked their actions as what Tracy Shaffer has described as 'conspicuous aesthetic performance,' a clear-cut, practiced and staged performance separated from everyday life through intentional stylistic choices (Shaffer 2016, 1). When they pursued personal engagements close to the Afrika Shrine and Kalakuta Republic, Fela's infamous commune, they embodied the ethos of the Afrobeat subculture, invoking Kalakuta's appeal for everyday admirers.

Olaide Babayale's claim to mobility in the epigraph – 'Wherever Fela goes, we are there!' – raises questions about the women's agency and autonomy vis-à-vis Fela Kuti. This essay is concerned not with the makeup itself, but with its ubiquitous presence in the Queens' everyday spaces. In the following pages, I will be suggesting that the exotic makeup sanctioned a combination of performance and physical mobility for the Queens. Although Afrobeat music constituted a dominant somatic impulse, the makeup marked them as engaged in conspicuous aesthetic performances in everyday life contexts. It functioned as a combination of mask and spectacle, both disguising the women and inspiring them to perform on and beyond the Shrine's stage. My treatment of the makeup's relationship to performance and mobility implies that the Queens inhabited parallel performance spaces in which, beyond the stage, they imposed themselves on the subculture.

Interpreting the Queens' social and creative roles in this way allows me to excavate sites of agency for the Queens. I intend for this move to complicate the dominant view of them as disposable sex objects. In rethinking spatiality, I understand Kalakuta as site of augmentation, amplification, extension, and even subversion when juxtaposed against the notions of objectification routinely attached to the women's appearances at the Shrine.

By placing the women's stage acts within the context of performances in Kalakuta Republic, I demonstrate that they understood themselves as operating across multiple spaces that fluidly overlapped. For the women, therefore, the heightened artistic awareness that attended their stage appearances at the Shrine was always active when they interacted with the world beyond the Shrine. They not only conducted themselves as proficient performers, they also exploited these aesthetic and domestic spaces to assert themselves as social agents, even for brief moments. Therefore, Olaide's pointed claim to mobility in the epigraph – 'Wherever Fela goes, we are there' – underscores a need to investigate the different, overlapping spaces in which the Queens circulated; even if they only occupied those spaces momentarily.

This essay focuses on two categories of space – first, domestic space, which Kalakuta Republic embodies and; second, what I call 'transient' spaces – to examine the twin concepts of performance and mobility, as well as to foreground the implications of these concepts for historicizing gender and agency in Afrobeat. My decision to interrogate seemingly non-theatrical spaces stems out of the recognition that Fela closely regulated the performances that occurred onstage of the Afrika Shrine, precluding particular modes of self-expression for the women. (In [Figure 1](#), for instance, a photographer



**Figure 1.** L-R, Olaide Babayale, Sandra Izsadore, Najite Mukoro and Yeni Kuti having a moment backstage of the Afrika Shrine, circa. 1978. Photo: Adrian Boot/Urban Image.

captures some Queens, including Olaide, having a moment of unpressured indulgence. It is significant that this moment unfolds backstage rather than onstage) I emphasize the overlaps and interactions between Kalakuta and transient spaces in an attempt at reconstituting them as sites of performance. This essay concludes that the Queens' performances across these multiple spaces makes evident their often-subtle negotiations of agency within the structural, aesthetic and social constraints in Fela's *Afrika 70* band, as well as against the backdrop of a larger post-Independence Nigerian world. I draw heavily on two oral interviews that I conducted with Olaide Babayale in Lagos in 2014.

### Space, agency and power

Despite the latitude that their lives as performers afforded the Queens, members of the Nigerian public routinely described as victims or as passive. An infamous 1978 mass wedding in which Fela married twenty-seven of them helped consolidate this perception. One writer, Caro Nwankwo (1978, 35), penned a passionate criticism of Fela's 1978 mass wedding to the Queens in a Nigerian magazine: 'It is obvious that Fela's 27 "brides" were victims of indoctrination ... Fela's decision to marry these girls shows the degree to which he can manipulate them as puppets.' Another less critical writer described them simply as the 'locomotive artists of Afrobeat' (Nzegwu 2003, 137), a description that evokes zombie figures. Only a few works examine the women's performances or their political significance in Afrobeat. Tejumola Olaniyan, for instance, observes that the women's appearance on the Afrobeat scene catalyzed it into a cultural phenomenon (2009, 169–170). In a similar vein, Vivien Goldman (2003, 105–106) points out the subliminal politics of the women's erotic routines. 'The circular swivels and percussive thrusts of Fela's dancers' hips,' Goldman suggests, 'represented the ultimate *yoní* – the Earth Mother and the Fertility Goddess, Mama Africa.'<sup>3</sup> Yet, what connects these divergent views on the Queens is an implicit assumption about space, an assumption that fixes the women's performances to the Shrine. Afrobeat scholarship operates upon an implicit but pervasive notion about the Afrobeat stage being the quintessential amphitheatre of Afrobeat.

This approach to space illustrates two tendencies in scholarship on the Afrobeat Queens. The first tendency emphasizes domesticity and thus visualizes the women through Fela's viewpoints on gender and sexuality (Moore 1982, 163–237; Denzer 2003, 125–132). The second takes the women's onstage appearances as the basis for elaborating on their contributions to Afrobeat (Goldman 2003, 103–110). A focus on the women's artistic labour inevitably privileges the Afrika Shrine as a site of knowledge production. However, focusing on the Shrine produces a partial vision of the women's lives, one that potentially reifies the sexual aspects of their work. These two tendencies take for granted the political and epistemological significance of spatiality within the Afrobeat subculture. Failing to consider space as gendered, sexualized and contested is to run the risk of contracting the vast landscape of performative options available to the Queens.

Treating space as multiple and intersecting is hardly radical since social actors in fact interact with space as such – simultaneously inhabiting actual and virtual spaces at any one time. Doreen Massey (1994, 3) has argued for viewing space as inherently dynamic; as 'cross-cutting, intersecting, aligning with one another, or existing in relation of paradox and antagonism.' For Massey, space signifies social relations as constantly shifting geometries of meaning and power (3). Viewing space as static or bounded inevitably

therefore produces a skewed and limiting understanding of power. In other words, while Fela undoubtedly wielded near absolute authority over certain spaces, the Queens also held sway, even if for brief moments, over the same or other spaces at separate times.

In addition to a skewed notion of space, a gendered politics of perception has hitherto framed how the Queens enter Afrobeat history. These modalities of perception inflect our understanding not only of spatiality but also of their agency. Molaria Ogundipe-Leslie (1994, 11) has famously asked: 'Are African women voiceless or do we fail to look for their voices where we may find them, in the sites and forms in which these voices are uttered?' As such, voicelessness gets produced in discourse more often than it reflects the material realities of African women. Sara Mills makes a similar point in her discussion of gender and colonial space. For Mills, the gazing subject operates not only with institutionalized beliefs about its position in a spatial terrain, but also with assumptions about how society, the object of its gaze, is organized (2003, 701). The beliefs and assumptions that colour this 'looking' does not simply produce a skewed perspective; it frames the object. These perspectives imply that cultural and intellectual assumptions undergird the ways we look for the Queens to begin with. These looking practices in turn produce and reify assumptions about the women's agency and power.

A shift in the analysis of space necessarily modifies the object of critical concern. This shift takes seriously the implication of everyday life for understanding postcolonial relations and realities. Citing Theodore Adorno, Ato Quayson (2000, 46) points out that defamiliarizing the everyday becomes an ethical requirement for postcolonial critique. For Quayson, everyday phenomena contain sediments of world historical processes and, as such, must come to bear in developing ethical postcolonial criticisms (46). John Storey (2014, 2) also argues that everyday life is hardly a residual category of human experience apart from the sublime and the beautiful. Everydayness, to put it differently, does not foreclose spectacle, neither does it preclude theory. The coincidence of everyday life spaces with the spectacular opens gender performativity to a postcolonial critique of and beyond the spectacular. Yet, it is crucial not to isolate everyday spaces, but instead to keep sight of their intersections and overlaps with aesthetic spaces. For the Afrobeat Queens, everyday life spaces bled into formally aesthetic ones, in ways that sanctioned performances of selfhood that confound simplistic notions of subjectivity and power. Importantly, the figure of the Queen became the vehicle through which the women translated everyday scenarios into moments of spectacle.

To stretch out space, to borrow from Massey's idea, is to stretch our vocabulary of the Queens' performance beyond the erotic, beyond the stage. The Afrika Shrine was at the core of Afrobeat's countercultural ethos. However, it was gendered and sexualized in ways that forecloses a comprehensive understanding of the Queens' lives beyond the stage. As such, to circumscribe the women's appearance to the stage is to reproduce the stubborn view of them as 'locomotive artists' bereft of character and faculty. It is for this reason that we need to formulate a more complex view of space, especially those typically associated with Afrobeat. This view of space must in turn uncover how the Queens' facial makeup sanctioned mobility on the stage but also beyond it.

To this end, it is crucial to examine space as intersecting with time (Massey 1994, 2). A space-time analysis of the women's performance foregrounds their dynamic and shifting relationships to space at different historical moments. Consequently, it becomes imperative to historicize 'Kalakuta Republic' since there existed at least three Kalakutas in Fela's

lifetime. The earliest one at the Mushin/Idi Oro area of Lagos, for instance, was markedly less spacious than its latest iteration in Ikeja. The spatial dimension of the Mushin/Idi Oro iteration afforded Kalakutans a physical and psychic intimacy that roomier iterations did not permit. Additionally, its modesty in space certainly helped cultivate in Kalakutans a sense of being a coherent subculture in the 1970s, its most troubled years.

The following section concerns itself with how one Queen, Funmilayo Onilere, instrumentalized performance to negotiate power within Kalakuta Republic. I take her performance as unfolding in particular configurations of space and as taking place at a moment when Kalakuta and the Shrine were near one another (The tendency in Afrobeat scholarship has been to speak of Kalakuta as a generic space without accounting for the uniqueness of each iteration). Therefore, when I speak of Kalakuta Republic in this section, I am referring specifically to the Kalakuta that existed between 1971 and 1977; the one destroyed in a massive military invasion in 1977.

### **Kalakuta Republic: differentiating the self**

In 1971, Fela expanded the size of his band following his success with the song 'Jeun K'oku.' He recruited more instrumentalists, dancers and singers. His success also inspired a reorganization of his *Africa 70* band. Housing the members of his band was part of these consolidation efforts (Allen and Veal 2013, 96). Some women in the band had had to commute long distances to attend rehearsals that often stretched late into the night. Others had challenges securing housing in Lagos as they had recently migrated from nearby areas (Fairfax 1993, 324). Fela's house was a modest duplex that sat adjacent to the Afrika Shrine. With Fela's house so close to the Shrine, commutes between work and home became relatively seamless. 'Kalakuta Republic' as Fela's home would become known by 1974, became notorious for sexual liberalism, marijuana smoking, and anti-Establishment ideologies. By the mid-1970s, Kalakuta had by this time become iconic in the Nigerian imagination. It constituted a literal and metaphoric rehearsal space for the 'revolution' that was dramatized on the stage of the Shrine. Kalakuta was also a space of contest for visibility and power among Kalakutans themselves.

There existed an active contest for supremacy among the Queens. This competition demanded that each woman invent strategies for self-differentiation and for seeking comparative advantage. On a certain level, the need to differentiate the self was linked with aligning with Fela's authority. On another level, however, the demand to navigate the complex of relationships within the commune imposed the impetus to perform. In this sense, the relationship *between* the women was no less politically exigent than their relationship to Fela. Indeed, a woman's artistic and political success within the organization was predicated, first, upon her ability to forge and maintain relationships with other women (Moore 166), who were at once co-artists, co-wives and competitors. The relationship among the women expressed a politics of sisterhood that did not assume a coherent or consistent alignment of interests. Rather, their politics of sisterhood was one that embraced divergent and, sometimes, diametric interests. Besides these plebeian concerns, the Queens also put aside their differences in weighty matters such as when they confronted real threats from State actors like soldiers. Fela's anti-Establishment politics rehearsed a Manichean logic of good versus evil and, as such, required that the Queens constituted a coherent force against an identified enemy.<sup>4</sup> Beyond these moments of

coherence and collective action was an equally powerful impulse towards self-preservation. This practice constituted a dialectical negotiation of the self within and against the collective. As such, each woman cultivated her own self-curated corpus of performance strategies.

Funmilayo Onilere presents a notable example. During her years in Kalakuta, Funmilayo became known for performing imitations of Fela's mother, Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti. This imitation was her self-cultivated performance strategy.

Funmilayo's example illustrates how the Queens employed performance to political ends. The younger Funmilayo joined Kalakuta as a teenager in 1972 (Moore 1982, 191) and is most prominently remembered as one of six dancers that performed in *Africa 70's* appearance at the 1978 Berlin Jazz Festival. Funmilayo was favoured in the organizational hierarchy, by virtue of her time of arrival and length of stay. Her first two years in the commune saw her working as a disc jockey. She considered herself an untalented dancer and so delayed her start as an *Africa 70* dancer. Only at Fela's prompting did she try dancing (191). However, despite establishing herself as a dancer within the organization, it was Funmilayo's impressions of Fela's mother Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti that earned her prominence within the Afrobeat subculture. Not only did she share names with Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti, the older and more famous human rights activist, both women shared similar facial features. Their prominent cheekbones became a basis for comparison of the two women. The parallels in name and physique paved the way for other interesting developments.

Rising to these similarities in name and physique, Funmilayo began performing impressions of Mrs. Ransome-Kuti. The younger Funmilayo enacted impressions of the older activist by appropriating the older woman's gestures and speech mannerisms. Her often brief, spontaneous acts delighted her Kalakuta audience even as these performances constituted her own political claims to belonging. For Funmilayo, imitation was a strategy for establishing herself within Kalakuta's hierarchy. However, to understand the significance of Funmilayo's imitations, one needs to appreciate Mrs. Ransome-Kuti's political and ideological significance within Kalakuta. Mrs. Ransome-Kuti's distinguished reputation as one of Nigeria's foremost feminist icons and anticolonial nationalists provided ideological weight to Kalakuta.<sup>5</sup> Mrs. Kuti's being a part of their everyday life in the late 1970s was remarkable even for Kalakuta residents. The sentimental value that Fela placed on his mother also amplified her already elevated status. He declared, for example, that nobody could make Funmilayo the subject of the petty insults or *yabis*, which was characteristic of communal life. The Queens scrambled to impress Mrs. Ransome-Kuti because doing so guaranteed social standing within the commune.

It is in the context of Mrs. Kuti's stature within the commune that the precariousness of Funmilayo's performances comes into focus, especially considering how easily her acts could devolve into mimicry. This is especially true considering the slippages to which this form of doubling is susceptible. Homi Bhabha's comments on how mimicry works are suggestive here. He contends that mimicry is constructed around ambivalence and that to be effective, it must constantly produce slippage, excess and difference (Bhabha 1997, 153). By this, Bhabha implies that the efficacy of mimicry rests in its ability to dance around the boundaries of difference, between the performer and the object of mimicry. It is plausible that Mrs. Ransome-Kuti witnessed Funmilayo's impressions of her. This would have constituted a moment of tension in which the older woman



became confronted by an 'excessive' version of herself. Following Mrs. Ransome-Kuti's death in 1978, Fela bequeathed Funmilayo his late mother's eyeglasses. Eludoyin Elutunde, a Kalakuta resident at the time, recalls that the eyeglasses made Funmilayo 'like the replica of [Fela's] mother' (Eludoyin 2014). It is unclear whether Fela intended the glasses to act as a gesture of appreciation or Funmilayo's earlier imitations of his mother, or whether he was setting the scene for future manifestations of his late mother through Funmilayo's acts.

Importantly, Funmilayo's imitations became a way through which Kalakuta fulfilled its internal impulse towards performance. Yet, Funmilayo's acts, especially following Mrs. Ransome-Kuti's death, also represented a communal impulse towards surrogation. Joseph Roach suggests that this kind of surrogation continues in the life of a community 'as actual or perceived vacancies occur in the network of relations' (Roach 1996, 63–64). The process through which a community seeks replacements for its departed, through performance, is also a process through which institutional and social memory is created. In other words, surrogation is a process of selective memory and, therefore, also of forgetting (3). Funmilayo's performances therefore represented one way through which Kalakuta memorialized its key actors, while simultaneously forgetting others. Crucially, it represented one Queen's capitalization upon this communal impulse around memory and collective self-fashioning.

Like the dynamics of individual difference on the Shrine's stage, Kalakuta's everyday thrived on the individual dynamism of its constituents. The creative energy of the individual led visitors and observers to the conclusion that Kalakuta was a sum of its parts.<sup>6</sup> The sanctioning of Funmilayo's performance in Kalakuta's speaks to the commune's unscripted processes of self-knowing. At the same time, the acceptance of Funmilayo's mimicry as part of the corpus of performances evinces her personal investment in shaping Kalakuta's public space. Funmilayo performances become instances in which one woman finds, explores, and exploits, a performance form to navigate a convoluted terrain of interests.

Internal to the dynamics of mimicry is the agency of its enactor. Mimicry necessarily places dramaturgical demands on its performer. The dramaturgy of mimicry raises questions such as: How much is enough to animate the mimicked before an audience? What are the boundaries of appropriateness and excess? What political opportunities and costs might attend a given act of mimicry? Funmilayo was one of the few Queens who personally attended to Mrs. Kuti, a position that earned her some legitimacy as a viable impersonator of Mrs. Ransome-Kuti. Funmilayo's intimacy with Mrs. Ransome-Kuti helped consolidate her place among the Queens. But, the young woman went even further. In 1981, Funmilayo became the first Queen to bear Fela a child since the mass marriage. In what appeared to be an attempt at 'performing' the dead, she named the child 'Olikoye,' the same name as late Mrs. Ransome-Kuti's first son, Dr. Olikoye Ransome-Kuti (Moore, 191). In her child's naming, we encounter in Funmilayo a keenness to mobilize narratives about her 'performance' from a discourse of artistry into one of maternity and matrilinearity. Her body's reproductive capacity unites with its productive capacity, as a site of art creation, to advance claims both to agency and primacy. In other words, that she could birth a second Olikoye powerfully underscored the potency of her artistic doubling as '*Funmilayo*, the mother of Olikoye.' One of the political implications of this dual doubling was that Funmilayo cast herself not only as surrogate, but also as incarnate, a situation that symbolically ranked her above the other Queens. Carlos Moore captures

this aspect of Funmilayo's relationship with the other women: 'Funmilayo has a proud, unapproachable bearing ... Her cool, rather haughty attitude detracts from her softly-sculpted face ... she is "not to be found in the company of the other queens ..."' (191). What is critical about Funmilayo's performative relationship to Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti is precisely that her stage appearances reveal nothing about her dynamic contribution to everyday life in Kalakuta. In fact, her 1978 appearance in the Berlin Jazz Festival says little about the complex negotiations around power and influence that she used her imitation performances to wield in Kalakuta Republic in the 1970s. Her stage appearances also do not sufficiently capture the dynamism of her character as a member of the *Afrika 70* band. To catch a glimpse of Funmilayo's person requires that one goes beyond the stage. Or, at least, that one takes the stage as a single node in a multiplicity of spatial networks connected to the Queens' everyday life.

### The significance of transient spaces

In this section, I turn my attention to what I call 'transient spaces.' By this, I mean officially regulated spaces such as airports and police stations, which the Queens occupied occasionally as members of Fela's organization and as citizens of the Nigerian state. I will analyse two scenarios: one in which a Queen, Olaide Babayale, exploits the fact of transient occupancy of an airport lobby in critique of State failure. The second scenario comes from Babayale's recollection of how the women occasionally occupied police stations to intimidate officers through verbal assaults. I want to suggest that in transient spaces we encounter attempts by the women to make autonomous political statements outside Fela's whims. The Queens' acts, such as the one I recount below, barely make it into the canon of Afrobeat 'events.' Yet, these acts demonstrate that the women occasionally circumvented Fela's agenda or even invented an agenda based on their reading of specific circumstances.

In *Fela: Kalakuta Notes*, John Collins recalls in his diary an encounter he had with Kalakutans. In the scene Collins describes, he is being informed about the *true* character of Olaide Babayale, one of Fela's women. This revelation happens in his conversation with Fela's lawyer, Feelings; during an interlude on the set of Fela's autobiographical film, *The Black President*. Collin's recalls the conversation thus:

When I told Feelings that [Olaide] was the only woman with us who was quiet and friendly he told me it was because she quietly drinks half a bottle of whiskey a day. He told me she can really do crazy things. Once at Lagos airport when Fela was travelling to Zaire, [Olaide] dropped her pants and pissed straight onto the carpet of immigration control. The officials raised hell and then she started to abuse them, saying that the toilets had been full up and there was a long queue waiting outside. She yelled at them that a modern airport should have more toilets. She caused so much trouble that Fela's departure was almost delayed. (Collins 2009, 56)

As if soiling the carpets was not emphatic enough, Olaide goes the extra step of verbally assaulting the immigration control officers, supplying them with the logic behind her actions. In verbally defending her action, Olaide rescues it from a discourse of basic physical need to one about intentionality. She consciously marks her act as a political one, a spectacle executed consciously. However, Olaide's action is not removed from the rubric of possible modes of protest practiced by the Afrobeat subculture. Fela Kuti's

1985 *You Gimme Shit I Give You Shit* is based on a similar confrontation he staged with his recording company, Decca Records. In protest of a breach of contract, Fela flooded their head office with buckets of faeces, leaving the space uninhabitable for Decca employees. Fela later took over the office space, converting it into a temporary 'Kalakuta' from where he and the commune conducted their business. Olaide's protest predates Fela's occupation of Decca.

Olaide enacted both a political and moral critique of Nigeria's postcolonial condition. On one level, her actions foreground Nigeria's colonially inherited cynicism about the 'native' who, uneducated and untravelled, understands nothing about deportment in modern society. Casting herself as that 'native,' Olaide stages a potent critique of Nigeria's postcolonial modernity at an airport, a space designated as one of Nigeria's contact points with the global-modern cultural economy. On another level, her argument was a moral one: a government that fails in its social responsibility to its citizens relinquishes the moral authority to prosecute those citizens for violating the social contract or notions of 'proper' conduct. Although disconcerting, Olaide's actions need to be appreciated against the background of the total failure of the Nigerian government, a failure that was systematically managed by pervasive military force, and by a government that derived its legitimacy from an order of violence. The disruption of public spaces also happened elsewhere and in other forms.

Like airports, police stations offered rich opportunities for the women to assert themselves publicly and in close range with the State. When Fela took his protest to police stations, he relied upon the presence and power of the Queens to intimidate the officers on duty. And, the women eagerly rose to this challenge. In an interview, Olaide reminisced, 'There is nowhere we don't yab,'<sup>7</sup> (*There is nowhere we do not abuse*). She recounted to me how the Queens temporarily claimed such spaces like police stations with nothing more than their presence and their voices. Olaide demonstrated how such a *yabis* scenario might unfold:

If we are outside, we behave.  
 But if the person wan pass im boundary; we give it to him or her ...  
 "Wetin dey happen?  
 What's wrong with you?  
 Wetin you think say you be?  
 You think say you be human being?  
 Abi wetin you carry for hand?  
 The thing wey dey you carry for body, na im I carry for body!  
 You dey crase!  
 You no get eye?" (Babayale, interview)

*(If we are outside, we behave ourselves  
 But the person wants to cross their boundary; we give abuses to him or her  
 "What is going on?  
 What is wrong with you?  
 What do think you are?  
 Do you think you are a human being?  
 Or, what do you have in your hand (referencing a gun)?  
 What you have on your body is what I have I have on mine  
 Are you crazy?  
 Are you blind?)*

Here, the use of 'boundary' to denote their perceived limits of official authority underscores the women's readiness to claim personal and collective space wherever they went. In this scenario, the women's *yabis* drew its potency from the polyphony of verbal abuses of which the above example would have constituted just a single thread. During this *yabis*, the police station as a symbol of civic control becomes momentarily demystified as the women verbally strip individual police officers of their official substance. Through these interventions, the women paved the way for Kalakuta's temporary invasion of spaces to which it would otherwise have had access as potential suspects. It is important to underline that these verbal assaults, of course, occurred with the women wearing the Queen makeup. As such, the makeup made their occupation of official spaces both feasible and effective. It is also significant that airports and police stations are spaces in which Fela wielded little influence compared to Kalakuta. At airports, government officials routinely thwarted the organization's travel plans.<sup>8</sup> In the same way, police officers played an active role in victimizing Fela and Kalakutans.<sup>9</sup> For this reason, police stations became sites of Fela's emasculation. And, even when Fela narrated police stations or army barracks as sites of trial and triumph, he was blunt about the starkness of the violence that occurred in them. *Alagbon Close* is a relevant example of Fela's precarious relationship to police stations.

As subjects of state violence, the women were first-hand witnesses to the police's penchant for inflicting needless suffering on citizens. Therefore, when the Queens took their *yabis* to these stations, they did so with an intimate understanding of the potential for extrajudicial violence in those spaces. Crucially, they were also aware of Fela's relative impotence in those spaces. Fela's diminished authority in police stations finds a parallel in airports where his artistic mobility was always threatened. Consequently, Olaide's spectacle in the airport lobby needs be understood in terms of protest but also as her reclaiming of the space as a site of Fela's diminished authority. In this way, Fela relied on the women's autonomous interventions in spaces where his authority was most tentative. Importantly, it underscores the women's negotiation of official spaces, or transitory spaces, as sites of self-expression within the collectivity of the Queens.

Despite what Olaide's story reveals about the Queens' capacity for initiative, this story only gets scribbled in the margins of history. Collins's initial documentation of the event occurs only in a diary, a fact that speaks to the marginal value ascribed to her story. While Fela controlled the ways through which his political actions have been narrativized – as in his Decca story in *You Gimme Shit* – Olaide has hitherto been unable to determine the narratives circulating about her choices nor what political value others attach to them. In fact, during our interview, Olaide was neither aware of the existence of Collins's book nor that anyone had published the incident. Despite the strategy and intention that went into her actions at the airport, they were hardly interpreted as anything beyond 'crazy.' This remains the case even though she vividly recalls even the minutest detail of the event four decades later; even when she insisted, 'It was a kind of protest' (Babayale, interview). Olaide's vocality, her articulating these actions as protest, implies not only her reclaiming the Queens as mobile and having political agency, but it also reflected her willingness to contest the narratives of the past, especially when viewing that past from a post-postcolonial present. Her political interventions and narrative investments sit beyond the purview of the Afrobeat stage, so must a critical view of her relationship to Afrobeat.

## Making room for oneself: onstage and in everyday life

The performances that formed Afrobeat's political identity unfolded not only in multiple, but also in fluid and intersecting spaces. This notion of spatiality not only argues for rethinking the Queens' contribution to the formation of Afrobeat's identity; it also argues for a greater appreciation of the women's complex negotiations agency in the worlds they inhabited beyond of the stage. Their wide range of performances demanded that they became astute readers of space and time, especially as sought to make political claims for themselves (and for the subculture) from a limited social position. This approach to space also underlines the ways in which the women animated Kalakuta, an ostensibly domestic space, as part of a larger network of performative spaces. This was especially true in the 1970s when the Shrine's was in physical proximity to Kalakuta Republic – actually, they were across the street from one another. This proximity made it so that both organizations influenced one another in potent and immediate ways. Performances at the Shrine bled into and fuelled everyday life performances in Kalakuta. It was routine to find in Kalakuta dancers rehearsing routines that would be, or had already been, performed at the Shrine. Or, to catch singers crooning their favourite Afrobeat tunes during everyday chores. It was equally commonplace for Kalakutans to employ lyrics from the organization's songs as rhetorical barbs during petty arguments (Elutunde, interview). Hence, rather than thinking about Kalakuta and the Shrine as distinct spaces, it might be more productive to understand them as intersecting and overlapping, as a continuum of performative spaces.

The spatial continuum between the Shrine, Kalakuta and other nodes of space underline the significance of everyday life in the making of performance that unfold within formal frames. In her study of theatrical jazz artists, for instance, Omi Osun Joni L. Jones suggests that exercising one's artistic muscle in everyday life prepares an artist for the spontaneity and freedom that aesthetic performance demands (2015, 26). Judith Hamera makes a similar case by suggesting that aesthetics is a form of socially embedded work that is steeped in the routines of everyday life (2006, 47). Aesthetic performances testify to and constitute artists' everyday material practices. In other words, performance always draws upon actors' everyday material relationships as well as the invisible labours and aspirations they invest in making the event.

Whether the Queens were onstage or in Kalakuta, the makeup marked them as being in a near-perpetual state of performance. The makeup – complete with its power to punctuate the everyday and elevate the theatrical – lent force to the women's quest for self-definition. In this way, the makeup performs a similar function as a mask behind which the performer 'assumes several identities and roles' (Bouttiaux and Roberts 2009, 57). The mask not only defamiliarizes everyday life, but it also conceals the usual self (Caillois 2006, 136). In this way, the mask enacts the double undertaking of concealing its bearer while granting them mobility, sometimes undetected. The makeup in this case performs a similar function as the eyeglasses with which Ndidi Emefiele, a Nigerian visual artist, endows the female characters in her paintings. 'The glasses are my strategy to give the female some form of protection,' Emefiele explains, 'It is that curtain, a veil, a mask behind which she masters the art of mobility' (2015). Emefiele asks that we contemplate the ways in which exposure or concealment of the face becomes not only an aesthetic, but also a gendered and political practice. Olaide Babayale recalls how even police

officers saluted them once they sighted the Queens in their distinctive make-up (Babayale, interview). In the same way, Mary Umude-Haverkamp, a singer in Fela's *Egypt 80* band, recalls how the women purposely applied the Queen makeup whenever they went around Lagos (Umude-Haverkamp, interview). One might therefore infer that Funmilayo's eyeglasses served a similar navigational impulse as the Queens' facial makeup, albeit within a domestic context. Making up was their proven strategy for warding off petty harassments from street urchins as well as for avoiding being disrespected as young, 'unattached' women in Lagos. It follows therefore that the women's stage performances represented a single dimension in a multitude of spaces with which they were actively engaged.

## Conclusion

African popular music in colonial and post-Independence political economies has been shaped by power contests (Waterman 1990, 8). One crucial way of thinking about performance's relationship to this notion of power is by understanding how power *enables* performance and, conversely, how performance consolidates power relations (8). For the Queens, visibility and artistic success at the Afrika Shrine was linked to larger concerns about status and stature beyond the stage. Funmilayo's imitations of Funmilayo Ransome-Kuti in Kalakuta were aimed at consolidating her power within the commune as much as they were about entertaining her fellow housemates. The Queen's stage and everyday performances illustrate important links between performance and the women's aspirations for social and economic capital within and beyond the commune.

While Kalakuta Republic dominated the Nigerian cultural imaginary for much of the 1970s, its significance as a performative space has remained underexplored. This has yielded a critical blind spot in understanding the vast landscape of performance available to the Afrobeat Queens,' and by extension, the possibilities of individual and collective agency. Also, focusing on the women's appearance onstage runs the risk of reifying the sexual aspects of what was 'women's work' in Afrobeat, especially in isolation of other political acts beyond the stage. The Queens' relationships to their multiple constituents played out spatially and, thus, allows for thinking about power dialectically. By articulating the multiple spatial frameworks within which the women circulated and performed, this essay has argued for a more complex and intersectional understanding of space, as fluid, layered and overlapping. For this reason, I have presented everyday life spaces, and the performances that occurred in those spaces, as crucial to understanding the Queens' work in Afrobeat. This mapping of space, I have suggested, is critical to an appreciation of the women's dynamic and shifting relationships with Fela Kuti and the larger Nigerian postcolonial world. I urge that the Queens' the facial makeup not only inspired performance but also sanctioned a kind of mobility to which they would otherwise have had little or no access as aged (young), classed (predominantly working class), and gendered (women) social actors. Their performances, as well as their use of space, were political precisely because they afforded them opportunities to construct their classed, gendered and sexualized selves against the backdrop of a postcolonial world, while simultaneously negotiating their place in the hierarchy of Fela's organization. On a certain level, their performances across multiple spaces represented conscious attempts at resisting the homogenizing nature of the concept of 'the Queen,' of

which the distinctive facial makeup was emblematic. On another level, their negotiation of multiple spaces can be understood as a refusal to exist as a mere cypher in Fela's ever-expanding bevy of women. Either way, their use of space needs to be understood as covert political acts, through which they struggled for self-definition within the narrow range of possibilities at their disposal. In this way, their 'politics' was, unlike Fela's concern with macro-political themes (such as anti-colonialism and anti-imperialism), tied to the protection and pursuance of self-interests and self-definition within and beyond the collective.

While I have explored the intersections between spatiality, mobility and facial makeup for a specific group of women, this work makes larger claims about women's navigation of urban, social spaces. It offers a way to rethink the ways that working-class African women not only instrumentalize facial and body adornments as strategies for social navigation; but also how these adornments in turn allow them to activate shifting enactments of the self. This politics of adornment could yield insights into the intricate relationship between performance, body aesthetics, gendered mobility and spatiality in the shadows of colonialism and patriarchy.

Let me round up with a comment on Olaide Babayale's words in the epigraph: 'We are Fela ... Wherever Fela goes, we are there.' For women who seldom spoke about their pasts, Babayale's words become a necessary punctuation of Afrobeat history, one that allows her to reimagine the self – now a grandmother and a practicing Muslim – albeit based on the exigencies of the present. Her retrospection lays claim to a different activist trajectory for the Afrobeat Queens. Her right to this claim has been, to say the least, hard-earned.

## Notes

1. Interview with the author. Lagos, Nigeria, August 16, 2014.
2. This documentary is perhaps the only published filmic documentation of this transformation process.
3. Vivien Goldman, *Thinking Africa: Afrobeat Aesthetics and the Dancing Queens* provides a good example of this idea. *Fela: From West Africa to West Broadway* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), 105–106.
4. This Manichean thinking is pronounced in the 'Afa Ojo' commandment in which the spirit of Funmilayo is said to have possessed someone in Kalakuta. In her words to Fela, she says, 'Your task is to hunt down evil. Everywhere. Wherever ... That is the meaning of your mission.' As such, Fela viewed much of his struggles as struggles against evil, which was mostly represented by the government. Moore, *This Bitch of a Life*, 277.
5. See Cheryl Johnson-Odim and Nina Mba (1997) for a thorough discussion of Mrs. Ransome-Kuti's activist and feminist work.
6. John Collins captures this dynamic in his diary entry in *Fela: Kalakuta Notes*: 'Everyone supremely self-confident, but lots of friction and skin-pain between them. Much stupidity and hurt, but much of it dramatic overstatement. Everybody's a born actor.' (Accra: KIT, 2009), 63–64.
7. Yab is a short form for *yabis*, a practice of verbal jousting or verbal abuse between Kalakutans.
8. The 1984 arrest that led to Fela's longest spell in jail happened at the Murtala Muhammed Airport in Lagos.
9. For example, in *Everything Scatter*, Fela narrates a story about a confrontation on a bus between a man and 'Fela's people.' The confrontation leads them to a police officer who enthuses about the prospect of locking Fela up in a holding cell where he would be silenced by mosquitoes. In a similar fashion, Fela's *Alagbon Close* details how the Nigerian police potentially brutalize its citizens regardless of their offenses.

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