

A Sense of Urban Africa

THIS BOOK IS ABOUT THE MORALITY AND ETHICS of musical identity and expression in a West African city: Bamako, Mali (Figure 1). Bamako is a city that incorporates multiple scales of place: national, local, translocal, and global. It is Malian, the multiethnic capital of a modern nation-state; Mande, the metropolitan center of a cultural heartland; Muslim, an urban locus of the Islamic Ecumene; and African, a continental city in a postcolonial world.¹ Bamako residents encounter these registers of place to varying degrees and in a variety of forms in their everyday lives, but such encounters, in all their diversity, always entail an ethical stance: an active positioning of the self vis-à-vis national, local, translocal, and global polities. These situated, value-inflected encounters constitute what I call an “Afropolitan ethics.” For the group of professional musicians with whom I have worked over of the past fifteen years, such ethical stances are the frequent subject of musical performance and interpretation. Music, whether performed live on stage, broadcast on the radio, or streamed over the Internet, is a privileged mode of moral expression in Bamako today. In this book, I present Malian artists and their audiences as a key demographic through which an Afropolitan ethics may be examined and elaborated, exemplifying broader trends in Africa and its diaspora.

By employing the term “Afropolitan,” I invoke a perspective on contemporary African urbanism that acknowledges the worldly orientations of the continent’s peoples and recognizes the prescriptive and volitional moorings that bind individuals to local lifeworlds. In the words of African historian and culture critic Achille Mbembe, Afropolitanism is

the awareness of this imbrication of here and elsewhere, the presence of the elsewhere in the here and vice versa, this relativization of roots and primary belongings and a way of embracing, fully cognizant of origins, the foreign, the strange and the distant, this

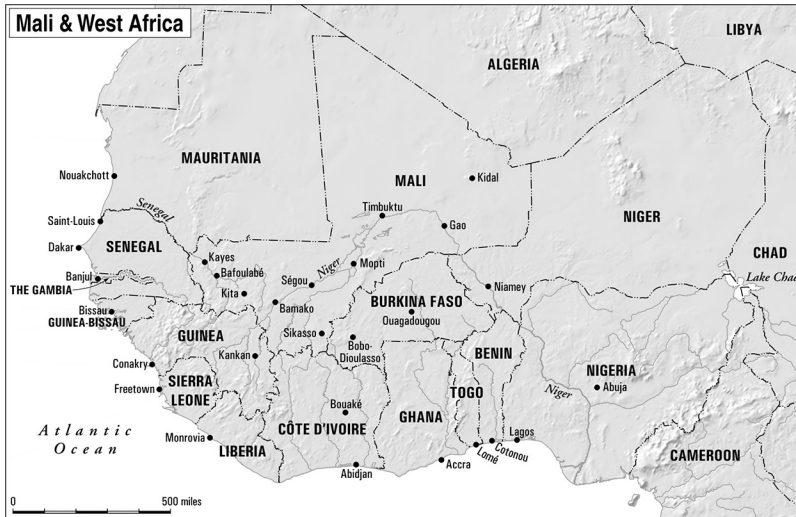


Figure 1. Mali and West Africa. Map by Philip Schwartzberg, Meridian Mapping, Minneapolis.

capacity to recognize oneself in the face of another and to value the traces of the distant within the proximate, to domesticate the un-familiar, to work with all manner of contradictions—it is this cultural sensibility, historical and aesthetic, that suggests the term “Afropolitanism.” (2010, 229)

Rejecting the undifferentiated universalism that the term “cosmopolitan” connotes (a critique that I elaborate in the conclusion of this book), Afropolitanism locates Africans’ global routes and local roots within a postcolonial and diasporic geopolitical framework. It represents particular urban African perspectives on the world that respect the specificity of cultural provenance and practice, reflect the common concerns and interests of continental and diasporic peoples, and respond to the essentialisms and injustices that continue to provincialize African peoples and inhibit their access to the international community. Through ethnography, social history, and close listening, this book elaborates the concept of Afropolitanism through the lives and works of Bamako artists. It shows, through thickly described case studies, the social and musical means by which artists reconcile local concerns with global interests and assert



Figure 2. Sidiki Diabaté in the studio. Photograph by the author.

themselves within an uneven postcolonial and diasporic world as ethical Afropolitan subjects.

To understand the ethics of Afropolitanism in Bamako, this book addresses multiple modes of self-identification and expression within the individually coherent and collectively co-present moral spheres of urban culture, profession, aesthetics, religion, economy, and politics. Take, for example, the life and work of artist Sidiki Diabaté (Figure 2). Raised in the bustle of Bamako, Sidiki belongs to a renowned clan of Mande “griots,” or *jeliw* (sing. *jeli*; the *w* indicates the plural), musical artisans practicing the time-honored art of musical panegyric and storytelling known as *jeliya* (literally, *jeli*-ness; the *ya* indicates the abstract noun).² Within this tradition, Sidiki’s family has performed the *kora* (a twenty-one-string Mande harp) for generations (see Skinner 2008a; a family history of music to which I return in chapter 3). His grandfather and namesake was a founding member of the Ensemble Instrumental National in Mali, and his father, Toumani, is a Grammy Award–winning virtuoso on the world music circuit. Sidiki is a devout Muslim and proud of his African roots. In his

music, he also reaches out to the diaspora, beyond his artisanal birthright, as a producer of hip-hop. Sidiki's moral personhood is the convergent product of his Mande heritage, Islamic faith, diasporic aesthetics, professional identity, and family history, with its postcolonial expressions of musical nationalism and globalization. These are the *moralities*—the salient local moorings and social imperatives—that locate and orient his being-in-the-world. Sidiki's *ethical* subjectivity—predicated on personal interest, choice, and agency—emerges from an irreducible investment in and negotiation of the multiple moralities that anchor his identity, a multiplicity that is the product of a particular urban African experience in the world, of his Afropolitanism.

Throughout West Africa, music has long been a privileged medium of moral and ethical identification, canonically expressed in the verbal arts of praise song, epic narrative, and didactic lyricism, but also represented in the forms and styles of instrumental performance and dance. Socially privileged, music takes on a distinct and at times contested ontology among contemporary artists and their audiences in Bamako, who, in the course of performance, traverse the generic boundaries of “tradition” and “modernity.” As members of a profession historically tied to state sponsorship and presently bound to commercial enterprise in local and global culture industries, artists are not (or not only) restricted to the secret societies or clan-based artisanal professions that once exclusively delimited musical practice in Mande society. They do, however, draw heavily on such traditional culture in their modern musical expressions, particularly when moral and ethical concerns are most salient (about which more in chapter 2).

Precisely because of their status and identity as modern musicians, Bamako artists have incorporated a variety of musical genres into their Afropolitan art world. Drawing on local, regional, and diasporic sounds, artists perform the music of *jeliya*, *wasulu* (a popular music form derived from hunter's music), *zigiri* (a musical expression of ritual Islamic praise), *takamba* (a genre of musical praise and celebration from northern Mali), hip-hop, reggae, jazz, and Afropop—not in isolation, but in a complex mix of urban music making. In this way, I describe Bamako's music culture as not only multigeneric but also *inter*-generic, as artists create and combine a great diversity of sounds within an equally rich social environment. Thus, an artist like Sidiki Diabaté may begin the day performing as a *jeli* for a life-cycle ceremony, lay down a hip-hop track as a sound engi-

neer at an afternoon studio session, and finish the day sitting in on a gig as a freelance artist at a local nightclub. When asked about these different musical identities, on stage with his *kora* or behind a mixing board in the studio, Sidiki refers to himself as a “musician,” an artist free of the constraints of convention, even as he affirms his status and identity as a *jeli*. “In my family, you are born into [*jeliya*],” he says, “but when I’m here [in the recording studio], I’m a musician, not a *jeli*.”³ The Afropolitanism of artistic practice in Bamako emerges from this generic movement and subjective multiplicity, not from any single venue, style, identity, or form of expression.

Moral Positions and Ethical Projects

In each chapter of this book, I emphasize a salient social position through which artists and their audiences imagine a diverse range of ethical projects in the contemporary Bamako art world. Thus, I present urban social space, professional identity, musical aesthetics, popular piety, the economy of culture, and (post)national politics as the existential grounds on which much performative and productive agency takes place among professional musicians in (and out of) Mali today. This list of artistic social positions is not exhaustive, but it is, I think, broadly representative of the ethico-moral lives and works of many of the artists who call Bamako their home in the world. In presenting these modes of artistic being sequentially, I do not mean to suggest that they represent isolable and exclusive categories of sociomusical existence; rather, I hope to progressively demonstrate, from one chapter to another, the co-presence, interconnections, and tensions of the multiple moralities and varied ethical projects that make up the complex lifeworlds of my Afropolitan interlocutors.

By “social position,” I mean the distinct point of view, way of acting, and mode of thought of subjects aligned by affinity (of gender, race, class, kinship, profession, and so on) and located within a varied and stratified social space. A social position is the structural framework for what Pierre Bourdieu calls *habitus*, those “schemes of perception, appreciation and action [that] enable [socially positioned subjects] to perform acts of practical knowledge based on the identification and recognition of conditional, conventional stimuli to which they are predisposed to react” (2000, 138). Phenomenologically, a social position represents a mode of being-in-the-world, a culturally modeled means of engaging with, experiencing,

and evaluating the human artifice—the “human world” of Merleau-Ponty’s thought ([1962] 2002, 403–6)—in all its variety. In this way, social positions are often encountered as givens in social space, even as they are achieved and confirmed in practice through modes of being. Such givenness shapes our sense of a stable, sustainable, and essentially *moral* world, of the immanent rightness and goodness of things as they are.

In this book, I argue that *all* modes of being, insofar as they model systems of social constraint and socially embedded agency (Bourdieu 2000, 138); of prescribed adherence to the mores and lifeways of a given society; of custom and convention (consonant with the Latin root of “morality,” *mor*); of value-oriented “stance” (Berger 2010), are potentially moral. This does not mean that one necessarily perceives a social position as inherently “right” or “good,” particularly if one encounters a social space as an outsider. Indeed, from the stranger’s vantage, social positions are also potentially immoral, shrouded in foreignness, the exotic, and the absurd. (I have more to say about this moral ambiguity, occasioned by cultural difference but also the coexistence of different and sometimes opposed modes of being within social space, in subsequent chapters.) Yet, for cultural insiders, social positions act as normative moral frameworks for agency in society. They are akin to Hegel’s concept of *Sittlichkeit*, the idea, as Theodor Adorno explains, “that the norms of the good are directly anchored and guaranteed in the life of an existing community” (2000, 12; see also Eagleton 2009, 125). Importantly, the “life” Adorno describes appears more as a collection of fragments than a coherent whole (see Adorno [1951] 2005). In other words, “the good life” cannot assume a reductive and singular moral compass; as social positions multiply within social space, so too do moralities.

As John Miller Chernoff observed in an earlier study of West African music culture: “Relying on their sense of appropriateness, [Africans] may participate equally in what we might think of as exclusive kinds of identities, perhaps being both nationalistic and tribalistic, Animist and Christian or Muslim, traditional and Westernized” (1979, 156). In Bamako today, artists are urbanites, working professionals, aesthetic critics, religious practitioners, entrepreneurs, and citizens; they are these, and they are much more. Each of these social positions presents an intentional orientation toward the world, conditioning what it means to live in the city, establish a career, make good art, deepen one’s faith, earn a living, engage in (or

oppose) civic life, and so on. As Georgina Born and David Hesmondhalgh have argued, in their postcolonial critique of the musicological disciplines:

Rather than conceiving of individual subjectivities as fully self-transparent and coherent, then, and in contrast to the apparent “unities” of collective experience, we should adopt the insights of poststructuralism and psychoanalysis and develop an awareness of the multiple musical identifications or subject positions to which individuals are susceptible as producers and consumers. (2000, 33)

With an interest in elaborating these “multiple musical identifications” in Bamako, this book asks: How do conventional forms of sociality emerge from living in and accommodating to the built environment of the city? How does one reconcile the co-presence of conflicting musical identities that, in positioning themselves in terms of given-ness and choice, tradition and modernity, produce different notions of social and economic value and musical expression? How do culturally informed aesthetic values adapt and respond, in the space of production and the course of performance, to global imaginations? How do popular religious practices, bound up with an urban African sense of place, confront (and conform to) transnational orthodoxies? How do postcolonial subjects make claims on, contest, and negotiate normative political and economic systems? And, what does it mean to make “Malian music” in a country fragmented by political dispute and internecine conflict?

Part of what I hope to accomplish in this book is to identify and elaborate certain salient modes of being and the moralities they encode as existential frameworks for the *habitus* of musical artists in Bamako today. Thus, I consider the complex amalgam of place, profession, artistry, piety, economy, and politics as social positions that give existential substance to this particular urban African “art world” (Becker 1982). This move “beyond culture” (Gupta and Ferguson 1992) to a more socially varied and morally multiple anthropology, resists reductive analysis, emphasizing social pluralism over cultural relativism. By this I mean that in any given context in which multiple modes of being are at play (as they always are), all moralities are not equal. Sometimes this is a question of foregrounding one social position over another, as when Sidiki says, “In the studio, I am a musician, not a *jeli*”; while at other times claims to social positions may themselves be contested: Does your clan name give you the right to

perform this music? Are you the right kind of Muslim? What does your claim to intellectual property mean in the informal marketplace? Who defines “patriotism” in a time of internecine conflict and crisis? My point is not, however, to deny commensurability, or the concept of culture as an anthropological hermeneutic.⁴ My argument is that while music culture in Bamako does encompass multiple moralities, articulated through multiple modes of being, it remains both coherent and dynamic. It is precisely this sociospatial coherence and dynamism, in which artists performatively negotiate the possibilities and constraints of a plurality of social positions in urban social life, that I call an “Afropolitan ethics.”⁵

Read as a whole, the case studies presented in this book reveal a particular conjuncture of morally inflected social positions and ethically oriented subjective agency observed in the lives and works of Bamako artists. This articulation of the conditional and agential exemplifies what Raymond Williams calls a “structure of feeling,” or a paradigmatic patterning of social disposition and activity in a given social space, or “culture” ([1961] 2001, 64–88). As Stuart Hall explains, one discovers such “patterns of a characteristic kind . . . not in the art, production, trading, politics, the raising of families, treated as separate activities,” but in the way this “complex of practices” incorporate “the underlying patterns which distinguish [them] in any specific society at any specific time” (Hall 1980, 60). In this book, I use the term “Afropolitan” to qualify the structure of feeling shared and experienced within a community of artists and their interlocutors in Bamako, Mali. Before elaborating further on this Afropolitanism, however, I will say a few words about the “sensuous human praxis . . . through which men and women make history” (63) in places like Bamako today.

In her seminal treatise on existentialism, *The Ethics of Ambiguity* ([1948] 1976), Simone de Beauvoir argues that subjective agency, intentionally directed at the world, is both socially emergent and contingent, or “positioned” in Bourdieu’s terms. She calls such agency “projects,” resonant with Hall’s history-making praxis and what anthropologist Michael Jackson identifies as the culturally relative self-making impulse to claim the right to call the world one’s own (Jackson 1998, 20). Projects are the means by which people act to consciously (re)produce the human artifice; they are vital acts of “natality,” constituting what Hannah Arendt calls the *vita activa* of the human condition ([1958] 1998); they, simply put, make being be (de Beauvoir [1948] 1976, 71). As such, projects move

us from a discussion of social position and modality to one of subjective agency and intentionality, but this should not be read as a facile distinction between structure and practice. De Beauvoir writes, “If it is true that every project emanates from subjectivity, it is also true that this subjective movement establishes by itself a surpassing of subjectivity. Man can find a justification of his own existence only in the existence of other men” (72). In other words, existential projects are inherently intersubjective and are, thus, contingent on the intentional interests and actions of others. For de Beauvoir, as for Bourdieu, there can be no pure intentionality, no purposeful thought or action that is uncoupled from social space, unconditioned by social position.

Yet, projects can never be fully contained by the structures (positions and modes) of society. The socially emergent character of existential projects makes them “ambiguous,” insofar as they remain open to the possibility of indeterminate outcomes, irreducible to any individual interest or desire. It is our ability to give purposeful shape to this horizon of possibility, subject to context and circumstance, that defines an “ethics.” As de Beauvoir writes, “There is an ethics only if there is a problem to solve” (18). The “ethics of ambiguity” is, thus, the ability to meaningfully act upon social space—to solve a problem—without denying the intentional agency of others or one’s own intentionality. “To will oneself free,” de Beauvoir writes, “is also to will others free” (73). By contrast, to deny one’s own freedom, or to refuse the right of others to act upon the world, is to “[harden] in the absurdity of facticity” (71), what Jean-Paul Sartre calls the “bad faith” of an excessively moralistic society (Sartre [1956] 2001).⁶

Toward an Afropolitan Ethics

These ethico-moral concerns are consonant with Achille Mbembe’s important account of postcolonial subjectivity (1992), a rendering of African modes of identification within a particular structure of feeling—the postcolony—at the end of the twentieth century:

The postcolony is made up not of one coherent “public space,” nor is it determined by any single organizing principle. It is rather a plurality of “spheres” and arenas, each having its own separate logic yet nonetheless liable to be entailed with other logics when operating in certain specific contexts: hence the postcolonial

“subject” has had to learn to continuously bargain [*marchander*] and improvise. Faced with this plurality of legitimizing rubrics, institutional forms, rules, arenas, and principles of combination, the postcolonial “subject” mobilizes not just a single “identity,” but several fluid identities which, by their very nature, must be constantly “revised” in order to achieve maximum instrumentality and efficacy as and when required. (5)

Like Mbembe, my attention is drawn to the bargaining, improvisation, mobilizations of identity, and intersubjective revisions that characterize the ethical projects of African subjects in the world today. And, like Mbembe, I perceive popular culture as a particularly rich space through which such projects articulate and develop; though I do not entirely share his conception of popular culture’s statist “promiscuity” and aesthetic “vulgarity” in contemporary Africa (see also Ivaska 2011; about which more in chapter 6). Following Mbembe’s more recent work (Nuttall and Mbembe 2008; Mbembe 2010), I am also interested in locating post-coloniality, “that [condition] of societies recently emerging from the experience of colonization” (Mbembe 1992, 2), within a broader sociospatial configuration of continental urbanism, itself part of an emergent global southern modernity (to paraphrase Nuttall and Mbembe 2008, 24–26). Thus, I return, as a gesture toward the chapters that follow, to the concept of Afropolitanism.

For Mbembe, Afropolitanism emerges from a decentered and dynamic idea of Africa. It is Africa conceived as a site of passage, and reproduced through circulation and mixing (2010, 224). It is what he calls an “interval,” or “an inexhaustible citation susceptible to multiple forms of combination and composition” (226). Presenting an archaeology of this African interval, Mbembe invokes prehistory, stating that the continent has always been characterized by itinerancy, mobility, and displacement (227); that is, Africa, present and past, possesses, for him, an irreducible heterogeneity based on movements and migrations, appropriations and accommodations, imitations and inventions through the millennia. This idea of Africa leads Mbembe to a vision of African renaissance. He moves from a critique of what he considers to be an earlier politics and aesthetics of “loss,” especially in the literary canon of Négritude, to one of reimagination and renewal (224)—a “new dawn” suggested by the title of his book, *Sortir de*

la grande nuit (French, “Out of the darkness,” an homage to the late Frantz Fanon). This renewal is profoundly syncretic and incorporative, building on Africa’s inherent social and cultural diversity, from which new subjective potentialities—new ethical projects—may emerge, on the continent and within its proliferating diasporas.

Mbembe’s account of Afropolitanism is essentially ethical, urging us to attend to the varied conceptions, emergences, and orientations of existential projects in the modern African world. It is in this way that he is able to speak of the Afropolitan’s radical breaks with the past, predilection for syncretism, and desire for renaissance and reinvention. I find this perspective compelling and rich in its capacity to account for and elucidate a wide range of urban African social life. Others, however, would beg to differ. Indeed, the idea of Afropolitanism has received a great deal of critical attention in popular media of late, variously recommending and rejecting its use as an empirical marker and conceptual tool in a (broadly defined) African world (for an overview, see Eze 2014, 239–41). In most definitions, Afropolitanism refers to a concurrence of the urban and global in (and out of) contemporary Africa, to a mode of identification emergent from what AbdouMaliq Simone has called “the worlding of African cities” in the twenty-first century (2001b). For some (such as Mbembe), Afropolitanism intersects with themes of continental renaissance, creativity, mobility, circulation, and exchange, bound to an ontological rejection of extant modes of (post)colonial being-in-the-world (see also Gikandi 2010). For others, Afropolitanism reinscribes reductive and stereotyped ideas of “African-ness,” now coupled with the aestheticized subject positions and commoditized cultural styles of a diasporic and urbane African elite (see Tveit 2013 and Dabiri 2014; compare Tuakli-Wosornu 2005).

Cognizant of this critical discourse around an emergent (and contested) keyword in the Africanist lexicon, my approach to Afropolitanism emphasizes a broader field of social practice, whose scope, scale, and, ultimately, location is continuously being negotiated, expanded, collapsed, claimed, and contested. This is why I follow Mbembe in presenting the Afropolitan as a “site” of existential practice, or, in the terms employed here, an ethics of urban African being-in-the-world. Afropolitanism is too fractious, too elusive to operate as an essential (and essentially moral) mode of identification. The term does, however, effectively bring together multiple subjective valences that conditionally converge to produce an

affective presence, or what I call (via Raymond Williams) an urban African structure of feeling. In this way, the Afropolitan is as ethical as it is multiply moral, as intentional as it is irreducible.

To call the urban artists whose lives and works I discuss in the pages that follow Afropolitan in this broader ethical and moral sense is to attend to both a mode of identification and the polity of which it is an intersubjective part. It is to observe an urban African context—Bamako—that encompasses the many social positions and existential projects city dwellers claim and create every day. It is to this Afropolis that I turn in chapter 1, but, before I do, I will say a few concluding words about this Afropolitan sense of place. By calling Bamako an Afropolis I invoke an anthropology of African urbanism that considers the ways in which cities like Bamako are rooted and routed in the world (see, for example, De Boeck and Plissart 2004; Ferguson 1999; Larkin 2008; Meintjes 2003; Perullo 2011; Simone 2004; Shipley 2013; and Whitehouse 2012a). Yet, recent theoretical accounts of the modern African city have tended to favor narratives of displacement over emplacement, of imaginative ethics over established moralities. “Cities,” Achille Mbembe and Sarah Nuttall argue, “are subjects *en fuite*. They always outpace the capacity of analysts to name them” (2008, 25). In their study of the “elusive metropolis” of Johannesburg, Mbembe and Nuttall identify this excess of signification in the “multiplicity of registers” that continually (re)produce the urban African experience. Like Johannesburg, Bamako appears similarly “elusive,” as registers multiply within and beyond its urban landscape. As I observed at the outset of this introduction, Bamako is Malian, Mande, Muslim, and African; and it is still more than all of this.

My argument in this book is not to deny such Afropolitan (or more broadly urban) elusiveness, but to assert that people in cities like Bamako routinely operate across multiple scales of place and modes of being to cultivate intersubjective coherence in their everyday lives (what Loren Kruger calls “urban *allusiveness*,” 2013, 17). Put differently, I echo the questions posed by anthropologist Bruce Whitehouse in his insightful study of dignity and belonging among migrant urbanites in an (which could be any) African city: “Why is it that, even as lives are becoming increasingly mobile, the process of identity construction for many people has become increasingly circumscribed by territorial boundaries? If globalization is associated with deterritorialization, how do we explain concurrent processes of reterritorialization around the world?” (2012a, 23). In the pages

that follow, I examine the musical means by which artists creatively and critically reposition and reorient themselves within a complex but no less coherent moral community; in a world that is lived, conceived, and perceived from an urban African perspective; in a city saturated with speech, song, instrumental jams, public broadcast, and punctuated cacophony. It is to these Bamako sounds that I now turn.