



Musical borderlands: A cultural perspective of regional integration in Africa

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ABSTRACT

This paper deploys a notion of “musical borderlands” to understand the practice and meaning of music production in an African context. This concept stresses flow rather than stasis, and liminal not dualistic thinking and being; it also relates economic and social practices to cultural content. It shows how Francophone (West and Central) African participants in hip hop music use translocal networks to sustain their community, and demonstrate dynamic relationships between material production and social reproduction. This enables new socialities to emerge with the potential to rearticulate political relations, which reaffirm trans-local, trans-urban, trans-border solidarities.

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Introduction

High taxation and tariffs as well as complex visa procedures significantly illustrate a government bureaucracy that impedes a facilitative framework for the circulation of goods and people within a region. From this perspective, it can be argued that public officials and authorities in West Africa have poorly invested in the music sector. In fact, and in spite of forming an economic community (ECOWAS), in the ‘West African ensemble’, the management of copyright remains deprived of any regional harmonisation. Such a failed coordination illustrates the constraints created by a national approach, one that challenges the imperative of producing musical goods for wider markets than domestic ones. To confront this, the concept of “musical borderlands” is here suggested to read and render visible regional integration in Africa as expressed in the practices of their “ordinary” citizens that are already at play across borders.

Researchers have recently considered “borderlands [as] vanguard landscapes of globalisation” (Konrad & Nicol, 2011, p. 70); in particular historians, who have been at the forefront of borders and borderlands studies, recognise that Africa, as the continent with the youngest borders, has demonstrated “the most buoyant borderland historiography” (Baud & Van Schendel, 1997, p. 235). Going beyond the conventional focus of borderlands literature on material frontiers, this article stresses an active role of African musical borderlands, and inquires into “what borderlands can teach us about ways of conceptualising social space and local identity” (Baud & Van Schendel, 1997, p. 241).

This paper is structured in three major sections. First, it addresses issues relative to the planning of the lands and borders of African music, with the objective of stressing the use of a relational thinking as well as the value of practical planning in approaching this field. As musical borderlands are to be revealed through practice, a second section argues for an appropriate contextualisation of entrepreneurial and networking practices. Linking cultural products and practices with the social conditions of production, the third part provides an incursion into the material and symbolic borderlands of Francophone (West and Central) African

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Hip Hop, to make a case against fixed and dualistic concepts and approaches of borderlands.

Planning the lands and borders of African music

Contrary to the partial realities of the Global North, most policies concerning the cultural economy in African contexts have been undertaken at the national level; there is, in other words, a prominent 'national land' of planning, marked by a state-centred approach, regarding cultural production in general, and musical production in particular. The concept of musical borderlands is here suggested on the premise that African music, as a sector, can be theoretically and symbolically relevant for it can significantly frame and inform processes of regional integration, through its unique economic and cultural perspective.

Relational thinking of the lands of African music

The proposed analysis of African musical borderlands draws on relational thinking, as "a promising theoretical avenue to explore the contemporary mobile world and its circuit of commodities, people and ideas" (Jones, 2009, p. 493). This paper weaves dialogic imports from cultural geography (Nash, 2000, p. 654) with the literature on borders and borderlands studies, while reconciling the material prominence of the latter with its symbolic perspective as developed in its Chicano strand. The intention here is to draw attention to the non-economic as well as non-material drivers of cross-borders cooperation, through a relational analysis (one that tries to avoid false dualisms), concerned with the linkages across, via communities of practice, which mobilise and construct new forms of solidarities (invisible to binary thinking).

Relational thinking of spaces such as borderlands insists on "the open-ended, actor-centred, and mobile politics of spatiality", while explicitly challenging "claims for a political economy of scale" (Jones, 2009, p. 488). Considering that both macroeconomic phenomena and processes occurring on the ground actually shape development (Scott & Storper, 2003), the argument is to go beyond a state-centred planning of the cultural economy, thus putting an emphasis on practices. The existing planning framework – related to general public policies as well as the ones about the cultural economy – remains formulated from a specific government related view. Therefore, this paper develops from the recent invitation of planning studies scholars for planners to "profoundly re-orientate their view and re-direct their perspective towards an outside-inward approach: this would involve [...] starting from the practical basics and with reference to the

aims of key stakeholders in civic and business society" (Boelens, 2010, p. 30).

While research in management studies have proven to be useful for network analysis and the inquiry into agency and entrepreneurship (Boggs & Rantisi, 2003, p. 114), the following examination of African musical borderlands further elaborates on the precise nature of how space and actions are co-constituted, while being sensitive to particular contextual constraints. It thus stresses the multiple dimensions of 'borderlands' as a conceptual space of intersections between locational, situational, aesthetic, material, and entrepreneurial endeavours. As such, this perspective is aligned with a body of work that looks at this relational element of practice and of regional development, while highlighting the dynamic relationships between material production and social reproduction. Challenging dualistic approaches in favour of relational modes, the following analysis furthers network and community studies, by connecting economic and social practices to cultural content.

Practical planning of the borders in African music

There is a paucity of reliable and quantifiable information on the potential of an African music economy, both at national and regional levels, which led to a dualistic thinking in development policy that has not seriously looked at practices. This calls for elucidating the informal and invisible practices more fully; besides, it resonates with Sandercock's engagement with the invisible discourses of the borderlands and the relevance of this metaphor for planning theory and practice (Sandercock, 1995, p. 77). Including new voices – those of non-planners – into the discourse of planning theory (Sandercock, 1995), can be paralleled with the critique of state-centred approaches in border studies literature, while also resonating with the call made in Chicano literature on borderlands for an "epistemology of multiplicity" (Gómez-Peña, 1993). Indeed, if borderlands are these 'in-between' places marked by constant exchange, negotiation, and partnership (Zutshi, 2010, p. 595), then we need to challenge the governmentally focused perspective of planners both in practice and in theory. Sidestepping duality between macro- and micro-, this calls for an active focus on actors (Boelens, 2010, pp. 35–8).

The conceptualisation of borderlands as a metaphor in planning theory and practice (Sandercock, 1995) echoes the political economic use of "analytic borderlands" in addressing the global urban economy (Sassen, 2002). Through this concept, Sassen encourages a focus on the actual production process, acknowledging borderlands as spaces constituted in terms of discontinuities that reveal the multiplicity of economies and work cultures. Similarly, this article

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