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The Cosmopolitan Nativist: Fela Anikulapo-Kuti and the Antinomies of Postcolonial Modernity

Tejumola Olaniyan

Even in death, the Nigerian Fela Anikulapo-Kuti (1938-97) remains, without doubt, Africa's most controversial popular musician, and the one with perhaps the largest following outside the continent. Today, no reputable online compact disc store is without a generous sample of the musician's recordings, many of which appear to be no more than opportunistic compilations designed to cash in on the renewed popular interest in the musician since his death. Fela, as his fans call him, is renowned for his distinctive "Afrobeat" sound (itself a masterly blend of diverse forms), his politically charged lyrics and anti-establishment politics, his offbeat charismatic figure, his many encounters with the Nigerian authorities leading to his repeated harassments, prosecutions, and imprisonments, and his general flamboyantly nonconformist lifestyle. Such a spectacular figure is already a sure candidate for uncomplicated and one-dimensional appropriations, especially given the pressures of "watered-down" labeling demanded by mass culture marketing, not to say marketers. In any case, the point could be made in the latter's defense that those cash-and-carry profiles in popular encyclopedias and "world beat" pamphlets pretend to no higher purpose than advertisement, that plainly motivated and unashamedly biased genre of persuasion. But even otherwise useful studies have been understandably awed by this or that particular side of Fela, sacrificing a much more robust assessment as a result (Grass, Stanovsky, Idowu).

The frank admission needs to be made right away that an even-tempered critique of such a multisided popular artist who excites little but untethered passions is indeed a great challenge to thought. Yet Fela's musical practice is too textured to gloss and discipline into a univocal narrative, no matter how alluring that option is. I suggest that a chastening, and therefore potentially more rewarding, study of that musical practice is best pursued by examining what I identify as its hallmark: its "antinomies."

Musically, Fela was an accomplished musician but his extramusical or extramusical reputation dominated and still dominates that of the musical. He thoroughly enjoyed this extramusical reputation and repeatedly stoked its fire in pronouncements and lifestyle, but he nevertheless struggled laboriously in each (of his trademark one-song) album to subvert and redirect that attention to the musical. He did this by emphasizing "pure sound" in two ways: (1) he sang only on one side of an album, while the other side is devoted entirely to instrumentals; and (2) even the side devoted to the song is prefaced by an extended instrumental "introduction," further reducing the overall time allotted to the sensational, rhetorically ostentatious, and politically inflaming lyrics. At the level of *personal lifestyle*, he was an indefatigable campaigner against tyranny but ran a strictly hierarchical

household, much like a palace, though with hardly the structural checks and balances of model indigenous Yoruba monarchies. He was the son of Nigeria's foremost nationalist feminist (Johnson-Odim and Mba), but he was also the one who gave many boys of my generation a language for our sexism, and made that sexist language extremely musically pleasurable. In terms of *political ideology*, he was a cultural nationalist, but his main intellectual props were Kwame Nkrumah and Walter Rodney, two decidedly left-leaning and anti-cultural nationalist intellectuals. The critic, and Fela's friend, John Howe hints at these antinomies when he notes that Fela "had no interest in perfect philosophic correctness," and that "contradictions of a sometimes painful sort were apparent in Fela's own life and household" (130).

A figure of crisis, antinomy describes a contradiction between conclusions or inferences drawn from equally warranted or necessary principles. It marks the radically dispersed heterogeneity of desire, and a reaffirmation of the irrepressible bursting seams of the social in the face of the usually disciplining aspirations of thought, of the knowing subject. A "fundamental aporia" (McCole 295), antinomy is the condition of incommensurability between judgments that seem just as valid, coherent, or essential. The antinomies of Fela's art, because they are persistently and publicly given full play at the levels of thought as well as praxis, underscore their immediate sociality in a dependent postcolony's unequal social relations within, and with the outside world. It is for this reason that closely studying the antinomies promises larger insights about cultural production in the condition of an unresponsive but nevertheless enticing modernity called postcoloniality.¹ The especially interesting antinomy I will explore at some length here is Fela's unyielding nativism—his insistence on privileging "authentic" African paradigms and institutions in search of solutions to many African problems today, from corrupt leadership to collapsed health-care system; as well as his equally relentless cosmopolitanism—a deliberate anchor of his practice and passions in the transnational and global. For him, "authentic" postcolonial music, especially a committed political music, can only speak as a "cosmopolitan nativist," borrowing tools from wherever in defense of African ways of knowing and being conceived as embattled by Euro-American cultural imperialism.² In this conception, postcolonial musical modernity, indeed postcolonial modernity, is best theorized as an aporia pulling together two or more apparently contradictory paradigms. In a condition of aporia, social and political action can only be contingent and continuously subject to revision; only a full affirmation of this in both thought and praxis can make aporia enabling.

Tyrannical leadership, political instability, flagrant disregard for rules, and entrenched nepotism as currency of official transactions, economic malformation, epochal inequalities between the few and the many, impossible cities, recurrent devastating interethnic wars, anti-state rebellions, and attendant heart-breaking dispersal of populations: these are a few of the components of postcolonial African history that catalyze Fela's nativist exertions. His exasperations seem to be not so much with the crises as with

their seeming permanence, their *normalization*. Because he reads this contemporary “crisis-as-norm” as without precedent in the entire preslavery history of Africa,³ he invests that period and the “African past” and “traditions” more vaguely, with great polemical power as potential ameliorative capital. Perhaps it is understandable then that Fela strategically locates the origin of the African crisis in slavery and colonialism. The question he asks is apparently the simple interrogative, “Why Black Man Dey Suffer” (1971), but which he also means as explorative by the absence of the required question mark. In either case, his answer literally sets the stage for his obsession with reclamation and reinstatement of authentic African subjectivity:

We dey sit down for our land jeje
We were living peacefully in our land
 We dey mind our business jeje
Minding our own business
 Some people come from far away land
 Dem [**They**] fight us and take away our land
 Dem take our people and spoil all our towns
 Na since then trouble start
That’s when our troubles started

 Dem take our culture away from us
 Dem give us culture we no understand
 Black people we no [**don’t**] know ourselves
 We no know our ancestral heritage

Fela would repeatedly return to this “original scene of the crime” to draw from the justified anger at European despoliation of an innocent Africa that his narrative calculatedly authorizes.

Although the album *Why Black Man Dey Suffer* was released in 1971 and thus would seem to support the accepted wisdom that Fela’s extended sojourn in the United States in 1969 and his initiation into the passions of the Black Power revolt led to his cultural nationalism, the fact is that he had been groping for such an ideology and a new musical form well before the trip. A year earlier, faced with the popularity of imported soul music and its bland imitations, he had been stricken with the bug of racial and nationalist consciousness. Even at the risk of playing to empty clubs in Ghana or Nigeria where he lived off and on between 1967 and 1969, he resolutely refused to capitulate to the new trend. In 1968, he thought long and hard and concluded with determination: “I have to be very original” and “must identify with Africa. Then I will have an identity” (Moore 75). He became dissatisfied with “highlife jazz” as the name of his music, and began a search for a new one, “a real African name that is catchy” (Moore 75). He called a press conference and announced the name, *Afrobeat*, and established a club, *Afro-Spot*, the prefix “Afro” signifying the emerging consciousness. It was the next year, 1969, that the opportunity to travel to the United States presented itself.

Fela's experience during the trip decisively shaped his groping cultural nationalism of the preceding year and half. This was the height of the Black Power, a composite movement of black political radicalism and cultural nationalism. Sandra Isidore, an African American Black Panther party activist in Los Angeles, introduced him to the literature of black struggle such as Malcolm X's autobiography, and he changed profoundly. With his immersion in the issues of black struggles for civil rights and police persecution of activists across the country, Fela rediscovered his blackness and Africanness in a radically new way. He made the connection between black oppression in the United States and the dependent "independence" of African countries from colonial rule, and then linked both back to the trans-Atlantic slave trade. He arrived at what he called his ideology of "Blackism," a "new Africanism" (Moore 29, 89) characterized by a valorization of Africa's ancient heritage, a critical juxtaposition of that heritage with the iniquities of the present as caused largely by the continent's historical unequal encounter with the West, a inchoate mix of both knee-jerk and selective suspicion of Western modernity, and a presentation of a theatrical, idiosyncratic mix of magic and face-masking as "African Spirituality" or "religion." In the contexts of live performances, public lectures, interviews, and other such showbiz occasions for grandstanding that any seasoned and hugely egotistical pop star knows so well how to manipulate, the features of his ideology frequently turn out as no more than a polemical opposition between Africa and Europe, black and white. In this scenario, Africa is often presented as in the death-grip of cultural deracination by Westernization, with Fela the Afrocentric⁴ liberator wielding the heavy cudgel of venomous satire against the agents of Western cultural imperialism, native or foreigner.

Much more popular than "Why Black Man Dey Suffer" is "Lady" (1972), lampooning overly Westernized African women who thereby have become much less African, coyly preferring to be called "Lady" rather than the unpretentious label "woman." This Lady mindlessly sold to colonial Victorian values rides roughshod over "African" womanly virtues of obedience to her husband in "anything he say," and, more alarming, calls for equality with men. The world is no longer what it used to be, for Lady has become master, "lady na master!" Overly Westernized African men got their own censure a year later in "Gentleman." Clad in a three-piece suit with hat to match in steaming tropical Lagos, and displaying excessive and sham civility at the slightest pretext, this African man can only be of dubious pedigree, a white man in black skin. To the captivating repetitive chorus of "I no be gentleman at all o," Fela asserts his own manly and earthy authenticity: "I be Africa man, original." The phenomenon of skin bleaching that was rampant among urban Nigerian youths of the 1970s and early 1980s—a practice Fela reads as self-hatred and craving for Caucasian standards of beauty—is savaged in "Yellow Fever" (1976). The yellowness that results from bleaching he articulates as a disease by adroitly playing upon words and linking it to malaria fever infection, the local name of which is "yellow fever." In Fela's larger scheme of things, Africa as a whole is infected with the fever of Westernization, of which this craze for Caucasoid

look is just one instance. In “African Message” (1977), the indigenous “chewing stick” cleans the teeth much neater than toothpaste, and the local habit of using water is much more hygienic than the foreign-introduced toilet paper threatening to supplant it (Fairfax 294-95). “Suffering and Smiling” (1978) ridicules Africans held in the thrall of foreign religions such as Christianity and Islam. As Fela sees it, abandoned African deities are not deceived; hence contemporary African prayers remain unanswered as Africans bow sheepishly to this and that alien divinity. On the album cover art, suffering Africans, against pleas by their own beckoning deities, cart all their resources to the altars of Islam and Christianity, to the broad grins of the priests of those religions: the Bishops and the Imams. What Africans get in return are cheap illusions that, as the lyrics say, tell them to accept their sufferings in this world so they can “enjoy for heaven.” “Why not African religion,” the cover art asks, in Fela’s characteristic omission of the question mark, and reminds us, in case we have forgotten, that the arranger, composer, and producer of the record is Fela, “The Undisputed Black Mind.” And in a wild hit, “Perambulator” (1983), the solution to the sorry state of modern healthcare delivery in Africa lies unequivocally in “African medicine”:

English man go say “pile,” Yoruba man go say jedi-jedi
 doctors want to do something about it
 doctors must give you capsule. *Chorus: no solution!*
 doctor must give you tablet (*ch.*)
 doctor must give you mixture (*ch.*)
 injection must enter your nyash [**butt**] (*ch.*)
 doctor carry you go theater (*ch.*)
 him take de knife slice your nyash
 [**he operates on your butt**] (*ch.*)
 I say solution dey for African medicine
I say the solution is in African medicine
 in one week jedi-jedi go start to run away
One week, and you are cured!
 we must learn to respect our African medicine
 our doctors must go to learn how to make research
 but, but, but dem go dey perambulate and dem still dey *Chorus: same
 same place!*
 they go dey perambulate and dem still dey (*ch.*)
 see jedi (*ch.*); malaria (*ch.*); gonorrhoea (*ch.*), and syphilis (*ch.*)
 dem no fit do dem (*ch.*) **they can’t cure all these diseases**
 me, I dey tell them (*ch.*) **I keep telling them**
 our medicine better (*ch.*) **Our medicine is better**
 hey get name for am (*ch.*) **but they have a demeaning name for it:**
 “herbal medicine” (*ch.*)

Even if enthralling lyricism alone were our yardstick of measurement, it would still be extremely difficult not to qualify and complicate Fela’s nativism, in spite of himself. Take, for instance, the language itself of the lyrics. Fela began the first phase of his musical career singing mostly in his

native language, Yoruba, and then some English and that mixture of English and indigenous languages called “pidgin” (Olaniyan, “Fela”).⁵ This was the decade of the 1960s. Some of his recordings of this phase include the LP *Fela Ransome Kuti with the Koola Lobitos* (1969) and *Live at the Afro-Spot* (also 1969), with titles of tracks such as “Ololufe” (Lover), “Mio fe” (I don’t want), “Obinrin” (Woman), “Fine Fine Baby,” “Araba’s Delight,” and so on.

Ideologically, Fela’s musical practice at this phase exhibited nothing of the concerns for Africa or blackness that he later developed. He was at this point what one might call, very charitably, an apolitical bohemian artist. He was more concerned about aesthetic innovation as such, unanchored to or by any express ideological commitment. His later wholesale adoption of pidgin in the 1970s ironically coincided with his vociferous assumption of nativism. “Ironically” because pidgin, located in the interstitial space where English meets the indigenous language, is a potent denativizing, transethnic and transnational mass language. It disciplines both the foreign and the local within the seething cauldron of sprawling urbanization where only self-conscious and heroic periodic renewals are able to shore up—and even then, in reshaped “modernized” forms—nativist or ethnic loyalties. Pidgin’s syntax is African but most of its vocabulary is English; in spite of this huge indebtedness to the foreign, it nevertheless provides a comfortable, less threatening psychological space between the potent mix—English and the diverse indigenous languages—that characterize Nigeria’s urban areas, and indeed cities along the West African coast. It is experienced—and welcomed—as a language of a “cosmopolis” larger than the domains of one’s native tongue but which nevertheless bears the imprint of local agency, unlike English, which is yet to shed its image as an imposed, alien language. But both can only raise a deconstructive query against any project of African nativism conducted in them.

For most of the 1960s, Fela and his band, the Koola Lobitos, an impossible name fashioned in the manner of American pop music bands, were playing the hybrid form, *highlife jazz*. This was a composite that synthesizes an older form, highlife, with jazz. Highlife emerged on the West African coast in the interwar years from the Africanization of imported European martial music composed of instruments such as trumpets, trombones, tuba, and parade drums, while jazz became the new music from abroad after the end of the Second World War (Collins 17-31). Highlife, with important figures such as E. T. Mensah of Ghana and Victor Olaiya and Bobby Benson of Nigeria, already had a substantial following among the educated elite. There was also a comparatively smaller audience for jazz, but there was none at all for highlife jazz. Even Fela’s mother admonished him to “start playing music your people know, not jazz” (Moore 73, Veal 8-13). She could have meant any of the existing urban popular forms such as highlife, Juju, Apala or Sakara, but Fela stuck to the apparently new and strange mixture, highlife jazz. The strangeness of the sound or sonic elements was attenuated by the lyrics, which were often in Yoruba and occasionally in English or Pidgin; and the subjects were usually familiar ones such as love, fidelity, friendship, or the pressures of city life. After Fela’s

ideological rebirth, the subjects changed dramatically, but much less so the sound.

The surname Ransome-Kuti became Anikulapo-Kuti (as Fela would say, a meaningless English name for a meaningful African name: “one who carries death in his pouch”), and Koola Lobitos became Africa 70, but the very Westernized orchestra with the trumpets, saxophones, and keyboards all remained, to create the ingenious form, Afrobeat: a fusion of indigenous Yoruba rhythms and declamatory chants, highlife, the funky soul of James Brown, and jazz. Fela’s music became more muscular but also supple, with the plain and chantable pidgin aiding an emphasis on improvisation and spontaneity in the choice of subjects, the articulation of the individual instruments in the band, and the incorporation of scat-singing in which nonsense syllables, whoops, yodels, and other vocal devices replace the words of a song. As the musician scrutinized the unjust social relations of a dependent capitalist state, the subjects of the songs became more comparatively cerebral, and their mode of delivery pedagogic. The music as a whole became more corporeal, calling on much physicality in dancing,⁶ and the presentation more dramatic and sensational—features that had the effect of underwriting mass accessibility among his immediate main audience base: the wide spectrum of the Western-educated, from the elementary school drop-out to university professors.

Before Afrobeat, existing musics such as highlife, but more decisively Juju and Apala, have fashioned for the Yoruba body a tempo that idealized royalty in bearing, a stately elegance, and a majestic gravity. This is consummated by the musics’ panegyric form, in which only the superlative praise, and then some more, is due the elite and the wealthy. Juju music is virtually impotent outside of a context that glorifies and mythologizes wealth and status and, in the final analysis, considers poverty a kind of curse. Juju suggests to its listeners dreams and visions of everlasting grandeur. Afrobeat subverts this constructed native ideal with its much faster and therefore ruder tempo. The capacious *agbada* or meter-high *gele*⁷ that is supposed to “rock gently to the beat” find no regard here. The class of the rich that is showered with praises in Juju is the same that is relentlessly abused and lampooned in Afrobeat. Juju trains your vision on the end goal of all aspiration, defined as the acquisition of limitless wealth, many children, and high status; its implied horizon does not extend beyond the immediate culture where those elements carry great cultural capital. On the other hand, Afrobeat interpellates you as a member of the oppressed lower classes, insistently reminds you of the harshness of your life, and now and then shows you in very bad light those who profit from the harsh system, so that you can confront them; its horizon is simultaneously transcultural, transnational, and transcontinental. It is the most cosmopolitan of Nigerian popular musics.

But *how* do we read the antinomies that constitute and structure Fela’s musical practice? I have been using “antinomy” to avoid the two pitfalls the more familiar term “contradiction” commonly produces: the “contradictions” in Fela as caused by his personal failings at the level of thought or ideology, or by the chaos of postcolonial history that created him

(Ayu 1-55). The first invests Fela with an absolute autonomous individual subjectivity, which no human being really has, and the second completely divests him of it. The best way, it seems to me, is at the interface of these two, that is, to see the “contradictions” as located at the juncture of Fela’s individual subjectivity, and the structural conditions that produces it. I have borrowed “antinomy” to tap into that sense in which, given the historically determinate choices confronting a subject, a “contradiction” between two necessary choices may be inevitable.

Fela’s colossal exertion, I suggest, is willfully aimed at *taming* modernity, that historical aggressive Western imposition on other lands, which he felt has dealt Africa an unfair deathly blow. To tame at all, not to say to do so successfully, demands that what is to be tamed is readable within the hermeneutic horizon of the tamer. What is to be tamed must be known and digestible within that most elementary but fundamental forms of understanding—friend or enemy, good or evil, and similar oppositions by which we categorize our world. The significance of these oppositions in ordering relationships, knowledge, and action is underscored by the distinguished sociologist Zygmunt Bauman when he writes that “we may say that friendship and enmity, and only they, are forms of sociation; indeed the archetypal forms of all sociation” and that between them, “they make the frame within which sociation is possible, they make for the possibility of ‘being with others’” (144).

The distance between friend and enemy is not as important as their mutual self-recognition. This is not to say that there is always a symmetry of power relations between them, but to emphasize the mutual self-(re)production. And the poles are so expansive as to be capable of disciplining into either direction all the messy surplus of variations within their spectrum. Without friends, there would be no enemies, and the reverse is true. “Being a friend, and being an enemy,” Bauman writes, “are the two forms in which the other may be recognized as another subject, construed as a subject ‘like the self’, admitted into the self’s life world, be counted, become and stay relevant” (144). The basic condition of coherence of Fela’s project of taming is that modernity be readable within this opposition, as friend or enemy, to make it fully compliant—by yielding its secrets—before Africa’s hermeneutical gaze. But the historical circumstances of that modernity’s encounter with Africa firmly preclude any such certainty of readability, though the urge to forcefully impose it is often irresistible. Friends and enemies are on the terrain of the known and decidable, but modernity in Africa is outside this orbit, and defines and occupies an undecidable entity. I have elsewhere characterized this multifaced, undecidable nature as *enchanted*, an aporetic situation in which modernity is simultaneously railed at as an alien, oppressive, and bewitching illusion (a *dis*-enchantment), and as a catalyst for further striving (a *re*-enchantment) (discussed in “Enchanting Modernity,” my book in progress). It is untamable, but it is also inescapable. Bauman’s term for this enchanter is the “stranger,” a figure that short-circuits the (discord-ridden, tension-soaked, yes, yes, but also fundamentally psychically comforting) friend-enemy economy, and disperses the protocols of recognition that sustain their opposition and

therefore coherent meaning-generation capacity. I quote Bauman in some detail:

Against this cosy antagonism, this conflict-torn collusion of friends and enemies, the stranger rebels. The threat he carries is more awesome than that which one can fear from the enemy. The stranger threatens the sociation itself—the very possibility of sociation. He calls the bluff of the opposition between friends and enemies as the compleate mappa mundi, as the difference which consumes all differences and hence leaves nothing outside itself. As that opposition is the foundation on which all social life and all differences which patch and hold it together rest, the stranger saps social life itself. And all this because the stranger is neither friend nor enemy; and because he may be both. And because we do not know, and have no way of knowing, which is the case. (145)

The stranger thus poses the greatest challenge to taming. Most attempts to tame the stranger will have to be prepared to accommodate the inadequacies, wobbly edges, and bursting seams that inevitably result. There may be no want of heroic effort to rise up to the challenge, and the productivity may even be gargantuan, as in Fela's case. But victory is never guaranteed, and even many of the successes will appear to be condemned to something like a perpetual self-suspicion.⁸ And since the purpose of taming is control, the decisive imposition of one's own will and imprint on the borrowed or imposed, the inability to fully tame has meant the inability to exercise critical control over the stranger, that is, modernity, in Africa.

Taming a stranger, a stranger that may be friend or foe, is thus bound to leave a trail of paradoxes, contradictions, and more precisely, antinomies. Fela rhetorically foregrounds his nativism more than his cosmopolitanism, but given the circumstances of his socialization and then self-resocialization, he cannot not be cosmopolitan, a citizen of the world. But the same factors of resocialization demand that he anchor his cosmopolitanism, unlike the conservative free-floating version that is celebrated as paradigmatic today, in a collectivity embattled precisely by the historical forces of that cosmopolitanism. It is for this reason that Fela also cannot not be nativist, exposing the repressions and inequities that underwrite the reign of the cosmopolitan.⁹ In this regard, Fela seems well aware of that perspicacious critique of the new cosmopolitanism launched by Timothy Brennan:

The new cosmopolitanism drifts into view as an act of avoidance if not hostility and disarticulation toward states in formation. The dichotomy and the binary almost universally deplored—as much in official policy statements and editorials as in literary theory—continues to make sense (indeed, is demanded) dialectically, not in the name of authentic, non-European culture or any other useful fiction but in the name of what this conflict over colonialism and postcolonialism has largely been about: collectivity, community, self-sufficiency (2).

Unlike Brennan, I am not anxious about the word “authentic” and therefore willing to say that Fela’s nativism is a quest for authentic subjectivity. “Authentic subjectivity” is an oxymoron, and this should begin to lead us to an appreciation of a peculiar contribution that studying postcolonial cultural production makes to critical social theory. “Authentic subjectivity” is an oxymoron because subjectivity as such can never be authentic, meaning completely self-fashioned and uncorrupted. After all, we achieve subjectivity only in language, a fully formed symbolic economy—with all its tendentious structuring predispositions—to which we are born without choice. Our subjection to—or, if we prefer the soothing euphemism, immersion in—the given language is the condition of our speaking, our subjectivity. Yet because our subjection here is so fundamental and enabling, we rarely lament it as inauthentic or as oppression, but mostly speak our language and bear our names proudly about, as if we chose them ourselves. At this level, our subjection enables our agency, that is, our capacity to act on the world, in a “natural,” unobtrusive way. But this is a narrative of subjectivity *as such*, which is far less complicated than the production of the (post)colonial subject. Unique in the latter is the second layering, a second subjection, this time to an alien symbolic economy, Western, which is neither fundamental nor escapable. What is neither fundamental nor escapable cannot but constantly call attention to itself, which is why our subjection to the second layer is often experienced as a circumscription of our agency. It is in the context of the double layering that it is possible to speak of “authentic subjectivity”: as a gesture against the visibly oppressive second layer of subjection, and toward the (illusion of) autonomy or self-control that constitutes subjection at the first, fundamental, level.

Nativism in postcolonial cultural production is not a rejection of the encounter with Europe or of modernity as such; it does not fear openness, and hybridity is not alien to it. What it laments is the “forced necessity”¹⁰ of the native to capitulate, appropriate, or borrow: a characteristic condition of capitalist modernity that rules out equality in advance. Fela’s nativism is not an atavistic return to roots but a reclaiming of “authentic subjectivity”: a subjectivity that expresses, that is, subjects, itself “freely” without the element of a crudely obvious compulsion; the power and autonomy of Africa to self-direct itself and its place *in the world*. In other words, it is not the foreign as such that Fela’s nativism is against, but the seemingly unappeasable (that is, untamable) power of the foreign *and* the seeming inevitability of its dominance in the lives of the natives. Inevitability precludes choice, and subjectivity without (the illusion of) choice will forever have the taint of the inauthentic. We can keep “authenticity” as a powerful energizer and rallying cry, once we keep in constant focus that “inauthenticity” is and remains a catachresis, a misapplication of terminology, since what it means to say is not really “not original,” but “dominated.” Antinomy, given such an unparalleled expansive play by Fela’s musical practice, promises to be a useful figure for cutting through the dense perplexities of our postcolonial modernity.

 NOTES

1. If it is not difficult to imagine that different historical periods in all societies will have discourses of self-differentiation and gleeful self-promotion and legitimation from preceding eras, then ideas of the “modern” as such cannot be alien to any society. By “modern” and “modernity” in this essay, I am referring to capitalist modernity, that phenomenon of European aggressive self-propagation worldwide described so well by Karl Marx in *The Communist Manifesto*. Relevant to my consideration is Aimé Césaire’s characterization of the specific form that modernity’s encounter with Africa took as, on the whole, a “historical tragedy”: “[T]he great historical tragedy of Africa has been not so much that it was too late in making contact with the rest of the world, as the manner in which that contact was brought about; that Europe began to ‘propagate’ at a time when it had fallen into the hands of the most unscrupulous financiers and captains of industry; that it was our misfortune to encounter that particular Europe on our path, and that Europe is responsible before the human community for the highest heap of corpses in human history” (23). See also Lefebvre’s useful study (168-238).
2. As in many other areas of contemporary African intellectual production in which it appears, “nativism,” supposedly the clamorous ‘return-to-roots’ reaffirmation of native, indigenous traditions against a stifling encroachment by the foreign, has a very elastic character. Nativism here has strangely refused to be bound by its conceptual “tribal” or ethnic delimitation, and has been unapologetically transnational, continental. In other words, nativism in African discourses rarely speaks so much in the name of this or that ethnic culture as of African cultures generally. Ordinarily, such transnationalism can hardly be described as “nativist”; that is, it generally is now a testament to the power and ability of European racialism to cheapen and simplify complexity in its own interest. This is what Frantz Fanon means when he writes that “[c]olonialism did not dream of wasting its time in denying the existence of one national culture after another. Therefore the reply of the colonized peoples will be straight away continental in breadth” (212). See also Adeleke Adeeko’s useful book on nativism in African literary discourse, *Proverbs*.
3. Basil Davidson, the distinguished historian, laments: “[T]he historian, emerging from the study of past centuries when African generally knew no such misery and crisis but, generally, a slow expansion of wealth and self-development, meets questions not to be avoided. What explains this degradation. . . ? How has this come about?” (9).
4. On Afrocentrism, see Olaniyan, “Afrocentrism.”
5. For a useful introduction to pidgin, see Sebba; see also Todd.
6. The late Apala king, Haruna Ishola, was apparently referring to Fela’s music, and disco music generally to which the much older musicians were wont to consign Afrobeat, when he sang the noted rebuke:

Ti wa ya to si t’awon ajo foniloju
 I am very sorry kii se pe a bu won
 Ero pele ni jo wa

**You won’t blind anyone (with your wild wigwaggings) dancing to our fare
 We can’t say this of the musics of some musicians we know**

I am sorry, but we are really not abusing them

Just distinguishing our subtle, mannered style.

I am still trying to locate the title and publication details of this recording.

7. *Agbada* is the classic Yoruba men's dress; its three pieces, minus the cap, are made of no less than ten yards of clothing. *Gele* is the classic women's headgear.
8. Take, for instance, the famous case of Chinua Achebe on the question of the place of English language in African literature. In the early 1960s, he wrote with optimism of his taming capacity: "I feel that the English language will be able to carry the weight of my African experience. But it will have to be a new English, still in full communion with its ancestral home but altered to suit its new African surroundings" ("African Writer" 62). In spite of all the accolades he received for his mastery and distinctive use of English (the "stranger"), Achebe issued, a decade later, a lament that describes the self-suspicion I am talking about: "[T]he fatalistic logic of the unassailable position of English in our literature leaves me more cold now than it did when I first spoke about it . . .] And yet I am unable to see a significantly different or a more emotionally comfortable resolution of that problem" (Preface xiv). We may have no such exemplary statements from Wole Soyinka, but his aggressive, take-no-prisoners ransacking of the properties and inner recesses of English in order to speak his world, indicates no less an anxiety. And since the one and only *egalitarian* relationship between two living languages is translation, the most promising project of taming so far—in spite of such remaining untamable factors as European alphabet and some categories of narrative making—has been Ngugi wa Thiong'o's resort to writing in Gikuyu, and then translation into English.
9. See, for instance, Howe's useful analysis: "When Fela spoke—as he often did—in the name of 'Africa', he may have been projecting some of the attitudes of a famous, eccentric, successful, Westernized, upper-class Yoruba anarchist and bohemian on a largely uncomprehending continent; but people understood that the Africa he referred to was a colonized Africa whose private history had been disrupted by outside forces and needed to be relaunched. This *knack of being wrong, but right*, endeared Fela to his constituents. . . ." (130; emphasis added).
10. This is what Karl Marx means in one of his eloquent characterizations of capitalist modernity: "It compels all nations, on the pain of extinction, to adopt the bourgeois mode of production; it compels them to introduce what it calls civilization into their midst, i.e., to become bourgeois themselves. In one word, it creates a world after its own image" (84).

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