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REAL LOVE VERSUS REAL LIFE: YOUTH, MUSIC AND UTOPIA IN FREETOWN, SIERRA LEONE

Michael Stasik

In contemporary Freetown, the most ubiquitous theme in popular music is love. Whether on the city's dance floors or airwaves, in drinking parlours or during intimate gatherings of friends, squeaking from mobile phones or blasting from loudspeakers installed in minibuses, 'love music' offers a kind of insistent soundtrack to the lives of Freetown's urbanites. A great deal of that love music is imported from elsewhere, including up-to-date music hits from the US (headed by the emic category of 'sentimentals'), the latest variations of Jamaican reggae (above all, lover's rock) and recent love song exports from Nigeria. The city's youths form the most prominent audiences of love music, but older people listen to it as well. However, it is the young who, despite limited means, spend considerable amounts of time and effort in tracking down the latest hits, in compiling and exchanging 'love anthologies', and in reciting and discussing the romantic lyrics. Their (love) lives and relationships, in turn, are often characterized by chronic states of emotional uncertainty and dissatisfaction. Severe economic struggles and disparities lead to an increasing monetization of young people's relationships, driving them either into a fragile flux of multiple partners or out of intimate engagements altogether. An ambivalence thus marks the salient presence of love in Freetown's popular music and the experienced absence of love in the lived realities of its young audiences. That ambivalence between globally infused desires and locally experienced constraints is echoed in a variety of locales across Africa (Archambault 2012; Hansen 2005; Honwana 2012; Mains 2012; Nyamnjoh 2005). It was formulated succinctly in Weiss's notion of 'the sense of indeterminacy and incompleteness […] that is both the source and the product of so many potent fantasies' in Africa today (2009: 38; see also Weiss 2004). In this article, I take this ambivalence as a point of departure for an ethnographic exploration of the lives, aspirations, fantasies and frustrations of youths in Freetown. Tied into broader reflections on youth and love in Africa (Cole 2010; Lewinson 2006; Manuel 2008; Smith 2001; Spronk 2012; van Eerdewijk 2006), as well as on the consumption of foreign popular media in the global South (Dolby 2001; Fuglesang 1994; Larkin 1997; Manuel 1993; Miller 1992; Pace and Hinote 2013; Remes 1999), I attempt to offer some explanations as to why Freetown's youths are so in love with love songs while their experiences with love relationships are so fraught.

Several authors describe contemporary youth culture in Freetown and Sierra Leone in conjunction with popular music (Alexander 2007; Shepler 2010; Spencer 2012; 2014; Tucker 2012). All of these accounts, however, focus on the socio-political dimension of what is usually dubbed 'protest songs'. Others

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foreground the similarly political relationship of the country's youth with American hip hop (Lock 2005; Prestholdt 2009; Sommers 2003). Up until the 2007 elections, locally produced music about politics was indeed ubiquitous and enjoyed great popularity, and not only among youths. Reminiscent of Nigerian *yabis* music (Olatunji 2009), Sierra Leonean protest songs served as a powerful 'informal opposition' (Abdullah 2009: 15) and arguably helped in bringing about political change (Kandeh 2008: 627). With the successful transition of power in 2007, however, politicized music abruptly dropped in popularity.[1] Internationally produced songs of a carnal and sentimental character captured the city's audiences. However, the popularity of palpably non-political music was also salient during the years prior to the 2007 elections. In fact, most of the country's prominent 'protest musicians' had major hits with songs that deal with allegedly more mundane matters of romantic love and physical pleasures, many of which turned out to be more successful than their political songs. Emmerson, for example, Sierra Leone's foremost social critic in the guise of a musician, certainly made a great impact with his 2003 release '*Borbor bele*' (literally 'Little boy's belly'), in which he depicts corrupt politicians using the unmistakeable stereotype of their swollen stomachs. Yet his feel-good dance tune 'Tutu party', in which he praises the skilful manoeuvres dancing women perform with their buttocks, had still greater resonance.

Many Africanist studies on youth culture and popular music focus on locally produced music with political connotations and encoded critiques of socio-political malaise (see, for example, Englert 2008; Ntarangwi 2009; Schumann 2009; Stroeken 2005). Obviously, this sort of political lens is inspired by local musicians' potential 'to sing what cannot be spoken' (Agawu 2001: 4). I propose a different approach towards the multifarious relations between African youth and popular music. During my fieldwork in Freetown in 2009–10, I listened to young people listening to their music and to the experiences they ascribe to it and the fantasies they invest in it.[2] The bulk of that music was anything but political, and nor was it local. However, being imported from elsewhere and standing outside the political fray by no means implies that the music has less significance for its audiences than locally produced political songs.

[1]I have discussed elsewhere the ways in which, through the blurring of boundaries between music protest and music propaganda, Sierra Leone's local protest music lost its trait of being a critical 'voice of the voiceless', which is what its initial success was based on (Stasik 2012: 100–5).

[2]My main ethnographic tools were conversations, interviews, focus group discussions and participant observation among what can be broadly framed as 'young' people (aged between around fifteen and thirty-five years). I complemented this with interviews with Freetown's music sellers, producers, DJs and musicians. Initially, my research focus was 'open' in the sense that I did not direct my interlocutors into discussing any specific connections between music-related and extra-musical domains. As the themes of love, intimacy and sexuality surfaced as the most prominent concerns in these talks, I began to use the subject of (love) music as a discursive gateway for discussions about these more intimate matters. It should be noted that it was significantly more difficult for me to establish a rapport with female interlocutors than with male ones. Whereas most male youths were usually willing to talk to me about their intimate lives from our first encounter (and then opened up even more in subsequent meetings), the young women I met were much more reserved. In most instances, it took me many weeks of continual contact and frequent participation in joint social activities to break down these reservations and change my role from a potential boyfriend (or a threat to actual boyfriends) to that of a 'brother', 'small brother' or what some framed apologetically as 'our gay brother'.

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Without doubt, the mere assertion of love music's prominence in Freetown is nothing particularly exceptional. Music that evokes sentiments of love is popular all over the world. Propelled by today's ever-widening channels of media dissemination, the very same love songs circulate around the world interminably, targeting a 'global' audience with seemingly 'deterritorialized' and depersonalized invocations of love. However, when we shift our attention from these sonic 'simulacra of love' to local engagements with them, more intricate and intimate relations come to the fore. In this regard, Freetown's foreign love music conveys a great deal of significance for its audiences, who consider it a gateway to the creative, imaginative practices of 'self-positioning' (Barber 1997: 359) and 'self-fashioning' (Weiss 2009: 18), and, just as importantly, for contrasting and complicating more 'traditional' understandings of love in relationships. What love songs produce in the lives of Freetonian youths is reminiscent of music's 'hollow space' as delineated by Agawu (2001: 7): a realm of fantasy and imagination in which 'active listeners and interpreters are invited to play, to invent, to dream, and inevitably, to lie'.

Expanding on the notion of *utopia* – denoting a desired yet unattainable state – I argue that it is within the experiential gap between the consumption of a representation and the desire to live (up to) that representation that Freetown's youths rework their imaginative horizons of possibilities. In this, I follow in particular Weiss's (2002: 99–100) assertion that, for 'understanding how fantasy works', we need to focus on the specific practices, experiences and relations of those who indulge in these fantasies and invest them with meaning. In what follows, I thus juxtapose young Freetonians' imagining of (im)possibilities through music – epitomized in songs exalting 'real love' – with the realities of their lives. The combined analysis of the extraordinary imagery of utopian love and of the quotidian realms of real life, I suggest, throws into relief how (musical) representation creates desire, and how desire, in turn fuelled by deferred gratification, serves to interrogate the links between present predicaments and future potentials.

FREETOWN'S CONTEMPORARY MUSIC SCENE

On the eve of peace in 2001, a 'spirit of renewal' (Jackson 2004: 71) captured Sierra Leone society. After many years of authoritarian rule and a devastating war, expectations were high for a more prosperous future. With billions of dollars made available by international donors for reconstruction, nation building and so on, the country embarked on a fast-forward process of transition. In the wake of these transitions, Sierra Leone's music scenes and industries – with Freetown standing as their epicentre – experienced a thorough makeover and revival.

This revival was spurred in particular by increasingly available technologies for the production and dissemination of music; and these technologies significantly widened the channels through which Freetonian audiences could connect to global media flows.[3] New radio stations proliferated; the number of Freetown-based broadcasters

[3]In fact, Freetown's connectedness to global currents of music reaches back far into the city's history. From the titles of sheet music sold and in stock in Freetown in 1886, Spitzer (1974: 24) notes that 'there is nothing to suggest that the shop [Sawyer's] was located in tropical West

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alone increased from five in 1999 to some two dozen in 2009. There was a mushrooming of local recording studios, serving growing crowds of local recording artists. Alongside the democratization of music recording technologies, the means for duplicating music also flourished. Music piracy turned into a contentious yet veritable bedrock of the city's music distribution system.[4] Today, hundreds of well-organized street bootleggers tout hit compilations they have retrieved from the World Wide Web.

Simultaneously, a revolution in electronic media surged ahead. Small, battery-run radio receivers have been imported and sold in quantity since the early 1980s, representing an indispensable source of information and diversion during the war (Gordon 2004). In recent years, the distribution of television, CD and VCD/DVD sets has also increased significantly. The most frequent use people make of TV sets, whether in popular bars or in private homes, is for playing back selections of international movies and music videos supplied in bulk by Freetown's bootleggers. Television broadcasting is fairly limited, with only one main operational network (SLBC) on the grid.[5] Still, the few shows that are aired enjoy a substantial following. The most eagerly anticipated programme is probably *Musical Mix*, a weekly broadcast of the latest music videos, most of which are foreign. However, the prime medium for music consumption in Freetown today, besides the radio, is the MP3-equipped mobile phone – which, in fact, often includes a radio receiver as well. During my stay in Freetown, I spent large amounts of time joining in popular trade chains created through the exchange of digitally compressed songs from phone to phone.

Compared with the heyday of Freetonian live band music in the 1960 and 1970s (see Horton 1985; Stasik 2012: 64–76; Ware 1978), the schedule of live performances is rather sparse. A number of regular live shows in bars and restaurants cater to Freetown's upper class and expat community. The main forms of concerts that tend to attract, and include, the city's youths are sporadically staged record launches and somewhat notorious lip-sync spectacles, at which phone network providers gather groups of local musical artists and feature scraps of pre-recorded music in between lengthy advertisements. Youth, however, finds its dance venues elsewhere, for example in the many nightclubs that opened after the war or in front of the innumerable street bars where impromptu 'dance frenzies' are staged every other night.[6]

Africa, catering for black Africans whose ancestors had been slaves, rather than located in the heart of London where white Victorian Englishmen formed its clientele'.

[4]Music piracy has been a part of Freetown's cottage industry since the 1960s (Stasik 2012: 78–9). During the first years of the post-war boom, the Cassette Sellers' Association (CSA) managed to keep in check the illicit distribution of local music. By 2006, however, following a controversy over embezzlement and a subsequent rift between senior members of the CSA, this largely monopolized control began to dissipate.

[5]In 2005, a private TV station (ABC) began operation. Because of limited coverage and unreliable services, however, its programmes have a fairly limited viewership.

[6]Gems of the annually held public music events in Freetown are the so-called 'devil masquerades'. Reaching back far into the nineteenth century (Nunley 1987), in recent years the masquerades have changed dramatically in form and outlook. Traditionally, they centred on lavishly decorated hunting deities (the 'devils') that paraded along the streets of downtown Freetown with musicians providing the drumbeats for the devils' dances. Today, the devils still parade but their drumbeats are drowned out by large PA systems installed on trucks and from which

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During these popular gatherings, just as during music programmes on radio and television and in the informally traded song selections, the most frequently played songs by far are foreign and of a carnal and sentimental character: love music, as it might be labelled succinctly. A striking feature about Freetown's love music is that there is no distinguishable love music genre as such. Rather, across all locally differentiated music styles and genres, it is the songs that deal with love that 'hit the city hardest', as expressed in a common local saying. During my fieldwork, the list of songs that 'hit hardest' spanned across a great many musical orientations: from Céline Dion's yearning ballads and Beyoncé's sassy incitements to commitment, to Busy Signal's reggae-updated version of Phil Collins' 'One More Night' and Tony Matterhorn's dancehall anthem 'When It Rains', through to the latest Igbo-style love syllabuses performed by musicians such as P-Square, D'banj and Bracket.[7]

Around 2010, local music began a slow but discernible recovery from the doldrums it went through after the 2007 elections. Tellingly, most of the locally produced songs that proved popular are marked by strong musical and lyrical references to current love music hits from abroad.[8] Most of my young interlocutors discriminate carefully between local and foreign music, and although some local songs are appreciated for their 'home-grown' value and vernacular allusions, by and large they are labelled pejoratively as *falamakata*, or imitations. As explained to me by a local radio DJ: 'Sierra Leone music is to expat music what fake is to real. Our youth has now become very attentive to the difference. Typically, they choose the real.'

Writing about the audiences of popular arts in (urban) Africa, Barber (1987: 48) notes that 'this audience, however volatile and scattered, is still reached by the techniques of immediacy, of an emotional "obviousness" that deepens and reaffirms common values'. In contemporary Freetown, the idioms of foreign love music, beyond all ephemerality of style, serve as the main medium of that immediacy. In the remainder of this article, I explore the 'dissonant' relations between the aesthetic domains of love music – which is consumed, enjoyed and vested with imaginative meanings by its young audiences – and the lived realities in which these love fantasies are grounded.

Western dance tunes blast out for the youthful dancing crowds who have turned the masquerades into a mere pretext for their own festivities.

[7]While not gainsaying the recent scholarly analyses made of Freetown's and Sierra Leone's youth (music) culture, I find it noteworthy that, while all of the listed songs permeate the whole of the country at deafening volumes, none of them were mentioned in ethnographers' accounts. As van der Geest (2009: 259) notes with regard to the neglect of cars as an object of ethnography in Africa, foreign love songs also appear to be 'too familiar to be visible', or, in this case, to be audible (see also Larkin 1997: 433–4).

[8]A glance through the weekly 'top ten' charts of local songs compiled by a popular radio station in Freetown (Sky Radio) in late 2009 reveals the unmistakeable popularity of one theme: love. For instance: 'Alphabet of Love', 'Apple of My Eye', 'Baby (Luv)', 'Love Mathematics', 'Love Sweet' and 'You Are My Sunshine'.

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FALLING IN LOVE

A longer fragment from an interview I conducted with Isaac, an eighteen-year-old pupil from Freetown, elucidates the ways in which young Freetonians make sense of love music and how they relate their lives to it. Seen within the broader context of recent events in Sierra Leone (above all, the civil war and its political and economic aftermath), it is noteworthy that Isaac, when faced with my question about what music he likes, begins by speaking about which music, and therefore the ideas associated with that music, are *not* of interest to him.

> *Isaac*: For some years after the conflict we had a lot of these musicians that were dealing with all this reconciliation and peace and so forth. They all didn't attract me at all. You know, I am neutral. I do not belong to any political party here. Not that I don't care. But it is just not my case for this music. You know, for me it is more about those things that matter to me: love, losing love, searching love.
>
> *MS*: Do you have a girlfriend?
>
> *Isaac*: No. As for now, I don't. I want to have one. But it is difficult, you know. You need to be somebody. You need some jewels and stuff, some bling-blings. I don't have them now. But I am very much in love, all the time. I am always liking some girl. But I can never give her anything so there are no girls for me. I don't have the money for real love. […] You can say that politics are the roots of my problems. You see, politicians take all the money, they have all the jewels and diamonds. And they have all the girlfriends, but I don't. […]
>
> *MS*: So, what is the music you like?
>
> *Isaac*: I do like reggae music at times, lover's rock. Not that I am a Rasta man, but I like their tunes. It's sexy music. But mostly I like listening to sentimentals. You know, this music dealing with love. It speaks for me. Like 'Yori Yori',[9] you know, this song makes me feel … sexual. When I hear its beat, I feel sexual. And all the girls like it, so it is good if I like it too.

Isaac's preference for love music is intimately connected to his expressed desire for love. Besides the somewhat pragmatic dimension of his opportunistic alliance with the love music tastes of 'the girls' (giving a coquettish twist to Grossberg's (1992: 80) concept of 'affective alliances'), the genre serves as a vehicle for expressing and creating his love desire. At the same time, these musical fantasies about love are bluntly opposed to his deferred ambitions for finding 'real love'. He explains this deprivation by pointing to his deprived material condition, and to the economic and political reality he finds himself in. Sketching the contours of a sort of 'political economy of love' (see Groes-Green 2013), Isaac posits material favours achieved through clientelism as a prerequisite for marital, and extra-marital, gains.

[9]In 2009–10, 'Yori Yori' was probably the single most popular song in Freetown. Besides its jauntily lilting, upbeat riff, the song from the Nigerian duo Bracket impresses with its banal chorus: '*I am with you my lover lover / With you everything is wellu wellu / Your love dey make my heart do yori yori / Nobody can love you the way I do*'. The neologism coined in the song ('*yori yori'*) was soon adopted by many Freetonians as a playful reference to the loved one and the sentiment of love.

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He considers that being excluded from these circles of acquisition of status and wealth – an exclusion organized mainly along generational lines, which echoes the disenchantment of youth across the continent (see, for example, Porter *et al.* 2010) – means also being excluded from any possibility of realizing his dreams about love.

The perceived correlation between deprivation in terms of material conditions and disappointed ambitions in love was a recurring theme in many of my talks with young Freetonians. Revisiting his field site in Sierra Leone, Jackson made similar observations. The correlation between affect and deprivation was summed up by one of his interlocutors in an aphoristic sentence: 'You can't expect love when you have nothing to give but love' (Jackson 2011: 10). The rampant love fantasies formulated in Freetown's popular music augur quite a different destiny. To give just one example, in the popular local song 'Alphabet of Love', J-Wan (a Freetonian artist who mimics the style of US rapper Jay-Z) reiterates a line that has been sung countless times in other love songs: 'Love is a thing that money can't buy.'

A story I was told by Emanuel, an unemployed Freetonian in his mid-twenties, provides a distressing example of the gap between these two axioms, and hence between the fantasy of how love might be and how it is in reality.

> For long I was in love with this one girl who lives next door to me. For many years she was my dream. But she didn't think of me, not as in love-thinking. Last year, she came to my house one evening. First I was very happy. But she said that things are difficult and if I could help her out with something little, like 1,000 leones or something. I invited her in. I had no money on me. But luckily I was fortunate to have this mega cola, this soft drink. So I gave her that and a bread and a boiled egg with it. She ate it all. And after that she stood up and went straight to my bed and lie down. She undressed all her clothes. For once, I was surprised. But the lust overcame me and I went to her and sexed her. I believe what she got from me was less than some 2,000 leones: just the cheap mega cola, bread and egg. But when she left, I felt a big regret inside. Here is a beautiful woman, my lady-dream and big-time love. And she just gives me her body for this stupid egg and bread. I don't even give her any money. She just sleeps with me for this bread and egg. Like she is no value. After that night, I could not love her anymore.

Just as Isaac finds his dreams of love stymied by his lack of resources, Emanuel's dream disintegrated because of his 'lady-dream's' privation and because her offering of sexual favours led to a deterioration in the passion he felt for her. Whether we take Emanuel's egg story as 'true' or not, it relates to a crucial moral dimension of intimate relationships among Freetonian youths. Like Isaac's story, it points to a paradox unfolding between fantasies about 'real love' and the materiality that is perceived to hinder their realization in real-life relationships. Men who are able to cater to women's material needs can have access to them sexually; and, conversely, men who are not able to provide material favours are excluded from these arrangements. When a woman avails herself of such transactional relations, however, she is no longer desirable as an object of 'real love'. Fantasy is thwarted by reality's materiality. At the same time, material constraints are what make fantasy necessary.

Franklin's story offers another example of the conundrum of 'real love' fantasies and tensions. Franklin has a job and the relative financial security his job provides him. He is a college graduate and in his late twenties. His experiences with

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love relationships, however, reflect the very same kind of structural chasm that Isaac and Emanuel find themselves in; and, like them, he explains this by pointing to economic reasons. When I asked him about his relationship status, he began by talking about 'the situation at large'.

> The whole story with women and men here, it is not working anymore. Maybe in the past it was working. But now it is over. It is the poverty that breaks us apart here. Either you are poor, or the other is poor, or you are both poor. Relationships don't work for that. For this, I have never been in love really. I have a girlfriend. In fact, I have more than one, many. And I had many, many others before. But this is just for the pleasure leisure. You know, just to sex. But there was never any love to it.

When I asked Franklin what he means by 'love', he replied that he could not say because he never experienced 'real love'. However, he added that 'love':

> is that what we got in all our music. All the music you hear everywhere. It is all about love. We know all the love, but we don't find it. And I am now getting old. But there is still time. Who knows, maybe tomorrow I will fall in love forever. Maybe tomorrow I will find my *yori yori*. You can never know.

With his remark about the omnipresence of love music, Franklin supports my argument. While Freetown's music chants about eternal, exclusive and immaterial love, and while audiences listen to it, sing along to its lyrics and dance to it, their lives and relationships speak of the opposite: an emotional volatility coupled with relationship hyper-mobility (or stagnating immobility), material affliction and uncertainty. The music formulates – and, more importantly, is perceived to formulate – something that *there is a lack of*. In Franklin's words, that which is known or seems to be known but that cannot be found: 'real love'.

Franklin's analysis of the 'whole story with women and men', with his diagnosis of its dysfunction in *present* times, further hints at the important temporal dimension of the relationship between representation and desire. The discrepancy between the experienced aporia of love and music-fed fantasies about love is complemented by the temporal breach between the presence of love projected onto times past (when love relationships 'worked out') and its prospective potentiality in future times (when they might 'work out' again). In this constellation, representations of love, nourished and consumed through love music, serve as more than just an odd construct of something to aim for. Rather, the music's representations of love offer an additional resource of imagination and desire.

This imaginative 'bridging' takes on particular significance with regard to the temporally indefinite state of youth's 'waithood' (Masquelier 2013: 475) before they transition to socially accepted adulthood – a much discussed phenomenon in recent Africanist youth studies (for example, Christiansen *et al*. 2006; Durham 2000; Honwana and De Boeck 2005; Sommers 2012). In Sierra Leone, the social categories of manhood and womanhood respectively – as construed and affirmed both by elder generations and by most of the country's youth – are premised on the ability to form independent households and support one's dependants (for men) or be supported (for women) (King 2007; van Gog 2008: 56–8).

The ideas about partnership conveyed in these gendered norms of adulthood do not exclude the possibility of affective connection. In fact, many of my interlocutors mentioned their parents or, more frequently, grandparents as examples

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of relationships displaying care, commitment and love. Yet the ideas about love implied in these references to previous generations, most of which are couched in nostalgic allusions to rural life, are inextricably bound to notions of material support and reciprocal care. While acknowledging that these prior generations faced material hardships as well, many believe that their hardships were much easier to reconcile with affective longings. For example, one man in his late twenties, after recounting to me his many frustrated ambitions in love, then contrasted his fate with his grandfather's life. As he framed it, his grandfather was 'not a rich man but a farmer', but he had three wives – which was 'three more than I have'. And although his wives often caused him '*walhalla*', or trouble, as he could provide for them all, 'they loved him his whole life'.

As idealized as this story appears to be, it clearly illustrates the cultural benchmarks both for successful marriage and for the related achievements needed to enter productive adulthood. These achievements include the formation of an independent household, marriage, children and, essentially, the ability to meet the needs of one's spouse and children. Given the actual and perceived constraints that young Freetonians face, these benchmarks become a trap. And that is the crux for most of Freetown's youths, as it is for many other young people across both the country and the continent (see, for example, Grant 2006; Masquelier 2005; Richards *et al*. 2004): young men's trajectories of unattainable or 'failed' adult masculinity limit young women's prospects of achieving adult femininity. In other words, many young women do not find 'proper' men to be their husbands because many young men do not find the means to become 'proper' men.

In the extensive literature on Sierra Leonean youth that has emerged since the mid-1990s, the broader context of this 'trap' is framed by the often invoked notion of a 'crisis of youth' (Richards 1995).[10] Commonly defined as the social, economic and political marginalization of young people (and corroborated by a wealth of quantitative studies[11]), the idea of a 'youth crisis' gained currency not only among analysts but also among Freetown's populations. The youth-inspired protest songs of the years prior to the 2007 elections were a particularly symptomatic articulation of the exigent circumstances of the Sierra Leonean present. By giving voice to grave feelings of discontent about a system whose gridlock of patrimonial and gerontocratic rule renders most prospects for socio-economic advancement illusory, these songs served as a more or less direct expression of the experiences of 'crisis' (see Shepler 2010).

Freetown's foreign love music defies straightforward interpretations of that kind. Rather than speaking directly of the experiences of frustration that are

[10]Much of that literature is concerned with the role of youths in the civil war, mainly as combatants (see, for example, Abdullah 2004; Peters and Richards 1998; Richards 1996) and as excombatants in the post-conflict years (for example, Christensen and Utas 2008; Fanthorpe and Maconachie 2010; Menzel 2011). It mainly revolves around the question of whether Sierra Leone's 'youth crisis' can be seen as an underlying – and potentially unresolved – cause of the conflict (Hanlon 2005; Peters 2011).

[11]As stated in a World Bank report (Peeters *et al*. 2009), for example, the labour market situation is disastrous for the country's youth, with the highest rates of unemployment and underemployment among male youths in the Freetown area (about one in two being jobless). Similarly grim are evaluations of access to education and political participation (Betancourt *et al*. 2008; Boersch-Supan 2012).

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conflated into the notion of 'crisis', they allude to other, alternative states against which the crisis can be judged. They figure as a corollary to and a tacit qualification of judgements about *how things are* by positing a possibility of *how things could be* or *how they should be*. By fostering a moral demand for a difference between reality as it is and as it could be, 'real love' fantasies help to bridge the gap between today's deferred potentials and tomorrow's redeemable promises. Returning to the cases mentioned above, while Franklin, Emanuel and Isaac find their current *yori yori* only in the music they listen to, these representations help keep alive their desire to continue their search in the hope of finding 'her' in real life tomorrow, and, ultimately, to become 'proper' men.

AMOROUS EXPLOITS

As far as Freetown's young women are concerned, the situation becomes somewhat reversed while the overall picture remains the same. Christine and Florence, two college girls in their early twenties, are two examples from a rather well-off part of society. In their lives, love is omnipresent – in their media consumption, that is. The music Christine and Florence listen to is chosen almost exclusively along the lines of its 'sentimental' content. Their musical tastes, like those of most of my other female interlocutors, comprise primarily songs by American and Nigerian artists, but they differ from young men mainly in that they favour dance and pop hits over rap. Emblematic of this gendered difference in otherwise quite similar (if not largely identical) musical tastes are the figures of Beyoncé, who is the single most popular artist among Freetown's young women, and Tupac, who is venerated by most young men.[12] Christine's and Florence's main preference with regard to films – Bollywood romance movies – might be described as following late (or 'parallel'; Larkin 1997) modernity's ultimate narratives of idealized romantic love – which is understood as an involuntary and 'eternally' committed emotional attachment to a single person.

Their real-life loves, by contrast, appear to them as 'eternal' sources of disappointment and futile effort. Both girls have boyfriends – or rather, they have a chain of regularly changing boyfriends – but none of the relationships they engage in seem to live up to their emotional needs. Love is longed for, fantasized about, discussed for evenings on end, but virtually never 'caught hold of'. From that apparent discrepancy, one could infer that their realities of love cannot ever match their (media-inspired) fantasies about love because they follow the 'wrong' representations (see Illouz 1997; Leclerc-Madlala 2003). As for Christine's and Florence's relationships – and for many of their Freetonian contemporaries – this inference appears too short-sighted. It fails to account for the actual 'fuzziness' of the factors that underlie and complicate the connections

[12]The veneration in which most male Freetonian youths I encountered hold the late American rapper appeared to relate to the vulnerable and 'sentimental' themes evoked by Tupac's lyrics and popular imagery, rather than to the 'thug' attitudes Weiss (2009: 105–8) describes in relation to young men in urban Tanzania, and even less to the violent evocations that Prestholdt (2009) depicts among young male combatants during Sierra Leone's civil war.

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between the fantasies they invest in their love music and their experiences with love relationships.

As Christine claimed, these complications are brought about by the seemingly irreconcilable ends of the desired affective connection, of what she called 'the vexing issue' of material provision and the pitfalls of *kongosa* (gossip). She explained to me these underlying intricacies with the following story:

> People think there are no kangaroos in Africa. But we got plenty of kangaroos here in Sierra Leone. Kangaroos are quick in jumping. And the she-kangaroos have a bag under their breast to carry what is precious to them. When she jumps around that means her bag is light. When she stops jumping that means somebody put something inside. You can't know what is inside. Maybe a baby or a ring or something, maybe emotions. People don't know but they start the *kongosa*. Sometimes the *kongosa* can make the kangaroo jump when people talk bad, even when something good is inside. Maybe the bag is full of things but there is no love – so she jumps. Maybe her bag is full of love but there is nothing to it that people can see – she jumps. Maybe she found love and her bag is full but people talk that she only loves her full bag – she jumps. And she continues jumping until she gets tired.

Echoing the situation of young women in various locales across Africa (Cole 2009; Cornwall 2002; Masquelier 2005), Christine's allegory of Sierra Leone's 'kangaroo women' maps out the potentially fraught role gifts and money play in relation to a desire for 'real love'. While gifts represent a real sign of care and affection, they also obstruct the realization of 'real love' ideals, not least by prompting *kongosa*. Here, we find a complement to the paradox described above that emphasizes the simultaneously enabling and thwarting role played by material favours and disparities in the love desires and intimate engagements of young Freetonian men.

On another occasion, Christine and Florence invited me to watch video compilations of 'sentimentals'. As we were watching the stylized enactments of amorous sensibilities performed by black American female singers (including Alicia Keys, Rihanna, Ashanti and Beyoncé), Christine mentioned the kangaroo story again. Florence then commented on it by relating it to the romantic images of the clips. It is these ideals, she said, that keep the kangaroo from 'running loose' and allow her to 'discover routes to commitment'. While the 'harshness of life' made it difficult to pledge unconditional commitment in relationships (and not look for material gain), it was important to 'commit to the ideal at least'. If you do not make a claim for 'real love', she further explained, it was not worth trying in the first place, even if reality would make 'real love' fail eventually. Florence does not strive to make real-life relationships conform with the (unattainable) ideals of 'real love'. What she expressed was more a desire to realize an approximation of its promises, and, for this, popular love representations provided an itinerary of sorts.

The 'routes' leading in that desired direction are multiple and the perceived quandary of affection, commitment, gifts and gossip is negotiated differently by different groups of young women in Freetown. Christine and Florence were particularly concerned about not giving the impression of 'jumping' between different relationships too frequently. While this concern resonates with their ideas about romantic love derived from popular representations of love, it also reflects other influences that are brought to bear on their particular outlooks on intimate

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relationships and related norms of 'propriety'. Above all, these influences come from the family and the church.

Like most of their fellow (female) college students, the two girls are regular church-goers and active members of campus-based youth ministries. These congregational circles articulate means for achieving social respectability and advancement by linking them to premarital continence and fidelity; this is similar to the situation Cole (2010) describes for young Malagasy women in the context of Pentecostal sects. Whereas the principal aim corresponds with the young women's aspirations for (emotional) stability and, ultimately, marriage, the means, bound to a restrictive sexual morality, tend to conflict with their practices of trying out different forms of intimate bonds before formalizing a relationship. Rather than openly contesting the pressures arising from these conflicting expectations, they circumvent them by veiling youthful sexuality with a veneer of decorum. Christine and Florence framed this by using the notions of 'sober' and '*chak*' (drunk), explaining that, while it was important to keep up the pretence of being faithful and chaste (hence 'sober'), in their search for 'real love' they inevitably had to act *chak*.

These kinds of pressures, however, appear particularly relevant for middle-class families. Many young women I encountered whose family backgrounds implied that they would be less explicitly concerned with reproducing class position (and with maintaining appropriate levels of decorum) tended to balance differently the strictures of generational, and congregational, pressures with the prospects for realizing their emotional *and* material needs. Usually, this implies a more openly enacted fluidity of relationships, and, in fact, it frequently entails an engagement in multiple relationships simultaneously. While affective longings are not less prominent per se, the chosen trajectories towards their realization nevertheless appear of a more instrumental and, in terms of reputation, also of a potentially more precarious character. Often, these relationships involve a broad spectrum of 'transactional' exchanges, in which various forms of intimacy are reciprocated with various types of gifts. These may comprise money, material goods or an invitation to a night out in a bar.

Older Freetonians scorn these practices as 'prostitution' and call the girls 'prostitutes'. The term 'prostitution', however, describes these relations only very inadequately, and it is certainly not how the women involved would describe themselves. The notion of 'transactional sex relationships' (Hunter 2002) fits the context better, although it too has one-sidedly economic and sexual connotations. Hunter (2002: 100–1) defines transactional sex relationships by stating that their participants 'are constructed as "girlfriends" and "boyfriends" and not "prostitutes" and "clients", and the exchange of gifts for sex is part of a broader set of obligations that might not involve predetermined payment'. In the intimate reciprocal relations practised by many young Freetonian women and men, payment is indeed not necessarily involved, but neither is sex.

A more refined emic term used to differentiate them from 'actual prostitutes' is '*rarray* girls'. Reminiscent of the designation of '*godrap* girls' that Newell (2009) describes for Abidjan (and of '*ashawos*' in Accra; see Chernoff 2003), Freetown's *rarray* girls are reputed to be sexually promiscuous, to ignore social norms and to 'use' men to pay for what is seen as a dissolute lifestyle. The term, which is used frequently in reference to 'troublesome girls' who are said to engage in relationships only for the 'love of money', generally lacks the more positive connotations

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of independence, wit and streetwise attitudes that people in Abidjan attribute to *godraps* (Newell 2009: 391). Unlike their male counterparts, the *rarray* boys,[13] Freetown's young women reject the use of this term when referring to themselves, however 'troublesome' they may be.

Lola and Binta, for example, appear to be not particularly concerned about conforming to normative social expectations regarding young women's lifestyles. They practise a somewhat playful form of engagement in fluid relationships, in which various forms of exchange are involved. Both are around the age of eighteen and moved together from the provinces to Freetown in order to raise money to be able to attend secondary school. They share a room in a deprived area in the east of the city. Because of their propensity for spending nights out in popular dance clubs located in the far west, a central 'asset' they seek to obtain is mobility. Here is a telling fragment from an interview I conducted with Lola:

> I and Binta we like going out too much. […] When we want to go to the club, we call our men. If one is not there, we call the next. They come and take us to the club. If they can't come, we know plenty *okada boys.*[14] They take us to the club because they take us as girlfriends. We make them take us as girlfriends so they can talk to their friends about us. But really, we don't take them as boyfriends. They are only our small brothers. We don't sleep with them. […] We don't sleep for money. Only when we like the man. But some like to give me money. And some like to buy me things. But I go choose when I like. I have one I sleep with him because he is pretty. One I have because he knows to dance very good.

Lola and Binta do not fit the category of prostitutes, and nor does 'transactional sex relationship' seem to be an adequate description of their engagements. Borrowing a notion from Mead (1928: 37), their *rarray* girl-like involvement with men might be described as reciprocal 'amorous exploits'. Sex and money are not the central elements in their often short-lived and multiple engagements. From the perspective of the girls, mobility is one among various goals in their exploits. What they give in exchange, however, is neither predetermined nor obligatory but depends on their level of involvement. Unlike Christine and Florence, who 'jump' from one boyfriend to another while trying to reconcile the divergent needs of affective connection and material resources in one relationship, Lola and Binta 'juggle' multiple relationships with varying degrees of commitment and for differing ends. Rather than following a single 'route', they explore a combination of routes simultaneously, seeking to obtain pleasure, affection and benefits independently of one another.

While they obviously attach less importance to matters of *kongosa* and reputation, they also face less direct pressure from family and congregational circles. (In fact, they attend church only during sporadic visits home.) Still, their self-granted freedom to explore (and enjoy) youthful sexuality and to try out different forms of engagement is markedly fragile. Their diverse repertoire of exploits will most likely

[13]The term '*rarray* boy' dates back to the late nineteenth century and is generally used in reference to young unemployed male criminals and drop-outs (Abdullah 2002: 21, 36). Its feminized derivate, '*rarray* girl', appears to be a much more recent lexical invention of Freetown's urban vernacular.

[14]*Okadas* are motorbike taxis, and '*okada* boys' is a rather pejorative term referring to motorbike taxi drivers.

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be reciprocated by similarly exploitative engagements, with none of the men involved wanting to formalize the relationship. Their latitude to engage in these loose relationships will eventually become more constrained, while unwanted pregnancy and childbirth could bring them to an even more abrupt end. Both appear to be aware of that. This became particularly evident in their remarks about 'romantics', the word they use to paraphrase sentiments of affection. Even though their comments were usually taunting rather than wistful, the two girls frequently resorted to common idioms borrowed from love music when speaking of potential future partners 'for marriage'. At the same time, however, they habitually lamented the lack of 'serious men' in Sierra Leone – men, that is, who are suitable for, or capable of, marriage. They thus cited failed adult masculinity as an explanation for their wilful 'failure' to follow normative standards.

Janet, a woman in her mid-twenties, practises a less playful form of reciprocal amorous exploits. At the time I met her, she had fourteen boyfriends. The number fourteen, she claimed, was chosen deliberately: it allowed her to 'operate' her partners on a two-week rotational system without any of the men finding out about the dozen others, and with each one making smaller or larger 'allowances' to subsidize her living costs. In order to manage these complex arrangements, she had developed an elaborate 'monitoring system'; her simultaneous handling of five mobile phones was but one of many elements devised to accommodate the fragile balance between 'display and disguise' (Archambault 2013). As she explained, the situation works for her. She decides which man she sees and stays with and which one she staves off. That said, her case clearly indicates a path of advanced precariousness and constricted freedom that Lola and Binta might be heading towards.

Despite her somewhat excessive number of boyfriends, Janet is drawn to the same fantasies of exclusive and 'eternal' love as her younger contemporaries. She also chooses her music and films depending on whether they express ideals of what she calls 'real love'. When I visited her apartment, I found that the significant role played by romantic representations in her life was illustrated vividly in various ways. She has an impressive collection of largely original (that is, non-pirated) CDs and DVDs, which includes virtually all of Freetown's recent love music and romantic movie hits. Somewhat ironically, this large collection of popular 'media' of love stems from gifts made by boyfriends and lovers. Her penchant for the romantic came out even more clearly in the way in which she furnished her room – literally so. The walls were decorated with carefully arranged posters displaying ornate portrayals of couples holding hands, cuddling and kissing, each one captioned with a stylized phrase: 'I Love You', 'Forever Love' and 'Love Story', for instance. When I asked her about this impressive assembly, she referred to it as her 'shrine', adding that she enjoyed looking at these images because they 'reminded' her of 'another love'. This, however, was not a love she had found in any of her past relationships. Indeed, she explained that she had never been in a 'serious' love relationship before. That 'other love' was a desire for the future. At present, as she hastened to add, she just 'cannot afford' to engage in a relationship in ways that would allow for a realization of these desires, since this would mean committing to only one relationship – and that would be too much of a risk to 'invest in', because if the (one) man left her, she would lose her support and her livelihood.

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Just as Janet cannot afford to have a stable relationship with one man only, many young Freetonian men cannot afford to have a stable relationship with a woman. And so many young men and women are left in a situation in which their hopes and desires are deferred to a future that seems to be out of reach because of the obstacles put in their way by the reality of their lives.

CONCLUSION: LOVE QUA UTOPIA

In the realms of Freetown's love music, and in the meanings its young listeners invest in the music, a world of stability and steadiness is framed. The songs sing about something that they lack: (successful) falling in love, the one 'real love', commitment, marriage and family. The chorus of Nigerian D'banj's 'Fall in Love', which has been among the most popular songs in Sierra Leone ever since it was released in 2009, illustrates the contours of that fantasy quite clearly: '*You don make me fall in love / Fall in love-o / We suppose marry because you don make me fall in love*'.

Trite as these lines appear (and many similar ones could be adduced), they formulate a salient absence in the lives of their young Freetonian audiences, a sonic manifestation of desires, hopes and aspirations. As Spronk notes for middle-class audiences of romance films in Nairobi: 'media representations of love and sexuality provided them with a sense of what is possible' (Spronk 2009: 196). Freetown's popular love music appears to offer a similar horizon of possibilities and expectations. Compared with young professionals in Kenya, whom Spronk writes about, or readers of popular romance novels in Ghana, about whom Newell (1997) makes a similar point, for most youths in Freetown the prospects of ever realizing these possibilities seem much more disconnected from their lived realities. Seen from this comparative perspective, the romantic allusions conjured up in Freetown's love songs clearly slant more towards the fantastic than the didactic.

The lived realities of their young audiences are where the longings and aspirations, as well as the accompanying anxieties and (lovelorn) frustrations, find their initial formulation. As relationships – in real life – cannot be 'pinned down' and as a world unfolds that is fraught with sexual hyper-mobility or stagnation, with flux and uncertainty in interpersonal and, above all, in intimate relationships, love music takes on the form of a *utopia* – an unrealized place that is fantasized about and dreamed of. The etymology of the word 'utopia' is relevant for a further conceptual framing. Derived from ancient Greek, 'utopia' combines 'not' (*ou*) with 'place' (*τόπος*), hence the *no-place*. While the no-place, the utopia, is out of reach, the idea itself, the space for its formulation and imagination, requires a reachable space in the imagination – hence, the '*topia*' in which the *utopia* can be framed, where it can be created, dreamed about and set in relation to the conditions of everyday life. Love music matches this structure. As a sonic 'space', it provides its listeners with a realm on which to project their fantasies and hopes, to imagine alternative states, and, conversely, a space from which to draw desire, inspiration and motivation. By offering a place ('topia') in which to imagine the no-place (utopia), love music can be conceived of as a sonic 'topia' of a utopia shared by many of the city's youths.

Utopia, as Graeber (2011: 50) notes, 'is the place where contradictions are resolved, an impossible ideal'. The ideals evoked by Freetown's foreign love

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music, to which the city's youths are so emphatically drawn, present such an impossible solution. Yet they do not constitute a mere extolling of the imagination. By posing a counter-vision to the experiences of relationships fraught with contradictions, representations of 'real love' serve as an imaginative resource, a 'device' that can be used against the constricting realms of reality. Here, fantasy is not blindfolding perception, but helping transcend its limited faculties.

The popular practices that gravitate towards and encompass these utopic representations of love – above all, listening to love music lyrics and tunes in MP3 collections, on CDs and videos, on the radio and in clubs, but also watching (and commenting on) romance films and romantic poster images – all bear witness to the actuality of 'fantasy as lived practice' (Weiss 2009: 87; see also Appadurai 1996: 54). The kind of 'imagined realism' conveyed in these practices – and therefore the concrete engagements with social realities through the medium of fantasy – is not in itself geared towards the geographically tangible 'elsewheres' that Weiss (2009: 72) and other authors emphasize in relation to African youths' engagement with 'global' popular media (see, for example, Masquelier 2009; Diouf 2003).

More often than not, my young interlocutors were well-briefed about the history and provenance of any recent foreign love music hit. And they usually took an interest in the celebrity gossip about the artist's lifestyle, frequently also emulating the styles of particular musicians. These forms of 'consuming' and linking to current trends in mainstream popular culture serve as conspicuous sources for self-fashioning. But the imaginative connections and apparent dissonances between the real and the utopic that these love songs shape in their lives pertain only superficially to 'fantastic geographies' (Weiss 2009: 71). The fantasy that is at work here appears to be of a decisively more intimate outlook. By juxtaposing that which is lived and experienced in the present time with what appears to elude possible lives and experiences – hence what *their* present lacks – the imagined trajectories of 'real love' are of a temporal rather than a spatial order. In other words, while utopic love has no tangible place – neither here nor in any 'elsewheres', however distant – it does bear traces of a potential future.

The struggle to keep these works of imagination alive and to confront 'the limitations of the current moment' without losing the 'sense of alternatives' (Weiss 2009: 239) becomes more necessary as real-life prospects become more inauspicious. The utopia formulated in Freetown's ubiquitous representations of love encourages adherence to a desire, and to moral demands, for the future realization of something that is denied in the present: an approximation to the possibilities of 'real love'. This approximation is, on the one hand, a context that facilitates young people's engagement in stable and sustainable relationships, and, on the other, a love relationship 'real' enough to prevail against the odds of real life.

Writing about the interrelated facets of 'existential want', deprivation and fantasy in Sierra Leone, Jackson (2011: 61) makes a similar point. Referring to Bloch's (2000) distinction between 'abstract' and 'concrete' utopias, the first denoting mere wishful thinking while the second invokes a possible turn for the better, he states that his informants never lost sight of that distinction when fantasizing about a better life, and thus tended to avoid escapist illusions. The ways in which my young Freetonian interlocutors position themselves at the juncture of desire and reality point to such a differentiation between the abstract and the concrete. Yet that demarcation appears more indistinct and complicated than it

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does in Jackson's description. These complications are brought about by the assertion that ideas imagined as forms of concrete utopias (about partnership, marriage and adulthood) threaten to dissolve into spheres of the abstract as well. Here, then, the boundaries between abstract and concrete utopias become blurred, not on the side of my informants' fantasies and imaginations but on the side of social reality. Ultimately, the peril lurking in that blurring of boundaries is not primarily about falling into escapism, but about concrete fantasy being destined to become quixotic.

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ABSTRACT

The most popular music among youths in Sierra Leone's capital Freetown is music dealing with love. While the music, which is mainly of foreign origin, evokes idealized images of 'real love', the real-life relationships of its young audiences are characterized by chronic states of emotional uncertainty and dissatisfaction. Economic disparities lead to an increasing monetization of young

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people's relationships, driving them either into a fragile flux of multiple partners or out of intimate engagements altogether. Taking this 'dissonance' between sonic representations and social relations as a point of departure, in this article I explore the ways in which young Freetonians position themselves at the juncture of desire and reality. After an introduction to Freetown's contemporary music scene, I juxtapose various life and love stories of youths with the fantasies they invest in 'love music'. In so doing, I discuss the complex relationships between affect, exchange, deprivation and the strictures involved in attaining social adulthood. Drawing on the notion of utopia – denoting a desired yet unattainable state – I argue that it is within the experiential gap between the consumption of a representation and the desire to live (up to) that representation that Freetown's youths rework their horizons of possibilities.

RÉSUMÉ

La musique la plus populaire chez les jeunes de Freetown, la capitale du Sierra Leone, est celle qui parle d'amour. Alors que cette musique essentiellement d'origine étrangère évoque des images idéalisées de « l'amour vrai », les relations que vit son jeune public au quotidien sont caractérisées par des états chroniques d'incertitude et d'insatisfaction affectives. Les disparités économiques conduisent à une monétisation croissante des relations des jeunes, qui les entraîne dans un flux fragile de partenaires multiples ou les laisse en dehors de tout rapport intime. Prenant comme point de départ cette « dissonance » entre représentations soniques et rapports sociaux, cet article explore la manière dont les jeunes de Freetown se positionnent à la charnière entre le désir et la réalité. Après avoir présenté la scène musicale contemporaine de Freetown, l'auteur juxtapose des histoires de vie et d'amour de jeunes aux fantasmes qu'ils investissent dans la « musique d'amour ». Ce faisant, il débat des relations complexes entre l'affect, l'échange, la privation et les restrictions qu'implique l'expérience d'atteindre l'état adulte social. S'appuyant sur la notion d'utopie, qui dénote un état inaccessible pourtant désiré, l'auteur soutient que c'est dans la fracture expérientielle entre la consommation d'une représentation et le désir de vivre (à la hauteur de) cette représentation que les jeunes de Freetown reforgent leurs horizons de possibilités.

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