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Performing excess: urban ceremony and the semiotics of precarity in Guinea-Conakry

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Introduction

In Conakry, the capital city of the Republic of Guinea, a dance and social gathering called 'sabar' has gained unprecedented popularity in recent years for wedding parties. Sabar, derived from a Senegalese genre of the same name,[1] is a celebration in Conakry characterized by the quality of excess – manifested in hypersexualized dancing, lavish displays of wealth and electric amplification. Sabar's rise to popularity in Guinea coincided with the liberalization of the country's economy and the opening of national borders in the wake of state socialism (1958–84)[2] – events that have ongoing repercussions for Guinean citizens. Conakry sabar, I suggest, grapples affectively with such exposure to global capitalism and to the socio-cultural and economic changes it has engendered within Guinea. Average urban citizens discursively frame the experience of neoliberal reform either as a lamentable outcome of socialism's demise or as liberation from the socialist state's strict policing of national borders and everyday life.[3] While people openly discuss these twin poles of abandonment and liberation, they rarely talk in more depth about feelings associated with the lived realities of political-economic transformation. In a society where emotional restraint is a virtue, sabar's position as a foreign cultural import affords participants particular leeway to dramatize col-

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[1]Guinean sabar is loosely based on Senegalese sabar, which is a complex dance form in its own right. For ethnographically detailed accounts of Senegalese sabar, see Castaldi (2006), Tang (2007), Dessertine (2010), Neveu Kringelbach (2013) and Bizas (2014).

[2]Guinea's version of socialism was both a moralizing discourse championing the dignity of postcolonial subjects and a universalizing discourse of progress and modernity. Guinean socialism was politically strategic and ideologically hybrid. With no proletariat to speak of in Guinea at independence, Marxist ideas were adopted to fit local realities. In the early years of independence, president Sékou Touré pursued a policy of non-alignment and formed strategic alliances with capitalist as well as socialist countries (see, for example, McGovern 2015: 249). France encouraged its allies to boycott the emerging nation, thereby pushing Guinea towards socialist powers (Schmidt 2007: 174). As early as 1959, efforts were made in Guinea to socialize the economy by focusing on the nationalization of utilities, the collectivization of agriculture, and state control over trade, currency and prices (Rivière 1977: 103–4).

[3]During the socialist period, the state policed citizens' bodily and ethical comportment. Women's hairstyles and skirt lengths were subject to state sanction, as was the tightness of men's trousers (McGovern 2017: 2). Average citizens were compelled to participate in dance events as performers or spectators, and artists were lauded as socialist exemplars and performed moralistic plays for the population.

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lective affect and to publicly question shared conceptions of value in this changing society.[4]

Guinean sabar embodies a complex amalgam of hopeful affects (excitement, powerfulness) and 'ugly feelings' (Ngai 2009) (uncertainty, powerlessness) that mark young urbanites' engagement with their country's transformation from state socialism to liberal capitalism.[5] If precarity describes a condition of exclusion felt by many labourers in post-Fordist economies (see, for example, Allison 2012; 2013; Millar 2014) – a condition of not being able to realize the good life – it is also the condition par excellence of many post-socialist citizens whose ability to create stable lives was dramatically and suddenly upended (e.g. Verdery 1996; Humphrey 2002; Volkov 2002; O'Neill 2014; Ghodsee 2017). Across the African continent, and indeed all over the globe, neoliberal economic policies have produced increasing inequality and uncertainty through the shrinking of social welfare programmes and the privatization of public resources (see, for example, Ferguson 2006; Ganti 2014: 94). In Guinea, a socialist past gave way to a jarring period of neoliberal reform in the late 1980s and 1990s (e.g. Campbell and Clapp 1995), followed by continuing economic and political crises in the 2000s.[6] This article demonstrates how affective, energetic encounters – as opposed to stable objects of material or linguistic coherence – are key sites for investigating the lived experience of uncertainty ethnographically. It is based on over a decade of engagement: twelve months of participant observation and interviewing in Conakry's dance scene from 2010 to 2013, three years of dance apprenticeship and language study in Conakry from 2002 to 2005, and additional fieldwork among Guinean artists in the US from 2006 to the present. My fluency in Conakry's lingua franca, Susu,[7] was important to this research, as I was able to overhear conversations and comments surrounding events and practices that people avoided discussing when questioned directly.

[4]Despite class differences in Mande societies regarding emotionality and public display (cf. Conrad and Frank 1995; Hoffman 2000), acting overly emotionally in daily life is improper behaviour for any Mande adult group, regardless of class (see Jackson 2011: 25–8).

[5]Sianne Ngai's book *Ugly Feelings* (2009) offers an analysis of the connection between sites of emotional negativity and 'situations of suspended agency' or social powerlessness.

[6]Guineans experienced rapid inflation between 2004 and 2007, during which time average people lived through extreme economic hardship (see McGovern 2017: 167–8). A series of general strikes and low-level violence and street protests ensued in 2006 and 2007 (Engeler 2008). President Lansana Conté died in 2008 and was succeeded by Moussa Dadis Camara in a coup d'état. Following an assassination attempt against Dadis Camara in 2009, an interim government took over until general elections in 2010. Political protests and continual low-level violence surrounded the elections and were a routine feature of Conakry's political landscape during my fieldwork in 2012–13. Violent clashes between protestors and security forces continue to plague Guinean politics (e.g. Samb 2017; Barry 2018; Human Rights Watch 2018).

[7]Susu or Soso is a Mande language spoken in coastal Guinea and the lingua franca of Conakry. In my transcriptions, I follow official changes that were made in 1989 to the Susu alphabet under ordinance 109/PRG/SGG. I indicate which terms are French, Maninka and Susu (when together with other non-English terms), while all unmarked non-English words are Susu.

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Lamine's sabar 1: striptease

The wedding of Lamine Lamah[8] was a big deal among performing artists in Conakry. Lamine is the son of the late Kerfalla Lamah, a renowned director and choreographer in one of Guinea's national troupes, and the founder of a large private company in the capital. Lamine inherited the directorship of the company when his father passed away, and he is well respected among the city's artists. His marriage in February 2013 to an American woman was punctuated by a sabar party. Artists from troupes all over the city flocked to the event, both to support Lamine and his new wife and to experience what they expected to be a well-funded celebration.

At the party – which was a typical high-end Conakry sabar, meaning that there was plenty of food prepared, a backup generator, and many artists invited – I sat close to the drummers, snapping photos. Dancers captured the space one by one, seducing the audience with fiery jumps and sexy gestures, swinging arms and legs to mimic the classic Senegalese style. As the drums heated up, a tall, sturdy dancer named Bebe ran into the circle. She was wearing orange earrings dangling to her shoulders, a tight T-shirt with a red-lipsticked mouth emblazoned on the front, and a wrap tied loosely around her waist. She had been wearing jeans, but as the night progressed, many of the top dancers changed into looser clothing that allowed them to move freely and to expose themselves when performing suggestive movements. Bebe began with some classic moves, then squatted, thrusting her knees in and out while accepting tips from admirers and peers. The ring teemed with women and 'woman-like' (*gine daxi*) men;[9] apart from the drummers, few cisgender Guinean men dared enter the circle to perform.[10] Bebe stood up and pulled her shirt off, revealing a black push-up bra. She tapped her feet in an open stance, and then with one motion threw off her wrap to reveal her thighs – a part of the female body that is typically covered in Guinea. Clad only in blue underwear and a bra, she ran towards the percussionists. Before they could escape, she jumped on one of them with her legs open. She fell backwards as he tried to free himself and, with legs flailing in the air, they disappeared from view into the tangle of drums. While some observers, especially young female dancers, were amused by the spectacle, others looked uneasy or openly expressed disgust at such transgressive female conduct that has become increasingly common in Conakry sabar in recent years.

Bebe's striptease represents an extreme version of the hypersexualized theatrics typical of sabar in Guinea; however, even more suggestive displays are common to sabar in Senegal (see, for example, Neveu Kringelbach 2013: 86–90). No other

[8]This is a pseudonym. Pseudonyms are used in this article either when interlocutors requested anonymity or when their stories involve sensitive information.

[9]Effeminate men in Conakry are accepted in the dance community, despite the fact that homophobia is widespread. These men sometimes wear female wrap skirts in sabar circles and perform 'women's' dances, but they do not openly discuss sexual preferences.

[10]Sabar in contemporary Senegal is a women's dance; professional male drummers and dancers participate, but men rarely attend otherwise (Neveu Kringelbach 2013: 84). Guineans have adopted similar boundaries in sabar, although professional straight male dancers are less likely to dance sabar in Guinea than in Senegal.

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dancer stripped down to her underwear that night (although it is a regular occurrence in Conakry sabars) but many mimicked sexual acts in their dance moves or showed thighs through open skirts as they danced. While the hypersexual nature of sabar makes it the subject of moral scrutiny wherever it is performed, even in Senegal,[11] in Guinea the dance is controversial both because of its suggestive nature and because it is foreign and has become an emblem of contrast with locally derived cultural forms. Sabar and other women's dance parties in Senegal are typically analysed by anthropologists as liminal spaces where women are empowered to dramatize their sexuality. Suggestive dances, in these analyses, are an expression of resistance to patriarchal authority (Heath 1994) or a kind of inversion of normal social roles that helps women 'build up confidence in female power linked to sexuality' (Neveu Kringelbach 2013: 87; for a related example in the DRC, see Braun 2014). This angle is not entirely irrelevant to Guinean sabar, but female empowerment, as I will demonstrate, is only one element of the complex semiotic encounter that sabar constitutes in Conakry.

In Guinean sabar ceremonies, stripping generates both discomfort and excitement in the crowd. 'Women didn't used to act like this!' some people complain. Others just shrug and note dismissively that dancers can make big tips when they take their clothes off. Young women are often energized by the act and either give money to the performer or begin to dance suggestively themselves. Stripping in this context makes the dancer appear at once desperate and powerful – grasping for attention and money while also demonstrating her ability to transgress religious and cultural norms at will. As women are called upon to adopt the role of breadwinner in an economy in which husbands often cannot provide, female artists embrace new opportunities to make money and support their families. In conversation, however, they often lament that they are being forced by poor conditions to act outside the boundaries of normative femininity.[12] At sabar parties, hypersexualized dancing, money throwing and electrification are all instantiations of a quality that I refer to as 'excess' – a quality with no lexical term in Susu, which extends and decentres the culturally salient quality of *bigness* (*xungboe*). By actively probing the threshold of a positive quality (i.e. when does bigness become too much?), these manifestations of excess perform ambivalent public feelings at the heart of the lived experience of political-economic transformation and demonstrate how embodiment can be central to an anthropology of precarity.

Excess: the sensuous quality of uncertainty

The quality of excess saturates Guinean sabar parties. Embodied in showers of money, sound amplified until speakers are cracking, and frenetic, lascivious

[11]Sabar has been taken up in multiple West African contexts, including Mali, Guinea and Burkina Faso, but anthropologists and historians have largely ignored its practice outside Senegal and Gambia. One exception is Rainer Polak's brief discussion of sabar as a phenomenon associated with youth in Mali (2012: 268).

[12]While Guinea's socialist state championed gender equality both as a political strategy and as a moral stance, the subsequent regime under Conté (1984–2008) reversed or failed to enforce many of the laws protecting women's rights (McGovern 2017: 179). The performing arts were also massively defunded after Sékou Touré died, which meant that female artists were doubly disaffected in the wake of socialism, although these artists rarely discuss women's roles in explicitly political terms.

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dancing, excess tests the boundaries of bigness (*xungboe*) – a lexically salient quality that is coveted in Conakry and in Mande societies more broadly (e.g. Ferme 2001: 159–86; on being 'little' in Mande, see McNaughton 1988: 153). Bigness can materialize as corpulence, which indexes financial means and social influence, and powerful people are referred to as 'big people' (*mixi xungbee* in Susu, or *grand[e]s* in French). Bigness is also a quality built into aesthetic systems in Guinea: multiple layers of boldly coloured starched fabric enlarge the figure both physically and figuratively; percussion involves a similar aesthetic of loudness and polyrhythmic layering; and dancers are encouraged by their teachers to increase the volume of their movements – to 'make their moves big' (*pas ra xungbofe*).

Anthropologists often pay attention to qualities when they are labelled and collectively deemed to signal positive value (see, for example, Munn 1986; Keane 2003; Chumley and Harkness 2013; Harkness 2015). But what happens when people feel that their shared understanding of how to obtain desirable lives is under siege? I demonstrate in this article how attention to qualities that materialize in action without being named can reveal emergent dimensions of social life and offer empirical traction on the active production and reformulation of shared value.

My use of the term 'value' throughout this article is most closely aligned with Nancy Munn's (1986) definition of value as the transformative potency of actions. For Munn, value is not just another word for shared importance, nor does it denote congealed labour, as in Marx's famous formulation. Rather, Munn defines value as the potential of actions to produce (positive or negative) transformations in the world (see also Graeber 2001: 43–7). Embodied qualities then evidence those socially recognized potentials (an example in her ethnographic context of Gawa is lightness indexing positive potential and heaviness indexing negative potential). While I espouse Munn's basic definition of value as generated through action, I push the idea further by investigating embodied qualities that are unsettled and not firmly positive or negative. These qualities, which I call 'emergent', are part of precarious social-scapes and index the ambivalent process of reformulating which kinds of actions generate desirable transformations in the world.

Excess in Conakry is one such 'emergent quality' that is affectively salient but not lexically salient, that is not named or consciously categorized but experienced. Unlike in cases where qualities unequivocally signal either positive or negative value (for instance, in Munn's account, buoyancy, lightness and swiftness are set against heaviness and slowness), excess is fundamentally ambivalent. It is not the antonym of a desirable quality, but rather a *degree of a desirable dimension* – a degree that has exceeded a definitively positive value threshold to signal the uncertain potential of relatively new social actions and configurations. Excess is *too much* of a desired quality, not its opposite, and the sentiments it arouses are not as clear as those surrounding oppositional categories. In the sabar circle, excess manifests via multiple sensory experiences – including stripping, money throwing and electrification – which are not found together in other Conakry ceremonies. Their combination, I suggest, embodies both the thrill and the extreme uncertainty of Guineans' engagement with liberal capitalism, and brings into ethnographic focus the idea that emergent phenomena are those that 'exert palpable pressures and set effective limits on experience and on action', even if they are

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not (or not yet) consciously defined, classified or rationalized (Williams 1977: 132). A focus on manifestations of emergent qualities illuminates embodiment as being central not only to alternative modes of 'knowing' (e.g. Mauss 1979 [1934]; Lock 1993; Foster 1996) or to understanding socio-cultural reproduction or maintenance, as in *habitus* (Bourdieu 1977), but to theorizing the lived experience of rapid social transformation.

Sabar and ballet: producing a 'stable alterity'

> They put us in jail for playing sabar and announced on the radio that we had sabotaged Guinean culture! (Mbemba Bangoura)

While sabar is a widespread cultural phenomenon in Conakry that has become popular since the end of socialism among people of all ethnic and class backgrounds for wedding parties,[13] it is made possible thanks to highly skilled musicians, singers and dancers, most of whom train daily in troupes called 'ballets' across the city.[14] Conakry sabar is not exclusive to professional artists, but a detailed analysis of its production must be rooted in an ethnographic understanding of the ballet scene. Ballet in Conakry emerged out of a complicated political history, which I and others explain elsewhere (Straker 2009; Cohen 2016a; 2016b; Dave 2019) but that I will outline briefly here. Guinean dance troupes from the late 1950s to the mid-1980s were part of the state's apparatus for communicating both subtle and didactic messages to the population, and for producing embodied orientations to the world that have endured long after the end of socialism (see McGovern 2017).

During the First Republic (1958–84), the Guinean state developed a hierarchical nationwide training system funnelling the best artists into national companies, and performing artists were celebrated as ideal socialist subjects in newspapers, on the radio, and in regular arts festivals where thousands of troupes competed (see PDG-RDA n.d.: 88; Cohen 2012). Despite the fact that Guinea's socialist state persecuted many innocent people (see, for example, Bâ 1986; Kaké 1987), performing artists recall socialism fondly as a time when their profession was officially recognized and average people did not want for basic goods and services.

[13]While sabar was introduced in Conakry towards the end of socialism (around 1981), my interviews with socialist-era artists suggest that the genre was not widely practised until the regime of Lansana Conté (1984–2008) and was actively discouraged by Sékou Touré and his party's injunction to embrace the local over the foreign (see, for example, Counsel 2009: 91). Elder informants often suggest that sabar 'replaced' two dances that had been popular in Conakry during socialism. One is called Yankadi-Makuru; this was a couple's dance that was done in the evening by the light of the full moon. It is often described to students as a dance of seduction, although it was not overtly sexual like sabar. The other dance that people reported as being 'replaced' by sabar is in fact a family of Susu dances and rhythms broadly referred to as *ginefare*, meaning 'women's dance'. *Ginefare* used to be more popular for weddings, but now is typically performed for female circumcision in Conakry or on stage. Yankadi-Makuru is now only performed on stage and has lost its position as a social ceremony.

[14]The term 'ballet' was used to describe staged African dance across francophone Africa following decolonization, framing African performance as equivalent to European forms (Castaldi 2006: 9, 205).

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In their periodizations of recent history, the most significant break they emphasize is between socialism and what came after it.[15] In artists' narratives, post-socialism is alternately characterized by *loss* (of state support, of meaning, of aesthetic coherence, of power) and by *freedom* (to move, to make money, and to create art as one pleased). Thirty years after Guinea's initial move away from socialism, this ambivalent experience of political-economic transformation is evidenced in urban aesthetic practices, one of the most significant of which is sabar.[16] Sabar parties both perform and negotiate public feelings that are discernible through embodied actions but have little outlet in the more codified realms of discourse and formal choreography, either because they are not fully conscious or are considered inappropriate, or both.[17]

Sabar's beginnings

Mbemba Bangoura is one of the Guinean drummers who first introduced sabar in Conakry. He has since become one of the most well-known Guinean drummers in the world and has lived in the US for over two decades. One afternoon in 2012, I sat with Mbemba on his tile porch in Conakry as he recounted the early days of Guinean sabar. According to Mbemba, a group of Senegalese women in Conakry asked him and some of his fellow drummers to play their traditional rhythms for the arrival of their president, Abdou Diouf, in Guinea in the early 1980s. The women sang the sabar rhythms and the Guinean musicians imitated on djembe drums. After the president's visit, the genre began to catch on among Guineans in Conakry, and soon Mbemba and his colleagues were being called to animate sabar parties all over the city. Not only was this a challenge to the traditional Maninka praise singers (*griots/griottes*) who had hitherto been hired to animate many urban wedding celebrations, it also confronted a national culture industry that had been carefully engineered to match the political vision of the socialist state.[18]

[15]Guinea has known three presidents since the end of socialism: Lansana Conté (in power 1984–2008), Moussa Dadis Camara (in power 2008–09) and Alpha Condé (elected in 2010). These three presidents have all espoused free-market capitalism, marking a distinct experiential break from the Touré era.

[16]For related cases about artists in other post-socialist contexts, see, for example, Verdery (1996: 214) on cultural officials in Romania, and Silverman on Bulgarian musicians (2012: 151–2). Gerald Creed's work on mumming in post-socialist Bulgaria provides another useful point of comparison whereby the experience of uncertainty and chaos becomes part of the affective experience of the performance (2011: 205).

[17]In Mande cultures, artisans traditionally are encouraged to be loud and expressive in public, while 'nobles' are encouraged to be more restrained, but Conakry is a cosmopolitan city where people of different backgrounds have long interacted, making these caste-like distinctions less relevant. In everyday life, people of all backgrounds are regularly discouraged, in speech and song, from 'thinking' or brooding (*maɲɔxunfe* in Susu, or *ka miiri* in Maninka) about negative feelings – making the inappropriate and the unconscious blur into one another. In other words, certain kinds of negative emotions become less conscious because people are actively discouraged from acknowledging them.

[18]The elements of this political vision that were most relevant to the performing arts were a focus on anti-colonial nationalism and disdain for capitalist accumulation. Revolutionary cultural policy devalued foreign (especially European) cultural influences as bourgeois or colonial. 'Bourgeois marriages' were frequently critiqued by party media outlets as anti-revolutionary and private property and income were tightly regulated by the socialist state, partly in an effort

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The state-run ballet that Mbemba and his group worked for was not supportive of this new cultural and entrepreneurial venture and had the drummers thrown in jail for animating sabar parties. Mbemba recalled that it was announced on the radio that they had 'sabotaged' Guinean culture. They were released after only a few days, making it clear that the gesture was only symbolic. However, the dramatic state response to the adoption of a 'foreign' practice offers a glimpse of how sabar has long been construed as a sign of the danger of foreign cultural intrusions in Guinea. These events did not dissuade Mbemba's group from playing sabar, and they continued to expand the genre, which gained traction in Conakry especially after the death of Sékou Touré in 1984.[19] At first, they had borrowed instruments from their ballet for use in sabars, but after having the instruments confiscated repeatedly, they began to use the money that they made at sabars to purchase drums. Equipped with their own materials, Mbemba explained, they became 'independent' and the directors no longer tried to stop them from pursuing this new direction, although it put them at odds with ballet officials and in competition with griots.

Three decades later, sabar has become one of the most popular dances in the capital, and is no longer connected to resident Senegalese. Its popularity, however, does not override its status as a stigmatized non-local cultural form. Instead, I suggest that sabar's status as a cultural import fuels its local appeal. During the socialist period, ballet became emblematic of the budding nation, and dances and rhythms from various ethnic groups were staged in a display of national unity typical of state-sponsored folk dance ensembles in socialist countries from the 1950s to the 1970s (cf. Shay 2002; Taylor 2008). While some of the dances that were included in Guinean ballet repertoires were not native to Guinea, the overarching logic governing what could legitimately belong in ballet choreography was (and continues to be) based on narratives of autochthony and/or cultural heritage. Mande expressive forms, for example, are sometimes accorded belonging in Conakry's ballet lexicon even if they originated within the boundaries of neighbouring nation states.[20] As in most discourses of autochthony (e.g. Harrison 1999; Geschiere 2009), the division between 'inside' and 'outside' in Guinean ballet has as much to do with signification and power as it does with literal historical connections to place or ethnic ownership.

When I spoke with ballet practitioners in Conakry about sabar either in interviews or informally, they almost always highlighted its foreignness. In an interview I conducted with an elderly ballet directress named Jeanne Macauley, who was a celebrated dancer during the socialist period, I brought up the topic of sabar and she immediately cut me off: 'No! Sabar, I have nothing to say about that. It's not

to contain the political strength of the bourgeoisie (O'Toole and Baker 2005: xli; Azarya and Chazan 1987: 112).

[19]While state-socialist systems in Eastern Europe and the former Soviet space outlasted individual leaders, Guinean socialism was tied to its chief architect, independence president Sékou Touré, and his death marked the end of Guinea's socialist experiment.

[20]This focus on autochthonous forms was not part of the original Les Ballets Africains de Keïta Fodéba, founded by Guinean national Fodéba Keïta in Paris in 1952, which later became Guinea's national company Les Ballets Africains de la République de Guinée (Cohen 2012). Keita's original group was composed of people from a variety of ethnic and national backgrounds (Joshua Cohen, personal communication, 2017).

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my culture. Sabar is from Senegal … I can't explain sabar to you! So if you ask me about sabar you will make me worry. I will worry!' Even young artists who claimed to appreciate sabar and attended sabar parties regularly focused on its foreignness in interviews. One such dancer named Fatou described how she knows how to dance sabar, but refuses to teach it in classes because she is not Senegalese. A prominent male dancer named Aly suggested that he likes the genre because it reminds him that each culture is rich and distinct, noting that Guineans could never dance sabar like Senegalese. Others treated sabar as an emblem of youthful disrespect. A young transmigrant drummer named Laulau who was visiting Guinea from his home in Japan during my fieldwork used sabar as a metonym for lack of respect and discipline among post-socialist youth. 'The current generation, they aren't disciplined, there is no respect,' Laulau complained. 'They don't see what has come before. If I just started [drumming] I will respect [those who know more] so that I too can learn. But that is not in the current generation. They just start to hit the drum. It's like, only sabar, just sabar! There's no respect.' Implicit in this critique is the idea that youth are forsaking their socialist-trained elders and disavowing the practices of discipline and collective sacrifice that the socialist generation so esteemed.

In contemporary Conakry, sabar maintains physical, cultural and symbolic distance from Guinean ballet dance, which was developed to index national pride and Guinean revolutionary ideals (much like rumba in Cuba; see Daniel 1995). This condition of what Brian Larkin calls 'a stable alterity' (2002: 752) – by which sabar's outsider status keeps it safely distant from local cultural forms – makes sabar a prime site for engaging, and attempting to contain, feelings associated with loss, vulnerability and precarity that the post-socialist era has invited. Semiotic containment efforts are, however, always complicated – they create, as Judith Irvine observes, 'a kind of present absence' (2011: 17) by directing attention to the object of containment. While sabar maintains symbolic distance from ballet, it has become thoroughly enmeshed in the cultural fabric of the city, and its popularity stems in part from its transgressions.

While there are many other ceremonies in Conakry, they may roughly be divided into two groups: those that are mostly performed by people of the ethnic group from which the ceremony derives; and those that do not delineate insiderhood through ethnicity.[21] This distinction is significant because the ceremonies with no ethnic referent, which tend to be organized by youth, delineate insiderhood instead through shared experiences of urban life (villagers visiting Conakry, for example, often express disdain for these gatherings and cannot easily join in as they can with ethnic dances). Sabar and another ceremony called *dundunba* are the two central non-ethnic dance parties popular in Conakry today, and they accomplish different things. Dundunbas are the ceremonies most closely connected to organized ballet. They take place in the afternoon, are carefully timed to end at the evening call to prayer, and professional artists are the main participants. In contrast, sabars take place only at night and

[21]For example, someone who has Maninka heritage, when they get married, would have a traditional Maninka marriage, called *Foli* or *Denbadon* (Maninka: mother's dance), and may *also* have a sabar. Each ethnic group has its own ceremonies, but most young people want a sabar in addition to, or instead of, the ethnic celebration.

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are attended by many people who are not artists. Dundunbas require few monetary transactions and no technological fixtures in order to be successful. Professional dancers and drummers are motivated to attend sabars, on the other hand, by the potential for income generation as much as interest in the genre.[22] As ideal types in the local collective imagination, dundunba and sabar occupy oppositional categories. During more than four years of participation in Conakry's ballet scene, I attended scores of sabars with ballet dancers, and sometimes danced myself, as I had learned basic sabar from Senegalese teachers in the US. In Conakry, however, I became far more proficient in dundunba than sabar, as I rehearsed in ballets daily where the dances present in dundunba ceremonies are taught. My own training therefore reflected the bracketing of sabar as foreign in Conakry.

For artists, dundunba ideally connotes respect, dignity and social unity. The means for signalling these virtues are contested in dundunba circles, especially between generations trained in the socialist and post-socialist eras (see Cohen 2016b). The ideal typical virtues associated with the dance, however, remain central to both cohorts. Dundunba also signifies masculinity,[23] and although women have now appropriated its once exclusively male movements, dundunba is not associated with female sociality, unlike sabar, which is historically a women's dance in Senegal. As ideal types, dundunba and sabar oppose each other at every turn: dundunba is done during the day, sabar at night; dundunba is based on gifting, sabar on monetary exchange; dundunba is male, sabar female; dundunba is national, sabar foreign; dundunba is respectable, sabar lewd. While dundunba is not immune from internal upheavals and anti-aesthetics, sabar as a category has allowed dundunba to maintain a more distanced relationship to the ugly feelings that sabar invites.

Manifesting excess

Sabar parties in Conakry overwhelm the senses. Participants engage in acts of amplification and accumulation (instantiations of bigness) that reach tipping points at which they signal impossibility and/or produce uncomfortable affects. Amplified sound, for example, is distorted through old equipment and often cut abruptly by electrical failure. Acts of throwing money with abandon – performing a fantasy of capitalist accumulation – contrast sharply with daily experiences of material shortage. Dance solos rev up into frenetic encounters that sometimes end in striptease. Occasionally, music and dance disintegrate into an odd combination of discomfort (indexed by pained facial expressions and shouting) and

[22]In socialist Guinea, ballet practitioners often worked during the day and rehearsed at night, and those in the national troupes were salaried. In post-socialist Conakry, where there is little opportunity for formal employment and even the best young dancers in the national ballets are not salaried, artists piece together incomes through informal means. Compared with many other ceremonies, sabars are lucrative. In 2013, dancers reported that a single talented dancer could make anywhere between 30,000 and 300,000 Guinea francs (US$4.30–US$43) at a sabar party, depending on how many dancers were present and who was throwing the sabar.

[23]Dundunba is referred to in Conakry as 'the strong man's dance', and its chief movements are performed only by men in rural contexts.

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laughter, after a dancer literally tackles the drummers, sometimes in her underwear. In these moments, the threshold of desirable bigness is transgressed in different ways, drawing attention to uncomfortable collective feelings that exist alongside the thrill and empowerment that are on the surface of the expression. In the following pages, I describe ethnographically how these scenes unfold in Conakry sabars.

Lamine's sabar 2: throwing money

At the sabar party celebrating Lamine Lamah's wedding, guests arrived – as they do for all sabars – wearing immaculate gowns and men's outfits made from the most coveted shiny fabrics overloaded with expensive embroidery. Women guided pointy high heels over pebbled ground, their large headwraps competing for attention in the crowd. Dancers and spectators occupied yellow plastic chairs encircling a dance space the size of an Olympic swimming pool, with drummers, a guitarist and several singers at one end. Dancers entered the ring one by one to perform solo, swinging their legs and arms in broad, quick strokes and jockeying for attention as the music grew faster. When the dancers had been soloing for a while, a *griotte* would interject a song, inviting guests out to dance slowly and offer money as she sang praises and popular songs.

When it was time to honour the special male guest or 'godfather' (*parrain* in French) of the sabar, his friends gathered at one end of the ring, encircling him. He was a tall dark man who was a popular member of a group of virtuosic effeminate sabar dancers. As they began to move slowly across the circle, he was in the centre of the pack, wearing a light blue outfit made of the highest-quality cloth called *bazin riche*, embroidered around the neck with shiny white and red thread and decorated with fuchsia, lime green, yellow and blue squares.[24] Matching lime green leather slippers completed the ensemble. Flanked by his friends and supporters, the distinguished-looking *parrain* walked slowly to the music, showing off his expensive outfit, interjecting a subtle flourish here and a toss of the head there. He lowered his eyelids, raised an eyebrow and pulled out a thick stack of new cash from his pocket. As the *griotte* sang his praises, a large metal platter was presented before him and he began to dish out crisp 500 and 1,000 franc notes. He did this slowly and deliberately, interjecting sassy graceful moves. His friends cheered him as the *griotte* elaborated on the good deeds of his ancestors in between verses of a popular song. By the end of the song, the platter was full.

Money 'spraying' is a common practice across Western and Central Africa and is productively analysed by anthropologists as a means of self-fashioning and reputation building (Barber 1995; White 2008; Newell 2005; 2012). Sasha Newell describes it as an act that projects 'the fantastic onto the realm of the social' (2005: 139), allowing the performer to enlarge himself socially by enacting a fantasy image. Nomi Dave (2019) suggests that when someone performs wealth and receives praise, they are recognized in a way that transcends the individual – that reproduces and recognizes the collectivity. Throwing money, as these authors

[24]A single outfit made of *bazin riche* can cost several hundred dollars in Conakry, more than the average person makes in a month.

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have shown, is a hopeful and productive performance of social grandeur. By throwing money, people become bigger socially.

While money spraying is a performance capable of generating social bigness qua reputation, however, actually achieving the status of big man or woman in Conakry also involves becoming financially stable and being able to support others. At a time in Guinea when it has become painfully clear that the vision of rapid development and economic growth offered first by the socialist state and then by neoliberal adjustment regimes has not come to fruition, the drama of capitalist opulence embodied in money throwing also indexes the extreme uncertainty of gaining financial stability in contemporary Conakry. The money sprayed at sabar parties is collected and split between drummers and singers at the end of the night (dancer income is separate and based on tips). The act of spraying is therefore also a drama of precarity for the musicians *receiving* the money, as their incomes fluctuate significantly depending on how many artists are there, who throws the party, and which distinguished guests are present.

While some people in Guinea have experienced economic liberalization and globalization as the ability to accumulate resources without constraint, most have gained an acute awareness of disparities: (1) between local conditions and standards of living in the global North; and (2) between those who have gained access to power and resources and those who have not (cf. Comaroff and Comaroff 1999; Mains 2007). While being asked to be a distinguished guest is considered an honour in Conakry sabars, average people grumble privately if they are chosen for the role because they know that it will deplete their already meagre cash reserves, and local spectators are all aware of this fact. There is insecurity in the spray for all but the wealthy, as people distribute what they don't have, and as artists on the receiving end scrape together a living in a hustler's economy.[25]

At sabars, all distinguished guests – artists or not – spray money, but a trained dancer has the wherewithal to create exaggerated gestures that call explicit attention to the separateness of this performance from regular life. A dancer, for example, may raise her eyebrows masterfully while lowering one eyelid in a facial gesture of haughty success; or stop and move her shoulders in a slow figure eight and flip her head as she tosses a bill, using these embellishments to demarcate the act of throwing bills from simply handing them over in a market. It is precisely this separation – between the fantasy of largesse and the reality of its fraught attainment – that makes money throwing into a public spectacle of insecurity, hitching a ride with aspiration.

Electricity and powerlessness

The quality of excess is again materialized in sabar parties through electrification. While dundunbas and all other dance ceremonies involving percussion in Conakry are performed acoustically, sabars utilize an amplified electric guitar, a PA system for the singers, and electric lighting to make the dancers visible in the dark. The drums are also sometimes amplified by a singer's microphone held inside or

[25]Daniel Jordan Smith similarly writes of practices of what he calls 'conspicuous redistribution' in Nigeria, noting that they 'ultimately benefit elite[s] … and can be seen as reinforcing and exacerbating inequality rather than remedying it' (2017: 19).

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next to a djembe drum during a solo. While acoustic djembe drumming is already extremely loud (*a xui gbo* – its voice is *big*), its amplified sound literally exceeds the threshold of the PA system's capacity, resulting in sonic *excess* – frequent screeches, buzzing and distortion of the sonic material. This is not a cultivated sound, as in heavy metal music, where distortion is an important feature of the genre (Wallach *et al.* 2014: 11). Rather, the sensorial experience created at sabars is akin to that of pirated video and audio recordings, which are marked by poor transmission and ambient noise (Larkin 2004), creating a sound that indexes inadequacies both technical and social. Instead of electrified sound being simply bigger than acoustic sound and therefore better on a smooth valuative gradient (the bigger the better), failures of channel and provisioning get in the way of such a clear intensification of positive value.

During the socialist period, everyone in Conakry had electricity, but it was extremely modest – a single 25 watt bulb in each household (McGovern 2013: 220). Since the end of socialism, electricity provisioning has been unpredictable and socio-economically uneven in Conakry: it is available more frequently in wealthy neighbourhoods. At the same time, Guineans have become increasingly aware of cultural and political realities outside national borders, and their desire for, and sense of entitlement to, regular and abundant electricity has grown. While in the socialist period Guineans were taught that shortage had a social and ideological purpose,[26] now it is simply interpreted as state failure. In the sabar circle, lack and uncertainty are evidenced at once through the sonic excesses signalling technical breakdown as well as through sudden outages that index broader infrastructural failures.

During my fieldwork from 2010 to 2013, electricity was highly irregular in Conakry, and it was almost impossible to predict when the electricity would be on and for how long, especially in poor neighbourhoods. Due to this irregularity, the host of a sabar party usually also prepared a backup generator to keep the party going even if the electricity went out. Only relatively wealthy patrons could afford to sidestep the grid entirely by planning a party with exclusively generated power. The source, quality and evenness of electricity at sabars therefore betrayed socio-economic inequality in the cityscape.[27] The topic of the state's failure to provide regular electricity is central to everyday politics in Conakry (e.g. *Economist* 2013; Diallo 2017; Barry 2017), as in many other African contexts (cf. Mains 2012; Degani 2017), and there were regular protests around these issues during my fieldwork in Conakry.

[26]Guinean citizens during socialism were encouraged to interpret individual suffering in the present as a necessary sacrifice for the collective benefit of the population in the long term (see McGovern 2017).

[27]While electricity remains erratic in Conakry, Guinea's current president, Alpha Condé, has made electricity a priority. The Guinean state, in a partnership with the Chinese, completed a new hydropower plant called Kaléta in 2015. This plant fell short of its goal to meet Guinea's electricity needs, and protests continue in the capital as citizens contend with energy shortages. A new hydroelectric dam project called Souapiti has also been contracted with the Chinese, but will not be completed for several more years (Diallo 2016; African Energy 2018). Guinea's power sector faces other significant challenges, such as poor infrastructure and poor financial performance, that will have to be overcome in order to provide consistent electricity to citizens (USAID 2017).

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Even when a generator is waiting in the wings, the period between grid failure and generated power is pregnant. A flicker and 'ziiooop' sound signal the imminent transformation of the audio and visual experience. When the microphone is suddenly severed, sighs of disappointment fill the ring. '*Ade ahhhh*!' – 'Not this again!' Disappointment turns to anger as people suck their teeth loudly and curse the government. Cracks of the djembe drums – which would exemplify sonic 'bigness' in a non-electrified landscape – sound weak and strained. The dancer soloing continues to swing and spin in the dark in a stubborn effort to keep the party alive. When the electricity cuts out, the ring is flooded with literal and metaphorical darkness, silence and powerlessness. In the loaded pause between grid and generator (or grid and grid, or grid and the end of the party, as the case may be), regular people are reminded of Guinea's dismal 'place-in-the-world' (Ferguson 2006) and the limits of modernity's relativism.

Conclusion: precarity's emergence

Precarity

> To live with precarity requires more than railing at those who put us here … We might look around to notice this strange new world, and we might stretch our imaginations to grasp its contours. (Tsing 2015: 3)

Bigness in Guinea is still a key quality indexing personal success. To be a big person is to be respected and financially stable – signalled by big bodies, big clothing, big names and generous acts (described in Susu as having a 'big heart'). But social bigness is elusive in a neoliberal economy in which the mechanisms for becoming a *grand[e]* that were available to the previous generation are no longer viable. In the three examples above – stripping, money spraying and electrical amplification and outage – performances of desirable bigness in sabar circles reach thresholds at which they generate ambivalent affects and call attention to impossibilities. If value arises in actions that transform, and qualities signal the potency of those actions, as Munn suggested, what does it mean in Conakry sabar that bigness as a quality is repeatedly pushed beyond its capacity to unambiguously signal positive value?

Guinean dance is always 'big'. Directors tell their students to make their movements bigger (*pas raxungbofe*) – to claim the space in which they dance through jumping, expanding the stance, opening the fingers outward and smiling broadly. In a common Guinean sabar solo, a good dancer will call attention to herself through energetic moves punctuated by sexy flourishes. In a solo that devolves into a striptease, the dancer accelerates quickly from energetic moves to sexy asides to another act entirely – one that most observers think exaggerates the sexiness of the dance to the point of 'ruin' (*kannae*). Many Guinean artists describe such spectacles as 'dirty' (*nɔxi*) or simply note 'She exaggerates!' (*A exaggererma*!, combining Susu and French) with a negative inflection.

What does it take to make a living – to be noticed and stand out from the crowd – in a gig economy? When dancing well is not enough, what kinds of actions will propel artists into the lives they desire? This is an open question in Conakry, and artists are inventing dance practices that defy or test the boundaries of qualities that the generation before them considered definitively positive, such as collectivity, bigness and control (see, for example, Cohen 2016b). Qualitative

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bigness is no longer enough to propel social bigness, either for individuals or for the nation as a whole. During socialism, pathways to success for artists and many other youth were fairly direct. Going through school was likely to produce a secure government job, and developing one's skills as an artist through hard work led to upward mobility in a state-run system of troupes, at the apex of which were the prestigious national ballets that travelled the world regularly. In post-socialist Guinea, those pathways have become increasingly insecure.

By examining stripping, money throwing and electrical interruptions together as instantiations of excess in sabar ceremonies, I posit active and embodied encounters as important sites where collective value is deliberated. If the good life is ideally stable, but getting there is profoundly insecure, sabars in Conakry dramatize that uncertainty through actions that generate shared affect. This is a socially productive drama that shapes the reality in which it circulates by probing the qualitative contours of positive value in precarious times.

Emergence

Contemporary secular urban ceremonies and artistic genres in Africa are emergent in Raymond Williams' sense – they exert force on conceptions of the desirable and make possible collective feeling, but they are not rationally or consciously calculated to produce such effects. As I have argued, one of the mechanisms for exerting such force is the embodiment of emergent qualities. In situations of rapid transformation, people embody emergent qualities before, or instead of, settling on lexically salient ones. When the basic condition of being is precarious, a condition of emergence – and the ambivalent feelings that accompany it – may replace more stable models of indexing shared value (through words, objects or representations).

To paraphrase Sianne Ngai (2009), nagging unpleasant feelings, while often not the subject of philosophical inquiry, can offer rich material for understanding social and political predicaments of restricted agency. In Conakry, sabar is a site of foreign vulgarity at the heart of local senses of what matters. It is at once elevated as being worthy of wedding celebrations and denigrated as culturally other, feminine and unserious – and therefore bracketed as a space of untrammelled affect. While anthropological accounts of both money throwing and hypersexual dancing on the continent tend to focus on social uplift and empowering inversions, I explore the fundamental uncertainties – and downright 'ugly feelings' – that are captured in these performances.

For Guinean artists, like many other Africans, the neoliberal era has meant radical exposure to the vicissitudes of global markets and to the uncertainty of private provisioning. This experience of economic liberalization and state retreat has both negative and positive value potential in Conakry. It is an experience of worlding – of becoming global in a way that is both vulnerable and hopeful (Simone 2001; Ong and Roy 2011), the possible outcomes of which are as yet unsettled. The fundamentally ambivalent quality of excess in sabar parties reflects this precarity that surrounds the Guinean present and illuminates the unconscious and embodied ways in which feelings transcend the individual (on public feelings, see Durkheim 2001 [1912]; Gordon 1997; Berlant 2011; Cvetkovich 2007; 2012; Mazzarella 2017a). As Durkheim reminds us, to feel

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together is central to what it means to be part of a collective. To feel ambivalently is what it means to live in precarious times.

The urgency of sabar in Conakry – both for participants and for theory – is precisely its ability to articulate emergence or becoming in cultural practice. Like other cultural performances, sabar parties do not merely reflect a coherent social world; they also play a part in its very constitution. By examining how the trusted quality of bigness is extended repeatedly beyond its capacity in sabar parties, I show this performative process in action as bigness is stretched into an emergent quality – one that captures life and form in dialectical relation (see Mazzarella 2017b: 64–5). Conakry sabar begs us to consider how qualities that manifest not in lexical terms, but in embodied, affecting encounters, can index 'value-in-the-making'.

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Abstract

In Conakry, the capital city of the Republic of Guinea, dance ceremonies called *sabars*, derived from a Senegalese genre of the same name, have become extremely popular for wedding celebrations. Sabar's rise in Guinea coincided with the liberalization of the country's economy and the opening of national borders in the wake of state socialism (1958–84) – events that have produced profound uncertainty for average citizens. This article explores sabar as a practice that grapples affectively with the social and economic changes neoliberal reform has engendered within Guinea. Sabar ceremonies are characterized by instantiations of excess, including hypersexualized dancing, electric amplification and theatrical displays of opulence. By examining excess as an 'emergent' quality whose cultural value is undetermined, the article demonstrates how dancers participate in the active constitution and questioning of collective value in Conakry, and how embodiment is central to an anthropology of precarity.

Résumé

À Conakry, la capitale de la République de Guinée, des cérémonies de danse appelées sabars, dérivées d'un genre sénégalais du même nom, étaient extrêmement populaires pour les célébrations de mariage. L'essor des sabars en Guinée a coïncidé avec la libéralisation de l'économie du pays et l'ouverture des frontières nationales dans le sillage du socialisme d'État (1958–1984); des événements qui ont fait naître une profonde incertitude pour les citoyens moyens. Cet article explore le sabar en tant que pratique qui se heurte affectivement aux changements sociaux et économiques qu'a engendrés la réforme néolibérale en Guinée. La cérémonie de sabar se caractérise par des instantiations de l'excès, y compris une danse hypersexualisée, une amplification électrique et une mise en scène de l'opulence. En examinant l'excès en tant que qualité « émergente » dont la valeur culturelle est indéterminée, l'article démontre comment les danseurs participent à la constitution active et au questionnement de la valeur collective à Conakry, et le rôle central de l'incarnation dans une anthropologie de la précarité.

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