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Research Question: In what ways can the non-conformity of Ghanaian female alternative artists be considered as contributing to Afrofuturist/Africanfuturist imaginaries?
In his essay *Black to the Future*, Mark Dery defines Afrofuturism as a “speculative fiction that treats African American themes and addresses African American concerns in the context of twentieth-century technoculture”.¹ (Dery 1994). Over time, this cultural movement has grown to examine the African Diasporic identity and its futuristic possibilities across many art mediums including, film, music, paintings et cetera. In recent years, Naijamerican writer Nnedimma Nkemdili Okorafor, coined the term Africanfuturism, because she believed it was a better descriptor of the work she was producing, as a result of being miscategorized as an Afrofuturist writer. In her blog post, *Nnedi’s Wahala Zone Blog*, she mentions that “Africanfuturism is similar to “Afrofuturism” in the way that blacks on the continent and in the Black Diaspora are all connected by blood, spirit, history, and future. Africanfuturism, however, is a cultural movement informed by African ways of knowing and being. At its center, it interrogates Africa the continent, its people, and their cultural beliefs and values, while simultaneously engaging with Africa the idea, and interrogating its pasts, present, and futures. The idea of Africaneity in Africanfuturism has no limits, it takes on different forms as it weaves itself through the continuities and discontinuities of the atemporal space it occupies. Africanfuturism is an ongoing conversation that has forced its way into contemporary Africa demanding the African, whether local or abroad, to redefine and reimagine Africaneity on the continent and beyond. The difference is that Africanfuturism is specifically and more directly rooted in African culture, history, mythology, and point-of-view as it then branches into the Black Diaspora, and it does not privilege or center the West”. (Nnedi 2019).² Similarly,

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² [https://nnedi.blogspot.com/2019/10/africanfuturism-defined.html](https://nnedi.blogspot.com/2019/10/africanfuturism-defined.html)
Africanfuturism has served the same purpose, if not more, in influencing present visual vocabularies and conceptual narratives about Africa.

In this research paper, I will use Africanfuturism as a lens through which I explore Ghanaian female alte musicians’ contributions to the growing Africanfuturistic imaginaries. Overall, this research aims to contribute to the growing body of knowledge on Ghanaian female Alte musicians and highlight their significance in shaping alternative realities. I will employ a qualitative research methodology, including interviews with two Ghanaian female alte musicians, and content analysis of their music videos, lyrics, and musical productions. By delving into their personal experiences and artistic expressions, the paper seeks to uncover how these artists challenge traditional gender roles, explore cultural identities, and address social issues within the context of Ghanaian society through their musicality.

**Why Africanfuturism**

Popular culture, which includes music, film, and fashion are all sites for creating imaginaries that offer us an ontological examination of any society’s way of life. Consequently, they become the very same epistemological sites and mediums through which these imaginaries are produced, shared, and reproduced. These imaginaries and their visual, sonic, and spiritual fragments offer us the ability to re-examine African histories and futures influencing the formation of new African identities. Similarly, it is in these same places that critical forms of resistance emerge, intra-diasporic dialogue (civil or not) happens, and evidence of the process entailed in the making, becoming, and unmaking of Blackness unveils themselves.³ According to Stuart Hall, a

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sociologist whose work was mainly focused on cultural theories, mentions in his seminal essay *What is this “Black” in Black popular culture* that “[P]opular culture always has its base in the experiences, the pleasures, the memories, [and] the traditions of people. It has connections with local hopes and local aspirations, local tragedies, and local scenarios that are the everyday practices and the everyday experiences of ordinary folks”.

Popular culture, which encompasses entertainment (music, films, video games), fashion, politics, sports, and technology (amongst other things), encompasses contemporary aspects of our day-to-day lives. The ever-evolving urban landscape influences trends in popular culture including the music we listen to and the clothes we wear. Music, in particular, is a necessary cultural product. This is because there is an inherent relationship between music and culture. Musical sounds and practices in a given collectivity have a connection to the respective social functions music performs in any given cultural setting.

Africa is a young continent witnessing a cultural renaissance drawing inspiration from the local and the cultural exchanges with the global stage. Through the constant movements and cultural exchanges of her people, the continent's urban landscape is constantly shifting and growing. According to Sandu Marta Christina, author of *Sociomusiology and The Importance of Music Education in Society*, “The ever-changing tastes, the more and more diversified needs, the pursuit of the extraordinary and nonconformism, the speed with which trends appear and disappear forced the musical area to comply with the requirements of the society”.

Similarly, the Africanfuturist is constantly engaging with an ever-evolving idea of Africa whose concepts emerge out of changing urban landscapes and are shaped by popular culture which usually combines elements of African culture, history, and aesthetics with

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emerging technologies, slang, and fashion, transporting Africa into a futuristic world. The musician guides society, drawing, of course, on the people's collective conventional wisdom, reservoir of knowledge, and social world views. In this case, the music being released by Ghanaian female alte musicians becomes a site of these imaginaries.

**From the streets of Nigeria to the World**

Fela Kuti, born in Nigeria in 1938, was a legendary musician and activist. He is widely credited for creating and popularizing Afrobeat. Afrobeat is a music genre that originated in the 1960s and 1970s in Nigeria. It combines traditional West African music, jazz, funk, and highlife with a polyrhythmic drum at its base. His lyrics were often critical of the Nigerian government, and he used his music as a platform to express his discontent and frustration with the social injustices of his time. "Zombie" and "Sorrow, Tears, and Blood" are examples of his politically charged songs where he fearlessly addressed political and social issues, calling out corruption, and government oppression, and advocating for the rights of the common people. Afrobeats, on the other hand, is a more contemporary genre that emerged in the early 2000s.

The term “Afrobeats” was first used by London-based Ghanaian DJ Abrantie Boateng as a name for his radio show, The Afrobeats Show. This polyrhythmic genre finds its origins in West Africa, mainly Nigeria and Ghana, and defines the pop music coming out of the region; a mixture of Afrobeat with hip hop, dancehall, R&B, and electronic dance music. Afrobeats gained prominence in the early 2000s, but over the past six years, it has experienced a tremendous surge in popularity both within Africa and transcending geographical boundaries by engaging a global

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8 https://www.theguardian.com/music/2012/jan/19/the-rise-of-afrobeats
audience. Artists like Wizkid, Davido, Burna Boy, and Tiwa Savage have ascended to global success, contributing to Afrobeat's mainstream popularity. Afrobeat has risen to the top of international music charts and left an unmistakable influence on multiple facets of popular culture. Despite the enormous popularity of Afrobeat there is a significant lack of scholarly study dedicated to understanding and assessing the impact of Afrobeat.

Alte music (pronounced as all-teh) is a contemporary style of music that emerged in Nigeria in the late 2010s. Alte is characterized by its fusion of various musical genres, drawing influences from hip-hop, alternative R&B, Afrobeat, reggae, jazz, and electronic music. This sound can be traced back to DRB LasGidi collective which was one of the first “alte” groups of artists. The term alté itself originated from the 2014 song "Paper" by BOJ. BOJ, a member of the DRB collective, included the lyrics, "The ladies are attracted to me because I'm an alté guy."9

According to Apple Music, Alté music often features introspective and unconventional lyrics, experimental sounds, and unique fashion aesthetics. Some key alté artists include Odunsi (The Engine), Santi, Lady Donli, and Tems. The alté movement has gained significant traction in recent years, both within Nigeria and internationally. It represents a departure from traditional Nigerian music styles and has been embraced by a younger generation of artists and listeners. An indicator of the constant dialogue between the old and the new, the modern and the contemporary is seen yet again as Africa’s musical urbanscapes continue to evolve. The alté scene has its distinctive sound and vibe, blending elements of Nigerian culture with global influences. It has created a space for artists to express their individuality and push the boundaries of creativity in

9 https://imullar.com/2023/07/06/is-alte-music-seeing-an-early-revolution/#:~:text=The%20History%20of%20Alt%C3%A9&text=The%20term%20alt%C3%A9%E2%80%94meaning%20alternative,traditional%20music%20and%20style%20landscape.
the Nigerian music industry. Alté started as an unconventional coconspirator to a traditional way of thinking but was perhaps popularized most by its genreless sound.\textsuperscript{10} These unique individuals who wanted to create music without mental restrictions or play by the industry book have reshaped and pushed the musical barriers, inviting their listeners to brace themselves for an otherworldly musical journey. However, with the rise of comparable alternative scenes in other African creative cities including Nairobi’s EA Wave and Lagos’ alte scene. It seems necessary and timely to fill the gap in the literature regarding what alternative African music is and what its social value might be, particularly in the context of African societies and cities forced through colonial disruption to grapple between new and ancient sonic soundscapes and visual vocabularies.

Amaarae, a recording artist, played a crucial role in shaping the alté movement in Africa. The queer Ghanaian multitalented genre-bender was frequently mistaken as Nigerian because of her extensive collaborations with members of the Nigerian alté community like Cruel Santino. In an interview with Spotify, Cruel Santino mentions that “Women are the cornerstone of Alte music”.\textsuperscript{11} From video vixens that visualize this alternative reality, inspiring fashion trends, attitudes, and hairstyles Nigeria's contribution to the genre has been extremely valuable. Beyond music, alte expresses itself as an individualistic, and non-traditional mode of self-expression, and fashion. Teeze (whose real name is Teni Zacheus Jr), one of the faces and cultural innovators within the Nigerian alte community characterizes Alte as a concept. He argues that “It's come to include a music genre, but it started as a way of being that champions individualistic and non-traditional modes of self-expression”. Alte is more than a sound, it is a cultural movement

\textsuperscript{10} https://thenativemag.com/alte-nigeria-continues-to-thrive/
\textsuperscript{11} https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cVQp1EhOEf0&t=327s
that transcends into fashion, how we think how we relate, and how we practice self-expression, it is individualistic in that regard. The influence of alte extends beyond just the music itself. It has impacted fashion trends, dance styles, and even the way people communicate. Alte-inspired fashion, with its y2k fashion prints and bold makeup, has gained traction in the fashion industry, with many designers drawing inspiration from Alternative aesthetics. In his WordPress titled Care is a New Cool, Kobina Graham, A Ghanaian cultural geek mentions that such things have power that goes beyond mere aesthetics.\textsuperscript{12} This new wave coincides with the rise of a counter-culture, with artists from different countries and backgrounds coming together to create music that transcends borders and showcases the collective creative energy of the continent. Interestingly, the Alte movement also embodies a distinct fashion and lifestyle aesthetic which as a result forces us to reimagine the African identity, sound, and look. “Their interactions spill from the digital into actual events, friendships, and community. They create language, music, film, theatre, fashion, photography, digital artwork, and anything else that pushes the culture’s outer limits. And while in pursuit of it, they are not solely beholden to money (Graham 2019).

An Alternative Reality

“Otherness” is something a lot of alte artists have to grapple with as they are often dubbed unconventional, and non-mainstream. From being labeled as elite kids with no mainstream hold over the music industry, alte artists have had to redefine and defend their craft against critics of their identity, background, and music. Karun, a Kenyan alte artist, mentions in The Inevitable Growth of the alte movement in Africa, a documentary with Google Africa, that “For sure, I’m not making the music that is being pushed heavily on radio and tv right now. I don’t fit that box

\textsuperscript{12} http://tamperedpress.com/care-is-a-new-cool-by-kobina-ankomah-graham/
of what you would consider a pop artist in Kenya”. Even though Alte is not mainstream, it remains very popular because it creates a space for a significant group of people. Spotify's Alte cruise playlist garnered over 80,000 likes on Spotify alone. In the same documentary, Mnikhelo Qubu, a cultural commentator, mentions that African Alte allows its creators, young Africans around the world, with a long cultural heritage to redefine themselves as young Africans within a modern globalized context. By refusing to conform to the traditional music route and how African artists are represented to the world, these Alte artists offer us a unique glance into the limitless potential of the African artists in the music industry. Traditional norms of clothing are also replaced with new forms of fashion expression. You can see the influence of this sub-cultural alternative niche on fashion trends in Nigeria, Ghana, and everywhere in the continent.

**Worldbuilding as resistance**

I interviewed with one of Accra's rising artists, Anabel Rose, a Ghanaian Filipino alt pop artist while she was on set filming content for her latest single Do Not Disturb. During our conversation, she reflected on her journey as one of Accra’s growing acts. She mentioned that the Alte scene usually forms an inclusive umbrella, providing a platform for minorities and individuals who are considered "other" in conventional social spaces. When asked about the acceptance of queer people in the space, Rose mentions that, “Yeah, I think the alternative scene has definitely like formed an umbrella around minorities or people that would be considered other even in like, the social spaces and stuff is very easy to like, be comfortable assume that it's a queer-friendly space. It's not outwardly spoken about. But like, you would know once you're in

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13 [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2fpTfRNehOM&t=35s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2fpTfRNehOM&t=35s)
it, that's yeah, there is no kind of prejudice tolerated here.” She continues to say that, “There's a lot of anti LGBTQ agenda in this country (Ghana), but when the alternative community communes or meets, it's like a whole different country. It's like everyone just has the memo. They got the memo. And it's not necessarily because they've traveled and you've come back, like most of them grew up here. So I don't know. It's very interesting to experience.”

During our conversation, I asked her thoughts on the topic of elitism regarding Alte artists and she responded by mentioning that; “they're all hustling like everyone is hustling…I know a lot of them are like music is kind of make or break for them, like their parents might still support them. Maybe they are juggling like a nine to five alongside but like they always show up in the community and for the community.” This shows that regardless of class, alte artists are emerging from every corner of Africa’s creative communities.

**Content analysis**

“Just as Harlem had its renaissance, this Accra is in the process of intellectual, social, and artistic upheaval and this movement has national implications.” (Graham 2019)\(^{14}\). Similarly, when musical sounds from one music culture travel through several cultural frontiers including temporal, spatial and genre-defined frontiers and enter into another music culture, they affect the communities in which the music is made and to wherever it travels\(^{15}\). By doing so, it shapes ideas, engages its listeners. By analysing the content of this music, we can get them a glimpse into the mind of the artist.


Lyrical content

Anabel Rose, is by no means representative of the complete diversity of Ghana’s increasingly vibrant alternative music scenes. Drawing inspiration from other indie artists, she skillfully bends her ways different genre, creating new sonic soundscapes. In her latest single *Do Not Disturb*, Anabel Rose blends talks about her dissatisfaction she has from the current world order and takes on a self-resilience and confidence with the lyrics;

“*Me I live life for the drama*

*If you hate me tell my mama*

*Me I live life full of drama*

*To the left to the right*

*You can’t pay me to live this life*

*To the left to the right*

*If you see me look this side*

*HEYBAAAAA*

Music videos as world-building

Amaarae The singer-songwriter and producer was born in the Bronx and spent much of her childhood and adolescence moving from New York to Atlanta to her family's home base in Ghana. Her music videos are also another site of world building where she incorporates various
artistic elements, such as bold visuals, intricate set designs, and dynamic choreography, further emphasizing the theme of creative wordbuilding. These elements work together harmoniously, creating an immersive experience that aligns with Amaarae's distinct musical style and artistic vision. The icon also embraces queerness as an essential part of her storytelling, allowing her videos and lyrical content to portray diverse queer identities and experiences. Amaarae actively includes queer individuals in her music videos, providing visibility and representation for marginalized communities. By showcasing queer characters in various roles, she contributes to a more inclusive and diverse music industry.

To conclude, In a world that is seemingly constantly on the edge of its demise, these new worlds sustain and instill hope in societies as the artists create the possibility of an alternative lifestyle, a counterculture, and a new way of life. Ghanaian female alte musicians, through their works, collaboration, and skillful navigation of different sonic worlds, fashion trends, and visual landscapes, encourage to reexamine our positionalities while also adding their own contributions to afrofuturistic imaginaries.
13. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2fpTtRNehOM&t=35s
