

## **“Real Love” vs. “Real Life”: Love, Music and Utopia in Freetown, Sierra Leone**

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A flirtatious encounter in a discotheque: A young woman dances to the tunes of a popular Nigerian love-song. Approached by a man, she starts singing along with the song's romantic lyrics. While doing so, she confronts her admirer with an imperative declaration: "I don't fuck under 20.000", some 3,50 Euro.

I witnessed this scene in Freetown, Sierra Leone. It bluntly illustrates the ambivalent and often painfully contradictory relations between the (hyper-)presence of love in everyday life music and love's perceived absence in lived-in realities. In post-war Freetown, as across the region's urban centres, love emerged as the most ubiquitous theme in popular music. Predominantly young audiences make love-music popular, whilst their lives and relationships are often characterized by a chronic state of emotional uncertainty and chagrin. Factual and imagined economic inequalities urge an increasing monetization of socio-sexual relationships and drive many young people into a fragile flux of multiple partnerships. Within these rapidly changing and challenging realities of (West) African urban life, love becomes a powerful trope, embracing a multitude of contradicting meanings, dreams and experiences. Whereas local notions of love seize on the “universal” romantic ideal of an involuntary, singularly committed emotional attachment, they as well comprise the rather profane, deliberate interweaving of sexual desires and material concerns.

Based on seven months of fieldwork I conducted in Freetown, this paper examines various conjunctures of love as a ubiquitous theme in popular music and as an ambiguous social discourse and practice. Drawing on the notion of *utopia* - implying a place (*topia*) where the non-place (*u-topia*) is imagined -, I argue that realms created through love-music serve as places for the negotiation of old, and the imagination of new, meanings of love (and its "collaterals": lust, envy, sex/uality, notions of wo/manhood etc.) while simultaneously expressing that what is wished and longed for.