

Black on Black sounds: Music, Migration, and the 'NU-K Blak' identity formation in early 21st century Britain.

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Abstract

Examining literature on the under researched areas of Afrobeats and African migration to Britain, this article identifies significant internal shifts in the ethnic diversity of Black Britain —i.e., from Caribbean (predominantly Jamaican) to West African (Nigerian, Ghanaian) (ONS 2011). Interpreting literature and applying to the British context, it highlights how Afrobeats reshapes Blackness in Britain, particularly the incorporation of desirable Africanness through Afrobeats music. It argues that demographic and musical shifts in Britain result in a renegotiation of the Caribbean and US dominant 20th century Black Britishness — 'UK Blak' identity (as identified by Bradley 2013, Gilroy 1993 & Palmer 2011). It proposes a new 21st century 'NU-K Blak' identity that incorporates West African culture and aesthetics. The article contextualises and builds upon limited research on Afrobeats, Black British youth and their musical identities and elucidates the significance of migration, London and West African values to Afrobeats' commercial success.

KEYWORDS: Black Britain, Black Britishness, Afrobeats, Black British Music, Nigeria, Ghana, Migration.

Introduction

Music migrates with people. Since 1948, an ethnically diverse African diaspora has migrated to, and settled in Britain in significant numbers (Hesse 2000), bringing their musical sensibilities with them. Music evolving alongside the developing Black British identity has influenced both popular and youth culture in Britain,

transitioning from the underground to the mainstream (Bradley 2013). The article focuses on the under-researched genre of Afrobeats, a pivotal period, marked by major shifts in the ethnic diversity of Black Britain, and the exploration of 'ontological third spaces'—spaces that have supported both the rise of Afrobeats and changing public perceptions of African identity and desirability.

Elucidating and addressing these under researched areas, is a substantial contribution to the field in numerous ways. It highlights and engages the gaps in knowledge around the nuance of Blackness in Britain, which has historically homogenised Blackness into a 'community' (Parekh 2000). Addressing migration patterns brings clarity to the analysis of musical and identity shifts relating to music as a sound and social process (Lena 2012) that produces new sonic footprint timestamps (Charles 2016; 2018). This article also highlights the centrality of London in the global expansion of the genre.

This article explores, the ways through which a new 21st century 'NU-K Blak' identity and culture formed. Specifically, with the incorporation of the Black West African influence, through Afrobeats music in the public sphere (also under researched). Contextualising and applying West African migration and Afrobeats to the British context, and specifically Black British identities, is pioneering, foundational work. This article proposes that the mid-2000s to mid- 2010s were a key period of exploration and revision of Black British youth identity. Acknowledgment and acceptance of the West African presence in Black British identities was, shaped largely by Afrobeats music and in opposition to mainstream British narratives, stereotypes, regimes of representation (Hall 1997), controlling images (Hill Collins 2000) and Caribbean understandings of an 'imagined Africa' (Aarons 2019; Daynes 2004).

Prior to this, the formation of the Black British 'UK Blak' identity of the late 1980s and early 1990s dominated. It was influenced by second-generation (1) Black Britons of Caribbean heritage (Bradley 2013; Gilroy 1993; Palmer 2011). Beckford (2000), Gilroy (1993) and Reynolds (2006) found music provided 20th century Black British youth with a space to resist British norms and values that oppressed them. Through the incorporation of Reggae and Dub into youth cultures in the 1970s, Black British youth sought connection to Africa (Day 2019) in resistance to 'Babylon systems'. Day (2016) argues that Reggae lyrics highlight the injustices of society and can become moral and ethical guides for scene members. Lyrics advocated for social and personal freedom (Day 2019). The adopted elements of Rastafari philosophies, and ideology were ingrained into the reggae British music scene, including repatriation to Africa. However, connections sought to Africa in reggae lyrics and symbolism were spiritual, ahistorical, 'imagined' and/or utopic. Ethiopia and Africa were used interchangeably; Zion is also referred to (Aarons 2019). Generally, 'Africa' is a spatial and temporal elsewhere, constructed in opposition to the Western world or Babylon system (Daynes 2004; Aarons 2019). Whilst acknowledging African ancestry and slavery as part of their identity, most Black British musicians and scene members did not move to or engage with Africa in a tangible way. For the purposes of clarity, definitions of migrant generations will be referred to as identified in table 1 (3):

TABLE 1. Generation definitions

GENERATION	
First generation	Migrant – born elsewhere, i.e., migrated from natal country and living in host country as adults.
1.5 generation	Migrants born elsewhere, migrated to host country as children.
Second generation	Born in host country to migrant parents.
Second+ generation	Subsequent generations – born in the host country. Having migrant parents, grandparents or great grandparents.

In Britain, 1.5 and second generation Caribbean youth, came of age in the 1970s and 1980s and took inspiration from reggae and American soul to develop their own British sound - lovers rock (Palmer 2011). They created their own sound systems, fast chat style etc. (Henry 2012), scenes and music cultures over the coming decades. Between the late 1970s into the early 1990s, Black British youth applied Caribbean musical sensibilities and aesthetics to their musical interpretations, such as punk (punky reggae), electronic music (jungle), pop (2 tone), Reggae Dub, hip hop (UK rap, fast chat) and soul (British soul). London's club culture and scenes, including – acid house, rare groove, (Melville 2020) and jungle (Veal 2007; Melville 2020) contributed to the formation of Black (and wider) youth culture in the 1980s (Chude-Sokei 2015; Veal 2007). Music scenes and spaces allowed for self-expression, exploration into Black British youth identities and belonging in Britain (Chude-Sokei 2015; Veal 2007) for 1.5 and second generation Black British (Caribbean) youth. These explorations coalesced around a 'UK Blak' identity and aesthetic in the late 1980s and early 1990s which recontextualised elements of reggae and sound system culture and aesthetics of Rastafari. Young men, for example reinterpreted locs in the British context – to create the 'funky dread' in Black British culture. Recontextualizing locs by shaving the sides of the head, avoided first generation Caribbean parental condemnation of Rastafarianism. It helped to hide locs under hats (Bradley 2013). This aesthetic was synonymous with Jazzy B's (Soul II Soul founder) 'funky dread' image (Bradley 2013, Palmer 2011). Style and fashion became less symbolic of the ideological, philosophical, and spiritual sentiment(s) of Rastafarianism, as did 'imagined Africa'. Black British youth adopted clothing that was popular in American and British youth culture. It included British (comfortable clothing from British House and clubbing cultures) youth aesthetics. Caribbean heritage, traditions and understandings reinterpreted and applied in the British context (2) created something uniquely Black British. A fresh look went along with the new sounds and identities created.

Research and explorations into 'UK-Blak' are limited despite it being an essential element of understanding Black Britishness. Up until the 2000s however, it should be noted that understandings of Black Britishness and Black culture that became

synonymous with youth culture, was generally understood to refer to Black people of Caribbean descent (Thompson 2015a, 2015b cited in Twumasi-Ankrah 2019). This is because the largest proportion of Black migrants to Britain came from the Caribbean, Jamaica particularly (Hewitt 1986; Jones 1988) since 1948.

Understandings of Black Britishness focused on the Caribbean migrants (who were already diverse on their own, with differing national histories and internal dynamics), whose diversity was 'flattened. Jamaicanness and 'Black' were at times, used interchangeably by the British mainstream, especially as it pertained to youth culture, owing to the dominance of Jamaican cultural style and music (Hall cited in Ward 2018:358; Jones 1988; Gilroy 1993:81; Hewitt 1986). Later, Black people in Britain were referred to as 'the Black community' (Parekh 2000), suggesting homogeneity. It should be noted however, West Africa migration and settlement, namely from Nigeria and Ghana, also occurred in smaller numbers during the same period.

Recognition of Black British music as a discipline of study has gained traction (Charles 2023; Gray and Riley 2024; Bradshaw 2024; Bradley et. al 2025; Bradley 2013; Melville 2020; Holness 2021; Springer forthcoming, 2026). However, the focus has been on Caribbean, particularly Jamaican derived contributions. There are very few academic works on Afrobeats (Ayobade 2024, 2024b) and even fewer works examining Black African contribution to the British music culture (Adofu 2022; Ugwu 2023). Yet, between the 2010s and early 2020s, African musical contributions dominated British (and global) popular/youth culture. Grasping this dominance requires contextualization. In the context of this article and newly emerging discipline of Black British music therefore, this article addresses how, through Afrobeats music, the Black British identity extends and transforms from late 20th century 'UK Blak' to 21st century 'NU-K Blak'. Black Africans in London played a crucial role, specifically in Afrobeats development and expansion globally. Thus, informing disciplines of popular music, migration studies and geography, cultural studies, sociology, Black British music studies and Black British studies more broadly. Contextualising available literature and outlining the ways in which music and cultural engagement highlight meaning making and practice that led to Afrobeats dominance.

The article proposes the inclusion of a real, tangible Africanness in the 'NU-K Blak' identity, through Afrobeats, builds upon existing Black British youth and musical identities of previous decades. It works through intra ethnic antagonisms in an increasingly ethnically diverse youth culture in Britain (and the focus of this article, Black Britain). Africanness moves from a spatial and temporal elsewhere to here and now. It demonstrates the complexities of identity Gilroy articulated relating to Black Britishness and its connection to the Black Atlantic and African diaspora. 'NU-K Blak', is a Black British identity that dismantles historical narratives of Africanness attributed by British stereotyping, Caribbean dominant Black Britishness AND first-generation African migrants from the continent. The main West African countries of focus here are Nigeria and Ghana, owing to higher numbers of migrants from these countries living in Britain, and their direct and substantial contribution to the mid-2000s — 2010s Afrobeats music phenomenon crucial to shifting narratives, stereotypes, identities and popular/youth culture. As these are two distinct countries, with separate histories, they will be referred to

separately and within as much context as possible within the limits of this article. Additionally, for the purposes of clarity, waves of African migration periods after 1948 are outlined in table 2 below.

TABLE 2. Waves of Migration

WAVE	Time period
First	1950s – 1970s
Second	1980s – 1990s
Third	2000 onwards

Migration

Kea (2020) identified three waves of West African migration to Britain. The purposes of each wave differed from their Caribbean counterparts, who came for employment, predominantly in service roles, such as in public transport or nursing. The primary wave of West African migration that occurred after WWII was in the 1950s and 1960s. Migration was temporary — for higher education and these migrants belonged to the elite classes of their respective countries. Their British education would position them upon their return in places of power and influence in their newly independent, or soon to be independent African countries. A smaller number migrated during this period to avoid conflict (Crowley 2018). Up until the 1970s, thousands of African children born in the UK (second generation) were privately fostered to white British families (African Farming) whilst parents studied (Chibelushi 2021). Proportionally, these Second generation Africans were smaller than second generation Caribbeans.

The second wave of West African migration occurred in the 1980s into the 1990s, for higher education, but also for employment, with significant numbers recruited into professional service positions (Imoagene 2012) such as accountants, teachers, engineers (Daley 1998), doctors, nurses and academics (Adesote & Osunkoya 2018). Semi or unskilled African migrants upskilled to remain in Britain. Smaller numbers migrated for entrepreneurship opportunities including import and export businesses (Daley 1998). For Nigerians, migration opportunities were fueled by increased financial access because of the oil boom, sponsored either by their families or the government (Daley 1998). Others sought asylum. Ghanaian migration was influenced by political upheavals and revolutionary coups producing several students, refugees and exiles coming to Britain (Daley 1998) and “...by the mid-1990s Ghana had the highest emigration rate of all West African countries...” (Carl 2013:254).

Regardless, for both Ghana and Nigeria during the second wave period (1980s – 1990s), the longstanding unrest resulting from ‘independence’, resource related wealth and, later, Nigerian currency unfixing (i.e., the Naira devalued, losing its intrinsic value), and upskilling, meant that many people with the education and/or financial means to emigrate opted to do so. They headed for Canada, USA and

Europe (Adesote & Osunkoya 2018; Imoagene 2012; Reynolds 2006). In the British context, by 1991, the increase of Nigerian and Ghanaian presence was a result of substantial emigration, with 84% born in Nigeria and 89% born in Ghana (Daley 1998) aged between 20 and 44. Unlike temporary migration associated with the first wave, many opted to stay, having met partners/married and started families (Daley 1998). With most West African migrants over the age of 20 migrating for professional and entrepreneurship roles during the second wave, it is unlikely these migrants' focus would include youth culture and identity construction, through music, often attributed to adolescence. That focus was a more urgent and pressing issue for 1.5 to second+ generation predominantly Caribbean Black British youth, coming of age. The 'UK Blak' period coincided with the second wave of African migration during the 1980s into the early 1990s.

By the late 1990s into the mid-2000s, the third wave of migration from Nigeria and Ghana to Britain was predominantly for education, with many obtaining a student visa to pursue higher education (Domboka 2019:16) (4) and NHS employment (Adesote & Osunkoya 2018:402). West African migrant numbers steadily increased and "...the phenomenon became unprecedented in the period between the 1990s and 2000s" (Adesote & Osunkoya 2018:395; Domboka 2019). (5) West African migration peaked between 2002 and 2004, before Britain's clamp down on issuing student visas. Ghanaian migrants during this period were between 25 and 55 years of age, which "is consistent with postgraduate study and career moves abroad..." (Doku & Meekums 2014:383). The majority resided in London (Twumasi-Ankrah 2019). By 2011, Nigerians, particularly Yorubas (Harris cited in Kea 2020:71) were the largest proportion, of African migrants to Britain, with many located in Peckham (aka Little Lagos or Yoruba Heartland — White 2005, cited in Kea 2020:71), Elephant and Castle, Camberwell, Deptford, Woolwich and other parts of Southeast London (Alakija 2021). Black African migrants living in Britain reached almost 1 million (Domboka 2019). Approximately 7% of the 30-year-olds were born in Ghana and/or holding Ghanaian passports (Twumasi-Ankrah 2019) and an estimated total (all generations) of 1.5 to 2 million Nigerians were living in Britain (Alakija 2021). Alongside third wave migration, Britain now had descendants of the second wave migration (1980s – 1990s). (6) These second generation African youth eventually began developing a sense of their identity and musically, this became evident with the emergence of artists, producers and creatives in Black British youth culture i.e., in the Grime scene, and the emergence of Tribal House and UK Funky genres in the 2000s.

By the 2010s when Afrobeats gained popularity, there were a critical number of second and second+ generation British — Black West Africans, born and domiciled in Britain, particularly London. Significantly, West Africans collectively became the largest number of African or Black descended people living in Britain (overtaking Jamaicans and Caribbeans more broadly). Daley (1998) highlights that Black Africans were the most qualified ethnic group in Britain in the 1991 census. They sought to improve their income and status through work and further education (1998:1723). For both Nigerians and Ghanaians, Domboka (2019) identifies the prestige associated with obtaining a British degree since the 1990s. "Here, respect, hard work, aspiration, the possession of various forms of capital and a sense of morally appropriate behaviour underpins British Nigerian middle-class

subjectivities” (Kea 2020:81). Kea (2020) highlights that Nigerian families in Britain placed a premium on boarding schools (in Britain or Nigeria). They were viewed as a method to reproduce class and status signified through education, respect, good morals and securing employment in the service class – the highest class in Goldthorpe’s (2001) class schema (cited Imoagene 2012). Family and education are also important to Ghanaians and are used as resources to increase social mobility and combat discrimination (Twumasi-Ankrah 2019). These values, familiarity with aspirational professional roles, and the reputation of class and social capital that second and second+ Black Africans were exposed to (which differ from the Caribbean positioning in Britain) become factors that support the eventual commercial success of Afrobeats, the revision of Africanness and Black Britishness.

This close examination of the ways in which Black people migrated to Britain and for what purpose is important and pioneering for context. It highlights the ways in which, despite collectively labelled as ‘Black’ or ‘the Black community’ in Britain, the grouping is not homogeneous. Black Britain comprises distinctly different migratory patterns, timelines, heritages, socioeconomic positioning, educational attainment, and employability. Combined, they influence music making, practice and identity shaping possibilities.

However, 1.5 to second+ generation youth, from the 1980s and 1990s onwards, find themselves navigating and integrating the same cultural resources available to articulate Blackness, Britishness and youth culture in the British context (Beckford 2000; Gilroy 1993; Reynolds 2006). This includes the legacy of Caribbean infused ‘UK Blak’ identity, an ‘imagined Africa’ alongside their Nigerian and Ghanaian family values, practices and, wider public discourses of Africa and Africanness.

The Cultural Context — War Child

From the 1980s onwards, it was not ‘cool’ to be African (De Witte 2019). (7) Africanness was associated with corruption, poverty, war, underdevelopment and famine. These were the predominant narratives about Africa and Africans circulated in mainstream media and the public sphere and many African heritaged youth disassociated. Second generation Ghanaians (i.e., those born in New York) were unlikely to celebrate or announce their ethnicity/heritage, often opting to blend into African Americanness (Shiple 2013). Second generation Dutch Ghanaians avoided identifying as African, opting to present as Black Caribbean (De Witte 2019). Into ‘third wave’ Britain, second generation African youth appropriated Jamaicanness (e.g., DJ Abrantee (Ghanaian) in Alakija 2021; Skepta (Nigerian) in Dasent 2023; Twumasi-Ankrah 2019) (8) to articulate or perform their identities ‘...because [Nigeria] had nothing on the table’ (Adegoke 2015, cited in Alakija 2021:247). Adjoa (Ghanaian), interviewee, states:

“When we were in high school [in Britain] it wasn’t cool to be African; everybody wanted to be West Indian, so everybody put on like a West Indian accent...” (cited in Twumasi-Ankrah 2019:25)

Despite engaging in ‘ethnic performativity’ in the public sphere in Europe or the USA to avoid stereotypes, Ghanaianess was marked within and against broader Black affiliations (Shiple 2013:231) separate from African-Americaness and Nigerianess, but also, in the British context, from Jamaicaness and Caribbeaness (Twumasi-Ankrah 2019) in the private sphere. Privately, British Nigerians did not view themselves as Caribbean or even British (Imoagene 2012). They identified with having a passport and a right to live in Britain. They saw themselves as being Nigerian and not English – “... a distinction between the legal status of holding a British passport and an emotional attachment to Britain” (Imoagene 2012:2161), even if born in Britain and never having visited Nigeria.

These considerations highlight the significance of African adolescence in the mid-2000s — 2010s, Afrobeats and its impact in shifting perspectives around Africaness and Black Britishness to create a new African infused ‘NU-K Blak’ identity, to be explored/proposed here. Before doing so however, Afrobeats music, must also be contextualised to illustrate its power in shaping identity and narratives.

Afrobeats (with an ‘s’)

Music and youth culture have a symbiotic relationship. Afrobeats is no different and played a pivotal role in this shift in the perceptions of Africaness in the public sphere in the 2010s. The origin of Afrobeats (with an s) is debatable. This is in part due to the definition of the term and how it is applied. Afrobeats is cross (African) continental (Dasent 2023) — with West (Congolese, Ghanaian) and South African and international (USA, Caribbean and British) influences. More specifically, it includes genres such as “Nigerian Afrobeat, highlife, son, reggaeton, rap and dancehall” (Krings et. al 2020:185; Adofo 2022). It has influences of “... rhythm and blues (RnB), American soul music, Jamaican reggae, and other musical forms from America” (Graham cited in Sunday-Kanu 2016:141) as well as the “...[B]lack British music styles such as grime” (De Witte 2019:72). Afrobeats can include “...hip life, juju music, and even South African house...[with] terms Afrobeats and hip life... used interchangeably” (Clark 2023:67). Afrobeats can be understood as a collection of African music genres, or as an identifiable and specific genre of music.

This article refers to the specific genre, identified as originating in West Africa — in particular Nigeria and Ghana (Shonaiya 2022). Significantly, Afrobeats is rooted in Nigerian Afrobeat, a genre pioneered by Fela Kuti, and Ghanaian highlife. Traditional African polyrhythms, mix, blend and fuse with international sounds. Scholarly works identify Afrobeats as an “...electronically generated sound combined with indigenous sonic elements and foreign sounds” (Adeniyi 2022:69), characterised by significantly altered auto tuned vocals that alter the timbre of the voice (Sunday-Kanu 2016:138). Afrobeats has “...melodious beats exploring themes of love, money, sex, hedonism and accompanied by a good combination of dance worthy sounds” (Adeniyi 2020:69), with a ‘bell’ (Eze 2020)/ Nigerian high life or hip hop (Omojola 2009)/ ‘5 beat’ (Shonaiya 2022) pattern, as the sonic signature infused within it. The distinctive pattern is a result of “...sampling of music classics from Afrobeat, high life and Juju” (Armani cited in Eze 2020:8) and digitizing it. Afrobeats is danceable, inspiring African dance styles “...such as leg

work, Gwara Gwara, Shaku Shaku, Zanku, Kupe, Akwaaba and Azonto” (Dasent 2023:295).

The birth of, and international expansion of Afrobeats resulted from a variety of factors. On the continent itself, the decline of the national recording and media industries, such as radio, created a void in both Nigeria and Ghana in the 1980s and 1990s, alongside substantial mass emigration. (9) The collapse of West African music industries and government policies around music making, created a captive youth audience in West Africa. They were exposed, firsthand to US media, including American rap and hip-hop culture and secondarily, through music cultures via their international family networks. West African artists took inspiration from and replicated Americanised versions of their respective indigenous music — e.g. Ghanaian highlife to hip life. The reinvestment in musical infrastructure resumed in the 1990s, by which time, young people had exposure to US hip hop and began making and disseminating music through the revitalised local and national radio stations and industry.

The then unnamed Afrobeats sound began to develop in the 2000s and it was enjoyed on the continent and “...with Afropolitans living abroad” (Royston 2022:2). Outside of radio and industry, on the continent itself, Afrobeats music spread across countries, through people travelling along aviation routes often transiting/‘laying over’ in Europe. Europe became an intermediary space for exchanging music and cultural experiences amongst Africans overseas (Ugwu 2023). De Witte (2019) and Ugwu (2023) highlight the significance of London as an important node in the naming, production and consumption, and international spread, of Afrobeats. In the 2000s, both Ghanaian and Nigerian pop music converged in Britain’s London underground music scene (Clark 2023:67) amongst its growing and substantial (10) adolescent West African populations, contextualised above. A key catalyst to Afrobeats’ expansion occurred with the international success (underground, across the diaspora) of Blackfacenaija’s ‘African Queen’ (2004). Additionally, a growing number of West African migrants in the West created infrastructures to advocate for and support the dissemination of African popular music. Nigerian migrants, such as DJ Abbas, (Shonaiya 2022) worked within entertainment and media industries in Britain to create space to celebrate, enjoy/consume, facilitate, recognise and appreciate Nigerian music (Eze 2020:10). London based Ghanaian DJ and promoter, DJ Abrantee, coined the term Afrobeats (Eze 2020; De Witte 2019) and it has since been widely referred to as such (Krings and Simmert 2020:185).

Afrobeats stayed within African migrant communities (third wave and second and second+ generations) in the 2000s. The advent and democratization of the Internet by the mid-2000s played a role in Afrobeats becoming an international phenomenon from the 2010s onwards. It facilitated explorations into African music and young West African identities globally (especially in the case of Nigeria — Eze 2020). The Internet made West African music accessible across the diaspora through blogs that included free, downloadable music and/or reporting “...about new releases with links to videos on YouTube” (Krings and Simmert 2020:184). Nigerian copyright laws meant that Nigerian music could be accessed easily and freely on digital sites such as notjustok.com. DJs created and uploaded mixes to YouTube, allowing more people to freely access Nigerian music online. The removal of financial barriers around distribution and/or consumption of Nigerian

music, attracted and bolstered diasporic audiences, as well as highlighting/promoting continental performances and events to locals.

By the 2010s Afrobeats entered the British mainstream, D'Banj's (Nigerian) *Oliver Twist* (2013) was the first Afrobeats song in the Official UK Top Ten singles charts (Nikoi 2023:12). The music video features an appearance by international American artist Kanye West. Fuse ODG (Ghanaian) had five top 40 hits in the Official UK charts in the 2010s (Official Charts n.d.). Since Afrobeats' (and other Black British genres such as Grime and Afro Swing) entry into the mainstream, second and second+ talent continue to succeed in the music industry. Contemporarily (i.e., 2020s) (male) stars of British - Ghanaian or Nigerian heritage (De Witte 2019:72) such as Skepta, Dizzee Rascal, Stormzy, Tiny Tempah, Tinchy Stryder, Lethal Bizzle, Tao Cruz, Fuse ODG and J Hus (Kwaku 2016) top a variety of charts. The patriarchal nature of the music industry impacts the commercial success of women generally, Black women specifically (Charles 2024), including those of Nigerian and Ghanaian ancestry in Afrobeats and Black British music.

Contemporarily, Afrobeats is the national pop music of Nigeria and is accepted as part of both Nigerian and Ghanaian popular culture (Emielu 2013; Eze 2020). Its commercial success led to British recognition via its own Afrobeats UK chart in 2020. The US Recording Academy added a best African performance category in 2024.

This shift to global musical dominance is a success story. However, it can be argued that Afrobeats was a significant 'vehicle' that has provided the opportunity for African youth to shift the perspective around Africanness in the public imagination on an international scale since the mid-2000s. With the significance of the music in the British context and commercially successful British acts of West African heritage, Afrobeats (alongside Grime, Tribal House, UK Funky and Afro Swing) has shifted the narrative around Black Britishness, to negotiate a 'NU-K Blak' identity — building upon the 1980s – 1990s 'UK Blak'. This exploration looks at how the meaning of Africanness has shifted through what can be called 'ontological third spaces' — spaces shaped by familial and cultural values, the perspectives of a new generation of 21st-century youth, experiences of migration and diaspora, and the influence of digital platforms. When these elements come together through the global rise of Afrobeats music, they help reframe and recontextualize African identity in new and empowering ways.

Ontological third space

Martin Stokes outlined "...in migrant communities in Western Europe and North America, religious institutions and their media networks increasingly provide social and cultural infrastructure, and a sense of home and that in this context, music is... particularly important means of making a home and imagining a future" (Carl 2013:265-266). Furthermore, the connection between West Africans on the continent and in London has generally, remained consistent and dialogic (11) sustaining musical and religious exchange – i.e., 'home'. Extended family structures (12) mean that "...migration is not an individual decision but often a family affair..." (Carl 2013:261) with many Africans desiring or actively seeking to move abroad (Adeyeni 2022; Kyei 2021). This expansive and outward outlook for both Nigerians

and Ghanaians means familial connection to identity and 'home' are sustained and maintained across borders. "Connections [are] made to the homeland through Ghanaian food, clothing, language, religion and communication with significant persons" (Doku & Meekums 2014:383) and "...music, poetry..." (Doku & Meekums 2014:385), which provide "... identity and emotional connection" (Doku & Meekums 2014:385). Shipley (2013) identifies that 'nationhood' is a node or 'ontological third space' through which migrant Ghanaians identify. Spaces such as the home, church, densely populated West African areas of London (addressed above) and university, become 'ontological third spaces' where migrants can reinforce their sense of belonging (Carl 2013; Daley 1998; Doku and Meekums 2014) i.e., 'home' in the diaspora. Third spaces enable marginalized groups, such as West Africans to come together and reaffirm identity outside of work and immediate home binaries (Bhabha 2004). It should be noted however, that first generation migrants (second or third wave) and their cross-national worldview related to geography, their cultures and family, quite possibly never sought to confine themselves to Eurocentrically constructed binarized spaces, in the wider context of a British hostile environment.

Organisations/associations founded by West African migrants created 'ontological third spaces' in Ghana, Nigeria and in Britain, maintaining connection between migrants and the homeland (Lampert 2009; Twumasi-Ankrah 2019:23). Many British based businesses, infrastructure, organisations and associations were principally set up, formally and informally (13), around cultural connections to natal countries as well as "...export of goods and services... money transfer and other financial services including courier services..." (Domboka 2019:15) retaining connection to 'nationhood' and 'home'. Migrant operated (international) traditional media companies were 'ontological third spaces' broadcasting to viewers connecting to 'nationhood' and 'home'. In the early 2000s, they disseminated culture, news and 'new' Afrobeats music in new international locations. These spaces and places reinforced connections to identity, 'nationhood' and 'home' for migrants and their descendants. 'Ontological third spaces' allow cultural values, meaning, knowledge and knowing to be created, shared and affirmed – independent of outside forces.

Such spaces were important. As outlined previously, second wave African migrants (1980s and 1990s) who came to Britain entered a hostile climate. Controlling images (Hill Collins 2000) and regimes of representation (Hall 1997) about Africa and Africans as inferior caused 1.5 & second generation (children) descendants to disassociate in the public sphere. Upon entering adolescence in the 2000s, they begin to negotiate their identity in the British context (Nyanni 2020) and redefine cultural practice and meaning. Both Bhabha (1994) and Brah (1996) (cited in Carl 2013:261) argue that discarded and undesirable space (such as negative stereotypes about Africans or Rastafarians in Britain) become places of inquiry, 'process' (Gilroy cited in Lawore 2021:142) and/or meaning making. 'Ontological third spaces' and Afrobeats were central to changing what is known about Africa and Africans in the public sphere as well as modern understandings of Black Britishness.

"...music has been a lens through which the negotiation
in diasporic identities... the generation and transformation

of gender relations in diasporic communities..., or the relationship between migration and historical memory in the diaspora... have been examined" (Carl 2013:252).

In the 2000s, the wider diaspora remained a conceptual and physical space of 'process' where identity was complicated and unpacked (Lawore 2021). However, second generation West African British youth capitalised on the networks, organisations and associations, media companies, businesses, churches, and university connections created by the older (highly skilled) generation(s) that created 'home' and 'nationhood'. They also capitalised on Caribbean derived elements of Black British culture in the creation of new meaning. Cultural products, traditions infrastructure and middle-class aspirations all valued in West African 'ontological third space', contributed to transform perceptions of the Black African identity in Britain and Black Britishness more broadly. Through the 'vehicle of Afrobeats', second and second+ generation British youth shared their 'home' and 'nationhood' to the wider/ international diaspora and extended family networks across borders.

'Ontological third space' permits nuance and movement between heritage, ethnicity, migration and location. Okpewho (2009) highlights that affirming signifiers emerge in the creation of the 'New African', which includes subjectivity and enables a fluid concept of self. It allows (some) Africans i.e., in the diaspora and returnees to the continent to develop their own connections to Africa and African identity on their own terms. They can connect to multiple identities, places and 'homes', seeing oneself as a global citizen — in stark contrast to externally constructed narratives, stereotypes, controlling images (Hill Collins 2000), regimes of representation (Hall 1997) or 'imagined Africa'. Adolescent 'ontological third space', notably the seamless connection between digital space with music and culture, accelerated the subjectivity and fluidity of the 'New African', and thus, 'NU-K Blak'.

Afrobytes

Afrobeats and the Internet grew together. Since 2003, when Afrobeats was in its infancy, Nigerian (MINT(14)) access and use of the Internet has grown exponentially. By 2020, use had increased by over 61% with the young, approx. 200m population. Continental artists promote themselves digitally across the world (Eze 2020). They interact directly with fans — including a significant proportion of the 1.5 to 2 million Nigerians living in Britain (Alakija 2021) and substantial British based Ghanaian population. With significant numbers, and established infrastructures designed to connect to 'ontological third spaces' of 'nationhood' and 'home', there is enough interconnectedness to sustain 'process' and create new meaning. With Afrobeats', dialogic digital and physical 'ontological third spaces', supported by people with skills in the service class (Goldthorpe 2001 – Imoagene 2012) sustaining "...networked economic and production systems, migrating shows and musicians" (Stahrenberg & Grosch 2014:187) is a tangible possibility. Diasporas access these spaces, to connect with existing (or create new) international circuits of music, musicians, each other (fans) (Alakija 2021; Shipley

2013) global trends and events (Alakija 2021:238). The ‘vehicle of Afrobeats’, through ‘ontological third spaces’, creates meaning, opportunities and networks, i.e., economic, technological and artistic (Shipley 2013) across borders.

Through ‘ontological third spaces’, young people embrace and ‘become African’, by engaging with Afrobeats music, dance, and young urban culture (De Witte 2019). Partaking/embodying the aesthetics and practices of Afro-cool are essential components in the process of ‘New African’ renegotiation. On digital platforms, such as TikTok, Instagram, Netflix and Facebook, Dasent (2023) highlights the significance of a) dance challenges in the proliferation of Afrobeat music and culture, and b) image, storytelling and film “...signifying a way to reimagine Black culture and identity” (2023: 287). Social media supports interactive relationships (Royston 2022) and “...networks...Europe and across the Atlantic to share and discuss experiences, identities, opinions, readings, music, fashion, etc.... blogging...” (De Witte 2019:65). Connecting through ‘ontological third space’ “...diasporans have brought Afrobeats routines back to New York, London or Paris – which in turn have become global centers for the genre with regular studio classes and important web platforms such as Chop Daily” (Royston 2022:2). Digital exchange supports physical ‘ontological third spaces’ in the ‘host’ countries. It reinforces ‘nationhood’ and ‘home’, offering second and second+ generation the realistic option to migrate ‘back’ to Ghana (Twumasi-Ankrah 2019), Nigeria (Ugwu 2023), unlike many Black Caribbeans had with ‘imagined Africa’. It also made travelling further afield (such as China, see Kea 2020) as ‘New African’ global citizens an obtainable and achievable option.

Contemporary ‘New African’ identities in the public sphere, are different to second wave migrants’ (i.e., first generation parents) perceptions of Africanness (De Witte 2019). Under regimes of representation (Hall 1997) of the 1980s and 1990s, the choices were to assimilate or retreat in response to hostile ‘host’ environments in the public sphere. Afrobeats music, related dances and the ability to share, ‘experience’, engage, consume and distribute across borders, allows young people to indulge in an urban, young, fresh, sense of what it means to be African. The ‘process’ of centering the ‘New African’, particularly in digital ‘ontological third space’, positions related cultural practices, and music with meaning, and, as valid and ‘cool’.

Good Juju

Through ‘home’ and ‘nationhood’, supported by ‘ontological third space’, the ‘process’ of African meaning making occurred. Meaning making engaged with the wider narratives that constructed Blackness as ‘cool’, yet, simultaneously denied Africanness. Engaging with, embracing and claiming African cultural practices, music, iconography, dance, storytelling and experience outlined above, allowed the ‘New African’ to be a) distinct from the wider diaspora, and b) positioned alongside the familiar preexisting reference points of local and wider diasporic Blackness. Afrobeats was an important development in shifting wider narratives around Africanness, Blackness and, in the context of this article, Black Britishness. Twumasi-Ankrah states that “Being African is now ‘cool’ and so is asserting an African identity...” (2019:26). Tolu states:

“...we now have something to call our own; no more getting to the party and expecting to hear only American, British and Jamaican music — we have something to proudly flaunt also! And that is what makes it so popular, the fact that it is uniquely ours” (Interviewee cited in Alakija 2021:243).

Afrobeats, dance, iconography and aesthetics has become a source of Ghanaian pride (De Witte 2019) and revalorized Nigerian identity (Alakija 2021). Black desirability and ‘coolness’ (frequently attributed to African Americans or Jamaicans in the British context), associated with youth culture are now extended to the specificity of being African. Twumasi-Ankrah (2019) found it, “enables Ghanaians in Britain to assert and explore belonging, combat negative associations with African migration that fueled second generation disassociation with their natal country” (Twumasi-Ankrah 2019:13) in childhood. For Nigerians in the diaspora, witnessing Afrobeats music, Nollywood films and Ankara clothing in their ‘host’ society, and entering the global mainstream, it solidified a sense of national pride (‘nationhood’). Second generation Nigerians ‘reclaim[ed] that identity’ that was subsumed in co-identification with Afro Caribbeans.’ (Alakija 2021:243-4)

In terms of ‘sound’ (sonics), both Ugwu (2023) and DJ Ronny (Shipley 2013) state there is something about both Afrobeats and Hiplife respectively, that connects to DNA/heritage, makes sonic sense (Charles 2018), or feels culturally familiar. Its intrinsic relatability reinforces a sense of ownership, identity, ‘home’, networked connectedness and pride across the diaspora. Osumare likens such connection to music as a ‘...“mobile form of Sonic nationalism” that marks the genre, that travels freely across borders, with authenticity of home’ (231 cited in Nikoi 2023:2). Shipley argues that ‘Sonic nationhood is composed in the disjunctures of movement and the ways that youth use the cultural dimensions of displacement to re-imagine new continuities’ (2013:265). Such framings elucidate Afrobeats’ musical contribution to ‘New African’ subjectivity. Afrobeats’ sonic nationalism/nationhood and the ‘New African’ sonic community is a result of shared culture, heritage, sensory and emotional experiences exchanged in ‘ontological third space’. African expansive outlooks allow for local reinterpretation, meaning making and identity formation in new contexts – such as The Netherlands, The USA and Britain. The significance of London youth in the role of globalising Afrobeats and the construction of the subjective and ‘cool’ ‘New African’ across the diaspora, forms new Sonic Footprint Timestamps (SFT). (15) It shaped local Black music (e.g., Tribal House, UK Funky, Afro Swing) and cultural identities (Black Britishness – ‘NU-K Blak’).

Reinforcing ‘cool’, artists living outside of the continent celebrate musical careers and publicly claim their musical DNA/heritage. In the 2010s, Ghanaian diaspora artists split their time between Ghana and the United States or the United Kingdom (Clark 2023:69). Similarly, Nigerian diaspora artists, such as D’Banj split their time (Shonaiya 2022; Ugwu 2023). Afrobeats gained popularity with international (e.g. British, Black-British, African American, American) artists raising its visibility on the global stage beyond second and second+ generations and generating international industry interest (Dasent 2023). “There have been numerous collaborations between African and American or British artists and

African music has received increasing attention in the global north” (Krings and Simmert 2020:182) reinforcing ‘cool’. Collaborative examples include “...D’Banj and Snoop Dogg in ‘Mr. Endowed’ (2011); Wizkid, Skepta and Drake in the remix ‘Oluelegba’ (2014) ...” (Eze 2020:14), Sarkodie alongside Bob Marley and the Wailers remix ‘Stir it up’ (2023), Shatta Wale alongside Major Lazer and Beyonce with ‘Already’ (2019).

Continental artists are performing at increasingly larger international venues, with second and second+ generations – but increasingly attracting multiethnic fans from various locations. In early 2020s British youth culture, Afrobeats is simultaneously attractive to other ethnic and racial youth groups. In Britain, Nigerian artist, 2Face, performed at The Indigo O2 Arena in London in 2021 and Burner Boy sold out the 60,000 capacity London Stadium in June 2023. Significantly, Kwaku (2016) highlights that mainstream Black British musicians who have made the biggest sales since the 2000s have been of West African descent. It should be noted however, many who mainstreamed in Britain and achieved commercial success early on, did it a) through grime and b) by capitalizing on music and cultural practices rooted in Jamaican Soundsystem culture. (16) They incorporated elements of ‘Caribbeanness’ such as Jamaican patois and British youth culture whilst disassociating from Africanness in the public sphere. This, in conjunction with the network of service class professionals (Goldthorpe 2001, in Imoagene 2012) across and within generations, may have contributed toward the business approach/outlook ingrained into their cultural production, and thus their commercial success.

Afro Nation

The circulation of positive ‘cool’ Afro iconography and ‘New African’ meaning making in physical and digital ‘ontological third spaces’ affirmed participation in Africa and/or African-oriented events, culture, practices, style and aesthetics. For young cultural producers and creatives, the inclusion of African aesthetics was intentional in their works (De Witte 2019) (17) and strategically positioned alongside African American, Black British and/or Caribbean signifiers or significant landmarks to assert their identity and belonging. Specific Black British examples include Ghanaian artist Sarkodie’s music video ‘You Go Kill Me’ (2011), which includes an Azonto girl and dance partner dancing in front of iconic London locations. Nigerian British Femcee Shaybo incorporates Yoruba language and cadence into her lyrics e.g., Dobale (2020). Shaybo’s music video showcases and celebrates her heritage, with food and dress, alongside her lived experiences and reference points in South London. Ghanaian British artist Fuse ODG advanced the message TINA (This Is New Africa) in his musical videos (and through merchandise), to reshape the ways in which Africa and Africans were viewed in the public sphere.

By embracing Afrobeats, music and culture, migrants and their descendants in the West have helped shape the image of a ‘New African’— one that draws strength from heritage and cultural pride. Much like the 1.5 and second-generation Caribbean’s of the 1980s and 1990s, 2000’s West African youth seized new opportunities rooted in cultural expression. These include organising tours, events

and music promotion, such as the work of Hashim in New York promoting Ghanaian artists (Shiple 2013). British based satellite TV shows on Ben TV broadcast Nigerian and British Nigerian musicians to audiences in both Britain and Nigeria (Shonaiya 2022). Online platforms such as iROKING and Iroko.TV, founded by Jason Njoku and Sebastian Cotter, began on YouTube and became key digital distribution channels for African content. Additionally, businesses like Free Me provide multifunctional media spaces for artists and creatives in both Nigeria and Britain, further supporting the growth of this cultural movement (Ugwu 2023).

Continued entrepreneurial ingenuity, seeded from Ghanaian and Nigerian educational values, extended familial connections and middle-class subjectivities (outlined earlier) ensure Africans have got the business side of music 'locked' (Krings and Simmert 2020). Descendants have capitalised on opportunities and exercise control over the business, representation, and narrative of Afrobeats and the 'New African' on a global scale. It has been so successful that Apple music described Afrobeats as "...one of the most eclectic and exportable sounds in contemporary music" (Dasent 2023:295).

Conclusion — 'NU-K Blak

Afrobeats and Afro-Cool proliferated through 'ontological third space', directly contributed to the 21st century 'Black British youth identity'. Together, they build on, and add to the 20th century, Caribbean dominant, Black British youth 'UK Blak' identity, aesthetic, music, culture, dance, aesthetics, style and language/slang. Upon increasing numbers of West African adolescence since the 2000s in Britain, West African aesthetics, language, culture, dance and style renegotiate Black Britishness and brings forth a new, 'NU-K Blak' aesthetic.

This shift was possible through the infrastructures created by second wave African migrants and their descendant's maintaining connection to 'nationhood' and 'home'. This was sustained in physical and digital 'ontological third space' over time, and across borders. These spaces accumulated and solidified social and cultural capital independent of dominant narratives, controlling images (Hill Collins 2000), regimes of representation (Hall 1997) and stereotypes about Africans. Organisations, associations, institutions and businesses created in Britain and natal countries, expressed and/or explored identity, through 'process' and meaning making connected to music, culture, and heritage. The Internet and its increased accessibility and use over time, allowed for more consistent and multidirectional connection to (and about) Africa, Africans on the continent and across the diaspora.

West African migration, the Internet, diaspora and the 'vehicle of Afrobeats' in 'ontological third space', introduced fluidity and subjectivity to Africanness. The 'New African' was created. The 'New African' was 'cool' and "...reasserts the relevance of Africa in an emerging [B]lack Europe" (De Witte 2019:76) and a global citizen (Kea 2020). The 'New African' directs the narrative '...focusing on its abundant beauty, joy and style' (Adeniyi 2022) through culture. Afrobeats' success assisted the 1.5 to second+ generations connection to 'home' differently to the first generation. 'Ontological third space' strategically placed the 'New African' in direct conversation with other iterations of global Blackness. It broadened understandings of Blackness in the British youth culture context. Art and culture were strategically

placed in conversation with wider narratives of Blackness and Britishness. Africanness was no longer constructed as something separate from the trendy, cool, Caribbean and United States infused Black Britishness. It was no longer dictated by mainstream narratives, nor was it 'imagined'. However, West African values and outlooks (e.g. the importance of service class skills, spatialities and borderless family structures) allowed creatives to successfully apply them to the business of music.

Afrobeats' rising popularity, enabled Black people from the wider diaspora to consider, explore and/or express a connection to Africa (Rasak 2021; DeWitte 2019)(18) through enjoyment of and engaging with the music, dance, events, aesthetics and/or West African phrases incorporated as slang amongst British youth, e.g. Chale, 'Wahala'.

In the Black British context, ideas around Africanness, Blackness and Black Britishness were renegotiated through Afrobeats. It resulted in the 21st century creation of a 'NU-K Blak' identity which incorporates elements from across the diaspora (Beckford 2000; Gilroy 1993; Reynolds 2006), the 20th century Caribbean and Caribbean infused Black Britishness solidified in the 1980s – 1990s 'UK Blak' and the inclusion of 'New African' identities (Okpewho 2009).

Endnotes

- (1) See tables 1 & 2.
- (2) Including a vague conceptualization of an 'imagined African' heritage.
- (3) Definitions as outlined in the Immigration initiative at Harvard.
<https://immigrationinitiative.harvard.edu/topic/first-and-second-generation/>.
- (4) Also visiting family and friends, refugees and asylum seekers (Domboka 2019:16).
- (5) Conversely, the numbers migrating from the Caribbean were declining (Jones 1988).
- (6) Who become the second + Black Britons of West African ancestry/heritage.
- (7) This should not be confused with an 'imagined Africa' or 'imagined African' constructed in Reggae music that is a spatial and temporal elsewhere.
- (8) As did Black youth from other Caribbean islands (Hall cited in Ward 2018:358).
- (9) Contributing to second wave migration in Britain.
- (10) Third wave migration and second+ generation i.e., West African Youth in the 2000s and 2010s.
- (11) With the methods of connection to the homeland varying between each generation.
- (12) Both beyond the concept of the nuclear Eurocentric family and spatially – i.e., across national borders.
- (13) Owing to migrant status — Domboka 2019.
- (14) Emerging market economy.
- (15) See Charles 2018.
- (16) This dynamic has caused tension in genres such as grime itself — notably Wiley (Caribbean) and Chipmunk (Caribbean) with Stormzy (West African) not engaging with Soundsystem cultural elements of Grime.
- (17) i.e., beads, make up styles, hair, prints, dance etc.
- (18) Regardless of direct connection.

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