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# 'I opened the door to develop kuduro at JUPSON:' Music Studios as Spaces of Collective Creativity in the Context of Electronic Dance Music in Angola

Stefanie Alisch

*In this paper, I demonstrate how studios producing the Angolan electronic dance music (EDM) kuduro ('hard arse') in the capital Luanda are usefully investigated as social spaces of collective creativity. I triangulate interviews, observations, close listening and ethnographic participation. Researchers often portray kuduro and other EDM styles in the Global South using what I name the 'scarcity-resilience narrative'. This narrative gives short shrift to the rich cultural resources that feed into EDM styles. It perpetuates problematic stereotypes about African people and occludes the deliberate labour that kuduro practitioners ('kuduristas') invest in their craft. As kuduristas routinely affirm that sociability drives their interpersonal creative processes I portray kuduro studios as social spaces and construe kuduro's collective creativity through Extended Mind Theory (EMT). In my analysis, I first introduce kuduro studios in Luanda broadly and then focus on two influential kuduro studios: JUPSON and Guetto Produções. I show how kuduristas mobilise their collective creativity inside the studio by tapping into aesthetic strategies and conventions of the rich popular culture that surrounds them. Via EMT, I portray aesthetic duelling, puto-kota ('elder-younger') relationships, call-and-response and urban vocal strategies as collectively maintained social institutions. Inside the studio, kuduristas translate these rich resources into the sonic materiality of kuduro tracks which, in turn, are designed to achieve maximum audience response through mobilising the social institutions when radiating out into the world. This paper provides the first, fine-grained study of kuduro studios in Luanda. It de-centres the 'scarcity-resilience narrative' of Global South EDM by focusing on collective creativity and, as such, offers a fresh epistemological position on the study of music studios, Global South EDM and popular music in Angola.*

**Keywords:** Kuduro; Luanda; Music Studio as Social Space; Collective Creativity; Extended Mind Theory

Kuduro (‘hard ass’) is Electronic Dance Music (EDM) that originated in Luanda, the capital of Angola.<sup>1</sup> The country is marked by several centuries of Portuguese colonial rule, slavery, forced labour, and transcontinental exchanges. After independence in 1975, Angola plunged into a brutal civil war that lasted until 2002. José Eduardo dos Santos, the Angolan president from 1979 to 2017, installed a kleptocratic petro-capitalist system. His closest circles accrued unimaginable riches while a large part of the population struggled from hand to mouth.

In this context *kuduro* emerged, a style that can be competitive, playful, acrobatic, comic, sensual, or theatrical. Computer-produced instrumentals called *bits*<sup>2</sup> are coupled with lyrics delivered on the verge of shouting. The practice of verbally addressing audience or dancers with the aim of engaging them dialogically is called *animação* (‘animation’). This antiphonic vocal style is closely linked with dance moves called *toques*. Through nominal or kinetic references, *toques* often evoke daily life in Luanda. People who are active in singing, dancing, producing, or consuming kuduro, who call themselves *kuduristas*, typically display colourful, highly individual sartorial styles and sometimes innovative language use.

Since around the year 2000, kuduro has become the dominant youth culture in Angola and the Angolan diaspora. Despite its popularity, classist and culturally conservative voices in Angola echo colonial sentiments when they often express that ‘kuduro is not real music’, has no history,<sup>3</sup> requires no skill or knowledge. For *kuduristas*, quite the opposite is true. For them, good kuduro is marked by *carga*, an intensely competitive performance in dance, vocals, dress and styling, or musical production. *Kuduristas* create this over-the-top energy through competition, hyperbole, and dialogic interaction. In its competitiveness, *carga* distinguishes select individuals (‘to be better than the other’) via skills, stamina, and hyperbolic styling. However, *carga* emerges by connecting with powerful music, fellow performers, opponents, and an audience, either live or through camera interaction. As such, *carga* is a social phenomenon that is socio-affectively distributed, similar to *vibe* in a rave setting (Witek 2019). Kuduro dancing, production and singing are organised through social groups and networks called *staffs*, *turmas*, or *crews*.<sup>4</sup> The frequent and lengthy lists of shoutouts to vocalists, DJs, producers, distributors, discotheques, sponsors, and production companies bespeak the importance of kuduro’s social networks.

*Kuduristas* routinely recount how sociability drives their collective creativity. In this article, I verify these claims by analysing the two key kuduro studios: JUPSON (run by DJ Walter Laton),<sup>5</sup> and Guetto Produções (run by DJ Killamu, Figure 2) as social spaces by way of extended mind theory (EMT) (Clark and Chalmers 1998; Gallagher 2013; Witek 2019). In this view, kuduro’s collective creativity entails coupling between individual human minds through musical and social interaction, between people and objects (technological tools and instruments), as well as between people and different social and cultural systems, such as aesthetic norms and conventions that are collectively maintained. When construing the collective

creativity that emerges in kuduro studios through the lens of extended mind, one finds that this coupling encompasses not only interacting with audio equipment or the creative processes of other people. It further invokes collectively produced and maintained systems such as particular ways of joking and banter, playful language with double entendres and inversions, mimetic dancing inspired by daily life, *kota-puto* ('elder-younger') relationships, as well as aesthetic duelling and other strategies to conjure up the energetic impetus of *carga*.

Investigating kuduro studios as nodal points of collective creativity allows me to push back against a stereotype of Global South EDM that I call the 'scarcity-resilience narrative'. In the perspective presented here, kuduro's collective creativity draws on systems outside of the studio, which then becomes a place where these references are translated into the sonic materiality of kuduro tracks. The sonic artefacts produced in the studio extend in turn into Luanda, Angola as a whole, and the larger world to stimulate *carga*, dancing, aesthetic duelling, call-and-response, and mass euphoria.

### Materials, Methods & Positionality

This article focuses on the two aforementioned kuduro studios, the now defunct backyard recording space called JUPSON, and the still operating Guetto Produções studio, using data produced through ethnographic study, oral history, and close listening. I triangulate the testimonies of influential currently and formerly active kuduristas with each other. I further relate this material to songs recorded at the studios. To interpret these sources, I draw on insights gained during my ethnographic research in Luanda, Lisbon, Paris, Berlin, and Amsterdam from 2011 to 2017 (Alisch 2017).

As a white, female, East German, highly educated musicologist and DJ who worked many years at music technology companies in Berlin, my positionality is in some ways marked by privilege, and in others by marginalisation. I experience marginalisation as a music practitioner when I am excluded from 'ways of knowing' (Almeida 2015) about music technology, and from collective creativity because of my gender. I also experience liberation when I engage with music and music technology in feminist networks. When DJing and collectively producing music events in the largely Black city of Salvador da Bahia in Northeastern Brazil, I learned how white privilege lightened my existence, accrued me authority and, in a curious way, empowered me, as race trumped gender. Being East German is statistically associated with lower income and less powerful social positions than being West German. But sharing the post-socialist and luso-postcolonial experience with my Luandan interlocutors has given me an advantage when navigating the Angolan capital as a research field, since Luanda is marked by a mixture of postcolonial, post-socialist, and neo-liberal petrocapiatist dynamics. Almeida (2015) argues that such a 'double-consciousness position' renders an epistemological advantage as it 'provides viewpoints from the margins and the mainstream' (Almeida 2015, 90).

### The Scarcity-Resilience Narrative of Kuduro

There is a particular narrative that permeates academic and journalistic writing as well as aficionado conversations around kuduro and other electronic dance music from the Global South. According to this narrative, people in the Global South are poor, they got their hands on cheap, outdated but robust technology, e.g. ‘music technology products that weren’t selling in the developed markets’ (Zagorski-Thomas 2007), windows XP computers, and cracked versions of the Fruity Loops software, with which they make enticing beats (e.g. Cafolla 2019). I call this the ‘scarcity narrative’. The scarcity narrative often foregrounds themes of war (Lewis 2020; Young 2012) or war-related migration (Marcon 2012). This narrative implies that EDM producers in the Global South have a gift for groove (‘have rhythm in their blood, so their beats are always catchy’) and are hence able to make beats that induce movement and make you want to dance in a sexy way, despite limited access to state-of-the-art technology. As such, this narrative perpetuates the dangerous myth that black people are somehow closer to the body and to nature (Almeida 2015).

The scarcity narrative around kuduro often goes hand in hand with a ‘resilience narrative’, in which technical limitations (Sheridan 2014) lead people to creative workarounds. This is also reflected in the kuduro song ‘Aqui Tass’ by Dog Murras, who intones ‘Suffering in the city increases creativity’.<sup>6</sup> The scarcity-resilience narrative portrays kuduristas as resourceful, and sometimes as opposing Angola’s dictatorship (Bagulho 2010; Young 2012; La Barre 2019).<sup>7</sup> However, while many young people in Luanda see kuduro as a tool of social mobility (Tomás 2013), most players who were first active during the forming years are from middle or upper middle class backgrounds (Moorman 2014). Many are socially connected to the ruling MPLA party, and have often leveraged their relations with the political power networks in order to increase their visibility, rather than openly critique them (Alisch 2017).

The reductive scarcity-resilience narrative is dangerous because it ignores the rich and detailed history of performative practices that feed into kuduro. I acknowledge and respect the myriad creative and persistent ways in which kuduristas navigate their environments, and push ahead in the face of adversity. However, focusing only on resilience can play into racist stereotypes about endurance, inherent rhythmic and bodily intelligence, and conversely suggest that Black people lack other forms of intelligence. It invokes happily dancing, stereotypical Africans, and by extension Black people throughout the world. This line of argument occludes the deliberate labour that kuduristas invest in their craft.

The scarcity-resilience narrative can be coupled with condescending attitudes which further exacerbate it by supposing that people are too ignorant to use technology properly. It buys into the technology-fosters-creativity myth that big, global music technology companies peddle to monetise the creative aspirations of music producers. A typical sentiment I have heard amongst up-and-coming producers in Berlin is: ‘If only I had this more powerful soundcard/new software upgrade/faster

computer/any other supposedly empowering piece of technology I could translate the ideas in my head into awesome music'. Much of music technology's marketing fuels this aspirational drive, and sells the idea of creative magic made possible by expensive gear. This trope is linked to the idea of musical creativity as a concept born in the mind that is then translated into sound, akin to the idea of 'the presumed genius' (Cottrell 2010, 21) of the white male composer in Western art music, a myth that has been debunked in scholarly writing but continues to dominate ideas around musical creation and performance (Rodgers 2010).

### **Kuduro's Collective Creativity in Light of Extended Mind Theory**

Kuduristas often underline the importance of sociability to their creative processes, whether feeling the 'adrenaline of the people' when on stage, or the *carga* of a dance battle, or by antiphonally improvising lyrics, kinesics, or interjections based on a momentary, real life situation, when developing a new chorus or dance move at a backyard barbecue. Following the kuduristas' reasoning, I treat the kuduro studio as social space and nodal point in which practices converge and radiate back into the world. By doing so, I push back against the scarcity-resilience narrative, and concomitantly oppose the local, classist narrative that kuduro has no history and requires no skill or knowledge (Alich 2017, 18). Moreover, opening up the universe of performative and social practices in which kuduro studios are situated links studio practices to the world outside the studio and to the audiences kuduristas envision when working in the studio. In this sense, what happens in kuduro studios is always already based on imagining a potential performative situation.

Practitioners and scholars have cast music studios as social spaces before. Trend-setting UK pop music producer Trevor Horn remarked that

the times when I mostly feel [constrained by the recording studio as a creative environment] is when I'm on my own. If I have people to help me then I don't find it frightening [...] I've always had sociability make it possible to tame and use technology. (Warner 2017, 145)

Porcello reports, for the context of North American recording studios, that '[j]amming and singing and punning and joking often flow seamlessly into one another [...] And often they produce specific inspirations that wind up on tape as part of the final recording' (Porcello 1998, 496).

Louise Meintjes (2003) portrayed South African recording studios as spaces where style, identity, and politics converge. Stephen Cottrell addresses European composed and annotated music through an ethnomusicological approach to 'musical recordings as social practice—the collective enterprise of performers, creative practitioners, engineers and so on' (Cottrell 2010, 21). Other scholars argue that humans and sound technology interact, and that both can hold agencies in a music studio setup. Ringsmut (2018) relates this literature to pop music recording and production

studios, drawing on Latour's Actor Network Theory (ANT) to develop an understanding of the studio equipment as an integral part of a cyborg producer.

Moreover, Clark and Chalmers (1998) extended mind theory (EMT) can usefully be brought into this conversation and applied to the case of music studios. According to this theory, 'the mind is a distributed system where brain, body, and environment play equal parts' (Witek 2019, 1). Working against the idea that the mind is confined to 'boundaries of skin and skull' (Clark and Chalmers 1998, 7), the authors introduce the *parity principle* according to which 'the part of the world' that supports a cognitive task is 'part of the cognitive process' (Clark and Chalmers 1998, 8). As such, Clark and Chalmers conceptualise individual humans 'as an extended system, a coupling of biological organisms and external resources', as 'spread into the world' (Clark and Chalmers 1998, 19), advocating 'an active externalism, based on the active role of the environment in driving cognitive processes' (Clark and Chalmers 1998, 7). If we understand creativity as related to cognitive processes (as does Hayes 1989), then extended mind theory provides a model that accommodates the distributed creativity in the kuduro studio. The authors further raise questions around the socially extended mind, where 'mental states are partly constituted by the states of other thinkers' (Clark and Chalmers 1998, 17). Gallagher (2013) advances a liberal idea of the socially extended mind to 'involve institutional structures, norms, and practices' (4). Ryan and Schiavio identify three waves of EMT. The third wave invites us 'to rethink the locus of agency in light of the complicated and continuous dance between brain, body, and world' (Ryan and Schiavio 2019, 2).

Clark and Chalmers' approach accounts for the coupling of internal mental processes with external supporting objects, which in the case of EDM production can be beat patterns or sample banks stored in music software or hardware. More importantly, the theory of the socially extended mind accommodates kuduristas' own reasoning, according to which creativity is socially extended into the collective processes of social systems and aesthetic conventions. Such social systems and conventions could be ways of responding to *animação* with body movement or antiphonic vocal expression, elder-younger relationships, the distribution of tasks between dancer and dance-caller during performance, or conventions of aesthetic duelling and other strategies to conjure up the energetic impetus of *carga*. Collectively produced and maintained systems, such as the aforementioned practices of banter, linguistic double entendres, and mimetic dancing constitute 'encounters with others, especially in the context of various institutional procedures and social practices [which] offer structures that support and extend our cognitive abilities' (Gallagher 2013, 4), and as such sustain kuduro's collective creativity.

Like ANT, EMT accounts for the relationships between human actors and non-human objects and grants agency to both. But unlike ANT, EMT factors in cognitive processes that facilitate such coupling of minds, objects and collectivity. Thus, in this paper, I draw on EMT as it allows me to account for creativity in kuduro as a collective process. Collective creativity may be contained inside the studio, but in kuduro it



is always linked with larger cultural systems, quotidian processes and social interactions outside the studio. Thus, unlike ANT, EMT allows me to anchor my theorising and interpretations in kuduristas frequent statements about the importance of socialibility for inventing new kuduro dance moves, lyrics, or tracks. By approaching kuduro's collective creativity through EMT as distributed cognitive process I can address the epistemological problem of the scarcity resilience narrative while mooring my argument in ethnographic data.

While these premises form the backdrop of my reasoning, the scarcity of detailed studies of EDM practices in the Global South in general, and kuduro in particular, motivates me to lay out the culturally established, embodied institutions that shape kuduro as musical, kinetic, and otherwise performative social interaction.

All of these approaches to sound studios and human-technology relationships account for the interactive dynamics between kuduro producers and their equipment, and some—most notably extended mind theory—even factor in the social component of creativity. However, they share one problem: they were developed far away from Angolan realities, and even if we accept the universalism of EMT, the cultural conditions in which minds socially extend must be considered.

During my research in Luanda, I experienced the way the socially-extended mind can leverage collective creativity, be it when participating in making up rhymes, or dancing on stages during a TV show or a kuduro party, or in a kuduro video clip. To supply one example from my research, in 2012, Luandan street vendors peddled their wares through megaphones playing back pre-recorded messages. In street markets around town, I noticed a tinny voice chanting 'Mata barata, mata rato, mata tudo' ('Kills cock-roaches, kills rats, kills everything') to promote insecticides. The rhyme scheme, flow, and fervour appealed to me. Discussing this segment of advertising during a lively dinner with Angolan friends, I started entertaining the idea of turning it into a kuduro chorus. When the kuduro duo Os Namayer jested that we should record a song together, I proposed 'Mata barata, mata rato ...' as the hook-line. When they asked me to participate impromptu at the weekly kuduro TV show 'Sempre a Subir', we intoned this chorus together off the cuff in the TV studio. The programme was aired on a Saturday night. On the following Monday, children in the Sambizanga neighbourhood sang 'Mata barata, mata rato ...' at me in the street, and I joined in. Actively circulating an element of Luandan daily life through kuduro's collective creativity made more palpable to me what kuduristas might mean when they stress that the genre is close to the streets, that children are its main adherents, and that playful sociability is key to kuduristas' collective creativity.

### **An Introduction to Kuduro Studios**

Afrohouse DJ Silyvi states that '99.9% of kuduro is made in home studios'.<sup>8</sup> This sentence needs to be understood against the historical context that recording studios of the late colonial period declined after independence (Moorman 2008, 161).<sup>9</sup> During



the 1980s, *Cabine Numero.1* ('Booth number 1') at the National Radio Station was arguably the only sufficiently equipped and functioning recording studio in Angola. Here kizomba pioneer Eduardo Paim not only played drums, guitar and keyboard but also handled the recording equipment (Pedro 2015). *Cabine Numero 1* is now a mythical place in the popular memory of Angolan music. Curiously, Paim's *Nagibo* (Paim 1991) is a proto-kuduro smash hit, and he counts as a pioneer of the genre (Barros Wilper 2011). But, besides gesturing at the hiatus in the history of music studios, DJ Silyvi's statement also echoes the larger, somewhat condescending, elitist public discourse around kuduro production.

On closer inspection, however, the set-ups of kuduro producers vary considerably, and not all kuduro studios are squeezed into a bedroom corner. Music studios can be found on rooftops (Circuito Fexado in Sambizanga), in city centre residential buildings (Seres Produções in Marçal, see Figure 1) or in an annex to a *musseque*<sup>10</sup> house (Guetto Produções, DEVIS Produções, and DJ Fofeira's studio in Rangel), as well as in DJ's bedrooms (DJ Bandzily's Mix Records in Viana). Some kuduristas, such as Os Namayer and their management Casa Rebita in the Morro Bento neighbourhood, set up shop in spaces that are exclusively designated to making music. Some studios that offer vocal recording or beat making services, such as Makka Entretenimento of Lauro Cientista at Vila do Gamek neighbourhood, cater to a range of genres, like semba, r'n'b or kizomba.<sup>11</sup> Fofa Sho in the Rocha Pinto area runs a studio that producers (e.g. DJ Ski) rent by the hour to produce a *bit*, and to record vocals for kuduristas.

At the time of my research, the pieces of technology that I found in a typical kuduro studio were a desktop PC, a pair of monitor speakers, a mixing desk where an audio lead entered from the vocal microphone which was sometimes placed in a separate booth, a MIDI controller keyboard connected to the computer to manipulate sounds in Fruity Loop Studio software (see Figure 1), and two pairs of headphones—one for the producer, one for the vocalist. Some kuduro studios boast racks with audio enhancing hardware equipment such as compressors or effects. Star producer DJ Devictor produced the *bits* of Titica's chart hits *Olha Boneco* (2011) or *Chão* (2011) playing drumsticks on the rubber pads of a Yamaha DD 65 MIDI drum-set rigged up to his desktop PC: 'That is why the *bits* are always giving *carga*' he laughed.<sup>12</sup> Like many kuduro producers, in 2012, he worked with the computer's on-board sound-card, rather than an external audio interface.

Aside from being places of technical production and creative processes, studios are meeting places. DJ Devictor brings up the importance of sociability for his work:

I am more inspired when there are people looking at me. I show [them my work]. When I am alone comes this laziness, I am not inspired. But as I am here, at times, I call the children who are outside: 'Come, and keep me company.' I make a *bit* and [ask them] 'How is this?' and they [in response] give me power: 'You are good, you are bad!' and then I go and look for other rhythms [...] I have a team, my musicians, they give me a lot of power. If I was alone, I don't know ... Also people here in the neighbourhood, older ones of the neighbourhood who advise me:



**Figure 1** Studio of Seres Produções run by DJ Satelite, Luanda, 2012—Studio of Seres Produções run by DJ Satelite in a storeroom in a residential building. On the bottom screen a work-in-progress afrohouse track in FL Studio software. Top screen shows the produtora’s logo. The set-up comprises desktop PC, a two octave keyboard as MIDI controller, two monitor speakers, external audio interface, two screens, an effect rack (under bottom screen), headphones, five channel mixing board (left of keyboard), and microphone with pop filter (far right). Marçal, Luanda, 2012. Photo by the author.

‘Devictor, do this, do that.’ (DJ Devictor, interview by the author at Studio Devis Produções, Rangel, Luanda, August 02, 2012)

DJ Devictor alludes to the different roles he takes on in *puto-kota* relationships when calling in the neighbours’ kids, or taking advice from elders. He also emphasises the interactive aspect of *carga*—the creative drive through collegial connection and audience feedback. I witnessed how the presence of others energised his productivity when I visited his studios with a documentary team: he whipped up a complete kuduro *bit* in front of the rolling cameras within a couple of minutes.

Other producers, too, organise a team around their studio. Whenever I met DJ Satelite, his younger brother DJ Vamburgue or his cousin DJ Panico were usually also around. They would run errands, pick me up when Satelite was busy, or just listen to music or discuss musical or personal affairs, weighing in on aesthetic or business decisions. The SERES music studio (Figure 1) was located in a chamber



**Figure 2** DJ Killamu at his studio Guetto Produções, Rangel (Luanda), 2012. To the left computer cum keyboard controller for music production and microphone with headphones for vocal capture. Diplomas, prizes for particular CD releases, in background. Photo by the author.

of a residential building in the central Marçal neighbourhood. Beside serving as a place of forging kuduro and afrohouse *bits* and capturing vocals, it served as a nexus of social configurations, the seat of a small business which DJ Satellite runs with his family-based team, where artists and international visitors were received. This social and professional organisation around studios is common in Luanda. DJ Devictor runs DEVIS Produções, where he works closely with Mona Star. He is considered a freestyle rhyme prodigy who writes lyrics for kuduristas like Titica, and is the in-house *compositor* for DEVIS. The lyricist Mestre Ara fulfils a similar role at Guetto Produções. Studios also make for creative mingling amongst fellow kuduristas. The documentary *Luanda, a Fábrica de Música* ('Luanda, the music factory') (Gonçalves and Liberdade 2009) depicts the busy waiting areas of DJ Buda's studio, where boys and young men kill time with rhyme battles, honing their skills and stamina. Some studios go hand in hand with a namesake *produtora* ('production company', i.e. artist management). This is reflected in the term *produções* ('productions') that studios like Guetto, DEVIS, or SERES carry in their title.

### Walter Laton's JUPSON: The Recording Space that Amalgamated the Kuduro Scene

Numerous shoutouts to 'JUPSON' and 'Walter Laton' punctuate kuduro tracks recorded in the years 2003–2007. During this time DJ Walter Laton operated the JUPSON recording space in a *quintal* ('courtyard')<sup>13</sup> of the Rua Azul in the Precol section of Luanda's Rangel neighbourhood.<sup>14</sup> Kuduro super star Noite Dia, who lives in this street, bows out of the song 'Ndombolo Socoto' (Noite and Prata 2003) by shouting out lyricist Mestre Ara among others, and by sending a final 'Thank you, JUPSON Family'. The song *Iniquidade fora* ('Unrighteousness out') (Fofando c. 2003a) opens with a couple of looped sounds of trigger pulling and gun shooting, followed by an exaggerated, spiteful laughter that sounds like it might be sampled from an action film. Fofando launches into her lyrics addressing DJ Killamu and DJ Walter, telling them to open the door to send all the unjust people out, because here (at JUPSON) they don't want unrighteousness. Later in the song she intones 'Hey DJ Walter open the door of JUPSON and don't let the unjust in so I don't have to throw them out later'. She lauds Walter Laton by singing 'DJ Walter, when he plays. [You] let go of the heart's pain. We came from JUPSON, JUPSON, JUPSON. We shall return' (Fofando c. 2003a). The song's themes of righteousness and the conscious selection of social acquaintance may be interpreted as an attempt to counter the common accusations that kuduro is connected with gang crime (Alisch 2017, 117), but it surely conjures up JUPSON as a space where the good people mingle. By using the verb *vir* ('to come') Fofando situates herself inside this space. And she is free to return here and restore peace and order if need be, claiming JUPSON as an accessible space for her agency.

Walter Laton himself spoke about his recording space in the following words: 'I created revolutionary kuduro where all young people of Angola left their fear of the microphone behind. I opened the doors to develop kuduro at JUPSON'.<sup>15</sup> He then enumerated a list of well-known kuduristas who started out at JUPSON like Fofando, Noite Dia, Gata Agressiva, Puto Prata, Bobany King, Puto Agressivo, Maquina do Inferno, Pai Diesel or Kome Todas.

Walter Laton is also widely known as the first producer to record female kuduro vocalists. One of them is Gata Agressiva ('Agressive Babe'). She alerted me to the importance of JUPSON during the first kuduro interview I conducted in Luanda, in August 2011. She, too, relates that Walter Laton had created an encouraging atmosphere where young people could record their songs, without needing to pay for this service.<sup>16</sup> The combination of free recording services and a welcoming atmosphere marks JUPSON as an accessible mingling space.

Gata Agressiva recorded several songs at JUPSON, including her first song 'Afro-basket' in 2003 (Agressiva 2003).<sup>17</sup> Over the same instrumental as 'Afrobasket', vocalists Fofando & Saborosa recorded the song 'Muito Rara' (Fofando c.2003b), whose lyrics praise JUPSON, DJ Killamu, Walter Laton, and themselves as 'very rare', while also shouting out legendary producer DJ Znobia and the instrumental dancing space

*Mãe Jú* ('Mother Ju') where he worked as a DJ. They intone 'This is JUPSON. Everybody is enjoying [...] JUPSON is promoting.' While emphasising the socially open climate, this lyric also suggests that JUPSON not only provided technical services but might have served as a promotion company or as a brand name. Later in the song they sing 'The discotheque JUPSON is a hit in our Rangel', which underlines the fact that Walter Laton also entertained at parties as a DJ.<sup>18</sup>

In the following passage, I contrast the statements of recording operator Walter Laton with those of vocalist Gata Agressiva. In this juxtaposition I run up against a contradiction which I try to unpack. This process is epistemologically fragile because (a) the statements pertain to events that happened several years before the interviews, and reports are shaped by blurred memory and personal motivations, and (b) the vocalist and the recording operator represent different perspectives on the workflow. Nonetheless, the comparison highlights some important aspects of social and technical processes at JUPSON in a particularly palpable and illustrative way. Both distinguish the recording process at the time from the way kuduro later came to be recorded, noting that whereas one now uses a computer, in 2003, Walter Laton recorded directly to CD.

Gata Agressiva explained that people at JUSPON 'were DJs' and that the *bits* there were ready-made instrumentals. Walter Laton confirms that by stating 'I only captured vocals [...] I made mixes on top of underground music'.<sup>19</sup> 'Afrobasket' (Gata 2003) contains an *intro*<sup>20</sup> calling out DJ Du Marcel, who produced several kuduro classics like 'Tribal Sound' (2007) and confirmed that Walter Laton is his old friend.<sup>21</sup> In 2003, DJ Du Marcel started producing kuduro instrumentals with Fruity Loops, so it is highly likely that he supplied Walter Laton with *bits*.

Gata Agressiva stated that she sang without headphones and without a microphone, facing the tabletop loudspeakers blasting an instrumental from a distance of five meters. She described this process as *cantar na coluna* ('singing with/for/ towards the loudspeaker').<sup>22</sup> In her memory, the loudspeaker would simultaneously serve as playback and recording device—while blasting the *bit* they would at the same time capture her vocals and send them to the CD recorder. This is technically and acoustically unlikely. However, if it was produced in the way she recalls, this understanding would have shaped her vocal performance of belting over the volume of the beat. Gata Agressiva continued, 'And if you made a mistake you couldn't edit it out like you can in software based recording technology today. You had to come back and try again'.<sup>23</sup> She added that this way of recording required a strong voice and stamina from the performer, which many people didn't have at the time, much less today. This way of recording also required everybody else to be quiet. This suggests that people were usually present for social as well as musical reasons, often in lively conversation with each other. This underlines the idea that JUPSON served as a social as well as a recording institution.

When I first asked Walter Laton about Gata Agressiva's interpretation of *cantar na coluna* he responded that 'we were all there watching her sing without making a noise', using this opportunity further to emphasise her energetic delivery, especially



when facing an audience.<sup>24</sup> His statement implicitly confirms that *cantar na coluna* requires a strong vocal performance. But much more importantly, Walter Laton emphasised that the presence of other people charged up Gata Agressiva's kuduro singing. However, he then goes on to contradict her description of the setup. According to him there was indeed a microphone. The sound of the *bit* however, he claims, did not play out loud. It went directly into the mixing board and then into the CD recorder, so the sound of the instrumental was not captured from the room (or backyard rather) according to him.

Walter Laton explains the setup as follows:

At the time we didn't have a computer. So we recorded at a manual recording device at my house in the backyard. They were all standing there, looking at Gata Agressiva singing, without making noise. [This device] was a Samsung CD recorder. The microphone was connected with a 20 meter cable to the 4 channel mixer, of the brand Denon. The loudspeakers were of the brand JBL. (DJ Walter Laton, interview by the author via Facebook, November 23, 2012)

While it makes sense that the instrumental sound from the CD-player went into the mixer and blended with the vocals before entering the CD-recorder, Gata says that it played back through the loudspeakers. It is likely that at least some of the room sound (or rather backyard sound) was captured and found its way into the final track. This is even more likely when considering that everybody in the studio had to be silent. In fact, during the first second of *Muito Rara*, joyful children's shouting and male voices in conversation are faintly audible before a gun salvo sample opens the track proper. This trace of room sound conjures up JUSPON as a social setting of daily life, as the quintessential *quintal*. I conclude that a combination of the different narratives occurred; that Gata did shout over the instrumental, *as if* she had to make herself heard on top of it. Since the instrumental came from a CD, played most likely through a cable into the mixer as well as into the room, the microphone captured Gata Agressiva's voice as well as traces of the *bit* in the room audio. In the YouTube<sup>25</sup> version of 'Afrobasket', Gata's voice sounds at once clipping and muffled. As if she belted close to the mic, and as if the input volume of her voice was quite low in the mixer. Balancing levels in this way could have blanked out most background noise.

### 'Cantar na Coluna' Construed as Scarcity or Abundance

At the 1. Kuduro International Conference 2012 in Luanda, I presented my initial ideas on *cantar na coluna* and suggested that this style of recording enhanced *carga* in the sense of overcoming a challenge. Building on my findings (Alisch 2012), Sheridan (2014) then doubles back to a scarcity-resilience argument. Filling in missing historical information by (unmarked) speculation and choosing examples out of time and out of place, he claims that kuduristas were 'harnessing the rhythmic variation and frenetic energy' to create 'a technique and aesthetic that emerged as a

response to technological limitations' and 'outlived these limitations' (Sheridan 2014, 89). He then techno-deterministically argues that this way of recording brought about the vocal style that is typical to kuduro. This myopic view conceals the abundance of resources that kuduristas mobilise for their musicking.

Researchers of global EDM, including Sheridan and myself, are often DJs and sometimes also producers. Coming mostly from European, North-American, or Australian backgrounds, or else belonging to the educated class in countries of the Global South, we are often conditioned by a fixation on 'proper gear'. This logic perpetuates a typical fallacy around creativity, and misses the collective, distributed, and playful aspects of creativity that kuduristas themselves prize. At the same time, this logic perpetuates the construction of a white male knower as superior, by articulating academic knowledge production with technology domination. It thus becomes a way to affirm a white masculinity that is established through technology fetish, superiority fixation, and illusion of control. From Shana Almeida I take the cue that '[a]s critical scholars we also need to deconstruct the epistemologies of the critical tradition and the epistemologies we choose to use in our own work' (Almeida 2015, 98). If we leave this work undone, our scholarly actions might even impose what Almeida calls acts of 'epistemic violence' (Almeida 2015, 81). Following her call, I argue that, as researcher-DJs, we need to more rigorously deconstruct our own cultural conditioning around music technology. If we fail to do so, we continue to project a 'boys and their toys' logic onto our analysis of Global South EDM, and blank out the cultural practices and repertoires from which Global South EDM styles emerge.

Mark Katz argues that '[r]ecording has influenced invention as well as affected nearly every aspect of musical composition' (Katz 2010, 214). While I do agree that the adaptation to JUPSON's recording setup plays into the emergence of *carga* during the recording process there and most likely reinforces the belting intonation that is typical of kuduro, technological constraints are by no means its sole source. Instead, I connect kuduro's vocal style to several vocal practices situated in the cosmopolitan hub of Luanda: (1) dance calling, and (2) carnival, and (3) professional street cries.<sup>26</sup> Firstly, while conservative Angolan voices regard kuduro *animação* as 'mere shouting' and thus inferior to earlier popular music styles, typical interjections of kuduro like 'Aíwé!' or 'Puxa!' ('Pull ahead!') were already used in the popular music of the late colonial period, the music which the cultural elites value as a symbol of national identity (Alisch 2017, 233). These songs of the 1960 and 70s likewise relied on spurring shouts to performers, and dance animation for the audience. In Kizombada ('Kizombering') (Paim 1991) kuduro forerunner Eduardo Paim harks back to the ephemeral dance calling by animating in *rebita* style, linking the electronically produced track back to the salon tradition of *rebita* couple dancing. This couple dance, popular among the Luandan urban elite of the 1930s (Dos Santos 2012, 259), draws on quadrille dancing (Kubik 1991, 207) in which couples are directed in a circle around the dance floor via 'instructions called out in French by the emcee' (Moorman 2014, 61). Lourdes Van Dunem's song from the 1960s



*Imbwa kegie ngana lé* contains a recording of a very similar dance calling (van Dunem 1960s) which begins with the whistle sound of the dance caller.

The second cultural practice in Luanda that is available as a resource for kuduro's vocal style is carnival singing and animation. Paim's proto-kuduro track *Nagibo* (Paim 1991) combines minimal electronica with the whistles of the Luandan carnival. Paim recounts that he created the track by mistake during a show at the Luandan carnival, where he called a rhythm pattern from his hardware sequencer and, to avoid tedium, Paim animated popular call-and-response lines on top of it for 27 minutes (Pedro 2015). This opens up connections to practices where the voices of carnival vocalists need to carry over the brass and percussion instruments of the parading groups.<sup>27</sup>

A third practice in which to root kuduro's projecting vocal technique is the context of professional street cries in Luanda's soundscape. Vendor women have for decades created specific melodic shouts (*pregões*) to hawk their wares (Dos Santos 2010a). During the time of research, countless young men in Luanda worked as taxi shouters, to announce destinations of minibus taxis over the noise of traffic and construction, usher patrons into their cars, and cultivate banter with rivalling taxi *staffs*. In fact, several kuduristas work in the minibus business, and taxis' *staffs* frequently overlap with kuduro networks (Tomás 2014).

These cursory remarks on established vocal strategies show that kuduro's projection technique did not spring from a cultural vacuum, but is deeply interconnected with the history of popular vocal practices in Luanda. This panorama opens up the range of projecting techniques that kuduristas can mobilise for the recording practice of 'cantar na coluna'. For their collective creativity inside the studios, kuduristas tap into the rich popular culture that surrounds them, and this culture contributes just as much to *carga* as do the tools of the recording studio.

The gatherings and recordings at JUPSON were fundamental in amalgamating and documenting a generation of artists who came to shape kuduro for over a decade. The *quintal* served not only as recording space studio but also as an incubator where Walter Laton and up-and-coming kuduristas nurtured creative practices, long-standing networks, and careers.

To have sustained access to a whole backyard, to own, rig up, and operate this technological setup, to have a social network of producers, DJ and vocalists, to tap into the repertoire of vocal techniques, to make time available in order to offer recording services free of charge, and to mentor upcoming talent, to harness the inspiration and collective drive to foster a new musical genre and bring it into the world is the opposite of scarcity.

### **DJ Killamus's Guetto Produções—Encoding Performance Practice into Sonic Materiality**

Even though JUPSON closed in 2007 when Walter Laton left the country,<sup>28</sup> its influence lingers. DJ Killamu has fond memories of recording sessions at JUPSON.

Watching Walter Laton record, direct, and mentor kuduro vocalists inspired Killamu to start Guetto Produções (Figure 2).<sup>29</sup> Here, he continues to work with artists who already gathered at JUPSON.

Noite Dia is one of them. In 2011 the kuduro star excitedly reported to Killamu: ‘Look, I have a new dance. I did a show in the province, animated this thing to the people and the audience collaborated really well. We have to do it’.<sup>30</sup> Her statement points to the key function that *toques* have in building up popularity for kuduro songs. She had already tried out the *toque* and antiphonal chorus of ‘Olha Fogareiro—Apaga Fogo’ (‘Look the barbecue—Put the fire out’) with an audience before the song had even been produced. Noite Dia had sensed the hit potential of the *toque-animação* through live performance.

Killamu trusted her judgement, and turned this snippet of dance animation into the most popular kuduro song in 2012. In his studio he produced an antiphonal and forward-pushing percussive instrumental for it, and Mestre Ara composed lyrics for Noite Dia’s verses. Furthermore, they involved male kudurista Puto Lilas to intone part of the lyrics, which rely on boasting, battling, and neighbourhood pride. Killamu edited the two, separately recorded voices in such a way that the final song became a duet that teeters between duelling and flirting.

When ‘Fogareiro—Apaga Fogo’ is played loudly, people respond to its chorus by executing the *toque*—tapping a foot on the ground as if to put out a fire, and by waving a hand towards the crotch. Such thinly veiled sexual references provide kuduro’s well calculated shock value, and triggering moralising responses is often part of a new song’s marketing strategy.

Noite Dia relates the origin of ‘Fogareiro—Apaga Fogo’ as follows:

We were sitting together with a group of friends. Someone was grilling a fish and the fire came up high. And I said ‘Put it out, put it out, put it out!’ and the friend said ‘Put out the fire in the BBQ’ and then we kept saying ‘Olha fogareiro—apaga fogo! Olha fogareiro—apaga fogo!’ I only asked to put out the fire in the BBQ.<sup>31</sup>

On the surface this may look like just another example of kuduristas discursively rooting their creativity in day-to-day sociability. But knowing that Noite Dia was accused of an overly sexual performance with ‘Fogareiro—Apaga Fogo’, it becomes clear that her statement further serves as a hedging discourse to preserve her respectability.

When ‘Fogareiro—Apaga Fogo’ is played in schoolyards, on dancefloors, or on street corners people engage in verbal and kinetic call-and-response, so that during a performance *bit*, lyrics, and dance moves point to each other in repeating sequences. These cycles interlock on different performative levels to render a propelling effect, like a perpetual motion machine (Alisch 2017, 289). In his studio, DJ Killamu encoded multiple modes of performance into a sonic configuration, so that the final song would mobilise maximum audience response through call-

and-response in vocals and rhythm, through dance-calling, aesthetic duelling, and sexual innuendo.

## Conclusion

Harnessing the heightened importance of sociability in Angola, the two influential kuduro studios JUPSON and GUETTO provide salient and apt examples of music studios as social spaces in the broader global context. Providing fine-grained accounts of how the processes inside these studios are connected with larger cultural systems and conventions enriches the literature on sound studios and popular music in general, and on Angolan music in particular.

Construing the collective creativity in kuduro studios through EMT shows that sociability is more important for understanding creative processes here than focusing on technical equipment alone. It shows how kuduristas appeal to an abundance of resources such as vocal techniques, ways of constructing and understanding jokes, playing with figurative speech, and call-and-response enacted in mundane situations, or their *puto-kota* relationships that shape social interaction. In this sense, the kuduro studio is a nexus within a web of larger systems of social interactions as well as quotidian and aesthetic conventions. The kuduro studio is the place where these references are translated into the sonic materiality of kuduro tracks, which in turn are designed to mobilise these systems when played out in the world.

As the example of Gata Agressiva's 'singing over the speakers' at JUPSON shows, the objects in the studio and the kuduristas' understanding of them shaped her vocal performance and consequently the collective creative processes. EMT allows us to understand her performance during the recording process in the sense that she interacted with the watching assembly of other kuduristas but also the speakers as she understood them. But EMT allows us to go a step further and avoid techno-deterministic pitfalls. We can situate Gata Agressiva's studio performance within a larger context of vocal practices of Luanda and thus the collective creativity that is distributed throughout of the city.

Investigating how collective creativity thrives in kuduro studios in light of socially extended mind theory reveals how spreading the mind into social systems, such as cultural conventions and playful, collective creativity, de-centres the scarcity-resilience narrative of Global South EDM production, and counters Angolan conservative voices who claim that kuduro has no history or requires no skill. On the contrary, the JUPSON and GUETTO examples show how mobilising collective creativity in the setting of Luandan kuduro studios opens up an abundance of resources.

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## Notes on Contributor

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## Notes

- [1] I thank the kuduristas and cultural activists of Luanda, the organisers and participants of the workshop 'Opening the Doors of the Studio' at the MPI for the History of Science in June 2019 as well as Hillegonda Rietveld, Maria Witek, Shanti Suki Osman, Sydney Hutchinson, Matthias Haenisch and Tim Groß for lending their eyes, ears and thoughts to support me in developing different parts of this article's argument.
- [2] Loanword from English 'beat' as in 'percussive instrumental track'.
- [3] As Johannes Fabian shows throughout the monograph 'Time and the other. How anthropology makes its object', the discursive denial of shared time ('coevalness') is an attempt to create an inferior Other. The denial of history is a strategy to this end as it places the Other in a place of 'savage' or 'primitive' (Fabian 2014, 30).
- [4] These loose groups can be traced back at least to carnival related 'turmas', groups of young men who gathered to play after work, who were incubators of collective music making and led people to starting bands (Moorman 2008, xxii).
- [5] Numerous songs and personal statements underline the importance of Walter Laton's JUPSON recording space. However, because of frictions within the kuduro scene it has been sidelined in the dominant narrative of the genre's history, so I set out to rectify this lacuna by centering JUPSON in this article.
- [6] This song, however, is an exception and Dog Murras withdrew from musical activities after his initial success.
- [7] In the impuls to interpret popular music as protest these authors follow a long-standing pattern in music studies (Klenke 2019).
- [8] DJ Silyvi (part of Os Kuduristas), interview by the author, Luanda, August 1, 2012.
- [9] Because of the lack of well-equipped studios to this day, Angolan musicians seek out recording and mastering services abroad. As a consequence, the diaspora plays an important role in the recording and production of Angolan music. The two first kuduro albums, Tony Amado's 'Sexy Musa' (1997) and Bruno de Castro's 'No Fear' (1995), were recorded in Boston and Madrid respectively.
- [10] Unpaved neighbourhood with informal building activity. Mostly with low buildings in and around Luanda. Can range from highly precarious to comfortable living conditions. Densely populated hotbeds of popular music and dance. From Kimbundu 'sand'.
- [11] Lauro Cientista, interview by the author at Celamar, August 20, 2011.

- [12] DJ Devictor, interview by the author at Studio Devis Produções, Rangel, Luanda, August 2, 2012.
- [13] A *quintal* is a walled area adjunct to residential building or compound where housekeeping activities, social life, animal keeping, music and dance rehearsals, and celebrations occur. Quintais are instrumental to Angolan popular culture (Dos Santos 2010b).
- [14] It is worth noting that Rangel at the time was the site of other instrumental kuduro spaces like party salon Mãe Jú and the cultural and recreative centre Kilamba.
- [15] DJ Walter Laton, interview by the author via Facebook, November 23, 2012.
- [16] During the time of my research in 2011–2017 it was common that kuduro vocalists paid a producer for recording their song in a studio. Sometimes the instrumentals are reused, but if the *bit* is exclusively produced for their song the vocalists pay an additional fee.
- [17] Afrobasket is a biannual basket ball tournament of the African continent. Since hosting it in 1989 the Angolan team won 11 times. In 2003, the Angolan team had taken the trophy in Alexandria (Egypt) and Sebem and other kuduristas had put together a *Trio electrico* (sound system truck) to meet the team at the airport and celebrate. At this occasion Gata Agressiva performed the song, lauding the prowess of the Angola team.
- [18] DJ Walter Laton, interview by the author via Facebook, November 23, 2012.
- [19] DJ Walter Laton, interview by the author via Facebook, November 23, 2012.
- [20] In kuduro *intro* describes a DJ's vignette/drop/jingle. The *intro* contains the name of the DJ, and often also of his production company. It may be topped off with a sound effect. Producers mark a song as their product by branding it with an *intro*. The practice of placing names in song lyrics has been established in Angola since at least the golden age of popular music of the 1960s and 70s (Moorman 2008, 94).
- [21] DJ Du Marcel, interview by the author via Facebook, December 12, 2012.
- [22] Gata Agressiva, interview by the author at Rangel, Luanda, August 25, 2011.
- [23] Gata Agressiva, interview by the author at Rangel, Luanda, August 25, 2011.
- [24] DJ Walter Laton, interview by the author via Facebook, November 23, 2012.
- [25] Gata (2003): Afrobasket. With the collaboration of Walter Laton and DJ Du Marcel. Luanda: JUPSON. Accessed August 17, 2020. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZvA6OTLnTxE>.
- [26] All three of these practices are distributed across and around the Black Atlantic. Exploring how kuduro is deeply enmeshed with trans-regional musical and bodily performative practices is, however, beyond the scope of this paper.
- [27] Conjunto Angola 70, interview by the author, Berlin, August 17, 2014.
- [28] DJ Walter Laton, interview by the author via Facebook, November 23, 2012.
- [29] DJ Killamu, interview by the author at Studio Guetto Produções. Rangel, Luanda, July 12, 2012.
- [30] DJ Killamu, interview by the author at Studio Guetto Produções. Rangel, Luanda, July 12, 2012.
- [31] Noite Dia, interview by the author at Le Showcase Club Paris after Show 'I Love Kuduro', October 6, 2011.

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