

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Rhythms of Value:

Tuareg Music and Capitalist Reckonings in Niger

by

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This dissertation examines how Tuareg people in Niger use music to reckon with their increasing but incomplete entanglement in global neoliberal capitalism. I argue that a variety of social actors—Tuareg musicians, fans, festival organizers, and government officials, as well as music producers from Europe and North America—have come to regard Tuareg music as a resource by which to realize economic, political, and other social ambitions. Such treatment of culture-as-resource is intimately linked to the global expansion of neoliberal capitalism, which has led individual and collective subjects around the world to take on a more entrepreneurial nature by exploiting representations of their identities for a variety of ends. While Tuareg collective identity has strongly been tied to an economy of pastoralism and caravan trade, the contemporary moment demands a reimagining of what it means to be, and to survive as, Tuareg. Since the 1970s, cycles of drought, entrenched poverty, and periodic conflicts have pushed more and more Tuaregs to pursue wage labor in cities across northwestern Africa or to work as trans-

Saharan smugglers; meanwhile, tourism expanded from the 1980s into one of the region's biggest industries by drawing on pastoralist skills while capitalizing on strategic essentialisms of Tuareg culture and identity. These developments engendered novel cultural production, including several new festivals across the Sahel-Sahara and a guitar musical style that has evolved from protest anthems into popular songs. This dissertation draws on over fifteen months of ethnographic research in Niger, Mali, and the United States—grounded in participant observation, audiovisual recording, consultation of archived materials, social media engagement, and interviews—to demonstrate how a variety of stakeholders produce, manage, and curate Tuareg music as a resource in order to produce diverse forms of value and to create meaning.

The dissertation of Eric James Schmidt is approved.

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To my brothers, for modeling unapologetic ecstasy in music:

*to John, for the nights listening to Tchaikovsky under the Christmas tree;
and to Chris, for singing bols in the car and practicing tabla on the steering wheel.*

And to the rest of my family, for their unflagging support for my journeys, no matter how far:

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