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LOCATING HIP HOP ORIGINS: POPULAR MUSIC AND TRADITION IN SENEGAL

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> In America, when they started rapping, it was just to defend society. I heard Louis Farrakhan said one day that the rappers of nowadays have the same responsibilities as Malcolm X or Martin Luther King. Those things they were defending, rappers nowadays have to defend the same thing. That is why I can say that rap is more important than *taasu*, because it represents society. We have the habit of saying we represent the people who don't have the opportunity to face the microphone and say what hurts. You have to be in the body of the people and know what's wrong and then translate those things that are wrong into your music. You have to represent those people who don't have a mouth.[1,2]

Raised in the Pikine *banlieue* on the outskirts of Dakar, rapper N-Jah took up the mic in 1999, during a pivotal moment in which youth linguistically re-localized hip hop even as they re-inscribed its origins in African American struggle and defined it against local performance practice.[3] It was youth in Dakar's affluent neighbourhoods who had first encountered hip hop music and dance in the early 1980s, through globally circulating media and family members travelling abroad. They soon formed battling hip hop dance crews, added front men who engaged audiences by rapping US hip hop songs, and finally transformed into rap groups performing original lyrics in Wolof and French.[4] Senegalese hip hop broke internationally when, in 1992, the group Positive Black Soul opened for Senegalese-French rapper MC Solaar at the French Cultural Centre in Dakar, an encounter that paved the way for an international record deal and tours. A select few groups, namely Pee Froiss and Daara J Family, followed suit. Local

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[1]The quotations in this article are representative examples of consistent interview responses and conversational remarks from a significant range of participants in my research. Although the same actors are quoted multiple times in an effort to create a partial continuity of narrative, I have not included perspectives that were not widely corroborated.

[2]Interview with N-Jah of Tigrim Bi. This interview was conducted entirely in English according to N-Jah's preference. All quotations in this article are drawn from interviews I personally conducted and translated (see 'Personal interviews' for details). I have indicated the language spoken for the first quotation from an individual interview but not in subsequent instances unless multiple languages were spoken. As those quoted are public figures, I have not used pseudonyms (in accordance with their stated preferences).

[3]The *banlieues* comprise the overpopulated quarters on the outskirts of the city, including Pikine, Parcelles Assainies, Guédiawaye and Thiaroye. Although *banlieue* is generally translated as 'suburb', in Senegal there is an implication of ghettoization that accompanies the word, making it very different from common understandings of the American suburb. For this reason, I retain the French *banlieue* throughout this article.

[4]See Charry (2012b) for a discussion of how this trajectory relates to the arrival of hip hop in other African cities.

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participation in hip hop exploded in 1998, when the group Rap'Adio, from the popular quarter Medina, released an album of Wolof-language, hard-hitting social commentary that struck a chord with Senegalese youth, igniting what local rappers still refer to as Senegal's 'hardcore' or 'underground' hip hop movement.[5]

That first, internationally successful wave of Senegalese hip hoppers garnered sustained interest from Western scholars, 'world music' enthusiasts and journalists with their claims that hip hop originated in the musical practices of West African *griots*, lineage-based bardic figures responsible for social commentary, genealogies, epic poetry and praise singing.[6] Early in their careers, they identified the Wolof griot speech genre *taasu*, a rhythmic form of chanting, as hip hop's aesthetic predecessor, and positioned their social commentary as a modernized version of griot practice that represented hip hop's 'return' to its African roots.[7] It is hard to say who should be credited with this origin story: Western scholars and practitioners, African practitioners, or maybe a combination of all three. In her 2012 case study of Positive Black Soul, Patricia Tang attributes the emergence of the griot trope in the United States to the 1970s miniseries *Roots* and traces the subsequent emergence of the griot as a ubiquitous figure in (self-)representations of African and African American arts and artists. While linkages between West African and African American orality and music have been a consistent topic of scholarly exploration in the United States,[8] hip hop in particular has often drawn comparisons with griots in scholarly and popular outlets. These are usually passing references that position rap music as the end point in a genealogy of black orality beginning with the griot (Banfield 2003: 180; 2009: 67; Banks 2010; BBC News 2014; Dyson 1993: 12, 191, 276; Fernando 1994: 32; Hadley and Yancy 2011: 5; Peterson cited in Alim *et al*. 2009: 1; Perkinson 2003: 146; Smitherman 1997: 4; Toop 1991: 8; Watkins 2005: 239), although more in-depth analyses have been conducted, most notably in Kermit Campbell's 2005 study of African American Vernacular tradition (see also Appert 2011; Keyes 2002; Tang 2012). Likewise, journalists have insistently depicted Senegalese rappers, and rappers in general, as figurative griots (see, for example, Makinwa

[5]This article draws on ethnographic work conducted in Dakar during July and August 2007 (work with underground rappers began the following year), July and August 2008, for eleven months in 2011, and for two months during the presidential elections of February and March 2012. It relies heavily on interviews and informal conversations grounded in daily interactions with rappers, producers, managers and fans. The very condensed histories recounted here have been reconstructed from points of unanimous consensus in my informants' accounts. For an extended history of Senegalese hip hop, see also Appert (2012), Herson (2011), Moulard-Kouka (2008) and Niang (2010; 2013).

[6]While many stratified West African societies include such bardic figures and speech genres, the word 'griot' is a French colonial invention lumping together disparate performance traditions that, while tied to similar social functions, are aesthetically and culturally distinct from one locale to the next. Nevertheless, I use the word 'griot' throughout this article in place of the ethnically specific Wolof word '*géwël*' to replicate the day-to-day language use of Senegalese hip hoppers.

[7]See, for example, PBS's song 'Return of Da Djelly' ('Return of the Griot') from their 1996 album *Salaam*, and Daara J's 2003 'Boomerang' from the album of the same name.

[8]For just a few examples, see Coolen (1991) on Senegambian roots of African American music; Smitherman (1977) on African American speech; Maultsby's essay 'Africanisms in African American music' (1990); and Oliver's (1970) and Kubik's (1999) work on the blues.

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2012; Pollard 2004; Fernandes 2012; Flock 2014), and some US hip hop artists themselves, from hip hop's 'godfather' Afrika Bambaataa to the currently popular Kanye West, have drawn this connection (see Keyes 2002; Tannebaum cited in Tang 2012; Perkins 1996).[9]

Grounded in the same Pan-Africanist sensibilities as their Western counterparts (Moulard-Kouka 2008: 246–8; Spady 2006a: 640), but also informed by world music markets (Herson 2011: 33), the first generation of Senegalese rappers has shifted significantly its engagement with the griot trope over the course of the rappers' now-lengthy careers. As Tang (2012) and I (Appert 2012) have both explored at length, they are well aware that they are not griots, despite the assertions of similarity in their early international releases that were perhaps never meant to be taken quite so literally. While acknowledging hip hop's African Americanness, they invoke general aesthetic and historical connections between Africa and its diaspora.[10] Nevertheless, the significant roles that griots continue to play in Senegalese society, as well as the centrality of griot performance in *mbalax*, Senegal's pre-eminent popular music genre, have often been obscured in the cycling of the griot trope between this first generation of rappers and subsequent waves of Western researchers and journalists.[11]

These internationally recognized artists represent only a tiny fraction of Senegalese rappers.[12] But, until recently, their perspectives – weighted with the multifaceted privilege of local class background, international artistic visibility, and resonance with existing Western scholarly and popular discourses – have disproportionately dominated international narratives about Senegalese hip hop. While acknowledging their significance as the forerunners of Senegalese hip hop and recognizing the complex constructions of Africa in the world that underlie their engagements with the griot trope, in this article I focus on Dakar's expansive hip hop 'underground' (a term explored below) and their equally strategic narratives of hip hop origins, which emerged in interviews and extended informal interactions during ethnographic research that I conducted between 2008 and 2012.[13] Unlike many of their predecessors, the majority of underground rappers hail from Dakar's popular quarters and the *banlieues*, where their experiences of the failures

[9]For sources that extend the griot connection to deejaying and digital music production, see Banks (2011) and Miller (2004).

[10]Based on ethnographic interviews with DJ Awadi, Fada Freddy and Ndongo of Daara J Family, and Xuman, formerly of Pee Froiss. See Appert (2012) for a detailed description of their engagement with the griot trope.

[11]This is not limited to Senegal: Mwenda Ntarangwi notes the similarity of hip hop to praise-singing traditions across East Africa (2009: 27) and David Samper (2004: 42) notes that some Kenyan rappers understand rapping to have originated in Africa.

[12]In 2007–08, I was told by numerous artists and fans that there were 'more than 3,000 hip hop groups' in Senegal. By 2011, this self-accounting had risen to 5,000. I interpret these numbers as a self-representation of hip hop's significance in Senegal rather than any kind of concrete statistic. To date, I am not aware of any systematic cataloguing of hip hop artists in Senegal. Such a cataloguing would prove nearly impossible to carry out: (1) hip hop 'group' is a vague construct that can mean anything from one artist (e.g. Sen Kumpë) to six (e.g. Alien Zik); and (2) fledgling artists are constantly emerging and many more are making hip hop in their own neighbourhoods without city-wide or national visibility.

[13]In this article, I use both 'rappers' and 'hip hoppers' to denote the people who participated in my research; the latter term encompasses fans, managers, producers and other active participants in the Dakar underground scene who may not rap themselves.

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of colonial and postcolonial modernizing projects are all the more immediate.[14] A lack of access to adequate education means that many – particularly the youngest newcomers to the scene – are not fluent or even conversant in French, the official national language, and one that would be more accessible to international audiences.[15] And while international rappers have at times embraced their Western audience's enthusiasm for an idealized African past, the underground, with its decidedly local audience, is generally critical of traditional culture as something that helps to maintain a status quo of underdevelopment in Senegal. Instead, they emphasize hip hop's roots in the post-industrial United States, grounding their claim to hip hop not in a sense of historical racial or aesthetic connectivity between Africa and its diaspora but rather in a keenly experiential awareness of socio-economic marginalization and urban struggle.

In doing so, they draw on a well-established origin myth of hip hop culture as an aesthetically mediated form of resistance and cultural resilience that emerged in the late 1970s and early 1980s in the US inner city, specifically the South Bronx (see Rose 1994; Keyes 2002; Forman 2002; Perry 2004; Perkins 1996). I refer to this as a 'myth', not to debate its historicity but rather to emphasize that, as Murray Forman has noted:

> [Scholarship has] the power to sediment certain histories or historical accounts that may, in retrospect, require critical revisitation. This is not to suggest that the history of hip-hop has been falsely inscribed, but that the evolutionary construction of a hip-hop canon is itself now part of hip-hop's lore. These texts and their content do not exist outside of the culture – they do not provide an externalized objective view. Rather, they, too, are internally significant facets of what is today recognized as hip-hop culture. (Forman 2002: 36)

The ever expanding body of literature on hip hop outside the United States has fruitfully explored the significance of this origin myth (not always explicitly designated as such) for hip hop practitioners around the world (see Alim *et al.* 2009; Baker 2011; Basu and Lemelle 2006; Caglar 1998; Charry 2012a; Diessel 2001; Eqeip 2010; Kelley 2006; Maira 2008; Mitchell 2001; Morgan and Bennett 2011; Saucier 2011; Sharma 2010; Spady *et al.* 2006; Terkourafi 2010; Urla 2001; Watkins 2001). But as much as the griot origin myth romanticizes the griot as a symbol of a timeless, ahistorical Africa (Tang 2012: 81), hip hop's origin myth at times idealizes and codifies the musical culture, centring as it does on a canon of figures and practices that represent a specific and limited historical moment of creative innovation coupled with radical social consciousness.[16] Thus global hip hop scholarship – including literature on African hip hop – is

[14]Senegal's popular quarters include the Medina (the colonial 'native quarter') and the neighbourhoods surrounding it, including Grand Dakar, Fass and Koloban.

[15]Sophie Moulard's PhD thesis, based on fieldwork conducted in 1999–2002, notes that most of the rappers with whom she worked in Senegal had fairly high levels of education (Moulard-Kouka 2008: 94); likewise, Jenny Fatou Mbaye's PhD thesis, citing her informants, describes Senegalese hip hoppers as people whose minimum level of education is the French baccalaureate and who read and write fluently in French (Mbaye 2011: 136). My personal observations and conversations in my later research showed that this is increasingly no longer the case across a wide sampling of hip hoppers, particularly the newest and youngest.

[16]Figures such as Afrika Bambaataa (founder of the Universal Zulu Nation and the 'godfather of hip hop'), KRS-One (founder of the Temple of Hip Hop) and the members of Public Enemy,

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replete with almost obligatory recitations of hip hop's origin story: born in the Bronx; defined by the four performance elements of rapping, deejaying, breakdancing and graffiti; enhanced by a fifth element of knowledge (for a few examples in the African context, see Auzanneau 2001: 715; Eisenberg 2012: 558; Ntarangwi 2010: 1317; Schneiderman 2014: 91). Recently, however, some scholars have critiqued the centrality of the Bronx origin story, arguing instead for a multiplicity of origins that allows for alternative narratives like those of Senegal's first generation of rappers (Mbaye 2011: 105; Osumare 2012: 33; Pennycook and Mitchell 2009: 27; Terkourafi 2010: 4). In retellings of hip hop's origin myth, dichotomous characterizations of contemporary rappers as 'underground' (alternatively termed 'socially conscious') or 'mainstream' (otherwise referred to as 'commercial' or sometimes 'gangsta', although in reality these terms cannot be so easily conflated) carry this idealized moment of origin forward to the present, where underground rappers carry the torch of the authentic hip hop of yesteryear, and mainstream rappers epitomize contemporary hip hop's supposed degradation through commercialism (Banks 2010: 240; Clark 2012; Honwana 2012: 134; Nkonyeni 2008: 154; Shipley 2013: 15).[17] Thus both the griot and hip hop origin myths erase contemporary practitioners to a certain extent – the griot myth implicitly by characterizing rappers rather than contemporary griots as 'modern-day griots', and the hip hop myth explicitly by invoking categories of 'mainstream' and 'underground' to dismiss certain artists as 'not really hip hop'. These two myths come together strikingly when, as is often the case, writers and artists specifically link socially conscious rap with the romanticized African griot (see, for example, Campbell 2005: 52; Fernandes 2012).

'AFRICAN HIP HOP', LOCAL MUSICS

Scholars have productively engaged hip hop's origin myth with analyses of 'youth' in contemporary Africa as a marginalized social class disenfranchised vis-à-vis their elders, linking continental continuities of urban experience to the widespread adoption of hip hop. Alcinda Honwana, for example, describes hip hop in diverse African locales as a practice of citizenship that contests a politically corrupt status quo, providing a counterhegemonic space for what she terms the 'waithood generation' of African youth liminally trapped between childhood and socially recognized adulthood (Honwana 2012: 111). In his article 'African hip hop and politics of change in an era of rapid globalization', Mwenda Ntarangwi notes:

> it is no wonder that youth in Africa use hip hop to express and represent their lived experiences, to reformulate the relationship between Africa and the West, to challenge

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whose black nationalist anthems of the late 1980s and early 1990s testified to hip hop's political potential, are just some of the canonical figures who represent this 'golden era' of hip hop.

[17]In the US context, 'underground' denotes a position deliberately outside the mainstream music industry, occupied by artists who are understood to 'stay true to hip hop' by prioritizing socially conscious lyrics over commercial success. In Senegal, a lack of financial return due to a dysfunctional music industry and the marginalization of hip hop in the media, particularly in comparison with *mbalax*, keeps most rappers forcibly 'underground', the exceptions being the very few who enjoy international success.

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> the practices and policies of their own governments, and to paint a picture of the kind of society in which they desire to live. But this comes with many challenges given that African youth are quite often ignored or exploited when it comes to making decisions about their own countries and communities. (Ntarangwi 2010: 1318)[18]

For Halifu Osumare, 'hiplife music in Ghana, like hip-hop in other parts of Africa, is an important tool in shifting power and offering young people a modicum of authority in shaping their personal lives and national affairs that is unprecedented' (Osumare 2012: 84). Saucier (2014), Künzler (2007) and Fredericks (2014) make similar observations about African youth and hip hop.

But while a framework of 'African hip hop' enables certain analytically useful generalizations, it also potentially overlooks the local specificity of particular hip hop scenes. In her work on hip hop in Kenya, Carolyn Mose protests the indiscriminate imposition of ideologically loaded US hip hop categories of 'underground' and 'mainstream' onto African hip hop (Mose 2011) and insists on the specificity of the urban context in analysing hip hop scenes (Mose 2013). Such specificity may even displace hip hop altogether: commenting on the recent Senegalese social movement *Y'en a Marre*,[19] Devin Bryson cautions that facile continental connections centred on hip hop erase the national cultural context that, he argues, was fundamental to the movement's cultural and political logic (Bryson 2014). Building on these calls for locally grounded analysis, I argue for the importance of extended ethnographic engagement with on-the-ground workings of hip hop cultures that takes into account not only global or continental frameworks of understanding but also local ones that grow out of interactions with practitioners rather than preceding or determining them.

This approach stems from my experience of beginning my research in Senegal, as a fledgling ethnographer years ago, with carefully constructed interpretive frameworks that – as soon became apparent – dramatically contradicted hip hoppers' representations of their own musical practice. Following extended ethnographic work with Senegalese rappers in Los Angeles who located hip hop's roots in griot practice (Appert 2007), and after conducting preliminary research in Dakar, in 2009 I wrote a chapter combining that research with the narratives of these international rappers and Western scholars to argue for an understanding of an undifferentiated Senegalese rapper as 'modern griot' (Appert 2011).[20] The pronounced dissonance between that interpretation and those that emerged from my extended fieldwork led to a doctoral thesis that explored differing narratives of hip hop origins, focusing primarily on the previously undocumented perspectives of Senegal's underground rappers and their disavowal of the griot trope

[18]Hip hoppers themselves often draw connections between hip hop-mediated representations of African American experience and their own lives, from identifying as 'thugs' in Arusha (Weiss 2009), to a more general identification with the African American experience in Kenya (Samper 2004), to ideas of realness (Eisenberg 2012) and street cred (Mose 2013).

[19]*Y'en a Marre* can be translated as fed up, or having had enough.

[20]While conducting interviews and fieldwork in 2011, I spoke openly and frankly with my informants about my previous misconceptions and the chapter in question.

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(Appert 2012). Damon Sajnani subsequently presented similar findings in his 2013 article 'Troubling the trope of "rapper as modern griot"'.[21]

As in other African countries, hip hop in Senegal serves as a medium for youth disempowered by a combination of traditional and postcolonial power structures that leave them voiceless in domestic, economic and political forums. But hip hop does not fall into a musical void any more than it falls into a social or political one; voicelessness (or voicedness) is not just about social and political structures but also about the local musical practices that reflect and sustain them. An ethnographic consideration of how hip hop intersects with other musical practices pushes beyond the question of 'Why hip hop?' that is rather easily answered through generalizing narratives to explore the necessary but often unacknowledged correlate – 'Why *not* something else?' Unlike youth in Ghana, who draw on the rhythms of highlife music and the speaking styles of traditional court orators to create a hybrid 'hiplife' genre (Osumare 2012; Shipley 2013), or rapper K'naan, who links Somalian oral traditions to hip hop (Pennycook and Mitchell 2009), or even their own Senegalese predecessors' invocations of griot practice, the majority of Senegalese hip hoppers react vehemently against their local popular music *mbalax* and the oral traditions it incorporates.[22]

In this article, I argue that Senegalese practitioners' engagement with hip hop is as much about local musical and popular culture as it is about transnational, continental or global connections. In doing so, I refer not to the ways in which hip hop is localized through language use and the digital sampling of local instruments (see Appert 2016), but rather how hip hop practitioners make sense of, negotiate and reimagine the local and global through the stories they tell and retell about musical performance. I suggest that their discourse about music actively and strategically reconstructs the local and global histories that inform contemporary experience.

Rather than attempting to prove or contend the historicity of either griot or hip hop origin myths, this article delves into the particularity of Senegalese hip hoppers' engagement with them. Notwithstanding the critiques noted above, the question of origins has consistently proven central to local understandings of hip hop in Senegal, both in the earlier generations' invocations of the griot and in later generations' exclusive emphasis on hip hop's African American roots. Likewise, Mose's critique of 'underground' and 'mainstream' designations can be fruitfully engaged in a consideration of how local actors themselves implement and

[21]Both Sajnani's claim to singularity (he states that 'the contrary position of a critical mass of Senegalese HipHoppers has hitherto gone undocumented' [Sajnani 2013: 157]) and the extensive critiques of my 2011 chapter on which much of his article relies are predicated on the omission of my 2012 PhD thesis from his discussion of my work and of the broader literature on the 'rapper as modern griot'. That thesis – and not the 2011 book chapter Sajnani critiques – stands as what is currently (and was at the time of his research and writing) 'the most recent and in-depth [analysis] of the modern-griot trope as appropriated by Senegalese HipHoppers' (*ibid.*: 162); it was posted online as an open-access document in summer 2012 in accordance with the policies of the University of California. The explicit self-critiques of my 2011 chapter appear on page 190 and the misconceptions that guided that article are addressed on page 2; the thesis in its entirety addresses Sajnani's later critiques about intertextuality, indigenous instrumentation, social roles, and the disjuncture between international and local narratives about hip hop origins.

[22]Ntarangwi (2010: 1321) notes that Senegalese hip hop is informed by *mbalax* but offers no evidence to support this statement.

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manipulate these categories. In Senegal, ideas of underground and commercial hip hop – while carrying very little of their original industry-related meaning – constitute important modes of self-identification explicitly tied to the hip hop origin myth. In proudly claiming an underground status, Dakar rappers discursively conflate their largely involuntary position vis-à-vis mainstream (*mbalax*) and international (world music) audiences with their explicit emphasis on social consciousness. Thus, although it is important to recognize the problematic romanticizing of both griot and hip hop origin myths, in the disjunctures and convergences between the two lies a rich and previously unexplored space for analysis.

In what follows, I show how the Dakar underground's understandings of traditional culture – and specifically griot practice – inform their own strategic origin narratives. First, I address how hip hoppers represent the popular musical genre *mbalax*, in its dependence on griot musical and speech genres, as the 'modern tradition' of postcolonial Senegal (Waterman 1990). Rather than providing a thorough musicological analysis of *mbalax*, which can be found elsewhere (see Mangin 2013; Tang 2007; Truher 1997), my discussion here centres on hip hoppers' representations of *mbalax* to show how their engagement with hip hop depends on their disengagement from local oral and musical practices. I demonstrate how the perceived sycophancy of contemporary griot practice is conflated with *mbalax* and contrasted with understandings of hip hop as historically having created possibilities for self-expression in political and social forums previously inaccessible to marginalized youth. I then examine the centrality of ghettoized urban space in conceptualizing connections with African America and situating those connections along a temporal trajectory of social and economic development reliant on the hip hop origin myth. Finally, I comment briefly on exceptional moments of hip hop activism as examples of social action situated within and enabled by these larger understandings of local and global cultural practices.

WE ARE BORN IN *MBALAX*: FINDING TRADITION IN DAKAR

> We are born in *mbalax*. You can't say – I'm a rapper so I don't know *mbalax*. It's not true. If you are born in Senegal, you know *mbalax*. It's obligatory. Because it plays 24/7 on the radio and TV … You can detest it. But you can't not know it. You know it because you are Senegalese; it is in your blood.[23]

> We are all baptized with *mbalax*. We are born with it. We grow up with it.[24]

It wasn't until Senegal achieved independence from France in 1960 that popular music took off in Dakar, as the jazz and Cuban music of the colonial city's largely segregated urban nightclubs were transformed into the distinctly postcolonial genre of *mbalax*.[25] While maintaining the harmonic structures of those international

[23]Interview with Drygun of Yatfu, conducted in French.

[24]Interview with Sister Coumbis, conducted in French.

[25]The racialized organization of the colonial city, in conjunction with the sparsely applied assimilation policies of the French, resulted in largely segregated urban audiences, and meant that the newly developing popular music scene in Dakar for the most part continued to faithfully study and reproduce musical genres from Europe and Latin America (see Shain 2002). The

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popular musics, *mbalax*'s early backing bands for singers such as Youssou N'dour, Thione Seck and Omar Pene took the rhythms of the Wolof griot's *sabar* drums, in particular the '*mbalax*' or foundational accompaniment rhythm for which the popular genre is named, and transposed them to electrified Western instruments (Mangin 2013; Tang 2007).[26] Rapper Baye Njagne of Medina's 5kiem Underground evoked this musical history to describe traditional music to me, speaking an uncomfortable French heavily interspersed with Wolof: 'What they did was, it was the griots who did it. They were historians. He was a messenger. He carried a drum. You had to pay attention to him. It was the griot who brought traditional music with the *xalam*, calabash, things like that. That became *mbalax*.'

In present-day Dakar, *mbalax* is heard in taxis and buses, through loudspeakers and mobile phones, from house windows and in the tiny boutiques that line the streets and sell daily necessities such as butter, eggs, soap and matches. It is the primary music in nightclubs and at weddings. Despite its ubiquity in the Senegalese urban soundscape, however, *mbalax* has not replaced the traditional music performed by griots, who, while adjusting to new political, religious and social systems in the years since independence, continue to play acoustic music for lifecycle events and traditional wrestling matches. In many contexts, however – particularly celebrations of naming ceremonies and marriages – acoustic griot performance and *mbalax* recordings, with their shared percussive rhythms, have become interchangeable. Thus, when rappers say they were 'born in *mbalax*', they refer quite literally to the naming ceremonies that were traditionally accompanied by *sabar* drumming and are now also infused with *mbalax*.

Nevertheless, raised in an urban environment marked by contradictions between coexisting traditional and 'modern' social structures, many Dakar hip hoppers express a sense of disassociation from traditional music, which they describe vaguely as something that pertained, in an unspecified precolonial past, to the various ethnic groups that are now partially subsumed into Wolof-dominated urbanity.[27] For example, Lamine Ndao, at the time a graduate student at Dakar's Cheikh Anta Diop University and manager of the Medina-based hip hop group Sen Kumpë, told me in his confident, university-polished French:

> Traditional musicians explain the trajectories and biographies of different groups, their laws, their history, how things were before we were a state … It was the griots who usually did it, just to explain things that belong to an ethnic group, to explain their culture, what they lived, to record this type of thing. It belongs to the ethnic groups.

A few blocks away, Lamine's neighbour Allou of the up-and-coming duo KTD Crew spoke hesitantly to me about traditional music. In carefully accented French slowed only by his discomfort with the topic, he said:

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ballroom, jazz and Afro-Cuban music played by popular dance bands thus remained fairly unaltered during the colonial period, in contrast with other cities throughout Africa, where these types of music were indigenized much earlier (see Erlmann 1991; Coplan 1985; Turino 2000; Waterman 1990).

[26]Today, *mbalax* bands also often include *sabar* and *tama*, or pressure drums.

[27]Increasingly, second and third generation non-Wolof Dakarois, while maintaining a sense of ethnic identity, speak Wolof as a first language and French as a second language; Wolof language and cultural practices dominate Dakar society.

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> [Traditional music] is varied. Because the most mediatized music in Senegal is *mbalax*, even though there are other traditional forms of music. I personally am not familiar with many but I think that there are a lot. It's like, there are how many ethnic groups in Senegal? There are just as many kinds of traditional music, I think.

Next to him, his musical partner Madou finally chimed in, shaking his head and opening his hands in comedic resignation as he quipped in Wolof: 'I don't have many thoughts on *that*.'

Due to its reworkings of griot musical practice, not only hip hoppers but also many *mbalax* musicians and fans refer to *mbalax* as 'tradition', despite its marked cosmopolitanism (Mangin 2013: 25–6). From its inception, many of the genre's singers have claimed griot lineages (Panzacchi 1994; McLaughlin 1997; Tang 2012; Mangin 2013; personal observation), although non-griots also increasingly perform *mbalax*.[28] Whether performed by griots or not, *mbalax* consistently incorporates griot performance practices including praise singing and *taasu* (Mangin 2013: 25, 32). Descriptions of *mbalax* as traditional music thus invoke its dependence on Wolof drum rhythms, but also its association with griot singing: not only the vocal styles and timbre of griot performance but, even more so, the practice of singing the praises of illustrious patrons in return for money. As rapper N-Jah explained in his proudly self-taught English, accented with African American Vernacular inflections: '*Mbalax* is like a tradition. Most of the time when they sing on it they are trying to sing your grandmother and your great-grandmother. They sing history, where history came from. They try to give value to your traditions so you can give them money.' While, historically, griots' praise singing re-inscribed the client–patron relationships central to traditional hierarchal social organization, over the last several decades *mbalax* singers have adopted the lucrative practice of praising urban audiences, political leaders, and the *marabouts*, powerful Muslim holy men with significant political clout (Benga 2002; Mangin 2013; McLaughlin 1997; Moulard-Kouka 2008).[29]

Thus, many hip hoppers describe *mbalax* as a modern tradition that replaces ancient griot practices – what rapper Gaston called '*traditional* traditional music' – despite the fact that those practices still thrive in Senegal. This temporal

[28]Established *mbalax* singers Youssou N'dour, Thione Seck, Fatou Guewel and Coumba Gawlo, as well as younger artists including Pape Ndiaye Thiopet, Wally Seck and Aida Samb, are among the many *mbalax* singers who claim griot lineages; foundational *mbalax* singers Omar Pene, Ismael Lo, Baba Maal and Ousmane Diallo are among those who are not from griot families, as is also the case for younger artists Adiouza Diallo (daughter of Ousmane) and Viviane (N'dour/Chidid). However, the majority of *mbalax* singers still come from griot families.

[29]As French colonialism destabilized local social and religious systems, the *marabouts* gradually replaced the unstable indigenous ruling classes, garnering communities of disciples. Their new role as rural leaders and their involvement in the cultivation of the peanut crop made them an important liaison between French colonial leaders and rural subjects. The reliance on the Muslim brotherhoods that characterized colonial rule did not diminish with Senegal's birth as an independent country; if anything, the new African administrators, lacking the support of the major backing power on which their colonial predecessors relied, depended even more on the *marabouts* for political support. The state's reliance on the authority of *marabouts*, particularly in the interior, was accompanied by state protection of their material interests; today, the *marabouts* constitute one of the richest sectors of Senegalese society (Behrman 1970; Van Hoven 2000).

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re-inscription of the griot as a symbol of a precolonial past echoes that of the earlier generation of rappers, whose own narratives of hip hop origins strategically displaced contemporary griot practice to make space for the rapper as modern griot. Unlike their predecessors, however, underground rappers locate the modern griot in *mbalax*. While in some ways this reflects larger cultural understandings of the music, the totality with which they conflate *mbalax* and traditional music reduces contemporary griots to nothing more than singing sycophants and, in doing so, creates social *and* musical space for hip hop.

Singing silence, voicing dissent

> There is a generation that finds itself within [hip hop]. Because it is a music that speaks truth … it's the emancipation of this new generation, and it's the particularity of a society that has always excluded these youth. Leave talking to the elders, to the old, it's the middle aged that should speak, so this new generation has taken the mic thanks to rap.[30]

> You can't be in an underdeveloped country where people just sing people and don't say anything useful, and rappers should attack this.[31]

The practices of 'singing' that mark *mbalax* as traditional music are deeply imbricated in a system of patronage belonging to wider social norms that limit personal expression, particularly along the lines of age and gender (see Appert 2015). Keyti, one of the founding members of Dakar's first underground group, Rap'Adio, told me in English honed through years of practice:

> To understand the music here I think you also got to understand how Senegalese society is … you really can't expose the human being no matter what he's doing, what he's saying, how he is … and that's how the whole Senegalese society is functioning throughout history. Traditional music is related to that. You'll never hear traditional music here trying to be revolutionary or change society – it's mainly entertaining, period.

> [In Senegalese society] younger people, they don't talk, they just listen to the elders. And what the elders decide, that's what everybody's doing … From independence to the Nineties, the standard of living kept going down, you know … I think back then, Senegalese people were ready to hear such a message, a message of revolution, that we need to change this country. They felt oppressed and couldn't say it. The musicians in other genres that were here weren't talking about that. And that is why when hip hop came and was addressing these issues, people were like, yeah, this is what we've been waiting for.

The traditional social organization Keyti described is performatively re-inscribed through lifecycle events such as baptisms and weddings, where *mbalax* dominates aurally. As Lamine Ndao explained:

> For parties, religious events like baptisms, weddings, you're going to pretty much only hear *mbalax*. But if there is a problem with the government, something serious, it's hip

[30]Interview with Thiat of Keur Gui, conducted in French.
[31]Interview with Amadou Fall Ba of Africulturbain, conducted in French.

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> hop that is there … People might ask, where are the *mbalaxmen*? Are they drunk or what? They can't speak. I think they can't speak because they are always busy singing the government to have money.

'They can't speak because they are always busy singing' drives home the perception that the constrained praise-singing voice, imbricated in traditional practices of patronage and clientelism that foreclose the possibility of resistance, is not a voice at all but a stifling silence.[32]

But, to some extent, *mbalax* is reimagined here as well: if in its long history it has rarely been socially or politically resistant, there have been exceptions. Singer Omar Pene, for example, has always explicitly eschewed praise singing (Josselin 2009), and the *mbalax* group Ceddo's song 'Jambaat' was censored on government-owned media during the 2000 elections due to its political critique (Mangin 2013: 64). Youssou N'dour's music was central to the *Set/Setal* (clean/make clean) movement of the late 1980s, in which youth '[redefined] the space and social logic of public places' through murals and cleanliness initiatives (Diouf 1992: 41, my translation; see also Havard 2009: 328). As Jenny Fatou Mbaye has noted, however, *Set/Setal*:

> never questioned the cultural construction of the ruling class, only displaced its poles of reference, from neo-colonial intellectual (President Senghor) or administrative (President Diouf) referents, to *Wolof* and Muslim heritages. In other words, neither the *mbalax* nor the *Set Setal* were ever capable of reflecting the deepening of the economic crisis and the emergence of new social actors; the poor, marginalized and revolted, claiming for new socialities. (Mbaye 2011: 115)

Although a vast majority of Senegalese youth still avidly consume *mbalax*, hip hoppers strategically reimagine *mbalax*'s history as one of total apathy. Insisting that it cannot speak to or for Senegalese youth, they turn instead to hip hop as a music of vindication in the struggle to reconcile traditional social norms with the hypocritical modernity of underdevelopment.

TEAR OF THE GHETTO: TIME AND URBAN SPACE

Xoolal fi ci ghetto	Look here in the ghetto,
metti ñipp a koy yëgando	we all feel the same hardship
Tear of the ghetto	Tear of the ghetto,
rangoñ yipp a toqaando.	we are all crying together.[33]

> Even if I don't know the whole history of rap, I know where it comes from … It doesn't come from Africa … We are influenced by Americans and this comes from American ghettos.[34]

[32]Adrien Benga credits praise singing's financial rewards with the fact that, with very few exceptions, Senegalese music from independence to the beginnings of the hip hop movement lacked subversive discourse (Benga 2002: 297).
[33]From 'Rongognou Guetto' by Tigrim Bi (with author's own translation).
[34]Interview with Books of Sen Kumpë.

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This turn to hip hop centres on its mythologized origin narrative that highlights a (relatively brief) moment of explicit political consciousness in US hip hop's now almost forty-year trajectory. Keyti describes his first encounter with Public Enemy's 'Don't Believe the Hype':

> [The] music we were used to here was *mbalax*, which is more about, you're coming from a good family, you're a good person, you've been well educated, and for me as a youngster at that time, to see a video where they say don't believe the hype, don't believe the system … that was amazing and I felt like I wanted to do that.

But Dakar rappers' engagement with hip hop goes beyond global understandings of the genre as a music of resistance to highlight the parallels and divergences between hip hop-mediated depictions of African American experience and their own realities. This is grounded in understandings of Senegalese urban spatiality – marked by clear distinctions between an affluent minority and an impoverished majority – as being congruous with the 'ghettos' of early US hip hop. Like Tigrim Bi's 'Rongognou Guetto' quoted above, 5kiem Underground's song 'Jooyu Askan' ('Tears of My People')[35] describes the distinct issues of daily life in Dakar's popular quarters (including blackouts, malnutrition, poverty, and lack of access to medical care), returning each time to the refrain that demands that a plural 'you' – elders, politicians, religious leaders – *listen* to the people's plight.

Dafa mel ni yëguleen	It seems you aren't aware
li nuy daj bes bu nekk.	of our struggles every day.
Deggluleen: Askan baangi jooy.	Listen: the people are crying.
Xanaa yeen yëguleen	Aren't you aware
li ñuy jankonteel.	of what we face every day?
Seetluleen: Askan baangi jooy	Look closely: the people are crying.[36]

5kiem Underground member Djily Bagdad described 'Jooyu Askan' to me in fluent English, picked up during a brief stint studying in Atlanta, Georgia and inflected with African American Vernacular English:

> ['Jooyu Askan'] is about the masses, people in the ghetto, the hood … It seems like since independence, things are getting worse and worse. Things were better when the white people were here, when colonization was here, the farmer would sell his product and the white people would pay them in due time. But since independence people are doing whatever they want … it seems like the white people cared more about us than our new leaders. It talks about what people are living on a daily basis, the problems they have, like while they are building huge buildings and monuments and statues people are dying of hunger, people are in the hospital without medications, you see more and more people in the street begging for money in the street … as the situation is getting worse and worse, the rich are getting richer and richer and the poor are getting poorer and poorer.[37]

[35]Djily Bagdad translates 'Jooyu Askan' as 'Tears of My People'. The literal translation is 'The Crying of the People'.
[36]Author's own translation.
[37]*Le Monument de la Renaissance Africaine*, which depicts a man, woman and child in a heroic pose, was finished in 2010 under the direction of then-president Abdoulaye Wade. Overlooking

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Djily's partner, Baye Njagne, connected this historicized understanding of post-colonial underdevelopment in Senegal to hip hop-mediated understandings of the post-industrial US inner city: 'We say what's happening in the ghetto. We're obligated to do what Americans are doing because we live the same problems, the same difficulties. Underground rap there talks about how life is hard, daily problems. It's like here in Dakar, in a popular quarter.'

But, while they valorize early US hip hop for its depictions of urban poverty and struggle, most hip hoppers believe that it has since deserted social consciousness in favour of celebrity and financial gain. As Lamine Ndao lamented:

> There are a lot of rappers who have changed and now they only talk about material things – yeah, I have nice cars, a nice house, bling bling, a chick, hoes … The old school had truth – they defended the American people, the ghetto, their own neighbourhood, they always situated themselves in a neighbourhood – there was a philosophy, they taught you something. But modern hip hop, there's a huge change.

Citing US hip hop's globally mediatized images of conspicuous consumption, some Dakar hip hoppers claim that US hip hop has left behind not only its messages of truth but also the very realities of racialized urban poverty that provoked those messages to begin with. Rapper Lamine, speaking in French on behalf of the other members of his group Niamu Mbaam, said:

> We are at the same place where American hip hop started. If American hip hop isn't conscious anymore it's because they've fixed their problems – their social problems, their economic problems. Before in the United States there was racism and slavery and they spent all their time clashing with whites to have liberty and now they have their blow. Everyone should write what he lives and they live this: they live luxury, they are millionaires … You should tell people the real life that you live. Americans, I get it. They've achieved that liberty. But we aren't there yet.

Conflating the US ghetto with life in the postcolonial city thus entails a temporal adjustment, in which Senegalese hip hoppers link their own realities to a recent African American past and look forward to a not-so-distant future that gleams in the limited images of African Americans represented in globalized mainstream US hip hop. In this strategic invocation of hip hop's origin myth, the distinction between old-school and contemporary US hip hop comes to signify a distinction between Senegal and the United States that is temporal as much as – or more than – it is spatial and that locates a potential for development within hip hop as an agent of social transformation and change.

Schooling the street

> We're trying to show Senegal it's not just the government, it's the people. We are citizens … Now rap is part of the development of the country. Rap plays a role in development.[38]

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the city of Dakar, the towering statue has been a topic of controversy, as many Senegalese citizens protest not only about the gross financial expenditure but also about the short garment that the bare-breasted woman wears, which is considered an affront to Muslim religious beliefs.

[38]Interview with Baye Njagne of 5kiem Underground.

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Many Senegalese rappers describe music as a substitute for familial or formal education in the face of processes of urbanization and modernization that have contributed to the ongoing destabilization of traditional familial structures without providing adequate educational alternatives. Therefore their lyrics overwhelmingly address issues such as unemployment, flooding, power outages, illegal immigration and poverty, although they also include themes of love, religious devotion and family.[39] Lamine of Niamu Mbaam explained:

> We aim to raise consciousness, to let people know that they are the ones who have power, they are the ones who can run their own country. Currently there are no longer parents who can stay at home to raise their children, because they need to go to work, and no one is left to raise children except music.

A poor public education system effectively disenfranchises a large part of the Senegalese population. Although French is the official language in Senegal, most children do not speak it at home. A small economic elite sends their children to private Catholic schools while the majority struggle through public schools, where they learn to read and write in a language they sometimes do not even speak. This leaves many young people ill equipped for formal employment or for exercising their rights in an ostensibly democratic system.[40] In this context, rappers attempt to educate Dakar's underserved populations about their rights and responsibilities as citizens in an effort to effect social and/or political change. As university student Lamine Ndao stated:

> When I studied English, and American civilization, the professor gave us documents, and I told myself, I am in Senegal and they furnish the American constitution even though no one has *ever* given me this kind of document. Every new regime, we should have all the documents necessary to inform the population – you should do this and that, your rights are this and that, you should act like this and do this, your rights are limited here and here.

Several distinct instances of highly visible socio-political engagement provide examples of hip hop-centred efforts to educate the Senegalese population and advance the nation, including: hip hoppers' involvement in the *Bul Faale* social movement of the late 1990s (Havard 2009: 329; Mbaye 2011: 116);[41] their role – through compilations and songs – in turning out the youth vote in the 2000

[39]It is important here to distinguish between the deceased, sainted *marabouts* such as Cheikh Ahmadou Bamba and Cheikh Ibra Fall, who are sometimes the subjects of hip hop songs, and the living *marabouts* who are often implicated in contemporary government corruption. While many rappers profess allegiance to living *marabouts*, they are not above critiquing them, and it is extremely rare to hear a rapper singing the praises of a living *marabout* in their music (see Moulard-Kouka 2008: 198, 245, 371, 374). Those to whom I spoke were critical of *mbalaxmen* who praise sing *marabouts*, citing the financial incentive behind the practice, which potentially increases album sales or results in financial gifts from disciples of the *marabout* you are singing about.

[40]Consistent strikes on the part of schoolteachers, whom the government often fails to pay, further destabilize the educational system, an issue that extends all the way to the universities, where the students themselves often strike when their government stipends are late in arriving.

[41]*Bul Faale* was a youth movement in the late 1990s that was not limited to hip hop and that centred on ideas of youth self-determination (Mbaye 2011: 118).

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presidential elections, helping effect the first change in political party since independence with the election of Abdoulaye Wade; and their subsequent and ultimately unsuccessful efforts to oust Wade in the 2007 elections.[42] More recently, the *Y'en a Marre* movement, partially organized by rappers and drawing heavily on hip hop social networks, has been internationally characterized as a hip hop movement despite its primarily extra-musical orientation.[43] Following the success of a massive mobilization on 23 June 2011 that blocked corrupt constitutional reform, hip hoppers and other youth continued to agitate under the banner of *Y'en a Marre* or *M23* (*Mouvement 23*) during the months leading up to the presidential elections of February 2012, canvassing for voter registration, holding meetings and rallies, and facing police harassment and, at times, imprisonment. When Wade lost the elections, the Senegalese public – as well as foreign observers – credited *Y'en a Marre* with having played a central role in his overthrow.[44]

It is perhaps not surprising then that rappers increasingly view hip hop as something that carves a space of social legitimacy. In mobilizing for political and social causes, rappers earn begrudging respect from elders who are sceptical of hip hop as a globalized US cultural product but who cannot deny the value of their children's efforts to improve their country. As rapper Reskape explained in quiet but fluent French:

> Since hip hop came after *mbalax*, it's not easy … It was around 2000 that hip hop started to take its place, and there it was because hip hop had contributed to bringing in the new president with compilations, and then people started to say this new young generation is very aware. And now they do forums in the universities to try to impose hip hop texts in colleges and high schools … because the youth are much more interested in rap than in French or English literature. The youth don't really take the time to learn texts that don't directly concern them. They identify with rap texts much more … It will be hard to impose rap over *mbalax* … But when people need to talk about something important they never call *mbalaxmen*, they call rappers to debates or shows. And that's a strong message, when they need to entertain people they call someone else, but when they want to raise consciousness they call me.[45]

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[42]See Ben Herson's 2007 documentary film *Democracy in Dakar* (produced in New York by Nomadic Wax Productions).

[43]In 2011, Senegalese president Abdoulaye Wade's controversial announcement that he would run for an unconstitutional third term was closely followed by his proposal of a bill that would enable a presidential candidate to win in the first round of elections with only 25 per cent of the vote, rather than the constitutionally mandated 50 per cent. As the incumbent against a fractured, multi-candidate opposition, Wade could be confident of his 25 per cent, and the bill was sure to pass in a parliament dominated by his political party.

[44]Mareme Gueye and Devin Bryson both correctly qualify the *Y'en a Marre* movement as something that far exceeded hip hop. For deeper analyses of this movement, see Bryson (2014), Fredericks (2014), Gueye (2013) and Savané and Sarr (2012). *Y'en a Marre* was created and much of its action carried out during my extended fieldwork in Dakar during 2011–12. My book manuscript (currently in progress) critically examines how *Y'en a Marre* and narratives of hip hop resistance have potentially replaced the griot as the overriding identifier of Senegalese hip hop to outside observers and comments on the material consequences of this narrative within the local hip hop community.

[45]In a 2006 interview with James Spady, DJ Awadi of Positive Black Soul also commented on the difficulties of carving a space for hip hop in Dakar's sonic landscape faced by an earlier generation of rappers (Spady 2006b: 651).

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Although the moments of explicit political engagement described above threw hip hop into sharp relief against the backdrop of Senegalese society, they do not represent Senegalese hip hop in its totality. As rapper Gaston stated in a reluctant French spoken solely for my benefit, as we sat together on the roof of his recording studio in the Parcelles Assainies *banlieue*:

> I am a musician. If I have an opinion, I'll put it in a song. I'm not in any movement. I make music. I am a musician. And I will stay a musician. But what is essential is that we both have a point in common – how to bring Senegal out of this regime. And we each have our own approach to that.

Notwithstanding the influence of *Y'en a Marre* in recent years, many rappers reject the role of extra-musical political activists. Drawing on understandings of hip hop itself as a medium of 'voicedness', they represent their musical texts as a tool for political action that stands on its own without demonstrations and speeches to accompany it, as many focus on raising awareness of pressing social issues without ever engaging in an explicit critique of the government.

But hip hop's freedom of expression is not without limits. When, at a *Y'en a Marre* rally in 2011, rapper Thiat of Keur Gui called the president a liar (a serious insult in Wolof culture, regardless of its veracity), he was widely criticized by old and young alike; the latter demographic held long discussions on the international social networking website Facebook about the need to respect their elders. Rappers are thus still very much constrained by intergenerational relationships and religious norms. As Djily Bagdad explained:

> When you're putting out a record you can't curse in the record or people won't respect you. You have to respect Senegalese values. When you put out a video with girls in swimsuits you are going to be criticized even though they do worse than that in the national *mbalax* music, but when a hip hop person does it they're gonna be like, oh you're copying America, those people with no morals. The religion and the society don't allow you to say whatever you want.

Drygun, of the early hardcore group Yatfu, described in fluent French how these same religious and cultural constraints limit hip hop's capacities as a medium of free speech to men:

> It's true that the youth now evolve, they are very Western, but at the base we have a tradition, a culture, that brings women – to be obligated to – not to veil herself, but to respect her body, to not go to certain places, to not do certain things … And that is why some women are ashamed to go on stage and do hip hop because that is more given to men. And so they prefer to play the traditional music here, *mbalax*.

Young women's efforts to make a place for themselves in hip hop – and to reap the same benefits of agency, articulation and acceptance that their male counterparts enjoy – are doubly constrained by the same traditional norms that male rappers seek to circumvent via hip hop practice and by the very masculine overtones of (Senegalese) hip hop itself. Sister Coumbis, then a member of the female rap collective Gotale, explained the challenges that women face in Senegal in her calm, measured French:

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> Here in Senegal, in Africa in general I would say, there is a tendency to put women off to the side, they are here to get married, to have children, or to be home watching the children. Gotale is here to show another facet, to show that a woman has the right to go on stage, to do her music, to work in an office, and other things. We also want to show guys in hip hop that women are here and, what's more, we can do what they do, better than they do it.

Young rapper Sista Dia, also involved with Gotale, told me passionately in her quick, urban Wolof, relying heavily on French verbs:

> It's uncomfortable being a woman alone in hip hop. In every job. You can be a woman in a business and have problems. You can work as a maid in someone's house, where they pay you every month, and you'll have problems. Women are the ones who have little power, and here there are people you know are trying to diminish women's power … Our battle is: how to give woman a voice in Senegal, make people respect her in rap, as a maid, in an office, everywhere? If you're a woman, what do we do for you to know that wherever you go you have a voice, that you're as respected as a man?

In terms of lyrical content, imagery and gendered participation, the freedom of expression that hip hop provides youth is still largely limited by local cultural and religious norms. Hip hop may give youth a voice, but it does so selectively and conditionally.

CONCLUSIONS: ON THE ORIGINS OF HIP HOP

> There are a lot of *mbalaxmen* who do [*taasu*] … But I want to clarify something. Too many people say rap comes from *taasu*. I would say no. Even if *taasu* comes from Africa, rap was born in the United States.[46]

> I understand them. They want to just say that people who make hip hop in America were descended from slaves who came from Africa. Everyone knows that. But the first rapper wasn't Awadi [of Positive Black Soul]. There was Tupac before that, Chuck D, Public Enemy. So rap can't have been born here. If it were born here, Awadi or Daara J would have been the first rappers. Maybe there's a history that their grandparents came from Africa. Everyone knows that. But is that a scientific consideration to prove that rap is born in Africa?[47]

Underground rappers are all too aware of the popular griot origin story, which in Senegal relies on rapping's aesthetic similarity to *taasu*. But, for them, in *mbalax* and/as contemporary griot performance, *taasu* goes hand in hand with praise singing as an aural marker of underdevelopment. While discussing traditional music with the members of KTD Crew, rapper Allou's initial hesitance dissipated as he began to compare it with hip hop:

> When someone does *taasu*, he pays homage to someone or talks about things that don't have any sense, while when we do rap we make efforts that it be logical, that it has a certain form … even originally, when black Americans did rap it was for their

[46]Interview with Almamy (A. Bathily) of 23.3, conducted in French.
[47]Interview with Amadou Fall Ba of Africulturbain.

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> revindication. Here they don't do *taasu* for revindication. I've never heard of that. It's just for fun, to pay homage or give history, but I've never heard a *taasukat* [person who performs *taasu*] talk about a politician or denigrate the regime via his *taasu*. Never.

The aesthetic resonance between *taasu* and rapping as forms of rhythmic chanting simply does not hold weight for underground rappers, who refuse to separate the Wolof speech genre from its social context and function. As Gaston stated: 'It's true there is a nuance between *taasu* and rap but that has nothing to do with anything. *Taasu* is giving homage to someone while rap denounces, is revolutionary, informs and educates.' Where international rappers have defined their music through shifting claims to African origins, underground rappers locate hip hop's authenticity and social utility exclusively in its mythologized foundations of racialized urban struggle in the United States.

But this is more complex than a simple invocation of hip hop as resistance. Dakar rappers explicitly define their music in opposition to *mbalax*, the modern-day singing griots who perform it, and the traditional speech genres recontextualized within it. *Mbalax*'s deep reliance on the patron–client relationships that defined traditional social structures and that, although not otherwise particularly relevant to youth's daily experiences, now contribute to political corruption in Dakar renders it unattractive to youth who are tired of the combined disenfranchisement of (post)colonialism and traditional social norms that limit the agency of youth vis-à-vis their elders, a category that includes political leaders; in a country with a median age of 18.7 years, the recently ousted president Abdoulaye Wade was 85. Hip hoppers reimagine *mbalax* as a musical metonym for a Senegalese modernity mired in limiting social relationships that leave youth voiceless in the face of rapid change. In rejecting *mbalax* – and, along with it, the griot origin myth – they turn to hip hop to come to terms with the trials of daily life in the *banlieue* and in the popular quarters of Dakar, a city whose disjunct spatiality, a result of colonial racialized urban planning and the failures of a corrupt postcolonial socialism, resonates with globalized hip hop narratives of the US inner city. It is in this experiential transatlantic resonance, rather than in historical diasporic or aesthetic connections, that they locate hip hop's potential for voiced social action.

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ABSTRACT

This article complicates internationally circulating origin myths that alternately link hip hop to West African griot traditions or highlight the global resonance of its roots in the US inner city. I argue that such generalizing narratives potentially obscure how complex understandings of traditional cultural production inform local engagements with hip hop in Africa, and advocate instead for ethnographically generated interpretive frameworks that enable alternative, locally grounded analyses of hip hop cultures. In doing so, I examine the particularity of Senegalese invocations of origin myths to ask how local and global histories are reimagined through discourse about musical practice. Based on their understandings of tradition as something that precedes, is transformed in, and remains integral to contemporary urban life in Senegal, underground hip hoppers conflate the local popular genre *mbalax* with griot practice, contrasting it with hip hop as a modern music born from experiences of urban struggle that resonate with their own realities. I demonstrate that Senegalese hip hop practice is defined not only through political engagement or social action but also through and against local musical practices that performatively re-inscribe the political and social systems that limit and contain youth.

RÉSUMÉ

Cet article complexifie les mythes d'origine véhiculés dans le monde qui tantôt associent le hip hop aux traditions des griots d'Afrique de l'Ouest, tantôt soulignent la résonance mondiale de ses racines dans les cités urbaines aux États-Unis. L'auteur soutient que de telles généralisations masquent potentiellement la manière dont des interprétations complexes de la production culturelle traditionnelle informent l'adoption locale du hip hop en Afrique, et prône plutôt des cadres interprétatifs d'inspiration ethnographique qui rendent possibles d'autres analyses localement ancrées des cultures hip hop. Ce faisant, l'auteur examine la particularité des invocations sénégalaises des mythes d'origine pour s'interroger sur la manière dont les histoires locales et globales sont réimaginées à travers le discours sur la pratique musicale. Sur la base de leurs interprétations de la tradition comme quelque chose qui précède, se transforme et reste partie intégrante de la vie urbaine contemporaine au Sénégal, les artistes de hip hop underground fusionnent le genre populaire local *mbalax* avec la pratique du griot, le distinguant ainsi du hip hop en tant que musique moderne née d'expériences de lutte urbaine en résonance avec leurs propres réalités. L'auteur démontre que la pratique sénégalaise du hip hop se définit non seulement à travers l'engagement politique ou l'action sociale, mais également à travers et par rapport aux pratiques musicales locales qui réinscrivent de façon performative les systèmes politiques et sociaux qui limitent et jugulent la jeunesse.

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