

IN HIP HOP TIME

MUSIC, MEMORY, AND SOCIAL CHANGE
IN URBAN SENEGAL

CATHERINE M. APPERT



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For Modou, who helped me begin, and for Moustapha, who saw me through

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IN HIP HOP TIME

1

SAMPLING MYTH

I COULDN'T SAY, then or now, where the street ended and hip hop began.

We had walked here, brothers Books and Bourba and I, moving slowly but purposefully through Medina's grid of streets, their precise layout tracing a hundred years of colonial and national memory. The night air weighed on us with the promise of a rain that had been absent for days, until the heat and smog threatened to smother the city. We didn't use the sidewalks, with their unpredictable dips, the abrupt peaks where roots have surfaced after decades of struggle, the protruding legs of tables set on their sides until commerce begins again in the morning.

At this hour, the street is empty of cars but not truly quiet. Bits of light and noise leak from the houses closed against the night despite the heat. Every block or so, small shops spill a line of brightness and music and chatter across our path. The mosques are silent.

Assalaamaalekum, they said, every time we passed a knot of people seated in a doorway or crowding the entryway to a shop. Assalaamaalekum, I murmured in turn. Books swung off to the side and rejoined us with two cups of spiced coffee. I took mine and continued following them, soon losing myself in the web of streets. We heard our destination before we saw it, encroaching on the not-quite-quiet of the surrounding blocks.

A stage, set up in the middle of the road, flanked by stacks of speakers, open to the heavy sky that threatens to end the show before it's begun. We converge with

other rappers from the Jolof4Life label, their oversized T-shirts in red, green, and yellow paired with baggy jeans and chunky sneakers. Young people gather, mostly men and a few women, slipping away from the closed houses and humming streets to fill this space with their energy and noise. Books and Bourba take the stage as rap duo Sen Kumpë, and I'm left alone to watch them perform (Fig. 1.1).

"Medina in the house!" they shout as they spring into movement, the other rappers circling behind them in a kaleidoscope of matching shirts, the platform bouncing up and down under their shifting weight. The audience clustered in front of the stage cheers affirmation. It's hard to understand their words, their voices distorted over the speakers; one of the mics is cutting in and out, so they pass the other back and forth. And yet there is something and everything familiar in their performance. In the instrumental beat, its constant looping and layering of repeating, synthesized snippets of melody, its heavy drums, its global ubiquity tempered only by the locality of the voice. In the words, whose meaning I don't understand but whose rhythms articulate against the beat to pull me in, their syncopation etching the aural contours of a uniquely *Dakarois* mixing of Wolof and French, enveloping English words in a linguistic rootedness that is, in itself, global. They reach the hook, its lighthearted words jarring against the heavy minor



FIGURE 1.1 Bourba Djolof (right) and Books (left) perform in Medina in 2008.

beat, Books's trilingual declaration, "Kumpë Sen is back, Kumpë Sen is back, Get up, Stand up, *allez allez*," trading off with Bourba's, "La-di da-di relax your body, *yëngal* Senegal, New York, *ba biir Paris*." Smiling at the Slick Rick reference, I watch and listen as their words, cadence, gestures, and music project through the streets of Dakar, layering aural memories of hip hop's diasporic movements between Senegal, the United States, and France.

AN ORIGIN MYTH

Long before France put down roots in Senegal, which would become the administrative center of its African colonial project, the transatlantic slave trade uprooted millions of people. In the centuries that followed, and against all odds, the seeds of culture that survived this violent transplantation flourished, as enslaved Africans and their descendants in the United States revisioned their musical heritages into field hollers and shouts and spirituals. In the Reconstruction and post-Reconstruction South, new liberties with instruments and time coupled with these slave songs to produce the blues, a music that alternately led or followed newly free Black Americans as they migrated en masse away from the nouveau-slavery of the sharecropping South and toward the burgeoning industrial cities of the North. The blues spread to a scattered audience through the nascent music industry of the early twentieth century, even as they made their first troubled forays into the Black Church. White performers repackaged urban Black musicians' rhythm and blues as rock 'n' roll. In the 1960s, gospel and soul led Black music away from the static catharsis of the blues, moving on up with the growing civil rights movement and the recognition that a change was gonna come. When the 1970s saw that promise go unfulfilled, funk diverted the movement's soul toward a more strident Black nationalism, while disco danced its way into the mainstream.

Enter hip hop. Disillusioned minority youth in the burned-out neighborhoods of the postindustrial South Bronx of the 1970s take these musics and fixate on the break, that moment where melody and voice fall away, and all that's left is a percussive, low-end groove to be endlessly looped and manipulated, never changing, never quite the same. They repurpose turntables as musical instruments, street corners as stages, and flattened cardboard boxes as dance floors. West Indians plug into a heritage of massive sound systems. At rent parties and nightclubs, emcees join the new deejays to urge on the crowd in a role that soon takes on a life of its own. Hip hop emerges, as the saying goes, by making something out of nothing.

Born from the musical remnants of the civil rights struggle, hip hop can't stay so party-oriented for long. Youth with stolen cans of spray paint (re)claim public

spaces, and hip hop's young godfather, Afrika Bambaataa, christens graffiti into the family fold of the new musical culture. At the dawn of the 1980s, Melle Mel's incisive lyrics over the stripped-down instrumentals of "The Message" provide a stark soundtrack to the burned-out city's even starker reality. The decade turns again, as Public Enemy raps an antiauthoritarian Black nationalism, while on the opposite coast, gangsta rappers declare: "Fuck tha Police." Hip hop you don't stop gives way to a new political consciousness inextricably tied to these new ways of producing sound and movement and images. The 1990s usher in the jazz-based, socially conscious music of the Native Tongues Posse, whose Queen Latifah sings of "U.N.I.T.Y." in her pro-women anthems. The Wu-Tang Clan encodes Black Muslim ideology in their lyrics. Tupac and Biggie rise and fall as hip hop martyrs.

By now, this is all a memory. When Nas proclaimed that *Hip Hop Is Dead* on the cover of his 2006 album, he merely amplified widespread whispers: that the rap music flooding the US airwaves, with its interchangeable instrumentals and unabashed celebrations of consumption, is not hip hop at all, but an imposter. Others say that real hip hop isn't dead but in hiding, *underground*, where embattled emcees keep its flame of knowledge alive.

This is hip hop's story. Or at least, it is *a* story about hip hop. As its tellings and retellings circulate between the United States and the global hip hop nation of which it is part, hip hoppers and scholars alike recite its mythical litany. Hip hop has four elements: rapping, writing, breaking, and scratching. It was born in the South Bronx. It is political. It is resistant. It is Black. Or it was—political, resistant, Black, *conscious*—back in the day when it was young.

Senegal's own story of hip hop is bound up with this origin myth even as it exceeds it. Beginning in the early 1980s, hip hop transcended language to captivate youth around the world with its rhythms and rhymes, movements, fashion, and graphics. As hip hop matured into a global musical and cultural force, its aesthetic practices served as conduits for its histories, real and imagined. Irrevocably encoded in hip hop's sonic substance, these histories were quickly taken up and adapted in service of diverse realities. Yet even as hip hop gained global force as a social mobilizer, it never left behind the fundamental beats and rhythms that first drove its worldwide expansion.

This book zooms in from this bird's-eye view of hip hop globalization to consider how and why hip hop continued to mean *musically* in a particular postcolonial African city—Dakar, Senegal—even as it was at times instrumentalized as resistance. It does so through two interconnected claims. First, the stories that people tell about music, across generations and on both sides of the Atlantic, actively inscribe meaningful links between Africa, past and present, and its diaspora. As practices of remembering, these stories trace multiple pathways of connection to

produce a place in the world that is always already global. Second, these diasporic connections are strategically reimagined through practices of musical genre, in which narrative, memory, and myth imbue hip hop's multivalent layering of texts and sounds with meaning that is at once locally specific, historically shifting, and globally implicated. Focusing on hip hop as musical practice and on musical genre as social practice, this book shows that hip hop's significance in Dakar is as indebted to Senegalese musical history as to hip hop's own origin myths.

The primary stories about hip hop in Senegal—what practitioners, in a slang inversion of Sene-gal, call *Rap Galsen*—rework two origin myths told by practitioners and scholars around the globe.¹ One concerns hip hop's origins in the inner-city struggles of Black youth in the South Bronx. The other links hip hop to indigenous orality, often located in the practices of hereditary West African bards called *griots*. In exploring how Senegalese hip hop practitioners make sense of, negotiate, and reimagine their place in the world through the stories they tell about and through musical performance, this book locates Rap Galsen at the shifting intersection of these two myths—one about urban marginalization and resistance, the other about African aesthetics and tradition. These myths are not immutable; like nesting dolls, they open to reveal other myths: of the ghetto, of resistance, of voice, of commercialism, of *Africa*; like woven cloth, they pull apart, yielding threads of history and memory to be spliced back together in any number of combinations.

At particular moments in recent Senegalese history, hip hoppers have mobilized these same myths, guided by their positioning vis-à-vis local and international audiences and in conversation with a range of musical practices that preceded and coexist with their own. They have, at times, placed particular importance on the spatial dimensions of hip hop history—that is, its debated geographic origins and the directionality of its movement. For many, resonances between hip hop-mediated images of the postindustrial South Bronx and the lived experience of the postcolonial African city articulate through hip hop practice to bring historic diasporic connections into conversation with contemporary understandings of race in a globalized world.² At the same time, the Bronx myth, when distilled into a generalizable marginality, allows for alternative stories of origins whose assertions of hip hop indigeneity disrupt the unidirectionality of hip hop globalization and its links with cultural imperialism and capitalism (Alim et al. 2009).³

In representing African hip hop as an engagement with the familiar, however, we miss that the rappers who tell these stories are cosmopolitan subjects who consciously engage, and at times subvert, global narratives. And that these stories vary, not only from place to place, but within locales, over time and contemporaneously. To recount origin myths, then, need not mean to explain hip hop origins, but rather, to “take modes of self-fashioning seriously, and allow competing voices

that claim Hip Hop as part of their history into the discussion” (Pennycook and Mitchell 2009, 40).

To call these narratives *myths* is to acknowledge how people understand them as relating to formative or transformative events or periods; to emphasize the weight that certain stories carry for different individuals and communities, at different times and in different ways; and to explore how myth is consciously constructed in practices of memory that sometimes contradict the official memory of the historical record, itself a highly constructed and negotiated collection of presences and absences.⁴ Origin myths *diasporically* remember both the griot and hip hop, (re)tracing connections across time and space; they partially efface historical memory, overlaying it with new memories that work in the service of the present (Assmann 1997, 14). Diaspora, as produced through the palimpsestic memory of origin myths, cannot be reduced to either a generalized marginalization or a specific historical forced migration originating in Africa; it both evokes and surpasses these.⁵

The following chapters trace diasporic memory through the conjunction of musical aesthetics, verbal narrative, and social action that I call the practice of hip hop genre.⁶ Positioning sound and musical gesture as social actions, I ask how local and global histories are remembered both in discourse about musical form and through musical practice itself. I argue that diaspora emerges as a conscious strategy of globally local emplacement, enacted through music making and the stories people tell about it and sounding at the crossroads of western⁷ imaginings of Africa and African imaginings of African America. Histories of music and musical myths, layered together in the cyclical ebb and flow of hip hop time.

What, then, is hip hop time? It is a memory of hip hop, and a collective remembering through hip hop, that (re)imagines the dynamic between locality and globality as one that is diasporic. It is a particular way of negotiating generational difference and social change; it is an epoch brimming with possibility and shadowed by disappointment. It is a retemporalization of diaspora, a post-colonial remapping of urban space as diasporic space. It is a refiguring of the past in the service of the present, but also a reconfiguration of the present through collective mythmaking. It is, and is produced through, hip hop form, defined by constructions of meter and practices of layering—the former inscribing distance from indigenous performance even as the latter permits new musical engagements with tradition that bridge the past and the present.⁸ Ultimately, *hip hop time* refers to how all these things—memory, age, social change, tradition, modernity, past(s), and present(s)—are translated into hip hop flows and beats, in a practice of genre that opens an analytical path through (but not around) lyrical texts and toward an understanding of how music means, in, through, and as “time.”

ARRIVALS, FAREWELLS, AND OTHER ETHNOGRAPHIC MYTHS

In the summer of 2008, about a month before the concert in Medina, I waited for a rapper named Modou at Just4U, a restaurant and live music venue across the street from Cheikh Anta Diop University in Dakar.

I had picked a table in the middle of the restaurant, uncertain, thrown by its emptiness and the measured yet directionless movements of the few staff there so early in the day; I'd yet to learn to move with their deliberate slowness in the pressing heat. Fans whirl lazily under the thatched roof. My Coke sweats through the napkin below it as I steal glances around the room, noting the small stage nestled in one corner, the bright mural on the wall behind it. Steeped in the lethargy of the scene, I'm startled when he enters, announcing, I am looking for Catty! as though the lone white⁹ girl sitting in the center of the space was not a dead giveaway.

He had come with his manager, Lamine Ndao. They gave me Sen Kumpè's press book, told me about the group's history. I was taken by his confidence that was not bravado, his extroversion that was not brash. He was amused by my diffidence, my insecurity, but most of all, I sensed, by the occasional sparks of personality that passed through the anonymizing wall of French between us (Fig. 1.2).

He was tall—at least head and shoulders taller than me—and already slim by the time I knew him. His short dreadlocks hadn't grown to his shoulders yet, and

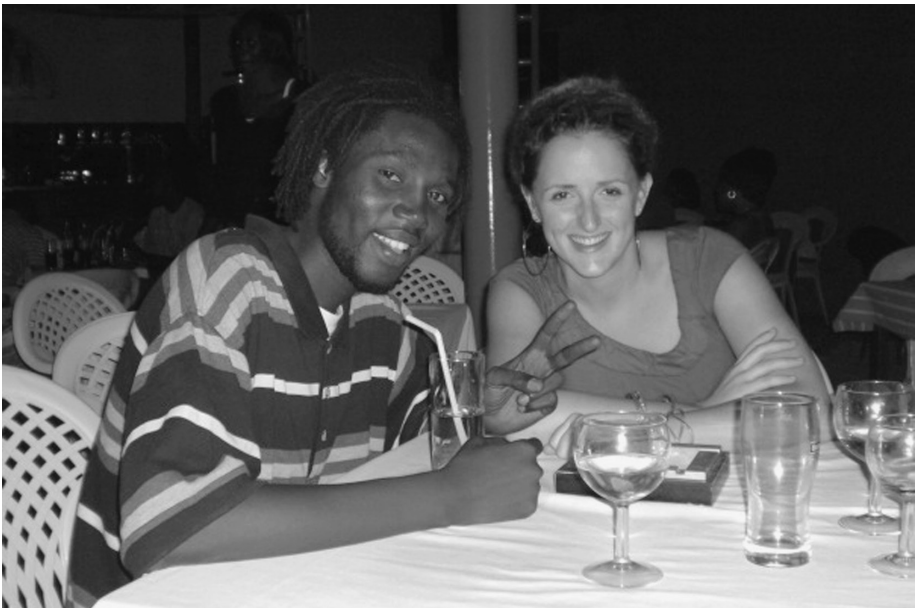


FIGURE 1.2 Bourba Djolof with the author at Just4U.

they bounced around as he spoke, giving a sense of perpetual motion to a body that was often still.

Modou was an oasis of calm in a city that left me high-strung and jumpy with its ceaseless noise—from vehicles, animals, mosques, people—and its constant verbalized attention to my whiteness. He sensed and buffered my shyness. He was kind. Even in pain. He whisked me around Dakar, handing me off to his brother and musical partner, Books, or to Lamine Ndao when the exertion was too much (Fig. 1.3).

Through him, I met rapper Simon, owner of Jolof4Life Records, and the other groups on the label at that time: 5kiem Underground, Tigrim Bi, Zair ak Batine. We moved as a group, Books, Modou, Lamine, and I. They took me to meet Keur Gui, back when the group still had three members (in 2017, I will encounter Mollah Morgun again, and we will remember, together, the day Modou brought me to meet him and his former partners). We ate rice together in his room, and his sisters smiled at me, babies on their backs. We met their neighbor Almamy (stage name Nigga Mee) and his partner Falsower, who formed the duo 23.3 Wisdom Connection.¹⁰ We surely met more, but I couldn't keep track. Everywhere we went, Books bought me spiced coffee until I felt what I imagined were the stirrings of an ulcer and begged him to stop. I met Lady Sinay; she frequented Modou's house, where we three would stand on the roof in the evenings looking down into the street as tree roots and table legs became indistinguishable in the fading light. I traveled with her to Kaolack one day to meet the men for a concert.



FIGURE 1.3 (l-r) Lamine Ndao, Books, and Bourba, 2008.

Before I returned to the United States, Modou grasped my left hand on a busy street corner, in a gesture of hope that we would meet again. *Ba beneen yoon*, he said. Until next time.

Over the years that have passed since our leave-taking, I confronted ethnographic myths—of holistic field sites, of participant observation, of narrative authority, of gender neutrality—that themselves intersected with local myths about music making. I came to find that my research was delimited and defined through the same conditions that have spurred a hip hop practice of diaspora in Senegal: the fragmentation of traditional structures in an urban context, the broadening of social relations across space, the limitations on expression and mobility associated with certain identities, the particular nexus of economic and political power that aligned with race, nationality, and language, but was complicated by gender and age. Setting up, analyzing, and at times knocking down the myths that alternately guided and impeded my project shed light on the ways in which myth functions in Rap Galsen.

The following chapters pull at these myths of hip hop and ethnography. Each addresses a particular facet of hip hop mythology, teasing out hip hop's twists and turns through memory and musical history; as a whole, they trace the challenges of working in urban and popular music field sites, the dynamic between oral history and memory as accessed through ethnographic interviews, the inescapable influence of gender dynamics as they intersect with geopolitical privilege, and the ways in which ethnography might work as a mode of musical analysis.

Chapter 2, "Globalizing the Underground," reads global hip hop myth through the specificity of the postcolonial city to reconstruct Rap Galsen's origins and show how the "underground" has been causally linked to social and artistic visibility. (Re)tracing the city through its musical histories, Chapter 3, "Remembering the Griot," considers how claims to (and rebuttals of) hip hop's African origins intersect with contemporary African oralities, which are coopted in commercial music genres and by the postcolonial state. Chapter 4, "Voicing Galsen," implicates these musical histories of orality in Rap Galsen's invocations of voice, contesting the naturalization of agency and resistance in hip hop. Chapter 5, "Gendering Voice," reveals how hip hop voice is itself predicated on mobilizations of tradition that actively gender urban space and musical and speech genres. Chapter 6, "Producing Diaspora," shows how hip hop's musical form layers origin myths to produce globally articulating palimpsests of sound and memory. A final remix, "Consuming Resistance," critically reflects on the resonances between scholarly projects, global hip hop narratives, and State interventions in Rap Galsen.

But first, we cycle back to a beginning.

I remember how terribly hot it was, the day I found myself in Kaolack (a small city four hours southeast of Dakar) with Sen Kumpë in 2008. We hadn't planned for an overnight stay, but the concert's outdoor venue meant that we waited there almost two days for the rain to stop, crammed into a large room whose floor was covered in mattresses for us to sit and eventually sleep on.

In the heat of the afternoon, I pause in the doorway; my gaze pans the room, full of the dozen or so men whom I've met briefly in the last few weeks as Sen Kumpë and I made the rounds for interviews. Modou, standing by one of only two windows, sees me hesitate and beckons. Turned toward each other, inner elbows resting on the windowsill, we watch the motionless, sandy street as we talk about this and that. I call him by his given name, but I'm curious to know about his emcee pseudonym, Bourba Djolof. He tells me that Jolof is Senegal, Senegal is Jolof. There was a great empire that was called Jolof. And Bourba means "king" in Wolof. His narrative of naming followed collective memory back through centuries, tracing a history of translocal exchange. Before Europeans ever came to the continent, diverse ethnolinguistic groups populated what is now Senegal, exerting differing levels of influence over the region as empires rose and fell. The latest of these, the Wolof-dominated Jolof Empire, collapsed around the mid-sixteenth century.

And yet, this distant history was far from anyone's mind that evening in Kaolack. Tired and miserable, without a change of clothes or contact lenses, I'd huddled restlessly in a corner of the room while the rappers of the Jolof4Life label unintelligibly debated local and international politics for most of the night. The only word I picked out easily was *toubab*, the term for "white person/foreigner" liberally peppering the animated Wolof speech patterns that sounded angry to my unaccustomed ear. I grew increasingly uncomfortable, shrinking in on myself as my eyes followed the conversation, until Simon stopped suddenly, looked at me, and laughed something to his friends. Another rapper sat down next to me and gently explained, in slow French, their discussion about France's interference in African governance. The conversation weighed on me, as I thought about my own name and its histories; although my ethnic background is best described as assorted Western European, the vagaries of patrilineal descent, coupled with a Catholic heritage, have landed me with a name as French as Senegal's colonial past.

I didn't know, when I started spending so much time there, how the Medina neighborhood—home to Sen Kumpë and many of the other Jolof4Life rappers—was itself a vestige of this colonial history.