Roots, Routes and Rhizomes: Sounding Women’s Hip Hop on the Margins of Dakar, Senegal

Ali Colleen Neff  
Virginia Tech

Toussa Senerap is video conferencing in from the threshold of Fam’Musik, her hip hop recording studio in the dusty district of Guediawaye, Dakar. She is busy tweaking multitrack vocal effects on her donated Macbook Pro; she’s got a lineup of local MCs working in the studio today, remixing tracks that they hope will get them exposure through hip hop showcase organizers. The fees of these male artists will subsidize the studio’s true mission: free recording, membership and community for any woman artist interested in making a name for herself in Dakarois hip hop. It is the only studio of its kind here in Senegal. As far as she knows, it is the only one in the world. Toussa tells me that the name of the studio signals a crossroads for African hip hop: “It reads like ‘fam,’” she says, referencing the familial term global hip hop artists use to refer to their creative collectives, “but when you pronounce it, it sounds like femme.” Like the name of her studio, Toussa’s music itself takes on different meanings according to how you sound it.¹

Twenty-three-year old Toussa has been working for seven years to establish a women’s hip hop network in Dakar, and to secure an extended family of women artists under the banner of GOTAL, a collective that has become central to the Dakar hip hop community. Working at the crossroads of Third-World feminism and longstanding familial modes of sociality in the Senegambia region, the women rappers of GOTAL build an infrastructure of their own: one that speaks to the circumstances of young women struggling to live on the poor outskirts of the city center, in the banlieue. Toussa says:

Because I just want to agitate the people, to stir them again. Because when I create my slogan, rap bu jiggen bii [rap belonging to the women], they don’t want to hear that. They don’t want to acknowledge that women can rap differently. We rap like women because we draw from different sources. In most studios, everything is made to sound like men’s style. We overtake men’s rap with our style. When I create the idea of femme music in Senegalese hip

© 2015 Wiley Periodicals, Inc.
hop, they say I am being too feminist. They say it is all about my feminism, but what we are creating is an infrastructure of support for other women; a women’s family of the banlieue.²

To establish space of her own: in the studio, Toussa can experiment with and develop a musical aesthetic by her own hand. Other studios in the region are controlled exclusively by male producers with access to specialized training and equipment, many of whom require women artists—especially promising young ones—to sign restrictive management contracts before receiving a digital copy of their recording. If they refuse, producers sabotage them by handing them derivative, uninspiring backing tracks to work with. In my seven years of ethnographic work with women hip hop artists in Dakar, I have witnessed a dozen strong careers cut short under these circumstances and heard of many more. To these add community sexism, family pressures, missteps and rivalries. Fam’Musik is a locus of practice, a bounded interiority from which Toussa and her peers can stake their claim. To understand the forms this music-from-the-margins takes, its influences and its trajectories, popular music studies must situate it in a richer framework: one less concerned with what the music is than what it does for practitioners whose work rarely makes it beyond those interior spaces. Hip hop in the Global South cannot be understood without attention to the spatial textures women’s aesthetic practice bring to bear: interiority, privacy, practices of affiliation, and tradition-bearing.

To send that work into the world: against the odds, Toussa has managed to locate agency not just in, but through, her place on the margins.
Toussa’s work emerges from the feminine and feminist social networks that take root in the banlieue, and it embodies the local aesthetics of women’s traditions of eloquence and sounding. From the margins of the postcolonial cityscape, this production is confluent with a media infrastructure distinct from the dominant circuits that have brought middle-class male rappers into the global music industry. In emphasizing the spatial dimensions of women’s musical production in the Global South, we locate the thick politics of aesthetic work that unfolds amidst multiple political economies, vectors of difference, and sites of possibility—a locational feminist criticism (Friedman, 34). To consider Doreen Massey’s formulation:

...not just that the spatial is political... but rather that thinking the spatial in a particular way can shake up the manner in which certain political questions are formulated, can contribute to political arguments already underway, and—most deeply—can be an essential element in the imaginative structure which enables in the first place an opening up to the very sphere of the political (9).

Research and scholarship on global music are heavily bound up in the politics of global cultural representation. Increasingly, the field has become the first step in global musical publicity as, fueled by renewed consumer demand in the age of digital globalization and its concurrent neoliberal curiosities about cultural difference, western cultural brokers seek to “discover” or “give exposure to” emerging global undergrounds (Tucker). In turn, the field has the special potential to advocate for these artists as they attempt to cultivate the resources associated with international cultural diplomacy programs, world music showcases, NGO sponsorship, and the global media industries. With a critical ear toward these neocolonial discourses, research based in collaboration and advocacy with artists on the margins offers the possibility of movements and solidarities altogether different from the trajectory of extraction that haunts the work of the global media industries. Through seven years of collaborative ethnographic work with Toussa, this work has gone beyond documenting the rise of women’s hip hop in Senegal as she has experienced it; it has settled into a mode of scholarly advocacy that manifests the potential for popular music studies to amplify the critical work of global practitioners.

Six years ago, in the spring of 2009, I witnessed Toussa rapping at her high-school talent show in Guediawaye, a poor suburb on the outskirts
of Dakar. Of the fifty teens who rapped over tinny, downloaded MP3s that summer afternoon, Toussa was not only the only girl; she was the standout talent, mixing French, Wolof and an American hip hop lexicon into a layered, self-styled timbre she calls, “ego trip.” Within the year, she had formed GOTAL, a collective of young women and girls who met on the edges of local hip hop concerts, all of them based of Dakar’s poorest neighborhoods on the outskirts of the city. Some of the girls—Sister Coumbis Cisskho and Sister Dia—are griottes from established musical families; others—Sister Anta and Zeyna—pushed their way into rapping with the boys in their neighborhoods. Toussa was the youngest, but was the organizing force. They began to organize weekly hip hop cyphers in Ginaaw Rail (a deeply impoverished neighborhood on the outer reaches of Dakar whose name means “Across the Tracks”). In these circles of improvisation, challenge and practice, the girls were safe to develop their talent. Their big brothers made sure the space belonged exclusively to female rappers. The neighborhood boys, who looked up to the elder girls, listened with rapt attention. When I witnessed GOTAL perform one of their first freestyle sets at an organized cypher at a venue called The Cafeteria in 2010, the group stuck together, in a corner, until they took their turn and literally blew up the show; they performed so impeccably that the circle itself dissipated within moments of their last rhymes. The boys quickly left for home. “Rap bu jiggen is a weapon” quickly became the group’s creed, following the military metaphors of GOTAL’s only women predecessors in Senegalese hip hop, the group, ALIF (Liberate Attack of the Feminist Infantry).

From the margins, to the interior spaces of hip hop production and back again, working through the circuits of a Senegalese media industry that trades in prestige and sponsorship rather than album sales, GOTAL mobilized themselves in the Dakar hip hop scene. When the group managed to save sixty dollars in performance payouts to record their first song professionally in 2010, they had to travel to the monied, central Dakar neighborhood of Parcels; all of the studios were located in the homes of male artists with the means to afford the necessary equipment. The women of GOTAL were entering a hip hop economy that worked much differently than that of their cyphers.

Anticipating the tropes they would be have to reproduce to put their work into circulation, they composed a song entitled, “Hey Jiggen [Hey Woman]”: a mash-up of the rhetorics of Pan-Africanism, French feminism, and hip hop “positivity” that failed to cohere with the contours of the artists’ vocal delivery, based on the “hard” crunk styles they emulated. While they and their friends were dedicated to hardcore, bass-heavy hip
hop styles generating from the US “Dirty” South, their producer, rapper Gaston, encouraged them to find an acoustic guitarist, and to cut in the kinds of sounds that would appeal to the European world music showcase producers who hand out sought-after artist visas to Dakarois artists like Gaston himself. “The track needs more *Africanity*,” said Gaston during the track *mixage*, pulling up a digital folder containing samples of *djembe* and *dundunba* drums. GOTAL’s composition for the session was marked by the same brand of Afrocosmopolitanism: one that freely quotes from sounds and styles that are highly identifiable as Afrocentric to European consumers. Later, European photo shoot directors would ask the women to trade their black, gender-neutral hoodies and fitted hats for bright African wax prints, showers of dreadlocks, and big earrings that signify Africanness to the world music producers to whom their work is marketed. As the contours of the music are softened in the studio, so are the appearances of the artists themselves. At odds are these cultural brokers’ image of the stylish African “Femme-cee” and the highly experimental artistic subjectivities that emerge from rich, differential practices of women artists who draw from the mighty women’s traditions of eloquence that line Senegambian culture. Contested notions of the feminine and the feminist—and the politics that accompany them—are layered heavily in the mix.
It would be four years before Toussa would finally make a track that sounded like the music she liked to listen to. Her 2014 mixtape, *Clin d’Oeil [Wink]*, established Toussa’s style in Dakar’s hip hop infrastructure: a richly timbred, endlessly multitracked call-and-response based, on one hand, on the polyphonic vocal traditions of the griottes and, on the other, the tinny 808s and distorted, chopped-and-screwed production values of U.S. Dirty-South hip hop. Even so, Toussa often finds herself virtually photoshopped into an exclusively male hip hop constellation as the sole female artist amongst lineups of (often much-less-accomplished) men. Her star finally rose when she entered the Senegalese version of *American Idol* in 2013, where she was offered a rare opportunity to spit her freestyles live, commanding a public microphone and broadcasting her work past the confines of the masculine hip hop establishment. At the same time, Toussa was a part of the slow rise of banlieue hip hop masterminded by Nix and Fou Malade around 2010—a style based more on the United States “Dirty South” dance-floor chant than the sample-heavy, political tracks prized by French hip hop brokers. Toussa was gaining the cultural capital she needed to enact the politics of refusal that define her personal ethics: refusal to cut her dreadlocks as the teachers at her trade school demanded, refusal to be disciplined into traditional gender expression in an Islamic society, refusal to forfeit her love of mbalax pop music, and refusal of the powerful disciplining forces that attempt to declare her work frivolous, naive or apolitical.

Even as a host of literatures defines contemporary Dakar according to the presence of media and hip hop dominated by men, Toussa and GOTAL produce a distinct cityscape of their own. Their work escapes notice in much the same way the fundamental social influence of women’s ritual has long escaped analyses of the political movements of the region. Mapping the city according to the production and circulation of this work renders the politics of women hip hop artists legible as a musical “form of life,” as Achille Mbembe puts it, for which “sound forces” are the medium for political agency (Variations, 74). In fact, hip hop is a primary medium by which a generation of young women produce the cityscape of Dakar. Their work is not only thickly emplaced; it is powerfully place-making. Through dialogic, collaborative ethnographic work with artists throughout the Global South, and through special attention to domestic, private and otherwise hidden sites of practice—particularly those considered peripheral to global development—popular music studies carries the potential to intervene in, rather than to reproduce, narratives that marginalize women artists. As it attunes itself to musical places that are, to echo J. K. Gibson-Graham on globalization, “open, continually under construction, decentered, constituted
by antagonisms, fragmented, plural, multivocal, discursively as well as socially constructed,” women, young people, and marginalized populations produce critical cartographies of their own (252–253).

The following three flyers, all made to announce performances on International Women’s Day—a major national holiday for the Senegalese—show the multiplicity of representations that play into women’s hip hop in Dakar. All of them are appropriate to the group, who posted the three of them side-by-side on social media:

Figure 3: This flyer plays on the classic themes of the holiday in Dakar, in which the region’s Sokhna (women of maturity and character, signified by the head wrap) are celebrated by their families, headline concerts of traditional and pop music, and comprise panels to discuss women’s issues on radio and TV. (Design credit: Djib Anton).

Figure 4: This web icon plays with the notion of the “bobo” (a term referring to Parisian hipsterism) in the form of a contemporary young Senegalese woman. It should be noted that to see a woman smoking a cigarette is very rare in this Islamic society. (Design credit: Djib Anton).
Figure 5: A flyer for a women’s hip hop showcase for International Women’s Day. Only Toussa and Daba Makourejah (in headscarf) are not wearing the earrings, weaves, and/or wax prints that signal “Bobo” or “Afrocosmopolitan” style. Toussa is in characteristic omnisex Western clothing. (Screenshot from Toussa Senerap’s Facebook page).

Sounding the Cityscape

The rapidly changing urban infrastructure of Dakar—one that has developed quickly from a loose collection of ethnic villages and workers’ neighborhoods in the fifty years since Senegalese independence—collects around the colonial plateau, the main financial and governmental center of the city that draws and exports resources (peanuts, fish, petroleum and gold, and most importantly, labor) from the interior, and imports French-brokered goods (largely overpriced rice and medical items) for Senegalese consumption. The contemporary city is produced by an ongoing series of representations, discourses, relationships, institutions, and exchanges that do much more than map its routes and dimensions; they work as processes of territorialization that determine, as Lawerence Grossberg puts it, ”the sorts of spaces people can occupy and how they can occupy them” (Bringing, 366). Senegalese media producers, writers and cultural critics including Miriama Ba, Ousmane Sembene, and Djibril Diop Mambety have heavily critiqued the colonial production of Dakar as the “capital of African Francophonie,”
a space that atomizes community networks and marginalizes the cultural contributions of women. Their work shows how the colonial notion of a “developed” Senegal—one that erupts in the Dakarois cityscape—inscribes fissures across the longstanding familial, religious, and ethnic networks that have organized the sociality of peoples of the Senegambia for thousands of years.

More than anything, the plateau serves a critical symbolic function for capitalist development in Africa: it is meant to sell the idea of Dakar as the model for African modernity, and for the Global South at large (Ralph). As such, and even as myriad hip hop communities flourish throughout the continent, Dakarois youth have become the focus for African hip hop documentaries, scholarship and NGO work. The first of these, “African Underground: Democracy in Dakar,” a documentary by American producer Ben Herson on Senegalese hip hop in an era of presidential regime change, argues that Senegalese artists have taken up the political valence of American groups like Public Enemy over other variations of the genre, thus joining the force of global hip hop artists invested in “creating social change,” “forcing political change,” and espousing “peace, love and positivity” (Nomadic Wax). The narratives surrounding the regime change echo Western ideological investments in notions of development as well as the interests of French cultural brokers who resourced Senegalese hip hop throughout the 1990s and early oughts with international showcases—including Peter Gabriel’s WOMAD Festival—and visas. Many of the artists who have risen to meet these resources, relatively affluent foreigners to Dakar whose families migrated from turbulent neighboring counties, perform French-language rap influenced by European hip hop pioneers and American backpack rap. Their hip hop is centered in the plateau, at foreign consulates and cultural centers such as the Institut Français du Sénégal, where artists can command ticket prices up to $16 American—nearly the average weekly income in Senegal—from European and American exchange students and NGO workers.

Beyond the teleology of a hip hop progressivism that predicts the eventual development of Western cultural forms in Third World sites over time, Rosalyn Fredericks locates the alternative “virtual, audio and public space” in contemporary Dakar in the work of the Y’en a Marre youth movement, in which a hip hop coalition swayed the Senegalese public toward wholesale regime change during the 2011 presidential elections (131). “Originally the voice of disenfranchised African-American youth,” she says, “hip hop is particularly associated with its valence as a medium through
which to oppose domination and authority” (133). In cases in which the figures of domination and authority are clear-cut, as with outgoing president Abdoulaye Wade’s corrupt regime, Senegalese artists have been able to quickly organize under the banner of the strongest opposition candidate and successfully presented a unified front for regime change. Established discourses on what resistance and opposition look or sound like beyond the two-party liberal democracy model, Western-style social progressivism, or the immediate response to a social crisis cannot account for the political complexity that comes to play in the work of the women from the Dakarois banlieue.

Dakar is a highly contested, emergent space, crisscrossed by cultural influences that trouble the postcolonial status quo, and its politics only rarely erupt in the form of regime change. Few Senegalese have direct involvement in the business of the plateau, and instead live and work in the massive network of secondary economies that have collected around the city center. The banlieue are comprised of circulating workers from the village, artisans, griots, Sufi devotees, traders, and brokers in the informal economy. Systems of affiliation still intact in the remote desert villages are transposed into an urban ecosystem the Senegalese call the jaxasé: a term meaning intermixture—a tangle—that characterizes the web of city streets, the cacophony of the morning market, the rush of a handful of patrons to find seats on the bright karrapit minibusses that improvise near-random routes across town. My Senegalese consultants also use the term jaxasé to describe both the rhythms and the climax of the dance associated with mbalax, the national popular music style that embodies Senegal’s complex historical processes of globalization. Cuban rumba and American R&B, the product of Western military presence and the American record industry’s outreach, respectively, are interwoven with a cross-section of regional ritual praise song. In an increasingly resource-starved urban landscape of disjuncture and dispossession, the young people of Senegal draw from longstanding customs of cultural elasticity to build new formations, new publics that respond to a rapidly shifting cultural circumstances. They produce a globally-oriented city of their own.

In the resource-poor neighborhoods of Dakar where rap bu jiggen bi takes root, young people establish creative spaces in critical response to the complicated, elusive movement of resources they need for survival. The vast majority of these hip hop studios and venues are located in the sprawling suburban banlieue: makeshift, semi-nomadic zones that collect around the city center. Geographer Abdou MaliqSimone describes these neighborhoods
as a “multitude of stories”: collaborations, associations and strategies evident through fields of “informality, invisibility, spectrality, and movement” (14). In turn, the young people of Dakar’s poorest neighborhoods have produced a constellation of physical and conceptual spaces including national Senerap and Galsen movements, practice spaces such as Africulturban and Dak’Art, political movements Boul Falé (“[We] Don’t Care”) and Y’en a Marre, (“We Are Fed Up”) and broader conceptual formations, such as “Rap Djolof” (rap styles based in indigenous, rather than Western, languages). Toussa’s rap bu jiggen bi has become a studio, a performing group, and a growing discourse on the politics of women in Senegalese popular culture: a series of institutions and media that form what she calls an “infrastructure of support.”

While any outsider on the uptown streets of Dakar sees streetfuls of young men looking for work (or working informal networks to piece together enough rice to feed their families), one rarely attends to the everyday, domestic, and ritual sounds of Dakar that are the substance of the cityscape as women know it. For thousands of years, women masters of eloquence—casted griottes from various ethnicities whose families have been musicians and orators for untold generations—have conducted the regional life-cycle rituals that structure personal and household relationships: baby-naming ceremonies, marriages, and nat mbootaye microlending meetings among them.8 In the cultural interiorities of the banlieue, social life, and the alternative networks of resource distribution necessary to its survival, is largely produced and maintained by women, who work through customary modes of community-building transposed to the complexity of the urban situation. Politics are aestheticized here, in the grain and tone of a ritual emcee’s voice, in the structure and style of a Sufi devotee’s robes, in the rhythms of the talking drum that carries political allegiances. In the Senegambia, the griottes have been improvising chants and rhymes for thousands of years in a form called taasù, which many Wolof-language Dakarois rappers, male and female alike, cite as a primary influence in regional hip hop styles. Meanwhile, the political economy of the plateau rarely accounts for the work women do, nor the arts they make, as it centers itself on the 9-5 workday for postcolonial banking, business, and governmental exploits. Neither the timetable nor the neighborhood infrastructure allow for the formidable resources most Senegalese invest in ritual life; nor do their institutions account for the fluctuating incomes, constant migrations, and aesthetic and spiritual robustness that makes the feminine political economy possible in the banlieue.
Even so, banlieue youth have occasionally managed to occupy city space for their own use. The first 72h Hip hop Festival, held in the shadow of the massive obelisk that marks Dakar’s Place de l’Indépendence in 2009, complicated existing modes of hip hop politics in the Senegalese capital. As the mass emigration of young men—often involving forged papers and treacherous foreign boats—spiked in the wake of global financial crisis and regional drought, waves of young Senegalese immigrants (documented and undocumented alike) were settling in the hip hop communities of Atlanta, Houston, Richmond and Memphis. The emergence of Southern hip hop as central to the genre’s development and the emplacement of Senegaleseness amidst these capitals of Black cultural production, and vice-versa, generated new mediascapes that continue to trouble the center-periphery model of musical “development” (Appadurai, 29). As hip hop cultural production from the “Dirty South” spreads digital roots across the African continent, the young people of the banlieue locate the kinds of creative collectivity and dancefloor politics that resonate with their own values.

At the 72h Hip hop Festival, in place of their usual bags of peanuts and perfume, the sector’s many street merchants carried boards hung with golden chains decorated with die-cut pendants in the shape of hubcaps, hood ornaments, and lucky dice, the materials of an emerging symbolic economy shared between the postindustrial South and the Senegalese ghetto. A new mode of street style, based on the looks of Senegalese-American rapper (and son of Dakarois griot Mor Thiam) Akon, emerged at the event: bootleg black T-shirts with regional favorites Tupac, Eminem, or the emerging local “Rap Djolof” slogan, oversized pants slung low with a studded belt, and the (at that time) sought-after fitted caps hat have since become wardrobe staples for young Senegalese.

The event marked a shift in a Senegalese hip hop hierarchy that had been established by Francophone rap and world music-oriented styles. But even as these banlieue, Wolof-speaking youth established their presence in the city’s public arena with the event, discourses of dominance endured. Seminal local rapper Fata was booed off the stage for his collaboration with mbalax pop artists with chants of “hip hop!” as middle fingers waved, American-style, in the air. The dance genre, inflected with the eloquent voices and dancing bodies of urban women, was considered so feminine as to denature the masculinized politics of this budding youth movement. The event was a crucible in which Senegalese youth intermixed class consciousness and conspicuous consumption; the sophisticated aesthetics of
hip hop’s Dirty South sound and a caricatured masculine posturing. Senerap, a genre prized for being from the margins, imposed new margins of its own. The few women onstage and in the crowd were treated with intimidation and indifference. Meanwhile, the creative worlds of young women and girls, for whom the economic crisis was also very real, unfolded far beyond the public square.

Toussa’s Facebook page has joined others’ as a critical space for emerging discourses on representation, gender, class, and Senegalese hip hop. Debates on the importance of ‘90s hip hop rage in replies to artists’ posts, often with stern dismissals by male artists of assertions that, for instance, the “Dirty South” style is as political as Public Enemy. The backlash from the exclusively male hip hop leadership against Toussa’s work as “too feminist” —both in online comments and in her occasional, egregious non-invitation to public hip hop events—also points toward her concern that her work is, like Fata’s ritual dance-inflected beats, “too feminine.” Fam’Musik may be the epicenter of a new women’s movement in African hip hop, but the currents of women’s traditions of eloquence, and the rich aesthetic practices that articulate in them, have been running though Senegalese popular music all along despite many male artists’ claims that the griottes have no influence in the genre. Kyra Gaunt, whose work with teen and tween girls in the American inner-city, evidences their position at the genesis of new sounds and styles in popular culture, as well as the disciplining work of genre and history that marginalizes these contributions, suggests: “power works in both directions between males and females, but the popular (read: mass culture) context of hip hop tends to eclipse our comprehension of the dialogic and interdependent social formation of a black musical identity and popular music” (108).

Toussa prizes the social and the aesthetic contributions of the women in her community. At her request, a song is buttressed by the sampled voice of Yandé Codou Sene, Senegal’s beloved woman poet laureate, a griotte appointed by Senegal’s first independent president and Négritude poet Leopold Senghor. At hand, however, is a double-edged sword: when women’s arts erupt into urban visibility, they threaten both the socioeconomic status quo of the postcolony and the distribution of resources toward a nearly exclusively male hip hop community that claims to resist Western values. In this case, the problem is not only with the hegemonic work of postcolonial modernity, but the patriarchal impulses of the Senegalese hip hop establishment itself. Toussa tells us:
The political system in hip hop here puts down the female rapper. It’s not that we don’t have a lot of women rappers in Dakar—we do. It’s just that organizers have habituated to insert a single woman onto a flyer with thirty male rappers.

For a moment, everybody focuses on you [a woman artist], they invite you, they cannot stand to see many women all at the same time. It is a threat. Before being the single woman on the flyer, I was seeing [onetime GOTAL member] Sister Dia, and before her, Sister Coumbis. Now both of them have stopped rapping and are becoming singer/songwriters. They [the Dakarois arts establishment] want us to go out and make acoustic music. The system puts you down, and the second thing is, it demands that you put yourself in competition with other women. The women are afraid of social assassination: they bring out one single, and they stop.

The elite want you to add a token in their compilations, but they do not want you to establish your own long-term career. They do not want you to change the system. I know the system pushes women really hard, but if they don’t be strong and stay, we won’t be able to build something that works.

To build something that works—the kinds of feminine, interior spaces that Toussa and her colleagues build, and the underground networks that connect them, escape the notice of much research on musical scenes in the Third World. For her, the Global South works as a body in sound: a zone of emergent and unexpected solidarities that respond to an ever-shifting series of political contexts. In order to understand these solidarities, we must replace notions of hip hop politics and agency—ones specific to a very particular Western universalist ideal based in political regime change—with inquiry into the politics of solidarities, affinities, and resonances that unfold in interior spaces or secondary media circuits. In order to locate these spaces of empowerment, research on women’s participation in global popular music requires reflexive, intersectional research into the spaces where global cultural forms such as hip hop take root. As Grossberg puts it, “A self-reflective theory of contexts—and an adequate contextual analysis—will have to theorise not only these different dimensions or modalities, but also the articulations among them” (“Theorising Context,” 35). Sustained, collaborative ethnographic work offers insight into local constructions of
space, place, and the feminine that inflect the political valence of Dakarois hip hop. This enriched ethnographic work traces, to echo Brad Weiss, the “conflicted fantasies” that texture the world of hip hop production in the Global South and the stylistic formations that erupt at these sites of struggle (38).

Like many Senegalese who produce community life in the context of postcolonial poverty and disenfranchisement, women artists must engage critical practices of space-making amidst the urban grid that is not designed to answer to their needs. The terms Toussa uses to describe the action of her life’s work—“to agitate,” “to stir,” “to overtake”—are more than metaphors. They are processes of remapping the ways young people in Dakar relate to each other, to the broader Senegalese public, and to the world at large. For Toussa and her peers, the medium for this remapping is located in the sound of *rap bu jiggen bi*, a mode of imagining the dimensions of young Senegal by way of its ongoing conversation with feminist and feminine cultural forces. The feminine “infrastructure of support” that Toussa describes as the core mandate for her work unfolds amidst a Dakarois hip hop industry that, undergirded by a masculine national vision of hip hop authenticity and the desires of international arts brokers alike, marginalizes both *femme* and “fam”:

Living in solidarity is the best thing Dakarois women have in this world: doing their culture, they live, they are feeling themselves. They make the culture work for them so that they can live by that. Because they are working to make the conditions of their own lives, their religion, their culture. They *goor-goortlu* [fight for survival] a lot every day. To live with everybody in a big family together, you have to take care of everybody. That is why social living is important. You can wake up one day and the father is gone, but never can you see a family that can survive without a mother present. Woman is the key. She is the cycle, the person who is watching over everybody. In the banlieue, women have this kind of power. Their time is different: they wake up and need to be sure they have something to eat. It’s what they have, and they try to do the best thing with what little they have.

Questions of presence and absence figure heavily into the cultural lives of banlieue residents. Here, nearly every family has at least one son—and, often a daughter—living and working in the secondary economies of the
US South. Like the hip hop crucible of the Bronx of the 1970s, the banlieue are already crisscrossed by global migrations, overlapping positionalities and contested notions of the political that undo a totalizing narrative of hip hop development. As recent work on hip hop in the US South and a host of feminist hip hop studies evidences, American hip hop itself is an amalgam of contested spaces with multiple, competing, and covalent centers of empowerment (Robinson; Crunk Feminist Collective; Morgan; Neal). A developmental notion of globalization reduces the complexity of new cultural forms in a mediated age: “Not only is the global as hybrid as the local, but the past was as hybrid as the present. If the past, the other, was never as simple or homogeneous or local or unified as we imagine, the present is probably not as fractured or heterogeneous or global as we assume” (Massey, Cited in Grossberg, “Theorising Context,” 33). Narratives on hip hop authenticity based on a Western politic of progress expose vectors of domination and authority that are reproduced in the practice itself. Further, the notion of youth, Senegal’s hip hop generation, as torch-carriers of neoliberal progress collapses the complex, conflicting politics of Dakarois young people and the music they make (Ralph, 126–127).

Hip hop studies in Senegal must be understood through the refractory lenses of global discourses and localized notions of race, gender, class and caste as they articulate to specific historical conjunctures that bear upon hip hop creativity. A hip hop geography, drawn from ethnographic rather than strictly historical methods, recognizes these multiple centers of activity, allows for a hip hop paradigm that evidences the complexity of elided categories such as “youth” and “Third World” and acknowledges gender as a key component of global racial formations. Toussa’s work embodies a mode of aesthetic difference that is doubly inflected by her status as a woman and as a lifelong resident of the banlieue.

The Global “Dirty South”: A Digital Mixtape

To make a place of their own: in Sound of Africa: Making Music Zulu in a South African Studio, Louise Meintjes traces the production of Africanness in the aesthetic registers of the music itself. Because the idea of Africa—and the resources bound up in it—are highly contested, African artists struggle to craft their own representations of place amidst spaces and media infrastructures largely controlled by European, colonial or hegemonic interests. Drawing from women’s traditions of eloquence and the dance-club
aesthetics of the African American urban underclass, Toussa’s work carries with it a very different sense of place than that of most of her male peers, and more so, than the upper-middle class leaders in the genre who hail from Dakar’s business plateau (Harrison, “Leaping Towards The Edge”). When it comes to a rapidly emerging urban Africa, place is, in essence, in the mix, and its dimensions depend on the media technologies and infrastructures through which it is produced and deployed. In the recording studio, Meintjes finds, artists go beyond mapping their “social positionings within a system of power,” to locate new mobilities within and beyond it (248).

Phenomenological links between space travel and other kinds of movement enabled by the studio are also there to be sensed and elaborated by those who work in its space. Indeed, by means of successful recording, music makers may well rocket upward through the star system, just as they may travel out to new places in the listening, dancing, sociopolitical world. And while working in the confines of the studio itself, they may be propelled to inner worlds, expressive worlds—art worlds—in the process of composition and production (67).

Beyond conventional concepts of space invested in three-dimensional, Euclidian coordinates, the textures of production reveal two key alternative modes of spatial possibility for artists in the Global South. The first, a “rocketing upward through” the constraints of postcoloniality, is a kind of global supermobility drawn by the loops and whorls of the music as it moves through a global, highly digitized, mediascape unconstrained by visa checkpoints. Secondly, the music is a medium by which the artist is “propelled to inner worlds” in the process of musical production. These private spaces of creativity, unreachable by the social world and its constraints, offer a differential cartography Adrian Piper calls “interiority . . . a vivid and extended life of the mind that includes imagination, intellection, and reflection; these are the foundations of transpersonal rationality” (200). Both within and without, standard cartographies cannot contain the sites of musical creativity that matter most to marginalized artists.

In the high-contrast visibility of the Web 2.0 and the sounds of a new digital cosmopolitanism enabled by electronic sampling, Africanness holds a special currency to online documentaries, travel series, viral nonprofit campaigns and street style blogs, which have come in recent years to trade in cinematic representations of African and Afro diasporic
pathos, dependence, and exuberance. This spectacular media-making relies on pseudo-ethnographic modes of immersion, participant-observation, special access, and interlocution to obscure its commercial, promotional and political underpinnings. In fact, the work of researchers is often indistinguishable from these lay projects online without careful investigation on the part of the audience. NGOs have produced a number of online films, articles and compilations on Senegalese hip hop, but few of these projects are grounded in a critique of the restrictive, highly visual conceptions of African authenticity that obscure these artists’ struggles to enact the politics that matter most to them. Ethnographic representation and business projects are further conflated by a neoliberal dynamic of click-activism, through which African life is “rescued” by the commercial ad revenue generated by online viewership. The impact of digital media on global perceptions of African politics has also contributed to a sharp rise in American State Department
programs (particularly hip hop and social media projects) designed to sway global attitudes toward US interventions on the African continent. The fields of media anthropology, African cultural studies, and Black studies, among others, evidence the modes by which young people throughout the Global South conduct media worlds of their own through direct and off-label uses of these selfsame digital technologies, both in conversation and in conflict with discourses and resources from the West. These alternate modes of digital self-writing offer programs by which young African people cultivate a context of hope: one often confluent with the contemporary global lexica of mediatized self-promotion and hip hop cosmopolitanism.

For Senegalese youth, the digital age and the hip hop diaspora have unfolded in tandem. The importance of digital media and the aesthetic modes they carry, particularly those of voice and musical performance, represent the primary medium by which artists of the Global South articulate themselves amidst the overlapping, contradictory fields in which contemporary Dakar is nested. Toussa freely samples her personal style from global cultural and political signifiers—many of them stemming from Afrodiasporic influences: horn-rimmed wayfarers in double homage to Senghor and Malcolm X, the revolutionary rhetoric of Angela Davis and the catchphrase couplets of Nicki Minaj.11 Like any contemporary subculture, Senegalese youth sample from a world of signs, symbols and practices, ones that have differential roots and routes than those available to artists of the plateau. Toussa’s online YouTube playlists range from French Muslim rapper Diam’s to Canadian EDM producer Grimes to Detroit rapper Dej Loaf. It’s Toussa’s sound, she tells me, her voice and her flow, that put her on the map. Her calling card is her ability to generate new lyrical and stylistic techniques.

As she introduces these to the public through her SoundCloud site and live performances, male artists quickly pick them up and integrate them into their own styles. In the early spring of 2011, I witnessed Toussa record a solo track at Gaston’s Def Dara Studio in Parcelles: her first solo recording. She had spent weeks perfecting a new vocal and rhythmic technique for the record, turning each spoken bar into a sustained, strained, almost whispered note: the inflection of a storyteller calling those within earshot to gather. This aesthetic of suspense is cast in the textures of the Wolof language, in which elongated vowels signify intensity, and the regional praise singers’ emphasis on strained, subtle vocal timbres. This phrasing allows for further polyrhythmic play within the verses themselves by anchoring them in tandem: a jazzy style. While Toussa labored over the three ensuing years to collect enough tracks to make a full mixtape, Gaston himself released a new
single through YouTube in July of 2011—just months after Toussa’s work in his studio—using a remarkably similar technique to her own. When I asked her about the similarity, Toussa shook her head and said not to worry, that she would develop new styles for each of her recordings so no one would think she was cribbing from the male studio owner. Toussa calls her vocal approach *Nguéweulé*, literally the “style of the griotttes,” that she says resonates with the vocal and rhythmic aesthetics of the US “Dirty South”:

Following the appearance of Senegalese hip hop in the ‘80s, The Dirty South style took hold long-term in Senegal 2006 with [Dakarois rapper] Canabasse, and has now evolved to trap music. It is an evolving force in Senegal. Dirty South rap that meets our own culture the same rhythm and the same themes. We Senegalese have our own feeling we call “Nguéweulé,” the rich sound of the griotttes. Like this sound, Dirty South hip hop production allows the space to add clear words and more feeling—it has all the rhythm of hip hop and jazz . . .

In Senegal we make mbalax music which uses tradition to make a unique rhythm that is found nowhere else in this world. The Dirty South and mbalax have common rhythms and textures. My personal take is that Southern hip hop is enormously rich in rhythm and this is its Africanness. When I say that rhythm is the space, I mean that the beats allow MCs to find plenty of space for flow and improvisation on a track . . . I’m falling for this music. It is the music of my generation.

The hip hop generation, however, is not the first Dakarois youth movement to use cultural sampling to forge a new generational identity. The interethnic peoples of the Senegambia region, geographically positioned in the semi-nomadic zones between North Africa, the Sahelian interior, and the bustling European ports of West Africa, have long practiced assemblage as a primary mode of cultural formation. Mbalax dance-pop music has been, from its fusion in rapidly urbanizing 1960s Dakar, a primary mode for women’s involvement in the region’s popular music as singers, dancers, and fans. Where, in the era of independence, musical cosmopolitanism came with the arrival of Western military servicemen and their LP collections, today, digital technologies are the medium by which the Dakarois mobilize a global imagination. Social media foster virtual infrastructures where no physical space exists. Throughout the Global South, digital technologies allow for
solidarity and mobility beyond their immediate physical and social confines. Whereas Black Twitter, the Vine, and Instagram are modes by which the American hip hop underclass communicates beyond neighborhoods they call the “trap,” Senegalese people vying for visas tend to use Facebook for the purposes of event promotion, self-representational imagery, and GIFs, all of which they use to tag dozens of online friends far and wide. For the poorest of Dakar’s outer reaches, these media recreate modes of prestige as modeled on the customary social medium of griotic praise-singing, which empowers the subject of the song by detailing the richness of her social generosity and interconnections.

Toussa and her cohort set up camp at a confluence of hip hop genealogies: Americanness, “positivity,” a politics of opposition, the legacy of Black Atlantic traditions of eloquence and style. In contrast to the kinds of sampling—of a Motown vocal or a funky break from a rare groove track—that reveal the nostalgic impulse of many contemporary fans of self-described “conscious” hip hop, for Toussa and her peers, hip hop becomes a mode of spatial sampling: a practice of assemblage, of making global
connections and drawing new mobilities that trouble the construction of a single mode of hip hop authenticity (McLeod, 39). Artists draw stylistic fast tracks between formerly-rural women’s traditions of eloquence (and the forms of community prestige that accompany them) and contemporary hip hop styles from the US South, the Parisian banlieue, and the emerging styles of Egyptian and Middle Eastern rap. Not only can this spatial hip hop imagination de-essentialize discourses on the genre based on the notion that Africans eagerly import and imitate Western cultural forms wholesale, it also evidences the ways in which aesthetics matter in the construction of places and the relationships between them. Toussa and her cohort produce an emplaced subjectivity that is invested in—and can push back upon—the politics of global representation.

For Senegalese women and girls, the stakes of self-representation are clear. In their neighborhoods, the structures of postcoloniality are in sharp focus: an exploitative tourism industry, corruption in the national government, self-serving world music promoters, parasitic European corporate interest in the Senegalese telecommunications, power, and banking industries, persistent prohibitions on women’s divorce and inheritance rights. Within the city, women struggle for access to media and mobilities that hold critical resources in their folds. Toussa and her community work to configure and deploy their own liberatory projects in sound. In order to recognize and empower the work of these women, and to better understand the modes of creativity that make life possible for young people in the Global South, scholars of popular music are beginning to pay close attention—particularly through the amplifiers of sound studies, sensory ethnography, and transatlantic imaginaries—to spaces of musical production and the media by which their work materializes and becomes confluent (Meintjes; Shipley; White; Jaji).

**Deterritorializing Dakarois Hip hop**

Women’s hip hop practice in urban Senegal establishes a coalition against the totalities that would exclude it: a market-defined hip hop genre, a developmental model of globalization, essentialized notions of Senegaleseness and of Africanity. Rather than emplace her work in a teleology of African hip hop development from its Western origins, an ethnographic approach to women’s hip hop in Dakar engages a notion of politics and agency as they extend from Toussa and her community’s own work. Thus enriched with aesthetic polyvalence, the cosmopolitan
musical landscape of Dakar, Senegal—one largely authored by women—resonates with an increasingly mediatized Global South. To establish a women’s recording studio in Guediawaye is to establish differential values, differential modes of Senegaleseness, and in turn, the global hip hop cosmology. The resources associated with African hip hop, like the space of the emerging African cityscape, are highly contested. As such, they are subject to competition and struggle. Here, collaborative, long-term scholarly research becomes a medium by which previously unrecognized artists can write themselves into discourses and access critical resources. This kind of representational advocacy not only traces the well-established dimension of public scholarship by popular music scholars from Alan Lomax to Reebee Garafalo and Joan Morgan, it is an appropriate methodological answer to the empirical task of locating the critical work of global hidden practitioners.

Beyond the tokenism of the thirty-act hip hop showcase with one woman guest artist, Toussa hopes to contribute to a media infrastructure that works for the women of the Dakarois banlieue. She is improvising her own network from a combination of digital media and a strategic program of engagement with foreign cultural brokers, including an American manager. Her tours of the US with US State-department-sponsored “hip hop diplomacy” programs, including OneBeat and NextLevel, have greatly increased her global social media profile. For these programs, she says that she collaborates with acoustic musicians and raps about general “conscious issues,” ones framed by an understanding of political positivity legible to the funders of arts NGOs, the State Department, and to consumers of a kind of hip hop historicism based on a developmental model and an ever-present brand of middle-class hip-hop nostalgia (Harrison *Hip Hop Underground*, 29). In spring 2015, Toussa met with executives at MTV at their Manhattan headquarters to discuss the possibility of future collaboration with Ben Herson’s *Rebel Music* series for the media conglomerate. Beside her excitement about the possibility of touring globally due to exposure from the series, Toussa was most impressed, she told me later, with the fact that the lush offices were outfitted with a brew-your-own Starbucks latté machine that featured a video screen running a silent documentary about fair-trade coffee growers.12

There is currency in these representations. There is currency in the desire to make the image of hip hop in the Global South perform a certain kind of work. Toussa is sharply aware of these investments. Global youth cultures are the lifeblood of an emerging NGO intervention that merges with documentary work. Dozens of NGOs, journalists and researchers have
approached her about collaborations, each promising a premium of exposure for her time. But, for all the lure of the global media industries, she puts her resources into local politics—lyrics about cultural mores that foreclose women’s sexual freedom, heated debates on the merit of a new production style with male fans on her Facebook page, engagement with local griots and musicians as peers and collaborators. Toussa messaged me as she prepared for a show at the Sorano national theater, one established by Leopold Senghor in 1965, to show me the flyer. Thirty-two rappers were featured on the flyer; she was the only female among them. Next month, she and GOTAL will hold their own concert. The flyer says, at her insistence, “...featuring selected men.” Toussa leverages her growing international reputation and her distinct artistic prestige in Dakar against each other as she builds herself into a hip hop constellation based on her native soil. There are struggles, too—aesthetic and business disagreements between members of the group, jealousy from other artists surrounding her possession of the studio, and competition for space in paying showcases.

Toussa is contacted weekly by (largely American) researchers wishing to conduct interviews, make documentaries, or write dissertations.
about her work, which they see as the latest chapter in a hip hop historicism that expects the form to spread from Western, masculine, urban center to a Third World, feminine, sub-urban periphery. At the same time, Toussa must constantly maintain the erosion of what she has worked so hard to establish on the ground. As a novice producer who prefers to develop her lyrical expertise, Toussa has difficulty accessing backing beats that are complex and original enough to carry her message and that are properly licensed and copyright-cleared. The NGOs for whom she is often pressured to perform or collaborate in public performance often tax her time and energy without contributing substantial resources, especially the equipment repairs and replenishment necessary to keep the studio functioning. Finally, Toussa must fight the possibility that she will lose her studio space for security issues, primarily the threat of thieves or jealous competitors. Fam’Musik survives by a series of tactics arising from Toussa and GOTAL’s core set of values rather than a single long-term strategy. The politics of representation are central to this survival:

Still not easy to talk about why [American and European cultural brokers] always want to hear “revolutionary” hip hop. What I would say is that—since hip hop began in New York 1978 until today—things are constantly changing in all aspects of music and politics itself. From my point of view, after we achieve revolution in the form of political change, we must try to develop what we have now. A music that knows how to be revolutionary if a change is needed, but who is also ready to share that moment of laughter, and to meet the politics of new historical moments.

Just as the African metropolis is sectored in layered, permeable maps, Dakarois hip hop is an assemblage of different projects and institutions; like any study of like in the Senegalese city, studies of hip hop can vary widely depending on perspective. The hidden maps of women’s creativity in Senegal are less likely to be located in visible registers or physical metrics, but they can readily be heard in the emerging sounds and styles that they influence; a digital sample at the heart of a foreign hip hop compilation; the center of a hip hop cypher across the tracks. As popular music studies scholars, critics and practitioners with a long view toward the possibility of representational empowerment, we ask how we might attend to the spatial dimensions of African cultural practices, to locate and signal-boost Third-World “audiotopias” that escape the notice of the global media industries
Collaborative ethnography, media anthropology, and new modes of digital representation offer popular music studies the potential to detect and intervene in the uneven distribution of resources away from women artists in the banlieue (Schloss, 3). Potential interventions by music scholars include fostering decolonial copyright practices, affordable access to social media and video editing software, the provision of self-sufficient recording equipment and media labs to Third World artists, and new forms of access to artists’ visas. Most importantly, we ask how popular music studies can help to advocate for new routes to self-representation in the surprisingly uneven digital media landscapes of the Global South.

“Woman” Lyrics copyright Toussa Senerap, 2015.

| Jigguên Djì Guene                     | The woman who rises up          |
| Yallako sakak dimbeuleu              | Allah has made her to have peace with him |
| Kiy djouteul mbindreñ               | Who is bound in childbirth      |
| Nopi mome lagnioy mbougeul           | Who differs without complaint  |
| Bok li di sokhi adouma               | She is the one who reproduces the world |
| Bou naré halate gniounéko danouma    | But you never think about these perspectives |
| Geumeule djouromi wakhtou            | Close your eyes for five hours  |
| Halate adouma bou amoul djiguène     | And imagine the world without women |
| Bahame dou touhou                    | Everything would disappear     |
| Yeurmandé bi yalla déf si mome       | Peace that God put into it     |
| Digueune bi amé si yaye ak dome      | The love of a mother to her son |
| Diamo bimouko eumbéwone              | Nine months in her womb       |
| djeume oumpou deug noumouko doundé wone | How does the boy imagine he becomes who he is |
| Xèw xèw yiye xèw Thi mome           | Everything that he becomes    |
| Deug deug mo déf mou outék gniome    | What makes different from others |
| Thi djeumeume damaye yeuk adouma     | He moves through the world easily |
| Dissayou doundounigor deugla         | He thinks this life is made for men. |
| Gueune diiss adounak lissi bire      | Woman is born into pain in this life |
| Nahanétëk bopam ak liko yalla di hire | She must remain calm and follow Allah’s regiment |
| Diamo bìtay djeuff daye faye         | Our generation is going to repay you |
| Nite Loumou gniane lako yalla di maye | We will give you what you need |
| Soutourale gniou waye                 | Allah covers us with grace and kindness |
| Fi dara doufi wèyyy                   | We must do more here           |
| Ana gnifì nèkone                     | We are only here for a short time |
| Heuye nagne meuuy                     | Hey, we are calling            |

Notes

1. The best aspects of this piece have been shaped by my colleagues Anthony Kwame Harrison, Justin Burton, and an anonymous peer reviewer. I am also indebted to Louise Meintjes for critically shaping this approach to ethnographic work, and to the editorial team of JPMS.
2. All interview excerpts taken from online chat conversations between the author and Toussa Senerap throughout the week of August 23rd–29th, 2015. All translations and interpretations, as well as the argument itself have been approved by Toussa. All images used with permission.

3. The women’s performance names come from a moment in early-oughts Senegalese pop cosmopolitanism when young people—particularly Senegalese-American migrant Akon and groups like Positive Black Soul Radikal and Daara J—gestured toward their fandom for Jamaican dancehall with ‘90s-era American hip hop, privileging Jamaican stage names.

4. Louise Meintjes on the politics of the studio production of Africanness: “While the idea of an Africanness is essentializing, ahistorical, and a gloss of a diverse geopolitical region, it takes in a particular form in the local context and performs in a way specific to its music-makers’ personal and social investments, ideas, and ambitions. Africanness emerges as an utterance out of a stylistic and social history and from a locally constituted consciousness concerned with race, national citizenship, and authenticity” (110).

5. “As opposed to what I see as the hasty dismissal of sexual difference, in the name of a polemical form of “anti-essentialism,” or of a utopian longing for a position ‘beyond gender,’ I want to valorize sexual difference as aiming at the symbolic empowerment of the feminine understood as ‘the other of the other’: as a political project” (Butler and Braidotti 48).

6. “To reduce Congolese musical experience to a sheer auto-hypnosis of the masses without any aesthetic content, which neither embodies nor reveals any element of universality, is to mistake the very nature of music.” (Mbembe, Variations 72).

7. A cultural ecosystem of intertwined affiliations persists for the semi-nomadic peoples of the western Sahel region, whose social lives must stay resilient amidst an ever-shifting geography of periodic drought, religious reformations, Trans-Saharan trade, and a half-millennium of colonial urbanization.

8. For a rich depiction of women’s social networks in Dakar, see Beth Ann Buggenhagen’s germinal ethnographic work on the ritual lives of Senegalese women, and the immense political economy that they produce.

9. According to Toussa, “There is a lot of complexity in the special power women have in the banlieue . . . they live without money but they continue to be proud in their lives because here in the ghetto, we are the people who live in a society like a big family. The women run their households and they have a lot of children, and they have ritual. They are a force here, and in downtown, they are made to work like men and have western nuclear families. They have a lot of people with a hard life around them, but they show strength and resilience everyday.”
10. “First, the scene has—at least—two spatialities, one being its Euclidean space (defined by a set of three-dimensional coordinates) and the other its network-space (defined by the heterogeneous assemblages that constitute every actor network). Second, the shape (i.e. the scene) reaches continuity by being unstable both in network and in Euclidean space: the scene is an actor network that is ‘on the move’ in Euclidean space (a mobile and episodic geography that has no center) and whose network-elements (the bands, the projects) are constantly changing (multilayered identities, multitasking, virtual non-human mediators) (Tironi 46).

11. This kind of assemblage on the part of youth cultures is to be expected in popular music studies: Barry Shank finds similar behavior in the music scenes of Austin, Texas (132–136, 159–160).

12. Many thanks to Toussa’s US manager, Allason Leitz, for her notes on the meeting.

Works Cited


