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Musical Infrastructures and Techniques of Survival in Dakar

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Musical Infrastructures and Techniques of Survival in Dakar

A Senior Project jointly submitted to
the Division of Social Studies
and the Division of Arts of
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by
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Jërëjër bu baax.



Même s'il s'ajoute de vampiriser son énergie,
L'artiste reste debout!
Souriant quand l'échange avec son public passe bien.
On chante plus! On danse!

*Even if he ends up draining himself of energy,
The artist remains standing!
Smiling when the exchange with his audience goes well.
We sing more! We dance!*

Cherif

Introduction

Musical Infrastructures

This is a study of musical infrastructures in Dakar, Senegal. Physical infrastructures—water treatment facilities, internet cables, hospitals—both serve a community and make possible its existence. “Built networks that facilitate the flow of goods, people, or ideas and allow for their exchange over space” (Larkin 2013, 328), they generate and sustain nodes of human life and cultural production, enabling modes of exchange that are again dependent on and derivative of those infrastructures. They are as much structuring forces as they are structural objects and are thus highly political. Taking the example of bridges over the Long Island parkway in New York, Langdon Winner highlights the inherently political nature of technology and physical infrastructure. He writes that the specific height of the overpasses prohibited tall public buses from passing underneath, that “Poor people and blacks, who normally used public transit, were kept off the roads because the twelve-foot tall buses could not get through the overpasses. One consequence was to limit access of racial minorities and low-income groups to Jones Beach” (1980, 124). He goes on to argue, “Histories of architecture, city planning, and public works contain many examples of physical arrangements that contain explicit or implicit political purposes” (*ibid.*), highlighting not only that infrastructures as seemingly benign as bridges can enable and limit mobility in profound ways, but that they do so unevenly across different demographics and socioeconomic backgrounds. Similarly, social and religious infrastructures—political systems,

worship spaces, healthcare programs—further shape and organize society along political and cultural lines.

The term ‘infrastructure,’ in reference to the buildings, wires, pipes, asphalt, and oil that enable a system’s continued functionality within a society, carries with it a sense of inherent tactility, of having a concrete place in the world. Yet, as Brian Larkin writes,

infrastructures also exist as forms separate from their purely technical functioning, and they need to be analyzed as concrete semiotic and aesthetic vehicles oriented to addressees. They emerge out of and store within them forms of desire and fantasy and can take on fetish-like aspects that sometimes can be wholly autonomous from their technical function (2013, 329).

Placing emphasis on the ‘addressees’ of infrastructural systems, Larkin highlights that material structures necessarily inform cultural and social realms in ways disconnected from their actual function. However, cultural forces may structure and shape society just as extensively. They are fixed to society not as iron foundations but as hegemonies and counter-hegemonies perpetuated and reinforced by tastes, opinions, and beliefs. Acknowledging infrastructure’s connotations of materiality, I apply the term *musical infrastructures* to refer to the cultural institutions and systems of belief within Dakar that shape the networks of connections between people (musicians and society as listeners, critics, and consumers), places (venues and rehearsal spaces, as well as rooftops and beach fronts), economies (national and international music markets), and states. An example I explore in chapter two, subaltern musicians pursue ‘elsewheres,’ a musical infrastructure, both in the physical world and through imagined ideologies of nationality and identity. Musical infrastructures underlie the real and imagined spaces made available to musicians by the particular social conditions of a highly interconnected and rapidly developing African metropolis.

Arjun Appadurai’s seminal conceptualization of global cultural flows in *Modernity at Large* proves useful here: he writes, “The new global cultural economy has to be seen as a complex, overlapping, disjunctive order that cannot any longer be understood in terms of existing center-periphery model” (1996, 32). He defines these disjunctures through mutually influencing yet

independent “scapes,” topologies of movement characteristic of globalization that constitute “imagined worlds,” an extension of Benedict Anderson’s understanding of “imagined communities” (*ibid.*, 33). The concept of nationality, once fixed within the geographical and cultural limits of a nation state, now spills over its formerly rigid borders into fluid dimensions of exchange predicated on the flows of people, media, technologies, capital, and ideas that Appadurai lays out in his introductory chapter. Imagined worlds, removed from state lines, enable people “to contest and sometimes even subvert the imagined worlds of the official mind and of the entrepreneurial mentality that surround them” (*ibid.*, 33).

I observe a strong example of such contestation across chapters one and two: In the decades following Senegal’s independence from France in 1959, mbalax,¹ the percussion-driven genre pioneered by Senegalese musical icon Youssou N’Dour, has attained the unofficial status of national genre and saturates every corner of Senegal’s musical world. Mbalax’s domestic dominance, coupled with its close attachment to Senegalese national identity, limits non-mbalax performers’ capacity to find opportunity at home. Facilitated by the movement of taste within the world music industry and of international audiences moving in and out of the country, musicians engaging in global cultural flows associate themselves with broader continental narratives of musical identity and seek out alternative markets. As a dominant cultural institution, a musical infrastructure, mbalax shapes the movement and production of music in Dakar and determines how artists situate themselves in relation to the state and their communities. With entrepreneurial savvy and improvisation informed by musical infrastructures, subaltern artists contest mbalax’s hegemony and strive for representation within the nation.

Appadurai’s work provides a robust foundation to understanding how globalization facilitates and extends movement within Senegal’s musical infrastructures. However, the topographies of flows that he engages throughout *Modernity at Large* do not comprehensively address the breakages, failures, and inequalities of global exchange, inequalities bound up in all forms of infrastructure. Musicians in Senegal work within a state of precarity defined by insecurity

¹Pronounced “em-ball-uh.” ‘X’ in Wolof orthography is similar to ‘h’ in English and is sometimes replaced with ‘h’ or ‘kh.’

and a perennial lack of resources that disrupts and complicates the possibility of mobility and exchange. Gavin Steingo, an ethnomusicologist whose book, *Kwaito's Promise: Music and the Aesthetics of Freedom in South Africa*, has deeply influenced my own work on this ethnography, applies the term “obduracy” to describe the moments of immobility that result from lived precarity. Whether staying home to safeguard resources, unable to find transportation, or facing technological failure, kwaito performers in Soweto, South African idle between sporadic bursts of opportunity and movement. His work complements Anna Tsing’s conceptualization of “friction” as “the awkward, unequal, unstable, and creative qualities of interconnection across difference” (Tsing 2005, 4), which addresses the breakages, failures, and power dynamics inherent in global encounter and exchange. Tsing complicates universalist discourses on global flows by examining local fields of difference; difference, she argues, is “both a pre-established frame for connection and an unexpected medium in which connection must find local purchase” (*ibid.*, 245). Grounded in difference, friction acknowledges how the specificities of local cultures and demographics structure broader global movement; it entails the productive tension between the global and the local, between hegemonic and subaltern cultural forces.

I structure this ethnography around three predominant musical infrastructures: mbalax, elsewheres, and teranga. So solidly implanted in Senegalese society, these cultural institutions function as a lens through which I approach diverse themes including collective precarity, globalization, heterotopias, and noise in Dakar. Drawing from months of ethnographic research, I detail the counter-hegemonic music practices and techniques of survival of amateur and semi-professional musicians in pursuit of greater professional success and representation within Senegal.

Situating Contemporary Senegal

The westernmost country of continental Africa, Senegal borders Mauritania to the north, Mali to the East, and Guinea² and Guinea-Bissau to the South. It also borders all sides of the

²Also referred to as Guinea-Conakry to distinguish it from neighboring Guinea-Bissau.



Map of Africa

Gambia, a narrow Wolof- and English-speaking country, except for the Gambia's small coastline on the Atlantic Ocean. Senegal too claims a long coastline along the Atlantic which has greatly informed its cuisine (ceebu jën,³ Wolof for “rice and fish,” is the national dish), economy, and global relations. Additionally, during the colonial era in Africa, Senegal's unique geographical proximity to Europe and the Americas made the French colony a central node in the slave trade.

³Ceebu jën, pronounced with a ‘ch’ sound at the beginning of its name, holds a special place in Senegalese culture alongside the similarly renowned past-time of preparing ataya, a bitter sweet tea mixed with mint and poured from two small cups to produce a head of foam. Several artists, including Youssou N’Dour, have songs named after and dedicated to ceebu jën. Advertisements for bouillon cubes throughout Dakar show gorgeous, bountiful platters of the dish.

Lunch and dinner in Senegal are almost always communal activities; courses are served on a flat platter usually half a meter in diameter or in a large salad bowl. Rather than dividing the large dish into smaller plates for individual consumption, everyone sits around the one platter equipped with a spoon in the right hand and eats from his or her corner. Although couscous and pasta sometime make up the base of some Senegalese dishes, rice is the most common and is the foundation of ceebu jën. Spread out on top of the bed of seasoned rice are steamed carrots, yams, and cabbage and, in the center of the dish, grilled fish. Tamarind seeds, pulverized hibiscus leaves, and chili peppers add additional seasoning. The host of the meal will often take his or her spoon and distribute the various ingredients to the other diners if the host thinks they have not received an even share, a particular manifestation of Senegal's culture of teranga which I discuss at length in chapter three. I grew to love ceebu jën—slimy hibiscus leaves and all—and would invariably eat it two or three times a week with my friends and peers.



Map of Senegal and its Regions

Indeed, the French colonization and exploitation of Senegal in the 18th and 19th centuries and leading up to independence on April 4, 1959, have greatly informed Senegal's present political system, culture, economy, and infrastructure. French is the official language there although Wolof, spoken by most Senegalese as their primary or secondary language, is the *lingua franca*. In contrast to rural villages which are said to speak a Wolof *pur*, many people in Dakar speak a city dialect that weaves between French and Wolof (see Swigart 2000). According to research published by the CIA in 2016, the Wolof ethnic group is the largest of Senegal and constitutes 41.3% of the national populace alongside the Pular (28.1%), Serer (15.3%), Mandinka (5.4%), and Jola (3.4%) ethnic groups and other populations, each of which claims its own language (The World Factbook).

Islam, practiced by the vast majority of Senegalese, is a similarly massive cultural force in Senegal. Mosques are abundant throughout the country, as are Quranic schools. Many of Senegal's Muslims belong to the Mouride brotherhood, a denomination of Islam local to Senegal that follows the teachings of Sufi religious leader, Cheikh Amadou Bamba (1850-1927). Artwork and photos depicting Amadou Bamba and his principle disciple, Ibrahima Fall (the founder of the Baye Fall sect devoted to prayer through manual labor), can be found painted on colorful *cars rapides* and building walls, hanging above beds, on storefronts, in wallets and on necklaces. Their images and teachings saturate Senegal.

Faced with an unemployment rate of 48% (The World Factbook 2007 est.), one of the highest in the world, Senegal also grapples with extreme poverty throughout the country. Precarity, a term that “capture[s] both the tenuous conditions of neoliberal labor as well as states of anxiety, desperation, unbelonging, and risk experienced by temporary and irregularly employed workers” (Millar 2014), is a prevalent reality for both musicians and non-musicians in Dakar, who must constantly improvise to combat the persisting threat of hunger and sickness while providing for their families. I address precarity among musicians to varying degrees throughout this project and explore its tense relationship to *teranga*, a culture of expected giving and reciprocity, in chapter three.

A Return to Dakar

Situated on the Cap-Vert peninsula, Dakar juts out from continental Africa into the Atlantic Ocean. My relationship with Dakar, a frenetic city of almost two million, predates my ethnographic research in the West African country: for four months in 2014, I took weekly classes in Wolof at a cultural center not far from the city's main university, rented a room from a Senegalese family of ten spread across three generations, and threw myself into Senegal's diverse community of musicians. I arrived with few contacts, principally Jean, a French international school teacher I met through one of my sibling's high school friends, and Althea, an American kora player and ethnomusicology student whose blog I had stumbled upon online. Thanks to

several of the connections that Althea helped facilitate, I joined a group of reggae musicians as a lead guitarist and became deeply entrenched in multiple musical communities soon thereafter, even working for a drum and dance festival featuring the nationally celebrated Sabar composer Doudou Ndiaye Rose.

My experience learning and performing music in Dakar, 2014 inadvertently exposed me to many of the themes and methods foundational to the field of ethnomusicology and drove me to pursue future research in Senegal for this undergraduate thesis paper. Throughout my four years studying at Bard college, comprising the year and half of preparation, fieldwork, and writing that I devoted to this project, I ruminated on issues of class division among musicians, pervasive social precarity, the counter-hegemonic pursuit of “non-mbalax” performers, a category of my making that I address comprehensively below, and of the movement and economies of music within Senegal and among international music markets. All of these themes saturate my ethnography at various stages; they are the central forces behind the circulation of people, goods, ideas, and money within Dakar’s musical infrastructures.

I was met with a wave of nostalgia as I exited Dakar’s centrally located airport for the second time in late June 2017, days after the end of Ramadan during which music and most other festivities were put aside for the month of fasting and religious worship. A collage of noises emanating from battered taxis, airport officials, and Cafe Touba vendors mixed in the sweltering, humid air just outside the airport walls. Before I could make sense of this familiar sensory overload, I had to first address the immediate challenge of actually leaving the airport: taxi drivers, taking advantage of the abundance of flustered and disoriented foreigners, reached for my baggage and gestured to their open cabs as I pushed through a crowd of similarly sweaty bodies waiting at the arrival door.

Seynabou, a fashion designer and friend from whom I had arranged to rent a room for my stay, greeted me at her apartment in Ouakam, a former village within Dakar that has experienced an explosion in growth and development in the past decade. I spent the first few days in Ouakam largely by myself, wandering its sandy roads as I reacquainted myself with the

inner workings of the city. A short walk away from a produce market, the lingering stench of raw fish greeted me when I trudged home in the early hours of the morning after the band rehearsals and concerts that made up my weekly routine. Sometimes, if I returned late enough, I could hear the melodious, early morning *Adhan* (call to prayer) that signaled the beginning of the day for most. By this point, I had already adapted my own circadian rhythm to the late night lifestyle of Dakar's musical community.

Like in 2014, I practiced and performed with a broad range of musicians. Doudou, a kora⁴ player and singer whose repertoire includes traditional Mandinka folk songs and original Afro compositions, offered me weekly kora lessons and brought me into his band of four as a rhythm and solo guitarist. I resumed my former position in Xalima, a band led by R&B vocalist Sidy and rapper and slam poet Amadou. A wiry and energetic Baye Fall, Sidy's vocal style emulates the crooning and vocal improvisations of Michael Jackson, his self-professed musical idol. Amadou's slam poetry, which alternates between French and Wolof lyrics, adds an explicitly political edge to the group that addresses issues ranging from the responsibility of a mayor to his city, political corruption, and educational reform. Through Amadou, I met Cherif, a young singer-songwriter who grew to be one of my best friends in Dakar. Cherif plays a blend of pop, funk, and jazz largely informed by jazz fusion acts such as Richard Bona, Xalam (a Senegalese group founded in 1969), and Chick Corea. I also rekindled my relationship with Saliou, an afrojazz guitarist and singer, after running into him by chance at the Mamelles beach, a popular spot for musicians to pass long days relaxing and playing guitar and djembe. This is an abridged list of the performers who appear throughout this ethnography and who have contributed substantially to its theoretical and ethnographic arguments.

These performers circulate across a variety of intimate and professional spaces on which they depend to socialize, practice, and perform. Rooftops and beach fronts constitute intimate space as protected and non-commercial localities where musicians practice, relax, and bide time. Scattered across the city, these spaces form the basis of Dakar's musical communities and facil-

⁴The kora is a 21-string, harp-like instrument associated with the Mandinka ethnic group.

itate the exchange of ideas between musicians in an informal setting. I extend intimate spaces to include communal idling in a lived state of precarity, in which musicians prepare ataya tea, socialize, and pass time between sporadic opportunities to perform or rehearse. By contrast, professional spaces are the formalized points of exchange between musicians and their consumers, the venues of all sizes where musicians earn money, access audiences, and solidify their reputations as performers. I explore both types of spaces below.

Intimate Spaces

Whenever I had spare time, I would walk to the Mamelles beach by myself and socialize with the familiar faces that I invariably found at the tables set up by vendors capitalizing on the crowds of musicians, tourists, athletes, and other beach-goers that circulated in and out of the space. There, I engaged in long debates on Senegalese music and politics, shared beers, and jammed on borrowed acoustic guitars. The Mamelles beach serves as a unique point of convergence for many musicians and, as such, is a cherished space within Dakar's musical community. Recent legislation to build a desalination plant there has stirred an outcry from the beach's community,⁵ which holds weekly concerts to fundraise and raise awareness for the "*Sauver les Mamelles de Dakar*" (Save the Mamelles of Dakar) movement of cultural and ecological preservation. "Mamelles," a word for breasts in French and a reference to the two rounded hills adjacent to the beach, also serves as a useful metaphor for a protected and intimate space; painted signs around the beach read "*Ne Touchez Pas Nos Mamelles*" ("Don't touch our breasts") in protest of the government's encroachment on a valuable cultural hub claimed by the people who frequent it. The sentiment of communality and shared intimacy among the musicians at *les Mamelles* made the beach an important resource in my fieldwork.

Like the Mamelles beach, which benefits from a geographic boundary of sharp inclined hills that isolates it from the urban commotion a half-kilometer away, rooftops provide necessary

⁵The Facebook page "Sauver les Mamelles de Dakar" has documented the movement to block the construction of the new desalination plant since 2014 – <https://www.facebook.com/Sauvermamelles/>



Pouring ataya between cups to create a head of foam

respite from the bustle of Dakar where musicians can convene, relax, and practice free of charge. I passed many of my evenings with Saliou on the roof of his family's apartment building learning his catalog of syncopated and jazz-infused compositions on my unamplified electric guitar. Sometimes we practiced alone, but more often than not his bandmates and family members would join us to watch, chat, jam, or prepare ataya, a twenty- to thirty-minute long ceremony of boiling a mixture of Chinese green tea, mint, sugar, and water and pouring the concoction repeatedly from two small cups to create a thick head of foam.

Repeated over several steepings, preparing ataya is an inherently social act that encourages group conversation and inclusion. Cups are passed around in a circle, with preference given to a guest or outsider. Ataya is also referenced in conversation, both seriously and jokingly, as a pastime associated with unemployment and immobility, as a way of wasting time in a day instead of working and proactively sustaining oneself. Its dual role as a social facilitator and a means of killing time appropriately captures the reality of Senegalese musicians living in a

state of social precarity. To perform and practice on a given day is the exception rather than the norm. Between the rare opportunities to perform and make money, performers may spend time collectively, passing sticky cups of ataya from hand to hand in support of each other. Ataya itself fosters a type of intimate space momentarily shut off from the constant demands of lived precarity, liminal in its indeterminacy of movement, an unresolving yet cohesive space of bonding and exchange. In the preparation of ataya, the prolonged process of pouring frothing tea between cups demonstrates the preparer's familiarity with the ritual; time plays secondary importance to his attention to detail, to the texture of foam and the bitterness of the tea, making sure to rinse the outside of the cup with water before handing his work of deliberation to the drinker. To my surprise, once received, many would just drink it all in one burning gulp and pass the emptied glass back to be refilled with the next steeping. In this capacity, the tea itself is secondary to its ritualized preparation and the intimate social space that it creates.

Professional Infrastructures

Alongside the intimate social space of the rooftop are the venues and rehearsal spaces that serve as a foundation to Dakar's musical economy. Venues come in several tiers: La Grand Théâtre National, a multi-purpose theater hall built in 2011 with workers and funding from China as part of an economic plan to boost Senegal's entertainment industry, holds 1,800 guests and only hosts the most prominent and popular acts, including Youssou N'Dour, Wally Seck, Viviane N'Dour and Baaba Maal. Built at a cost of \$36 million, it is the largest venue of its type on the African continent (Africa Review 2011). This project only engages this tier of venues in relation to the power and cultural influence of the artists that perform at them.

Instead, I explore the professional, semi-professional, and amateur spaces made available to mainstream and alternative performers to differing degrees. In Dakar, mainstream music largely means mbalax; "exploding in energy," some of my interlocutors would say of the genre, but also "noisy": "*Il y a trop de bruit!*" Driven by syncopated sabar percussion, heavy rock instrumentation, and virtuosic vocal performances, mbalax pervades all corners of Dakar's musical

economy. “Over 90 percent,” several interlocutors argued, of Senegalese listen to mostly mbalax. In fact, many considered mbalax’s role in Senegal’s music industry as oppressive, a dominating force that limits the consumption of other genres throughout the country. The possibility for exaggeration aside, that mbalax makes up a visibly large majority of Senegalese music taste and consumption explains the imbalance in opportunity afforded to mbalax performers and those that play otherwise, revealing some of the tensions and possible difficulties that might face a performer if he or she deviates too far from mbalax’s hegemonic aesthetic model.

Just4U, a restaurant-bar and live music venue, hosts a range of mbalax, Afro, jazz, and pop acts of varying degrees of professional success. At one end of the professional spectrum, mbalax duo Pape et Cheikh perform regularly as the headlining act on Saturdays, a coveted slot with a high cover charge, and usually attract large audiences. Though the venue reserves weekend nights for the most popular and profitable acts, Just4U also hosts a broader range of musical backgrounds during slower weekdays and as opening acts. Cherif described his first performance at Just4U as a rite of passage, an important stepping stone in his career in 2014 that led to a second offer to perform again as the opening act on a busy night.⁶ As a platform for both solidified professional acts and upcoming performers, Just4U helps validate rising acts and is believed to lead to new professional opportunities.

“Non-Mbalax Musician”

I focus on venues like Just4U that bridge amateur and professional realms as central cultural institutions that allow for the expression and dissemination of subaltern (*i.e.*, not mbalax) music genres. Finding opportunity in these venues, my interlocutors, who perform all but mbalax, must fight an uphill battle to record, perform, and build an audience with entrepreneurial savvy and cultural awareness in a musical world determined foremost by mbalax. Throughout this text, I employ the term “non-mbalax musician” to describe the range of musicians of differing

⁶However, as I address in chapter three, he would not get to play this follow-up concert as a result of an act of sabotage.

socioeconomic and musical backgrounds who share in the struggle for representation against the hegemony of mbalax in Senegal.

A generalizing term, “non-mbalax musician” does not appropriately capture the various opportunities and avenues to success that performers of different genres pursue in their musical careers. For example, reggae performers in Dakar often play in venues and for audiences different from those of afrojazz musicians; the popular outdoor sound system events that host reggae and dub DJs and draw in large Senegalese audiences every weekend could never accommodate a pop or jazz performer. Sound systems, built around the Jamaican model, are expected to host DJs and emcees spinning reggae, dub, or dancehall tracks and do not suit live performance. On the other hand, the local appeal of reggae does not translate in clubs and venues catering to foreign audiences that typically host Afro or pop acts. The nuances of the cultures and politics of these performance spaces are of central importance to my project and are forgone by the term “non-mbalax musician,” which broadly categorizes the large range of musicians and their personal experiences performing in Dakar. It is a point of identification that most musicians would not use themselves and asserts that these musicians do not perform mbalax in any capacity, which, as I explore momentarily, is not true in some cases. Despite these limitations, the term “non-mbalax musician” also usefully frames their music in relation to mbalax’s structuring and dominant role in Dakar’s music industry.

The term serves a necessary, if complicated, role in my ethnography. During my stay in Dakar in 2014, I experienced Senegal as a young performer eager to play and experience as much music as possible. My first opportunity to play came from an invitation from Ibou, a reggae singer and guitarist, to practice and perform with his band, a group consisting of two singers, one guitarist (not including myself), and a drummer, bassist, and keyboard player. Surrounded by reggae performers, I anticipated that my musical experience in Dakar would quickly become relegated to the social world of reggae. However, I was wrong to assume relative isolation between genres: Ibou also played in a rap group that owned and recorded in a studio near his home and was friends with musicians from several rap, afrobeat, and reggae groups.

Keyboardist Jonas played in pop acts outside of the reggae band and was similarly well connected with other groups of different genres, while drummer Tass also performed in an afrobeat group. In fact, the intermingling of musicians between genres and groups is widespread in Dakar; most lesser-known performers perform in several groups out of financial necessity. Consequently, as my social network expanded, the trajectory of my experiences in Dakar as a musician in 2014 and researcher in 2017 followed a natural yet unintuitive path across many genres. “Non-mbalax performers” usefully encompasses the range of people and musics that I encountered throughout both experiences.

To label a performer such as Ibou or Jonas simply as “reggae musicians” fails to capture the entrepreneurship of these musicians as they navigate multiple genres to open themselves to new opportunities to perform and make money. However, non-mbalax musicians that traverse genre boundaries typically do not participate in mbalax acts, highlighting the apparent cultural division between mbalax groups and subaltern music groups. Of notable exception, Pape, a guitarist who prides himself in his vocabulary of “African” performance styles, was recruited in 2016 as a solo guitarist in Wally Seck’s band, the most popular modern mbalax group in Senegal. He says that Wally Seck hired him to contribute a traditional African sound to the group’s catalog of mbalax songs and maintains that he is not a mbalax musician in spite of this. Instead, he sees his position in Wally Seck’s group as a form of job insurance: “Wally Seck, at the moment, is the most solid group playing in Senegal.” His forceful rejection of the genre suggests that playing mbalax is inauthentic, an act of selling out that I address further in chapter one. Playing with Seck pays well and, because the mbalax singer’s celebrity is sufficiently fixed, Pape can count on the stability of his job as long as he maintains a high standard of playing. However, he asserts his own standing as an “Afro” musician and does not describe himself as a mbalax performer, arguing that he only has financial interest in the genre. His work with Seck shows another facet of entrepreneurship and musical savvy that musicians exercise to pursue individual interests and subsidize careers playing less consumed genres of music. Similarly, Saliou, whose repertoire of recorded music bears no resemblance whatsoever to mbalax, nevertheless

incorporates elements of mbalax in his live shows to appeal to Senegalese audiences and elicit stronger crowd engagement.

Broadly, “non-mbalax musician” communicates the tension of performing genres consumed and appreciated by a minority of Senegalese in lieu of mbalax performance, which affords musicians more opportunities to make money and find audiences. The term highlights the tense relationship between my interlocutors and mbalax as a hegemonic cultural infrastructure in Senegal comprised of the venues, audiences, media outlets, and labels that support mbalax performance. Non-mbalax performers must actively choose to perform in these spaces and adapt their music to appeal to mbalax listeners or avoid them and find alternative spaces to present their music. As I address at length in chapter two, musicians across all genres in Senegal navigate the hegemony of mbalax in varied ways.

Methods and Absences

The ethnographic research that makes up this undergraduate thesis draws principally from two months of fieldwork from late June to the first of September 2017 but also includes memories and experiences from four months of performing music in Dakar in 2014. A combination of ethnographic interviews, informal conversations, and participant-observation gives substance to the broad themes of precarity, entrepreneurship, counter-hegemonic music practices, and local and international musical identities that I contemplate here and in subsequent chapters. My fieldwork took me to many corners of the Dakar peninsula as I performed with multiple groups, rehearsed on rooftops and in bedrooms, attended concerts both big and small, and passed time wandering from neighborhood to neighborhood with my friends and interlocutors.

I speak a near-fluent level of French on which I depended almost exclusively in my communication with others as I navigated the former French colony. While I also have a working understanding of Wolof grammar and vocabulary from weekly language classes in 2014 and can engage in basic conversations and small talk, my limited grasp on Wolof was a significant impediment in my fieldwork. Fortunately, most of my interlocutors spoke a strong level of French, an

indication of formal education, and usually switched from Wolof to accommodate me. However, as a result of sheer habit or in consideration of non-francophone peers, group conversations frequently resolved to Wolof, the more natural mode of communication for most Senegalese. I felt awkward and intrusive interjecting to ask for a rapid translation and summary when I could not parse together someone's argument despite my best attempts to learn and speak the language. Sensing my frustration, many interlocutors (wrongly) consoled me that learning Wolof was easy and could be done in several weeks. Some joked that I needed to find a Senegalese girlfriend to facilitate the learning process.

A second caveat worth mentioning here is the unequal representation of male and female performers in my research. The vast majority of the performers I spent time with were men for several reasons, most notably the reality that women's lives in Senegal are fraught with inequality.⁷ Renting a room with a large Senegalese family in 2014, I observed the sharply delineated gender roles in the house: as a man, I ate apart from the women of the house, who were expected to perform the domestic roles of cooking and clean up. Such gender divisions exist in various forms throughout Senegalese society and ultimately limited my ability to meet and speak with women musicians. Women singers make up a non-trivial part of Dakar's music world and mbalax vocalists like Viviane N'Dour have garnered immense national popularity alongside their male contemporaries. Yet, as Timothy Mangin notes, "there is still a stigma attached to women performing in nightclubs even though there are plenty of female patrons" (Mangin 2013, 127). The relative abundance of singers notwithstanding, only a tiny fraction of Dakar's instrumentalists are women. Because it was difficult for me to access women's spaces and elicit comments from female musicians on their personal experiences relating to gender in Dakar, I would like to share an excerpt from my peer Althea's blog, in which she describes her own experiences of gender division and inequality as a foreign, female musician:

...no one needs to tell me that I'm only hired because I'm a light-skinned woman. I know that. I know that the only way I came to even learn the kora is because I'm a

⁷The World Economic Forum's Global Gender Gap Report ranks Senegal 91st of 144 countries based on factors of economic opportunity, educational attainment, health and survival, and political empowerment. (World Economic Forum 2017)

foreigner; families in Senegal aren't often capable of investing in musical education for their children, particularly if they come from outside the tradition and particularly if their children are girls (SullyCole 2014).

Addressing gender inequality broadly, she also writes, with painful detail, about her own experiences of sexual harassment within musician communities ranging from semi-regular comments from strangers asking to marry her to anxiety-inducing physical encounters. And, as a kora player within a large afrobeat group, she notes that she was left unpaid after gigs or was excluded from gigs altogether. By contrast, the group consistently paid and supported her American male contemporary, a keyboardist, who was also a part of the band. A serious ethnomusicological project exploring the role of gender and femininity among women musicians in Senegal is deeply needed.

Chapter Overview

Chapter one, "Critiquing Mbalax," serves as a foundation to the two chapters that follow it, outlining the pervasive and hegemonic role of mbalax in Senegal's music industry. I trace the genre's lineage back to the Afro-Cuban music popular in the last decades of French colonial rule and explore how Youssou N'Dour's fusion of Afro-Cuban melodies, rock instrumentation, and sabar drumming grew to become the national music model. As mbalax rose to national prominence, so did Youssou N'Dour, who is now both a revered musical celebrity and business mogul at the head of a widely consumed newspaper, radio station, and television network. He also runs one of the only established record labels in Dakar. Non-mbalax musicians see his omnipresence in Senegalese society as troubling and complicated; a massive cultural and political force in Senegal, N'Dour's playful title as the "king of mbalax" also carries undertones of despotism and unchecked power.

Later, I situate the reader in mbalax's present state of affairs with a detailed case study of Wally Seck's music video for "Sante Yalla" that highlights many of the popular visual and aural aesthetics found in contemporary mbalax. I focus specifically on "*bruit*," the French word for noise or clatter and a term that my interlocutors used to criticize the perceived excess of percussion within the genre, as a distinctly Senegalese mode of listening; an aesthetic model

that carries immense cultural capital and facilitates the circulation of music; and a polarizing musical tool that divides local, mainstream music tastes from outside, alternative music tastes. *Bruit* solidifies mbalax as an internally focused genre in its exclusive appeal to Senegalese music preferences and pushes genres that do not meet its aesthetic criteria to the periphery of national music consumption.

Mbalax's hegemony within Dakar limits the spaces and opportunities made available to non-mbalax performers, forcing these musicians to look to alternative audiences, spaces, markets, and countries to sell their music. Chapter two, "Far-Off," details the many strategies and modes of imagining that non-mbalax musicians employ to fight for relevance and socioeconomic mobility. I consider these various entrepreneurial techniques through the lens of "outside worlds" and "elsewheres": musicians may pursue a better life through immigration, moving beyond Senegal altogether to access a country that promises greater job security. When immigration is not a possibility, they may choose to curate their music to international audiences within Senegal, taking advantage of Dakar's expat community, or by appealing to the world music market. Many venues, including Just4U, attract large groups of tourists and expats who will pay to hear non-mbalax genres of music. In this capacity, these local venues constitute outside worlds in their ability to attract non-Senegalese audiences and offer a platform for alternative music genres. That said, the limited venues available to non-mbalax musicians are insufficient for some groups. I detail how the perceived inadequacy of Senegal's venues and musical infrastructures compel rising acts to tour abroad. In all cases, musicians conceptualize 'elsewheres,' a state of "living in two and many non-opposing worlds—all located in the very same place as where one is" (Minh-Ha 2011, 2). Grappling with widespread precarity and social immobility, musicians navigate their lived state of existence while strategizing around real and imagined outside worlds.

My third chapter addresses the tensions and dynamics between pervasive social precarity and *teranga*. Translating to "hospitality" or "openness" in Wolof, *teranga* also refers to a culture of expected reciprocity within Senegalese communities that acts as a support system against collective precarity, affording the poorest and most afflicted community members greater social

mobility. Teranga, as a form of grassroots socialism, complicates the capitalist model that governs Senegal's musical world. The model of "presentational" (Turino 2008) musical performance, in which the divide between performer and audience member is strictly delineated, correlates to this capitalist musical economy, enabling musicians to assert themselves as professional acts and sell tickets, CDs, and other merchandise as a means of making money. Yet, teranga calls into question the protected space of the stage: it demands that a performer share opportunities, resources, and money when other performers ask for them. Otherwise, he risks social isolation and condemnation for not meeting teranga's quota for sharing. Even at established venues like Just4U, outside musicians may successfully request to play alongside the headlining act for a song without prior arrangement.

While teranga provides great benefits to amateur musicians, particularly those who cannot afford instruments, it also proves a hindrance to acts pursuing greater professional legitimacy in Senegal and abroad and limits one's ability to sustain oneself on music alone. Though musicians cannot publicly reject teranga, I outline two private methods of contesting it: sabotage and self-isolation. Several interlocutors recounted instances in which they witnessed or were subject to acts of sabotage ranging from slander intended to weaken close relationships between band members and across groups to the direct obstruction of concert plans through subversive means. In an uncertain musical world, as the logic goes, the success and mobility of other acts directly threatens an artist's own ability to make money and find gigs. In contrast, performers may also opt to isolate themselves from the hostility underlying Dakar's network of musicians. Doing so allows them to focus quietly on their musical career and limits (but does not eliminate) their participation in teranga's system of expected reciprocity.

Each chapter details a massive cultural force within Senegal's music world that reflects the pervading reality of life as a musician in a rapidly growing and interconnected "Afropolis" (Mbembe 1992). The counter-hegemonic understanding of "elsewhere" contests and responds to mbalax as an imposing, hegemonic actor in Senegal, so solidified and perpetuated throughout society as to be considered infrastructural. Similarly, teranga structures how many Senegalese

understand their community and their relationship to that community, forming a basis of exchange through mutual accountability and collective support. Musical infrastructures define the points of encounter, exchange, and friction for Senegalese musicians within global and local cultural landscapes. I address these monoliths from the ground-level perspective of ethnographic research, through the shared stories and experiences of my interlocutors who all vary in upbringing, demeanor, and perspective to differing degrees and have contributed massively to this project.

1

Critiquing Mbalax

*How the National Popular Genre Informs
the Lives of the Musicians who Challenge It*

Mbalax, a postcolonial popular dance genre, saturates the musical consumption of Senegalese listeners to the point that it dominates every corner of the country's music industry. Its hegemony, solidified in the decades following independence from French colonial rule, is reproduced through the listening practices of the Senegalese. Several of my interlocutors, most of whom hold conflicting or negative opinions on mbalax, quote the percentage of Senegalese that listen primarily to mbalax above 90%. Cherif, a singer and guitarist who describes his music as "Afro," opting for the common prefix attached to many African-borne genres while excluding the usual identifier, argues, "because of the cultural dominance of Youssou N'Dour and other mbalax musicians like Wally Seck, there is insufficient room to perform music outside of the genre. 99% of people [in Senegal] listen to mbalax, and people are unwilling to listen to anything else." While 99% might exaggerate the extent of mbalax's pervasiveness among Senegalese listeners, it nevertheless points to Cherif's anxiety as a non-mbalax performer and his frustration towards the inflexibility of mainstream Senegalese musical taste. Cherif, like all of my interlocutors, creates and performs his music with mbalax and its audience in mind, even as he makes music that is explicitly not mbalax. Mbalax dictates where performers can or cannot play music and to whom they should market their music.

This chapter seeks to explore how minority musicians critique and engage with a genre that has subsumed the national populace and has become synonymous with Senegal itself. These musicians both resist and exploit the hegemony of the national genre to create musical sub-narratives that compete for space among national listeners. The disparity between mbalax's national popularity and the limited consumption of other genres is a byproduct of Senegal's music industry, history, and economics; analogous examples of a dominating genre do not exist in the American music industry, namely because the expansive resources available to record, perform, and promote music allow the industry to cater to different markets and audiences in ways that the postcolonial Senegalese music market, still relatively young and small, cannot. The performers whom I refer to as "non-mbalax" musicians face hurdles including the perceived absence of state support in music and the lack of "legitimate" venues and music labels for subaltern genres to flourish and thrive, issues I address at greater length in the following chapter.

Whether performers eschew mbalax performance in specialized venues appealing to the minority of non-mbalax listeners or adapt themes from mbalax to communicate their music in a more socially recognizable form, they must navigate a musical landscape determined principally by mbalax. Questions and criticisms surrounding mbalax and its grip on Senegalese musical consumption punctuated my conversations and interviews with interlocutors from disparate musical backgrounds. Several concerns targeted the inflexibility of national taste for mbalax, suggesting that mbalax listeners resist outside influences and creative interpretations that deviate too far from the current model. Other interlocutors considered mbalax as too culturally specific to Senegal; the unorthodox timing of accents and the busyness of the percussion, they argued, limited the consumption of the genre outside of the country. By contrast, non-mbalax musicians often seek to appeal to "world music" audiences in Europe or America or to neighboring West African countries that might be more receptive to the kinds of music they are playing.

Following a brief and partial history of mbalax, this chapter focuses on how non-mbalax performers perceive and engage with a national genre that polarizes music tastes and dictates where, and where not, musicians can perform to make a living. At the heart of mbalax's rise

to dominance is Youssou N'Dour, the “king of mbalax,” an international world music celebrity turned media mogul who pioneered mbalax in its earliest stages and has shaped the modern Senegalese musical landscape. His influence on media consumption in Senegal both through his enduring canon of works and as the owner of a radio station and record label, among other outlets, indeed cements him as a powerful cultural figure; his title as “king” communicates both endearing support and appreciation for his music and the authoritarianism of an unchecked ruler. Later, my analysis turns to “*bruit*,” the French word for noise and clatter, which I extend as a metaphor for understanding the varied perceptions and criticisms of mbalax by outside performers.

Defining Mbalax

“Mbalax is not actually a genre of music,” Cherif corrects me following one of my earlier probes into his stance on the popular music style. “It’s a rhythm, and a piece of the Serer ethnic identity. Every beat and rhythm here has a legible ethnic origin.” This was not the first time I had heard this such a statement; weeks earlier, I accompanied Amadou, a rapper, slam poet, and politically-minded citizen, to Université Cheikh Anta Diop, where students at the university had organized a weeklong festival celebrating the culture of Casamance, the southernmost region of Senegal. Casamance exists in relative isolation from the rest of the country because the Gambia, a narrow and long country that juts into Senegal along the Gambia river, sequesters it off from the mainland. As Amadou and I spoke with the festival organizer, a gaggle of spectators marched alongside a group of drummers. “Those are rhythms of Casamance!” Amadou notes excitedly, eager to impart his cultural wisdom onto me, “They come from the Jola ethnic group.” As both Cherif and Amadou explained to me, rhythms had cultural origins that could often be traced back to a specific ethnic group and can help to identify a drummer’s background. Mbalax, as Cherif explains, is one example of such rhythms. However, his point does not necessarily reject the idea that mbalax is a genre; Cherif acknowledges its widespread use in quotidian parlance yet asserts his knowledge of the rhythm’s history as an ethnic marker.

Indeed, *mbalax* means “rhythm” or “accompaniment” in Wolof, a term appropriated by a young Youssou N’Dour to describe the music coming out of Senegal in the decades following the country’s independence from France in 1960. In the early post-independence period, musicians drew from a repertoire of sounds and genres that persisted from the colonial rule: jazz and Cuban music, popular among French residents in Senegal and made public over the radio, became the musical foundation for early groups like the Star Band, Orchestre Baobab, and Étoile de Dakar. Musicians from the Star Band, in particular, would sing their Cuban repertoire in Spanish and perform Cuban rhythms on timbales and other imported instruments including the guitar, keyboard and drum set. Youssou N’Dour, who spent his early teenage years performing with the Star Band, later left to join Étoile de Dakar (Star of Dakar) along with several members of the group, where he became the frontman of the new collective.

At once a member of a younger generation of musicians born into Senegalese independence and a collaborator with older musicians drawing from the colonial period, N’Dour was uniquely poised to incorporate indigenous musical ideas into the standard of Cuban and jazz performance. Alongside Omar Pene, Thione Seck, and other musicians, N’Dour introduced Wolof lyrics into the Senegalese musical repertoire and replaced Cuban rhythms with the local *sabar* drumming style, fulfilling, at the time, “urbanites’ desire for a music that was African and also distinctly Senegalese” (Mangin 2013, 97). “Most importantly,” as Mangin points out in his dissertation on the genre, “*mbalax* was received as a modern style, like jazz, R&B, rumba, *highlife*,...and *makossa*” (98). Thanks largely to N’Dour’s intervention, *mbalax* became embedded in Senegalese culture as the national popular dance genre by the 1980s, its widespread popularity persisting to the present.

As the meaning of its name suggests, *mbalax* draws extensively from its rhythm section, particularly the *orchestre* of two or more *sabar* drummers that leads moments of complex syncopation and pushes songs forward with a rapid galloping pattern shared across the genre. These drummers perform in tandem with the *tama*, a small double-headed drum held in the armpit of a drummer, who hits the drum with a curved stick in the far hand and an open palm on

the arm nearest the drum. By compressing the drum with his arm and adding tension to its supporting strings, the performer can raise and lower the pitch of the drum, giving it a melodic quality that contrasts the rhythmic foundation of the sabar percussion. While drummers from both groups are usually afforded opportunities to solo at certain points in a song, the *tama* plays the role of a lead instrument, embellishing on melodic ideas from other members of the band and adding detail between lyrics. Both *tama* and sabar percussionists perform alongside a trap drum set, which, like the sabar *orchestre*, solidifies the foundational rhythm of the genre and further contributes to its fast pace with eighth- or sixteenth-note patterns on the high-hat. Rhythmically, little to no emphasis is placed on the downbeat of each measure; the kick drum lands most commonly on offbeats or the two and four beats of the measure. This rhythmic feature sets mbalax apart from many Western genres, in which accents predominantly land on beats one and three of a measure.

The lead guitar and keyboard marimba add further layers of depth to mbalax's rhythm: both instruments play fast arpeggiated melodies over the rhythm section and the sharp attack and fast decay of the keyboard marimba add yet another percussive quality to the genre. A secondary rhythm guitar performs rapid strumming patterns that resemble the accents placed on the hi-hats, while an additional synth, if present, fills space with longer, drawn out pad sounds. Meanwhile, the electric bass guitar locks in with the bass drum and further grounds the rhythm of the song. Collectively, mbalax is frenetic and driving and, especially amongst the highest level of mbalax performers, demands virtuosic performances that exude energy and liveliness. Performances switch between verses, choruses, and extended solo sections. Typically, throughout a verse, the solo guitar and *tama* lightly embellish and improvise while the remainder of the group maintains a busy yet consistent rhythmic foundation for the vocalist. By contrast, choruses are marked by complex syncopation across all instruments that mirror the rhythmic patterns of sabar drumming. In the solo section typically near the end of a song, various members of a group further emphasize their mastery over their instruments. A normal live performance of a mbalax song may last anywhere between eight to fifteen minutes, with most time dedicated

to solos. In comparison to the dense rhythmic structures of mbalax, however, the genre tends to feature simple, repetitive, and cyclical chord progressions.

Though the instruments call attention to themselves through high-energy performance and virtuosity, they all function as a frame of reference for the central figure of mbalax performance: the singer. Mbalax vocal performances are similarly virtuosic in style to their instrumental counterpart, with singers performing loudly and with a wide vocal range. Particularly in the decades after independence, mbalax groups were led largely by singers from the griot caste of oral historians, who used music as a medium for keeping records and promoting moral virtues (for more information on Senegalese griots see Tang 2007, Mangin 2013). Youssou N'Dour, though not raised in the tradition by his griot mother, later exemplified this model; his lyrics depict positivity, compassion, and respect, offering spiritual and moral guidance to listeners. In spite of its lyrical spirituality, mbalax functions fluidly in a diverse range of social contexts from casual listening to festive celebrations such as weddings or baptisms (Tang 2007). Speaking with musicians playing outside of the mbalax tradition, however, I was frequently met with the complaint that modern mbalax had lost its roots as musicians shifted away from this socially conscious tradition, opting for anecdotes detailing feelings of love or sentimentality.

Because of the deep level of musicianship needed to perform mbalax, the genre is largely presentational in nature (Turino 2008); opportunities for call-and-response between audience and performers are rare. However, performers elicit excitement and engagement from the audience through a process called *animation*. Tim Mangin notes three facets of *animation*:

1. Singers elicit excitement and intimacy through praise singing and narration.
2. Audiences judge *animation* by how well groups fuse or alternate between mbalax *pur et dur* [the busier, percussion-laden form of mbalax] and *Afro* to create and resolve tensions that lead to *ci biir* [a feeling of closeness to the music].
3. Groups rely on griot performance practices in their *animation*. Many singers employ griot praise singing techniques to shape their melodic phrases, color the timbre of their voice, and ornament their melodies. (Mangin 2013, 21-22)

Animation underscores a key dynamic between mbalax performer and audience and is central to how musicians develop renown in the genre. Dance in mbalax (detailed at length in Tang 2007,

Mangin 2013) is central to the genre and further enables audience members to interact with the music.

Youssou N'Dour, "King of Mbalax"

Though Youssou N'Dour continues to perform and record new music, both musicians and listeners associate him with an older generation of mbalax performers that arose in the early post-independence years. His earlier repertoire is revered as classic, canonical; few Senegalese, even those that harbor generally unfavorable views towards the genre, dispute the quality of his voice or musical composition. Ibrahima, a rapper and guitarist who comes from a large musical family, accredits N'Dour's success to the extraordinarily talented musicians he surrounded himself with at a very early age. Expertly executed, his music serves as a model and point of origin for new mbalax performance. Through his successful music career and the wide international exposure he received in response to his 1986 collaboration with English singer-songwriter Peter Gabriel on "In Your Eyes," N'Dour has implanted himself in Senegalese culture as a highly respected musical producer and ambassador for Senegal.

Yet, his cultural influence has transcended that of a musician. Youssou N'Dour owns *L'Observateur*, *TMF*, and *RFM*, a newspaper, television channel, and radio station, respectively, all of which are widely consumed throughout Senegal and are the principal competitors against state sponsored media outlets, namely *RTS (Radiodiffusion Télévision Sénégalaise)*, a publically owned media network in control of radio and television stations across the country. Closer to his interests as a musician, N'Dour founded *Jololi*, one of the only music labels in Senegal with the resources to successfully promote and sustain musicians. He also owns a recording studio in Dakar. As I later discovered, and as I will discuss momentarily, his grip on music production in Dakar is perceived as monopolistic and exploitative of the lesser known musicians that signed with *Jololi*.

Beginning with a 2012 bid for the presidency against incumbent Abdoulaye Wade, N'Dour has also fiercely pursued a career in politics. Citing his "supreme patriotic duty" to the Sen-

galese people that “have in various ways called for [his] candidacy in the February presidential race” (Rohter 2012), N’Dour ran amongst a dozen other candidates before dropping out of the election due to concerns over the validity of the signatures needed to be nominated as an official candidate. He later offered his support to Macky Sall, backing the candidate in a speech and through his media outlets, which offered alternative information on Wade that was not communicated by the state media. Following Sall’s victory, N’Dour was appointed as Minister of Culture and Tourism for a short tenure before being renamed as a presidential adviser.

Youssou N’Dour’s dominance in Senegalese media has garnered him the playful title as “king of mbalax.” The term points to his early role pioneering mbalax and his later international exposure through high profile collaborations, rooting him as a beloved national musical icon. In her glowing article on N’Dour’s rise to prominence, Lucy Duran points to Peter Gabriel’s “immeasurable impact on Youssou,” particularly in cultivating a “new style of stage presentation” that dispelled early rumors that N’Dour could not dance (Duran 1989, 282). Gabriel’s intervention pushed the still-young artist to develop his stage presence and incorporate light shows and dancing that added spectacle to his concerts, a model of performance that did not previously exist in Senegal. She offers ethnographic evidence of N’Dour’s celebrity in the neighboring Gambia, quoting Ibrahima Jarju, a DJ at Radio Sy, who claims, “Here in the Gambia, Youssou N’Dour is still at the top” (283). Her article shows how he has cultivated himself as an endeared and respected figure and cultural icon.

However, the article does not venture to consider the artists that have grown in his wake and how N’Dour’s hegemonic cultural role in Senegal has influenced them. N’Dour’s title as “king” carries conflicting connotations: its celebratory meaning is perverted by qualities of unchecked power and privilege, even despotism. The oppositional definition of “king” resonates with the conflicting opinions that my interlocutors feel towards Youssou N’Dour. While the quality of his early music, and of his voice in particular, rarely comes under contention, his critics point to the power he exerts over the Senegalese music industry as the owner of the most reputable and financially supportive recording label. In the eyes of my interlocutors, N’Dour exists dually

as an enormously successful and powerful businessman and as a celebrity musician: even the sharpest critics of mbalax offer leniency towards Youssou in the height of his career with the *Étoile de Dakar*, a group he helped push to national fame and that served as an early incubator for mbalax.

On one evening, drinking mango juice on the roof of my apartment building, Cherif and I passed hours listening to Xalam, an Afrofunk group that emerged in the early post-independence period at roughly the same time as Youssou N'Dour. I recall the bodily reaction I experienced hearing the intensely rough, commanding rolled 'R' in the second half of their song "Kanu." Hearing his praise for Xalam, I asked how Cherif saw the group in relation to Youssou N'Dour's music: "Youssou N'Dour is incredible, but personally I prefer Xalam. Youssou's special gift is his voice. But in Xalam, even the instrumentation is phenomenal and exciting. They learned to play in colonial music schools and became exceptional musicians. They *understood* what they were playing." Cherif's critique of N'Dour's music points to his preference for funk, jazz, and pop styles of performance and highlights his ambivalence towards mbalax's sound by contrasting it with Western musical ideals of composition and virtuosity while maintaining N'Dour's supremacy as a singer. When I encountered musicians or listeners who held negative opinions on the state of mbalax in modern Senegal, I would ask how they perceived N'Dour; none outright rejected the singer's talent as a musician, and many spoke to the high quality of songwriting and instrumentation that gave N'Dour's work a distinguishing edge over what they perceived as the *bruit*—clatter—of contemporary mbalax.

However, his role in politics, media, and in the music industry specifically is a sharp point of contention among non-mbalax musicians. In an interview, Ibrahima, a rapper and guitarist from a family of seven other brothers who all play music, describes how Youssou N'Dour, as an ambassador for Senegalese music and cultural tycoon, has been both a boon and hindrance to musicians. I had invited him to my apartment to jam and conduct an interview, where we prepared some of the last reserves of my American roasted coffee—a rarity and stark contrast to the sweet Nescafé sold by street vendors. Realizing that I did not have an amp for my electric

guitar, we decided to relocate to his apartment and left to hail a taxi. As we entered the vehicle, the crooning jazz of Chet Baker played over the radio. Ibrahima and I, who have had long conversations on our favorite jazz musicians, were both shocked by the familiar yet rarely heard genre. Our murmurs of surprise worried the taxi driver, who offered to change the channel. He chuckled when we insisted that we actually *enjoy* the music and commented that *mbalax* usually permeates the inner spaces of taxi cabs and *cars rapides*, colorful buses that offer some of the cheapest means of transportation in Dakar.

Once at Ibrahima's apartment, our conversation naturally moved towards N'Dour: Ibrahima commented, "Youssou gave a name to Senegalese music and drew awareness to Senegal as an internationally known artist." His international exposure as a Senegalese icon cannot be understated as a positive force for Senegalese musicians. However, Ibrahima also pointed to the negative side of N'Dour's political and cultural power, arguing,

No one can surpass Youssou. His grip on Senegalese media and music is too strong. Specifically, in his label, if he sees that a young act is poised to rival or surpass his own popularity, he will take steps to limit the progress of that musician. And, musicians are forced to sign to his label because no viable alternatives exist; either you sign to Youssou's label and release creative control over your music or sign to a label that does not have the resources to promote or record your music.

In an underfunded and still developing post-independence music industry, Youssou N'Dour and his label maintain one of the only proven avenues for sustained success for fledgling musicians. While other labels do exist, they often only exist by name and do not offer the resources to promote, record, and distribute music professionally. Thus, musicians feel compelled to pursue contracts with *Jololi*, which means that even before signing, the musicians are adapting to a model that they think the label will find marketable. After signing, as Ibrahima points out, the level of control exerted over musicians is even stronger, even exploitative, forcing musicians to perform and write under a model set by N'Dour, who will assure that he remains the musical point of focus in the label's output.

A New Generation of Mbalax

At the vanguard of the newest generation of mbalax performers are Wally Seck and Viviane N'Dour (née Chidid, the former sister-in-law of Youssou N'Dour), who regularly sell out the largest venues in Dakar and have amassed enormous followings both in Senegal and among Senegalese communities abroad. Their style of playing retains many of the musical qualities of older iterations of mbalax yet also incorporates new themes and ideas through lyrics and musical cues that recast the mbalax griot singer-storyteller in a new light, one that borrows from tropes of Western pop stardom. Born into an affluent griot family, Wally Seck embodies this new kind of mbalax performer: in his music videos, he wears slim suits and hip designer clothing and displays his social status through jewelry, cars, and other legible symbols of wealth. At the same time, he also identifies with older characteristics of mbalax singers as spiritually connected griots, pointing to his griot heritage on his website and occasionally dressing in traditional garb. As Mangin points out, this model of griot-celebrity actually originates from Youssou N'Dour, who “negotiates his obligations as a ‘modern’ griot (for his Senegalese audience)...with the desire to be an international pop star” (Mangin 2013, 98).

As much as Youssou N'Dour's music prevails on the radio and on TV, his presence on stage is limited to infrequent concerts. Now, most of his cultural influence stems from his less visible work running several media outlets and working in politics. By contrast, Wally Seck and Viviane N'Dour are hyper-visible ambassadors of their generation of mbalax both in the live music world and in recorded formats played on MP3 players or over the radio. To emphasize some of the themes behind this modern, popular form of mbalax, I turn to Wally Seck's music video for “Sante Yalla,” which visually captures the competing themes of griot traditionality and modern, upper-middle class mobility and embodies the defining musical characteristics of most of the mbalax I heard in Dakar during my research trip. This video analysis serves to situate the listener within Senegal's musical world and offer a point of comparison to the music of the non-mbalax performers with whom I spent the large majority of my time in Dakar.



Figure 1: Wally Seck and sabar drummer clothed in traditional attire

“Sante Yalla”: Listening to Contemporary Mbalax

Keyboard marimba introduces “Sante Yalla,” its percussive minor key arpeggiation augmented by 16th-note hi hat rhythms. Building tension and atmosphere, a synth pad enters in the second measure, slowly ascending melodically. An electric guitar, undistorted and wet with reverb, further accentuates this sense of atmosphere with semi-improvised and meandering riffs. The sabar drummers enter with syncopated hits and slowly build in complexity and phrase length as a MIDI horn section enters triumphantly. Throughout the instrumental introduction to the song, the music video cuts between two scenes: in the first, dressed in a traditional red and white boubou and adorned by a staff and spiritually imbued necklaces, Wally Seck sits before a group of men and women clad in matching blue and yellow traditional garb as they dance in unison to syncopated sabar phrases. The second scene shows two men dressing Seck. In a ritual of spiritual preparation, they place black leather necklaces around his neck, pour a white concoction by his feet, and plant the staff firmly in the ground before him in anticipation of his imminent vocal delivery. These symbols situate Seck as a spiritually connected griot storyteller and evoke similar ritual preparations like that of popular *laamb* wrestling, in which spiritual



Figure 2: Choreographed sabar dance



Figure 3: Seck in front of a white Porsche

leaders adorn wrestlers with amulets and lotions to mitigate the risk of losing in battle. Asides from a sole sabar percussionist performing for the onlooking Seck, musicians are noticeably absent from the video (Figure 1). The video, instead, places emphasis on choreographed sabar dance performances by both men and women in matching garb, showcasing the high energy and agile movements common in both mbalax and sabar dance, and on Seck himself (Figure 2).

Following a particularly intense burst of sabar drumming, the song switches from its suspenseful introduction to an upbeat and frenetic groove marked by the ubiquitous galloping rhythm of sabar drummers playing bursts of three 32nd notes leading into the two and four beats of each measure. Except during moments of syncopation, when the sabar drummers lead the band in complex rhythmic motifs, and throughout a rhythmic break later in the song, the drummers embellish little on this driving rhythm. Seck finally enters a minute into the song, singing the refrain of “Sante Yalla,” the Wolof language equivalent to the common Arabic expression, “Alhamdulillah,” meaning “praise be to God.” Seck’s voice, also augmented with studio reverb, emphasizes longer drawn out phrasing and moderate vocal ornamentation that often touches the lower register of its singing range.

By the second half of “Sante Yalla,” the video forgoes the themes of tradition, ritual, and heritage that assert Wally Seck’s connection to his country’s history of griot storytelling. Although choreographed Sabar dance continues to play a central role in the video, Wally Seck switches from his red and white boubou in preference for a sleek, Western wardrobe. We see him singing from the balcony of his presumed residence wearing a leather jacket and tight black pants; on top of a yacht wearing shades, a designer hoodie, and boots; and leaning on of a white Porsche sports car with matching white clothing (Figure 3). Seck, as one of the highest paid musicians in Senegal, emphasizes his wealth, social status, and musical success through a material representation that contrasts the earlier visual themes of religiosity and tradition. The music video captures the oppositional sides of the archetypal mbalax performer: at once, Wally Seck asserts his piousness and commitment to ritual and history and situates himself as a griot.

Yet, he also stakes his claim as a celebrity whose success in Senegal comes across in his display of wealth and style throughout the video.

Perceptions of Mbalax as *Bruit*

In my own personal quest to discover and understand mbalax, I asked non-mbalax performers how they perceived and understood the genre. Many of my interlocutors dismissed modern mbalax performance, rejecting the genre on the grounds that it is too noisy or busy (“*Il y a trop de bruit*”). These musicians perceive the increasing role of the *tama* talking drum and keyboard marimba that saturate the modern mbalax sound as gratuitous, noisy, and lacking in musicianship or narrative. Several joked that many marimba performers in modern mbalax groups do not even pay attention to the notes they play and that they focus solely on the rhythm of the instrument as if it were a drum. They contrast performers like Wally Seck with Youssou N’Dour and his generation of mbalax, arguing that N’Dour’s music was more “musical” and deployed *tama* and sabar drumming to tasteful effect. Similarly, I was met with comments on how the lyrical standards set by N’Dour had deteriorated in light of the recent popularity of sentimental love songs. These pointed opinions on mbalax show the very real divisions between its old and new forms and the contentious standing modern mbalax holds in the eyes of performers competing against it in Dakar’s music industry. In my analysis, I look to the multiple interpretations of *bruit* in mbalax to understand how and why non-mbalax musicians perceive recent trends in the genre as isolating, commercially motivated, and inaccessible across cultures.

On one afternoon during band practice with Cherif, in the humid air of the roof of his bassist Ahmed, the four musicians and three onlookers from Ahmed’s family began an impassioned debate on working as musicians in Dakar and on the hegemonic role that mbalax plays in Senegal’s music industry. The conversation touched on many of the perspectives and criticisms that I experienced of mbalax throughout my two month research trip. In addition to Cherif on guitar on vocals and Ahmed on bass, his group rehearsal consisted of Cheikh, who plays drum set but was confined to a cajon for practice, and sabar drummer Moussa. Because Moussa did

not speak French, the early half of the conversation occurred mainly in Wolof, a frustrating reality for me as an ethnographer, and I had to regularly confer with Cherif when I could not glean a basic understanding of the arguments with my limited Wolof.

Suggesting a past musical golden age in Senegal, Cherif argues that, “In the 1970s, Dakar was the musical capital of West Africa. Now, when producers fly in from elsewhere, they go to Bamako [capital of neighboring Mali].” Cherif’s argument references high-profile collaborative albums such as “Talking Timbuktu” between Malian guitarist Ali Farka Touré and American guitarist Ry Cooder and “Mali Music” by English songwriter Damon Albarn and Malian musicians Afel Bocoum and Toumani Diabaté, among others. In his view, the music of Touré and Diabaté succeed in capturing international audiences, particularly Western listeners, better than mbalax, which the four musicians agreed had a local particularity that made the genre unappealing to foreign listeners. Ahmed explains this phenomenon:

Mbalax is like a code, a language. To appreciate the music you have to understand that language, which is very difficult for outsiders to understand. And because too few musicians outside of mbalax succeed in recording and promoting their music on an international level, people do not want to visit Senegal for its music.

The group also points to conflicts in taste between the Senegalese music market and the world music market, which these musicians see as a boon to performers. This is particularly true for non-mbalax musicians, who consider trends in the world music market as musical templates that offer upward social mobility, given that the dominance of mbalax in Senegal limits the extent to which these performers can find success at home.

Their comments show a frustration for mbalax as a major part of Senegal’s national cultural identity. Mbalax’s blanketing authority over Senegalese culture detracts from other musical forms, limiting artists’ capacity to employ a national identity to promote their music when performing a lesser-known genre. Scott Linford offers an ethnographic vignette that exemplifies this perception: “‘Today, people who don’t know Senegal think that there is only mbalax,’ [musician Goudiaby] bemoans. ‘Here [in the Casamance], there is cultural diversity. In Dakar, it’s just mbalax’” (Linford 2016, 301). Goudiaby argues that mbalax’s national popularity and

international recognition as Senegal's chief musical export has cast Senegal as musically one dimensional, a fiction that he contests as a non-mbalax musician. It also translates, simply, to a lack of opportunity for non-mbalax performers. Cherif argues, "You can practice jazz your whole life and still have trouble making a living. Meanwhile, someone can learn to play an instrument and start writing mbalax in two years time and easily become richer than you." Cherif's example of jazz communicates a Western standard of musical sophistication, one steeped in prestige, cultivated taste, and virtuosity, to assert that skill and musicianship are trivial in contrast to choice of genre. Questioning the competency of mbalax performers, his comparison of mbalax performance with jazz also disparages mbalax musicians and implies a low standard of performance to successfully play mbalax. In doing so, he frames his music, which he considers afrojazz (and Afro without the identifying genre), as elevated in taste and quality over the national popular genre.

By calling attention to *bruit* in mbalax, listeners concisely echo Cherif's personal criticisms and judgements towards the genre and undermine the musical legitimacy of mbalax. Ethnomusicological interventions on noise in music and culture help explain how and why listeners categorize music as noise: in his essay from *Keywords In Sound*, David Novak writes that "noise is composed of sounds that are unintentional and unwanted. But if noise is nonmusical, music is noisy, and noise-sounds have always been part of music" (Novak 2015, 126-127). Driven by the fast attack and decay of marimba and sabar, sharp, percussive sounds that privilege rhythm over harmony, mbalax certainly employs noise-sounds to a greater degree than most other competing genres in Senegal. However, by categorizing mbalax as noisy or by simply calling attention to *bruit*, which, in the French language, carries a less flexible meaning in contrast to its English counterpart and conveys unambiguously disruptive clatter, critics of mbalax denigrate the intentional noisiness of the genre as unfocused, overindulgent, and non-musical. Under this interpretation, the sabar drumming in mbalax is not noise in and of itself; only when deemed excessive, out-of-place, or disruptive do noise-sounds become noise.

In his research on identity and music in the Jola ethnic group of Casamance, Senegal, Scott Linford also observes critiques of noise in mbalax. Interlocutor Sambou calls the ubiquitous sounds of mbalax “a bunch of noise” to dismiss the genre as culturally homogenous: “The northerners, everything is Wolof-*mbalax*, Lebou-*mbalax*, Serer-*mbalax*, everything *mbalax*. Here in the Casamance there are many ethnic groups, more diversity” (Linford 2016, 139-140). Sambou contrasts the cultural diversity of the music of Casamance with the homogenous and infiltrating sound of mbalax pioneered largely by the Wolof ethnic majority (in contrast to the subaltern Jola ethnicity of Senegal’s southern region) (*ibid.*). As a *Casamançais*, Sambou contests the political and cultural power of the northern mainland through his critique of its popular dance form, rejecting the noise of mbalax for its pervasiveness across Senegalese culture. Linford writes,

Not only does Sambou pointedly exclude northern mbalax rhythms from the mixture of instruments voiced by his *ekonting* [a three-stringed lute], but the diversity of sounds he does include is, itself, an articulation of difference from the perceived sonic homogeneity of the north. This piece of Sambou’s musical narrative is clearly emplotted within the hotly contested public narrative that sees the Casamance region as politically and culturally distinct from the Republic of Senegal. (Linford 2016, 140)

In other words, Sambou reaffirms his position of difference as an ethnic and musical minority in his active refutation of mbalax. Though he rejects mbalax as a “bunch of noise,” that same noise nevertheless informs what he chooses to play (or not play) and how he structures his identity as a Jola musician from Casamance. Similar processes of self-identification around and against mbalax and *bruit* occur among my interlocutors. The rejection of mbalax is an active decision that allows musicians to appeal to alternative demographics in Senegal and abroad and market their music in contrast to the mainstream genre. I expand on such strategies in the following chapter.

The term “*bruit*” also references the idiosyncrasies of mbalax performance that non-mbalax musicians believe limit its consumption abroad and in the world music market specifically. Cherif’s bandmates argue that noise or clatter in the genre, legible to the Senegalese as *sabar* drumming, comes off as an undesired and distracting sound to foreign audiences. Novak writes, “the category of noise has continued to symbolize excessive, emergent, and *unexplored* materi-

alities of sound, even as noise-sounds have become increasingly crucial in musical composition” (Novak 2015, 127; emphasis mine). If *bruit* points to “unexplored” qualities in mbalax, then noisiness in mbalax may also highlight musical forms that musicians perceive as unique to Senegal and thus unexplored and misunderstood by Western music audiences unacquainted with sabar drumming. One interlocutor even called mbalax “*too* cultural,” implying that a familiarity with Senegalese life, traditions, and culture is necessary to appreciate the genre.

Bruit as Cultural Currency

The strong link seen between *bruit* and Senegalese life has only grown in recent decades as *bruit* in mbalax has become increasingly popular and marketable within Senegal. Citing the early albums of Youssou N’Dour as evidence, Cherif’s bandmates suggest that *bruit* has not always dominated mbalax but that recently, mbalax groups have incorporated *tama*, sabar drums, and keyboard marimba, all highly percussive and “noisy” instruments, at increasing rates. For non-mbalax musicians, the trend towards noisiness in mbalax is seen as pandering to the Senegalese populace and taking the path of least resistance to sell records without other musical innovation. From the perspective of mbalax performers, however, *bruit* is an invaluable tool to strategize and pursue a career as a Senegalese musician. They employ noise-sounds that distance mbalax from international markets to more closely connect to local Senegalese music tastes, highlighting the genre’s inherently internal focus. In this context, noise cultivates commercial appeal and opens new paths to success for mbalax musicians.

Youssou N’Dour recognizes how preferences for *bruit* divide Senegalese listeners from international listeners. On several occasions, both during my conversation with Cherif and his band and with other musicians and listeners, interlocutors referenced how N’Dour would tame the percussion of his live set and incorporate elements from other styles of music to suit foreign audiences. And, as Patricia Tang notes, “Despite his international success, [N’Dour] continues to be based in Senegal, regularly performing and releasing new cassettes containing a truer mbalax sound than the versions of his music released internationally, which tend to minimize

the role of Senegalese percussion and provide a clearer backbeat” (Tang 2007, 159). Minimizing *bruit* in his live performances abroad and in his international releases, Youssou N’Dour hopes to curate his music in a way that will best resonate with non-Senegalese music tastes. At the same time, he retains a strong connection to Senegal and its music as he continues to release music that responds to Senegalese preferences, even as that music diverges from international marketability through its incorporation of *bruit*. By contrast, musicians that do not have the resources to simultaneously curate, release, and perform for disparate demographics must make the political choice to incorporate or exclude *bruit*, further identifying their target audience as local or international.

Even non-mbalax musicians use *bruit* as a performance technique to appeal to Senegalese audiences. One Sunday, performing at Sharky’s, a beachside bar and restaurant repurposed for live music, Saliou played his usual setlist of afrojazz compositions with a particularly large band consisting of three guitarists (himself included), a bassist, keyboardist, drummer, djembe percussionist, and trumpet player. The audience members reacted favorably to his energetic vocal performance from the confines of their tables and happily participated in Saliou’s call and response. Towards the end of his set, Saliou decided spontaneously to adapt his song “Wiri Wiri,” a crooning, fast-paced tune with a descending chord progression, into an extended mbalax jam featuring the heavy percussion, syncopation, and vocal affect that characterize mbalax performance. Saliou, whose recorded music bears no trace of mbalax whatsoever, would frequently comment on the flaws he perceived in modern mbalax performance. And, on most occasions, his live shows excluded mbalax altogether. However, he also acknowledges the genre’s utility in connecting his own music to the Senegalese populace. The sudden shift to mbalax’s legible musical aesthetic at Sharky’s elicited hoots and hollers from the unsuspecting audience, compelling some to leave their tables to dance in front of the performers. While Saliou’s performance style is energetic and thoughtful, only by incorporating *bruit* in his live sets can he elicit the impassioned audience engagement typically reserved for mbalax acts.

Bruit in mbalax polarizes listeners and reinforces the divide in consumption between mbalax and other forms of music, which Ahmed argues limits Senegal's agency in the world of global music production. This divide is also made worse by "the lack of producers in Senegal" as Ahmed explains:

Senegal has a very limited number of producers, labels, and distributors available to musicians. As such, producers naturally tend towards mbalax because it is the financially safest option. Producers know they can make money and attract new clients if they work in that domain, which continues to inform the divide between mbalax and all other musics in Senegal.

The resulting lack of infrastructure and opportunities to support musicians outside of mbalax creates a vicious cycle in which the financial security of mbalax compels producers to prioritize that genre over others, further limiting non-mbalax musicians and adding to the popularity of mbalax through continued promotion. The specter of Youssou N'Dour's musical legacy continues to inform this disparity. At the head of *Jololi*, the only competitive music label in Senegal, N'Dour claims a monopoly on professional music production and is seen as reinforcing mbalax's musical model for financial success, pushing alternative genres to the margins of Senegalese taste. N'Dour's popularity as a mbalax celebrity and power as a media mogul and political figure haunts my conversations with non-mbalax musicians and informs how musicians perceive and engage with mbalax in general.

A Possibility for Change?

Working in opposition to the hegemony of mbalax, non-mbalax musicians focus their gaze outwards, looking to successful models in the world music industry and searching for alternative demographics both locally and internationally to sustain a career in music that is constantly brought into question. In its emphasis on mbalax, this chapter primes the reader for the subsequent question of "What next?" for non-mbalax musicians grappling with the national genre. Here, I traced the lineage of mbalax's rise to prominence and eventual stronghold over Senegalese culture through the lenses of Youssou N'Dour, the nationally renowned ambassador of the genre

and power wielding media mogul, and through *bruit*, a conceptualization of noise that conveys both the genre's commerciality in Senegal and its cultural isolation from foreign demographics. Moving forwards, Youssou N'Dour and mbalax shift towards the periphery of my ethnography as I turn to the urgent question of "How do I survive as a musician?" and focus on the techniques of survival that my interlocutors employ to navigate Dakar's musical landscape.

2

Far-Off

How Performers Envision Musical Outsides in Dakar

His DSLR camera slung across his shoulder, Malick gazed upwards with squinting eyes at a ten story building undergoing construction. “I am in an *état de lire*,” he comments to me as he gives the building a once-over before pointing his lens. Malick, a documentary photographer by profession, coined *état de lire*, literally “state of reading/observation,” to describe his process of reading and recording Dakar’s rapidly changing urban landscape. Indeed, high rise construction punctuates city streets both in the busy business center of Dakar-Plateau and throughout the city’s arrondissements. In particular, Ouakam, the neighborhood in which I was renting an apartment, had exploded in size in the past decade; the majority of the buildings in the former village, I had been told, did not exist several years ago. Malick undertook the challenge of capturing the transitioning state of his home city.

I too found myself in an *état de lire* when I returned to Dakar in late June of 2017. Not only did I need to relearn the art of navigating the city’s frenetic streets as a white foreigner, but I also had to reestablish relationships to a group of contacts with whom I had not spoken in four years. Scouring my Facebook contacts, I cast a line out to about ten of the musicians whom I met in 2014. Brahms was the first to respond: “Hey Simon! I am in Hamburg but will be back late August.” Another response, from percussionist Boubacar: “I am happy that you are back in Senegal! I would love to play with you but, presently, I am not in the country. Big up!” Similarly,

Pape, a guitarist for mbalax star Wally Seck, was on tour with the group in Italy. I learned, directly and indirectly, that a significant percentage of my friends there had left the country. My social network had completely fragmented. Like Malick documenting a quickly changing urban landscape, I was taking mental snapshots of the changing social landscape, trying to understand what social transformations had overtaken my group of friends in my years away from Dakar.

While the sheer number of people that had left the country surprised me, the aspiration to move from Senegal to European countries, particularly France, had always been a frequent point of discussion in my conversations with Senegalese musicians. In fact, the dream of emigrating from Senegal pervaded my conversations with the wide variety of demographics that I encountered in Dakar. Ryan Skinner points out that, in Mali, “it is not an exaggeration to say that all artists are, in some way or another, looking to tour or record abroad, especially in Europe and the United States” (Skinner, 50). Similarly, the musicians that I knew in Dakar were all considering life outside Senegal in some capacity, with a select group actually succeeding in finding jobs or marriage in the West.

For those not lucky enough to find concrete opportunities to perform music abroad, non-mbalax musicians formulate imagined elsewheres and outsides within Senegal that contrast and compete with mbalax’s monopoly on the Senegalese music market. As I detailed in the previous chapter, mbalax’s rise to popularity on a national and international scale has made the genre a tenet of the national musical identity and has become representative of Senegal itself, ultimately limiting the capacity to circulate music that fails to conform to the mbalax model. In response, musicians pursue an alternate national model as they seek different audiences and markets to consume their music. If mbalax saturates the ‘inside’ of Senegal, non-mbalax performers challenge and compete with the hegemonic genre by looking outwards in numerous ways. Plans to tour or immigrate to the West are perhaps the most direct manifestations of this outwards perspective. However, Senegalese performers also conceptualize their music through identifying genre labels like “Afro-” that contextualize their music in broader continental narratives of an imagined ‘Africa’ and adopt non-local genres in an appeal to foreign audiences living in Senegal. Such

strategies demonstrate the marketing savvy and entrepreneurship that non-mbalax musicians use to navigate the inherent challenges of Senegal's musical world.

Imagining Elsewheres

Drawing from the French word “errance”—*wandering* in English; a word that evokes its etymological cousins, errant and error—Jonathan Zuluaga details the indeterminate pursuit of an “elsewhere” by African émigrés whose plans (and lives) had come to a standstill in Dakar. He engages Trinh Minh-Ha's interpretation of “elsewhere” as “living in two and many non-opposing worlds—all located in the very same place as where one is” (Minh-Ha 2011, 2), arguing that “such a view emphasizes that tensions between here and there or now and then are inherent to any experience of displacement” (Zuluaga 2016, 597). Non-mbalax musicians in Dakar also engage with such an “elsewhere” both as citizens seeking a life beyond Senegal and as entrepreneurs who envision new market spaces informed by international music markets. Facing the monolith of mbalax in Senegal, musicians employ ‘elsewhere’ as a tool to engage alternative worlds, publics, and markets beyond the protected interior of the dominant music genre.

“Elsewhere” helps conceptualize how musicians in Dakar build their livelihoods around peripheral, counter-hegemonic worlds and speaks to a position of precarity that musicians experience as they undergo a process of continuous self-identification around a hegemonic force. It may reflect the disassociation experienced in the constant reality of moving between gigs with no guarantee that one night's pay, divided between several musicians, will cover food, bills, and transportation money until the next gig. Using Foucault's model, Zuluaga considers elsewheres as heterotopic spaces that link “the actual lived space (here) with other spaces (there)” (Zuluaga 596, 2011); musicians operate within both a lived state of collective precarity and the real and imagined outside realms that motivate musicians as sites of refuge and new opportunity.

Zuluaga's analysis does not contemplate at length the specific ways in which immigrants, in his case, may improvise or strategize to combat a state of errance. Unlike immigrants who may not have a solid grasp on Dakar's culture, people, or languages, Senegalese musicians use

their cultural awareness to navigate the city's landscape of musics, producers, and consumers. With entrepreneurial savvy, non-mbalax performers strategize to compete alongside mbalax or look beyond its wide base of listeners to alternative audiences.

Immigration and National Responsibility

In *Bamako Sounds*, Ryan Skinner addresses the complicated role of immigration among Malian musicians. Documenting the shift in the postcolonial era of neoliberalism from “an ideal of repatriation bound to a strong sense of national citizenship to the necessity of expatriation in the context of diminished sociopolitical solidarity,” he applies the metaphor of exile to underscore how “artists mediate modes of identification” and give voice to “ambivalent exilic discourse and the precarious political subjectivity to which it refers” (Skinner 2015, 49-50). Specifically, he emphasizes the country's move away from a national discourse of “Exile is bad” to a more complicated approach that “acknowledg[es] the urgency of travel abroad while at the same time warning of the threats to local lifeworlds such travel poses” (50-51). With the rise of global modernity and neoliberalism (alongside the state's diminishing investment in the arts), artists consider the conflicting possibilities of a life outside Mali. Traveling abroad may afford new opportunity yet also entails that the émigré will not be able to contribute to his or her home community, especially if life abroad does not yield a financially sustaining opportunity, an often occurrence.

The same conflicting perspective on immigration exists in Senegal. Much like Pionnier Jazz, who released “Tunga Man Ni” (“Exile Is Bad”) in the 1960s in Mali as a call for expatriated citizens to return home and assist in rebuilding the recently liberated nation, Senegalese musical celebrity and media mogul Youssou N'Dour released the 1988 album *Immigrés*, whose title track makes the appeal, “Immigrants, it's good to travel, but don't take it too far by staying forever in a country that is not your own” (transl. Duran 1989, 281). N'Dour has respected his own advice; he resides in Dakar and continues to contribute substantially to Senegalese culture and politics.

Opinions on immigration among my interlocutors were varied and demonstrated that, like in Mali, immigration played a complicated and ambivalent role in Dakar. On one side of the spectrum, Cherif and Amadou both opposed emigration. Amadou, who works at a religious association that distributes meals to homeless children and whose slam poetry documents his political and social concerns, rejects leaving the country for better opportunity because he feels deeply obligated to contribute meaningfully to Senegalese social causes.

Speaking from an entirely different perspective, Cherif criticizes marriage as a tool for social mobility on a broader level, arguing that

If a marriage is founded on material needs and desires, one risks sacrificing the potential familial chemistry needed to raise children. If I were to marry a European, she would have to understand the symbolic side of marriage in Dakar. You probably have noticed that Dakar is very community oriented. When you get married, everyone will judge you based on your marriage. So you have to take into consideration the opinion of society and family so that you can coexist in it.

While Cherif's point differs in scope from Amadou's, his comments demonstrate his consideration for Senegalese society and the wellbeing of children in families established under the desire to immigrate. His own hypothetical pursuit of a European women would necessitate that his wife understand the social nuances and expectations of his community to maintain a good standing with his friends and family so that he may also continue to contribute productively to his community.

In contrast, many of the musicians I met in Dakar either expressed a strong desire to leave or ended up leaving altogether. Saliou, an afrojazz/soul musician, cited his desire to leave for Montreal, Canada to study jazz and studio production and rejoin his former bassist, Tarek, a successful session musician who had immigrated to the country a year prior. Yet Saliou also recognizes the difficulties that would face him there: "The level of competition [in Dakar] is different than in NY or other Western cities. If you work hard enough, it is not too difficult to become a high tier Senegalese musician." Implicit in his statement is that, unlike Dakar, which does not have the same resources available to train musicians as cities with music programs in

Western genres such as jazz or classical (which Saliou regards highly), Western music scenes have a far greater concentration of professional musicians and a much higher barrier to entry.

Instead, Saliou reckons, “If I develop a strong ability for jazz and combine it with my sensibility for Afro, a genre running through my blood, I can succeed as a musician and make money.” In pursuing a Western standard of performance, Saliou looks to ‘elsewhere’ with a more entrepreneurial approach, cultivating a hybrid music of Western jazz virtuosity inflected with a musical style that his audiences read as specifically African. As Jesse Shipley argues in *Living the Hiplife*, “travel is a form of value conversion, transforming movement into self-expression. For West Africans who have not travelled abroad, Western locales add an aura of distinction. For London hipsters, traveling and recording in Ghana give [rapper] M3nsa exotic authenticity” (Shipley 2013, 210). Without traveling, Saliou’s pursuit of a rigorous knowledge of jazz nevertheless seeks to create value by conceptualizing and incorporating foreign musical worlds into his music and drawing on the cultural capital of jazz as a virtuosic and exotic performance style.

The Local International

However, in a Senegalese musical landscape informed foremost by mbalax, Saliou’s hybrid focus imbues his music with value differently than in Shipley’s example in Ghana, principally because of a heretofore unmentioned fact: his target demographic consists largely of Western foreigners in Dakar. Acknowledging the limitations of circulating non-mbalax music among Senegalese communities, Saliou seeks out clubs and venues that cater to wealthier, mainly European demographics. He performs regularly at Sharky’s, a beach-side restaurant and bar popular among expats. I do not want to discount his Senegalese fanbase, as his concerts are, in fact, frequented by a mix of foreign expats and Senegalese locals. However, both for him and the concert venues at which he performs, Western audience members serve as more reliable sources of income and are therefore favored. Ismou, the drummer of Saliou’s group, bluntly explains his preference for Sharky’s: “There are lots of *toubabs* [white person or foreigner in Wolof] there! Even venues like

Just4U are undesirable in contrast. White people promise financial results that aren't assured with local audiences."

Saliou's group, like many of the non-mbalax groups I encountered, enacts a "cosmopolitanism of *dependency*," a term Gavin Steingo borrows from Ackbar Abbas to describe musicians "sustained almost exclusively by foreign interest and support" (Steingo 2016, 125). He applies the term to capture the marketing practices of three commercially successful artists whose use of social media platforms, video streaming services, and "boutique" record labels abroad (153) enabled a form of cosmopolitanism that connected the artists with non-South African demographics. Though Saliou has recorded music and uploads videos to a Youtube account, he has not released his EP publicly and has not found success on any internet platform. With his scope as a musician centered on Senegalese concert spaces, his cosmopolitanism of dependency instead seeks out an international audience within Senegalese expat communities.

In the last week of my research trip, walking to a bar with Ismou and Moudou, a pianist for Saliou's group, I stumbled upon Ibou and Brahms, two guitarists whom I had come to know quite well in my first trip to Dakar in 2013 and who had since left the country through marriage. Ibou, a reggae guitarist, had moved to southern France with his French wife and now works as a security guard. Brahms, who performs blues and rock, was returning from Berlin. Both were on vacation in Senegal to visit family and friends. While Brahms continues to play live shows with a group of musicians he met in Germany, Ibou had largely stopped playing music in his new life. After expressing my disappointment at the fact he had not found any new musical project, Ibou responded, "Brahms is my new project. It is my responsibility to make his musical career as smooth as possible." Seeing the confused look on my face, he explained that he had taken on the role of manager on Brahms' behalf, acting as a liaison to book shows in France. Similarly, he suggests that his former bandmate, Bangaly, who had since moved to Spain through marriage, could also fulfill the role of facilitator in the Spanish music world and help Brahms. Skeptical, I asked Ibou what compelled him to take on this position. "It's not a question of his talent," he responded, "I am doing this for him because we are very close friends. It's all about

sharing. Because I live in France, I can help organize bookings there; that way, he gets paid, and I get paid. Same in Spain with Bangaly. It's about giving opportunities to one another." His comments point to an imagined network of expatriate Senegalese musicians throughout Europe poised to support musicians like Brahms, who have greater musical success both at home and abroad than the majority of musicians in Dakar, and share in the profits. Ibou suggests that I too could be a part of this network by helping book gigs for Brahms in New York. While, in practice, I remain unsure of the extent to which Ibou can help Brahms in this capacity, our conversation nevertheless shows one of many ways musicians, even after immigration, continue to pursue opportunity with an outwardly focused lens towards networking, imagining new paths of global circulation defined by the Senegalese diaspora and contextualizing one's own life in Europe as a resource that could benefit others.

Similarly, as Catherine Appert explores in her article, "On Hybridity in African Popular Music," hip hop musicians in Dakar draw "on globally circulating Afrocentric narratives to locate hip hop's roots in the performance traditions of West African griots" (Appert 2016, 284). Underscoring the "aesthetic resonance between hip hop and the speech genre *taasu*, a style of Wolof griot performance that they describe as the rhythmic chanting of topical rhymes over a drum beat" (*ibid.*), these rappers highlight the transatlantic movement of Africans to the Americas during the slave trade and claim a stake in the distinctly American genre through aesthetic and historical connections linking the two populations and their respective art forms. Ungrounded in historical actuality, such narratives hypothesizing the African musical forebears to popular American genres risk essentializing the histories of both African and American art forms. In its promotion of 'desert blues' from Mali, the world music industry traced the (unsubstantiated) movement of Malian *ngoni* performance from Mali to the American south and back to Mali, placing emphasis on the shared use of pentatonic scales and improvisation, among other characteristics, between indigenous Malian musics and the blues as evidence for such a historical lineage (see Duran 2013). However, as Appert explains, these rappers do not seek to impose alternative histories on hip hop; instead, by imagining transatlantic linkages between *taasu* and

hip hop, “rappers bypass [taasu’s] generally superficial texts while invoking its original context to signal a locality and indigeneity that lend weight to their own music’s social messages” (Appert 2016, 286). These musicians claim authority through conceptualized musical and historical linkages that facilitate the adaptation of foreign musical styles and enable Senegalese performers and listeners to relate with otherwise disconnected black American communities.

Infrastructural Reasons to Pursue Elsewhere

Momen, a manager of several of the most highly esteemed touring Afro performers in Dakar, describes a few of the practical challenges that necessitate an outwards musical focus from a managerial perspective, challenges that I also fielded from musicians themselves. He cites three interrelated factors: firstly, he argues that “there exists a lack of national infrastructure to sustain a professional [non-mbalax] musical career.” Specifically, there are too few “legitimate” venues in Senegal that meet his standards. In this case, legitimacy in venues refers to a level of organization and audience capacity that most venues, often repurposed restaurants or clubs, fail to meet. The Institut Français, a French-run cultural center in the center of bustling Dakar-Plateau that holds concerts, movie screenings, and language courses, constitutes an example of a legitimate and well-organized venue by his definition. By contrast, even staples of the Dakar music scene such as Just4U fail to meet Momen’s criteria of a systematically run and transparent venue business model. He expands on what he means by “organization” (or lack thereof) in his second criticism: “the absence of contracts, rules, and even distribution of pay between concert organizers, labels, headlining artists, and supporting musicians prevents musicians from establishing trust. It means that musicianship, as a profession, is not secure in Senegal.” As a result, it is unnecessarily difficult to organize extended tours in the country. Sahad and the Nataal Patchwork, one of the groups he manages, struggled to consistently book shows in Senegal. However, with Momen’s guidance, the group was able to book several tour dates in Europe. There, six tour dates expanded into over fifty. Momen accredits this to the professionalism and efficiency of Western venues, a model that he says highlights the inherent flaws of Senegalese

musical infrastructure and pushes non-mbalax musicians to look outside of the country to find paying gigs that will sustain a musical career.

As musicians pursue outside performance spaces as alternatives to flawed Senegalese musical institutions, they also use genre labels and other musical descriptors to frame their music in contrast to the Senegalese nation, applying continental narratives of Africanness to appeal to international audiences. Many Africans, as James Ferguson points out, “understand their own situations, and construct their strategies for improving them, in terms of an imagined ‘Africa’ and its place in the wider world” (Ferguson 2006, 6). While essentializing media representations of Africa collapse an expansive and diverse continent into a one dimensional place, these representations nevertheless gain immense circulatory power and define “‘Africa’ as a category through which a ‘world’ is structured” (*ibid.*). My interlocutors engaged with the imagined ‘Africa’ in innumerable ways; for example, many expressed sentiments of African fraternity through statements like “We are one Africa” that reflect a shared sense of solidarity and question the political legitimacy of colonial governments and the state borders they imposed on the continent. Senegalese musicians call upon an African continental narrative in their application of the “Afro-” suffix to describe their music. The Afro label offers a pragmatic means for musicians to categorize their music for a broader international market; musicians may frame their music as African to appeal to a world music market that seeks an embodied African authenticity and connect with neighboring countries on the basis of their shared Africanness.

The world music market plays a complicated role in the musical careers of African performers. Firstly, the ‘world music’ category is necessarily vague: a repository for all non-Western musicians that do not meet the white, Western criteria of rock or pop, the genre is defined not qualitatively but by what it lacks. Timothy Taylor argues that the world music genre is “less stable than many other genres since it is relatively new and is forced to contain a massive variety of musics, making it sometimes difficult for musicians to know what positions might be available for them to take in the field of world music” (2016; 104). Observing the success of several musicians from neighboring Mali in the world music market, many of my interlocutors cited

the model of Malian music, which they described as more melodic and universally appealing in contrast to the rhythmically-focused mbalax, as one means of tapping into the changing world music industry. In this case, ‘universally appealing,’ in fact a reference to a Western standard of musicianship and songwriting, points to the paradoxical nature of ‘world music’: seeking musical legibility for the imagined Western audience that consumes world music records, artists move towards that Western model of musicianship. Yet, the genre also marks these musicians as ‘other’ and distances them from more commercially popular and legitimized Western genres which have historically privileged white male musicians; “‘Third World’ and ‘world music’ stem from the same kind of classifying and distancing ideology” (*ibid.*, 105) and frame non-Western musicians in opposition to the West.

In the context of the world music market, the “Afro-” prefix that many of my interlocutors favor plays a complicated role. Recalling James Ferguson’s analysis of an imagined Africa circulated through global media discourses, “Afro” presupposes an imagined African musician and sonority and informs how Senegalese musicians curate music with a global audience in mind. While “Afro,” as a generalizing label denoting ‘Africanness’ for the range of musical backgrounds it represents to the world music industry, may prove problematic in the same ways that broad discourses of an African condition have limiting effects on the African countries that want to break from that mold, its use among Senegalese musicians shows the label’s malleability. In their application of “Afro,” Senegalese musicians may rebut stereotypes of the African identity engrained in the hierarchies of the Western music industry through claims of modernity and civility that offer alternative narratives of the African condition (Appert 2016, 286-7).

While Afro- sometimes prepends other genre types (afropop, afrobeat, and afrojazz, to name a few), it is also used without a modifier. Noting Sizwe and other interlocutors’ rejection of genre labels, Gavin Steingo claims that such descriptive ambiguity insists “on the fundamental equality of people to engage whatever music they choose” (Steingo 2016, 54). By insisting on the broad Afro- label, my interlocutors smartly demarcate their music as ‘African’ without constricting themselves to a specific genre type that could unnecessarily delimit their target demographic.

It reflects these musicians' entrepreneurial savvy and ability to market their Africanness while maintaining a flexible musical identity in a musical culture defined foremost by mbalax, whose status as *de facto* national genre in Senegal limits non-mbalax musicians' capacity to wield their Senegalese-ness as a tool for upwards mobility. The Afro- genre, in its evocation of African cosmopolitanism (or Afropolitanism, which I detail below) and a continental musical narrative, helps non-mbalax performers contest mbalax's rootedness in Senegalese history and culture and claim their own musical legitimacy. In this case, musicians' exclusion of an explicitly Senegalese musical identity through the Afro prefix inadvertently enables new ways for them to understand a different national musical identity.

The "International" as Social Capital

Steingo details how South African musicians also draw from an African identity as an entrepreneurial tool. Stoaan, one of his interlocutors and a member of Bongo Maffin, argues, "as soon as you go [overseas], you start realizing that the more of your African identity you expose, the more people overseas want to see you. And the more people here at home want to see you" (Steingo 2016, 65). Exploiting an "explicitly" and "fictively" African sound (*ibid.*), Bongo Maffin undergoes a process of self-exoticization for Western audiences that molds the group's identity to match the imagined 'African' persona. And, just as M3nsa's cosmopolitanism and international travel garnered him esteem in Ghana, Bongo Maffin's exposure to international audiences validates the group's music and self-described 'fictive' persona at home in South Africa.

I experienced this phenomenon in an uncomfortable way. Performers could curate a cosmopolitan identity in a variety of ways, through travel, musical production, lyrical reference, and, as I describe here, through association. In my performances and rehearsals with different local musical groups, I was not the only one in the group to notice the extent to which I stuck out like a sore thumb as a white man on stage. My legibility as a foreigner to Senegalese audiences could recast a local group as an international act, the culmination of diverse musical and cultural backgrounds. I observed this in Sahad and the Nataal Patchwork, a group that included

several different white Americans at different stages in its tenure and whose message of intercultural exchange and connection was supported by its incorporation of American instrumentalists on stage. Oddly, in a country whose colonial past of exploitation by the French continues to manifest in every corner of daily life, whiteness, as a marker of privilege and foreignness, was a commodity that performers could use to get a leg up over the competition. Such dynamics complicated the kinds of relations that I had with interlocutors and often left me with uneasy questions about my role in the bands in which I performed: if my whiteness makes me more attractive as a musician to a group, am I unfairly benefiting from an already privileged position and potentially taking opportunities away from other Senegalese performers? On the other hand, are my relationships with different groups predicated on the value that my status as a foreigner offers the band? Such questions ultimately went unanswered yet were central to thinking about how people built relationships with me and helped me understand some of the power dynamics that I brought to my relationships as a Westerner.

In response to an offhand comment of mine, Cherif articulated how the foreign and international are commodified and translated into social capital. I shared an observation from my experiences living in Dakar that “people in Senegal greeted and introduced one another more often and with more deliberation than in America”; often when I entered a new social space with an interlocutor, he or she would methodically greet and introduce me to each friend or acquaintance in that space, inviting me to exchange names and pleasantries before moving on to the next person. However, I was wrong in assuming that my observations were emblematic of a general cultural difference between Senegal and America. Cherif points out that a relationship with a Westerner could lead to new opportunities; I (the American) could assist in the expensive and complicated visa application process or provide financial resources or useful contacts abroad that could lead to a greater degree of social mobility. “When people introduce you to others,” he argues, “they are offering this potential for opportunity to their colleagues as a kind of favor.” Whether or not the act of introduction results in sustained contact in the future, its interpretation as a favor imbues the initiator with social currency. By offering their peers new

opportunities, these musicians participate in Senegal's culture of *teranga* (structuralized and expected reciprocity which I detail at length in chapter three).

Far-Off: Heterotopias and Afropolitanism

Through the social capital drawn from associations with foreigners, musicians market themselves as international and cosmopolitan through diverse means to communicate their band's success in competitive international markets and to bolster their brand to as wide a base of listeners as possible. However, as Steingo explains, musicians may also draw from distant cultures as a means of reshaping and reinterpreting local life. In their interpretation of American house music, *kwaito* musicians frame their music as distinctly international and *non-African*. In the 1980s, in fact, “*kwaito*’ and ‘international music’ were used interchangeably” (*ibid.*, 29). Blurring the boundaries between the local and nonlocal, *kwaito*’s circulation of house music relishes “in the fact that it remained international, foreign, and far-off” (*ibid.*, 55) particularly because the international and apolitical qualities of American house establishes an aesthetic space outside of the harsh social conditions of South Africa both during and following apartheid. Citing Jacques Rancière, Steingo argues that “*kwaito* is not an illusion that hides reality; on the contrary it *doubles reality*” (*ibid.*, 6). Its focus on the outside, the international, creates parallel realities that enable musicians and listeners to distance themselves from the pervasive hardships of living in South Africa.

Kwaito musician’s emphasis on the “far-off” to create alternative worlds, much like Zulu-aga’s understanding of “elsewheres” among African immigrants, evokes Michel Foucault’s conceptualization of heterotopias as “counter-sites, a kind of effectively enacted utopia in which the real sites, all the other real sites that can be found within the culture, are simultaneously represented, contested, and inverted” (Foucault 1984, 3). In their outwards focus, Senegalese musicians also create idealized spaces that contest and invert a culture delimited by *mbalax*, enabling them to engage alternative audiences, stake claims in an African identity, envision new

market spaces, and create strategies to circumvent the inherent difficulties of the Senegalese music industry.

In my interpretation of elsewhere as a conceptual tool afforded to Dakar based musicians performing subaltern music genres, I have frequently applied the term “cosmopolitanism” to describe the ways in which musicians envision opportunity from disparate sources around the world. However, Achille Mbembe coins a more precise term, “Afropolitanism,” that shakes the implicit notion of cosmopolitans as elite ‘world citizens’ removed from a home culture. “Cosmopolitan,” as a catchall to describe individuals from any demographic that imagine themselves as part of a broader global network, fails to account for the specific postcolonial condition that Africans engage with on a daily basis; instead, Afropolitanism offers a more productive and detailed understanding of the global paths that define modern African existence. Mbembe defines Afropolitanism as

the awareness of this imbrication of here and elsewhere, the presence of the elsewhere in the here and vice versa, this relativization of roots and primary belongings and a way of embracing, fully cognizant of origins, the foreign, the strange and the distant, this capacity to recognize oneself in the face of another and to value the traces of the distant within the proximate, to domesticate the un-familiar, to work with all manner of contradictions--it is this cultural sensibility, historical and aesthetic, that suggests the term “Afropolitanism.” (2010, 229).

In its emphasis on “here,” “roots,” and “origins,” Mbembe’s definition asserts the shared importance of the local alongside the global; as African countries and individuals define themselves in a relatively young postcolonial era marked by the ever increasing flow of people, commodities, and information across borders, local cultures are subject to constant change.

Afropolitanism lies at the heart of Ryan Skinner’s broad study of Bamako musicians and is similarly useful in understanding the dynamic urban life of Dakar. Skinner describes Bamako’s music culture as “not only multigeneric but also *inter*-generic, as artists create and combine a great diversity of sounds within an equally rich social environment” (2015; 4). Musicians balance several identities as performers to meet the different criteria for the range of genres permeating the city, enacting “subjective multiplicity” (*ibid.*, 5) to meet the multiple demands

of an Afropolitan city. Dakar, in its strong emphasis on mbalax over other genres, might not intuitively embody the same degree of musical diversity across its similarly complex social world. While mbalax's dominance over the Senegalese music industry certainly informs the spaces in which other musicians perform and make a living for themselves, it only pushes Afro performers, reggae groups, and pop acts (among other underrepresented groups) to seek out new spaces and audiences that exist in Dakar. As artists navigate the urban environment, they experience "multiple scales of place and modes of being to cultivate intersubjective coherence in their everyday lives" (*ibid.*, 12). Skinner and Mbembe's focus on scale reflects the dynamic application of elsewhere to meet the constantly shifting and increasingly difficult demands of postcolonial modernity. To envision outside worlds within the locality of Africa, as an Afropolitan, is necessary to combat the precarity of the Afropolis.

As an abstraction of the many ways that musicians look beyond the local to frame their music, elsewhere allows us to conceptualize how performers compete with and look beyond national identity (and the hegemonic forces associated with it) in an increasingly globalized world. Musicians craft heterotopic worlds to counter political and social hardships. Elsewhere becomes a new lens to understand and make decisions based on one's environment and lived reality. "Elsewhere" also serves as a deeply useful entrepreneurial tool: emigration, as the rare realization of aspirations to move beyond Senegal, shows an extreme case in which pursuing outside worlds leads to new and different opportunities. Yet, for the majority of performers who do not have the resources to immigrate to the West, or for those who do not want to, elsewhere nevertheless continues to play a significant role in determining audiences, venue selections, genre labels, band identity, and other factors that could eventually lead to a greater degree of success. And, with mbalax so closely tied to the local, seeking elsewhere becomes a necessary tool.

3

Sharing and Sabotage

Employing Teranga to Navigate Senegal's Precarious Musical Landscape

“*Teranga*” is a way of being, a one word distillation of an imagined national ideology, a doctrine connecting individuals to their community. Literally, it means “hospitality” or “openness” in Wolof and, as a point of national pride, is a deeply important concept in how Senegalese citizens understand their Senegalese-ness. If I went to any house and knocked on the door, I was told by musicians and non-musicians alike, I would be swiftly invited inside to share a meal with the resident family. If I needed a place to sleep that night, they would go to great lengths to try to accommodate me. These are the examples of sharing and reciprocity that my peers offered to me as examples of *teranga*, often through unsolicited comments to me over lunch or dinner. In many respects, *teranga* serves as a major brand identity for Senegal: restaurants evoke *teranga* in their names, the street hecklers that I had to actively deflect walking downtown by myself would use the term to appeal to me in on a more personable level in an attempt to better sell me their goods, individuals associate with it to show the virtues of the Senegalese nation (and, transitively, of themselves).

As Francesca Castaldi understands the concept, *teranga*

covers a semantic field associated with the morality that governs interactions between hosts and guests and the circulation of gifts among a wide network of relations. (...) The paths along which generosity flows are socially delineated to strengthen

community solidarity and the support of well established social networks.
(2006; 176)

Teranga determines how musicians engage with their communities and, as a structuralized support system, directly counters the state of precarity that most Dakar musicians grapple with in their daily lives. However, as I hope to demonstrate through two opposing ethnographic examples, teranga is not the utopic grassroots socialism that it appears to be: with every resource shared, someone else is left without the tools or money needed to record or perform and pursue a sustained career in music, stifling the momentum necessary to move beyond the limitations of Senegal's music industry. Privately rejecting the public obligations of teranga, musicians combat the inherent flaws of socially mandated sharing through self-isolation and, sometimes, sabotage.

Precarity

Quickly, a word on what precarity means in Dakar and among the musicians there. Drawing on Anne Allison's interpretation of precarity, Marié Abe applies the term precarity "to characterize the pervasive sense of fragmented sociality in Japan: a condition of being and feeling insecure in life that extends one's disconnectedness from a sense of social community" (249, 2016). For Dakar musicians, precarity is interwoven with daily life: few performers can count on music alone to sustain themselves and must constantly improvise to pay for food, provide for their families, and support their musical careers. In one instance, I accompanied my friend Mbaye into the downtown area of Dakar populated by market stalls. He was carrying a bike chain that he had found and planned to trade it at the market in order to repair his phone which had been broken for weeks, inhibiting him from contacting his peers and making plans. Isolated by technological breakages and financial insecurity, Mbaye found an improvised and temporary solution to overcome a state of obduracy. However, in such a state of precarity, he must constantly find new means of overcoming quotidian struggles. This reality exists across Senegal; endemic unemployment and low pay wages contribute to a state of insecurity for a large percentage of Senegalese. Musicianship, as a particularly unstable source of income, comes with inevitable

risks and may go against the best wishes of a performer's family, which may depend on that individual to survive.

Teranga is integrally tied to precarity. Strengthening connections among community members through structural reciprocity, teranga effectively eases the symptoms of social precarity as a support system that individuals can rely on when all else fails. Abe's argument that precarity "extends one's disconnectedness from a sense of social community" does not apply in the Senegalese case: in fact, precarity underlies the social connections that people establish through teranga and is a point of solidarity and shared hardship. Precarity reinforces community links as communities collectively act to mediate individual insecurity.

Learning to Share

I begin with a personal experience, one that was uncomfortable at the time, that arose from differing ideologies on sharing. Acting on an invitation to perform with Jean, one of his friends and a charismatic guitarist and singer, Saliou and I made our way to L'Eden, a small bar and venue on the outskirts of the posh Almadies neighborhood, to play a few of the songs we had rehearsed that week as a duo. I knew many of the concert-goers: Saliou offered a general invitation to the regular crew of musicians that liked to pass their evenings at the Mamelles beach. The beachfront has chairs, inexpensive food and drinks, and serves as an intimate space of refuge where individuals could pass long nights playing music and bantering. A fifteen minute walk from my apartment building, I was familiar with the crowds that frequented the Mamelles beach and would stop by if I did not have a meeting or rehearsal on a given day. Several of the beach regulars had arrived halfway through Jean's set, among them Mohammed, a tall, outspoken, and occasionally obstinate guitarist.

Per Jean's invitation, Saliou had anticipated playing two or three songs after the main set. However, the energy of Jean's performance, culminating in several extended solo sections, lasted quite longer than any of us had expected. By the end of his show, the audience was eager to chat idly and buy a last round at the bar in the calm of the relatively subdued music being

played overhead. As Jean's group of performers broke down their equipment, I brought my electric guitar on stage and connected to the PA system as Saliou adjusted his microphone. I tuned, quickly and inadequately, over the chatter and background music. The PA system did not support my guitar well and sounded thin. The microphone's loose connection to the XLR cable emitted sharp cracking noises with every readjustment. No one was paying attention to us. Saliou made no introduction and began his first song, "Jamm Ak Salam." A few turned to listen, though most continued to mill about by the bar. Halfway through the song, realizing the inferior sound quality and lack of interest, we decided to stop: Saliou was not expecting any kind of payment and felt that it was ultimately an inappropriate time to play despite Jean's invitation.

As I began to return my guitar to its case, Mohammed interjects: "*Hey bro,*" he says, using the English phrase, "let me play a few songs on your guitar." In the past, I have lent him my guitar at the beach and during some of the more casual concerts that I have played with Saliou and Cherif on various occasions, so the request was not out of left-field. However, I argued that now was not a good time to play, reiterating Saliou's rationale for stopping his own set. He continued to insist adamantly, expressing his frustration to my indirect refusal with exasperation: "Why don't you lend me your guitar?" "I let you play my guitar [at the beach] all the time." "This is a jam session that should be open to everyone." Placing emphasis on the desirable brand of his own electric guitar, he says, "If I had my Epiphone here, you could use it whenever you wanted," recalling that he had left his guitar in Thies, a city a few hours east of Dakar where his family lives.

Folding to his request, I pass him my guitar and cable. By that time, the tuning pegs had bumped against my guitar case and shifted dramatically, leaving my guitar egregiously out of tune. Connecting to the PA, he performs a blues song he had written without rectifying this error, improvising to no accompaniment between verses as background music continues to play from the bar. Murmuring our reactions of displeasure to the out-of-tune noodling, Saliou and I approach Mohammed a second time. I reach back for my guitar.

Here, angered by my forceful interjection into his opportunity to perform, Mohammed reacts aggressively. A debate ensues: on one side, Mohammed loudly accuses me of disrespecting him in front of my group of peers. He would have shared his guitar under any circumstances if I had requested it, he argues, and feels that I should share the same belief. He suggests that I am missing a fundamental tenet of Senegalese culture as an American outsider: if I were Senegalese, I would relinquish my instrument to him without hesitation and afford him the opportunity to showcase himself as a musician. Recognizing my bewilderment and inarticulateness arguing with Mohammed, Saliou interjects on my behalf, trying to calm Mohammed and reason that I was not trying to attack him or question his merits as a musician.

Mohammed and I do not reach a resolution, so, with my guitar in hand, I decide to leave with Saliou and Ismou (Saliou's drummer who came to watch the show). Still flustered and wanting to make sense of Mohammed's arguments, I ask Ismou as a third-party spectator how he interpreted the verbal exchange:

I understand what Mohammed is trying to say. In Senegal, it is expected of you to share at any given moment. Even if I am drumming for the main act at [the venue] Just4U, if someone approaches me to play drums for a song I will gladly hand over my sticks. To not share in a situation like that is a faux pas that people will avoid at great lengths.

Both Saliou and Ismou acknowledge that Mohammed *had* in fact acted oddly: his assertions, they argued, were rude and reflected the obdurate side of a charismatic and complicated individual at the end of a long night. However, as Ismou's comment suggests, Mohammed's anger is tied to a wider culture of reciprocity, sharing, and generosity on which he and his peers depend as musicians living in a state of precarity. While my experience was extreme, it serves as a useful anecdote to explore how performers understand the relationship between performer and audience in Senegal's musical world and analyze the deep manifestation of *teranga* as a form of social contract and currency across all corners of Senegalese society.

Blurring the Presentational

In *Music as Social Life: The Politics of Participation*, Thomas Turino offers textbook definitions of “participatory” and “presentational” performance styles as two poles of a continuum describing the varied extent to which audience members may engage with or contribute to a live musical performance. On one end, in the case of participatory performance, the boundary between performer and audience member is nonexistent and allows for amateur musicians and onlookers to contribute meaningfully to a musical experience predicated on its openness to outsiders. Specifically, Turino concludes that participatory performances

1. functioned to inspire or support participation;
2. functioned to enhance social bonding, a goal that often underlies participatory traditions;
3. dialectically grew out of or were the result of participatory values and practices (2008; 36).

An emblematic example of participatory musical practices from a Senegalese context, the weekly gatherings of Baye Fall practitioners to chant in Arabic for hours in the late evening captures the musical and social qualities of participatory music through its short, easily learned phrases and its openness to the Baye Fall community and beyond.¹ Participatory modes of performance both foster and depend on the sociality of music, creating avenues for non-musicians to enter into the otherwise delimited, professional realm of music; different forms of performance on the presentational-participatory gradient inform power hierarchies between musicians and audiences and enable new forms of exchange.

In stark contrast, Turino defines “presentational” performance styles as those that sharply delineate audience and performer, often with physical barriers between stage and seating, allowing for virtuosic displays of musical ability and prepared musical forms that uninitiated musicians would not readily be able to follow (Turino 2008; 59). While features such as dance, clapping, or singing along to a musical motif allow spectators to engage with the performed music, the sanctity of the musician-audience divide is nevertheless maintained.

¹The Baye Fall religious group is a sect of the Mouride brotherhood (a Sufi order Muslim group that makes up 40 percent of Senegal) who devote themselves to Islam through manual labor. As an act of religious worship, Baye Fall’s may contest whether the chant constitutes music. However, the Baye Fall community is deeply embedded in Dakar’s music scene and many of them consider themselves musicians. (For more information on Baye Falls, see Savishinsky, 1994)

Ismou's comment to me, "if someone approaches me to play drums for a song I will gladly hand over my sticks," shows that such a divide becomes complicated by expectations of reciprocity among Senegalese musicians. Of course, the division of audience and performer still exists: that night, Saliou had received an invitation to share the stage (and the social capital that comes with it). This enabled him to shift from the role of audience member to performer without encroaching on Jean's right to play as the booked performer. In all the concert venues I attended, the conventional barrier stood between the stage and floor. However, among musicians seeking exposure to new audiences, the divide becomes porous both in preparation for and during shows; individual musicians may request to play along for a song, or simply a solo, or sing praise for the performers, itself an act that garners attention for the praise-singer.

Consider the associated risks and benefits of sharing space on stage: performers, compelled by social expectations to share the stage with an individual, often a friend or acquaintance, may not anticipate the quality of the other performer and risk presenting an inferior version of their prepared music to the audience. Comparatively, the potential benefits to the musician joining the group on stage may be significant. The exposure to other musicians and different audiences one receives on stage could lead to new opportunities performing for other groups, translating to new sources of income and greater social mobility. In such a precarious musical world, the sharing of opportunity is itself a kind of currency system that musicians use to support themselves on a week-to-week basis. In their acknowledgement of a mutually shared state of precarity and its immediate threat to their social mobility, musicians balance mobility and opportunity in relation to their peers and community, enacting a codified form of *teranga*.

Praise Singing

A specific yet widespread case in which conventionally presentational performances make space for outside contributions, praise singing enables audience members to engage with and perform alongside the headlining act. Praise singing pervades multiple genres in Dakar, most notably *mbalax* and Afro performance styles, whose emphasis on drawn out solo sections and repeated

chord patterns offers extended periods for individuals to mount the stage and adlib praise for the band leader into his microphone. The frontman of the group may stand adjacent to the praise singer, feigning humility to the praise singer's comments of musical prowess and virtuosity. The exchange often ends with the outsider offering money to the group leader and encouraging applause from the audience (and, implicitly, additional financial contributions).²

Articulating the ways in which singers may convert praise singing into economic and social capital, Ryan Skinner describes praise singing as one strategy of “a series of tactics to get by” (2015, 68-69) and offers a close reading of a performance by one of his interlocutors, Issa Bamba, in which he details praise singing as “a source of potential value, both aesthetic and economic. As Issa puts it, ‘In Mali, when you sing a man’s praises, he is happy. He gives you money. We do this to make a living’” (*ibid.*, 67). Skinner’s example focuses on how praise singing, in relation to broader griot traditions, translates to greater social mobility and reframes the moral subjectivity of the singer. While he does not address the case of an outsider mounting the stage to praise the singer himself, similar ideas apply: by calling positive attention to both the praise singer and performing group, praise singing enables an individual to attract social clout without overshadowing the protected concert space of the performers. In fact, it is seen as a normal, if infrequent, part of live performance and is not considered an incursion on the autonomy of a group.

Sharing Instruments

The first time Cherif and I played together, his acoustic guitar was missing a string. In a country where imported musical goods are considerably marked up and hard to find in the scattered downtown market, this poses a disproportionately large problem for Cherif and other guitarists. That minor technological breakages threaten artists’ mobility both explains and complicates the pervasive culture of reciprocity among urban Senegalese performers. On one hand, Cherif

²A pervasive practice in Senegal, particularly for highly esteemed musical groups, audience members will stuff banknotes into the hands and pockets of performers during heightened moments of musical prowess to show one’s support and enthusiasm.

need not find an immediate solution to his individual problem because, collectively, his group of peers has the resources (in this case, a spare guitar) for him to perform and all share the same attitude towards reciprocity. However, given the possibility of theft and destruction, sharing poses significant risk to an owner who might not have the resources to change a broken string or replace an instrument altogether.

Gavin Steingo's focus on obduracy among kwaito performers in South Africa helps explore the tension of (im)mobility in a precarious musical world, particularly in relation to technological failure and theft. For musicians facing the threat of theft, "there is only one sure way to protect one's possessions, including musical equipment: to never leave home"; he emphasizes that the circulation and exchange of music is defined principally by "*immobility rather than mobility*" (2016; 91). On the other side of his argument, Steingo critiques "overly optimistic, technophilic approaches to music and mobility" that do take into account technological breakdown and failure and connects technological failure to the broader condition of obduracy and "blockages" that constitute South Africa's musical topology (*ibid.*, 92). By arguing against the fluid movement of music through this lens, he focuses on the friction of musical exchange and the state of continuous problem solving and shrewdness that musicians need to overcome such friction.

In the Senegalese case, theft does not appear to pose as pervasive a threat to performers; while I encountered several accounts of thievery, never did such experiences confine an artist to his or her house. However, technological failure and lack of material resources certainly impedes performers' capacity to record, perform, or self-promote. When Mohammed insists that he would share his guitar with me without hesitation if it were with him, he lays bare the fact that many performers do not have such musical resources and would relish the opportunity to play his instrument, particularly a coveted Epiphone-brand electric guitar. Cherif, who practices on a nylon string acoustic guitar without electronics to amplify the instrument, often asks his friends to borrow an acoustic-electric guitar before concerts to ensure he can plug into the venue's PA system and perform fluidly. He depends on and expects the generosity and support of his peers to perform.

Technological breakages further contribute to a state of precarity. Almost invariably, the sound systems at concert halls, encompassing the house microphones, patch cables, speakers, and mixing boards, fail in some capacity. Microphones, if there are enough of them in the first place, may crackle and cut out irregularly. Overworked speakers distort signals. Sporadic power outages across the city further threaten the already precarious technological balancing act that performers who rely on amplification undergo in live performance. By borrowing more reliable gear from friends, Cherif hedges these inherent risks in hope of a more seamless concert experience; any small technological failure could result in a frustrating concert for the performer and audience. Additionally, bars and restaurants repurposed to support live music often do not have a house sound system and require the artist to rent one before a show and expend a significant portion of the evening's pay. Rental fees may necessitate up to two-thirds of a paycheck, leaving larger groups with trivial returns once payment has been allocated to each performer. Even then, these considerable expenses do not mitigate the risk of technological failure and leave musicians in a state of both technological and economic precarity.

Steingo articulates a similar tension between risk and expectation inherent in sharing among Kwaito producers in Soweto:

Musicians are obligated to lend storage technologies such as external hard drives and memory sticks to friends. But external hard drives are not plentiful in Soweto, and it is more common, in fact, for people to lend hard drives from their own computers or even to lend the computer itself. (111; 2016)

Hard drives, as repositories for data, music, photos, information, a digital storage space, reflect the individuality of its users through its scattered and intimate content. As the limited supply of hard drives circulates among groups of kwaito producers, the backup devices accumulate new files that index the particular usage of each borrower and ultimately document the broader network of musicians that depend on the reciprocal exchange of technology for mobility. This “particular cumulative creative process,” Steingo argues, arises from “the failure of smooth information transmission” (113). In this process, the proprietor, himself worried and bracing to lose the device altogether, may be left without the tools needed to create music. Steingo recalls

visiting musician Sizwe to produce music on several occasions, only to discover that he had lent his drive to a friend for an undetermined amount of time (111). While Senegal's culture of *teranga* may lower the barrier to participate as a musician for a larger community of performers, it also impedes on an individual's capacity to perform or produce music at a given time and complicates notions of ownership and material wealth.

Sharing Opportunity

As instruments and material circulate among groups of musicians, opportunities do as well. Musicians in Senegal seldom perform with one group. To support oneself through music, musicians must seek out a role in multiple groups to hedge the risk of not performing on a given week. A byproduct of unstable and unpredictable musical infrastructures (see chapter two), few musical acts can consistently book dates nationally to support themselves. Instead, performers shift roles across musical groups and genres, always seeking out new gigs and opportunities to make money and hedge precarity. Consequently, when a performer succeeds in booking a date, outside musicians will pursue a spot in the final lineup. Given the culture of sharing as a means of limiting community-wide social precarity, such opportunities are rarely withheld from musicians that ask for them, even if it means greater financial risk for the organizing musician.

I return to Saliou to explore the predicament of sharing opportunity: Saliou often booked gigs with relatively few performers (an accompanying guitarist and/or percussionist) to perform alongside him, only to incorporate more and more musicians in the days (and sometimes hours) leading up to the show. Following a concert, the paycheck that Saliou initially hoped to share with one other person would eventually be divided evenly between the expanded group of performers, leaving him with little more than needed to take a cab home that evening. Addressing a similar conundrum among Senegalese ballet performers, Francesca Castaldi posits that

This practice of circulating earnings adds an affective value to money. Money is not only measured in economic terms, over which dancers, like other members of society, have little control; the fluidity with which money travels across a network of relations converts hard currency into affective ties and mutual responsibilities. (2006, 180)

In this capacity, Senegal's culture of *teranga* disrupts an otherwise capitalist musical economy, calling into question an individual's right to self-sustenance by prioritizing collective stability and reinforcing social linkages to ensure "the survival of a community under a chronic state of crisis" (*ibid.*, 179). *Teranga* outlines the sharp value conversion from economic resource to a particular kind of social capital defined by a community's evaluation of public sharing.

Different mediums of capital and resource are central to a social world structured around *teranga*. With money and other material resources distributed thin among musician communities enacting structural reciprocity, favors (as a form of social capital) become the default mode of exchange and compensation. The reciprocation of favors underlies why musicians willingly forgo greater pay to share opportunities with their peers and speaks broadly to the networks of collaboration that make up Dakar's musical economy. Exploring questions of value conversion through collaboration and other forms of exchange among Ghanaian hiplife performers, Jesse Shipley outlines an informal economy

in which those on the margins appropriate social networks for economic gain across various alternative realms. (...) Musicians bring an idea of the free market to a network of personal affiliation to transform music and publicity into celebrity; the value of celebrity, then, can be transformed to access new audiences, economic realms, and corporate sponsorship (2012, 201).

Here, "celebrity" communicates a wealth of social capital that artists convert to record and concert sales and itself may be bartered for favors or goods; a track featuring a well known performer can attract new audiences for an otherwise unknown musician. However, precisely defining the value of celebrity in monetary amounts proves an impossible task. The slippery value of social celebrity complicates expectations behind musical labor and compensation and how performers understand and reciprocate favors: in the pursuit of musical celebrity, at what point does one delineate between a favor and an act of musical labor that demands direct monetary compensation? Generally, does one risk commercial success in the long run by demanding immediate financial support to survive in the short term?

Such questions, combined with the larger social expectations of *teranga*, again reflect an economy of exchange predicated on collective precarity. In Ghana, as in Senegal, “labor is seen as an investment in connections and future possibility and its worth is often negotiated after the fact” (Shipley 208; 2012). Navigating an informal economy of promises, bartering, and favors in which success and compensation are never guaranteed, individual musicians depend on the immediate mobility provided by *teranga*. Whether sharing space on stage, loaning out instruments to peers that need them, or giving up parts of a paycheck even if inconvenient, the sharing and reciprocity dictated by *teranga* all constitute a form of investment into one’s musical community; they also present inherent risk to the individual through the imprecise conversion of immediate material resource into the future potential for celebrity and opportunity.

Sabotage, Slander, and Self Isolation

As I have shown above, the role of *teranga* among Senegalese musicians is complicated and presents both benefits and risks to performers. The question soon arises, what social or economic consequences await those that intentionally evade *teranga*’s quota of sharing? Castaldi writes, “A lack of *terànga* brings a lack of respect in one’s own social circle and a moral isolation that can take the form of severe sanctions if the breach in reciprocity and mutual obligations has been profound...*Terànga* denotes not only generosity but accountability” (2006; 177). In other words, outright and blatant ignorance of its social codes is folly. However, late in my fieldwork, in hushed one-on-one conversations with several interlocutors, I slowly became familiar with a private means of contesting *teranga*: covertly, performers may work outside the parameters of *teranga* through acts of sabotage and slander that ultimately limit and undermine Senegal’s economy of opportunity. In these conversations, the performers did not, in any way, suggest that they had intentionally disrupted other performers for personal gain and instead recounted experiences in which they had either been the subject of an act of sabotage or a third party witness. Even then, the quieted tone that they took on showed that the topic is nevertheless a taboo and controversial point of discussion, one that directly contradicts a Senegalese national

ideology built on *teranga*. I turn to two particularly insightful excerpts from conversations with Ibrahima and Cherif to illustrate how sabotage complicates the structural role that *teranga* serves within Senegalese communities and compels musicians to isolate themselves in response.

The youngest of eight musically gifted brothers and sisters, Ibrahima had just performed a rare collaborative show with three of his brothers at Just4U, alternating the role of band leader with each song. He joins me at a table in the back of the venue where I was sitting with several of our mutual friends and purchases a Coca Cola. We chat intermittently for several minutes before I pose the question, “In your opinion, how do you succeed as a musician in Dakar?”

He responds: “You cannot have too many musicians friends here. Musicians here have a tendency to gossip and speak behind others’ backs. While musicians may offer you praise and commend your musicianship to your face, they will slander you both on a musical and personal level when you are out of earshot. Similarly, people will mention that someone else has spoken negatively about you, whether or not that is the actual case, to disrupt the relationship between you and the musicians you perform with. Dakar has a very small base of musicians; many people will play in several groups at once. Because of this fact, there is a lot of crosstalk between group members. Information and misinformation spreads very quickly. Everyone wants to be in the spotlight, so the more attention they can draw towards themselves and away from others, the better.”

“How do you avoid being ensnared in this?” I ask.

“I just don’t listen to people’s comments about me. This culture exists among musicians and happens regularly, but I don’t let it phase me.”

Acknowledging Dakar’s tightly knit musical community, Ibrahima’s comments show how musicians may exploit this closeness to leverage themselves into more advantageous positions, creating openings for opportunity through rumor and slander. Though such actions seem to blatantly contradict *teranga*’s principle of sharing (not to mention broader social and religious principles against intentional harm onto others), its effectiveness is actually derived from a similar understanding of how to produce opportunity from an interdependent network of per-

formers. “Crosstalk,” as Ibrahima calls it, perverts interpersonal relations that would otherwise be solidified and formalized through *teranga* and threatens amicable relationships between band members on which individual performers may depend to ensure that they remain a part of the group. His comment, “You cannot have too many musicians friends here,” is an obvious example of how the practice of self isolation has manifested in Ibrahima’s outlook on the Dakar musical community. He feels compelled to limit personal connections with other musicians to avoid becoming embroiled in controversy and upsetting his standing as a well regarded performer. At the same time, he limits his obligations to others by working largely by himself.

In an interview, Cherif articulates an even more hostile form of sabotage, one that ultimately stifled his band’s career several years ago: “Musicians in Dakar are not who you perceive them to be. As a foreigner, they hide part of their identity from you. But, in reality, musicians can be ruthless and vicious to each other. No one wants anyone else to succeed. I have experienced this many times.

“When I was just starting to perform with my group—we were not enormously talented at the time but still played solidly—we were invited to perform at Just4U a second time after having played a small show there as an opening act. The venue’s manager confirmed the event. However, going against the manager’s promise, her assistant manager cancelled the event at the last minute. My band and I were furious.

“Later, we discovered that she cancelled our show because the headlining act that evening did not want to be overshadowed by our performance and consequently lose revenue to us in the future. The group demanded we be taken off the bill at the last minute. When you are a generally successful musician, other people’s musical talent is seen as a direct threat to your ability to sell tickets and CDs. Artists attempt to sabotage other rising acts that they see as potential competition to ensure that the door to success is closed off.”

This was the sharpest example of several that Cherif presented that night. It illustrates how performers living in an already uncertain and precarious musical economy see the success of other acts as a source of future professional instability. Like before, Cherif’s anecdote di-

rectly contradicts teranga's economy of sharing resources and opportunity. Publicly, individual performers meet the societal quota of reciprocity and, in doing so, may put themselves at immediate risk with the later expectation that they will be able to cash in on favors from their peers. However, covertly, performers improvise to limit the distribution of opportunity to those same peers with the hopes that they will benefit from the resulting surplus of gigs. In his account to me, Cherif took on an exasperated tone towards what he saw as an endemic culture of ruthless individualism that constantly impeded him at key moments in his musical career. The time and money that he had spent on rehearsals in preparation for the show at Just4U were squandered. Jaded, frustrated, and without the financial means to pay an entire band for practice time, Cherif now opts to practice and perform by himself, enacting self isolation to hold onto financial resources and avoid future conflicts that could lead to greater loss of resources and credibility.

Given the limited amount of time I spent conducting interviews and the controversial and hidden nature of sabotage and slander, it is impossible to fully qualify the extent to which sabotage pervades Dakar's community and informs relationships between performers. However, Ibrahima and Cherif's comments demonstrate how teranga, as a point of national identity and as a system of structural reciprocity, becomes questioned and undermined. While the majority of this chapter frames teranga as a totalizing force among performers in Senegal, a hegemony that dictates the workings of the country's informal economy, sabotage shows how performers may privately repudiate teranga and how those who do not engage in acts of sabotage are forced to consider the limits and breakages of teranga. Acts of reciprocity within teranga only hold value insofar that an individual can guarantee future assistance from his or her community; sabotage complicates the relationship between individual and community and demonstrates that such a safety net against collective precarity is, in fact, not as all-encompassing and reliable as it may seem. By practicing self-isolation, performers distance themselves not only from future acts of sabotage, but also from the broader economy of sharing.

Beyond Teranga

As a response to nationwide precarity, teranga complicates the paradigm of neoliberal individualism; it values community support over individual success and structures a culture of giving and expectation, legitimizing the exchange of material wealth for both social capital and future credit in times of need. Nevertheless, teranga's role in Senegal is messy and uneven. If teranga, at its best, minimizes collective precarity through a system of support and affords a greater degree of social mobility to community members that need it most, sabotage and slander intentionally disrupts the fluid exchange of opportunity, increases the possibility for loss, and isolates performers from Dakar's network of musicians.

Additionally, as Ibrahima made evident in his comment, "You cannot have too many musicians friends here," performers may preemptively choose isolation over communality to avoid becoming a target of sabotage. Whether or not intentional, self-isolation also minimizes (but does not eliminate) the quota of reciprocity that performers are expected to meet as a member of a community. This proves tremendously useful in cases where performers expend significant percentages of their gig money to meet such quotas, a frequent occurrence for many of my interlocutors. At the same time, isolation draws the individual closer to precarity by limiting access to community support.

A rebuttal to Senegal's highly visible culture of teranga, isolation and sabotage show that participatory music making can only go so far. Thomas Turino extols the virtues of inclusivity and sociality in participatory styles of performance throughout *Music as Social Life*. However, his analysis does not consider the politics of distribution when participatory music is commodified and sold. Senegalese music practices straddles participatory and presentational styles in an unconventional way: at concert venues, while the divide between audience and performer is clearly delineated, Senegal's culture of sharing opportunity and resources adds a participatory element to an otherwise presentational model on which musicians depend for revenue. With funds spread thin across a community, most performers cannot reach economic independence and stagnate in the indeterminate space between amateur and professional musical careers.

Rejecting the participatory model through isolation, some artists claim a sense of musical and economic independence and strive for mobility beyond the limits of teranga in order to succeed in a capitalist marketplace.

Conclusion

On Cars Rapides and Mobility

“Jox ma sama weccit!” — “Give me my change!” The bus attendant, holding a wad of neatly organized bills in his hand turns to the middle aged woman whose sharp demand had diverted my attention away from the glassless window of the *car rapide*. Following a brief, pointed altercation, the attendant hesitantly procures a 50 franc piece (about ten cents) from his limited reserve of coins needed to facilitate the small monetary exchanges that make up Dakar’s economy of transportation. Sporting a brightly patterned, form-fitting wax print dress and a bag of vegetables, the woman signals to the attendant for the minibus to stop. He reaches his arm out of the permanently open back door, tapping loudly on the similarly colorful exterior of the bus to notify the driver. The bus grinds to a halt to let her and a couple of other passengers off, who push through the crowded maze of legs inside the vehicle and descend into the busy streets of Dakar’s Parcelles Assainies neighborhood.

Cars rapides, “rapid minibuses” that shuffle the masses across the city, embody a distinctly Senegalese infrastructure of mobility. The buses, covered in beautifully painted depictions of spiritual leaders, animals, religious phrases, and symbols, offer the cheapest mode of urban transportation in Senegal; *“transport en commun,”* “communal transportation” in French, is inscribed onto the sides of the stylistically uniform yet custom designed fleet of yellow and blue vehicles in acknowledgement of this fact. I often found myself staring at the intricacies of the *cars*



Front of a *car rapide*

rapides to absorb their collage of cultural icons only to realize, upon closer inspection, that they too were staring back at me. Eyes painted on the front and rear of the weathered vehicles lend them an omnidirectional gaze that surveys Senegal's changing cultural and physical landscapes as they travel down sandy corridors, through street-side marketplaces, and along the sharp cliffs of *la corniche* where Dakar meets the Atlantic Ocean. Exploring themes of entrepreneurship, mobility, and noise, I look to *cars rapides* as a direct cultural reflection of the reality of life in contemporary Dakar for the artists whose stories, experiences, and testimonies inform this ethnography of musical infrastructures and counter-hegemonic musical practices.

Entrepreneurship and Precarity

The *car rapide* idles at a busy bus terminal, waiting for a new round of passengers to fill the vehicle before heading south towards the Medina neighborhood. Unlike the larger, undecorated buses of the government-run public transportation system, *cars rapides* make up part of a network of privately run taxis, *clandos*,³ minibuses, and horse-drawn carts that enable the movement of people or goods within and beyond Dakar. In fact, the French colonial government and, later, the Senegalese government have “constantly fought against their proliferation” (Lombard 2011, 105) since the painted minibuses began appearing in Dakar in 1949. Unsanctioned by the government, *cars rapides* exist within Dakar’s informal economy and operate on a colloquial system of payment. Those that drive and collect money on the buses must use entrepreneurial savvy to survive off the many small monetary transactions from a day of driving across Dakar, an exhaustive task. A padlock shuts off the gas tank from thieves. With one arm fixed to the back of the bus, the bus attendant gestures widely with his spare arm in an act of invitation and shouts out the bus’ destination to attract passersby. He directs commuters to slide over to best utilize every square inch of the vehicle, whose seats are outfitted to hold the maximum volume of passengers with little regard to comfort or personal space.

Such entrepreneurship and improvisation are imperative to counter a state of precarity. Across their album, *Dimanche à Bamako*, Malian duo Amadou and Mariam, in collaboration with Manu Chao, present a musical ethnography of African modernity. In “Camions Sauvages” (“Wild Trucks”), track seven of the album, Chao sings “The route is long, my feet are heavy / And my eyelids as heavy as lead / Crash on the road / ... The world is my wild truck.” Overworked and close to falling asleep at the wheel, the truck driver must nevertheless continue to work to sustain himself against a lived state of precarity: “Panic, panic, panic from the periphery,” Chao sings at the end of the song, “Economic panic,” “Panic in Africa.” “Through rhythm, speech and sound, ‘Camions Sauvages’ describes a destructive material force that is

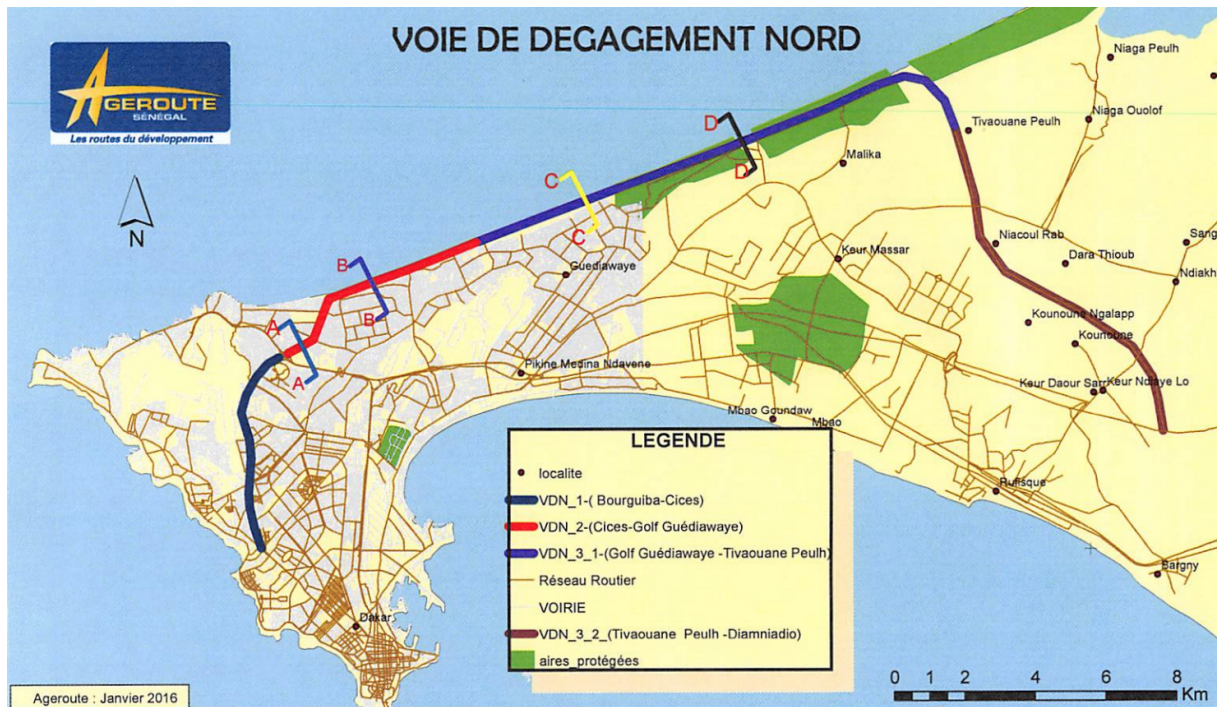
³Unlicensed, ‘clandestine’ taxis that charge less than taxis and operate on a pool system.

relentless in its menace to nature and society” (2010, 28), argues Ryan Skinner in his close reading of the album; “The wild truck not only strips its occupant of humanity but also threatens the lives of those who encounter it, whether by force of impact or by the forces of global capital” (*ibid.*, 29). In the periphery of the neoliberal world economy, *cars rapides*, like wild trucks, symbolize a state of constant uncertainty and panic that forces drivers to the point of exhaustion to survive.

A counterpoint to the wildness of “Camion Sauvage,” “Taxi Bamako,” track twelve of *Dimanche à Bamako*, offers a narrative of civility and calm from the perspective of a taxi driver: “I make my rounds in heaven / You sit down, I drive.” Skinner writes, “Everyday sociability is central to the maintenance of civility in Mande society. In Bamako, taking a taxi isn’t just about getting from point A to point B, it’s also about establishing a social relationship between passenger and driver” (*ibid.*, 28). As I explored in chapter three, *teranga* structures such a culture of sociability, mutual accountability, and collective support needed to create order and civility in a precarious musical world. It mediates socioeconomic risk and formalizes exchange in a largely informal and unstable economy. However, sabotage and self-isolation returns musicians to a state of precarity; “the individual is caught between centripetal forces of community and centrifugal forces of competition, pulling and pushing between civil and wild spaces, in and out of social balance” (*ibid.*, 29). Musicians must navigate this tension with keen awareness of their social environment and with entrepreneurial savvy to subsidize the pursuit of a successful career through music.

Infrastructures of Mobility

I jumped through a cloud of exhaust and into the *car rapide* with Cherif, who offered to hold onto my guitar as I balanced my way through a mesh of tightly squeezed bodies, making sure not to step on sandaled toes. The sky shone a darkening orange as commuters made their way from work; Cherif and I had come from practice on Ahmed’s roof, where we jammed on jazz standards (he loves Donna Lee, but I can’t play it) and passed around several steepings of ataya over conversation. We are heading to the university across town to attend an open-air hip



Map of the VDN in Dakar

hop showcase and sat in silence to the hefty grumble of the aging engine and jabbing horns of impatient taxi drivers in the usual evening rush hour. At a standstill, one rider gestures to a young woman on the street carrying pouches of water. She passes two sacks to the man through the windowless frame of the bus in exchange for 50 francs.

Finally finding momentum, the bus passes down the completed end of the VDN (Clearance Path North), a massive road connecting the south-west coast of Dakar to the north side of the peninsula and curling east into mainland Senegal. Still in progress, the VDN is part of several large-scale infrastructural undertakings that the Senegalese government has conducted in recent decades to modernize and increase mobility in the country. One such project, 45 kilometers outside of Dakar, the Blaise Diagne International Airport vies to replace the centrally located Léopold Sédar Senghor International Airport, which takes up a significant footprint of downtown Dakar and has become too small to accommodate the increasing amount of movement to and from Senegal. As the VDN and new airport aim to increase the flow of people both nationally and internationally, the Grand Théâtre and the Statue of the African Renaissance, both built with funding and labor from the Chinese government, look to boost Dakar's tourism



Statue de la Renaissance Africaine

and entertainment economies. The Grand Théâtre, the largest of its kind on the continent, functions as a national platform for Senegal's greatest musical acts and showcases the country's economic and cultural strides towards ideals of urban modernity.

Similarly, the Statue of the African Renaissance, which stands atop one of the two *mamelles* of Dakar facing west over the Atlantic, is a proof of concept; inaugurated in 2010 before 19 African heads of state, taller than the statue of liberty, the Stakhanovite-style statue depicts a muscled man grasping a woman and baby who point in opposite directions, to Africa and the West (BBC 2010). Its advocates say the statue, erected on the 50-year anniversary of Senegalese independence from France, “represents Africa’s rise from ‘intolerance and racism’” (BBC); Africa’s renaissance entails distancing the continent’s shared colonial past from its independent future and re-establishing relations with the West and other international powers on its own terms. The bronze baby points to America as an invitation for collaboration and exchange, as an articulation of independence and identity, and as a call to the diaspora of Senegalese who have

found themselves in the so-called New World throughout history. The Senegalese diaspora in America flourishes in Harlem, New York. A community of immigrants, many pursued America as the realization of an imagined elsewhere, one marked by social security and the promise of employment.

Many of my interlocutors articulated their own desire to tour or immigrate to the West, where they see greater possibility for opportunity and mobility. Mbalax's hegemonic stranglehold on national music consumption and close attachment to national identity, coupled with pervasive social precarity and the lack of "legitimate" music venues and labels, drives non-mbalax musicians to look to the West as a strategic means of escaping a state of obduracy and insecurity. In chapter two, "Far-Off," I explored questions of mobility among non-mbalax musicians through the lens of real and imagined 'elsewheres.' Elsewhere communicates a kind of counter-hegemonic space in which performers can find rare opportunities to perform, make money, and express themselves in a world otherwise hostile to non-mbalax performers. When immigration is not a possibility for performers, they pursue greater professional mobility and legitimacy by seeking out alternative venues and audiences. The world music market, itself a hegemonic and structuring musical force within Africa, informs a broader African musical identity and serves as a model of musicianship that Senegalese musicians may employ to appeal to new demographics in Senegal, Africa, and the West. James Ferguson argues that narratives of a general African identity circulate globally, informing how African performers "understand their own situations, and construct their strategies for improving them, in terms of an imagined 'Africa' and its place in the wider world" (Ferguson 2006, 6). Musicians both complicate and lay claim to this African identity through the 'Afro-' genre prefix, whose descriptive ambiguity enables them to associate with a continental musical identity (in contrast to the dominant national musical identity associated with mbalax), create new narratives of African modernity, and assert "the fundamental equality of people to engage whatever music they choose" (Steingo 2016, 54).

Large scale infrastructural projects like the statue of the African Renaissance reflect the Senegalese state's efforts to create new economic and social mobility for its citizens and for the

country within the global economy, laying the foundation of a new national imaginary. At its unveiling, however, thousands of protesters fiercely condemned the statue on multiple grounds, critiquing “The cost of the project, the imported labor [from North Korea], the representation of the people as worn out caricatures, [and] a president [Abdoulaye Wade] who decided that a legacy perched on a hilltop, gilded in bronze, to be more fitting than filling the mouths of his people” (Russo 2018). With national plans for new mobility, those peripheral to the national push towards modernization are reminded of their own *immobility* and economic precarity through the state’s significant expenditure on what they see as a petty status symbol that does nothing to assuage immediate social issues of unemployment, hunger, and poverty. “The \$28 million statue has been criticized as a waste of money in a country where almost 20 percent of the population is undernourished,” a project that directly benefited former president Wade, who sought one third of the resulting tourism revenue (Al Jazeera 2010). The troubling themes of patriarchal imagery, corruption, and wasted resources suggest a regression as much as the statue’s symbolism and appeal to tourist markets aim to push the country forward.

While projects like the VDN and the Statue of the African Renaissance point to forms of mobility on a national level, *cars rapides* embody a local infrastructure of mobility that enables mass transportation throughout the city. A typical ride on a *car rapide* costs 50 to 200 CFA francs (about 10 to 40 cents) depending on distance, in comparison to the state run buses (150-250 francs) and taxis (700-2,000 francs), making *cars rapides* the most affordable public transportation in Dakar. Yet, mobility is an exception, not the rule, for non-mbalax performers. On many occasions, I observed that even the relatively small cost to take public transportation prohibited some of my interlocutors from moving within the city. One musician who lived in Pikine, a suburb of Dakar, was accustomed to walking nearly ten kilometers into town to practice and perform because he did not have any money at his disposal. *Cars rapides* thus represent the luxury of mobility for a population of musicians that exist in a state of insecurity. Mbalax, a hegemonic musical infrastructure addressed at length in chapter one, contributes to immobility for those musicians who do not adapt their playing style to mbalax’s musical aesthetic. Its

dominance in the national music market limits where and how others perform and make money to sustain professional and semi-professional careers, forcing artists to subsidize their careers through non-musical labor and by performing in multiple groups at once. One performer bought an old vehicle to rent out to taxi drivers as a means of making supplementary income; another bartered found goods in Dakar's downtown market whenever he exhausted the reserves of money he had accumulated playing shows. And, in addition to such improvised means of combating precarity, almost all performers depended on their families for food and shelter.

Noises of Dakar

At the end of our journey, Cherif and I squeeze our way out of the *car rapide* and into the dense urban soundscape of the Medina neighborhood. A chorus of low rumbling emanates from the aged motors of *cars rapides*, taxis, and buses that fly by us at the busy roundabout. Market stalls selling sandals, clothes, kitchen appliances, produce, and a wide assortment of other goods line the sidewalk, where vendors shout over the mechanical din. I identify the distinctive tenor voice of Youssou N'Dour and clatter of sabar percussion in the distorted mbalax being piped through a loudspeaker in the market.

Youssou N'Dour's legacy as the foremost pioneer of mbalax and modern cultural influence have vastly shaped Senegal's musical economy. In the spirit of griot tradition, N'Dour extols virtues of engaged citizenship and positivity through his music. During the 1988 presidential elections in Senegal, a period when "looting and rioting became a daily affair" (Russo 2013, 2), N'Dour's song "Set" established the *Set ak Setal* (clean and proper in Wolof) movement as an alternative to destructive forms of protest: "Have a clear mind," N'Dour sings, "Be pure in your heart. Be sure in your actions." In a 1991 article for the Village Voice, Mboji, a Senegalese youth, asserts, "Youssou sang his song and originated the movement. Young people bought the cassette and heard it, and said 'We won't wait for the government. We'll rebuild our districts ourselves.' All Senegalese thank Youssou. We don't thank the government, but we thank Youssou" (Gehr

1991). Mboji's point reflects the integral role that mbalax, and Youssou N'Dour specifically, plays in Senegal's socio-political realm as a reflection of Senegalese ideals and identity.

Born months after Senegal's independence from French colonial rule in 1959, N'Dour's emergent career with the *Etoile de Dakar* and the Star Band in the 1970s positioned the singer between an older generation of Afro-Cuban performers like *Orchestre Baobab* and a generation of musicians growing up in the newly independent nation. As the first to fully incorporate Wolof-language lyrics and Senegalese percussion and rhythms with the already popular genres of jazz, rock, and Cuban music, he pioneered a distinctly Senegalese genre that rapidly exploded in prominence in the country. Later generations of mbalax performers like the highly renowned Wally Seck and Viviane N'Dour continue to draw from his model.

This is not to say that mbalax has gone unchanged since then. My interlocutors argue that the genre has shifted away from themes of social responsibility towards a more sentimental, personal lyrical approach and note the increasing prevalence of *bruit* (noise or clatter in French), a reference to the noisy percussion of the sabar orchestre, *tama* talking drum, keyboard marimba, and driving hi-hat patterns that lend mbalax its frenetic energy. *Bruit*, as I detailed throughout chapter one, is a complicated and contested musical aesthetic in Senegal, one associated with an imagined national musical identity. Mbalax musicians may use *bruit*'s distinctly Senegalese sound as a way to market their music and connect with listeners in Dakar, many of whom hold a fondness for its percussive qualities. However, non-mbalax musicians, critiquing mbalax on the grounds of its noisiness, argue that *bruit* is "too culturally specific," that it isolates outside listeners who might otherwise take interest in Senegalese music and contribute to the country's musical economy. *Bruit* polarizes listeners, who either appreciate or feel disconnected from mbalax's unorthodox syncopation and rhythmic emphasis. Youssou N'Dour acknowledges that *bruit* positions mbalax as an internally focused genre: playing before international audiences, he tones down the percussive elements of his live sets in favor of simpler rhythmic instrumentation that more closely models Western musical performance. Oppositely,

non-mbalax musicians strategically incorporate *bruit* in their live sets to more closely connect with Senegalese audiences.

Partly solidified by *bruit*, mbalax's persisting dominance in Senegal may also be accredited to Youssou N'Dour's more recent role as a politician and media mogul. A presidential adviser at the head of a widely consumed newspaper, television network, and radio station and the founder of one of the only successful music labels in the country, the millionaire "king of mbalax" influences Senegalese culture and politics both through the enduring legacy of his music and through direct media control. His title as "king" reflects the two sides of his cultural power: at once, it frames him as a cherished figure in Senegalese musical history and as an absolute ruler whose wealth and cultural influence comes across as monopolistic. Such factors further contribute to the national hegemony of mbalax, pushing non-mbalax musicians to the periphery of national taste and compelling them to seek out counter-hegemonic spaces to perform and find opportunity.

Future research extending the work presented here could tackle questions including gender inequality among musicians; the role of Islam and the Mouride Brotherhood within Senegal's large and highly musical Baye Fall sect; the influence of colonial rule in Senegal's current musical landscape; and the appropriation and reinterpretation of black musical forms, such as rap and reggae, in Senegal. Through the frameworks of mbalax, elsewhere, and teranga, this ethnography explores how musical infrastructures shape and inform the lives of a range of non-mbalax performers. Focusing on the tensions between hegemonic musical practices and subaltern musical communities, I situate Senegal within global flows of music, cultures, people, and money and outline how a collective state of precarity in a modern Afropolis gives rise to the techniques of musical survival detailed throughout this ethnography.

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