REVIEWS

In Hip Hop Time: Music, Memory and Social Change in Urban Senegal. Catherine Appert, 2019. Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press. 41 figures b & w, bibliography, index, 234 pp.

How does a musical import from the ghettos of the South Bronx function within an urban African setting? In *Hip Hop Time*, Appert takes us to Dakar to examine the various threads, influences and origin myths that are woven together to produce Rap Galsen, the local hip hop variant that distinguishes itself from the ubiquitous *mbalax* popular music style that dominates the music scene in Senegal. Using traditional ethnographic methods such as interviewing, observation and participation, Appert leads us through an examination of local history, gender issues, and electoral politics as they have played out over time in twentieth and early twenty first century Senegal. Her closeness to the artists is evident throughout her work, sometimes suggestive of an unspoken intimacy. She is as much of a scholar as a fan, offering personal recollections of time spent listening to hip hop artists in the USA and Senegal, dropping terms like "Dirty South" and championing what she admires in the art and poetry of Little Wayne, much to the horror of her politically aware Senegalese informants. Her primary contention is that Rap Galsen serves as an aural palimpsest upon which subsequent layers of text are continually written, erased, re-written and revised over time. The aim is to show "how hip hop practices of layering and sampling delink indigenous musical elements from traditional communicative norms to rework them in hip hop, where they signify rootedness and locality in ways consistent with hip hop practice in the United States" (60).

The seven chapters of the book lead the reader through a thoughtful engagement of issues surrounding origin stories of the genre in both Black America and Senegal, such as gender, political voice, the genre's relation to traditional music and even studio production techniques. In Chapters One and Two, Appert examines the provenance of the origin myths of the genre as they are generally understood by both music historians and local practitioners of Rap Galsen. Interviews with both young and veteran artists paint a vivid picture of a scene that is both arrived and yet always becoming. In describing the past French colonial policies that directly led to Dakar's urbanisation, she ties this history to the birth of street culture in the city and the development of successive styles of local hip hop through time. Recounting the development of the genre, Appert shows how even the Wolof language itself had to be adapted to address concepts and engage issues that previously were not expressed. As rapper Keyti says, "the biggest problem in Wolof is to translate feelings. We were raised like that. We don't grow up with certain words" (105).

Chapter Three is intended to illuminate the influence of griot culture on the genre. We are told that the *djeli*/griot is the "Master of the Word, a living source of ancient tradition, steadfast in the face of centuries of upheaval and social change"

(63). My own interviews with Guinean *djeli*, Moh Kouyate, revealed that beyond mere musical entertainment or verbal mastery, the *djeli* provides social cohesion, binding all members to a cultural center and acceptable codes of conduct, thus serving the needs of the present while being rooted in the ancestral past (Interview 15 April 2014). The presence of a *djeli* as an officiant at important life events – births, baptisms, marriages – is a cultural imperative. Appert hints upon the role and the status of the griot without giving much in the way of specifics, and although she does make a strong argument for connecting the local *djeli*/griot tradition to Rap Galsen, a deeper consideration of the scope of the *djeli* beyond music and oral mastery is required. The role of the improvised form of praise poetry known as *taasu* is also considered for its satirical and erotic elements although it is ultimately rejected as a foundational element of the genre, with one informant explaining, "It's just for fun, to pay homage or give history, but I've never heard a *taasukat* [person who recites *taasu*] talk about a politician or denigrate the regime via his taasu" (110).

In Chapter Four, "Voicing Galsen", Appert continues to explore the impact of *taasu* as well as griotism in the growth of Rap Galsen. The rapper, Kronic, critiques the "false histories" linking *taasu* to hip hop, cautioning against too close an association: "because it resembles hip hop is not to say that it is the true ancestor of hip hop. It is one thing that our ancestors did here, but hip hop is another thing that resembles taasu and that Americans created" (92). Taasu's position as a form of satirical or erotic wordplay within Senegalese culture is strikingly similar to the position held within African-American culture by the dozens, the game of artful verbal put-downs that is at the foundation of much of Black American humour and lyricism. Though neither are in themselves representative of hip hop, both practices are part of the larger cultural milieu that eventually gave birth to this genre in their respective locales. Although the griot myth is central in the formation of the genre, Appert conflates this ancient profession with the European bards without clear explanation of the distinctions between the two: "French colonists were the first to dub the bards whom they encountered throughout West Africa *griots*, a word as invented as the tradition it came to signify. The term, a catch-all for a variety of distinct performance traditions, caught on with indigenous populations" (63). Other than praise singing and oration, relatively little attention is given to the griots' cultural obligations such as arbitration, mediation or the maintenance of kinship ties.

At this point in the book Appert leads us in a discussion of Senegalese impressions of the sociopolitical origins of hip hop in the US which have informed their local movement. Not surprisingly, their awareness of the cultural milieu that led to hip hop is fragmented and incomplete due to their specific time and location. Here a brief consideration of proto hip hop fathers such as the Last Poets, the Watts Prophets and Gil Scot Heron would be a welcome addition, their work being foundational to the lineage of political hip hop in the USA. One wonders if there is a Senegalese equivalent to Heron's highly charged anthem, "Whitey on the Moon." What would it say? She writes that "each generation of Senegalese rappers has laid claim to hip hop's mythologised

history of racialised socio-economic struggle in the urban United States" (93). Rappers' lack of information about the US context of hip hop's birth contributes to what she calls a "mythologised past and a material present" in Senegalese impressions of the genre. Her adaptation of the palimpsest motif is particularly apt; we see the hip hop music making methods being consciously adapted to local styles. She explores the use of traditional instruments and the methods used to incorporate traditional music into the strict 4/4 pulse of hip hop, creating something new, local and yet essentially hip hop at its core. Although the first rappers were dancers who adapted to rhyming as an accompaniment, Appert shows that Rap Galsen is more than mere beats and lyricism, as it touches upon hip hop fashion, entrepreneurship and graffiti in Dakar. She visits the Galsen shop, owned by an older interlocutor named Drygun whose establishment is described as "the only one-stop destination for local and imported streetwear in Dakar." Her description of the graffiti adorned exterior as well as the merchandise and Nike shoes that populate the interior evoke familiar hip hop spaces that are now fixtures on the global map.

Rap Galsen exists within a community that actively and consciously represents its impression of Black South Bronx B-boy culture (breaking, graffiti, DJ-ing and MC-ing) on its own terms. Similar to the input of the various African American cultural elements such as work song, the dozens, the blues, gospel, and jazz, Rap Galsen also has its particular constituent elements such as *taasu,* mbalax, traditional music and the oral mastery of the griot tradition. Through the palimpsest that is Rap Galsen, Appert explores the ways in which local elements were fused onto a diasporic movement such as hip hop. She also delves into the significance of the accepted hip hop myths in the context of the Senegalese scene. Interviews with local informants expose the perception that the main differences between East and West coast rap in the US revolve around simplistic concepts of mere "party music" or "gangsta rap" as opposed to "conscious rap." Appert goes on to examine the position of the indigenous *mbalax* genre – a modern Senegalese popular music grounded in praise singing and featuring traditional *sabar* rhythms – by way of Rap Galsen. She quotes rapper Kronic's explanation of the genre: "It's just our national music. We are born within it—well, I hope that I won't die in it" (95). Mbalax simply does not fulfill the youthful needs of voice and political critique in the same way that Rap Galsen does.

Appert exposes how traditional praise-singing practices were co-opted by ruling elites, compelling rebellious youth to seek a new creative outlet for their social critiques: "hip hop voice is speech as action, unlike griot speech which, although powerful and empowering, leaves social action to the patrons whose power it upholds" (122). The rapper, Dex, confirms this when he says, "hip hop has given me a lot of experience. In a way, it's played a role in my intellectual life" (121). We glimpse hip hop's potential for social liberation when another informant declares, "we have freedom of expression in hip hop. So what others don't dare to say, it's rappers who say it" (*ibid.*). Appert's work leads us through a rich tale of the construction of Rap Galsen and in doing so, revealing the ways in which it empowers individuals and increases their social awareness.

In Chapter Five Appert takes up the issue of gender, showing how traditional roles have complicated the participation of women in the genre. Through ethnographic sketches of practicing female rappers we see how their lyrical content is directly linked to their difficult social position as Senegalese women who are expected to conform to traditional modes. Indeed, although the genre is popular with girls and young women, their participation is limited by traditional gender roles: once a young woman is married and her husband does not approve of hip hop, her career is effectively over. Young women's domestic duties keep them occupied and away from developing their craft while young men have considerably more free time. It is notable that although none of the women interviewed were older than their early thirties, men do not "age out" of hip hop, still actively participating while maintaining families well into middle age. An informant named Sister Dia says, "There are a lot of women, but they aren't famous, because their careers pass too quickly. Sometimes they get married and have to leave it. Sometimes they get pregnant and have to leave" (141). The brief liminal period of girlhood that allows the freedom necessary to participate in the local scene often ends when gender roles come into play; the culturally prescribed duties of wife and mother do not allow for a career in Rap Galsen. Ultimately, although hip hop is prized because of its utility in lending a voice to pertinent issues, traditional gender roles and perceptions still govern whose experience is popularly promoted.

Chapter Six muses upon the complex intertextual layering practices in hip hop composition, once again bringing the concept of an aural palimpsest to bear. Hip hop in the context of Rap Galsen can be understood as an extended and richly textured conversation between two poles of the African diaspora: contemporary, urban Black America and urban Senegal. Senegalese living in New York and Paris brought the politically charged hip-hip of a group such as Public Enemy home to the continent where it took root in African soil, influencing Senegalese youth to adopt a similar creative stance and political discourse. Appert often reiterates this "global" nature of the genre, though she stops short of embracing a pan-African view through her assertion that hip hop is not essentially African. Quoting rapper, Books: "It doesn't come from Africa. It doesn't come from us. We are influenced by Americans and this comes from American ghettos" (111).

Perspectives such as this powerfully show how local perceptions separated from historical fact can become origin myths of local genres. My personal memories of Black youth in the early eighties include attending parties where the DJ did the spinning and the rhyming all at the same time. This is before the frontman MC was commonplace, and more than a decade after the politically charged proto-raps of Heron, the Watts Prophets and the Last Poets; indeed, hip hop's most recognisable roots are in party music. In those years between post-disco and pre-"boom bap", politics was not an overt part of the daily business of getting up on the down stroke. We were not living in "the ghetto"; we came from working- and middle-class homes in the suburbs.

It is notable that very few of Appert's informants are particularly knowledgeable about Black American music, neither its historical nor social context. She displays a

firm grasp of commercial hip hop, but most of the work of placing it in the larger context of Black American music and its African roots is left undone. The reader may want to hear more about the diasporic links between Africa and Black America, but an explanation of the blues element – the sphere of so many overt African musical and rhythmic retention (Mississippi, New Orleans and Congo Square, can you hear me?) – and its central importance in the evolution of hip hop in the USA is lacking.

While allowing ample consideration for the discourse on diaspora, Appert stops decidedly short of a pan-African perspective. However, it is not coincidental that Senegalese youth watching Public Enemy videos in hip hop's early days would see images and hear sounds of Black urban youth in 1980's America in ways that they innately understood without even knowing English. It is precisely this pull of diaspora – melody, rhythm, wordplay, posturing, image – elements that constitute a global Black identity that is the foundation for their affinity towards hip hop. The methods and concepts governing recording and mixing traditional instrumentation are also discussed where we see that Wolof speaking B-boys in Dakar are not only serious practitioners of "real" hip hop, they are also progressive traditionalists in their composition and production techniques. Most importantly, they are mindful not to "lose" hip hop or turn it into just another hybrid of western musical motifs and traditional instrumentation such as the ubiquitous and often maligned *mbalax*.

The Final Chapter, "Remix", functions as an epilogue of sorts, dealing with the social and political power inherent in the hip hop voice in contemporary Senegal, particularly how hip hop was mobilised during the "Y'en A Marre" political uprising of 2011. Appert demonstrates that it was the political involvement of the underground that led to increased acceptance and global visibility. A new, politicised international narrative recast Rap Galsen as a combination of activism and extra musical mobilisation, though the realities on the ground were much more complex and nuanced. Compiled through multiple interviews conducted in Senegal over several years, Appert's book provides a vivid and detailed ethnographic account of the adaptability of the hip hop aesthetic in the search for a local voice within a diasporic tradition of word, sound and power.

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