Gëm Sa Bop: Performing ethics, claiming space and grabbing the mic as Senegalese female hip-hop artists

Sophie M. Keane
Macalester College, sophie.keane47@gmail.com

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Gëm sa bop: Performing ethics, claiming space and grabbing the mic as Senegalese female hip-hop artists

Photo by Sophie Keane, art by Zeinixx.

Sophie Keane
Dr. Anna Jacobsen, Department of Anthropology
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i. Abstract

The hip-hop cultural movement has taken hold of youth communities around the world. DJs, taggers/graffiti artists, rappers/MCs, and breakers/dancers exist in every corner of the globe; Dakar, Senegal is no different. Hip-hop has historically privileged male bodies, but female artists in Dakar grab the mic to unapologetically express themselves and disrupt the systemic silencing of their voices. I argue that Senegalese female hip-hop artists navigate and claim gendered spaces by carving out creative spaces of their own and grabbing the mic. Gëm sa bop, a Wolof phrase meaning “believe in yourself,” grounds the ethics — how an actor practices being good, broadly defined — that drive the actions of the individual artists with whom I spoke. Gëm sa bop has roots in historical Senegalese cultural values but also supports the outspoken, liberated values of hip-hop music and culture. In exploring how female hip-hop artists acted out the ethics of gëm sa bop by claiming space and grabbing the mic, I follow my informants across the spaces I observed them inhabiting: homes, hip-hop production spaces (the label/recording studio), other kinds of everyday hip-hop spaces, and concert stages. I identify key cultural values that women learned within their homes, characterizing the domestic sphere as a site of both identity construction and contestation. I follow my informants to the recording studio, examining female artists’ ethical relationships with Senegalese cultural values and hip-hop values as they navigated male-dominated spaces of hip-hop production. I analyze two major performative actions women used to linguistically claim space within the hip-hop community: ego trip and speaking up. Finally, I analyze women’s onstage performances as exemplifications of grabbing the mic, claiming space, and thus expressing their ethics. Ultimately, in this ethnographic analysis, I argue that Senegalese women have made critical creative contributions to global hip-hop culture via the platform that hip-hop has provided for their voices.
ii. Maps

Figure 1: Dakar and its suburbs

Figure 2: Important places in the Senegalese hip-hop community
Notated with a red circle and a corresponding label
iii. Acknowledgements

I am indebted to so many for their invaluable support during the completion of this project. First of all, to my honors advisor, Anna Jacobsen: thank you, from the bottom of my heart, for your wisdom, bravery, guidance, and humor. You have shaped this project, and me as an anthropologist, in invaluable ways. I also thank my academic advisor, Dianna Shandy, whose influence I felt even from across the Atlantic. Thank you for guiding me towards anthropology in 2013, and for pushing me to think critically and deeply. I am honored to be a part of your lineage.

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1. Introduction

“I speak from the hood, I wish you could hear me now
’Cuz I’m a woman they want me to back d-d-down
They said I can’t do it, so I had to put it down
I came from the bottom, I can’t let my top down”

— Gotal, “U.N.I.T.Y.”

Hip-hop artist Sister LB navigated the streets of her Dakar suburb like an expert. Her part of la banlieue\(^1\) is a neighborhood called Petit Mbao; like the rest of Dakar’s banlieue it is the crowded home for many low-income families. Sister LB balanced on narrow curbs, squeezing past vendors selling their wares and trucks making deliveries. She cuffed a neighborhood kid on the chin. As we passed an older woman on a street corner in a long green veil, Sister LB touched her hand to her heart and lowered her eyes. She exchanged handshakes with her peers in the neighborhood — other rappers and hip-hop artists. Sister LB was in community with these artists, most of them men.

She shared a special kind of community with an even smaller group within it: Senegalese hip-hop artists who identified as women. These artists were graffiti painters, DJs, dancers, and rappers like Sister LB.

Sister LB led me to her home in Petit Mbao, in the region of Pikine. We sat on a cushion on her living room floor and Sister LB relaxed against the wall. She adjusted her tight white head wrap as I asked her if she still got nervous before she had to get onstage at a rap concert. She explained in French that she had not always had the confidence that she seemed to exude in her daily life, and when she performed:

\(^1\) The French term for “suburbs” that my informants used. Contrary to an American understanding of the suburbs, la banlieue referred to the poorer outskirts of the Dakar city center.
At the beginning it was like that [I got nervous]. Because you weren’t used to seeing ten people looking at you at the same time. Now, you get onstage and there are a thousand people, or a hundred, two hundred, it depends, all looking at you at the same time. You’re a little bit frustrated, shocked, all of a sudden you want to get rid of the mic, quoi. But after, that’s the experience. Over time that evolves. You have your way to manage your stress, your timidity.

She stretched her legs, clad in dark blue jeans. I asked her what she did to help with nervousness:

I tell myself, if I do well, people are going to appreciate it. [These days], I’m not looking to make people scream, or make people move — I do my show, I try to give myself pleasure, after the rest, voila — if it comes from the heart it touches the heart, quoi...and now, voila, when I need to get onstage I do my prayers — all Senegalese, all Muslim — I do my prayers, because...I take a lot of interest in that. I do my prayers, I get onstage, after it’s God who decides. The rest, ca va. Now, I’m used to watching people watch me.

Critics, she said, are frank with her when she does not do a good show. Sister LB listens to them, lets them make her evolve. “If I did that [performed poorly] today, tomorrow, I’m gonna to do a lot more. Me, I’m like that, I give a hundred percent. I believe in myself.”

As of this writing, only one all-female rap collective existed in Senegal, called Gotal. Sister LB was not part of the four rappers and one DJ who compose the group. Nonetheless, when I asked her about it, she said reflectively, “I am in Gotal, I’m part of Gotal, because Gotal, it’s a spirit…even if I’m not onstage [with them] I’m a part of Gotal, because Gotal, it’s a fight, to be a lot more respected.” Sister LB articulated the power of a group like Gotal within the world of Senegalese hip-hop, an all-female group in a male-dominated community.

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Gotal performed together for the first time in November of 2014. The chosen venue: Le Ravin nightclub in Guediawaye, a suburb of Dakar, Senegal. The concert of which they were a part was curated by one of Gotal’s members, a rapper called Toussa.
Toussa wanted to highlight Gotal’s introduction onto the public sphere and performance circuit in Dakar.

Gotal made their entrance in style, descending one by one down the stairs that led to the stage. First, Toussa, all MC-swagger as she introduced her fellow collective members. Anta was next, rapping in her signature hardcore style in dark jeans. Then Vénus, grooving in high heels as she mixed rapping and singing. Last, Lady Zee made her entrance in a form-fitting teal minidress and tights, singing in her smoky, seductive manner. Gotal introduced themselves with their single “Get Up,” and then launched into their recently released single and music video, inspired by Queen Latifah’s “U.N.I.T.Y.”

Flash-forward seven months. On a hot afternoon in July, Gotal was preparing for the release of their newest single, “Nuul Kuk” — a Wolof phrase meaning, “Black is Beautiful.” A makeup and wardrobe consultation for the song’s music video was cancelled last minute, so Lady Zee and Vénus met me for lunch at Caesar’s Palace.

There were lots of hugs as we reunited. We found a table. Lady Zee snapped photos of herself and us as we sipped bissap² and nibbled on pizzas. She and Vénus laughed about their workplace dynamics, teasing each other in Wolof (both of them have day jobs). When Lady Zee noticed an older man watching us, she playfully made him guess how old we were, and then explained to him that she and Vénus are a part of Gotal, a rap collective. He nodded, seeming curious — but Lady Zee turned back to our table. We kept eating and the conversation flowed between French, English and Wolof.

“Rap is a denunciation of what’s happening around you,” Vénus said, between bites. “People think that it’s for men; they’ll send you to the kitchen. But rap is music, it’s universal.” She sipped more of her bissap. Vénus took her time, speaking reflectively.

² A Senegalese juice made from hibiscus leaves.
Lady Zee spoke quickly, chiming in about her guiding principles: no smoking or drinking. Studying is important. So is not “giving your ass,” or selling your body for success.

“As a woman, you have to be wise,” Vénus said. “Believe in yourself.”

Lady Zee agreed. She offers the Wolof: “Gëm sa bop.” Believe in yourself.

***

I argue that Senegalese female hip-hop artists resist the second class to which women around the world are often relegated by grabbing the mic to navigate and claim gendered spaces. Gëm sa bop, a Wolof phrase meaning “believe in yourself,” grounds the ethics that drive the actions of the individual artists with whom I spoke. Gëm sa bop has roots in historical Senegalese cultural values but also supports the outspoken, liberated values of hip-hop music and culture. In analyzing how female hip-hop artists acted out the ethics of gëm sa bop by claiming space and grabbing the mic, I hope to respond to two major questions: How do female hip-hop artists internalize values imbued in both domestic and creative spheres, and how do artists use these values to perform multiple, at times contradictory selves to survive within the spaces they inhabit?

Theoretical background

Nikki Lane’s (2011) discussion of black women in the production and reproduction of hip-hop culture drives my understanding of female hip-hop artists in Senegal. Lane draws attention to the traditional privileging of the “urban Black heterosexual male” body in the narrative of hip-hop (Lane 2011, 775). Her description of “the mic” illuminates this object as central to hip-hop communities around the world — an object of both power and responsibility, of belonging to the world of hip-hop (Lane
Thus, *grabbing* the mic, literally and figuratively, is an uninhibited, unapologetic claim to power. To grab the mic is to express oneself hip-hopologically, to make one’s own voice heard. For Lane,

In hip-hop culture, the microphone [...] represents power for the one who holds it, because it is their voice that is heard at the party, in the car, on the block, and on the radio far beyond the city limits. The majority of hip-hop creation stories, or mythologies about the founding of hip-hop music and culture, name men as the original and primary producers, or suppliers, of hip hop to both “the street” and the world. Although there were and always have been djs, dancers, graffiti artists, and rappers who were Black and women, they are placed on the periphery of hip-hop culture; their voices [...] devalued and their contribution to the global rise of hip hop either forgotten or eschewed.

This project aims to center the black African women in Senegal who are making critical contributions to hip-hop culture. I want to illustrate how they grab the mic to disrupt the state of “‘silence, secrecy and [...] invisibility’” (Lane 2011, 776) to which they, as black women, are often subjected. Lane explains, “Black women are often forced into silence by being left out of conversations all together or erased from having made contributions” (Lane 2011, 789). This thesis runs counter to this silencing by illustrating both the artistic contributions that Senegalese female hip-hop artists make, as well as to the ways that they live out the values imbued in metaphorically and literally grabbing the mic.

Women in hip-hop have generally been discouraged from both accessing the mic’s symbolic capital and using it to make their own voices heard (Lane 2011, 776). Grabbing the mic is a performative, *ethical* act that typifies the internal relationship my informants had with their own desires — their own needs for self-expression — and the various moral and cultural codes that governed their environments. The mic, after all, also “represents duty—to speak, to act—on behalf of one’s self and community” (Lane 2011, 776). This is an ethical duty to advocate for one’s self and one’s community, which
I argue is in fact congruent with certain traditional Senegalese cultural beliefs as well as global hip-hop culture.

I use ethics here not to refer to a colloquial understanding of moral rights and wrongs, but to a deeper and more holistic phenomenon: a desire and need to be “good,” to both see oneself and be perceived as a good person — and actively construct one’s self as such (Lambek 2013, 10). Ethics is an actor’s dialogic relationship with their society and themselves, an ontological dynamic rather than a binary category (Foucault 2000b, 263; Foucault 2000c, 284). Ethics encompasses the socially imposed moral codes, and their corresponding values, which are mapped onto particular spaces, as well as an actor’s own subjectivity. Thus, ethics explains the at times contradictory nature of my informants’ behavior, as it both responded to culturally constructed codes/values and defied cultural norms. An actor can justify acting culturally inappropriately in a certain space by the ethics that governed her behavior — for ethics refer to the internalization of how the actor herself tries to be a good person (Lambek 2010, 44). Lambek’s (2010) action-driven ethics encompass this relationship between space and the moral codes mapped onto it, practice, and an internalized criteria about how to act in certain spaces in order to be “good” (Lambek 2010, 39). In other words, action-driven ethics embody an actor’s internal relationship to the space one occupies, its corresponding moral codes and the actor’s own desires. Actors self-consciously practice being “good” while considering these factors.

Among my informants, I observed what I argue was the construction of ethical selves (Mahmood 2010). These selves shifted fluidly, strategically and creatively between piety, outspokenness and respectability, depending on the space my informants inhabited.
Here I draw upon Katherine P. Ewing’s (1990) theory of multiple selves concealed within an “illusion of wholeness” (Ewing 1990, 250). Ewing states that “[…] in all cultures people can be observed to project multiple, inconsistent self-representations that are context-dependent and may shift rapidly” (1990, 251). They experience a cohesion that may appear to be contradictory, but is in fact a reflection of the various selves required of them in different cultural scenarios. Because my informants were concerned with both moral codes imbued in different cultural scenarios and their own subjective desires, these multiple selves were a way to behave ethically in different spaces.

Action-driven ethics can only be understood through practice (Lambek 2010, 40; Foucault 2000b, 262). Practice refers to performative actions, such as behavior and language (Bourdieu 1977; Low and Lawrence-Zúñiga 2003). Drawing on this literature, Saba Mahmood (2005) asserts that “only through an analysis of the specific shape and character of ethical practices [can] one apprehend the kind of ethical subject that is formed.” In other words, ethics only have meaning when one looks at how they are acted out. Each member of Gotal, for example, acted out their own unique ethics as they took the stage in November. We will further analyze the act of grabbing the mic to take the stage in later chapters.

Mahmood (2005) integrates a Foucauldian understanding of ethics into her work, meaning that to her, ethics is the “conscious practice of freedom” (Foucault 2000c, 284). Mahmood goes so far as to expound upon an “ethics of freedom,” stating that a subject is “liberated” as long as they are acting according to their own free will (Mahmood 2005, 11). If we understand ethics as a process of free will — an internal, self-conscious process that ultimately reflects the subject’s own unique desires and conceptions of what
is good and right — we can begin to see how liberation stems from ethical practice. A kind of ethics of freedom opens up a wider net of possibility for considering a subject’s actions. Not to mention, it embraces the freedom that one exercises by “choosing the kind of self one wishes to be” (Laidlaw 2002, 324). I observed my informants constructing complex selves, which encompassed their own subjectivities as well as moral and cultural codes. This was an ethical practice that enabled — to differing degrees, depending on the space — a liberated expression of self.

The liberation imbued in ethical practice encompasses the notion of *agency*, as we understand it to mean the way one can act given particular circumstances and power structures (Mahmood 2005, 6). However, agency, as it has been used in in anthropological literature, tends to refer only to those choices we deem “right” (Laidlaw 2002, 315). My usage of the term ethics rejects right/wrong binaries, instead privileging an expression of multiple selves that subjects construct and use at times strategically, at times self-consciously, at times piously. For at times, as Mahmood illustrates, ethical performance involves adherence to moral codes that Western understandings may deem limiting or even oppressive (Mahmood 2005, 11). But as we will see in chapter two, “The Home,” my informants’ practices of piety both upheld the prominence of Islam in Senegalese society and liberated the actors. They practiced agency, maintained the structure of their larger society, and creatively constructed selves in space. They were not merely agents of their own free will, but ethical subjects constructing and expressing themselves according to moral codes and internal processes.

Ethics informed how Senegalese female hip-hop artists were empowered to *claim space*. This translates to both the seizure and carving out of real, physical space, as well
as the claiming of symbolic capital and legitimacy within the hip-hop world. *Claiming space* is related to *negotiating space*: as in, Gotal *negotiated* the male-dominated label within which they were working by *claiming* a space of their own within it. Space can also be negotiated in even more subtle ways, as we will see in chapter two. In chapter four, artists will figuratively and linguistically claim space and in chapter five, they will explicitly, physically do so. The claiming and negotiating of space were always ethical acts, responding to the moral codes embedded in the space and the actor’s own desires and understandings of goodness.

The need to claim space in these ways arose from the relegation of women to second tier status in a patriarchal society. This is not a uniquely Senegalese phenomenon, nor is it at all inherent in hip-hop culture — gangsta rap is infamous for misogynistic and violent lyrics, but this subsection of hip-hop culture is not a reflection of the whole, nor should it be divorced from larger patriarchal systems (Kelley 1996, 184). Inhabiting a female body translates to marginalization nearly everywhere in the world (Ortner 1974). As I acknowledge the oppression of women at a global scale, I will rely on gender theorist Judith Butler (1988) to explain womanhood as something one does, not just something one is. Gender is a performative act, the reproduction of a certain historical moment through a myriad of actions and behaviors (Butler 1988, 520). Gender is a “social temporality” that one is culturally conditioned to maintain through a performance; it is constructed by a heteronormative society and policed by such (Butler 1988, 526).

Subconsciously illustrating Butler’s definition of gender, female hip-hop artists in Senegal both resisted their oppressed status and reinforced the gendered norms accorded to womanhood. As they simultaneously upheld and resisted gendered norms, we can see
resistance not in direct opposition to but as a diagnostic of power (Abu-Lughod 1990; Foucault 1977).

As we analyze the gender performances of female artists, both in their artistry and their daily lives, it is crucial to include a discussion of the gendered spaces they navigate and claim. According to Setha Low (2003, 34), gendered spaces are those that “cultures invest with gendered meanings, [or] sites in which sex-differentiated practices occur, or settings that are used strategically to inform identity and produce and reproduce asymmetrical gender relations of power and authority.” Each of the spaces that my informants inhabited and moved between possessed a gendered dimension. Even female-dominated spaces, like artists’ homes, required conscious, ethical navigation. The theory of gendered spaces is supported by both the marginalization of women and the social construction of gender, for space, like gender, is socially constructed (Low and Lawrence-Zúñiga 2003, 33). Female hip-hop artists ethically navigated the social construct of gendered space in their daily lives, through everyday actions.

Action-driven ethics (Lambek 2010) fuel a fluid understanding of my informants’ ethics, which are influenced by multiple sites: artists’ homes, recording studios, concert stages. Action-driven ethics encompass the relationship between gendered space, practice and goodness, explaining the self-conscious manner with which my informants acted out their ethics based on the internalized criteria that corresponded with the space they happened to occupy. In other words, practice both responded to ethical processes — the internal negotiation of relationships between the self and external moral codes — and reproduced the ethics of my informants, in whatever gendered space they inhabited. Grabbing the mic exemplifies an ethical response and a reproduction of the ethical beliefs
held by female Senegalese hip-hop artists. These sets of gendered, hip-hopological ethics were acted out differently by each of my informants. Because of the fluidity of this notion of ethics, as well as its subjectivity and its dialogic relationship with cultural and moral codes, it defies conceptions of human behavior that rely on only one of these frameworks.

**Related Literature Review**

This thesis builds upon the work of feminist scholars on both the African and the North American continents. Awa Thiam’s seminal work *Speak Out, Black Sisters: Feminism and Oppression in Black Africa* provides important context and nuance for performative theories of gender. Thiam attunes her readers to prior representations of African women’s bodies as hypersexualized objects (Thiam 1986). The contexts of the Senegalese women with whom I spoke need to be understood within the larger systems of power that oppresses them as black women on the African continent. Thiam’s work not only gives crucial historical context for the women I spoke to; Thiam represents a radical female Senegalese voice speaking out on behalf of others and herself, in a way grabbing the mic on behalf of herself and her black sisters. Her work paves the way for female hip-hop artists, both those who identify explicitly as feminists and those who do not, to contribute to her legacy.

Other African feminists offer groundbreaking ideas for a discussion of gender, sexuality, empowerment and hip-hop. Sylvia Tamale (2013, 48) seeks to broaden the understanding of sexuality in human life, viewing sexualities as the complex interweaving of desires, actions and orientations often tied up with the equally complex notion of gender. Tamale’s work challenges us to see the body, the site of the performance of these identities, as both an “object of power” and a “site of resistance”
(Tamale 2013, 163). This understanding of the body empowers the black female body in hip-hop performance. Tamale’s work grounds my exploration of the lives and artistry of female hip-hop artists in Senegal within a framework of empowerment through the expression of gender and sexualities. Tamale’s work, like Thiam’s before her, lays a foundation upon which future feminist discussions can occur.

Hip-hop feminist theorist Aisha Durham (2011) bolsters a discussion of multiples selves with her work on Black femininities in music video. Durham maintains that high-profile Black musical artists strategically deploy multiple femininities to both acknowledge local particularities and appeal to wide audiences (Durham 2011). We can see this plurality mirrored in the ways that multiple femininities allowed my informants to grasp at the wholeness — and respectable woman-ness — of a consistently “feminine” self, and yet shift between different performances of this femininity depending on their context. My informants were always “women,” but the kind of womanhood they performed depended on space, moral codes and subjective desires. Not only did my informants deploy multiple femininities in their artistic work, as we will see in chapters three and five; multiple femininities helped artists to shift between being a “good” hip-hop artist, Senegalese woman, daughter, Muslim, or whatever else their context required of them.

Ali Colleen Neff (2013a) has explored the musical stylings of women’s hip-hop music in Senegal, working specifically with the Gotal collective. Her work investigates the influences and recontextualization of American hip-hop on Senegalese shores (Neff 2013a). She has also worked with female praise poets — women practitioners of Sufi Islam — in Senegal, highlighting the centrality of music in everyday life in many
Senegalese communities (Neff 2013b). Female hip-hop artists, according to Neff, echo the strong tradition of these praise poets, who at times employ a fast-talking form of praise poetry called *tassau* that some have compared to rap (Faye 2013; Neff 2013a). This position is contestable, and should not be interpreted to conflate the form of *rapping* to the historically and culturally distinct form of poetry. Nonetheless, the relationship between the two echoes the occasional congruence that I, and the artists I talked to, observed between Senegalese culture and hip-hop culture. The connection was not only made internally, in the construction of artists’ ethics; it also existed in the lived practice of other kinds of Senegalese musicians.

Finally, this thesis relies on the work of hip-hop scholar and theorist H. Samy Alim (2005), and the term he developed to refer to the global network of hip-hop consumers and producers in the world today: the Hip-Hop Nation, or the HHN. The communities of the HHN exist across the globe, but all maintain the cultural pillars of hip-hop as it first developed in American streets: tagging or graffiti art, breakdancing, DJing and MCing or *rapping* (Alim 2005). In the 1970s, in the dance clubs of the Bronx, pioneering DJs and rappers had started stopping and scratching over the dance breaks of old funk records and “rapping” over them (Charnas 2011, 65). H. Samy Alim (2007) defines rapping as “the aesthetic placement of verbal rhymes over a musical beat.” Alim (2005) asserts the preponderance of rapping within the communities of the HHN, as well as its utility in reading other cultural phenomena. As such, most of my informants were rappers. Another important element of the HHN is its attentiveness to the street, as both

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3 Afrika Bambaata, one of the founders of the hip-hop cultural movement, adds “overstanding” to these cultural activities; hip-hop pioneer KRS-One adds “knowledge” (Alim 2005). Others might add “entrepreneurship” (Killer Mike in an interview with Bill Maher, 2016) and “streetwear” (see Romero 2012).
the original site of hip-hop’s creation and an important imagined site for much of its production today (Alim 2002, 288). I will expand upon the street as both an imagined and physical space in chapter four. These elements of the HHN ground the hip-hop cultural movement as it appears in Senegal today, known there as Hip-Hop Galsene (the inverse of Senegal).

Methods

I lived in Dakar, Senegal for a total of five months: three and a half months in the fall of 2014, and one and a half months in the summer of 2015. I began work on this project in November of 2014, and then returned to the United States to continue bibliographic research in preparation for my return to the field in July 2015.

During my time in the field, I employed three main kinds of ethnographic methods: semi-structured interviewing, unstructured interviewing and participant observation. In a typical semi-structured interview, I might ask an artist or group of artists questions about their childhood, or ask them to take me through a typical day in their life. I might ask an artist to watch a performance or music video with me and explain what was happening. On a few occasions, I came prepared with lists of “folk terms” and asked my informants to sort the terms into piles that made sense to them. Over these two periods, I held recorded interviews with a total of 23 informants (individual artists or “teams,” groups of people coming together under a label): five male, 18 female. Eight of my female informants I interviewed more than once; I consider them “life history informants.”

My access to this community stems from a young woman, Ina Thiam, with whom a prominent Senegalese rapper named Keyti put me in touch after he gave a lecture to my
study abroad group. A professional photographer and videographer, Ina works at the cultural center called Africulturban, a space dedicated to the teaching and protecting of urban culture and the hip-hop arts founded by pioneering Senegalese hip-hop artist Matador. Africulturban hosts the biggest hip-hop festival in Senegal every year, Festa2H. They are also home to the program called Hip-Hop Akademy that trained Ina in photography and video. Ina curates probably one of the most comprehensive existing hip-hop libraries in West Africa at Africulturban, and is thus an expert in hip-hop culture and history. Ina manages several artists through the cultural center, including the collective of female rappers called Gotal. She introduced me to the women of Gotal and provided entrée into the larger community at Africulturban.

My connection to Ina demonstrates an element of Lila Abu-Lughod’s notion of “writing against culture” upon which I would like to draw: what she refers to as a kind of “ethnography of connection” (Abu-Lughod 1991). Abu-Lughod highlights the importance of looking to historical and contemporary connections and interconnections between the anthropologist and the place where they are doing work (Abu-Lughod 1991). This need not be an existential project, Abu-Lughod says, nor even a historical one — more central is the notion of asking questions about the “processes by which it came to pass that people like ourselves could be engaged in anthropological studies of people like those, about the current world situation that enables us to engage in this sort of work in this particular place” (Abu-Lughod 1991). Hip-hop connects and continues to connect the United States and Senegal in creative and mutually beneficial ways, a notion that I will

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4 For example, a program through the United States Department of State called Next Level allowed for both American and Senegalese artists to travel to each other’s countries and exchange information. One of my informants, Toussa of Gotal, participated in this program. This connection through hip-hop appears more symmetrical than other connections between Senegal and other what we call “Western” nations,
return to throughout this work. In my case, I, an American, was a student in the hands of Senegalese hip-hop artists — in one instance, literally taking classes from a dancer named Jeanne D’Arc. I tried to emphasize my relative ignorance of, but commitment to learning about, the hip-hop arts and how they create community in Senegal.

Nonetheless, my presence was often noted and of course at times affected people’s behavior. I saw that at times people went to lengths to speak French so that I, a *toubab*, would understand — even in contexts where they otherwise would probably be speaking Wolof. My limited command of Wolof meant that interviewees who may have been more comfortable speaking in Wolof spoke in French for my benefit. I missed cultural nuances and turns of phrase that I hope to reflect honestly and usefully in this project. Objective cultural fact does not exist; ethnographers present the ethnography as a “fiction” that tells some portion of the truth (Geertz 1973; Clifford 1986). By continually self-reflecting and accounting for my presence in the spaces where I performed research I hope to create a narrative that approaches some sliver of the truth of the lives of these women.

Building upon this idea, I will use my informants’ real artist names in this thesis to show respect for their work and for the public personas they have developed for themselves. Part of my aim with this work is to increase the visibility of these artists in whatever small way that I can. Using their artist’s names thus becomes important, and undergirds the notion that these women are real, professional artists attempting to make a particularly when considering the politics of aid programs. Power dynamics between “the first world” and “the third world” of course continue to play a role, even in a program like Next Level, which frames its mission in terms of workshops led by American artists for artists in poor countries and professional development for the few “international” artists who are chosen to come to the United States. See Next Level’s website for more information: [http://exchanges.state.gov/us/program/next-level](http://exchanges.state.gov/us/program/next-level)

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5 The Senegalese word for white person or foreigner.
living from what they create. Artists agreed to the absence of pseudonyms in this project, for these reasons (see 7.1 Consent Form). In one vignette, an artist asked for discretion (a subsection of Chapter Two, “The Home”); artists in that subsection thus have pseudonyms and do not carry too many identifying features so as to maintain anonymity in a more private realm.

The following thesis is organized across spaces, based on those that I observed female artists inhabiting: homes, hip-hop production spaces (the label/recording studio), other kinds of hip-hop spaces, and concert stages. The following chapter, “The Home,” will identify key cultural values that women learned within their homes, drawing on Bourdieu’s notion of *habitus* to illustrate how women embodied these values and carried them to other spaces. It will introduce the domestic sphere as a site of both self-construction and contestation. It will also present the home as the object of desire for female artists, a source of tension between the longing for legitimacy as hip-hop artists and as Senegalese women. It is necessary to begin to understand the ethics of my informants in their home, as the home was the original site of the construction of ethical selves.

In chapter three, “The Label: Spatializing Production,” I will follow my informants to the recording studio, to examine female artists’ relationships with Senegalese cultural values and hip-hop values as they interacted with one another in spaces of hip-hop production. As I mentioned in this introduction, I will unpack the values of the HHN as rooted in the history of the street. I will provide a brief history of hip-hop in Senegal, as well as its contemporary realities, to understand those values that undergird it and that inform female artists’ ethics. I will provide a brief ethnographic
study of an independent label to analyze how it provided a platform for a signed female artist to grab the mic, and then analyze the power dynamics of other labels that female artists navigated. Finally, I will examine the spaces of production that female hip-hop artists carved out for themselves.

In chapter four, “Grabbing the Mic: Linguistically Navigating Hip-Hop Space,” I will analyze two major performative actions women used to linguistically claim space within the hip-hop community: ego trip and speaking up. I will analyze how these actions are the manifestations of artists’ ethics, embodying both Senegalese cultural values, the values of the HHN and artists’ own desires. I will also attend to the notion of rap bou dgjuen, “women rap,” and how it allows for collective ethical expression and empowerment. Finally, in chapter five, “The Show,” I will analyze women’s onstage performances as exemplifications of grabbing the mic, claiming space, and thus expressing their ethics.
2. The Home

“Être femme, qu'on te place au pieu la number one,
Être femme, tu sais une femme est forte elle est digne,
Être femme c’est beau être femme c’est nekh.”

— Rapper Moona, “Pour les vraies”

Rap artist and singer Sister Dia lives with her family in Pikine, a suburb of Dakar. Like many of my informants, she lived in the home that she grew up in, surrounded by her nuclear family and other relatives until she could become financially independent. Neither Sister Dia nor most of my informants discussed day jobs frequently, but many of them had them: a real estate agent, a receptionist, a salesperson. These were acceptable positions for a woman in Senegalese society to hold, making her own money until she could either move out on her own or move in with a husband or boyfriend. These daytime occupations represented a kind of alternate sphere within which female artists existed; similarly, the home was the site of yet another set of performances of self. Yet the home remains more than just the physical space where artists ate, slept and interacted with their families. This chapter will examine the values imbued in the home and the way that artists navigated the domestic sphere.

One afternoon, Sister Dia and I sat in her bedroom to talk about her life and music. We propped up her laptop and listened to some of her most recent singles. Her mother, a poet who encourages Sister Dia’s creative expression, passed in and out of the bedroom where Sister Dia and I sat talking. At one moment Sister Dia’s mother showed me a book of her own poetry. However, she primarily stayed in the family room, the central room of the house, as we listened to the song she had inspired on Sister Dia’s

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6 To be a woman, it’s to be placed at number one/To be a woman, you know a woman is strong and dignified/To be a woman, it’s beautiful, to be a woman, it’s delicious
laptop. The song had not yet been made public and Sister Dia wanted to keep it a surprise for her mother.

Sister Dia’s high, powerful, mournful voice called out “Balma ak,” the refrain and title of the song, over a hip-hop beat. Roughly translating to “forgive me for everything,” the song is a lament of the pain Sister Dia has caused her mother, and an intimate (almost disbelieving) expression of gratitude for all that her mother has done for her. In the song, Sister Dia reaches back to the moment of her birth and the pain she caused her mother, as well as the difficulties she must have given her as she was growing up. She lauds her mother’s lived experience in the home, taking care of the children.

Sister Dia was not the only artist to speak intimately to lived familial experiences in her music. A young volunteer at a hip-hop cultural center called G-Hip-Hop put it his way: “Every rap artist has a song about their mother.” Several of the artists I spoke with, both men and women, confirmed this idea. Lady Zee of Gotal has a song called “Doom” (“children”) in which she thanks her parents for raising her. Sister LB has a song called “Yaye” (“mother”), a praiseful song about her mother who worked hard to provide for her and her fellow siblings. In the song, Sister LB sings that now it is time for her to attempt to give back all that her mother gave to her, although it is impossible.

This deep intertwining of the personal and the artistic illustrates the transcendent nature of the home as more than a physical space, and the importance of analyzing it in an exploration of artists’ work and ethics. For the female hip-hop artists with whom I spoke, the home was a multi-layered, gendered space that simultaneously placed limits upon their hip-hop expression and grounded the ethics, which allowed them to hold several selves at once. Home was the site of the enculturation of values, beliefs and ways
of being, as well as the site of tensions between at times conflicting yet intersecting selves: “Senegalese woman” and “hip-hop artist.”

Within the physical home, mothers and grandmothers taught artists traditional and cultural Senegalese values. The home was *gendered female*, as authoritative female figures were almost always central in the space of the home (Pellow 2003). Female friends and relatives, especially mothers and grandmothers, reified Senegalese cultural values, expectations, and ways of being in the physical space of the home. These deeply ingrained values that artists encountered and learned within the home stayed with them as they move through different spaces, creating a kind of figurative home that informed how artists behaved outside of the physical space.

I conceive this figurative home as embedded with a particular *habitus* for each artist — a set of taught, acquired dispositions that lie beneath the level of consciousness but vary based on social location and trajectory (Bourdieu 1977). *Habitus*, for these women, involved a process of enculturation, which would inform performative actions used to construct an ethical self. Adult mentors, particularly mothers and grandmothers, taught bodily ways of being in the world to the women with whom I spoke during their childhoods, which necessarily informed their artistry as mature people. The unconscious practical mastery of traditions and values affected their artistic choices today, as well as how they did or did not incorporate old morals, or socially imposed codes, into the ethics they shaped for themselves. The values that artists learned within their homes as girls informed how they behaved in these spaces in the present day.

Low and Lawrence-Zúñiga (2003) have called attention to the utility of studying the home as a gendered space. Because the homes of my informants were complex
spaces, where power dynamics were present but not always merely confining to female artists, it seemed that they were obligated to perform a nuanced balancing act with the multiple selves they held. Overlapping selves were both constructed and contested in the home. Female artists navigated how to continue to maintain their *hip-hopological*, artistic selves and still respect the values and moral codes of their families. This required ethical self-construction and action, enabling artists to express themselves artistically and survive within their homes. Rather than explicitly subverting the systems of power that kept women in the home, women acted within them according to their particular ethics, which determined which of their multiple selves to perform how and when. These kinds of ethics, which were in dialogic relationship with the spaces that women occupy, also provided women with strategies, or performative actions, to maintain their autonomy — despite the limitations placed on which aspects of their person they could fully express in the home. And by the very nature of these actions being informed by internal negotiations between moral codes and subjective desires, women could both see themselves as good and right and be perceived by those around them as good Senegalese women and daughters. Artists act out their own unique hip-hop ethics within the home, which is incidentally also the site of the foundation of values that inform these ethics.

Later in this chapter, I will build on how artists developed these ethics, which in turn determined how to behave within the home. I will first examine how artists learned about these values and moral codes, and what precisely they were.

*Learning about Senegalese Womanhood*

I held several conversations with artists that focused almost exclusively on artists’ childhoods to glean as much detail as I could about the kinds of values they learned and
how these values were enculturated. One late morning I spoke to Toussa, a young rapper in her 20s, in a small sitting room that housed a TV, a couch and a few wooden chairs. It was the quietest place in her house but we could still hear the shrieks and laughter of nieces and nephews and neighborhood children playing in Toussa’s family courtyard just outside the door. Toussa’s family life here appeared to be typical, surrounded by kin both actual and fictive, as she spoke about the influential role her grandmother had played in Toussa’s childhood. Toussa’s father and uncle supported her musically (her uncle was a trumpet player), and they listened to American and international artists such as Bob Marley, Tracy Chapman and Sting. However, it was her grandmother who taught her about Islam, its five pillars, and perhaps most importantly, about dignity and respect. Toussa called the value associated with respect and dignity *kersa*. *Kersa* is a Wolof word for a Senegalese cultural value that I first encountered in a lesson by the Senegalese professors of my study abroad program. In separate conversations, other artists referred to what I believe was broadly conceived of as *kersa* with different French words, such as *dignité* and *respecte*. Because we spoke in French, perhaps artists did not use the Wolof *kersa* for my benefit. Undoubtedly something like *kersa*, for many women, became ingrained in the home because of the influences of their mothers and grandmothers. For Toussa and others it seemed to define Senegalese womanhood.

Toussa said, “One shouldn’t miss it, one shouldn’t play with it [kersa].” The notion of respect, for one’s self and one’s community, recurred as crucial in my conversations with Senegalese female artists. Toussa connected the seriousness of this value to the inspiration she drew from the hardworking, family-oriented women who
surrounded her as she grew up, in a comfortable and welcoming household. When I asked her about these women, she said:

The African woman is truly extraordinary...It’s someone who says, ‘ok, The family before everything.’ It’s someone who manages her family, since birth... It’s a woman who, despite all the barriers against her, resists to live, resists to truly share all that she has in her, who gives the pain to do it all, so that’s why I talk a lot about the African woman [in my music]. And when I say that it’s with respect to my mother.

Toussa said that she grew up watching her mother tirelessly take care of those around her, even as she suffered and exhausted herself helping, sharing and giving every morning through every night. This mirrors Butler’s (1988) discussion of gender, particularly as women were either consciously or subconsciously compelled to act out certain duties associated with femininity — namely, nurturing children and preparing meals (Ortner 1974). Toussa explained that African mothers are not limited to mothering their own children. In Senegal, she said, one treats every child as though they were one’s own; when your children grow up, and have their own children, you take care of your grandchildren in the same manner. We will see this paralleled in the communal attitude that female artists in the hip-hop community in Senegal took towards each other. Artists lifted each other up as they became more successful by inviting each other to shows and doing collaborative songs — taking care of each other, so to speak.

In this way, mothers and grandmothers seemed to shape much of the values and thinking of these women. As I spoke to Sister LB in her living room, her mother was present and even sang along to some of her daughter’s music. She smiled when we listened to the song that Sister LB wrote about her mother (‘Yaye’). Mère Violet, as Sister LB, her young siblings and even her close friends affectionately called her, represented a mobile and capable woman (and mother) to Sister LB’s family. Even when
Mère Violet was not present, perhaps when she was running errands downtown or attending a wedding, her absence was noted.

While Mère Violet provided a living example of a powerful and successful mother figure, Sister LB also demonstrated how she kept her grandmother in her life despite her death a few years earlier. Sister LB’s grandmother had played a deep role in her formation, and Sister LB kept her photograph as the background for her laptop. In the performative act of keeping the photo on her computer, Sister LB linked the values of the home and the education she received from her grandmother with her artistic work. Sister LB stored all of her recordings on her laptop, as well as photos and videos from concerts and other performances — every time she opened her laptop, the first thing she saw was her grandmother. Like Toussa’s grandmother, Sister LB’s grandmother taught her about the values of dignity and respect and the importance of practicing religion. Sister LB said her grandmother had a special quality, difficult to describe but undeniable.

Artists also demonstrated the respect that they had for mothers and grandmothers by internalizing the values these female figures taught them. Vénus, a rapper/singer/dancehall artist in her early 30s, grew up with a grandmother who taught her about history, culture, self-respect and honor. She did not separate her background and teaching from her music, instead incorporating her past into her artistic work. She especially incorporated the value of self-respect into her songs about empowering black women and urging them not to change their physical appearance or bleach their skin. Vénus is a petite woman who today wears her hair in long “rasta” braids, but when she was young, she explained how she used to wear extensions and bleach her skin. Her journey away from these harmful practices was painful, and now she speaks vehemently.

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See the song “Nuul Kuuk” (“Black is Beautiful”) by Gotal
about it: “I don’t touch that shit no more,” she said, in English. Her lyrics display this fierce self-pride that she re-acquired through hip-hop, the foundation for which was laid by older female figures.

Artist EveCrazy spoke about the association of this pride with Senegalese womanhood. I asked Eve about what being a Senegalese woman meant to her, and she echoed some of Toussa’s sentiments about working hard, being self-sufficient and taking care of others.

There are women here [in Senegal] who aren’t proud. Who want to be like you [me] — who don’t speak Wolof, who say, ‘At my house we don’t speak Wolof, we have maids so I don’t do work.’ That’s not a Senegalese woman — you should know how to do everything.

Pride in myriad forms (national, personal, artistic) appears in a phenomenon called ego trip. Later, in chapter four, we will analyze this phenomenon as a vehicle for claiming legitimacy within hip-hop spaces. Here, it is important to mention as it is a hip-hop manifestation of traditional values about maintaining one’s culture, national identity and self-pride. The phrase gëm sa bop, believe in yourself, was repeated among artists; rapper Déesse Major’s most recent single was even entitled “Gëm sa bop.” This song, driven by a desire to inspire and motivate young listeners, exemplifies the ways that female artists reproduced the cultural values of their mothers and grandmothers in their work. Gëm sa bop is not possible without kersa. Both represent important notions that artists were taught to embody in their homes, notions that they carried with them to and practiced in other spaces. We will see notions of kersa recur, as women demonstrated both self-respect and community respect by performing traditional notions of Senegalese womanhood along with new forms afforded to them in hip-hop. Women were
empowered to do so — to freely perform these ethical selves — based on the belief that they had in each of these selves.

*Balancing a hip-hopological self*

Nonetheless, a generational disconnect at times remained between female artists and older authoritative figures. As many of artists were being raised by mothers and grandmothers, they were also discovering hip-hop, and many were not initially supported in their first forays into this new world. Vénus recalled her times as a teenager, when she went out to local clubs and *freestyled* with her sister (much to the chagrin of her mother). She laughed as she told the story of her mother finding out that she performed freestyle at local clubs, saying “The first time that she heard that I had performed at a concert, she grumbled at us, she said ‘If I see you onstage I am going to bring you to the police!’”

Vénus was not the only artist to be threatened by her family when they found out about her love for and connection to the hip-hop community; Zeinixx, a graffiti artist, said that her mother threw away her paintings. Mothers warned artists that hip-hop was “dangerous” and “not for women.” This belief seemed to be born out of a genuine concern for the safety of their daughters, but it actively discouraged women from participating in the hip-hop culture with which they had fallen in love. This love of hip-hop drove women to keep following it.

In certain homes, a tension seemed to remain between artists’ hip-hopological selves and the persona they maintained in their homes. In these cases, artists developed strategies to claim their own space to express themselves, while still adhering to cultural expectations for the gendered space of the home. To be “ethical,” these strategies

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8 Improvised rapping over a beat.
required a complicated internal relationship with what “goodness” meant, according to socially imposed moral codes and the artist herself, in a certain gendered space. The theoretical concepts of gendered space, performative activity and internal ethical processes converged in a seemingly innocuous afternoon I spent with Maimouna, a 26-year-old hip-hop artist.\(^9\)

“Can you keep a secret?” she asked me. The two of us sat in her bedroom on the second floor of her family home in Sicap Mbao, a suburb of Dakar in the region of Pikine. Her bedroom was large, with green and pink paint artfully splashed across the walls. She had a window open; a breeze fluttered the curtains.

I nodded. She proceeded to light a stick of incense, looking up from time to time at the closed door to her bedroom. Maimouna lit a cigarette and lifted it to her lips. She explained that her parents “would kill her” if they knew she smoked. She blew the smoke over her shoulder into the bathroom behind her. She crossed the room and pushed the window open wider. We chatted a bit more. Later, Maimouna’s mother called out to her from outside the bedroom. Maimouna opened the door a crack and responded, leaning out of her bedroom door but holding the cigarette inside and out of her mother’s sight.

The presence of Maimouna’s mother in the central part of the house, at the apex of the bedrooms on the second floor, speaks to the notion of the home as gendered female in many Senegalese households. Maimouna’s mother put herself in a central position to assert her ability to oversee all that occurred in the house, while Maimouna’s father cloistered himself off in his own bedroom. Deborah Pellow (2003) describes the archetypal construction of many homes in West Africa as a courtyard or central area with

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\(^9\) Maimouna’s name is changed to protect her secret and her anonymity in the private sphere of the home. The rest of the names in “Balancing a Hip-Hopological Self” subsection are also changed for a similar reason.
rooms arranged around it (Pellow 2003). Even in the homes I entered that did not follow this precise floor plan, I noticed female figures dominating the central, communal spaces of the house while male figures spent time in an adjoining or separated room. The homes in which I spent time felt controlled by female presences. Yet, even in homes where communal spaces were gendered female (as was the case in nearly every home I visited), the space of the home can still be confining to young, female hip-hop artists. Age hierarchies (Bass 1996, 2000) often relegated female hip-hop artists, daughters within the home, to subordinate status in relation to their mothers and grandmothers.

As Maimouna and I spent more time together, I observed her using several strategies to claim space within the home — driven, I argue, by the ethics that helped her determine how to be a good daughter, a good Muslim and yet stay true to her need to express her artistry at the same time. In this incidence Maimouna practiced a kind of freedom beneath her mother’s authority, without disrespecting her mother, by hiding her cigarette in her own domain: her bedroom.¹⁰ In the time I spent in Maimouna’s home it was clear that she and her family enjoyed what appeared to be a healthy relationship — Maimouna and her older brother, mother, father and older female cousin often engaged in playful teasing, debate and other common household discussions. Maimouna’s deception was a performative, not subversive, act that communicated her claiming of her own space. Maimouna’s mother’s calling out to her essentially performed the same function. Whether consciously or not, the two women avoided a confrontation and maintained the status quo while each of them remained liberated and agentic in their respective activities. Maimouna’s ethics determined how she chose to carry out her desire to smoke in this

¹⁰ This act could be theorized as a “weapon of the weak” (see James C. Scott 1990 and 1985). However, I maintain that hiding the cigarette had much more to do with Maimouna’s personal ethics, not any broader political scheme, which runs counter to an important component of Scott’s “weapons of the weak.”
particular context. Although I did not ask Maimouna about this desire, it was a clearly a
secret that she still felt compelled to maintain, for any number of reasons. Her smoking
habit was a part of her — if a small part — that she knew she had to hide from her
parents.

This had much to do with the moral code that Maimouna’s family interact with as
Muslims — many Muslims in the Senegalese hip-hop movement with whom I spoke
rejected smoking along with the consumption of alcohol and drugs (interview with
TafZion Productions, 2015). Foucault distinguishes between morality and ethics by
stating that morality is the code that social institutions attempt to impose upon its
members (Foucault 2000b, 263). Ethics, on the other hand, is the “conscious practice of
freedom,” a subjective internal relationship with moral codes that one acts out in a
particular way (Foucault 2000c, 284). In other words, ethics embody the liberated
expression of internalized processes about right and wrong, as they are informed by
socially imposed moral codes and other external forces. As Saba Mahmood (2005)
outlines, one does not simply comply with moral codes or act against them. According
to Mahmood, “there are many different ways of forming a relationship with a moral code,
each of which establishes a particular relationship between capacities of the self (will,
reason, desire, action, and so on) and a particular norm” (Mahmood 2005, 29). Looked at
this way, I argue that in hiding her smoking Maimouna was not merely trying not to get
cought. She seemed, instead, to be considering the moral code ascribed by her religion
and her family, in addition to her own desires and personhood, by choosing to smoke in
secret, in her bedroom. These intertwining considerations formed Maimouna’s internal
criteria for this particular choice, and in turn the action to carry out the choice itself. The
performative action she took produced a particular relationship with a moral code in this moment — it seemed important to her in the sense that she wanted to acknowledge its esteem within her family, but equally important was her will to respond to her own desires. Thus, she claimed her own space to do as she wanted within her home while still respecting its structure.

It appeared that both Maimouna’s gender and position in her family confined her to her home and impacted her need to claim her own space. As the youngest daughter in her family, Maimouna was obligated to perform many of the household tasks, particularly as her mother refused to hire a maid\(^{11}\) to do so instead. Cooking and cleaning occupied much of Maimouna’s time and often tethered her to her home, which she said that she was not planning on leaving until she moved out with a boyfriend or husband (she was at the time dating a fellow member of the hip-hop movement, an MC). Maimouna said that she did not have as much time as she would like to go to the studio and work on her art, consumed as she was by household work. Additionally — unlike her older brother, who moved back and forth between their parents’ house and a house in another part of Dakar — she did not have the mobility to go freely between the house and the recording studio or the rehearsal space.

Another element of Maimouna’s home life that may seem insignificant was in fact crucial in understanding Maimouna’s internal processes, a culmination of the values of hip-hop, Senegalese cultural values and her own desires. Maimouna practiced her own ethics and exercised her own autonomy within her house, when she could not leave it, by using notebooks. Notebooks were both a liberated means of self-expression and a

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\(^{11}\) In many families living in both the city center of Dakar and its banlieue, hiring domestic help is seen as commonplace and necessary for multi-person households. See Ohenaba-Sakyi, Yaw and Baffour K. Takyi 2006.
portable, physical manifestation of the internal feat of straddling multiple selves — they could be carried to hip-hop spaces and taken to the home, like the artists themselves. Maimouna kept a number of notebooks in her bedroom: on her bed, her desk, the floor. The afternoon with the cigarette, Maimouna handed me one of them and I leafed through it, admiring colorful sketches of beautiful women in profile, lyrics in French, English and Wolof, and graffiti-style script. There were also a few assignments for the business school from which she received a degree. Her notebooks in her bedroom illustrated a means through which Maimouna could maintain her artistry within her home, when she could not go to the studio or another hip-hop space to make art. On the occasions when Maimouna had some time to herself, notebooks provided her with an uncensorable, utterly creative space. Notebooks helped Maimouna relate to the above-mentioned moral code, with which she and her family interacted, as well as practice her own personal hip-hop ethics, which valued free creative expression. Maimouna was not just being a hardworking artist when she brought notebooks to and from her home; she was acting out a desire to maintain two equally important selves at once: hip-hop artist and Senegalese/Muslim woman/daughter. Several other artists with whom I spoke kept notebooks at home as well, suggesting that this was a useful means to hold on to the hip-hop piece of artists’ selves when they occupied a space that did not always support its expression.

Artists did not always operate in isolation from one another, even as systemic factors kept them in the home and away from the spaces of the hip-hop community. On another afternoon spent with Maimouna, she had invited over three girlfriends, two of them DJs and the other a rapper/slam poet/singer. This gathering represented a culturally
sanctioned way to continue to live a youthful and hip-hopological self within one’s home, a conscious effort to gather outside ascribed hip-hop spaces. We did not excessively discuss hip-hop culture, spending more time taking pictures of each other lounging on Maimouna’s bed and idly catching up on news in their respective communities. They inserted asides having to do with the hip-hop community, though perhaps only as a response to my presence there—one of the DJs present told me about an artistic residency she recently completed in Mauritania. Beyond that, the women did not talk about hip-hop, instead taking the time to simply be with each other as friends. Still, Maimouna played her playlist of Moussapha, Kendrick Lamar and Wu-Tang Clan (American and French hip-hop artists); despite the lack of conversation about hip-hop, these friends enveloped themselves in hip-hop culture, by the music they listen to and the graffiti paintings on Maimouna’s walls. When Maimouna could not leave the house, it seemed as though friends who understood her and the complex interweaving of her multiple selves came to her instead. Together, within the home but away from its authority figures, they could freely perform the multiple selves they hold without worrying about being policed.

In addition to acting out hip-hop selves, these spaces also allowed artists room to act out Muslim moral selves. Mahmood’s (2005) moral selves are notions of modesty, faithfulness and devotion communicated through action. As we will observe in the following example, the seemingly spontaneous and uninhibited expression of Muslim moral selves within a space carved out for female hip-hop artists speaks to the ethical freedom that women had the capacity to exercise, particularly among each other.

In Maimouna’s house with her three friends, one of them — Arame, the slam poet/rapper/singer — took a moment to put on a long-sleeved floor-length robe, sit away
from the group and pray. She exchanged playful grins with the rest of us on the bed as she counted prayer beads and muttered the words under her breath. Her friends snapped photos of her in this casual liminality; when she finished she ribbed her friends and posed as what one might imagine a “pious Muslim” would in their photos — she inclined her head and smiled with her mouth closed, making explicit displays of modesty in garb that indexed prayer. In this space it seemed that Arame could balance her “good Muslim” self with another equally important self: a young woman who liked to gossip and listen to American hip-hop.

Arame’s choice to pray, in the space she and her friends had carved out, demonstrated a deep understanding about how a pious Muslim woman should behave. Arame understood the context of fun, light times with girlfriends, and perhaps because of this levity adopted a joking nature to pray. And yet, in later interviews she asserted a strong Muslim self, which reflected this desire to self-consciously perform a more serious aspect of this self. Mahmood and Lambek both speak to the importance of examining action in order to understand ethical behavior (Lambek 2015, 129; Mahmood 2005, 29). Arame’s action revealed a concern with responding to a moral code in a particular way, informed by a particular space. In this case, Maimouna’s bedroom represented a space where Senegalese female hip-hop artists were allowed to encompass a number of selves and contexts. Fellow artists understood and recognized this complexity in one another. The female artists in Maimouna’s house expressed a multiplicity of ethical selves, informed by growing up in Muslim, Senegalese households but also by living hip-hop. They understood that Arame was a pious Muslim as she removed herself to pray, despite
her winking and nudging, because they also understood her joking, witty nature as a
talented MC and slam poet.

Morality, or a socially imposed notion of being good and right, is not always
performed “automatically” or “self-interestedly” — it is self-conscious and in dialogue
with the space within which it occurs (Lambek 2010, 40). Arame praying, in the space
her friends had claimed, epitomized the practice of freedom that ethical construction of
the self enables one to exercise. Women carved out their own spaces within the home to
express hip-hopological selves as well as Senegalese and Muslim selves. Outside of these
special spaces, female artists were often obligated to check their performance or hip-
hopological selves at the door in order to put themselves and their family members at
ease. They were only allowed to express one self at a time, depending on the space they
occupied. At the same time, artists’ self-expression and empowerment was not entirely
divorced from the communal and family living of the home. The home was a respite and
a burden, an integral piece of the lives of Senegalese female artists that became more
complicated with their artistic self but was not necessarily in direct opposition to it.

Desires

Indeed, home seemed to be an imagined goal for many artists that affected the
choices they made later in life, especially with regard to the pursuit of an artistic career in
the face of starting a family. Nearly every artist with whom I spoke expressed this desire,
but many also affirmed that for women, this meant quitting a career in hip-hop. A home
of one’s own holds specific meanings based on whether one lives their life as a woman or
a man — the artists who persist today and have families of one’s own are nearly all men.
Fou Malade, a famous rapper and co-founder of the Y’en A Marre (We’re Fed Up)
Movement which we will discuss in the following chapter, has two wives and multiple children, but continues to travel and speak on behalf of the Senegalese hip-hop movement. Women have different responsibilities that turn creating a home into a more time-consuming job (Butler 1988; Ortner 1974). A choice to do so would almost certainly end a hip-hop career, at least in the capacity that many women I spoke with envisioned having one or had already.

And yet, gendered pressures created an expectation that womanhood brings motherhood — that women are mothers, and women with no children are somehow failing in the role that they play in society (Ortner 1974). I would argue that a certain element of respect from the broader culture was tied in to desires for housewifery and motherhood. Much like artists were legitimized when they sold an album or a painting, women were legitimized, in a manner of speaking, when they had children and created a home. Thus, a tension developed between achieving success as an artist and achieving success as a woman. Because of the enormous labor and time investment that women were pressured in the home, doing so and succeeding in the world of hip-hop was rare.

Rapping for the fun of it, or simply to “stay in the game” as some informants said, was no longer a possibility when artists needed to reconcile their hip-hop endeavors with taking care of children. The narrative of women artists who stop creating and contributing to hip-hop to start a family is a common one. Vénus’s older sister, who in fact introduced her to rap but is now married with children, is an example of this; almost every artist with whom I spoke knew someone personally who also exemplified the pressure to abandon their craft to have a family. Even among the female artists who made significant contributions to hip-hop in Senegal (Myrièm, Sister Njaayaa, and others), many no longer
produce work due to this phenomenon. A member of Gotal, Anta, even said “For a lot of girls, when they come into [the hip-hop scene] and meet difficulties, they stop. And after they stop they get married, have one or two kids.”

I asked Anta if she envisions someday settling down and having children. She responded as many of the other artists I spoke with did. Motherhood, to a degree, legitimized one’s presence on the planet:

For me, it’s something that completes the existence of each person. Because for each girl, it’s her wish to have a husband and children. Me for example, if I have children later, and my daughter wants to do rap, do hip-hop I’m going to let her do it. I entered into hip-hop with conviction, with love, and if my daughter wants to do the same thing I’m going to let her do it. For me it’s a question of conviction and feeling.

The family and the home seemed to provide an enormous amount of love and support for many artists. Thus many constructed the home as any human’s ultimate goal, with other goals worthy of sacrifice for it. However, at the same time, several artists asserted that they would not settle down before they had had the chance to make their mark on the hip-hop world, whether that meant to release an album or a few more singles. Artists also acknowledged the pressure that husbands had been heard to occasionally put on wives who were creative and self-expressive; no artist wanted a husband who would repress her in this way. Despite the expectation of motherhood and family, many artists still maintained focus on their art. A tension persisted between the belonging and respect associated with having one’s own family as a woman, and the respect that one garners within the hip-hop community as a successful artist.
Conclusions

Women artists navigated the gendered home with strategies that keep their creativity alive in covert, mundane ways which adhered to the values of the domestic sphere, hip-hop communities and their own subjectivities — writing in a notebook, for example, or listening to hip-hop music with friends. They surrounded themselves with each other in order to continue to live hip-hop as they lived their lives as dutiful, Muslim, Senegalese women and daughters. The figurative home taught women about important Senegalese values, and represented the influence of their mothers and grandmothers; at the same time, it was an imagined goal and desire constructed in the minds of many female artists that represents happiness and fulfillment in life.

The multi-faceted aspects of the home provided artists with a foundation that they carried with them as they navigate the outside world. Thus, an understanding of what values are developed in the home — the most important values that stick with these artists as they incorporate them into their artistic work — is crucial to understanding strategies in places outside the home. In chapter four, we will unpack these external strategies and see how they reflect the moralities that women artists build for themselves based on the values they learned at home. Here, the notion of gëm sa bop came into action in myriad ways. In the following chapter, though, we will contextualize the behavior, words and work of these artists in the hip-hop community in Dakar, providing important background information on the nature of the Senegalese hip-hop scene as it appears and operates today.
3. The Label: Spatializing Production

“Ok ok yo…this is how we come in the game! TafZion Prod, homie. EveCrazy ’bout to show you how it’s going down!”

— Rapper Aboubakre on the EveCrazy track “Hot Girl” produced by TafZion Productions

To get to independent record label Tafzion Productions, take the 64 bus out to Guediawaye, find Awa’s Dressmaking and Hairdressing School, and scale two sets of stairs covered in scraps of colorful fabric and pieces of hair (meches). Once on the rooftop, pass through the laundry flapping in the wind and follow the music sounding from behind the label’s curtained entrance. TafZion Productions is a small room with a table, two computers loaded with music cutting and designing software, and walls covered with quotes like “Life is what you make.” TafZion is a modest enterprise, but an ambitious one: in addition to managing two rap artists, TafZion programs events and does multimedia for different contractors.

One of the artists that TafZion manages is an up-and-comer named EveCrazy. Eve, 24, was the youngest rapper with whom I spoke. EveCrazy got signed to TafZion Productions after winning the Flow Up competition (part of Africulturban’s Festa 2H) in 2015. Her artist’s name derives from her given name, Awa, the Senegalese translation for Eve. EveCrazy’s style is young, spunky and feminine, with a hardcore edge that appears from time to time in well-placed curse words.

I sat with the TafZion team in their office one hot July afternoon. A small electric fan whirred in the corner and some of the men worked behind the computers while I

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12 TafZion Productions is fortunate in this sense to have been able to afford electronic equipment for their endeavors. Although they are based in the poorer banlieue of Dakar, within this place they still represent an upper-middle class of young people who can finance an independent hip-hop venture, rather than relying on the equipment of community centers like G-Hip-Hop and Africulturban.
asked questions. The marketing chief at TafZion, Weezy, explained to me how the team sells t-shirts and hats not to make money, necessarily, but to do publicity for EveCrazy. This publicity functioned as symbolic capital for both Eve and her label, as these kinds of marketing strategies increased Eve’s name recognition. “The color purple, also, is a marketing strategy for us,” he said. “It’s Eve’s favorite color, and we want it to be associated with her.” The team manufactured goods with EveCrazy’s name printed on them and the TafZion Productions logo. EveCrazy often wore purple for photo shoots and from time to time in concerts.

She recognized the importance of self-promotion, and even of capitalizing on people’s less-than-pure motives to populate a concert. “If you’re going to have a good audience, you should really invite women [to perform], because you’ll have men saying ‘Eve is gonna come, she’s gonna wear shorts, we’re gonna see her butt!’” Eve explained, laughing. I asked her what she thought about men like that.

“Profiteers. We’re not interested in that. What interests us is the net — follows, Facebook, Twitter, YouTube. That’s our research. The guys who come for ‘Oh, Eve, ass’ — that doesn’t interest us. Every day we check our stuff on the net.” EveCrazy promoted herself on social media by “sharing” links to her newest singles and photos of her performing at concerts. She even used her own hashtag, #YesIAmCrazy, to signify her brand of uninhibited, youthful rap.

In this sense, Eve seemed to accept the symbolic and monetary capital accumulation-driven motives of TafZion Productions, in order to enable her to continue to freely express herself. Eve and her TafZion team knew that the accumulation of symbolic capital, like “shares” and “likes” on Facebook, contributed to name recognition
and amassed respect for their organization. Respect, as we saw in the previous chapter, is a crucial Senegalese cultural value. When artists could prove that they were engaged in concrete and productive activities through photos and promotional materials, they could garner this kind of respect. Ultimately, this led to the accumulation of monetary capital, as it follows logically that artists who are at least somewhat known are more likely to be invited to concerts and shows.

EveCrazy participated in and actively contributed to this cycle of capital accumulation through online self-promotion. By participating in this system, EveCrazy was in fact acting ethically — she was responding to the values of hip-hop culture. Making money and expressing oneself freely are key aspects of the hip-hop movement that EveCrazy integrated into her behavior as an artist. She knew that in order to survive and achieve respect within the world of hip-hop in Senegal, capital accumulation of all kinds was important.

In this chapter, I aim to spatialize the world of hip-hop in Senegal in the imagined street, identifying the street as the source of values for the HHN today. After doing so, I will trace hip-hop back to its beginnings in Senegal, following it through the political changes it sparked and what the cultural movement looks like today. I will then examine the structures of contemporary spaces and the values embedded in these structures, which stem from the values of the broader HHN and which are recontextualized in local Senegalese hip-hop communities. After laying this groundwork I will begin to explore how female artists interact with these structures and values, to argue that women embody the commitment to self-expression that pervades the HHN, as well as capitalistic desires and needs, in their ethics. I understood hip-hop communities in Senegal as developed in
male-dominated spaces, often fueled by capitalistic desires and gendered pressures to produce in an increasingly neoliberal world. Thus, female artists navigated these “hip-hop spaces” armed with their sets of ethics — their relationships to the moral and cultural codes that they learned in the home as well as to the values imbued in hip-hop spaces.

*Values of the Imagined Street*

By “spatialize” I mean that I want to “locate, both physically and conceptually, social relations and social practice in social spaces” (Low 1999, 11). The spaces of Hip-Hop Galsene social activity are varied — an independent label is only one space within which Senegalese hip-hop happens. Later in this chapter I will also explore community centers as sites of production for the hip-hop community, and the following chapter will look to everyday spaces of the HHN in Senegal. To undergird our understandings of these spaces, it is important to say here that historically, hip-hop has been located in and fueled by the street, as both a physical space and culturally imagined one (Alim 2005).

We have already seen Nikki Lane (2011) refer to the importance of the street in hip-hop culture: “the majority of hip-hop creation stories [...] name men as the original and primary producers, or suppliers, of hip hop to both ‘the street’ [my emphasis] and the world.” The street is a community space for the HHN (Alim 2005). It is “the site, soul, sound, and center of the Hip Hop Culture-World” (Alim 2002, 288). As Alim (2002, 288) goes on to explain, “not only did Hip Hop Culture begin in the streets of African America, but the streets continue to be a driving force in contemporary Hip Hop Culture.” Alim cites hip-hop producer Marley Marl, who explains that being “street-conscious” means that essentially, “I got to stay true to my people, you know what I'm saying? I stay true to Hip Hop. I be in the streets, you know what I'm saying?” (Marley
Marl quoted in Alim 2002, 288). The street becomes much more about people and community than physical space.

In my research, a gendered dimension of the street persisted. Other scholars have called attention to the street as a masculinized environment (Hunt and Laidler 2001, 664; Beatty 2008, 25). Indeed, in many hip-hop communities, the street continues to serve as a space where disenfranchised black men — victims of structural violence and perhaps unemployed or else denied opportunity — reclaim power and control (Kelley 1996, 185). The city street in the United States, the birthplace of hip-hop culture, has historically been the theater in which tensions fueled by structural racism and poor, minority communities have played out (Kelley 1996, 184). The Senegalese context lacks a violent, racialized past; there is no urgent need for black men to seek power in the streets. At the same time, later in this chapter we will see how certain values of the American hip-hop street are recontextualized in Senegal, particularly what some scholars call a notion of “ghettocentricity” (McLaren 1999).

An imagined notion of this gendered street certainly figures into the creativity, reproduction and recycling of hip-hop culture in Senegal. The commodification and globalization of hip-hop has put the street into larger conversations with different types of spaces and institutions: the recording studio, the label, the community center. These spaces hosted their own communities, and to a degree were less accessible to the masses than the physical city street (which every citizen of Dakar interacts with in one way or another). However, these hip-hop production spaces maintained the masculinized gendering of the street. This chapter focuses on the label and the recording studio as significant spaces of production in the Senegalese hip-hop community, for rappers in
For rappers specifically, access to a label often ensures access to a recording studio, which grants artists’ access to opportunities for capital accumulation and legitimacy in the world of hip-hop.

These opportunities represent two crucial values, values which I observed at work in hip-hop spaces in Senegal and which pervaded the HHN: capital accumulation and liberation of expression. As Lester Spence (2011) argues, hip-hop, especially in recent history, in fact celebrates neoliberalism and global systems of capitalism in ways that contradict its perception as a “liberal” art form (Spence 2011, 5). According to Spence, hip-hop’s politics have always been nationalist (or in the case of the global HHN, transnationalist), not necessarily liberal (Spence 2011, 64). Foundational hip-hop artists have celebrated the “hustle” throughout the history of the form, exploring the centrality of money-making in the lives of many poor black Americans and how best to address it: from Wu-Tang Clan’s “C.R.E.A.M.” (1993) to Jay-Z’s famous verse in Kanye West’s “Diamonds from Sierra Leone” (2005).

Strong beliefs in liberated self-expression and being true to one’s self also drive the cultural production of the HHN (Thomas 2009). In Senegal, at least two nonprofits exist which are dedicated to the furthering of hip-hop culture and artistry for young people; there is no monetary incentive behind them, beyond the aim to give young people an opportunity to go further with their chosen art form. Centers like Africulturban in the

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13 Other kinds of hip-hop artists (graffiti artists, dancers) utilized different spaces of production, which most likely functioned like labels and recording studios. However, I did not perform in-depth investigations of the politics of these other kinds of spaces, as the majority of my informants were rappers.

14 See Knocking the Hustle: Against the Neoliberal Turn in Black Politics (2015) by Lester Spence for an argument countering the upholding of neoliberalism and notions of “bootstrapism” among Black American communities.

15 “I’m not a businessman I’m a business, man” — Jay-Z’s sentiment represents the self-branding that occurs on the ultra-wealthy side of hip-hop, in comparison to Wu Tang’s “Cash rules everything around me” because of pressures to support oneself in dire economic circumstances (“It's been twenty-two long hard years of still strugglin’/Survival got me buggin’, but I'm alive on arrival” — “C.R.E.A.M.”).
suburb of Pikine and G-Hip-Hop in the suburb of Guediawaye provide free training for both artists and managers, access to media (books, tapes, photographs, videos), free concerts and film screenings as well as spaces for unsigned artists to record and rehearse.

These two kinds of spaces, independent labels and nonprofit cultural centers, interact with each other to form a complex web of networks across the Hip-Hop Galsene scene. Members of TafZion Productions, for example, seek mentorship from older founding members of cultural centers like G-Hip-Hop. Nonprofit cultural centers and independent labels alike — as spaces of hip-hop cultural production born from the original site of the HHN, the street — tended to function as gendered spaces, privileging the male identities that dominated them. To understand the functioning of particular spaces, it is necessary to contextualize the lineage that allows them to exist today.

*Senegalese Hip-Hop History and Contemporary Realities*

Hip-hop was born in Senegal in the late 1980s, just after American hip-hop had begun to develop. Hip-hop arrived in Senegal, however, in an entirely different fashion than it did in the United States; while hip-hop in the U.S. traces its roots to poorer, urban areas, Senegal has an upper class of young people to thank for the initial importation of American hip-hop dance, music and art (Harvard 2001, 65). Hip-hop came to Senegal in the latest albums by Snoop Dogg and Public Enemy; it came in shared VHS tapes of iconic American music videos and magazines shipped across oceans (Senghor 2015, 25). An upper class of Dakarois youth brought back these artifacts of this new, exciting movement and shared them among their circles.

Breakdancing was the first form of the HHN shared between the two nations, as Senegalese young people imitated what they saw happening in the United States via the
videotapes and television shows that they brought back home. Some of these same young people soon became enraptured by rap, as well — namely Didier Awadi, often named the founder of Senegalese hip-hop, and fellow pioneer Doug E-Tee (Senghor 2015, 27; Sène 2014). They lived in the residential neighborhoods of Amitié 2 and Liberté 6 in Dakar with their relatively well-off families (Harvard 2001, 66; Sène 2014). Their names would become synonymous with the Hip-Hop Galsene movement after they founded the groundbreaking and internationally known rap group, Positive Black Soul.

Although hip-hop in Senegal initially belonged to a privileged upper class, it soon permeated the rest of Senegalese society. In 1988, rap and hip-hop’s potential as vectors for larger social change reached a critical tipping point. Then-president Abdou Diouf, unpopular among many youth, nullified the 1988 academic year (Sène 2014; Harvard 2001, 67). Just 28 years after its independence, Senegal struggled in the face of national debt, the global oil crisis of the 1970s, a drought during the same time and an economy too heavily reliant on imports (Sy 2012, 84). As only the second president of the nation, following the poet Leopold Sedar Senghor, Diouf took an entirely different approach as an “homme de l’état,” neglecting the cultural sector that Senghor so intensely developed (Sy 2012, 84). It was during these difficult times that Diouf infamously called the youth of Senegal unhealthy and fake (“[une] pseudo jeunesse malsaine”) (Harvard 2001, 70).

An angry youth, frustrated by what they perceived as a misrepresentative, corrupt government, responded with an explosion of rap music in Senegal. The 1990s, while continuing to prove difficult for the nation with damaging Structural Adjustment Programs imposed by the World Bank and gross mismanagement of national resources,

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16 Loans made by the World Bank to developing countries. Such economic policies were instituted in the early 1980s. See [http://www.who.int/trade/glossary/story084/en/](http://www.who.int/trade/glossary/story084/en/) for more detailed explanation.
produced an utterly Senegalese brand of politically conscious, action-inciting rap music (Sy 2012, 84; Sène 2014). Positive Black Soul called the nation to revolution with their song by the same name, denouncing a political system put in place by the colonizer and perpetuated by the political parties in power (Sy 2012, 79). Rappers like Xuman of Pee Froiss critiqued the power-grabbing tendencies of politicians as well; an artist called Fou Malade attacked the government for a lack of action in areas in conflict like the Casamance region and played an important role in organizing the youth of Senegal around political action against it (Sy 2012, 89). These rappers and others (Fou Malade in particular, plus Daara J Family, Wa BMG 44 and Matador, to name a few) harnessed the frustration of a generation of young Senegalese and channeled it into their music. They mobilized young people to oust Diouf and elect the third president of Senegal, Abdoulaye Wade, in 2000. The music that inspired their nation became globally known and uniquely Senegalese, classified as music of the *Y’en A Marre* (We’re Fed Up) movement. In 2011, after violent protests, the power of *Y’en A Marre* resurged to again push young Senegalese towards the polls and oust Wade. *Y’en A Marre* persists in diminished force today, utilizing Youtube advertising space to continue to attempt to mobilize support. Youth still sport “*Y’en A Marre*” t-shirts on the streets of Dakar. Beyond this, though, the original *Y’en A Marre* movement does not wield much political influence as they have redirected organizing energies away from public protests and demonstrations.

Hip-hop in Senegal today supports a range of agendas, ideologies and goals — some of them politically oriented, some of the driven towards capital accumulation, some of them simply aiming to enjoy the form. A concert organized by a rapper named Mario represented this diversity within the hip-hop community. Mario was set to perform along
with a long list of guests in the suburb Guediawaye, at Le Ravin nightclub. When I arrived at Le Ravin, young people in crisp baseball caps and harem pants or chayas were clustered around the entrance. Hours later we all began to move inside. The few women in the crowd and most of the men sat on benches around the edges of the standing area. When the first rapper performed, one of Mario’s many openers, a group of young men came to the front of the standing area, directly in front of the stage. The crowd only increased as the night proceeded.

Large groups of young men moved to the edge of the stage for a rapper in all white and a bucket hat. He rapped over a Wiz Khalifa-esque beat, a repetitive refrain and a few lines. The men—the group of fans for this particular artist, and most other artists, were all men—were pumping their fists and recording the action with their smartphones. Meanwhile Balvada, a young rapper who I had come to know at the nonprofit cultural center called Africulturban, was sitting in the dark on the edge of the large ground level floor watching this artist perform. I approached him and asked him what he thought. He looked somewhat disdainful.

“He’s the new generation,” Balvada explained in English. This performer was a part of a new generation of Senegalese rappers inspired by Americans like Wiz Khalifa, rapping about a lifestyle of individuality and disregard for community standards: in Balvada’s words, “not giving a fuck.” They emphasize getting paid, getting women and getting drugs. Balvada kept half an eye on the boys and young man bouncing to the rhythm of the song on the dance floor as he spoke to me.

“It’s not our reality,” he said. “We’re poor. Senegal is a poor country.” Balvada said that he preferred conscious rap, the kind that launched the Senegalese hip-hop scene
to international prominence and earned early rappers the respect that they largely hold on
to today. His identifying of Senegal as a “poor country” was not a defeatist or essentialist
remark; Balvada was simply illustrating the context within which Senegalese artists work
and with which they must engage. Indeed, the particular situation of many Senegalese
hip-hop artists in the banlieue of Dakar is in fact a crucial element of their hip-
hopological self. Many of the Senegalese young people I spoke with connected their
narratives, as poor black youth in the banlieue of Dakar, to their understanding of stories
of what they called “ghettos” in the United States, populated mostly by urban youth of
African heritage.

This merits a discussion of “ghettocentricity” in different contexts within the
HHN (McLaren 1999). In United States hip-hop, this notion of ghettocentricity
transformed poor, urban neighborhoods from spaces of violence and hopelessness to
places with communal and cultural value (McLaren 1999, 24). Ghetto-centricity in
American hip-hop music functions to celebrate marginalized urban communities — such
as the banlieue — as a creative, meaningful spaces. Senegalese artists use terms, ways of
being and imaginations of “the ghetto” and “the street” that stem from poor, urban
African-American communities to create meaning and identity in their own contexts. In
Senegal, ghettocentricity seemed to offer a new way for youth to find pride and
belonging in both their local and national context.

In the previous chapter, we saw the importance of pride illustrated in values of
self-respect and self-belief. Ghetto-centricity is a hip-hopological interpretation of these
values, allowing hip-hop artists to construct ethics that encompassed both pride in
themselves and pride in their communities. Déesse Major, for example, told me with
pride that she comes from “Parcelles — it’s a poor neighborhood, the ghetto.” Julza, Sister LB’s partner in her rap duo Fippu Clan, took me on a tour of the neighborhood that he explained as the “Fippu Clan Zone”: a poor neighborhood called Thiaroye-sur-Mer in the Pikine region. Or, as Julza explained would boost my credibility if I used it with anyone from the banlieue, “Thiamarow. Chia-ma-row. It’s much more hip-hop.”

The sandy streets of Thiamarow were lined with low cement walls, some of them emblazoned with graffiti and the names of rap groups (Fippu Clan was written on one of them). Large homes seemed designed to house multiple families, and children ran from house to house playing and shouting. Women sold local fruits from street corners. An old man recognized Julza and asked about Sister LB. “Where’s Selbé [her given name]?” He called in Wolof with a smile. “It’s been awhile since we’ve heard from Fippu Clan!”

Julza beamed with pride as we walked, and it was not hard to see why. He explained how he had brought concerts to his neighborhood that everyone could attend, enriching local life — especially for Thiamarow’s young people. He and Sister LB had even filmed the music video for their group’s main song, “Fippu Clan,” in the neighborhood, with neighborhood folks. This captures the spirit of what McLaren (1999) calls ghettocentricity, and the positivity that hip-hop brought to spaces that were otherwise marginal. Hip-hop music seemed to bring both producers — rappers like Julza, Sister LB and Déesse Major — and consumers, people in the neighborhood like the old man who called out to us, new ways to express national and local pride.

Beyond this, hip-hop also represented a way to attempt to support oneself financially. The dress, mannerisms and musical stylings of many of the rappers at Mario’s concert reflected the styles of American rappers, many of whom seem to be more
concerned with money and reflecting a certain image than helping their listeners become conscious. This should not be misinterpreted as trivializing or diminishing the importance of these kinds of motivating factors in hip-hop—far from it. For many young people, men in particular, hip-hop offers a potentially viable money-making solution that also allows them to utilize their creative skills, contributing to a form and a movement about which they are passionate.

A group of these young men exists in an enterprise called TafZion Productions. In the following subsection I will provide ethnographic detail about their functioning internally and within the broader context of the Senegalese hip-hop scene. This is important to understand, as TafZion is the platform upon which female hip-hop artist EveCrazy grabs the mic and claims her space. I will explore the interplay of capitalist desires and liberated, independent creative production in a microcosm of Senegalese hip-hop, to set the stage for how female artists both use labels to their advantage and navigate their politics.

**Case Study: An Independent Label**

TafZion Productions seemed committed to positioning themselves on the cutting edge of a new generation of young people poised to take advantage of the business of hip-hop. TafZion wanted to capitalize on the business of hip-hop, and the group of five men that compose it had at least one driving force in common. The beatmaker for the label, Keihe, summed it up like this:

Here in Senegal, you haven’t succeeded if you’re not making money. [People think that] you haven’t succeed if you’re not making money. Parents think that what you’re doing isn’t serious, isn’t important. You aren’t supported if you don’t have money.
Ultimately, of course, these men were driven by a love of the hip-hop arts and the community that comes with it — most of the team members had started out as rappers or \textit{b-boys}\textsuperscript{17} before delving into the business side of hip-hop. But they affirmed this statement by Keihc, the beatmaker and designer for the label. Moustapha or “Taf” for short founded the label along with Keihc as a revamping of an entertainment company he called Zion Entertainment. They organized parties and events for local high schools and at cultural centers like G-Hip-Hop. In this manner they attracted some of the younger members of their team to work for what would become TafZion Productions. TafZion principally earned money through contracting for specific events, such as a high-end hip-hop show at the Grand Theater of Dakar for which they did lights, tech and videography. TafZion first and foremost, though, was a label that managed two young rappers.

Each member of the group carried out a specific function to help build capital in one way or another for the label. Keihc (pronounced \textit{keysh}) made the beats for the rappers signed to the label and did graphic design work for their promotional materials. Matar managed the budget of the team and acted as production chief. Weezy was in charge of marketing for the artists and for the TafZion brand, and JB (pronounced \textit{jee-bay}) was in charge of video production. Keihc emphasized to me that the leader, Taf, did not pick the team simply because they all happened to be friends. “He picked people who were trained,” he explained. It appeared that Keihc wanted to reinforce the notion that the team was serious about their goals, not just a group of friends who loved hip-hop.

Taf iterated another one of the larger goals of their label, in addition to promoting their artists. I asked him about the music industry in Senegal. “That’s the problem, there is no industry. That’s what we have to do, industrialize,” he replied. According to Taf, the

\textsuperscript{17} A hip-hopological term for male breakdancers.
lack of infrastructure in the buying and selling of music stands as a major obstacle to this mission. Senegal does not have any electronic music selling platforms. Finding music for free online is relatively simple, so CD selling is obsolete. This leaves artists and their managers in the difficult position of trying to get the word out about their products and still somehow make money from them. Each team member recognized the specific skills they had to contribute to this end, although actual moneymaking opportunities were usually limited to booking gigs at concerts and selling tickets — not selling the music itself.

One afternoon, as I sat in the TafZion offices meeting the group members for the first time, Keihc put on a beat he had recently created. Aboubakre, the other rapper managed by TafZion, started rapping over it. JB pulled out his camera and started recording. EveCrazy joined in, freestyling over the beat. The video would become important media that could then be posted to social media to help promote both TafZion and its artists, EveCrazy and Aboubakre. In this way, the team members collaborated to earn capital for the group. They each perform their own functions, and although they did not always meet like this to work together in the office at the same time, they recognized each member’s crucial contribution to the success of the label. Much of this hinged on EveCrazy and Aboubakre’s success and recognition as artists.

Ultimately, the label wanted to revamp the way hip-hop business is done in Senegal. “We want to fill a void here,” Weezy explained. “We want to bring a level of professionalism to the business [here]. Here in Senegal, for example, people don’t come on time to appointments. We want to be on time and be professional.” Timeliness was a small example of the differences that TafZion noted between more developed hip-hop
industries and the burgeoning business in Senegal. The quality of equipment was another. In the United States, for example, the team members explained that there was simply more money to invest in hip-hop performance and production. A Nicki Minaj show, Weezy said, was much more curated and produced than an EveCrazy show.

TafZion Productions recognized their artists’ autonomy to make final artistic choices, but at the same time, Weezy explained to me that the structure of a label exists to do things for artists that they do not know how to do. At times, they need to convince them that this is the best way, because “they [artists] have lots of whims.” He and EveCrazy worked through an extensive process to choose an image to use to promote her new single, an *ego trip* that I will analyze in more detail in the following chapter called “Hot Girl.” Keihc had made several different images for EveCrazy to choose from; she did not like many of them. He had to explain his artistic reasoning behind some of the images, and convince her why the images made sense and would be interesting for people. They ultimately chose a graphic of a phone with flames coming out of it, because in the song, the first thing EveCrazy says is Senegal’s country code (221, *deux cent vingt-et-un*) to indicate that she is the hottest in Senegal.

As the team and I talked, EveCrazy remained largely silent, sending messages on her phone in the corner. She seemed to read the scenario where I interviewed her label — her “team,” as she calls them — as business that was for them to handle, even as later the discussion crossed into how the label works with EveCrazy and women in hip-hop more generally. Outside of more formalized interview settings, I observed EveCrazy talking and laughing easily with her team members. EveCrazy represented a minority among female hip-hop artists — those who have been signed to a label. Labels provide
professional support and often help book artists to shows. But most women rappers in Senegal are unsigned or “underground,” meaning they navigate the hip-hop world without a cadre of professionals or a “team.” They must find their own ways to promote themselves and perform without the support that a label offers to artists like EveCrazy.

*The Dynamics of the Label*

In addition to EveCrazy, OMG and Déesse Major were also signed to labels owned by men. At times the politics at work at labels were complex, as OMG illustrated in the following scene. Her navigation of the power dynamics of her own label, DD Records, showed that the self OMG constructed in this particular space was not necessarily outright subversive. As she worked within the label, her behavior was dictated by an ethic that did not necessarily resist the dominant power structure, but responded to its values along with OMG’s own desires. OMG’s navigation of the label allowed her to survive and thrive within it.

DD Records was a small, dimly lit, air-conditioned room on the second floor of one of its founder’s home. Its plush interior — a couch, red carpeting, expensive-looking recording equipment — contrasted with the rest of the household, through which one had to pass to get upstairs. OMG and I had been holed away talking in a storage space a few doors down from the label when she was called back to do a *featuring*, a sung or rapped portion of a song that an artist asks a fellow artist to complete.

OMG featured for a rapper named Baryo’s song, “Self Control.” Portions of the hook that she sang were in English; her English pronunciation, independent of her ability to speak it or not outside of a musical context, gave her clout in the studio space. Even though she recorded the song in her own label, DD Records, she was in this context a
guest artist contracted for another rapper. OMG navigated these complex power
dynamics to ultimately maintain control over her art and increase her visibility in the hip-
hop scene.

When in the studio, OMG listened to Baryo record how he would like the refrain
to sound. She wrote down the lyrics on a scrap of paper and took her place behind the
glass, adjusting the headphones on her head and standing in front of the mic. On the other
side of the glass, I sat with the rapper, his beatmaker, and the label’s beatmaker, Ahmed.
OMG sang the refrain with Ahmed sitting at the soundboard. The rapper’s beatmaker,
who sat on the couch across from the soundboard, gave OMG critiques as she recorded
and re-recorded the refrain. He wanted less R&B, and more “hardcore.”

“It’s hip-hop,” he said in Wolof. She tried several more times. At one point,
Ahmed became frustrated after a recording and asked OMG matter-of-factly, in French,
“You’re not singing anymore?” OMG insisted that she sang, and Ahmed retorted by
saying that it was not good. He pulled out a keyboard in the desk to play the notes for her.

The rapper said in Wolof “Be dangerous.” OMG asked for more clarification —
did they want sexy? No; “nice” was the qualifier they repeated. The beatmaker again
stressed the difference between her smooth, R&B style and the hard hip-hop beat. These
adjectives indicated the element of hardness and stereotypical masculinity that male
artists expect out of hip-hop, a kind of danger that comes with the music of the street
(Harvard 2001). One of the stereotypically masculine phrases that informants mentioned
was na gooré, in Wolof, or “do it like a man.” It seemed likely that the men in the
recording studio with OMG, as well as many of their colleagues, were initially attracted
to hip-hop in part because of these elements, as well as access to a space where one could
easily assume a tough, masculine identity (Harvard 2001). Interestingly, a critique of male rappers that I encountered in several conversations was the belief that men rapped for fellow rappers, and not for the broader public, in a sense insulating themselves in the affirming world of hip-hop. It follows that these men would want to protect these spaces where the kinds of masculinity they perform are reified, and do so by attempting to control the sound of women who enter into the space — “nice,” but not “sexy”; feminine, but in a manageable way that allowed men to maintain a more stereotypically masculine element of danger or hardness.

OMG strategically deployed a particular ethical self, when it appeared that opposing demands were being asked of her, by reconciling the values of the gendered space she occupied with her own desires. She practiced an ethic that understood the values of the male-dominated hip-hop space, as well as the belief and respect she had for her own artistic work. She engaged the beatmakers in light questioning about what it was exactly that they wanted, maintaining professional composure. She eventually delivered on the beatmakers’ demands for the featuring while maintaining her own style. OMG knew that she had to be respectable, as the contracted artist for the track and as a gender minority, but she did not change her manner of singing in any dramatic way. Ultimately, her voice would be the one that listeners would remember in the refrain. She would get the symbolic capital associated with featuring on the most memorable part of the song.

Senegalese women artists reified capitalist systems to respond to their own desires for capital (both monetary and otherwise) accumulation. Chapter five will explore in more detail what this looks like on concert stages. Here, it is important to note women’s self-conscious acknowledgement of themselves, the artists, as products in order to
understand the strategies that some of them use to make money and survive within a capitalist system. Some Senegalese artists deploy the same kinds of strategies that we see American female artists using as they rise in prominence on the music scene. The extraordinary example of Beyoncé explains the deployment of “multiple femininities,” or expressions of womanhood, as a way to appeal to mass audiences as well as nod to local particularities (Durham 2011). Although not to the same degree, Senegalese rapper Déesse Major deploys multiple femininities in her most recent music video, “Gëm sa bop.” To Déesse, this video represented a shift from her first single, a kind of pop rap about love designed for easy public consumption. “Gëm sa bop” was more engaged and meaningful to Déesse.

Déesse Major, as of this writing, is one of the most well-known female rappers in Senegal. Her path to success was paved by her interaction with Fou Malade, one of the rapper leaders of the Y’en A Marre movement and a prominent figure in Hip-Hop Galsene. He saw potential in Déesse and set up a meeting with her at his studio. “And of course I arrived early!” Déesse said with a laugh. He prompted her to write about love between a man and a woman. After several minutes of writing, Déesse showed Fou Malade and his team the song, and it became her first single, “Mu Nice.” Fou Malade advised her that her entrée into the public sphere should be something nice, light, dealing with love and romance – suitable, feminine subjects for a woman rapper. Significantly, much of Déesse Major’s fame stemmed from her seductive performance in the “Mu Nice” video and at subsequent performances. She has caught beef with other female rappers in the game, and several male members of the hip-hop movement do not necessarily regard her highly. Weezy from TafZion Prod brought her up as an example of
someone being provocative and contrary to the norms of Senegalese society. These norms, many of which, as we saw in the previous chapter, are enculturated in the home, emphasize a kind of self-respect that values modesty surrounding one’s own body. In chapter five, “The Show,” Déesse Major will explain in more detail how her choice to rap could be construed as a fundamental break with these norms of piety and respectability.

The figure of Déesse Major is much more nuanced than simply that of a young woman manipulated by older, male management into a sellable product. While it appeared that Déesse’s first foray into the music scene was defined to a degree by these patriarchal forces, Déesse’s unapologetic sexual politics and her commitment to writing her own lyrics has let her forge an identity uniquely her own in Hip-Hop Galsene. She has since “stayed in the game” on her own terms after gaining entry into it. In “Mu Nice” Déesse strategically employed the expression of one of her multiple selves. Now that she is an established artist in Hip-Hop Galsene, she spoke about wanting to do more engaged, meaningful rap. This past summer, she released another single called “Gém sa bop” (“believe in yourself”), an anthem of empowerment for all who are trying to do something with their lives.

We watched the video for “Gém sa bop” together and Déesse explained what was happening. Developed with a local production group called Blackaneze, the story of the video opens with Déesse Major performing a pious Muslim self, a fisherman’s daughter who is having trouble making ends meet. She and her father pray that things will get better. Déesse is dressed modestly, prostrating herself before an actor portraying her father. The video cuts to shots of Déesse dressed in urban finery, tight pants and a bright top with long wavy hair. She struts on the streets of Dakar with fellow rapper P.P.S., who
is featured on the track. These contrasting images attempt to earn Déesse symbolic capital with both groups, reassuring viewers of her piety as a Muslim woman as well as her modernity and her fluency within hip-hop culture.

In the video, Déesse performed multiple selves through the strategic — though no less genuine — expression of multiple femininities. The music video was a space within which she could freely act out an ethics that held these multiple selves: a modern urban woman, a hip-hop artist, a pious Muslim, a good daughter. We can also see, of course, how these choices garnered attention in order to make money, particularly considering how modernity intertwines with notions of the State and capitalist production (Piot 1999). Similar to EveCrazy’s online strategy (Déesse Major has a social media presence as well), Déesse’s provocation strategies generated name recognition and the likelihood that labels and concert organizers will think about her for their next show.

This is all to show, of course, that women were not at all impassive objects or products even as they play into the modes of capital accumulation written into hip-hop. They made conscious choices to engage in hip-hop communities in these ways, in fact acting according to ethics that celebrate these values. By signing to a label, they secured benefits for themselves, despite the power dynamics that they consequently had to navigate.

_Carving Out Their Own Space_

In spite of the obviously male-dominated space of the label, much like in the home, women carved out their own spaces and opportunities for themselves, both within and outside of male-dominated production spaces. Toussa is a prime example of this. She is a young rapper who also happened to be the first and, as of writing, only solo female
rap artist to release a full-length album in Senegal (*Clin d’Oeil*, in April 2014). Toussa created her own label, RockTeam Music, to help other members of the hip-hop community. At her studio, women recorded for free. Toussa said that she and her team also work with the women who come to record at the studio, to give them an extra push and ensure that they produce quality work. And even if her staff is almost exclusively male, at meetings to coordinate upcoming shows and other events, Toussa seemed to be completely in charge, listening to her team but directing the meeting and delegating responsibility.

Toussa’s clout within the hip-hop community helped her fellow members of Gotal carve out a space for themselves in the oftentimes male-dominated recording studio of Africulturban. There, I watched Gotal record a new song inspired by the Wolof word for “training.” Toussa helped her collective member Anta find her flow when she was having trouble with it. “We can do better,” Toussa told her as they both stood in the recording booth. Anta rapped her verse again, reading from her handwritten notepad – she sounded more assured. Toussa exited the room and practiced her verse under her breath, reading from her iPad. When she entered to record, she stopped and restarted herself several times, insisting on perfection. Vénus arrived and rapped in punchy, clear English. She was encouraged to be louder by Ina, Toussa and Anta listening outside. Lady Zee was the last to arrive, coming from a full day of work as a real estate agent. As the best singer of the group, after rapping her piece, Lady Zee recorded two different versions of the song’s hook, and the group voted on which one they preferred. Africulturban staff members came in and out of the recording studio as the women worked, greeting them and listening to their progress. As they waited for the others to record individually, the
women teased and playfully tackled each other on a peeling leather couch, relaxing in the space they had claimed for themselves to work on their art.

Like this group of women in Africulturban, 21-year-old dancer Jeanne D'Arc carved out her space at another cultural center, G-Hip-Hop. She rehearsed there nearly every day that I was in Senegal. G-Hip-Hop is an oasis of green in sandy, crowded Guediawaye — a recording studio, library, offices, and meeting rooms, all splashed with graffiti and organized around an open-air rehearsal space and stage. Jeanne D'Arc was often the only woman there, and sometimes the youngest person. Every day, she staked a claim to her space in the middle of the rehearsal space. She leaned a large mirror against the cement supports and plugged a flash drive loaded with the latest dancehall and hip-hop hits into a boom box. She moved her body at times seductively, at times sharply, with her hip-hop colleagues and friends watching and crossing through the space. Jeanne D'Arc asserted herself physically in her claiming of rehearsal space every day at the center. In her artistry itself, Jeanne D'Arc subtly subverted power structures, emphasizing “dance that speaks,” as she explained to me, rather than just dance that moves. One of the last moves of a combination that she taught to me was fingers slicing across the throat in a killing motion – a clear communication of aggressive, violent intent. Jeanne D'Arc would kill anyone who got in her way, in a manner of speaking of course.

Unlike many other women in hip-hop, Jeanne D'Arc was a not only a practitioner but a teacher of her craft. She turned a profit from holding dance lessons at G-Hip-Hop for local kids. By spreading her art and teaching it to others, Jeanne D'Arc was earning capital – both social and economic – for herself as an expert who can provide an entry point into hip-hop. For several afternoons, I took dance lessons from Jeanne D'Arc at G
Hip-Hop, paying Jeanne D’Arc her rate (2,500 francs CFA, the local currency in Dakar, or about five U.S. dollars). She was professionally trained by a nonprofit organization called *Sunu Street* (“Our Street”) that offers scholarships to promising talent. Jeanne D'Arc’s strategies for claiming bodily autonomy were perhaps more overt because of her clear delineation, in certain scenarios, as a person with authority. As a teacher, she had to be a disciplinarian at times. When a new student, a young boy, showed up late for a lesson, Jeanne D'Arc chastised him. “Learn quickly!” she urged him. His punishment for his lateness would be to learn the steps that Jeanne D'Arc had already taught me without any special assistance. Jeanne D'Arc recognized, in that moment, that she had to be strict in order to ensure cooperation and respect from this student in the future. Like Déesse and other hip-hop artists, she deployed a particular ethical self — an authoritarian teacher — in order to be successful in her business.

Other women laid claim to hip-hop space and made a living by doing so in different ways: by becoming music journalists, photographers and videographers, and entrepreneurs. At the press conference for the release of an album by the all-male rap group S’killaz, for example, the only reporter to ask more than one question of the group was a woman. She asked the second question of the event, about the group’s influences, and finished the event with an inquiry about the group’s next moves. Other ex-rappers, such as the well known and celebrated Fatime and Maimouna Dembele, now make their careers as broadcast journalists. Based on these examples and others, it would appear that women accessed space in the hip-hop movement through places where speaking up is allowed and encouraged, such as at a press conference or in the newsroom. These women
got paid for the stories they produced, and could count themselves among those who benefit from the hip-hop music industry.

Mariama Touré is another kind of hip-hop entrepreneur. In the city center of Dakar, a wealthy neighborhood called Mermoz, Mariama is the founder and CEO of The Dance Hall, the only hip-hop dance studio in Senegal. Mariama saw a void to be filled in the world of Senegalese hip-hop, and strategically chose to fill it in a place where people could afford to pay for dance lessons. The Dance Hall recently launched “Motherland Urban Dance Camp,” in which students paid fees to participate in a month-long workshop of different forms of urban dance from across the African continent. I asked her about how she handles business dealings in the male-dominated world of hip-hop entrepreneurship. “I have to be a bit of a man,” Mariam Touré explained to me in French in her office at The Dance Hall. She said that she does not use her sexuality to try to make business deals or give her an advantage in a world that is consistently difficult for Senegalese women business owners. She assumed stereotypically masculine airs, such as directness, to be taken seriously in male-dominated spheres — not unlike some of her rapping, dancing and slamming peers.

Mariama broke with gender norms in other ways, as well. Although she is married, she and her husband have no children, and neighbors at times perceived her and her husband negatively. “Other people talk, but it doesn’t bother us,” she said. Mariama did not seem to be bothered to adhere to others’ and society’s expectations, instead embedding herself in hip-hop culture as both the founder and CEO of The Dance Hall and a slam poet, a form which she uses to discuss identity and power. She described her activities today as “returning to hip-hop.” “I really bathed in hip-hop as a kid,” she said.
“I don’t know who I would be today without that. I would’ve never created The Dance Hall. [Hip-hop] had an enormous impact on me, on my life choices.” Indeed, Mariama exemplified the values of the HHN in her commitment to ensuring free expression for young dancers, and employing hip-hop dancers to teach others. Jeanne D’Arc, along with other alums of Sunu Street, taught classes during Motherland Urban Dance Camp. Mariama not only made money herself from this venture, but also spread the wealth to other lovers of hip-hop like Jeanne D’Arc.

“I have big goals for The Dance Hall,” Mariama said. “I want to export. I would love to see a chain — I want a Dance Hall in every African country.” This sentiment echoes the capitalistic desires and values of the HHN. It also speaks to Mariama’s desire to express herself as a hip-hop entrepreneur. Her ethics encompassed both of these elements and allowed her to exercise freedom as the CEO of a hip-hop business venture.

Conclusions

In order to continue to enable freedom of hip-hop expression, as well as make money, Senegalese hip-hop seemed to be beginning to engage in the messy business of creating an industry where little music-selling infrastructure exists. This process is based upon the generation of both actual monetary capital and symbolic capital: the name recognition of labels, nonprofit organizations and artists, as well as the reification of their work on social media by their fans and followers. This necessitates the labor of larger nonprofit groups and the entrepreneurial ventures of small, independent labels — and the complicity of artists.

Female artists recognized their position as “products” and contributed to a system that almost inevitably reduces performers to the sum of their parts. Many women, in fact,
become entrepreneurs themselves, controlling their own means of production and selling
their own products to earn their own capital, their own way. In some cases, we saw the
policing of women who “cash out” on this system, such as Déesse Major. Even in
Déesse, though, we see a balancing of an adherence to piety and Senegalese and Muslim
values with capital accumulation. Women navigated spaces of hip-hop production
through strategic ethical performance — the expression of certain selves in certain
gendered spaces. In the following chapter, we will see how women linguistically
expressed these ethics to claim figurative space in the hip-hop community.
4. Grabbing the Mic: Linguistically Navigating Hip-Hop Space

“I break into a lyrical freestyle
Grab the mic, look at the crowd and see smiles
Cause they see a woman standing up on her own two
Sloppy slouching is something I won’t do
Some think that we can’t flow (can’t flow)
Stereotypes, they got to go (got to go)
I’m a mess around and flip the scene into reverse
(With what?) With a little touch of ‘Ladies First’”

— Queen Latifah, “Ladies First”

Women in Senegal access hip-hop spaces despite the fact that women have been historically discouraged from engaging and existing in them in the ways that men do (Alim 2005; Lane 2011). As we saw in the previous chapter, throughout history hip-hop has been located in and fueled by the street, as both an imagined and physical space (Alim 2005). Today in Senegal, the imagined street figures into sites of production, such as the label and the recording studio. However, I include “hip-hop spaces” to mean more than just labels. Hip-hop spaces are also those everyday spaces which are made meaningful sites of production and reproduction for the HHN in Senegal: cultural centers, university campuses, workshops, and, as we will explore in chapter five, the stage.

This chapter will explore the performative linguistic strategies that Senegalese women hip-hop artists used to survive and thrive as artists in these spaces. These are symbolic, linguistic methods of metaphorically grabbing the mic: a phenomenon called ego trip, and a performative action that I will refer to as speaking up. These performative acts are informed by gëm sa bop — each of these acts requires the courage to make one’s voice heard even when it is not encouraged to do so, even when it runs counter to the dominant, often male-dominated, discourse. Here, I will analyze how women play with language in their ego trips to flip the dominant script and express themselves. For even as they curse and flaunt their talents, artists interacted with both societally imposed moral
codes and the values of the HHN, forming internal relationships with these codes and constructing their multiple selves. As a community of women rappers they collectively respond to the pressures that discourage them from succeeding in the world of hip-hop, by ego tripping in groups under a banner of *rap bou dgjiuen*, “women rap.” They also to act out internal ethical processes in their daily lives, when they are not grabbing the physical mic to record a song but grabbing the proverbial mic to *speak up* for themselves and their community. After the ego trip, we will discuss what it means for female hip-hop artists to speak up. Both of these techniques are powerful actions that women use to simultaneously express ethics and develop them.

*The Ego trip*

Through performative speech acts women claim figurative space in the hip-hop community, particularly in a phenomenon called *ego trip*. In Senegalese hip-hop communities, I heard ego trip used as a noun, verb and adjective: “this song is my ego trip”; “this part is a bit ego trip”; “in this part of the song, he ego trips.” Ego trip can thus refer to an entire song or merely a verse, but whenever it appears, it boldly reinforces the belief in self of the artist singing or rapping. Ego trip in rap, a moment where the artist talks about themselves, their own background and their own beliefs (which can sometimes last for an entire song), can act as a mini-biography for an artist — as Sister LB told me, it can give essential information about the artist’s identity and message. “It’s important, if it’s not too focused on something banal,” explained Sister LB in French. “If you have good character, that other people can imitate, [then you should do it]…if you do an ego trip, you should do it in a positive way.” Each artist used the ego trip to not only
introduce herself to the hip-hop world but also claim space, power and legitimacy in the different hip-hop spaces.

A Guediawaye-based rapper, Big Mama, navigated different kinds of hip-hop spaces as a student at the Université Cheikh Anta Diop (UCAD). From time to time UCAD hosted concerts and ciphers\(^\text{18}\) for local hip-hop artists, transforming into a hip-hop space for the enjoyment of students and the benefit of local artists. She participated in these events, but most of her day-to-day was spent with her fellow students and friends, a group of men her age who are deeply interested in American culture and learning to speak English. She joked and teased with these men, who lovingly made fun of her for her size and told her she needed to lose weight. They were friends, but not supporters in the way that managers at a label are. Their teasing might even be viewed as hurtful at times, but Big Mama seemed to have a thick skin. Despite their ribbing she affectionately called her friends her *sy sys*.\(^\text{19}\) She seemed to know when to respond and when to ignore their teasing.

I walked with Big Mama and her friends back to their UCAD dorm. There, she and I listened to Big Mama’s song “B.I.G.” as her friends talked amongst themselves. This is Big Mama’s ego trip, her self-introduction to the hip-hop scene. The ego trip is an important component in the career of many young rap artists, as it gives them an opportunity to lyrically stake out their space and assert why they are the best in the game. Ego trip for women is especially important as a tool for showing off their skills in a man’s world. In “B.I.G.,” Big Mama raps over a borrowed Nicki Minaj “Roman’s

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\(^{18}\) A group of hip-hop artists (frequently dancers or rappers) freestyling one after the other, which occurred historically on the physical street.

\(^{19}\) *mes sy sys* — *sy sy* refers to a kind of man: in American slang, a “player,” someone who does not take their relationships seriously
Revenge” (2010) beat. She worked with RockTeam Music in 2015 to make the song. Her mixer at RockTeam, Platinum Beats, mixed “Roman’s Revenge” with hints of a traditional Senegalese drumbeat. She translated the refrain for me as we listened to it:

- Big big big big big big Mama
- Def hit ci beat [make this beat a hit]
- Cooragal tek ci brit [he who is scared flees]
- May def lo wek it [what I do is too mean]
- Big big big big big big Mama
- Fuck with your shit
- Do la big xama [hit with a big amount of knowledge]
- Nek chacow [located on top]
- De shine like a diamond [to shine like a diamond]

Big Mama is aggressive and unapologetic in her lyrics, and in her rapid-fire, smooth delivery earns her clout in hip-hop communities. In this ego trip, Big Mama shows off her linguistic skills by using “street” phrases in both Wolof and English, the languages with the most cultural currency in Senegalese hip-hop. “Tek ci brit,” for example, is what Big Mama called a “street phrase.” Big Mama’s identifying of certain words as “street phrases” echoed the notion of hip-hop spaces as reproducing ideals of the imagined street; Big Mama directly contributes to this phenomenon in her song.

Her repetition of the word “big,” in the two lines where she says her name as well as in reference to her xama (Wolof, “knowledge”), also illustrates the deftness with which she spins a word that her friends might use to disparage her for her size. In this song, Big Mama reclaims it and makes it a source of her lyrical – and therefore cultural – power. This device is reflected in her name, also a reclamation of the word “big” to use it as a proud self-identifier. Big Mama seemed comfortable enough in her skin — or, in other words, had enough self-belief — to put her own body on the line in her lyrics and her choice of artist name. She did so to express this self-belief and self-respect,
simultaneously reproducing it and reinforcing its power. Her ego trip is thus the ultimate ethical act; her ethics both inform and are driven by the action of ego tripping.

Appropriate and clever uses of swear words are a hallmark of any great rap artist (Charnas 2011, 64). The formation “fuck with your shit” is relatively complex, and demonstrates Big Mama’s strong grasp of English and its curses. Other artists prefer to use vulgar Wolof words and slip them into their verses, as Sister LB does in her group’s ego trip. Sister LB is part of the rap duo Fippu Clan, whose song, “Fippu Clan,” introduces the artists and their philosophy. In their refrain, Sister LB and her partner, Julza rap in unison:

\[
\begin{center}
Fippu clan \\
The one you represent \\
Sunu bu chacow [our group is on top] \\
Fight barrow \\
Represent sunu crew nigga
\end{center}
\]

Before the refrain, Sister LB is the first to grab the mic, followed by Julza. In Sister LB’s second verse, she outlines the type of revolution that Fippu ("revolution" in Wolof) refers to – not a violent uprising, but a revolution of the mind, harkening back to the political messages of early Senegalese hip-hop. Making their listeners conscious is the center of their mission. Sister LB intersperse jokes and wordplay into her frank explanation of whom Fippu Clan is and what they plan to do, such as including the phrase “giko rek moy chok.” This Wolof phrase refers to doing something as habitually as you groom your pubic hair, “chok” being the dirty word for genitalia. In the song, rather than saying the word “chok,” Sister LB auto-censures with an “ooooo!” in its place. She explained that it was not necessary for her to say it, and that those who were old enough would get the joke. She could then spare younger ears from hearing a dirty word (in the
video for “Fippu Clan,” Sister LB and Julza are surrounded by young kids from their neighborhood dancing to the song). Sister LB reflected a concern for the community for whom she was speaking when she grabbed the mic. She also was concerned with being perceived as a good and moral person in her omission of the dirty word. She considered the ears of everyone in the neighborhood as she crafted, along with Julza, her group’s ego trip.

As we saw in the previous chapter, it appeared that Déesse Major’s first foray into the music scene, her first opportunity to ego trip, was defined to a degree by patriarchal forces. As discussed, though, Déesse’s strategy allowed her more opportunities to ego trip, as with her most recent single “Gëm sa bop.” Déesse’s work explicitly reinforces the importance of gëm sa bop or, in French, crois en sois for female hip-hop artists; almost every artist with whom I spoke confirmed that self-belief and self-assurance are necessary to enter into, gain respect in and stay in hip-hop spheres. Thus, their multifaceted ethical selves, mélanges of Senegalese cultural values, hip-hop values and personal desires, allowed them to succeed in hip-hop. Ethics ground the freedom that liberates female artist to express themselves hip-hopologically.

A crucial component of these ethics, driven in part as they are by the notion of grabbing the mic, is the community responsibility that Lane (2011) says is imbued in this action. An ethical way that female hip-hop artists claimed space and amassed power for themselves was by grabbing the mic as a community, in a kind of group ego trip. As minorities within the hip-hop community, solidarity was important. Toussa gave this solidarity a name in her popularizing of the term rap bou dgjiuen.
Rap bou dgjiuen

Toussa is known as the creator of a notion in Hip-Hop Galsene called rap bou dgjiuen – “women rap.” This term is met with controversy in certain circles. A few artists outright denied the existence rap bou dgjiguen, insisting that music is sexless. To others, the term was simply amusing, such as to the members of the TafZion team who smiled and shook their heads when asked about rap bou dgijuen. At any rate, Toussa’s assignment of a label to the many women who rap and do hip-hop music in Senegal has arguably raised visibility for these artists, at least within the hip-hop community. More than this, it has provided for them a moniker under which to find solidarity and unity. In the United States, women hip-hop artists are at times referred to as “hip-hop divas” (Vibe Magazine 2001); in Senegal, where hip-hop has been historically driven by mass movements, female artists can now claim membership in a uniquely female movement, rap bou djiguen. The concept of rap bou djiguen enables the existence of another phenomenon: the group ego trip. In several songs, women rappers and hip-hop artists worked together, or featured on each other’s tracks, to create truly great work.

An all-female ensemble created the single, “Kou Koy Tothie,” through a project at DD Records. The group included OMG, Lady Zee, EveCrazy, Big Mama, Déesse Major, DJ Zeyna, and two artists with whom I did not speak, Skills and Mamy Victory. The power and meaning of this single is lost without the context of the phrase kou koy tothie, a Wolof construction meaning “who makes the most buzz [noise]?” In two separate conversations at DD Records and TafZion Productions, members of the hip-hop community identified the gendering of certain Wolof words and phrases — kou koy tothie came up as one of them. In these conversations, several other phrases came up that were
associated with a specific kind of femininity: the stereotypically female, indexing someone who is demanding and materialistic. *Defal bambar* is a phonetic spelling of a phrase that roughly translates to “do it nice;” one would say this to a tailor making clothes or someone cooking food, for instance. Most people with whom I spoke said that a man would not use this phrase. Similarly, the phrase *yama gunuh xam* was apparently used exclusively by women, to mean in a mocking, condescending kind of way “you even know” in a variety of contexts. I never heard men use these phrases and, when asked about it, men often strongly rejected any kind of association with the phrases.

Rather than playing to the aforementioned female stereotype imbued in such a phrase as *kou koy tothie*, though, the song sounds like an aggressive reclamation of the sentiment by allowing each rapper on the track to do her own ego trip. Lady Zee unifies the rappers’ contributions by singing the group declaration in an ominous, minor key: “*Kou koy tothie? Bena koy tothie*” (“Who makes the most buzz?/I do”). The overwhelming power of seven women’s voices on the track, plus beats by a female DJ, work together to create a hardcore and foreboding sound, running counter to the idea of a weak or catty woman that *kou koy tothie* might reference. The women in the song re-attach power to the femininity indexed in this expression. Through these kinds of radical, intentional reclamation of “women’s speech,” women ego tripped to claim legitimacy and belonging in hip-hop spaces that historically, and today, have been dominated by men.

Toussa and the aforementioned Gotal collective of which she is a member recorded another kind of group ego trip. Rapping over legendary hip-hop diva Queen Latifah’s “U.N.I.T.Y.” beat, Gotal calls all people to be receptive to her (and their)
message for unifying love, self-empowerment and self-belief in black communities. Each artist raps a verse in the song. Vénus, one of the members of the collective, used part of her verse to illustrate the special challenge and pride she has in both being a woman artist and coming from the “‘hood,” or the banlieue, harkening back to the importance of ghettocentricity discussed in the previous chapter:

*I speak from the hood, I wish you could hear me now
‘Cuz I’m a woman they want me to back d-d-down
They said I can’t do it, so I had to put it down
I came from the bottom, I can’t let my top down*

Collaborations like “U.N.I.T.Y.” allow more high-profile women artists, like Toussa, to lift up their counterparts and give talented voices a platform. Like “Kou Koy Tothie,” “U.N.I.T.Y.” included elements of ego trip for each of the seven artists who had verse on the album. Gotal filmed a music video for “U.N.I.T.Y.,” in which a dancer grooves to the song in the streets of Guediawaye – none other than Jeanne D’Arc. The artistic collaboration between the women in the video mirrors its sentiment, and the importance of female artists banding together to make a name for themselves in Hip-Hop Galsene.

Beyond lyrically grabbing the mic, women also spoke up when their opinions and perspectives were underrepresented. In this way, women grabbed the figurative mic in a performance of ethical behavior. The notion of speaking up aligns with both the values of the HHN, which celebrates rapping as a means of making oneself heard, as well as with Senegalese cultural values, which included respect for oneself and one’s community.
Speaking Up

I observed Sister LB in a slam poetry workshop at Africulturban, hosted by a guest artist from Mali who was accompanied by a French cultural liaison. While the workshop was led in French, Sister LB — the only woman present at the workshop, other than Zeinixx — and her male counterparts mostly performed work in Wolof. They were preparing for a performance to be held at L’Institut Francais in downtown Dakar. And yet Wolof, for what seemed to be most of the artists present, was a first language.

The French cultural liaison suggested to the group that the slam pieces be translated into French. Sister LB flatly decried this idea.

“Then why not translate them into Peul and Mandinka and Serer [other indigenous languages in Senegal]?” she demanded. “Now they might say, ‘I want to learn Wolof.’” Sister LB passionately opposed the colonial legacy inherent in the liaison’s request that the poems be translated. She understood that by incentivizing the learning of Senegal’s indigenous languages the power dynamics between France and Senegal could be mitigated. She was also reproducing a core value of the HHN: indigenous language reclamation. A hip-hopological ideology runs counter to dominant beliefs about the importance of standardized, national (in the strict sense, not referring to the HHN) language (Alim and Pennycook 2007, 91). Global hip-hop, especially, defies the monoculturalism that different national governments impose through the enforcing of standardized codes (Alim and Pennycook 2007, 91). Thus, Sister LB’s speaking up was an act that explicitly communicated the ethics she had developed, in part based on the values of the HHN.
The Malian leader of the workshop seemed to want the only two women artists, Sister LB and Zeinixx, to be more overtly engaged and committed to the workshop. He said that Sister LB should take his place at the front of the room. Sister LB smiled.

“That’s not necessary,” she said, and explained that she did not have to sit at the front to have her presence and influence be known and felt in the group. The group laughed. The leader of the workshop did not directly penalize Sister LB for her teasing and distracted aura; it was his liaison, a white man, who demanded Sister LB’s attention when she did not immediately respond to a question posed by the leader. Sister LB had been spending time on her phone, perhaps in a similar strategy to maintain her own bodily autonomy and freedom over her choices. In this way, doing so was an ethical act — Sister LB was balancing the value of a workshop to her artistry with her own personal desires to be on her phone and resist the authoritative, masculine figures of the leader and his liaison.

Sister LB and her fellow artist, Zeinixx, seemed to resent the pressure and expectation of complete commitment as the only two women artists in the room. Neither of them said that they could attend the event for which the artists were preparing. Sister LB said that it was possible but not yet certain. Zeinixx had other commitments and she could not go. These artists resisted the pressure put on them as women in this situation, reclaiming control over their artistic schedules and endeavors by not immediately agreeing to perform in the concert of a foreign guest artist. I found out later that Zeinixx could not make it to the guest artist’s event at L’Institut because the bus tickets to get there, and the taxi to get back, would be too expensive. She did not apologize for this in the moment and in fact said simply that she had other plans when the guest artist asked her about it. Later, she and Sister LB acknowledged that it did not make much sense to be
hosting the event in downtown Dakar, so far away from the banlieue where everyone actually lived. Transportation was probably expensive for all of the artists. And female artists especially, as we saw in chapter two, experienced gendered pressures to stay at home and work rather than make their living as hip-hop artists. Perhaps Sister LB and Zeinixx’s responses were reflective of this, as well.

In another workshop at Africulturban, an American led a smaller group of Senegalese slam poets and rappers in creating a collaborative piece. Similarly, as the leader led the workshop in French, Sister LB made asides to her fellow artists in Wolof. The American artist introduced the project with emotion and passion. “You don’t need to cry about it, quoi,” Sister LB playfully told him in French, in a demonstration of her linguistic fluency and knowledge of which language to speak when, and how. She made both the workshop leader and the other participants laugh; humor helped her maintain goodness as she balanced her own desires with the rules of the space she inhabited. When it came time to work, Sister LB was all business. She improvised effortlessly over the beat the American leader had brought with him. She rapped Wolof under her breath as he repeated the track and each of the workshop participants worked independently. Later, the workshop leader would gush over Sister LB’s ability and her voice, despite the fact that she had initially teased him and not made obvious signs of paying attention as he introduced the project.

In both workshop scenarios Sister LB engaged in the work in her own ethical way. She balanced the values of the HHN, values of self-respect, personal desires, and the pressures and rules of gendered spaces. Simply by her presence at the workshops Sister LB was acknowledging the importance of such events for an artist like herself. She
participated and contributed her work along with her colleagues. And yet, she resisted the power dynamic that existed between the leader of the workshop and the participants by behaving as though she did not want to be there. She did not allow them to police her behavior in a way that a teacher might in a teacher-student dynamic, retaining control over her personhood and her art and acting out her own self-respect. By making her fellow group members laugh, and speaking to them in their native Wolof, Sister LB in fact assumed a degree of power and influence over the space that the leaders — outsiders and non-Wolof speakers — could not access. Her belief in herself, and in the importance of respecting one’s self, became all the more relevant when she was in a subordinate position.

Other female members of the hip-hop community expressed their ethics through speaking up — although Ina, from the hip-hop library at Africulturban, is not a rapper, dancer or graffiti artist. She had taken DJ classes, but identifies primarily as a photographer and videographer of the hip-hop arts. She manages artists, photographing them for promotional materials and filming music videos like that of Gotal’s “U.N.I.T.Y.” She was respected at Africulturban as someone who deeply knows hip-hop culture, even though she is not a performing artist within it. Ina can still grab the mic like her rapping peers. Sometimes, it was necessary for her to speak out on behalf of herself and her community, perhaps in spite of her legitimacy within the hip-hop scene.

At a film screening of a documentary about the Y’en A Marre movement at Africulturban, Ina demonstrated the kind of gēm sa bop-driven ethics that the women in the hip-hop movement with whom I spoke seemed to have in common. During a question and answer session after the film, a young man asked the filmmaker, a Dutch woman,
about the propagandist nature of her film. He went on for a few minutes in what seemed like a verbal attack. The filmmaker attempted to answer, and after she was finished, Ina took the mic and stood up from where she was sitting near the film projector.

“To me, the more dangerous thing would be to not have information, to live in a world where this type of film did not exist,” Ina said in French. Ina’s male counterpart attempted to interrupt her, but she had the mic and she did not stop until she had made her point. She was one of only a handful of Senegalese women present at the film showing, which was dominated by Senegalese men and expatriates. The space was not one that encouraged Ina to speak out, but she did so all the same. She was driven to speak for her community — in this case, fellow women filmmakers within the hip-hop community. She grabbed the mic to advocate for herself and others like her, although national borders divided Ina and the Dutch female filmmaker. The HHN connected them, as both made art about the global hip-hop movement. Both, in their own ways, grabbed the mic and expressed themselves ethically within the hip-hop scene. Even though the filmmaker was not Senegalese, Ina spoke up on her behalf as a fellow woman in the HHN.

Conclusions

Female hip-hop artists figuratively grabbed the mic, an inherently ethical act that women expressed through ego trip and speaking up, to navigate everyday hip-hop spaces. Through ego trip, individual female artists and groups reproduced notions of the imagined street and reclaimed language to empower women, not limit them to degrading stereotypes. Through speaking up, female artists adhered to values of the HHN, which accord importance to indigenous language forms, as well as the home-taught values of
respect for oneself and one’s community. In previous chapters, we have seen how women navigated gendered spaces like the home and the label. In the following chapter, we will see how women navigate a final gendered space, the stage, by literally grabbing the mic. The stage is the culmination of the ethical work — the internal processes and external performative actions — that women do.
5. The Show

“Are you ready?” EveCrazy called out to the crowd in French. She switched to English: “Are you ready for the show?”

In the taping EveCrazy and I watched of her performance at the Flow Up competition for young unsigned rappers, she stood behind the turntables with the DJ. She moved out from behind it in a tank top and denim shorts and was soon surrounded by male dancers, with whom she did some choreography. A male rapper echoed her at times and rapped along at certain moments for emphasis, but it was EveCrazy’s show. She was relentless, performing a series of hard-hitting raps for the majority of the set.

EveCrazy placed third out of hundreds of competitors. “At first, I was nervous, but after a few rounds — there was a hundred [competitors], then there was fifty, then there was ten — and then it was just fun, quoi,” Eve explained. She felt at ease in her final performance.

She chose to close the set with a quieter, mournful song called “Nyans,” roughly translating to “prayers” or “hopes.” For this song she wore a boubou\(^\text{20}\) patterned with the Senegalese flag over her t-shirt and shorts, and a red, yellow and green head wrap. She sang about her wishes for peace and understanding between the religions of Senegal as her dancers marched slowly behind her, some carrying Christian crosses and others dressed like Muslim marabouts and Animist practitioners. She sang for an end to conflict, and mourned the losses of those in the hip-hop community due to health complications. She had commanded the crowd’s attention throughout her set (the video had shots of arms waving and eyes transfixed), but this closing song drew the most vocal responses from the crowd. The audience seemed to respond to EveCrazy’s patriotism,

\(^{20}\) A long, loose dress, often worn by older women in Senegal.
and her piety in the sense that she is “praying” for harmony and health for her country. At the end of the song, EveCrazy crumpled to the floor onstage. The dancers standing next to her rushed to her aid — but Eve was just overcome with emotion. The pleasure and connection she felt in performing overwhelmed her physically and contributed to the power of her set. EveCrazy’s sartorial choices, behavior onstage and even the curating of her set were clear, performative acts that served a specific purpose to connect her rap performance to broader cultural values and national concerns.

Before we analyze the finer aspects of this performance, it is important to ask: how did Eve access this space in the first place? Any female hip-hop artist performing onstage has grabbed the mic — literally — to get there. They have seized access to a gendered space, the stage, which external forces discourage women from accessing (as we have seen expressed in the masculinization of hip-hop spaces and the initial lack of support from mothers). Even when women achieved access to the stage, pressures to “rap like a girl” existed; indeed, both men and women are policed in the expression of their genders in the public sphere. Nonetheless, concerts were undoubtedly liberating for female performers. During the moments that artists took the stage, they carved out their own space to express their own ethical selves, their own ways.

*Dual Selves*

Women distinguished between the selves they performed in the domestic sphere and in public non-hip-hop spaces, and the selves they assumed when it came time to perform or work as a hip-hop artist. Often, the former was associated with the name artists had been given at birth, and the latter with the artist name that they created for themselves. Durham’s (2011) discussion of multiple femininities in the case of Beyoncé
recurs to explain the balancing and strategic deployment of these selves. Even within a singular performance, we witnessed EveCrazy’s conscious expression of a more quintessentially hip-hopological self (jean shorts, a tough-talking attitude, hip-hop dance moves) followed by one that espoused national pride, traditional values and piety (a boubou, a prayerful demeanor and intention, no choreography). EveCrazy epitomized the coexistence of all of these values in a single person — and the ability to express them all, to act out the complete set of complex ethics that drive an individual, in one performance. Action-driven hip-hop ethics are most explicitly acted out when artists grab the mic to take the stage.

EveCrazy explained her dual selves, and how she elected to perform certain selves in certain spaces. According to Eve, in French:

I’m two people. When I’m onstage I’m doing something else. When I come back, [people say] ‘You sang like it wasn’t you!’ When I’m serious I’m serious, when I play I play. Even at the house when I play my songs they say, ‘That was you singing that?’ I say ‘Yeah…’ They say ‘No, that’s too extraordinary, you can’t do that.’ My mom watched Flow Up on TV and she said ‘No, that’s you? I don’t believe that’s my daughter!’ At the house, I’m another person. Sometimes I veil, I stay there, pray all day. I don’t talk with anyone. Here [at the label] I talk to everybody, I play [laughs]. [...] One is EveCrazy, the other is Awa. When it’s rap, it’s rap. When work calls me, it’s home with the family.

EveCrazy went on to say that, when she is EveCrazy, she is perceived as someone who does not fit into society’s gender expectations for a woman; she gave the example of people assuming she does not know how to cook. The maintenance of this double image became even more important. Not only did it allow for EveCrazy to be liberated when she was onstage, it also allowed for Awa to be viewed as a respectable Senegalese woman when she was at home. EveCrazy was proud to be Senegalese and wants to uphold these expectations, but she also loved rap, and wanted to be able to express herself through her chosen art form.
Nearly every artist with whom I spoke became someone else when they performed. They abandoned the respectable, even pious selves of their home lives to inhabit their performance personas, the aspect of themselves several artists said they had to hide in their day-to-day life. Certain words like “crazy,” “fool” and “beast” recurred in women’s descriptions of what happens to them when they get onstage. Vénus, a singer, rapper and dancehall artist, said that she is “a real beast” onstage. Sophie, Vénus’s given name and the name used by her family at home, was “shy” in real life. Sister LB becomes “a fool.” Rapper Sister Dia is a “beast” as well. These descriptors reclaimed negative words that could be used to disparage these women’s choices to even go onstage in the first place. They referred to the quality of the performance — uninhibited, engaging, bold — rather than a limited mental state that might drive a woman to want to perform as a rapper. Several artists recalled how people had called them crazy when they first expressed an interest in hip-hop. Now, as performing artists, they could call *themselves* “crazy” as they whip up a crowd and communicate their message to the masses. Zeinixx, a rapper, singer and slam poet, was “crazy” — “another being” when she performs. She highlighted the distinction between Zeyna (her given name), the quiet, girl-next-door at home, and Zeinixx, her artistic moniker. When I asked her why she does not simply go by Zeinixx in all contexts, she said simply, in English, “Zeinixx is crazy!”

Zeinixx’s story also highlights the transformative nature of performing, though in a different way. While hip-hop ultimately empowered Vénus to stop altering her appearance in harmful ways, as we saw in chapter two, for Zeinixx it allowed her to come out of a painfully shy public self. She told me two separate stories of first-time performance that illuminate the necessarily circuitous route that sometimes women must
take to access hip-hop. We sat in an open-air area outside of Zeinixx’s kitchen as she prepared lunch and told me about her childhood.

Zeinixx said that she was ten when she first took the stage to perform for an audience. She and her older siblings used to attend a *colon de vacances*, a kind of a summer camp, run by her father’s work in a region not far from Dakar. The camp put on a cultural show as a component of their activities, separating the children by ethnicities so that each group could prepare a show about their specific ethnic group (in Senegal, there are roughly 20). “I can’t dance,” Zeinixx said, laughing, “so I sang.” She described her nerves before she opened her mouth to sing, and seeing her parents in the audience, as it was parents’ day as well. Zeinixx sang a song by Baba Mall, one of her mother’s favorite artists: Zeinixx said she remembered her mother’s jaw dropping when she began to sing. Two years later, Zeinixx rapped in front of an audience for the first time. The context was another *colon de vacances*, and she talks about how she was the littlest one in attendance. “They [the audience] said, ‘She’s so little, she doesn’t talk!’” Zeinixx explained. There was surprise when she grabbed the mic, but she received an ovation from the crowd. This experience inspired her to continue to explore the world of hip-hop, as she now performs as a slam poet, singer and rapper.

*The Erotic as Policed Power*

Being onstage not only transformed the artist into someone else; it simultaneously sanctioned her public pleasure in this transformation. The artist was allowed to enjoy herself onstage as “someone else”; OMG, in fact, said that the artist must have fun or the audience will not be engaged or amused. Feminist writer Audre Lorde (1984) theorizes the notion of pleasure as empowering and significant for women in the project of
liberation. She offers an important perspective on the notion of the erotic — not the pornographic or the sexual, but the embracing of pleasure and joy in women’s work — as power (Lorde 1984). Lorde demands for the inclusion of the erotic in all aspects of the lives of people who live as women and asserts that this is an energizing and radical act. Lorde’s attention to the power of women’s creative work applies to the performance of hip-hop and rap by female artists in Senegal, although in many ways, her article “The Erotic as Power” narrows in on America’s uniquely racist, sexist and “anti-erotic” society (Lorde 1984, 59). Yet Senegalese society, like America’s, is patriarchal, and in different contexts borders more on the ascetic rather than the erotic — particularly considering the deeply pervasive impacts of Islam. Thus, the erotic — as Lorde would use the word, referring to pleasure rather than sex — nature of some female hip-hop performances is a radical act in Senegal as it is in the United States.

The erotic female hip-hop performance in Senegal is policed by a society that reproduced widely held beliefs about the danger and perverseness of female sexuality. I have already discussed the example of Déesse Major, who was widely criticized for overtly seductive outfits onstage and in music videos. In my conversation in French with Déesse in her home, she attributed the tension surrounding her sartorial choices to broader aspects of culture that police different aspects of behavior, especially for women:

Me, me as a rapper, I get onstage in a sexy outfit — there are our parents, there are quite a few people who say ‘No, that’s not our culture, you shouldn’t dress sexy onstage. You shouldn’t say all that you want to say.’ If you say what you want, if you speak frankly and say what you feel, they tell you ‘No, you shouldn’t say what you feel. We’re in Senegal, it’s not our culture, even if we know something’s not good we don’t say it, we hide it. [...] you should at times hide things, that’s our culture.’

Déesse’s remarks flipped the critiques of her dress on their head by connecting them to other cultural imperatives to which artists must conform. Instead of making her
clothes directly index her sexuality, she implicated her freedom of expression, her ability to say what she thought and felt, in her wardrobe choices. Déesse’s clothing was an expression of the erotic as it divorced the explicitly sexual from a more generalized liberation, and corresponding pleasure. Despite her more provocative onstage choices, like her peers in the hip-hop movement Déesse did not dress in the outfits she wears at shows or music videos in her day-to-day life, reflecting a similar concern for the community around her and an ethical practice that she integrated into her everyday life. However, the stage, for her, was where she could break away from the aspects of her culture that did not agree with her. More importantly than dressing how she likes, she could express her own personhood in precisely her own way. Wardrobe became much more significant than showing skin — for Déesse, it stood for female liberation in a broader sense. After all, I witnessed a male artist perform topless, in jeans and a plastic crown. Female artists are not afforded the same kind of “liberation” onstage. However, as they are acting according to their ethics — which at times upholds notions of respectable Senegalese womanhood — their performances are still expressions of freedom.

Many artists and managers in the hip-hop community repeated sentiments that supported the idea of “rapping like a girl” to sound acceptably feminine. “You don’t need to be a man,” Lady Zee told me over lunch one day. Lady Zee said that of course there are differences in the ways that men and women sound, and that one should embrace this, not try to change one’s voice to sound more masculine. In this sense, “rap like a girl” could be read as an empowering statement, one that female artists followed willfully in order to be “good,” not a limiting one that eschewed alternative expressions to mainstream femininity. It appeared that most artists with whom I spoke were comfortable
expressing their femininity in a culturally acceptable way, by sounding “like women” and
dressing in traditionally feminine attire both on and off stage.

However, at least one artist, Anta of Gotal, did not always conform to notions of
what a “girl” should sound and dress like, choosing instead to rap in a “hard” style and
wear looser, more stereotypically masculine clothing. Other artists held her up as an
example of someone who was still successful despite her somewhat unconventional
choices. Anta herself may have been responding, in her own ways, to the gendered
pressures of the hip-hop movement. However, she was doing so in conscious, ethical
choices to shape a self that would be respected in the hip-hop community. She explained
in Wolof her choice to hold onto her given name as a means to connect with others in the
hip-hop movement and stay true to her family:

For me, the hip-hop movement is a male movement. And for me, if I come in the
hip-hop movement and I continue with the first name Anta, it’s that which was
given to me by my mother and father. [...] Anta in Arabic is the third person
singular — “him.” “Him,” “man.” If someone is talking to a man, you say “Anta.”
So [we are] in the hip-hop movement, [and I’m] a woman in a domain reserved
for men — I’m a girl, and yet when I rap men identify with what I say. So that’s
why I’m continuing with the first name “Anta.”

Many artists praised Anta as a strong, talented rapper, and in many ways she
represented the range of gender expression afforded to women. Anta was a direct affront
to the sentiments that I heard repeated, from both male and female members of the hip-
hop community, for female artists to “rap like a girl” and “dress like a girl.” However,
because Anta was talented and respectful, and still claimed full identity as a woman, she
maintained legitimacy in the hip-hop community as something of an exception — a
woman breaking the rules who was still a good artist. Most women artists embraced
traditional notions of femininity onstage, even artists like OMG, who said that she
“dressed like a boy” in high school.
All the same, several artists corroborated that hip-hop audiences still are not quite ready for a predominance of female rappers. As a strategy to enable their own performance, women partnered with male artists on numerous occasions. Zeinixx performed slam poetry as part of Le Duo, with her partner, Mustaf. Sister LB performed as one half of Fippu Clan, with her partner, Julza. OMG was backed up by DJ Pol, another artist on her label, and in turn OMG backed up a performance by Illegal (a male DD Records rapper). These artists had positive, working relationships with each other—it did not appear that women felt pressured to perform with men or sacrifice part of the spotlight in order to share the stage with a male partner. Sister LB even considers Julza and his family as part of her own. Zeinixx admitted that she prefers to perform as part of Le Duo, and not alone. Nonetheless, the consistent prevalence of male-female duos over solo female artists speaks to a demand in the Senegalese hip-hop scene for the legitimizing presence of men.

This is not to exclude male hip-hop artists from gendered expectations for onstage performances. In different ways, male rappers and hip-hop performers are highly policed by both the hip-hop community and the society at large, which bitterly condemns homosexuality (Harvard 2001, 70). In a conversation with OMG and Sister Dia at DD Records, the artists agreed that a male rapper must adhere to the standards of dress for the hip-hop community, as a matter of security. “At hip-hop concerts, you get real guys, you know,” OMG explained. “It’s not smart to get onstage in something tight or adorned [as a guy] — the public can tell, they’ll go ‘Ooo…’, it’s not very safe. So most rappers prefer to wear something classic, loose, to go onstage.” OMG went on, saying “If you wear slim pants [in the hip-hop community], everybody disses you. It’s shocking, to see a boy dress
like that, even I’m shocked. I’ve never seen a rapper onstage dress like that.” Sister Dia chimed in to say that artists like EveCrazy clache (diss) men who wear tight pants. EveCrazy even has a song called “Na Gooré” (the Wolof phrase to “do it like a man”). In this way, men may in fact be afforded less of a range of expression than female artists are.

Female artists utilized a number of strategies to effectively communicate the message of their music and be respected onstage. The goal of most artists’ onstage performances was twofold: to enjoy themselves, and to communicate a message or engage the audience in some way. It was fascinating and illuminating to observe the range of female hip-hop performances in Senegal, set on achieving these goals but going about them in different ways. This illustrates the diversity of ethical performance among the women with whom I spoke and spent time; all of their performances were born out of complex internal relationships with both hip-hop values and socially imposed moral codes.

**Performance Strategies**

At a show called Open Doors at Le Grand Théâtre of Dakar, OMG took the stage in a form-fitting black and gray dress and high-top sneakers. She wore her hair in long waves. “I wear things that go well on me,” she explained in a later conversation. “There is a way to be sexy and not vulgar.” Although she said that she was nervous before the show, onstage she seemed at ease and relaxed. At first, she backed up her fellow performer under DD Records, a rapper by the name of Illegal. When OMG sang her own songs, she came to the front of the stage and appeared even freer. She gestured at the audience and engaged them in a call-and-response with her song, “Happy.” She
encouraged them to chant along to the “na na na”s in the refrain: “You see me smile/I’m just happy/life is beautiful.” The crowd shouted “happy” back at her when she held the mic in their direction, a classic call-and-response technique that is common in hip-hop (Alim 2005). To close out her set she shouted the words “Fu mu neuf, fu mu neuf!” at the crowd and they yelled it back in response. She had enraptured them to the point where they repeated this Djoula phrase back at her (Djoula is one of the indigenous languages of Senegal). Although OMG spoke French to the crowd between songs, perhaps because of the institutionalized, formal setting and the presence of foreigners in the crowd, she knew intuitively when to draw upon distinctly Senegalese phrases to make a connection with the Senegalese hip-hop audience that was in attendance.

OMG said that she was lauded for her clear delivery after the Open Doors show. “It’s the fact of holding the mic,” she explained, saying that singing lessons taught her to hold it farther down so that the sound could come out. Her knowledge of musical technique gave her yet another means of clearly spreading her message and connecting with the crowd.

OMG explained a number of different techniques she uses and factors that she considers to create an exciting, engaging set. “There are certain ways to rap to make people scream,” she said. “You can rap really quickly, for example.” It is important to mindfully choose which songs one plays for the public, because certain audiences appreciate certain styles more than others. OMG said that she tried to know something about her audience going into a show, and pick songs based on this knowledge: she cited a young hip-hop audience who likes hip-hop “pure and hard,” an audience who liked new styles of hip-hop like trap music, an audience who preferred a softer, more R&B style
with more singing incorporated. At a gala dinner, for example, OMG said that rappers could be in attendance, as well as ministers who like rap that was not too hardcore. The job of the performer is to engage both of these audiences. OMG seemed to enjoy rising to this challenge of performing that is somewhat catered to an audience, rather than feeling restricted by it. She also described her process of rising to another significant challenge facing her in her performance career — the intense nerves she faces before a show:

[before a performance] I am super-mega-stressed! Fuck! I am too too too stressed [...] even when you’re onstage you stress a bit — at the beginning, you stress. But the people can’t see that, you fight [it], you try to dissolve the stress, to make it leave [laughing] [...] [backstage] I talk to myself! Calm yourself, it’s nothing. Yes! I talk to myself, I breathe, I breathe again, calm yourself, it’s nothing, it’s a show, you need to be at the top of your game, et cetera. I motivate myself. I try to motivate myself and little by little it starts to leave.

OMG told me that when she gets onstage, despite her nerves, her primary goal is to exchange with her audience: to make them sing and rap along, to make them yell, to make them dance. She performed to prove herself, because she knew that there were people in the audience who were only there to see what she knows how to do. Of course, she also performed to give herself pleasure. Despite her nerves, she was happiest when she was performing. “It’s [performing] that feeds me, it’s [performing] that gives me life,” she said.

In our conversation in her home, Toussa said “Every time I’m onstage, it’s something new.” The newness of each experience gives her the most pleasure. There are always people in the audience who have never seen Toussa before, and have no idea what to expect from her. She enjoys the challenge of convincing the audience member who did not want to come to have a good time. She gives them all of her energy. To Toussa, improvisation is always preferable to pre-choreographed movements in a concert setting, and although the image of an artist is important, Toussa does not spend that much time
thinking about her clothes. She focuses on the music, and when it comes time to perform, she allows herself to naturally respond. Toussa articulated how these moments of unfettered exchange between her and her music and the audience are the most rewarding:

The most important moment is when you’re giving and the others give back. That’s to say, in a concert or show, it’s not only me who can get things going. There’s the audience. And when they share my energy, that becomes extraordinary. It’s why — I’m there, at a concert, I can smile the whole time, all night. When I play at a level that it causes me to smile, it’s because I’m truly feeling the energy that manifests in the room. It’s why, sometimes I’m playing, I’m playing, at my mic, and I look out at the people and I just want to smile. It’s also like sometimes I look at them and I want to cry. That’s it, you see — it’s just emotion. Feeling. The energy that’s out in the room truly responds to the kind of energy that I’m putting out.

This room could be as large as the Grand Theater’s spacious proscenium stage, or a smaller venue in her suburb of Guediawaye. To kick off her set at Open Doors, Toussa entered in darkness to strummed guitar with a hip-hop beat layered over it. Lights slowly came up on her figure, standing with her legs apart and arms folded. In black leggings, sneakers, a collared shirt, a baseball hat and her signature dark glasses, Toussa looked defiant and powerful. She started rapping with ease, punch and confidence, gesturing with her arms but not wavering in her stance. She did not give way to her fun loving, dancing, goofy persona until later in her set. A male rapper backed her up on a few tracks. She played off him, dancing next to him and rapping at him. Like OMG, she also engaged directly with the crowd: “Are things goin’?”, she asked the crowd in French. She surprised the audience by running across the stage, crouching down low and pumping her arms. She gave shout-outs to her city: “Guediawaye, sup!” Her plastic badge that identified her as an artist dangled from her wrist — almost all of the artists displayed this badge in some form or another. Her brandishing of the badge claimed identity with her home as well as belonging to a cohort of professional artists.
At the Ravin Nightclub, on the other hand, Toussa was on home turf, Guediawaye. Her approach in this environment was necessarily different. When I saw her in concert in November 2014 at Ravin, and then again in August 2015, Toussa seemed to take more risks than when she was at Le Grand Théâtre, especially when it came to engaging the crowd. In the November show, Toussa was the curator and organizer — she was the headlining event, and seemed to claim her space with more bravado. She was the one who introduced Gotal to the crowd, acting as a legitimizing presence to welcome them into the space. At the August show, Toussa jumped into the crowd and they danced around her as she rapped, bouncing in time to the beat and surrounding her in energy and support.

At the August show a male artist backed Toussa up for a few songs. Importantly, a male rapper by the name of Mario, who had worked with Toussa in the past, curated this show. In Mario’s partnership with Toussa, he has given her performance opportunities and introduced her to his already relatively established fan base. She is legitimized as Mario’s guest among an otherwise all-male cohort of invited artists. And yet, the audience seemed somewhat hesitant to wholeheartedly embrace her as they did with other artists, when they jumped around close to the stage and reached their hands towards it. They did not seem to be completely on Toussa’s level until she, symbolically and physically, got down off the stage and came down to theirs, engaging them in the most direct way that a performing artist possibly can. This kind of approach would have been inappropriate in a more formalized setting like Le Grand Théâtre, where no artists left the stage and much of the audience remained in their seats.
All of these approaches illustrate the diverse ways that artists grab the mic to perform their ethics in the most public of spaces. It requires an enormous amount of gēm in one’s self to do so, to combat the nervousness that many artists encountered (and still encounter) and perform all the same. This nervousness adds a crucial layer to the self-respect that women had for themselves, complicating ego tripping and mic-grabbing and demonstrating that these are not, in fact, egotistical acts. An artist claimed space by grabbing the mic, but not for herself alone. She did so to speak for her community, to raise her voice for her sisters — and to make space for them onstage as well.

*Lifting Each Other Up*

Ultimately artists claim space, ego trip and grab the mic to make room for more. Déesse Major invited OMG to her show, giving OMG her first chance to perform as a hip-hop artist. Toussa’s label encourages the participation and contributions of women through both monetary incentives and the mere presence of a woman at its helm. Toussa’s show, which she organized, also allowed her to intentionally invite women. These actions echo the sentiment that Toussa articulated about the African women that she observed growing up. Just as her mother took care of her family and the community of children that surrounded Toussa in her childhood, Toussa takes care of her community of female hip-hop artists today. She does all that she can to fortify *rap bou dgijuë* and ensure that it only grows in number and influence.
6. Conclusions

“We need to be an example. It’s that that’s missing. We need to be something that animates […] when there’s no examples, she [the young female rapper] thinks that it’s difficult, that she can’t achieve it.”

— Toussa

In 2014, I stopped by Africulturban one afternoon to listen in on a slam poetry workshop the organization had coordinated with a Canadian NGO. The shaded courtyard, lined with trees and benches, was filled with schoolchildren from across the street. They were listening to an instructor, a Canadian man, talk about slam poetry (slam poetry, at Africulturban in particular, crosses over with rap and many of the hip-hop arts; Zeinixx and Sister LB are both rappers and slam poets). Several young girls in the group listened attentively and scribbled down ideas. At the end of the workshop, when the teacher asked the students to come to the front and share their work, at first there was silence. Then, a young boy came to the front and said his piece. A few more boys, affirmed by the example of their peer, followed him.

“A girl?” the teacher asked the crowd of potential slam poets in French. He scanned the group of them for a moment, and a young girl stood up. Like the group had done for all of the poets, they cheered and supported her as she made her way through the other students, then quieted as she said her piece. The audience erupted into more applause as she returned to her seat. As though a dam had been lifted, the next poets to come to the front and read their work were all young girls. There was a flood of young, female voices, ready and eager to share what they had to say.

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“When I first hear ALIF, I just thought to myself...finally.” OMG, sitting across from me in a hot pink top, closed her eyes. She shook her head and laughed. “I saw
myself working like that,” she said. ALIF, the Senegalese all-female rap collective of the late 1990s, had two singers and two rappers; OMG is both a singer and a rapper. “I wanted to be better than ALIF!” She laughed again.

For OMG, and many others, ALIF was a first experience with women in the hip-hop movement. OMG’s narrative of her exposure to the world of hip-hop has ALIF at its center, and speaks to the importance of representation in the hip-hop community. Finally, OMG could see herself in the music that she loved, and today, she is a celebrated hip-hop artist. Representation thus has important implications for the future of women in the Hip-Hop Galsene scene. As we have seen, women have already made vital artistic contributions to the form; encouraging the participation of more female bodies opens the door for more new voices to contribute to hip-hop.

Hip-hop, in turn, gave the women I talked to a platform upon which to make themselves heard. In conjunction with the cultural values that women grew up learning, hip-hop values reinforced the values of self-expression and self-respect embedded in notions of kersa and, especially, gëm sa bop. Grabbing the mic was a response to these internalized values and a way to reinforce the belief that women had in themselves. In grabbing the mic, female artists performed a new kind of womanhood that was both familiar and different, that celebrated the values of their country, their religion and the Hip-Hop Nation.

The internal processes that connected the moral codes of both Senegal and the HHN resulted in unique, Senegalese, hip-hopological ethics for each of my informants. Senegalese female hip-hop artists’ ethics helped them navigate their home lives, centered as many of them were on influential female figures. In acting out Hip-Hop Galsene ethics
in the home artists wrote in notebooks, gathered with one another, listened to music and
displayed graffiti art. They weaved elements of hip-hop spaces into the private space of
the home. In the male-dominated spaces of hip-hop production, they held onto the values
learned in the home and navigated complex gender politics at work. They carved out their
own spaces for fellow women within the Senegalese hip-hop community. And they
deployed linguistic strategies to claim symbolic capital within the hip-hop scene. They
grabbed the mic in myriad everyday, innocuous acts to navigate quotidian gendered
spaces. And they grabbed the mic to seize access to the concert stage, performing their
ethics in the public sphere — perhaps inspiring others to do the same.

The publicness of grabbing the mic reinforces the notion of the act as an
assumption of responsibility (Lane 2011). In the public personas that they created for
themselves, the lyrics that they wrote, and the shows they performed, female artists
constanty attended to their surrounding community — both their audience, and their
fellow female artists. My informants grabbed the mic to pass it off to their community
members, fellow women in the hip-hop cultural movement in Senegal. Grabbing the mic
also represented a larger responsibility to the script being written about the location of
black African women in cultural production. As hip-hop artists continuing to work at
their craft and make themselves known, these women placed themselves at the center of
this narrative. It is a narrative contributed to by Awa Thiam, Sylvia Tamale and many
other scholars who disrupt problematic representations of black women’s bodies. It
echoes the legacy of hip-hop feminism in the United States, which works to foreground
women’s contributions to the culture rather than relegate them to the periphery.
Women in the hip-hop movement in Senegal keep finding new ways to contribute to this script. In a community-based example of grabbing the mic, much like a group ego trip, this past March marked the fourth annual “Urban Women Week” in the Senegalese hip-hop community. A program put on by Africulturban since 2012, the week functions as a period of exchange and collaboration for female artists in the hip-hop movement in which women’s work is centered as the dominant narrative in the hip-hop community. For one week, every year, members of the hip-hop community, both male and female, intentionally carve out female-dominated hip-hop spaces. This year, the theme of Urban Women Week was “The Investment of Women in urban culture towards expression, visibility and responsibility in public space.” There was leadership workshops, graffiti “en live,” a lecture about “The Role of Mothers in the Social Reinsertion of Young People,” and much more. Ina was at the center of organizing, promoting and coordinating these events.

In my first interview with Ina at Africulturban, I asked her about the challenges she envisions for the future of the hip-hop community in Senegal.

“A challenge that remains is to not be a copy of the music industry,” Ina replied thoughtfully. “We want to truly represent Senegalese women, to speak about the agenda of Senegalese women, and stay Senegalese women.”

Through ethical action, my informants balanced this self with a hip-hopological one. This was not an easy feat; by falling in love with hip-hop, my informants deeply complicated their multiple selves and future path. They set in motion complex internal processes, which worked to encompass the cultural values they learned as girls, the new values that the HHN presented to them, and their own desires and needs. Ultimately, the
ethics that are driven by all of these forces liberate women to act in ways that are true to their selves, yet still supported as good and right. This complication perhaps paints a more holistic picture of what empowerment looks like among female hip-hop artists in Senegal. Much like the global hip-hop movement, the notion of female empowerment seems to continually expand and reinvent itself, just as female selves become more varied and complex. It would follow that, as a response, female hip-hop artists in Senegal will continue to innovate on the expression of multiple selves. They will continue to find new ways to follow their passions, make themselves seen, and make their voices heard.
Je mène un projet d’étude dans le cadre de ma formation académique en anthropologie et les études Africaines. Ce projet examine les rappeuses au Sénégal : leur puissance, leur diversité et les expressions de leur genre et sexualités comme les femmes Sénégalaises. Je vous invite à participer dans le projet, parce que vous êtes un membre du mouvement de hip-hop ou vous bien connaissez le mouvement de hip-hop au Sénégal. S’il vous plaît, lisez ce formulaire attentivement et posez toutes les questions que vous avez avant de signer la déclaration d’adhésion et d’accepter à participer dans ce projet.

Je m’appelle Sophie Keane, étudiante de l’anthropologie, 77-498-15-25. Ma conseillère est Professeur Anna Jacobsen, L’anthropologie, ajabobse@macalester.edu

Procédures: Si vous consentez, je voudrais vous demander de faire une des deux choses :


2. Participer dans trois interviews, comme un informateur de l’histoire de la vie. Si vous consentez, les entretiens se passeraient aux emplacements dont vous conviendriez. Chacun dura pour une heure, maximum, et si vous consentez, j’enregistrerai chaque entretien avec un dictaphone pour ne manquer pas aucune info. Je prendrai les notes aussi, pour la même raison. Si possible, je voudrais aussi arranger les rendez-vous qui ne sont pas officiels, pour discuter sans un dictaphone ni les questions déjà déterminé. Mais, si c’est un engagement trop grand, je comprends et donc ce n’est pas obligatoire pour les informateurs de l’histoire de la vie.

Caractère volontaire : La participation est volontaire ; donc, vous avez la liberté de participer ou ne pas participer sans aucune conséquence. De même vous pouvez vous désengager sans dommage. Votre désengagement ne sera pas nuire à des relations avec moi ou Macalester College.

Risques et avantages : Il y a quelques risques si vous consentez à cette recherche : il y a une risque que vous pouvez trouvez quelques questions sensitives à cause des sujets dont ils traitent. Ceci est relativement peu probable, à moins que, comme une informateur de l’histoire de la vie, certaines questions posées dans les deuxième et troisième entretiens sont trop personnelles ou gênants (les questions relatives à l'identité de genre ou l'expression de la sexualité, par exemple). Cependant, encore une fois, vous ne devez pas répondre à toute question que vous ne voulez pas répondre, pour n’importe quelle raison.
Deuxièmement, comme un artiste établi ou à la hausse, c’est possible que vous ne puissiez pas vouloir certains détails sur l’histoire de votre vie ou de justifications derrière vos choix de performance révélées au public. Ce risque est relativement probable, bien que la plupart de ce qui sera exploré aura des choix et des détails déjà rendus publics (par l’acte de la scène). Ces détails ne seront pas divulgués au-delà de sélectionner les étudiants et les professeurs de Macalester College.

Les avantages à la participation incluent la possibilité d’un public plus large, comme un artiste de travailler avec un étudiant étranger qui va ramener les œuvres (DVD, CD, tout type de médias publics de spectacles) aux États-Unis.

Confidentialité : Je protégerai les données collectées avec un mot de passe sur mon propre ordinateur. Les informations de l’interview vont servir le projet courant. Sélectionnez les étudiants et les professeurs seront les seuls à lire cette recherche.

Contacts et questions : Si vous avez des questions ou préoccupations, vous pouvez me contacter ou bien vous pouvez contacter ma conseillère Anna Jacobsen (ajacobse@macalester.edu)

Sophie KEANE : 77 498 15 25, skeane@macalester.edu

Si vous avez les autres questions et vous ne voulez pas parler avec la chercheuse, vous pouvez contacter Macalester College Institutional Review Board: 1600 Grand Avenue, Saint Paul MN 55105; 651-696-6626.


Signature du participant : ________________________________ Date : ____________

Signature de la chercheuse : ______________________________ Date : ____________
7.2 Artists’ Information

**Anta Ba**: A Pikine-based rapper and a member of Gotal. Follow her on Facebook as “Anta,” SoundCloud at soundcloud.com/anta-ba, YouTube on the “Gotal Collectif” channel and on ReverbNation as Gotal Collectif.

**Big Mama**: Also known as Mary Saï, a Guediawaye-based rapper and student at Université Cheikh-Anta Diop. Find her on Facebook as “Mary Saï.”

**Déesse Major**: Rapper out of Parcelles, in the Northeast region of Dakar city. Find her on YouTube on the Déesse Major TV Channel as well as the BlackaNeZeTV channel, and on Facebook as Déesse Major.

**DJ Zeyna**: A Pikine-based freelance DJ, associated with the Gotal collective. Follow her on Facebook as DJ Zeyna and on ReverbNation as Gotal Collectif.

**EveCrazy**: A Guediawaye-based rapper signed to TafZion Productions. Follow her on Facebook as “EveCrazy Officiel” as well as through “TafZion Productions,” and YouTube on the channel TAFZIONPROD.

**Jeanne D’Arc**: A professional freelance dancer trained by Sunu Street. Follow her on Facebook as Jeanne D’Arc and see some of her work on YouTube in Gotal’s “U.N.I.T.Y.,” and OMG’s “Chic Choc Cheque.”

**Lady Zee**: A Guediawaye-based rapper and singer, and part of the Gotal collective. Follow her on Facebook as Lady Zee, on the Gotal Collectif YouTube channel and on ReverbNation as Lady Zee and Gotal Collectif.

**Mariama Touré**: A Mermoz-based hip-hop entrepreneur, founder and CEO of the The Dance Hall. Find them on Facebook at The Dance HALL – Centre de danses urbaines à Dakar. Also find Mariama’s slam poetry on YouTube on the Vendredi Slam channel.

**Moona**: A Beninese rapper of Senegalese origin. Find her work at http://moonamusic.skyrock.com, follow her on Facebook as MOONA, and on YouTube at Moona Officiel.

**OMG**: A rapper and singer signed to DD Records. Find her at the DD Records YouTube channel, ddrecords Senegal.

**Sister Dia**: A Pikine-based rapper. Find her on YouTube on the Mame Diarra Fall channel and on ReverbNation as Sister Dia.
Sister LB: A Pikine-based rapper and singer, and half of the rap duo, Fippu Clan. Find her on YouTube on the sisterlb diouf channel, on Facebook as fippu-clan and on ReverbNation as fippu-clan.

Toussa: A Guediawaye-based rapper, member of the Gotal collective and founder of RockTeam Music. Find her on Facebook as Toussa Senerap, on YouTube on the Toussa Senerap channel, and on ReverbNation as Toussa Senerap and Gotal Collectif.

Vénus: A Guediawaye-based rapper, dancehall artist, singer and member of the Gotal Collective. Find her on YouTube on the Venus Sweet Chocolate channel and the Gotal Collectif channel, on Facebook as Venus Tafari, and ReverbNation as Gotal Collectif.

Zeinixx: A Pikine-based slam poet, rapper, singer and graffiti artist, and half of the slam poetry duo, Le Duo. Find her on Facebook as Zeinixx LFDM and as LE DUO Zeinixx & Sal Ngaary.
7.3 Glossary of Senegalese Hip-Hop

*Beatmaker:* the person charged with constructing the beat for a hip-hop or rap song.

*Breaking:* breakdancing, one of the cultural forms of the HHN that involves grounded floor work to the dance break of a song.

*Chayas:* the Senegalese word for harem pants, or trousers with a dropped crotch.

*Clache:* diss, or insult.

*DJing:* the act of mixing, scratching, spinning and using other techniques to layer music and beats beneath a rap performance.

*Ego trip:* the action of introducing one’s self artistically in a song or portion of a song, the song itself, or the adjective describing a self-centered song or portion of a song.

*En live:* a rap show performed without pre-recording or lip-syncing.

*Featuring:* a portion of a song performed by an artist other than the principal artist.

*Festa 2H:* the largest hip-hop festival in Senegal, put on by Africulturban.

*Flow:* the term referring to a rapper’s style and manner of keeping time over a beat.

*Flow Up:* the competition held as a part of Festa 2H, also organized by Africulturban.

*Freestyle:* to improvise, usually used in reference to dancers or rappers.

*Gangsta:* an attitude stemming from the “gangsta rap” moment in the hip-hop cultural movement in the United States, at its peak in the 1990s and indexing a tough, stereotypically masculine sound and attitude. See Kelley (1996) and McLaren (1999).

*Ghetto:* a poor neighborhood in an urban area, used in reference to both American and Senegalese contexts. See McLaren (1999).

*Graff:* the Senegalese term for graffiti or street art, public painting or tagging usually done with aerosol cans.

*Hip-Hop Akademy:* a program providing free instruction in the hip-hop arts run through Africulturban.
*Hip-Hop Galsene:* the hip-hop cultural movement in Senegal.

*La banlieue:* (French) the suburbs, also referred to as the “ghetto”; the poor outskirts of the city center of Dakar.

*Na gooré:* (Wolof) do it like a man.

*Gëm sa bop:* (Wolof) believe in yourself.

*R&B:* Rhythm and Blues, an originally American musical form that experiences crossover with hip-hop. Many Senegalese artists were inspired by American R&B, as well as hip-hop, artists.

*Rap:* “the aesthetic placement of verbal rhymes over a musical beat” (Alim 2007).

*Rap bou dgjiuen:* (Wolof) woman rap.

*Wala bok:* (Wolof) a widely used phrase in Hip-Hop Galsene, a kind of “what’s up” that artists use to both greet other artists and call out to an audience.

*Y’en A Marre:* (French) We’re Fed Up, a political movement fueled by rap music.
8. Bibliography


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