

# Troubling the Trope of “Rapper as Modern Griot”

by

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“[Ancient] Griots would accompany kings into battle to record their deeds and sing their praises, so they were brave, they were militant. Today rappers have become militants, so there is again no difference.”  
-Fadda Freddy of Daara J Family

“The role of the griot and the role of the rapper are completely different, we are nothing alike. Ancient griots served kings and modern griots praise rich people and serve politicians. We are the opposite—we serve the people against the politicians, we are the voice of the voiceless.”  
-Thiat of Keur Gui

## Abstract

This essay interrogates the ubiquitous troping of rapper-as-modern-griot, both as it circulates through HipHop studies outside of Africa and as it has been appropriated by some West Africans as a means of asserting their HipHop authenticity against the Amerocentric paradigm. While scholars have addressed this latter phenomenon, the contrary position of a critical mass of Senegalese HipHoppers has hitherto gone undocumented. My interviews and extensive participant observation with rappers across Senegal has uncovered a perspective contrasting sharply with the received interpretation of rapper-as-modern-griot. These artists locate their HipHop authenticity in a counterhegemonic politics antithetic to their perception of griot practice. By contrasting these perspectives with a critical review of the scholarly treatment of rapper-as-modern-griot I expose an under-recognized dissonance emanating from the respective social positionalities of griot and HipHop subjectivities. Recognizing and addressing such contradictions are key for advancing anti-essentialist pan-African solidarity in the interest of social justice.

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One consequence of the paucity of continental African focus in global HipHop<sup>1</sup> studies has been the failure to interrogate how reified notions of African culture continue to circulate in the literature. HipHop studies grounded in lived African experience offer opportunities to supplant romanticism with reality in service of social justice and global African liberation. P. Khalil Saucier's edited volume *Native Tongues: an African Hip-Hop Reader* (2011) is a welcome corrective to HipHop scholarship's relative lack of continental attention. At its time of publication, it was perhaps only the second book-length treatment of HipHop in Africa—after Mwenda Ntarangwi's *East African Hip-Hop* (2009). In the anthology's foreword, Murray Forman invokes this imbalance. He acknowledges that “Africa has long been defined as hip-hop's ‘ground zero,’ the original site of the drum and dance from which hip-hop was born.” Yet, he argues, Africa as a trope—without deep engagement with its living history—casts it “as the wellspring of an innate black cultural aesthetic that reverberates across time and the diaspora, producing a single essentialist cultural continuum that is unproblematically traced through the creative arts” (Forman 2011, xi).<sup>2</sup> Ironically, one of the most ubiquitous examples of this one-dimensional troping of Africa in HipHop studies is perpetuated in *Native Tongues*, namely, the un-nuanced reading of rappers as “modern griots” (Appert 2011; Saucier 2011, xviii).

Indeed, this troping in HipHop studies is part of a larger phenomenon of appropriation that Stephen Belcher identifies as a “mythos [that] now attaches to griots, who have come to symbolize all that is positive about the preservation of the past in African oral tradition” (2004, 172).

He continues,

Many of the features that define a griot in the original West African context are lost in translation: questions of hereditary and ambiguous social status, ...questions of behavioral norms, the relations of griots and power structures. These elements are lost [in part] ...because they attach to a less idealized vision of the griot.... Yet these features should also draw our attention, for in West Africa they are common to the institution across ethnohistorical lines[.] (2004, 173)

Recognizing these complications, I set out to determine how Senegalese HipHoppers<sup>3</sup> grapple with the tensions inherent in the rapper as griot analogy. My participant observation included formal and informal interviews and discussions with over one hundred artists, who overwhelmingly dissented from the trope. Their objections were framed largely in recognition of the definitive relation “of griots and power structures”<sup>4</sup> and their contrasting perceptions of rappers as counter-hegemonically aligned. This criticism resonates with a perspective on griot subjectivity well established in the literature on griots but elided in scholarship positing rappers<sup>5</sup> as modern griots. I proceed by reading the scholarly depiction of rappers as modern griots against the literature on griots themselves and in contrast to the widespread, though not unanimous, rejection of the notion by Senegalese emcees. I then suggest how this development invites a constructive re-articulation of HipHop identity as African diasporic activism.

While this article uncovers an under-recognized criticism of the rapper-as-griot analogy that undercuts a particular essentialist interpretation of HipHop’s Africanness, it opens the space for a more activist affirmation of the same claim. My work is theoretically grounded in a materialist social constructionism that recognizes race and the attendant identities of African and European to be co-constructs of the inseparable conjuncture of modernity and coloniality (Hesse 2007; Iton 2008). Following Du Bois, such a view recognizes Pan-African solidarity and identity as necessarily based in collective anti-colonial struggle as opposed to the recovery or reassertion of a pre-colonial racial or cultural commonality (Eschen 1997, 4–5). Accordingly, transnational HipHop identity rooted in such struggle may be seen as fundamentally African by way of its political and cultural commitment rather than a supposed pre-colonial continuity. This view in no way diminishes the vital importance of the study of pre-colonial Africa for its own sake, for the general decolonization of historical knowledge, or for the ways it can shape and inform our perspectives on present identities and contemporary societies. Black culture is crucial for Black liberation, but we must follow thinkers like Frantz Fanon and Amilcar Cabral in conceiving of culture as dynamic, contingent, and continually constructed rather than as an artifact unproblematically recoverable from the past (Collins 2006, 102–3).

In expressing dissent from the association of rappers with the specific institution of griotism, Senegalese HipHoppers do not reject the broader co-relation of HipHop aesthetics with those multifarious aspects of African culture that, according to Belcher, the griot mythos is sometimes reductively used to symbolize. Rather, they reject the strategy of authentication through a reified Africanism in favor of forging a diasporic HipHop identity rooted in anti-colonial struggle.

David Toop's *The Rap Attack* (1984), the first book-length contribution to what has become HipHop studies, posits an unbroken tradition of verbal dexterity traceable through U.S. Black artists and styles of the twentieth century—and then jumps<sup>6</sup>—“all the way to the griots of Nigeria and the Gambia” (1984, 19). He describes the griot as a member of a West African caste of musicians, previously “associated with a village but now an increasingly independent 'gun for hire', who combines the functions of living history book and newspaper with vocal and instrumental virtuosity.” Griots are recognized as oral bearers of culture and communal history, through the meticulous learning and recital of traditional songs, but also masters of extemporizing on current events and chance incidents with “devastating” and “formidable” local knowledge (1984, 31–2). Arguably, the parallels with HipHop culture are fairly obvious here, and HipHop practitioners, journalists, and academics have latched onto the analogy. HipHop studies is replete with affirmations of HipHoppers as modern griots, though the vast majority of these references are no more than gestures—African culture as a mere trope (e.g., George 2011, 45; Shusterman 2011, 460; Potter 1995, 116; Alim, Ibrahim, and Pennycook 2008, 1; Pennycook and Mitchell 2008, 34; Strode and Wood 2007, 1; Hoch 2007, 353; Niang 2006, 172; Osumare 2007). Yet, with the sole exception of Patricia Tang's recent work (2012), even in the more considered comparisons offered by Geneva Smitherman (1997), Cheryl Keyes (2002), and Catherine Appert (2011), discontinuities are not considered alongside the similarities. However, if the parallels were evident in Toop's outline above, so, already, should have been some of the differences. If according to Toop, the griot's “previous” association was with the village—more specifically as ‘clients’ of nobles in pre-colonial societies—this was a key position for maintenance of the status quo (Leymarie-Ortiz 1979; Panzacchi 1994; Johnson, Hale, and Belcher 1997; Belcher 2004; Mbaye 2011). By contrast, HipHop's de facto stance is overwhelmingly interpreted as that of dissident social critic. Alternatively, the position of “hired gun” contradicts HipHop's avowed commitment to “keep it real,”<sup>7</sup> to speak truth to power irrespective of interests or outcomes. There is no question that the griot and the rapper share similarities in aesthetic repertoire. However, their respective social stances—historically and presently—are diametrically distinct.

Perhaps the most prominent claim<sup>8</sup> across writing on global HipHop is that the culture represents the voice of the voiceless. In other words, there is broad consensus that HipHop is adopted and adapted around the world by different groups of youth—marginalized in their particular ways—and deployed so as to counter their marginalization (Perkins 1996; Mitchell 1996; Bennett 2000; Mitchell 2002; Basu and Lemelle 2006; Condry 2006; Chang 2007; Alim, Ibrahim, and Pennycook 2008; Perry 2008; Ntarangwi 2009; Terkourafi 2012; Saucier 2011; Niang 2006; Strobe and Wood 2007; Appert 2011). Indeed, prominent African American commentators such as Nelson George and Michael Eric Dyson have lamented that U.S. HipHop appears to have lost its way in contrast to the global iterations that remain counterhegemonic (George on “HipHop Vs. America” 2008; Dyson cited in Terkourafi 2012; see also Asante 2009). In one way or another, the literature overwhelmingly characterizes disparate HipHop communities as performing so many variations on the theme of “Fight the Power.” In stark contrast, studies of griot history and practice describe what Thomas Hale calls “the natural affinity of griots [for] those who hold political power” (Hale 1998, 122).

If Toop’s opening treatment of the rapper-as-modern-griot analogy only hinted at a dissonant undercurrent, this conflict is all the more apparent when he revisits the topic.

He writes,

[a]lthough they are popularly known as praise singers, griots might combine appreciation of a rich employer with gossip and satire or turn their vocal expertise into an attack on the politically powerful or the financially stingy. If the hip-hop message and protest rappers had an ancestry in the savannah griots, the Bronx braggers, boosters and verbal abusers are children of the black American word games known as signifying and the dozens. (1984, 32)

The problem with this line of reasoning is that claiming griots might occasionally turn their skills against the wealthy admits their de facto position as subserviently aligned with power. The exception proves the rule. Far from indicating any commonality, this represents the opposite stance of the “protest rapper.” Worse, there is no indication or reason to suppose that such subversive griot performances might be enacted for anything other than personal gain. Indeed, when Paulla A. Ebron describes “the double-edged power of the jali’s<sup>9</sup> knowledge... [that] escapes no one” in West African society, in much the same terms as Toop, there is no suggestion that such power might serve society’s disadvantaged. Rather, she is clear, the jali can “promote the interests of a patron, or take his information to please and flatter another patron with different ties and aspirations to power” (Ebron 2002, 115). As scholars have noted, the griot’s supposed propensity for such profiteering is precisely what accounts for their diminished prestige in contemporary times among those who perceive them as parasitic and manipulative (Panzacchi 1994; Diouf 1996; Belcher 2004).

Toop's weak connection is made all the more precarious by the arbitrary juxtaposition of lineages set up as mutually exclusive between griotism on the one hand and "the dozens" on the other. Of course, there is no less reason to suppose the dozens itself to be rooted in griot aesthetics than either 'protest' or 'braggadocio' rap. Further, griot performance, the dozens, and braggadocio rap—relying as they do on humor, improvisation and insult—have just as much in common with each other, arguably more, than griot performance has with "protest rappers." Thus, if the arguments advanced in this article for questioning the concept of rappers as modern griots are persuasive, Toop's particular association of griots with "protest rappers" is all the more dubious. Yet, this association arises again with Appert, who remarks, "many rappers also directly refer to themselves as griots, particularly when discussing the more overtly political manifestations of Senegalese hip-hop" (2011, 9). Though names and examples are not provided to support this assertion, Appert specifies that most of the rappers she cites reside in the Dakar neighborhood of Medina (2011, 15). Yet, I found that Medina's most prominent HipHop artists, Simon, Books of Sen Kumpë, and the duo 5iém Underground (the latter two are cited throughout Appert's article), all of whom are well known as politically engaged artists, not only reject the notion that rappers are modern griots but do so by specifically invoking HipHop's commitment to social justice. Ironically, 5iém Underground's objection to the trope involved caveating a correlation between the griot practice of taasu and precisely that side of rap that Toop and Appert dissociate from griots. For instance, G-Lee Bagdad said, "Taasu and rap have similarities, especially with the rap that [is a bit obscene]... because taasu speaks of obscenities as well, taasu is vulgar, it talks about women, you know, explicit sex, most of the time they're talking about stuff like that. So there is a similarity with that side" (Bagdad and Njagn 2013). Yet, despite the mutual breaching of taboos by some rappers and griots, 5iém Underground argued that the two were fundamentally distinct based on their contrasting relations to institutional political power—as will be elaborated below. While affirming the aesthetic convergences, this group articulated a contrast that arose repeatedly in my conversations with Senegalese HipHoppers. On this view, the griot's position is subservience to, and advocacy for, the powerful in exchange for patronage; by contrast, HipHop's stance is understood as defiance and advocacy for 'the people,' avowedly rejecting any overture to 'sellout.' Although these characterizations of the social stances of griot and rapper are well established in the respective literatures, the obvious contrast between them has gone largely unremarked by scholars who have compared the two. Significantly, this overlooked contrast is the basis on which a number, and perhaps a majority, of Senegalese HipHoppers take issue with the notion that rappers are modern griots.

In Senegal, where both HipHoppers and griots are active in electoral politics, this is not just a theoretical generalization. While the rapper as griot analogy may have its origins in U.S.-based Afrocentricity,<sup>10</sup> scholars have addressed how West African artists have usefully appropriated it as a locally specific way of asserting HipHop authenticity—against the common charge faced by HipHop communities outside the U.S., that rap is an ‘American thing’ (Omoniyi 2008, 117; Pennycook and Mitchell 2008; Lanzano 2008, 10; Appert 2011; Tang 2012). At the same time, nowhere are the opposed tendencies of griots and HipHoppers more materially manifest than in contemporary Senegal. Griots have played major roles in political campaigns at least as far back as the extension of the franchise to a majority of Senegalese in the decades leading up to independence from France and likely much earlier.<sup>11</sup> No party is without its griots and, as campaign fixtures, their participation has always been explicitly partisan and unabashedly clientelistic (Leymarie-Ortiz 1979; Panzacchi 1994; Gellar 2005). This accords with the longer history of clientelism characteristic of griot practice from the earliest accounts and across ethnic lines (Hale 1998; Ebron 2002; Belcher 2004; Mbaye 2011). By contrast, for as long as it has had an audible political voice, the HipHop movement has on balance remained avowedly unaligned (Herson 2000; Niang 2010a; Niang 2011). The HipHop ethic as manifested in Senegal is explicitly and expressly non-partisan and anti-elitist, whereas griot participation is the opposite on both counts. In electoral politics, griots align with candidates for material gain, while HipHop expresses an antithetical ethos—commitment to the people against institutional power (Niang 2006, 179).

Since Appert and Tang have offered the most recent and in-depth analyses of the modern-griot trope as appropriated by Senegalese HipHoppers, their articles warrant detailed consideration. There is much to appreciate in Appert’s well written chapter, “Rapping Griots,” including her approach to the study of HipHop as performed intertextuality beyond the written text and inclusive of “discourses surrounding hip-hop,” and her recognition that the indigenizing impetus among Senegalese artists is simultaneously accompanied by a dialogic identification with the African diaspora. Additionally, she acknowledges HipHop’s roots in Black American struggle and the role it plays in framing Senegalese rappers’ politics and practice (Appert 2011, 3,10). However, her invocation of intertextuality is insufficient to resolve the contradictions she implicitly recognizes between the notion of rappers as griots and the former’s self-conception as committed activists, nor does it overcome the reified Africanism upon which the rapper-as-griot trope depends—a reification she rejects but her arguments inadvertently perpetuate. Further, the trope does more to hinder than help the diasporic solidarity to which these artists are committed. The irony here is that Appert’s intervention seems to have been motivated by the initial recognition of a dissonance between rappers and griots.

Appert aims “to elucidate the griot’s unsolicited yet pervasive presence in [her] experiences of Senegalese hip-hop” in light of the fact that “Hip-hop scholars and practitioners alike often position rappers as modern day griots, the contemporary manifestation of an authentic African past.” Yet, she stipulates, “the relationship between African and African American music is a contested” debate that she seeks “not to engage” (2011, 18). Despite this stipulation, her position on this matter seems clear in her claim to have substantiated a connection between rappers and griots that is premised “otherwise [on an] unconvincing socio-historical continuity between” the two (2011, 16). Thus, noting the claim of “rapping griots” among her interlocutors, but unsatisfied with the essentialist aspect of the existing rationale, her article attempts to establish a more convincing connection. Unfortunately, as I show below, she ultimately reinforces a framework that fails to resolve the tension in the trope she implicitly recognizes.

Tang’s essay is welcome as the first to critically consider the troping of rapper as modern griot. She argues convincingly that the trope relies on “a romanticized and historically static idea of the griot” (2012, 81–2). Further, Tang recognizes an important distinction between griots and rappers in terms of the latter’s propensity for confrontational social critique. While Tang understands this difference in terms of the “freer speech” enjoyed by rappers, the present article argues it to be symptomatic of the diametrically distinct social positionalities of rappers and griots and the differential obligations they entail. Curiously, neither Appert nor Tang seem to have come across any rappers critical of the trope. Yet, their sources include artists who told me that they have always taken issue with the idea. For Appert, these voices fundamentally contradict her assertions; for Tang, their absence limits her critique, which stops short of considering a fundamental contradiction between griot practice and HipHop culture as conceived of and practiced by Senegalese artists.

Appert proposes her notion of “Rapping Griots” based on three points: two “indigenizing strategies” of (1) sampling traditional griot instruments and (2) highlighting similarities with taas performance, and lastly (3) on their commonalities in terms of “social function” (2011, 10). Systematically, I argue these points fail as attempts to substantiate a link between rappers and griots any more “convincing” than that offered by the essentialist Afrocentric paradigm she rejects. On the first point, it is true that Senegalese HipHoppers often sample indigenous instrumentation to mark the cultural specificity of their productions, sometimes these include instruments traditionally played by griots (Appert 2011, 8). But this indigenizing strategy is neither limited to, nor preferentially selective of, griot style performance in West Africa, nor is it limited to West Africa—rather this is the same indigenizing strategy used by disparate HipHop communities around the world to mark their ethnic specificity or context. As such, it constitutes a weak basis for the claim of rappers as griots.



Indeed, if sampling local musics affirms a modern griot identity, it is news to the members of 5iém Underground, whom Appert cites<sup>12</sup> on this very point (Appert 2011, 8). Ironically, as noted earlier, though Appert explains her support for the trope to have derived organically from her interlocutors, the members of 5iém Underground tell me that they have always been against the idea that rappers are modern griots. According to G-Lee:

The essence of griot is what? In monarchical times, the role of the griot was to transmit the message of the King. And... after the King went to war, the griot would come and say, oh, you're the greatest warrior, you got this from your father.... That was the griot's role. The griots were there to sing praises and disseminate information from the royal court. However, with rappers, it's the contrary. They bring the grievances [*revindication*] of the people to the rulers, it's the opposite. This is why I don't like HipHop to be assimilated under the term griot. (Bagdad and Njagn 2013)

His partner Baye Njagn added, "I've never been down with [the idea of rapper as griot] because the griot is there to sing you flowers so you'll give money but we're here for the sufferance of the population, injustice" (Bagdad and Njagn 2013). As will be seen, the practice of praise singing arose repeatedly in my conversations with emcees and provides a foundational reason for their rejection of the trope. Though Appert and Tang list praise singing as one of many griot functions, they assign it no particular centrality. This accords with works that trope the griot in the way Belcher describes but contrasts with studies that focus on griots themselves. Indeed, in the latter case, the term praise-singer is often used as a synonym or substitute for "griot." Thomas Hale's opus, *Griots and Griottes*, opens with what aims to be an "exhaustive" description of griot functions. Though Hale cautions that "the praise singing function" alone is too limited and simple a descriptor to capture the occupation as a whole, he stipulates that it "is by far the most obvious and audible manifestation of their profession" (1998, 18). Accordingly, analyses that under-emphasize the centrality of this defining feature do so despite the contrary trend in griot studies and in contrast to prevailing conceptions of griot practice among Senegalese emcees.

Like the members of 5iém Underground, Sister Fa, the leading female voice in Senegalese HipHop, while also strategically marking her music as African through the use of samples, disagrees with the characterization of rappers as modern griots. While also acknowledging aesthetic similarities, she argued that the trope is misleading: My personal opinion is that HipHop is a music of revolution. It is *revindication*. The griot has nothing to do with this. In the beginning they were accompanying Kings to the battlefield to see how they were doing and sing how they were brave ...today we still have the ones telling you about your ancestry. Maybe the technique of speaking with the drums, this is similar, but HipHop has something different. (Sister Fa 2012)

Scholars have noted and interrogated the ubiquity with which Senegalese artists associate the notion of “revolution” with HipHop (Herson 2000; Niang 2006; Niang 2011). As in Sister Fa’s comments above and others I cite below, the most prominent way of expressing this critical stance against oppressive power is the use of the French word “*revindication*,” which means to forcefully claim or demand a right. If it is too strong to assert that Senegalese rappers are “revolutionaries” in any rigorous sense, their invocations of these terms demonstrate that they perceive commitment to social justice on behalf of the dispossessed as fundamental to HipHop identity. This affiliation with the afflicted against political power could not contrast more sharply with the way, according to Ebron, “Jali identity is formed by linkage to important patrons, and patrons’ identities are linked to regimes of power” (Ebron 2002, 143).

Yet, this is not to say that no examples exist of rappers aligning with political power in Senegal. The most high profile case is that of Pacotille, who rose to prominence in 2000 as part of the chorus of HipHoppers supporting Abdulaye Wade’s presidential bid to end Abdu Diouf’s twenty years in office, and remained a Wade supporter against the massive HipHop civil-disobedience movement that contributed to Wade’s electoral defeat in 2012. Pacotille’s detractors claim that he destroyed his credibility by supporting Wade amidst popular disillusionment; that he got paid to do so and, according to some, if he shows up to a HipHop event people will throw stones. His sympathizers insist that his support for Wade is based on conviction rather than patronage, but they generally acknowledge this affiliation to have severely hampered his artistic viability. This social sanctioning from the HipHop community at large further evidences the entrenchment of *revindication* as central to Senegalese HipHop’s self-conception, imposing an ethos to which griots are not expected to adhere.

Appert’s second point is that “many rappers claim the griot verbal performance genre *taasu*... as an aesthetic predecessor of contemporary rap music” (2011, 8). To support this notion she cites an interview in which Didier Awadi explains the reception of HipHop in Senegal from the U.S. as facilitated by the similarities between it and *taasu*. Yet, it is not evident from the quote that Awadi’s observation of aesthetic convergence amounts to an assertion of a predecessor relation. Indeed, as Tang’s citation of Awadi attests, his position on the matter is ambivalent. After acknowledging what he sees as the journalistic similarities between griot performance and HipHop, he stipulates, “all of the other aspects of the griot, we don’t do.” In particular, he emphasizes, from antiquity to the present, the griots have always “sang for money... But we do not sing about people so that they will give us money.” Ultimately he concludes that in his opinion, “the role of the griot here is different from the role of the rapper” (Tang 2012, 85). While Tang recognizes “a marked distinction between the worlds of griots and rappers,” her proposed explanation for this difference is questionable. She conjectures that unlike griots, since rappers do not inherit their trade, their “freedom to decide their profession is further expressed in their freedom of speech” (2012, 85).

However, explaining the difference as a matter of free speech undervalues the significance of the cultural obligations associated with each form; as illustrated in the case of HipHop by Pacotille's social sanctioning, for example. In other words, it is not merely that rappers have freer speech and therefore have more leeway to criticize society; rather, as Awadi notes, they have a "role"—distinct but perhaps as scripted as that of the griot—to agitate on behalf of the public and the downtrodden. After all, as Tang recognizes, while mbalax is dominated by casted griots, people from any background can and do become performers (2012, 80). Further, when I asked Matador, a veteran emcee and co-founder of Dakar's HipHop Academy, about the aesthetic similarities between rappers and griots, he raised the taasuu comparison precisely to refute the connection:

There are many aspects that are similar, arts often resemble one another. But I say taasuu has remained taasuu, and I've never seen a rapper do taasuu. There are similarities but ...these are not the same thing. Us, we knew taasuu before we knew rap, and we did not do taasuu, we chose to do rap. I can't criticize the system with taasuu, saying it does not work. (Matador 2012)

As their quotes attest, Matador and Sister Fa did not become emcees and coincidentally find the freedom to express their social critique. Rather, they chose HipHop precisely because they understood it to embody a critical stance they agreed with. According to Matador:

The role of the griot in society is to guard history and to repeat this to the coming generation. And the rapper, he's implicated and interested in current events, political and cultural. So, it's not the same period. ...Some say the rapper is the modern griot but I disagree. We do not praise sing, that is the role of the griot. Our role is to create balance in society, to raise consciousness, say what is happening below. The rapper is an educator but more than this the rapper is an activist. (Matador 2012)

As did Matador, Books brought up the similarities with taasuu to refute the notion that rappers were modern griots. He told me:

For example, there may be similarities with taasuu, but there is a difference, taasuu is for ambiance and all that. There are very successful taasuu performers, they drive big cars and live in fancy houses, but they do not engage in the music industry to achieve this. They praise sing for millionaires and take their part. Rap has a revolutionary element to it. It is a revolutionary music. This does not mean that every song and every moment of an artist's life must be *revindication*...but the world needs to know the truth... As rappers, we must speak the truth. (Books 2013)

From these points we see that, on the ground in Senegal, at least for a number of leading HipHop figures along with dozens more whom I interviewed, the similarities between HipHop and taasu are not grounds to consider rappers modern griots.

Appert's third, and most "tenuous" connection by her own account, is that rappers and griots can be significantly linked as "social figures," claiming that "many rappers consider themselves to be griots not only in terms of performance style and delivery but also in terms of social function" (2011, 9–10). This seems surprising in light of the literature and arguments presented above. Further, the very facts laid out by Appert seem to belie the claim, as she ultimately argues that extant griot practice is seen as irrelevant to many urban Senegalese youth who, by contrast, are drawn to the politically engaged stance of HipHop. Yet, Appert argues, the "aesthetic similarities between taasu and rap," coupled with youth preference for the latter's political engagement, justify the conception of HipHop as "modernized griot practice" (2011, 10). Thus, her "social link between griots and rappers" turns out not to be based on what she calls a "functional continuity," (2011, 18) but rather on a functional *contrast*, in which the "modern" aspect of rappers' "griot" performance "manifests in political activism" (2011, 10). She does not show that rappers play the same role as griots do or did, but that, as *modern* griots, their social role is "transformed" into that of activist. In other words, ancient griots were masters of the word who performed social functions that, presumably, were seen as relevant to the youth of their time. Today, rappers are masters of the word who perform social functions that, though unrelated and perhaps contrary to those of ancient griots, are seen as relevant to today's youth. But why is youth interest taken as the arbiter of griotism? And why are the aesthetics of oral performance taken as definitive whereas social function and caste heredity are treated as incidental? These assumptions are clearly problematic. Further, this reasoning has the unfortunate consequence of juxtaposing the relevant ancient griots with their "irrelevant" descendants, who paradoxically are rendered other-than-modern (traditional? un-modern?) when compared to "rapping griots" (2011, 10). As Maxi Krezy poignantly commented, "if rappers are the modern griots, what do we call the casted griots who have adapted their practice to modern times?" (Maxi Krezy 2013) This observation points up Appert's implicit reliance on a reified image of the ancient griot that, to her credit, she aims to avoid. The supposed connection elides the contemporary lived experience of active griots—as if they themselves are not modern and have not adapted their lives and practices to the contemporary world. In other words, it relies on assumptions which the literature, as well as the lived experience of modern day griots, proves to be false (Panzacchi 1994; Ebron 2002; Belcher 2004; Tang 2007; Mbaye 2011).

So, while consensus exists on the “aesthetic similarities between taasu and rap,” Appert’s claim that these “enable an otherwise more tenuous social link between griots and rappers” is the opposite conclusion of my interlocutors (2011, 10). According to them, rather than enable such a link, the aesthetic similarities contrast sharply with the dissonant social roles of griots and rappers.

In sum, Appert’s first connection between rappers and griots was the indigenizing strategy of sampling local instrumentation, which I showed to be not particularly connected with griotness. The second was what she called the “more nuanced” similarities between “rap and taasu,” which were dismissed as incidental by many local rappers. Her third and final connection turned out to be based on a contrast between rappers and griots, rather than the “continuity” suggested by her wording, and which she qualifies as contingent on the second point which we found to be dubious.

These issues notwithstanding, Appert’s claims are not wholly unfounded among the rappers I interviewed. For example, high profile artists Fou Malade, of the group Bat’hallion Blin-D, and Fadda Freddy, of Daara J Family, endorsed the notion of rappers as modern griots without qualification. However, with few exceptions, I found Senegalese emcees to be overwhelmingly critical of the trope. Even among the minority of interviewees who were sympathetic to the concept, there was one point of unanimous distinction—the diametrically opposed relation to social power. For example, Jojo, of Yat Fu, explained to me:

Yeah, it’s a great concept, we are modern griots. We play an important role in society as they did. The similarity is that we are intermediaries between the people and power. But the difference is that griots in the past were aligned with the kings, while we are aligned with the people against political power. We are against the establishment. (Jojo 2013)

Nigga Dou of ATM expressed a similar view:

We are modern griots in that griots were society’s spokespeople. They were intermediaries between the King and the people, but Griots would never criticize the King. Today, we are on the opposite side, so there is an important difference. (Dou 2013)

The same caveat was offered by Duggy Tee, Awadi’s former partner in *Positive Black Soul* (PBS). Duggy Tee’s input is of particular interest both because along with Daara J’s album *Boomerang* (2004) and Gokh-Bi System’s single *Rap Taasu* (2009), his song “Return of the Djelly,” off PBS’s first international album *Salaam* (1996), represents one of the best known artistic invocations of the rapper-as-griot analogy in Senegalese HipHop.

Further, his song provides the case study for Tang's chapter. It serves as her principal example of how "Senegalese rap artists have seized upon and exploited ...griotism," (2012, 79) by "drawing upon Western ideas of the djelly as a romanticized and historicized African phenomenon" (2012, 90). However, in conversation, Duggy Tee offers a more nuanced position than Tang credits him with. He qualifies the similarities between rappers and griots as educators and entertainers, historians and wordsmiths. However, the "big difference" he emphasized is that praise singing is integral to the activity of the griot but is antithetical to "HipHop culture, we don't praise nobody... They ask for money, we hustle." Further, he stipulated the opposed social positionalities central to the argument of the present article by affirming, despite the aforementioned similarities, as ancestral griots were aligned with monarchies, "they [griots] were on the wrong side, we are on the right side—the side of the people" (Duggy Tee 2013).

Whether for, against, or lukewarm about the notion of "rapping griots," the point of consensus among all my interviewees was the association of HipHop with social justice advocacy, expressed most often by affirming its commitment to *revindication*. Even the very few, like Malade and Freddy, who denied that HipHop's social stance constitutes a contrast with the social role of the griot, predicated this denial not on a rejection of rappers as activists, but on a conceptual break between ancient griots—venerated as duty-bound social pillars, and contemporary griots—largely dismissed or denigrated as opportunists. According to Malade, "Griots were councilors to the kings. Those who sing for money today are different, but we share similarities with the ancient griots" (Fou Malade 2013). As noted, this dichotomy is implicit in Appert's analysis as well, and is consistent with the comments offered by Jojo, Dou and Duggy Tee. However, the contrary view recognizing continuity between ancient and contemporary griot practice in terms of an unbroken tradition of patron-client relations with the well-to-do is borne out by the scholarship, accords with the opinions offered by the majority of my interviewees, and neither romanticizes ancient griotism nor elides modern griot practice.

Revelation of widespread dissent from the "rapping griot" trope among Senegalese artists mandates significant revision of the existing scholarly picture. Both Appert and Tang's articles affirm without qualification that Senegalese emcees appropriate the rapper as griot trope to suit their interests (Appert 2011, 4,7,9; Tang 2012, 79,86,90). Since Appert's article aimed to reckon her reservations about the trope with the pervasive comparison Senegalese rappers made between themselves and griots in conversation with her, it's clear that knowledge of an abundance of Senegalese emcees dissenting from the trope fundamentally changes her premise and calls for an alternate analysis (Appert 2011, 18). While Tang's article is noteworthy as the first to criticize the trope, the relative absence of dissenting voices from the field elides the standpoint knowledge of the community in question and accounts for the provisional nature of her otherwise insightful critique.

Though she problematizes the trope's reifying Africanism, she lacks the grounds to address the wholesale rejection of the analogy that characterizes the majority position of my interviewees. Though she touches on the contrast between the social roles of rappers and griots, as does Appert, and both allude to the varied roles played by griots across spatial and historical context, neither notes the specific centrality of praise singing as an integral and trans-historic griot feature. Yet, as evidenced by the citations throughout this article—including noteworthy artists cited by Appert and Tang—it is precisely the defining practice of praise singing, both as applied to ancient and contemporary griots, that underlies artists' arguments for a fundamental distinction between HipHoppers and griots. For these artists, the notion of *revindication*, so central to their understanding of the role of HipHop, is incommensurate with griot practice and renders the unquestionable aesthetic similarities incidental.

In an effort to avoid “leading questions,” I broached the subject of “rapping griots” by initially asking “what is a griot?” In some cases, this was sufficient to prompt an objection to the notion of rappers as modern griots. For instance, after giving me the pretty-much textbook definition that I got from artists across the board, Nonybone, of the group Dablessed, said to me “I know why you ask this, but I don't agree.” He anticipated my query about the rapper-as-griot but incorrectly assumed my de facto affirmation of the trope. This reaction, he explained, was due to the fact that interviewers, often radio personalities, frequently pose the same question. On his analysis, the notion that rappers are modern griots has more currency outside the Senegalese HipHop community than within it. A more extreme version of this position was opined by Maxi Krezy, who suggested that the notion originated with *toubabs*<sup>13</sup> (Whites or Westerners). For Nonybone, the trope resonates most with those segments of Senegalese society sympathetic but external to HipHop who seek a framework to understand and justify its indigeneity. By contrast, Nonybone implied, he was secure enough in his Africanness to make such rationalizations unnecessary in light of the stark contrast between the roles of rapper and griots that he recognized. As he told me, “We do HipHop. We are African. Everybody knows this. We do not need to go on stage in traditional clothing or argue that we are griots in order to prove this” (Nonybone 2012).

While this widespread rejection of the rapping griot trope undercuts one particular rationale for HipHop's Africanness, the grounds upon which these African artists affirm their place in HipHop is inseparable from the Africanness of their American cousins. The Senegalese notion of HipHop as *revindication*—protest on behalf of the have-nots—is traceable back through golden era conscious HipHop whose politics are rooted in the Black Power movement (Rose 1994; Chang 2005; Ogbar 2009). Influential Black Power theorists and organizations understood African Americans as internally colonized peoples, and Blackness as connoting a commitment to anti-racist and anti-colonial struggle and, by extension, social justice more generally (Ture and Hamilton 1992; Ture 2007; Newton 2009).

In this conceptual framework, the counterhegemonic stance of HipHop is an iteration of anti-colonial black struggle. Thus, continental African participation in this cultural identity constitutes a practice of transnational solidarity rooted in common cause. The salience of this framework and shared sentiment of black struggle is evidenced in Senegalese HipHop by the frequent invocations of Martin Luther King and Malcolm X alongside anti-colonial African heroes such as Kwame Nkrumah, Thomas Sankara and Senegal's own Cheikh Anta Diop. In rejecting the rapper as griot trope in favor of rapper as revolutionary, Senegalese HipHoppers enact a transnational African solidarity based on a shared practice of struggle against injustice rather than reified notions of static africanicity.

This article challenges the widespread reduction of aspects of African culture to tropes as occurs in HipHop studies under the sign of the "griot." This entails neither denial of cultural retentions through the middle passage nor the more complex multi-directional historical flows that constitute both diasporic and locally specific African identities (cf. Matory 2005). Rather, the challenge is to the imposition of a reified trope that neither coheres with contemporary West African reality nor best services the diasporic African solidarity to which these artists are committed (Appert 2011, 17; Niang 2011). Since HipHop's early days, U.S. theorists have alluded to the griot to assert rap's cultural lineage to pre-colonial Africa. In West Africa, this strategy is sometimes appropriated as a means of asserting local ownership over HipHop. Unfortunately, both these strategies rely on a romanticized and selective depiction of the griot. Further, this alternate "origin myth" as deployed by West Africans and scholars (Omoniyi 2008) to justify their participation in HipHop inadvertently introduces a discursive dichotomy pitting continental Africans against African Americans in a zero-sum contest for HipHop legitimacy. Such a framing invites dismissive, submissive, or contestative responses from across the Atlantic far more than it facilitates a solidaristic one. But this notion is refuted by a significant number of Senegalese HipHoppers on the grounds that it contradicts their widespread construction and practice of HipHop authenticity through *revindication*—a defining ethos not shared by griots. This construction facilitates transnational solidarity by drawing upon HipHop's historical association with counterhegemonic Black struggle, thusly prioritizing activist commitment over aesthetic convergence as the arbiter of authenticity. If proximity to African soil is discursively constructed as the measure of HipHop legitimacy in a reactionary counter-narrative to the Bronx "origin myth" (Alim, Ibrahim, and Pennycook 2008, 7), diasporic Black solidarity is limited. But if the measure is commitment to transnational struggle against racism and neo-colonialism, and even more broadly on the side of the downtrodden against elites, the invitation to global solidarity is open. As against what many of these artists see as the moral bankruptcy of contemporary commercialized U.S. HipHop (Lanzano 2008, 9; Niang 2010b; Gokh-Bi System 2013), this framing sets up a more positive challenge across the Atlantic, inviting U.S. HipHop to return to its roots and rejoin the struggle.



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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Following the Temple of HipHop, I spell “HipHop” as one word, without a space or dash, to signify the term’s maturation from a portmanteau meaning “cool dance” to a proper noun. The Temple’s rationale was laid out in an unpublished essay by KRS-One entitled “How do you spell Hip Hop?” (see also KRS-One 2009, 62–3). However, unlike the Temple, I retain capitalization of the second “H” as an aesthetic preference.

<sup>2</sup> Foreman’s criticism here can be seen as an extension of that offered in *The Hood Comes First*. One aim of this seminal HipHop studies text is to offer a materialist, or “industrial and cultural,” analysis to counterbalance deficiencies in HipHop historiography that rely upon “valorized and romanticized” notions “of hip-hop’s formative spaces... [responsible for] misperceptions that position its cultural expressions as the apparently organic product of a particular sociospatial milieu” (Forman 2002, xx).

<sup>3</sup> A French translation of this article will be circulated amongst the Senegalese HipHop community in keeping with the conviction that social science should serve the public it concerns. I’d like to shout out all the Senegalese HipHoppers who have formally and informally discussed this topic with me. These include but are *not* limited to all members of A-J One, Alien Zik, 314, Adama and MD of All Right, Dider Awadi, B One X, Baat Sen, Bido Matt, Books, Bidew Bu Béss, Black Mbolo, C Bass, Carr’e D’as, Colonel MC, Daddy Bipson, Djibson and Mob 12, Déesse Major, DJ Kenza, Duggy Tee, Donia Sonia, Eboueua, Fatim, Fata, Fadda Freddy and Ndongo D of Daara J Family, Fla the Ripper, Fou Malade and Bat’Hallions Bin-D, Fuk n Kuk, G-Lee and Njang of 5iém Underground, Gofu, Jojo and Dragon of Yat Fu, Hardcore Side, Iba of Rapaudio, Kalif and Shotgun of Under Shifaay, Underground AK, Keyti, Kadu Gunz, Maxi Krezy, MASS, Man du Yaw, Matador and Amadou, Morgun, Naobi, Naz, N’Mo, Nigga Dou, Nigga Pii, Nigga Mi, Niagass, Ngandami, Nonybone and Dablessed, Red Black, Rosso and Jahmerue, Shoudaish formerly of Section Carre Dass, Simon, Sister Anta, Sister Coumbis, Sister Dia, Sister Mily, Sister Fa, Sister Nancy, Sister LB, Talif, Tewal Askanwi Tigrim bi, Thiat, Kilifeu and Gadiaga of Keur Gui, Wagable, Xpress, Xuman, DJ Zee and Zinexx and everyone else that shared their time and thoughts with me.

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<sup>4</sup> This article focuses on the relation of griots and power structures since it was the principle criterion rappers voiced to explain their rejection of the rapper as griot analogy and because, most starkly, it constitutes the glaring contradiction in the respective literatures on rappers and griots. However, due to space constraints, it remains for future work to consider the role played by another key defining feature of griots that Beltcher notes is overlooked in the troping of griots—the issue of caste. Specifically, to what extent, if any, does the diminished prestige of griots in contemporary Senegalese society (Panzacchi 1994; Tang 2012) explain rappers’ disapproval of the rapper as griot analogy. When I asked them to define the term “griot,” most of the artists I interviewed briefly mentioned the hereditary nature of the institution, but only occasionally was caste mentioned as a key reason for the rejection of the analogy. The striking exception was Keyti, who reinforced the general critique of differential relations to power but also said we must count caste among the various reasons why rappers reject the analogy. He challenged, “for those rappers who say we are modern griots, ask them if they would approve of their sister marrying a griot” (Keyti 2013). Since many emcees are geer—the upper-caste traditional patrons of griots who reportedly make up the majority of Wolof society—it is reasonable to suppose that at least some of the rejection of the trope is fuelled by caste inflected sentiment. Every artists I asked about this denied that caste meant anything to them, but acknowledged that it still carries weight for segments of Senegalese society. While an important topic for future work, it is unlikely that this dimension supersedes or entirely undergirds the explanation offered by the rappers I interviewed.

<sup>5</sup> The terms “rapper,” “emcee,” and “HipHopper” are used synonymously here since this article is largely in conversation with works that do not draw the distinction. However, in my broader work I acknowledge the important difference between a “rapper,” merely signifying one who raps, an “emcee,” as a rapper who represents and identifies with HipHop culture, and a “HipHopper,” as an adherent of the culture.

<sup>6</sup> Though the Caribbean and the intervening centuries are left out of this account, they appear in others (e.g., Chang 2005; Keyes 2002).

<sup>7</sup> Here I am referring to the original notion of HipHop “realness” prominent in U.S. HipHop productions of the late 80s and early 90s, and best exemplified in the works of artists such as Public Enemy, Boogie Down Productions, Eric B. and Rakim, Ice-T, Paris, etc. Though overlapping in some respects—including notions of “ghetto authenticity”—this version of “keep it real” contrasts markedly with the one that subsequently gained ascendancy in U.S. commercial rap. I characterize this latter ethic as “I thug therefore I am.” Though the original notion remains salient globally as well as in the U.S. underground, HipHop studies has overwhelmingly and disproportionately critiqued the latter while ignoring the former. I aim to address this imbalance in future work.



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<sup>8</sup> The other prominent claim across the literature is the sometimes spuriously supported and by now overly emphasized point that each HipHop community constitutes a particularity (see especially Bennett 2000; Prévos 2002; Mitchell 2002; cf. Hutnyk 2006).

<sup>9</sup> Jali, also spelled jeli, jelly or djelly, is the Mande term for griot.

<sup>10</sup> Appert and Tang both gesture to the U.S. Afrocentric origins of the rapper as modern griot trope. I first learned of griots, along with maroons, and their connection and theoretical link to HipHop in the early 1990s through mentors in Toronto's conscious Afrocentric HipHop community. In particular, a series of workshops called *Rap Sessions* were run by teachers Wendy "Motion" Brathwaite and Verle Thompson, and attended by Toronto HipHop notables such as myself, Kardinal Official, Socrates and others.

<sup>11</sup> France granted voting rights to francophone African males of the four communes in 1848. In proportion as this limited elite suffrage gradually expanded, the importance of griots in mobilizing votes likely increased. Notable benchmarks of this expansion include townswomen winning the right to vote in 1945, the enfranchisement of various categories of rural dwellers in 1946, and universal French West African suffrage which was implemented by 1956 (Leymarie-Ortiz 1979, 189; Panzacchi 1994; Schaffer 1998, 14–15). In *The Livelihoods of Traditional Griots in Modern Senegal*, one of Cornelia Panzacchi's informants claims that in Senegal the "party that has the best griots wins." Though clearly an overstatement, Panzacci takes this as an accurate "illustration of how the 'man in the street' understands the political influence of griots" (Panzacchi 1994, 197).

<sup>12</sup> Appert cites the members of 5iem Underground, G-Lee and Baye Njan, respectively as Abdou and Mamadou. I use their artist names in accordance with their preference.

<sup>13</sup> Toubab is most often translated as "White," though it can also be used to refer to non-African foreigners more generally, usually Euro-American nationals inclusive of non-whites.