AFRICAN EXPRESSIVE CULTURES

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Over the past fifteen years, street life in urban Mali has come to pulsate to the word-rhythms of rap. Even though various musical styles enjoy great popularity among young urbanites, it is rap that has achieved a privileged status among many male adolescents, particularly in the capital Bamako. Rap's triumphant national career has been facilitated by the diversification of the media landscape in the wake of the introduction of multiparty democracy and concomitant civil liberties in 1991. Yet in spite of the diversification of marketing structures and the plurality of views and styles broadcast on private radio stations, Malian national television remains the primary channel through which new trends in rap are popularized because it regularly features talent shows such as the Saturday afternoon program Jouvance. Accordingly, many young men in town make sure that they spend Saturday afternoon in front of the television screen to acquaint themselves with the most recent fads and fashions in the Malian rap scene.

At a most immediate level, rap indicates a musical style. Yet whenever used synonymously with hip hop, the polysemous practices of Malian rap stand for the dreams, self-understandings, and projects of self-making of an entire generation. As fans in Mali commonly emphasize, rap not only perpetuates traditional forms of social criticism but also allows young people to combine a critical attitude toward society and established authority with a modern, cosmopolitan orientation, which they expressly associate with an authentic African identity.

To be sure, only to some groups of young media consumers does a rapper identity appear as desirable and hip. In many small towns of southern Mali and their surrounding rural areas, for instance, the majority of male adolescents express a clear preference for musical styles that are coined as typically local, such as balafon music and the hunters’ (sing., donson) music and poetry, all of them genres
many consider emblematic of Mali’s rural traditions and therefore more authentic. The aesthetic preferences for a genuinely Malian music of these consumers who live in semi-urban or rural areas are echoed by many adults in town. Most of them are mothers and fathers whose perception of youth culture is shaped by their daily struggle to manage large households. They find the protest stance of rap threatening and argue that this music, along with its posture of social critique, lends a fashionable outlook to intergenerational conflicts that are currently unsettling most urban households as an outgrowth of economic liberalization measures imposed on Malian society since the mid-1980s (Brand 2001; Schulz 2004: 97–158; 2005). Similar to many young music consumers from the countryside, these adult opponents to rap culture commonly posit a contrast between rap as culturally foreign and other musical styles, which they identify as authentically local. They point to the attitude transported in rap as a sign of youngsters’ propensity to mimic Western consumerism, and scathingly denounce the moral and social degradation under foreign cultural influence that rap music facilitates. They thereby wholeheartedly dismiss rappers’ self-portrayal as those who educate society, as well as their assertion that rap helps them live a modern, cosmopolitan, and authentically African identity. The portrayal of rap by these critics thus hinges on a conceptual dichotomy. Certain musical styles are presented as being rooted in rural society, traditional, and morally superior, and they are contrasted to the stylistically foreign and thereby impure music and immoral lifestyle of the city.  

How should we understand these contradictory accounts of the nature of rap and its social import? And why are issues of morality and educational value highlighted when it comes to evaluating a musical genre that in other areas of the globe is commonly associated with youth protest?

The second question had been nagging me for years, since I began my research on the political biography of Mali’s praise singers (jeliw) and on some of their most prominent female representatives, pop stars such as Ami Koita and Kandia Kouyate (Schulz 2001a). In the mid-1990s, I was mainly interested in understanding the reasons for their breathtaking popularity among women and girls, and therefore focused, to borrow Raymond Williams’s evocative phrase, on the appreciative “structure of feeling” of female listeners. But I also wondered what the male counterpart was to the culture of sociality and debate that emerged around women’s and girls’ consumption of jeli pop music (Schulz 2001b, 2002a). It was already evident that to those young men and adolescents who understood themselves to be hip, “kuul,” and oriented toward things modern, rap was the music and lifestyle of the future.

Whereas most women and girls expressed a strong preference for national musical styles (among them the songs performed by jeli singers), and enthusiastically followed the trials and triumphs of their favorite pop stars, the young men I used to hang out with took a very different view. For them, jeli performers, their music,
and lyrics belonged to the world of yesterday, of “traditional” culture, and of antiquated norms of conduct and ways of dressing, speaking, and moving around in the world. Over the years, the longer I followed these friends’ engagements with an emergent Malian hip hop scene, the more I became intrigued with the stark contrast between their views of rap (and its significance in a Malian context) and the ways rap is often portrayed in scholarly literature. That is to say, whereas fans and musicians in Mali highlight the educational value of rap, many scholars, particularly those who work on Francophone hip hop, tend to foreground its political and critical potential and its role in articulating a global culture of youth protest (Krims 2000; Kimminich 2001, 2004b; Auzanneau 2002; Silverstein 2002; Osumare 2005; Lipsitz 1994; Potter 1995). Most of these authors emphasize that hip hop, as a globally circulating idiom, is translated and appropriated into locally specific material and aesthetic forms and practices of signification (see Androutsopoulos 2003). At the same time, the assumption seems to persist that hip hop around the globe articulates a culture of youth protest. Often implied in this portrayal is that young people throughout the black diaspora face the same dilemmas and experiences of racial discrimination and come to articulate their “connective marginalities” (Osumare 2005) in the shared idiom of hip hop. As insightful as this focus on protest and marginality is, it cannot explain why rappers in Mali evaluate rap lyrics primarily according to their edifying and moral value, and self-consciously portray themselves as those who bring “moral lessons” (ladili) to a society divided by egotism and material greed.

Clearly, to grasp the social significance and repercussions of rap in Mali, we need to pay closer attention to the specific aesthetic conventions, moral standards, and social institutions within which hip hop emerged and, since the 1990s, has enjoyed such spectacular success among male youth. I begin by sketching out basic characteristics of hip hop as it emerged in the United States, in an attempt to identify important differences between the U.S. model and its adapted and reappropriated forms in Mali. This will allow me, in a second step, to elucidate the particular situation of marginality that young men and adolescents in Mali face, and to discuss why and how hip hop seems to offer them a way to come to terms not only with their personal dilemmas but also with their desire to imagine themselves as modern, cosmopolitan, and kuul citizens of the world.

**Rap/Hip Hop as a Musical Style and Globally Circulating Idiom**

Starting in the early 1980s, various subcategories of rap emerged in the urban ghettos of American metropoles, especially in New York and Los Angeles, often in competition with, and contradistinction from, each other. The social environment in which rap materialized as a new musical style offered adolescents very
little opportunities for upward mobility, economic success, or turning their cultural creativity into a professional career. Because of the specific racial composition of the ghetto population, these restraints had more severe consequences for nonwhite segments of the urban lower classes. In this environment, rap articulates the logic of street life characterized by honor, freedom, competition, and self-assertion. From this follows a pervasive tendency in rap lyrics and performance toward raw autobiography and self-aggrandizement.

The social and sometimes political critique formulated by rappers tends to bear a strong racial undertone (Anderson 1995; also see Keyes 1996). That is, many of the lyrics composed by U.S. rappers are characterized by what Paul Gilroy (1993: 101–102) ironically refers to as “powerful magic of alterity.” Gilroy thereby castigates what he considers an unacceptable inclination to define one’s social identity through the category of race. According to Gilroy, this category of race is based on a reified and essentialized notion of African American culture and its unmitigated rootedness in the African homeland.

Gilroy’s insistence on the need to recognize class as a marker of difference rightly captures the fact that many of those involved in the rap production process continue to struggle in a stigmatized social environment, at least as long as they have not yet been discovered by a broader public. At the same time, rap has been discovered and marketed as both a musical style and a lifestyle, and has therefore turned into an object of consumption by a racially diverse, broader range of (mostly youth) consumers.

The lyrics of U.S. rap reflect a broad spectrum of ideological orientations that range from political and social criticism (including symbolic references to the 1960s Black Panthers and Nation of Islam) to more apolitical forms, among them those heavily geared toward commercial mainstream music as it is presently marketed on MTV and other popular music channels. Whereas the tendency by numerous rap groups to articulate misogynist, anti-Semitic, and homophobic views has been decried by many critics, apologists argue that these contents simply reflect on the genuinely subversive nature of rap and its breaking with conventional forms and understandings of music making on one side and with established ideas of musical, acoustic, visual, and poetic aesthetics on the other (Potter 1995; Darby and Shelby 2005). Whether or not one agrees with this rationale, it is certainly true that rap music moves beyond conventional categories used in the assessment of musical harmony and beauty, and of performance skills, by replacing them with criteria such as technical virtuosity on nontraditional musical instruments, such as a DJ’s turntable, and the mastery of a different repertoire of symbolic and verbal skills. In this process, the slang of rapping and improvisation becomes, to borrow once more from Gilroy (2004: 92), the “dissonant soundtrack of racial dissidence.” Rap generates and resonates with a “moral panic” (Baker 1993: 5, 13, 20). It shatters conventional musical and verbal aesthetic standards of harmony, beauty, and
Hip Hop in Mali: The Social Locations of a Youth “Protest” Culture

Earlier in this chapter, I cautioned against a tendency to study hip hop in African societies without due consideration of established standards of performance and taste that allowed this seemingly global idiom of youth protest or idiom of a “global diaspora aesthetic” (Manthia Diawara 2005: 252–53) to be appropriated and integrated into music making across the African continent. The immense success of hip hop in Mali as well as the fierce reactions it generates on the part of its mostly adult critics can be only understood if we relate it to established forms of youth sociality and critique, to its embodied modes of performance, as well as to key metaphors through which social critique is commonly articulated across different genres of Malian music and oral culture.

I start with the forms of sociality in which hip hop in Mali, as an expressive culture of forging individual and group identities, is embedded and from which it draws its dynamics. Perhaps the most striking continuity between hip hop and earlier music youth cultures is that they all emerge around the same institution of male sociality. Most rappers with whom I talked recounted that their musical activities started in a so-called grin (an informal structure of male socializing). Grins exist in each neighborhood and can be seen as the backbone of male social life—not just of adolescents (Brenner ms; Schulz 2002a; also see Manthia Diawara 1998: 99–104; 2005; Kiefer 2006). What brings men together in a grin is not so much a shared educational and socioeconomic background (in fact, the absence of the latter is a striking characteristic of many grins), but experiences and concerns that derive from a similar standing in the Malian age and status hierarchy. Male friends, some of them from different neighborhoods, convene on a daily basis (mostly in the afternoon) to drink tea, play cards or board games, and talk. As I argued elsewhere, perhaps the most important social significance of the grin is that it offers men of all ages a space where they can address their concerns in a sphere outside of the household among friends. Married men discuss worries, such as concerns about financial hardship or marital conflicts, which their role as head of the household prevents them from doing otherwise. To young and unmarried men, grins are the place where they can articulate feelings and views that norms of filial respect would prevent them from doing within earshot of their parents (Schulz 2002a; also see Sessay 2001).

As Manthia Diawara (2005: 252) recounts in his recollections of his youth in Bamako in the 1960s, grins brought together young people (mostly but not exclusively men, and mostly from the middle classes) thrilled by the music, lifestyle, and
self-assertiveness of musicians such as James Brown and “other diaspora aestheticians from North America.” Diawara observes that his and his friends’ enthusiasm for the “diasporic aesthetic” articulated by African American musicians translated into embodied performances of an African modern identity through dress, dance, and musical activity. It also resulted in the organization of musical happenings modeled on Woodstock and other sites of the performance of global youth culture. The fact that contemporary Malian hip hop, too, is deeply rooted in grins points to the persistent relevance of this form of male sociality for the generation and reconfiguration of male consumerism, musical creativity, and possibly protest culture.

If the structures of socializing and conviviality within which hip hop is lived are similar to earlier forms of urban youth culture, what are the particularities of hip hop and in what ways do they reflect on the specific situation and dilemmas of today’s youth?

The majority of producers and consumers of rap are males between fourteen and twenty-five years old, yet their most important common denominator is not age per se but a shared experience closely related to the worsening of economic conditions for the urban middle and lower middle classes. Large-scale unemployment and a rampant lack of opportunities for adolescents to make a living (regardless of the kind of diploma they may have received) limits opportunities for many young men to marry and to establish an independent homestead. Many young men are obliged to rely on their parents’ income and to put up with the equivocal constraints and expectations such a dependency generates. In more privileged families, this lack of financial autonomy often goes hand in hand with a dependency on the political connections that older family members can provide. Most adolescents are highly ambivalent about their ongoing dependence on parental resources. Even though they might benefit from it, they simultaneously resent and deplore their lack of self-sufficiency (Schulz 2004: 159–202).

It is important to distinguish between musical producers and consumers in Malian rap. The consumers include those who establish a rapper identity not only through music consumption but also through dress style, bodily comportment, and speech. So far, most young men (and the few women) who have set new musical and stylistic impulses and initiated new trends in fashion, appearance, and body movements come from a privileged family background. Although influences of Senerap from neighboring Senegal are palpable in Mali, inspiration for local trends in dress, lyrics, and modes of expression is mostly drawn from French hip hop and introduced by young men who have spent some time in a European metropolis (mostly Paris or Brussels). Here, for the first time, they had the experience of being discriminated against because of their skin color and cultural origins. This experience made them highly susceptible to the protest stance of French rap, much of it made by immigrants from North and West Africa. As illustrated by many personal biographies of male rappers that I collected, the (entirely novel) ex-
perience of discrimination prompted them to conceive of their identity in terms of race and being black.12

Once returned to Mali, they translated their experience into musical productions and into personal narratives of an adventurous marginality recounted to friends and peers at their grin. I suggest that in this process of translating experiences of racial and social discrimination, the very meanings of race, blackness, and a youth protest culture are remediated and significantly transformed. Malian rappers do so because they speak and appeal to local audiences and their concerns, thereby appropriating and simultaneously redirecting the idiom of a common transnational black experience of marginalization.

Most of the rappers are autodidacts. Lacking the necessary technical equipment and training, they initially rapped to the accompaniment of a boom box and to improvise with various versions of rap and other local musical styles. The inspiration from an international Francophone hip hop culture is undeniable, yet most rappers self-consciously describe themselves as “self-made men” (pronounced in English) and trace their ideas about being “black” (which most of them pronounce in what is locally considered U.S. ghetto slang) and black culture back to the adventure accounts, movies, photographs, and video recordings of friends who managed to “embark on the adventure” (partir à l’aventure) across the Atlantic Ocean and who, once returned to Mali, are often celebrated as heroes, very similar to earlier generations of young males who migrated to neighboring countries in search of new opportunities and fortune.13

Most rap crews make their first productions in private recording studios, either in their homes or in a facility provided by a sponsor, who is often a relative. Some groups gain wider renown through participation in events organized at the neighborhood level and that bear similarities with talent shows organized and sponsored by Malian national radio. A group may then gain wider popularity and renown by making recordings at commercial recording studios. Yet, although private recording studios have multiplied over the past ten years, national television and radio remain the privileged channel through which rap musicians seek to circulate their musical productions. Rap music and lifestyle thus enter the national market of mass-mediated entertainment culture through the same venue as various other music styles, which over the last two decades have achieved wide prominence and public recognition. And as it is the case with the latter category of musicians, having personal connections to employees of the national broadcast station is often the first step in one’s national career, a step only the privileged ones may realize.

Among these privileged rapper crews are those which, at least in the initial stages of their career, are funded by their parents or relatives. Fathers who are willing to provide their sons (much less their daughters) with the technical equipment necessary for their musical activities usually do not have any particular liking for the music their children perform. Rather, their financial support springs
from their hope that, in the absence of other job opportunities, their children will be able to embark on a successful musical career. Very few rap groups, even those who have already gained some renown, manage to attract the attention and support of their internationally successful compatriots, who can offer financial, institutional, and personal assistance. The more professional support these star musicians provide often affords these fortunate rap groups an entry into the international music scene. But even for those rappers whose success remains limited to the national arena, the assistance they received from their sponsor translates into a higher level of professionalism which, once reflected in their recordings, significantly increases their income. For all these institutional and financial reasons, those in Mali who become nationally or even internationally renowned rappers do not represent the socioeconomic background or the marginality that many of their U.S. models claim.

Given the specific institutions and socioeconomic locations of hip hop in Mali, this raises the question of how rap, as a local appropriation of a global “diasporic aesthetic” in Mali, differs from its historical predecessors from the 1960s described by Manthia Diawara (1998, 2005). A major difference resides in the radically altered political situation within which hip hop culture today can unfold its social critical and political potential. Malian youth culture in the mid-1960s was realized in a politically repressive atmosphere. The state, represented through vigilantes, sought to exert almost totalizing control over its citizens’ comportment, consumption, and taste, yet also promised its youth new opportunities for upward mobility and achievement in the new state apparatus. The contemporary status quo appears almost as the opposite. Following a worldwide surge of a neoliberal ideology of self-reliance and self-realization, political liberalization since the early 1990s has brought unprecedented liberties for self-organization, yet fails to provide the urban youth with opportunities for employment and regular income. It is against the backdrop of these seriously forestalled opportunities of self-realization that one needs to explore the particularities of contemporary youth culture in Mali and the kind of protest it articulates. As a first step, it is useful to look more closely at the formal characteristics of rap as it is performed and appreciated in Mali in order to understand how it continues with, and possibly departs from, conventional forms of oral narrative and social critique.

**Word Music: The Pulse of Social Critique**

Characteristic features of rap music in Mali, and elsewhere in Africa, are the playful jockeying of words and sounds and the combination of rhetorical ingenuity and inventiveness with a rhythmic patterning borrowed from established genres of popular music. In many of their songs, the group Les Escrocs [The Crooks], for instance, ingeniously relies on the kora to introduce additional layers of complexity into their instrumental and speech performance. Other rap crews com-
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Monkeys mobilize a partly novel linguistic repertory by combining different national languages with a French, English, or Arabic lexicon, thereby infusing their lyrics and music with cosmopolitan prestige, greater credibility, or an authentically local outlook.15

Rhythm plays a pivotal role in rap, in Mali and elsewhere. To a greater extent than the text, which significantly appeals to one's intellect, rhythm integrates and congeals rappers and listeners into a shared experience of community or “communitas” (see Turner 1969). The privileging of rhythmic speech over melody leads Malian critics of rap, among them many adult men and women, to question whether rap constitutes music at all and to assert that it lacks not only morality but also pleasing appeal. Their denouncement of rap deserves closer attention because it implies an evaluative framework that highlights melody and musical harmony as evidence of a rap song's quality and moral value. Yet this assessment is at variance with the pivotal position of rhythmic speech in local aesthetic performance conventions. The spoken word is said to mobilize emotions inaccessible to listeners' conscious efforts and to move them to extraordinary action. In other words, fast, well-measured, and articulate speech is commonly perceived as essential to the moving effects of a successful oral performance (Zahan 1963; also see Charry 2000: 94–96, 322–27). And it is precisely this verbal and rhythmic virtuosity that consumers of rap highlight whenever they rave about a particular song or performer. To deplore the absence of musical form in rap thus seems to be a way to express one's uneasiness with the critical posture implied in both the form (edgy, speedy speech) and contents of rap.

Clearly, the appreciation of rhetorical virtuosity in Malian rap cannot be interpreted (as critics of rap sometimes do) as an indication of their mindless imitation of U.S. rap performance conventions and its logic of competitive self-display. Rather, the popularity of rap among Malian male youth is in line with established notions of the aesthetically and ethically moving powers of rhythmically patterned speech. Moreover, similar to areas of East and Southern Africa, the appreciation by fans of a rapper's verbal and rhetorical virtuosity perpetuates the conventional high valuation of verbal rivalry, often combined with subtle derision or satire directed at those in power. In Mali, the most significant of these traditional genres of youth critique is the baara, a Bamana musical form performed by female and male youth, combining song with evocative body movements and other embodied forms of criticism directed mostly at the parental generation and local authority. These musical, nonverbal forms of criticism used to be particularly well suited to subverting existing standards of conduct that prohibited any form of critique on the part of juniors. Rappers and their fans frequently refer to baara and other conventional forms of youth criticism to claim that they continue an “older” social function “just with new means.” Rappers, in other words, employ a distinct repertoire of lexical forms, symbolic gestures, and body movements that allow them to perform a modern kuul identity and to subvert standards of bodily deport-
ment that require a downplaying of any allusion to sexuality. But they understand themselves as being in continuity with long-standing local traditions of social critique, mockery, and speech contest. To emerge from this contest as the winner, the “master of the word” (ngaara, in Bamana), one needs the ability to keep the longer breath and eclipse one’s rivals through compelling speech.

**Lyrics: The Subtle Assertion of an African Particularity**

Many rap songs in Mali borrow substantially from the symbolic repertory of U.S. hip hop culture. That is to say, Malian rappers assume the critical posture of their “brothers” in the U.S. diaspora and thereby imply that hip hop culture refers not only to a shared performance aesthetics and lifestyle but also to a common experience of racial discrimination. Yet closer scrutiny reveals that their espousal of a rhetoric of racial confrontation characteristic of some strands of U.S. rap is ambivalent. One reason for this ambivalence is that the critical stance that Malian rappers assume draws on central terms and metaphors of U.S. rap, yet ultimately refers to a significantly different context of social and political inequality. The specific context within which Malian rappers operate and voice their critique marks their distinctiveness from the situation in the United States and France and also within the African continent. A closer look at the specific dilemmas that the youth in Mali faces and decries warrants new insights into the actual meanings of the “connective marginalities” (Osumare 2005) of youth around the globe, but also into their locally specific conditions of marginality.

Compared with southern Africa (taken by Osumare as a representative example of Africa’s youth protest culture), where the legacy of apartheid continues to haunt and fragment the political imaginary, in Mali and other areas of sahelian West Africa, settler colonialism and its attendant forms of racial discrimination have never been significant. In this latter situation, the category of race easily acquires the status of a free-floating signifier. Rappers refer to it in shifting and contingent ways to denounce various aspects of the colonial past and of postcolonial forms of political and economic dependency. In this process, and similar to hip hop cultures in other African countries, such as Senegal (Biaya 2000; Havard 2001; Wittmann 2004), the exact contents of racial discrimination are redefined, partly as a result of the specific colonial heritage that bears on contemporary state politics as much as on the internal restructuring of family dynamics. Accordingly, much of the criticism made by Malian rappers is directed toward what they perceive as the most serious social evils of Malian society, among them rampant unemployment, AIDS, the ongoing attempts of family elders to maintain control within the family, the arbitrary treatment of women by their husbands, and the deeply eroding effects of money on society and love relationships. More important, the sliding meanings of blackness allow Malian rappers to draw on a symbolic register of sameness to American hip hop, yet also to mark their own authenticity as African rappers. In-
volved in their conflation of an African with a black identity is therefore a double
movement of authentication that yields an ambiguous outcome.

Malian rappers borrow heavily from the U.S. expressive repertoire by inserting
key terms of the black political struggle into their songs and self-portrayals. For in-
stance, Cikan [Message], the title of a recently released CD of the rap group Tata
Pound, translates and brings a concept from the broader hip hop linguistic cul-
ture to a Malian context. Similarly, fangafin, the literal translation of Black Power,
has been chosen as the name for one of the most successful Malian rap groups. As
a neologism in Bamana, this term only makes sense in reference to a global black
protest culture. At the same time, employing key notions of U.S. hip hop culture
also allows some Malian rappers to subtly assert an identity as “veritable” (yèrè in
Bamanankan) Africans, as opposed to their American brothers whose preoccupa-
tion with race they do not share. For example, similar to their U.S. superstars of
rap, some Malian rappers emphasize their pride in their African cultural and his-
torical roots through the adoption of names of legendary historical heroes (such as
Shaka Zulu) who confronted white hegemony. Yet, underneath this claim to same-
ness, a subtle assertion takes place of a genuinely African, not just black, identity.
Although not everyone in the Malian hip hop community lays claim to a more au-
thentic African identity, the claim pinpoints the somewhat ambivalent positioning
of Malian rappers within a diasporic aesthetics.

There are yet other significant elements of Malian rap lyrics that mark their
specificity within a global black culture. Contrary to the subversion of conven-
tional moral standards in many U.S. rap songs, many Malian rappers subscribe
to a highly moralizing discourse that is conservative, if not reactionary, in nature.
And they are self-conscious about their moral mission: they frequently point to
their role in improving society and morals, and assert that, compared with the
“self-centered” and “culturally alien” nature of U.S. rap lyrics, their own educa-
tional vocation proved that they were deeply rooted in African cultural norms and
thus more “genuinely African” than their U.S. counterparts.17 Several rap crews,
among them Fanga Fing and Tata Pound, understand themselves as articulators
of a “message” of political criticism and as mouthpieces of a youth disaffected
about the promises of democracy that were not borne out. Yet the majority of rap-
ers consider edification and exhortation to be their primary objectives and feel
that this practice is more significant and of higher value than the striving for self-
aggrandizement and antagonism many of these rappers associate with U.S. hip
hop.18 Accordingly, their songs denounce the moral degradation of society and the
fact that feelings of love and empathy have been emptied out by a greed for money
instilled under the influence of western imperialism and corrupt political elites.

Also pervasive in many lyrics is the tendency to present women as both agents
and beneficiaries of the erosion of friendship and love. The conservative tenor
of rap lyrics, in Mali and other countries, has been largely overlooked by schol-
ars whose preoccupation was with the subversive politics (Lipsitz 1994; Krims
idEntity and hybridity

2000) and protest culture of a global youth. Wittmann (2004), one of the few authors who addresses this phenomenon, views it as a conundrum and rightly concludes that “protest” or resistance does not necessarily entail a progressive politics (also see Abu-Lughod 1990). What both interpretations miss is that the moralist-conservative tenor of many rap lyrics echoes established aesthetic conventions for oral performances. That is to say, there is a common perception (not only among fans of rap) that the true value of a song shows in its moralizing and edifying effects and that it teaches “moral lessons” (ladili). Also, the image of the “greedy,” “immoral” woman and its corrupting effects on men and the social order at large is a recurrent figure of speech in local accounts of social change and degeneration (Schulz 2001a: 235–80; 2001b). This means that rap lyrics are successful, not in spite of their conservative outlook but because they frame their social critique as a moral concern and thereby draw on, and respond to, commonsensical understandings of Malian society, its ills, and ways to remedy them.

But there is more to the marked emphasis of many Malian rappers on the social usefulness of their performances. And this brings back the question of the particular conditions of marginality with which Malian youth grapple. I noted above that those who perform, consume, and enjoy rap in Mali share problems that arise from a situation of postponed autonomy from parental control and that foreclose any possibility of being accepted into the world of adults. Given their marginal position in economic and social life, rappers’ insistence on their educational mission should be seen as an attempt to claim a place and a function as morally responsible members of society (Schulz 2002a, 2004: 97–158, 203–61; H. White 2001; Weiss 2002). To assume the function of a moral watchdog in a situation of relative exclusion allows them to reclaim some elements of an adult identity which otherwise remains unattainable. This search for recognition by, and integration into, the adult world comes out clearly in the ways in which many of the rappers with whom I interacted on a regular basis envision their futures. They dream of the reputation or “name” (tògô) that their musical career will afford them and that will materialize in visible signs of success such as lavish outfits, a mansion, and a sports convertible (see Hacke and Roch’s 2004 documentary Bongo Flava). Most significantly, they daydream about future, unlimited possibilities to “put their parents in better conditions,” possibilities that would enable them to live up to the expectation that an obliging and dutiful child should pay respect and “show gratitude.”

Whereas social and moral critique is central to the self-understanding of rappers in Mali, this critique sometimes stands in tension with the privileges many of them enjoy because of their family and economic background, as well as with the actual dilemmas that arise from their socioeconomic positioning. As noted above, a theme that figures centrally in numerous rap songs is the denouncement of the attempts by parents, particularly by fathers, to maintain or extend control through economic dependency. Although rappers thereby adequately portray the conflicts waging in many urban households, it is also a fact that many of them depend on
the financial and social support of a father who either occupies an influential position in politics or administration or engages in highly successful business ventures. Parents’ continued hold over their juniors is thus often the precondition for rappers’ poetically and musically mediated criticism of parental control and of other sources of intergenerational conflict.

A final notable difference between Malian rap and its U.S. counterpart consists in their respective social vocations and their repercussions. Whereas rapping in U.S. cities takes place in, and reflects on, a highly competitive setting, rap in Mali as a musical and performance style often serves to confirm and expand social relations. Many rap songs contain lengthy passages in which the performer greets people in a neighborhood or at a particular grin. This form of public greeting is highly popular among urban and rural audiences, especially among those individuals, families, or grins whose reputation a singer boosts by addressing them in person. Simultaneously, greeting people also helps the rapper to establish himself as someone who is popular and to whom one should feel indebted because of the public kindnesses he showed to friends and acquaintances in public. By inserting personal address forms into their performances, rappers continue with the social function that other conventional forms of cultivating social bonds through oral public performance assume, such as those practiced by jeli singers and radio speakers (Schulz 1999). The group Tata Pound, for instance, combines in the song “Badala” allusions to specific places, events, and instances of performance with the greeting of specific individuals. This and other songs thus allow the group to expand existing forms of sociality through the medium of music, partly by evoking an insider knowledge that binds listeners and performers into a common realm of shared experience and extends it to new public arenas. Here again, rap illustrates how a global genre acquires specifically local properties and significance through the process of its appropriation and translation into local social and aesthetic conventions.

**Sartorial Practices and Other Forms of Embodiment**

To many rappers in Mali, clothing and other embodied expressions are as important in conveying “the message” (always pronounced in English) as do the critical-yet-edifying lyrics. The central importance of their visual and embodied performance of a kuul, cosmopolitan identity, is evidenced in the spontaneous, often nonverbal reactions of their fans and of hip hop consumers in general. Bodily posture and movement of rappers form, together with a complex gestural apparatus, a symbolic repertoire of mimetic acts that is modeled on the example of prominent U.S. rappers that helps them articulate a political-ideological orientation, a critique of the establishment (“the elders,” “the system”), and a youth identity that is commonly described as kuul, associated with a cosmopolitan orientation. Significantly, this notion does not simply borrow from U.S. notions of
coolness but is informed and shaped by conventional local understandings of dignified conduct: whoever wants to be considered an adult needs to display a capacity for self-restraint, illustrated, among other things, in speaking in a “cool” way (*suman*, literally cool, as in temperature), that is, in a low-volume and measured way, and contrasted to the “heat” of someone whose immaturity shows in his impatience, quickness (*teliya*), and thoughtless speech (Schulz 2001a: 235–280).

As a reference to a shared black identity, numerous rappers in Mali, as well as their fans and other consumers of hip hop culture, favor corporeal expressions and forms of ornamentation such as dreadlocks, skullcaps and colors associated with the Rastafari movement. They also seek to obtain consumer objects, such as posters, stickers, and dress accessories that many Malians associate with a global black culture.

Yet not everyone supportive of this type of Malian youth culture, and of the project of self-making associated with it, has the actual institutional and financial capacities to partake in it, either as a producer or as a consumer. Moreover, in Mali, outside articles, signs, and gestures become operative as elements (emblems) of a global black culture only if they make sense in local and personal frameworks of meaning and signification practices. In this process of insertion and appropriation, some articles gain new meanings, such as the association with a cosmopolitan identity, as in the case of “I love New York” T-shirts. And so can the definition of an authentically African identity gain new meaning, as in the case of certain gestures and body movements that reflect on local concepts of dignified behavior.

Thus, similar to hip hop culture in settings outside the Euro-American West, the project of constructing one’s identity in which rappers and rap consumers engage is effected through powerful, globally circulating representational forms that tend to be associated with a black global culture and are shaped by the forces and exclusionist tendencies of an entertainment market (see Wade 1999: 457). Their attempts to carve out a space for self-expression and for recognition by the adult world are located within this market-mediated arena of material and symbolic practice. Although many symbolic and expressive elements of a rapper identity circulate at a global scale, their meanings are restricted by way of their insertion into local contexts of signification practices.

**Conclusion**

Similar to other popular music styles in Mali, rap has emerged as an area of cultural creativity at the interface of several social, technological, and economic developments. One is the spread of new technologies that allows for new ways of producing music, such as sampling and cut and paste. Another process consists in the appropriation and selective revising of aesthetic conventions, standards of musical appreciation, and markers of social distinction. New dynamics also emerge at the interface of globally circulating objects and emblems of a modern, cosmo-
politan orientation and of a black youth protest culture and of the practices of signification they generate in various local and regional arenas. In the case of Malian youth culture, rappers draw on consumption objects and images that circulate along transnational commercial structures and have a decidedly global outlook. By inserting themselves into this global consumer culture, rappers contribute substantially to the objectification of their protest culture. Simultaneously, however, they attribute distinctive and sometimes particularistic meanings to these objects, in an attempt to map the self, to envision an African adult identity for themselves that is in line with local norms and expectations (see Wade 1999: 457). Seen in this light, Malian rap culture continues with, and is representative of, conventions of appropriation that, for a long time, have enabled the adoption and partial transmutation of transnational musical and verbal repertoires, in accordance with local aesthetic sensibilities and preferences.

A word of caution is in place, however. The transnational symbolic and aesthetic repertoire of hip hop culture offers rappers in Mali opportunities to imaginatively define themselves as modern Malians. Yet it is important that their possibilities for mapping a kuul, hip, and cosmopolitan image of themselves are circumscribed by the limited conditions under which most African urbanites may engage in consumption. Rather than heralding the contemporary moment as an era in which consumption constitutes a site of seemingly unlimited opportunities for identity construction (see Miller 1995; Remes 1999), we should recognize that this is a site with restricted access (Schulz 2002b, 2004: 203–261; see Ferguson 2002). As we have seen, most of the urban youth supportive of rap in Mali lack the financial means and social networks that would enable them to partake in the making of a rap culture that is local in outlook and orientation. For them, mapping a future self remains an affair of embodied imagination and “mimicry” (Ferguson 2002) of a transnational idiom of black protest.

This leads me back to my earlier concern with the common emphasis on protest and a politics of subversion in writings on the global circulation of hip hop. Not only do we need to recognize substantial diversity within the category of Francophone rap. But studies of hip hop in African societies and beyond need to pay closer attention to the specific socioeconomic locations of those who perform rap, as well as to the specific dilemmas that they, as well as hip hop consumers, face. True, young people across the African continent share certain experiences of exclusion or marginality (e.g., Honwana and de Boeck 2005). Yet the dilemmas that emerge from this situation, the answers that adolescents of different economic background envisage, and the forms of sociality that accompany their (makeshift) solutions differ widely, along with the regionally specific social and aesthetic conventions from which they draw inspiration. Viewed in this light, a nuanced understanding of African hip hop and its complex social repercussions will allow us to refine the analytical categories we bring to bear on hip hop as a polysemous and shifting idiom of a highly diverse diasporic aesthetic.
This chapter is based on research conducted in Bamako and San between 2001 and 2006 (altogether fourteen months). Earlier versions were presented during a roundtable discussion on popular music in Africa during the 2003 African Studies Association meetings in Boston, and as the habilitation lecture to the Faculty of Social and Political Sciences, Free University Berlin, February 2005. I thank Jochen Seebode for helpful comments on earlier versions of this article, and Lamine Doumbia, Tonton Kulibali, and Teyan and Boa Keita for teaching me the first important lessons about hip hop and male youth culture in Mali.

1. See Polak (2004, and this volume) for the popularity of djembe drumming in Bamako. Some authors distinguish between rap as a musical activity and hip hop as a way of life that, in addition to musical practice, comprises a particular orientation and attitude, which manifests itself in specific patterns of consumption. However, the dividing lines between the two notions remain fuzzy. In this chapter, I employ the term *rap* to refer to a musical culture in a broader sense, to describe a specific, even though highly heterogeneous, musical genre and the process of oral performance and technical production. *Rap* also refers to the various symbolic and social acts which are associated with the consumption of this music and follow particular conventions of self-representation. I am interested in rap as a practice of signification whose social relevance stretches beyond the immediate production process. In other words, the meanings of rap are constituted both in the immediate production process and in the course of consumers’ engagements with it, which taken together constitute a field of socially situated acts of signification.

2. Unless noted otherwise, all foreign expressions are rendered in Bamanankan, the lingua franca of southern Mali.

3. They understand the impurity of urban musical styles to derive from their mixing of various foreign influences, among them the use of new or electrified instruments, rhythmic patterns, and lyrics.

4. The *jeliw* [French: griots] belong to a professional group (*nyamakalaw*) that forms one of three status categories of Bamana society in southern Mali. The conventional tasks of jeliw are to serve as genealogists, praise singers, and mediators on behalf of their patrons.

5. Herein consists an important difference to British rap and the less exclusionist and racially defined project of self-identification that many British rappers formulate.

6. Gilroy (1993, ch. 3) criticizes the idea and claim by numerous rappers of rap as an authentic and uniquely African American cultural form. Instead, he proposes to see rap and hip hop as illustrations of the hybrid nature of all black cultural forms as they exist and travel throughout the African diaspora. He emphasizes that rap has its origins as much in the booming electronic culture of Jamaica as in the preference for orality and oral mastery that continues to shape aesthetic performance conventions on the African continent (also see Lipsitz 1994; Klein and Friedrich 2003).

7. Yet as Houston Baker Jr. (1993, ch. 3) cautions us, this soundtrack also bears its risks, especially if it is employed by writers such as Henry Louis Gates, who as “experts” of rap translate and simplify its contents and agenda for racially mixed audiences (also see Anderson 1995: 17).

8. The literal meaning of the Bamana word *grin* is “reunion.”
9. In a certain sense, grins are the equivalent of age groups in rural societies. These groups, very often formed on the occasion of life status transition rituals such as circumcision, allow men of approximately the same age to move together through the different phases of life.

10. Brenner (ms.) argues that grins, particularly those of unmarried and unemployed men, acquired a central political significance as centers of popular protest and opposition to the government of former president Moussa Traoré in 1991.

11. Malians distinguish between three kinds of social categories that historically could be roughly correlated with different socioeconomic backgrounds. People of free-born (horon, from Arabic hurr, free) or noble descent were usually the most powerful and wealthy in an area. Dependent on them were different groups of clients of nyamakala (artisan) background, among them the jeliw, whose expertise was to perform music and various oral genres on behalf of their free-born patrons. And finally there were the people of serf background (sing., jon). Although these status distinctions hold sway in everyday life, it is important to note that today, particularly in urban areas where rap is mostly performed and consumed, social background cannot be correlated to socioeconomic position or class. In other words, the economically privileged background of many rappers does not indicate that they are of horon birth.

12. Rappers usually use the term black in the untranslated English version.

13. The practice of partir à l'aventure has been a long-standing rite of passage for male adolescents. Various oral genres recite the trials and triumphs of heroes who established their claim to military and/or spiritual leadership by surviving various travels to foreign lands.

14. The most prominent example of this kind of sponsorship is provided by Salif Keita. Toumani Diabaté, who lent money to musicians in the mid-1990s, has since stopped his support.

15. Cases include well-known passages from particular suras (Koranic verses) or loanwords from U.S. slang or French argot. See Auzanneau (2002), Auzanneau and Fayol (2004), and Kimminich (2004b) for interesting parallels to the mixing of linguistic repertoires in Senerap.

16. I suggest below that their choice of names (e.g., Les Escrocs, Black Panthers) allows rappers to claim commonality with the gangsta identity of their U.S. role models and that blacks around the globe share the same concerns emerging from uniform modes of discrimination.

17. Expressions in quotation marks (translated from French or Bamanakan) without citations here and throughout this chapter are taken from conversations with my informants.

18. This perception is in line with a conventional evaluatory framework that places the highest value on moral education, empathy, trust, and mutual reliance.

19. Many consumers of rap in Mali denounce the competitiveness and boosting of U.S. rappers as an indication of their selfishness and lack of social responsibility. Rappers in Mali, as well as their fans, often contrast ego-centered and insulting U.S. rap lyrics with Malian rap lyrics and argue that the latter have a superior value because they do not aim at personal aggrandizing but at the improvement of society.

20. These reactions are gestures, facial expressions, and body and dance movements.
21. Yet in Mali as well as in numerous other African countries, these rastafari colors coincide with the colors of the national flag. Accordingly, consumers propose contingent and sometimes contradictory interpretations of the meaning of these colors.

22. Pop icons of Malian rap consumers (who see themselves as supporters of this black culture) include Bob Marley, Lucky Dube, the basketball star Michael Jordan, and U.S. American rappers such as Public Enemy. This suggests that rap consumers fashion an identity for themselves that is conceived as an unbroken continuity of black resistance in North America, the Caribbean, and in Africa (see Wade 1999: 457).
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ERIC CHARRY is associate professor of music at Wesleyan University. He has published extensively on music in Africa, including *Mande Music: Traditional and Modern Music of the Maninka and Mandinka of Western Africa* (2000). He wrote the introduction to Babatunde Olatunji’s autobiography (*The Beat of My Drum*, 2005) and is completing a manuscript on the emergence of an avant-garde in jazz in the 1950s and 1960s.

JOHN COLLINS has been active in the Ghanaian/West African music scene since 1969 as a guitarist, band leader, music union activist, journalist, and writer. He taught music at the University of Ghana until 2005. He is manager of Bokoor Recording Studio, chairman of the BAPMAF Highlife—Music Institute and archives, a patron of the Ghana Musicians Union (MUSIGA), and a leader of the Local Dimension highlife band.

JOHN FENN is assistant professor in the arts and administration program at the University of Oregon’s School of Architecture and the Allied Arts. He has conducted field research on popular music and youth identity in Malawi, folk arts and material culture in southern Indiana and the Pacific Northwest, and the cultural history of African American communities in Eugene and Springfield, Oregon. His current research projects include work with boutique effects pedals, as well as ethnographic work in Beijing with experimental musicians as part of the ChinaVine project (http://chinavine.org).

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**Rainer Polak** is senior research fellow (principal investigator) at Cologne University of Music and Dance. He is author of *Festmusik als Arbeit, Trommeln als Beruf: Jembe-Spieler in einer westafrikanischen Großstadt* (2004), which received the 2003–2004 academic award of German Association for African Studies. He has published in *The World of Music, Anthros,* and *Music Theory Online,* is anthologized in *Ethnomusicology: A Contemporary Reader* (2006), and will contribute to forthcoming editions of the *Continuum Encyclopedia of Popular Music of the World (EPMOW)* and *New Grove Dictionary of Musical Instruments.* Polak’s approach to West African percussion ensemble music includes perspectives from social and cultural anthropology as well as from empirical musicology and music theory. He also performs and teaches jembe music.

**Daniel B. Reed** is associate professor of folklore and ethnomusicology at Indiana University. He is author of *Dan Ge Performance: Masks and Music in Contemporary Côte d’Ivoire* (Indiana University Press, 2004), which won the Amaury Talbot Prize from the Royal Anthropological Institute for best book in African anthropology. He has also published articles in journals such as *Ethnomusicology* and *Africa Today* and is co-author, with Gloria Gibson, of the CD-ROM *Music and Culture of West Africa: The Straus Expedition* (Indiana University Press, 2002).

**Dorothea E. Schulz** is professor in the Department of Cultural and Social Anthropology at the University of Cologne, Germany. Her new book, *Muslims and New Media in West Africa* (Indiana University Press, 2011) deals with Islamic revivalist movements in Mali that rely on media technologies to promote a relatively new conception of publicly enacted religiosity. She has also published widely on media practices and public culture in sahelian West Africa, gender studies, and the anthropology of the state. Her new research project deals with Muslims in Uganda. It investigates Muslim practices of coming to terms with death in a situation of continued ecological and social disaster and irruption.

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Patricia Tang is associate professor in music and theater at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. She is author of Masters of the Sabar: Wolof Griot Percussionists of Senegal (2007). She is the founder and co-director of Rambax, MIT’s Senegalese drum ensemble, and has performed extensively with Senegalese mbalax band Nder et le Setsima Group (violin) and with the Afro-mlbalax band Lamine Touré and Group Saloum (violin and keyboards).

Lee Watkins teaches ethnomusicology at Rhodes University in South Africa. He has been conducting research on rap music and hip hop in South Africa since the 1990s and has undertaken research on rap music and hip hop in China. His research interests include the study of music in relation to migration and diaspora studies, asymmetrical relations, the musical aesthetics of marginal expressive cultures, and music developmental studies. He has several publications on rap music in South Africa and on migrant Filipino musicians in Hong Kong.