

**ADAPTATION AND CREATIVITY IN MONTREAL'S WEST AFRICAN MUSIC
SCENE**

by

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Abstract

This thesis is an ethnography of Montreal's West African music scene. Through participant observation, interviews, and research I provide a view of how African musicians have adapted their music to a new environment. Special focus is given to how African music was constructed and perceived by African performers, though attention is also paid to their Québécois counterparts. I discuss how an array of interpretations about the meaning and form of African music co-exists, forming part of a larger musical discourse that gives shape to a style of African music unique to Québec.

I first provide an overview of the African music scene, describing its major venues, events, and performers. Next, I describe the style of African music that takes place there, an adaptation of Malian and Guinean popular music. I also describe the efforts of Québécois musicians to reimagine African music for their own use, offering up a very different interpretation than that given by Africans in Montreal.

Through collective interpretation, African and Canadian musicians in Montreal have built an innovative and interesting music scene that is still developing. This scene relies on a productive discourse between African musicians, Québécois performers of African music, and the larger audience for African music in Montreal.

Preface

The study that formed the foundation of this dissertation required the approval of the RISE UBC Behavioural Research Ethics Board. The Principal Investigator (PI) was Michael Tenzer, the Department Approver in the music department was John B. Roeder, and the Primary Contact was myself, Alex Kelley. The study, numbered H13-00187, was deemed to be a behavioural study of minimal risk. The initial approval date for the study was June 4th, 2013, and the study required ethics reviews with annual renewals. Study completion occurred September 1st, 2013.

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Dedication

To Habiba and François, Elage and Assane

Chapter 1: Introduction

This thesis is a study of the performance of West African music in Montreal, Québec. Montreal is one of Canada's great multicultural centres, home to a diverse group of people from all over the world. As one of the world's largest French-speaking cities, it is also a magnet for immigrants from Francophone West Africa and home to a thriving African musical community. Through ethnographic fieldwork, interviews, and analysis, I investigate how African music has developed on Canadian soil and how it has become, to some extent, a Canadian music as well. I will explore how African musicians in Montreal have been able to adapt and transform their music to attract a new, Canadian audience, while still remaining relevant to first and second generation African-Canadians.¹

African musicians and promoters in Montreal work hard to present their music to a Canadian audience. This is done in large part by providing this audience with an interpretation of African music, showing its deep connection to other aspects of African culture. It is also accomplished by adapting their music through collaborating with non-African musicians and adopting Canadian multiculturalism as a positive artistic value. My study will show the engagement of Québécois musicians with their African counterparts in Montreal, participating, performing, and even composing African and African inspired music. By participating in this

¹ Issues of nomenclature can be perilous, in particular since they often seem to imply a homogenous identity where none might exist. Though the issues of identity construction among immigrants are many and interesting, I thought it best to simply bracket them out here and follow Puplampu and Tetty by referring to all recent African immigrants to Canada as "African-Canadians." Anyone wishing to explore these issues further should consult their text on the subject (2006b).

African music scene, Québécois musicians shape these influences in their own distinctive ways, offering a distinctive Canadian interpretation of African music and transforming it for their own use. Decades of this engagement have allowed Québécois musicians to construct their own interpretation of African music, related but distinct from the music of West Africans living in Québec.

Though African music has been the object of much ethnomusicological study, the primary object of such research has been “traditional,” rural, and/or pre-colonial music, along with the dissemination of music from Africa to the Americas as part of the slave trade. Research in this field has been prominent in Ethnomusicology for many years, with early work by Erich von Hornbostel (1928) and A.M. Jones (1959) joined by many more recent works (Chernoff 1979, Friedson 2009). These studies have been joined in recent years by work on popular music in Africa’s urban centres. These musics are often creative blends of traditional music with stylistic, timbral, and performance practices borrowed from the rest of the world, in particular Europe and the Americas (Bender 1991, Collins 1992, Olaniyan 2004).

What has been less documented is the movement of African music to Europe and North America that is not historically connected to the slave trade. This second movement is much more recent and has been facilitated by advances in technology, allowing music to travel further and faster than ever before. Political and economic changes—such as the partial lifting of restrictive, racially discriminating immigration policies that limited the migrations of Africans until the 1960s—also facilitated this transference (Mensah 2010:69). These factors, combined with the economic disparity between Africa and the west, has led to increasing numbers of West Africans moving to major cultural centres such as Paris, New York, and Los Angeles, as well as Montreal. But though studies have been done on the African musical population of other major

urban areas (Winders 2006, Canon 2005, van Buren 2001), no such study has taken place in Montreal, one of Canada's cultural capitals.

This musical migration finds ethnomusicologists chasing a moving target. As John Blacking noted in *How Musical is Man?*:

The Venda taught me that music can never be a thing in itself, and that *all* music is folk music, in the sense that music cannot be transmitted or have meaning without associations between people.... Music is too deeply concerned with human feelings and experiences in society. (Blacking 1973::x)

Blacking, like many others, claims that it is impossible for music to have any meaning if it is not embedded in a society. Music cannot exist without this cultural context. For ethnomusicologists the challenge is to understand how diaspora musicians are able to develop and create music outside of its original milieu. As uncomfortable as this vantage point may be, increasingly this movement of people and their music seems to be the norm. As technology and globalization continue apace, it is easier to encounter music away from its "home," free floating in a concert hall or on a computer screen.

Though in many cases this development reflects a certain cultural homogenization in which cosmopolitan elites from all over the world begin to resemble one another, this is not the only way that music becomes disconnected from its cultural milieu. As Arjun Appadurai noted in his essay "Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Economy," "as forces from various metropolises are brought into new societies they tend to become indigenized in one or another way" (Appadurai 1990:5). As music finds a new context, it is inevitably transformed by its local audience. New listeners find new meanings in the music and discover their own ways of listening.

Local diasporic music scenes act as a kind of ground zero for this dissemination. Though

their practitioners introduce unfamiliar, different kinds of music to our attention, they do so as part of the community, living among us and adapting their music for its consumption. They provide not just entertainment but education, helping us understand how to listen to their music. This encounter with the other is less uncomfortable and more personal. Such cultural exchange is exciting and challenging.

1.1 Why African music in Montreal?

I first became interested in the African music scene in Montreal when a Québécois friend of mine, François Belliveau, met my girlfriend, Habibatu (Habi) Ba. He was ecstatic to find that she was from Senegal, as François was a huge fan of Senegalese music and had travelled to Senegal several times. He was an accomplished percussionist as well, and a skilled player of the Senegalese sabar (a collection of single-headed drums played with one hand and one stick, held in place by pegs) and tama (a small hourglass-shaped, two-headed talking drum).

François has an impressive collection of music from Senegal and elsewhere in West Africa. Habi and I spent several nights sitting and listening to the music with him, energized by his obvious passion. For Habi it was a nostalgic return to the music of her past, something to be remembered fondly, while for me it was something completely new. Listening to mbalax—Senegal’s most prominent popular music, made famous globally by Youssou N’dour—was a revelation. The music was groovy, sounding just close enough to American pop music that I knew to make the differences stand out all the more. I loved the juxtaposition of guitars and synthesizers with the high-pitched crack of sabars, and the sudden rhythmic shifts undertaken with apparent ease. François spoke often of his study of Senegalese music in Montreal, describing learning and performing with friends and studying hard to replicate the music they

heard on records. He also talked about all the great African music in Montreal. He described seeing Omar Pene performing outdoors during the Festival Nuits d'Afrique (Nights of Africa Festival), and dances taking place in church basements spread only by word of mouth with equal excitement.

In the summer of 2012, Habi called me with news. While wandering through Vancouver's Granville Island, she happened upon a band of Senegalese musicians performing at the Children's Festival. The music and the chance to talk to her compatriots cheered her up after years of being one of very few Senegalese people in Vancouver, and she invited the whole band home for dinner. The group was Elage Diouf with his backup band, based in Montreal and on tour across Canada. At dinner I was able to discuss the scene of African music in Montreal with some of its most prominent participants.

Later, listening to Elage's album *Aksil* (2011), I was again intrigued by the music. The recording was a subtle transformation of the Senegalese music that I had listened to so often. It had the sabar drums, guitars, and synthesizers, but with an even more cosmopolitan feel through elements borrowed from Brazil, American folk music, and elsewhere. Throughout the record Elage plays with timbres and grooves that challenge the distinction between African music and American music, Senegalese music and Guinean music. Talking and reading more about Elage and other African musicians in Montreal, I heard more and more about this innovative blend of cultures. As someone who performs with Brazilian, Mexican, and Cuban musicians in Vancouver, I was intrigued to discover how African and Québécois musicians worked together to perform this music and how Africans adapted their music to the Québécois environment. Most of all I wanted to hear more of this music, wanted to understand where it came from and how it came about.

In the summer of 2013, I spent two months in Montreal, living in a studio apartment near McGill University. My time was spent seeking out the West African community, attending concerts, and talking to musicians and audience members. I studied sabar with Cheikh Anta Faye, a Senegalese musician and performer living in Montreal. I attended many concerts of West African music during the Montreal International Jazz Festival, and especially during the Festival Nuits d’Afrique, a large African music festival. I also attended concerts of Malian dance music, Senegalese Reggae, Québécois hip-hop, and Afro-Brazilian percussion groups. I met and spoke with musicians from West Africa living in Québec. I talked to promoters and hung around outside after shows. In short, I did everything I could to experience all of the African music making taking place during my time in Montreal.

While in Montreal I did much more than experience the African music scene, however. It has always been a goal of mine to spend time there. As someone from British Columbia, the dichotomy between French and English speaking Canada always seemed very remote to me. Nevertheless, it also seemed to me to be one of the most important, the most foundational aspects of Canadian culture. The division between Ontario and Québec, the so-called “two solitudes” of Canada (Saul 1998), was something I had considered a great deal. As a Canadian from Vancouver I have not had a great deal of personal experience with Québécois culture, and as a result did not have a clear understanding of the differences. I had always wanted to understand these differences, if only to understand Canada better. The city of Montreal is perhaps the best place to experience the many layers of Québécois culture. As the country’s only bilingual metropolis, the city is at the heart of Canada’s linguistic and cultural disputes.

1.2 Literature Review

The worlds of music are vast, and one of ethnomusicology's great strengths is its flexibility. Recent decades have seen a great expansion in what counts as ethnomusicology. One important new kind of work is "fieldwork at home," ethnomusicological studies not of the unfamiliar but of one's own music culture, that which is closest to us (Martin 2013, Stock and Chiener 2008). A further expansion of the ethnomusicological field, one with more precedents, is the study of musicians in the diaspora (Bohlman 2002, Henry 2008, Monson 2003). What this kind of work illuminates is the adaptability and flexibility of music, forced through migration to connect to new audiences. This involves a curious reversal for the ethnomusicologist, where rather than travelling to study the other, the other instead deigns to come to him or her.

1.2.1. Mande² Music in New York

Two important works for the study of African immigrant communities in North America are twin Ph.D. dissertations dealing with the performance of Mande music in New York City. The first is Thomas van Buren's "The Music of Manden in New York City" (2001), a study in applied ethnomusicology that documents his work promoting and organizing concerts for Mande griots³ in New York. His research examines this community and explores issues of interpretation and presentation as a promoter of Mande musicians. This culminates in a series of concerts

² The term Mande refers to a collection of peoples loosely unified by a common culture, tradition, and history, dating back to the thirteenth-century Malian empire. Other common names for this group are Malinke, Mandingue, Mandinka, and many others. I've chosen Mande, following most English-language ethnomusicological work (Charry 2000, van Buren 2001).

³ The use of the word griot is contested in studies of African music, and its origin remains unclear. To some it is an uncomfortable remnant of the colonial period, though some maintain that it has an African origin (Hale 1998:357-66). It's used in this thesis because it was the word used by African musicians in Montreal to describe themselves.

produced by van Buren while working for The Center of Traditional Music and Dance in New York. Van Buren claims that Mande griots were able to retain their musical traditions almost completely intact in performance in New York. They accomplished this by only compromising on its presentation, adopting Euro-American conventions such as formal concerts and a strict audience/performer divide.

Building on this work is a dissertation by David Racanelli, who cites van Buren as an inspiration and who seeks to explore more fully the community van Buren describes (Racanelli 2010). Racanelli approaches the music as a performer, playing guitar with many of the musicians he discusses. He claims that Mande musicians and their collaborators do adapt their music for Western audiences, adopting a “jam band” aesthetic that emphasizes groove and individual soloists. Racanelli also describes how American (and other African) collaborators are introduced to the music, claiming in his case that a certain “intensity of contact” (ibid.:iv) and sustained musical interaction allows one to learn Mande music almost as adeptly as a native performer. Here he claims that even though he “felt as if [he] was ‘faking it’ so much of the time...Abdoulaye ‘Djoss’ Diabaté, with whom I have had extensive contact and performance experience, insists that I ‘know everything’” (ibid.:141).

What these two studies share is a focus on the “Mande sphere,” a description of a fairly unified style and structure found in performances in New York. However, neither study really questions this unity, and the diversity of musical styles across national lines, ethnic groups, and individuals is rarely problematized as such. Both authors, interacting with masters of a particular style, claim that they are viewing a transportation of one basic genre of music. Van Buren, by focusing on the preservation of Mande music, and Racanelli, by discussing the griots “and their collaborators,” are not always attentive to the possibility of dialogue and creative interaction

between musicians from Africa and America. Though Racanelli discusses African collaborators who are not griot, he doesn't consider the opportunity performance outside of Africa gives to musicians from differing West African traditions to interact and learn from one another. This is doubly true for the opportunity to collaborate with the many musicians from Central and South America that New York offers.

1.2.2 African Music in North America

Aside from these studies on Mande music in New York, there are several other texts that shed some light on the performance of African musicians in North America. The chapter "The West is Cold" by James Burns, included in the volume *The New African Diaspora* offers another look at African musicians' experiences in North America (Burns 2009). Burns, too, describes the adaptations made by musicians to appeal to a North American audience, in his case by Ghanaian musicians. He describes the need for African musicians to project a certain Western notion of authenticity in their music, often insisting on "African" dress, only African musicians, and the inclusion of so-called "traditional" music tropes in their music.

A contrasting dissertation by Sherri Canon offers a comparison between Ghanaian and Senegalese musical communities in Los Angeles (Canon 2005). She emphasizes the innovative and interesting uses of modern technology to communicate, share their lives, and retain a connection to friends and relatives still in Africa. Both Burns and Canon make clear that African music, when performed in North America, has a very different character than when performed in Africa. When music is transported across vast distances, even if the music sound itself is unchanged, the culture, associations, and practices surrounding this change along with the scenery. Canon's work in particular shows that this is not simply a matter of the expectations of

North American audiences. African communities in North America themselves feel the need to change and adapt their musical practices as well.

Very little has been written on the subject of African music in Canada. This lack of study is unfortunate, because the African experience of migrating to Canada is quite different from the American one. Significantly, there are few African-Americans in Canada. On the other hand, there is a fairly large Caribbean and African population in Canada, both in Toronto and Montreal. These two factors make the already existing networks and communities very different in these two nations. Another important difference is the uniqueness of Québec in Canada. As the only francophone area in North America, Québec is a magnet for many immigrants from Francophone West Africa and other Francophone centres.

Another important factor is the distinctive Canadian approach to immigration policy. Many other nations that are home to large numbers of African immigrants, such as France and the United States, follow an assimilationist policy on immigration, encouraging immigrants to be absorbed culturally into the larger nation-state (Majstorovic 2013:220-21). Canada officially supports a policy of multiculturalism, in which immigrants and other groups within Canada are encouraged to retain their distinctive culture. Under this policy national groups are encouraged to express their own culture as part of Canada's cultural mosaic, and performances of "ethnic" music often receive official support (Wsevolod 1999:160, 205). This multiculturalism is not without its problems, and many claim that the kind of engagement encouraged by this policy is superficial and shallow. Despite these differences, multiculturalism has to some extent spread throughout the Canadian population, making Canadians more tolerant and accepting of world culture (Buchignani 1994). This extends to musicians as well. Many of the West African musicians I spoke to referred to multiculturalism—whether explicitly or implicitly—as a value in

their music, attempting to include elements from many cultures in their work.

The study that deals most directly with African-Canadian music is a master's thesis from the University of Calgary by Carianna Friesen (2010). This work surveys African-Canadians in Canada's largest population centres in order to discover the impact of musical taste on identity formation. She found that most African-Canadians find in the music they listen to or perform a way to foster a sense of home, of connection to their roots and of their identity. This was not just as African-Canadians, but also as Gambian-Canadians, Ashanti-Canadians, and so on. Though this work opens up a space in Canadian ethnomusicology for my project, our goals are different. Where Friesen focused on the music African-Canadians listen to and how they construct their identity, I intend to study the music produced by African-Canadian musicians in Montreal. Mine is a study of performance and adaptation, rather than of audiences and musical taste. Where Friesen sought in African music a sense of connection to an immigrant's past, I seek instead a sense of the music's future.

There are several other works that touch on African-Canadian music. One, part of a study on transmusicality by Bruno Deschênes, discusses Nathalie Cora, a Montreal-based player of the kora⁴ (2007). Deschênes writes about musicians who "opt for the other," those who perform music from a culture not their own. Deschênes' work formed much of the original impetus for my study and his look at transmusicality is a valuable one for my work. (Nathalie Cora, an important figure in the Montreal African music scene, will be discussed later.) Deschênes also wrote about the experience of African and other diasporic performers in the Montreal Jazz Festival (Deschênes 2000). In this writing he discusses the wide diversity of music it is possible

⁴ The kora is a 21-string bridge-harp with a resonator built from a calabash and cow skin. It is a common instrument among the Mande peoples.

to hear every year at this festival, with musicians and music from all over the world. He discusses notions of transmusicality here as well, claiming that one who performs music not of their own culture can never be entirely rooted in it, and this inevitably affects one's performance and the perception of an audience. Much of Deschênes' work emphasizes the challenges of musicians playing music outside their cultural experience. As such, his work provides a useful reference for my description of Québécois musicians who perform in the African music scene.

The collection *Canadian music: Issues of hegemony and identity* (Diamond and Wittmer 1994) offers insight into the situation of African musicians in Canada. Though the authors don't deal with African musicians specifically, the book discusses the challenges and issues of immigrant musicians in the country. An article by Norman Buchignani, "Canadian Ethnic Research and Multiculturalism," addresses the role that multicultural policy has had in performing world musics (1994). Buchignani acknowledges that this policy has allowed musicians in Canada to express themselves and has fostered intercultural communication. Buchignani also notes that multicultural policies may create imaginary communities, projecting unified interests and cultural history onto groups without justification. The problem of imaginary community is a real one in Montreal, where many diverse groups of African and African diaspora communities live. The spirit of multiculturalism sometimes projects a unity onto this diverse group, conflating immigrants from all over Africa with groups from Haiti and other areas in the Americas. In fact, promotion of African culture often swings between two extremes, sometimes promoting African culture as a whole with its diasporas thrown in, and sometimes narrowly promoting the culture of specific national and ethnic communities.

The book also includes an essay on Trinidadian culture in Toronto, offering a history on the establishment of a large carnival festival there (Gallaughier 1994). This history parallels the

efforts of African-Canadians in Montreal to establish a presence for their music while also adapting to Canadian audiences and attracting Canadian participation and communication. Here, too, multiculturalism is critiqued as fostering a shallow, superficial engagement between cultures and obstructing true dialogue.

Aside from specifically musical works, there are quite a number of books that deal with African immigrants in North America. Among these is the *The New African Diaspora*, which attempts to frame the conversation on this subject, contrasting this movement of people from Africa with the original, slavery dominated African diaspora (Okpewho and Nzegwu 2009). The authors discuss issues of citizenship, identity, religion, and justice, and highlight the often-vulnerable nature of Africans immigrants as well as their resilience and achievements. Specific to Canada is a book titled *The African Diaspora in Canada* (Tettey and Puplampu 2006). Since Canada does not have the long history of African-American enslavement of the United States, contextualizing this diaspora is both more complex and less fraught with political implications. Much of the work is devoted to raising awareness of racial conflict as an issue in Canada, to combat the “mythical refrain that ‘race doesn’t matter here’” (ibid.:27). The authors bring attention to the implications of racial difference in Canada and the existing marginalization of African immigrants. They also wish to combat the image of African-Canadians as eternal immigrants, never at home in Canada even as second and third generation Canadians.

Several books written on the subject of the African diaspora in Québec help to set the stage for my project as well. *Le Contribution Des Noirs au Québec* (Bessière 2012), a book published by the Québécois government, details the story of African-Canadians in Québec as well as the older Haitian community and much older African-Canadian populations dating from the colonial period. This book details the struggles for black equality that began with Caribbean

immigrants early in the 20th century and continues today, as well as the significant cultural achievements of black Québécois. Even more specific is the book *Les Immigrants Senegalais au Québec*, itself written by Senegalese immigrant Amadou Ndoye (2003). This book focuses on the integration and intercultural adaptation of Senegalese immigrants to Montreal, focusing on two individuals as case studies.

1.2.3 Scenes and Micromusics

Perhaps the most significant change for African musicians who leave home is the unfamiliarity of the rest of the world with Africa's deep, rich, and complex musical universe. Transposed to foreign soil, the many diverse genres of African are clustered together under the catch-all phrase "African music." A style familiar to an entire nation at home here becomes specialized knowledge, known only to few. In a highly diverse city such as Montreal, the music scene is highly fragmented, with hundreds of genres and venues competing for an audience's attention. To succeed in this new framework, African music has had to constitute itself as something relatively unified, as a single style. In order to understand how the West African musical community is constructed in Montreal we must have some notion of how these fragmented, smaller music scenes work. In order to do so, Mark Slobin's notion of micromusics, as well as Andy Bennett and Richard Pederson's idea of a scene, will be useful. What is needed is a sense of how a disparate group of musicians, audiences, promoters, and other actors can work together to present and promote themselves as a semi-coherent unity.

Marc Slobin has done much to advance a theory of how multiple and overlapping musical styles exist in a single place. His work on micromusics (1992) illuminates how such styles work on many levels simultaneously. He describes how genres that begin locally can spill over into

regional and even global musics. Here he points out the immense complexity that takes place in such musical interactions, while also providing some means to manage this complexity. Chief among these are his notions of superculture, subculture, and interculture. Each of these concepts indicates one slice of the multiple shifting groups of affiliation, affinity, kinship, and national ties we each belong to. They are also intended to act flexibly, expanding and contracting as needed. The superculture of Montreal's music forms a subculture of Québécois music, which itself is part of the Canadian superculture. Intercultural units, by contrast, depict the connections between these subcultures as they weave together to form a superculture and facilitate change within subcultures. Subcultures can be ethnic, and thus depend at least nominally on one's heritage and place of birth; or simply by affinity, subcultures of genre and style where anyone interested can participate.

The notion of African music in Montreal already invokes a complex web of super- and subcultural exchanges and interplays. For some purposes, African music in general looks like one subculture among many, competing with other genres of music for an audience's attention. As one looks closer, though, African music looks less and less unified, itself split into many subcultures. These subcultures are formed ethnically, as in a comparison between Malian music, Chadian music, and Senegalese music; and between genres, in which reggae groups from different countries may share more with one another than with groups from their nations. Also misleading is the suggestion that African music is a genre apart from other musics in Montreal, competing with them. African musicians are part of many genres in Montreal, with African hip-hop and electronic musicians having more in common with their stylistic counterparts than their national ones. This notion of micromusics is crucial when trying to track the dynamics of "African music" in Montreal, to tease out the relationships between the subcultures and the

superculture, as well as to find the place of African music within Montreal's superculture.

Very close to this notion of micromusics is the concept of "music scenes," put forward by Andy Bennett and Richard Pederson. In their edited volume *Music Scenes: Local, Translocal, and Virtual* (2004) the authors envision the notion of music scenes as a vital opposition to the notion that corporations today predetermine all music and record companies. They write that "It is good that this is not the whole story, because then music would deserve no more attention than do men's shoes or shower fixtures" (ibid.:1). They seek to combat this notion, with the authors in this volume each in their own way claiming that small-scale music scenes are where the really interesting ideas in music come from. Their work mirrors Slobin's in many ways, while also drawing attention to the "translocal," a connection found between related scenes all over the world. How does the performance of Mande music in Québec relate to similar scenes in Paris, New York, Dakar, and in Mali itself? How do these scenes communicate with one another, sharing innovations, ideas, and performers? In some ways the connections between these diasporic communities are more important than their relationship to their home community. For example, communities of Mande musicians living in New York and Montreal, each developing their away from home, may have more in common, both stylistically and through interpersonal connections, than their Malian or Guinean counterparts

Music Scenes discusses the idea of a virtual music scene as well. This idea, perhaps novel during the text's writing (2004), is ubiquitous today. Musical collaboration, promotion, and interaction take place today online as much—if not more—than the so-called real world. Facebook and YouTube provide an invaluable resource for the African music fan, and doubly so for the researcher. Because of its ubiquity, virtual scenes are integral parts of every music scene. Local scenes benefit greatly from promotion as well as interplay between fans and artists, and

translocal scenes find it very easy to communicate with one another.

Chapter 2: An Overview of Montreal's African Music Scene

I begin by providing a brief overview of the constituent elements that contribute to an African music scene in Montreal. This discussion includes the various venues, organizations, and people that make up this community. In the case of local, small-scale scenes, a relatively small group of people can exercise a considerable influence. My approach here mirrors Slobin's in his essay on micromusics: I, too, strive "to be as relational as possible, to lay out the musical interplay—the cultural counterpoint—between individual, community, small group, state, and industry. It is a piece without a score for a collective without a conductor" (Slobin 1992:4).

2.1 Club Balattou

The most prominent venue for African music in Montreal is Club Balattou. Founded in 1985, Club Balattou is the only place in Montreal to focus exclusively on African music. It is located on St. Laurent Street, in the heart of the Plateau, one of the city's busiest entertainment districts. It is a relatively quiet street by day, lined with delis offering Montreal's famous smoked meat sandwiches. The Street comes alive at night, however, with bars, clubs, and venues spilling out into the streets with live music and DJs blasting from every corner.

Club Balattou appears to be just one bar among many other live music venues. As one approaches, though, Balattou's distinctive "African" feel is more and more apparent. Passers-by during the day are treated to the sound of djembes⁵ and other drums coming from Nyata Nyata, a dance company and school that has its studios directly above the club. As night begins to fall, a

⁵ The djembe is a goblet-shaped drum originating in Mali, with the head attached to the body with a braid of string or leather cord and an iron ring.

number of people—many clad in traditional African garb—gather around the entrance, talking, smoking, and waiting for the show to begin. One of these people is Lamine Touré, the owner of Club Balattou and Montreal’s most prominent supporter and promoter of African music. Touré arrived in Montreal in 1974, opened his first bar, I Creole, in 1976, and then Club Balattou in 1985. As a business, Touré’s bar predates the existence of a significant African music scene, dating from a time before large numbers of African immigrants arrived in Montreal (Laurence 2011). Touré’s personality still looms large over the music scene here. Every night after six he perches outside of his establishment, smoking cigarettes, greeting friends, and watching the bar fill with customers. Many onlookers stop to say hello and linger for a moment to join the discussion or swap stories. Touré is the city’s most important promoter and presenter of African music. He has been involved here for so long that it is hard to imagine an African scene without him (Belliveau 2013). During my stay in Montreal, I found myself passing Club Balattou frequently, whether to see a show there or at a neighboring bar, or on my way elsewhere. Musicians and fans were easy to engage in conversation with, getting some air in between sets or after the show.

While the exterior of Club Balattou radiates community, conversation, and welcome, the inside is narrow, dark, and dingy. Only advertisements for upcoming shows betray its African character. Round tables and expansive booths face a risen stage, behind which lies full-length mirrors. At the far end stands the bar. Augmenting the beer and wine is Bissap, a juice made with hibiscus from Senegal, and rum punch, an “Antillaise” offering. At around 7pm, the band for the evening arrives, sets up, and does a leisurely sound check. The music starts around 9:30, and the crowd usually arrives a bit later. Balattou attracts a more Québécois than African crowd, their motto “musique d’ailleurs, pour les gens d’ici” (music from elsewhere, for the people here)

welcoming those unfamiliar with the music. This is not to say that there were no African audience members, and in fact I met many who frequented Balattou. Nevertheless, Balattou does have a reputation for being a Québécois-only hangout, and several musicians I spoke to complained about having trouble attracting an African audience to their shows, noting that Africans rarely went out to see live African music in Montreal.

During the summer, Club Balattou presented live music from Tuesday through Thursday every week, with DJs playing African and Caribbean pop hits on the weekends. Balattou hosts acts from Québec and from Africa and its diasporas. When I was there they presented a wide and varied program. Just a few of the many acts I saw there were Natty Jean, a Senegalese rapper accompanied by a French reggae collective; Abou Diarra and Adama Daou, Mande musicians from the Cote D'Ivoire; and Dama, a guitarist from Madagascar. They also hosted several Latin American groups, among them Timba MM from Cuba and Dato from Mexico. In addition to these "one-off" concerts, Balattou is also responsible for many recurring series. Perhaps the most interesting is "le rythmes au feminine" (feminine rhythms), a showcase of women performers curated by Congolese performer Joyce N'Sana.

2.2 Festival Nuits d'Afrique

Along with Club Balattou, Lamine Touré is the founder of Festival Nuits D'Afrique. This festival, inspired by a similar event in his homeland of Guinea Conakry, has been around since 1987 (Brunet 2011). Though it was originally presented just at Club Balattou, Festival Nuits d'Afrique has grown over the last 27 years and is currently a two-week long event, expanding to many other venues including an outdoor weekend showcase where the festival's headliners perform. In 2011, this outdoor concert took its place in Montreal's newly built Quartier de

Spectacles, an enormous plaza complex in downtown Montreal which also hosts the Montreal Jazz and Just For Laughs festivals.

By 2013 Nuits d’Afrique had grown into a large-scale production. Shows took place at six venues, many with two acts a night. The outdoor weekend had grown into a major event for the city. One enormous stage presented most of the evening’s music, with a large space for watching and dancing. In the rear was a large merchant area selling shirts, Shea butter, African art, and instruments (djembes, koras, balafons,⁶ and more). Stands sold Yassa, a Senegalese chicken dish, alongside “Sandwiches du Monde.” To the side of the main stage lay Agora Afrique, a much smaller stage that hosted workshops, storytellers, classes, and smaller performances. Here Aboulaye Koné offered a workshop on Mande percussion and Oumar Ndaiye offered a class in Guinean dance. This was Nuits d’Afriques’s attempt to explain itself to its non-African audience. Those who came simply out of curiosity could attend these workshops and have some idea of the context of the music they were hearing.

At the Festival Nuits d’Afriques’s inception the majority of the performers were touring acts from Africa and Europe passing through Montreal. As immigration from Africa has increased over the past three decades, more and more space was opened up for African performers based in Montreal to perform. The engagement of Festival Nuits D’Afrique with this local African scene has increased greatly over the years. The Syli d’or (gold elephant), a competition of local African music sponsored by the festival, is one important way that the festival recognizes, encourages, and promotes these musicians. This contest is a nine-week-long event that pits 36 groups against one another in order to award three winners prize money and

⁶ A balafon is a wooden keyed percussion instrument, similar to a marimba or a xylophone.

performance opportunities. It begins in February and continues until the summer, acting as a showcase for small-scale acts. Many of Montreal's most prominent African performers have taken part in this event, which has helped provide cohesion to the otherwise disparate African scene.

In 2009, searching for a new direction, Frederick Kervadec and Helene Dimanche were hired to take over booking for the festival (Laurence 2009). After more than twenty years, many commented that the festival primarily appealed to a small, older crowd, and was unable to attract more recent immigrants, second-generation African-Canadians, and Québécois. To this end, the festival has attempted to present a mix of music, emphasizing fusion and interaction between genres and nations. As Kervadec puts it, "The musics of the world are more and more mixed. We wanted to reflect this trend" (Laurence 2013). Older iterations of the festival featured superstar African pop stars such as Youssou N'dour, Omar Pene, Tikeh Jay Fokoly, and Manu Dibango. In contrast, Kervadec declared 2013 the year of "the rock stars of the desert," inviting musicians who inhabit the genre of "African Blues" made famous by Ali Farka Touré, such as Ethiopia's Krar Collective, Mali's Caravan pour Paix, and Algeria's Hasna El Becharia (Laurence 2013).

Another aspect of this emphasis on diversity has led to a loosening of the festival's original goal to present African culture in Montreal. Currently a wide variety of Latin American, Caribbean, and European music accompanies the African music during the festival, although these other genres are always presented with some connection to Africa or its diasporas. In 2013, the program included Afro-Columbian and Afro-Brazilian music, as well as the Stooges Brass Band, an American group from New Orleans. Some have complained about the new format, arguing that it has taken "Africa" out of the festival, and Festival representatives have responded,

claiming that challenges obtaining visas for musicians and budget concerns make it difficult to bring more African musicians (Laurence 2009, Lemay 2009).

These concerns illustrate the challenges that any large festival has in representing its community. In seeking to attract a larger, more diverse audience, the Festival risks losing its original appeal. Remaining stagnant is not an option for organizers and the decision to diversify the festival's musical content is more than just a commercial consideration. By deciding to include more music from the African diaspora, Festival Nuits d'Afrique is also presenting an interpretation on the meaning of African music. It is an attempt to construct or recognize a larger unity behind the variety and diversity of Afro-musics across the world.

The festival refuses to present African music in strictly racial terms, providing a richer view of African music and its influences all over the world. After all, the play of influences between Africa and its diasporas is crucial to understanding contemporary popular music. It is true that Columbian Cumbia and New Orleans jazz is deeply related to African music. However, the influence of African music is not one directional. Much of today's popular African music has taken inspiration from its diasporas. To cite but a few examples, the debt owed by Senegalese and Congolese mbalax and rumba to Afro-Cuban music (questions of origin aside) is immense, as is the influence of people like John Lee Hooker on Ali Farka Touré (Shain 2009, Tenaille 2002:102). In recent years, the explosion of reggae and hip-hop on the African continent is undeniable. This is not news to African performers and audiences. When I asked a Senegalese man I met at a concert what he thought of music in Senegal today, his first response was to brag to me that, after the United States, Senegal produced the most hip-hop in the world. With this in mind, a diverse concert experience might be the best possible expression of African music, its cosmopolitan nature, and its willingness to borrow from everywhere.

African musicians living in Montreal perhaps exemplify this cosmopolitan musicianship. Many of them (Diouf 2013, Seck 2013) expressed to me that the presence of this otherness was one of the things they found most interesting about the Montreal scene, and that they wished to explore this diversity and make it a part of their music. Elage Diouf's music, in particular, exemplifies the searching openness that I heard in much of Montreal's African music performances. By complaining that there is not enough 'Africa' in Nuits d'Afrique, commentators may reveal that their interest is not in a real encounter with African music, but rather in confirming their own expectations about what African music is and who plays it. James Burns discusses these kinds of expectations in his article "The West is Cold" (2009), where he describes how Ghanaian drumming ensembles would encounter disappointed audiences when their group included some white people along with the Ghanaians, or when groups would perform without their traditional dress. I've encountered this confusion myself when performing with Brazilian or Afro-Cuban groups, and it can be a real impediment to musical dialogue. This is not a typical response to African music among Québécois, and it certainly doesn't stifle Québécois-African musical interaction, which is widespread. Still, it is a concern in presentations of African music in Montreal.

2.3 African music in other festivals in Québec

Aside from the Festival Nuits d'Afrique, African performers are integral parts of most of Montreal's other music festivals. They have a substantial part in the Festival International du Jazz, one of Montreal's most famous cultural landmarks. Though this festival also had humble origins, it currently presents a wide variety of music styles and occupies the entire Quartier des Spectacles (concert district) for its two-week run. This year (2013) the festival had as its official

closer the Malian duo Amadou & Miriam, who packed downtown Montreal despite heavy rain. In some ways the Nuits d’Afrique is a small-scale version of the Jazz Festival. Both Nuits d’Afrique and the Jazz Festival present fusion and mixtures of styles as a positive value. For example, the Jazz Festival in 2013 hosted daily an encounter between two brass bands. Each began performing on opposite ends of the street and marched towards one another, their music blending together as they became closer.

Several prominent African groups besides Amadou & Miriam were invited, among them Vieux Farka Touré, the son of Malian guitarist Ali Farka Touré, and Alpha Blondy, a reggae performer from Cote D’Ivoire. There was a place for Québécois presentations of African music as well. Lorraine Klaasen—a Juno-award winning Miriam Makeba acolyte—performed, as well as Banda Aydé, a Brazilian samba-reggae group that also performed at the Nuits D’Afrique. This openness to music around the world is a stated goal of the festival, which claims that their “program...showcases and redefines ‘diversity’” (Hébert 2013).

The Jazz Festival is perhaps most significant for the number of other summer festivals it has inspired in Montreal. Through the summer months, not a day passes without one or more street festivals taking place. The African community in Montreal hosts many smaller festivals, some organized around specific communities, such as Haiti en Folie (Haiti gone crazy), a three-day event dedicated to showcasing Haitian culture in Montreal. Others are family-oriented events, such as the Bal Poussiere, an evening organized by Senegalese organization Les Productions Désbrouil’Art. This event featured musician Zale Seck as well as a small dancing and drumming event. Larger, more heavily sponsored events also exist, such as Weekends du Monde, a weekly festival that takes place at Parc Jean-Drapeau, a small island off the coast of Montreal. La Tohu, Montreal’s circus community, sponsors a weekend festival that gave its

closing spot to Gotta Lago, an Ivorian performer based in Montreal. Another significant festival that offers performance opportunities to African musicians is Francofolies de Montreal, which offers space both to local African musicians and international performers.

The summer festival season spreads to the rest of Québec as well, and most offer a space for African musicians to perform. Longueuil, a suburb of Québec, hosts an International Festival du Percussion which offers performances and workshops. In 2013 this festival featured percussion from Australia, but still had space for several West African percussion groups, some of which were even able to invite performers from West Africa to perform with them.

Further up the St. Laurence, Québec City also hosts a number of large summer festivals, such as the Festival d'Été de Québec (Summer festival of Québec City), which invited big stars like Femi Kuti and Alpha Blondy alongside local performer Karim Ouellet. Further still is the Festival International Rhythmes du Monde (International Festival of World Rhythms) in Sanguenay, which invited a number of African and Afro-musicians to perform. Finally comes the festival at the very top of Québec, Gaspé's Festival au Bout de Monde (End of the World Festival), offering the now familiar mixture of Québécois music, rock, and pop music with African music.

Though Montreal, and to a lesser extent Québec city, are the only parts of Québec to have significant African and Afro-diaspora populations (Statistics Canada 2012), festivals throughout Québec regularly offer this music to its patrons. African music is just another kind of music on offer, a genre alongside fiddle music, hip-hop, and others. This remarkable breadth of festivals, many sponsored by the Québec government, significantly support Montreal's musical community. These festivals rely heavily on Montreal's artistic talent, especially for African music, and give musicians a group of reliable gigs every year. This improves Montreal's scene as

well, and makes it easier to attract international performers. African performers who came to tour in Québec often performed in small venues in Montreal as well. Friends of mine were shocked to hear that I was able to see Les Frères' Guissé and Awadi, very prominent Senegalese groups, in tiny bars in Montreal. This was made possible because of larger concerts at festivals in the rest of Québec. The performances of these groups in Montreal were attended by musicians and longtime fans and had an intimate, convivial air as a result.

2.4 Other venues for African music in Montreal

Despite the prominence of Club Balattou and the Festival Nuits d'Afrique, there are many other African events happening in Montreal. Many African musicians make a living without ever playing at Club Balattou. One musician suggested to me that, as prominent as Touré's productions were, they rarely paid enough for professional musicians to rely on them. One venue is rarely enough to make a scene in any case. Without a variety of places to play, music scenes are too one-dimensional. Each venue adds something to the scene, inviting different kinds of musicians and different kinds of performances.

A music venue that hosted a great number of African events was Les Bobards, a club just across the street from Club Balattou on St. Laurent Street. Even though Les Bobards doesn't exclusively feature African events, or attempt to attract an African audience, it did host quite a few events during my time there. Just as in the festival Nuits d'Afrique, musicians from Africa and its diasporas often found themselves performing for similar audiences and at similar venues. Les Bobards hosts a weekly performance of Cuban music—Dimanche à Cuba—with The Cuban Martinez Show. They also host a collective called Kalmunity, which presents live, improvised hip-hop every Tuesday night. During the summer of 2013, Les Bobards hosted groups from out

of town, some quite famous in Africa. They also hosted a number of acts based in Montreal, including Gotta Lago, a prominent musician from le Cote D'Ivoire. Where Balattou is small and dark, Bobards is expansive, with a smaller stage and a larger dance floor.

Performers of African music in Montreal, like musicians all over the world, search for opportunities to play wherever they can. During my time in Montreal, performances of African music also took place at The Upstairs Jazz Club, a small restaurant named Saveur Soleil, a performance space named L'Alize, and at Sala Rosa, a concert hall sponsored by the Spanish Cultural Association. Haitian, Brazilian, and Guinean drumming ensembles regularly played in a kind of open rehearsal outside at parks during weekend afternoons. Apart from performance at formal venues, there are a large number of informal events put on by individual African communities. These events are spread through word of mouth, phone calls, and Facebook, and this makes it difficult for those outside of the community to find them.

2.5 Montreal's African drumming and dancing schools

There are several drumming schools in Montreal. Québécois musicians run most of these in order to teach other Québécois. These schools act as a kind of mediator between African and Canadian culture. Classes are large, with as many as 30 people in a class. These schools encourage an "anyone can play" attitude, and also focus on the social aspect of participation. Students seem to feel less inhibited and more extroverted in exploring something that is apart from their own music traditions (Bellemare 2013).

Samajam is the most prominent of these drumming schools. Louis Bellemare, the group's founder, is not only a teacher and educator but is a team-builder and motivator. The group offers classes, but their focus is on workshops, especially to the business community. These one-off

sessions promise corporate students an experience where “you are the musician,” connecting African drumming with employee satisfaction, leadership, and stress management. Samajam suggests that African drumming will take people away from their normal lives and let them escape (ibid).

Drumming classes are also offered by the Zuruba group, led by Martin Bonin. Martin is an entrepreneur who got his start importing djembes into Canada. He also opened several small cafes and live music venues, though Zuruba is now his main occupation. He teaches both African percussion and Brazilian percussion in his own studio in Montreal’s trendy Mile End district (Bonin 2000). He has beginner students, as well as some quite advanced musicians who play with him and who often perform professionally, especially for outdoor events as a Brazilian Batucada band. Martin makes an explicit connection between Brazilian and African music. His band and students always perform with West African djembes alongside Brazilian instruments, and he tries in his classes and his performances to emphasize this connection.

Another significant school is the percussion school run by Senegalese dancer Dioncounda Njaiye. This smaller group, called Daradji, is one of the only dancing schools that is run by Africans. Njaiye herself is an acclaimed veteran of the national ballet Syra Badaral in Dakar. What sets Daradji apart is the use of live drumming in dance classes. This provides one of the only regular opportunities for highly skilled African percussionists to rehearse and perform in a casual setting.

These three schools are the main catalysts for African drumming and dance education in Montreal. As interest in these African traditions continue to grow, some other music and dance schools in the city are also starting to offer one or two courses in African percussion or dance.

Chapter 3: African Styles in Montreal

It's clear that the African music scene in Montreal is vibrant. The question is: How is African music understood there? As has been noted in the (ethno)musicological literature, there really is no "African" music as such. African music is rich and diverse, with hundreds of musical styles, thousands of groups, and innumerable variations across nations, ethnic groups, and regions, not to mention the large-scale division between modern and traditional approaches to music making. Naturally, the scene in Montreal is rather less diverse. As just one group among many—with practitioners attempting to preserve their culture, create new music, and promote it to a Québécois audience—African music becomes a genre among many, another place to go, another event to see.

It is often claimed that music in Africa is something more than an aesthetic practice, that it is deeply integrated into daily life, serving important functions besides mere entertainment (Chernoff 1979:31-33). This aspect of music in Africa is one that does not survive the change of scenery. What may have been an essential, irreducible aspect of music in its home culture is reduced to a scene in Montreal. African events in Montreal, with a few notable exceptions, accept North American conventions for performance. Musical events take place in bars, concert halls, or outside stages, with opening acts, set breaks, and all the other trappings of American (rock) music culture.

Nevertheless, "African" music in Montreal—and elsewhere out of Africa—is viewed as something fairly unified, a consistent and stable genre. The issue of genre is one that is much discussed in the ethnomusicological literature (Brackett 1995, Holt 2008, Negus 1999), but certainly one aspect of genre development has to do with the establishment of an *audience*, some

group of people who have certain *expectations* about a performance or recording. A genre might be loosely defined here as a classificatory tool for helping people decide whether they may or may not be interested in participating in a particular musical experience. Though it is certainly true that genre labels—especially highly reductive ones imposed on a music from without—can be very limiting, they also can be a useful and helpful tool for musicians and promoters to signal to an audience that they should come see your show. As I’ve indicated earlier in this thesis, the African community is largely built around several key institutions, many of them affiliated with one another. The smallness of the community, especially compared to the North American cultural juggernaut that stands just outside of Québec’s borders, has led this community to offer a fairly coherent version of African music to its audience, both African and Québécois.

3.1 Mande Music as African Music

The music most often presented in Montreal as normative “African” music is a kind of pan-Mande music. The Mande—also known as the Malinke, Mandinka, and various other transliterations throughout the post-colonial African world—are a collection of related ethnic groups based in Southern Senegal, Guinea, Mali, and parts of the Ivory Coast. Though Mande music is itself vast, it is often presented to Québécois (and other North American) audiences in a hybrid, professionalized form, developed through exposure and performance with international audiences (Polak 2000:14). This style has been termed by some researchers as having a jam band aesthetic (Racanelli 2010), borrowing from long form, groove-based improvisations of bands such as the Grateful Dead and Phish. In Montreal, presentation of this style revolves heavily around the use (and symbolic value) of instruments such as the djembe, the kora, and the balafon, important Mande instruments.

In most venues where African music is performed, this Mande style is presented as “African music,” full stop. This is especially true among percussion schools, which often act as mediators between African and Québécois culture. Here classes in Mande music are invariably described as “percussions Africaines.” The strangeness of this one tradition standing in for all of Africa is heightened in the case of the Samajam percussion school, which offers classes in “percussions Africaines” (performance on djembes and dun duns), alongside courses in “percussions Senegalaises,” teaching sabar drumming. Interestingly, both of these classes were taught by Cheikh Anta Faye, a Senegalese Wolof speaker for whom Mande djembe music was not his tradition (Bellemare 2013). The example of Cheikh Anta Faye is a good one to demonstrate what I mean when I say that Mande music is dominant in Montreal. Though Cheikh Anta is a Senegalese musician and an expert sabar player, he was able to achieve his goal of coming to Canada as a djembe player. He secured a working visa, and finally a permanent residency, through a Samajam search for a djembe teacher at their school.

This process is not uncommon. Several of Montreal’s most successful African musicians—including Les Frères Dioufs, also from Dakar—also got their start in Canada playing djembe, both with the Cirque de Soleil and with Les Colocs, a Québécois folk/rock band (Belliveau 2013). I don’t mean to imply by this that a Senegalese musician playing djembe is “inauthentic” or wrong. In fact, Senegal is home to many Mande musicians, and Dakar is home to a thriving djembe scene, both performance and production. Rather, it is to show that the musicians who have success in Montreal are the ones who are able to conform to the vision of African musicians as Mande musicians, where Mande means performing on djembe, kora, or balafon.

3.1.1 The Role of the Griot in constructing Montreal's African music scene

Also key to the presentation of this music is the griot, a term referring to West African hereditary praise singers. Griots are musicians, but also much more. They act as genealogists, historians, and storytellers. They are masters of language and master culture-bearers. As one musician I met put it, "when a griot dies, a library is burned." Though some Montreal Mande musicians are in fact griot, the symbol of the griot is generally deployed to produce an image of African culture as rich, deep, and self-aware. The griot is a critical trope used to explain African culture to the Québécois. This is often invoked to articulate African music as something deeply embedded in one's culture, doing something more than simply playing music. When the griot performs, it is understood to be a deeply meaningful event. To a certain extent this view of the griot is idealized and universalized. Rather than expressing the griot as a particular member of society whose job it is to document genealogies and history, the magic of this term subsumes African culture as a whole, sublimated into a vague respect in African culture for "tradition" and "the past." Gone also is the association of the griot with caste and class as a marginalized member of society, doing something that more nobler castes are too dignified to perform (Tang 2007:52).

Interestingly, though the metaphor of the griot as a means to explain African music is common, the presence of griots performing *as griots* is rather less so. Some of this is easily explainable. With the absence of large extended families in Montreal, not to mention the completely different overarching majority culture, griot music no longer fits into a larger cultural framework. There is, after all, no ruler or priests for the griot to act as advisor to, no cultural capital to be gained by belonging to a noble genealogy or caste in Montreal (Hale 1998:19-22). With the large diversity of people from all over West Africa (and elsewhere), no griot could

amass enough knowledge about the history and genealogy of enough of the people in Montreal to earn his or her keep. Never mind the fact that “by donation”—performing for someone, and then expecting them to be overwhelmed with enough gratitude and thanks enough to pay—does not exactly fit with the modern North American capitalist economy (the griot, after all, is not a busker or a panhandler). Within this diversity, the specific historical or genealogical content of a griot’s music loses its cultural importance and becomes something incidental to the music, as when I overheard one African woman say to another during a concert, “This song is about my family.”

In a situation where the lyrical content is less and less important, more focus is placed on the virtuosity of the musicians, in particular the beauty of the kora. As a symbol of West African music in Montreal, the kora is second only to the djembe. The typical setup for a Mande group in Montreal is bass, percussion, djembe, and kora, sometimes with guitar. The kora player is usually the star of the show, and his/her style is reminiscent of rock singer/guitarists, interspersing sung content with virtuosic flashes on the kora. This is taken literally in the case of Bassoukou Kouyate, a kora player based in Paris but who occasionally comes to Montreal to perform. Shifting the emphasis from accompaniment to a lead instrument role, he is usually billed as the “Jimi Hendrix” of the kora (see Charry 2000:14). The djembe, too, in these kinds of bands will often leave accompaniment parts to the percussionist or drummer, sitting out front and adding improvisatory flourishes.

3.1.2 The Aestheticization of the Griot in Montreal

Though griots still do perform life-cycle events such as weddings, it was my impression that they took place with a full group and rarely involved the genealogical or historical

recounting the griot is famous for. The music of the griot, and of Mande music in general, here became aestheticized. Detached from its functional, cultural aspect, it was thus transformed into a style of music, a genre among others. What began as an essential cultural experience becomes a scene, something optional and voluntary. This is not to say that this process only takes place in Montreal, however. Similar aesthetic transformations have taken place in New York (van Buren 2001, Racanelli 2010) and in Paris (Winders 2006), to name just a few examples.

It's true that griot practice has changed in Africa as well. As capitalism becomes more prevalent, and the world of patronage changes, griots have difficulty convincing their clients of the value of their work and are forced to look for other ways to make money. As recordings become more and more popular, supplanting live performance, the kind of highly individualized performance of the griot also is out of fashion. In Senegal, many griots perform praise song not to individuals, but to famous marabouts (religious figures), imams, or political figures, hoping their supporters will buy these recordings (McLaughlin 1997, Panzacchi 1994).

The complement to the aestheticization of the griot's music is the de-musicalizing of his or her work. Though we often think of the griot as primarily a musician in the west, his or her true job—at least according to Senghor—is to be “master of the word” (Senghor 1979:105). The work of the griot—singing praises, telling stories, and giving histories—still takes place in Montreal, but in a much different form. Instead of using music and singing in languages unknown to most people in Montreal—Québécois and African alike—the griot in Montreal uses ordinary speech in French, directed towards the Québécois. In effect they act as cultural ambassadors, promoting, explaining, and delivering African culture all at the same time.

One example of this is the performer Abdoulaye Koné. He promotes himself as “le griot de la temps moderne” (the modern griot) with “la musique dans le sang et le style mandingue au

bout des doigts” (music in the blood and the Mande style at the tip of the fingers). He performs as a musician, with his own group Bolo Kan and several others, while also acting as an interpreter of African music to Québécois. He teaches djembe and dun dun classes, like many Mande musicians, but he also offers a course in what he calls Jams supervisée, a kind of guided jam session for Québécois and Africans to get a sense of “real” djembe performance.

Abdoulaye also produces, along with some others, the theatrical production Baobab, directed towards children. This successful show, which tours across Canada and throughout North America, is a production of the Québécois theatre company Theatre Motus. The play is an introduction to African culture centered on the griot as storyteller. The production is a story as told by griots, while also including the griot as a character. The kora, balafon, and djembe are played as accompaniment to the spoken tale. The study guide given as a complement to the play when performed to schools uses the trope of the griot to explain African culture while also connecting it to universal ideas of communication and oral tradition:

Griots who are storytellers are also looked upon as poets, traveling musicians and the guardians of the oral tradition. A man named Balla Fasséké, believed to be the first griot, began the line of Kouyaté griots that are still active to this day. Since the beginning of time, adults have been telling stories to children and sometimes to adults. They do not always know how to read, but they all remember the stories that others had told them and so on from one to the next. This collection of stories is part of what is known as the oral tradition. As a result, griots, like other storytellers in other cultures of oral tradition, are very important because for a very long time there weren't any books to keep an account of the very old and beautiful stories they tell. (Bruyère 2012)

Storytelling associated with griots is also very important for the Festival Nuits d'Afrique. Alongside the main stage, a smaller stage was set up for the outside events called Agora Afrique, a space designed to explicate African culture for the audience in order to give them some context for the music. Mande griot music was a prominent aspect of these presentations, with workshops given on the kora, the balafon, and on African (Guinean) dance. Alongside this were

performances by Beбето Lonsili, a comedian who describes himself as “grandi dans le cercle des griots et des forgerons” (raised in the circle of the griots and the smiths) (Lonsili 2013), who also introduced his audience to African culture through storytelling accompanied by balafon. The griot thus forms a central trope in attempts to convey the meaning and power of African music to its audience. Though many who make use of these tropes are themselves griot, the idea or spirit of the griot is available to all, and I heard it mentioned often when discussing African music with friends and musicians.

The dominance of Mande musical tropes in Montreal is also clear when viewing collaborations between musicians and groups. Very often African groups (or even Brazilian ones) would add djembes or other Mande instruments to their music, even when performing a completely different style. Performances by Senegalese groups such as Karim Diouf, Zale Seck, and many others usually included djembes, even if alongside other percussion. Especially interesting to me was the transformation of other instruments to resemble djembes. One sabar drum, owned by my teacher Cheikh Anta Faye, was built not with the horizontal pegs typical of the sabar, but with the intricate rope tied around rings of iron of the djembe. Though it still sounded like a sabar, it is clear that the look of the djembe was to be imitated. This was more understandable given that Cheikh Anta played djembe as well, but I was still unable to get an explanation from him besides “C’est etrange, oui?” Or, “C’est Beau, non?”

Another very unusual example of non-Mande groups making use of Mande musical ideas was the invitation of Zal Sissokho, a kora player, to the Algerian group Syncop. This ensemble was part of the Festival Nuits d’Afrique, despite a sound very different from any sub-Saharan music. Sissokho sat in with their group one night following his own performance and played almost an entire set with them. Besides the musical mismatch between these sounds, the

disconnect was heightened by the fact that Syncop and Sissokho were not using the same tuning system. No one else but me seemed confused by the pairing. It may be that Mande music seems, in Montreal, to be so quintessentially “African” that it seems appropriate as part of all African music.

3.1.3 An Explanation for the predominance of Mande music in Montreal?

Why and how has Mande music become dominant as a style in Montreal? This is certainly not an inevitability. As mentioned above, the world of African music is by no means small, and for one ethnic group, even a large one, to dominate the music scene is quite extraordinary. This was one of the things that most surprised me upon my arrival, especially since I decided to come to Montreal after hearing some of the music from Senegal performed and played there. Asking musicians, promoters, and audience members proved unhelpful. Non-Mande musicians I asked generally responded that Mande music was simpler, easier to understand, and more *carré* (square) than their own music (musicians from Senegal, especially, seemed not to consider any other possibility). Others who I asked pointed to the popularity of the djembe in North America as a probable explanation.

These explanations seem incomplete to me. Certainly the popularity of the djembe isn't sufficient, as I argue that the dominance of Mande music in part is responsible for this. Added to this is the popularity of the djembe as a signifier for African music all over the world, even in places with few Mande people such as Vancouver. The chauvinism of musicians who feel that their music is too complex and intricate to be understood by Québécois also seems not quite to work. As I have argued, some effort has gone into making Mande music explicable to a North American population, and the style of Mande music popular in Montreal has been designed in

some ways to appeal to the other. Surely this process could take place for any number of genres and styles of African music.

Language and demographics have some impact on this development. It is not mysterious, for example, why Ghanaian and Nigerian music is marginal in Montreal. As the world's second largest French speaking city after Paris (Roussopoulos 2005:292), Montreal is a magnet for French speaking African immigrants (Bessière 2012:151), with its African immigrants hailing primarily from Francophone West Africa. The figures, however, do not seem to indicate any reason why Mande music should dominate. People from Mande areas living in Québec, such as Guinea, Mali, and Cote d'Ivoire, are not more prominent than other immigrants from sub-Saharan Africa. In 2006, Québec residents who claimed ethnic origin from these nations numbered less than 4500 residents, whereas Congolese, Rwandan, Cameroonian, and Senegalese residents each numbered over 2000 residents each (Statistics Canada 2008). It's not clear, either, that Mande immigrants have primacy in migrating to Québec. In fact, immigration from Senegal was more than quadruple that from Mali and Guinea combined up until 1996, when larger numbers of Guineans began to arrive (Ezéchiel 2006:68-69). In general, the answer to the questions of what music becomes dominant seems not to turn simply on demographics.

To give another example, the population of Haitians in Montreal greatly exceeds that of Africans of any kinds living there. And yet it is very difficult to see Haitian bands perform regularly. Whereas the Festival Nuits d'Afrique spans a full two weeks, the comparable festival of Haitian culture—Haiti en Folie—lasts only a weekend, with musical acts competing with films, lectures, and other events. An interesting counterexample to this situation is with respect to food. Though there are very few African restaurants in Montreal, it's very easy to get good Haitian food. This brief anecdote just goes to show that population levels are not necessarily as

important as they seem. Different histories, as well as the effects of chance, can create two very different results in what seems at first glance to be two very similar cultural institutions.

Demographics seem not to have played a very large part in this tale. In many ways this is not surprising. Since the African population, especially that of any particular nation in Africa, is very small, a musical group or genre is not going to be able to achieve success by relying simply on its own community. In order to be successful, a group must appeal, at least in part, to the superculture. Clearly, Mande music has been successful because it was able to do so.

I claim that there are several more concrete musical and cultural factors, both local to Québec and internationally, that led to the perception of Mande music as African music writ large in Québec. Along with Gerard Kubik (1999:13), I feel that this process is anything but deterministic. The spread of music, and especially musical taste, is idiosyncratic and ambiguous, dependent always on individual listeners and performers. The decision of what to listen to, where to go to see music, and what to be passionate about is affected by too many factors to list. And yet, as Kubik claims, the deciding factor may be so small as to be invisible to history. A single performance or one recording could be influential enough to shape an entire genre and the listening patterns of a community or nation. The development of music, and of art in general, is anything but an inevitability. Cultural progression does not follow a straight path, but rather a winding, twisting development, full of paths not taken, of gaps unfilled. In this way, the twists and turns of styles and genres resemble the conception of the novel espoused by Milan Kundera:

But hasn't the novel come to the end of the road by its own internal logic? Hasn't it already mined all its possibilities, all its knowledge, and all its forms? I've heard the history of the novel compared to a seam of coal long since exhausted. But isn't it more like a cemetery of missed opportunities, of unheard appeals? (1988:15)

Though some rely heavily on the idea of social capital as a determinant to our cultural habits (Bourdieu 1980), this theory tends to divest the notion of culture of any content at all, claiming that one interacts with culture just because others do so, downplaying personal gratification or engagement with the material. Without adopting a deterministic stance, it is necessary that arguments about the primacy of Mande music in Montreal remain speculative. I wish not to offer a definitive explanation of how things came to be how they are, but simply offer some suggestions of how things could have been different.

One explanation of how Mande music came to exert such an influence is the actions taken by the nations of Guinea and Mali soon after their independence. These two countries made musical production a cultural priority, placing a great deal of state attention and funds into musical competitions and official groups. In Mali, these groups were heavily politicized, creating a national music out of the multi-ethnic framework of the new country (Cutter 1971:224, 240). These groups were split between ensembles that played exclusively modern and exclusively traditional music. With significant political support, these groups were able to develop new musical styles for performance, which relied heavily on the rhetoric of the griot. In Guinea, too, president Keita Fodeba pushed hard to form groups throughout the country (Tenaille 2002:30). The official support of some groups led hundreds of other groups to compete for the slot, groups which explicitly aimed to promote a “Pan-African vision that privileges encounters and multi-ethnicity” (ibid.:30).

The culmination of this was the creation of *Les Ballets Africaines*. These ballets generally took the form of dancing and drumming ensembles, usually using djembes and adapting Mande repertoire. These groups were part of a sense of African socialism promoted by the state. These ballets grew out of the French colonial tradition and were retooled after the fall of French

colonialism to demonstrate the existence of African national culture, both equal to and distinguished from European culture. Though these national ballets were designed to demonstrate the independence and equality of new African states such as Guinea and Mali, the commercial power of the west was too great to resist, and the most successful of these groups toured Europe and America as well as Africa, sometimes with support from the French Government as well as their own (Racanelli 2010:20, Polak 2000:18, Flaig 2010:72). Residencies in New York and Paris further introduced Americans and Europeans to African music, many for the first time (Flaig 2010:6). The touring of these groups throughout West Africa also introduced many Africans to the music of the djembe and this new, stage-driven Mande style as well (ibid.:72).

In other parts of West Africa, such as the Ivory Coast and Senegal, nothing like these international ballets developed. In Senegal, instead of a highly nationalistic, highly stylized form of traditional music, an adaptation of Afro-Cuban music was the soundtrack of the post-colonial Belle Epoque. For them the music of Cuba and Latin America offered a kind of alternative modernity, untouched by the hegemony of colonial powers (Shain 2009:192). Instead of stage shows, the dissemination of this music took place in nightclubs and hotel lobbies on the dance floor, rather than the concert hall.

When Africans began to immigrate to Québec in the late 1960s, therefore, Mande music was often the only African music known to Québécois. When Lamine Touré opened his first club in 1975 this music was a natural fit. As a Guinean dancer, the music of the ballets must have been familiar to him, and groups made up of members from touring ballets were the only African musicians touring through North America. Without any large African presence in Québec at that time, Touré was unable to hire as musicians local performers from other parts of Africa. It is

easy to imagine how a certain kind of musical inertia could develop. Accustomed to seeing Mande music as African music in Montreal, listeners would be more likely to attend concerts featuring music they were already familiar with and had often been adapted specifically for their tastes. This is not to say that Mande music in Montreal has remained unchanged throughout the years, as a number of talented, innovative, and skilled performers have pushed the boundaries of this music in Montreal today.

Along with the historical explanation, I believe another key element to understanding the prominence of Mande music is the figure of the griot. The *Ballets Africaines*, along with the djembe, brought a number of other important concepts from Mande culture into contact with American and European audiences, especially the idea of the griot. In Montreal, the griot acts as a kind of super-promoter, making Mande culture more explicit and coherent to listeners. The most challenging aspect of promoting and producing music from another culture in North America is the problem of interpretation and understanding. Simply put, the griot figure is one that has been digested, in certain respects, by North American audiences, especially in Montreal. It has been used by many figures in African and African-American studies as a key to understand African culture, in particular by Alex Haley in his book and movie series “Roots.” Its ubiquity in productions of Mande African music in Montreal may make this music easier to understand and listen to for Québécois audiences.

3.2 Alternative African Styles in Montreal

Mande music is not the only African music taking place in Montreal. In fact, there is a startling diversity of music from Africa taking place. However, these groups tend to be more

idiosyncratic, playing music that does not easily fall into one style or another, and/or does not resemble an “ethnic” style at all. One excellent example of this is the group H’Sao. This group of brothers, originally from Chad, has had quite a bit of success in Montreal and abroad, touring Europe and around Canada. Though they discuss their roots in tradition, as well as coming from a “musical family” (Izra 2013), their tradition is not that of the Mande griots. Instead, they describe their musical upbringing as beginning in church (H’Sao 2013). Their music is very innovative. They offer a profound mix of styles, often beginning their sets with acapella numbers. Their newest album is a mix of styles African and American, playing hip-hop, reggae, and heavy rock, as well as funk and jazz. Unlike Mande musicians in Montreal, H’Sao seems to revel in the movement between worlds, switching from Africa to Canada, the old to the new. The cover art for their album *Vol. 235* was all shot in an airport, with evocative images of the band waiting in line with their bags, a modern reality surely familiar to any immigrant to Canada. While the band is quite popular in Montreal, and often mentioned to me as one of the most exciting things happening in African music in Montreal, they are without a doubt singular. There does not seem to be a larger community of Chadian musicians in Montreal playing, much less any groups who join in H’Sao’s distinctive style and sounds.

A similar story can be told about the music of Elage Diouf. Elage has had quite a bit of success in and outside of Montreal, but again with quite idiosyncratic music. His Juno award-winning album *Aksil* is dizzying in the musical barriers and interactions he employs. Brazilian and Cuban percussion instruments are among the first instruments to sound on this album, alongside guitars, sabars, djembes, and drum set. Perhaps most genre bending of all is the bluegrass song “I am a Man of Constant Sorrow,” reimagined and translated into Diouf’s Wolof. Like H’Sao, Diouf seems to revel in the movement between cultures, with sharp transitions

between styles and languages all over the record. The initial moment of *Aksil* is a burst of voices, offering the listener welcome in French, English, Arabic, and Wolof. A Song that begins with a Cuban montuno moves within seconds to a reggae groove. A melody begun by a kora in one song shifts to acoustic and electric guitar, making common cause between a Mande style and American folk music (Diouf 2011).

The relationship between Elage and tradition is also much different than what we saw with Mande artists. Though Senegal, too, is marked by the hereditary caste of griot praise singers, Elage is quick to disassociate himself from this tradition, explaining that he is not griot and that as a child he was careful to hide his musical activity from his parents (Diouf 2013). A discussion with Assane Seck, guitarist for Elage among many others, reveals a different attitude to traditional music, saying, “Si je voulais jouer juste le Mbalax, je reste á Dakar” (If I only wanted to play Mbalax, I would have stayed in Dakar) (Seck 2013). Elage and Assane both are masters of mbalax and perform traditional music often, but it is clear that this is not their goal in their own music. Their desire, rather, is to play as many kinds of music as they can while in Montreal.

Chapter 4: Québécois interpretations of African music

Though much of the focus on African music in Montreal is focused on people of African descent, there is no lack of Québécois participants in the African music scene. Québécois are the primary audience for percussion and dance classes in Montreal, which offer them a community-based, mediated form of African music and culture. Québécois make up a large portion of the audience for African music concerts as well, regularly outnumbering Africans at Club Balattou and elsewhere. As I have already noted, most African music in Montreal seems to adapt itself, at least nominally, to Québécois performance practices and expectations. However, it is not only as spectators and students that Québécois people participate in this culture. Many working musicians collaborate with African musicians and play in African bands. In my time in Montreal, I didn't see a single African group that did not include at least one Québécois musician, and the number was often higher. Though several musicians I spoke to decried this fact, blaming it on a shortage of African musicians (Belliveau 2013), it was my feeling that the presence of these individuals was critical to the vibrancy of the African music scene. Without this sustained encounter between the two music cultures—on the level of individual musicians relating to one another—it is difficult to see how the scene would be able to work as well as it does.

This musical interaction travels in both directions. Though we have seen in Montreal the adaptation of African music to Québécois, the opposite has taken place as well. Many groups and individual musicians have made subtle use of music gathered from African sources, appropriating some of its conventions, timbres, and processes for use in their own music. This use was sometimes incidental to the music, other times profound. Part of this was simply the integration of African music into Montreal's musical superculture. Even if it was not their

primary occupation, many musicians I spoke to said that they had performed with African musicians at one time or another.

Such cross-cultural encounter was common. Particularly notable was the music of drummer Jah Son, leader of the hip-hop collective Kalmunity. When I approached him about what seemed to me African elements in his work, he mentioned that he was influenced by African groups he played with. In contrast to this casual appropriation are the Québécois musicians who have taken up African music as their primary musical outlet. The most prominent example of this is Nathalie Cora, a Québécois musician who adopted the kora as her first and only instrument in the 1980s, and has been performing on it ever since. African music as such has had an impact on the larger musical community as well. The prominence of African music in Montreal led to the reinterpretation of Latin American music, with many musical groups from Central and South America emphasizing the African roots of their music.

Of course this appropriation is not without its problems. Ethnomusicologists have long attempted to guard against the misappropriation of music, particularly when done by European or American musicians of African or Asian works. In such a venue, the risk of belittling or exoticizing a culture is a real concern. However, appropriation can be a very powerful catalyst for musical development. The dissemination of the electric guitar in the last five decades, to take one example, has played a part in the development of many genres of music all over the world (Dawe and Bennett 2001). In the case of Montreal, the use of African music by Québécois musicians has created a very interesting hybrid music, recognizable as African-derived, but with clear North American characteristics as well.

4.1 Québécois performers of African Music

Of the Québécois musicians who have embraced African music wholeheartedly, Nathalie Cora (née Dussault) is perhaps the most impressive. She had her first encounter with African music in mid 1980s, when she heard the kora in a Montreal bar. Later she was given one by a Guinean musician she knew. She became entranced with the instrument, studying it on her own, with teachers in Québec, and finally in Guinea and Senegal in 1993 (Dussault 2010). Her musical world begins and ends with this West African instrument, a fact much remarked upon in a study by Bruno Deschênes (2007). Currently she is one of the longest standing performers of African music in Montreal, having been active in the city continuously for over 25 years, pre-dating almost all of the Mande musicians living there now.

Nathalie is an exemplary performer and one of the few kora players in Montreal I saw who performs solo regularly. She plays in the group Quatour Mandingue, a traditional ensemble in which she is the only Québécois musician. She also plays in the band of Alpha Thiam, a Guinean musician and songwriter. Currently much of her time is spent performing in Theatre Modus' production *Baobab*. Aside from performing, she also works as a kora teacher and instrument maker. Her koras are beautifully crafted, with her own personal touches always added. She uses guitar tuners to attach the strings, and outfits each of her instruments with a pickup to plug into an amp. Along with full-sized koras, she also builds half- and three quarter-sized ones for children who are learning to play.

Nathalie Cora's music is steeped in traditional African music, emphasizing often her reliance on traditional oral learning as well as the performance of griot repertoire. In recent years, though, she's chosen to move away from performances consisting of solely African music, and she released a more expansive album under her own name in 2004:

Therefore, I met with other musicians who play another kind of music: A more western music. That allowed me to take a break from African music. I recorded a CD in 2004 under the name of Nathalie Cora. This CD had nothing to do with traditional African music. I play the kora with the violin, the accordion, and in my own way. It was for me a new way to work with the kora. (Dussault 2010, translation my own)

Another CD, *Petite Terre* (2004), features a very interesting compromise between African and North American sensibilities. Technically and idiomatically Nathalie plays like a kora player, deploying the fast flourishes and runs characteristic of the instrument as well as the typical 2:3 polyrhythm almost constantly traded between the musician's two hands. In other ways, however, the work is unmistakably North American. Part of it is her use of violin and accordion, though these instruments are not foreign to West African music. More significant, perhaps, is the overall sensibility of the work. The CD is very spare, with light percussion and no vocals. Especially notable is the song "Sept Carré" that features the kora yet still sounds like a traditional Québécois chanson with the instrument perfectly integrated into the genre. Cora is careful in other ways to distinguish herself from the griot tradition, emphasizing the unusualness of a woman playing kora. She is very clear that she is only a musician and performs none of the other functions of the griot. Musically, too, she distinguishes herself from the tradition of the griot, and her compositions are unlikely to be mistaken for African music.

Though Cora is one of the first Québécois to perform African music regularly in Québec, there is another group who has popularized it to the Québécois population at large. This group is Les Colocs, a popular folk/rock act of the 1990s headed by fierce Québécois nationalist Dede Fortin. This group was known for its fun, high-energy songs and music videos, such as "passe-moi le puck" (Les Colocs 1995). In 1999, they invited the Senegalese duo "Les Frères' Diouf" to join the group on vocals and percussion. This new addition fueled a sharp change in direction for the band. On the album *Dehors Novembre* (1998), and especially *Suite 2116* (2001), released

after Fortin's death, the band integrated its sound quite closely with the Dioufs. They recorded songs in the West African Wolof language, with the Diouf's distinctive mbalax vocal style soaring above Fortin's raspy blend of spoken word, story, and song. The music of Les Colocs began to take on an African flavour, the songs sounding more like Afro-pop with some Québécois influences, rather than the sound of a Québécois group imitating African music. This was the first time there had been such a widespread presentation of African music to a Québécois audience (Belliveau 2013).

The prominence of African music in Québec has also led to more casual borrowings of African musical resources by the larger Québécois musical community. Though many of these resources are used out of context and without the deeper relationship to African music that is evident in Cora's or Les Colocs' work, they provide an expansion of the possibilities for Québécois musicians, enabling creation of new compositions and styles. The most obvious of these borrowings is the use of djembe by many musicians in Montreal. It is not unusual to see djembes as part of Brazilian percussion troupes, as auxiliaries to hip-hop ensembles, and in many other kinds of ensembles. Even more notable is the use made by double bassist Olivier Babaz of the kalimba. A skilled and creative jazz bassist, Babaz attaches a kalimba to the side of his bass, and performs both instruments simultaneously, using the kalimba to add chordal accompaniment or melodic accentuation to his solo efforts. Babaz performs with African musicians in Montreal as part of Guinean Alpha Thiam's band and in the Soley trio, a jazz group that also features Togolese Moise Matey. He does not incorporate other aspects of African music in his bass/kalimba experiments, though, using them mostly in performances of jazz or rock cover songs (Babaz 2013).

African culture seems definitively linked to African music in a way that doesn't seem true for other popular musics in Montreal. One connecting thread that links most performers of African music I met in Montreal is the importance of a personal connection to Africa. In one way or another, each wanted to emphasize a link to the "roots" of the music. When asked how they became interested, how they began to perform, or how they are able to play as well as they do, most musicians discussed their time spent in Africa, whether as a child or an adult, and/or there to work or on vacation. This tendency to authenticate their music by citing a connection to Africa occurred even when their personal experiences and their use of African music seemed unrelated.

Babaz, when discussing his use of kalimba and his performance with African musicians, cites his time spent in Madagascar and Reunion Island as an early influence. Though his performance of African music generally focuses on Southern and Western African influence, this is nevertheless an important touchstone for him (Babaz 2013). The same is true for Martin Bonin, the head of Zuruba percussion school and ensemble. Though Bonin cites his time spent in Africa as essential for sparking his passion for the music, he also describes himself as largely self-taught, approaching the music in a highly personalized way (Bonin 2000). This experience travelling in Africa remains a touchstone for Bonin, even though the majority of his musical journey has taken place in Québec.

Parker Mah, a pianist who performs African music in Montreal and also promotes it through his radio program, describes learning about African music by spending time as a volunteer in Senegal. There Mah became involved in the Senegalese hip-hop scene and studied percussion (Crossroads 2012). Through this personal experience, he was able to make connections with African musicians in Montreal and break into its African music scene. For Nathalie Cora, travel to Africa was necessary for her to improve musically. For many this

pilgrimage had more to do with getting the feel of Africa and getting in touch with the people and the place, rather than directly studying the music.

This connection to Africa extends even to musicians who do not make extensive use of African musicians or tropes. One example of this is Sebastian Lacombe, a Québécois pop/folk musician who travelled extensively to Dakar in 2011 (Lacombe 2013). Though he described much of the music of his following record as being inspired by this trip, the music remains very firmly in the milieu of Québécois pop/folk music. Still, Lacombe's personal connection allowed him to participate, if only peripherally, in the African music scene in Montreal. He performed, along with Gotta Lago, Assane Seck, and many other luminaries of the African music scene in a benefit for orphans in Senegal, backed up by Lago's band.

It is not entirely clear to me exactly why musicians seemed to emphasize this personal dimension, why an appeal to the "roots" of the music is such a common trope in their adoption and appropriation of this musical style. It may be that for the musicians I spoke to, African music represents a way to explore a completely different sensibility than they are familiar with, a way to discover something new. While many discussions of African music, scholarly and otherwise, emphasize the difference between African and Western music, there seems to be an even sharper emphasis on the difference between Western and African attitudes towards music. Adopting this "African" attitude towards music seemed even more important than adopting an African sound. While most musicians I asked resisted the notion that it was impossible to learn African music without actually going there, most agreed that it would be much more challenging and much more tenuous to learn African music without having made a personal visit to the continent.

4.2 The Tam-tams

The most prominent Québécois appropriation of African music is the weekly “Tam-tams” percussion jams that take place in Montreal’s Mont Royal Park. This event is one of Montreal’s most well-known tourist attractions (Direction de la culture et du Patrimoine 2013), as well as one of the most anarchical musical events I’ve ever experienced. For decades, drummers, dancers, and hangers-on have gathered at the St. George Etienne statue at the centre of Montreal for an all-day, all-night dancing and drumming extravaganza.

It can be heard from a long way off, the high-pitched sound of djembes mixing with the pounding bass of the nearby DJ. As one gets closer, the sound becomes clearer, easier to perceive. Even when you’re close enough to hear the music, however, it is still hard to see the musicians. Surrounding the drummers are waves of dancers with a large crowd of people watching, selling, loitering, drinking, and hanging around. If you succeed in wading through this scene to finally see the percussionists, what greets you is a scene of almost complete chaos. Between 10-40 drummers stand, sit, and lie in a concrete plaza opposite the great statue. Their instruments are a mix of djembes, timbales, tambourines, cowbells, parts of drum sets, and the sides of old garbage cans. At the margins are guitarists, inaudibly strumming their instruments, and some brass and woodwind instruments, struggling to be heard above the din. Beer, cigarettes, and weed liberally fuel the event, which routinely lasts more than eight hours on a summer Sunday.

Musically, my first impression of the Tam-tams was one of utter confusion. I searched but could not find a sense of order or musical style. As I listened further, coming back week after week, I began to hear small pockets of order amid the chaos. I could see small group of musicians off in a corner playing together. In another corner sat a group of drummers who

obviously arrived together, perhaps as part of another band. I could see someone trying to signal for a change in rhythm, tempo, or texture. Amazingly, the group would start and finish together, performing pieces of 45 minutes or longer as part of the marathon, daylong set. After watching for a few afternoons, I could see that there were a few great drummers in the crowd. Though there was no leader, no organization, some sense of style and order had evolved over the decades.

Though the Tam-tams could not strictly be described as African music, the music remains African derived. It is my feeling that the weekly event is an extended enacting of an interpretation of what African music is through the eyes and ears of Québécois musicians. This Québécois interpretation has little to do with the performances of African musicians in Montreal. The Tam-tams do not emphasize or rely on tradition, unlike many of the African groups in Montreal. Neither is there the creative fusion of African and American music styles that we have seen in groups such as Elage Diouf and H'Sao. Rather, the primary values of the Tam-tams are its inclusiveness and encouragement to all to participate. Everyone is welcome regardless of musical ability, shared musical styles or goals, or common ideas about how the music should sound. All one has to do is dance, drum, or just observe (Fraser 2012, O'Neil 2011).

The view of African music as inherently inclusive and participatory is common in ethnomusicology. John Miller Chernoff used this concept as a central one in his work *African Rhythm and African Sensibility* (1979). In this work, Chernoff claims that the “community dimension is perhaps the essential aspect of African music,” and that “they do not wish distinguish the musicians from the audience at a musical event” (ibid.:33). Here he follows Alan Merriam, who writes that in Africa “The common attitude seems to be that almost all individuals

are equally potentially ‘musical’” (1964:122).⁷ This view of African music as inclusive and participatory is a common trope in discussions of African music by Québécois. Promotional materials for Samajam, the percussion school discussed previously, features students expressing their interest in African music by claiming that it is “accessible for every kind of person.” This kind of participation is the basis for Samajam’s workshop style, which boasts that “in this fully participatory and interactive musical show, the audience turns into musicians” (Bellemare 2013).

4.2.1 History of the Tam-tams

The Tam-tam jams began in 1978 with Senegalese drummer David Thiaw, when he began teaching classes out in the park under the summer sun. Thiaw’s group of students merged with a similar group led by drummer Don Hill, and the event began to attract spectators, dancers, and other drummers (Toussaint 2009). Joining these sessions was Montreal percussionist Michel Seguin, part of Toubabou, one of Montreal’s first bands to perform African music. As more and more drummers came, and the original leaders of the group left Montreal, the music began to change. Beginning drummers began to outnumber more dedicating students of African music, leaving those musicians who wished to play in a more organized way to find other venues. According to Godfried Toussaint, a researcher at McGill University and one of Thiaw’s original students, “the quality of the music progressively deteriorated until it became unbearable...there were six hours of only one rhythm, a fast and loud 4/4 that left your ears ringing until the

⁷ Recent scholars have contested this view, most notably Kofi Agawu in his work *Representing African Music* (2003). Among these critiques is the unwarranted assumption that musical attitudes and practices are at all unified across Africa (ibid.:59). Agawu also contests the notion that because African music is more participatory than Western music, it cannot also be contemplative or non-functional (ibid.:99).

following Tuesday” (ibid). Without teachers knowledgeable in African music, the Tam-tams began to take on a new style. By 2013, there was little one could recognize of Senegalese, Guinean, or any other kind of traditional African music at the Tam-tams. Most African musicians I spoke to said that they never attended the jams, making the same criticisms as Toussaint.

Yet, despite the lack of a recognizable style, the sound of the Tam-tams still retains an “African” feel. Each participant seems to play rhythms and patterns idiomatic to their own instrument, recognizable in a style they have learned. What remains is the bare bones rhythmic archetypes described by James Burns in his article “Rhythmic Archetypes in Instrumental Music from Africa and the Diaspora” (2010). Burns attempted to compile a host of data from ethnographers across the world to distill common tropes across the African diasporic world. Among these are the interwoven 2:3 polyrhythms much remarked upon by students of African music and the use of high-pitched instruments to play upbeats in between pulses. These elements are usually present during the Tam-tam jams, almost performing a reduction of the myriad African drumming traditions that are present in the jams. The Tam-tams retain a symbolic connection to African music as well, and several musicians I spoke to said that this was their first introduction to music in Africa, inviting them to go deeper (Belliveau 2013).

Many more organized, culturally specific groups use the Mont Royal Park to rehearse and perform as well, but they do it quite apart from the Tam-tams themselves. A group playing Afro-Cuban music often sets up on the opposite side of the park to play their own music, and groups of Haitian and Brazilian percussionists are often seen parading or playing through the park as well.

The great irony of the Tam-tam jams is that by divesting itself of specific African musical traditions, it is actually able to reproduce the societal values of participation and inclusion that

are so important to many West African drumming functions. Because of the cultural baggage attached to them, it is much more difficult for other drumming traditions to maintain these values in Montreal. The situation for these groups is quite different than in their home cultures, where these traditions are well known parts of the musical superculture. In Montreal, African music is one subculture among many, and specific drumming/dancing traditions are known only to a few. This gives performances of more authentic African dance/drumming events a very different character in Montreal than they have in Africa. Inclusivity and participation for all is not possible. Instead, performances are enacted in private, mostly attended by those already in the know, or those who have studied that particular musical culture. I now turn to one such example.

4.3 Le Grand Sabar

During my time in Montreal, I was able to attend a Grand Sabar⁸ hosted by the Senegalese community in Montreal. This event, unlike the vast majority of performances of African music in Montreal, was emphatically *not* adapted for performance to a Québécois Audience. The Grand Sabar was designed to appeal to the expatriate Senegalese community by recreating a Senegalese street party.

I heard about the sabar several weeks before it happened, from musicians and fans of Senegalese music who I told about my interest in mbalax and sabar playing. Each mentioned the rarity of the event, and the difficulty of putting it on. To have enough drummers to perform, several had to drive in from as far away as New York. My teacher, Cheikh Anta Faye, was performing, and every lesson I took with him was peppered with comments about how I would

⁸As well as being a musical instrument, the word sabar can refer to the dancing-drumming event in which that instrument is featured.

be able to hear this or that part better during the sabar and how playing the music would make much more sense after I saw the event. Elage Diouf, who led the drummers for the evening, was excited to tell me about the event, saying that it was the biggest Senegalese concert happening that year. Everyone I spoke to pointed to that event as the place I had to go if I wanted to really understand what Senegalese musicians were doing there.

I arrived at Sala Rosa at around 8pm on the night of the Sabar. Sala Rosa is a hall located behind a Spanish restaurant, and as I entered I passed by several couples confused as to whether they were at the wrong place for the show. Though the concert was to begin at around 8:30, the venue was nearly empty. Only the doorwoman, who informed me that she was a dancing student of Dioncounda Ndaiye, and a few others were milling about, waiting. After a while, a DJ set up and began spinning a mix of Senegalese and American pop music, taking advantage of the nearly empty hall to practice his scratching as well.

Soon the hall began to fill up. Women entered, one by one and in large groups. Most were elegantly dressed in long flowing robes, dresses, and headwraps. It wasn't until the hall was completely full that the drummers arrived. I greeted my friends among them warmly. It was clear that the entire crowd was buzzing with excitement, all of them anticipating this infrequent event. The crowd was almost all women, with very few Québécois. It was the only event I saw during my stay in Montreal with this peculiar demographic. The women all were seated, forming three sides of a square where the final side was the drummers, with a dance space in the middle.

At around ten the music began. Slowly, the sounds of drummers warming up took shape, and the band played an opening piece, which Cheikh Anta had taught me was always the first piece of a Sabar. Following this ceremonial beginning, the drummers began to play in earnest. For the next several hours the music rarely stopped. Rhythmic patterns shifted at a glacial pace,

with each rhythmic feel lasting twenty minutes or more. Speeches and announcements were made with the drumming as constant accompaniment and accentuation. Dancing at a Sabar is a strictly individualistic affair. A woman is coaxed by her friends to mount the dance floor, feigning reluctance, and then dance her heart out for ten or twenty seconds, dashing off to allow another her turn. The dance is, most of all, an interaction between dancer and drummer, the dancer performing for the drummers more than the audience. Drummers respond enthusiastically to the best dancers, matching her rhythm and doing their best to co-ordinate her final flourish with a collective rhythmic accent.

Rather than the placid stability of the audience and orchestra of a concert hall, both the drummers and the audience were constantly in motion. Organizers and their friends moved chairs around throughout the evening, with the dance floor slowly shifting and twisting under this movement. Drummers moved about the stage, switching drums with one another, propping their drums against a chair to get a better sound, and throwing sticks to one another. Halfway through the performance several djembe players entered, and stayed to the end. One man entered the stage to dance and stayed to make a speech, sing a song, and then pick up a drum.

Later, when the music had been going on for quite some time, the time for dancing had ceased and the time to show appreciation for the musicians had come. The audience lined up patiently in front of the stage, each stopping to donate money to the drummers. Some collected from their friends and deposited everything on the floor in front of the stage, and others gave to everyone, giving money to all of the drummers, the organizers, and the best dancers. With the entire audience eager to show their support, this process took a long time.

The dancing continued for a time after that, but eventually the band stopped and the DJ went on. Some women continued to dance, this time in a way more reminiscent of a night at

Club Balattou, with everyone dancing together. More streamed out into the street, some driving up to play their own music and continue the dance party outside. In the hot Montreal night, it was quite some time before the crowd dispersed completely. Finally, I walked home as well, amazed by what I had seen. I felt that this was the only time I had seen African music in Montreal that was performed for Africans, with no compromise to North American sensibilities.

In form and content, the Sabar was almost exactly like one in Dakar described by Patricia Tang in her book *Masters of the Sabar* (2010:129-30). The repertoire was identical, each rhythmic feel following another precisely as she documented, as was the dynamic between female dancers and male drummers. The only concession made to Québécois sensibilities that I could find was holding it in a hall, rather than on the street as they would in Dakar. Also notable was the inclusion of a small set of Mande music during the set break. Besides myself, and some men with Senegalese women on their arms, the only Québécois faces I saw belonged to Dioncounda Ndaiye's dance students, eager to practice what they had learned.

For a cultural outsider, participation in this event was very challenging. The drummers slowly moved from rhythm to rhythm at a pace that was clearly familiar to the Senegalese audience, but otherwise mysterious to the rest of us. The movement of solo dancers to the dance floor for brief exhibitions obscured the distinction between performer and audience. At an instant, a dancer could become a drummer, a singer, or give a speech to praise the band or to raise money for charity. To the mostly Senegalese audience, this event had a familiar rhythm, and both performers and audience members seemed comfortable with the inexorable flow. Clearly, though, without extensive education and dedication this familiarity was not available to a Québécois audience. My study of the sabar and discussion with Senegalese musicians allowed me to understand parts of the event, but I was not able to participate fully.

Despite the great similarity between Sabars in Senegal and the Montreal grand Sabar, in meaning they were quite different. In Senegal the Sabar is a commonplace event in which the music and the dance is deeply embedded in its culture. It is much easier for the music to be inclusive and participatory because the conventions of the event are common knowledge (Chernoff 1979:36, Agawu 2003:xi). In contrast, in the Montreal Sabar only Ndaiye's students who had studied the music were able to participate. In Senegal the Sabar is a public event, but in Montreal it is available only to a very few. The practical result of this is that since very few people are able to participate in a Sabar, organizers are not able to host very many of them. Without this regularity fewer and fewer people are exposed to and learn sabar dancing and drumming themselves. This makes it very challenging for the tradition to catch on in Montreal.

Chapter 5: The Creative Tension of Montreal's African Music Scene

African music has carved out its own space in Montreal and has become a permanent and important part of the Montreal musical landscape. This is possible only through the hard work, compromise, and adaptation of African and Québécois musicians in Montreal. The work was that of collective interpretation, in which musicians, promoters, and audiences together established the bounds of what would count as African music in Montreal, how it was to be performed, and who was to perform it. These bounds were, and are, something malleable, subject to change, revision, and development. The interpretation of African music in Montreal is anything but a monolith, in which rules are obeyed with little question. Rather, it is a musical discourse, with each performer offering his/her own take on how African music can be perceived and performed there. This discourse is what gives the Montreal African scene its shape and its vitality, allowing it to continue to grow and develop.

When Abdoulaye Koné and Diely Mori Tounkara preface their performance and discussions about their music by explaining that they are griots, heirs to a long lineage of musicians, historians, and genealogists, they are presenting an interpretation of their music to us. Their claim suggests that we should hear this music as tied to an extended cultural tradition, exhorting us to imagine it in its original context, to imagine them as more than musicians. When Nathalie Cora uses this same instrument to play original music reminiscent of Québécois chansons, she is making a very different claim, encouraging us to hear the instrument as universal, adaptable to many kinds of music around the world. Between these two ends of a spectrum is a great deal of space for dialogue, mutual communication, and creativity. The fact

that Cora, Koné, and Tounkara perform together makes it clear that this dichotomy is productive, and not an insuperable divide.

Other aspects of this discourse take place when Martin Bonin of Zuruba integrates his West African and Brazilian percussion ensembles. He makes an explicit claim about the African roots of Brazilian percussion, pointing at a deep connection between the two. The same is true when musicians bring Cuban and American percussion instruments to perform at the Tam-tam jams. Many others oppose this move, preferring to retain the stylistic diversity and distinctive characteristics of Brazilian, Cuban, and African music, seeing attempts to merge them as misguided. Against these we can place those who complain that there is not enough of Africa in the Nuits d’Afrique (Laurence 2013) or who characterize the Tam-tams without the supervision of an expert teacher as “six hours of only one rhythm, a fast and loud 4/4 that left your ears ringing” (Toussaint 2009). These positions push and pull against one another, one arguing for the value of cultural distinctiveness and the other for collaboration between cultures and the universality of music. Though these debates take place musically, and not through arguments and publications, they nonetheless have a certain weight, shaping the way that African music is performed and perceived. They make their way from person to person in conversation, through witnessing performances, and from playing with other musicians.

Musical discourses and debates of this kind take place in every musical subculture and scene. It might even be argued that subcultures and scenes are nothing more than spaces opened up by these discourses. Diasporic music, though, expands the possibilities of this discourse enormously. In its completely new locale, African musicians are able to reimagine their music, performing in ways that would never occur to them at home. Québécois musicians benefit also, hearing and playing music that they would otherwise know nothing of, allowing them to imagine

new possibilities for their own music. Debates about the meaning of African music and its connections to other musics around the world are brought alive and given concrete expression through their encounter with Québécois music and people. Previously taken for granted notions in the music, such as the centrality of the griot in Mande music, are thematized and presented as essential keys to understand Mande music and culture. Previously unseen possibilities, such as the use of the kora or the kalimba to play French or American music, are brought out and cultivated by Québécois musicians who take up this invitation. African musicians in Montreal learn from Canadian music culture as well, taking the value of multiculturalism up as their own, as we have seen from H'Sao and Elage Diouf.

To some, the disparity between African and Québécois performance of African music in Montreal is lamentable, demonstrating a misunderstanding by Québécois musicians of African music, or a lack of respect for African music in Québec. For many musicians, the Tam-tam jams in Mont Royal Park are just such a provocation, the result of a debasement of African music by those who do not understand it. For me, though, the tension between African performers in Québec and the Québécois interpretation of African music is a productive and creative one. Each is able to feed off of the other. There are those like François, who first learned about African music through the hedonistic sprawl of the Tam-tams, and through exploration became deeply engaged with African music and musicians. Next to him I place Assane Seck who, though a successful professional in Senegal, came to Montreal to learn and play other music. Assane's inquisitive attitude, his willingness to play any kind of music seemed to me an attitude highly reminiscent of jazz and commercial musicians I know in Vancouver. Just as slight exposure to African music can pique further interest, so, too, did living in Québec inspire Assane to study American music more and more. In the conversations I had with him, my questions about

mbalax were each answered by his about jazz. As the African music scene deepens in Montreal, more and more musicians are able to move between these two poles to navigate this creative tension for themselves and use it to produce more interesting music.

Interestingly, very few performers of African music I spoke to in Montreal were able to see it this way. Many, when I asked about African music there, looked surprised, as though nothing particularly exciting was happening there at all. Many mentioned Paris as the place where real things were happening, or else suggested that if I wanted to know about African music, perhaps I should go to Africa. Musicians I spoke to complained that Montreal had no breakout performers, no stars known to the rest of the world. Added to these are concerns familiar to working musicians all over the world: difficulties making a living, not enough places to play, and challenges with promoters, bar owners, and other musicians. Of the musicians I met who were able to make a living playing music, many were only able to do so by maintaining grueling touring schedules, performing all over North America and only rarely in Montreal.

For those performing in small-scale music scenes like the African music scene in Montreal, it is difficult to appreciate what is important and unique about what they are doing. Rather than valuing the collective work of many musicians to build and maintain these scenes, we tend to value its exceptional products. We find it easy to separate The Beatles from their Liverpool incubator, to take Mozart and Beethoven while discarding the rest of 18th-century Vienna. In Montreal, many feel that the African scene is unfulfilled in some way, that something is missing from it. For me, though, there is something worthwhile and beautiful in itself about the African scene in Montreal, distinctive and important. Though it is not host to any national or global stars, it does produce music that is unique, interesting, and valuable. After all, music is much more than a commodity organized around Top 40 charts and sold-out stadium shows. It is

a mistake to focus too much on large-scale performers to the detriment of local musicians and scenes. National and global stars may take the lion's share of listeners and record sales, but their music would not be possible without the day-to-day working of local performers in local scenes. It is important to recognize the value of small-scale local music scenes, even if the musicians who perform in them do not.

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