



Dakar Wolof and the configuration of an urban identity

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ABSTRACT *The turbulent period of political and social unrest at the end of the 1980s and beginning of the 1990s in Senegal gave rise to the Set-Setal movement in which the city of Dakar was recreated in the historical imagination of its youth. This essay argues that the Set-Setal movement coincided with the emergence of a self-conscious urban identity among the Dakar population, evidenced by a variety of artistic expression that focuses on and exalts the culture of the city. Central to the notion of an urban identity is the role of Dakar Wolof, a variety of the language that has significantly diverged from the more conservative dialects spoken in the rural areas, primarily by incorporating massive lexical borrowing from French. Dakar Wolof is portrayed in sustained written form for the first time in two comics that appeared during this period: *Boy Dakar* by Ibou Fall and Aziz Bâ, and *Ass et Oussou* by Omar Diakit . This essay discusses the hybrid nature of Dakar Wolof and its depiction in written form in the two comics. Finally, it is argued that Dakar Wolof has had a profound effect on the notion of ethnicity in the Senegalese context and has contributed to the emergence of a de-ethnicized urban identity.*

1. Introduction

In February of 1988, presidential elections in Senegal failed to produce a change of regime from that of incumbent president Abdou Diouf to that of opposition leader Abdoulaye Wade, whose widely proclaimed campaign slogan had been *Soppi!* or *Change!*¹ A little more than a year later, in April of 1989, during the Muslim holy month of Ramadan, unprecedented ethnic violence against the Moorish population in Senegal broke out in the streets of Dakar, the country's capital, escalating into an international crisis that stopped just short of war. These

¹ Wade ran against Diouf and again lost in the presidential elections of 1993. It was not until the second round of presidential elections in February of 2000 that Wade democratically claimed a victory over Diouf. Although many factors contributed to the shift in regime, much of the credit must go to the private media, especially private radio stations, who provided credible reporting on all aspects of the presidential campaign.

two pivotal moments in the recent history of Senegal served to delineate a trajectory of increasing disenfranchisement among urban dwellers, and particularly among Dakar youth. While at times nihilistic and destructive, the climate of disenchantment eventually gave rise to an aesthetic revolution of sorts, carried out in the streets and on the walls of Dakar. In the early nineties the young people of Dakar directed their energy towards cleaning up their neighbourhoods and inscribing them: walls were painted with murals of such cultural icons as marabouts or religious leaders, the Statue of Liberty, anti-colonial heroes from Senegalese history and football players; monuments sprang up on neighbourhood corners; and streets were given names. This short-lived but remarkable movement, which led to a symbolic transformation of the city, was known as *Set-Setal*, a term that means 'cleanse' in Wolof, the dominant language of urban Senegal.

Among the many types of artistic expression that served as an impetus for the *Set-Setal* movement were popular songs, especially pre-eminent Senegalese pop star Youssou Ndour's hit, *Set* ('clean'), which became somewhat of a theme song for the movement. In addition, a new genre of song celebrating the city and its people emerged around the same period, typified by Ndour's *Medina* and Baaba Maal's *Ndakaaru* (Dakar). *Medina* is about Ndour's own origins in the populous Medina neighbourhood of Dakar, and celebrates the neighbourhood and the imprint it leaves on its inhabitants by claiming that 'children of Medina' (*xaley Medina*) can be recognized by the distinctive way in which they walk. Baaba Maal's song, *Ndakaaru*, is a verbal mapping of the city in which he enumerates the various popular neighbourhoods, but most significant is that Maal sings *Ndakaaru* in Wolof, the urban language. Maal is a Haalpulaar, or speaker of Pulaar (Fula), whose band is named *Daande Leñol*, 'the Voice of the People,' namely the Haalpulaar'en. Up to the recording of *Ndakaaru* he had declined to sing in any language but Pulaar'; thus the switch to Wolof was a significant break with precedent. Equally important, and perhaps even more closely associated with the *Set-Setal* movement, was its visual aspect, characterized by the proliferation of painting that sprung up overnight on walls throughout the city, creating an overwhelming visual effect in the public spaces of individual neighbourhoods.

Senegalese historian Mamadou Diouf has called the *Set-Setal* movement an assault against the ruling class and its historicity which, by redefining public space, has fashioned a new historical memory, one which is quintessentially urban (1992: 41). In this essay I suggest that the trajectory that led up to the *Set-Setal* movement in Dakar and the movement itself constituted a pivotal moment in the configuration of a self-conscious urban identity. While the visual and musical aspects of *Set-Setal* were the most accessible signs of an urban culture undergoing change, a less obvious but equally radical attempt to legitimize urban identity, and one which focused on the very essence of that identity, passed relatively unnoticed: the attempt to legitimize the urban language by committing it to written form. This was accomplished through the recreation of the urban world in the appearance of two comic books: *Boy Dakar*, by Ibou Fall and Aziz

Bâ, which had a short-lived appearance of two privately published issues that sold for 100CFA francs a copy in Dakar; and *Ass et Oussou*, by Omar Diakité, which appeared over the course of several months in 1988 and 1989 on the back page of what was then an Islamic weekly news magazine, *Wal Fadjri*.² The two comics have much in common: in addition to treating picaresque themes that deal with foibles and urban social problems, especially unemployment among young men, they are also among the first sustained attempts to produce urban Wolof in written form. These comics serve as chronicles of acute urban social problems, with a particular focus on unemployment, an all-too-important factor in the disillusionment and attendant violence of 1989. But their contribution goes well beyond that of social critique. The transfer of what is essentially an oral language to written form provides us with a valuable document on the perception of the complexity of the urban linguistic environment. In addition, the actual encoding of Dakar Wolof in written form reveals much about writing conventions and literacy in the Senegalese context. The act of writing in a hybrid language, which up to that point had been circumscribed to the domain of the oral, is a gesture of legitimation – legitimation of an urban language, an urban culture, and an urban identity. Moreover, and as we shall see, the manner in which Dakar Wolof is inscribed in the comics is more than a simple attempt to record an urban language; it is also an act of literary and cultural creation, a step that both reflects and helps create the moment of configuration of an urban Senegalese identity.

2. *Urban identity*

Among the hundreds of passengers who emerge each day from the various bush taxis at Colobane station in Dakar are newly arrived immigrants from other regions of Senegal, drawn to the capital in search of work and a source of income to contribute to the growing needs of their families left behind in smaller towns and villages. As the rural exodus towards the African city grows, so does the city itself, with its ever-expanding, crowded suburbs, like Pikine and Guediawaye, teeming with young men and women in search of a chance at a better life. But despite the allure of the city, the urban environment is a difficult one. In order to get by, rural immigrants have to learn how to be urban, to integrate themselves, to absorb and ultimately become part of the hectic vibrancy of urban culture.

Dakar, like any large African city, is characterized by a certain boundlessness. A frenzy of commerce spills from the markets outwards onto the streets, obliterating the sidewalks and sharing space with Qur'anic schools, beggars, impromptu restaurants, the cardboard boxes of the homeless, and the homeless themselves. Finally, the markets become ambulatory: watches, perfume, coat hangers, mangoes and prayer rugs circulate through the city in the hands of itinerant merchants who thrust their goods at passers-by, through bus, taxi and *car rapide* windows, in an attempt to sell them. In this sense, Dakar closely

² *Wal Fadjri* has evolved from being an Islamic weekly magazine into one of the most prominent independent daily newspapers published in Senegal.

resembles Mbembe's (1997: 153) description of the Cameroonian post-colonial urban world, of which he writes:

In these circumstances, the best way to get results is to experiment. Experimentation takes various forms. On the one hand, to move around amidst the crowd made up of customers, passers-by and beggars, one always has to manoeuvre in and out, get round or step over things and people. But manoeuvring in and out, getting round and stepping over are things that everyone has to do. They constitute a determining element of behaviour and urban knowledge.

Urban knowledge, as Mbembe terms it, is the ability to improvise, survive, and ultimately succeed in the city. Such knowledge can only be acquired in a practical manner, but it also invites experimentation and improvisation. The characters who people the pages of *Boy Dakar* and *Ass et Oussou*, are experimenters and consummate *débrouillards* who continuously invent creative solutions to the problems they face.

In the first frame of the first issue of *Boy Dakar*, we are introduced to the picaresque hero, Lazou, as he is searching under the mattress in his modest, mouse-infested room for the wallet that he has misplaced. Youssou Ndour's song *Medina* blares from a radio on the floor. 'Lazou nak mom,' we are told, '*il est de ceux qui ont toujours un petit problème à régler dans la vie*'³ ('So this Lazou,_w he's one of those people who always has a little problem to take care of in life_F'). Lazou's immediate *petit problème* is, of course, money, which translates broadly into survival, the principal theme of the comic book. Lazou sets out to find his wallet by going first to a seer, who tries to give him unwanted advice on his love life, and with whom he has a fight before retrieving his 100FCFA. He then goes to Marché Sandaga, Dakar's boundless principal market, where anything, reputedly, can be found, and where he meets Baye Galaye, who is described as a '*commerçant très spécial*' ('very special businessman'). Baye Galaye's speciality is selling lost passports, identity cards and wallets back to their owners. At first, Lazou is outraged that he has to pay three hundred francs to get his own, now empty, wallet back, and he brings a policeman to deal with Baye Galaye. Baye Galaye, however, charms the policeman by flattering him. 'Good morning commissioner,' he says, and when the policeman corrects him, saying that he is not a commissioner, he retorts graciously, saying 'I'll pray that you soon become one.' A voluptuous young woman, a *jongoma* in Wolof, who is addressed as such, then comes by to reclaim the lost wallet that someone had brought her from Mecca. Baye Galaye hands it over to her gallantly and tells her that she need not pay, her beauty suffices, thereby lending credibility to his position vis-à-vis the policeman. The policeman leaves without reprimanding Baye Galaye, and Lazou is left to apologize and offers to pay six hundred francs to reclaim his wallet. Baye Galaye accepts and tells Lazou that he should learn to respect his elders or

³ Throughout this essay (and in accordance with the conventions of this journal) I use *Times italic* to indicate French, and a typewriter style to indicate Wolof in citations of written and spoken language in which the two are mixed; corresponding portions of the translation are marked with subscript _F and _w.

he will never get by in life. Lazou thanks him profusely and walks away, saying to himself that Baye Galaye is a real capitalist.

In this first episode of *Boy Dakar*, Lazou has learned that he is not the only one seeking to survive in an urban environment. The policeman, who represents a bureaucratic system that is fundamentally out of touch with reality, is no match for Baye Galaye and his creative improvisations that are characteristic of *système D* (for *débrouillard* 'savvy'), as it is known in francophone Africa. Baye Galaye is a master in the art of getting by, which is what Lazou has to learn. The informal system, or *système D*, is ultimately superior to the formal system, as illustrated by the way in which Baye Galaye fools the policeman and, thanks, ironically, to the policeman's intervention, comes out on top by collecting twice as much money as he had originally asked for. By appealing to values such as respect for one's elders, Baye Galaye also teaches Lazou that civility must be maintained in such interactions.

Ass⁴ and Oussou, the main characters of the second comic series, are twin brothers who have just arrived from the country. In physical terms they are opposites: Ass is tall and thin with a thick head of hair, while Oussou, his foil, is short and fat, with a shaved head. Their attitudes and knowledge about the city are also diametrically opposed. Oussou is a simple and honest person who does not like to misrepresent himself, while Ass continuously experiments with *système D*, seizing every opportunity for possible employment, and constantly getting himself and Oussou into fixes. In the first episode, which appeared on 19 August 1988, Ass tells Oussou 'Fi town la!! *Tes trucs de champ tu les laisses au village, vu?*' ('This is the city!!_w Your country ways, leave them in the village, OK?_F'). Several episodes later Ass tells a potential employer who wants to hire them to run a snack bar that Oussou has had two years' experience in the profession. When Oussou protests that Ass is misrepresenting him, Ass counters with the same line: '*Je te l'ai déjà dit, fi town la. Pour réussir, il faut qu'on sache mettre tous les atouts de notre côté*' ('I've already told you,_F this is the city._w To succeed, we have to know how to play all the trumps on our side_F').

Becoming urban, as Ass is trying to tell Oussou, is a process of transformation, in which an old identity is temporarily (or sometimes permanently) shed, and a new one, more appropriate to the surroundings, is assumed. Oussou's lack of urban knowledge, nostalgia for the country and failure to adapt to how things are done in Dakar are a constant source of frustration to Ass, who wants desperately to succeed in the city. The two characters, the savvy and the naïve, are played off against each other, reflecting a dichotomy between appropriate urban and non-urban identities. This dichotomy is not unfamiliar to a great many Senegalese who travel back and forth between rural and urban areas, slipping out of one identity and into another as easily as if they were changing clothes. For many such people, discourse on the components of fluid identity involves both language and ethnicity.

⁴ The name Ass is a Wolofized version of the title El-Hajj, which is given to one who has made the pilgrimage to Mecca. It is a common given name in Senegal.

An earlier study on language and identity in Senegal (McLaughlin 1995) shows that language is a key factor in self-reported adaptation strategies of people who move back and forth on a regular basis from Dakar, where they work, to other parts of the country where their families live. Significantly, many people reported that they spoke Wolof one way at home and another way in Dakar. The specific examples included using fewer French words at home and using different noun classes in the two places, favouring the default class in the urban context. While many people reported speaking Wolof in a different way in the city, even more striking was the comment by a teacher from the region of Sine, who claimed that his ethnicity changed when he was in the city: ‘*Quand je suis chez moi je suis Haalpulaar, quand je suis à Dakar je suis Wolof*’ (‘When I am at home I am Haalpulaar, when I am in Dakar I am Wolof’) (McLaughlin 1995: 156).

While contemporary anthropology has contributed much to our understanding of the fluidity of ethnic identity (see, for example, Amselle 1990 and Clifford 1988), even where it is no longer appropriate the notion of ethnicity as a primordial category dies hard in Africanist discourse. In looking at the notion of urban identity as reflected in the writing of urban Wolof at a particular historical moment, what is intriguing is the apparent emergence of an as yet inchoate identity that goes by the cover name of Wolof: Wolof ethnicity and Wolof language. In an attempt to put together the pieces of the puzzle of the relationship between language and ethnicity in Senegal, Swigart (1990) suggests that in the urban context people claim to be ethnically Wolof because Wolof is all they speak. She cites a worker from the 1988 census who reported that when people in Dakar responded to one of the census questions on their ethnicity, they often hesitated, cited the ethnicity or ethnicities of their parents, and then added ‘Just put Wolof, that’s all I speak’ (Swigart 1990: 4). At face value, this example suggests that ethnicity in the urban Senegalese context is in some sense defined by language, but it also raises a much larger question: is ethnicity really the issue here? In an essay entitled ‘Beyond Identity’ in which he probes some of these issues within the context of what he terms ‘the postidentitarian predicament,’ Miller (1998: 173) writes: ‘The easy, positive means of identity definition, based on ready-made categories such as gender, race, ethnicity, and nation, have become unsatisfactory, but the terms of any new paradigm are not immediately apparent.’ I suggest that within this context, when the teacher cited above says that in Dakar he is Wolof rather than Haalpulaar, and when Baaba Maal sings *Ndakaaru* in Wolof as opposed to Pulaar, they are using the ready-made terms of the old paradigms of identity, namely ethnicity and language, but they are in fact talking about a newly configured urban identity for which there is as yet no term.

Taking these observations one step further, I would suggest that claiming that one is Wolof for lack of any other plausible ethnic identity is, in fact, an unconscious abandonment of ethnicity as an identifying category. Wolof, and especially Wolof in the urban context, is simply the unmarked or default ethnicity when there is nothing else to fall back on in self-definition. The category of ethnicity is not always satisfactory, as we see in the report by the

census worker, but the ready-made terms of the old paradigm are still in use. In this case, individuals fall back on language as a determiner of ethnicity. Since language and ethnicity in many other Senegalese contexts are still a major aspect of identity (McLaughlin 1995), the ready-made concept is maintained in urban identity; but when there is nothing to fill it, it becomes vacuous. Seen in this way, Baaba Maal's choice to sing *Ndakaaru* in Wolof is not a switch in allegiance away from the language of his own ethnic group and towards that of another; it is simply a way to reflect the urban focus of the song. Similarly, the teacher who is Haalpulaar at home and Wolof in Dakar is really saying that when he is in the capital he is as fully integrated an urbanite as anyone else.

3. Urban Wolof

Officially a francophone country, and one whose first president, Léopold Senghor, exhorted his people to speak French '*comme (des) bourgeois de Paris*' ('like Parisian bourgeois') and was subsequently (if not consequently) elected member of the Académie Française, Senegal is remarkable for how little French is actually used. The 1988 census figures estimate that only twenty-five per cent of the population is literate in French (Cruise O'Brien 1998: 37), making the country that hosted the 1989 international Francophonie summit a *de jure* rather than *de facto* francophone state. The language that has filled the role of lingua franca in Senegal is Wolof. Although no such official status has been granted it, Wolof is frequently referred to as the national language, not only by native Wolof speakers, but by speakers of many of the other languages spoken in Senegal. Wolof has been gaining speakers steadily in a spread that began during the colonial period – the areas of Senegal first colonized by the French were Wolof-speaking – and picked up momentum with sustained migration of rural populations from the countryside into the cities. Moreover, the social and economic influence of the Mouride Sufi order, whose origins are in the Wolof heartland, has also favoured the ascent of the Wolof language. (Cruise O'Brien 1998, 1979; Swigart 2001). Figures from the 1988 Senegalese census also show that more than eighty per cent of the Senegalese population speaks Wolof, while only 43.7 per cent are ethnically Wolof. Due to this language shift, Senegal may more accurately be described as a wolofphone than a francophone country.

Wolofization, or the spread of Wolof as a lingua franca, is essentially an urban phenomenon, and urban Wolof is a language that has arisen out of continuous sustained contact between Wolof and French.⁵ Although I use the terms 'Dakar Wolof' and 'urban Wolof' interchangeably in this essay, the language is not geographically limited to Dakar, but is spoken in most Senegalese urban areas and even in Banjul, the Gambian capital, where English is the official language.

⁵ Although they are not the focus of this study, loanwords from other languages, especially English and Pulaar, are also incorporated into urban Wolof. The semiotics of English loanwords have undergone an interesting change in recent years. Originally associated with the language of delinquency, they now bespeak a cosmopolitanism primarily associated with the international trading networks of the Mouride Sufi order (Dème 1999).

In addition to the numerous English loans found in urban Gambian Wolof, there are also many French loans that have entered the language secondhand via urban Wolof rather than through direct contact with French. Given the specific peculiarities of urban dialects and the pressures placed on rapidly spreading languages, it is not surprising that urban Wolof has undergone and is continuing to undergo rather drastic changes in many areas of its grammar, leading to a marked dialectal difference between urban and non-urban varieties of the same language. The emerging urban language, the nature of which will be elaborated on below, is a hybrid language, characterized primarily but not exclusively by extensive lexical borrowing from French. In considering the situation of Wolof in Senegal, what emerges is a portrait of considerable complexity, in which two versions of the same language coexist. Speakers may be competent in one or the other, or frequently in both. In this latter case, speakers may be able to manipulate a variety of styles or registers along a continuum that ranges from *olof bu xóot* – or ‘deep Wolof,’ as it is called – free of any French influences, to the hybrid language that is urban Wolof, depending on the context.

What, then, is urban Wolof, and how is it differentiated from other varieties of Wolof? In traditional parlance the term ‘codeswitching’ is used to describe situations in which two (or more) languages are used in a given stretch of discourse. Gumperz (1982: 59) defines codeswitching as ‘the juxtaposition within the same speech exchange of passages of speech belonging to two different grammatical systems or subsystems.’ Taken at face value, Gumperz’s definition serves as a point of departure for the formal analysis of a hybrid language like urban Wolof. It is also useful to adopt Myers-Scotton’s (1993) terminology of matrix language and embedded language. One of the two languages involved in codeswitching or code-mixing can be said to be the matrix language in that it supplies the overall morphological and syntactic structure of the discourse, while the embedded language supplies lexical items that can be plugged into the matrix structure. In the case of urban Wolof, Wolof serves as the matrix language and French as the embedded language, as the following examples of naturally occurring sentences show.⁶ Wolof words are indicated by typewriter-style type, while French words are in italics.

- (1) *Structure* bi ak *contenu* bi cent points la.
 structure DET and content DET one-hundred points 3S⁷
 The structure and the content are (worth) one hundred points.
- (2) *Feu* bi rouge na.
 Traffic-light DET red 3S
 The traffic light turned red.

⁶ These and all other examples in this essay are naturally occurring utterances which I recorded during periods of fieldwork in Senegal between 1989 and 2000.

⁷ The following abbreviations are used in the glosses: DET: determiner; IMP: imperfective; NEG: negative; OBJ: object; 1/2/3: first/second/third person; S: singular; PL: plural.

- (3) Dafa doon *errer* ci monde bi rek.
 3S PAST.IMP wander in world DET just
 He was just wandering around the world.
- (4) Lonkukaay, *il-faut-que* mu rond.
 hook it-is-necessary-that 3S round.
 Hooks have to be round.
- (5) AG-ngeen ba pare *eska?*
 A(ssemblée)-G(énérale)+2PL already INTERROG.
 Have you already AG'd (had a General Assembly)?

Although it is not difficult to identify the French words in the Wolof sentences, the adequacy of the traditional term, codeswitching, namely the juxtaposition of two different grammatical systems, is thrown into question by the simple fact that while the speakers who uttered the sentences in (1), (3) and (5) can speak both French and Wolof, those who uttered the sentences in (2) and (4) do *not* speak French, an issue to which I will return below.

The term 'code mixing' has been used by some sociolinguists to designate a more local switching of codes in which a single word may contain morphemes from two different grammatical systems, as shown in the following examples where stems that come from French are frequently combined with other Wolof morphemes in word formation.

- (6) *Akise-wuma* la dara.
 accuse-1S.NEG 2S-OBJ nothing
 I didn't accuse you of anything.
- (7) *Seer-ul!*
 expensive-3S.NEG
 It's not expensive.
- (8) Bu! ko *baraase-wat!*
 2S.NEG.IMPERATIVE 3S.OBJ plug-in-ITERATIVE
 Don't plug it in again!
- (9) Lu ñuy *grev-ati?*
 what 3PL-IMP strike-ITERATIVE
 What are they striking about again?
- (10) *Arieer-a!*
 behind-2S.IMPERATIVE
 Reverse!

The sentences in (6) and (7) show verb stems from French: *accuser* 'to accuse' and the adjective *cher* 'expensive,' while the respective negative morphemes (first person singular - (w)uma and third person singular -ul) are from Wolof. Example (8) shows the Wolof iterative suffix - (w)at attaching to a verb stem from French *brancher* 'to plug in' in order to give the meaning 'plug in again,' while (9) shows an iterative suffix attaching to a verb stem formed from the French noun *grève* 'strike.' The final example, (10), involves the suffixation of the Wolof imperative -a! to the French *arrière* 'behind' to get the verbal command 'reverse.'

It is evident from the examples in (1-10) that French loanwords undergo phonological changes that adapt their pronunciation to the sound patterns of

Wolof. The high front rounded vowel [y] in French becomes unrounded in Wolof to [i], as in (11) and (12); the voiced labiodental fricative [v] in French becomes the labiovelar glide [w] in Wolof, as in (13) and (14); and the fricatives [ʃ] and [ʒ] in French become [s] in Wolof, as in (15) and (16). One last phonological observation is that permissible consonant clusters in French are frequently split up in Wolof, especially among speakers who do not speak French, since Wolof licenses only CV or CVC syllables. Examples of these include the word-initial clusters [gr], as in (17) and (18), and [kl], as in (19).

	FRENCH	WOLOF	GLOSS
(11)	<i>perdu</i>	perdi	lost
(12)	<i>tu</i>	ti	you, singular
(13)	<i>valise</i>	waliis	suitcase
(14)	<i>voyou</i>	wayu	scoundrel
(15)	<i>cher</i>	seer	expensive
(16)	<i>garage</i>	garaas	garage
(17)	<i>grave</i>	garaaw	serious, grave
(18)	<i>griot</i>	giriio	griot
(19)	<i>client</i>	kiliaan	customer, client

The examples cited above are typical of Dakar Wolof; however, it should be noted that there is much variation in the language, much of which depends on the speaker's command of French and Wolof. In some cases, where the speaker is fluent in French, fewer adaptations to Wolof phonology will be made; in other cases, where the speaker has little or no knowledge of French, the adaptation to Wolof phonology may be complete.

Urban Wolof and languages like it, such as Town Bemba, spoken in urban Zambia (Spitulnik 1999), are readily characterizable as hybrid languages. But to call a language a hybrid is to make a statement about its history, namely that it is derived from diverse sources, and as we know, people do not inherit the history of their language when they inherit the language. In the case of urban Wolof the sources are Wolof and French, distinct grammatical systems that are readily identifiable and isolatable within Gumperz's definition of codeswitching. But this is if and only if one recognizes a distinction between the two grammatical systems. So to return to the utterances in (2) and (4), as well as those in (7) and (10), all of which were uttered by speakers who do not know French, the notion of codeswitching falls substantially short of describing a reality. For those speakers, there are no distinct grammatical systems juxtaposed in their utterances – there is only one, the grammatical system of urban Wolof. What substantially complicates the analysis of urban Wolof is that those who speak it have diverse linguistic repertoires. Some may speak urban Wolof, French, and 'deep Wolof' (oɓɓɔf bu xɔɔt) as well as other Senegalese languages; others may speak a subset of those languages, and still others may speak only urban Wolof. The resulting situation is that speakers of urban Wolof vary in their ability to recognize the French influences in their language. Speakers who are fluent in French recognize and even joke about French loans in their Wolof; on the other hand, those who know no French are frequently oblivious to its influences in their own speech. For example, when asked if there had been many people attending a naming

ceremony in her Dakar neighbourhood, an elderly monolingual Wolof woman replied ‘Ampagaay!’ (‘Lots!’), a word that has origins in the French expression *en pagaille*. In an ensuing discussion it was apparent that she did not recognize the French origin of the word, although she was aware that urban Wolof has been influenced by French, presumably because it is a frequent topic of conversation.

As language contact and new languages that emerge from such contact come to be better understood, scholarly emphasis is starting to shift away from the traditional concepts of codeswitching and code mixing towards a more fluid, speaker-based approach to the topic. As Spitulnik (1999: 35) writes, ‘in many cases of languages in contact, code boundaries that appear distinct at a *formal* linguistic level are not *experienced* or even functionally operating as such in contexts of use.’ Such is the case of the monolingual Wolof speakers whose utterances have been cited above. I would even claim that while urban Wolof speakers who also speak French may be able to sort out code boundaries at a formal linguistic level when they reflect on their speech, when they speak Dakar Wolof those boundaries do not operate functionally. The shift towards focusing on speakers’ multiple experiences of their own languages becomes all the more crucial in light of recent work by Woolard, who, in a Bakhtinian mode, shows that single utterances may sometimes be ‘bivalent’ or uttered simultaneously in two languages. Woolard’s examples involve Catalan and Spanish, related languages that are typologically similar and have similar vocabularies, but the same phenomenon can be applied to speakers of urban Wolof who incorporate French loanwords into their Wolof. Such words can be intended or understood as either French or Wolof. In such cases, the two distinct grammatical systems are not even juxtaposed, but rather simultaneous.

The frequent metalinguistic commentary on Dakar Wolof by everyone from taxi drivers to radio talkshow hosts affirms that it is a topic of great interest to its speakers. Attitudes towards the different varieties of Wolof are, however, ambivalent. Set off against the ‘deep Wolof’ (olof bu xoot) spoken in Baol and Cayor, the Wolof heartlands, Dakar Wolof is seen by many as an impure language because of its extensive borrowing of French lexical items. Paradoxically, the urban Wolof term for olof bu xoot is olof piir, or pure Wolof, piir being derived from the French word *pur*.⁸ Taxi-drivers and shopkeepers pride themselves on being able to speak olof piir, often unaware that they are speaking a Wolof that is as urban as any Boy Dakar’s. Radio announcers, especially in formal programs, will use elliptical ways of getting around the inevitable French vocabulary by prefacing the use of a French word with the phrase ‘as they say in Toubab (French).’ And Pulaar and Seereer

⁸ The trope of purity extends beyond the linguistic domain. Diouf (1996: 227-28) writes: ‘Postcolonial urban sociology is dominated by a paradigm in which the rural peasantry is regarded as the fundamental expression of indigenous Africa. As a consequence, the city has long been thought exclusively in terms of the colonial ethnology of detribalization, rural exodus, and the loss of authentically African traits and values ... (U)rban dwellers ... were supposed to have lost their traditional reference systems, qualities, and virtues.’

speakers claim that their languages are superior to Wolof because they have words for everything while Wolof speakers have to use French loans.⁹ These negative attitudes towards urban Wolof are most likely a reflection of negative attitudes towards Dakar and the difficulties of urban life in general rather than a direct attack against a language or an ethnic group. But even if the notion exists that Wolof spoken in the heartlands, away from the urban areas, is in some sense better than urban Wolof because it has no French loans, people who speak oLof bu xóot are also regarded as kow-kow, unsophisticated country people who lack urban knowledge, including urban linguistic norms. The attitudes towards both types of Wolof, oLof bu xóot and urban Wolof, are thus quite ambiguous. On the one hand, and from the conservative perspective, oLof bu xóot is an object of admiration, since it bespeaks a real or imagined pristine, uncontaminated cultural product, as opposed to urban Wolof, which is viewed negatively as a hybrid language; on the other hand, no self-respecting urbanite would want to speak oLof bu xóot in the capital, since it would mark him or her as someone who is not at home in the city. This is especially true for youth, who comprise the majority of the Dakar population, and for whom language is a special mark of identity. The ability to speak urban Wolof, then, is a sign of urban integration, and as such carries a certain prestige. Calvet (1994: 67) emphasizes the centrality of language to urban identity, pointing out that the growth of an urban language depends on the prestige associated with it:

S'il y a une façon bamakoise de parler bambara ou une façon dakaroise de parler wolof, et si, en même temps, le citadin est valorisé, alors ces façons urbaines de parler la langue deviennent à leur tour des modèles et on s'emploiera à les imiter pour marquer son intégration urbaine.

[If there is a Bamakois way of speaking Bambara or a Dakarois way of speaking Wolof, and if, thereby, the city-dweller gains standing, then these urban ways of speaking the language in turn become models, and one sets to imitating them in order to mark one's urban integration.]

The cultural climate of the Set-Setal movement was one in which urban identity was both enhanced and legitimated. As we shall see, the act of writing urban Wolof is a means of legitimating its existence, just as writing in a national language, as opposed to a colonial language, is also a means of legitimating that language.

4. Wolof as a written language

Although it is viewed primarily as an oral language, there is quite a respectable history of written Wolof in Senegal, including many literary works. Gérard (1981: 72) reports that a substantial body of written texts in Wolof emerged in

⁹ My own observations reveal that urban varieties of Pulaar and Seereer also borrow heavily from French, but because those two languages are characterized by rich inflectional morphology, which is not true of Wolof, loanwords are substantially altered and thus disguised. By way of example, the Pulaar word *gantirɗo*, meaning 'hospital patient,' is derived from the French verb *entrer* 'enter, check in' but bears little resemblance to its French source.

the late nineteenth century, as a ‘belated effect of the wave of Muslim expansion.’ These texts consisted primarily of *ajami*, religious poetry written in the Arabic script whose emergence Camara (1997: 164) dates to the seventeenth century. Wolof writing in the Arabic script is known in Wolof as *wolofal*, literally to ‘make Wolof.’ Of *wolofal* Dème (1996: 150) writes:

Le *wolofal* est la transcription graphique utilisée par certains locuteurs du wolof (surtout des marabouts) qui, ayant appris l’arabe, ont rompu avec une tradition exclusivement orale. C’est donc un procédé qui consiste à reprendre les signes (caractères) de l’alphabet arabe pour représenter, à l’écrit, les phonèmes de la langue wolof.

[*Wolofal* is the written transcription used by certain speakers of Wolof (especially *marabouts*) who, having learned Arabic, have broken with an exclusively oral tradition. It is thus a process that consists of taking signs (characters) from the Arabic alphabet to represent, in written form, the phonemes of the Wolof language.]

As Dème implies, *wolofal* originated within a religious context, but it is also fairly widely used on the contemporary scene by those who are familiar with the Arabic alphabet but not the Roman, to keep records and notes and especially to write letters. The use of *wolofal* for writing Wolof appears to be much more widespread than the use of the Roman alphabet for the same purposes, a fact that is due to almost universal attendance by Muslim children at Qur’anic school, where they master the rudiments of the Arabic writing system. Public school education is conducted in French, and thus students who attend those schools learn to write in the Roman script – but attendance at such schools is not as high as attendance at Qur’anic schools, and was even lower in the past.

Although a standard Wolof orthography exists in the Roman alphabet, it is not widely used, being almost uniquely the domain of linguists or educators working in literacy programs, as well as a handful of Senegalese authors who write in Wolof. Wolof written in the Roman alphabet, whether in the official orthography or in a French orthography, presupposes a knowledge of French, however basic, on the part of the writer, and for most people who know French, that is the language they will write in, thus relegating Wolof or other indigenous languages to the oral domain. To summarize the general situation, those Wolof speakers who are literate in French normally write in that language; those who are not write in *wolofal*. The writing of Wolof in the Roman script is thus by far the least used of all written possibilities, a fact that will have repercussions on the type of audience attracted by the comics under discussion, since they are written in the Roman script.

Before the publication of *Ass et Oussou* and *Boy Dakar*, Wolof phrases often appeared in newspaper and magazine cartoons, almost always with French translations at the foot of the frame. The publication of *Boy Dakar* and *Ass et Oussou*, however, heralds the writing down of urban Wolof in a sustained manner, a practice that has been continued in more recent comics such as *Goorgoorlu*, which is quite similar in theme and content to *Ass et Oussou* and *Boy Dakar*, and *Lamb ji*, the satirical series on the 2000 presidential elections, which portrays the candidates as traditional wrestlers. All of these comics are

completely in Roman script. In addition to serving as a chronicle for the woes of contemporary urban life, the comics are a window into the complex and ambiguous linguistic environment of urban Senegal. In the issues of *Wal Fadjri* that contain the serial *Ass et Oussou*, it is noteworthy that the comic's creator, Omar Diakité, never quite gave up the habit of providing at the foot of each frame a French translation of the urban Wolof phrases contained within it. About halfway through the serial the translations diminish and several urban Wolof utterances are left without translation, but even up to the final episode at least some translations are provided. What this indicates is that the linguistic frame of reference for the series is the French language, and thus a French-speaking reader is implied. In cases where the French translation is provided, the reader would not even have to know urban Wolof to understand the comic, but given the variability in the inclusion of a translation, expectations as to the intended audience's knowledge of Wolof are ambiguous. The vast majority of readers of *Ass et Oussou* more than likely had almost no experience reading Wolof in the Roman script, and in the reader response to the comics that I observed, individuals often glanced down at the French translation for help in deciphering the Wolof. Subsequent decipherment most often involved sounding out the word orally and, once it was deciphered, laughter. Readers reported that the humour came from two sources: what the characters were actually saying, and the fact that the Wolof words appeared in written form.

Boy Dakar is more radical in its approach to committing urban Wolof to written form. Here there are no translations, so the intended audience is expected to know urban Wolof, and monolingual French speakers are excluded. Given the more experimental nature of the depiction of language in *Boy Dakar*, my commentary will focus primarily on that comic.

The printed pages of *Boy Dakar* contain three primary linguistic channels: the omniscient frame for the narrative, which introduces the reader to the characters and provides commentary on their actions; the representation of speech or thoughts conventionally emanating from the mouths or minds of the characters in bubbles; and the written environment, which includes signs and other aspects of what Calvet has called the graphic environment.¹⁰ To begin with the frame, its most salient attribute is that it is almost entirely in French. Like *Ass et Oussou*, these comics are thus intended for an audience literate in French. The second channel, namely the speech and thoughts of the characters, is linguistically much more complex than the frame, because it mirrors the continuum of language varieties found in the urban Senegalese context. On a formal level, almost all the characters engage in codeswitching, in the Gumperzian sense, within a single bubble. For example (Fig. 1), the seer who returns Lazou's hundred francs to him says, as he hands the coin over derisively, '100 francs rek! Am sa khaliss! *Reprends-les!*' ('Just_w a hundred francs!_F Take your money!_w Take them back!_F'). Of the three phrases he utters, the first is in French and Wolof, the second in Wolof, and the third in French. Although it is written in the Roman

¹⁰ The graphic environment of Dakar is described extensively in Dumont (1998).



FIGURE 1



FIGURE 2



FIGURE 3

script, the Wolof depicted in the frames of *Boy Dakar* does not follow the standard orthographic conventions of Wolof in the Roman script, showing rather a great deal of influence from French spelling conventions. For example, the velar fricative [x] in the word for money is depicted as *kh* rather than the standardized *x*. This is hardly surprising, since few people other than linguists are familiar with standardized Wolof in the Roman script. In addition to the depiction of French in standard French orthography and Wolof as described above, the author of *Boy Dakar* has also quite cleverly depicted a third category of words or phrases that have French origins but that have been Wolofized. These words are simultaneously both French and Wolof, thus bivalent in Woolard's terminology, and to set them off, they are not written in standard French orthography. For example, in showing Lazou his lost wallet (Fig. 2),

Baye Galaye says ‘*C’est ça wala!?*’¹¹ (‘Is this it_F here!?_{FW}’). While *c’est ça* is in standard French orthography, wala from French *voilà*, has been appropriated as a Wolof word. Significantly, later on Baye Galaye uses the same word depicted in standard French orthography, revealing that that are no absolute parameters on what is French and what is Wolof, and that boundaries between them are fluid.

The technique of showing words that have been entirely Wolofized through orthographic means is used particularly with female characters, who are depicted as using less French, but more French in their Wolof. For example (Fig. 3), the jongoma who comes to reclaim her wallet from Mecca is told by Baye Galaye, ‘*Le voilà! Un kalpe comme ça ne peut être que pour une djongoma comme toi*’ (‘Here it is! A_F wallet_W like that can only be for a_F jongoma_W like you_F’), to which she responds ‘*Iiih! Osordiwi sakh, dama neguilisse*’ (‘Eeee!_W Today_{FW} I was even_W negligent_{FW} (in appearance)’). Baye Galaye’s matrix language in his utterance this time is French (including the word *voilà*), into which he inserts two Wolof words, *kalpe* and *jongoma*, the latter written in French orthography. The jongoma’s response, however, includes a completely Wolofized spelling of *aujourd’hui* ‘today’ and *négligée* ‘neglected,’ where French [ʒ] becomes Wolof [s], and French consonant clusters are split up by vowels.

Contrasting with the depiction of urban language that makes up people’s thoughts and words is the depiction of the written word, primarily on signs such as Baye Galaye’s professional sign and the writing on the table and basins of a Peul milk-seller, indicating what his wares are. The humour comes from the fact that they are written incorrectly in French with many spelling errors. This is one of the most interesting aspects of language depicted in *Boy Dakar*, because similar conventions are used for Wolofized French words in both oral and written language. But while reader response showed that the oral forms were considered to be so nativized as to be Wolof, the written forms were seen as errors. Baye Galaye’s professional sign reads ‘*Chez Baye Galaye. Passpor, dentite et kalpe perdi*’ (‘Baye Galaye’s. Lost passports_F ID cards_{FW} and_F wallets_W’) (Fig. 2). The three items, passports, ID cards and wallets, form a written linguistic continuum of their own. The spelling, *passpor*, conforms better to its pronunciation than the standard form, *passeports*, but the fact that it is spelled incorrectly indicates that Baye Galaye, or whoever wrote the sign for him, does not write well in French. Dentite is a widely used Wolofized version of the French *carte d’identité*, but the fact that it is written as such provokes laughter on the part of the reader. Finally, *kalpe* is the Wolof word for wallet, and Baye Galaye is either ignorant of the French word or thinks that *kalpe* is a French word. The final word, *perdi*, also reflects Wolof pronunciation of the French *perdus*.

In the Peul milk-seller who is sleeping in his chair while a child, egged on by his two friends, tries to steal some of his curdled milk, we see a character who

¹¹ Bivalent utterances are shown in typewriter-style (indicating Wolof) italics (indicating French), additionally underlined for higher visibility, and marked _{FW} in the translation.

would not be expected to know French. The sign written on his table reads ‘*Je van pa di yawoor*’ (‘I don’t sell yoghurt’) reflecting spelling that more closely mirrors colloquial spoken language. The largest bucket contains ‘*Le cahie saf sap*’ (‘Delicious_W curdled milk_F’), as does the smallest one, labelled ‘*SOOW piir*’ (‘Pure_{FW} curdled milk_W’). As in Baye Galaye’s sign, the milk vendor’s signs involve words in French which are spelled incorrectly, Wolof words and Wolofized French words like *piir* ‘pure.’

Part of the linguistic richness of *Boy Dakar* comes from the fact that it depicts both oral and written language. The attitudes of readers towards the orthographic conventions for the two media – namely that changes in French orthography were permissible in the written depiction of the oral domain because they represented nativized words that had become Wolof, but if they occurred in the depiction of the written domain they were perceived as errors – are a perfect reflection of linguistic reality. Readers bring with them to their reading of the comics the expectation that Wolof is an oral language but that French is also a written one. In addition to taking into consideration the spoken environment, as we saw earlier, Calvet also considers what the graphic environment has to tell us about a city and its inhabitants. With regard to Dakar, he tells us that the graphic environment is ‘indicative of a situation of transition between orality and writing, of a society where the relationship to the written is not yet fixed’ (177-78). He bases his observation on a comparison with the graphic environment of Paris, within a highly literate society. In Paris, he posits, there is a constant relationship between the graphic form and the linguistic content: Arabic is written in the Arabic alphabet, Chinese in Chinese characters, Thai in the Thai alphabet, etc.¹² In Dakar, on the other hand, there are two writing systems: Roman and Arabic, and three languages to be written: Wolof, Arabic, and French. With the exception of French, which is always written in the Roman alphabet, Calvet claims that there is an ‘incertitude’ in the relations between the written and oral systems and a great fluidity between languages themselves. This incertitude can be expanded to include the ambiguities, simultaneities, and bivalency to be found in urban Wolof.

As literary creations, *Boy Dakar* and *Ass et Oussou* involve the artistic mediation of linguistic forms represented in their pages. Consequently, an important question arises: to what extent does the oral language depicted in the comics accurately reflect real-life urban Wolof? While all the elements of hybridity are contained in the pages, the fictionalized version of Dakar Wolof exhibits a curious reversal of elements found in actual spoken urban Wolof. The reversal becomes clear when we compare a naturally occurring utterance with a fictionalized utterance as in (20) and (21). The former is a naturally occurring utterance, while the latter is a fictionalized form.

¹² Calvet’s observations about the graphic environment of Paris may have to be tempered for some neighbourhoods. I suspect that Parisian neighbourhoods peopled by Senegalese would probably mirror the Dakar environment to a large degree.

(20) Mungiy végéter rek, ndeysaan.
 3S-IMP vegetate just, alas
 He's just vegetating, alas.

(21) Un kalpe comme ça ne peut être que pour
 DET wallet like that NEG can.3S be except for
 une diongoma comme toi.
 DET woman like 2S

A wallet like that could only be for a woman like you. (*Boy Dakar* 1: 11)

The reversal has to do with what is identifiable as the matrix language in each phrase. In (20), the naturally occurring phrase, Wolof is most definitely the matrix language, as would be expected in urban Wolof, while in the fictionalized version in (21), French is the matrix language. Although there are examples of fictionalized speech in *Boy Dakar* which show Wolof to be the matrix language, most notably emanating from female characters, in general a French matrix is favoured. A plausible explanation of this discrepancy between the real and fictionalized versions of urban Wolof is the consideration that the fictionalized version occurs within a written medium, not an oral one, and the matrix for writing is French, so as a text, *Boy Dakar* exhibits oral Wolof embedded within written French. The resulting product is, somewhat paradoxically, a written depiction of an oral language that reinforces the fact that it is not a written language.

5. Towards a new paradigm

Within the historical context in which they appeared, *Boy Dakar* and *Ass et Oussou*, constitute just two of the many creative attempts to legitimate an urban identity, and they do so by legitimating a uniquely urban language. Returning now to the question of urban identity, we have seen how the term Wolof has played into what Miller (1998: 173) calls 'the terms of the new paradigm.' I have argued that within the urban context Wolof is a default category when applied to ethnicity, and in fact represents a de-ethnicized identity which is still cast in the terms of the old paradigm. More than a decade after the pivotal period of the Set–Setal movement, the notion of a de-ethnicized urban identity appears to be gaining currency, as witnessed by the following recently observed interaction: in June of 2000 a professor at the Université Gaston Berger in Saint-Louis, asked another with a typically Seereer last name if he was a Seereer. The latter answered with a smile, 'No, I'm from Dakar.' The first professor then said jokingly, 'That's the new ethnicity in Senegal now, to be from Dakar!' Similarly, in April of 2000, an article in *Wal Fadjri*, now a daily newspaper, reported on a group art exhibit of young urban painters. Based on an interview with one of the artists, Cheikh Ndiaye, the article reported, '*Il peint la nouvelle ethnie sénégalaise, l'ethnie urbaine qui vit dans les cars*' ('He paints the new Senegalese ethnic group, the urban ethnic group who live on the buses') (Maitre 2000: 9). As these examples indicate, the terms of the new paradigm are not forthcoming, but the terms of the old no longer mean what they once did.

If the evolution of urban identity that I have sketched in this paper is right, then urbanization in Senegal, as well as in many similar urban contexts throughout Africa, is having a profound effect on the notion of ethnicity. New multivalent ways of projecting and performing identity in urban Africa demand new paradigms for viewing African societies, and the study of urban languages and the repercussions of their use should play a central role in this endeavour.

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