In late May, I traveled to the country of Senegal in West Africa, where I spent five weeks exploring the city of Dakar and several of its suburbs, as well as the city of Louga, and the village of Fande Aas Podor. The human tongue as an expression of human intellectual faculties (through articulation of speech) has become an integral part of my art practice, and I was initially interested in Senegal for its deep and rich oral traditions. The development of several modern music forms and aspects of spoken word movements in the United States can be traced back to traditions established by individuals called griots in the Mali-Songhai empires (which includes modern day Senegal), predating written forms of record keeping. As Senegal held some key ports of the transatlantic slave trade, it marked a point of departure for these traditions from West Africa and their introduction to the United States in various forms.

My primary goals in traveling to Senegal were to investigate and experience firsthand this oral tradition, which is preserved to this day by the griots, (or gewels in the language of wolof.) The word griot refers to a learned storyteller, entertainer and historian from a particular caste in West Africa. The role of the griot is a complicated combination of historical preservation through storytelling, song and performance, memorizing genealogies of everyone in a village (or in a metropolitan area like Dakar, perhaps a neighborhood). Despite the low position of the caste, being of this lineage privileged one to the skill, as well as much guarded political and historical knowledge. To this day, the griot occupies an important position in Senegalese society on a daily basis. Through my travels in both urban and rural areas of the country in a variety of socio-economic conditions and social circumstances, I was able to connect personally with a number of griots, watch them perform their functions, interview them, and at times make voice recordings when appropriate. These interactions gave me a more nuanced understanding of the complexity and multidimensionality of the griot from both a historical and contemporary standpoint, which quickly shifts from the sacred to the commercial, from diplomatic to the spiritual and beyond. These interactions enriched my own thinking about the possibilities with oration and use of speech as a form of art.

**Dakar**

I based myself in Dakar, the largest city and capital of the country because it is a cultural hub that provided me with an opportunity to sample a multitude of sights, sounds and tastes. The way in which the residents of this city conducted themselves was indeed one of the most visually impacting aspects of my trip. From the makeshift construction of a place to rest in the shade in between working, to the arrangement of a stack of fruits to sell in the market, to the delicate balance of a basket on a woman’s head as she crossed traffic, and the use of patterns and bright colors in buildings and clothing, I was able to find an impeccable artistic sense in the mundane. Senegal is also a relatively poor country, and so the people often have to improvise in terms of resources, and so watching the use of materials and space
became a keen interest of mine, as my own practice draws heavily on the theme of creating meaningful objects from recycled material. I was also interested to investigate the different ways that the griot culture would interact with the visual arts which have a distinct role there, the forces of modernization that are present in a major metropolitan area like Dakar. Dakar provided the grounds for an engaging mixture of past, present, and future, western and non-western.

Louga

In early June I traveled to Louga, a city 100 miles from Dakar. I went there specifically to attend the wedding of my Senegalese roommate, whom I was traveling with, knowing that griots are an integral part of such significant events. They not only provide entertainment through their musical talents and verbal dexterity, but their presence is also functional as they are record keepers who witness the event, and serve to officiate it, committing it to memory. Griots are typically associated with a family or a network of families from an area that they are rooted in, and at a wedding they have a duty of honoring those family members of the bride and groom through a process called ‘praise singing.’ The praise singing at this event took on a variety of forms that ranged from rehearsed and scheduled performances, to other more spontaneous and sporadic outbursts, in which the griot would recite a portion of a family genealogy. They often embellish and elaborate on a person’s accomplishments and characteristics (much like court painters would exaggerate the physical beauty of the royal family). Attendees are expected to tip the griots during and following such impromptu performances (no matter how many times they perform). Watching how some of the griots demanded payment from people (including myself!) introduced me to an interesting opportunistic aspect that is associated with certain griots.

DakArt 2010-- Biannual Exhibition

Aside from my interest in the oral traditions of Senegal, I explored what Senegal had to offer in terms of the visual arts. Senegal has a vibrant and extensive contemporary art scene and in addition to visiting various galleries I planned my trip to coincide with Dak’Art 2010. Dak’Art 2010 was the 9th installment of an exhibition that occurs biannually, the largest of its kind in Sub-Saharan Africa pulling artists from many countries on the continent. This year saw over 100 off-site exhibitions at venues that sprawled across Dakar and its suburbs, even reaching into other cities in Senegal. Navigating this exhibition afforded me an incredible vantage point, in which I was introduced to a variety of art practices that I was previously unfamiliar with, giving me the opportunity to perceive the role of the arts from alternative perspectives. While the exhibition is underfunded, resulting in a number of problems, one still manages to find works that are stimulating and thought provoking. Highlights were the works at IFAN (Musée de l’Institut Fondamental d’Afrique Noire) - Museum of African works in Dakar, which held a closing ceremony that brought together memorable pieces from Dak’art 2010, including prize-winners and honorable mentions.
Sunu Ker Center

Following Dak’Art I stayed at the Sunu Ker Cultural Center in the suburb of Grand-Yoff Dakar. This particular part of Grand-Yoff is in the “banlieu” or an impoverished area, though rich in culture and talent. Sunu Ker, (a Wolof word that means “our house”) is a partnership between Finland and Senegal, initiated as a chance for collaboration between Finnish artists and this neighborhood in Grand-Yoff called Santhiaba. It includes a residency program, a library, an art room, workshops and classes in both French and English for neighborhood residents, and a quiet area for youth to study. While I was there I had the opportunity to work with two Finnish art education students who were completing overseas teaching requirements. Working with Dadou, the center’s artist on staff, they facilitated a series of classes for neighborhood children aged 12-16, premised on art and environmental education. I was able to participate in the production of a series of skits they were filming that portrayed the “life” of a plastic bag as it left the factory and ended up in Senegal. This project was an attempt to raise awareness amongst the youth about the human impact and duty to their environment. Senegal has a large waste disposal problem, and this was but one of several projects that they initiated in an attempt to find solutions. Other projects included installing trash disposal units throughout the neighborhood, acquiring and repairing a dump truck which would assist in collecting and disposing of trash (as well as provide employment for some youth), and making recycled paper for art projects. Dadou gave me a demonstration on the paper making process, which enriches my own visual art practice that often involves incorporating found/recycled materials.

Through my involvement with Sunu Ker, I met an english teacher named Mbaye who introduced me to an entire family of world-renowned griots named the Bannayas, who lived in Santhiaba. He helped to arrange an opportunity to watch the Bannayas rehearse for an upcoming performance in Europe, followed by an interview with two head members of the family. While watching the rehearsal was one of the richest and impressionable experiences of my trip, the interviews were equally as valuable, informative, and comprehensive. These individuals occupied a unique position because, while coming from a family that has been quite commercially successful on an international level, they still lived as one large family in one house in this humble neighborhood. The conversation in fact stressed the importance of the role of the griot as a backbone of the community and diplomat, discussing their belief that they should utilize their talents and position to help ensure social harmony. They also brought interesting perspectives on the relationship of commercialization of culture and art to what is considered sacred and “not for sale”. They were learned in the development of the griot tradition and provide some insights into it.
Fande Aas, Podor

I was fortunate enough to spend a portion of my trip in Senegal traveling with my roommate from the United States, Mamadou Mustapha Ly. Mustapha is a University of Michigan PhD candidate, a French professor, and native of Senegal. His father, Amadou, is the chief of Fande Aas, a small, remote village in the northern part of the country. We stayed there in late June, where I partook in a lifestyle that was in total contrast to anything that I had ever experienced. It was an agricultural community of two to three hundred people spread over a few miles. The climate was dry and arid, and visually it was a virtual wasteland with very little vegetation, aside from certain areas where irrigation systems had been established which enabled them to farm. Traveling with Mustapha, I was accepted as family and thus was brought into more private spheres, seeing a more intimate side of their lives. As was my experience with most Senegalese people I interacted with, the people were exceedingly generous and open. During my time in the village I met and interviewed local griots, including one named Abdoulaye Diop. This enabled me to compare and contrast the roles, functions, and perspective of the griots in a remote area versus more modernized and congested spaces like Dakar and Louga that are more susceptible to a wider variety of influences. Abdoulaye had some interesting insights into the role of preservation, notions of historical accuracy that raised some probing questions about perceptions of history from a non-western perspective, and the interplay between artistic license and “accuracy.” I also learned about another extremely sacred oral tradition—the transmission of the Muslim holy book, the Qur’an, from generation to generation. Islam entered West Africa hundreds of years ago, and memorization of the holy text is still something that people are devoted to across Senegal. I was able to interview and record a local religious leader, or imam, who spoke to me about this tradition of memorization, what it entailed, and its role in the society.

Though physically the most trying and exhausting portion of my trip, going without such amenities that I was accustomed to (such as running water and electricity) in a remote part of the country was a liberating experience that allowed me to “disconnect” from my ideas of civilization and orient myself to the world in a new way. Witnessing the simplicity of their daily routine, hearing the history of the village, and experiencing their profound hospitality, generosity, and respect was truly humbling and unforgettable.

Goree Island

I spent one day touring Goree Island, just off the coast of Dakar in the Atlantic Ocean. Goree Island is a significant historic site as it was a key port in the Atlantic Slave Trade, thus having a particular link to the United States and relevance to my research a point of departure for this oral tradition. I was able to record a walking tour of the island and the House of Slaves that included a chilling history. Reconciling this aspect with the fact that the island also serves as a key area for tourism and day-vacations made me consider the complex interplay between past
and present. Visiting this historical site was sobering, impactful and will resonate with me indefinitely.

**Boribana Museum**

Another significant moment in my trip was a private tour of the contemporary Museum Boribana in Dakar. I met with curator Dienga Khalifah, who gave me a tour of the space and spoke with me about the mechanics of running a museum in Senegal. Sadly, this project was underfunded and Dienga works most of the time there unpaid, also teaching at a local college. Still, the space was very well maintained, had a nice collection of art (including an impressive number of Kehinde Wiley pieces), two rooms for an active residency program, and a nice sculpture garden. He spoke to me about upcoming projects and opportunities, including the possibility of doing an exhibition there in the future.

My trip to Senegal was extremely fruitful. Being my first trip abroad, it made it particularly profound to leave the boundaries of home and gain a new perspective on the world and myself. The rich experiences that I had traveling across the country, and connections that I formed were not only beneficial for my art practice, but, in fact life-changing and I will continue to derive meaning from them long into the future. I would like to extend a deep gratitude to Susan-Smucker Wagstaff, Reid Wagstaff and the Art and Design community for making an invaluable opportunity like this possible.

A typical scene in the bustling and bright City of Dakar—Residents boarding and exiting rapid mobile transportation.
Griots in between performances in Louga, Senegal

Griots and Wedding attendees participating in praise singing Louga Senegal
Neighborhood children work on art projects with Finnish Art Education majors in the art room at Sunu Ker Center—Grand-Yoff, Dakar Senegal

Discussing Art project in art room—Sunu Ker
Artist on staff, Douda, at Sunu Ker Center paper making demonstration

Members of the Bannaya family of griots rehearse for a performance-Grand Yoff
Installation at Dak’Art 2010—IFAN Museum Dakar Senegal

Griot Maham Sene in Fande Aas Podor
Me with griot Abdoulaye Diop (center), and roommate Mustapha Ly

Mustapha Ly (center) with village elder (right) and village chief Amadou Ly -Podor
Home of Village Chief Amadou Ly and family Fande Aas Podor Senegal

Communal area of village and my sleeping place—Fande Aas Podor
View of the House of Slaves at Goree Island, Dakar Senegal

Boribana Contemporary Art Museum in Ngor Dakar Senegal
Me with Boribana Museum curator, artist, and professor Dienga Khalifah