Imperfect Resistance: Embodied Performances in Nairobi Underground Hip Hop

DISSERTATION

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree Doctor of Philosophy in the Graduate School of The Ohio State University

By

RaShelle Ranae Peck, M.A.

Graduate Program in Comparative Studies

The Ohio State University

2014

Dissertation Committee:

Barry Shank, Advisor

Nina Berman

Maurice Stevens
Copyright by

RaShelle Ranae Peck

2014
Abstract

My dissertation project, *Imperfect Resistance: Embodied Performances in Nairobi Underground Hip Hop*, explores how hip hop practitioners in Kenya enact agentive subjectivity through the creative maneuverability of bodily performances. Non-commercial rappers operate from a post-Mau Mau underground cultural aesthetic of resistance, which harnesses the long trajectories of narrativized political struggles and underground hip hop culture to challenge categories of difference and circumvent disciplinary regimes that encode bodies. Underground performances materialize out of long trajectories of the performative practices of Congolese dance, US rap, dancehall, and Kenyan Benga, which include the knotty transnational history of the black body as propertied and commodified. Hip hop gestures and stances contest an environment where state repression, a restrictive music industry, and the struggle for economic security all work to create constraining conditions for many practitioners. These embodied enactments are heavily masculinized, and male and female artists use this embodied knowledge to both celebrate and challenge hip hop’s gendered spaces. Artists develop creative gestures and movements that are in conversation with both larger historic, cultural, and economic realities, as well as their racial, national, and gender subjectivities. Rappers create music videos, which espouse their subjectivities as artists and allow them to participate in a global rap culture. For these reasons, hip hop performances hold
transformative possibilities for disavowing disciplining structures, developing strategies of subversion, and producing new forms of embodied knowledge.
Dedication

To Nakami and Ajani
Acknowledgments

There are so many people to acknowledge. I want to thank my committee, Barry Shank, Nina Berman, and Maurice Stevens. I am grateful to Barry for the feedback on countless drafts, long meetings, and continued assistance along with way. Thank you to Nina Berman for wonderful feedback and enlightening conversations about Kenyan politics and social issues. And Maurice, your encouragement has been needed and valuable. Other people in Comparative Studies deserve recognition, including Kwaku Korang, Wen Tsai, Lori Wilson, and Elizabeth Marsh. I thank Dan Reff for wonderful feedback and assistance in publishing. Outside of OSU, scholars like Andrea Bachner, Diane Ciekawy, Walter Hawthorne, Vibert Cambridge, and Dauda Abubakar have provided support and guidance. Several scholars during my undergraduate career at Kalamazoo, many unknowingly, encouraged my intellectual interests. I would like to thank Matthew Filner for introducing me to Marxism, R. Amy Elman for modeling a type of feminist interrogation that has stayed with me through the years, and Marigene Arnold for encouraging critical thinking and transnational study.

I acknowledge the mighty Rita Trimble, my writing partner and friend, for sticking with me through doubt, exhaustion, and hardship. We made it! Thank you to Mara Penrose for not only feedback in scholarship, but working alongside me in several academic capacities. I acknowledge Michael Murphy fondly, who helped me through
writing, and more importantly gardening. Nicole Vangas, I appreciate our friendship and your intelligence, and Kate Horigan the rising super-scholar, I am grateful for our brief writing exchange. So many Black women showed me how to navigate often hostile spaces. I recognize Jennifer Black, Tanikka Price, Carlotta Penn, Erica Butcher, and Othni Turner. Thank you to Jacque Scott, and although your journey took you to the next life, I learned from your presence in this one.

Fieldwork was no easy task. Asante sana, Janette Watila for coming with me to the most unique places and learning all about the underground (let’s do it again sometime). Lavenda Watila, Ruth Wekunda, and Anne Wekunda, I could not have done this work without your assistance. Manassah and Diana Wekunda, your willingness to host me was selfless and invaluable; Azande zana, zana. I appreciate all of the artists, producers, and deejays that took time out to speak with me. The list is too long to list, but without your willingness to share music, debate topics, and speak with me, this project would not be what it is. Nimeshukuru sana, sana, sana. May your music reach all who need and want to hear it; upendo kwote. Your critical politics have taught me about my own modes of thinking and challenged them in beneficial ways.

This project would have been difficult to execute without Philip Wekunda, the father of my children and my close friend, who helped endlessly with the rearing, but who also translated songs and helped arrange fieldwork trips. I recognize and appreciate all of the sacrifices you have made; it is difficult to express how much this means. A huge
asante sana to Michael Wekunda and Katila Makokha for all of the assistance with childcare. Thank you to Jaja Yogo for help with lyrical translation and interpretation.

I appreciate Alana Gracey and Kathy Bolden, who showed me what everyday resistance to white supremacy, sexism, and homophobia looks like through artistic modes of cultural production. There are others who have taught me a type of radical Afrocentric politic and Black-centered empowerment that I treasure, including my cohort at Kalamazoo College: Kim Henderson, Tamara Tucker, Kenyatta Tucker, and Sharika Crawford, among others. Perhaps without knowing, you have influenced me.

My family has stood by me though a lot. To the family matriarch, the proud and strong Mabel Hill, this dissertation is for you. To my grandfather James Hill, my aunties Pamela Kisner and Gayle Flack, my aunt Nancy Peck, and my cousin Rishana Kisner—your presence, support, and teaching has made me a better person. My sister, Arika Peck, showed me through her own experiences, what it means to pursue higher education. I want to name my brother, Michael Peck, and my parents Steven Peck and Cynthia Peck as significant people who have shaped my life.

To the people who are a part of a more broadly conceived family who have stood by me during this journey, one that is not only academic, but also spiritual. There are too many to name here, but I want to extend a heartfelt sentiment of gratitude to Maureen, Jude, Beth, Anita, Kim, Nita, Megan, Shon, John, Jamie, Julia, Sarah, Chet, Lisa, Mary,
and Bruce. I will be sure to carry the messages of hope that you have taught me. Thank you.

And last, to my children, the creative and conscientious Nakami Peck-Wekunda and the wilily trickster Ajani Peck-Wekunda, who continue to teach me about life, learning, and what is important. I hope the sacrifices I have made to attain this degree have been worth it. Please see this as inspiration for your own pursuits.
Vita

1997 ...................................................... Hackett Catholic Central High School
2002..........................B.A. Interdisciplinary Degree, Kalamazoo College
2005..........................................................M.A. International Affairs, Ohio University
2008 to present...........Graduate Teaching Associate, Department of Comparative Studies, The Ohio State University

Publications

“Political Strictures and Latex Caricatures in Kenya: Buttressing Mzee Masculinity in The XYZ Show”

Fields of Study

Major Field: Comparative Studies
# Table of Contents

Abstract.......................................................................................................................... ii

Dedication......................................................................................................................... iv

Acknowledgments........................................................................................................... v

Vita.................................................................................................................................. ix

Chapter 1: Introduction................................................................................................... 1

Chapter 2: “Hip hop is like a CV”: Compromises and Resistance within the Parallel Public.................................................................................................................. 58

Chapter 3: Music and Bodies, Discourse and Commodities........................................... 143

Chapter 4: Politics of Shupavu......................................................................................... 219

Chapter 5: Performing Hip Hop Subjectivities.............................................................. 296

Chapter 6: Conclusion.................................................................................................... 394

Works Cited....................................................................................................................... 401
Chapter 1: Introduction

Hip hop is a collection of embodied practices, and its meanings rest in the ways it is performed. Underground Kenyan rap practitioner Nafsi Huru demonstrates this when he confidently proclaims “Mi ni mtemi!” (I spit, or I flow) in his music video “Still Strong.” The force of the moment is in the way he articulates “mtemi.” He places the emphasis on te, following Swahili grammar, and as he says it he lunges slightly at the camera with his chest out, and then bobs quickly back and forth before quickly moving to the next lyric.¹ What is important about this moment is not only the verbal affirmation of his skill, asserting that he can flow; it is how he uses bodily gestures to imbue the lyric with meaning. Nafsi’s enacted performance, outside of the words “Mi ni mtemi,” generates sets of creative knowledge must be addressed to understand the full depth of underground hip hop culture.

My dissertation project, “Imperfect Resistance: Embodied Performances in Nairobi Underground Hip Hop,” explores how practitioners in Kenya enact agentive subjectivity through the contingent, ephemeral, and creative maneuverability of bodily performances. This study explores how artists create bodily performance styles that are part of a wider underground hip hop aesthetic, respond and resist to constraining social conditions, and create new modes of innovation. Underground non-commercial rappers

¹ Most Swahili words are pronounced emphasizing the second to the last syllable.
use stylized hip hop gestures and stances to produce knowledge by both challenging categories of difference and circumventing disciplinary regimes that encode bodies. Hip hop performances contest an environment where state repression, a restrictive music industry, and the struggle for economic security all work to create difficult conditions for many practitioners. Artists, therefore, develop creative gestures and movements that are in conversation with both larger historic, cultural, and economic realities, as well as their individual subjectivities. Rappers use performances, alongside lyrics, graffiti art, and music, to participate in an imagined global rap culture. These performances materialize due to the performative practices of Congolese dance, US rap, dancehall, and Kenyan dance practices, which include the knotty transnational history of the black/African body as propertied and commodified. These rap music performances are also heavily masculinized, and male and female artists use this embodied knowledge to both celebrate and challenge hip hop’s gendered spaces.

There are several components of this chapter. First, I introduce the concept I use to describe the practitioners that I study. I argue that rappers cultivate a post-Mau Mau underground cultural aesthetic of resistance, which grounds their perspectives, the music they make, and the performances they enact. Second, I introduce the Nairobi underground culture, and the ethnographic methods I use to study various sites. My fieldwork visits and conversations with artists have largely informed my theoretical perspective and which academic fields I base my study around. I briefly describe the sites I studied, which are explored in great detail in the following chapters. Third, I profile the multiple cultural elements that contribute to the way that hip hop performances
materialize in underground hip hop. US hip hop, Jamaican dancehall, Congolese dance, and Kenyan dances all contribute to the elements of rap music performances. These in-depth descriptions of performance styles are a basis to understand hip hop performances of underground culture.

Post-Mau Mau Underground Cultural Aesthetic of Resistance

This project considers how artists produce hip hop embodied performance as part of a resistant, overtly political stance. Nairobi underground hip hop embodies what I call a “post-Mau Mau underground cultural aesthetic of resistance.” Considering the significant work that performances do allows us to see hip hop as a fluid, dynamic musical style that uses the traditions of Mau Mau revolutionary images and signifiers as a starting place toward creating an aesthetic expression. Practitioners imagine themselves as existing within a trajectory of freedom fighters, and through performing hip hop music they exert their unique cultural influence. This has been enacted most directly through the hip hop collective, Ukoo Flani Mau Mau (UFMM). UFMM forms out of two smaller groups. Ukoo Flani is a group of Mombasa rappers, and their name is an acronym for Upendo Kwote Ole Wenu Ombeni Funzo La Aliyetuumba Njia Iwepo. This roughly translates to: love everywhere, all who seek teachings of the creator; there is a way. Mau Mau is from Nairobi, whose name obviously draws from the historical anti-colonial army and struggle. Ukoo Flani Mau Mau is best known for their album 2004 Kilio cha Haki.
UFMM, for the most part, currently does not perform or make music as one large collective, and most practitioners are involved in their own careers or no longer make hip hop music. Mwenda Ntarangwi asserts that UFMM is a “A conglomeration of groups that come together for different artistic projects of which music is a central one, the twenty-four-member clan comprises youth from the lower-class urban estates of Nairobi and Mombasa in Kenya and Tanzania from different ethnic backdrops and religious beliefs” (126). UFMM includes artists like, Kalamashaka, Mashifta, Chiznbrain, Wakamba Wawili, and Shaolin.

Most of the artists that I study in this research are those artists who have come after UFMM and who continue to be influenced profoundly by the group’s music. The “post” in the term “post-Mau Mau underground” signals to the next generation of underground hip hop after UFMM. It also refers to those rappers who see themselves as “freedom fighters” who come after the 1960s liberation army. Currently, artists state that while they treasure the musical innovations of UFMM, they proclaim the collective’s largest failing was their inability to make money. Graffiti artist Esen contends, “[…] most of the guys from Ukoo Flani Mau Mau camp are very popular. Most of the guys, ah, […] most of them are the pioneers. Um…but majority of them are broke anyway,” (Esen). The artists I study are interested in continuing the musical traditions that began with UFMM. Many believe that they have learned from the supposed financial mistakes of UFMM and have the abilities to achieve widespread popularity and succeed economically.
The Mau Mau element of this cultural expressiveness in hip hop originates from the multiple ways in which the Mau Mau war and army are imagined. Mwangi notes, “[UFMM’s] music is rarely played on the mainstream radio, and it does not feature much in mainstream magazines. It uses Mau Mau in its name to underline its guerrilla-like tactics in negotiating public cultural spaces” (“Incomplete” 98). The Mau Mau, known as the Kenya Land and Freedom Army, fought against the British colonial forces and allied Kenyan home guards and loyalists during the 1952-1960 conflict, known as the State of Emergency.² The Mau Mau have come to be known as freedom fighters responsible for ending British colonization and paving the way toward independence. In post-independence, political leaders, especially Jomo Kenyatta and Daniel arap Moi, have deployed narratives of the Mau Mau in different ways in service of their own strategic agendas.³ Hip hop artists appropriate and continue narratives of the Mau Mau as revolutionary actors who fought and died in the struggle for Kenyan freedom. Their

² The details of the Emergency and war are too long to explore here, but I will provide a few key details. Mau Mau fought against the British, as well as African loyalists or home guards, many of whom were Kikuyu. David Percox notes, “the State of Emergency imposed in October 1952 legalized the repression of Mau Mau guerillas and their supporters” (122). The British incurred nominal losses compared to the thousands of Africans who were tortured, beaten, and died during this time. Estimates of one million people were detained. Famous leader, Dedan Kimathi, is often cited in popular culture narratives. Other famous generals were Stanley Mathenge and Warihiu Itote. There were also “the subalterns of the movement, the food carriers, the couriers, the recruiting sergeants and oath administrators, the treasurers and fund-raisers, the assassins and enforcers, and of course, the ordinary foot soldiers in the forest” (Anderson 7). The army was composed largely of disaffected landless Kikuyu, who fought for access to resources. The battles waged in Murang’a, Nyeri, Kiambu, Meru, and Embu, places where mostly Kikuyus resided. Mau Mau are commonly called forest fighters because they hid in the forests, would plan attacks against the British and home guards, and return to the forests to regroup. One early example of such an attack was the Lari massacre of 1953. Officially, the Mau Mau war ended when British officials caught Dedan Kimathi in 1956 and executed him a year later, though conflicts continued until 1960.

³ Jomo Kenyatta was arrested and detained as a supposed leader of the Mau Mau, even though he had little connection to the group. In fact, he spoke out publicly against the army. Grace Musila adds, “[Popular] memory in Kenya has always been diplomatic in muting Kenyatta’s disassociation from the Mau Mau movement, while simultaneously granting him a certain heroic status that has more to do with his stint in prison as a Mau Mau than actual participation and endorsement of the liberation movement” (“Violent” 155).
constant evocation of Mau Mau is less about the actual events of the armed struggle, and more about the ways in which the army is remembered and how revolutionary themes are harnessed. Mbūgua wa Mūngai confirms, “Mau Mau history supplies critical tropes by which popular musicians seek to apprehend and explain the tensions in their everyday lives, especially those to do with identity and power” (“Riverwood” 57). Many rappers see their work as continuing this sentiment, and therefore, the imagery they use in music videos, the sounds, and their lyrics are serious, political, and revolutionary.

The musical themes of both UFMM and the artists I study are noteworthy in my project. There are several points of similarity between both groups of artists. Narratives of ghetto poverty and individual or group perseverance made popular in Kenya by UFMM continue to emerge as important themes with the underground rappers noted in this project. Both groups compose songs and create music videos in which rappers declare their subjectivity as artists, and such first person narratives are opportunities for artists to demonstrate their lyrical skill. The artists of this study and UFMM perform songs that additionally celebrate hip hop culture and Kenya as a place of pride. However, there is one point of distinction: UFMM had much heavier revolutionary subject matter. For instance, the songs “Mashairi” (Poetry/Poems) and “Angalia Saa” (Watch the Time) used language, history, and memory to remember Mau Mau, as well as other freedom fighters, and to draw important connections between themselves and the army. Evan Mwangi observes, “The group’s play with time and space in its audio and visual representations and in its evocation of emotions indicate that the objects of the Mau Mau war have not been achieved” (“Incomplete” 98).
In the music video “Angalia Saa” there are images of the Emergency, including men being led into a prison, a detained Dedan Kimathi, and people showing pass cards to officers. Alongside this, there are contemporary images of dreadlocked young men running from police, which are shot in black and white to correspond to the past clips of the Mau Mau war. There are clips of people being detained after the attempted 1982 coup of Moi, which is meant to illustrate a continuity of oppressive forces, from colonialism, to Moi, to the present (Rwangal). These images conjure up revolutionary sentiment, drawing similarities between the past and the present, and creating a romanticized and nostalgic notion of resistance. It is important to note that, though beyond the scope of my project, these scenes also tell specific stories at the expense of a more holistic account of the Mau Mau war.⁴

The artists of the current underground scene do not make music with such explicit references to resistance, freedom fighting, and the Mau Mau. There are several reasons for this. Many have a desire to explore other content than Mau Mau, which can be quite a hackneyed topic. The entrance of neoliberal self-help ideology now present in Kenya at large as well as in rap, as well as the targeted campaign against Mungiki, who draw from and are compared to Mau Mau, are additional characteristics that have influenced this shift.⁵ I regard the previous emphasis on Mau Mau revolutionary tropes as meaningful in producing a rap culture based in a tradition of struggle and freedom. My project considers

---

⁴ Evan Mwangi notes that the images show only men victimized by the British and home guards, and leave out the fact that women and children also suffered. He notes that it “does not archive the torture or the heroism of women and children,” and therefore their elision from the scenes implies their non-participation in the war and their non-victimization (“Incomplete” 106). Women fought in the Mau Mau war, taking and delivering oaths, and recruiting men and women. Leaders include Rebecca Njeri Kari and Wambui Waiyaki. See S.M. Shamsul Alam’s Mau Mau in Colonial Kenya.

⁵ I highlight the Mungiki in chapter four.
how the move away from explicit Mau Mau imagery opens up possibilities for exploring
how music can generate social change in other directions. Neither forms of music are
perfect sites of resistance or immune from problematic tendencies. The turn away from a
substantial reliance on Mau Mau content and iconography has shaped the underground
hip hop in critical ways by articulating new forms of hip hop that are situated against the
status quo. My project will not compare the performance or song aesthetics between
UFMM and its successors, but rather specifically focuses on a post-UFMM expression. It
is, though, important to note that the artists I study make critical departures from UFMM.

There are several other characteristics of a post-Mau Mau cultural aesthetic of
resistance worth explicating. Practitioners continue to imagine their work as socially and
individually transformative. Each rapper defines this transformation differently; some
artists believe that gospel rap is best, while others make hardcore hip hop about ghetto
life. Hip hop that is too watered down, and too much about carefree celebration and
leisurely fun lacks substance, relevance, and value, according to many underground
artists. There is a deep component of cultural nationalism, whereby artists show
allegiance to Kenya even as they consider how their work challenges mainstream
nationalism and is in conversation with a transnational hip hop culture. Eisha Stephen
Atieno-Odhiambo states that Mau Mau cultural nationalism incorporates “unity,
brotherhood, and struggle” (“Matunda” 39). In underground rap, this allegiance extends
especially to Kenyans who are dispossessed and marginalized.

Underground hip hop artists use the traditions of non-commerciality to assert their
place in an imagined hip hop transnational culture. Kenyan rap music is supposed to
celebrate pride in one’s cultural context. This means realizing that Kenyan revolutionary actors, whether from hip hop or from armed struggles, contribute to the political histories of African diasporic people. This non-commercial hip hop is locally rooted in Kenyan culture and globally imagined as part of a wider hip hop culture of social consciousness and politically transformation. Mwenda Ntarangwi argues, “[…] hip hop homogenizes youth cultural identity in East Africa by directly appropriating American hip hop to allow for transnational notions of identity while distinctly drawing on its roots as an authentic space for youth contestations of nationalized and even globalized forms of self-actualization and relationships to others” (17-18). Building from Ntarangwi’s thesis, the task of any underground culture is to establish a firm tradition situated in local uniqueness so that their participation in an imagined global rap community is one that contributes to and enhances global rap, rather than a hip hop culture that is regarded as borrowing and mimicking. Allegations of American imitation follow underground rappers, and their response is to claim their rootedness in a long Kenyan tradition of fighting cultural wars that draws roots from Mau Mau legacies. According to practitioners, they do not need to borrow or copy from the US precisely because they have this rich reservoir of expressivity that they are firmly grounded in and draw from.

These rappers imagine an aesthetic that is mostly inclusive, and hip hop spaces are conceived as egalitarian. Rappers, regardless of ethnicity, class, and gender are said to be welcome. Female artist Amora argues, “You don’t have to be black or white to do hip hop. You don’t have to be a certain tribe to do hip hop. Hip hop, itself is a culture of its own. […] You’re a chick, you’re a dude, you’re gay, you’re not gay; it doesn’t matter. As
long as you have the culture in you” (Amora). There is evidence of this inclusion.

Rappers with a range of abilities perform at Sarakasi events, and women have demanded presence with the support of many males. Despite Amora’s claims, hip hop does not always welcome difference, however. Women often have to contend with a space that is set up by and for men, something I explore in chapter five. Hip hop artists, Amora, Judge, and Baby T claim that rap is inclusive of queer artists, and yet I have not heard of any underground rappers that claim a non-normative sexuality.

Kenyan hip hop scholars have identified how UFMM artists draw on Mau Mau representations. Aurelia Ferrari notes through what he terms “militant rap,” artists from the Mau Mau camp express lyrics geared toward social transformation, individual empowerment, and making good decisions despite external circumstances (115-123). David Samper argues that artists continue the intentions of the Mau Mau, “[…] just like the Mau Mau fought colonialism, they are fighting this new colonialism with raps” (44). Mickie Koster states, “Ukoo Flani Mau Mau artists are conducting a spiritual war designed to fight by educating, uplifting, inspiring, and calling to action listeners to embrace change” (96). Koster’s research examines how artists in Dandora rethink social boundaries and make music that is critical of the state. Like Samper and Ferrari, Koster argues that UFMM is engaged in a type of revolutionary struggle of underclass people that takes place through music. Evan Mwangi, in his study on the emergences of Mau Mau in popular culture, states that the rap collectives use lyrics to challenge conventional knowledge, “Ukoo Flani quotes written popular and canonical texts to demolish the boundary between orality and literacy […]” (“Incomplete” 101).
My project builds on Kenyan hip hop scholarship in important ways. It looks beyond a lyrical analysis, which is important for understanding rappers’ projects, and focuses on performances. Placing performance, gestures, and stances at the center of a study on hip hop allows for a more comprehensive understanding about Nairobi underground hip hop. Raps are not the only method for understanding hip hop culture, and at times scholars who develop comprehensive readings of lyrics do not consider other elements of hip hop culture. Lyrical analyses are useful, and my research examines lyrics alongside and in the context of performance methods. Performances allow us to consider the multiple ways in which artists engage socially transformative hip hop. I argue that a post-Mau Mau cultural aesthetic is the starting point for artists because they emerge out of that tradition and find it useful for conceptualizing their work as valuable. It, nevertheless, is not the end point. From there, artists branch off and explore how they can make diverse styles of music. Likewise, the performance styles they craft are not always explicitly resistant and subversive; at times they are playful and creative. Furthermore, I build from Mwangi’s work in exploring the critical gradations that exist in underground culture. He sees the imperfect construction of underground rap, one that is male dominated and often romanticizes the army’s legacy because “they are only interested in the idealized side of the Mau Mau” (“Incomplete” 107). My research explores the difficulties, contradictions, and problematic tendencies of underground hip hop, by examining how artists appeal to larger notions of governmentality, sexism, and capitalist ideologies. Such an approach allows for the space not to be just “this new Hip Hop
revolution,” as Mickie Koster claims, but a site of ambiguity, failure, and unachieved expectations (82).

This project is about how a post-Mau Mau cultural aesthetic, which is a class-based consciousness and marginality and the collection of creative, stylistic, embodied performance methods, create a compelling underground expressive culture. This cultural aesthetic is heavily dependent on how the underground is defined. Anthony Kwame Harrison describes the definition of US underground music as a “national music subgenre and a local music scene” as well as maintaining that rappers “[work] to secure and sustain distinctions between their music/culture and its commercial counterpart” (11). In Kenya, underground hip hop materializes within local scenes, and rather than it being a national subgenre, it is conceived as a global one, whereby artists know that underground cultures exist all over the world even when they may not know the specificities of such sites. Underground Nairobi rap departs from mainstream sounds, which in Kenya are Afropop and dancehall. Non-commercial rap often “sounds” underground, with hard bass-infused beats fit with creative rap lyrics. These lyrics cannot be empty of meaning, they must affirm the author’s presence as an MC and/or invest in some sort of social change. These elements of the underground are found in all aspects of the Nairobi rap culture, including graffiti, performances, music, and lyrics.
Ethnographic Methodology

My ethnographic trips, including my discussions with artists and other actors and my visits to events, have ultimately determined how this project unfolds. My fieldwork helped to shape my theoretical perspectives, and I used ethnographic data to inform what bodies of literature I placed my project in conversation with. I crafted my project around the notion of “hiphopography,” which “integrates the varied approaches of ethnography, biography, and social, culture, and oral history to arrive at an emic view of Hip Hop Culture” (Alim, “Roc” 11). Emic approaches to ethnography place the people being studies at the center of research and allow individuals to guide the course of the research. As much as possible, I followed and investigated what hip hop practitioners identified as important. I asked practitioners about their opinions on television and radio shows, political occurrences, and on the recent copyright policies. I then took the information they provided me and examined these various elements, characteristics, and events. I visited upscale malls and vendors on River Road in the CBD. I attended WAPI, Hip Hop Fest, Da Factory Club, Blankets and Wine, and bars and clubs in Westlands. I tracked various forms of graffiti, from highway tags to commissioned art. I sought out the work by Vultures Graffiti, who painted elaborate scenes portraying politicians as vultures. I visited two music studios. Investigating multiple characteristics of Nairobi’s music culture has allowed me to understand hip hop practitioners’ experience, music, and perspectives. My exploration of music videos as a primary way that underground Nairobi practitioners realize themselves as artists is due to their lengthy discussions on the
restrictions and impediments of the industry. Furthermore, their innovation and drive to enact rap subjectivity, through rap lyrics and embodied performances is powerfully evident in their music videos.

In as much as this project is about the local—underground Nairobi hip hop, it is also a larger conversation about non-US hip hop, the state, and neoliberal capitalism. My ethnographic perspectives account for studying global processes and local realities. Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff discuss that ethnography must be attentive to the global forces at work and the local specificities of people’s lives amid those forces. To answer such inquiries, methods should address the “local and translocal, empirical and analytic, […] and part pedagogic, part ethnographic” (163). Derek Pardue similarly notes in his ethnography on Brazilian hip hop: “I address issues of performance and production, which refer to hip hop transnationally. Furthermore, I demonstrate specific procedural and conceptual aspects of hip hop […] that are particularly Brazilian” (7). I, like Pardue, explore how production, commodification, and consumption are tied into local practices of hip hop. I discuss how colonial notions of labor exploitation connect to the early music industry. I trace the state’s music censorship policies and note how this was replaced by Kenya’s transition to neoliberalism, whereby the market creates difficult realities that in some ways mirror censorship. All of these factors emerged out of my ethnographic trips and are important in conceptualizing the significance of hip hop performances.

My first fieldwork trip took place on December of 2008, when I had just begun my dissertation program. I visited music stalls, examined television and radio, and attended events. No interviews were conducted during this time. I quickly realized that
the industry was more restrictive than I had previously known. The state seemed more aggressive in eliminating bootlegged music and that seemed to change which music was available to buy. I investigated this as part of examining hip hop embodied performance to realize the social realities that hip hop performances encountered. This research helped set up questions about the economic and political realities that rappers confronted. I considered multiple, large scale cultural, social, economic, and political elements when studying rap music performances. Comaroff and Comaroff note that “once [ethnography is] orientated to particular sites and grounded issues, [it] is pursued on multiple dimensions and scales” (169). Therefore, I visited music stalls to discover what music was available and what genres were missing, all the while understanding that my larger project was to conceptualize how bodies are affected by and respond to limiting conditions. I attended up-scale events, noting what populations of people were present, and how accessible such a space was to the underground artists with whom I spoke.

I conducted three other in depth fieldwork projects in December 2011, July 2011, and October 2012. These trips were approximately a month long and were intensive and busy. I conducted interviews, attended events, pursued leads to artists and events, and visited vendor stalls and other places where music is sold. What assisted in my analysis of the political economy of music, the impact of matatu regulations, and the copyright regulations was an early stay in Nairobi. As an undergraduate, I lived in Kenya for six months (2000-2001). During this stay, I traveled throughout Kenya, to Meru, Mombasa, Naivasha, and other cities as part of a study abroad curriculum. I conducted a study on the influence of African American culture on Kenyan society. This study was
shortsighted and inchoate, yet it still provided me with an introductory framework to examine various cultural emergences in Kenyan society. My subsequent trips to Nairobi, coupled with doctoral training have allowed me to craft a much more comprehensive project.

Several social and political events took place during this study. The 2008 trip took place approximately one year after Mwai Kibaki’s disputed presidential victory and the ensuing post-election violence. Kenyans were impacted heavily by this violence, and mainstream and underground artists expressed the need for peace and solutions. There were (and still are) reminders of this violence. I traveled to Naivasha, Eldoret, and Bungoma, which are cities in the western part of Kenya. I passed through financial districts where businesses had been burnt and saw the camps where internally displaced people (IDPs) resided. I talked to people in middle class communities who stated they witnessed the violence and killing. Artists, mainstream and underground, seemed resolute in addressing this issue in their music both through direct lyrics about the violence and through more general calls for peace and unity.

In 2010-11 a famine hit Turkana, which is the northeastern part of Kenya. Kenyan corporations led a campaign called “Kenyans for Kenya,” which raised funds for food and resources for the region. Safaricom, Kenya Commercial Bank, Media Owners Association, and the Kenya Red Cross were prominent actors. I attended one of the fund raising events, where businesses competed to see who could raise the most money. This movement, which arose after Alfred Mutua, the then-government spokesperson, denied people were suffering and dying in Turkana. This inspired Kenyans, and many
businesses, to look for solutions outside of government help. Kenyans helped raise billions of Kenya shillings, after the nation-wide campaign appeared on television and radio. It served as a nation-building exercise, and for many it proved that Kenyans could come together in crisis, especially after the divisive election violence drove wedges along ethnic lines. “Kenyans for Kenya” solidified corporate Kenya as a solution to these social problems, feeding the notion that neoliberal capitalism rectifies perhaps what the state cannot. This event and the famine, though, rarely came up in interviews. When it did, it was in the context of government incompetence. For instance, rapper Judge discussed how the government’s only concern in that situation was to make money out of the situation, a view held by many (Judge).

Kenyan involvement with the conflict in Somalia intensified after the Kenyan army invaded Somalia in 2011 in Operation Linda Nchi (Operation Protect the Country). This occurred in response to Al Shabaab fighters having kidnapped European tourists and aid workers on the coast. Security became an issue throughout Kenya; everywhere I went in Nairobi, I passed through security, where guards used a wand for metal detection purposes. This occurred in stores, malls, and even buses and matatus. I was advised not to travel alone at night, for general reasons of security, but additionally because it was thought that Al Shabaab specifically targeted non-Kenyans. The conflict itself only residually appeared in interviews and in the music. For instance, in Judge and Flamez song, “Shupavu,” Judge raps, “Mi ninakesha na mistari, kama jeshi ya Kenya Somalia” (I stay up all night with lyrics, like the Kenyan army in Somalia). In September 2013, Al Shabaab fighters entered the upscale Westgate mall and killed approximately 70 people,
reportedly in retaliation for the Kenyan army invading Somalia and killing Al Shabaab. However, at that point I was finished with my fieldwork. Consequently I have not asked artists about the tragic event or how it might impact their music.

Time commitments prevented me from extended stays. The composition of Nairobi has changed dramatically in the past ten years. City congestion has worsened and there are more people in the city center, also known as the Central Business District (CBD). New highway construction has sought to alleviate the problem of traffic, but this has helped little. This affected my fieldwork because I could not travel to multiple sites in one day; I accomplished one or two tasks daily. Traveling to the city center to visit music stalls in the CDB might take a half hour or forty-five minutes. Visiting the stalls took a few hours. A few times, I scheduled interviews near the stalls I visited. To leave the city center and go elsewhere, even to Sarakasi, took a few hours especially during rush hour. It was not uncommon for the bus or matatu I was on to be in traffic for an hour or more, inching through congestion. If there was an event at Sarakasi I wanted to attend, that was the only thing I scheduled that day, for fear that I would be caught in traffic and miss something critical at the event. Several times, I scheduled interviews that did not happen, which quite possibly meant that half of a day or a day of research would be compromised. I tried to schedule an interview with an officer of the Music Copyright Society of Kenya (MCSK) and never was successful. I did not plan anything that day, realizing that I desperately wanted that interview. When he did not show up, I realized I could not devote too much time to this endeavor, as it meant taking time away from other things, like speaking with rappers and visiting sites. My short trips prevented me from
knowing artists intimately, and some elements of social media helped with this, for instance “friending” people on Facebook.

The briefness of my trips impacted how I interacted with rappers. It was difficult for me to form trusting and meaningful relationships. I decided to pay the artists I interviewed as a show of appreciation and gratitude for their time. The impacts of this were obvious. After my first fieldwork trip, I interviewed two graffiti artists who I met at WAPI. These interviews came after I spent the day with them and learn about their work. I attempted to set up other interviews and to meet people, but because I had not spent a great deal of time within these hip hop spaces, they never materialized. Upon returning, I altered my IRB so that I could pay each artist 500 KSH, which is the equivalent to approximately 5.70 USD. In some ways, 500 KSH is not a lot of money considering the cost of living has gone up so substantially in Nairobi in the past ten years. In others, it is an easy way for rappers to make a small amount of cash by sitting down for an hour with a researcher. People were less likely to cancel appointments and not show up for interviews because I paid this stipend. Our relationships were mediated by money, and this further prevented more in-depth relationships from forming. It is possible that the practitioners I interviewed thought I expected certain responses because of the stipend. I invented a number of strategies if I thought they were telling me answers that they believed I wanted them to say. I would investigate one comment or statement in great detail, I often abruptly switched topics, or I simply questioned the validity of their comment.
Ethnography involves bodily knowledge, and according to Dwight Conquergood, “participant-observation fieldwork […] privileges the body as a site of knowing” (180). In studying bodily performance, I was aware of my own subject position as an ethnographer. I am a light-skinned African American woman, which afforded me privilege in Kenya in various circumstances. One reason I was able to access an invite-only “Kenyans for Kenya” event was because I looked non-Kenyan, perhaps western, and therefore “important.” Most people recognize me as a person of color, though some cannot place where I am from. In Nairobi, people speak to me in Swahili and most believe that I have at least one Kenyan parent (the other one, white and non-Kenyan), sometimes even after I insist I am American. Most immediately know I have not grown up in Kenya when I speak Swahili. Artists conflated, perhaps rightly, my American subjectivity with middle class status, of which I am both. In Kenya, as well as other places in the global south, Americans are seen as automatically wealthy and well-connected. Some artists I interacted with saw me a resource; some asked me if I had connections with US record labels, others felt I should push their album in the US. Some male artists confused interview requests with sexual or romantic advances. These were all difficult challenges that I needed to mediate, particularly because I felt an obligation to represent and assist these practitioners as much as possible. Drawing from Judith Stacey’s provocation “can there be a feminist ethnography,” I understand that no ethnography can be entirely removed from social relations and power structures (88-101). I acknowledge my privilege in fieldwork situations and attempt to place the people I
interview at the center of this work so that, as much as possible, their perspectives are represented.

Profiles of Spaces

All of my fieldwork for this project took place in Nairobi. Nairobi is a city of between three and five million people, given the urban sprawl that has flourished in outlying areas. It has gross distributions of wealth; while some live in lavish houses, mostly on the city’s west side, the majority of Kenyans live in informal settlements, known as slums or as graffiti artist Wise names, “high density neighborhoods” (Wise). James Ogude explores ethnic music in Nairobi clubs and states, “it is the openness of the city—its fluidity—that allows for the creation of spaces within which a projection of fantasies rooted in popular cultural memory could be performed” (151). Ogude does not want us to focus on Nairobi’s socioeconomic discrepancies at the expense of cultural expression; accordingly we must see beyond the city as “a site of perpetual insecurity, poverty, and unequal economic relations” (150). I examine Nairobi somewhat differently by considering both elements, particularly how the economic informs cultural expressions, and how cultural expressions resist, speak back, and interrogate gross economic inequalities.

My fieldwork centered on locating and attending spaces that hosted hip hop events for underground artists. I visited Sarakasi Dome, the Kenya National Theatre,
Godown Centre, an upscale outdoor concert called Blankets ‘N Wine, and a few nightclubs in Westlands. Visiting various venues allowed me to compare these spaces, the artists who performed, and the participants who frequented these events. A large part of my fieldwork references the events at Sarakasi Dome because this is a location where a lot of underground artists perform. Most of the artists who I interview in this project attend events and perform at Sarakasi, and I cite this heavily in my research. I also met TS1, the environmental activist hip hop group, at Sarakasi who I reference in chapter five. Importantly, it is not the only venue to host non-commercial artists; the French Cultural Centre and the Goethe Centre hold sporadic events.

Blankets ‘N Wine and nightclubs in Westlands had live music that catered to upper class patrons. Artists at Blankets ‘N Wine sang and played mostly Afropop, the popular commercial music in East Africa. At one event, the group from Tusker Allstars performed; Tusker Allstars is a television reality show competition for singers. The entrance fee to this event is 1000-1200 KSH (11-14 USD), making this event inaccessible to the underground artists I interview, as well as most Kenyans. About thirty percent of the audience members were white, which was the largest number of white people at any event that I attended. Nightclubs in Westlands cater to wealthier patrons, and occasionally I attended clubs where a band played live music, such as jazz. Most of the clubs in Westlands that play hip hop or popular music prefer American music and South African and Jamaican reggae.

This project explores the music industry and the political and social conditions that music occurs within. I did archival research at the Kenya National Archives to search
for how the Moi administration, in particular, documented music culture. I investigated
the origins of the Music Copyright Society of Kenya (MCSK) by examining
parliamentary proceedings. At times, portions of documents were missing or were out of
order. Other times, the online database stated there was a text available for viewing and
when I asked for it, the curator could not find it. This research led me to explore the
current economies of music in Nairobi. I walked extensively through the Central
Business District (CBD) in Nairobi, River Road (also called Riverwood), and in several
malls, Westgate, Yaya Centre, Capitol, and others. Here I searched for music, evidence of
the enforcement of copyright policies, and struck up brief conversations with vendors. I
discovered an overall absence of hip hop music and an unwillingness on behalf of
vendors to sell hip hop, even more mainstream rap. My observations, which I make in
chapter four, that the Kenyan state and music industry does not allow for a flourishing
music scene came from these experiences.

I visited two music studios, one in Embakasi where TS1 recorded at and Audio
Kusini, located in Kahawa West. Both studios were located in working class communities
in Nairobi. TS1’s studio was located in the upstairs portion of the house, and Audio
Kusini’s was in a flat. These studios had relatively up-to-date technology and software,
even though many songs that I discuss contain low production quality. Makeshift studios
are not only in working class communities; I regularly passed similar types of studios in
South C, which is located on the generally wealthier west side of Nairobi. The
widespread availability of music studios and producers willing to help an artist lay a track
(for a price), in some ways, contributes to the democratizing elements of the music scene.
As I explore in this dissertation, there are many other reasons that make the industry a difficult place. All of these spaces are explored in greater detail throughout the project.

Profiles of Performances

Rap artists speak and perform bodily gestures from their given cultural contexts. In the following chapters, I explore the economic, social, and political elements that contribute to rappers’ perspectives and their enacted bodily performances. Likewise, discussing the cultural components that contribute to hip hop performances is critical to understanding the larger frameworks that artists often draw from to create their expressiveness. In order to accomplish this, I do not only rely on an emic approach but also I incorporate elements of etic analyses. This section draws from my own observations about the performance styles present in Kenya to the multiple characteristics present in hip hop bodily gestures. I am not the first hip hop scholar to do this. Thokozani Mhlambi studies South African kwaito and contends:

As a young African researcher, I have witnessed the genre’s development first hand, while being educated in the European system of music theory and performance practice. This background coupled with a deep understanding of the language of kwaito and its socio-cultural implications enables me to discuss this genre from an emic perspective coloured with etic influences. (118)
Similarly, I identify the historical development of the music industry, the difficult economic realities that many live under, and political developments. These elements all contribute to underground rap and the perspectives of the practitioners with whom I have spoken. At times, practitioners identify structural barriers, historical developments, and other macro-level elements of music. At other times, I work to flesh out, connect, and conceptualize their musical works and viewpoints within larger historic and socioeconomic contexts. Derek Pardue, in research on Brazilian rap, suggests that it might be useful to look beyond the emic/etic binary, “Of course, this division of emic/etic is an abstraction, since, in practice there is a great deal of influence and overlap between insider and outsider classifications” (17). A large part of my ethnographic work and dissertation analysis is to make critical observations about the performances, music, and politics that surround both. I rely, therefore, heavily on what interviewees state, as well as my own contributions.

Most of my interviewees had never been asked about rap performance and bodily gestures. Some enjoyed thinking through such questions, like “what is cool?” or “in rap culture, how do bodies communicate?” Others were puzzled by these questions. I used their interviews and music, as well as my observations of television shows, music vendors, concerts, and clubs to consider the multiple characteristics that constitute hip hop performances. On the surface, it may seem that Nairobi hip hop underground practitioners derive their performance styles from only US hip hop. American rap music is one place of influence, but not the only one. My contention is that rappers draw purposefully or unintentionally from the performative practices that have long been
present in Kenya. In this hip hop, there is the presence of historic and reciprocal “complex musical exchanges” of Africanist music styles (Zeleza 228). Aside from US musical production, equally significant is the musical borrowings that have occurred away from the oft-cited US metropole influencing Kenyan music in interesting and complex ways. Paul Zeleza discusses an unrecognized depth of musical circuitry between continental Africa and the diaspora, “This was a dynamic and dialogic exchange, not simply a derivative one between a primordial, static Africa and a modern, vibrant diaspora” (212). This study, therefore, extends beyond the cultural territorialities of Gilroy’s black Atlantic. Nairobi hip hop performances cannot be described by taking “the Atlantic as one single, complex unit of analysis in […] discussions of the modern world” (Gilroy 15). Moreover, the emergence of Kenyan rap is not due to a one-way transmission of US cultural goods to Kenya that describes underground hip hop.

Examining the rich cultural texture of rap music performances in underground Nairobi scenes enriches our understanding of Africanist music by allowing us to consider how Nairobi rap draws from diverse repertoires to create a dynamic music style. The post-Mau Mau underground cultural aesthetic that most rappers exist within relies heavily on African diasporic cultural influences. This underground aesthetic allows for artists to participate in a transnational imagined hip hop culture by seeing themselves as equal contributors to this cultural movement. The performance styles that emerge in underground spaces, hence, also draw from diasporic and transnational elements. These embodied practices have materialized because of interactions with styles of Jamaican
dancehall and the Caribbean influenced Congolese music, US hip hop, as well as the long traditions of Kenyan expressive dance practices.

The following sections are descriptions of performative styles. I discuss dancehall, Congo dance, US black performance, and Kenyan styles from their initial locations: Jamaica, the DRC, the US, and Kenya. These dance styles and performance methods have traveled and transformed as they are taken up in other cultural locales. The focus on place, therefore, is not to suggest that these performance enactments are fixed in these locations. Rather, it is to locate “the strands [that] were drawn from many sources and [that have] flowed in many directions to create a complex tapestry of musical Afro-internationalism and Afro-modernism, or global Afro-modernism” (Zeleza 228). The post-Mau Mau cultural aesthetic of underground rap takes place in Nairobi hip hop scenes, but the influences and compositions of its practices are transnational and diasporic. US rap, dancehall, Congo music, and Kenyan styles contain some common characteristics, like improvisation, isolated bodily moves, and subtlety of gestures. These performance styles make underground hip hop a diverse and fluid set of practices.

US Hip Hop

US Black music has profoundly influenced music innovations in various places in Africa. Jesse Shipley and Stephanie Shonekan identify many African American artists who were popular in Ghana and Nigeria beginning in the 1960s and into the 80s,
including James Brown, The Ohio Players, Parliament, Aretha Franklin, and Teddy Pendergrass (30; 152-3). This history of the flows of US music to various Africa countries set the stage for the emergence of American hip hop in places like Kenya. Shonekan further notes in the 1970s due to increased travel to the US, many began bootlegging cheap cassettes from music acquired abroad (152). Likewise in Kenya, music began appearing through the same channels. DJ Adrian, a prominent actor in the music industry in Nairobi, recalls how he brought hip hop and R&B music into Kenya in the early 90s:

I would have to have it imported from the US. If I traveled, I would go buy it there. And it would take—a song would come out and by the time you get it, it was probably a month old. So it was a bit stressful. […] I [also] had a friend who used to work with the airline and they used to travel all the time and, you know, I would look at billboard magazines to see what singles are out there. And then I would send him to get it. Yeah. It was a bit expensive also because I would have to buy and then…you know, but, that was one of my main challenges. (Washika)

The underground hip hop practitioners in Nairobi have a complex relationship with US hip hop because they see themselves as heavily influenced by US music, but partaking in their own unique forms of hip hop culture. Mbūgu wa Mūngai asserts, “[…] youth rappers appropriate the surface representations of African American popular culture […] to explore local social-cultural space” (48). My research contends that artists are influenced by, draw inspiration from, and reference African American hip hop.

During interviews, I asked the question to artists, “Who has influenced you?” Artists first
and foremost answered with US artists: 50 Cent, Eminem, Da Brat, Nas, Tupac, Biggie Smalls, Talib Kweli, Missy Elliott. Interviewees named Common (also called Common Sense) more than any other rapper. I did not explore it then, but I now believe that Common represents what these artists strive to be. He is regarded as an underground artist, in that he maintains his anti-corporate themes, by rapping about Pan-Africanism, love, and non-commerciality. Common has had mainstream success and has acquired wealth. Artists that I interview strive to accomplish all of those characteristics.

Hip hop dancers, rappers, and other practitioners enact a variety of performance styles. Using the body to espouse affective experiences is central to performance gestures including those found in hip hop dance. In these contexts dances are avenues of articulation for emotions, thoughts, and experiences. Defrantz notes that US hip hop dancers employ a “cool facial mask…which is a symbol of focused energy” (72). Hip hop dance practices continue to reflect the important notion of bodily stances of confidence and composure. Hip hop dancers use many dance moves, stances, and postures as ways of negotiating within various forms of marginalization. Katrina Hazzard-Donald states “The hip hop persona emphasizes […] postures of self-assurance in the face of unbeatable odds” (230) and “hip hop dance possesses an air of defiance of authority and mainstream society” (229). The ability to express and negotiate wider social relations is paramount, and makes black dance an extremely viable and significant within wider African American contexts. Artists use hip hop dance to express pain, frustration, endurance, persistence, anger, happiness, and contentedness. Cool
performances, as well as other types of moves, exhibit the creative aesthetic of the performer and hip hop dance at large.

Many scholars describe embodied rap performances and related expressions as “cool” performances, including those studying consumer culture. Scholars such as Tricia Rose and David Crockett argue that commercial hip hop has commodified cool performances, which has presented young black males in a one-sided and stereotypical way (245-268; 87). The commercialization of rap music and black bodies has created a thorny dynamic that shores up a host of complexities concerning its ability to create knowledge. Denise Fernandes argues, “while the cool pose codes black Americans with the physical (for instance, sports, violence, sex, and dance) it also addresses the dualistic conception of race that has come to associate black Americans with primal behaviors” (34). Commercialization complicates the meanings of black performance styles because it often evacuates or waters down political interventions, as well as any productive and creative characteristics. Commercial venues, like music videos, television shows, and advertisements, can portray black performances as monolithic representations of black men who lack agentive capacities. Such depictions feed into wider and historic conceptions of the pejorative black body. Many artists and performers who enact cool performances, even in commercial settings, attempt to eschew, escape, or redefine such conceptions.

Rap music performance styles in mainstream commercial culture appear with problematic forms of black masculinity and these forms complicate its oppositional and functional characteristics. Derek Iwamoto, in discussing Tupac Shakur, notes that cool is
a “hypermasculine front” for young black men. He suggests that cool performances are a strategy of combating racism, and states that Shakur utilized the cool pose to confirm his ultramasculine identity. In *Hip Hop Wars*, Tricia Rose exposes the double standards that exist when mainstream and conservative critics attack US hip hop. She states that cool poses are blamed for black men’s failure to educate themselves and their lack of engagement with sustainable employment (79-86). Performances of cool appear in popular culture. Herman Gray asserts that comedians Richard Pryor and Eddie Murphy use cool to reclaim sexist power in an exclusionary society, and this is “masculine energy as an agency that never interrogates itself” (265).

Other music styles precede rap music embodied performances that are worth mentioning. For instance, scholars have documented the role of an unaffected and cool demeanor in jazz performances. Eddie Meadows states, “In a macro sense, [the term cool] describes a jazz musician whose performance style is restrained and subdued […] the term Cool was also used to describe the behavior of musicians who held their emotions in check when performing” (262). Stepping is a form of dance and expression that utilizes cool performances. Halifu Osumare argues cool is the “unconscious overarching principle” that influences how African forms of dance and performance manifest in the Americas (6). Particularly, she states that steppers’ facial appearances reflect notions of cool: “facial gestures [such as closing of the eyes as in sinking deeper into rhythm, or consciously projecting a ‘cool’ composed exterior to the audience in direct assertion of individuality]” (13). Facial expressions help to assemble composed bodily stances and performances. Using one’s face to perform composure and confidence
works together with the body. Stepping utilizes body movements that are influenced by cool performances. Stepping, as Osumare argues, is a cultural form that resists racism and other forms of societal othering. She notes, “[s]teppers [have] a conscious sense of [s]tepping as an African performance mode that shared a ‘lineage’…used for group solidarity and unity to ameliorate the often abusive social conditions” (14).

Hip hop performance styles can exist in a space between dance and non-dance. In fact, a large portion of my project is about illustrating how performances can be similar to dance moves, but can also exist in their own frame. These performances, including gestures and stances, are located in commonplace black cultural modes of communication, and not solely within formalized performative and music spaces. Richard Majors and Janet Billson discuss how young black men use “the cool pose” in educational settings to disassociate from mainstream society, to regain pride, and to assert masculinity (11-25). Major and Billson suggest that “cool poses” can exist in everyday gestures and bodily stances and conclude that it is a problematic negotiation of one’s social context. Hip hop performances exist on a continuum of bodily expression; they can appear as dance movements, in formal rap performances, and in the everyday ways of walking and gesturing.

Michael Jefferies resists Major and Billson’s research and argues for a “hip-hop complex coolness,” “which is more than a masklike coping mechanism run amok” (60). Jefferies suggests that complex coolness interrogates a “publicly conflicted discourse of black masculinity,” which is variegated, historically situated, and not monolithic or limiting (62). The bodies of young black youth become one mode of expression to
confront and resist the limited opportunities that many face. These embodied enactments can be a response, negotiation, and/or interaction with political, social, and economic realities. For example, Ralph Ellison understands that cool composes were (and are) necessary in navigating racism: “One countered racial provocation by cloaking one’s feelings in that psychologically inadequate equivalent of a plaster cast—or bulletproof vest—known as “cool”[…] Coolness helped to keep our values warm, and racial hostility stoked our fires of inspiration” (166-167). This means there is no definitive line that marks the black performative aesthetic and the response and negotiation of one’s social realities. The black expressive performances detailed here, as well as the underground performance styles in Nairobi rap, are always already situated in certain social and political contexts.

Africanist elements of these characteristics factor heavily into US black expressive culture. This is a primary reason why Kenyan artists find American hip hop so appealing. Robert Thompson is one of the first scholars to study and suggest a philosophy through dance and music that encourages notions of cool. His research primarily takes place in the 1960s in various places in West and Central Africa, although methodologically, he expands this as well, citing more historical examples of cool performances and interactions. Thompson suggests that coolness is about “control, stability, and composure” worn at all times, whether one is upset, calm, content, distressed, etc. (“Aesthetic” 41). Furthermore, he states that coolness, as Afro Diasporic expression, can indicate spiritual wellness and purification, a connection to ancestral knowledge, and wisdom. In researching Yoruba communities, he states, “coolness: truth
and generosity regained; an all-embracing, positive attribute which combines notions of composure, silence vitality, healing, and social purification” (“West” 73). Thompson’s later research spans West and Central Africa, South America, and the US. He documents translations of cool into multiple languages, which he states originate from West and Central Africa, although he includes Zulu and Xhosa from southern Africa and Kikuyu and Luo from East Africa. A large portion of Thompson’s work is to see how seemingly disparate notions of cool actually exist in the same cultural aesthetic expressive practice. For example, he cites a B.B King performance at the Regal and Malcolm X’s last words (“Now brothers, be cool! Don’t get excited”) in the same cultural aesthetic as West African dance (73). My research builds from these scholars by considering how artists enact other performances besides cool.

**Congolese Dance Music**

Congolese dance elements are evident in several spaces in Kenya. Mainstream Kenyan gospel music videos, for example, often feature moves that are inspired by Congolese dancing. Sakata, the television dance show, features competitors performing choreographed moves, many of which are Congolese-inspired. Afropop, which is the dominant musical trend, draws from Congolese and dancehall elements to create a largely synth-driven musical style. Even in underground spaces, Congolese characteristics appear. Da Factory Club is a dance event held in a small room at the Kenya National
Theatre, which I discuss in the next chapter. Participants dress in bright colors like orange, bright blue, and red and dye their hair similar colors. They dance to Afropop, hip hop, Congo, and dancehall music.

Underground artists that I follow mostly distance themselves from these dance and music styles. However, even at the Sarakasi events where large numbers of underground artists congregate, Congo influences can be seen. At Hip Hop Fest, the Sarakasi Allstars danced for an opening rap duo. The Sarakasi Allstars are an acrobatic dance troupe that performed a choreographed dance that contained Congolese elements. They regularly practice and hold events as Sarakasi. At this event, the two rappers performed in front of four teenage female dancers, dressed in generic African-themed outfits. The dancers spread their feet far apart and circled their hips, while isolating their torso and upper body. Most Congolese dancing is centered on how well performers can move the lower regions of their body, like the hips, buttocks, and legs, in isolation from the rest of the body. At one point, one of the male rappers joined in on the performance, moving with the dancers. He bent his legs, and moved his legs ever so slightly as his hips moved in and out. His performance was subtle and not exaggerated, but still in unison with the Allstars. Performances like this one are not common in underground settings, yet they reveal the deep presence of Congo styles.

The role that Congolese music has played in musical style and dance movements is not only felt in Kenya, but also western, eastern, and southern Africa. In Kenya, Congolese music is known mostly as Lingala has been significantly impacting music scenes since at least the mid-1960s. Traces of Congolese styles are found in Kenyan
television shows, traditionalized dances, gospel music, and Afropop. Additionally, some of the dances we now see in the Caribbean have been influenced by the longstanding influence of Congolese performance practices that materialized in New World black communities, brought by individuals who came from the Congo regions as a result of the transatlantic slave trade. For this reason, the role that Congolese aesthetic practices have in Kenya appears in dancehall, not just Soukous, kwassa kwassa, and Ndombolo.

Congolese music produces, like hip hop, performances that are cool, stylistic, and creative.

Congolese music is both intra- and inter-continental, because its various forms have traveled and influenced music from non-African genres and become hugely popular within Africa. Paul Zeleza notes:

Congolese musicians have been mining the rich reservoirs of their respective traditional musics and aesthetics, combining them with their own creativity, and the cumulative stock of modern popular music to create new forms of music that have earned them such a popular following across the region and Africa as a whole and made Congo music perhaps the most recognizable form of modern popular African music across the world. (215)

These music and dance styles have become popular and commonplace, part of a wider repertoire of popular music that continues to generate meanings in urban areas in Kenya (Parsitau; Frederiksen; Nyairo). Specifically, Soukous music began as first guitar music later transforming into big band music in the 1960s, and is among the first mass produced African music available for consumption. Soukous music is known as Congolese rumba,
and in some instances stands in for a general name of all Congolese music. Instruments include percussion, bass guitar, horn, or organ (Wheeler).

Here I focus specific attention to kwassa kwassa and Ndombolo dance moves, articulate movements, poses, and postures similar to hip hop performance styles. Kwassa kwassa is dance music from the 1980s and a dance style that Kanda Bongo Man made popular. It is widely practiced and borrowed throughout many African countries, including South Africa (Livermon 272). The name kwassa is a play off of the question, “c’est quoi ça?” French for “what’s that?” (Stewart 327). Ndombolo is a much more recent and controversial dance form. Ndombolo is regarded as an explicitly sexualized dance, with more pronounced pelvic thrusts and stronger hip movements, than kwassa kwassa. In fact, there have been attempts to ban Ndombolo in the DRC, Cameroon, and Kenya, and in the DRC in 2005, the state banned the videos because of seemingly explicit content (“Ban on Rap”; Ngwa-Niba; Trillo 301).

Ndombolo is the more popular and controversial dance that is viewed as sexually explicit and provocative. This is primarily because of its strong body movements based on sexually suggestive pelvic thrusts performed by both men and women, “The dancing emphasised fluid articulated buttock movement, much attention to the knees, and subtle movements of the feet” (Gilman and Fenn 372). It involves strong and explicit bodily movements and is based on isolation, pivot, and hip movement:

The dancer lightly flexes the knees, fixes the buttocks, arches the back and then begins to turn her hips in a way that reveals those sensual and provocative curves of the body. The hips here act as a chassis for the whole body, but at the same
time they are flexible, as are the buttocks. The other parts of the body follow, moving from this central pivot. (Mbembé “Variations” 80)

Often, men and women can dance Ndombolo. Lisa Gilman and John Fenn describe this dance in Malawi, “Facing one another in close proximity, two dancers […] direct hip thrusts at one another with knees overlapping” (372). Ndombolo music videos appear extremely sexualized, particularly because many have one male dancer/singer with seven to twelve provocatively dressed female dancers. Many Soukous videos, to contrast, can have more equal presentations of men and women, however there is normally one main male singer/dancer that remains as the specific focus of the song and video. Papa Wemba, Kofi Olomide, and Dany Engobo serve as primary examples of both kwassa kwassa and Ndombolo.

Ndombolo are subtle performances of composure, within high intensity movements. Brenda Dixon Gottschild calls this “embracing the conflict[,] [which is] embedded in […] the aesthetic of cool, since coolness results from the juxtaposition of detachment with intensity” (5). The presence of contradictory sensory characteristics, which Gottschild calls “high-affect juxtaposition,” makes these performances compelling. While Ndombolo dancers jerk their hips in fast and complicated methods, their facial expressions often convey various emotions, including a sense of unaffectedness, contentedness, and happiness. Often times the wrists and hands move in tandem with the legs and pelvis in a rhythmic fashion “producing what is called ‘attitude’ or a pose”, and the arms, head, and shoulders are isolated or not moving (Mbembé, “Variations” 80). Ndombolo, like hip hop performances, can be assertive and powerful, and rely on the
hands to produce performances of “attitude.” These styles can exist within a continuum of bodily movements that can be fast, slow, subtle, and explicit. Ndombolo dances are energetic and full of movements, so the unaffectedness present in these dances occurs amongst fast, lively gestures.

Congolese dance culture has long been connected to fashion, clothing, and materialism. In the 1970s, a movement started called La Sape, *La Societe des ambianceurs et personnes elegantes*, or The Society for the Advancement of Persons of Elegance. La Sape began in Congo-Brazzaville and spread to the DRC, accompanying the emergence and extreme popularity of the Lingala music scene. As Lingala’s global exposure grew, mostly male musicians made connections and drew fashion influence from Paris. Informal style competitions became central to the Lingala music scene:

Fans of rival bands would compete to see who could look cooler, perfecting dance moves that allowed them to show off their socks on the disco floor or display the silk labels on the insides of their jackets. (Wrong 22)

La Sape served as a foundation for the emergence of the *sapuer* youth culture. *Sapuers* are young, predominately male youth who dress in flashy name brand clothing and exhibit and perform style and creativity. Beginning as early as the 1980s, the *sapuer* youth culture was a response to Mobutu rule, whose mandates banned western clothing, names, and culture, in favor of African ones. Donning foreign and name brand clothing from Europe began as acts of resistance against a brutal and repressive regime (McCrummen). As Michaela Wrong documents, according to musician and *sapuer* Colonel Jagger, those *sapuers* often refused to wear abacosts, which was the state’s
mandated clothing under Mobutu’s *Authenticité* (27). At the center of *sapuers*’ style is bodily performativity:

Asserting oneself (*affirmer*) is crucial to being a *sapuer*, as is an understanding of how to *debarquer*—make an entrance (never, but never, go unnoticed). But it is of primary importance to know how to walk. A *sapuer*’s walk is an art form in itself, a mixture of swagger and stroll as individual as a graffiti artist’s tag. (Wrong 22)

*Sapuer* culture reflects the Afrodiasporic practices of “‘The Cool’[,] [which] is the culminating step in an attitude that combines vitality with composure” (Gottschild 7). Similar to black American concepts of performances of cool, *sapuer* performance is deeply connected to an interesting negotiation with materialism and clothing styles as resistance. Moreover, contact with the “west,” in this case France, informs these performances. Some Ndombolo dancers and songs, like certain hip hop music, are intensely concerned with and actively create materialist and consumerist sensibilities, through clothing, cars, and other possessions that symbolize wealth. Ndombolo dances rely on the body as “kinesthetic vessel of memory,” where the dancer exists, performs, and conceptualizes her/himself within various social contexts (Scott 21). The same way that the dancer uses the body to negotiate social contexts in Ndombolo is very similar to how hip hop practitioners use performances to contextualize their environments. Scott suggests that Ndombolo in the DRC “mimics” hip hop’s materialistic commercialism. The presence of La Sape and *sapuers* in the 1970s would suggest that negotiations of materialism in Congo dance emerge out of a longer history of cultural subversion and economic marginalization.
Congolese music and dance have come to incorporate and navigate the long history of violence in the Congo and the need to survive such conditions. The region of the Congo has witnessed horrific colonial rule and post-colonial unrest, where millions of people have been disfigured, tortured, and slaughtered, and the body becomes a primary site in which terror has been enacted. These dance forms, hence, are deeply situated in a long legacy of violence in the DRC. Filip De Boeck states that events in Kinshasa, like the early 1990s violence from the *hibous* death squads and the invasions from Ugandan and Rwandan rebels in the 1998, created “spaces of death,” and the “banalization of the material and symbolic usages of violence and death invested in the earlier periods of the (post)colonial state” (16). The commonplaceness of death and violence permeated into most aspects of social space, including popular music, and the body becomes an important and obvious site where performative gestures and the banality of violence are brought to bear. Citing Mbembé’s necropolitics, De Boeck argues:

> Their music translates a whole imaginary of war, political power, and ethnic violence into an embedded youth vocabulary and choreography. In and through dance, the juvenile body thus appears as a subversive site, as a corporeal locus that reflects, and reflects upon, the violence and death generated by official postcolonial cultural and political grammars, which have been characterized by some as necropolitical, as the work of death. (16; also cited in Scott 18)

The history of colonial and post-colonial violence has contributed to the overt and explicit representations of the body in Soukous music. The tragic trivialization of violence has coexisted alongside a flourishing music scene. Congolese music can remind
its participants and viewers of the connections of expressive performance to bodily
violence, or as Mbembé states, Congolese music is “above all a carnal experience[,]…a
celebration of the flesh” (81).

Dancehall

Dancehall is one of the most popular music genres in Kenya. Many bars and
clubs in Kenya play dancehall music, mostly from Jamaica, South Africa, and elsewhere.
Mainstream rappers Prezzo, Juliani, and Jaguar all incorporate dancehall elements into
their songs. Moreover, dancehall beats and moves help constitute Afropop music. Most
artists I interviewed distance themselves from dancehall, in favor of a non-commercial,
harder hip hop sentiment that does not prefer the carefree sounds that dance music lends
itself to. A few artists I interviewed, however, made songs that incorporate dancehall
music elements. Baby T, Demaine Jabez, and Decence all perform dancehall songs.

There are several reasons why dancehall music is popular in contemporary
Kenya. Its popularity in Kenya can be explained partly because of the historic cultural
transmissions between Jamaica and East and Central Africa, beginning with reggae

---

6 I want to recognize dancehall as a distinct Afrodiasporic form, while being attentive to how it is
interconnected with other forms of music, like hip hop and Congolese music. Many enslaved Africans
brought to the Caribbean were from the regions of central Africa. Portugal was the first country to ship
slaves back to Portugal, then to Brazil and the Caribbean islands. This began approximately four hundred
years of transporting Africans to the Americas. Nathaniel Cromwell notes that this facilitated multiple and
diverse creative music and dance styles throughout the Caribbean, including bomba in Puerto Rico,
meringue in Haiti, soca in Trinidad, and dancehall and reggae in Jamaica. In the twentieth century, music
from places like Jamaica and Cuba began to appear and influence popular music in the Congo region and
eastern Africa.
music. Dancehall is a distinct departure from the politically conscious reggae music. Reggae traditions have involved producing sometimes essentializing Rastafarian narratives about Africa that emphasize political action. Louis Chude-Sokei contends dancehall reimagines black music as an urban expression that strays from the political themes of reggae (80-84). Jamaican dancehall arrived in Kenya in the late 1980s and early 1990s, as it achieved global popularity and as Kenyans traveling abroad brought back music from the UK and US.

Dancehall music is part of mainstream music in Kenya. In Jamaica, dancehall often represents and is associated with the underclass, but in Kenya it is popular among upper class youths. In Kenya it is considered is a softer genre than the harder forms of rap music. Baby T asserted, “Just cuz you’re listening to ragga [dancehall], you can’t listen to hip hop. Maybe you’re in the house with your brothers and sisters, they say they can’t listen to hip hop, they say it’s boring, they want to dance” (Baby T). Alliances between dancehall and hip hop in Kenya have been around for many years. Mainstream Kenyan artists like Necessary Noize’s Wyre, Juliani, Daddy Owen, and Jaguar incorporate rap lyrics into their songs. One early example is hip hop and dancehall artist Hardstone’s famous 1997 remixed song “Uhiki,” where he covers Marvin Gaye’s “Sexual Healing” on top of dancehall beats. A few scholars have noted that genge hip hop blends dancehall and hip hop (Ntarangwi 129; Osumare 171). In addition, kapuka incorporates similar

---

7 The Jamaican Rastafarian movement inevitably linked with reggae advocated for independence from Britain, and this gained popularity in Kenya around in the 1950s. During this time, Jamaican Rastas identified with the Mau Mau fighters, organizing rallies with the same name and locking their hair as an expression of resistance (Savishinsky 268-272; Campbell). Jesse Shipley observes that both reggae and dancehall gained popularity in Ghana as well as across Africa in the 1960s-70s (30).
dancehall styles and beats. Dancehall music’s thirty-year presence in Kenya has assisted in creating the repertoire of bodily performances.

Dancehall has long occupied marginal position in Jamaica. It is constantly blamed for social ills, including poverty, sexism, homophobia, and youth rebellion. It started in the impoverished neighborhoods of 1960s Kingston, whereby DJs would hold local parties equipped with sound systems. Dancehall is a “space, culture, attitude, fashion, dance, life/style, economic tool, institution, stage, social mirror, language, ritual, social movement, profile, profession, brand name, community tool of articulation for, especially, inner-city dwellers […]” (Niaah 3). Dancehall culture informed US hip hop, and both genres have similar sound-system technology. These genres emphasize similar musical construction of defined beats and rhythm structures. The dancing body in dancehall, like hip hop, depends on bass-produced beats, which can be hard and fast. The participants’ performances at dancehall events involve how performing the celebration of style:

[Perhaps] the human body is where the most significant symbols and practices of dance-hall circulate. […] Through fashion [cycles], speech, and techniques of the body, ghetto youth mark their participation in dancehall and assert their control over the public space they occupy. Styles of clothing, haircuts, and [jewelry] worn […] have come to signify a subordinate and oppositional position within Jamaica’s race-class hierarchy. (Stolzoff 2)

Much of dancehall is known to reject mainstream ideals. Often, resisting mainstream standards is not through explicit socially revolutionary lyrics, like reggae
lyrics. Rather, it embraces the controversial, despised, and restricted elements of Jamaican life. Some of the music focuses on guns, women’s sexualized bodies, and an aggressive masculinity. Many events and concerts historically started and continue to take place in impoverished areas of Kingston, and thus they are often interwoven with street gang organizations and illicit drug economies. Stanley-Niaah notes that the music began to reflect the neoliberal economic shift in the late 1980s and early 1990s espousing individualism, unencumbered wealth accumulation, and glorified violence (Dancehall 4). Concerts often attract gunfights between rival gang organizations, police raids, and extra-judicial violence. Lyrics express this gun culture, particularly as it intersects with masculinity.

The presence of slackness coincides with these formations of (hetero)sexuality, gun imagery, and gender. Slackness is a set of highly controversial, often problematic, sexually explicit and suggestive bodily moves. Many people, including scholars, debate about slackness’s efficacy as an oppositional site amidst dancehall’s unapologetic celebrations of masculinity (Cooper; Stolzoff 104-106). For example, Cooper argues:

Slackness is a contestation of conventional definitions of law and order; an undermining of consensual standards of decency. At large, slackness is the antithesis of restrictive uppercase Culture. It thus challenges the rigid status quo of social exclusivity and one-sided moral authority by the Jamaican elite.

Slackness demarcates a space for alternative definitions of culture. (Cooper 4)

Both masculine gun culture and slackness are integral parts of Jamaican dancehall. These characteristics open up significant questions about its transgressive potential. As Cooper
notes, dancehall’s transformative nature is not automatic, but instead often “contingent and oftentimes partial” (22). Bodily performances in dancehall are very much influenced by slack, gun cultures, and drug economies, and they operate within an in-between space of appropriate, critical, transgressive, and problematic, by ostentatiously defying social order.

Gender politics influence dancehall performances. In many dancehall spaces competition over status is often battled over in terms of masculine rhetoric of gun violence and domination over women. Norman Stolzoff states that the participants in dancehall events, including leaders of local gangs (known as dons) and rude boys use clothing and jewelry to “embody coolness, commanding respect from those they encounter” (207). Stolzoff’s observations allude to how performing unaffectedness can often times embody the intertwining of gender, social power, and materialism. Women, too, use dancehall culture to formulate feminine subjectivities. Bibi Bakare-Yusuf discusses how women use bodily adornment in dancehall culture to assert agency and to resist dominant Jamaican notions of the body informed by upper class, white, and Christian ideals. Drawing comparisons from the fashion of Congolese sapuers, she states that both cultural groups use fashion and the body to refuse to be affected wholly by social marginalization and impoverished conditions (469-470). She likens the display of the body to a mask that one wears, “by presenting the fleshy female body as unruly and

---

8 See Donna Hope’s “Dons and Shottas.”
hyper-feminine, dancehall women show femininity to be a masquerade, a kind of mask” (471-472).9

Dancehall music has developed spaces of intense contestation. Norman Stolzoff asserts there are “sites of clashing and zones of conflict,” where the music and accompanying performances exemplifies not only competing sound systems but also class conflicts (8). Carolyn Cooper states that “sound clashes,” which is the agitating, rhythmic, heavy beats of dancehall, exist alongside what she terms “border clashes.” Encapsulated in border clashes are categories of difference, like gender, class, sexuality, race, and language (12). Cooper asserts that sound clashes of dancehall music mirror and exemplify the border clash struggle between young people and the state (55).

These conflicts and contestations play out in the music and dance movements as well. The politics of the clash are articulated in events that often involve competing sound systems, DJs, and in many instances competing gang organizations. Dance movements, largely influenced by the external politics that surround dancehall, are highly energetic and full of intensity. Julian Henriques notes:

[…] [Kinetic], not to say frenetic, participation offers some powerful techniques for intensifying affect. The crowd’s exertion brings to the fore a corporeality that literally pulsates with cycles of exertion and rest, sweating and cooling off. (69) Henriques further notes “the dancehall soundscape becomes more than auditory, or even haptic, it is a whole-body vibrotactile experience” (78). Many dancehall moves can be

9 Bakare-Yusuf draws from Joan Riviere, “Womanliness as Masquerade” for this analysis. Other scholars too refer to general stylistic dance performances as a mask. See Brenda Gottschild, and Richard Majors and Janet Billson.
high energy, and like Ndombolo, exist alongside and help to construct notions of styled performances. These enactments demand that the practitioner be able to show unaffected expressiveness, and that despite external circumstances s/he maintains and fosters one’s directed sense of self. Gottschild discusses the various components of Afrodisporic dance movements and asks, “how can a practitioner’s face remain calm and mask-like as her body jerks and veers in a dance that seems to come from a force beyond her physical control?” (6). The various forms of dance found in dancehall can illustrate such a dynamic, where the dancer’s body exhibits extremely high amounts of intensity while her/his face remains composed, detached, and/or focused; “many dances […] emphasize pelvic isolation and the ability to articulate precise movements with the hips in time with the riddim” (Stolzoff 206). These creative performances illustrate the range and diversity of styled performances in Afrodisporic dancing. While Afrodisporic embodied performances can be subtle, other performances, like those found in Jamaican dancehall, incorporate high-energy bodily movements.

Kenyan Dance Styles

The traditions of Kenyan dance practices play a significant role in popular culture. Much of Kenyan dance moves have been long influenced by outside influences, but such characteristics cannot be considered as the only source of performance practices in Kenya. There has been a flourishing dance culture in Kenya for many decades, made
popular by the emergence of nightclubs and bars in the early colonial period. Just as these places have been influenced by the ongoing presence of Congo music and dance, Kenyan styles also proliferate. Scholars generally have paid attention to dances that exist within ethnic communities in rural or peri-urban places, while ignoring how urban settings foster noteworthy performance traditions. There are so many expressive forms, and space does not allow for a thorough examination, but I will discuss a few. This section discusses popular urban dance, ethnic performances, and an informal celebratory dance.

In 2008, NTV’s television show, Churchill Live, ran a segment called “Dance 101.” Daniel Ndambuki, known as Churchill, hosts the live comedy show where actors, musicians, and politicians are interviewed. In this particular segment, an assistant host and a few stage participants performed a number of dances to specific songs, and then told the audience to guess or name the dances. He led this in a timeline fashion, beginning with the 1960s twist dance made popular in South Africa, Malawi, and Kenya, among others. He then moved to kwassa kwassa and Ndombolo, and as they performed each dance the crowd cheered in excitement. After these two dances, they performed four Kenyan dances, kuku, slide, mosquito, and kangaroo. Audience members laughed hysterically as they immediately recognized each dance (NTV Kenya). What was important is that these dances index a particular time period, and the juxtaposition of these dances reflected the expressive practices that flourish in places like Nairobi. James Ogude states, “One of the most enduring and common aspects of Kenyan music in recent times has been its recourse to memory. There is a persistent anxiety on the part of musicians and local producers to reinstate ‘authentic’ Kenyan culture […]” (161).
Questions over what dance was Kenyan and which one was “borrowed” did not matter in this setting; participants were as excited for so-called outside dances like twist, kwassa kwassa, and Ndombolo as they were for kuku, slide, and kangaroo.

The kangaroo dance became famous in the early 2000s, and most people perform it to Jamaican artist Anthony B’s reggae song, “Real Warriors.” In this dance, performers jumped up and cross their feet back and forth. They then placed their hands behind their back, and bent over slightly, allowing their head and torso to guide their bodily movements in a back and forth motion. The participants’ head moved back and forth, and the group communicated a skilled and leisurely look on their faces. The move was repeated as the song continued. Mostly these dances are performed in clubs and bars, where the DJ plays a song, prompting people to move to the dance floor. Such dance moves like this are brought about by the expressive bodily dance traditions already present in Kenya, in combination with the transnational borrowing of both music and dance styles.

Dance styles performed in various ethnic communities differ widely. Usually such performances are done around celebration, like birth, marriage, and circumcision. There are several commonalities that the dance practices have with each other, and with the African Diasporic practices I have named throughout this discussion. First, there is an “isolation of body parts in movement, such as the head, shoulders, hips, rib cage, etc.” (Cayou 4). For example, Helen Odwar states that in the Luo dances, namely the Tigo or Ngaga, there is intense shaking of the shoulders and head, particularly because the dancers wear beads, and this movement enables the beads to sound (43-44). While the
shoulder blades move in toward each other then out again, other parts of the body are required to stay still or move opposite the head and shoulders. Asante Darkwa notes that these dances can often involve holding the torso still while moving the waist to each side, which can include pelvic thrusts (649-650).

Second, subtlety of bodily gestures is found in many ethnic dances. Brenda Dixon Gottschild describes subtle movements as “[knowing] how to dig under the obvious rhythms atop the movement and show...the pulsing flow of energy beneath” (288). She describes briefly that performance of subtlety comes out of “an Africanist aesthetic” whereas the use of slight movements are a “way of channeling energy in the service of spirit” (288). Mellitus Wanyama discusses that among Bukusu communities of western Kenya, the Kamabeka dance involves shaking their shoulders intensely, whilst other regions of the body are subtly moving.\(^{10}\) The dance encourages individual expression, and performers often dance in a circle or with male/female pairings (218). Thirdly, not all dances are subtle; some dances contain high energy. The coastal Giriama dance is what Brenda Dixon Gottschild calls “high affect juxtaposition” characterized by “detachment with intensity.” Valerie Briginshaw notes that the Digo dances are most “[characterized] by more sedate movements consisting of slower, shuffling steps and subtle, graceful shoulder shaking” (153).\(^{11}\) Isolation of the body and subtleness of movements can influence each other because isolation requires that specific areas of the body move, while the rest is still or moves in other direction.

---

\(^{10}\) Bukusu communities are a sub-group of Luhya and live and are historically from western Kenya, although like other ethnic communities in Kenya live in various parts of Kenya. Kamabeka is a Bukusu word for “shoulders.”

\(^{11}\) This is just a cursory examination of ethnic dances in Kenya. For a more thorough examination see Mickie Koster, Wanderi and Muya, and George W Senoga-Zake.
There is also a more generalized celebratory dance that is practiced throughout Kenya. Celebratory dances have similar elements to popular music dances and ethnic performances, such as isolation of various regions of the body and subtle gestures and movements. This dance also tends to be improvisational and can cross ethnic lines. In fact, generalized celebratory dances occur in many African contexts. Kariamu Welsh-Asante observes that African dance is “a reflection of life,” which is a “collection of dances that are imbued with meaning, infused purposely with rhythm, and connected to ritual, events, and occasions, and mythologies of a specific people” (16). There is scant literature on such performances. Lisa Gilman notes in her discussion of dance in Malawi: “People sing and move informally while engaging in all sorts of occasions from work to play to worship: weddings, collective farming sites, athletic events, installments of leaders, political rallies, parties, tourist venues, dance clubs, religious and healing rituals, and places of worship” (12). Informal and celebratory dances, like the ones Gilman describes, are common occurrences in Kenya. Celebratory dances mostly occur at semi-formalized events and gatherings. I have seen this type of popular celebratory dance during graduations, weddings, and during other times of success and happiness. It can begin and end at any time and is performed by men and women.

The performance most often erupts during times of milestone celebrations, like overcoming obstacles and beating difficult odds and accomplishing difficult tasks. They serve as a marker of recognition; family members can dance for a graduation, one can dance for acquiring an employment position, or attendees celebrate a wedded couple. Usually the dance is conducted in a group setting, and there is some unison associated
with it, although each individual performs the dance according to her/his individual style. Participants slightly step one foot after another, swinging their arms slightly in unison with the wider group. Their facial expressions may involve unaffectedness, a look of accomplishment, pride and confidence, or seriousness and skill. Lisa Gilman states, “the relationships between praise performers and the people they praise are frequently asymmetrical: those uplifted through songs frequently enjoy higher economic, social, cultural, religious, or political status than do those who exalt them” (16-17). Gilman’s discussion of political praise singers relates to a longstanding practice in many African contexts. Kenya’s informal dancing, albeit different than the praising singing in Malawi, operates similarly to acknowledge and observe the intended individuals, which mostly relate to accomplishments transcending large structural hurdles.

There are other traditions that need brief mentioning because they have and continue to influence Kenyan dance culture. South African house music, for example, has a firm presence in Nairobi clubs and on radios. South African *kwaiso* dance moves are found in dance clubs and in some mainstream music videos. Commercial Kenyan musicians have begun collaborating with South African hip hop and Afropop artists. Moreover, the Ghanaian hip hop dance Azonto is extremely popular across various African contexts, including Kenya. These performances are dynamic and evolving, and therefore the styles that Kenyan hip hop draws from will continue to change.
Chapter Outlines

The following chapters of this project continue the discussions of performance in underground Nairobi rap and how these practices are in conversation with social, political, and economic occurrences. The second chapter, "'Hip hop is a CV': Choices, Compromises, and Resistance within the Hip Hop Parallel Public" explicates on the notion of the underground. I discuss the specific characteristics of Nairobi underground rap music. Rap practitioners often imagine that post-Mau Mau underground hip hop as wholly resistant to social norms, and this chapter considers that idea, while additionally exploring the nuances present. I argue that hip hop occurs in a parallel public, where it positions itself away from dominant society, while intensely borrowing from it. I briefly lay out the aesthetic trends, considering sound and content in songs. This chapter delves into artists' approaches to capitalist ideologies and practices. I explore how artists use gospel rap as music that partly appeals to a wider trend in popular music. These practitioners do not just want to appeal to mainstream standards, many use gospel messages to empower listeners and encourage individual transformation. This chapter explores underground hip hop spaces and artists attempts at securing a stable venue for concerts. Their difficulty in securing venues typifies underground hip hop’s marginal location in Kenyan society. Last, I argue that due to the difficulties artists face, the underground music video fills an important and necessary gap. These videos are artists' best attempts at marketing themselves, creating careers, and realizing themselves as rappers. Music videos help to enact subjectivity as rappers by allowing artists a platform
Chapter three is "Music and Bodies, Discourse and Commodities," which considers the cultural formations of hip hop as a commodity, how society reads and interprets this music, and how artists respond to criticisms. I argue that underground and commercial forms of hip hop engender a discourse of cultural anxiety around a supposed lack of “authentically” Kenyan cultural products. This chapter is historic in two ways. First, I discuss the development of hip hop as commodity, which focuses the historic commodification of black bodies in the transatlantic slave trade and the development of settler capitalism in Kenya. Second, I discuss the historic political economy of music, with a focus on the early music industry and the role of Congo music. I argue though Nairobi was a recording center, Kenyan musicians had difficulties making money from the industry. I additionally contend the early state repression of music (1970-1980s) helped to fuel a discourse of cultural anxiety and lack. Hip hop then enters spaces already constituted around general notions of cultural lack. Last, I examine how underground hip hop artists navigate this discourse, specifically through a discussion of swag. By locating bodily performance in this discussion, I argue that societal perceptions, especially from older generations and non-fans, partly originate from how and which bodies perform hip hop. Moreover, underground practitioners enact their own standards and value on Kenyan hip hop by policing Kenyaness in hip hop bodily performances.

“The Politics of Shupavu” is chapter four, which investigates how hip hop artists craft explicitly political and resistant forms of hip hop to challenge the status quo. In chapter two, I discuss the nuances that exist around underground rap production, and in
this chapter I consider the more rebellious elements of rap music. I locate this subversive and defiant element in a political project to combat the state. Therefore, in order to understand what artists encounter, I discuss the current political and economic conditions in detail. I examine the current music industry and the constraining policies that surround copyright. Specifically, artists identify the Music Copyright Society of Kenya (MCSK) as a structural barrier that inhibits the music industry by operating as a quasi-state and for-profit entity. I end this chapter by doing a close reading of Judge and Flamez’s music video and song, “Shupavu,” by contending they seek to reclaim their own humanity and subjectivity amid difficult economic and political realities.

The last body chapter is “Performing Hip Hop Subjectivities,” where I investigate the important work of hip hop performances. In previous chapters, I investigate how artists face barriers and obstacles that prohibit them from crafting a career. Moreover, I locate their performances as largely in response to these conditions. This chapter considers how artists use creative bodily performances to cultivate hip hop culture. Practitioners, both male and female, enact embodied agentive subjectivities, which play with social boundaries, confront power, and can be exclusive and masculine-centered. I identify five characteristics of embodied rap performances: ludicity, armor, transnationality, indecipherability, liminality, and rap's complicated relationship with power (in terms of gender).

The conclusion completes this study as I consider the benefits of using performance as a method to investigate hip hop spaces. I draw some conclusions about the directions of underground music production. Last, I discuss the limitation of this
study, with special consideration on gender, sexuality, and ethnicity in performance subjectivities.
Chapter 2: “Hip hop is like a CV”:
Compromises and Resistance within the Parallel Public

This chapter explores various facets of the underground, including music, sounds, ideologies, spaces, and videos. Nairobi underground hip hop is constituted by a post-Mau Mau underground cultural aesthetic, which means rappers often imagine the music they create as profoundly distinct from that of commercial artists based on its abilities to call for political action and social change. Coinciding with these themes are the less romantic realities of underground rap, including the mainstream politics that artists appropriate, the multiple reasons why their music does not make it to radio, and the difficulties they face in fostering an underground scene. Additionally, this chapter illustrates hip hop practitioners’ strategies to navigate the music industry. The underground is a place of knowledge, where practitioners create music, debate controversial topics, and execute strategies to get paid. Rappers espouse a variety of perspectives, some critical and subversive, others tactical and compromising, and still others troubling and problematic. Artists in underground rap do not have an easy time creating a paying career, gaining recognition, or receiving royalties that seem to be promised to them. These obstacles shape the characteristics of the underground, including what types of music are made. However, practitioners continue to persevere and attempt to shape the industry in ways that are beneficial for them.

58
This chapter intervenes in important discussions in Kenyan hip hop studies around the supposed social importance of the music. Mickie Koster argues that Kenyan hip hop, specifically UFMM, holds inherent political potential, “Hip hop is revolutionizing Kenyan youth listeners by providing messages for healing empowerment, and unity. […] [It] is very possible that hip hop can act as a catalyst for a new revolution in Kenya” (96). Mwenda Ntarangwi, in research on East African hip hop, provides critical analyses of gender and neoliberal economic conditions. She concludes, “Hip hop has become a mouthpiece through which youth engage and get involved in critiquing social, cultural, and political realities of their time” (116). Other scholars have examined how hip hop reinforces dominant Kenyan social mores. Evan Mwangi explores gender, masculinity, and nationalism, noting, “because of its sexualized presentation of the nation and the region, the music is haunted by notions of hegemonic masculinity” (6). Andrew Eisenberg examines Mombasa rap and argues that artists fashion their music and subjectivities around a privileged Nairobi subject position, stating “hip-hop culture in Kenya at times serves as an instrument of normativity in the process of transforming young Kenyans […]” (559).

These conversations call into question rap music’s social efficacy and cultural value, especially underground hip hop, which cannot depend on radio and television access to shape its validity. I contend that just because these artists are from low-income neighborhoods should not be reason to discount their music, something that Koster’s research makes clear. It is also important, though, to utilize a more investigative lens to study Nairobi rap in the ways that Eisenberg and Mwangi do. I explore the various
narratives that compose Kenyan rap, some of which reveal how the music facilitates political interventions, and others which illustrate how artists use mainstream avenues to build their careers. Specifically, I discuss the obstacles that artists face in order to make careers, which include not just lyrical content differences, but class-based barriers, like the inability to afford production costs. This chapter addresses Mwenda Ntarangwi’s provocation about Ukoo Flani Mau Mau and other underground East African artists; she asks “[Should] they stay true to their social messages and have little airplay and popularity or sing about sex and partying and sell more records?” (119). The question is not that simple. There are a host of reasons why underground rappers cannot obtain radio play, and even when they make songs that appeal to the mainstream there is little guarantee it will make it to radio or sell albums. This chapter constructs the underground, the perspectives and politics that shape it, the material difficulties that arise, and the creative and difficult negotiations artists face. Ultimately the underground is a place of imperfection, transformational politics, and ideological compromises.

This chapter illustrates several characteristics of underground non-commercial hip hop. The strategies and perspectives that practitioners adopt are a direct response to material realities. Dick Hebdige states, “The twin concepts of conjuncture and specificity (each subculture representing a distinctive ‘moment’—a particular response to a particular set of circumstances) are […] indispensable to a study of subcultural style” (84). Kenyan hip hop music is a formation that is different than other hip hop cultures, because of the actors, the scenes, and venues where practices take place, and the history of Kenyan music, politics, and culture. Artists, moreover, respond to a unique set of
present circumstances that are rooted in political and social developments. They craft solutions to these realities by drawing on readily available resources. Those artists who must search out and perform in venues for nominal fees and record in makeshift studios, like the artists I interview, are more likely to practice underground aesthetics.

Nairobi underground hip hop is a distinct subculture that is positioned away from and in conversation with what Hebdige calls “the parent culture” (79). Identifying the cultural location of underground rap considers the avenues that hip hop practitioners pursue. Rappers who, for example, have access to television, radio, and advertisement deals are rendered mainstream. Such distinctions lay a foundation for understanding the hip hop spaces from which performance and bodily knowledge materialize, which are taken up in the following chapters. Hip hop performances, as I demonstrate in chapter five, are not completely subversive nor wholly in alliance with power. Likewise, the practices, ideologies, and music found in underground rap are just as variegated. “Hip hop is a subculture of American music, of American culture, and of black America,” writes Imani Perry about American hip hop. “And as much as it resists the philosophical and aesthetic pressures of mainstream America, it finds itself in constant conversation with, response to, and a part of Americana” (194). This is the case for artists in Kenya as well; practitioners situate themselves strategically within Kenyan society and adopt methods that work for them. Artists in the underground do not have easy access to opportunities and thus attempt to assemble a career using several methods: performing at Sarakasi, attempting to launch events, placing songs on ReverbNation.com, and making
music videos—to name just a few. These practitioners figure out what practices and ideologies fit into their individual expressive repertoire.

This chapter is divided into five sections. First, I briefly discuss the characteristics of the term underground, which is the primary term that both the artists and I use to describe the artists I follow. In this section, I discuss the aesthetics of the underground, by explicating the themes and sounds of the music. Second, I examine practitioners’ approaches to economic choices. Artists both resonate with normative neoliberal approaches, and at the same time depart from traditional avenues of making money and creating platforms for people to hear their music.

Third, I look at the role of gospel rap and illustrate the reasons why artists produce gospel songs. Here, I argue that rappers tap into gospel music’s long presence in Kenya as a popular, largely read as ethically and politically neutral music that is used to uplift and empower. Rappers craft gospel music that fits into their wider objective of creating culturally positive and socially beneficial music—which is a primary characteristic of the underground. Fourth, I document artists’ experiences in establishing a permanent venue for hip hop events. Their difficulty in doing so illustrates further difficulties in an already exclusive music scene. The physical spaces that compose underground hip hop—makeshift studios, Sarakasi events, behind the Kenya National Theatre—are just as important as the perspectives of artists. Last, I argue that music videos fill a necessary gap because artists solidify their roles as artists through the music video. This section introduces how the music video is able to house hip hop performances. Each of these discussions illustrates various examples about how artists
creatively and ingeniously craft ways and exploit avenues to become artists, as well as their simultaneous inability to earn a living from such ventures.

The Principles and Aesthetics of the Underground

Most of the artists with whom I spoke described the hip hop they do as “underground.” This is a widely used concept in non-commercial subculture hip hop communities throughout the world, and most of the artists I interviewed used it liberally to describe politics, music, and other expressive practices. Underground hip hop has a complicated relationship with dominant society, in that it appropriates some practices and ideologies from the mainstream, while resisting and defying others. It carries with it a powerfully rebellious and anti-status quo sentiment. Marcyliena Morgan describes hip hop in the United States as “counterpublic” because it “threatens the dominant discourse about black and urban youth,” “it forces recognition from society,” and “it intentionally attacks and redesigns how urban spaces […] are conceived […]” (13). In Nairobi, underground hip hop has youthful and rebellious sentiments, most practitioners embark on specific projects, like elucidating ghetto realities, empowering marginalized youth, and critiquing mainstream society. Nairobi rap spaces, however, do not always resist every type of power structure, and cannot be seen as consistently inhabiting a politics of dissention. Hebdige states that subcultures “do not stand outside the reflective circuitry of production and reproduction which links together, at least on a symbolic level, the
separate and fragmented pieces of the social totality” (85-86). Therefore, marking hip hop as only countercultural can imply that it is permanently subversive and rebellious, which is not the case.

For these reasons, Lester Spence’s discussion on rap music culture as a parallel public best describes Nairobi underground music. The parallel public is a space that is separated from the mainstream but still uses normative values or assumptions:

The black parallel public operates according to established class, heterosexual, and gender norms, providing a space within which blacks can accommodate, criticize, and generate alternatives to the so-called mainstream public sphere. In its capacity as an accommodating space, it both inculcates and enforces both at-large and internal norms and values. (9)

The hip hop parallel public, therefore, is often in opposition to and interrogates greater society, while conforming to or appropriating some social norms. Examining rap music culture through this lens means that we can explore and conceptualize the compromises that practitioners make, the economic realities that compose the culture, and the problematic politics rap music sometimes espouses. I argue that inside of hip hop as a parallel public exist the other elements that I describe below: its non-commerciality, its subcultural elements, a cultivated oppositionality, and its affirmative and humanizing nature.

Artists believe that the non-commercial position of their music means that it has intrinsic value outside of the mainstream music industry. Harrison describes US underground rap as “a national music subgenre that developed principally in response to
themes and sentiments that dominated Music Industry rap during the 1990s” (34). Similar to US rap, Nairobi artists believe that their music resists standardization of the music industry, and because it is not bound to commercializing forces, it has the ability to offer realistic, untainted messages. Lness notes that underground hip hop is more meaningful than commercial rap:

Lness:[…] The message in hip hop it’s important. It can change somebody. Like for women, since now like, ah, since I said that guys are not representing us, like women, what are you talking about, the kind of content that we do.

RP: So does hip hop have to have a message?

Lness: Because, ah, it’s not just rap music. There is a difference. Cuz rap is being done in other genres. There are guys that can rap on reggae songs, but if you look at hip hop as a movement, then you see the difference. It’s bigger than just music, it’s bigger than just rap, it’s about changing attitudes. And most of the people who listen to hip hop are youths. A bulk of the youths, especially those youths who are not listening to other genres, they listen to hip hop. (Lness)

Lness partnered with several female artists to create the 2012 album, *Gal Power*. In this album, Lness’s second, she collaborates with female MC’s like Nazizi, Candy, and Tanzanian artist Nakaaya. An all-female rap album, for Lness, allowed women to occupy a central role in hip hop culture, “With this project, I called [it] *Gal Power*. Just to encourage any woman anywhere just be strong, doing her thing, and do whatever she
does. So when we were recording the songs, I was telling the ladies address your topic on encouraging women, or encouraging yourself as a woman [sic]” (Lness). Lness, like most rap practitioners mentioned in this research, does not have a long term secure music career.

There are long-standing traditions of DIY practices that most artists acknowledge and exercise. Anthony Kwame Harrison makes a similar observation in US Bay area:

Embedded in such sentiments of place and past are strongly felt anti-establishment and activist connections which, within the arena of hip hop, manifest as […] “the Bay area hustle.” This notion of “hustle” seems to saturate all varieties of local hip hop. It suggests a savvy, independent-minded business approach to life that willfully embraces nonconventional means of pursuing artistic and career ambitions. (35)

Artists constantly explore any and every opportunity to market their music. The artists at Sarakasi continue to return there for events, not only because they can perform with other like-minded practitioners, but also because practitioners pursue every available venue as a potential economic opportunity. The do-it-yourself approach is not an easy one. Some artists have hustled, and continue to sell their CD, and others opt to market themselves online. In a later section, I note a marked shift away from selling CDs on the streets, and toward online marketing with no immediate returnable profit. Both types of work, street hustling and creating and uploading music, involve a lot of labor and offer few returns. Sue Timon expresses dissatisfaction with the amount of labor that artists must do:
But what you see in this set up now a days [sic], is that, you are the one who is hustling to get to the studio. Then, after you produce your song, you produce your video. After you hustle for your video, then you hustle so the deejays can have your songs. Then you hustle for your songs to be played [on the radio]. So it’s like, it’s so hard; it’s so hard. So, it’s like, you need to have money to do this thing, or you need to have connections to do this thing. (Timon)

The DIY ethic that artists must have creates a culture of hard work and sacrifice, though it should not be romanticized, as Timon reminds us. Hip hop artists participate in every aspect of their music careers and most have a lot of difficulty earning money. As I discuss below, this DIY ethic produces creative innovations, and sometimes the rather tragic neoliberal ideology that if one is not succeeding, s/he needs to work harder.

The hip hop underground produces rap that challenges conventional notions and “strongly felt anti-establishment and activist convictions” (Harrison 28-37). The Kenyan underground scene is strongly rooted in activism, which involves developing a hip hop community (not just attending events), and developing economic and social networks that place practitioners first. Most rappers believe that hip hop holds sets of tools that can and should be used for social change. Graffiti artist, Esen, provides a description of underground hip hop that emphasizes specific social sensibilities:

Like, [underground rappers] are more politically aware, socially aware, economically aware, of what is going on in the country. […] They are open-minded. One can do a song like, praising women, and all that. At the same time the next track could be about the president. Or about the community he is living
in, or about the police. They’re socially aware, economically aware, and all that stuff. (Esen)

One example of the sensibilities that Esen discussed is the violence that marked the 2007-8 political processes. I conducted the majority of this research after the post-election violence and before the following election in March 2013, and many artists referenced the election or discussed the music they made in response to the violence. Evaredi regards his album *Rasta President* as a necessary tool to encourage people to avoid violence, by insisting that politicians are accountable to the people they lead, “So basically for *Rasta President*, [I wrote it because] we need a good president. A good president who understands everybody. From the top line to the bottom line. A president who is ready for the people” (Evaredi). His conversation alludes to one of the primary elements of underground rap in Nairobi; that it is imagined as coming from a place of alterity, and it is simultaneously regarded as inherently democratic and something that all people can relate to.

Judge believed hip hop is a tool that activists use to create peace, “[…] You know like post-election violence. Now people are going to election, hip hop is like a tool right now that people are using in peace. Because it’s a tool you can use to communicate to someone who is up there and someone who is down there” (Judge). Judge used an extremely dramatic voice in an almost whisper when he said “someone who is up there” and “someone who is down there,” and he was referencing both the upper classes and the poor. Other artists expressed Judge’s contention that hip hop is able to reach multiple segments of society. For example, Demaine Jabez exclaims, “Hip hop is like a vuvuzela
Hip hop is a way of expression. And hip hop is music is powerful. Music changes societies,” (Jabez). A vuvuzela is the instrument that is used during South African football (soccer) matches, and became globally popular during the 2010 FIFA World Cup. It produces a loud sound, especially in a stadium, and is used to cheer and show team spirit. Jabez used this metaphor to assert that hip hop is able to communicate messages widely across society loudly and forcefully. Esen, Judge, Evaredi, and Jabez’s statements contend that hip hop can remedy deep social problems. Nairobi underground hip hop activism begins from the premise that there are social wrongs, and positions itself against the status quo.

The underground cultivates belonging, shared community, and a politics of affirmation. For Morgan, the US underground references the histories of African Americans who carved out spaces of affirmation, fought for freedom, and made relevant cultural expressions. “[It] recalls the era of slavery, when a people summoned incredible desire and courage for a chance to exercise control over their own language and communication, creativity, body, culture, spiritual practice, and life itself” (16). The underground “is the place where truths can be told […] [and it] is the ultimate space and place of humanity” (16). In Kenya the ways that hip hop promotes a common humanity materializes differently than in the US. One unique feature of underground Nairobi rap is its constant theme of love, which began with Ukoo Flani Mau Mau. As already stated, the first two words in the acronym are Upendo Kwote, meaning love everywhere. When I asked both Jabez and Judge about the importance of hip hop, they both referenced this phrase as something that shapes underground rap (Jabez; Judge). Jabez noted, “Ukoo
Flani, yeah, they used to inspire me because they used to sing ‘hip hop is upendo kwote’ (Jabez). In this case, love is a social compassion for people. Evaredi’s discussion expressed that artists must have love for hip hop to do it well:

But underground hip hop, I can say, is like when you do it for the love. You do it from your heart. Like you are doing it for the people. You’re doing it for the correct way. Not basically because of the money. Even though the money may make the world go ‘round. But you’ll always stick to the message. You’ll always teach people. You’ll always have something to tell people. But when you say commercial music, it’s like you’ll do it for some time, get your money, move on.

Yeah. (Evaredi, emphasis mine)

To make his point, he compared his reasons for rapping to mainstream music. It is necessary for artists to make money in underground settings, which Evaredi acknowledged, but there is pressure that one cannot abandon the principles of social change and activism in order to acquire economic mobility. Artists proclaim their allegiance to hip hop first and foremost, even if it is subtle and often implicit.

Commercial artists are vacuous and money driven, many underground rappers contend. One element that these mainstream artists cannot possess, therefore, is a deep and authentic love of hip hop and the notion that hip hop is, actually, upendo kwote. This distinction, as I explore later, should be challenged. What is noteworthy is that underground artists continue to make music despite the fact that it is not financially beneficial.
The sound aesthetics and song constructions have several noteworthy characteristics that also contribute to the culture of underground rap. Mwenda Ntarangwi asserts that East African hip hop’s songs “make direct reference to the lives of urbanized East African youth by using an idiom that mobilizes images, words, and references specific to their lived and imagined realities […]” (117). These characteristics construct the non-commercial character of hip hop. What rap music sounds like is one of the major signifiers of its location in either the mainstream or the underground. Tricia Rose notes, “Rap’s distinctive bass-heavy, enveloping sound does not rest outside of its musical and social power. Emotional power and presence in rap are profoundly linked to sonic force and one’s receptivity to it” (63). Underground rap is distinguishable from commercial music because of musical beats, rhythms, and sound. Most underground artists do not have access to production resources, and therefore the beats and sounds tend to be simpler and contain little ingenuity. At times, songs can sound similar to each other, particularly when the same studio produces multiple songs. For example, “Shupavu,” “Hustle,” and “Ulimi” have comparable resonances and were produced at Audio Kusini. These beats often sound stark and hard, as opposed to inviting, catchy, and danceable. Most songs have sonic qualities that generally are not light and carefree, rather solemn and thoughtful sentiments. Many songs do not have a danceable rhythm, and the verses are full of words. The lack of sound innovation in many songs means that the rapping voice and lyrical content become highly important in underground raps. Moreover, lyrics are imperative because artists view themselves as narrators, protagonists, and spokespeople for underground culture, the neighborhoods they are from, and even of
society at large. “The power of the word,” writes Halifu Osumare, “spread through rap music has indeed empowered the voices of many marginalized peoples throughout the globe” (*Africanist* 32-33).

Most rappers put great effort into their lyrics. Practitioners’ lyrics cannot be repetitive and trite, but rather they must be creative, demonstrating the verbal dexterity of artists. This is most prominently accomplished through language use, which artists accomplish through their ability to rap and rhyme in Sheng, a hybrid or creole language. “Sheng’s emergence in the poor residential areas of Nairobi and its adoption as the youth’s secret code accounts for the stigma associated with its speakers. It has since spread its tentacles out of the inner city in addition to becoming increasingly popular in the media and popular culture […]” (Githinji 115). There are forms of Sheng specific to neighborhoods, whereby outsiders easily might not understand the content. Artists’ use of Sheng is obvious in the context of hip hop, whereby both are regarded as either being located or having origins within marginalized settings. Sheng is a creative always-shifting language that mixes Swahili, English, and other Kenyan languages, which appeals to hip hop because practitioners use Sheng to create imaginative and artistic lyrics. For example, Evaredi uses Sheng in the song and music video “Ukweli.” The introductory verse is “*Hip hop ni kolej/college, after class lunch ya chips na sausage/ Moto ya kuspit  
ni knowledge*” (Eastafricamix). Here he likens hip hop to college, asserting that one can gain knowledge from his raps. Hip hop is a place where knowledge is produced that occurs away from normal learning spaces, which makes it a powerful, not just creative, subculture. “*Moto ya kuspit ni knowledge*” is “the fire to spit is knowledge.” Yet he
contends that even in college, though, the best part is after class, when one can leave and get the popular meal *chips na sausage*, or fries and Kenyan sausage. The Sheng used here enhances the creativity of the lyrics. Here Sheng words and phrases use a Swahili structure, like in the word *kuspit* (to spit). Here, *ku* is the infinitive marker “to,” combined with the English word “spit.” Moreover, English words are used in the rhyme scheme: college, knowledge, sausage. This type of Sheng is very basic, whereby most would understand, as opposed to neighborhood-specific Sheng.

Much of underground rap engages in some way with explicitly political lyrics. Themes of songs can uplift individuals and communities and they can challenge and produce outcries of injustice. The idea of a common love of self, community, and people is consistently addressed in songs. Judge’s “The Way to Go” incorporates many of the elements I describe above: political love, simple beats, and elaborate raps. The lyrics are mostly rapped in Swahili, with very little Sheng used. The song includes his raps, a repetitive female background sound, his collaboration with another unnamed rapper, and a standard simple synthesized rap beat. The chorus and the verses blend together, as Judge ends the verse, he moves into singing the hook, with the others, and they transition into the second verse in this manner. At the end of Judge’s rap in the first verse, for example, he starts rapping, “one love.” The woman then repeats, “the righteous way to go.” Judge and the other rapper then say, “One love,” before the woman ends, “for you.” Therefore, the chorus is a collaborative “the righteous way to go, one love, for you” (“The Way”). A female’s voice in the background, repeats “the righteous way to go” and
then “for you” so repetitively that the words are instrumental, which brings a bit of feminized softness in the juxtaposition of two masculine sounding male voices.

The love in this song is one that encourages communal togetherness and unity across differences. The following examples are from the first and second verse, respectively:

*One love, bado ni upendo tunazambaza, tofauti weka kando tuone zote mwangaza/*

(One love, it’s still love we spread, put differences aside so that we can all see the light)

[…]

*Ni njia gani tutafiata, ni njia gani tutapitia, mi naona njia upendo/*

(What path will we follow, what path will we pass, I see the path as love) (“The Way”)

Though the song is simple in construction, the sounds come together harmonically. The opposing sounds—the male voices rapping and the feminine voice singing, create a type of unity that the lyrics buttress. Judge has a raspy voice, and the other rapper has a deeper voice, which is clearer than Judge’s. The song’s creativity is in the juxtaposition of all these sounds. It sounds underground because it has a recognizable and simplistic hard and gritty beat, along with complex lyrical styles.

Not all songs accomplish the creative expressiveness that “The Way to Go” does. Lness’s “*Mi Mcool*” has a lot of the same characteristics as Judge’s song, but the song’s resonances are not as affectively appealing. Lness is one of the most popular female MCs
currently, and her lyrical style is hard and fast. She produces complicated raps that require the listener to really pay attention if the meanings are to be understood. “Mi Mcool” (I’m cool) is a cautious song with Christian undertones, meant to warn people about choosing social evils and encourage people to avoid temptation. She raps very fast with intense emotion, and she uses a generalized Sheng, as well as Swahili. The title, for example, uses mcool. This is combination of the English word cool, and by placing an “m” in front of it, it becomes the Swahili adjective for a person. She has a deep voice, which she uses to assist in singing the chorus. The beats are straightforward, which include the high-pitched sound of an electronic keyboard against the lower sounding typical bass beats. The first verse is about a woman who is in trouble, and has not been making good choices, though Lness never states exactly what the poor choices are. As the verse continues, Lness testifies that the woman grows frustrated, “Lakini lately ameona amesuffer for long ever cursing, bitterness, complaining” (Although lately she thinks she has suffered for long ever, cursing, bitterness, complaining) (“Mi”). Lness uses the second verse to encourage the woman to make the right decision, “Rudi mwangani, tubu zote za ndani, neno litaendelea mpaka kutimizika” (Come back to the light repent all that is inside of you (your sins), the word will flow until it’s done) (“Mi”).

Her ability to rap and rhyme is noteworthy, but the other sound qualities do not enhance her rapping, and instead take away from them. She raps the chorus, with another unnamed female artist who sings the hook. She raps, “Siku ikikuwa soh, Siku ikikuwa soh” (If the day is long)/ Usiku ikinever end, Usiku ikinever end” (When the night never ends) (“Mi”). This chorus is repeated throughout, with the unnamed vocalist singing
backup to the chorus. The singer backs up Lness’s raps, repeating the end words to some of her lyrics. The sound elements are as follows: repetitive beats, Lness rapping both the chorus and the hook, and the female singer whose voice is similar to Lness. This does not provide enough sound diversity, and it ends up sounding repetitive and dull. The lyrics do not help with this, as they constantly reference repenting, the darkness of sins, forgiveness, and forsaking. This makes the song sound punishing, especially given its tedious elements that constantly remind the listener that one must change in order to be content. It is clear that Lness has the ability to produce good music, but the lyrics alone cannot create an effective sound. The challenge of underground rappers is to produce songs that are able to complement their lyrical skill and innovation. Judge’s song works well because of the contrasting elements of the song, while Lness’s “Mi Mcool” lacks diversity.

Two popular themes that practitioners rap address either personal transformation or societal or political change. There is a common trend among the artists that I follow to rap about individual change, even when it exists within difficult circumstances. Lness’s song, “Mi Mcool,” is a primary example of this. Others include Sue Timon’s song “Weee,” and Karpchizzy’s “System.” All of these songs are calls to people to choose good actions and to alter their life should they engage in negative behavior. This seems to be dramatically different from the songs that decry government corruption and other social ills. I locate these songs in a neoliberal framework that encourages a subjectivity of *homo economicus*, whereby people discipline and govern themselves to accept reality. *Homo economicus* is someone who “responds systematically to systematic modifications
artificially introduced into the environment [...and] someone who is eminently governable” (Foucault, *Birth* 270). Though artists never articulate this, I suspect that the end of the Moi dictatorship and the introduction to multi-party politics, which coincided with neoliberal reform, is somewhat responsible for this trend (these political settings are discussed in chapter four). The applications of both multi-party politics and neoliberalism are both flawed, but in some ways they did open up possibilities. These openings gave way to ideologies of personal betterment, whereby the opportunities are now available and it is up to people to change their actions to achieve upward mobility.

Sue Timon’s “Weee” is song about self-discipline that has overtly Christian themes. The song begins with her rapping about how she has the authority to speak knowledge, and she believes others should follow God. She raps the chorus, which is a serious call for listeners to change their lives, “Sifu bwana utakuja skiza, Wee!” (Praise God when will you listen? You!) and then, “Utakuja badilika lini, Wee?!” (When will you change? You!). The “Wee!”—or “you!” at the end of the line is emphasized and articulated loudly, giving the feeling that she is pointing her criticisms at her listeners (“Wee”). Sue calls people to stop smoking marijuana and cigarettes, as well as drinking alcohol. In the first verse she raps, “Badilisha njia ndo ubadilike pia, mabangi ni hatia, ubadilishe pia” (Change your ways and you will also change, weed is a crime, change that too) (“Wee”). One interesting element about this song is that the beats and hard style of rapping create feelings of dissidence and opposition to the status quo, and the lyrics call for people to stop drinking and smoking, which in many respects can be seen as a mainstream position. The song sounds uncompromising and staunch, and the chorus is
not inviting and encouraging, but instead hard and rough. It lacks diversity because the only sounds we hear are Sue’s voice in the lyrics and chorus, a background male voice singing “Wee,” and a straightforward and unchanging rhythmic beat. Sue has a deep voice, and next to her male counterpart, this does not provide a range of sounds that make for an effective and appealing song. “Wee,” like Lness’s “Mi Mcool,” demonstrates the lyrical ability of both artists, and lack the range of musical resonances.

“System” by Karpchizzy speaks to lower class residents of “system ya mtaa.” This is a song about the injustices of the hood, but more so it is about individuals making the best decisions they can in their given contexts. Like Sue Timon, Karpchizzy raps the verses and the chorus, making him the only voice we hear, which means the content of his lyrics become central. “System” is a standard underground beat that repeats with little change or innovation. Karpchizzy continually encourages people to make good choices:

We ni soldier, kaza kamba, tunakaready steady ka mamba
(You are a soldier, we tighten our ropes, be ready and steady like a rock)

Ngazi pole pole, mdogo mdogo, tunapanda, life ikigo hard, mwanangu unago
harder iki get rough, mi hugrow even tougher.
(You can’t go slowly, small by small, we climb up, when life gets hard we go harder, when life gets rough, I grow even tougher) (“System”) He tells people that, regardless of what life brings, respond by overcoming it. He personally reacts through a masculinized toughness, “mi hugrow even tougher.” People should not become vulnerable or succumb to the harsh realities of the hood according to
this song. We watched the video during our interview, and he stated, “I’m trying to motivate the same, same guys in the hood. I’m telling them, there is this system” (Karpchizzy). This system is created by the political leaders of Kenya, according to his lyrics, “Ukimweka ndani ya bunge punde anasahau na anaanza madharau” (As soon as you elect them to parliament they forget you and start disrespecting you) (“System”). Yet, it is the poor who should discipline themselves around the inevitable realities of inequality. There is a sense of hopelessness that the song produces inadvertently because Karpchizzy implies that politicians will not change, and it is up to the most economically vulnerable to make good choices. The jarring and uncompromising beats help with this sentiment. His desire to inspire people drives the lyrical content, and like “Wee”, the song sounds hard, intense, and jarring. The song seems to be targeted toward lower class men.

The intentions of these songs are to inspire people and encourage them not to capitulate to problematic temptations and obstacles of society. Lness, Karpchizzy, and Sue do not belong to the upper classes, and they all rap assertively and confidently, which asserts that their contributions are noteworthy despite their social position. These songs represent how the underground fosters a type of cultural power that assumes its practitioners have important knowledge to impart on society. Their most powerful message is that people can be empowered, despite social situations. This important characteristic should not overshadow the fact that “Wee,” “System,” and “Mi Mcool” all produce notions of self-policing that feed into dominant ideas about hard work, discipline, and upward mobility.
Nairobi rap references place heavily. This practice is well known, and scholars have documented the diverse ways artists utilize to invoke location in their raps. Naming or describing neighborhoods is common practice in Kenya, and began with Kalamashaka’s early 1999 hit “Tafsiri Hii,” and the intense descriptions about ghetto life in Dandora, a neighborhood located in Eastlands. Another early example is Mr. Googs and Banton’s “Githurai.” Githurai is a lower class neighborhood, mixed with some wealthier communities, in the eastern part of Nairobi just southwest of Kahawa South. The chorus is upbeat and proclaims, “Na wasee, tumetoka Githurai, Githurai!” (And guys, we’re from Githurai, Githurai!) (Juicethedj). Current commercial rapper, Octopizzo constantly references Kibera in his songs, and underground rapper Evaredi evokes Embakasi.

Dandora is still a major citation for underground hip hop at large, despite the regular habit of artists to name other places. Mickie Koster, in research on UFMM, notes how Kamau Ngigi from Kalamashaka calls Dandora “the birthplace of Kenyan hip hop” (101). Referencing Dandora in rap has become so commonplace that it is often trite and unoriginal. Yet the constant invocation of Dandora serves a critical purpose. These neighborhoods include makeshift housing, poor sanitation, lack of clean water, while many struggle with hunger, access to health care, and social insecurity. Dandora is the largest landfill and dumpsite in Nairobi, making pollution and sanitation an even larger concern (Koster 85). Songs that mention Dandora as a place of affirmation become explicitly political because they transform Dandora-as-landfill to it as a place of cultural production and aesthetic expressiveness, which humanize the neighborhood and its
inhabitants. A more recent example is Washamba Wenza’s “Strictly Dandora,” which in some ways is a repetition of Dandora hood narratives. In other ways, however, it departs from this format by incorporating mainstream sounds. The beats are more complicated than the usual simplistic synthesized resonances that underground hip hop produces. This is an optimistic, anthem-like song and celebrates Dandora in affirmative ways, as opposed to elucidating harsh realities. The song welcomes the listener in by repeating “strictly Dandora” loudly and excitedly.

Some artists rap about generalized marginalized neighborhoods, as opposed to naming the place. One example of this is Washamba Wenza and Judge’s “Shupavu” (brave/warrior), discussed extensively in chapter four. Karpchizzy’s “System” follows this direction, where he raps about “system ya mtaa” or the “hood system.” In both of these examples, these artists rap and speak from the location of the hood or ghetto. For Karpchizzy, he sings about the “system ya mtaa” or hood system, where people need to work hard despite obstacles. “Hii ni system ya mtaa kulingana na sheria vile sii tunaka hapa ndani” translates to “This is the system of the hood, in accordance with the law of the hood, of how we live (here in the hood)” (“System”). As the song continues, it is clear that Karpchizzy wants to speak to all people who live in impoverished communities, not only to Kahawa West, which is where he is from. Both methods, whether it is the specific naming of neighborhoods, or more generalized hood narratives are meant to provide that same identificatory feeling and appeal to audiences.

Artists evoke place by referring to matatu routes that go into these neighborhoods. This practice began in mainstream hip hop, particularly with the group Necessary Noize
and their song “Kenyan Girl, Kenyan Boy.” This song is about a romantic relationship that forms in a matatu. It celebrates rap culture, as Nazizi raps about taking matatu #23 to the Outerring estate, located on the eastside of the city. She opens the song with these words before beginning her verse, “Hii track inaenda kwa wathii wote wa mathree, dere wa mathree, conda wa mathree, pia kama unapanda mathree… Necessary Noize!” (This track goes out to all the people on matatus, drivers of matatus, conductors of matatus, also if you take a matatu... Necessary Noize!) (Ikahara). At the end of the song, she shouts out several Nairobi matatu routes as a show of an ideal unity, and this coupled with the romantic themes of young love make it a celebratory song about the young people who actively contribute to Kenyan or Nairobi culture. Evan Mwangi and Wanjiru Mbure note about this song, “[...] this group’s reference to love is coded with symbols unique to Nairobi audiences” (27). The song’s romantic context is meant to extend to the love she has for Nairobi culture. Indeed, she speaks to the many young people who used to take (and still do) matatus for socializing, courting, and meeting others. The shout-outs to matatu routes, the images of Nairobi, produce a feeling of pride about a unique urban environment. This was a hit in Kenya in the mid-2000s, and for obvious reasons widely played on matatus before the enforcement of strict regulations. Other artists have continued this tradition. Current mainstream rapper, Octopizzo, raps numba nane (number eight), which is the matatu route to Kibera. Underground practitioner Evaredi raps “thirty-three” throughout his songs, which is the route to Embakasi. This number is also the basis for his small-scale clothing line, EMBA 33.
Post-Mau Mau underground rappers often imagine their work as essentially
dissimilar from mainstream music. Many assume that their rap is always socially
meaningful and important while mainstream songs contain empty or insignificant
messages. Judge argued that commercial rap, which usually incorporates dancehall and
Afropop elements, delivers watered down lyrics, which he calls “ABCD rhymes,”
“nursery rhymes,” and “cartoon rhymes” (Judge). Afropop is a lively, electronically
based dance music that often uses voice synthesizers. Two Kenyan genres, *gende* and
*kapuka* draw on Afropop influences and have mainstream visibility. *Genge* “incorporates
hip hop dancehall, and traditional African music styles sung in Sheng” (Ntarangwi 129).
Similarly, *kapuka* “is specifically known for its repeated beats and lyrics meant to
enhance the song draw for dancing [and] many sounds in *kapuka* are generated from
existing computer tunes” (130). *Genge* artists tend to rap more in their songs, while
*kapuka* artists tend to sing. Mainstream hip hop fits into these standards, whereby artists
craft songs with raps alongside Afropop and dancehall sounds.

Commercial music, however, is not absent from engaging with socially political
content. For instance, commercial artist Juliani’s song “*Utawala*” is about explicit
governmental corruption and the need to vote in leaders who will guide the country well.
The chorus is:

\[ \text{Niko njaa ata siezi karanga, hohe hahe shaghala baghala/} \]
\[ \text{(I am so hungry that I can’t cook, I feel helpless\textsuperscript{12})} \]

\textsuperscript{12} *Hohe hahe, shaghala baghala* are verbal expressions of helplessness that do not translate to English easily.
Niko tayari kulipa gharama, sitasimama maovu yakitawala/
(I am ready to pay the cost, I will not stand aside as evil rules)

Ufisadi, Ubinafsi, Ukabila, kuuza sura, hawataki kuuza sera/
(Corruption, individualism, nepotism, selling their face, politicians don’t want to sell policies)

Undugu ni kufaana sitasimama maovu yakitawala.
(Brotherhood is benefiting each other, I will not stand aside as evil rules)

(Julanimusic)

Politicians are responsible for the conditions of society, according to these lyrics. The song is less about people making the right choice, and more about having pride about being a Kenyan despite political injustices. Juliani gives the chorus anthem-like qualities through its constant repetition. The music video shows a number of working class Kenyans singing the chorus and rapping the verses, giving the performance of unity and a common struggle toward good governance. There are clips of Wangari Maathai being beaten up and receiving a Nobel Peace Prize, images of poached elephants, a snippet of Kibaki burning a large pile of ivory tusks, and images of a starving woman probably of Turkana. Juliani does call people to make choices mostly through the vote, but he also places political deficiencies on the government. “Utawala” is a pop song that creates a nationalist sentiment. Its ability to create social commentary is noteworthy and accomplishes the task of political interrogation.
Underground rap’s critical intervention lies in the fact that artists’ social positions are marginalized compared to commercial artists. Moreover, their raps largely avoid relying on a commercial formula and rest in their lyrical innovations. Language is not always a distinguishing factor either because each style uses Sheng and Swahili extensively. There are some mainstream rappers who use English, for example Bamboo, and Kaligraph Jones rap in English. Bamboo, who spent his youth in the US, switches back and forth between English and Swahili/Sheng in his songs, while Jones raps almost exclusively in English. However, it is unlikely that these commercial artists would rap in the Sheng that Judge and Washamba Wenza in the song “Shupavu.” In that song, highlighted in chapter four, they use Sheng words specific to Dandora. Not all underground practitioners use Sheng however, underground rappers Amora, Baby T, and Ibbs all rap in English.

One of the apparent differences between commercial and underground lies in the song construction. Non-commercial rap tends to focus on a standard beat and lyric innovation, while mainstream rap uses voice synthesizers, a danceable chorus, and repetitive lyrics. Underground music often lacks good production quality and therefore places emphasis on lyrical skill. It has rough and gritty beats with dense lyric-filled verses. At times, innovative songs emerge from this formula, but it can be difficult to produce a good song within such limited conditions. Non-commercial hip hop sounds, by and large, do not necessarily invite someone in like dancehall and Afropop do; they do not create a space where the majority of people automatically feel compelled to listen.
Instead, artists craft their songs in such a way that only the dedicated few devotees feel compelled to listen.

**Hip Hop as Economic Parallel Public**

Hip hop is a way of expression. And hip hop music is powerful. Music changes societies. Music shapes cultures and music brings up generations, you know? So I find hip hop, huh, as a tool where one can stand out and do music and cause his plea to be heard. It’s like a CV, you have to bring your CV before the guy you want a job from. So hip hop is like a CV. (Jabez)

The explanation is from gospel rapper Demaine Jabez, responding to a general question about the cultural significance of rap music culture. His argument reflects a general one in hip hop culture; rap music is a set of practices that offers up devices and methods to interact with the world. The notion that hip hop can be *curriculum vitae* reflects its deep and long connections with neoliberal capitalism, which is present throughout a lot of post-Mau Mau underground hip hop. Jabez’s claim reflects what David Harvey, drawing from Gramsci, calls “entrepreneurial ‘common sense,’” a mode of thinking about the world in terms of marketplace ideals (68).

This section illustrates how hip hop both reflects and resists economic practices and ideologies. Lester Spence states, “Rap MCs, like other black cultural workers, both accommodate and criticize mainstream norms and values” (9). Spence asserts that hip
hop culture formulates economic normative values or assumptions, “[…] that rap and
hip-hop’s productive, circulative, and consumptive politics both mirror and reproduce
what I call the neoliberal narrative across space and the most dominant aspects of black
politics across space and time” (11, emphasis in original). The hip hop parallel public
sees itself as distinct from the society it often criticizes, despite its similarities to the
mainstream. The post-Mau Mau cultural underground aesthetic posits itself as a voice of
resistance, though artists’ relationships to economic ideologies and practices are much
more nuanced than explicit dissent. Artists are actively involved with developing their
music into a sustainable career, and their approaches to economic elements of rap culture
often mirror capitalist notions. In this section, I examine hip hop artists’ perspectives on
their careers and consider how practitioners reinforce those assumptions about economics
and everyday life that undergird neoliberal thought. This section additionally explores
economic strategies that artists employ to create their careers.

Underground hip hop practitioners see capitalism as the solution to social
vulnerability. In chapter four, I argue that precariousness is an everyday experience
exacerbated by the state and economic conditions. Many hold the state responsible for
this difficulty, as opposed to, perhaps, larger global economic systems. Many artists see
capitalism as way to greater opportunities, and not necessarily as an impediment in their
lives. The state is regarded, by far, as the largest barrier in their lives. Practitioners
believe that the government misuses capitalism, which could be easily beneficial. If only
politicians would not be so greedy, so the belief goes, artists—and people in general—
would be able to exercise personal potential within capitalist practices. Rappers argue
that the state does not allow them opportunities to work, make money, and acquire wealth, and therefore the government becomes an impediment toward a type of economic freedom. As a result many rappers’ adopt the capitalist practices as a response to a repressive state by exercising a neoliberal subjectivity, or homo economicus: “[at] stake in all neoliberal analyses is […] homo economicus as entrepreneur of himself, being for himself his own capital, being for himself his own producer, being from himself the source of [his] earnings” (Foucault, Birth 226).

Hip hop practitioners as homo economicus uphold the ideas that one should work hard for their success. Difficult obstacles are not a reason to stop making music. Lness fully acknowledged the difficulties of developing a music career, and still she viewed the process as full of necessary and inevitable hard work and personal sacrifice:

Lness: Most artists, some people actually stop, they give up the game cuz they’re like, I’ve done a song, I’ve paid a video, a good video, I’ve paid a good studio—a very good song. And then they put all their hope into it. All their money into it, then they take it to the stations, it runs only one week. Then it doesn’t play. You don’t get shows; you don’t get your money back. Some people are just like “fuck it.” You know [laughs]. So many artists…

RP: So do you, are you, I mean is that understandable? Or do you […] not agree with it?
LNess: I don’t agree with it, because here, are so many ways, so many things happening in scene. We also have cartels that are controlling the game. But that shouldn’t make anybody give up. Cuz you can, you don’t focus on Kenya. When you make your music, you focus on outside Kenya. So if Kenyan stations don’t play, Tanzanian stations will play. Ugandan stations will play; South Africa will play. But it’s hard; it shouldn’t be like that. It shouldn’t be like that. (LNess)

Right before this explanation she objects to the music industry’s informal payola system. Elsewhere in the conversation she also discusses how female artists encounter hardship in maintaining a rap career because of familial duties and pressures. So it is not that LNess does not think that people face industry hardship, it is that she believes that one should persevere under any circumstances. This sentiment appears in songs, mentioned in the last section. Her song, “Mi Mcool,” Karpchizzy’s “System,” and Sue Timon’s “Weee” all reflect this sentiment. She adheres to the rational neoliberal subject whose call is not to see defects in economy and society at large, “homo economicus is someone who accepts reality” (Foucault, Birth 269). She believes that rappers must persevere and that they are in charge of their own success despite perceived or actual barriers. Supposedly artists need to try harder if they are to prosper. Sentiments like this illustrate how hip hop is influenced by wider practices of governmentality around a neoliberal logic. This allows for late capitalism to be regarded as inevitable and obvious by those who act on its behalf. One must work hard and sacrifice to make it in the hip hop game. All artists who choose to participate in rap do so with the knowledge that entities like the state and music

---

13 David Harvey notes, “individual success or failure are interpreted in terms of entrepreneurial virtues or personal failings” (65).
industry work to create real barriers in their lives. Economic success is supposedly available the more a rapper coheres him/herself around the logic: if you work hard, you will be successful.

Artists talked a great deal about making it in the music business, not in terms of talent and abilities, instead in the framework of hard work and discipline. Just because the state is an unbearable obstacle, does not mean that artists do not see themselves as having agency and freedom. I asked Evaredi why more non-commercial and underground hip hop artists are unable to enter the music industry. The following statement was made in the context of him getting his own music on the radio, and I asked about any barriers he faced in that endeavor:

As in basically, I can say like [these artists] found that the underground hip hop music in Kenya, it’s like they, it came a time that they were on bad terms with the media. They used to complain the media is not playing their underground music. Basically I can say that for now we have like more radios, whereby the underground artist is capable of being played on radio. (Evaredi)

Evaredi expresses an assumption that radio, perhaps a lot like the marketplace, holds inherent democratic practices that one must simply know how to navigate and have enough good talent. This means “[while] personal and individual freedom in the marketplace is guaranteed, each individual is held accountable for his or her own actions and well-being” (Harvey 65). The underlying logic is that state’s oppressive presence in the lives of rappers, and Kenyans at large, is not an excuse for failure. The idea is that
practitioners, as *homo economicus*, can still make economic choices within capitalism’s context.

Evaredi’s conversation additionally relates to a much larger notion I met: underground hip hop artists are regarded as generally bad businesspeople. Though Ukoo Flani Mau Mau are highly praised for their work, many criticize them for not being able to make money and establish financial security. This came up during a discussion with graffiti artist, Esen. I asked him general questions about the difficulties one may face while attempting to sell and distribute music. I relayed a then recent encounter I had had at a River Road music stall to explain my point: I had gone to a vendor stall to explore my initial observation as to the absence of Kenyan rap from music stalls. I asked the vendor for Ukoo Flani Mau Mau because it was well known, yet controversial. The vendor looked at me with shock and surprise when I asked for this group as if there was no possibility his stall would sell such music. His negative reply also implied that my request was strange, and he looked at me inquisitively, as if he wanted to understand why I would ask for *that* music. I guessed it was perhaps too outdated and/or too politically controversial. I explained my experience to Esen and asked for his opinion on this very significant, yet brief exchange. His response is worth quoting at length:

Ah, you know like, ok, here is the thing. Here is my personal opinion. It brings back to like, business ethics. You know like, I’m not even looking at it like an artist. Or whatever. I’m looking at it like from a business point of view, business perspective. Most of these guys are usually not serious. Ok, like, yeah, they might, like, shoot me if they hear me talking like this, but it’s true. Most of these
guys are not serious. So they are not aggressive, they don’t push their product that much. Plus, ah, you know like, most of the hip hop artists in Kenya don’t even have managers and all that. So the business element of hip hop in Kenya is very poor compared to like Uganda, Tanzania, so like, *if you’re talking like let’s say, Ukoo Flani, or Mau Mau, or whatever, regardless, or any member of the crew, by now they should be riding hummers and shit like you know like cause they started way back 1996.* They used to actually do world tours. You know like, if they go to Europe, do some tours there, South Africa, but mismanagement is what actually brought them down. So they are good lyrically, but business wise, no, most of them are poor. (Esen, emphasis mine)

The scenario I laid out prompted Esen to discuss the ineptitude of UFMM, and not the structural reasons for rap’s absence in the stalls, the negative associations of underground hip hop, or even the vendor’s personal decision not to sell rap because of a perceived notion of what the music entails. Evaredi and Esen’s comments both illustrate how rappers must be able to function as business-minded musicians. These comments further exemplify how any rational subject of capitalism structures his or her choices around the conditions, and does not attempt to change, challenge, or decry the conditions. Esen sees the dearth of rap music in stalls as the responsibility of the artist to correct. The inability of artists to navigate the industry is seen as the musicians’ fault to enact suitable and rational choices, rather than a misdeed of the institutions and individuals that gate-keep
and maintain the industry. To be a capable rapper is to know one’s field and to act accordingly; in short, it is to govern one’s actions along disciplinary power.\footnote{14 Foucault states, “Economics is an atheistic discipline; economics is a discipline without God; economics is a discipline without totality; economics is a discipline that begins to demonstrate not only the pointlessness, but also the impossibility of a sovereign point of view over the totality of the state that he has to govern” (281).}

Esen’s perspective highlights an actual difficulty—most artists do not have managers to work for them. Artists who do not have access to assistance in producing their music or setting up performances are subject to being taken advantage of. Judge gives an account of the person or people who sold his single without his knowledge, which is discussed in the fourth chapter. There are others: female artists like Sue Timon, Baby T, and Amora all admitted or implied that producers pressure women for sex to finish laying a track (Timon; Baby T; Amora). What’s important about what Esen stated is that when rappers cannot translate the popularity of the music into economic profit and sustainability, it is a personal shortcoming. Targeting the artists for her/his deficient rationality eclipses differential articulations of power, for example, how women artists are vulnerable to men in higher positions.

This discussion relates to how neoliberal rationality inevitably infiltrates and saturates all areas of life because it “presents an image of society as a market” where all people are implicated as inexorable producers and consumers (Read 33). Current rappers, knowing that UFMM were not able to make money, desperately aim to turn their art into livelihood, their talents into monetary security, in a society and world that have been increasingly economically stratified and unpredictable.

A few artists offered proactive solutions to the difficult obstacles they face. Esen...
believed that there should be a hip hop distribution system outside of the current industry: “So, overall, the main thing is take control of the industry. You know like, ah, instead of us like waiting for distributors from River Road to do the distribution, let’s form our own distribution companies and start small and eventually grows into, you know like, a big corporation out of it” (Esen). There are no huge corporations present in Kenya to do the work that he desires. There are, though, companies that do distribution work for mainstream *kapuka* and *enge* music, like Calif Records and Ogopa DJs. Baby T records at a smaller company, ATL Entertainment in Embakasi. ATL also secures gigs for her and promotes her music, and she must pay for this service (Baby T). Most underground practitioners do not have access to companies that will promote for them.

In Kenya, distribution problems are not only within hip hop, but in the music industry in general. DJ Adrian, Mtawali, and Esen all confirm that the music industry lacks a good distribution system. In the global north and west, for instance, the large transnational firms do such work for mainstream artists. The absence of and inaccessibility to these large corporations means that marketing and promotion are relegated to the artist, producers, and the few promoters that work for mainstream artists. Mtawali argued that the distribution labor falls on the artists: “The outlets [that sell music], they are not as many. And the few distributors that are there may not be willing to distribute your music. So now what you depend on is: you perform somewhere, you sell it; you perform somewhere, you sell it” (Mtawali). This comment is similar to Timon’s comment discussed above about the amount of labor artists must put into their craft. Mtawali’s explanation illustrates how marketing and distribution is inevitably
necessary regardless of artists’ opinions about it. Kwame Anthony Harrison notes that in the US Bay area, “the lack of Music Industry presence has forced local hip hop artists to embrace independent production and distribution practices as a ‘way of life,’” which means DIY ethic is an inexorable element of being a rapper (39). What is important about the artists’ comments, as well as Harrison’s, is that DIY is not a choice, one must put in the labor in order to have or build a music career.

Lness suggested underground hip hop should be subsumed into the mainstream industry:

Lness: You know right now, [hip hop’s] been on the runway now, the plane has just about to take off. If we strategize well, if we play our cards right now, then it’s really gonna take off and be the mainstream right now. […] It will be hip hop standing by itself […] until it goes corporate. It hasn’t gotten to that level but it’s getting there. Like right now. In the pipeline there are things that are working.

RP: So you think it should go corporate?

Lness: Yeah, it should. It’s actually combining. It’s not only hip hop alone. Right now, if you go to a show, and you just make it play hip hop, people won’t come. But if […] you combine it with all this other aspects that can attract other people who are not necessarily hip hoppers. Then you find that it’s grown to that level.

(Lness)

This perspective is understandable given that artists must take on all or most of the duties
associated with music. Lness was most likely referencing the Hip Hop Fest, which I discuss more thoroughly later in this chapter. She and the other planners for Hip Hop Fest wanted to transform it into a place that can host a number of vendors, musical acts, and performances. The idea is that the more diverse the programming the larger the audiences will be. The planners of Hip Hop Fest, including Lness, Judge, and Sue Timon, cast a wide net of cultural possibilities, though the people who attended this event were lower and middle class young men with little buying power, many of the same underground hip hop devotees who normally frequent Sarakasi.

Artists constantly face the standardizing pressures of mainstream music, even as they often lack access to make such sounds. Afropop and dancehall are hugely popular and set the guidelines for what commercially successful music is. Mainstream artists like Prezzo, Bamboo, Jaguar, and Juliani incorporate dancehall beats and at times their lyrics have less controversial lyrical content. Jaguar’s lyrics, and at times Juliani’s, blend rapping and singing. Popular examples include Jaguar’s “Kigeugeu” (One that cannot be trusted) and “Kipepeo” (Butterfly), Prezzo’s “Mimi na We” (Me and you). Daddy Owen and Juliani are two examples of mainstream musicians who sing gospel music and other inspirational and uplifting music. Their collaboration song “Utamu wa Maisha” (meaning the “sweetness about life” or “the good thing about life”) is an upbeat dance song that focuses on living for today. Both sing overtly religious songs, yet this is an example of a song that lacks explicit Christian signifiers but has the same themes of moral messaging, uplift, and positivity. The chorus is “Utamu wa maisha ni ati haujui kesho iko vipi,” which means “the good thing about life is you don’t know what will happen tomorrow
(or in the future)” (Ogopavideo1). The song teaches listeners about how one should never look down on others because one never knows what the future holds.

Some artists elect to make commercial music. It difficult to isolate one reason why rappers choose to make mainstream sounds: some want access to monetary payoffs and others enjoy such music. A few artists that I interviewed made mainstream sounds that have very similar characteristics to “Utamu wa Maisha.” Artists Decence and Baby T noted that dancehall was a more palatable genre. Decence stated he liked dancehall because of opportunities:

Actually, I also do a bit of dancehall. I did a regga/dancehall song. Actually I’m trying to be diverse. […] There is this artist called Daddy Owen. He’s very diverse in his music. He used to do regga, what-what, but once he just came out, he does everything. He’s already accepted, so he does everything. So me, my point is, any slightest opportunity. If regga dancehall is what will expose me to the world, I’ll do it. And then I’ll try to come up with the best thing that will express what I want actually. That will express my heart fully, which is hip hop.

(Decence)

Decence asserted that the reason why he did a dancehall sound was to gain mainstream accessibility, which would allow him to make hip hop the way he wants. Decence recognized that Owen’s success is partly because he sings dancehall, and he strategically posited that if he follows a similar track as Owen, he could perhaps have a chance at the industry.
Baby T recognized, like Decence, that dancehall carries weight in the industry. She argued that rap is more “cumbersome” due to its often heavy lyrics, and “hip hop goes underground because many people don’t want to take the time to listen to it” (Baby T). For her, these were reasons to look to make more mainstream music. She, like Decence, recognized the popularity of dancehall:

Most people love dancehall more than hip hop. […] I’d say that hip hop artists are working hard to make, to bring hip hop back alive. So and when it comes up, you just have to mix it with other things to get people to listen. So if you do a fusion of maybe hip hop and dancehall, people listen to it because there’s a bit of dancehall so, yeah. I think there will be a fusion, and maybe sometimes you even might overlap some dancehall. (Baby T)

Of all the artists with whom I spoke, Baby T explicitly aspired to do mainstream music, and even stated that she would one day like to do a collaboration with US rapper Meek Mill. At the time of our interview, she had just completed a remix of mainstream rapper, Octopizzo’s “Bila Mic,” which also features Frasha, J’Mani, Rabbit, Jay A, and Collo. The song celebrates success that owes all credit to hip hop: “Bila mic, mi si sonko” (Without the mic, I wouldn’t be rich/wealthy) (Octopizzo). Baby T raps, “This music is my money, so my pockets are baggy” and then “you betta recognize I’m the female Idi Amin, Idi Amin!” (Octopizzo). Most artists with whom I interview see themselves as following in the footsteps of UFMM (or just Ukoo Flani or Mau Mau), but Decence and Baby T are examples of exceptions.
There are places where artists express views that stray from dominant economic thought within the hip hop parallel public. Marcyliena Morgan notes that “hiphop creates an alternative space where norms are questioned [and] what is stigmatized is valorized” (14). In Nairobi underground hip hop, one such perspective concerns the controversial issue of piracy. Some artists express that pirating music is and can be a benefit to artists. Agano argued that piracy indicates the success of one’s music, and that artists should utilize piracy for their benefit.

RP: So you think that copying [pirating] CDs is a big issue right now in Kenya?

Agano: First of all in hip hop culture people are pirating a lot, which I don’t have a problem with because if they [consumers] can’t get it, what should they do?

RP: So piracy becomes necessary in some ways?

Agano: Yeah. It’s like you are forcing them to do it. They don’t want to. They want to support you because they love your music. But if they can’t get it, so? Like I remember when we did our first pre-album, we pushed those CDs like we were selling, I don’t know, food or something. We sold them, like we sold like maybe 200 copies a day. And that’s not like being like taking it into the market. It’s just walking around. If I’m in town, I’ll just people will come to me, ‘I need that. I heard you had that. I heard it’s out.’ Yaani, we would be selling them, but we would not be taking it to the market. That means there is a bigger market,
people want to buy stuff but they don’t get it. Other rappers can complain, like piracy, they’re all complaining. Like, instead of […] thinking of a way like to sort the problem out: why is it happening? (Agano)

Funzo Kuu viewed the inevitability of piracy as a good thing:

Ah, piracy to me, to me, my perspective it’s, it’s not a bad thing. It depends on you. Your strategy on how you are going to push your product. Obviously when something is pirated, it’s good. You know? Nothing bad can be pirated. So to me, you have to push your product. It’s being pirated, you have to push it more. You come up with new products for the pirates to pirate. Because they are also marketing. (Funzo Kuu, emphasis mine)

The popular perception in Kenya and elsewhere is that music piracy is a thorn in the side of artists who already struggle tremendously to churn their music into profits. The fact that Agano and Funzo Kuu see pirating as not altogether detrimental illustrates the radical breaks that practitioners can have with mainstream economic ideas. They interpret illegal copying as an indicator of good music. Certainly not everyone agrees with them. Judge and Lness, for example, believe that hip hop artists are negatively impacted by piracy (Judge; Lness). Agano and Funzo Kuu rethink how potential barriers can be re-imagined as assets and possibilities.

Kenyan rappers create opportunities in spite of an industry that fails to accommodate them. Sue Timon states in an interview with Voturadio: “In the music industry, it is one thing to write songs and another to get them recorded and marketed. In as much as one is talented, recognition will never come without extra effort from the
musician” (Ombui “Transition”). Some artists try traditional routes: Evaredi and Judge take their music to radio and television stations and ask vendors to sell their music in stalls; Baby T, Jabez, and Evaredi make music that mirrors commercial sounds. These avenues are often unsuccessful: announcers may ask for a bribe or refuse to play the music and vendors may shy away from hip hop because it is widely associated with pirated music, even if the music reflects the current industry standards.

Non-commercial artists focus on securing shows because there is generally the idea that careers cannot be created from album sales. Several people expressed this sentiment, including graffiti artist Esen, producer Jagero, and artists Mtawali, Lness, and Evaredi. Very few artists I spoke with spend a great deal of their time physically selling their albums and songs. Most rappers earn the little money they can from live performances, and have turned to the Internet to market. “By the end of the 1990s,” Harrison asserts, “the Internet has become a catalyst in expanding independent hip hop’s market by providing both music makers and their fans with options outside the conventional yoke of major label dependency” (31). In Kenya, underground artists have begun to use the Internet heavily within the past ten years for a few reasons. First, the copyright policies, enacted in 2003, made it difficult to sell CDs on the streets, which I discuss in chapter four. Second, the turn toward cell phones to listen to music, as opposed to hard copies of CDs, is another factor. Internet distribution, however, is distinct from selling CDs because the purpose of pursuing Internet marketing is not for the direct sale of their music. Rather, most artists use the web to become known in the hopes of booking live shows, as well as general exposure. Many artists have realized that they can earn
more money performing at Sarakasi or at another venue, than they can selling their own music. The two examples I illustrate below, Voturadio.com and ReverbNation, exemplify how artists use the Internet to make themselves widely known in the hopes of opening the doors to greater opportunities. A third example, music videos, will be discussed in the last section of this chapter.

Hip hop artist and producer, Ndugus Uswakamili, runs the website Voturadio.com; Votu, standing for “Voice of the Underground.” Ndugus began writing songs and rapping in 2000 when he was still in high school. After graduation, he began recording songs. Many of his current songs are available on ReverbNation.com, which I discuss below. His decision to start Voturadio in 2005 began with initial disillusionment about the music industry:

When I was starting, I thought hip hop would pay—would avail food to me, clothes, and everything. But it’s different here in Kenya. The industry is very tough. I started building a movement for those later on to run smoothly, because it was hard to get your track played on the radio. It was hard to get shows. People were, like, dealing with discrimination and stuff. So I started a movement. That is “Voice of the Underground.” […] So I developed a website that was dealing with only African hip hop. Because here in Africa you find that people are, like, into western stuff a lot, they forget their own roots. So Voice of the Underground was giving voice of the youths, to the slums, and everywhere. (Ndugus)

Ndugus initially began Voturadio because of gaps he recognized; he realized he could not make money by selling records, and he also noticed a lack of emphasis on Kenyan music.
Voturadio hosts interviews, songs and videos, and various hip hop events. Artists from Kenya, Nigeria, Ghana, Tanzania, and Zimbabwe have music and interviews on the site, and there are news items about music and politics. The goal of the website is to have a platform for like-minded artists to share their music in one space. Voturadio is a small-scale project that does not necessarily directly bring revenue for artists or for Ndugus.

When I interviewed him, Ndugus mentioned that underground artists work hard in places like Nakuru, Molo, Nyere, and Mombasa and he wants the website to showcase that, though most of the Kenyan artists showcased on the website are from Nairobi (Ndugus; Voturadio). The website houses interviews and songs, but it is difficult to maneuver, and the articles are more easily accessible through their Facebook and Twitter pages.

Ndugus used Voturadio.com to open up avenues for himself. At the time of this interview (2011), Ndugus had just started working in IT and as presenter with Ghetto Radio’s hip hop show. He stated that the producers at Ghetto Radio had approached him in the hopes of collaborating on sharing music and interviews. That idea transformed into an employment opportunity (Ndugus). Ghetto Radio posits itself as an underground radio station and calls itself, “Your Official Sheng Station” (Ghettoradio). A few artists I interviewed stated it was the only hip hop station in Nairobi that was willing to play underground rap. This is rather unfortunate because the station does not play a lot of Kenyan music at all, much less underground rap. Mostly, they play American music and non-Kenyan reggae and dancehall, and other African music. By July of 2013 Ndugus had left that position. Ndugus was able to use Voturadio to get a paying job, using his talent in IT and hip hop. Most artists aspire to do what Ndugus has done by using hip hop to
create job possibilities. Unfortunately this job did not last for Ndugus, which seems to typify the music industry and the sometimes precarious employment positions within Kenyan economic sectors.

ReverbNation is a resource that many of the artists with whom I interviewed use. It is a company founded in 2006 that targets those not connected to major recording labels, or non-commercial, underground, and independent musicians. They use ReverbNation to replace the limited avenues for radio play. Lness confirmed this:

I’ve even reached a point where I gave up music. [...] I mean, no pay, no pay, you work so hard to have the fair yeah, you go there, you even have your CDs, people don’t—it's been difficult. But now I see change because some people who love, who appreciate music. [...] You know, when you’re overflowing, yeah? With generosity, it pours out to somebody else. So the generosity of music lovers has flown even to Internet. There’s [sic] sites like ReverbNation. So I’ve posted my music there. I have fans now. I’m looking forward to going places and doing music. (Lness)

Lness discussion illustrates how her frustration with creating a music industry made her adopt alternative strategies. The Internet is a viable resource for many underground artists because there are low costs, or none at all. Many artists I spoke with have their music on ReverbNation, including Agano, Judge, Nafsi Huru, Lness, Sue Timon, Evaredi, and Demaine Jabez.

The site provides the easiest way for artists to promote their music online. One of their website slogans is “Over 2 million artists use ReverbNation to power digital
distribution, promotion, and more” (ReverbNation). The artists I interviewed use
ReverbNation, in addition to Facebook, as a way to market themselves with minimal
expenses. ReverbNation began to offer sellable and downloadable MP3s in March 2013
for all accounts.\(^{15}\) Most artists have not taken advantage of this feature yet, and I
speculate it is because their primary reason for placing their music online is to secure
performances. These rappers recognize, many from their own hustling, that selling music
is not a practicable way to earn a living. ReverbNation had not begun this program of
buying and selling songs online at the time that I conducted interviews of rappers. Thus
far, few artists have elected the option of selling their music. Allowing artists to sell
music only makes ReverbNation all the more beneficial, which fills in a critical gap for
many hip hop practitioners. It is unclear how successful this avenue will be in generating
income, but since no clear and obvious opportunities exist for rappers within the music
industry, it seems beneficial.

The lack of adequate mechanisms in Kenya means that ReverbNation addresses
cconcerns and allows for some immediate solutions for rappers to sell, promote, and
distribute their music. Many Kenyan consumers desire digital copies of music now that
mobile phones are more accessible, as opposed to buying CDs. In a sense, ReverbNation
is a viable alternative to the radio because it is a space whereby people can have access to
rap artists’ music. Fans can go to artists’ pages and download songs onto their phones for
free, and can in turn listen to that music. This avenue becomes the best method of

\(^{15}\) ReverbNation has three different accounts available: Basic (free), Pro (19.95 USD/1706 KSH/month),
and Max (41.67 USD/3564 KSH/month). This program is called “Music for Good.” The breakdown for a
1.29 USD/110 KSH song is as follows: .56 USD/48 KSH to the artist, .56 USD/48 KSH to a charity of
choice, and .12 USD/10 KSH to ReverbNation for transaction costs.
disseminating music with the widespread use of cell phones, especially in urban areas. Artists do not have to become disillusioned by ReverbNation, like they do with the radio, because there is no expectation of receiving royalties (this is a discussion fleshed out in chapter four). Moreover, they do not have to cross obstacles to get their music on the websites, like they do on radio. Many artists make and upload music with low production quality, and even that music which has low production quality can be uploaded to the website, which as I discuss below, is quite common for underground practitioners.

Gospel Rap

Several practitioners I spoke with are Christian gospel artists or sing gospel songs. Lness, Sue Timon, and Demaine Jabez, and Sheria have all produced gospel songs. I did not expect to encounter gospel music in underground spaces, and only when I realized how widespread making songs with religious content was did I invest in learning more about this topic. I spoke with artists who stated explicitly or implied that they used churches to record music, and made gospel because of its popularity and widespread acceptance. Such moves exist in a much larger practice, whereby the industry has disallowed possibilities within music, causing musicians to turn to alternative venues like gospel.\(^{16}\) Given the tight constrictions of today’s industry it is not surprising that many

\(^{16}\) Something similar occurred in Ghana, whereby government taxes on music instruments prohibited the development of a music culture in the 1980s and as a result many musicians turned to churches, which were exempt from such taxes (Shipley 31-32).
artists would do gospel to increase the likelihood of success. This contributes to the multiple reasons underground and non-commercial artists take up gospel music as a mode of expression.

Christianity, and by extension gospel, currently inhabits a normative space in Kenya. Parsitau argues that “gospel music is popular culture” in Kenya because it is marketed toward and to the younger generations. Artists use hip hop, reggae, dancehall, and R&B, and Afro-pop with Christian lyrics and messages, which heavily appeals to many Kenyan youths. Kidula argues gospel’s diversity in genres is strategically innovative: “gospel musicians reinvent […] music styles and traditions […] by fusing old and new, local and foreign, familiar and unexpected, secular and scared, as well as ethnic, national, and global resources” (“There is Power” 62). Larger societal reasons have influenced its cultural reach as well. Political repression, ethnic tension, and a transitioning music industry have influenced gospel’s popularity. Post-colonial rhetoric during the transitions of independence often depicted coastal Islamic culture as a cultural other. Such claims helped to construct an urban Nairobi Christian ethic (with underlying dominant Kikuyu cultural inflections) as normative (Porter). Christianity’s authoritative potency in public discourse has been influenced by other sociopolitical factors, like including the historic marginalization of Somali (both from Somalia and Kenya), the war with Somalia’s Al Shabaab group, as well as ongoing post-911 anti-Islamist sentiment. Televangelists, Christian radio and television stations, and mega churches all contribute to Christianity’s normative position.
Gospel became popular during the politically repressive Moi era of 80s-90s. The government run Voice of Kenya radio station banned songs sung in ethnic languages after the attempted 1982 coup. Moi also established the Presidential National Music Commission, which produced a report on all forms of music, with recommendations on how to develop a national music culture (also discussed in chapter three). This generated a public conversation about which music should represent Kenya, and this in conjunction with the repressive climate, encouraged artists to search for politically neutral songs. “Kenyan ethnic and indigenous music articulated specific cultural and folk identity as well as portraying national diversity rather than unity” (Kidula, “Polishing” 411). This meant that songs sung in ethnic languages, especially Kikuyu, were read as challenging the status quo. Artists who avoided censorship or sought to appeal to a wide audience composed songs in Swahili or Lingala, and often had Christian references. These characteristics constituted a type of performed neutrality (410).

Music with Christian religious content has been read as free of ethnic leanings or celebrations, and therefore political inclinations, an important factor in a context where people continue to be injured by politicized ethnic tensions (Kidula, “Polishing” 410). Kidula reports: “There was a need for a genre, preferably in Swahili language, disassociated from the congolese [sic] expression, and with a neutral regional, society, and political position. […] The Kenyan public decided on a Christian religious product” (“Polishing” 411). Gospel music largely escaped censorship when Moi’s Kenya Censorship Board (KCB) was active in seizing and destroying politically dissenting

---

17 Of course, there are exceptions. Mark Lamont’s study focuses on gospel music from Meru and composed largely in Kimeru. See “Lip-synch Gospel.”
material (Lamont 473). Artists composed gospel songs in an effort to dodge restrictions and escape censorship. Joseph Kamaru, for example, wrote several reactionary songs against Kenyatta and Moi and then converted to Christian music to avoid censorship (Lamont 473).

Christianity’s dominance in Kenyan music culture has also been due to economic factors. Churches began to fill some voids in the music industry during the 1980s as multinational recording companies in Nairobi began to decline (Kidula, “Polishing” 408-409). For instance, Baptist Communications and Nairobi Pentecostal Church, Valley Road were recording artists by the mid-1980s (Kidula 414). Currently large churches sponsor musicians and host concerts, and this provides readymade audiences and potential consumers. Many of these churches are huge businesses. Now a mega church, the Nairobi Pentecostal Church, Valley Road still records artists. Churches fund artists’ production costs, host rap concerts, and open up avenues for artists to appear on radio and television. Gospel music, in part due to churches’ influence, is so influential that “musicians [re-invent] themselves as the recording industry’s market has turned to the lucrative wave of commercial Pentecostal-Charismatic Christianity” (Lamont 473).

Pentecostal-Charismatic Christianity is hugely popular in Kenya, where worship services focus energetic dancing, lively performances, and engaging sermons (Parsitau). Most Pentecostal-Charismatic churches have a youth wing that aggressively attempts to draw in members. They host concerts that include hip hop, dancehall, reggae music—and this music, of course, all contains Christian messages. Some of the artists I spoke with recognize that Pentecostal-Charismatic churches fill the lack of opportunities available in
other sectors of the industry, and this unquestionably informs their decisions to pursue gospel. For example, Decence stated that the only place he is able to book performances is in churches.

I go to Deliverance in Rungai [Deliverance Church, Ongata Rongai]. I’ve done a performance there. NPC, Karen [Nairobi Pentecostal Church], I’ve also had a show there. Actually we organize events, I’ve done quite a number of performances. Actually my performance isn’t restricted to any one church, it’s anywhere I can do it. (Decence)

Artists tap into gospel’s normative cultural location to make the types of rap music that are important to them. These decisions are strategic; as Jean Kidula states of Kenyan artists, “Gospel musicians intentionally explore, exploit, and manipulate arenas that inform their cultural and social formation for commercial and religious expediency” (Kidula, “There is Power” 62). These artists use the resources that Christian churches have even though they may not be completely dedicated to gospel music. Both Sue and Decence articulate this idea in their interviews. Decence asserted that being a gospel artist does not mean that one has to only discuss Christianity, “I wouldn’t say that I talk just about the Bible kabisa,18 because there is so much going on around. You know people need to wake up. Actually there is so much to talk about. Politicians and stuff, yeah. And actually, I would say that people need to wake up” (Decence). Likewise, Sue affirmed her interest in discussing matters affecting people aside from issues of Christianity and religion, “I’m able to—now my lyrics, I’m able to rap about real life issues. I write about

18 In this context, it means completely or totally, as in “I wouldn’t say that I only talk about the Bible.”
the government, I can write about ah, God. I can relate to people. And that is what makes it powerful. Because it affects someone, and someone is able to feel what I am saying” (Timon). Sue and Decence aspire to use gospel to put forth messages, and they see themselves as redefining gospel. Their decisions not to rap about the Bible kabisa also exemplifies how they take advantage of Christianity’s social position to make the music that they want. For example, Sue Timon and Flamez’s song “Ulimi,” which I explore more thoroughly in chapter five, has obvious biblical undertones. Ulimi means tongue, and the song is about how one can use their tongue, or words, for good or for evil. She or Flamez never reference Jesus or Christianity. Sue, who attends Jubilee Christian Church, Parklands, has other gospel songs including “Asante Mola” (Thank you Lord), “Overcome,” and “Niongoze” (I Lead).

Sue reported that gospel’s central position in society helps people accept gospel rap.

Sue Timon: If I can sit with my mother, or someone elder, and they can feel hip hop with the first vibe, it’s all good. Like they can say, “You know you rap people, you’re violent, you are always show guns in the videos.” I can say, “No, grandma, listen to this. This is what I am doing. This is different.” They’ll say, “Oh, you’re talking about God, you’re talking about real life issues.”

RP: So is that what your grandma really says? [Joking.]
Sue Timon: [Laughs]. Ok, my aunties and everything. They like what I am doing. Yeah, this is it.

RP: They do?

Sue Timon: Even if they have never loved rap, but they see what I am doing, they can say yeah this is good. Even though the beat is fast, you know they won’t understand because the beats are going fast. But the lyrics they can listen to. You see. It brings unity. Because of the things you speak. (Timon)

Sue’s decision to make gospel rap is a smart one. She recognized how rap is culturally othered and uses gospel messages to make it more palatable to those who might not otherwise listen to rap. Her ability to create rap music that her older female relatives like is difficult, especially considering that hip hop is considered a pejorative American genre, associated with gangster lifestyles that young people emulate. For Sue, gospel rap is not necessarily a compromise because she identifies as an active Christian rapper and believes her task is to spread positive messages to young people.

Christian messages can stand in for general, positive, and uplifting music, which Demaine Jabez and Sue Timon both have used for their own personal transformations. Both Timon and Jabez stopped making gangsta rap and began to do Christian rap when they sought to express their life changes through hip hop. Jabez did not go into detail about some of his previous choices, but he does say that he had to distance himself from drugs, violence, and “negativity” (Jabez). He notes, “I was a gangster rapper. Because at
that time I was cold, I saw life, as in, life is just a painful place where we come, we live, we go through difficulties” (Jabez). Timon sought gospel hip hop when deciding to abandon a lesbian subjectivity, drugs, and alcohol. She now uses her faith to encourage other young girls not to feel ashamed of being female, as she connects being a lesbian to a rejection of her authentic feminine self.¹⁹ Both currently use gospel rap to express subjectivity centered on spiritual growth, which allows them to overcome behavior that they saw as personally destructive.

Demaine Jabez’s music is underground in the sense that he does not have access to mainstream venues. His music utilizes Afropop and dancehall sounds and therefore fits into commercial standards. He recorded in a studio in Ongata Rongai, in the same community where he resides.²⁰ At the time of our interview (2011), he was raising money to fund a music video, where he planned to work with underground artists, Washamba Wenza. Thus far, a music video is not available on the Internet. His music, like so much of non-commercial rap, lacks good production quality. The songs available on his ReverbNation page need slight alterations to make the sound quality radio ready. Many songs have similar formats. He typically collaborates with another unnamed rapper, and they take turns rapping verses. A female or male artist sings a catchy chorus, the hook, and backup. Examples include “My Call,” “Reality,” and “I am Free.” These songs do not have the hard and gritty beats like a lot of underground music. Jabez has more commercial inclinations compared to the rappers at Sarakasi and stated that he would like

---

¹⁹ I will continue this discussion in chapter five on gender.
²⁰ Ongata Rongai is a fast developing area in the southwest part of Nairobi. It is in close proximity to Nairobi’s city center (about a 30-minute drive). There are diverse economic Many people who reside there are lower working and middle class.
to produce some dancehall and house songs, even though he has been influenced by underground Nairobi rap. He stated that Ukoo Flani’s music inspired him to do gospel rap, “I find when I listen to [Ukoo Flani’s] music, they are, as I connect with them—music is spiritual. Music is not only physical, music is spiritual” (Jabez). Therefore, the way to pursue music that is transformational, in the way that Ukoo Flani was influential to him, is to make gospel music.

In “I am Free,” Jabez collaborates with rapper Churchill and R&B artist Cynthia, in a rap song with explicit Christian references. It uses a commercial format that is appealing and uplifting. This format is similar to “Utamu wa Maisha,” which has a fast, captivating beat, and raps that complement the sounds. Cynthia sings the chorus, which is catchy, upbeat, and affirmative. In English, she sings, “I am free, I’m alive/ Set on the sky, I will fly/ Like an eagle spread high/ Jesus is home” (Blackman). The song sounds liberating, in large part due to the repetitive first lines in the chorus, “I am free, I’m alive.” There are diverse resonances, including Jabez and Churchill’s raps, a synthesized male background voice, and the chorus. In the first verse, he raps:

_Hangewai die, singewai pata uhai/_

(If he had not died, I would not have life)

_Na pia na ka singedai kusikia, singedhani ningepata change kuingia/_

(And also if I had not claimed to hear, I don’t think I would have had the chance to get in)
Na pia nikisisitiza, penye kuanaia, ndio pia kunanjia, naanzia nikidai/
(And I insist that where there is a will there is a way, I start claiming)

Bwana Yesu pekee ye ndio Messiah naye mfalme mkuu mwenye enzi juu amekaa kwenye kiti ya enzi juu/
(Jesus Christ alone is the Messiah and he is the king above all, seated on the throne) (Blackman)

“I am Free” is a gospel song because of the obvious references to Jesus, God, and Christianity. Jabez’s song relies on two types of music standardization in Kenya: a pop sound and a gospel message. He is part of underground culture, as evidenced by his work with Washamba Wenza. His songs, however, are a departure from the harder sounds that underground artists make. Jabez and “I am Free” is one example whereby underground artists can make mainstream sounds, while still seeing themselves as a part of an underground aesthetic culture.

Physical Spaces

Underground hip hop is subculture because it develops artistic expressions and music practices that exist, for the most part, in marginal social spaces. Hip hop’s rebellious force is evident within the physical spaces where formal events occur, which are the places where artists rap and produce hip hop performances, gestures, and other
Most rappers stated that the best avenue to generate income is to perform at shows. Only a few artists, like Evaredi and Decence, reported that they have had success getting their music onto television and radio, but such achievements are difficult to come by and do not last. Even the gospel artist Mtawali who was the most economically successful artist with whom I spoke stated, “Why struggle for an album, when the sales aren’t working out. It’s the shows you get” (Mtawali). He argued that successful mainstream gospel artist, Daddy Owen, made it big by putting out singles and performing at concerts before completing an album, and that many rappers follow a similar logic. To complete an album, one must pay for studio time and the production of the all songs, and many artists lack the finances to fund such large projects. Rap concerts especially for underground artists are difficult to come by and are not an automatic solution. Lness argues that despite performances being fundamental for rappers, they still do not pay enough (Lness). Mick Jagero, the reggae producer, believed that rappers lack efficient connections to perform at shows regularly:

So you’ll find a studio, a studio that says, you’ll make a pact with the DJ, or a presenter. I’m telling you if you take some of my artists from the money that they make from the shows, ‘I’ll give you a certain percentage so we can keep this thing going on and on and on’. But you find that avenue is not there for the hip hop guys. Because they don’t have anyone in the system to make an arrangement like that. (Jagaro)

Here Jagero states that the music presenters and DJs mostly conduct business by making deals with people, like producers and managers, they are closely connected with. Deals
like the one that Jagero illustrates are a part of the common mechanism in which most musicians work. His contention that underground rappers do not have managers is a common concern. Esen similarly noted, “Most of these guys are not serious. So they are not aggressive, they don’t push their product that much. Plus, ah, you know like, most of the hip hop artists in Kenya don’t even have managers and all that” (Esen).

Sarakasi Dome is one of the primary venues where artists are able to gather, perform, and share music. Sarakasi is sponsored by a number of foreign donors primarily from Scandinavia, including the Royal Netherlands Embassy, the Danish Embassy, Stichting Doen Netherlands (A Dutch Foundation), and FK Norway (a Norwegian state entity). One of the aspects that typify non-commercial rap is foreign, mostly European, involvement and investment. There are several examples of this. Peter Jansen (or Pjay), who is from The Netherlands, manages the environmental activist group TS1, which I discuss in chapter five. The Netherlands Commission for International Cooperation and Sustainable Development (NCDO) and a Dutch foundation, Uptoyoutoo, funded Ukoo Flani Mau Mau’s 2004 album, “Kilio cha Haki” (Matheka 7). The relationship between European NGOs and individuals and Kenyan artists is two-way. Artists recognize that foreign organizations want to hear and fund politically conscious rap, and likewise entities seek out underground hip hop artists as needy populations that produce an exemplary model of socially responsible art. Sarakasi’s importance is partly due to the fact that artists do not have easy access to other venues. Sarakasi Trust (also called Sarakasi Dome) is a non-governmental organization (NGO) and community center that has hosted both WAPI and Hip Hop Fest. Located along Ngara Road, it is in a mostly
lower and working class community. In the back lot that is also used for parking, hip hop-goers gather leisurely, watch spray painters, dance, or freestyle. Overlaying the external faded reddish brown building is colorful graffiti with both words and pictures. A thin gate partially netted with barbwire outlines the perimeter of the lot. A security guard sits at a former entrance ensuring that no one enters through the outside lot. There are other events that take place there; the most popular act is the Sarakasi Allstars, an acrobatic dance troupe for adults and youth. Sarakasi Allstars hold regular events. Each time I have visited the venue I have seen young children practicing acrobatic routines in the main lobby where people enter.

Marcyliena Morgan’s description of the spaces of Project Blowed mirrors my observations of Sarakasi, “it is common for participants to move within Project Blowed’s four spaces (park, sidewalk, side concession, and workshop/performance space)” (103). At Sarakasi, practitioners have certain spaces they congregate in as well, including the hall, the lobby, the outside space where the graffiti walls are located, and in the parking lot near the building. It is common to see a group of artists spray graffiti on the walls while others stand back and offer commentary, which can take up to two hours to complete. Their work usually will be left up until the next event when it will be painted over and sprayed again. In the other section of the parking lot, a group of men might gather and freestyle or practice for their upcoming turn on stage. Rappers and fans congregate in the lobby and drink sodas, though Sarakasi management does not like this, and usually tells them to leave the lobby area.
Sarakasi events do not draw crowds that buy large amounts of hip hop music. Those who frequent the community center events are from working class backgrounds and are most likely aspiring rappers, the artists, or friends of artists. For the most part, non-commercial rap’s devoted fan base are other rappers, “where the lines between producers and consumers blur,” where “every emcee’s a fan and every fan’s an emcee” (Harrison 42). This is of course not to argue that these artists have no fans: when I interviewed Judge at the Kenya National Theatre, someone approached him for an autograph. Judge took the pen from the young man, and scribbled his signature on the querent’s khaki pants. The querent responded, “Yeah, mazee, J-U-D-G-E!” Judge frequently spells out his name in this way in his raps and performances. He did this when he MC’d at the Hip Hop Fest and even in his interview with me. Lness similarly reports getting stopped on the streets with fans shouting out her song lyrics (Lness). What is noteworthy, here, is that the crowds who frequent Sarakasi do not represent a wide enough fan base to support an artist’s career.

Practitioners gather to share collective practices within common spaces. Sarakasi events are formal in the sense that there are organizers for the event, it takes place at a set day and time, and certain people are in charge of ensuring the function of it. There was also increased security at the Hip Hop Fest, due to the ongoing war with Al Shabaab in Somalia. There was a security guard who wanded people for weapons at the entrance of the building. Also, people could not enter through the parking lot as they once did, and

---

21 *Mazee* is a colloquial expression, similar to “yeah, man” in English.
everyone had to come through the main doors. The event was informal and fluid. People came and went as they pleased. Some stayed inside for the entire event, and others moved back and forth between the outside parking lot and the performing hall.

I witnessed young men rapping in the corner of the Sarakasi performing hall during the open mic portion of the Hip Hop Fest. While everyone had their attention on the performer on stage, these two men stood in the back of the hall and rapped to each other. One faced the other in extremely close proximity and rapped to the beat playing from the speakers. He moved his body back and forth, and his head bobbed to the music. The other male stood facing the stage and bobbed his head to the music and to his rapping friend. This was both an intimate moment shared between them, and a public one in that it took place in a public space with others. Neither ever took the stage to rap themselves during this event, in the open mic session nor during the main performances. These individuals took advantage of the music and the space to rap. This brief, seemingly unimportant moment, exemplifies “underground hip hop’s capacity to blur distinctions between musicians and fans” (Harrison 39).

Practitioners come to Sarakasi to perform, for leisure and entertainment, and in case an unexpected opportunity opens up. Before Hip Hop Fest, WAPI was held on a select Saturday and had free admittance until it ended in 2011. The British Council hosted the event, prior to it being held at Sarakasi. The WAPI crowds had begun to dwindle significantly by the time my research began. I attended a WAPI with about 75 people. Each event has the same basic format, whereby five or six well-known

---

22 Harrison gives a similar ethnographic account of Rockin’ Java’s open mic night (74-76).
underground rappers who were paid for the performances. Prior to these main acts, there was an open talent show where budding practitioners could test out their skills in front of judging crowds. At each level, people can sit or lean against the metal bars that separate the each of the sitting and standing area. Event-goers occupy all levels of the space. People tend to gather and talk in low chatter toward the back of the hall, and crowd around the stage during main acts, though there are people on every level of the audience space.

Both Esen and Judge used the example that WAPI is responsible for initiating the career of mainstream artist Octopizzo. Esen noted, “Ok, we actually kind of made him to be who he is. You know like, he started in WAPI. We kind of gave him the platform. We, the WAPI crowd” (Esen). Octopizzo’s story is a remarkable account of beating the odds of poverty. He was born in Kibera, Kenya’s largest informal settlement. After losing his parents in 2002 and 2003, his siblings went to live with different relatives. He subsequently worked for the government census project in his late teens in Kibera. Soon after, he started performing at WAPI where he freestyled on open mics for two years. He stated that he never made it to the headline acts, and thus performed for free. Octopizzo met a producer at WAPI and started recording, using the funds from the census job and was able to launch a career in music. Currently, he is the CEO of Chocolate City Tours, a slum tourism company, and he also heads Y.G.B. (Young Gifted and Black), which is a collective of Kibera artists, as well as a clothing line called YGB Wear. Octopizzo’s connections to Kibera are found throughout his music. His name contains the numerical value 8, which is the matatu route to Kibera. His clothing line, mostly including t-shirts,
often displays the number eight. In most of his songs, he exclaims “Namba Nane!”\textsuperscript{23} Octopizzo’s rags/riches narrative is well-known and frequently cited in the rap music world.

Once WAPI ended in 2011 events like Hip Hop Fest seemed to fill a needy gap. At the time of my last fieldwork trip to date, Judge, Lness, Sue Timon, and others had brought a proposal before the board at Sarakasi to fund regular events of Hip Hop Fest. As of 2013, the artists had not secured this spot at Sarakasi. Hip Hop Fest, much like WAPI, headlined acts with a talent show featuring beatboxers, freestylists, and rappers all with a range of talents. The event in October 2012 featured Washamba Wenza, Black Bong, Kimya and Head Bangaz, Lness, Nafsi Huru and Mojay, Evaredi and The Crew 711, and Sue Timon. Currently semi-regular hip hop events occur at Sarakasi, but it has been difficult to acquire funding for an ongoing event.

Artists have had a difficult time securing spaces outside of the Sarakasi Dome. I realized this when I visited the Kenya National Theatre in search of Da Factory Club, something that I initially thought was an underground hip hop event. The Kenya National Theatre is on Harry Thuku Road near the University of Nairobi and the Kenya Broadcasting Corporation (KBC) and across the street from the Fairmont Norfolk Hotel. The Kenya National Theatre is historically well known, and it was initially built to entertain white settlers. The Jomo Kenyatta government mandated that the Kenya National Theatre provide a forum for arts after independence, and soon after it was under the watchful eye of the state; it hosted only programs and performances that were

\textsuperscript{23} Namba is Swahili or Sheng for number, and nane is Swahili for 8.
uncritical of the state. The most notable exception has been Ngugi wa Thiong’o’s play, *Ngaahika Ndeenda* (I Will Marry When I Want). Currently, the theater holds plays, dances, and other cultural performances. I once attended a play hosted by a church. Da Factory Club is a reoccurring event held in collaboration with the Kenya Performing Arts Group (KPAG), a group that puts on dance and theater performances. Most of the performances I describe above take place in the main stage area of the theater. Da Factory Club is not held here, but rather takes place in a small room toward the rear of the building. The room is approximately twenty feet by twenty with small windows in the back. Each time I attended there were between thirty and fifty people in attendance cheering on dancing performers. The room was so packed that people easily filled up seats, leaving the rest of the audience to wrap around the walls to the door, making it difficult to enter and leave. The space was thick with the smell of sweat and dust, given the sizable and excited crowd and high energy dancing. Outside in the green space and parking lot, one can see groups of young people coming to the event. Often these event-goers adorn colorful clothes; the women often have bright jewelry on, and both men and women display dyed bright red, orange, or blue hair. The entrance to the event at any given time has between ten to twenty people practicing dance moves, socializing, and waiting to attend and perform.

One day, I met Judge and Evaredi at the Theatre and I asked them about the event. Judge stated that he helped to start Da Factory Club. However, after he found out that the

---

24 The British colonial government built the theatre and housed performances that catered toward white settlers. The theatre not only did not hold performances for the black Kenyan population, but it also charged high fees for entrance, further perpetuating the exclusivity of the venue. This contributed to the impetus to create other theatre venues in Nairobi, as well as in other parts of Kenya. See Ciarunji Chesaina and Evan Mwangi’s discussion in *A History of Theatre in Africa* (206-232)
event received funding and he was not paid for his contributions and others were, he decided to abandon the project (Judge, informal conversation). Da Factory Club clearly seems to be influenced by some elements of hip hop culture like popping and locking dance styles, and many goers don hip hop-influenced urban wear, like skinny jeans and t-shirts with embroidered lettering. It is heavily influenced by Afropop styles, newer versions of Congolese dance, and dancehall. It, in many ways, mirrors mainstream music scenes, where hip hop’s safest most palatable characteristics are blended with other popular styles, dances, and performances. Evaredi dismissively declared, “that’s not hip hop,” when I asked if they had ever attended (Evaredi, informal conversation). It is easy to see why he would assert that. Events I observed were more like dance competitions; performers did not engage in hip hop’s other elements, like rap. Judge explained that he recently attempted to create and host a regular hip hop event at the Kenya National Theatre. The administrative persons refused this request citing that the Theatre does not want people smoking weed on the grounds. I responded quite shocked at this because the venue has always carried a reputation for open marijuana smoking. I first started frequenting the Theatre in 2000, where an assortment of people, including rastas, rappers, and university students regularly gathered and smoked marijuana. Upon my return years later, I found that groups of people still engaged in these same practices. I do not know if the administration has identified this as a problem, but it is plainly obvious that it still occurs. To refuse a hip hop event on this basis alone makes little sense, given its long tradition of people smoking marijuana on the grounds. Nonetheless, this experience serves as another example of the difficulties rappers face in creating intentional spaces of
hip hop. To let in Da Factory Club and to deny a hip hop event means the administration sees these events as different. WAPI ended, Hip Hop Fest has had trouble getting a stable space, Da Factory Club does not serve the interests of all rap practitioners like rappers or graffiti artists, and the Theatre has refused to host rap events. Evaredi’s comment that it is not “real” or “authentic” hip hop is pertinent because it exists in a context of frustration, whereby it seems that even within non-commercial settings there are certain cultural events that are allowable. Indeed, there are other venues for hip hop, like the Goethe Institute and the French Culture Centre. Yet the stories of Sarkerasi and Kenya National Theatre illustrate the overall difficulty that hip hop practitioners can face. Certainly hip hop occurs in less formal settings that can create significant meaning, such as in recording studios and at neighborhood ciphers. Venues are important because they are formal structures that can serve as platforms for creative expression, they can generate likeminded audiences and potential consumers of albums and mixtapes, and they can open up other economic opportunities. Moreover, even outside of formal performances, these spaces host informal freestyling, debates over the role of hip hop culture, and sharing information. Graffiti artist Esen told me that people used to come to WAPI events to learn how to spray (Esen, informal conversation).

There are other examples where the venues are often marked with ephemerality and uncertainty. I interviewed a group of artists in 2011 at Audio Kusini, which at the time was one of the main studios that produced underground artists. Karpchizzy, Nafsi Huru, and Sue Timon have all made music there. I discovered that Audio Kusini had “kicked everyone out” when I returned in October 2012, and only hosted gospel artists.
(Karpchizzy, informal conversation). Sue Timon reported in another interview by the summer of 2013 that the studio had been evicted and she had lost her master copies (Ombui “Christian”). This story is frustrating and is one example of how hip hop spaces are not permanent. The obstacles artists endure in underground settings only add to their difficulties.

The events at Sarakasi, for the most part, do not receive ongoing and widespread media attention. The press and online media initially took note of WAPI, but as the event faced changes—for instance moving from the British Council to Sarakasi—itits attendance waned and the media has paid less attention to it. One reason for this shift away from these artists could be the rise and popularity of gospel and Afropop music, which often does not incorporate the heavy lyrics of rap. The artists who continue to frequent Sarakasi are not mainstream artists with industry connections. Most are rappers who have yet to parlay their skills into a full-time career. Rappers like Judge and Lness are popular, yet such recognition has yet to translate into economic stability and success. This also means that these events, WAPI and Hip Hop Fest, and even Da Factory Club, are located at the margins of popular culture. They are low budget projects that can be eliminated at any time. As a result, precariousness and non-permanency marks these spaces and is an unfortunate barrier for artists.
Music Videos

Hip hop music videos are an extremely significant way of solidifying one’s position as an artist and responding to the uncertainty of the music industry. In chapter five, I examine the characteristics that make up hip hop performances and argue that the hip hop music video is a text that enables the documentation and survival of performances. Therefore, in this section I introduce performance studies approaches to assist in understanding the place of videos and as a framework for the following chapters.

Spaces where rappers frequently and regularly meet do not tend to be secure and steady locations and often they are often ephemeral. Non-commercial hip hop events do take place and are appreciated by a dedicated group of devotees and rappers. The desire for most artists, though, has been to secure an ongoing venue to open up economic avenues for their careers. This has not been achieved. Music videos are more permanent texts that artists can create with relative autonomy, which can display the innovativeness and creativity of hip hop.

Performance studies scholars distinguish between performances and their representations. Peggy Phelan states, “Performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented…once it does so, it becomes something other than performance” (146). Diana Taylor’s work distinguishes between what she calls the archive, which is any recorded or documented material that can be recalled and reviewed, seen and heard in repetition, while the repertoire references any embodied performance that exists in its own immediacy. Both are sets of knowledge production, though the archive is a
historically privileged source of information. Like Phelan, Taylor reminds us, “The live performance can never be captured or transmitted through the archive. A video of a performance is not a performance [...]” (20). These claims are valid—indeed a recording of a performance captures the event from the lens of the device and the perspectives of those in charge of recording. What my fieldwork has highlighted is how the power differentials that arise from consumerism and commercialization inform archival materials. This means that the underground music, though part of the archive, cannot be seen in the same way as mainstream videos. Non-commercial rap videos that never make it to television should be regarded differently from commercial artists’ videos or US hip hop videos that receive at least somewhat regular play on television. The archive is not a monolithic entity, just as the repertoire is not; for these reasons, it is useful to think about (at least) two archives, one that is shaped by the media and has access to venues like radio and television, and one that lacks commercial visibility. In this setting, underground artists seize the music video to promote their music and further their career. This has created both a proliferation of underground music videos, and also a deepening divide between mainstream and marginal music.

The underground rap music video exists as part of the parallel public, in part because it reflects some forms of popular culture standards and yet it exists in media’s periphery. Videos are positioned in a liminal position; liminality is best described as the in-between spaces where cultural meaning is cultivated. Victor Turner describes liminality as a newness and a departure from homogenizing discourses that can police bodies: it is “a no-man’s land betwixt-and-between the structural past and the structural
future as anticipated by the society’s normative control of biological development” (11). Moreover, he states that performance liminality can be a “storehouse of possibilities” because of its location in between given social structures (12). Jon McKenzie addresses these possibilities by asserting that it is “a mode of activity whose spatial, temporal, and symbolic ‘in-betweeness’ allows for social norms to be suspended, challenged, played with, and perhaps even transformed” (27). Liminality does not ensure progressive or transformative politics, yet, underground videos hold the possibilities of pushing boundaries because they are not held to commercial standards in the same ways that mainstream music is.

Music videos are the primary way underground artists can express themselves as artists. They document their participation and contribution in an underground music culture that lacks visibility. They can be used to propel the careers of underground rappers. S. Craig Watkins describes that, similarly, in the US in the 1990s the hip hop music video was used as “a promotional tool” that helped to propel US rap into the mainstream (211-215). In Nairobi underground rap they serve as affirmations and 25 Kenyan hip hop scholars use notions similar to liminality to describe the cultural registers rappers navigate. Both David Samper and Aurelia Ferrari state hip hop draws on and negotiates US rap on one hand, and traditional Kenyan specificities on the other (37-51; 107-128). Samper and Ferrari both suggest that this balancing of two seemingly oppositional elements is a site of tension and the creative force of Kenyan rap. These examples of liminality in Kenyan rap are useful to conceptualizing the different elements from which practitioners draw. However, the politics of hip hop in Kenya, I contend, is more complicated than a negotiation of US and Kenyan culture. For example, currently rappers draw on US songs and politics to create what they regard as authentic in response to an industry that privileges dancehall, house, and Afropop. My argument diverts from Samper and Ferrari in that rap culture and performances take place within a number of structural and discursive realities: the already marginal position of underground rap, a discourse of cultural anxiety that jettisons rap for being too western/American, and consumer culture that appropriates and allows in certain forms. Underground Nairobi hip hop rejects many of US rap’s characteristics, while drawing from others. It seeks to mark itself as different from Kenya’s standardizing Afropop music, while striving to create rap that reflects Kenya’s realities. It rethinks social categories of identity like gender, while also contributing to the normative constructions of gender and sexuality in society at large. Such navigations articulate how liminality describes the spaces of hip hop and the politics that compose it.

25
accomplishments. Many artists I speak with explain that music videos signify their creative capacities and outline their dedication as rappers. Snooker, a gospel singer from Ongata Rongai, stated the following:

In Kenya, you can be a hip hop artist, you can be well known, you can spit 16 bars, but as long as you don’t have a video, you are not considered to be anywhere. Because the most common airplay is the television. And the Internet. But if you have a video, it’s going to be played and people are going to see it. Radio stations are not becoming so much relevant [sic]. (Snooker)

Perhaps Snooker argued that radio stations lack pertinence because of their propensity toward American music. Certainly several of the rappers I interviewed did not bother to try to get radio play, just as many did not bother to register with the MCSK. Snooker’s comment corresponds with artists’ general conceptions that visibility is critical for artists.

I interviewed rapper Karpchizzy, and during our discussion, he showed me one of his then recent videos, “Hustle.” My questions explored the role of bodily performance in his video. I asked him about cool’s significance in hip hop, to which he responded:

It’s all about defining yourself. It’s all about defining your inner self. Portraying the world the way you see it in your own eyes. And the way we dress. Most of the time it is how we see the world. The way you look, that’s how you see the world.

(Karpchizzy)

This idea, though spoken in the context of cool, relates to the role that music videos serve. They become an important mechanism of self-definition, especially when so many other avenues remain difficult to access.
Underground practitioners are able to accomplish use of the music video as “a medium increasingly predicated on craft, story, image, and performance” (Watkins 106). I have identified four basic characteristics of the importance of videos. First, videos create or demonstrate the presence of a vibrant hip hop culture in Nairobi. Judge and Lness’s “Msanii” (artist, rapper) illustrate this. This video is part of Ukoo Flani Mau Mau’s *Kilio cha Haki*’s 2004 album, which occurred prior to the heavy restrictions on the music industry and when non-commercial artists were able to create more opportunities. The video shows them performing in front of a large and devoted crowd at the popular restaurant Carnivore. The crowd is energetic and excited, giving the impression that these artists have created an authentic and widespread following. It has interviews of hip hop artists interspersed in between verses, including Kama from Kalamashaka (Kevinco77). The video illustrates the reputation of Judge and Lness and the popularity of hip hop culture.

Second, hip hop videos often celebrate place, which is more often than not not lower class ghettos. Black Duo’s video, “Rap kwa M.I.C.” includes visual images of Nairobi neighborhoods. Judge was a part of Black Duo, along with his brother Mo Phat, before embarking on a solo career. The video opens with grim music and the words, “Somewhere in Nairobi,” before shooting to buildings in Dandora (where they are from), trash heaps, children playing on top of a metal structure, along with Black Duo’s hip hop crew walking through this neighborhood in a gesture of identification (Hapahapa23). The video’s visual imagery provides illustrates how “the spatial emphasis in rap has […] [provided] astute commentary on the intensification of ghetto poverty” (Foreman 58-9).
Third, music videos are used to make political interventions. Videos may show an artist rapping about politically salient topics, or they may make use of imagery that is meant to interrogate common knowledge and elucidate social ills.

Last, artists use videos to enact their subjectivities as artists. Raps, most often, are first person narratives and videos display practitioners performing their stories and accounts. Often the composition of rap videos lends itself to a narrative style. Evaredi’s video “Ukweli” (Truth) featuring female R&B singer Krunkid, addresses a number of themes, including morality, upward mobility, and Pan-Africanism. The video opens with Evaredi, Krunkid, and a young boy with dreadlocks walking into the high end restaurant Le Vans where the performance will take place. The young child bobs his head quietly to the music throughout the video. The three of them—woman, man, child—create the slight inference of family, though this theme is not discussed in the lyrics.

This is not a typical hood narrative with images of young males persevering through urban decay, like “System,” “Rap kwa M.I.C.,” “Hustle,” and others. Rather the video takes place in colorful bright rooms fit with leather couches and several windows, which let in a lot of light, meaning it was shot in Le Vans during the day. This restaurant is located on Uhuru Highway, in between Nyayo Stadium and Haile Selassie Rd in the western part of the city. In the beginning of the video, the camera points down and captures Evaredi and Krunkid sitting on a seat in a room with lighted floor tiles that are bright blue, red, and purple. Evaredi also sits on a white and burgundy leather couch, and Krunkid and Evaredi sing while sitting on bar stools. Behind the bar stools is an elaborate display of shiny liquor bottles, which contributes to the colorful qualities of the video.
Each room is relatively empty, with the exception of just a few couches or bar stools. The environment is a clean and sanitized upper class space.

Evaredi raps from a place of knowing and self-affirmation, like many narrative-style videos. One of the most creative verses in the song is in the second verse, “Hey Bana, I’m a Blackstar ka Ghana, Bafana Bafana, Mwafrika kwa sana.” This translates to “Hey man, I’m a Blackstar like Ghana, Bafana Bafana, a true African” (Eastafricamix).

Evaredi asserts an African subjectivity when he raps that he is a Blackstar like Ghana and a Mwafrika kwa sana. He uses Blackstar, which is the name of Ghana’s football/soccer team, contending that he is a “black star.” His references to Ghana’s Blackstar and South Africa’s Bafana Bafana, each football (soccer) teams, are ways to assert his pan-African subjectivity. This statement also subtly claims his musical reach extends across Africa. Naming these countries shores up notions of African resilience and strength, as Ghana was the first country to obtain independence, and South Africa is often cited for its successful defeat of apartheid. He relates to the history of African struggles of social and political determination and this is part of an articulation of himself as Mwafrika kwa sana.

He positions himself in a place of knowing against what he perceives as social ills. There are a number of things he sees wrong with society, including male homosexuality, and the notion that people forsake God to strive to be on top of others. This is not an explicitly religious song, like Sue Timon and Demaine Jabez’s songs, but does carry subtle religious themes. Expressing homophobia Evaredi raps, “World imelost, siku hizi wanaume macouple, dress code ya pink na purple” (The world is lost, these days
men are couples, the dress code is pink and purple) (Eastafricamix). In the introduction to this project, I noted several artists open mindedness to sexual difference, and this is an overt example of intolerance to queer subjectivities.

Evaredi’s bodily performances mostly exude confidence and self-assurance, which are partly built from his own unspoken normative masculinity. Miles White describes this as “street swagger,” which “indexes not only rhythm and style in one’s performance of physical self and personal carriage, but a high degree of self-confidence, the knowledge that one can handle himself in any situation with cool and sophistication” (42). Evaredi tends to perform the same, repetitive gestures throughout the video. When he is sitting, his hands move in and out from his body in sharp and clear movements to the beat of his lyrics. At times, he puts his head down in contemplation and puts his hands up as he finishes a lyric. Evaredi stands and raps at the camera, and performs the popular gesture of “making it rain.” He lays his hand on top of the other and flings the hand on top toward the camera repeatedly. This movement is meant to convey that the person has so much cash that he (or she) can afford to sling bills about. This gesture first began in US hip hop, whereby rappers would perform it in reference to giving money to female exotic dancers. Now, it has become a common performance of being unfazed by economic uncertainty or by celebrating one’s upward mobility. This is a masculinized gesture of cool in that it references the economic exchange between male spectator and female performer. Moreover, Evaredi’s ability to brush off financial worry, or be unaffected by the social conditions that once plagued him, is the enactment of a cool
style. The “make it rain” gesture coupled with his homophobic lyrics creates a normative and dominant version of masculinity.

There are clear references to upward mobility. Krunkid’s chorus is:

*Ukweli wa mambo/*

(The truth about problems)

*Nakupa ukweli wa mambo/*

(I give you the truth about problems)

*Twakupa ukweli wa mambo/*

(We give you the truth about problems)

Cuz it’s the way this world is unfair to me/ I gotta keep it real for real, it’s true to me. (Eastafricamix)

Krunkid references the fact that she (and Evaredi) used to be down, and the video frames them no longer in a marginalized situation. Rapping from Le Vans assumes the performers have the wherewithal to inhabit the club. Krunkid dresses in expensive clothes, with flashy jewelry, and sunglasses with rhinestones. Evaredi wears a backwards purple hat (quite ironically), a Converse jacket, nice jeans, and sunglasses. He also dons a dark (perhaps wooden) medallion of Africa, emphasizing his Pan-African themes. Evaredi raps in front of his crew composed of all men, except Krunkid and the small child. Street swagger, as White explores, “suggests a sense of empowerment that comes
with success, however that is measured, and with getting respect from one’s peers, associates, and others” (42). This respect appears at the end of the video when his crew sits behind him. Some of the men look into the camera and bob their head as he raps, while others look away or down as they listen. This common performance communicates that Evaredi is in a position to speak or rap on behalf of their experiences, which he does so with self-assuredness.

The videos I discuss in this project mostly do not have access to commercial venues. Therefore, there are different types of archival materials, mainstream and underground videos. Rap practitioners use the archive to record their work, and in doing so, transform their songs and performances into more permanent objects that give credence to their work when the music industry cannot or will not.

Music videos demonstrate that a hip hop artist is serious about her or his craft. Most artists who have videos post them on youtube.com because this is the cheapest and easiest way for people to see their work. The artists obviously do not receive money from posting their videos here, but it does bypass television and radio difficulties. Funding is always an issue. Most artists that I speak have explicitly stated or implied they fund their own videos, which is no easy venture. Ibbs, a gospel artist, asserted that a good quality video cost 100 thousand shillings (1156.70 USD) (Ibbs). Karpchizzy, who at the time of our interview had worked in video production, informed me that he can make a music video for about 75 thousand shillings (862 USD). Whatever the cost, making a video is an investment in time and money. Youtube.com is the best way to share a music video to
the widest possible audience. Some artists, though, use the Bluetooth function on their phone to share videos and music with each other.

Several artists have music videos posted to youtube.com, like Nafsi Huru, Sue Timon, Agano, Judge, Evaredi, and Karpchizzy. Decence reported that he had a video completed, but it is not on youtube.com. Both Baby T and Demaine Jabez stated during their interviews their videos were in the final stages of completion, but as of yet they are not accessible on youtube.com. Surprisingly, Lness, whom many artists proclaimed was the best female MC, only has “Msanii” available online.

The Imperfect Underground

The underground is formed by creative and innovative practitioners, as well as constituted by external structures and processes. Acknowledging how larger social norms work on underground Nairobi culture is an important element of this project. The two things that rappers cannot obtain are economic stability and access to radio and television. Most practitioners resist formal politics and commercialism, but they also desire and need financial wherewithal to continue their projects.

Neoliberalism has inevitably influenced the ways that Kenyan hip hop culture has materialized. David Harvey notes that there are two avenues in neoliberalism. The first is “For those left or cast outside the market system […] Their only hope is somehow to scramble aboard the market system either as petty commodity producers, as informal
vendors (of things or labour power)” (185). The second option is for those who have some access to wealth, but who are “obliged to live as appendages of the market and of capital accumulation rather than as expressive beings […]” (185). The hip hop practitioners I have interviewed exist somewhere in between these two poles. Ndugus and Agano have worked for Ghetto Radio but their prospects at obtaining secure and lasting employment are a constant struggle. Some do not yet know what their financial prospects are. For instance, Baby T was just beginning college at the time of our interview. Many like Sue Timon, Jabez, Snooker, and Evaredi come from struggling middle class homes, and this does not ensure they themselves will be able to obtain jobs, though they are better off than most. These artists, as do most people, want the freedom to prosper economically. Neoliberal ideology, thus becomes an enticing concept because of its seeming commonplaceness, “it claims to present not an ideal, but a reality; human nature” (Read 26).

Practitioners’ compromises and normative tendencies reveal the complexities of a post-Mau Mau underground culture. Rappers may imagine themselves as the embodiment of struggle and resistance, but that does not fully capture the realities of underground spaces. Rather, non-commercial hip hop is more nuanced, with artists making critical decisions about their music. This subculture, or any for that matter, is not wholly transgressive. It is fraught with problematic tendencies. This fundamental characteristic of Nairobi underground rap sets the stage for the bodily performances that emerge within its spaces. Rappers’ economic survival is imperative, which can explain why rappers are heavily invested in neoliberal approaches. Underground hip hop is
diverse and rappers pursue different projects for a variety of reasons. Some make gospel as a way to uplift the communities of which they are a part. Others make commercial music because they want to get paid.

Practitioners are intensely invested in finding ways to earn money because abject poverty is a reality in Kenya, something that most people must learn how to escape. The introduction of neoliberal reforms in the way of structural adjustment programs (SAPs) and foreign investment has not alleviated poverty, and has actually made economic realities more difficult for people. Yuki Asaka reports, “Despite Kenya’s achievement of 5% annual GDP growth in the period of 2004-2006, the percentage of population [sic] living under the poverty line increased from 40.3% in 1994 to 45.9% in 2006” (23). Moreover, there are approximately 160 informal settlements in Nairobi, where sixty percent of Nairobi’s population resides (Crow and Odaba 733). Artists like Judge, Nafsi Huru, Karpchizzy, Agano, Washamba Wenza and others come from informal settlements. Engaging in neoliberal ideas is the easiest, most available choice.

The underground’s political potential and realities are shaped by the mainstream’s exclusion of it. Commercial music, no matter how political, has larger threats of appropriation and compromises. The most well known is “Unbwogable”, which the Kibaki campaign used in the 2002 presidential election. A more recent example includes Jaguar’s song “Matapeli” (conmen), referenced throughout this dissertation, which is about how Kenyans should not be duped by politicians. It incorporates the graffiti that appeared throughout Nairobi that portrayed politicians as vultures. For all its interventions, the music video includes the controversial Member of Parliament (MP),
Gideon Mike Mbuvi, popularly known as Mike Sonko. The irony here is worth noting. In the video, Sonko appears as a poor jua kali shoe shiner who is verbally abused by a rich paying customer. In reality, Sonko is a flashy dresser, who regularly dons colorful hip hop urban gear and gold jewelry; sonko is a Sheng word for “rich man.” He is also controversial; there are allegations that his wealth comes from controlling the drug trade in his district. He has supposedly used these funds to buy popularity, including paying constituents’ rent, distributing food, and giving out money. Jaguar is a supporter of Sonko, stating, “Sonko is a man of the people. He has said before that he would like to rap in a song and here he is, doing just that” (Mwakilishi). Mainstream artists support politicians regularly. Bamboo endorsed Uhuru Kenyatta in the last presidential election, and he performed at several of Uhuru’s campaign events. Underground rappers generally do not have this type of access to politicians, mostly due to class barriers and rapper’s lack of widespread popularity. This means that, whether underground rappers would choose it or not, they are not able to tap into the same opportunities as Bamboo and Jaguar. Their defiant sensibilities about resisting the status quo, therefore, partly are due to their already determined exclusion from these types of formal politics.

Underground rappers cherish the subculture they cultivate. “Those who choose to participate” notes Marcyliena Morgan, “can experience and learn the freedom and creativity of hiphop culture” (17). Rappers must figure out how to access venues, secure shows, and earn profit in order to continue doing their work. Rappers turn critical on each other because they recognize how valuable hip hop’s creative expressions are concerned about its survival. Hip hop practitioners strategize about how to make money from rap,
while keeping intact hip hop’s cultural force. Morgan notes that hip hop is “obsessed with
criticism and self-criticism in an effort to both maintain and raise its standards” (12). Practitioners’ critique of each other’s bad business practices and faulty knowledge of the music industry are evidence of this. Their participation in ideologies that reinforce capitalist tendencies is essentially for hip hop’s survival.

Both the music video and the marginal and often temporal spaces where hip hop performances are enacted are meaningful for different reasons. The music video responds to the ephemerality of space that seems to plague underground rap music. It responds to this perceived vulnerability of permanence where artists are able to craft videos according to their visions and input. I believe artists know their videos have a difficult chance making it on television, and yet they still invest and create them. The events that take place in Sarakasi typify the underground. Underground rap in Nairobi contains a DIY ethic, whereby artists hustle and seize any opportunity to cultivate cultural and economic opportunities. The grant that Judge, Lness, Sue, and others drafted and presented to the board at Sarakasi exemplifies the work that these artists are willing to put into hip hop. This is not an ideal situation for them due to the nominal economic payout and the non-permanency of the events. The performances that take place here, however, are meaningful because they emerge out of conditions of ambiguity and navigate such realities through creative and artistic gestures.

Practitioners’ alliances with economic norms and their refusal to be victimized by them characterize the underground. Morgan posits, “What is the urgency and peril of a hip hop underground?” (17). In Kenya, it is a collection of variegated practices that
emerge from hip hop’s tenuous and ephemeral spaces, the ideological norms that help constitute rap culture’s practices, and the insistence that rap is indeed politically resistant and culturally subversive. These characteristics are the setting for the emergence an expressive bodily performance culture.
Chapter 3: Music and Bodies, Discourse and Commodities

A post-Mau Mau cultural aesthetic does not only occur in rap lyrics and performance styles, it is a philosophical perspective. It places an underground, class-based marginalization and cultural style as the place of orientation. Underground Nairobi hip hop artists base their perspectives on US hip hop and Kenyan mainstream perspectives from this aesthetic, which challenges the traditional notions of Kenyan identities through the creative force of hip hop. Yet it also polices its own borders; rappers recognize that though underground rap challenges normative subject positions, many realize that not anything goes—Kenyan hip hop’s standards must be guarded. The standards that rap music creates and maintains assists artists in responding to criticism that are leveled against hip hop. Practitioners are acutely aware of the charges of western and American imitation that it draws. I asked graffiti artist, Esen, about this:

That’s what they usually say, we are trying to imitate the west. So, to me, that’s kinda messed up because it means these guys don’t even have, you know, the right material to criticize us. So when they see hip hop artists wearing earrings, they’d be like, “hey, these guys are copying the west.” Blah blah blah….but in real sense, we’ve been wearing earrings even before the west knew what earrings were. All these Africans, or Kenyan communities were wearing earrings, from the Maasais, the Kikuyus, and all that. We used to rock dreadlocks and shit like that.
This chapter explicates the tension Esen identifies, and elaborates on the cultural and economic atmosphere that Nairobi underground rap exists within and how artists navigate this social terrain. “A music,” Jean Kidula informs, “does not suddenly burst onto the scene; it is rooted in particular traditions. Through innovations initiated, manipulated, and approved by composers, producers, and audiences, new styles are birthed” (“Polishing” 410). I use Kidula’s statement in a much broader framework to argue that music additionally forms through global economic processes and historic cultural practices and gains meaning through specific social discourses. The conditions produced by the colonial and post-colonial state and the economy to contribute discourses about what Kenyan culture is and which cultural expressions are appropriate, useful, and relevant to local settings. These discourses reflect cultural anxieties and debates about American cultural imperialism, non-Kenyan music, and notions of Kenyan appropriation and mimicry. Moreover, widespread ideas about Kenyan culture structure how hip hop is received, as well as how hip hop practitioners see their own work and the work of other Kenyan rappers. I locate hip hop, and its performance styles, within a broad and historic system of economic production and exchange of music, the state’s efforts to regulate and sometimes prohibit music, and the discourses that emerge out of and assist in framing rap music culture.

This discussion illustrates that political, economic, and global influences shape debates over “culture” and exemplifies how hip hop artists respond to cultural anxieties. Hip hop emerges out of and responds to discourses of cultural anxieties and notions of
cultural lack. The terms “cultural anxieties” and “cultural lack” are similar, and worth elaborating to establish their slight distinction. Discourses of cultural anxieties are the general and everyday perceptions that Kenyan culture needs to be at a different place than it is, and this often appears as controversies and debates that emerge around expressive forms like music and dance practices. A common example includes whether or not a Kenyan musician playing Congo music is producing, in fact, Kenyan music. Questions about if hip hop music is actually Kenyan, or if it is pure appropriation and commodification, are others. By a discourse of cultural lack, I mean the widespread conception that Kenyans do not produce their own music, art, or dance, and instead constantly borrow from elements outside its borders. Moreover, I frame lack as a state of desiring what one does not have. These discourses situate debates over how well music, art, and other cultural practices are able to facilitate Kenyan subjectivities.

This chapter builds off of Mbūgua wa Mūngai’s “‘Is Marwa!’ It’s Ours’: Popular Music and Identity Politics in Kenyan Youth Culture.” Mbūgua situates hip hop within a larger project of how people cultivate identities and expressive cultures that speak to needs of Kenyan youth identities. He argues that the state, the church, and academia are three places that have actively espoused notions of Kenyan identity. These institutions have taken up the work of supposedly reclaiming identity from colonialism’s legacies and the grip of western cultural imperialism. All for different reasons, these entities have proposed that an “authentic” Kenyan identity be cultivated and local specificities be affirmed. Activists in the university decried western curricula and demanded an African centered one, the state used “authenticity” as a basis for its legitimacy, and independent
African churches continue to create Kenyan- or African-based religious ideas and practices. Like my research, Mbūgua sees hip hop as interceding in the conversations over identity and culture. My work departs from Mbūgua’s because, while I see these entities as responsible for igniting heated identity and culture debates, I see conversations over cultural anxieties as being informed by material conditions and political realities.

A political economy of music assists in grounding this argument, which is the way in which music commodities structure aspects of society—the music industry, the economy at large, social relationships, and state practices. Jacques Attali argues that the affirmative and beneficial element of music “gradually dissolves when the locus of music changes, when people begin to listen to it in silence and exchange it for money. Then emerges a battle for the purchase and sale of power, a political economy” (26, emphasis in original). Attali draws from Marx in his discussion of the political economy of music. For Marx, the commodity is at the center of political structures and social relationships. “[…] The commodity-form of the product of labour—or the value-form of the commodity—is the economic cell-form” (Marx 294). My work asserts that the Kenyan economy, the state, and social discourses cohere around relationships to music commodities. Marx asserts that the production of commodities structure social and political relationships and entities:

The sum total of [the] relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which rises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of

---

26 I prefer the use of the term “subjectivity” over identity, and I specifically explore this in chapter five.
production of material life conditions the social, political, and intellectual life process in general. (4)

People’s understandings, or “social consciousness,” about popular music are informed by how the music industry has materialized, how the Kenyan state has sought to control, regulate, and sometimes profit from music industries, and how artists, singers, musicians, and rappers have sought to navigate the politics of music commodification. In Nairobi, the “commodity as cell-form” sets the groundwork relationships that compose economies, including those who control the music industry, profit from the musicians who perform the music, and what types of music materialize in these environments. Moreover, such conditions give rise to certain sets of understandings about music, but also about larger questions of culture, power, and identity.27

This chapter is divided into four parts. First, I argue that any modern political economy, especially (or even) of music, comes to fruition as a result of transatlantic slave trade, the movement of human capital, and the economies that benefited from such forced and exploitative labor. This is especially true of black and African diasporic music styles,

27 I use a Marxian political economy of music and a Foucauldian notion of discourse for this research. For Foucault, discourse circulates and accumulates force in public conversations, supported by institutions, and privileged sources of “truth”: “[…] This will to truth, like other systems of exclusion, relies on institutional support: it is both reinforced and accompanied by whole strata of practices such as pedagogy—naturally—the book system, publishing, libraries, such as the learned societies in the past, and laboratories today” (Discourse 219). Yet, Foucault’s revision of political economy contests the notion that the commodity structures relationships, and instead argues that power/knowledge is produced out of relationships: it “arises out of the perception of new networks of continuous and multiple relations between population, territory, and wealth; and this is accompanied by the formation by a type of intervention in the field of economy and population” (The Essential Works 217). For Foucault, power is “that which represses” and “the implementation and deployment of relationships of force,” and “only exists in action” (Society 15; 14). Therefore, the commodity cannot be power, nor can people hold on to power through the commodity. For this research, I argue that political economy, as well as nation-building exercises, largely structures and shapes the discourse. My argument draws on both thinkers, though I want to acknowledge Foucault’s important departure from Marx.
which reflect the long politics of the black body as propertied and commodified. Examining slavery and colonization in both Kenya/East Africa and US/New World contexts points to larger models of exploitation and contextualizes how Kenyan hip hop performances exist in the larger trajectories of capitalist exploitation. These performances must be located in the historical legacy of the transatlantic slave trade. Moreover, Kenya’s initial contact with hip hop was with American gangsta rap, which presented often complex versions of black bodies deeply implicated by commodification politics. Such interactions frame how hip hop is currently understood, mostly through comparing it to other forms of popular music read as more “authentically” Kenyan.

The second section articulates how historic political and economic conditions framed the economy at large, as well as the music industry. It is historic in that it briefly traces the economic exploitation during colonialism and the early music industry in Nairobi until its downfall in the 70s and 80s. Tracing the moments that compose a political economy of music means examining events during colonialism, including forced and exploitative labor. During colonial rule, Nairobi began to serve as a cultural hub and “commercial nerve” of international music of eastern and central Africa (Wallis and Malm 92). This music economy continued until its restructuring in the late 80s and early 90s. I explicate Kenyatta and Moi’s policies around music censorship.

Third, post-colonial state practices inhibited the production of Kenyan music styles. Explicit censorship and policies engendered environments difficult for Kenyan musicians. I argue that conceptions about lack of Kenyan music can be partly traced to how the government has impeded the development of certain forms of music. In this
chapter, I discuss Kenyatta and Moi’s policies, and in the next chapter, I thoroughly examine how the policies of music copyright have impacted artists.

Fourth, I argue that hip hop enters a music scene already occasioned by a cultural anxiety produced by ongoing and significant presence of Congo styles, and this unquestionably informs perceptions of rap music. Hip hop bodily performances, accompanied by music and rap lyrics, are always confronting this anxiety of cultural production. I discuss swag performances within a political and economic terrain that creates ambivalence over cultural others and within an environment where hip hop is often read as non-Kenyan. Conversations around swag indicate a deep negotiation with the socio-political climate, as exemplified by the artists with whom I interviewed. Hip hop practitioners are deeply aware of the constant charges that rap is mimicry of the US. Underground rap artists create expressions from a “post-Mau Mau cultural aesthetic,” and argue that because of this social efficacy, their music is deeply meaningful and valuable. Moreover, rappers see their music as challenging traditional Kenyan assumptions about identity, while they continue to argue that their music is uniquely and creatively Kenyan, beneficial and effective because of its potential to elicit social change.

Global Black Bodies

Hip hop is symbolically attached to the global dominant US core. It is tied to notions of Americanness, despite the presence of diverse hip hop communities throughout the globe, and even given the fact that US hip hop itself contains elements of
African performance culture and traditions, or an “Africanist aesthetic” (Osumare, *Africanist* 12-13). US rap is a constant citation whether critics indict practitioners for copying the US, or whether Kenyan rappers pay credit to a US rapper as inspiration for his/her own work. Both sets of meanings are rooted in the notion that “the ghettos of North America continue to be the primary cultural referent for hip hop around the globe” (Kelley, *Vinyl* xiii). The remembered first contact with hip hop in Kenya is through US products. Beginning from the mid-to-late 1990s American rap began to appear in Nairobi in various ways: bootlegged cassettes and CDs and DVD music videos, TV, and bar and club music. This section explores how hip hop, as a globally exported commodity, produces widespread understandings about Kenyan rap’s proximity to US hip hop blackness. Moreover, I discuss the cultural location of Nairobi underground hip hop, as a US music style and commodity, and compare with other forms of popular music.

US rap music is associated with the commodification of black music. Russell Potter reflects on 1990s gangsta rap and the US music industry: “hip hop culture is the ultimate incarnation of this spectacularized cultural exchange; never has black rage been more up front; never have consumers been so ready to buy” (9). American rap attaches blackness to a sellable music product. Definitions of blackness have originated through a system of exchange value, particularly because the black body continues to be tied to legacies of slavery, “black Americans, having experienced the violence of slavery’s subjection, had had the singular historical experience of having their blackness made into a spectacular commodity of great value” (Potter 8). Potter’s work draws on Guy Debord’s *Society of the Spectacle*. In it, Debord notes, “the spectacle is capital accumulated to the
point that it becomes images” (34) and “the fetishism of the commodity—the domination of society by ‘intangible as well as tangible things’—attains its ultimate fulfillment in spectacle…” (36). The spectacle is embedded in hip hop, and many hip hop practitioners rely on a politics of spectaculization whereby they embrace hip hop as commodity. Rap, unlike many forms of popular music, does not always attempt to eschew its presence as a spectacle; at times it celebrates, emphasizes, and draws meanings from itself as an ultimate commodity form. Hip hop as a commodity that produces forms of blackness means that blackness itself becomes a product that can be purchased, consumed, and enjoyed.

Interwoven in hip hop as commodity is the historic relationship of the sellable black body. Several institutions are responsible for the development of this economy, including transatlantic slavery, colonialism, and apartheid. These have all informed contemporary capitalism and assisted in building political economies based on bodies performing exploitative labor for profit. The slave economy assisted in the modern transformation of black people’s bodies into commodities, as Walter Johnson names “turning people into products” (117).

Altering people into sellable objects whose worth was measured by their capacity to labor occurred in all levels of slavery institutions. One place where this was most evident is the auction block. Johnson argues that traders erased slaves’ histories and identities and manufactured as a sellable laborer. People were separated from their families when auctioned, thereby dehumanizing then without social and familial networks. Sellers downplayed disobedience and exaggerated physical strengths and work
ethics. This new identity was based on exterior qualities and marketplace demands and made the slave into only worthwhile investments and exchangeable commodities. Slaves’ physical bodies were altered, people were fattened, hair was dyed to hide age, and many were forced to exercise and dance to prove vitality (119-120). Above all, the seller had to convince the buying public that the commodity was a specialized and worthwhile investment:

…traders had to peel back their own representations of commodified similarity and slip beneath them a suggestion of personal distinction that would make one slave stand out to a buyer […]. They breathed the life of the market into bodies, histories, and identities of the people they were trying to sell, by using a simulacrum of human singularity to do the work of product differentiation. (124)

Slaves' ability to be bought and sold was the sole criteria for determining their worth. The slave sale system was, of course, involved developing profit driven practices.

The US slave institution, practices, and legitimizing discourses all worked to constitute black bodies as not fully human, precarious, and susceptible to outside forces. Saidiya Hartman notes the “fungibility of commodity” interpellates the black body as vulnerable to the system meant to benefit economies driven by and benefiting whites:

The fungibility of commodity makes the captive body an abstract and empty vessel vulnerable to the projection of others’ feelings, ideas, desires, and values; and as property, the dispossessed body of the enslaved is the surrogate for the master’s body since it guarantees his disembodied universality and acts as the sign of his power and dominion. (Hartman 21)
Like Johnson, Hartman notes that people’s bodies were transformed for the good of the slave economy. Two different dynamics are important here; the specialization of black slave bodies, as Johnson notes, and the fungibility of the slave body. The idea of a human as a unique or special product, but also being easily replaceable if need be, marked the systematic ways African American bodies were scripted as products. The “captive body,” as Hartman notes, is always on display. It is a spectacle, subject to societal gazes and interpretations that mark its otherness. These politics and practices of exchange creates it as vulnerable, one that is owned and subject to exploitative labor practices, bodily injury, and psychic harm. Black bodies are connected to histories of exchangeability, being displayed entities. Therefore they are objects of criticism, critique, and ridicule. Contemporary notions of blackness have been marked by this vulnerability of ongoing condemnation. Blackness is ever appropriable, or as Hartman states, “elastic” and moldable (25). For instance, blackface minstrel shows relied on the ability of blackness to stretch onto white bodies where actors performed and audiences consumed “black.” E. Patrick Johnson opines that US black culture formulates itself around “the mutual constructing/deconstructing, avowing/disavowing, and expanding/delimiting dynamic that occurs in the production of blackness” (2). Blackness becomes a perfect commodity because of its multiple uses, its appropriative abilities, and its closeness to exchange and profit. Slavery, including the sale and ownership of people, set in place ongoing processes of producing it as essentialized and limiting, and malleable and

---

28 This is present in contemporary consumer culture. The notion of pseudoindividuality of products states that commodities are marketed as specialized toward individual’s tastes, even though they are mass produced and, in large part, meant to be easily replaceable. Adorno notes, “By pseudo-individualization we mean endowing cultural mass production with the halo of free choice or open market on the basis of standardization itself” (445).
appropriable. All forms of African American music, and particularly hip hop, materialize out of these politics of the captive black body, as commodified, fungible, spectacularized, and moldable.

Hip hop is a transnational music form that constitutes itself out of the global politics of black bodies. This, however, does not mean that notions of blackness across various hip hop sites are singular. Rather, each site navigates through ideas of what a hip hop blackness can be. Timothy Brown argues, “rap music has become a way to articulate a new definition of Blackness, which transcends boundaries and includes references to North America, the Caribbean, and sub-Saharan Africa” (Brown, *Vinyl* 160-161). In Kenya, artists pull from Africanist elements of hip hop, the marginal subject position that hip hop blackness offers, and use these characteristics to construct their own versions of hip hop. Underground Nairobi rap resignifies blackness as a class marker and a rebellious social identity. Rappers assert their presence and authenticity through this aesthetic, where artists must never draw criticisms of mimicry or imitation. Underground hip hop uses conceptions of a hip hop blackness from is the ongoing presence of US rap music in Kenya. One does not have to go far to encounter US black popular culture in Kenya, for example radio stations and television music shows play a large dose of American rap, black television shows, and bootlegged copies of films are widely available. Hip hop’s popularity among the youth evoked a critical reception among older generations and non-listeners. The first type of American hip hop that appeared in Kenya, like most African contexts, was gangsta rap. Gangsta rap’s emergence and popularity in the US during the 90s occurred simultaneously to the global exportation of American hip hop. This rap style
produced, and continues to articulate, very specific and controversial forms of black subjectivity.

Gangsta rap emerged within a context of postindustrial urban crises and the collapse of already faltering opportunities for young black men within this setting, or as William Eric Perkins suggests, “it reflects the twin maladies of deindustrialization and lumpen proletarianization” (18). Kenya’s preliminary contact with hard and gritty rappers like 2Pac and Notorious B.I.G. solidified pejorative understandings of black Americans and rap music. Gangsta rap has taken on a number of themes: economic conditions in poor neighborhoods, rappers’ participation in drug economies, crime, the criminalization and incarceration of young men of color, police brutality, and also the sexual exploitation of women, misogyny, homophobia, and the descriptions and celebrations of masculinized violence and gun imagery. Gangsta rappers’ socially dangerous dispositions can be seen as reflections of US failures and excesses of a capitalist system:

[…] “Real Niggaz” are not only victims of race and class domination, but agents—dangerous agents, nightmarish caricatures or the worst of the dispossessed. What is most striking about gangsta rappers’ construction of “Nigga” as the embodiment of violence is the extent to which this highly masculinist imagery draws from existing stereotypes. (Kelley, Droppin’ 139)

The figure of the nigga, to draw on Kelley, represents the dominant notions of rebelliousness, hypermasculinity, blatant and celebrated rejection of US norms predicated on racism, and a negotiation between cultivated media stereotypes and lived collective and individual experiences. Gangsta rap, thus, encompasses a host of contradictions; as it
celebrates conspicuous consumption, rappers claim to be subject to economic marginalization, while they reject the ideologies like racism and classism that inform the US economic structure.

This primary figure of gangsta rap is located in longer history of the social positioning of black people. R.A.T. Judy suggests that a moral economy dictates and interpellates black bodies. The nigger as the slave commodity “becomes the negro through moral behavior” (131). For Judy, the nigga represents a break from disciplinary regimes that police black people and resists this moral ontological trajectory of subjectivity, partly because he (or she) embodies “commodity affect,” selling various forms of affect: “anger, rage, intense pleasure” (129). The figure of the nigga, as the commodified body, *par excellence*, most likely never registers as politically efficacious or morally acceptable. The nigga is not rendered as a legible body of resistance especially since subjectivity involves embodying society’s worst character defects. Therefore, performances of these black bodies are deficient and failing, which reduces the nigga to “an index of social malaise” (121). The hip hop gangsta is deeply located within the politics of the *nigga*. Gangsta rap relies on *nigga* as always the rebellious and despised other to stake its claims.

US rap music in Kenya, and throughout Africa, navigates through the complex terrain of the gangsta rapper as imported US rap subject and/or object. US rap music, and those who attempt to “copy” it, are often maligned for embodying American cultural imperialism. Zine Magubane, who did research in South Africa, highlights how hip hop’s value is often missed or overlooked. Magubane asserts, “Although American rap music
has been used as a vehicle for the creation of novel indigenous musical styles, it has come under heavy criticism from the older generation of South African musicians, some of home have dismissed indigenous rap as hopelessly imitative of the worst excesses of American culture” (216). Magubane note how US gangsta rap helped to fuel these conceptions. She cites a speech given by famous jazz musician Hugh Masekela, “[Our] children walk with a hip hop walk and they think they are Americans …[they have] an African American reject personality” (216). Bodily performance, what Masekela calls “hip hop walk,” is evidence of misguided appropriation or mimicry of a harmful form of black subjectivity. Magubane notes, like I do in my fieldwork, that hip hop artists contest these dismissals and argue their work is creative and located in local practices.

The perceptions of hip hop and gangsta rap that Magubane identifies is present in Kenyan contexts as well. Kenyan writer and scholar, Bantu Mwaura offers a scathing criticism of US and Kenyan rap:

A cursory examination of the hip-hop music riding the waves on the Kenyan music charts today clearly shows a cultural phenomenon that has perfected the art of regurgitating Black American perversion of gangsterism and sexism expressed in a good bit of the American hip-hop music. The only notable difference for the local hip-hop artistes who have bought into this perversion is the iniquitous translation of the same perversion in local languages. (70)

29 Masekela first stated that the youth “think they are Americans,” which is seemingly something different than desiring to be African American. Magubane states that because of the influx of black American cultural commodities such as films, music, and television shows, American imperialism is often synonymous with black American cultural symbols and representations (208-229). I continue to encounter this in my own fieldwork, where many people I talk to refer to how the youth desire to imitate the west, and when I inquire about what the ‘west’ is, it becomes clear that it mostly always means African American cultural experiences and contexts.
Mwaura does not regard anything redeeming or instrumental in gangsta rap, and finds those who “regurgitate” it as lacking in judgment and musical value. Dick Hebdige proclaims, “For punk to be dismissed as chaos, it had first to ‘make sense’ as noise” (88). Likewise, Mwaura’s comment implies that Kenyans’ “appropriation” of hip hop is problematic because the music lacked prior value and was inherently flawed.

The politics of the gangsta rapper appeared in my conversations with artists. Most of the rap practitioners that I spoke with recognized that society views hip hop through the lens of gangsta rap, which they thought did not capture the full diversity of rap culture. Moreover, most did not identify with a gangsta rap lifestyle and those who spoke about it distinguished themselves from it. For example, Judge from the group Black Duo, argues the following:

Like here in Kenya […] people have been thinking like hip hop is for, gangsters, you know? […] Let’s say if you are doing hip hop, and you are—they normally expect that you to start doing and saying the “f-word.” Or the “b-word.” And start being hood, and start like putting some dreads on your head, and be like, ah, you’re bad boy so that you start doing [sic] hip hop, you know? (Judge)

Judge’s description exemplifies how rap carries negative signifiers, so that if an artist were to “be hood” and wear dreadlocks, they would be associated with gangsta rap. Of course such meanings carry local connotations as well. Dreadlocks have always been seen as non-normative and improper. It is only recently that large numbers of middle

 Sidney Lemelle contends that many Tanzanian hip hop artists “universalize the particularisms” of gangsta rap by applying the content of gangsta rap to all black Americans and every form of US hip hop (239-240).
class men and women in Nairobi, for instance, have started wearing them. Before that, dreadlocks were associated with Mungiki men, and more historically with Mau Mau fighters. The Mau Mau are usually remembered with recognition and appreciation, but the hairstyle has conjured up notions of useless rebellion. Moreover, the gangster figure in Kenya is generally despised. Unlike the US, there generally are no romanticized notions of the gangster, only the one who robs with violence and occasionally kills people in the process. Hip hop enters a scene in which things like dreadlocks and gangsters already have meaning and the music only add to the already present notions about the negative archetype of the gangster. Like Masekela’s “African American reject personality” quip, Judge’s comment suggests that evidence of appropriation of American gangsta rap is found in the way hip hop artists perform their bodies: “being hood” and wearing dreadlocks.

I asked many about the general reception of hip hop. Nafsi Huru discussed how the cultural othering of hip hop comes from people’s perceptions of gangsta rap. He disagreed with this association, and does not see himself as gangsta rapper and grows frustrated at the constant associations to it.

RP: How does Kenyan society view hip hop?

Nafsi Huru: There are some people, like parents, who don’t really love hip hop. Parents don’t really love it. They think it’s like for gangsters or for people who do drugs or something like that. They don’t see the positive side of it. But I think
with time, they are going to understand what we are doing, and they will get to follow us.

RP: And where do they get that perception from?

Nafsi Huru: I think it’s just a conception because people who do hip hop are energetic and we have swag and things like that. So they, society expects you to go to school, you dress official and things like that, and you just go to work in a corporate company, and things like that. When you are doing hip hop, when they haven’t heard your lyrics, […] they stereotype you do being someone who doesn’t understand what he is doing. (Nafsi)

Nafsi asserted that artists are always thought of through the lens of the gangster/gangsta. Social norms, including how to act, to dress, and where to work all propose there are certain apposite behaviors, which hip hop is measured against. This type of rebellion against social norms manifests as a generational, as well as a class conflict. He states that those who dislike rap do so without hearing lyrics, which means that the assumptions non-listeners make are based off of perceptions removed from the realities of music. Nafsi’s statement echoes Judge’s, as he notes that rappers are othered because their bodily performance, in this case “swag,” which strays from the dominant mores.

Nafsi’s mention of parents’ dislike of rap exemplifies how generational differences are influenced by how to navigate American musical influences. This
comment corresponds to what hip hop researcher, Dorothea Shulz, asserts about Malian hip hop:

...[A]dult opponents to rap culture commonly posit a contrast between rap as culturally foreign and other music styles, which they identify as authentically local. They point to the attitude transported in rap as a sign of youngsters’ propensity to mimic Western consumerism, and scathingly denounce the moral and social degradation under foreign cultural influence that rap music facilitates.

(130)

The cultural location of rap in Kenya, and elsewhere in Africa, relate to its pejorative “gangsta” association. Non-devotees of rap seek it as reflecting a blind western mimicry, the appropriation of a harmful pejorative lifestyle, full of empty and meaningless consumerism.

Michael Wanguhu’s 2004 Kenyan documentary, *Hip Hop Colony*, traces some of these receptions. An unnamed middle-aged Kenyan woman is interviewed about her opinions of hip hop culture:

Some of [hip hop], I really don’t think is positive at all. And sometimes, they even show, with the way they dress, I mean, they could be giving a very positive message, but the first impression, you know might catch my eyes. So I might look at a young person singing, and I might not even know it is gospel music because of the way he is dressed. You know, the pants all the way down, and I just wouldn’t listen, or I wouldn’t be patient enough to know what he is talking about. (Wanguhu)
Again what is noteworthy is that her conceptions of hip hop are due to bodily demeanors or appearance, in this case sagging pants. The documentary’s next clip, shown as an indirect response to the above statement is from Steve Ominde, a then producer at record label Soul Child Records:

Those who don’t have their ear to hip hop, will always blame hip hop for a lot of things. Like, you know in America, they always say that a lot of murder is as a result of people listening to negativity that comes from hip hop. Or you know like in Africa, you will find parents blaming, you know, the media for playing hip hop. And they say that their children, you know, have gotten spoilt or whatever because of the music they listen to. But I would say that is questionable, because I would say that hip hop is also very positive, hip hop has quite a strong voice.

(Wanguhu)

Rap music’s supposed inability to generate meaning outside of its commodity status and its rebelliousness and social deviance often clash with established modes of respectability.

Hip hop challenges the social order and the normative constructions that hold it in place. Notions that rap appropriates the worst elements of US society, like blind consumerism and a deviant black lifestyle, and that Kenyan practitioners deviate from acceptable bodily performances both relate to how hip hop challenges dominant ideas.

Michael Wainaina discusses a study on Kenyan hip hop and perspectives on education:

Ever since the genesis of Kenyan hip-hop in the early 1990s, a tension has existed as this form, which is popular with the youth, is seen as being at variance with the
dominant adult values and prescriptions for youth in the contemporary society

[…] Genge and its appeal…with the youth as ‘their thing’ [which] is not a
welcome preposition to the established order. (58, 68)

“Social order” is imbued with power; institutions, historical legacies, and discourses
work to construct and discipline bodies.\(^{31}\) Order constructs those who fit by identifying
those who betray social standards. In Kenya, non-devotees of all ages and many older
people view the hip hop artist is seen as one who misguidedly chooses the ills of the US,
like gun violence and the unnecessary celebration of greed. Hip hop performances fail to
conform to normative terms, and thus rappers are regarded as choosing demoralization
and other self-deprecating ways of enacting oneself.

When hip hop is mainstream, commercial, and popular, I argue, it emerges out of
this othered status, or what Richard Middleton calls “low-other” music. Middleton states
that the low-other is music that occupies an othered positionality against a dominant and
more normative musical form, which is “portrayed as attractive as well as dangerous,”
“enticing as well as subordinate” (7). Commercial hip hop, therefore, is popular and
successful when it embraces elements of “otherness” alongside more safe, palatable
music characteristics. The political appropriation of “Unbwogable” serves as a good

\(^{31}\) Power, social order, and exclusion all inform how cultural meanings develop. Foucault, in *The Order of Things*, posits “[…] in what way then, our culture has made manifest the existence—of order [and] what
modalities of order have been recognized, posited, linked with space and time, in order to create the
positive basis of knowledge as we find it employed in grammar and philology, in natural history and
discipline bodies, in the study of wealth and political economy” (xxi). Most modern societies identify and exclude
social others in order to maintain relative normative categories. In *Formations of a Persecuting Society*,
Moore suggests that Europe is now a persecuting society because of its historic identification,
marginalization, and violence against those groups deemed as a threat to a particular type of social order.
Such monumental historic processes, like the Inquisition and violence and murder of Jewish people were
fundamental moments that must be seen as interrelated. He states, “The patterns, procedures, and rhetoric
of persecution which were established in the twelfth century have given it the power of infinite and
indefinite self-generation and self-renewal” (155).
example. NARC’s use of the song helped them appeal to young people, and the song was catchy and repetitive. Political leaders and parties continue to host concerts and sponsor musicians, for example, rapper Bamboo endorses Kenyatta and performed at his campaign events prior to the 2013 election. These instances of when the state uses hip hop fuels conversations about hip hop’s otherness, instead of allaying them. Moreover, rap music is not regarded as “real” or “authentic” Kenyan music in the same way other genres are given that title no matter how much it appears in the media and at state-sponsored events.

Rap music as regarded as primarily mimicry means that outside of its commodity status; it has no cultural value. As a raw or pure commodity, those who don’t listen to hip hop and older generations contribute to the discourse that states that hip hop musicians are doing nothing but creating, or attempting to create, a commodity empty of cultural meaning. Rap generates its othered status against other forms of more socially accepted music. Popular music conveys larger cultural significance about communities, cultures, and people: “[music’s] order simulates the social order, and its dissonances express marginalities. The code of music simulates the accepted rules of society” (Attali 29, italics in original). Hip hop music in Kenya, whether Kenyan, US, or otherwise is often coded as culturally other, completely commodified, and imitative. Understandings of other genres of music, including Afropop, dancehall, gospel, and Benga, together with hip hop, continue to facilitate discussions about what “real” Kenyan music styles look and sound like.
Music that is rendered “real” or “authentic” Kenyan music, like for example Benga, is imagined to have meaning outside of being commercialized. Hip hop, alternatively, is regarded as only a commodity. Benga music, which I discuss more thoroughly in the next section, is popular guitar music that emerged in the 1960s. Emily Achieng’ Akuno notes this of Kayamba Afrika:

The group can be called a ‘real’ Kenyan group because of the representative nature of their repertoire and the performance practice adapted that reflects the cultural origin of their songs. They are an example of Kenyans making Kenyan music. (152)

Akuno does not name what would be a group that is not real but such an idea must rest on identifying “inauthentic” music. These music genres are thought to have roots in what is “traditional,” and have generated a very different narrative than hip hop. There is an underlying notion that these genres’ appeal leads to the production, commodification, and popularity of these styles. This is in opposition to hip hop, which is often considered nothing but a commodity. I have observed this sentiment among some scholars of Kenyan popular music. Achieng’ Akuno notes that Kayamba Afrika “[refurbishes] of the old folksong traditions for a new performance space—the concert hall or recording studio, for which the original music was not…” (154). Kimani Njogu posits, “urbanization, commercialization and globalization have contributed to the vibrancy of East African popular music of the 1990s which is marked by hybridity, syncretism, and innovativeness” (Songs xi). I do not necessarily disagree with Njogu and Akuno here; indeed Benga and other guitar music celebrate strong cultural relevance and their
entrance into commercial spaces has transformed their meanings. My point is that these observations usually contrast with the dominant notions of rap music. Rap is rarely, if ever, granted such creative power.

Memory, the past, and nostalgia play critical roles in this construction. Joyce Nyairo illustrates this in her research on *zilizopendwa*, or oldies. Nyairo asserts that they draw on already present styles in Kenya and other African contexts to elicit a remembering of a particular past in her example of the group Kayamba Afrika. Remaking oldies has the ability to operate as a “site of memory [...] because of [their] very content, and also because through its references, it can encapsulate an ear, harnessing the retinue of imaginaries and emotions evoked in the past into a single textualised form in the present” (*Zilizopendwa* 30). In bringing so-called “traditional” styles into the space of production and consumption, Kayamba Afrika is able to create new types of meanings for oldies. Their rendition of Sierra Leonean artist S.E. Rogie’s “My Lovely Elizabeth” functions in many ways. The guitar song came out in the 60s, so it draws notions of the past. It is an example of acceptable forms of music, existing in a transnational context, which can be borrowed and transformed.

Cultural meaning about Benga and hip hop emerge out of their juxtaposition to each other. Certainly Benga has been around longer than rap, but its ability to conjure descriptions of “tradition” is partly formed from that which is not deemed “traditional”—in this case hip hop. Commercialized Benga music began in the 1950s, and yet it is easily still imagined as a traditional music even though it is now commercialized. Benga, and

---

32 Njogu continues to assert that Kenyan rap, hip hop, and ragga plays a prominent role in this cultural field.
other styles like Taraab and Mugithi, are granted a pre-commodity status, which makes them meaningful, generative, and noteworthy within their social contexts. Such renderings are partly what define “authentic” African or Kenyan music.

Popular Benga guitar music has been around for the last sixty years, which could have conjured up notions about the lack of “authentically” Kenyan styles; but it does not. This is partly due to the fact that older music is always heard as more authentic than newer forms. It borrows some traditions from Luo music, through the use of the Luo lyre, the nyatiti, and the guitar is a borrowed instrument in Africa. Benga popular music developed prominently during the 1960s and therefore draws influence and is very similar to older Lingala music. Its status as significant Kenyan popular music is partly due to the fact it competed with Congolese music during a time when the Nairobi music industry thrived. Currently, Benga and hip hop’s significance in Kenyan society depend on each other’s place. This mutually dependent relationship helps to derive the meaning that both Benga and hip hop accumulate. Potentially, we could tell the same story about Benga and hip hop: each is a musical style that brought in western influences in order to continue and transform certain cultural music practices. We could state that like Benga, which emerged out of Luo communities and developed and entered popular spaces of production, hip hop emerged out of traditional African contexts and developed out of specific cultural landscapes. Yet, these two genres occupy different spaces.

If Kenyan guitar music elicits nostalgia, hip hop often represents discontent with the present. Richard Middleton observes, “nostalgia is actually emblematic of modernity for it is the fracturing of tradition that brings forth this particular figuring of loss” (51). In
order to feel nostalgic about music, there must be some dissatisfaction with the present state of music. This is precisely where hip hop, and at times other popular youth music like dancehall, enters. If Benga music draws nostalgia and ideas of “tradition,” rap music is always read as perpetually new and foreign. And while commodification strips rap of meaning and indicates its lack of cultural relevance, commodification enhances Benga. Many times when the media, for example, compares rap to other Kenyan music, a singular often pejorative conception of hip hop rises out of that interaction. Despite these representations, rap does not have a singular meaning in Nairobi. Mainstream artists like Nonini, P-Unit, Nameless, and Prezzo have commercial success and are viewed far differently from artists like the ones I interview in non-commercial spaces, although all could easily draw charges of mimicking the west.

Most rap music has a complex relationship with commodification. Even when rappers use hip hop to resist or to create alternative sensibilities, their ties to the consumer marketplace continues to form the foundations for meaning. “Black cultural forms,” Paul Gilroy notes, “have struggled to escape their status as commodities and the position within the cultural industries it specifies” (73). For rap music, the relationship to commodification shifts contingently; at times rappers wholeheartedly embrace hip hop and themselves as commodity and spectacle, other times rejecting it and working against the pejorative representations that can arise out of such a dynamic.
Nairobi’s music industry began in the 1920s, around the same time Kenya went from being the East African Protectorate to a British colony. African peoples were still subject to exploitative and forced labor conditions. This assisted in the foundations of inequality, exploitation, and repression; Aime Cesaire calls the colonial project “thingification,” which produce “relations of domation and submission” where “the indigenous man [is turned] into an instrument of production” (42). Scholars of Kenyan music rarely examine the dynamic between colonial labor conditions and most discussions of the industry occur in isolation of the larger social forces. I wish to highlight the relationship between the two here because these economic practices occurred at the same time and are related to music production. This brief conversation on Kenyan colonialism as it relates to exploitative labor practices is important in considering how colonial policies and practices occurred alongside the early music industry.

The Kenyan colonial state operated along what Berman and Lonsdale call “the vulgarization of power.”

---

33 The British did not institute chattel slavery. The Kenyan coast was involved in an extensive trade spanning about 1,000 years between Persia, Egypt, India, and East Africa. Slaves, ivory, gold, and cloth were traded on the coast. Ethnic communities, both along the coast and inland, were either victims of raids or participated in raiding. This trade increased in the 1700s when European demand for slaves heightened. By the 1800s, the British attempted to abolish the Indian Ocean slave trade. Coastal plantations used enslaved people from Kenya and Tanzania, and slaves were exported to Seychelles and Reunion. Kenya, Tanzanian, Madagascar, and Mozambique supplied slaves to the Persian Gulf. See Ralph Austen’s, “The 19th Century Islamic Slave Trade from East Africa (Swahili and Red Sea Coasts)” and Chapurukha Kusimba’s “Archaeology of Slavery in East Africa.”

34 See Kidula “There is Power” and “Polishing.” Kubik discusses how music developed in the Kenyan colony after WWII, but does not align the industry’s development with colonial practices (“Neo-traditional”).
[State]-building...[is] a conscious effort at creating an apparatus of control...and
state-formation, as an historical process whose outcome is a largely unconscious
and contradictory process of conflicts, negotiations and compromises between
diverse groups whose self-serving actions and trade-offs constitute the
‘vulgarization’ of power. (5)

The colonial state acted in its own interests maintaining its survival and legitimacy
among the larger British settler and African population. Operating as an apparatus of
force, the colonial state sought to ensure the docility of groups of Kenyans through
multiple ways of control and governance. The settler population, which was
economically and socially privileged, advocated their own interests (Murphy 55-65). The
colonial administration worked directly and indirectly to empower the settler population
and disenfranchise black Kenyans.35 Colonial rule was based on inherently racist notions
of white superiority and black inhumanity. Together, the settler population and the state
created hostile and difficult social realities and economic opportunities for black Kenyans
and “[ensured] the conditions of settler capitalism” (Murphy 55). Recognizing the history
of economic exploitation in Kenya assists in realizing Kenya’s early participation in
forming a capitalist society, and therefore the context in which music exists. Just as the
institutions of slavery are myriad and complex in the US and New World places,
similarly in Kenya and Africa at large, the institutions of exploitative labor hold just as

---

35 There is debate over the role of the Kenyan colonial state. Swainson argues that the state directly
advocated for settler interests. Alternatively, Murphy, and Lonsdale and Berman contend that colonial
authority had their own interests some of which conflicted with settler populations and some of which
aligned. My research tends to lean toward Lonsdale and Berman’s more compelling argument, though that
debate extends beyond its scope. What is important here is that the colonial state facilitated the conditions
for capitalist exploitation, which white settlers primarily benefited from and African populations did not.
many complexities. White farmers owned huge tracks of land, an average of 2400 per acre, and many Kenyans worked on the large cash-crop farms (Ogot and Ochieng’ xv). The colonial state in Kenya, did not institute an explicit form of chattel slavery as in South Africa or the US. Instead corvee labor was widespread, which is forced labor through taxation.

The colonial state and the settler population both relied on control over African populations, and through the enactment of policies and laws this became possible. The state used taxes to fund itself and white farmers needed large supplies of cheap labor pools. The 1902 hut and 1908 poll taxes (or head tax) forced African men to work and created ongoing revenue for the colonial administration. Hut taxes were enforced on any dwelling, and subsequently, poll taxes were implemented to tax those men who did not pay a hut tax. This policy meant that men (18 and older) were forced to work to pay the taxes. Additionally, through what Berman and Lonsdale call “extra economic coercion” the state enforced policies that ensured Africans provide their labor to settlers. The administration enacted “compulsory labor” policies dictating men to work sixty days per year, and “unpaid communal labor” at 24 days a year. These policies did not last long due to outcry from the church and missionary organizations and as well as from the British metropolis. The colonial administration created “desertion” policies that stated if men left or abandoned their positions, they would face punitive actions. The state instituted the kipande program around 1920, which dictated that men had to carry a kipande, or pass, to ensure and record their work and police their movements outside the reserves. Failure register, to produce a kipande upon request, or to destroy one meant that men could face
criminal charges. If one did not adhere to the policies and the *kipande* program, it could mean the possibility of they could face punishment of fine, prison time including “unpaid communal labor.”

British rule in Kenya was an important step toward an economy built on wage labor, making people dependent on producing income for survival. Colonial governments did not intend for African groups to acquire wealth and political power. The goal was to keep people subservient, dependent, and docile. There were several policies and law enactments that made it difficult for African people to accumulate wealth, and produced a proletarian underclass and a more privileged settler population. While people were not owned, *per se*, the conditions kept black people disenfranchised, poor, segregated, and policies and their enforcements were designed to discipline, control, and exploit. As such, the common denominator was the exploitation of African labor. Both entities sought to exploit Africans for their own preservation and profit. African people were only useful insofar as their labor was concerned, and failure to labor and to pay tax meant a host of penalties.

The music industry began to develop in the 1920s, around the time of the implementation of the *kipande* program. Again, music industry research does not mention what it meant that measures like the *kipande* program coincided with the development of

---

36 Aside from British rule, caravan trade and Omani Arab-owned plantation labor in the nineteenth century contributes to this. Muslim Arabs owned plantations along the coast and used slaves as labor. In the 1830s, the sultan of Zanzibar established lucrative clove plantations on Zanzibar and Pemba. After this, Arabs began to develop plantations and use slave labor along the coast, growing maize, millet, and coconut (Brantley 8-32). Germany first established European rule along the coast and into Tanzania and Zanzibar in 1885. By 1890, Germany had given its occupied lands to the British. The British outlawed slavery in Kenya gradually so as to maintain a relationship with Muslim Arab slave owners so they could be used as part of the British’s indirect rule practices (Sunseri 481-511).
the music industry. I wish to mention it here because it is relevant to how contemporary notions of music are related to the development of societies around wage labor and a commodity-based economy. The early industry mirrored the exploitative realities of the wider system. Most laborers were men in the colony (men performed more wage labor than women), and likewise the majority of the marginal actors of the early industry were men. African Kenyans, still bound by colonial policies and regulations, were not able to assert control over the music industry en masse. By mid-1920s, the Gramophone Recording Company had produced records of US and European music and sold 42,000 Indian records to Indian peoples working and residing in the country (Kubik 91; Bender 120; Gecau 561-561; Stapleton and May 201). The British East African Broadcasting Company Limited began airing English programming, and by the beginning of WWII the station was airing programs in Kenyan languages and Hindi (Okumu 146). Most musicians who sang and recorded music were migrant laborers who worked in Nairobi and Mombasa. Indians, first coming Kenya to work on the railroads, ventured into various business opportunities and brought and sold phonograph records and played music in their shops due to a small urban market for phonograph records (Bender 120).

Many musicians who managed to record during the infancy of the industry expressed anti-colonial sentiment. Artists in the 1920-30s started recording subversive music and the government quickly banned it. The colonial state instituted the Government Censorship Board (GCB) to ban material it deemed harmful or inappropriate in the colony. Peter Muhoró Mwangi asserts “there [was not] a coherent law regarding censorship, but rather the government use[d] the GCB in an ad hoc manner to control the
media whenever it produce[d] material deemed to promote antisocial behaviour, violence and breaching of the peace in the nation” (158). One of the targets of censorship was Kikuyu songs and dances because of its intentional and/or its perceived subversive qualities. Muthirigu, for instance, was a Kikuyu traditional song and dance that acquired new meanings in colonial contexts. Muthirigu performers sang about the colonial government’s disapproval of female circumcision and disregard for Kikuyu cultural practices (158-159). Musicians used female circumcision as a symbolic reference to opposition to the colonial government. Performers who sang about female circumcision did advocate for the practice, but also their acts stood in for larger ways of resisting colonialism. Some prominent singers included Athman Kiriro wa Tharimu, Gachungi wa Kamau, John Arthur wa Muhuga, and Kibira wa Muthia. The government responded by instituting the “Public Order Act” in the early 1930s, which outlawed Muthirigu. Many of these songs were allegories that carried powerful messages; for example the 1946 song, “Hurira Tindo” (P. Mwangi 46). A few decades later with the development of a firm anti-colonial resistance, the same act included banning the Kikuyu Mwomboko song and dance genre, which was associated with Mau Mau resistance. Composers developed Mwomboko when returning WWII servicepeople combined Scottish accordion music with Kikuyu dance. The famous singer, Joseph Kamaru (mentioned below) composed these songs preceding his career as a Benga performer (P. Mwangi 76).

---

37 Gikuyu is another term for Kikuyu and may be used by cited authors.
38 James Ogude states that Mwomboko is closely related to wedding celebrations and is a “precursor” to smaller or one man guitar bands, both Benga and Mugiithi styles (158).
Mostly African Kenyans composed and sang music, and settler, British, or other Europeans owned the companies. In 1947, British businessmen started the East African Sound Studios in Nairobi (Okumu 146). A few years later, international record companies, Odeon (Germany), Pathé (France), and Columbia (US) began to produce Swahili music (Stapleton and May 262). Major production companies, such as the early locally owned Jambo Records and the multinational companies like HMV Blue Label, and later companies such as CBS (US), Polygram (once Phonogram) (Germany/Holland), EMI (UK), and AIT, produced and disseminated music. It was during this time that the River Road area of Nairobi became a popular place for Kenyan and international music performances. Today River Road vendors still sell bootlegged music, although this has changed dramatically since the recent state policies (discussed in the next chapter).

The end of WWII brought economic growth, which influenced the development of music. The British colonial government began to encourage the expansion of mass media, and this resulted in the formation of more radio stations. This, along with factors like the presence of the international music companies, enabled various forms of what Kubik calls “popular neo-traditional dance music” (87). Many people began to migrate to Nairobi, many for economic opportunities. Service people returned after the war and brought with them new guitar skills. For example, Joseph Sheila’s group Rhino Boys played rumba and were recruited into the King African Rifles (KAR) band. The KAR

39 This economic growth most benefited the colonial government and white farmers. For instance, many farmers, especially in the Rift Valley, altered the contracts with the rural Kenyan workers. These contracts dictated that many had to increase their required work days to 270, up from 240. Workers en masse refused to sign these contracts, citing exploitative practices (Atieno-Odhiambo “The Formative Years” 28). The worsening exploitation of Kenyans lead to an increased feeling of dissent.

40 Rumba is a guitar music style from the Congo.
was a British regiment of mostly African soldiers, which had a band that entertained the troops. The KAR band was one of the first military brass band ensembles, and had actually been around since around 1900 (Martin 74). The returning bands came back to Nairobi and joined other, mostly smaller music bands.41

WWII was not the only external political event to influence the Nairobi music scene. Congo musicians began to appear in Nairobi beginning in the 1950s due to the DRC’s political instability. Immediately after independence in 1960, violence and instability ensued over land, diamonds and rubber, and political power. Mobutu Seke Seko’s 1961 coup d’état exacerbated violence in the region ending with him gaining complete control over the country in 1965. Also in 1961, with the help of the CIA and Belgium, Mobutu orchestrated the kidnapping and execution of left-leaning Prime Minister Patrice Lumumba, who had received military support from the USSR. This incident only added to the political strife and ongoing violence of the country. By 1964, an estimated one million people died from the political instability and ongoing power struggles. Musicians were among the thousands of people who fled the violence into the Republic of Congo, Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda (Stewart 1; Graham 239; Wallis and Malm 32).

Military bands were popular across the region. When Germany had control over Tanzania, military bands came to Tanzania. Eventually Africans began playing in the bands. The beni ngoma tradition emerged partly out of contact with military band styles and was transformed and made popular by the wars. Beni ngoma had “the ability […] to absorb Western music and to restructure it into an African framework” (Martin, “Brass” 79). Three characteristics that compose beni ngoma, “the tribal tradition of competitive dance associations of the interior, the colorful display of the old Arab pageantry, and the adaptation of the European military drill movements and brass band traditions” (Martin, “Popular” 47). After Germany had lost their colonies to Britain after WWI, Britain began to form military bands (Martin, “Brass” 73).
Congolese music developed from both the Republic of the Congo and the Democratic Republic of the Congo.\textsuperscript{42} Gerhard Kubik states that there has been a “strong and continuing intra-African exchange,” where Congolese music has traveled to places like Kenya, Uganda, and Tanzania (86).\textsuperscript{43} Congolese music, like most genres occupied different cultural locations. At times it was directly and indirectly attached to colonial powers and postcolonial state governments, and at others it was used as a method of resistance. Beginning during WWII, both Brazzaville and Kinshasa (formerly Leopoldville) became centers of this music production. In Brazzaville, French colonial officials assembled bands for performances, some groups in celebration of colonial authorities such as Orchestre Americain for a local US military site (Stewart 19-23). Jesse Wheeler argues that Congolese music served as a means of articulating an anti-colonial nationalism up until independence (Wheeler). Most musicians have historically come from the DRC, though both cities are responsible for innovations. Many artists describe how Congolese music has created and contributed to a certain type of urban modernity in Kinshasa (White 664). Congolese popular music has been influenced by the transnational intersections of several different types of music. In the 1930s-40s, Congolese brass bands drew from Ghana’s high life genre and European waltzes and polkas and created unique

\textsuperscript{42} Mobutu instituted \textit{authenticité}, an ideology aimed to foster supposed traditional and “authentic” African and Congolese values, tropes, and customs. He changed the name of the country from the Democratic Republic of the Congo to Zaire, which he stated was a more “authentically” African title. \textit{Authenticité} included several practices: an enforced dress code meant western suits were to be abandoned for African wrap dresses and abacosts, mandates to change peoples Western or Christian to African names, and state-sponsored events where state employees had to attend and sing. Both music and dance became central components of this set of ideological practices, and this gave further attention to the already popular Congolese music.

\textsuperscript{43} Congolese music influenced Tanzanian music spaces as well (Martin, “Popular” 47). Tanzania lacked the infrastructure and music industry to develop, along with the government’s \textit{Ujamaa} policies, it could not become a hub of the production of music (Wallis and Malm 33).
styles. This earlier Congolese music, mostly known as Congolese rumba, Lingala, Rumba Lingala, or Soukous incorporated characteristics from the Afro-Cuban rumba first globally popularized in the 1920s. Cuban sounds were first introduced when Cuban bands were hired for colonial authorities (Wheeler). Bob White notes that many people in a rapidly urbanizing Leopoldville considered these Afro-Cuban musical styles to reflect a certain urban cosmopolitan aesthetic (671-673). Soukous music continued to gain popularity because of the appearance of radio stations in Leopoldville and Brazzaville during the post WWII 1940s, which enabled various musicians to be heard in many different countries.

The Nairobi music industry peaked in the 50s and 60s with guitar music, both Congo and Kenyan styles (Stapleton and May 226, Martin 47). Musicians started out playing the acoustic, called dry or box guitar, and by the 1960s were playing the electric guitar. Many Kenyan musicians drew from traditional styles of the stringed lyres, like the Luo nyatiti and Luhya litungu, which made the music new and avant garde, but still legible and “Kenyan” against the influx of Congo music. Kenyan guitar music came to be known as Benga music. One of the most well known bands was Shirati Jazz, lead by D.O. Misiani, who popularized Benga in the 1960s (Stapleton and May 230). Some other famous acoustic Benga musicians include Fundi Konde, Paul Machupa, Jumbe, and

44 Bob White carefully notes that Congolese rumba, as it is related to Cuban rumba, is not the Latin American rhumba, but instead is related to the Cuban music style that materialized from informal housing slums in the early 19th century (665).
45 In Leopoldville, Radio Congo Belge transmitted informational programs from the British Broadcasting Corporation to Belgium. According to Gary Stewart, Germany could not interfere with this station easily, as compared to the radio stations in Europe. This radio station, in combination with Radio Brazzaville in the Republic of the Congo was critical in transmitting Congolese music across many African countries. See Stewart’s Rumba on the River.
Daudi Kabaka. The music industry was a male dominated space, most musicians, producers, and other actors were male. These musicians engaged in cultural borrowing of non-Kenyan styles. For instance, the aforementioned artists created some of their music using Malawian Nyasa sound—which is a style that borrows from South African Kwela music (Graham 238; Low 19). Other musicians borrowed from western pop music. For the most part, multinational companies looked for popular music from all over Africa, but most of it came from the Congo. Zairean Jean Bosco Mwenda known for his finger-pick guitar style performed in Kenya. Mwenda sang in Swahili, like many Congolese musicians wanting to appeal to Kenyan audiences (Graham 238). Many Kenyan musicians, wanting to compete with other Congolese singers and appealing to popular aesthetic choices and expressions, sang in Lingala.

Dance clubs and other venues where bands play emerged during the 60s. These venues hosted Kenyan, Tanzanian, Congolese musicians, and when musicians were not recording, many were performing (Gecau 565). Again, Kenyan singers and musicians played Congo music wanting to appeal to market demands, and Congolese artists played versions of Tanzanian, Kenyan, and Soukous styles (Gecau 565). Benga began to gain some international popularity in the 80s, but could not compete with Congo music: “newer forms of Central (not East) African dance musics—soukous, kwassa, kwassa, and rumba among others—began to assume increasing prominence and market share in the globalization of the African popular music industry” (Barz 115). Currently, Benga music has not been able to acquire the same popularity regionally, across the continent, nor in the global market in the ways Congolese music has. Moreover, the popular music market
in Kenya today still is heavily influenced by Congo language, music, and dance styles. Caleb Okumu, in a critique of the government and music industry, argued, “The yardstick of music performance in Kenya seems to measure how well one can sing in the foreign language, Lingala. This has been the trend over the years, and even local bands like the Ulinzi Orchestra and Maroon Commandos copy the catch phrases of Lingala music in their climaxes” (231-232).

Artists had a difficult time crafting a sustainable living, despite the fact that Nairobi was a regional center of music production. One famous story was that of Benga singer, Fadhili William. His narrative highlights issues about copyright, profit, and the exploitative aspects of a music industry that has been largely formed around non-Kenyan actors. Fadhili William is the first known singer of the famous song “Malaika,” and in 1959 he recorded the song supposedly thinking about a woman he loved, calling her malaika, which is Swahili for angel. William never received royalties for the song despite numerous samplings. William stated that he originally recorded the song in Kenya in 1959. The version that supposedly became popular in East Africa was the 1963 version of the song, produced after he joined The Equator Sound Band. Internationally, there are various versions of “Malaika,” and Mariam Makeba and Harry Belefonte’s rendition is perhaps the most well known. Peter Seeger, Jamaican band Boney M., Benny Anderson, as well as the group Saragossa remade the song. Miriam Makeba’s record company soon after he recorded the song claimed copyright to the song, and in 1966 she won a Grammy Award for the song. On one album, Makeba stated the song “came from Tanzania.” William or his recording company never received royalties. Others have claimed
ownership and rights to royalties as well, including artists from Tanzania. “Malaika” entered the emerging commercial market of global music in the 80s. Grant Charo claims he, not William, originally wrote the song and therefore should have copyright ownership to it (Gecau 563). The story of William serves proof for many that the industry was and continues to be a harsh place for Kenyan artists. Consider a conversation I had with reggae producer, Mick Jagero:

RP: So where do you think music is at right now in Kenya?

Jagero: I’ll start from way before, in the sixties. Kenyans are very talented when it comes to music. In fact one of the most sampled songs, comes from a Kenyan. It’s called “Malaika.” It’s been sampled over and over and over, and the guy died a pauper. (Jagero)

Jagero introduces the issue of William and “Malaika” as exemplary of the music industry. Mtawali, a gospel singer I interviewed, expressed similar sentiment of William dying poor despite having produced a globally recognized song:

RP: What do you recall about William and his experience?

Mtawali: Ok, he died a poor man; that is one. Ok, they said he was the composer of “Malaika,” though the original composer—that song is very controversial through no one knows who wrote it. But, um, it is believed that it was written by a guy from my community called Grant Charo. (Mtawali)
William dying in poverty is the most significant element of the story for Jagero and Mtawali. William was not able to reap the benefits of “Malaika”’s success and did not have access to the global popular music market, which means local politics, as well as the international market, influenced his inability to earn money from the song. William (or Charo) did not have the same opportunities to benefit and economically profit from the song in the way that the other non-Kenyan artists and music companies did. This story illustrates for Jagero and Mtawali the unfortunate and established realities of artists’ inability to profit from the music industry in Nairobi. In the next chapter, I continue to examine how present realities continue to inform such sentiments.

State Repression and Music

The state implemented several policies and practices that limited Kenyan music's ability to thrive during the formative years of the post-independence state, thereby playing a critical role in perceptions of Kenya’s cultural lack. The government under both Kenyatta and Moi implemented such strict policies because of fear of dissent:

[The government] worked systematically to co-opt or control, silence or detain, neutralise or eliminate any voices and figures of dissent from within the ranks of its regime-building. Behind this façade of regime and nation-building was the naked spectre of crude accumulation of wealth by a class that had inherited a state whose chief function was to serve its class interests. (Ogude, “Cat” 177)
Attali asserts that the state often seeks to limit the capacities of the musician because of his or her capacity for political subversion and resistance: “it is impossible to separate [musicians’] history from that of repression and surveillance” (11). Kenyatta’s administration, like many in Africa, sought to eliminate any form of opposition as it built legitimacy and authority. Kenyatta’s Kenya Broadcasting Corporation (KBC) Censorship Board was to monitor cultural expressions, similar to the one used during the colonial period (P. Mwangi). Music and culture censorship boards have existed in various places in Africa. During the extremely repressive Banda regime in Malawi, censorship board functioned as explicit policing body and secret groups would appear in various places to monitor and report any questionable music. People were encouraged to report anyone suspected of producing music that opposed Banda (Chirambo 109-126). In Tanzania, Nyerere’s Ujamaa socialist policies dictated that music must be productive insofar as building the nation. Cultural expressions like music, so thought Nyerere, it must be in service of Tanzania as a whole, and seemingly benefit of everyone. Practically, this meant that musicians should not express dissent against the state, and many musicians were jailed during this time (Askew and Kitime 137-156).

Kenyatta’s government continued the colonial practice of instituting a censorship board that was responsible for examining music for “inappropriate content,” and political subversion and resistance. Joseph Kamaru is a famous Benga artist who was victim to the censorship board’s policies. At first, Kamaru performed nationalistic songs, even supporting Kenyatta against a mountain of criticism when he fell unpopular. It was widely known that Kenyatta was responsible for the controversial and high profile
murder of popular and charismatic Luo politician, Tom Mboya. Yet Kamaru composed songs defending Kenyatta. In 1975, his allegiance would shift, when his song about the slain leader Joseph Mwangi Kariuki, “J.M. Mwendwo ni Iri” (J.M., The People’s Hero). This was an attack on Kenyatta, who most believed was responsible for Mboya’s death, and the administration banned that song (Mutunya 24). Its lyrics cited a traditionalized Kikuyu custom of punishing thieves by rolling them down a hill in a beehive.

Mumutinia ciiga ciothe cia mwiri/ (Whoever mutilated his body)

Mumtwari muhara ini wa nyamu/ (Whoever took him to the wild animals)

No nginya aka garagario na mwatu/ (Will be rolled in a beehive)

Muingi wothe wa Kenya wiroreire/ (With the Kenyan public watching) (34)

The Kenya Broadcasting Corporation (KBC) Censorship Board banned the song from airplay, and allegedly state police arrested and beat Kamaru at the president’s residence (P. Mwangi 164). The KBC Censorship Board outlawed Kenyan songs that were deemed explicitly obscene. Peter Mwangi points out that radios still played songs like Marvin Gaye’s “Sexual Healing,” highlighting the fact that it was Kenyan musicians that were the true targets of censorship (165).

The Moi government instituted more explicit forms of censorship. Authorities confiscated and destroyed politically subversive music from vendors, and whoever was

---

46 J.M. Kariuki was a Mau Mau leader. He was very critical of The Million Acre Scheme to sell land to white ex-patriots, ostensibly ignoring the African Kenyan poor (Hornsby 222-225). He famously stated, “We do not want…a Kenya of ten millionaires and ten million beggars” (224).

47 The Kenya Broadcasting Corporation is interchangeable with Voice of Kenya. In 1928, the British colonial government created the Kenya Broadcasting Service, and in 1961 the Kenya Broadcasting Corporation. After independence in 1963, the new Kenyan Parliament renamed it Voice of Kenya (VOK), where it remained state operated. Radio and television liberalized in the early 1990s, when it then changed back to KBC (Sobania 81-82).
connected to the music—be it vendors, musicians, or producers—could face criminal prosecution (Nyairo, “Reading” 56). In 1984, the Presidential National Music Commission produced a report on all forms of music, with recommendations on how to develop a national music culture. Nyairo, citing Ewens, notes that the Commission was additionally formed to address the problem of non-Kenyan entities, like multinational companies, profiting from traditionalized Kenyan music (Nyairo, “Reading” 57; Ewens 160). Moi additionally had an interest in Kenyan music as a conduit to legitimate and sustain his presidency, enlisting for example the Muungano Choir to sing songs praising him (Hornsby 348). Ngoju observes:

[The] Christian-dominated Muungano Choir…sought to perpetuate a hegemonic relation between the rulers and the ruled, [valorized] national leadership, as well as [gave] their interpretation of patriotism. The post-colonial government sponsored choirs which composed music to perpetuate hegemonic normalcy and maintain the socio-political status quo. (Songs xiii)

Mutonya appropriately names Muungano “Moi’s propaganda ensemble” (25). The KBC aired other songs praising Moi, including “Rais Moi,” “Hongera Moi,” and Joseph Kamaru’s “Safari ya Japan,” and “Chunga Marima” (Mutonya 25). The use of musicians, choirs, and dancers to promote the state has been common, with perhaps the most popular example being Mobutu’s use of traditional dancers. Additionally, the 1982 attempted coup d’etat made Moi increasingly concerned about any form of dissent. The state-run Voice of Kenya (VOK) banned songs in ethnic languages and only played songs in Swahili, English, or Lingala.
The Censorship Board was extremely active during the Moi regime in the 1980s, particularly after the attempted coup. The board banned songs, had people arrested, and had copies of songs and albums destroyed. One example is “Kenya ya Ngai.” Ngai is Kikuyu for God, and the song, meaning “Kenya is for God” criticizes the government for violence and corruption (Mutonya 26). Odhiambo Osumba Rateng’s “Baba Otongolo (Budget Iko High)” (the governmental budget is high) articulated the grievances over the rising living costs and the 1984 famine that threatened East Africa. The song was an allegory about the president and his inability to keep a proper budget. The verses tell about Baba Otonglo (Otonglo a Luo word for money) who cannot earn enough money to support his family. Mwangi notes that although state officials seized copies of the song, jua kali vendors continued to sell it illegally (166). Osumba was arrested and later released, despite never being formally charged (Owuor).

The influence of state policies and multinational companies resulted in the emphasis on non-Kenyan music in the 1980s. In 1980, the government mandated that seventy-five percent of music played on Voice of Kenya (VOK) must be Kenyan in origin (Hornsby 348). Many radio stations strongly opposed it citing their difficulties in finding enough music deemed “Kenyan.” Music companies paid radio stations to play the music they were producing, which was mostly Congolese, and DJs and other radio stations saw themselves as adversely affected by the measure (Kidula 409; Stapleton and May 226-229). Such a move created protest from VOK and from multinational music corporations that would surely lose profit in this arrangement, and the initiative quickly died. These entities argued that there was not enough Kenyan music to accommodate the
mandate. Charles Hornsby echoes this sentiment, “[There] was still too little material available, and listeners preferred Western pop. Two weeks later, the decree had to be withdrawn” (348). Companies were, however, invested in the imposed quota not working, so whether enough Kenyan music existed seemed to be moot. Kenyan musicians could not compete well enough to gain widespread airplay, especially given radio’s preference to Congolese music. Jean Kidula argues that while mostly the upper classes desired non-Kenyan music styles, these corporations perpetuated notions that there was a dearth of Kenyan music (“Polishing” 409). This fueled the already present notion that Kenyans did not appreciate Kenyan music, and that musicians were not interested in composing Kenyan sounds. These factors encouraged Kenyan bands to play Congolese music and/or sing in Lingala and allowed for the continued popularity of Congolese bands in Kenya. For these reasons, a lot of Kenyan music during the early 80s particularly was co-opted for governmental purpose, outshined by Congolese music, or censored and banned.

Multinational companies stayed in Nairobi and continued to produce music and look for talent until the late 1970s. With the arrival of cassette tapes, and the growth of Nairobi’s informal economy, the illegitimate production of cassettes became widespread. Music companies, realizing they could not make money, were, for the most part, forced to leave. In 1978, EMI reported mismanagement and declared bankruptcy (Wallis and Malm 93). Polygram left Nairobi in 1990 after the increased sale of both legal and bootleg sales of cassettes (Wallis and Malm 79). Indian businesspeople stepped in to fill
the economic vacuum, and today largely control the bootleg industry, which is now the sale of CDs (Gecau 563).

Government mandates set in place public conversations about radio and television programming fulfilling quotas to air “local content.” Musicians that I interviewed often cited what they thought the percentage quotas were in order to demonstrate the absence of Kenyan music on local airwaves. For instance, gospel singer, Mtawali referenced a 40% local/60% foreign mandate, while Judge cited that in clubs DJs aim for 30% local/70% foreign (Mtawali; Judge). Nafsi Huru noted, “[Radio presenters] don’t play a lot of local content. And according to our constitution, I think we are supposed to be like...I’m not sure, 70% local content, and the rest is from western places” (Nafsi). These artists’ statements were always postulations; no one really knew whether a current quota is in place or what it is. Naming quotas in everyday conversation cites governmental policies and illustrates how these mandates have informed public conversations concerning expectations of music. Interviewees referenced these quotas when articulating what radio stations, televisions, or the government should be doing. Artists’ rough estimates of how much Kenyan music should be played were always in the context of institutional failure. These conversations are part of the wider notion of cultural lack, and specifically how the government facilitates such inadequacies. Additionally, these estimations demarcate what counts as local and foreign by insisting that people call attention to what is Kenyan, and what is not.
Music enters into and helps create an environment that fosters discourses of cultural anxieties. The early Nairobi music industry and its decline, long presence of Congolese music and now hip hop, and state policies which have inhibited Kenyan music, and media failures to host Kenyan music all fuel notions that Kenya does not produce cultural expressions, does not appreciate its rich traditions, and looks to the outside for influence. Material conditions largely account, though not wholly, for the public conversations around cultural lack. Franz Fanon wrote, “an inferiority complex […] is the outcome of a double process,” that is “primarily economic” and “subsequently the internalization—or, better, the epidermalization—of this inferiority” (4). Fanon theorized that material inequalities and ideologies of inferiority created settings where people affectively felt inhuman and unequal (28-35). Like one’s supposed inhumanity, cultural lack is felt affectively. Moreover, notions of cultural deficiency can be individually experienced and societally widespread. Postcolonial nationalist discourse about the urgency of cultural cohesion on a national level alongside fragile economic conditions has worked together to create the widespread threats about Kenya’s cultural lack. This section discusses how post-colonial nationalist discourse, and the state’s appropriation of it for its own purposes, contributes to widespread perceptions about Kenya’s cultural lack. Rap music, both Kenyan and non-Kenyan, have entered a social landscape already occasioned by apprehensions and anxieties around cultural definitions of Kenyaness.
Institutions that held, or currently hold, economic or social influence have been responsible for perpetuating notions of cultural deficiencies. Joyce Nyairo discusses how the popularity of Congo music contributes to this dynamic. She analyzes how Ndombolo styles collaborate with Kenyan songs, which “is yet another testament to the extent of the myriad contagious cultural influences that pervade African post-colonial life and which are invariably met with cries about cultural loss…” (Nyairo, “Zilizopendwa” 48). Other entities have explicitly taken up cultural identity as a topic of interrogation outside of the music industry. Mbūgua wa Mungai’s work, mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, identifies three places where “post-independence anxieties” of identity are perpetuated: the state, Kenyan academia, and the church (“Is Marwa”). The writings of Kenyan scholars, while articulating the need for cultural redefinition, additionally perpetuated notions of cultural anxieties.

One place where this began was “in the period of cultural nationalism witnessed at the University of Nairobi in the 1960s” (Mbūgua 50). Academics who were most involved in advocating for cultural reform in the university were Ngugi wa Thiong’o, Okot p’Bitek, Owuor Anyumba, and Taban Lo Liyong. Mbūgua states, “while not downplaying the need to pay attention to African forms of creativity, it must be acknowledged that the direction suggested by these scholars, if not pursued judiciously, runs the very real danger of instituting a nativist project” (50). I suggest the works of Wunyabari Maloba, E.S. Atieno-Odhiambo, and Bethwell Ogot contribute to the concerns of nationalism, postcolonial politics, and culture, which were raised in the 1960s. Both Atieno-Odhiambo and Ogot began producing scholarship in the 1960s
studying Kenyan ethnicity, history, and politics. Maloba’s contributions on Kenyan nationalism, Mau Mau history, and gender came later in the 1980s. These scholars’ early interventions, and continued work, in the composition of Kenyan scholarship are noteworthy and continue to structure African Studies. In this discussion, I want to consider how their contributions, while providing a framework approaching and centering African scholarship, also have contributed to discourses of cultural anxieties.

From the beginning of cultural nationalism, there was a need and ability to craft one’s history and cultural belief system. Ngugi wa Thiong’o, along with Henry Owuor-Anyumba and Taban Lo Liyong, drafted the 1968 essay, “On the Abolition of the English Department.” The essay proposes, “If there is need for a ‘study of the historic continuity of a single culture’, why can’t this be African?” (Ngugi, “Abolition”439). Ngugi’s *Decolonizing the Mind* is a call to African writers and educators to write in African languages and create African centered curricula. “The effect of a cultural bomb,” quips Ngugi, “is to annihilate a people’s belief in their names, in their languages, in their environment, in their heritage of struggle, in their unity, in their capacities and ultimately in themselves” (3). The devastating effects of colonialism are responsible for the conditions that enable physical violence of imperialism and the cultural injury of the alienation from one’s heritage and history. For Ngugi, the return to African languages can combat “producing a society of bodiless heads and headless bodies” (28). Like Fanon’s “epidermalization of inferiority,” the people are culturally incomplete because bodiless heads and headless bodies cannot vet cultural influences.
Economic dilemmas factor heavily into questions over culture. Wunyabari Maloba argues, “Economic freedom, cultural reassertion, political empowerment of the local population are all components of the phenomenon and process of decolonization” (12). Economic structures and political institutions were largely left in place and filled by the petty Kenyan bourgeoisie and individuals politically privileged during colonialism. Struggles over economic and political power continue to materialize in Kenya, as well as throughout Africa. Producing substantial change whereby Kenyans have access to decision-making processes in both of these terrains has proven extremely difficult. The role that culture plays in decolonization politics is significant because not only was “political independence linked to cultural freedom and reassertion of cultural identity” but also, “[culture] is integrally linked to the restoration of the dignity and identity of a people” (19). Maloba argues that if local culture is acknowledged, celebrated, and disseminated throughout communities, cultural values will bleed into political organisms and transform for the democratic good of people (20-21). This view of the role and power of culture, though compelling, tends to efface larger economic forces—corporations and monopolies—that enact power and wield influence. Moreover, this approach can run the risk of implying the global south is poor because it lacks culture. Yet Maloba’s point is significant, cultural definition and freedom are fundamentally attached to human agency. It is important for other reasons; it is the element most readily available to individuals and communities. People can vet culture, decide what is important, enact certain expressions, and abandon others much more easily that they can exercise significant economic or political control.
Culture questions have materialized within conversations on nation-building. Historian E.S. Atieno-Odhiambo posits:

Kenya, as a new nation, has demanded a new postcolonial history. This history has had to be invented, assembled together, arranged around the metaphor of struggle. This metaphor entails seeing our history of the past fifty or so years as a moral enterprise: against the injustice that is colonialism; against poverty, ignorance and disease; against the drudgery of rural life; against the foreignization of the cultural ecology; against the intervention of alien ideas in the indigenous discourses on nation-building. It has also been a moral enterprise for the decolonization of consciousness. (“Invention” 2)

Atieno-Odhiambo sees a connection between material conditions and ideological frameworks that structure society. Like Ngugi, Atieno-Odhiambo believes historians, activists, and writers must cultivate meanings beyond colonialism as the one exemplary factor in Kenya’s history. Thinking beyond the problem of colonialism and toward what Kenya has to offer is imperative in this quest. This must be a holistic plan, whereby one considers “patriotic endeavor, economic development, social and spiritual space, the valorization of the cultural heritage and the definition of Kenya’s place in the world” (Atieno-Odhiambo, “Invention”1). These nationalist theories assert that notions that the building of a nation should not come at the expense of the cultural character of Kenya. In fact, it is culture that can supposedly resolve some of Kenya’s deepest issues. Bethwell Ogot contends that, “Culture contributes to an individual’s or nation’s sense of identity by providing bases of social integration and offering guidelines to action during periods
of uncertainty” (215). Ogot, in the essay “Construction of a National Culture,” from which this quote originates illustrates that for African postcolonial nationalism, culture is a foundation for any nation and provides sets of tools to navigate challenging moments, like postcoloniality. This notion sets up serious quandaries if Kenya’s culture were to be situated around western, American, or other outside influence during difficult moments.

Ngugi, Atieno-Odhiambo, Maloba, Ogot are post-colonial thinkers who regard culture as primary in structuring society and having the potential to remedy problems that arise from nation-building and political struggles. On one hand, this view is germane in that it celebrates and affirms culture’s role, especially given the peripheral politics of Kenya. On the other, their work sets the foundations for the discourse of cultural lack. Especially for Atieno-Odhiambo, Maloba, Ogot, culture is called upon to resist western imperialism, which embellishes culture’s ability to suture political and economic crises. Further, such discourse has the potential to draw rigid boundaries around the supposed Kenyanness of literature, arts, and music, meanwhile ignoring the fluidity and dynamism of any cultural process. These widespread conversations can produce stark we/other categories, which can inhibit expressiveness and innovation of arts, music, dance, and literature, as much as it can promote these things.

The Kenyan state has long used and perpetuated this discourse by fostering definitions of national culture, unity, and patriotism. The Kenyatta administration used the production of Kenyan nationalism as a mechanism of legitimacy, “Cohesiveness and unity were said to be the basis of progress and they inevitably entailed that a homogenised nation be built, one that would speak in one voice—that of the President
(who is said to be the symbol of national unity)” (Gecau, “History” 28). Kenyatta espoused a cultural policy where culture recognition and celebration could develop. A 1975 UNESCSO report details the Kenyan state’s Cultural Policy, “The objective of government cultural policy…is the realization of national unity and cohesion and the creation of national pride and sense of identity among our people” (Ndeti 35). Currently, Kenya, like many African states, continues to produce official cultural policies. The 2009 National Policy on Culture and Heritage echoed the overreliance of culture on development that Atieno-Odhiambo, Maloba, Ogot all argued. It states:

Development theories over the years have tended to undermine the role of culture in development. In the Western World, culture was for a long time portrayed merely as art, music, dance and literature. However, it is now recognized that culture is much broader. It constitutes a fundamental dimension of the development process, and helps to strengthen the identity, independence and sovereignty of a nation. (7)

Moreover, it stated that the government will facilitate the development of “indigenous music,” “promote talent in the performing arts,” institute a learning curriculum of music and dance in educational settings (23). The state has made itself a conduit for cultural advancement, which probably explains why artists I interviewed continued to reference government quotas of music. Hip hop practitioners, and other musicians, inevitably grow frustrated if the state promises to sponsor these initiatives and then fails to follow through.
These conversations over “national culture” and rejecting “western influence” have emerged to justify state power. For example, a few months before the 1982 attempted coup, Moi consolidated power and made Kenya a one-party state. Fearing a loss of legitimacy, he ejected Oginda Odinga from his political party, KANU, for Odinga’s ongoing disagreements with him. Moi charged Odinga and other associated outspoken critics as “promoting foreign ideologies” as a way to discredit their growing criticism of him (Ahluwalia 134-137). “Foreign ideologies” were presented as antithetical to the notion of national unity and Kenyan culture, and thus a threat to the social fabric. Moi often called on Kenyans to resist foreign ideologies and western influence, although Moi cultivated foreign policy connections with the US.

The state has often espoused notions of “Kenyanness.” The 2004 campaign “Najivunia kuwa Mkenya” (I’m proud to be (a) Kenyan) serves as a recent example. The goal was to “re-socialize Kenyans from all walks of life into reflecting on their achievements since independence and cultivate the spirit of togetherness and dedication to the country” (Wekesa 51). Additionally, the campaign sought to solidify state power as a legitimate site of cultural affirmation and illustrate how state representatives could serve as ambassadors of Kenyan pride and patriotism. Alfred Mutua, the former and rather unpopular government spokesperson, even handed out bumper stickers in the streets. “[The] greatest impact of this event was easily discernible in the numerous advertisements in the press, bumper stickers and banners in several social places […]” (Wekesa 51). State instituted pride, however, did not work in the long term, either because it came from the top, or because of the fact that many disapproved of the
government in general. A counter-phrase soon circulated “Navumilia kuwa Mkenya” (I tolerate being Kenyan) resisting not necessarily the notion of being a Kenyan, but rather the institutionalization of the pride (Mbūgua, “Is Marwa” 47).

Notions of cultural lack appeared during some interviews when discussing music. Gospel musician, Mtawali contended:

Mtawali: So I think as a culture we need to change. And begin appreciating our own music.

RP: Why would you say that Kenyans don’t appreciate their own music, do you think?

Mtawali: Um, I think the reason is [it’s] something that started a long time ago. We are like copycats. We, we really don’t have a national identity. In every aspect. Look at the dress. If you go to Congo, now, you’ll tell a Congolese. If you go to Tanzania, you’ll tell—if you go to Rwanda, name it. There is something that will tell you this is a Tanzanian woman, this is a Congolese man. Here, really we don’t have. So, musically, there has been a Benga, which is trying to come out.

(Mtawali)

The anxiety illustrated here is that despite shared histories, geographies, and politics, the DRC, Tanzania, and Rwanda have managed to carve out a national identity, while Kenya is stuck in constant appropriation. Mtawali’s comment about dress relates to broader notions about expressive cultures and is indicative of what is really at stake in national
unity—culture. At the center of this discourse has been and currently are inferences that Kenyans have had an inability and/or unwillingness to apprehend and appreciate those regarded as Kenyan cultural expressions. Moreover, there is an inherent assumption that Kenyans often eschew “their own” culture for the preference of an external, non-Kenyan culture.

In the setting of this chapter, it is easy to see how nationalist discourses work to produce their own forms of “others” who don’t fit into the larger body politic. Certainly, I would argue that this dynamic is partly, though not wholly, responsible for creating contemporary assumptions about various cultural other groups, for instance, Somalis, Muslims, LGBT folks—just to name a few. I am cautious about altogether disavowing cultural nationalism’s meaning making because these concerns open up important conversations. Bethwell Ogot asserts that an influx of music into Kenya from the US, Latin America, European, DRC, and South Africa should be cause for concern and continues, “foreign musical diet must be assimilated into the local cultural milieu, into a local popular musical tradition” (229). Such an approach does not jettison the role of non-Kenyan music, rather it insists that the local and Kenyan styles deserve to exist alongside other genres. For these reasons, anxiety discourses serve important and affirmative purposes. They produce conversations about culture and often allow people to conceptualize Kenyan apart from the ideological grasp of colonialism. The sixty year presence of Congo music, and the almost thirty year presence of rap—both Kenyan and non-Kenyan—continue to give life to these same conversations. In part, debates over non-Kenyan music continue because such styles have not been outright rejected or
relegated to just television sets, but instead because artists, singers, rappers, and dancers insist these forms are relevant to their modes of culture and self-expressiveness. In turn, hip hop artists continue to claim their music is African or Kenyan, thereby pushing back against notions that would render their music mere mimicry. Practitioners’ imperative demand that rap music reflects their social settings solidifies conversations around hip hop’s place in Kenya.

Swag and the “Quest for Relevance”

Kenyan hip hop, and in particular, embodied performances hold a complex relationship with these discourses. They respond to, resist, and/or contribute to cultural anxieties. In the next chapter, I will discuss exactly how artists navigate a constraining industry. Here I will illustrate how artists maneuver the cultural space constituted by specific socio-political discourses. Artists formulate their positions, raps, and performance styles from a post-Mau Mau cultural aesthetic, where they position themselves as agents within this cultural debate. They confidently assert that their music is Kenyan, while they seek to mediate and resist the boundaries of a normative identity. Mbúgu posits that Kenyan rap culture develops out of resisting mainstream institutions where traditional notions of “a Kenyan identity” are espoused: “[Faced] with the idea of a traditional identity resulting from the three key authorities—state, church and academy—[…] it becomes clear that young people in Kenya find themselves having to confront a
mainstream society whose self-concept does not really entertain the notion of plural identities” (“Is Mwara” 51). Practitioners use hip hop and other popular music, according to Mbůgua, to “[repackage] some traditional ideas into ‘new’ performative modalities” (57). Likewise, my findings indicate that rap artists are interested in crafting new practices, performances, and subjectivities that continue to interrogate the status quo. Hip hop’s cultural project involves navigating through cultural anxieties and taking a firm position that underground non-commercial hip hop is a unique Kenyan style. This hip hop does not simply accept taken for granted assumptions about Kenyan music, it resists notions that commercial music should have to conform to Afropop standards. It laments poverty, social injustice, and widespread state corruption. Moreover, underground rap sees itself in conversation with a global hip hop aesthetic. All the while proclaiming that underground rap is indeed Kenyan music, it disavows conventional nationalistic categories and rethinks musical boundaries.

Rappers continue to encounter “western mimicry” criticisms. These indictments suggest that imitation, or mimicry, reveals an unavoidable lack located in a Eurocentric, western, and/or American framework. As Homi Bhabha states, “to be Anglicized is emphatically not to be English” (125). To imitate US hip hop artists, therefore, is to imply or admit one’s non-US subjectivity or to expose oneself as someone who longs to be what s/he cannot: an American rapper. Bhabha argues quite convincingly that mimesis can be structured complicatedly around aspects of subversion and resistance. Yet the fear in postcolonial Kenya is that mimesis reveals an always-unresolved inadequacy and lack. Hip hop has garnered disapproval from older generations and others who do not
otherwise listen to rap. Rappers are extremely aware of these discourses’ abilities to shape meanings around hip hop. Rap artist Funzo Kuu best articulated this as conservatism.

RP: So what are some hardships that you think musicians face?

Funzo Kuu: There are many, many hardships. First of all, there is the perspective that people...people’s perspective of hip hop. Here in Africa, especially in Kenya, people consider hip hop as gangster music, about drugs, prostitution, blah, blah. Yeah. So, that’s the biggest issue because Africans, they are not yet—they are still conservative. They still conserve our culture. You know, parents. Parents, they only see [or] perceive what they see on TV. Yeah. Other than that, there is also...the media. (Funzo)

This conservatism is strongly linked to postcolonial discourses about protecting and celebrating what is Kenyan. The history of non-Kenyan music in Nairobi’s music industry, either because of economic profit, preference, convenience, or otherwise has activated a reactionary need to draw boundaries around Kenya’s culture. The media, television, radio, and now to a certain extent, the Internet, play a complicated role by hosting US and other non-Kenyan styles. Media representations are not solely responsible for producing this anxiety. Young consumers and listeners, no doubt using the media formulate opinions and desire certain genres. Hip hop practitioners see themselves as cultural ambassadors, attempting to convince people about the relevance of their music: “their practices evince a particular concern with anxieties of an identity especially in
conflict with...the broader narrative of the Kenyan identity” (Mbūgua, “Is Marwa” 47-48, italics in original). Furthermore, rappers assert that hip hop can be a starting point toward rethinking subjectivities and identities. Rapper Amora states, “You don’t have to be a certain tribe to do hip hop. Hip hop itself is a culture of its own. It’s like, if we were to be given a chance or an opportunity to create a society. A tribe. Hip hop would be the language” (Amora). Postcolonial nationalist discourse pressures people to vet music and dance that does not come from Kenya, and to celebrate and define what should be rendered authentically Kenyan. It is no surprise that artists are eager to argue that Kenyan hip hop is, in fact, Kenyan or African.

Rap music culture certainly relies on shared characteristics like its ability to transcend borders and its inherent political inclinations. It shares aesthetic expressions, cultural productions and common styles, evident in the various elements like deejaying, rapping, graffiti, etc. Shared styles do not indicate mimicry, imitation, or a sense of lack that these terms engender. Practitioners are eager to dispel mimicry accusations. Nafsi Huru, gave an example to confront such notions.

RP: How do hip hop artists in Kenya feel about the notion that artists are imitating the west?

Nafsi Huru: Right now, we have, people are merging from all over the world. We have artists from the US working with artists from Kenya, Europe. The hip hop community—we all understand each other, we all embrace each other. And hip hop is a culture that is all over the world. And there are real MCs out there. Like
there might be a guy from Uganda, you don’t even know what he is saying, but you can feel that he is saying something from the way he’s delivering it. And ah, the other day, we had artists from Kenya, Colombia, Germany. It was something called Translating Hip Hop, where they do hip hop in their own tongue. It was at the Goethe Institute. And then the artists also went to Berlin the other day. It was last month in November. And it was performances and it was good because it was bringing the hip hop community together.

RP: So what you are saying is that it’s not about imitating the west?

Nafsi Huru: And hip hop is not about imitating. We don’t imitate, we are just real, we do what we feel. If I like something, I do it. If I don’t, I won’t. So that’s how it is. (Nafsi)

The assertion here is that rappers play active roles in developing the hip hop spaces that function and serve them. The fact that artists see themselves in conversation with a global hip hop culture is certainly not analogous to mimicry or imitation. Many scholars of non-US hip hop term this dynamic as appropriation. Mbûgua’s research on Kenyan rap leads him to conclude that, “youth rappers appropriate the surface representations of African American popular culture not to speak to American themes per se but more crucially to explore local and social-cultural space” (48). Furthermore, Evan Mwangi argues that rap produces alternative types of nationalism: “It is in hip hop that the youth most intensely appropriate western culture while at the same time resisting its hegemony to forge a new
sense of nationalism” (7). These explanations are meant to account for how Kenyan hip hop has materialized because of rappers’ agentive choices. My conclusions extend beyond Mbūgua and Mwangi’s. Discussions like the one with Nafsi led me to determine that Kenyan rappers innovate and transform rap music with their own unique interventions to participate collectively in a global hip hop culture. A transnational hip hop culture, which I explore in the fifth chapter, is more imagined than material. These terms serve this study more aptly than appropriate and, insultingly, imitate. It is out of the anxiety of cultural production in Kenya that artists seek to distance themselves away from indictments of “aping the west”—a common adage in Kenya—which collapses their own agential subjectivity.

Hip hop artists disavow imitation claims, while realizing that mainstream commercial culture fuels conclusions around hip hop as imitation. Many recognize this othering as two-pronged involving both the Kenyan media and the US music industry. Funzo Kuu identified Kenyan media’s over-usage of US hip hop for producing negative conceptions of hip hop in general:

But people like, you know, commercial people like Lil’ Wayne, you know those people. They paint a very bad picture. Because in Kenya, they are overplayed. They are both on radio and TV. Kenyan people, they get influenced very quickly by other cultures, especially the west. Yeah so, even you see people now with skinny jeans, you know? (Funzo)

48 See Global Linguistic Flows. The term Global Hip Hop Nation (GHHN) is used to describe the “imagined community” of rappers.
The current music industry, which is explored in the next chapter, continues to prefer western and American music for a variety of reasons. Like the early music scene, many cannot gain access to mainstream settings, much less earn a living. Mostly, rappers see themselves as being removed from mainstream commercialism, both in Kenya and in the US. When they do identify with US artists, it is mostly artists they see as non-commercial, like Common, Talib Kweli, Immortal Technique (Karpchizzy; Esen; Wise). Funzo Kuu’s complaint about US hip hop’s prevalence on television and radio is understandable, given that Kenyan media privileges US music. Meanwhile, underground and non-commercial rappers who see their work as very different than these representations are left with the task of proving their legitimacy as a viable and legitimate Kenyan music, against the plethora of representations that US rap carries.

DJ Mos contended that hip hop has gone through an evolution. He discussed how many early Kenyan rappers initially tried to rap in English with African American accents. After he stated that rappers copied styles from people like Ice Cube, I asked if he thought artists today imitate the west. He responded:

No. Hip hop basically is like a culture. I can say it was about [imitation the] time that guys came and [first] did hip hop. Because hip hop [is] like—you could do hip hop and you can make a living out of it. And it’s something serious, like considered like any other profession. And at the end of the day, it’s not a joke. I can say in society it’s not that common, but amongst the youth, it’s something that is serious. (DJ Mos)
A former rapper, DJ Mos’s perspective on the industry is from someone who used to be very invested in hip hop culture, and now more broadly works in the music industry. He realizes how hip hop could easily be misrepresented as something not as legitimate as other work, although he is not a part of hip hop scenes in the same ways that other interviewees are.

Artists confront the notions of imitation with strong arguments about the inherent Africanness or Kenyanness of hip hop. Some dismissed critics as unknowing and uneducated about hip hop culture and relevance to Kenyan culture. Here I again analyze this statement from Esen, which appeared at the beginning of the chapter:

That’s what they usually say, we are trying to imitate the west. So, to me, that’s kinda messed up because it means these guys don’t even have, you know, the right material to criticize us. So when they see hip hop artists wearing earrings, they’d be like “hey, these guys are copying the west.” Blah blah blah….but in real sense, we’ve been wearing earrings even before the west knew what earrings were. All these Africans, or Kenyan communities were wearing earrings, from the Maasais, the Kikuyus, and all that. We used to rock dreadlocks and shit like that. (Esen)

Esen positioned hip hop as not being external to Kenya, but instead a part of Kenyan historic transformations of cultural expressions. He recognizes that hip hop artists are forced to navigate the constant criticisms of always being in a position of lack. This perspective appears in other non-US hip hop scholarship. For example, in *Global Linguistic Flows*, Pennycook and Mitchell document Australian rapper Wire MC’s
assertion that hip hop has “always been a part of Aboriginal culture,” Pennycook and Mitchell note that “it is not so much the case that Hip Hop merely takes on local characteristics, but rather that it has always been local” (30, italics in original). Kenyan rappers, like Esen, see hip hop as celebrating through their own culture and redefining what it means to be Kenyan.

Artists do not just challenge the anxiety discourse, they contribute to it. Artists’ deep appreciation of US hip hop does not translate to them wanting to be American or do US hip hop. Most see their work as existing alongside US hip hop, and not as a mimesis of it. This is an important distinction, “even though [rappers] remain quite versatile at making such appropriative gestures toward hip hop, young people see, still, a clear demarcation between ‘foreign’ forms and ‘what is ours’ [Ismarwa!]” (Mbūgua, “Is Marwa!” 48). I had several conversations with rappers who guard the borders around Kenyan rap, identifying which rappers mimic the west or do commercial music and who creates a more “authentic” hip hop. These debates inevitably lead to juggling the complicated relationship between the “west” and Kenyan hip hop, because US hip hop is a constant reference. Karpchizzy stated that Common, more than anyone else has influenced him, “I don’t know why, Common gets me” (Karpchizzy). I asked this question to almost every interviewee, “Which rappers have inspired you?” Interestingly, most artists answer this question by naming US artists first and foremost, even though they could draw from Kenyan and other African artists. Some participants could have answered in these ways because I, as an American researcher, asked the question. Perhaps some assumed that I would not know Kenyan or other African rappers.
I have observed that artists are most inspired by American rappers, but see their work as critically different than those who the look to for creativeness. The underground rappers that I speak with rap in Swahili and Sheng—with the exception of Baby T and Demaine Jabez, reference or shout out Kenyan elements, places, and neighborhoods in their songs, and construct their music videos with clear and unambiguous Kenyan imagery. Ndugus, a former Audio Kusini artist, contended that Kenyan specificity should be highlighted as significant:

In Kenya we have our own issues in the streets. In New York, life is different. So I think a lot of people should learn to embrace what is ours, and speak our language. Cuz imagine you go into a store and the best Kenyan hip hop album, and you find one which has that African groove, and there is this artist who is trying to rap in English, and he is not good in it. Sounds fake. I’d rather prefer you get hip hop that is done in Kikuyu, Kimeru, Kikisii. You don’t understand but you feel what this guy is trying to… you can feel with the way he is rapping. He is like singing the chorus, you can know it’s like the real thing. But this other one that is a guy who is trying to rap in English, it’s not original. (Ndugus)

Most artists I spoke with believe Kenyan hip hop should be rapped in Swahili or Sheng (or ethnic languages). Many view performers who rap in English, like Ndugus does, as desiring to be like Americans and/or disconnected from Kenyan realities. Only a few well-known mainstream artists rap large portions or whole songs in English, for example Bamboo, Prezzo, and Octopizzo. Ndugus’s perspective is further influenced by the website he runs, voturadio.com. VOTU stands for Voice of the Underground, and is a
space where African noncommercial hip hop can be showcased (discussed in chapter four). He, like Karpchizzy, does work that is very different from both US rap and Kenyan mainstream music.

Interview content that focused on bodily performances related to controversies around “authenticity” of hip hop expressiveness. In particular, swag came up continually in interviews, through my probing questions about bodily performances, and even when artists discussed hip hop without such leading questions. Swag is a hip hop aesthetic widely popular in the US, usually connoting style of dress and the way one carries oneself.49 Peterson Braxton defines swag as a verb, “to walk with a bold, arrogant stride [or] to boast or brag loudly.” He continues, “In hip hop speech communities, […] the ‘walk’ or ‘walking’ has been transformed into the total project of one’s public persona. Thus, swagger is a comprehensive, boastful, stylistically arrogant, and somewhat effortless presentation of self in the public sphere” (618). I add that swag subjectivities are deeply rooted in neoliberal sensibilities celebrating oneself along materialistic or consumerist sensibilities. To exude oneself confidently is to publicly present oneself as an agent, and not as a victim, to economic realities.

Swag performances in Kenyan hip hop elicit debates about westernization, Americanization, cultural imperialism, and consumerism. Many artists claim that the origins of swag have come from Kenyan (and US) consumer culture. The notion of swag is regarded as borrowed from either mainstream rap culture or from the US because of its ties to the celebration of materialism. Hip hop’s other practices: rap, graffiti, and dance

49 Swag depends on the celebration of oneself. There are other occurrences of such performance gestures. See Nyairo and Ogude’s discussion of the “Nairobi City Ensemble” (390).
widely regarded as having originated in poor areas, like Dandora. Just like it can indicate personal expressions of hip hop, it can reveal defective allegiances to the US. The way one performs herself/himself reveals whether one is an “authentically” Kenyan rapper, or whether one wishes to emulate American culture.

Several interviews that specifically focused on bodily performativity often centered on swag. What I discovered is that how artists perform is a critical signifier in determining the Kenyanness of rap music. My first set of interviews involved asking people to analyze photographs of Kenyan male rappers. There were four images 1) Kalamashaka, the most famous pioneer group 2) current *enge* artist Jua Cali 3) another *enge* rapper Nonini 4) Bamboo, a member of K-South who spent his formative years in Inglewood, California. The images illustrate bodily performances that are common in global hip hop. I used the images as a jumping off point to discuss cool gestures. I asked interviewees a host of questions, including identifying similarities and differences.

Many practitioners used the term swag when discussing Bamboo. The image is a close up photo; he is wearing a blue New York Yankees baseball hat, a red hoodie with the words in white “Soweto,” and a silver chain. His hands are assertively griping the rim of the baseball cap, a common gesture in US hip hop. He has a grimacing, yet confident look on his face. By way of background, he is a member of K-South, born in Kenya, grew up in Inglewood, CA, moved back to Nairobi as a teenager, and has made music for both American and Kenyan markets. He continues to travel back and forth. He did a remake of Akon’s “Mama Africa” and has yet to get widespread recognition from the US market. Bamboo is an example of someone who has access to material possessions and
external influence to develop style. Bamboo has endorsement success both in East Africa and the US: Coca Cola Africa and Kenya Brewery signed him to market their products, the Star newspaper reported that he sold one of his songs to Disney (Kerongo). Throughout his career he has produced songs in both English and Swahili.

Bamboo, more than the other artists, drew charges of western imitation and mimicry from the interviewees. Struggling male gospel artist Ibbs asserted Bamboo’s pose is “copied swag” (Ibbs). Likewise, R&B singer, Snooker notes Bamboo’s lack of loyalty to the Kenyan rap scene:

RP: So let’s take Bamboo, what is he trying to say by the way he is posing?

Snooker: From the way he is posing, I wouldn’t say that he is supporting Kenya as such. He’s more into the states.

RP: Why would you say that?

Snooker: First of all, he has a New York cap. He has bling, this is silver. The only thing that is African about him is his looks because we know him. And the jersey that is written Soweto. Other than that, there is nothing African about him.

RP: If it’s not African, that what is it?

Snooker: It’s American.
RP: So what in particular is American? So what does an African swag look like?\textsuperscript{50}

Snooker: Africans, we are simple people. This one for Jua Cali is simple, for Kalamashaka it’s simple. Nonini is African, but you see his clothes are Kenyan made. We’ve seen them around, but for Bamboo, we know from what we see in the image. (Snooker)

Snooker’s comments allude to how a person’s hip hop gestures can be read as a betrayal of Kenyan culture. Snooker’s dismissal of Bamboo seems to be because Bamboo has spent time growing up in the U.S. and dons a New York Yankees cap. If we were to have examined the images based on clothing styles alone, it is Nonini who looks much more “flashy” than Bamboo. Bamboo’s silver chain is modest with no emblem. Nonini wears sunglasses and a leather outfit from Kenyan designer, Jamhuri Wear, with an elaborate embroidered logo.\textsuperscript{51}

Bamboo has a distinct African American accent when rapping in English, which is another reason people label him as western. Wise, a graffiti artist in the underground scene, references his accent as faultily imitative. When I stated that he spent a large part of his life in California, Wise cited this common quip, “Like it’s so simple. If I sent him [Bamboo], to a country like India for ten good years, he wouldn’t get that accent [an

\textsuperscript{50}Snooker is the one to bring up the term swag in this interview.

\textsuperscript{51}Kenyan designer Kimathi began and runs Jamhuri Wear. KNaan, Jay Z, and Akon have all worn Jamhuri Wear publicly. The clothing line have been marketed in the US and Kenya, and is inspired by hip hop, but also African leaders and freedom fighters like Dedan Kimathi and Nelson Mandela. Jamhuri Wear has appealed to middle and upper class consumers.
Indian accent]. You know what I mean?” (Wise). Bamboo has responded to such critiques. Here is an excerpt from a 2007 interview:

Jamati: You have been criticised for sounding too ‘American’, how do you balance the American and African sides so that both are happy, or do you? Do you think that it works against you to sound too African?

[Bamboo:] Well I do Swahilli [sic] music for Kenyans, and English music for my western fanbase [sic]. If it’s not in [S]wahilli [sic] they should understand that its not really for them its for an audience which only understands [E]nglish..I don’t have an [A]frican accent so if I tried it would be fake and sound funny as hell!

Lol. (Alusa-Brown)

Artists with whom I spoke do not think that Bamboo believes he is American, but rather he wants to be successful by styling his rap with American characteristics. Wise states of Bamboo and Jua Cali, “they’re Kenyan but they try to put in, ah, this American flavor to their music” (Wise). This is an important distinction and it has a firm place in anxiety discourses, which infer the problem isn’t the presence of American music, but instead the fact that Kenyans incorporate it into their musical lexicons. Kenyan artists can enjoy American hip hop, but they must see themselves as distinguishable from their US counterparts.

There are several reasons why Bamboo could be read as creating distinctly Kenyan rap. Bamboo’s albums, Nairobbery (2002) and Nairobizm (2004), are not positioned in the US; they are about his experiences in Kenya. The embodiment of hip

---

52 Ntarangwi discusses this insult in the same fashion Wise does (54).
hop as an American other, and not just listening to it, is what ultimately provokes these deep questions and apprehensions over rap. I will illustrate an example of this from Bamboo’s latest track, “25 Flow.” This song is a dance song that features the female singer Sugar. The title is a play off of Kenya’s country code, +254, again locating this song in Kenya. Bamboo’s raps are about being fresh and having style. He announces his return to the Kenyan hip hop scene. The music video’s backdrop is in largely in front of a new Range Rover positioned in various urban settings, with people dancing and bobbing their heads. Bamboo is lyrically creative and raps over beats with confidence, flow, and style. His bodily performance does appear notably different than his underground counterparts (which I explore thoroughly in the fifth chapter). This includes bouncing back and forth, with his arms flexed and chest out. This type of performance is assertive, masculine, and leisurely. Often he looks down with his chin out and lips pursed in a judgmental fashion. He dances, but his torso stays isolated and his forearms and hands move to the beat, keeping his torso, chest, and upper arms isolated, giving him masculine hardness. It is not difficult to see why artists find Bamboo influenced by the US. There are a few of his performances that appear in African American contexts. One of his dance moves involves punching backwardly into the air at an angle, while bouncing to the beat. So many of Kenyan dance styles are about hip and waist movements (no doubt influenced by Congo dance), and this dance seems to be centered around subtle and slight upper body movements, which is similar to some African American dance styles. He licks his lips in between raps, in a seductive and masculine manner. This is a common gesture in African American contexts, including hip hop, perhaps made famous by rapper
and actor LL Cool J.

His performances exist against female artist, Sugar, who sings the hook. Her contribution to the song is nominal, as she sings the background chorus which echoes “2-5-Flow, 2-5-Flow.” She is very feminine, adorned with a fan, large women’s sunglasses with a jeweled neck cord, diamond necklaces, and bright red lipstick. There are people and young children behind him helping him sing the chorus. The central focus is Bamboo, who at one point raps extensively about what swag is:

Siku hizi swagga mahimu/ (These days swagga (swagger) is important)
Siku hizi swagga ni doh/ (These days swagga (swagger) is about money)
Siku hizi swagga elimu/ (These days swagga (swagger) is education)
Siku hizi swagga ni job/ (These days swagga (swagger) is a job)
Siku hizi swagga marashi/ (These days swagga (swagger) is perfume)
Siku hizi swagga ni flow/ (These days swagga (swagger) is about flow)

(TherealBamboo)

All of these descriptions are meant to be illustrative of how he embodies swag. In many respects, the underground artists who criticize him are correct; his swag is commercial. Bamboo states that swag is about money, and it’s a full time job. To state that swag is about perfume means that it is about keeping one’s presentation at its best, always being conscious about personal appearance. It symbolizes that it is something to be put on, although I do not believe that Bamboo asserts that his swag is inauthentic. He instead locates swag as personal within a materialistic register. He is from the upper class, and his bodily performances, the new and shiny Range Rover in the background, and his
clothing all tell viewers this. The majority of the artists interviewed felt that Bamboo was “inauthentic” or that he wanted to be like US rappers. Only Nafsi Huru and Esen said they liked Bamboo. Most of those I speak with are long attendants of WAPI and Hip Hop Festival both at Sarakasi Dome, and are connected to and influenced by underground groups like Kalamashaka and Ukoo Flani Mau Mau. Bamboo is a mainstream artist who has garnered credibility and fame through his work in Kenya and the US.

The artists I interview rethink swag on their terms, while they maintain that the swag subjectivity that Bamboo performs is commercial, western, and privileged. Karpchizzy stated, “I believe I have my own swag. I mistook the swag thing for being all shiny” (Karpchizzy). I followed that comment up with asking if swag is about material possessions. He responded, “It doesn’t have to be. If you are looking good, you know what you are doing, you are fresh” (Karpchizzy). He identified male artists like Camp Mulla and Octopizzo who fall into the category of copying the west, “To me, they are copying. And I don’t want to copy/paste. As much as I want to deliver the good stuff, I want it to come with a more African feeling. A more street feeling” (Karpchizzy). Both Octopizzo and Camp Mulla are relatively successful mainstream artists who do hip hop music. He provided the disclaimer that, “I’m not hating,” before naming Camp Mulla and Octopizzo as western mimics to preface his argument non-judgmentally and to not appear jealous of their success. Female artist, Amora, stated, “I think swag is ah, you, what you feel what looks good on you. Your style, your class, your presentation of yourself to other people” (Amora). Moreover, male artist Funzo Kuu posited, “You know, you can’t force swag, you can’t force style. You can’t force fashion and art. It’s an emotion that’s in you”
(Funzo). These statements point to the idea that swag can be recontextualized into an embodiment of hip hop culture that allows artists to have “authentic” interactions with hip hop.

There are underlying similarities to the internal policing of hip hop culture and critiques from general society. Both reflect tendencies to define Kenya along its own terms. Bodily performances in hip hop play a critical role in this conversation by demonstrating one’s commitment to rap music culture. I asked Nafsi Huru where people gain negative perceptions of rap from, which I quoted in full in the beginning of this chapter. Here, it is worth mentioning again because he answers by voluntarily mentioning swag, “I think it’s just a conception because people who do hip hop are energetic and we have swag and things like that” (Nafsi, emphasis mine). Nafsi’s point, that swag denotes something negative, illustrates the cultural anxieties that swag elicits. He told me later that his mother is supportive, while his father wishes for him to get a “real job” (Nafsi). This is a reoccurring theme in my interactions with artists; some have one or both parents who support them, while many have parents who want their children to have a wage earning “respectable” position. Anxiety about economic security drives many parents to discourage rappers, and additionally, Nafsi’s comment motions to a larger normative standard at work—one that has strict ideas of what culture looks and sounds like, as well as one that disciplines bodies toward both docility and productivity. The policing of bodies, to which he so aptly identifies, will be the subject of the next chapter.

The artists of the post-Mau Mau underground cultural aesthetic take firm stances on hip hop. Multiple historic and social forces help to structure conversations about
Nairobi rap culture, and the discourses that arise out of processes carry a lot of weight. The artists who navigate through and encounter charges of mimicry take such accusations seriously. Yet their conceptions of commercial rap mirror how many non-devotees judge rap music. The indictment of musical mimicry is a trenchant and caustic verdict because it signals an inherent lack. To want to mimic the US, either through sounds, gestures, or materialism, bespeaks a permanently subordinate subjectivity dependent on what one is not. Artists, unsurprisingly, reject such positions on such matters.
Chapter 4: Politics of Shupavu

Non-commercial underground hip hop, following a post-Mau Mau underground cultural aesthetic, responds to social precarity produced by the state, contemporary capitalism, and the music industry. In the spirit of this aesthetic quality, underground hip hop examines, re-conceptualizes, and resists these conditions. Rappers develop stylistic methods, like music and performances, to counteract and combat everyday economic and political uncertainties. Many practitioners enact performances in this context as an unaffected and unfazed armor against a social setting that marks their bodies as always and constantly the other. The music industry, which is the composition of both state power and capitalist institutions, is responsible for the obstacles many hip hop practitioners encounter as they seek to develop their careers. This chapter extensively traces the settings from which a post-Mau Mau underground cultural aesthetic emerges, and discusses the various ways artists respond to these social realities. Rappers’ refusal to accept the status quo, through their interrogation of copyright policies and industry regulations, fuel a resistive and rebellious sentiment.

Hip hop practitioners argue that state power is a barrier in their lives. Indeed the government’s heavy-handed actions, fueled by greed and an unwillingness to address problems, have exacerbated unrest and political dissent. It exercises sovereign power that produces what Agamben calls bare life, lives that can be “killed, but not sacrificed;”
those bodies who can be regarded as excess to the greater body politic and can be excised from national spaces without recourse or explanation (12). The state additionally reinforces economic inequality by fostering an elite and powerful upper class largely composed of politicians and their associates. This has lead me to consider Judith Butler’s discussion on precarity and vulnerability, as she posits a rather frank question, “who counts as human?” (Precarious 20).  

Butler focuses a portion of her discussion on how state formations create endemic social uncertainties, and how notions of vulnerability can be rethought as a basis of social action. Precarity is additionally the result of material conditions created by a global capitalist economy. Marx theorized this when discussing labor alienation.

“[…] [The] mass of propertyless workers—the utterly precarious position of labour-power on a mass scale cut off from capital or from even a limited satisfaction and, therefore, no longer merely temporarily deprived of work itself as a secure source of life—presupposes the world market through competition. […] [It] is certainly an empirical fact that separate individuals have, with the broadening of their activity into world-historical activity, become more enslaved under a power alien to them. (162, 163, emphasis in original)  

This chapter explores how the Kenyan state and a capitalist economy create notions of humanity, which in this case are those who are exempt from violence and precarityousness,
while others remain victim to it. Moreover, it investigates how rap music performances respond to and exist within society built inequality. Hip hop performances, like the music, confront ills produced by these inequalities. These performance styles work to maintain one’s humanity, challenge state power’s mechanisms of subjection, allow artists to dodge systems that police bodies, and help artists to be in control of their own creative processes. Hip hop consistently commits to facing, disavowing, and deflecting marginalizing practices that work to dehumanize.

The aim of this chapter is to understand the social and political conditions from which hip hop materializes. I discuss the historic and contemporary barriers, created during the Moi regime and demonstrate that while the Kibaki state sought to open up democratic processes, it also has dealt with opposition and dissention through an enforcement of violence. First, I discuss how the Kenyan state is constituted by the intersection of power, the politicization of ethnicity and the grab for and distribution of resources. I use the terms governmentality, necropolitics, and prebendalism, to discuss how the state works to repress and police people. This chapter also picks up where the last left off in terms of the history of the state and continues that discussion to the present day, as well as illustrating contemporary political economy of hip hop. Second, I explore the obstacles that artists face in the current music industry with a particular focus on copyright issues. Artists consistently discussed the music industry as an immediate barrier in their careers. The last section delves into the composition of rap music performances in relation to power, authority, and foreclosed opportunities. I conduct a close reading of Judge and Washamba Wenza’s song and music video, “Shupavu,” which
is located within a post-Mau Mau underground cultural aesthetic that seeks to call
attention to the everyday modes of violence that lower class people confront.

The State

Most rap music practitioners view the state as corrupt, violent, and undemocratic. Rappers see their work as challenging an exclusive society that political elites continue to monopolize and control. Artists often cited the government as causing the hardships they face even when asked general questions. The following example is from an interview with Funzo Kuu, a rapper and producer. We had begun an introductory conversation, and I asked him why hip hop is important in Kenyan society:

Cuz, music…ah,…the majority of young people that I know, they are under
pressure. It’s from the government. Living standards are high; there are no jobs.\(^{55}\) […] We have one common thing, all of us. We are oppressed. We want love, you know. […] And hip hop is the only thing that is we can associate ourselves with, because it is common to everyone. Everyone relates to hip hop. I don’t know what hip hop has. It has this, I don’t know, this punch. It’s like a voice for the oppressed. Or something like that. (Funzo)

This section elaborates on Funzo Kuu’s concerns by discussing the Moi and Kibaki state.

---

\(^{55}\) Here, Funzo meant to state that “the cost of living is high.”
The Moi administration operated under a one-party dictatorship rule, and the Kibaki government, though in some ways better than Moi, was plagued by extra-state violence, a disputed election, and politicians’ continued grab of state resources. Both presidents constructed states that held onto power, all the while stoking historic ethnic divisions, and resorting to heavy-handed violence at various times. This analysis of the Kenyan state must be read in a larger context; it has long been known for its relative stability in the East African region. Unlike places like Uganda, Sudan, Somalia, and the DRC, for example, Kenya has had relative peace since independence. This of course does not mean that there have not been severe conflicts, incidences of state repression, and ongoing economic instability. The Kenyan state continues to be constituted under the long history of ethno-nationalism, whereby state power and economic competition has materialized along ethnic and class lines. I examine the Kenyan state, specifically as it is prone to violence, repression, and policing and adopt three arguments for this reading. First, the state operates through governmentality, which is a Foucauldian notion meaning “a mode of power concerned with the maintenance and control of bodies and persons, the production and regulation of persons and populations, and the circulation of goods insofar as they maintain and restrict the life of the population” (Butler, Precarious 52). Second, the state operates necropolitically. It lacks a systematic infrastructure to enable a more comprehensive policing of bodies, and therefore relies on the deployment of violence to fill the inevitable gaps that governance cannot meet. Necropolitics, as articulated by Achille Mbembé, is the political enactment of the “power of death.”

56 There are several reasons for this, including that Kenya has been historically US-oriented. See Bachmann and Honke’s “‘Peace and Security’ as Counterterrorism?”
that act necropolitically marshal the use of violent and unabashed force with the sole aim of using death to demand compliance. I draw on Agamben, who Mbembé heavily relies on, and specifically his notion of the sovereign and “bare life” to conceptualize the Kenyan state. Third, I argue that the state is prebendal, drawing from Richard Joseph, meaning its actors use the state to enable their own wealth generation. This section also traces the state’s transition into neoliberalism and considers how new economic realities have transformed government practices of prebendalism and necropolitics.

Daniel arap Moi’s rule was part of a group of second-wave leaders in Africa known as “life presidents,” those who stated explicitly or through repressive actions they would rule until they died. The consolidation of power and violent dismantling of any dissent especially marked the first half of his twenty-four year rule (1978-2002). Rapper Funzo Kuu in his interview described the 80s as a particularly difficult time:

The Kenyan generations from 1978 to 1988, that whole gap, *yaani*, people… you know I was born in 1986, that whole gap, we have lacked something. There’s something that we’ve wanted because our parents […] were giving birth to us, our country was still under one-party dictatorship. So guys were trying to catch up with life and they neglected you know, their children, their spouse. So, there’s this anger that many people, young people [have]. There’s this anger and the only way they feel they can express it. They want to, the only way we can express it is by shouting it out loud. Because our parents tried. But it didn’t work, you know? And we’ve noticed that things are just getting worse. You know? (Funzo)

Moi’s one-party dictatorship that Funzo alludes to was the basis of several forms of
political suppression. This occurred through the consolidation of power. He exerted control over the media, making the Kenya Broadcasting Corporation (KBC) more or less coterminous with the ruling party, the Kenyan African National Union (KANU), and therefore the state. Each radio service, for instance, ended with a version of “KANU Yajenga Nchi” (KANU builds the Nation), the anthem for the party (Mazrui et al 14). Moi continued a widespread culture of corruption that began during Jomo Kenyatta, which ensured that the government served politicians and other affiliated elites. Moi had been weary of politicians and activists who questioned his power even before the 1982 failed coup, especially university professors and students. In 1980, he charged university academic staff union with hiding pangas in Nairobi University. He accused university lecturers of plotting violence against the state in May 1982 and detained six of them who spent approximately a half-decade in prison. The same week, parliament passed an amendment making Kenya a de jure one-party state making other political parties besides KANU illegal (Atieno-Odhiambo, “Hegemonic” 228). This move made KANU co-extensive with the government. Those who opposed were imprisoned, like Oginda Odinga, Micere Mugo, and Raila Odinga, and others exiled, specifically, Ngugi wa Thiong’o and Elisha Stephen Atieno-Odhiambo. Many were subject to torture and killings, for example members of Mwakenya, which was a mostly Kikuyu underground group that organized in the years after the coup. They called for an end to American imperialism and military relationships with the United States. They destroyed the

---

57 In relation to this phenomenon, Agamben states, “The structure by which the State party tends to appear as a duplicate of the State structure can then be considered as a paradoxical and interesting technico-juridical solution to the problem of how to maintain constituting power” (30).
58 When the leader of the union argued against the accusations, he disappeared for three days (see Atieno-Odhiambo 227). Pangas are machetes.
Mombasa-Nairobi railway line, were labeled terrorists, and faced government crackdown from 1986-1988. Moi used the crackdown on Mwakenya to his advantage. Anyone who opposed the government during this time could acquire a Mwakenya label and be questioned or detained. Such a move helped justify years of torture and extra-judicial “invisible killings” of university professors, activists, and other dissenters in the infamous Nyayo House (Mbembé, “Necropolitics” 30).  

His rule was characterized by both extreme forms of violence coupled with commonplace acceptance among people. People’s tolerance was encouraged by fear, preoccupations with basic survival, economic benefits, assumptions of powerlessness, and/or general apathy. Like other dictators, he used forms of symbolic power to legitimate his rule. Examples include the practice of posting presidential portraits in all businesses and the reprinting of money with his image on it, which is widespread in African and Asian countries. Mbembé argues that state authority, or what he calls commandement, produces an everydayness of its own power through representations of itself:

The signs, vocabulary, and narratives that the commandement produces are meant not merely to be symbols’ they are officially invested with a surplus of meanings that are not negotiable and that one is officially forbidden to depart from or

---

59 There is some controversy over Mwakenya, as some suggest that the state created the group to justify its campaign of suppression (see Hornsby 414-417).
60 Moi tried to maintain moderate acceptance during the course of his rule. He had, for instance, diverse ethnic representations in many government positions. The highest and most important of positions were many times given to Kalenjin elites, but individuals from other ethnic groups held lower level posts, especially provincial positions. The goal was to discourage discontent, and it was extremely strategic because any one who expressed disapproval or questioned him would be replaced with a more loyal person (Hornsby 404). It was no secret he held his popular base among Rift Valley Kalenjin communities (see Klopp “Moral Ethnicity”).
Moi’s one-finger performance serves as an example of how a symbol, or more accurately a gesture, functioned in service of his rule. This performance would occur during festivals, rallies, and any other place where Moi passed publicly. As the motorcade came through, he stood up in his open limo and shook his index finger pointedly in the air, representing one-partyism. The crowd would then return the gesture with a one-finger shake, demonstrating what Mbembé would call “mutual zombification” (*Postcolony* 104). I witnessed such a performance in 2000, even though one-party rule technically ended in the early 1990s. The person who was with me at the time shook his finger with Moi, as did most of the crowd. Then he laughingly confessed that he hated Moi, and that he “just does it.” The gesture illustrates how political rule can solidify in the performance of power. Moi’s rule was solidified, not only through violence, symbolism, and the consolidation of power, but also through “an obsession with pomp and theatrical ritual” (Berman 335). This is an example of what Judith Butler terms the performative, which “accumulates the force of authority through the repetition or citation of a prior, authoritative set of practices” (*Bodies* 227).

The Moi government was characterized by prebendalism. Richard Joseph argues that prebendalism is marked by “patterns of political behaviour which reflect as their justifying principle that the offices of the existing state may be competed for and then utilised for the personal benefit of office-holders as well as that of their reference or support group” (30). Hornsby describes how state elites connected to Moi conducted “briefcase business,” whereas “the sole objective was to fleece the state” (441). These
widespread practices that began during Jomo Kenyatta occurred on several levels of state practices. One example is government contracts, where businesspeople overcharged the state for projects half completed or never begun at all. Prebendal politics helped keep Moi in power. The World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) insisted that Moi hold elections in 1992, and he used state resources illicitly to fund KANU’s questionable victory. Such interactions solidified power based on a cooperative corruption that involved many untouchable individuals. Fighting such corruption has been largely impractical for many reasons, one being that such calls are largely met with apathy and denial by the leaders and politically connected bourgeoisie, unless it serves their interests to act otherwise, which is hardly the case. These practices have assisted in giving rise to a commonplace culture of bribing that exists today. To escape police harassment or even to complete a transaction at a government office, or sometimes even a private office, all could involve handing over extra money. These interactions have been called kitu kidogo or nipe chai, though these phrases can be regarded as outdated due to their widespread use. Kitu kidogo is “something small,” and colloquially it is used to mean a bribe. Nipe chai is literally “give me tea,” which carries the same meaning as kitu kidogo. Eric Wainaina’s song “Nchi ya Kitu Kidogo,” (A country of kitu kidogo) explores what is commonly called a culture of corruption.

Kenya, like most peripheral countries, has been impacted by the global neoliberal economy. Neoliberalism is based on unregulated competition and involves open markets for supposed unlimited economic potentials of competent actors. It supposedly is “coextensive with all of society, all of rationality, and that it is economics ‘all the way
down”’ (Read 28). Neoliberal proponents advocate for its global reach, which is always regarded as beneficial and necessary. Moi faced pressure from the international community and within Kenya to reform by the end of the 80s, specifically to bring back multipartyism and hold elections. The phrase, “Moi must go,” became a common plea. Notable political leaders, like Kenneth Matiba, Martin Shikuku, and Charles Rubia, were arrested or detained in the early 1990s for organizing political meetings. The *Saba Saba* rally in July 1990, which these leaders were involved in, continued to pressure for reform. The police responded by arresting scores of activists, bystanders, and passersby (Mazrui et al 17). There were other songs, besides “*Nchi*” that criticized political authority. Joseph Kamaru came out with a gospel song, “*Mahoya ma Bururi*” (Prayers for the Nation), which contained political undertones. Albert Gacheru composed “*Mucemanio wa Nyamu*” (Meeting of the Animals) and “*Thina wa Muoroto*” (Troubles of Muoroto) (Mutonya 27). Officials saw these songs as a political threat with the capacity to arouse greater dissent, and Gacheru was imprisoned briefly. International actors continued pressure as well. The IMF and World Bank in partnership with the US began to insist that Moi liberalize economies, hold elections, and retire. Eventually donors froze aid demanding competitive elections and open markets, ultimately resulting in two elections, 1992 and 1997, both ending in ethnic violence and Moi’s victory (Klopp 272; Atieno-Odhiambo, “Hegemonic” 226). So-called freer economies also meant liberalizing airwaves. Up to that point, the media had been largely impacted by the influential reach of the state, evident by the media’s continued overwhelmingly positive portrayal of KANU (Mazrui 17-19). For example, radio programs on the state owned and
Neoliberalism and the implementation of structural adjustment programs (SAPs) have served to further solidify state power and disempower the majority of the populace, rather than opening up avenues. As a result, prebendalism only transformed and strengthened in the 1990s and enabled politicians to acquire obscene amounts of wealth. Neoliberal thought calls for the obsolescence of the state, but this has happened nowhere in practice, and in Africa as in other places, state institutions have undergone “radical reconfigurations” in service of capital (Harvey 78). The IMF and World Bank imposed SAPs on post-colonial states like Kenya seeking aid beginning in the early 80s. The progress toward meeting the demands of the IMF and World Bank was slow and corrupt. SAPs insisted that the government privatize its vast number of state owned companies. Moi’s administration largely failed to sell state run entities in the 80s, and it only began to occur in the 90s when the IMF and World Bank began to withhold aid (Hornsby 567). Privatization did not manage to open up economically democratic possibilities, and it mostly ended up benefiting politicians and well-connected elites. The government sold businesses to politicians and other cronies. For instance, it sold the Milling Corporation to private buyers for a fifth of its worth, and Moi, along with Nicolas Biwott and Joshua Kulei, were the owners (Hornsby 569). Additionally, the Moi and Kenyatta family are owners of Commercial Bank of Africa and the Euro Bank (Hornsby 655). These transactions enabled state actors and their cronies to exacerbate economies of exclusion. 

---

61 Hornsby cites Wikileaks for this information. Nicholas Biwott has been in politics for a number of years, holding many positions as an MP and government minister of agriculture, home affairs, state, and energy. He has amassed large amounts of wealth through business deals. He is said to have played a major role in the Goldenberg scandal and the murder of Robert Ouko. Joshua Kulei was Moi’s close associate who is said to have amassed a tremendous amount of wealth during his presidency.
where only a few elite people could benefit. Now elite groups run the most profitable industries. For example, Uhuru Kenyatta and his family own Brookside Dairy heading the milk production in Kenya and many parts of East Africa, and Raila Odinga owns an extremely profitable molasses plant in Nyanza province.  

SAPs have had a devastating impact in many sectors in Kenya, including inflation, the elimination of civil service jobs and basic social services, all of which has worsened poverty. It was during this time that hip hop practitioners began to use songs to reflect on economic severities. Kalamashaka bemoan these social circumstances in their groundbreaking and well-known 1999 song “Tafsiri Hii.” The song disparaged government corruption, as well as urban poverty and police brutality especially in Dandora, a poor neighborhood in Eastlands, Nairobi. In short, “Tafsiri hii, Maisha kule D ni mazi” (Translate this, Life in the D (Dandora) is bad/hard). The 1990s market liberalization meant that the market set wages, giving little economic justice to low wage earners. This also ballooned the informal jua kali sectors in Nairobi and elsewhere. SAPs forced government spending to reduce the budget and deficit through the elimination of some civil service positions and departments. Health care and education budgets were cut, cost sharing imposed, and low-level civil service jobs were eliminated as a result. These changes have exacerbated poverty in an already tenuous economic situation, helping to create an underemployed or unemployed urban class living in informal settlements. Additionally, such moves have worsened conditions for many living in rural

62 Uhuru Kenyatta has monopolized the milk industry since becoming president in April 2013. Additionally, he has expanded production in the banking and tourism industries. See Victor Juma’s article in the Business Daily, “Kenyatta Business Expansion Goes into Overdrive.”
Political leaders have historically woven ethnicity into the practices and constitution of the state. It continues to factor into political life and create sets of problems that the state exploits when necessary. Kenyan politicians have built the post-colonial state on “the maintenance of the ethnic networks of patronage that are the basis of their power” (Berman 306). Bruce Berman draws on John Lonsdale’s work calling this “uncivil nationalism,” which is the combination of “moral ethnicity” and “political tribalism” through patronage (324). Moral ethnicity is best defined as communal cultural expressions and responsibilities, and political tribalism is the reconfiguration of ethnicity in the practices of state power and client networks (324). Thus uncivil nationalism occurs when politicized ethnicity colludes with moral ethnicity to become a commonplace and troublesome presence of Kenyan society, which enables “the combination of the heavy-handed authoritarianism of the state with the pervasiveness of patron-client relations at all levels of politics, the salience of ethnicity in political and socio-economic transactions, and the crude materialism and corruption of the ‘politics of the belly’” (308).

This has been evident in every administration, Kenyatta (Kikuyu), Moi (Kalenjin), Kibaki (Kikuyu), and though Uhuru Kenyatta just became president in March 2013, he has not indicated that he will break from the well-established practice. Many Kikuyus have historically benefited from the long presence of Kikuyu leadership. Given that there are over 40 ethnic groups, this minimal amount of presidential ethnic representation alludes to a much larger prevalent problem. Ethnicity matters in Kenya in large part due to politicians’ practice of politicizing it. For example, resistance and dissidence
materialized along lines of state power and ethnicity. Many of those individuals who vehemently resisted Moi, for example, were Kikuyu and Luo activists. And several Kikuyu activists outspoken during Moi’s era were all but silent during Kibaki’s.

The Kibaki government (2002-2013) promised a new form of governance in Kenya; “there was unheralded jubilation and heightened expectation that the change in regime […] marked the dawn of a new era” (Murunga and Nasong’o 2). Kibaki’s then political party, National Rainbow Coalition (NARC), defeated Moi’s KANU, disrupting a forty-year rule. Kibaki’s win symbolized a break from the old, oppressive, hackneyed form of governance that Moi long signified. Kibaki took full advantage of people’s hope, desperation, and unrelenting desire to see fundamental change. This was demonstrated poignantly by NARC’s appropriation and re-production of Gidi Gidi Maji Maji’s popular rap song, “Unbwogable.” The song was not written for use in official politics. Its original lyrics celebrate Luo politicians, freedom fighters, and activists. NARC took advantage of the popularity, bought the licensing rights, and remixed it (Nyairo and Ogude). NARC wanted to use the song to exemplify the democratic collaborations and mend ethnic divisions, and did so by altering the original song’s Luo emphasis and incorporating other ethnicities directly into the lyrics. Kibaki used the song to make a larger argument that Moi’s KANU was solely responsible for the economic realities that had befallen Kenya, and thus making NARC an easy and appealing choice (Nyairo and Ogude).

“Unbwogable” also helped build the image of Kibaki as someone who could stand by the
The different styles of governance and the break from a dictatorship are evident in the way hip hop artists referenced Moi and Kibaki. Moi’s one-party dictatorship was easy for artists to identify as a challenge in people’s lives; recall Funzo Kuu’s statement above. During Kibaki’s presidency, artists expressed general discontent with the state, and Kibaki is rarely mentioned. Most artists speak more generally, naming “politicians” and “the government” as their source of general cynicism. I asked both Judge and Wise about why hip hop is important. Judge stated, “This the kind of voice that, eh, even like eh, the government sometimes don’t have time to listen to the people who are down underground” (Judge). Esen contended, “[You shouldn’t] take what society, or government, or whatever it is, tell [sic] you, ‘this is how it is supposed to be.’ I think hip hop music gives you a way of addressing it without really being violent about it, you know?” (Esen). Many rappers believe that the “the government” is the source of problems, meaning that multiple actors are implicated in this indictment, as opposed to it only being about Kibaki.

There were several attempts at reform during Kibaki’s rule, which are noteworthy. In 2003, the administration instituted the National Youth Service, designed to provide education and job training to young people, especially street children. This

---

63 Citizen. Colloquially, the phrase common *mwananchi* is “the common man” or “common person.” This is a regularly used phrase. Kibaki could have easily been seen as a recycled politician since he had been in politics since independence and served as vice president from 1978-1988. He actually only advocated for multiparty politics after Moi removed him from power. The song worked to tell a different story, however, that Kibaki could bring political change. After being pushed out of vice presidency, and just when Kenya opened to multiparty politics, he formed his own party. Kibaki had beat Josephat Karanja overwhelmingly for the post, and Moi inserted Karanja instead. Perhaps he was able to draw some of his popularity from his history of pro-multipartyism, as well as being victim to Moi’s power-hungry tactics.
was welcome news in a situation where adolescent street boys, known as *chokoraa*, can rob and menace people in Nairobi and other urban areas (Innovations). By Kibaki’s second term, this program ran ineffectively and at times not at all. Relatedly, the Kazi kwa Vijana (KKV) headed by Raila Odinga was implemented after young unemployed males were blamed for the post-election violence. Similar to National Youth Service, KKV was a youth training program sponsored by the World Bank. Both programs have had implementation problems, and the World Bank pulled funding of KKV after it determined misallocation of funds (“Statement”). Kibaki ran a large part of his campaign on constitutional reform. In 2005, people voted on a constitutional referendum. The major issues included how much power the president should have, land reform, and existence of other religious courts of law besides Islamic. This issue fell along ruling party lines, whereby Kibaki’s NARC campaigned for the referendum and the opposition, Orange Democratic Movement (ODM), was against it (Lynch, “Fruits” 233-270). Voters turned down the referendum, however, the election ultimately represented a more open political process compared to the years of Moi’s autocracy.

There have large problems during this administration as well. Kibaki’s campaign promises included, “neoliberal populism,” “civic nationalism and […] a multi-ethnic coalition” (Kagwanja 373). Kibaki’s time in power involved moving power from the “Kalenjin elite to the Mount Kenya Mafia” by giving positions to those well-connected people from Kikuyu communities (Murunga and Nasong’o 7). He gave posts to close relatives and associates of the Kenyatta family. A few years after he came into power many from KANU, which was his political opposition in 2002, were ironically back in
government. Kibaki campaigned along the lines of government reform, a leadership that incorporates civil society, and one that recognizes youth concerns. Democratic coalitions, in some ways, have been a façade for the monopolization of wealth into mostly a Kikuyu elite. His regime has been at the center of many scandals, including a deliberate, avoidable, and profitable maize shortage, the extravagant spending of government money, and setting up unscrupulous anti-corruption bodies (Murunga and Nasong’o 20). Conspicuous overspending has coincided with the government’s insistence that anti-poverty measures could not be taken because of the unfair demands of the IMF and World Bank (21). The state has tried to silence those who publicly speak out about its actions. Journalists have been arrested for publishing articles criticizing Kibaki’s administration, notably David Makali, Kwamchetsi Makokha, and Kamau Ngotho (23).

The 2007-8 post-election violence has come to mark Kibaki’s administration, though several state actors are responsible for perpetuating it. Kibaki was sworn in amid a highly disputable victory in December 2007, and that night Kalenjin, Luo, and Luyha groups supposedly funded by Raila and Ruto began to attack Kikuyu businesses in the Rift Valley.\(^{64}\) That began a serious of retaliatory attacks, whereby Kikuyu groups fought against Kalenjin, Luo, and Luyha militias, committed acts of violence and killed people from those communities. Likewise, Kalenjin, Luo, and Luyha militias and informal youth groups hunted down and killed Kikuyus, burnt houses, and other buildings. Uhuru Kenyatta’s trial at the ICC involves him giving resources to groups like Mungiki, which

\(^{64}\) Peter Kajwang’a states that the immediacy of the violence suggests that it was planned. This is based on the fact that Kalenjin youths were being trained, and received oaths, in the months leading up to the election (“Courting” 378-379).
is a largely Kikuyu organization and street gang, to retaliate violence against Luo and Kalenjin communities. Likewise, Ruto’s allegations include funding Kalenjin groups to purposely hunt down and kill Kikuyus. Those who were victims and perpetrators of turmoil were by and large not the middle and upper classes, but those people from economically vulnerable neighborhoods and areas. Mbembé notes, “…war is no longer waged between armies of two sovereign states [but] waged by armed groups behind the mask of the state against armed groups who have no state but control distinct territories” (“Necropolitics” 35). These conflicts were concentrated in informal settlement slums, though violence occurred throughout the country. This seems tragic and ironic now, given that Uhuru and Ruto are now president and deputy president, and belong to the same political party.

The Kibaki regime exercised extra-judicial state violence, what Agamben refers to as “[permission] to kill without committing homicide” (53). The deployment of violence during Kibaki’s regime was mostly reactionary, generally in response to large scale threats. Peter Kagwanja identifies that “by 2007 a complex architecture of ‘informal’ or extra-state violence had emerged” (366). He cites several examples, including the state’s use of ethnic groups, gangs, and informal organizations. This state can be described as necropolitical, whereby it utilized destructive mechanisms to control, discipline, and destroy groups of people:

If power still depends on tight control over bodies […], the new technologies of destruction are less concerned with inscribing bodies within disciplinary apparatuses as inscribing them, when the time comes, within the order of the
maximal economy now represented by the “massacre” (Mbembé, “Necropolitics” 34).

Mbembé’s use of the term references apartheid-like violence against Palestinians, as he examines the intersections of destructive force and occupation. He locates the exercise of sovereignty in the “conflation of war and politics” (16). The Kibaki state used violence in this way by acting on its own interests of maintaining power through brute force. The Mungiki serve as a primary example. Mungiki are regarded as an illicit Kikuyu youth organization that partakes in controlling and extorting money from matatu workers on their routes in exchange for “security.” They have been linked to various practices, including Mau Mau-style oathing, rejecting the government, renewing Kikuyu cultural traditions, and in some cases practicing Islam (K. Mungai 183). Its formation began in the 80s and they became well known a decade later for their extreme actions and beliefs. Mungiki have had intimate connections with the state, either by condemning the government or by forming precarious and ephemeral ties with leaders. Their most public recent alliance was during the 2007-8 election violence (Frederiksen, “Mungiki” 1072).

In the early 2000s, some members in Nairobi publicly stripped women for wearing pants, and the group has also been tied to forcible circumcisions of both men and women. They are controversial, and many regard them as a menace or a terror organization.

Mungiki posed a serious threat to the early Kibaki state, beginning with his

---

65 Oathing was instituted during the Mau Mau rebellion to ensure that allegiance, create morale, and to inspire perseverance. Oathing partly originated from the development of Kikuyu resistance in the 1920s-40s whereby groups were asked to take an “oath of unity” (Green 76). General oaths and warrior oaths were given to the Mau Mau fighters, and those sympathetic to the struggle. Ritual ceremonies included removing all European clothing, sacrificing a goat, and using its blood and intestines and repetition of phrases vowing allegiance (Green 75-80).
election when they killed 50 people in the Rift Valley in 2003. They openly supported KANU, and when Kibaki/NARC won, the attacks were seen as revenge. Kibaki issued a “shoot to kill” directive toward anyone suspected of being aligned with the organization (Kagwanja 371). The then Minister of Internal Security, John Michuki, headed a heavy-handed campaign, at one time forming the Kwekwe, a police force responsible for executing the group. Michuki, also a Kikuyu, was a Home Guard during British rule, which fought opposite the Mau Mau. If this gives any indication to his ideological stance, his operations reveal more. The Oscar Foundation Free Legal-Aid Clinic Kenya reported that in a five-year period (2002-2007) the police and other officers of the state had killed an estimated 8,000 Mungiki with 4,000 missing (Kagwanja 372). Kikuyu lawmakers did not know how to respond to Mungiki, and many opposed the crackdowns fearing outcries from Kikuyu communities.

The directives against Mungiki did not occur as a visibly structured campaign, but rather were more secretive, sporadic, and reactive. In 2007, approximately 500 youths were killed between June and July, and “bodies were often recovered in the virtually-deserted precincts of the Nairobi National Park and in the rivers of Kamba districts” (Lafargue 299-310). Again in 2007 the police entered Mathare, one of Kenya’s largest informal settlements, apparently to recover stolen guns, and killed one hundred participants and thirty non-Mungiki (Kagwanja 371; Atieno 527). It is not clear whether the police forces knew the individuals killed did not belong to the group, whether their aim was simply to terrorize, or even if they officially claimed the dead to be affiliated. The government’s actions caught the attention of Amnesty International, which has
pointed out severe human rights violations. This was a directed campaign in response to partly the violence, but more so to threat Mungiki posed. These widespread killings had the potential to affect even though not associated with the organization. During my visit in 2008, I had a brief conversation with a young male who lived on the streets. He told me that he used to have madredi (dreadlocks) and cut them because he did not want the police to confuse him with Mungiki. He then laughed uncomfortably and said that the police like to “go after” Mungiki. In the introduction, I posited that the turn away from Mau Mau style representations used in some of UFMM videos was probably the result of this campaign. The crackdown of Mungiki is an example of how sovereign power is “constituted power,” as Agamben asserts, does not have to be answerable to any law. “The violence exercised in the state of exception clearly neither preserves nor simply posits law, but rather conserves it in suspending it and posits it in excepting itself from it” (Agamben 41). The Kenyan state acted outside of law, killing extrajudicially, and in so doing, it reaffirmed its own power.

The Mungiki, like other organizations who openly defy the government, are seen as a dangerous menace. Mungiki, the Mombasa Republican Council (MRC), and Sabaot Land Defense Force (SLDF) are examples of groups who are seen as causing havoc and instability (Kamungi 345-364). Indeed, like Mungiki, the MRC and the SLDF have committed acts of atrocities or killings, to which the response is the exercise of heavy force and never to deal with the conditions that perhaps engender the organization of such groups. These groups posed a threat to the state and in most cases committed initial violence against people seemingly unconnected with the government. The police do not
usually receive widespread condemnation when they commit acts of brutality and murders against these groups, but rather their actions are often welcomed news to settings that are increasingly marked with violence and economic insecurity. The media regularly reports on Mungiki, for example, as disrupting security, evoking terror, and causing violence, but there has been no mention of the killings of Mungiki (K. Mungai 177-179). The Kibaki administration’s treatment of these groups is not a straightforward narrative of oppression and state aggression, but rather it is inundated with nuances, complications, and contradictions. Furthermore, most middle class people welcome state intervention because these groups are bothersome, aggressive, and often violent. Aside from those actually a part of the organizations, it is only those in more vulnerable class positions who feel threatened by these state actions.

It is not just organized groups that are targets of extra-judicial violence, but even persons who commit violent robberies, for instance. Routinely there are reports of police catching suspected criminals and executing them in front of bystanders, which is a continuation of Moi era practices. These incidents accompany long trends of unchecked police brutality, especially committed against poor young people. There are common stories about police will threaten sex workers with sexual demands, or just rape them.

---

66 In 2008 Nyakio Maina, the wife of imprisoned Mungiki leader Maina Njenga, and her driver were found brutally hacked to death by machetes. Immediately, Mungiki claimed the police were responsible and attempted to kill by machete to make the deaths seem like Maina’s rivals committed the acts. The police quickly refuted such claims stating they do not need to use machetes to kill. Mungiki members rioted in Nairobi in response to the murders, and the police shot and killed a number of them. The media glossed over the reasons for the uprising, implying Mungiki’s actions were baseless. Mungiki are violent, but such broad brush strokes serve to justify and legitimate the extra-judicial killings and violent crackdown on the sect.

67 The Human Rights Watch has documented the violence committed by police. See “Don’t Expand Police Powers;” “You Are All Terrorists”; and “Witnesses Describe Killings.”

68 See Okal et al; Mgbako and Smith; and Warimu.
The police are regarded as generally corrupt. They routinely bribe drivers by stopping them at a checkpoint and hunting around for any violation. It is so endemic that one would rather give in to such acts than protest. Occasionally police bribing comes up in media reports but little can be done to curb the practice, especially since the police are extremely underpaid.

The government’s intentions to regulate *matatus* were part of the campaign to disable Mungiki and other ethnic street organizations, like the Luo Taliban and Kalenjin Kamjesh. The 2003 Michuki laws, also headed by John Michuki, sought to control the *matatu* industry largely controlled by Mungiki, particularly in Nairobi. A 2003 state mandate required all *matatus* be Michuki compliant. This stated owners had to eliminate outer graffiti decorations and loud music, install speed governors, provide uniforms to *matatu* workers, install seat belts for passengers and paint the exterior of the *matatu* in a solid color with a horizontal yellow stripe (Mbůgua, “Kaa” 25-26; Ogude and Nyairo 17-18). Prior to 2003 drivers still could face fines for loud music and speedy and erratic driving behavior, but there was a greater enforcement with the new policies. Many vehicles regularly displayed colorful graffiti on the exterior, blasted hip hop or ragga, and drove without caution weaving in and out of traffic. It was commonplace for the tout to cram as many people into a *matatu* as possible, termed *iko nafasi* (Mbůgua and Samper 57). Implementing safety belts and imposing one person to a seat meant an overall loss of money for the touts and drivers.

---

69 A tout is a *matatu* worker who collects the money and tells the driver when passengers need to alight. *Iko Nafasi* means, “There is a chance.” Colloquially, “there is always room for one more.”
The regulations illustrate how the state operates through governmentality. “Governmentality operates through policies and departments, through managerial and bureaucratic institutions, through the law, when the law is understood as ‘a set of tactics’, as through forms of state power, although not exclusively” (Butler, Precarious 52). Most owners have since altered the appearance of the vehicles and abide by the new mandates to avoid stiff penalties. If a city council person catches a *matatu* worker breaking one of the said laws, the tout and/or driver would have to pay a fine, bribe the officer, and perhaps serve jail time. Passengers were and still are subject to punishment as well. They can be fined or arrested if they are found squeezed into *matatus*. The threat of such punitive measures ensures that many people will refuse to board a *matatu* that is already full. Self-policing is also class-based, as there are also stigmas associated with riding *matatus* (Mwangi 28). It is said that people who have well-paying jobs should not be seen riding *matatus*, lest they be talked about at work or passed over for a promotion.70 Touts, passengers, the police, as well as the state, which is responsible for the law, all act within a system constituted by governmentality. It should be noted, though, that *matatu* culture and practices needed to be addressed; for example overcrowding, erratic driving, and gendered violence against women on *matatus* are ongoing issues. There are always stories about women who are sexually assaulted or raped on *matatus* or by touts and drivers (Mbūgua and Samper). The regulations have addressed problems of unsafe speeding and irresponsible driving. The laws, though, were not meant to necessarily

---

70 I also heard a story of a man whose car was receiving maintenance and he had to go through elaborate measures to prohibit his coworkers from knowing he had to ride a *matatu*, including not telling them when he was leaving work (Ruchugo, informal conversation).
address passenger safety, and certainly not to tackle the problem of sexual violence. Instead, these laws were enacted to disable Mungiki (Kagwanja). This has meant that though restrictions were put in place, they do not address some of the more harmful issues that are present in matatu culture.

The policies additionally work to encourage self-disciplining behavior, passengers and workers alike. It has been about ten years since the enforcement of the policies, and some enforcement of the policies has been lax. One can hear music now in matatus in Nairobi, and people mostly do not wear safety belts. Workers still have to dodge city council people by quickly turning down their music when one approaches. The laws create new opportunities for abuses, and police can arbitrarily enforce these policies. It is not uncommon to hear of the police pulling a matatu over and sending the people to a holding cell for not wearing seat belts, which is especially deemed unfair since most matatus now do not have seat belts.

These laws were important not just because of the policing and ordering of bodies, but also because such policies influenced cultural codes embedded in matatu use. Matatus have become a signifier of Kenya’s urbanity and a cosmopolitan aesthetic, as discussed in chapter two. They are present throughout semi-urban and rural Kenya and in many other contexts in Africa as well. I have known young people to pass over matatus without music or stylish decorations and wait for the more hip ones, especially pre-Michuki matatus. Matatus have become “the space for debates on current world fashion and politics, with themes ranging from Tupac to Obama” (Mwangi and Mbure 27). Mbūgua and Samper argue that rap music has facilitated a matatu culture based on a
celebration of urban masculinities, subversions of authority, the ownership of cultural
capital (51-81). The policies regulate how people take *matatus*, and also they prohibit or
alter how people practice individual subjectivities associated with urban cultural
expressions.

Michuki compliance with *matatus* had little to do with the explicit regulation of
hip hop, but it profoundly affected urban settings and the long regarded obtrusive
presence of hip hop in public space. Most parts of the visual aesthetic of hip hop, as well
as reggae and dancehall, now appear in stickers and posters taped to the inside of
*matatus*. It is rare to see a fully decorated *matatu*. The last decade of music copyright
reform has also impacted *matatus*, as drivers and owners are subject to paying royalties
for playing music.

The Kibaki state was markedly different than Moi. Several types of reform were
enacted, constitutional reform, job assistance with youths, and even matatu regulations
have provided some welcomed change. Even the state’s use of force has been debatable,
even appreciated, especially among more privileged classes. Mungiki, MRC, and the
SLDF have been violent; these groups have raped, killed, and brutalized people. Yet the
state’s crushing actions against Mungiki contribute to a widespread culture of the
everydayness of violence and precarity alongside poverty and lack of resources. The state
officials continue to grab government resources, enact the management and policing of
embodied life, and enforce a politics through killing. This section begins to address how
“the conditions under which a grievable life is established and maintained, and through
what logic of exclusion, what practice of effacement and denominalization [such
conditions occur]” (Butler, *Precarious* 38). The Kenyan state has done little to thwart, and instead facilitated, an economic system built on a few powerful people. Though politicians fuel ethnic divisions, the top wealthy politicians form tenuous alliances, often at times across ethnic lines and when they are simultaneously responsible for fueling divisiveness. There are brutal consequences if anyone who seriously opposes the government or challenges its power may be subject to suppression. Agamben asserts that central to sovereign power is the embodied person, that “bare life” “constitutes the first content of sovereign power” (53).

The State and/of the Popular Music Industry

During an outing with a colleague during a 2011 trip, I sought to buy Kenyan hip hop from the local street vendors in the Central Business District (CBD) of Nairobi. I approached one vendor in a stall in the CBD and asked for Kenyan hip hop. She very reluctantly stated that she only had a DJ mix of hip hop. I purchased the music for 300 KSH and my colleague told her to play the CD to ensure its usability—a common practice in Kenya. She, looking surprised and shocked, immediately refused, stating she could not play Kenyan music publicly and that it was illegal. I was also surprised by her reaction to a simple request, yet took the item and left. Out of a week of attempting to buy Kenyan hip hop from street vendors, this CD was the only one I was able to acquire. It had become increasingly clear that purchasing Kenyan rap, or any other Kenyan
popular music from street vendors was no longer an easy exercise, but instead a
painstaking process of chasing down vendors and following misinformed leads about
where exactly to buy music. The music we attempted to buy would either have been
pirated or informally produced music—that is, either it was produced illegally or looked
pirated. Such music had become so commonplace in Kenya that I thought nothing of
buying it on the streets. Yet, different than my visit a decade ago, I could not acquire
bootlegged Kenyan music, although there were endless supplies of bootlegged
Nollywood and American films, in addition to Congolese, Tanzanian, Nigerian,
Ugandan, and other foreign music. Even Kenyan gospel, which is widely available and
popular, was absent. The vendor’s hesitance to sell me Kenyan music and her refusal to
demonstrate its usability are indicators of what I later discovered was her avoiding
unwanted attention and fears of retribution resulting from the current copyright laws and
policies of the state.

The above incident illustrates the realities of the music industry influenced by
state power, which affects not just musicians but also the people who sell and distribute
music. This section illustrates how the state and the music industry collectively operate to
limit opportunities for artists. The vendor refused to play the CD because she operated
from fear of state reprisal, like people who will not board a full matatu, those who pay a
bribe to the police, or even the individual who gave Moi the one-finger gesture. These
actions are commonplace, and even unnoticeable at times. Yet, together they constitute a
legitimate culture of fear. Of course a vendor who sells bootlegged materials will not be

71 In this instance, the Kenyan state is not passing laws to censor musicians, as different from the
censorship that occurred during Moi’s era.
subject to extra-judicial killing, but she might have her goods confiscated and destroyed, be arrested and detained, and lose her livelihood. These are co-present through-lines in state practices, a competitive neoliberal setting, and the emergence of a restrictive music industry. Together, these characteristics compose a reality whereby only a select few can succeed.

There are several characteristics that explain my experience in the music stall. There is now the enforced and sometimes rogue implementation of music policies. This causes people to self-police to avoid harassment by the police, the Kenya Copyright Board (KECOBO), and the Music Copyright Society of Kenya (MCSK). These institutions benefit from the fear and ignorance that surround copyright policies. Instead of explicit state censorship that I articulated during Moi, the conditions produced by these entities result in the limited production and dissemination of underground non-commercial hip hop music. Musicians, as a result, do not benefit from the exclusive industry.

Currently music dissemination in Kenya is difficult. No longer was bootlegged music widely available as it once had been. I spent time in Kenya (2000-2001) before the complete implementation of copyright rules and regulations, which was in 2003. When I returned to do fieldwork in 2011, I discovered that the music scene had changed substantially. Many bars, clubs, matatus, and other venues did not play Kenyan music. Alongside the music crackdown of matatus and the self-policing of the vendor who did

72 It can be compared to Ghana; after J.J. Rawlings staged a coup d’etat and established a socialist government, a 6 p.m.-6 a.m. curfew stalled the nighttime music economies. Many artists fled the country as a result (Shipley 31).
not want to play Kenyan music, the industry seemed hostile to Kenyan music. I discovered that some Kenyan music had returned to these stalls with copyright stickers ensuring authenticity a year later during a 2012 visit. Most of the Kenyan music was gospel; I could not find hip hop music, dancehall, or other popular youth-oriented music.

The government currently uses Kenya Copyright Board (KECOBO), and the Music Copyright Society of Kenya (MCSK), as well as other intellectual property rights societies to enact copyright politics. The changes that have taken place within the last eleven years are due to revisions and changes made in the 2001 Copyright Law, to address the widespread practice of bootlegging. Current estimates suggest that as much as ninety percent of music sold in Kenya is pirated (Wanyama 32). First I provide context for the implementation behind these entities in order to understand how they came about. The government’s decision behind creating KECOBO and rehabilitating the MCSK is primarily due to its membership with the World Trade Organization (WTO). Multinational corporations during the mid-1990s wanted firmer copyright laws because they recognized they benefited when there are strict IP laws and wanted these policies to serve their interests (M. Wekesa 5; McBride and Teeple 26-7). Corporations lobbied governments for tighter local legislation and policy implementation in General Agreement Trade and Tariffs (GATT). Approximately one year later, The World Trade Organization (WTO) was established (in 1995) and came to replace (GATT). The WTO has tremendous global influence and power, supposedly existing to enable “liberalize trade” by “[freeing] trade from tariffs and other governmental restrictions” (Peet 146). The US has dominant influence in WTO; for example, it has 17% percent voting power,
while most economically peripheral countries have one percent (Peet 158). The WTO is controversial, and critics contend it operates within neoliberal ideologies and for corporate interests. “Together with the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank,” argues McBride and Teeple, “the World Trade Organization stands at the centre of global economic governance” (26). GATT implemented a trade agreement called the Agreement on Trade Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) in 1994. The WTO and United Nations agency, the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO), work together to execute TRIPS. Member states of WTO must be TRIPS-compliant or else they can face trade sanctions (M. Wekesa 65). Kenya became a member in 1995 and it had five years to adhere to all of the standards and regulations of TRIPS. The decisions for the Kenyan state to have the KECOBO and MCSK delegated to implement policy around IP and copyright because of compliance as a WTO member state (Ouma and Sihanya 95; Sikoyo et al 3).

KECOBO is a government entity, defined as a “state corporation,” composed of government officials and representatives from the private sector and was instituted under The 2001 Kenya Copyright Act (Kenya Copyright; “The Copyright Act”). This office has been active in attempting to curb pirated CDs, music, television shows, films, and other audiovisual products. Its website hosts news clips whereby KECOBO officers are shown seizing and destroying pirated materials and arresting vendors in business districts in Nairobi (Kenya Copyright). Perhaps this is what the vendor feared when we requested she play the CD. The Board made an antipiracy security device (APSD) that is to be applied to all audio and audiovisuals, and it works with the Kenya Revenue Authority
and the Kenya police to implement it. The APSD is a barcode hologram sticker, and musicians, producers, and all other appropriate persons can purchase the stickers from the KECOBO.\textsuperscript{73} The current price is 100 stickers for 1000.00 KSH. Those who wish to purchase APSDs must first register their work with the KECOBO, submitting two copies of their music. These stickers are visible on CDs, and other audio and audiovisual products, in several stores in Nairobi. I saw products with stickers on them in several malls including Yaya Centre, Westgate, and Capitol Centre, and in music stalls in River Road and on Moi Ave.

KECOBO gives license to the MCSK to collect and distribute royalties to artists.\textsuperscript{74} On the KECOBO website is a link to the MCSK, which is technically a non-profit institution and a collective management organization (CMO). The MCSK has been in existence since 1983. The Society has been a lot more visible since the 2001 copyright legislation, which took effect in 2003, due to the push to become TRIPS compliant. According to the Memorandum and Articles of Association, the MCSK has the ability to: “[A]ppoint any agent or agents for the collection and recovery of any monies receivable by the Society in the exercise of its powers or otherwise for the purpose of the exercise of any such powers” (“Memorandum”). MCSK collects money from matatus, taxis, bars, restaurants, clubs, and other entertainment venue. This money is then pooled into a large fund and supposedly distributed among the registered MCSK member artists.

\textsuperscript{73} On August 22, 2011, the Kenya Copyright Board announced that the price of APSDs are 4.00 KSH, down from 10.00 KSH.
\textsuperscript{74} Copyright laws have been in Kenya since pre-independence. In 1966, just three years after independence, the Kenyan Parliament passed the Copyright Act, Chapter 130 of the Laws of Kenya. Prior to this, Kenya was subject to the 1895, 1911, and 1956 UK Copyright Acts. The 1956 UK Copyright Acts continue to influence the current Copyright Act of 2001 was enforced in February 2003, which repealed the 1966 version (Ouma 922-923).
in April and October. My understanding is that officials from the Society ride and patrol *matatus* and can approach a driver or tout asking for a music license. The threat of “undercover” officials confronting workers is enough for them to try to avoid such interactions, and thus they do not play a lot of Kenyan music.

The MCSK has been plagued with problems. KECOBO mandated the MCSK to spend only 30% of its total revenue on administrative costs and give the remainder to musicians. In a 2010 annual report, the MCSK reported to have collected 185 million KSH, and spent 137 million KSH on administrative costs (Mukei). In 2011, the MCSK spent 70% on administrative costs, and in April of the same year, the courts revoked the MCSK’s license and on May 6th, it was deregistered on the grounds that there have been gross misappropriation of funds (Muchiri). Later on June 6th, the KECOBO reinstated their license, and they have since been allowed to collect monies on behalf of artists (Mutegi and Mark). Some of the MCSK’s actions are questionable. Sam Ikwaye, the president of The Pubs, Entertainment, and Restaurants Association of Kenya (PERAK), states that while the MCSK was de-registered, it harassed employees in entertainment establishments for royalty payments (Otieno). The MCSK has also had other instances whereby it was not clear if the organization’s officials should be collecting royalties. The court case ruling, *Music Copyright Society of Kenya v Parklands Shade Hotel t/a Klub House*, asserted that it is not authorized to collect royalties for musicians unless they are registered with the organization. The MCSK sued to stop Parklands from playing recorded and live music, because it had not acquired a license to play music. The hotel argued that the artists of the music played were not registered with the MCSK, and since
the MCSK is not the only agency collecting royalties, they cannot enforce such a blanket restriction. The courts sided with Parklands (Ouma and Sihanya 20-23). This incident exemplifies how the Society can be challenged. Certainly Parklands had resources to confront the MCSK’s actions, and of course, this situation is far different than most artists who do not have the wherewithal to combat the organization.

There are other ambiguous regulations of the MCSK. A November 2012 Buzz article highlights this vagueness. The article focuses on whether DJs should pay royalties because of a mandate that recently went out to all DJs stating that they had to obtain a license, which costs 31,000 KSH (approximately 365.14 USD). Maurice Okoth, the spokesperson for the MCSK, further notes, “The law is very clear on copyright issues. Everybody who plays music in a public environment must have a license to do so” (Muchiri). When pressed for clarification, he responded that DJs do not have to purchase one if the venue they are playing at already has one. So, according to this interview, the law is not clear about whether a person (DJ) or an establishment must obtain a license. “But, when MCSK officials ever catch up with you playing in a place without a license,” stated Okoth, “you will be answerable” (Muchiri). A few things are noteworthy about this interview. First, Okoth’s statements confirm that, contrary to his claims, it is not clear on who or what entity needs to obtain a license. His conflicting answers contribute to already present misinformation, purposeful or not, which creates ideas about what the Society’s role is. Second, his threatening tone about who might eventually be held “answerable” implies that the Society has the authority to enforce punitive measures, although he never states what those are. This might encourage DJs, even those who play
at venues with licenses, to buy one to avoid the hassle of the MCSK. This obscure enforcement of policies and threatening reputation of the Society can encourage people to purchase a license to be safe from them.

KECOBO and MCSK’s practices are largely directed toward the informal economic sectors. In Kenya, non-official economies or micro and small enterprises (MSEs) are also called *jua kali*, which is a term literally meaning “hot sun.” The phrase references those workers who labor under the hot sun without reprieve. The original meaning of the term was reserved for male mechanics and blacksmiths, and now can describe the informal economic sectors *writ large*. During the 80s and 90s, the state, the IMF and World Bank wanted the government to focus on how to make informal sectors more efficient in development projects (King). Jua kali workers are hard to police and are seen as an annoyance to authorities because of their difficulty to police efficiently. Yet consumers depend on informal economies to purchase goods and services that would otherwise be more expensive in more formal settings. Many business owners situate themselves along busy routes of foot and road traffic to provide convenience. The majority of people in Kenya live in poverty and many engage, even nominally, in non-official networks to earn money. *Jua kali* laborers are vulnerable to fluctuating and insufficient incomes outside the parameters of wages, as well as ongoing harassment by the police. Workers regularly dodge city council people who are always requesting proof of licenses. They invent creative methods to avoid or pay off police and city

---

75 The term perhaps emerged in 1985-6 when Moi visited some workers in Kamukunji. He expressed the need for policy implementation that centered on the informal sector. He had sheds built for the workers to they would not have to work under the hot sun (King 13).
commissioners. Such businesses, like car washes, mechanics, and kiosks have been subject to forced removal, even bulldozing and burning. The insecure structures that many operate out of are also vulnerable to weather and fire.

These informal economies help to compose the music industry. Recall in the previous chapter that it was because of cassette piracy in the 1980s that led to Polygram abandoning its Nairobi pressing plant. Now films, entire seasons of television shows, music from many parts of the world can be bought in several commercial places in Nairobi. Even in wealthier areas one can encounter a vendor stationed strategically in a high foot traffic area walking around with a box of bootleg American and Nigerian films, American and non-Kenyan African music. In the city center on roads like Uhuru Highway, vendors weave in and out of inescapable traffic jams dangling toys, passport holders, fruit, watches, and other commodities in view of transit goers. The vendors at River Road and Moi Ave stalls most likely pay rent and have legal permission to sell goods. I visited several stalls during visits to Nairobi in search of the enforcement of regulations that affect music buying practices. Many vendors would give me the number to their friend or relative, or send me on a trip to another stall for “that” music when I asked for Kenyan rap. Once I left that place, and searched out a lead or made a phone call, I entered a more informal economy, where I would need to order a CD from a person who would then call an associate for it. The term “informal networks” perhaps does not always best describe these economies because these businesses are usually highly organized. Indian businesspeople run the music piracy, although one could never tell. When police crack down on bootlegged music, these wealthy elites are never
implicated, it is usually the workers who struggles to sell CDs for a meager living.

The rappers I interviewed have had various types of experiences with the MCSK, but most are cynical and view it as an obstacle. Only R&B singer Snooker thought the Society is a good thing in concept and implementation, while the rest mostly held negative views. Artists view the MCSK as contributing to the ongoing battles that rappers face to survive in the industry. Graffiti artist, Esen, confirmed this:

RP: Um, ok… how does the government view so-called underground hip hop? Do they care about it?

Esen: I don’t think so. I don’t even know what the Music Society of Kenya does. So if I must, I don’t think so. I don’t think they support [musicians] in anyway cuz if they do, they would have created structures that would make it easier for underground artists to break even. (Esen)

Two things are compelling about this statement. First, Esen states that the MCSK does not even enable artists to “break even” with royalty payment. His expectations are not that the MCSK allows artists profit from their music, but rather that the Society should give artists just enough money to prevent a loss in profit. More often than not, non-commercial rappers struggle to recover the expenses they put into their music, much less profit. Secondly, he sees the state and the MCSK as the same thing, which became a common theme in conversations with artists.

Musicians supposedly receive 10,000 KSH regardless if their music was played in

---

76 Esen misnames the MCSK.
these various venues, and artists whose songs play more frequently, receive additional funds. Evaredi and Nafsi Huru stated something similar whereby within a scheduled timeframe, the MCSK disperses 10,000 KSH to each registered artist (Evaredi; Nafsi). Both are dissatisfied with this standard, and they concluded the body must pocket a disproportionate amount of money.

Issues of royalty payment and copyright surfaced in interviews during open-ended inquiries. I asked Demaine Jabez and Evaredi questions about the challenges that they face as artists, to which both lamented the lack of a clear avenue to earn a decent wage from their work. Jabez asserted that Kenya lags behind what he saw as the US industry’s clear and beneficial system of royalty payment (Jabez). Evaredi registered but holds very low expectations, “basically you’ll be there [you’ll register] because it’s the only opportunity you can get” (Evaredi). Lness and Ngugus believed that the issue with the MCSK is an absence of representation of hip hop artists’ experiences (Lness; Ngugus). The MCSK’s lack of input from rappers leads to misinformation, according to Ndugus. Only after he joined did he realize that membership comes with other benefits like help with hospital bills and loans. He had difficulty even obtaining basic payments, “I’m registered. I have my songs on radio, television. When I go there, [they say] come tomorrow, stuff, stuff. They never pay us” (Ndugus).

Some practitioners opt out of registering reasoning that the costs of membership and the labor behind chasing payments are not worth it. Nafsi Huru believed that the body does not have an efficient or honest way of delivering payments due in part to underrepresentation.
From what I’ve heard from other artists is that you don’t get paid, cuz those guys collect a lot of money and they don’t get paid like 10,000 like after two or three months. So that’s peanuts. And ah, so they are the only ones who benefits from that thing, and there is no artist who works for the MCSK. (Nafsi)

Funzo Kuu saw the body as completely negative.

RP: You have not registered?

Funzo Kuu: No. Because I know. [Laughs.] I know how it works. They are swindlers. You know? They swindle money, they play your songs without telling you. They use your songs in advertisements. And all that stuff, they don’t ah…You register for your royalties but you have to go and ask for your cash. You have to ask and beg for your money. (Funzo)

Funzo’s comment relates to a commonly held opinion that the MCSK is part of a larger system that is designed not to empower artists. Several rappers I have spoken with state that they have to chase down officials to receive their money, even though automatic disbursements are supposed to occur through direct deposit. Perhaps this additional labor and poor reputation of monetary payout deters people like Nafsi Huru and Funzo Kuu from membership. The MCSK’s reputation has created general disdain and thus is not an avenue for musicians to earn a living. Most of the artists I speak with do not think that the Society serves on behalf of their interests.

The frustration with the Society also extends beyond hip hop practitioners.
Mtawali was perhaps one of the most successful and popular artists I had a chance to speak with. At the time of our interview, he was excitedly preparing to perform at the state house for the annual Heroes Day celebration. He and his band had received a presidential invitation. Mtawali has had horrific experiences with the Society, despite his popularity. He narrated a humorous tale about duping an official who kept avoiding his repeated requests to receive his payment.

Mtawali: [...] I used to call them and say um, I was calling to find out when the next royalty payment will be done. They say we will give you a call. There is one day they had my money that was like two years ago. And they were supposed to pay it by the bank. But now the problem was I’m 837 and someone who is like number 1000 plus got paid. So now when you call—actually that day I played a trick cuz I was calling this guy and he was not picking the phone. Then I text him, I said, please call me very urgently. So he didn’t know who I am. So he called immediately. So when he called I said, I actually wanted to ask how I can get my music on the downloads for telephones. He said oh yeah, we do 1-2-3. [Then I said] the second things is, I have not received my payment [laughs]! So a week later, I got my money. (Mtawali)

This story illustrates how the MCSK serves as an obstacle in artists’ lives. Many register because they feel like they have to, for the remote possibility of payment, and just in case it leads to eventual payoffs and opportunities. What’s worse than the experiences of artists is the reputation that the Society has acquired. It is seen as an organization that steals money without reproach, uses force to implement measures, and threatens those
who they see as not complying. The music industry is a cutthroat environment, and the Society only adds to it by fleecing monies that are supposed to be allocated for artists. The frustrations that artists feel stem from the fact that there are no structures in place that advocate for them. The state and the industry both act on their own interests and within an economic environment that already has limited job opportunities for young people. The rappers I interview mostly do not come from privileged families, for example, Nafsi Huru is from Magongo, a low-income area in Mombasa, and Agano and Judge are both from Eastlands in Nairobi. Acquiring a secure job can be daunting, even for people from more economically stable backgrounds. None of the rap artists I spoke with made comfortable incomes from the music they made.

Many artists stated that a mature music royalty system would benefit them because of ongoing and widespread piracy. A few held impassioned perspectives on music piracy. Mtawali defines it as “guys stealing your music and making a living out of it, while you remain poor” (Mtawali). Mick Jagero, the reggae producer, believed the government is to blame:

_Hii ni River Road, chini hapa._

You go and do your stuff in the studio, when you release it in the market, it’s already selling. Fake copies. At a cheaper rate. So I think that ah, mix, makes the artist to lose hope and even creativity. Because you’ve been working on an album for a year. Then someone comes and makes sales for a month on something that you have been doing for a year. You’d say what kind of life am I doing? There’s no point in doing this. So the government

77 This place, River Road, down here.
plays a big role in how the music develops. And the challenges that the musicians are facing. (Jagero)

Judge had first hand experience with pirates, and remembered it as something that prohibited him from earning money. People copied his hit single, “Rap kwa M.I.C.,” a song that he produced with his brother in the group, Black Duo:

RP: So were you getting the benefits from that, from those sales?

Judge: By that time, no I can’t say I was benefiting nothing.

RP: Hmm…where was the money going?

Judge: Someone else, I don’t know even who. Like let’s say, piraters [sic]. Like someone like that. Like close people, who are acting like they are working with me but behind me they are doing some other stuff. You know. (Judge)

Judge recounted this as a learning experience, and he expressed very little hostility. He stated about this, “at the end of the day, we ended up like, seeing it’s knowledge” (Judge). Judge was thoroughly disheartened by the experience and wished he had more understanding of piracy at the time.

Music vendors who sell pirated goods have also adapted to the most current revision of copyright enforcement. Mtawali recounts a story of how in Mombasa vendors sell CDs with their own reproduced stickers.
Mtawali: You know, I know one pirate who will ask for one hundred copies. And
you will give him. So what he does, he takes your stuff, scans it, and then he used
to run them. And then takes your CD, your design, does the same. So now, he will
never ask for more copies from you again. [...] So these guys, they just, ah, they
kind of come up with new tricks everyday. So now, if you go to a shop—like I
went to a shop in Mombasa. And the lady said, ok, you see this one. Looks as if
it’s original. But this one from this guy. And then I said now what do we do. It’s
tricky we can’t, ah, get him arrested because you need a lot of evidence cuz
suppose he says he denies that.

RP: So does he have the…

Mtawali: He has the machines.

RP: Does he have the stickers on them?

Mtawali: Everything! Just as the original. Just as the original. Cuz he now runs
them with his printer. And has a CD burner, he can burn those CDs and the
stickers, he can get them and stick. And normally he puts his stamp for his shop,
and puts them there. So you’re like ah, this is genuine. But he’s not paid the
musicians. (Mtawali)

This account demonstrates how creative and innovative music actors in the industry are
when attempting to circumvent authorities. This practice simultaneously creates difficulty for the musicians who rely on sales to profit from their music, like Mtawali whose descriptions give good reason to why the state should fight to combat piracy.

There are conceptions that the MCSK has the power to ban music, although it is not supposed to operate as a policing force. Dickson Oyugi, one of the male members of the group TS1, defined underground hip hop as that which the MCSK bans. Typically, most practitioners believe underground music is situated away from commercial demands, not connected to any of the major multinational corporations, and/or that which takes up controversial content designed to subvert or confront power structures and ideologies (Price 49-50; Harrison 6-11). For Oyugi, the definition of underground music is one that the MCSK has deemed illegal and prohibited. I thought little of this comment at the time, and as my fieldwork progressed, I continued to hear similar concerns. I visited some music stalls on Moi Ave. during an October 2012 visit, and after realizing that some Kenyan music had reappeared in some stores. I requested some Kenyan hip hop, and a salesperson stated that he did not have it, but instead he had US hip hop (which were pirated copies). I pressed him as to the total absence of Kenyan rap music, he told me that “they” do not want him to sell “pirated music.” I asked him if all Kenyan hip hop was pirated, and he hesitated and thought for a bit before stating that the original copies are too expensive. He never specified who the “they” is, though I suspect it must be some authoritative force that has the capacity to police what this vendor sells, like law enforcement or the MCSK.

I took this scenario to a conversation I had with rapper Evaredi to gain more
clarity on the issue. I described the situation, to which he responded:

Evaredi: Basically, to tell you, I can say like, the last albums that were being sold in Kenya for hip hop...you can say like the Kalamashaka [and] K-south. But up to date, I don’t know what the problem is, but they believe like, with hip hop in Kenya, its like telling people the truth. So hip hop and the government are not on the same line.

RP: So why wouldn’t stalls sell music? Is that a reason for the stalls not to sell music?

Evaredi: I think the reason for the stalls not selling the music is the government. Because the government is not promoting the local music. As in basically, the local hip hop music. (Evaredi)

The copyright laws banned any pirated music, not any one genre. Hip hop appears to be subsumed into banned music ipso facto based on vendors’ unwillingness to sell Kenyan hip hop. I think that salespeople’s decisions to not sell rap music relate to fear of retribution, since the KECOBO and the police are known to seize and destroy goods. Hip hop albums also “look” pirated. At Sarakasi events artists walk around and sell their CDs occasionally. Most do not have stickers and the CDs are in inexpensive plastic wrap with a grainy copy of an image for the album cover. It looks unofficial, and I think vendors do not want to sell anything that could be confused with being pirated. American and Nigerian films also often come with a grainy cover, but since these DVDs do not attract
attention in the same ways that hip hop does, vendors continue to sell them. It is easier for a vendor to refuse to sell any hip hop, and be assured they will not face reprisals from the state, than to vet music to figure out which is actually legitimate.

There is no explicit law or mandate around rap’s inherent pirated nature, only conceptions. Vendors most likely do not sell music that has the potential to bring any harassment by the MCSK or the police. Artists in turn recognize and interpret this as a government dislike or prohibition on rap. What results is a de facto ban on the commercial sale of underground rap. The government policies, MCSK practices, and the fear of retribution all create the execution of a ban even when no such law or policy exists. It is effective and inconspicuous; it cannot generate outcry and disapproval, either within Kenya or internationally in the same way that a perspicuous law can. Agamben notes that “a ban is a form of relation” between the state and people. “He who has been banned is not, in fact, simply set outside the law and made indifferent to it,” he writes, “but rather abandon by it […]” (23, emphasis in original). This is precisely the sentiment of artists; they believe the state has abandon, or never supported, hip hop.

Enforcement, or just force, can ensure that people in the music business, especially vendors, operate with extreme care. Like the police, the extent to which the MCSK can act appears to be wide-ranging. Mtawali told a narrative of how the MCSK confiscated televisions in public business that play shows with Kenyan music:

Mtawali: [The MCSK] have their officers who run over the country. And if they find your TV is on, it is showing some music, no license. They take the TV, lock you in the police cells.
RP: Are you serious?

Mtawali: Yeah. Where I live on Thika Road. One of the barbershops I go to, the guy [the owner] was locked in, the TV taken. They had to pay some money because he was playing music without a license. But the question is, where does this money go? It doesn’t come to us. And even if it’s on—

RP: But he was showing a television show. Right?

Mtawali: Now, every barbershop has a TV. That’s like you go to a bank, you find a TV. So that TV will [most likely] have a local music show playing.

RP: So was he playing a show? Was it a program, or was it—or did he put in a DVD?

Mtawali: No, no, they know that he has it there; they know somehow you watch local programs. So they need you to have a license. (Mtawali)

It is difficult to tell if this was actually the MCSK, or KECOBO acting with the police, or the police themselves. All scenarios are possible. Moreover, the MCSK website states that all places of business who play television or radio in their venue must have a license to do so.
Many view the MCSK as an extension of the state. Mick Jagero, a reggae and dancehall producer, discusses this in relation to his frustrations with royalty payments and musicians.

Jagero: The government gets a certain amount of money from local music that is sold.

RP: Oh, really?

Jagero: Even from *matatus*. There’s a fee that *matatus* have to pay.

RP: Ok, I thought that those fees go to the MCSK.

Jagero: Isn’t it government owned?

RP: No. I don’t think so. The government part of it is the Kenya Copyright Board. The MCSK is a licensing agency.

Jagero: It’s independent? The way I look at it, probably it’s not from the government, but they are just making profit without helping the artists. Because they take all that money and they don’t pay the royalties. You find that an artist’s song has been played ten times in a day, and he gets nothing from it. It’s not
supposed to be like that. He’s supposed to be paid a certain amount every year or every month. (Jagero)

Jagero’s conflation of the MCSK and the state is understandable. The state gives license to the Society and in turn it functions as a policing force, apparently with abilities to dole out punitive measures for those who do not comply. They act, or seem to act, without restriction or accountability to any other governing board. Vendors, artists, and other actors in the industry fear or despise them for the power they have. In essence, the MCSK is an extension of the government. This perception works to the Society’s advantage. The more people confuse the MCSK with the state, and the more people self-policing in fear of reprisal or perceived powerlessness, the more power the Society has.

The non-commercial hip hop artists with whom I have spoken assert their biggest challenge is the restrictive music industry created in part by the MCSK, the Kenyan state, and the laws that govern issues around music copyright. Mellitus Wanyama contends that the conditions for musicians are purposefully difficult to prevent dissent. He cites Susan Kibukosya, a producer and manager at Serenade Studio, who argues that “[One] way of perpetuating the huge gap between the rich and the poor is to censor the musician by economically immobilizing him. In such a state he is ‘tamed in order to remain submissive and toothless’” (“Policy” 28). Such claims like Kibukosya’s are rare, and it seems more likely that the difficulty musicians face is the result of poor policy implementation that is never meant to benefit artists in the first place. The presence of copyright laws and procedures are to remain in good standing with the WTO, and it is not a local initiative designed to empower Kenyan musicians.
Many artists I speak with have noted how although the MCSK is designed to enable the payment of royalties to artists, it has failed miserably. To make matters worse, there are perceptions and supporting stories about the policing actions of the MCSK officers. The state has created and attempted to institute copyright laws and regulations that in collaboration with a copyright board, which does not create the atmosphere suitable for a flourishing music industry. Furthermore, the MCSK has created policies that make vendors apprehensive about selling hip hop music, which is fundamentally detrimental to non-commercial artists who lack access to radio and television and might depend on CD sales. Only a few artists, like Ndugus, Demaine Jabez, Judge, and Evaredi, noted that their music has made it to radio. Therefore, the music industry becomes that much more difficult if sellers are not eager to allow such music in stalls.

Radio stations are separate barriers that underground artists must navigate. Popular radio stations targeted toward the youth play mostly music from the US, for example KISS 100, Capital FM, Ghetto Radio, and Homeboyz Radio. Radio stations have always played non-Kenyan styles. There are various reasons for this: the long presence and popularity of Congo music, the 1980s ban on Kenyan music deemed subversive and dissenting, and multinational corporations running radio stations that resisted a state-imposed quota to play Kenyan music. Christopher Okumu reported in 2001 that some programs on the KBC played 100 percent non-Kenyan music (“Reclaiming” 229). Mellitus Wanyama noted that in 2007 ninety percent of music played on the radio was non-Kenyan (“Policy” 39). Currently even Ghetto Radio, which was cited by many of the artists that I spoke with a reputation for playing Kenyan
underground rap, plays a large amount of non-Kenyan music. When Kenyan music is played, it is mostly mainstream music.

There is a lack of clarity concerning royalties and the radio. For example, there is a conception that radio stations avoid playing royalties to artist by playing a large fare of Kenyan music. “If you play like 50 Cent, here in Kenya,” contends Judge, “it’s really hard for that guy to come and start asking for their royalties here. But if you play like a lot of let’s say J-U-D-G-E’s song (that’s me), I’ll just be like, ‘Hey!’ You know?” (Judge). Judge’s assertion is that these stations have an immediate money-saving incentive to not showcase Kenyan music. Stations like Capital, Metro, KBC, and KISS FM have always played a large dose of western music, even before the 2003 copyright regulations. Wanyama’s analysis concluded that radio stations owed 68.2 million shillings to the MCSK in 2002 for the Kenyan music played (“Policy” 39). It is difficult to tell whether the radio’s slant toward western music is to avoid paying such large amounts of money to the MCSK.

According to the company website, however, it cannot be royalty-dodging that inhibits radio play. Stations, regardless of what percentage of Kenyan music they play, must obtain a license from the MCSK (MCSK). The Society states that it receives a flat rate from radio stations annually, regardless of music content. The Society must also distribute monies to international bodies, according to their website, but it is hard to ascertain if this actually occurs (MCSK). An interview with Joe Murimi, an MCSK manager, confirms that since 2004 radio stations and televisions have had to pay for licenses. Murimi additionally states, “The fact that almost all broadcast stations play a lot
of music from the North American pop or hip hop in their daily music rotation, MCSK ends up remitting most of the revenue collected as royalties to foreign artists” (Okande and Mwangesha). This dispels both Judge and Wanyama’s accounts of how the MCSK avoids playing Kenyan music.

Radio stations continue to play American music and other non-Kenyan sounds for other reasons besides royalty payment, most likely to appeal to advertiser demands and because of the long privileging of western music. This does not mean that the MCSK pays international bodies or artists, however. If the MCSK were remitting monies to international entities, it does not explain why there is such a discrepancy in Kenyan and non-Kenyan music in stores and stalls. There continues to be large numbers of non-Kenyan music (and films) in vendor stalls in the CBD, alongside a noticeable dearth of Kenyan music. This suggests that the MCSK and KECOBO are not responsible for non-Kenyan products and will only police Kenyan products. This lack of transparency around this issue works to the MCSK’s advantage—people are left fearing reprisals and entities, like radio, purchase licenses.

Whether radio stations dodge royalty payment or not is a somewhat moot point for the underground artists I work with. The fact that vendors will not sell Kenyan rap is far more detrimental to underground artists than their haphazard record of royalty payment from occasional radio appearances. Many emphatically stress that one must have connections to get onto the radio in the first place, and many do not. Aurelia Ferrari reported that these “connections” are not elaborate. In an interview with Kamau Ngigi of Kalamashaka, Ngigi asserted that friends of mainstream artists flood radio stations with
calls and SMSs to request their songs, which resulted in eliminating more politically controversial music from playlists (115-116). Mick Jagero argued that many mainstream artists achieve opportunities despite their lack of talent:

Jagero: Most of these guys that you see have ah, deals with the corporate entities, most of them are not good.

RP: Really? So how do they get where they are? How do they manage to be “successful” (I say “quote/unquote successful”)?

Jagero: Yeah! Those are very big quotes! [We laugh.] This is a fluke and connections. What I was telling you about presenters. And most of the artists who are big names, they have a clique. When you deliver your music to the music station, it’s only a certain clique that gets frequent airplay. But if you are an upcoming artist and you are a broke one, for that matter, and you come from downtown, you’re in for a real shock. (Jagero)

This sentiment echoes Esen’s previous concerns about the difficulties artists endure to earn a living. The common belief is that if one is not well connected, they must be willing to pay kitu kidogo to whomever gatekeeper they encounter, whether the administrative assistant at the radio station or the deejays themselves. Judge asserted that bribing is so normal that many artists expect to pay, “because it has been a routine, they normally feel like, ah, they want to take their music there, they have to pay, even if they’re, they haven’t been asked or something. They normally pay automatically” (Judge). Judge
believed that not all DJs ask for payola, and that artists foolishly part with their money prematurely before even being asked. Divinity LaShelle Barkley, in research on Mombasa hip hop, asserts that artists often pay between 2000-3500 KSH for inclusion in a playlist rotation for one month (7). No one I interviewed admitted that they had to bribe DJs, but I conclude that the practice is widespread and non-exceptional. DJ Adrian with Capital FM supported this claim:

I think there is a lot of red tape at radio stations. I’ve heard a lot of artists saying that they went to this station and somebody was asking for money and you know, so I don’t know what their policies are, but ours is kind of open door. So you just bring your music. (Washika)

He works for Capital FM and deejays at several popular and wealthier locations, including Amboseli Gardens. His role makes him a gatekeeper in the industry, and he affirms this by contending that he can choose what he plays, and “within the first five seconds” he has the ability to decide if it’s worth a radio spot (Washika).

The actors who contribute to the makeup of the music business each play an important part, whether DJs like Adrian, desperately hopeful artists who come in ready with a bribe, or mainstream artists who are already wealthy and have an easier time navigating the system. In the 1980s it was Moi’s one-party rule and multinationals that worked to exclude certain Kenyan music. The agents in the industry might differ today, but the results are the same. Kenyan stations have a long history of playing non-Kenyan music, and the continuity of the practice suggests that it is unlikely to change. The traditions of Kenyan radio playing a base of non-Kenyan music have continued today for
a combination of above reasons, and not merely due to one cause. What is noteworthy is that every recent policy, mandate, and practice seems to have discouraged the growth of a diverse industry inclusive to underground artists.

Currently Afropop is the popular Kenyan music widely played on the radio. Afropop, which in this case is an East and Central African popular music style, has emerged, which draws on Congolese dance and music, South African house, and dancehall. Halifu Osumare states that “indigenous pop music (genic and kapuka),” “[vie] with the more conscious rap produced by groups like Kalamashaka for record sales and airtime” (“Motherland” 171). Kalamashaka is not at the forefront of underground rap currently, but Osumare’s point, that non-commercial rap has a difficult time getting on the radio as compared to mainstream music, is well made. Radio does play a large portion of American music, and when it does play music from Kenya, mostly, it is the most famous and well-known geng and kapuka artist. This does not fare well with the majority of underground rap artists who do not compose and rap danceable, upbeat songs.

Many artists, as well as scholars, hold conceptions that underground music is too controversial to be sold in stores and played on the radio. Osumare argues, “Kenyan radio is often reluctant to play socially conscious music typical of Kalamashaka because it challenges the status quo and often specific government officials” (“Motherland” 171). Recall the conversation mentioned above with Evaredi where we discussed why hip hop is not sold in vendor stalls. I asked him why gospel music is found in stores, and hip hop is not. He responded, “After diluting your content in music, that’s when basically you will get airplays, you get your music being sold in stalls. You see like that’s what the
government—that’s what the media likes. Like you’re supposed to do what the media likes for you to get paid. Or for you to sell” (Evaredi). For him, gospel is a more acceptable genre. His brief conflation of the media and the government is noteworthy because both operate as real and perceived barriers in artists’ work. Both entities serve as gatekeepers and create settings whereby underground rap is marginalized. I did not ask Evaredi what he meant by “Diluting your content,” but I believe he was referencing two things. First, “diluted content” meant eliminating any songs that question political authority, and second, to have palatable tunes that harmonize rather than disrupt and confront in the way many underground hip hop beats do. 

I do not think the subversive nature of underground rap wholly describes why non-commercial music is not played on the radio. There are some mainstream songs that challenge political power. Much of mainstream music have less threatening sounds than the harder beats of some rap, are affectively pleasurable to listen to, and easily danceable. Jaguar’s song “Matapeli” is an example of a mainstream song, briefly referenced in chapter two. This is an Afropop song and the verses are sung, and not rapped. Matapeli means conmen and the song and music video decry government corruption. The first few lines are as follows:

Namshukuru Mola kwa kunipa hewa na dunia bure, kama ingekuwa ni binadamu angenikatia hewa kitambo,

(I thank God for having given me air and the world for free, if it was a human being they would have cut the air long time ago)
Ona tuliowachagua wanatucheza kama marioneti hakuna anayetujali,
wamekua wa wa pesa,
(Look at the ones we elected, they are playing us like marionettes, they have become money people)

Bei ya unga inapanda wakati mahindi inaoza kwa shamba. Eeh! Maziwa inaganda wakati kwa duka bei inapanda.
(Price of flour is going up while maize is rotting on the farm. Eeh! Milk is getting sour while price at the store goes up) (Ogopavideo1. Jaguar)

Jaguar references the claims that politicians have created and benefitted from a profitable maize shortage (“Food Graft”). He uses the recent graffiti that has appeared in Nairobi in his music video. The graffiti, which appeared on Moi Ave as well as other places throughout Nairobi, has elaborate images portraying politicians as vultures (Chonghalile).

I asked DJ Adrian if he would play a song if it had subversive qualities. He responded by referencing the song, “Oh, I would play. There’s a song by Jaguar called ‘Matapeli’ which basically talks about what politicians are doing, why teachers are not being paid” (Washika). Certainly not every Kenyan song is politically controversial and most are not, and what is important here is that questionable and resistant content, alone, does not prevent radio play.

Artists must have connections to mainstream production houses and corporate performance venues to make it to the radio for any long period. Most non-commercial artists do not have access, while some mainstream artists do. The major production
houses include studios like Ogopa DJs, responsible largely for the development of \textit{kapuka}, and Calif Records, which is known to make \textit{genge} records. Jua Cali and Nonini, mentioned in previous chapters, have worked under Calif Records. Jaguar, whom I just discussed above, produced \textit{Matapeli} with Ogopa DJs. International music corporations have began to sign artists. In 2012, Sony Music Entertainment Africa signed a deal with female rapper, Xtatic, and the rap group Camp Mulla acquired a deal with Universal Music Group. Both Sony and Universal have explored setting up permanent offices in Nairobi and report on continuing to look for musicians to contract (Walubengo).

Most mainstream artists’ financial security comes from obtaining sponsorship deals to earn money, like artists in the US and elsewhere. Jua Cali became an ambassador for Guiness and Orange (cell phone carrier), and Nonini had deals with Safaricom (cell phone carrier) and Standard Group (media house) (Omondi “Top”). There are also venues where commercial artists can perform. The monthly event Blankets and Wine is held in Leisure Gardens in Mamba Village. It is an outdoor concert that caters to upper class Kenyans, with ticket prices at 1000 KSH (11.63 USD). Concertgoers can eat \textit{nyama choma}, smoke from hookahs, and listen to music. At one Blankets and Wine I attended, Muthoni the Drummer Queen, who is a female rap artist, MC’d the event, and the main acts were the Tusker All Stars, musicians from a Kenyan reality show contest. For underground artists to be able to acquire record deals, have corporate contracts, or perform at a venue like Blankets and Wine are not impossible feats, but very unlikely.

Class determines access to these resources and venues. The artists I interview, with the exception of Baby T, have not had the opportunities to work with artists from
mainstream labels. This means they must mostly pay out of pocket for production costs with their often limited budgets. Most artists state that it costs about twenty thousand shillings to produce one song. This impacts song and music video production heavily. Lness, Karpchizzy, Demaine Jabez, for example, all have produced songs that have poor production quality. Many of the music videos I have observed from underground music, too, have irregularities and mistakes. For example, in Karpchizzy’s “Hustle” the sound and visuals are misaligned, which becomes obvious toward the end of the video. “Still Strong,” by Nafsi Huru, Kevlexicon, and Nje, has a screen interruption in the middle of the video that states “Check Signal.” This image is extremely fleeting and only visible if one slows the video down, and nevertheless must be the result of a glitch in the recording system that went uncorrected.

I met Nafsi Huru, Karpchizzy, Agano, Funzo Kuu and Ngugus at Audio Kusini, located in Kahawa West, a working class neighborhood. All of these artists are from lower class families. Audio Kusini was a transformed house, with moderately updated equipment. I returned in October 2012, and according to Karpchizzy the studio “kicked everyone out” and only works with gospel musicians. Sue Timon gave an interview in May 2013 stating that Audio Kusini had been evicted from their studio (“Christian”). Many studios, even those located in wealthier neighborhoods, are built in this fashion. Embakasi is another lower middle class area that is a popular place for music studios. TS1’s studio is there, as well as ATL Entertainment, where Baby T records.

DJ Adrian cautions that aspiring artists need to pay attention to production issues. “Production is very important. You find that sometimes they are not mastered. So the
vocals are low [puts his hand down gesturing at low level], the music is up there [puts his hand up, elucidating the disjunction]” (Washika). This problem is evident in a lot of the music I listened to. DJ Adrian did not view the industry as restrictive:

RP: One of the things that some folks say, um, they will say that it’s really hard to make it in the music industry because you always have to know people.

Adrian: Um, I don’t think that is really true because um, if you have a good product I mean you don’t have to really push it. Um, it will be acceptable. Like most of the time you find that a lot of artists, mainly new artists will come up with stuff, which is not really—I would say—quality. And ah, I guess they would have a hard time trying to push it. You understand? So I really don’t think you have to know—as an artist you just have to know the right producers.

RP: So your track will be good?

Adrian: Yeah, your track will be good…um, your video will be good. Basically you kind of have to bring money to invest in yourself as well. So I think, ah, that is pretty much the disconnect people have. (Washika)

His view is that artists should be willing to pay to create good music, video, or album. It seems that one aspect that he overlooks is that some musicians lack means to invest. Sentiments like his do reflect this idea that musicians cannot enter the music business with nothing and expect to generate wealth. One must already have money to invest.
These realities make it difficult for many artists to work their way into a system that is inaccessible. DJ Adrian’s perspective is not widely shared among many rappers I interview, as most view the industry as being flawed, and the obstacles that one has to jump through are burdensome. Some, though, do share his views. Evaredi notes that, “anything good will always get played,” after discussing how he has been successful in getting a song on the radio and TV (Evaredi). This is an interesting comment, especially given that above he also insists that one has to “dilute content” to get it on the radio. Lness, Judge, Baby T all express this idea, that if their music is good enough, it can be successful in mainstream venues.

The Kenyan music industry, compared to its western counterpart holds possibilities in some areas. It is possible to lay a track, take it to a radio station, and perhaps eventually have it air on the radio briefly. Such maneuvers are not possible in other places where bureaucratic policies of corporations structure such encounters. Moreover, Afropop is an innovative, creative music style. There are other brands of this style, for example in West Africa. East African Afropop is popular in Tanzania, Burundi, and Uganda. It is an example of popular African commercialized music. Its ability to standardize might be frustrating for underground rappers, but it highlights how African music is moving in promising directions. Afropop’s innovations should be acknowledged alongside its dominance in the music scene. It is difficult to tell where the industry will go now, given that multinationals like Sony and Universal have expressed interested in creating bases in Nairobi. This is not the only place where uncertainty exists. The enforcements of the copyright policy by the MCSK seem haphazard and unstructured,
and at times rogue. It is likely a more complex and illicit music economy will emerge to sell products. The uncertainty produced by the industry in some ways mirror the insecurity of broader forms of governing power. The state and the music industry attempt to operate through policy and when that is not sufficient the potential of violence supplies the remainder of the enforcement. The threat of police destroying products and arresting people mirror state-like policies like matatu regulations. Hip hop artists seek solutions to these precarious scenarios whereby one can acquire economic stability and confront and oppose forms of authoritative power.

This further illustrates the notion that while the government and the music industry do not explicitly ban music, the practices that it engages in operate as a form of policing and fear and frustration many in the music industry feel toward the MCSK. The policy enforcement of both the KECOBO and the MCSK make production, sale, and transmission very difficult. It is clear that both entities do not function together, but this does not mean they do not present serious obstacles to musicians. The enforcement of these laws and policies both by the MCSK and the KECOBO contributes to the othering of rap music. Scholar Halifu Osumare and rapper Evaredi believe that Kenyan underground rap is prevented from obtaining airplay. It is possible that the state somehow secretly bans certain forms of music. This would not explain, though, why songs like “Matapeli,” are heard. Moreover, the government does not have to ban hip hop explicitly, like Moi once did with other music, the market is a powerful enough enforcer. This defacto ban is more pernicious and complicated because it is set in place by neoliberal
capitalist practices and class stratification. The structural conditions of the music industry and society at large inhibit artists.

Shupavu!

This section gives an example of a hip hop song and music video that responds to conditions constituted by state, a limiting music industry, and an economically unequal society. To structure this conversation, I return to the notion of bodily vulnerability. Judith Butler’s *Precarious Life* explores the characteristics that make for grievable lives. Butler considers how the War on Terror creates lives that are not legible or intelligible. I want to consider how Kenya’s situation creates inequality where people’s lives do not seem to matter.\(^{78}\) For Butler, this creates a politics of dehumanization, “where dehumanization becomes the condition for the production of the human,” meaning we can only understand how our own humanization by recognizing the extent which someone else is not fully human (*Precarious* 91). To counter this, Butler advocates for recognition of a common human vulnerability, “a corporeal vulnerability,” as a political basis for social relations. This radical act “considers the ways in which our lives are profoundly implicated in the lives of others” (*Precarious* 7). Butler believes that by considering people’s inherent sociality means we are all vulnerable to each other and this can be the basis on which we can begin to recognize our common humanity. Rather than

\(^{78}\) “[S]overeignty,” writes Mbemé, “means the capacity to define who matters and who does not, who is *disposable* and who is not” (“Necropolitics” 27).
vulnerability as the marker of whose life does not matter, Butler sees that vulnerability can be the radical reconceptualization of humanity and sociality. I want to consider how post-Mau Mau cultural aesthetics shape underground rap artists, as they reflect notions of “corporeal vulnerability.” These artists have been continually shaped by the politicization of the Mau Mau struggle against colonialism, and one that demands constant recognition. Evan Mwangi states for Kenya’s “canonical writers,” “Mau Mau is a successful peasant rebellion against colonialism and an embodiment of Kenyans’ unity against oppression” (“Incomplete” 92). Today, underground artists contend with the government, the music industry, and social inequality—though most stop short of putting the blame on capitalism. Rappers harness this spirit of unity, fight, and reclamation of humanity in their music. While Butler calls for people (perhaps westerners) to acknowledge a common vulnerability toward “others,” these artists, who are othered, are vying for their own legibility. In this context, hip hop artists argue that they and others who come from similar backgrounds possess an inherent humanity and deserve recognition.

Underground artists enact “corporeal vulnerability” by reaffirming their humanity through recognition of a common oppression or marginality. Underground artists contend with economic inequality. Inability to get their songs on the radio is largely due to reasons associated with class, either because rappers do not have connections, or because they lack resources to make well produced songs. The results of copyright policy affect rappers adversely. Mtawali had a negative experience with the MCSK and was still invited to the statehouse. For underground artists, however, the copyright policy is one more barrier in a series of structural impediments.
Two hip hop scholars explore rap’s relationship to peripheral politics. Halifu Osumare states that rappers ground their practices in “connective marginalities.” “Connective marginalities” “drives global hip hop underground” and “are the resonances of social inequalities that can manifest as four particular configurations in different parts of the world—youthful rebellion, class, historical oppression, and culture” (Africanist 63). This term exemplifies the idea that artists are in conversation with a transnational culture, while they articulate their own unique circumstances. Derek Pardue similarly argues that rappers, in his case Brazilian, create a “discourse of marginality”: “hip hoppers use the […] discourse of marginality to save themselves from further negativity and by extension transform the periphery into a place and concept more akin to empowerment than marginality” (5). Pardue examines how practitioners navigate and resignify the places they inhabit as a place of power. In Osumare and Pardue’s accounts, class position figures prominently into their arguments because they each argue that artists enact their subjectivities through rapping about and speaking from the economic margins. Both approaches also recognize that practitioners are oriented toward US hip hop, even while they depart from it by articulating the specificities of their lives. While Pardue’s approach thinks through how rappers articulate a localized experience, Osumare’s discussion is more oriented toward rappers’ global similarities. I use both approaches to frame how rappers name and identify their own marginality and vulnerability, and in so doing, either explicitly or implicitly draw connections with other marginalized youths. In this gesture, practitioners acknowledge their own precariousness and that of others (most likely other rappers), and use this realization as a foundation for
a radical hip hop aesthetic. Hip hop, therefore, becomes a conduit toward recognizing “corporeal vulnerability.”

The example that I will use here is “Shupavu,” by rapper Judge and rap duo Washamba Wenza. The music video and song illustrates how hip hop practitioners articulate conditions of unjust dehumanization, a call for unity, and affirmation of their humanity. “Shupavu” means “brave” or “warrior,” and figures prominently into a post-Mau Mau underground cultural aesthetic. The image of the warrior relates directly to the figure of the Mau Mau as freedom fighter. Evan Mwangi, in research on UFMM, describes the Mau Mau as “the ultimate symbol of ordinary people’s bravery and resolve to wrest power from colonialists toward ultimate political self-determination” (88). The artists I study continue to draw from the general themes of bravery, perseverance, and struggle. The primary task of “Shupavu” is to assert that Judge and Washamba’s relevant and significant points of reference come from their neighborhood, Dandora. This song is a complex text that accomplishes a number of interventions. First and foremost, it is about Judge and Washamba Wenza’s dominance in a competitive rap game. The lyrics set out to argue convincingly and unhesitatingly for their authority as rappers; it is a boast rap. Secondarily, the artists express how they are confined by and made subject to social inequities. They continually make references to their social position, not as a determining or essentializing factor in their humanity, but as a significant element that shapes the unfairness of their lives. Moreover, their emergence as rappers on top of the game is evidence of their turpitude and strength to conquer the toughest of conditions.
Judge and Smallz both stand while they rap in front of buildings. The camera angle points up toward them, illustrating their authority to speak. Judge raps the chorus, and it is as follows:

_Wamezuba! Makamiti ni familia, kamiti kuchungulia, sifiti tukitulia. Shupavu!_ (They are dazed! Prisoners [Those imprisoned] are family, Prison to peep, it’s not good to relax/chill. [We are] brave/warriors!)

_Tunawaramba na mabavu, Shupavu! Tunakusanya ka viabu._ (We finish/crush them with force, [We are] brave/warriors! We make money)

(Orenge)

The chorus establishes their competitive stance. The first proclamation, “Wamezuba!” means that their hip hop rivals are confused, unknowing, or dazed, and implied is that Judge and Washamba are speaking from a place of knowledge. “Tunawaramba na mabavu” reiterates their strength and abilities as rappers. It also serves as a reminder that Judge, Flamez, and Smallz are never victims, in this case it means they do not lose to their rival practitioners, but it could easy simultaneously mean an articulation of their perseverance to endure social obstacles.

These lyrics reflect their own social peripheral position. The next part, “Makamiti ni familia” implies that these artists align themselves with those in prisons. Acknowledging themselves as having familial ties, or ones that are closely felt and personal, with the imprisoned reiterates their susceptibility to the state. They additionally find commonalities with the incarcerated, which is a powerful gesture meant to humanize
those imprisoned. Pardue notes something similar in the use of “criminal” in Brazilian rap, “The explicit adoption of ‘criminal’ is evident in everyday greetings among hip hoppers [and] it can be construed as positive and inclusive” (83). Kenyan rappers do not embrace the “criminal,” they reject it along with the iconography of the gangsta. They do, though, reconfigure the imprisoned as victimized by the system. “Kamiti kuchungulia,” to be so close to prison life one can actually see inside, illustrates the everyday precariousness that they experience. Because of these difficulties, Judge exclaims, “sifi*tukitulia,” meaning that one cannot relax or let one’s guard down lest they become victims of the system and imprisoned themselves. This statement serves a dual purpose in that it also means they must be aware of other rappers and strive to be on top. “Shupavu!” occurs in between each phrase, which reconceptualizes their fringe status as something empowering, “Hip hoppers have reworked the categorizations of periphery pathology into marginality as a productive utterance […]” (Pardue 84). Continual proclamations of “Shupavu!” reminds listeners about the fact that though life is difficult, they persist. The artists rap in a localized Sheng from Dandora, one that not everyone can easily understand. For example, the end of the chorus is “Tunakusanya ka via*bu,” which means, “we gather money” or “we make paper/money.” This is not a widely used statement, but is Sheng specific to Dandora (Orenge). The rappers use of language grounds them in a particular context in Nairobi and this is intentional; they want their audience to know they are rapping from this place.79

---

79 Dandora is a poor area in Eastlands, Nairobi. Nairobi’s city structure is divided along class lines; the west is where the wealthier people live, and the east is largely impoverished. In many neighborhoods, both poor and wealthy, there are different types of Sheng. For further discussion on Sheng differentiation, see Peter Githinji’s work, “Bazes and Their Shibboleths: Lexical Variation and Sheng Speakers’ Identity in Nairobi.”
The song subtly critiques the music industry, and the actors who compose it. In the first verse, Judge raps, “Tunachukiana badala ya kuinuana, wasanii ndani ya game muziki laana” (We hate each other instead of lifting one another, to be a musician in the game is a curse) (Orenge). Judge argues through this boast rap that he is a superior rapper. However, this does not eliminate the idea that he recognizes a commonality with other rappers—a common vulnerability. He situates the rivalry with other rappers as being produced by the competitive environment of the industry, though he simultaneously states that “ndani ya game muziki” (inside the rap game) he is top rapper. He calls out the industry for its promotion of antagonism instead of unity, but not insofar as to undermine his own rap skills.

“Shupavu” is a masculine text about the experiences of males. There are no women in this video, only men. The absence of women makes the rap game and the neighborhood from which they rap appear as a fiercely male space. In chapter five, I explore how hip hop is a male homosocial space constituted by and for men, something that Pardue also explores in his research (126). He notes that hip hop “is generally about the process of men delineating masculinities and femininities (as voiceless remainders) […] which often reinforce the paradigms of masculinity espoused by male hip hoppers” (129). Judge and Washamba’s performances of masculinity correspond to the beats, which are hard, repetitive, and jarring. This illustrates the unforgiving and marginalizing place from which they rap. Judge has a raspy voice and he also sings the chorus, giving the song a masculine affect. The song offers no reprieve; the chorus and verses are strung together like one long proclamation about their fortitude and perseverance in the rap
game, others’ weaknesses, and their commonplace social vulnerability to which their lives are constituted. Therefore, marginalization is constructed alongside masculinity, asserting the notion that economic marginality is most importantly a male problem.

The video’s setting powerfully inscribes class inequality. Osumare notes, “For youths among […] “lower-class” groups, hip hop becomes a way of giving voice to their unrest” (70). Moreover, “The global poor as the world’s underclass is a facile unifying construct for the class sentiments of hip-hop’s protest voice” (70). For “Shupavu,” the articulation of class oppression is most evident in the visual scenes in the music video. The images evoke an intolerable harshness. It takes place in a neighborhood at night, and streetlights, fires set in the neighborhood (probably of trash), and the occasional car headlights make it possible to see the artists. This dim setting corresponds to the tone of struggle, despair, and perseverance. The entire video is shot in this setting, and is most likely shot in Dandora, where these artists are from. The images of the neighborhood, however, give away no legible signifiers as to the location. From the beginning, we see images of a police officer walking through the neighborhood, meant to represent the ongoing presence of the state. The viewers never see daylight, but rather darkness and the various forms of light produced at night. The light of the fire and the streetlights give against the darkness of the night produces two dominant colors: a subdued yellow against black. Occasionally there are other colors, a red light from an unknown source. This creates an environment that seems surreal or constructed, and hard to find. The dimness of the video, the unusual colors, and the dark shadows of people give impression that this world is difficult to find—that one cannot simply search out Judge, Smallz, and Flamez’s
neighborhood. Though it seems hidden, that does not make their environment fake. Rather, the place from which they rap from is tragic and frightening exactly because it is real.

The participants in the video rework notions of “corporeal vulnerability.” Butler states that people’s ability to enact this performance is due to the unavoidability of our contact with others:

To the extend that we commit violence, we are acting on another, putting the other at risk, causing the other damage, threatening to expunge the other. In a way, we all live with this particular vulnerability, a vulnerability to the other that is part of bodily life, a vulnerability to a sudden address from elsewhere that we cannot preempt. (*Precarious* 29)

The video shows several scenes of men who are outside with the rappers. There are young men gathered around fires, purportedly to keep warm; others are walking around and sitting together. An image of an angry and barking stray dog appears during Smallz’s verse. These scenes evoke strong images of disenfranchisement, poverty, and despair. These realities are collectively felt and experienced, as evidenced by the groups of young men that the artists rap in front of. Widespread poverty is collective and tragically unjust. Judge, at one point, puts both arms by his side, shakes both fists pointing upward, and looks to the sky while singing “Shupavu!” This gesture seems to indicate tiredness with the current situation, and a plea to something above him (perhaps God) for reprieve. Several times Judge sings the chorus and looks bothered, rolling his eyes and shaking his head in frustration. He stances, though, are serious, affirmative, and steadfast. While
rapping, his arms move tightly and confidently around his body, either straight out, or when pointing or gesturing. These performances indicate that though Judge has no power to change the present, he can marshal his own will to get through it. This is a common sentiment in underground rap. Neither does he, Flamez, nor Smallz smile, laugh or indicate any emotion of happiness or pleasure. This is because “hip hop masculinity is a discourse of ‘hardness’ […] in personal experience and collective representation through narratives of resistance” (Pardue 146).

The music video enacts an everydayness of violence and marginalization, which is best exemplified during the third verse. Flamez’s scene illustrates an acknowledgement of vulnerability and the conditions that create it. Flamez raps his verse sitting down in a stairwell, in between two concrete walls. The place from which he raps, symbolically and physically, are unfortunate and unjust. The concrete is crumbling and stained by water and dirt. Pardue states, “[…] hip hoppers, through their cultural work, attempt to restructure the periphery spaces […] not only through metaphorical refashioning in rap lyrics, but also and perhaps more important through a heightened sense of “occupation” (61). Flamez’s gestures are determined by the structure, and yet his eloquent raps come from a place of knowledge, and therefore he is able to ascertain a type of bodily presence that occupies the space and defies its attempts to restrict him. The camera points up at him slightly, and he thus looks down while he raps. He addresses his abilities as a rapper:

*Tara sina taratibu, wamezuba ninawatibu/

(I am in no hurry I go slowly, they are dazed and I am (lyrically) healing them)
Nawatoboa tu kama kichungi na ukipenda unikashifu/

(I go through them like a sieve and you can come against me if you like) (Orenge)

He moves to the beats, moving his hands in and out from his body as he raps. The video cuts to him interacting with his peers, standing around talking, and walking through the neighborhood. Flamez only raps in that stairwell. He emphasizes the end of each verse verbally, and moves his hands to the beat of that emphasis. Each hand moves toward the camera, in and out from his body, as he raps. During his verse, the camera shoots one of the groups of young men sitting outside. Only their silhouettes are visible against the building and the obscure night setting. Suddenly, they stand up and run, as a shadow of a police officer appears walking toward them. This officer has actually appeared in quick shots throughout the video, but only now presents an actual threat. The young men dart toward the camera, not away from it, giving the impression that we as viewers are or should be allied with them. The police officer (presumably a male) continues to walk toward the camera slowly or in slow motion, and visible is the shadow of his semi-automatic weapon resting at his side. The fact that the men run, for seemingly doing nothing, illustrates how fear of state violence is a commonplace reality.

People can be interpelleted as lawbreakers due to their position in society, what neighborhood they live in, and the places they frequent. Pardue states on Brazil, “rap’s central focus on crime and violence exposes the essential basis for periferia [peripheral] reality manifested in crime syndicates, police activity, and the miseducation of the people” (83). In “Shupavu,” like a lot of Nairobi rap, themes of crime do not factor into music. Instead, artists use imagery of state power to illustrate their subordinate social
position. This scene exhibits the potentiality of state violence and how people can be interpreted as criminals for partaking in everyday actions. The decisions to depict lower-class poverty are intentional. Mbūgua wa Mūngai asserts, “Kenyan musicians are aware of the politics of (mis)representation and there are consciously deconstructing this discourse by placing themselves and other ‘ordinary’ persons (hawkers, shopkeepers, matatu drivers, and bar tenders amongst others) as central performers in their VCDs” (“Riverwood” 62).

In many respects, this video is typical of an underground rap song. For example, Karpchizzy’s “Hustle” and “System,” discussed in chapter five, both show poor young men negotiating a police state, poverty, and other oppressive realities. Usually these videos are shot in a poor neighborhood with groups of young men. Flamez, Smallz, and Judge all articulate a refusal to be victimized by a repressive state, a bleak economic situation, and the music industry. Upper and middle class people may be able to be unaffected by the violence by not seeing themselves as constituted its banality, but these artists do not. Their ongoing representations of the state in their music videos are noteworthy because they contend that the state has the capacity to harm or to make lives precarious. It is a fundamental marker of difference between mainstream music and underground sounds. The artists answer Judith Butler’s inquires, “Who counts as human? Who counts as lives? And finally, What makes for a grievable life?” (Precarious 20, emphasis in original). By arguing for their humanity, these artists inevitably exemplify their own social and economic marginalization; those who are privileged rarely have to argue for why their lives are worthy and valuable. Judge, Flamez, and Smallz articulate a
common vulnerability, mostly with the other men in their neighborhood. They exemplify how class and segregation impel underprivileged lives in certain neighborhoods, and create privilege and wealth in others. They answer Butler’s calls by reminding us that social divisions and inequalities must be acknowledged.

The culture of fear that Moi created and Kibaki continued in many respects forces these artists to enact warrior subjectivity. Matatu regulations, the absence of hip hop records in stores, and turning over bribes to police are only a few examples of how people operate in environments where there is ongoing apprehension over state retribution. Judge and Washamba Wenza recognize this fear. Indeed, their own comrades in the video run when the police come. Yet, in between the state of fear and people’s self-policing exist a type of resistance, subversion, and defiance, even when it comes with its own flaws. Underground rappers cannot succumb to difficult social conditions, as their humanity depends on challenging this. Flamez raps about his authority as an MC as he sat walled between concrete, a concrete that was in fact crumbling. The politics of underground rap plays with boundaries like this, its artists search out ephemeral moments of possibility amid conditions of seeming impossibility.

It is no surprise this song does not appear on the radio. The song is obviously not upbeat and positive, but rather it has a cautious, melancholic tone. The music video’s nighttime setting, their raspy and tragic voices, the location-specific Sheng, and alliances with the imprisoned all shape the audience they appeal to. It is almost as if these artists do not want a large population of listeners to identify with the song, and perhaps this song was not meant for the radio. Judge and Washamba Wenza did perform this at Sarakasi to
an excited and hyped crowd, as I detail in the next chapter. This song embraces
marginality, and seems to accept hip hop’s otherness and cultural location. The aesthetic
quality that the song and music video produces, furthermore, advocates for fostering the
creative expressions that can occur on the periphery. Instead of attempting to make a
radio-ready song, the artists rap about tragedy and sorrow, things that most people would
not want to hear and many stations do not want to play. Their audience is the dedicated
hip hop underground practitioners who understand this language, the content of the song,
and the reasons why it has to sound like this. The underground is diverse, and not all
songs contain these resonances. Some incorporate choruses with R&B style singing, are
upbeat and danceable, and produce affectively uplifting, leisurely, or entertaining
sentiments. There is, though, a style of rap songs like “Shupavu,” what Imani Perry terms
“argumentative realism,” which decry social injustices and justifies questionable
activities on the basis of limited options (96-97). These songs remind the most dedicated
listeners of underground practitioners of uncensored injustice. What artists do with
marginality, attempt to escape it or embrace and transform it, is left up to the artist.
Chapter 5: Performing Hip Hop Subjectivities

Hip hop performances, whether they are done in live settings or music videos, are methods of enacting knowledge. A focus on the body allows for a more holistic analysis of rap culture because “the body has been as critical in the construction of the hip-hop community as have words and music” (White 20). Practitioners creatively enact methods of communication through performances, that speak to local realities and that signal an imagined hip hop community. This chapter builds on Diana Taylor’s claim that, “every performance enacts a theory, and every theory performs in the public sphere” (27).

Bodily stances, gestures, and poses are not just repetitive movements, but rather produce ways of knowing and understanding the world. These bodily expressions are part of a wider post-Mau Mau underground cultural aesthetic within rap music culture of producing viable mechanisms of interrogation. Rappers use performances to navigate through a deeply hierarchal society. Stances, gestures, and poses are used to confront social ideologies that attempt to interpellate individuals into homogeneous and disciplined subjects, to claim one’s subjectivity and humanity, and sometimes to appropriate normative positions. These corporeal enactments reflect the complicated agentive maneuvers that are part of a wider aesthetic of cultural expressiveness found in hip hop culture.
Underground Kenyan hip hop is a subculture that uses creative aesthetic forms to engage critically with power. Dick Hebdige writes, “Style in subculture is, then, pregnant with significance. It’s transformations go ‘against nature’, interrupting the process of ‘normalization’. As such, they are gestures, movements towards a speech which offends the ‘silent majority’…” (18). Underground artists rap about topics like political corruption, social and individual empowerment, ghetto street life, and relationships. Even outside of its lyrics, hip hop performance of defiance, armor, and rebellion have the power to evoke commentary and meanings. All of these characteristics constitute the post-Mau Mau perspectives that artists rap and perform from. Not all lyrical subject matter is serious and grave, and likewise not every performance is about resisting state power. Mau Mau revolutionary ideology that current artists draw from helps to shape and constitute underground culture, and furthermore Ukoo Flani Mau Mau’s investments have created a tradition out of this remembered legacy. The artists I follow use this space to explore artistic creativity, joy, and pleasure. Bodily performances often defy conventional structures, but they also allow artists to have fun inside of hip hop spaces and they enable artists to perform subjectivities that explore social boundaries.

This chapter is dedicated to illustrating how performances are central to rap culture by contending rappers use bodily movements to facilitate knowledge and confront social realities. What rappers do, the way they move their bodies in space, is fundamental to hip hop culture. Christopher Small’s notion of musicking helps in this regard: “to music is to take part, in any capacity, in a musical performance, whether by performing, by listening, by rehearsing or practicing, by providing material for performance (what is
called composing), or by dancing” (9). Rap musicking at more formal and structured events, thus, relies on all elements of the respective performance, music, rapping, posing, and dancing. An artist cannot just stand at the mic and rap, hands down to her side, body not moving. She must move in particular ways, and use her body to articulate lyrics, communicate with participants, and confirm her confident expressiveness. Audience members deliver their own interpretations, performances, and dancing to take part in the collective action. These gestures are intentional, agentive, and meaningful. Likewise, the performances that practitioners enact in more casual and everyday settings contain powerful communicative expressions. These performances are what Diana Taylor calls “embodied practice,” which “along with and bound up with other cultural practices, offers a way of knowing” (3). Embodied performance styles in hip hop, therefore, are methods of expressing types of knowing that are best articulated through and by the body. Rappers use their bodies along with other elements to generate methods of articulation, critiques, and resistance. These practices along with rap, freestyling, dance, music, graffiti, and other characteristics together constitute holistic hip hop methods.

This chapter is constructed in several parts. Thomas Defrantz states “dancing black bodies produce actionable assertions,” and each section is designed around how artists enact agency and how their performances produce “actionable assertions (66). The first section sets the discussion for thinking about the elements that compose hip hop performance. I begin with a general discussion of hip hop and bodily subjectivity, with a focus on how artists discuss the mechanics of performance. Following that, I focus on five characteristics that constitute underground Nairobi hip hop’s gestures and stances:
ludicity, armor, transnationality, decipherability, liminality, and rap’s complicated alliance with power. First, the deployment of the ludic in underground hip hop serves to disrupt normative bodily presence by challenging the idea that bodies have to conform. Rappers use ludic performances in conjunction with and alongside very serious social messages, which makes hip hop seemingly unpredictable and difficult to define. Second, rap performances serve as armor against larger subsuming systems, like the state and music industry—both of which are mediated and influenced by global capitalism. Third, creative gestures are intentionally obscure and constantly dodge authoritative entities that work to discipline bodies. Gestures and poses are often difficult to define and discuss, and yet they are citations to an imagined global rap aesthetic that is politically charged, artistic, and affirmative. Rappers do not need every stance, performance, or lyric to make coherent sense to outsiders or even to themselves; these practices exist within a wider, transnational expressive hip hop culture. Fourth, liminality, or an inherent in-betweenness positioned away from mainstream and privileged spaces, compose underground rap and its performances. Fifth, performances are never wholly resistive to or completely allied with power. At times a performance can at once reinforce normative frameworks, while disrupting others. Hip hop’s liminal position in society allows it to both buttress power and undermine and rethink normative conscriptions. Previous discussions focused on its complicated relationship with capitalism, and this section focuses on gender. Hip hop performances, and the spaces they exist within, reinforce a type of exclusive masculinity, even while it reworks gender politics and creates momentary openings of interrogation.
Literature Review

My focal aim is to account for how underground rap music facilitates a subjectivity expressed through embodied knowledge. Three approaches from somewhat disparate fields assist in constructing this argument: Dick Hebdige’s *Subculture*, Christopher Small’s *Musicking*, and Arthur Kleinman and Erin Fitz-Henry’s “The Experiential Basis of Subjectivity.” I draw inspiration from music studies scholar, Christopher Small, who discusses how music occurs through a series of performances. He coins the term musicking to describe how “music is not a thing, but an activity, something that people do” (2). Small contends music materializes through a composition of performances and materializes because of the contribution of all participants—including artists, fans, listeners, producers, and critics. His intervention is that musicking is about bodies in space exploring the communication that music offers, “musicking is about relationships, not so much about those which actually exist in our lives as about those that we desire to exist and long to experience” (183). My work focuses on how hip hop gestures and stances are part of hip hop culture and in that way are an important characteristic of the way music develops.

Dick Hebdige’s seminal work, *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, explores how youth subcultures produce ways of enacting performance and style. Hebdige argues that the style of subculture willfully subverts and undermines authority. His attentiveness to how seemingly everyday gestures are meaningful and useful ways of subverting power; of reggae, he notes: “Reggae provided the focus around which another culture, another
set of values and self-definitions could cluster. These changes were subtly registered in
the style of black youth; in the gait, the manner, the voice which seemed almost overnight
to become less anglicized” (40). My work is inspired by his attention to seemingly
commonplace or insignificant elements of young people’s lives. Understandings of power
relations, for Hebdige, are best understood in terms of Gramsci’s hegemony, which
asserts is there is an underclass that gives their consent to social structures and the
dominant class. My project alternatively considers the nuances of power, specifically
how practitioners negotiate inescapable networks of domination, like capitalism, and how
they reinforce troubling notions of gender and sexuality.

Arthur Kleinman and Erin Fitz-Henry situate their discussion of human agency
and subjectivity between the notion of the social and the singular. “Experience,” as
Arthur Kleinman and Erin Fitz-Henry observe, “has much to do with collective realities
as it does with individual translations and transformations of those realities” (53). The
serious consideration of the individual and the social in subjectivity assists in structuring
the type of literature I draw from for this project. Hip hop ethnographies focus on
people’s stories and the intricacies of people’s lives, and global hip hop scholarship takes
up the question of how to locate non-US hip hop as a global and collective practice.
Much of this scholarship fits into both categories by thinking through how “experience is
intersubjective inasmuch as it involves practices, negotiations, and contestations with
others with whom we are connected,” for example literature on women’s experience in

---

80 Arthur Kleinman and Erin Fitz-Henry argue against a different kind of universal—biological. They contend that reaching toward a universal shared “human nature” limits our understanding of human subjectivity as economically and socio-politically located.
rap spaces and research from the global south (53). My fieldwork corresponds to what Kleinman and Fitz-Henry state compellingly; that ethnography is able to document the considerations of how to think through human ways of being in a social and political world. This approach also allows me to recognize how artists engage in a transnational imagined culture that is intensely personal.

My research is inspired by hip hop ethnographies and scholarship, performance studies, and non-US hip hop research. Ethnographies are helpful because they mostly take a firm position recognizing practitioners’ agency within often limited social contexts. Some prominent hip hop ethnographers include Greg Dimitriadis, Marcyliena Morgan, and Kwame Anthony Harrison. Dimitriadis’s research focuses on how hip hop devotees perform “identity and culture,” and use popular culture texts like films to enact understandings about their realities. “Rap,” he contends, “[serves] as a kind of alternative curriculum through which often intensely disaffected young people have produced and maintained notions of community, history, and self” (34). My ethnographic work illustrates similar tendencies, whereby Kenyan rappers use US rap artists and songs to think through their own realities. I take influence from how Dimitriadis states that such navigations reveal how rappers and practitioners utilize these references, not blindly or without consideration, but thoughtfully and innovatively.

Anthony Kwame Harrison’s ethnographic study of US Bay Area underground hip hop examines race, specifically notions of blackness, and authenticity. Harrison observes that artists articulate a powerful desire to resist mainstream rap’s version of blackness, and promote a complicated version of rethinking rap’s boundaries. Underground rap’s
notion of “keeping it real” has been influenced by navigating African American cultural contributions and essentialized blackness. Nonetheless, Harrison acknowledges that hip hop interrogates racial boundaries, as evidenced by black rappers’ refusal to be confined by borders, as well as white, Latino, and Asian American hip hop (86-101). He calls this “hip hop’s essential blackness and non-essential inclusiveness” (102). My research parallels many observations Harrison makes in the Bay because Kenyan artists challenge confining notions of what hip hop is, appropriate sometimes essentialized notions of US blackness, and reconfigure hip hop as uniquely non-commercial and Kenyan. Harrison, Morgan, and Dimitriadis all consider hip hop a “product of African American cultural, political, social, and artistic expression” (Morgan 14). Morgan notes, “It is that aspect of the American experience on which hiphop has shaped its understandings and representation of race, social class, gender, sexuality, and political power” (14). My work sees theirs as contributing to thinking through hip hop’s materialization in Kenya, while also departing in critical areas. My fieldwork has revealed how Kenyan rap not only appropriates and borrows, but also innovates and stylizes unique methods in Nairobi, something that I continue to argue throughout my project.

Most non-US hip hop research recognizes that rap outside the US embodies a transnationality that draws on global references, while grounding itself in local specificities. Eric Charry’s Hip Hop Africa explores various rap sites that together interrogate US influences, economic and political realities, and cultural references. Charry identifies how African rappers most profoundly take up and muddle through notions of authenticity—hip hop and African—and globalization to craft cultural forms
suitable for them (285-315). In this chapter, I reference the contributions of Jochen Seebode, Jean Kidula, Jesse Shipley, and Lee Watkins, who all make contributions to *Hip Hop Africa*. Kenyan hip hop scholars explore this notion well, for example David Samper who argues that artists interrogate the ideas of the “western” and the “traditional” (37-51). Mbūgua wa Mūngai states that, “Local experience, not Western/American values, forms the real ground upon which contestation takes place” (57). “It is in hip hop,” states Evan Mwangi, “that the youth most intensely appropriate western culture, while at the same time resisting its hegemony to forge a new form of nationalism” (7). Mwenda Ntarangwi illustrates how globalization, in its many forms of colonialism, neo-colonialism, and neoliberalism, create the conditions from which rappers work. Moreover, she argues that contemporary global politics opens up creative spaces for artists (4-15). The edited volume, *Global Linguistic Flows*, captures how artists produce hip hop that reflects artists’ lived local circumstances by using an art form imagined as global. H. Samy Alim calls this the “Global Hip Hop Nation” (GHHN), which is a “multilingual, multiethnic ‘nation’ with an international reach, a fluid capacity to cross borders, and a reluctance to adhere to the geopolitical givens of the present” (3). The contributors in *Global* use language styles to interrogate rap, in much the same way my project uses performances. Alim writes that “this perspective views speakers as both producers and products of language, using language in ways that simultaneously reproduce social structures and individual subjectivities” (10).

My research, like the work done in *Global*, explores what performances reveal about power, cultural hierarchies, and the creative expressiveness that takes place within
such settings. However, I am uncomfortable with Alim’s unproblematic use of the term “nation” because I think it can perpetuate, not just describe, the uneven power politics of, for example, gender and sexuality difference that continue to plague hip hop spaces. This unintentional gesture is perhaps evidenced by the volume’s absence of female, queer, or non-male practitioners. Indeed, rappers use the term and rethink the “nation” in their work. Evan Mwangi’s study explores this very idea, how masculinity and nationalism materialize in variegated forms in Kenyan hip hop (5-20). Marcyliena Morgan, likewise, references “the hiphop nation” as a collective body of artists. Yet, one must be attentive to language, as Alim calls us to do, which means realizing the weight of language within terrains of power, both in practice and theoretically. Some artists imagine themselves as purposefully reproducing hip hop along nationalistic terms that are exclusive and male-centered, and others do not. In order to account for these differences, I use the word “community,” as in “a global imagined hip hop community.” Also appropriate is this term in the plural, “global hip hop communities.” At times, artists imagine their work in direct conversation with a transnational hip hop culture, in which the reference to a singular community makes sense. One example in this chapter is Nafsi Huru’s song, “Still Strong.” In other moments, like the music video “Shupavu,” artists intensely focus on the specificities of their work and how it may reflect their communities and neighborhoods in Nairobi. In these instances, it is necessary to use the term communities to acknowledge the unique expressions that emerge out of particular hip hop sites.

Marcyliena Morgan, Mwenda Ntarangwi, Imani Perry, and Tricia Rose in their respective explorations of hip hop culture all include sections addressing women
practitioners. One commonality in this literature is that all authors illustrate that female rappers use hip hop, as imperfect and troubling as hip hop may be, in diverse ways to explore their own self-definitions and creative expressions as artists. Tricia Rose’s intervention revolves around the notion that women’s participation is not static and monolithic, but rather complex. Rose argues that “black women’s rapper’s central contestation is in the arena of sexual politics,” and that how these artists navigate through this by questioning racial politics, celebrating black female beauty and bodies, defending male artists, and forming safe spaces for women (146-182). Like Rose, Marcyliena Morgan argues for the multiple experiences of hip hop women in US underground who “carve out a female identity that, for them, embodies the emotional complexity and humanity of black women” (133). She observes that women craft spaces for each other, that women support male artists because there is a shared experience of using rap to address marginalization, and that many female artists in underground spaces have unrecognized talent (133-147). Perry interrogates how female rapper as badwoman enters into highly contestable hip hop spaces, use rap as a refusal to be victimized, expounds on racism and sexism experienced by black women, and calls into question caretaker roles and other gendered tropes (156-190). Mwenda Ntarangwi conducts ethnographic fieldwork in Kenya, Tanzania, and Uganda. Her work in Kenya is at K1, a club that caters to middle and upper class patrons. Like Morgan, she observes how women enter hip hop spaces piecemeal. She identifies how hip hop gives the few women who practice hip hop an arena to have a voice in a society still dictated by forms of patriarchy. Furthermore, she argues that “hip hop expresses […] the fluidity and performative nature
of gender, revealing how normalized gender identities can be reconstituted to gain new meanings,” and asserts that “hip hop also reifies and straitjackets gender in a way that is both liberating and controlling” (49). These accounts of women in hip hop have lead me to investigate how female rappers participate eagerly and creatively in spaces constituted for and by men first and foremost.

Hip hop performance scholarship is still emerging. Russell Potter’s discussion of the role of the ludic, though he does not examine performance, helps consider the importance of bodily gestures. He examines how hip hop’s heteroglossic and ludic practices “push the boundaries of the political, in the process redefining the structures of resistance” (15). Greg Dimitriadis’s ethnography is through a very specific lens, which is “a performatve approach to the textual [that] allows us to see how shifting contexts of production (e.g., from performance spaces to privatized ones) enable particular kinds of texts to emerge, with particular histories, ideologies, etc.” (123). In other words, he sees the films he analyzes, like Menace II Society, Boyz ‘N the Hood, and Panther, as texts that young people transform and negotiate. His notions of how culture is performed rests in how rap devotees activate these relevant texts and apply them to their lives. This is a present phenomenon in Kenya that I have witnessed while talking to artists.

However, my fieldwork most aligns with authors who investigate how artists use the body to create meaning. Michael Jefferies delves into what he calls “complex cool,” as a departure from the limited “cool pose theories,” “[Complex cool] openly foregrounds and sustains the conflicts of Black American masculinity rather than concealing them, saturating these struggles in an appealing marinade of pride in one’s hip hop skills and
sensibilities” (60). Robin Kelley offers up a critique of problematic cool pose theories in “Looking for the ‘Real’ Nigga,” where he explicates on ethnographic approaches to read US black lives as inscribed by an “authentic” culture of poverty (135-156). Miles White examines the historic emergences of black performativity by considering how minstrelsy set the politics around race, performance, and masculinity. Important to this conversation is how notions of threatening black masculinity exist within the trajectory of black performance, and within the politics of appropriation and commodification. His work is US-centered, and when thinking beyond America’s borders very briefly in the epilogue, he uses the lens of appropriation and consumption. He argues that at a 50 Cent concert in Prague attendees participate in the appropriative performance of black masculinity that is removed from the fan or devotee. This may be true in the context of Prague, but different politics are at play in Kenya where practitioners use US hip hop “blackness” to cultivate their own identities that often depart from hardcore gangsta rappers like 50 Cent. Kenyan practitioners see commonalities, but also some distinct differences between themselves and gangsta rappers, for example. Again, I think beyond notions of appropriation as the most explanatory element of hip hop in Kenya. Appropriation is one characteristic that exists alongside other elements, including the history circuitry of Afrodiasporic performances that I describe in the first chapter, as well as the way hip hop responds to social divisions in both the US and Kenya.

---

81 See Majors and Billson’s Cool Pose: The Dilemma of Black Manhood in America.

82 Along similar lines, E. Patrick Johnson examines how an Australian gospel choir enacts forms of US blackness. Here, Johnson states “‘blackness’ does not belong to any one individual or group. […] All forms of cross-cultural appropriation are not instances of colonization and subjugation. Some of these appropriations are instances of genuine dialogic performance—instances that provide fertile ground upon which to formulate new epistemologies of self and Other” (Black Cultural Traffic 60-61).
Thomas Defrantz suggests bodily knowledge can be understood as “corporeal orature,” in his study of hip hop and black social dance performance. Black dance for Defrantz is culturally generative, and simply viewing a dance is not enough; one must experience the movements to understand the knowledge that is produced. Hip hop performances, likewise, “presume the possibility of efficacious performative gesture”—that is, embedded in the movements is the understanding that it is always already meaningful (67). Corporeal orature is the notion that the body can communicate, or talk. He posits, “dance movements convey speech-like qualities” and “all African diaspora dance…may be likened to verbal language” (66). There are long traditions of African Diasporic dance connected to oral communication, music, various customs and other related cultural expressions. His dedication to the meaning that bodies intentionally produce is useful in studying hip hop performance. Yet, performance must be understood on its own terms, not necessarily through a register of orality. If it functions as its own method of communication, it produces its own sets of value and thus does not need interpretative mechanisms that are derived from linguistic analysis. Moreover, the linguistic and the performative, though both enacted, are significant for different reasons. It is easy to privilege the linguistic in rap because speech and words can be analyzed and deconstructed, even if only to conclude the lyric’s indecipherability (Perry 50-51). Moreover, artists’ ability to play with words in lyrics is critical to their skill and practice. Marcyliena Morgan asserts, “The Word brings hip hop into a being as an art, a culture, a space and place, and a people with a history, ideology, and much more” (62). The contributors to *Global*, a text that is discussed below, also aptly identify how language in
hip hop reflects and creates unique rap music cultures that challenge sets of norms. These approaches are useful and contributory but an engagement with performance theories is necessary for hip hop performance studies to develop an adequate methodology and to recognize a holistic account of practitioners’ influences.

My project moves performances to the center to think through how practitioners enact both culture and subjectivity. To do this, I rely on performance theorists’ contributions. Richard Schechner contends that performances are twice-behaved, or never wholly original and always references or articulations to a previous enactment. He contends that performances are themselves, in a sense, their own entities ripe with meaning; he states that “behavior is separate from those who are behaving…restored behavior is ‘out there’, distant from ‘me’” (35-36). This is true for black Atlantic and Afro diasporic performances on the continent because, as I have outlined in the first chapter, they are unique and culturally situated while they also draw on previous and already existing embodied practices. The problem with Schechner’s approach is that it reaches for universals of both performance and people, while eliding both cultural subjectivities and the agentive capacity of the individual enactments. The fact that performance characteristics are similar does not make them separated from the bodies

---

83 In this essay, he does acknowledge that performers in, for example, so-called orally based societies carry “performance knowledge,” but this is not necessarily an articulation of agency (49). Schechner is accounting for how performances are passed, transmitted, or travel from person to person, or from location to location. My project, instead, seeks not to begin from the starting point of the performance, but from people’s individual agentive subjectivity.
that enact them. The presence of hip hop performances produces significant sets of knowledge, both on an individual and collective level.\textsuperscript{84}

Performance should be studied to understand how people make sense of their realities and enact creative expressions. Mwenda Ntarangwi notes how Kenyan hip hop is “a means of retaining autonomy and the ability to act on their own behalf while influencing other people in political discourse and even economic activity in spite of the global forces of inequality and exploitation that they face” (3). For this reason, I find that Diana Taylor’s, \textit{The Archive and the Repertoire}, discussion of performance as knowledge as particularly appropriate. My work focuses on how the hip hop body can perform and communicate knowledge, what Diana Taylor calls the “repertoire.” Taylor places performances as central to her study of American hemispheric politics because “embodied practice […] is a way of knowing as well as a way of storing and transmitting cultural knowledge and identity” (278).

Taylor argues that performance exists in the present. For Taylor, the repertoire includes songs, lyrics, along with performances, dances, and other bodily movements. The archive is the documented, accessible place “where records are kept,” including maps, recordings, DNA, and photographs (19). Peggy Phelan’s “Ontology of Performance,” like Taylor’s work, states that performance is fleeting and momentous. To be a performance is to have “representation without reproduction”—performance itself does not enter into “economies of reproduction” because once it is reproduced, it is no

\textsuperscript{84} Diana Taylor makes a similar point discussing performances as a method of analysis, “performance as a lens enables commentators to explore […] the scenarios that make up individual and collective imaginaries” (278).
longer a performance, but a copy of a performance. Phelan argues, “Without a copy, live performance plunges into visibility—in a maniacally charged present—and disappears into memory, into the realm of invisibility and the unconscious where it eludes regulation and control” (148). This is the very possibility of performances that hip hop practitioners seize—that enacted gestures and stances dodge power while maintaining creativity, innovation, and style.

To depart from Taylor, neither the archive nor the repertoire are uniform places where knowledge occurs; in each nuances and differences abound. I want to distinguish between, for instance, lyrics and performances because of their specificities. As stated above, performance cannot be seen through the lens of, or as an appendage to, lyrical form and style. My discussions of songs and lyrics are to support an examination of bodily gestures.

Analyzing Characteristics of Performances

Performances are ways of enacting an agentive subjectivity and practitioners use performances to craft meanings of everyday realities. “Artists express agency,” notes Marcyliena Morgan, “constantly undergo change, and inevitably express the right of all youth who participate in hiphop culture to assert identities that incorporate race, gender, social class, location, and philosophy” (75). My project firmly illustrates how, “instead of being fixed, hip hop identities are resolute” (75). I regard artists as developing methods
of making sense of various social realities by relying on Diana Taylor’s notion of embodied knowledge practices. Bodily movements and gestures generate meaning, though still culturally situated and informed by wider social and political frameworks. Performances are, as Richard Schechner states, “twice-behaved” and “restored,” meaning that actions are citations to previous behaviors, never wholly original, repeated, “stored, transmitted, manipulated, [and] transformed” (Between 35). Hip hop performances act as citations to previous performances, and as I explore below, reference a wider imagined global rap aesthetic. Hip hop performances are, therefore, intimate bodily responses and gestures that are meant to be creative, intentional, citational, and reflect both a unique personhood and a common set of understandings. “Experience,” as Arthur Kleinman and Erin Fitz-Henry observe, “has much to do with collective realities as it does with individual translations and transformations of those realities” (53).

Underground Nairobi rap performances are both globally recognizable and locally exercised. Alim and Pennycook, in Global Linguistic Flows, suggest that scholars need to acknowledge this dual characteristic:

While “Hip Hop Culture” is still valuable in its broad usage (at a particular level of abstraction), engagement with specific sites of Hip Hop cultural practice, production, and performance demands a perspective that favors the plurality of Hip Hop Cultures over the singular and monolithic “Hip Hop Culture.” (3)

---

85 Arthur Kleinman and Erin Fitz-Henry argue against a different kind of universal—biological. They contend that reaching toward a universal shared “human nature” limits our understanding of human subjectivity as economically and socio-politically located.
Hip hop cultures develop sets of common politics that accompany performances, which is used as a basis of understanding. The focus of *Global* is on language choices, verbal references, and songs in general. Contributors acknowledge that language intensely reflects local sensibilities and expressiveness, which shape the composition of the respective site (5). Performances and gestures are more fluid because they help to compose the aspects of hip hop that are recognized across borders. Lyrics situate individual hip hop as a product of place, and gestures and performances reflect locality as well as assist in constituting hip hop as a transnationally recognized cultural form. This is why many times regardless of location a rapper’s dress, appearance, and bodily stances “look” like hip hop. Some examples I will explore in this chapter include cool performances, ludicity, performances of mic authority, and armored stances, which are legible to most rappers regardless of location. Jesse Shipley observes that US based hip hop allowed Ghanaian youth to cultivate a method of interacting with local social realities. He states that hip hop’s rebelliousness was used as a method of interaction with local politics:

Children of Lebanese, Syrian, and Indian merchants as well as those of mixed parentage were drawn to the music as a marker of black American coolness, resonating for the second generation born after independence coming of age in the context of the revolutionary coups of 1979 and 1981. While their older siblings and parents continued to listen to gospel, highlife, soul, and R&B, rap music provided a new defiant sensibility in relation to the radical political changes and economic hopes they faced. (33)
Kenyan hip hop, too, cultivates a “defiant sensibility” and its practitioners position themselves away from popular and dominant modes of thought. I sought to explore the meaning in bodily expressions in the interviews I did and asked rapper Sue Timon why artists gesture in cool ways:

> It’s like ah, we don’t want to be NORMAL! [Laughs.] You know, […] the society’s like you have to be like this, your shirt has to be “collar ironed,” the tight…the look. And then, it’s like, when you look at the history of hip hop, it’s rebelling actually. It’s rebelling. We don’t want to be the way you want us to be.

> We want to be different. Yeah. So it’s, we want to be different. Yeah. (Timon)

This perspective, which does appear in mainstream Kenyan hip hop, is encouraged and promoted in underground spaces. Timon uses clothing as an example of how rap responds to normative pressures. In Nairobi, clothing is a marker of status and there is pressure to dress formally. People rarely don shorts, for example, and usually it is the youth who do so, in contrast with, say, coastal Ghana where people regularly wear shorts. Timon’s brief statement on this provides a good framework to think about how rap performances are globally practiced, and also respond to local specificities.

The way underground artists discuss their performances, bodies, and intentions elucidates how individual subjectivities form through a shared practice of communicating within local realities.\(^{86}\) Rappers use the body to articulate a creative and resistive sensibility that Timon described. Expressions of the face, arms, hands, and whole body

---

\(^{86}\) Kleinman and Fitz-Henry discuss, in quite a different circumstance, how people’s participation within the Rwandan genocide are mediated within realities that are historic, present, globally economic, and locally cultural. “In the context of ‘ordinary lives’, however, people certainly had more than one motivation for participating in the genocide—and those motivations were rooted as much in the political history and cultural traditions of Rwanda as in the terrors and scarcities that defined their lives” (58).
craft methods that inherently or explicitly resist normative discourses. Agano, of the rap
duo Wakamba Wawili, discusses his participation in front of an audience: “Because
you’re creating the image you are creating, the image that you have should go with your
poses too. What you say is your habit” (Agano). Judge proclaimed that bodily movement
is actually an element of hip hop, similar to DJing, rapping, and graffiti art, “Yeah, I can
say that like hip hop [sic] normally like, movement, normally play [sic] a lot of part of
hip hop. It’s one of the elements. Movement. You know. Like […] most of people, who
normally, like, do hip hop, [you] will notice [communicate] through their hands, you
know” (Judge). He explained this rather repetitively, while he moved his forearms in and
out from near his torso, and his fingers were spread wide and firmly. Moving one’s hands
and forearms back and forth is such a common gesture that it often signifies hip hop,
even to non-fans. Evaredi noted that other hand gestures are important in hip hop: “I can
say like, basically, the body language of hip hop is like crazy, like, the throwing of hands,
the sign of the fist” (Evaredi). Again, while he explains how rappers use their hands, he
raises his fist and then throws one hand up slightly to illustrate. Artists typically use the
latter gesture to arouse excitement in a crowd, and the fist in the air harkens to the
common black power gesture taken up in the US and throughout the diaspora.

Agano began to speak about the importance of bodily performance, after being
momentarily puzzled by some of my inquiries. I showed him the four photographs of the
artists, and he thought for a long time about the questions I asked, not wanting to say he
did not know how to respond. After pondering, he suggested, like others, that hands are
key to executing performances.
RP: What are the similarities, or one similarity, between the photos?

Agano: Hands.

RP: Hands?

Agano: Yeah, they are all saying something.

RP: With their hands?

[...] 

Agano: Hands, eyes, and mouth. See here? Look at the eyes. Look at the mouth. Look at the hands. That’s how they, that’s how they talk, with eyes, mouth, and hands. Even you see me here. [Gestures in a grimacing manner while moving his hands outward and then inward from his body in a controlled way.] My hands are moving. (Agano)

The arms and legs are important, as well as how the way the body leans and contours around objects. For instance, later I describe how a rapper performs what I call mic authority. Many hip hop performances depend on facial gesturing that Agano alluded to. The face is a primary focal point when artists are rapping, along with the way the body moves across stage, or the manner in which the arms and hands gesture toward the rapping body. Miles White explains how facial expressions in US rap music culture are
central to the production of iterations of masculinity that seek to contest normative discourses. He uses the example of mean mugging to illustrate this importance: “Facial expression has also become a critical index of masculine performance, often projected through the intense gaze referred to as mean mugging, which has become virtually a cachet with hard styles of rap performance” (43, emphasis in original). White uses this example to contend that rappers constantly resist the power structures that keep watch over black bodies, while dispelling the troubling cultural work that the happy plantation slave has in US discourse (43).

Mean mugging is an enactment of aggression, or at least it is read that way, and in Kenyan hip hop most artists do not portray their faces in that manner. Practitioners in underground culture are more likely to perform hardness and toughness than their counterparts in commercial settings. This, however, must be distinguished from US hip hop’s forms of performance styles; non-commercial Nairobi rappers usually do not mean mug. Non-normative facial expressions in Kenyan rap music culture, as Agano demonstrated, work to speak back against disciplining discourses about how to act and present oneself appropriately and respectfully. In underground rap, there are facial expressions of seriousness and solemnity, and ones that are more playful and ludic. Artists can use their faces to express disagreement and disillusionment, to resist acceptance of a status quo that is class based and that excludes bodies that do not produce or strive to produce the norm. More often than not, the importance of facial expressions is relational. If an artist gestures or walks in a cool, styled, and dismissive manner, what expressions his face make assist in the performance.
Both Evaredi and Sue Timon suggested that hip hop artists distinctly “bounce” while walking, which alongside clothing gives them away as rappers. Bouncing, as opposed to an upright walking technique, is a common attribute in rap music culture. Timon: Um, the walking style. There’s the bounce. [Laughs hard.] There’s that bounce [Although she is sitting, she gestures a bounce using the upper part of her body, while laughing.] You know, the way someone walks, the “don’t care” attitude. The NWA thing, you know. [We laugh.] You just know. (Timon)

In US conversations, most would say that rappers walk with swag. Perhaps the term bounce has a playful, almost childlike connotation in the US. In Kenya, people frequently describe rappers as “bouncing” while walking or moving. Timon not only gestured expressively and excitedly when I asked questions, she also referenced the hip hop group, N.W.A. (Niggaz with Attitude), the Compton gangsta rap group from the mid 80s. She is like many Kenyan rap artists who acknowledge US rap, although many do not aspire to rap about the same things as their American counterparts. The evocation of “attitude” is significant here because these bodily styles are meant to show unaffectedness and unfazed demeanors. Timon is a gospel artist and very seriously devotes her raps to proclaiming her connection with Christianity. Her use of N.W.A. to describe the style of bodily movements reflected an acknowledgement of a transnational hip hop culture, rather than an identification with the group. Greg Dimitriadis argues that his informants “found some kind of broad and necessary cultural continuity by [making] use of […] popular resources,” like films and music, “that individuals mobilize in specific ways and
not others” (63). In a very similar way, Timon identifies with gangsta rap, although she
does not perform it, and uses it to locate her rap sensibilities.

There are two interesting observations from discussing general characteristics of
performances in interviews. First, these artists all gesture in some way to assist them in
describing performances, illustrating how descriptions of bodily stances are better
articulated when enacted. Second, artists are comfortable enacting these gestures and
stances, their actions are not contrived or difficult to exercise. Variations of these
performances exist in other hip hop sites, yet this does not make these movements foreign
or unfamiliar. References to N.W.A., the raised fist, and hip hop’s inherently rebellious
nature all attest to the transnational element of rap culture. These examples do allude to
how US rap is a dominant viewpoint for Kenyan rap, though “African American Hip Hop
is only a part of a much wider circuit of musical and cultural references,” (Pennycook
and Mitchell 35). This section only introduces what I will show below, that artists’ songs,
videos, and performances, further demonstrate their subjectivity as artists. They are
comfortable gesturing and posing because it is a part of who they are—they use similar
actions on stage, in videos and ciphers, and walking down the street. This subjectivity is
“forever in flux—not static, abstract, biologically fixed, or divorced from political, social,
and economic processes, but fluid, contingent, and open to transformation” (Kleinman
and Fitz-Henry 55).
Ludic Gestures

Nafsi Huru walked in and sat in a chair placed against the wall by the door of the small room at Audio Kusini where I conducted interviews. He wore a backwards hat, t-shirt, baggy jeans, and tennis shoes. Nafsi leaned his head against the wall as he sat, causing the bill of the hat to move upwards, and pushing the now front part of the hat downward. The cap rested just above his eyes. He was not attentive and eager like many interviewees. Instead he appeared unfazed and acted not invested. Behind this exterior could have laid a deep fear or insecurity about the questions he would face. Or he could have felt inconvenienced, or nervous, or eager to perform hip hop for the American researcher—I had no idea and no real way of knowing. My chair was placed to the left side of him, and as I asked him questions, he ever so slightly cocked his head in my direction to answer them. He talked slowly and quietly, careful with his words. He provided intermittent eye contact as he spoke about growing up in Magongo (a working class neighborhood in Mombasa), working with rappers from Ukoo Flani and eventually his group Skali Flani, and attempting to launch a rap career in Nairobi. What marked this interview as particularly important was a phone call he received early in the interview: “Hello? Poa sana (I’m fine, informal). ‘Salamu Alaikum (Peace be unto you, greeting of Islam). Niko! Niko! (I’m here, I’m fine!). Simu yangu iko off (My phone was/is off)” (Nafsi Huru). He seemed to be explaining to a friend why he had been unavailable. They had a brief conversation, and ended the call. He then apologized and said, “Sorry, that was my mom.”
I had done back-to-back interviews at that point, and had forgotten to inform him that I had basic understanding of Swahili. When he told me that was his mom, I almost laughed aloud. It was obvious that it was his peer. Had he known that I spoke and understood some Swahili, he would not have told me that. That interaction solidified my otherness to him, his otherness to me, and the ways that he attempted to explain his apparent rudeness for answering the phone. I, of course, did not care if he answered it, and there was no need to apologize. The power politics during the interview were evident; I was an light skinned middle class American woman, a university researcher, and he was a brown skinned male rapper from Magongo, though he has enjoyed some upward mobility. I sought information from him; he provided. Most interviewees did not answer their phones when it rang. I believe many of them felt obligated to be attentive to my questions because of their stipend. Nafsi did not. He answered the phone, talked with little urgency, never mentioned that he was busy with me, and then hung up and proceeded with the interview. He did, though, speak with a bit of nervousness.

For Nafsi, I was an authority, but one that was unknowing. So much of rap music culture is about testing the boundaries and finding ways to subvert or challenge various forms of authority, far-reaching ones like the state, and intimate figures like a disapproving father or an American researcher. The cool style that Nafsi presented to me contained underlying subversion that was compelling. His performance communicated that, though we have both had investments in hip hop, we were not the same. This exemplifies, in some small way, the types of style that are produced in hip hop spaces. Dick Hebdige observes that the processes of subculture “end in the construction of a
style, in a gesture of defiance or contempt, in a smile or a sneer.” He continues, “It signals Refusal. I would like to think that this Refusal is worth making, that these gestures have a meaning, that the smiles and the sneers have some subversive value…” (3).

Nafsi’s cool composure was potent with the subtle and easily missed inflections of disruption. Harrison states, “in the realm of underground hip hop the ideological complement to coolness is an equally elusive concept that can be referred to as ‘knowing what’s up’” (Harrison 112). Nafsi’s actions were about a particular type of knowing and an expressed bodily interaction because “coolness [focuses] on largely external, projected, or imaged-based considerations” and “‘knowing what’s up’ […] gets more at the core of someone’s outlook on the world” (113). Clearly, for Nafsi, I did not know what was up, and he did. He held a type of cultural capital that I did not have access to in an environment that he maybe read as inherently unequal. This illustrates how hip hop artists can create agentive ways of knowing, enacted through bodily communication, that confront available power structures. Gestures of cool, armor, resistance, and sometimes swag are subtle enactments of subversion designed to push against social boundaries creatively and eschew normative dictates in indirect, almost illegible ways. These performances exist in the in-between spaces of mainstream discourse, and social, political, and economic institutions. The remainder of this section illustrates how performances in rap spaces are marked by ludic elements.

Ludic performances are the playful, dissociated, and unaffected way artists walk, stand, or gesture, similar to the interaction I had with Nafsi Huru. The ways hip hop
artists play with language constructions, social conventions, and boundaries of art expression are not just a break or distraction from, or practice for, “the real world.” Artists use these methods to generate ways of comprehending the world because as Russell Potter notes, play “is potentially a powerful mode of resistance” and “a mask for a potent mode of subversion” (2). Potter uses the example of the use of U.S. black vernacular in rap culture to contend “there remains a deep commitment to pushing, bending, and even breaking the limits” (73). Marcyliena Morgan argues that inherent in “hip hop’s language ideology,” is “the play and pleasure inherent in contrasting and perfecting one’s knowledge of many aspects of linguistics” (77). The ludic-as-resistant and subversive in Kenyan underground rap is effective and powerful because it is difficult to name and conceptualize as something that challenges and subverts. I locate ludicity within the broad practices of underground Mau Mau aesthetics because it plays with social boundaries. Cultural post-Mau Mau aesthetics in underground rap rearticulate what it means to be a “revolutionary” or the ways people can propose and incite social change. Artists can use playfulness as an aesthetic gesture, as well as to subvert purposefully. Hip hop’s deployment of the ludic can be mischievous, fun, pleasurable, humorous, energetic, facetious, and/or jovial. To draw on Potter’s use of Gates’ term Signifyin’, rap does not always explicitly resist, but rather it reclaims exclusionary terms and practices, playfully creates new meanings out of hegemonic language and conditions, and refuses to be definable, locatable, and legible (55-79).

Initially, I misplaced the position of the ludic in underground rap culture. I hypothesized that underground rap would be the celebration and embodiment of leisure
and ludic informalities, and an almost total eschewal of pithy and easily appropriated political investments of rap. Scholarship seemed overly invested in, and therefore sought out, explicitly political messages to prove rap’s worth. Moreover, the surreptitious nature of rap culture’s ludic elements was an often-overlooked characteristic, one that begged investigation. I theorized that underground hip hop music should be released from the burden of being expressly and politically purposeful to be meaningful; if rap were about pleasure and playfulness, it would be politically efficacious inherently and not explicitly because it would resist society’s deep desire to police young black bodies. Rap’s playfulness was force enough to challenge the boundaries in the face of disciplining mechanisms of the state and capital. I posited that cool operates as a ludic site of resistance, confronting how regimes of economic and social norms act on the body.

I was only partly correct in all of the above approaches. In fact, most of non-commercial hip hop is serious and artists want people to know it is invested in addressing a variety of social issues, from individual problems to larger endemic catastrophes. The artists who continue the work of UFMM and the remembered notions of Mau Mau seek to inspire change in whatever form that takes. The use of ludicity does, I contend, challenge and subvert, though it works with other methods. The playful characteristics of performance and some rap lyrics exist alongside very explicit political notions.

---

87 Some ethnographic accounts recognize that artists do not always want hip hop’s value to be defined through political messages. Lee Watkins, who examines South African kwaito and hip hop observes this of rap group, Big Idea: “Their songs have a local orientation in language and social awareness. While many of the songs are political, there are equally keen on creating music for dancing, believing that people may resent songs where the political message is too strong” (63-64).

88 Jochen Seebo, in an examination of Malawian music, notes, “Many male youths prefer reggae and rap and incorporate into their everyday life related style attributes, such as clothing, hairdressing and other forms of body decoration, language, and gestures. After decades of strict censorship and dress codes, these
Defrantz makes this point briefly in his examination of dance, “[The] dynamic amalgamation of pleasure and critique form the basis of power present within hip hop dance forms” (66).

Underground Nairobi hip hop practitioners see themselves as culture workers responsible for addressing social problems. Their songs, music videos, and performances send specific messages to their fans and to greater Kenyan society. This observation coincides with David Samper’s description of Kenyan rappers as “culture brokers,” who seek to interrogate social boundaries, produce meaningful conversations, and rethink their urban environments (37-38).

Currently, there are fundamental differences between the underground and the mainstream due to both lyrics and the actual sound. Non-commercial artists place their serious lyrical subject matter over harder, grittier beats than that of mainstream. The rappers with whom I have spoken take their roles and the songs they make seriously, even if they do not reap economic benefits. It seems appropriate therefore to acknowledge the sacrificial nature of their roles as “culture brokers.” Non-commercial artists see their work as socially conscious, juxtaposed with what they see as the vacuous and superficial music of the mainstream. Many rappers argue their music is valuable, it does something meaningful in society, which they assert also happens to be the basis for its marketability. Lness believes the artist has a social role and responsibility in society and that lyrics can carry weight.

---

style attributes distinguish them from others in a significant way, stressing their difference to the mainstream and creating social cohesion” (240).
So rap is coming into this positive kind of thing. Where you are trying to teach people the right thing to do. Or just trying to rap about the right stuff. Or if you talk about negative stuff, you’re not glorifying it. If you talk about, thuggery or if you talk about drugs, you know. You need to come through as if you are trying to change somebody’s life. You shouldn’t look like you are trying to praise drugs, because so many people are going to go into it and go like, “Lness said [this and that]”… So it’s like that. (Lness)

Evaredi argues that hip hop has the power to stop conflict. His example is how the government commissioned artists for concerts after the 2007-8 post-election violence.

Evaredi acknowledges these concerts featured other types of popular music, but believes that hip hop works best to carry a message, “…In hip hop, the main thing is the message. What you are telling the people. Like I can say, hip hop is the best tool for peace. For people to stop war. Hip hop is true.” When I asked him what “war” he refers to, he stated:

[T]he hip hop artists are capable of getting down to the common mwananchi, the slums, yeah, the second class houses. That’s hip hop, that’s where hip hop is. Basically for me I know that for me you can’t hip hop in a big estate like… that guy won’t be talking, won’t be talking of peace, but he don’t know what war is. You can’t talk of peace when you don’t know what war is. Yeah. I can say that.

(Evaredi)

In other parts of the interview he refers to the post-election violence as a war. His basic argument is that since most of the victims of this violence were the most vulnerable and

---

89 Citizen. Colloquially, the phrase is “the common man” or “common person.” This is a regularly used phrase.
lower classes, the artists who can best speak to the needs of the artists are those who come from similar economic situations.

Underground rap songs have explicit messages about social and individual transformation, as well as how to navigate through social ills. “Still Strong” is a song by Nafsi Huru, Kevlexicon, who is a white male American rapper who often collaborates with Kenyan artists, and Nje, a male artist who sings the hook. Female rap artist, Amora, and male rap artist, Karpchizzy, appear in this video, though they do not rap. There is one other female present, and otherwise the rest of the approximately ten people are men. The music video and song illustrate how the playful and subversive forms of bodily performance take place alongside a very serious message.

The video exudes leisure and carefreeness. The practitioners who participate recognize social ills and refuse to be taken in by them. The song is explicitly political on one hand, and self-affirmative and empowering on the other. The setting of the video mostly takes place in front of the Kenyatta International Convention Centre (KICC), with some brief scenes in a studio with Nafsi, Nje, and Kevlexicon rapping and singing in front of a microphone. Young people skate behind an excited rap crew who dance and sing to the song. Upon first glance, it appears as if the practitioners are in a skate park, as people are seen skating behind the rappers. There is no skate park surrounding the KICC, meaning that participants created the scene. Roller skating is not widespread in Kenya, but it is popular with and more accessible to the middle and upper classes. The presence of practitioners rapping behind skaters does exude a celebration of a certain middle class lifestyle, but it seems the purpose was the performance of leisure. This most likely is a
creative move meant to convey a carefree atmosphere. There are occasional and brief shots of skaters as they move through the setting. A male skater is shown intricately moving his legs to and fro in a figure eight motion, before the camera quickly cuts back to the rappers. The crew smiles and laughs joyfully as if unfazed by the social problems the song illustrates. The camera makes use of the sun, which shines brightly into the lens and signifies hope, happiness, and warmth. The sun appears shining behind in several shots of Nafsi and the other crewmembers at times making only their silhouettes visible. This frequently partially blinds the viewers to the artists, making the artists appear transcendent.

Nafsi and Kevlexicon rap, while Nje sings, and Amora, Karpchizzy, and the others dance, bob back and forth, act excited, and show support to their fellow rappers. The crew affirms Nafsi and Kevlexicon as rappers, and their body movements articulate an alliance with the message. The song is feel-good and predictable, and not necessarily negatively so. The chorus is fun and catchy and sounds uplifting, which makes a solid and uniform message. The chorus is in English: “We still strong/ We never fear anything coming on our way/ United we stand, and divided we fall/ We the same people but scattered away/ Hey!” (“Still Strong”).

Both artists sing a verse, and at the end Kevlexicon raps a closing before the song ends. Kevlexicon’s lyrics point out social problems and give hope.

Robbing the ministry of education is dumb and politics is get a buck & run/
(MPs have a lot of money while the citizens are broke)

**Nje ya mtaa watoto bila hope, kuna stress kwamba tunavuta cess for recess/**

(Outside in the hood children are hopeless there is stress we pay cess (tax) to be taxed) (Kevlexicon)

He raps in both Swahili and English, though he has a clear American accent. He flows in Swahili with ease, though one can tell it is not his first language. The word “nje” is mispronounced in the music video version, spoken with an American “g” sound. He begins and ends his verse in English, with a bit of Swahili in the middle. Kevlexicon demonstrates his lyrical craft by being able to code switch. His language choices maintain a balance in the song because Nje’s chorus is in English, Nafsi’s verse is exclusively in Swahili and Sheng, and Kevlexicon raps in both languages. His otherness, as a white American and non-Kenyan, is downplayed, and he appears as one who is informed in the language, Kenyan culture, underground rap, and the ills of state corruption.

This music video articulates one example of how the ludic appears alongside serious and engaging lyrics. The carefree performances, the celebration of leisure, and the performance of unaffected coolness are articulated in the rap crew, Nafsi, and Kevlexicon. The first verse tells listeners that there is an explicit message about recognition of government corruption, poverty, and the chorus is an answer of internal and collective strength, unity, and hope. Nafsi’s verses clearly serve to illustrate his lyrical skill because “[rapping] skills involve verbal mastery, mastery of delivery, creativity, personal style, and virtuosity. […] Their rhymes are embedded in an
aggressive self-possessed identity that exudes confidence and power” (Rose 163). Nafsi raps:

_Tunazikwenda hapa hii ni freestyle kama natoka mtaa ya Magongo kasha,

huwezi/

(That’s how we flow this is freestyle like a dream come true for a hustler in Magongo, you can’t)

_Ukanizuia kivovote kama hiyo mwanangu namulika kwote yaani, yeah!/

(I am above anything, like above my child I light up everywhere, yeah!)

_Mi ni mtemi, nani anataka kubisha, po napingapo unaweza na kama ni ngumi

mbaya tunaruka ni mateke/

(I have the flow, who wants to challenge me, cross me if you can and if its fists we jump in with kicks) (Kevlexicon)

Unlike Kevlexicon, he has lyrical abilities to play with words in Swahili and Sheng, and through repetition of sounds, he is able to play with the limits of language. Therefore, his skill at rapping affirms his subjectivity. There is a small break before “_Mimi ni mtemi!”_ which he delivers with force and emphasis. This literally translates to, “I spit,” and in this context it means, “I flow!” 90 He affirms his rap abilities through a performance of cool strength, against the backdrop of Kevlexicon’s lyrics about corruption and Nje’s chorus of perseverance and fearlessness. His rap skills correspond to

---

90 In formal Swahili, this means, “I am a spitter.”
the way he gestures. As he begins his rap, he throws his arms in the air confidently, dismissively, and without worry. He then bounces back and forth as he moves toward the camera confrontationally. This movement of cool confidence presumes the audience is unfamiliar with his style and that he is proud of his unpredictability. His approach toward the camera in a shifting manner allows him to act in control of his surroundings.

Artists must articulate the message they wish to convey, while simultaneously avowing their own presence, usually through lyrical abilities and performance stances. Each of the artists in this video has different and intersecting roles. Nafsi affirms his subjectivity as a competent rapper while producing playful, yet powerful performances. Kevlexicon displays knowledge about Kenyan corruption and ills while telling listeners to have hope and be proud. Last, Nje’s chorus is inspirations and uplifting. This video is an example of how the ludic is not separate from the seemingly contradictory notion of political seriousness.

The video is an example of the male homosocial environment of hip hop that I explore below. Men compose the space, with only two silent, but supportive, females artists. This masculinizes ludicity and implies that male subjectivities have room to explore the playfulness that hip hop offers. Amora’s silence renders her in a passive position, and yet her role in the video, though marginal, does manage to rethink some gendered notions about music. Within that space, she smiles joyfully and dances without worry with the other artists. Her bodily movements do not set her apart from her male counterparts. Female singers in mainstream music videos often perform in feminized ways, taking up little space, infantilizing themselves, and otherwise “look[ing] at the
camera, eyes fixed in a seductive invitation, mouth slightly open” (Perry 176). Moreover, “[a]ny signs of thought, humor, irony, intelligence, anger, or any other emotion, prove extremely rare” (176). This is not the case with Amora, as she is among her peers and is not the object of male gaze. The choice to include her in the video might not be transgressive, but rather stylistic. The work it does—to have her perform alongside men and not at the center of male desire—is noteworthy.

The ludic can be present in almost all elements of rap music culture, including lyrics, songs, gestures, and dance moves. In fact, consumer culture most often appropriates and dilutes the ludic in hip hop. By attaching hip hop to a product, that product too becomes fun and desirable. The force of the ludic—playing with boundaries and subverting power—is left behind for the good of music standardization in commercial settings.91 The creative and playful characteristics of non-commercial rap music culture exist within and alongside hip hop’s duty to be purposeful and meaningful. This is a distinct characteristic of underground rap. Undoubtedly, cool performances are important in both mainstream and underground spaces. In mainstream hip hop, playful lyrics celebrating elements like a leisurely lifestyle, male sexual access to multiple female partners, and swag subjectivities coincide with very ludic bodily performative styles. Examples of this include Octopizzo, Prezzo, Jua Cali, Bamboo, and Nonini. Bodily performances that are playful, leisurely, and exude wealth and carefreeness coincide with lyrics that extend similar messages. Ludicity in underground music is very different

91 Russell Potter observes, “[H]ip-hop is continually commodified by the music industry, ‘made safe’ (it’s only a song) for the masses, recycled yet again into breakfast cereal ditties and public service announcements” (108).
because artists’ songs often have very serious messages and still perform playfulness, forms of swag, and performances of cool.\textsuperscript{92}

Performances of “System ya Mtaa”

Hip hop performances materialize out of a social system marked by limited opportunities, fear of and frustration with the state, and neoliberal competition. Enactments of cool, therefore, are artistically crafted and deeply implicated in a system of exclusion, and involve dodging authoritative figures. Imani Perry briefly documents this, stating that hip hop is a “trickster music,” and through her example of breakdancing, argues that to trick involves skill on several levels: “Breaking depends on the isolation of body parts and the ability to shift between broad acrobatic movements and minutely detailed gestures, robotic or fluid. And of course, cleverness and the unexpected are appreciated in both lyrics and beats in hip hop” (30). Nafsi’s performance explores the ludic, where he plays with the boundaries mediated by privilege, class, and nationality. There are other forms of bodily enactments that respond to authoritative forces. Many cannot gain access to a music industry that is built on commodification, competition, and problematic gender politics. Bodily stances and poses respond to these realities. Thomas Defrantz examines US hip hop dance:

\textsuperscript{92} There are exceptions to this distinction—surely mainstream artists have socially conscious songs and underground artists have songs that are largely open to a wide range of interpretations, aside from political efficacy. For instance, two mainstream artists recently came out with songs decrying political corruption, for example, are Jaguar’s “\textit{Matapeli}” and Juliani’s “\textit{Utawala}.”
Hip hop dances also gain power from their subversive [black] stance outside the moral law of [white] America. The black body in America has long been legislated and controlled by political systems both legal and customary. In social dance, the black body achieves a freedom from traditional American strictures defining legitimate corporeality. (71).

Slightly different than “achieving freedom,” I observe that Nairobi hip hop performances can act as armor against a system of hierarchal entities that apparently are not meant to benefit practitioners. Performances of armor are common in post-Mau Mau hip hop spaces, whereby artists create methods to avoid being victimized by society. Evan Mwangi observes that “[UFMM] uses Mau Mau in its name to underline its guerrilla-like tactics in negotiating public cultural spaces” (98). The use of armor in a post-Mau Mau hip hop, where revolutionary themes are not as explicitly present, serves to articulate a type of confrontational resistance. These performances are class and youth-based forms of resistance that aim at the state as the central barrier in upward mobility, as I demonstrated in the analysis of “Shupavu.” These practitioners can enact frustration, rage, but also ways of surviving through performing unfazed demeanors.

Interviewees noted how hip hop performances can operate as armor. Agano, notes this in his discussion of Nonini. In the image I showed Agano, Nonini’s body is partly positioned in the opposite direction of the camera shot. The upper part of his body is turned slightly toward the camera, his arms are crossed, and his right hand is touching the bottom part of his chin. Nonini wears sunglasses so viewers cannot see his eyes. Agano identified his unaffected, hard exterior:
Agano: It is a way like ‘I don’t want to be bothered.’

RP: With what?

Agano: Like maybe, you asked him a question, he’s trying to tell you, “I know but I ain’t telling you.” Or, “I don’t know, but I ain’t telling you.” Like avoiding. Or something. A pose.

RP: So do you see this kind of pose a lot in hip hop culture?

Agano: Yeah, it’s common because every hip hop artist express himself in many ways. Yeah. This is another way of expressing himself. But, the body talks. A lot.

Yeah. (Agano)

To perform unaffectedness is a primary stylistic device in many rap music cultures. There are many reasons why rappers take up stances of opposition, and not always to resist power. Some execute performances as part of masculine subjectivity, to appeal to popular culture’s standards, and to embody a type of coolness that ultimately sells. Nonini’s body performances capture all of these aspects. Esen had similar reflections on the image of Nonini:

RP: So what about his posture?

Esen: So like his bodily posture?
RP: Like what would he be saying through his bodily posture?

Esen: “Whatchu sayin nigga?!?”

[We laugh]

RP: That’s what he’s saying?

Esen: Naw, I don’t know. “I’m still around,” you know, “I’m still around regardless of what anybody says, so it’s kinda like, whatchu gon do?” (Esen)

Nonini’s style incorporates ludicity into his songs and performances. One example of this is Nonini’s popular song and music video “Furahiday” which is a celebration of the end of the traditional work week the beginning of a weekend of relaxing, partying, and leisure time. This word is the combination of furahi, meaning happiness or fun and Friday. The beginning of the weekend (for most of privileged classes), “Furahiday,” encapsulates the feeling of carefreeness that can come with the weekend.

Many non-commercial artists use types of performed hardness as strategically positioned against society looking in and interrogating its harms. Victor Turner observes, “every major socioeconomic formation has its dominant form of a cultural aesthetic mirror” (“Universals” 8). Rap music, and the bodies that perform it, often signal the presence of power struggles because practitioners respond to society’s marginalizing tendencies that produce inequalities. Hip hop’s methods are not just a mirror, they also
are agentive or active in echoing back, contesting, or interpreting social realities. Judge observes, “[…] the government, sometimes, don’t [sic] have time to listen to the people who are down underground. That’s why I normally think, like hip hop, it’s really important here in Kenya” (Judge). I pressed Judge on this topic to understand how hip hop reflects and responds to the realities produced by the state and music industry. He responded with a lengthy and metaphorical conversation about the task of hip hop.

Judge: …Here in Kenya, most of the time, real hip hop is not being given that real play.

RP: Why is that?

Judge: Because it’s, it’s unstripping [sic] them. It’s unmasking them; it’s stripping the mask, peeling the mask off!

RP: And what’s underneath the mask?

Judge: If Kenyans, let’s say Kenyans has like ah, ah, there is this side that have [sic] some dirt that covering it up you know? But hip hop is removing it and saying like, “over here you have that, it’s dirty, you know, we need to clean it up.” (Judge)

His conversations largely occur in ambiguous comparisons. There are reasons for this. One is stylistic, as an artist the way he talks is meaningful to him. Judge additionally has
worked with non-Kenyans, like rappers from France and the United States, so performing a certain type of difference and subalternity is important to him. Last, he does not want to implicate any one person, including state actors in his discussions. For example, in another place I ask him to identify mainstream artists who have “sold out,” as he puts it, and he refuses to name them. Judge’s broad allusions to state power as impediment are important. The notion that underground rap uncovers social evils is a key characteristic for many artists. Performed stances and gestures confront and deflect the circumstances produced by state power. These stances are also masculinized: they reinforce unchecked masculinity as the taken-for-granted subject positions that structure hip hop. Female performances of armor are analyzed and measured against the normative and invisible masculinization of hip hop. For instance, women who enact armor are often read as tomboys and lesbians.

Rappers often use such stances to protect themselves from social harm, even as they critique various ills. Robin Kelley departs from scholars who state that cool performances can be reduced to class confrontations and social marginalization: “By playing down the aesthetics of cool and reducing the cool pose to a response by heterosexual black males to racism, intraracial violence, and poverty, the authors not only reinforce the idea that there is an essential black urban culture created by the oppressive conditions of the ghetto but ignore manifestations of the cool pose in the public ‘performances’ of black women, gay black men, and the African American middle class” (“Lookin’” 144). In non-commercial Nairobi rap, resistance occurs because of the barriers that artists see the state creating. There is nothing, though, essential about
Kenyan rap performances or the bodies that enact them; they continue to be fluid, creative, innovative, and in conversation with a host of other questions about culture. Like Kelly, I recognize their diversity and innovation. Performances are also not always about resistance, though they can be. Enactments of armor are about confronting, negotiating, realizing, and rethinking what seems to be totalizing power. Imani Perry discusses such a dynamic in the context of the American male outlaw rapper who stands on the perimeter of US culture: “Hip hop resists victimhood, preferring, much like the arm of the women’s movement that engages in activism around sexual assault, the concept of survivor. Survivors do not define themselves by their victimization, instead fighting against it and examining the social practices that lead to such violence” (111).

Armored performances and unfazed demeanors in Nairobi rap culture exist in this interplay between espousing disdain toward appalling realities and rappers’ refusal to be claimed by such circumstances. These performances are not simply tethered to the power dynamics that help to inform them, they reveal and enact knowledge about controversial occurrences that mark everyday life. They confirm that its participants seek to think more critically about the spaces they inhabit.

Cool performances and other methods of rap’s embodied enactments confront power while exploring the creatively aesthetic elements of hip hop. Karpchizzy’s music video and song “Hustle” provides a good example. Karpchizzy argues that his music portrays actual experiences of himself and those around him. He states it is explicitly
different than mainstream artists like Octopizzo and Camp Mulla.\textsuperscript{93} “I want to deliver the good stuff, I want it to come with a more African feeling. A more street feeling,” he contends during our interview (Karpchizzy). He then produces his phone and we watch his music video, “Hustle.” The video takes place in Kahawa West, a working class neighborhood in Nairobi. This is also the location of Audio Kusini, the studio at which I interviewed him along with others.\textsuperscript{94} The video starts with a group of young people are hanging out in the 	extit{mtaa},\textsuperscript{95} when suddenly an 	extit{askari} appears. An 	extit{askari} is a guard or watchperson who is located outside of both commercial and residential places, like banks, restaurants, apartment complexes, or any other facility that seeks to keep out potential thieves. They are common in most settings, and in lower class settings they will chase people away. These watch people do not stave off all crime, as occasionally they are killed in attempted robberies. The young people in the video, which includes Karpchizzy, get up and run as they narrowly dodge the 	extit{askari}’s whip. As they run, the rap begins. Throughout the video, they return to play cards and gamble until the 	extit{askari} appears and they run again. The 	extit{askari} symbolizes authority and the ever-present potentiality of violence. The scene more generally represents the social uncertainties by which the young people live, including the constant threat of the state and the struggles of poverty. Their choice to return to card playing knowing the 	extit{askari} will eventually catch them and

\textsuperscript{93} Underground artists vastly differ about Octopizzo. For some, he has not sold out to market demands. He is a rapper who has enjoyed commercial success. Others see him has a sell-out, one who does not represent the same hip hop aesthetics. Karpchizzy believes his work does not need swag styles that Octopizzo uses.

\textsuperscript{94} When I returned in October 2012, I discovered that Karpchizzy, along with the other artists were no longer working with Audio Kusini. The story is difficult to capture, but from what I hear, the manager told all artists he would only accommodate gospel artists.

\textsuperscript{95} Neighborhood. Colloquially, hood.
understanding their gambling will never materialize into long term financial stability underscores the conditions from which armored performances manifest.

The song seems to have two different themes. The first is an acknowledgement that to make ends meet is difficult, and that the hood affords limited opportunities. The second one is one of hope, that one can transcend such barriers if one keeps trying. The chorus lyrics are as follows:

\[
\text{Life ni game mambo ku-hustle/} \\
\text{(Life is a game, the word is to hustle)}
\]

\[
\text{Life ni game mambo ku-hustle/} \\
\text{(Life is a game, the word is to hustle)}
\]

\[
\text{Life ni game mambo kufanya choisote/} \\
\text{(Life is a game, to do anything)}
\]

\[
\text{Waeza enda kokote ndiyo upate utakacho/} \\
\text{(You can go anywhere to get what you want) (Karpchizzy).}
\]

Karpchizzy’s call is not just or only the notion that capitalism works if one can work the system. Upward mobility is possible, he raps, and one need not be held down by oppressive realities, people can preserve. This is an inherently neoliberal contention, which reflects the popular themes of self-discipline. It alternatively relates to personal perseverance that disrupts mainstream ideas about the inherent ineptitude of the lower
class. He does not profess the intrinsic benevolence of the larger economic system. Instead, he argues that people from vulnerable economic positions possess aptitude, ingenuity, and strength for navigating systemic exclusion. Karpchizzy’s project is to recognize that lower class residents have humanity and hold abilities to maneuver what perhaps many cannot. His own performance is one of assertiveness and impermeability, and he calls for compassion for those living in marginalized communities.

Karpchizzy’s stylized gestures express toughness and an armored masculinity, similar to what Defrantz notes: “hip hop dances contain an assertive angularity of body posture and an insistent virtuosic rhythmicity” (71). The camera is positioned mostly at various ranges of up angles at him, the sole narrator. He appears a bit aggressive through most of the video. He bounces back and forth in common hip hop movements, and his hands are always in front of him. He sticks his chest out as his arms move back and forth, in and out, protecting his body. The gestures are assertively strong, proactively resisting bodily vulnerability. His performances throughout the video appear hard and impenetrable. His face grimaces as if irritated. A few shots pan to a group of sitting young men in the neighborhood, throwing their hands up, affirming Karpchizzy’s raps. “Complex cool,” Michael Jefferies notes, “emphasizes a reciprocal relationship: rappers represent the hood, while the presence of the hood gives rappers pride and makes them seem both powerful and authentic as representatives of a neighborhood constituency” (67).

In only a few places, especially in the end, he appears more relaxed. During the interview, I ask him about his stances, and he responds, “I’m keeping it real.” I press him
on this issue and to which he posits, “The message I am trying to portray in this is that you can be yourself and still be cool. You know. You know have to go that extra to be cool” (Karpchizzy). I am the one to bring up cool as a theme in many conversations, but in this instance Karpchizzy names it. His bodily enactments in the video are notably more aggressive and tough. Michael Jefferies states of an analysis of US rapper T.I.: “The cool pose of pride, strength, and control seems be of paramount importance for the narrators and their hood peers, and their ability to embody these qualities make […] T.I. [et al] similar to other residents” (66-67). Karpchizzy performs this demeanor in the hopes of speaking to the underclass, specifically men. His more aggressive demeanor is not necessarily representative of all underground hip hop performance styles. His work is connected to the ways he perceives himself, his neighborhood, and those who are close to him. The work Karpchizzy does comes out of his experiences, and he wants his audience to recognize his uniqueness. He still uses the term cool to describe his work in “Hustle,” and he also sees himself as reworking ideas of swag.

The beat is krunk, but I still wanted to keep in street. I wanted to show these same, same mabatis that you can see.⁹⁶ Cuz that’s me. But still give them the freedom that there is so much need. So it’s hard trying to balance the two. If you ask them, they will say, there is no swag in that. But if you ask me, there is a lot of swag in that. That’s what they would say, man, “You are not dressed to the bone!” (Karpchizzy)

⁹⁶ Mabatis are technically the iron sheets used to compose housing structures in informal settlements. Here Karpchizzy is using mabatis to mean people who inhabit these houses, or people from these neighborhoods.
Swag is the embodiment whereby artists celebrate themselves in the rap music world, and not all artists align themselves with such a performance. Here Karpchizzy sees himself as departing from a reliance on material possessions to produce swag style, while he thoughtfully re-envisions it. Swag is a celebration of oneself usually along economic standards. A non-materialistic aesthetic functions here. He recognizes the people from his neighborhood do not have the same access to consuming goods like say, Octopizzo and other mainstream rappers. Karpchizzy instead seeks to articulate a bodily performance of cool and armored style that can relate to marginalized groups of people.

“Hustle” is an appropriately named video, not only for its content, but additionally because it reflects the conditions from which it is made. The quality of this video and its subject matter intersect on a fairly basic level. “Hustle” is about the rough life of Kenya’s poorer residents, and to hustle is to pull together resourceful mechanisms to make things work. Shot in Kahawa West, it has three or four main backdrops in the neighborhood. As the video progresses, it appears as though the sound and video tracks are misaligned, and the overall sound quality is not that good. The video production quality is surprising given that the producers work for, or used to work for, a major television show in Kenya.

His other two videos, “System” and “Mawazo,” with Audio Kusini contained better sound and image quality than “Hustle.”

Karpchizzy’s performance of armor occurs within the production of “Hustle” and the politics it aims to espouse. For one, Karpchizzy is the sole voice in “Hustle.” He raps or sings the chorus, with male backup vocals echoing “Hustle” (which may also be his

97 Karpchizzy states that the producers are the same people who produce the popular KTN show “Changing Times,” and it is obvious that the video is a low budget project.
voice layered). The beats are a basic hardcore rap beat containing heavy and agitating bass, making the song sound gritty, harsh, and unforgiving. The song structure is also basic, chorus-verse-chorus-verse construction, which makes the song predictable. It is designed to reflect the struggles of everyday life, and to articulate life in a social and economic environment that lacks opportunities and resources, and this is precisely what the song sounds like. I should note that this is not the only video Karpchizzy has made. In the last chapter, I noted DJ Adrian’s call for artists to be “willing” to invest in their music. The production of “Hustle” is not what I see as unwillingness, but rather limited access to resources.

Stylized gestures counteract the economic conditions that the state produces. To wear armor is to recognize harm and to be protected from it. For Karpchizzy using such stances and gestures allows for him to espouse a type of persistence through difficult odds, and to encourage others along the way. “Hustle” seeks to humanize Nairobi’s underclass, like “Shupavu.” Karpchizzy also understands that we must think about how an inequitable social order inscribes and positions people to seek to then reconfigure transformative ways of interacting. To enact a nonplussed, cool, affirmative body is a measure that reconfigures one’s relationship to her/his environment.
Nafsi Huru raps, “Dunia nzima utazunguka kwote utatupata tupo tupo, pale pale, mambo yetu, yale yale! Irie! Irie! (Kevlexicon). The song, discussed in a previous section, is about social empowerment and personal perseverance. Some of the force of this lyric is lost in the English translation. For instance, the last part of the lyric has both alliterations and rhymes and is best appreciated when listening to the song: “tupo tupo, pale pale, mambo yetu, yale yale! Irie! Irie!” Nafsi raps fast emphasizing the rhyming words, pale and yale. It is common for Swahili or Sheng speakers to repeat words for emphasis purposes. It roughly translates as: “You’ll go around the whole world and find us at the same place! Our stuff! Same stuff! Irie! Irie!” The repetitive, alliterative nature of tupo, pale, and yale, along with the quick delivery make this difficult to understand, and yet a creative and witty moment in the song. The repetitious poetic sounds the words make are just as important than what the words actually mean. The line, like most raps and other poetic forms, do not adhere to linguistic rules. The lyric illustrates a significant component of Kenyan rap, its outward transnationality. Dunia nzima, or “whole world,” appears in the same line as “Irie! Irie!” Irie is a well-known Jamaican or Rastafarian word meaning “I am at peace with myself.” It is also used as a greeting to mean, “I am fine, well, or cool.” It is similar to several Swahili greetings used in Kenya, like mambo, poa, fiti, and mzuri. Nafsi’s use of irie is a reminder of Jamaican music’s long influence in Kenya, including reggae and dancehall. Additionally, his performance gestures exude
self-affirmative confidence and unaffected coolness, something that *irie* captures succinctly.

Nafsi’s lyric points to what I explore in this section as hip hop transnationality. Investigating performances’ transnationality is significant because they are the primary way that hip hop is imagined as a global aesthetic; bodily movements, dance, and other gestures are universally recognized as hip hop cultural styles. These performances are often difficult to explain and define in words, yet they hold significant value. Thomas Defrantz states that performances are “actionable assertions” that “do not ‘describe’ dancing; rather, they are the physical building blocks of a system of communication […]” (67). One of Nairobi underground hip hop’s political projects is to see their music in relation to global politics, other hip hop cultures, while still being deeply rooted in Kenyan social realities. Jean Kidula states that Kenyan rap is composed of both global and Kenyan elements:

Hip hop in Kenya has incorporated global rap, which has then been appropriated and reconstructed using indigenous creative forms, popular national and pan-African languages and styles, and African diasporic figurative poetic language and genres like R&B, funk, reggae, ragga, taarab, and others. (“The Local” 179) Kidula’s larger point is that Kenyan rap mentions local politics, realities, and signifiers as much as it borrows from music styles practiced outside of Kenya’s borders. Rap in Kenya has always been a transnational music, drawing local aspects, as well as characteristics beyond Kenya’s borders. Transnationality is not the antithesis to the local; both can be present. Artists cultivate music positioned outward, always attuned to US and South
African trends, forging East African regional collaborations, and drawing on Jamaican cultural texts. There are differentiations that need to be made between underground and mainstream music. Many times, underground rappers will reference other underground contexts, or at least what they read as marginal or subaltern. Nafsi’s invocation of *irie* can be read in this way; although reggae inhabits some normative locations in Jamaica, in Kenya it is often music of the underclass.

Kenyan hip hop’s transnationality needs to be contrasted with US rap, where there are less traces of an outward transnationality in US rap and more of an emphasis on American life and culture. When other locations are referenced, it is usually the diasporic narratives of African cultural production used to account for the emergence of US hip hop, which involves an inward directionality. On the other hand, Kenyan rap traditions, like many forms of non-US rap attend to local characteristics and point beyond national borders. Lee Watkins notes how hip hop upholds two distinct notions, diaspora and globalization.

The term *diaspora* is invoked when referring to the space that nonindigenous groups inhabit on arrival in foreign places or pass through on their way somewhere else, while *globalization* refers to these places as well as the cultural and economic influences of which everyone becomes the agents and subjects in the course of everyday life. Rap music in South Africa offers an understanding of globalization and the diaspora in which the two concepts are intimately connected. (71, emphasis in original)
The “global” in Kenyan rap, therefore, draws on African American artists, music, and culture, while also taking influences from France, UK, Tanzania, and South Africa, to name a few. Kenyan hip hop additionally recognizes a black diaspora, with the US as a primary point of “origin” of rap. H. Samy Alim states that non-US rap is composed of “transnational blackness,” is one that is “equally concerned with broader racial politics and specific Indigenous histories,” meaning that it is both global and local (Alim 15). Alim does not explicate on the definitions of transnational blackness, but I take this term to mean the ways in which hip hop draws on and creates an imagined black aesthetic that is globally conceived and locally inclusive. This black aesthetic celebrates difference and reclaims it as a basis for politicized sensibilities. Drawing from this term, I advocate for a broader idea of transnational hip hop or rap aesthetics where a notion of US hip hop “blackness” is one characteristics alongside innovative collective repertoire. A post-Mau Mau aesthetic is about local realities, as well as global or transnational concerns. Specifically, this aesthetic seeks to connect Kenyan hip hop’s legacies of challenging the status quo with imagined global sentiments of political resistance. Transnational rap aesthetics are the shared collective practices of hip hop spaces, which artists additionally use to think about the local specificities involved in music sites. Practitioners use the strong presence of difference rooted in conceived notions of blackness inside of these spaces, which continues to fuel perspectives, songs, and other modes of hip hop expressiveness.

98 As a term, transnational blackness is too confining and limiting to be able to describe the realities of local hip hop in Kenya. Additionally, the term does a static and fixed notion of US blackness, which elides the complexities of African American lives, in and outside of hip hop.
These performances are also difficult to put into words. Diana Taylor notes that this, far from being a limitation, is actually a transformative possibility:

[Performance’s] very undefinability and complexity I find reassuring.

Performance carries the possibility of challenge, even self-challenge, within it. As a term simultaneously connoting a process, a praxis, an episteme, a mode of transmission, an accomplishment, and a means of intervening in the world, it far exceeds the possibilities of words offered in its place. Moreover, the problem of untranslatability, as I see it, is actually a positive one. (15)

Euro-American forms of western thought, for Taylor, have overlooked most performance as knowledge producing. She argues that non-western cultures have developed that extensive knowledge systems based in performance that processes of colonialism have historically rendered insignificant. Like Taylor, I argue that performances are not easy to describe or locate, but are sites where ways of knowing are produced and enacted. Additionally, “[…] Hip hop dance in particular, resist inscription and interpretation from an exterior, immobile microanalytic perspective,” which means that hip hop dance does not depend on wider societal standards and values to determine its meanings (Defrantz 67).

Practitioners exercise many ways of creative obscurity, which are always in conversation with a wider transnational hip hop aesthetic. It often does not matter that not every song, verse, gesture, or stance is explainable easily or completely. Nafsi’s lyric utilized similarly sounding words, key phrases, and repetitiveness to convey a sense of self-assertiveness, cool composure, and a global perspective. H. Samy Alim explores the
imagined globality of rap culture by first asserting the widely accepted truth that hip hop is “a vast array of cultural practices including MCing (rappin), DJing (spinnin), writing (graffiti art), breakdancing (and other forms of streetdance), and cultural domains such as fashion, language, style, knowledge, and politics” (Global 2). He then notes that this collective discursive composition can be called the “Global Hip Hop Nation” (GHHN), because it is an imagined community, “with an international reach, a fluid capacity to cross borders, and a reluctance to adhere to the geopolitical givens of the present” (3). Alim identifies how hip hop’s elements hold shared meanings, which is applicable to Kenya whereby artists always imagine themselves as part of a much broader movement with other rappers, even ones they have not met or will ever meet. His term is useful because it recognizes transnational imagined sites where similar practices are understood as legible forms of meaning making. It is less useful for allowing a comprehensive analysis of gender and sexuality, a point made in the literature review. What is important about the imagined community of hip hop practitioners is not that every lyric and gesture is articulable into descriptive words, but rather that practitioners collectively have a set of cultural forms that is exercised across borders.

Rap music takes advantage of performance’s untranslatability and uses it as a basic for creativity. There are four characteristics of hip hop’s untranslatability that are worth noting. First, most rappers do not want to be easily definable. It is true that practitioners want to make a living from their music, and want their fans to enjoy their work, but they also do not want every element of their music to be translatable, and many enjoy exercising obscurity. Even graffiti artists’ work depends on creating art that borders
on the conventions of art and description. Second, hip hop culture’s intentional obscurity gives practitioners a method to resist, counter, and avoid repressive political and economic conditions—if only temporarily, symbolically, and/or ideologically. Imani Perry posits that in hip hop, “incomprehensibility is …a protective strategy,” stating that “the lack of clarity…represents struggle against the repressiveness of traditional literariness in terms of content, censorship, and more important, in terms of the limitations tradition imposes on structural innovation” (50). Most talented rappers aim for this incomprehensibility; they confuse with words, insert hidden meanings, express difficult lyrics, or play with words and meanings. Kenyan rappers use Swahili, Sheng, and English to accomplish this. This intentional obscurity extends to gestures and stances, whereby most rappers seek to dodge the normative mechanisms in place in Kenya. Third, most artists recognize that they, even as rap practitioners, will not understand every element. And last, lyrics, performances, and songs do not always have to make complete sense; they do not have to be holistically translatable. Hip hop culture, like perhaps other art forms, is not designed to be translatable into coherent verbal and written explanations. At times, it is more important that a lyric rhymes or a beat feels nice as opposed to a song being a set of complete ideas. The objective in rap culture is not to be decipherable, but rather to create artful expressions that are open to interpretation.

Judge stated that he was able to appreciate French rap though he did not speak the language:
Judge: But through hip hop you can know, like, what is what. What’s real and what’s not real. Because it’s all there, through lyrics. Even if you don’t understand they lyrics, you will feel it spiritually. [laughs]

RP: So even if you don’t understand the lyrics, you feel it spiritually. Why is that?

Judge: Because, me, there’s something’s I can’t explain to you. Like for me, I don’t understand French. But comes a time, I used to listen to French hip hop music. Cuz the way I love hip hop music too much, I used to listen to them. I didn’t know what they were saying. (Judge)

Evaredi expressed an appreciative indefinability of performances. He stated that an artist’s “bounce” is part of “rap’s body language” (Evaredi). He further contended that bodily stances are commonly shared amongst practitioners though he cannot tidily talk about them.

RP: When hip hop artists are walking and they’re bouncing—what does that mean?

Evaredi: Basically, I can’t say what it means, but I can say it’s just a style.

RP: A style?

Evaredi: Just a style for hip hop.
RP: So…what is hip hop style?

Evaredi: Hip hop style? Hip hop is a similar style for the majority [of] people. You are doing the same thing. Like the style, you have those people who like sagging, who like bouncing, and basically to do that, it is an inspiration from hip hop. As in, it’s a trend, I can say [...]. (Evaredi)

These elements make hip hop ripe with meaning, even if its meanings are obscure and difficult to explain.

Evaredi and Judge not only attest to the common sentiment amongst rappers, they also point to how some of the most meaningful elements of hip hop are difficult to explain. Gathering information about affective gestures and stances that are a critical element of hip hop culture has been no easy task. Thomas Defrantz states, “black expressive cultures value the process of signification over the signified…talking by dancing over talking about dancing” (66). Asking people about bodies, often their own bodies, challenged interviewees to talk about something that was often uncomfortable and other times easier to enact. My first question involves showing images of artists in various stances and asking about what is going on. The questions elicited a variety of responses, but one similarity was interviewees’ difficulty in using words to describe performances, gestured styles, and the body. I quickly realized that the questions elicited artists to theorize about consumer culture and “sell out” mainstream rappers. Though important, I wanted to continue to understand all facets of performance. I then asked,
“what is cool?”; or “how important is cool in hip hop?” During a later trip, I asked what I thought to be a critical, yet open-ended question: “If a rapper were to walk by us right now, how would we know he or she is an artist?”

Talking about images of artists posing, and the elements contained in the image, was much easier to do compared to discussing performance. Most artists saw the images of Kalamashaka, Bamboo, Nonini, and Jua Cali and felt compelled to discuss consumer culture, the politics of selling out, and “real” hip hop. None immediately discussed the similarities of the photos, only the differences: how Kalamashaka were from the hood and produced authentic rap and how Nonini appealed to mainstream standards. Many interviewees referenced the photos’ qualities. For example, people discussed how Kalamashaka’s photo is rather grainy and has a lower class setting as the backdrop, while Nonini’s image is clear and sharp. To steer them away from the photo’s descriptions, I asked about the common characteristics among all the artists. Many struggled to articulate any similarities.

RP: Do you see any similarities?

Ndugus: Yeah. [Pauses.] The hands. They are trying to communicate. The “sign language.”

RP: Which is what? What is the sign language they are trying to communicate?
Ndugus: Like here [points to Jua Kali], [he’s doing] peace. This looks like he’s…[Pauses] Eh! It’s hard. They all look the same to me. But now that I know them, I can look at them at very deep angles, and I cannot even categorize them, and I now tell who is who. So I don’t see any similarities. Except the way they are posing. (Ndugus)

Ndugus identified how all artists posed similarly but found it difficult to articulate what the stances mean in the follow up questions. I asked the same question to graffiti artist, Esen, who also pointed out the differences between the images. I encouraged him to talk about the commonalities:

Esen: Similarities, similarities. Ok, I don’t know, like the posing, the posing. They all look like they are rappers because of the way the pose.

RP: So what makes them look like rappers? What about their posing makes them look like rappers?

Esen: Ok, that’s a hard one. I’m trying to put it into words. Um…appearance I guess you say of what, you know like, every genre, every genre of music, there’s a way they, you know like, they have a certain way, a certain look. So, uh, I’m likely to know a guy that is doing hip hop just by looking at him. (Esen)

Performances, though they are largely indescribable, induce emotive and communicative qualities. The body becomes the site of creativity, and the transnational characteristic—the fact that rappers globally exercise these movements—gives
performances credibility and cultural force. One in particular is what I call the performance of mic authority, enacted when an artist is rapping at a stationary mic and s/he closes in around it, raps with energy and control, with arms moving in and out of the body. Marcyliena Morgan notes:

The height of creativity and proof of leadership is to demonstrate that they can “rock the mic,” take things to the “next level,” and “flow.” [...] Anywhere in the world there is hiphop, there is the demand that MCs be able to flow in order that their country, community, and crew are represented as part of the hiphop nation.

(62)

The performance of mic authority is recognizable across borders and takes place in a studio, concert, or music video. Nafsi Huru, Kevelexicon, and Nje all do mic scenes in the music video “Still Strong.”

I witnessed rapper Dickson Oyugi enact this performance. He is a member of the group TS1, a globally activist oriented group of three or four young artists who rap about social issues. I first met them at WAPI when I was introduced to Pjay, the group’s manager, who is the older white male manager from the Netherlands. He invited me out to the studio for a visit. My understanding is that he maintains creative control of the group’s songs, which are aimed for an international audience. I was with them when they recorded a verse for the song. Their studio, which is a converted house located in the middle and lower working class area of Embakasi. When I visited, it lacked running water and had a slight smell of sewage. I never gathered if anyone actually lived in the house, though it was furnished. I only saw numerous artists moving in and out of it. The
actual recording studio is on the top floor, which leads out to an outdoor balcony. In the recording room, there are two unclean couches, some recording equipment, and a microphone. There was a producer sitting at the computer assisting with the recording. Oyugi, a tall and slim young male, stood by the microphone against the wall, which made him face the wall away from us. Oyugi did not have a traditional audience and had incredible energy and dedication, though he faced the wall. He laid one hand flat and moved it in and out from the body. He also took both hands and moved them tightly and rhythmically around the mic. Traditionally, this is done for emphasis, especially when reaching a climatic point or difficult moment in a verse. Oyugi’s movements also assisted in emphasizing points in the song. There was one line where he struggled to articulate clearly, and he had to continue to record it over and over again. Oyugi clearly was not comfortable with English and continued to stumble over a particular verse. He kept moving his body in similar ways, confident, nonplussed, and energetic, even as he continued to record and grow frustrated with his inability to master the verse. The only indication that he felt mildly agitated was when he would mess up the lyric, and back away from the mic, stumble, laugh nervously, slouch, and shake his head. The producer sat at the computer and each time erased the errred track while laughing at him, and Pjay joked that he was stupid. Eventually, after several failed attempts they dubbed the music so closely over the verse that it covered the mistake.

All of TS1’s songs are sung and rapped in English, and most have an explicit social message, and the group is connected to NGO initiatives. Some of these songs

99 The song is about how mainstream notions of education and hard work can lead to success, though I have yet to see this song on their SoundCloud site.
include, “Trash is Cash,” Me and My Bike,” “Water, Mother Earth, and My Bike,” “Bio
Gas, Climate Change, and Trash.” In December 2012, the video “Not Afraid” aired in
NYC’s Time Square. The group won a Connect4Climate video competition with “Me
and My Bike.” “Not Afraid,” is a remix of Eminem’s song and appears on the Rhythms
del Mundo: Africa, an album produced in partnership from MTV and NGO Artists
Project Earth. TS1’s songs are aimed at various social issues. The artists have talent and a
desire to rap, yet their songs seem almost clichéd, trite, and without the creative thrust
that rap music is known to have. The first verse of “Not Afraid,” Oyugi raps:

In the artic they are drilling,

All the beauty they are killing,

There are more things we can shout about,

Like famine and terrible drought and no doubt,

This is a war unlike any that’s been fought before. (Rhythms)

The song is a polemic about the problem of global warming. It sounds contrived and
predictable, and it would not fit into either underground spaces or on the radio. TS1’s
songs appeal to a specific global audience of people dedicated to certain sanitized
versions of environmental change. It is the opposite of what Perry would describe as
lyrical difficulty and intentional incomprehensibility descriptive of much of rap culture.

Oyugi’s performance exemplifies how subjectivity is performed. His
performances, both bodily and lyrically, illustrated a disjunction between his performance
and the song. He stood at a mic confrontationally, and rapped uncomfortably in English.
His hands and body moved assertively around the microphone, even though he continued
to fumble over the lyrics. Not all performances at the mic illustrate this disjuncture
between what the author’s body states and the words he uses, but Oyugi’s certainly did. It
is difficult to say how he felt about the lyrics, and whether his trouble with rapping this
lyric was solely due to his unfamiliarity with English or with the messages of the song.
After his recording, Mary, a rapper and singer in the group recorded her portion of the
song. Pjay ordered that everyone leave the studio, and he stated she becomes nervous
when recording. I exited, along with my research colleague and the other members of the
group. We went out to the patio to wait until she was done. I learned there that these
young people did not know English well at that time, as the conversation took place in
Swahili and Sheng. It was there that Oyugi and the other members began various debates:
whether *genge* was rap from the underground, whether *kapuka* was rap at all. Oyugi was
particularly adamant about the fact that artists in Kenya had the great possibility to
fashion their own unique styles. He joked that if one wanted to make music on the roof,
they could easily call that “rooftop rap.” He used his hands and gestured in lively ways
and seemed generally unaffected about his studio performance. This conversation helped
lead me to believe that rapping in English is a market-driven decision for a global
activist-oriented audience. The fact that he articulated critiques about underground hip
hop, *genge*, and *kapuka* illustrates his intimate knowledge of rap scenes. This knowledge,
which is clearly an interest for him where he sees himself belonging, was not necessarily
captured with his participation with TS1.

Rap music cultures have similar aesthetic forms of creativity. Oyugi’s
performance of mic authority is one example. “[In hiphop when the MC commands the
mic, the direct consequence of his or her talk is power in hip hop” (Morgan 191). The emphasis here is not on language but on performance, as Oyugi fulfills the performative function while lacking English lyrical ability. Mic authority exists within a hip hop repertoire of clothing styles, graffiti art, rapping, walking, standing, and gesturing. These transnational performance practices in hip hop “[have] […] offered a global stage for the postindustrial alienation and discontent of adolescent youth,” which suggests the need to explore the multiple possibilities for why young people in various contexts find rap’s cultural forms meaningful (White 131). In Kenya, rappers use shared performances of cool, armor, and authority to produce meanings. Oyugi performs a way of knowing, not through the lyrics he had trouble mastering, but through the way his body moves. The moves are familiar to him, and through these gestures he illustrated his knowledge of hip hop. I left the studio wondering about the other types of rap he could perform, and feeling as though I had not witnessed the full range of his talent.

Gender and the Untidy Alliance with Power

Sue Timon stood to the far left side of Sarakasi’s performance hall and bobbed her head back and forth to the music at the Hip Hop Fest. Performers freestyled and tried out their new songs during the open mic session, the Sarakasi Acrobats took the stage, and a talented beatboxer showed off his skills to a crowd that was awed by his abilities. Judge was the MC for the event and was extremely lively and energetic. Things began to
change when the popular male duo, Washamba Wenza, took the stage. The two members of this group are Flamez and Smallz Lethal. The hall began to fill up, and people started moving and dancing more energetically. Timon also became more enthusiastic; her body began to move back and forth to the rhythm of her head sways. Her arms lay to her side, at one point, and she moved rhythmically to the raps relying on her back and forth head bobbing to communicate her connection to Washamba’s performance. As she moved, she would pivot looking at other audience members for affirmation of a shared experience. Sue, at one point, put her arm up and moved it up and down in straight manner, almost to pay homage to the performance. This is a common gesture in rap music culture, to move one’s arm up and down as the rapper displays their lyrical abilities. It communicates the participant’s fluency in the cultural commonalities of hip hop. The sound system, the acoustics of the building and/or the microphone and speakers, make the words of the raps difficult to hear. Yet Sue, like other audience members, understood the gestures of rap performances and rapping, and/or recognized the actual lyrics.

The hall was not that crowded with about seventy-five people in attendance including the hip hop heads, vendors, and a few shoppers and devotees milling around outside. Still though, it was hard to miss Sue; she is tall and very slim with her hair cut into a Mohawk surrounded by a close fade. She was one of the few women who attended, and was more engaged. Washamba transitioned to different songs, and Timon moved close to the stage to be right under the duo, jiving to the beats, moving excitedly. At one point, Judge transitioned from MC to rapper when Washamba and Judge performed their song, “Shupavu.” At this point, a large crew of male rappers were on stage showing
support, dancing, and gesturing. Flamez and Smallz rapped and moved to the music, bending over toward the crowd right below them. Timon and others danced and grooved to the beat allying themselves with the message. The crew on stage and the audience members right below them almost enacted a sort of cipher, due to their close proximity and their communication with each other. Sue’s dancing and stances suggested that being one of only a handful of women did not faze her. Her behavior differed vastly from that of the few other women, who stood by, conversing with men, or observing quietly without offering any gestural presence.100

Timon’s ability to navigate within Sarakasi and hip hop spaces has to do with her bodily enactments of what are easily perceived as masculinity. She walks with a masculine-identified swagger and moves through the space with ease. I later found out that she was fully aware of male artists attempting to read her as lesbian. I met and interviewed her at the Kenya National Theatre and she shook my hand in a typically male manner common in rap culture and in many US black communities. We shook right hands and she swung her left around my back, and I likewise felt compelled and did the same to her. At the end of the shake, our fingers met and hung tight while the hands quickly moved downward before release. The entire gesture lasted about five seconds, and though I am familiar with it, I am not used to performing it and found myself momentarily uncomfortable. She later stated during our interview that the way artists greet each other is significant, “The greetings. ‘Yeah, what’s up?’ Ah, there’s this

100 Marcyliena Morgan similarly notes in her ethnographic accounts, “In the case of Project Blowed, the audience members affirm the MC by bobbing their heads, moving their shoulders in quick succession, throwing their hands up with their fingers in the shape of the letter W, or even forcing the MC off the mic by yelling repeatedly “please pass the mic” (60).
southern [US rap thing], I don’t know how they put it, “how we do?” [Laughs.] There’s that greeting part of it thing” (Timon).

This section examines observations made during my fieldwork understanding Sue Timon’s participation, and women’s participation at large in underground rap culture. Underground hip hop promotes contradictory politics in terms of gender. On one hand, post-Mau Mau rap culture, like its predecessor, is constructed in terms of male homosociality. Rap music culture is a male space, women are “let in,” and mostly welcomed insofar as they do not disrupt the maleness of the space. Yet, at momentary times female and male artists are able to challenge notions of gender, though these are fleeting and conditional. Underground hip hop is an ideal space to challenge gender constructions, not because it is a perfect place free of power politics, but because it is constituted out of the legacies of subversion and opposition to the status quo. Mwenda Ntarangwi states of Kenyan hip hop:

> Hip hop expresses […] the fluidity and performative nature of gender, revealing how normalized gender identities can be reconstituted to gain new meanings. […] There are hip hop artistes who mobilize and celebrate a critical and interrogative stance on gender, while there are others keen on maintaining traditional and conservative notions of gender. (49)

In underground rap women draw on the same post-Mau Mau traditions of resistance to articulate their politics that men do. In some ways, men recognize and make space for women, and in other ways, men want to guard against too much fluidity. There are two
characteristics I use to describe the gender politics of hip hop: homosociality and the liminal-norm.

Underground hip hop artists construct spaces that utilize male homosociality. Eve Sedgwick notes “in any male-dominated society, there is a special relationship between male homosocial (including homosexual) desire and the structures of maintaining and transmitting patriarchal power: a relationship founded on an inherent and potentially active structural congruence” (25, emphasis in original). Male homosociality can be, according to Sedgwick, homophobic and heterosexual, and based on desiring the companionship of men that operates along these terms (1-27). Rap culture is homosocial because it functions to continue and legitimate male power, and it is decidedly heterosexual in that it constructs itself based on a (mostly) feminine absence. Marcyliena Morgan observes, “hip hop is dominated by young men hoping to become grown men, and in this setting every issue of masculinity and male sexuality is in play” (133). This means that men construct a space that is explicitly heteronormative and masculine.

Hip hop performances occur in liminal moments and spaces. Liminality at times underpins social structures and does not always mean transgression, as Victor Turner and Jon McKenzie have noted. Hip hop liminality can operate under normative terms for two reasons. First, it functions under what McKenzie calls the “liminal norm,” which “operates in any situation where the valorization of liminal transgression or resistance itself becomes normative” (27). Underground hip hop prides itself on challenging any form of status quo, articulating a politics that society misinterprets, and espousing a style that is global and pregnant with meaning. Many interviewees uttered the clichéd, “hip
hop is a way of life” to argue for the full breadth of the culture, especially when
describing how mainstream society does not understand the full capacity of rap culture.
Artists embrace this othered status, and use it to enact their own subjectivity through
performing and rapping. Yet, non-commercial rap’s segregated position can still work to
reinforce normative social constructions. Turner notes that initiation rites of what he calls
“tribal societies” involve young people’s ceremonies into adulthood were separated from
regular community life, but worked to reinforce wider social beliefs (From Ritual 53-92).
This is especially true for underground rap’s relationship to neoliberal capitalism, as
shown in the previous chapter, and for gender, which will be explored below.

Hip hop spaces cultivate navigations of neoliberalism and notions of masculinity
and femininity, which are largely in service to the status quo. Female artist, Amora, made
this point when I asked her if women face undo obstacles in hip hop settings:

But that’s everything. When it comes to men and women. Men always have a
higher hand. Like if I give an example with Kenyan culture, back in the coastal
region, they believe that a boy child should be educated to a certain level, very
higher than a girl child. A girl child will reach like primary six and that will be it.
And ah, a boy child should go to the university. A boy child should be the
president. So it’s not only in hip hop. So everywhere if you are lady, you have to
fight your way, yeah. You have to walk the extra mile to get what you want. It’s
not only in hip hop. (Amora)

---

101 In Kenya, most schools adhere to a British-style system. Here, primary six is equivalent to sixth grade.
Amora does not want hip hop to bear the responsibility of societal sexism. Below, I explore the places of possibility where artists challenge normative gender constructions, but it is important to note that the space is constituted by heteronormativity and exclusive masculinity. Morgan notes, “most successful female MCs recognize that for them the only place where they can navigate race, class, gender, and sexuality with relative freedom is the hiphop world. It is not an ideal space but rather one populated by those searching for discourses that confront power” (159). Anthony Kwame Harrison makes a similar observation in his ethnography of US Bay area hip hop:

[U]nderground hiphop’s racial and class inclusivity does not extend across gender lines. In this regard, there is a stark contradiction between the subgenre’s liberationist ideal—the belief that all people should be able to take part in hip hop regardless of race, ethnicity, class, gender or any other category of collective identification—and the existing structures for participation which significantly privilege men over women. (33).

This means that these are difficult places for women to operate from because they are imbued with power inequalities that directly impact them.

One music video that reflects both the liminal-norm and homosociality is “Kazi Kwa Vijana.” This video aptly promotes an unchecked subtle heteronormative masculinity that is not necessarily explicitly pernicious. Framed around a narrative of social empowerment and protest, the song and video decry political corruption and focus on kazi kwa vijana, which is “work (employment) for youth.” Before expounding on this visual text, it is necessary to give a history of the term.
The term *kazi kwa vijana* relates to a much larger public conversation about young people. There is an entire discourse about the “idle youth” and the anxieties and frustrations that wider society have with the presence of unemployed young people. The word *vijana* is Kiswahili for the youth, which is a gender-neutral term. Yet connotatively, it mostly is used to refer to male young people. The term “idle youth” has circulated for years and mostly signifies poor young males in urban and peri-urban areas who supposedly have nothing to do but cause havoc. The state has perpetuated this discourse, and by proxy the media, though I routinely have encountered this term in casual conversations. To the middle class, “idle youth” are a problem that can be remedied with jobs. The state has often co-opted young people into political process exploitatively that has been self-serving for politicians. These youth, mostly young males, have been both willing participants and manipulated in political contests and controversies, including during nation-building post-Mau Mau, Moi’s kleptocracy, and Kibaki and Uhuru Kenyatta’s questionable electoral practices.102 “Idle youth” were blamed for the chaos of the post-election violence, which became the impetus for state-sponsored The Kenyan Youth Empowerment Project (KYEP), which instituted the Kazi Kwa Vijana (KKV) program in 2009.103 It purportedly sought to address the serious problems of

102 Peter Kagwanja states, “Like ethnicity, generational identities have been manipulated and instrumentalized by Africa’s patrimonial elite” (“Power” 53). Young people are constantly manipulated in political processes. During independence, KANU created a youth wing to deal with the problem of, and help discipline, politically-minded young people who had played active roles in Mau Mau movements. Moi later recreated the KANU Youth League as a policing force, to quell dissent and terrorize people. Moi used Youth for KANU to win the 1992 elections. Kibaki’s National Youth Service was supposed address the “problem” of disenfranchised youth and create employment opportunities. These are just a few examples of how the state has manipulated young people under the auspices of employment to discipline, surveil, and use them for political purposes.

103 The blame leveled at young males is particularly deplorable. The state largely perpetuates social conditions of unemployment for poor men. After Kibaki’s questionable swearing in ceremony, Uhuru and
disenfranchised youth in both urban and rural areas. KKV has an affirmative action program, with thirty percent of the slots must be filled by women (OECD 2). Scandals surrounding stolen and misappropriated funds and non-payment to participants have plagued the program, and to date it is not actively implemented.

Kactus and Mswati’s song and music video are a direct attack on the initiative, and engage with the discourse of “idle youth” and the program KKV. The texts reflect the masculine-centered nature of the KKV, notions of who constitutes “young people” in the program, in hip hop, and in wider society. The video is framed in terms of a protest, with the song sounding like a rallying cry against a system meant to benefit wealthy older politicians. The chorus is “Kazi kwa vijana, mishahara kwa wazee,” which is “jobs for the youth, and money or payment for the old” (“Kazi”). The “old” directly refers to elder male leaders in particular. The longstanding “gerontocracy” present in Kenya since independence is “a state of generational differentiation characterized by gate-keeping and isolationism,” and is designed to keep young people pushed out of political processes (Odhiambo 105). The song references a variety of social problems, rising gas prices, government maize theft, inadequate electricity, and the outsourcing of road projects to Chinese businesses. Kactus and Mswati rap with about fifteen other men in the background rapping to the chorus. The video takes place outside in a field and the men

---

104 The World Bank, who sponsored the program, pulled funding in October of 2011 after the government misallocated funds (World Bank). The program has been littered with problems outside of corruption, including the common perception that it exploits young people to do menial jobs. There have also been complaints that the pay is irregular despite working on a contract (Heltberg et al 180). Many refer to it is Kazi Kwa Vijana- Pesa Kwa Wazee, meaning work for the youth, money for the older people (or politicians) (Thieme 335).
have neon green protest signs reading “Haki Yetu” (Our justice) and “Kazi Yangu ni Kutafuta Kazi” (My work is finding work) (“Kazi”). There is only one visible woman in the video, and her role is nominal. They explicitly contest the notion of “idle youth” asserting that economic conditions are responsible for the harsh conditions of young people. Katkus raps:

“Hawataki tuendelee/
(They (politicians) don’t want us to continue/persevere)

Matusi ya mdonsi anadai umechelewa kufika kazini/
(Abuse from your boss claiming you are late)

Hajui ni unfair/
(He doesn’t know it’s unfair)

Kuenda hadi job tao kuearn fare/
(Go to the job in the city just to earn bus fare) (“Kazi”)

The song is directed toward young men specifically. The song and video are framed through outrage and dissent, and yet the video and lyrics do not address the direct grievances of unemployed or disillusioned women. Instead, the song is male-centric. Katkus raps, “Na bibi amekudare ukikosa kurudi na chapaa atapotea,” which translates as “my wife has threatened/dared that if I return with no money, she will leave” (“Kazi”). Additionally, “Pesa haitoshi makali unadoea na wamatha kwenya ploti kuzidi
“Kazi kwa Vijana” illustrates the subtle and implicit ways masculinity is privileged in rap settings, and likewise interviews also reflect this. Most male interviewees imagined that women could and should participate in rap concerts, battles, and other performances, though never addressing the fundamental inequities of hip hop spaces. Lee Watkins makes similar ethnographic observations on South African hip hop, “In my first round of fieldwork, I was informed by male hip hoppers that women were reluctant to participate in the movement because hip hop was associated with rebellion
and street life. The men were adamant, though, that women were free to participate” (61). This observation is an example of how the maleness of the space subtly stays intact; men were not going to alter the space, but women were invited to participate in such a space that was first and foremost male. Imani Perry asserts of US rap, “masculinity in hip hop reflects the desire to assert black male subjectivity, and that it sometimes does so at the expense of female subjectivity […]” (118).

Male interviewees I interviewed made similar descriptions and observations both overtly and indirectly. Agano sums up the complexities of gender in hip hop:

RP: Do [women] have experiences that make it harder for them as women?

Agano: As women. Yeah. Because they have to challenge men. Yeah. You know, ok, in hip hop, it’s kinda hard for a woman because she has to be there, you know women have different feelings. […] And we should respect them. And it’s like, for men, it’s like, a kinda life. But for a woman, it’s life, but there is [sic] a lot of things that comes in between. Like maybe marriage. Maybe like wanting to look decent, maybe like a woman. And it’s so hard for her because she wants to be like a tomboy or something. There is a lot of hardship for a woman. But I like it because they overcome it. They’re strong. (Agano)

This statement reflects the sentiments of many men when they discussed gender politics. Agano’s above statement adeptly articulates the gender politics of underground spaces, it is worth thinking through at length. He pointed to five noteworthy themes: essentialized or limiting notions of femininity, women’s roles and duties, challenges of women, and
the notion that women can persevere through difficulties. All of these characteristics contribute to the marking of women as different or othered inside of the space.

The old adage, “hip hop as a way of life,” which Agano briefly refers to, sets up the male standards of hip hop. He stated that “for a woman, [hip hop] is a life, but [also] there’s a lot of things that come in between.” Hip hop “as a way of life” is a celebrated and globally embraced ideal that asserts that those dedicated practitioners recognize hip hop as a method and set of practices for engaging with the world. One who embraces this also embodies an authentic subjectivity. Michael Jefferies explores this in *Thug Life*, citing Simon Frith’s notion that musical experiences are meaningful because they are performed and enacted (36). Interviewees he worked with stated that hip hop is not only music or art, but it is instead about practitioners’ way of being in the world, interactions that collectively compose hip hop. He concludes that hip hop is a culture used as “a tool for identity building and interpersonal communication,” and it “is something that allows people to tell the world who they are” (36, 35). It also refers to the ways these underground artists produce subjectivity. In Nairobi underground rap, to argue that hip hop is a way of life is to contest the allegations of US mimicry and inauthenticity that many face. My interviews suggest that notions of masculinity and femininity are embedded in these characteristics, and thus also factor into larger questions of hip hop culture. Women, Agano asserts, cannot be rappers all the time, because it is not a “way of life” for them, it is rather something they have to fit into their lives among other responsibilities and duties. This is dramatically different for men, who can easily practice “hip hop as a way of life.” Agano’s observation reflects a dominant notion in Kenyan
society that women must first and foremost consider household and childrearing duties that men simply do not have to think about. What becomes problematic about this is that the statement points to the underlying assertions about hip hop realness and culture as inherently masculinized. It asserts that men set the standard, maintain the space, and are easily able to exercise these standards, while women are measured against such criteria.

Male artists expressed essentialized notions of femininity that they argue work to prohibit women’s participation in hip hop culture. Evaredi contended that male artists have the strength and perseverance to face the incredible barriers in the music industry, while women’s “emotions” inhibited them.

Like you can be used, introduced to drugs, or you can be used like…a producer does you an album, after the album, he’s unable to promote the album. But on the feminine side of it, they emotionally, the emotions, and the desperation, they won’t make it. They just leave the game. Basically, she’ll get pregnant. Get introduced to drugs. (Evaredi)

I followed up by asking if men become involved in drugs, and again, he responded that men do abuse drugs but have more inner strength to overcome such hardships. I asked Judge about the obstacles that women might face in the industry, and he asserted that women’s “emotions” are the largest barrier. To illustrate this, he gave the example of when artists have to work with a producer to lay a track, which is worth quoting at length:

And like here in Kenya, females have been having challenges because very few producers normally understand the feminist, feminine… [struggles with word] situation. Because them [women], they’re very emotional. They are the kind of
people, if you tell them like ah, “Tomorrow if you come, and you find me, I have mastered your song […].” You know, and then you come tomorrow and you find that like [the producer] has not done that. And [the producer] will be like “I was busy, come tomorrow again.” You know for a woman, you can't keep on doing that. [The woman] will be like “Ah, no, you’re not respecting me,” and it will be like it’s very easy for her start crying and to be like leaving the whole project […]. But for a man, he’ll be like, “Ah, man.” Even after one month you can still go there, “Ah man you haven’t finished this?!” You know? Sometimes, even you [sic] quarrel and you diss each other, you cuss each other […]. So, women have, like, real challenges. (Judge)

Judge explains in this hypothetical situation that men can yell, diss, and become angry with a producer, but then come and amend the relationship and work through the situation. For women, however, he states that their inherent womanness prohibits them from rationalizing their way through such situations. The “challenges” that women face, according to Judge, are not due to the inherent sexism or limiting opportunities within the industry, but rather women’s own inability to navigate situations.

Male artists also discussed how women’s roles and duties deter them from developing a career. Judge and Ndugus, in addition to Agano, mentioned that women have responsibilities at the home, caring for children and a husband, which can inhibit women. Ndugus, unlike Judge, believes that the society is responsible for women’s challenges.
[Women] face a lot of challenges, *like trying to convince people that this is what they live by*. Because in Kenya, when we were starting hip hop, our parents were like, you leave my plans for music? Will it really pay you? Will it help you feed your kids in the future? It’s also complicated for females. Let’s say at night they need to go to shows. You also find that female is a married woman and she has kids to take care of. They have a lot of challenges (emphasis mine). (Ndugus)

Ndugus, like Agano, suggests that female artists have difficulty “living hip hop,” because they have other duties. What is interesting about these statements is that men, also presumably husbands and fathers, do not face the same pressures to balance home and family life. Female artists must think about children and their families when making music decisions, while men do not think about such questions. The fact that this idea exists in society at large, and not just in hip hop circles, means that though underground hip hop may live in liminal spaces, it nonetheless supports, perpetuates, and relies on wider notions of gender politics. These male artists never gave examples of women who have to think about their familial duties, and additionally, the female MCs I interviewed never discussed that their home and family life kept them from performing. This leads me to believe that many men believe women automatically face such questions or will face them. The presumed tethering of womanhood to family life makes it difficult to imagine that a female rapper can “live hip hop.” Moreover, these interviewees do not believe that labor conditions for women should be changed in order to accommodate their role in hip hop. Instead, these male artists observe that the obstacles that female artists encounter are inevitable challenges.
Female hip hop tropes inform underground hip hop politics, and male artists discussed them as mostly limiting. Male rappers discussed the MC as tomboy, ho, or groupie when I asked them open-ended questions about women. Nafsi Huru states that these stereotypes are barriers for women:

“It’s kinda hard for female MCs because if you are female, and you are doing hip hop, many people will think you are a ho or maybe a groupie, or something like that, you know? They get that biasness. But if you are good, and if you prove to people that you are good, then they embrace you and it’s ok. (Nafsi Huru)

The rapper as tomboy came up in several interviews. Both Judge and Agano proclaim that women should not have to be, and in fact are not, only tomboys. Judge states, “If you’re a chick [they say] you have to be like […] for example, a tomboy […]. Naw. You can still be sexy and you are doing hip hop. You know?” (Judge). Similarly, Agano argues that one does not have to be a tomboy to make it, though many are. I asked him if this was acceptable, and he stated, “Ok, there is no rules there but I think they can do what they are doing. I think it’s cool. But not every girl should be like that though” (Agano). Judge and Agano imply that women do not have to be tomboys, that they should be free to choose their identities. Underneath these comments is the notion that the trope of tomboy is not desirable. Judge’s notion that women should be able to be sexy seems to imply that women should be sexy in hip hop spaces. Neither artist argued first and foremost that the tomboy is an acceptable articulation of subjectivity, rather their argument was that women should not feel boxed into such an assignment. Michael Newman illustrates a similar dynamic where male interviewees stated that the best female
MCs are not sexually desirable. Interviewees stated that often they are too “butch” and “all the ill ones don’t be walkin’ around showin’ they tits” (195-212, *Global Linguistic Flows*). This implies that a non-heteronormative subjectivity of the tomboy is inherently pejorative because it does not fulfill male desires that are encouraged in homosocial spaces.

Many men discussed troubling notions of women, but this should not overshadow that they additionally identified inherent problems that women may encounter. Both Ndugus and Nafsi Huru noted that women face unfair obstacles. Agano additionally states that women are not given fair shots. I asked him if he thought that the industry creates space for women, to which he replied, “Ok, they don’t. They don’t. They don’t give them a chance. They don’t, and that’s not good,” (Agano). Men were able to discuss how women are treated in the industry, and this points to recognition that there are wrongs, which is noteworthy.

Women’s perceptions and participation also contribute to male homosociality. Tricia Rose makes a similar observation, “Not only do women rappers defend male rappers’ sexist speech in a larger society that seems to attack black men disproportionately, but their lyrics sometimes affirm patriarchal notions about family life and the traditional roles of husbands, fathers, and lovers” (150). The following statements that Kenyan female artists make do not overtly support male power in rap culture, as Rose notes of US culture, but alternatively imply that men serve as gatekeepers and women have little input. One of the youngest interviewees I spoke with was Baby T, who just began college. At the time of our interview, she had also been rapping for only six
months. She was anxious throughout our interview probably because she was young and a new rapper. She did a collaboration song, “Bila Mic,” with mainstream artist Octopizzo (discussed in a previous chapter), and described her nervousness in recording the song:

RP: And what was that experience like [recording the song]?

Baby T: It was overwhelming actually. Cuz it’s me among all these guys, and I’m the only chick rapper there. The only female. I’d say I was shocked at first that they asked me to be in the remix. And ah, it also gave me confidence as in, the big people like, the big people to believe in you, to work with you. It means you’re good. Or maybe they’ve seen potential in you. It encouraged me. It makes me want to go farther. (Baby T)

Baby T depended on the more seasoned artists for approval of her as an MC to gain confidence. Age, gender, and newness play important roles here. She does not state that it was because men, specifically, liked her skills that she gained self-assurance, and as an aspiring artist she was looking for others to say that she had skills. Yet it is noteworthy that more experienced artists were men. Her hesitancy and trepidation is rather understandable given these factors. Amora similarly asserted that it is men that afford women opportunities after I asked her a question about how rap culture challenges some social barriers:

Hip hop is breaking down […] boundaries. Ah, like me, any opportunity I’ve been given, I’ve been given through my male hip hop artists. Because they recognize that we can do it as good as, or even better, than they can. Or we can pull more
crowds than they can. So they understand that, so they give us platforms to do that. Yeah. (Amora)

Amora wanted to argue that the space is collective and makes room for anyone who wants to participate. She, like Baby T, acknowledges—I believe unconsciously—that the people who can “give” such opportunities are other males. Like men, women artists see men as the enforcers of hip hop’s borders.

Women must navigate their roles in hip hop. This takes place most prominently in negotiating the “tomboy” archetype for the female rappers with whom I spoke. The tomboy disrupts the homosociality of hip hop, in many ways, because a woman’s role in rap culture often times is to be the object of desire. I found that most women tried to navigate between being feminine, which meant to be desirable, vulnerable, and submissive, and being a tomboy or too masculine, which often meant being afforded hip hop legitimacy. Imani Perry argues that in the early US hip hop scene female artists had little choice to appropriate a masculine subjectivity:

One of the first ways women entered the music, and were able to receive respect as artists, was by occupying styles of presentation and archetypal roles coded as male in the world of hip hop or in the larger world of black popular culture. As a masculinist form with masculinist aesthetics, hip hop, and the art form’s masculinist ideals of excellence and competitiveness, have often forced women to occupy roles gendered male. (156)

The artists I spoke with negotiated female masculinized subjectivities in Kenyan rap in two different ways: by disavowing the necessity for rappers to be tomboys through an
assertion of normative femininity, and by arguing that while women should not have to be tomboys, they also should not objectify themselves. Both Baby T and Amora believed that having normative femininity should be enough to gain acceptability in hip hop.

Amora, corroborating what Perry argues about the US industry, asserted that one has to prove their legitimacy to negotiate rap settings, which is often to act male.

If you look at me…I’m a hip hop chick. But I’m still a lady. I still keep my lady look. I’m in 6-inch heels, a mini skirt and all that. So for some reason as hip hop came up, um, back in the days, Nazizi, Kalamashaka, in Kenya, ah, people thought that if you are a chick doing hip hop, then you have to dress like I’m a dude. You have to dress like a tomboy. You have to be a tomboy, you have to be hard. You have to be straight, no jokes, no crap. You’re just hard. But I disagree. Cuz I grew up with the hardest of the hardest in hip hop in Kenya. And that didn’t, I fell in love with hip hop as hip hop. Not as a dress code, not as a talk code. So that’s why I say, it doesn’t matter. (Amora)

Amora’s reference to Nazizi is important here. Nazizi is a part of the duo Necessary Noize. She was one of the first successful female mainstream artists, and did collaborations with the famous non-commercial group Ukoo Flani Mau Mau. Her gender performance embodies male inflections of rap subjectivity. Nazizi uses feminine signifiers to enact femininity, such as makeup and earrings, and despite this, she is easily read as a tomboy. Amora clearly distinguishes herself from Nazizi. Baby T, like Amora, noted how women should not have to be masculine:
People think that all female artists are gangsters, tomboys, and bad girls. Not all of them are so hard. Some of us are shy. Like basically, I’m shy, that’s why people call me Baby, cuz ah, I don’t think we all have to go hard. And ah, gangsta, and wear shorts, and baggy pants. People think that all female artists are gangster. (Baby T)

These two statements are noteworthy because what these artists are arguing is for the ability to be feminine and not be the object of male gaze or to be discounted because of a performance of femininity. They exemplify a common tendency in rap, that usually for women to be taken seriously is to perform maleness, and to be non-heteronormatively feminine is not sexually desirable. Both carry pejorative associations where women must sacrifice something be accepted in rap.

Lness argued that women who dress too provocatively appeal to western standards. She, of all the people I interviewed, most identified with the tomboy label, though she stopped short of calling herself one. Lness believes there is a middle ground in-between the tomboy and the sexually desirable females that most women should strive to situate themselves.

Lness: Most female hiphoppers are just tomboy. I don’t know, it just comes. […] But ah, the other performers, they want to go an extra miles to be sexy. They’ll want to appeal to the men. You know? There’s a difference. If I’m rapping I want to touch everybody. But there is someone who will go on stage and start singing and maybe they want to appeal to the men. You know, they are dressing in something short. Even their moves, they have to be sexy moves. […]
RP: You think that’s bad?

Lness: Yeah, I think it’s bad. It’s not necessary. Women shouldn’t be portrayed like that. If you look at many videos, you feel sorry for most of the models, because it’s not just about that. […] But it’s just a westernization kind of thing.

(Lness)

Sue Timon gave the most complex account of avoiding a tomboy trope. Timon has a non-normative gender practice, because while she identifies as a woman, she exercises masculine performances. The way she walks, her body language, and her stances and poses are typically associated with male rappers. This has caused her to be accused of wanting to be a male and lesbian.

When they look at you, they think you wanna be like a boy. […] They’ll even ask you are you gay? [Laughs.] Hip hop comes at its own, what is it called?—its own look and appearance. So you know the first time I saw Da Brat, I was like, yeah, that’s a nice swag, I want to look like her, you know. The baggy t-shirts and everything. [Laughs.] But people will mistake you because they will think you are changing your sexual orientation. Cuz maybe you want to be gay or something. But then there’s also the aspect of, you want to be like a man. (Timon)
She discussed how men regularly read her as lesbian and how, in fact, she used to be one. Getting saved through the Christian church helped her overcome lesbian practices. Of all of the female artists I spoke with, she was the only one who discussed sexuality openly.

Eventually, I became gay [laughs]. So, I can’t believe I’m saying that, but I have to say it anyway. […] I have to mentor someone. Someone doesn’t have to go through what I went through. You see, because I lost my identity. Because I was listening to the wrong voices. To the wrong lyrics, that’s what I can say. (Timon)

Timon explained that she uses rap to educate girls about how they do not have to deny their natural feminine selves, like she once did. She explains that due to the negative images of women in the media, she began to hate being a woman. Making her way through what she describes as a difficult time in her life, and then transitioning into a Christian, is how she was able to appreciate and reclaim her femininity.

The performance and subjectivity of tomboy was clearly something to be avoided at all costs, and each woman articulated how they maneuvered the limiting nature of such a trope. The women I spoke with all implied that they were not tomboys, which led me to ask most if there was something wrong with such an identification. All stated no; that it just was not for them. For instance, Baby T stated, “I wouldn’t say it’s wrong [to be a tomboy], if it suits you it’s fine. As long as you stay in character. Know yourself. So, if you’re gangster, or if you’re happy, it’s still the same thing. As long as you’re you.”

---

105 I believe her decisions to identify as straight cannot be removed from the ever-present homophobia in Kenya, Africa, and globally.
(Baby T). Their acceptance of people who aspire to be tomboys is noteworthy, even as they actively avoided such a term.

It is difficult to see how such a space can provide momentary openings to rethink gender categories. Indeed, there are examples available; Amora’s participation in “Still Strong” and the acknowledgement by men that women face restrictions are both brief instances. The music video “Ulimi,” by Sue Timon and Flamez disrupts mainstream ideas. Above, I explicated the boundaries that women must negotiate and that men maintain. Here I want to consider how transgressive possibilities offer “contingent and oftentimes partial” ways of thinking through subjective agency of gender categories (Cooper 21).106 The lyrics, layout of the music video, and the performance of both artists challenge notions of gender. There are two verses in this song, each sung by one of the artists, and both also rap the chorus. Flamez is a member of Washamba Wenza, from the group described in the introduction to this section. The overall production is good, though the video is composed of a few scenes in a neighborhood setting, making this a low-budget project. “Ulimi” is Kiswahili for “tongue,” which is a biblical reference. The song is generally about how people have the power, through words, to create harm or peace, and they encourage listeners to choose words wisely. The song is slightly imbued with messages of Christianity, though does not sound overtly religious.

Timon states in an interview that the song is directed toward both hip hop artists and politicians because both groups have power to influence people (Ombui). The song

106 Carolyn Cooper, in her discussion of dancehall slack, describes women’s liberation as “contingent and oftentimes partial” (21). I find this useful because she argues that women find openings to interrogate gender and articulate affirmative subjectivities inside of a masculine-driven music practice.
makes one explicit political reference to the post-election violence. This brief mention of the event in Flamez’s second verse makes the song serious.

The setting of the video is in a working class neighborhood, and most of the scenes occur outside next to a series of apartment buildings. One can see flats of a high storied building in the backdrop of the video, where drying clothes are strung outside of windows. Such a scene is common in residential areas of even the upper middle class. The buildings are stained and tattered, and the neighborhood is most likely in a lower or middle class area. The messages the video tries to send are sometimes unclear. For instance, one brief scene presents a young man taking a ring off before chatting and walking with a young white woman, perhaps someone he hopes to have an extra-marital affair with. It is not entirely clear what the purpose is, though it seems that scene is supposed to be about marital dishonesty and infidelity. Flamez appears behind some bars temporarily, evoking the notion that one can feel imprisoned by their words.

Timon’s subjectivity is embodied through her lyrics, her position in the music video, and her bodily performances. Timon presents herself as one of two “protagonists” in the video. I borrow this term from Ronni Armstead’s research on Cuban female rappers Las Krudas, and want to use it to think through Sue Timon’s music (106-117). Pelusa, one of the members of Las Krudas, states that traditional Cuban theater relegates black women to “non-protagonists,” something that she seeks to resist in her own work with theater and rap music (108). Sue Timon’s presentation as a protagonist reconceptualizes the role of women in underground rap. Imani Perry explores this in a description of the female rapper as badwoman. Her example is Lil’ Kim, who through her
raps, “occupies male spaces linguistically” and is also the object of male desire (157). Unlike Lil’ Kim, Timon is not the object of male gazes.\textsuperscript{107} Her role in “Ulimi” is to deliver a direct and personal message to her listeners. She raps in the introductory first verse:

\begin{quote}
Nimepewa kipawa ya kutema mistari kwa hii jamii/
(I’ve been given the talent of spitting lines in this family)

Ulimi ninao ya kujenga kuvunja hii jamii/
(I have the tongue to build and break this family)

Natatha njo kwa usanii; msani unayo isema kwako mziki unaishi ao ni utani/
(I’m calling out on the music industry; musicians are saying that they are making a living from music)

Ulimi ni silaha unafa ukatekate maovu kungine ni dawa unaposha posha, wacha maovu/
(The tongue is a weapon you are supposed to cut down on bad deeds, elsewhere its medicine it relives pain, [it] stops bad deeds). (Flemming)
\end{quote}

She identifies herself as an authority to speak on morality, while imploring people to think about how words can be used to both injure and build.

\textsuperscript{107} Perry states that Lil’ Kim “travels back and fourth in her occupation of traditional female and male spaces” (158). Timon does not do this and is not read along the lines of mainstream femininity.
The camera is centered on her as she raps with the other practitioners positioned behind her moving to her raps affirmatively. In music videos, “women are often presented as vacuous,” notes Perry, “doing nothing but swaying around seductively” (175). This claim on the US industry is also applicable to Kenyan music, as female R&B and Afropop singers are often sing behind men, are unassertive, and are situated in a secondary role in the song. “Often, they avert their eyes from the camera, allowing the viewer to have a voyeuristic relationship to them” (175-176). Timon commands presence, and the other practitioners stand back and look at the camera as if telling the viewers to listen to what she raps. Flamez and the others stand behind her, listening and with focused stances on and toward the camera. This is a common stance in hip hop videos: the artist raps in front of a group of people who stand behind and stare back at the camera. Michael Jefferies describes this as “extras holding their poses as the camera shoots them in what is supposed to be their natural habitat” (65). This communicates a firm message, that the group already knows and endorses what the rapper will say. As they stare into the camera, they implore the audience to listen to the raps seriously. In this way, the artist becomes a spokesperson for the group, articulating what the group already knows to be true. The participants in “Ulimi,” like in “Hustle,” “Still Strong,” and “Kazi Kwa Vijana,” are in a relationship of mutuality with the rappers.

Timon’s bodily stances and performances also contribute to her protagonist position. She takes up space as she raps her lyrics. Her shoulders are squared, and contrary to women being encouraged to yield space to men, she fills up space through her gesturing and assertive postures. As she raps she moves her arms to the pace of her lyrics.
and to the beats of the music. Timon moves both of her arms out in ways that are non-fluid, rigid, and determined. She points to the camera, performing authority and strength. At one point the camera zooms in on her and she puts her forearms up with balled fists pointed upward in a gesture of protection and strength. Timon evokes a protective armor that is also cool and unfazed. Several times she raps, then moves her body back defensively from one side to another, as if anticipating physical blows. This is a common performance for mostly male rappers, and it exudes a sense of strategic armor, that an MC is crafty enough to deliver biting lyrics and maneuver and avoid harm in case such messages are not well received. This particular performance is different than the one I describe of Nafsi’s because she is less playful and more focused on espousing the song’s lyrics. She also does not smile a lot, neither does Flamez, nor the group. The song’s tone is serious, and its lyrics are about how people need to take heed, which automatically places Flamez and Timon in a place of authoritative knowing.

The gendered politics of this video are complex. Far from being an example solely about hip hop’s exclusive or liberatory characteristics, the video exemplifies the knotty practices that help construct notions of gender and sexuality. Male homosociality is both challenged and upheld with Timon’s performance. The video contributes to the notion that hip hop culture is homosocial, made by and for mostly men—as Imani Perry notes, “hip hop is masculine music” (118). Enacting male subjectivity perpetuates notions that MCs must measure up to standards of maleness to navigate hip hop spaces. On the other hand, Timon is not male, and she is never situated in a marginalized position in the video. She exists among others as an equal participant in the rap setting and she does not
acquire her legitimacy through men. Her protagonist position allows some power when
seen next to her supporting crew. Timon’s bodily performances are masculine, which
exude confidence, strength, creativity, and perseverance. Timon is comfortable in this
setting, rapping amongst men, as they perform similar stances and postures. Her ability to
integrate into these male spaces is what helps uphold those spaces and keep hip hop
exclusive. Yet she also disrupts the maleness of the space through her gender
performance by asserting that one does not have to be male to perform notions of
masculinity.

Performing, Considered

This chapter illustrates the construction and meaning of rap music performances,
and how artists enact agency. The performative styles taken up in hip hop spaces
illustrate a post-Mau Mau underground cultural aesthetic. Most artists deviate from the
explicit revolutionary images and representations of Mau Mau that UFMM has used,
while still utilizing the approaches of resistance to craft new styles to engage with power
and create artistic expressions. A turn away from obvious Mau Mau iconography and
themes, far from it straying from an underground aesthetic, opens up other possibilities of
subversion and resistance. The role of ludicity in underground hip hop is powerful in that
it presents multiple ideas. Ludic performances occur alongside politicized messages, and
can be a temperate method of delivering a forceful social critique. Ludicity serves a
release from the constraints people endure daily, whether economic, from the state, or otherwise. Lastly, ludic bodily enactments reveal the creativity of artists, their ability to not always be serious, and the pleasure inherently present in hip hop. Corporeal enactments of enjoyment tell us about how artists search out and play with boundaries in ways that are affectively pleasing. They hold transnational indecipherable elements of performance that constantly dodge pressures to normalize. The notion that bodily performances do not have to be logically coherent is equally a powerful intervention. Often that is a side effect of the performance; it is not always the intention. The intention of hip hop’s transnationality is to cite a global imagined hip hop community, one that affords legitimacy, respect, and commonality.

Gendered performances reveal a great deal about underground hip hop spaces. Men rely on the masculization of hip hop spaces, which depend on Mau Mau male-centered narratives, social norms that privilege men, and the constitution of maleness already present in global hip hop cultures. Men expect that rap culture will be first and foremost for them, which helps to reclaim status when they are often victims of class-based obstacles, including obtaining opportunities for their music careers. Women, too, depend on a post-Mau Mau resistance politic as the basis of their interactions. A shift away from the Mau Mau rhetoric that inevitably carries with it masculine tropes, and toward a more general form of subversion, has allowed women to create music that can speak to their sensibilities as agents. They not only take advantage of this shift, they help to shape it. It is all too easy to regard hip hop as the site of perpetuating male power, and it is much more difficult to notice the openings it allows. Sue Timon and Flamez’s video
allows both artists to be equal protagonists, despite the sexism present in rap culture, and Kenya at large. This means that Flamez’s performance of masculinity involves conceding space to a woman whose non-normative gender enactments provoke questions about her sexuality. Moreover, Timon’s participation in some ways reinforces gender constructions, and in others allows her to perform a type of equality that hip hop often celebrates.

Mwenda Ntarangwi states of Kenyan hip hop:

> What these hip hop artistes do is try to reorder the existing gender normative values without changing the existing structures that define them all together. To better understand women’s and men’s perceptions and performances of gender through hip hop, we take into account not their ability to transcend normative gender markers but the meanings that are attributed to each gender. (51)

Timon and Flamez’s subject position challenges gender, even when such occurrences are ephemeral and inconstant. Timon’s staunch position against homosexuality and the armored performances of masculinity Flamez uses in “Shupavu” further illustrate this point—that the hip hop’s ability to challenge coincides with its characteristics of imperfection and inconsistency.
Chapter 6: Conclusion

This project explores how underground Nairobi hip hop style that is taken up through the body responds to social, political, and economic conditions. These performances reveal how hip hop is one more example of transnational and transcontinental flow of African diasporic expressions. Hip hop performances are connected to cultural anxieties over what constitutes authentic Kenyan expressions because it is through the body that rappers express their subjectivities. Enacted creative bodily gestures are neither wholly informed by social conditions, nor entirely independent of these contexts. Subjectivity that is felt and experienced through the body, and exercised in poses, gestures, and dance moves do different types of work than the lyrics that artists craft. Hip hop performances, as responses to and productions of material realities and social anxieties reveal local knowledge production—that is, how artists fashion their methods of expression. Moreover, underground practitioners use poses to boldly assert their own subjectivity as artists; a post-Mau Mau aesthetic is creative, innovative, and purposeful, even if such articulations are at times contradictory and problematic.

The rappers who engage in the post-Mau Mau underground cultural aesthetic face challenges toward creating a financially stable career that will enable them to produce music more easily and earn money from their craft. Artists struggle to get performance venues, cannot sell CDs in stalls, do not have access to good production resources, and
rarely are heard on the radio. New popular forms of Kenyan music dominate airwaves (along with American music), which continue to push hard core rap to the margins. It seems that only a small, dedicated following want to listen to underground rap. Without a fan base to support them economically, even if it is only through performances, it seems that this music goes largely unappreciated.

These practitioners, like their predecessors, believe their music fundamentally addresses deep social issues, and according to them if they only had opportunities they could market their music commercially. Only the dedicated practitioners and fans (who mostly are artists or aspiring rappers) appreciate the raw, harsh sounds loaded with lyrical depth. What sounds good and what sells is commercial Afropop, which is aesthetically appealing, danceable, and music that is uniquely Kenyan. Underground artists of the early 2000s fought to craft a youth music that would reflect Kenyan specificities, but now such music exists in commercial spaces. This means that underground rap’s claim to “authentic Kenyan” elements completes with more palatable genres, which also lay claim to Kenyaness. Underground practitioners, therefore, are left to re-strategize their musical choices, which undoubtedly includes compromises.

This study gives some nuanced narratives to underground rap. Far from it being the perfect site of resistance, it is a flawed and contentious space, composed of some troubling tendencies. It is true, that artists like Nafsi Huru, Lness, Judge, Sue Timon, and others, continue the socially conscious and revolutionary traditions in different ways. Post-Mau Mau rappers may want social change, but they also adhere to a neoliberal logic of self-discipline and personal betterment, sometimes I think, at the expense of critiques
of political and economic structures that set people up to be disenfranchised.

Underground music continues to be made by and for men. The women who use the spirit of post-Mau Mau critical interrogations to make music do so in spite of the male composition of the space. The heteronormative masculinization of the space means it holds limiting and sexist notions of women, and mostly pejorative views of queer peoples.

This research and fieldwork opens up large questions that I could not address in this dissertation. There are critical questions that emerged as I executed this project. The first concerns the issue of gender. One of my conclusions notes that the shift away from explicit Mau Mau masculine rhetoric in hip hop allows women practitioners to challenge normative conceptions of gender. What additionally should be explored is the ways that these women perhaps draw from the historic traditions of Kenyan women who have engaged in political activism. If rappers draw from the remembered legacies of the Mau Mau, there perhaps might be other inspirations for female rappers. Grace Musila notes, “Despite the overwhelming male-dominated structure of state power, Kenyan women have a long history of contestation; a history that stretches back to the anti-colonial struggles of legendary women such as the Giriama leader, Mekatilili wa Menza and women Mau Mau combatants” (52). Exploring these influences may allow us to further reconceptualize the work that women rappers do as feminist interrogations of power.

I cover notions of gender, while only scantly covering sexuality. The men of underground rap believe that women should play a role in the culture. These seem like positive aspects in a social context increasingly marked by intolerances of non-normative
sexual identities. However, men maintain the masculinization of the space, and therefore, women’s participation should not modify the configuration of underground rap. Most female practitioners and a few men I interviewed express openness to LGBT folks in rap spaces, though homophobia is present and much more the norm than an exception. Outside of hip hop, non-normative sexuality and gender subjectivities are constantly under attack. As I write this conclusion, the Ugandan government has enacted a draconian controversial anti-homosexuality law, which undoubtedly continues to spark conversation in Kenya. The precedent this law creates is pernicious and potentially far-reaching. Conversations over anti-gay laws continue to emerge in the Kenyan parliament (McGregor). These public conversations contribute to the already hostile environment that LGBTQs encounter in Kenya and throughout Africa.

Moreover, the Ugandan law creates a setting where the state can police people’s everyday actions; for example, one can be arrested if s/he knows someone who is queer and does not report them to authorities. This is the enforcement of a commonplace policing of people, something that is already a huge concern in Kenya. Activists and others have already begun to complain about the surveillance mechanisms and the limits on free speech of Uhuru Kenyatta and William Ruto’s government. Policing, surveillance, and enforced norms are all elements of state power that hip hop seeks to confront and resist. Artists use embodied performances, along with the music and lyrics, to defy dominant ideals artistically and strategically. Hip hop is already a cultural site that embodies contradictions, and given the changing precedents and the culture of policing emerging, it may continue doing what it does now: draw from the heteronormalization of
space, while fervently resisting a society victim to harmful policing. Ultimately, time will tell how the underground hip hop scene will grapple with these new forms of state power.

A post-Mau Mau cultural aesthetic has the potential to introduce new ideas of ethnicity. In as much as hip hop’s negotiation of blackness is performed, so too is ethnicity. A longer fieldwork project is needed with extensive time in hip hop spaces to consider how performances of ethnicity confer in underground rap. Ethnic difference and identity are key markers of individual subjectivity and constructions of power. In the introduction to this project, I quoted Amora who stated that hip hop does not care what ethnicity one comes from. This may be true in some ways, but we should consider how dominant notions of ethnicity materialize in hip hop settings, as they would in other spaces.

Mau Mau references complicate the performances of ethnicity in rap music culture. The Mau Mau was a predominant Kikuyu movement, even though exceptions abound. People from other ethnicities, including Kamba, Luhya, Luo, and Maasai, played important roles in the war, and both public discourse and scholarship give such accounts insufficient attention. Moreover, Evan Mwangi notes, “Although strategically using Mau Mau as a purely Kikuyu movement to shut out other Kenyan communities from power, Kikuyu leaders who occupied positions of power after independence did not accept the radical agenda of the Mau Mau” (“Incomplete” 91). The privileging of Kikuyu references and culture are common in Kenya.

State discourses continually measure political viability using ethnicized forms of

---

108 See Myles Osborne’s work, “The Kamba and the Mau Mau.”
masculinity. In another project, I consider how the television program, XYZ Show, relies on the discourses of circumcision and ethnicity perpetuated by state leaders (Peck “Buttressing”). Specifically, normative masculinity can often be defined through ethnic difference, such as in the public conversations about the inherent capabilities of Kikuyu men, who are traditionally circumcised, and Luo men, who are not. During the 2008 chaos, Kikuyu men forcibly circumcised Luo men because ethnicity, circumcision, and political aptitude converged during this crisis (“Kenya Plea”). The post-election violence is a tragic example of how ethnicity comes to matter in public spaces and events, and it furthermore highlights the notion that ethnicity is performed. This opens up a huge question, what does the everyday performance of ethnicity look like? Moreover, how does ethnic difference, alliances, and conflict concretize in hip hop settings?

Underground Nairobi rap culture is multifaceted, and the performances that practitioners craft are the embodiment of an imperfect aesthetic practice of resistance. Such embodied emergences do not fit together seamlessly; some challenge boundaries, others reinforce exclusion, both unintentionally and purposefully. They all, though, are in conversation with the equally variegated and complex political, social, and economic realities that hip hop practitioners encounter daily. Christopher Small states that musicking is “gesture based” and therefore “can deal with many concerns, even apparently contradictory ones, all at the same time, while words can deal with matters only one at a time” (184). Nairobi hip hop, as a performance-based set of practices, deals with society’s constructions and contradictions by articulating a method of investigation. Styled performances are cool, shifty, and creative, as well as exclusive, confrontational,
and intentional. These elements compose the methodological rigor of hip hop culture.
Works Cited


Baraka, Amiri. *Blues People: Negro Music in White America.* New York: W. Morrow,


Gecau, Kimani. “History, the Arts and the Problem of National Identity in Kenya.” 


Hofmeyr, Isabel, Joyce Nyairo, and James Ogude. "Specificities: 'Who can Bwogo Me?"


Mwangi, Peter. “Silencing Music Expression in Colonial and Post-Colonial Kenya.”


Nyairo, Joyce. “’Zilizopendwa’: Kayamba Afrika's Use of Cover Versions, Remix and


Okal, J, MF Chersich, S Tsui, E Sutherland, M Temmerman, and S Luchters. "Sexual and Physical Violence against Female Sex Workers in Kenya: a Qualitative Enquiry."


Okande, Austine and Mkala Mwangesha. “Artistes Royalties ‘to Shoot Up Soon.’”


Okumu, Caleb C. "Conceptualising African Popular Music: a Kenyan Experiment."


Okumu, Caleb C. “Reclaiming Kenya’s Popular Music: A Solution to a Dilemma.”


Otieno, Brian. “Pubs Body Seeks Direction from Copyright Board.” _Nairobi Star_.


Stolzoff, Norman C. *Wake the Town & Tell the People: Dancehall Culture in Jamaica.*


Interviews:

Agano. Personal Interview. 10 December 2011.

Amora. Personal Interview. 20 November 2012.

Baby T. Personal Interview. 20 November 2012.

Decence. Personal Interview. 10 December 2011.

Evaredi. Personal Interview. 20 November 2012.
Ibbs. Personal Interview. 10 December 2011.
Jagero, Mick. Personal Interview. 18 November 2012.
Judge. Personal Interview. 16 November 2012.
Karpchizzy. Personal Interview. 10 December 2011.
Lnness. Personal Interview. 20 November 2012.
Ndiba, Moses. Personal Interview. 11 September 2012.
Ndugus. Personal Interview. 10 December 2011.
Sheria. Personal Interview. 10 December 2011.
Snooker. Personal Interview. 10 December 2011.
Timon, Sue. Personal Interview. 20 November 2012.
Washika, Adrian. Personal Interview. 15 September 2012.