

Introduction

2-5-Flow!

An artist excitedly moves onto a stage with the mic in their hand, taking a deep, steadying breath. As the sound emerges, they look to the crowd and bob their head, first slightly and rhythmically up and down, then back and forth, using their shoulders to frame the gesture. The beat drops. They look toward the horizon of the crowd, clutch the mic, and deliver their rap bars, stretching words into rhymes. Their body is a knowledgeable vessel of the culture, enlivened and energetic but always composed. Sonic arrangements of the song structure the syllabic emphases of the lyrics. Every time the artist reaches a verbal climactic point, their momentum surges. They move back and forth, toward and away from the crowd, and movements mix intentionally cadenced motions and dances. Audience members participate by bobbing, swaying, shouting, pointing toward the stage, and rapping to the lyrics, all responding to how the rapper's performance engages with the encompassing sonic energies. The rapper receives the arena's abundant verve and experiences the euphoria of embodied sonic pleasure.

This is just one description of hip hop flow: the various performance practices of rappers and other practitioners of the music. The flow of an artist includes how they gesture as they spit rhymes and how their rapping and movements work with and give energy to song beats. These embodiments not only interact with the immediate surroundings of the stage, the music video, and the cypher; they also contribute to societal and global conversations about power and social difference. I use several key terms in this book to consider the cultural and sociopolitical significance of hip hop corporeality: *ludicity*, *political seriousness*, *orature*, *diasporic blackness*, *cultural anxieties*, and *sound*. I focus on the specific performative embodiments of flow in Nairobi, Kenya, and contend that

rappers' use of these themes indicates the complex processes by which the music becomes Kenyan.

"2-5-Flow!" Whenever we hear rappers, announcers, DJs, and party planners shout "2-5-Flow!" we are listening to Kenyan rap music. The partly hackneyed, partly celebrated term plays off +254, Kenya's country code. Artists reference it in lyrics or create songs with that title, using the term to form a musical community while asserting themselves as primary contributors to how Kenyan hip hop has materialized. "2-5-Flow" inspires the book title and harkens to the major explorations within these pages—how the embodied, the performative, and the sonic converge, while also underscoring the relationship that the music has with conceptions of the global and local. If Kenya's country code marks its geopolitical boundaries, it also locates the country within a global sphere because those who have left and call into Kenya must use the code. Therefore, flow in Nairobi speaks to local specificities as much as it gestures toward how Kenyan hip hop participates in an imagined global rap culture. Although many Nairobi artists lack ongoing radio and television airplay, they find methods to disseminate their product and take part in the music's global rhythms. They contribute to rap culture not only sonically and lyrically but also through the embodiments of performative flow, and together, these practices develop a critical interrogation about race, diaspora, gender, nationality, postcoloniality, and the city space of Nairobi.

I emphasize the critical significance of examining the misunderstood and passed-over beauty of underground embodiments, which, for me, is described in Tavia Nyong'o's offer, "afro-philosophy, the love of black wisdom on the lower frequencies."¹ Instead of focusing on the purely linguistic or sonic, this book considers those elements by placing the artistic, disaffected, cool, styled, embodied performance practices at the conceptual center and as a method of enriching our understanding of sound and lyrics. As opposed to concluding that the gestures and stances are external imitations of Black Americanness, something always already foreign, and the linguistic as the home of the innovative and local, I gather the embodied, the lyrical, the visual, and the aural together as one comprehensive collection of practices and consider the complicated and innovative projects of Nairobi artists. In so doing, we can understand performances as interfacing with the modalities of resistance within traditions of Kenyan music, as well as within an imagined global hip hop diaspora.

WHAT IS NAIROBI UNDERGROUND HIP HOP?

While "2-5-Flow!" references any form of Kenyan hip hop, I focus on the non-commercial underground hip hop found in Nairobi scenes. Like most forms of underground sounds worldwide, this Nairobi music is attentive to the poor and marginalized and focused on raising the consciousness of disenfranchised people. It is mainly resistant to mainstream music standards and broader social norms. Artists tell stories from some of Nairobi's most well-known neighborhoods, such



FIGURE 1. Graffiti art in Nairobi, 2012. Photo by author.



FIGURE 2. Graffiti art in Nairobi, 2012. Photo by author.

as Dandora, Kibera, Githurai, Ngara, Jericho, and Ziwani. The music has certain core themes. It holds a defiant position against both the media entities that exclude them and the continuously corrupt state. Underground music also has a complicated perspective of other modalities of power in Kenya, such as capitalism and the churches and NGOs that periodically host their events. These compromises

are not always foreclosures but rather the music's contradictions. Listening to the archives of this underground and noncommercial rapscape, one can hear the tensions, the hustle, the cacophonous, the symphonic.

In the Nairobi underground, many rappers construct diasporic meeting points by using a Mau Mau cultural aesthetic, a class-based consciousness and artistic method of marginality that has roots in how they remember the anticolonial Mau Mau war. Mbũgua wa Mũngai 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."² The legacy of artists drawing on Kenya's well-known freedom struggle has allowed them to imagine themselves participating in the global traditions of the music that take up the political struggle for African and Black liberation. Hip hop in Kenya rose to fame with Kalamashaka's 1998 hit single, "Tafsiri Hii." Kalamashaka and the groundbreaking Ukoo Flani Mau Mau made a compilation of music that set the stage for underground culture. Dandora, the poor Nairobi area of Eastlands, has been the most mentioned place and is a continual reference point in these songs.³ It is arguably the birthplace of Kenyan rap culture. Ukoo Flani Mau Mau is best known for their 2004 album *Kilio cha Haki* (A Cry for Justice), which was inspired by the Ali Mazrui play of the same name about political corruption and social change. Their constant evocation of the Mau Mau is less about the actual events of the armed conflict and more about how rappers remember and draw on the army and its revolutionary themes.

Many of the artists I follow were once a part of UFMM, having friends or mentors from the group. In the last fifteen years, direct references to the Mau Mau have faded, transitioning into generalized themes of war, warriors, fighting, struggle, underclass marginality, poverty, political repression, and state corruption. Keeping with the traditions of global hip hop sentiment and Kenyan rap, these artists have continued to imagine their work as socially and individually transformative. Each rapper defines this characteristic differently; some artists believe that gospel rap is suitable to make interventions about social change, while others make hardcore music rooted in ghetto life. There is a deep component of cultural nationalism, meaning that rappers feel that culture is the joining fixture in Kenyans' lives that can unite people, erase divisions, and (re)constitute the nation. Artists use cultural nationalism to show allegiance to Kenya as they consider how their work challenges mainstream nationalism, resists the state, and holds committed ties to transnational rap culture.

Rapper L-Ness comes out of UFMM and is from a family of musicians, namely the acoustic guitarist Peter Akwabi, who is her father. She has made music for over fifteen years, and on *Kilio cha Haki* she had the song "Msanii" (Artist). She took the name L-Ness after the mighty animal, "lioness," and she builds on that name with quick and fierce lyrical deliveries. L-Ness released *Gal Power* in 2012,

a collaborative album with other African and Kenyan women artists like Nazizi and Xtatic. L-Ness remains involved with various projects, including the Babishai Poetry Festival in Uganda, Nairobi's StoryMoja Festival, and the Nairobi-Berlin initiative SPOKEN WOR:L:DS Project.

Many artists come from working-class areas in Nairobi. Evaredi hails from Embakasi, Sue Timon is from Ngara, and Judge is from Dandora and grew up in Ziwani, all of which are lower- and working-class areas of Nairobi. When I first met Sue, she was making gospel music, and about a year after meeting her, she joined the queer group I Am, recorded music, and continued to perform at Sarakasi with the group for a short time. Judge made his start with his brother, Mo Phat, in their group, Black Duo. He has also worked on solo projects, and ones with Washamba Wenza, hosting and performing at numerous events, like Hip Hop Fest at Sarakasi Dome. Rapper Nafsi Huru, meaning "free soul," moved to Nairobi as a young adult and hailed initially from Magongo, a poor neighborhood in Mombasa. His name has become central to his brand, and he often wears T-shirts bearing Nafsi Huru or the English translation. As a teen, he formed the rap group Skali Flani before moving to Nairobi. He has hosted the Hip Hop Hookup at the Sarakasi Dome and has performed with Juma Tutu and the Swahili Jazz Band for many years. Nafsi fuses hip hop with jazz music and reggae influences because, as he regularly states, he is influenced by the genres of global Black music.

Most underground rappers often imagine their work as fundamentally dissimilar to mainstream music through sound and content. They believe that their music is exceptional because of its commitment to socially meaningful messaging without regard to whether it appeals to a mainstream sound. Practitioners often attempt to be unconcerned with fulfilling the commercial appetites of listeners, and they regard themselves as cultural stewards of society who are unfazed by obstacles and determined to make music that benefits Kenyan society. As Anthony Kwame Harrison describes, underground music "[works] to secure and sustain distinctions between their music/culture and its commercial counterpart."⁴ The majority of radio airplay goes to American and British hip hop and pop, Nigerian Afrobeats, Afropop from East Africa, and mainstream Kenyan rap that draws influences from many of the above-mentioned genres. Underground and noncommercial artists often feel sidelined by the privileging of genres with smooth sounds, danceable beats, and palatable lyrics. Many consider music that is too watered down and too much about carefree celebration and leisurely fun as lacking substance, relevance, and value. Noncommercial rap often "sounds" underground, with hard bass-infused beats that fit with usually fast-paced lyrics. Sonically, the kick drum accompanies instruments like the horn, piano, guitar, or saxophone, which are typically produced technologically. These sounds evoke solemn, uplifting, persevering, and gritty tones and are critical to the underground ethic. For rappers true to this game, these lyrics cannot

be empty of meaning, and they must affirm the author's presence as an MC and articulate some investment in social change.

To compare, Afropop is a synthesized electronic dance music that can incorporate rap, Congolese dance and music, South African house, and Jamaican dancehall. Afropop is similar to West African Afrobeats. Within Kenya, Afropop music is sometimes called *kapuka* or *boomba* music. *Kapuka* "is specifically known for its repeated beats and lyrics meant to enhance the song's draw for dancing [and] many sounds in *kapuka* are generated from existing computer tunes."⁵ Often contrasted with *kapuka*, *genge* and *gengetone* rely on rap more heavily and borrow from dancehall and synthesized East African Afropop.⁶ *Genge* artists tend to rap more in their songs, while *kapuka* artists tend to sing. While many may distinguish between *kapuka/boomba* and *genge* music, underground artists do not. Mostly, they view mainstream music as valueless and empty, fleecing the best elements of hip hop to make it marketable to a broad audience of people who would not generally like hardcore rap music. Conversely, many commercial artists believe underground sounds are not danceable or upbeat and are too controversial to be sold in stores and played on the radio.⁷ Despite these divisions, some artists straddle the underground and mainstream. I profile Baby T, who did a remix collaboration with mainstream artist Octopizzo (also featuring Rabbit, Collo, Frasha, and J'Mani) on his song "Bila Mic" (Without the Mic). Her notable songs have since included "Utanitii" (You Will Obey Me), "Dandiwa" (Jumped On) and "Bado" (Not Yet), many of which have appeared on television and radio. Additionally, she teamed up with L-Ness and other women artists on the noncommercial song "Looking Up," which I analyze in chapter 2.

HIP HOP AS ORATURE

Hip hop is best analyzed using the African term orature. Capturing political potency and ludic energies, orature describes how the music is a collection of sonic elements, corporealities, and verbal dexterity that work together to formulate a holistic performance practice. I use orature to advocate for a turn away from an overly heavy focus on lyrical analysis to illuminate how artists indigenize the music. In much of global hip hop studies (usually defined as non-U.S. hip hop studies), there has been an emphasis on highlighting the contributions of non-U.S. artists and the various methods employed to make the music local through lyrical content and language practices, from which the field of global hip hop literacies has made significant interventions.⁸ I proffer an examination of the performative elements of orature to consider the profound insight that might be missed in a linguistic-heavy evaluation. Relying on performance as a frame of reference, I insist that we use embodied performance practices as a contextual center to understand artists' interventions. The now well-cited term orature was first put forth by Ugandan literary theorist Pio Zirimu, followed by Kenyan playwright, author, and

theorist Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o.⁹ Ngũgĩ argues that in African contexts, written European forms of literature were imported, but that does not mean literature itself is foreign. There have been other types of literature in Africa, especially those focusing on orality and performance. Orature describes how Africana performances often have elements of song, literature, music, and dance. Thus, in African cultures throughout the globe, the boundaries between literature (which can be oral) and dance and movement (which can tell stories) are often fluid.

Therefore, studying the music through the lens of orature means that we must consider how embodied performances interact with the speech-act of rapping. Rather than study lyrics on their own, using orature we need to consider how lyrics are best analyzed in relation to elements of the cultural, the political, the sonic, the technological, and the embodied. The Kenyan feminist writer Mĩcere Mũgo writes, "African orature is an art form that uses languages to create artistic verbal compositions. The verbal art culminates in dramatized utterance, oration, recitation and performance."¹⁰ Hip hop draws from and continues the long traditions of how people used orature to confront and subvert domination, particularly among the landless poor and working class. Both Ngũgĩ and Mũgo note how the oppressed have found orature fundamental to self-determination and political struggle during and after colonial rule. Ngũgĩ writes:

[African] languages were kept alive in the daily speech, in the ceremonies, in political struggles, above all in the rich store of orature—proverbs, stories, poems, and riddles. The peasantry and the urban working class threw up singers. These sang old songs or composed new experiences in industries and urban life and in working-class struggle and organizations.¹¹

Mũgo builds on this idea. She asserts that *mapinduzi* orature (revolutionary orature) occurs in everyday African spaces like farms, factories, and *matatus* (public transportation), as well as in slave narratives, political movements, and protests.¹² Like the forms that Mũgo and Ngũgĩ mention, the orature of rap music draws on the lived experiences of lower-class folks to produce meaning-making about practitioners' lives.

Rapping is an example of orature. Embodied performance, storytelling, interactions with sonic characteristics, social theories, and world-making ideas are all present. While the lyrics matter, it is how one articulates their words, what they put emphasis on, how their verbalities meld and interact with sound, and how those embodied emphases resonate with fans and other artists. Just as lyrics articulate culture, so too do embodiments, and at the center of orature is the performing body conveying knowledge and producing notions of agency. Thomas DeFrantz's elaboration of Black social dance as "corporeal orature" draws from Ngũgĩ and others. He argues that simply spectating Black dance is insufficient; one must participate in understanding the philosophies produced within bodily movement.¹³ Rappers, producers, and musicians can help set the parameters for

flow. The types of flows may differ depending on skill, experience, and embeddedness in the culture, yet flow itself is an embodied performance in which all devotees can participate. If rappers can create flow, so too can the crew in a music video, the audience members at a concert, and the fans listening with headphones in public transportation. These shared cultural practices do not mean that everyone who is a hip hop head can rap, but there is a democratizing force to the culture where all are invited in, even in its most competitive moments.

This embodied knowledge is in the form of performances of slickness, coolness, defiance, and subversion. Rappers enact what Robert Farris Thompson defines as African cool, the embodiment of “control, stability, and composure,” and what Katrina Hazzard-Donald calls a “hip hop persona,” which “emphasizes . . . postures of self-assurance in the face of unbeatable odds.”¹⁴ For her, “hip hop dance possesses an air of defiance of authority and mainstream society.”¹⁵ Including diasporic frameworks like Thompson’s and U.S. Black performance theorists like Hazzard-Donald and DeFrantz points toward one of the central themes that runs throughout this book—that the orature in Nairobi is also always a diasporic project drawing on the embodiedness of U.S. blackness. Sometimes, the presence of U.S. Black performance citations is explicit and upfront; other times, it is simply a trace or specter. In whatever way it appears, Nairobi rappers pull on and draw from U.S. styles as part of their music-making processes of orature. These subtle performative and lyrical tributes are found throughout the music. Hence, the orature of Kenyan rap uses a collection of signifiers of diaspora and blackness to reference and discuss the contexts of their local sociopolitical conditions.

Hip hop orature combines embodiment and vocalities, like rapping and ad-libbing, in conversation with sounds from synthesizers, computers, sound systems, and musical instruments. Among the bass and snare, piano and violin motifs, and horn sounds often created with computer production, it is not uncommon to see a freestyler spitting rhymes to the sounds of an acoustic guitar. Encountering a musician strumming next to a rapper’s lyrical rhymes and in the absence of the expected bass of the kick drum might sound clumsy to an outsider’s ear, but what we should hear is the union of Afrodiasporic poetic forms given the guitar’s long presence in Kenya, which I discuss in following chapters. Moreover, as Julian Henriques offers, it is through practitioners’ performative interventions, like DJing and production, that technologies put forward musical sounds.¹⁶ The subjectivity of artists as rappers is understood through their relationships with the sonic, precisely how the sonic undergoes racialized, gendered, classed, and nationalized significations.¹⁷ Even those who spit in a cypher or freestyle without recording devices rely on their familiarity with sonic technologies to structure lyrics.

Nairobi hip hop additionally has transnational characteristics because of how sound technologies have been racialized globally. African and Black people’s perceived relationships to instruments and other technologies have long been used to define desire and taste. European interest in twentieth-century African bands

was steeped in the notion of what supposedly primitive subjects do with musical technologies coded as white and modern, similar to what Jeremy Lane names in the context of jazz as the “seductive affective force” of the “techno-primitive hybrid.”¹⁸ Nairobi rappers are just one more group that participates in forming what Alexander Weheliye calls “technosonic blackness.” In the oft-cited *Phonographies: Grooves in Sonic Afro-Modernity*, Weheliye argues that the Black subject has been constructed from notions of modernity and sound through their conflicted relations with technologies, specifically the phonograph as a sonic machine.¹⁹ Hip hop is another contemporary example of how racial codes are imbued within ideas of music and sound. Nairobi rappers’ use of music-making machines structured by globalized blackness, in turn, informs how the embodied performance practices of rap culture materialize.

THE POLITICAL AND THE LUDIC

Nairobi underground orature comprises two dominating themes, the political and the ludic. The political or political seriousness describes how the music takes on earnest themes and embeds itself into the social fabric of society, critiquing social inequalities and the ineptitudes of the state. I use the term political seriousness to describe the recurring theme of earnestness that I encountered in my fieldwork, such as this statement from DJ Mos:

Hip hop basically is like a culture. . . . It’s something serious, 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.²⁰

After a few conversations like this, it became difficult to ignore how artists demanded recognition in contexts where nondevotees write off the music. DJ Mos’s comments align with Maina wa Mutonya’s concerns about how the political tonalities within Kenyan genres are stitched into the banality of life. Mutonya writes: “Music does not reside in music texts themselves but in their articulation with society. The articulation then encapsulates the politics of everyday life.”²¹ In the sonic characteristics of the music, political seriousness is solemnity and melancholy, and even when perseverance is present, it can sound like lost hope. Just like these sounds pierce and intrude, so too do the lyrics.

Artists use political seriousness to demand recognition. Their sacrifices to make music often yield little profit, a fact they believe elevates them to cultural ambassadors who have and should have more legitimacy than mainstream musicians and corrupt political elites. Also, the earnestness is a rejoinder to the quandaries of postcoloniality, the harsh conditions that helped birth hip hop, the commonalities found among Black, African, and other oppressed peoples, and the anxieties that surround the music in the calls for cultural independence and Kenyan pride. Practitioners combat the long-standing and widespread claim that rap

is antithetical to Kenya or Africa by creating a counterdiscourse that only authentic artists who love hip hop and Kenya can craft music with devotion and seriousness. Artists spend much time proving to themselves, fans, and others that their music is a serious diasporic and Pan-African style that locally takes on Kenyan social issues, which works to stave off the reduction of Kenyan rap to mimicry. They respond to cultural anxieties in several ways: by representing their neighborhoods through music videos and lyrics, by rapping about Kenyan social issues, and by policing sounds determined to be excessively commercialized and thus judged as inauthentic to Kenyan culture. Artists also rap in Sheng, which is a regularly shifting language tied to urban areas and considered a youth-originated vernacular, with a linguistic base in Swahili that also incorporates English, Arabic, and other Kenyan languages.²²

Political seriousness in Nairobi underground rap has at least four characteristics: its compromises with neoliberalism, a resistance to the state, a notion of a politicized hip hop love, and a commitment to masculinized rap spaces. Rappers also sometimes use Christian themes and gospel to frame their music as socially useful and significant. Like many other iterations, Nairobi's version holds a deep contradiction: it is dedicated to social change while simultaneously espousing problematic alliances. Underground rap resists some elements of capitalism, like music standardization and commercialization, by arguing that their music eschews mainstream success and only seeks to benefit disenfranchised communities. However, rap's commitment to neoliberal principles promotes personal self-discipline, especially as it rejects the state as a corrupt body. Underground artists' tendency to rap about economic achievement as a measure of human worth is a component of political seriousness. This notion of personal encouragement to become a thriving economic actor is how artists express agency. Political love, which is the notion that the love of and dedication to hip hop is innate, powerful, and the source of rappers' creativity, also serves to argue that they are authentic artists who do not imitate. Similarly, the masculinization of underground music is seen as beneficial and purposeful because it is so intensely entwined with a broader practice of romanticizing Mau Mau histories. Artists create and further notions of cismen as warriors and fighters, directly drawing on the anticolonial conflict. Rappers have departed from the more explicit references to the war but find meaning in a generalized "Mau Mau consciousness."²³ The impacts of the war's shaping of national imaginaries and popular cultures, including hip hop, cannot be understated. This conflict was a distinctly Kenyan event. It thus signifies Kenya, and the ways that artists draw from it have long assisted them in claiming that their music is specific to the country. The cultural themes started under UFMM, such as political seriousness, social justice, and even exclusive masculinities, are primary ways for their rap to be seen as uniquely and legitimately Kenyan.

This book not only details political seriousness but also discusses the conditions to which political seriousness responds. Mbũgua wa Mũngai notes that young

people have encountered anxieties about poverty, lack of jobs, and social uncertainty and use music to “[encode] their politics in a mode that transgresses mainstream tastes” and “perform the tensions between the mainstream’s traditional worldview and their own sense of dissatisfaction with it.”²⁴ Although rappers resist the status quo, as Mũngai writes, they equally concern themselves with hip hop’s validity, insisting that the genre should be considered within the catalogs of the country’s music. To add to Mũngai, hip hop and its political seriousness respond to long-held anxieties around music regarded as non-Kenyan. The music situates itself within the ongoing apprehensions about influxes of external music, both historic and contemporary, steeped within societal conditions of a rigid industry and a continuously iniquitous state. Kenyan rap is caught between two political truths: first, its participation as a part of the long tradition of music resistance in the country, and second, its residence within an environment that has always hosted non-Kenyan sounds. This complication creates tension about where to locate the music as an often-regarded outside genre that is politically dissident and one that rappers have innovatively made locally relevant. Within this conundrum, artists use the theme of political seriousness as an indigenizing thrust meant to confront, disrupt, and quell cultural anxieties that continue to hover around the music.

Ludicity is the dominant characteristic found especially in bodily expressiveness that, like political seriousness, confers knowledge about the world. A steady focus on embodied performance practices, which can be improvisational, unconscious, or rehearsed, opens a textural component of rap culture often overlooked. I pinpoint the playful as a dominant characteristic in the culture and as a way to think about how artists divest from, buck, dodge, and dance around discourses and structural conditions of power, allowing them space, reprieve, and joy to continue their political engagements. Victor Turner writes that the ludic “arises from excess energy,” which is the substance of possibility, and a “part of that surplus fabricates ludic critiques of presentness, of the status quo, undermining it by parody, satire, irony, slapstick.”²⁵ In hip hop, the ludic attempts to erode the grip that power has over people’s lives by sculpting something different, even if it is strung or connected to the norms rappers try to elude. Lindon Barrett designates such efforts, particularly through the Black singing voice, as “sly alterity.” Barrett writes that amid enslavement, dispossession, and torture, African Americans have drawn on Africanist cultural impulses that center and celebrate that which has been stolen. Moreover, in contexts in which written literacy conveys a false primacy of knowledge, he asserts that Black sonic vocality narrativizes and theorizes about people’s lives.²⁶ Ludicity also holds a creative intangibility, what Édouard Glissant defines as opacity. Glissant theorizes that opacity is an otheredness that is potentially undefinable, an alterity that holds the possibilities of multiple meanings and interpretations, and a “density” that occurs over “duration.”²⁷ Through divestment, untranslatability, and a clever dodging, hip hop play becomes a political alternative articulating the expansive possibilities in the music.

Embodied creativities are subversive, often indecipherable, gendered, and diasporic. Artists of all genders seize an armor that is working class, largely ableist, and masculinist, which is fraught with exclusive registers that purport that all are “let in” to a space created and maintained by cisgender men. As part of a movement-centered Black transnationality, performances are one of the primary ways that the music culture is imagined and constituted as diasporic by its practitioners. In Kenyan rap, the ludic performances move back and forth, flirting with power and freedom. A single performance can articulate transgressive anti-establishment sentiments through deployments of a body that rely on the privilege of physical able-bodiedness and masculinity. This duality reveals one way that the relationship between the political and the ludic is complex and neither wholly subversive nor explicitly compliant. In Kenyan rap, lyrics and music are often intensely solemn, while bodily enactments play with social boundaries and resist some of the conformity of lyrics that encourage self-policing and disciplining behavior. Even rappers’ performances of armor, masculinity, and toughness rely on a shifty disaffection of cool, and these enactments of the playful assist in resisting those larger subsuming systems, like the state and the music industry.

The political and the ludic are not strict but porous, integrated, and dynamic categories that constitute hip hop orature. Political seriousness sets the stage for the emergence of playful embodied practices. In this way, the ludic in underground rap is never separate from the political commitments that artists express; it is at the heart of the music and culture. Moreover, ludic elements are often present in lyrics, rhymes, and wordplay in the same way that performances can appear as serious and intense. Artists additionally use lyrics, graffiti art, musical beats, and other elements to play with boundaries for aesthetic explorations and their artistic pleasure.

BLACKNESS, DIASPORA, AND PERFORMANCE IN KENYAN HIP HOP

Nairobi Hip Hop Flow addresses how artists create and circulate music about the specifics of the large urban capital city and Kenya by relying on notions of hip hop diasporic blackness. The music’s embodiedness articulates an underclass masculinized diasporic sentiment that consistently refers to and negotiates a U.S. Black-derived quality. Therefore, global blackness as a performative aesthetic is a cultural rubric in the long-standing and indigenization practices of Nairobi styles.

A lingering tension exists in non-U.S. hip hop scholarship involving researching blackness in hip hop culture. Global hip hop studies has long used notions of indigenization to describe the processes that non-U.S. artists use to make music relevant and creative in their own contexts to center the agency of rappers.²⁸ Some scholars have had an uneasy time with how blackness is globalized, pitting global against notions of Black. The most well-referenced example is in *Global Noise*,

where Tony Mitchell writes that American hip hop is “atrophied, clichéd, and repetitive” against the vibrancy of non-U.S. styles.²⁹ The editors of *The Vinyl Ain’t Final*, Dipannita Basu and Sidney J. Lemelle, write against Mitchell’s notion that non-U.S. global hip hop has distanced itself from American styles to produce good and viable rap music.³⁰ In *Global Linguistic Flows*, to which Mitchell is a contributor, H. Samy Alim acknowledges that Mitchell’s past comments are “reductive” and a “misrepresentation of Black American Hip Hop.”³¹ In a review of *Global Linguistic Flows*, U.S. Black feminist scholar Elaine Richardson still finds snags with Mitchell, his collaborator Pennycook’s work, and other contributors. She writes, “[There] is a tendency to de-emphasize the globalized African American and Afrodiasporic discursive foundations of hip hop.”³² Richardson goes on to state her contentions with Mitchell and Pennycook’s dichotomous presentation of “African American hip hop” and “global hip hop.”³³ Richardson and Gwendolyn Pough coedited a special issue of *Social Identities* entitled “Hip-hop Literacies and the Globalization of Black Popular Culture,” continuing the examination of U.S. blackness within the transnational circulation of the music.³⁴ What remains true, and what their issue highlights, is that *Black* and *global* have never been mutually exclusive, and the historic and continual global circulation of Black popular culture makes any Black/global dichotomy both challenging to conceive and predicated on erasure.

In African hip hop studies, two trends fall short of conceptualizing African rap’s relationship to U.S. blackness. Either scholars briefly indicate U.S. artists or blackness as a contributing framework at the beginning of the work, having it fall away as the discussion progresses past the introduction (including in my own previous work), or they do not focus on it at all.³⁵ Eric Charry, in *Hip Hop Africa: New African Music in a Globalizing World*, writes in the introductory chapter that the music on the continent formed when artists “made it their own” by no longer rapping in English and African American accents.³⁶ He asserts its popularity came from it being flexible and youth-oriented: “Rap was a youth music, which was its most attractive quality” and “it was a malleable form and could be shaped to fit local circumstances.”³⁷ Although Charry does mention a persistent drawing on Black culture in the conclusion of the book, he does not account for the myriad ways that African youth drew on and cited U.S. Black art and how those citations, often interstitial and slight, were one of the many markers of creativity within the music.³⁸ In their edited volume *Hip Hop and Social Change in Africa: Ni Wakati*, Msia Clark and Mickie Koster conversely flesh out the prevalence of African youth who find resonance with the struggles of Black people in the U.S. and globally and contend that hip hop is a Pan-African cultural movement.³⁹ I build on Clark and Koster, as well as on a number of scholars who identify a diasporic conversation in the ways that non-U.S. rappers use U.S. Black rap culture to create local music.⁴⁰

I continue this conversation and state that there is more to say about the deep sensibilities within the sound and style that travel through borders. First, I contend that an evidentiary diaspora exists that contains components, characteristics, and

traces of a negotiated U.S. hip hop blackness. This diasporic blackness is sorted through using people's individual experiences, created through knowledge of the music across the African continent and in the U.S., and influenced by U.S. popular culture's pervasive presence. Second, diaspora is embodied and performed, at various times imperfect and flawed, flexible, and profoundly affectively pleasing. Artists of all races and ethnicities negotiate and can perform a signified blackness in their indigenization processes, many times using it as part of a lower-class ethic of subversion deeply tied to what I call political seriousness. Last, Nairobi artists use diasporic blackness to explore themes of Kenyanness, Pan-Africanism, and Africanity. Many use these diasporic connections to contend that rap music is an inherently African music form that has materialized in the U.S. before spreading around the globe. They use these linkages to Africanity to create the music as inherently Kenyan, while many times drawing distinctions between Africanity and U.S. blackness.

Examining hip hop as a holistic performance practice allows us to identify how this blackness can appear in fine details of embodiment and small moments of liminal creativities. I investigate blackness in Nairobi rap culture as one, though of course not the only, element that adds to the deep texture of the culture. Under the modalities of orature, diasporic blackness occurs in the corporeal, the sensorial, and the verbal, and in so doing, says something specific about Nairobi life. These performances often surface not in opposition to ideas of tradition and Kenyanness but as a method to create locality in this global music. In short, blackness is an indigenizing force.

I am motivated by a U.S. Black hip hop feminist lens, which treats hip hop blackness as intersectional, undergoing classed and gendered significations as it moves and travels before arriving on non-U.S. concrete. Hip hop feminism has been long established within the legacies of Black feminism, developing significant and applicable methods to investigate the music and the world at large.⁴¹ The analysis contained in the following chapters is indebted to thinkers like Cheryl Keyes, who identified rap as not only an embodied practice but as one that holds intrinsic diasporic traditions: "Africanisms also appear in abstract levels of performance [in hip hop]."⁴² Keyes discusses how Black women develop active identities in the music, such as Queen Mother, Lesbian, Fly Girl, and Sista with Attitude, which are not mutually exclusive or static.⁴³

I use hip hop feminist approaches to formulate how women and others of marginalized genders use political seriousness to engage with the Kenyan underground. In addition to Keyes, Joan Morgan reminds us that "hip-hop on the womanist tip" involves "black-on-black love[, which] is essential to the survival of black women and the black community."⁴⁴ Tricia Rose contends that women rappers are full participants in "dialogic processes" with men rappers, resisting the idea there exists a gendered binary between women who are automatically feminists and men who are inevitably sexist.⁴⁵ Gwendolyn Pough observes that Black

women participate in the performative practice of “bringing wreck” to demand their place in hip hop and public space.⁴⁶ Keyes, Rose, and Pough’s observations are all instructive in how I examine Nairobi spaces, where the music should not be reduced to an automatic misogynist space, but it still holds that women must vie for recognition to do their work. There is much gray to fuck with in Nairobi rap spaces, to reference Joan Morgan’s famous line, and doing so allows me to understand the complexities that artists both create and navigate.⁴⁷ Brittney C. Cooper, Susana M. Morris, and Robin M. Boylorn, among others, make up the Crunk Feminist Collective and drive this point home, specifically naming their work as “percussive feminism,” which deals with the tensions and fissures that surround the music and “finds its way, its mode, its articulation in the spaces of noises, cacophony, and controversy.”⁴⁸ Moreover, the ways Tanya Saunders have examined gender, feminism, blackness, and transnationality in their study of Cuban activist practitioners have been especially useful in conceptualizing how blackness appears throughout my work.⁴⁹ Hip hop is an artistic practice that is constituted through transnational flows and rises out of and feeds off specific societal tensions. For instance, in Kenyan society, anxieties around urban women’s independence abound, and women rappers confront this discourse while also appealing to ideals of gendered respectability informed by rejecting global figures like the tomboy and overtly performative femme rapper, often rendered oversexualized. Thus, I use feminism to investigate politics, dynamics, and events in the research, as well as focus on how women and other rappers of all genders make use of the music’s frictional qualities.

My methodology involves studying orature as a collection of experiences that uses diasporic blackness as an interwoven characteristic of performance throughout the Nairobi underground. I investigate the smallest details of corporeality and identify how artists create subtle, direct, and innovative throughlines of diaspora. I rely on scholars of U.S. Black performance, who find that amid the constrictions of society, at some point, embodiments yield instances and speculations of Black freedom. In *Black Movements: Performances and Cultural Politics*, Soyica Diggs Colbert explores how performances in folk narrative, film, music, dance, and fiction connect to the past and embark on a reclamation of Black humanity. She notes that Black narratives like *Flying Africans* “[imagine] futures within the black diaspora that are predicated on understandings of the human that exceed the physical instantiation in the body.”⁵⁰ Kyra Gaunt’s *The Games Black Girls Play* has pioneered hip hop performance studies, where she adeptly identifies how Black girls’ double-dutch games and the practices of “musical play” set the foundation for the emergence of hip hop culture.⁵¹ Gaunt situates Black girls’ knowledge production as a verballity and embodiedness called kinetic orality, which works to form what she terms “musical blackness,” a participatory set of communicative and community practices. Musical play induces “symbolic and performative moment[s] of freedom.”⁵² I find that both Gaunt and Diggs Colbert offer rich starting points from

which to conceptualize the inner workings of blackness as an *ur-text* that then helps to structure a hip hop diaspora.

The analytical structure of U.S. Black hip hop performance studies can enrich the observations made in Kenyan hip hop studies. For far too long, the assumption has been that the farther the music is from the Black U.S., the more it has nothing to do with Black life and blackness as a conceptual signifier. Furthermore, although unspoken, it seems that when African rappers collaborate with white rappers or NGOs tied to European countries, this means that U.S. blackness, notions of diaspora, and Black citationality are absent from the equations. This book calls for global hip hop studies to end the ways the music is uncomfortably and inaccurately dislocated from U.S. Black references. Focusing on orature in hip hop is one way to avoid the elision of blackness and its move through borders.

This study investigates how Nairobi rap practitioners formed imagined notions of solidarity through fusions of the political and the ludic. During interviews, artists stated matter-of-factly they owed respect to U.S. rap, but more importantly, participated in a significant citational practice in the music, gesturing toward U.S. Black life, rappers, and hoods as they sought to make their unique style specific to Nairobi contexts. These sentiments mirror H. Samy Alim's discussion of rap's navigation of racial politics, what he terms a "transnational blackness," which he briefly describes as "equally concerned with broader racial politics and specific Indigenous histories."⁵³ I focus on embodiment as a lens and as an object of study, and through this, I identify how U.S. blackness in the music serves as a connective web at times, and a nominal but enduring presence at others, all of which work to tie artists to an imagined global culture. The making of hip hop diaspora has shortcomings, as it can be bound to the politics of antiblackness. While many artists draw important connections to U.S. Black rappers and others in the diaspora, often those same artists disavow the most popular figures within the music, the deviant masculinized thug or gangsta or oversexualized femme rapper, without making room for nuances and imperfect interventions. According to most rappers, the gangsta and sexualized feminine figure fly in the face of Nairobi underground's objectives of political seriousness and their campaign to prove rap's worth in society.

I focus on how artists create commonalities and sameness within conceptions of diaspora and blackness. I avoid hybridity as an approach because it ignores the similarities and commonalities of Afrodiasporic culture, historic political resistance, and the political economies of music. Framing the music's indigenization as the coming together of two seemingly oppositional or disparate characteristics delimits the ever-present African and Black diasporic commonalities that pervade all of hip hop. While hybridity aims to recognize an artist's ingenuity—how well they/she/he can make music out of two opposing cultures—the term fails to capture the totality of creative processes. "Hybridity," Catherine Appert writes, "—as traced in sound and musical form—reinscribes the limitations of western-centric

models of cultural globalization that don't necessarily account for how music makers understand themselves in relation to a globally interconnected world.⁵⁴ We must thus attempt to study the commonalities within musics, what Kofi Agawu's calls a "hypostatized presumption of sameness," as an endeavor to recognize the similarities among people, contexts, and various cultural expressions.⁵⁵ The hip hop sameness of blackness is a set of musical and cultural practices in Kenya that construct a diaspora, which is undoubtedly complex. Nairobi artists are active participants in deciding how to navigate the music's racial politics and create their own visions of Kenyan and African continental hip hop. Rappers make choices about blackness, Africanity, and Kenyanness, which appear in the music and lyrics and embodied practices and thus are part of hip hop orature.

I see the blackness in Nairobi rap culture, which can be the ludic embodiments that express diaspora, as well as the solemn earnestness in sound and lyrics, as interconnected with the city's cultural politics. Kenyan hip hop studies has addressed diverse topics, which have helped inform how I think about the political, the ludic, diaspora, and blackness. Scholars' investigations include an exhaustive list: historic colonial struggle and postcolonial politics,⁵⁶ language innovations,⁵⁷ the vibrant and troubled music industry,⁵⁸ indigenization,⁵⁹ ethnicized, urban, and postcolonial notions of identity,⁶⁰ religious interrogations,⁶¹ and Nairobi's urbanity,⁶² to name a few. Of particular importance to my research are the explorations of masculinities and deployments of gender in rap music spaces that are in continual conversation with the urbanity of Nairobi.⁶³ Kimani Njogu and the scholars with whom he produces edited volumes elaborately explore the cultural politics of Kenya. In *Culture, Performance and Identity*, he writes how through the media, literature, and music, practitioners explore the historic, ethnicized, and politicized formations of identity, concluding that identity occurs through performances, which are "instruments of practical experiences."⁶⁴ Njogu's discussions parallel how I approach studying hip hop from a historical perspective, framed around the conversations that emerged out of colonial contact and continue into the present.

Chris Wasike brings conversations of society and music to the present, writing, "[*genge*] is indeed an expression of local and global urban fears and anxieties within the city space of Nairobi. . . . [It] is the masculine tensions that are more highlighted through rap music because both (the music and city spaces) are dominated by men."⁶⁵ Relating to how U.S. blackness surfaces, Mbũgua wa Mũngai argues that Kenyan rappers move through American tropes and Kenyan genres to draw on what is helpful in their process of creating music: "Youth rappers appropriate the surface representations of African American popular culture . . . to explore local social-cultural space," and "young people are continually contesting predominant concepts of identity while simultaneously repackaging some traditional ideas into 'new' performative modalities."⁶⁶ Like Wasike and Mũngai, Esther Milu identifies Kenyan and transnational qualities in the music. "Ethnic and linguistic activism" scrutinizes the ongoing politicization of Kenyan ethnicities through wordplay

usages of Sheng. Milu writes such activism “[challenges] hegemonic practices of ethnic and racial identification and [forges] cultural and linguistic identities that mark them as true Kenyans, both in local and global contexts.”⁶⁷ In my study, I focus on the topics that Wasike, Mūngai, and Milu broach—masculinity, urbanity, identity, linguistics, race, ethnicity, globality, “tradition,” and Kenyanness—and argue they can and should be thought of as a part of the music’s earnestness and embodied performativities.

RESEARCHING HIP HOP IN NAIROBI

Nairobi Hip Hop Flow is an interdisciplinary investigation of embodiment that uses ethnographic methods, political and cultural histories, and performance analysis, all of which help to tell the story of underground orature. I discuss the history of the music industry, which helps to contextualize the apprehensions that have long endured around the genre. With Nairobi serving as a prominent regional hub of music recording and production, especially since the postwar era, the city has attracted musicians and recording companies from outside Kenya. The development of the industry coincided with colonial restrictions and bans on music and performance deemed subversive. In the 1960s, Kenya formed as a newly independent state and witnessed Congolese music’s popularity explode, opening huge questions about the role of Kenyan music traditions and culture in the country. The ’80s saw how Moi’s dictatorship added to the difficulty Kenyan music encountered, especially politically defiant sounds. By the time hip hop entered the scene in the late ’80s and early ’90s, several long traditions were in place: banning Kenyan music, hosting outside artists, and the rich and enduring creation of subversive tunes. In post-Moi Kenya, restrictive copyright policies have replaced bans, and the influx of music from around Africa, the United States, and Europe has been continuous. This book details how rap music fits into and engages with this complicated and burdened setting by responding to various political urgencies, engendering cultural anxieties, and exemplifying what cultural production looks like in a postcolonial African city.

I examine underground music culture in the capital city of Kenya while also understanding that there are scenes in other places in Kenya, like Nakuru, Naivasha, and Mombasa.⁶⁸ Artists travel between these major cities to perform at gigs, record with others, and have followings in these places. At times, they travel to Uganda and Tanzania for collaborations and concerts. Nairobi, in this context, serves as a cultural center amid other centers like Dar es Salaam and Mombasa, as well as an economic crossroads within and outside of Africa. This study is not generalizable to all Kenyan hip hop, as there are artists who do not emerge from the UFMM camp. Additionally, mainstream sounds have a different story to tell. The discussions I have about underground rap in Nairobi are perhaps most similar to other forms of rap in Anglophone African countries, specifically those

in East Africa, given the shared British colonial history and the widespread use of Swahili. Categories like political seriousness and ludicity are specific to my research and found in other hip hop spaces. It is not difficult to imagine that practitioners everywhere are known for spirited verbal sparring, the corresponding playful bodily movement about the stage or in a music video, and the political commitments to social change. Seriousness is found throughout global rap cultures as a way to engage with notions like inequality, cultural affirmation, and political resistance. However, how these concepts interact with the given locality of Nairobi is specific to the cityspace and Kenyan cultural histories.

Studying hip hop's multiplicities must be undertaken with robust approaches. I draw on James Spady's hiphopography, which H. Samy Alim builds out, writing that it is a method that "integrates the varied approaches of ethnography, biography, and social, cultural, and oral history to arrive at an emic view of Hip Hop Culture."⁶⁹ I spoke with various actors within the music industry, dug through files at the Kenya National Archives, and conducted participant observations at concerts, bars, and music stalls in Nairobi's city center, all of which helped me stitch together the story of the embodied and the political. Economic barriers and family responsibilities often prevented extended stays, and I carried out intense fieldwork trips in 2008, 2011, 2012, 2014, 2016, and 2018, ranging from three weeks to two months. I followed several artists on social media, which provided me with updates on events I missed. I sought to have artists shape my research, as they held critical knowledge about their marginal place in the economic system and as citizens who fought for their creative agency within limiting conditions. I had a range of inquiries, including their views on the political system and the music industry, the place of rap within Kenyan society, what they accomplished in their songs, and the meaning of embodiment in the culture, the latter being the most difficult to discuss. The conclusions I draw are based on field research, probes of the music industry and the state, interviews with various actors, examinations of music videos, and observations at Sarakasi Dome.

Practitioners have various and often faulty investments in power that need to be identified, such as with capitalism, able-bodiedness, normative masculinity, and homophobia. Even though men outnumber women heavily in underground rap, I intentionally prioritize women by considering their voices, experiences, and performances. In my research, I only met one artist who described himself as having a disability: a cisman who had a cleft palate. He volunteered that he was determined not to allow that to limit his possibilities and that others welcomed him and were open to collaboration, though his career struggled. Hip hop privileges able bodies, those that can move, rap, and dance. Similarly, homophobia and transphobia exist in the community, although rappers have hesitated to admit this. A few artists I interviewed discussed at length their navigation with sexuality and the pressures they felt to be heterosexual even though they were not. Although all I interviewed identified as either a cisman or cismoman, at times I use the pronouns

“they/them/theirs,” the terms “marginalized genders” and “gender-expansive people,” and wording such as “artists of all genders” to hold space for those rappers who continue to explore their gendered self-making.

I conducted structured and recorded interviews with sixteen rappers—some of whom I introduced above, a rapper turned DJ, two graffiti artists, two music producers, one DJ on a mainstream radio station, and a gospel artist who did not make hip hop. I had impromptu, informal, unrecorded conversations with a handful of other music producers and about a dozen other rappers. The briefness of my trips impacted how I interacted with many practitioners. I continued to encounter an ethical dilemma concerning my role as a researcher, obtaining information about their challenging experiences and knowledge of the industry. I sought to mitigate the politics of extraction that had long plagued Kenyan and African music scenes, which led me to provide a small stipend to anyone I formally interviewed. I realized what feminist ethnographer Karla Slocum notes as the ongoing “impossibility of dislodging the imbalance in the researcher-informant relationship.”⁷⁰ Paying artists helped to acknowledge the power relations between working- and lower-class rap practitioners and me as a privileged American researcher.⁷¹ I aimed to recognize their labor of sharing knowledge and mediate any minor difficulties that meeting me might cause. In most cases, we met in a café in a central area, which required them to pay for public transportation and spend time in the city center.

I was mindful of how I structured fieldwork trips, given the complications of paying a stipend. I purposely visited venues at the beginning of my stay and then, toward the end, conducted interviews. My presence in venues was less disruptive this way because not many knew I would then be providing stipends. However, some understood I was an American researcher, and additionally, while mixed race and Black, I could pass for white or *mzungu* in Kenya, which also meant my presence conferred privilege. I also moved around to different places—I visited most NGOs where events took place, and I spent time at the Kenya National Theatre, random street events, outdoor music festivals, and nightclubs and bars in wealthier areas. With this, I often encountered new groups of people, again meaning that I could observe and interact with others without the complication of my presence as a researcher who offered remuneration for interviews. Toward the end of my research, I conducted follow-up virtual conversations with artists I continued to follow closely and again paid a stipend, motivated not only by recognizing their knowledge sharing but also by how expensive internet service is to maintain a ninety-minute discussion. Doing interviews before and after deciding to pay a stipend meant that I was able to compare conversations. I noticed no vast differences between how the conversations unfolded, aside from those receiving the stipend being less likely to cancel or reschedule. Yet, how our interactions were mediated by economic exchange and the shorter duration of fieldwork trips prevented the formation of in-depth relationships.

I spent time at Sarakasi Dome, Goethe-Institut, Alliance Française, and the British Council, all international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). Additionally, I attended events at the Godown Arts Centre, which models itself as an organization that promotes community arts and music through training and events. It envisions relying on funding from Kenyan individuals, corporations, and global partners and has received support from entities like the British Council and the Ford Foundation.⁷² From the places mentioned, I spent the most time at Sarakasi, which receives sponsorship from several 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).⁷³ Artists have long relied on NGOs and cultural organizations to host events. These places regularly hold various cultural and language classes, workshops, concerts, festivals, and training programs. Regardless of the incredible diversity and quality of many events, these entities often perpetuate and maintain global north/south power relations. NGO programming, interest, and investment do not undo or challenge the privileged position these centers or their countries of origin hold. Consider Maurice Amutabi: “[NGOs] are gatekeepers, situating themselves between [Africa] and donors, exercising so-called benevolent hegemony.”⁷⁴ The artists I followed recognized that foreign organizations are interested in listening and funding politically conscious rap. However, the role of NGOs in the underground world has not been stable. During the course of the research, I noticed fewer events at these places. When I approached artists with this inquiry, they stated that many NGOs have increasingly requested that events produce monetary profit. Some artists apply for and obtain grants from NGOs, but these funds have decreased over the years. Therefore, artists charge devotees to get in at the door, which invariably limits those who want to attend but lack the expendable cash to do so. The decline of events has meant that many artists have relied more on the digital world to circulate music.

Music videos have been fundamental to my research analysis because they are critical storehouses of hip hop oratured performances. Practitioners contribute to creating an underground archive that exists on platforms like YouTube, Mdundo, and ReverbNation, which rarely translates into direct income. Rappers repeatedly stated that to break into the industry, one must have videos.⁷⁵ During one interview, a gospel singer from Ongata Rongai named Snooker stated, “In Kenya, you can be a hip hop artist, you can be well known, you can spit sixteen bars, but as long as you don’t have a video, you are not considered to be anywhere.”⁷⁶ The greater truth is that for many underground artists, videos do not serve as a promising ticket to access mainstream visibility on television and radio. Thus, the music video, in many ways, seems to be not only an industry and genre standard but also, for these rappers, a response to the exclusions and a primary way artists express their cultural agency. Practitioners explained that though trained producers developed the



FIGURE 3. Graffiti artist Esen at Sarakasi Dome, 2011. Photo by author.



FIGURE 4. Graffiti artist Wise at Sarakasi Dome, 2011. Photo by author.

finished product, they gave input into the shape and texture of the video. Wanting to retain creative control, rappers helped frame background scenes, experimented with props, and positioned their bodies in specific ways related to the camera. The critical role of this visual technosonic text has acquired significance over time as the industry has shifted away from CDs and toward digitality as a primary mechanism of circulation.

Underground videos challenge our traditional notions of the media archive. The noncommercial archive is distinct from mainstream music because it lacks commercial visibility. These musicians often work with studios to release the videos. Although they enter an economy of circulation and reproduction, the music exists on a different stratum than mainstream Kenyan sounds. Noncommercial rap videos rarely make it to television and, therefore, do not have the same visibility as the work of commercial artists or U.S. hip hop that often receive regular play on television.

With the decrease of events at NGOs, music distribution has altered. For underground artists, by 2016 or 2017, gone were the days when one could hawk CDs at NGO concerts and earn some income. It is important to note that CDs are still sold in Kenya to a small market. While one can encounter a salesperson making rounds between cars on the city streets, such practices no longer work well for underground artists. The digital marketplace and virtual world have made it easier for rappers to host their own freestyle battles and small concerts. Rappers use Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, and music-sharing platforms like ReverbNation and Mdundo to make their songs and music videos more visible. Of course, the downside to such shifts is a marked difficulty in acquiring profit. Given the limitations of the industry and artists' demand to be heard and seen, the weight and force of the music video becomes vitally apparent.

POLITICAL TIMELINES OF RESEARCH

The time period of this book is from 2011 to 2018, although I reference events both before and after these dates. I trace both the political conditions of the country at large as well as the music industry itself, on which I started research when I lived in Kenya in 2000–2001. I studied public transportation vehicles, *matatus*, and specifically the imagery and the African American and Afro-Caribbean references made on the exterior of brightly colored and graffitied vehicles. This early research occurred at the end of Daniel arap Moi's presidency and coincided with the music of early artists like Kalamashaka and the Ukoo Flani Mau Mau collective. Their music interfaced with harsh political repression and the long-lasting effects of structural adjustment programs (SAPs), especially as urban poverty worsened due to inflation, the gutting of public funds, and the elimination of jobs. Moi had begun opening markets, selling state parastatals, and embracing neoliberal reforms, responding to IMF and World Bank stipulations, insistence from

donor countries, and internal political pressure.⁷⁷ In 2002, hip hop ushered Mwai Kibaki into power. He rode the wave of political optimism with the help of Gidi Gidi Maji Maji's song "Unbwogable," which rallied young people and energized the atmosphere of Kenya.⁷⁸ Murunga and Nasong'o describe an "enthusiastic euphoria" and "heralded expectations that a new political era of democracy had dawned in Kenya."⁷⁹ Under Kibaki, Kenya's adoption of neoliberalism as an answer to the dictatorship years, for both better and worse, has set a significant tone for underground rap. In all the change, hip hop culture played its own part in integrating a political outlook of optimism and a renewed commitment to advocating for capitalism's promise that hard work would equivocate success and monetary return.

The Kibaki presidency brought the flourishing system of bootleg music to a grinding halt. By the early 2000s, new copyright policies prevented practitioners from easily selling their burned copies of music. Additionally, the colorful and booming *matatus* under then-new Michuki state regulations were absent, replaced with quiet(er) and slower monochrome vehicles with a tacky yellow horizontal stripe across the exterior.⁸⁰ While Moi's dictatorship was gone, the Kibaki governance brought new difficulties for musicians. The state aggressively eliminated bootlegged and copied music. The copyright policies, imposed by WTO regulations, were in place to benefit artists and prevent the bootleg economy from profiting from musicians' music.⁸¹ The Kenya Copyright Board (KECOBO) and the Music Copyright Society of Kenya (MCSK) created a restrictive and constraining music industry to ensure that musicians supposedly received royalties and abided by copyright laws. While the *matatu* and copyright laws were supposed to be beneficial, they resulted in a noticeable muting of hip hop culture. Such changes meant that artists had to be creative and aggressive in their pursuits and continue collaborating with NGOs like the British Council, Sarakasi Dome, and the Goethe-Institut. The Kibaki presidency was plagued by rampant corruption and postelection violence in 2007–8, and in the following years, rappers would use the music like a salve on these open wounds.

Uhuru Kenyatta assumed the presidency in 2013, and rappers and others settled in and collectively recognized that, although the state has the burden and responsibility to help the populace, it will not. Five years later and after the postelection violence, it became clear that the newly elected President Kenyatta and Vice President William Ruto (Ruto was also elected to the presidency in 2022) would dodge their International Criminal Court (ICC) trials for their roles in orchestrating the election mayhem after trial postponements, media campaigns declaring themselves victims of western imperialist meddling, and accounts of witness intimidation and silencing.⁸² If Kibaki ushered in a jubilation of postdictatorship shifts and then shattered it under his administration's corruption and postelection violence, Uhuru's presidency meant an acidic acceptance that at the level of the state, real change and accountability seemed unviable. The mantra "everybody is corrupt" sounded in barroom conversations, in *matatus*, and on stages. Under Kenyatta,

the enforcement of some music restrictions put in place during Kibaki's time had weakened, although these policies had not benefited artists even when enforcement was stronger. Those who complained about the utter ineptitude of the Music Copyright Society of Kenya (MCSK) and their promises of royalty payments in the early 2010s believed that the organization has slowly become more corrupt and mismanaged. Musically speaking, rappers grew accustomed to the hustle of the industry, the lack of venues and radio play, and an absence of copyright protection.

CHAPTERS

As with any other work on music, the reader must listen to the songs and watch music videos mentioned to appreciate the analysis and the careful work of placing embodiment at the conceptual crux of investigation. Chapter 1, "Cultural Anxieties, Music Commodities, Rapping Bodies," sets the scene for the underground and music more generally, detailing the social urgency of hip hop and the general apprehensions that arise around cultural expressions. I argue that rap's political seriousness has responded to the cultural anxieties over the long-standing presence of non-Kenyan music. To understand this, I discuss the early music industry formed in the 1920s through the practices of music extraction and commodification, just as the Kenyan colony was taking shape. As the industry grew, it hosted non-Kenyan genres like Congolese and South African music. Alongside this, the colonial state repressed all forms of dissent, including several instances of resistance music, dance, and performance. The consistent hosting of non-Kenyan genres and the silencing and censorship of some Kenyan music throughout the colonial epoch and into the first two presidencies created a hostile atmosphere for artists, regardless of whether they aimed for their music to be subversive. New copyright policies have replaced state censorship, continuing the hardship that plagues Kenyan music, resulting in the long-standing cultural anxieties of "foreign" sounds that hip hop has continued to incite. The U.S. Black hip hop performing body is at the center of current apprehensions, which usher in claims of mimicry and the supposed empty value of U.S. music. Rap's political seriousness grows out of this anxiety, rejecting the claim that the music is another example of a foreign genre privileged in an already challenging music scene.

Chapter 2, "Play and Gender," clarifies how embodied creativities operate through performatives of gender and play. Rappers use the ludic within the imperfect political, where songs condemning injustice rely on the playful unpredictability of practitioners' performances to fashion the creative repertoires of rap music. Both the political and the ludic coexist to form notions of global Black rap solidarities. At the same time, the performing body of the Nairobi rapper induces potentialities, movements, and circulatory knowledge in seemingly foreclosed settings. In that sense, artists imagine their bodies as immune from normative structures. This playfully obscure body signals beyond borders and contexts, thus enacting

what practitioners enumerate as a global rap culture. Ludicity is part of a larger pattern of movement-centered Black transnationality. Its creative force celebrates the playful narrations of bodily storytelling, actively resisting the antiblackness that follows hip hop around the globe. In this chapter, I introduce the term the *armor of gender*. The now-established idea that gender is indeed a set of performances means that to analyze gender in rap spaces is to investigate embodied performance practices. Here, I explore how cismen and ciswomen seize a gendered armor that is working class, largely ableist, and masculinist. The armor of gender is fraught with exclusive registers that purport that all are “let in” to a space created and maintained by cismen. Nonetheless, women and others of marginalized genders use political seriousness to stage their interventions.

Chapter 3, “Diaspora, Love, and Limits,” contends that political love is the foundation of a hip hop diaspora. Underground rap’s continual reference to love is not just about fondness toward the music. This political love solidifies the authenticity of practitioners who exercise the innate and undying commitment to the culture, Kenyans, and Africana peoples in general. In Nairobi rap, diaspora is orature. The force of lyrics and the creative embodiments synthesize to espouse a globalized blackness that constantly cites the United States. Elements of diasporic blackness are embraced, sorted through, sometimes rejected, and reworked into a signifier of lower-class solidarity. Not only do diaspora and love facilitate Pan-African sentiments, but these themes are indigenizing mechanisms that rappers use to create uniquely Kenyan music. The film *Ni Wakati* and the South African-based Afrikan Hip Hop Caravan exemplify how diaspora and blackness in rap cohere around motifs of transit, or a “diaspora in motion,” a common theme in the music.

Chapter 4, “The Sounds of Imperfect Resistance,” argues that the sonic confers with rap corporeality to produce a distinct underground aesthetic. Sound is one dominating characteristic that critics use to discount the music. Likewise, underground practitioners also use sonority to guard their genre, claiming that commercial rappers may use politically conscious lyrics asserting that this music sounds American and “not from the hood.” These noncommercial rappers accuse wealthy rappers of imitation and focus on how affluent artists copy the wealth-based braggadocios of swag embodiments. In this manner, these practitioners imagine themselves as having a final say in the debates around imitation and mimicry of U.S. music. I use sound to claim that rappers hold conflicting anticapitalist ideas. They see their participation in capitalism as hard workers and promising entrepreneurs within the industry as a remedy to a corrupt state. However, these same artists also reject commercial standards in part fueled by capitalist practices, seeing the aurally pleasurable sentiments of mainstream music as a significant problematic that waters down the force of hip hop. In turn, these artists use harder sonic qualities to interface with their corporeal interventions, producing sustained conversations about Kenyan society, the state, and music’s commercialism.

In the conclusion, “Hip Hop Flow as Kenyan, as Black,” I build on P. Khalil Saucier and Tryon P. Woods’s assertion that hip hop studies needs to reclaim its radical traditions and become Black studies.⁸³ Saucier and Woods’s contention enhances the interventions within both global hip hop and Kenyan hip hop scholarship by insisting on the music’s Black foundational elements. Adding performance theory to this way of studying the music in Nairobi not only deepens the analysis of how artists create and think through a Black-informed diaspora but also intensely focuses on the manners in which rap speaks to and rises out of the specificities of Kenya’s realities. I acknowledge, and indeed hope, that the ludicity and opacity of performances prevented complete readings. The descriptions contained herein were as ample as possible, and it is also unfeasible to account for every detail of orature given the dodginess and intentional incomprehensiveness of the music’s aesthetic beauty.