

## Cultural Anxieties, Music Commodities, Rapping Bodies

Kenyan hip hop has entered a complicated musical landscape. Historically, state restrictions and industry exclusiveness have resulted in the emptying out of Kenyan sounds while outside genres have been pumped in, unsettling a populace that has long heeded nationalist calls to exercise self-determination and celebrate Kenyan culture. Left in the wake of these difficult conditions is an ongoing anxiety about how to articulate what Kenyan music is and what to do with the persistent presence of sounds from other locales. Like other popular genres circulating within the country, hip hop has embedded itself in the country's postcolonial meaning-making processes, helping to tell the story of the country. Rap, including its political seriousness and playful diasporic corporeality, responds in a diversity of creative ways to this cultural landscape that has offered the music a frosty reception.

Many factors, often unaccounted for, have played pivotal roles in the treatment and perspectives of Kenyan music. Past and current bans, inconsistent state policies, and the failures to implement much-desired quotas for radio play have all added to how the public has come to understand the country's music, including hip hop. State actors on both sides of Kenya's 1963 moment approached music with suspicion, wary of its potential to rally people. The industry limitations on the country's genres forced fans and consumers, and those interested in notions of culture writ large, to respond rigidly in defining and defending Kenyan music. Debating what counts as Kenyan and what does not reflects what Mbũgwa wa Mũngai terms "post-independence anxieties" about American cultural imperialism, non-Kenyan music, and notions of appropriation and mimicry.<sup>1</sup> For Mũngai, three institutions—the government, the church, and the East African academy—proffered notions in the lead-up to independence and afterward about what it

meant to be Kenyan (and East African and African). Mũngai rightly contends that hip hop artists and young people use the music, often what the media provides, to expand notions of Kenyanness and explore their identities in multicultural urban environments like Nairobi. I build on Mũngai's discussion here because it is not solely institutions proffering discourse that shape these worries; the political and economic conditions also contribute to questions about Kenyan culture and what artists do within this arena. Hence, the first two sections of this chapter pan outward beyond Mũngai's three prongs and examine colonial and postcolonial state-instituted bans and a flourishing historic Nairobi industry that long privileged Congolese genres. Not only does this discussion on policy and commerce situate the historical arc of cultural anxieties, but it also helps to contextualize the contemporary state practices hostile to artists explored at the end of the chapter.

The following two sections address how the state and music industry have stymied Kenyan sounds. While there was a marked boom in production during the Kenyatta era (1963–78), much of the focus was on Congolese styles. During the Moi (1978–2002) and Kibaki (2002–13) years, the industry and the state, in different capacities, limited Kenyan music. While Moi was concerned with dissidence, Kibaki's implementation of WTO copyright policies adversely affected the circulation of products that long depended on informal economies. Radio stations and multinational corporations promoted tunes from outside the country during this time. These entities, state power, the music industry, and the World Trade Organization (WTO), in different ways, have held much sway over the appetites of music culture, resulting in challenges defining what it means for a music to be Kenyan, a real quagmire in a context where the country has had its ear to foreign genres for decades. In the section "Radio Play," I discuss that artists must have wealth, connections, and a specific mainstream sound to make it consistently to media airwaves. Here, I delve into the obstacles that underground artists have in obtaining long-standing media airtime, with many blaming the state and its failure to create and implement much-desired quotas, which supposedly would allow for a healthy block of Kenyan music.

The last two sections address the loaded claim that people make of each other: "Kenyans do not appreciate Kenyan music." This common accusation appears in various arenas, such as on television and radio, and often when anything related to music is broached as a topic. Musicians, producers, and fans alike will utter the declaration in casual conversation. I connect this weighty statement to the cultural anxieties around hip hop and all genres that move within the country. In this respect, the idea that "Kenyans do not appreciate Kenyan music" reflects and encapsulates the elements of political, cultural, and intellectual history explored in this chapter. The quip helps to tell the story of a lengthy span of outside sounds and people's responses, given the appeals to center Kenyan culture. It also enables an understanding of how the industry framed the parameters of

music and how people have negotiated through these conditions. The notion that Kenyans do not value or treasure Kenyan music is laden with meaning. Media hosts will frame the conversation as a matter of truth: “Of course, we all know that Kenyans have struggled to support and appreciate their artists, but the success of [event X] is testimony to how far we have come.” Musicians mention this complaint to lament that they need more opportunities to perform in front of mostly Kenyan audiences and find ways to sustain a fan base and sell their products. Many feel they cannot compete with Congolese, American, Nigerian, and other sounds and find the popularity of genres from these places unnerving. When rappers are accused of making hip hop because they do not appreciate the country’s music, they respond with the stern assertion that their music is Kenyan and earnestly located within the contexts of those who live around them. The ways that artists craft political seriousness in hip hop, in other words, is a response to the “Kenyans do not appreciate Kenyan music” accusation. Moreover, the entrenched idea that the citizenry does not enjoy sounds from their country and the retorting political seriousness in rap belong to the same historicized discourse that calls people to prioritize Kenyan cultural expressions within a difficult setting.

Unpacking this loaded claim reveals that focusing on taste conceals structural conditions. Rather than placing the blame on the buying public, I shift the focus to bans, policies, and industry practices. While it is understandable to conclude that Kenyans turn their ear toward all music beyond the borders, there is more to this story than consumer preferences. Entertainment establishments have played Jamaican dancehall and Tanzanian Bongo Flava, and in Nairobi’s city center, there has been a plethora of American, Congolese, Nigerian, Tanzanian, and South African music to buy. Television shows air Kenyan artists, yet much airplay has gone to songs from the places just mentioned. Many genres of Kenyan music, from commercial Afropop to Benga, have drawn influences from Congolese music and dance culture. The media’s choices in playing these genres or artists’ decisions to borrow from styles from around and outside Africa cannot rest solely on the consumer or musician. Absent from many of these conversations is how the long stretches of state censorship and the formation of production industries with a commercial ear to outside music have critically impacted entertainment scenes, and it is from these perspectives that I discuss Kenyan music history.

I establish that music production and state censorship, as well as current policies and politics, have shaped, sometimes indirectly and other times explicitly, the widely circulated beliefs about underground rap and Kenyan styles more generally. These dynamics together fuel racialized conceptions about hip hop and its place in Nairobi. Therefore, I discuss the imported notions of American antiblackness that have ridden in with the music that causes nondevotees to be judgmental and rappers to mount a defense of their craft. From this comprehensive understanding, I contextualize the implications of the imported figure of the U.S. Black rapper who traveled to the country in the 1980s as American hip hop

began to make its global rounds. Practitioners recognize that their music all too easily shores up notions of derivativeness that feed into hip hop's status as a genre of racialized otheredness. Therefore, political seriousness has a dire job of filtering out attacks on the culture and affirming hip hop's place within a field that easily writes off rappers.

## HIP HOP AND HISTORY

Kenyan hip hop has emerged within and continues to participate in the long traditions of dissent launched against both colonial and postcolonial state power. Within this dynamic, hip hop uses political seriousness to give form to the music's legitimacy within the country's cultural geography. Much of Kenyan rap has served as a vibrant archive for dissecting how the violence of colonialism is presently felt, as illustrated in the famous 2008 Ukoo Flani Mau Mau music video, "Angalia Saa" (Look at the Time). The song induces themes of urgent longing and unfinishedness with its slow pace, solemn beats, and a chorus of high-pitched masculine moaning matched with word-heavy, concentrated verses. Scholars have paid particular attention to how it juxtaposes historical and contemporary notions by displaying various images next to each other.<sup>2</sup> Evan Mwangi writes, "'*Angalia Saa*' [is] a mourning song seeking to memorialize the dead, the raped, and the injured in anticolonial and post-independence Kenya. At the same time, it refuses closure to suggest to the listener that the Mau Mau liberation war is still going on."<sup>3</sup> Scenes of home guards and white authorities checking for *kipande* work passes, pictures from the attempted 1982 overthrow of the Moi government, an image of the tragic capture of Dedan Kimathi, and the 1950s mass detention of Africans during the State of Emergency all work to construct the notion that freedom is a continual struggle.

One moment worth mentioning is the song's brief allusion to activist Mary Muthoni wa Nyanjiru. She organized a protest in the 1920s supporting imprisoned labor organizer Harry Thuku. His advocacy and leadership within the East African Association (EAA) (formerly the Young Kikuyu Association) attracted the ire of the authorities. In 1922, his supporters gathered at the police station across from the Norfolk Hotel, demanding his release. Mary Muthoni wa Nyanjiru was among many other women in the increasingly agitated crowd who threw their loyalty behind Thuku for his concern over how labor conditions exacerbated women and girls' exploitation and sexual assault. After a day of protest, they left, unsuccessful. That night, a frustrated Nyanjiru and other women gathered and took oaths, which dictated that what one did, they all did. Returning the next day, EAA negotiators, all men, met with colonial officials and failed to secure Thuku's release.<sup>4</sup> Upon the meeting's breakdown, these men returned to urge the dispersal of the crowd, now grown to eight thousand people. Dissatisfied, Nyanjiru pushed her way toward the front of the group and lifted her dress, revealing her naked

body to the men and the larger crowd.<sup>5</sup> This practice, termed *guturamira ng'ania*, is where older women bare their nude bodies to younger men (typically their son's age) and has been long considered a curse, insult, or abomination within Kikuyu (and many other African) communities.<sup>6</sup> Other women followed suit, lifting their clothing and exposing their front sides to men whose power they no longer recognized and whom they saw as not taking Thuku's freedom seriously. Kenyan home guards or *askari* raised arms toward the protesters. Harry Thuku, watching from a jail cell window, remembered seeing the women "[pushing] on until the bayonets of the rifles were pricking at their throats."<sup>7</sup> *Askari*, threatened by the naked unrest of these older women, fired into the crowd. After the smoke and gathering dissipated, Nyanjiru, along with at least 150 other protesters, lay dead. Accounts emerged that depraved white settlers who were at the Norfolk Hotel eagerly participated in the massacre by shooting at the backs of running protesters. The *Kanyegenyūri* song and dance narrated grievances of Thuku's detention and celebrated Nyanjiru's activism; a version would become one of the songs during the Mau Mau resistance.<sup>8</sup>

Kamah raps, "Wa-shoot Muthoni wa Nyanjiru (They shot Muthoni wa Nyanjiru) / The same route wa-rape mama yetu Njeeri (In the same way or manner they raped our mother Njeeri)." Here, Kamah draws two incidents together: the 1920 assassination of Nyanjiru and the 2004 sexual assault of Njeeri wa Thiong'o, the wife of well-known writer and cultural scholar Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o. This incident occurred after their return from self-imposed overseas exile.<sup>9</sup> The attack on Njeeri was widely thought to be a state-sanctioned hit against the returning elderly author, and the song sees little difference in the violence enacted against these two women. This song points to how underground rap can concern itself with how the body, in particular women's bodies, can be violated, raped, shot at, and killed. Moreover, hip hop locates itself within Kenyan social history, and here, it operates as a performative archive responsible for reminding people about those figures in an anticolonial struggle who may have been forgotten.

This single example of "Angalia Saa" shows the degree to which Nairobi hip hop takes account of Kenyan history and its complexities, which are its claims to Kenyanness and the music's seriousness. Underground texts like this understand the complex layers of the nation's history, not just as individuated events but as connected occurrences of violence and resistance. The song reveals a sophisticated awareness of how the history of musical suppression is indistinguishable from political violence. In 1986 and while in exile, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o published *Decolonising the Mind* and called for African literature to confront the "cultural bomb" of colonial rule, where the goal was "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."<sup>10</sup> Artists see their music as meeting the challenge of rectifying the damages of colonialism that Ngũgĩ precisely identifies.

We can use the engagement of “Angalia Saa” with history to further explore how the characteristics of the colonial state set the foundations for the content and meaning of rap and other music. Ngũgĩ’s “cultural bomb” that detonated across the landscape was a slow, disjointed, and chaotic rollout of what would become Kenya’s colonial state. This apparatus birthed twin forces that impacted music: the capitalist growth of music production and the state’s squashing of public dissent—Nyanjiru’s murder an example of the latter. Nairobi grew to serve as a cultural hub and “commercial nerve” of international styles for eastern and central Africa, helped by its status as a major city in the British-settled colony.<sup>11</sup> This music economy continued for some sixty years until its restructuring in the late ’80s and early ’90s. The Kenyan music industry started in the 1920s and was constructed alongside the colonial economic system, and then prospered during the post-WWII period.<sup>12</sup> Like other arms of a capitalist machine, such as agricultural production, the industry profited from African labor. While colonial authorities did not have a direct hand in the industry *per se*, the repressive state apparatus normalized and created pathways for exploitation and extraction from which the industry concretized.<sup>13</sup> From the start, the cultural positioning of music mattered; songs that were produced in studios and sold within the colonies, Europe, and India were regarded as entertaining. Conversely, work that dispossessed people created, especially expressing anticolonial sentiment, often received censorship and a mark of illegality.

Around the turn of the twentieth century and when Kenya was under British control as the East African Protectorate, colonial state workers, so-called explorers, and anthropologists traveled to various communities and recorded musicians and singers, just as they did in present-day countries like Uganda, Tanzania, Rwanda, Burundi, and the Democratic Republic of the Congo.<sup>14</sup> These recordings would end up in many European institutions, like the British Library Sound Archive and the Berlin Phonogramm-Archiv, which still hold many originals today.<sup>15</sup> By 1907, the Protectorate state had implemented “extra economic coercion” through the hut and poll tax, forcing Africans into an economy of labor where people worked for wages subject to taxation.<sup>16</sup> Concurrently, the global music companies scrambled to divvy up control of the music markets, each taking portions of the globe, in striking similarity to the 1884–85 scramble to divide the continent among colonial powers. The Gramophone Recording Company grabbed the region that would come to be known as Kenya and other parts of British-occupied Africa, and five other major companies participated: Victor Talking Machine Company (later RCA) (U.S.), the Columbia Phonograph Company (later CBS) (U.S.), the Edison Company (U.S.), the Lindström Company (later Polygram) (Germany), and the Pathé Company (France).<sup>17</sup>

The Protectorate became a colony in 1920, just two years before Nyanjiru’s uprising and subsequent assassination. The colonial state took on the task of how to surveil and compel labor from Africans, like implementing the extremely

unpopular *kipande* work pass, meant to limit movement outside of African reserves.<sup>18</sup> Also, around 1920, an emerging British and Indian consumer base began to buy American, Indian, and European records imported into the territory.<sup>19</sup> In the colony, institutions of power determined whether music was deemed acceptable or offensive. Africans who recorded in studios or learned European religious hymns tied to churches made acceptable music in the eyes of the state. These individuals were participating in how the state determined something as banal or impactful as musical taste, and as Achille Mbembé states, engaged in practices “designed to alter the moral behavior of the colonized.”<sup>20</sup> Authorities viewed all other music suspiciously because of its potential to rally people against the colonial state.<sup>21</sup> From the 1920s, the Government Censorship Board (GCB) began to vet and ban any material, music, or performance undermining colonial domination.<sup>22</sup> For instance, the GCB targeted the nationalist Kikuyu Central Association and the associated Muigwithania paper.<sup>23</sup> Anticolonial uprisings drew strong responses from the state and ended in arrest, detention, or death. Beginning in the 1910s and continuing through the first half of the century, the state targeted people like Mekatilili wa Menza (sometimes written as Me Katilili) and prophet Ndongye wa Kauti, as well as the religious organizations of Mumbo and Dini ya Msambwa.<sup>24</sup> Colonial authorities also outlawed the supposedly seditious *Ituika* songs and dances, which celebrated and acknowledged Kikuyu traditional leadership. In 1930, under the Public Order Act, the British banned the Kikuyu circumcision song and dance, “*Mũthirigũ*,” which doubled as a performance of protest.<sup>25</sup>

The presence of prohibited protest music came simultaneously with the growing industry’s sale of commercial Kenyan sounds. By the end of the 1930s, the British company EMI had tremendous success selling records by local artists.<sup>26</sup> Several companies competed over the emerging star Shahir Sitti Binti Saad, a woman singer from Zanzibar, who sang the coastal *taarab* music. By 1928, she was in recording studios in Mombasa.<sup>27</sup> HMV, Gramophone, and Odeon all sought to profit from Saad and her band, who would go on to transform and popularize *taarab*.<sup>28</sup>

This incongruity, the state’s squashing of sounds labeled subversive, and the industry’s commodification of acceptable commercial music carried through the war, the State of Emergency, and into independence. The Mau Mau war for political independence ignited and continued the longer trajectory of freedom initiatives that began with earlier anticolonial movements. The sonic and dance performances of protest that blossomed were met with the state’s swift censorship and banning. Authorities hunted and jailed those who refused to comply. After WWII, King African Rifles and East African Army Service Corps fighters returned from Burma, the Horn, and the Middle East Command and formed bands like the Rhino Boys and the Peter Colmore African Band.<sup>29</sup> Returning fighters also delivered their own messages of liberation, helping spur the subversive Kikuyu *Mwomboko* song and



dance.<sup>30</sup> As Kenya's political climate intensified in the 1950s, songs continued to be censored by the colonial state or commercialized under the authority of music companies. To quell resistance, the forest fighters were regarded as an illegal group at the beginning of the 1950s, and a few years later, the almost decade-long State of Emergency began.<sup>31</sup> During the resistance, the Mau Mau composed a sizable catalog of songs that circulated orally. As mentioned above, at least one was about Mary Muthoni wa Nyanjiru's 1920s uprising.<sup>32</sup> Colonial authorities arrested then-activist Jomo Kenyatta in 1952, and about a year later, the state began to seize the land of the Mau Mau, others deemed terrorists, and people suspected of belonging to outlawed political parties. By 1956, 11,000 fighters were killed, with another 30,000 in detention camps.<sup>33</sup>

### KENYA'S CONGOLESE PREDICAMENT

During much of this political upheaval, the music industry faced its most significant period of growth when the colonial state, benefiting from the economic upturn at the end of WWII, actively encouraged the expansion of mass media, forming more radio stations.<sup>34</sup> Wealthier "uptown" studios like Peter Colmore's HMV Blue Label and Charles Worrod's Equator Records attracted musicians from the Kenyan elite and artists from the DRC, Zambia, Tanzania, and Uganda. Colmore and Worrod, both British, promoted their music locally but also tapped into a wider regional and global market. HMV had great success in selling Afro-Cuban music throughout Africa, including in Kenya.<sup>35</sup> In the 1960s, Equator Sound Studios was also highly active, pressing vinyl and recording singers like Fadhili William and Daudi Kabaka, as well as South African Miriam Makeba and Beninese Angelique Kidjo. Smaller Indian-run labels in the working-class "downtown" River Road areas included Capitol Music Stores (CMS), African Gramophone Stores (AGS), and the Mzuri label owned by the still-operating company Assanand and Sons Ltd.<sup>36</sup> River Road in Nairobi became a popular place for production and performances during this time and still is.<sup>37</sup>

Political instability and violence in the Congo caused people to flee the region, resulting in an influx of musicians to Kenya, Uganda, and especially Tanzania.<sup>38</sup> Congolese music first made it to Kenya through 78 records and those coming for studio sessions and gigs in Nairobi. However, musicians relocating to East Africa helped solidify the long-standing presence of Congolese sounds in the country.<sup>39</sup> Artists recorded with multinational companies, like EMI, Polygram, and CBS, by the late 1960s and early '70s.<sup>40</sup> Congolese rumba included famous singers like Jean Bosco Mwenda, Losta Abelo, and Edouard Masengo, who traveled into the then-new country of Kenya to record and perform.<sup>41</sup> Jean Bosco Mwenda, famous for his fingerstyle, and other Congolese artists sang in Swahili and played versions of Kenyan and Tanzanian songs.<sup>42</sup>



Although Congo bands created a popular niche, Kenyan artists continued to make and perform music. Benga artists included Fadhili William, D. O. Misiani and Shirati Jazz, Fundi Konde, Paul Machupa, Jumbe, and Daudi Kabaka.<sup>43</sup> Performers played the guitar with a distinct finger-picking style, drawing on the traditions of other stringed instruments.<sup>44</sup> Even today, Kenyan guitar music is deeply popular and richly nostalgic. Both dry (acoustic) and electric styles are firm fixtures in the country and extremely popular, even though these sounds have never acquired the same status as Congolese tunes regionally, across the continent, or outside the African market. Kenyan musician Joseph Kamaru managed to engage in both popular music and subversive protest throughout his career, spanning both the colonial and postcolonial epochs. Beginning in the 1940s, he composed and sang the outlawed Mwomboko songs before his successful career in the '60s.<sup>45</sup> His high-pitched voice and diverse lyrical subject matter accompanied upbeat guitar sounds, and he sang in both Mugithi and Benga genres, gaining appeal in East and South Africa. Later, in the '70s, he composed a song condemning the state for the extrajudicial killing of activist J. M. Kariuki (mentioned below), and from the '80s until his death in 2018, he continued to record popular music.

The emergence of jazz bands in the '60s solidified Congolese music's influence. Franco Luambo Makiadi's OK Jazz / TPOK Jazz and Tabu Ley, who joined the band African Jazz, enjoyed popularity globally and in Kenya.<sup>46</sup> Nairobians frequented a growing number of bars and nightclubs that played the music. Although Benga enjoyed some international popularity in the '80s, it could not compete with Congolese jazz.<sup>47</sup> Congolese artists also sang in Swahili to connect with audiences while performing in Kenya. Some Kenyan musicians decided to sing in Lingala and play in the Congo jazz band style to remain competitive.<sup>48</sup> Paul Zeleza notes that "Congo music [is] perhaps the most recognizable form of modern popular African music across the world."<sup>49</sup> Given its status as a center of production, Kenya has felt the force of Congolese music's fame and appeal. Caleb Okumu, in a critique of the government and music industry, argues, "The yardstick of music performance in Kenya seems to measure how well one can sing in the foreign language, Lingala."<sup>50</sup>

Older artists with whom I spoke during my research have recalled the inequalities and unevenness of this early industry. In my conversations, this has cohered around one important story, that of Benga singer Fadhili William. His narrative highlights issues surrounding copyright, profit, and the exploitative aspects of global music production. Fadhili William is the first known singer of the famous "Malaika," the 1959 song with sanguine guitar riffs and cheerful and fast lyrics. The story goes that William was thinking about a woman he loved and called her *malaika*, Swahili for angel. The version that became popular in East Africa was produced in 1963 after William joined The Equator Sound Band. William claimed he never received royalties for the piece despite numerous covers of the song.<sup>51</sup> The grievance for many is that the song entered the world market with William's legacy obscured and forgotten. Miriam Makeba's serene and softer rendition of

“Malaika” has been the most internationally well-known. In 1966, she and Harry Belafonte won a Grammy Award for an album that included the song.<sup>52</sup> William’s tale emerged when I asked reggae producer Jagero a general question: “So where do you think music is at right now in Kenya?”:

I’ll start from way before, in the sixties. Kenyans are very talented when it comes to music. 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.<sup>53</sup>

Jagero’s sentiment about William’s popularity and material poverty strongly mirrors hip hop artists’ discussion of Kalamashaka and Ukoo Flani Mau Mau’s inability to acquire wealth from the music they pioneered. The fact that hard work and talent cannot translate to economic wherewithal is a narrative that haunts artists in the industry. Gospel singer Mtawali also brought up Fadhili William. He expressed a similar sentiment of William dying penniless despite producing a globally recognized song: “Okay, he died a poor man; that is one. Okay, they said he was the composer of ‘Malaika.’ . . . That song is very controversial though no one knows who wrote it.”<sup>54</sup> William dying in poverty is most significant for Jagero and Mtawali, illustrating the unfortunate realities of artists’ powerlessness to profit from the music industry in Nairobi.

What is fascinating about William’s “Malaika” is that the song works to dispute the claims made within the discourses of cultural anxiety, specifically that the lack of music is the fault of artists and consumers. William’s saga is about how an artist came to be alienated from his own work, as the song reappeared as a foreign product and was consumable on the world market, where he could not receive the credit and recompense deserved. There is something interestingly relevant: even though “Malaika” still circulates in popular discourse and easily elucidates a broader problem in the structure of Nairobi’s relationship with global capitalist economies, the story of William is not enough evidence to overturn widespread claims that Kenya has a dearth of music and fans.

Stories of Kenyan music exemplify how colonial power and exploitative global markets sought to regulate and relegate bodies in ways that increased profits and stymied the agency and self-determination of African peoples, as we see with the stories of Nyanjiru’s unclothed refusal and the emergent Mau Mau songs referencing her, as well as Fadhili William’s inability to gain in a 1960s market. The state set conditions by which the music industry profited while overseeing the active censorship of the creativities and subversions of African bodily performances, dances, and movements. At the same time, a flourishing recording industry emerged that benefited companies like HMV, EMI, and Polygram. These companies’ preference at times for non-Kenyan sounds furthered the government’s political aims (both before and after independence) of downplaying Kenyan music because of its inherent or potentially subversive quality. Kenyan artists in the industry struggled, while many Congolese artists experienced comparably more success from the

expanding African continental and world markets. Yet, the impacts of the African music market in the country, including the rise of popular consumer taste in external styles at the expense of homegrown genres, has continued to engender soul-searching from Kenyan musicians and its devotees alike.

### MUSIC IN THE POSTCOLONY

After 1963, Kenya faced nagging questions about whether music could operate as a tool of cultural self-determination necessary to move beyond colonial rule. At the beginning of Jomo Kenyatta's leadership (1963–78), the entertainment scene seemed to benefit from his policies. His openness to foreign investment attracted the Phonogram company, which then operated the only regional pressing plant for records.<sup>55</sup> Phonogram's role solidified Nairobi as a center of music production that promoted large amounts of Congolese styles, which coincided with Congolese jazz bands' explosive regional popularity. Kenyatta created pathways for small business owners, which, as Ian Eagleson states, "in terms of music, led to more production labels, music stores and studios, equipment owners, and venues such as bars and hotels."<sup>56</sup> However, Kenyatta also used music and performance to his advantage. Mau Mau songs of rebellion were transformed into presidential praise songs. Like so many African presidents, he utilized singers and dancers as a theater of admiration during official ceremonies and events, what Mícere Mũgo calls "coerced *waheshimiwa* orature" or "neocolonial ululation culture."<sup>57</sup> He oversaw the covert squashing of political dissent, the ethnicized consolidation of state power and resources to Kikuyu elites, and music's continued censorship. Kenyatta inherited and continued to use a censorship board, then called the Kenya Broadcasting Corporation (KBC) Censorship Board.<sup>58</sup> Joseph Kamaru's arrest and beating for the 1975 song "J. M. Mwendwo ni Iri" was one of the most high-profile bans.<sup>59</sup> The song excoriated the killing of the well-loved and dissident politician J. M. Kariuki. Kenyatta never admitted to the murder, though all evidence indicates his administration was responsible.<sup>60</sup>

Moi's presidency (1978–2002) profoundly impacted music culture. In 1980, Moi promoted his nationalist agenda by issuing a quota that mandated that 75 percent of songs played on Voice of Kenya (VOK) (renamed from the Kenya Broadcasting Corporation) must be Kenyan in origin and then reissued this quota in 1988.<sup>61</sup> Moi must have felt particularly confident that filling airwaves of Kenyan sounds would not be a conduit of protest. His directives showed how much the music culture had been emptied of its political potential. In other words, the quotas indicated the deep shift away from songs that challenged and liberated and toward a compliant cultural system. However, companies, radio stations, and the VOK intensely disliked this measure to promote Kenyan music. Companies paid radio stations to play the genres they were producing, mostly Congolese, and thus faced profit loss.<sup>62</sup> These entities falsely argued that there were not enough Kenyan songs,

eventually causing the mandates to die.<sup>63</sup> In 1982, soldiers broke into the VOK to play East African pop and announced an unsuccessful coup d'état over radio airwaves.<sup>64</sup> These dissidents seemed to deliver the message of many past agitators—that music often accompanies, if not services, upheaval and revolt.

The failed coup shifted the climate by giving evidence to Moi that music must be under the state's constant review. The VOK's censorship board banned songs in ethnic languages and only played those in Swahili, English, or Lingala, and aired ones praising Moi, including "Rais Moi" (President Moi) and "Hongera Rais Moi" (Congratulations President Moi).<sup>65</sup> Odhiambo Osumba Rateng's "Baba Otonglo" and Joseph Kamaru's "Kenya ya Ngai" (God's Kenya) received censure.<sup>66</sup> Most patriotic songs had to contain the *nyayo* philosophy started by Kenyatta, which, among other precepts, asserts that following a leader is inherently African. Some Kenyan bands continued to play Congolese genres and/or sang in Lingala to secure gigs and avoid government surveillance. State-funded or supported groups like the Muungano Choir and traditional dancers were tasked to heap praises on the president, further muddying the waters about music's place within the nation.<sup>67</sup> Corporations created a market for Congolese sounds, then perpetuated beliefs about a shortage of Kenyan genres, and Moi banned ethnic songs in favor of those supposedly politically neutral. In addition to Congolese music, those tracks sung in Swahili were often considered unthreatening. At the same time, multinational companies like Polygram and CBS were pulling out of the country, their departure instigated by a thriving bootleg cassette tape industry, which meant that foreign music was sold unregulated and widely and cheaply available.<sup>68</sup> It is no wonder that people proclaim their dislike and suspicion of outside music in a setting where the spirit and vitality of Kenyan cultural expression have been perpetually cleared out. A large portion of Kenyan tunes during the 1980s and into the 1990s was co-opted for government purposes, censored and banned, and overshadowed by corporate and state preferences for Congolese and other international styles.

Yet, true to the defiant qualities of Kenyan art, musicians refused silence. Protest songs included Eric Wainaina's "Nchi ya Kitu Kidogo" (A Country of Bribes) (mentioned in chapter 4), Joseph Kamaru's "Mahoya ma Bururi" (Prayers for the Nation), Albert Gacheru's "Mucemanio wa Nyamu" (Meeting of the Animals) and his "Thina wa Muoroto" (Troubles of Muoroto). Artists felt the consequences; subversive sounds were not given airplay, Wainaina was sidelined, and Gacheru and Kamaru were briefly detained.<sup>69</sup>

It is within the difficulty of the Moi era that hip hop emerges. The 1980s were marked by his one-party and prebendal state benefiting the Kalenjin wealthy, where he eliminated opposition through imprisonment, extrajudicial killing, and exiles.<sup>70</sup> The '90s were not much better, as the impacts of structural adjustment programs (SAPs) and questionable election victories indexed by violence weighed on the nation.<sup>71</sup> Under- and unemployed urban youth, reeling from the poverty-inducing SAPs and the political climate, searched for another music to capture

their disenfranchisement and found hip hop. Shortly after it gained momentum in the United States in the '80s, bootlegged products were sold alongside the hip and urban Jamaican dancehall in Nairobi stalls. By the '90s, U.S. rap songs and videos appeared on television, radio, and in bars and clubs. Kalamashaka and the related collective Ukoo Flani Mau Mau (UFMM) formed in the mid-'90s. Kenyan artists tried their hand on the mic with Poxi Presha's "Total Balaa" (Total Chaos, 1995), Hardstone's "Uhiki" (Wedding, 1997), and Kalamashaka's "Au Siyo" (Or Not, 1998) and the renowned "Tafsiri Hii" (Translate This, 1998–99). The bootleg industry would draw the attention of the state, multinational corporations, and the World Trade Organization (WTO), all of whom wanted firmer regulations. Furthermore, the liberalized airwaves opened up possibilities for music to be played on the radio, as up to that point, the media had been largely controlled by the influential reach of the Moi state.<sup>72</sup> While censorship abounded, Kenyan hip hop gradually snuck into media spots, and Kalamashaka hosted the country's first hip hop Wakisisha Show on the radio station Nation FM.<sup>73</sup> By 2000, hip hop was a mainstay.

#### THE MUSIC INDUSTRY: *HIYO NI TRICKY*<sup>74</sup>

Rappers who were tapped into the political climate argued that they were mouthpieces of the masses of angry and frustrated young people. Moi slowly capitulated to international and domestic pressure and held multiparty elections, making a pathway for Mwai Kibaki to win the 2002 election.<sup>75</sup> Like many people, these artists sighed in relief at the end of Moi's rule and desperately wanted to take advantage of the promises of a multiparty and neoliberal Kenya. Kibaki's presidency (2002–13) promised a new form of governance in the nation: "There was unheralded jubilation and heightened expectation that the change in regime . . . marked the dawn of a new era."<sup>76</sup> This apparent change was demonstrated poignantly by the appropriation and reproduction by Kibaki and his party, the National Rainbow Coalition (NARC), of Gidi Gidi Maji Maji's famous hype song, "Unbwogable."<sup>77</sup> During at least one political campaign concert, the group rapped enthusiastically alongside Kibaki. Wanting to convey change and attentiveness to a young populace, Kibaki crafted a positive image of himself to voting young people. He disrupted the Kenya African National Union's forty-year rule, symbolizing a break from the oppressive and hackneyed form of governance long associated with Moi, and he capitalized on people's hope, desperation, and unrelenting desire to see fundamental change. Extrajudicial killings, widespread and blatant corruption, and the tragic and hallmarked 2007–8 postelection violence dampened the aspirations that many had of a transformative Kibaki presidency. Initiatives like constitution reform and job assistance for the youth were marked by corruption and mismanagement.<sup>78</sup> These questionable schemes include the haphazardly created and enforced Michuki *matatu* safety regulations, with the overly punitive elimination of *matatus*' elaborate and colorful graffiti art and music.<sup>79</sup>

The Kibaki era saw WTO policies and the renewed Music Copyright Society of Kenya (MCSK) opening new complications. During the 1990s, Kenyan hip hop could be heard in some popular venues. Kiosks and shops along River Road sold inexpensive copies of Kenyan rap, gospel, and other popular genres. Yet by the 2000s, music in the informal sectors was no longer as widely available as it once had been. CD copies of African American rap like Tupac or 50 Cent and the underground Kalamashaka in cheap plastic sleeves were replaced by a hefty dose of U.S. music bound in hard CD covers displaying state-issued copyright stickers. These changes were due to the implementation of copyright legislation as part of the nation's membership status with the WTO and the Trade Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) Agreement.<sup>80</sup>

On the surface, adhering to copyright standards and paying royalties is critical for mainstream and underground artists to earn profits. Yet the enforcement of TRIPS voided the informal practices and exchanges that much of the music industry was built upon and long depended on, meaning that many bars, clubs, *matatus*, and other venues did not play Kenyan music. Prior to the new Music Copyright Society of Kenya (MCSK) policies, music sales were an unreliable avenue to economic success for most artists, especially those who were noncommercial. But they were a marketing method and a way to book live performances on which most rappers have depended. After the new regulations, many vendors would not sell music that appeared to have a low production quality because the music looked bootlegged. News reports showed at the time how police rounded up music without the appropriate copyright stickers and publicly set fire to piles of CDs in the middle of the city center.<sup>81</sup> Especially during the Kibaki years, the MCSK used the police or private security officers to confront bar and restaurant owners, *matatu* operators, and other vendors for not adhering to policies. Some more high-profile encounters turned violent, made the news, and gave the MCSK a questionable reputation.<sup>82</sup> These stories of public destruction of music have waned over the years, but they still exist in public memory, and the threat of force remains, even if nominally.

I had several noteworthy interactions with street and stall vendors that spanned several years. Most of my fieldwork occurred during a shift away from CD copies to digital sharing via phone Bluetooth, and websites like ReverbNation and YouTube.com. One afternoon in 2011, a friend and I maneuvered our way through the crowded sidewalks and noisy streets of the city center with one steadfast objective: to buy Kenyan hip hop from the local street vendors in music stalls. I approached an eager vendor. When I stated what I wanted, she disappointedly about-faced and said softly and reluctantly that she only had a DJ mix for sale. I purchased the music for 300 KSH (approximately 2.50 USD), and my friend requested she play the CD to ensure its usability—a common practice. She looked shocked that we would ask and immediately refused, asserting that she could not play Kenyan music publicly because it was illegal. Her reaction to a simple request surprised me, yet I took

the item and left. Out of a week of attempting to buy Kenyan rap from street vendors, this CD was the only one I could acquire. It had become increasingly clear that purchasing rap, or any other Kenyan popular music, was no longer an easy exercise but a painstaking process of chasing down vendors and following misinformed leads about where to buy music. The music we attempted to purchase would have been pirated or informally produced—that is, it was homemade or looked that way. Such music had become so commonplace that I thought nothing of buying it on the streets. Yet, unlike during my visit a decade prior, I could not acquire any Kenyan music. However, there were endless supplies of bootlegged Nollywood and American films, in addition to Congolese, Tanzanian, Nigerian, Ugandan, and other foreign albums. Even Kenyan gospel, which has been widely available and popular, was absent. The vendor's hesitance to sell me the music and her refusal to demonstrate the CD's usability are indicators of what I later discovered was her avoiding unwanted attention and fears of retribution resulting from the copyright laws and policies of the state.

I visited music stalls on Moi Avenue during a 2012 visit. After realizing that some Kenyan music had reappeared in stores, I requested hip hop, and a salesperson stated that he did not have it; instead, he had U.S. styles, which were bootleg copies. I pressed him as to the total absence of Kenyan rap music, and he told me that “they” did not want him to sell “pirated music.” I asked him if all local rap was pirated, and he hesitated and thought for a bit before stating that the original copies were too expensive. Although he never specified who “they” referred to, at the time there were several factors at play, including the law enforcement's crack-down on noncopyrighted music and the MCSK, as well as the Kenya Copyright Board (KECOBO), which is the government body that gives licensing powers to the MCSK. I mentioned this interaction to rapper Evaredi, who responded:

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, it's like telling people the truth. So hip hop and the government are not on the same line.<sup>83</sup>

Evaredi's view that the state targets the music and prevents its sale is a sentiment I heard among many artists. However, there is little evidence that specific genres are subject to prohibition.

While not as aggressive with enforcement, the Uhuru administration (2013–22) simply continued the policies that began under Kibaki. As I wrapped up my fieldwork in 2018, I returned to Nairobi's streets, scouring the stalls for vendors selling Kenyan music. Someone told me, “We don't sell CDs anymore.” This was somewhat true, as sellers still regularly cut American and Nollywood films onto DVDs, and a few still vend Tanzania's Bongo Flava music. During the same trip, I traveled to Eldoret to a shopping mall where someone was selling music in an entertainment store fitted with bright neon lights, video game consoles, and a young



middle-class crowd milling about. The seller boasted of his expansive Tanzanian catalog, and when a friend I was with pressed him for Kenyan music, the vendor replied negatively, “Hiyo ni tricky” (That is tricky).

The MCSK is seen as an organization that steals money without reproach, uses force to implement measures, and threatens those it sees as not complying. Some rappers register with no expectations of getting paid; as Evaredi noted, “Basically, you’ll be there [you’ll register] because it’s the only opportunity you can get.”<sup>84</sup> Ndugus stated he is sent in circles: “I’m registered. I have my songs on radio, television. When I go there, [they say] come tomorrow. . . . They never pay us.”<sup>85</sup> And many artists do not bother to register. Funzo Kuu stated, “They swindle money; they play your songs without telling you. They use your songs in advertisements. . . . You register for your royalties, but you have to go and ask for your cash. You have to ask and beg for your money.”<sup>86</sup>

The MCSK adds much difficulty to an industry already racked with issues by fleecing monies that should be allocated for artists. The frustrations artists feel stem from a lack of structures advocating for them. Many could not afford the fees and did not register, meaning that their songs had no chance of being sold in stalls, played in *matatus*, or appearing on television or radio. Others faced bias on River Road when vendors, too fearful of reprisal, refused to sell their products. The copyright laws banned any pirated music, not any one genre. Underground albums also “look” pirated. Most do not have stickers, and the CDs are in inexpensive plastic wrap with a grainy copy of an image for the album cover. Because it looks unofficial, vendors do not want to sell anything that could be confused with being pirated. Most salespeople would rather refuse to sell hip hop and be assured they will not face reprisals from the state than vet music to figure out what is legitimate.

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 sounds. The government policies, MCSK practices, and the fear of retribution all create the implementation of a ban even when no such law or policy exists. It is effective and inconspicuous; it cannot generate outcry and disapproval in Kenya or internationally in the same way that a perspicuous law can. Following the logic of Giorgio Agamben, who wrote that “a ban is a form of relation,” we may understand these artists as not separated from the law “but, rather *abandoned* by it.”<sup>87</sup> The words of Agamben are the sentiment of artists; they believe the state both bans and purposely does not support underground hip hop, and thus, artists feel forsaken. Enforcement, or just force, can ensure that people in the music business, especially vendors, police themselves to avoid conflict with state or quasi-state actors.

Moreover, from the standpoint of fans and consumers across genres, it might appear that there is a lack of music culture, that venues dislike Kenyan sounds, or that artists are not interested in recording. Rappers want to see the MCSK

function correctly; others long for the ability to make music without feeling coerced into a formalized economy, recognizing the bootleg industry's positive role in their own struggling careers. Those practitioners who advocate seeing it function to their benefit acknowledge that consumer sales are not the way to go but understand that the exposure might secure TV and radio slots, which could garner royalty collection. The new wave of MCSK policies that have hit the country in the past fifteen years has been inconsistent and corrupt, leaving musicians feeling that a state-like entity has squandered this hope of monetary gain. Replacing colonial and postindependence censorship, the implementation of TRIPS compliance has ultimately contributed to the absence of Kenyan music in many public spaces, which continues to ignite discussions of so-called consumer-driven cultural lack.

The noncommercial hip hop artists with whom I have spoken assert their biggest challenge is this restrictive industry created by the MCSK, the state, and the laws governing copyright issues. For many, these entities blur together. Recall Evaradi's comment above when I asked him why vendors do not want to sell rap, and he began talking about the state. While he does not discuss the MCSK per se, he believes that the government has a direct role in the industry. Several artists and producers I have spoken with have mistakenly conflated the MCSK and the state. Take graffiti artist Esen's comment:

*RP:* How does the government view so-called underground hip hop? Do they care about it?

*Esen:* I don't even know what the Music [Copyright] Society of Kenya does. So, if I must, I don't think so. I don't think they support [musicians] in any way cuz if they do, they would have created structures that would make it easier for underground artists to break even.<sup>88</sup>

Although I asked about the state, Esen answered by discussing the MCSK. His comment highlights how people have come to understand this organization through state power, and in essence, the MCSK has become an extension of the state through its practices of force. This perception has worked to the organization's advantage. The more people confuse the MCSK with the state, and the more they self-police in fear of reprisal or perceived powerlessness, the greater the power this entity wields. 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.'"<sup>89</sup> While there needs to be more evidence to support Wanyama and Kibukosya's claims that the government hinders musicians purposefully, their thoughts raise questions about who stands to benefit from policies. Of course, censorship still occurs in Kenya, but it is more likely that the difficulty

musicians face is the result of ineffective policies and poor implementation that are not geared to help artists in the first place.

### RADIO PLAY

In 2015, musicians protested in the streets of the Central Business District (CBD), outraged at the amount of South African, Nigerian, and Tanzanian music played. A collective known as the Kenya Musician Movement (KENAM) demanded that 70 percent of music on radios be Kenyan and called out the system of bribery that stands in the way of artists obtaining a spot.<sup>90</sup> Popular radio stations that these protesters cited also play a large amount of songs from the U.S., including KISS 100, Capital FM, Ghetto Radio, and Homeboyz Radio. Perhaps recognizing that the U.S. and U.K. slots were not worth fighting over, KENAM attempted to vie for airtime given to other African music. The protests sparked another round of debates over whether the system was unfair to Kenyan artists or whether other African music was better.

Radio stations have always played outside music. Historically, various components feed into this, like the lengthy presence and popularity of Congolese genres, the ban on Kenyan music deemed subversive in the 1980s, and radio stations that resisted a state-imposed quota to play Kenyan music. Christopher Okumu reported that in 2001, some programs on the KBC played 100 percent of music from other places.<sup>91</sup> Mellitus Wanyama cited a report that stated in 2002, 90 percent of songs played on the radio were from outside the country.<sup>92</sup> Currently, even Ghetto Radio, cited by many of the artists that I spoke with for having a good reputation for playing Kenyan underground rap, plays a large amount of non-Kenyan music. When Kenyan songs are played on most stations, they are primarily from the mainstream.

Musicians believe that the radio avoids paying royalties to artists by playing a hefty fare of American and other international music. "If you play like 50 Cent, here in Kenya," contended 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 songs (that's me!), I'll just be like, 'Hey!' You know?"<sup>93</sup> Judge asserted that these stations have an immediate money-saving incentive not to showcase Kenyan tunes. He may be correct, as Wanyama's analysis concluded that radio stations owed 68.2 million shillings to the MCSK in 2002 for the Kenyan music played.<sup>94</sup> Popular stations have always played a large amount of western music, even before the 2003 copyright regulations, and the MCSK claims that they pay remittances to foreign entities, though it is hard to ascertain if this occurs.<sup>95</sup> Regardless of the percentage of Kenyan music they play, stations must obtain a license from the MCSK and pay a flat rate annually.

Radio stations play American music and other international sounds, most likely to avoid royalty collection but also to appeal to advertiser demands because of

the long-running privilege of western music. It is doubtful that the MCSK remits money to international entities. If the MCSK did pay royalties to global companies and bodies, there would likely be a dramatic decrease in the amount of copied and unregistered non-Kenyan albums, films, and television programs on DVD and CD that are sold in stalls. Since externally produced materials are still widely found, this suggests that the MCSK and KECOBO are mostly responsible for products made within the country. However, confusion and a disconcerting lack of transparency remain, which works to the MCSK's advantage.

Most actors in the industry argue that one must have inside connections to obtain radio spots. Many emphatically stress that knowing the right people helps to get onto the radio.<sup>96</sup> Reggae producer Jagero stated, "Most of the artists who are big names, they have a clique. When you deliver your music to the music station, only a certain clique gets frequent airplay. But if you are an upcoming artist and you are a broke one, for that matter, and you come from downtown [poor areas], you're in for a real shock."<sup>97</sup> Similarly, Judge asserted that bribing is so typical 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 haven't been asked or something. They normally pay automatically."<sup>98</sup> No one I interviewed admitted they had to bribe DJs, but the practice is widespread and unexceptional. DJ Adrian (Washika) 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 a 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."<sup>99</sup>

At the time of our interview, Washika worked at Capital FM and has since deejayed at several popular and wealthier locations, including Amboseli Gardens. His role has made him a gatekeeper in the industry. Washika affirms this by contending that he can choose what he plays and "within the first five seconds" decides if it is worth a radio spot.<sup>100</sup> The diverse actors contributing to the makeup of the music business play an essential part, whether DJs like Washika, 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. The cutthroat industry and copyright policies do similar work to Moi's one-party rule and multinationalals that once sought to exclude certain Kenyan sounds. The agents in the industry might differ today, but the results are the same. The radio's tradition of playing a base of outside genres has continued for a combination of the reasons mentioned and not merely due to one cause. Notably, every recent policy, mandate, and practice seems to have discouraged the growth of a diverse industry inclusive of underground artists.

Many hip hop practitioners, as well as scholars, hold conceptions that underground music is too controversial for commerciality. Hip hop researcher Halifu 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.”<sup>101</sup> In an above conversation with Evaredi, we discussed why hip hop is not sold in vendor stalls. I also asked him why some gospel is found in stores and hip hop is not. He responded, “After diluting your content in music, that’s when basically you will get airplay, 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.”<sup>102</sup> 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. While the subversive nature of underground rap does not *wholly* explain why noncommercial songs are not played on the radio, especially given the presence of mainstream songs that seek to challenge the state, what does seem to be the case, as Evaredi noted, is that the state and the industry serve as gatekeepers and create settings whereby underground rap is marginalized. I did not ask Evaredi what he meant by “diluting your content,” but his subsequent words suggested that “diluting content” involves eliminating songs that question political authority and producing palatable sounds that harmonize rather than disrupt in the way many underground beats do.

DJ Adrian cautioned that aspiring artists need to pay attention to production issues. “Production is very important. You find that sometimes they [the songs] are not mastered. So, the vocals are low [puts his hand down gesturing at a low level], the music is up there [and then puts his hand up, elucidating the disjuncture].”<sup>103</sup> DJ Adrian did not view the industry as restrictive:

*RP:* One of the things that some folks say [is that] it’s really hard to make it in the music industry because you always have to know people.

*DJ Adrian:* I don’t think that is really true because 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?

*DJ Adrian:* Yeah, your track will be good . . . 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.<sup>104</sup>

DJ Adrian believes that artists should be willing to pay to create good songs, a video, or an album. One aspect he overlooks is that some musicians lack the means to invest. Sentiments like his reflect the idea that most musicians cannot enter the business without wherewithal 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 this system. DJ Adrian's perspective is not widely shared among many rappers I interviewed, as most view the industry as flawed and the obstacles as burdensome.

Recommendations for a national and standardized quota for radio and television have long circulated in public discourse. The Kenya Culture Policy (more recently called the Kenya National Policy on Culture and Heritage) is in place to facilitate and assist in creating a foundation for the acknowledgment and celebration of Kenyan musical and cultural traditions, following UNESCO's initiatives to honor and celebrate various ethnic customs.<sup>105</sup> In the past, the committees of the Kenya Culture Policy have set quotas for the amount of local music played on the radio—in 1980, at 80 percent.<sup>106</sup> The 2009 version notably cited colonialism's attempted erasure of practices and traditions as a rationale for a firm policy.<sup>107</sup> Musicians and nonmusicians agree with such conclusions and directives, believing that since consumers will not choose Kenyan sounds first and foremost, the government should intervene and execute the commitment to a flourishing culture. Even though quotas have not appeared in recent versions of the Culture Policy, many artists I interviewed often cited what they thought was the authorized percentage to demonstrate the absence of Kenyan songs on local airwaves. For instance, Mtawali referenced a 40 percent local / 60 percent foreign mandate, while Judge cited that DJs aim for 30 percent local / 70 percent foreign in clubs.<sup>108</sup> 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 percent local content, and the rest is from western places."<sup>109</sup> These artists' statements were always postulations; no one knew whether a current quota was in place or what it was. But, like KENAM's 2015 protest, they were committed to the idea of them as concrete measures that the government should take to correct the inequitable radio play. These conversations about quotas were always discussed within the context of a broader notion of absence and cultural lack, specifically how the government facilitates such inadequacies. Moreover, the deployment of the quota discourse was evidence that circuitously implies that left to the devices of consumers and musicians, other African and western music would dominate. The issue of quotas points to corporate radio decisions and perhaps the government's inability or disinterest to intervene in the industry for the actual material benefit of artists. And yet the entrenched discourses of cultural anxiety, including the frustration over the influx of U.S. country and pop in the '70s and '80s, hip hop and R&B in the '90s to the present, and Congolese genres throughout, will continue to point to people as responsible for the scarcity of Kenyan music.

Aside from the industry standards limiting possibilities, socioeconomic class also heavily determines the production and circulation of music. Most mainstream and commercial artists who sustain television and radio airplay are from the middle and upper classes; they already have cultural capital, connections,

ways in the door, a method of favored communication, assumed legitimacy, and the privilege of everyday resources. Artists must have these connections to mainstream production houses and corporate performance venues to make it to the radio for any prolonged period. Baby T, for instance, has recorded with ATL Entertainment, which promotes her products. She has performed at middle-class venues like Tribeca Lounge and K1 Klub House. Most noncommercial rappers, however, do not have regular access to venues like this. Artists state that it costs about 20,000–60,000 KSH (160–490 USD) to produce one reasonably good song and up to 100,000 KSH (800 USD) to assemble a video with basic quality. Because of a lack of resources, it is common for songs to have low production quality, and some of their videos contain irregularities and mistakes. Combined with their frustrating tales of the MCSK, a collective experience of exclusion from the media, and their individual challenges recording, their working-class status contributes both to the music's marginal cultural location and to emergent political sensibilities, the latter of which the following chapters explore.

#### MUSICAL AGENCY AND THE IMPORTED BLACK BODY

Cultural anxiety discourses that produce the “Kenyans don’t appreciate Kenyan music” statement work to formulate truths about people, human agency, and the postcolonial subject, even if the actual statement is faulty. The widespread sentiment of cultural anxieties promotes the idea that people do not appreciate Kenyan music and leads to the view that artists’ work is so influenced by outside inspirations that it lacks relevance, context, and pride. Moreover, these beliefs posit that artists remain locked in a practice of always copying or imitating a culture that ultimately does not belong to them. Cultural anxieties about taste are rife within the material, economic, and political struggles of Nairobi. The histories of the music industry, the western imports of antiblack racism, and the 1960s call for cultural independence all bear responsibility for creating a discourse that vets and often jettisons hip hop. The lack of Kenyan music in many public or commercial spaces spoon-feeds this anxiety, and whether consumer taste can be blamed lies at the center of these accusations. If there is an overabundance of American hip hop and pop on radio, do the middle-class buying youth shoulder the burden of that circumstance? What about rappers who supposedly imitate African Americans? Should the musician participating in the long-standing borrowing of Congolese styles also assume responsibility if rappers are indicted? Whatever the answers, this remark—Kenyans don’t appreciate Kenyan music—asks people to draw boundaries around what Kenyan music should be and holds people responsible for creating an accessible industry.

Hip hop enters a scene already marked by widespread perceptions that the available Kenyan sounds are derivative. There is a continued claim that the populace fails to vet pernicious outside influences and neglects to see the creative richness



within their borders. Such ideas concern agency, self-determination, and the need to assess external cultural forces. The older artists, DJs, and producers who supported this allegation referenced its assumed historical accuracy, while younger critics spoke about how current artists uncreatively borrow from outside. I talked to Mtawali about the general state of the music industry. At one point in our conversation, I asked about what needs to shift for people to benefit. He responded by urging people to change their preferences:

*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?

*Mtawali:* Um, I think the reason is [it's] something that started a long time ago. We are like copycats. We really don't have a national identity. In every aspect. Look at the dress. If you go to Congo, now, you'll tell [that that is] 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 [the same]. So, musically, there has been a Benga [music], which is trying to come out.<sup>110</sup>

Mtawali argued that despite some shared histories, geographies, and politics, the DRC, Tanzania, and Rwanda have managed to carve out national identities and music cultures, while Kenya is stuck in constant appropriation.

The discourse of cultural anxiety constitutes a collection of ideas that obfuscates the state's role and mystifies the industry's powerful actors. Corporations and capitalist enterprises are let off the hook and their extractive practices muddled. While some artists acknowledge the presence of historical censorship bans and a current unfair industry, these facts are not used to explain the absence of music deemed Kenyan. Specifically, cultural anxiety discourses hail rappers, devotees, and others, thereby interpellating them as a particular postcolonial subject—victims of, rather than agents against, the onslaught of globally dominant cultural productions. Those who dislike the music are also hailed, particularly those willing to disparage hip hop in the name of challenging outside influence. Most practitioners understandably and swiftly condemn those who deride rap and assert themselves as people who resist subjugation, offer social and global critiques, and remain dedicated to Kenyan traditions. To give an example, consider graffiti artist Esen's comment about navigating mimicry claims:

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 a 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.<sup>111</sup>

Here, Esen defended why rap is relevant and argued that the music is an extension of Kenyan cultural traditions, encouraging people to adopt an expansive understanding of hip hop's genealogy.

I have regularly watched television shows like *Mseto*, which showcases dancehall, Afropop, and some mainstream hip hop, and is aired in the evening, usually between 5 p.m. and 6 p.m. While doing so, friends and others who wandered into the room commented on whatever music video was displayed. Most people who were not fans of hip hop exclaimed, "See? This is a complete copy of U.S. music!" Shocked, I often wondered if we were watching the same program. I saw Afropop, dancehall, and commercial artists rapping in Swahili, frequently incorporating Congolese dance styles and with Nairobi and other East African urban backdrops. When I asked what they meant, responses were often vague: "I mean, their whole style . . . just everything is a copy." The signifier of apparent derivativeness seemed to be an aurally embodied performance: how rappers moved their bodies when they voiced their lyrics, how singers gestured as they sang the hook of songs, and how these artists danced to synthesized beats. Surely, some of these critiques must have been due to hip hop's usual references to nice cars, new urban clothing styles, and occasional ghetto backdrops. Yet, it seems that the corporealities interfacing with rap beats eerily similar to African American artists were fundamental to these criticisms. These decriers mapped African American embodiments onto Kenyan rappers, hoping that the indictments of mimicry would serve as enough warning to avoid the music. After all, what Kenyan artists do with their bodies in spaces is inevitably connected to the agitative ways they produce their subjectivity.

Contemporarily and globally speaking, rap continues to garner perhaps the most controversy of any other genre of music for its confrontational style and content and its deep ties to lower-class African American youth experiences: "The ghettos of North America continue to be the primary cultural referent for hip hop around the globe."<sup>112</sup> Indeed, rap's critics often are older folks who accuse young people of succumbing to the appealing lure of American music and lifestyles. Underneath this disrepute hides antiblackness. For many nondevotees, hip hop is a monolithic genre that signifies misplaced Black American rage, sounding disturbingly illegible, often crass, and nihilistic. Most African countries have historiographies of cultural anxieties surrounding U.S. music, and rap appears as a focal point of youth interest and critics' disgruntlement. In formerly colonized countries, hip hop provokes debates about American cultural imperialism that easily slide into derision for African American people. U.S. rap is commonly regarded as the worst example of American culture, a signal of moral rot and urban backwardness commodified into sellable rebellion. Zine Magubane cites the beloved South African jazz musician Hugh Masekela, who once stated, "[Our] children walk with a hip hop walk and they think they are Americans . . . [they have] an African-American reject personality."<sup>113</sup> Bantu Mwaura acerbically writes that Kenyan artists "regurgitate Black American perversion of gangsterism and sexism."<sup>114</sup> Critics

contend that American rap is only a cheap commodity meted out to the masses, void of cultural value or relevance in a Kenyan and African context. Many cite the gangsta rap of the 1990s, which traveled to the country in plentiful supply during that time. Gangsta rap supposedly embodies the worst of American excess and is the site of assumed personal failure, laziness, and violence. Overlooked in these conceptions are the interventions that gangsta rap makes. R. A. T. Judy (Ronald A. T. Judy) suggests the gangsta rapper, or the figure of the nigga, rejects a moral economy meant to keep Black bodies in place and embodies a “commodity affect” that sells “anger, rage, intense pleasure.”<sup>115</sup> For its critics, detested American hip hop is the quintessential cultural example of empire decaying from within. The problem is not just that African youth listen to American rap; it is that they want to *make* hip hop, *become* rap artists, and *perform* rap embodiments, like Masekela’s “reject personality” and “African American walk.” Interestingly, the embodiment of rap aesthetics—the walk, talk, clothing, style, and the actual music—has agitated detractors. This harmful form of American racism is deployed to impugn American products, which then connects to more profound and historical apprehensions about so-called outside sounds in Kenya.

The historical and international circulation of African American genres also contributes to how people receive hip hop. Beginning during WWI, blackface, ragtime, and jazz helped create ideas about how aurality and corporeality were racialized. In African contexts like Kenya, Tanzania, Ghana, Liberia, Nigeria, and South Africa, jazz and ragtime bands blended with local styles and took off as popular urban genres. These performative styles carried with them discourses of *primitivist modernism*, to cite Louis Chude-Sokei.<sup>116</sup> The Black body was cast as still backward and subhuman but fused with the civilized sounds of sonic Americana and cosmopolitan urbanisms. In Kenya and Tanzania, the British and Germans put together military brass bands as part of their colonial projects and participation in the world wars. Stephen Martin remarks that the bands initially sounded “rough and unpolished . . . to the European ear” and cites German ethnographer Karl Weule’s description, “Both bands are under official patronage. . . I cannot say much for the proficiency of the native performers; in any case, their music was accompanied by a great deal of noise.”<sup>117</sup> Nonetheless, the ideological goal was to impress European military training and the lessons of musical time on the savage African.

The theme of the untamed Black body and its relationship to technologies surfaced in jazz’s global popularity. As the music spread, highly desirable styles emerged that brought together ideologies of Black people’s abilities to perform instrumentally and corporeally, combining the supposed “inhuman machinic accuracy of jazz choreography” and Black people’s “supposedly innate ability to swing and jive.”<sup>118</sup> The attractive duality of primitive bodily movement and obedience to the machine of the instrument came to typify the racial codes of Black jazz that would be transmitted and exported across U.S. borders. Jazz’s presence did

not exist without significant disputes about Americanization, even as early as the 1910s, in places like South Africa.<sup>119</sup> In this country, musicians like Hugh Masekela would later use jazz as a subversive, a protest against the apartheid government and in collaboration with U.S. artists and their struggles. Its evolution and white appropriation now mean jazz is respectable in the U.S., and in Kenya, it can confer a sophisticated cosmopolitanism. But the conversations it birthed about racial codes and Black people's relationships to music did not end and were spun into other genres like hip hop. Interrogations about hip hop have abounded: Would Black and African peoples use the sound system and computers to create music that inserts them into cosmopolitanism, modernism, and sophistication? Can African peoples use technologies to divest from their supposed atavistic and raw instincts and create desirable sounds? How much difference is acceptable as avant-garde innovations, and what difference exceeds the bounds of respectability?

In Kenya, colonial racism merged with U.S. globalized antiblackness to form racial codes. Carolyn Shaw notes how the British colonialists smuggled American ideas of blackness into the territory: "In colonialist imagery the Kikuyu and the Maasai form a contrasting pair similar to the black American slave and the wild Indian in American folklore."<sup>120</sup> For Shaw, colonist discourse identified both the Kikuyu and the African American slave as inherently "corrupt and corruptible," thus justifying the permanent subjection of U.S. Black people and Africans from Kenya.<sup>121</sup> In the postcolony, respectability politics attempt to save Kenyans from this abject status, purporting a Christian middle-class ethic that distances themselves from the savage Black figure. Relatedly, contemporary social bottom politics is extant, whereby groups of people are relegated to the underside of society, such as queer people, the poor, the mentally unstable, and those deemed lazy or permanently wretched.

Global racisms lie on one side of this discourse of cultural vetting, and on the other is a postindependence notion of what it means to resist cultural imperialism. In the 1960s, men scholars at the University of Nairobi interrogated the figure of the postcolonial subject and its supposed desire to remain in relationships of dependence.<sup>122</sup> Many like Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Okot p'Bitek, Taban Lo Liyong, Eisha Stephen Atieno-Odhiambo, Bethwell Ogot, and others demanded that African culture should be the cellular unit upon which the nation should be built.<sup>123</sup> These scholars vigorously sought to shed the notion that Kenyans and other Africans were forever dependent and thus outside humanity. To be dependent means to be located at the bottom of society without choice, will, individual drive, or purpose. The solution was a return to and reclamation of African cultures. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's famous essay "On the Abolition of the English Department" proposed, "If there is need for a 'study of the historical continuity of a single culture,' why can't this be African?"<sup>124</sup> The question did not stop there; culture was meant to be the imperative strand that stitched together and structured Kenyan and other African nationalisms. In other words, the role of culture is not just to

provide subjects with pride and identity; it is also a means to build a nation of free-thinking and acting people.<sup>125</sup> Mbũgwa wa Mũngai cautions that this moment also “[ran] the very real danger of instituting a nativistic project” through hardening notions of Africanness.<sup>126</sup>

The argument for cultural nationalism is circular: If people center their traditions and practices, they can create a sustaining nation, and if a country is built on prioritizing Kenyan culture, the people will prosper. In short, constructing a nation out of the ruins of colonial rule should not come at the expense of the cultural character of Kenya. Traditions and practices can supposedly resolve some of the country’s most profound issues.<sup>127</sup> This line of thought for cultural nationalists delegates culture to carry out monumental duties, such as providing safety and security to the country, enabling human dignity, and operating as a framework for a functioning state. Cultural nationalism has shortcomings; it often locks women into being permanent carriers of culture and in servitude to the nation, and it effaces larger economic forces that structure societies and determine people’s destiny while running the racist risk of implying the global south is poor because it lacks culture. Yet, the persistent demand to center Kenyan cultures has been imperative and critical for academics, rappers, and anyone else with an opinion on Kenyan society, and this is because cultural definition and freedom are fundamentally attached to human agency and self-determination.

#### CULTURAL ANXIETIES, CONSIDERED

The 2018 short documentary *Nu Nairobi: Inside Nairobi’s Music Scene* explores several pertinent topics and debates about what it means to make Kenyan music.<sup>128</sup> Mainly focused on the lively dance-fused scenes in Nairobi’s western and wealthier areas, the documentary begins by debunking the idea that Kenyan styles are statically “traditional” and only associated with drums and guitars. The narrators argue that colonialism disrupted the nation’s lyricism and performances and assert that there is not one Kenyan genre, contending that a multiplicity of styles coexist, including hip hop. While *Nu Nairobi* credits Taarab and Benga, it centers on middle- and upper-class nightlife in Nairobi and focuses on Afropop, neo-soul, hip hop, and techno. The documentary turns anxiety discourses inside out, and musicians refuse to believe that there is a scarcity of Kenyan genres. Mainstream rapper Octopizzo argues, “We don’t have, like, Kenyan music. It’s not like Tanzania where there is one style of music, and you go to Nigeria, there’s one style of music, which for me is a good thing because everyone can do their own thing.” Immediately following this, radio presenter Patricia Kihoro of Homeboyz Radio argues, “We just want to make music, and it’s Kenyan because we are Kenyan!” The sentiment from this moment is that while there may not be one coherent popular genre attached to the country, this is not a deficiency. Octopizzo and Kihoro instead identify how artists seize control of production in the directions of their

choosing and that this is the definition of Kenyan music. The documentary pulls viewers into Nairobi nightlife; in between interviews with major industry players, there are synthesized background sounds interspersed with young people dancing near stages, large audiences moving to the flow of performers, and DJs grooving over their turntables while they spin. Clubgoers are framed as taking advantage of a wide range of genres as they participate in sonic embodiments of leisure and carefreeness.

No sooner are we taken in by the seductive imagery of beaming faces and lively crowds than the documentary takes a curt but necessary detour toward difficulties and disunities. Here, artists begin discussing class divisions in hip hop music, naming them “uptown” (wealthy) and “downtown” (impoverished) politics, with participants arguing that both sides perpetuate discord through “ego.” According to interviewees, poorer downtown east Nairobi rappers arrogantly assume that English lyric-based rap lacks relevance and rich practitioners cannot know hood life. Likewise, west Nairobians supposedly condescend to their downtown counterparts for not knowing how to operate expensive synthesizing equipment. Attempting to cast these two sentiments as equally frictional elides how access to resources structures this entire conversation. These statements on divisions are unpleasantly insufficient in capturing class politics. Ultimately, what promises to be a hearty reading of the industry is a superficial and straw-person contention that leaves viewers wondering why so much of the film attends to wealthier participants. The documentary prioritizes more privileged musicians like EA Wave and Camp Mulla while almost entirely ignoring how poverty inhibits opportunities and makes life hard for artists from lower-class settings. In one of its more promising moments, artists speak to the cameras about what underground rappers have long been asserting: that a lack of policies that support musicians, weak royalty payments, the defunding of arts in education, and an oppressive political environment all bear down on practitioners. The political entities and figures implicated in this discussion are either edited out or assumed to be known. It seems that the documentary and its actors are willing to engage in conversations about the conditions of the industry because, while they do not live in poverty, they are not immune from royalty complications and an oppressive state. As quickly as the film pivots toward these problems, it returns to the hype and vibing millennials that make this documentary enjoyable to watch.

The ramifications of copyright policies, the difficulty obtaining radio play, and the hardships around royalty payments hamper music in public spaces and leave narrow pathways for artists. These realities only provide fodder for the discourse of cultural anxiety, which in turn encourages hip hop artists to enter studios and concerts keen on proving their worth and their music’s value. The discourse continues to call on individuals, consumers, and devotees to drive Kenyan culture and create an affirmative set of diverse practices and beliefs. In a postcolonial setting, where echoes of freedom and self-determination still sound, people insist

that consumers somehow have control over what songs the media plays. Congolese sounds are still the original foreign music that has set a fire of apprehension. Nowadays, hip hop seems to stand in the place Congolese genres had carved out, insisting on further questions about the role of culture that African nationalists and Kenyan academics fervently advocated for during independence transitions.

Chronicling cultural anxieties means piecing together the disparate elements that help comprise why music in Kenya is never just about the music but also about power and economics, postcoloniality, the state, and ideas of freedom. Recordings of African performances during the Protectorate era are still held in western institutions. Kenyans will continue to exclaim that Fadhili William received an unfair turn at success. The Kenya Film Classification Board from the 1960s still operates and continues to ban audiovisual materials that it decides are inappropriate to Kenyan culture, primarily films that contain explicit sexuality and queer content.<sup>129</sup> Music commodities, subversive embodied public performances, Congolese music, state bans and copyright policies, hip hop's Black body, the anticolonial war: these actors help write the script for how we understand cultural anxieties today. On the surface, statements like this from Bethwell Ogot, one of the University of Nairobi scholars calling for cultural nationalism, seem reasonable, "Foreign musical diet must be assimilated into the local cultural milieu, into a local popular musical tradition."<sup>130</sup> But questions of what music qualifies as Kenyan become knotty given the sixty-year presence of Congo styles and the almost thirty-year existence of rap within the country.

Debates over non-Kenyan genres continue, not because such genres have been outright rejected or relegated to television, but instead because artists, singers, rappers, and dancers insist these forms are relevant to their modes of culture and self-expression. In turn, hip hop artists continue to claim their work is African and Kenyan, pushing back against notions that would render their music mere mimicry. Rappers resist the idea that their songs have no place on radio and disavow the MCSK's excessive and arbitrary copyright enforcement. Underground rap challenges postcolonial anxieties that deem their music derivative by refusing the claim that they operate from a colonized mind. In response, they design and protect the creative boundaries of hip hop. When artists state that "underground hip hop is serious," they also mean that *it is Kenyan*. The music's innovation and dynamism are deeply connected to Kenyan sociality and are extensions of African culture. Hip hop speaks to all Kenyans and prioritizes the urban poor, exemplifying how a music can unite everyone, which responds to the call that African cultural nationalists and anticolonialist writers made a half-century ago.

So much of cultural anxieties are about how bodies create and perform certain types of artistic expressions. Anticolonial writers have conjured the body, mainly relying on normate-centric parameters as the marker of agency and culture. For Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, returning to African languages can combat "producing a society of bodiless heads and headless bodies."<sup>131</sup> Léopold Senghor similarly asks, "But



what of a headless body, and an arm with no soul?"<sup>132</sup> For these writers, the disarticulated body indicates one's alienation from their culture. Ableist tendencies in tow, these writers conscript postcolonial subjects to appreciate their culture and throw out any lasting impacts of colonialism. Perhaps these words also portend why hip hop's performing, unruly, and disruptive body unnerves critics, as it too quickly represents western cultural imperialism, even if it is subversive. The idea that culture can serve as a balm to the irregularities and injustices of society neglects significant and often violent forces that work in people's lives. When the failures of the state and economic instabilities materialize, people want to know that their culture is intact, even if that culture is multiplicitous and adaptive. Rap music and its performances betray any neat confines and solutions to the political and economic chaos of postcoloniality.