

Play and Gender

“Can I freestyle for you?” L-Ness asked me at the end of our interview as we sat on the steps outside of the Kenya National Theatre, a site that has always been a space of tension, possibility, and contradiction.¹ The theatre opened during the war for independence and hosted European plays, and even after 1963, many Kenyans were excluded from producing works due to the state’s fear that they would incite dissent. In 1976, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o and Mĩcere Mũgo managed to put on *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi*, much to the ire of the Kenyatta government and the white expatriates who held sway at the theatre. Ngũgĩ reported that at the close of the performances, the police stood ready down the street in protective gear for battle at the Central Police Station.² Some fifty years earlier, it was home guards, or *askari*, who gathered and slaughtered Mary Muthoni wa Nyanjiru and her fellow protesters in front of that same police building. The theatre has distanced itself from its troubling past, holding various events, including Kenyan and African dramaturgy and music and dance performances. In the early 2000s, it was common to see gatherings of young people outside on the grounds smoking weed, playing drums, or freestyling, often there to perform at or support an occasional hip hop event. However, by the 2010s, the theatre’s high fees pushed planners to seek other venues. That, in combination with the increase in security, gating, and anti-loitering spikes on the perimeter sitting walls, means that hip hop practitioners view the space as catering to a more affluent crowd unfriendly to a working-class underground culture.³

On the day of our conversation, L-Ness sat as she rhymed, moving energetically from one line to the next. One hand was extended, with her fingers and palms flatly horizontal with the earth. Her hand moved briskly and sharply from

side to side. This common rap embodiment resembles the DJ's gesture of spinning a record. L-Ness extended her hands in the air, creating a space for the lyrics and building hip hop liveness. These days, it seems like there are very few performances that manage to occupy the thick present unscathed by reproductive technologies, even if it is a cellphone camera lens.⁴ Indeed, L-Ness's performance was subject to some form of technological capture, for I used a digital voice recorder for dictation. Archived or not, rappers use their bodies to create a temporal spatiality for words to exit their mouths. For L-Ness, each hand and arm movement might appear without meaning, though taken together, these styles signify and create hip hop culture. There, on the steps of the theatre, L-Ness created hip hop without a studio, musical instruments, a stage, or a microphone, and through orature alone.

L-Ness can rap and rhyme at incredible speed without pause or hesitation. Her rapping is clear and firm; she enunciates her words with precision, using crisp and sharp bodily movements to match. L-Ness's movements demonstrate the creativity and indecipherable wit of hip hop embodiments. At times, she raps so fast that she passes the beat by, almost as if she expects the beat to keep up with her stamina and excitement. While she gestures in ways expected of rappers, her hard and fast rap style is often at odds with societal notions of the feminine.

L-Ness's performance is a primary example of the ludic in hip hop. This ludicity consists of several interlocking components. First, ludicity is a part of orature, performed and embodied, spoken and verbal, and often sonically influenced and produced. Ludic embodiments found in much of global rap culture encapsulate the quotidian and formalized ways that artists use their bodies to deliver creative, often indistinct disaffection and unorthodoxy. I draw from Victor Turner's discussion of play as containing the potentials of disruption. For him, play is "a volatile, sometimes dangerously explosive essence" that "cultural institutions seek to bottle or contain in the vials of games of competition, chance, and strength."⁵ Creative corporealities allow rappers to participate in the urgencies of lyrics while preventing societal circumstances from informing their perspectives in totalizing ways. Ludicity is never divorced from the political surroundings, and hip hop play is not just a performance that produces a hollowed-out area of pleasure devoid of meaning or intention. Rather, at its core lies a constant shifty and trickster ethic that refuses obedience and contains inherent defiance of social norms. To cite Turner, it is the music's political seriousness that "bottles" ludicity, framing it as a part of the substantive strength of the music.

Next, the ludic is based on intentional unreadable alterity, or what Turner would note as "recalcitrant to localization."⁶ Here, I additionally root the hip hop ludic in what Édouard Glissant terms opacity/*opacité*, which occurs in the illimitable interpretative qualities of alterity, like those found in literature and poetry.



FIGURE 5. L-Ness (*left*) and Baby T (*right*) fist-bumping with other artists. Image by L-Ness.

For Glissant, cultures at large, especially those marginal cultures, need not be bound to larger social forces. Glissant understands that opacity is a right that all cultures should have, which avoids an “enclosure within an impenetrable autarchy” and can yield freedoms.⁷ Further, this notion of freeness is fundamental to hip hop ludicity. These performances hold indefinability as an articulation of the aesthetic, and such bodily gestures articulate brief notions of freedom. In further thinking about how play produces epitomes of freeness, Jayna Brown notes that music-making breeds what she terms a “utopian impulse,” which is an “ineffable connection, a collective space free of possessive individualism.”⁸ Brown notes that musical experiences, specifically in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, involve the sonic and the embodied to make spaces of utopia that intervene in a society and world filled with crisis, war, and unsustainable transnational capitalism. Nairobi’s rap performances respond to a similar volatile social context and gesture toward something beyond on-the-ground specificities. Hip hop finds spaces of creativity as it rejects and responds to the economic crises of poor youth, state-sanctioned violence and corruption, and the siphoning of resources toward foreign investments. Moreover, play’s alluring and pleasurable elements are an intensely local production, as well as radically located in hip hop’s Black diasporic politics. The opacity of embodiments and the creativity of music-making allow for openings and possibilities because this art is political, imaginative, and expansive.

Lastly, far from flawless, playfulness is indeed masculinized. Ludicity is about opening a space of creative movability and freedom, and so, too, is masculinity. To perform masculinity, especially one that is cishet, is thus to hold privilege and authority. When women like L-Ness utilize play as a way to move and spit rhymes, they are often read as acting like cisgender men, whereas men who flow are more easily granted validity as rappers. Cismasculine rappers are, furthermore, the direct beneficiaries of hip hop, while for those of marginalized genders, there is no uncomplicated way to access benefits from engaging with the trope of masculinity. Cismen can play more spaciouly, as these rappers structure and define the music and have the social power to set the parameters. Women and many other marginalized genders, alternatively, are often caught in a trap between the performances of perceived feminine oversexualization and masculine tomboyishness.

This chapter investigates the cogency of hip hop flow like L-Ness's, which occurs as performed and often indecipherable masculinized freeness. To conceptualize how ludicity fits into Nairobi's underground world, I first articulate its cityspace as the focal point from which artists make music, arguing that they draw from the city's masculinized tenets, music culture, and the long traditions of protest and dissent. Next, I provide a section that discusses how rappers draw from the masculinity already present in Nairobi and Kenya, as well as practices from global hip hop, to produce what I call the *armor of gender*. Artists draw from local Mau Mau characteristics and the global culture of the music to perform the armor of gender. Such embodiments work to interrogate local conditions and assist in asserting rappers' presence in the transnational hip hop game. Through an engagement with two songs, Black Duo's "Rap kwa Mic" and "Looking Up" by Uditā, Alisha Popat, Sugar, L-Ness, Baby T, and Taamic, I situate ludic embodiments within the city's gendered space and gendered discourse.⁹ I investigate "Rap kwa Mic" as a text where cismen's performative participation in armored gender is comparably more straightforward; they steward masculinized toughness in notions of play, earnestness, and subversion. Ciswomen, however, maneuver unfairly around an intrinsic trap of gender, caught between supposed oversexualization and excessive masculinity. To escape this snare, women insist that they, too, own the right to play with space and sound, thus staging versions of political seriousness. In an extensive analysis of "Looking Up," I explore how women's performances of play and modalities of seriousness manage to breach power, both creatively and radically, even when the music promotes some of hip hop's pernicious gendered traditions. Lastly, I investigate how rappers use ludic orature to find joy and intimacy within the context of play and how such performances have existed within spaces like the Sarakasi Dome. Within these explorations, ludicity appears as both locally bound and consistently diasporic. In this respect, this chapter introduces how ludicity is inherently tied to how artists cite a U.S. hip hop blackness. Taken together, rappers

fashion creative disruptions and modes of compliance through play and gender and *play as a mode of masculinized gender* to facilitate artistic self-making unique to Nairobi that is also globally recognized.

PLAY AND POLITICS IN NAIROBI STREETS

Hip hop practitioners of all genders engage with the politics of Nairobi to make music. Many craft ludic embodiments, which though diasporically instantiated, are localized interactions with the material conditions and discourses of Nairobi. Women rappers stage their way out of gender constrictions through a political seriousness that draws on a tradition of protest, activism, and a refusal to be repressed by the city's strictures. Their work in the underground indicates an engagement with the confinements of the city, the vibrancy of street culture, and the long traditions of dissent. Alternatively, men reiterate the gendered dynamics of the cityspace as one made for men even as they speak out against injustices like poverty and state corruption. Masculine artists' playful resistance to the city's politics is from a place of relative privilege and fundamentally distinct from women's place in hip hop.

Nairobi has a thriving street culture from which rappers are influenced. Heavy foot traffic births a complex economic and cultural life. Street musicians occasionally play drums and sing. Magicians perform card tricks. Preachers yell about the end times. Men and boys shine shoes, *jua kali* workers push loads through town with trailers, and women sell books and clothes.¹⁰ Street boys get high on glue to chase away symptoms of hunger and disenfranchisement. Pickpocketing duos and triads band together to slip their hands into pockets, snatch a purse or watch, or peruse surreptitiously through a backpack. Workers take long breaks to sleep on the grass and smoke cigarettes in the now-designated areas of the city. Just outside the city center and along footpaths, men sell roasted maize. The further east one travels toward the birthplace of Kenyan hip hop, Dandora, the more poverty there is, the more cramped the housing, the more visible the trash, the bumpier and dustier and muddier the roads, and the more heavy-handed the police. Conversely, in the cleanliness and spaciousness of Westlands, there are high-end stores, fancy nightclubs, malls, cafés, closely guarded apartment complexes, and well-manicured lawns and bushes.

Matatus (public transportation minibuses) help construct the classed and gendered spaces of Nairobi life. *Matatus* offer movement around the city while at the same time serving as culturally complicated and masculine-defined spaces. They are Nairobi hip hop's symbolic and official vehicle occupying the streets in a sonically and visually brassy fashion and are seen as representative of street culture. Before the restrictive Michuki regulations in 2003, touts (workers who take money and find passengers) regularly crammed people in, hooking, swinging, and hanging out of moving graffiti-stained and bass-emanating *matatus*.¹¹ These days, the culture is not forgotten, as graffiti has slowly returned to the vehicles, and one still sees touts engaging in this persistent, playful practice. The touts have cautiously

begun to perform this reckless defiance again, which can earn them a ticket from the Nairobi City Council if caught. Touts can be women but are mostly cisgender men. Their work is hard, but it is also spirited, whipping their bodies in graceful, controlled movements, attempting to catch the ear of potential customers by shouting the cost of the ride or the vehicle route. They laugh and argue with other touts, catcall, chew *miraa* (khat), buy cigarettes on the street, skip out of their *matatus* to run alongside them, and return to their vehicles before their speed increases. Those heading into the city center call out, “Tao! Tao! Tao!”—a Swahilized word for town. There is a difficult underside to this space as well; passengers and touts alike have accosted and assaulted women on *matatus*.¹²

Nightlife bustles throughout the city. Night-shift hawkers and those not exhausted from their daytime schedules maneuver through traffic on Nairobi’s major thoroughfares to pawn cheap Chinese goods and sometimes recorded music, depending on how they perceive the threat of selling bootlegged CDs. Cisgender women and men, and some transwomen, sell sex for survival and means. People gather at bars and clubs after work. In poorer areas, some might gather around *changa* (illicit brew) spots and purchase a cup of alcohol to socialize and unwind. In other places, patrons listen to live music in small bars. The Westlands hosts middle-class college students and those with well-paying jobs just off work, and both groups find their way to higher-end establishments. On the weekends, Kenyans in their late teens and twenties (and some even older) go out for a night of leisure, drinking, dancing, and clubbing until daylight creeps up on them. New venues pop up regularly, but places like Carnivore and K1 Klub House are long-standing. Spaces often host themed musical nights. James Ogude writes that Nairobi’s venues host popular “traditional” music nights for genres like Mugithi and Benga. Ogude contends such music nights dislodge the genres from their ethnized rural locations, allowing for the consumption and appreciation of a range of music: “It is the openness of the city—its fluidity—that allows for the creation of spaces within which a projection of fantasies rooted in popular cultural memory could be performed.”¹³

While the city’s music venues open possibilities, Nairobi’s public spaces have historically operated as exclusive. It has all the characteristics of a former administrative colonial center. Racial and class apartness has been a key feature of the city since colonialism, as the wealthiest parts are to the north and west where the white settlers resided, while the south and east, once confined to Africans and Indians, are poorer and more working class.¹⁴ Although women take up space in commercial and public areas and work in most professions and at every economic level, the city is a masculine and heterosexist space. In the city center, men regularly snatch women’s purses and sexually harass women in the streets. Just like in other cities, women and gender-expansive people, especially those who are poor, are more susceptible to violence. Mobility, wealth, able-bodiedness, and masculinity make it so that abled men can easily move and occupy public space without the same fears of unwanted attention that people of marginalized genders face.

Kenyan official histories privilege cismen, which is profoundly evident in the structural makeup of the city. Kenyan cultural nationalism proffered African traditions that centered men and encouraged governing women's bodies as foundational to build the new nation. These views paradoxically borrowed from colonial beliefs that insisted urban spaces corrupted migrants. Women have long been the targets of urbanity's perceived degeneracy, resulting in the conviction that women should remain subservient to men and only occupy domestic spheres so as not to be tarnished by the city's offerings.¹⁵ Besi Brilliant Muhonja states that after independence, Nairobi architecturally archived an exclusive history of men freedom fighters through monuments, street naming, and landmarks.¹⁶ For Muhonja, this action built on and revealed how the city space masculinized itself by removing women from contemporary public histories. After all, and as she notes, the road outside where Mary Muthoni wa Nyanjiru lost her life protesting Harry Thuku's detention is named Thuku Road.¹⁷ These gendered elisions correspond with anxieties about Nairobi women that continue to populate television, social media, and the radio. According to popular heterosexist beliefs, urban women make disadvantageous partners for men because they are unruly, assertive, educated, and untrustworthy. These supposedly disobedient city women are said to have affairs with married men regularly, refuse to accept their duties of unpaid house labor and childrearing, and hold opinions assertively and to the disdain of men.¹⁸ Caroline Mose also reminds us that hip hop is not immune from participating in this discourse. Mose argues that rappers attach those viewed as obedient and politically conscious African women to the struggle and troublingly juxtapose them with the unruly urban and promiscuous femme figure.¹⁹

The femme sex worker, the young university woman, and the educated urban single woman are held up as examples of how Nairobi corrupts those who supposedly cannot refuse the lure and temptations of urbanity. Men regularly comment about how rebellious city women are and how wife prospects, domestic and docile, are to be found in the countryside. When these tales circulate, men are rarely characterized as culpable for buying sex, courting young college students, having extramarital affairs, or even leaving their families for mistresses or second wives and families. These stories, whether fact or fiction, are often told from masculine perspectives, lamenting how city women betray their supposed rural roots and African upbringings. Gendered narratives and other interlaced discourses and the city's spatial politics weave together Nairobi's character. Keguro Macharia simply terms this ideological and material violence as the "unhoming of Kenyan women," where through juridical, discursive, and physical means, women are dislocated from a society from which they are supposed to belong.²⁰

Amid the city's constraints, people regularly take to the streets in protest. These gatherings attack corruption, call for election reform, and decry both legal and illegal evictions, to name a few. Political parties sometimes curate these uprisings, specifically those opposed to the ruling party, and many times receive the

support of people from across class divisions. There were organized protests after Kibaki's questionable victory in 2007 and amid the postelection violence.²¹ Boniface Mwangi led the Occupy Parliament protest in 2013, where he and others marched a pig and piglets in front of the Parliament building. There, Mwangi and others spilled buckets of blood onto the sidewalk where the pigs furiously licked the *damu*, all of this to represent the MPs as vociferously greedy swine who were then voting to confirm yet another raise for themselves.²² University of Nairobi students, often unhappy with unreasonable school fees, many times have organized public demonstrations, set up blockades on roads, and thrown stones at cars and police who fired tear gas at them. Kenyan feminists have long protested rape culture, inheritance laws, reproductive rights, environmental concerns, and education and job training.²³ In 2012, 2015, and 2021, sex workers, often alongside LGBTQ activists, protested the illegality of both prostitution and queerness. Those who have taken to the streets don bright red masks and carried banners that read *mwili wangu, chaguo langu* (my body, my choice), decrying violence against and murders of sex workers.²⁴ Beginning in 2014, a movement called *#MyDressMyChoice* began to confront the culture that enables men to assault women wearing skirts physically and sexually in public.²⁵

Many of these protests contain chants and collective jogs of dissenters moving through public space. These performances can quickly turn into a subtle and rhythmic dance, with participants grabbing tree branches and pointing them toward the sky as they perform slowly and methodically through the streets. Not all these examples are situated within lower-class agitation, but many are often influenced by economic precarity. These are instances of orature, incorporating song, chants, movement, and just the slightest dance steps in order to inspire the collective energy of the crowd and any onlookers. Hip hop practitioners situate ludicity and political seriousness inside many of these Nairobi realities: the performances of life's regular hustle, the charged discourses of gender, the vibrant music culture, and the embodiments of political urgencies. Hip hop play is deeply involved in the sociality of Nairobi life, and since the music so profoundly engages with street life, it enmeshes itself within the city's gendered codes.

THE ARMOR OF GENDER

The masculine elements of ludicity include movement-based gestures and stances of armor that are common in hip hop, such as the stiff body, wide-stance posture, and hardened facial features. These practices are globally circulated but also interface with Kenya's history, the city of Nairobi, and its hip hop spaces. The performances found in Nairobi rap are similar to Tricia Rose's early observation that "ghetto badman posture-performance is a protective shell against real unyielding and harsh social policies and physical environments."²⁶ The *armor of gender* is a series of performances that practitioners enact that hold hardened,

creative, and underclass-based masculinities as an available set of actions within the culture.

Men, almost all cisgender, use this performance to assert their privilege as a broader set of resistance practices that centers lower-class experiences. Such performances draw on Mau Mau tropes used by the Nairobi underground.²⁷ Mickie Koster notes that the histories of the Mau Mau army and the war with the British are not seamless stories but often contradictory and up for debate. Nonetheless, the Mau Mau moment bred a singular question about the concept and notion of freedom for Kenyan people that continues to exist in many hip hop spaces.²⁸ Koster notes that the question of liberation remains “unresolved and painful histories like Mau Mau that go untreated carry visible scars in the present.”²⁹ Rappers, in turn, have picked up and developed these pervasive questions about whether Kenya is free and, if not, what a liberated Kenya would look like. I add that these sentiments of liberation, fighting, and masculinity meet similar global themes within hip hop that converge to form an outward-looking Nairobi rap culture. As I mentioned in the introduction, rappers have largely moved away from the confrontational and effective ways that Ukoo Flani Mau Mau incorporated the Land and Freedom Army into their videos and lyrics, and what has remained is a warrior-inspired, toughened masculinized resistance.

Kenyan practitioners use the armor of gender regardless of their actual gender, though there are critical differences between women and men artists. Those who are masculine people use the armor of gender to construct and maintain the culture. In contrast, women and others of marginalized genders adopt carefully fashioned performances within this framework so as not to jeopardize their legitimacy. Imani Kai Johnson explores this practice in her notion of “badass femininities” and considers how U.S. Black women practitioners constitute their subjectivities through histories of slavery, colonization, and anti-Black class marginalization.³⁰ Johnson argues that badass femininities should not be called masculinity per se, but rather be thought of as the assertive and bold characteristics that can and do constitute femininity. My analysis is slightly different in that I insist that the women I follow in Kenya negotiate and embody an existing masculinity even while they identify as women and with femininity, thereby pushing back against the masculinizing presence in the music.

Jessica Nydia Pabón-Colón in *Graffiti Grrlz: Performing Feminism in the Hip Hop Diaspora* is vastly helpful in this regard because she provides a thorough examination of global graffiti culture and its community of women and femmes, most of whom are white, Latinx, white-passing, and otherwise non-Black or African. She identifies a “feminist masculinity” at work for these artists, which is “a gender performance characterized by the utilization of recognizably masculine traits.”³¹ Her study is helpful in that she demonstrates that women and femmes enact a recuperative feminist method of performance that fashions a hip hop diaspora and uses masculinity to articulate a viable subjectivity. While Pabón-Colón

recognizes a U.S. Black and Afro-Caribbean origin to hip hop and graffiti, she does not necessarily factor such characteristic roots into how artists construct feminist masculinity in graffiti performance.³² I contend that the armored gender I study is subversive, masculinized, and historically situated within Kenyan contexts, and in addition, it also uses a U.S. blackness as a cultural throughline to create diaspora. Pabón-Colón also distinguishes between the conventional performance of masculinity found with cismen in hip hop and the feminist masculinity that seeks to redo constructs of power in performances. My observations of Nairobi rap culture differ from her study of graffiti culture because, in Nairobi rap, all artists navigate a similar gender dynamic. While women do not have the same privileges men do and may use armored gender to assert space in the culture, they also make music and perform alongside men, as well as understand their work as pulling from the same traditions as men. For these reasons, I use one term, the armor of gender, to describe how all artists navigate masculinity.

Women, both feminine and masculine, use able-bodied toughness in performance to create a culture where they prioritize themselves. Armor allows artists to perform impenetrability, which is a necessary tool to protect oneself from social marginalization. Here, Pabón-Colón's notion of feminist masculinity is particularly salient. She writes, "I locate feminist masculinity in how graffiti grrlz perform their gender, but it is a performance of self available to any body. Feminist masculinity does not come at the cost of femininity."³³ She observes how not all graffiti artists identified with the term "feminist," but most understood the stakes centering women's work. In the performances of Nairobi's armor of gender, femme and masculine women incorporate armor to perform their subjectivity. Just like the artists in *Graffiti Grrlz*, not many women I spoke with identify as feminists, but most understood the critical task of taking up space and making music using themes of political seriousness.

The *armor of gender* helps to compose hip hop's playfulness. While "armor" may imply a rigid set of bodily conscriptions, the opposite is true, and it unfolds with the theme of playfulness to produce willful rebelliousness and shifty subversiveness. When I discussed embodiment with Sue Timon, her response indicated a marked commitment to ludicity: "There's the bounce. [Laughs hard.] There's that bounce. [Although she is sitting, she gestures a bounce using the upper part of her body, while laughing.] You know, the way someone walks, the 'don't care' attitude. The N.W.A. thing, you know. [We laugh.] You just know."³⁴ Sue not only gestured expressively and excitedly when I asked her questions, but she also referenced the hip hop group N.W.A. (Niggaz wit Attitudes), the Compton gangsta rap group from the late '80s and early '90s. While Sue did not identify as either a feminist or a tomboy, her more masculine performances demonstrated that hip hop offered embodiments that worked with the music she then made.

I asked several rappers to discuss embodiment, and many stated that performance was another element of the culture, similar to breakdancing, DJing,

rapping, and graffiti art. Others noted that bodily corporealities are found in all hip hop elements. When I asked graffiti artist Esen what bodily postures convey, he smiled, lifted his arms a bit, and proclaimed, “Whatchu sayin, nigga?!³⁵ Here, Esen responds with a rhetorical question that translates into a protective readiness that is confrontational, playful, humorous, and U.S.-originated. Additionally, Evaredi noted that hand gestures are also meaningful: “I can say, basically, the body language of hip hop is crazy, like, the throwing of hands, the sign of the fist.”³⁶ While he explains this, he puts one hand up slightly and raises his fist to illustrate his point. A part of this fist-raising is a vestige of how early conscious hip hop in the U.S. sought to continue the mission of the Black Power movement of the 1960s. During the same period, the thrown fist became an anticolonial and anti-apartheid symbol as it spread to places within Africa, especially South Africa. Evaredi, Esen, and Sue cited the U.S. in their discussions of embodiment and hip hop play, which did not convey a sense of alienation or foreignness to their work but rather a closeness and familiarity. These embodiments that convey elements like a defiant “attitude” or Black power aesthetic point to how the ludic is a diasporic proposition, rooted in U.S. Black music, that has been localized and reformulated to work in Nairobi rap, illustrating that citational practices are also exercises in indigenization.

Artists use ludicity, masculinized and diasporic, to perform freeness even as they feel restrained by the industry and its lack of real opportunities. Women participate in the larger social project that hip hop offers, and they continually challenge the dominant masculine culture of the underground scene. Further, ludicity allows cisgender men to apprehend performances of cool and subversion to move their narrations of hood life to the forefront of Nairobi’s chronicles. Taken together, the *armor of gender* is a diverse set of embodiments that draw on and reinforce the masculinity present in the music.

SOMEWHERE IN NAIROBI

Artists’ rhyme schemes, lyrical critiques, and demonstrations of rap skill all depend on them using their bodies in defiant, cool, and stylized manners. Practitioners find inventive techniques of masculinized play to confer knowledge about an analysis of Nairobi life. On the surface, it may seem that the ludicity of bodily performances enables the potency and effectiveness of the political seriousness of lyrics and sound. However, play can still be found in the lyrics, and armored gender encapsulates both play and seriousness. This unpredictability makes the music innovative and pleasurable while also allowing artists to find small moments of sonic and bodily liberation. Notably, many cismen practice embodiments to create spaces of freedom where their voices and raps gain legitimacy. In music videos, these gestures of self-determination often materialize through physical movement and one that mirrors the privileged mobility that men enjoy in the city.

"Rap kwa Mic" (Rap on the Mic) by brothers Judge and Mo Phat of Black Duo dropped in 2009 and illustrates how masculinities are formulated and how they are in conversation with the spatial politics of the city. The song was an instant hit. When I spoke with Judge about this, he lamented that bootlegged singles were so rampant that he hardly made any money from the song. He held no hard feelings, as he understood that such economic practices were part of the hustle. "Rap kwa Mic" samples from U.S. musicians Talib Kweli, Hi Tek, and Bahamadia's 2008 song "Chaos" from the album *Soundbombing Vol. 2*. Talib has gained mainstream exposure, and his dedication to underground and noncommercial music has earned him some fame among artists in Kenya. The fact that Talib has an established career but remains committed to politically conscious music makes him appealing to many Kenyan rappers.

"Rap kwa Mic" uses computer technologies to create an ample range of divergently assembled noises exuding a solemn and cautionary tone about hood life in Nairobi, building on the already established serious nature of "Chaos." We hear piano keys, a violin, a saxophone, and eventually a horn, which is retained from the original. The standard kick drum gives the bass, and after the beat drops, there is a noted transition to softer and subtle horn sounds that fall into the background to provide room for the lyrics. It is not just the raps that provide the vocal presence. Just like U.S. hip hop from the '80s and '90s, there are chuckles and improvisational sounds that make the song unfold like a conversation that is firm and advisory. Also retained from the earlier version is the "la-la-la-la-la" ad-libbing, which appears in the beginning before Talib begins his lines. In "Rap kwa Mic," the *la* ad-libs exist throughout the song, creating an aura of impending or imminent danger. The chorus is sung in staccato, with several overlapping high and off-pitch voices laid on top of each other. At one point, the chorus's *la*s bleed into the verses and are met with the rappers speaking "la-la-la-la-la" in lower registers. These vocal sounds meet one another and vie for respect, creating a sounded compilation of Nairobi life that produces "reconstituted echoes" of "Chaos," to cite Glissant.³⁷ These differing clatters organize "Rap kwa Mic" as a polyrhythmic diasporic text located in the specificity of Nairobi.

The video opens with grim music and grainy, sepia imagery with the words "Somewhere in Nairobi." Viewers are never given a full view of the city, and the majority of the scenes are from the working-class area of Ziwani, near Eastleigh.³⁸ The scenes are gritty and harsh, matching the serious and contentious words, and there are few markers to locate where in Nairobi this was shot. Viewers see buildings and children playing and dancing on top of metal structures, along with Black Duo's crew walking through the neighborhood. Judge and Mo Phat are constantly in motion, walking deliberately through the streets as they laugh and communicate with their crew of men and masculine individuals, as the performance of mobility is a common theme in many videos. Listeners only hear voices sonically read as masculine; therefore, we encounter a text specifically about the experiences

of cismen. The song progresses, and more men join their casual and slow walk, the strut of collective cool. Their movements are slow and carefree, not labored or swift. In this way, the rappers represent themselves as not being exploited, nor are they fearful of or worn down by their neighborhood, where underemployment and insecurity are rife.

Throughout the culture, the playful and the serious reside alongside one another, and armored gender fits into the presentation of both the ludic and thematic earnestness. Songs like this are never about complete social ease—the ludic is indexed within a conversation about the importance of assuming tough bodily postures that can withstand economic marginalization. As Black Duo raps, their crew performs hip hop's hand gestures in the air as if they are rhyming. Performances like this, which are easy to overlook, are part of the shared diasporic orature that combines the themes of play and earnestness. Michael Jeffries names embodiments like these as "complex cool," which shapes "a publicly conflicted discourse of black masculinity" and "[affirms] black cultural practices and black collective identity."³⁹ When Black Duo's crew walks and then suddenly dodges and darts toward the camera or provides solemn stares and then outbursts of laughter, they demonstrate their relationship with the ghetto, that within the unjustness of their lives resides a space of something spirited and playful. Jeffries describes such interactions as a mutuality: "Rappers represent the hood, while the presence of the hood . . . makes them seem both powerful and authentic as representatives of a neighborhood constituency."⁴⁰

Jeffries explores people like Jay-Z, T. I., and Lil' Wayne, analyzing how performances of thug masculinities in gangsta rap are the toxic and creative methods used to express vulnerabilities and connections, deliver social critiques, and position themselves as skillful artisans. He identifies how, for instance, nihilism in Tupac's music "should be seen as a force ripe with possibility," understanding it as a meaningful exercise in perspective.⁴¹ Jeffries stops short of concluding that these performative presentations equate to political progressiveness or radicality, given investments in misogyny and capitalism. He ascertains that what occurs in subcultures does not have enough strength to shift Black people's lives: "The symbolic work accomplished by hip-hop practitioners and fans is insufficient for structural change."⁴² The U.S. rappers Jeffries studied may not be able to make effective political interventions, but the ways listeners and fans use the music in their daily lives is essential. Furthermore, evaluating hip hop in terms of its direct ability for structural reform could limit our understanding of what music does in society and what it should do. In thinking through the vast differences between the mainstream U.S. hip hop that Jeffries analyzes and the underground Kenyan music I discuss, we should not overlook the cultural force of play, pleasure, and joy present in both musics, especially as they are tied to contributing to the social discourse that rejects systems of policing and economic exploitation in both places.

Robin D. G. Kelley makes this often-referenced point in his discussion of gangsta rap and infrapolitics in writing that listeners use the music to make claims to public space.⁴³ Drawing from James C. Scott, Kelley argues that infrapolitics are the regular forms of working-class, subtle resistance and defiance, or the “seemingly innocuous, individualistic acts of survival and resistance [that] shape politics,” like “footdragging to sabotage, theft at the workplace to absenteeism, cursing to graffiti.”⁴⁴ In hip hop music, it is critical we identify how artists and devotees employ methods of defiance through orature, both the commonplace and the rehearsed. Sonically embodied performances have everything to do with how the force of imagination meets quotidian subversion.

Infrapolitics in “Rap kwa Mic,” like in much of the Nairobi underground, is orature that is habitually indecipherable and elusive, issuing a defiant sensibility and social critique. Judge and Mo Phat’s performative repartee is catchy and styled, and their fleeting performance of freeness meets lyrics that exude struggle and seriousness. Mo Phat opens the song by comparing music to prayer, and he invites his listeners to participate: “Muziki ni kama kusali / Wee piga magoti / Ni tamu tu kama sukari” (Music is like prayer / You, get on your knees / It’s sweet like sugar). In the middle of the song, Judge states that rapping helps to feed and sustain him: “Na hii rap ‘taweza kuniekea dish (With this rap I can get myself a dish/some food) / Ama niimbe tu kenye wote mna (Or I only sing about what y’all have).”⁴⁵ Lyrics, like embodiment, blur the categories of the ludic and the earnest. Mo Phat japes: “Ndio maana unapigwa na butwaa[-twa-twa-twa] (That’s why you are hit by surprise) / Hili kichwani ni kama Doom (In the head, it’s like Doom).”⁴⁶ At the moment of this rhyme, Judge and Mo Phat walk in front of the crew, and Mo Phat draws out the word *butwaa* (surprise): “but-twa-twa-twa!” Just as we hear the words/sounds “twa-twa-twa,” overlaid with the sound of gunshots, Judge confidently steps forward and provides the final “twa,” while pointing his hand in a quick upward formation as a finger gun toward the camera and takes a shot. Firing his weapon, Judge surprises his opponents and cynics and does not diverge from the beat, and he continues his rhythmic gait.

According to their words, when a devotee meets Black Duo, they are hit in the head as if with Doom, the popular cockroach spray. Being struck with Doom for roaches means instant death if they cannot dodge the liquid. Similarly, if listeners are not attuned to their rap skill, they will also receive a blow resulting from these practitioners’ overpowering verbal confrontations. The artists’ creative banter leads to a grave warning to their rivals about the depths of their flow.

Even with its specific detailing of Nairobi in “Rap kwa Mic,” this song is not just about the capital city; it is also about the transnational globality of hip hop blackness. It asserts the city is a grim and unforgiving landscape where men rappers eke out survival. They walk but start and stop in the same place and never end up somewhere physically different, wanting viewers to know that Nairobi is the focal point. However, there is a marked global element. Michael Jeffries calls

this hood-making, “building the universal hood through affirmation of local hood experience.”⁴⁷ While he cites places like Brooklyn, Chicago, and Atlanta, Black Duo adds to this by staking a claim in a global hip hop scene outside of only U.S. cities, thereby rejecting the cultural geopolitics that relegates African music to the margins.

The combination of the performative, the visual, and the sonic characteristics in the video effectually emits a global tone worth noting. Specifically in this song, the shrill and admonitory overlapping *la*’s, the contentious boast-style raps, the firing of a warning shot, and the full instrumentalities work together to announce how people must clamor for recognition in the limited spatial realities of the hood. Mark D. Morrison’s notion of Blacksound is helpful to evidence this, a theory that describes how racialized performance, sound, and mimetic scripts are foundational to American popular music. Tracing the origins of Blacksound to blackface minstrelsy, Morrison contends that music’s historical commodification constructs notions of race, relying on the flexibility and fungibility of blackness. Morrison states that it is inherently transnational and global simply because Black music is.⁴⁸ Thus, the practices of sampling found in “Rap kwa Mic” are a part of how the politics of mimicry are tied to the fungibility of blackness. The song’s connection to the U.S. through Black sonic characteristics is not derivative but is instead part of a cultural system of citations. What surfaces is a long tradition of borrowing that is deeply dependent on how diasporic sameness is forged and how U.S. blackness and its cultural productions remain reliably appropriable. It is not that the gunshot, the *la*’s, or the ominous sonorous qualities are intrinsically Black, but rather that together they signify a recognizable hip hop blackness. The video creates urban blackness through its connection to “Chaos,” using rappers’ embodiments and visualities, and the narrations of lower-class youth in Nairobi. The song and video produce Blacksound, which “amplifies these low frequencies by directing attention to how the sonic and material histories of race continue to resonate.”⁴⁹ These sonic qualities are generalizable to any ghetto, and therefore listeners and viewers encounter both the Nairobi hood and the global hood.

Pairing the diasporic travel of the sample with their motility and rhymes, this song is a text about play, movement, and freeness. The “Somewhere in Nairobi” framing exudes an anonymizing element in that these rappers do not wish to make known where they are in the city. In this way, rappers perform untraceability and indefinability, which are central to the ludic themes of the music. Their playful, dodgy, and shifty gestures add to the idea they resist being fastened to any modes of surveillance that would undermine their project. Judge, Mo Phat, and their crew perform a type of movability to walk, exercise leisure, and find instances of joy within their movement. By the end of the video, the conditions of the hood have not changed, but the artists have found space to implement their

ludic contentment. These practitioners move on their terms and create a conversation that is not about a desire to leave the hood behind, Ziواني or otherwise, but rather for them to author their stories of movement within the places they live.

LOOKING UP, PERFORMING FROM BELOW

Women use the armor of gender to move through the difficult bind they often find themselves in when making music. Along with gender-expansive people, many in the Nairobi rap community argue that their performances are separate from the tomboy/hypersexed trap that permeates the music. The armor of gender operates as both limiting and capacious, allowing these rappers to adopt fraught embodiments to explore their subjectivities and move toward notions of freedom. Mwenda Ntarangwi hints at this in *East African Hip Hop: Youth Culture and Globalization* when he writes that practitioners of all genders use hip hop to explore their place in the culture and the world at large and that it “expresses . . . the fluidity and performative nature of gender, revealing how normalized gender identities can be reconstituted to gain new meanings.”⁵⁰ As Ntarangwi notes, the music can also affirm societally established gender, and thus, any fluidity that exists should not be confused with a free-range set of gender expressivities.⁵¹ Focusing on mostly commercial artists like Wahu from Kenya and Zay B from Tanzania, Ntarangwi observes that women artists primarily challenge their marginal position in the culture in several ways, including by unsettling the commercialization of their bodies and critiquing men’s dominance in hip hop. In underground music, these elements are present. Women rappers also constantly navigate performances of masculinity, which are always available tools for all rappers. They often “reorder the existing gender normative values without changing the existing structures that define them,” as Ntarangwi observes, but this altering in hip hop occurs as these artists work through and enact masculinity.⁵² These masculinized sets of performances are practiced and made into a “user-friendly” armor for all to implement, even when real exclusion is evident within the culture.⁵³

Rappers work through structural, ideological, and societal politics that inform hip hop spaces. Women’s navigations reflect what Mary Njeri Kinyanjui terms African feminist “fireside knowledge,” referring to the everyday ways that Kenyan women activate methods of solidarity, shared expertise, and modes of survival. According to Kinyanjui, women in the kitchen or cooking hut produce significant feminist ways of knowing.⁵⁴ This “anti-patriarchal frame which does not position women as ‘add-ons’ to a masculine framework” so aptly describes how women rappers create and apprehend sonic space as central actors in the culture.⁵⁵ She refers to how *jua kali* traders, peasant farmers, and other working women develop systems of knowledge that confront the constraints that sexist capitalism delivers. Like the working-class women Kinyanjui

references, women rappers also advance musical interventions meant to defy the cismen-dominated industry.

The 2015 “Looking Up” music video is particularly exceptional because it brings together a large group of women Kenyan rappers and singers. In this video, two singers provide the hook, Uditā and Alisha Popat, while Sugar, L-Ness, Baby T, and Taamic all take turns with verses. This song is a remix of a track by the collective Dandora Music. While the original song includes predominantly masculine rappers, the artists in the remix sought to create a song centered around the skill-set and perspectives of Nairobi’s “femcees,” a term women artists call themselves. In a conversation about the video, L-Ness informed me that they chose to shoot the track in the informal settlement of Kibera in an effort to not always focus on Dandora.⁵⁶

The video exemplifies how women authorize themselves as rap’s knowledge producers through embodied and sonic orature. Daphne A. Brooks names such works “Afro-sonic feminist noise,” which are the ways in which a collage of competing, refracting, and conducive vocalities by Black women are often found in musical and performative texts. Brooks calls us to consider how Black women’s musicianship interfaces with sonic musicalities, sometimes in tension with each other and other times in tandem, producing a fertile engagement with and fervent disassociation from structures of power.⁵⁷ A deluge of sounds builds throughout “Looking Up” and collaborates with the disparate voices of the six performers, working to create a type of sonic fullness that refuses women’s silencing. Along with pronounced piano sounds and a subtle bassline, the song contains a violin motif that creates themes of perseverance and urgency to which the lyrics add, thus creating a conversation about women’s firm tenacity in the culture. While it is polyphonic and clarion, there is no heavy bass sound. The presence of the boom and rattle of basslines are regularly gendered as masculine, as Shanté Paradigm Smalls notes, and while such characteristics can be found in other songs by women, here such elements are absent.⁵⁸ As each rapper and singer moves through the text, they embody its aural intensity and perform an announcement of their sustained presence within underground culture. Their performances are articulations of their agentive subjectivity but also ones that must be fought over within the thorny field of masculinities that organizes rap.

The song begins with rapper Sugar emerging from a couch over railroad tracks that cut through Kibera. Donning large gold rope chains and a red jumpsuit, she walks down the middle of the tracks toward the camera. In her hip hop version of Mary Njeri Kinyanjui’s fireside knowledge, Sugar steps over debris and through small, enflamed piles of trash while her raps grant homage to her mother’s resolve. Through smoke, Sugar rhythmically moves her arms and hands in and away from her body through her verse, which creates a site for her lyrics and verifies her rap skill. She lays down bars with strength and certainty, exemplifying how William Cobb describes hip hop flow: “[It] is not about *what* is being

said, so much as *how* one is saying it.”⁵⁹ Ending with a customary nod to Kenya, she raps, “2-5-flow! To the death, killing ’em!” before passing the song on to her five collaborators.⁶⁰

Sugar’s saunter toward the camera illuminates how motility and armored gender converge. A styled gait allows rappers to establish ownership over the spaces that they occupy, just like Judge, Mo Phat, and their crew’s movement through the hood in “Rap kwa Mic.” In “Looking Up,” Sugar is the only rapper to perform this strut; L-Ness sits and paints, Uditā and Baby T are also seated, and Alisha Popat sits, stands, and dances in place. The last artist, Taamic, rides a bike through the neighborhood, but she hops off and heads toward a group of sitting children to stand before them and spit her bars. The summations of these gestures symbolize how women often unconsciously navigate their feminized bodies within hip hop’s gender performance. In the frames, the women use poses, stand, and interact with others, yet none walk toward the camera as Sugar does. However implicit and without specific intention, it is essential to highlight how these women artists’ bodily enactments of relative immobility reflect the gendered realities of the underground and that moveability is often an attribute of cismen. Furthermore, the presentations of these women rappers as largely stationary reflect how the city does not enable the safe movement of Nairobiens of marginalized genders. These performances articulate a political problem because while cismen can marshal masculinized gestures to create hip hop more easily and to navigate their presence in the city forthrightly, women are left wrestling on two fronts: how to be a woman in the culture without being dismissed and how to participate in an authentic hip hop Nairobianness. Therefore, we must recognize how Sugar’s embodied reframing of this normally masculine script aptly indicates how women use gendered codes often set against them to uphold their abilities as creative producers.

At times, one’s decisions to perform gendered armor may be directly personal or situational. In other performances and videos, Sugar performs very feminine attributes. She is an example of an artist who straddles the class demarcations of the mainstream and underground worlds. In chapter 4, I mention Sugar’s appearance in the song and music video “2-5-Flow,” in which she teams with commercial rapper Bamboo and sings the hook to that song. In “Looking Up,” however, she is centered in the video as the first rapper to appear. And unlike her traditionally feminine positionality in her video with Bamboo, she wears a tracksuit and Timberland boots, walks, and gestures insistently. Yet her collective movements are not exactly the firm, masculine performances that rappers like L-Ness or Sue Timon produce, as her embodiments adopt more feminine signifiers. In an interview with *Pulse*, a youth and entertainment magazine in *The Standard* newspaper, she states that she was concealing a pregnancy at the time of filming. When asked why she kept her pregnancy a secret, Sugar revealed that she wanted to continue working on her music without being sidelined for her “condition” (her words) because of some of the stereotypes that run in the music industry.

I wanted to run business as usual. There was no missing studio recording sessions and concerts for me. I was also afraid of the pregnancy going wrong. This is because Brian and I suffered a miscarriage before we were blessed with Sabira. The emotional trauma was a bit too much to handle, therefore I wanted to keep [the pregnancy] a secret.⁶¹

Sugar's experience as a woman in an industry that can often be hostile, as well as the personal pain of a miscarriage, informed her performative inclinations in the video. It makes sense that she thus dons baggy clothes as a protective shield guarding her temporary secret. Her gestures add to her armor by protecting her body from viewers who would notice her pregnancy and perhaps also safeguard her from the internal pain of miscarriage. The way she stands and walks down the railroad tracks, rapping and using her gestures to emphasize her lyrics, all serve to celebrate her as a rapper and detract from her status as an expectant parent. For better or worse, most would not associate her flow with pregnancy, and thus, she successfully uses the performance to keep her personal life closed off from public view. Considering this video, the one with Bamboo, and her comments on pregnancy, Sugar ultimately puts forward a marked adaptability of performed gender. She thoroughly understands that different idioms of gender change her stance, and as much as she operates within the constraining settings of the industry, she also asserts personal and artistic decisions about her body.

Women embrace armored gender carefully and by not fully endorsing masculinity, but rather by engaging in a tactful balancing act rooted in socially gendered expectations. Many recognize that they must perform around modes of masculinity for them to be taken seriously while also understanding that treading too close would not be sexually desirable and would ultimately draw indignation. Msia Clark remarks, "[African] female MCs can be labeled troublemakers (because of hip hop's confrontational nature), lesbians (because of hip hop's masculine culture), and whores (when female artists do not express their sexuality in socially approved ways)."⁶² Thus, being too masculine and too feminine both carry pejorative associations, so women must sacrifice something to be accepted. The tomboy persona on one side and the hypersexual figure on the other are both hip hop's versions of the rogue urban woman who defies the contrived categories of gender. Although an analogous dynamic is found in U.S. versions, the trap that this binary produces is also particular to how postcolonial discourse relegates African and Kenyan women's corporeality, which is regularly absorbed into rap. In the "Looking Up" video, despite the differences in navigating femininity and masculinity, none of the rappers buy into conventionally regarded femininities, such as seductive vulnerabilities or heterosexual availability, nor do they advocate fully for the tomboy.

Women practitioners often measure their performance against the rather disparaged tomboy. For Baby T, she has rejected more masculine or tomboy identities. She stated:

People think that all female artists are gangstas, tomboys, and bad girls. Not all of them are so hard. *Some of us are shy*. Like basically, I'm shy, that's why people call me Baby, cuz ah, I don't think we all have to go hard. And ah, [be] gangsta, and wear shorts and baggy pants. People think that all female artists are gangsta.⁶³ (emphasis mine)

In this discussion, Baby T finds it difficult to design her hip hop presence outside the trap and therefore uses shyness. Although shyness can be rendered feminine, she uses it to place herself outside of the music's binary. She is not unlike other women who try to articulate some other way to be a rapper aside from masculine and femininely sexy and ultimately find it challenging.

In the video, she is seated with Kibera's informal settlement housing, which appears in the background. She wears a hoodie, a ball cap, red lipstick, and oversized hoop earrings. As she raps, she moves her arms slightly in and away from her body, with less emphasis than L-Ness or even Sugar. If masculinity is about movability and the taking up of space, Baby T's gestures only mildly make use of such availabilities. Her words coincide with her physicality of creating a gendered armor, albeit distanced from associations of tomboyishness and women gangstas. Her performance is confident and affirmative, adding to the gravitas of the song. She raps:

I know life ain't easy, teenagers in the streets tryin to make a living /
 Society mistreated by the leaders they believe in /
 No work for the youth, kids dying, no food /
 But I keep on looking up because the streets need hope /
 We've been down for too long /
 now we tryin to move on cuz /
 shida za dunia, ka sabuni zuisha (the problems of the world, like soap,
 will get finished) /
 mi najivunia kwa hii maisha, yeah! Baby! (so, I am proud of myself in this
 life, yeah! Baby!)⁶⁴

Considering her performances, lyrics, and interview statements together, Baby T articulates what Daphne Brooks describes as "black women's sonic performances and phonic expression[, which] are dialectically and dialogically engaged with black women's discursive and dramaturgical acts."⁶⁵ Baby T's corporeality attends to the compromise between what are two impracticable poles of masculinity and femininity, creating a footing for her words about the unfair lives of poor youth.

Cisgender men also express uneasy sentiments about the tomboy and proclaim that hip hop women should not feel boxed into what they regard as an imposed assignment. Judge states, "If you're a chick [they say] you have to be like . . . , for example, a tomboy Naw. You can still be sexy, and you are doing hip hop. You know?"⁶⁶ Similarly, Agano argues that one does not have to be a tomboy to make it, though many are. I asked him if this was acceptable, and he said, "Okay,



FIGURE 6. Rapper Baby T in the “Looking Up” video. Screenshot by author. Source: Dandora-Music, “Looking Up Rmx X 254 Female Rappers (Official Music Video),” YouTube, November 6, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w6PoSkSuDqU&t=2s>.

there is [*sic*] no rules there, but I think they can do what they are doing. I think it’s cool. But not every girl should be like that though.”⁶⁷ These statements imply that women do not *have* to be tomboys and should be free to choose their identities, deducing that the tomboy is unsuitable. Judge’s notion that women *should be able* to be sexy seems to imply that women simply *should be* sexy in underground spaces. Judge and Agano solidify the cultural mores, implying that for women, the available genders are either one that resembles masculinity or something desirable to normative masculinity. There is an unresolvable exclusion that women face: that rap skill level is read through a masculine sieve, but also that the nonheteronormative subjectivity of the tomboy is inherently pejorative because it does not fulfill cismen desires that are encouraged in hip hop’s heteronormative spaces.

L-Ness, of all the people I interviewed, most identified with the tomboy label, though she stopped short of calling herself one. L-Ness believes that women should not make themselves desirable to masculinity:

Most female hiphoppers are just tomboy. I don’t know, it just comes. . . . But ah, the other performers, they want to go an extra mile to be sexy. They’ll want to appeal to the men. You know? There’s a difference. If I’m rapping, I want to touch everybody. But there is someone who will go on stage and start singing, and maybe they want to appeal to the men. You know, they are dressing in something short. Even their moves, they have to be sexy moves. . . . It’s not necessary. Women shouldn’t be portrayed like that. If you look at many videos, you feel sorry for most of the models, because it’s not just about that. . . . But it’s just a westernization kind of thing.⁶⁸

For L-Ness, this is an inauthentic method of rap subjectivity. Like Baby T, L-Ness recognizes the bind, but unlike her, L-Ness’s way out is to avoid the conditions that

make women objects of sexual attention. From an outsider's perspective, these women may all sound the same. However, they have unique and differing methods of creating themselves as artists in this music video. How they navigate gender elucidates the imperfections of the Nairobi underground. However, these comments also allude to how variegated the artists' performances and subjectivities are and how differently they choose to position their bodies within the culture.

The politics of the Nairobi hip hop tomboy feed into larger ideas about notions of imitativeness and mimicry that circulate within Kenyan discourse and the histories of sonic technologies. Alexander Weheliye reminds us of the historical situatedness in which practices of mimicry in music-making occur: "Not surprisingly, unmediated mimetic listening was most habitually ascribed to 'others,' such as native subjects, women, and black people. The mimetic dimensions of recorded sound were also highlighted in scenes depicting the ascription by 'primitives' of paranormal powers to this machinery."⁶⁹ The notion that social others can only hope to copy and imitate carries over into the figure of the tomboy. Although a large part of disavowing the tomboy label is a refusal to be read as lesbian, queer, or nonfeminine and thus disregarded, what is also at play is ciswomen artists' refusal to be assessed as only parrots of their cismen counterparts. L-Ness, Baby T, and Sugar eschew claims that their embodiments are inauthentic while steadfastly asserting that they articulate an imaginative and inventive method of rapping. At the center of gender politics in Nairobi are anxieties that ciswomen artists are inauthentic rappers because of their propensity to copy. A large part of the social anxiety over hip hop is due to claims of copying the west and not having the informed capacity to make cultural or musical choices that reflect Kenyan culture. If mimicking is the worst characteristic of a non-U.S. rapper, to be a woman or femme indicted for mimicry of their men colleagues is a judgment that aims to cast women outside the bounds of the culture. The tomboy serves as the quintessential imitator of both U.S. hip hop and Kenyan cismen practitioners, solidifying the otherness of women artists. While cismen might only be accused of a single U.S. imitativeness, women supposedly doubly mimic both men and U.S. rap at large. This dual spotlight is the essential dilemma for many people of marginalized genders whose actions are constantly up for review and attempted dismissal by cultural gatekeepers. This intra-hip hop dynamic, then, in turn, serves to accuse femme artists within the space as the "actual" imitators. In other words, it is not Kenyan rap at large that is guilty of mimicry, nor are the men who dominate it; it is women. Hence, anxieties over postcolonial subjects wanting to parody western culture seep into the underground and surface as conversations about whether women rappers have the capacity to express the complexities of an urban, globalized hip hop Kenyanness.

Women rappers combat this snare in two ways. First, their mere presence in the culture disrupts the field of hegemonic gender, and thus, they shift and reconfigure spaces. While women rappers recognize that there may not be a way out

of masculinization, they problematize the music through their performative participation. They disrupt men-only spaces and masculine music practices, even if nominally, and their performances and songs in concerts and videos force the music into a more inclusionary politics. Women recognize that men gatekeep the industry side, as men are the most likely to be producers, own studios, and have labels. However, men MCs, as a collection of artists, perform embodiments in hip hop culture through nonnormativity and rejecting social categories. Cis-women performances compel artists to question gender through an interrogation of society's figures: the tomboy, the lesbian, and the promiscuous woman. Tanya Saunders writes on Cuban underground music that regardless of one's subjectivity, "it is a queer act for a woman to enter into hip hop and make an intervention into non-normative behaviors" and that "the female presence within hip hop is a queer presence in and of itself."⁷⁰ Building from Saunders, Kenyan women's embodied performances queer the space of Nairobi rap and thus queer the performing body that helps constitute the hip hop diaspora. These rappers do not explicitly advocate for queering spaces, but instead their embodiments unsettle a cismasculine dogma. Such disturbance opens the door for the culture to question itself and further decipher its values, impelling many men artists to confirm their support for women rappers, even if that support comes with guidelines and policing. In so doing, and however imperfect it might be, these artists of marginalized genders communicate embodied knowledge about how hip hop is a space to affirm the outcast while jettisoning the idea that they should be marginalized. Above all, women's performance practices make spaces that insist they have a place in the music. The fact that women use normative standards to discuss gender means that such interventions are never forthright but murky and imprecise.

Secondly, the women use this song to participate in the commonly mentioned "hip hop is a way of life" axiom. This concept is a celebrated and globally embraced ideal that asserts that dedicated practitioners recognize the music as a method and set of practices for engaging with the world. Michael Jeffries writes that practitioners state that "hip hop is more than just art . . . and the subjects insist that hip hop is something they live, not just listen to," concluding that it "is something that allows people to tell the world who they are."⁷¹ Usually, Kenyan artists espouse the "way of life" adage to combat accusations of U.S. imitation by responding that they cannot mimic this art form because it is how they live. The video contributes to the "way of life" philosophy by framing the music as a quotidian exercise while also staring down the idea that only men can live hip hop.

In the underground, the artists reclaim the culture for poor youths and exemplify that it can be performed in everyday settings, contesting mainstream rap's regular representations of wealth and excess. For example, during L-Ness's part, she raps with her standard speed and grit, which adds to the song's sonic surges. Although she remains sitting, her rhymes take up performative space, along with how the sound saturates the video. She sits in front of a picture and paints, wearing

a graffiti-style half-mask respirator. Her body moves quickly and assertively, implicating her viewers in listening to what she has to say by repeatedly pointing directly at the camera. Even though she does not use spray cans, she sports the mask, framing her painting as a part of graffiti art. Toward the end of the song, hip hop is transformed into a class when the last rapper, Taamic, displays her lyrical skill to an audience of children sitting in an outdoor classroom, eagerly absorbing the knowledge she imparts. Though the chalkboard she stands by is not entirely shown, enough is there to gather that her lyrics have been written onto it, transforming her verses into actual lessons. By insisting that they have something to contribute to the culture, these women demand that their music is how they live.

POLITICAL SERIOUSNESS IN "LOOKING UP"

In "Looking Up," the rappers exhibit a critical claim to political seriousness and utilize it to respond to their marginalization. Women's usage of the "way of life" adage and the intentional centering of their spatial and sonic presence are examples of political seriousness. This section explores the multiple other ways this framing occurs in the video, including through social critiques and affirmations of their work. These women rappers demonstrate that despite being stymied by gender constructions, they still retain creative control over how they represent themselves as critics of Nairobi, which for them is a place containing layers of social and economic dispossession.

The serious elements within the lyrics are extended through the various performances in the video. The rappers' words induce an earnest, normative "feel good" logic. The verses and chorus are generally about never giving up, not succumbing to poverty, and always remaining positive, all while the artists acknowledge the precarity and vulnerability of poor people's subject position. Throughout the video, people from various backgrounds, ages, genders, and races hold up a sign with the words Looking Up. It is passed from one to another, including three white people in succession, a young child in a school uniform, and another child living on the streets. One woman carrying firewood on her back also has the sign affixed to the wood. The message leans toward promoting a hip hop bootstrap capitalism as a response to poverty. At the beginning of the video, Udita sings, "Just keep on, looking up / Keep on, keep on, looking up." With these words, the song participates in the hood narratives of perseverance that have long pervaded underground rap. By asserting that one's good outlook on life will result in upward mobility, the song's political seriousness utilizes common neoliberal messaging of human worth as defined through positive attitude and affect.

However, the embodied performances in the video rescue it from being solely and unpleasantly aligned with a normalized economic ethic. Children in the video skip with makeshift jump ropes, hula hoop with wire, and participate in collective breakdance battles. The activities exist as similar practices, framing rap as a part

of the life of marginalized people in the hood. Applying “hip hop as a way of life,” the video suggests that all these actions are the same. Furthermore, such imagery mirrors those early days in the U.S. when practitioners used discarded records to scratch on, made sound systems from whatever resources were available, and fleeced electricity from light poles. Hip hop theater scholar Daniel Banks calls these practices making “something from something.”⁷² Rather than calling these innovations “something from nothing,” as the adage goes, these children make “something” and interrogate notions of what is considered outcast waste within an economy that manufactures easily discarded and obsolete products in order consistently to market what is new. Such a shift, regarding children making things from other things, also allows viewers to see children as who they are: innovators and inventors. This moment in the video thus is not just about seeing hip hop as a normal part of children’s lives but also about seeing the children as actors in artistic technology. Rap culture becomes a part of these inventions, an example of the technology that rejects capitalism’s insistence on consuming goods and new products. These scenes demonstrate how children’s fun, leisure, desires, and knowledge production can exist outside of consumer culture in affirmative ways.

Themes of defiance and compromise with an economic status quo often occur in the same contexts. In “Looking Up,” this happens when Alisha Popat sings the hook to a young boy: “You got the power, just use it / Make a difference with what you have / Don’t ever think that you’re not worth it,” and continues with “Believe in you / Dream that dream.” The young child nods in affirmation, walks away, and performs a basic freeze, which is a breakdance move in which a dancer boosts themselves into a position and holds it, usually to the beat of the song that is playing. The dancer then returns to a standing position or transitions to another move. Here, the freeze occurs when the child does a handstand and bends his legs upside down, holding his body in an L position before lowering back down. Lyrics like Popat’s commonly relate to how one can accomplish goals related to acquiring financial means, education, and a career.

Therefore, this moment could be read as hip hop’s investment in capitalism. Popat is a Kenyan Indian with more racial and class privilege, and her instructions could be seen as insultingly and patronizingly informing a young African person with less access to resources to develop their potential agency. Before this specific scene, the boy is shown attempting to breakdance and then falling to the ground. Other taller (seemingly older) boys around him laugh and push him out of their way so that they can have their turn dancing. The older youths have an easier time hitting their moves than the smaller boy to whom Popat eventually speaks. The faulty implication here, too, is that the older boys represent the obstacles this young child faces in his life. A common discourse in Kenya puts forth the idea that youths without privilege need good role models in a context where gangs and other impoverished men are simply “bad examples” who encourage laziness,

crime, and dropping out of school. This classist argument, of course, erases the larger systemic issues that all marginalized people encounter.

In addition to the problematic dynamic between Popat and the young child, this scene also encodes dance as an act of resistance. The young boy's breakdancing is a performance that seems to refuse the false logic of "work hard, get ahead." In this sense, breakdancing is a rejection of the status quo. In his defiance, hip hop embodiments become his answer to poverty. He and other abled children breakdance on the dirt, which yields no immediate benefit within a productive frame of labor, meaning that the space is seized and created for the playful and the performative. The children dance, smile, laugh, and move because they find joy in doing so. The excerpt illustrates that these embodiments offer a space to depart from the mainstream discourse on individual economic wealth subsequent to hard work, even when that discourse is found inside rap culture and, indeed, the song itself. The dynamic between the youth and Popat is yet another instance where the music can display the troublingly conformist and compellingly disruptive in the same scene, which, in this case, is the commitment to capitalist philosophy alongside its disruption of that same code.

Situating activities like Taamic's teaching and L-Ness's painting inside women's hip hop are instrumental to resisting the faulty perceptions that the music cannot be an appropriate life for women. For instance, several cismen artists told me that women have it hard as rappers because of their duties to raise families, which is supposedly their primary responsibility. For them, men do not have to share in the unpaid childrearing duties and can thus have time and space to make music. Rapper Ndugus laid the blame on society, family, and husbands/partners:

[Women] face a lot of challenges, *like trying to convince people that this is what they live by*. Because in Kenya, when we were starting hip hop, our parents were like: . . . Will it really pay you? Will it help you feed your kids in the future? It's also complicated for females. Let's say at night they need to go to shows. You also find that a female is a married woman, and she has kids to take care of. They have a lot of challenges.⁷³ (emphasis mine)

Ndugus reaffirms the idea that women artists encounter the regular pressures to make money from hip hop and that their primary responsibility is supposedly to care for their families. In the video, instead of rejecting the label of women as caretakers, they embrace it. The beginning of the song has Sugar producing a gracious ode to her mother for her childrearing, and such practices also transpire when Alicia Popat encourages the breakdancing child and when Taamic educates the children in her outdoor class. This type of caretaking is usually not seen in videos of artists who are men and can easily slide into the gendering of labor. The women's presentation of motherhood-like care alongside rap lyrics and breakdancing suggests that these acts need not lie in juxtaposition. Rather, rappers can

be parents and custodians of children as well as be cared for, as Sugar demonstrates with her gratitude toward her mother, all of which are exemplary of living hip hop.

“Looking Up” represents how women artists push for radical inclusivity in underground music, thus expanding who might be included in the “way of life” philosophy. While many cisgender men vocalize their acceptance of women, they often imagine themselves as hip hop’s lookouts who determine who is accepted and who is not. Alternatively, women’s ingenuities manage to intervene in and push up against the fabric of Nairobi’s underground culture. For example, “Looking Up” shows parts of the hood that are often rendered too “abnormal,” even for hip hop tales. In the middle of the song, a street child or boy, or *chokoraa*, holds the Looking Up sign. Street boys have notorious reputations in Nairobi. To stave off poverty and hunger, many buy shoe glue from street cobblers and inhale it. It is common to see street children affix glue bottles between their teeth as they walk, stand, or sit along busy roads and in lower-class neighborhoods. They often beg for money from middle-class people who walk within the city limits and are chased away by *askari*. When they are high, they can be aggressive and violent. For the most part, the lack of social nets, intergenerational poverty, and systemic disenfranchisement account for the pervasiveness of children who must live and survive on the streets. In Kenya’s imaginary, the figure of the street child is the dirty, abject, and outcast, located outside of the boundaries of parental concern and societal welfare. Empathy for these young people is often in short supply from wealthier (even slightly well-off) Nairobians, and children who call the streets their home are often the focus of bile or apathy. In the past, there have been several governmental attempts at reform. In 2003, during Kibaki’s rule, the administration reinstituted the National Youth Service, designed to provide education and job training to young people, especially street children.⁷⁴ This was welcome news in Nairobi, and in other urban areas as well. During one 2008 trip, I noticed a marked absence of street children in the city center. But by Kibaki’s second term, this program ran ineffectively and, at times, not at all. During the Kenyatta presidency, two high-profile corruption scandals broke in 2015 and 2018, and reports indicated that huge amounts of funds were stolen from the program.⁷⁵ Relatedly, the World Bank-funded Kazi kwa Vijana (KKV) (work for the youth), headed by Raila Odinga, was a youth training program implemented after young unemployed men were blamed for the 2008 postelection violence. The World Bank pulled funding from KKV after it determined a misallocation of funds.⁷⁶ Many young people have since visibly returned to the streets, and their problems remain.

In this video, the street child’s abject subject position does not preclude him from possessing enough humanity to appear in and participate in the music’s narrative. During his scene, while he holds the Looking Up sign, he clutches a glue bottle in his mouth and gets high (or performs the act of doing so). Through his intractable intoxication, he, too, is afforded the ability to grasp onto a hope that,

although unreasonably inequitable, most would see as unavailable to him. However, he stands alone in the video, like the other nonrapping adults who hold the sign. This child appears slightly older than the other small children who play and run throughout the video, breakdancing and hula-hooping. He is not afforded the space to play or explore these freedoms, presumably because his life is solemn and severe. If we consider Taamic's teaching to be a form of gendered care, he is excluded from that as well. The video situates him within the context of neoliberal, able-bodied adulthood, and he is positioned as someone who should take responsibility for his economic mobility. Though he does not receive nurture nor the opportunity to participate in leisure, as the other children do, his inclusion in the video is fascinating, given the reviled status of *chokoraa*.

In another embracing of the abject, flying toilets are also referenced. This occurs in the scene when L-Ness paints a large and colorful checkerboard of abstract shapes. Like the other artists, L-Ness's lyrics relate to the urgency of personal change and the basic understanding of class oppression. The following is a portion of her raps:

Step up, stand up, rise up, sky's your limit /
Badala ya kublend gizani light up a candle (Instead of blending in the dark,
light up a candle) /
Na look up kulingana na jinsi tunafinyanzwa (And look up in regard to how
we are oppressed)⁷⁷

In the upper left corner of her painting, the words Toilet with Wings appear in large lettering. This statement is a reference to the phenomenon of "flying toilets" in slum areas, where people who lack sanitation dispose of solid waste by wrapping it in plastic bags and throwing it onto rooftops.⁷⁸ Here, she participates in the many existing campaigns to end the practice, which can only be dissolved when people's lives change, including adding widespread sanitation infrastructures to residential areas. Nevertheless, she inserts the most uncomfortable truths of the hood experiences in this video.

Taking cues from L-Ness's painting, "Looking Up" operates as a performative bricolage that assembles those things that would not normally appear side by side: images of trash, references to waste, outcast street children, white people, and women rappers from a range of backgrounds. In much of this text, what is often repudiated exists alongside the artistic elements of the music. The performances of the street boy and references to flying toilets articulate how these artists embrace those things outside the bounds of what should be visible. These women artists do not present the hood in standard, often hackneyed ways, that is, by convincing viewers that the hood should be exhibited as a romanticized place of perseverance for only strong-willed and abled men. Instead, the video elucidates the unsavory and unspoken facts of people's marginality. While many men artists claim to speak for the dispossessed, these women artists have created a text that steps beyond the



FIGURE 7. Rapper L-Ness in the “Looking Up” video. Screenshot by author. Source: Dandora-Music, “Looking Up Rmx X 254 Female Rappers (Official Music Video),” YouTube, November 6, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w6PoSkSuDqU&t=2s>.

rap canons and elucidates themes of the ghetto experience that have many times been rendered too uncomfortable to explicate.

In this video, the rappers understand that hip hop is a place of possibility for their expression and a site where they need to assert their agency as practitioners. Most women MCs will defend the culture while deliberately marking out a place for themselves. Woman hip hop artist and poet Amora made this point when I asked her if women face undue obstacles in rap settings:

But that’s everything. When it comes to men and women. Men always have a higher hand. Like if I give an example with Kenyan culture, back in the coastal region, they believe that a boy child should be educated to a certain level, very higher [*sic*] than a girl child. A girl child will reach like primary six, and that will be it.⁷⁹ And ah, a boy child should go to the university. A boy child should be the president. So, it’s not only in hip hop. So everywhere, if you are a lady, you have to fight your way, yeah. You have to walk the extra mile to get what you want. It’s not only in hip hop.⁸⁰

Amora does not want the genre to bear the responsibility of societal sexism. Marcyliena Morgan correspondingly writes: “Most successful female MCs recognize that for them the only place where they can navigate race, class, gender, and sexuality with relative freedom is the hiphop world. It is not an ideal space but rather one populated by those searching for discourses that confront power.”⁸¹ Women make use of these far-from-idyllic spaces even when the music and culture are imbued with power inequalities that directly impact them. “Looking Up” and the

women that perform it accomplish an expansive list of feats by using armored embodiments to activate knowledge while embracing the outcast, insisting that hip hop is life for women, interrogating sexism, mucking through the tomboy figure, and offering a subtle challenge to wearisome neoliberal values. This cultivation of fireside knowledge “preserves and transfers women’s logic, norms and values of nurturing, care, [and creates] solidarities and commons,” which, for women rappers, allows them the space to make music.⁸² The probing and imperfect practice of play is the centripetal force underlying and actuating most of these interventions, and rappers of marginalized genders insist upon the space to explore and create innovatively.

PLAY AND INTIMACY

Practitioners enact ludicity collectively with others. Tinkering with words, embodiment, space, sound, and diaspora produces a shared politics about rappers with similar musical and cultural goals. These embodiments of play can be the rehearsed intentional actions in front of a camera in making a video or the unprompted and subtle performances at events. Hip hop corporeality, which is both planned and banalized, intentional and impulsive, constructs a set of intensely and aesthetically powerful practices. Artists create culture alongside each other in intimate ways in attempts to locate themselves both inside and outside of economies of production and commerce. Jayna Brown notes the importance of intimacy in the Congolese music spaces she studies: “I stress the importance of music’s connection to physical response, the utopian articulations of the body we find enacted in dance. It is our bodies as much as our souls that we seek to reclaim, or recover, despite the impossibility of restoration.”⁸³ She writes of dance here, but this explanation could easily be applied to any bodily movement alongside musical sound. Moreover, the experiences referenced in this quote indicate contact with others aurally and physically in methods that are profoundly meaningful. Working from Brown, I want to stress that practitioners engage with each other to produce corporeal interventions that are collective as well as individually affective. Nairobi rap orature, which is ludic, masculinized, and serious, occurs in public spaces but produces sites of closeness and familiarity that artists and fans depend upon for evoking pleasure, subversiveness, and freeness.

Hip hop corporeality is in conversation with the city of Nairobi and wider society, as well as in specific spaces. One of the crucial sites artists have used to try out their shared embodiments and lyrical skills is the NGO Sarakasi Dome, where events have been highly competitive ecosystems. Most artists within the space toil amid adversity; only the few privileged and lucky move to the mainstream and formulate careers. There is a hustle-like work ethic at Sarakasi, and one must be quick and always prepared to take advantage of often fleeting and precarious events. Sarakasi is located just east of the city center and in the working-class area



FIGURE 8. Sarakasi Dome at the Hip Hop Fest, 2012. Photo by author.

of Ngara. Venues like this can serve either as the primary place where artists navigate their careers or as transit stops where the fortunate ones move on to radio and television airplay and receive endorsement deals. At these events, organizers, rappers, graffiti artists, and other participants receive small stipends through funding from Sarakasi. There are often vendors selling jewelry and occasional aspiring rappers selling CDs between performances and outside by the walls where graffiti artists are sanctioned to paint. Most artists cycle in and out of spaces like Sarakasi, using their learned skills to acquire other careers, perhaps remaining in the underground or sometimes leaving altogether. They will not readily admit that they have left the scene if asked; they just stop making music and showing up to events. The fact that not many artists leave the underground (or admit to departing), except when they make more money and move into the mainstream, works to solidify the sacredness of the underground.

Impermanence does not mean that rappers write off spots like Sarakasi or withdraw their participation. It is the opposite; artists make space and exploit any opportunities with the full knowledge that the events could be short-lived and their contributions fugacious. Within this space of transience, rappers develop a culture that is prepared, enduring, and potentially mobile, always ready to move to different physical sites. In the midst of such conditions, the opacities of play exist, and artists make do with what they have, which often generates evocative and nourishing interactions. During the open mic portion of the Hip Hop Fest in 2012, I observed two young men standing in the back of the performing hall. The audience had their attention on the freestyling performer rapping to a predetermined generic beat, and these two men stood together, one facing the other in proximity, while he rapped to the beat. As he rapped, he moved his body back and forth, his



FIGURE 9. Sarakasi Dome at the Hip Hop Fest, 2012. Photo by author.

hands performing an angled gesturing while his head bobbed to the music. Since it was an open mic, he could not have been rapping along with the performer's improvised lyrics. He, too, was freestyling, or perhaps he was rehearsing a song he had written. The other listening man stood facing the stage and bobbed his head to the music and his friend's raps. Occasionally, the rapper would briefly place his hand on his friend's shoulder, still rhyming. Neither of these two men ever took the stage to rap themselves during this event, never assuming rap's authoritative position as the live onstage performer. Perhaps this rapper was working up the nerve to perform during the open mic session; perhaps he was attempting to prove his deftness to secure a future gig, or maybe he was simply sharing the space with another person.

These participants exercised the ludic by hewing space out of an event that already welcomed the spirit of artistic freedom. They fashioned a moment of intimacy, even during the competitive spirit of the event at Sarakasi, which included rap battles. Additionally, the two individuals took ownership of whatever musical spatiality was available. The rapper held the self-assurance to refine his acuity somewhat publicly, and the listener stood supportively, moving slightly to the voiced montage. This interaction illustrates that the hip hop live show can operate as a portal for other types of performing, listening, and participating. Such an instance of sonic closeness, where only the comrade gazing upon the stage heard the rapper's words and where the rapper made listening demands upon the other, calls for our recognition. Inside of the on-stage freestyle was another space of independence where this practitioner made art on their own terms outside of any governing body, even the likeminded planners of the event,

demonstrating a brief example of what Jayna Brown calls the “repossession of bodily freedoms.”⁸⁴

Hip hop intimacies also occur in planned performances. During another visit to Sarakasi that same year, I witnessed Sue Timon, who stood to the far left side of the hall and bobbed her head back and forth to the music. Again, rappers free-styled and tried out new songs during the open mic session, the Sarakasi Acrobats performed, and a talented beatboxer showed off his skills to a crowd that was awed by his abilities. Judge MC’d the event with impressive talent and an energy that kept the crowd meaningfully engaged, even when some of the actual performers were either beginners or lackluster. The atmosphere shifted when the group Washamba Wenza took to the stage. Although the hall had filled up, it was not exceptionally crowded, and people started moving and dancing more energetically. There were about seventy-five people in attendance, including the hip hop heads, vendors, and a few shoppers and devotees meandering around outside. Sue also became more enthusiastic, and even before the beat dropped, her body began to move back and forth to the rhythm of her head sways. Her arms lay to her side at one point, and she moved rhythmically to the raps, relying on her back-and-forth head-bobbing to communicate her connection to Washamba’s performance. As she moved, her body pivoted around with expressions of intensity, looking at other audience members for affirmation of the collective experience. At one point, Sue put her arm up and moved it up and down rhythmically to encourage and pay respect to the performance. This is a familiar gesture in rap music culture, the moving of one’s arm vertically as the rapper displays their lyrical abilities, and it communicates the audience member’s knowledge of the song. The sound system was not equipped to handle the acoustics, and the space swallowed the lyrics while magnifying the music’s heavy bass. The muffling of their wordplay did not stop Sue, nor the other audience members, who simply rapped along to the song’s then often incomprehensible lines.

Sue is tall and slim, and her hair at the time was cut into a Mohawk surrounded by a close fade. She was one of the few women in attendance. Washamba transitioned to different songs, and Sue moved close to the stage to be right under the duo, grooving to the beats and moving excitedly. The climax of the performance occurred when Judge transitioned from MC to rapper when it was time to perform “Shupavu,” a song that he collaborated on with Washamba Wenza, who includes Flamez, Smallz Lethal, Kev Mamba, and later Frank West (I analyze this song in chapter 4). A large crew of men rappers then gathered on the stage, showing support by dancing and gesturing. Washamba rapped and moved to the music, bending toward the crowd below them. Sue and others danced and grooved to the beat, allying themselves with the message. The crew onstage and the audience members right below them drew in close and built a sort of cypher as the rappers spit into the mic, shooting their lyrics into the speakers and beyond the huddled crew. Their stage energy was hardened and masculinized,

with the audience producing energetic and rhythmic responses to the rappers' calls. Being one of only a handful of women did not faze Sue. Her presence differed vastly from the few others of marginalized genders and many other men who stood by, conversing with each other or observing quietly without offering any overt gestural presence.⁸⁵ Sue's shared experiences here, and with Flamez in their music video "Ulimi" (discussed in chapter 4), demonstrate how tough and playful performances often pull participants together in a shared space. Her moment with other cismen practitioners exemplifies the contradictory nature of gender in the underground. In conversations with me, some men vocalize their uneasiness about the role of masculine-performing women like Sue, while many have collaborated on work with such women.

The two men fans standing in the back of the hall sharing a close moment, as well as Sue Timon's participation in Washamba Wenza's stage act, are exemplary of how rappers insist on their subject positions by making or practicing hip hop through embodiment even when they are not central in the rap performance. These practitioners participated in the culture's exercise of gender by both disobeying and affirming the well-etched social codes within music-making processes through performances that, though particular, are also constructed as unremarkable. The ludic in these contexts involves making space through performance within a site that is contested but also relatively welcoming. Embodiments that are playfully dissident also comprise small and unconscious decisions about what rules rappers will cleverly forsake, resist, and infringe upon. These two stories about the ludic serve as evidence of how Sarakasi participants realize themselves as practitioners who are creating systems of knowability that are deeply dependent on their commonalities with others. Both instances illustrate "underground hip hop's capacity to blur distinctions between musicians and fans" through the sharing of a singular space.⁸⁶

To return to Jayna Brown's discussion, musical sites do not simply put aside society's ills; instead, they take them on and make a space that cohabits with society's flaws in facilitating a sonically utopic vision. Her remarks about how music spaces in the DRC are not far removed from authoritarianism, bloodshed, and late capitalism are instructive for the Kenyan milieu because these Nairobi practitioners are unable to reckon with large economic forces that impede their music lives but find space within Sarakasi's walls for something different and new. Many are disillusioned by intergenerational underemployment and lack of access to the resources that some wealthier Kenyans take for granted. In turn, these rappers facilitate spaces where those urgencies hover and occupy but do not subsume them, employing the performative ludic and what Brown calls "bodily utopias, the rehabilitation of the body as a site of joy and exultation."⁸⁷ Hip hop culture uses ludicity to engage in the boundaries and borders present throughout Kenyan society. The music creates critical commentary about the wealthy and poor, women and men, the global and the local. The ludic orature of practitioners,

fit with armored gender, engages with these dichotomies in both compliant and resistant ways. They exercise musical freeness through play and, in so doing, are able to enunciate their critiques of society while ensuring that their bodily performances remain dislodged from conformity, thus preventing them from wandering too close to officialdom. Even when this orature is short-lived and couched in the inequities of Kenyan settings, rappers use this persuasive modality to participate in expressive self-making.