

The Sounds of Imperfect Resistance

Just as bodies bestow meanings in hip hop, so too does sound. Rappers use sonic qualities to distinguish between underground and mainstream music. To any ear, the music can sound “underground,” “mainstream,” “commercial,” “real,” “sold out,” or any combination of these ambiguous and often fraught categories. According to many Kenyan underground rappers, hip hop music is intended to grind away at the barriers that keep the poor disenfranchised. They state that upper-class rappers can afford to sing about their leisurely lives because these privileged artists do not face poverty and the hustle and grind of the industry. Such conversations often deduce that music that sounds too commercial conveys little social value and betrays the diasporic missions of the culture. Melodious, danceable, and leisured tracks, including commercial gospel that more easily makes its way onto radio and television, are considered too compliant with the status quo. These songs contain supposed unwillingness to work against the state to affect real social change. Yet, underground rappers do not completely renunciate the mainstream. Many often incorporate what elements of music work. They discard what does not. This delicate dance that artists do with mainstream music politics and broader social ideologies reveals their position as cultural laborers who strategize about their careers and make the music they love.

In this chapter, I explore how sound is a significant device to distinguish underground artists from commerciality. The ludic and the sonic often interact to produce the music’s potency. The sonic qualities in hip hop confer with economics, access, and music standards to create meaning about the world that artists navigate. These rappers have a complicated relationship with capitalism. They seek to earn money through selling their music, do not want to be sellouts, and mostly refuse to use the palatable sounds of commercial music to make theirs more

commodifiable. They believe they are the major drivers of the culture but also criticize each other's failures to earn monetary success from music. On one side, they regard capitalism as a solution to the state's inability to provide for Kenyan people. On the other, these same rappers reject industry standards in part fueled by capitalist practices, seeing the aurally pleasurable sentiments of mainstream sounds as a major problematic that waters down the force of the music. These practitioners use harder sonic qualities to interface with their corporeal interventions, producing sustained conversations about Kenyan society, the state, and the commercialism of music.

Sound serves as an indicator of access to mainstream channels. Underground artists understand that radio and television are going to give airtime to the catchy, synthesized, and danceable pop tunes that convey an African urban wealthy cosmopolitanism and carefree sense of leisure. Mainstream rap that takes on Afropop elements and has easier access to commercial spaces, for them, is not loyal to lower-class urban culture. These rappers seek to alter a dynamic wherein society's values are flawed and skewed in favor of easy listening. In the underground, artists use untranslatability in lyrics, sound, and performances, which results in a political imperative around listening. Hard and disruptive sounds reflect the insistence that music induces social change when it jars and unsettles, not softens or anesthetizes.

I rely on the constructed boundaries around the mainstream and the commercial while recognizing that these categories are messy, blurry, and reductive. Caroline Mose interrogates this binary in "Jua Cali Justice: Navigating the 'Mainstream-Underground' Dichotomy in Kenyan Hip-Hop Culture."¹ Mose contends that hip hop studies has mapped U.S. categories onto the Kenyan scene and that this process has become an unsustainable description of what occurs on the ground. She exemplifies how mainstream artists write socially conscious music and that those in noncommercial scenes also rhyme about topics widely taken up in commercial music, such as women, partying, and sex. Her point is that the "dichotomy [has boxed] artists in categories that do not reflect the fluidity that is characteristic of hip hop culture."² Mose's argument helps me consider the songs I analyze, which also do not fit into neat confines. The underground artists I highlight ally with neoliberal principles and some commercial artists rap about political subject matter. Given this, there are two ways I depart from Mose's discussion. First, the categories of mainstream and underground in Kenya are not only academic imports from the U.S. While there are artists in Kenya who defy these muddled borders, many others are invested in and create meaning using these two descriptions. For better or worse, rappers rely on this dichotomy to locate themselves within the culture. The definitions of these groupings are not precise, and artists still use the terms mainstream and underground to indicate one's access to the industry. Many of their observations are accurate; the more a song conforms to standard aural elements, the more likely it



FIGURE 15. “Amandla” music video, featuring Judge. Screenshot by author. Source: Nomadik Studio, “‘Amandla’ Ft. Khusta, Mic Crenshaw, Ran-D, Judge and MC Bagol,” YouTube, December 14, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=usamqjWxtyk>.

is to receive slots on television and radio. Second, Mose’s argument relies almost solely on lyrical content to determine a song’s categories. Sound, and how sound fuses with embodiment, often signifies whether a song is considered mainstream or underground. Many underground artists use aurality and corporeal embodiments as methods of defiance and believe that music that appeals to mainstream criteria at the sonic level compromises political commitments because the messages either will not be heard in the same way or will not be comprehensible as a method of resistance.

I argue several points in this chapter. First, practitioners use aurality to help determine whether a song is underground or mainstream. Many reject mainstream sonic formulas because such standards are signs of selling out, which inevitably undercuts political seriousness. For them, their positions are not empty stances; rappers who imagine themselves as activists hold a commitment to making music that intervenes in society. There are unresolvable contradictions that emerge from the need and desire to make money within an industry with specific criteria. Artists often find themselves in a bind because they want to make money and have fans, but ideally, to do so, they must make music that appeals to a broad audience. Songs profiled in this chapter include Sue Timon and Flamez’s “Ulimi” and Judge and Washamba Wenza’s “Shupavu.” These examples underscore practitioners’ choices to make grittier beats and exude hip hop’s core elements of ludic embodiment, sonic resistance, and political seriousness.

Second, gospel rap fits into this politics of underground sound tied to modes of resistance and ethics of economic self-discipline. Those artists who incorporate Christian-referenced lyrics still believe the objective is to make music that remains true to underground culture. Christianity holds authoritative weight in popular discourse and is posited as a solution to the problems of the nation. Some underground artists identifying as Christians have explicitly religious themes in their songs, while others slip biblical references into lyrics. They often advance precepts of hard work and personal responsibility, both of which are neoliberal ideals and additionally fundamental to political seriousness. These characteristics, however, do not mean that the sound changes, and in fact, these gospel songs hold similar sonic qualities to other underground songs. Using “Ulimi” I explore Christianity-infused lyrics and how the song reflects neoliberal ideas of self-regulation, hard work, and good deeds.

I determine that performance practices join the seemingly contradictory themes of self-discipline and sonic dissidence. This fusion appears when artists perform armored gender, combining the figure of the rapper as a hard worker with the trope of the “warrior” borrowed from the Mau Mau. Both “Shupavu” and “Ulimi” display these corporeal gender politics, which not only fit into global trends but mark the music as distinctly Kenyan. Relying on masculinities from the past tropes of the warrior, in other words, helps to solidify hip hop as Kenyan, and through this, underground rap confirms its local cultural relevance and its status as a Kenyan music genre. After the sections on song analysis, I contextualize hip hop’s relationship to capitalism, both its propensity to adhere to neoliberal ideals and its rejection of an industry that sets standards and gives a platform to specific music. The capitalist-based hard work ethic artists purport as a solution to state corruption and greed is not a sentiment particular to the underground but found throughout Kenya. In this sense, practitioners’ perspectives on capitalism, including how they criticize each other’s failures to be apt businesspeople within the industry, add to how the music reflects its location as profoundly embedded in Kenyan contexts.

Lastly, I include artists and songs regarded as mainstream and commercial to illustrate that sound determines access. The mainstream songs Jaguar’s “Matapeli,” Juliani’s “Utawala,” and King Kaka’s “Wajinga Nyinyi” contain messaging that calls people to be politically minded and to challenge the state and the inequalities it exacerbates, defying notions that only underground artists produce such music. These songs exemplify how a certain type of mainstream sonority is privileged in the industry, which I contend limits commercial music’s capacity to blur, obscure, trick, and disrupt as compared to the work that underground music does. I discuss Bamboo, an artist born in Kenya who grew up in the U.S. and has returned to the country. His music, privilege, proximity to U.S. blackness, and the way his voice and music “sound” have garnered much conversation in the music world.

I use rappers' opinions of Bamboo, which are that he does not stay true to the underground, to highlight how sound often dictates the boundaries that the noncommercial world draws and reflects the realities of the larger music culture in Kenya.

SOUNDING LIKE A WARRIOR

The song and video "Shupavu" by rapper Judge and rap duo Washamba Wenza demonstrate how masculinities, a reliance on capitalism, and a disavowal of the Kenyan state cohere in an underground text. Judge and Washamba Wenza filmed the video in Ngara, a lower-class area near the Central Business District (CBD), and where Judge grew up in Ziwani. Washamba Wenza includes Kev Mamba, Flamez, and Smallz Lethal.³ Smallz is from Kisii and moved to Nairobi after high school, Flamez is from Dandora, and Kev Mamba is from Jericho, a lower-middle-class neighborhood in the east Nairobi area.

The song's sonic resonances confirm the themes of underclass masculinity within a bleak socioscope. The audience is encouraged to drop their heads, bob to the music, and listen intently and purposefully. Helpful to this analysis is Julian Henriques, who discusses sounding in *Sonic Bodies: Reggae Sound Systems, Performance Techniques, and Ways of Knowing*. Henriques states that sounding occurs when "sonic bodies produce, experience, and make sense of sound."⁴ Sounding embodies practitioners' interactions with sound systems and audience members' movements to the music; it is the sonic affect felt through all registers and how these practices produce theories about arrays of power, such as class, gender, and race. To use this concept as a framework to understand "Shupavu" and other Kenyan music is to consider how artists produce and interact with sound and how these collections of sounds acquire social signification in a Kenyan context. Henriques describes Jamaican dancehall as both *bass* culture with low frequencies and high volumes and *base* culture, or the sounds that emerge out of the economic base of society. The same is true of the Kenyan underground, which often uses heavy bass sounds from "the street, often the unpaved ghetto street."⁵ The term *underground* captures much of the textures of Nairobi base or bass music: low frequencies, the use of bass sounds, industry and societal marginalization, music that represents lower-class people and *jua kali* workers of the economic base, and even references to the Land and Freedom Army fighters who took to the forest and fought in stealth.⁶ Purposeful hiding and social invisibility are the foundations of this type of hip hop sound.

"Shupavu," meaning "brave" or "warrior," I argue, heavily draws on a Mau Mau-inspired underground theme. The practitioners I follow have long imagined themselves existing within a trajectory of anticolonial fighters in Kenya and throughout Africa. Evan Mwangi asserts that "the dominant Kenyan imaginary presents Mau Mau as the ultimate symbol of ordinary people's

bravery and resolve to wrest power from colonialists toward ultimate political self-determination.”⁷ In his larger argument, Mwangi explores how, in postindependence, activists and political rivals developed the Mau Mau as an anti-government trope deployed against the first two administrations, which became a normative and populist stance, as he notes, “a dominant opposition.”⁸ The way the Mau Mau was fed into popular culture often produced conflicting and gendered narratives of the army. After the peak of Ukoo Flani Mau Mau rap in the mid-2000s, many songs have continued to draw on the prevalent resistance in Kenyan social imaginaries. Incorporating struggle and warriorship have appeared in their songs even as more explicit references to the Land and Freedom Army have diminished. In the music, Mau Mau warrior tropes produce a gendered armor of masculinity, merging with the figure of the artist as a capable economic actor. The figure continues the legacies of freedom fighting while demonstrating artists’ unwavering economic and social survivability in a contemporary landscape.

“Shupavu” illustrates how the performances of African, Black, and Kenyan subjectivities are sonically defined. Along with the rappers’ vocal contributions, the song utilizes a single-pluck guitar strum, violin, the kick drum, and synthesized hand claps. There is no excess of sound, only utilitarian sonic unfolding. One of the most noteworthy aspects of the song is where most of the bass sounds come from: not from the synthesizer but from the rappers’ vocalities. The chorus starts with “Wamezubaa,” with the rappers drawing out the last syllable: “Wamezubaaaaa . . .” This short “a” sound, the “aaaaaa,” rhymes with the second line of the chorus, “Shupavu,” and the extended “Shupaaaaaaa(vu).” The pronounced “aaaaaaa” in both words serves as the bass presence in the absence of heavy computerization and is affectively felt as being bodily and raw. Although monosyllabically produced, this moment resembles how beatboxers construct creative imageries that mimic the percussive drum machine. Shanté Paradigm Smalls contends that artists interface with societal categories such as race, gender, sexuality, and class in beatboxing, and the characteristics of bass sounds, like beatbox rhythms, are often rendered masculine.¹⁰ The gendered diasporic bass that the artists in “Shupavu” lean into and contribute to fuses with the meaning of “Shupaaaaaaavu,” the masculinized brave warrior. Again, masculinity is fed through class positions. The heavy computerization of sounds and vocal synthesizing found in Afropop has acquired connotations such as smooth, refined, and finished, thus creating a sound often associated with wealth and privilege. In “Shupavu,” the unrefined voice, especially the rasp that Judge’s voice offers, furnishes a lower-class masculinity. The rappers affirm masculinity within the culture by disrupting an elitist standard of sound in popular music. These aural elements might be described as crude and unsophisticated by outside listeners, but the rappers cultivate the technologies of rawness as an artistic form and, in some small way, intervene in industry standards that determine which sounds are appropriate.

The processes of sounding, both in live, mediated presentations of “Shupavu” and the recording of the song, indicate that sonic subjectivity is a performed practice. Henriques describes the dancehall floor as consisting of heartbeats, breathing, and movements, which make up the “corporeal vibrations” of the scene.¹¹ Judge and Washamba’s corporeal vibrations are integral to the song and create a sensorily haptic feeling; in other words, the listener perceives the bodily vibrations of their voices as they produce the familiar traits of peripherality and masculinity. The artists become the bass sounds, and listeners can experience their representations of hip hop’s low culture through them.

Their live performance of the song captures how their subjectivities as rappers are about the visibility of the performance and their aural presence merging and informing each other. In chapter 2, I discuss Sue Timon’s ludic orature in the live stage performance of “Shupavu” at Sarakasi Dome as one that works to disrupt a masculine culture and affirm her presence. While she was grooving to the beat, the bass coming out of the speakers at Sarakasi was almost deafening. Every time the audience sang along, and the mics absorbed the rappers’ vocalizations of “Shupaaaaaaaavu” or “Wamezubaaaaaaa,” the “aaaaaaa’s” shook the large auditorium, and the acoustics swallowed the subsequent lyrics to the point of incomprehensibility. I imagine that this is similar to Henriques’s descriptions of the dancehall floor; both consist of euphoric bodies, the distinct aroma of pungent perspiration, and the movement of a collection of people in sync with each other who share in and contribute to the ephemeral sonic embodiments of the moment.¹² There is only a slight difference in that Washamba Wenza and Judge insert their sounding bodies into the recording of “Shupavu”—they produce the bass—so that even without the audience, the inexpensive sound system, and the ill-fitting hall, the corporeal vibrations of their “aaaaaaa’s” remain a part of the text.

The rappers in “Shupavu,” Judge and Washamba Wenza, bring together the tropes of the rational economic actor and the tough and impassable masculine fighter to demonstrate their competence. The song is a boast rap that sets out to argue for their *ipso facto* authority in the hip hop game. They do this by reminding the audience that they are confined by the imbalance that shapes the unfairness of their lives. Despite the barriers of poverty, they exist at the hip hop zenith, which only serves as testimony to their sheer survivability: “Tunawaramba na mabavu, Shupavu! Tunakusanya ka viabu” (We finish / crush them with force, [We are] brave / warriors! We make money).¹³ Being a warrior means not just fighting physically; it also means using one’s armored gender to survive and thrive economically. Although subtle in this particular song, the references to warriorship are part of a wider practice within the culture of drawing on Mau Mau tropes. The affirmation of masculinity through the warrior trope draws directly from how the anticolonial struggle is remembered, and in that way, “Shupavu” uses masculinity to articulate a music that is Kenyan. In the video, the rappers affirm their ability to survive in hip hop and life itself, delivering their message to their witnesses, who appear to

be only cismen. The absence of other genders reiterates how much of underground culture writes texts that affirm and rely on cishet masculinity. In the videos that Evan Mwangi analyzes, “Angalia Saa” and “Mashairi,” rappers compose women as static objects of nationalism, and “the oppression of women [occurs] in glib summaries, which invoke the idealized figure of mother Africa.”¹⁴ Here, women and gender-expansive people are simply nonexistent, implying a setting where cismen are the ones to survive and fight when society breaks down into predictable chaos. Hence, the armor of gender is a performance of a subject position that draws on the global circulatory components of hip hop blackness while also being deeply entrenched in the ways that a specific Kenyan history has shaped gender politics. In short, the armor of gender and its reliance on masculinity makes the music more Kenyan.

“Shupavu”’s trace of Mau Mau themes in the gendered armor is not the only marker of Kenyanness in the song; stringed instruments are included. Guitar strums and violin chords, both synthesized, remind listeners of the Kenyanness of “Shupavu,” which is exemplary of hip hop’s location in Kenyan music’s traditions of chordophones. “Shupavu” has a slow tempo, and this, combined with Washamba and Judge’s quick rapping, makes intent focus necessary if one is to hear and understand the words. The song’s sonic qualities produce inconspicuousness, and the rappers’ desire to fit all their verbosely packed verses into the song outweighs their need for listeners to comprehend the words masterfully or even memorize the verses easily. The slow tempo, the quick delivery of lyrics, and the vocal bass elements make it difficult to obtain a surface-level understanding on a first listen.

Linguistic characteristics contribute to the deliberate and limited legibility of “Shupavu.” The artists utilize a localized Sheng from Ngara and the surrounding areas in some parts of the song, and one that not everyone can easily understand.¹⁵ For example, the end of the chorus is “Tunakusanya ka viabu,” which means “we gather money” or “we make paper/money.” This phrase is spoken in a Sheng that is specific to Ngara. While Sheng is said to have originated in Eastlands, relatively near Ngara, there are neighborhood, regional, urban, peri-urban, and rural language variations.¹⁶ Furthermore, the variation of Sheng that emerged twenty or thirty years ago is still spoken by many people (especially older people) in Kenya. Younger Kenyans, in turn, actively create new words, phrases, and sentence constructions, making Sheng (or perhaps the different *Shengs*) a vibrant and dynamic set of languages rather than merely a diminutive of the putatively more formal Swahili. As the rappers draw viewers into the video through unsettling images of strife, the viewer or listener can still appreciate the flow even if they do not know the type of Sheng used and therefore cannot understand every word.

The lyrical constructions of songs such as “Shupavu” say something specific about the neighborhoods of their artists. The densely filled verses of these songs, often created by rappers’ swift deliveries, correlate to everyday living conditions

in high-density areas. Ngara has 100 people per hectare (one hectare is about 2.4 acres) and is not as densely populated as informal settlement neighborhoods. In Dandora, where Judge is from, there were about 403 people per hectare in 2010, and in 2020, figures reflect an increase to 585 residents per hectare. The numbers are worse in Kibera, where “Looking Up” was filmed. Approximately 672 people resided in 2010 for every hectare, increasing to about 986 people a decade later.¹⁷ It seems that artists’ lyrical commentary, often fast and full of content, is symmetrical to places such as Ngara, Dandora, and Kibera. Just as there is a relative lack of space in these settings, so too is there a lack of spatiality in the songs.

“Shupavu” is a video that portrays urbanity’s obscene undersurface as a place where the awful and the beautiful clash. A lack of daylight suggests dystopian features. Throughout the video, the camera points upward toward the rappers, presenting them as authoritative actors within a harsh and pitiless landscape. The sounds that narrate the video are likewise hard, repetitive, and jarring. There is a solid and unflinching air of competitiveness, as the first proclamation in the video is “Wamezubaa!” (They are confused!), meaning that Judge and Washamba’s rivals are unknowing or dazed by the knowledge that the artists deliver. If competitiveness is constructed along masculine lines in the song, so too are social isolation and disempowerment. The video shows several scenes where men gather outside with the rappers. Some young men huddle around fires, purportedly to keep warm, while others walk around and sit together. An image of an angry and barking dog appears during Kev Mamba’s verse. These scenes evoke strong images of disenfranchisement and despair. Widespread poverty is portrayed as being collective and tragically unjust. At one point, Judge shakes both fists, pointing upward, and looks to the sky while proclaiming, “Shupavu!” This gesture indicates weariness with his current situation and a plea for a reprieve from something above him (perhaps a God). Judge sings the chorus several times and looks bothered, rolling his eyes and shaking his head in frustration, never offering so much as a grin. His stances are serious, affirmative, and steadfast. While rapping, his arms move tightly and confidently around his body. These performances indicate that although Judge has no power to change the present, he can marshal his own will to get through it.

Profound structural restraints inhibit the rappers in “Shupavu” and produce an insufferable vulnerability. In Flamez’s scene, he raps while sitting in a stairwell between two walls, where the concrete is crumbling and stained by water and dirt. His motions are aligned with the song’s beats, moving his hands toward and away from his body as he raps. The structure around him seemingly determines Flamez’s gestures and words, and his bodily presence occupies the space while defying its attempts to restrict him. Eloquently boasting, he raps, “Tara sina taratibu, wamezubaa, ninawatibu (I am in no hurry, I go slowly, they are dazed and I am [lyrically] healing them) / Nawatoboa tu kama kichungi, na ukipenda unikashifu (I go through them like a sieve, and you can come against me if you like).”¹⁸ The

video cuts to shots of him interacting with his peers, standing around, talking, and walking through the neighborhood. However, he only raps from the concrete stairwell. These moments symbolically indicate the significance of corporeality—while structural limitations confine his voice, he exercises some freeness through bodily movement.

The video portrays the music industry and the Kenyan state as obstacles to freedom. Judge raps, “Tunachukiana badala ya kuinuana, wasanii ndani ya game, muziki laana” (We hate each other instead of lifting one another; to be a musician in the game, music is a curse).¹⁹ Though this is a braggadocio rap, Judge recognizes that the music industry creates a harsh environment where he is left to compete with fellow rappers. He calls out the industry for its promotion of antagonism rather than unity. Likewise, the representations of the state solidify the idea that the rappers are not only bound by the struggles of making it in the rap game but also face the ongoing threat of state violence. During Flamez’s verse, the state is denoted through the police figure. The camera shifts to one group of young men sitting outside, with only their silhouettes visible against the building and the obsidian setting. Suddenly, they stand up and run as the shadow of a police officer appears to walk toward them. This officer slowly approaches the group in this shot and throughout the video, with the shadow of his semi-automatic weapon swinging lightly at his side. This unhurried perpetual saunter terrifies the men, who quickly dart from the scene and toward the camera. Like someone watching a horror movie where the vulnerable run and the pursuant struts assuredly in their direction, the viewer is left rooting for the fleeing men.

Accompanying the sonic and linguistic dodginess in “Shupavu” are the visualities in the music video, as the graphics exude an incomprehensibility that adds to the futuristic-yet-tragically-present-day aura. The hood, in this case, Ngara, is located at the margins of society, but it is also the place that capital relies on the most—the place where poor, working-class, and expendable laborers are housed. The entire music video is shot at night, and viewers never see the assumed clarity of daylight but rather darkness and the various forms of light that only the nighttime can value. The light from multiple fires and streetlights combined with caliginosity produces two dominant colors: a subdued yellow against a beautiful blackness. These hues create a surreal setting that is not readily identifiable, a neighborhood widely found throughout Nairobi yet indistinguishable from the next hood.

What devotees hear and see when they watch videos such as “Shupavu” is a map, one that is visual, linguistic, sonic, and performative. Artists use both language and imagery from their hoods: the sounds reflect desperation and strength, and the gendered armor serves as a remedy to these artists’ difficulties. The messaging in “Shupavu,” similar to that in the song “Looking Up,” is not a call for destroying global capitalist enterprises. Instead, it tells the story of what exists on the margins of society in places where people are simultaneously socially invisible and highly noticeable, as almost 60 percent of Kenya’s population lives in informal

settlement neighborhoods.²⁰ The music's loudness and underground quality reflect this contradiction, indicating that a sound can make a mark on society while that same society writes the music off as being too hood, a copy of the west, or simply bad music. An important conversation exists in a text such as "Shupavu." The performance of Judge balling his fists and shaking them as he looks past the sky and to the heavens while proclaiming his warriorship is a commentary on the basic facts of hood living: that space is a faraway luxury and basic amenities are often in short supply. Those with their ear to economic discourse might see this as part of a larger conversation about capitalism as an unremittingly failed project. However, Judge and Washamba Wenza want listeners to understand their sheer fortitude in encountering the disasters of this system and encourage listeners to see the state, symbolized in the video as the armed officer with the methodical gait, as the orchestrator of their misery and a barrier to a righteous and self-determining life.

THE TONGUE IS A WEAPON

Artists make Christian music as a way to move through the industry with limited resources. Several of the practitioners with whom I spoke identify as Christians or have, at one point, produced gospel songs; this included L-Ness, Sue Timon, Demaine Jabez, and Sheria. I spoke with artists who stated explicitly that they have used churches to record music and have made gospel songs because of the genre's popularity and widespread acceptance. Such moves exist within a much larger and more difficult setting that causes musicians to turn to alternative venues such as gospel. Given the tight constrictions of today's industry, it is not surprising that many artists would create gospel music to increase their likelihood of success.

Underground hip hop enters a context in which Christianity has a complicated presence in Kenya that ties into the politics of postcolonialism and privilege.²¹ After 1963, Christianity helped form the nation and larger ideals such as citizenship and belonging.²² The Moi era saw a bolstering of gospel music as both an unintentional by-product of the elimination of dissent and a direct result of Moi's attempts to legitimize his reign. Gospel earned a position in Kenya as a politically neutral and thus acceptable genre in the face of growing dissent.²³ Because many musicians were censored at this time, artists from outside Kenya found opportunities in the country, as they were less likely to produce anti-Moi music. Kenyans who avoided censorship or sought to appeal to a wide audience composed songs in Swahili or Lingala fit with Christian references.²⁴ The religion's rise and popularity in the Kenyan music industry has also resulted from industry factors. Churches began to fill voids in the music industry during the 1980s as multinational recording companies in Nairobi started to decline. For instance, Baptist Communications and Nairobi Pentecostal Church-Valley Road had begun to host recording sessions for a number of artists by the mid-1980s.²⁵ Additionally, the Nairobi Pentecostal Church owns and runs the radio station Hope FM.²⁶ Currently, several

Pentecostal churches continue to sponsor musicians and host concerts, providing the artists with readymade audiences and potential customers. Many of these religious institutions are also large businesses. They fund artists' production costs, host rap concerts, and open avenues for artists to appear on radio and television. Gospel music, in part due to the position of these churches, is now so influential that "musicians [reinvent] themselves as the recording industry's market has turned to the lucrative wave of commercial, Pentecostal-Charismatic Christianity."²⁷ It is within this context that some underground artists attempt to tap a market that is relatively easier to access compared to radio and television.

Pentecostal-Charismatic Christianity has a long history in Kenya and has influenced hip hop culture. Pentecostalism reached Africa in the early 1900s, and by the 1970s, it had become widely popular in Kenya.²⁸ Although it occupies a dominant place in Kenyan society, it breaks from mainline denominations, such as Anglicanism, Catholicism, and Methodism. In Pentecostal-Charismatic denominations, worship services focus on energetic dancing, lively performances, the giving of testimonies, glossolalia, and engaging sermons. Most have a youth wing that aggressively attempts to draw in members by espousing ideals of individual spiritual transformation, cosmopolitanism, modernity, and economic prosperity. Concerts can include hip hop, dancehall, and reggae music, all of which contain Christian messages. Rather than recoiling from worldly issues, these churches address societal problems, occasionally critiquing the state and interfacing with formal politics.²⁹ They often provide economic assistance along with a hefty dose of prosperity gospel, which dictates that God wants the faithful to be successful financially and that the more one gives to the institution and believes in the will of God, the more one will receive economic rewards. This philosophy appeals to many because it provides methods of spiritual fortitude: as people build up their belief systems while waiting for monetary benefits, they are afforded a type of resilience that enables them to make it through tough times. For those who live in precarious realities and those seeking to grow their wealth, Charismatic-Pentecostalism gives people hope and allows them to exercise a faith-based capitalist outlook. Just like corporations—and insofar as megachurches can be corporate entities—people view these institutions as viable sources of support when the state fails.

Today, gospel music receives much airplay on television and radio. Pastors and ministers of megachurches appear on television programs during the week and far outside of Sunday hours, and gospel music regularly plays during music slots on television. These realities emphasize Damaris Parsitau's argument that Kenyan "gospel music is popular culture."³⁰ Parsitau notes that in the 1990s, the Kenyan media ushered gospel music into commercial spaces, taking advantage of radio and television liberalization. For Parsitau, people angry and confused about rampant political corruption, poverty, and the HIV/AIDS crisis readily received such programming and music to make it through adversity.³¹

Not surprisingly, artists recognize the central place that Christianity, especially Charismatic-Pentecostalism, has come to occupy in Kenya and noted that they have sought out and performed at venues such as Deliverance Church and Nairobi Pentecostal Church. These artists have tapped into gospel's normative cultural location to make the types of rap music vital to them, a point emphasized by Jean Kidula.³² She notes that all kinds of Kenyan gospel music have dynamic elements that incorporate African styles from around the continent, Black and white American aspects, and older Kenyan traditions. Artists' decisions to integrate components into gospel are often because of taste and faith but are also strategic, as "gospel musicians intentionally explore, exploit, and manipulate arenas . . . for commercial and religious expediency."³³

Given that Pentecostal Christianity seeks to attract youth and position itself within popular culture spaces, it makes sense that rappers would seek out these institutions. Before Sue Timon joined *I Am*, she made music with Christian references. She stated at the time, "I'm able to rap about real-life issues. I write about the government. I can write about, ah, God. I can relate to people. And that is what makes it powerful. Because it affects someone, and someone can feel what I am saying."³⁴ Her sentiments echo another artist, Decence, who asserted that being a gospel artist does not mean that one must only discuss Christianity: "I wouldn't say that I talk just about the Bible *kabisa*,³⁵ because there is so much going on You know people need to wake up. Actually, there is so much to talk about. Politicians and stuff, yeah."³⁶ These statements reveal artists' needs to lean on the openings offered by gospel and redefine their music on their terms as much as possible. Their decisions not to rap about the Bible *kabisa* also exemplify how they take advantage of Christianity's social position to make the music they want. This sentiment differs from that of other artists who explicitly identify as Christians, such as Juliani, discussed in a later section in this chapter. Their decisions to make gospel are smart and deliberate in many ways because they recognize that gospel messages make rap more palatable to a broader audience.

"Ulimi" (Tongue) by Sue Timon and Flamez from Washamba Wenza warns its listeners concerning the obligations devotees have to their communities. The song, released around 2011, folds Christian values into a strict underground ethic. "Ulimi" is about the power of one's voice, and according to Sue Timon and Flamez, the tongue is a weapon, "*ulimi ni silaha*," and rappers have a moral duty to use their words to spread encouragement, hope, and positivity rather than triviality and pessimism.³⁷ The song elicits the corporeal and fleshy just like "Shupavu," and does so through its explicit reference to the tongue as voice. It contains a typical underground sound that captures the political seriousness of the culture with its solemn and overly heavy beats. The sonic energies of "Ulimi" mirror its lyrics and materialize as a warning call to those who influence others. There is little carefreeness in the song, as listeners are asked to inventory their lives and make appropriate changes for the good of society. The religiousness of "Ulimi" uses noncommercial sound and lyrically heavy quality typical of underground music.



FIGURE 16. “Ulimi” music video, featuring Sue Timon in front of other rappers. Screenshot by author. Source: Flamez Mshamba Mwenza, “Ulimi Sue Timon & Flamez (Washamba Wenza) Official Video,” YouTube, January 28, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zkwxRjBpoLs>.

“Ulimi” adheres to the same Pentecostal-Charismatic notions found in many churches, mainly through the individualist notion of religious self-policing. In “Ulimi,” Sue Timon raps, “Ulimi ni silaha, unafa ukatekate maovu, kungine ni dawa unaposhwa poshwa, wacha maovu” (The tongue is a weapon, you are supposed to eliminate bad deeds, elsewhere it is medicine, it relieves pain, [delivered as a directive] stop bad deeds!).³⁸ The idea of the “tongue as a weapon” alludes to Christian notions about policing one’s actions in the service of faith. Using the biblical idea of “tame the tongue,” Timon and Flamez construct their voices as weapons. The message is the same: be careful about what you say. Timon and Flamez specifically construct themselves as agents who take on social responsibility. “Ulimi” has many characteristics that typify the Nairobi underground, such as encouraging listeners to discipline themselves to live a better life and expressing the notion that the voice can be used as a weapon to fight injustice. Following the traditions of both Pentecostal-Charismatic and underground ideals, it focuses outward on society. In the lyrics, Timon and Flamez refer to the evils of the music industry, postelection violence, and colonialism. Whereas the song’s overarching theme is that one must control what one says and use their voice for good, the call to do better is situated within harsh historical and contemporary realities. What emerges is a text that sounds obstinate and almost merciless, counseling people within the context of a broad concern for the welfare of Kenyans.

“Ulimi” was produced at Audio Kusini studio, where I met and interviewed several artists in the beginning part of my fieldwork, including Nafsi Huru, Agano,



FIGURE 17. Sue Timon in the “Ulimi” music video trailer. Screenshot by author. Source: Flamez Mshamba Mwenza, “Ulimi Sue Timon & Flamez (Washamba Wenza) Video Trailer,” YouTube, January 11, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ShuCJ2992yo>.

and Funzo Kuu. Nafsi’s “Still Strong,” the song I examined in the previous chapter, was produced at Audio Kusini. Soon after this visit, artists reported that the studio leadership had decided to restructure its focus and gear its music toward Christian gospel. Audio Kusini had “kicked everyone out,” according to rappers, when I returned in 2012 and only hosted “gospel artists.” Years later, artists told me that people regularly joked that someone performed witchcraft on the studio because of its unexpected turn, which resulted in chaos and frustration.

Audio Kusini’s website now boasts an assortment of gospel songs, primarily ones that fall within a mainstream commercial sound. There are several hip hop songs, including ones by Kaktus Kusini, the named founder and CEO of the

studio. In an interview on WemaTV, a Christian Kenyan online television station, Kaktus spoke of rapping in his childhood, starting the studio with help from his family, eventually drinking, straying from his Christian faith, and ultimately returning to a more religious life.³⁹ Kaktus never mentioned what happened with the former rappers at the studio, so it is difficult to glean where they fit into his timeline of struggle and transformation. The studio shifted from a very specific underground sound to more industry-compatible music. There is also a difference in the finishing quality of the two types of videos. “Still Strong” and “Ulimi” appear less polished than Audio Kusini’s current catalogs, implying that there may have been modifications or upgrades in studio technologies. Kaktus continues to make rap songs and produce other artists, but the music does not carry the same underground spirit as “Ulimi.” Critically, one underground artist explained of the current Audio Kusini tracks that “you can’t hear the soul of hip hop in the music anymore.”⁴⁰

Despite the studio’s shifts, it must not be forgotten that “Ulimi” is a gospel song. There is not much difference in lyrical messaging between “Ulimi” and the songs that Audio Kusini now produces, and although “Ulimi” draws on biblical themes, the song and video are not included on Audio Kusini’s website. It is difficult to conclude why this is the case, and Kaktus Kusini certainly has the freedom to build and implement his studio and company in whatever way he sees fit. The prominent difference between a song such as “Ulimi” and the current music at Audio Kusini lies in the sound. In “Ulimi,” Sue Timon and Flamez rap over a stark and resolute beat, and the bass is heavy and occupies much of the song’s sonic space. The lyrics are delivered quickly and without much pause, and the sentiment is cautionary and exasperated. Much of Audio Kusini’s current music carries an uplifting tone set to commercially synthesized sounds and a marked lack of the sonic heaviness of underground bass; that is, it is no longer underground but aboveground, matching much of the popular music that circulates in media spaces.

CAPITALISM IS THE “SOLUTION”

In late 2017, commercial artist Juliani reported that he would host a large-scale tribute concert for Kalamashaka and would be inviting sponsors through his Dandora Hip Hop City project. He mentioned Ukoo Flani Mau Mau, Wenyaji, and Mashifta as some of the artists on the concert bill. While the concert did not materialize as indicated, the headlines stood out as important. Juliani stated in a related interview, “Kalamashaka did so much for the industry, but look at them now. Look at them now: they are neglected; nobody cares about them.”⁴¹ He is kinder than other artists, who have expressed frustration and ridicule over Kalamashaka’s inability to establish a veritable career in the rap game. These criticisms reveal the tensions and angst artists often feel about themselves as economic subjects in a late capitalist system. Kalamashaka and UFMM have developed a dual reputation as the cultural founders of the music and as individuals who have failed to whip their

profits into something sustainable, which is at the heart of a much larger discourse in Kenya about artists from the hood.

During a discussion I had with a man practitioner, I queried him about the difficulties that artists face when attempting to profit from selling music. I told him about a previous interaction in a music stall in the Central Business District. I had asked the vendor for underground music, but they had responded with confusion and mild shock before stating that they did not sell “that type” of music. I asked for the artist’s thoughts on the interaction, and their response is worth quoting at length:

You know, like, I’m not even looking at it like an artist or whatever. I’m looking at it like from a business point of view, business perspective. Most of these guys are usually not serious. Okay, like yeah, they might, like, shoot me if they hear me talking like this, but it’s true. Most of these guys are not serious. So, they are not aggressive; they don’t push their product that much. Plus, . . . most of the hip hop artists in Kenya don’t even have managers and all that. So, the business element of hip hop in Kenya is very poor compared to like Uganda, Tanzania, so like, *if you’re talking like let’s say, Ukoo Flani or Mau Mau or whatever, . . . by now they should be riding hummers and shit . . . cuz they started way back in 1996*. They used to actually do world tours. You know like, if they go to Europe, do some tours there, South Africa, but mismanagement is what actually brought them down. So, they are good lyrically, but businesswise, no, most of them are poor.⁴² (emphasis mine)

The scenario I laid out prompted the artist to discuss the ineptitude of UFMM rather than any structural reasons that could explain rap’s absence in the stalls, such as the negative associations of underground sounds or even the vendor’s personal decision not to sell rap because of a perceived notion of what the music entails. This practitioner saw the dearth of rap music in the stalls as the artist’s responsibility to correct. The inability of artists to cope within the industry is seen as their failure to make suitable and rational choices rather than as a misdeed of the institutions and individuals that gatekeep and maintain the industry. These assessments of other rappers, thus, enforce a disciplinary logic where an artist is always judged for their economic actions. To be a capable rapper is to know one’s field and to act accordingly; in short, it is to govern one’s actions in the face of or in accordance with structures of power.

There do exist hardy critiques of capitalism when discussing UFMM. To return to the documentary profiled in chapter 3, *Ni Wakati*, Albert Josiah, a former radio presenter at KISS FM, edges close to a condemning assessment of capitalism in his discussion of the rich and poor. Josiah accurately dismantles the claims about Kalamashaka that they could not secure economic benefit because of their shortcomings. Josiah also frames the argument within a broader historical setting. He identifies how Kalamashaka’s story is similar to that of the Mau Mau fighters: “If you think about it honestly, [Kalamashaka] bore none of the fruits of that struggle. Does that sound like a familiar story?”⁴³ As soon as he asks this, *Ni Wakati* transitions to a scene from the 1952–59 State of Emergency in Kenya,

wherein the colonial state exerted catastrophic violence on Africans in an attempt to hold on to the colony. Josiah then states the following:

They are the guys that are fighting for your rights for the belief that, you know, there is something more to do, that Kenya shouldn't be on its knees begging the World Bank, "Nisaide, nisaide, za zote" (Help me, help me, all the time). That we shouldn't be yoked with that elusive, invisible hand meddling in our business, and stealing our souls, and taking our babies, and destroying our future. We shouldn't just sit back and look at it happen; we need to say something. And that, you know, a lot of the part of you being poor and unhappy, some of it has to do with people who are rich because they took what was supposed to be yours.⁴⁴

Josiah's statement is one of the most impactful interventions in the film, and it offers several points. He asserts that the Mau Mau fighters who survived the conflict still sacrificed enormously, as many who managed to survive were still landless and poor after independence. Thirty years later, landless and poor artists paved the way for well-off artists and other industry players to turn hip hop into a profit-generating genre. Josiah's point is that the rich are rich because they stole from the poor, not because they worked hard, and Kenyans should not beg for money from entities that represent a larger global system that has turned Africa's valuable commodities into incredible wealth for the global north. Josiah's comment directed at the greedy shifts us toward a welcome indictment of the inherently unfair economic system. Though rappers do not necessarily move toward a wholesale critique of capitalism, many agree with Josiah's point that politicians and well-connected businesspeople who monopolize industries and hoard wealth stand in the way of the freedoms of working-class people.

Most rappers do not put pressure on the economic system but on individual actors, like politicians and themselves. They reflect wider societal values of hard work within capitalist contexts and tie these beliefs into the culture of hip hop, upholding the ideas that one should work hard for their success and that difficult obstacles are not a reason to stop making music.⁴⁵ This emphasis on labor in Kenyan society is connected to how people earn and exercise self-determination in a context structured around global capitalism. Hence, it is of little surprise that the genre is often defined through its use-value. Consider the following statement from underground rapper Demaine Jabez:

Hip hop is a way of expression. And hip hop music is powerful. Music changes societies. Music shapes cultures, and music brings up generations, you know? So I find hip hop, huh, as a tool where one can stand out and do music and cause his plea to be heard. It's like a CV; you have to bring your CV before the guy you want a job from. So hip hop is like a CV.⁴⁶

I have heard many similar sentiments: that the music is a resource that leads to greater opportunities. Other rappers with whom I talked discussed the need to approach hip hop as a small business, reiterating the idea that if artists are to succeed, they must build their brands. Many argued that rappers who have failed

and left the game have either not worked hard enough or neglected to craft themselves as a marketable product. Such views reflect the economic circumstances and are reasonably understandable given that most underground rappers are from working-class backgrounds, and even those who have managed to form a career out of their music do not have inheritable wealth and thus find themselves in an ongoing hustle.

L-Ness fully acknowledged the difficulties of developing a music career while also viewing the process as being full of necessary and inevitable hard work and personal sacrifice:

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

RP: So, I mean, is that understandable? Or do you . . . not agree with it?

L-Ness: I don't agree with it because here are so many ways, so many things happening in scene. We also have cartels that are controlling the game. But that shouldn't make anybody give up. Cuz you can, you don't focus on Kenya. When you make your music, you focus on outside Kenya. So if Kenyan stations don't play, Tanzanian stations will play. Ugandan stations will play; South Africa will play. But it's hard; it shouldn't be like that. It shouldn't be like that.⁴⁷

Immediately before this explanation, she had objected to the music industry's informal payola system. Additionally, she discussed elsewhere in the conversation how women artists encounter hardship in maintaining a rap career because of familial duties and pressures. L-Ness knows that people face industry hardship; despite that, she believes one should persevere under any circumstances. She is not alone in this belief; the notion that one must be a fit and rational economic actor is a widespread ideal among underground musicians. Such ideals can be regarded as bolstering and placing one's faith in the same capitalism that marginalizes artists in the industry. However, rappers have melded compliant economic subjecthood into a practice of defiance and subversion, which simultaneously emerges through gendered armor subjectivities. What appears is a rugged work ethic dictating that rappers should be capable businesspeople within an oppressive reality, easily fitting with masculine ideas of toughness and survivability. Thus, L-Ness's comment that artists should persevere despite familial pressures on women and industry limitations for many lower-class musicians also points to a more endemic set of codes about how subtle masculinities operate.

For rappers, capitalism, or their marginal position within it, is not the problem in their lives; instead, it is the available solution to the obstacles they face. Much of the pressure rappers put on themselves and others to be capable and able to survive the rap hustle surfaces from their class positions and their views of the state. Most

see capitalism as a way to obtain greater opportunities, while the kleptocratic state is seen as impeding their journey toward economic self-actualization. Many practitioners think the government misuses capitalism, which could be beneficial. If only politicians would not be so greedy, artists—and people in general—could exercise personal potential within capitalist practices. Rappers argue that the state does not allow them opportunities to work, make money, and acquire wealth and that the government impedes economic freedom. Furthermore, underground artists believe they can be wealthy, but that wealth must be garnered through selling products that do not conform to mainstream standards. Most assume that rappers who make it do so by compromising. These rappers explicitly understood that those who remain pure to hip hop are bad businesspeople and never able to earn money consistently, and those who become affluent sell out. There is an inherent and unresolved paradox because those who hustle must succeed, and wealthy rappers who started as poor are almost always considered as having sold out.

The idea that capitalism is a solution to how the state impedes people's path toward economic security is not something that exists only in hip hop spaces; it is a widespread societal belief in Kenya. I encountered this notion early in my fieldwork. In 2010–11, a famine hit Turkana, the northeastern part of Kenya. After the then-government spokesperson Alfred Mutua denied that people were suffering and dying, many Kenyans were outraged. Corporations, including Safaricom, Kenya Commercial Bank, Media Owners Association, and the Kenya Red Cross, led a campaign called "Kenyans for Kenya," which raised food and resources for the region.⁴⁸ I attended one of the campaign's fundraising events, where businesses competed to see who could raise the most money. Kenyans across the country and those abroad donated funds, and people regularly discussed how they could confidently donate because they knew their money would not be swallowed into mismanaged and corrupt government initiatives. The idea that Kenyans could and should help each other independent of state assistance proliferated during this time, and the able and generous helped raise billions of Kenyan shillings after the campaign appeared on television and radio. "Kenyans for Kenya" served as a nation-building exercise. For many, it proved that Kenyans could come together in a crisis just a few years after the tragedies of the 2007–8 postelection violence. The unanimous discourse at the time was that people did not need the state to remedy the crises afflicting the country and that with the assistance of corporations, Kenyans could help themselves.

According to media reports and press releases during this time, the people in Turkana lacked food because the area was semi-arid and prone to drought. However, larger structural analyses of how famines are avoidable and often the result of global racial capitalism were left out of these conversations. For example, people's livelihoods and the ability to exercise pastoralism, a long-held and thriving practice in Turkana, have been made difficult by a drying climate and the extractive oil industry's presence there. Land has long been seized for oil exploration, and in 2012, production began. Charis Enns and Brock Bersaglio

discuss how civil society in the region organized for rights from the very oil companies inducing the economic and social shifts.⁴⁹ They describe the Turkana oil camps as another example of resource enclaves, for them “spaces of corporate control,” where workers—usually not from Turkana—live in protected gated compounds and have access to excess food and amenities. In contrast, in the surrounding areas, many people live in poverty and subsistence.⁵⁰ Rarely is there a hearty analysis of how racial capitalism enables government violence and instability and thus creates and exacerbates other societal problems, such as the arrivals of dispossessed Sudanese to the Kakuma refugee camp and the Kalobeyei Integrated Settlement or the cattle rustling and economic conflicts between Pokot and Turkana communities.⁵¹ Ignoring how capitalism creates and is dependent on inequities positions corporations as the solution to, in this case, the ill-suited barren environment and the inept state.

Of course, “Kenyans for Kenya” only built on and hardened the already-in-place notion that capitalist Kenya is a solution to these social problems. Upon independence, Jomo Kenyatta sought to sell capitalism to the populace as inherently African and socialism and communism as an anathema.⁵² He aligned the country with the U.S. and the west during early independence, both economically and militarily, a strategic Cold War–driven set of moves.⁵³ By the time Daniel arap Moi began privatizing government parastatals, liberalizing the media, and permitting multinational corporations into the country in the late 1990s, capitalism was positioned as a remedy to his authoritarianism. Institutions such as the World Bank claim that the growth of capitalism is a goal for “developing” countries, but these beliefs have also been absorbed and pursued by Kenyans of all classes. Corporations are seen as “cleaning up” Kenya, bringing infrastructure and employment to people. Additionally, as China’s investment in Kenya and its close relationship with the country’s presidents have intensified over the past few decades, the skepticism Kenyans have had with this form of investment has been directed at China itself rather than at corporate practices at large. The conditions of capitalism are regarded as inevitable, and the origins of inequalities are misidentified as accidents or the result of human failure, including of the greedy rich and the poor and lazy.

SYNTHESIZING RESISTANCE

In the underground world, mainstream music standards are a thorn in the sides of artists who believe their music is worthy of occupying ample amounts of space on radio and television. Artists regard those who make mainstream music or incorporate hip hop elements such as rapping into Afropop songs as sellouts. Many see adhering to neoliberal values, such as disciplined hard work, as acceptable, while artists who adhere to capitalism by being overly commercial are seen as disloyal to the culture of hip hop. Judge argued that commercial rap, which typically incorporates dancehall and Afropop elements, delivers watered-down lyrics, which he calls “ABCD rhymes,” “nursery rhymes,” and “cartoon rhymes.”⁵⁴ This

comment refers to simplistic lyrics that are basic in their structure and those that do not take up strong critiques of society, both of which are largely derided in the underground.

I spoke with some artists who fuse their music with Afropop instrumentations, either for diversity, taste, or marketing purposes. Rapper Baby T, who appears in the song and video “Looking Up,” stated that Afropop and dancehall both carry weight in the music industry. She argued that rap is more “cumbersome” due to its often heavy lyrics and that “hip hop goes underground because many people don’t want to take the time to listen to it.”⁵⁵ For her, these are all reasons why someone may want to make more mainstream music:

Most people love dancehall more than hip hop. . . . I’d say that hip hop artists are working hard to make, to bring hip hop back alive. When it comes up, you just have to mix it with other things to get people to listen. So, if you do a fusion of maybe hip hop and dancehall, people listen to it because there’s a bit of dancehall, so, yeah. I think there will be a fusion, and maybe sometimes you even might overlap some dancehall.⁵⁶

The cumbersome nature of underground music, as Baby T noted, has everything to do with the sonorous elements: the bulky sounds, the closely packed lyrics, and the overall heavy tonalities. Her argument presents questions about when listening feels laborious and demanding and relates to an industry-wide sentiment: that the music should be set to accompaniment that aids listeners and consumers in easily appreciating the music and taking in the lyrics. It is important to note that the dancehall that Henriques describes in *Sonic Bodies* does not retain its low or othered signification as it travels across the Atlantic to the African continent. Dancehall in Kenya materializes as part of commercial music that middle- and upper-class youth listen to. Although it is recognized as a relative of low-cultured reggae, which is also historically popular in Kenya, it preserves an alternative connotation as being attached to an affluent ethos. Dancehall music’s sound systems, computerized vocoders, and synthesizers are machines of access and excess. Artists who have the resources to produce a finished product can make use of computer technologies, which thus come to signify an upper-class sound. Of all the artists I spoke with, Baby T was the most dedicated to making mainstream music and once aspired to collaborate with U.S. rapper Meek Mill. Much of Baby T’s music has made it to Kenya’s evening music video slots on television. She exemplifies the straddling that Caroline Mose writes about in “Jua Cali Justice,” as the artists Mose writes about, like Jua Cali, Madd Traxx, and Wenyaji, are similar to Baby T. These artists produce music that has a range of subject matter from political oppression to partying and sexual relationships and therefore do not fit into neat categories of either mainstream or underground boxes that, for Mose, are “unreliable” and “non-specific.”⁵⁷

Several mainstream songs take on socially salient topics or contain subversive messaging, but this does not dissuade underground artists from writing off the music as commercial and mainstream and thus inauthentic to the culture.

In hip hop, aesthetic and sonic characteristics and political commitments are closely intertwined. When mainstream artists create conscious music with sonic appeal, the earnestness of their songs can easily appear thin or hollow because the sound does not align with the content. Unlike the heavier sounds and thick lyrics in songs such as “Ulimi” and “Shupavu,” in many commercial songs the words can be clearly heard and are matched with a buoyant and easily singable chorus. There are three songs I examine here: Jaguar’s “Matapeli” (Conmen/Con people), Juliani’s “Utawala” (Leadership/Rulership), and King Kaka’s “Wajinga Nyinyi” (Y’all Stupid).

Jaguar’s 2012 catchy and then-popular song “Matapeli” decries government corruption and the blatant and gross profiting off the multiple episodes of disaster capitalism in Kenya. The first few lines are as follows: “Ona tuliowachagua, wanatuchezea kama marioneti, hakuna anayetujali, wamekuwa watu wa pesa (Look at the ones we elected, they are playing us like marionettes, no one cares about us, they have become money people) / Bei ya unga inapanda wakati mahindi inaoza kwa shamba. Eeh! Maziwa inaganda wakati kwa duka bei inapanda (Price of flour is going up while maize is rotting on the farm. Eeh! Milk is getting sour while the price at the store goes up).”⁵⁸

Here, Jaguar, also known as Charles Njagua Kanyi, references the claims that politicians created and benefited from one of the many maize scandals that have become relatively commonplace in Kenya. Politicians and businesspeople create intentional maize shortages to profit from them. The National Cereals and Produce Board (NCPB) is the institution that buys maize from farmers, and they keep stockpiles of it to account for demand and in case of drought or hardship. The scandal occurs when the farmers attempt to sell the maize to the NCPB, and the board inaccurately tells the farmers that the product is worth less than market value, insisting they need to buy it at a drastically low price. The farmers will, in turn, not sell the maize and hold off for better prices because they cannot break even, causing the silos to run low. The NCPB then states they must import maize because of this manufactured shortage, and the board then buys maize from colluding government officials who oversee the importation of new product. When this imported maize is, in turn, sold at a higher price, this ultimately yields billions of Kenya shillings in profit for all involved. In addition, sometimes the maize is sold to shell companies or “briefcase millers,” who then sell the product outside the country and make an incredible profit.⁵⁹

Upon first listen, it is easy to be swept up in the progressive reach of this popular artist and his willingness to engage with public art that articulates everyday people’s concerns and the gross corruptive practices of the government. For instance, the video shows several images from the folk hero art of Pawa 254’s 2012 Mavultures graffiti project that appeared on buildings along streets such as Moi Ave and Koinange Street throughout Nairobi and portrayed politicians as vultures who devour the citizenry and the country’s resources.⁶⁰ However, a cursory look

into the song and video reveals its collaboration with the normative parameters that arrange the music industry and state power. For instance, Jaguar includes politician Mike Sonko in his video, demonstrating his closeness to the government. Sonko is a long-embattled former MP, former senator, and Nairobi governor. He appears in the video as a *jua kali* shoeshiner. As an MP, he acquired a reputation for being closely connected to youth and hip hop culture by wearing urban streetwear in public settings and donning earring studs on the Parliament floor, much to the dismay of other MPs who called for decorum and respectability.⁶¹ At the time of the video, Sonko was a senator for Nairobi and had crafted himself as a controversial, outspoken ally of poor youth. However, he has had a turbulent career, facing accusations of drug trafficking, being arrested for corruption, and being impeached and removed from governorship in 2020.⁶² Sonko's controversies aside, his presence as a state figure in a music video about the greed of political elites is contradictory at best.

The sonic qualities of "Matapeli" also align with industry criteria. Like many other pop songs, it includes computerized vocal instrumentalizations, a quick tempo, and a danceable beat. Jaguar's delivery of the lyrics is somewhere between rapping and singing. His vocals are certainly not the fast and cutting delivery of rap bars in hip hop traditions but rather a smoother sing-song rhyming style. Unlike the jolting tonalities often found in much of rap music, especially noncommercial forms, Jaguar sings with smoothed-out vocals that cushion his indictment of social issues.

Throughout the song, "Eh eeh eh eeh eeh, Eh eeh eh eeh" can be heard in chorus-like echoes.⁶³ While this utterance can be easily overlooked, it deserves an explication. The "Eh!" is a Kenyan (and African) exclamation of disgust meant to convey a harsh rebuke. People smack their lips or suck their teeth and shout "Eh!" when they are maddened and repulsed at a given situation. In the context of the subject matter of "Matapeli," which details how well-paid and resourced politicians sought to turn food shortages into profit, this expression could be apprehended in a musical context to Africanize dissent and to encourage the contempt that many Kenyans felt during this time. However, this speech-act materializes through the synthesizer and occurs within the rest of Jaguar's machinic vocals. The thrust of defiance and revulsion that might otherwise convey opposition is lost. What listeners hear is a profoundly distinct buffered and veiled "Eh!" and what is meant to proffer indignation floats out in the aural space as pacifying and harmonic scatting.

"Matapeli" foretells Jaguar's subsequent political career. Jaguar regularly performed for then-presidential hopeful Uhuru Kenyatta's campaign, which began circa 2013. When Uhuru came into power, he tapped Jaguar to lead a youth wing before appointing him as director of a semigovernmental body, the National Authority for the Campaign against Alcohol and Drug Abuse (NACADA). In 2017, Jaguar was voted in as an MP for the working-class area of Starehe in Nairobi.⁶⁴

If his sentiment of dissent meant to press against the monopolistic state power structure was questionable in “Matapeli,” his participation in the gears of the state solidifies his inability to intervene in rap’s traditions of sustained resistance.

King Kaka’s 2019 song “Wajinga Nyinyi” does not follow the same musical blueprint as “Matapeli” and “Utawala,” the latter of which is discussed below. “Wajinga Nyinyi” is formatted like a poem and prayer that calls out Kenyans’ numbness to the scandals of political elites. King Kaka, who initially went by the name Kaka Sungura, established himself as an Eastlands-born rapper, as detailed in songs such as “Eastlando.” Over the years, Kaka has started several businesses, such as the bottled water company he established in 2015, Kaka Empire’s Majik Water.⁶⁵

“Wajinga Nyinyi” is the most sonically effective of the three songs. “Wajinga” avoids a catchy sonic structure, and King Kaka sets his prose to a solemn piano sound. The song addressed yet another maize scandal in 2018, the joblessness of college graduates, a corruption controversy involving former minister and Kirinyaga governor Anne Waiguru, a failed government-funded laptop project, and the troubling exile of government critic Miguna Miguna.⁶⁶ As the song progresses, one may anticipate a predictable beat to drop and a rap flow to form, but neither ever comes. Instead, King Kaka delivers his intense lyrical montage alongside a piano sound that seems almost off-beat to his words. Listeners are left slightly uncomfortable, wondering if a predictable song formula will develop. This deviation from the expectations of sound causes listeners to pause slightly, hesitate, anticipate, and wonder, all predicated upon sonic uneasiness. Kaka does not use the synthesizer’s predictable Afropop formula to numb his words as Jaguar does in “Matapeli.” Instead, fans are forced to speculate on the sonic divergences and, in the process, absorb the lyrical content.

The song lyrics match the sonic themes of popular opposition but also undercut pleas for resistance through ableist tropes. Kaka contends that Kenyans have become indifferent to corruption. To be sure, it is difficult to be outraged by every news headline that reports on an official siphoning funds into their personal bank accounts, which is an exhausting, if not impossible, response. Kaka’s song urges listeners who are stupid, or *wajinga*, to continue applying pressure to the state. Indicting people as stupid is attention-grabbing and surely meant to be a rallying call for action. However, it also works to judge inaction through foolishness, a fallacious opinion that ultimately concludes people’s unintelligence should be blamed for state greed. Additionally, for him, “sisi ni vipofu na viziwi” (we are blind and deaf), and people must avoid the impassiveness that leads to apathy and the tacit allowance of Kenya’s kleptocracy.⁶⁷ Kaka’s line leaves the listener with the difficult question of whether a mass uprising against politicians *eating* money, as it is phrased in Kenya, would lead to systemic change or a heavy-handed state response of force and bloodshed. However, he curtails his argument by implying that sightlessness and hearing loss parallel political unconcern. Kaka’s encouragement for

people to fight through corruption fatigue may be reasonable, but not when people's dissent is measured through the register of a normate body.

"Wajinga Nyinyi" stirred much attention in the media and with governmental officials, probably and partly because of its shock value ableism. After its release, Governor Waiguru filed a lawsuit and later dropped it against King Kaka, stating that he had defamed her.⁶⁸ Kaka also said that he feared for his life and reported that he had received calls from President Kenyatta, among other leaders. In December 2019, with media cameras rolling and legal representation and other musicians at his side, he reported to the Directorate of Criminal Investigations (DCI) for questioning after taking to social media, stating that the office had called him in. However, the DCI released a formal statement saying that the office had, in fact, not summoned him there and retorted that Kaka's arrival was a media publicity stunt.⁶⁹ If Kaka's goal was to whip up attention to magnify the iniquitous state attention on him or to produce headlines, it worked well. Artists Juliani, Wahu, and Eric Wainaina, along with Boniface Mwangi (the activist discussed in chapter 2), among others, appeared in front of the DCI and spoke in news interviews about the inherent right to create art to protest in a democratic country and to be protected under the constitution. Eric Wainaina famously faced government censorship with his 2001 song "Nchi ya Kitu Kidogo" (A Country of Bribes), which commented on the culture of corruption under President Moi's administration.⁷⁰ "Kitu kidogo" (something small, as in *give me something small*) is the commonplace saying and practice of bribes; to escape police harassment or to complete a transaction at a government or private office could involve handing over extra money. In his interview outside the DCI, Wainaina discussed his past censorship and stated that Kaka's outspokenness reflected a general sentiment of Kenyans' outrage that should not be ignored.⁷¹

The third song of this discussion is Juliani's "Utawala." As Kaka walked to the parking lot from the DCI, Boniface Mwangi, Kaka, Juliani, and others began to sing the chorus to "Utawala" as cameras surrounded them.⁷² "Utawala" is a 2014 upbeat anthemic track that ties governmental corruption and ethnic-based nepotism in Kenya to the country's lack of job opportunities, inadequate sanitation in poor areas, and police violence against protestors. As they sang, "Sitasimama maovu yakitawala" (I will not stand while evil rules) and pumped their fists to the beat, there was a cheerful energy among the people singing.⁷³ Perhaps these activists understood that the cameras provided some safety against the government officials who seemed to have their eyes on Kaka and that this was a small victory in the fight against the censorship of musicians.

Juliani, who composed "Utawala," is a gospel hip hop artist who once hailed from the UFMM camp and who has managed to acquire success and popularity.⁷⁴ He boasts a large social media following and has matched his music-making with a variety of spearheaded initiatives. The Dandora Hip Hop City project, to name one, hosts many events and community projects, including collaborations with

organizations and businesses. In his writing, he reflects on his dissatisfaction with the gross levels of inequality in Kenya and attempts to maintain a solid perspective about the poor.⁷⁵ The artists I spoke with had mixed sentiments about him. While most saw him as an authentic rapper dedicated to helping the community, others regarded him as too tied to commercialism. Juliani raps with crisp vocals, and the content is similar to underground songs. However, conforming to mainstream standards, many of his songs lack the hefty bass sounds that typically interact with his rap bars. “Utawala,” like “Matapeli,” seems to produce and demonstrate the formula for commercial songs that are politically conscious, as both songs set their denouncements of the government to sanguine tunes. The seemingly spontaneous performance of “Utawala” in support of King Kaka’s “Wajinga Nyinyi” exemplifies how Kenyan protest songs are tied together through similar critiques of government mismanagement and corruption. “Utawala,” furthermore, exists in the archives of significant protest music in Kenya.

In what ways might popular music contribute to the political listlessness that King Kaka refers to? For Jaguar, musician-turned-politician, his attachment to the state apparatus severely decreases the possibility that “Matapeli” will enter Kenya’s protest song history, which does include songs such as “Nchi ya Kitu Kidogo,” “Utawala,” and “Wajinga Nyinyi.” His political status aside, Jaguar’s catchy tunes in “Matapeli” have succeeded more in anesthetizing people’s outrage at the state’s lootocracy than bolstering it. The song’s lack of opacity demonstrates what Glissant would call uncreative transparency or a “lukewarm humanism, both colorless and reassuring.”⁷⁶ It transforms people’s indignation toward corruption into a feel-good tune, and it contains none of the hip hop aesthetics of untranslatability, including intentional shiftiness through embodiments, music, lyrics, and sound. Often, a song’s afterlife can acquire new significations of resurgent political possibilities; it can be sampled or referenced, thus pumping new energies into its initial force, as in the case of “Utawala” in the DCI parking lot.

Juliani’s “Utawala” exists in a murky area between political agitation and industry compliance. The continued circulation of “Utawala” and its reemergence in places such as outside of the DCI means that it intervenes in cultural and political discourse surrounding corruption. Yet, a part of the song’s popularity is due to its affectively pleasing sonic qualities, upbeat tonalities, and chantlike structure. The song is subversive enough to materialize in the unprompted yet perhaps media-encouraged performance outside the DCI. Yet “Utawala” is also subdued enough to be co-opted by the state. In November 2020, President Kenyatta’s Jubilee political party used the song without permission in their Building Bridges Initiative (BBI) promotional video. Under the banner of government efficacy and unity, BBI has sought to make changes to Kenya’s constitution, most notably expanding the powers of the executive branch, including both prime minister and president, the latter of which would be given the power to select two deputy premiers.⁷⁷ Many people have been critical of these moves. Disturbed by the video, Juliani

responded by issuing a letter through legal counsel stating in part that Jubilee must cease using the song and “admit liability for infringement of intellectual property rights.”⁷⁸ The fact that Jubilee would find the song rousing yet tepid enough to use in their initiative is evidence of the pacificatory aural similarity between “Utawala” and “Matapeli.” To compare, the dark and dystopic “Shupavu” and the gripping “Ulimi” would never make it into a Jubilee promotional video. While the interventions that “Utawala” makes in public discourse should be acknowledged as profoundly more effective than those of “Matapeli,” the two songs lack the shifting, defiant aesthetics that have come to signify hip hop.

This analysis of “Wajinga Nyinyi,” “Matapeli,” and “Utawala” should not be the only applicable formula of critique for Kenyan commercial music at large. The type of sound preferred by radio, television, and other venues matters, and yet, we should consider how mainstream music mediates Kenya’s social discourse. A catchy and danceable song does not necessarily mean it fails to accomplish cultural work. Instead, we must consider other factors in determining the relevance of commercial music. Imani Sanga, for instance, writes how Tanzanian popular music expresses a “postcolonial cosmopolitanism,” which adheres to a world-beat music system. For Sanga, artists facilitate unique indigenization processes and nation-building exercises, while maintaining their regional or international recognizability.⁷⁹ Most importantly, popular music presents what Sanga terms as “postcolonial consciousness,” a loaded sensibility that both departs from the colonial condition and inescapably adopts notions of otherness into the music.⁸⁰ We should see Kenya’s mainstream music similarly—as style that affirms Kenya not as a destitute nonentity but one that stands alongside other African music in its ability to make sounds that celebrate a familiar hip and urban sophistication. Afropop, for instance, is a genre that has encroached upon the central position that western music holds in Kenyan radio stations. American music still occupies a large portion of the diet of Kenyan radio, but Afropop continues to carve a substantial niche in this market. The making of a continental genre that Kenyans, Ugandans, Tanzanians, Congolese, and others collectively listen to and consume should not be disregarded, even with its ability to set standards in the industry. Afropop likely engenders social collectivities through listening, dancing, and critiquing.

One of the most enduring qualities of Afropop and Afrobeats has been the continual emergence of dance styles accompanying this music. Within Kenya alone, there have been dances like Lipala, Odi, Obe, and Bazokizo, in which practitioners perform boast-style footwork and hip movements that convey urbanism and Afrodiasporic commonality. These dances join a vast African continental repertoire of movement made possible through the circulatory registers of Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter. Ghana’s Azonto and Pilolo, South Africa’s Gwara Gwara and Voshos, the Shaku Shaku and Zanku from Nigeria, and Botswana’s Gweta are among a vast library of performances. The dances are often made popular by musicians and their accompanying songs and then go viral and take on new and

exciting reinventions, meaning that these embodied practices travel, transform, and produce continually unfolding ideas about movement.⁸¹ The styles additionally open inquiries about Afrodiasporic corporealities that explore joy, pleasure, urban life, digital competition, and the circulation of African popular cultures.

SWAG AND THE LIMITS OF LUDICITY

Artists often respond to commercial pressure by guarding the underground. There is no broad acceptance or anything-goes ethic when artists define “real” hip hop. Just as Kenyan cultural critics police what Kenyan music is and should be, underground rappers determine what the music is. This patrolling regularly occurs through considerations of how a piece of music sounds and how artists perform it. By positioning the genre’s audibility and corporeality in conversation with the values of the underground, artists decide what counts as hip hop and what sounds are merely imitative. Practitioners typically reject a complete alliance with the music’s more mainstream qualities, such as conspicuous consumption, materialism, and commercialism. Songs of the underground may link with capitalism’s insistence that bodies labor away exploitatively despite offering no real economic promises. Still, the sonically subversive and performatively ludic are a respite from the governance that late capitalism forces upon bodies. To preserve the politics of the body as a sacred enactment of freedom, artists cast off mainstream music and its accompanying bodily presentations by asserting that it waters down and robs the authentic soul of hip hop. These are the limits of ludicity, occurring when artists theorize their unwillingness to suture their bodies to consumerism and mainstream music standards.

To make these arguments, artists identify others who do not live up to hip hop’s standards. One rapper who has continued to surface in these conversations is Bamboo, who also goes by Simon Kimani and Abraham Kimani. Bamboo is a former member of the mainstream group K-South. He was born in Kenya, grew up in Inglewood, California, moved back to Nairobi as a teenager, and has made music for American and Kenyan markets.⁸² He has traveled back and forth between the U.S. and Kenya and once did a remake of Akon’s “Mama Africa,” though it did not gain widespread recognition in the U.S. market. His diasporic positioning as someone who does not just cite blackness but who has also lived in the U.S. and returned to Kenya makes him a complicated figure. Bamboo is the embodiment of the Kenyan hip hop diaspora. He is the figure who has roots in Kenya, has resided in the Black U.S., and has returned home. Much like the genre’s return to a continent to which it is said to have begun, his homecoming has been no easy landing. Bamboo represents the deep internal conflict about Kenyan music, as his wealth and success have been tied to his “Americanness,” mainly because he has rapped in English with an African American accent. He rests at the very core of what it

means when people demand that Kenyans do not appreciate Kenyan music, as practitioners have long spoken of notions of his derivativeness.

In the early 2000s, K-South released two albums, *Nairobbery* and *Nairobism*. Unlike most underground artists, Bamboo has had endorsement success, including with Coca-Cola Africa, Kenya Brewery, and Chandaria Industries. In 2013, Bamboo performed for and publicly endorsed Uhuru Kenyatta's presidential campaign.⁸³ Around 2016, he converted to Christianity, made gospel music, and became an outspoken critic of African spiritualities, voodoo, and "witchcraft." In the past few years, he has claimed that much of his early career was spent fighting the forces of others "bewitching" him.⁸⁴

In 2013, Bamboo released a track and music video appropriately entitled "2-5-Flow," yet another appearance this phrase makes in rap culture. The song is about his return to Kenya's rap game after spending some time in the U.S. Bamboo's video captures much of the intricacies and politics of Kenyan music, including how his embodied performance and sound come together to signify notions of commercialism. In the video, Sugar, who also appears in "Looking Up," sings the chorus in repetition: "2-5-Flow! / Get your damn hands up!" Bamboo and his supporting crowd of followers, including children, use their fingers to put up the numbers two and then five, and when Sugar sings "Flow!" everyone moves their arms in unison in a wave-like motion.⁸⁵ Their arms "flow" across the screen, creating the visuality of mobile togetherness. The sentiment is fun, leisurely, and cool, with camera shots bouncing to the beat of the song and alternating between black-and-white and color scenes.

Many artists I spoke with have critiqued Bamboo as being too American, which also means too wealthy, imitative, and disconnected from Kenyan realities. The accusations surrounding Bamboo tended to lie in the corporeal and the sonic; he acts and sounds too American. Their concerns over his work have reflected the idea that practitioners are deeply invested in maintaining a nonderivative hip hop aesthetic that demonstrates Kenyanness. Bamboo's corporeality and sound in music videos engender claims of imitation, which underground artists are all too familiar with. Regina Bradley writes about a U.S. mainstream *hip hop sonic cool pose*, in which performances of masculinity materialize through "sonic signifiers of black manhood, experiences, and coolness."⁸⁶ For Bradley, the sonic and performative masculine blackness can be contained both within and outside of music and are furthermore bound up in the complicated politics of blackness as historically propertied and currently commodified. Bradley's analysis encourages a consideration of how Bamboo's sonic iterations of blackness and masculinity land in Kenya. The discussions circulating around Bamboo reveal how aural and embodied performativities become coded and racialized. Bamboo has personified an excessive and disproportionate commodifiability of African Americanness, meaning that how he produces a hip hop diaspora is constantly read as faulty.

Many discussed Bamboo and stated that while he has rap skills, he is dismissed because of his supposedly imitative American swag. In the U.S., now that white Americans and the mainstream media have long adopted the term “swag,” American Black people have abandoned its usage, and it is now considered obsolete or used in other ways. In Kenya, the term “swag” has continued to carry important meanings and serves as a discourse about agency, economics, globality, and cultural imperialism. During my fieldwork, I asked directed questions about bodily performances, and from these, swag emerged as an important signpost for the Kenyan music style. The term has its origins in hip hop aesthetics, typically connoting styles of dress and how one carries oneself. Mecca Jamilah Sullivan mainly ties swag to masculinity, and Bettina Love connects it to resistance, writing that it challenges societal disenfranchisement.⁸⁷ Caroline Mose offers that swag is “made up of braggadocio, lyrical and performance skill [giving] an artist a unique ‘street’ identity and . . . a symbolic capital . . . representative of a marginalized periphery.”⁸⁸ Mwenda Ntarangwi, writing about East Africa, notes that swag is an invented way of performing wealth: “[Rappers] get caught up in a life of ‘swag,’ doing things so that others can see how successful they are even when such success is often a façade.”⁸⁹ Therefore, combining these approaches, I observe that swag is a corporeal compilation of masculinist energies and boast styles that have deep roots in both a defiance of social norms and an embrace of capitalist sensibilities by celebrating oneself along materialistic or consumerist lines. Swag draws from lower-class urgencies to protect oneself from being poor, as Mose contends, and one of its practices in accomplishing that is materialist consumption. Although femme rappers can and do adopt embodiments and ideals of swag through clothing, style, and wealth, the standards and origins of swag are still rooted in masculinity.

Many underground rappers see Bamboo’s sonic speech qualities of sounding African American as inauthentic, even though Bamboo may have picked up Black English from spending his formative years in California. One graffiti artist made this common quip: “Like it’s so simple. If I sent [Bamboo] to a country like India for ten good years, he wouldn’t get that accent [an Indian accent]. You know what I mean?”⁹⁰ Bamboo, in turn, has wholly repudiated that his sound is mimetic. The following is taken from an interview with Bamboo:

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

[Bamboo:] Well I do Swahilli [*sic*] music for Kenyans, and English music for my western fanbase. If it’s not in [S]wahilli [*sic*] they should understand that its [*sic*] not really for them its [*sic*] for an audience which only understands [E]nglish..I don’t have an [A]frican accent so if I tried it would be fake and sound funny as hell! Lol.⁹¹

Bamboo's way of speaking is what Regina Bradley calls "sonic scripting of the black male body," which can be read as either real or derived and can occur both inside music and in everyday encounters.⁹² In the eyes of many artists, Bamboo should not and need not imitate American artists because Kenyan styles are valuable enough. In Bamboo's opinion, his voice belongs to himself. Many rappers believe that Bamboo does not see himself as African American and think instead that his intentional usage of a U.S. Black accent is done so his music will sell and he will gain or sustain fame. It is also possible that his accent could have resulted from having grown up in the U.S. with the pressure to assimilate, especially given that in recent public appearances, his speech now mirrors that of other Kenyans. Practitioners' opinions of Bamboo reveal that just as there are acceptable ways in which Kenyan practitioners can draw from U.S. Black styles, such as through naming, sampling, citations, and collaborations, there are also practices that are considered improper. Having or co-opting an African American accent when one is Kenyan, for many, exists too explicitly within the framework of imitativeness and commercialism, and Bamboo is thus seen as putatively turning himself into a commodity without agency.

Swag performances in Kenyan hip hop elicit automatic debates about westernization, Americanization, cultural imperialism, and consumerism. Just like with the figures of the thug and tomboy, the swag rapper embodies superfluosity; in this case, the excess of material things that mark wealth. Many nondevotees dismiss Kenyan rappers who incorporate what they see as swag because of their bodily performances, clothing, and rapping. Just as Bamboo has been scorned for his accent, other commercial artists such as Kaligraph Jones are derided for their English-dominant lyrics, which are seen as marketing to a phantom U.S. audience or to upper-class Kenyans who might not know Swahili or Sheng well. Either way, working-class artists often feel excluded from an art form meant to represent them, and coupled with ongoing industry marginalization, this can feel like an entire system of actors working against them. For the underground Nairobi rappers with whom I spoke, the question is whether swag can be a legitimate personal expression or whether it is only a defective allegiance to the United States. I talked to a gospel artist who asserted that Bamboo's pose is "copied swag."⁹³ Another artist said that the way Bamboo performs his body indicates his lack of loyalty to the Kenyan scene and that when one sees Bamboo, he does not look like an African. When I pressed about what it means to look African, they responded, "Africans, we are simple people," and stated that even rappers should present themselves in humble ways.⁹⁴ This comment reveals that bodily dress, performance, and aural characteristics converge and are intertwined. When concluding that Bamboo betrays Kenyan culture, those in the underground consider how Bamboo presents himself, especially in his pre-gospel days, with his thick chains, expensive clothing, and, in music videos, his stance in front of pricey vehicles. Although a

well-established, upper-class consumer culture exists in Kenya, such practices are automatically attached to the U.S. for many rap artists.

Bamboo's "2-5-Flow" does share significant similarities with underground songs and cannot be seen as a complete outlier. Like his noncommercial counterparts, Bamboo creates diaspora by rapping from inside a Kenyan context while indicating outward to a larger imagined global rap culture. For Bamboo, it seems that "2-5-Flow" is a journey beyond the borders of Kenya and a call back to home. Moreover, underground rappers posit neoliberal hard work as a solution to poverty in the same way that Bamboo constructs celebrations of wealth to express his version of Kenyanness. Both sentiments reveal an adherence to the idea that the codes of racial capitalism will result in upward mobility in a system that, in reality, offers little assurance. In other ways, the song stands in strong contrast to underground sounds. The logic of "2-5-Flow" articulates an upper-class ethic unbound by the structures of poverty and the characteristic callousness of the state that is so often found in noncommercial rap. It has no representations of the state found in many underground songs. "2-5-Flow" contains leisured performativities and slowed rhyming that are not the same as the content-filled lyrics and ludic performances that buck state power and eschew a society that pushes the poor into invisibility.

Bamboo exemplifies nearly every characteristic of what it means to make Kenyan music. He is an uneasy performance of hip hop diasporic blackness. He is the Kenyan diaspora that has left and come back to the country and been culturally unrecognizable. His persona is seen as being rooted in his excessive mimicry of African Americanness. Though Bamboo is labeled as an imitator, he has made music that is rooted in Kenyan life. The rappers with whom I spoke do not like his work, and his political alliances and allegiance with state actors, namely Uhuru Kenyatta, have further eroded his credibility.

The Kenyan music industry's appetite for Bamboo-style rap songs and Afropop's catchiness leaves the brazen underground tunes largely invisible and unheard. Mainstream music works to smooth out the supposed jagged fringes of Kenya. Rather than portraying images of state violence and poverty, its music videos often show dance routines, vacations, parties, and clubs. Much of the music itself is full of mellifluousness and easily memorized choruses. The industry and its actors create popular musical tastes that are designed in line with Kenya's social order. However, underground artists do not take these social and sonic preferences as a given and believe there is a need and desire for a particular type of sonic quality in their gripping, truth-telling music.

I take Caroline Mose's provocation about the blurriness between music categories seriously, as many artists and songs fall through the gaps of the underground-commercial duality. Simultaneously, artists pump meaning back into the same binary that appears to misconstrue their work. The ways artists discuss this binary help to tell a story about their experiences in the hip hop game and how

society fails to hear and see them properly. These practitioners continue to invest energy in and create an understanding of their music through these categories. Access to resources, class, and opportunity overwhelmingly can structure how their music sounds and, therefore, where it is played, in addition to informing how underground and commercial rappers and devotees determine musical value. There is a correct way to embrace capitalist ideals: through the push of hard work and the maintenance of discipline. Where mainstream music strays, according to noncommercial artists, is through a problematic endorsement of materialism and commercial sound.