

## Conclusion

### *Hip Hop Flow as Kenyan, as Black*

This book uses corporeality to understand not just hip hop but Kenya and its history, the celebrations of its diaspora, and the everyday stories people tell about their lives. Performance is a method, a device to approach and study the world that accounts for the numerous ways people can be creative agents within their respective settings. Underground rap performances allow us to witness and experience what articulations of freedom look like in a musical community where its members are always on the move, seeking new and old venues, navigating laws and policies, and attempting to earn enough to continue making music. The circulatory globality of U.S. blackness is brought about as a product, a commodity, and a performance, and how it is bound in the formations of antiblackness helps to create meaning in places like Kenya. Performances, thus, become ways that artists move through, resist, and make pacts with power. Ludic embodiments in the music are similar to José Muñoz's notion of disidentification, which "neither opts to assimilate within [the dominant ideological] structure nor strictly opposes it; rather, disidentification is a strategy that works on and against dominant ideology."<sup>1</sup> Disidentificatory performances, for Muñoz, refer to how queers of color create complicated self-making through modes like camp and drag and how those processes turn away from a basic, straightforward narrative of identity formation. The artists I followed use practices like disidentification to divest from elements like commercialism and state-sponsored ethnicity and create hip hop genders to live through power structures while still operating as creative makers and innovators. Muñoz emphasizes, "There would be no theory . . . without the cultural work of the people"; and then, "The making of theory only transpires after the artists' performance of counterpublicity is realized with my own disidentificatory eyes."<sup>2</sup> I depart from this latter point because I understand embodiments as the site of

theoretical interventions by themselves, including those that fall under disidentification. Embodied performances can be the building blocks of theory, helping to contribute to how we think about hip hop as a holistic music culture. Additionally, orature is theory in and of itself. For the body must be understood as a site of philosophical interventions on its own terms to understand how artists' musical, performative, and lyrical work says something profound about the world they inhabit.

Years after the bulk of my fieldwork, artists are still in the studio, producing and releasing singles and sometimes music videos and relying more than ever on digital circulation. Many obstacles have remained unchanged: the difficulties of airplay, the lack of royalty collection for those who do appear on the airwaves, the transient nature of underground events, and the lack of venues willing to host. I first met many artists in 2012 when NGO events were more regular and consistent. Nafsi Huru, L-Ness, and Judge disagreed on why the events have waned over the years. Judge blamed the organizers for mismanagement, and L-Ness, who has had many gatherings at Goethe-Institut, stated that NGOs need to acquire revenue and that many underground fans do not want to pay entrance fees.<sup>3</sup> Nafsi Huru adamantly disagreed with any assertions that economic woes prevent events, arguing that Sarakasi's Hip Hop Hookup was funded and supported and drew crowds. Instead, he asserted that over the years, NGOs have looked unpropitiously at anything hip hop and have rejected event proposals by rappers. During a conversation in the fall of 2021, Nafsi told me he is preparing to launch another attempt at rehabilitating Sarakasi events, in which he will most likely be successful, at least for a time.<sup>4</sup> Most accept the idea that events at venues will come and go, and it is artists who need to be pliable, prepared, and resolute in chasing down any opportunity. They continue this work because they can make some money, but also because they are concerned with the welfare of Kenyan society, even when that same society often does not love them back.

There are always rappers who have long hiatuses from making music or tire of the hustle and decide there is insufficient return in ripping tracks and recording music videos. As I wrapped up my research in 2018, Baby T was beginning a sustained break from the studio to reevaluate her music career. While Baby T enjoyed her projects with ATL Entertainment, she expressed a need to experiment with her music differently and take more creative control over her songs and videos. The producers at ATL listened to her input and feedback and largely shaped the direction of her work. When she first started, she was grateful for the guidance. After spending about a decade making music, she wants to bring more of her creativities into production directly. Baby T's experience is generally unlike the other rappers I spoke with, who, due to their limited funds and "your best friend with a camera helping you with your video," as Nafsi Huru put it, must give much input into their work out of necessity.<sup>5</sup> Even though she has more resources than other artists, Baby T's next moves indicate a general desire for rappers to use music to express their autonomy. She plans to create songs that incorporate *gengetone* and *kapuka*

with hip hop and aims to perform at bigger concerts rather than rap gigs in clubs. It is not enough that Baby T's music appears on television and radio—perhaps more than the other rappers I followed in this book—she must be a director of her own craft. She explained, “I think I wanna be more aggressive in the videos. I wanna be more like Missy Elliott in videos. If people are dancing, she's there dancing with them. She just becomes the center of the videos, so I think I wanna be more active.”<sup>6</sup> Unsurprisingly, this brief statement suitably touches the core topics in this book of the performance of gendered armor (aggressiveness), diasporic citations (Missy Elliott), and creative agency.

Furthermore, comments like Baby T's provoke me to think about the multiple roles many Kenyan producers play in making underground music, like staging bodies and props in videos, helping to make and choose beats, and marketing the finished product. My research does not address the roles of producers and studios in depth, which would undoubtedly add to the analysis of corporeality, as well as to the music at large. Future research would include a robust investigation of this topic.

Many artists I follow who rap about inequality also do work to fight injustice in their communities. Their devotedness to those economically stymied reveals the sustained desire to undo structures of power that disallow people to enact choices in their lives. Judge, who has not been in the studio since 2019, is unsure when he will return. He has started a program, Rhymes Behind Bars, with other rappers, such as Roba from Kalamashaka and Agano from Wakamba Wawili, where they run workshops in Kenyan prisons about spoken word and the skill of rhyming.<sup>7</sup> Judge detailed the struggles to solidify funding for this project but stated that he has secured some sponsorship from the Kenyan Commercial Bank and affirmed his commitment to continue the initiative. Nafsi Huru has continued to make music and found other rappers and musicians with whom to collaborate. At the time of our follow-up interview, he was working on a song titled “Simba Wa Magongo” (Lions of Magongo), and he aimed to work with artists, activists, and athletes from his neighborhood, Magongo, Mombasa. He stated that the song is his way of highlighting the people he considers the powerful lions of his hood who do not usually receive admiration for who they are as leaders and activists.<sup>8</sup> The love of his hometown does not stop there; at the time of our last interview, he was organizing a crew of other artists to bring funds and supplies to a children's home in Magongo.

L-Ness, who still makes music, has been working on a theater project with the Nairobi Musical Theatre Initiative (NBOMTI). The project is called “Escape” and will be a hip hop musical composed and performed in Sheng. L-Ness also raises funds for the Korogocho Transforming Development and Self-Help Group (KTDG), and during the COVID-19 pandemic, she collected and distributed personal protection supplies, foodstuffs, and other needed items to poor areas in Nairobi such as Korogocho, Embakasi, Kahawa West, and Githurai. Additionally,

since 2018, she has been an interviewer and ethnographer in working-class neighborhoods for the African Population and Health Research Center (APHRC). I asked L-Ness to describe if being a rapper assisted her in her career outside of music. L-Ness responded by explaining how when out collecting data for APHRC, she encountered people serving as gatekeepers who did not want outsiders in their communities and who made entering and extracting information difficult:

You find the boys seated there, and you need to penetrate an area, and I would have to tell them, “Look, you know I am UFMM [Ukoo Flani Mau Mau], you know, don’t play with me! You know I’m a rapper!” . . . If they do not want you to access an area, you will not, you see, but *my hip hop demeanor* has helped me in how I approach them.<sup>9</sup> (emphasis mine)

L-Ness’s description of the ways she uses rap culture to move through certain spaces exemplifies the everydayness of rap corporeality, the reliance on an armored gender, and the ways the music is deeply concerned with Nairobi’s working-class urbanity. L-Ness confirmed that hip hop provides an embodied method to interact with others and do the community initiatives she finds necessary. She described what Aimee Meredith Cox terms as “staying in the body,” which is the “place of intuitive knowing that allows movement to both feel and look organic.”<sup>10</sup> L-Ness’s testimony of “staying in the body” makes plain the centrality of performance and how rap embodiment appears in everyday life. Such corporeality is deeply enmeshed in Kenyan postcolonial anxieties over what it means to exercise freedoms in the context of limitations. Moreover, L-Ness’s embodiment practices are the individual choices that reflect and contribute to a Kenyanness connected to the global politics of the culture.

This study of Nairobi hip hop belongs within Kenyan cultural and hip hop studies and firmly within U.S. Black studies. P. Khalil Saucier and Tryon P. Woods published a piece in 2014 proffering a compelling and necessary declaration for hip hop studies to disentangle itself from the (neo)liberal university and become Black studies. By that, they mean that hip hop studies desperately needs to shift away from the ways universities and many scholars have hijacked it to advance a multicultural approach that waters down, if not obliterates, hip hop’s radical Black origins and continued political interventions.<sup>11</sup> As Saucier and Woods note, we must not forget how the music, and its sonorous elements and its performative aesthetic, bears an entangled relationship to and emerges out of “state violence against black communities and their concomitant structural dispossession.”<sup>12</sup> To respond, it seems that that even in the face of corporate takeovers, scholars have walked the field back into Black studies, pronouncedly in the wake of the diverse and global movements for justice for Black lives that intensified circa 2015. However, one way to solidify hip hop’s unquestionable place in Black studies is to recognize the diasporic elements of the music’s blackness as it reconfigures during its movements throughout the globe. Identifying diasporic blackness in places like

Kenyan rap does not elide or displace how the music has been indigenized in Nairobi; rather, it illuminates the projects that artists are doing on the ground. *Nairobi Hip Hop Flow* proves that performance provides a gripping contribution to the argument that hip hop studies must be Black studies. In Kenya, the music draws from the urgency of the Black radical tradition, and as it has indigenized, narrativizes how cultural production in Nairobi is a part of the story of the formations of early governments, the postcolonial state, the dictatorship years, politicized ethnic conflicts, the failures of neoliberalization, and ongoing state ineffectiveness. In this way, a practitioner becomes an archivist of Kenyan history, a theorist of political and economic thought, and an expert on the machinery of a greedy state. Rappers have continued and created anew the monumental and surviving work of those before them, igniting their devotees, making pathways to give resources to their communities, and creating an enduring musical culture. Kenyan hip hop studies is greatly enhanced through in-depth considerations of transnational dialogues between the U.S. and Kenya. The tensions and connections that the Mau Mau struggle induced, the ways the fighters have been remembered, however imperfect and incomplete, and the emergent culture in Kenya provide potentially endless and fruitful conversations about diaspora. The connectivities between the Black U.S. and East Africa deserve attention. The stories of Mic Crenshaw, Umi, M1, Mama C, Mzee Pete, and Toni Blackman are all examples of how, if we delve into the particularities of the Black experience in the U.S., we might arrive in Nairobi or Arusha. Moreover, there is a continued opportunity to explore and learn how the underground music in other places thrashes out ideas of the diasporic details of blackness and Black culture.

Acknowledging L-Ness and Baby T's accounts in totality and the ones outlined throughout the book, there is something crucial about centering performances in the study of underground music. My research approach has been heavily informed by ethnography. The embodiedness of rappers has been the first and most significant element I encountered in the hip hop field, and it guided and framed the research. Dwight Conquergood writes that ethnography "privileges the body as a site of knowing," both for the ethnographer's experiences and for their study of cultural performance, which "functions as a special form of public address [and] rhetorical agency."<sup>13</sup> Embodied performances were always the primary aspect of the music I experienced visually and felt auditorily and affectively. Centering these performances allowed for a framework whereby I could analyze the fine detail and intricacies of not just performances but also the statements rappers made and the music videos they created. Thus, Baby T's aspirations to be a protagonist in her videos and to be more "aggressive" on the mic, as well as L-Ness's "hip hop demeanor," would perhaps not have been given the depth deserved had I not centered corporeality.

We stand to understand better the textures of hip hop's blackness and how it provokes antiblackness by centering performance. Both blackness and antiblackness

are globally flung about and come to rest in places like Nairobi. For every artist that rejects the gangsta because such a figure impedes the project of political seriousness's respectability, other artists reference, draw on, cite, and mention Missy Elliott, Drake, Kendrick Lamar, Nicki Minaj, and many others. The rejection of one figure and embracing something different are about how U.S. blackness travels and how it is consumed and reconfigured. Artists make music suitable for their own aims, and as this book has shown, we must be willing to sit with how and why the music's blackness continues to serve as a utilitarian and referential goal-post as rappers explore power, ethnicity, inequality, and liberation in their own contexts. Moreover, through the lens of orature, which is a comprehensive Africanist method of regarding the projects of these practitioners, we understand the multiple layers they draw on and add to in their quest to make embodiments, sounds, and visualities. This book allows us to understand that conceptualizing the culture's Black diasporic tendencies and how the music is profoundly rooted in Kenya's history of violence, subjection, and ideas of self-determination often overlap and are not necessarily in opposition or tension. We must continue to offer up new analyses about how the spinnerets of racial capitalism produce the qualities and practices of antiblackness found throughout the globe and, in turn, are absorbed in cultural spaces like hip hop.

This study of orature has initiated questions about ethnicity that I could not fully answer. I was not able to access how ethnicities are performed and how they are differentiated from each other. For instance, questions remain about how performances of Kikuyuness, Luoness, and Luhyanness intersect and stand in tension and cohesion with blackness and artists' larger musical projects. What was most available for analysis was the sustaining and sinewy projects of hip hop love and political seriousness that joined people across lines of division, which, for me, ultimately impeded a probe into ethnicity. The powerful characteristics of love and seriousness within the music stood as barriers to uncovering how ethnic subjectivities materialized in the interstitiality of the music. The manners in which the postcolonial states of Jomo Kenyatta, Daniel arap Moi, Mwai Kibaki, and Uhuru Kenyatta have all used ethnicity to frame political power and enflame tensions, what Bruce Berman calls "uncivil nationalism," have had dramatic effects on people's everyday lives.<sup>14</sup> We must think through what it would mean for Kikuyu rappers to take on an embodiedness that reckons with their working-class realities even with membership in a larger, even disconnected, group that continues to hold state power. Likewise, we are called to think about how an embodied Luoness calls on a history of attacks on Luo cultural masculinities even though elites from this community have enjoyed political positions. The public conversations about the assumed inherent capabilities of Kikuyu men, who are traditionally circumcised, and Luo men, who may not be, ride just below the surface and emerge around moments of political divisiveness, like most tragically during the 2008 chaos, when Kikuyu groups reportedly attacked Luo men.<sup>15</sup> We must think

through how, as artists formulate their genders of armor, they use these historical and public conversations about Kenyan masculinities, what Grace Musila aptly calls the “phallocratic aesthetic.”<sup>16</sup> Moreover, how rappers of all ethnicities, particularly those named, have sorted through these traumatic moments and the continued aftereffects has been a hard question to address in the research. Lastly, we would be wise to consider how long-standing cultural traditions within rappers’ respective ethnic communities inform, and perhaps even amplify, embodied performance practices, even when these artists work with political love as an ethic of commonality.

This book brings together the fields of performance, feminism, and gender studies in the U.S. and Kenya. Much overlap exists between U.S. hip hop studies and the Kenyan and East African scholars who examine power and difference in the music. U.S. Black and African scholars, however, sit on no even plane. I heed the call of Tanya Saunders, who contends that a hip hop feminism needs to “[de-center] the . . . hegemony of the United States” and “give[ ] space to a . . . praxis that challenges the discreteness of geo-political and linguistic boundaries.”<sup>17</sup> Decentering the U.S. and giving space to African scholars, in particular, are gestures toward the comradeship that should exist among scholars of the African diaspora. Such nods can acknowledge the inherent power relations operating in global academia and encourage us to recognize that many of our colleagues in African countries face barriers in the circulation of their research, securing funding for international conferences, and publishing full-length single-authored book manuscripts. Here, I add to Saunders’s shift by pressing the field of global hip hop studies to attend to how scholars of non-U.S. hip hop continue to overlook U.S. Black feminist hip hop scholars who are gender-expansive people and women. These academics have shaped our understanding of the ways misogynoir, anti-blackness, and queer antagonism converge in the music culture and detail how people, including those of marginalized genders, manufacture transformative and complicated spaces to create music. Black feminists’ work deserves recognition. Building from this idea, we must ensure that we cite women and gender-expansive scholars in Africa and throughout the diaspora, as such moves assist in avoiding the hierarchies that plague academia.<sup>18</sup>

I have spent much of this book discussing hip hop performance’s theatrical, thaumaturgic, and piercing qualities. It is possible that my mission to delve into and describe what is better left seen, felt, and embodied has been culturally blasphemous to the music’s ethic of obscurity and ineffability, which is a burden I accept. I hope what these conversations make poignantly clear is that ascribing words and descriptions to rap’s corporeality is not a simple mission. Quite possibly, analysis robs the music of its core elusive beauty. After all, Jeff Chang warns, “Interpretation should never be the place where art goes to die.”<sup>19</sup> For better or worse, this book spends much time describing the mechanics of play and the boundless fissures opened by the workings of the ludic and the serious. The

ludic only appears to have no endgame or real purpose within capitalism; it just plays inside a context that favors a system of production and labor. In reality, play is deeply intertwined and dependent on the political for its emergence, allowing artists to create self-making, even when such commencements are ephemeral and loaded. We must remind ourselves that the ludic will never be understood fully, as performances are not legible enough for any neat conclusion. The music's ludic opacity and its refusal of strict assignment mean that at least some of its magic has been missed in this discussion. Hip hop is an intensely visual music, but this is not tantamount to conspicuousness because artists intentionally duck legibility in the exercise of play. In my research, there must have been countless features of rap minutiae that I surely overlooked. I hope this book merely scratches the vinyl surface of the music's work. Rappers manufacture nodes of freedom in many places in Nairobi where play can exist even in the context of a postcoloniality structured by intricacies of global antiblackness and racial capitalism. And inside these meeting points, one can find the embodied flow of Nairobi hip hop.