

## Diaspora, Love, and Limits

When Sue Timon and I met, she greeted me with a pound hug. She grabbed my right hand and swung her left around my back, and I did the same, feeling a bit compelled. At the end of the shake, our fingers met and hung tight while our hands quickly moved downward before release. This gesture, known as a pound hug or a pound and a hug, is an embrace of familiarity between friends or comrades and is typically performed by masculine people. I possessed a certain type of bodily unaccustomedness since I do not typically perform this gesture, although I am familiar with it. Timon would later state during my interview with her that how artists greet each other is significant: “The greetings. ‘Yeah, what’s up?’ Ah, there’s this [U.S. rap] Southern thing, I don’t know how they put it. ‘How *we* do?’ [Laughs.] There’s that greeting part of the thing.”<sup>1</sup> The phrase “How we do?” is not known to be associated specifically with Southern hip hop in the U.S., especially given West Coast rapper The Game’s song of the same name. It is possible that Timon could have been referring to “What it do?,” which is a phrase that emanates from the U.S. hip hop South. Nonetheless, Timon’s references to U.S. Southern rap culture represent a larger and more significant pattern. Her embodiments displayed styled joviality and the seamless coupling of U.S. blackness with her understanding of the world as a Kenyan person. The coalescence of her words and performances demonstrates one of the many ways rap culture in Kenya and Africa produces ideas of diaspora. Kenyan artists use U.S. hip hop blackness to realize themselves as artists, to make music about Nairobi, and to produce notions of Africanity and Kenyanness.

In this chapter, I piece together the elements that constitute diaspora, Pan-Africanism, and love in the Nairobi underground, inspired by Sue’s brief interaction with me during our conversation. These elements help rappers negotiate

through divisive social conditions within the country and connect to hip hop's transnationality. As I laid out in the introduction, within African hip hop studies, many scholars explore how artists indigenized the music by abandoning English-only lyrics for rap bars in indigenous languages and by disavowing gangsta rap for politically salient sounds. There is more to be said about hip hop's engagement with what is largely referred to as the "global" and what I identify as a Black diasporic performance politics. For example, Caroline Mose observes that Nairobi rap draws on globally practiced traditions, like swag and street cred. Drawing from Murray Foreman, she briefly writes of Nairobi's connectivity to blackness within hip hop: "The city is seen through an expanded vision of Blackness, where an international Black tradition is manifested in the local space; local and national borders are erased, and the city becomes an extension of a global Black experience."<sup>2</sup> Though she mentions street cred and swag as performances, most of her instances asserting Nairobi's formations of blackness are lyrical, and it is from here that I build on Mose through my attention toward orature. This chapter explores how diaspora is profoundly evident in the orature of artists—how the linguistic, the embodied, and the sonic converge with other characteristics contained within music videos and live performances.

A hip hop diaspora in Nairobi is made up of four key points. First, I identify that a collective and public political love is a dominant theme in the music that undergirds diaspora. This political love does not fit neatly into a local-global binary and occurs in hip hop flow throughout the lyrics, sounds, and movements. Political love serves as a framing device and creates space for how ideas of diaspora circulate throughout the culture. It is most readily identifiable through lyrics, community initiatives, and the way rappers discuss why they make the music they do. Political love is both a local production of Kenyan sensibilities and a participation in a larger imagined global culture. When Sue Timon greeted me as an old acquaintance, she enacted an assumed commonality of love for and devotion to the music. Although we had not met before, that did not matter to Timon because she felt compelled to communicate with me through an embodied language of hip hop blackness (although the pound hug exists outside of the culture as well). The affection she presented to me was not just individualized (between us) but a broad gestural nod meant to identify the commonalities between two devotees from different parts of the world. In essence, her brief action demonstrated the local practice of a globalized music culture.

Second, Nairobi hip hop diaspora is composed of interpreted notions of U.S. blackness, which may be explicit references to the U.S. or more subtle citations. As previously stated, diasporic blackness operates as an indigenizing force by allowing practitioners to root the music in their own localities. Like Sue Timon's gesture, it is often embodied performance, materializing as ludic and masculinized. Furthermore, hip hop diasporic blackness dynamically draws in other forms

of Afrodiasporic cultural characteristics. I depart from scholars like Marc Perry, who identifies the ways that artists perform the culture through lyrics and aesthetic bodily style, resulting in the specific creation of an Afro-Atlantic diasporic blackness. He references South Africa, Cuba, and Brazil, noting, "Blackness, as such, becomes a transnational site of identification and self-making; one made most immediately tangible for many diasporic youth by way of hip hop."<sup>3</sup> Perry argues that this music diaspora draws on multiple sites of blackness throughout the Atlantic world: "Diasporic rather than U.S. understandings of blackness are in the end instrumental in fashioning critical expressions of black Brazilian self."<sup>4</sup> I contend that hip hop diasporic blackness is fundamentally rooted in U.S. notions, even while artists draw on and devise modes of blackness and Africanness that digress from the U.S. Perry notes how rappers use figures like Malcolm X, baseball caps from American teams, and baggy pants. He states that Brazilian rappers Consciencia Urbana drew on how U.S. rap used Malcolm X's radical positionality and reconfigured him to be a global and diasporic figure in their project, thus exemplifying its diasporic blackness. However, such moves by Urbana depend upon recognizing that American hip hop first engaged with Malcolm X, a dominant figure in the U.S. Black struggle, even as he turned his politics globally outward. While we must recognize the diverse ways artists play with notions of diaspora, hip hop, no matter where it is located, always contains a persistent, originary U.S. blackness.

Third, Nairobi's hip hop diasporic blackness lays the foundation for profound notions of Pan-Africanist sensibilities that draw significant cultural connections within Africa and places outside of the U.S. Nairobi artists recognize and celebrate their Africaness not in opposition to a ubiquitous blackness but because of it. Moreover, the music's Pan-Africanism allows Nairobi artists to celebrate uniquely Kenyan musical contributions alongside other African cultural elements. Both the diasporic blackness and Pan-Africanism in Nairobi music are always a gesture back to the local, and, in fact, these characteristics say more about on-the-ground politics and realities than they do about anything beyond Kenya's borders. Through examining two songs, Nafsi Huru, NJE, and Kevlexicon's "Still Strong" and Mic Crenshaw, Khusta, Ran-D, Judge, and MC Bagol's "Amandla," I identify how ideas of diasporic blackness and Pan-African sensibilities appear through Kenyan lenses, which grounds the music as a local and indigenized production of the global. Specifically, relying on Nairobi as an international city of commerce, rappers paint it as a place of economic, political, and cultural motion, where they imagine themselves at the center of this motility. Inspired by Soyica Diggs Colbert, who discusses that movement is about not staying in one place, whether physically, socially, or politically, I contend that rappers align hip hop's physical motility with the various political movements they may reference throughout the African diaspora.<sup>5</sup> While these songs seek to transcend national boundaries through diaspora

and Pan-Africanism, they use the globality inherent in hip hop to respond to the local and closely felt state violence and repression in Kenya.

Last, Nairobi practitioners do not accept all forms of hip hop blackness they encounter. Most position their work as separate and oppositional to gangsta rap and thug subjectivities, which both fans and critics widely reference. Artists understand the figure of the gangsta or thug as incompatible with their versions of diasporic blackness, Pan-Africanism, and political love. For most artists, this figure is antithetical to the objectives of social change and wades too far outside of political seriousness, and many see it as a way to be further discounted by critics. In the U.S., the gangsta or thug has been seized by hip hop and is rendered a masculinized and romanticized antihero who participates in illicit economies and eschews societal hatred of Black men.<sup>6</sup> In Kenya, the thug is not necessarily glamorized, emerging during colonialism to name Africans as unruly and criminal and continues to the present day to label them as intrinsically and ferociously lawless and violent.<sup>7</sup> Nairobi rappers, thus, depend on this figure and its meaning in Kenya to state affirmatively what work they do *not* do, and criticism and dismissal of the gangsta or thug helps artists define their music. The widescale jettisoning of this trope in the underground means that not every characteristic of the U.S. suffices and that artists vet what is functional to produce their aesthetic interventions. Marc Perry is informative to this point, demonstrating how early South African rappers, looking to defy apartheid's racial categories, employed the music to create a "recuperative notion of a black Africanness."<sup>8</sup> Despite the significant racial and ethnic differences between South Africa and Kenya, the notion that rappers produce African formations of blackness—which, I argue, cite the U.S.—applies to the Kenyan scene, as these artists do not abandon affiliation with their ethnic communities or their identities as Kenyan and African, but rather incorporate modes of blackness into their embodied performances. If at all, artists rarely and briefly integrate notions of the gangsta or thug into their work. Here, I rely on conversations with several artists and a reading of Evaredi's video, "Ukweli," which briefly references the thug persona. I contend "Ukweli"'s overarching themes of Pan-Africanism and the art of the struggle work to undo the troubling histories of the term thug and participate in creating masculine-centered notions of diaspora.

For the final section, I do a close read of the 2010 Kenyan documentary *Ni Wakati*. The artists profiled from the U.S. and Kenya are invested in arguing that hip hop has African roots and thus is fundamentally African. However, in attempting to put forward this concept, they inadvertently affirm how U.S. blackness is an unremitting signal for the music, upholding my central point that all hip hop is rooted in a negotiated U.S. blackness, however slight or abstract. Using this film, I maintain that artists engage in an ongoing citational practice with the U.S. that grounds the ways they imagine and perform a masculinized underclass diaspora. Taken together, the examples laid out in this chapter

articulate how cisgender men are the unspoken appointed drivers of a diasporic transnationality in the music.

### POLITICAL LOVE

Political love is an indispensable theme in Nairobi hip hop on its own terms and through its connectedness to diaspora. It serves as a staging ground for articulations of diaspora because it moves artists past boundaries and creates openings for them to connect with others outside of socially constructed categories. Rap's continual references to love are not just about fondness toward the music; rather, they are about a deeply entrenched affection utilized by rappers to prove their innate and undying commitment to the music culture, to Kenyans, and often to Africana peoples at large. Such sentiments mark out connections that allow artists to produce various subjectivities about what it means to be Black, Kenyan, a part of their respective ethnic community, and African. Therefore, this political love operates in two ways: to attend to local realities in Kenya about how to create a culture and to connect artists to a global imagined hip hop community. Such a sentiment mirrors Keguro Macharia's insistence on a type of love that enables transformative ideas and actions. He writes that love can be holistic: "an embedding, a valuing, a possibility, a 'risking,' a demand."<sup>9</sup>

Political love serves to indigenize music and locate it within Kenyan contexts while also allowing artists to create music outside of the bounds of a society that often rigidly defines difference. When artists delve deep into their neighborhoods, critiquing poverty and inequalities, love is applied as a guiding principle. This enthusiasm and commitment solidify the authenticity of practitioners and espouse a basis for music-making that claims to better Kenyan society. During the emergence of the genre in Kenya, Ukoo Flani Mau Mau (UFMM) established love as a guiding element in their music, as their name stands for "Upendo Kwote, Ole Wenu Ombeni Funzo La Aliyetuumba Njia Iwepo," meaning "love everywhere, woe unto you, seek the teachings of the creator for there to be a way." Mickie Koster observes that UFMM's notions of love are tied to social change: "The group [aimed] to help use love and the power of the Creator as a force for equality and justice."<sup>10</sup> Many artists have come to reference *upendo kwote* (love everywhere) in songs and everyday speech, so much so that it has become a cliché. The phrase's wide reach has led many to rely on the well-worn theme to provide homage to UFMM's work. During interviews, several artists phrase-dropped *upendo kwote* in casual speech as a basic way of describing how their music is in conversation with the culture of the underground. In so doing, these practitioners both acknowledged UFMM as the inventor of political love and established *upendo kwote* as a guiding principle that has created a sustaining culture.

Artists additionally use ideas of love for self-making, seeing themselves as part of a larger global community. Woman rapper and spoken word artist Amora

insisted, “You don’t have to be Black or white to do hip hop. You don’t have to be a certain tribe to do hip hop. Hip hop itself is a culture of its own. . . You’re a chick, you’re a dude, you’re gay, you’re not gay; it doesn’t matter. As long as you have the culture in you.”<sup>11</sup> The music’s connection to U.S. blackness does not mean that artists of other races are excluded, as many rappers envision a culture informed by blackness, but that can and does comprise people of different races. Statements like these exemplify how affiliation and devotion to rap music and culture allow artists to transcend how the state politicizes ethnicity and identity. Furthermore, hip hop investments emerge from the artistic soul, causing a love dedicated to resistance, artistic creativity, and enlightened consciousness.<sup>12</sup> Self-worth is often measured in terms of how authentic an artist is, which may appear limiting, but the impactful feelings of adoration that artists have for the music reflect their value as people who make culture. Amora’s sentiment seeks to address, but does not settle, the problems that women face. Nevertheless, many share her opinions and recognize how hip hop earnestly attempts to reconcile unequal social differences. Rappers root their enduring honor of music in their souls and then move beyond the self toward community and diaspora.

Political love articulates political seriousness, creating credibility and legitimacy within the terrain of Nairobi music. To dispel the constant criticisms, they proclaim, “I do it for the love.” With this phrase, along with *upendo kwote*, artists disregard the claim that they copy American music, allowing them to insist on their place within an imagined global music community. Some rappers attempt to fight off imitation claims by stating that it is impossible to imitate an inherently African style. Even for those who root hip hop as something that arrived externally, love is an indigenization device that allows them to argue that the music is now Kenyan and is situated in the creative soul of artists. Many recognize that they are viewed as imitators and mention their intrinsic affection for and participation in transnational rap culture to buffer themselves from outside criticisms. Such self-making is more than resisting disapproval; it is also tied to how one sees oneself within larger social categories of Africanity, blackness, and Kenyanness. Sue Timon raps in her (and Flamez’s) song “Ulimi,” that love is the basic element that undergirds hip hop’s cultural mobilization: “Mi naifanya juu ya mapenzi / na hii silaha mdomoni / kama kijana mkoloni” (I do (hip hop) out of love / with the weapon in my mouth, this tongue / like a colonized boy/girl/youth).<sup>13</sup> Timon sees herself as a force resisting the legacies of colonial rule. Not wanting to ingest the harmful ideologies of the remains of British domination, Timon fosters political love to develop rhymes that resist. Lyrics like this undergird how rappers understand their place as cultural practitioners in a postcolonial world.

Artists realize themselves as legitimate actors and employ love to counteract claims that Kenyan rap is unimaginative mimicry and to reinforce their authenticity and authority to enter and help create a global diaspora. The culture’s cultivation of love is used to solidify Kenya’s participation in revolutionary traditions that

exist within hip hop's diasporic music. Underground rap is also juxtaposed with the intentions of commercial music, which many rappers believe is void of meaning. Evaredi explained the following in my discussion with him:

But underground hip hop, I can say, is like when *you do it for the love*. You do it from your heart. Like you are doing it for the people. You're doing it for the correct way. Not basically because of the money. . . . But when you say commercial music, it's like you'll do it for some time, get your money, move on. Yeah.<sup>14</sup> (emphasis mine)

To make his point, he compared his reasons for rapping to the motivations behind mainstream music. Of course, artists in underground settings still need to make money, which Evaredi acknowledged when I pressed the issue. Still, most rappers do not want to abandon the principles of social change and activism to acquire economic mobility. According to underground rappers, commercial artists are vacuous and money-driven and cannot hold *upendo kwote* in their hearts. I also asked many artists about the regular presence of commercial songs with socially conscious messaging, which they laughed off, proclaiming that such songs do not stifle their critiques. Instead, mainstream artists who rap or sing about societal problems are seen as fleecing from the culture's core values and are thus considered inauthentic, a topic that I address in chapter 4.

Hip hop's ethic of love serves as a very localized answer to the continual reiterations of polarizing notions of ethnicity in Kenya. Ethnicity is not the problem, but rather the ways state actors have historically hijacked it to consolidate political power, and this dynamic has long plagued the country. In the recent past, for example, the postelection violence in 2007–8 should be seen as a culmination of fracturing and enflamed tensions rather than as a unique moment in time. This violence marked the second term of Mwai Kibaki, who was sworn in amid a highly disputable victory in December 2007. That night, Kalenjin, Luo, and Luhya groups, supposedly funded by Raila Odinga and William Ruto, began to attack Kikuyu businesses in the Rift Valley.<sup>15</sup> These events started a series of retaliatory attacks, whereby Kikuyu groups fought against Kalenjin, Luo, and Luhya militias, committing acts of violence and killing people from those communities. Likewise, Kalenjin, Luo, and Luhya militias and informal youth groups hunted down and killed Kikuyus and burned houses and other buildings. Uhuru Kenyatta went on trial at the ICC, charged with giving resources to groups like Mungiki, which is a largely Kikuyu organization and street gang, to retaliate against Luo and Kalenjin communities. Likewise, Ruto's allegations included funding Kalenjin groups to purposely hunt down and kill Kikuyus.<sup>16</sup> All charges were eventually dropped due to witness intimidation and lack of evidence.<sup>17</sup>

After the bloodshed, artists famously came together to form the Hip Hop Parliament, using a call for love as the solution to how the country had been torn apart.<sup>18</sup> Angela Wainaina, Muki Garang, Judge, Buddha Blaze, Mwafrika, and Roje Otieno were among the artists who convened and held concerts calling for



reconciliation and ending all brutalities. When former UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan arrived in Kenya to mediate a power-share between the two presidential candidates, Mwai Kibaki and Raila Odinga, the Hip Hop Parliament wrote and delivered a Declaration of Unity to Annan.<sup>19</sup> This action solidified how the artists envisaged themselves as legitimate political actors whose power rested in their separateness from the treacheries of the Kenyan state. The declaration espoused that while leaders have fanned ethnic flames, rappers have long used their voices to inspire commonality, equity, and welfare for others. Their solution was not to privilege one ethnic language over the other but to promote Sheng as the official inclusive language of hip hop culture. Though spoken throughout the country by people of all ages, there are neighborhood-specific Shengs in Nairobi, and lower-class urban young people are responsible for its consistent production of new words.<sup>20</sup> Sheng has come to signify poor urban youth, and its use in the document affirms its presence in hip hop culture. The document disdained violence of any kind, stated that women and men stood as equals, and denounced what is regularly referred to as “tribalism,” which is the pernicious manipulation of ethnicity for political and economic benefit. Bluntly stated, the group’s campaign was “Ukabila ni taifa killer” (Ethnicity is a nation killer), which may seem like a strong statement. However, these artists responded to the crisis of the moment and how political leaders have historically woven ethnicity into the practices of manipulating its populace. Like songs and music videos, the declaration was another hip hop text originating from the underground, demonstrating the culture’s political seriousness and exemplifying how rap practitioners offer solutions to social problems.

Rappers’ incorporation of their personal ethnic affiliations in the music is a careful project, especially because of the politicization of ethnicity. While many use notions of Africanity and hip hop blackness to produce the commonalities of love and diaspora, most rappers only reference their ethnic communities in their music if doing so does not challenge their overall mission to promote lower-class solidarities. Artists have long been aware of the volatile climate that surrounds ethnicity and power and are careful to ensure that their content does not contribute to the politicization of difference that has become too regular. Many often avoid discussing their identificatory markers if explicitly asked, as Esther Milu recounts in her study. Rappers often told her they were “Pan-African” or Mkenya (Kenyan) or would not say.<sup>21</sup> I did not ask this question in my research, yet many rappers volunteered to state their ethnic community. In addition to seeing me as an unknowing outsider, I attribute their openness to the fact that I did not explicitly ask about where they were from, which may have led them to believe that I was unbothered or unconcerned with the topic. It is possible that Milu’s direct questioning gave the impression that she was attempting to form conclusions about artists based on this social category, which caused the artists to avoid answering. Nonetheless, Milu’s accounts highlight that artists want to be acknowledged for their contributions to Kenya’s music culture, as well as a larger Pan-African ethos, rather than be



enclosed in a set of historical indicators, especially given the tense ethnic climate that waxes and wanes around elections and other political moments.<sup>22</sup>

Since ethnicity can often be seen as a marker of privilege or, alternatively, as an indicator of disempowerment, celebrating an ethnic identity is a tricky, but not impossible, task in the underground. One imperative that a shared diaspora calls for is not the elimination of difference but rather the expulsion of ethnic particularities that can fracture a community. For example, artists from Kikuyu communities are much less likely to reference their ethnicity in music, due to the history of state power. Out of five presidents and the over forty ethnic groups in Kenya, Jomo Kenyatta, his son Uhuru, and Mwai Kibaki are from Kikuyu communities. Daniel arap Moi and newly elected president William Ruto are Kalenjin.<sup>23</sup> Since independence, presidents have created ethnic blocs of power, monopolizing resources and placing allies from their communities in high governmental positions. Jomo Kenyatta's Kikuyu nationalist state enabled politically connected elites to buy former white settler land and take government positions, arguably resulting in what Jeni Klugman calls the "kikuyuization" of the country.<sup>24</sup> Kibaki created what was termed the "Mount Kenya Mafia," a small group of politicians he turned to for support from the Kikuyu, as well as the related Meru and Embu communities.<sup>25</sup> Uhuru Kenyatta grew his family's secreted wealth by solidifying monopolies on milk and creating opportunities for income generation in timber, banking, and construction.<sup>26</sup> It should be known that Moi conducted a similar practice by enabling land sales and providing government posts to connected and loyal Kalenjins. These exercises of ethnicized state power bleed into social and economic spaces, as evidenced by several instances of violent ethnic clashes and conflicts.<sup>27</sup> Therefore, what it means to be Kikuyu in public space and the historic and politicized meanings of such identification can be fraught, even for those from working-class backgrounds, and this translates to many artists avoiding the mention of Kikuyu ethnicity. Moreover, regardless of the community that rappers hail from, many avoid this topic because of the divisiveness it engenders and the possibility that it undercuts both an aspired egalitarianism and a political love.

To promote love, artists must find a workable balance in which the celebration or naming of ethnicity does not feed into the destabilizing ethnic atmosphere that often materializes in Kenya. In some circumstances, they are willing to use ethnicity in their music. For example, Judge's song "Mad Jaluo" references his Luo identification, and he also has drawn on blackness, as his former group with his brother was Black Duo. The duo Wakamba Wawili, of which rapper Agano is a part, named themselves after their community, as the name means "two Kam-bas." Rapper Ekori often raps in Turkana and seeks to resolve entrenched conflicts in the northeastern region. Many of his songs have addressed struggles over resources among Turkana, Pokot, and Daasanach communities.

While some artists do identify as Black or African *and* as a part of their ethnic community, I believe that spending too much time on *how they identify* does not

give credence to the more accurate and imperative questions of *what they do*, *how they perform*, and *what they rap about*. Underground Nairobi rappers often seek out ideas of blackness and Africanity, typically alongside their respective ethnic identities. These explorations can be described as what Jennifer Nash calls “affective politics” or how “bodies are organized around intensities, longings, desires, temporalities . . . and how these affects produce political movements.”<sup>28</sup> Nash uses affective politics to enunciate the “Black feminist love-politics” that have long been present in the U.S., similar to the deep collective sentiment of political love found in Kenya’s hip hop. Both focus on what culture workers do rather than on how they identify. The motivation to recognize people as makers of serious, creative, and subversive works allows one to see artists beyond their identities, often not the artists’ focus. Instead, concentrating on what practitioners do allows one to regard them as holistic producers of music culture.

#### DIASPORA MOVES

In Nairobi hip hop, diasporic blackness enables the flow of music from the U.S. to Africa, and then from Kenya outward. It is the fixture that artists use to tell stories about the specificities of Kenyan cultural life. Embodied performances that exude diaspora are often indecipherable, unpredictable, and rhythmic, allowing rappers to do their part to create an imagined global community. Here, I bring together Soyica Diggs Colbert and Paul Zeleza to consider how the music actualizes diaspora. Zeleza proposes that the musical relationships between Africa and its diasporas are best described not by a dynamic and contemporary (western) diaspora and a fixed and always borrowing Africa but as historically multidirectional cultural exchanges within the continent, between diasporas and the continent, and within diasporas.<sup>29</sup> Zeleza’s argument that Africa participates in developing dynamic and diverse musical styles in conversation with other continental music and those outside Africa allows us to consider how diaspora in Nairobi hip hop appears as a vigorous performative method, not a passive recipient practice. Soyica Diggs Colbert explores how various U.S. Black culture workers use embodied performance in the post-civil rights era to contest the ways that blackness marks social and physical death and to create notions of freedom and political sensibilities.<sup>30</sup> Colbert identifies how performers and writers foster “webs of affiliation,” which draw on past performances to articulate desire and liberation. Colbert’s theory of “webs of affiliation” is useful in thinking about how hip hop embodies ideas of diaspora. While rappers facilitate musical networks that connect themselves with Kenyan history, they are also invested in contemporary meaning-making that pulls from U.S. blackness, past and present Pan-Africanism, and a variety of the culture’s signifiers, places, music styles, and artists. Placing Colbert and Zeleza together, I identify how embodiments in Kenyan underground music reveal a vibrant assertion



FIGURE 10. Rapper Nafsi Huru in the trailer for the “Still Strong” music video. Screenshot by author. Source: Kevlexicon, “Still Strong—Musa Aka Nafsi Huru and Kevlexicon,” YouTube, January 22, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aMQSVPP8g4c>.

of ideas of freeness through movement by proffering paradigms of diaspora and African agency.

The movement-based themes in “Still Strong” create Nairobi as a global city that artists use to demonstrate diaspora and Pan-Africanism. This song is by Nafsi Huru, white American rapper Kevlexicon, and Kenyan R&B singer NJE. The music video displays scenes outside the Kenyatta International Conference Centre (KICC), which sits on Harambee Road near Jogoo House, the Kenya National Archives, Jomo Kenyatta University of Agriculture and Technology (JKUAT), and the upscale Stanley Hotel. The building’s architecture is slim and tall, with a lid at the very top. Several governmental offices are located at the KICC, but it also symbolizes Kenya’s internationality, often hosting concerts by African artists, entrepreneurial events, and academic conferences. The KICC is located in the middle of the Central Business District and is a symbol of Kenya’s participation in the global economy. In the music video, the structure is the backdrop to young people roller-skating in circular formations, hanging out, smiling, laughing, sitting together, and bouncing back and forth as Nafsi and Kevlexicon rap. There are several other artists in the video, for example, Judge, Amora, and Karpchizzy. When I spoke with him years after the project, Nafsi fondly mentioned that watching it reminds him of a family reunion.<sup>31</sup>

The “Still Strong” video is comparably more leisured than other texts about hood life, and even still, it pairs the necessary political seriousness with the vitality of ludicity. When artists make music videos demonstrating harsh realities,

their embodiments, in turn, appear comparatively more hardened and armored, conveying that they are equipped to navigate the streets and to say something meaningful through lyrics about life in poor settings. In the “Still Strong” video, however, the rappers are not in the hood, and their embodiments appear more leisured and carefree, but their creative objectives continue to exist within the lexicon of underground activist-themed music. At the beginning of the video, a flash of light appears, and the scene transitions from a color setting in front of the KICC to a black-and-white blurred shot with five or so men throwing up Black power fists, which summons a history of activism that is still marshaled for present-day confrontations of injustice. The men’s faces are indistinct and grainy, but the gesture is clear. The juxtaposition of roller-skating and clenched fists indicates that the force of the song and the playful themes belong alongside each other. While Black power fists evoke a focused solemnity, these clenched hands appear within a context of ludicity. The raised fists are reminders that playfulness is always indexed within the intensity of struggle in the underground. In this video, resistance resides within the context of joy and pleasure, with its momentary and fleeting reminders of a more expansive and transnational struggle for the freedom of Afrodiasporic peoples.

“Still Strong” tells the story of how Nairobi holds unique diasporic elements. It has a smooth melodic flow and does not contain the sense of urgency that we hear in other songs that visually, performatively, sonically, and orally recall the inequalities of ghetto life. NJE delivers synthesized reggae vocals, and together with Nafsi Huru and Kevlexicon’s raps, there is a harmonic union of different voices. Nafsi adds to the diasporic tendencies in verse: “Dunia nzima utazunguka kwote utatupata tupo tupo, pale pale, mambo yetu, yale yale! Irie! Irie!”<sup>32</sup> Some of the force of this line is lost in the English translation. For instance, the last part has alliterations and rhymes and is best appreciated when listening to the song: “tupo tupo, pale pale, mambo yetu, yale yale! Irie! Irie!” Nafsi raps quickly using the rhyming words *pale* and *yale*, participating in the African diasporic practice of repeating words for emphasis. The lyric roughly translates to “You’ll go around the whole world and find us at the same place! Our stuff! Same stuff! *Irie! Irie!*” The repetitive, alliterative nature of *tupo*, *pale*, and *yale*, along with the quick delivery, makes the lyric difficult to understand, almost indecipherable, yet it is also a creative and witty moment in the song. *Dunia nzima*, which translates to “whole world,” appears in the same line as “Irie! Irie!” *Irie* is a well-known Jamaican or Rastafarian word meaning “I am at peace with myself.” It is also a greeting that means “I am fine/well/cool.” It is similar to several Swahili responses to greetings used in Kenya, such as *poa*, *fiti*, and *mzuri / nzuri*. Nafsi’s use of *irie* is a signifier of Jamaican music’s long influence in Kenya and the similar cultural position of reggae and underground rap.<sup>33</sup> Both genres are known as types of hood music that signify working-class people and experiences, and artists occasionally do collaborative work with reggae musicians and the genres share venues in Nairobi.

During his raps, Nafsi rhythmically shifts back and forth to the beat of the song while rotating around the camera to promote his affirmative confidence and disaffected coolness. His movements are rhythmic, engaging, and energetic, wherein the embodiment exudes an unfazed deportment from any external pressures seeking to criticize him. He confidently proclaims “Mi ni mtemi!” (I spit, or I flow).<sup>34</sup> The force of the moment is in the way he articulates “mtemi,” placing the emphasis on *te*, following Swahili grammar.<sup>35</sup> As he says the phrase, he lunges slightly at the camera with his chest out and then bobs quickly back and forth before moving to the next lyric. Nafsi’s legitimacy is born from and within his oratured rap flow, wherein his mastery of style connects him to a community of rappers in Nairobi and an imagined diaspora. He maintains a cool control, putting *irie* into action. He draws on similarities between *irie* and Kenyan words, thus making *irie* local and a part of the local and global formations of hip hop. The music video’s camera moves around Nafsi, allowing him to own the space that his lyrics and performances produce. At times, it is more important for the lyrics, rhyme, or beat to induce affective pleasure than for the song to embody a set of complete ideas. Nafsi’s lyrics transmit the common objective in rap culture, which is not to be comfortably legible but instead to create artful expressions open to interpretation. The use of different elements like Sheng, Jamaica’s *irie*, and Black references creates what Glissant calls Creolization, which is “a perpetual movement of linguistic interpenetrability.”<sup>36</sup> This intentional untranslatability, whether in the body or lyrics, is not the same as unknowability. Instead, these enactments of clever sharpness converge Pan-Africanism and hip hop blackness and demonstrate the capacity to use rap bodies in tune with music, thus authorizing themselves as cultural producers.

These performativities are globally recognizable in and out of rap communities, with their meanings not easily describable. Imani Perry writes, “incomprehensibility is . . . a protective strategy” in hip hop, stating that “the lack of clarity . . . represents struggle against the repressiveness of traditional literariness in terms of content, censorship, and more important, in terms of the limitations tradition imposes on structural innovation.”<sup>37</sup> When the power of corporeality appears inside the music, these performances open possibilities that perhaps defy straightforward description. Practitioners aim for this incomprehensibility by inserting hidden meanings, rapping quickly, or shifting the meanings of words. This intentional obscurity appears in gestures and stances, whereby most rappers seek to dodge the normative mechanisms that are in place in Kenya. Bodily movements that aim for intentional obscurity, such as Nafsi’s, allow practitioners to resist, counter, and avoid repressive political and economic conditions, if only temporarily or symbolically.

The motility of diaspora is put forth as a solution to state corruption and violence and the poverty the artists attribute to inept governance. Its commitment to educating listeners about social issues that impact vulnerable communities is never far from oratured ludicity and the diasporic articulations in Nairobi rap.

The pleasure that Nafsi finds in his movements exists in the context of societal difficulty. Kevlexicon raps the following:

Robbing the Ministry of Education is dumb and politics is get a buck and  
run /  
*MPs wana mashilingi mingi lakini wananchi broke* (MPs have a lot of money  
while the citizens are broke) /  
*Nje ya mtaa watoto bila hope, kuna stress kwamba tunavuta cess for re-cess*  
(Outside in the hood, children are hopeless, there is stress, we smoke cess  
[taxes] as we are taxed again and again)<sup>38</sup>

Kevlexicon's lyrics are meant to speak to the locality of incompetent Kenyan governance, used as a basis of political solidarity across boundaries. Halifu Osumare names lyrics like these "connective marginalities," which exemplify the "reality of extant social inequalities that link youths internationally through hip-hop culture."<sup>39</sup> The need for diasporic connections often begins with a common dissent about local governance, poor economic conditions, and the state's apathy toward disenfranchised youth. Throughout the video, Kevlexicon's lyrics are accompanied by footage of beaming and laughing young people who demonstrate freedom and joy through diasporic movements that work to counteract the realities of a failed state polity and their economic disempowerment. Joy in the midst of struggle is not a less mighty form of seriousness; it is instead one more way rappers forge a method of love and diaspora within harsh conditions.

Diaspora does not mean the space is always exclusively Black or African. Kevlexicon is a white rapper, historian, and filmmaker from New Jersey who has collaborated with other underground practitioners.<sup>40</sup> For instance, in the music video "Tumchoka," he teamed up with several Kenyan artists, including Ekori, L-Ness, and Skobo. It is notable that in a cultural cityspace where rappers are regularly tagged as imitators, Kevlexicon, as someone who is not Black or African, is never labeled as such, which is a testimony to how privileged whiteness allows him to escape the identifier of mimic. Daphne Brooks, who writes about U.S. Black women's music, is instructive in identifying this dynamic: "That which is 'authentic' and 'original' is made by white men. That which is mimetic and lacks innovation is made by everyone else."<sup>41</sup> Kevlexicon's place in hip hop reminds us how the marker of cultural mimic is leveled toward those who are already rendered marginalized or othered and rarely toward those who sustain or embody power. It is also important to note that white, light-skinned, and racially ambiguous people are regularly present as extras and collaborators both in mainstream Kenyan music videos and in the underground world. In songs such as "Still Strong," what comes through most forcefully is a spirit of collaboration and an understanding of shared politics among artists. They all uphold the powerful testimonies conveyed through love and political seriousness, and for these artists, the fact that Kevlexicon is white and American is less important than a set of mutual political beliefs.

The song and video “Amandla” illustrate a transnational collaboration that articulates a hip hop Pan-Africanism, affirming the same diasporic articulations of movement and openness in “Still Strong.” “Amandla” accomplishes several objectives: it highlights the dynamic linkages of diaspora by explicitly recuperating U.S. blackness as a part of Africanity; it sees Kenyan music traditions, often regarded as static and fixed, as part of the globality of hip hop; and it presents diaspora as a symbolic remedy to the conditions of the poverty of informal settlements. These are instances of what Nadine George-Graves calls “diasporic spidering,” expressed as “the multidirectional process by which people of African descent define their lives [and] the lifelong ontological gathering of information by going out into the world and coming back to the self.”<sup>42</sup>

The song’s artists are Mic Crenshaw from the U.S., Khusta from South Africa, and Ran-D, Judge, and MC Bagol, all from Kenya. The song is part of the Afrikan Hiphop Caravan, a collective of artists from South Africa, Zimbabwe, Senegal, and the U.S., among other countries. One of the founders of the Caravan is Soundz of the South (SOS), a collective that describes itself as antisexist, anarchist, and anti-racist. Beginning in 2004, SOS, along with other activist groups in Africa rooted in resistance to neoliberalism, consumer culture, and authoritarianism, poured these philosophies into various phases that worked to provoke their hip hop activism. These artists have traveled around the continent, providing concerts and producing music videos, exercising “horizontal organising based on principles of direct participatory democracy.”<sup>43</sup> In Nairobi, the Caravan put on shows in 2013 at the Goethe-Institut and 2014 at the British Council. In 2017, the Caravan released an album that cited several social issues: the xenophobic violence in South Africa and Mozambique, U.S. police brutality against Black people, the disappeared anti-Mugabe journalist Itai Dzamara, and the charges against the rappers and activists who have come to be known as the Angola 15.<sup>44</sup> The Nairobi rappers’ alliance assists the Afrikan Hiphop Caravan in spreading awareness about themes of political seriousness and diaspora. The music video’s shots are mainly from Kenya, but the lyrics and the rappers’ embodied practices work to display the Caravan’s Pan-African sentiment. To emphasize cross-continental comradeship, the artists also proclaim in repetition “Amandla Owethu” (or “NgaWethu”), the widely used anti-apartheid South African Nguni phrase, meaning “Power to the People,” “Our Power,” or “Black Power.”<sup>45</sup> The continued usage of this term across southern African states marks the relevance of the morphing struggle for Black rights in a post-apartheid and racial capitalist context.

Diaspora appears in “Amandla” by negotiating Kenyan societal conceptions of blackness. Mic Crenshaw raps during his verse, “Black American, I’m Afrikan (African)! I’m on the caravan!”<sup>46</sup> Black American is a term often used by Kenyans and other Africans to describe African Americans. Many Kenyans have explained to me that “Black American” is an intentional term meant to exclude U.S.-born Black people from the category of “African.” However, hip hop refuses





FIGURE 11. “Amandla” music video, featuring (left to right) MC Bagol, Ran-D, and Mic Crenshaw. 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>.

such designations, and Mic Crenshaw turns the term on its head. While in wider Kenyan society, U.S. blackness may be antithetical to Africanness, in the culture these two terms can overlap, touch, and come together. Mic Crenshaw leans on a shared commonality of hip hop love and political seriousness that allows artists to address the claim that Black people are not considered African in Kenyan society. Instead of avoiding the term “Black American” to proclaim his Africanness, Mic Crenshaw uses it alongside “African” and “caravan” to announce his ideological and physical travel. Because “Black American” is flexible enough to acquire new significations, he easily flips the phrase’s meaning to include it within the framework of caravan politics.

“Amandla” addresses how what is regarded as Kenyan or African traditional music is also constitutive of a Pan-Africanism and hip hop diaspora. The *nyatiti*, a Luo stringed instrument, can be seen and heard throughout the song. It is common practice for Kenyan practitioners to embrace elements of Kenyan culture that are deemed “traditional” and “ethnic” to exemplify the flexibility of both hip hop and other types of Kenyan music. Here, the video accomplishes what Paul Zeleza calls for: “not to freeze [African music] in temporal boxes in which Africa’s influences on diasporan music are confined exclusively to the past.”<sup>47</sup> Not only is hip hop rendered African, but so is the *nyatiti* made contemporary and active, disrupting the notion that noncommercial and ethnicized music is static and permanently localized. Stringed instruments in rap can also be heard when artists freestyle over guitar sounds. In the film *Ni Wakati*, analyzed in the last section of this chapter, and in Michael Wanguhu’s other film on the underground scene,

*Hip Hop Colony*, artists are filmed rapping or freestyling to guitar music. Firm beats and weighty bass traditionally mark hip hop. In Kenyan music, while computer-generated beats are widely utilized, rappers regularly use the guitar. As discussed in chapter 1, guitar music, such as Benga and Congolese rumba, has a long history in Kenya. Additionally, other chordophones, such as the *nyatiti* and *litungu*, have been used in Kenyan music both before and after the introduction of the guitar. In fact, East African knowledge and usage of these and other instruments have made the guitar a beautifully viable source of music-making.

The presence of the *nyatiti* demonstrates Kenyan hip hop's indigenization practices, also exhibiting that the project of diaspora is not always transnational and outward-looking. Often, the reclamation of African and Black humanity in diasporic projects means that artists must draw lines, or webs, according to Soyica Diggs Colbert, in a multitude of directions. Some connections are made intercontinentally, others are made across oceans, and still, other critical lines are drawn within Kenya itself. The *nyatiti* is positioned near the artists on the ground when they are rapping, and MC Bagol plays the instrument intermittently. Given the history of string music and its frequent incorporation in rapping, the video expresses that hip hop owns its place within the many genres of Kenyan music. Because the music is viewed as a consistent other, linking it to various genres is one way it sturdily asserts its presence within the catalogs of Kenyan sounds. This othering appeared during a television interview on the show *Culture Hub* with MC Bagol. Halfway into a short conversation about MC Bagol's life, *nyatiti* musicianship, and career goals, the presenter asked a platitudinous question comparing American and Kenyan styles: "What is your message to the other young folk that we see, especially here in Kenya, who are imitating a lot of the hip hop that is in the west?" MC Bagol, partly refusing to fall for the trap of setting Kenyan music on a moral high ground against western (i.e., American and therefore African American) forms, replied:

Well, okay, I don't have anything against hip hop. Hip hop is a powerful music. It is about the African man in the diaspora. The Black man. He is expressing the issues that are affecting him in the diaspora. So hip hop is a positive culture. I can say it is a good culture. So, we have to enrich it more. We have to enrich it more. So, my message to all the young artists that are coming up, the hip hop artists in Africa that are coming up, I just like to say, they can do hip hop, but let's enrich it. Bring it to the motherland. Bring it back to the roots and have some conscious messages.<sup>48</sup>

Bagol continued to note, nodding to Haile Selassie, that artists must focus not only on economic empowerment but also on spiritual fulfillment.<sup>49</sup> Though Bagol's comments partly fold into the notions of a flawed American music, he also recognizes the cultural sameness and commonality of struggle that exists among Black peoples, or, specifically for him, among Black men. Like Mic Crenshaw, Bagol briefly places blackness alongside Africanity in a unifying gesture. Black and



FIGURE 12. “Amandla” music video, featuring (*left to right*) MC Bagol, Ran-D, and Mic Crenshaw. 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>.

African may be two opposing subjectivities in Kenyan society at large, but here, in the underground, the concepts are brought together in a gesture of sameness. In hip hop, Black and African are not necessarily synonyms, but they are still two similar characteristics whose nets are cast in differing directions and meet for a common purpose.

Espousals of diaspora forge a mutual recognition of the similarities that Africana people share across various borders. Jean Muteba Rahier and Percy C. Hintzen write that “white supremacy is . . . at the center of black misrecognition,” and if this is so, then diaspora works to “[render] the ‘space’ of collective self-recognition and self-consciousness.”<sup>50</sup> A hip hop diaspora produces a relationality: an imagined camaraderie wherein Africana people do not render those who look like them as “other.” In this version of diaspora, artists resist the disarticulating regimes of colonialism and slavery as well as their afterlives while also speculating on unity based on shared perspectives. The idea of diaspora, of seeing others as not dissimilar to oneself, is a mutual recognition that the other is not an other after all.

The traversal of this musical African convoy of the Caravan from hood to hood, from South Africa to Zimbabwe, and then to Kenya and beyond, allows for the growth of a music-based activism that sees the hood as a diasporic site. Ran-D rhymes in “Amandla” and contributes to the idea that the moving caravan is an answer to a seemingly inescapable social confinement:

*Jamii iko locked ndani ya poverty, maisha mabaya* (The community is locked in poverty, bad life) /

*Wamebow down to pressure, domestication* (They have bowed down to pressure, domestication) /

*The slave master kupitia Intimidation Avenue kufunga* (The slave master through Intimidation Avenue closes [to close]) /

*Kuwafanya wajinga, wameziunda concentration camps ndani ya mtaa* (To make them stupid, they have built concentration camps in the hood)<sup>51</sup>

Here, Ran-D states that powerful forces, referred to as “the slave master,” have domesticated or held down the oppressed, who are forced to accept their positions. Some artists refer to the downtrodden as being unknowing or, in this case, stupid. Ran-D positions himself as knowledgeable and capable of providing answers to those who are miseducated. Normalized ableism does appear in hip hop music. For example, the 2019 King Kaka song “Wajinga Nyinyi,” meaning “Y’all stupid,” which is examined in the next chapter, encourages people to hold the political system accountable. Rappers place themselves as responsible for lifting a veil that those in power have placed over the impoverished populace. Calling for political consciousness is reasonable, yet the accusation of stupidity does not exist without an ableist and elitist indictment of the working class and poor persons as being unaware and naïve.

The settings of the “Amandla” video also mark the ghetto as a project of social confinement. The video was shot in the middle-class area of Hurlingham. In one part, there is footage just south of Hurlingham from a moving vehicle capturing a scene from Lang’ata Road. Kibera, known to be Africa’s largest informal settlement neighborhood and where the “Looking Up” video was shot (see chapter 2), can briefly be seen in the background. Rather than heading away from the city and hood, the caravan heads toward both because the hood is one stop that it will always make. In some traditional ideas of diaspora, homeland, and motherland, Africa is portrayed as ahistorically positive. Far from the land of queens and kings or collective village life and animals, the hood is a marker of hip hop diaspora and transnationality. The space and visual sight of ghettos operate as an indigenizing mechanism that locates the music inside Kenya, and with the help of the caravan, the ghetto functions as one stop along the Pan-African path.

The caravan-as-*matatu* is quite apposite given the vehicle’s sturdy connections to rap music culture. Songs like Nazizi and Wyre’s old school classic “Kenyan Girl / Kenyan Boy” (2004), Baby T’s playful and upbeat song about sexual pleasure, “Dandiwa” (Jumped On, 2015), and Tunji’s flashy song “Mat za Ronga” (*Mata-tus* of [Ongata] Rongai, 2017) are just a few ways the *matatu* figures prominently in songs. Octopizzo’s proclamations of “Namba Nane” (Number 8) in his music as a nod to the *matatu* route line to Kibera and Evaredi’s use of the 33 *matatu*



FIGURE 13. Graffiti artist in the “Amandla” music video. 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>.

route line in his clothing and music as a marker of the way to Embakasi are other examples. Working from Evan Mwangi and Wanjiru Mbure, who call the vehicle a “fugitive institution,” I see the *matatu* as symbolic of diaspora through its propensity to transgress borders in hip hop.<sup>52</sup> In “Amandla,” what is important is the *matatu*’s symbolism of a Pan-African caravan that joins people together across geographic space.

The complicated interventions of “Still Strong” and “Amandla” echo Paul Zeleza’s note that “movement, it could be argued then, in its literal and metaphorical senses, is at the heart of the diasporic condition.”<sup>53</sup> This theme of movement shores up how hip hop prioritizes bodies that are able-bodied, whether in dance or rhyme. Unlike “Still Strong,” where only skilled roller-skaters participate in the performance, using the *matatu* figuratively makes the caravan available to those who cannot walk their journey. The *matatu* conveys the possibilities of an inclusive caravanned diaspora, wherein one is not required to be physically able-bodied to partake in the transit. Moreover, “Amandla” and “Still Strong” illustrate that representations of diaspora are produced mostly by cisgender men, resulting in its masculinization, however unintentional.

Although the diaspora in “Amandla” only includes men, the translocal articulations are dynamic and still unfolding. In fact, in the larger project of the African Hip-Hop Caravan, women rappers such as Mama C (who I profile in the last section of this chapter) are on the album in other songs. In “Amandla,” Ran-D,



Khusta, Mic Crenshaw, and Judge can be seen spitting their verses in front of the mic in the studio. As they rap, they hold up their recently completed and “not-yet-memorized” bars, reading from either cellphones or paper. During Judge’s rap, there is a cut to shots of a man graffiti artist painting a collage, which includes an open book with a tree growing out of it and an image of an African woman on the mic. These practitioners are all in process, embodying their purpose while remaining open to the possibility of something different. These shots remind those watching that practitioners are always putting pen to paper; they are still exploring the directions of their paint cans. Such embodiment practices beckon toward continual newness, highlighting what Nadine George-Graves calls “performativity in flux.”<sup>54</sup>

### THE DIASPORIC THUG

Kenyan artists cite U.S. Black themes in the music, but they do not use one of the most popular global figures in rap, the gangsta or thug. Hip hop is both a magnet and a filter for global racial politics, pulling in and sorting out ideas of blackness and Africanity that fit into the music and respond to Kenyan societal beliefs. As such, many grapple with the gangsta or thug idiom and how it confers blackness, primarily by calling it into question and ultimately rejecting it as unusable for projects of diaspora, political love, and seriousness. Evaredi’s music video “Ukweli” (Truth) in this section illustrates that the reference to the thug must be fed through notions of political seriousness for it to be viable. For most artists social consciousness is a driving force for their music, and incorporating what is largely seen as a gangsta or thug aesthetic into their art would mean straying from their mission. Kenyan, and indeed many African, artists disassociate from the figure of the thug or gangsta to mark their music as socially useful and valuable.<sup>55</sup>

In the U.S., the thug concept has been substantively reclaimed in hip hop and is a continuation of the bad man and bad nigga aesthetic long present in Black popular culture.<sup>56</sup> The figure eschews formal economies for high-risk quick money and has open heterosexual exploits that often border on or fully embrace misogyny and sexism.<sup>57</sup> The U.S. thug is usually cast as the venerated antihero outlaw in music and film.

In Kenya, the thug has accumulated a somewhat different meaning, and the figure is generally despised. The idea of the thug emerged during colonialism, when white authorities used the term to describe young African men in a fast-developing urban Nairobi who supposedly did not want to work in formal economies but would rather steal and cause havoc to the colonial social order. During the Emergency, it quickly became a word to describe the fictitiously inherent barbarous nature of the forest fighters.<sup>58</sup> For example, S. M. Shamsul Alam cites a 1954 state-run *Voice of Kenya* pamphlet, “The Kikuyu Tribe and Mau Mau: Some Factors Causing the Rise of Mau Mau,” describing why people would feel compelled to join

the fighters. One reason was “Little of family or clan authority and no change for the young male to prove his manhood except in chivalry, thuggery, and reversion to primitive savagery.”<sup>59</sup> During colonialism and independence transitions, it was a racialized term to mark out the nonconforming African, and it then entered the mainstream Kenyan lexicon as a class-based description conferred on men who are apparently invested in crime instead of legitimate work. Though most Kenyans might not view the Mau Mau as thugs, the term itself has remained, as well as a societal willingness to enter people into that category. In the current Kenyan news, broadcasters speak of men who rob violently or extort money from businesses as being thugs, and it is common to hear broadcasters make statements such as “police killed two thugs.”<sup>60</sup> These are often extrajudicial murders and are seen as easy solutions to the rife problem of gang or cartel violence in informal settlement areas in Nairobi. Such executions are meant to send messages to gangs, who community members often despise for the power they hold over residents as a result of their violence. Unlike in the U.S., there are typically no widespread romanticized notions of the gangster in Kenya; the term is mostly only used to describe people who rob with violence and occasionally kill people in the process. Rappers are, therefore, hesitant to identify themselves as gangstas or thugs in such an arena.

For example, in our conversations, Judge differentiated much of U.S. hip hop from African styles and argued that the subject of a song matters: a Kenyan rapper cannot discuss things that fall outside of cultural norms. Judge noted how in American songs, a rapper can “diss their mother,” but in Africa, one’s music will not sell with lyrics about parental criticism. In Kenya, there is a consistent desire for artists to create music that is deemed “positive.” Judge lamented that gangsta rap lies far from his creative purview:

There’s some people who will rap about violence and people will rap about killing each other, you know. And music, I normally believe that it has a very big inspiration whereby if you say something, you don’t know it, but someone will be listening to that music, and he or she is in that situation whereby you can react or whatever. He or she is listening to—because I normally believe . . . music . . . touches some other parts of the brain.<sup>61</sup>

Judge’s comments notably tell how artists parse through U.S. hip hop as they engage in their citational practices. As mentioned, he participated in “Amandla.” Throughout his music, he has drawn on notions of blackness, naming his group Black Duo, and in chapter 2, I analyze the song “Rap kwa Mic,” which samples from U.S. artists Talib Kweli and Bahamadia. He, like others, is hyperaware that society views the music through the lens of the gangsta or thug, which many argue does not capture the full diversity of rap culture. I asked many rappers about the general reception of hip hop in Kenya, and Nafsi Huru immediately discussed how the cultural othering of the music comes from people’s perceptions of gangsta rap. He disagreed with this association, explaining that he does not see himself as a



gangsta rapper and has grown frustrated at the constant association between hip hop and gangsta rap.

*RP:* How does Kenyan society view hip hop?

*Nafsi Huru:* There are some people, like parents, who don't really love hip hop. They think it's like for gangsters or for people who do drugs or something like that. They don't see the positive side of it. But I think with time, they are going to understand what we are doing, and they will get to follow us.

*RP:* And where do they get that perception from?

*Nafsi Huru:* I think it's just a conception because people who do hip hop are energetic, and we have swag and things like that. So, they, society, expect you to go to school, you dress official and things like that, and you just go to work in a corporate company . . . When you are doing hip hop, when they haven't heard your lyrics, . . . they stereotype you to being someone who doesn't understand what he is doing.<sup>62</sup>

Nafsi asserted that perceptions of the music originate from how rappers perform the culture, such as through swag and clothing styles, which signifies the thug or gangsta for nondevotees. Nafsi stated that people who dislike rap do so without listening to the lyrics, meaning that the assumptions nonlisteners make are based on a disengagement with the music. Social norms, including how to act, how to dress, and where to work, propose that there are certain behaviors deemed suitable, and rap is continually measured against these actions. Artists rebel against social norms, which often manifests as generational and class-based resistance. His mention of parental dislike of rap exemplifies how age differences are influenced by how people navigate American influences. When hip hop first started, it was a youth music, and globally, it has still retained this notion, even though its fifty-year permanence now means that many popular artists across the globe who pioneered the genre are well beyond middle age. In Kenya, parents disapprove of their children becoming rappers because of specific cultural expectations around what it means to become an adult. Many ethnic communities in Kenya have circumcision rites for boys, specifically for young teenagers, after which they become men and assume certain responsibilities. Due to cultural and historical factors, including how the colonial and postcolonial states have hijacked circumcision for their aims, there exists an entire discourse surrounding manhood transitions in Kenyan society.<sup>63</sup> While the artists I spoke to never elaborated on this as a reason for their parents' disapproval, circumcision discourse rests securely inside of the differentiations between youth and adulthood, specifically for many cismen.

Although few will admit it outright, rappers do care about how they are perceived. The sustained resistance to social norms that the culture celebrates has limits, and the goal for all artists is that some elements of the political urgency of their music resonate with larger society. Judge implied that external societal perceptions of hip hop are tied to what themes rappers avoid.

Like here in Kenya . . . people have been thinking like hip hop is for gangsters, you know? . . . Let's say if you are doing hip hop . . . they normally expect that you to start doing and saying the "f-word." Or the "b-word." And start being hood, and start like putting some dreads on your head, and be like, ah, you're a bad boy?<sup>64</sup>

Judge's description exemplifies how rap carries negative signifiers: if an artist were to "be hood" and wear locks (or dreads or dreadlocks), they would be associated with gangsta rap. Of course, such meanings carry local connotations as well. Locks have long been seen as nonnormative and improper in Kenya. Only in the past fifteen or so years have large numbers of middle-class men and women in Nairobi begun to wear them. However, these styles are heavily refined and symmetrical, thus making them ideologically distant from the large and uncultivated locks historically associated with Mau Mau fighters and also with Rastafarians and Mungiki groups.<sup>65</sup> While these organizations have a variety of reputations, with the Mau Mau being remembered with recognition for its contribution to independence, the hairstyle still conjures up notions of useless rebellion.

The cultural location of rap in Kenya and elsewhere in Africa relates to its pejorative gangsta association. Nondevotees of the music see it as reflecting a blind western mimicry, the appropriation of a harmful pejorative lifestyle full of empty violence and meaningless consumerism. Rap music's supposed inability to generate meaning outside of its commodity status and its rebelliousness and social deviance often clash with established modes of respectability. For many artists, the figure of the gangsta does not travel well to Africa. Msia Clark's discussion of Somali-Canadian rapper K'Naan and his song "What's Hardcore" captures this complexity.<sup>66</sup> K'Naan's contribution to the hip hop game in Kenya should be noted as well, as he has spent much time in Nairobi, where he recorded songs such as "Soobax" (Come Out). In "What's Hardcore," he juxtaposes violence-ridden Somalia with life on the U.S. streets to highlight the artificiality of U.S. street life compared to the ongoing battles for peace in Somalia. Clark notes that K'Naan's identification with U.S. Black culture, his use of Ebonics or African American Vernacular English (AAVE), and his work with U.S. rappers means his discussion is not flimsy or appropriative. However, K'Naan's comparison, while elucidating the tragedies of Somalia, is slightly irresponsible, as he does not locate the gangsta within multilayered structural, economic, and historic antiblackness that continues to destroy Black communities in totalizing ways. Still, his larger conversation is significant. Like many Kenyan artists, K'Naan's affinity with Black culture is complex and intimate, yet he never embraces the figure of the gangsta and its relationship to violence.

Thug subjectivities fly in the face of political love in Nairobi rap. Such love does not mean that everything in hip hop is revered, just as explorations of diaspora do not translate to an open acceptance of everything that has the potential to confer blackness. Although spreading political love appears one-directional, that

is, artists spread love to Kenya, they also desire to be valued by Kenyan society. Because of these yearnings, many artists trenchantly confront the criticisms that seem to be leveled at them constantly. When MC Bagol uses the *nyatiti*, he connects rap to the beauty of Kenya's other musical expressions; such exercises exemplify practitioners' love of the self through culture. Many artists also create uncountable forms of ludic corporealities and lyrical maneuvers meant to undermine structures of power and produce spaces of immersive creativities. However, utilizing the thug as a rebellious figure rarely works in maintaining underground spaces because its very construction is built on society's credulous derision. Michael Jeffries extrapolates how the U.S. thug rapper understands that onlookers (both white and respectable Black) have an endless supply of judgment and contempt at what they see as the thug's unnecessary nihilism and wanton violence. He notes, "Thug subjectivity is rooted not only in outsider and rebel status but in the fact that *existence as a thug is based on the premise and knowledge that you are hated.*"<sup>67</sup> In U.S. rap, these characteristics of gangsta rappers who are men and sometimes women bad bitches can both apply pressure to the contradictions of the U.S. state's excessive eagerness to author violence and resist the respectability politics that trap Black people in unwinnable scenarios. In comparison, Nairobi underground artists do not accept society's hate; instead, they aim for a recognition that their music is valuable and effective. Therefore, the image of the deviant thug does not map onto Kenyan society with the same subversive force.

Much like the tomboy, the image of the gangsta thug rapper is entangled with ideas of excess and mimicry. Women who act as men in a context where artists are already rendered copycats of the west face many difficulties. The same is true for the gangsta thug. In a setting where artists must prove their worth as creative producers, such a label is not something that most can afford. The gangsta, like the tomboy, embodies too much excess, too much masculinity where there should not be, too much toughness, and too much blackness. If artists are to cite blackness from the U.S., it must be the kind that is supposedly generative, useful, and politically salient. The undercurrent of respectability is found within discussions of the gangsta thug, just as it is present in discussions of the tomboy. Artists want their bodies to be read as defiant and forceful, but only to a point. Women can be rappers, but only if their presence does not destabilize the entrenched notions of masculinity that mark and constitute hip hop culture. Furthermore, formations of the thug are simply not profitable in the underground scene. It is doubtful that any NGO, and indeed no church, would host a gangsta rap event. It is also unlikely that artists would want to draw any potential associations with gang organizations or street cartels that widely and often violently operate in Nairobi, especially given the police's readiness to inflict violence on these groups.

Evaredi's song "Ukweli" is fascinating in that he incorporates the thug into the song's general themes of Pan-Africanism and working-class consciousness. Evaredi

and much of his crew wear T-shirts with the wording “T.H.U.G. Familia [family]” on them. Thug Familia is his former rap group, which he was a part of before going solo in the late 2010s, and here, T.H.U.G. is an acronym for True Heroes Under God. The term is redefined as a part of political seriousness and articulated as something purposeful for hip hop culture, which is one of the only ways it could be used in the underground. However, for this video analysis, it is quite difficult to see the wording *familia* on the T-shirts. Also, Thug Familia was not as well known as other groups, meaning that what viewers mostly visually encounter in “Ukweli” is the word THUG. Nonetheless, Evaredi’s reconception of the term aligns with the earnest premise of fortitude and social consciousness found throughout the song. At the beginning of the song, he raps, “Hey Bana, I’m a Blackstar ka Ghana, Bafana Bafana, Mwafrika kwa sana.”<sup>68</sup> In this line, Evaredi captures the Africanist thrust of much of the Nairobi underground. The line translates to “Hey man, I’m a Blackstar like Ghana, Bafana Bafana, a true African.” Evaredi asserts a Pan-African subjectivity when he raps that he is “a Blackstar like Ghana” and a “Mwafrika kwa sana.” He uses “Blackstar,” which is the name of Ghana’s football (soccer) team, while also contending that he is a “Black star.” His references to Ghana’s Blackstar and South Africa’s Bafana Bafana, both football (soccer) teams, espouse his Pan-African subjectivity vis-à-vis sports. Not a player for either team, he uses these references to develop his politics as an African rapper. In this single line, Evaredi reaches across several borders to usher forth notions of African resilience and strength, as Ghana was the first sub-Saharan country to obtain its independence, and South Africa is often cited for its uprisings and defeat of apartheid. He calls forth African struggles by drawing lines from one country to the next, positioning himself as a true African or *Mwafrika kwa sana*.

Evaredi also goes by MC Snarl and is from the working-class area of Embakasi. As already mentioned, EMBA 33 is the basis for his small-scale clothing line, with “33” as a reference to Embakasi’s *matatu* route. Additionally, the settings of his music videos often create a presentation of wealth. In my interview with him, he argued that hip hop has the power to stop conflict and gave the example of when the government commissioned artists to hold concerts after the 2007–8 postelection violence. Evaredi acknowledged that these concerts featured other types of popular music, but upheld that hip hop works best to carry a message: “The main thing is the message. What you are telling the people. Like I can say, hip hop is the best tool for peace. For people to stop war. Hip hop is true.” When I asked him what “war” he referred to, he responded:

Artists are capable of getting down to the common *mwananchi*,<sup>69</sup> the slums, yeah, the second-class houses. That’s hip hop; that’s where hip hop is. Basically for me, I know that for me you can’t hip hop in a big estate . . . that guy won’t be talking, won’t be talking of peace, but he don’t know what war is. You can’t talk of peace when you don’t know what war is.<sup>70</sup>

Here what Evaredi describes is a class war, where the poor suffer. These references to poverty also align with the themes in "Ukweli." Krunkid's chorus is: "Ukweli wa mambo (The truth about problems) / Nakupa ukweli wa mambo (I give you the truth about problems) / Twakupa ukweli wa mambo (We give you the truth about problems) / Cuz it's the way this world is unfair to me/ I gotta keep it real for real, it's true to me."<sup>71</sup>

Furthermore, Evaredi's lyrics, just like Ran-D's lines about social confinement, position him in a place of knowing in opposition to what he perceives as social ills. He raps about his sense of hustle, which has supposedly brought him upward mobility, and relatedly briefly performs the "making it rain" gesture. His bodily movements and stances in "Ukweli," which exude confidence and self-assurance, communicate additional knowledge about how to confront society's difficulties. Evaredi raps in front of his crew, which is composed of all men except for Krunkid and a small child. Some of the men look into the camera and bob their heads as Evaredi raps, while others look away or down as they listen. This common performance communicates that Evaredi can speak or rap on behalf of their experiences, which he does with self-assuredness. Evaredi enacts what Miles White describes as "street swagger," which "indexes not only rhythm and style in one's performance of physical self and personal carriage, but a high degree of self-confidence, the knowledge that one can handle himself in any situation with cool and sophistication."<sup>72</sup> Evaredi performs repetitive gestures throughout the video. When he is sitting, his hands move toward and away from his body in sharp and clear movements to the beat of the song and the flow of his lyrics. At times, he puts his head down in contemplation while putting his hands up as he finishes a lyric.

This video shows bright and contrasting colors and a shiny and crisp background. Evaredi wears a backward hat, a Converse jacket, designer jeans, and sunglasses. His protégé, Krunkid, dresses in expensive clothes and wears flashy jewelry and sunglasses studded with rhinestones. The venue is Le Vans, a moderately priced club on Uhuru Highway on a perhaps symbolic precipice of east and west Nairobi. Though it is a modest location, the framing of the video creates the illusion that it is a high-end establishment.

The term thug has a double meaning in this video. Not only is it reconceptualized as something useful for political seriousness, but it also easily joins with the song's portrayal of the working-class grind and hypermasculinities. In "Ukweli," the lyrics do not present such economic activities within the perhaps conventional thug rhetoric of illicitness and violence, but rather Evaredi's hood success is crafted as both vague and benign. In most rap music, just like in this song, all we know is that the hustle is possible, but outside of selling music, we do not know exactly what the occupation is. This shifty refusal to say what work rappers do outside of making and selling music is part of the defiance of being un surveillable. Moreover, both versions of the thug are masculinized and globally recognizable



FIGURE 14. “Ukweli” music video, featuring Evaredi and Krunkid. Screenshot by author. Source: #id33ke musiq, “Snarl Evaredi Ft Krunkid—Ukweli Official Video,” YouTube, October 15, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EDrAH3BwXco>.

and, therefore, become pliable toward the different aims of this particular video. Evaredi’s most enthralling intervention is how he plays with the word, emptying out its historic definition in Kenya as a socially hated figure and then concurrently surrounding it with the well-worn markers of the term. This simultaneous resistance and compliance to conventions is at the core of the effectiveness of a hip hop politics of subversion. Further, his wordplay, alongside the song’s other themes of rap culture’s street hustle, invites a critical question about whether the figure of the thug, partly pulled from Black U.S. rap, can fit into Nairobi hip hop’s paraphernalia of customary citations. Artists dedicate themselves to disruption as a theoretical practice of making good music and disturbing the social norms often deemed pernicious and unusable for many lower-class African youths. “Ukweli” both conforms and departs from the common underground text, with the help of the figure of the thug on both fronts.

#### THE TIME FOR DIASPORA

Michael Wanguhu and Russell Kenya’s 2010 documentary, *Ni Wakati* (It’s Time), holds contemporary discussions about hip hop diaspora in Kenya and about themes of African and Black revolution, commercialization, and hip hop homelands.<sup>73</sup> The film is centered around two noncommercial African American rappers, M1 from Dead Prez and Umi from P.O.W., and follows the duo as they take a trip to Kenya and Tanzania. It highlights some of the historical connections between East Africans and African Americans. As *Ni Wakati* unfolds, the audience

witnesses how the rappers mostly work with a version of diaspora that locates rap traditions in Africa and how they see themselves as making a return to a distant cultural homeland. They speak with various actors in the Tanzanian and Kenyan industry about blackness as an imposed subjecthood due to historic trafficking and enslavement in the U.S. and describe themselves as Africans who have been estranged from their native land. Umi and M1 spend the film traveling to hip hop events, namely WAPI Nairobi and WAPI Tanzania, performing, talking to artists, fielding interview questions at radio stations, spending time in the studio, and reporting on their numerous excursions.

Although the film seeks to see hip hop as indigenous to Africa, in the end, it confirms that the music is rooted firmly in U.S. blackness. In so doing, *Ni Wakati* works with two interrelated conceptions of diaspora found throughout the music. First, it directly mirrors the Afro-Atlantic diaspora, whereby the characteristics of hip hop are considered to have begun among African griots and drumming traditions, after which it moved to the New World, eventually emerging in the South Bronx via the urban and Black descendants of kidnapped Africans, and finally returned to Africa amidst its spread around the globe.<sup>74</sup> It should be noted that Kenyan rappers are often dissatisfied with their exclusion from this diaspora and make claims about the existence of East African oral historians and musical practices, thereby including themselves in the continental contributions of the origins of rap culture. The second type of diaspora stresses that the autochthonous setting of hip hop was in the U.S. before it moved outward to various sites in Africa and around the globe.<sup>75</sup> The film seeks to communicate that the second form is widely known in rap circles and needs reconsideration, which is the core theme of Umi and M1's journey to East Africa. As they move to different sites throughout Tanzania and Kenya, these rappers aim to highlight that the first type of diaspora, beginning in Africa and moving outward, is less known and underappreciated.

*Ni Wakati* includes interviews with an impressive array of people, all providing insight into their understanding of the general theme of hip hop across borders. In the beginning, as Umi and M1 pack up and head to the airport, the film introduces Davy D (also written as Davey D) and Toni Blackman. Davy D is a U.S. journalist, historian, radio host, college professor, and longtime activist whose work in hip hop and Black politics spans several decades. A member of the old-school group Orange Krush, he is also known for working with artists such as Run DMC and Kurtis Blow in the 1980s and has played bass for Public Enemy. In the early 1990s, Toni Blackman formed the workshop Freestyle Union. She is also the founder of Rhyme Like a Girl (RLAG) collective, where she continued to focus on the importance of the cypher. Blackman has also served as the U.S. Hip Hop Ambassador with the State Department, for which she has traveled internationally to give lectures and facilitate workshops. Like Davy D, she has also taught college courses. Her presence in the documentary is apropos, as she has collaborated with African



artists throughout the diaspora.<sup>76</sup> Soon after Davy D and Blackman appear, so too does Binyavanga Wainaina, the late Kenyan author and journalist. Wainaina wrote several essays, including “How to Write about Africa” and the book *One Day I Will Write about This Place: A Memoir*.<sup>77</sup> The late Geronimo Ji-Jaga Pratt, the famous U.S. Black Panther, also speaks about the types of hip hop that come into Africa. Graffiti images of his godson, Tupac Shakur, from either Tanzania or Kenya, are interspersed throughout his dialogue. Pratt discusses his apprehension about hip hop surfacing on the African continent, given what he sees as the “negativity” of U.S. styles. However, recognizing the work of Kalamashaka and UFMM, he concedes the beneficial contributions that the music makes to societies. In the film, Pratt speaks from Tanzania, where he lived for the latter part of his life until he passed in 2011.<sup>78</sup>

Charlotte Hill O’Neal, better known as Mama C, and her husband, Mzee Pete O’Neal, who reside in Arusha, are also featured. The couple runs a community organization, the United African Alliance Community Center (UAACC). In the 1960s, Mzee Pete was the chairman of the Kansas City Chapter of the Black Panthers. He fled into exile in the 1970s after being arrested for a gun charge and then spent time in Algeria before settling in Tanzania with Mama C.<sup>79</sup> The film captures a fireside discussion about Pan-Africanism among M1, Umi, Mama C, Mzee Pete, and other unnamed artists. Notably, Mama C appeared in the collaborative 2017 album of the Afrikan Hip Hop Caravan alongside Mic Crenshaw, Khusta, and others (discussed earlier in this chapter). She is a long-standing spoken word practitioner, adept in the *nyatiti* and other African instruments, and frequently creates music with African rappers. In the 2017 Caravan album, she raps in “Soul Power” and “Zimbabwe.” In the film, the couple speaks to rappers as elders, counseling young people and performing ceremonial libations and Africanist elder and ancestral acknowledgment that are both indigenous to Africa and practiced throughout the diaspora.

Through their travels, M1 and Umi position Africanity as a foundational element in hip hop. After arriving in Kenya, both announce their Africanness and discuss the failure of the U.S., a country that they argue is not their factual homeland. Viewers see M1 rapping his signature, “I’m a African / I’m a African, uhh / And I know what’s happenin’” from Dead Prez’s well-known song “I’m a African.” To compare, in the song “Amandla” and its music video, Mic Crenshaw brings blackness and Africanity into one conceptual space. Mic Crenshaw’s avowal that he is “Black American” occurs in the same sonic space as the expression “Amandla,” the *nyatiti*, Nairobi hoods, and the *matatu*. In *Ni Wakati*, Umi and M1 do not name blackness as a primary current and instead do something entirely different. For them, blackness falls out of their self-definition, seeing it as representative of how the U.S. has disarticulated African peoples from their original homelands through forced displacement and enslavement. Throughout the documentary, the artists speak to audiences about the need for African hip hop to avoid

the many snares of American styles, such as corporate takeovers and the bodily celebration of wealth through items such as jewelry and clothing, often detested in conscious rap communities. M1 and Umi proclaim that they have witnessed how consumer culture has eliminated the music's political force, or to cite S. Craig Watkins, "[dulled] the oppositional edges" of U.S. hip hop, and that their goals are to avoid the same trend in Africa.<sup>80</sup> Their solution is frequently espoused by Black nationalist artists and concerns the need to seize creative and economic control over the production and circulation of the genre. These artists seek to paint Africa as a hip hop homeland and a place of purity and relative incorruptibility compared to the fraught U.S. music industries.

M1 and Umi's understandings of Africa and Africanity are framed through the lens of U.S. Afrocentricity. While they remove blackness from their self-definitions, what they miss is how their views are deeply embedded in a Black and Afrocentric idea of Africa. M1 and Umi desire to ground their work in Africanness, but the politics of diasporic liberatory movements force to the surface just how much U.S. blackness is embedded in their version of hip hop's Pan-Africanism. At one point and in front of an audience, they proclaim "RBG!" (or Red, Black, and Green), which is an ode to Dead Prez's musical themes and the flag of Black Nationalism and Pan-Africanism. While many in Kenya are familiar with the flag and Garveyism, the declaration "RBG!" is uncommon.<sup>81</sup> It is not that Kenyans or other Africana peoples would not understand the intentions behind RBG; it is more that the term has a particular resonance in politically conscious hip hop communities in the U.S. In another moment in the film, M1 begins a speech by greeting people with a shout of "uhuru!" Swahili for "freedom." However, this is no longer the rallying cry it once was during independence in East Africa, nor is it a greeting in the region. Hence, the audience does not respond to his call. His speech about his return to Africa does receive enthusiastic applause for the weight of his words, but at the end, when he calls out "Ashe!/Àşę!" the crowd does not respond again, as the word has little cultural relevance in East Africa.<sup>82</sup> This borrowing from Yoruba philosophies is a long-standing practice in the U.S. among those who point their cultural orientations toward Africa.<sup>83</sup> M1's speech-acts are a few of the many ways Black people in the U.S. form understandings of African contexts and cultures through rap.<sup>84</sup> Paul Gilroy describes in his oft-cited magnum opus *Black Atlantic* that Afrocentricism is often "heavily mythologised Africanity that is itself stamped by its origins not in Africa but in a variety of pan-African ideology produced most recently by black America."<sup>85</sup> Hence, even though M1 and Umi proclaim Africanity, it is cultivated through U.S. reference points.

M1 and Umi present themselves as willing to learn about the particularities of Kenya's ethnic landscape beyond a facile and tourist encounter. During one scene, then-Kenyan radio DJ Albert Josiah asks them questions about their time in the country. Umi answers that he has been hanging out in the hood and recently ate Mukimo. The dish, consisting of mashed potatoes, greens, and corn, among other

vegetables, is eaten by many in Kenya and is popular in the central provinces and the Kikuyu, Embu, and Meru communities. They both wish to make a point that they are not tourists in the conventional sense, coming into the country and bouncing from airport to coast with little interaction with Kenyans outside of the service sector. To eat Mukimo, they had to visit someone's house or go to a restaurant specializing in more traditional dishes. While it is not difficult to locate such eating spots in Nairobi, in the city's commercial districts, which many foreigners frequent, it is much easier to find fast food and *nyama choma* (roasted meat) restaurants. As Umi proclaims his recent consumption of the food, M1 grins and bobs back and forth alongside his traveling partner. He then shouts, "We Kikuyu boys now!," eliciting chuckles from Josiah and the others in the studio.<sup>86</sup> While proud of his knowledge of Kikuyu foods, M1 appears to know little about the etiquette surrounding ethnicity and the historical ways in which it can confer divisiveness, power, and privilege in Kenya. M1's tossing of the term Kikuyu into radio space was perhaps uninformed. Kenya and Wanguhu's decision to include this moment in the film is odd, especially given the tense atmosphere surrounding ethnic identities. Nonetheless, these are the rappers' attempts to recognize the unique social landscape of Kenya.

The film highlights the methods of artists' indigenization processes. Binyavanga Wainaina contributes to the conversation, stating that Kenyan hip hop is a literary movement that cannot be contained by the written word alone. According to him, the music has fundamentally altered how people see themselves and the world, and he scoffs at older people who lament about artists' apparent deep desires to be western or American. Wainaina criticizes these ill-advised people for spending too much time listening to Luther Vandross or Congolese Lingala music and then discusses how rappers have built an industry of production, recording, and performance that is uniquely Kenyan. His comparisons between rappers and older devotees of non-Kenyan sounds are stark and poignant. For Wainaina, rappers have created a system of cultural production that is far more indigenized and embedded in Kenyan social life than the older Kenyans who criticize them for copying the U.S.

A moving moment occurs when Kamah from Kalamashaka speaks to M1 and Umi in a car as they transition between destinations, testifying, "You guys inspire us like crazy, we get it from you, you know? You know, it's our culture, we're in Africa. We were supposed to know our culture, but you guys made us look for our cultures."<sup>87</sup> Here Kamah emphasizes that hip hop originates in African culture but that it is not recognizable to Africa until it is seen from afar (the U.S.) and then reimported into the continent. Kamah's comment articulates a fundamental difference between African Americans and Africans as demarcated by borders and power. Here, I believe that both notions of diaspora are at work in Kamah's statement. While he solidifies that the music's elements are rooted in the cultures of Africa, he also understands that U.S. artists created the music and made it legible

for African rappers to use as a cultural system. In this statement, the U.S. is both a starting point and a part of the diaspora responsible for birthing the music.

The film is also a reminder that the practice of cisgender masculinity helps to make hip hop diasporic and politically conscious, whether in the U.S. or East Africa. After arriving in Tanzania to do a WAPI performance and visit Mama C and Mzee Pete, Umi and M1 visit Coco Beach in Dar es Salaam. M1 appears on the beach, playful and cheerful. He bobs and dances, creating his own rhythm, and raps, "I wanna go, I wanna go, I wanna, I wanna, I wanna, I wanna, I wanna, I wanna go, I wanna go, I wanna, I wanna go to Africa / Not being pimped like a ho in America / Not being pimped like a ho in America."<sup>88</sup> According to M1, being in America or dealing with the U.S. hip hop grind is similar to being held in the inescapable feminized position of "ho," wherein he is exploited and abused sexually. Likewise, his desire to be in Africa is equated to a desire not to be "hoed out" and therefore to be able to exercise full cisgender masculine autonomy over his gifts. This inflection of masculinity reveals an important part of M1's diasporic articulations; his desire to be in Africa is rooted in his affirmation of his cisgender masculinity. Together, his dance, bob, and lighthearted freestyle elucidate a common practice in underground and politically conscious circles: the alliance of the ludic and masculine within hip hop creativity. Artists are considered inventive, sharp, and witty when they can insert ideas about what it means to reaffirm the genre's masculinity in new ways. M1's beachside orature presents the playful and seemingly innocuous assertion of the disavowal of a femininity that is read as deprecatingly sexually promiscuous.

There are only a few brief appearances by women rappers in the film, although the elision appears unintentional. At one point, UFMM rapper Empress Vicky is filmed at a WAPI voicing an ode to the culture using a Malcolm X quote. Other than this, the interviews with Toni Blackman mainly fill the space of what should be a hearty contribution of African women and other rappers of marginalized genders. One specific scene in the film captures the paternalizing silence that women rappers continue to endure. The traveling duo are in Tanzania, speaking about the lack of women within East African hip hop while fielding questions during an interview. M1 frames the absence of women artists as a problem that East African hip hop must undoubtedly confront. As he speaks about an artist he met named Anna, the film cuts to her recent WAPI performance. Anna is shown rapping on the stage and commanding the respect of those who watch her, yet the voice of M1 discussing the absence of women is placed over the footage of Anna and her performance. Rather than showing her rapping with full sound, the film only displays Anna's body and her performance, and her raps are muted for the sake of M1's voice, which discusses the lack of women artists. Anna is only partially embodied; her body is present, but her voice is not. M1 interprets the embodiment of Anna's mic-rocking, and the film's viewers, therefore, know little about her embodied flow. The prioritization of M1's diagnoses over and literally on top of Anna is an

appropriate allegory for how men artists perform a gendered knowability that is often at the expense of women. The film does include Toni Blackman's lengthy and significant discussion about the place of women in hip hop, but her statements do not recuperate the film's gendered arc that results from instances like the silencing of Anna and M1's beach pimp and ho performative.

*Ni Wakati* affirms two details: that U.S. hip hop blackness serves as a consistent mention and that the music is a globally masculinized culture. Even when M1 and Umi insist on making a return to what they see as a hip hop homeland to identify the real and authentic origins of the music, they tell their story through the lenses of African Americanness, using the historically masculinized theoretical practices of Afrocentricity and U.S. Black nationalism, further affirming that U.S. hip hop blackness is a constant reference point. They frame their trip as a *going back* and, in brief instances, paint African hip hop as an ungarnished music not touched by the dirtiness of American commercialism, mirroring the notions of a static African past unsullied by attempts at modernity. The undercurrent thematic elements of going back and an African past draw away from the intensely fruitful conversations present throughout the film that highlight the historical and contemporary connections between U.S. Black people and East Africans, including how hip hop enhances those narratives. Moreover, the film's most persuasive point is that Nairobi rappers and other practitioners in East Africa insist on their place in the music's diaspora. *Ni Wakati*, in many ways, does not lend itself to Marc Perry's notion that artists work from a diaspora composed of multiple elements of Afro-Atlantic blackness. Yet Perry also writes about "nationally transcendent modes of black diasporic identification," where thinking beyond the way nations construct categories of racial difference is imperative.<sup>89</sup> Similarly, the rappers, figures like Mama C and Mzee Pete, and the numerous commentators work from a fundamental principle of Pan-Africanist solidarity. All participants in the film grasp that Pan-Africanism often runs against the dominant ways that Kenyan and Tanzanian societies present racial categories, especially given the complicated representations of U.S. Black Americans. M1, Umi, and other rappers put forth the idea that viewers of the film must understand hip hop's African origins to posit its complexity. By the end, what is most evident is that despite the goal of constructing the music culture as beginning in Africa, the film mostly confirms that it works from a U.S.-inspired masculinized diasporic blackness, which operates as a continual fulcrum for other forms of the global music.

This diasporic blackness is malleable and, in Kenya, fitted to mostly express a lower-class cultural sentiment of resistance to forces like commercialism and imperialism that practitioners see as impeding on their lives. There are several moments where the film achieves Paul Zeleza's point that we ought to move beyond a search for Africa's roots in the New World, and instead look to understand how Africa contributes to the back-and-forth musical flows and cultural practices that make Africana musics so rich. For one, the film introduces Dead Prez's groundbreaking

2000 album *Let's Get Free*, reiterating its then popularity across the continent and Kalamashaka's foundations in making Kenyan hip hop possible. These artists are presented alongside each other as having the same missions of economic and social autonomy for Africana peoples. Throughout the film, we hear Kenyan artists drawing influence from U.S. rappers, as well as a specific point when M1 affirms that his cultural inspiration is Africa, after which the film moves into a beautifully compelling guitar-accompanied freestyle that includes Nairobi artists MC Kah, Kamah, Zakah, Labala, Agano, Swaley, as well as M1 and Umi. Moreover, after discussing the largely unappreciated labor and conscious messaging that Kalamashaka put into the music, Albert Josiah concludes that "[Kalamashaka] are our Mau Mau." After showing the famous images of the detained Dedan Kimathi, the film cuts to a Malcolm X image and excerpt from the 1963 speech "Message to the Grassroots," where he states, "There's been a revolution—A Black revolution going on in Africa, in Kenya. The Mau Mau were revolutionaries."<sup>90</sup>

*Ni Wakati*, thus, succeeds in helping to recount a story, not of a rigid and static Africa as a needy recipient of the west's tools but as an active participant in conceptualizing Black music and its imperative themes of political consciousness. Zeleza writes that Black musics of the past have been constituted through "returns, both permanent and periodic, physical and psychic, through migrations and increasingly the mass media[, which have] created loops of musical influences."<sup>91</sup> *Ni Wakati* represents hip hop in the same manner. From M1 and Umi's return, lyrical cyphers occurred, and practitioners and activists alike had conversations about attaining Pan-Africanist visions and resisting corporate control in music. Among this, viewers were reminded that U.S. hip hop has sculpted influence from Kenyan movements and themes for social revolution and, additionally, that Kenyan music engages in an assiduous citational exercise that pulls from U.S. Black music while creating something new and sustaining.

*Ni Wakati* provides critical instances of how artists construct ideas of global blackness to constitute the culture of music communities. In her seminal article "Defining Diaspora, Refining a Discourse," Kim Butler theorizes how to conduct the imperative work of ascertaining distinguishable elements of diaspora, writing that diaspora can, in fact, be a "framework for the study of a specific process of community formation."<sup>92</sup> Butler elaborates on the careful work of identifying diasporan groups, their dispersal, the places that host them, and their relationships to their respective homelands. She asserts that diasporas are self-defining by people whose identities, while unstable, are central to understanding their lives concerning dispersals and homelands. Inspired by Butler's work, I determine that Kenyan artists make decisions about how to exercise creative agency in producing diasporic blackness. Rappers use it malleably to explore Kenyan social and political life, to assert ideas about Pan-Africanism, and to affirm their participation in a global hip hop community.