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Identity Politics in Nairobi Matatu Folklore

Mbugua Wa-Mungai

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Identity Politics in Nairobi

Matatu Folklore

By Mbugua Wa Mungai

Identity Politics in Nairobi *Matatu* Folklore

A dissertation presented to the Senate of the Hebrew University of Jerusalem,
for the award of the degree degree of doctor of philosophy

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Declaration

This dissertation is my original work and has not been submitted for any academic award, or other credit, in any other institution. The writing has been done under the supervision of Professor Galit Hasan-Rokem, Department of Jewish and Comparative Folklore and Dr. Hagar Salamon, Departments of Jewish and Comparative Folklore and Middle Eastern and African Studies.

Dedication

To the Mbugua clan, my wife Wambui, and our children Mungai and Njeri, in appreciation for the life that we share, for braving the lonely years and for keeping my place by the fireside as I went *matatu*-chasing.

The *matatu* ride is now yours.

Table of Contents

Title Page.....	i
Declaration.....	ii
Abstract.....	iii
Acknowledgements.....	iv
Dedication.....	vi
Chapter One: <i>Matatu</i> Culture: Nairobi’s Three Dimensional Space	
1.0 Elements of the <i>matatu</i> culture matrix	1
1.1 Definition of terms	1
1.2. The study of “ <i>nothing</i> ”: Informants’ understanding of <i>matatu</i> (culture)	7
1.3 “Demands of the road”: Key Problems in <i>Matatu</i> Culture	12
1.4 Literature Review.....	21
1.5 Theoretical Framework	25
1.6 Dissertation Plan	30
Notes	32
Chapter Two: Creating and Contesting Expressive Space	
2.0 Fieldwork.....	34
2.1 Alternative Logics of Space.....	36
2.2 The Creation of Tradition: Exchanges in the <i>Tea Zone</i>	39
2.3 In the Absence of a Fireside: Blackboard Narratives.....	48
2.4 Cultivating Difference, Ghettoizing Modernity.....	53
2.5 “Mobile Street Philosophy” and Imagined Space	59
2.6. Embodied Spectacle and Consumer Discourse.....	62
2.7 Sticky Meanings: The Sticker as Contest(ed) Discourse.....	72
2.8 Conclusion.....	78
Notes.....	82
Chapter Three: Expressive Forms as Tactics of Self(re)invention	
3.0 Spectacular Signs.....	85
3.1. Sticker Lore.....	88
3.1.2.0 In Praise of <i>Bad</i> : Rap’s Inversions	96
3.1.2.1 More Resources from the Mediascape	106
3. 2 “In the beginning...”: Biblically-derived Transgressions	108
3.3. 0 Discourse of Bodies.....	114
3.3.1 Detached Parts.....	114
3.3.2 Animal iconography	117
3.3.3 Spider/man: The Career and Mutation of a Trickster/Hero.....	120
3.4 Conclusion	129
Notes.....	132
Chapter Four: World Upside Down I: <i>Kanda-Boy</i>	
4.0 The Traditional within the Modern	135
4.1 The traditional Gikuyu world-upside-down.....	138
4.2. Wrecked modernity: “ <i>Mahewa!</i> ”.....	142
4.3. Libidiously speaking: Obscenity in <i>matatu</i> culture.....	153
4.4 The Politics of Eating/ Erasure.....	162

4.5 Complicated games: Travelers' Personal Experience Narratives.....	166
4.6 Leisure: Mugithi and the Links in the Web of Obscenity.....	174
4.7 Conclusion.....	179
Notes.....	182

Chapter Five: WUD II. A *Last Laugh*: Carnavalesque Esthetics in Nairobi

***matatu* culture**

5.0 An Inventory of Inverted Roles.....	187
5.1.0 Locating the Esthetic.....	193
5.1.1.0. Intertextuality and Reflexivity in <i>Matatu</i> Texts.....	196
5.1.1.1 Names.....	198
5.1.1.2 Drawings.....	204
5.1.1.3. <i>Tpurruk</i> : Word Games	212
5.2.0 Interflows between representational strategies.....	222
5.2.1 TV comedy, advertisements and the popular press.....	223
5.2.2 Popular Music and Fashion Labels	229
5.2.3 Football Metaphors.....	233
5.2.4 Barroom entertainment as social discourse.....	234
5.2.5 Satan's Blessings: <i>Matatu</i> Rumors as Social Critique.....	236
5.3 Conclusion.....	239
Notes.....	245

Conclusion: *Dada*, *Houdini* and *Chameleon*: Metaphors of Cultural

Adaptivity.....	250
Notes.....	268

Appendix I: Interview guide	270
Appendix II: Glossary of work-related terms.....	272
Appendix III: Glossary of Sheng Terms commonly used in <i>matatu</i> culture....	278
Appendix IV: A Nairobi bar-room 'hymn'.....	282
Figures.....	283
Bibliography.....	322

Chapter One

*Matatu*¹ Culture: Nairobi's Three Dimensional Space

Our every day lives can also be seen as stories, as narratives,
in which we act out our lives and construct our identities.

(Berger 1995:165)

1.0 Elements of the *matatu* culture matrix.

In this introductory chapter, I seek to map generally the issues that lie at the core of this study, indicate the perspectives from which the study has approached its subject as well as highlight key questions that have been addressed in subsequent chapters. An appropriate beginning point then is to explain the term "*matatu* culture."

1.1 Definition of terms.

Matatu culture is the combined range of activities and symbolic acts, verbal or written, either deployed upon the vehicle or embodied by *matatu* workers and passengers in their interaction upon the space constituted around the material culture object known as *matatu*. Its worldview is governed chiefly by the fact that *matatu* work is a predominantly male youth occupation.² Music, DVD movies shown in the duration of a trip, stickers, icons of film, music and football stars drawn on the vehicle's exterior surface,³ hip hop fashion, humor, idiom and gestures used by crews and passengers, attitudes towards other road users and disregard for the Highway Code are key ingredients of *matatu* culture. It is a culture that thrives on the hybridization of semiotic codes as diverse media, languages and attitudes are brought to capture and express experiences and worldviews.

After Hebdige, I view culture as any "systems of communication, forms of expression and representation" (1979: 128,161) of which the combined oral, visual, auditory and written items deployed on *matatu* are examples. Hence, *matatu text* means crews' quotidian expressive acts and forms manifested through such elements as stickers, dress, language, pictures, gestures and music, variously or in combinatory sets. Even though subcultures generally enact values that differ from those of the mainstream (Bauman 1992: xiv-xvi; Fiske 1992: 25; Dundes 1987:149-150), as an example of such, *matatu* culture discourse is ambivalent in the sense that it is also couched within mainstream patriarchal practices and views on crucial issues like gender and (male) control over property.

Passenger responses to the culture are part of *matatu* culture in that they help to circulate its ethos and values within public discourse, with personal experience narratives being a relevant instance of such responses. I use the term *sign* to refer to any object, action, image or sound that embodies meaning either within itself, outside or in juxtaposition to other objects, images and sounds. As texts, such signs point to other meanings in other texts. An agglomeration of such visual, oral, auditory signs, among others, which might seem disjunctive when taken as a unit because of their disparate media, make up texts just as individual items like sayings, swear words, gestures or designs on the *matatu* have been treated as texts in themselves. Without doubt, behavior such as pick-pocketing, extorting sexual favors from female passengers whose fare has been stolen on a *matatu* by a conductor's accomplices or the physical confrontations between crews, passengers or, on the other hand, competing *matatu* crews lies in the region of criminality. As such, an assessment of *matatu* work as crime does not lie within the scope of this study; it is only pertinent to the extent that it sheds light on the general transgressive behavior that shapes the subculture's character.

As informants pointed out, it is important from the outset to be clear that the designs on *matatu*

are not taken as mere 'decorations'. Moreover, these artists eschew the set of terms decoration/decorators because it reduces their work to mere aesthetic appeal as an end in itself. The term decoration also carries with it the sense of superfluity, which subsumes the work's politics to some other, supposedly more important purpose. This stance shows that these artists see a subcultural politics, a tension, expressed in their work, an awareness captured succinctly in the *matatu* name *Subculture* (Figure 1). The function of a copied work of art, Benjamin (1966:225) has demonstrated, is political.⁴ In this case, they pride themselves in effecting a creativity that affects the constituency of consumers of this 'mobile art.'⁵ The objective in *matatu* designs is to make the esthetic component give a perceptible pattern, and therefore some sense of order, to the final 'product' as a whole, to wit, the vehicle, its name(s), drawings, the crew and their road behavior. I have analyzed *matatu* names⁶ as floating signifiers in order to isolate patterns used in their invention/choice.

Matatu have been in operation in Kenya since 1953 when the first ones came onto the scene in Nairobi as "pirate taxis." They were branded pirate operators because the By-laws of the then municipality gave sole franchise for public transportation within its borders to the Kenya Bus Company (Lee-Smith 1989). In this act of illegality is to be found the central defining element around which the phenomenon referred to as *matatu* culture came to develop over the years; transgression. For above all else, the practices of the vehicle's male crews are constituted within the notion of crossing set (b)orders (of taste, decorum, thought) just as *matatu* are considered the epitome of non-compliance with driving norms.

It will be seen therefore that taken in isolation, its individual elements cannot be said to represent the culture; their combined effect achieves the *sui generis* phenomenon known as *matatu* culture and has produced the epithet *matatuism* (Bennett 1992; Loeffler 2000) as the supreme trope for 'social decay.' But *matatuism* is also the metaphor for social survival in the face of tremendous odds, and to this extent *matatu* culture becomes a marginalized groups' statement both of its presence and victory over these obstacles. Marginality and triumph—polarities that indicate the oppositions at play in the culture—are themes that resonate profoundly with crews and feature widely in the imaginary space the culture has carved for itself over the half a century that *matatu* have been transporting people and ideas in Kenya.

By inveigling themselves upon the city space, an act we might understand along the terms of De Certeau's tactic (1984), *matatu* crews tone the tone for their abrasive engagement, then and in the future, with officialdom in particular but also, broadly, with the rest of other city cultures. In a sense then, *matatu* culture is to be understood as an agglomeration of acts built upon the invasion of space where private property (the vehicle) and public space (the city road) come into contact in directly contestatory terms (illegal entry). This sets the stage for subversive acts by *matatu* crews, primarily for economic gain but also to symbolically wage war on mainstream values. Indeed, as informants' responses indicate, the first thing the word *matatu* evokes upon mention is 'disorder', 'chaos.' But then, as this study shows, there is nothing really chaotic about the cultural performance that has over the years grown around this transgressive vehicle, especially if we consider the motivations and objectives that move the *matatu* man to act as he does. It is only disorderly to the extent that it is defined from *our* perspective and not *theirs*, a dichotomy whose untenability I demonstrate by comparing *matatu* culture against a mainstream-allied city subculture (entertainment).

It is important to acknowledge "speed" as a key fact and concept that governs crews' occupational experience and symbolic expressive practices. Speed is so important in crews' rush to make profits that usually they will be visibly irritated with anything or anyone that gets in their way. This is aptly indicated by the common imperatives "*fasta fasta wewe* [S. Faster faster you!]", "*Harakisha* [K. Move it]" and "*Gerageria* [G. Try to be quick]" issued by conductors to prospective passengers regardless of their age or physical condition. Speed is of the essence in *matatu* work and the witty logic is succinctly expressed by the sticker *Time is money don't waste it on bargaining*. Presumably this is meant as advice to commuters who, as is common, haggle

over fares before boarding the vehicle. This state then creates a convenient moment for the adoption of brash mannerisms, of which crews are supremely nefarious, to show contempt to the sluggish but also to reiterate the notion that they are in a hurry to 'go places.' Going, as a trope for movement as both act and process, might be seen as mapping crews' internal desire to 'transport', and thus transform, the self into other fantastic states and places, a critical function of symbolic expressive behavior. An awareness of this point is significant since the invention of imaginary spaces is an integral aspect of the subculture; speed erases topos to enable the replacement of the physical with the fantastic.

The concept of imaginary transport suggested here aids crews' re-imagination of the dreary pot-holed Nairobi streets by constantly invoking the symbolic capital of some of the world's leading commercial and cultural metropolises like New York, L.A and Tokyo in their speech and expressive devices like *matatu* names. Icons are appropriated from spaces and times as far removed from each other as they are different; the Hindu cobra posted alongside the portrait of the English football star David Beckham, the Zulu legend Shaka depicted alongside Mighty Mouse, ogres and monkeys from local folklore signifying alongside the actor Will Smith and Hulk Hogan, a wrestler. In this sense *matatu* culture is to be read broadly as a site of encounter between diverse discourses—national politics, global popular culture, local tradition, personal ambitions etc.

After Hebdige I view culture as any "systems of communication, forms of expression and representation" (1979: 128,161) of which the combined oral, visual, auditory and written items deployed on *matatu* are examples. Hence, *matatu text* means crews' quotidian expressive acts and forms manifested through such elements as stickers, dress, language, pictures, gestures and music, variously or in combinatory sets. Even though subcultures generally enact values that differ from those of the mainstream (Bauman 1992: xiv-xvi; Fiske 1992: 25; Dundes 1987:149-150), as an example of such, *matatu* culture discourse is ambivalent in the sense that it is also couched within mainstream patriarchal practices and views on crucial issues like gender and (male) control over property.

Passenger responses to the culture are part of this subculture in that they help to circulate its lore within public discourse. Personal experience narratives are especially relevant in the dissemination of the culture's practices into the public domain. Common to such narratives are accounts of various types of abuse suffered at the hands of *matatu* crews. Without doubt, some behavior like pick-pocketing, demanding sexual favors from female passengers whose fare has been stolen on a *matatu* by a conductor's accomplices or the physical confrontations between crews, passengers or, on the other hand, competing *matatu* crews lies in the category of criminality. As such, an assessment of *matatu* work as crime does not lie within the scope of this study; this aspect is only pertinent to this study to the extent that it sheds light on the general transgressive behavior that shapes the subculture's character.

Throughout the study, I use the term *sign* to refer to any object, action, image or sound that embodies meaning either within itself, outside or in juxtaposition to other objects, images and sounds. As texts, such signs point to other meanings in other texts. An agglomeration of such visual, oral, auditory signs, among others, which might seem disjunctive when taken as a unit because of their disparate media, make up texts just as individual items like sayings, swear words, gestures or designs on the *matatu* have been treated as texts in themselves. Since *matatu* culture adopts texts from, and expresses them in, varied media, it becomes possible for popular culture texts (icons from TV, film and music and sports magazines) to co-exist alongside oral texts (jokes, personal experience narratives, insults) and thereby create hybrid texts. These interpellate with others circulating in general urban lore to become part of city dwellers' common discourse. People find meaning in these expressive forms not only on account of their communicative-aesthetic aspect, recognized as central to folkloric texts (Ben-Amos 1982:13), but also because they are rendered in popular codes that are readily understood within the context of their deployment both within *matatu* culture and in the broader context of city life. Even if, strictly

speaking, the culture is occupation-specific, and as with all such groups has a unique lore, (Ben-Amos 1982: 14; Dundes and Pagter 1978: 33,222), over time the it has broadened out to encompass the general lore of urban youth culture—not that the two cannot be meaningfully divorced—and discourses shaped within such mainstream domains as political rhetoric and religious proclamations.

1.2. The Study of “*nothing*”: Informants’ Understanding of *matatu* (culture).

Having established the parameters of the term *matatu* culture, it is important now to examine how it is understood by Kenyans as I attempt to articulate an academic understanding of the phenomenon as social process. It is puzzling that there has not been a full-length academic study from either a literary or folkloric perspective but this can be explained. Indeed, an informant raised a rather timely observation in this respect; “Almost everyone in Kenya uses or has used *matatu* at a given point in life or knows someone else who relies on them. How come a study like the one you’re doing has not been done before?” (Waithaka 2003).

Part of the reason has more to do with the very understanding of the concept of culture and, by extension, refusal, if not outright inability, to critique social process within the terms of dynamism that even a conservative view of culture should admit. To many people, the *matatu* space is simply not considered a legitimate site of cultural practice. For example, quite a few of my informants were baffled by the fact that I was inquiring “about *these matatu* people” for an academic project, going on to derisively remark “what is the university coming to these days? Are there no more *serious* things to study?” or “God forbid that someone is paying for you to study *nothing*!” If not openly contemptuous of the endeavor, they were categorical that my research interests were “weird”: “*Culture* amongst these *matatu* guys? Please!”; “These chaps are just acting infantile. Please make no academics about childishness.” Indeed, when I suggested *matatu* discourse as a topic for Ph.D. research, one professor bluntly stated; “It is naive to think that you can study this thing *academically* at all, even in the next one hundred years!” Whatever the case, as Oring (1996) has suggested, there might still be handsome dividends in attempting a theorization of trivia; this study demonstrates, contra my informants’ claims above, that there is nothing *obvious* at all about *matatu* culture; its apparent banalities are serious cultural process at work.

The above views are also important in any attempts to understand what culture is conceived to be and how it is deemed to work. Most views of *matatu* work are overshadowed by a perception of the occupation as well as the crews as anti-social, and this might account for these informants’ general contempt toward *matatu* folk. However, even after expressing hostility to the notion of *matatu* crews having a culture, these informants did not attempt an explanation as to what motivates *matatu* folk to behave transgressively. Rather, they merely set up an us (cultured)-them (uncultured) divide without examining the space between the two polarities in order to see how one might lead to or account for the other—if indeed it can be taken as an other. Moreover, these views seem in part to derive from a view of culture as static tradition, with ‘educated’ informants basing their positions on the high vs. low brow view of cultural texts and processes (See Bauman 1992:4).⁷

In a diametrically opposed sense, another category of informants, while indicating that much activity amongst *matatu* folk “leaves people’s mouths hanging wide-open” [i.e. gaping in shock], holds that *matatu* workers’ practices need to be taken as accountable cultural phenomena. “You will learn a lot about this country just by sitting in a *matatu* and listening to what people talk and gossip about,” an informant, Wahome Mutahi pointed out (Interview, 2001). He further went on to argue that since the majority of *matatu* clients and workers are the youth, one could even begin studying “now the kinds of things these people do and see how their behavior many years hence will be explained in light of them. It is not surely out of idleness that they dress like Tupac and paint names like Shaggy on these *matatu*?” Proceeding from this position, I show in subsequent chapters through interview material how the rhetoric of symbolic expressive communication expresses crews’ awareness of the world. Thus my invocation of Berger (1995) at the head of this

chapter.

At a third level, other informants specify a definite need to study *matatu* culture qua culture precisely because of the elusive nature of its meanings. In this regard, an informant suggested an extremely potent connection between the name *matatu* and three-dimensionality as a metaphor for the culture's evasions thus:

Think about the name *matatu*, which means 'three', and think about the fact that we never seem to completely understand what *these* people say or do. Hence, the 'threeness' of the name implies that the culture is three-dimensional—the three surfaces, which we can see and understand, and the fourth, hidden from view, which is unknown to those of *us* without an insider's view of the culture.

(Wangeci.2002.My Emphasis)

Wangeci's insight has several implications that bear significantly upon the theoretical and empirical approaches I have adopted for the study of *matatu* culture. First, her response indicates the need for an emic perspective as a basis for a fuller investigation and understanding of the culture. Hence my use of interviews and participant observation as a means of accessing more fully the meanings embedded in this culture. This means that I straddle the insider/outsider border, enabling a wider view which enables me to apply theoretical analysis to the insights gained from my ethnographic encounter of the culture. Second, there is an awareness that even though a subcultural practice, *matatu* culture is more connected to, than it is disconnected from, other (city) cultures; at least most of it is generally understood even by outsiders. Consequently, the culture's expressive forms resonate with meanings in mainstream subcultures. Such meanings circulate freely in urban lore among residents of diverse backgrounds, with rumors and personal experience narratives being perhaps the best examples of such texts.

A third crucial point in my informant's response is the concept of a fourth space, "hidden from view", where *matatu* culture operates according to its own logic. The significance of this is the possibility it gives for transgressive practices within the shelter of this fourth space, esoteric and incomprehensible to outsiders. This space has an aura of unreality to it, a quality that lends it quite appropriate for crews and passengers to engage in such excesses as groping others' bodies without attracting censure, nay sometimes even getting applause, from other commuters as I show in the fourth chapter. This suspension of the normal order of reality implicitly gives participants in the culture a *carte blanche* to engage in all manner of behavior, from the explainable and harmless to the inexplicable and offensive. Indeed, one 'explanation' informants give for the culture's transgressions is the tautological retort '*matatu* people are *matatu* people'; for their capacity for physical and verbal abuse, *matatu* crews are a much-feared lot. This view is also couched within the general perception of *matatu* space as a clearly marked space, much in the term of the frame concept (Goffman 1974).⁸ As such it is understood that *matatu* culture, unlike other experience, operates on a peculiar order of laws. Obfuscation and trickery happen within the hidden, fourth dimension thus constituted to complement the other three dimensions and thereby complete the picture of *matatu* culture.

This fourth space is the basis upon which I ground my theoretical argument for *matatu* culture as inherently subversive discourse, enabling its critique within the modality of carnival esthetics as suggested by Stallybrass and White (1986). Also this gives us a ground for arguing that the discourse of *matatu* culture is best viewed as a palimpsest; the layers of discourse imbricated within it need to be peeled off and each examined for its relations to the whole. The hidden fourth space and the palimpsest metaphor are particularly relevant to our discussion of the nature (Chapter Four) and esthetics (Chapter Five) of the upside down world of *matatu* culture.

Going by the charged responses *matatu* culture elicits from Kenyans in general, we can see that much of it is conditioned by a narrow definition of culture and inattention to how various forms of knowledge, the oral and the written for example, intersect to create popular flows of culture. Yet, as has been long recognized by folklorists, tradition is always prone to 'movement' in that it

involves the continued invention of new forms of practice that pass into a people's lore and practices. Thus we now consider as legitimate tradition cultural process that embrace individual innovation of expressive forms within the context of the every day practices (see Abrahams 1972; Ben-Amos 1982; Bauman 1989:178-179; Okpewho 1992:362; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1998 etc). In this case *matatu* crews' symbolic expressive acts have long-passed into the realm of an occupational, if ever-mutating, vernacular, a consideration upon which I base my claim for the legitimacy of *matatu* culture as cultural practice.

1.3 "Demands of the road": Key Problems in *Matatu* Culture.

A problem that repeatedly comes up in informants' views of *matatu* culture is the conceptualization of the city's physical space in agonistic terms whereby awareness of physical space translates, often, to hostility /aggression against other road users. For instance, one of the few female drivers in Nairobi admits that whenever she gets behind the steering wheel of a *matatu*, a new personality emerges; "I find myself becoming rough, involuntarily, but as you can see I am a gentle person otherwise." This response is significant in that when asked to explain her rough driving, the informant said that it was a response to "demands of the road", i.e. *matatu* driving protocol. Moreover, as a female in a traditionally male occupation, such demands have shaped her view of life from a male-oriented perspective.

This male-centric view of space, as discussion in subsequent chapters shows, is a key method by which the road is used to map power contests between the genders, with *matatu* crews being quick to use their sheer visibility on the road, owing to their vast numbers and the fear they evoke, to taunt competitors with their manhood. Thus crews' perennial challenge to competitors "*tutaona ni nani mwanaume* [K. We shall get to see who is the man]" need to be appreciated as the rhetorical articulation of a deeper concern with the whole question of their increasingly besieged masculine identity. Differently put, the subculture requires crews to express themselves in ways that maximally display their masculinity, which they understand to hinge primarily on libidinous superiority. Thus, as I interrogate the various expressive forms and practices within *matatu* culture, a key concern is to explain how they encode crews' perceptions of sexuality.

An area I find to be particularly revealing of the workings of sexual power in the expression of road relations is crews' superstitions. For instance, a *manamba*⁹ in his early twenties relates how he can tell who among a crew "slept with a prostitute last night and failed to take a bath in the morning depending on which *matatu* tire has burst." He goes on to relate the case of his hero, heavyweight boxer Mike Tyson, who lost his championship belt to James 'Buster' Douglas in 1990 "for sleeping with Tokyo prostitutes the night before the fight." In my informant's mind, events from twelve years ago, when he was a mere boy, are as fresh as if they had taken place last week and as a narrator he is convinced of the causal nexus between Tyson's frolics and defeat in the boxing contest. This information is pertinent to our purposes in two main ways.

First, it adumbrates the tendency to recuperate values from traditional practices that is so common in *matatu* culture as crews attempt to legitimize their often-contrary behavior. In this case, the framing of *matatu* culture's idiom in the terms of traditional superstitious beliefs about the contaminating nature of sexual relations are used to justify contemporary male views and (mis)treatment of women. However, as I show in the third and fourth chapters, such idiom points to hidden anxieties about male identity and gender relations in a detraditionalized urban social. This is because definitions of masculinity, a core concern amongst *matatu* crews, no longer carry as much force as they used to due to these youth's lack of control over material wealth, the main plank upon which 'manhood' stood in traditional societies.¹⁰ Second, my informant's response helps us to see the general power of the print and electronic media in shaping youth consciousness by supplying metaphors and narratives for processing their harsh everyday realities by imagining a longed-for elsewhere, a map of dreams and possibilities (Appadurai 1997:5-6; Hannerz 1996:21). By extension, crews create lore from their constant interaction with 'foreign' material culture of which *matatu*, often kept going by owners' sheer skill at innovating worn parts, is perhaps the supreme trope of modernity's dysfunction. At one level, their lore on gender

speaks to these prevailing contradictions. In this way we can see the role technology plays in actively (re)shaping youth subjectivity, a critique of which provides insights into the nature of interactions between popular culture and folkloric practice.

Perhaps nowhere is this more eidetic than the engagement between this culture and popular music. Jamaican roots reggae and American techno pop were extremely popular forms in *matatu* culture in the 80s and early 90s. However, with stringent competition against the public broadcaster coming from newly launched private FM stations', the above forms were swiftly displaced by American rap. Its extremely forceful entry into Kenyan popular culture has made the genre perhaps the single most critical and desired metaphor of contemporary popular expression among urban youth; it presented a radically alternative mode of relating to the world.¹¹ Packaged in trendy fashion and looks, and thus introducing the discourse of consumption into youth culture, hip hop sets norms of taste in direct counterpoint to those of the mainstream. Perhaps nothing better represents the unapologetic brashness with which the latter's conservatism is challenged than the cockiness with which youths strut around the city clad in oversize *Ruff Ryder* pants and enormous Timberland boots.

Furthermore, over the last five years, nascent local hip hop has set to cut its own identity by using Sheng rather than English in its raps. Sheng, an urban Kiswahili-based hybrid dialect (Githiora 2002), is an act of heteroglossia that creates a niche for Nairobi youth culture independent of the regulated linguistic space of English and Kiswahili, Kenya's official languages, where the latter doubles up as the national language. In this scenario, hip hop, actively aided by Sheng, becomes a space of license, instigating transgression to enable the constitution and expression of alternative subjectivity. Through local rap and Sheng, I interrogate *matatu* culture as a site of complex encounters between the local and the global, where popular culture genres and icons are appropriated to aid the processing of local youth dilemmas that arise, mainly, from their stated frustrations with modernity's undelivered promises.

However, *matatu* culture does not just address itself to gender-based notions of power but also addresses issues of marginality arising out of local economic and social relations. This is often captured in the culture for example, when crews humorously comment on passengers' dress; "hawa watu wa threads za ofisi wanajidai sana [S. People in formal wear are very arrogant]." Such commentary is spawned especially by crews' poor performance on the score of modernity's achievements; "Sisi watu wa matatu hatupendwi. (Laugh) Sijui kama ni kwa sababu hatukusoma [K. We *matatu* people are not liked. I don't know if this is because we never went to school]." At times, this awareness is couched in terms of absolute bitterness; "Ona ithui watuona guku matatuni, mani githomo twinakio ti wiira ungi tungithuura. Nikwaga wagaga [G. Even us you see here in these *matatu*, man we are educated and would not mind other kinds of jobs. But we never find them." Such remarks are all the more poignant when uttered to an interlocutor who, being a researcher from the academy, epitomizes the other, unattainable end of the academic spectrum from which the informant feels totally divorced. Such wry comments enable us access into the insecure world of the *matatu* man. Accordingly, I have adopted the trickster metaphor as a frame through which we can understand his assumption of many fronts to cover up for his deficiencies and in the process stage his subversive performance. By presenting himself for what he is not, he is able to confront the anxieties resulting from contradictions in his life. Thus we can see that despite their 'tough', macho exteriority, deep down *matatu* crews have to contend daily with myriad fears, at the personal and collective levels. I see this as one way of trying to explain their recourse to the symbolic experimentation with identity.

Some of these anxieties tend to bring to the fore the 'darker' side of *matatu* culture when crews attempt to get even with a society that they perceive to be constantly seeking to shunt them to society's lowest echelons. For example, when they hike fares in response to rainy weather or an abundance of commuters, they often rationalize their behavior thus; "Nii ndiri nyukwa [G. I am not your mother" i.e. and therefore need not be considerate to passengers] or "ndiri tha na mwana iteciariire [G. I have no pity for anyone that is not my offspring]." Others might point out that

"*hii Nairobi ni shamba ya mawe, mtu anajilimia vile anajua* [G. This Nairobi is a garden of stones; everyone must coax some produce out of it the best way they know how]." Such sentiments, even uttered in jest, reveal the passion with which contests within *matatu* culture are fought, a point most eloquently expressed by a *manamba* who indicated extreme hatred for Indian businessmen in Kenya. Speaking at the top of his voice, he opined that *all* Kenyan Indians had unjustly taken over the country's wealth and lamented that "they own everything here." Had it been in his power to do so, he stated, they would all have been "taken back to Asia." It was not clear if his bitterness arose from personal dispossession, or how he had discovered that, "all these Indians you see in Kenya, back in their place in Asia they're just poor people with nothing", but his anger makes clear the emotion with which issues of control over material wealth are viewed.

While it might be tempting to read *matatu* culture from a class-conflict approach, such an undertaking would only result in a partial analysis. The subculture is an intricate part of the general Nairobi youth culture which comprises members from disparate socio-economic backgrounds. Popular youth tastes in fashion and other consumer items, for example, apply as forcefully to Nairobi's rich suburbs (e.g. Karen and Muthaiga) as much as to the dilapidated Eastlands slums (Dandora, Kayole, Jericho etc). Thus, while not down-playing the role of economics in constituting some of the competitive aggression in *matatu* culture, a class analysis would only serve to obscure the discourse of consumption that definitively binds individuals from diverse social backgrounds into the collectivity of youth culture. As MacDonald (2001) has argued in her study of graffiti, readings of subcultures tend to obscure such hidden dimensions as gender, also a key aspect to this study. I eschew a class analysis especially because in *matatu* culture values are contested most acutely at the symbolic rather than the material domain in which, ironically, crews' anxieties are rooted.

In line with the above, crews feel frustrated in their pursuit of wealth not just because they deem others to have taken "everything" for themselves but especially because crews' low educational levels and lack of skills in other fields disadvantages them in a modern economy where formal employment depends more on the quality of one's skills rather than their physical stamina—in which crews trade. In effect, repressed anxieties resulting from such self-conscious deficiency are projected upon passengers, with women taking the main thrust, since there are already pre-existing biases against women in local cultures. This, I contend, is a crucial background that sustains the deployment of sexist languages and practices (see Chapter Three). In this context, I have examined *matatu* culture as a meeting point between modernity and tradition whereby crews confront certain facets of this modernity by recuperating a traditional idyll that seeks to (re)position males at the centre of social activity and hence visibility. At the same time, and perhaps undisturbed by the attendant contradiction, the culture does not disavow desire for modernity's goods—cars, houses, and high educational attainment. One does not have to renounce the traditional in order to be modern. Hence, we can see that *matatu* culture operates counter-culturally at one level while at another it is enfolded within mainstream values without rejecting them in their entirety. It is in this manner that the subculture operates not on the fringes but at the center of urban social life, instantiating Bhabha's assertion that "it is the city which provides space in which emergent identifications and new social movements of the people are played out" (1994:170). Accordingly, I have tried to explore how the identity project in *matatu* culture grapples with marginality to express its difference within mainstream cultural structures.

Arising from the foregoing, I have argued that *matatu* discourse is not confined to the space defined by the vehicular structure called *matatu*; it draws in other city cultures, with particular strands of discourse seeking to erase or overwrite the positions expressed by others. For example, various civil society groups and government agencies take advantage of the pervasive presence of *matatu* in Kenyans' lives to raise awareness about diverse issues. This is done mainly using stickers to sensitize people to issues like domestic violence (*Real men don't beat their wives, Real husbands support their wives*), HIV and illegal gun ownership. While many crews support such efforts, some are decidedly against displaying these stickers arguing that they have no desire to

help the government, especially the traffic police department, which is seen as the culture's perennial nemesis. Some crews go so far as to express the desire to own guns themselves and take back from the "rich" what they feel has been "stolen" from them, thus reinforcing their sense of marginality. I have argued that this us-them ethos is only tenuous, at best.

On the whole, mainstream utilization of the space of *matatu* discourse is an implicit recognition of the culture's centrality and impact as public space. Moreover, particularly in the deployment of stickers and designs, passengers use its site to actively contest and reinforce values. It is in this way also that I understand commuters' personal experience narratives as channels through which anxieties of city life are processed, with crews' exploits acting as reference points for wider dilemmas and conflicts in urban interaction. What is more, these personal narratives depict connections between *matatu* culture and the wider practice of transgression in other city subcultures. The culture therefore does not just elicit defensive responses but also shows participants actively engaged in the negotiation of positions, more so in the case of crews who reconfigure the public space of the *matatu* into a kind of private space.

The above point can be demonstrated if we take into account the artistic uses to which the exterior surface of the *matatu* is put. Besides using popular culture icons as devices for the imaginary, crews weave their personal stories into *matatu* designs. They might not be professional writers, but they capture on these surfaces bits and pieces of their lives, hopes, fears and wishes; names chosen for these *matatu* are at times testimonies from private narratives. For example a *matatu* owner has named his vehicle *Thornbird—From Grace to Grass*, to remind him of his glorious wealthy past as the proud owner of a vast fleet of *matatu* in stark contrast to the present when he owns only one. The thorn bird here is also a metaphor of fickleness since its nest, made of grass, usually disintegrates easily; I take this as the *matatu* owner's philosophical comment on the futility of seeking security in vast wealth; crews indicate that they really don't mind such relative "poverty." Elsewhere, a *matatu* owner has named his dear *matatu* after his beloved daughter, *Chelsea*; the name was often presumed to refer to Chelsea Football Club, indicating the interpretive challenges in reading *matatu* name. Another *matatu* owner captures the physical progress of his son, Brian, by having bigger designs, commensurate with the boys' physical growth, posted on every new *matatu* acquired. The designs are accompanied by appropriate names thus *Little Brian*, *Brian*, *Big Brian* etc. A *matatu* can also be named after one's siblings, parents or sweetheart, and in this way *matatu* names can be treated as archival texts or the truncations of narratives.

In the present work, I read these *matatu* texts as floating signifiers and tie them to local lore, traditional or contemporary, as one of the chief contextual grounds for their interpretation. Investigation in this study shows that the significance of *matatu* as a legitimate space of creative practice and cultural production is yet to be grasped, certainly not from the perspective adopted here. For instance, the many newspaper articles that invoke the term '*matatu* culture' do so solely to point out crews' negative behavior while sociologists seek within its fold data to explain deviance. This indifference or outright silence to the culture's creativity is informed by different types of bias found in some of the writings on *matatu*, as shown in the literature to which I turn next.

1.4 Literature Review

Much of the academic writing on *matatu* has mainly come from practitioners in critical urban geography, perhaps the only discipline in the Kenyan academy to have so far given serious, consistent attention to the subject. This writing, done especially from the political economy perspective, concerns itself with relations between producers and the production process, work conditions, stakeholders' interests in *matatu* work, implications for urban transport planning, road safety and socio-political ramifications of *matatu* as a field of economic production (see for example Murunga 1999; Khayesi 1999, 2002; Murunga, Kemuma and Khayesi 2002). Owing perhaps to the disciplinary orientation of such studies, consumption through the culture's expressive behavior has not been studied. I consider this a vital link, through the actual

consumptive patterns it creates, to the overall economy of symbolic consumption in Nairobi and I critique the uses of youth music and fashion within it in order to fill the gap identified above. Thus in order to fully apprehend the complexities of representational strategies at play in *matatu* culture's imaginary, it is critical that a study such as this remains aware of the general discourse of consumption with which crews are intimately linked.

Generally, available academic and non-academic commentary on *matatu* evinces one major critical lack; none of it addresses itself systematically and rigorously either to the expressiveness of subculture's artistic forms or to the subculture as a folk activity coterminous to other subcultures. For instance, while supplying a broad overview of some of the practices in *matatu* culture, a survey such as that by Chege, Rimbui and Olembo (1994) does not make critical deductions from its data. Having described the problems faced by girl-students traveling on Nairobi *matatu*, the authors conclude that many schoolgirls are "lured" to board them by the "gaudy colors, music, pictures and graffiti" (*sic*) without showing how such texts mean in order to "lure" the schoolgirls. This presents these schoolgirls, in their interaction with *matatu* culture, as devoid or incapable of agency, an implication that my interviews with young girls traveling on *matatu* disprove. Fiske puts the point most succinctly when he states that in regard to popular culture's presumed passivizing power over " 'the people' are [not] 'cultural dopes'; they are not a passive helpless mass incapable of discrimination..."(1998:504). Further, a glaring error in this survey lies in the labeling of *matatu* designs as graffiti, thereby betraying a prejudiced view, common in much local commentary, of *matatu* subculture as a purely negative phenomenon. As I demonstrate, *matatu* decorations and graffiti are rooted in different socio-cultural trajectories; notwithstanding, they are and need to be understood as legitimate acts of cultural expression within each one's specific context (Chapter Five).

Other writing manifests clear bias by interpreting *matatu* culture's data from predetermined ideological positions, a spectacular example being Shorter and Onyancha's (1997:86-99) work on the secularization of Nairobi. The authors use Christian morality to advance the claim that the one hundred 'self-advertising' *matatu* names and 'slogans' they analyze glorify a culture of 'aggression' and 'perversion'. My investigation of the hip hop-related *matatu* names the authors cite in making their claims reveals that such texts need to be appreciated first as foremost within their roots in African American signifying,¹² which fact and practice these authors seem totally oblivious. Deployed as parodic devices within the folk humor of *matatu* culture, these floating signifiers cannot make sense within the authors' religious framework first because of the narrowness of such a frame, and secondly because it is wholly inappropriate for reading texts whose meanings, ideologically and in practice, it can hardly anticipate or accept in theory. I share with Graebner's censure of research on *matatu* culture that tends to seek the "one-dimensional meanings so dear to researchers and bureaucrats" (1992:4). *Matatu* culture's expressive forms need to be read primarily within the terms of usage in the culture's occupational context if they are to explain anything at all about their creators and users rather the tastes of critics positioned outside it in other contestatory mainstream subcultures.

Newspaper commentaries, as a forum of mainstream opinion, are another area where evident bias can be seen in the general proposition that *matatu* culture is a negative social phenomenon that Kenyan society should strive to be rid of (see Mbuguss 1992; Muiruri 1992; Bennet 1992; Loeffler 2000; Nyasani 2001 etc). However as I have argued above, such etic views of *matatu* culture are merely intent on highlighting crews' perceived "criminal" acts; a competent analysis ought to draw a clear line between criminality—which is not a peculiarity of *matatu* culture and which anyone is capable of—and crews' symbolic expressive activity—in which not just anyone can excel. Newspaper commentary positions the *matatu* man as an agent of corruption to the moral order, but by selectively seeing only the pernicious aspects of the subculture, such writing does not explore the fulfillment that crews gain by symbolically transgressing the social order. It is in the latter regard for instance that the music played on *matatu* has turned these vehicles into a powerful site of subversive political activity (Haugerud 1997:18). In this context, I interrogate the

politics of contemporary urban rap played on these *matatu* and the hip hop ethos around which youth taste revolves and show how it is used to create some space for youth identity to flourish.

A 2001 survey done for the Kenya Human Rights Commission has noted the prevalence of human rights abuses in Nairobi *matatu*.¹³ Common violations include "female sexual harassment" and crews' use of "vulgar language." In this study, I discuss the function of physical and symbolic violations in the subculture within the framework of carnivalesque signification. I consider this to be the most productive analytical tool for a critique of *matatu* culture because it suggests itself from the data at hand. Upon the canvas of transgressions cited in the above report I have placed the culture's misogyny alongside its aggressive humor since in the end, *matatu* culture is just that—an accretion of excessive acts of folk humor. As Bakhtin points, in order for 'obscenity' to be fully grasped, it has to be appraised within a totality of carnivalesque acts, i.e. as part of a broader process of transgressive performance; to do otherwise yields little meaning other than the charge of vulgarism (1984:150). Thus I have taken the culture's ludic address to other discourses—local, foreign, official, political, social, modern, religious, gender etc— as a lighthearted articulation of its own worldview and deep-seated anxieties.

The use of the *matatu* body¹⁴ as expressive space can be placed within a broader worldwide tradition where cars are utilized to express ideas about owners' identity or, as material objects, to speak to wider social issues like conceptions of race and national identity (e.g. Gilroy 2001; O'Dell 2001). Bumper stickers act as an interactive space for a discourse on political events, socio-political choices and creative expression in Israel whereby these expressive forms are intensive intertextual and reflexive processes (Salamon 2001). Lawuyi (1997) has also shown how "vehicle slogans" are used by Yoruba taxi drivers to capture and express their tradition-bound but urban situated worldviews. Similarly, but in a different context, Menez (1988) demonstrates how Manila Jeepney drivers' use of car inscriptions, assemblage and stickers is shaped by their religious inclinations as well as the local social-political context. Elsewhere, Smith (1988), Aguirre (1990), Case (1992) and Enersby and Towle (1996) have analyzed car use and expressive behavior on American freeways and shown that bumper stickers creatively mediate ideas, especially about drivers' identity. Botkin (1968), writing on the difficulties spawned by the transition from horse-carriage to mechanized transport in America, shows how sticker jokes were made about the car, the road and the driver as a way of processing the awkwardness of the new technology. In this study I explore how *matatu* subculture fashions its identity and addresses other mainstream-allied subcultures by deploying stickers, among other symbolic forms of interaction, within the cultural competition of the urban market place.

1.5 Theoretical Framework

I have adopted a number of inter-related theoretical frameworks in order to address to the fullest extent possible the diversity, intertextuality and contexts of *matatu* texts. Principally, I operate from the theoretical formulation of the concept of transgression in carnivalesque practice elaborated most broadly by Bakhtin in *Rabelais and his World* (1984). There are sufficient characteristics within *matatu* culture that can be readily read within Bakhtin's analysis of the carnivalesque. It will be noted in our discussion thus far that the culture is formulated very much around acts of collapsing and crossing (b)orders; linguistically, in dress tastes, hip hop music, spectacular display, and the mockery of the official order by re-inventing an imaginary realm according to an alternative scheme of values. Further, the excessive concern with the discourse of lower bodily materiality (sexual and excretory acts) and the erasure of hierarchies through an invention of vernacular speech (Sheng) can all be read within the terms of the notion of inversion discussed by Bakhtin.

However, it is not my objective to show that in this subculture is to be found the whole matrix of the medieval carnival; little gain would accrue from such an endeavor. Moreover, whereas traditional carnival forms are officially sanctioned practices, I take the view, after Gilbert and Tompkins, that "more enabling is the idea of carnival as a subversion that undermines virtually all categories of social privilege and thus prevents their unproblematic reassemblage" (1996:84). It is

also useful to recall the timely insight that the European carnival “as a mode of understanding, a positivity, a cultural analytic [...] as an analytic category can only be fruitful if it is displaced into the broader concept of symbolic inversion and transgression” (Stallybrass and White 1986: 6, 18). In so doing, I recognize that the conception of carnival as an officially licensed performance along the lines of Bakhtin’s discussion can be, and is, unnecessarily self-limiting, a limitation that I hope to move beyond.¹⁵ This statement is all the more applicable to an analysis of contemporary marketplace forms, of which *matatu* culture is a spectacular instance; the carnivalesque gains more transgressive force precisely by resisting regulation, when the marginalized seize “the privilege of self-representation” (Gilbert and Tompkins, *ibid*). Thus, building from the insights of Bakhtin and his successors, I attempt to show how a carnivalesque subculture subverts the social body to create the space necessary for the (re)invention of its identity. Bearing in mind this awareness, I analyze the culture’s display, where costume, decor and music are critical to meaning-making in the performance process.

Aware of the syncretism inherent in the culture’s modes of self-representation, I invoke the discourse of hybridity in the analysis of identity politics of *matatu* culture. This is particularly so since the pastiche practices of *matatu* culture suggest instability but also regeneration; its texts and parts are unequal and reveal cracks in the overall jumble. Similar flux can be seen in crews’ identity, at least so far as can be deduced from their rhetorical postures, which means that at the very core of *matatu* culture’s identity project lies a deconstructive agenda. Moreover, the city space, as marketplace, is conceptualized in terms of its oppositions—center/periphery, inside/outside, stranger/local, urban/ rural, commerce/ festivity, high/low (Stallybrass and White 1986:27). Particularly relevant here are the oppositions and meeting points between the global and the local; an examination of their (dis)junctions reveals how *matatu* subculture negotiates in the cracks, the ‘interstices’, which result from cultural contact. Following Kapchan and Strong, I take hybridity, as a theoretical prism, to be a “unique analytical vantage point on the politics of culture” (Kapchan and Strong 1999:250) from which the transformations of symbols and the ideas they represent in *matatu* culture are assessed. In this regard, Hannerz’s concept of a “global ecumene” (1996:21) from which people borrow and, in the process, creolize cultures is useful to an understanding of *matatu* culture.

Arising from the foregoing, Bhabha’s concept of the liminal third space where identities are forged by those “living at the borderline of history and language” (1994:170) informs my discussion of youth identity, particularly with regard to Sheng. Arising from their self-perception as marginalized folks, *matatu* crews speak back to, and denounce, the local mainstream, seen as constituting itself upon values inherited from a colonial modernity e.g. the English language. However such denunciations are caught in the contradiction of irreconcilable historical trajectories. As postcolonial subjects, crews simultaneously envy and ridicule modernity, but even as they do so their despair at not being able to afford the rich consumer lifestyles of ‘modern’ city folks is almost palpable. Bhabha’s (1990) ambivalent subject comes to mind when we see *matatu* crews, as part of Nairobi youth culture, inventing Sheng to compete against English and Kiswahili for status; so does the concept of “conscious heteroglossia” come to mind (Bakhtin 1981:368). Taking language as a key with whose agency cultural practices might be read (Duranti 1997:38), I have attempted to show the importance of code-switching within different contexts, especially for members of several (urban) speech communities (See Myers Scotton 1997:231-232; Samper 2002a), in order to show *Sheng*’s subversive operations.

Since *matatu* culture thrives upon the appropriation and (re)deployment of signs, it has been necessary to make use of the insights of semiotics. As Langlois has observed, “folklore is semiosis...[in which we can see]... folk patterning and sign making as distinct cultural phenomena which have, however, *overlapped* in ways at once strange, irregular and implicit” (Langlois 1985:77 Emphasis mine). The strangeness and irregularity referred to here are what actualize transgression in *matatu* culture; by tracing the specific transformations of a sign as it crosses into other domains, its overlaps with other signs, it becomes possible to explain what has

been subverted and why. The signification process in the subculture's folkloric forms often makes use of its infinite ability to poach signs from diverse domains, redeploy them in novel ways and layer them onto pre-existent meanings.

Signification in the complex of palimpsest texts that results from the above process has been analyzed by tracing actual and probable meanings depending on intertextual connections suggested in each case, for instance where names of successful popular culture icons on the one hand and youth narratives of modernity's failures on the other are deployed in the same context. As Kristeva observes, texts always entertain the possibility of plural meaning, especially because they have an inherent intertextuality (1984:78); semiotics can fully address the polysemy of sign-texts in their varied nature. Thus for instance, since *matatu* are under Nairobi City by-laws banned from operating within certain sections of the city center, the very act of mobility is problematic by the very fact that the 'entry' of these vehicles into the 'purity' of the city space is considered polluting. We can thus read crews' symbolic and physical responses to this rebuff as a semiotic problematic.

I have adopted the concept of "ground" from Peirce's semiotic model (Scholes 1982:147) as it enables the use of informants' responses to concretize and thereby offer empirical validity to the readings of the culture. In this way might be avoided the charge that semiotic interpretation divorces signs from their context of deployment (Strinati 1995:123-128). In the study, I read floating signifiers alongside contextual clues directly based upon field data. In this regard, I consider as timely Peirce's intervention when he states that

as semiotic interpreters, we are not free to make meaning but we are free to *find* it by following the various syntactic, semiotic and pragmatic paths that lead away from the words of the text. That is, we can't just bring any meanings to the text but we can bring all the meanings we can link to the text by means of an interpretive code. And, above all, we can generate meaning by situating this text among the actual and possible texts to which it can be related.

(Scholes: 1982:30. My Emphasis)

Thus we can, while reading a sign's meaning(s), trace other probable meanings by placing the sign within/alongside other signs. As Leach points out, signs communicate meaning not because of their similarity to other signs but, more importantly, due to their difference when placed in combination with "other signs and symbols from the same context" (1976:13). Implied meanings help to establish connections between signs and their symbolic referents.

1.6 Dissertation Plan

The study is organized into five chapters. The first is an introduction mapping the problem and core arguments of the study as well as a review of literature related to *matatu* and expressive car culture in general. Also the discursive of the theoretical frame deployed in the investigation has been defined. Based primarily on informants' voices, Chapter Two is an examination of how those who directly participate in it view the space of *matatu* culture. Principally, I assess their understanding of the culture's symbolic expressive forms.

In the third chapter I make the case for reading the culture's icons as part of a wider signifying system whereby texts are adapted from wider fields of representation and refashioned to speak to local situations. I examine how, in this process of transfer, they are not only invested with new meanings but also subverted to serve an agenda that is specific to local youth culture. In the fourth chapter I have explored the links between *matatu* culture's transgressive practices and inversions in local tradition, to wit, the Gikuyu circumcision season, where, for about three weeks, dance and bawdy song were/are the norm. We investigate how the carryovers from this traditional lore are reformulated to address the needs of a frustrated urban youth population. Ultimately I trace the links between *matatu* culture and other city subcultures, especially those related to leisure where transgression and excess feature prominently as modalities of expression. In Chapter Five are examined the esthetics of *matatu* culture to show how its expressive forms

work to make subversive meanings. I then place these meanings as creative activity within the broader set of contemporary transgressive practices discussed in the fourth chapter. The fifth chapter is followed by a summation of findings.

Notes

¹ This is the Gikuyu name of privately owned public service commuter vans and minibuses that predominate passenger transportation in Kenya. The name is taken from the Gikuyu phrase “*mang’otore matatu*”, three ten-cent coins; this was the fare when these types of vehicles began operating in the 1950s. *Matatu* are also known in Sheng variously as *Mat*, *MaThree*, *Ma3* or *Muringa*, the latter derived from the Gikuyu name for metal, of which the vehicle has plenty. I have stuck to *matatu* throughout. The following language key is used to indicate the language from which the square-bracketed translation is made: G (Gikuyu), K (Kiswahili) and S (Sheng). Any other language is specified in context.

² *Matatu* work is traditionally a male domain—even though there are a few female drivers, I have only seen two—and I use the term *matatu man* throughout to indicate this fact.

³ The names, pictures or other decorations on *matatu* are known as ‘designs’ in the subculture while the artists are referred to as designers. I have retained the use of these two terms in the study. My designer informants indicate that there aren’t female designers; independent inquiries led me to the same conclusion—certainly up to the time of concluding fieldwork in October 2003.

⁴ To be sure, here Benjamin is discussing the mechanically reproduced work. However, his argument is applicable to the manually reproduced work, for example *matatu* copies of pictures from hip hop magazines, more so when as objects of display they are deployed as a critique in local political discourse. Music magazines like *The Source*, *XXL*, *Ebony* and *Vibe* and the basketball magazine *Slam* are much sought and supply raw material for *matatu* designers as well as narratives for the general urban youth culture. *Starscope* is a small, local low-circulation monthly magazine that features mixed news about local and international stars and seems to emulate the style of *The Source*, without the explicit language of the latter. I return to the signification of *matatu* portraits in Chapter Five.

⁵ I have taken the concept of ‘moving art’ from the title of Tunbridge’s article “Art on the Fast Lane: Nairobi’s *Matatu*” (1998).

⁶ Studies of similar phenomena in other parts of the world refer to these phenomena as slogans, mottoes, inscriptions and/ or names (Winsnes 1990; Parrinder 1954; Menez 1988; Dillard 1976). In *matatu* culture crews view themselves as being one and the same entity with their vehicles; a driver’s name is taken to index the *matatu* and vice versa. This elision of the human and technological body leads me to use the term ‘*matatu* names’ throughout the work as it captures the unity between self and material body that crews intend to convey.

⁷ These informants appear to have in mind the ‘high’ end of culture marked by elevated pursuits, and hence trappings of ‘refinement’ for society’s high class (See Williams 1959: xiv). It is possible to see their intellectual ancestry rooted in, among others, Hogart (1970) and Arnold (1932), for whom the lower orders of society wallow in a life of imperfection on account of the ‘corrupting’ ‘non-intellectual’ mass culture forms they consume, which act is deemed pernicious to ‘Culture’.

⁸ Frame is taken to be the set of orientational principles required for the interpretation of an experience (Goffman 1974:10).

⁹ The Kiswahili name for a *matatu* conductor which is used interchangeably with *makanga*, the latter being an adaptation of the Kiswahili *askari kanga* [guard] by addition of the pluralization prefix ‘*ma*’.

¹⁰ I am aware that masculinity and patriarchy are neither homogeneous nor equal terrains. The sense of manhood that concerns me here is the one that is dependent upon the control of wealth for its authority, which is the type practiced in Kenya. See for instance Silberschmidt’s (2000) study of the domestic and personal crises faced by urban men in East Africa when they find themselves in the predicament of desiring to wield authority without material back-up. Cohen and Atieno-Odhiambo (1989) demonstrate similar erosion of masculine authority among the Luo of Siaya, Kenya.

¹¹ Other studies show black youths appropriating hip hop, reggae and ragamuffin as resources for making

identity statements in situations of racial hostility (Salamon 2003; Shabtay 2003).

¹² Understood as 'argument by indirection' it is characterized by 'falseness' as a rhetorical strategy (Gates 1988; Abrahams 1970; McGregory 2003).

¹³ I wish to record my gratitude to the late Wahome Mutahi for generously allowing me access to his raw research data upon which the report is based, as well as a rather rich collection of *matatu* articles.

¹⁴ The term 'body' is used throughout Kenyan car culture to refer to a vehicle's side panels, hence the term 'body builders' to refer to body assembly/fabrication workshops. On the street, body is used interchangeably with 'board' (See Chapter Four, Appendix II: Work related terms). The body reference here might explain crews' tendency to conflate the first person 'I' pronoun with the vehicle. I have subsequently retained the street usage of "*matatu* body", ramifications of which are addressed in Chapter Four.

¹⁵ My adoption of Bakhtin's analysis is based upon the awareness that its applicability goes beyond the prose form; as cultural performance, the carnivalesque is found in spaces and times far removed from the mediaeval carnival (Featherstone 1998). Indeed, Bakhtin himself acknowledges the transformation of carnival practice and, further, that there are modern everyday acts that evince the carnivalesque. But even he appears to be attached to its medieval modalities as *the* model of carnival when he insists that "these latter branchings from the basic carnival trunk ... [have] emaciated the trunk... [and have] lost their former significance and former wealth of forms and symbols... [leading to] a deterioration and dissipation of carnival and the carnival sense of the world; it lost that authentic sense of a communal performance on the public square."(1998:258). This insistence on 'authenticity' as the legitimization of cultural practice is precisely the kind of (dated) assumption that my presentation of *matatu* as a site of legitimate cultural practice confronts. In the place of the public square, the city road is the locus of an everyday carnivalesque.

Chapter Two

Creating and Contesting Expressive Space

It Wasn't Me—Replest Yourself! (sic) *Matatu* Name

2.0 Fieldwork

Data for this study was collected in two stages. The preliminary stage (1999-July 2001) involved participant observation as I rode *matatu* to and from work and interacted informally with *matatu* workers in various parking slots at Nairobi's central business district (hereafter CBD), peri-urban estates and in rural towns such as Thika. As such, participant observation is a core component of my data collection method since, as I have come to learn, *matatu* subculture is often branded what it is actually *not* when critiqued outside its operational frames.

During this pilot stage, the key focus was on collecting as many names as possible and cataloguing stickers. Informal conversations with *matatu* crews were held both on and outside *matatu*. Quick name-collecting was necessary since *matatu* names have the tendency to be changed all too abruptly and thus for purposes of comparing them to future name forms as many texts as possible had to be documented. That names are always big quickly changed is a significant dynamic of *matatu* culture in that it indicates active interaction between the culture, its social context and various popular culture media. Consequently, comparing some of the name forms to their (probable) antecedents reveals patterns of development in, and influences upon, this naming system. *Matatu* photographs were also taken prior to the beginning of the formal stage of data collection.

The second phase of the work involved two intensive field trips in Nairobi (June- September 2002 and July-September 2003) during which detailed interviews were carried out (Appendix I).¹ This yielded direct information as well as personal experience narratives. An extensive survey of the two leading local dailies, *Daily Nation* and *East African Standard*, was undertaken in order to assess how *matatu* subculture is debated, and thus constructed, within popular discourse. However, it was necessary to delimit this survey of media discourse because it is a limitless, ongoing process. As such, other than a 1980 entry, the beginning point is 1990 and the arbitrary cut-off point of October 31, 2003. The thirteen-year span has been particularly interesting for *matatu* culture owing to a number of factors that have made it the subject of intense public debate. These range from the state's efforts to regulate the *matatu* business through laws banning multi-colored *matatu* and the playing of loud music on them to the high fatalities in road traffic accidents involving *matatu*. *Matatu* as a factor around which urban violence often coalesces, reports of robberies and the rape of passengers, *matatu* route cartels, and the rumored links between *matatu* culture and satanism are additional reasons that have kept *matatu* culture in the limelight of public discourse. Where they touch on the concerns of the study, these issues have been discussed.

Alongside this survey of print media discourse, more stickers were collected and *matatu* photographs taken. In total, there are 78 photographic texts from both phases of fieldwork. The implications of the replicative tendency in *matatu* texts are dealt with in Chapter Five. An analysis of the symbolic signification of texts displayed on the exterior of *matatu*, viz. names and pictures, is the key task in this chapter. I argue that these texts, as tools in a project aimed at enhancing self-visibility, express crews' claims to social space. This enterprise sets their subculture in direct conflict with other city subcultures. The title of Shaggy's rap that appears at the head of this chapter, and which is a *matatu* name, indicates subculture's affirmation of the legitimacy of their voice, as opposed to any other that might seek to represent the *matatu* man. They insist, rightly so, on speaking for themselves even though they might *replest* (sic) certain

things in ways to which others outside the culture are not accustomed, as the unusual spelling suggests. Hence my privileging of the subculture's voice throughout the study.

Observation was also done of *matatu* workers crowded around the (black/green) boards where all *matatu* operating from a particular terminus are listed and ticked off as they arrive and leave. Such boards act as the nodal point in *matatu* workers' activities since it acts as a control point; if a *matatu*'s registration number does not appear there, then it cannot operate from that particular terminus. Of greater significance for purposes of this study is that the board serves as a social space where workers, and passengers acquainted with them, interact freely. I participated in conversations with crews and other *matatu* workers at 12 such termini.

2.1 Alternative Logics of Space

A fascinating thing about life in a small city of around two million inhabitants, and which *appears* as thoroughly disordered as does postcolonial Nairobi, is how the common place takes on profound significance for an observer. Figures 2 and 3, depicting the central bus and *matatu* terminus right in the middle of the city and a main street, Tom Mboya Street on a typical day where many hours of fieldwork were spent, convey the sense of apparent disorder that I am alluding to here. I say 'apparent' because a scrutiny beneath the surface reveals that there are indeed sets of orderly relations in the way people interact with the city space and also between things in urban space. The Sikh Temple whose minaret is visible in the upper right corner of the picture, the jumble of buses and *matatu* and the public toilet lower left, all these are spaces that signify particular relations, and similarly, individuals relate to them in specific ways that cannot be said to be haphazard or chaotic in any way. This awareness is important in an attempt to make a balanced examination of *matatu* culture which has been categorically described as 'chaotic' and 'anarchic' in the popular press (e.g. Mathiu 2002; Nyasani 2001). One writer goes so far as to declare that *matatu* epitomize Kenyans' "absence of culture" (Ochieng 2003) i.e. refinement. However, it is the small details that motivate such statements that add up to a composite picture of what the everyday of urban space is all about, in all its simplicity and complexity. Such details tell us how urban residents, particularly *matatu* crews, use the space available to them to make identity statements.

Thus, most Nairobians, particularly those who daily negotiate with other road users, are actively engaged in inscribing meaning to street life. These impressions are best summed up by a fieldwork encounter trapped in a 5.00 pm traffic jam going out of the city in a No.25 *matatu* named *Mum's Love*. The driver had already explained that he preferred to pirate between several routes rather than sticking to one. Alarmed by his frantic weaving in and out between lanes and cars, I asked him why he didn't observe the 5-yard legal requirement between vehicles, or at least wait patiently in his lane for traffic to move. Would this not spare other drivers the unnecessary havoc he was causing them, I asked. Staring ahead, his tone now acidic, Mwangi explained:

You see, *people* think we *matatu* people are stupid. In fact, it is other people who don't understand the road. You can tell how stupid people are by looking at the way they waste space on the road. See this driver in a personal car in front of us? He will wait patiently but I will weave all over and get to *Baba Dogo* and back into the city more quickly. He is not in a hurry, he is rich but he should know that the space he has wasted in front means money to me. So, he has the time to waste and in wasting it he is wasting the valuable space in front of him and also wasting my time in that way. Time is money. Those rules you tell me about are for rich people, not *matatu* drivers! The more trips I can make, the more the possibility that one day I can become rich, buy a personal car and leave a gap of five yards between my car and the one ahead.

The driver, furiously shifting gears as he 'elbowed' his way into a non-existent crack in the clogged up traffic, encapsulates the typical brashness of the *matatu* driver; 'weaving' is a methodology that he takes seriously as an examination of the symbols around which he constructs his identity will demonstrate. Moreover, his cold calculation aptly captures and the passion with which city space is viewed and contested. Further, his obvious exasperation with an ignorant researcher helps to point at the finer threads that individuals use to spin their narratives of city space and their interactions with others in the city. Ownership (wealth/poverty), personality (stupid/smart), disposition (haste/tardiness), borders (private/public), regulation (legal/illegal) and attitudes towards these are points of potential conflict that thus open up room for negotiation.

It is within these interactions that crews create space to express their aspirations, with *matatu* becoming an instrument and site for their vibrant articulation. For anyone coming from a world governed by what the *matatu* driver calls 'those rules', an awareness of the technology of logic at work enables an alternative view of space relations. The thinking at work here evinces a view of the interplay of power relations between city subcultures strictly from the *matatu* crews' perspective. There is a clear us-them dichotomy, a critical point for our purposes as we seek an emic understanding of, first, how identities are constituted and expressed in *matatu* culture and, secondly, the culture's view of other urban cultures.

We can use the set of characteristics extrapolated from this driver's response to map Nairobians' understanding of time-space relations, and expression of oneself within them. Beneath the city's apparent disorder, for which *matatu* crews are apportioned a large measure of blame as we have already seen, lies a structure of responses are the logical outcome of having to express oneself within contested space. As informants' responses indicate, city dwellers are quite aware of the intersections available in the matrix of social relations set out above, and the points of potential negotiation. They attempt to insert themselves into one crack or the other, the cultural "interstice" suggested by Bhabha (1990:312), as a way of asserting and broadening their social space and at the same time harnessing the space thus gained to their advantage. City dwellers actively fall back onto their awareness of broader social relations, and global happenings, in the course of their everyday engagements within the broad field mapped by the term *matatu* culture. Accordingly, I attempt below an analysis of how *matatu* subculture creates and expresses its own awareness of the city, its identity and thus place within such space, as reflected in its lore. The opinions of other motorists are incorporated to the extent that they help us understand how different types of road-users respond to the same space.

2.2 The Creation of Tradition: Exchanges in the *Tea Zone*

Turning up for an interview at the vast terminus popularly called *Railways*, I found my informant playing South African reggae star Lucky Dube's 1990 track *Prisoner* on the vehicle's powerful stereo. Tired-looking, he had just offered *chai* to a traffic policeman who was alighting from the driver's cabin then. Across the terminus grounds a No.135 *matatu* to Limuru, one of Kenya's most productive tea producing areas, was picking up passengers. Its name, *Tea Zone*, was a perfect metaphor for that moment. As the policeman sauntered away, oblivious of the researcher's gaze, I mused at rather timely evocation of *chai*, Kiswahili for tea and in *matatu* culture an euphemism for bribery.² Lucky Dube seemed to have been speaking directly to this *matatu* driver's feelings; imprisoned by a gifting tradition from which he could never hope to escape.

The coerced exchange between the law 'enforcer' and the driver suitably demonstrates a point of intense struggle in *matatu* work and which leads to the construction of *matatu* folk's self-perceived image of victim-hood. Thus, since gifts come with attached expectations, to facilitate "social potential [and are offered in] the spirit of reciprocity" (Appadurai 1986:6, 11), *chai* might be seen as a normalizing ritual intended to ensure conformity to the subculture's behavior. This has significant implications for crews since it socializes them into seeing exploitation as normal.

In turn they make up for the money they offer to police officers by extracting extra fare from passengers by all possible means, and sometimes demanding sex in lieu of fare; being at the end of the chain, the hapless passenger is nearly always the loser. A self-deprecatative *matatu* sticker, mimicking the stereotype of a brash, poorly-educated Gikuyu *manamba*, boldly declares: *Kwoya kwoya is my policy, iko swari* [making easy pickings is my policy, any question/ problem with that]? This succinct sticker is a mocking reference to a common, entrenched perception of crews as self-centered greedy folks out to exploit every one in their quest for profit, a claim which, though not applicable across the board, nevertheless holds for a good number of *matatu* workers. But as a function of a general culture of corruption, exploiting others makes sense to crews for whom it is a means of self-preservation and self-expression within the framework of every day struggles.

Not far from *Railways*, at the junction of Tom Mboya and Cabral Streets a sharply-lettered, crisply worded billboard reads: *NO MATATUS BEYOND THIS POINT NCC* (Figure 4). A similar injunction is posted where River Road branches off Moi Avenue outside Khoja Mosque (Figure 5). Being the only billboards of this kind in Nairobi, and unlike commercial adverts, the simplistically worded imperatives in these statements belie tremendous asymmetries of power. Posted by the Nairobi City Council they represent what is perhaps the most overt attempt to inscribe clear-cut, unambiguous circumscriptions on *matatu* operations. Yet, despite the lack of ambiguity in these signs, *matatu* drivers still go ahead and them, often at great peril.

For instance, I was riding a *matatu* home one evening when the *makanga* noticed that the driver was about to join Moi Avenue, contrary to the order posted in Figure 4. Pointing out the warning sign, the tout explained how earlier in the day a crew on the route had been fined 7000 Kenya shillings for violating the “no *matatus*” order. The driver retorted; “why do they stop us from coming here and yet they allow KBS? Are we still living under colonial rule? Let them [police] arrest us!” and defiantly took the forbidden exit. Fortunately for him, no officers were on duty there at that time, he got away with his infringement. In another incident, the conductor on a *matatu* I was riding in encouraged his driver to violate the warning at the Moi-Avenue/River Road junction, cut through the upper parts of town and therefore beat the traffic jam into the city center.

I will never do that. I had better remain stuck here. You see that bougainvillea and the Kiosk behind it? There is one policeman who always hides there to arrest *matatu* that cut through here. He never stays in view, which means they know they are sure to catch some *matatu*.7000 [shillings] gone just like that. I'd rather waste a few more shillings [on fuel] than lose that kind of money.

(2002)

From these quite opposed views, we can derive general points of reference around which *matatu* culture relates to the law. Even drivers who would not contravene the ‘no *matatu*’ regulation express disenchantment with this prohibition. They concede that the prohibition prohibiting *matatu* operations in certain parts of the city center might have been issued in the interests of ‘order’ but they see this to have conferred an undue advantage to the Kenya Bus Services, a private company. As one driver pointed out, most office workers are located in office blocks on streets beyond Moi Avenue; this is precisely the lucrative end of the market where *matatu* are forbidden from operating.

Some crews also point out that KBS drivers are not much different from their *matatu* counterparts since they also allow people to alight from moving buses right in the middle of the road. As such, they do not see how traffic zoning can create order. In any case, fares for both bus and *matatu* travel within the city center is equal and thus *matatu* crews argue that passengers should not be forced to travel by bus only. They understand the discourse of order invoked by the ‘no *matatus*’ regulation as a ruse for the protection of vested economic interests. It therefore

becomes possible to see why exploitation in *matatu* culture is an accepted way of doing things. The focalization upon individual interest is a major aspect embedded to crews' lore as they respond to, or initiate, ways of being in urban space.

Inescapably, in thinking about *matatu* work, one notices a tension among crews that arises from their feelings of curtailed freedom. This is seen in their calling to question present regulatory practices in the light of the discourse of colonialism. For the *matatu* driver above who loudly wonders about current circumscriptions of freedom, there can be no doubt that the enforcement of regulations is equated to oppression. There is some truth in this comparison given that just as in colonial times when African natives were often arrested for the offence of vagrancy, today a *matatu* driver faces arrest for driving in the 'wrong' part of Nairobi. As crews claimed, these arrests are as arbitrary as treatment in the hands of law enforcement officials is capricious. The real intention of such arrests does not seem to be the punishment of offending crews but rather the instigation of opportunities to extort bribes, which is part of what crews call "police harassment." This is aptly illustrated by the case of police officers hiding behind the bougainvillea bush to ambush *matatu*.

The point can be demonstrated differently. Under city by-laws, touting for passengers is illegal. On diverse occasions during my fieldwork teams of policemen would descend on terminuses and bundle route workers into their vehicles, accusing them of touting. Crews and other route workers say that they are often branded idlers bidding their time to rob businesses in the CBD: "You see, every one thinks that if you're a *makanga* you must be a criminal. *Hata kama wangenikuta pale kwa board, wangenishika, na usisahau mimi si manamba, hii matatu nilinunua na pesa yangu ya retire* [K...If they had also found me standing at the board, they would have arrested me, and don't forget that I am not a *manamba*, I bought this *matatu* with my retirement dues]." These arrests are seen as ruses used to collect "*pesa ya lunch*" [K. Lunch money] since once arrested, the alleged 'idlers' and 'criminals' quickly buy their freedom and cheerfully go back to business, pondering over the financial loss incurred in the process. One *manamba* mourned; "their wives and children will eat tonight, mine won't! *Hawa mafisi wako na mishahara end month, mimi sina na sasa kwa sababu ya hii ninaitwa criminal* [these hyenas have salaries at the end of the month, I don't and now because of this job I am labeled criminal]." Notice here may be made of the hyena metaphor of the police, which may be taken as a reference to the greedy dupe in local folktales, implying that crews cast themselves as the dupe's other, the trickster.³

In another incident, arrested *manamba* bought their freedom from City Council security officials even before the posse had barely turned into a less-crowded alley. I asked one of the unlucky *manamba* to comment on the brief street drama in which he had just performed. Laughing, he said that unlike those who have "chewed books", he and his friends have to be content with an occupation that is "like a game of cards where you either win or lose and even if you win you can still lose what you've already gained. That is the way we live." He said that even after this transaction another 'security' team might still come along, arrest them, collect *kitu kidogo* and leave and thus keep the game going endlessly. Thus the *chaification* of *matatu* work needs to be properly understood since it largely defines the exploitative nature of *matatu* culture. Other forms of abuse, for instance those of a sexual nature, are subsumed into the broader framework of exploitation which defines a large part of the *matatu* man's identity.

An important deduction can be made in view of the foregoing. The various explanations proffered by parties to the practice of corruption in *matatu* work put down its overriding logic to competition for economic resources. Thus, the legitimacy of the ban on *matatu* operating in certain areas aside, an important issue for our purposes is that for actors within *matatu* culture, such regulation defines the sites around which economic contests take place. As a result, since the police and city *askari* [K. Guards] are cloaked in their official authority, at the surface level their place in this contest is viewed as the state's public face; they wear the 'enemy's' mark. For

matatu crews and *manamba*, it is a no-win situation in which they operate from an underdog's position.

Looking at a *matatu* name like 'violetors' (*sic*), we can see the extremity of pressure under which these presumed experts of disturbance operate, awake to the possibility that their economic well-being is very much dependent on how well they can play the survival 'game'; sometimes it depends on skills, at others on luck, or a combination of both, like in the card game metaphor invoked by the *manamba*'s case cited above. In order then for *matatu* workers to win against the wielders of power, the contest has to be moved to the symbolic level. Arising from this, I suggest that crews can quite validly be viewed as operating within the various modes of trickster characters. In this case, law-enforcement officials, cast as the trickster's dupes, constitute a physical threat to the well-being of *matatu* workers. In this way, a moral angle is brought into this conflict whereby the latter deliberately cast themselves in the mold of the weak trickster suffering at the hands of the brawny dupe; through the symbolic forms that he deploys, the trickster *matatu* man normally enjoys the last laugh.

The view of life as a hide-and-seek or gambling game suggested earlier can be used here to examine crews' popular view of the city street, more of which is discussed in Chapter Five. In the many games of urban survival, competitors are free to play by known rules or bend them to suit their purposes and invent others in the course of 'play'. I consider such acts to fall within the concept of tactics as conceived by De Certeau (1984). In the course of operating within the array of rules constituting the grammar of living in the city, individuals invent their own tactics—what I subsequently refer to as rhetorical strategies—in order to survive. It is within this rhetoric that crews' expressive behavior and the commentary they make about it that the subculture finds its space. As Huizinga (1955) has argued, play has its own serious uses within cultural processes. Accordingly, we might understand the various playful forms of playful communication in *matatu* culture as lighthearted address to underlying, complex situations.

Nonetheless, just as the trickster is capable of adopting many guises—"clown, fool, jokester, initiate, culture hero, even ogre"(Abrahams 1968:171)—the *matatu* man's attempts at presenting himself as persecuted need to be seen purely as a shift in rhetorical strategy. The grammar beneath that shift is constant, with the underdog re/inventing and expressing himself simultaneously in many identities which he exploits to his advantage as he goes along. The trickster-dupe antagonisms are expressed in and through *matatu* names such as *Endangered Species* while at times crews' 'suffering' has even been mapped in terms of genocide, as exemplified by the name *Escape From Sobibor* on a *matatu* playing loud hip hop music. As I emphasize throughout my discussion of *matatu* names, it is precisely such banal but accented absurdities that provide "cracks", again to use a term of Bhabha's (1990:312), in which the subculture finds expressive space; at that level it defies constraints, easy legibility and determinacy because of its difference. Perhaps the designer of the *matatu* cited above does not recognize fully the historical tragedy that was perpetrated at Sobibor but appropriating such a name enables the *matatu* man to map his own suffering and therefore attract sympathy. As I will presently demonstrate, such hyperbole has its specific purposes in the culture; these tricksters are unabashed in their moral posturing so long as such acts advance their claims. The gymnastic abilities involved in such self-reinvention are what concern me since they are the subculture's mainstay in crews' search for both space and visibility.

For crews, having a resource pool of knowledge about the myriad dangers lurking in the city street is an important survival tactic; knowing where police officers hide, at what times of the day there are fewer officers on the beat or which ones are more friendly and approachable than others. In this way, individual crews develop tactics to handle situations that cannot be addressed within the overall strategy of *chai* offering. Thus, pointing to a senior policeman whose lapels were bedecked with stars, a *matatu* driver declared reverently: "*ni lazima ujue ni gani atakuruhusu ujitete. Unaona huyu, huyu akikushika umekwisha!* Forget it. Every *matatu* driver

fears being arrested by this one. *Huyu hakuli kitu, hakuna matatu haimjui* [K. You must know which one will allow you to 'defend' yourself. You see this one, if this one arrests you, you are finished! Forget it...This one does not eat anything, there is not a single *matatu* that does not know him]". For *matatu* crews, be they owners or employees, knowledge of the city goes beyond identifying danger zones to include the awareness that even such usually highly efficacious negotiation skills like bribery have their limitations.⁴ Tactics are to be re/adjusted according to need since, as in the case cited above, there is always an aberration from the norm.

There is another, more dramatic method of dealing with infringements upon space which has come to be a distinguishing mark of *matatu* culture: violence.⁵ Often, verbal and physical violence are marshaled to deal with offending parties. Countless times, gangs of city council guards assaulted *matatu* crews over parking space disputes. Parking attendants and crews often exchange fisticuffs after disagreements over parking fees while route gangs, legitimate route workers, crews and their competitors routinely engage in acts of violence against each other in turf wars. Passengers reluctant to pay their fares, especially at night and if drunk, might also get a taste of crews' violence in one form or another. Such violence, it may be argued, is related to crews' tendency to use coarse, threatening language.

My contention is that because of the physical threats in their every day working environment, coupled with their perception of life as a risk-game, crews are psychologically primed to see the world purely in terms of its dangers. We might in this way find a rationale for the prevalence of, for instance, *matatu* names and stickers that reify violence and raw power (Chapter Three). A similar motif is reflected in crews' views of gender matters, as an investigation of their general idiom demonstrates (Chapter Four). Indeed, some *matatu* display huge drawings of diverse armor; battle tanks, hammers and swords (Figure 6); the road is seen as a ground for both battle-play. It might also be noted that the culture of violence associated with hip hop's *gangsta* rap genre has profound echoes here. As a result, crews are conditioned by their awareness of constant danger to always seek a vantage position, to stay on top, and hence to dominate. In this case, crews create permanent enemies by setting up a demarcation between themselves and everyone else.

2.3 In the Absence of a Fireside: Blackboard Narratives

Overall, when *matatu* crews and other route workers congregate around the terminus board, they spend a significant amount of their time talking about women and ideas of 'the' good life. To be sure, their talk also touches on other issues; national and city politics, who has bought a new *matatu*, which roads have the 'best' and 'worst' policemen, why the economy is doing so badly, who has not remitted their weekly dues to the welfare group, and so on. However, relative to the time spent talking about fun, these other kinds of topics take up only a tiny fraction of their time. For example, a pre-occupation with fashion items prominent on the priority list as is their concern with where "so-and-so was drinking last night", with whom and up to what time, who exchanged fisticuffs with whom, over which girl etc. Further, the state of people's relationships is a fertile topic for gossip and innuendo. Most of these men are single and even for those that are not, the tendency to cheat on partners is high. Hence, the Sheng word '*anamudog*' [s/he is cheating on him/her], from 'dogging', frequently comes up in these conversations; promiscuity is hardly frowned upon. Four issues stick out most prominently in blackboard talk; fun (women and alcohol), fashion, music and profits. Their talk can thus be seen as an attempt to impose order upon the world according to a manner that best suits their needs.

A notable aspect in such talk is that it often revolves around female passengers with whom the workers claim to have had sexual relations at some time or other. Usually, the talk is triggered by the arrival of a female passenger, prompting one of the workers to make either an appreciative comment often about her legs or prominent behind thus: "*Cheki michellin*" [S. Look at the legs] or "*Cheki madiaba! Mezea.*" [S. Look at the buttocks. Desire her]. There are alternative ways of

making these comments in other languages but the most commonly used are Gikuyu, Kiswahili and Sheng.

Another man might denigratingly respond by saying words like ‘*takataka*’ [K. Garbage] or “*Hapo hakuna kitu. Najua wasee watano wamepita hapo*” [K. There is nothing there. I know five of my friends who have passed through there]. The first speaker might then be warned: “*Unataka kwenda six feet. Hiyo ni something ya X*” [K. You want to go six feet under. That is the something of so and so]. Another might point out a nicely-dressed lady who has just alighted from a *matatu*, say that she is married but unfaithful to her husband and boast how he, or a friend of his, has been having an affair with her. The use of inanimate words like the nominative ‘*hiyo*’ [that], ‘*kitu*’ [thing] and the more pointed ‘*takataka*’ [garbage] in reference to women can be used to indicate *matatu* workers’ perception of women as sex objects.

While such language is no doubt derived from, or related in some way, to their notions of female bodies as contaminating, much of it can also be understood as fantasizing or cases of sour grapes. Thus, even the most benevolent remark turns into innuendo once a woman becomes a topic of discussion. Following Douglas (1966) in her theorization of notions of taboo with regard to women’s bodies, I contend that rather than being mere statements of esthetics, the ambivalent attitude towards women as simultaneously desired and denigrated, masks crews’ underlying social anxieties. Their narratives are important in that they help us to access crews’ worldview in general.

As I argue in succeeding chapters, *matatu* workers find the modern, urban-dwelling female to be a threat to them one way or the other. Here I am proceeding from an awareness of social ruptures spawned by the onset of modernity that have destabilized traditional notions of gender roles. (See for instance Sibers Schmidt 2001; Cohen and Atieno-Odhiambo 1989; Awuor 2003; Pala 2003). At the same time an authoritative occupation of masculine space has traditionally been contingent to male’s assumption and retention of control over economic, or/and other resources (White 1990; Lindsfarne 1994). What then does this mean for today’s Nairobi male youths who cannot perform their traditional role as the heads of families and breadwinners not only because they have no spouses but also because of new socio-economic realities? What is their view of modern urban women who, as an informant sarcastically remarked, “now put on trousers”? The male-oriented and controlled space of *matatu* culture provides an arena for the exploration of these questions. Crews’ emphasis on sexuality is an attempt to render the problem at a level that they can be confident about and around which a technology of (self) control might be designed. Sexuality being a private matter, the otherwise powerless *matatu* man can take full control over this particular sphere of expression—no one would know for sure whether the trickster is merely staging an act.

Dundes (1980) has demonstrated how inverted projection enables the perpetrator of a violation to blame his victim. In projecting female passengers as “bad” people, *matatu* workers are able to freely advance all manner of self-serving reasons to legitimize their thoughts about and treatment of these women. Furthermore, this phenomenon enables us to view and understand the various inter-related levels of violence in *matatu* culture as symptomatic of often concealed anxieties. Frustration with, or envy of, women’s increased access to more economic resources might be expressed through verbal or physical abuse, because their new roles blur and destabilize most traditional concepts of a ‘real man’. Such violence, we might also note, is not just found in *matatu* culture and has wider cultural roots. For instance, two of my female informants reported traveling variously in *matatu* where Gikuyu-speaking crews and several male passengers discussed and approved wife-beating as “an expression of love”; only a Luo passenger disagreed with such sentiments in one of these instances.

A great deal of talk amongst crews also goes to comparing notes about which shops stock the latest American *njumu* [S. boots] and at what prices, where to acquire cheaply a coveted *lebo* [S. Label; clothes. See Figure 7] ; where it is best to go *henging* [S. party fun, with music] with their

supuu [S. Girls], which college has the most willing of such *tusupuu* [S. girls, diminutive] and so on. Curiously, even though names of hip hop stars seen on video are dropped into the talk, their music is not discussed. Usually, such mention tapers off to a discussion of rappers' *gear* or *shine* [S. Dress]. For these young people fashion is taken seriously since it is a key plank in their identity project. It is therefore important for them to desiccate its composition the better to appropriate it.

There is a high tendency for female high school, college, and university students to join in the machinations of these crews and route workers in general in their pursuit of 'fun'. Contrary to popular thinking (see for instance Chege, Rimbui and Olembo 1994), crews do not necessarily take advantage of the girls; there are reciprocal processes at play. On the one hand, crews indicate that they want these "modern girls" because by associating with them, they gain some social prestige. The background to this is a popular stereotype of *matatu* workers as uncouth characters who, presumed to have been "daft" in school, could only have ended up doing the kind of 'low' work they do. To counter this stereotype they usually seek out girls who have "education capital" (Bourdieu 1984) for friendships and casual affairs. On the other hand, these young girls say that they go for *matatu* crews because, unlike most other male youths in Nairobi, they have disposable income. In the words of Ann: "*Wanazo doo* [they've got the money]! We too want fun, and if they are willing to take us to *K1*, *Pavement*, *Carni*, and *Kengeles*,⁶ why not? I need upkeep money but I don't want to go to Koinange. If I find a good guy willing to do these things for me does it matter that he is a *makanga*?" Versions of this argument were advanced severally. In a general environment of critical joblessness, even university level unemployed girls find this a rather attractive option; educational capital is traded off against cultural-economic capital.

Thus, the *matatu*, popular Kenyan journalist and humor author Wahome Mutahi pointed out, can be understood as a

microcosm of larger Kenyan realities. Only in a *matatu* can you find broke ex-government ministers, thieves, teachers, mad men, school children and nuns sharing the same space at the same time. To understand *matatu* is to begin to understand Kenya.

(2001)

Without claiming that *matatu* culture is a gestalt with which can be analyzed the maladies afflicting Kenyan society, I am however suggesting that an understanding of attitudes and beliefs found in many cultures, past and contemporary and particularly of the city, could be gained by looking beneath the surface of its symbolic forms. Also, tensions expressed in interactions within *matatu* culture closely speak to other struggles in the wider society; in the former site, they become more intense by being played out within one site.

2.4 Cultivating Difference, Ghettoizing Modernity.

Besides going for crews' money, my youthful female informants indicate that they admire their "coolness." Cool looks are a critical aspect of this study as they are a chief means by which difference is established. Even older highly educated people admit a grudging admiration for this particular aspect of *matatu* culture: "*Manamba* are very trendy in dress, the only problem with them is that they have no manners" says one, a professor in her early 40s. Even conservative men agree. Wa-Muthoni, an insurance loss adjuster in his mid-30s, concedes: *Reke tuuge atiriri, makanga maria methamba nimethambaga magathera, no mitugo niyo riu mekwendwo mathambie* [G. Let's put it this way, the *makanga* who decide to clean up are really clean, now they just have to clean up their manners]. Thus, the notoriety of *matatu* crews is mitigated by their savvy dress. Indeed, in Nairobi they are very much at the center of fashion in youth and urban culture in general. High-end clothes dealers specializing in youth attire agreed that *matatu* culture sustains much of the fashion scene in Nairobi. As Wacera, a businesswoman, commented on this consumption pattern, "if it [label] is not on *matatu* people, then it is not yet in town." Hip

hop culture is valuable in this regard because it supplies models upon which crews' looks can be invented.

All the same it is crucial to note that when *matatu* culture adopts hip hop, the specific context of American socio-cultural tensions, as part of the genre's constitutive politics, are not taken up. Indeed, it is hardly possible, being so far removed from the actual sites of African American struggle, that these *matatu* crews (can) read all the nuances wired into hip hop's signifying. Rather hip hop culture is adopted more at the level of its rhetorical discursive, especially in its spectacular modes. As Geertz has argued, the stock of symbols available to mankind for meaning making is limited (1973:127-128).⁷ If we take this argument alongside Appadurai's (1997) on the uses to which media resources are deployed for self-imaging, then we can see how, even if they are reused, icons and practices in *matatu* culture are made to speak so powerfully to crews' local dilemmas. Further, the resultant position of interculturality achieved through such blending complicates not just subjectivity but also perceptions, enabling crews to apprehend and express the pluralities of their social world. Thus, even if they might be superficially aware of them, *matatu* crews gloss over the social contradictions that give rise to hip hop and latch onto its dramaturgical aspects, 'coupling its symbols (e.g. fashion looks) to their own brash mannerisms. I take this process as instantiating Hannerz's concept of cultural creolization (1996).

In this manner, African American marginality is itself exoticized and reconfigured into one of the many exotic commodities available in Nairobi; it is turned into a style consumed to mark one's attainment of a *cool* version of modernity, no matter how contested this particular articulation of the modern is. Briefly stated, the history imbricated in rap is erased by this reterritorializing move⁸ and we see that blackness has its gradients; not all its hues appeal in the same way to consumers of blackness as exotica.⁹ Thus where there is identification with black American marginalization it is only secondary to the needs of Nairobi youth culture. To be sure these youths identify in some senses with the plight of African Americans, but this is to the extent that they too are (black) victims of racism which they understood to be a universal affliction. Thus, there can be little dispute that rap's deconstruction of "the ideologies and myths of race" (Potter 1995:121) is one way of explaining its consumption by vast global audiences who see in it a means of identifying with wider concerns. However, we need to note that *matatu* culture's hostility is directed principally against perceived as local black-on-black injustices, adopting in the process hip hop's representational strategies to mark its difference and at the same time mask its subterfuge.

A few more issues in the *matatu* culture-hip hop nexus need problematization. The glitzy face of America is what primarily kindles in Nairobi's jobless youth and poorly paid *matatu* crews the desire to migrate. They find the material aspect of the narrative of national belonging, where the concept of the Kenyan nation-state is itself a function of the English Empire's modernizing narrative, unfulfilling. As such, within the wreckage of the postcolonial state, a 'national identity' for youth culture does not make much sense. These youths harness migrancy (Appadurai 1997), captured in symbols, to formulate imagined identities that can be sensibly deployed within the local context in an attempt to come to terms with material deprivation. Such social alienation, like that of African Americans' from the mainstream, and the resulting ambivalence can be used to explain why hip hop's symbols resonate profoundly with Nairobi youth.

Such ambivalence is seen in *matatu* culture where crews seem to be simultaneously looking inwards and outwards, into the past and to the future, into tradition and out towards the cosmopolitan stage in their everyday travails. The processes of self-invention imbricate serious tensions born of the despair with the old order (generational clash) as well as dissatisfaction arising from modernity's unrealized promises (material wealth). Nairobi youth thus find themselves neither fully *this*, nor fully *that*; not fully traditional subjects and not full participants

in modernity; a ruined economy denies them jobs that would otherwise enable them stride towards personal achievement. Youth music is one of the dynamics used to respond to the resulting tensions in norms and worldviews, and the modality supplied by hip hop culture is found to be particularly fitting.

Alongside the foregoing, *matatu* crews identify with hip hop because its linguistic expressions reject the 'polished' norms of a mainstream American modernity without rejecting the concept of modernity itself.¹⁰ In a similar move, Nairobi crews find in the genre's radical representational strategies a vernacular with which to push their own agenda, staging an insurgency from within the folds of mainstream culture. What appeals to them are not hip hop's raps *qua* art but, rather, its rhetorical strategies that enable popular youth culture to capture and express its despair and joys using a commodity form that appears every bit modern-looking. In their world of display, this is a perfect alibi under which the lewd lyrics of hip hop connect to another agenda.¹¹ It is indeed quite telling that none of the crews I interviewed could sing in full verses of the raps that were playing on their *matatu* stereos; at most they could only chant a few lines of the refrain.

In common raps popular amongst crews were all of the 'explicit content',¹² hardcore mode. Jack, a 23 year old driver, said of his colleagues: "*Machali wengi hawa unaona hapa hawanyiti kitu kwa hii muzik. Ni zile tu maneno chafu chafu kaa fuck na shit wanapenda kusikia. Wengine hata hawajui kizungu juu hawakwenda chuo* [S. Most of these young men you see here do not understand anything in this music. It is just the dirty dirty words like fuck and shit they love to hear. Some do not even know English because they never went to school]." Several other drivers were in agreement with this assessment, with one saying that he played the music to act as a 'filler' to distract him from the boredom of driving for thirteen hours every day. Similar rationalization was given for stickers use, no matter the message.

We may also note the element of excess—whether realized in terms of auditory intensity or the 'violation' of linguistic norms—that is so central to rap. From the beginning, these two have been some of hip hop's most enduring characteristics. Hip hop music is a loud art form; it is intended to *disturb* (Potter 1995). Hip hop has the ability to simply 'grab' listeners' attention, a fact that *matatu* culture utilizes to good effect to call attention to itself. Once its spectacular aspects are added on, the combination more than potentiates rebellion; hip hop as a style is in itself a revolt. For *matatu* culture, this is the perfect means, passing as entertainment, for the contestation of other subcultures. It is a moment quickly seized upon to engage in 'rudeness' without appearing to be personally responsible for it. Just as hip hop visibilizes its identity through spectacle, *matatu* culture makes itself conspicuous by marking itself in all the 'offensive' forms of behavior it can muster, appropriating from the former whatever can be adopted—which is nearly everything. In the process, crews achieve the cultural capital that marks their difference and standing within the urban set up; it becomes simply impossible for other subcultures to ignore *matatu* culture.

Further, the misogyny that rap has been accused of, rightly or wrongly depending on one's interpretation of African American signifying practices,¹³ has profound resonance with *matatu* crews. This is because the view of women represented especially by patriarchal hip hop coincides with the male *matatu* culture's views of the social place of women. Thus, McGregory states that "many male hip hop artists *regressively* tend to inscribe "the cult of true woman" on African American women in order to *shackle* and *re-enslave* them." (2003:35 n.17. My emphasis). Within *matatu* culture, such raps speak to crews desire to reinforce an ideology of inequality between men and women. Such efforts are complemented by sexist stickers that in turn borrow from local sayings that seem to have an overt sexist bias against women, as I show later in this chapter.¹⁴

Granted that this is not by any means the consensus of all hip hop (Gilroy 1993: 85; Potter 1995:70) the fact that hardcore hip hop is the desired variety in Nairobi youth culture is relevant for our purposes. In other words, rap's general patriarchal structure and *matatu* culture share a concept of masculinity as visibility and femininity as merely complementing such male visibility while itself remaining shrouded by the shadows of traditional roles. This is in line with our earlier suggestion that *matatu* crews see modern women as a threat to traditional power relations between the sexes. Moreover, hip hop comes with a pre-packaged set of 'modern' (sexist) terms congruent to the needs of *matatu* crews' masculinity project.

This can be viewed within the frames of Appadurai's argument to the effect that ideas circulated by the electronic and print media are often quickly rearranged as scripts for other "social agenda" (1997). As such, rap's (mis)representation of women as objects of male sexual gratification is one of the methods that crews use to put the woman (as a social construct) *back down* to is considered her traditional, *proper* place.¹⁵ This is intended to at least symbolically contest women's social advance that crews see as besieging and erasing their notions of manhood. Indeed, crews occupy an uncertain social space, their world literally having lost its core support i.e. property and the means to its acquisition.

2.5 "Mobile Street Philosophy" and Imagined Space.

Written expressive forms, being a key way in which the culture marks its difference and worldview, are one of the most visible and talked-about aspects of *matatu* culture. Thus informants' views about *matatu* names and stickers were sought. There is general agreement that these forms evince "creativity" and names are often pointed out or recalled in conversations to back that assertion. Indeed these names are integrated into commentary on urban living whereby passengers regard *matatu* names, in the words of one young man, "as a way of adding gaiety to an otherwise dull city" and thus opposing to plans to do away with 'multi-colored' vehicles.¹⁶ When I pointed out that the names were lifted straight out of hip hop magazines, Ndegwa, pointing at a *matatu* named *Hazard* cruising down Tom Mboya Street, said: "Exactly! Look at this name. The creativity lies in choosing a name that specifically describes an element of *matatu* work. This name seems to have been created in language just to describe the way *matatus* (sic) operate. They are a hazard to everyone but we need them. If the person who wrote this is not creative, then I don't know who is." Grace states; "How do these *matatu* people manage to match the names so well with their vehicles?" Part of the reason the names "match ...so well" is that they creatively recycle the grammar of urban life.

Thuku, in agreeing with the above view, pointed at several No. 23 *matatu* cruising up the street bearing Gikuyu proverbs, and went so far as to declare: "the writers who do this are our street philosophers. They are simply wonderful to look at, these mobile proverbs." In other words, such proverbs have a certain power not only in their physical but also, more crucially, in their metaphorical movement that links the traditional to the modern, and the private world of the designer to the public one of urban popular culture. That my informant sees designers as 'writers', even going further to place street knowledge in the region of philosophical discourse, is a suitable index of how seriously these aspects of the subculture are taken.

For Kate, *matatu* names remind her of stories that she has either heard or read and the TV soaps she has watched. For example, the *matatu Bianca*, she says, reminds her of "some story on Queen Bianca I read in school." Also, she sees such names as ways of experimenting with identities. Pointing at two *matatu* racing each other up the street, she observes: "Look at this one, *Lil' Romeo*. Reminds me of Shakespeare. Poetry. But look at the other one, *Zainabu*. Between these two, if I were to choose the one that expresses the 'beautiful woman' idea, I'd take *Zainabu*, a cool African name, beautiful as any and of course better than Shakespeare's Juliet". *Lil' Romeo* is an African American rapper and his name, posted on a *matatu*, seems intended more to evoke dreams than poetic raps; if aware of it, my informant blissfully ignores the Arabic

origin of her preferred Zainabu. However, the key issue for our purposes is that even amongst hip *matatu* names, Ann sees a tension between identity aspirations.

It can therefore be seen that these names, read as floating signifiers, are vehicles to imagined spaces. For instance, Mary, a supermarket sales girl, loves *matatu* names because they echo her desires. They kindle romantic delights, and she fantasizes about expensive things like nice houses that she knows she cannot otherwise have. “*The Bold and the Beautiful!* Any time I am coming to town, I want to take that *matatu*. In there, I am in a dream world thinking of my own Ridge Forrester.”¹⁷ *Wild Rose*, *The Rich also Cry* and *Sind Band the Sailor* are other *matatu* names adopted from TV programs and cited by passengers as enabling them to imagine and vicariously experience exotic lifestyles. In this sense, the evocation of these names/places on *matatu* map the imagination of self onto different topos upon which is projected an alternative identity. It is clear from the way informants interpret *matatu* names and designs that these texts are read as floating signifiers.

In their study of advertising Goldman and Papsan have used the *Nike Swoosh* to demonstrate a cardinal principle of advertising that can be used to show how signs in popular culture operate; “Contemporary advertising traffics endlessly in decontextualized, **free-floating** signifiers, combining and recombining them without limit” (1998:25.Emphasis in original). This enables not just the emptying out of meanings from specific cultural signs but also, more importantly, allows for the layering of additional ones, an extremely productive way for anyone interested in fashioning an identity out of the chips availed by consumer culture. In like manner, *matatu* culture’s expressive forms imbricate prior meanings even as new ones are encoded in the reterritorialized signs. Of significance is how these ‘new’ codes are redeployed to simultaneously retain continuity with prior referents while at the same time accenting difference. In so doing, spaces of ambivalence are opened up that enable crews to re/invent their identity in desired ways. The flux suggested here perfectly fits the trickster’s needs as he is free to adapt his guise into any mode that he can then exploit to his advantage. Visibility in *matatu* culture is particularly important given that effective self-advertisement is a key element of the occupational. Indeed, crews are categorical that catchy names, for themselves and their vehicles, are useful in attracting passengers. However, in a conversation with his tout, one *matatu* driver—who used the same pronoun references for himself and the car—said that *he* would rather not have a name since anonymity enables *him* to hide from the police after making a traffic infringement. “That way”, he said, “*we* are like white furred sheep and unless he [policeman] writes down *my* registration [number], he will never catch *me*.” Nonetheless, even in this loner’s desire for anonymity, we see his implied admission that names, more than anything else, make *matatu* most conspicuous.

2.6. Embodied Spectacle and Consumer Discourse

In *matatu* culture, crews are keen to set up their bodies as sites for the performance of machismo; jewels, flashy *gear* and a general ‘money-appearance.’ This is geared towards enhancing the desirability of the male body by the female. In contrast, going by the picture stickers posted on *matatu*, the ‘true woman’ is framed in terms of ‘the more exposed the better’, a body revealed for the erotic gaze. Stickers of a skimpily clad hip hop star Faith Evans/Lady Eve are quite popular on *matatu*. In short, the emphasis is on a female body that opens up for scrutiny and evokes desire. Accordingly, when youthful *matatu* crews and their girlfriends go *henging* (S. Partying) in the numerous up-market entertainment spots, they dress more or less in the code set out above. One such scantily dressed twenty year old informant, Paula, confessed: “*Tusipopiga shine kaa hii, hawa mateeny wote wataishia kwa wale madame wanajua kuvaa* [S. Unless we dress like this, all these boys will run to the girls who know how to dress up.”

This view is common among young women in Nairobi, meaning that by their dress, they seek to pander to their male partners’ egos as a way of making them feel the focus of attention. Hence

even as their real intention might be to strike a chic pose, these women are actually working within the local traditional conception of women as members of a supporting cast, with males in the center. By reifying their femininity thus, Nairobi's youthful females in fact help restore power relations to more or less stable positions where crews feel in control again i.e. remolding the feminine body to enable a better male consumptive gaze. Thus, by deploying the general cultural style revolving around a (post)modern musical form, *matatu* culture at one level has part of its glance cast back, inwards, to a halcyon order of traditional societies while at another level the eye is trained outwards onto a cosmopolitan modernity. If the topography of masculinity in *matatu* culture charted above is correct, then we might apprehend the profound complementarity between the sexually charged language with which road behavior is apprehended, examined in the fourth chapter, and the popularity of raps' explicit, sexist slurs.

Mwangi, a *manamba*, was quite unequivocal as he stated in Sheng:

Unachekei hawa madame, kaa wewe ni fala hata hawaangalii dinga ya yours. Lazima uweke jina poa kwa dinga, unaona. Na bado, lazima upige shine moja ya mwaka kila siku. Ukiona machali wengine kaa sisi hatuna kitu, kwacha yetu yote inaishia kubembeleza wadhii. Hewa nazo ndio hizo [You see these girls, if you are the backward type they do not even look at your vehicle. You must have a cool name on your vehicle, you see. And that is not all, you must dress stylishly every day. If you find that some of us owning nothing, all our money goes to pleasing passengers. And still you have to have nice music.

(2001)

Indeed, at one time *Prince Naseem* was the most popular *matatu* while Mwangi and his driver, Ahmed, were voted the most courteous crew on route 45. For him, therefore, image is very important. Joy, a computer trainee and a passenger on route 23 agrees, saying that “we *dot.commers* are not looking just for a *matatu*; we're looking for comfort. We want to travel in style—*mahewa jo* [S. Music, esp. hip hop man]!” ‘*Dot.commers*’ is the name Nairobi youth give themselves, a variation away from the earlier ‘young turks’; one *matatu* is named *.com Generation* (Figure 8).

In their choice of names, crews rely heavily on their knowledge of popular fashion trends, as part of their cultural capital. Hence, even though on the one hand they say that they are mainly guided by passenger tastes in their choice of *matatu* names, on the other hand crews select expressive forms that specifically cater for a self-centered (re)molding of their identity. This enables crews to use names that focus upon the bodies, technological and social, that they control as a way of enhancing their cultural capital. Bockock has argued that the adorned body is an ideologically coded-text (1995:102-103). Hence, he observes, cultivated looks supply codes by which the semiotic body thus presented is read by others. Differently put, forms of dress construct and sell an idea; forms of costume and décor, in specific combinations, package an embodied idea.

Take the case of Sammy, a *konkodi* in his early 20s. On a day when he was off-duty, he arrives for our interview dressed in new jeans pants, matching shirt and a pair of brand new *Timberland* boots. Around his neck rests a thin imitation gold chain, his hair is a slick curly kit, and a tiny gold stud nestles pat in his right earlobe. In Nairobi, this young man's *gear* costs roughly 9000 Kenya shillings (USD115) while his daily wage averages to a monthly total of 7000 Kenya shillings. How he makes such expensive purchases and is still able to meet his recurrent expenses is another matter but he does not live cheaply. His is a heavy investment since he has at least three other similar outfits. The same story, with minor variations in costume and décor, is found among the youth working along Nairobi's more lucrative routes (23, 44, 58, 11). Bandanas, armbands and football capes, rakishly worn back to front, are quite popular. Two men had even had their real front teeth, one each, replaced with glittering false gold sets; an elderly *matatu* driver declared this latter practice “infantile behavior.”

Peter, a teacher who holds an MA, was quick to point out that even with his “two degrees and a salary” he could not afford to spend on clothes in six months what a *manamba*’s monthly expenditure on fashionable attire; “I have always suspected that mine is the wrong profession! These guys are doing well but as they say *muiritu mwega athiaga o-na makanga* [G. A good girl only goes out with a *makanga*].”¹⁸ However such fashion behavior is interpreted, it is must be seen as a core aspect of crews’ overall technology of self-representation. Indeed, this living well, or at least the impression of it, is a popular strategy of self representation in Nairobi generally and Peter’s sardonic comments help to show how successfully *matatu* workers have made themselves visible.

Ann, a *matatu* passenger, explains the adorned body in terms of identification codes: “For us *dot.commers*, the *matatu*’s type of *konkodi* [S. driver] and *dere* [S.driver] matter a lot. He has to be smartly dressed, you know *Nike*, *Ruff Ryder*, *Sean John* and *Fubu*. That way we find them [sic] appealing. They have to be like us.” Since a *makanga*’s work involves a lot of movement and negotiation with customers, he is more visible than the driver. As Graebner (1992:3) observes, the *manamba*’s antics attract more attention in *matatu* culture; as the star performer, he has to be appropriately costumed. In contrast, Ann says that she “wouldn’t be caught anywhere near the ugly old *matatu* with no *hewa* and conductors dressed in coats.” These responses further indicate Nairobi youth’s desire to keep up with the times. “Tired” *matatu*, as they are known in the subculture, is another name for the old *matatu* also denigratingly referred to as *mitumba*,¹⁹ after a famous, vast used-clothes market near Nairobi’s Country Bus Station. Since Ann and her friends do not consider themselves tired/old they even pay extra to travel on the newer *matatu* on route 23 rather than ride the *mitumba*. This way, they get to listen to rap and watch movies on the DVD players that installed in their favorite *matatu* and generally meet like-minded peers.

It is from such habitual patronage of specific *matatu* by passengers that casual relationships develop, more often between crews and female passengers, and in the course of time extended off duty.²⁰ Joni, for instance, recognizes the fact that looks sell and says that since he is “single and looking,” then he feels that he has to work hard and polish up his image “so that they [girls] will keep looking at me. That way, I might land myself a wife.” Baby-faced, the puny Joni draws attention by toting around a huge teddy bear, its size nearly obscuring his body, his oversize beach shorts hanging from bright orange suspenders. Though he is supposed to be the revving up the vehicle, he prefers to play the *konkodi*’s role and monkeys around the door as his *matatu* fills up, in this way attracting a lot of attention. This particular trickster’s comic act seems successful since, he claims, girls never leave him alone, which matters immensely for the *matatu* man’s ego. Overall the hodge podge manner in which crews gather elements from popular culture in the construction of their image enables a problematization of *matatu* culture’s identity. This has to do with what I would call “staged identities”²¹ within the conceptualization of *matatu* culture as play; its template opens up space for transgression. One way of probing this identity is to consider informants’ views of the *manamba*’s body. My young female informants said that they find the *matatu* man’s rough-hewn physical bearing appealing, even sensual, and would rather that crews maintain that image. Conversely, their dislike for men in formal dress can be taken as a direct indictment of the mainstream’s emphasis of the suit-and-necktie male as the epitomization of culture. For crews, within a structure of embodied performativity, looks are a vital prop as they seek to cater for various marketplace demands and hence, partly, the reason for their oft-shifting identities. *Matatu* in this case become sites of and for a staged identity based on a rarely spoken passenger demand for crews’ conformity to a stereotype macho image. However, such passenger demands play directly into crews’ wish to cut and maintain an image of ‘toughness’ since, often as not, their job in the first place requires them to be “rough”, characterized as it is by general hostility from numerous quarters—passengers, police, competing crews, route gangs and, often, robbers.

Directly descended from the above, *makanga* liberally use 'foul' language with which they enhance their rough-cut character. Moreover, they are quite aware that a section of passengers expect and even appreciate that kind of language. Wangeci, a *matatu* passenger who has traveled on *matatu* all her life, delineates the character and rationale of such excesses quite succinctly;

the *matatu* is the right ground for so many things that would be considered unethical or antisocial in any other place. It is not just desires that run riot. If some of this behavior took place in any other context, e.g. in a church or classroom, it would call for lots of trouble. In a *matatu* violation is physical, emotional, verbal and non-verbal and the context in which they occur could therefore also explain why there has been no serious public protest. I think the *matatu* is just a fertile ground for many types of displays and the responses those displays generate.

(2003)

The *matatu* then is a space of license, operating on an order of inversion very much within the carnivalesque, which explains why a number of passengers enjoy the various dramas as they themselves violate others or sit back to witness such violation. *Matatu* crews also know that this is a site where their transgressions will not only mostly be tolerated but will also be egged on. In this way, the 'bad boy' image raised above crystallizes into a normative ideal for many a *matatu* worker. In fact those among them that might be reluctant or are unable to conform might have the lesson driven home quite bluntly, as Karis' case, below, illustrates.

A route 23 *konkodi*, Karis narrated how upon employment he would turn up for work dressed in neat formal dress. Girls on his route promptly asked his employer, to either replace him with "someone who *knows* how to dress" or ask him to *dress properly*. When I met him in August 2002, a year after since receiving his ultimatum, Karis was quite properly costumed for his role: *Nike* boots, faded jeans, a *Ruff Ryder* Shirt, corn-rows, a red polka dot bandana and white armband. He had graduated into the *lebo* [label] fashion system. He complements his newly cultured look by liberally spicing his Sheng with "oh-meen--shit!" and "what the fuck!" type of phrases, his accent twangy enough to sound nearly American. He has developed a near-cult following among a large group of clients, male and female, who will not travel in any other *matatu* and had rather wait for long hours for 'him' to show up. Like other *matatu* men occupying such a pedestal, and with as much cultural capital as he commands, his excessively bedecked body is an apt trope for the urban youth identity. Karis and his colleagues Sammy and Joni command a significant portion of the signs and meanings that are trafficked in Nairobi's cultural contests.

However, crews' rough-hewn identity is looked at disapprovingly by many elderly folk in Nairobi who see *makanga*, often cited as representatives of *matatu* culture, as an index of "how *bad* today's youth have become"; "*wamepotea* [K. They are lost]", "*Washaharibika hawa* [K. These ones are already crooked/spoilt]", I was repeatedly told. An elderly male passenger, wondering why I would be interested in the "lost generation" he deems *matatu* people to be, advised thus: "When you write your book, you must state that we could do without all this Western influence. Our values are no more!" He wouldn't say what he considered "our values" to be, or how the onslaught of Western influence might be stemmed, but it was clear that his angst arose primarily from an inter-generational clash of world-views and practices. This represents some of the tensions between traditional values from Kenyan cultures and aspects of modernity adopted by Nairobi youth culture.

The foregoing might be seen even more clearly in urban hip hop whose loud lyrics on *matatu* have not helped to resolve the rift between cultural conservatism and youth innovation. A livid informant, Mwaura, described rap onomatopoeically, and with a sense of drama, as "the *dukuduku* banging of pots, pans and iron sheets by all the devils from hell gathered in one *matatu*." Finding itself caught in such fierce generational crosscurrents, *matatu* culture has

resorted to carving an aggressive identity—loud music, ‘loud’ dress and equally shrill names. The adoption of such ‘rudeness’ is a tactic of signification within an overall concern with self-visibility.

Nairobi’s little-known *designers* also come in at this juncture. Being members of what they call the ‘young generation’, these artists are very much aware of what animates the pulse of youth culture. I witnessed one of them, Charles, at the *Catskill Auto Tech* workshop in Nairobi’s Eastlands in the process of transforming the blank blue surface background of a new *matatu* body into a colorful *design*, *Mirth Shuttle* (Figure 9). Like *matatu* crews, he sees himself as part of youth culture’s larger process of selling catchy dreams; his specialty is distant places and figures. His designs are unlike those on long distance buses going to the countryside that ‘patriotically’ sport names and portraits of leading black (nationalist) figures; [Nelson] *Mandela*, *Jomo* [Kenyatta](Figure 10), [Dedan] *Kimathi*, [Martin] *Luther King*, [Al] *Sharpton*, *Shaka Zulu* and *Malcolm X* and the U.N.’s [Kofi] *Anan*. In fast-flowing Sheng, Charles legitimizes his practice thus:

Hizo majina na zile za hawa runners, hizo zinapendwa na watu wa Mungiki [route cartel]. *Hao unajua ndio wanapenda hii maneno ya Mau Mau na vitu kaa hizo*. Young generation *wameenda kwa mamovies na hii muzic ya kutoka ng’ambo sana sana America*. Hahaha! (Emphatically shakes his head), *nikidesign hiyo kwa matatu ya mtu, hakuna job nitapewa tena na wenye kununua mathree*. *Kaa hii 23, hakuna wadhii wataingia hiyo*. *Labda upeleke na huko D* [Those names and those of these [Kenyan] runners, those appeal to the *Mungiki*. Those, you know, are the ones who like this story of *Mau Mau* and those kinds of things/issues. The young generation has moved on to movies and music from abroad, mostly America. ... If I design that [nationalist figures] on anyone’s *matatu*, I will never get another design job from anyone who buys a *matatu*. Like on this [route no.] 23, no passengers will board that *matatu*. May be you’d have to take it to *D* [Dandora estate].

(2002)

In his explanation, Charles is awake to the various discourses around which Kenyans’ diverse identity narratives and worldviews can be and are woven; first, the nationalist (*Mau Mau*; *Mungiki* romanticizes the liberation movement) of which *Kimathi* and *Jomo* were associated; second, international sports (Kenyan track runners); third, the culture industry (American movies and music); and, fourth, consumer practices (the mannerisms of route 23 commuters).

However, even though the youth are aware of international sports as a consumer commodity, only English Football and American Basketball passionately engage their fancy, local athletics heroes being shunned perhaps because they do not seem to have the required exotic glamour. Thus it is vital that the designer knows how to position himself strategically within the competing narratives and consumerist frames that govern the lifestyles of Nairobi youth if he is to keep his niche in the design business. In short *matatu* are turned into moving billboards dedicated more or less to the advertisement of fantasies only that these are no longer mere imaginary stuff since nearly all these commodities are within arm’s reach of the buyer who can afford them. In this way, designers can be seen to be at once participants in youth culture and chroniclers of its icons. “*Tuseme ni kaa kuuza perfume fulani kwa supaa* [S. Let’s say it’s like selling a perfume brand in a supermarket]. You must know what the youth want and give it to them. They want exotic things, movies, perfumes and clothes from abroad,” Charles asserts and points out a number 23 *matatu*, *Christian Dior* (Figure 11), to demonstrate what he means by youth desires. The perfume, like all *matatu* texts, has double signification; at once metonymic to youth desire at the same time as it symbolically masks the *matatu* man’s excesses, his ‘stinking’ side.

Designers and crews relate the inversely diminished use of written stickers in *matatu* to the rise of the billboard-like *matatu* design.²² Being tiny by nature, sticker print is deemed unsuitable as a medium for the conspicuous advertisement of specifically conceived ‘dreams.’ However, as I show shortly, print stickers have another role in the construction of the subculture’s worldview. Picture stickers that bear images of popular icons of the American entertainment industry predominate the interior of *matatu*. Hip hop stars (e.g. Eve, Tyrese, Lauryn Hill, Puff Daddy, Benzino, Tupac Shakur), professional wrestling figures (Undertaker, Kane, Stone Cold, Macho Man, Diamond Dallas Page, Hulk Hogan, Shawn Michaels, British Bulldog and Big Show “Giant”) and sports figures and team logos (Michael Jordan, Bulls, Lakers) are the pre-eminent inspirations for these picture stickers.²³

In line with this, *designers* take care to have the external display on the vehicle ‘connect’ with picture stickers displayed inside. As such, since picture stickers and external designs are sourced from the same pool, they merge into a remarkably harmonized esthetic display. Further, since these latter two forms are adapted from the same popular culture sources, they have a hegemonic style whose esthetics written stickers are considered to disturb and are thus less used.

2.7 Sticky Meanings: The Sticker as Contest(ed) Discourse

Passengers, both male and female, have ambivalent feelings about written and picture stickers. Responses here fall into three categories. The first, a minority, does not know what to make of stickers and see them as “dirtifying” the vehicles. In any case, they said, since *matatu* people are “strange”, “weird” and “you cannot understand them at all”, getting at the real meaning of written stickers would be difficult. However, they agree that since these stickers are such a common phenomenon, they must mean something to *matatu* people. Accordingly, they argued that only crews can accurately say what such stickers might mean.

The second category of informants, both female and male, views stickers within a range of purely negative terms; a “public irritation”, “purely intended to offend, particularly women”, “perfect examples of male chauvinism” and “pornographic.” Stickers cited as offensive in this way all related to female sexuality, with informants pointing out that they are meant to depict women as “mere sex objects”. They stated that such stickers represent the entrenched views of male-oriented traditional Kenyan cultures. As such, they are seen as an avenue through which men legitimize their domination of women, arguing that from the language of the stickers, it is clear that they must have been written “not just by men but, specifically Gikuyu men.”²⁴ One of them, Njuguna, said that a ban on stickers would be welcome, since “some of these stickers depict things that our African culture (*sic*) does not allow us to even mention in public.” As proof, this informant cited a sticker depicting a boy in the shape of a screw running after a girl in the shape of a nut²⁵ and declared, “even if your mother was illiterate and you were traveling with her in the *matatu*, surely she’d figure out what this is all about. Imagine the embarrassment it’d cause both of you.” His solution to what he calls a ‘moral problem’ is to enforce aspects of Kenyan law that prohibit the public expression of “indecent behavior”, which law he says applies to such *matatu* stickers as well. Thus we see how readers resort to other discourses and moral worldviews in their interaction with stickers, and that visual sensation, besides writing, also plays a crucial part in this process.

The third category presents a paradox of sorts. While seeing stickers as being “somehow offensive”, these informants also appreciate them but from a rather unorthodox perspective; they rewrite them. In so doing, they reverse the messages, reading them backwards such that sexist stickers on women are turned round against men. Grace, for example, was outraged when she first saw the sticker “*A woman is a common maize cob for every man with teeth to chew*”, but not for long. “I thought to myself, women are cheap, huh, is this what this sticker is saying? I turned it backwards, “*A woman is not a maize cob for any man, with or without teeth, to chew!*” she says. She is satisfied at having revised and therefore neutered its negative message. Grace also relishes playing “mind games with words” during a *matatu* ride and admits that even though she

is a *dot.commer*, and therefore expected to be more liberal, she would rather see written stickers instead of ones carrying pictures posted in *matatu*. There is, she says, a border beyond which a woman's body cannot be revealed if the sticker text is to remain "decent."

Instead of empty interior *matatu* surfaces, some informants within this third category would prefer have the stickers, even though offensively worded, since they offer something to think about. Eunice's response aptly summarizes this line of thought:

You're coming from work and the first thing on your mind is how to get home. You get into this overloaded *matatu* and you're squeezed and tossed from all directions. A sticker posted on the window, nasty and naughty as it might be, is always a very soothing distraction. Simply thinking about it takes my mind off my immediate hassles.

(2002)

For her, like the *matatu* driver cited earlier who plays loud music to kill the boredom of routine driving, stickers are 'creative fillers' that help her cope with the stress of a *matatu* ride. Within this conceptualization, some stickers are seen as "purely humorous" devices for coping with the stress of urban life. For instance, *Am not deaf, am just ignoring you* depicts a woman shouting into a man's face; learning to ignore male advances is an important survival strategy for many a young schoolgirl. For Steven, the issue is quite simply utilitarian; "Even if the *makanga* removed these stickers, what are they to do with that empty space?"²⁶ *Matatu* crews share this last view. Bena, a *makanga*, states:

Nikicheki tu sticker poa, naikwachu na kubandika faster. Hii ride ya kwenda town ni ndefu sana, na badala ya kuangalia na kumezea wadhii, naona heri niziweke ndio nioccupy. Si hata wewe unajua vile kumeharibika, sitaki kubongesha madame sana. Heri nicheki mastickers zangu [S. Immediately I see a cool sticker, I grab it quickly and stick it on. This ride to town [Nairobi] is too long, and instead of staring and admiring the passengers, I prefer to occupy myself looking at these stickers. Even you know how bad things have become, and so I don't want to chat up the girls too much. I'd rather look at my stickers].

(2001)

Indeed, the roof behind the driver's seat has a neat row of stickers depicting women's large busts, red pouting lips and arrow-pierced 'love hearts'. Thus for Bena, these are a diversion that help him handle his anxieties about AIDS, which some *matatu* stickers address. Incidentally, no matter how hard crews were pushed to say why they had chosen a particular sticker, they invariably avoided the question by saying instead who it was chosen to please—either passengers or themselves. When I pointed out the fact that some passengers considered some stickers offensive, citing the 'maize cob' one as an example, they said that passengers found them funny. The fact that only female passengers, never male, took exception to the display of half-naked bodies in *matatu* stickers was lost on these crews. Furthermore, they would not say what the meanings of these 'offensive'-type of stickers were, but from their mischievous laughter, it was possible to see that they considered them 'naughty' enough to want to display them. A discussion of this nature usually drew animated participation from my informants, quickly veering off towards (their) social views on women.

However, from the three types of responses outlined above, we can map possible grounds upon which *matatu* stickers may be fruitfully read. First, they can be taken as commentaries on aspects of *matatu* work at the conflictual interface between a subculture's norms and those of other city subcultures. In other words, these stickers simultaneously affirm and breach norms. The use of civil law to deal with what are regarded 'pornographic' aspects of this subculture can be seen as attempts to demarcate boundaries between the acceptable and the unacceptable. From Bourdieu's (1984) critique of taste we may take the invocation of civil law by authorities as a perfect case of

the dominant culture's attempts at defining and delimiting the parameters of taste within the public domain.

Second, stickers can be seen as expressing a worldview, whether this is based on carryovers of tradition or rooted squarely within the practices of modernity. Arising from this, and complemented by crews' idiom, the eidetic sexism in sticker discourse is couched within an awareness of power relations. Gender thus becomes a subject of public contestation within the sticker form. Ideas about money, power and beauty derived from sayings and proverbs also inform the content of stickers and will be discussed in the following chapter.

Third, even if we were to admit the notion that stickers serve purely functional needs—decorative, leisurely contemplation, advertisement—we nonetheless find enough clues embedded into these texts and that point towards underlying nuances, conflicts and viewpoints to dissuade us from such a notion. My argument is that since *matatu* stickers are not mere decorations, as free-floating forms they imbricate positions, attitudes and beliefs that crews might not otherwise be willing to state bluntly in conversations. They are tactics of evasion. As an expressive aspect of *matatu* lore operating within a broader context of social relations, these stickers are used to stake claims, presumably of crews as 'writers'. Reader-viewers are free to identify with or counter such positions based on their own socially-determined claims. Expressive forms displayed internally and externally on *matatu* surface need to be seen as complementary aspects of a larger subcultural discourse.

Hence we see that beyond their esthetic value, stickers have a qualitative element in that they 'fill up' the experience of a *matatu* ride with something to think about. This is so because beyond the casual, overt meaning of such texts passengers will often take time to ponder the motivations of sticker writers and users. It is during this moment of contemplation that other discourses and experiences are recalled and marshaled to aid the interpretation process, like other studies on the phenomenon have indicated (e.g. Salamon 2001; Enersby and Towle 1996; Case 1992). Furthermore, since *matatu* stickers have both a picture as well as written content, even the illiterate can still respond to sticker discourse. However, such readers rely only on one part of the code for interpretation, say, an exposed female body. In the relatively conservative culture of Nairobi, such display attracts much commentary from passengers and has become part of public discourse, mainly through personal experience narratives.

2.8 Conclusion

Overall, *matatu* culture needs to be seen as a site of encounter and sustained negotiation that results from such contact. In it designers play the crucial role of mediating and thus translating between diverse worlds. They vivify the imagined far away by bringing it up close for local public gaze on the *matatu* surface. Ensuing associational meanings operate very much to create consumption drives in the manner Deleuze and Guattari characterize desire as a function of cultural seduction (1977). As agents of consumer seduction, designers trade in the representation of symbols that enable Nairobi youth to conceptualize the oneiric as attainable.

It is in and through the expression of desires thus evoked that Nairobi youth express their various identities. *Matatu* designs, taken as floating signifiers, are shorthand invocations of other, deeper texts—real and imagined, the local and the 'foreign', the traditional viewed through the prism postmodernity. In operating thus, the culture becomes very much an exercise in bricolage (Hebdige 1979), appropriating items from all sorts of fields and merging them into a uniquely distinct identity. Style here is a sign in a "semiological guerrilla warfare" (Eco 1986:135), with the look being one of the subculture's vital centerpiece. Necessarily, this leads to the construction of hybrid bodies through hybrid practices that give the subculture its tone. The resulting crossings, social and bodily, enable space for transgression (Stallybrass and White 1986; Kapchan and Strong 1999).

Arising from the fact that *matatu* culture comprises unstable signs, it follows that there cannot be fixed meanings to its expressive forms. This however, is not to say they cannot be reasonably if

tentatively determined. The suggestion rather is that we can only arrive at patterns of meaning in the subculture's expressive behavior derived from the totality of the *matatu* experience as a socially situated activity. The moment of this experience is the ground that lends meaning(s) to popular culture items displayed on *matatu* or embodied by crews and passengers. What is more, since meanings created in this way are themselves not static, particular situations call for associational meanings contingent to particular circumstances of occurrence. An awareness of how negotiation leads to contingency, and how such contingency informs negotiation, is important in the apprehension of identities in *matatu* culture. It is at the moment of the sign's contingency that local flavor is injected into the global and therefore localizing it. In the fracture, local sayings, proverbs, practices of the street and of urbanite residents in general are inserted into the cultural encounter. This could explain why *matatu* names are probably the most remarked upon aspects of the culture; they merge signs from disparate sources in, often, startlingly precise ways.

External texts enhance the visibility of both the vehicle and the culture. In this case, *matatu* culture can be read within the terms of consumer culture. This is a significant point at which *matatu* culture responds to the global marketplace by appropriating tools for its self-expression (Bocock 1993). Thus, through popular culture *matatu* culture brings local consumer practices to speak to larger global flows of capital and consumer trends. *Timberland* and *Nike* boots are as much an American commodity as they have become Kenyan. Inscribed as they are with the notion of a desired exotic status, such 'foreign' brands are used to capture imagined states, thus integrating the foreign into self-definition (Halstead 2002). All the above ways help to stamp impressions upon Nairobi youth culture, giving *matatu* crews, in lieu of educational capital, the cultural capital required to enable them achieve their desired image of the male body.

Matatu culture, as we have seen, meshes several inter-linked discourses, weaving back and forth between their various strands. The important thing for our purposes is to identify the main strands in this process in order to see how transformations occur at the interfaces to enable the expression of identity among *matatu* folk. The attendant reciprocal processes at play in *matatu* culture's expressive transactions can be seen to make for a true marketplace. In a sense, like in a commercial bargain, the culture's relations are governed by adjustment of positions, shifts in attitudes to accommodate new ideas and forms of expression and the outright rejection of others. This is a form of cultural bargaining.

The first of these threads is the value system derived from the traditional *matatu* workers' traditional backgrounds. Here, I am basing my argument on aspects of Gikuyu worldview that are discernible in this culture. From these, the importance ascribed to gender roles, wealth, social success and responsibility can be seen. In effect, my position is that crews' use of sexist language, in direct speech and other expressive forms is a deliberate means to staking claims mapped along traditional conceptions of gender. Furthermore, other road users, particularly female drivers, are conscious of the sexist, but very concrete, power relations enshrined in this type of language use.

Secondly, it can be seen that that their expressive forms are merely the overt level at which covert symbolic contestation of other issues takes place. Particularly relevant to such a mode of subversion is the use of expressive display to parody state power, more so because the conception of threat in *matatu* culture is not limited to modern women. How *matatu* culture addresses real and perceived threats through stickers is assessed in the next chapter.

Thirdly, the culture's expressive forms enable us vital glimpses into the interactions between oral and written cultures with stickers being a significant part of this process. A large corpus of written stickers has its genesis in oral practice, for instance traditional sayings and proverbs. Even where they are not directly based on traditional sayings or proverbs, they express traditional folk beliefs and values. Putting these into writing can then be seen as the adaptation of an oral genre onto a material culture genre—the sticker. In this way, orality is brought to

dialogue with popular culture in an urban context. Also, these stickers become so common on *matatu* that they coalesce into a resource base from which passengers tap expressions for use in their everyday conversations about *matatu*-related experience. As in the case of my informants, often when a passenger is presented with a specific sticker and asked to comment, the tendency is to reel off a number of thematically inter-related stickers. The significance of this is that a popular culture form is here the agency through which oral culture is coded, purveyed and disseminated back into orality (conversation). In the next chapter I turn to consider how the subculture's various relatively fixed, non-oral forms function to mark the *matatu* man's identity.

Notes

¹ In total there are 50 in-depth interviews with *matatu* crews, policemen, commuters, designers, sticker peddlers and route workers in Nairobi supplemented by observation notes.

² For other euphemisms see Appendix III.

³ A majority of the workforce on *matatu* is Gikuyu (Khayesi 1997) and therefore many phrases and notions from Gikuyu traditions filter into the subculture. See Chapter Four Appendix II for other derisive references to the police. Hannerz (1969) identifies a trickster pattern in forms of public self-representation by African American 'ghetto men' who feel that they need to put up many fronts, switching back and forth depending on who they are interacting with, in order to keep up socially desired identities. *Matatu* men utilize a similar concept in presenting their imagined identities, only that they map theirs according to narcissistic, not socially-defined needs.

⁴ The same holds for some law enforcement officials; they try to establish who owns a *matatu*—whether some 'big'[rich] man or a senior police officer, in which case a violation is ignored—before becoming too insistent on some of the demands they make upon crews. A number of crews boasted that they were "untouchable" because their *wadosi* [S. *matatu* owners] were policemen; other crews lamented that this phenomenon was a real obstacle to the running of *matatu* work. Since it was futile to arrest untouchable crews, one *konkodi* suggested that the police should instead "cane them on the spot"—he did not indicate whether he himself would submit to such punishment.

⁵ I witnessed most of these confrontations while some were related to me by passengers and crews during interviews. Weaponry included rubber whips, truncheons, sticks, stones, machetes and empty soda bottles.

⁶ These are up-market restaurants popular with the youth especially for their dance menus. *Carni* is the street clipping of the fuller name, *Carnivore*. Koinange refers to a Nairobi street popular for commercial sex; it is also known as K Street.

⁷ To be sure, here Geertz is specifically referring to religious symbols but the argument can apply to symbols in general, more so if his argument is taken alongside our awareness of how media images work (see in particular Goldman and Papson 1998) in what Geertz calls the comprehensive and fruitful ordering experience (1973:128).

⁸ For example, rapper Killer Mike explains how the baggy pants now considered 'cool' grew out of a culture of poverty necessitating ghetto youngsters to wear many clothes in which to hide the drugs they were pushing. He says of shoes with hidden compartments worn in the ghettos: "Niggas ain't hiding pens and pencils in there. It's drug culture. We do what is practical. And then kids from other cultures pick it up because they think it's cool. But it ain't cool; it's poverty" (Blanco 2002). See also Rhea (2001) on the subject of black American youths (mis)taking the glamour ('bling bling') of hip hop for the real thing. If the

latter can get enthralled by the bling bling of hip hop it should be possible to see how much more seriously the culture might be misconstrued in Nairobi, thousands of miles removed from the poverty and racial injustices of the South Bronx.

⁹ For instance, *matatu* crews say that they would rather cultivate the look of African American rappers Ja Rule or Jayz rather than that of say black South African reggae star Lucky Dube or the ‘bad boy’ of Nigerian high life pop Fela Anikulapo Kuti. Clearly, the distinct label ‘American’ on one set of icons makes it more yearned for than the set marked ‘African’ within a consumer/identity discourse that privileges the ‘foreign’. This is not to say that crews denigrate (their) locally-bred blackness, it just makes sense in their representational logics, as in the case of the Sape of Congo-Brazzaville (Hecht and Simone 1994; Friedman 1998), that one label is more useful than the other.

¹⁰ This might explain why many African Americans gravitate towards rap rather than reggae, sub-genres of which, with an Afrocentric ‘roots’ agenda, do not speak to modernity as most American blacks would wish to see it (see Potter 1995:123). The same might be said of Nairobi *matatu* culture’s general abandonment of roots reggae but this also needs to be seen as a re-orientation of the mask—the real desired social order for *matatu* crews is wired to a traditional frame rooted in local culture.

¹¹ That this is so can be seen in the rejection of Central African Lingala dance styles like *Ndombolo*, fashionable in Nairobi in the late 1980s. Even though it was based on a high powered, sensual gyration of the hips, few people understood its wording. Despite its tantalizing bodily seductions it was quickly supplanted first by Techno pop in the early 1990s and then in the 1990s by hip hop, whose English raps gave them added value since they were comprehensible. Another reason was, one suspects, that even though it is a black dance style from Cameroon, it was not considered exotic enough; hence the embracing of black hip hop first and foremost since it is American and fits the bill of the alluring exotic.

¹² Popular rappers whose music I found being played in *matatu* include Ja Rule, Ludacris, Exzibit, Busta Rhyme, Shaggy, Puff Daddy etc. The moral panic occasioned by hip hop led to the Recording Industry Association of America to require the display of the “Parental Advisory Services/Explicit Content” label on albums whose lyrics were likely to be deemed to contain ‘improper’ language (Holden 1999: 12). For rap’s politics of violence and the violence of its politics see Potter 1995:94-97; Ogg and Upshall 1999:137-176; Springall 1998:149-151).

¹³ Even among black rappers and intellectuals, there is considerable disagreement over whether it can be convincingly claimed that the sexist idiom of hip hop can convincingly be explained as “cultural” signifying (for diverse positions see Gilroy 1993:84; Potter 1995; Ogg and Upshall 1999; McGregory 2003). Thus, even if one were to hold with McGregory that within signifying practice hip hop intends to ameliorate the pejorative terms it deploys, it cannot be denied that their valence is not uprooted from, but reinvented within, the larger sociolinguistic-cultural constructs. Hence, listeners unfamiliar with the social-cultural contexts of hip hop, even in the US, would most likely seize upon the literal rather than the figurative signification of its tropes.

¹⁴ Nairobi’s female rappers’ tracks are rarely, if at all, played on *matatu*. Also stickers that rework or counter the culture’s sexism are hardly displayed on *matatu*, and those that have positive messages about women are mostly deployed on private vehicles. The dynamics of interaction on *matatu* are determined by the fact that these vehicles have traditionally been a male-controlled space.

¹⁵ Contra Kershaw’s (1997) assertion that *nothing* in Gikuyu ideology constructs women as inferior to men, Gikuyu folklore has for long been a site for the active constitution of exactly such a view of women. A popular Gikuyu myth tells how men, after having been tyrannized by their women folk when the latter wielded political power, overthrew the women by impregnating them. After this ‘revolution’, the first order of business by men was to take up the prerogative to have multiple spouses, a right previously solely enjoyed by the female rulers (See Kenyatta 1966[1942]). By this process, we see power explicitly coded in sexual relations, the women’s right to which is directly linked to the subjugation of their political power. This does not make women inferior to men, true, but it makes them *unequal*.

¹⁶ Amongst other things, the Minister of Transport and Communications announced ‘tough’ ‘new’ operating requirements for *matatu* effective February 1, 2004. These include having the vehicles being painted in one color, being fitted with seatbelts and speed governors, and having crews in uniform and identification tags (See Siringi 2003). These rules are not essentially new; they have never been enforced. Crews argue that they would look like “school boys”, a bad thing for them since the cultural capital gained from trendy dressing will be lost. However, only a future field visit will establish how, as they are wont to, crews will

subvert these requirements. Indeed, a law enforcement official stated; “These people are very crafty. They are always ahead of us. They will always devise ways of circumventing the rules.” In what appears like a jeering taunt to my informant’s statement, a No.23 *matatu* bears the aphorism *We make the rules you break them*.

¹⁷ A lead character in the soap *The Bold and the Beautiful* that has been running on local public TV since 1994. A number of my female respondents cited this particular *matatu* name, and the soap’s glitzy setting, as capturing their idea of a “nice life.”

¹⁸ In this wellerism, Peter has adapted a Gikuyu saying, *muiritu muthaka ageragira thome wa ngia* [a beautiful girl passes by the entrance to a paupers homestead without ever going in] i.e. he cannot afford the upkeep of a woman, especially a beautiful one. My informant is linking the irony of his having educational capital without financial capital thus no cultural capital; relatively, the *matatu* man has the latter in plenty.

¹⁹ These old vehicles are also derisively known as *manyenje* [G. Cockroaches] on account of their dawdling on the road or *wanguura* [G. Decrepit] due to their ancient-looking states.

²⁰ With cheeky apologies, a few of my informants openly discussed their promiscuous sexual lifestyles arising from such encounters. Even if they express fear of AIDS, their behavior is at variance with such anxieties. Indeed their behavior might be one way of explaining the popularity of the *Ruff Ryders* fashion label as a *matatu* name for its homophonic play on *Rough Riders*, a popular common brand of condoms; these are known in Sheng as ‘gadgets’ or simply ‘gumboots’.

²¹ The term is adopted from Wilson. She writes, “Today [...] all fashion has become ‘stagey’, self-conscious about its status as discourse, about its irrationality, about its message” (Storey 1998:392). It is precisely the kind of self-reinvention through costume by crews that I am interested in.

²² Stickers are mass-printed in various premises in downtown Nairobi and it is a male-dominated business. The printers use *noms de plumes*, the most popular being *Kariyanwo* [G. Let it be eaten]; *Nymi* [G. A stylization of *nimi*, itself a clipped form of *Karimi*, a personal name which means “tiller.” The play in the plural *nimi* however seems to be mean ‘tongues’], *Psalm Impressions* and *Armor*. After buying their stocks from the printers, peddlers resell the stickers at *matatu* termini, in bars and restaurants, shopping centers etc. I documented most of the stickers discussed in this study while a few were supplied by informants.

²³ It would be impossible to exhaust the names of music and wrestling stars since they are erased as soon as their popularity plummets. However, it is noticeable that amongst wrestlers, names of the most vicious and scheming tend to endure on *matatu*—Stone Cold ‘3.16’, Hulk Hogan, The Undertaker, The Rock. I discuss in the following chapter the significance of this motif for crews’ identity.

²⁴ Gikuyu women I talked to gave this reaction, the implications of which are examined in the discussion on stickers in the next chapter. Non-Gikuyu female informants too were of the view that irrespective of ethnicity, “only men can write some things.”

²⁵ Roemer 1994:129 cites a photocopy lore version of this sticker, “It’s just one fucking thing after another” depicting “De Cockis” chasing “Bush” in a satire of the 1988 presidential elections.

²⁶ In the past, the exterior surface of vehicles has also been put to commercial use, for instance in the late 1990s when paint manufacturers used to advertise on buses owned by the Kenya Bus Services Company (Njoka 2001). However there was a backlash when commuters complained that this made the buses ‘ugly’. Ironically, *matatu* decorative art has traditionally been generally well regarded, with General Motors-Kenya earlier organizing the ‘Isuzu *matatu* competition’ seeking the most beautifully designed *matatu* (*The Standard* May 19, 1992). This venture saw the emergence of high quality *matatu* designs as professionally qualified artists joined the field.

Chapter Three

Expressive Forms as Tactics of Self(re)invention

I wonder what goes on in the minds of some of these *matatu* guys. Look at this one [*matatu*], look at all those lines and fine pictures. How do they come up with all this fantastic artwork? Lord Almighty, isn't this just a beauty to behold?

(Faith, *Matatu* passenger.2002)

3.0 Spectacular Signs

As the passenger's baffled comment, above, indicates, popular discourse on *matatu* culture tends to focus mainly on its phenomenal character. Nevertheless, such discourse also speculatively recognizes that these external displays must somehow speak to some internal level of the subculture; otherwise why would crews deploy them? Consequently, "what goes on in the minds of some of these *matatu* guys" can only be meaningfully interrogated in view of their own voices as set out in the preceding chapter. Hence, as the principal task in this chapter, I interrogate the inter-relationships between such voices and the various expressive elements deployed in the subculture. A key way in which this can be achieved is to assess how such expressive forms are sourced. This then allows access to the subculture's internal characteristics that lie hidden from immediate surface view. In this way connections might be established between the expressive forms, the background from which they emerge and the consciousness that they effect.

Of necessity, since one of *matatu* culture's preeminent characteristics is its tendency to swiftly appropriate and discard expressive forms, here I can only set out a general framework that attempts an explanation of, first, the apparent patterns governing such forms and, secondly, why they persist. A semiotic investigation will enable an understanding of how the subculture's floating signifiers affect and effect the everyday of *matatu* crews, other city dwellers and subcultures. The surface elements of *matatu* culture evince a structural complexity that works in two main general directions. The more overt one involves the reterritorialization of symbols that appear 'exotic.' But as I hope to demonstrate, there is a crucial link between the meanings represented by the exotic and the non-exotic, locally situated forms. However, it needs to be noted that *matatu* names and drawings, while striding the two categories, seem to draw more from the former category. A second, less overt direction involves the use of local traditional norms as a template for the creation of expressive forms. Written stickers belong here.

However, the preceding delineation is only a general dichotomization and, as I will show, there are forms that defy strict positioning into either one of these porous categories. This is as it should be since this fluidity is in itself consonant with the identity of *matatu* folk; they do not inhabit solely just one world, local or foreign, but traverse borders at will. As such, the usefulness of such symbolic borderless habitation lies in the complementary gestures that elements borrowed from either of the worlds so occupied make to each other. In this way we find opening up an interstitial space of interculturality suggested by Bhabha (1990:312) and upon which I base the discussion of *matatu* culture's appropriations. Further, *matatu* culture's identity politics and its relation to the trickster motif becomes clearer if appreciated alongside Bhabha's additional caution, which seems to follow Leech's (1976: 13), that

the similitude of the *symbol* as it plays across cultural sites must not obscure the fact that repetition of the *sign* is, in each specific social practice, both different and differential. It is in this sense that the enunciation of cultural difference emerges in its proximity...

(*ibid*: 314. Emphasis in original)

In other words, signs make differential sense only when seen in the light of something else—e.g. another sign, the same symbol repeated in a different context or implied in another meaning. This is vital for a semiotic analysis of *matatu* culture's expressive forms since, by the fact of their being repetitions of signs, we can assess how their redeployment—as 'enunciation'—is used to map difference in crews' identity. Further, we can see how difference is then made to mean since, in any case, in itself difference *qua* difference is pointless until it is put to some use. This enables an understanding of how and when *matatu* culture transgresses into other domains. In view of this, some of my older informants' oft-voiced view that such symbolic appropriations are an indication of "the children of today aping the west" becomes contestable. Rather, I see this within the terms of cultural translation.

If such cultural negotiation might even be remotely seen as aping, and I contend that to do so is to ignore the fact of agency in cultural processes, this line of thought needs to settle a number of questions. Why, for instance, do such forms make sense to a vast majority of Nairobi youth? Additionally, how do we account for the residuals/continuities of various local traditional values manifest in forms such as written stickers? This "aping" view is also silent on why specific norms and patterns, and not others, are so dominant in *matatu* culture. Further it resists the possibility that the 'exotic' can be used to evoke the local—if such a neat divide were possible—whereby a non-local expressive form can be used as a rhetorical device. Moreover, as I show below, the affective power of the culture's expressive forms is rarely given serious consideration; when it does, such attempts founder because they limit the signifying framework by following over-determined frames (e.g. Shorter and Onyancha 1997). Such problems might be avoided by reading the culture on its own terms.

The imperative therefore is to analyze *matatu* culture's symbolic forms in order to find out how, as elements of a larger subcultural entity, they operate in creating and institutionalizing a *matatu* tradition. This is particularly necessary since the merging of popular culture forms with local meanings has turned the cultural site of *matatu* into what I would consider to be arguably one of the most vibrant spheres of self narration evident in contemporary Nairobi. As such, we can get to understand the internal operations and complexities of *matatu* subculture if we view it, to use Salamon's characterization of Israeli bumper sticker discourse, as a "folkloric, multivocal dialogue conducted through a contemporary medium" (2001:300). The interface between the oral and the written—and in this case the dramatized (e.g. gestures) and the 'consumed' exotic black body—comes up for scrutiny. First I examine the discourse of stickers.

3.1. Sticker Lore

For a long time in Nairobi, *matatu* stickers mainly bore bible verses, just as *matatu* names were preeminently biblically derived. In a society where a majority of the population professes Christianity, bible-based sticker messages are likely to have wide appeal. This is an effective advertising strategy as Nairobi's sticker peddlers confirm. Paradoxically, even as the 1990s saw in Kenya an upsurge of interest in gospel music, society was becoming increasingly secularized. As such, it would be erroneous to presume, at face value, that bible-based messages indicate users' religiousness. Reading bible-based stickers as parody offers a more productive engagement, in tandem with *matatu* culture's general transgressive character, than a Christian reading might permit.

Over time, the sticker communication has evolved into a uniquely *matatu* tradition. It is difficult to tell with statistical precision how many private vehicles sport bumper stickers but it can be positively affirmed that *matatu* have been largely responsible for popularizing the form. In any case, while most private motorists display stickers that more or less mark a driver's social status,¹ *matatu* sticker messages are of a more mundane variety. In many of them, crews seem to be presenting their opinions about *matatu* work and life in general, and might thus be seen as rhetorical devices modeled upon, and can be seen as only slightly removed from, actual "conversational" interaction. Prior to the 1990s public discourse, so far as one can tell from the

paucity of newspaper commentary, is quite silent on this phenomenon. This could be because of the then relatively undeveloped use of expressive forms on *matatu*.

However, being perhaps one of Nairobi's most dynamic public spaces in the 1990s, *matatu* have been at the center of the evolution of this discourse form whose aggressive humor, as we see below, engages with and is rooted in social realities. I see this as related to a wider rhetoric of resistance occasioned by the state's brutal repression of political dissent that left people gasping for alternative forms of expression. Theater was one particular site where parodic critique thrived (see Haugerud 1997:31-32; Ndigirigi 1999; Wa-Mungai 2003). But while it was possible for the government to censor theater and impose severe circumscriptions on its performance, there was no way of shutting down the *matatu* business.² Sticker lore and *matatu* onomastics need to be appreciated at one level as acting within and complementary to this wider rhetoric of anti-state resistance. However, as noted out in the previous chapter, the use of stickers is on the wane since and persists in less frequency. Incidentally, this decline in the use of stickers happened concomitant to the pervasive, countrywide reach of FM radio and private TV. These avenues have come about due to the easing of state control and repression of the various media of public expression as a result of the institutionalization of the culture of political competition beginning in 1990. As such there has been increasingly less need for the use of heavily coded subversive practices and now transgressions are committed in full view as my discussion of bar-room theater in Chapter Five shows. This however is not to say that Kenyans have entirely abandoned their 'hidden transcripts' (Scott 1990); subterfuge is still a common means through which power is publicly contested.

I investigate stickers according to the nature of their messages. Since they are written in a number of languages, it would be impossible to analyze them on the basis of a common criterion, for instance style, which in any case can offer only limited insight regarding the genre's social basis and context of deployment. Further, the fact that stickers are not as a rule generated in response to specific, immediate social-political events means that unlike the Israeli bumper stickers studied by Salamon (2001), *matatu* culture has no proto sticker from which some standard might be established and used to study style. Consequently, I address the diversity of sticker messages as a way of apprehending other factors at play outside the immediate text but within its codification process(es).

I am proceeding from the insight offered by Smith who argues that bumper stickers and other such "folk poetry" are: "recursive systems; their analysis requires the reader-reviewer to *reread* and *review* formal content in several *explicit* and *implicit* contexts in order to decode them" (1988:141. My emphasis). In view of this principle, other than attempting interpretation by turning sticker messages inwards it is necessary to read creatively and be willing to consider even apparently illicit and improbable associations. It is this latter aspect, I am arguing, that sustains the sticker as a particularly subversive expressive form since it is strategically 'safe'. First, it has shared agency and, secondly, a sticker says things that are absent from the immediate text and its transgressions cannot therefore, in the policed environment of the city road, be used against the crews.

In line with their view of themselves as besieged, crews mainly use stickers modeled upon themes derived from traditional patriarchal views of women. In so doing they are able to reinforce the view of females as *the* threat raised in the second chapter and also proceed to suggest solutions to the "problem" thus posed. This is a significant dynamic given the sexist and lurid idiom in hardcore *gangsta* rap, one of hip hop's most visible sub-genres and a favorite of *matatu* crews. I do not therefore consider it incidental that *matatu* stickers address gender through the prism of what is perhaps the oldest form of domination: sexual conquest and its idiom.

Such stickers include *Men are like gold; you lose one, you'll never get another*. Amongst Nairobi's most widely circulated and oldest *matatu* stickers, it has several related variants: *Men are like gold—you miss one you stay without*, *Men are like gold—too hard to find* and *Men are like oxygen women cannot do without*. These stickers confer pricelessness upon the male

(rare/unavailable= gold; life-sustaining=oxygen) while the female is made to look cheap. This is a reinforcement of the male's central position within traditional patriarchal society. Curiously, in this gender discourse, one sticker reads *Men are not oxygen, women can do without them.*³ Even if it wasn't possible to establish its author, because sticker-printing is a male-dominated business there is good reason to ascribe male authorship to it. In any case, having come onto the market after the other sexist stickers, it is a reasonable suggestion that the sticker is intended merely as a playful revision of the antecedent texts in order to confirm their underlying bias. This was the impression I got from the reactions of men whom I questioned with regard to the messages carried by this particular sticker.

They categorically underscored what they called the "fact" that "all women need a man by their side" while a majority of women said that even if for a fact men cannot be equated to oxygen "men and women need each other." Indeed, this specific sticker message seems to be an inverted comment on 'wicked city women' who are considered to be rebelling against traditions by remaining single in a society where spinsters, single parents (females) and divorcees are looked down upon. The intentional play in this sticker also emphasizes a widespread local male view that the only reason women can do without men is that they are simply unable to "catch" them. The antagonism here is more intensely directed at career women, more so those who appear to be prosperous. This is particularly so because in urban centers single-mother households are becoming common but, inevitably from the view of traditional society, they are viewed as 'morally loose' women (see for instance Frederiksen 2002). The sticker's wording thus turns reflexively, emerges with an unstated question, "can women do without men?", and supplies an implied negative answer.

The sticker, *Most men are handsome around end month (sic)*, captures the above issues in a different perspective. Supplied to me by a female informant as evidence that "not all stickers are anti-women" the text in fact affirms the contrary. If we consider the fact that 'month end' here refers to the day that those in salaried employment receive their pay checks, then we see that the only reason men are seen as handsome (by women) is that they are *loaded* [S. have a lot of money]. It is, in other words, their fat wallets and not their looks as such that attract their female admirers. Thus we see again a sticker whose surface seems to present a case for women but whose internal elements, once their semiotic links to the sticker's social context are traced, in fact reinforce the commonly held view that women should depend financially on their men. Indeed, women here are presented as fortune hunters. It can be argued that being an easily accessible medium on an equally freely accessible site (*matatu*), these types of stickers reinforce the sexist tendencies which already exist in Nairobi as we saw in the previous chapter. As such, part of the reason they mean so powerfully is that they are couched within the authority of traditional Kenyan cultures and sayings. Coming under a genre that works by constant regeneration, these texts construct their cultural force by hinting at antecedent 'superior' texts/practices, as Hasan-Rokem demonstrates in the case of proverbs in Israeli narratives (1982:55). Thus, even though it was impossible to trace these stickers back to a single source, it was possible to trace earlier stickers and local traditional practices whose authority they invoke.

Matatu stickers also specifically focus on anxieties that arise from the dangers inherent in a *matatu* ride, and even as they celebrate man's ability to tame machine, some of these texts show the trickster in moments of self-doubt. As usual when religion is brought into these stickers, a tone of cynicism is detectable e.g. *Even if I were to drive 200 kph, this world is not my home.* For Christians, heaven is 'home' and to get there needs to lead a righteous life. However, the drivers' (as presumed author) stated love for speed shows that he is courting recklessness, not the piety required to get one to the divine abode. A slightly different but related sticker states smugly, *I believe in death after life;* despite its grim message, passengers said they found it humorous. Another sticker celebrates speed and the imminence of death:

A speed song

80kph- take care of me
100kph- guide me good Lord
120kph-I commit myself to the(e) Lord
140kph-this world is not my home
160kph-I'm coming home Lord
180kph-precious memories

By manipulating an apparently 'religious' text, this sticker calibrates passengers' anxieties in the progression of a *matatu* ride and again we see a fatalistic play on death as home. "Throughout the length of the journey, it's like I am stepping on my brakes on account of the terrible speeds these things fly at," an informant, figuring herself in terms of a mechanical body, complained. This is not an unjustified grievance especially given that the "thing" in question happens to be a poorly maintained *matatu* cruising on a badly maintained road at between 120-140Kph, as most 'normal' *matatu* do.

Such a clearly anxiety-ridden situation calls for prayer, hence the invocation of the Lord's name for protection in the prayer-sticker which, incidentally, has been supplied by the same crew. The speed song here is a last will and testament of sorts but also a metacommentary on *matatu* work by one of its practitioners, the presumed author of the 'prayer.' Informants indicated that even though they had almost become inured to these speeds, they experienced a loss of control generally upon entering a *matatu*. Though often conscious of the risks involved, drivers feel obliged to speed in order to make profit, fully aware that in the event of an 'accident' only a higher power can intercede.⁴ Speeding at times causes deep worries among drivers, as seen in a common sticker, *Don't worry, professional driver under control* which is related to another, more crisply-worded one that reassuringly states *Professional Driver*. These are usually posted in prominent spots where passengers can easily see them. While the first might be taken as an attempt to allay passenger anxieties, the second one appears to be more of a self-affirmation of the driver's abilities about which he seems to (momentarily) waver.

As tools of subversion, stickers also camouflage frontal criticism of the authorities in their parodic 'religious' wording. This is evinced by a sticker like "*mbinguni hakuna TKK—Toa Kitu Kidogo*" [K. In heaven there is no giving something small] and its jocular, variant 'response' "*mbinguni hakuna TKK—Toa Kitu Kikubwa*" [K. In heaven there is no giving something big]. The phrase *kitu kidogo* [K. Something small] is the euphemism for *chai*, a core norm in *matatu* work as we have already seen. It is worth noting that bribery has undergone its own metamorphoses as the bribe 'size' changed from the standard twenty Kenya shillings in the early 1990s to fifty in the late 1990s before finally skyrocketing to at least two hundred shillings daily in recent years. Concomitant to this, the diminutive *kidogo* was changed to the penultimate *kikubwa* [K. Big] before eventually settling at the ultimate *kila kitu* [K. Everything]. Indeed, a recent sticker in this series states the grim reality of corruption as complete dispossession thus: *Toa Kila Kitu* [K. Hand over/give everything]. Informants found the latter sticker especially humorous since it links corruption to the religious discourse of tithing whereby Nairobi's popular evangelical preachers entreat their adherents to "give everything you have to God" in order to be rewarded with material abundance. By invoking 'heaven' these sticker texts highlight the decadence of street life, where *chai*, not faith, facilitates negotiation consistent with the inversions in carnivalesque practice that give prominence to lower forms (i.e. here corruption viewed as decay). Since crews work not in heaven but on city streets riddled with corrupt acts, then these stickers seem to suggest that it would be impossible for *matatu* folk not to be corrupt in such an environment of decayed morality.

Similar parody can be seen in the sticker *Hii ni dunia: thank you Jesus* [K. That's the way the world is]. It combines a local saying with a supposed affirmation of Jesus' power; he is thanked for having made the world as it is. But as we have seen above, the *matatu* world is corrupt and exploitative and it is this secular aspect, not the divine, that this sticker foregrounds in the first clause. The second statement, carrying with it a hint of cynicism, is thus a resignation to the ways

of the world. Differently put, since the (bad) ways of the world are the way they are, and since human beings have no control over the world, then only Jesus and by extension God viewed with the Christian concept of the trinity may be held responsible the world's decadent state. The sticker seems to express disaffection rather than gratitude for the status quo and hence calls the 'divine' order into question.

3.1.2.0 In Praise of *Bad*: Rap's Inversions

Matatu culture mainly identifies with black African-American fashion more than any other and this is an important point in trying to understand why *matatu* names are sourced as they are.⁵ This choice, as a kind of "diasporic dialogue" (Gilroy (1993:96), can be taken as a cultural problematic which helps us assess how difference is harnessed in crews' identity project. However we need to temper this awareness with the caution that blackness is not a homogenous, uncontested terrain.⁶ Due to the fact of past English colonial domination, it would be reasonable to expect in Nairobi more inclination towards English, rather than American cultural forms. Such is the case for instance in Congo-Brazzaville where the *sapeux* [elegant dressers] reach unequivocally towards Parisian *haute couture* (Hecht and Simone 1994:44-52; Friedman 1998:349-353). Expensive fashion labels, as cultural symbols, enable them to position themselves within the hierarchy of power, with the more prestigious labels indicating one's closeness to the hegemonic economic-political power center. In contrast, *matatu* crews' use of fashion labels is based on a non-conformist ideal. I see this as a gestural rejection of Kenyan mainstream culture whose hegemonic dress code is constituted around English values.⁷ Hip hop fashion, taken as an index of marginality, is used to reconfigure *matatu* crews' sense of dress into cultural capital. However, this act can be seen as one of those carefree moments of *matatu* culture where inconsistencies are easily elided; the narrative of English Empire is confronted with and replaced by another that reifies American cultural forms. But as I argue throughout this work such inconsistencies are not without purpose in the subculture.

Looking at the sheer numbers of *matatu* names sourced from the totality of hip hop culture, it is a plausible argument that a deliberate accent is placed on connections with the black diaspora. What, we might then ask, are the intentions of this particular emphasis? I would argue that whatever else he might have in mind, the *matatu* man here is playing the role of the trickster to make moral claims that are calculated to arouse sympathy by identifying with black American victimage. We can appreciate this assessment more clearly if we consider that African American personal and place names have historically been politically charged, both as identity markers and as instruments of protest. The processes of their derivation are characterized by a tension springing from the simultaneous desire for self-affirmation and resistance. As Dillard observes, 'strange-sounding' nicknames are common currency with which blacks signal disenchantment with society; 'beautiful, elegant' names are substituted with grotesque allusive applications (1976:35). Similar names are also a characteristic of black music groups (*ibid*: 45) that has achieved wide global currency.⁸ At the same time, African American self-referential usage of 'niggalz' is intended to neutralize the white-ordained 'nigger', to "rob it of its ability to psychically harm", as a strategy of resisting social erasure (McGregory 2003).

Hence, such acts of self-(re)inscription become both an exercise of power and a tool of resistance. By literally rewriting themselves within and upon the American landscape, blacks direct the American gaze to a different historical narrative, forcing an interrogation of their complex American subjectivity in ways that a bland racist term like 'negro' is incapable of anticipating. Such an onomastic process privileges black agency in the inscription of alternative subjectivity, thereby setting the parameters by which the subjects wish to have their blackness viewed. In so doing, they situate themselves outside the frames of mainstream American "melting pot" rhetoric and call to question the inconsistencies in metanarrative of the American nation. In self-naming, African Americans encode in their names a charge against and alongside which they should be read. The significant issue is how by their allusive character, these names point to other realities. Of interest for our purposes is the fact that black hip hop links up, through its names, to an

inescapable history, contemporary and past, of racial injustice. In this sense, the names turn reflexively before pointing outwards to connect with other meanings and contexts.

This politicization of names, central to hip hop, is relevant for this study since by appropriating its style, *matatu* names signal the situation of crews within a discourse of protest, resistance and marginality. Whether *matatu* crews are fully aware of the specific character of the historical baggage imbricated in such name-texts is a matter of serious doubt. What is not is the fact that they are content to appropriate black victimage since it serves their local interests. What matters to them is that the ambiguity of name signifying enables them space to insert their subcultural worldview into the city space and thereby find a voice. This becomes even more evident in the 'wild' *matatu* names borrowed from rap, examined next.

In the sourcing of *matatu* names, hip-hop and Reggae music are preeminently represented with the latter taking the largest share. In this regard we may note that the names of outstanding black singers in fields other than rap are strikingly few. The fact that famous black American blues, soul and pop singers are grossly under-represented introduces an interesting problematic to this onomastic practice; there is a preferred black image with which *matatu* people identify. For instance, among black non-rap singers we have only *Aretha Franklin*, *R. Kelly*, *Whitney Houston* and *Mariah Carey* as *matatu* names. In common, these four sing predominantly on love themes, to use a tautology, in a 'romantic' sense. Conversely, even though rappers sing about love, they politicize and radicalize it, representing it non-romantically as fraught with the tensions of race, hatred, financial greed, misogyny and violence. Their raps might then be taken as auditory maps of actual social injustices and exploitation.

The foregoing could explain why most of the popular hip-hop related *matatu* names refer to rappers and raps that cut a raw, abrasive 'street' (i.e. rough) quality. Alternatively, the real people the names refer to are notorious for one thing or the other, as the violence-and-drugs laden lives of *gangsta* rappers Tupac Shakur and Notorious B.I.G illustrate. Further to this, as one *matatu* driver stated, the "dirty" swear words and violence in most of the raps resonate well with many a *matatu* crew due to the fact that they violate the protocols of regular social engagement. Overall, *badness* as 'toughness' is beloved to crews since as we saw in the previous chapter, this presents them with a much-desired macho image for use in the various local contests. Names that seem to signify on such *badness* include, but are not limited to; *Snoop Doggy Dogg*, *Dawg*, *Top Dawg*, *Atomic Dogg*, *Doggy Style* (Figure 12), *Tha Dogg Pound*, *Nate Dogg*, *Tupac*, *Me Against the World* (the title of Tupac's 1995 rap), *Junior MAFIA*, *Junior Mafia correct*, *Three 6 Mafia*, *Salt-N-Pepa*, *Big Pun*, *Bone Thugz*, *Bones*, *Beatnuts*, *Bad Boyz*, *Bone Thugs-n-harmony*, *Notorious B.I.G* and *Rawkus*. Rappers who sing explicit raps and have therefore become popular *matatu* names include *Jayz*, *Ja Rule*, *Master P*, *Outkast*, *Scarface*, *Ludacris*, *Redman*, *Heavy D* (Figure 13), *Chuck D*, *Busta Rhyme* (Figure 14), *Exzibit* (Figure 15), *Mystikal*, *Lil' Bow*, *Wu Tang Clan* and *Eminem*.⁹

As I reiterate in the discussion on *matatu* culture's carnivalesque elements in the next chapter, these phenomenal names are used to signal an inversion of the normal hierarchy of values. They revel in 'criminality', the macabre, excess and rebellion, with hints at the *ludicrous* here evoked by the name *Ludacris*. A deliberate inscrutability, a near-terrifying opaqueness, is evoked by such names as *Big Pun*, *Rawkus*, *Mystikal*, the *dawg* cognates as well as names with an apocalyptic twist—*Bone Thugz* (a pun upon the white American stereotype of blacks as 'born thugs') and *Me Against the World*. Yet, considering the tradition of African American signifying (Gates 1988; Abrahams 1970; McGregory 2003),¹⁰ we can see here that 'dog' is not the four-legged carnivore we know. In *Dawg* are embedded contradictory meanings; "an exceptional person" and the ('uglier') trait of meanness.

A name is supposed to reveal, not conceal its owner's identity yet the meanings and senses carried in *matatu* names, combined, make it impossible to tell with certainty what they are all about. But this is precisely their operational advantage as indeterminate texts. The possibilities for ambiguity and, thus, play occasioned by this characteristic enable the *matatu* man, as trickster, to

slip effortlessly from one guise to another. As the name *Big Pun* suggests, the process is at one level like a punning game—the items deployed are polyvalent and can cause laughter as well as draw attention to peculiar mannerisms that crews might exhibit. Above all, the names impress by their creativity. For the initiated, the ameliorated meanings are clear, but for the uninitiated, the names of hip hop/*matatu* culture are a complex puzzle. This then enables the presentation of identities that act as masks for the expression of alternative meanings. As part of an overall performance strategy, and in line with my earlier suggestion about crews as trickster performers, these names complement crews' *dramatis personae*. As such, the names are subject to constant mutation, adaptability or outright erasure subject to crews' needs.

The preceding argument can be illustrated by the fact that as soon as rappers' stars begin to fade their names/track titles are displaced/ erased by current, prosperous ones. For instance, MC Hammer's *You Can't Touch This*, whose lyrics speak directly to crews' notions of perceived invincibility, was a popular rap in the mid 1990s. As soon as his singing career diminished, as happened later with the rapper Coolio, his name and that of his track disappeared from *matatu*; I have not heard the rap played on *matatu* or other public spaces in Nairobi for a long time now. Thus, even though there is still in existence one *matatu* named *Hammer*, Hammer the man has almost been erased from existence. However, a current *matatu* name like *Untouchable*, with its ironic reference to pariahdom, echoes the invincibility carried in *U Can't Touch This* and demonstrates the functioning of intertextuality and mutations in the subculture's naming system. In this way from time to time the subculture's 'archive' is dug out and a *matatu* name recuperated.

As the above name suggests, a common characteristic of *matatu* names is their distinct potential for multiple signification; untouchable perhaps because crews are deemed to be 'too sick', or for their impunity from the law. There are also echoes of the Hindu caste system, and the name may thus be signifying on the local stereotype of crews as uncouth. Another *matatu* name, *So Addictive* (an album by rapper Missy Elliot), read in hip hop's context, might stand for addiction to music and love. Similar meanings can be deduced based on practices in *matatu* culture and beyond the meanings suggested above the name may be taken to signify the phenomenon of drug addiction common in both cultures. This free play on referents and meanings enables names from rap culture to be reinterpreted in limitless ways once they are redeployed in *matatu* culture. However, since crews are hardly aware—I didn't find evidence to the contrary—of African American signifying as a tradition, they tend to take black English name forms at face value. Where signifying involves indirection, *matatu* onomastics literalizes it. This gives crews the space to encode new meanings within *matatu* names, enabling them to engage in overt symbolic expressive practices that mask deeper meanings. Thus we see diverse discourses—historical, contemporary, local and foreign—reversed, conjoined, juxtaposed and layered on top of each other within a single name text. Even as names retain their initial meanings, the tragedies of the black diaspora are reformulated to signify a different set of meanings. In the vast symbolic space that such texts open up, crews 'insert' themselves, constantly readjusting their identities to accommodate whatever claims they may wish to make.

Take the case of Ahmed, a Muslim *matatu* driver who says that he named his vehicle *Prince Naseem* because "in the US, the newspapers and TV are owned by white people, and they do not like promoting black heroes. So I decided to promote this boxer [Prince Naseem] in my own small way." Here, Ahmed glosses the American 'mediascape' (Appadurai 1986) and quite correctly identifies the role of its apparatus in shaping social injustices. By identifying with the American Muslim boxer, my Yemeni-descended¹¹ informant appropriates the broader phenomenon of black marginality to get some mileage out of the boxer; his *matatu* gains more visibility. The symbolic exchange here, like in the case of *chai* examined in the previous chapter, illustrates the self-serving motivation embedded to practices in *matatu* work, only this time it is not the police but the crew that stand to benefit.

Albeit with less frequency, *matatu* names are also taken from reggae culture, particularly the 'roots' sub genre. Dominant in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the influence of reggae has been steadily displaced by that of hip hop with the advent of FM radio. But there is another reason that is even more directly related to the identity project under scrutiny. I asked Rasta Hassan, a designer, to explain the fracture between his name (dreadlocks) and his not sporting dreadlocks:

Every time there was a crime in Eastleigh, the police always first knocked on my door. They locked me up, saying I was criminal. I have made my living as a designer since the 1980s. In this country, if you have *rastas* [hairstyle] you are a marked man. For the sake of my peace, I cut them off but kept the name. The police don't bother me any more.

(2002)

This goes to show the extent to which looks affect interactions within *matatu* culture and, more significantly, how (re)invented identities act as survival stratagems. The 1980s tout-in-dreadlocks image had led to a general perception of *matatu* crews as 'antisocial' and their 'bad boy' image constantly put them into direct collision with other city subcultures. For instance, none of my informants, including crews who might have been expected to show at least some ambivalence, approved the 'dreadlocks look'; most said thus such somatic presentation was the mark of "criminals", "*bhang* [marijuana] smokers", "madhouse cases" and "people of poor hygiene." This seems to be very much the unkempt hair, deranged-look style Austin-Broos (1995) identifies as prototypical to downtown Kingston, Jamaica, the primordial home of reggae.

In Kenya, this particular style is problematic as it is associated with the Mau Mau anti-colonial fighters, criminals on police "most wanted" lists and gangs bent on violently taking control of *matatu* routes. The Mau Mau narrative still draws emotional reactions and is a subject most people would lie to avoid. Thus aware of the negative connotations attached to a 'dirty' looks, and keen to avoid the passionate hostility it attracts, *matatu* crews have since the early 1990s sought to cultivate a different, more palatable style of self-presentation. One guise was abandoned in favor of another, but we can see that this is merely a metamorphosis in the trickster's disguise without a corresponding change in his intentions. As such this is just a tactical retreat.

To be sure, even today a number of *matatu* take their names from the field of reggae but they are in no way comparable to the thousands of names derived from hip hop culture. For example, on a number of *matatu* are posted stickers bearing the yellow, black and green standard of Rastafarianism, alongside a picture of a green cannabis leaf.¹² *Matatu* names derived from the movement include *Bob Marley*, *Bob Marley Footwear*, *Alpha Blondie*, *Zion Train* (a track by Bob Marley) and *Roots* (also the title of Alex Haley's docudrama). Incidentally, even as they use reggae names and iconography, the marijuana leaf etc), crews on such *matatu* don hip hop apparel. There is no contradiction here since reggae and hip hop are both connected as genres of protest, an element that gives the two cultural forms their universal appeal, particularly among black audiences. For instance, like rap, the Roots reggae subgenre has traditionally been the music of 'resistance, subversion and empowerment', particularly amongst diaspora blacks as a reaction to "poverty, fractured identity, and social and economic disenfranchisement" (Prahlad 2001:9; Porter 1995:3). Regardless of differences in form and content, the two forms speak to similar conditions of marginality in the diaspora and in Africa for the youth who appropriate them.

Arising from the foregoing, the potential instrumentality for subversion and rebellion availed by hip hop has enabled its quick acceptance amongst *matatu* crews and supplies them with a vast pool from which to source names. Moreover, even when crews don't dress in conformity with the hip hop style, rap music and names are ready made tools for the expression of defiance among these *Bad Boyz* (a *matatu* name). It is in this way for instance that a *matatu* name like *Two Blind to See* utilizes the concept of sight to jeer at a society (especially the police) that is too (*two*) blind to acknowledge (*see*) *matatu* subculture's right to space. But the name is also a space for self-referencing; a crews' boast about their ability to carry out transgressions whose full significance

nobody seems able to detect—especially the police who usually work in twos. Usually a *matatu* will have a crew of two, and here we could also surmise that the *Two* in the name is reflexive. Hence, just as other city cultures refuse to ‘see’ them, so does the crew in question assert their claim to deny others recognition. The play on visibility/erasure is important here since as I show in the next chapter, deletion plays a critical role in this subculture since *matatu* culture’s identity politics is formulated, and articulated, within a discourse and context of contest. The subaltern’s gay costume, playful contestatory names and ear-shattering rap all move the subculture towards the carnivalesque.

3.1.2.1 More Resources from the Mediascape

Besides American rap, another major source of *matatu* names is the electronic media. From this, ‘electronic personalities’ and issues become public currency for and in youth conversations. Some *matatu* crews and stage workers habitually surf the Internet at the various cyber cafés (none of which offer coffee!) dotting downtown Nairobi in order, as they put it, “*tukae masaa ya mbele* [S. So as not to be left behind].” Because these youth are also avid consumers of music and sports magazines, themes and personalities from the various media find their way onto *matatu* bodies. Such names relate to;

a) Wrestlers:

Stone Cold, The Rock, Big Show, Hulk Hogan, Shawn Michaels, Big Daddy, Bull Dog, Texas Tornado, Vader Time, The Undertaker among others. At the preliminary stages of fieldwork in 1999, names and pictures of wrestling professionals were the dominant name-source fad. However, by 2000 they were being steadily displaced by hip hop’s names and pictures.

b) Prominent figures, places and issues in world history, current politics, mythology/ literature, particularly those that

i) carry whiffs of controversy e.g. *Princess Diana, Candle in The Wind, Sharon, Arafat, Ghengis Khan, Monica Lewinsky, Uncle Sam, Bin Laden, Marka Bee, Whodini, Houdini, Adam & Eve, and Sir Lancelot-The Bravest of King Arthur’s Knight’s at Mount Camelot;*

ii) represent active physical and narrative contestation e.g. *Golan Heights, Dome, Axum, Chechnya, Bosnia Herzegovina, Bosnia kid, Inspector Weapons, Weapon Inspector, Georgia, and Necklace.*

c) Popular TV programs and stars:

Sinband the Sailor, Wild Rose, The Rich also Cry, Tom & Jerry, Stacy, Sparks, The Bold and the Beautiful, RoboCop, Butch Cassidy (Sundance Kid)—a film about American outlaws—and *Solid Gold.*

The media is therefore to be seen as a core resource in crews’ triadic project of self-narration, self-performance and self-inscription onto public consciousness. The youth prize popular culture icons derived from the above sources not just as indicators of a cosmopolitan modernity but also as tools within an overall rhetoric of contesting marginalization. Differently media icons afford these youths an alternative way of achieving symbolic power, one not mapped by economic success but by cultural forms. The media, with its global reach, is largely recognized as a key means through which people around the globe access to alternative ways of constituting their identities and thus intricately linking capitalism to culture (Bocock 1995:75-76).¹³

By appropriating signs and juxtaposing them in patently incongruous ways the subculture marks its own *sui generis* identity and at the same time, due to constant changes among media personalities, achieves remarkable vibrancy. As I argue in subsequent chapters, such incongruities and inversions constitute significant instruments for social transgression coming as they do from below. Hence, we see the overarching dynamic of the renovation of media symbols/myths as incorporating micro- and macro-levels of signification whereby reterritorialized signs now mean ambivalently; ‘harmless’ yet ‘dangerous’. Like the many billboards now dotting the city skyline (Figure 16), *matatu* bodies act like notice boards of sorts upon which are posted topical pickings from the various media allowing *matatu* folk to identify with far off narratives. This is a double-edged method of camouflaging comments on their everyday realities within non-local themes.

Subversion, carried through the voices and routine acts of Nairobi's youthful subalterns, thrives here. This strategy enables identification with often-controversial issues without attracting (too much) censure from either the authorities or the public.

3. 2 "In the beginning...": Biblically-derived Transgressions

One of the oldest and, in this case therefore, traditional source of *matatu* names has been the bible, both the old and new testaments. This tactic seems to follow from the tradition of parody as resistance which has a definite history not just in Kenya but the world over. They are best read as parodies, as exemplified by a *matatu* name like *Keep the Sabbath*; this *matatu* operates even during the said Sabbath it alludes to. That parody is intended is a reasonable assumption given the fact that the subversion of 'sacred' texts has had precedents in Kenya. During the anti-colonial uprising, Mau Mau fighters subverted the idiom of Christianity to critique the colonizer in their 'religious' songs/prayers and rally supporters to their cause (Haugerud 1997:30).¹⁴ The same means has been employed elsewhere, for example by African slaves in New World plantations (Prahald 2001) and by Jamaican Reggae artists (Austin-Broos 1995) as a form of resistance and articulation of a worldview. Through seemingly innocuous, every day acts that constitute "public transcripts", domination and power can be contested (Scott 1990; Mbembe 1992). The banal, routine tactics of *matatu* culture effect similar subversions.

Usually, sourcing names through such parody involves doing a number of things with biblical texts;

- i) A section of a bible verse or book name might be cited without indicating the source. E.g. *Christ is the King, The Lord is my shepherd* (Wolff 1980:5-7) *King of Kings* and *Emmanuel: God with us*. Usually, because Kenya is predominantly Christian, even without citations the sources are generally well known. Also, exhortations and phrases are clipped from larger (biblical) texts, especially those that seem to 'pray' around the same idea. These include, *Praise the Lord, Try Jesus Now, Yahweh, God's Favor, God's Blessings, God's Miracle, God's Mercy, God Knows, Jesus Power Supper Power [sic]*. However it is impossible, and not really productive, to pinpoint which of these functions as a proto-sticker. Also, it could not be established if the allusion to eating and power in the last name is intentional, but even if it wasn't, we can see how such 'mistakes' can be a source of humor (see Chapter Five).
- ii) Citation of verse numbers, sometimes *with* but often *without* text e.g. *I'M THE WAY*. This text evokes another in the bible, John 14:6.¹⁵ Other bible-verse *matatu* names include *Psalms 108:1*¹⁶ and *Isaiah 40:31*.¹⁷

By introducing such codes alongside each other, designers set in motion an endless process by which texts, once they are released into the public domain, assume a life force of their own as they are copied and recopied on other vehicles. Their ability to playfully tease multiple, indeterminate meanings at one go is a major factor in the subculture's vibrant character. This agglomeration of signs may or may not mean much of anything to readers/viewers but this largely depends on one's repertoire of interpretive frames. However, for *matatu* crews, these free-floating forms enable them to adopt any character/attitude/values that they might choose to extrapolate from the apparently incongruous jumbled texts.

In relation to the preceding these religious names become a parodic means of participating in the subculture's contests. To illustrate, the name *Amazing Grace* (Figure 17) may at first be assumed to mean divine kindness, especially if taken alongside another name like *God's Grace*. But the name could plausibly refer to some elegant lady called Grace, after whom the vehicle may have been named, which is a common enough practice. Grace might also have other attributes that are amazing, say, in their badness. Further, in the habit of personifying the car, the name could simply be alluding to the *matatu's* ability to glide smoothly, gracefully, along the 'chaotic', overcrowded city streets.

When read alongside, or even against *Amazing Strike* (Figure 18), the name *Amazing Grace* comes much closer to the secular realities of the city road. 'Strike' has several meanings here, all of which are specific to *matatu* culture. One, *matatu* crews often go on strike, for any number of

reasons, and an extremely disruptive one might be described as amazing. A second meaning refers to fortune, as in the phrase “a lucky strike.” Crews perennially hope for such a strike (i.e. a lot of commuters); given the unpredictability in their work, they always look out for opportunities to make windfall profits. Thirdly, *strike* means ‘hit’/ ‘knock’, commonly used in both Gikuyu and Kiswahili to mean ‘collision’. This vehicle might have survived a hit, hence the reference to luck. Fourth, in the slang of both languages (*G-ringā; K-gonga*) *strike* also means 1. to make excessive profit by overcharging passengers, 2. to steal, and, 3. having sexual intercourse. Being tricksters, crews are adept at exploiting others within the wide latitude of meanings derived from reading all the senses embedded by *Grace* and *Strike* above. Since a cardinal process in *matatu* culture is the sexualization of road relations through crews’ register, the implied sexual meanings deduced here are plausible.

A well-known verse/*matatu* name like *I am the way* is richly endowed with the opportunity for parody as it signifies the highly individualistic ways of *matatu* culture. From a passenger’s point of view, the issue might as well be; the way to where—a destination on earth or in the other-world? Given the high accident rates that often result from speeding and poorly-maintained *matatu*, this is a common anxiety among passengers. The name is also seen as having the potential for mischief. For instance, my informant, a female teacher, mock-seriously wondered of the *manamba* on the *I am the way matatu*; “Where does he want to take me? Doesn’t he know I am somebody’s wife?” This shows the diversity of frames marshaled in the reading of *matatu* names. Further, taking into consideration the biblical context of the verse, some religiously inclined passengers would be likely to read “way” here as the road to New Jerusalem. In the process of such religious identification, they feel persuaded to ride the *matatu* to their temporal destinations.

Transgression in such religious names could also be aimed at the police. *Forgive Them Father* and *Don’t Judge* are good examples that could be safely used by *matatu* crews to ‘pray’ for the police who harass them. This is the case when we take into consideration the missing parts of each of these texts. “Forgive them father, for they know not what they do” was Jesus’ prayer at his crucifixion. The trickster *matatu* man here dons the cloak of the ‘persecuted’, using a self-righteous moral scale to cast other participants in road interactions—especially the police and competing crews—as tormentors. A passenger remarked when I pointed out this *matatu* name; “It is as if these bastards are sinless yet they are the worst persecutors! But I like the sardonic humor.”

Similarly, the crew seem to be asking the police to judge them lightly, if at all, for their traffic misdemeanors since, taking Jesus (Mathew 7:1) and Stephen’s (Acts 7:60) pleas as the name’s context, judgment is considered to be God’s prerogative. I asked Musyoka, the driver of *Don’t Judge* if this was perhaps a plea to be allowed to commit road transgressions unfettered. Laughing, he stated that “*Nyinyi ndio mnaisoma hivyo. Hii ni mchezo tu, lakini yenyewe ina maana yake. Tunaambia watu hata sisi ni binadamu* [K. You are the ones who read it that way. This is just a game, but it has its own meaning. We are telling the public that we are also human”]. The need to proclaim their humanity arises from a popular view of *matatu* crews as ruthless and inconsiderate, an identity reified, unfortunately, by the many *bad*-natured names that they choose for their *matatu*, as I have already shown. Hence, we see ‘serious’ names playfully deployed in word games, a word my informants used incessantly, as negotiation strategies in symbolic discourse.

All *matatu* names, even apparently religious ones, have as a core feature, an element of ambiguity that allows access to other layers of covert meanings. Thus to automatically attribute religiousness to a *matatu* name, or sticker for that matter, simply on account of its biblical derivation is erroneous as it fails to factor into consideration the many guises of the *matatu* man. Whether they can accurately indicate a people’s religiousness, or lack of it, is another matter altogether. What the phenomenon ably demonstrates, conceived within the concept of hidden transcripts, is the deceptive capacity of *matatu* culture’s signifying practices. The religious texts

cited above need to be seen as an advertising ruse that uses a traditionally accepted form (bible quote) to code self-serving meanings. This way, the religiously inclined will still be attracted to board a *matatu* even as the youth, the commuting majority, remain the real target of such *matatu* names. Therefore, as a floating signifier, the more ambiguity a *matatu* name contains the more its potential to appeal to a wider cross section of readers/viewers. It leads to more nuanced interpretations. At the same time it gives the trickster ample room for maneuver; at times acting contrary to a vehicle's name is a ploy for drawing attention to himself, as was the case with a rather querulous crew on a 'religiously' named *matatu*, *Peace-lovers*.

Overall, looking at *matatu* names and stickers, aspects of intertextuality can be seen at work, more of which is examined in Chapter Five. The biblical hypertext in our present case is parodied within the context of the road as social space that in itself is the immediate ground upon which meaning is interpreted. In turn, a series of hypo texts are generated in relation to a bible quotation, or interpretation of it, as we see in the *God's miracle*, *God's favor*, and *God's blessings* series of names. Even in the absence of knowledge of the bible, the fracture between such names and crews' contrary behavior is sufficient to indicate to a reader the irony in the name. A *matatu* name like *3:16* (without text), assumes an altogether un-biblical meaning when the name *Stone Cold* is placed alongside it. The first bit apparently refers to the book of John 3:16, well known by informants in a predominantly Christian country, while the second is the nickname for Steve Austin, a popular 'bad boy' character of American wrestling. Is he *the* beloved son? Does he 'love' his fans so awesomely that he will suffer injury to gratify their desire for gory spectacle? Thus conflating Jesus with Stone Cold, the trickster would want to convince the traveler that his only purpose on the city road is to come to the rescue of (errant?) commuters. By counterpoising the wrestler against the biblical text we get a reading of crews' self-perception as embodiments of heroic resilience, wielding loving power/ control on Nairobi's brutal streets.

The motif of resilience-domination/conquest interwoven into *matatu* names points to crews' awareness of the city space whereby the constant physical movement of *matatu* is mapped in tropes that capture the risks, opportunities and thrills contingent to such mobility. Hence we see an abundance of names related to speed and flight.¹⁸ It may be noted in passing that even the non-human forms designed on *matatu*, other than that of the bear whose significance lies in his brute strength, share the characteristic of swift movement, a value reinforced by speed stickers such as those already examined.

3.3. Discourse of Bodies

i) Detached Parts

Alongside names, vehicles' external designs comprise a central part of the subculture's identity statements made by *matatu* subculture. Since, as I have shown in the first chapter, the subculture occupies a highly contested space, it is a reasonable assumption that crews encode such awareness into *matatu* drawings. Because these drawings and names complement each other, I have treated them as units comprising a larger text. However, a fuller discussion of inversions, grotesque bodies and their function as carnivalesque semiotics is deferred to the next chapter. Here I examine the dominant patterns in expressive forms in order to assess the worldview they articulate.

Matatu designs tend to make emphatic use of grotesquerie. For instance, on the side of a No.125 *matatu* (Figure 14) is drawn the blown out detached head of Busta Rhyme. The original picture appears in the *Source Magazine* without any of the exaggerated features. At the rear of another *matatu*, *What Else Matters* (Figure 19), what catches the viewer/reader's attention is the wisp of "smell", a thick black smudge, wafting from the subject's toes. The foregrounding of stinking feet above can be seen as a descent from 'good' taste to filth within Bakhtin's scheme of lower bodily materiality (1984). Another decapitated body can be seen on two *matatu*, *Baby Coach/Better than Ever* and *Cosy* (Figures 20 and 21). The detached head of a boy, cavernous mouth wide open, suggests both laughter and crying. In place of an earring, the right earlobe is weighted down with a padlock in the first design. This baby head-in-a-padlock is the logo of a popular local TV

parody, *Redykyulass*, whose mainstay is its irreverence. In it, particularly, the powerful in society, from the president to charismatic evangelical preachers, come in for heavy ridicule. Hence, this *matatu* drawing, read within this genealogy of social critique, might be viewed within the frames of carnival's liberatory laughter. This is even more so if we consider that the *matatu* drawing and the *Redykyulass* logo are nearly identical to the logo of the *Word of Mouf* album by the African American rapper Ludacris (*The Source* No. 146, 2001:83). The latter name is itself a pun on 'ludicrous'—to make nonsense of.

I observed a *matatu*, *Violetor (sic)* on whose back was depicted a man's detached head, his nostrils flaring nostrils and front teeth missing and the remaining one being disproportionately large. Again here is an emphasis on the misshapen especially as the overall impression is one of an asymmetrical body. In a subculture of exploitation, the emphasis on mouths in the four instances above can be taken to refer to the *eating* that takes place within *matatu* culture. Further, the image of the ogre/cannibal evoked in this manner seems aptly self-referencing since crews often exploit, thus 'eat', passengers by, for instance, overcharging them. In similar vein, three detached mouths are drawn on the *matatu Cheerz* (Figure 22). The drooling tongue here seems to be an indication of desire and since desire necessitates consumption, these three mouths can still be seen within the pattern of eating, even though in the latter case the red lipstick seems to point more to erotic consumption.

What then is the aim of this depiction of cut off body parts in *matatu* culture? I would argue that this is one of the ways of carving out an unpolished exterior, a practice that is central to the carnivalesque practice. Taking these mouths in the light of Bakhtin's discussion of "convexities and orifices" as key to defining the unfinished body (1984:19-20), and being aware of the evacuative consequences of eating, we can situate the drawings and names discussed above within the discourse of bodily grotesquerie (*ibid.* 316-317). With these bodies *matatu* culture sets itself in contrast to the mainstream notion of a neatly finished exterior presentation of the body. The image of 'crude' exteriority thus established acts alongside crews' hip hop dress whose nature conveys the impression of dress about to fall off to reveal the unclothed body, the antithesis of the finely draped, mainstream-defined one.

Besides such bodily mut(il)ations as have been charted out above, crews attempt a cross-gendering of bodies/names of known popular culture characters to fit the subculture's ideas of social identity. Take the case of *Oliver Twist* (Figure 23) which merges totally disparate worlds into one body/text. The drawing depicts Olive, a character in the *Popeye* comic strip available in a local daily, *Sunday Nation* but the *matatu* name refers to the orphan boy in Charles Dickens' novel. Another *matatu* on the same route No. 44 bears the name *Popeye the Sailor*, a clear indication that the twist from *Olive* to *Oliver* is deliberate since the designer seems to be fully aware of the difference between the two comic strip figures and the literary character. *Oliver Twist* is thus transformed and fitted into a female body. But since in conversation *matatu* are usually referred to by their names, rarely by their drawings, the male name and not Olive's body becomes the foregrounded element. Unloved by an unfriendly city, crews see themselves as lone strugglers surviving by their wits; the trickster here is stretching the moral canvas to present himself as deserving of sympathy. Crews see themselves as evincing the versatility required in order to cope with the hostilities of urban space, much as in Raban's (1974) image of the streetwise urban subject who survives because of his ability to adapt himself to the various demands of the city. The Olive-Oliver mutation symbolically places the man more visibly in social space. Like I argued in the previous chapter, the erasure of female bodies speaks to crews' anxieties evoked by Nairobi's modern female.

ii) Animal iconography

When *matatu* crews tap into non-human iconography to express views of themselves, their work and the city road they appropriate from a universal stock of forms. This means that they have easily recognizable symbolic meanings culled as they are from identifiable mythological sources across diverse cultures. However, other than Mighty Mouse (Figure 24), most other icons from

TV cartoons—Yogi Bear, Pink Panther, and Bull Dog—have not become sufficiently popular. Mighty Mouse seems to have become popular owing to the potential for signification carried in his name—cunning, resilient, and full of tricks. It isn't difficult for crews to imagine themselves in his position, always playing tricks against law enforcement officials—the cats—quite a relevant reading given the rhyme of Mighty Mouse with *Mau Mau* whose resistance to British colonialism supplies a mythic space for crews' self-imagination. Indeed, Mighty Mouse T-shirts and capes are quite popular amongst the youth.

A slew of other non-human characters (e.g. the American eagle, the horse, the dove etc) has a wider appeal and occurs with greater frequency on *matatu*. The reason for this seems to be that unlike the cartoon characters cited above, this category of symbols speaks more forcefully to crews' self-perceived traits. In various world myths (see Biederman 1994; Carr-Gomm 1995; Tressider 1998), each of these creatures represents specific qualities which crews appropriate to symbolize aspects of their work and identity. The (American) Eagle is symbolic of majestic pride, dominion of the skies and conquest over evil while the horse—always white—represents triumph and vitality, for instance in Pegasus' myth.¹⁹ The dove stands for speed and the transition from life to the spirit world.

We can take the adoption of these non-human forms as an attempt to represent a coherent, describable worldview of the subculture. This is achieved by creating a structure of iconic signification whose unifying principle lies not in the forms *per se* but in establishing connections between specific attributes of the creatures/objects in question and aspects of crews' behavior. For instance, a *matatu* named *Smoke* has flames drawn all around the body (Figure 25). Smoke can be taken as an agent of concealment, an act *matatu* folk are particularly adept at in their habitual violations of the Highway Code. Smoke also indicates fire, a commodity simultaneously useful and dangerous; indeed, the *matatu*, *Spinners* (Figure 26), carries the injunction *Speed is fire*. The ambivalence of smoke makes the motif quite popular as it enables crews the space to play *good* and *bad* at the same time and thereby blur the usual manichean dichotomization of these two terms. Similarly, like the mythological eagle gazing into the sun without blinking (Biedermann *ibid.*), *matatu* crews 'rudely' stare at law-enforcers and everyone else and often get away unscathed. Furthermore, like the uninhibited eagle, the flamingo or the dove, *matatu* enter into all spaces of the city at will and the bird imagery here may be seen to represent crews' conception of their work as unencumbered mobility. The popular shoe design *Nike* posted on myriad *matatu*, which is the name of the patron goddess of victory, can be linked to these birds to enhance the idea of swift movement, in which crews take great pride.

The dragon, another *matatu* design, is usually understood as the representation of evil (see the book of Revelation). Thought to be of oriental origin and given wide currency by Marco Polo (Wittkower 1987:79), in European Christian cultures this beast symbolizes victory in the face of tremendous odds, for example in the legend of St George (Carr-Gomm 1995:100-101; Biederman 1994:102). The dragon's frightful image accurately captures popular feelings expressed about *matatu* crews—a terror to be greatly feared and avoided where possible. It's use as a symbol does not necessarily mean crews affirming possession of these negative attributes but rather indicates their awareness of what the rest of society thinks about them. On the other hand, by using this symbol, crews pose a boastful taunt about their invincibility; neither police harassment nor public opprobrium can faze them. Yet, as with the cobra image in Hindu mythology (dangerous but good), there is an ironic tension in the dragon image. The composite picture of the dragon of oriental cultures represents forces of good—procreation, fertility, activity, immortality, and rain (Biederman *ibid.*)—unlike its occidental representation. Such ambiguity enables self-referencing and crews can operate anywhere along the continuum of possibilities that open up. In Hindu mythology, the cobra stands for protection over treasures and instinct. The cobra design on *matatu* works well for crews since it deals a psychological blow to passengers; few informants indicated willingness to bandy words with anyone, leave alone crews, using snake symbolism.²⁰ In similar manner, Shorter and Onyanha (1997:90) have noted the use of predator fish names such

as *Barracuda*, *Shark* and *Nile Perch* to indicate *matatu* crews' predatory habits. I see such traits as being linked to the subculture's general exploitative nature.

Overall, whichever non-human icon is appropriated from the vast repertory of mythological creatures available to crews these choices are never fortuitous. In common, the icons thus chosen indicate the feelings of control and power *matatu* crews see themselves as exercising, in reality or fantasy, over the city road and Nairobi residents. However, of these icons, the most popular and consistently used is the Spider/man, to which we now turn for another deep reading.

iii) Spider/man: The Career and Mutation of a Trickster/Hero.

As an amalgam fashioned from mythology, popular culture and technology, Spider/man has been one of the subculture's most enduring and apt symbols in the mapping of its trickster identity. The spider features in various forms and colors on *matatu*. Countless *matatu* have tiny/large spiders and/or spider webs drawn on them while others are simply named *Spider* or *Big Spider* (Figure 27); it is curious that the Spiderman icon does not feature on *matatu* which instead make use of his web signature. *Matatu* spiders can be white, black, blue or red, with these unusual colors further enhancing the quality of excess, calculated absurdity and contrariness prevalent in the iconography of *matatu* subculture which is now beginning to feature on bigger buses (Figure 28). Variations to this pattern include names like *web*, *websitel* *Web Them* (Figure 29) but there is always a clear connection to spider/man. The latter name appeared on *matatu* in 2000 when Internet technology was just beginning to make significant impact in Nairobi; the year before a *matatu* had sported the name *consultant@yahoo.com*. It does seem particularly apt that crews should adopt their principal signifiers from a cutting edge field like the worldwide web given that *matatu* culture is itself a field constituted around a technological object, the vehicle.

It is impossible to say with certainty when the spider's web became such a popular icon in *matatu* culture. However, it can be positively asserted that the first *matatu* bearing this motif appeared around 1999. Increasingly after that the Spiderman cartoon has been popularized in Nairobi through computer games, TV and popular magazines (e.g. *The Source* Issue No.146, November 2001:119; Still, 2001:87). Incidentally the 1999 Warner Brothers movie *Wild Wild West*, starring Will Smith whose popularity as a *matatu* name comes from his role in *Men in Black I*, has a giant iron Tarantula in a principal role. I am persuaded that the movie's evil-good iron spider can be seen as a key model of crews' imagining their land bound iron vehicles in similar terms. The name spider, both as a business logo or simply as an icon, is not limited to *matatu* and is found in other areas of popular culture.

For example, to advertise her business at Nderi, a small rural town on the outskirts of Nairobi, a fine artist has posted a billboard featuring two elaborately done iron spiders: *HOTEL/THE ARTIST* (Figure 30). No incongruence is seen in juxtaposing the arachnid to food, true to the spider's mastery at inveigling himself into all sorts of spaces. Elsewhere in Nairobi's CBD is to be found *Spiders Pub* (*Sic*. Figure 31). Being located directly opposite a busy *matatu* stage (Gill House), the restaurant is a popular meeting point for the youth traveling on towards the general direction of Eastlands. Again here spider is seen in a puzzling environment—amongst drinks, food and snooker—in an atmosphere of gaiety. Incidentally, the proprietor in whose workshop I found designers at work once operated several *matatu* from this terminus. Being a youth himself, it is quite possible that *Spiders Pub* directly across the street had made an impression on him although he claims to have taken his inspiration from the Spiderman comic.²¹ Whatever the case, we see contemporary media being used to transpose a 'traditional'²² trickster character onto a popular culture icon.

What then accounts for the popularity of the spider in Nairobi, and particularly for the youth? My contention is that the spider is favored because he has more potential for adaptation and is less objectionable than either hare or monkey, two widely known local traditional trickster figures. I will illustrate my argument on why the *matatu* spider, having been suitably indigenized—even if through school book 'error'—has turned into such a popular character in Nairobi. Since Mwangi's version has been read in schools throughout Kenya since the 1970s and is thus the only

widely known local tale that features spider as a character I will use it to demonstrate my point. It is significant that in Gikuyu folklore, hare nearly always plays the role of trickster, but in *Mr Spider's Courtship*, spider plays that role instead.

Though it is presented as an etiological tale seeking to explain hare's long ears, the core action actually focuses on a contest over women. Hare repeatedly and successfully poisons the minds of spider's fiancées, all of whom subsequently refuse to marry him. Their excuse is that they cannot spend the rest of their lives "fetching water to wash the spider's legs" (Mwangi 1983:70). Again and again, spider makes the mistake of introducing hare to his potential wives. A sweet talker, spider is either phenomenally stupid or reckless and always disclosing the results of his successful *talk* to hare. Two key issues that are directly related to our purposes arise from this tale; one, that the bone of contention between these two 'men' is *girls* and, two, the withdrawal of the web from the skies upon spider's return to earth, which leaves hare stranded in the heavens. We can see that as with Spiderman's, *modus operandi*, the web in the tale is deployed for both good and bad. This has links to the wider argument I make throughout this study, to wit, that inherently ambiguous symbols have particular appeal to crews since they offer space for unrestrained behavior, especially within the trickster framework.

What then is the significance of this seemingly absurd quarrel over legs in the narrative cited above? This is where we can see the real relevance of the girls in the story. By psychoanalytic explication, we can problematize hare's constant reference to spider's "eight legs", the single most emphasized detail in the text. The girls' behavior before and after meeting hare changes radically due to some sort of 'knowledge' that hare imparts about spider's legs, which process always takes place in the latter's absence. We note that in their categorical refusal to marry him they all cite his many legs—which we presume they had already seen—and of which we note hare to have four. Thus we realize that these girls without doubt must have done some comparison of something other than the eight legs whose number in any case is too obvious not to have attracted considerable thought before. Clearly, hare more than *talks* to these girls—he *does* something. As the dispute is framed in the danger posed by legs, we are safe to assume his four appendages have been being put to some work. The leg here is a phallic symbol, more so as the context of the story is spider's wooing of girls. As a trickster, we already know that hare is a mischievous character.

Two plausible conclusions may be arrived at based on this reading. One, hare is a better lover than spider; since all these girls have already *talked* to spider they can make the comparison between hare's set of firm, sturdy legs, and spiders' rather spindly infirm ones! Second, and issuing from the preceding point, the girls are naturally quite exhausted after a sexual encounter with *four-legged* hare and hence do not relish the prospect of double the physical exertion for the rest of their lives, as custom would require, if they married the *eight-legged* spider.²³ In Gikuyu custom, it was the wife's duty to supply the husband with water to clean up after a night of conjugal fulfillment. Consequently, we may see that the anxiety over fetching 'eight gourds' of water is directly related to these girls' fear of excessive sexual encounter with the many-legged monster.

Spider, in losing all the women but the last, effectively loses his manhood repeatedly, perfectly metaphorizing modern youth's anxieties over their manhood, which, as we saw in the previous chapter, is a serious crisis in their lives. As an examination of crews' celebration of libido in *matatu* names in the next chapter will demonstrate, the *matatu* trickster's flaunting of his sexuality is a form of embodied discourse. Thus, spider's revenge against hare for example directly mirrors a recurrent theme in crews' talk; how to take revenge against foes who run off with their girls. In other words, the subculture's deceptively simple symbols capture concrete and deep seated dilemmas in the dramas of crews' lives. Thus in the narrative, behind hare's punishment lies a philosophical inquiry on the nature of justice; after meddling so many times in spider's affairs, is it not time for him to get his just deserts? Incidentally Charles, the young man who designed *Spinners* (Figure 26), indicated that he had at the core of his mind this very

question regarding “Kenya’s wrong-doers” (especially the political elite) when he did the spider/man decoration on this particular vehicle.

I contend then that since trickery is already a well-established theme in Kenyan folk narratives, trickster acts and figures within *matatu* culture are likely to be tolerated since they are interpreted upon the basis of a pre-existing folklore form. Spider is favored over hare because he has greater potential for adaptation and is less-objectionable than the lazy monkey. Indeed, the *matatu* spider/man falls within a category of common trickster figures in Africa who go by different names; Ture in Equatorial Africa and Ananse in most of West Africa and Esu amongst the Yoruba (Barker and Sinclair 1972; Paulme 1977; Biederman 1992:316; Gates 1988). Nevertheless his function in folklore is constant: a character of many guises who, despite his specialty for the outrageous, is often a victim of his own excesses. Owing to schooling, Kenyans are quite familiar with these other trickster characters of the world and hence might be explained first their acceptance of the metamorphosis of spider into a local character and, secondly, their fascination with the Spider/man amalgam.

Most significantly for the trickster, the spider’s web can also stand for the world of illusions, of which there are many in his everyday.²⁴ This is a particularly useful symbol for crew’s identity; in their self-invention, they can present their many guises and laugh at or antagonize society even as they pretend not to. The illusory is indeterminate and gives rise to “unrealness” as an instrument for rupturing social borders of taste, calling norms to question and thus staging a ‘safe’ rebellion. Extending a reading of this character further afield, we see some correspondence between the African spider and Arachne in Greek mythology in the sense that weaving is symbolic of fate. Arachne’s punishment results from what Athena perceives to be a transgression against the gods by depicting their lecherous desires. Like Arachne, *matatu* folk are often accused of being overly preoccupied with the “filthy”, but if this is the case then crews are cannot be any more or less dirty than the rest of the society from which they come, a point to which I return in the next chapter. Yet, like Arachne, they are vilified for opening up the “darkness” of human desires. Crews seem to be aware of this, and hence the choice of a popular traditional trickster figure in modern (dis)guise who is able to raise such questions with impunity.

The popularity of Spiderman might then be explained as owing in part to his immense symbolic abilities, and in part because he is seen to literally replace the various local traditional tricksters. This then might account for both the simultaneous use of Spiderman and the “ugly” (ogre-like, detached bodies) designs discussed earlier; each signifies upon specific concerns in the subculture. At another level, the spiders’ web and names connected to the worldwide web are significant indices of crews’ perception of the world as a trap and their role as that of trappers. “*Dogs’ world*”, a design on the side of a No.9 *matatu*, reinforces crews’ self-conception as hunters, and life as a contest between opponents ‘eating’ each other up. In this sense these designs reinforce my reading of the subculture’s signification within the esthetics of carnival grotesquerie. However, aware that ‘dog’ in African American English also means ‘superb’, we can also see the *matatu* man here claiming superlative performance. Similarly, some spiders are harmless while others have a lethal bite just as some are beautiful and others unseemly; by adopting the spider as their symbol, crews capture the tensions and ambivalence of their identities, thus showing the impossibility of (easy) containment within bifurcated poles.

Hence, as with the names they adopt, the spider image offers multiple, sometimes apparently contradictory readings much in the same way that fashion is used to contest crews’ (self-perceived) marginality at the same time as it projects imagined identities. Since, as we saw earlier in this chapter, *matatu* culture operates within an inverted hierarchy of norms, the police, passengers, and other road users are all potential targets of this prowling *matatu*-Spider/man. Being the *matatu* man’s alter ego, Spider/man is cast into whatever identity that crews may wish to mould him in as a way of expressing their understanding of both their work and the city’s other subcultures.

However, despite his transgressions, the *matatu* man has quite a few admirers. This paradox can be explained if we consider that despite his many excesses, he is still vitally connected to the broader society, much as the North American trickster is “representative of the lawless, indeed anarchistic, aspect of ourselves which exists in even the most social creatures” (Abrahams 1968:17). What Abrahams calls “the duality of Trickster’s acts” helps us understand why *matatu* men are simultaneously liked and reviled, tolerated and cursed. Some of my informants explain ambiguities in the behavior of *matatu* men in the light of the ambivalence, discussed in Chapter Two, with which Nairobians generally view crews’ extreme, often inappropriate behavior. Stewart supplies a rationale of the trickster’s behavior that we may draw upon to explain this ambivalence when she states that he is “a violator of not only specific taboos [,] but also the idea of a taboo, the idea of a rule that cannot be violated” (1979:62). This desire to test the limits of circumscriptions, the essence of transgression, is harbored by people across the social spectrum but there are limitations as to which particular social actors can safely test such borders and safely get away with it. In our case, it can validly be argued that the *matatu* man’s jaunts represent the daring of a subculture that is unafraid, or simply does not care, about social prescriptions; vicariously, onlookers who might themselves not be so courageous gain relief in witnessing the subculture’s social trespasses. Like the spider in the tale discussed above who goes to the heavens in search of a bride, crews tend to go to phenomenal extremes in the pursuit of their goals. In their so doing, they force public attention upon themselves.

Moreover, his performance is convincing is seen in the fact that no matter the extremities of his obnoxious (dis)play, symbolic and actual, the trickster *matatu* man has ever been banished from the public sphere. Through calculated absurdities and excesses, in their fashion and redeployment of symbols, these bricoleurs have successfully inscribed themselves into Nairobi and by extension Kenyan tradition. That this culture holds a significant place in the city’s public life can be seen in the abundance of travelers’ personal experience narratives detailing different aspects of the subculture.

3.4. Conclusion

In the interrogation of *matatu* culture’s expressive forms in this chapter, the foundational analytic has proceeded from the assumption that content mutation corresponds to the adaptation of form. Thus we have seen how in the interface between local oral cultures and non-local popular culture older values are recreated in ‘new’ ways. In Nairobi’s cultural polyphony, we find ‘residuals’ from older traditions expressed in modern forms (stickers) and reinforced by cultural practices (hip hop culture) that appear radically ‘foreign.’ Yet, there are major points of convergence between all these culturally disparate forms that lend significant import to *matatu* crews’ identity project. Visibilizing himself by means of hip hop style and phenomenal names, the *matatu* man seizes his moment in the limelight to lay a cultural ambush upon the city. Indifferent to, or perhaps in spite of, protests from the mainstream culture, most visibly represented by traffic police officers, crews have, particularly over the last fifteen years, indelibly stamped their identity upon public consciousness. Their boldly accented difference, and the difference of this accent, forms the interstitial space in which they reinvent themselves in the various modes made possible by the trickster character.

Thus, I would argue that the real potency of the culture’s parodic forms lies in the myriad indeterminate and probable interpretations enabled by symbols, severally or in concert, rather than strictly in the sign itself. In this way, crews supply signs for their self-re/invention in as many guises as the codes at play can be stretched to accommodate. The indeterminacy of *matatu* expressive forms is thus particularly useful for crews since they can situate themselves within any number of positions that ‘mock’ or talk back to other subcultures at no risk to themselves. In this unbounded space constituted through signs, they have a niche from which to negotiate meanings with other agonistic subcultures in the city.

A common phenomenon in this subculture involves crews' simultaneous assumption of several apparently contradictory identities, a condition noted elsewhere as being common to urbanites (Raban 1974). For *matatu* culture, this is an important tactic since within the complexities of urbanity, identities need to be quickly adapted to situational needs. Indeed, operating as they do within youth culture, crews must master and muster the skills necessary for constant self(re)invention in order to negotiate profitably with their clients and also navigate the hostile city street that they see as being replete with threats. Moreover, since society views and treats them negatively, crews find it necessary to assert themselves by any means possible to contest marginalization. This calls for the deployment of expressive devices that may present contradictory surface meanings but which, being addressed to a diverse constituency of viewers/readers, make sense differently to individual viewers. Inscribing disharmony in the overall identity is in this case a tactical ploy, a method most profitable for transgressive practices that can be camouflaged within 'normal', banal acts.

As a direct consequence of the disjuncture inherent in the juxtaposition of various attributes of the trickster, expressive forms and normative positions, *matatu* culture offends at the same time as it pleases. In effect, while subcultures allied to the mainstream rail at *matatu* subculture, the youth readily identify with it; though a culture of the marginalized, they find it to be a viable alternative vehicle for their aspirations. *Matatu* culture might thus be seen broadly as a vernacular of every day youth affirmation and resistance in Nairobi. Hip hop's excesses, being both an instance of inversion and cultural consumption within that vernacular discourse, help to create cultural capital for these youths. Its various excesses work alongside traditional local values carried within crews' language in order to reinforce masculinity—a predominant aspect of the culture's identity. However, at the same time as they reinforce older values, the subculture's practices invert and fracture the 'normal' order of things in contemporary Nairobi. This modality enables, indeed calls for, the use of the carnival analytic in trying to understand *matatu* culture, which is the task of the next chapter.

Notes

¹ Most such bumper stickers might refer to issues far removed from everyday street life: "University of Missouri Alumni", "University of Iowa", "I support the Nairobi Heart to Heart Foundation", Muthaiga Sports Club, Rotary Club of Nairobi, Parklands Sports Club etc. Of the 'university stickers', all of them were about North American universities the car owners had presumably attended. On the other hand, older cars sport stickers with more ordinary messages such as "Honk if you are in love" or the "I love New York"-type stickers. Since an excessive display of stickers is looked down upon—one driver termed it "juvenile behavior"—owners of newer looking cars generally avoid using them. As Agguire (1990) argues, it is possible to determine with a fair degree of accuracy a driver's social class depending on the number of stickers displayed on his car. In Nairobi for instance, middle class professionals and business people sport the 'prestige' stickers cited above. On the other hand, taxi drivers and owners of battered vehicles were more likely to have displayed assorted stickers bearing more down-to-earth messages. In line with my characterization of *matatu* as a site for subaltern culture, Nairobi sticker messages can be seen to mark the general social boundaries of mainstream and non-mainstream cultural concerns.

² The government used to own a bus company, the *Nyayo* Bus Corporation, which was started in 1988 (See Widner 1992:181-183). The bus company collapsed in the mid-1990s, an instance of a postcolonial state becoming a victim of its own gross inefficiency. As such, in the absence of government investment in public transportation, private investors fully control the sector, and hence the predominance of *matatu*, a sterling example of indigenous capital. Stopping *matatu* operations would thus have meant stopping a majority of the population from going about their everyday business.

³ I only saw this sticker in one *matatu* in 1998 and it has since gone out of print. This is attributable to the predominance of men in the *matatu* and sticker printing sectors and because sticker production is guided by taste in *matatu* culture, unpopular stickers quickly go out of print. In contrast, popular stickers such as the 'bus/gold' and 'maize cob' ones discussed in Chapter Two have remained in wide circulation at least since the late 1980s when I first noticed them.

⁴ However, I noticed that quite a number of drivers were oblivious of the risks simply because they were drunk; some confided that they took *marijuana* "in order to cope with rude *wadhii* [S. Passengers]." Sometimes, passengers also urge drivers to speed. Whatever the case, speeding constitutes an integral aspect of crews' 'road games.'

⁵ Without exception, the following fashion labels (shirts, pants and shoes) noted on *matatu* workers and passengers are American: *FUBU*, *Sean John*, *Puma*, *Enyce*, *Nike*, *Jordan*, *Ruff Ryder*, *Mecca*, *Adidas*, *School of Hard Knocks*, *Roca Wear*, *PhatFarm*, *Johnny Blaze*, *Dragon*, *Kicker*, *Ecko*, *Pelle MB Pelle*, *Snoop Dogg*, *Caterpillar*, *Maijen*, *AND1*, *Skechers*, *Dada* and *Tommy Hilfigger* (*sic*).

⁶ As Salamon shows, the scheme of 'black' among Ethiopian Jews has different gradients, each coming with its predetermined meanings; the youth in this group identify with American "black otherness" in order to circumvent their Ethiopian culture's problematic relationship to the issue of being black (2003:21).

⁷ There other voices outside youth culture also question the mainstream's zealous attachment to the protocol of English dress. For instance humor writer Mutahi satirizes Kenyans for taking their mimetic dramas too seriously (1998:68-70). However, as pointed out in Chapter Two, *matatu* crews, if aware of it, ignore the contradiction that their own cool looks, and the fashion they use to formulate difference, are also forms of cultural colonialism but, as Hebdige (1979) demonstrates, in subcultures it is more the new pastiche that speaks, and less the antecedent discourse from whence it is appropriated.

⁸ Hebdige (1979:151, n19) cites Richard Hell saying that for punks, self-invention, the attainment of an "immaculate identity" is one of the vital achievements possible through rock' 'n roll. Other than *Hell*, other 'freakish' punk names cited are Paul *Grotesque*, Johnny *Rotten* and Sid *Vicious* [my emphasis]. An American professional wrestler later appropriated the latter name before it eventually turned up on a Nairobi *matatu*. Similarly, *matatu* crews display generally 'outrageous' names to highlight certain aspects of their identity. As Jegede notes, "judicious" appropriation and synthesis is one way in which popular cultures in urban Africa can, and do, ensure survival (1995:293); *matatu* culture amply illustrates such adaptation as a contest of social deletion.

⁹ The list of such names is endless and would be impossible to supply here. This is due to the speed at which these names are picked and changed depending on their currency in popular media; a *matatu* might sport one name in the evening and a new one the following morning. Suffice it to say that designers, themselves being youths, pay keen attention to the latest happenings in the mediascape.

¹⁰ Gates (1988) makes the case for signifyin(g) as a literary theory through which texts by black writers can be meaningfully critiqued. While McGregor (2003) agrees with this, she insists that an interpretation of hip hop needs to privilege a verbal rather than a literary understanding of signifyin(g). I take the latter position since by accenting the verbal aspect we can take into account performance, especially as it touches on audience involvement and the deployment of body gestures.

¹¹ Being of Arab stock, my informant is not considered black by Kenyan standards; passengers and crews unaware of his genetic descent called him "*mhindi*" [K. Indian] more so since no white people do not engage in the *matatu* business. The color assignment here utilizes sociological data, more than the actual skin tone, to confer identity.

¹² Though quite a number of *matatu* crews smoke cannabis, the display of this icon might be read as deliberate misdirection. Aware of the stereotype view of all *matatu* crews as marijuana smokers, they use the icon to 'terrorize' other road users, thus enhancing their 'badness.'

¹³ The words of one hip hop rap indicate this awareness thus: "Capitalism is like a Spider/The web is getting tighter/I'm struggling like a fighter/...Just when I think I'm free/It seems to me the Spider steps/The web is made of money/Made of greed, made of me/or what I have become in a parasite economy..." *Not Yet Free*, by the group The Coup in their album *Kill My Landlord* cited in Potter (1995:14).

¹⁴ Other than the parodies of Christian hymns by the Mau Mau on which Maina wa Kinyatti has written, cited here by Haugerud, it seems that the phenomenon of biblically derived parodies in contemporary Kenya is, to the best of my knowledge, yet to be researched. It is possible that other than the forms discussed in this study, myriad parodic forms, especially in narrative, could be in circulation.

¹⁵ "I am the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me." All bible citations are based on the New King James Version.

¹⁶ "O, God my heart is steadfast; I will sing and give praise, even with my glory."

¹⁷ "But those who wait on the Lord/shall renew their strength; They shall mount up with wings like eagles/they shall run and not be weary/they shall walk and not faint.

¹⁸ Names metonymic of mobility include *Smooth Flight*, *Flight 043*, *Frenzy*, *Ground Missile*, *Why Float When Others Fly?* and *Street Flighter* (*sic*).

¹⁹ See *Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Encyclopedia*.

²⁰ In a preeminently Christian country like Kenya, the snake symbol is read within the representations of satan in the fall of man story in Genesis. This particular picture sticker was pointed out as evidence that some *matatu* crews and owners were "devil-worshippers" (see rumors section in Chapter Five). But even as this charge is made, nothing is mentioned of the healing snake that is wielded by Moses in Exodus.

²¹ The steel grille on the inside of his workshop's main gate has an elaborate spider's web design as do the window grilles in the office annex. Still writes about a comic book editor who says he wants to put a new "spin" to Spider-Man (Still 2001:87). *Matatu* crews seem to have taken the cue and given the spider's web greater visibility and more meanings as they transport the character around the city.

²² 'Traditional' here refers to his widely known role outside Kenya. Despite Mwangi's (1983:68-71) presentation of spider as a character in Gikuyu folktales, I have not been able to trace any other narrative in which he features, as a trickster or otherwise. Informants from other Kenyan communities also indicated spider's absence in their folklore. Only one of my informants, Waitthaka, indicated having come across a spider riddle among school children; "Stephen *na kienyu kia ngima* [G. Stephen and a lump of *ugali* (K), a local corn flour-based dish]." Answer: "*Mbumbui ina itumbi* [An egg-carrying spider]." That the name of the spider in the riddle is 'Stephen', and the fact that the informant reports not hearing other spider-related texts, suggests that even this particular text is non-local. It appears that Mwangi's informants may have been influenced by contact with outside sources. Given that she does not indicate where her research took place, hailing as she does from Kiambu in Kenya's Central Province, a region with a heavy missionary presence since the beginning of the twentieth century, it is a safe assumption that she did her fieldwork there. Nonetheless, the tale demonstrates the adaptivity of folklore to 'outside' contact, resulting in the invention of spider as a Kenyan/Gikuyu trickster. Mwangi's book has been on the recommended reading list of oral literature syllabi in Kenyan high schools and universities since the 1970s and this is another major way in which spider has been traditionalized in Kenya. In a further demonstration of the role schools play in such traditionalizing, Miruka (1994) similarly claims that Spider is a character in local folklore, without citing which community has him as such. As evidence he refers to the tale of Spider's courtship, an apparent reference to Mwangi's text under discussion here.

²³ Trickster's excessive libidinous capacities are legendary, further enhancing the kind of psychoanalytical reading done here. For instance, p'Bitek (1974: 78) writes of the hare who copulates with his mother-in-law in the courtyard in broad daylight. Elsewhere, the Yoruba trickster Esu is "frequently characterized as an inveterate copulator possessed by his enormous penis" (Gates 1988:6). Noting that he even marries and copulates with same sex partners, Stewart, citing Paul Radin, has argued that "as the embodiment of disparate claims, trickster is analogous to the process of metaphor, the incorporation of opposites into a new configuration. He represents the breakdown and the emergence of the classifications constituting culture" (1978: 62). I find this a particularly relevant insight in trying to tease meanings out of the 'impossible' tropes taken by carnivalesque signification in *matatu* culture. Thus, whether consciously or otherwise, it can hardly be incidental that *matatu* culture's symbols of self-representation tend towards lower bodily functions, an issue I take up more fully in the next chapter four.

²⁴ For an explanation of spiders web as illusion see Tressider 1998.

Chapter Four World Upside Down ¹I: Young Man-Boy

Kenya lazima uwe kauzi kaa unataka kusucceed. Wameng'am nchi wakamaliza mafuta yote. Nchi hii si poa. Usipofanya mchoro ni useless kwenda chuo. Mimi nilienda chuo, of what use is it to me now? Ile certificate sasa si ni paper tu? Vile hawa mapolitician wametushow, Kenya inataka nguthi ndio usurvive [In Kenya you must become a thief if you want to succeed. They have gobbled the fat off the whole country. This country is not good. If you don't hatch a scheme it is useless going to school. I went to school, of what use is it to me now? That certificate is it now not merely a piece of paper? From what the politicians have shown us, in Kenya you must be a robber in order to survive].

(Karanja, driver of *Magic Wave*. 2002)

Parental Advisory Services: Explicit Lyrics (Figure 32)

4.0 The Traditional within the Modern

For a Kenyan youth, working on *matatu* is a difficult thing, even under normal circumstances and the realization that one's aspirations are stuck and going nowhere can soon lead to extreme agony. Karanja's account, above, generally maps the concerns of this chapter that may be formulated as follows; (1) what do *matatu* people achieve with their expressive forms? (2) How do they understand their position vis-à-vis the threats that they perceive within their everyday experiences? (3) Where, metaphorically speaking, are these *matatu* folk going? With these questions I hope to examine where and how crews place themselves vis-à-vis modernity and their understanding of such space. In the chapter, I examine how the relatively non-fixed forms, particularly in terms of language use, are used to reify the culture's transgression of normative (b)orders. I argue, ultimately, that crews' inverted world is very much a reflection of broader tensions and struggles in the society in general.

Finding barriers erected between themselves and their desired goals, people devise tactics in order to reach their ends. Necessarily, conflict arises between such tactics and the condition(s) they thus seek to subvert. In this chapter I interrogate *matatu* culture's adoption of such contest tactics that will lead us on to hidden points connecting this subculture and Nairobi's other subcultures that evince a similar preoccupation with transgression. I seek to establish why, despite protests in public discourse—as seen in newspapers for example—against the 'indecent' of *matatu* folk, people still identify with *matatu* culture and, moreover, participate in and enjoy its transgressions. Towards the chapter conclusion I examine a popular night time dance, *mugithi* [G. Train], in order to demonstrate my point that *matatu* culture is actively constituted within a general public preoccupation with carnivalesque transgression. To this extent I intend to call to question the general us-them dichotomy within which *matatu* crews and their culture are viewed by those positioned outside the subculture. Even though crews, as we have seen, deploy a similar view of themselves, it needs to be emphasized that they do so strictly within their occupational field whereas; it is to these tricksters' advantage to portray themselves as marginalized. Thus, while the *matatu* culture has unique occupation-related characteristics, it is firmly linked to practices in Nairobi/Kenyan subcultures that are considered more acceptable to mainstream culture.

A key contention in this chapter is that the inversion of norms that generally characterizes *matatu* culture can best be understood within carnival modes of representation. In order to sustain itself within a modern(ized) social context the subculture cushions itself within a local tradition in order to safely invent an atmosphere of irreverence. In this manner, the subculture operates within tradition to speak to a modern situation. I view this in terms of Bhabha's concept of third space that was raised in Chapter Two that acts as crews' staging ground for

their transgressive practice. I look at aspects of *matatu* culture that defy social definition of taste, that revel in their ‘obscenity’, which the *matatu* man unapologetically throws into society’s face to disturb its horrified posture. Hence this chapter’s prefatory *matatu* name that indicates not just the general ‘explicit content’ nature of this chapter, but also, crucially, indicates the code that we need to apply in reading the subculture’s practices. It is a subculture that is much aware of the terms of its performance. This has led me to search for connections between carnivalesque practice in general and its possible presence in local cultures.

Though theoretically I proceed from Bakhtin (1984), I do not try to fit every aspect of mediaeval carnival into an analysis of *matatu* culture since, in any case, the latter does not derive from the former. More generally I see *matatu* culture as situated within the practice of folk humor—Bakhtin’s concern in Rabelais—that permeates popular cultures universally. Indeed, as I stated in the first chapter, the usefulness of the concept of carnivalesque lies in its critique of society, not whether Rabelaisian characters appear in every nook and cranny of social practices. Transformations occur in all social practices, and so we should expect carnival to evince such mutations. Gilbert and Tompkins make a crucial insight in this regard when, in their discussion of carnivalesque practice in Caribbean theater, they observe that “the conservative view of carnival as a licensed inversion has only limited usefulness [...]; more enabling is the idea of carnival as a subversion that undermines all categories of social privilege and thus prevents their unproblematic reassemblage” (1996: 84). My view is linked to their argument in that whether dealing with *matatu* culture or the erotic *mugithi* dance, we’re looking at modalities of expression that disrupt stable categories of taste and order that have been prescribed by the mainstream culture’s notions of modernity. The latter does not have to license *matatu* culture’s insurgency; the oppositions are an *a priori* given. Below, I discuss the most probable originary custom in order to show how *matatu* culture, using the hip hop lifestyle discussed in preceding chapters, builds upon pre-existing local cultural frameworks to execute its own inversions. The subculture’s rootedness within local tradition makes it not only self-sustaining but secretly tolerated by a broad section of society.

4.1 The traditional Gikuyu world-upside-down

The preeminent representation of the Gikuyu in the *matatu* business, either as owners, operators or touts necessitates problematization. My argument is that *matatu* culture is what it is in the main because of the significant amount of Gikuyu traditional lore and values that inform some of its core values. Moreover, a Gikuyu traditional worldview seems to have found ready ground amongst other *matatu* workers.² It is against this background that I suggest that a Gikuyu custom revolving around the practice of circumcision could consistently explain *matatu* culture’s widely acknowledged ‘transgressions’.

Traditionally, the Gikuyu had a three-week period during which boys preparing for circumcision were permitted, indeed *expected*, to behave contrary to social norms; girls were involved in this process, but boys performed excesses of the nature that concern us here. Initiates had several dances during this period, *Mumburo*, *Mwithigo*—sung towards the end of the former—and *Matuumo*. Generally these boys and girls would gorge themselves to the full during this period. They were also allowed to literally whip elders and seize beer and meat from them, grab food from their age-mates’ mothers, and use any vulgar words that they could muster in their conversations with women. Leakey points out that “at such a time the initiation candidates were allowed to do all kinds of things which were forbidden from them normally. Indeed, they gloried in doing so, boasting that the elders would hasten the arrangements for their initiation in time if they were pestered sufficiently” (1977:409).³

Boys insulted and provoked each other to stick-fights while the girls watched and cheered from a safe distance. The point of these excesses was for the boys to demonstrate their ‘manhood’, even if by then they were yet to become men through circumcision. Winning in verbal and physical duels gained the boys respectability. Thus girls would seek out the winners (‘better men’) as dance partners while losers were derided.⁴ This training is intended to show that

manhood is, and should be, a physically demonstrable matter, and that adeptness at vulgarity has its own premium within such a scheme. Further, on the eve of circumcision, both boys and girls were required to dance naked in public. The songs and chants accompanying these dances were extremely bawdy (see for instance Leakey 1977:408-414).⁵ In other words, this period was a world-upside-down (hereafter WUD) as we understand it within carnivalesque representation. It is because of this traditional practice that songs sung in bars are normally referred to as “circumcision hymns”,⁶ a contemporary practice whose connections to *matatu* culture I try to probe towards the conclusion of the chapter.

Paradoxically, and contrary to popular assumption, a constantly-voiced opinion amongst my informants was that, other than the physical and verbal abuse sometimes suffered in the hands of crews, there is nothing seriously wrong with *matatu* culture. *Matatu* passengers, even though few would admit it willingly, find some amusement and fulfillment in the *matatu* WUD. Taken together, practices in *matatu* culture suggest that no matter how else it might be read, an apprehension of it within the terms of the carnivalesque is key to making any sense of the subculture. Thus, I am arguing that there are very tight links between the traditional Gikuyu circumcision carnival and the *matatu* WUD. Moreover, it is important to note that the practice of taking circumcised boys into an eight day post-initiation seclusion for purposes of inducting them into ‘adults-only’ knowledge still exists in rural central Kenya, where the bulk of Gikuyu live, and amongst the urban middle class in Nairobi. During these ‘lessons’ initiates are taught as many taboo words and superstitions carried in the Gikuyu culture as the guardians can muster. Of course, such instruction is useful in the socialization process but there is also the attraction individuals might feel in using the language thus acquired out of context. This appeal of the transgressive might help to account for the delight that the youths who work on *matatu* take in demonstrating their adeptness at using taboo words, especially those that reference bodily acts like copulation.⁷

Thus we can see that *matatu* culture is not as disruptive as its surface modalities seem to suggest. On the contrary, it is merely an unapologetic way of recuperating traditional society’s technology of values: power, material wealth and women as the main sources of male prestige. These are the constants that *matatu* culture seeks to reinforce using modernity’s tools and ideas from the media. Within a patriarchal social order, it is in the interests of older men to tolerate a subculture that helps to maintain the status quo with regard to women. This might be a good explanation as to why, despite the fact that most *matatu* in Nairobi are owned by older men, the same owners do not insist that sexist sticker messages for instance be removed from their vehicles.⁸ These messages are not just good business strategies for most of the elderly *matatu* owners. They also help perpetuate and (re)construct a particular social order amongst society’s (presumed) future controllers of property/power.

It is significant to note that inversion of norms as discussed above was associated *only* with the Gikuyu *rite de passage* from boyhood to manhood. This helps us center on the identity of boyishness with which crews play and exploit to their advantage. Boyhood, differently put, is a metaphor of transition and crews have much to gain by presenting themselves as ‘mere boys’. Aided by the fact of vehicular movement (and speed) in their occupation, crews’ identity can in this manner be seen to be based on a motif of transitions. However, these boys refuse to ‘grow up’, preferring to remain “boyz” despite undergoing the rite of passage, because by acting boyish, they can utilize the space of boyhood license that society allows them; it is a *carte blanche* to be ‘naughty’. Moreover, as I show later on, certain aspects of their naughtiness secretly amuse the adults (men and women). Indulgently, passenger informants explain away their transgressions with the saying “*makanga no makanga* [G. A tout is just a tout]” adopted from the Gikuyu expression “*ihii no ihii* [boys are/will always be boys].”

The preceding point ties up with the nature of insults in *matatu* language where irresponsible and ‘offending’ drivers are likened to boys and children. In other words like children, such drivers are not to be regarded too severely since they are presumed not to know better and their

actions are deemed to be mere infantile amusement. This might be one way of explaining the many *matatu* names that play with the noun or concepts revolving around 'boy/z'.⁹ As I showed in the second chapter, crews conceive of life on the street in terms of games and since boys are traditionally considered as having no dignity to lose, *matatu* men choose to remain in this symbolic liminal space. Consequently, crews' brazen acts that grate against the rest of society need not be (mis)taken for madness;¹⁰ they are acts that exploit boyish license to stake crews' claims. Indeed, once looked at this way, it seems the subculture's disguises have successfully tricked many observers. Next I attempt an examination of crews' motivations for staking claims that often run counter to most of society's norms.

4.2. Wrecked modernity: "Tupe mahewa!"

In the previous chapter we examined some of the ways in which specific expressive forms in *matatu* culture are deployed to make meaning. In this section, I try to probe crews' understanding of their society's contradictions; the *matatu* name *Wreckin' effect*, taken as a comment of crews' awareness that no matter how contemporary Nairobi is conceived to be there is something wrecked and malfunctioning about it, points towards the general direction of my argument here. By all means, their reactions to dilemmas of existence do not constitute a homologized response. Indeed, I must emphasize that mainly dependent on age and place of residence,¹¹ different crews emphasize different expressive forms. Older drivers tend to be content with merely sporting a name, which might not be catchy, and sometimes have none at all. From the car's in-built radio they might tune to Christian gospel music, against which youth passengers inevitably protest by demanding "Toa hiyo! Hewa [S. Turn that one off! (We want) Hip hop]!" However, there are few crews of this sort and their vehicles are quite unpopular with dot.commers who, in any case, comprise a majority of the commuting population of Nairobi.

Accordingly, a search for patterns and the real significance in the subculture can only be yielded by examining the younger men's practices since they comprise the subculture's core corps. They, more than older crews, also evince a brasher attitude towards everything and everyone as witnessed by the *matatu* name: *If you don't like my attitude QUIT talking to me!* It is largely the antics of these late teenage-to-early twenties crews whose catchy names for themselves and their *matatu* and sharp fashion looks that work alongside the picture stickers of mostly near-nude women and 'sound bombers' [powerful music players] installed in their vehicles that give *matatu* culture its main character and visibility.

Like other members of society, *matatu* crews yearn for success in life by seeking the material items by which middle class prosperity is generally understood; raising a (small) family, acquiring property, and taking their children to good schools; in spite of their contempt towards the poor *mwailimu* [K. Teacher], they are momentarily aware of what an asset a sound education can be. However, being poor the one resource they have in inexhaustible abundance is the will to *dream* themselves into success. As local opportunities for personal achievement dwindle up, they find themselves looking more and more outwards; more than local success stories, what crews see out "there" begins to shape their concepts of achievement.

To Nairobi youth in general, of which *matatu* crews are a core part, cosmopolitanism is the high end of modernity since, by the fact of either not having been born in the rural countryside or migrated from there, they consider themselves, *de facto*, modern. The success of their project therefore largely depends upon hooking into a contested version of modernity, the *ghetto license* (a *matatu* name) of hip hop, as a way of marking their sense of cosmopolitanism. They base their modes of being on portraits and metaphors of the modern that invoke their own local, traditionally-defined concepts of manhood that counteract mainstream notions of a modern identity. By doing this they do not merely gain an interstitial space for the expression of difference; their transgressive acts, just like hip hop's aggressive methods, ensure the culture's visibility. Thus understood, we see that *matatu* culture's (self-)representational modes are ineluctably agonistic to other cultures. Notwithstanding, like their American idols, *matatu*

crews are keen to present their identities within local mainstream forms of modernity. In this case, their culture becomes not a complete break from modernity but a tactical rejection of certain aspects of it as a way of accenting their difference. As such, *matatu* culture cannot be seen as wholly counter-cultural; indeed a keener examination shows that it has more rather than less in common with general Kenyan society than is usually presumed.

Take the case of the driver Karanja whose comment introduces this chapter. He is emphatic that he and many others in his occupation view the acquisition of formal education and skilled training as the normative route to the attainment of personal success. Generally, the youth among my informants were categorical that Kenyan politicians, particularly the ruling clique, are responsible for frustrating their dreams and struggle for material success. Here are sample responses; “They have totally messed up everything in this country”; “they are just a class of thieves”; “I wish I was a politician—I would also eat!”; “The system just requires you to be from the *prezi*’s [S. President] tribe—and then you don’t even have to be qualified for a job with the government”¹²; “They screwed up everything—including us!” and “There is no hope for the young generation in this country any more.” One senses packed into these feelings intense pent up despair and anger. Consequently, many young people speak of “going to America, even if to do dishes or wash old people in nursing homes” so long as such jobs, even if deemed ‘undignified’, ensure some measure of financial independence. Some informants were so bitter that they declared that said if they ever got the chance to leave the country they would never return, or at least not before accumulating enough money to return home as wealthy people.¹³

Furthermore, the youth see a dearth of inspiring role models or what some called “heroes”; politicians especially are seen as “crooks.” Further, informants attribute the country’s economic and moral stagnation to the negative political model based upon an unbridled *kitu kidogo* (bribe) ethic, tribalism and nepotism. Unemployed youth see their joblessness as a direct result of this. Also, despite its glamour, *matatu* work is not quite fulfilling and many crews indicate that they would prefer to switch to what they consider better jobs, saying that they had taken up *matatu* work in the first place for lack of options (see also Khayesi 1999:43-48). Whether Kenyan politicians are the sole culprits in ruining the country’s economic prospects is a moot point; the youth have to find someone on whom to pin the as a way of rationalizing their problems. This might be one way of explaining why rumors, examined in the next chapter, told on and about *matatu* focus on rich people, more so given that some *matatu* are owned by police officers and civil service bureaucrats.

Consequently, it may be argued that *matatu* culture is hostile to other social groups because what they stand for, or have the means to access, is largely chimeric for crews. This would explain, for instance, their contempt for the “tie-and-suits people” alternatively referred to as “people of the office” [i.e. those in salaried employment]. Similar derision is seen in crews’ interaction with educated-looking¹⁴ passengers; when they are called *mwaliimu* it is because teachers are largely a poorly paid lot and in this way crews call to question the wisdom of formal schooling. The same disdain can be seen when other activities, such as religion, that carry mainstream culture’s normative values are thoroughly parodied in stickers. However, the political establishment and women seem to bear the brunt of censure as they seem to represent special threats to *matatu* crews.

Trapped in the crunch of despair, the youth seize the option of dreaming about “possibilities” as a response to their dilemmas. The media, principally TV, largely brings these possibilities home (Appadurai 1997; Bocock 1995). The imagining that is made possible through such agency informs much of the expressive rhetoric of Nairobi youth. In this way, crews use their knowledge of spatially remote cultural practices as a means of apprehending their problems in the harsh spaces of a postcolonial city. The varying narratives, both accurate and hyped up, are a template against which *matatu* crews’ views of local decay are constructed and ideas of identity articulated. This is particularly so given that many of these people, with at best only a

high school education,¹⁵ have minimal possibility of leaving the country and are more or less permanently 'trapped' in a society in which they have lost all hope. The spider's web motif examined in chapter three is an apt signifier of this image of the country as inescapable snare. Hence the intensity of the bitterness against, primarily, the political elite. For instance, when I asked the driver of *Magic Wave* what the name meant, he shrugged and said; "Other than magic, *hakuna kitu inaweza kusolve zile majam ziko hapa* [S. Nothing can solve the many problems we've got here]." Their inability to access (fulfilling) employment means that they cannot obtain the modern material goods they so desperately yearn for and which would give them considerable social prestige. It can then be argued that the importance of Spider/man, the preeminent icon of the subculture, lies in his symbolic deployment in crews' psychological battles against society.

Arising from the foregoing, it shouldn't surprise that some youth aspire to become robbers/eaters/looters like the political class; as their culture is won't, crews are simply locating themselves within a terrain of contestable values. The *bad*, as we have shown already, is in this way turned into an ideal not because crews have an innate streak of evil, but because as a rhetorical posture, badness can be profitably deployed to sustain an identity that serves their interests. I suggest that such acts can be seen as hidden transcripts (Scott 1990) which are crucial to furthering an understanding of the trickster nature of the *matatu* man.

I consider it fitting in this case that urban youth, with their flux of identities, use a code like Sheng whose chief characteristic is innovation. They seem to be enacting Bhabha's argument that "the affective experience of social marginality—as it emerges in non-canonical cultural forms—transforms our critical strategies" (1994:172). Beyond addressing the concern with a distinct identity, Sheng rap as an expressive mode combines difference (costume, décor, language, outlook), to form a matrix of what we could call Nairobi youth difference, as a way of staking a claim to their social space. Thus, the baggy pants and sports gear of American stars, jewelry, a 'rude boy' stance in social interaction, reading hip hop magazines, shopping for clothes and other *labeled* consumer items at particular establishments and patronizing specific clubs mark who does or doesn't belong to hip style of Nairobi youth.

We might now turn to examine Sheng, an esoteric urban dialect deployed in the youth identity project.¹⁶ Their use of an esoteric code stems from speakers' awareness that in social transactions enhancing one's visibility can yield huge dividends, more so if one is able to negotiate with as many social actors as possible. This is in line with a key lesson on contemporary cultural engagement, to wit, that individuals do not necessarily have to position themselves within an either-or axis; indeed, an individual's experience gained from one cultural space is often used *translationally* in encounters with other cultural spaces (Bhabha 1994:172). Individual subjects situate themselves, or are situated by others, anywhere along a spectrum such that they are able to stride simultaneously into multiple (cultural) territories. Contemporary youth culture in Nairobi works very much in similar terms whereby the youth actively hybridize their identities through a linguistic code.

Sociolinguistic studies have shown Sheng's significance in effecting social negotiations among its speakers and it is even seen as an instance of conscious heteroglossia (Samper 2002a).¹⁷ Here I am more interested in Sheng as a tactic of evasion which at the same time destabilizes the linguistic terrain in Kenya. One of the most hotly contested questions regarding this linguistic scenario is whether Sheng is a good or bad phenomenon.¹⁸ For our purposes, a value judgement of Sheng is immaterial since the authority of complete outsiders in determining such a case cannot be, in my view of the workings of cultural process, legitimate or useful. More productively, what need concern us is a critique of the symbolic uses to which Sheng, as a cultural act, is put by its users. This can be done, like I have argued for *matatu* culture, from an emic understanding of youth culture.

One of the principal features of Sheng is the appropriative tendency, whereby words are borrowed from several distinct languages ranging from Arabic and English to Hindi and Kiswahili, Gikuyu

and other local languages. For example, Sheng words like *hamsa* [five shillings] and *hashu* [ten shillings] are adapted from the Arabic *hamees* and *ashra*, respectively for five [K. *Tano*] and ten [K. *Kumi*], while the Kiswahili word *thelathini*, for thirty, is appropriated as *salasa*, ‘thirty shillings’. In the context of *matatu* work from which these Sheng items have been taken, it is notable that enumerative words are prominent; they facilitate coded communication between crews, especially when they need to fix higher fares without passengers’ knowledge. Another feature of Sheng involves semantic shifts. A Hindi word like *buda* has changed its meaning from ‘sage’ to ‘father’ and ‘rich man’ in Sheng. Another interesting feature involves the borrowing of words from local languages and giving them new meanings. For example, the Gikuyu word for knife is *kahiu*, but when I first heard it used in 2002, my informant told me it now meant ‘money’, a tool that, like a knife, separates the rich from the poor. We see in this case what might otherwise appear like a fairly ‘harmless’ word being inscribed with a politics of its own of which outsiders, unless they are privy to the Sheng-speaking group or have a specific motivation to find out, remain unaware.

Furthermore, since Sheng is a coded form of communication, words often fall into disuse as soon as their meanings become widely known. This evasion cultivates a space of unintelligibility for the youth, a characteristic also found in black English (Major 1971: Introduction). Nairobi youth do not hide the fact that this esoteric dialect is intended to be evasive; their use of Sheng at all makes it clear that they do not want to use the linguistic codes already available. This can be illustrated by looking at words used for the police, initially referred to as *ponyi* and *kopa*. Over time these have had to be changed since they sounded rather too close to the original words, police and cop. Hence the subsequent adoption of more opaque names—*mafisi* [K. Hyenas], *miguu nyeusi* [K. Black feet], *ahooi* [G. Beggars], *abatari* [G. The needy]. Notable here is the fact that these derisive tags could refer to just about anyone and thus even when deployed within their hearing, police officers cannot prove a direct reference to themselves since, in any case, they do not wish to attract unwelcome attention to their roadside bribe-extorting negotiations.

Sheng, taken as an instance of hidden transcripts, is used to inscribe an alternative scheme of values when the youth talk about the legitimacy achieving social success through anti-social behavior. This can be seen in the prefatory words of the driver and conductor at the head of the present and succeeding chapters respectively. In the first case, the informant is not afraid of censuring the political elite, a risky practice under the former regime that carried out routine surveillance of dissent in every social nook and cranny, including bars. However, he is adequately covered by the opacity of Sheng when for instance he refers to *nguthi* [G. Thieves/robbers] as the only people who stand a chance of attaining success where only members of the ruling class have the ‘privilege’ of dipping fingers into the national till. In celebrating an alternative *mchoro* [S. Scheme] of theft, or the lives of gangsters in the second case, the two informants are in fact critiquing the state’s failures within the sanctuary of esoteric linguistic technology.

Ultimately, the appropriatory style of hip hop and *matatu* culture’s other expressive forms is evident in Sheng as well. The latter two especially need to be taken as symbiotic aspects of youth culture in that they are equally interested in maintaining the difference that they help to create. For instance, Sheng raps are played in *matatu* alongside the more predominant American hits and in this way the message and identity of youth difference is disseminated. Sheng, whether used by rappers or *matatu* crews, therefore comes in to accent the difference sought by *matatu* culture, fragmenting language before reconstituting it in new ways. Since the principal concern in this study is the symbolic expression of identity, then the question needs to be asked why Sheng users cross back and forth between identities.

This linguistic behavior can be placed within my argument earlier in the chapter to the effect that contemporary youth’s ideas of what within modernity constitutes social success and how it is to be achieved differ markedly from older folks’. With few opportunities or resources coming their way, the youth are left to improvise appearances of prosperity (see Chapter Two). Here, a hip code like Sheng comes in handy, especially when it is complemented by fashionable looks. In other words, the need to strike an impression of having “arrived”, as a front for whatever else one has failed to

achieve, is aided by the use of Sheng. Such ‘deceptive’ self-representation salves the ego since these youths would not want to always look like losers. Self-repackaging becomes a norm within a general culture where tricksters abound and acceptance within social transactions often depends on one’s keeping in step with the youth crowd; speaking last year’s Sheng is not good enough and one has to keep at its cutting edge. Thus, it is necessary for these youth to slip effortlessly from one (dis)guise to another; speaking standard English to prospective employers but slipping back into Sheng while, as is often the case, in the company of fellow frustrated jobless urbanites or *matatu* crews.

At another level, Sheng is a weapon as good as any for the articulation of youth rebellion. In any case, as I have pointed out in preceding arguments, there is already ample disaffection with mainstream values that do not seem to make much sense for these youth in their quest for social achievement. Adopting an urban dialect that is incomprehensible to the mainstream is their way of symbolically signaling disenchantment with society’s normative values. However, this is not to argue that these youths are incapable of corruption. As informant’s responses cited earlier in this chapter indicate, they relish opportunities to engage in venality; *matatu* crews have proven themselves only too able to exploit others much like the politicians they rail so much against. Therefore, we need to see the expression of youth disenchantment as a shift in the trickster’s rhetorical strategies in order to speak to their dilemmas without bringing up the question of their own role in shaping the deficiencies in the urban social body. The unabashed trickster, after all, does not expect to be judged by the same standards applied to everyone else. By using Sheng and ensuring the burgeoning of its vocabulary, *matatu* crews, as a subaltern category, innovate and maintain a space of unintelligibility that complements their subculture’s situatedness outside strictures of regular surveillance, not just as a heteroglossic act but also as an inherently subversive one.¹⁹ Simultaneously, it gives them cultural capital, by which they negotiate, especially, with the *supuu* but, more than this, I would argue, also with each other in evading the police.

It is along the same lines that Nairobi’s *dot.com* Sheng rappers can be understood when they address an array of themes pertinent to their urban lives—sex, relationships, money, corruption, despair, their ‘loss’ of cultural values, police harassment.²⁰ However, since the mainstream does not largely comprehend much of what is being rapped about, these urban rappers get away with things they would otherwise be put to task for, for instance the explicit allusion to sexual intercourse, or references to the government as a “a robbers’ system.”²¹ If *matatu* culture is seen as the site for the enactment of difference, then urban youth music needs to be seen as the space from which the lines of that difference are constituted in a linguistic code largely inaccessible to most people outside youth culture.

4.3. Libidinally speaking: Obscenity in *matatu* culture.²²

One of the most conspicuous characteristics of *matatu* culture’s language is the tendency to capture nearly all interactions on the city road using insults formulated along sexual tropes. Such slurs are as much gestured as they are explicitly uttered and suggested by innuendo. Crews’ raised middle finger and the thrust of the crotch at an ‘offender’ are some of the more dramatic instances of this form of sexual contestation. Alongside verbal slurs, they are deployed no matter who is watching or listening, a significant transgression in a society where for instance one’s elders are supposed to be accorded utmost respect. This I take to be an intentional signaling on the part of crews of their own understanding of power relations, actual or imagined. It is clear however that within these insults is imbricated a discourse of masculine power.

This can be demonstrated by looking at the case of Grace who works at a research institute. At a traffic intersection, a conductor whose *matatu* had drawn up level with her car derisively asked; “Sister, who lent you that car? It is so nice. Can’t you take it back to the owner? Oh, sorry, or does it belong to your husband?” She concedes that the *makanga* could simply have been being humorous but is also quick to point out that undergirding his aggressive humor is the social bias that as a female, she cannot acquire property without the help of some man. More discomfiting to

her is the fact that by merely driving a “nice” car, her morality is called to question by the implied trade off between a sexual favor for the vehicle. For the *matatu* man, the point is to reiterate a traditional norm governing property ownership. Some crews said their “road language” did not ‘really’ mean anything, a claim they could not defend when I pointed out the patterns in their metaphors. Their use of such terms has been routinized to the point of banality. However, outside their work, for instance with their families, crews do not generally use this type of language.

Within *matatu* culture there is the tendency to refuse to see women, and thus erase them, even when they officially occupy public space as is the case with female police officers. Male crews and passengers often refuse to see such officers beyond their femininity. One *makanga*, for instance, reported how he slapped a female officer after she booked him for a traffic violation involving his *matatu*. He spat on another and only submitted to arrest when male officers subdued him. Even after having served a jail term for the assault offence, he insists that he would still not submit to arrest by a female police officer. Elsewhere I witnessed a male passenger tell a female officer that she was “just a stupid woman”—only the intervention of an armed male colleague got the incensed passenger to back off. In a related issue, when crews commit traffic offences, they generally prefer to negotiate with male officers because, many argue, “*hawa wamasa huwanga unreasonable sana*” [S. These women are usually very unreasonable].

One of the reasons cited for this preference is that male officers are not too finicky when crews offer them a tiny bribe amount; female officers, on the other hand, refuse ‘small’ bribes, always pushing the stake beyond crews’ liking. This means that while both male and female police officers were described as greedy, the women were smarter in trying to maximize their *chai* from these illicit negotiations. Hence, since they would always outsmart the *matatu* crews, who really have no choice but to pay up, such officers are projected as hate-targets by playing upon traditional stereotypes of females. Similar dynamics may be seen at work in the case of female non-*matatu* drivers; their positioning and visibility on the road provokes *matatu* crews (and other male road users) into seeing them as a threat to patriarchally defined conceptions of public space and individuals’ *proper* place within it. Through sexist slurs, the road becomes a site for the public reinforcement of such roles. To be sure, cases of direct physical aggression against female officers or drivers are rare mainly because of the dire consequences to be incurred. The more usual method of contestation involves the deployment of sexist discourse within crews’ interactions, or between crews and passengers. Although this type of language has filtered into the general linguistic economy of road use in Nairobi, *matatu* crews most vividly demonstrate its tensions and nuances, in part because by their sheer numbers they are the most visible among road users and partly because they, more than anyone else, tend in what has become a tradition to use language without inhibitions.

The culture’s preeminent use of obscenity can be seen in the highly sexist and sexualized language the crews’ use in commenting about general road behavior (See Appendix II: work-related terms). Looking at such idiom in *matatu* culture we see that other than the equation of female and incompetent drivers in general to children and uncircumcised boys, the language tends to center upon explicitly sexual activity; penetration/entry, who does it, to whom, from what position and with what results. This build up of sexual activity evinces patterns. The matrix of sexual terms seems to be rather too carefully structured, with much emphasis on the ‘doing’ (not receiving), libido (not its lack), and, ultimately, conquest (over losing), with crews always situating themselves in the aggressive, hence winning, positions. These sexist exchanges are also often accompanied by the threat of physical violence.

My contention is that the gender of the recipient of the insults notwithstanding, crews’ use of explicit sexual metaphors is a projection of phallic contests by which they seek to ‘conquer’ the other. As Dundes (1997) argues, such contests are a means to the self-affirmation of masculinity by the feminization of opponents who are mapped in a woman’s passive position within this sexist discourse.²³ This is very much like the situation in Gikuyu pre-circumcision contests where cowards/weaklings lost their ‘value’ to the winners.²⁴ While this modality of expressing power is

not restricted to Kenyan cultures (Silberschmidt 2001:667), in the context of *matatu* culture it is turned into a kind of vernacular idiom. Incidentally, in the rare phenomenon of a female *matatu* driver, the tendency is to adopt the subculture's sexist language and to view the other/opponent as if looking through male lenses; the two *matatu* women I have encountered drive as aggressively as any male driver.²⁵ The reasons for this can be understood if we take into consideration the tendency in Kenyan car culture to invest the technological body with attributes of the biological body and vice versa.²⁶

Worldwide, as we saw in the introduction, drivers make strong (identity) statements with their cars for example by displaying specific objects and stickers, by their behavior in the moment of driving, the type of car they drive or even by the mere fact of driving (see for example Aguirre 1990; Bull 2001; Case 1993; Dillard 1976; Enersby and Towle 1996; Gilroy 2001; Menez 1988; Miller 2001 :1-5; O'Dell 2001; Parrinder 1953; Salamon 2001; Smith 1988; Stotz 2001; Winses 1990). *Matatu* crews go a step further and elide the borders between their bodies and their vehicles. Through speech, crews render explicitly the identity relations between themselves and their *matatu* by using personal pronouns. As such, metonymic transfer reconstitutes the mechanical and biological bodies into a unified, unproblematic subjectivity.

Therefore, in a society like Kenya where a vehicle, regardless of make and/or age, is still considered among the ultimate exemplars of modernity and social success, its possession is an index of (high/er) social class and, with it, presumably, financial power. Since the acquisition of property is traditionally a male role, whoever controls the car wields male power. When, therefore a female *matatu* driver adopts the lenses of masculinity as we saw above, this needs to be seen as a self-(re-)positioning within a pre-existing traditional regime according to which power, or a legitimate hold onto its trappings, can be claimed. Thus understood, sexuality in *matatu* discourse becomes a contest pitting affirmation against negation, control against surrender and empowerment versus emasculation. These acts are carried out routinely upon road users of all categories. And since the *matatu* body is usually mapped in terms of a phallic projectile, it becomes possible for crews to analogize road relations in terms of contests between penetrating and resistant bodies, with the *matatu*/driver as head.

Matatu can therefore also be seen as a space where fantasies are played out and crews find that this mode enables them to engage in many kinds of excess. Since the biological and technological bodies are already conflated into a singular entity, then we might even argue that through their sexual fantasies crews are engaged in everyday orgies in the course of their work. This can be seen in the preeminent mapping of their work environment in terms of heads, rears, and orifices (see Appendix of work terms), language that calls to mind the carnivalesque. Through projected inversion (Dundes 1980) crews continuously commit symbolic sexual violence against others. Vicarious gratification supplants and presumably sates the desire for actual assault in daylong indulgence. The *matatu* man here is seen to assume the character of the hypersexual trickster discussed in Chapter Two.

When a man is the specific object of abuse, other than the threat of feminization through being likened to female genitalia, insults can also be framed in terms of castration. For example, James was involved in a confrontation with a *konkodi* after the latter had insulted him. Upon alighting the conductor shouted at him: "*Unajua naweza kukufanya kwa matako saa hii* [K. You know I can do you in the anus you right now]!" James retorted by wondering aloud why the conductor had not "done it" before he had alighted. In response, the conductor asked him to get back on board and have both his testes removed whereupon James challenged him, if he was "man enough" and had "both [testes] in place", to alight and have a square fight. At this point the tout again repeated the threat of sodomy. A significant thing about this exchange is not even the kind of language used but the fact that the driver waited patiently for the two adversaries to finish their verbal duel; *matatu* crews' usual speed-is-money credo was held in abeyance for the moment. What is even more telling is the fact that passengers didn't protest either at the foul language or the delay. All in all, the equation of sodomy to castration here, as emasculation, implies the passive, non-resistant

sexually conquered body. The threat of sodomy is a severe insult where the notion of any contact between same sex bodies is still very much a taboo subject

This apprehension of road relations in terms of sexuality, conquest and abuse can be seen as a (re)statement of power relations into an equation that renders crews, within a fantasy of control, as the stronger parties.

Passengers too have nearly become inured to the kind of language being discussed here and hardly remark on it. Informants, asked to comment on it, merely shrugged off the suggestion, saying; “*makanga matiuragio*” [G. Never mind the *makanga*] or “*hiyo ndiyo tabia ya watu wa matatu*” [K. That is the normal behavior of *matatu* people]. As informants pointed out, it is difficult to exchange words with *matatu* crews since “their mouths have no brakes” and “they talk poison.”²⁷ Consequently, there is in public consciousness a stereotypical standard by which crews are expected to behave. Nonetheless, as subsequent discussion of *matatu* passenger personal experience narratives shows, this complacency cannot be convincingly explained away as the result of fear of *makanga*. To this extent, it is quite correct to argue that *matatu* travelers’ failure to challenge crews’ offensive behavior is in a function of passenger liking of it (Loefer 2002).

Notwithstanding, we need to acknowledge the asymmetrical power relations at work in the *matatu* setting; crews might actually throw a protesting passenger off a moving vehicle or rough them up. Fellow passengers rarely do anything, not because they can’t but because, having come to expect the *matatu* world to operate on its own peculiar order of logic, they find it unnecessary to stand up to crews. In this way we see that commuters are complicit in the creation of the ‘bad boy’ identity of *matatu* crews. Furthermore, since crews are aware that they are derided as uncouth people of low intelligence they deliberately behave according to this notion. They thus operate in a space that is immune from serious moral censure; the carnival performer, after all, is never taken too seriously. Under this (dis)guise of stupidity and the lack of ‘civilization’, these tricksters commit all sorts of excess, hitting back at the normative order through obscene language, physical violation of passengers, playing loud music whose content is highly sexist, speeding and driving recklessly. There is a thread in these forms of behavior that links them to acts of boyish ‘foolishness’ and the general logic whose pattern carnivalizes *matatu* space.

Matatu practice can thus be understood as a set of conscious acts performed in the full knowledge that the space of their enaction is in a sense set off from parameters of the ‘normal.’ In other words, since there is already a set of orientation set of principles that map the peculiar nature of transaction within the *matatu* space, passengers are able to tell when the ‘game’ is not being played within the logics of its ‘abnormal’ space. For example, a crew member who uses courteous language engenders much wonder amongst passengers, but even such deviation has its purposes within the topsy turvy *matatu* culture.²⁸ Thus, if in previous instances the trickster has shown some restraint, in his verbal excesses the *matatu* man violates all known borders of linguistic protocol. Where he at times presents himself in heroic terms, in his vulgar mode he represents the subculture’s lack of inhibitions. However, as I demonstrate in remaining sections of this chapter, owing to a general anti-female stance, and sometimes outright misogyny, inscribed in certain aspects of Kenyan traditional cultures (e.g. sayings. Ndungo 1998), quite a number of people outside *matatu* culture delight in the trickster’s hideous acts. Some dislike him for it while others raise feeble objections. To be sure, not all of my informants, or the general population for that matter, approves for instance the *matatu* man’s misogyny; some loathe him for while others raise feeble objections. But the traditional socialization process often renders quite a few informants, regardless of their education levels, ambivalent about society’s general anti-female bias.

Overall, that sexism evident in *matatu* culture’s verbal aggressions points to an issue raised earlier: crews’ obsession with reducing ‘conflict’ to a level they can control stems from their feeling of powerlessness once they step outside the domain of phallic expression. Differently put, it is as wielders of a libidinally-determined masculinity that crews feel in fuller control. For them other social realities (eg. the existence of career women, women owning private cars) that threaten to destabilize this cartography of masculine identity *must* be reduced to the bare minimum (sexual

object) in order for effective control to be established over it. In this way, through gestures and words, the *matatu* man tends to drag most issues within his world towards the center of lower bodily materiality, *pace* Bakhtin (1984). He is most at home with a mass of sweltering bodies crammed into a *matatu*,²⁹ adroitly slipping between them as he collects fares, cursing and shoving those bodies that resist his, and feeling up female passengers in the process. In other words, he thrives in situations that appear disorderly; where there is too much order, he seeks to inscribe some disorder in line with his preoccupation with the transgressive.

This is the sense communicated by *matatu* designs that deliberately invert the usual scheme of values to reify the lower forms of bodily matter. We can see for instance, the reification and politicization of filth as is quite eloquently expressed in the design on the *matatu Nothing Else Matters* (Figure 19), a close reading of which might shed further light on the workings of carnivalesque signification in *matatu* culture. The black smudge wafting from the toes of a white man, grotesque foot prominently thrust towards the viewer, aptly captures the agonies endured by *matatu* passengers. At the end of a grisly *matatu* ride taken standing in a crowded vehicle, putting up one's up feet in order to relax is the only thing that matters. The point here is to signify on the smirking, relaxing white man that arises out of the generally held stereotype of whites as lazy rich tourists.³⁰

The white man depicted in the drawing is *blackened* and his relaxation brought up for scrutiny—how is it that he is resting while others' feet are hurting from working/walking? Since prominence is given to the lower body (smelly feet), and not its upper part (the head and face), which is in fact distanced from the viewer, there is an inversion of the things that are normally given prominence. Differently put, instead of showing a happy white man, he is depicted in his grotesque state in order to draw some parallel, even if ironic, between his aching feet and those of *matatu* travelers who, unlike the white man, have no optional mode of transport. The white man's feet may be hurting for his walking around site-seeing, the *matatu* passenger's for standing in line waiting for a *matatu* and then having to stand to the journey's end. In this sense, parodying the (rich) white man through his stinking feet can be seen as a comment on the broader practices of global economic exploitation and production relations between blacks and whites especially in an economy dependent on tourists. I saw a similar critique in at least one sticker.³¹ The filthy, in this way, is infused with a political tension.

4.4 The Politics of Eating/ Erasure

As I argued with regard to *chai*, consumptive practices have a special place in *matatu* culture, a fact indicated by the numerous verbs and phrases derived from eating, actual and figurative, to capture phenomena involving car accidents and corruption. However, it is striking that these analogies are closely tied to the meanings attached to sexual intercourse figured as a consumptive act. In this case, we can establish a connection between corruption and sexual domination whereby these two practices may be viewed within the technology of control. For example, within the ritualized coercive exchange of corruption, police officers dominate the *matatu* crews. After the bribe has changed hands, the conductor usually informs the driver “*twariyo meeri* [G. We have been eaten 200 shillings]” or “*Amekula hamsa* [K. He has eaten fifty]” depending on the amount of money in question. Aware that money (as an index of wealth/worth) goes to the core of the definition of a ‘real man’ in contemporary Kenyan society, then we might argue that the taking away of money from crews amounts to emasculation. Hence the reference to the act of receiving *chai* as (G) “*kuria*”/ (K) “*kula*” which carries the senses of ‘to eat’ and ‘to corrode’ as a process of disintegrating an object. The disappearance of the money into the folds of the policeman's body brings to mind the hyena character of Gikuyu folktales who gobbles up his prey and the theme of cannibalism that feature's prominently in crews' talk and which I examine in the next chapter.

Incidentally, in Gikuyu the sentence “*niariyo ni murimu*” means that a person has succumbed to disease; corruption, eating and death share similarities. To make up for their losses suffered at the hands of law enforcement officials, crews devise tactics of ‘eating’ their (often) weaker clients; overcharging and arbitrary hiking of fares, (intentionally) forgetting to hand back change and so on.

In fact, fare disputes are one of the most common points of conflict between passengers and crews; sometimes sex is demanded in lieu of fare, and at times female passengers are overcharged because it is presumed that they will not have the boldness to complain.³² We can now see the *matatu* man's character effortlessly oscillating from victim to aggressor, his greed eliciting onlookers' contempt. He gobbles up his opponents, an act very much within the scheme of control outlined above; erasure of opponents marks the triumph of his manhood. We see the latter point where crews describe the competition between *matatu* in terms of control over sexual performance. Speeding *matatu* are pictured as bodies racing towards an orgasmic climax; the one 'arriving'/'coming' early is the loser while the other party wins the race because 'he' has a superior libido. To put it differently, *matatu* workers, who as we have already seen understand their works in terms a game, do not merely use the road as a site for the playing out of sexual. They also seek to render sexual virility, which in their view is equal to power, as an object for public demonstration and adulation. Similar idiom is deployed in stickers that reinforce the notion of women as consumable commodities in order to erase them more effectively. This can be seen in the sticker *A woman is like a common maize cob for every man to chew* which is sometimes varied to *A woman is like a common maize cob for every man with teeth to chew*. The texts map the woman solely as a sexual body and in so doing the 'speaker' completely deletes any of her identity that does not fall within this sexist frame. If we pursue the metaphor of chewing to its logical conclusion, we see that once food is crushed in the mouth and metabolism has taken place, the remnant passes out of the body as waste. In this sticker, since the chewing party is male, the woman is eaten up, dissolved, cancelled out, and as a revitalizing agent, used to build up the male body. Accordingly, the perceptible predominant motif in this type of sexist sticker constructs the female body as a freely accessible commodity for willful male consumption. Anything 'common' is likely to be available in abundance, calling to mind the market. Marketplaces, by virtue of being public spaces, enable people to mingle closely, leading to the pollution of the body through the violation/denial of personal space (Hannerz 1980:105). In such circumstances, once women have been cast in terms of a market commodity, they are delegitimized as subjects and robbed of control over/into their bodies. This literally happens to female travelers on *matatu* as the discussion of personal experience narratives, farther below, demonstrates.

At another level, we might apprehend the culture's preoccupations with sexual annihilation by proceeding from Bakhtin's (1984:407ff) discussion on birth and death as twinned negations that lead to regeneration. In his linguistic de(con)struction of women, the *matatu* man enacts a fantasy of his ascendancy to a position of absolute control in an imaginary social/material order. This fantasy might be taken to spring from the general Kenyan tradition where eating is simply a metaphor for destruction as a means of self-preservation; in the context of destroying and enemy regeneration can be seen to spring from decay. Once the woman as a biological body has been symbolically dissolved—sexual surrender mapped as death³³—she can be seen as having been recast in a social role that is compatible with crews' wish for a social order over which, in their capacity as men, they can wield full control.

Following is a female informant's reading of a religious-sounding sticker, *Good girls go to heaven bad girls go everywhere*. Unlike the 'maize cob' set of stickers above, this one uses 'coated' language.

It seems to be saying something complimentary to women but not when it is analyzed fully. All good people and not just girls are meant to go to heaven. Also one would want to think that 'heaven' here could be interpreted as the places that these girls or those men who take them there consider 'good'. That is why I say the language is coated; at face value it may give a very simple and self explanatory meaning but not when one gives it a second thought. Stickers that have coated language are not even condemned by the public and I don't think that it is for the lack of understanding. It just goes on because it is in the world of *concealed and coveted* behavior.

We see here a reader actively making meaning out of a text, peeling off layers from apparent banality to connect the message with social happenings around her. Not only that, texts are compared to others, meaning that passengers maintain a mental inventory of such texts, analyze them and look around for connections between sticker meanings and their social experiences. In this case, we might also note that the informant's reading is itself transgressive but then this is rightly so since it follows the semiotic codes at work in the text. Thus a connection is established between a 'holy' message and hidden desires to show some of the methods used in the construction of women as sexual objects. Heaven is equated to a leisure house, spiritual release to physical gratification. The high-low negations in Bakhtin (1984) are captured here by the oppositions between sweet/nasty or palatable/unpalatable, thereby profaning the 'sacred' (heaven) by dragging it into regions of bodily desecration. This takes us back to the issue of *matatu* culture's general desire to see women solely in terms of sexual performance. My informant's answer also leads me to a suggestion I explore in relation to personal experience narratives, next, viz: that generally, people enjoy—in various ways and to different degrees—the *scandalous* things that are done, said or symbolically expressed in *matatu* culture.³⁴ They secretly long to do/say/see certain, if not most of these things; it just happens that they lack the *matatu* man's boldness—or opportunity!

4.5 Complicated games: Travelers' Personal Experience Narratives

Contrary to general assumption, crews are not the only ones that revel in the excesses of *matatu* culture. Passengers too partake in *matatu* micro-dramas in their different ways. As we have seen, the *matatu* is often a space where games involving diverse degrees of violation take place. Abuse, might involve verbal and/or physical violation, for instance men feeling up women whose bodies are closely packed next to theirs. Participation in the various mini-shows is aided by the general anonymity amongst travelers; strangers become co-actors and spectators where some may be offended and others bemused by the transactions on board.

A general physical threat relates particularly to hygiene, and even the cleanest *matatu* has certain dangers lurking within it. This is due to crowding, mainly in the evening as people return home from work. In such circumstances, all kinds of scatological exchanges are bound to take place. This type of *matatu* ride is a concrete exemplification of the body stretching beyond its margins, "in the act of becoming", to meet with others, the outcome of which is a mass grotesque body (Bakhtin 1984:316-317). Common transfers resulting from such contact include, and are in no way limited to; sweating bodies, gas emissions, coughing and sneezing passengers, and smelly breath and feet. At times exhaust fumes waft into the vehicle through open windows or cracks on the vehicle bed. The vomit of drunkards, particularly late on Friday nights after pay day, and the sight of *makanga* picking their noses and handing back change bespeak the gross levels of filth that passengers endure at times. Hence, fully packed *matatu* bearing names like *Hazard/Fight B4 Da Fight*, *Anarchy*, *Danger/On the Loose* (Figures 33-35) or *Extremely Reactive* more than reference the havoc their drivers wreck upon the road outside. They index concrete, contaminating perils lurking within the interiority of these mechanical bodies. *Matatu* are, in the words of one informant, "an evil we have to endure."³⁵ Complaints about the perils of *matatu* travel come up most frequently in personal experience narratives (hereafter PENs).

Most complaints among female passengers involve male commuters who physically invade their space, for example by deliberately sitting in their laps or "jacketing" them into the crook of their elbows.³⁶ For instance, a nun narrated how a *manamba* pushed and ground his crotch into her armpit; she moved away but he pursued her. In revenge she hit him in the crotch with her bag as she alighted, leaving him doubled up in pain as fellow *manamba* laughed loudly. As she stated, "it was clear to me that they had been watching the movie and enjoying themselves from where they sat at the back." It was not quite clear why she did not protest more vehemently while still on board rather than doing so as she disembarked. But such silence might be understood given that most women said they kept quiet in the face of such violation in order not to draw onlookers' attention.

However, when, in a different *matatu*, a “well-dressed” elderly man began fondling the same nun on her thigh she stepped hard on his toes and shouted at him to “behave” in order to “embarrass” him. Few female passengers have the boldness to fight back, and this specific instance is quite the exception. Those who cringe in embarrassment later retell their experiences as PENS.

Winnie for example, reported how in a *matatu* as she was going to work an old Quaker tapped her on the shoulder. Immediately she turned to look at him he launched into a “prayer” in which he probed divine will thus; “O-God, do you create some people just to make us have evil thoughts? Like this one, is there not in truth someone who sleeps with her?” Other than the frankness of the old man’s desire/prayer, my informants’ reaction is even more revealing;

I was so embarrassed, especially as the *makanga* on that *matatu* knows me, and I could see other men looking at me, smiling, happy that the naughty old man had voiced what they obviously would have wished to say had they been bold enough. I longed for the journey to end quickly, but that morning the destination seemed to get farther and farther away. The *makanga* asked me if I wanted to change seats, but I declined. I didn’t want to draw any more attention to myself than I had already received. Also, ironically, I wanted to hear more of this prayer. To be honest with you, every woman likes to know that she is still sexually attractive, even if she is being reminded so by an unshaven old Quaker in a dirty turban. Few people will admit it, but most people enjoy a *matatu* ride even with all these violations which in fact are taken as welcome distractions. And that is why we always relish the trip in one.

(2003)

Numerous such narratives circulate among *matatu* passengers every day. In particular, negative remarkable episodes in a *matatu* ride are singled out. Part of the reason such narratives are retold is that hearers gain some control over uncertainty by comparing the actions to similar situations that might happen to them (Braid 1996:26). They become resources by which hearers can understand their own experiences, or modify them to enable them handle similar experiences in future. We may also note how the “welcome distractions” in the above mini-narrative correspond in nature and purpose to offensive stickers and lewd music which, as we have already seen, informants describe as “fillers”/ “distractions.”

I suggest that there is another element that is specific to most *matatu* PENS, especially those told by women: they contain a considerable amount of ‘dirty’ details, and even being the victims performer-narrators exhibit a degree of outrage, they nevertheless seem to enjoy retelling their experiences.³⁷ I am specifically ascribing this aspect to PENS by women since it is they, not men, whose freedom of speech in public space is socially circumscribed. Despite the pose of modernity that the city strikes, women’s freedom to say and do certain things in public is still quite heavily circumscribed by traditional norms. Consequently, they, more than men, would find more value in utilizing the opportunity of telling a *matatu* PEN to breach the limitations imposed upon them.

A significant amount of details that might be termed scandalous is contained in these tales. Here I begin from the rationale that there was no compelling reason for my female not to have declined to tell a male researcher their stories. Moreover, many were unknown to me and therefore there was no degree of familiarity between us to encourage them to open up embarrassing private details to a stranger. But they opted to, and this is an important detail. They could also have chosen to tell me any other narratives, but the ones that they told me must have struck them most, necessitating the telling. Having stated that PENS aid hearers to handle pragmatically problems that may arise in similar situations, of what practical purpose, we might then ask, is Winnie’s metanarrative above on the psychology of female sexuality, especially told to a male researcher? It is also noteworthy that the nun, in commenting on her own violation, invokes cinema, as simulated reality, showing that she is aware of the difference in the ordering of reality in the *matatu* space. Consequently, we might note the sense of voyeurism in these PENS, where tellers distance events from the self as if they are peeping into another world. Such a device eases the telling.

An even more vivid instantiation of this point can be seen in a PEN in which a married couple was involved in a *matatu* car-jacking in 1999. Over the next three years, I witnessed them retell the experience to at least five different sets of listeners. While in each retelling the man emphasized how worried he had been that the robbers might rape his wife, the latter, while admitting similar worries, unfailingly emphasized one curious detail. She related how a fellow female passenger had had her blouse, bra and skirt ripped off by the robbers, “leaving her in just her G-string. I remember seeing her sharp breasts bobbing up and down. The nipples were so sharp. I gave her my petticoat to cover her nakedness.” In retelling this bit, she would first glance at her husband, laugh, and then launch into the details as he sat quietly, but occasionally joining in listeners’ embarrassed laughter. How these details came to be noticed in such sharp relief either in the panic of a carjack or in the darkness of a coffee plantation where the victims were abandoned was never clarified. However, see the informant’s relating of such details in public in the presence of her husband to represent a breach of the social prescriptions regulating male and female behavior in public.

In general public interaction where speech mannerisms are normally used to indicate speakers’ respectability, women would not ordinarily talk about nudity or sexuality with men, especially strangers, since this constitutes a serious breach of norms. It is my argument that my informants, all of who seemed to know these rules, must have had a good reason for breaking with established rules of social protocol. It might as well be that they were playing mental games in their performances but the risk of losing respectability would preclude such an explanation. Be that as it may, the underlying principle seems to be that anything connected with *matatu* is not *ordinary* i.e. it does not operate within the parameters determining regular social interaction and solely on this score it might be permissible. And since the social space of *matatu* is generally understood to have some ‘absurd’ logic of its own, *matatu* PENs enable tellers and listeners to test and stretch the limits of normal verbal engagement. Hence the possibility I am raising that by re-enacting transgression through narrative performance, such narrators themselves enjoy breaching these norms. The ‘dirty’ details in their performances serve as a threshold into a space operating on a different order of logic. The metanarrative content in these stories shows victims interpreting their reactions, feelings and thoughts within the moment of retelling; invoking the *matatu* context is intended to normalize this secondary transgression.

Similar games can be seen in the deployment of clearly sexist or aggressively-worded stickers. An example may be taken here from a popular *matatu* sticker: *A woman is like a bus; if one leaves you there is another one coming down the road.* It has a related variation *Women are like a bus, if you miss one don't worry—you can catch the next one.* Here male-female relations are raised in the metaphor of a male riding a bus whereby the act of riding the technological body stands for the gratification of male drives. Following this order to its semiotic conclusion, we see that the trope of vehicles captures the kinetics of the sexual act, of bodies in constant motion, as well as the wear and tear attendant to the act, especially if its is a rape. This interpretation is possible grounded upon *matatu* culture’s conceptualization of road relations.³⁸ This sense is enhanced by the sticker *Don't laugh at my matatu, your daughter could be inside,* which is also displayed on male-driven private cars but varied to read *Don't laugh at my car, your daughter could be in the back.* Gazing at racy stickers is safe in the company of anonymous fellow travelers and because the logic of the *matatu* ride normalizes indecent thoughts that are likely to arise by making them appear commonplace.

However, as I demonstrate towards the conclusion of the present chapter, the sentiments expressed by these stickers, and other aspects of *matatu* culture, are not by any means limited to crews and passengers playing games within the moment of a *matatu* ride. Rather, they are drawn from an ‘ecumene’ of risqué verbal and physical acts drawn mainly from Nairobians’ leisure ‘habitus’, to use two terms of Hannerz’s (1996). Many Kenyans are familiar with and covertly partake of such indulgences but, as I have argued above with reference to social circumscriptions on what may be spoken openly, few would admit it. The difference between their behavior and the *matatu* man is that the latter’s ribald excesses are performed daily in full public view.

Looked at in this way, I suggest that *matatu* passengers are not wholly the ‘innocent’ travelers that they are usually presumed to be i.e. suffering under the terror of an aggressive mob of rule-hating macho crews. They are conscious participants in the collective game of turning *matatu* into an inverted world. I see this operating perfectly within the conceptualization of *matatu* space as a marketplace; linguistic and bodily (inter)actions therein are executed within a carnivalesque lower level order of excess. Consequently, even the ‘clean’ traveler contemplating the trip’s end, cannot remain untouched, one way or the other, by this upside-down world of *matatu*; it pervades the senses even without conscious invitation. Munene, a young man in his mid-twenties who does not hide his dislike for Nairobi youth culture, particularly hip hop, captured this topsy-turvy world thus:

Every time I alight from one of these discos that fly on the road, I have a problem re-orienting myself to life on earth. I arrive at work feeling tired, as if I have been beaten with a huge stick all over the body, particularly on the ears and the head. It’s like I have come back from hell. No wonder *makanga* are all mad men!

(2002)

Other-worldliness, madness, hell: these commonly invoked analogs aptly metaphorize the contrary logic of the *matatu* WUD. Of significance is the fact that even passengers who might not be too keenly aware of all the intricate twists and turns by which *matatu* epitomize an underworld of sorts. The orientation of *matatu* space is seen as requiring that interactions within it be carried out at a different order of sensation. This map of *matatu* space as hell might then explain why rumors center predominantly center on the theme of satanism (Chapter Five).

4.6 Leisure: *Mugithi* and the Links in the Web of Obscenity

Are the transgressive and, as we have seen, highly sexualized expressive forms in *matatu* culture the sole preserve of their subculture and do they make the *matatu* man a ‘decadent’ creature *sui generis*? Most informants cited the “crudeness” of *matatu* folk as the ultimate mark of debasement; “they use such uncensored language!”, “have these fellows ever been to school?”, “[of their good deeds that I pointed out] those are isolated cases you cite”, “*matatu* guys are all mad!” Granted, this trickster has many reprehensible qualities, with a penchant for excess, but do these aspects really mark him as being radically different from other members of society? I suggest that bland statements made about *matatu* culture, other than the presumptions they make about crews, reveal a lot about their authors; they mask speakers’ horror that *matatu* culture might in some way, however remotely, be linked to them. As I demonstrate below, the ‘ugliness’ of *matatu* culture can be taken as a social collective.

While it is true that the subculture has a predilection for the ‘uncensored’, crews’ excess is only conspicuous because, deployed every day by a vast number of youths, it represents a consistent, collective, and unapologetic violation of taste, *pace* Bourdieu (1984). In other words, the *matatu* man is neither more nor less vulgar than the next person; the only difference is that whereas he is an exhibitionist, participants in other Nairobi subcultures tend to conceal their indulgence in the erotic excess that they pursue as leisure. For example when I pointed out to my informants that popular local raps such as *Atoti* had extremely lewd lyrics yet they were given ample air time on numerous FM radio stations without audience objections, the glib reply generally was that “that is *entertainment*.” The medium, not the message *per se*, seems to be the problem in this case. While uttering a taboo word during face to face interaction is deemed obscene, saying it on TV, radio and CD to a national audience is entertainment and since the audience is anonymous the medium is safe.

Since informants seemed to set up a divide between media entertainment and their leisure experiences, I sought to find out what *matatu* do in their leisure time. Many, especially on weekends, retire with their *supuu* to Nairobi’s numerous entertainment spots, for beer roast meat and, most significantly, to dance. So long as one can afford it, they are open to everyone; amongst the clientele is represented the entire gamut of Nairobi’s social classes and a large number of Kenya’s many ethnic groups. A common form of entertainment in most of these

nightspots, particularly those situated away from the city center, is a popular type of music revolving around a lone guitarist who is popularly known as “one-man-guitar.”³⁹ Although regular music and dance are on offer, much of the consumers’ attention is focused on the guitarist. He is a solo entertainer mostly overlapping his own words over recorded music, in the method of hip hop, as he strums his guitar. Since they are already familiar with the music, audiences sing along hesitantly at first, but become eager and louder as the drinking continues before eventually breaking into a dramatic dance towards midnight.

Usually, the guitarist sings in many local languages, but as the night wears on and bars are left to hardcore partygoers, he increasingly veers off towards Gikuyu lyrics. Incidentally, no category of music is left out as even gospel songs are parodied; they serve as low-tempo interludes in the sequence of bawdy songs. In turn, the lyrics get more lurid as the atmosphere heats up. At or after midnight the tempo changes to a slow dance-type called *mugithi* (G. Train), presumably an adults-only dance but which anyone present can join; age, sex, social status and occupation become non-issues. From the back, each dancer usually grasps the one ahead by the waist or shoulders as the whole throng ‘trains’ around the stage/hall chanting unbowdlerized—mainly Gikuyu—lyrics led on by the guitar player.⁴⁰ In the *mugithi* dance, extreme socially defined opposites meet as, for example, a professor merrily clings to the shoulders of an illiterate street hustler, or a *matatu* tout to the waist of a female police officer. If the merriment surrounding the *mugithi* dance were to permit the revelers to take a keener look at the macabre inversions of their rattling train then they might see similarities between themselves and *matatu* man.⁴¹ In places where this type of entertainment is not available, from time to time bar patrons tend to break into hilarious chants of bawdy Gikuyu songs, which in fact are taunts about (men’s) lack of sexual prowess (see Appendix IV).⁴²

In Nairobi’s nocturnal leisure scene represented by the lewd *mugithi*, civility dissolves into rudeness and ‘culture’ into crudeness, amidst all sorts of contamination. After De Certeau (1984), I find powerful resonance between the Greek root of the word ‘metaphor’ as it relates to ‘transfer’ and the dance’s name *mugithi*, ‘train’, as an agent of mobility. *Mugithi* thus becomes the vehicle by which social hierarchies are invaded, resulting in inversion and erasure.⁴³ And just like in a *matatu*, (sw)eating bodies mingle amidst the flatulence, the reek of tobacco smoke and beer fumes all hermetically sealed in the train of grotesque acts; the modern, individual body that is reified by the “new bodily canon” (Bakhtin 1984: 320) disappears into a mass of anonymous bodies. Of and in itself, it ceases to mean unless it is, in this particular moment, a part of the whole. It is thus illustrative that the dance will only be done late at night, just as elsewhere copulation is taking place with lights out. We see light/darkness signaling upon the enticing sweetness of the illicit (‘bad’) as opposed to the boring routine of licit (‘good’) acts to illustrate desire, whose basic predilection for the erotic is quite evident.

Mugithi, modeled upon explicit-content traditional Gikuyu dances, can be considered a liberating act, its gaiety allowing the shedding of masks before the break of dawn forces them back onto dancers’ faces—with the exception of the *matatu* man. People from all social categories mingle, in temporal license, to partake of the joys of dancehall liberty. I see a parallel between this uninhibited jolly demonstration and the concept of boyhood as space of unrestrained behavior that was raised at the beginning of the chapter. The *matatu* man’s license, in other words, is the envy of a good number of urbanites. In a sense, these nightclubs are the city’s underground, topsy-turvy space where a significant aspect of contemporary Nairobi culture is hidden and from which revelers flee in the morning. I contend that part of the disgust expressed against the *matatu* man is provoked by his perennial and unrestrained transgressions while others sit *decently* in their offices waiting for the night/train, the only time when they can uninhibitedly indulge in their own forms of aggressions (‘fun’). Indeed, quite a number of *matatu* passengers openly expressed envy at the license of *matatu* crews. Consequently we can see that *mugithi*, taken as an instance of carnivalesque revelry, avails the modernized urbanite an opportunity for indulgence at an order that is perhaps unavailable in Nairobi’s other cultural spaces. The avowed dislike of *matatu* subculture might in many ways be seen as a mere mask.

I bring up the issue of leisure here to try and debunk the widespread notion of the *matatu* man as a singularly debased creature who corrupts Nairobi's 'innocents.' Indeed, if the evidence presented by Nairobi's nighttime, thus concealed, entertainment is anything even remotely representative of the city's tastes, then the number of such innocents must be far much lower than is presumed. Applying Dundes' (1980) argument here, we can see a process of inverted projection at play when the charge of obscenity is leveled against the *matatu* man. Those outside his subculture find that he reminds them of things that they would rather forget (or at least not be reminded of). Without tact, he makes it known that shorn of the trappings that mark 'culturedness', at night the company executive, for instance, spews obscenities with as much verve the *matatu* man. But by pinning labels such as 'unruly', 'insane', 'obscene' etc, the 'decent' other finds cause to vilify *matatu* crews and their subculture. In turn, it is possible to see why, based on his knowledge of the double standards at work, the *matatu* man directs some of his verbal aggression at the modern-looking "tie-and-suit" people represented by the impoverished *mwalimu* [teacher].

Macharia, a literature teacher and erstwhile devotee of this unrestrained dance form, analogized thus in a post-*mugithi* discussion; "Who wants to look into a mirror and see how they look in the shitting posture?" He is one of the few informants who frankly admit that there is something unsettling about admitting to having attended, this dance session.⁴⁴ The disturbing memory of *mugithi*'s bawdy excess reaches the ears of *decent* (office) workers by way of hip hop lyrics shouting "fuck you" over and over again from the 400watt boom boxes as *matatu* roar down the city streets. Aware of the ironies of representation that daylight brings, the *matatu* man carries on with his obscenities, shouting back and insulting ever more aggressively. He knows that Nairobi teems with tricksters, which might explain the popularity of the word *fake* in *matatu* culture to refer to pretenders and unreliable people.

In sum, once we take obscenity in *matatu* culture alongside other less visible, and thus accepted, sites and modalities of the obscene (FM radio entertainment for example) we can then see that *matatu* culture's is objected to by other subcultures not because it is too visible but because by its unrestrained nature it is a perpetual carnival. Furthermore, it demonstrates to other subcultures that the divide between *matatu* culture and their learned, cultivated prudishness is indeed very flimsy, which point, as we have seen, few 'polished' Nairobians would like to be reminded of. The mirror that my informant raised above is simply too uncomfortable to look into even as city residents zealously troop to their *mugithi* sessions.

4.7 Conclusion

Having examined the *matatu* man's hidden connections to the rest of society, we can see that in his expressive symbolic acts he is simply trying to navigate complex and conflicting identities and anxieties that arise from his everyday dilemmas. Simultaneously recoiling from prescribed standards of taste, he invents his own as a way of casting the glance more sharply towards himself, even as he fetches his props from as far away as the South Bronx. As they disrupt 'stable' norms of socialization, *matatu* crews call attention to the fact that in their world, even the inverted is enshrined with meaning. Thus they re-create their own norms—Sheng, phrases, superstitions, unusual fashion tastes—to cut a subcultural space whose gaze, though fixed upon contemporary local society, is cast outwards to the global and back into tradition as the youth seek ways of apprehending the present. In re/fashioning his values, the *matatu* man seeks icons and practices that speak 'loudest' and most rudely, conflating them to express an array of multiple identities and disregarding the chinks that appear where such identities overlap.

To apprehend the fullest range of meaning(s) thus presented in *matatu* culture, I suggest carnival practice as arguably the most productive analytic model; like the subject to which it has been applied the poetics of the carnivalesque shies away from constraints. It liberates analytical space to allow scrutiny of a subject whose very obscenity simultaneously begs explanation even as it invites 'revulsion'—accounting for why it has not been previously studied in the manner done here. The practice of *matatu* culture inscribes the terms by which it

should be assessed, setting the rubrics of an analytical frame for itself very much along the lines suggested by African American signifying practices. Thus, I have juxtaposed a 'low' practice (a preoccupation with the corporeal) against a 'higher' one (theory) to show how a presumably outdated custom like a circumcision dance operates within a 21st century (sub)culture that is at the same time demonstrably aware of interactions with the global. Having done so, we can see that the obscenity of Nairobi *matatu* culture is nurtured by its extensive links to other sites of transgressive practice such that *matatu* culture may be taken as being merely a paradigmatic instance of similar popular acts.

The thread of *matatu* subculture, if followed to its logical end, leads to interconnections in the fuller cultural web of Nairobi. Differently put, significant bits of other Kenyan subcultures can be found in the *matatu* subculture. I suggest that to look at *matatu* culture one needs to imagine looking into a cracked mirror while at the same time literally standing on it. Furthermore, some shards are missing from the cracked surface. Looked at thus, there really is nothing odd about the world of *matatu* culture; it appears upside down because the reflection in the mirror is distorted by the ordering of its 'cracked' up logic. However, following semiotic clues, a careful look into the mirror shows that the world of the *matatu* man is not as puzzling; 'we' can still recognize our likeness in the reflection. In the following chapter I examine the artistic processes that constitute this cracked-mirror, upside down world.

Notes

¹ Adopted from Bakhtin, I am using the term World Upside Down to refer to the matrix of inversions in *matatu* culture as carnivalesque practice. A common nickname amongst older crews, 'boy', is an example of such inversion. One *manamba* takes the appellation *Kanda Boy* i.e. (G) 'young man boy', ignoring the contradictions of the compound term 'circumcised-uncircumcised/adult-child' once is applied on an adult.

² Khayesi (1997) reports that Gikuyu workers dominate the *matatu* sector, followed by the Kisii, Kamba and Luhya. Remarkably the traditional values of these Bantu-language groups share common attitudes about gender roles, wealth and definitions of manhood. It should therefore not surprise that the thinking about these issues in *matatu* culture appears to be so hegemonic. It needs stating that Gikuyu entrepreneurs were earliest in the business; they still predominate the business in Nairobi.

³ This suspension of the normative is also seen in the circumcision practices of other ethnic communities. For instance amongst the Kamba, the initiates were permitted and expected to steal sugarcane for fermenting ritual beer for their seniors, while Maasai initiates emerged from seclusion "dressed like women" (see Mbiti 1970: 124,126).

⁴ Kershaw (1997) writes in her *Mau Mau From Below*; “Though there were unsatisfactory family and marital relationships among informants, *nothing* in Kikuyu ideology supported an inferior or superior position of either gender” (1997:24. My emphasis). What the author conceives ideology to be is impossible to tell in this context. But if we take Gikuyu practices such as those geared to the induction of boys and girls into their respective social roles, we see that even without explicit principles outlining a formal, pan-ethnic ideological statement, certain things such as bravery and physical might were wired into society’s awareness of its valued norms, and women were not considered to be invested with such. In any event, even today we have numerous proverbs and sayings among the Gikuyu that show a clear misogynistic bias, and it is difficult to see how Kershaw failed to hear them amongst her informants. Ndungo (1998) on the other hand shows the role of Gikuyu and Kiswahili proverbs in negatively constructing female gender.

⁵ I have benefited immensely from discussions about this Gikuyu custom from a number of people. Specifically, John Njuguna Wandoro, who had just undergone his circumcision ceremony, was the first to draw my attention to the widespread ‘vulgarity’ of the occasion. For discussions on the analytical valence of this cultural practice, and its various contemporary modes on *matatu* culture, I am grateful for many useful exchanges via e-mail and in person with Michael Wainaina of the literature department at Kenyatta University and Kimani Njogu, formerly of the Kiswahili department at the same institution.

⁶ Though mostly sung by males, females present in the company participate in the risqué jollity since bar room association is deemed to be a *de facto* erasure of ‘normal’ rules of social intercourse, with sexuality being the most common source of metaphors of norm inversion. This seems to be a widely held practice in bars as we see elsewhere in Spanish carnival practice (Gilmore 1998).

⁷ Informants from other ethnic groups such as the Kamba and Meru who practice circumcision and clitoridectomy also indicate having similar instruction lessons after the initiation ritual where sexuality is talked about directly, unlike during conventional times when euphemisms about it abound in speech. As Mbiti points out “the mysteries and secrets of married life are normally revealed to the young people at this point... [initiation] signals the official permission to get married and bear children” (1976:93). This would be one way of explaining the cross ethnic usage and appeal of taboo language in *matatu* culture and passengers’ tolerance of or indifference to it since they are familiar with this language taken as it is from initiation rituals. Mbiti (1970:121-131) has a fuller description of the rite amongst various Kenyan communities. The *matatu* man might state the ‘vulgarisms’ in new ways, but he does not say anything that is radically new; his cardinal ‘fault’ lies in his stating the known in the wrong context, hence transgression.

⁸ One *matatu* owner has had a drawing of a copulating couple posted on the front of his *matatu*. He says that since the youth, being “mischievous and corrupt”, demand such things, then he feels bound to satisfy his “customers’ tastes.”

⁹ For example *Boyz II Men*, *Boyz in the hood*, *Homeboyz*, *Boyzone* and *Naughty by nature* etc. Here the word ‘hood’ has double signification; the one phallic where the foreskin literally hoods the glans and the other a playful reference to the ‘brain’ which, if taken as indexing ‘head’, leads us back to the penis in the first meaning. *Boyz II Men* is a popular African American music group whose star has somewhat dimmed from its 1990s stature, but the fact that the name still appears on *matatu* makes it possible to argue that ‘boyness’ has an everlasting allure amongst *matatu* men.

¹⁰ Common epithets hurled at *matatu* culture, in local newspapers and *matatu* personal experience narratives, seem to coalesce around (mental) disorder: *matatu* mania, *matatu* madness, idiocy, menace, chaos, and nightmare.

¹¹ Nairobi’s Eastland’s estates such as Jericho, Dandora and Kayole, seen as the authentic ghetto, are considered to produce a superior brand of Sheng (See Githiora 2002; Samper 200a). Crews who work *matatu* from the city center to Kangemi (No. 23), Githurai (No. 44), and Southlands (No. 15) were cited by informants as being the most trendily dressed and play the loudest rap in their vehicles and are especially popular with the dot.com set, particular high school and college students.

¹² Here informants are referring to the predominance of people from then president Moi’s Kalenjin tribe in the civil service, especially in highly paying public jobs.

¹³ To be sure, quite a few youths said they were eyeing particularly South Africa and Botswana as potential destinations where they had ‘heard’ about better job prospects. The UK is generally avoided with the vast majority of migrants insisting on “flying to the states.”

¹⁴ This is the stereotype made of a neatly-dressed man, in a necktie and carrying a newspaper—probably borrowed from the office—or a big envelope bearing the legend *Republic of Kenya* and stuffed with paper

work from the office. This view might spring from the civil service dress code and the appellation *mwaliimu* is just a rhetorical device used on any persons dressed as such (see glossary of Sheng terms).

¹⁵ There is the occasional odd university graduate working on a *matatu*. They argue that in the desperate economic circumstances, “job *ni* job [K. Work is work]”, citing the message of a *matatu* sticker which in turn is adapted from a local saying, [G] *wira ni wira* or [K] *kazi ni kazi*. The reason this phenomenon is remarked about is that the ethos of the Kenyan school system orients ‘learned’ people towards white collar jobs (see Prazak 1999). The higher one scales the ladder, the more one is expected to land a highly paying prestigious job, an assumption the Kenyan economy is not quite able to support.

¹⁶ While it might be tempting to characterize the use of Sheng purely along generational lines, caution calls for a more balanced view to cater for various exceptions. This is necessary since even some considerably older people take part in youth culture in varying degrees e.g. donning the capes, sneakers and baggy jeans pants usually associated with hip hop culture as well as speaking Sheng. One such man, Charlie, resists all notions aimed at inscribing a strict generational characterization of Nairobi youth culture. Born and raised in Eastlands “where real Sheng was born” he says that as a city-bound resident throughout his life, he speaks fluent Sheng with his now grown up children. “We have spoken Sheng and Kiswahili as long as I can remember. You see, in this case, I am a *mzee kijana* [K. Old-young person].” There are many like Charlie, whose rather hip name is uncharacteristic of a 55-year old in Nairobi. Nevertheless, in general the core corps of the Sheng speakers is comprised of youths under their later twenties.

¹⁷ There are quite a number of such studies, but those whose conclusions directly concern us here are the ones that explore the symbolic implications of Sheng as code-switching e.g. Myers-Scotton (1991; 1993; 1997), Samper (2002a) and Githiora (2002).

¹⁸ These are the bifurcated poles around which most people on Nairobi streets judge Sheng. When asked to comment on it, usually informants stop at merely saying how bad or good they think it is, never evaluating its social functions.

¹⁹ Here I am toying around with the deprivileging of mainstream speech forms (high). Sheng disrupts the privileges of Kiswahili and English, two languages from which it borrows extensively and that enjoy official status in Kenya, to give agency to a socially marginal category, taking us to Bakhtin’s vernacular speech that undermines the higher orders of language (1984:465-466).

²⁰ A fairly representative sample of the themes they rap about is covered in the CD *Kenyan Chapter* (2000). Sexually explicit tracks like Nonini’s *we kamu* and Redsun’s *Apakatwe* have quickly given these rappers a ‘bad boy’ reputation in Nairobi; the hits cited here are now also *matatu* names. Other popular youth rappers are GidiGidi MajiMaji, Ndarling P (*sic*), Nameless, E-Sir (since deceased) and K-South. To be sure, explicit lyrics are generally objected to in Kenya but they get a lot of airtime on the various FM radio stations.

²¹ The rap group *Mashifsta*, the name originally given to Somali ‘bandits’ who wreck havoc in Kenya’s North Eastern province, have a track called *Majambazi* [K. Robbers]. They declare that the whole government machinery is a “system *ya majambazi*” i.e. a robbers’ system. See *Kenyan Chapter* Vol.1 CD (2000).

²² Throughout this section, it will be seen that the idiom discussed here is sexist, some of it explicitly and some subtle so. I find it necessary then to invoke an injunction of Hannerz’s who, in his discussion of verbal aggression among African American ghetto males, warns thus: “The reader is invited to take another look for himself (*sic*); too clean a mind might not be of any particular help.” (1969:128, n.5). I have rendered all the terms as they were used, unbowdlerized.

²³ The discourse of alternative sexuality may want to challenge this claim, but we need to be clear that within the Kenyan context, heterosexual relationships are predominantly *the* norm, and women occupy a specified role within such relationships. In any event, the accent in crews’ perception here is on the penetrated partner within the sexual encounter; whether in a same sex setup such a partner alternately takes up an active role is a *non issue*.

²⁴ The terms *man* and *boy* have more valence beyond linguistic specification and can be taken as tropes for larger social concerns. Amongst the Gikuyu, circumcision at puberty required the boy to ‘face the knife’, in the absence of effective local anesthesia other than ice-cold river water, without flinching. This meant that what made a man of a boy was not just the cutting *per se* but also his control over pain. A successful mastery of it earned him respect, while girls refused to dance with ‘cowards’ or even to marry them. For the Gikuyu man then, maleness indexes both will and control, not just over the body but also of other people and duties defined by their connection to the male body. In *matatu* culture, to call a man a boy is synonymous to erasing him socially and to compare him to a woman is considered equally offensive. White (1990) points out how British colonial administrators in Central Kenya used the concept of manhood as a means of social control.

They saw *the* perfect servant of Empire as ‘the complete male’; married and housed in ‘comfortable’ quarters with his wife in an environment conducive to the fulfillment of conjugal rights: if his libido was satisfied, he would be a productive servant, less likely to subvert colonial rule. This, White argues, shows how colonial practice imbricated the discourse of English patriarchal masculinity. Thus, *matatu* culture works within an ideological framework, even beyond Gikuyu patriarchal roots, that expects *authoritative masculinity* to be the given center of power in social relations. This would be one way of explaining why sexism in the subculture is tolerated and relished by crews and passengers from diverse ethnicities and even by people from other social classes.

²⁵ One such driver, a rarity in the trade, did not only drive aggressively and curse male drivers—e.g. *Caitani ino* [G. You satan] and *malaya wewe* [K. You prostitute]—but also threatened to pull up by the curb, seize her “*shenzi*” [K. Bastard] conductor and beat him up “*tuone ni nani mwanaume* [K. So that we can see who is the man].”

²⁶ In East and Central Africa, the introduction of the car within the framework of modern technology in the colonial economy was the cause of extreme anxiety by local people, with many terming the car a vampire in numerous rumors that continued to circulate for a long time (see White 2000). If we accept that these rumors were at one level locals’ critique of the colonial labor economy vis-à-vis technology, then we can argue that the contemporary conflation of car and body is an extension of the critique to specify which gender (male) should occupy the “right” technological body (car) as a normative inscription of power relations between the genders. In the next chapter I try to examine why contemporary rumors find such fertile ground on *matatu*.

²⁷ Crews’ tendency towards vulgarisms, alongside the display of semi-nude female bodies in *matatu* stickers led many people to brand the subculture pornographic. Indeed, none of my passenger informants said they would willingly engage in an argument with *manamba* because of the latter’s adeptness at uttering obscenities. As an informant put it, “Nobody in this world can curse like a *makanga*. It is as if they go for training in vulgarisms before they are hired for their first *matatu* job” (Mariga).

²⁸ One afternoon, at a *matatu* stage a route worker politely greeted passengers boarding a *matatu*, asked whether they had had a good day, solicitously showed them to their seats and inquired about their degree of comfort. He even asked if he could get them anything—“may be a soft drink to make the waiting bearable?” Once the vehicle was ready to leave, he wished everyone a safe trip and thanked them for choosing to travel on that route, “hoping to see you again, soon.” Nearly everyone was quite puzzled by this extremely “polished” violation of the character template of a *matatu* worker. It was largely lost on passengers that the young man was just mimicking the mannerisms and valedictory formula of an airline flight crew. Passengers had eagerly played along and helped the man make them the butt of his dramatized joke.

²⁹ Depending on its size a *matatu* is supposed to carry between 18 and 25 passengers. However, to find one that is not crowded is more the exception than the norm. (Government rules effected on 1st February 2004 governing the running of *matatu* are meant to change all this; a future field visit will be required to assess their impact on the dynamics under discussion). In a suffocating-hot and packed minibus *matatu*, some *manamba* often remove their shirts, retaining only their vests, in order to slip easily to the back of the vehicle and collect fares as they elbow their way back to the front. Minibuses usually have two ‘spare’ *manamba* to assist the main one in several ways as need arises, including beating up and throwing off passengers reluctant to pay the fare demanded. A disgusted passenger stated; “Nothing terrifies me more than the sweating armpit of a *manamba* as he shoves his way through to the front. I try and stand next to an open window to escape any contact with the guy. I always have the exact fare ready in order to avoid speaking to him. Were it not for my poverty, I’d buy my own car. This [traveling by *matatu*] is one way in which we catch dangerous diseases.” Indeed, medical reports cite “overcrowded public transport” as contributing to tuberculosis infections (Nesoba 2003).

³⁰ White people, local or foreign, rarely use *matatu*, but when they do, they get ‘first-class’ treatment by crews who will usually *mimic* English for their benefit and then compensate their linguistic labor by charging a higher fare. This might be the genesis of the view by local *matatu* passengers of such white travelers as rich invaders merely running away from the drudgery of their rich lives by seeking to *enjoy* poverty firsthand in a *matatu* ride. The generic name given to such white females is Wangari, the name of one of nine Gikuyu matriarchs, while white males might be called John or any other common name a crew might fancy. The point however is to play on a stereotype. In general, the name *mzungu* [a white] in Kenya also refers to a rich person, regardless of race or sex, particularly one’s employer. Wealth, laziness, extreme hygiene, envy, polished mannerisms, punctuality, dislike, fear etc are all possible connotations of the term which seem to be

derived from the mannerisms of English colonial administrators. In conversations, older folk still allude to names of such *wazungu* as paragons of whatever claim might be being made at the moment.

³¹ In two *matatu* I found a sticker reading “*Tuko jobless [we are jobless]*”, besides which were sketches of thin black tourists relaxing on a beach. This seems to be a parody of the prototype tourist figure—presumably rich, overweight, white—basking for a tan which is seen as an expensive and wasteful spite of the jobless/poor. Incidentally, these stickers were displayed on the window immediately next to the door, the *manamba*’s work station. Read reflexively, it could be taken as pouring derision on the view that *matatu* work is not (decent) “work” by juxtaposing the sticker parody of an idler (tourist) to the actual body of a busy *matatu* man.

³² However, the male-female borders used by crews in seizing up opponents can be risky at times. I witnessed a female passenger, angry at being overcharged, set her baby on the muddy ground and make for the *manamba*’s throat. Clearly sensing that he was about to be embarrassed by “a woman” in the presence of his peers stage workers, the *manamba* quickly returned the woman’s full fare, hopped into the *matatu* and his mate sped off. Once the passenger was safely out of sight and earshot, stage workers began lamenting how “dangerous women have become these days. They are now sitting on men.” There is a clear concern here about the “invasion” of the male domain of physical strength.

³³ This is an especially applicable interpretation since the physical state of a woman during or immediately after orgasm is described as death both in Gikuyu (*gukua*) and Kiswahili (*kufa*) slang. Similarly, if a girl begins to show physical responses to a man’s sexual overtures, this state is said to be (G) “*kwanjia gwikwithia*”/ (K) “*kuanza kujikufisha*” [To begin playing dead]. If we accept this linguistic formulation of the moment of crisis in terms of the death-life oppositions in Bakhtin, then we can see that the male in the cultures from which these terms are taken is given the upper hand in the regeneration process since, as pointed out in note 23 above, he is the initiator and controller of the sexual act.

³⁴ One popular late 1990s *matatu* was called *Hell* while a more recent one is called *Hellraiser*. I see these as intertextual parodies of the ‘holy’ names appearing on other *matatu* in order to evoke the concrete material existence of the *matatu* man’s life as a living hell—albeit one he enjoys—and as the paired opposite of heaven, thus making it possible to see hell as a logical and necessary partner of heaven. Despite, or perhaps on account of their eerie names, these ‘hellish’ *matatu* were quite popular. This further affirms my claim that individuals outside *matatu* culture’s immediate orbit find its inversions attractive.

³⁵ Phyllis, who says that she has always prayed to God for money to buy her own car some day laments: “In a packed *matatu*, I often feel helpless caught as I am between the bad smells inside and the toxic fumes coming in through the window I have opened to let in some gust of fresh air. It is especially bad when I have to travel with my kids, but rather than catching some dangerous airborne disease, I usually opt to deal with the monoxide from the vehicle exhaust” (Informant’s emphasis. See also note 29 above).

³⁶ Even though both men and women told PENS, I got the impression that the men were keen to avoid telling narratives that had salacious details; they dwelt more on cases of robbery and fights between competing crews.

³⁷ Few narrators in the PENS I collected avoid drifting to some ‘low’ detail, either to do with the threat of rape in a carjacked *matatu*, or some verbal or physical violation which somehow, though offensive, the aggrieved party finds necessary to tell time and time again. This might be a method of control through distancing, but it is also possible that in itself, the verbal repetition of a taboo act is an enjoyable transgression.

³⁸ This figuration of women in metaphors of the sexual act is also evident in other cultures—occupational, e.g. amongst American cowboys there is ‘cow-catching’ to map foreplay (Thomas 1995); social e.g. among African Americans ‘motorcycle-riding’ and ‘riding’ are metaphors of the coital act (Major 1971; Dillard 1976). Furthermore, as Bakhtin has noted, universally, mankind has a choice stock of expressions related to lower bodily materiality, more than relate to other corporeal aspects, precisely because such acts are what the discourse of the ‘finished body’ seeks to make taboo (1984:319). The human mind, as we saw exemplified by the trickster *matatu* man in the preceding chapter, is prone to seek the uncovering of the polished body, even if for no other reason, to prove that it is indeed still an unfinished entity, to show that there is nothing taboo *per se*.

³⁹ This form is meant as weekend entertainment, but some establishments, realizing its commercial potential, offer it more frequently. Some that had formerly had special sessions like “*Ladies’ Nite*” have replaced them with “*Mugithi Night/Night Train*.” I found individuals from diverse professional classes, devout Christians, junior politicians and business people, among others, attending these dances. Nairobi being a fairly small

city, chances of bumping into acquaintances are high, most of whom would not care to be reported as being *mugithi* devotees. Even more significantly, despite its Gikuyu lyrics, the dance succeeds even with cross-ethnic audiences because of its dramaturgical component. Mike Murimi, Mike Ruwa and Salim Junior were the three most sought-after one-man guitarists at the time of doing my fieldwork. Sam Muthee, an elderly pioneer one-man guitarist, avoids the bawdy lyrics of the other three and specializes in singing to the rhythm of earlier tunes. Incidentally, he holds a degree in Civil Engineering, demonstrating further the demarcations that the Nairobi entertainment underground crosses out lest it be assumed that only the uneducated go to these shows. While it might be objected that the *mugithi* is a fairly recent phenomenon dating as it does to the early 1990s, it needs to be stated that “circumcision hymns”, genre-wise the precursor to the ‘vulgarity’ of the one-man-guitar show, have always been a traditional feature of the bar-room in Nairobi and other parts of central Kenya.

⁴⁰ A representative sample of the kind of music played in these sessions is the Salim Junior (N.D) *Best of one man guitar “mugithi”* Vol. 1.

⁴¹ It is illustrative that very few people, and certainly none that I know, attend the *mugithi* dance ‘proper’ with their spouses; those who do leave the bar well before the ‘real adults-only’ session begins. This should indicate that no matter what else goes on in these dance sessions, there is something so utterly ‘scandalous’ about the whole practice that were its details to be witnessed by one’s spouse in the presence of acquaintances it would constitute a breach in social protocol as pointed out in the of PENS.

⁴² I am especially grateful to Kimani Njogu, for not only supplying part of the missing text, but discussing its significance within the broader tradition of taunts in Gikuyu circumcision-season dances. Any error in analytical application is solely mine. The mapping of the sexual act in terms of a wrestling match may also explain the popularity of *matatu* names and pictures of ‘tough’ macho stars of American wrestling.

⁴³ As further proof of the guitar-lyricist’s unapologetic elisions, his lyrics appropriate texts from sources as disparate as Twist, gospel and country music to traditional dances and children’s play songs in a rap-like pastiche; his syncretizing act involves combining all these disparate genres, sometimes within a line, or a verse. Mutonya (2003) offers further insights into the esthetics of the contests waged through this popular dance.

⁴⁴ A visit to music shops confirmed my assumption that music tapes and CDs that have lurid content are generally quite popular. Hence for instance, 1960s ‘Gikuyu Folksongs’ tapes by Joseph Kamaru and H.M Kariuki were very popular with my more elderly Gikuyu informants, a fact that is confirmed by the constant re-issuing of such tapes and the existence of thousands of copies in the not-so-underground pirate-tapes market. Few *mugithi* attendees lacked either of these musicians’ work in what they called their “bedroom collections”, hidden away from the children. The latter, quite aware of the double standards at work, tune into FM stations for the hip hop equivalence, a ‘sitting room’ collection that counters their parents’ bedroom space.

Chapter Five

WUD II: *Last Laugh* : Carnavalesque Esthetics in Nairobi *matatu* culture

Mimi namuadmire Sana Spike...Everything he does yeye husucceed. Cheki, he conquers everything, na mimi nikaona nikiweka hiyo jina yake kwa dinga yangu naweza kuconquer. Si Spike alikuwanga successful gangster na sasa ni successful actor...pia mimi ni hivyo. I also want to conquer [S. I admire Spike very much...He succeeds in everything he does. Look, he conquers everything, and so I thought that his name appearing on my vehicle might help me to conquer. Isn't Spike formerly a successful gangster, and now a successful actor...it's the same with me. I also want to conquer].

(MuSpike)ⁱ

5.0 An Inventory of Inverted Roles

Aware of the subversive nature of *matatu* culture's practices, part elements of which were discussed in the previous chapter, the principle objective of this chapter is to investigate the esthetic characteristics of the subculture's texts. This will enable us to grasp a fuller picture of the *matatu* WUD as well as to grasp the character of its inversions. I have already suggested that the festive activity surrounding Gikuyu circumcision rituals seems to bear significantly on contemporary *matatu* cultural practice. In this chapter I explore other aspects that lend credence to a key assumption guiding this study, viz., that *matatu* folk conceive and structure their subcultural activity within modalities of the transgressive. We analyze the processes/acts of destabilization that take place within the subculture and that enable the conception of alternative identities that are, almost always, directly counterpoised to the sordid realities of crews' social existence. This assumption derives from crews' perception of their performance as a *Fiesta* (a *matatu* name) where names, stickers, music and costume prop the carnivalesque acts. As one such sticker puts it, "*Been There, Done that--Welcome to the Carnival.*"ⁱⁱⁱ i.e. to show the vast experience of "fun" a speaker has had, and thus the conception of life as one vast carnival. I attempt to unravel the working principles of this carnival, which can be conceived of as a *fiesta* that is open to anyone who comes into contact *matatu* culture.

We can use my informant's statement above to probe how the ground for *matatu* culture's inversions is prepared in order to allow crews to engage in the sort of carnivalesque gestures suggested by the *matatu* name *Last Laugh*. For a 25year old youth, perhaps Muspike's relatively short career as a *konkodi* is packed with too much experience. The first *matatu* he worked on was hijacked by robbers, he has had numerous scraps with the police, is divorced and re-married. At the time of our interview, he was jobless after his *matatu*, *Spike*, was repossessed by auctioneers. In view of his life story, and in the face of tremendous adversities, it is not surprising that he has chosen for his hero Spike Lee to symbolize transcendental ability, even if on the basis of an error. This conductor has rewritten Spike's story, reinventing him as a successful former gangster. Nonetheless, the invented 'successful gangster' inspires him to believe that he too can scale the heights and be good at whatever he does—regardless of his line or past.

Muspik's narrative instantiates Appadurai (1997) and Hannerz's (1996) argument on the agency of 'medialized realities' in bringing experience from elsewhere to bear upon people's lives in far removed local contexts. Doubtless, my informant has taken Spike for someone else, but it is also clear that in doing so he is operating on the basis of the dominant narrative, often communicated through film, video and especially *gangsta* rap, that depicts American blacks as deeply mired in crime. For Muspike, Spike's name or face could even be replaced by any other without making any real difference to his conceptualization of the world; when he sees a black face on the screen for example, it is indeed exactly that—a face. What concerns my informant and others like him in the subculture is what the face stands for, the "aura of the star" (Benjamin 1968:325). The question then to be asked is why crews base their imagined selves, and fantasies, on characters and narratives that go against the grain.

As an icon, and seen within the practice of naming *matatu* after crews' perceived heroes, Spike Lee enables us to trace an interesting characteristic of the imagining process in the culture. A majority of those after whom *matatu* are named are what might be called 'bad boys', and in a few instances 'bad girls' e.g. music icons; names that are not derived in this manner adulate common folk who have made it big in one field or the other, especially in sports. Such fields fall outside mainstream definitions of success. In the Kenyan context high educational achievement is regarded as *the* means to social mobility and is often invoked as the yardstick for measuring success.ⁱⁱⁱ Asked why they glamorized people like sports and rap stars who do not conform to standard notions of professional success (e.g lawyers, doctors, professors, politicians etc), informants gave varied reasons. Some said that rap and sports icons enabled them and their *matatu* to have a catchy 'advertising' name, appear 'cool' and indicate a sense of 'citification.' There was also a feeling that Kenya lacks 'real heroes', especially amongst members of the political class who are viewed, rightly or wrongly, to have succeeded in life through deceit.^{iv} Conventional avenues to success such as schooling were especially derided; "education is one of the most useless investments in Kenya today—I'd rather buy a *matatu* for my son than take him to high school"; "you don't have to go to school to live well. Look at some of these illiterate millionaire politicians!"

The general consensus was that something was fatally flawed about processes of social mobility in Kenyan society, especially the way the patronage system worked, and hence the need to look further afield for more inspiring narratives and heroes. It shouldn't surprise therefore when Muspike repeatedly declares "I must steal a minimum of 300 [Kenya shillings] every day", an amount known as *mukinyo* [G. stolen stuff] and that crews openly confessed to pinching from the day's total earnings. This amount augments their wages and is their ticket to "living well"; "*shine poa* [cool dressing]", top-of-the-range Discman and CD player and enough money left over to take the girls to K2 for fun. These crews take the cue from the lives of popular culture icons whose narratives appear in various electronic and print media; sometimes they invent these icons and their roles as we see in the case of my informant, Muspike.

As becomes apparent upon interrogating the practices of *matatu* culture, a significant dynamic, and one upon which a key assumption of this study is based, involves the subversion of accepted meanings and tastes in order to create an alternative space. The self-insertions into such space constitute challenges to the social body and scheme of meanings fabricated around it; they penetrate and disturb its (b)orders. Predominantly American stars and narratives are deemed to aid better the processes of imagining unencumbered as they are by local contradictions. They are therefore more malleable than local heroes/narratives, enabling the infusion of a vast range of meanings with which to construct imagined identities.

The importance of the principle set out above to *matatu* culture cannot be overemphasized. It sets the stage upon which crews consciously perform their acts as evinced by their constant loud wishful thinking; "I want to be like Eminem," "*Yule Nelly ni mnoma*" sana, lakini Dr Dre ndiye favorite ya mine [S. That Nelly is bad, but Dr. Dre is my favorite]" or "*Maze hujacheki zile magear za Ja Rule. Nikiwahi gear kaa hiyo jo nitafurahi sana* [S. Man you haven't seen Ja Rule's apparel. If I had such apparel man I'd be very happy]." Conscious steps are taken to be like one's hero, an alter ego of sorts. *Matatu* culture's practitioners are thus aware of the relationship between their social space as marginalized subjects, the physical instruments of its transformation (e.g. clothing, looks and *matatu* space) and the role of the fantastic imagination in recasting their present realities and identities to celebrate things that do not really exist in their immediate environment but can be simulated through the force of imagination. In the process, exaggerations and outright deliberate distortions occur in crews' re-enactments of the imaginary but in all cases the important consideration is that such acts of creative (mis)representation are modeled upon a template. To this extent crews' simulated roles and props do not have to coincide exactly with those of the popular icons chosen. All that matters is the possibility of transformation that these approximations hold; they enable the re-invention of 'new'/different identities which are then

insert into the city space. In this manner, popular culture's icons, as floating signifiers, provide a ground upon which *matatu* culture's texts, as semiotic codes in free play, can be interpreted in their local context(s).

Conceived within its carnivalesque modality, we might argue that *matatu* culture's potency arises from its defiance of the mainstream through texts and practices that are always on open display yet whose subterfuge eludes detection. The culture's practices reveal a complex awareness of Kenya's social contradictions and deploy the power of fantasy as a way of dealing with them. This is especially so if viewed in the historical role of *matatu* as a site of, mainly, anti-government politics (see Atieno-Odhiambo 1987:200-201; Haugerud 1997:28-30; Murunga 1999). In fact, perennial attempts by the government to ban "multi-colored" *matatu* and the playing of music in them, while officially touted as a way of instilling 'sanity' in the *matatu* industry, needs to be seen as being in no small measure an effort to control avenues and vehicles through which alternative, transgressive meanings are purveyed.^{vi} And because the tactics that aid crews' evasions have slipped become commonplace in the quotidian domain, few people stop to seriously consider the culture's depth and content themselves with remarking upon its surface signification. The simplicity and routine of its texts and practices makes *matatu* culture appear banal but it is precisely this deceptive banality that makes it a complex, indecipherable space where transgression is carried out in full view.

By examining the artistic processes at work here, it will be possible to show how, after Kapchan (1995), carnivalesque behavior can, once analyzed, enable the comprehension of cultural acts that lie either outside the margins of, on the one hand, cultural doxa and, on the other, interpretive frames used in the study of such unorthodox material. As a whole, the multivalence of meanings in *matatu* texts and other expressive behavior such as crews' use(s) of their bodies as sites of (self-)performed identities call upon the student of culture to adopt an interpretive framework that recognizes, first, the legitimacy of the co-presence of texts from disparate media and genres on a single (technological or social) body and, secondly, the capacity for these texts to mean on their own or in diverse combined forms. Against the background awareness that transgression is a universal social practice, *matatu* culture can be seen as a critique of existing social meanings that temporarily disengages itself from conventional notions and definitions of taste and identity before recuperating them, or their fragments, and redeploying them to subversive ends. With the shards of meanings thus gathered from here and there, locally and abroad, and from disparate genres, an alternative cultural space is cultivated and nurtured.

Thus, to understand *matatu* culture requires a simultaneous interrogation of the immediate concrete against that which *is not* by virtue of its distance from the local context, the officially prescribed against the imaginatively inscribed, and thereby to evaluate the actual in the light of imaginary, transgressive states of being. As becomes apparent in the succeeding discussion, the cardinal unifying logic in *matatu* texts involves inversions and reversals. To this extent, I examine the culture's fixed and non-fixed carnivalesque texts in an attempt to unravel the esthetic dynamics at work in the practices of inversion.

5.1.0 Locating the Esthetic

In examining the esthetic processes at work in *matatu* texts, I follow Pocius (1995) who privileges *creativity*, understood as skill, as the basic criterion in defining art. He has argued that cultural every day acts can be seen as art forms since they require "a certain amount of skill to execute" by which criterion "the skillful activities of all humans can be considered as potential art"(1995:23). Doubtlessly, this is a very broad definition, like Ben-Amos' definition of folklore as "artistic communication in small groups"(Source), but I take this to be precisely its strong point since it encompasses all spheres of human activity, i.e. abstracted and material creations as well as corporeal signifying acts like gestures.

Matatu culture, given the nature of its constituent parts, is a perfect example of the merger of both the abstract and the material thus enabling a critique of the two expressive modalities at the site of their unification. Art is not exclusive to the literary, which is a very useful assessment in folklore

whose basic concern is lived experience in its myriad manifestations. I proceed upon the awareness that the component of creativity is enshrined in all processes/acts by which mankind makes meaning. Pocius' argument also gives room for the appreciation of points of commonality that may be found in texts as diverse as, for instance, graffiti, poetry and *matatu* stickers.

This latter point is quite relevant to *matatu* culture whose designs are popularly labeled pornography and graffiti in public discourse (Mkangi 1986; Waihenya 2002b).^{vii} The latter claim arises from the orthodox view of graffiti as an act of defacement by illegal inscription. In *matatu* culture, vehicle owners participate in designing their *matatu* and this might even be seen as a statement in terms of property rights. They are rooted to the land, and hence the identification with their property. The same applies to the case of African Americans whereby even though their identity is diasporic, it is legitimately and fundamentally American, a claim advanced as much by the self-inscription onto space through graffiti as well as the self-voicing strategies of hip hop. In any case, in the light of the symbolic signification by which cultural processes operate, a view of graffiti as destruction is blind to the crucial fact of agency by which users establish symbolic relationships between themselves and the signs they use. Differently put, signs must mean something to users no matter how arbitrarily they appear to be deployed; even the act of sullyng a (public) wall has some (positive) meaning for the graffiti writer (tagger). A useful analogy here might be drawn from rubbish theory; rubbish, as discarded matter, is only rubbish to the extent that it has not been retrieved and put to some other use (Thompson 1979). In other words, nothing is really rubbish as the dismissive view of graffiti as defacement would have it. Material considered as such has a latent value that can only be discovered by putting the 'rubbished' object to use. Thus, old building walls, and in our case the dilapidated mechanical body of a *matatu*, are given new value by the writings done on them which can be seen as a recreative process. Indeed various writers on this genre of urban popular culture (Castelman 1982; Cooper and Chalfant 1984; Chalfant and Prigoff 1988; Stewart 1987; Rose 1994; McDonald 2002, et.al) have amply demonstrated that tagging onto public spaces is an act of creative self-insertion by which members of marginalized groups reclaim a 'voice' and thus contest erasure.

Hence, we can see that *matatu* designs and graffiti provide avenues for subaltern groups to express themselves within the only channels largely available to them. Beyond such convergence, however, it is impossible to equate *matatu* designs to graffiti. To do so would be to ignore specific social dynamics and historical trajectories that structure the evolution of these two expressive forms; the *matatu* design may copy the *wildstyle* graffiti (Figure 36), but the sociological impetus impacting on the two is fundamentally different.^{viii} In succeeding sections, and as I have tried to show so far, I try to interrogate these texts from an emic perception of them as creative and meaningful symbolically expressive forms. On the whole, it needs to be understood that whatever other principles might underlie these texts, they operate by inverting stable categories (mainly of taste, but also of order) that present an alternative view of social realities. The resulting obfuscation can be taken as one reason to explain why some informants said that they did not understand, for instance, the meanings of various *matatu* texts. However, once we are aware that such texts are organized around an overriding logic that subverts pre-existing norms and categories, we can see how they make meaning. I now turn to examine the creative operations that make such texts meaningful for *matatu* folk.

5.1.0 Intertextuality and Reflexivity in *Matatu* Texts

As a point of departure, it is necessary to state that nearly all *matatu* texts are constructed intertextually in the sense that they exist in relation to others, diachronically and synchronically. Titon (1995:440), following Jonathan Culler (1982) and Richard Rorty (1991), suggests that the human body-text is a conjunction of "beliefs and desires that lead to action in the world" (1995:440). Proceeding from this position we can take *matatu* culture's symbolic expressive media, some of which literally enwrap the body, as agents for the construction and articulation of crews' "beliefs and desires" that lead them to express themselves as they do i.e. as they

understand their relationships with the world. This is not to argue that they operate from a fixed interior worldview that they seek to impose upon reality. Rather, it is to say that in their engagement with the world, they bring with them some notions that might then develop in other ways in the process of cultural negotiation. This culture is part of a larger world; its expressive forms and behavior interpellate with others' and its 'artifacts' (Oring 1994:212) need to be viewed relationally to other texts. The inter-referencing process in this case works well because most of their thematic concerns are already familiar to Nairobians existing as they do in other flows of public discourse. We might note also that such inter-referencing straddles genres, in diachronic and synchronic relationships, and as such it is near impossible to pinpoint a *matatu* text that does not in some way recall or point to another. As we have seen, most of these artifacts are deterritorialized appropriations. As such their meanings can only be fully grasped if, in interpretation, cognizance is taken of embedded clues that link them to other artifacts and texts, antecedent or contemporaneous. In this way *matatu* culture's texts can be taken as having an *a priori* inherent polyvalence.

It is this sense I take Kristeva (1984:34-61) to mean, in her discussion of textuality in the novel, that the novel (text) becomes truly dialogical only with the insertion into it of carnivalesque, thus dissenting, language. Since polyphonic discourse is necessary for social regeneration (of ideas, expressed in texts) we can view the multiplicity of links between texts as a complexification process which at the same time supplies clues as to how such texts might be read. This proliferation has led Titon (*ibid*) to invoke Rorty's metaphor of the web as a conceptual trope for the inherence of the intertextualities attending the ideas/acts that texts, as signs, evoke. As a site of cultural semiotic engagement, I take its texts to instantiate Kristeva's "place of disputes and self-questioning [...] a 'circle' that remains open" (*ibid*: 78), where meanings are perpetually in contention. Its contested texts (e.g. rap) are utilized to contest social meanings (e.g. success, views of modernity).

On this understanding my interrogation of *matatu* texts' esthetics adopts an approach that remains aware of the vast possibilities raised, stylistic as well as semantic, not only when a text points to another/others, but also what happens where the threads of the web interpellate. I consider this intersection a reflexive moment where the inward turn becomes briefly oblivious of other threads; the immediate context becomes the ground upon which meaning at the specific point of this turn is to be read by the interpreter. In looking at *matatu* texts this way, they can be located within their particular temporal junctures and still examine the nature of their interaction with others. Ultimately, the social context within which these texts work enables interpretation along various axes of probability.^{ix}In the subsequent discussion I have suggested broad organizing principles that give meaning to texts based on contextual clues. Owing then to the intertwined nature of these inter-references, and the vast numbers of such texts available, the rubrics under which particular items are discussed are purely for analytical convenience, viz. *matatu* names, drawings, word games, and inter-linked genres of local popular culture, to wit, TV comedy, adverts, popular press, popular music and fashion, the idiom of football, and barroom discourse.

5.1.1 Names

The most widely circulating of such names are derived from the Old and New Testaments and are sometimes cast in the form of religious-sounding precepts. As I have already pointed out, any reading of presumed religious names within the context of the secularized, consumer-oriented discourse of *matatu* culture requires one to be skeptical as to why such names are used at all. Once this is borne in mind we can it is possible to see the underlying parodic sense that governs the use of such names, as evinced by the fact that whether *matatu* sport religious-sounding names (e.g. *God's Grace*, *God Knows*, *God's Blessings*, *Keep the Sabbath*) or secular 'terrifying' ones (e.g. *Chaos*, *Anarchy*, *HellRaiser*, *Ruthless*), their crews generally behave in same brash and transgressive manner. Indeed, as one *konkodi* informed me, "*hii ni biashara na lazima ujipange vile utattract wadhii* [S. This is business and you must scheme on how to attract commuters]." It is true that some *matatu* owners name their vehicles according to their religious beliefs but when

the vehicle falls into crews' hands, the owner loses control over what the name can be made to mean. In any case, the crew cannot in any case be forced to behave according to the name; it becomes a floating signifier. For example, one devout Christian named his *matatu* *God's Favor*, since he believed that his investment was "the work of God." However, the vehicle's crew used the name to jeer at competitors thus; "We don't even try to persuade passengers to enter our vehicle—God always ensures an overflowing *matatu*." If we appreciate the parodic intent of these texts, then we can understand why a *matatu* would carry a name like *Pepe Jeans-Jesus is Lord*—within the logic of consumption, both these *commodities* can be bought, especially in view of the commerce-minded evangelical preachers cited in the third chapter. Moreover, in the word play at work here, we see that the *Pepe* brand of jeans might make the wearer feel as comfortable as a lord. In this case, the Bible is a hypotext that enables the sourcing of names that, once deployed, become hypertextual reference points for other names. The revision of each text is done as the artist deems fit and it is here that the possibility for subversion and creative play is put to work.

Rewritten names can at times carry deeply irreverent tones. For instance, the name *God's Grace*, read alongside, or against, names such as *Amazing Grace* or *Grace* moves from the realm of religious referencing into the secular context of female beauty. This is a plausible reading given the practice of naming *matatu* after women, mainly a sweetheart (e.g. *Lady Ciru* or the extremely playful *Faith Works-Baby Faith* which might be taken to mean that Faith is a (sex) worker, hence the reference to her as 'baby' which signifies an erotic context.) The name *Night Nurse* points to a similar theme since it might in this context be taken as referring to night as a time when desires are nurtured. Often these names indicate some sensuous quality ascribed to the women that are alluded to and of which crews seem to be voicing admiration.

Biblically-derived names are varied dependent on designers' wishes e.g. *Blessings* and *Blessin'-In Style*. The irreverence in these names is heightened by the posting of equally transgressive stickers inside the vehicle. For example, posted inside the roof of the latter *matatu* a sticker depicts a man, in a T-shirt on which is written *I love Hommyz*^x and covering his private parts with his palm. The sticker's Kiswahili caption says *Kila mtu achunge mizigo yake* [Everyone guard their goods]. The play is on 'goods' whereby the slang equivalent *mizigo* means genitalia. The phrase '*In style*', placed besides the sticker, is a potent euphemism for coital style, a sense understood not just in *matatu* culture but also in general street slang. In fact, another *matatu*, named after a video by the African American rapper-director Snoop Doggy Dog (Calvin Broadus) carries the pointed name *Doggy Style* to signal both the field and interpretive framework within which such a name, and others like it, is to be read. I map these transformations to demonstrate the myriad routes and some quite abrupt turns that a text is likely to take once it is introduced into the field as a signifier.

Not all biblically-derived names however are explicitly geared towards the sexual. The name *Target-Guide Mi Oh Lord/Revenge* combines a prayer with a clearly stated desire to get even with some enemy; no irony is seen in disregarding the Christian call to forgive. Within the context of the subculture, *target* is the specified sum a *matatu* owner expects from his employees at the end of a day's work. This sum is often the source of bitter dispute between *matatu* crews and proprietors; just as some owners set impossibly high figures, some crews help themselves to too much of the earnings at the end of a work day. One driver said that the more he races on the road, the more money he is going to make and thus the higher the sum skimmed off the *target*. In such a context of unbridled profit-seeking, it seems understandable, and perhaps necessary, for crews to seek divine guidance in trying to achieve set sums or to win over their competitors and thereby achieve set targets. Also sought is the Lord's guidance away from crews' perennial enemies, the police, who might target one's vehicle for "harassment". The sticker *If the Lord is with us, who can be against us?*^{xi} seems to revolve around this latter theme. Thus, as is usual in the practices of *matatu* culture, we can see texts from disparate sources absurdly collocated but whose overall picture makes sense once the subculture's transgression of boundaries is taken into account.

Christianity, one of the country's mainstays, is a perfect subject for parody, particularly because informants see contradictions between what Kenyan leaders profess and their actions. One informant was openly quite critical of the public demonstrations of religious zeal by the political elite and clergy yet "they spend the six days between Sundays looting our money." Such charges occurred perennially throughout my field encounters and whether they are justified or not is beside the point. What is not is that they seem to inform a significant part of the social critique carried in the subculture as I demonstrate farther below in the discussion of its visual metaphors. 'Ordinary' citizens are also criticized for practicing what is seen as a sham faith; "Nothing makes sense in this country anymore and you'd be a fool to believe that all these church-going Kenyans are good people." My irritated informant placed went on to censure, especially, the moral shortcomings of prominent national leaders whose names feature liberally in *matatu* rumors, discussed later in this chapter. *Matatu* culture's texts may therefore be seen as a means of dissecting and processing contradictions in social realities where mocking society's core values is one way of trying to achieve comprehension. It is thus possible to see why religious themes, captured by an array of religious sounding-names, provide such a rich field of play in *matatu* onomastics.

Within the inter-textual modality of its texts, some names also make fun of values such as formal education and the hard work ethic because their pragmatic relevance is undermined by daily social contradictions. For a society that aspires to full modernization, the importance of the aforementioned values cannot be overemphasized. Yet, I was reminded repeatedly, 'godfatherism'—the network system founded on nepotism and corruption and through which it is easier to find jobs—has negated their worth. Thus one *matatu* bears the name *B.A/General*,^{xiii} apparently referring to the many jobless degree holders with which the streets of Nairobi teem. On another *matatu* is the huge inscription, *World Party-Playaz University*, suggesting that just as "the university of life" is the best school, so is a *matatu* the best institution from which to learn streetwise ways. In this case one might learn how to *play* street games, especially on/with girls; the significance of play in the culture is discussed below. The *matatu* name *Akademikz*, after an American fashion label, implies a boast where *matatu* crews see themselves as the really educated ones, a sarcastic reference to the jobless educated. This is more so if this particular name is taken alongside others self-referencing boast names like *Smart* and *Wiseman*. In further parodic reference to formal education, another *matatu* goes by the name *Deejay Academy* pointing to the view that indeed one would be better off going to a music academy, rather than university, since that way one stands to earn more money and recognition. It must be borne in mind that the ground for reading these names thus is the chronic joblessness of unemployed youth.

Both the jobless and working poor also bear the brunt of crews' derision. During a teachers' strike a *matatu* appeared with the appellation *Teachers/Unite and Teach/www. teachersunite.com*. Crews often contemptuously boasted that a *matatu* worker's wage is better than a teacher's and hence there is no need to pursue formal education; "I would rather buy a *matatu* for my son instead of sending him to high school." This attitude is a possible explanation for the contemptuous appellations *Mwalimu* and *Ofisi* discussed in Chapter Three. In a general get-rich-quick culture, poor teachers and civil servants slaving away for miserable wages seem to naturally attract especial derision. Paradoxically, crews see no contradiction in chiding the thieving politician and the honest underpaid worker in the same breath but then the trickster's logic does not always follow set patterns.

At another level, *matatu* culture dialogically engages with topical world issues. A case in point is the set of names *Arafat* and *Barak* which appeared on two *matatu* plying the same route immediately after the outbreak of the second Palestinian *Intifada* in 2001. Informants' readings of these names were conditioned by their support for either of the two leaders. Informants' readings were situated within the narrative of English colonialism in Kenya (with the Mau Mau and Palestinians being put on one side) and that of Israel as Christianity's birth place and these formed the core of interpretive frames used to read the conflict. In the latter case, devout

Christians stated that as the “elect of God” Israel had “the right to wage war against non-believers. Zion belongs to Israel.” Ultimately, the two names came to represent, and be interpreted within, ideological and moral imperatives. Incidentally, as Israeli prime ministers were replaced, so were the *matatu* names altered accordingly from *Barak* to *Sharon*; Arafat’s name has since disappeared from *matatu*. Recent variants to this theme are *Sharon Blessing* and *Sharon Impressive*, recording perhaps the Israeli prime minister’s role in the conflict as viewed by an admirer. However, Sharon is also a common feminine name deflects the meaning, especially in the last two examples, from the political to the romantic. A more recent reading of the *Intifada* is a *matatu* named *Occupy* while another, sarcastically but probably also in earnest, bears the injunctive name *Occupy Till He Comes* (Figure 37).^{xiii} The name *Occupy* might also be taken as an assertion for crews determination to keep plying Nairobi streets despite government/police efforts to “harass” (read ‘regulate’) them. *Malcom* (sic) *X-Follow the Leader* and *Sharpton*^{xiv} are other *matatu* names that can be taken to map broader moral issues of social justice and race politics.

Other names that use the motif of conflict zones and issues include *Bosnia Kid* (Figure 38), *Bosnia Herzegovina*, *Chechnya*, *Weapons Inspector*, *Inspector Weapon*. The latter two appeared at various times during Saddam Hussein’s drawn-out encounters with U.N arms inspectors. By using names that signify conflict, crews, however playfully, express a view of their own conflicted identities that arise from their occupational risks—in encounters with the police, robbers, passenger, competitors—as well as from their marginality as a social category that is generally looked down. *Matatu* names like *Duress*, *Endangered Species* and *Trapped on the Edge*, the latter taken from a rap title, roundly express the feeling of being besieged. At the same time, this view enables crews to take up a contestatory stance that defines the terms for their engagement with the rest of society. Appearing on at least two *matatu*, and taken from Tupac Shakur’s 1993 rap album—*Tupac* is also a *matatu* name—the name *Me against the world* is a concise summary of the general ontological position of *matatu* culture. Like one Tupac’s life, it is a world that is perpetually rocked by psychological and physical violence.

5.1.2 Drawings

A striking characteristic of *matatu* texts is that few of them can be claimed to be ‘original’; most are lifted straight from the pages of music and sports magazines. Further, they seem to be painstaking copies of one another and even when done by the same designers there is hardly any attempt to make significant variations, either in style or detail. This, however, is not to say that these designs are any less creative. As Pocius, citing Ben-Amos (1972:7), has pointed out, “the skill in creation may come in the form of the perfect copy; creation may involve the thrill of exact recreation”(1995:424). In any case, as Scholes *et al* have observed, if we consider that “all texts are reworkings of other texts...[then we can see that] ‘originality’ does not mean creating something new but simply making an interesting change...”(1988:28). These observations bear critical ramifications for *matatu* culture’s texts since one of the ways in which designers make their reworkings *interesting* is by encode subversive meanings in the copies.

Designers take pride in imitative recreation on the *matatu* body copies of various consumer products; clothing, beer brands (e.g. Budweiser and Guinness), perfumes (*Versus*, *Christian Dior*), myriad clothing labels and, most importantly, faces/pictures of popular icons from the entertainment industry. The latter are already in wide circulation as commodities within the city’s popular culture. Recognition of the verisimilitude between the actual product and its copy is a powerful strategy of seducing consumer desire, which has been recognized as being a culturally conditioned process, *pace* Deleuze and Guattari (1977), and therefore it is important that designers reproduce as closely as possible the commodity item. Benjamin (1968) has argued that the reproduced object of art is encoded with a (political) meaning; here I am taking *matatu* designs as tools within a contest rather than mere objects of contemplation. As already noted in the Chapter Two, the young people patronize specific *matatu* depending on which commodities are featured on their designs as a way of indulging youth notions of cosmopolitanism. On this

basis we can see these copies as creative imitation that responds to consumer tastes at the same time as it structurally hegemonizes them according to the logics of *matatu* culture. By implication, any of the narratives about consumer items—e.g. *gear*, music CDs and DVDs, the ‘look’ of a popular icon—that circulate within the culture are easily understood since these commodities already pervade the youth’s “habitat of meaning,” to use a term of Hannerz’s (1996:23).

Recalling informants’ sense of betrayal by their leaders and general despair occasioned particularly by rampant joblessness, we can appreciate the impact of having sets of images that carry a more or less homogenized scheme of meanings. They act as a focal point for the distillation of anger and desire; the genial face of Will Smith or David Beckham smiling from the back of a *matatu* (Figure 39) is as much an indictment of the thieving politician as it is an expression of crews’ ‘dreams’. These copy images of popular culture’s icons, being the currency of imagining, help in the deflation of local ‘heroes’—politicians in this case—at the same time that they allow *matatu* crews, within the modality of the fantastic, to picture themselves in visible and elevated positions alongside those considered ‘real’ heroes.^{xv}

I argued in the preceding chapter that this practice appears to be a direct challenge the practice of displaying the president’s official portrait in business premises. Crews mock this practice by supplanting the potentate’s portrait with that of popular icons; since they see themselves as one with these latter heroes, *matatu* crews can be seen to dethrone the president from his perch of glory which they proceed to symbolically occupy. Albeit infrequently, the portraits and names of a few vanguards of the nascent local genre of urban rap such as E-Sir and the Ogopa DJs crew (Figure 40) are featured on *matatu*. An interesting problematic in this regard involves the absence on *matatu* of local female rappers’ names, voices and portraits.^{xvi}

The erasure of local female icons can be understood within the gender politics of *matatu* culture whereby the masculine voice, not the feminine, is given precedence. Where the names and picture stickers of American female rappers appear their importance lies in their evocation of the exotic. Further and perhaps even more significantly within the culture’s logic, their skimpily clad bodies buttress crews’ notions of the female body as a site where power is played out through male consumption—i.e. the gaze as precursor to sexual eating conquest. This deletion practice can also be understood within the gender politics of American hip hop patriarchy which has a history of seeking to silence women, a significant point here in that from it Nairobi youth culture generally takes broad cues, (see particularly Rose 1994:146-182). We can therefore see how *matatu* practice marshals discourses from other cultural sites to enforce its male-centric worldview.

At a different level, we may note the profusion of grotesque creatures on *matatu* bodies. Recalling the argument in Chapter Three about the representation of the political class as ogre-like, then the issue can be pushed a step further by drawing on an insight of Mbembe’s (1997). In his interrogation of Cameroonian newspaper cartoons as a popular modality of critiquing power, he notes how grotesque representation helps to ‘tame’ the image of the president; somatic distortions, unrefined behavior and obscene corporeal acts are fertile ground for the fusion of the actual with the imaginary where the powerful and mighty in society are figured in terms of cannibals. This theme is succinctly framed in consumptive terms by a cartoon character who states the banal sagacity that “it’s what gets into your mouth that really belongs to you” (*ibid*:157).^{xvii} Thus, even as the act of eating is crucial to self-sustenance, the knowledge that anal excretion will follow sullies the image of the eater that the public has of him/her i.e. does the president really defecate? If these powerful people have the appetite of ogre-cannibals, then logically they consume enormous quantities; the more labored their evacuation process. Such a view of power can be taken within the terms of carnivalesque dethronement.

This kind of representation makes sense in a context like Nairobi’s given the litany of informants’ laments about “too much eating” by politicians and the rich, which crime their sagging pot bellies are taken to index. An awareness of these dynamics of eating aids our understanding of the ironic senses in the myriad *matatu* designs that depict human bodies with over-blown features, mainly

the torso but particularly the mouth, and that invoke the theme of overeating and cannibalism (Figures 13,14, 22, 42,43). The theme might also be presented in self-mocking humor. For instance, the picture sticker *Kamata twende* [K. Grasp and let's move] (Figure 41), depicts a market porter,^{xviii} on average a more extreme version of 'marginal man'—the *matatu* man can cite at least one other category that he considers to be worse off than himself. There is ample irony in this sticker in the sense that the porter earns so little—which anyway he fritters away as quickly on alcohol—that no matter how hard he works, he will never add weight on his bottoms—a bad thing where corporeal bulk, as I pointed out above, is taken to be an index of material prosperity. Hard work, in other words, does not always pay. We might in this way account for informants' repeatedly voiced desire to 'eat' when they bluntly stated; "everybody eats when they get to power and even if you don't eat, others will eat." This paradox can be viewed within the trickster's darker desires that I brought up earlier.

The tension between moral outrage and desire for the debased is aptly captured in the doubleness of *matatu* names. For instance, at the rear of the *matatu Alligator/Mamba* (Figure 42) is the inscription *Predator or Prey*; beneath it is the drawing of a marijuana-smoking monkey and beneath it a detached human head, its hideously cavernous mouth revealing fanglike teeth. The intention of gobbling up prey, whether in this context it is human matter or money, is communicated unequivocally by the menacing mouth. For crews this visual representation of ogre-like behavior is a direct metaphor of the police, known by the Kiswahili slang term *mafisi* (hyenas), greedy characters in the folklore of many Kenyan communities notorious for their insatiability while. In the same context, the equally pejorative slang *mambwa* (K. Dogs)^{xix} alludes to the predatory habits of bribe-seeking police officers.

Through these grotesque figures, crews dethrone figures of authority, a reversal that symbolically uncrowns power. Further, these thievish politicians-turned-monsters, now floating signifiers, become the subject of commentary amongst street folk. These conversations also become the spaces into which rumor, particularly on devil worship, is inserted thus evaluating these floating body images against social contradictions. We can see an inter-textual process here by which traditional folktale characters (cannibals/ogres, hyenas) are reinvented in different guises and incorporated into the heart of contemporary city life. It is in this sense that I read *matatu* texts like *Ruthless/Scarface* (Figure 43), or *Violeter* (sic) on whose back is drawn the grotesque torso of a male with flared nostrils, huge teeth and extra-large mouth. In the rendition of the ogre-like characters here, the only variation to traditional folktales is that the 'stories', or their fragments, are told through visual agency, not oracy, much like in the Mbembe's (1997) study of Cameroonian cartoons cited above.

On the other hand, non-human forms (spiders, monkeys, bears, lions, horses, cobras, eagles etc) are drawn around motifs reifying transformation from lesser to higher or weaker to mightier states. These images, as floating signifiers, are valued both for what they symbolize and as the agency to self-imagining. The imagined identities are in turn enunciations of the desire to transcend social realities of stigmatization and marginality as a way of dealing with the crises that these states occasion in crews' lives. By mapping their identities through the positive attributes of the non-human forms depicted on *matatu*, crews visualize themselves in modes that potentiate transformation, empowering them to transcend the adversities of their occupation. Instead of the perpetual "losers" and "uncouth" "morons" that they are often branded, they figure themselves dominating over the city space and its inhabitants, either through brawn and/or wit. *Matatu* names like *Conqueror*, *Subdue* and *Dominator* are chosen to complement the aspirations that crews express through drawings.

In like manner, an inversion of positions is effected through a play on images and meanings that symbolically disempower one social category as they empower another. Further, *matatu* drawings hybridize bodies and objects by erasing their 'natural' borders or merging them with those of other bodies/objects. On a *matatu* named *Scorpion*, for example, the flag of the United States is drawn back to front, but with fewer stars and stripes (Figure 44). On another, *Starrider* (Figure 45), the

Panamaian flag is drawn, its signifying force enhanced by its similarity to the American flag.^{xx} In the first instance above, we might take the redesigned American flag as indicating a wish to see the American might reduced, removing the sting out of the scorpion so to speak, by disfiguring the very index of America. In the second case the symbolic overthrow of a superpower is achieved by hoisting a minnow's standard to the same level of visibility as that enjoyed by the American flag.

In another spectacular instance of metamorphosed bodies, on the rear of the *matatu SB* (Figure 46), a monkey swings on a blue twig in the center of a spider's web, the drawing neatly bringing together two tricksters. Though one is physically absent, his presence is indicated by the web from which the monkey appears to have temporarily dislodged the spider. However, the struggle holds the promise of a reversal in that the monkey might yet be enfolded by the spider's web. In a related design, the *matatu Scorpio* (Figure 47.) bears the drawing of a scorpion resting in the middle of a spider's web, again a transmutation involving displacement, the ascription of the qualities of one body to another and the possibility of a role reversal when/if the web folds up. In both these cases, even though informants said these figures were just "decorations without meaning," the designs contain profound potential for self-imagining. Crews might view themselves as agile tricksters on the road (monkey) or as invincible combatants with fighting tools as lethal as the sting of a scorpion.

In *matatu* culture surface appearances are often stretched to improbable modes but as the blue twig in the monkey's web above indicates, virtually anything can be achieved in the reinvented world of *matatu* tricksters. In relation to a point I made earlier in the chapter, we can see that the contest being waged in this drawing articulate 'the game of chance' view by which crews mapped their work. The same view is expressed elsewhere in names like *7 Day Theory*, presumably the lifespan of a fly that is lucky to live its full life, *Predator or Prey*, where crews can be either hunters or the hunted and *Win Some Loze Some* (Figure 48), which maps, like the preceding two, the chancy survival games crews play amidst hostile city cultures. Overall, the transmutation of bodies in *matatu* designs is achieved within the subculture's larger logic of contesting (b)orders and social meanings. In this case, weak/lesser bodies are invested with (self-)transformative capacities. This modality of imagining suitably captures the many spectacular (dis)guises and (re-)inventions of the *matatu* man as a trickster character. It is also in line with the culture's other operational dynamics like linguistic appropriation, dressing-up and general bodily display.

5.1.3. *Tpurruk*: Word Games

Many *matatu* crews often expressed fears about the risks involved in their jobs; robbers, police crackdowns, route cartels such as *mungiki* and *kamjesh*. There is also the danger of road crashes: "when I leave home in the morning, I am always aware that I might never see my family again," a driver in his thirties said, adding that if he had a formal day time job he would not work a *matatu*. How then are the feelings of insecurity dealt with in the subculture?

Some informants suggested that they pictured their every day life on the city road in terms of a gambling game in view of the uncertainties of the road; indeed one *matatu* is named *Gambler*. The Mickey Mouse icon is drawn next to the name; the cat (police) does not appear in the drawing the mouse (*matatu*) will just have to take the take the road and see what happens. While a name like *Win Some Loze Some* already cited above might suggest a philosophical resignation to fate, crews prefer to picture themselves as winners.

In the face of the uncertainties surrounding their work, they take the vagaries of each day as they happen. One name points to this approach in a conversational tone to advise thus; *Muchu-Each day is a new day*, a translation of the Gikuyu proverb *Gutiri muthenya ukiaga ta uria ungi*^{xxi} and thus calling upon the addressee, Muchu, not to give up in the face of life's adversities. This view of life as holding promise with each new day is generally woven into the subculture's texts. The name *Bowler-Gambler-Batsman* demonstrates the awareness that the space between the bowler and the batsman is fraught with huge risks but which must be taken since the ball must be pitched. *Matatu* life is thus figured as a combination of skill and luck. While this reference to

games might appear be presumed to be merely crews' play on words, I am suggesting that there is an underlying esthetic constructed around the logic of play in these texts. This is certainly the case if consideration is given to the consistence with which game/play metaphor is used. Differently put, these ludic expressions mask a world-view enacted through camouflaged linguistic activity along the lines I suggested earlier in invoking Huizinga (1995).

The *matatu* name *World Party-Playaz University* has already been pointed out. As I argue with regard to the use of stickers below, when 'ball' and 'play' are used in *matatu* texts they are sexual tropes. For example, the sticker in the *matatu* *KOBE* (an American basketball star) reads "Good girls get played" gives the connotation of play as sexual game that I have in mind here. This is the case given the slang meaning of the word 'game', for example in the admiring statement "*Huyu dame anajua game*" [S. This girl knows (how to play) the game] i.e. some female is considered good in bed, gossip of which proliferates among crews particularly at the various *matatu* termini. According to an informant, Wangeci, this sticker is a reworking of an earlier one, "Good girls go to heaven, bad girls go everywhere" which she reads in sexual terms by equating heaven to the leisure spots where men and women go to engage in sensual exploits. The power dynamics that are already ascribed to different genders in local cultures can thus be seen to inform both the sticker's coding and interpretation.

This sense is again seen in the name *Enjoy the game* that neatly ties the view of the city street as a playground to that of sex as the essence of the game referred to in the sticker. *Matatu* are considered to be a good beginning point from which to learn the games of the city since "good girls"—such as are alluded to in the sticker cited above—or some other playmate can always be picked up there. The same meaning appears again in the name *Hattaz Gonna Hate-Playaz Gonna Play* (Figure 49). A slight variation is seen in a name like *Big Tymers-I got that Work* but which falls into the logic set out above once its slang subtext is considered. In the slang *wira* (G) and *Kazi* (K), work explicitly refers either to sexual prowess or to genital enormity. If we consider that crews tend to see their occupation in terms of a game rather than as work, and in view of the general play on texts that revolve around libidinous drives, then we can see this *matatu* name as a sexual boast. A *matatu* name like *G.O.A.T.*, an acronym for *The greatest of all time*, a title conferred to rapper L L Cool J (Figure 50), can be read within the same terms since in Gikuyu slang 'goat' is the euphemism for an extremely promiscuous male. A similar concern with sexual drives is seen in the set of stickers "*Make Love not Babies*" and "*If She's Cute She's Mine*" displayed in a *matatu* named as *Clipper*.

As I argued in Chapter Two, a cardinal concern in *matatu* culture seems to be the enforcement, and recuperation, of notions of masculinity; these apparently simple texts that proliferate in *matatu* can be seen as doing just that through their construction of the female body as an object of play, conquest and consumption. Thus, given the culture's concerns with the affirmation of masculinity, the ludic sense in the word 'play' is interwoven with the larger worldview in which sexuality is a heavily coded power contest. The raps played on *matatu* are a key means by which gender matters are constructed and expressed, with the male body being a central key in the semiotic struggle for the conquest of its gendered other. Words culled from the music world, ludic or otherwise, are critical agents in the figuration of the female body in *matatu* culture.

Matatu word games however are not just confined to sexual matters. As I have previously pointed out religious themes are conspicuous topics of play, superceded only by those taken from the field of sexuality. The name *No One But Jesus* rewrites an earlier one *No One But You*, itself the title of a then popular TV soap. In this case the name works by recalling two disparate discourses, one biblical, and the other from popular culture. In a generally conservative society where Christianity is the dominant religion, such collocation might be deemed deviant but we must remain aware that such incongruities make sense more readily if viewed within the subculture's larger principle of transgression. In this manner, texts with different, even contradictory, meanings in other contexts are deployed unproblematically in the same environment. For instance, in a *matatu* owned by a Muslim I found the stickers *In God We Trust* and *Allahu Akhbar*

[Arabic. God is Great] juxtaposed next to each other. The deployment of the American motto in the same context as one praising Allah is at first baffling. Such an arrangement however ceases to bewilder if, in metonymic process, the American motto is taken to stand for the dollar as an instrument of economic exchange. Allah's name is then invoked as a blessing to enable the acquisition of dollars (money). Other *matatu* names more or less playfully address the same theme thus: *Mission Impossible—Paperchaser* (Figure 51) and *Hidden Doll\$*,^{xxii} attesting to the near impossibility of, and difficulties involved in, accumulating wealth, especially through honest labor. The latter sentiment was widespread amongst informants.

Another level of play can be seen where advertising logos are taken over as *matatu* names but turned to purposes of insubordination. A good example here is the *Yes!* logo for Kencell, a local cell phone company. In the enthusiasm that gripped many Nairobians after the introduction of affordable mobile phones in 2000, crews regularly posted the *Yes!* on their vehicles. This changed dramatically in 2002 when, in the run-up to the general elections, the then president sought to impose his choice of successor both on his ruling party, KANU, and Kenyan voters in general.^{xxiii} *Matatu* everywhere in Nairobi became fora for public discourse on the in/appropriateness of the president's imposition. Galvanized into reaction by the succession debate, crews began displaying a red *NO!* (Figure 52) all over their vehicles, sometimes playfully camouflaging it as *!ON* or simply negating 'yes' by reversing it to *!sey*. This calls to mind political contests in Israel played out in similar terms (Salamon 2001).

A casual observer may presume this parody of the *Yes!* logo to be mere play but it was actually a distillation of *matatu* culture's and passengers rage at the impropriety of the political elite. Cell phone company logos became the tools with which to talk back to power. However, in the turbulent political climate prevailing then, a camouflage such as that played out here was a necessary tactic if *matatu* crews were to escape the retribution that would have followed had the authorities deciphered the *No!* for what it was—a rejection of the president's choice. In further acts of public insurgency, crews played around the theme of refusal with other name-texts: *Refuse* (with the double meaning of 'rejection' and 'garbage'), *Kataa Kabisa!* (K. An imperative urging the addressee to 'refuse completely!'), *Why?*, *Because* and simply the question mark ?.

These public transcripts were non-verbalized but potent tools of inciting dissent and shaping opinion amongst the public. A popular local rap, *unbwogable*, was also used by the opposition to galvanize the country into opposing the then ruling party (Hofmeyer, Nyairo and Ogude 2003) at the same time as the name was being popularly deployed on *matatu* (Figure 53), turning crews into some of the most active participants in the political tensions of the day. The rap's spectacular success is attributable to the tendency for popular culture to inter-link and feed off each other, with one medium being used to circulate another genre, as is seen in the example being discussed here (Nyairo and Ogude *ibid*). Through T-shirts for example, *unbwogable* was transported to all corners of Kenya (Hofmeyer, Nyairo & Ogude *ibid*).^{xxiv}

My contention is that the potency of the word play in the texts cited above does not lie merely in the coding of symbolic gestures of defiance in a not-so-simple two letter word but, rather, within an interpretive frame that centers the symbolic 'no' in the field of political contestation and thus subversion. The reflexive process here involves paying attention on the one hand to the immediate text and on the other to arteries of popular culture such as advertising and political discourse; in this case we need to view the role of oppression in embittering voters against the promise of freedom that the transfer of political power held for them. In such a context, popular culture can be extremely useful "particularly in situations of fragile democracy or authoritarian rule [since it] provides a crucial set of resources and forums in which ideas can be defined, discussed and popularised in order to produce common-sense frameworks of understanding." (Hofmeyer, Nyairo and Ogude *op.cit* : 374). I see *matatu* culture's word play in the sense that is being scrutinized here as being geared precisely to supplying resources for interpreting various aspects of the Kenyan social-political and economic landscape. In these word games, crews, being the central performers assume the means to imaginatively reconfigure their social world in

a manner that allows them to state their identity in a manner that conduces to their needs and wishes.

Matatu culture also deftly adapts language from the electronic world to speak to realities of *matatu* work. The field of mobile phones is well represented with *matatu* names like *Network Search* or *Network*; incidentally the term seems to have shifted here from its regular domain of television mechanics. In Sheng “to have network” means “to be in the know” especially about matters affecting a certain *matatu* route; of ignorant crews it is said “*hawana network*” [S. They don't know], e.g. what times or points are best to pick up passengers. This aspect also technology has also been infused with comic-grotesque humor. At the bottom rear of one *matatu* is drawn an overblown male torso with a monstrous left ear attached to the head. The automatic response from the cell phone held against the large ear is announces; “*Mteja hapatikani* [K. The subscriber cannot be reached].”^{xxv} *Mteja* has slipped into the linguistic repertoire of *matatu* and general street culture as a reference to dodgy people. Another cell phone-related term, *mobile* has been adopted to mean route workers who perpetually chase *matatu* up and down the street collecting route fees.

In a related sense, its identification with the trendiest amongst modernity's offerings via sophisticated-sounding names marks the subculture as progressive. Hence the presence of *matatu* names that allude to cutting-edge technology: *Computer*, *Dot.com generation*, *Dot.matrix*, *Internet*, *Consultant@yahoo.com*, *DVD*.^{xxvi} One route worker even joked about the virtues of his *matatu*, *Meru Classic*, in these terms; *Hii ni ile mnaona kwa Internet!* [K. This is the one you normally see advertised on the Internet], glorifying its ability, like that of the worldwideweb, to connect people across vast swathes of space in virtual time—the latter being a boast on speeding. In this imaginary world, crews represent themselves as knowledgeable and thus subvert the common stereotype by which they are viewed as a bunch of ignoramuses. In the words of one driver, crews “like to be compliant” i.e. moving on with the rest of the world.”

Another prevalent practice in *matatu* culture involves turning meanings on their head in order to reverse terms from negativity into cultural capital. I have pointed out in the discussion of rap how acts that enable self-naming are seized upon by the marginalized in order to reconstitute to the individual the agency for the self-inscription of identity. This functions best when the names thus chosen disrupt prior, established perceptions of the now self-naming subject. The more a term, a mannerism that it conjures or a dressing style with which it is associated is connotation-laden, the better it appeals as a signifier in *matatu* culture. The practice can be understood as a way of contesting mainstream tastes and definitions, as is the case with other countercultures (see Hebdige 1979:52-54). For *matatu* crews, whose limited social space is the *matatu* body, a play on names/ideas on its surface is a potent means for registering their view of themselves and at the same time as it enables the parodying of mainstream values. Like in American hip hop culture, ghetto-centric experience and images are re-inscribed with positive meanings. This amelioration goes hand in hand with the esteem enjoyed by youths in Eastlands estates, considered to be Nairobi's *real* ghettos, who boast of speaking *the* authentic Sheng (see Samper 2002a; Githiora 2002) and thereby hold immense cultural capital within urban youth culture. Some notable names in this category include: *Scum Flooded*, *Bafu Chafu* (K. Dirty bathroom), *Durty Works—hustlaz* (Figure 54) *Disorder/Rhymes Chafu* [dirty]/, *Riot*, *Spoilt Brains*, *Bad Brainz*, *Nutcase* (Figure 55) and *Dirty Minds/ Hauz of Pain/TpurruK* [reversed black English form of ‘corrupt’; *Krupt* is also the name of an African American rapper].^{xxvii}

Besides names bearing reworked meanings, *matatu* drawings depict human forms engaged in excretory acts; a urinating boy (Figure 56), the popular *Home Boyz /Hommiez*-look drawing with pants slipping off to reveal underwear (Figure 57),^{xxviii} or the sticker depicting the couple locked in copulation. This depiction of lower bodily materiality can be understood as carnivalesque desecration of the refined social body. This has its usefulness in that “the lower bodily stratum is ...also the area of the genital organs, the fertilizing and generating stratum. Therefore, in the images of urine and excrement is preserved the essential link with birth, fertility,

renewal, welfare” (Bakhtin 1984:146-149). This formulation privileges the *code of the street* (Figure 58) over the refined prescriptions of the mainstream cultures; sullyng the existing canons of taste becomes the route to derisive laughter.

By dragging into full public view uncovered bodies and bodily functions otherwise stringently defined as private, these drawings and names erase the (b)orders between private and public and thereby bring into view forms of behavior that people, if they were not too coy and submissive to prescribed norms, would otherwise revel in talking about. As Dundes (1980:36) has pointed out, folkloric acts help to express what cannot be directly articulated within regular social interaction. These transgressive bodies articulate taboo subjects in a manner that forces people to shed their inhibitions and confront matter that lies beyond the defined borders. To this extent, these acts are liberatory gestures just as *Mũgithi*'s inversions and deletion of mainstream definitions discussed in the last chapter.

At another level, crews are aware of the enacted nature of their cultural imaginary. Some names recognize the inherent theatricality of that world where *matatu* become a space for the realization of wishes and fantasies. These include *Shakers-Theater Talk-It's Possible*, *Manchester United-Theater of Dreams*, *Causin' Drama* and *Child Wish-True Story*. Road relations are mapped as mental dramas in such names as *No more drama* and *Psycho Drama*. At the same time names pay tribute to the culture's practitioners who it considers to be artists, or what Atieno-Odhiambo calls “natural philosophers”(1987:200), as seen in the name *Dome Poetry/Masking Up the World*. Popular raps booming out of *matatu* emphasize this notion of vernacular artists by celebrating the “*philosophy sedi* [S. Seditious philosophy]”,^{xxxix} creativity and possibilities availed by hip hop culture in Nairobi's ghettos.

In addition to the foregoing, there are attempts to give a distinct local touch to *matatu* texts. This involves the translation of names and phrases that feature on other *matatu* into either Kiswahili, Sheng, English or other local languages. Some examples include: *Wisdom/Maarifa*[K] , *Bad Boys/Tabia Mbaya*[K] , *Super Ugly/Supaa Ugly*[S]/*Sura Mbaya*[K] , *Fire One/Ile mbaya*[K], *Usual Suspect/Mshukiwa* [K], *Fiesta/Sherehe* [K] and *Let the Fire Burn/Wacha Moto Uwake*[K]. The Arsenal FC logo 02 (Figure 59) has also been adopted by many *matatu* and is ostensibly (mis)taken for the formulaic representation of oxygen, whose Sheng equivalent is the ubiquitous *Hewa* (loud music).^{xxx} (*Ma*)*Hewa* has the variant *Midundo* (K. Rhythm/beats), also a *matatu* name. At times words are deliberately mis-spelt, and one informant felt that this is intended to reflect the ‘ordinary’ Nairobians'/Kenyan's struggles with articulation and structures, especially in English. For instance *Chiri Fresh* was thought to be a misspelling of the Chilli, an American rapper, caused by the articulation influence of /r/ instead of /l/. *Chiri* is also the local name for a type of spice. *Fresh*, which also means ‘ok’, is the Sheng name for a beautiful girl; in this process “*Chiri fresh*” would thus mean ‘Chilli is beautiful.’ Other examples of such contentious spelling include: *Annoited/Annoited*; *Advisor/Advisor*; *Seredimpity* (for Serendipity); *Inspector Weapons*. These misrepresentations humorously depict common stereotypes regarding pronunciation and syntax “difficulties” among members of the various Kenyan ethnic groups. The posting of both correct and incorrect versions of a word on the same *matatu* indicates designers' ludic intentions rather than inability to spell correctly. Also, rather than treating these as spelling errors, we might see them within the terms suggested by Bhabha (1990) where language, even if imperfectly mimicked, becomes a key with which subjects insert themselves onto cultural space. Thus, as hybrid linguistic forms, these ‘errors’ mark the identity of “Nairobi/Kenyan English.” At the same time, it is a means for undermining the strictures of standard language, a task that Sheng executes zealously as we have already seen. Therefore these transgressions can be considered as the linguistic equivalence of visual inversions in *matatu* culture.

5.2.0 Interflows between representational strategies

Generic intersections supply *matatu* culture with an extremely rich mosaic from which crews freely appropriate ideas, modes of representation and texts. A primary strength of *matatu* culture lies in its unabashed redeployments of inter-linked discourses, a method which it, perhaps more than any other Nairobi subculture, utilizes most visibly. Differently put, the eclecticism of *matatu*

texts ensures that there is at least one part of the cultural mosaic with which a reader/interpreter is familiar.^{xxxii} This becomes an apt way of importing ready-made meanings into the context of *matatu* culture; those texts that carry the potential for multiple signification are seen as better strategies for subversion. Below I examine some ways in which *matatu* practices re/create meanings from other strategies of representation common in the city's popular culture.

5.2.1 TV comedy, advertisements and the popular press

Matatu culture borrows extensively from popular genres that humorously critique society. Of these the television stand-up comedy *Reddykyulas*, briefly mentioned in Chapter Three, stands out.^{xxxiii} This comedy opened up a hitherto closed up space as social and political institutions that had remained opaque to the public gaze were spliced open and a humorous peek taken into their interior reaches. The most radical of such probing was directed at the political class. More than anyone else, then president Arap Moi was lampooned by being depicted in extremely ridiculous situations; energetically gyrating his hips to the rhythm of an aggressive Zairean, delivering an incompetent homily in church, being turned away at heaven's Pearly gates, dressed in a frayed bathrobe while entertaining members of his cabinet at his home and then proceeding to do a jig. This was one of the significant ways through which the political elite was dethroned from the majesty of power. The mystique that enveloped their class was eroded and the mighty were rendered in familiar terms as objects of laughter. The venal ways of wayward police officers were another popular topic in the TV show. Caricatures of them, like those of the ruling class, streamed into the discourse of *matatu* workers.

One of Arap Moi's president's signature statements in his public career "*na hiyo ni maendeleo* [K. And that is progress]" that was repeatedly parodied in the TV comedy quickly became popular currency in *matatu* work. Several years after the introduction of its comic version, this line is still often mimicked by crews, amid peals of knowing laughter, for situations that they consider ridiculous. As another instance of public transcripts, we see crews' mimicry and dissections of these TV parodies as important practices in the construction of a discourse that is critical of power. This can be seen in a particularly popular *matatu* sticker doing the rounds in the run-up to the 2002 general elections that depicts a furrow-browed president reclining on an easy chair looking into the distance, dressed in a traditional wrap-around garment. Next to him is an empty carton in which stands a milk gourd, and besides the box is an untouched plate of kales and *ugali*. The sticker, titled *Chief*, operating along the terms set out in the TV comedy above, comments on the retiring president's worries in view of his impending retirement given his past record in power. Quite literally, the finery of power is stripped from the ruler, his body now draped in the drab garb that announces his commonness despite the self-delusions created by the trappings of power. Other than broadening the field of social critique, the laughter attendant to these kinds of subversively coded acts liberated Kenyans—not just *matatu* crews—as they awoke to the possibility that they could *publicly* poke fun at the mighty and get away unscathed. This I see as amounting to carnivalesque dethronement.

A symbiotic process can be seen at work whereby the advertisement of popular consumer products are couched in the language of *matatu* culture and, in the reverse process, modes of meaning-making in the latter culture draw on the meanings circulated by the former. Furthermore, aware of the commercial potential of such a strategy, advertisements tap into youth culture's desires which are then woven into specific commodities. Popular commodities include cars, soft drinks and music players. For instance, in a billboard advertisement for a new car model, prominence is given to the imprint of a red-lip kiss, which has been replicated on several *matatu* but, as usual, designers have invoked their poetic license and rendered the kiss in various colors (Figures 61 and 62). That the erotic signification of the kiss would appeal to *matatu* culture's practices is eidetic enough since 'lips' is commonly used in the culture to reference female genitalia. What is not immediately obvious in the advert is the presumption that the owner of the 'posh' car will automatically attract beautiful women, or at least their admiration, signified by the red-hot passion of the kiss. By transferring the same signification to *matatu* culture, crews

transfer the prospects of 'catching' women to themselves.

The same signification is seen in Coke and Sprite advertisements (Figures 63 and 64) that capture the quenching of thirst in terms of the satisfaction of male heterosexual drives. While the Coke advertisement uses a woman's face to map such desire, the one of Sprite intimates a connection with the local usage of the word 'thirst' to mean sexual urge. The inside back cover of *The Source Special Collections Edition*, September 2001 features a similar message. The same strategy is seen at work in a popular advertisement for a Sony boom box where, to the rhythm of music and dance, a crowd chanting "Whose da man with da bass?" surges towards a set of giant speakers. The clip ends with the camera zooming in to focus on a girl, cuddling in the embrace of a pleased man and the voice-over declaring "His bass makes me shiver" (Figure 65). Masculinity, voice and control are intertwined and presented as the pillar of strength for the (presumably) weak female in search of *the* man; however, at the same time as it affirms the desirability of heterosexual relationships, this clip silences the female by subordinating and defining her in terms of male voice/control/authority all neatly wrapped up in the deceptively simple word 'bass'.

The encoding of signs, as Goldman and Papson (1998) elucidate in their analysis of the *Nike Swoosh*, often involves evacuating them of their original meanings and refilling them with others that prey on other cultural contexts and meanings. These advertisements consolidate definitions of what being 'cool' [S. *Poa*] in Nairobi means by preying on notions of masculinity and the good life to which women are considered crucial especially in *matatu* culture. The youth are nudged to figure themselves in alternative identities i.e. whereby the ever-marginalized now move to occupy enviable positions of social visibility. The practice of conveying messages in barely-concealed sexual tropes is rooted in the wider practices of a general patriarchal culture whereby notions of masculinity—upon which the sexual codes in these adverts are based—are used to render the female body as a site for the performance of power relations. This recalls the theme of conquest as a performance of masculinity that runs through most practices in *matatu* culture.

The popular press is another key genre from which *matatu* culture appropriates words, phrases and topics for humorous discussion; the process also works the other way. A particularly relevant example here is a bi-monthly publication, *Matatu Whispers*, which was dedicated solely to *matatu* matters, through which crews disseminated jokes and Sheng terminology. In this manner *matatu* culture publicized itself as crews huddled over copies of the newspaper to dissect jokes, for example, about underpaid but overweight (i.e. corrupt) policemen.^{xxxiii} Since it drew a wide readership from among the city's youth, Sheng was widely disseminated through the newspaper. This again is an instance where insurgency against mainstream values takes place through the propagation of a linguistic code that is at odds with the officially prescribed one(s). *Matatu* practice ably lends a hand in this instigation.

In the same manner, American music magazines are a popular source of some of the major practices in *matatu* culture's expressive behavior and texts. Indeed, the sheer numbers of African American rapper's names, rap titles and clothing labels far outstrip any other such items from other sources. What is more, when a crew member wants to picture himself in an exotic pose, the commonest gestures and speech inflections are borrowed from back American stars e.g. Snoop, Ja Rule and 50 Cent (Figure 66). This has resulted in the introduction of black English spelling forms onto the city street. The discourses of resistance and tensions of identity already inscribed in African American name forms give crews wide margins in which to insert themselves by picking names that they consider appropriate for mapping their sense of marginality and imagined identities.

A name like *Victor-Eclipse-Mo Thugs-It's tha Black Thang you Wouldn't Understand* (Figure 67), while puzzling because of the 'strangeness' of its combined elements, captures crews' wishes to surmount their problems (Victor) by erasing (eclipse), especially, competitors, out of the picture. At the same time the name expresses the roguish image so beloved of crews (*mo thugs*) even as it expresses the despair that many crews feel at not being understood by other subcultures of the city. At another level, the name points to the politics of body 'taste' considering that *thang*

here also refers to the derriere of a black body, which in turn becomes the location of a racially-constructed esthetics (see Rose 1994:166-175). By referring to the lack of 'understanding', the name reflexively points to its own deliberately constructed inscrutability to signify on white America's misunderstanding of genres like *gangsta* rap as preaching violence. Alternately it comments on the inability to (wholly) understand the black body by those outside its direct experience; they inhabit neither the said body nor its (oppressive) social habitat and cannot really comprehend the full import of blackness. A name like *Blackalicious* is an amalgam of that is formulated upon the tensions of corporeal estheticizing and stereotypes of black bodies as (sexually) delicious yet malicious. More often than not, however, crews are hardly interested in the cultural politics that these name forms encode; they are appropriated for their exoticism which is taken to represent the yearned-for totality called America.

At times however, the culture is either unable or, more likely, refuses to scrutinize cardinal tensions surrounding some Black English items like *Niggaz 4 Life*, *Ni**az Ain't Shit (sic)* and *Niggaz sh*t (sic)* that are slurs in other forms and contexts outside hip hop. It might be, as I have already pointed out, that many in Nairobi are unfamiliar with the intimate politics in these racist terms; certainly none of the informants amongst *matatu* workers demonstrated either a firm grasp of either the politics of racism or the techniques of African American signifyin(g). Nevertheless, such negative terms, at least on their surface-level meaning, might be taken as deliberate attempts to offend mainstream sensibilities, or black Kenyans' sense of racial pride, by referring—however remotely—to the tragedies of Black history. Either way, black English forms simultaneously disturb and enrich mainstream language forms and in this way problematize the culture's identity. In this way, the spotlight shifts from society's high and mighty and is trained upon a subaltern category. In addition their reading of 'low-brow', alternative texts (music and sports magazines, and the numerous two-sheet publications sold around *matatu* stages), transgresses the usual prescriptions of taste. Mainstream newspapers might be read for news but the main agendas of the subculture are catered for by popular, non-mainstream publications, often referred to as "the gutter press" by the mainstream. This, alongside the use of Sheng, shifts definitions of taste in favor of street codes.

5.2.2 Popular Music and Fashion Labels

Matatu culture plays a big role in setting the rhythms that govern the city's popular youth music and fashion. In part, this results from the culture's high visibility as a factor of mobility that is, like the self-referencing spiders' web metaphor that pervades *matatu*, entangled with the lives of a majority of Kenyans. Additionally, such visibility results from the culture's constant experiments with musical sound as a device with which it calls attention to its presence. As a site of innovation, the subculture seeks out beats that rasp most gratingly against the ear since the intention is to disturb, not to salve, the social terrain. It is not incidental then that of all the musical forms available, it was first reggae then techno pop and eventually rap (all of which are loud forms) that resonated most markedly with the culture's practices. As a rule, *matatu* music is played *Just Bloody Loud*, as the injunction on many *matatu* attests to. The significance of this is not just that it counters the more 'polished' genres (classical and country music) in which the mainstream revels. More significantly, 'bloody loud' music calls attention to the subculture like few other representational strategies can. It is also a rallying point that marks conformity with the culture's transgressive practices.

Indeed, one *matatu* represents the concept of keeping in step with the cultural rhythm, with the rhetorical name-question *Why Float While Others Fly?* (Figure 68). 'Float' in Sheng means "to be confused", "lost" and thus out of touch with others. The woman's portrait depicted at the back can be seen to connect to *matatu* crews' talk and fantasies about women that were examined in Chapter Two; presumably, if one is attached to some girl, then he is presumed to be flying with the rest. The idea of keeping in step with the times is also seen in the myriad names that dwell on the concept of voice as the agency to self-authorization; *SandBreeze-Better Days/Taste the Bass*, *Street Sound-We Keep it that Way because You like it that Way*, *Souljahz/Bass Zone*, the latter

name combining the genres of Soul and Jazz, to play on the homophone 'soldiers', an apt name in defense of the subject's right to a voice.^{xxxiv} However, the desired voice in *matatu* culture is the male's, as is suggested by the *bass* component in the latter name.

We can thus see the symbolic import of the culture's name for music, *ma/hewa*; music is simultaneously the subculture's crucial life-line and the city's aeration space, a site for the refreshing generation of different—if unnerving—ideas and ways of being. The boom of lyrics also means that the sense of hearing is crucial in any engagement with *matatu* culture, and crews, aware of this fact, use sound to enhance the culture's reception by the public. Adorno (1976, 1978) has argued that popular music dulls the critical faculties because, as a standardized consumer commodity, recorded mass music encourages passive reception. If we take into account the question of agency in relation to reception, and the fact that the *hewa* booming from *matatu* speakers originates as a rap against capitalism's greed, then we see that in fact passenger consumption of hip hop heightens their engagement with the political.

In making use of Adorno's argument, however, Bull has correctly argued that private motorists use music to carve a personal space, setting themselves apart in a quasi-capsule for the journey's duration (2001:193). This argument may be pushed further with regard to rap's presence in *matatu* culture. By a crews' foisting of loud music in a public space, they draw others, passengers as well as bystanders on the street, into the interiority of their subcultural world. Thus is constituted a community through powerful, audited technical agency. Contra Adorno, I would argue that in *matatu* culture the reception of music sharpens rather than passivizes consciousness.^{xxxv} Rhetorically, lyrics become the instrumentality for the subculture's shift from the margins to the center of the city's life. Crews invade public consciousness. The myriad microphones drawn on *matatu* are visual representations of the cultures' self-voicing gestures; with their loud raps and heavy bass stereos, crews present their agendas to compete against those presented in the voices of other city cultures (Figure 69). The attendant cacophony can be seen in the light of carnivalesque modalities of inversion where common folk upstage voices of the mainstream.

In relation to the above we might also understand the presence of American hip hop, and its Kenyan equivalent, as the agency that aids in the reconfiguration not only of new identities but also the terms within which the self is represented. As has been observed in Chapter Three, hip hop's appeal lies largely in its nature first and foremost as an unrestrained form of expression, secondly as an extremely radicalized means of social critique and thirdly as an alternative space. Nothing could appeal better to urban youth, of which *matatu* culture is a central cog, as a means of staging dissent from mainstream society's norms which are deemed to be modern in a conservative way. At the same time, the centrality of the body as a site of spectacular performance in the hip hop genre (Porter 1995) supplies a central point around which this male-oriented culture can experiment, crucially through modes of dress, with ways of highlighting a masculinity defined by traditional patriarchal understandings of power. The aggressive dance that accompanies the music can also be understood as an index of sexual prowess and this can be another way of explaining the numerous *matatu* names that manifest prurient inclinations.^{xxxvi}

Increasingly, Kenyan and Tanzanian Kiswahili raps have become much more popular and visible than was the case in the past. This can be explained on the basis of the increased connectivity achieved through the electronic media such as East African Television Network, the local version of MTV, which is one of the most significant dispersal sites of East African rap. Privately-owned FM radio, (pirated) CD and video copies have also been instrumental in this process. Further, Nairobi youth are also increasingly aware that cosmopolitanism entails a connection to wider flows of culture, and hence their enthusiastic reception of Kiswahili raps from Tanzania. The raps generally have a heavy component of sexual themes, as is seen in the *matatu* names and phrases that are clipped from them.^{xxxvii}

Phrases and song titles are instances of "portable mini-texts"; brief and thus easily summoned from memory, accounting for their conspicuous presence in popular cultural discourse (Nyairo

and Ogude 2003). In addition to this, I suggest that the popularity of song titles might also be understood as a function of their sexually allusive character. The terms in which these raps represent heterosexual relationships resonate profoundly with *matatu* culture's notions of sexual conquest as an affirmation of masculinity. This suggests that beneath the outward innovations in this emergent genre lies the logic of tradition; the gaze of urban rap has one eye fixed to the past even as the other peers outwards into the global stage.^{xxxviii}

5.2.3 Football Metaphors

Alongside sexually suggestive names, *matatu* texts make extensive use of phallic symbolism constructed around the idiom of football. Quite a number of *matatu* sport the names of English Premier League clubs, the Gunners Shield Arsenal logo being amongst some of the more popular *matatu* designs. Also popular amongst the youth are Arsenal T-shirts. Stickers bearing the standards of the various clubs also feature liberally in the culture.^{xxxix} Eco has suggested that as a spectator sport football is a form of social containment since it distracts people from focusing their attention upon pressing social concerns (1986: 167-172). I contend that this sport enables *matatu* crews to experience vicariously the thrill of 'conquest' presented by the scoring of goals. To the extent that this is translatable into sexual tropes along the lines advanced by Dundes (1997), as the linguistic practices of *matatu* culture show, then football assumes orgiastic qualities and hence its appeal to a subculture to which sexuality is a key concern. If within this metaphorical frame we take the domination of one side by another as a gesture of sexual conquest, then it becomes possible to see why crews take on only the names of football super stars (*Maradona, Ronaldo, Ronaldino, Cafu* etc) and winning teams such as *Brasil* (Figure 70). They map their libidinous wishes to dominate competitors and (especially female) passengers, other road users and the city using sanitized tropes constructed around the idiom of football skills. However, since such domination has a quality of erasure, I am inclined to read the popularity of football, as a media phenomenon, along the lines of death drives (Bocock 1995). Bocock posits that within contemporary cultures of consumption, TV viewers' death wishes make them enjoy electronically-mediated destructive events. Seen this way, football caters for primeval desires in *matatu* culture that would wish to see the annihilation of opponents. This might account for the immense popularity of champion Premier League teams/players since all *matatu* crews conceive themselves as winners, never losers, even though they consider their occupation as a gamble. In this regard, football, and to a lesser extent basketball, occupies a special place within the subculture. 5.2.4 Barroom entertainment as social discourse

Matatu crews are notorious for their consumption of alcohol and many spend a great deal of their leisure time in bars. However, besides imbibing alcohol, they also go to bars to consume informal theater. As critics of this genre have correctly argued, much of Kenya's barroom theater has for long dwelt on depicting the salacious. Nonetheless, Wahome Mutahi's popular barroom theater has been especially attractive to *matatu* crews as it pillories the ruling elite more or less in the manner of *Reddykyulass*, the TV parody.^{xl} This kind of discourse was hitherto considered dangerous and Wahome's plays, within the broader practice of bar-room theater, gave Kenyans a consistent, informal forum for critiquing the misdeeds of power through laughter. His *Makarĩrĩra Kĩoro* [G. They Shall Weep in the Toilet], the third in a stinging quartet, is particularly relevant here.^{xli}

Alluding to the title of the sketch, it soon became common to hear crews, and the general public in the city, trade the jocular warning "*makarĩrĩra kĩoro*", a prescient pointer that the mighty would one day face their day of reckoning. Also, it was deployed jokingly to warn crew members that if caught by the police they might find themselves full of regret like the worried lot in the toilet of Mutahi's parody. In this way, the toilet became a prominent signifier in public discourse. For instance, the motto *No Pain, No Gain* (Figure 71.) commonly found in public toilets soon found its way onto the *matatu* body (Figure 72). However, the connection between the toilet and power was established, on at least one *matatu*, by placing the president's insignia of a club, camouflaged as a microphone, near the motto (see Figure 14). Placing such insignia within a

context of signs of lower bodily materiality recalls the dethronement in Mutahi's parody.

As in the play on *No!* examined above, this tactic of hiding in the open was quite apt since the jumble of signs posted on *matatu* concealed users' insubordinations, aptly instantiating the working of hidden transcripts in *matatu* discourse. The *matatu* name *Thimbū* [G. Club] exemplifies the intricate interconnections in these subversive transcripts if we consider the transformation of the presidential insignia from baton to microphone (Figure 73). Thus obfuscated, the president's mark of authority is placed on a level that renders it safe for subversive play, particularly since crews mockingly referred to the then president through euphemistic references to his baton; *wa-gathiarĩ*, *wa-kanyoori*, *wa-gacũgũma*. These are Gikuyu diminutives for 'wielder of the club'. The club is a particularly potent metaphor for ridicule since in Gikuyu slang it is an euphemism for penis; whether enormous or tiny, it attracts equal ridicule.^{xlii} Through semiotic play the president's baton/microphone, variously big or small depending on the surface available on a *matatu*, becomes metonymic to phallic authority. As he lorded the citizenry through official instruments of state, *matatu* crews symbolically undressed the president, turning out his 'phallus' for public display as a gesture of symbolic emasculation. The disaggregation and subsequent reassembling in new ways of signs from diverse genres and contexts that is seen in the above case is a critical survival mechanism that enables the subculture to be comfortably performed in full view without the risk of official censure.

Stickers and idiom of a sexual nature picked from bars also quickly filter into *matatu* culture. One such popular sticker says *Tuliza Boli kwa Uwanja Mdogo* [K. Stop the ball in a/the small field], an AIDS awareness message urging males to restrict their sexual activity to one partner. We note here the use of a distaff, 'field', to map the female body and the control of a ball to express male dominance in such a relationship. However, crews' lifestyles cast serious reservations as to whether they take any of these messages seriously but by displaying the stickers bearing them they at least ensure the currency of crucial issues within the public domain. Of *matatu* that keep changing routes the question is asked "*kwani hiyo matatu ni malaya* [K. Is that *matatu* a prostitute]?" This is based on the presumption that only a female can be a prostitute and is an example of how idiom flows from bars, where commercial sex workers are mainly based. The equation of itinerant *matatu* to unfaithful women is an intensification of the coding of the female body in the subculture to signify on moral purity, breaches of which only the female is, self-servingly for crews, presumed capable. In this sense, language is used to settle the contest over moral superiority in favor of the male by reifying him as the epitome of self-control and, therefore, power. All in all, we see that the bar-room, other than being a place of 'vice' is also a point from which *matatu* culture's ideas and modes of representation are fed.

Rumors are yet another popular practice that *matatu* culture utilizes in the transaction of transgressions. As hidden transcripts, rumors about the (mis)deeds of the mighty are picked up from the so-called gutter press and circulated on *matatu*. A prominent topic in these rumors relates to Kenya's alleged devil worshippers, most of them supposedly living in Nairobi. These rumors focus on what such individuals supposedly own and who they offered for ritual sacrifice in order to acquire it.^{xliii} People might resort to rumors due to the scarcity of reliable information (Samper 2002b). This is especially so in Kenya where official information channels have in the past been little more than mouthpieces for government propaganda.^{xliiv} Also, people might resort to rumors as a means of resistance to certain practices that they feel to be oppressive and as an attempt to redefine social reality in a manner that makes sense to them (Turner 1994:218-220).

A conspicuous aspect about some of the rumors told by my informants is that they seem to follow themes of the jinn stories told mainly at the Kenyan coast, where the predominant population is Moslem and an Arabic culture flourishes (see for instance Burton 1996 for a sample of popular jinn stories). Informants told of cats walking on the roof at night and of individuals who become unaccountably rich after appeasing a secret guardian spirit of the underworld—by routinely offering them human blood. If the sacrifices stopped, the individuals in question, some of who

were named, were said to become, suddenly and inexplicably, poor. An informant even claimed that if one rented an apartment from a particular landlady, one just unaccountably began falling into debt, and eventually lost all property. Having rented one of these apartments herself, my informant moved out as soon as she began hearing, on consecutive nights, cats meowing outside her door—she saved her property.^{xiv} These rumors were also given as the rationale for unexplained deaths in the family; “why is it that only people from certain families, and not others, keep to dying for unexplainable reasons?” Informants wondered. Incidentally, these rumors were never told about poor people, who one might presume to have sufficient motivation to want to partake in ritual sacrifice as a way of escaping their poverty. Instead, the rumors were always told about reasonably rich people and those who showed signs of stacking their pile too successfully, too quickly.

In the light of informants’ oft-stated frustrated anger at the misdeeds of Kenya’s political elite, we can see why rumors about politicians and the rich—often the same people—are seized upon with such vigor in *matatu* culture. In an attempt to process their social marginality, and to explain the social contradictions around them, crews resort to rumors, among other symbolic practices, thus turning *matatu* space into a “mini-republic” (Atieno-Odhiambo 1987:201), where ordinary citizens contest official rhetoric. Their contentious facticity does not however detract from the power of rumors to point to hidden social tensions as the national political narrative is woven into the fabric of personal dilemmas. In a society where the elite are inexplicably rich, rumors offer fertile grounds for “theorizing” the genesis of such fabulous wealth. *Matatu* workers, considered to be among society’s damned, readily facilitate the dissemination of rumor—severally, I was shown *matatu* whose owners, my informants swore, were professed devil worshippers.

Quite a number of *matatu* displayed a sticker that stated *Kill them all God will sort them out*, in the background of which was drawn a pile of bones. Passenger informants pointed out this particular sticker as evidence that *matatu* crews and owners were devil worshippers. Indeed, as ‘proof’ informants said that school children—some of the most ardent adherents of *matatu* culture due to the attraction of music—were normally kidnapped and transported to their death in *matatu*. Informants did not even invoke the ‘foaf’ (Brunvald 1989) as the source of these ‘facts’ and simply claimed to be “sure that it happened.” Consequently, we can see a symbolic connection between the ogre/cannibal forms drawn on *matatu* and the blood rituals in devil worship rumors that can be seen as critiques of social injustices. The police, who as we have already seen are known in *matatu* culture as *mafisi* [S. Hyenas] and are loathed for their ‘eating’ habits, are also an object of this critique given that they are, in any case, the visible representatives of state power.

This disenchantment with ‘eating’ politicians and bureaucrats is reflected in *matatu* culture when crews indicate that they regard as the “real heroes” those popular culture icons whose names and faces adorn *matatu* bodies. Kenya, informants endlessly stated, is bereft of role models and the rampant joblessness is attributed, rightly or wrongly, to the theft of state resources by those in power. The images of Coolio, Tupac Shakur, P. Diddy etc gazing from *matatu* bodies are therefore not just the enunciation of dreams and desires. Rather, they are the direct indictment of a society that is deemed to have failed to deliver the material promises of modernity to these youth even after they had been trained to see such goods as the logical outcome of the formal education process. In this case we might understand the presence of grotesque ogre-like creatures with bloated bodies and especially huge mouths as symbolic representation that censures the eating political elite at the same time as it hints at crews’ own eating desires.

Conclusion

A major task in this chapter has been to demonstrate the inter-connections between the various aspects of *matatu* practice and the texts that enunciate those practices in order to identify the esthetic processes at work. As we have seen, the meanings of these practices are embedded within a broad range of possible contexts in *matatu* culture, aspects of city life or the prevailing social

political context. Thus a description of the culture's esthetics is ultimately tied to an awareness of grounds such as those discussed in this chapter and reasons for the deployment of certain forms.

In view of the foregoing, it needs to be noted that despite the lack of an overtly discernible organizational logic or structure in the culture's expressive practices, there are underlying transformational frameworks that are common to these acts and texts. The culture's music, language, fashion, visual art, written texts and body decoration all manifest intense appropriation, imitation and recombination of forms and styles. On account of this, viewed as a whole, the culture's practices are highly reflexive, the principle upon which I see the culture's internal coherence to rest. Hence, while on the surface these practices appear jumbled, they have an underlying internal unity around which the culture's symbolizing is predicated. This is evinced by the inter-referencing between its texts and the common ideas and tropes evoked in its practices. Interview material enables concrete grounds for semiotic interpretation, in turn validating the theoretical apparatus applied in analysis of the material at hand.

In direct relation to the above, the culture's practices are structured by a carnivalesque logic that defines the internal connections between them as well their relationship to other cultures. Viewed this way, we can understand why certain texts and practices appear to make sense only to the culture's insiders while others, less esoteric, are quite easily understood outside the subculture. This presents the subculture as simultaneously opaque and transparent; the three-dimensionality of the culture and the fourth one raised by my informant in Chapter One meet here. This sets the stage for 'misreadings' and multiple signification, enabling the subversion of social givens through expressive forms that operate on the, inverted, fourth space logic of *matatu* subculture. For instance the place of scatological matter is usually used to point out crews' singular predilection for the perverse, as do Shorter and Onyancha (1997). However, as deductions in the previous chapter with regard to leisure habits indicated, Nairobians in general are neither more nor less interested in lower order corporeality than *matatu* crews; the latter just happen to unapologetically breach social circumscriptions.

The role of urban rap in breaking such social borders has been highlighted. New musical forms by disenfranchised groups have always attracted suspicion not just because they are seen as vehicles to freedom; rather, "the anxious reactions that often greet new musics...indicate that something crucially political is at issue" (Mclary 1996:29-32). Accordingly, at one level we can understand older Nairobians' and the mainstream's deep apprehensions about "corrupting *matatu* music" as a clash between tastes. At another level, this rift, part generational, is to be seen as arising from a contest for the authority to prescribe social tastes, a politics in which rap loudly denounces attempts to subordinate *matatu* culture to definitions set out by other mainstream cultures. By voicing itself, the subculture stakes its claim to freedom even as its practitioners acknowledge that their culture cannot be completely divorced from the mainstream structures to which it is embedded. In a sense then, *matatu* culture restates age-old tensions and the imaginary becomes a suitable site for their symbolic performance. Using expressive modes fashioned from popular culture's dominant forms of representation —fashion, music, TV, magazines— crews insert their insurgent voices within the grooves of mainstream culture.

The superficial equation of such expressive behavior to a moral index instantiates what Bakhtin calls the reading of carnival acts "from the point of view of another ideology" and further points out that such acts need to be appreciated within the esthetic logic and totality of the carnivalesque if they are to make sense; the part is subordinate to the whole (Bakhtin 1984: 149-150). As such, the various texts and practices of *matatu* culture must be viewed in the light of each other in order to gain a fuller view of what takes place at the edges upon which contact is made or when an item is re-placed within a set of texts/practices to which it seems alien. Deploying the same logic we might, for instance, understand why people like Muspike, the *konkodi* whose story was examined at the beginning of this chapter, would find inspiration in a criminal's career; even narratives with off-center ideas can be reformulated as 'charters'(Appadurai 1997) for the construction of their social lives.

At another level, the practices of *matatu* culture help to demonstrate how the processes involved in the 'creolization of culture' (Hannerz (1996:66) work. Certain aspects are revitalized, some reconfigured into new equations and others are erased outright. This enables us to view *matatu* culture not as a site of cultural decay, as mainstream commentators often opine (see Mkangi 1986; Nyasani 2001; Ochieng 2000), but rather as a creative, rejuvenating space where difference can be, and is, celebrated. Its practices destabilize rigid categories while simultaneously harnessing the genres, texts, dress styles and objects thus liberated to constitute an alternative space. Once these are set alongside and against each other, the resulting fractures allow the insertion of meanings that transgress prevailing ones at the same time as crews experiment with new identities. However, in its travesty of the social order, *matatu* culture is counter-cultural even as it retains some core ideas from the mainstream, for instance about masculinity and its successful performance.

The creative performance of identity in this culture stretches Anderson's (1991) 'imagined identities' whereby we see marginalized categories making use of alternative, non-mainstream print media (hip music magazines) to map and purvey notions of a shared, subaltern 'nationalism'. Through this 'abstract' nationalism without geographical anchor, the expressive acts of hip hop are not only a modality of being but also a metaphor of imagining commonalities with others in similar, marginalized states. In the local context, Sheng, as a language of the urban marketplace, helps to force open the rigid structures of Kenya's official languages before proceeding to fill the interstices it creates with the alternative, transgressive meanings of youth culture. Being *matatu* culture's vernacular, it inserts itself where standard linguistic forms fall short in the transaction of informal social business. The resulting innovation becomes all the more a handy tool for *matatu* crews' exploration of their imagined identity. This conscious heteroglossia (Bakhtin 1981) then opens up social space and discourses to give vent to diverse voices and consequently the possibility for new, hybrid identities. To these possibilities, as one *matatu* name adopted from an American recording label aptly puts it, there *Ain't No Limit* (Figure 75).

The polyphony of this marketplace discourse, in the Bakhtinian understanding, is inherently discordant and ruffles the social order. But it is precisely such disruptions that regenerate the social fabric of contemporary Kenyan society as different ideas and agendas compete for attention. As we have seen, through the agency of Sheng and Kiswahili raps, those outside the mainstream now have vehicles through which to figure out how best to deal with their marginal subjectivity. If within this configuration *matatu* culture finds rap a suitable channel for expressing their concerns, it is because "noize music" (Ross 1994:5. See Figure 76) is largely the only remaining legitimate alternative tool over which crews can wield some control and with which they can experiment with different ways of being.

Taken as a whole, as my informants repeatedly observed, the gaudy color of *matatu* drawings, crews' excesses and the general exuberance of the subculture "give some life to the boring concrete and glass of Nairobi city." Further, and in terms that challenge the boundaries of neat literary definitions of what is 'artistic', these consumers and innovators of *matatu* culture recognize that it is "a good example of Nairobians' rich imagination." To rearticulate this view within the modalities of carnival, the license of *matatu* culture affords the city some gaiety, disturbing as it is rejuvenating, and creative in its critique. And if there is a significant ludic seriousness to this upside-down world, it is because the performers realize that light-heartedness can be a fruitful way of dealing with the many crises and pressures of their ordinary urban lives. As a mode of cultural performance *matatu* culture enables a great many Nairobians to process significant parts of their quotidian experiences.

Notes

ⁱThe name *Muspik* is a compound derived by affixing the nominative *mu* to the *matatu* name, *Spike*, hence 'X' of *Spike matatu*. My informant says he has watched a film called *Don't Get Around Me*—I could not track down any film by this title—to which he attributes his version of Spike's 'life story.' However, the Lee-directed film *Clockers* (1995) features a drug pusher, murder suspect called Strike who my informant seems to have mistaken for Spike. *Crooklyn* (1993), also directed by him, depicts the hardships of growing up in Brooklyn but is not Lee's biography *per se*.

ⁱⁱ An icon of a bomb is depicted on the sticker. Informants indicated that they took it to mean "bad things" like "chasing women all over", "drinking excessively", consuming drugs etc. These activities are consistent with the idea of carnival as gaiety, "fun".

ⁱⁱⁱ This view is not current only among city youth. As Prazak (1999) reports, even youth in such far-flung rural places have been trained by the school system to conceptualize formal education, itself taken as one of the most critical indices of modernity, as the surest way to a 'better', 'modern' life expressed in terms of material achievement.

^{iv} Amongst older informants Mau Mau liberation fighters were cited as examples of local heroes while younger informants were emphatic in citing Nairobi's emergent rappers and American film stars as well as English Premier League footballers as their heroes. Despite Kenya boasting of a whole galaxy of world class runners, only the name of one, Kipketer, featured on one *matatu*. This would add to my view that local narratives are not considered exotic enough to inspire these youth to grand dreams.

^v *Mnoma* comes from *noma*, 'trouble', 'danger' or 'bad'. However it has the ameliorated meaning of 'tough' or 'the best' in the sense of the phrase 'I am bad'. However, in reference to women *mnoma* is used on a comparative scale to mean 'normal', where *kali* (sharp, fierce) stands for 'super-beautiful' and *mzee* for either 'unremarkable' or 'old'.

^{vi} There have been many attempts of this nature, all of them being touted by the government and supported by sections of the public as being aimed at instilling "order", "discipline" and "civilization" as a way of dealing with the "menace" that *matatu* are deemed to be; none of these efforts have been successful. (See for instance Nyasani 2001; Mugo 2002; *Face the Facts* 2003; Waihenya, 2002a and 2002b; Gasumuni and Kamau 2003; Ochieng 2003).

^{vii} Shorter and Onyancha (1997) examine the inscriptions on *matatu* under the non-pejorative rubric 'slogans' but proceed, in a moralizing vein, to select those that refer to sexuality as proof of the culture's preoccupation with the erotic. However, sometimes the drawings can be pornographic. On one vehicle I found, above the front left headlights, the drawing of female genitals with the word *nyap* written above it. The word is Sheng for vagina derived from the Kiswahili *nyama* (meat). Nevertheless these kinds of explicit texts are few.

^{viii} *Matatu* proprietors participate in creating designs on their vehicles, or at least commission the work; illegality, the core definition of graffiti, is clearly a non-issue in *matatu* designs. *Wildstyle* is a graffiti style that originated from New York (See Cooper and Chalfant 1984).

^{ix} Salamon (2001) suggests five axes along which readings of the relationships between one text and another might be done, viz. diachronic, synchronic, an interpretive bridge between "copywriter" and "audience", sectarian and private axes. In the case of *matatu* texts, it appears that to these may be added a traditional axis i.e. one that situates the text squarely within traditional as opposed to modern practice and thus also supplying a ground for interpretation. Here would be found many of the proverb stickers that legitimize male views of women.

^x The plural contracted form in Sheng for 'home boys.' Its semantic sense is derived from the common phrase (K) *mtu wa nyumbani/kwetu* or (G) *mundu wa mucii/gwitu*. In the city it refers to 'boys from the (neighbor)hood' but, having been adopted from hip hop culture, it is also a general dressing style that marks the boundaries of belonging to youth culture.

^{xi} Romans 8:31.

^{xii} To be sure, even other categories of degree holders roam the streets. *Matatu* crews, obviously not aware of the finer distinctions between the various degree classifications, use *B.A.* as a rhetorical device.

^{xiii} The November 2002 attack on an Israeli-owned hotel in Mombasa, a predominantly Muslim city, is one recent pointer as to why the *Intifada* remains within Kenyan public consciousness. Significantly, the August 1998 bombing of the US embassy in Nairobi has been memorialized in the ironically-named *matatu*, *Bin Laden*. The American-Israel-Arab conflict is a perennial topic of discussion amongst *matatu* crews in Nairobi.

^{xiv} A reference to Al Sharpton, the radical African American protestant minister.

^{xv} It is significant that the most prominent designs on a *matatu* are often posted at the back. The rear is strategically used to post the most forceful, especially transgressive, texts. Unlike the front, the rear enables longer, concentrated viewing by occupants in oncoming cars and bystanders as the moving image recedes into the distance.

^{xvi} Many of the male rap groups have female crew members whose names, unlike the males', are unknown. Even though at least two female rappers, Wahu and Wairimu, are popular, to the extent that I could tell, their portraits, names or rap titles have yet to join the currency of *matatu* culture. Given the culture's masculine bent, this is unlikely to happen soon, if at all.

^{xvii} Similar wisdom pervades Nairobi. A Gikuyu saying states “*yumbukaga na kiria imeretie* [A bird flies away with what it has already swallowed].” To this awareness might be linked the many terms coined for corruption to legitimize the ‘eat now!’ ethic in *matatu* culture.

^{xviii} These tough bodied men specialized in carrying 100kg loads on their shoulders from the city's famous Wakulima Market to the various *matatu* and bus stops within the city center. They drink and live hard. However, in the context of *matatu* work, the phrase “*kamata twende*” is usually an unjunction from a *manamba* to a passenger to get on board quickly, grasp any part of the vehicle and hang onto it for support as the *matatu* speeds; looking for seating space comes later.

^{xix} They are also derogatorily called *maguru mairu* [G.] on account of their black police-issue boots.

^{xx} Few informants within and outside *matatu* culture seemed to know for a fact the number of stars and stripes on the Star Spangled Banner; fewer still knew what these represent. One such flag on a *matatu* had 56 stars and no stripes while another had 46 stars and 4 stripes; reduction and expansion are both ways of traducing the American standard.

^{xxi} The accurate equivalent translation would be ‘no new day dawns as the one before’, but the *matatu* man has invoked his poetic license.

^{xxii} ‘Paper’ is clipped from ‘notepaper’ while ‘dollars’ is a general name for money in Nairobi youth culture. However, the more common names for money are the Sheng *chums*, from the Kiswahili *chuma* for metal to refer to currency coins, and *chapaa*. The latter is also a *matatu* name. Incidentally, *chuma* is slang for penis, making a clear connection between financial endowment and masculinity/power. *Doll\$*r seems to be a playful amalgam of ‘doll’ (girl) and money (\$); in the subculture it is a basic axiom that without the money the girls are unavailable. The stickers *No money No Supuu* [S. No money no girls] and *More Money More Supuu* [S. More money more girls] affirm this reading.

^{xxiii} For instance the *Daily Nation*, July 31, 2002, dramatic headline put the imposition thus; “Forget it, Moi tells Raila and Musalia.” *The two were contenders for the party nomination against Moi's protégé.*

^{xxiv} One crew even posted *Rainbow* on their vehicle, this being name of the faction that broke away from the ruling party to challenge the official position. In the *matatu* name however, ‘w’ was camouflaged to look like an ‘x’, a tactic for evasion. Even a letter appearing on a *matatu* body, as is the case with those that refer to lower body materiality (e.g. *K*), is capable of transgressive signification and hence the crews’ in the above case masking their position by switching letters.

^{xxv} The full text of the automated Kiswahili/English voice message is “*Samahani, mteja wa nambari uliyopiga hapatikani kwa sasa*! Sorry, the mobile subscriber cannot be reached.” “Loss of network” is both a popular phrase on *matatu* as well as in popular music, for example Peter Kigia's song *Ni watumire nde Network* [G. You have disoriented me with your deceit], demonstrating further the dynamism of *matatu* texts' interlinkages with other aspects of popular culture.

^{xxvi} Interestingly, one *matatu* is impressionistically named *Vector Generation*, presumably within the trend of sophisticated scientific language. However, read alongside a *matatu* name like *Dudu Mbaya* [S. Dangerous vermin, here a reference to the HIV virus; the name seems to be adopted from *Dudubaya*, which is the stagenam of the Tanzanian singer Godfrey Tumaini], *Vector Generation* may be taken to mean a generation thought to transmit/carry disease, on account of its perceived tendency for unbridled

promiscuity and “cultural corruption.” Another *matatu* name *Chosen Generation* (*sic*) apparently re-reads *Vector Generation* with a religious twist; may be this generation is favored by God.

^{xxvii} Other names, mainly from song titles and singers’ names, that glamorize negativity: *House of Sound/Thug Mentality*, *Ghetto-licenced* (*sic*), *Ghetto Boyz*, *Gheto* (*sic*) *Thug N Old Skool Jam/God Bless Corner Boyz-Money Love*, *Crazy Gang*, *Crazy Boyz*, *Manic/4Life*, *Chaos*, *Scandalous Playa*, *Juve/Juvenile*, *Hard Skull/Kichwa Ngumu/Ngumu Sana*[K. *hard head/very hard*], *Desperado*, *Fatal Bandit/Outlaw*, *Bad Ass*, *X-Con*, *Terrible*, *Anarchy*, *Anarky-Dog Dayz/Headbangers*, *Danger Set on the Loose*, *Mayhem*, *Havoc*, *Rawkus*, *Chaos*, *Kaotik*, *Horror*, *Terror*, *Hostile Takeover*, *Outrageous/ Street Killa*, *Total Balaa* [S. *Chaos*], *Caution: Do not Provoke*, *Two Skunks*, *Injected/Max Power*[With echoes of drug addiction], *Me Against the World* [an album by Tupac Shakur], *Virus/Killer Loop*[Drawn alongside is the picture of a urinating boy playfully peering at his penis], *Anthrax-Bad News*, *Damage/Rat Race/Busy Bee/8th Wonder/V*, *Rejected By Hell Accepted By Heaven*, *Furious-This Means Tracy Lee*, *Fanatic*, *When the Party is over tha shit Begins*, *Ganja* [From Hindi. *Marijuana*; a bull mastiff is drawn at the back]. In an interesting reversal, a high fashion name is ‘sullied’ by being dragged into the street thus: *Pierre Cardin-Street Couture*, a pun on the word ‘culture’ to give a positive twist to street mannerisms

^{xxviii} A *matatu* photo featured in the *East African Standard Date*

^{xxix} The rap from which this phrase is taken is anagrammatically called *L.O.V.E* and praises Dandora, an estate, for being one of the genre’s well springs in Nairobi, which is given the appellation ‘hip hop city.’ The track, playing on a number of *matatu*, decries the mainstream as an ‘ugly society’ that feels rappers should be confined to mental asylums.

^{xxx} *O₂*, in chemical terms, represents an oxide, not oxygen (*hewa*), but the 2 is taken as a doubling of Oxygen molecules, hence *excess hewa* or *mahewa* (Plural). “*Wape dose*” is the Sheng call by a *konkodi* to the driver to ‘administer a dose’ of *mahewa* to passengers once the *matatu* leaves the city center, out of the hearing of traffic police officers.

^{xxxi} It is in this sense for instance that those familiar with literary texts like *Things Fall Apart*, *Hard Times*, *Game of Silence* (Figure 60), *Oliver Twist* and the Arthurian legend, in which *Sir Lancelot* features, would recognize them as such on *matatu*. The first name above also refers to an American hip hop group. Once they are redeployed as *matatu* names, these texts refer to an aspect of *matatu* work; its apparent chaos, hardships, attempts to silence the culture by imposing a ban on music, crews’ feelings of social stigmatization and the bravery with which they confront occupational hardships. The name *Game of silence* here double signification since the handshake that is depicted at the back evokes the *chai* practice whereby, once a *matatu* has been flagged down, the conductor races to meet the police officer at the back of the vehicle where, over a handshake, money changes hands. By the time the officer walks round to the front of the vehicle and goes through the motions of an inspection, he has already been silenced.

^{xxxii} The detached head of a yelling-laughing baby with a padlock in his left ear that is the signature of this stand-up act is an important signifier. The gesture of chained laughter, as a comment on qualified freedom, suitably visualizes the character of *matatu* humor that has moments of bitter laughter at social contradictions but, true to carnival fashion, gaiety eventually wins over lapses into somberness. It might be objected that the airing of this program on the private *Nation TV* channel was one of the mainstream’s mechanisms for controlling popular anger against the then ruling regime. While this might be so, it cannot be disputed that the parody of powerful figures set viewers free to conceive particularly state power in a manner that they had not done or thought possible before. Popular barroom theater, stand up comedies, popular music, the popular press, *matatu* and youth culture in general supplying different fora and cracks that enable the transgression of the existing social order.

^{xxxiii} For instance *Matatu Whispers*, Iss.No. 001, 15th May-15th June, 2001,P.p.1-2 and Iss.No. 004, 25th August-25th September 2001,P.p.1-2.The paper, published by humor writer/theater practitioner Wahome Mutahi, has since folded up.

^{xxxiv} Some more sonic-related names: *Boomboyebye*, *True Vibes-R.I.O.T*, *Muzik Junkies*, *Addicted to Muzik*, *Southern Crooks-Soundbombing/Blitz*, *The louder the better* (*Sticker*), *Biff Baff*, *Tukutendereza-Heavenbound/Explicitly Gospel*, *Hauz of Praize*, *Praise House*, *Ministry of Sound and Jazz*. Another *matatu* bears the drawing of a huge trumpet and a music score sheet; no amount of negotiation would persuade the Ethiopian owner to let me take a photograph—he was convinced that I was working for the police.

^{xxxv} A number of criticisms have been made against Adorno, chiefly to do with the Marxist view that industrially produced music, equated to the industrial production of mechanical parts, is a tool for ensuring hegemonic capitalist control of consumers. My concern relates to the lack of a role for the consumer's agency, a point that underlies *matatu* culture's choices. For a brief survey of the broader limitations with Adorno's arguments on music see Longhurst (1995:10-14) and McLary (1995) with regard to the Jazz form.

^{xxxvi} Examples of other texts constructed around sexual metaphors: *Bizzy Bone, Sticky Bumps; Hot, Wet, Sticky; Hot Stuff, Irresistible/Virgin, Ladies Edition-All Day Party, Over 18, Over 21?/ Niko Freshi Lakini* [S. But am I beautiful]? (The last two names refer to one's being over 18 years, the age of consent, and thus an adult), *Dik Dik* (if taken to refer to the gazelle species, it might be seen as a reference to the freakish but swift manners of *matatu* drivers, but, more likely, it might be a covert reference to the slang name for penis), *Real Equipment-Fast and Furious, Screw Ball/Never Boring Saga, Enjoy the Game, Not Guilty-Drop da Balls/Mayhem/Dudu Mbaya/Baadaye, We Sell Old Guns, We adjust old guns(sticker), Drop da Balls, Puppies Inside-We Bite, Sizzling Advisory-Strictly Adults Only-Rough Edge, Supporter, Take it-Squeeze It, Baby will you do it with me?/Tumewashika, King T/Lock it, Fiesta/Bring it, K, K K K, Sans K, V* [this seems to be taken from either the logo of Violator Management, a music agency, or the Virgin Records label; however in the street it is short for either 'virgin', or the more widely used 'insult' 'vagina', in street idiom represented by K], *Bonanza/Queen Nafrette/Take IT* [the determiner here is quite suggestive], *Bonanza-So Deep it Heartz, Ripperz-Pimperz/Lights Out* [this last one combines both the grotesque and the sexual with its reference to farting and pimping], *Ruff Love, Ruff Ridaz, Love Zone, Love Scene* etc. I also found the sticker *Ass cash Cash posted* alongside another, *Allahu Akhbar*, demonstrating the co-existence of unlikely signifiers in the same environment as part of carnivalesque practice.

^{xxxvii} Examples of phrases clipped from such raps include *Tumerudi kuwashika-Tuko Fresh/Lakini Niko Fresh* [S. We have returned to grab you-we're ok/but am I beautiful?], *Mko tayari?* [K. Are you ready?] and *Wee Kamu* [S.(You) just come], *We Come* (derived from the former, and twisted for its sexual connotation), *Moss Moss* [S. Slowly slowly], *Mwenye wivu Ajinyonge* [May the jealous one go hang], *ninanoki* [S. Am going crazy], *Teremka* [K. Get down], *Vunja Mifupa-Nikutach Videnja* [K/S. Break the bones-I'll touch you dangerously] and *Hatucheki na watu* [K. slang. We don't joke with people]. *Vunja Mifupa* is the title of a popular Kiswahili song from the early 1980s that local rappers have recently recuperated from the archives of popular music. Its chorus rallies listeners thus: *vunja mifupa kama bado meno iko* [K. Break the bones while you still have your teeth]. Local rap has seized upon the potent sexual signification of 'breaking bones' and 'teeth' in a manner that recalls both the *matatu* name *Bizzy Bone* and the sticker *A woman is a common maize cob for any man with teeth to chew* discussed in Chapter Two. A third meaning relates to the breaking of opponents' bones, especially in the context of street culture.

^{xxxviii} Hip hop fashion is one such way of casting glances to cosmopolitanism and *matatu* and youth culture's refusal in general to wrap itself up within the drapery of English dress styles can be seen within the rhetoric by which Kenyans question such mimicry. For instance Mutahi, in a humor article, *Born in Kenya, Made in America*, satirizes Kenyans' attachment to assorted exotica (1998:68-70). With regard to dressing up, the author finds that the "gentlemen [...] wrapped in woolen suits [...] in the humidity and the blazing sun of Mombasa" (*ibid*: 69) take their mimetic dramas too seriously. However, as I pointed out in Chapter Two, *matatu* crews ignore the contradiction that their own *cool* looks, and the fashion that they use to formulate them, are also forms of cultural colonialism. But as Hebdige (1979) demonstrates, in subcultures it is more the "new" pastiche that speaks, not the antecedent discourse from whence it is appropriated.

^{xxxix} The absence of names borrowed from other ball games such as golf, cricket and rugby is worth mentioning. This can be attributed to the fact that in Kenya these are all elitist sports, and are thus class-marked; Appadurai (1997:89-113) offers the opposite case for cricket in India which he sees to serve as the metaphor of national imagining. Between 1999 and 2003, other than *Gambler/ Bowler*, the only *matatu* name I saw borrowed from elitist sports is *Jonah Lomu/Allblacks*, referring to the black New Zealand star and national rugby team respectively. Incidentally, even when Tiger Woods was the rave of professional golfing, his name did not feature on *matatu*. Football, on the other hand, is a kind of "people's game", played from the city right down to the dustiest village in rural Kenya using improvised rag balls or polythene wrapping. In a good example of Appadurai's (*ibid*) argument on the role of media texts in people's imaginative reconstruction of their lives, it is common in small villages to find boys kicking up the dust chasing after a rag ball and calling themselves after football greats like Pele, Maradona, Ronaldo, Figo

etc in the process of imagining their identities. Live radio broadcasts of local national leagues matches ensure the constant presence of football in people's lives and this might be one way of explaining the pervasiveness of football metaphors in the linguistic repertoire of *matatu* crews.

^{xi} The 1990s witnessed the birth of bar-room theater in Nairobi, with tiny estate bars becoming venues for the performance of lewd sketches (on this point see particularly Ndigirigi 1999). On the other hand Mutahi concentrated on political parody, using bars that had relatively bigger space for the professional production of theater in informal surroundings and went on to found Citrus Whispers Theater. *Matatu* crews also supported Mutahi's theater because he was the publisher of the popular *Matatu Whispers*. Upon his demise in July 2003, a number of *matatu* eulogized him by carrying the name *Whispers*, a character and alter ego of Mutahi in a humor column he wrote in the local dailies. The politics of his theater and its esthetics are explored at length in wa-Mungai (2003). It remains to be seen whether the tradition of bar-room theater, already on the wane, can survive the competition from one-man guitar shows/ *Mugithi*.

^{xii} Set as the enactment of a nightmare, it depicts the then president and his coterie cowering in a public toilet after losing power; uppermost in their minds is the fear of retribution from those their former subjects. After KANU lost power in 2002, Mutahi staged a sequel, *Mararirira Kioro*, which, while recycling the plot of its immediate predecessor, pokes fun at the ex-majesties. The then extremely filthy conditions of Nairobi public toilets set Mutahi's parody in a magnitude of its own singular order because critiques of power had never before been performed in such blatantly scatological terms.

^{xiii} Mbembe (1992:7) reports a similar act of public insubordination when the Togolese map the enormity of the presidential phallus in terms of the ruling party's symbol, the key. As we have seen in the previous chapter, the libidinous is thickly woven into *matatu* culture's linguistic economy.

^{xiiii} Sometimes mainstream publications feed Nairobi's rumor mills. For example, the *Finance* magazine issue of August 30th 1998 was dedicated to an expose of Free Masons and carried a series of suggestively juxtaposed sub-headlines "Are they Devil Worshipers or Ordinary Human Beings?" and "Is President Daniel Arap Moi and Other Kenyan Leaders Members of this Secret Society?"

^{xlv} The context of this perception is the former regime's dissemination of official government information through the party newspaper *The Kenya Times* and its stranglehold on the public-funded Kenya Broadcasting Corporation radio and TV. Kenyans turned to other news sources like BBC radio, creating a suitable environment for rumors to thrive.

^{xlv} 'Evidence' of such occult liaisons included the hippies "peace now" sign (Figure 74) which informants claimed was an inverted cross and the hexagram. An agitated informant claimed to have seen a house on whose walls the landlord had etched satanic symbols; it turned out that these are the masonic signs used in carpentry. However, in Kenya Free Masons are presumed to be devil worshippers. See *Daily Nation* 4 August, 1999 and *Daily Nation* 6 August, 1999.

CONCLUSION

Dada, Houdini and Chameleon: Metaphors of Cultural Adaptivity

By way of concluding this study, I would like to let voices from Nairobi youth subculture have a tentative last word. Hence I will use two cases to tie up the folklore-popular culture threads of *matatu* culture that have been discussed in the study. My approach is necessitated by the awareness that within the charged discourse on *matatu* culture, voices other than those of *matatu* folk would like to have the final word, each competing to drown the rest with its point of view.¹ Indeed each day seems to bring with it a new problematic to the discourse as new dynamics are introduced into the field, for instance the 'new' rules that the government has set in place. And because *matatu* culture is assigned a prior contestatory stance within the wider Kenyan social discourse, its practices cannot therefore be constituted in other than primarily subversive terms. I take it that the carnivalesque modes of representation in the subculture speak to crews' awareness of this position.

The question of subversion is raised here because, being one of the key assumptions upon which my critique is based, it has a fundamental relationship to the indeterminacy that we have seen as being a principal aspect of *matatu* culture. In this case, applied to texts in *matatu* culture, the concept of transgression that is enshrined within the subversive is an important device with which can be examined the interface between traditional and emergent cultural forms that do not conform to orthodox terms of description and analysis in contemporary urban Africa of which *matatu* culture is an apt instance. I take a detour via the Nairobi street and popular youth culture as a way of getting to the more theoretical positions raised by my contention above.

The 1990s saw an intensification of *matatu* culture's discourse as well as a broadening out of its expressive forms from stickers and simple, mainly bible-based names to more complex onomastic strategies as evinced by the numerous names adopted, or modeled upon, the African American practice of signifying. This change, as we have seen, corresponded with a sea-change in the political arena following the introduction of multi-party politics in Kenya. This meant that the public sphere, at least in terms of self-expression, was no longer the preserve of the postcolonial state's rulers. We might then in this case take the complexification of *matatu* texts as being related to the newly liberated social-political space whereby the subject could now, like the state, vie for public attention for his/her own causes. And because the state, as we have seen from informants' responses, is viewed as the project of a wrecked modernity, *matatu* culture, as a forum of public discourse, has over time become a key site where the malfunctioning state is indicted.

In turn, this necessitated *matatu* culture's adoption of signs that were more self-conscious of their power of representation, resulting in a more engaged critique of the Kenyan social-political context. In effect, if an authoritative commentary on these strategies of representation were needed, then it needs to be rendered in the subculture's voice(s), a position that I find to be crucial to the discussion of *matatu* culture's identity project, and its probable future. However, here I can only highlight salient trends upon whose threshold ways of knowing might continue to enter and circulate in the subculture. In this regard, two narratives from my informants, a *matatu* woman and a DJ, will be used in tying up the threads of my discussion.

Alice, in her late 30s, is a mother and a wife; she is also a *matatu* driver! Armed with a cheerful smile, she sits behind the wheel of *Karianjahi*, a blue *matatu* parked at the Gill House stop, waiting for passengers to fill up her vehicle. Her *matatu* is part of a larger fleet named *Commuter Train* which operates on a schedule. The company is out to "change the face of the *matatu* industry", a route manager, himself in a neat tie, informed me before I boarded the vehicle. None of the popular *Enyce*, *Adidas*, *G-unit*, or *Phatfarm malebo* so popular amongst *matatu* crews is visible on any of the other route workers. Indeed that Alice is a *matatu* driver at all, and that her *matatu* has no *mahewa* is remarkable. I asked her how she felt in her work:

I don't find it strange doing a man's job...I have been doing 'men's jobs' since I was a kid...*Hata nimeendesha* tractor, and my role model when I was a small girl was a lady who worked at Marshalls East Africa as a mechanic. *Watu hunicheki na kuzubaa wakiona wakiona dere mumasa. Kaa mzee mmoja nakumbuka. Alisimamisha dinga, nikasimama na akaanza kuingia lakini aliponicheki akasema kwa nguvu "mimi siwezi hebwa na gari*

inaendeshwa na mwanamke” na akadinda kuingia. Yenyewe ilinihurt lakini nabelieve hizi ni zile tu stereotypes watu wanakuwa nazo ati women can’t do this or that. I have always wanted to prove these attitudes wrong [K. I have even driven a tractor...(S) people look at me and are amazed at seeing a female driver. Like this man I remember. He flagged down the car. I stopped and he began boarding but when he saw me he shouted “I cannot travel in a vehicle driven by a woman” and refused to board. This hurt me but I believe this is an example of the stereotypes people carry around that ...]

(2003)

Alice represents a new phenomenon in *matatu* culture; a female who is at the forefront of the positive transgression of boundaries and is proud about it because it gives her space. She has not only entered a traditionally male domain—wearing pants into the bargain, where such dressing is generally still considered relatively immodest of a woman—she takes her driving as a career and is not bashful of the fact that as a married woman, she, more than her husband, spends most of the time *outside* her house rather than inside as is the norm. She is also an adaptable performer as can be seen when she slides with ease into fluent English, Kiswahili, Sheng and Gikuyu. Thus, when I seek an explanation for the Sheng word *Nganya*², she points out that in her world, she has to have a fine grasp of all the tools of the trade. In addition, she invents a few more, for example “good PR” because, in her admission, as a woman in a traditional male space she has to contend with tremendous impediments. She is in essence an individual who is conscious of her abilities and is unafraid to put them to use in negotiations with a hostile urban world which, even though for the large part detraditionalized, is moored to a conservative view of gender matters and seeks to enforce the space set for each through various prescriptions and proscriptions.

Would she not consider herself a rebel? I ask. She says that the question of rebellion does not arise in her case whatsoever; she is happily married to a supportive husband, fulfils all the obligations that come with her various social roles, and spends time when she can with her family. “What is rebellious about that?” She asks and goes on to raise the, at first, apparently paradoxical claim that *matatu* culture helps to “maintain traditional Kenyan values.” For example, on the back of her own *matatu Karianjahi*³ is inscribed the English translation of a Gikuyu proverb, *Too much eating leaves you with a swollen stomach*. She recalls an elderly, literate male passenger telling her; “The names of *matatu* on your route are very good. They remind people of the values and good things from our past.” For her, *matatu* culture has both positive and negative values to it, a point she says its critics miss when they only focus on its negative aspects.

This can be seen if we consider other Gikuyu sayings and proverbs posted on various *matatu* on Alice’s route 23: *Muriu Muriu* [G. Son, son]—*you don’t need everything you want*; *Theru* [G. a monkey species]—*we make the rules, you break them*; *Mwaniriri* [G. Broadcaster]—*he who pays the piper calls the tune*⁴; *Ruku* [S. Money]⁵—*the most dangerous person is a liar*. Jocular and conversational, these proverb-names archive and memorialize traditional ideals and philosophy—they testify to the depths of tradition’s roots which keep sprouting on new ground. As part of *matatu* culture’s humor, they point to transformations of content and form in Gikuyu folklore, as can be seen in the merging of an English proverb with the local phenomena of a horn-blower which is then rendered in a hybrid, visual form. I return to this point farther below.

Overall, my informant’s case is a direct challenge to tradition especially given that *matatu* space is also used by passengers to publicly affirm and debate certain values felt to be the bedrock of social life.⁶ For Alice, this space is a platform for contest as she seeks not merely to assert her own identity but, in the first place, to prise that very space from its social circumscriptions. In the face of this, her’s is no mean task as can be seen in the risks that her work involves, for example being locked up in police cells and having to contend with the “attitude” of female officers who, she says, try to show her “that they too got balls.” The latter point is significant in that it uses the male-determined language of *matatu* crews to sexualize road relations, showing the ease with which power relations filter into the culture’s idiom regardless of the speaker’s gender.

Alice might not cut the sharp fashion looks of the young *matatu* men donning the latest *gear*, or present the street-savvy image of most of the cocky, twenty-something youths working and riding these *matatu*, but she is a significant metaphor of social changes that are likely to come via *matatu* culture. It is also quite apt that *matatu* as a factor of mobility are, so to speak, the vehicle for the kind of social changes she represents. As she points out, if in future more female drivers engage in *matatu* work, then we can expect *matatu* culture to become an even more intensely-contested site for the (re)invention of identities that challenge traditional definitions of gender and its “proper” space.

Elsewhere, Kiddy, a 24-year-old disc jockey who tells me that his name means ‘stone’ in his Dholuo vernacular, is turning up the vibes at a restaurant on Nairobi’s Tom Mboya Street right outside of which is an extremely noisy *matatu* stage known simply as Commercial. The name resonates well with my informant who, as a DJ, is well placed to identify the complex commerce in the web of meanings that link the popular music that he juggles to earn a living and *matatu* culture, where he has many friends.⁷ Indeed for our interview, he turns up in an I♥NY cape, *Ciro Citterio* sweatshirt and a pair of black *Ruff Ryder* pants; he sits at the cutting edge of fashion. “*Mimi nadress ki-hip ndio nikuwe unique. Hii ndio kung’ara poa* [I dress hip in order to be unique. This is cool shine/dressing],” he declares. His fashion style, like that of urban youth culture, is purposeful differentiation, an act of creative self-insertion into social space whereby he and his friends do not just talk cosmopolitan. They enact it.

He hands me a CD that I had requested the previous evening when I had found him playing a string of ribald Sheng raps to the great delight of his audience. Out of seventeen raps, only one track does not explicitly allude to sex but even it is about women. They celebrate a carnival of love, money and the power of the body in dealing with life’s anxieties. The rappers featured in the CD are the new voices of urban youth; they speak to and for the *matatu* man, his young passengers from Eastlands’ ghettos and the more affluent youth, known as *mababe* [S. Babylonians], cooped in up-market entertainment sports like *Carnivore*, *K2* and *Pavement*. DJ Kiddy, as his name ‘stone’ suggests, is also among this new type of cultural mediators, increasingly popular in Nairobi’s entertainment circuits, and who form the bedrock of contemporary urban youth culture. Moreover these rappers speak a language that is becoming increasingly difficult to understand, especially for the older generation, for they not only rap in Sheng, they also drag into full public view such ‘sensitive’ topics as sex in a country where any public utterance touching on carnality is met with instant opprobrium.⁸ While on the one hand their view of the world emphasizes traditional power relations constructed around gender positioning and the access and control of material wealth, on the other it is directed to look far outwards into the global stage in its search for tools that facilitate dialogue with the local. Thus, when my elderly informants dismiss urban cultural forms (hip hop stands high on the list) as “useless things”, they evade the real issues. Else, why would they rave so passionately against a phenomenon that they consider as being of no use?

As McLary points out, since Plato’s Republic, popular music has been condemned as a purveyor depravity; she goes on to warn that whenever such claims are raised then “something crucially political is at stake” (1994: 29-32. See also Storey 2003:10-13). In urban music, the problematization of social relations via sex is based on the recognition of the basic principle that whether in modern or traditional society, most of the critical questions of the day are determined by gender and its relation to power(lessness). And as patterns of local leisure consumption generally indicate, Nairobians are paying great attention to somatically encoded meaning. In its practices, youth culture makes of the body a sensual text that is deployed as a tactic for drawing attention to the concerns of the youth. And through their singularly unapologetic texts, these youth proffer an alternative view of modernity.

Thus having entered center stage, the youth also loudly announce the terms of that occupancy. Hence, acts of rapping about sexual relations or posting sexist stickers and lewd names on *matatu* are not an end in themselves. Rather they are signal devices for underlying tensions, in this case those resulting from the failures of modernity in the local context. It is in this way that I find the name *Dada*, prolifically posted on *matatu*, to capture the culture’s mood. These youth may not know the specific transgressions committed by Dadaism within the art world, but theirs is a cultural avant-gardism. They are unafraid to be at the vanguard of “something”, and that something here is change in terms of the way the body is understood and expressed. In other words, youth culture is emphatic that nothing is fixed and things can be made to

mean in diverse ways in Nairobi's cultural matrix. In so doing they create their own space where otherwise, at best, society allows them only a strictly regulated one.

Furthermore, even though local rap and youth culture are predominantly an urban phenomenon, its transmission to all corners of Kenya through private TV and FM radio, coupled by increased access to the Internet, suggests that increasingly wider youth audiences are accessing new ways of thinking and viewing their place in the world. To be sure, the conservatism of much of Kenya's traditional cultures does not conduce for the expression of bawdy lyrics, but it is only a matter of time before the authority of such (conservative) values comes in for serious questioning; the processes is already in motion.⁹ New values are being adopted, and the youth are not ashamed of living them, sometimes too boldly but often as a 'normal' way of conducting their everyday lives.

However, there is also a profound ambivalence in the way even some of the culture's practitioners view their situation rooted as it is in social contradictions they are powerless to resolve. My informant Kiddy for example does not delude himself about the material conflicts driving the consumer ethic in Nairobi's youth culture, and the lore that young people create about consumption. He observes bluntly that "Nairobi youth are greedy—they have too many dreams and desires, especially inspired by their joblessness. Yet, given that they see all these things, can you blame them for desiring and dreaming of better lives?" This is the point at which the power of the imaginary crucially lends a hand to youth culture.

Urban youth in general evince most starkly the traumas of Kenyan postcolonial subjectivity. The question might be posed: what does one do faced with a situation where society's material conditions do not support one's ideas about, and aspirations within, the narrative of modernity? The implication of the foregoing is that as a segment of youth culture, symbolic expressive behavior in *matatu* culture will remain pegged to crews' awareness of social contradictions as they negotiate their place in the world. Thus, for example, if we agree that these youth are bitter with existing social inequalities, it does not matter whether government regulation actually leads to the removal of ogre-cannibal figures drawn on *matatu* bodies. In any case, the culture's iconography is just one level at which is expressed crews' underlying self-perception as marginalized contestants in society's many (eating) games. In this regard, informed as it is by an awareness of the disadvantages weighed against it in the structure of its contests with the mainstream, we can safely surmise that *matatu* culture's verbal lore is likely to remain as transgressive as it has always been.

Arising from the foregoing, and as the struggle against mainstream culture persists, it can be presumed that in line with the youth's stated wish to escape from conditions of deprivation and the tyranny of authority—in particular that of the state—the culture will continually seek, and devise, symbols that map such desire. My suggestion is that the *matatu* man's core trickster trait, represented by popular icons such as Spiderman/spider and a *matatu* name like *Houdini*, after the escape artist, can only keep mutating into 'new' expressive forms on the myriad fertile grounds generally available in urban culture. And if, as my elderly informants claimed, these urban youth are likely to get "lost" within their subculture, then it will be a "creative loss" as they regenerate their identities within the terms hybridity. This suggests more or less the rejuvenation of carnival. Characterized as it is by syncretism of forms, truncations, an excessive concern with spectacularization, surfaces rather than depth in its forms, and intertextuality, youth culture is likely to become even more predominantly postmodern in its style(s) of self-representation. This is more so the case as participants' habitats of meaning, in Hannerz's (1996) terms, expand to include more tools of modern technology, especially those that enable access to information and thus electronic, sometimes virtual, contact with other cultures.

This however does not mean that images drawn from local lore are totally forgotten; rather they are transposed onto the realities of local experience. Hence, for instance, despite its pervasive misogyny and verbal aggression, the playfulness of *matatu* culture is still considered by residents to fuse and express significant meanings. To illustrate, we may take the case of Carole, an 18 year-old college student. Asked if she encountered in her every day life any texts that she might consider folkloric she succinctly captured the agency role of *matatu* culture as follows:

I certainly cannot remember the last time I heard dad or mum telling me stories about *hares* and *hyenas*, and am willing to bet they have never told me such stories. But look at

all these *matatu* bearing pictures of *chameleon*, and the other funny one that has a *monkey* swinging in a *spider's web* (Figure). Isn't it strange the way we're reminded of our abandoned story-telling traditions in these funny ways?

(My emphasis)

One of the *matatu* that she is referring to has on its rear windshield posted what might at first appear an extremely contradictory *matatu* design depicting a chameleon sitting on two giant gear cogs. Here speed (gear) is confronted with its antithesis, sloth. It is also significant that here, chameleon and monkey, tricksters in the traditional folklore of many local communities, are principal signifiers of contest. In contemporary Nairobi popular culture, their role is predominantly taken up by the tricky Spider/man, and the hyena's role as dupe is played by many social actors from police officers to passengers and motorists. Not the fastest of creatures, in Gikuyu etiological narratives chameleon is also the character to whom is attributed the origin of death (Mwangi 1983).

As a visual metaphor deployed within the context of social change, I find this evocation of death to speak precisely to the frustrated aspirations of urban youth. In the words of Muspike, the *konkodi* whose narrative I discussed in Chapter Five, "*hii inashow vile tunazuiliwa kupepea* [S. This is a symbol of how we are prevented from flying]." But beyond the question of death, and given his singular adeptness at merging into surroundings, chameleon's character template aptly captures crews' versatility at cultural camouflage: when not initiating their subversive agenda, they blend their identities and cultural forms to respond to diverse contingencies. The resulting insertions and deletions enable continuity and destabilization, innovation and experimentation and, ultimately, the sustenance of the tradition that is now given the appellation *matatu* culture. In this manner, Sheng, contemporary urban hip-hop and *matatu* culture, being the three key spaces of Nairobi youth culture, vivify the dynamics of cultural creolization.

Earlier I raised the problem of content transformations in contemporary urban culture involving the amalgamation of content from diverse genres, for instance truncations of a narrative layered onto the content of a word and picture sticker. Often, when asked if they still experienced folklore, informants wondered: "Does it still exist?" This issue is relevant since we need to attempt to explain what happens within the detraditionalized urban society where even if folklore might not exist in its traditional forms or conditions, still its existence cannot be denied. This is where popular material culture comes in, particularly the sticker. The sticker can be seen as one way in which previously oral forms, in this case the proverb and the saying, have been transposed into a short written form and still serve a function similar to the one it served in the oral context. This is not to say that the oral forms have fallen into disuse; rather, the oral and the written can be found co-existing within the same urban context.

At another level, I see a correspondence between mobile *matatu* texts and romances in the traditional folklore of many Kenyan communities. In *matatu* culture, as seen mainly from wishes expressed in personal narratives, vehicle names and drawings, crews' fantasies are constructed around self-perceived heroism, for example the conquest of serious obstacles and the ability to traverse vast swathes of space.¹⁰ This seems very much to follow a predominant motif found in the numerous episodic folk narratives that feature heroes going out on adventures over long distances and having to contend with many impediments along the way. Thus we might argue that since *matatu* are by nature mobile space, they enable crews' to imaginatively map the hostility of the urban environment in terms of the adventure motif appropriated from local lore. Moreover, their immense trickster's abilities are survival tools more or less like those of heroes and heroines in traditional narratives who have to rely on their wits for survival, especially in confrontations with ogres and other antagonists. Occasionally brawn comes in handy. On the whole, my contention is that a keen look at contemporary urban forms reveals points of continuity between them and traditional oral cultural forms and themes that are otherwise usually presumed to be extinct.¹¹ In a related sense, as we have seen in the case of *matatu* passenger experience narratives, a shorter form of performance has been adopted and become widely established as a way of explicating the everyday of urban life, a function that is more or less like that ordinarily ascribed to traditional folktales (Miruka 1994). It is a reasonable conjecture that an examination of other urban societies in Africa would reveal similar cultural dynamics.

Arising from the above discussion, it becomes necessary to attempt an explanation of how popular culture is to be read— whether as oral or written expression, or both. Barber puts the finger squarely on the issue when she observes that “there is a vast domain of cultural production which cannot be classified as either ‘traditional’ or ‘elite’, as ‘oral’ or ‘literate’, as ‘indigenous’ or ‘western’ in inspiration, because it *straddles* and *dissolves* these distinctions”(1997:2. My emphasis). In erasing the distinctions between them, Nairobi popular youth culture more than sits astride these categories; in constituting itself, it mocks any privilege accorded either of them. In any case, need we read material such as that in this study *only* along terms such as those that Barber criticizes? I suggest, and show below, that there is an alternative to the above terms; in the first place to accept them as the only analytical terms valid for the kind of multi-media project studied here is to implicitly accept a conception of the cultural acts under investigation as static. As I have shown, mutability is a core aspect in the contact between Nairobi’s popular culture and folklore as it indeed is the case with other cultural contexts.

Fabian (1997:18-28), Jewsiewicki (1997:99-109) and Mbembe (1997:151-163) elaborate a key concept through which we can navigate the minefield mapped by the categories indicated by Barber. More insistence needs to be placed upon not just the erasure of these distinctions in popular cultural practices in Africa but also those conditions, outside the text strictly defined, which necessitate such dissolution. This is a pertinent issue particularly for a study such as this that explores the interface between folklore and popular culture. For instance, Granqvist (2002:81-89) discusses the social-economic dynamics around which books are produced and consumed in Kenya in order to show how popular fiction decenters the dichotomies identified by Barber.¹² What is more, even though there are significant elements of popular culture in *matatu* culture, we cannot solely make use of the analytical tools applied to the former. The complex texts of contemporary African urban cultures incorporate diverse forms of textual experience— auditory, oral, visual, tactile and olfactory. As such, the role of sensory, extra-textual experience, I suggest, needs to be given greater attention in trying to read meaning in texts that are situated at the conjunction of technology and performance.

In order to do this, I propose that texts such as those discussed in this study be approached more as examples of texts-in-performance, i.e. within the process of composition/happening, rather than being viewed solely within oral-written frames. Otherwise to privilege the interpretive methods associated with either the oral or the written would be to reify one text over another thereby disregarding the dynamics that are usually at work in the moment of its deployment/performance. Accordingly we must then entertain the notion of *matatu* culture’s expressiveness as constituted by unfinished texts heading towards completion, as it were texts in literal motion, whereby those sensory aspects that cannot be captured (e.g. in writing, on film or tape) are acknowledged as critical embedded aspects that must be taken into account during the interpretive process. In this case, there is an integral correspondence between the malleability of these texts, the fad cycles in the culture, spinning as a trope of mobility and the flux in the identity template of *matatu* crews.

The benefit to be gained in viewing these texts as I have suggested here is that one is able to factor other aspects into the text during the performance process, to wit, the crucial role played by sensory experience in the coding and interpretation of meaning. Listening, sight, or the mere fact of being present during a performance (whether or not one acknowledges it as such e.g. passengers in a *matatu* ride) where unsought texts float all around and impact upon consciousness—all these I take to be implicated in crucial ways in the meaning-making. Similarly, the *smells* in a *matatu*, the embarrassed stares of commuters upon hearing an obscenity, the *feeling* of being crashed and hemmed in by other bodies, the *sensuousness* of body movements in *mugithi* dances, the *blasts* of rap over a *matatu* stereo: all these mean that the texture of the experience cannot be evaluated in either-or terms.

Visual imagery, written and oral texts as well and other sensory experience, juxtaposed and occurring simultaneously, all vie for the subject’s attention. But one must resist the temptation to read in the terms of Baudrillardian simulacra (1988:11-28); elements of it might exist in *matatu* culture, but it cannot be claimed that the TV viewer’s alienation has already set in. Pushed further, my argument then implies that *matatu* culture’s texts can have no strict form undergirded as they are by contingency. Differently put, they have unfixed forms; texts are broken and patched up and in themselves they absorb and discard

whole fragments almost at will and still make meaning. On account of this, meaning-making is enabled not just by the nature of a specific text *per se* but, significantly, by *how* such a text is deployed. Thus, a semiotic interrogation of urban culture needs to pay attention to the contingency of a sign's deployment.

Because some key aspects of *matatu* culture's texts lie beyond the strict confines of form, individuals can still participate in meaning-making, for example, whether or not they are literate. In like manner, one really need not understand the words of a loud rap in order to respond to it; loudness is in itself a key that invites a response. Also the interpretation of texts often depends more upon other, extraneous knowledge (e.g. of the city, consumer culture, police and *matatu* behavior) rather than an accurate identification of the stories of persons, objects or animals depicted in *matatu* texts. Notwithstanding literacy and exposure to global fields of culture—though the two have no inherent correlation—carves out a wider interpretive frame.

As such at any given moment interpretation is taking place on a number of planes. We have already seen for example, how a performance like *mugithi* erases the social hierarchies inscribed upon bodies, reconfiguring them into a transgressive mass where each body's characteristics add onto an accretion of other bodies' codes. This implies that even the interpretation of such a mass requires the engagement of multiple senses. In like manner, the combinatory nature of its forms means that there are very few *matatu* texts, if any, whose borders can be clearly delimited. The totality of *matatu* culture's practices would thus be needlessly constricted by analysis in either-or terms. Viewed thus, it can be argued that *matatu* culture, as a corporate text, has not one center but several which phenomenon results in the divergent worldviews evinced by urban youth. As an experienced text, its component forms are constantly engaged with similarly incomplete texts, thus enabling interpretation in the light of other, experience-defined texts. And in order for any analytical protocol to be productive it must begin by appreciating them as fundamentally non-static, ever-mutating artifacts.

In a related sense, such a conceptualization of urban culture enables us a more fruitful way of thinking about the concept of group; as Nairobi youth culture's shows, group is a very fluid construct. This is especially important in contemporary Africa where urbanization has sundered native communities, and ideas of 'group', leaving people to experiment with new ways of belonging. Consequently, we see individuals coalescing around 'unorthodox' parameters of defining their in-groups, as the case of Sheng illustrates. Significantly, we must entertain the possibility that because individuals come to urban cultures with a pre-existing code/text already in place, then any resulting texts and worldviews will tend to be interpreted, primarily, in the light of 'basic' keys; 'new' others will be shaped or interpreted to reinforce the basic keys. This is the deduction we get from urban youth culture's tensions of identity that fluctuate between the (post-)modern and the traditional.

It is hoped that by continually probing such 'unorthodox' sites of urban culture we will keep our eyes trained fully upon the diverse creative processes, resources and methods by which ordinary people in everyday situations process experience. The voices and modalities of performance represented here by the *matatu* man, the nascent *matatu* woman and youth culture in general may guide us into seeing how today's narratives might be retold tomorrow. After all, in the concrete bleakness of Nairobi city which dialogically informs the carnival gaiety of *matatu* culture are to be found, still, myriad engaging narratives and dramas—however these might be (re)told.

Endnotes

¹ Even my analytical voice is not intended as *the* last word; others have claimed final opinion on the matter more emphatically. For example, on March 3, 1996 Mungai wrote, with lack of prescience, on "Concluding the *matatu* culture debate: so feared and hated but not so bad." Before him Mkangi (1986) had determined that "*matatu* graffiti" reflected "society's wrongs."

² The name of the new, longer minibuses that have more comfortable seating and no music. Adapted from the original late 1980s Sheng name *manyanga* (minibuses fitted with ear-splitting boom boxes) which were the precursor to the *dotcom matatu*. For a time, *manyanga* was also the name for a beautiful young woman but has now been replaced by *supuu*.

³ This Gikuyu name means “eater of *njahi*”, a type of black bean popular for its delicious and nutritive value but which, if eaten in excess, causes bloating.

⁴ This is an English proverb ‘customized’ with the drawing of a traditional Gikuyu horn-blower (*muhuhi wa coro*), the piper’s equivalent.

⁵ The Sheng meaning given here is the one used by crews; in Gikuyu the word means firewood. There is a metaphoric connection however in that where fire generates warmth, in Nairobi generally money causes people to feel ‘hot’ (i.e. good), becoming arrogant as a result. Money is also a subject most people are thought to be quite dishonest about—especially in the repayment of debts—and hence the reference to liars in the *matatu* name.

⁶ For instance, on July 18th 2003 a 67-year old widow, Wambui Otieno, married 27 year-old Peter Mbugua, an occasion that was prominently aired on local TV and radio news broadcasts that evening. It featured in the national dailies the following morning and was hotly debated in the papers and FM radio call-in-shows for weeks after (see Amran 2003; Lugaga 2003; Muganda and Muli 2003 etc for the various normative angles that were emphasized about the narrative). The wedding became the subject of parody on *Reddykyulass* the following Sunday; condemnation of it ricocheted from pulpits as well (see Masibo 2003). A *mugithi* I attended at Nairobi’s *Daytona Club* on 19th July, 2003 was dedicated to the newly weds. In *matatu* for two weeks thereafter, I listened to men and women across age brackets and ethnic origin assert that “the widow is corrupting our traditions by showing our children bad habits.” They also branded her “an old woman of loose morals and no sense of shame.” Little disapproving comment was directed at the young husband. Thus we see the intense connection between social events, the constitution of a *matatu* ride into an open court, public re-inscription of values and their amplification in popular culture.

⁷ Such traffic is seen when Kiddy tells me how music facilitates his negotiation with *matatu* crews; he obtains for them the latest CDs and they in return give him free rides. Popular topics during such rides include “*kuhanya*” [S. To run after women], fashion and music.

⁸ For instance, a local lobby group within the Catholic Church attempted to rally fellow faithful to have Chinua Achebe’s *A Man of the People* struck off the high school literature syllabus arguing that it was “pornographic” for its depiction of a character, Irre, boastfully displaying to his friends a condom that he has just used (1972:25). See Muriithi 2003.

⁹ Villagers in the rural countryside are also hitching onto *mugithi*’s transgressive practices, albeit belatedly. In a small rural center called Kwa Haraka [K. lit. The place of haste] in Central Province, I found the residents reveling to the rhythm of *mugithi*. The rhymes were mild, tempered on account of the fact that nearly everyone in the hall knew everybody else, but as the village’s name suggests, given the hasty pace at which ‘new’ forms of culture are flowing all over the village, perhaps it is only a matter of time before even the lyrics of the village *mugithi* become as ribald as those of Nairobi’s anonymous dancehall crowds. For starters, the guitarist in this specific *mugithi* was a Kamba man doing Gikuyu raps, pointing to the kinds of innovations, lyrically speaking, and cultural convergences that are likely to occur. I am grateful to Kwa Haraka resident Kuria wa Mwangi for an intense discussion of the dynamics of this particular *mugithi*.

¹⁰ Examples of such narratives are represented in Kabira and Adagala (1994). Moreover, the ogre, trickster and dupe are such prominent characters in the many local narratives of the kind that I have in mind here for them to just have simply fizzled out of existence despite the social disruptions wrought by urbanization.

¹¹ Modern African literature has already been shown to refashion traditional art forms (Okpewho 1992:293-327). However, there is still the need for an examination of how, outside literature, popular culture forms such as stickers and walls decorations in bar-rooms and restaurants make use of such material.

¹² Even Granqvist’s conclusion is undermined by some of the evidence on the ground. I noted for example that the youth in *matatu* culture rarely read the stories in popular youth magazines. Often, they are absorbed in *gazing* admiringly at the *look* of, say, Michael Jordan or Ja Rule and tell their own narratives about these icons. This, however, is not to argue that these youth are illiterate; they merely choose to ignore one medium for another.

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Appendix I
INTERVIEW GUIDE

A. *Matatu* crews

(Personal data)

Name: Age: Ethnicity: Languages spoken:
Residence: Level of Education: Job Description and Work
experience:

1. What are your leisure activities (if any)?
2. Who do you socialize with? Where?
3. When do you begin your working day? When do you stop? Are there times in between when you are not working? What do you do during those times?
4. Do you get official leave? How often and for how long?
5. What are your aspirations in life?
6. Who owns your *matatu*?
7. What is the name of your *matatu* and who named it? Does the name mean anything to you? Explain.
8. Do you play music in your *matatu*? Explain why. If yes, specify the type of music.
9. Do you listen to music other than in your *matatu*? If yes, specify type/give names of the artists.
10. Why do/don't you display stickers in your *matatu*? What do passengers usually say about them?
11. Approximately how much do you earn working on a *matatu*?
12. Why do you break traffic rules/highway code?
13. (Why) do you bribe traffic police officers?
14. Are there aspects of your work that you would like to see improved? Give reasons?
15. (Why) do you think people are generally hostile to *matatu* people? How do you personally react to such hostilities at work?
16. (When) do you speak Sheng and why?

B. Questions for informants outside *matatu* work

Name: Age: Ethnicity: Languages spoken:
Residence: Level of Education: Occupation:

1. What are your leisure activities (if any)?
2. Who do you socialize with? Where?
3. What is your opinion about *matatu* workers?
4. What do you understand by the term *matatu* culture?
5. What do you think about the *matatu* decorations?
6. Can you tell me meaning of the writings on this *matatu* _____?
7. What is the meaning of this sticker _____? Can you give examples of other *matatu* stickers that carry a similar meaning?

8. What do you think is the purpose of such stickers in/on *matatu* in general?
9. What do you consider to be the elements of Nairobi youth culture?
10. What do you think about Nairobi's urban rap?
11. Do you see/hear/participate in any folkloric activity? Specify.

Appendix II: Glossary of work-related terms

The Sheng component of the language of *matatu* work is quite dynamic. However, some phrases and words borrowed from the local languages, and that seem to form the core of the technical/biological (human but sometimes also animal) body analog, have been stable throughout the years. These include

1. Vehicle parts

- i) Body/board; the vehicle as a whole. The term is also especially used to refer to a woman's physique. Similarly, small cars are often described in feminine terms e.g. "*kana tumatako tuzuri* [K. "[It] has nice buttocks." The *tu* prefix is diminutive.
- ii) (K. sing/pl.) *Mimi/sisi*; (G. Sing/pl.) *Niithui*; I/us. The crews use these terms interchangeably to refer to themselves and the car. In following their conversations, one needs to pay particular attention to the semantic shifts since there is often no transition mark from technical to biological body and back. Part of a vehicle's license plates (e.g. AG 30, or AHK), a combination of it with a crew member's name (e.g. Jimmy 090) or simply the *matatu* name (e.g. *Monie*) are other ways in which the conflation of identities and bodies is done.
- iii) (G/K) *Kiongo/Kichwa*; lit. 'head'; driver's cabin
- iv) (G) *Maguru*; lit. 'Legs' but used to refer to a vehicle's wheels.
- v) *Maito*; lit. 'Eyes'; headlamps
- vi) (G) *Mbaru*; lit. 'Ribs'; the side panels of *matatu*, buses and other large-bodied vehicles.
- vii) (G) *Ndina/Itina* (K) *Matako*; the rear end of a vehicle
- viii) (G) *Nyina-ini*; colloquial, literally 'in the mother', to refer to the vagina, here presumed to be located in the rear end of a vehicle. Also used interchangeably with the oblique '*kiria-ini*'. The latter would translate as 'in that' where that demonstrates '*thing*'/ '*Kitu*' (K), slang for vagina.
- ix) (G) *Guoko*; Hand. To give back a passenger's change. In the plural, *moko*, it is also used to refer to windshield wipers.

2. Road mishaps

- i). (G) *Nicionana na guku kiria-ini*; they have made contact with 'that'. 'That' here is an oblique reference to human genitalia, in general and the phrase, like others below, is used especially when a vehicle has been hit from the rear.
- ii) (G) *Niciahutania/nicionana kuuria kwega kwega* (G). They have made contact/they have seen each other in those good good parts). Alternative to (i) above. The phrase *hutia mundu*, on which this description is based, means to have intercourse, where *mundu*, the Gikuyu noun for 'person', is taken to refer to a woman (see also the section on *mugithi*).
- iii) (G) *Nicianunganira / Zimensusana* (K); they have sniffed each other, used to describe a collision generally, but mostly one from the rear. It is based on the observation of the practice amongst animals on heat.
- iv) (K) *zimeingiana vizuri*; they have interlocked/fitted perfectly. Alternatively uttered as (K) *zimeshikana kisawasawa*; they have locked tightly. These are further descriptions of a car that has been rammed from behind.
- v) (K) *Imeumwa kwa matako/nyuma* or (G) *Niciariyana*; it has been bitten on the buttocks/ rear or they have eaten each other. The Kiswahili verb '*uma*' has several

senses; 1. To bite 2. To hurt or, 3. To scoop, as with a spade or the palm of the hand. These meanings, severally or collectively, are relevant to the sexual act. In Nairobi street slang, 'to scoop' a woman means to pat her behind with a cupped palm while 'uma' (eat/bite) means to have sexual intercourse with her. In the linguistic economy of *matatu* culture, 'eating' has a special place; it simultaneously carries a metaphorical (corruption) and a literal (consumptive) sense. Since then by nature an accident is violent, the 'eating' here, mapped as a posterior sexual act, implies painful entry, most probably sodomization. Unlike in earlier examples, the explicit reference and emphasis here is to the posteriority of the act and not just the 'good' (read *accepted*. See 2.ii above) parts of the (heterosexual) human body.

- vi) (G) *Ni yahutio na kuria nyina-ini*; It has been touched in the mother parts. Used when a vehicle has been rammed from the rear, and sometimes if the engine has been damaged in a collision, accompanied sometimes with a gesture of the raised middle finger. Incidentally, this was the only sentence I found to refer explicitly to a 'mother's' private parts. The lack of such phrases/words/insults may be explained by the fact that among the Gikuyu, reference to anyone's mother, particularly in a sexual sense, by way of insult is considered extremely transgressive. Unless under extreme provocation few men, even amongst *matatu* crews, make such references; repercussions could be dire. See Abrahams (1970) and Hannerz (1969) for the opposite case in African American verbal contests (e.g. dirty dozens and joning) where aggression is directed against an opponent's mother.

3. Driving behavior

- i) (K) *Anaendesha gari kama mwanamke* [he is driving like a woman]; incompetent male driver presumed to be a village bumpkin unaccustomed to driving in the city.
- ii) (G) *Aratwara ngari ta kihii/mwana* [s/he is driving like an uncircumcised boy/child]; usually used for an incompetent female driver, but sometimes also for the male. They might also be called (K) *mjinga* [fool] and/or (G/K) *ng'ombe* [cow].
- iii) (K) *Mwingie*; Enter or penetrate (another vehicle/driver). Alternatively (K) *Ingiza kichwa!* [Insert the head]. Used when a driver will not give way to enable a *matatu* weave through.
- iv) If however a driver completely denies access to a *matatu*, the latter's driver will dismiss him/her thus; "*ni uhii areka*" [s/he is behaving like an uncircumcised boy]. Boy is often interchanged with child, goat, cow or dog and the adjectival 'dogness' (G. *Ugui*). This 'sour-grapes' reaction is meant to mask defeat by denigrating the other, unwilling, driver.
- v) (K) *Anakingia je kama mwanamke?* [How is s/he entering/penetrating you like a woman?]. The question is alternatively expressed as a statement (K) *amekingia kama mwanamke* [S/he has entered you like a woman] or simply as a taunt (K) *umeingiwa vibaya!* [K. You have been penetrated badly/roughly]. Only a conductor, or a passenger on familiar terms with the crew, can make these utterances when a *matatu* driver is on the receiving end of aggressive/bad driving. The point here is to call attention to the undesirability of being the 'penetrated'/'

‘conquered’ party. Usually in such instances, his ego deflated, the driver either keeps quiet in the face of the taunt, pretends not to have heard it or insults the tout back e.g. “*tiga wana we*” (G. Quit being childish you) or “*wacha ujinga*” (K. Don’t be stupid). This is the reason that a passenger not (well) acquainted with a crew cannot usually tease the driver.

- vi) (G. Emphatic) *tumekite atil ni twameka ati* [We have done them like that]. ‘Like that’ here is an indirect reference to the sexual act, and the phrase carries the same sense as ‘we’ve had/screwed them’. The emphasis is on the verb *ika* [do], Gikuyu slang for sexual intercourse. These are used when the speaker’s crew beats a competing team, either by picking up more passengers or racing ahead.
- vii) (K) *Tumewapeleka mpaka wakapenda*” [We have taken them to their satisfaction], (K) *tumewapeleka wakafika*” [We have taken them till they have arrived] or (G) *tumatwarite magakinya* which has a meaning similar to the two Kiswahili examples. These are used as the preceding examples. The root verb *peleka*, while literally translating as ‘take from one point to another’, actually refers to chasing the competing *matatu*. Thus, the losing crew is said to have ‘liked it’ (*wakapenda*) to indicate their admission of defeat. In slang, the root verb *fika* [arrive] in the second sentence—semantically equivalent to its Gikuyu alternative *kinya*—literally means the achievement of orgasm. Only a winning crew makes the claim upon the losers. The latter content themselves with a face-saving excuse like (K) “*hakuna pahali wameenda tutawafikia hapa mbele*” [They have gone nowhere we’ll catch up with them ahead]. Only in one case did I hear a driver admit thus “*wametufanya*” [K.They have done us].
- viii) (G) *Ni twamathiriria* and (K) *tumewafanya*; ‘we have penetrated them’ and ‘we have done them’. Both phrases have the same meaning as the two immediate preceding examples.
- ix) (G) *Gukunurwo*; to have the lid removed. It is used in the same manner as the three examples immediately above but has some slightly varied contextual nuances. It is used especially for greenhorn *matatu* drivers who, being new to the city, imagine that winning is merely racing ahead of a competitor; often, such drivers end up winning the race but without profits to show for it. Hence they are compared to virgins who have just been deflowered [hence ‘opened’]. Further, when crews boast of having broken some girl’s virginity, they refer to the act as “removing the lid” (G. *Nguniko*; lid/stopper; in contemporary slang, the expression is “removing the sweet’s wrapping”). Also, in a traditional gambling game where players use coins, if the player whose turn it is to make a guess does so correctly, the loser is said to have been *gukunurwo*.

4. Work-related terminology

It will be noted that the terms discussed here lean heavily towards female genitalia and reproductive processes, and we may take these linguistic expressions as the construction of a desire to make the work environment yield, like a woman, to crew’s advances.

- i) (G.) *Irima* or (K) *shimo*; Hole. The point at the terminus from where *matatu* registered to ply a specific route queue up to pick passengers. In their respective slang, these popular terms are euphemisms for vagina.

- ii) (G) *Ngaari niyaingira irima/* (K) *Gari iko kwa shimo*; the vehicle has entered/is in the hole. Used by crews when it is the right turn for a *matatu* to pick passengers at the designated terminus.
- iii) (K) *Nani anajaza?* and (G) *Nuu urekira?* [Who is filling up?]. These are literally lifted from their respective languages based on the metaphorical reference to a woman's impregnation (*jazalihuria*=fill up). When crews quarrel over turns at picking up passengers they are said to be 'fighting over [a/the] hole': (G) *Kuruira irima/* (K) *kupigania shimo*.
- iv) (K) *Imezaa* or (G) *Ni yaciara*; it has given birth. Alternatively stated as (K) *imeenda maternity*; it has gone to the maternity (hospital). This means that the vehicle, having broken down, is in this stationary state compared to a woman waiting to give birth. This arises out of the analogy of filling up a *matatu* with bodies as impregnation.
- v) (G) *Niyamatema*; it has cut them. 'Them' here refers to petrol/diesel, for which Gikuyu has no singular. Literally, this expression refers to running out of gas. It is an adaptation of the idiomatic expression *gutema macani* [cutting tea] i.e. to take tea. Since the act of taking tea requires a consumer to remain still the term becomes applicable to a stalled vehicle. Another significant and relevant allusion in the latter phrase is that after the clipping of tea bushes, they do not yield a crop in subsequent months. This is a particularly apt metaphor for a broken down *matatu* since without repairs, the *matatu* man's source of income is in an unyielding state.

5. Common superstitions amongst *matatu* workers. Again, like in much of the subculture's occupational idiom, female reproductive processes felt to be contaminating are used to explain away common road mishaps

- i) If the vehicle engine stalls inexplicably, a crew member often wonders aloud if one of the female passengers is in her menses. A female informant later explained this away as crews' attempts at humor in the face of a bad situation; none of my other female informants shared her view.
- ii) When a vehicle's front right side tire bursts, the presumption in *matatu* culture is that the driver had a liaison with a prostitute the previous night and failed to take a shower in the morning. The same is said of the tout if the front left tire bursts. The bursting of rear wheels on either side is taken with less seriousness. However, these signs are considered serious omens and are sometimes used to explain why a certain crew always seems to have bad luck on the road, for example low earnings, never finding enough passengers or mishaps with the police. Consequently, fellow workers may avoid certain crews on a particular route; in one case, passengers refused to board a particular *matatu* altogether owing to the lore that had been circulated about this vehicle through passenger personal experience narratives and route workers' rumors and gossip.

Appendix III Glossary of Sheng Terms commonly used in *matatu* culture.

Afande. K. Title used to refer to any male police officer.

Ahoi. G. Beggars. Used to refer to the police. Derived from the Gikuyu practice where poor men (never women) would ask a rich man to allow them to squat on his land in exchange for labor.

Angusha K. Drop. From the practice of crews' dropping a crumpled currency note at the police officer's feet and quickly speeding away.

Auntie. E. Aunt. Any smartly dressed woman but who is older than *Supuu* but younger than *mathe*.

Baku. Most likely from fake; deception or lies.

Blue. 20 Kenya shillings. From the color of the currency note

Bumper. A vehicle's rear but also a woman's buttocks.

Chai. K. Bribe.

Chai ya afande. K. Lit. The officer's tea. Bribe.

Chota. K. Scoop. i.e. Offer a bribe to a police officer.

Christmas. A bribe, i.e. something to spend over Christmas or any other holidays. Mostly used in December and varied according to whatever other holidays are current at the time of negotiation. The more standard term is *siku kuu*.

Chrome. E. An overloaded *matatu*.

Dere. E. Driver.

Dot.com/mer. From cyber lore. Youth, esp. teenage to early twenties.

Fake. E. An unreliable person or thing. A liar.

Fanya kitu. K. Do something. I.e. Offer a bribe.

Finje. S. Fifty shillings.

Fisi. K. Hyena. Name for police officers. Most likely taken from the greedy character common in local folktales.

Gear. E. Clothes, especially fashionable ones.

Hashara. Arabic. *Esra*. Ten Kenya shillings.

Hashu. Variation of *hashara*.

Jacketing. To pass the elbow over and behind the shoulders of a passenger seated next, enveloping them in the crook thus formed. Usually done by men to female passengers.

Jam. Derived from traffic jam. 1. To cease functioning. 2. To be angry. 3. Problem. 4. A

glut, especially of commodities but also a human crowd.

Jet. Fifty shillings. From the picture of the plane that appears at the back of the note.

Kahiu. G. Money. Coined from the literal use of a knife; the cutting separates cleanly the
haves and the have-nots.

Kali. K. A 'super looks' woman, especially one dressed to kill. See also *kuua*.

Karao. Origin unclear. Police.

Kaushi; K. Thief. From, *kausha*, to dry. The practice whereby thieves rob the victim
'dry' i.e. completely.

Kauzi. Variant of *Kaushi*. Thief, robber.

Kiasi. K. A woman of average looks.

Kigonyi. G. Driver, i.e. 'turner'. Descriptive of the act of turning the steering wheel.

Kinde. (Origin unclear). Ten shillings.

Kitu kidogo. K. Something small, i.e. bribe.

Kitu kikubwa. K. Something big, i.e. bribe. Jocular variant of *kitu kidogo*.

Konkodi. Conductor. Probably from Concorde, because of the conductor's extreme
agility, especially in running after his already moving *matatu*, jumping aboard and
hanging precariously from the door. Conductors are usually young men in their
twenties, most likely because of the gymnastic excellence involved but also in
order to do the myriad physical chores that go with the occupation—including
roughing up stubborn passengers.

Kopa. From cop; Police.

Kukenga. From Kitaita, local language. To look, esp. to stare.

Kula Kitu. K. Eat something i.e. accept a bribe.

Kuua. K. Killer looks; i.e. dressed to the nines.

Kuwacheki. K. To look, stare.

Kuwaona. K. Lit. 'To see them'. To look.

Kusisia. From Kikamba, local language. To Look.

Lebo. S. Clothes with designer labels printed on. Alternatively *malebo* (Pl.)

Log on. To board a *matatu*.

Madam. E. Usually the reference to a female police officer.

Manyenje. From Gikuyu, *nyenje*, cockroaches. Derisive for old *matatu*, on account of
their slow movement.

Mathe. E. Mother. The address to an elderly female passenger.

Mbau. From the Gikuyu slang, *kibau*, for the 20 shillings currency note.

- Mhola*. Origin unknown. A sick person. Incidentally, the Hebrew word for disease is 'chola'.
- Mnoma*. From normal. 1. A woman of average looks. 2. Dangerous (predates sense 1).
- Mobile*. E. Route workers who chase *matatu* up and down the streets collecting levies for *matatu* operating on a route.
- Mubatari*. G. An ever-needy person, greedy. The police.
- Mukinyo*. From Gikuyu. The amount pinched from the total fare collected, at the end of a trip or a working day.
- Muringa*. From Gikuyu, 'iron rod or wire. Vehicle. Derived from the fact of its being made of metal.
- Muti*. G. Tree. The one thousand shillings currency note. There is also a play on the slang sense of the word which means penis. Crews tease each other with one saying "*nipe mti* [Give me a/the tree]" only to be told "*niko na moja tu* [I only have one]" or asked "*nibaki na nini* [with what shall I be left]?"
- Mwalimu*. K. Teacher. Common reference for any smartly dressed male; from the common stereotype joke that the teacher is always smart, as a role model.
- Mwone kando*. G. See the officer privately, out of passengers' view.
- Mzee*. K. An elderly woman, in comparison to *kali* and *mnoma*.
- Namba tatu*. K. Number three. Code for 30 shillings, usually used between crews so passengers will not know that the fare, which on most routes used to be 20 shillings, had been hiked.
- Network*. Having knowledge/information, regarding the operations/happenings on a certain route. Derived from the use of cell phones whereby due to poor signal transmission, or failure, in some areas it is impossible to make/receive a call. Hence the phrase "loss of network."
- Nganya*. Clipping and metathesis of *manyanga*. A newish, gaily decorated *matatu* fitted with powerful music.
- Nguthi*. G. Thief. Derived from the act of a thief having to beat up his victims before robbing them.
- Noma*. Origin unclear. 1. Problem. 2. Bad.
- Ofisi/ watu wa ofisi*. K. Office/people of the office. Same as *watu wa tai*; officially dressed.
- Pilot*. Driver. A number of *matatu* names suggest the vehicle to be a flying object on land E.g. *Street Fighter* (sic), *Scud* and *Ground Missile* .

Sare. S. A non-paying passenger, mostly but not always a young lady.

Salasa. S. Thirty. From Kiswahili *thelathini*.

Siku Kuu. K. Holiday. Euphemism for bribe. See *Christmas*.

Supuu. S. Young girl, beautiful, usually high school and college students.

Tara. G. Onomatopoeic for running feet. speed

TKK. K. Acronym for *Toa kila kitu*. Remove everything. Also acronym for *toa kitu kidogo* and *toa kitu kikubwa*. All are euphemisms for 'bribe.'

Toa Christmas. K. Produce Christmas. Same as *Christmas*.

Udo. Origin unknown. Useless.

Ungisi. Origin unknown. Broke, penniless. Also clipped to *ungi*.

Wabici. G. Same as *Ofisi*; metonymic for those in salaried employment.

Wanguura. From the Gikuyu adjective *gukura* i.e. "aged". Derisive for old *matatu*.

Watu wa tai. K. People of the necktie i.e. in formal dress.

Young generation. The youth. Same as *dot.com/mer*

Note: Corruption-related words/terms proliferate within the subculture and quickly filter into the nation's general linguistic economy, not necessarily the road. Most of them change quickly, especially the Sheng ones, but nearly all of those cited here have been consistent, in usage and meaning, throughout the years.

Appendix IV: A Nairobi bar-room ‘hymn’.

This “circumcision hymn” though documented in Nairobi bars, was also heard in other parts of Kenya’s Central province where Gikuyu is the vernacular language. ‘X’ might be the name of anyone present and against whom the jocular taunt is directed.

<i>X nuu, X nuu?</i>	Who is X, who is X?
(chant) <i>Haiyai-hu</i>	(chant)
<i>Mundu urundagwo ni muka uriri!</i>	One who is wrestled in bed by his wife
<i>Huui wainaga!</i>	(chant)
(All) <i>Kindu kia muna-i, mututu!</i>	(All) Something of so-and-so is full of sweetness!
<i>Ndikuheaga, ndikuhega?</i>	Don’t I give [it to] you, don’t I give [it to] you?
(chant) <i>Haiyai!</i>	(chant)
<i>Ndagukorire ugithica mwatuka,</i>	[That is why] I found you fucking a crack [in the ground or wall]!
<i>Huui wainaga!</i>	(chant)
(All) <i>Kindu kia muna-i mututu!</i>	(All) Something of so-and-so is full of sweetness!
(The third verse is usually omitted from the original Gikuyu song)	
<i>Guku ni kwau, guku ni kwau?</i>	Whose homestead is this, whose homestead is this!
<i>Haiyai-hu!</i>	(chant)
<i>Nditemanie ta njau ya mbogo!</i>	I will settle on the ground like a buffalo’s calf!
<i>Huui wainaga!</i>	(chant)
<i>Kindu kia muna-i mututu!</i>	(All) Something of so-and-so is full of sweetness!

Note: Traditionally this song would be performed by male initiates after circumcision and recovery to demonstrate the state of their manhood. As can be seen, there is no sexual content in the third verse, usually first in the traditional song, which might explain its being dropped. The play in the first two revolves around a wrestling match, a traditional game amongst the Gikuyu, here a metaphor for the physical stamina requisite to conquer one’s partner in the sexual act. The first verse in the bar-room taunt is presumably sung by X’s ‘agemates’ while the (implied) wife sings the second. Because the man is so weak that he never gets ‘it’ / ‘something’ from his wife, he resorts to the crack for gratification; unfortunately, the ‘wife’ caught him in the act and is now spilling the beans to his agemates. The whole song is a joke against one imagined unable to obtain a sexual partner; however, sometimes the taunt is based on reality.