Hustle Urbanism

Globalization and Community

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Making Life Work in Nairobi

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Globalization and Community

Original art by Tatiana Thieme.

For Zoë and Felix, and their generation

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Somewhere in downtown Nairobi

Introduction

One rainy June afternoon in 2010, I ran into Mike, a young man from Mathare, one of Nairobi's largest and oldest popular neighborhoods approximately seven kilometers from the Central Business District (CBD). We exchanged our usual street banter. My question to him, "niaje?" (a local common greeting for "what's going on?"), had an added inflection of curiosity, as I hadn't seen Mike in a few weeks. He stopped in his tracks and replied with a smile, "Niko poa T, nahustle tu" (I'm cool, T, just hustling). Codeswitching to English, he finished his thought, "Here in the ghetto it's always about hustle economics." I had gotten to know Mike over the course of that year and was familiar with some of his activities involving various community and environment-oriented work. Mike was one of the founders of a local youth group that provided residential waste management services in his densely populated neighborhood. He was also a thespian (his real passion) involved in activist community theater. That day, I had caught him in the middle of some kind of labor—one that wasn't altogether clear in its temporal start or duration, or prospects for remuneration. But I knew Mike was "at work." Here, hustling is the way of the hood.

At about 5 p.m. at the end of the workday, one of the popular roundabouts in the CBD becomes a key gathering point for graffiti-laden *matatu* (Kenya's minibus taxis), each impatiently courting pedestrians to board their vehicles so they can get back on the road and get everyone home before dusk. In April 2023, I met a man named Andrew, who was standing on a small slice of pavement at the center of the cross-roads where he would spend entire afternoons hailing down *matatu* to give them one more customer

before they left town, to fill that last seat. He had developed a habit of jumping on the *matatu* with the customer and standing right near the open door, ready to jump off at any moment. He would engage in friendly but firm banter to convince the conductor to give him 20 KES (about US$0.20) for his labor. After all, the customer who had just boarded would pay 50 KES for their fare, so the conductor would still make 30 KES on a seat that would have otherwise been empty. Everyone wins. One afternoon, I was that customer. Andrew did not work on any particular *matatu* but on all of them at once. As both Andrew and I stood near the *matatu* doorway we had just jumped on, Andrew explained, "I work in the morning at another job, and then I come here from 1 to 5 p.m., and I help *matatu* leaving town get those last customers. Then I know I can go home without stress. You know, T, I'm a hustla." Minutes later, Andrew jumped off near Museum Hill. Here, hustling is the extra bit on the side at the end of day.

In 2022, Kenya elected William Ruto, a president whose campaign involved referring to Kenya as the "Hustler Nation." Despite being a member of the political elite class long involved in Kenyan politics, Ruto made a point of recounting his humble beginnings as the son of a poor man and his lived experience with economic hardship and the daily struggle to make a living. He, too, called himself "a hustler." Although he was known to own seven helicopters, to self-identify with the "hustling class" was to speak to the majority of Kenyans, for whom some form of hustling is integral to their daily lives and vocabulary. Here, hustling is a populist pitch made by powerful people.

Over the past fifteen years of ethnographic engagement in Nairobi, references to *hustle/hustling/hustler* have in one way or another been evoked in the majority of encounters—from the long-form narrative interviews and conversations with friends in Nairobi's popular neighborhoods, to the street banter with *matatu* operators or street vendors in the CBD. As a term, *hustling* may at first seem too prosaic and ordinary to take seriously. Indeed, in the early days of my fieldwork, it took me a while to consider the significance of a term that was not only commonly used in Nairobi but also common in other parts of the Anglophone world. This book argues, however, that paying close attention to hustling opens up timely empirical and theoretical questions about the paradoxical assemblages of urban troubles and possibilities that coexist in the everyday city.

Hustle Urbanism argues that hustling in Nairobi has become the city's expressive articulation of struggle, solidarity, and soul that emerges out of the ordinary confrontations with historical and contemporary injustice, and the persistence of hopeful imaginaries rooted in a detachment from hegemonic pathways of development, work, and adulthood. Hustling has diverse meanings, moral connotations, and epistemic positionings, and this book does not presume to cover all of these. The book does conceptualize hustle as four interconnected elements. First, it is a narrative of struggle associated with "getting by" when income is made beyond the wage and basic infrastructure is insecure. Second, it is a dynamic urban practice of (sometimes communal) self-provision that constantly adapts to volatile and uncertain environments. Third, it is a socially embedded and place-based practice of exchange, distribution, and reciprocity shaped by the complex structures of opportunities and obligations unique to each individual's position and stage of life, involving different forms. Fourth, hustling is an oppositional as well as performative disposition that reflects twenty-first-century versions of anti-colonial self-determination and agentive autonomy. Each of these four elements reveals the entangled spatial and temporal webs of economic, social, and political life in precarious urban environments.

Geographies of hustle are replete with ambiguities, layered meanings, and diverse tactics. Paying attention to *hustle* as an urban form opens up a constellation of ways to deepen our reading of urban dispositions and practices associated with diverse labors and modes of valuation. Understanding hustle economies matters because they are inextricably connected to the concerns of researchers, practitioners, and policymakers grappling with the following pressing question: how are the majority of young urban Africans making a living, making a life, and making a mark in cities without jobs and where service provision is uneven? This book advances twenty-first-century debates concerning the future of work for youth on the African continent but also beyond (Barford and Coombe 2019; Dubbeld and Cooper 2021; ILO 2018), because as Will Monteith, Dora-Olivia Vicol, and Philippa Williams (2021) argue, we live at a time when diverse economies across the globe are increasingly operating "beyond the wage." In Nairobi, hustle reflects the layered histories of anti-colonial struggles and uneven urban planning, and the role youth have played in shaping the first and contesting the second. But hustling also reflects wider global histories and continuities of urban inequalities and insecurities. Therefore, inviting readers to *think with* Nairobi opens up a wider reflection about the "precarious

present" (Millar 2018), the uncertain future of work, and the modalities of self-organized provisioning in cities with uneven services (Kinder 2016).

Hustle Urbanism provides a deep engagement with the "self-narrations" (Kimari 2022b) of young Nairobians whose perspectives have to date been under-represented in mainstream discourse. As Kimari asks, "what becomes possible when African youth self-narrations are foregrounded?" (2022b, 35). The book explores the narratives, logics, and urban practices of *hustle,* used as a verb and a noun to convey dispositions as much as actions, always somewhat ambiguous in their specificity and moral register. Engaging empirically and theoretically with hustle as an idea and a practice opens up the possibilities of seeing how youth on the edges of political, social, and economic urban life express and make sense of life, labor, and belonging in the city. It starts with the premise that there is much to learn from youths' street-oriented knowledge and narratives of struggle, opportunity, and placemaking and that doing so calls for taking seriously the descriptive and analytical expression of everyday vernaculars and urban practices.

HUSTLE MATTERS

In Nairobi, the hustle economy has formed and is most concentrated at the urban margins of main(stream) city spaces, economics, and political life. And at the same time, as the three opening vignettes illustrate, references to *hustling* travel across the city, from the popular neighborhoods to the Central Business District, to the populist discourse of contemporary Kenyan politics. Hustling has become integral to the everyday "webs of significance" for young people in Nairobi whose childhood, education, and working lives may be "spun" (Geertz 1977, 5) at the urban margins, while their popular cultural performances are entangled with hyperglobal references (Katz 2004). In each context across scenarios and spaces of the city, the situated practices of hustling thus echo wider cultural, economic, and political geographies, so as the modalities of hustling traverse the cityscape, they also find resonances beyond Nairobi.

These resonances connect to a number of profound reckonings that concern how life and livelihoods in cities are made when people across the globe, to different degrees, face growing volatilities and uncertain prospects. It is perhaps what Astra Taylor (2023) calls collective "existential insecurity," which facilitates, more than ever, an opportunity to acknowledge shared vulnerabilities with "anonymous others" (Butler 2004, xii). This acknowledgment, in itself an asymptotic as yet unrealized project, is one

that would embrace rather than deny the "inevitable interdependency" (Butler 2004, xii) of all humans and nonhumans in cities globally (Barua 2023). This acknowledgment is foundational to forging collective coping strategies in the face of what Bruno Latour (2019, 9) calls a ground that is "in the process of giving way." So where do we (all of us) orient our attention for how to make sense of what is going on when the ground is giving way?

The book seeks to understand the meanings and situated practices of *hustling,* recognizing that the very idea of hustling may have landed in Nairobi but has traveled across time and space. The first significance of an idea / practice that has found popular circulation in this African city is that it reflects particular dispositions toward life, labor, and belonging in *this city.* Second, the Nairobi stories and hustlescapes relayed in these chapters open up ways of examining how cities elsewhere might be *giving way,* especially when considering the globalized unwaging of cities where making work and making things work is increasingly decoupled from finding a salaried job and from public provision. Third, in scenarios of *hustle urbanism,* the particular dispositions that residents adopt—particularly young people born into a century of rising uncertainty, precarity, and insecurity but also hyperconnectivity—combine a unique ability to both "stay with the trouble" (Haraway 2016) and, as the late civil rights activist John Lewis put it, not be afraid of getting into "good trouble."[1] Therefore, this book argues that paying attention to hustling and its plural registers offers a way of being open to different imaginaries of life, labor, and belonging, and seeing different expressions of care, provisioning, aspiration, and endurance, while at the same time refusing to lose sight of the vulnerabilities and dispossessions that can underpin (and even enable) hustle economies.

For youth living and working in marginalized neighborhoods of Nairobi, hustling is an *expressive articulation* and an *urban practice.* As an expressive articulation, hustling has become part of Nairobi's urban vernacular and folded into the palimpsests of everyday lived experiences across diverse contexts throughout the city, with evocations of urban hustles displayed on the canvases of moving *matatu* or narrated through the homegrown hip-hop tracks of Nairobi youth artists. As an urban practice, hustling shapes modes of provisioning, placemaking, and resistance, all of which challenge the hegemonic norms of the modern work ideal (Ferguson and Li 2018; Monteith, Vicol, and Williams 2021). These urban hustles reflect the "unique, hybrid, informalised modernities of cities in the South" (Pieterse 2011, 13),

while also echoing the plural, situated, diasporic practices of cities in the North.

Hustling reflects the dynamic and innovative dimensions of youth liveli-hoods in contrast to more well-established narratives. These include "infor-mality," describing the activities and formations that take place outside state purview and regulation (Hart 1973, 2009; G. Myers 2005); "precarity," describing the uncertainty and insecurity associated with rising rates of casualized labor, often associated with postindustrial contexts (Neilson and Rossiter 2008; Vosko 2000); and the "gig economy," describing on-demand work mediated through digital platforms (Woodcock and Graham 2019), which appears to be an "inevitable" effect of tech-driven futures, but as Jim Stanford (2017, 383) reminds us, "the creation of more precarious jobs, including those associated with digital platforms, reflects the evolution of broad social relationships and power balances, as much as technologi-cal innovation in its own right." Informality and precarity have primarily defined urban conditions and economies in under-resourced urbanscapes in terms of what they lack (Roitman 1990) or what has been eroded (Stand-ing 2011), while the gig economy has come to connote the more recent temporary mode of work facilitated and performed by the platform econ-omy (L. Richardson 2020). In addition to these three concepts describing labor arrangements outside the wage, there is also "entrepreneurship," which has become what historian Moses Ochonu (2018, 2020) calls the "dis-cursive referent" of twenty-first-century studies and policies of African eco-nomic development.

Hustling can reflect aspects of informality, precarity, the gig economy, and entrepreneurship, but it also reveals a more complicated story that does not fit into discourses of survivalism and poverty traps or those of uplift and poverty reduction. As the ethnography in the following chapters shows, the narratives and urban practices of hustling are an emic expres-sion of the affirmative and generative, but also exploitative and insecure, ambivalent dimensions of social and economic life for youth living at the urban margins.

While many people across the world today might describe themselves as entrepreneurs, there is a notable contrast in scholarly evaluations of entrepreneurship particularly focused on the Majority World: one reading has tended to celebrate individual pursuits of profit and responsibility and argues that formalizing property rights is key to enabling entrepreneurs to "unlock" capital from their informally secured assets (e.g., De Soto 2000);

another reading adopts a neo-Marxist view focused on the structural dis-possession of workers, arguing that any celebration of entrepreneurship is a form of petite bourgeoisie that undermines the possibilities of organized labor struggles (Rizzo 2017).

In a way, both the celebration and derision of entrepreneurship argue that operating within informally organized systems of labor and urban provisioning is a problem insofar as it can lead to continued insecurity, exploitation, and poverty traps. There is validity to this. But both perspec-tives also miss something important. First, market relationships are *not* purely transactional. They are highly relational, spatial, and "embedded" in social ties (Polanyi 2001).[2] Second, because business in the nonofficial econ-omy cannot be divorced from the personal and the political, there are a multitude of obligations and pressures entangled with everyday dealings. In turn, these form possibilities for accessing and distributing resources, and avenues for collective resistance and organizing. The book therefore complicates dominant representations of entrepreneurial activities, which have tended to depict (and celebrate) self-interested pursuits seeking out innovation and demarcation from one's peer group.

Hustling emphasizes what and how things get done (what is there rather than what is absent), how doing so is profoundly relational (rather than individualistic), and how hustling operates because of and in spite of structural inequalities (rather than assuming that any form of business can operate outside of these). As Ochonu (2020) argues with reference to entre-preneurship in Africa, there is a need to develop new analytical frames for examining the "complex economic lives" of African entrepreneurs who complicate some of the "neat dichotomies" often evoked in scholarship on African economic history or development policy, between formal/infor-mal, worker/merchant, bourgeoisie/peasant. To do so, the book is deeply informed by the perspectives and analytical registers of interlocutors who self-identify as hustling and whose moral economy defies singular narra-tives of either survivalism or "boot-strapping success" (Ochonu 2020). So let us consider how Nairobi itself facilitates particular hustle terrains.

NAIROBI: PALIMPSEST CITY

Nairobi reflects histories and "continuities" (Kothari 2019) of uneven devel-opment and systemic social, economic, political, and material inequality, in terms of access to housing, education, employment, and health care. But it is neither enough nor helpful to regard life, labor, and modes of

provisioning in Nairobi's popular neighborhoods in terms of abjection, lack, or failure. Prince Guma's (2020, 729) articulation of "incompleteness" offers a generative lens through which to investigate and appreciate the "processes of infrastructural heterogeneity and diversity" in Nairobi. Guma's empirical focus on mobile service infrastructures in Nairobi and their mode of incompleteness advances a rereading of Nairobi and incompleteness more broadly, in a way that can be applied to several realities across the city. Incompleteness can express a literal material manifestation of being *in construction* or *missing parts* or in *disrepair.* But it can also reflect a figurative and symbolic mode of being "always in the making" (Guma 2020, 729), Francis Nyamnjoh (2017, 262) argues that with affirmative recognition of incompleteness comes a particular kind of conviviality, where "accommodation is the order of the day" and where incompleteness in oneself and in others is not seen as "something negative but as a source of potency." This offers an important way of re-seeing a city that started out in 1899 as a settler colonial metropole excluding Black Africans other than through modes of exploited labor and servitude. Nairobi's colonial urban imaginary was therefore literally *made up* for the British and later was unmade and remade by African Kenyans following independence (Smith 2019). All the while, Nairobi was always relationally entangled with diverse and sometimes competing influences, investments, and interests. To see Nairobi as a city of incompleteness, unfinished, is to affirm its ongoing modalities of (un)(re)making and "becoming" (Biehl and Locke 2017), to read the cityscape beyond deprivation or lack and instead pay attention to *what is,* in all its complexities, contradictions, and contingencies (Fontein et al. 2024).

Nairobi's profound contradictions date back to its colonial past, and inequalities across all domains of urban life have persisted despite the transition between British colonial rule (1899–1963) and Kenyan independence. Since 1899, when Nairobi was known as a "white garden city" and off-limits to Africans outside of Kibera, the city has continuously contended with the legacies of exclusionary master plans, segregation, unregulated real estate markets, and makeshift infrastructures (Hake 1977; Huchzermeyer 2011; Wrong 2009). During the colonial era, Kenya's primary wealth was based on its agricultural production. Nairobi itself did not have an industrial economy, so the majority of economic activity in the city was based on migrant service-sector work (L. White 1990). Some of the only livelihood opportunities in the city were informal and unwaged service jobs, albeit intimately tied to the formal and regulated economy, either filling a

gap or complementing existing economic activity. As Luise White (1990, 1) argues in her study of sex work and casual labor during the colonial era, "the illicit often supported the respectable."

Today, Nairobi exemplifies urban extremes at work. Since Mwai Kibaki's presidency (2002–13), the past two decades have seen an acceleration of speculative urban development, with a confluence of foreign investment, deregulation of housing and land markets, and a growing international development sector using Nairobi as its East African hub. Special Economic Zones and "fantasy plans" like Tatu City (Watson 2013) and large technology hubs like Konza Technopolis (Van Den Broeck 2017) have projected futuristic visions of African "smart" high-tech urban development. Nairobi has been heavily marked by (and in many ways helped to shape) twenty-first-century digital revolution and information communication technology (ICT) innovations. Parts of the city contain all the familiar trappings of contemporary neoliberal capitalism, serving Kenyan elites and a well-resourced expatriate class of development and social innovation professionals who benefit from the city's fancy shopping malls and restaurants, private international schools, manicured lawns, and cheap domestic labor. After years of political deliberation and complicated financial maneuvers, the city now boasts an elevated toll expressway used mostly by private vehicles going to and from the Jomo Kenyatta International Airport and the most affluent western part of the city; a journey that used to take two hours now takes under twenty minutes (Pollio 2021). But alongside these expressions of modernization and development, the postcolonial governments never actually decolonized the colonial state apparatus (Shihalo 2018)—as the political elites have continued to concentrate wealth and resources at the expense of the *wananchi* (common people).

Nairobi's "smart" urban dreamscapes contrast sharply with the everyday realities of Nairobi's majority residents, the economically active poor who "live on little" (Zollman 2020) and lower-middle classes. According to the most recent 2019 census, more than 60 percent of the city's residents live in underserved densely populated neighborhoods that occupy "five percent of the total residential land area of the city" (UN-Habitat 2006, 7), cut off from reliable basic services, experiencing frequent power and water shortages and inadequate sanitation facilities. Yet the *wananchi* are the tech-literate frugal customers, retailers, and repair technicians of the various ICT products and services being marketed and sold all over the city. So, alongside corporate "platform urbanism" (Pollio 2021) and "speculative

urbanism" (Goldman 2011), the majority of Nairobians have long developed a constellation of "real" economic practices (MacGaffey 1991) and micro-level financial decisions (Zollman 2020) that may appear makeshift and peripheral to state purview (King 1996; G. Myers 2005) but are also deeply entangled with mainstream East African "success stories" of the mobile banking sector and other tech innovations. Youth living in popular neighborhoods in particular reflect this paradox the most: they are marginalized by the formal labor and housing market yet superconnected to the global digital economy and shaping their own dynamic modalities of urban life, work, and play.

How then can we understand contemporary youth livelihoods and dispositions in Nairobi's popular neighborhoods? Mary Kinyanjui's (2019, 8) work on *utu-ubuntu* business models examines the "global and local spatial and cultural forms as well as different business logics, values and norms" of informal markets in Nairobi, emphasizing practices of mutuality and reciprocity in everyday transactions and economic relations. Though she focuses on the informal markets around the city, her analysis of these practices reflect the socially contingent logics and economic rationalities that mark the rich diversity of everyday dealings and business in Nairobi.

This calls for what Felwine Sarr's (2019) *Afrotopia* refers to as the possibilities of reading cityscapes anew—not only recentering an Afro-centric perspective but also suggesting that African cities are best positioned to "rethink our conceptions of progress" (118) to avoid the (Western) "mistakes of the industrial adventures of the past several centuries" (117). This reading includes moving away from notions of informality and a focus on lacks, instead conceptualizing African cities as "palimpsest cities" (105), with several layers and entanglements of form—from the superimpositions of different architectural forms evoking different precolonial, colonial, and postcolonial temporalities and influences, to intersecting economic forms and logics that defy formal/informal and capitalist/community dualisms, to diverse choreographic ways of inhabiting public spaces. Drawing on both Kinyanjui and Sarr's reading of urban life, let us turn to Mathare, one of the oldest and most densely populated neighborhoods in Nairobi that epitomizes palimpsest urbanism, situated approximately seven kilometers from Nairobi's Central Business District. The focus in this next section is not simply on describing Mathare as a place but also on considering how things get done, and by whom.

MATHARE MODALITIES

Mathare Valley has a long history of being regarded as "beyond the city's responsibility" (Hake 1977, 147). There are several reasons for this. Waves of displaced people settled in the 1930s during the height of British colonial rule, before later being evicted. It was also where anti-colonial freedom fighters came and went during the 1940s and 1950s, and where squatters came back to settle by the time of colonial independence in 1963. As chapter 2 explains in more detail, in this peripheralized part of the city, the state has either been largely absent or manifested its presence in inconsistent ways, which has meant that residents making life and livelihoods in Mathare have faced extreme forms of infrastructural poverty but also formed a plurality of self-organized, autonomous zones.

In a historical account of Mathare published in the decade after independence, Andrew Hake (1977) picked up on the rhetoric of "self-help" that was informing popular descriptions of local social, economic, and political organization in this part of the city that had been left to its own devices. Referring to the kinds of work that took place across Mathare Valley, Hake differentiated between what Barbara Ward called "odd job men" (quoted in Hake 1977, 9), referring to the urban migrants scrambling for any work to make ends meet in any corner of the city, and the "self-help jobs" that were made and undertaken in Mathare Valley itself. As a palimpsest of urban space accommodating different modalities of refuge, resistance, and resettlement, Mathare had acquired a reputation for operating "outside the law and conventions of the colonial regime" (Hake 1977, 147) and became a place where men and women "without jobs or houses set about building a new suburb of the self-help city" (148).

Hustle Urbanism picks up on, and elaborates, the description of Mathare as a "self-help city," conceptualized here as a part of the city that contends with long-standing adversities that reflect legacies of colonial violence, continued underinvestment, and inequalities of global capitalism. And yet the popular neighborhoods that become self-help cities also forge repertoires of resourceful strategies for learning, making, working, fixing, doing, moving, staying, leaving, earning, paying, playing, taking, sharing, and waiting. This book argues that these repertoires form *hustle economies,* relying on a combination of mutual aid, bricolage, and making do, often strategically subverting certain norms in order to get things (done) against the odds.

Mathare was segmented into different "villages" and despite having grown significantly in population over the past fifty years (from circa 30,000 to 300,000), many residents still refer to their "village," each with its own social and economic organization. Against the backdrop of profound inequality that persists as the "future city" and the "real city" continue to operate in tandem, Mathare contends with a vulnerable youth demographic with limited access to formal employment and education opportunities (including secondary school and vocational training). Yet, given its densely populated settlement with a high concentration of households whose infrastructural needs are not met by the state, groups of Mathare youth have asserted their place as local providers of homegrown basic services.

In Nairobi, there is a deep history of youth-led associational life, which has played out in the popular neighborhoods that have formed and grown on the edges of the main city. Youth groups have served as vital community-based organizations with diverse social, economic, environmental, and activist pursuits. Most notably, these youth groups have provided crucial support systems particularly for school leavers unable to afford further formal educational or professional training, and often unable to reach milestones associated with adulthood. Within this window of time and space of collective vulnerability, uncertainty, and imagination, youth groups have tended to form portfolios of collective entrepreneurial practices.

These have varied across groups, but a foundational entrée into the popular economy for youth across the city has been residential garbage collection, which requires minimal financial and seed capital and enables various scales of resource recovery and repair. This may seem, to some, like last-resort work, but to those with little to lose and an imagination, working with the capaciousness of waste and the possibilities of turning discards into some form of value has given many youth across the city ways to build diverse livelihood opportunities, secure vital social ties and forms of belonging in their neighborhoods, and connect to external actors and support structures outside their neighborhoods.

In Nairobi's popular neighborhoods, garbage poses a visual, olfactic, and material disturbance (Hawkins and Muecke 2002) that reflects the "unruly" effects of growing urban density (Archer 2015), especially when there is no reliable public-service provision (Tripathy and McFarlane 2022).[3] Youth without jobs and nothing to lose recognized the value of *tako* (colloquial term for garbage) in material terms (for resale and recycling), and its value in terms of neighborhood claims and placemaking. Garbage became for

many youth raised in popular neighborhoods a material, social, and spatial currency of the hustle economy, and the waste hustle became widespread though hyperlocal, fragmented, and territorially zoned.

Through and alongside waste work, perhaps one of the most reliable sources of revenue for youth groups in popular neighborhoods, a constellation of other "real" labors formed across the licit/illicit spectrum. This included illegal alcohol brewing, petty theft, or providing "muscle" to protect a neighborhood business or residential compound. But it also included, and sometimes by the same youth groups, sanitation and cleaning services, urban farming, grassroots humanitarianism, social work, environmental activism, peer-to-peer mentorship, community organizing, development workshop hopping, and various genres of performance and creative art. All these labors have been predominantly youth-led and have reinvented the terms of "work" and what occupations could be valued in the unofficial, wageless economy.

Youth who hustle in Mathare therefore occupy and shape a particular kind of terrain, with various facets of their local economies operating in a form of "legal twilight" (Hake 1977, 159). Inevitably, certain activities within these diverse livelihoods at some point circumvent the law or come up against local authorities. Here I am not only referring to the activities that are systematically criminalized or policed, such as petty theft or illegal alcohol brewing. I am also referring to the labors involved in forging relationships with the "right" actors who might have some leverage and could ensure that municipal lorries actually come, or finding alternative ways to get a lorry to come to your part of the city, the "no-go zones," so that the trash collected by local youth groups might be taken to the municipal dump. I am referring to the creative hacks that youth engaged in water vending undertake to reroute water connections during the dry season when there are shortages.

This hustle terrain is laced with local codes and shared street knowledge often rooted in entangled biographies that combine tragic and comedic moments alike, where comic relief is often a coping mechanism for all-too-frequent loss, violence, and drama. It is precisely the tragicomedy of what youth in Nairobi refer to as the *mtaa* (Swahili term for the street or "the hood") that can simultaneously leave youth feeling "stuck" if they want to get out but can't (Sommers 2012) but also continuously drawn back (and proud) if they do leave. Folded into the Swahili vernacular known as Sheng (Githiora 2018), the term *hustle* refers to a condition, a way of life,

a persistent struggle, a logic, and an interpretation of the multiple labors involved in making life work in Nairobi. As a constantly changing pattern of advancement, loss, banter, social connection, and individual experimentation that is always met with obligations, hustling has become a kaleidoscopic performance of everyday efforts to get by and get things done—with soul and style.

In Mathare, the key objective is simultaneously to keep moving and find one's place, even when there is no clear sense of direction. Youth are often busy being "somewhere," as a popular exchange between two friends illustrates: The retort to the humorous accusation *umepotea!* ("you've been lost!," insinuating that you haven't been seen) is *niko tu* ("I'm just here," insinuating that you've been around), often followed by *ninahustle tu* ("I'm just hustling"). Fist bumps are then usually exchanged, as both parties understand that *ninahustle* infers simultaneously being on the move and stuck in place. By extension, the oft-used plural expression *tunahustle* (we hustle) has become a euphemism for the shared struggle to get by but also an affirmative phrase recognizing the "hard work" involved in constantly contending with uncertain returns. There is a kind of dance in the *mtaa* where being stuck and being on the move involves a constant oscillation between individual and collective endeavors. This choreography includes making the in-between moments and spaces matter—when there might not be any work at present, something could come up at any moment. That something can invite solo effort, but a lot of the time it calls for ensemble work.

While many across Nairobi refer to their life and work as hustling, youth who have engaged in the local waste economy, in particular, demonstrate the parallels between waste work and the logics of hustling more broadly: the ability to make a living against the odds by building an opening of opportunity that both takes advantage of and calls out systems that perpetuate urban inequality. According to the oral histories I have heard over the years, youth-led residential garbage collection started in Mathare in the 1990s, responding to a confluence of factors. These included continuous rural to urban migration in response to the structural adjustment programs of that era, with popular neighborhoods (pejoratively called urban "slums") serving as sites of urban "arrival" (Saunders 2010) for new Nairobians looking for housing and work but unable to find either in the formal economy. And at the same time, there was a rise of nonbiodegradable waste across the city when fast-moving consumer goods were being packaged

and sold at the right price point for low-income areas (think of the Unilever sachets and the like that entered these markets in the early 2000s), and the municipality was ever-more stretched and unable to service households across the city. This was especially the case for densely populated neighborhoods where concentrations of uncollected solid waste accumulated on the roadsides and became literally enmeshed in the fabric of every pedestrian footpath.

Combining time on their hands and collective audacity, underemployed youth across Nairobi's popular neighborhoods turned the "unruly" (Archer 2015) uncollected household garbage into a resource: turning the discards of their densely populated neighborhoods into a livelihood opportunity and a homegrown waste collection service. It is telling that many older youth claim to have been "one of the founders" of the original youth-led garbage collection and recycling initiative in Nairobi. But this is part of the point: the story of garbage collection in the *mtaa* (explored further in chapter 3) has become a source of place and pride among the majority of youth who have grown up in popular neighborhoods and who have become over time the key providers of numerous basic services. As Kimberley Kinder (2016, 11) describes in her study of Detroit communities "making do in a city without services," there are forms of "shared self-provisioning" that emerge among neighborhood residents realizing that they have to self-organize when public provisioning either no longer reaches them or has never done so in the first place. As activist scholar Robert Bullard (1994) reminds us through his enduring work *Dumping in Dixie,* the environmental injustice facing vulnerable communities forced to live alongside (or literally with) untreated waste and associated toxins cannot be overstated, a reality that has played out across geographies and is consistently enmeshed in racialized, classed, and gendered violence. In the face of such harms, the ethic of "shared self-provisioning" and the formation of grassroots activisms are integral to everyday collective life, and must be amplified.

In Nairobi, many youth are caught in a sense of suspension and "waithood" (Honwana 2012), which is individually felt but collectively experienced. Comprising over half of the residential population in Mathare, the majority of youth growing up there face limited prospects of getting a formal job and are often unable to reach the culturally recognized milestones and life stages for a young person moving into adulthood (e.g., a stable job, affording property, being able to pay for dowry). Therefore,

friendship-based youth groups have become crucial foundations for social and economic organization in different Mathare villages. Importantly, young men and women who self-identify as *mahustla* (hustlers in Sheng) have never been passive in the face of threats to livelihoods, health, and justice. They have found ways to articulate and practice their everyday "social navigations" (Vigh 2006) to cope with the uncertainties, unpredictabilities, and risks associated with life (Waage 2006) in the self-help city. This has included experimenting with different sorts of aspirations, dealings, and plans to reconfigure the world around them and render their lives more viable (Dyson and Jeffrey 2023; Honwana and De Boeck 2005; Katz 2004; Kimari 2018; Simone and Pieterse 2017; Thieme 2018).

The social navigation of hustling has shaped particular youth subjectivities and rhythms starting from the neighborhood because youth do not stand still for long, even if they are in some way caught in waithood. They find a constellation of ways to assert their place, build networks, and form modalities of work, however tenuous. These are situated within the *mtaa* but also extend beyond it and inform youth culture across the city. Youth at the margins continuously remake the everyday city, by shaping their own *mtaa* strategies and dispositions founded on shared practices and lived experiences—a kind of learned way of being in the city—what Pierre Bourdieu (1997) referred to as "habitus"—that involves adapting to expected and spontaneous emergencies of all kinds. This learned way of being forms what Chris Richardson and Hans Skott-Myhre (2012) have called a "habitus of the hood," a modality of dwelling and belonging in marginalized urban spaces that are—despite their status, stigma, and positioning in relation to the mainstream city and economy—a place where the majority residents in the city live, work, and pass the time.

The *mtaa* is where people *wanakaa* (stay) and make ties, where they weave webs of social, ecological, and political labors that operate outside of, or sometimes alongside, hegemonic frames of waged and linear economies, and formal institutional politics. The *mtaa* is not necessarily where people call "home," as this is often a concept reserved for the place "up-country" that is close to ancestral lands and where elders live. The *mtaa* is composed of what Suzi Hall (2021) calls "edge" spaces that are simultaneously marginalized and transgressive. In Nairobi, the habitus of the hustle makes work outside the wage and finds ways to make things work even when systems and materials break down. It organizes life, labor, and learning on and for the street, through various registers and acts of rejigging,

repositioning, reuse, repurposing, and repair. To study and begin to grasp what the habitus of the hustle might be poses all kinds of methodological dilemmas and journeys, which is the focus of the next section.

ETHNOGRAPHY AND THE WAYS IN

7:30 a.m. Check my bag one more time: Notebook, small pen, pocket knife, recorder, batteries, passport copy, phone, bandana, 1,000 KES note in a hard-to-reach pocket, 200 KES for transport and food for the day, a couple of plastic bags to use for trash, water bottle, hand sanitizer . . . Put exact change for matatu in pocket, slip on boots. Walk for thirty minutes to town. Queue up at public toilet next to Kenyan National Archives, likely the last easy-to-access toilet for the rest of the day. Give the lady at the entrance 10 KES; she gives me a bit of toilet paper. If there is water and soap that is a good day. Get to the matatu stage nearby and wait for number 46 to fill up. Can take up to twenty minutes, maybe more. Can't be picky, but if possible I love the window seat, in the second row. Once we get moving, I'm about thirty minutes from Mathare, depending on traffic. Text my friend to say I'm on my way . . .

To get to Mathare, I take a bumpy *matatu* ride from the CBD, route 46. Each time I come to Nairobi, it takes me an hour on the first day to meander around the CBD asking different *matatu* conductors hanging outside their parked vehicles where the stage for *matatu* going to Mathare is now situated. It seems to change every few months, depending on several factors, including the continuous disciplining of *matatu* mobility and presence in the city center, especially since 2005 when the Transport Licensing Board started to demand that all *matatu* have a permit in order to access the CBD (see chapter 4 in Ference 2024). Once the *matatu* has departed from town, it defies traffic rules and any sense of straightness, and eventually arrives onto Juja Road, which connects one point of Mathare to other parts of Eastlands. We ride past "Little Mogadishu," and I usually get off before the *matatu* starts getting close to Kariobangi, or "Light industries." The transition from the CBD to Juja Road bombards the senses, as do the soundscapes. Like countless streetscapes in the Majority World, Juja Road is a kaleidoscopic street theater where the lines between commercial, residential, social, pedestrian, and motorized space and sound are constantly embroiled. Like the corrugated metal sheet that covers most homes and stalls, everything seems jagged and in motion, and the *matatu* seems to swerve even when it presumes to stop to let people off—in fact, it never completely stops, and getting off requires a jump and a certain satisfaction

in finding one's balance before walking away from the squeezed vehicle, into the busy streets.

The spaces between built structures, pedestrians, and popular economies lining the streets are liminal and always full of possibility—a greeting, a curious glance at the stalls to one's left and right, a quick calculation of the price of tomatoes this time compared to last, the chance of running into a friend. All spaces feel modular, particularly pavements, the spaces to sell and display fresh produce, spaces to repair thirdhand goods, space to meet and greet neighbors (and to greet strangers so they find you a little bit less strange), and space to zigzag one's way through a constant countercurrent of bodies heading in the opposite direction. Moments of some pushing and shoving in the interest of just being able to get to where you're heading are interspersed with moments of humor and civility, and in my case, probably excessive utterances of *sama hani* (excuse me), as though I am constantly asking for some kind of permission to walk these streets where I am not from but keep returning to. Eventually, *sama hani* is replaced with various iterations of "hello," from the formal *Habari yako?* greeting directed to elders, to the slang greetings like *niaje?* directed to youth, once I start slowing down my pace and intend to stay a while.

The roadside includes a lively social infrastructure of commerce and banter, often occupied by street vendors who have been selling their fresh produce of the day for years, some decades. Some of the women who are known affectionately as *mama mboga* (greengrocer) can often be found cutting kale, called *Sukuma wiki* (push the week), the most nutritious and affordable staple vegetable.[4] *Mama mboga* cuts with agility and nonchalance, looking up at her friend to share the daily gossip. Her knife may be blunt and missing a handle, but imperfect instruments do not get in the way of getting a job done. The shoe shiner on the street corner sits on a small stool that bring his knees to his shoulders as he curves his back over his customer's shoes. A well-cared-for tattered leather briefcase is opened with three colors of shoe polish, a brush, and a cloth. The customer is made to feel comfortable perched on a chair placed carefully under a small parasol—get your shoes shined under the shade, first-class service. As a single man reads his *Daily Nation* paper while sitting on another stool on the roadside, two other men (perhaps longtime friends, perhaps just fellow roadside time killers) stare over the shoulder of the one who had money to pay for the newspaper that day—or find a copy of yesterday's somewhere.

The three men occasionally comment on the headlines, and an animated discussion ensues about the politics of the day. It is worth talking about age-old issues that seem to rarely change, just because it is important to make one's opinion known. Debate makes the morning move, after all, and helps pass the time both for those who have no time to lose and for those who have too much time to spare.

Some street vendors claimed their corner ages ago. Mama Kahos sold a modest quantity of fruits and vegetables on the corner of Mlango Kubwa bar every day for forty-six years (1974–2020), until she recently retired. The same goes for Geoffrey with his *mandazi* (fried dough) stand in Huruma. Amid these peopled fixtures that became "landmarks" of popular street life and precious sources of local knowledge, the daily rhythm and generalized uncertainty associated with how much each person might earn that day created an atmosphere of contingency, provisionality, and impermanence. At the same time, care and precision characterized the presentation of street businesses, pedestrians, and homes. The fruits and vegetables, thirdhand shoes, and pieces of coal were neatly displayed on the *kanga* fabrics carefully set out by daily street vendors. Every person's shoes were meticulously polished, every man's shirt and children's school uniforms were carefully ironed. Though every street combined a mixed typology of homes—from the flats in the four- to eight-story concrete buildings to the *mabati* (shack) structures, outside each home, laundry lines bowed with brightly colored sheets and clothes hanging to dry in the sun.

There was a constant choreography of embodied labor involved in the most minute of tasks, performed with precision and dexterity, and animated with constant sociality. Underpinning most homegrown businesses was a craft for resource recovery and maintenance. To conserve, repair, and repurpose was as important as earning, producing, and selling. And in the background, various genres of music, banter, some shouting, and much laughter punctuated the nearby drones of traffic sounds, with *matatu* horn percussions and their engine throttles being the loudest instruments of all. Juja Road and its vivacious soundscape was simultaneously thrilling and exhausting, for years appearing increasingly familiar in its daily pace and general patterns of movement and activity but seeming different in the particulars of each visit. Riding along Juja Road on *matatu* 46 could let the unfazed commuter daydream and pay no attention or serve as an electrifying mosaic of partially rendered stories of popular urban life.

Entering Mathare

Conducting ethnographic fieldwork in any city involves a multiplicity of encounters with different parts of the city, its infrastructures, its residents, and its atmospheres. Urban ethnography feels like a dance with and within the city, a constant movement through space and time, a structured impro-visation that is both intense and playful. Navigating the city itself plays a significant role in negotiating the spatial and relational differences that are integral to methodological dilemmas and possibilities, including the first practical challenge regarding where to stay and how to get around. In this sense, urban ethnographic work complicates the boundaries between the doing and the writing. I've been coming to, leaving from, and returning to Nairobi since 2005, and what constitutes "the field" continues to expand temporally and spatially, stretching beyond the city itself as some of my research interlocutors have become dear friends over time. One has tragi-cally passed away. If we self-identify as ethnographers, we grapple with the ever-present political and ethical dimensions of cultural representa-tion (Clifford 1986), the hard-earned and sometimes fragile trust between researcher and research participant (Duneier 1999), and the shared vulner-abilities between the "vulnerable observer" (Behar 1996) and those who become key interlocutors and sometimes research collaborators. Here it is important to foreground the rest of the book with a reflection on what ethnographic fieldwork entailed, specifically.

   In the summer of 2005, I had an opportunity to take part in a collab-orative action research project focused on piloting a participatory meth-odology for sustainable business development in Kenya, led by Cornell University academics from the Johnson Business School. We were a six-person team with different disciplinary training, all in our early twenties and either in the middle of or just having completed our master's degrees. We spent time in Nairobi's largest and most well-known popular neigh-borhood, Kibera, traveled to Kisumu and Nakuru, and did homestays in Molo, a town in Nakuru country. Following that experience, I realized that I wanted to come back and better understand the social and working lives of the young people we collaborated with, and I was especially interested in the urban context, where young people were all at once celebrated for their "entrepreneurial capabilities" and yet systematically stigmatized for being "trouble makers." I left Kenya that summer realizing that there was so much more to learn, and importantly much to unlearn. I hoped I could

return and spend much more time, detached from the obligation to adhere to a particular framework. While I have a great deal of respect for practitioners, and greatly respected my colleagues that summer, I wanted to better understand how people living and working in popular neighborhoods described and analyzed their own realities rather than how they might adopt particular development or business theories of change.

Kibera was already saturated with nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), development projects, researchers, and film crews. So I became interested in other parts of the city that had not received as much concentrated attention, the ones that were more self-organized and less well connected to external forms of support. Once I embarked on a PhD program a few years later, I returned in August 2009 to start language training and fieldwork. I spent a year in Nairobi with my partner and our daughter, who was eight months old when we arrived. Over the course of the first few months, I spent time with different members of the social enterprise that had formed as an outcome of that 2005 summer of ground work: Community Cleaning Services (CCS) (see chapter 4).

One of my entry points into ethnographic fieldwork was to start as a participant "cleaner," which I did for three months with each of the ten CCS teams. I then decided to focus on four key areas in the Mathare Valley area: Mlango Kubwa, Mathare Number 10 (also called Mathare 10), Huruma, and Kosovo. These areas were all relatively accessible from one another on foot, getting off the *matatu* somewhere on Juja Road, but they each had their own particular features in terms of housing, community structures, youth group dynamics, and nearby resources. Over the course of that year, weekly transect walks across these four areas involved countless conversations with local residents.

I conducted a total of 140 interviews with community residents, youth group members, and organizations across Nairobi working for NGOs, local governments, and the University of Nairobi. I collaborated with a youth-led film collective on a documentary from May to July 2010 (*Story Yetu*), which involved another thirty interviews. I conducted ten focus group discussions in Mathare; collaborated in three participatory workshops; and attended seven conferences in Nairobi focused on issues including citywide sanitation management, the Kasarani Youth Congress, urban dilemmas (with Pamoja Trust), and a stakeholder's forum with Plan International. I attended three large community-based events and sat in on more than forty weekly Community Cleaning Services staff meetings and ten Pamoja

Trust staff meetings. In collaboration with the late community activist Rose Nyawira, we conducted 190 household survey questionnaires focused on sanitation in Mathare and Kawangware. I also did three homestays at different stages (Kariobangi South in October 2009, Kawangware in December 2009, and Huruma in February 2010), staying with three different interlocutors and their families.

These multiple modes of engagement enabled different kinds of ethnographic observation, learning, and encounter. The information gained from these encounters and oral histories concerned the homegrown waste economy, perceptions and experiences of sanitation, everyday street life in Mathare and gendered dynamics therein, the politics of development in Nairobi and their effects at neighborhood scales, and popular youth culture. Each mode of inquiry facilitated different sorts of relationships with interlocutors. Some were one-off interviewees; others became key interlocutors, even long-term friends.

I also visited the British Institute of East Africa to go over and top up field notes and peruse the extensive book and journal collection in the library, and hosted two workshops there: one in 2010 gathering fellow PhD researchers to share work in progress, and one in 2017 thanks to a BIEA small grant to host an event around the research theme "spending time." I also spent time at the Kenya National Archives searching for documentation on all matters concerning "informal settlements," municipal development, sanitation and waste planning, urbanization, and anything I could find about the areas of the city that had been historically unmapped, rendered invisible, or stigmatized.[5]

There is no doubt that the doctoral program was a crucial foundation for my research in Nairobi and the greatest concentration of time spent there. Yet it was only the beginning of a longer ethnographic engagement, and my analytical work really took form in the subsequent years following completion of my PhD, through a "patchwork" ethnographic approach.[6] I returned in 2011, 2012, 2016, 2017, 2019, 2023, and 2024 to conduct two- to three-week fieldtrips, reconnecting with my key interlocutors in Mathare and trying to read the cityscape more widely—to think and learn with Mathare and the rest of the city in relational terms. Mathare seemed to be a lifeworld on its own, but I also became interested in the ways in which narrations and practices of hustle *moved* across the city. Over the years, especially the past decade as I transitioned from graduate student to university lecturer, with less time to spend *in* the field, I prioritized maintaining ties

and cultivating ongoing relationships with certain key interlocutors from each of the field sites where I had spent so much time between 2009 and 2010, and making new contacts along the way too. The trips back were crucial points of reconnection, homestays, transect walks, follow-up interviews, workshops at the BIEA in 2016 and 2017, and so on. In addition, the last decade saw an expansion and democratization of digitally mediated communication, which facilitated regular interactions—especially through Facebook and WhatsApp (see chapter 7). This book focuses especially on the stories and lives of individuals who were not only key interlocutors during the PhD years but whose social and working lives I've also had the privilege of following over time.

A persistent predicament of long-term ethnographic engagement with a place and a group of people involves a continuous self-critical acknowledgment that ethnographic writing is inherently contingent, especially when we opt for the "textual technique of storytelling" in our ethnographic writing and recognize that "a story is always situated" (Abu-Lughod 1993, 15). Ethnographic writing is an outcome of ethnographic encounters, so for all its "thickness," ethnographic description depicts fragments of lives, moments shared with interlocutors that involve conversations and walkabouts, and if one is fortunate, shared ordinary tasks undertaken in comfortable silence such that spending time together goes far beyond a set of research interviews.[7] In some cases, field*work* becomes entangled with friend*ship,* and here ethnography takes on a whole different meaning, as practice of being in the field, and as practice of writing the field. The more one understands, the more one sits with what one does not know. For any encounter may be shared, but it is individually felt. Both as a method of research and a method of writing, as Lila Abu-Lughod (1993, 16) once argued, ethnography has the challenging task of considering how to set in conjunction the interests and preoccupations of interlocutors as articulated to us, with our interpretation of what we see, hear, and sense in the field, and then we wonder how audiences might find "salience" in the issues raised in the storytelling. And of course, there is so much we cannot include—the eight moleskin notebooks that contain field notes, the seven small pocket notepads, more than one thousand digital photographs, and twelve hours of video footage. Ethnographic writing is partial and ruthlessly selective.

Studying and writing about life and work in Nairobi's self-help urban spaces must also contend with the unprecedented pace and shifting prisms of an urbanism that "we cannot yet 'determine' because it has not yet

become or will never be definite" (Mbembe and Nuttall 2004, 349). An ethnographic approach therefore seems to be the only viable way to experience the "uncertainty and turbulence, instability and unpredictability, and rapid, chronic and multidirectional shifts" of everyday life on the margins of a city like Nairobi (349). It provides a humbling and albeit imperfect mode of getting close to, and learning about, everyday hustles in subjectivity and form (Di Nunzio 2019). Conducting an ethnography on the urban margins challenges mainstream narratives about what constitutes city life and who the protagonists are. Popular neighborhoods may be places of transience, porosity, mobility, experimentation, and adjustments (McFarlane 2011; Vasudevan 2015), but they may also be places of fixture, repetition, discipline, habit, and form (Simone 2018). Therein lie epistemic dilemmas associated with what aspects of urban ethnographic work and "(re)description" (Simone and Pieterse 2017) to render visible and how to do so (Hitchings and Latham 2021). The ethnographic approach adopted for the research on which this book is based has moved *with* the city across time and space, a city that is constantly changing in some ways and stays the same in others. While much is provisional and marked with uncertainty, other aspects of everyday life resist change or are simply ignored (E. Cooper and Pratten 2015; Fontein et al. 2024).

Ethnography in and through a city becomes not just a record of ephemeral bounded *fieldwork* but also a process of connecting particular observations and experiences with wider historical and geographical contexts (Jeffrey and Dyson 2009; Simone and Pieterse 2017). As such, the city itself becomes ethnographic text, and the ethnography moves with the city, through time, and through the relationships that form over that time and in the urban spaces that become familiar ethnographic "sites" of inquiry, of continuous return, of imagination and wonder. Ethnography is as much a constant exercise in cultural interpretation (Geertz 1977) as it is one of intertextual, affective, and relational matter (Stewart 2009). Next I reflect on how this translates to writing *ethnographically*.

On Ethnographic Writing

The sketches I've included at the start of each chapter represent the acknowledgment of intertextuality, affect, relationality, and partial rendering. The sketch represents the ethnographic *way in,* the excuse to linger, and the continuous exercise of working with what Édouard Glissant (1997) terms "opacity." As I've explained elsewhere (Thieme 2024), both the artifact of

the sketch and the practice of sketching reflect a deliberate commitment to paying really close attention to one's surroundings while accommodating that sense of opacity—accepting the limits to what we can know and understand about a place and the people who reside, work, and socialize there. Sketching has become a literal and metaphorical mode for working with opacity because it forces you to linger with what is in front of you, whether it's a familiar scene or something completely new, and invites the mind to wander. In that mode of lingering, musing, and *sitting with scenes,* sketching is deep noticing while deferring explanation—letting the explanation emerge over time.

Although I hope that the explanations offered in this book have matured over time and attained some degree of analytical clarity, the quality of my writing and the presentation of this ethnography still sit with opacity, the enigmas and the "knotty ambiguities of everyday urban life" (Simone and Pieterse 2017, xvii). I do not presume to *speak for* anyone or *give voice* to my interlocutors. This is not my place. But I have tried to read particular urban spaces and places, and occasionally I have found spots to sit or stand still amid the walkabouts and homestays and conversations, hoping that my presence would not disturb, but from where I could get a sense of converging urban sociality and spaces, and try to *make sense* of what was going on. Sketching suspends other kinds of "fieldworking" (such as taking part or interviewing), while enabling the prolongation of *staying* a little while longer, to see what happens. For this reason, each chapter of the book starts with a sketch as a way in and a reminder that the chapter is a partial rendering, working with opacity and limits of what is knowable, that it *sees* from a particular vantage point and positionality (Abu-Lughod 1993), and that it was always entangled with the longing to stay a little longer.

The longing to be *there* in the first place, to stay, to return, especially when "there" is at the urban margins, raises complicated ethical dilemmas (Thieme, Lancione, and Rosa 2017). The conditions of everyday life for my interlocutors are rooted in legacies of colonial violence, uneven development, and continued inequality, while my own intersectional privilege (white and waged) continues to benefit from the structures of historical and contemporary inequality. It is not enough to simply acknowledge this and move on, and there are many reasons why it could be problematic for a white European woman working in a Western university to write about marginalized Kenyan youth living in underserved neighborhoods. But it is equally problematic for white Europeans to *not* pay attention to, and take

seriously, the social and working lives of youth in Nairobi. This would not only mean turning away from the lived realities of underserved communities in an African city where multiple modernities coexist; it would also mean overlooking the correspondences between different forms of precarity within cities and across them, and the diverse coping strategies that form in the face of intersectional harms and insecurities. The question is how to write about ethnographic encounters, what claims can be made by scholars who do not share the same lived experience as that of their interlocutors, and which aspects of encounter to focus on. This is a time when questions of positionality and legitimacy abound, fueling much-needed, long-overdue discussions and critical reflections among scholars.

This book is an opportunity to connect reflexive questions concerning *how we do* urban ethnography with critical questions about *how we read* African cityscapes (Kimari 2022b; Mbembe and Nuttal 2004; Okoye 2024; Sarr 2019). Urban ethnography in particular is loaded with anxieties concerning how to locate "the field," how to negotiate one's positionality, and how to write up the field. These raise crucial methodological debates about how we should rethink our own positionalities and roles as ethnographers (Nagar and Geiger 2007) and what regimes of representation and modes of storytelling emerge through our writing practices (Abu-Lughod 1993). Scholars have grappled with these questions for some time, particularly when scholarship is entangled with a political commitment inextricably linked to the social fields they study. This is especially fraught when we are compelled to intervene in the field in some way, knowing that this might challenge conventional ethical norms of research, and yet *not getting involved* would then render the research purely extractive rather than a mutual exchange (Sheper-Hughes 1995). As a Kenyan friend once admitted to me in conversation (and I paraphrase), "if you hadn't continuously shared with us your fieldwork findings and told us what you think about what we're doing when we asked, we would have stopped talking to you a long time ago."

But what does this mean for scholars committed to social justice when part of our own heritage represents systems of oppression? Here I take inspiration from something Tao Leigh Goff said during one of our departmental seminars in 2020 at University College London, remarking on her own mixed heritage: "we all harbour forms of coloniality and decoloniality." And as Kaushik Sunder Rajan (2021) argues in his book on ethnography as "diasporic praxis," we are all "diasporic practitioners" working different

understandings of what is familiar and what feels strange. In my research, the productive tensions between coloniality and decoloniality and "diasporic praxis" have underpinned the fieldwork, the data analysis, the sharing of writing with key interlocutors, and the journey of putting together this book.

An anti-colonial, reflexive ethnographic practice calls for a continuous critical examination of our intentions and biases, including those within activist scholarship. While anthropology and geography have over the past few decades explicitly interrogated and disavowed their disciplines' colonial legacies, ethnography remains "a knowledge practice based on the epistemic objectification of the native informant, which is at the heart of colonial reason" (Rajan 2021, 1–2). We inevitably make mistakes along the way, and the ethnographic representation that emerges through our written interventions are inevitably situated, even as we try to "decolonise our minds" (Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o 1986). Juliette Singh's (2018, 2) writing on "mastery" is instructive here, as she argues that *mastering* was not only integral to colonial logics of domination but inadvertently also became part of anti-colonial revolutionary actions. By extension, efforts to study—to understand, to study, to *master*—a particular field can constitute a form of capture in itself and risk becoming an extractive exercise. How might we then move away not just from claims to "mastery" but also from the very intentions to "master" a field of study?

Ethnography remains an important, albeit imperfect, method and pedagogical practice because fundamentally it is about *being with* people and is, at its best, a "multisituated" practice that has the potential of transgressing presumptions of capture and mastery, making room for other sensibilities and ways of learning: curiosity, vigilance, openness, sensitivity (Rajan 2021), and shared vulnerability. These sensibilities animate the motivation to stay in but especially to return to the field, to maintain ties, to engage in a slower kind of scholarship, to allow for our own fieldwork practice, thinking, and writing to evolve.

Over these past fifteen years, fieldwork included engaging in both toilet cleaning and garbage collection as an apprentice researcher in order to learn about the graft and craft involved in the often invisible and undervalued sanitation and waste labors that take place in the city. These were often crucial precursors to interviews and other forms of data collection because they permitted learning and understanding by doing rather than just observing or asking. Other ethnographers studying waste work in cities

have also done some form of this, working alongside and learning with their key interlocutors, and it can take weeks, months, even years to earn the invitation to work alongside your interlocutors / colleagues in this way.[8] But it's also important not to overstate the legitimacy that might accompany such modes of embodied ethnography, simply because we, the researchers, eventually leave. We do this "hard work," we respect the skills involved in undertaking it well, we are grateful to be shown the ropes, and we are able to write about this work with more sensitivity and granularity, perhaps. We even learn to enjoy the work, for the camaraderie that forms around it, for the satisfaction involved in getting a job done with others. We defend the dignity of work that might otherwise be regarded as "dirty" work. But then, we leave. We have the choice to do other kinds of work.

In my writing, I have deliberately refrained from transposing new categorizations onto the narratives of my interlocutors or qualify their labors in ways that would classify them in terms of legal status, economic revenue, or formal educational attainment. I chose instead to work with their descriptive and analytical categories and youth language (Kimari 2020). I unpack what this means for theorization in chapter 1. Although I have engaged in various efforts to "decolonize ethnography" (Bejarano et al. 2019) through participatory research methods and co-analysis with my interlocutors, many of whom have become friends over the years, this book does not claim to be decolonized ethnography, the way that Carolina Alonso Bejarano et al.'s book is, or Richa Nagar's *Playing with Fire* (2006). Put simply, it is not coauthored. I have instead tried my best to do what Ochonu (2020) suggests—provide an account that is deeply informed by the perspectives and analytical registers of my interlocutors—and I have intentionally included an afterword, inspired by Hakim Hasan's afterword in Mitchell Duneier's *Sidewalk* (1999). It felt important that the last section of the book be written in the voice of someone who has featured in the book, with whom I have shared many conversations over the years. Edward Kahuthia Murimi read an earlier draft of the book and has intimate experiential knowledge of every theme discussed in each chapter, and I knew that he could also shed light on some of the nuances of everyday urban life in Mathare that I might have missed—again, an important point to emphasize: the limits of what we ethnographers can see and know.

Ultimately the book is an intentional reflection of my ethnographic encounters with individuals and spaces in Nairobi, and the themes and angles that have stayed with me the most. This work culminates a phase

of longitudinal research with a particular cohort of interlocutors whom I met at the dawn of their transition into young adulthood and whom are now facing the dusk of their youthhood. The book presents a kind of archive of assembled ethnographic material *and* different hustle stories that are connected to a particular temporality of youthhood and the transition out—both my interlocutors' and my own.

I also want to remark on an additional ethical consideration that has informed the written expression of the book, specifically the deliberate use (or omission) of certain reoccurring terms that feature throughout these chapters. As readers may have noted already, the terms *ghetto, popular neighborhoods,* and *Majority World* have come up. Each merits explanation. *Ghetto* is an emic term sometimes used by my interlocutors. Their use of the term echoes a wider Afro-diasporic urban experience.[9] Connected to this, I have also chosen to draw on the French expression *quartier populaire,* which translates to English as "popular neighborhoods." I do this to avoid the more familiar and pejorative term *slum* or the legalistic term *informal settlements* often used by development practitioners or government officials.[10] Finally, I borrow the terms *Majority/Minority World,* inspired by Bangladeshi social activist and artist Shahidul Alam (2008). The terms *Majority/Minority World* offer an alternative language and optic to the normative and artificial binaries *developing/developed, Third/First World,* and *Global South/North* and decenter not just a Eurocentric perspective but also the presumption that there is a norm and desired end point of "development" and "progress."[11]

BOOK OVERVIEW

Following this introduction, the next two chapters (1 and 2) provide theoretical and historical context, while the core ethnographic chapters that follow (3, 4, 5, 6, 7) adopt a narrative style, each focusing on a set of individuals whose portraits are threaded throughout the book. Each chapter builds on the former and introduces a particular aspect of hustle urbanism, in its relational, spatial, temporal, and political sense. While an underlying theme running across the chapters is the nonlinear and unpredictable temporalities and terrains of the *hustle economy in the self-help city,* the presentation of each chapter does largely follow a chronological order in terms of the sequencing of events.

"Creolizing the Hustle" (chapter 1) explores the social history of hustle, contextualizing the evolution of the term and its use. Doing so involves discussing its relationship to racialized struggles in U.S. cities under Jim

Crow; the representation of hustle and the "hustler" figure in popular culture from the 1960s, including during the rise and globalization of hip-hop from the 1980s onward; its twenty-first-century entanglements with Afro-diasporic vernaculars; and its recent appropriation by corporate and political entities. Providing a conceptual grounding for the following chapters, this first chapter illuminates why *hustle* as a concept and a practice merits further theoretical and empirical attention. The chapter argues that hustle has circulated as an idea across time and space, and its situated practices have diasporic resonances far beyond Nairobi. It thus opens up timely lessons for rethinking urban practices in times of globalized, accentuated uncertainty.

"Self-Help City" (chapter 2) historicizes Nairobi hustles by considering the paradox of Nairobi's urban development. Written for both Kenyanists and for those less familiar with Kenya's political economy, the chapter reflects on how Nairobi's contemporary modernity is shaped by the legacies of settler colonialism and its multifarious postcolonial identity—including the fact that Nairobi popular neighborhoods house more than half of the city's residents on less than 5 percent of the city's land. Drawing on a combination of archival sources, older ethnographic studies, and recent work on Nairobi, the chapter foregrounds the ethnographic chapters that follow with a reflection on Mathare's history of "self-help" urbanism, homegrown economies, and grassroots activism.

"Straight Outta Dumpsite" (chapter 3) focuses on the relationship between youth, hustling, and waste labor in Mathare. The chapter traces the rise of the homegrown youth-led waste economy that formed at a time of major changes in Kenya, including the transition to multiparty politics in 2002 and reforms that included granting more power and recognition to local-level organizations. Youth groups in popular neighborhoods who had little to lose and zero seed capital turned to residential waste collection as an opportunity space. The chapter illustrates how these youth have strategically modulated between survivalist strategies, livelihood diversification using waste as a resource, and transgressions against various forms of authority. As such, hustling *through* waste work enabled at-risk youth to assert their place and position in the city, and highlights the contributions of these hustles to urban political ecologies and economies.

"The Business and Politics of Shit" (chapter 4) focuses on a "partnership" between a social business seeking to commercially engage "entrepreneurial"

youth from Mathare to co-develop a community-based sanitation service. The social business aimed to build on existing youth-led income activities—including the residential waste management business. The chapter traces the different stages and dilemmas of this partnership between unlikely bedfellows—a multinational company bound by particular parameters of for-profit business success and youth groups bound by particular parameters of the hustle economy and *mtaa* way. This case study reframes the critiques of business-led development by focusing not just on the ethical concerns of commercializing "basic" services and turning social needs into market demands but also on the diverse effects of a corporate/community encounter navigating different motivations and contrasting economic and organizational logics.

"Ghetto Gal" (chapter 5) focuses on the gendered dynamics of hustling in Mathare, a neighborhood where women have historically been subject to both gendered violence and insecurity as well as various forms of female-led businesses and openings for challenging traditional gendered norms. The chapter illuminates what it means for women (working single mothers in particular) to navigate intersectional forms of hardship and obligations. Following the previous chapters, which focused on youth group entities, the focus here is on Eliza, whose own life trajectory illustrates how women in the *mtaa* often assume shifting gendered roles as "provider," "carer," "leader," "mentor," and, as Eliza would say, "ghetto gals who hustle too." The chapter draws on life history interviews, informal conversations, homestays, and walkabouts with Eliza to illustrate how she describes and analyzes her situation, particularly how she has navigated male-dominated lifeworlds, while doing everything to provide for her children and their futures at the same time.

"Stayers and Leavers" (chapter 6) focuses on the terrains and temporalities of hustling by reflecting on the effects of passing time on the nonlinear and unpredictable vicissitudes of life for the cohort of youth who featured in chapters 3, 4, and 5. The chapter does this by considering the dynamics at play when certain individuals leave, while others stay, and by analyzing the tensions and solidarities between older and younger youth. The chapter explores what it might mean to make room for younger youth to step up to leadership roles and how the *form* of hustling shifts with age and particular life stages. The chapter thus explores how hustling evolves over time for certain individuals (including the new sorts of investments made)

but also how hustling cultures and aspirations themselves evolve from one youth cohort to another.

"Storytellers Performing the Hustle" (chapter 7) focuses on the performative dimension of hustling, drawing attention to the hustles of youth who identify as activists, social warriors, tour guides, and hip-hop artists. These youth speak from the *mtaa* for the *mtaa* but also have taken advantage of digital platforms and social media to spread their rhythms and build up their brand beyond their hood. The chapter emphasizes the importance of hustling through storytelling—a form of artistry, counternarrative, and creative entrepreneurship that contributes to wider popular efforts to reclaim and decolonize the city. This coincides yet also contrasts with recent efforts to transform former colonial spaces in the historical city center, such as the recently refurbished McMillan Memorial Library built in 1931 at the height of British colonialism, now advertised as a reclaimed "palace for the people."[12] The rise of Nairobi popular artists speaks to themes that not only reflect the realities at the urban margins but also provide what Felix Mutunga Ndaka (2023) calls "alternative archives" for theorizing social, economic, and political lives that counter mainstream discourses. Thanks to digital platforms, the stories of hustling are told both to *sell* the story and to make a living. The *mtaa* then becomes a stage and a commodity.

The conclusion reflects on current-day, postpandemic Nairobi as a cityscape where *hustling* has traveled from the street vernaculars of the "hood" to more mainstream parlance across the city, including the president as of August 2022, William Ruto, who proudly speaks of his bootstrapping beginnings and affirms his own claim to hustling. The chapter takes a reflective tone, gesturing to future-oriented uncertainty but also cautious optimism, pointing to the plural meanings, modalities, and contributions of hustling in Nairobi and beyond. In Nairobi and across other cities in the Anglophone world, people of various income and social classes speak of their "side hustles." In Nairobi, these popularized discourses of hustling traveling across the city have in some ways elevated the resourcefulness and skills of the "hustling classes" and recognized the structural hardships that have pushed the marginalized majority to hustle in the first place, while political and business elites have appropriated and co-opted the language of hustling as campaign and marketing slogans. The wider implication of this is that the globalized use of the term, within Nairobi

and beyond, also signifies a broader shift in the possibilities and demands of work, including the growing impossibilities of wage labor that exist now across the "classes" in the Majority and Minority World. The book ends with an invitation to take seriously the diverse narrations, practices, and dispositions of hustling in times of constant uncertainty in our moral and material economy.
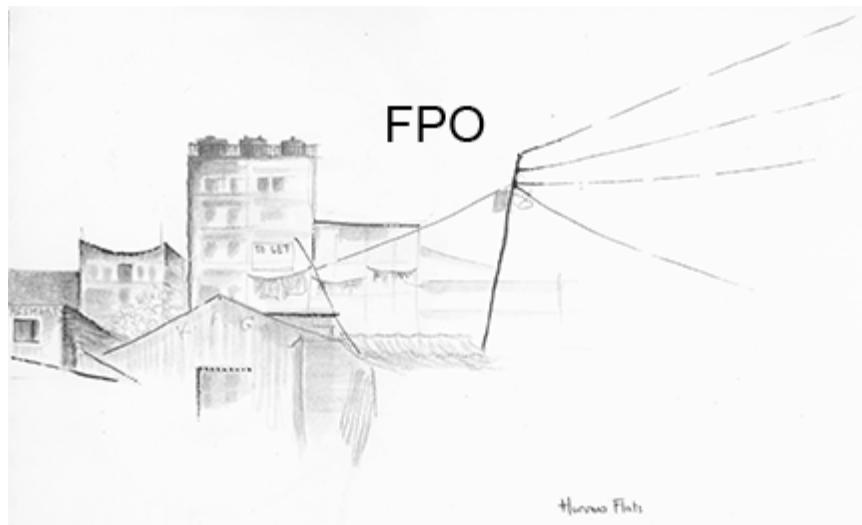
From Juja Road to Huruma Flats, heading toward the *baze*

1 Creolizing the Hustle

Social History of a Concept

> Most scholars are overburdened by a priori moral assumptions
> about what is good, normal, modern, and what is not, and
> therefore not worthy of study, or if studied, not to be valorised.
> We urgently need to move towards a more dispassionate
> approach to the real city, the real economy and the real social
> practices and identities of the majority of urbanites who are
> building our cities if we want to make sense of them.
>
> —Edgar Pieterse, "Grasping the Unknowable"

This chapter reflects on the social and political history of hustling. By considering why the concept landed in Nairobi and foregrounding the contemporary manifestations of hustle described in the core chapters of the book, I argue that its meanings, associations, circulations, and popular uses open up ways of seeing and sensing changing conceptions of life, labor, learning, and belonging in this African city but also beyond. There are multiple and contrasting assumptions, moral economies, and performances associated with the term *hustle* that are reflected in diverse portrayals of hustling, hustlers, and hustles in popular culture. This section examines the evolution of its meaning, its associations, and vernacular uses over time.

For residents living in Nairobi's popular neighborhoods, the term *hustle* became incorporated and mutated into the everyday "Kenyan Swahili vernacular" known as Sheng, which, as Chege Githiora (2018) explains, is not only closely tied to Nairobi's urban youth culture; it has also become for many Kenyan youth what they call their "first language." Aspects of Sheng can morph from one neighborhood to another or indeed one sector to another if we think of the particular Sheng spoken among *matatu* workers (Ference 2024). As such, it has become a kind of place-based linguistic

marker, where certain words and phrases might seem obscure to those who are not members of a particular area or social group. And yet in the main, Sheng is no longer just the vernacular of marginalized and stigmatized groups. As Githiora's (2018, 2) interviewees assert, "everybody speaks Sheng." Sheng, like the hustle, adapts to constant rapid changes and can be deployed as a matter of surviving the streets and creating linguistic codes, but it can also facilitate finding common ground with people who may come from very different corners of the country.

What do we make, then, of the insertion of this Anglophone term *hustle* and *hustla* into the Kenyan street vernacular, where the root of the verb *hustle* is, for example, folded into the Swahili conjugation *tunahustle* (we are hustling)? Here, the seminal work of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind* (1986), reminds us of colonial "linguistic oppression" and the dilemma African scholars, fiction writers, and performance artists have had to grapple with when deciding to either write in colonial lingua franca or their own African languages. As the later chapters of the book illustrate, self-narrations of hustle are place-based and have been creolized, mutated, and entangled with local histories and youth geographies, while echoing multiple elsewheres through the various modalities of projecting these self-narrations onto various social media platforms and connecting with countless other auto-portraits of shared struggle, solidarity, and dreams.

LEARNING WITH THE HUSTLE

In Kenya, the incorporation of the English word *hustle* into local vernacular does something to the meaning of the term through its situated practices. Here I'd like to take a moment to reflect on what this incorporation means for how we theorize hustle and how it has traversed time and space. In the 2010s, when I was in the midst of my PhD fieldwork and writing, a strand of critical postcolonial scholarship promoted "theorising from the south" and adopting "alternative visions" for understanding how cities work (Comaroff and Comaroff 2012; G. Myers 2011; Parnell and Robinson 2012). The idea was to interrogate the long-standing dominant assumptions that ideas from the West should not only be applied to non-Western contexts but also that these ideas were de facto points of reference. So postcolonial scholars argued that we could learn from different contexts, notably the historically peripheralized and marginalized "South."

To clarify, what has become known as the "southern urban critique" does not refute all Western ideas, but it does suggest that "the global south is

empirically different" (Lawhon and Truelove 2020, 4) and calls for a "north-south co-production" (Comaroff and Comaroff 2012) through different modes of theorization. In conversation with southern urban critiques, Gautam Bhan (2019) proposed a different orientation by suggesting that we focus on "southern urban practices." To ground this provocation, he analyzed certain kinds of urban practice in Indian cities that are usually not considered part of "modern" or aspirational city planning. He argued that these practices, and the terms to describe them, are rife with analytical purchase and could be important starting points for urbanists. For example, instead of framing a project around construction, Bhan asks how we might work with the existing everyday practice of *repair* to think about what goes into city making. This was premised on the idea that of course repair goes on everywhere to a degree, but in southern cities, repairing practices are *the norm* rather than "new" construction—repair of things and structures that constantly undergo forms of breakdown in under-resourced areas in particular, such that the *real* innovation is actually in the ingenuity of repair and maintenance rather than in discarding old things and making new ones.

My writing journey over these past few years has in various ways been inspired by this last decade's call to "theorise from the south" and the push to consider "southern urban practices." But the topic of this book and its ethnographic detail actually complicate both propositions: Writing about hustles in Nairobi might at first seem to suggest that hustling is a "southern urban practice" and that this book joins the collective project of "theorising from the south." But in actuality, studying *hustle* as it manifests in Nairobi requires a detachment from the pretense that we can ever really know what hustle entails in its multifaceted forms. It productively complicates the idea that we could *theorize from* somewhere and the idea that practices of hustling might in some way be southern, or at least especially concentrated in the South. Put bluntly, what is *southern* or "African" about hustling? Actually, not being able to answer that question is precisely the point. So what does this mean for how (and from where) to theorize?

While *Hustle Urbanism* takes significant inspiration from the diverse body of postcolonial scholarship that has challenged Eurocentric perspectives and argues that studying hustle requires a decentering of Eurocentric readings of the cityscape and of the economy, I cannot propose that we actually *theorize from* Nairobi or that we frame hustling as a spatially bound southern/African practice. Instead, the book makes a different kind of

claim: it redescribes how *situations* in particular places can generate certain ideas and practices and that the narrations of these practices echo ideas that have in themselves traveled from elsewhere or could potentially be translated and applied elsewhere. Drawing on Edward Said's notion of "traveling theory" (1983), I suggest that we *learn with* Nairobi's creolized vernacular emanating from the city's popular neighborhoods—as a concept, an analytical frame, and an urban practice that has "traveled." By *learning with* rather than *theorizing from,* we might recognize the inherent multisituated positioning of geographically diverse concepts that land in a city, with echoes of elsewhere and else-times). This approach reorients our attention to what people do, how they describe it, how it feels, and how it is projected and performed, and why hustlescapes have become increasingly widespread.

HUSTLE TRAVELS

To *learn with* Nairobi hustles means first recognizing the global salience of the term and the practice, and wondering why and how the concept traveled to Nairobi in the first place. As Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih (2011, 3) explain in their introduction to *The Creolization of Theory*, it is important to consider how particular historical events "provide the primary ground for the interrelated global disciplinary questions that concern us now." This section argues for a kind of archaeological dig of ideas. It explores in particular how hustling reflects particular historical geographies, how it has been portrayed in various genres—literary, artistic, and scholarly—and how it has taken on myriad forms across time and space. The section investigates selected works and representations of hustle that differ in form and connotation but share an underlying premise: combined dispossession, risk taking, ingenuity, and sometimes a subversive edge, leading to simultaneously always fragile but surprising potential rewards.

Most dictionary definitions (e.g., *Merriam-Webster* and *Oxford English Dictionary*) show that the etymological root of the term is connected to the Dutch word *husselen,* meaning to shake, push, or jostle. Between the early eighteenth and late nineteenth century, *hustling* was associated with acts of pushing "roughly," and by the early twentieth century, *hustle* became a slang term associated with forms of work that might involve selling "energetically," and could include a "swindle."[1] By the 1960s, hustling became equated with a particular kind of "hard work" ethic, one that was deeply entangled with wider experiences of racialized, classed, and

gendered inequality. But of course, the phenomenon by other names pre-dates this use; as but one example, Mark Twain's autobiographical account of his early years of "variegated vagabondizing" in *Roughing It* ([1872] 1962) recounts how he experimented with several ad hoc ways of making a living during an époque that was often described as that of the American "frontier."

There are several Black intellectuals, activists, and artists who have written about *hustling* to explain what was happening in North American cities in the twentieth century. In his autobiography, Malcolm X (1965) describes the lifeworld of hustling that he and many of his peers inhabited. At the start of his chapter titled "Hustler," he writes, "I can't remember all the hustles I had during the next two years in Harlem, after the abrupt end of my riding the trains and peddling reefers to the touring bands" (qtd. In Joseph 2020, 111). Hustles. In the plural. To hustle is often in the plural; there is rarely just one hustle because at some point one or two might fall through. Further on in the chapter, he describes (and recalls having been at the time) a "true hustler—uneducated, unskilled at anything honorable, and I considered myself nervy and cunning enough to live by my wits, exploiting any prey that presented itself. I would risk just about anything" (111). This was an autobiographical reflection, but he follows this statement with a wider social commentary: "right now, in every big city ghetto, tens of thousands of yesterday's and today's school dropouts are keeping body and soul together by some form of hustling in the same way I did." He explains that the creative means to make ends meet (and maybe even make it big) could include illicit activities such as gambling, prostitution, drug selling, and petty theft. But notably, hustling, in its combination of labors (whether read as licit or illicit), could also accompany, precede, and even be part of various forms of resistance, intellectual endeavors, activism, artistic and musical practice, and community organizing against regimes of oppression. Implicit in Malcolm X's account is a sociological reflection on why hustling was taking place and on its form: hustling reflected the African American experience in cities under Jim Crow, the racial caste system operating in the United States between 1877 and the mid-1960s, up to the Civil Rights Act, where accessing work, education, housing, and mainstream public space was constantly up against the continuities of white supremacy and racial capitalism (Bhattacharyya 2018).[2]

Finding means of making a living under Jim Crow that would build some form of autonomy might involve a precarious existence but one that

involved conscious detachment from a variety of hegemonic structures associated with racial capitalism. Hustling had in many ways become integral to what dramatist Lorraine Hansberry called "the scars of the ghetto" (1965, 34), the multiple ways in which "the ghetto itself was and is maintained . . . to withhold as much as possible." In her essay published the same year as her tragic young death, and the same year as Malcolm X's autobiography, Hansberry was writing about education, housing, and the enduring effects of Jim Crow segregation. Her analysis also applied to the context of labor, insofar as the "ghettos" she described were maintained to withhold as many decent modes of work as possible, for both men and women. As Saidiya Hartman writes in *Wayward Lives* (2021), some of the only forms of employment available under Jim Crow were demeaning extensions of "servitude." Hustling was therefore not just about survival and struggle. As Peniel Joseph's (2020, 30, emphasis added) writing on Malcolm X explains, this was "a generation of young black men who *refused* to work dead-end jobs and resisted military induction," such that hustling was informed by a search for self-determination, "autonomy, freedom and pleasure in urban cities against the backdrop of war, violence, and racial segregation" (30) that underpinned Black life under the racist Jim Crow regime.

The relationship between hustling and employment is important to examine here, rather than presume its distinction or even opposition. In *Black Folk: The Roots of the Black Working Class* (2023), historian Blair Kelley centers the roles and realities of Black working people whose lives and labors have often been invisiblized in dominant historical and contemporary accounts of the North American "working class." Kelley's detailed historical account, spanning two centuries, emphasizes the economic contribution of countless Black workers across diverse "essential" but often low-paid services. Additionally, Kelly highlights how these jobs were both precarious and spaces of Black solidarity, activism, and joy. So where might hustling come in amid "working-class" life?

If Malcolm X offered an autobiographical account of hustling from his own perspective and experiential knowledge (among many other themes), one of the first in-depth sociological studies of hustling drew on ethnographic research conducted by Bettylou Valentine between the mid-1960s and early 1970s. In *Hustling and Other Hard Work: Life Styles in the Ghetto,* Valentine (1978) outlines the structural and institutional failings that led communities of color to face systemic employment, education, health-care,

housing, and welfare poverty in the American inner city. A key argument in her work was to dispel the stigmas associated with urban poverty in the United States that had (and continue to) persistently individualize blame (as well as individualize the successful pathways out of poverty). In her ethnographic account, Valentine describes the ways that the individuals living in the neighborhood she and her husband embedded themselves in for five years combined multiple survival and livelihood strategies: including "hustling" (which she defined as "a wide variety of unconventional, some-times extralegal or illegal activities" [1978, 23]), "welfare" (different forms of public assistance), and other forms of "hard work" (including care work at home and other low-paying jobs like factory jobs or truck driving).

Hustling was never an isolated practice operating in some kind of illicit sphere. By setting Kelley's recent historical work in conversation with Val-entine's earlier urban ethnographic study conducted in the 1960s, along-side Malcolm X's description of hustling on the streets of Harlem and Hansberry's essay on the "scars of the ghetto," we can see hustling as a collective and relational practice. As Valentine demonstrated, the point should not be to exoticize the hardship of communities who are strug-gling, or deem morally deviant those who have resorted to "hustling." The point is rather to illuminate the diverse and often creative strategies (what Valentine called "life styles") that people built in order to cope with systemic bureaucratic, state, legal, material, and social discrimination. In the North American inner-city context, therefore, hustling was relation-ally connected to the jobs and whatever welfare provision there was, open-ing up a kind of third space for autonomous work and provisioning. As such, hustling could be actioned on an individual basis (e.g., sex work or gambling) or within group formations (e.g., underground drug econ-omy), and could even at times reflect the movements and porosity between spaces of incarceration and street life (see Williamson 1965). But it was also deeply connected to community-oriented shared solidarities, collective self-provisioning, and self-determination in the face of social, economic, and political injustice.

HUSTLING IN U.S. POPULAR CULTURE

Depictions of hustling eventually made their way into popular cultural genres portraying underground economies as well as radical urban resis-tance. These representations were often gendered, and particular imaginar-ies of masculinity influenced the popular portrayal of "hustling" personae.

For example, the book *The Hustler* by Walter Tevis (1959), adapted into a film in 1961 featuring Paul Newman, was a dramatized portrayal of working-class men in a small U.S. town who spent hours "after work" in pool halls. In this book and the film adaptation, the hustler was depicted as a clever, unapologetic, charming trickster, and hustling represented the sorts of shrewd acts of moonlighting and gambling that took place among working-class men to supplement their otherwise meagre wages and offer an alternative to the monotony of industrial, repetitive work. The practice of hustling was, in this story, connected to white working-class life, showing perhaps that hustling is a condition that is rooted in contextually contingent experiences of relational marginality, which can be racialized as well as classed and gendered. These can also form an ambiguous relationship to morality, and indeed representations of hustling can impose certain readings of the moral register connected to particular hustles.[3]

In the following decade, the dance style originating in the South Bronx known as "the Hustle" gained particular popularity when Van McCoy's 1975 hit song, "The Hustle," came to epitomize the disco era and captured the dance floors and radio airwaves of that summer. *New York Times* journalist William Safire (1975) took notice of the choreographic particulars of the Hustle in an article that came out that same summer. He remarked on the shift in attitude and disposition on the dance floor: dance styles in the late 1960s and early 1970s were highly individualistic, "a grimly inward-turning philosophy of doing one's own thing." But with the Hustle, explains Safire, it was important to understand the *steps,* and to "signal your intentions so that the 'team' of which you are a part can stay in step, then you have embraced not only a dance partner, but responsibility." Safire goes on to relay the geopolitical significance of what he calls "this social phenomenon," a dance that "requires instruction" and "negotiation" (rather than random jerks and confrontation). Listening to Van McCoy's track, and (re)watching available film footage of dancers doing the Hustle, I sit with the following: that 1975 conception of the Hustle as a danced form was about dancing *together,* after a period of time where dancers had been doing their own thing with little regard to those around them. It was also a diasporic dance that was started by Puerto Rican teenagers in the South Bronx and then spread in its popularity to the disco dance floors of New York City in the 1970s and beyond. So the Hustle as a dance may have been situated within a particular time, place, and genre of musical, choreographic, and stylistic inflection. It may seem quite removed from any discussion

concerning contemporary labor precarity, social struggles, and subversive edge economies. But what is key here are the ways in which echoes of a dance style like the Hustle resonate with logics of other choreographies and styles of hustle that took place after the 1970s and beyond New York City. In particular, the Hustle sound and dance of the 1970s involved a degree of improvisation but demanded skill, attentiveness to the other, a learning of steps, and a style with diasporic resonances.

The rise of hip-hop, from the 1980s onward, enhanced the popularity of *hustle* even further: as a phrase, a disposition, and a multifaceted and multivocal concept/experience. One of the earliest hip-hop artists, Grandmaster Flash, once explained that "hip hop is the only genre of music that allows us to talk about almost anything. . . . It's highly controversial but that's the way the game is" (Light 1999, vii). As hip-hop scholars Derrick Darby and Tommie Shelby (2005, xv) argue, this is why hip-hop artists can be regarded as popular philosophers, whose "rhyme and reason" and word battles are akin to the Socratic forms of debate and "pursuit of wisdom." Inherent in the pursuit of wisdom is a confrontation with matters concerning truth, justice, moral codes, and power. So in the 1990s and early 2000s especially, hip-hop became not only a globalized popular genre of music and entertainment; it was also a vital form of social commentary. Notably, the concept of "hustling" was heavily encoded across countless hip-hop tracks during that time, integral to the constellation of stories being narrated.

As hip-hop scholars have noted, hip-hop lyrics described the rich spectrum of urban life in all its vicissitudes. Hip-hop became a kind of self-narration and political refrain describing inner-city struggles in the face of continued racialized inequality in the United States, exposing the harms of street gun violence, income poverty, drugs, and the absence of welfare support. But it was more than just that. As Imani Perry (2004) writes with regard to Biggie Smalls, hip-hop could at one moment include lyrics about hustling and marginalization and at another moment include lyrics evoking endurance. As Perry (2004, 1) writes, "to listen to hip hop is to enter a world of complexity and contradiction." It is deeply connected to "black style and black youth culture" in the United States, but as one of the most popular and lucrative musical genres today, the "soul of the music resonates with marginalized people of various nationalities and ethnicities" (2). Hip-hop served as a form of storytelling shedding light on what Jay-Z (2010) describes as the "struggle and insurgency" among Black communities facing

the continuities of urban underinvestment and racial discrimination in the postindustrial American cities of Baltimore, New York, Philly, Los Angeles, and many others.

When "hustling" appeared in hip-hop lyrics, it carried different meanings and connotations that echoed some of the earlier diverse representations of hustling. Hustling was understood to take place when employment and resources were scarce but where "work" could be made everywhere and anywhere, beyond modes of labor production in the industrial economic sense. It could evoke the creative strategies to get by and mobilize for resources in underserved neighborhoods. This meant that earning a living and navigating street life could engage with underground economies and be regarded as "illicit" or "risky business," which required skill and an ability to cope with risk (Hart 1973; Malcolm X and Haley [1965] 2015; Valentine 1978; Wacquant 1998). The representation of the hustler continued to be dramatized and explained in different ways—in popular culture as well as in sociological studies. In the late 1990s, Loïc Wacquant's (1998) long-term study of Chicago's South Side included a focus on what he called the "social art" of hustling, which he described as a form of necessary survivalism but involving potentially deceitful and manipulative practices. So to be a "hustla" became associated with the ability to make money against the odds, and the moral ambiguities around hustling were combined with an unapologetic admission of doing whatever it took to make money and having no issues with making lots of it. In Wacquant's depiction, the hustler could be a "trickster" or a "gangster."

In other words, in different genres of representation, from sociological studies to popular cultural realms including fiction, film, and hip-hop lyrics/videos, hustling came to carry a certain stigma on the one hand but also a particular romanticism on the other. All the while, the "hustla" persona tended to project a particular performance of masculinity. Beyoncé played with this in her 2008 track "Diva," with the refrain "I'm a diva . . . a diva is a female version of a hustla." Notably, hustling in all its performative, economic, political, and cultural dimensions became especially folded into the storied mosaic of hip-hop, presenting stories, biographies, feats, and antiestablishment commentary that challenged mainstream accounts of American history (Jay-Z 2010), while also enabling "syncretic expressions that are at once wholly local and definitely global" (Rollefson 2017, 2).

Eventually, as with many aspects of hip-hop culture, the term *hustle* experienced various forms of glamorization and corporate appropriation,

especially in the second decade of the 2000s when both widespread casual-ization of wage labor *and* the rise of the internet became globalized. For example, in 2016 Uber came out with an advertisement that asked the rhe-torical question, "What if your car could make you money?" pitching the vehicle as a "money-making machine" and ending the thirty-second add with the punch line "so get your side hustle on." I'll return to the implica-tions of this in a later section of this chapter, "Hustling Debated."

While the term has carried racialized and urban connotations, as Bar-bara Kingsolver (2023, 512–17) reminds us, hustling is not just a city thing; it's a "land economy" thing too. Kingsolver's recent novel *Demon Copper-head* (2022) takes inspiration from Charles Dickens's *David Copperfield* to tell stories about the plural forms of violence against the people of Appalachia in the United States and how they cope from *these* margins. Grounded in the author's own lived experience and intimate contact with Appalachian communities, the novel relays the harms experienced by communities hit hard by decades of corporate extraction (timber, tobacco, coal) and the recent opioid epidemic. But it also dwells on people's countless forms of mutuality, resourcefulness, and self-sufficiency in the face of these inter-sectional injustices. When Demon and his friend Tommy are discussing the difference between the city economy and the land economy, they real-ize that the very things that people do in their part of the world to get by—like farming, fishing, hunting, making their own liquor—are "the exact things that get turned into hateful jokes on us." They're referring to the "straw hat, fishing pole, XXX jug" (Kingsolver 2022, 517) that have stigma-tized rural Appalachian people for decades. Both friends then realize that folks on the "edge of society" (Watkins 2019, 12), whether based in the city economy or the land economy, may live in vastly different lifeworlds, and the currencies of their economies may be different. But, as Demon says at the end of that chapter, "in the long run it's all just hustle" (Kingsolver 2022, 517).

Hustle Urbanism therefore conceptualizes a creolized theory of hustle (Lionnet ad Shih 2011), reflecting in this chapter on the historical, intel-lectual, and popular entanglements of hustle as a concept, practice, and performance. Hustle is read here as radical in its ordinary subversions of dominant hegemonic norms: it is not depicted as a pathology (informal, nonstandard, illegal) but rather as a narrative and an urban practice rooted in legacies and continuations of injustice, making a claim to different and *opaque* modalities of social and economic organization. Glissant's (1997) notion of opacity offers a way of recognizing that, in addition to our own

ethnographic limits to knowing (accepting that we cannot always see what lies behind and sometimes even within our ethnographic encounters), even neighbors and friends in Nairobi's *mtaa* often do not always know about each other's hustles.[4] Even if youth would say that they hustle in the "we," together, the collective spirit of hustling is distinctive from the enigmatic form individual hustles take in their precise form. And as the next chapters will illustrate, the line between the local service provider, the activist, and the gangster is never obvious to draw.

COGNATES IN SCHOLARSHIP AND OTHER LANGUAGES

What are alternative ways of interpreting the kinds of work that are taking place in cities outside waged employment, without resorting to vocabularies that suggest absence or deficiency or recall a supposed norm that once was and is no longer? Informality and precarity fall into this category. They point to either what is lost or what should be. In her writing on "a critical politics of precarity," Kathleen Millar (2017) reviews key literatures on precarity in order to assess the value and limitations of precarity as a theoretical and political concept, at a time when "precarity seems to be everywhere."

As Millar points out, one of the earliest studies of "precarity" came from French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's 1960s sociological study of work in Algeria, which provided an articulation of precarity in relation to labor and forms of colonial domination. In his book *Travail et Travailleurs en Algérie* (Work and workers in Algeria, 1963), Bourdieu drew on in-depth fieldwork to illustrate the experiences of unemployed and underemployed workers in Algeria in the transitional years of decolonization. Through a catalog of household income streams and personal accounts, Bourdieu argued that the French colonial economic systems of industrialization and agricultural development disrupted Indigenous economic practices. With the imposition of a cash-based economy and principles of industrial capitalism, it would become difficult to sustain a living without migrating to nearby towns or bigger cities to engage in waged employment or be a *commerçant* (small business owner). Those who could not find waged employment or own a business were therefore rendered either formally unemployed or in modes of underemployment: *précarité*. In other words, the normative way of doing the economy would be through particular forms of economic production, consumption, and exchange, at the expense of economic practices that might fall outside these cash-based, waged, and industrial parameters.[5]

Moving beyond a labor-centric reading of precarity, Millar argues that the use of the term *precarity* can perform political work and is analytically relevant in several ways but also potentially problematic in others.[6] Her argument is indirectly relevant to the social history of hustle. Millar contends that there are several ways of interpreting the growing use of the term *precarity*. In one sense, a focus on precarity can perhaps "smuggle in a conservative politics . . . in the broad sense of seeking to preserve the status quo" and hold on to certain "normative modes of life" and work (2017, 2). For example, Guy Standing's (2011) work on "the precariat" in the Global North expresses an alarm with the erosion of waged employment in contemporary postindustrial economies, arguing that a twenty-first-century socioeconomic class of precariats leads to inevitable social, economic, and political disorder. In that conceptualization of precarity, there is a nostalgia for twentieth-century forms of waged labor.

To call out precarity as a problem is, in part, to lament the changes in formal, industrialized labor markets. This includes opposing the idea that postindustrial economies might increasingly resemble the conditions of uncertainty and unpredictability that have characterized popular economies (often called "informal" in mainstream parlance) in the Majority World. As such, there can be a resistance to imagining an "otherwise" that doesn't merely propose a return to the "proper job" imaginary of the twentieth century (Ferguson and Li 2018), idealized for the predictable working trajectories across labor sectors. These were to different degrees of remuneration and working conditions accompanied with the security of a wage and the assurance of gradual, linear, economic mobility over time if one stuck with the "proper job." But as Will Monteith, Dora-Olivia Vicol, and Philippa Williams (2021) remind us, across all sectors, labor was highly gendered, racialized, classed, and bound by certain temporal and spatial parameters defining where and when work could happen. We might then consider what is implied by the lamentations concerning the rise of "precarity." As Millar (2017, 2) puts it, "to be concerned about precarity is necessarily to hold onto things"—that is, "to hold onto" certain "a priori moral assumptions about what is good, normal, modern, and what is not," to go back to the opening quote of this chapter (Pieterse 2011, 14).

Hustling resonates with other related articulations that simultaneously express relational marginality, insecurity, and rearticulations of life at the margins. In academic literature, a series of cognate expressions describe the ways in which individuals and communities make life possible and even

worthwhile when faced with overlapping structural and everyday hurdles. These include "getting by," which refers to the creative calculations and strategies of survival and getting things done that form in under-resourced social housing estate in the UK (McKensie 2015). Youth in Freetown, Sierra Leone, refer to "straining" to describe their relationship to precarious life and work in a city where finding livelihood opportunities is constantly met with the risks of being criminalized or chased from your trading spot (Finn and Oldsfield 2015). Hustling also finds conceptual affinities with Ravi Sundaram's (2010) notion of "pirate modernity," or the ways in which marginalized urban residents living in the "illegal city" (Datta 2012) negotiate space from their gendered subjectivities, including accessing basic amenities like power and water in Delhi's squatter settlements. And given the stigma associated with certain forms of hustling and the conditions surrounding hustle economies, Alexa Clay and Kyra Maya Phillips (2015) remind us that those who are living and working at the margins of various kinds across the Majority and Minority World may be subject to stigma, regarded as "misfits." Clay and Phillips collate narratives from different contexts (they speak to prisoners, hackers, and self-styled entrepreneurs, among others) to argue that the "misfit economy" is one that harbors an undervalued repository of local knowledge, creativity, and craft.

There are also several equivalents in other languages, though the meaning is slightly different in each because ultimately hustling conjures metaphorical and experiential thinking (Lakoff and Johnson [1980] 2003), which means the concepts and the practices associated with hustling are deeply, culturally, and contextually contingent. To name a few in particular: There is the Hindi/Punjabi notion of *jugaad,* defined as "shrewd improvisation" (Jeffrey and Young 2014, 188), "provisional agency" (Jauregui 2014), and "hacks" (Rai 2019) that form under conditions of scarcity. Describing the contrasting connotations and valuations of *jugaad,* Amit S. Rai (2019, 2) calls it "a sometimes elegant, but always makeshift way of getting around obstacles." Jeremy Jones (2010) has written about the *kukiya-kiya* economy in Zimbabwe to describe how the local expression *kukiya kiya* came to epitomize the combination of seizing the moment and making do in response to the economic hardship of the early 2000s. Another concept that similarly evokes frugal innovation or finding ways around times of crisis is *System D,* shorthand for the French expression *système de débrouillardise,* a common expression in Francophone parts of the world that refers to systems of frugality, resourcefulness, and creativity that develop in response

to punctual or long-term resource scarcity (Neurwirth 2012). And finally, there is the concept of *la brega* used in Puerto Rico.

In 2003, Arcadio Diaz Quiñones wrote *El Arte de Bregar* (2003), in which he explained the multifaceted meaning of *bregar* in Puerto Rico. This book carries more relevance than ever today, as New York–born Puerto Rican journalist Alana Casanova-Burgess demonstrated in the beautiful National Public Radio (NPR) podcast series *La Brega* produced between 2022 and 2023. As each episode illuminates, *la brega* is not a concept that one can easily translate, for it can mean to struggle, to hustle, to "find a way to get by and get around an imbalance of power."[7] When I sent a link to the podcast to a friend from Puerto Rico, he texted back, "Yes! In Puerto Rico, *la brega* is EVERYWHERE!" And as Casanova-Burgess explains in that first episode, *la brega* is a way of life for everyday people in Puerto Rico and the diaspora, a way of coping with the overlapping challenges of system breakdown—politics and potholes alike. These are not the only examples, but they provide a glimpse at the wide resonance of the concept and the connections between these resonances and Nairobi hustles.

NAIROBI HUSTLES

The diverse representations of hustle discussed in this chapter illustrate how the concept carries global resonances. And yet, as the book will go on to show, these representations do not fully capture how hustle manifests in Nairobi. Its expressive articulation resonates with elsewheres, but it takes on situated, creolized forms and practices.

Homi K. Bhabba's questions around identity and social agency offer a useful avenue for thinking through the kind of creolization taking place. In *The Location of Culture,* Bhabha (1994) uses concepts such as mimicry, interstice, hybridity, and liminality to analyze different forms of cultural production. Bhabba's work explores forms of colonial and decolonial influences in contemporary cultural production and thus provides a useful frame for investigating the interplay of colonial and decolonial connotations in the narratives and practices of hustling and their hybrid manifestations in Nairobi. Paul Gilroy's (1993, xi) *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* also mobilizes the notion of hybridity by arguing that Black Atlantic culture transcends national or ethnic identities, as it is "always unfinished, always being remade" (1993, xi). The hybridity in the expressions of hustling among Kenyan youth relay stories that are rooted in the realities of their *mtaa* but reflect "diasporic intimacies" (Gilroy 1993, 16) with the globalized

Afro-diasporic music narrating the "life styles" (Valentine 1978) of other urban neighborhoods and housing estates whose youth facing racial and class discrimination find ways to subvert their position of marginality.

There are ever-changing and layered possibilities, tensions, and predicaments where youth in Nairobi's popular neighborhoods are coping with the legacies of colonialism, uneven development, and neoliberalism, while also reappropriating "global" imaginaries, brands, and discourses on their own terms. For example, youth hone their local knowledge of UK and European football clubs and debate with humorous repartee about which European team is the most Africanized.[8] Their self-styled fashion redefines which brands are cool amid the secondhand clothing sold in local markets, such that U.S. brands such as Timberland shoes become referred to as Timbas in Sheng. Timbas have acquired special status among many youth because they represent the enduring fashion of the quintessential work boot and hip-hop aesthetic. Gen X hip-hop fans might recall that classic hit by A Tribe Called Quest, "Oh My God," from their 1993 *Midnight Marauders* album. Near the end of the track (2.52–2.56), we hear the rhymes "Timbo hoofs with the prints on the ground / Timbos on the toes, I like the way it's going down." Some youth style their hair in dreadlocks and proudly evoke Rastafarian culture and expressions, signing off text messages with "One Love." Many of my Mathare friends humorously reappropriate Facebook's "education" tab when they curate their profile, specifying that they graduated from "Ghetto University." The use of hustle should be read as part of this intentional connection to the diaspora, but as detailed later in this chapter, we cannot simply apply scholarship on the hustle in North America to Nairobi.

In other words, youth in popular neighborhoods might be unimaginatively classified as unemployed, at risk, marginalized, idle—and many other pejorative descriptors—under certain narrow measures. But their modes of "inhabitation" (Lancione 2023; Simone 2018)—of dwelling, navigating, belonging, and making life work in the city—are plural and cannot be reduced to some kind of explanatory framework. To even begin deciphering their repertoires of knowledge, practices, and ideas starts with paying close attention to their own popular cultural references and cosmopolitan shared attachments to the lived experiences and histories of struggle, solidarity, and joy of Afro-diasporic youth elsewhere. In *Afrotopia,* Felwine Sarr (2019, 80) calls for "a project of epistemic decentering," which involves both different ways of reading the cityscape and moving away from "dominant

epistemes" and concepts (xiii) such as *"development, economic emergence, growth* and *struggles against poverty."* As anyone who knows Nairobi a little or a lot, we might ask ourselves how to (re)read a cityscape like Nairobi, beyond the familiar tropes.[9]

HUSTLING DEBATED

As this chapter has argued, hustling is an important part of Nairobi's story, but as a concept and experience it has traveled and reflects shared concerns across geographies of the Majority and Minority Worlds, related to changing relationships to work, rooted in different though intersecting histories and experiences of marginalization and restricted economic opportunity, including strong ties to Black diasporic experiences of labor and racial capitalism.

Part of making space for an affirmative reading of hustling includes engaging with scholars who have been critical of the concept for what it says (or doesn't say) about racial capitalism and the persistence of labor precarity and marginalization. In particular, the works of sociologists Lester Spence (2015) and Tressie McMillan Cottom (2020) offer important critical readings of hustling and caution against celebratory and ahistorical accounts. Focusing on the North American context, their works show the importance of contextualizing any study of contemporary hustle within wider patterns of historical and continued racialized inequality, state welfare erosion, and individualization of success (and failure), which have continued to disadvantage people of color across labor sectors.

In his book *Knocking the Hustle* (2015), Spence argues that from the 1980s onward, the concept of hustle reflected the effects of the neoliberal turn on African American communities. As the term *hustle* became an increasingly normalized expression in popular vernacular, it came to signify and call out several facets of late twentieth-century urban life: it became an expression of everyday street life in the post-Fordist American rust-belt cities, where deindustrialization had a severe impact on the working classes, with Black communities often most affected by inner-city disinvestment, insecure employment opportunities, underfunded school districts, and overpolicing on the streets. And as industrial, unionized jobs were progressively shut down, automated, or off-shored, after-school and welfare programs were also closing down (Wilson 2009).[10]

What Spence (2015) decries is the implications of calls to "hustle harder" among Black communities—as though the only way to get ahead and get

around racialized inequality is to constantly harness your own human capital, be creative, chase the gig, or create opportunities for yourself. The hustle could therefore be argued to reflect a product of the postindustrial, neoliberal, racial capitalism where everything and everyone must be rationalized and mobilized along market-based logics of incessant individualized productivity, "self-made" entrepreneurialism, while holding no expectation of welfare support or safety nets of any kind. Spence argues that hustling has become an expression of the American economy in the twenty-first century (nonstop work with stagnant or declining wages, if there is one at all), and he deplores the way hustling is increasingly narrated as the de facto mode of life in today's economy. Ultimately, to "hustle harder" also presumes that if you don't hustle hard enough, you will not only not "make it" but you are also likely to fail—and that failure and blame is individualized and decontextualized, dehistoricized.

McMillan Cottom's (2020) recent writing has also focused on hustling as a reflection of long-standing and persistent forms of racial inequality in the United States and as a phenomenon that may increasingly be popularized as a narrative of work and struggle but is experienced very differently along intersectional lines of difference—class, gender, and race. Writing about these intersectionalities in relation to labor, focusing in particular on the tech industry, McMillan Cottom (2020) writes, "What hustling looks like in 2020 depends on who you are. To hustle, if you are working class, is to piece together multiple jobs. If you are middle class or upper class, it is discussed as 'multiple revenue streams.' But the goal is the same: pull together a patchwork of income in order to get ahead." McMillan Cottom not only calls out the push to constantly diversify one's income opportunities (with all the stresses that this assumes); she also describes how the pervasiveness of racism in the U.S. context infiltrates social networking. Concerned with the tech industry she knows well, she explains that Black tech workers "hustle harder" than their white counterparts to advance in these environments. McMillan Cottom's argument therefore cautions against any celebratory account of "hustling," by emphasizing the multiple ways in which racial capitalism in the United States underpins the career trajectories and lives of Black workers in particular industries. So to evoke that 2016 Uber advertisement mentioned earlier in this chapter, it is vital to unpack what is at stake when we ask people to "get their hustle on" and to recognize that even seemingly novel forms of (digitally mediated) "gigging" or seemingly licit forms of "hustling" are always in some

ways entangled with local and global continuities of racialized and gendered labor extraction that deny or progressively erode the protections for the most vulnerable workers (Meagher 2022; Stanford 2017).

Another perspective on hustle that has emerged in recent U.S. literature converses in useful ways with the arguments made by Spence and Cottom but takes a different direction. In Craig Watkins's book *Don't Knock the Hustle* (2019), the focus is on the "new innovative economy" that has emerged and been shaped by young creatives, entrepreneurs, and grassroots activists from minoritized communities. Watkins starts the book writing about how the "side gig" of Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez got her into U.S. politics from below, and he goes on to mention the ingenuity of unlikely tech start-ups, hip-hop entrepreneurs, and those who talk about their "side hustles." As Watkins (2019, 12) writes in his introduction, "While hustling may not be new, the sheer number of people pursuing a side hustle suggests a climate of urgency, especially for the youngest employees in the economy." Watkins is not suggesting that everyone should now go out and hustle or have a side hustle if the day job pays poorly and does not take you seriously. He is simply saying that there are a growing number of people out there hustling in one form or another, from the realms of grassroots politics, to the off-beat creative industry, to the indie game developers. Watkins is not overlooking the ways in which race, racism, and racialization have played a part in contemporary labor regimes that have pushed people to hustle. His introduction actually emphasizes the importance of "a historical perspective on the hustle as a way of life for those on the edge of society" (12). Focusing on the creative industry as an example (especially given his media studies expertise), he reflects on the 1970s "blaxploitation" taking place in the Black American film industry where "hustler creatives" who were experiencing racial exclusion from mainstream film and production studios found ways to produce their own films using creative means to show and distribute their films, circumventing Hollywood (12). So without romanticizing the hustle, Watkins chooses an affirmative reading of hustling itself, arguing that these historical and contemporary diverse and creative practices, often undertaken by young communities of color, need to be valorized, taken seriously, and supported.

These writings on the hustle economy focused on North America raise a number of important considerations for the study of hustle in other geographies. A key question I pose here is: how might we understand hustle economies that form in urban lifeworlds where residents who say they

hustle do not seek (or imagine) inclusion in dominant spheres of labor? In the Kenyan colonial economy, a salary was a form of disciplining, and despite the stigma associated with illicit labor outside wage relations, as described by Luise White (1990) in her historical work on prostitution in colonial Nairobi, work made through what Andrew Hake (1977) calls "self-help jobs" were a form of resistance to unequal labor relationships. Indeed, it has been argued that the wage has long presumed the fiction of "equitable labour relationships" (Monteith, Vicol, and Williams 2021), often intimately connected to oppressive systems of patriarchy, colonialism, and capitalism.

Hustle Urbanism therefore situates itself within current scholarly debates concerning the struggles to find a "proper job" (Ferguson and Li 2018) and to navigate precarity, but it also speaks to the ways in which youth "living on the edge of society" (Watkins 2019, 12) subvert hegemonic expectations. What if they refuse certain kinds of work and actually choose forms of work that operate outside the norms of the wage? Some scholars have been writing about such refusal: Millar (2018) writes about the *catadores* in Brazil who return to the dump as waste pickers and deliberately leave the nine-to-five job that was too constraining. AbdouMaliq Simone (2016) writes about the forms of "precarious detachment" of youth in Jakarta and Hyderabad who reject normative expectations. And Marco Di Nunzio's (2022) ethnographic research in Addis tells the story of a young man, Tamrat, whose acts of "refusal" occurred during Ethiopia's construction boom, when construction jobs appeared to offer economic empowerment opportunities for youth. But continued disappointment with a series of jobs in the construction sector that underdelivered on this promise (and continued to further marginalize poor workers) pushed Tamrat to refuse this kind of work and return to street-oriented hustles.

In conversation with the diverse repertoire of hustle stories, some of which I have discussed in this chapter, *Hustle Urbanism* argues that in the Kenyan context, the self-narration and urban practice of hustling connect to long-standing histories of creative resistance in the face of marginalization, such that hustling does not reflect ambitions of assimilation into a particular economic order but instead presents alternative economic logics, forms of ordinary resistance, and sometimes refusal. But the book also seeks to extend the argument further, by illustrating that while hustling reflects young people's relationship to work, it also reveals logics and practices that go beyond labor. Each chapter that follows describes and analyzes the multifarious ways in which *hustling* shapes Nairobi's self-help urbanism

from popular neighborhoods and economies and how the logics, narrations, and practices of hustling stretch across the rest of the city and beyond the struggling class. Hustling becomes a form of placemaking and shared provisioning (chapter 3), a form of networking and collaborating with external sources of support (chapter 4), a form of adaptation to the gendered vicissitudes of volatile urban life circumstances (chapter 5), a form of traversing different stages of life and ensuring that shared provisioning becomes intergenerational within a mixed-age youth peer group (chapter 6), a form of storytelling and performance (chapter 7), and a form of political positioning and citywide branding (conclusion).

In Simone's recent book *The Surrounds* (2022), he refers to the constellation of possibilities that lie in the actual spaces where things are happening, that lie in the propositional experiments that imagine alternatives (the otherwise), and that lie in the practices that are conditional, that are subversive because they are nonconforming. The surrounds, as Simone describes, offer openings and possibilities that do not carry judgment, measurement, or assessment. These are perhaps deliberately or conveniently outside the bounds of legibility. In many ways the chapters that follow describe, analyze, and theorize hustling in the *surrounds* of Nairobi, as everyday, ordinary, and unspectacular confrontations with injustice and the continuous expressions of struggle, solidarity, and soul that emerge out of that confrontation.

To hustle can be read as a precarious livelihood strategy outside wage work and is endemic to racial capitalism and neoliberal regimes of labor casualization. But it does not merely fit within classifications of "informal" economy because it is more than labor operating outside waged arrangements, and it does not necessarily adhere to narratives of transition from one state to another in the way that, for example, the dualism of informal/formal implies. It sometimes includes temporary waged work or even attempts to engage with government employment programs. It engages with capitalist relations while also revealing other kinds of economic logics (Gibson-Graham 2008), as it involves plural forms of work and diverse kinds of labor, some of which are paid, others not. In the Kenyan context, it can also be read as a form of anti-colonial resistance and a creative practice. In sum, hustling reflects multiple forms of values—economic, social, cultural, political—and those who hustle become versed in "staying with the trouble" (Haraway 2016), while experimenting with plural and often hopeful imaginaries, stories, and plans (Pettit 2023).

LETTING GO

Being attentive to the "self-narrations" (Kimari 2022b) of individuals who describe and understand their own practices in certain ways that deviate from hegemonic definitions of work and urban "inhabitation" (Lancione 2023) offers scholars and practitioners who have held on to certain normative conceptions of what counts as work and urban life to perhaps *not* "hold onto things," perhaps even to let go. The focus could then consider modalities that surpass mere endurance and getting by, and it would make room for other kinds of deliberations, turning to how popular neighborhoods imagine, rearticulate, and craft their own social, working, and political lives in the face of intersectional insecurities.

It has been easier and more obvious, in the liberal arts and critical social sciences, to call out the moral assumptions of conservative views, especially when these carry strong resonances with past and present regimes of power, oppression, coloniality, bordering, and policing. But it is perhaps less obvious, and less comfortable, to push against the moral assumptions of presumably liberal views, which can include, for example, calling for more salaried jobs in a world with growing casualization, demanding more public funding for certain resources, or arguing for centralized infrastructure rather than off-grid solutions (Lawhon and McCreary 2023). There are of course also right-wing populist demands for all these things, so the demands for more secure jobs and more reliable infrastructures are not necessarily a partisan issue or claims made by left-wing activists and academics alone. But there has been a tendency in leftist academic writing and industrial labor activism to lament the *erosion* of the state and the rise of neoliberalism since the 1980s. In considering how work and lives are made in the Majority World, I am not sure that these lamentations necessarily apply or always provide useful starting points for meaningful analysis and critique, let alone transformative change, when the history of the state and people's relationship to work in popular economies present different challenges and levers for mobilization. "Holding onto things" can be a disservice to considering other possibilities and can overlook what about existing coping strategies and situated practices could be harnessed and amplified rather than "unlearn" a presumed "ideal" form (of employment, state provision, infrastructure) of modernity in the name of more equitable and just outcomes (Lawhon and McCreary 2023).

"Letting go" might open up space for the perspectives and diverse strategies of individuals who refer to their hustles in order to make lives and

livelihoods more "viable" (Dyson and Jeffrey 2023). Their multiple labors and tactics are formed at the margins where waiting for certain typologies of (in some places, long promised but never delivered) modernities to arrive is neither realistic nor part of the collective imaginary of what could be. In addition, the "modernities" of so-called advanced capitalism have not only had drastically uneven and unequal effects; they have also clearly failed to deliver on fundamental social, political, ecological, and economic levels (Lancione 2023; Latour 2019; Mbembe 2021).

While the book intends to be ethnographic in its empirics and writing style, it also seeks to make an intervention that reaches beyond African studies: it argues that hustle economies serve as starting points for re-thinking urban struggles and aspirations in uncertain economic times, for seeing anew the diverse strategies that make up lives and connect liveli-hoods to justice claims, and for valuing the forms of city making that hang at what James Esson calls the "conspicuous margins."[11] Many residents of Nairobi's conspicuous margins never really "held onto" Eurocentric hege-monic ideas related to work and how things ought to work. Yet, as with many other contexts in the world that have experienced an amalgam of Indigenous, colonial, and anti-colonial histories, the narrations and expe-riences of economic, social, and political life in Nairobi reflect a kind of creolized and diasporic modernity (Gilroy 1993; Lionnet and Shih 2011; Par-vulescu and Boatca 2022). This is especially the case with hustle economies in Nairobi's popular neighborhoods, which are contextualized and histori-cized in the next chapter.
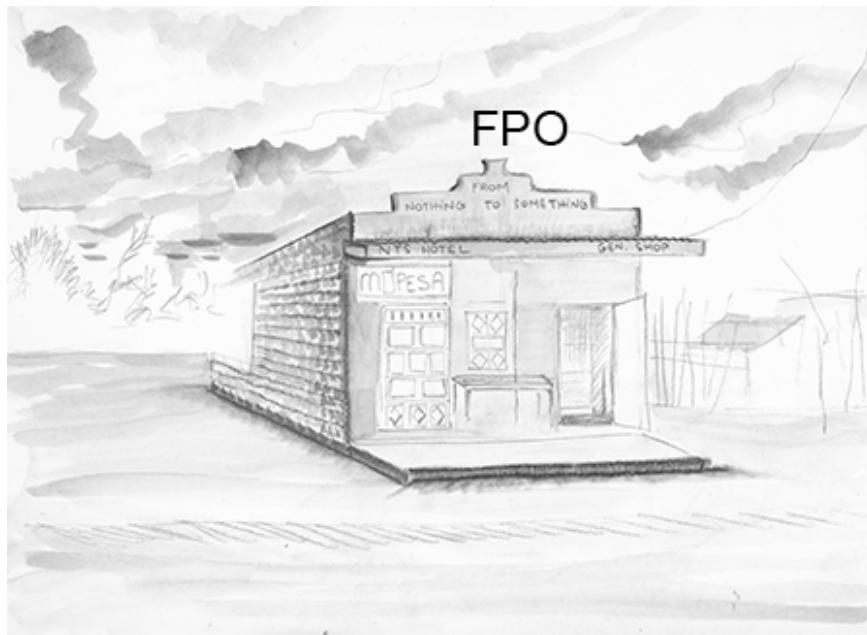
Roadside shop on the way to Nairobi

2 Self-Help City

The Making of a Hustling Class

> The African city should be seen through its complex history, culture and economy. It should also be understood by the way in which people have transformed it and how it has in turn changed them.
>
> —Mary Njeri Kinyanjui, *Women and the Informal Economy in Urban Africa*

The historical development of Nairobi and the political economy of urban planning, land appropriation, and class formations were heavily influenced by the capitalistic interests of the colonial state. The kinds of commercial transactions, currencies, and modes of social stratification in Kenya's precolonial societies were based on economies of "reciprocal undertakings" (Lonsdale 1992b, 14). Most African Kenyans were peasants or subsistence farmers in rural areas, with power relations and cultural identities pertaining to notions of seniority and kinship, and exchange founded on "goods, women, and trust" (13). At the turn of the twentieth century, Kenya went from being "a patchwork of hunting, cultivating and herding people" (Lonsdale 1992b, 13) to a "harshly politicized economy" with power centralized in the colonial state that applied "economic, political and social force" (Ochieng' and Atieno-Odhiambo 1995, xv) and an "imperial ideology of progress" (Lonsdale 1992b, 14). This involved racial and social segregation of property rights, access to land and enjoyment of resources, structural inequities, and power relations, which left a lasting legacy.

The colonial administration's imposition of "tribal" boundaries and land "reserves" distorted precolonial histories of social and geographical distinction among African Kenyans (Ochieng' and Atieno-Odhiambo 1995) and created persistent tensions concerning land redistribution during the

decades that followed independence in 1963, particularly among the political elite. As Frantz Fanon argues in *Les Damnés de la Terre* (1961; later translated as *Wretched of the Earth* [2001]), national liberation movements fighting for decolonization were often captured by a new elite, such that the transition to political independence did not necessarily mean an end to socioeconomic inequality (see also F. Cooper 2002). Though Fanon was writing about Algeria, his argument applies to several anti-colonial struggles across geography and time. To extend Fanon's argument to the Kenyan context —where the racialized violence that was integral to British colonial capitalism morphed into another kind of slow violence—poverty remained integral to the legitimizing discourses and practices of postcolonial development capitalism. Contemporary Kenyan politics have been mired in executive-level power disputes while the social and economic interests of the *wananchi* (the common people, who comprise the majority population) have often been left ignored, either sporadically addressed through government schemes that have been regarded ex post facto as tokenistic or passed on to the international development community for donor-funded programs.[1]

At the same time, overemphasizing a "dependency theory" reading of the formation of Nairobi's popular neighborhoods, presented as a relic of colonialism and neocolonial structural injustices alone (Leys 1975), diminishes the consideration for the agentive role of urban residents who live and work at the urban margins and peripheralized spaces. To quote Bruce Berman (1992, 180), it risks "treating Africans as a relatively undifferentiated mass who were exploited, impoverished, and impotent victims; dominated classes rather than agents of their own history." Though this chapter does not diminish "what was done *to*" urban poor Kenyans, it does seek to emphasize the dialectics between various actors in the city and to historicize the everyday urban practices of Nairobi's hustling class.

Along with the "oppressive and corrosive tendencies of propertied capitalism," colonialism also "enlarged markets" (Huchzermeyer 2011, 15) and facilitated the economic and political foundations of the urban informal economy that engendered innovation, solidarity, and collective economic advancement at the grassroots against all odds (Kinyanjui 2019), while simultaneously worsening those odds by fomenting a climate of unregulated corruption from the top, which perpetuated decaying public services, power abuses, and continuous dispossession of the urban poor. In other words, postcolonial Nairobi exemplified the contradictions of capitalist development and "progress." Importantly, the postcolonial state was never really

equated with "public provision" of basic infrastructures such as afford-able housing, basic services, and employment opportunities for working people. In the urban context in particular, ordinary Kenyans had become accustomed to modalities of urban dwelling that relied on their own devices. This started with where to "stay" in the city.[2]

THE COLONIAL SQUATTER

The building of colonial economic and political power in the first quarter of the twentieth century in Kenya included allowing African Kenyans to "squat" on land on which they had previously resided, including, in large majority, Kikuyu people. A Kenyan friend once remarked on this, to explain how Kikuyu people came to the Rift Valley in the first place (where the artificially designated capital of Nairobi was then built), by reflecting on his own family's story:

> Historically, the Kikuyu resided in the Central Province and moved to the Rift Valley. My family moved from Kiambu District, from their land, to Njoro, in the Rift Valley. My father was actually born on a white farmer's land in Njoro in 1935. (WhatsApp communication, March 2024)

A complex relationship formed between Kikuyu squatters and the colonial administration over the first half of the twentieth century, involving at first land "alienation," followed by diverse labor recruitment arrangements with European settlers, and ending with the "Mau Mau" politics of protest in the years following World War II and leading up to independence in 1963 (Anderson 2005; Berman and Lonsdale 1992; Kanogo 1987). By the end of World War I, "the squatter system had become an established part of the socio-economic structure of European farms and plantations in Kenya, with Kikuyu squatters comprising the majority of agricultural workers on settler plantations" (Kanogo 1987, 8).

The story of the Kikuyu squatter laborers and their role in both the events that led to independence and the politics of postcolonial Kenya highlight two key points: First, the conflict between two agrarian systems (settler plantation economy and the squatter peasant economy) exemplified a persistent tension between the colonial system (both government and the settlers) and the African response of active resistance to "coercion and subordination as they struggled to carve out a living for themselves and their families" (Kanogo 1987, 1–2). Second, the story of Kikuyu social economic

organization showed how both among ethnic groups and between them, "social division and the corruption of authority were the essential foundations of state power" (Lonsdale 1992b, 37) throughout colonial rule, a dynamic that persisted in the years that followed political decolonization (Leys 1975). These social divisions were manifested through the formation of particular socioeconomic classes that were informed by the cultural economies of ethnic affiliation. As Berman (1992, 199) explains, "class and ethnicity are not mutually exclusive processes and identities." They were constantly being "revised and fought over in the continuing and unfinished encounter of capitalism with African societies."

By the 1940s, Kikuyu people made up 50 percent of Nairobi's population (Huchzermeyer 2011, 127). Given Kikuyu predominance among the Africans of the Nairobi area, some would eventually become landlords of housing structures (within both popular neighborhoods and low-income multistory tenement buildings); others would become part of an emerging Kikuyu middle class that established a foothold in local politics and acquired a considerable advantage over the landless and wageless "African under-class" (Burton 2005). Some of these would become the political elite of the postcolonial state following decades of "politics of collaboration" with the colonial administration (Berman and Lonsdale 1992, 83) and by means of a strategic "moderate stance" vis-à-vis the militant Mau Mau "freedom fighters" (Kanogo 1987, 163). In turn, this emergent African elite would benefit from the Mau Mau struggle for independence and subsequent political decolonization, but Britain would also benefit from these "moderate" African politicians whose new position of power and independence allowed the former colonial metropole to retain an influence on the newly independent state (163).

Some have argued that the long-term goal of African nationalists, including complete "Africanization" of the country's political, economic, and cultural systems (Ochieng' and Atieno-Odhiambo 1995, xiii), was surrendered to a "neocolonial" relationship (Kanogo 1987, 164; Leys 1975). Specifically, the neocolonial state was reflected in the "institutional continuities" (Ochieng' and Atieno-Odhiambo 1995, xiii) that followed independence and the persistence of a state that protected a dominant elite class at the expense of "non-possessing classes" (xiv). For the "non-possessing classes," the landless and wageless Nairobi residents, the state was neither regarded nor actively presenting itself as a source of provision and care. Provision and care would have to be sought "from below" and from the "surrounds"

(Simone 2022) where things happen otherwise, not only outside the purview of the state (G. Myers 2005) but also outside what is institutionally legible (Scott 1998).

THE URBAN FORM(S) OF NAIROBI'S POPULAR NEIGHBORHOOD

The magnifying glass of urban poverty debates in Nairobi is often placed on the "horizontal" single-story "squatter settlement" (UN-Habitat 2003, 82) composed of makeshift shacks, open sewers, an absence of public services, and insecure tenure. Another kind of contemporary urban poverty and housing phenomenon has tended to elicit less attention—that of multistory private rental or "tenement" housing. The imaginary of the East African "horizontal slum" has been epitomized by regular forms of "slum tourism," including dramatized portrayals of Nairobi's Kibera featuring in a series of early twenty-first-century popular media: BBC4 documentaries, the 2005 film *The Constant Gardner,* and the 2011 reality show cum fundraiser *Famous, Rich and in the Slums,* which shadowed British celebrities "roughing it" among locals (see Warah 2011). Conversely, other "vertical" or mixed tenancy housing that has mushroomed in unregulated ways across African cities create, as Maria Huchzermeyer (2011, 6) argues, a "largely ignored and undebated" urban housing reality. Owner occupation across income groups in Nairobi is rare. In *mabati* (shanty) and tenement neighborhoods, it is largely absent (14). According to Huchzermeyer's (2011, 3) detailed study of tenement housing in the early 2000s, multistory tenements comprised an estimated 23 percent of Nairobi's population. Less than 20 percent lived in suburban or gated communities, and more than 60 percent lived in horizontal "slums." Most "slum" evictions or other forms of urban displacement that have occurred over these past decades have taken place in order to accommodate the unregulated, rapidly growing tenement-housing market.

Since the 1980s, Mathare Valley's housing combined horizontal and vertical structures, with "dense multi-story tenement districts" interspersed with "single-story slums" (Huchzermeyer 2011, 5). Its deep history of "private tenancy" or "lucrative landlordism" had roots in the "land dispossessions and neglect of housing by the colonial rulers" (2) and took shape especially during the 1970s. In particular, the leaders following political decolonization, Jomo Kenyatta (1963–78) followed by Daniel arap Moi (1978–2002), established decades of autocratic rule, single-party systems,

and corrupt practices "at all levels of government" that generated a culture of land grabs and the formation of an unregulated housing market that privileged "large scale tenement construction" for those with enough political leverage and capital to control, while an "urban vision" (Huchzermeyer 2011, 132) or plans for ~~subsidized~~ housing ~~for the poor~~ were completely sidelined.

While tenement and *mabati* housing structures and practices were connected to Nairobi's colonial legacy, the 1980s local and global forces shaped a pivotal period of increasingly rapid urbanization and global economic liberalization and exacerbated the conditions of urban poverty (Ferguson 2006), which persisted through the presidency of Kenya's leader in the early days of my fieldwork, Mwai Kibaki. Therefore, throughout Kenya's colonial and postcolonial history, unregulated tenement housing markets persisted, with landlords bypassing legal restrictions on modern building and zoning regulations, which also deepened the continuation of the social and racial segregation of the city (Huchzermeyer 2011, 6–7).

Yet, inherent in any unregulated market lie particular "pragmatic" practices, and in Nairobi, multiple actors benefited from tenement housing (Huchzermeyer 2011, 3–4). Landlords sought a return on their investment and had to deal with the risks of high tenant turnover, mobility, and rent default because these tenants were working outside the waged economy and could not always predict their monthly earnings, balancing poorly paid jobs and ~~various odd jobs~~ in the informal economy. Tenants were always on the lookout for a more affordable deal and had to adapt quickly to sudden economic losses. Finding the affordable deal meant navigating the unregulated tenement housing market because there was a lack of government-subsidized, public housing for low-income residents. For rural-urban migrants, life in the city's popular neighborhoods was a better alternative to rural poverty, especially given the proximity to diverse income opportunities and community networks that would facilitate access to "mobility and convenience" (7). This meant accepting the exploitative practices of the *wakubwa* (big men) who invested in unregulated tenement housing and dealing with substandard housing because that was the price and risk tenants were prepared to pay in order to reside less than seven kilometers from the CBD (213).

For some tenants, the city was a place of "transience" (Leys 1975, 181) and circular migration; for others it was the "arrival city" (Saunders 2010).

But even for those who have made Nairobi, in neighborhoods like Mathare, their place of residence, it was common for families to move multiple times within the same area, depending on what they could afford that year or that month, upgrading or downgrading their living conditions accordingly, while continuously evoking the imaginary of their rural home upcountry.[3] Ultimately, the disputed postelection violence of 1992, 1997, and especially 2007–8, and any subsequent ethnic clashes and periods of political and social unrest (including the 2022–23 *maanda mano* riots protesting the rising costs of living), have always influenced people's decisions to stay or move away.[4] There are internal and external structural, social, and economic factors influencing the dynamics of unregulated housing development, shifting tenancy, and the persistent demand for substandard cheap housing in the absence of planned public housing.

To the east of Mathare Valley, Huruma ward has possibly the highest population density on the African continent, with more than 1,500 dwelling units on each hectare (approximately 5,000 people) (Huchzermeyer 2011, 4). Because of the volatility of income among low-income residents and perceived "under-utilized land" of "informal settlements," it is not uncommon to find in Nairobi dense multistory tenement districts existing "alongside single story 'slums'" (5), with residents moving from one part of the neighborhood to another for their daily purchases, domestic tasks, and business undertakings. And while most household members may be unemployed, at least one member of each household is "economically active," some making a living within the neighborhood, while others take part in the daily exodus to the industrial area for on-demand manual labor or get hired in middle- and upper-class suburbs as *askaris* (watchmen), maids, *ayas* (nannies), and gardeners.

What residents refer to as the *mtaa* (hood) is often interchangeably the horizontal and vertical settlement, although at a granular level, the characteristics of ~~urban poverty~~, particularly concerning waste and sanitation, feature some important differences. "Horizontal slum" areas have historically relied on public toilet and ablution blocks in the absence of such facilities in makeshift residential compounds built by structure owners. Conversely, vertical structures include toilet and bathing stalls on each floor of the building. Although these facilities are also subject to disrepair and shared across multiple households, they are semiprivate and provide a relatively safer option than the public community toilet available to

"horizontal slum" dwellers whose continuous growth in numbers across Mathare Valley has, decades ago already, largely outgrown the trifling number of facilities built by municipal government in the early years following independence.

In 2004, the Central Bureau of Statistics stated that 64.4 percent of households in Nairobi share a toilet with another household (Huchzermeyer 2011, 146). This includes both horizontal and vertical habitations. Between 1969 and 1971, the Nairobi City Council (NCC) acknowledged the need for some form of planning in areas such as Mathare Valley, administering the building of 156 public toilets.[5] An estimated 300,000 to 500,000 people live in Mathare today, and the NCC has not completed a single public toilet since the early 1970s. The local Constituency Development Fund (CDF) attempted to fill this gap in the early 2000s as part of the Minister of Parliament Margaret Wanjiru's political platform.[6] MP Wanjiru politicized sanitation to affirm her empathetic stance toward the urban poor, with whom (she reminded people often) she shared past experiential knowledge of economic hardship. But despite these efforts to rehabilitate, upgrade, and construct public toilets in her constituency, by the time I first left Nairobi following twelve months of fieldwork (August 2010), the CDF's dozen toilets remained unfinished and nonoperational.

There is an important distinction between tenement cities that were also "industrial cities," where the need for housing paralleled the rapidly growing urban labor force, compared with tenement cities such as Nairobi where urban migration and the need for low-income housing was not concomitant with formal wage employment (Davis 2006; Huchzermeyer 2011). The "industrial cities" had urban-planning rationalities woven into industrial growth and development. In Nairobi, there was a 1948 Master Plan, but it was not implemented (Huchzermeyer 2011, 8). There was a vicious circle of unregulated construction and informality, fostered by a perpetual tension between the municipal officials and central government. Unlike the "rationality of the state" in nineteenth-century France (Harvey 2008; Lefebvre 1991) or the strategic "oppression of the ruling class over the working class" (Engels 1952) in early twentieth-century Germany, Kenya's context demonstrated, if not an omission of state rationality, a veiled rationality of passive exploitation and oppression. As described in Michela Wrong's book *It's Our Turn to Eat: The Story of a Kenyan Whistle-Blower* (2009, xii), looking out from one of the government buildings above Uhuru Park, "from up here, the park seemed the green and pleasant public garden its

planners had originally envisaged, rather than what it had become in the intervening years: open-air toilets, haunt of roaming muggers, resting spot for the homeless and exhausted."

In Mathare Valley, landlords themselves rarely live in their own rental blocks, which is one of the many reasons why negotiating infrastructural improvements is such a challenge. Although the unregulated tenement market ensures a level of strategic discretion, these "absentee" landlords are rumored to be government officials, lawyers, pastors, and university professors, deeming these tenements safe retirement investments (in the absence of secure pension plans for most salaried professionals) (Huchzermeyer 2011, 7), and have little to no direct contact or interest with the tenants who live in these four- to eight-story walk-ups. The primary motive is a familiar capitalistic logic: "maximization of capacity" in order to yield as much profit as possible. As one multistory block is built after the next, with no formal regard for urban-planning requirements, an unregulated, densely populated city *within* the city has been built, with dramatic health and safety implications on tenants.

The tensions between central government and the Nairobi City Council date back to the origins of the municipal authority in 1919 (Huchzermeyer 2011, 124), whose powers and responsibilities were founded on the basis of serving the interests of European settlers seeking a say in local matters (Lonsdale 1992b). Central government has persisted in limiting the powers of municipal government, while at the same time refraining from putting forward and helping implement comprehensive urban planning to accommodate rapid urban growth and expansion of the city's boundaries. While the municipal authorities have historically, and still are, vilified for underserving the majority of low-income neighborhoods and ignoring a decaying urban infrastructure, it is also clear that the Nairobi City County (formally known as the Nairobi City Council) has never been adequately funded, resourced, or managed to assume its role and address citywide municipal services and planning regulation. Municipal councilors are known for turning a blind eye to unregulated construction and informality, accepting bribes, or even inserting themselves into the tenement market to supplement their meagre wages. As a result, the tenement "typology," alongside the horizontal makeshift auto-construction, have become the status quo and growing "urban form" of rapidly growing cities in the Majority World, especially across the African continent, in "defiance of modern planning" (Huchzermeyer 2011, 8; Potts 2008).

ALTERNATIVE TO MODERNIST PLANNING:
KENYAN INFORMALIZATION

In response to attempts by the state to establish formal economic and political institutions to impose regulatory regimes, African households disrupted the locus of political power through various small-scale economic transactions and "novel forms of association" (Lonsdale 1992b, 37) that subverted state and chief control. Importantly, the encounter between the colonial state and its "conquered" people was a continuous process of negotiation marked by tensions that effectively "forced changes in the forms that states take" (39). Nairobi's colonial and postcolonial history was marked by the tectonic forces of oppressive, "autocratic," top-down politics and subversive, evasive, bottom-up informalization. The climate of unregulated practices appeared at every level of social, economic, and political life, giving way to various forms of structural and experienced exploitation, resistance, and opportunism. This was also reflected in the growing informal sector, which was hailed in the 1980s as reflecting "high levels of competitiveness as compared to the widely criticized monopolies associated with the state sector" (King 1996, xiii) but experienced in many postcolonial states as ~~corrupt and~~ serving the interests of the political elite. In a way, the informalization that occurred at every level provided an avenue for unregulated, corrupt, and exploitative practices, while at the same time "exemplified for many of its admirers the benefits of the market" (xiii) because it could have democratizing effects on marginalized groups, including allowing Indigenous economies to form under their own logics in their own right (Kinyanjui 2019; Varley 2013).[7]

In exploring the diverse African working class, W. R. Ochieng' and Eisha Stephen Atieno-Odhiambo (1995) describe the occupations of skilled and educated workers who had a degree of security of employment and income—the petite bourgeoisie that would later become critical in questioning the legality of colonialism and be instrumental in leading Kenya to independence. In contrast to this emerging middle class of Africans, there was a "semi-proletariat class of poorly paid, ill-fed and badly housed manual workers and farm labourers" (Ochieng' and Atieno-Odhiambo 1995, xvi). Several historians have argued that independent Kenya inherited the colonial structures and class formations of colonialism (Kanogo 1987; Leys 1975; Ochieng' and Atieno-Odhiambo 1995). As such, the social, infrastructural, and economic structures of low-income neighborhoods in Nairobi reflect the inequalities and disparate sources of accumulation between the

African bourgeoisie and what economic anthropologist Keith Hart termed the African "sub-proletariat." As Hart (2009) has argued, the informal sector opens up spaces for working with and in opposition to both the bureaucracy of the state and the rigidity of formal markets. The research of Margaret Macharia exemplifies ~~well~~ this mode of "working with and opposition to" both the state and formal markets. Highlighting the ways in which informality in Nairobi requires historical, spatial, and cultural contextualization, Macharia's doctoral research focused on the critical role of Somali Kenyans and their role in gradually "Africanising" urban street trade in the area of Eastleigh (which neighbors Mathare). This exemplified the modes in which different African groups have continuously countered social and spatial polarization in the city, from the colonial to the postcolonial period (Macharia and Van den Broeck 2016).

Despite expansion of Nairobi's urban periphery in the early colonial era, "the emerging town did not welcome African urbanization" (Huchzermeyer 2011, 124). The "Native Pass Law" enacted in 1920 prohibited any African not formally employed from residing in Nairobi (124). Yet colonial rural policy, namely fertile "land alienation" from rural communities, pushed people, especially Kikuyus, into the city as their rural livelihoods were increasingly jeopardized. As such, the first "African hut settlements" or "villages" (later called "slums") emerged to the north and northeast and to the west of the town center. "Landlordlism" and the consequences of unregulated urbanization grew concomitantly with the mushrooming of these "segregated communities" (125). The confluence of "inadequacies and positive qualities" that emerged in Mathare Valley during the early years following independence shaped the trajectory of urban development that went from community-led solidarity and mobilization protecting the interests of the urban poor to out-of-control exploitation of the poorest Mathare residents and of the "underutilized" land.

In the early 1970s, Nairobi became an oft-quoted example of African postcolonial urban economic transition. The 1972 International Labour Organization (ILO) report on the "informal sector" (ILO 1972) put a magnifying glass (and a label) on Kenya's vibrant though unregulated urban economic sector a decade following colonial independence, borrowing from Keith Hart's (1973) anthropological work on informal economic practices in Accra, Ghana. Yet despite these "transition" narratives (Ferguson and Li 2018) and their inference that informal economies were only viable if transient, Kenya's economic activity that falls outside wage labor has comprised

the majority of urban labor (Lindell 2010). Urban labor largely classified as "informal" became known locally as the *jua kali* sector (King 1996), a symbolic reference to the propensity of informal sector workers to operate outdoors and in ad hoc conditions (*jua kali* literally means "hot sun") and the official recognition of Moi (second Kenyan president) in 1984 to deem these workers as important contributors to the Kenyan economy. Decades following the early debates about informal economies and how to describe them, let alone valorize them, informality has been conceptualized as a mode of practices and urban logics in their own right (McFarlane 2011; Roy and Alsayyad 2004), ranging from infrastructures that are centrally unplanned but locally cobbled together into makeshift arrangements of provisioning (Vasudevan 2015), to the diversification of income opportunities being a matter of everyday common sense and risk mitigation.

The characteristics of the *jua kali* sector have been shaped by the particular urban form of the Kenyan tenement and *mabati* city described in the previous section. The *jua kali* workers, historically comprising clusters of manufacturing and trading activities, illustrate the paradox of informality in Kenya. Exemplified during Moi's presidency, the expansion of "corruption and lawlessness" (Huchzermeyer 2011, 141) influenced structural social and economic inequalities through the growth of the tenement market and land grabs, but it also accorded official support of the then thriving *jua kali* sector (King 1996). Moi became a contradictory political figure, heralded on the one hand as even more corrupt and autocratic than his predecessor and first Kenyan president, Jomo Kenyatta, and yet demonstrative of a "human face" toward the poor.[8]

Moi was known, among the urban poor especially, for his "highly symbolic act" (King 1996, 1) during a visit to one of the lower-middle-income districts in 1985 when he promised all workers under the "hot sun" (*jua kali*) a piece of shade. Moi encouraged informal sector workers to form groups in order to apply for various forms of assistance. This was both a way of legitimizing the growing informal sector (while formal employment in the 1980s was estimated at 12.6 percent [Huchzermeyer 2011, 143) and setting up measures to govern an otherwise variegated and unregulated economy. While Moi, like Kenyatta, encouraged entrepreneurialism and the spirit of "self-help," they both (especially Moi) "stripped" municipal councilors and local government of power and resources, leaving behind "hampered municipal service delivery" (Huchzermeyer 2011, 143) and little control over shady land allocation and authorization of construction across

the city's low-income neighborhoods. In subsequent years, the absence of urban reform policies at the level of central government was concomitant to the inability of the municipal government to implement any meaningful infrastructural improvement in these neighborhoods. And while state-led investment and provision was patchy at best in the 1980s, the 1990s saw growth in the heavy influence and involvement of international donors, aid organizations, and consultants who came on the scene. These powerful funding bodies even started dictating the kinds of research projects local university researchers would conduct, focusing especially on "slums" without differentiating between horizontal (single story) and vertical (multistory tenement) housing structures (146), or indeed the interconnections between them.

THE "SELF-HELP" SPIRIT OF MATHARE

In 1978, a UNICEF report, authored by Wanjiku Chiuri, set out to examine the scantly documented social and historical background of Mathare's "squatter settlement" and considered the educational, marital, and economic status of Mathare "squatters." In a summary of the main findings based on household interviews, the report stated that 55 percent of interviewees had received no schooling, while 84 percent had not finished primary school. The author noted a trend of single mothers who had migrated to the city from the rural areas after having children out of wedlock, in search of anonymity and a chance to raise their children away from the disapproving gaze of their kin and community. Chiuri (1978, 9) wrote, "They drifted into the city as there was no real place for them in the rural society." Chiuri went on to specify that there were generally "very few nuclear families living together in Mathare" and that "many of these people were landless."

The report noted that despite low levels of formal education, the prevalence of "broken homes," and the lack of land and housing tenure, there was a strong fabric of "existing community organisation" in each of the villages of Mathare. These local organizations served as a way "to try to convince the authorities against bulldozing the community" as well as campaign for the party candidates (Kenya African National Union, KANU) of the upcoming elections following independence. According to the report, the first institution developed in Mathare, following the successful KANU elections and the local MP's suggestion, was a nursery school admitting children from all over the valley (Chiuri 1978, 11). Every four years, village

chairmen were elected, and a village committee was formed. These committees met regularly to address needs iteratively. The committee even appointed "health inspectors" whose responsibility it was to patrol the village and "order people to clean around their homes" (11).

The report described a strong "self-help spirit" that combined a sense of collective organization and mobilization toward initiatives including requesting access to the city water pipeline, collective fundraising schemes to pay for such installations and their management, and facing local authorities as a collective. Notably, the request to access the city water pipeline was "held up as it took the City Council Water Department several months to decide that 'illegal squatters' should not be permitted to use clean water" (Chiuri 1978, 12; Etherton 1976).

These descriptions foreshadowed the persistent strained relationship between the Nairobi City Council (later Nairobi City County) and Mathare residents who, despite continuous attempts to mobilize in an organized manner to request certain basic services or legitimize their settlement, have throughout postcolonial history been treated as unlawful residents by the local authorities, with no *right* to access basic municipal services. The lack of reliable basic services and infrastructure thus animated diverse coping strategies, including collective saving schemes and mobilization, and shaped alternative income opportunities particularly among formally unemployed youth. The report stated that "young boys made wheeled carts which they used to bring water down the valley, and by doing so raised some income" (Chiuri 1978, 13).

Beyond the provision of basic needs, there were also sophisticated arrangements made for the provision and funding of social amenities. By the late 1960s, one of the villages in Mathare had established a "cooperative savings and loan association" that helped construct a social hall and fund such projects as a local school, hiring educated unemployed youth as teachers, providing emergency medical funds, or other miscellaneous community expenses. The "self-help spirit" shaped a grassroots safety net that provided assistance to those most in need. As Chiuri (1978, 16) observed in her report, by 1969 "Mathare Valley had developed a community-wide institutional structure capable of mobilising relatively large resources in a short period of time to solve a myriad of problems that evolved within the community."

The self-help spirit and necessary resourcefulness soon went beyond the provision of basic and social amenities. Many became part of cooperative

networks and saving schemes, aiming to purchase the land they were "squatting" on and legitimize their tenure. Yet these community-based cooperatives faced a harsh reality: legal tenure of land did not assume legal building rights. Their *mabati* (shack) homes would therefore still be subject to potential demolition. In order to expand their buying power, cooperatives did two things: they accepted members from outside Mathare Valley, opting to change their status from cooperatives to "limited liability companies"; and after continuous disillusionment with their ability to negotiate with city officials, they decided to go ahead and develop as much of the open space remaining in Mathare as possible. This marked a shift in the power dynamics of Mathare Valley: the "companies" were no longer democratic community formations but rather represented the "better-off squatters and outsiders who looked at the companies as purely business enterprises" (Chiuri 1978, 17), and it marked the beginning of rapid low-income housing development that bypassed formal planning regulation. By the end of the 1960s, Mathare Valley was officially recognized as a "legal squatting area" (1978, 16), where Mathare residents would experience a paradoxical position of claim making. On the one hand, their place of residence within the squatting area was recognized; on the other hand, their housing within "illegal structures" was insecure and subject to potential evictions and unforeseen changes in rent. Additionally, the landlords' investments in the construction of these illegal structures were equally precarious, which diminished any incentive to provide households and shared compounds with adequate basic infrastructure such as water points and toilet facilities. The form of secure housing development and investment thus became the "tenement" form.

THE *KADOGO* ECONOMY

In Nairobi's popular neighborhoods, the *kadogo* (small) *economy* has come to create a pattern of daily consumption in the form of single-unit packaging when it comes to consumer goods such as food, soaps, and other daily requirements. Inherent in the meanings and practices of the *kadogo* economy are a set of codes that determine what benefits are valued by venders, service providers, artisans, customers, and residents. These codes can include informal arrangements such as alternative payment schemes, administering small loans, buying on credit, and bartering. They form part of what Kinyanjui (2014, 2) calls "pursuits of livelihood negotiation," which can sometimes be embedded in local trust networks but can also "bridge

socioeconomic gaps" if vendors and customers live in different communities. The logics of reciprocity and mutuality that Kinyanjui (2019) describe in her writing on Nairobi's informal markets form systems of value exchange that enable people not just to buy and sell their goods and services but also to borrow and lend to one another—with the understanding that no matter what, negotiating the price is integral to any respectful transaction where both parties can benefit. The *kadogo* economy does not so much operate outside formal market economies as much as it finds ways to weave in and out of its capture. It is informal but locally regulated, inextricably linked to collective survivalism in the face of structural and intercommunity pressures, and grounded in a paradoxical logic of solidarity and tension, depending on the context.

Amid the indigenous *kadogo* economies of popular neighborhoods lies a vibrant economy of circulation and repair that reinserts new life in various repurposed objects and materials of all kinds—from clothing to shoes to plastic containers to all sorts of metals. This all starts from residential garbage collection. The "unruly" (Archer 2015) presence of residential garbage in popular neighborhoods is at first glance the visible proof of both municipal neglect and the contested treatment of the "brown" commons. Especially since the years of the "sachet" economy and the introduction of polythene packaging, waste has literally become part of the urban ecology of popular neighborhoods. It is woven into the tapestry of unpaved dirt paths and roads, skipped over by agile pedestrians, left to be washed away during the rains, attracts flies, and emits putrid smells during dry season or when left uncollected. Waste moves around, sometimes to ad hoc transit "dumping" sites that somehow inevitably end up near homes, schools, rivers, and footpaths.

In the 1990s, the rise of nonbiodegradable waste and continued demographic growth across Nairobi meant that demand for basic services completely outpaced the ability of the municipality to provide for the city's residents, especially those living in popular neighborhoods (Parnell and Pieterse 2014). This propelled two parallel phenomena: the privatization of basic services in the higher-income neighborhoods and the privatization "from below" of basic services in the low-income settlements among youth. In light of the increasing number of people competing for market share in the informal sector, young people whose possibilities of acquiring even modest amounts of seed capital were limited, so they carved out their own niche businesses unoccupied by elders and other established informal

traders and workers. Hence, unregulated dumping of household waste provided the available resource for unemployed but opportunistic youth to render discarded materials a valuable commodity from which they could generate income, especially since no one (municipal or local residents) was really prepared to deal with the "problem" of garbage, let alone perceive its potential value. Waste therefore became a niche resource and business opportunity, such that diversifying income-generation activities around the management of waste became a widely practiced neighborhood-based, youth-led enterprise across Nairobi's popular neighborhoods.

An important aspect of the colonial project, later echoed in the organizational logic of popular economies, was that African political and social forces were "fragmented, isolated and contained within the framework of local administrative units," with specific efforts to prevent "horizontal linkages that could generate African opposition" (Berman 1992, 162). In the twenty-first century "slum," the "self-help" spirit and encouragement to form civic associations (e.g., community-based organizations [CBOs]) dating back to Kenyatta's and Moi's eras combined with the colonial legacy of "fragmentation and isolation" has made it difficult, if not impossible to date, for community organizations to mobilize and scale their efforts. Platforms for horizontal engagement and wider network building are still a challenge and have kept even the most meaningful efforts for transformative change highly localized, small in scale, and grounded in hard-earned social ties and personality politics. It is all the more pressing, then, to better understand the significance of the small-scale initiatives that are youth-led and address the neglect of the state.

KENYAN YOUTH NAVIGATING AND SHAPING THE SELF-HELP CITY

One of the most vulnerable demographics in African cities today are young people between the ages of fifteen and thirty-five. In Kenya, young people between ages ten and thirty-five comprise approximately half the population.[9] A quarter of the population is between eighteen and thirty-five, technically of working age, although many who are younger are economically active in some way. In the decades following independence and the reclaiming of Nairobi as an African city, rural to urban migration accelerated, especially among young people in search of urban livelihoods. But given the lack of employment opportunities in the formal sector, most young migrants made their way into popular neighborhoods from where

housing, income opportunities, and social networks were more accessible, albeit precarious (Huchzermeyer 2011; Saunders 2010; Yaqub 2009). As a result, youth under the age of thirty-five comprise a large majority of the urban population living in densely populated neighborhoods.

Today, residents in popular neighborhoods make a distinction between those in the hood "who came" from rural areas (*watu wamecome*) and those "who were born" here (*watu wamezaliwa*). Those who were born here feel a more emphatic sense of belonging to the *mtaa*. They might go "up-country" (referred to as *shago* in Sheng) during holidays to see elders and family relations, but they don't necessarily spend extensive amounts of time there. For those who came to the city, many feel less rooted in the *mtaa* and are less likely to hang out in the streets with other age-mates. But both the youth who have come and those who were born in the *mtaa* find ways to form livelihood strategies outside waged employment and develop their own networks outside formal institutions.

The category of "youth" in Kenya has undergone a highly politicized history. The notion of youth has, across different cultural groups in Kenya, traditionally been associated with a time of ambition and disciplining practices, including "dramatized" enactments of the three main stages of a man's life, from "gallant youth to mature family headship and awesome old age" (Lonsdale 1992b, 21). The transition from one stage to another assumed not only culturally contingent rites of passage (Turner 1969) but also specific accomplishments related to land, marriage, and civic life.

The economic liberalization policies of the 1990s prompted ~~waves of~~ urban migration into Nairobi (Huchzermeyer 2011, 148). Among these migrants seeking opportunity and new beginnings in the city were countless young men who were either or both school dropouts and/or unable to earn a living from agricultural ~~livelihood~~. This created a generation of disaffected youth whose energies and aspirations informed an urban youth subculture where gang life and entrepreneurial niches overlapped considerably. Perhaps the most infamous group reflecting this nexus is the Mungiki, meaning "a united people" in Kikuyu. The Mungiki is a Kikuyu youth movement that originally emerged in the early 1990s and was motivated by principles of liberation, "defending the dispossessed: women, migrants, and landless youth" (Frederiksen 2010). Over time, members of Mungiki were seen as agitators of violence, reflecting the dangerous combination of rising discontentment among marginalized youth and politicians willing to exploit youth disaffection to spark havoc during key flash points of political tension (e.g., the 2007/8 contested presidential elections).

Research focusing on Nairobi urban youth culture and its intersection with "gang" formations includes Musambayi Katumanga's (2005) study of what he calls the "bandit economy," referring to Mungiki and rival gangs. Susanne Mueller's work (2008, 192) on urban gangs expands the analysis beyond banditry by describing Mungiki as a "shadow state in some of Nairobi's slums" providing basic security and services in the absence of state-led provisions, and a "classic capitalist operation" (193) carving out its own niche for economic advancement and recognition. Mungiki represented, therefore, an underground youth-led movement grounded in a politics of opposition that is considered today a "banned" organization, though it has been known to retain punctuated connections to both political elites and capitalist economies.

If, in other words, youth living in urban poverty could not get a "job" or secure housing, they would at least seek out modes of asserting their power, control, and creativity to shape alternative economies that bordered on licit and illicit, legal and illegal activities. These various income-generating activities would in turn serve two main purposes: an implicit critique of the state's corrupt practices and failed municipal services; and the generation of youth-led mixed livelihoods, enabling vulnerable youth to renegotiate their terms of work, belonging, and place within the neighborhood and the city.

While the violence of Mungiki gang culture of the 1990s was quelled under Kibaki's presidency, the Mungiki became an important symbolic reference, echoing ideologies of the Mau Mau and providing unemployed youth and school leavers with an agency and voice that could, at least in spirit, combat as well as participate in a system where power, money, and fear were critical means to advancement. Though this book does not focus on youth gang culture, it acknowledges that youth-led social and economic lives in popular neighborhoods are always intimately entangled with diverse youth lifeworlds and subjectivities that shape an array of street-oriented learning and knowledge. Crucially, as activist scholars Wangui Kimari (2022b) and Naomi Van Stapele (2019) argue in their own work focusing on Mathare youth, in some way whatever youth do, they are constant targets of stigma and extrajudicial violence. As a result, Kimari (2020) argues, Mathare has become stigmatized as a kind of "outlaw" settlement. Kimari (2022a) conceptualizes what she calls "outlaw spaces" as systematically criminalized and peripheralized spaces where the most marginalized (youth especially) generate novel forms of knowledge and practices, particularly around ecological justice. Whether some youth engage in activities

that would be deemed "illegal" under one light or residential services under another depends on whose perspective is vocalized. Either way, these are all part of a community-based portfolio of livelihood activities, and there is a spectrum of moral codes that shape how youth get things done, get around, get by, and get ahead.

ALTERNATIVE POLITICAL LANGUAGE

John Lonsdale (1992a, 204) writes about the importance of identifying a usable "political language," one that "unites people over what to argue about." This political language not only "provides the images on which they can base their ideologies"; as researchers it also gives us a crucial window into expressions and perceptions of ideas we seek to understand and practices we seek to study. As Atieno-Odhiambo argues, Kenya's postcolonial history has had to be

> invented, assembled together, arranged around the metaphor of struggle. This metaphor entails seeking our history of the past fifty or so years as moral enterprise: against the injustice that is colonialism; against poverty, ignorance and disease; against the drudgery of rural life; against the foreignization of the cultural ecology, against the intervention of alien ideas in the indigenous discourses on nation-building. (1995, 2)

As Atieno-Odhiambo recalls, the "struggle" has been a dominant theme throughout various stages of colonial and postcolonial life, acquiring a politicized status of collective pride, especially during Kenyatta's rule, and pertaining to various issues spanning struggles for "land for health, for housing, for water, for the environment" (2).

Inherent in youth "struggle" is their place within the working life of the city and the constant judgment concerning the legality or licit nature of their labors. Notably, although the diverse occupations of youth living in the city's popular neighborhoods might be classified as "informal" by development economists or government officials remarking on employment statistics, most youth groups in popular neighborhoods are registered CBOs, paying dues to the Nairobi City Council. It is therefore worth questioning what constitutes "becoming legal" (Chant 2009, 174). Most youth enterprises in popular neighborhoods operate in relation to or within a youth group, and their liminal status has offered opportune entry points for organizations (NGO or private) who want to "partner" with local

"entrepreneurs." These same "entrepreneurs" might under another light become targets of harassment and stigma for local or national authorities deeming youth in the popular neighborhoods "troublemakers." Against this backdrop where youth are hailed at different moments as either entrepreneurial "makers" or unruly "breakers" (Honwana and De Boeck 2005), narrations of hustling have become a contemporary alternative "political language" (Lonsdale 1992b) that affirms youth-led struggles and ingenuity as they endeavor to make a life, make a living, and make a mark in the city.

CONTRADICTIONS OF MODERNITY

Nairobi exemplifies the political economy of a rapidly changing landscape of twenty-first-century urbanism in all its contradictions. Its urban infrastructures have struggled to cope with rapid demographic growth over the past forty years, and in response a multitude of makeshift infrastructures and diverse economies have formed side by side. The pace of ICT innovations, speculative urban development, and international development interventions are set in sharp contrast with the uneven development experienced by the majority of off-grid residential areas cut off from reliable basic services, educational resources, and tenure security (Huchzermeyer 2011; Van den Broeck 2017; Watson 2013). Inequalities across all domains of urban life have persisted despite the transition between British colonial rule (1899–1963) and Kenyan independence (Wrong 2009). Today, the city persists with a perverse combination of unrealized master plans, techno-optimistic future urban visions (Pollio 2021), and accelerated private investment in middle- and upper-class enclaves and shopping malls, in contrast to a continually under-resourced municipality struggling to provide reliable basic services to the majority of citizens living in densely populated underserved neighborhoods like Mathare.

Against the odds, Nairobians across precarious neighborhoods have developed diverse economies to the more mainstream East African "success stories" of the mobile banking sector and other tech innovation. Nairobi's vibrant entrepreneurial urbanism "from below" includes its *jua kali* sector of self-made welders, carpenters, and *fundi* (repairmen). In Kariobangi South, otherwise known as Nairobi's "light industries," and around the market in the area of Kamukunji, east of the CBD, there are hubs of artisanal manufacturing (especially metal and repair work) that have formed and grown since the 1970s (King 1996). As Neil Carrier's work describes, Kenya is also home to a vibrant (albeit illicit) economy of the plant (and

so-called drug) khat or *miraa* (Carrier 2007) and the economic trading hub of "Little Mogadishu" (Carrier 2017) in Eastleigh, Nairobi. In addition, homegrown popular cultural mediums including street art, hip-hop, and a constellation of street economies and so-called informal sector services are what *make* the city move and provide a crucial counternarrative to the "future city." The "real city" (Pieterse 2011) and the "real economy" (Mac-Gaffey 1991) of Nairobi are occupied by those who simultaneously speak of their *hustle,* who say they're "around" while never standing still, and who may be formally un(der)employed but who are active in a variety of ways.

Consider the following contradictions of the postcolonial city in relation to the "petty enterprises and services" that have shaped ~~the~~ homegrown ~~waste sector~~. First, there has been since independence a continuous tension between the anti-poor policies (including failure to provide public or low-income housing in the 1960s and 1970s, and the "slum demolitions" and evictions common throughout the 1980s) and the increasing recognition since the 1972 ILO mission and Moi's symbolic recognition of the *jua kali* sector in the mid-1980s that despite the absence of government support, Kenya's informal sector had become the "provider of employment, goods and services for lower-income groups, for which there was no alternative source of supply" (King 1996, 12). It was not only a thriving part of the Kenyan economy but also a much cheaper source of job creation than what the Kenyan government's 1986 report *Economic Management for Renewed Growth* then called the "modern sector." This recognition, it has been argued, might have excused and later perpetuated the "total neglect" (King 1996, 12) of the state in providing basic services in lower-income neighborhoods or formal employment opportunities, while at the same time encouraging *jua kali* workers to form associations of various types in order to "qualify for assistance," including access to land, sheds, and loans (13). This also provided the state with the possibility of extracting some remuneration from these "registered" groups.

Second, the composition and evolution of the so-called informal economy, a diverse sector composed of micro-industrial enterprise, cottage industries, and various forms of self-employed work, was intimately linked to the lack of tenure security and lack of formal employment opportunities in the "modern" industrial sector. Additionally, the "non-formal education" (King 1996, 8) that provided de facto forms of training and the eventual formation of "associations" encouraged by Moi's government shaped particular coping strategies and modalities of labor, provisioning,

and self-help. The businesses of "African entrepreneurs" was also, as Kenneth King (1996, 6) describes, influenced by the "Asian businessmen" (known among my interlocutors as Wahindi) and the "small-scale India factory sector," with a combination of "animosity towards Asian business practices" (as primary competitors and/or ~~abusive~~ employers) and respect for their business shrewdness. Alongside the Wahindi, the Kikuyu community became known as having a "distinctive trading culture and a business ethic," an enterprise culture that was apparent among *jua kali* workers but also among *matatu* workers, landlords of structures in popular neighborhoods (some of whom actually lived in these neighborhoods themselves), and the *wakubwa* absentee landlords who were never seen around.

Third, the ~~unplanned~~ urbanization and inadequate basic infrastructure of ~~lower income~~ neighborhoods combined with both the "total neglect" of government and the culture of "rugged self-reliance" (King 1996, 12) shaped yet another kind of informal-sector entrepreneurship ~~occasionally evoked in the literature but to date unelaborated~~: the urban waste and sanitation sector. While the *jua kali* sector has been recognized by government and received some form of official support since the 1980s, it is primarily a micro-industry of blacksmiths, metalworks, and mechanics (King 1996, 22), and has become part of what is called a "site and service" industry where the business premise is as crucial to the trade itself. Indeed, Moi's symbolic promise of "shade" inferred that these informal traders and metal workers would be accorded a space within particular estates, encouraged to register as a cooperative, and some even afforded an official PO box address. What has been less documented, however, are the "mobile" entrepreneurs of the informal sector, often composed of youth whose negotiation and boundaries of workspace are different from *jua kali* entrepreneurs. These youth have the freedom and inclination to roam but are bound to particular demarcations within their popular neighborhoods, where establishing social spaces for collective gathering often become crucial sites where those who work and those waiting for work coincide, scheme, and mark their place within the neighborhood.[10]

Life in Nairobi's popular neighborhoods has long been grounded in an "accepted informality" (Huchzermeyer 2011, 6–7) and an "incompleteness" (Guma 2020), which generate diverse infrastructural forms that pose a certain paradox: given the lack of formal regulatory measures and layers of auto-construction and improvised urbanization, there are aspects of everyday street life that continuously contend with the visible manifestation of

unmetabolized ~~urban sanitation and~~ waste. The piles of residential garbage and the sewage spilling from "overburdened pipes" (Huchzermeyer 2011, 5) literally infiltrate the ground on which people walk. At the same time, street life is animated with "the varied use of street facing ground floor units" (5), which are highly social and dynamic spaces of commerce, banter, and mutual aid. In a way, the decentralized basic services in these popular neighborhoods, including solid waste management, reflect ~~what~~ Henri Lefebvre (2009)'s concept of *auto-gestion,* a system of self-management that was articulated as profoundly collective and always unfinished—or again, to echo Prince Guma, "incomplete," in the generative sense, or "always in the making" (Guma 2020, 729).[11] And because it is always in the making, on some days, the garbage sits in place, piling up, until it is taken away.

In the social economy of popular neighborhoods where survival either depended on or defied communal solidarity, in the absence of formal social safety nets or legal structures, any aspect of life that could be deemed shared civic responsibility or voluntary action underwent at best communal deliberation and collective mobilization (community cleanups, *harambee* fundraisers following tragedies, or social theme-based community events), and at worst potential neglect or violent disputes.[12] The social economy of Mathare, therefore, could teeter between "cosmopolitan urbanism" (Huchzermeyer 2011, 6) and violent outbreak in the space of little time, sparked by the manipulative public rhetoric of political leadership (see Anderson 2002). On a day-to-day basis, there was a constant interplay between the vulnerabilities and socialities of life ~~in popular neighborhoods~~.

The next chapters build on the scholarship concerned with Nairobi's political economy, informal economies, housing struggles, and criminalization of youth by focusing on the mixed-livelihood strategies of youth in Mathare and the multiple ways in which they make work, meaning, and place in the self-help, "outlaw" city within the city. As chapter 3 explains, this started with the shared understanding that individual youth in popular neighborhoods ~~have~~ little power, but as collectives, youth groups ~~have~~ a powerful voice. With a space from which to organize as well as spend time, they ~~devise~~ plans and ~~make~~ deals. One notable example of this has been how youth in ~~popular neighborhoods~~ turn *trash into cash.*

Early morning on the streets of Kibichoi, Huruma, Nairobi, June 23, 2016

3 Straight Outta Dumpsite

Youth-Led Waste Economy

> In the ghetto, about ten, fifteen years ago this place was so dirty. Trash was everywhere . . . and we realized that waste could be gold.
>
> —Kaka, Mathare Environmental Conservation
> Youth Group member, 2009

One evening in June 2016, I stood at the *matatu* stage along Juja Road near Redeem Church, parting ways with my friends Eliza and Ken, when one of the loudest and most ornately beautified *matatu* pulled up displaying graffiti art and lettering that said *Straight Outta Dumpsite,* a playful reappropriation of the American film title *Straight Outta Compton,* which had come out earlier that year. When a *matatu* slows down for a moment to let passengers jump off and others alight, the graffiti art on that *matatu* flashing an urban story on wheels reflects the connection between place-based narrations and global popular culture. The reworded traveling tagline "Straight Outta Dumpsite" served as a playful affirmation of the shared condition and position of marginalized youth living in neighborhoods exposed to underinvestment, inadequate infrastructures, and overpolicing. Youth in both Compton and Mathare have inhabited a lifeworld that is stigmatized as rife with joblessness, violence, and crime. At the same time, to say that something comes "straight out of" also means that it is unique, that it is the source of something worth paying attention to.

That Nairobi *matatu* was a moving reminder of the opening line preceding the first beat of N.W.A's 1988 hip-hop track "Straight Outta Compton" (inspiring the biopic that followed almost thirty years later): "you are now about to witness the strength of street knowledge." To come "straight out of" was therefore an affirmative declaration of that strength of street

knowledge. Branding that *matatu* with the tag line *Straight Outta Dumpsite* was a subversive and affirmative claim that emphasized in bold terms the human and material value that resided in this part of the city. These words were an assertion of place but also an echo of another place, an expressed diasporic cosmopolitan solidarity with other past and present elsewheres (Gilroy 1993; Rollefson 2017; Weiss 2009). The "straight outta" reflected a resonant, traveling, popular cultural hook that shape-shifted from California to Nairobi neighborhoods, from one hood to the next, both simultaneously peripheralized and repositories of creative ingenuity. That *matatu* was a mobile reflection of what Glissant (1997) has called *mondialité,* translated as "worlding," oppositional to the homogenizing concept of *mondialization* or globalization, which infers a sameness and uniformity. This creative re-appropriation from *straight outta Compton* to *straight outta dumpsite* reflected the intellectual and cultural enrichment of a shared but shifting affirmation of place, belonging, and collective capaciousness *to face* (as well as *stay with*) "the trouble" (Haraway 2016).

In Mathare, roads are unpaved; basic infrastructures of water, sanitation, and housing are insecure; and public provisions (including legal protection) rarely operate in the interest of local residents. Mathare is equidistant between the Central Business District (CBD) and Dandora, the latter commonly known for its municipal dumpsite. Dandora is a part of the city's periphery, not only a place that receives and concentrates the city's solid waste but one that also connects the labors of a vibrant and atomized youth-led economy of informal garbage collectors across the city. Dandora is also known as a place that draws together the city's burgeoning *genge* hip-hop scene. When *matatu* ride along Juja Road, moving from Dandora, through Mathare, and to the CBD, they become moving canvases for urban storytelling and loudspeakers for homegrown hip-hop sounds, bringing the urban periphery to the CBD. The stories and the sounds of the periphery are pulled into the center and the discarded materials and wasted young lives are reclaimed (Millar 2018).

This chapter describes and conceptualizes the multiplicity of everyday strategies and urban experiences that shape city life for youth living in Mathare, focusing on the nexus of youth, waste, and work. In particular, it examines the story of neighborhood-based waste management, to illustrate the innovative ways in which landless and wageless youth have appropriated household residential solid waste as a resource for income generation,

in the face of continued state underinvestment in basic service provision in these peripheralized neighborhoods. The chapter joins other critical urban scholars in contesting problematic representations of urban African social, economic, and political life in terms of "negation" (Roitman 1990), "crisis," or "failure" (Mbembe and Nuttall 2004). The stories relayed in this chapter complicate and challenge these stereotypes and tropes.

The intention here is neither to romanticize the resilience of youth living in underserved neighborhoods nor to victimize them but rather to take seriously youth-led coping strategies that form at the margins of the main city. These are vital "potentially generative space[s]" (Simone 2010a, 41) that are on the one hand full of "innovation and adaptation" (41) and on the other hand often overlooked or stigmatized. But even the innovative and adaptive strategies are deeply entangled with local and structural inequalities, such that part of being a young person in these neighborhoods involves a situated but shared "spirit of struggle and insurgency" (Jay-Z 2010, 27). In Mathare, that "spirit" has informed how youth identify particular opportunities for participating in the social, economic, and political life of the city.

Focusing on three areas within three of the six "wards" of Mathare (Mlango Kubwa, Mabatini, and Huruma), the chapter centers the perspectives and stories of three youth groups whose local street and ecological knowledge has rendered waste not only a material but also a symbolic and political resource. If the previous chapter foregrounded the historical continuities of structural environmental injustices in popular neighborhoods in Nairobi, this chapter focuses on the ways in which the homegrown waste economy in Mathare has become foundational to youth hustle practices in popular neighborhoods, enabling school leavers without jobs and further educational prospects to build and shape a portfolio of youth-led popular economies that experiment with situated ecological, infrastructural, and activist practices.

The ethnography here reflects the spatial and organizational practices of waste work, the relationship between youth and external actors, and the importance of group work, which includes marking a shared space in the neighborhood to stake a ground from which to mobilize, work, and assemble during "downtime." These groups engage in diverse labors centered around the resource of waste, including residential garbage collection, sorting and shredding, recycling, and repair. Many also engage in grassroots

environmental advocacy and liaising with external actors, such that youth in these popular neighborhoods have not only cultivated situated economic and political agency; they have also projected these beyond "the hood," which has important implications for thinking about the role of youth in remaking the everyday city from the margins.

The chapter resonates with ethnographic studies exploring the relationship between urban waste flows in cities without reliable municipal waste management, informal waste labor, livelihood struggles, and citizenship claims (Doherty 2022; Fredericks 2019; Millar 2018). Youth-led waste management in Nairobi surely exemplifies coping strategies of "shared self-provision" when formal institutions and social services are otherwise absent or inaccessible (Kinder 2016). But the labors and effects of the youth-led homegrown waste economy in Nairobi go beyond waste management. In Mathare, waste work has increasingly become intimately entangled with the efforts of activist collectives who see environmental, economic, and social justice causes as intersectional. For example, many youth engaged in waste work operate in solidarity with networks mobilizing against police violence targeting youth (Kimari 2023; Van Stapele 2019).[1] As a result, what might at first just seem like a fragmented, informal garbage collection economy is in actuality an important youth-led platform for transgressing structural urban poverty, environmental harms, and youth unemployment. The "waste work" that youth do is part of a wider web of what Wangui Kimari (2022a) calls "ecological justice" and what I will refer to here as "ecological hustles" (or eco-hustles for short). Eco-hustles draw together collective economic opportunism, community provision, environmental activism, and shared solidarities among friendship groups. They involve three modulations: hustle as a *last-resort survival* mechanism (being a garbage collector); hustle as a *livelihood strategy,* including economic opportunism and diversification of income streams around the multiple use and exchange values of waste; and hustle as a *politics of contestation, opposition, and punctual transgression* in the face of municipal absenteeism and the false promises of cyclical youth employment programs. Alongside all this, there is an ambiguous and sometimes complicated moral economy underpinning eco-hustles because the spheres of entrepreneurship, opportunistic group crime, and the careful navigation of social pressures when so much depends on group work are often intertwined, and navigating these spheres (including avoiding engaging with any of them) becomes part of the daily calculations.

YOUTH: THE MARGINALIZED MAJORITY

Youth in Nairobi contend with an unemployment crisis, continued disinvestment in basic services, and persistent marginalization. In many African cities, urbanization has happened without large-scale industrialization or comprehensive employment programs following independence (Davis 2006). But narrow labor categories that define work in binary terms (legal / illegal; employed / unemployed) have not helped advance our understanding of what is actually going on in everyday lived experiences among young people (Ferguson and Li 2018). Furthermore, across mainstream representations of popular neighborhoods (commonly referred to pejoratively as "slums"), the social and economic modes of organizing, exchanging, sharing, cohabiting, and learning are not only largely categorized, legally at least, as "informal" or "illicit"; they are usually defined by what they are not (Roitman 1990). In some cases, youth are portrayed as jobless, idle, violent, or displaced. In other cases, youth are hailed as entrepreneurial, digital natives, creative, and resilient.

The complicated and politicized category of "youth" in Kenya and beyond has generated polarized narratives that mirror the competing discourses of the "slum city" as an apocalyptic lawless ghetto on one extreme (Davis 2006) and a site of creative coping strategies and vibrant entrepreneurship (Neurwirth 2012) on the other. Youth can be perceived as a vulnerable social and political category, but their ambiguous limbo status can also shape generative spaces of opportunism, experimentation, and ingenuity. These move fluidly and sometimes inconspicuously between illicit and licit activities; one may even lead to the other. Youth find their own "ways and means," which sometimes "involve the supply of hitherto unimagined 'services,' sometimes the recommissioning of the detritus of consumer society, sometimes the resale of purloined property of the state, sometimes the short-circuiting of existing networks of exchange" (Comaroff and Comaroff 2005, 23).

As a result, the lives of youth—the marginalized majority city dwellers—go underdocumented or reduced to essentialized narratives of deprivation, violence, or romanticized boot-strapping entrepreneurialism. And yet their "life styles" (Valentine 1978) and "habitus" (C. Richardson and Skott-Myhre 2012) are much more (and sometimes much less) than deprivation, violence, and entrepreneurship. The lifestyles and habitus of the *mtaa* (the popular neighborhood) consist of a multitude of livelihood strategies along

with interludes of "hanging about" (G. Jones 2012) and different forms of community work, including peace building (McMullin 2022). This is especially the case with youth groups who share a particular form of "liminality" (Turner 1969). In popular neighborhoods, youth are left in limbo as school leavers with nowhere to go and nothing obvious to do, and are not yet ready (or wanting) to perform adult roles and adhere to normative expectations of adulthood. Their alternative interpretations of work are entangled with the shared prolonged transition to culturally contingent norms of adulthood (Hamilton and Hamilton 2009; Honwana 2012), perhaps even a shared "detachment" from these in some cases (Simone 2016)—a kind of *protracted liminality*.[2]

In the African urban context as in Nairobi, youth (particularly male) comprise the majority of the informal labor force (Yaqub 2009). While the informal sector has grown due to job losses incurred in the wake of neoliberal economic policies, an entire generation of young people does not even have "jobs" to be lost. In such a context, youth risk being a "potential category of exclusion and exploitation, a source of surplus value" (Comaroff and Comaroff 2005, 22). This reality has pushed scholars to focus on the experiences and subjectivities of African youth facing systems that seem rigged against them, to better understand how youth struggling with gendered expectations struggled to imagine, let alone build, a future in the midst of persistent unemployment and adversity, alongside the quixotic promises of globalization.

There is a rich ethnographic literature focused on how youth navigate various forms of heightened catastrophic insecurity in the contemporary world. To mention a few notable examples within African youth studies that resonate with this book: Marc Sommers (2012) focuses on youth feeling "stuck" in Rwanda. Daniel Mains (2011) focuses on youth in Ethiopia trying to construct hope in the midst of uncertainty. Henrik Vigh (2006) examines the opportunistic ways in which youth socially navigate conflict-ridden social landscapes in Guinea-Bissau. Sasha Newell (2012) focuses on young men in Côte d'Ivoire who engage in conspicuous consumption as a collective performance ("modernity bluff") to mask their daily struggle to make ends meet. Brad Weiss (2009) depicts the performative and lively space of the barbershop as the locus where socializing, business, and expressions of popular urban culture overlap in Tanzania. James Esson (2015, 2020) focuses on young men in Ghana whose football dreams are entangled with the false promises of international development, the global inequalities

of capitalism, and the harms of "irregular" migration management. And Marco Di Nunzio (2019) focuses on young men whose precarious street lives in urban Ethiopia highlight the perverse contradictions between rapid urban development and persistent marginalization of youth. What comes through in the growing scholarship on African youth is the vast heterogeneity of "real economies" (MacGaffey, 1991) and "real social practices" that make up the "real city" (Pieterse 2011, 14) where the marginalized majority live, dream, play, work, and pass the time. Given this heterogeneity, still too little is known about how young people actually "get by," how they navigate normative expectations and pressures, and how they analytically describe their relationship to everyday life, work, and their urban environment.

In the absence of employment opportunities and other official support systems, youth in popular neighborhoods are left to their own devices to create their own "ways of being in the city" (Simone 2010b, 58), operating on the periphery of legal and formal employment. They shape hustle economies that reject formal institutions of authority while maintaining connections to them and continuously negotiating political and economic arrangements. Their experience and position of liminality, marginality, and trouble can exacerbate youth vulnerabilities, but they can also generate spaces of unlikely opportunism and solidarity to make a living and get things done. In the context of protracted uncertainty and the absence of formal institutional support, chances of survival and success are predicated on "webs of exchange" with other peers and the capacity to "bring others along with them" (Venkatesh 2006, 95, 103–4). Notably, friendship- and place-based youth collectives have taken on waste work to strategically modulate between survivalism, livelihood strategy, and contestations of authority, striking a tenuous balance between feeding themselves and renegotiating their place within the city.

Rather than the endless pursuit of individualized economic profit, the everyday logics of the *mtaa* involve remaining embedded in familiar social and commercial relations (Dawson 2021), while constantly "realigning" hustles to fit the shifting demands of local and citywide economies (Di Nunzio 2019; Venkatesh 2006). These constant shifts and adjustments reflect the "incompleteness" (Guma 2020) of popular economic practices among youth. Here, hustling generates processes of street-oriented learning and shapes generative spaces of experimentation, popular education, and local knowledge for youth who have carved out their own diversified occupations (Di Nunzio 2019; K. Hart 2009; Kimari 2023; Moser 1998),

appropriating and monetizing particular corners and services as and when they can. Notably, hustling in Nairobi's *mtaa* involves collective enterprise, and so here it's worth delving for a moment into the significance of the youth group as a hustling entity.

YOUTH GROUPS: LIMINALITY AND *COMMUNITAS*

Across popular neighborhoods in Nairobi, community-based organizations (CBOs) have long served as vital support networks for local residents, providing a grassroots mechanism for self-organizing all manner of collective efforts—from group saving schemes to event logistics, as well as communicating with development actors and local politicians (Hake 1977; Van Stapele et al. 2019).[3] Some CBOs also engage in various forms of activism and associated "care work" (Kimari 2018) to fight against a range of intersectional issues concerning everyday forms of violence in the "ghetto"— from sanitation and water poverty to extrajudicial killings (Kimari 2018; Van Stapele 2019). In every neighborhood, some of these CBOs are known as "youth groups" whose CBO status is often associated with the name of their territorially marked home ground, a particular village *within* the wider ward, often known only to those who navigate these streets and take the *matatu* to or through these neighborhoods. And depending on the area (and whose point of view), these youth groups might be classified as CBOs, youth groups, or gangs (Van Stapele 2019).

Youth groups serve as vital support networks for school leavers who are caught in a state of limbo, unsure of what to do to find income opportunities and often unable to reach the normative milestones associated with adulthood that are often expected of them. The youth group becomes a form of what anthropologist Victor Turner (1969, 94–96) has called "liminality and communitas," described as key "forms and attributes" of any "rite of passage." In Turner's writing on "rites of passage," he explains that "transitions" shape temporal and social experience and outlines three phases that occur during the period of "transition" that marks a rite of passage: "separation," "limen" (from Latin, meaning the threshold that separates two spaces from one another), and "aggregation." Separation marked a kind of "detachment" of the individual or group from an earlier social structure; the "limen" period was full of ambiguity because it was unknown and uncertain but importantly also experienced with other individuals going through this time together; and the phase of "aggregation" inferred a kind of resolution, when the rite of passage was "consummated." In that middle

period, the *limen* one, Turner suggests that there was a lack of stability—to be "between" and "betwixt" two worlds, neither in one nor in the other. This is what he calls "liminality." And within this context of liminality, there was, he describes in relation to his own research on rites of passage, a kind of social bond that formed among those undergoing the rite of passage and "roughing it" together. This is what Turner calls "communitas," drawing on the Latin meaning to describe a feeling of shared solidarity that forms during the "liminal" phases of a right to passage, and importantly this shared solidarity and liminal period was also one when individuals exercise a "transient humility" (Turner 1969, 97). Thus, *communitas* shapes a sense of collective endeavor but also one where new social roles and experimentation might take place. This is different from the notion of "community," which describes a grouping of people living in the same place or having shared characteristics. *Communitas* describes the shared experience of being in transience together.

This conceptualization of liminality and *communitas* can be applied to the youth groups in Nairobi's popular neighborhood and their own particular experience of "roughing it" and navigating this period together. Here I extend the concepts of liminality and *communitas* beyond just rites of passage that might be temporary ritualistic moments traversing from one state of childhood to another state of adulthood. In the contemporary context of youthhood in the *mtaa,* I argue that first, the state of liminality and *communitas* is prolonged and protracted, and second, that this state is also marked by an entanglement of diverse social, political, and economic experimentation. For these youth, hustling is the self-narration and practice that emerges out of this period of protracted liminality, the sense of *communitas,* and the forms of plural experimentation.

One of the entrées into the popular economy and forms of experimentation ~~was~~ waste work, around which various kinds of resource recovery and repair have emerged. There was a pragmatic economic reason for this: waste collection and recycling hardly required any seed capital (though a handcart and eventual storage were advantageous). But in symbolic and material terms, the waste business also reflected a sense of liminality—the recovery of objects and materials that are caught in an in-between state, moving from one state (use value) to another (discarded). In that in-between state, this waste was full of possibility as well as transience and uncertainty. Its value was in question, and its potential transformation a possibility. These youth groups caught in liminality and *communitas*

had gravitated toward an activity that could be seen as menial, dirty, and last resort by some—but it was also propositional insofar as it perceived the possibilities of recovering the value of that which is caught in a state of limbo. Discards epitomize liminality in all its uncertainties and possibilities.

IT'S ALL ABOUT THE *BAZE*

The physical space where this liminality and *communitas* were experienced and cultivated was what youth called the *baze* (Sheng for "the base"). In each neighborhood, the *baze* served an important geographical and social function, what Saidiya Hartman (2021) describes as a kind of extension of living space akin to the staircases, fire escapes, stoops, and courtyards of popular neighborhoods in other cities. The *baze* also resonates in form and meaning with the "yard" in Jamaica, which Jovan Scott Lewis (2020, 2) describes as "a particular geography of shared fate, of communal striving" even when this "space of inclusion" runs against "tensions and suspicions." Youth in Mathare tended to stay in dwellings with multiple family members that were too small to assemble as a group, so the *baze* was a space where a group of friends could commune. In popular neighborhoods more generally, it is often that public spaces become "domesticated" (Koch and Latham 2013) by groups of people for one activity or another. For youth group members, the *baze* is where a sense of place, belonging, and camaraderie is built. Thinking here with bell hooks (2009, 144–52), who describes her experience of the porch in her home state, Kentucky, there are spaces in popular neighborhoods that epitomize a certain liminal zone between the home and the street. These are spaces where a group that might otherwise experience discrimination (along race, gender, class, age, or other lines of difference) does not just access but also *makes* a space for hanging out, for lingering, for bantering with peers. That space may be quite ordinary and visibly somewhat exposed, but it also becomes known as a space that is occupied by a certain affinity group, and it is through the daily and repeated acts of occupying that otherwise semipublic space that a sense of place and belonging might be claimed and affirmed, and over time that place can become a symbolic space of resistance. Through its liminal positioning, the *baze* situated between the home and the street was rendered visible to all around, comprising an informally marked territory in the neighborhood where youth groups assembled, greeted, lingered, bantered, and schemed. And it was also the gathering point for starting and ending any kind of "work."

The *baze* was a meeting point where you could be found or where someone knew where to look (and ask) in case you were not around. During an informal group discussion one February afternoon in 2010, the *baze* was described as a place "where you belonged and where you were known." It informed street credibility, and relationships to the *baze* had everything to do with one's visibility—to be seen or keep an eye out for what was going on around. It afforded the space and time to make plans or simply to provide a point of collective assembly for various improvised, ad hoc, or routine hustles. The *baze* also serves as a basecamp for dealing with all sorts of mundane emergencies, a stage for recounting all manner of exploits, and a place to be bored, to wait, and to scheme together. And for those passing through or visiting, it was a point of reference and perhaps even arrival, as well as a node from where youth hanging out at the *baze* could let others know that there was company.

For instance, for Mathare Number Ten Youth Group (which goes by the acronym MANYGRO), based in the Mabatini ward of Mathare, its *baze* is situated at the bottom of the first hill one hundred meters from the *matatu* stage on Juja Road, which links Mathare Valley to the CBD. The MANYGRO *baze* is conveniently situated at the crossroads of several paths: that which provides a direct line of sight to Juja Road and the foot path coming down from it, that which descends down toward the river, and the line across that connects several street-oriented small businesses and the pedestrians going to or coming back from Juja Road. There is a public toilet a few meters away built and managed by MANYGRO since 2007. Over the years, a few MANYGRO members could always be found at any one time assembled together at the *baze*.

The exact positioning shifted over time—in the early 2010s, MANYGRO's "office" consisted of a small wooden shed, with a couple of plastic chairs, a wobbly wooden table, and a few posters up on the wall. During my 2016 visit, the space of assembly had shifted, now a small kiosk with multiple offerings: an M-Pesa service for mobile banking, a fridge to serve cold drinks, and a water tap outside the kiosk. Walter, who manned the M-Pesa business of things, was able to assist someone trying to make an M-Pesa payment (or receive a temporary Safaricom loan), take payment for the water or the toilet, or give someone a soda, with a few of the other MANY-GRO members sitting inside the kiosk with him to provide some banter and company. If the guys were standing around the kiosk, they had multiple angles of visibility. They could see who was coming from the stage,

what the *wazee* (elders) were doing on the other side of the footpath (often playing a local version of checkers and discussing local politics), the group's urban farming corner nearby, and a good distance across Mathare Valley. When it came to garbage collection and servicing the plots of other tenants, youth group members asserted, "you don't go beyond your *baze*." This relationship between economic activity and territorial zoning related both conceptually and practically to codes of youth group culture, reflecting a key characteristic of the homegrown waste economy: the small and fragmented scale of these otherwise neighboring enterprises.

In group conversations, youth would openly discuss the different activities they were involved in, some of which included individualized tasks, while others involved collective effort. But they tended to be deliberately elusive about the specifics of their income streams.[4] As if to explain why this was, youth remarked on the potential negative effects of doing "too well." The strategic discretion about "how much" one earned for this or that hustle was best expressed by a group of friends up the road from Mathare 10, at the Kibichoi *baze* in Huruma ward. During an informal discussion in April 2010, one of the guys explained, "Most youth don't want to admit how much they earn—even to each other. When you seem like you make more than your neighbor, you can get into trouble." I remember reflecting on what they might mean by "trouble" and asking my friend Rosie about it later. She laughed and then put it in allegorical terms: "Eh, T. If you do well and everyone knows it, then you'll find you have lots of friends coming over to your place right before lunchtime!" These comments reflected the habitus of the hustle among youth in the *mtaa,* who had to constantly balance the logics (and benefits) of redistributive solidarity, exercised through group work and symbols of transparent collective gain such as the "group account," and their own private moments of desired independence from the group.

Certain individuals took the lead on elements of each business or took responsibility for running one of the businesses, like Walter did with the MANYGRO M-Pesa kiosk. And only a few individuals were signatories of the group bank account. But ultimately, the businesses themselves were operationalized through the entity of the youth group, and there were always group members hanging around those who were "at work," such that any job involved an entourage of friends who could serve as extra muscle, in every sense—whether that involved an extra push with a heavy load or keeping an eye on things. Any business task was ~~essentially~~ a group

effort and somewhat publicly performed. As such, gains were expected to benefit all members.

Contradictory to conceptions of entrepreneurship informed by neo-classical economic theories (Ochonu 2018), maximizing growth for individual businesses was not a key motivation for youth groups. Most youth groups ran several small business ventures, and similarly to the logic of a social enterprise, the key was covering running costs and reinvesting profits either as start-up or running capital for the next business. Pursuing a profit-maximizing model for individualistic gain was not part of the narrative or practice of youth groups. They did not speak about being individual "entrepreneurs" or having individual "jobs." They spoke of their hustles as plural and most often expressed the practice of hustling in the "we," conjugated as *tunahustle* (we hustle).

Youth-led economic activities that teetered between the licit and the illicit included work that could be done in groups—(alcohol) brewing (see Van Stapele 2021), water vending, sporadic petty street crime like "nighttime bag snatching," garbage collection, and recycling. Each of these hustles circumvented the law in some way or came up against local authorities: rerouting water connections during shortages; facing frequent crackdowns on the brewing economy; finding out which individual with some decision-making power could help manage unresponsive municipal lorries for garbage collection. Youth-led waste work has become a foundational hustle in the popular neighborhoods, one of the ways in which youth have navigated the tenuous terrains of infrastructural poverty, un(der)employment, and stigma and through which they have found ways to exercise modes of survival, some semblance of secure group work with short- and long-term gains, and resistance against an unresponsive local authority. Waste in the *mtaa* has been a dramatic problem for residents as well as a "generative space" of resource recovery, an income opportunity with distributive outcomes, and a source of eco-activism (Kimari 2022a).

WASTE (H)AS VALUE

Across cultures, once humans dispose of something we have used up or metabolized, whether this is a banana peel or our own shit, there are a set of situated (and learned) practices that determine when it is appropriate and urgent to separate our bodies from the remains of our own consumption, the stuff we regard as no longer usable, safe, valuable. The anthropologist Mary Douglas (1966) has been instrumental to many writing about discards

to highlight the cultural constructions that discursively (and spatially) classify materials as "waste" once they are perceived to have lost their use or exchange value and are deemed threatening in some way if they hang around. Notably, references to waste conjure up images of things being *thrown away*, which raises the questions: what is being thrown away, where and by whom, and which bodies are most exposed to the potential toxic residues of waste? Over the past two decades, scholars from across disciplines have contributed a rich repertoire of research and writing that highlights the material, discursive, relational, spatial, temporal, and political registers of waste as it becomes increasingly clear that there is simply no "away."

Waste management has become an increasingly politicized issue across many rapidly growing cities across Africa, Southeast Asia, and Latin America, where many densely populated low-income neighborhoods are often left underserved by municipal or private-sector forms of collection, removal, and disposal that are either unable or unwilling to cover the whole city (in the case of municipalities) or whose customer base (in the case of privatized services) usually comprises middle- and high-income residents. Across cities globally, waste labor and the multiple stages of value involved in waste collection, recycling, and recovery are of growing interest across academic and policy circles, a topic that may disturb sensibilities but that is vital to the sustainable metabolic flows of cities and their futures (McFarlane 2023). Since the early 2000s, there has been a growing literature on the discourses, production, and reproduction of waste in the Majority World.[5] Each provides a rereading of waste, offering accounts relaying the complexity of waste as a reflection of environmental and public health hazards, while providing a source of economic and political opportunity for urban residents whose lives and places of dwelling in the city may be pushed to the peripheries but whose labors and contestations are central to the environmental justice of cities—and a reminder that the shear density of cities renders waste a central by-product of urban life. Read together, these works show how different forms and stages of waste, as materially and relationally constituted, become a critical locus for contestations of development, consumption, social and economic inequities, and power within rapidly urbanizing cities.

Discourses of waste in relation to cities have also long been entangled with various forms of violence, displacement, and stigma. Marisa Solomon (2019) writes about the labor of "pan-handling and scavenging" that takes place in Brooklyn's neighborhoods undergoing rapid gentrification. Here

trash has a poignant double significance: to the panhandlers and scavengers who feel *from* these Brooklyn neighborhoods, recovering remains from demolition sites is a way of contending with the racial capitalism and violence of urban renewal (recall James Baldwin noting in 1963 that urban renewal comes with "Negro removal"[6]). The collection of "trash" is in this context a way of holding on to the material culture of a neighborhood, of preserving fragments of history that are being slowly erased and appropriated. She gives the example of the old Brownstone doors that are now a form of decoration for new residents, symbolically closing off former residents of color from their homes and streets. At the same time, the calls for "cleanups" that have been integral to urban renewal projects in the United States have consistently narrated racialized discourses equating spaces of urban poverty with filth and decay, or in need of what former New York City mayor Rudolph Giuliani (1989–2001) called the "civic cleanup," rather than acknowledging gradual and systemic disinvestment and discriminatory housing, education, and public health policies. For Solomon, the "ghetto is a goldmine" insofar as it reflects a form of violence, removal, appropriation, and racial capitalism, and the labor of panhandlers and scavengers becomes a vital practice that "name[s] the power relations that circumscribe changes that turn objects, people, histories, and labor into waste." She explains that "gentrification makes trash a discursive and material index of degeneration, mobilizing projects to 'clean' and 'better' neighborhoods and people" (2019, 91).

In Nairobi, popular neighborhoods are underserved and at risk in a different way: they're *not* (at least yet) sites of potential urban renewal and forced displacement but rather ignored and left to their own devices, so communities face the converse challenge: themselves calling out the lack of external support for trash collection and self-organizing "cleanups." In these neighborhoods, the significance of "trash" takes on a different meaning altogether. First, the assigning of use and exchange value to objects and things that might have been discarded, broken, or left behind becomes part of everyday practices of potential collection, sorting, repurposing, fixing, and reselling. In other words, what might be classified as waste in one context and to one person may be regarded as "gold" in/to another. Second, the fact that a municipality may be ill-equipped and under-resourced (or turns a blind eye) to adequately cover the waste collection needs of the urban majority residents living in densely populated neighborhoods has made garbage one of the most political matters but also a potential business

opportunity. In this age of eco-alarm and calls for regenerative and circular solutions at city levels across the globe, there is a growing recognition that what might have once been regarded as menial "dirty" work—scrap collecting and junkyard scavenging (Solomon 2019; Strasser 1999)—is actually one of the most vital labors, with environmental, economic, and political effects. In Brooklyn, the calls for "cleanups" can be a form of violence leading to rapid or slow displacement, removal, and erasure. In Nairobi, when the "cleanups" are done by community-owned businesses, they reflect a subversive form of resistance, insofar as a livelihood opportunity is built in the absence of state-led services—such that waste work becomes a "fuck you" to the state. With growing interests in and declarations of commitment to "circular economies," with a whole industry of take-back programs and recycling businesses, dumpsites are indeed gold mines. The key question that Solomon reminds us of is: for whom.

Here the questions of "calling out" and "self-help" raise questions about the balance between leaving the absentee state off the hook *through* forms of self-help urbanism or the extent to which self-help serves to shame the state but also assert independence from it, shaping semiautonomous zones of basic service provision that tap into municipal services when they are available but also plan for their systematic disruptions (e.g., blackouts, water shortages, garbage trucks that don't come for weeks). This resonates with Kimberley Kinder's (2016) writing on Detroit, which she describes as a "city without services" where residents from underserved neighborhoods have formed practices of "self-shared provisioning" in this city marked by decades of deindustrialization, racialized inequality, de-investment in public infrastructure, and declining service provision. In another context, Millar's (2018) work on waste pickers of Rio, Brazil, redescribes peripheralized neighborhoods as spaces of productive labor and productivity, not just poverty traps or repositories of low-skilled laborers seeking meagre wages in service jobs in the mainstream city and cheap precarious housing in the favelas. Rosalind Fredericks's (2019) work in Dakar, Senegal, and Sarah Moore's (2009) work in Oaxaca, Mexico, also show how histories of oft invisible and precarious waste labor are also punctuated by key moments of protest and mobilization that can be transformative. And Jacob Doherty's (2022) writing on the "waste worlds" of Kampala reconceptualizes waste and its presumed forms of exclusion and wider metaphor for disposability: he shows that waste not only is discarded material but also enables productive infrastructures

of inclusion and possibility for urban dwellers who are often themselves "cast off" to the margins.

In Nairobi, youth who engage in waste work are more than waste pickers per se, though in many ways waste work is their starting point for further pursuits and their entry point into paid work of some kind. Though this book certainly engages with (and has been inspired by) the recent scholarship focusing on urban waste and sanitation workers, the focus on the "dumpsite" and waste work is only part of the story—indeed the narrative arc goes beyond the story of garbage to show that while waste work is central to youth livelihoods in the underserved neighborhoods of Nairobi, it is only a part of their livelihood portfolio, a crucial but partial stepping stone for their wider efforts to assert their claims to the city. So the significance of that tagline, "straight outta dumpsite," is multiple: it points to many activities and opportunities that have come *outta* the dumpsite, such that in Nairobi, garbage in the popular neighborhood is a kind of currency for the hustle economy and one that connects to myriad other forms of unlikely sources of opportunity and possibility. I draw on Steven Jackson's (2014, 222) conceptual frame "broken world thinking" to evoke the "subtle acts of care" that are integral to everyday forms of maintenance and repair that underpin *mtaa* life, in their repetitive, provisional, fragile but always persistent forms. As the next sections illustrate, Nairobi youth make work, as collectives, *with* waste as a way to provide for themselves and their surrounds. Crucially, through this ecological and care work they engage in diverse acts of material, social, and political repair (Corwin and Gidwani 2021; Kimari 2018) and become versed in the art of adaptation to constant breakdown.

TRASH IS CASH

In Nairobi, much like in other postcolonial cities (see G. Myers 2005), postconsumer non-biodegradable waste, especially polyethene plastic, is woven into the tapestry of unpaved dirt paths and roads, skipped over by agile pedestrians, washed away by rain, and sometimes dumped in the river. When it is left to sit and accumulate in "transit sites" in and around neighborhoods before it can be collected and removed, it inevitably attracts flies and emits putrid smells during dry season or when left uncollected for too long. While affluent parts of the city such as Karen, Westlands, and Muthaiga are serviced by private garbage collection providers in the absence

of comprehensive government waste management services, these popular neighborhoods have been left to their own devices, creating their own forms of privatization. According to Professor Peter Ngau from the Department of Urban Planning at the University of Nairobi, only 12 percent of the city's waste is formally collected and brought to the official dumping site in Dandora, while the other 88 percent was discarded, collected, and managed through informal channels.[7] And this echoes wider trends across the Majority World, where it is estimated that informal waste pickers collect between 50 and 100 percent of the solid waste in cities.[8]

While waste can be one of the most tangible and visible manifestations of urban poverty and ignored urban spaces by the state—an environmental and health "bad" (Beck 1992)—it has also become an opportune resource for diverse forms of contestation, livelihood, and community-based management.[9] Myriad economies of circulation reflect the multiple lives of what might in some contexts be deemed unusable detritus and in others become repurposed materials to style homes; fix roofs; mend clothes and shoes; collect, transport, and store water; and fertilize urban gardens. Waste, thus, is at once a problem and threat to public health and a resource for creative and improved circular economies.

Following colonial independence, waste in popular neighborhoods became an increasingly unmanaged, undesirable, and "dirty" relic of household consumption and epitomized the absence of basic services in low-income neighborhoods. There was a combination of residential density and changes in the composition of postconsumer waste itself—with plastic as the most notable form of nonbiodegradable waste. At the same time, in response to escalating unemployment rates along with Moi's government policies encouraging *jua kali* (hot sun) informal-sector workers to form associations (King 1996), many youth started registering their community-based organizations or "youth groups" to find alternative ways to make a living.

In the 1990s, two friends, Salim and Josiah, living and working in one of the other large informal settlements of Nairobi (Kibera), decided to take a trip to Egypt. They had heard that in Cairo, garbage had for decades been collected, sorted, and recycled by members of the Coptic community known as the Zabbaleen, who went door to door in both affluent and poor neighborhoods to collect trash and recycle up to 80 percent of what they collected.[10] Noting that uncollected garbage was becoming a growing problem in densely populated settlements in particular, Salim and Josiah

thought they could bring back what they learned from the Zabbaleen and start a community-based waste collection scheme in Nairobi, which would help the garbage problem but also address the other growing issue: youth unemployment. From the 1990s onward, solid waste in low-income residential areas was positioned as both a problem and an opportunity. By the early 2000s, each popular neighborhood had its own youth-led garbage collection system and everyone claimed to be a founder of the idea, or at least part of the first groups who kick-started the trend. Whom was actually the first wasn't the point. It was the sentiment of pride and *ensemble* work (in Swahili what people call "being together": *tuko Pamoja*) that mattered, the sense of collective ownership and collective effort in cleaning up *mtaa yetu* (our hood) and making money at the same time.

In addition to being an underutilized resource, managing waste also required no upfront start-up capital and little overhead cost. And importantly, it was not a one-person job, so operating within a collective became a key feature of this labor. By the early 2000s, youth groups were the primary organizational entity of most community-based waste management services. Their services relied on traditional, low-tech infrastructure. Lacking motorized means for transporting waste outside the residential areas, youth resorted to using large, heavy *mikokoteni* (handcarts), which allowed them to navigate the narrow pathways and uneven terrain of Mathare's labyrinthine configuration. But it also meant that they had to find "transit" sites for dumping the garbage while they figured out a way to transport the garbage out and take it to the municipal dumpsite in Dandora.

Here the complex moral economy of hustling in the *mtaa* through the lens of the waste economy becomes apparent, as does how it differs from other conceptions of "hard work" and more individualized narratives of hustling. Getting customers to pay for the service was ~~also~~ an issue, as many youth admitted with a combination of mischievous pride and embarrassment that in the "early days," part of getting the business of garbage started included scare tactics to force community residents to pay for the service. But because the long-term sustainability of any business in the *mtaa* had to be premised on trust, the garbage business underwent processes of negotiation between residents and the young men (often sons of women to whom youth groups would become service providers) until its operations and transactions became normalized into the local economy. In the early days of my fieldwork (November 2009), Rosie, a youth activist and community worker, explained,

First it was a way of earning income. You know, they would see, there's all this garbage here, can we collect it and get some money? But then it became an opportunity to do something about garbage too. In some areas where the groups would come saying they wanted to collect garbage from each household, people said, "First remove all the heaps of garbage in the streets and in the community. Then we'll start giving you money for collection." So for the youth, most of it was an entry point for income generation. That was the main agenda in most of the areas.

By the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, youth-led community-based waste management practices were a widely recognized phenomenon ~~within the informal economy~~ across Nairobi, in part thanks to the initiative and subsequent idiom known as *taka ni pato* (trash is cash), which gave heightened visibility and some training support to these community-based waste management youth collectives. Yet youth engaged in garbage collection were nevertheless often stigmatized for their "lack of discipline" and "uncontrolled and indiscriminate dumping" (Muniafu and Otiato 2010, 346), highlighting only the punctual desperate acts of disposing collected refuse in the river or main roads. These discourses failed to understand the logistical constraints under which these youth operated and how vital these private service providers had become within their communities.

Combining time on their hands, an imagination, and inspiration from other Majority World cities like Cairo, where waste pickers had developed a vital homegrown waste collection economy, underemployed but entrepreneurial youth in Nairobi managed to capture the underutilized resource of household garbage in their highly dense neighborhoods, where postconsumer waste was both a problem no one was prepared to deal with and a perfect opportunity for youth who had nothing to lose by turning trash into cash. The waste hustle thus became widespread and a key part of "makeshift urbanism" (Vasudevan 2015), where materials and resources were reworked to shape alternative possibilities. It continues to this day to remain small-scale and fragmented; its social and economic organization is bound to territorially marked subneighborhoods, where each group knows which buildings and plots they can service and where the mutually agreed boundaries are drawn, such that groups know not to "go beyond your *baze*."[11]

Residential garbage collection became the foundation of youth groups in Mathare and across Nairobi's other popular neighborhoods. Youth groups tended to average forty members, with some becoming veteran shareholders over the years, while room was made to accommodate new younger members once they had "proven themselves." Each group collected residential garbage from up to four hundred households for a monthly fixed fee. Vertical blocks, four- to eight-story walk-ups, each averaging twelve apartments per floor, were each managed by a member. Everyone knew which block was managed by whom, and a careful allocation of waste collectors then got paid each month once payment had been collected from each household. The manager of that building then got their cut. On average, a member of the Mathare Environmental Conservation Youth Group (MECYG) could get up to 15,000 KES (US$150) a month. In the early 2000s, youth groups across Mathare started to think about ways they could add value to their waste collection business. Rather than simply charging households for collection, they realized that the materials found in the rubbish had value. Sorting became a crucial part of the postcollection activity, specifically finding what could be resold. In order to insert exchange value into this solid "waste," groups sorted through the collected garbage composite materials to measure what was worth shredding (such as plastics), reusing (such as metal), fixing (such as electronics), and reselling to the industrial area or to a broker with connections.

When plastics became a hot commodity, some youth groups were in a good position because they either had space to store the plastic (which allowed them to wait for the right moment to rent a lorry to take it to the industrial area for resale) or they were well connected to NGOs and other external sources of support that could provide the means to upgrade their business. The homegrown waste economy elicited attention from a number of actors across the city who were either interested in the "waste problem" or the "youth problem," and some were interested in the intersection of the two. In 2007, the MECYG received a plastic shredder as a "gift" from Pamoja Trust, a social justice organization tied to the Slum/Shack Dwellers International (SDI) alliance. The shredder gave the group an important distinction: adding value to each kilogram of plastic. With the shredder, the group was easily identifiable as "organized," which drew the attention of the local area MP, Margaret Wanjiru, who needed to court youth votes during her election campaigns. In exchange, she would help

MECYG upgrade its hall and provide a water tank on the roof. Over time, the space also allowed the group to organize events, opening up the social hall for a modest fee to the community. ~~Football nights were especially popular (and lucrative).~~

Taka ni pato also became appended to the local culture of youth football because the youth groups involved in trash collection had formed through their childhood friendship networks that had grown up around each other, where one of the main forms of play in the hood was kicking a ball around in the streets and, if you were lucky, finding a space to play a proper match with neighborhood teams. The 1990s were a time when an NGO known as Mathare Youth Sports Association (MAYSA) developed youth programs using sports (especially football) as a tool for building peace, cooperation, self-esteem, and leadership in disadvantaged communities. The majority of the youth I met over the years recounted their time playing football through MAYSA and their aspirations to become a professional footballer.[12] Most young kids having a kick about in their streets had a makeshift football made of reclaimed polythene plastic bags wrapped together with a few pieces of string. Even the footballs were made of reclaimed waste, and the "recreational" spaces that youth found to play were literally on or adjacent to garbage heaps.

"WORK FOR YOUTH, MONEY FOR THE ELDERS"

Nairobi youth from under-resourced neighborhoods have over the years been lured into various government youth employment schemes. When I first started my research in Nairobi, one such program was Kazi kwa Vijana (KKV, Work for Youth), following the infamous postelection violence of 2008. Later, there was also the National Youth Service schemes set up by the Kenyatta administration from 2013 onward. Although many of the youth I spoke with in Mathare admitted to trying out their luck with these youth employment programs, they were consistently drawn back to neighborhood-based livelihoods. The nepotism, short-term contracts, and delays in pay were consistently mentioned as sources of disappointment.

Following postelection violence in early 2008, the KKV acknowledged the detrimental correlation between political violence and high youth unemployment. At least in principle, the program aimed to respond to postelection violence by seeking to "put youth to work." Although many intended beneficiaries of KKV admitted that the idea was laudable, most youth who had firsthand experience with the program were disheartened

by the corruption, the lack of accountability, and especially the practical problems such as late pay, low-wage manual labor, and lack of prospects for skills development. Within months of the program's implementation, it was popularly recoined Kazi kwa Vijana—Pesa kwa Wazee (Work for Youth—Money for the Elders) among disaffected youth.

On December 10, 2009, the Kasarani Youth Congress (2009, 9) launched a social audit report on Kazi kwa Vijana as part of an effort to ensure that public-service programs targeting youth were "effective, responsive and accountable."[13] The report argued that the KKV government initiative was "patchy and superficial" and laudable in its conception but flawed in its implementation. It highlighted the need to address youth unemployment through more empowering grassroots efforts rather than a constant cycle of one-off wage labor opportunities that pay poorly and provide no skills training.

This event and the program criticized by the report reflect the wide-ranging concern for the role of youth in Kenya and the complex politics of work, particularly following the postelection violence in 2007 and the volatile sociopolitical climate. According to the report, 76 percent of working-age youth are formally unemployed and the majority live in poverty. These statistics, however, do not reflect the diverse forms of economic activity that lie outside the official definitions of work, including the portfolios of youth-led enterprise that are self-organized in popular neighborhoods within the structure of the youth group.

For many youth discouraged by the government's ability to speak on their behalf, let alone provide meaningful programs addressing youth concerns, KKV represented the false promises of youth work programs and further entrenched their conviction that they had to find alternative sources of income and support mechanisms and were better off hustling on their own terms. As the program manager of the Youth Congress pointed out to me when we met in April 2010, "The idea is good, the concept is flawed, and the implementation is poor! The concept of KKV is to deal with drought and idleness, not right to food and unemployment! So it only seeks to get youth occupied. . . . It is like a behavior change program. This is not sustainable!"

During these conversations, "hustling" had to do with the struggle of "getting by" but also with teetering between accepting and refusing government handouts or poorly paid short-term contracts. Many key interlocutors admitted that it was customary for local politicians to bribe youth living in popular neighborhoods during election campaigns in exchange

for votes. In October 2009, I met a young man from Korogocho, another popular neighborhood northeast of the city center. He explained the pressure youth were under and implicitly admitted that it could just be too hard to resist the temptation of accepting these bribes: "If youth have economic power, then they will not be tempted to take the money, but the problem is that when people are desperate, then they will be bought. I hope that next time I am in the position to say no to these bribes." In many ways, it wasn't saying "no" to the false promises of government or "no" to the mediocre conditions of employment that determined whether a young person was hustling. ~~Choosing *not* to be "someone else's donkey"~~ has more to do with carefully assessing the risks and odds of any income-generating prospect. Whether it was considered licit or illicit was not the point. To hustle defined a way of life that had less to do with asserting rights than it did with the daily calculations involved in carving out opportunities against the backdrop of constant hurdles. These calculations sometimes prioritized short-term gains for immediate economic pressures, including taking a KKV contract for two days if it was on offer or in some cases engaging in opportunistic petty crime. Many admitted that they had done one or the other, often both, in their time. And those who spoke about crime as a thing of the past in their own biographies told stories of youth who either got killed for being caught or who would probably not make it to their thirtieth birthday.

"I DON'T WANT TO BE SOMEONE ELSE'S DONKEY"

Amid this fluid moral economy, garbage collection represented one of the first forms of legitimate income opportunity for school leavers and created a working environment that was premised on relations of care, in terms of both peer-to-peer training/support and service provision for fellow residents. In this way, hustling *through* waste work afforded what Millar (2018, 90) terms "relational autonomy." In Millar's ethnography *Reclaiming the Discarded* (2018), she explains why the *catadores* (waste pickers) keep returning to the dump, despite having occasional opportunities to get salaried work in environments less exposed to toxic harms and physical arduous labor. Millar's interlocutors express the value of (and indeed even a reverence for) autonomous work, being able to come and go from work as they please, such that they can tend to the web of social obligations and ordinary emergencies that inevitably occur among under-resourced communities who create their own forms of welfare and service provision,

which often depend on the flexibility of everyone's work. This is something one cannot necessarily get in a salaried job, where institutional hierarches, unequal markers of social and economic class, and rigid working hours do not accommodate family and community care obligations. Thus, autonomy is deeply relational. It was similar for youth in Mathare, and this relational autonomy manifested in different ways.

In some areas, youth were known to "snatch," and the role models were the ones with guns. In other areas, garbage collection and other composite businesses (like recycling and urban farming) were narrated as a way of maintaining what the MANYGRO members proudly described in April 2023 as a "crime-free zone." Either way, the hustle was a daily struggle that included the constant calculation of multiple options, sometimes traversing the spectrum of licit activities and illicit activities, hard work, and leisure time. But across this terrain, there was a kind of "detachment" (Millar 2018, 91; Simone 2016) from certain normative assumptions about how youth should work and what work youth should do. Detachment from such norms (reflected in programs like Kazi kwa Vijana, along with other presumptions about what counts as proper work) also meant finding "other attachments" (Millar 2018, 92–93), which involved working with fellow youth to find ways and means to make a living on their terms and by returning to the *baze* where one's social relationships were intimately entangled with livelihood projects.

It was also around the *baze* that detachment was exercised in relation to local figures of authority—the elders. A group of youth in Mlango Kubwa one day explained to me that elders in their communities were sometimes considered *watu watiagi* (people on our backs). It is of course a well-known phenomenon across cultures for young people to complain that their elders are "on their backs" and for elders to worry about "today's youth." But it is worth dwelling for a moment on how the generational rift between youth and elders manifested itself in relation to the cultures of work and leisure in the *mtaa*. This tension was reflected in the discourse of "hustling," which evoked the sense of detachment from restrictive modalities of employment and from the restrictive obligations to adhere to elders' imaginaries of proper work. In January 2010, during a group discussion with members from MECYG in Mlango Kubwa, Jackson explained,

> We looked at our parents, who toiled their backs doing daily employment for all their lives, and there was no change. When we were growing up, we

had no role models. None of our parents who were employed were role models because they had no resources, no power. . . . To make change you need resources. The only guys who had power were thieves, or gangsters, or land grabbers. . . . So we believe that we deserve to be self-employed, because at least if we have our own business, then we are free.

These expressions of agency, the choice of working in the *mtaa* and being "free" versus working in the industrial area, reflected the perceived benefits of working independently but as a collective and the refusal to be "someone else's donkey." This expression had a double meaning: it was a critique of the modes of colonial subservience that they perceived in their parents' and grandparents' generations, who had labored either for the white British settlers or the Wahindi (Kenyans of South Asian descent), and a perception of the exploitation they would experience (or know their peers to experience) working in the industrial area for little pay and with no guarantee of long-term work. While many in the informal settlement Kibera walked each morning to the industrial area along the railway tracks to test their luck, residents in Mathare had to take public transport to get there, which was too much of a cost to bear for little assurance of returns. It would also be something they would have to do alone, and for many, their decision to work in the *mtaa* was influenced by the support system they had cultivated within their youth groups and the sense of belonging they found at the *baze.*

These youth worked in collectives and knew how to "hustle hard" but also then spent time just "idling" or what elders called *kuzurura* (just roaming around). "Hustling hard" might include collecting garbage from households at 4 a.m., cleaning a community toilet at 8 a.m., sorting through plastics at 3 p.m., managing a water point before dusk and a car wash between 9 p.m. and 2 a.m., and collecting payments from serviced households on the first Sunday evening of every month. Most waste management work took place at punctual moments of the day or night, and often at "off hours." Youth might seem idle at noon, but they had often already put in five hours of work that morning. To be in a mode of *kuzurura* was part of the strategizing persona of the hustler. The state of *kuzurura* at the *baze* was shared to face the hurdles of stigma and uncertainty of "what next" as a collective. The public performances of *kuzurura* happened between the plan, the gig, and being on the move. For each person coming back to the *baze* to hang out, these moments of *kuzurura* served as respite

between jobs, camouflaging the extent of the work done and the income generated.

Its performativity was part of the implicit resistance to other more mainstream forms of work in the city. As one member of MECYG explained,

> In Kenya, we never acquired a national character or identity as a people. We were either tribes or part of a social and economic class. There is no "we" in Kenya; it is only "I." . . . But in the *mtaa,* people look at our group as a model. Youth come here, instead of going to look for construction work, because they know that they will find a common identity. And [*laughter*] we don't always work! A lot of the time we watch TV!

While "watching TV" might involve staring at the screen, with the volume on quite high, it did not stop the ongoing banter of ideas, often related to details like costing and other "business issues." *Kuzurura* was at times a facade for scheming and reflected a double meaning: it performed moments of joblessness inherent in the hustler's habitus (they needed to show a constant steady state of struggle and ambiguous reference to how getting by would happen that day), and it made openings for new social and business dealings with other peers, all caught in a state of being *in between* things. To be in this mode of *kuzurura* at the *baze* involved precious ongoing forms of support and care (Kimari 2018) as much as a means to secure the next source of income. Eventually, even the TV became a money-making resource, as youth groups who had managed to get their hands on a TV and who had access to a bit of shared public space started to host football match viewings, charging a modest fee for "entry," and there you had another hustle for the group.

BUSINESS IS SOCIAL

Although it was commonplace for youth groups in the *mtaa* to offer residential garbage collection as one of their services, the manner of "doing business" in waste management took on diverse forms and has evolved over time. When I started my research in Nairobi, for some youth living in popular neighborhoods, garbage collection was one of the only work options without a completed education, and it was local, so you could get work from the older youth (some might even be your friends' older brothers). At the entry or lowest level, waste pickers earned an average of 700 KES a month (US$10). For those at the bottom of the waste economy ladder,

garbage collection was casual labor and a last resort. But it was also potentially lifesaving for some.

It was common to see street children involved in the ad hoc waste-picking work. Street kids were usually homeless orphans who navigated the streets, dealing with constant stigma and the gaze of all Nairobians who could immediately spot them—their oversized dirty clothes, eyes glazed over from sniffing glue, sometimes barefoot or wearing oversized shoes, and roaming the streets as human cast-offs of the city, often begging in different parts of the city. The street-kid hustle in Nairobi was one of the harshest to bear. But because they often lived near dumpsites, waste picking was one of the obvious ways to make a little money, and it was something you could do while high on glue (and being high on glue helped you deal with the difficult smells emanating from the rotting trash). Despite numerous charities operating in Nairobi and in other parts of Kenya to "rescue" and "rehabilitate" street children, youth groups in the *mtaa* were an important, often underacknowledged and informal, source of care for these street kids. Some of the organized youth groups would hire street youth as waste pickers and made sure they would get fed on those days, knowing full well that these youth only had the clothes on their backs and minimal access to food or shelter.[14] Mlango Kubwa was an area where one of the local youth groups, MECYG, had access to a slightly bigger common space than the other youth groups, and they were known to organize regular feeding programs for street families. A day's wage as a waste picker could come with some other kind of care, including kindness that extended beyond just giving these street families a plate of *githeri* (beans and maize, a common dish that was nourishing but also jokingly called the "poor man's" dish). Youth in the *mtaa* spoke to the street kids with respect and playfulness, treating them like little brothers and sisters that sometimes needed a bit of tough love but also showing them mostly love, humor, and no judgment—and a big bowl of *githeri* and a place to sit down without being told to move along.

The "organized" youth groups were registered with the government, had group bank accounts and some kind of office space, and elected administrative and operational roles within the organizational structure. For some, garbage collection was part of a wider portfolio of income-generating activities, with some youth continuously thinking about how to keep diversifying their mixed livelihood opportunities. Some groups managed to blend individual specialized skill sets (where different individuals

took on the leadership role of key businesses) with collective effort and decision-making, along with group saving schemes and collective financial investments. One such group was MANYGRO, mentioned earlier.

The area of "Mathare Number 10" (M10) was infrastructurally and economically one of the poorest areas of Mathare. Amid some vertical tenement housing, most households in M10 lived in horizontal, semipermanent housing, makeshift combinations of mud and corrugated-metal single-room structures.[15] These residents did not have access to a shared residential toilet facility. Despite the deficient state of infrastructure, epitomized by open sewers spilling to the river down the valley, the lack of medical clinics, and the frequency of water shortages, a particular village within M10 known as Kuamburu had a well-known youth group, MANYGRO, whose activities combined community service, street theater, and several youth-led community businesses. MANYGRO had a diverse portfolio of waste management businesses, including garbage collection, plastic recycling, and urban farming. Over the years its membership shifted slightly, but it always had between twenty-five and thirty members, all between the ages of twenty and late thirties, who engaged on a rotational basis in different income-generating activities. Both the portfolio and rotation schemes served to mitigate risk, against the backdrop of unforeseen circumstances that so often pulled any young entrepreneur from relative prosperity back down to "zero income" poverty, as the cultural expectations of youth toward their families added consistent personal pressures on their economic advancement.

When you come down from the "number 10" *matatu* stage, watching your steps along the narrow path precariously perched over an open sewer, you arrive at the base of MANYGRO. MANYGRO was one of the groups courted by a social justice organization fighting for land and tenure rights, Pamoja Trust. In the early 2000s, it seemed clear that youth needed to be included in slum upgrading schemes, but they weren't preoccupied with land and housing tenure as much as the right to a space in their neighborhood from which to assemble and operate their various community-based businesses. MANYGRO became members of the *taka ni pato* network during those years and has over the past two decades established a diversified constellation of environmentally oriented businesses that benefit from and serve local community interests. When I first came in 2009, its businesses included garbage collection, plastic recycling, a sanitation service (more on this in chapter 4), and the beginnings of a small urban farming project.

Each time I returned, MANYGRO seemed to expand its portfolio—always community-based, and managed from within the group, with shared returns but specific allocations of leadership depending on individuals' passions and ~~interests~~.

By 2016, the group had planted a tree near the base, where members had that optimal view of the three intersecting foot paths. The tree provided shade for three chairs, where a few youth group members would sit to manage the public toilet at a distance, keeping whomever was running the small M-Pesa kiosk company, witnessing the hourly mobile banking operations taking place, while taking payment for the water point that was fixed to the outward-facing wall of the kiosk. I remember being stunned the year the group added the cold fridge in the kiosk, which took up most of the space but provided a vital additional source of income and respite from the heat, selling a variety of "cold drinks" (soda) ~~to the local youth and workers~~. By 2017, the small corner of urban farming had expanded and the group had managed to secure several small patches of green space for vertical farming between the *baze* and Juja Road. In 2019, one of the MANYGRO members was showing me the expansion of their urban farming allotment, which now included kale and spinach for local consumption and resale. Wally, who managed both the M-Pesa kiosk and the greenhouse, smiled and said they were thinking of "food security." At a time when food prices started skyrocketing, these youth-led community-based experiments with urban farming provided valuable complements to their livelihood portfolio and further solidified their discourse at the nexus of enterprise and ecology. As Wally pointed to the chicken coop next the greenhouse where food scraps from garbage collection were taken, he evoked the homegrown circular economy at play and said, "Everything can be reused."

The vicissitudes of the ~~informal~~ waste economy were constantly affected by customers' ability and willingness to pay for services, the demand and price of recyclable yet "dirty" plastic contingent on seasonality and quality, and the frequency of Nairobi City Council truck stops in these often ignored neighborhoods. On numerous occasions during fieldwork, unforeseen disasters (fires, illness, deaths in the family) forced youth who were doing "well" to contribute their entire savings (or go into debt) to pay for funeral, hospital, or rebuilding costs. These incidents and setbacks were nevertheless mentioned with relative acceptance and resolve, if not pride. *Ni kawaida—hii ni maisha* was the response: "It is usual—this is life." It was almost inevitably the case that hustling could shift from a mode of survival

to one of diversified livelihood strategy, not as a linear progression of economic improvement but rather as a kind of pendulum, and this was part of what Guma (2020) calls "incompleteness." Here the incompleteness refers to the unknown but expected imponderables of life in the hood, where all manner of crises are the norm, *ni kawaida*. The cyclical nature of the hustle encompassed all efforts from "doing whatever you can to feed your stomach that day" to "being free to grow one business and invest in another."[16] The hustle was both the freedom to thrive and the risk to fall. It was always incomplete, and this meant being able to adapt to the breakdowns, the blackouts, and the losses and being ready to repair, replace, and reuse. As Wangui Kimari (2018) has argued in her writing on activists and care work, the forms of affective repair and care that youth groups take on in all kinds of mundane ways is part of what builds the fabric of what Mathare youth call "ghetto life."

The refrain *tunajaribu* (we are trying) is integral to the self-narrations of what it takes to get through days and years in the *mtaa*. It is as if to say that regardless of the outcome, it was crucial to "try." The struggle against the hardships of everyday life "in the ghetto" assumed two possible paths: "trying" and "giving up." Hustling was the attempt, the "trying" to defy the odds and traps and tropes of poverty, and arguably it had a time limit. Elders did not refer to their work or their state of being as "hustling." One MANYGRO member once jokingly remarked, "You see Mzee George over there, he is hustling to sell his onions, but he will never use that word. He calls himself a businessman or says '*ninafanya kazi*' [I am doing work]." Youth saw their elders as hustling too, struggling to navigate the uncertainties of a day's prospects and using the resources at hand. But the narrative was different, and many elders had not, especially in the early 2010s, appropriated that language to describe their work and their own daily struggles. It wasn't their vocabulary.

Unlike the strategic moments of idling described earlier, the other kind of idling most lamented yet common among youth living in urban poverty (especially the street kids) was addiction to drugs or alcohol. In 2010, a young man who had become a key interlocutor and friend went from being a well-respected youth group member who was always keeping busy to an embittered drunk spending what he earned playing pool in a local bar. Speaking to his close friends, I was told that he could no longer really claim to be "hustling" anymore, at least not in the way he had formerly described. Hustling involved being economically active, "out there," trying

to make a living and a life that was more than self-serving. While there was much accommodation (or at least a refrain from judgment) for different kinds of hustles, including occupations that were deemed illicit, "drinking your money away" in an enclosed bar away from the *baze* and the sunlight was much less accepted. That contradicted the terms of the collective *mtaa* hustle (the collective *tunahustle*) because it meant you stopped "trying." It's not that his friends judged, but to them, falling into substance abuse was considered giving up. At the same time, the door was never closed. In early 2023, I got a WhatsApp text from Kennedy, the very person who had told me years ago that he was so disappointed to see his closest friend slip into drinking. He wrote to say that his friend (whose name I won't mention here) was in Huruma and "wants to say hello!" When I saw Kennedy a few months later in April 2023, we spoke about his friend's visit. "He is okay now. He is living up-country, has a family." There was no judgment in Kennedy's voice, just joy that his friend was doing better and living again. Trying again. The fact that he had left the *mtaa* was something we didn't talk about. I am left with questions about what leaving meant for this young man, one of my first friends in Mathare, and whether he would say he was just hustling up-country now, in the "land economy," as Demon Copperhead would say (Kingsolver 2022).

Amid the youth group members with whom I spent time in Mathare and Huruma, there was a special character whose work and social world overlapped with youth and the waste economy, though he was not really a youth group member. Shei was an older man, though his exact age always remained a mystery to everyone. He was nicknamed Mzee Kijana (young elder) because he had so much energy, seemed to work all the time, and did not hesitate to get involved in waste-related work (see chapter 5). One day in February 2011, Shei joked that he was "running out of time" and explained,

> You see these young boys; they think they have all the time in the world to do something. So that's why you see so many of them just there. . . . It's not only that they are jobless; they are wasting their youth! And a big part of the danger can be the temptation to get into drinking or drugs. Me, I am running out of time. I can't just sit there. I have to do something, so that's why you see me work every day, and take every (cleaning) job.

Mzee Kijana's remarks about "wasting youth" were echoed by youth who disapprovingly described the peers who veered into drugs or alcohol abuse

as "no longer trying." Petty crime and "thuggery," a topic that came up candidly during group discussions, were deemed an illicit but more acceptable branch of the "hustle" than "wasting your youth" with substance abuses that evaded reality and the tangibility of daily struggle. Yet the liminality of youthhood accorded those who might come out of drug and alcohol abuse a second chance to make a living and once more reengage in the hustle. But the temporality of youth afforded a degree of experimentation and chances that were no longer common or as socially acceptable among elders. Mzee Kijana was a kind of exception. It was because he was seen to still hustle, always looking for the next cleaning job, that youth around him affectionately referred to him as the young elder. He took advantage of this ambiguous status, joking in 2023 that he was not embarrassed about applying for "youth funds" to get cleaning contracts—he didn't feel guilty about this because ultimately he would then hire youth, "including ladies!" (he would proudly say), for these jobs.

STRATEGIC ILLEGAL DUMPING

All forms of self-employment in the *mtaa* were politicized and crosscut with contested notions of legality and legitimacy. Aspects of these entrepreneurial activities evaded or responded critically to the state, while other aspects engaged directly with local authorities. Given the micro-enterprise model of garbage collection and its unpredictable ties to the municipality, the key challenge was how to transport refuse from the point of residential collection to the city's main dumpsite in Dandora, approximately ten kilometers from Mathare.

In the early 2000s, a compromise was reached between registered youth groups and the Nairobi City Council to provide lorries for garbage pickup in exchange for a monthly fee of KES 1,000 (US$11.75) per youth group. I had the chance to meet with the Nairobi City Council Solid Waste Department deputy director in May 2010 and was curious to hear his side of the story. In theory, the NCC was meant to send lorries twice a week to each ward in Mathare during the early hours of the morning. He described this as "meeting the garbage collection groups halfway." I tried to triangulate this with what I observed over the course of several months. The trucks (when they came) were usually parked a few meters off the main road and would wait for about thirty minutes for all the garbage collection groups to throw the bags of household waste onto the truck. However, these trucks were always already full, caricatures of distended dilapidation, and it always

seemed like an anemic effort on the part of local authorities to "meet the groups halfway."

The trucks became the symbolic locus of negotiation between the NCC and the youth groups involved in garbage collection within their neighborhoods. They were also the material manifestation of the skewed relationship between these garbage collectors and the municipal authority. When the trucks failed to come to Mathare starting in late December 2009, they became the catalytic issue prompting "illegal dumping" on Juja Road in April 2010. The conflict that took place in the days following this act of defiance emphasized the tenuous relationship between youth, waste, and work in the *mtaa*.

On April 9, a youth group member based in Huruma expressed his views on national TV regarding the garbage collection crisis in Huruma.[17] He complained that since December 21, the NCC had not sent its contracted lorries into Mathare, forcing garbage collectors from these neighborhoods to finally bring the garbage to the main road. He claimed the councilor of Huruma told the groups to bring garbage there to make NCC collection easier. The councilor later denied this claim.

A few days later, four youth were arrested for "illegal dumping," including the vocal young man who had expressed his discontent days prior. Among the four, there were also two youth wearing overalls with the name "Community Cleaning Services" on the back. At the time of their arrest, these two youth were in the middle of a cleaning job, in uniform, equipment in hand. Eliza, a young woman who was working for Community Cleaning Services (CCS) as a trainer of cleaning teams at the time, went to city hall in their defense. As a young woman who lived in Huruma, she knew that being "from the ghetto" meant having little voice to contest an arrest. But as she explained to me a few days later, she knew that an affiliation with an established organization could help get anyone out of trouble—so she argued that these two young men represented a "professional organization called Community Cleaning Services, partnering with a big American company called SC Johnson." Within minutes, the two CCS workers were released.

The other two youth, I later learned, were seen as just "youth from the slums who do garbage collection," making trouble. They remained locked up, charged with three months of jail time and a fine of 10,000 KES (US$117.50) each. The youth with the CCS uniform were released because of their affiliation to a "company." The story of CCS will be discussed in

the next chapter, but for now the point is that seeming "professional and organized" carried considerable weight to local authorities, who tended to habitually disenfranchise youth by systematically underplaying their efforts to provide neighborhood services and judged their homegrown economies as illegitimate or illicit. On April 23, another thirteen youths were arrested on the same charge, "illegal dumping." The first six were arrested at 1 a.m. while they were collecting garbage. The other five were arrested the following morning when they came to the Jonsaga Police station in Huruma to bring breakfast to their arrested coworkers. The charges, in addition to illegal dumping, included "resisting arrest."

This ethnographic vignette exemplifies the contradictions of the homegrown waste economy, the municipal authority's misconceptions of garbage collectors, and the challenges of legitimizing youth's role in solid waste management in the city. According to NCC respondents, the stagnant budget imposed on the NCC by central government in an otherwise rapidly growing city was to blame for the shortage of municipal services across Nairobi's low-income neighborhoods. But following such disclaimers, as a senior community development officer flippantly argued, "these youth groups should come together and hire trucks. We don't have enough trucks to handle the whole city, and these groups are making money." Contradicting herself, she then emphasized, "There needs to be a central point of coordination. The only place equipped to do it is the NCC because they can go down there. But we need to improve capacity, certainly." While she admitted that the NCC could not assume the cost or the logistical headache of servicing low-income neighborhoods, she stressed that the NCC ought to remain the coordinating body.

Despite the presence and daily operations of the informal waste economy being noted by the NCC, youth "garbage collectors" operating within the *mtaa* had limited bargaining power. From different interest camps, the NCC and local activists counseling youth argued that youth groups involved in the informal waste economy ought to coalesce their resources and organize to rent or even purchase a truck that could accommodate the micro-enterprises across a number of neighboring low-income wards. But this required complex logistics and intergroup cooperation that had not, to date, been possible.

At that time, youth had little faith in official political engagement as a platform for addressing their group's issues, let alone to accommodate youth across Nairobi's *taka ni pato* economy. Their claim making, therefore,

pertained to the narrow license to operate their small businesses and evade harassment or dependency on the NCC, and their ambitions pertained to being recognized as legitimate place-based service providers rather than affirming grandiose projects of citywide expansion and coalition. The challenge was that every youth group, from the least to the most organized, along with NGOs engaging with youth, preferred to pursue their own projects rather than widen their agenda for the sake of creating a broader network and effort. The result was an uncoordinated mosaic of small-scale youth enterprises, most involved in garbage collection, many involved in some form of recycling, some with links to external institutional support, while others remained self-made "reluctant entrepreneurs" (Banerjee and Duflo 2011), unable to access capital, skills training, or any form of mentorship outside their familiar "repositories of social capital" (Saunders 2010, 21).

In this context of small-scale and territorily bound operations, while the *spirit* of youth hustle spread across the city, hustling did not involve seeking wider coalition building for practical and operational purposes beyond the immediate solidarity of the local base and "group." "Legitimizing" had inherent risks that contradicted key aspects of the hustle economy. Following the April arrests, Mathare residents and outside institutional actors in Nairobi reanimated the debate about whether creating a more formal waste management system would protect these youth and their waste economy, perhaps by flagging the opportunity to outside private contractors with more political leverage and resources. Staying disparate and informal had protected youth's income by operating "under the radar" but also put them at risk of unjust NCC demands and treatment. As one put it, "we need to strengthen the garbage collection network to have a bigger voice." But there were sixteen garbage collection groups in Huruma ward alone, and although many know each other through contexts such as football or other amicable means, it wasn't easy for them all to meet, let alone mobilize.[18]

"GREEN" AND "CIRCULAR": TRASH IS NOW TRENDY

Though often referred to as "informal," "unregulated," or "fragmented," this citywide youth-led waste economy has elicited attention from a number of actors over the past two decades, each proposing their solution to the solid waste "problem." In the early 2000s, there were some efforts (or at least claims) to rehabilitate Dandora's municipal dumpsite, discursively framing the dumpsite as a public health hazard. This included the ambitious

but ultimately unrealizable plan devised by the UNDP, the University of Nairobi's Department of Urban Planning, and the NCC. In the 2010s, there were various steps taken to "green" the city, including the 2017 plastic ban in Nairobi, following the steps that had been taken in Kigali, Rwanda's capital. Nevertheless, the neighborhoods where more than 60 percent of Nairobians live are still largely underserved by the municipality, which has consistently been under-resourced; and lorries still refrain from entering the "no-go zones" with any regularity to take away the garbage that has been otherwise collected by countless youth groups and left in transit spaces. As far as waste management is concerned, there have been growing declarations of greening and talk of new tech-driven innovations to treat waste, but ultimately self-help urbanism persists in this city with uneven (public) services (Kinder 2016), though in constantly changing ways.

Since my first years doing fieldwork in Nairobi, there had been rumors that solid waste management had to undergo serious rehabilitation, formalization, and investment, which alarmed many of my interlocutors in the *mtaa* who felt threatened by top-down improvement schemes. As the chairman of one of Huruma's youth groups put it in May 2011, "If they don't include us, and take garbage collection away from us after we've spent years building up the business, then there will be a revolution." And yet, following the April 2010 arrests, despite pressure from community activists and a few outspoken residents, the youth decided the benefits of hustling outweighed the risks and costs of getting too overtly political. Their mothers echoed the sentiment but from a different perspective. They "didn't want trouble," knowing too well that fighting for "rights" could lead to more external harassment in a context where slum dwellers' place in the city was insecure. They raised money to post bail and wanted the whole debacle to end. Thus, while the *mtaa* waste economy displayed a form of consistent resistance against joblessness and the absence of basic services, it ultimately evaded official political channels and kept to the "*mtaa* ways." Here the hustle exposes a form of resistance and *auto-gestion* (Lefebvre 2009) that does not directly oppose the state or loudly "occupy" central public space in the city but instead finds other quieter ways to "encroach" (Bayat 2013) on authority and work around breakdown and injustice.[19]

This started to change over the years, as some programs funded by a coalition of actors started to include side events focused around community-based waste management. These events and various initiatives now going on in Nairobi highlight, more than ever, that there has not been an effort

to eradicate or formalize the existing waste economy. Instead, there are clear efforts to connect the homegrown to wider recycling and circular economy initiatives. In April 2023, I attended ~~a meeting~~ hosted by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and the NCC, ~~primarily focused on young women's empowerment. But they also~~ included a ~~side event~~ focused on "waste management training." In that meeting, several spokespeople from various youth groups doing garbage collection across Nairobi attended to share and discuss their respective operational challenges in waste management. Several ~~have~~ started branding their waste work, as though aiming to reach more than community audiences. For example, a youth group in Dandora, where the municipal dumpsite is located, calls itself Dandora Green Recyclers. Later in 2023, one of the group leaders sent me their "2023–2024 business plan," which included the following statement: "Dandora Green Recyclers is a green social enterprise born out of the Dandora dumpsite with the core aim of creating economic value and sustainable livelihoods for the communities in and around the Dandora dumpsite through recycling of plastic waste." With access to countless online resources and a growing effort to network among themselves across the city, these groups are now using idioms like "circular economy" and "sustainable solutions" to market their services, aware that their core customers may still be their fellow residents in the *mtaa,* but their audience, peer-to-peer network, and potential investors can be much more global now. By adopting the very language that is legible to both development and business practitioners focused on disrupting linear economic models, the Dandora Green Recyclers have cleverly presented themselves not only as grassroots environmental stewards providing a basic service for their communities; they are also pitching themselves as a potential supplier.

Just as youth groups have been finding ways to give their businesses more visibility and legitimacy, other bigger waste-related initiatives have come onto the scene, recognizing that they have no other choice but to work *with* these groups, not against them. Since 2018, a company called Mr. Green Africa started operating out of Nairobi's industrial area, with a business model that takes as its strategic starting point the alarming problem and opportunity that "Africa generates 22 million tons of urban plastic waste every year." Its mission is to "change the perception of waste" by buying collected postconsumer plastic from 2,500 waste collectors across strategic outposts across Nairobi low-income communities. It then processes this plastic in an industrial-sized waste management plant, where

the plastic waste is sorted by color and type before it is recycled. The team there emphasizes the fair income they pay to waste collectors and the local circular solutions they are helping create. As the founder of Mr. Green Africa explained in a conversation we had in 2019, Nairobi may not have been known for its large-scale manufacturing sector, but it could become known for its waste-processing and recycling sector, connecting the grassroots waste pickers to an industrial-scale processing plant. What is especially notable about their model is the emphasis on the importance of small-scale waste pickers and collectors for industrial-scale recycling to work. Dandora Green Recyclers has become one of their most important and well-organized suppliers.

IT'S A *MTAA* THING, BUT IT MATTERS CITYWIDE

Living in marginalized areas of the city with little prospects for formal employment, minimal financial capital, and limited political representation or interest in participating in more conventional housing-rights struggles, youth in popular neighborhoods used the least desirable resources—waste —to make their own claims on the city. They mobilized their street credibility and gall to capture an "opportunity space" (Mwaura 2017) by turning "trash into cash," forming a city-wide, neighborhood-based, youth-led waste management service throughout the urban centers of Kenya. This waste economy formed in response to economic liberalization policies in Kenya that simultaneously reduced prospects of finding formal work and public service provisions. Youth groups in the *mtaa* exploited this absence of public provision to create a market for garbage collection. Over the past two decades, *taka ni pato* (trash is cash) became for some youth groups a viable way of making a living and making a mark in the self-help city, especially when it served as a foundation for other investments and experiments. Whether youth hustled at the bottom of the waste economy as "scavengers" or were *sonkos* (bosses) in charge of managing plots around the *baze,* waste became a key currency for the *eco-hustle,* a way of turning nothing (or that which has lost value) into something (that which is recognized as having value once more).

The values and effects of waste services shaped by youth-led practices of self-management and self-help were multiple: these included individual survivalism, collective accumulation, and community activism that involved moments of resistance, detachment, and refusal; but these also included hanging out with peers and taking it easy. Eco-hustlers faced moments of

stigma and reproach (when activities were perceived to be illicit) and yet were also subject to applause, appropriation, and incorporation (when activities were perceived to advance community development and ecological transitions). As Raphael Obonyo once put it, "No young person dreams of becoming a cleaner . . . but that can be a means to getting to levels they want to get to."[20] For some youth, waste work would be remembered as their first stepping stone into economic activity and a form of collective labor integral to their formative "liminal" years. For others, it would endure as an integral part of their hustle and *mtaa* lives.

In the early 2000s, the multiplying small-scale youth enterprises were important for youth job creation and a creative mode of self-reliance and resourcefulness, but the waste economy was somewhat fragmented and uncoordinated, which presented a weak defense against the harassment by government authorities or in the face of new big players in the waste business who never spoke about partnering with local garbage collectors. Part of the hustle in those early days was asserting one's turf and getting jobless youth involved in local residential provision.

During that first decade of the 2000s, development organizations seeking to engage with "entrepreneurial" youth in popular neighborhoods increasingly saw youth groups as desirable entry points for various development projects. Urban programs mandated to support "entrepreneurial youth" included the Ford Foundation's grant that helped MECYG acquire a shredder for its plastic recycling business. The British NGO Comic Relief supported a youth group in another Mathare ward called Ngei, neighboring Huruma, which was known for being the only youth group with a truck to transport its garbage—the ultimate asset for the homegrown waste management business because it meant avoiding dependence on the Nairobi City Council. The work of NGOs focused on youth and gender empowerment tended to support youth initiatives through peace-building activities oriented around group events such as sporting (namely soccer) tournaments, community cleanups, and skills training through community workshops. For the development sector, engaging with youth groups was seen as a way of reaching a critical mass.

Later, in the 2020s, the growing pressure and interest across sectors to think about ecological transitions and circular economies rendered these youth-led waste management services vital across the city. Forward-thinking youth within these groups, those with leadership skills and often the ones comfortable speaking in public, became increasingly aware that there was

power in numbers and a benefit to showing a collective front. Together, these groups were handling 88 percent of Nairobi waste, and more people were paying attention. At a neighborhood level, the connection between garbage collection and the *baze* was still crucial. But there was a slight shift in the hustle logic. The relationship between economic activity and territorial zoning reflected the codes of youth group hustles in the *mtaa*: the recognition that these businesses needed to remain small and territorialized in scale in order to sustain the trust of local residents and provide a first-rung step on the livelihood ladder for young school leavers. But over time, these youth groups also recognized that they had formed a citywide popular economy with neighborhood nodes, based on a logic of collective work and *auto-gestion* (self-management), a mode of provisioning that was led by local youth to serve local customers but that could also contribute to wider legacies of people-led environmental and livelihood efforts in the face of social, environmental, and economic injustice. The memory of a national hero—Kenyan social, environmental, and political activist Wangari Maathai—looms large in these neighborhoods. Not only is she hailed for her work with the environmental NGO Green Belt Movement involving tree planting and environmental conservation, but she is also celebrated for grassroots mobilization and the hopeful narrative that if ordinary people organize at local scales to improve their environment, there can be a wider impact.

As this chapter has shown, youth in Nairobi's popular neighborhoods have created their own social worlds and shaped homegrown economies that operate at times independently from formal institutions and authorities, while also finding creative ways to hook into certain economic and political networks when such arrangements can help amplify their work and causes. The next chapter builds on the story of youth-led, decentralized basic service provision but turns away from the relationship between youth "eco-hustlers" and the (absentee) state or NGOs and instead focuses on a particular collaboration between these youth and an unlikely "partner" based in the private sector. Here the focus is on the interface between eco-hustles and "social entrepreneurship," a concept that has become increasingly en vogue among companies committed to "social innovation" and seeking to "do good while doing well." This "partnership" reveals a series of interesting conundrums. For the business to work, it had to embed itself in local youth-led socioeconomic structures. And at the same time, engaging with youth groups had its own challenges because doing business

with a group perhaps calls for another kind of logic: detachment from the expectations of "efficiency and speed of a more typical command and control structure."[21] This is the story of an international business seeking to co-develop a community-based sanitation social enterprise with "local entrepreneurs" in residential areas marked by "sanitation poverty"—"local entrepreneurs" being the young eco-hustlers of Mathare.

Community Cleaning Services in Mathare Number 10

4 The Business and Politics of Shit

Sanitation Entrepreneurship

In Mathare there are very few things that can be said to
serve the public good. There is no community hall; there is
no secondary school. But one of the things that you could say,
it is ours, it belongs to us, is the public toilet.

—David Waithaka in front of Kambi Motto
public toilet, Mathare, May 18, 2010

In February 2010, Sammy and I met up at the Mathare Community Re-
source Centre and went on one of our usual walkabouts, starting from his
Kosovo base, down toward the river past the guys brewing *changa,* and up
toward village 2A, a few minutes away from Mathare Number 10. On the
top of the hill, we emerged from the narrow labyrinthine residential alley-
ways onto a busier, more open pathway, which afforded a clear 360-degree
view of Mathare Valley. Sammy nonchalantly lit up a cigarette, masking
his quiet activist outrage, and motioned with his chin to look ahead at a
large surface of rubble. When we asked some of the vendors what had
happened, they told us the structures had all been demolished the night
before. Sammy reflected on this all-too-familiar scenario: "Some *mkubwa*
[big man] bought that land and wants to build a building of flats like the
ones you see over there. The problem is the flats will be too expensive for
people in the ghetto to afford." About one hundred households had been
evicted from their *mabati* homes.

This scenario was not unusual for Mathare given its confluence of pri-
vate and public land. But among the demolished *mabati* structures, there
had stood a shared community toilet, accessed by the surrounding residents
as well as the shopkeepers, local schoolchildren, and people walking to

and from work. The eviction and demolition of structures deemed "illegal" were always tragic but nevertheless habitual and expected. *Mabati* tenants often had no legitimate legal claim when it came to housing (neither did many of the structure owners) and little leverage to contest such displacement. But they had potential clout when it came to contesting the destruction of a "public" toilet facility serving the needs of the local residents and other community members. This moment underscored the significance of the toilet block, reflecting two levels of sanitation politics in Nairobi—the toilet as the contested "public good" in densely populated neighborhoods, and the toilet as object of sanitation-based development, turning sites of infrastructural dilapidation into material manifestations of externally sponsored rehabilitation schemes.

In neighborhoods where so few public toilets were part of the residential landscape, let alone properly maintained, these shared resources were crucial facilities and highly politicized. Urban sanitation, and in particular "the toilet," had become an integral part of urban poverty politics at multiple levels: In the *mtaa* (the hood), these toilets exemplified the deliberations and potential tensions related to the contested commons, and the demolition of that "public good" was grounds for political mobilization "from below." For local politicians, such as MP Wanjiru of Starehe constituency, toilets were the material and symbolic locus of political "good will" and tangible investment. Among various interest groups in the city, the toilet was the emblem of the unplanned urbanization crisis and sites for potential humanitarian, public health, educational, urban planning, or business opportunities. Paradoxically, while inadequate sanitation had become normalized, toilets and the sanitation commons had become highly politicized and contested spaces. Toilets revealed the multifarious considerations related to the building, maintenance, management, access, and financing of shared ablution blocks, which went beyond questions of legality and hardware infrastructure.

This chapter is the story about the life of a sanitation social enterprise that took form in Nairobi's popular neighborhoods. It focuses on how a group of youth already engaged in waste work (the "eco-hustlers" presented in chapter 3) became micro-franchise "sanitation entrepreneurs." The chapter is written in a mode inspired by development anthropologist David Mosse, who conducted a project ethnography during a period of time when he was an "observing participant" consulting for the Department for International Development (DFID), which turned into his book

Cultivating Development (2005). I write this chapter to recount the biography of a project and its key participants, basing these reflections on a series of touch points: the first trip I took to Kenya in 2005, which marked the inception of this project; my ongoing curiosity ~~of~~ the project between 2005 and 2008 and how it was affected by the postelection violence; the year of my PhD fieldwork (2009–10), when I conducted "observing participation" cleaning of shared community toilets with youth groups providing sanitation services and attended meetings with the leadership of the social enterprise; and my subsequent ~~six~~ field trips (2011, 2012, 2016, 2017, 2019, 2023), following the afterlife of the social enterprise once its corporate funding officially ended and it continued to operate as a self-managed entity.

The theoretical positioning of this chapter is multisituated. On the one hand, I acknowledge the important ~~work of~~ critical analyses of business-led development. In particular, for example, critical development geographers Emma Mawdsley and Jack Taggart (2021, 3) interrogate the ways in which capitalist logics have increasingly "inhabited" development, pointing to the shifting mechanisms of development assistance from aid to development finance and the emplacement of the private sector "at the helm of Development." Anthropologists who have conducted ethnographic studies of corporate development practices have interrogated "entrepreneurial developmentalism" (Dolan and Johnstone-Louis 2011, 30; Dolan and Rajak 2016) for how it uses a "benign language of partnership" (Cross and Street 2009, 6) and an individualized understanding of "entrepreneurship" (Ochonu 2020) as disciplining devices that often misunderstand local community dynamics and power relations. On the other hand, this chapter is not trying to argue whether business-led development is a "good" or "bad" thing (Ferguson 1994). Instead, the chapter reflects ethnographically on the *effects* (Ferguson 1994) of business-led development in discursive, practical, and relational terms: showing how claims to "sustainable," "inclusive," "purpose-driven" business have shifted modalities of practice and engagement between external actors and local community groups on the ground. The chapter illustrates the hybrid space between pro-profit ventures motivated by social and environmental goals (e.g., job creation, reducing packaging waste, and addressing public health concerns) and social missions seeking to build entrepreneurial capacity within local economies (building local business capabilities while addressing the public health concerns). The intellectual work here is therefore to suspend outright critique of corporate engagement by instead opening up meaningful methodological and

empirical insights on the convergence of two seemingly irreconcilable economic logics at play: those of corporate development capitalism and those of hustle economies. Concretely, the chapter focuses on how a hybrid social business venture operated and tried to embed itself in the *mtaa* hustle economy—that is, how a corporate-led project and its particular business parameters for success were shaped and reconfigured by the hustle economy of a popular neighborhood, and how particular aspects of the corporate presence, in turn, marked local practices of hustling. In addition to telling the story about a business-led development project considering different vantage points and moments in the chronology of events, the chapter dwells on the plurality of actors, contrasting logics, and expectations involved in a social business venture that tried to address social and environmental challenges while building on existing homegrown economies.

Although market-based approaches to development challenges have multiplied in the twenty-first century, finding ways to study social business ventures is not obvious. First, it is difficult to gain long-term research access to the business organization itself and to the various nodes of the business operations. Studying a business venture therefore calls for a multisited approach, spanning the boardroom (whether this be individual corporate employees at company headquarters or those working in other markets) and grassroots settings (where retailers, distributors, and customers of corporate brands may be operating). Researching the social and economic life of a business project therefore benefits from shifting one's role during fieldwork: from "participant observer" to "observing participant" (Holmes and Marcus 2005; Mosse 2005; Welker 2009). My methodological approach included being both a "participant observer" in the business meetings of the social enterprise as well as an "observing participant" with the neighborhood "sanitation entrepreneurs," in an attempt to build trust and share my insights with both the corporate and the community-based lifeworlds. In addition, my research focused on residential perspectives and experiences of *usafi* (a Swahili term that can mean three overlapping but distinct ideas: hygiene, sanitation, and cleanliness) rather than privileging the discourses of sanitation "experts" who speak of sanitation "coverage" (Dufo et al. 2015, 8) or the "vectors" (2015, 4) of water-borne diseases, and who refer to "the sanitation ladder" to measure the progress of sanitation provision (UNICEF and WHO 2002).[1]

I also draw on the work of Lawhon, Gloria Nsangi Nakyagaba, and Timos Karpouzoglou (2023, 152), who call for a "modest imaginary" of sanitation to take seriously existing heterogeneous infrastructures of sanitation rather

than hold "modern infrastructural ideal" as the only viable goalpost. Drawing on their research in Kampala, Lawhon, Nate Millington, and Kathleen Stokes (2023, 149) advocate for an "analytical vocabulary" that describes and understands how the world works and a vocabulary that takes seriously the small, incremental, and plural efforts made by diverse actors to address infrastructural struggles. To think with a "modest imaginary" is to be more open to the generative registers of "incompleteness" (Guma 2020; Nyamnjoh 2017) and what counts as a meaningful *otherwise*. To work with incompleteness, as Francis Nyamnjoh (2017, 262) argues, is also to "mitigate the delusions of grandeur that come with ambitions and claims of completeness."

BUSINESS FIGHTS POVERTY

At the turn of the twenty-first century, there was a case made for large business entities to commercially engage small community-based businesses as new partners, new distributors, new consumers. The emergence of market-based development in the early 2000s was both a proposition and an experiment that reflected Gro Harlem Brundtland's (1987) calls for "sustainable development," which called on all sectors, including large business entities, to engage with environmental and social urgencies that had until then been considered business "externalities." The case moved from (at first U.S.-based) business schools to multinational boardrooms and symposia, drawing together development practitioners increasingly critical of paternalistic and ineffective aid models and enlightened management scholars, some of whom had a *penchant* for both postdevelopment theories (such as Arturo Escobar's [(1995) 2012] seminal critique of "Third Worlding" development) and participatory development approaches (citing Robert Chambers's [1995] lifelong work on people-centered development). From these spaces of interdisciplinary knowledge production, a few corporate practitioners who had been invited into the room of these deliberations agreed to champion and even pilot projects where they already had a commercial presence but where they recognized that they were primarily serving the upper-middle-income segment of these "emerging markets." The idea that they could combine experimental business and development innovation, "doing good while doing well," was an attractive proposition and worth the try.

In 2004, I attended an event hosted by the SC Johnson College of Business on the Cornell University campus, mostly to support my now husband, who was helping organize the event. The event was themed around

the role of the business sector, especially multinational corporations, in addressing contemporary development challenges and "fighting poverty." I remember being intrigued by the optimism and the call to engage formerly underserved markets and irritated by the presumption that the business sector could fix what the development sector and governments had "failed" to accomplish, and the naiveté with which the homogenized concept of "communities" was incorporated into the pitch.

At the time, a group of management scholars led by C. K. Prahalad (based at the University of Michigan) and Stuart Hart (based at Cornell University) had argued that there was an economic and ethical case for commercially engaging the world's four billion poorest people rather than providing humanitarian aid alone (see Prahalad and Hart 2002). A growing number of business school students and business practitioners were listening, especially those who were excited that there might be a chance here to forge a pathway where their interest in the dynamism and innovative possibilities of the business sector could also connect to the urgent imperatives of more sustainable and just futures. These students would become the future business activist practitioners working at the nexus of business and "sustainability" over the following decades—my husband is one of them. At that time, in the development sector, the Millennial Development Goals (which would transform into the Sustainable Development Goals in 2015) were also actively calling upon the private sector as a new agent of development. This triggered animated debates concerning the merits and concerns of emerging market-based approaches to development, some celebrating the "optimistic view" about the potential collaborations between economically active poor and larger business organizations (Prahalad 2005), others calling out the unequal power relationships between companies and small-scale businesses, and skeptical about the "legitimizing claims" (Welker 2009) of these new "ethical regimes" (Dolan and Rajak 2016).

The construction of new knowledges forming at the nexus of the business and development sector seemed rife with pressing questions. I was simultaneously intrigued by the possibilities of interorganizational encounters between actors with different economic knowledges and logics, and skeptical of the business vernacular borrowing from participatory development using phrasing like "engage with the local community." I realized on that day that I wanted to do more than be a critical anthropologist in the audience. I wanted to get involved somehow in these debates.

I would have a chance to go to Kenya that next summer, joining a team of six graduate students who had been tasked to test and refine a methodological framework developed by Stuart ~~Hall~~ and his graduate student at the time, Erik Simanis. The methodology was called the "Base of the Pyramid Protocol" (Simanis et al. 2008). The graduate students all had business or engineering backgrounds, and I was invited to join because, I was told, someone with an anthropology background would "complement" the team well given what we were trying to do, perhaps in part because the BoP Protocol had borrowed and adapted several methodological approaches developed by applied anthropologists, including appreciative inquiry, participatory rural appraisal, doing community homestays, and so on. It merits mentioning that at the time I was so eager to join the team and have the opportunity to go to Kenya that I did not argue when I was told it was "difficult to quantify my contribution" as someone who didn't have business or engineering skills. All the other team members were paid five times what I was paid that summer. I mention this here simply to call attention to the differentiated ways in which certain skills and training are valued over others—and to question the amusing and troubling labeling of certain skills as "soft" versus "hard." Mine were clearly considered soft.

In 2006, I had the chance to meet with Professor S. Parasuraman, director of the Tata Institute of Social Sciences in Mumbai. As I asked Prof. Parasuraman about his thoughts on the nexus between business and development in India, he asked the rhetorical question, "Why can't business be social work and social work be business?" At the time, the claims to poverty alleviation made by various corporate-led Base of the Pyramid strategies failed to prove Parasuraman's statement, both commercially and socially. Some of the more nuanced critiques of BoP approaches (see Cross and Street 2009; Dolan and Rajak 2011) have focused on the legitimizing discourses of BoP strategies that appended social missions and ethical claims to products including soap and other fast-moving consumer goods that had not necessarily been designed with development ends in mind. To quote Michael Edwards (2008) in his critique of what he called "philanthrocapitalism," these products were being (re-) "packaged and sold" as consumer goods that could promote and advance poverty-alleviation goals. They moved from middle- and upper-income supermarkets and were repackaged into sachet form with a reduced price point so they could adapt to the inventory needs of small retail outlets of popular neighborhoods and could match local daily budgets where single-serve units were more affordable.

A few years later, other terms related to business-led development multiplied and moved away from associations with corporate philanthropy (e.g., Corporate Social Responsibility) or Base of the Pyramid (e.g., repackaging mainstream products to the poor) to social enterprise (where profits are reinvested into the business operating costs), Markets for the Poor (M4P), inclusive business, purpose-driven business, and no doubt others (McEwan et al. 2017; Thieme, Plumridge Bedi, and Vira 2015). Over the past decade in particular, much more purposeful research and development has gone into designing appropriate products and technologies to serve the needs of low-income and marginalized consumers, what Jamie Cross and other authors of a special issue on "little development devices" (2017) have called "humanitarian goods" (Collier et al. 2017). This second wave of business-for-development initiatives produced products that were much more deliberate in their humanitarian design, appeal, and mode of delivery. Today, an increasing number of social enterprise models exist; an even greater number have been attempted. The discourses have moved away from exploiting new "untapped markets" (Prahalad 2005) and toward "market creation," "social innovation," and "incubation"—merging a kind of appropriate design-thinking approach and new business development. Coinciding with the 2008 financial crisis and the imperative for all sectors to start tightening budgets, one of the approaches advocated was what some business scholars and practitioners called "reverse innovation." Navi Radjou, Jaideep Prabhu, and Simone Ahuja's (2012) book on *jugaad* innovation exemplified this argument, making the case that businesses had much to learn from the frugal practices of largely informal economies in countries like India and others in the Majority World.

In the second decade of the twenty-first century, debates among corporations, NGOs, and business schools increasingly moved away from grandiose claims to poverty alleviation and became more specific about the practical challenges of delivery and distribution. The greatest challenge was not in the strategizing and planning but in the "last mile," where the offering meets the end user and must be put into practice. The last mile included the complexity of cultural practices, social norms and behaviors, economic considerations, incentives, and personal circumstances, which all informed end users' decision-making and interfaced with the orchestrated interventions seeking to "improve" lives, or as interlocutors in Kenya called it, "changing mindsets."[2] Today, there is a whole industry of practitioners using business to "fight poverty" or find ways to engage with formally

excluded small-scale producers, entrepreneurs, retailers, vendors, and consumers.[3] From the 2010s especially, sanitation became a key topic of collective deliberation and intervention.

SANITATION: BASIC NEED, PUBLIC GOOD, HUMAN RIGHT, BUSINESS OPPORTUNITY

According to the World Health Organization (WHO), 2.6 billion people currently lack access to "adequate sanitation."[4] The sanitation problem is more often than not associated with rural poverty and is constantly set behind its more photogenic and appealing counterpart—"clean water." During my interview with Joel Nkako from the Ministry of Public Health and Sanitation in 2010, he encapsulated the complexity of the sanitation issue and the need to think beyond the toilet "hardware":

> When we say sanitation, we mean a lot of things. You have to see waste management. You have to see water. You have to see housing. You have to see the planning aspect of it. You have to see the coverage and access and usage of facilities like latrines. Sometimes we use a single word, like when we say we want to scale up latrine "coverage." What we mean is we want many people to use toilets and maybe stop open defecation. But when we use the word *coverage,* it does not ensure usage or access, because if we walk around we'll find places where toilets are locked. They are used by specific people and excluding others. And access also does not translate into proper usage. All these aspects have to be considered together. (Interview in Nairobi Central Business District, July 28, 2010)

While the surge of water-related conferences over the past few decades has been abundant, sanitation remained, until only recently, "always an afterthought, if considered at all" (George 2008, 76). The urban sanitation situation, however, is increasingly recognized as one of the greatest threats to global health. More than 50 percent of the world's population now lives in cities, with more than 43 percent of city dwellers in the rapidly growing cities living in superdense neighborhoods with makeshift sanitary conditions, the consequence of poor infrastructure and uneven urban planning (Pieterse 2008; Satterthwaite 2007; UN-Habitat 2008). In the popular neighborhoods of Nairobi, some of the largest in East Africa, toilets are shared across multiple households, sometimes up to an estimated 150 residents per toilet.

Everyday uncertainty underpins the seemingly most mundane bodily rhythms in neighborhoods like Mathare. When it comes to sanitation, a common phrase in English, "going to the toilet," becomes laden with social and infrastructural contingencies for the majority residents in Nairobi: depending of the time of day or night, the season, and a person's perception of safety near their home or place of work, uncertainties relate to the availability not only of a toilet structure but especially to its condition, its smell, its opening hours, its proximity to an available and affordable water point, and of course its cost structure and with whom one must negotiate the terms of payment. Spatial and temporal dimensions of toilets mean that most mundane bodily needs (colloquially referred to in Kenya as "short or long call") are not just a matter of "relieving bodily functions" but rather involve constant calculations and ~~residents are often forced to improvise (McFarlane 2011)~~. This includes ~~"flying toilets," open defecation, or~~ the risk of exposure to waterborne diseases associated with ~~inadequate~~ sanitation ~~facilities~~.

In response to what has been increasingly regarded as an urban crisis, and given that Nairobi is the East African hub for development agencies and various social enterprise experiments and investments, a constellation of corporate-NGO-community arrangements have made Nairobi a sanitation learning lab. Over the past fifteen years, a mosaic of sanitation-related programs reveal the business and politics (as well as discourse) of shit at various levels: the local micro-politics and tensions between individual perceptions of cleanliness and collective maintenance of shared facilities; the embodied politics involved when highly private everyday hygiene practices, including modes of "forced improvisation" (e.g., open defecation), are rendered public (George 2008); the infrastructural politics involved concerning the maintenance and management of the shared sanitation commons or "public good"—the community toilet. All these scales of sanitation politics raise complicated questions about who should own and govern public facilities, how funding maintenance of building costs should work, and who should do what kind of labor. These are questions that have underpinned citywide and cross-sectoral politics of waste and sanitation management in Nairobi, informing the spectrum of debates and discourses around what constitutes "adequate" versus "inadequate" sanitation, "latrine coverage," and how best to implement "community-led" sanitation. All these considerations reveal diverse interest groups, with differing emphases on what commitments to prioritize: public health, basic human

rights, ecological solutions, participatory development, or returns on infra-structural investment (Thieme and DeKoszmovszky 2012, 2021).

In the densely populated neighborhoods of Nairobi, the majority of residents rely on either public toilets, where they pay per use, or shared toilets near their homes.[5] Across all cases, the conditions of maintenance, cleanliness, and infrastructure have often been deplorable. As water and sanitation field officer Mambo explained the first year of my fieldwork, "no one wants to deal with their own shit, let alone their neighbors'. And in the frequent absence of water . . . you can imagine." Precisely because toilets represented potential public health harms and were shared resources, they became particularly politicized. Most of the dilapidated public toilets dated back to the 1970s when the city council reluctantly built 156 toilets for a tenth of the population that exists today in Mathare (30,000). The fact that toilet construction has not grown concomitantly with demographic growth in these neighborhoods is a reflection of both the "absentee landlord" (Huchzermeyer 2011) and the absentee state, whose ambivalence toward popular neighborhoods is intimately connected to the colonial and post-colonial legacies of uneven development and service provisioning across the city. It is unsurprising that in Kibera, one of the largest and oldest pop-ular neighborhoods in Nairobi that has received concentrated attention from development organizations, "slum voluntourists," and film crews look-ing for dramatized footage of urban poverty, there are more NGO offices than there are public toilets.[6] Across popular neighborhoods, the structures that have been rehabilitated or constructed include sponsorships from the German Embassy, USAID, UNEP, Pamoja Trust, Maji Na Ufanisi, World Bank's Water and Sanitation Program, and Cooperazione Internazionale (COOPI). Despite the fancy plate on the outside wall featuring a date and name of sponsor, these sanitation prestige projects often ended up in a state of disrepair and were ill-maintained.

FROM STREET TO BOARDROOM, TO STREET AGAIN: BUSINESS FOR DEVELOPMENT *WITH* HUSTLE ECONOMIES

The "geographies of marketization" have positioned markets as increasingly dominant institutions of modernity and development, across the formal/informal sector divide (Boeckler and Bernt 2012). The corporation, one of the dominant protagonists of twentieth-century global capitalism and co-producers of mainstream business knowledge (Olds and Thrift 2005), has become an opportunistic agent of development (Cross and Street 2009) in

the twenty-first century as market-based approaches to development have mainstreamed claims to "poverty alleviation," "access" to basic needs, and "partnership" with the entrepreneurial poor. These claims and subsequent practices vary widely across industries and geographies, simultaneously demonized and venerated depending on the ideological and intellectual perspective.

One literature rooted in business and management scholarship celebrates the emancipatory potential of corporate-led development and "Base of the Pyramid" strategies, hailing them as the most efficient option for delivering on the promises of globalization, including the advancement of social and environmental causes (Hammond et al. 2007; Kandachar and Halme 2008; Prahalad and Hart 2002). In contrast, another literature (largely based in anthropology and geography) regards corporate interventions as void of moral agency (Korten 1995), questions the "legitimising discourses" (Welker 2009) of businesses making claims to social responsibility, and interrogates the implications of corporate-led development on vulnerable communities "repurposed" as self-driven entrepreneurs (Dolan and Rajak 2018). Amid these divergent perspectives, one other perspective stands out, articulated by Erik Simanis when he published a piece in the *Harvard Business Review* (*HBR*) in 2012, making a different argument altogether.

I met Erik Simanis in 2005, when he was a PhD researcher at Cornell University, and remember one of our first animated chats about our shared passion for Arturo Escobar's writing on the "making and unmaking of the Third World." I was impressed by his extensive knowledge of critical social theories that was not part of the typical business school syllabus. Simanis had spent much of his PhD conducting action research codeveloping methodologies and piloting corporate-led business ventures seeking to engage low-income markets. So it was all the more interesting when Simanis published this *HBR* piece in 2012, deliberately staying away from the moral and ethical debates. After almost a decade of working on business-led projects in various contexts seeking to improve access to sanitation, nutrition, and health in underserved markets, Simanis argued that appending development claims to social business ventures was both unrealistic and a questionable business strategy. Using various case examples to support his claims, he suggested that new business development was challenging enough in low-income markets with highly informal structures, and it was near impossible developing a business with such low margins and low price points. It would call for "impractically high" penetration of that given good or service into

that local market. He suggested that businesses should stick to their fundamental competencies of growth through sustained increase of supply and demand rather than hope to address the multidimensionality of poverty through enterprise. He argued that the way to really build an impact (social as well as economic) was through three key steps: "bundling products" rather than trying to sell individual products, offering an "enabling service" that would help accelerate market penetration, and helping cultivate "customer peer groups" (Simanis 2012).

Whether or not one is bothered by the decentering of the moral and ethical case is not my key concern here. What is especially noteworthy is Simanis's implicit recognition for the need to consider relational dimensions of business practice and consumer behavior in underresourced economies. But his analysis does not explicitly articulate how these proposed steps would work with (or against) existing social and economic logics. In Nairobi, for example, how might a business-led project engage with, displace, or push against the social and economic logics of hustling in the *mtaa*? How might it learn the perspectives of hustling "customers" and those of hustling "entrepreneurs" who would be facilitating so-called market penetration? The questions that animate this chapter are: How are pro-business for development discourses justified, funded, and practiced in popular neighborhoods? How do these business-led projects embed themselves into local hustle economies, and with what claims?

Here it's useful to briefly consider some of the scholarship across economic anthropology, microeconomics, and development that has since the early 1970s studied and sought to theorize the "economies of the poor." Starting with Keith Hart's seminal research in urban Ghana, research conceptualizing "informal economies" demonstrates the logic of diversifying income opportunities and the risk in conditions of rising unemployment and diminishing state welfare in postcolonial cities (Hart 1973; Potts 2008; Skinner 2008). Influencing the justifications for bottom-up approaches to development, scholars focused on development practice concerned with the multidimensionality of poverty and well-being through the lens of "livelihood strategies" (Chambers 1995; Chant 2009) to examine the ways in which people's diverse activities, capabilities, and assets (stores, resources, claims, and access) were mobilized and pursued. Using economists' frames of reference to articulate what the poor *have,* Caroline Moser (2006) suggested that an "asset vulnerability framework" (8) pointed to the "tangible and intangible assets" (5) of the poor, who were in effect "managers of

complex asset portfolios" (36). Similarly, Abhijit Banerjee and Esther Duflo (2011) have referred to the entrepreneurial poor as "barefoot hedge-fund managers" and emphasized the high degrees of risk involved in the everyday calculus of what they term "poor economics," where 100 percent of the liability falls on these entrepreneurs, unlike their white-collar counterparts whose occupations are high risk but who enjoy limited liability. Finally, a detailed study of "how the world's poor live on two dollars a day" (Collins et al. 2009) used financial diaries in villages and popular neighborhoods across Bangladesh, India, and South Africa to document the careful attention, financial literacy, and frugality that goes into everyday earning, spending, and saving patterns of poor households.

Read together, these studies point to the meaningful though often piecemeal aspects of everyday economic survival, demonstrating that being income poor does not equate lack of planning or financial literacy. Instead, calculations of risk and adaptations to uncertainty and everyday forms of breakdown and injustice shape diverse survival strategies and skills. Yet what is often less explicitly articulated in the literature expressing disaffection from the left in the face of seemingly unstoppable neoliberal capitalism and "privatization of everything" (Watts 1994) is that street-oriented economies themselves engage with capitalist relations, using market means to deliver products and services to customers in their own communities in contexts where state welfare, basic services, and public institutions might be systematically absent or unevenly distributed (Fontaine 2008; Neurwirth 2012). This absence has fostered entire popular economies focused on the provision *from below* of basic services, especially water, waste, and sanitation (Fredericks 2019; Gill 2010; McFarlane 2011; Moore 2009; Thieme 2021). The work of Vinay Gidwani in *Capital, Interrupted* (2008) is especially instructive for reflecting on the logics of popular economies. Gidwani studies the effects of a large surface irrigation scheme in Central Gujarat on agrarian development as a broader interrogation of established narratives of capitalism. He argues that Eurocentric and neoclassical theories of capitalist accumulation and labor relations do not adequately represent the realities of agrarian capitalism in his field site and points to other "cultural logics" and micro-politics of work to examine the contingent constructions and assemblages of economic relations. Similarly, there are "cultural logics" and micro-politics of work in the *mtaa* hustle economy that need to be considered when evaluating the effects of business-led development

projects that are premised on commercially engaging local consumers and entrepreneurs.

In the absence of formal institutional support, chances of survival and success are predicated on "webs of exchange" between individuals in popular neighborhoods (Venkatesh 2006, 95, 103–4). Here an important economic logic transpires: everyday business dealings are anchored in social relations and often dependent on collective networks of mutuality and reciprocity (Kinyanjui 2019) that require constant realignment to fit the shifting demands and needs of local neighborhoods (Venkatesh 2006). These constant shifts and adjustments reflect the provisional structures of popular economies and are part of the "cultural logics of work" (Gidwani 2001, 2008) that involve continuous adaptation to daily emergencies (Millar 2018) but also developing the patience to endure long periods of nothing much going on. Youth therefore become skilled in their ability to appropriate and commercialize particular corners, goods, and services as and when they can, even if it means capturing the least desirable opportunities, such as dealing with garbage or shared toilets.

A key theme that connects chapter 3 and this chapter is how to reorient the critical evaluation of "privatized" basic services (privatized either because the state is not involved or because market-based approaches are enabling private provision) when a core feature of their operations relies on relational ties, group work, and localized service provision. This chapter has assembled these various, sometimes conflicting perspectives to foreground the ethnographic discussion that follows, which will bring to life the challenges, limitations, and possibilities of a business-led development project. The aim in connecting these seemingly disparate literatures together in conversation with the story that follows is to reflect with nuance on the vicissitudes and dynamics of what I metaphorically call *street to boardroom to street again* encounters, where the logics of the hustle economy interface with and rework capitalist business logics to coproduce hybrid social business practices that draw on, twist, and harness the knowledges and "cultural logics" of both the street and the corporate boardroom.

The next section tells the story of a corporation putting its "BoP strategy" into practice, engaging with groups of youth in Nairobi's popular neighborhood involved in homegrown waste services. What happened when the company tried to create a new local market for its cleaning products while delivering "positive social outcomes" in these neighborhoods,

including additional revenue streams for economically active youth and cleaner toilets for local residents?

A SANITATION SOCIAL ENTERPRISE: COMMUNITY CLEANING SERVICES

Founded in the late nineteenth century, SC Johnson (SCJ) is an American family owned and run consumer-packaged-goods company. "Sustainability" has been a core part of the company's ethos, reflected in its various efforts to reduce the environmental footprint of its operations even before regulations were imposed on industry and to invest in greening its manufacturing processes through renewable energy sources. Curious about the Base of the Pyramid (BoP) thesis put forward by C. K. Prahalad and Stuart Hart, in 2005 SCJ began to widen its commitment to sustainability by focusing on "poverty alleviation" through enterprise models and became one of the first corporate pioneers of BoP incubation.

In July 2010, I had the chance to interview two former SCJ Kenya employees who had worked with the company from 1992 to 2003. They provided an oral history of the company's Kenyan business during that time and reflected on the significance of the company's presence in the East African market. The company's East African subsidiary was established in 1968, five years following Kenya's independence. As a leading provider of insecticide products, SCJ had become the world's largest buyer of Kenyan Pyrethrum, a natural insecticide grown in the fertile Kenyan highlands. In the 1980s and early 1990s, the company was best known to Kenyans for selling locally manufactured mosquito coils, special because they were sold individually for 2 KES (US$0.023) and called Mwananchi (Common Man). In the late 1990s, the mosquito coil packaging started shifting its product image and name to a more global brand. In 2004, SCJ's Kenyan factory in Nyeri was closed. By the early 2000s, SCJ products were available on the shelves of Kenyan supermarkets, but they had lost considerable market share to other corporate competitors. Furthermore, retailers in lower-income neighborhoods could not afford most of SCJ's cleaning products, at best stocking a few of the aerosol insecticide products. Ironically, a few years after the "common man" mosquito coil and local production facility were strategically removed from the Kenyan market, SCJ would sponsor a BoP pilot study in Kenya to identify potential business innovation opportunities working with income-poor communities, where the majority of *wananchi* (the common people) resided.

In 2005, the company sponsored a Kenya-based test of a business development methodology called the Base of the Pyramid Protocol, developed to facilitate corporate engagements with low-income communities to "co-create businesses of mutual value" (Simanis et al. 2008). Sponsoring the BoP Protocol pilot marked the beginning of a long-term commitment to explore innovative ways to deliver the benefits of the company products—from insecticides to "home cleaning" products—to previously underserved markets. Densely populated urban neighborhoods were identified as a key opportunity market because insect-borne and waterborne diseases were one of the major public health concerns. The company felt its product offerings could address these public health and development concerns but recognized the need to rethink the business potential in communities formally considered causes for humanitarian aid. The venture started out as an action research project involving six graduate students, and though it included rural as well as urban field sites, it eventually focused on Nairobi's popular neighborhoods as the opportune site for a business innovation initiative.

From the company's point of view, operating in an environment with such different infrastructures and economic organization than those of middle-class, industrialized, formalized markets meant accepting to work with business partners whose economic knowledge and training takes place on the streets, not in business schools and boardrooms. Recollecting this challenge, the former vice president of SCJ's developing markets division noted, "We were working with young people who had very little capital and knowledge about how to start new businesses. In many cases at the Base of the Pyramid people don't even have a rule of law to be able to control their assets or their money or be able to own property."[7]

For any company operating in the formal economy, the perceived risk here would be the difficulty of tracking, documenting, and monitoring operations. And yet the conscious decision to bypass formal institutional channels, including government, and engage directly with "these young people" afforded SCJ a certain license to start *somewhere*. What the business would ultimately become was unexpected.

In 2007, following months of what was referred to as a "test small, fail small and learn big" experimental phase resembling a more standard "Avon ladies" model of door-to-door home pesticide control service (see Dolan and Johnstone-Louis 2011), some of the youth engaged in this early stage of the pilot turned their attention away from door-to-door services and instead paid attention to the ill-maintained community-based public toilets.

In Nairobi, due to the shortage of toilet coverage in most public spaces, toilets had become a business with "pay per use" systems of revenue generation for toilet blocks. Toilets were also a tool of political opportunism, often fueling the stigmas associated with popular neighborhoods, including inadequate sanitation (Chiuri 1978). Yet for a company seeking "BoP business innovation," these poorly maintained and managed community resources fit "triple bottom line" values, overlapping commercial, environmental, and social objectives (Robbins 2006).

Toilets were at once the site of potential income for youth waste workers, a potential source of revenue and product placement for the company, and a potential preventive health-care offering through improved sanitation conditions. Moving away definitively from the first experiment with door-to-door sales using SCJ's insecticide products, the focus of the BoP project turned to developing a shared-toilet cleaning business. The micro-franchise Community Cleaning Services (CCS) was thus cofounded by the company's American sustainability manager (SM), hired in 2006 in part to lead "BoP innovation" in emerging markets, and the company's former Kenyan distribution manager, who became the new manager of CCS. The idea of CCS was different from other corporate-based models, which had taken either a "sachet-model" or a door-to-door-sales approach, trying to "push" a project to a single customer or household, usually through individual entrepreneurship. In contrast, CCS provided a sanitation service model, using the product for the cleaning service, cleaning a shared resource, and doing so in a group.

While daily operations were handled by the local CCS Central team (headed by the CCS manager, the only person *not* from and living in the neighborhoods where these services were being offered), weekly phone updates and quarterly field visits were part of the company SM's involvement. Additionally, there was a delicate balance between considering the challenges of new business development in volatile and unpredictable economies and considering the unyielding demands and parameters of a multinational company. Everyday operational decisions were made on-site by the CCS manager, while broader strategic decisions—including how to identify potential entrepreneurs, cost structures, team training procedures, and product delivery logistics—were made between the company's SM and the CCS manager, who referred to each other as "my business partner." While the SM was attuned to local economic realities, had considerable field experience (including basic Swahili skills), and knew most

community-based CCS entrepreneurs by name, the nuances of everyday practices among local CCS teams were not perceptible from afar. And yet, as the next section describes, these nuances were inextricably linked to the reasons why CCS would ultimately have difficulty scaling its operations and why its impact was difficult to measure and quantify.

By 2008, CCS operated daily, selling and delivering cleaning services to shared residential toilets accessed by several families, schools, clinics, restaurants, and bars. One of the company's research and development employees had identified the optimal existing formulas of the company's cleaning products that would prove effective in Nairobi's "slum toilets" infrastructures. These were imported to Kenya from the company's Egypt facility in barrels, not cases of consumer packaging. Bulk importation was an important business adaptation for the CCS service model because it "closed the loop" on packaging waste within the CCS business, allowing reuse of all packaging—locally sourced repurposed twenty-liter jerry cans—reducing the environmental impact and service cost.

In 2009, CCS was working with more than twenty independent entrepreneurs and more than one hundred public toilets, establishing a presence in most of Nairobi's low-income communities. Overall, the business development phase of CCS from 2007 to the end of 2009 aimed to provide a platform for iterative experimentation, or "business innovation," and to test the feasibility of a business model in hopes of replicating it elsewhere. In practice, this phase put in sharp relief the differences between corporate and community economic logics, parameters, and expectations.

FROM WASTE WORKERS TO SANITATION ENTREPRENEURS

CCS had identified potential entrepreneurs in 2007 with the help of a local NGO that had connections to various youth groups in Nairobi neighborhoods. As explained in the previous chapter, these youth groups had formed out of childhood friendships, football team allegiances, and place-based attachments to the neighborhood "base," and many were involved in community-based waste management, turning "trash into cash" (*taka ni pato*). These *taka ni pato* networks became logical partners for a social business venture focused on urban sanitation.

Though the youth groups provided entry points, a key contact person or "entrepreneur" within the group was identified and made responsible for selecting a team. At first, most of these teams were composed of six to twelve individuals. Initially the entire youth group seemed keen to be part

of CCS. They saw uniforms, new cleaning equipment, and a "sponsor." But eventually, many members lost interest because CCS involved hard physical work, constant negotiation with residents over payment, and modest earnings. Furthermore, a small initial customer base meant that there were not enough cleaning jobs to justify large teams. Once the novelty of working with an outside "sponsor" faded, the disinterested left. As one CCS member explained in October 2009, "they realized that there was more to this work than just getting a free uniform."

For the cleaning teams, CCS work started with an early morning assembly of the cleaning crew at the youth group base, uniform and equipment in hand. From there, the team would conduct deliberate pedestrian marketing, walking through the streets at peak rush hour to the first toilet stall. This contrasted with garbage collection, which always happened before dawn, while the streets were empty and it was easier to navigate with a heavy *mkokoteni* (handcart) and ~~easier to~~ get work done fast. For CCS, the work was done in full view, in part to render more visible an issue that was unpleasant and taboo for all to acknowledge—how dirty and ill-maintained the toilets were. During an interview in May 2010 with one of the few salaried CCS employees, Mambo, whose job title was "quality assurance professional," he explained the sanitation from a perspective of lived experience and newfound expertise in the cleaning business. Mambo lived in Kawangware, a low-income residential neighborhood located in the western part of the city, about fifteen kilometers from the city center. He said,

> Many of these toilets are not well connected to the sewer line, and because of the big number of people using them daily, we have that problem of clogging. It is common to find that there are ten plots [homes] using two toilets, with an average of five people in each plot, so you can imagine the mess they're in. After we clean every part of the toilet, scrub the walls and the floors—every corner—we then use the product to disinfect. That is how we clean.

That would be considered "one job." Because toilets were shared, so was the cost of the service, usually between 250 and 350 KES (US$3–4), an average of 30 KES (US$0.34) "per door" of households whose monthly rent ranged between 1,000 and 3,000 KES (US$11–34). A CCS job usually involved two to four cleaners, and each "job" could take between twenty and forty

minutes. Whatever the earnings were, the team split the amount equally, and if the lead entrepreneur wasn't present, he or she would get a "finder's fee" but the majority of the earnings went to those who actually cleaned. Completing four to six "jobs" was considered a good day.

Although it was deemed easier to deal with one "entrepreneur" per area, in practice the unit of the micro-franchisee was the "group" rather than a single individual. Initially it was hoped that individual entrepreneurs would themselves manage multiple teams and aspire to scale the micro-franchise. Informed by Western conceptions of entrepreneurship, the company had encouraged CCS to target individual entrepreneurs, who would be dually motivated by prospects of an additional business opportunity and by perceiving the social benefit of the cleaning service. In reality, individuals who would prove to be capable "self-interested entrepreneurs" (Dolan and Rajak 2011) were not necessarily "team players" nor considerate of community interests. For instance, one of the earlier CCS "entrepreneurs," nick-named "Ben Clean," was initially lauded for his ability to grow his customer base but was eventually asked to leave CCS in 2009 when it was rumored that he was using acid to "make the bowl as white looking as possible," while not providing protective gloves for his cleaners.

In contrast to Ben Clean, most CCS "entrepreneurs" were accountable to and part of a youth group collective. In practice, the cleaning work and customer relations, operational decisions, and even cash management were shared or rotational responsibilities among a smaller unit within the youth group. By late 2009, the nomenclature within SCJ and CCS Central shifted from "entrepreneurs" to "mobile cleaning teams" (MCTs), which had paradoxical effects. On the one hand, promoting a more egalitarian and less hierarchical structure meant that if the so-called CCS entrepreneur faulted for whatever reason, another team member could take the reins and keep operations going. On the other hand, managing teams meant having to manage group micro-politics. In practice, it was both vital and complicated to work with groups rather than seek out single individuals, something CCS management started to appreciate as time went on.

Most teams had specific days for CCS work. Mathare Number Ten Youth Group (MANYGRO), introduced in chapter 3, had a landlord for whom members cleaned daily, but most other CCS teams had weekly clients and a few monthly clients, including primary schools. The likelihood of accessing water was higher in the earliest part of the day, so jobs were often completed just after dawn, and during dry season when water was predicted to

be scarce, the teams ensured to fill (and guard) enough twenty-liter jerry cans of water the night prior, and rented the CCS handcart to transport them around. The end of a CCS workday could be at 10 a.m., noon, or 2 p.m. But it was rarely the end of the workday. Before the team disbanded, if the group felt rich that day, they might buy a cup of chai (tea) and a chapati (flat bread) from one of the local street-food vendors. That was often the first meal of the day, and perhaps the last until suppertime.

CCS youth could spend hours after their day's work hanging around their base in their CCS uniform, a simple dark-blue boiler suit commonly worn by mechanics and other laborers in the city but not often worn in the *mtaa* at that time, and certainly not branded on the back. Hanging around with the uniform half undone was a sort of de facto marketing statement that became part of a performance, particularly among youth who might otherwise be stigmatized for appearing idle much of the time or up to some trouble. In their CCS overall, these youth gave curious gossiping pedestrians corporeal proof of *having been at* work. And at the same time, they built up interest and curiosity in the service itself, in a way that displaying the SCJ products and the claims on the packaging could not have. SCJ's *mwananchi* insecticide coils of yesteryears were sold in the local *duka* (kiosk). CCS was a community-oriented business for the *wananchi* by the *vijana ya mtaa* (youth of the hood). It wasn't the product and its packaging that got people's attention; it was the uniform worn by youth otherwise seen as underemployed and idle much of the time. In their professionalizing function, the uniforms not only afforded these cleaning groups the legitimacy to enter semiprivate compounds, schools, and elite spaces such as the local chief's compound but also gave specific meaning to the moments of *kuzurura* (loitering) that provided a public signpost that implied, "I may be idling right now, but I was working today." As they circulated the neighborhood to come in and out of semiprivate spaces to clean, they moved from one public space to another as branded pedestrian "sales people" as well as "cleaners."

In one sense, they professionalized the hustle economy especially given that these youth were associated with sometimes morally ambiguous forms of income generation, depending on the base. But as most of these youth were also involved in waste work, the CCS uniform also reminded residents that the groups doing garbage collection during the nighttime hours were getting outside attention and respect—rendering the value of their labor more visible as they further diversified their portfolio of economic

activities centered around waste, sanitation, and the environment. There was another reason why the uniform was worn after hours. The various meanings and moments of uniform display illustrated how the branding of CCS was locally appropriated by the subjectivities and performances of youth whose hustle involved moving in and out of modes of work, leisure, idleness, and ambiguous in-between states that might be one or the other. The uniform worn after working hours was both the embodied archive of work practice hours ago but also the subversive affirmation that a young person has a right to take up space on the streets during the hours of downtime.

Eventually, some mobile cleaning teams (MCTs) operating out of their youth groups created a separate CCS account to keep track of toilet-cleaning earnings, even if part of CCS revenues were reinvested in other youth group activities. Each team handled this process differently, but systematically most CCS MCTs ended up being a four- to six-person collective, anchored within a broader youth group of approximately twenty-five to thirty members. As a result of this internal circle within the circle, practices of *kuzurura* involved two contrasting though adjacent rhythms: youth who were working at a particular time and their other mates who were hanging out—those on the "job" adjacent to the "jobless corner." The jobless corner provided a social entourage and served as a source of protection in the face of potential harassment from police, other youth gangs, or the disapproving remarks of overbearing *wazee watiaji* (elders on our backs).

THE *MTAA* WAY: ECONOMIC RATIONALITIES IN THE HOOD

Since 2007, MANYGRO's CCS team had identified the lack of community toilets in their community and targeted two kinds of customers. They marketed CCS to households that had access to a shared residential toilet (trained and encouraged by CCS Central to do so). They also negotiated with the landlord of a residential plot in a central area of their neighborhood to construct a "community toilet" in 2006. The agreement was that MANYGRO would oversee maintenance and management of the toilet at a pay-per-use cost of 2 KES or 150 KES (US$1.68) per month per household. In exchange, MANYGRO paid the landlord 700 KES (US$7.83) a month and agreed to take on any repairs or additional costs, including water. This toilet had significant local meaning, serving thousands of residents who otherwise lacked access to a shared facility. The CCS team cleaned it every morning and after a while, most neighboring shack dwellers, whose

landlords had consistently refused to provide shared toilet facilities in the residential compound, accessed the MANYGRO toilet for a monthly fee. In 2011, MANYGRO added to the community toilet's offering (and revenue potential) when it rerouted a water point so the toilet had nearby access to water, adding significant value and foot traffic to the MANYGRO *baze*.

Between August 2009 and April 2010, MANYGRO's CCS sales—number of toilets cleaned and product used—remained relatively consistent but stagnant throughout the months. It had sought out customers within its existing garbage collection customer base—residents with whom it had developed trusted relationships over the years. But, as one team member explained, "it's difficult to market CCS because so many people say they appreciate the end result but cannot afford to pay for it regularly." And yet the challenge was not only the (un)willingness or (in)ability to pay. What SCJ and CCS management perceived, with some frustration, as a "lack of growth" was more complex than a simple question of scalability.

The challenge of scaling CCS was that even those who seemed most active in CCS (the core CCS mobile cleaning teams in each base) also had to maintain their other sources of income, which had come to form an expanding portfolio of mixed-income livelihoods, including garbage collection as the foundational and most reliable income source (i.e., you knew how many customers you had each month), plastics recycling (which was seasonal and depended on the type of plastic and availability of a nearby shredder or pelletizer), and urban farming (which had become for some an important way of asserting some local agency regarding food production). For MANYGRO, CCS provided the seed capital for its urban farming business, and it benefited from the access to business training and regular visits from CCS field officers. This afforded MANYGRO a certain status of recognition and influence in the community as a youth group capable of eliciting external sources of attention and support from the NGO and business sector. Maintaining the combination of activities was an important form of risk diversification and commitment to logics of solidarity and mutuality common within other Kenyan businesses in the informal economy (Kinyanjui 2019).

At the same time, working in connection to group entities also meant being potentially subject to peer pressure and sentiments of obligation. Both the territorial sensibilities of the groups who were economically bound to their base and the individual social cost of doing "too well" posed real psychological limits to individual economic gain, regularly manifest as

strategic discretion concerning personal income and an implicit resistance to scaling up any one business. For this reason, each enterprise stayed strategically small in scale, and profits from one were used as seed or working capital to invest in another, allowing the diversified portfolio to expand laterally, always benefiting the group and even others around. Consciously hiding and subconsciously limiting one's income was a protective mechanism against the risk of becoming a target for crime, being exploited by friends and family, and being subject to social exclusion.

MANYGRO CCS sales numbers indicated a tendency to maintain a limited number of regular customers and focus especially on the "daily clean" of the community toilet. The group was not trying to grow its CCS business and certainly did not venture out beyond its informally marked economic zone of existing residential garbage collection customers. This raised the following paradox. As explained during a focus group discussion in January 2010, "Unlike with garbage collection where you get paid once a month and the income doesn't change since you have a set number of plots each month, with CCS you get paid each time you clean, and the income and customers have potential to continuously grow." And yet, to MANYGRO the importance was retaining a set number of customers. While members participated in CCS quarterly general meetings where the "market potential" of tenement buildings in each CCS customer base was discussed at length among the MCTs, in practice MANYGRO was more committed to sustaining a constant, albeit small-scale, venture.

In contrast, Shei, or as he was affectionately called, Mzee Kijana (young elder), one of the CCS entrepreneurs, worked as a sole entrepreneur. He recognized that the "youth group" was an important entity but also posed challenges. Mzee Kijana was in his fifties when I first met him. Explaining his business approach, which depended on teamwork but was not operating out of a youth group structure, he noted, "Those youth groups, I use them, yes. I use them as a workforce when I need other workers. But otherwise I work alone." He had little ability to retain "repeat" customers, instead focusing continuously on seeking out new customers beyond his immediate residential periphery. Mzee Kijana belonged only loosely to a youth group and was not involved in the garbage economy or its associated economic or relationally constituted territorial zoning. He was the only "non-youth" CCS member (in his late forties at that time) and preferred to work alone, hiring cleaners he trained personally on a case-by-case basis. MANYGRO and Mzee Kijana's approaches and impact contrasted: a

small sustained set of repeat customers versus the continuous expansion of a one-off customer base. As these two examples show, CCS members and their life histories challenged the deceptively homogenizing and individualized qualifier "micro-franchisee" or "entrepreneur." Despite efforts to standardize operations, no two CCS teams would ever be the same, act the same, or work the same, nor would the value of CCS work acquire the same meaning to any two people for whom CCS was an additional hustle among several. The notion of *kazi* (a job) in the hustle economy was experienced in different forms from one "hustler" to the next.

IMPATIENT CAPITAL: CHALLENGES OF TURNING HUSTLERS INTO ENTREPRENEURS

The incremental growth of the business, "one toilet a day," was to many CCS members a source of pride in a context otherwise marked by expected and frequent setbacks. This contentment in incremental improvements, akin to the "politics of patience" (Appadurai 2019) of other community-led slum upgrading efforts, would inevitably clash with a corporation's temporal expectation and vision of change. To SCJ, sponsoring CCS with "patient capital" and a commitment to the wider experiment of "corporate-community" business co-creation, "incremental change" was nevertheless associated with stagnant growth. Over time, when capital could no longer afford to be "patient," what was at first seen as an investment in social innovation in low-income markets became seen as too much of a business loss. Conversely, CCS's manager was a well-educated middle-class Kenyan who had never lived in the city's popular neighborhoods but was very aware of the *mtaa* way and the modes of mutuality that transcended income class in Kenya. He understood (and relied upon) the reality that change and gaining communities' trust took time. As Mzee Kijana said during a conversation in July 2010, "trust has to be earned and cannot be forced."

To the company's sustainability manager, patient capital and social investment had a rapidly approaching expiration date after six years of "incubating." CCS's manager was aware of this and received considerable pressure from his business partner to produce more data from the field to justify the investment, if only for "business innovation learning" purposes and to keep the SCJ leadership committed. The CCS manager, however, did not express the same sense of alarm when faced with the company's "P&L" (profit and loss). These two men had grown to become good friends and honest partners with one another, but this tension between their very

different approaches was reflected in the weekly CCS meetings between 2009 and 2010, which simultaneously offered moments of ephemeral celebration concerning positive field anecdotes, followed by deflated enthusiasm when the "numbers" of that month were disclosed. At best, sales per mobile cleaning team had plateaued throughout that year. From a corporate business perspective, these underwhelming P&L numbers meant CCS was unable to scale. But within the *mtaa,* the limit of growth had an explanation and rationale tied to the risks of doing "too well."

To the youth doing garbage collection alongside other income activities connected to the value of waste, CCS had become an important part of their portfolio: it had helped create additional income opportunities for youth in a way that equated with two key values: "earning an honest living" and "building trust" with customers, two things that were not taken for granted or easily coupled in the *mtaa.* According to one of the first CCS team leaders who had an active role as a youth mentor and football coach, opting for an "honest living" meant making a choice between potentially higher gains from criminal activity (despite high risk of gang in-fighting and conflict with the police) and working hard for a small wage. CCS faced the following paradox: It offered more lucrative work than casual labor in the industrial area, with a payment structure that remunerated all cleaners involved in the day, in-field training, and a strong social support system. However, in fostering self-employment around an unestablished service, each team was responsible for marketing, customer relations, and recruiting new members. This made it much more laborious than the alternative income-generating activities in the hood that had become well-established businesses (garbage collection, secondhand sales, recycling) and less lucrative than petty criminal activity or just relying on NGO projects engaging youth as foot soldiers, often jokingly referred to as "feeding programs."

Trust was critical and yet difficult to secure in concrete terms. No CCS contracts existed and any attempt to draft official contractual agreements might have put off most of the youth whose various hustles always retained a degree of strategic discretion. The notion of trust was continuously evoked in relation to cash management, customer relations, inter-team dynamics, and between CCS "entrepreneurs" and CCS Central. The issue of cash management in particular reflected the tension between self-interested individualistic behavior and group interests.

Striving for an honest living and earning trust of customers and peers alike were ideals that could not be granted with permanency in a context

where unforeseen circumstances and the pressures of everyday struggle could sometimes create lapses ~~of~~ group solidarity. While both "earning an honest living" and "building trust" were laudable and oft-expressed goals in normative rhetoric, in practice they were both entangled with the messier reality of the *mtaa* where everyday adversities sometimes blurred the line between licit and illicit work. Being discrete about how to tread that line was part of everyday *mtaa* life, because ultimately all local business was socially contingent—your customers were often your neighbors and friends.

CCS wasn't meant as a temporary fix to urban poverty or to just target a phase of youthhood in a tokenistic fashion. Many individuals within CCS had grown with it since 2006, going from team cleaners to team leaders to hired staff or "mentors" of other teams. Both SCJ's sustainability manager and the CCS manager agreed that all CCS personnel needed significant street credibility, knowledge of local street codes, and entrepreneurial experience in order to relate to, let alone manage, teams. The CCS manager explained in June 2010,

> Often as businesses grow, they start needing people with bachelor's or even master's degrees, bringing people from outside. This is what makes us unique; as long as we're able to say we create employment opportunities within these communities, the people working within CCS will be from these communities. The second you start having country manager or someone running things with a master's, you begin to withdraw from these communities.

Over time, CCS had provided for some individuals either a stepping stone to other forms of work or education or a legitimizing channel toward attaining symbolic markers of adulthood. For example, for Mambo, the CCS quality assurance professional, CCS was the first job he had *not* wanted to quit after four months, as he once explained with laughter. For him, it became more than just overseeing cleaning teams and gathering sales data in the field. He described his work as a chance to mentor and motivate troubled youth. He was already a youth mentor as a football coach in his area, but he felt that his role within CCS expanded his opportunity to offer youth alternatives to crime. In December 2011, savings from years of CCS work helped him finally afford a proper dowry and wedding celebration to make official his union with his longtime partner and mother of his three children. These were meaningful but intangible effects, difficult to measure

and communicate in "return on investment" terms, as the next section illustrates.

CONTRADICTIONS OF ASSESSING IMPACT

At the community level, by 2010 CCS was, to quote one of my inter-locutors working with CCS at the time, becoming a movement. She went on to say, "The name speaks for itself." CCS clients and nonclients alike referred to the "professionalism" of CCS teams and the use of the company's "world-class" products. Visual and olfactive references to the "sweet-smelling" product or "whiteness of the bowl," driven by personal and social pride, stood out above any health benefits. Despite income and infrastructural poverty in Mathare, residents valued having a toilet facility that they, their families, and their guests could use without discomfort or shame. CCS was the only community-based business to provide and enforce the use of uniforms, protective gear, and cleaning techniques subject to "quality control" follow-ups. Rather than contradict the terms of the *mtaa* way, the uniform professionalized and validated youth-led eco-hustles, if anything else to signal that all kinds of waste work merits protective garb and being taken seriously.

A number of anthropological studies have provided key insights related to the retail distribution of products in low-income markets and the political economy of such products (Burke 1996; Cross and Street 2009; Dolan and Rajak 2011). CCS did not resemble most mainstream corporate approaches seeking explicitly or implicitly to shape and meet "commonsense" hygienic demands. In contrast to other "business for development" models, CCS did not distribute "sachets" of cleaning product to local small-scale retail outlets, to be sold to individual customers for private in-home use. Instead, it had trained youth already involved in one kind of waste work, *taka ni pato,* to operate as entrepreneurial channels of product sale through a service model, targeting the toilet commons, that infamous and vital "public good." Targeting public toilets was precisely what had enabled the impetus of CCS at first, but what also entangled business practices were the contested attitudes toward the shared commons and toward the residential "end-user" perceptions of what was worth paying for. The issue was not convincing people that CCS offered a valuable service but instead convincing them that the service's cost was worth the price, and this was not merely a matter of "better marketing" but rather of understanding the norms of the local economy in relation to sanitation.

Within the local waste economy, residents were end users of sanitation and waste services but exercised their agencies in different ways. In certain cases, the end user was a citizen recipient of the right to better sanitation. In other cases, the end user was an agent of improvement. In all cases, the end user became a consumer-client of a particular service. In merging the roles of citizen and client, community member and customer, sanitation was both subject to consensus building (when it came to maintenance, management, and payment), while remaining a private matter of consumer choice and personal hygiene. In this regard, CCS faced the following paradox.

In Mathare, the commercialization of public health and basic services (e.g., water vending, waste collection) had already happened, given ~~the absence of~~ municipal service provisioning. Therefore, CCS was actually *building on* an existing grassroots portfolio of private service provision. In these hustle economies, you could not get anything done if you didn't do it yourself or pay some enterprising person to do it for you. Mathare hustlers at community levels have long been private providers—albeit small scale—offering services in the absence of municipal provisions of proper waste and sanitation management. Yet, given that CCS's model depended on private interest and capital engaging with the delivery and management of "public" services and goods, turning residents with very little disposable income into paying customers ~~of the most basic bodily practice~~ was not as obvious as anticipated.

CCS's offering inevitably shaped new geographies of sanitation sensibility and consumption (Burke 1996) as certain residents became regular customers of the cleaning service, while others did not. Certain waste workers were refashioned into uniform-wearing "sanitation entrepreneurs" representing a "professionalized" company name, while other peer groups also involved in garbage collection and other waste work (e.g., plastic recycling) remained isolated from external support. These cleavages within popular neighborhoods where CCS had a presence reflected the inevitable geographies of exclusion that occur through monetized economies and fee-paying services, no matter how socially "responsible," "innovative," and "inclusive" the business model may be in theory.

The reality is, CCS became embedded in existing structures of difference and uneven access to a clean toilet. Most customers were residents living in semiprivate shanty compounds or in four- to eight-story tenement walk-ups. The "cleaning contract" had been informally established with the landlords, who had consistently neglected the state of these poorly

managed shared toilets (in the poorest pockets of Mathare they even refused to build a toilet for their tenants). The other public toilets serviced by CCS had always been pay-per-use toilets accessible by surrounding households, local businesses, schools, and pedestrians. CCS had either been given a license to clean these ill-maintained "public goods" by local politicians or had sufficient social capital and "muscle" to rehabilitate the toilets themselves. Moreover, improvement schemes could not just create a "supply," be it of upgraded housing with self-contained toilets, rehabilitated toilets, new toilet construction, or more "education" campaigns regarding health and hygiene. They could only create change if matched by grassroots efforts to build demand. Part of creating the demand was to normalize the monetization of *cleaning* shared facilities and human waste disposal through justifications attesting to environmental and public health claims. But these normative values were often rendered irrelevant in the face of adverse infrastructural conditions, to the extent that abstract notions of "social good" or "public health" were less convincing claims than economic value. If it cost more to be healthy and safe without some immediate benefit (e.g., mobile phones cost money but the value is clear and the return on investment immediate), behavior change was unlikely in neighborhoods where environmental harms were normalized.

According to triangulated interviews conducted with residents and local clinicians, the cost of treating a case of diarrhea was equivalent or higher than the average day's wage of a resident living in Mathare or equivalent, and a third of one household's monthly rent (approximately 600 KES). But while appending a social and health message to a commercial sale might seem like a logical and commendable social enterprise strategy, asking waste workers to serve both as marketers and community public health officers, showing the health value and potential health-care savings of a clean toilet, was quite another hurdle in practice. As a result, securing "repeat customers" was limited because the full value was difficult to transmit and perceive in neighborhoods unfamiliar with any kind of door-to-door service and with CCS teams who were not used to selling a "new" idea. How do you show a frugal and skeptical customer the value of disease prevention in the context and time frame of a door-to-door exchange? These practical challenges reflected the faulty assumptions around meeting public health ends through commercial means: the classic trap where a health "need" (as proven by science) does not necessarily transfer into market demand or consumer behavior (as proven in the market).

One poignant example: In March 2010, after noticing the dip in sales for his area reported at the CCS weekly meeting, I spoke with Mzee Kijana to ask him about "business last month." He explained that in February the children were on holiday from school. During holidays, regular customers told him not to come because the children "will make the toilets dirty." In other words, when the children were around, it was not worth paying for a cleaning service because too quickly the value of the cleaning job was undone. But the other pragmatic reason was the financial strain on all parents around February of each year, when school fees were due and household budgets were already "stretched" following the recent Christmas holiday travel expenses up-country to see relatives. This illustrated residents' pragmatism concerning the cost of clean toilets, especially related to children. Children were rarely given a 5 KES coin to use the community public toilets either and instead were forced to defecate out in the open spaces near the rubbish heaps or near the river. In schools, those who cleaned toilets were children who had "misbehaved," so it was stigmatized as a degrading task associated with punishment and public shame. Plus, few schools provided water or soap for handwashing, and while handwashing before meals was part of Kenyan cultural norms across income levels, the cost of water and soap impeded many residents from doing so.

Given the challenges of building market demand in the face of survivalist pragmatism and the complacency with slow or even stagnant business growth, the overall CCS financial performance consistently lagged behind break-even targets. By 2012, the leadership at SC Johnson who had enthusiastically sponsored the BoP Protocol pilot study in 2005 and consistently invested in CCS in the years that followed felt it could no longer justify further business investment. Local CCS mobile cleaning teams were profitable with revenues from residential customers covering their operating costs, with earnings well above minimum wage for each team member and some profits for reinvestment or disbursement. However, the "central" costs—for training, follow-up, and quality assurance—were well above projections and greater than the SCJ revenues generated through sales of product to the mobile cleaning teams, impeding profitability for the company. The dilemma was that these processes, especially the in-field presence and visits of people like Mambo and Eliza, the two salaried quality control professionals, were a key driver of the "buzz" and crucial to relationship building with each CCS group. Their presence and regular "on-the-job" training was also what helped establish high quality standards,

and the business could not grow without it. And yet creating more demand through sanitation marketing efforts and public health educational campaigns aiming to shift residential expectations of cleanliness and change individual hygienic habits would still not solve the structural business problem. The uncomfortable truth revealed only later was that more "demand" from the residential customers would mean more cost to the business. Despite dual positive impact on customers and cleaners, the business was not covering its operating costs and could not be considered a viable investment from SCJ's point of view. Efficiencies were attempted and increased prices discussed but neither of these were able to make a viable business case for SCJ to continue. "Increased demand" could add new entrepreneurs, new teams, and new streams of income for youth in the *mtaa* economy, but when it came to the crude business numbers and the company's investment in CCS, cost scaled with revenue.

In February 2012, seven years after its inception, CCS received its last installment of funding from SCJ. A year later, Eliza, one of the CCS staff members, sent me a message to say, "Today's meeting was to close CCS officially." One of the first CCS entrepreneurs followed soon after with the following text:

> It is indeed true and sad, I still cannot believe it, six years of doing something you like and believe in, only to have it suddenly crumble, times are hard and what we have worked for so many years to build to fade so abruptly is hard to bear, anyway it's still encouraging to see teams still working, this means at least we did something right to inspire them.

The exact details of what "closed down" CCS a year after the company's funding ended have remained unclear ever since, and each have their side of the story. CCS Central funds ran out, and while the CCS governance structure fostered a unique support system for both the mobile cleaning teams and the staff, it had in parallel cultivated an opaque accounting arm. But in a way, the end of SC Johnson's investment should not be regarded as the termination of CCS as a community-based business that took on a life of its own as time went on.

Since 2013, the original CCS teams in various pockets of Nairobi's popular neighborhoods have continued to remain "active," still cleaning shared toilets in their neighborhoods. To this day, there is still enough SC Johnson product in stock to last another few years at least. Some groups have

decided to start their own cleaning businesses in their local area; some were inspired to manage communal toilets and turn these into sources of revenue. For example, Kevo Uduni, one of the founding members of Huruma Town Youth Group, explained in 2023 that they were "young boys" when CCS first arrived in their neighborhood more than ten years ago. Today, the group manages and cleans its own public toilet for nearby community-owned businesses to use. In Mathare Number 10, where MANYGRO has been managing the same public toilet for years, the older youth have tasked younger youth to manage, clean, and collect payment for the same. The CCS logo painted in 2008 has now faded, but people who have been around for that long remember what the logo was about. And Mzee Kijana and other former CCS members in Mathare, Huruma, and Dandora decided in 2020 to apply for funds to register a new company, under the name "Community CLARITY Services." Mzee Kijana called this a "CCS revival," and what was poignant about this was that the *revival* was completely community led. They knew they couldn't keep using the name Community Cleaning Services for legal reasons, but they wanted to keep the well-known acronym, which still held clout in their *mtaa* communities. And with this new company, the groups started to clean more than toilets. I would regularly receive WhatsApp messages from my CCS friends, who proudly shared videos of their cleaning jobs in places across Nairobi and even beyond.

As of October 2023, Joseph Njenga gave all the remaining product to Kennedy ~~in Kibichoi~~ so he and the other groups could use it. The product, Kennedy claims, will serve them for "at least five years." CCS is now, more than ever, a *mtaani* business. The product was the last affirmation of that corporate-community business alliance. In my text exchange with Njenga soon after this where I remarked that this was a very symbolic moment in the story of CCS, he replied that it was indeed "bitter sweet." In a way, for Njenga to give the remaining product to the youth who were still running CCS operations was akin to the cash transfer logic (Ferguson 2015) but without actually being just cash. It was a "gift" of sorts that would provide the necessary resource to have that competitive edge in the cleaning business outside the *mtaa,* but here Eliza's reaction was especially interesting. Eliza left me a voice message around that time, explaining that she was also very pleased and grateful that the remaining product was now in the *mtaa*. ~~But~~ she felt it was especially important to keep servicing local toilets and residents, to keep it a *mtaa* thing as well as create cleaning

jobs elsewhere. She had told Kennedy as much, and he agreed. On most Saturdays, as I witnessed on my most recent trip, several of the old CCS crew could be found near their base wearing their tattered but well-maintained CCS overalls, broom and bucket in hand, ready to clean one of the communal toilets. For Mzee Kijana, who was perhaps in the end the person who most depended on CCS as his main source of revenue, CCS was more than anything a really good business, offering a quality service. And that was always the point: provide improved sanitation locally and through locally owned businesses; create jobs and provide cleaner, safer toilets. Alongside the big jobs far away, which of course pay well, Kennedy, Eliza, and Shei agreed the business needed to stay close too. Having product on hand has reaffirmed that commitment to the "social business" side of things helped do just that. Social business the *mtaa* way. The CCS hustle goes on, in its own way, now without the "good company" or CCS Central.

The CCS story reflects the spectrum of market-led development claims and counterclaims, and there are several ways to read its story, to interpret what it was and what it became. In March 2012, I had the chance to speak about CCS as a case study to a group of business school students and professors at the Haute Études Commerciales (HEC) in Paris, for their Social Business / Entreprise et Pauvreté (Business and Poverty) Program. This was an audience sympathetic to (and in the case of students, hoping perhaps to become) corporate sustainability practitioners, who regarded CCS as an example of "good corporate citizenship," harnessing business to promote job creation and improve hygiene. During the Q&A discussion, one of the business professors, learning of CCS's spin-off into a nonprofit community-based social enterprise, said it was a "great shame" that CCS was a "business failure." Despite the stable economic viability for CCS "entrepreneurs" and the value to regular customers, its inability to scale and meet corporate parameters of commercial viability equated failure.

Speaking to a very different audience on another occasion, at an academic seminar with mostly geographers and anthropologists, one audience member raised a different concern, skepticism about enterprise-led approaches to basic service provision more generally, arguing that this was becoming an all-too-familiar neoliberal trend: rendering what ought to be a public service a private consumer good. While this argument's weakness

is that it presumes public provision is always possible, it does make a valid point. Under this light, CCS exemplified the neoliberalizing postcolonial city in three ways: one, it was reaching into income-poor neighborhoods to compel residents already on a tight budget to become paying customers of a sanitation service; two, it risked diverting resources away from focusing on improving public sanitation infrastructure (the actual toilets) and toward building a cleaning business; three, it risks further encouraging a "scramble" for informal labor (Meagher 2016) and could be argued to perpetuate a form of disguised employment to carve out new distribution channels for corporate products in markets where purchases of single units were unaffordable.

This last point echoes the view expressed by Anil Karnani (2007) in his critique of the BoP thesis when ~~we~~ wrote a short piece about "the mirage at the Base of the Pyramid." In it he argued that the pressing imperative should be increasing employment in order to address poverty, not finding ways to sell corporate products to low-income consumers. CCS's focus on youth job creation could be commended, but the push of SCJ cleaning products through the marketing of a cleaning service could raise concerns, given that revenue depended on cash outflow from a low-income neighborhood. Ethnographic studies of other corporate interventions have criticized companies like Unilever for appending a public health message to their market offerings and micro-entrepreneurship schemes (Cross and Street 2009) and cautioned against legitimizing discourses of corporations claiming to be "socially responsible" (Welker 2009), while associating "cleanliness" with a "social good" (Burke 1996; Cross and Street 2009; 5). Catherine Dolan and Mary Johnstone-Louis (2011, 22) have raised critiques of schemes that purport to improve lives by "converting" local informal workers into "empowered entrepreneurial subjects," with the promise of "poverty alleviation" while seeking new sources of revenue for the company.

Each of these critical assessments raise crucial points and offer important broader critiques of market-based development schemes that are now widespread. But my hope is that this chapter highlights complexities that do not always feature in either the celebratory accounts of business for development or the critiques of these. The chapter relays the intangible effects of a social enterprise that engaged with, rather than displaced, local hustlers, that avoided packaging waste and *just selling more stuff,* that tried to adapt to local economic and social customs by moving slowly and through existing social and economic organizations, and that ultimately

worked with the "incomplete" (Guma 2020) sanitation infrastructures at hand rather than propose to "reinvent the toilet."[8] As a result, CCS received an unusual degree of patience from its corporate sponsor, capital and otherwise, but eventually could not be justified as "commercially viable" from the company's point of view. And yet, over these nearly two decades, CCS has continued to circulate as a case study example of "business innovation," an important though complicated experiment that provides notable learnings and reflection points for those who were part of it in any form and who are now pursuing other "social business" projects elsewhere.

As a corporate-led initiative, CCS could not survive as a flawed commercial proposition, unable to guarantee a return on investment or sustained growth. But CCS adapted to the local hustle economy, and what remained of it was a *mtaa*-based appropriation of the service, locally valued for the "sweet-smelling product" and the "professionalism" of the cleaners. While mainstream business and even development metrics of impact would deem CCS a failure, the lasting effects of this corporate-community, street-boardroom entanglement merits an alternative, more "modest" (Lawhon, Nsangi Nakyagaba, and Karpouzoglou 2023) reading.

During the years of its corporate-community encounter, CCS had elicited the interest of diverse actors, including different sanitation professionals, local politicians, NGOs focused on youth entrepreneurship, community-development activists, and youth groups alike. CCS had brought in particular assets familiar to "professional" businesses outside these popular neighborhoods (e.g., uniforms, equipment, product) but ended up acquiring a street credibility and abiding by local codes and sensibilities, which elicited the respect of its youth members, thereby sustaining enthusiasm and engagement beyond its corporate sponsorship. This was something other youth programs struggled with in a period where the economic imperative of addressing youth poverty through "putting youth to work" had become integral to discourses of peace building and social stability following the 2008 postelection violence. CCS was one of the only organizations that managed to motivate, train, and bring otherwise fragmented youth together for local economic and social development ends. Informal conversations with NGO directors in Nairobi revealed the difficulty of managing youth groups and the challenges of rapid turnover of youth participants in youth programs (Makau 2011). CCS harnessed the mixed-livelihood approach of urban youth, offering tangible access to "on-the-job" skills training that would benefit their other hustles as well as intangible

benefits of increased self-esteem, mentorship, and collective identity. It is the reason why CCS continues in its own form today.

In sum, CCS was perceived as one or all of the following: a grassroots business focused on improved sanitation, a social network of youth groups, a youth-led organization, a mentorship model for youth teetering between crime and entrepreneurship, a training program, a corporate social responsibility project, a social movement, and a nonprofit social enterprise. It did more than provide a new source of product distribution in the untapped markets of popular neighborhoods. It tapped into the subjectivities of hustling youth and residential customers who had themselves identified that shared toilets were a problem. It embedded itself and added to the grassroots *mtaa* economy, folding itself into the logics of "self-shared provisioning" (Kinder 2016, 11) but with a hybridized market-based approach to that "provision." It recognized the lack of formal state presence, but one of its first public-sector champions was the same person, Margaret Wanjiru, who has been regarded as the "Mother of Work" (Mama Kazi) for youth across Mathare. In the early CCS days, Wanjiru asked the CCS team to rehabilitate and brand the only decaying public toilet in Pangani, serving the nearby retail outlets, street vendors, and pedestrians walking by. CCS turned the public toilet into a business and helped make sanitation infrastructure a political issue. CCS encouraged youth groups to welcome rather than fear "healthy competition" between their *bazes*. To this day, if one of the CCS groups has a big cleaning job, they'll call up youth from other areas to come along.

At the same time, the logics of solidarity and self-help have made it difficult for youth to detach themselves from a collective narrative of struggle, which means that "scaling out" a business is not an obvious aspiration or marker of "success." But stagnation and sustained endurance merit consideration. By embedding itself in the "cultural logics" (Gidwani 2008) of the "*mtaa* way," CCS took on a form of its own over the years, and it continues to illustrate the different parameters, aspirations, and expectations of the hustle economy versus those of a corporation bound by its bottom line. As the former CCS manager recently told me when we met in April 2023, "At the end of the day, CCS was about one or two business ideas, but above everything else, it was about community work." Retrospectively, the story of CCS takes me back to that office in Mumbai, in 2006, with Professor Parasuraman. Business *can be* social work and social work can be business. To evaluate the "success" of a social business against

the metrics of "growth" and "scale-up/scale-out" alone is to miss its plural effects and the radical possibilities *within* a more "modest imaginary" that pays attention not to the end of CCS as Community Cleaning Services but to the endurance of CCS as Community Clarity Services. In the *mtaa,* there is a place for the kind of social business that draws on the resources of external support but then adapts to and ultimately is led by the hustle economy in the self-help city—a kind of *situated social business* that shape-shifts and remakes, that "keeps on keeping on" (to quote Curtis Mayfield), in its own modest way.[9]

A portrait of Eliza

5 Ghetto Gal

Gender, Life, and Work at the Urban Margins

In the popular neighborhoods of Nairobi, gendered spaces and roles play out in public view on the streets, where social and economic life interconnect with domestic tasks that extend into the streets. Fetching water or accessing some space to wash clothes or cut vegetables means that reproductive labor spills into the public footpath between the rows of shanty dwellings. These interstitial spaces become the alleyways where one can get the news of the day while doing household chores, with children milling around their mothers' *kanga* skirts, finding ways to play amid their mothers' work. A few meters away, on the streets that transition from residential narrow alleyways to busier commercial strips for local customers, other women manage all manner of small-scale businesses, from vegetable handcarts to small kiosks selling sweets, cold drinks, and an inventory of diverse nonperishable goods. Women are intimately entangled in and makers of both reproductive and productive labors, and through their involvement in both, sometimes at the same time and in the same spaces, the private and public spheres of life overlap.

Urban sociologists have theorized urban marginality by focusing on the "ghettos" (Wacquant 2008; Wilson 2009) and "edge economies" (Hall 2021) of the United States, Europe, and the UK, highlighting postindustrial economics, racialized segregation, and politics of welfare state retrenchment that have continued to further exclude marginalized groups from mainstream urban society. Similarly, in youth studies, there has been a growing academic and policy interest in youth un(der)employment and the politics of mass youth disaffection (Castells 2012; Dawson 2022; Diouf 2003; Honwana and De Boeck 2005; Jeffrey 2010). In African studies, given the

enormous "economic, social and cultural damage done by decades of colonial exploitation" (Kinyanjui 2019, 74), there has been an understandable emphasis on how uneven urbanization and urban planning have pushed African residents into precarious neighborhoods and vulnerable working arrangements. But, as Kinyanjui (2014, 4) argues, there is a need to better understand "how Africans have configured the city through their participation in economic informality." This book has so far emphasized how young people in popular neighborhoods have configured the city around them through their shaping of, and participation in, the hustle economy. This chapter turns to the role of women in the hustle economy, to explore how their own subjectivities and participation can sometimes be overlooked (Kinyanjui 2014).

The previous two chapters have emphasized the social and economic organization of youth groups, showing how these collectives have formed what Kinyanjui (2019, xiii) calls "autonomous and self-regulating networks" that privilege communal learning and support through shared endeavors that include various moments of labor and leisure that end up in some way connected to the *baze.* These chapters have illustrated the situated cultural and material logics that have informed everyday rationalities and experiments in these popular neighborhoods, shaping young social, economic, and political lives and a sense of place. While youth groups do include female members, both the working and social lives of these groups have tended to be male-dominated lifeworlds, as are the spaces that youth groups occupy to prepare for or wind down from their various daily endeavors. This chapter focuses on the presence of women in the *mtaa,* paying particular attention to one woman's life trajectory. The chapter is written as an outcome of a longitudinal ethnographic encounter and friendship with Eliza, whom I have known since 2009. It is inspired by the work of other anthropologists and geographers who have written about a single individual in their own ethnographic work (e.g., Behar 1993; Biehl 2005; Chernoff 2003; Jeffrey and Dyson 2009).

Young women's stories merit particular attention, especially when their lives are impacted by intersectional vulnerabilities (Abu-Lughod 1993; Crenshaw 1991; Hartman 2021; Kinyanjui 2014; Okoye 2024). In particular, the stories of young female "hustlers" tend to either be missing or dwell only on narratives of victimization. But what happens if the narratives of these young women, and how they experience and analyze their own lived experience, are centered rather than spoken for (Chernoff 2003)? It might

reorient the attention away from gendered dispossession alone and toward a greater appreciation for the complex subjectivities of young women who reflect the liminal and politicized status of "youth," while also contending with everyday gendered expectations associated with domestic responsibilities, navigating traditional land inheritance norms, and dealing with the stigma associated with teenage pregnancy and single motherhood. In part, their status of "youthhood" is stunted once they become mothers, which isn't the case for young men who face cultural markers of adulthood that are increasingly unattainable (Honwana 2012). For young women, their "adulthood" is often accelerated in one sense, but they occupy another kind of liminality in another sense.

Eliza's story builds on the previous accounts of hustling discussed in chapters 3 and 4, which emphasize the importance of collective sociality and group-based economic organization. As discussed so far, hustling can simultaneously normalize dispossession and offer affirmative pathways, involving continuous calculations in order to manage diverse obligations to both kin and community relations. Eliza's story here offers an additional vantage point: her struggles involved navigating access to a largely male-centric homegrown waste economy, negotiating the drawback of eventually "doing too well" and learning how to mobilize performative gestures of hustling to facilitate unlikely forms of solidarity and security. This reflects three dimensions of the hustle in this part of Nairobi: gendered subjectivities, the success penalty, and hustling as a performance of shared struggle.

ETHNOGRAPHIC PORTRAITURE

Eliza is the person whose life I have gotten to know best out of all my interlocutors in Nairobi, in part because she has often been the person with whom I̶ ̶s̶t̶a̶y̶ ̶w̶h̶e̶n̶e̶v̶e̶r̶ I have done homestays. Although in many ways my research has focused on male youth, as a female researcher, it was more appropriate for me to stay in a female-headed household whenever I stayed overnight. Spending time with Eliza included sharing mundane tasks like walking through the streets together running errands, cooking dinner together and her teaching me how to make *chapati* or *ugali* the Luo way, and chatting in the darkness of the night before falling asleep. These hours spent together anchored my understanding of the gendered dynamics at play in Mathare and its surrounds. Eliza invited me into her lifeworld and shared her perspective on what she saw. She was eager to talk things out, as much as I was eager to listen and ask questions.

Eliza can come off as shy at first, but once a good conversation has formed, she is always keen to offer her analysis on a matter. In the midst of the conversation, Eliza often would take a pause, turn to me, and ask, "T, what do you think?" As much as Eliza has given me the gift of time and stories, it also felt that our conversations and time together offered Eliza time and space to reflect on her own surroundings and test out her own ideas, in a way that was perhaps not available to her in her everyday life. When Eliza let me into her lifeworld, she let me ask her to articulate things that she had never been asked to reflect on before. In this way, the chapter reflects the inevitably partial but also reciprocal nature of ethnographic encounters, emphasizing the interpersonal dimension of fieldwork where friendships form through and around the interviews, the "deep hanging out" (Geertz 1977). In this way, there was a shared understanding that we offered one another something valuable. Eliza has long called me "dada" (sister) in her texts and correspondence, as have I. Our sisterhood is grounded in the shared acknowledgment that we may come from vastly different life-worlds, but we are friends who never run out of conversation and have a shared curiosity for what the other thinks and sees.

This chapter pieces together key segments of our conversations that have taken place over the years, drawing on recorded life history interviews, field notes following our countless walkabouts, and moments of group bantering between Eliza and her male childhood friends with whom she had grown up, played football and boxed, worked as a garbage collector, mentored, and eventually bossed around as a sanitation entrepreneur and team leader. Though the chapter is written through my narrative voice, I try to center Eliza's own reflections and analysis, her wisdom and good humor, to show how Eliza has simultaneously navigated the gendered harms of precarious urban life over the years, while rendering "the ghetto" a place of feminist, activist, and entrepreneurial possibility.

In the previous chapters, I have argued that the epistemologies of hustling are situated within everyday banter, accounts of life on the streets, and articulations of struggle, work, and aspirations. These accounts emphasize the interpersonal dynamics and social ties that are integral to the hustle in the hood, which paradoxically are consistently anchored in the collective unit of the "group" but sometimes erode solidarity and possibilities to do well. While the hustle economy engages with capitalist relations and entrepreneurial urbanism, it does not necessarily reflect individualistic, self-interested pursuits of continuous and limitless economic gain or desires

for differentiation. The hustlers' skill is instead to strategically modulate between survivalism, livelihood strategy through diversifying sources of opportunity to mitigate risk, and contestations of authority. The tenuous balance between feeding themselves and renegotiating their place within the city is at the core of urban hustlers' subjectivity.

Eliza was never really involved in youth group culture per se or even in a women's group. Her sociality, sense of place, and allegiances were multisited, as she tended to move between different peer groups and social situations. She even admitted preferring not to be part of any group saving schemes because she valued discretion and her privacy, and part of her own approach to *mtaa* living was to avoid having others know too much about the vicissitudes of her earnings.

This chapter does two key things: First, it focuses on a gendered perspective, particularly girls and women. It shows that it matters who is hustling. Hustling is often evoked, imagined, and performed as a hypermasculine urban practice, but as Eliza once remarked, "ghetto gals hustle too!" They do so with a different set of repertoires, pressures, and projections. Though much of the book focuses on youth and young men, the role of women is paramount, including for the ways it challenges and complicates understandings of waithood, how young women experience and make sense of their own liminalities, and the different pressures and urgencies that underpin their own hustles. Women who hustle show how so very active and busy hustling is. Second, this chapter seeks to provide a more intimate sense of a single person's life trajectories—to consider their family ties, their biographical vicissitudes, and how hustling hinders or enables these trajectories.

By focusing on Eliza as the central female figure, I do not mean to suggest that Eliza is somehow extraordinary. As you will see, in countless ways Eliza *is* remarkable, brave, exceedingly clever, funny, and generous. She is of course extraordinary *to me,* and my admiration for her will undoubtably come through here. But I argue that there are countless women like Eliza in the *mtaa.* It just so happens that I know Eliza and it is valuable to focus on a single person so that we might better ground our attention in the life trajectory of a single life and its effects on others and to understand the wider context. Focusing on Eliza enables us to see that women in the *mtaa* hustle in particular ways. Perhaps it is *ordinary* to be this tough, this creative, this generous. And through this life history, we might better grasp what it means for women to hustle, why it matters that a woman is

hustling, and what we can understand from a single woman's lived experience and point of view. Eliza's story and her own analysis of "ghetto life" point to the gendered hardships women and girls face in Nairobi's most vulnerable neighborhoods. She has always been acutely aware of teenage pregnancies, domestic violence, stunted schooling for girls, last-resort strategies taken up by young teens in order to just access phone credit or sanitary pads, let alone money to contribute to household income for basic expenses. But she is also one of many women who found nonconforming ways to confidently ~~and quietly~~ subvert social and gendered inequalities, patriarchal norms, and urban injustices.

INTRODUCING ELIZA

Eliza's parents were from Eastern Province, near Kisumu, and came to Nairobi in the 1980s. Eliza was born in 1987 and felt most *at home* in Huruma, the popular Nairobi neighborhood where she was born and raised. Yet she felt *from* Kisumu. She allowed her Luo identity (and pride) to shine when she was in the company of other Luos—something I witnessed whenever we went to have *samaki* (fish) lunch or bought fish from a street vendor. "You can only buy fish from Luo people," she joked, sharing this common knowledge with me.[1] Kisumu's location on the shores of Lake Victoria explains why Kenyans from Kisumu living in Nairobi at some point remind others that their province is well known for its fish, especially tilapia. But at the same time as humorous banter was used to emphasize *difference* and pride associated with one's own "native place," Eliza was also a conscious polyglot and chameleon—able to code-switch into Kikuyu and deep Sheng depending on those she would greet or with whom she would keep company. Eliza was also able to code-switch across different social groups. She was a self-proclaimed *tomboy* who had always felt more comfortable around the boys. But as a young single mother, she also related to her female peers who had ~~also~~ gone through similar life experiences. When she spent hours at the hair salon getting her braids done every few weeks, she was one of the girls and had credibility as a mentor to younger girls going through their own hardships. In the streets, she could be found exchanging friendly banter with her male friends but also greeting and making time for the *shoshos* (grandmothers) and *wazee* (male elders). Eliza retained a foothold across different social groups in her neighborhood. It was this plural position that accorded her a unique street credibility—as a single mother who understood what it was like to grow up and raise a

child in the ghetto, as a youth female activist and hustler finding creative ways to make a life and a living, as a young person who showed respect toward her elders and was known as "hard working" and loyal to her local church, and as Mama Kevo, who was seen as the tough mother who wouldn't hesitate to reprimand her son's friends in the streets if they were being mischievous.

Eliza embodied the paradox of youth growing up in Nairobi's popular neighborhoods. Her story as a single mother who got pregnant before finishing secondary school was familiar in these neighborhoods, where countless teenage girls ended up having their youth prematurely truncated by unintended pregnancy and the social stigma that followed the experience of being a young single mother. These two factors, single motherhood and the inability to afford living on her own, exemplified the *protracted liminality* of youth living in urban poverty in Nairobi. On the one hand, youth were forced to "grow up" quickly and assume adult responsibilities; on the other hand, the lack of job opportunities and ability to afford housing typified youth's inability to attain key markers of adulthood such as a secure source of income and being able to afford "your own place." This was all the more significant for young women who were the de facto primary carers of their children as well as often dutifully tending to their elders.

And yet Eliza had defied the stereotypical ripple effects of single motherhood and youth unemployment. She had *not* dropped out of school when she got pregnant at seventeen, instead finishing her secondary school against the odds. She challenged gendered norms of her local entourage by inserting herself in the male-dominated homegrown economy of garbage collection that had become one of the main sources of ~~income~~ for young men in the *mtaa*. Eliza admitted feeling more comfortable hanging out with the guys. She boxed, she played football, she pulled the *mkokoteni* (handcart) during garbage collection, and she participated in the macho banter with her male peers in a way that playfully mocked their sexist ways while finding it humorous. It helped perhaps that Eliza quietly refused to be one of those women that her male friends referred to as *mpango wa kando* (the spare part, meaning the mistress or "girl on the side"). But she was not the girl that the guys courted either. She was their friend, their sister, in some instances their boss. Her story shows that the *mtaa* is a context where traditional cultural norms and roles can be challenged and where the regulatory and legalistic parameters of urban provisioning can be creatively circumvented (Hartman 2021; Mabala 2011; Sundaram 2010).

When I first met Eliza in 2009, she was a twenty-four-year-old working single mother navigating the largely male-dominated informal waste economy, and this included working with Community Cleaning Services as a sanitation entrepreneur and field training officer (see chapter 4). Garbage collection was for many years her primary source of income, and during the early 2000s, development actors seeking to engage the growing youth demographic in popular neighborhoods noticed that neighborhood-based ~~informal~~ waste collectors operated in groups and occupied particular territorial zones. Like many of her generation who grew up during the rise of "NGOization" in Nairobi, Eliza became a savvy navigator of the development and social business sectors that were seeking to harness the entrepreneurial skills of youth groups who could help outside organizations navigate and find ways of working in these urban neighborhoods. But through my conversations with Eliza over the years, I understood that her working identity was not tied to her "day job." Instead, she continued to self-identify as a hustler, where survival and recognition were understood to be contingent on a combination of improvised income-generating activities, unpaid social activism work, and an active presence on social media (mostly Facebook), where she would often proudly sign off with the hashtag #ghettoGal. Eliza's everyday "social navigation" (Vigh 2006) involved several maneuvers to "act, adjust and attune" (Vigh 2009, 420) her strategies in relation to anticipated shifts in the various forces at play in her own lifeworld and at various scales of city life. These maneuvers included a concerted effort to "be seen" in her neighborhood when it mattered but retain a discrete degree of personal autonomy and space. Eliza's hustle at times combined some form of wage employment with organizations seeking a foothold in the *mtaa* economy, ad hoc self-provisioning *in* the neighborhood economy, and various forms of social activism and reciprocation that helped build up and benefited from her street credibility. Undertaking an assemblage of personal, social, political, and commercial labors that each tapped into her street-oriented knowledge and skills meant that Eliza's hustles ensured modest daily gains alongside incremental, experimental investments. In the absence of safety nets, and as a single mother in a world designed to benefit men, trying different things out ensured at least a few immediate returns to cover key costs, while cultivating a repertoire of back-up plans for the future, knowing that all manner of uncertainty and breakdown was always around the corner.

LAND FOR MY SON

Huruma is one of the most densely populated neighborhoods in the world (Huchzermeyer 2011) and sits at the nexus of Nairobi's historical anti-colonial activism (with Mathare to its south) and Nairobi's light industries and largest municipal dumpsite (with Kariobangi and Dandora to its east). Eliza grew up with four brothers and one sister, all born in Nairobi. When I met Eliza in 2009, she lived with her parents, two brothers, and her son in a two-room flat on the bottom floor of a four-story tenement walk-up in the middle of Huruma. The main space where the family spent time contained a double bed for her parents, surrounded by a mosquito net, which served as a kind of spatial divider with the rest of the space. A small coffee table was sandwiched between the bed and a two-seater sofa. The sofa turned into a makeshift bed for Eliza's seven-year-old son, Kevo, but during the day and evening hours, it served as the main seating for other members of the family. A twelve-inch television screen was perched on a tired-looking pine wall unit that (along with the mosquito net) also marked the spatial separation between the "bedroom" space and the "living room" space. There was a second room that had a single bed for Eliza's older brother, and a mattress on the floor against the iron sheet wall for Eliza. Between these two rooms, there was a small separate utility space used for cooking and storage, with a single stool near the ceramic *jiko* stove and a stack of *sufuria* aluminium cooking pots. The toilet, bathing stall, and water tap were all down the hall and shared across all the families living on that floor, typically ten to twelve flats per floor. Although most of Huruma was electrified, blackouts were a daily occurrence, and there was no lighting in the hallways of these tenement-style buildings anyway, so little pieces of waxed candlesticks were always around the common washing area, serving as makeshift lights, especially after sundown.

As was common for most children born in Nairobi's low-income settlements in the 1980s, Eliza's parents had come from one of the rural provinces in Kenya, migrating to the city for the father's work. As Eliza explained during one of our first recorded life history interviews,

> He was employed by the government. I think he was an accountant for the NSSF [National Security Social Fund]. Mom was a businesswoman. She was selling secondhand clothes. Eventually the business collapsed. My childhood was not bad because at the time I was being brought up, my dad was still

working. But by the time I was thirteen, my dad stopped working. I don't
know what happened to the job. That is where life became difficult.

Although Eliza's father had been out of work for years, her father's former
status as a government employee was an important part of the family folk-
lore and pride. The secondhand clothing market, in which Eliza's mother
was a "businesswoman," was a large but saturated share of the ~~informal~~
street vending economy in Nairobi, and it was common for individual
entrepreneurs in the secondhand market to give up their business at one
stage or another, due to the significant logistical and economic challenges
associated with inventory space, vending stall rental cost, and keeping up
with local competition. When both her parents were out of work, Eliza's
oldest brother, who had just finished secondary school, "took care of the
family." When she spoke about this period in her childhood, she evoked
a sense of gratitude toward both her brother and the benevolence of her
primary school, as though inferring that this was unusual fortune within
the *mtaa*. Referring to her brother, she explained,

> He was just doing some casual jobs. He was able to take care of the whole
> family because the little he could get he could pay for food. I went to
> St. Benedict's school, and it was a church school so they were understand-
> ing if you couldn't pay for school fees. You would still have to pay, but you
> could pay in installments. My favorite subjects in school were English, math,
> and science. In 2002, I took my KCP exams, the first national examination at
> the primary level. At that time my brother was still taking care of us because
> my dad still wasn't working. I did the exam without paying because they
> understood my situation. I did my class eight for free; I never paid. They
> were understanding. I liked school.

Eliza's brother had become the sole breadwinner of the family by the time
he completed school. It was not uncommon for a young member of the
household to take care of the whole family in these neighborhoods. What
was less common at that time was young people finishing secondary school,
partly because this part of Nairobi had very few secondary school options
and unlike certain benevolent primary schools, most secondary schools
were fee paying and did not accommodate for financial aid. Eliza had spent
her early teenage years with her brother's example, hustling to generate
income wherever an opportunity arose. As long as his parents were out of

work and younger siblings were in school, it was a given that the eldest child's obligation was to provide for the rest of the family. Eliza was influenced by her brothers and older boys around her neighborhood in other ways as well. By the age of fifteen, her social and recreational activities were often spent hanging about with an array of "big brother" figures who taught her how to train, how to be tough, how to defend herself.

> My best childhood memories were playing football and boxing. I was usually training mostly with boys. My brothers were all boxers. So I was just going with them to see them train, and then I started training with them too. The women didn't think it was strange because they knew I grew up with only brothers, so they thought I was just more comfortable with the boys. But the boys, they were cool with me because they saw that I was not like the other girls.

In 2003, Eliza joined a nearby secondary school. But within a few months, Eliza realized she was pregnant and dropped out of school. The tone of her voice and her facial expression changed ~~suddenly here~~. She recalled,

> After that, life became difficult. My parents weren't very happy with me. My older sister was not really around because she is married. You know, the situation was such that I was the last born, and now pregnant, so it was a situation whereby everyone is against you. At that point, I was really scared. So I went to stay with my friend for some months. Then I met with my brother, who told me to come back home. When my family finally accepted the situation, they said, "The fact remains that you are our daughter and our sister." On November 13, I gave birth to Kevo. I was seventeen.

Despite the ordinariness of teenage pregnancies in popular neighborhoods, the social stigma associated with teenage pregnancy was, as Eliza described, a kind of "curse." Her father and brothers had stopped speaking to her for a time, and the mothers of her friends forbade them to socialize with Eliza for fear that she was a bad influence. Eliza reflected on this period as both a time of social exclusion but also an affirmation of her independence. With modest pride and a slight smirk, she recounted,

> Even those same girls whose mothers were saying, "Don't play with her," many of them fell in the same trap. They got pregnant and they are worse

off than I am because they went for early marriage, which they could not cope with. At least me, I'm just there.

What Eliza meant by "I'm just there" was that she was not forced to go into early marriage. She recollected her eldest brother being the central source of encouragement in this regard when he insisted, "We'll support you. Just give birth and have the baby. We'll help you take care of the baby. Then you'll go back to school." After Kevo was born, Eliza took a hairdressing course. Hair salons were one of the most common local businesses in the *mtaa* and most women paid up to 1,000 KES (approximately US$10) to get their hair braided, equivalent to nearly a third of one month's rent in Huruma. Eliza spoke about the course as a transient phase.

> The training took nine months. I would go with Kevo to the daycare, and then to the college for my course. After that I did salon work for two to three months but it wasn't good because my boss saw me as someone who just got out of school without much experience, so he would give the other ladies the work since they were more expert. Since it was a commission-based job, I wasn't earning much so I decided to leave. My brother was not very happy because he had paid for the course. I told him I would try my best and look for another place.

Eliza admitted that she did not like hairdressing, and even less being bossed around with little prospect for advancement. She also intimated that she preferred to work independently, and following her hairdressing course started experimenting with various modes of self-employment. Working in one place for two to three months, she would use her saved earnings as seed capital for a small business idea, such as selling rice in her neighborhood. Eliza traveled long distances once every two weeks to purchase rice at wholesale prices and then sell a kilogram of rice through door-to-door sales to people she knew. She made a small profit on sales and saved on overhead costs, and her customers saved money by paying less than the local retail price. But as with any business in the hustle economy, there were inevitable blockades even in seemingly lucrative and well-oiled business plans, which required quick adaptation and improvisation. When the price of rice went up, Eliza gave up the rice distribution business and turned to her male peers and childhood friends, who by then had all finished or dropped out of secondary school. Most of them were engaged in

the residential garbage collection business, which had become a common "first rung" income-earning opportunity for youth living in popular neighborhoods with few prospects for finding secure employment and in neighborhoods that were dealing with a growing garbage problem—ever growing density and an ill-equipped municipality to service these low-income densely populated areas. As discussed in chapter 3, "trash became cash." Eliza's eyes lit up when she started to explain the early days of her work with *tako* (garbage), acknowledging that what seemed at first like dirty work had in fact permitted her to adapt her skills. She explained,

> I started garbage collection. I just approached some of the boys and asked them, "Please can you call me? Even if it's commission I'll take the job." No matter what the job, I'll do it so that my child can eat and be dressed. I didn't mind what the job was. I had gone to these workshops and I was well informed and was determined to earn a living for my son.

This was in 2005, and no other women were doing garbage collection at the time. Eliza spoke about being the only woman "doing this kind of job" in a way that highlighted the physical demands of the work and the pejorative associations with handling garbage. But her recollection of this work also emphasized the pride of being part of a largely youth-based entrepreneurial activity and doing something that the local government had failed to provide: deliver basic waste management to a residential community.

On the one hand, Eliza admitted to being desperate enough to do almost any kind of work if it would support her son and the rest of her family; on the other hand, like many other youth who had grown up in the "ghetto," there was a deliberate choice in doing "dirty work" on their own terms over "donkey's work" for an exploitative or abusive boss in the industrial area of the city. Indeed, working for someone else, for this generation of Kenyan youth, recalled highly uneven power relations and exploitative practices between employer and employee. Working for yourself and among fellow peers, anchored in friendship-based youth groups, was integral to the collective identity of many young people for whom these groups served as crucial social infrastructures of care—circumventing both formal state and formal market channels of service provision, employment, and control.

In addition to her income-generating work, Eliza was also a peer educator for young girls in her neighborhood, something she had become

involved with following Kevo's birth in pursuit of a support network for "young mothers in the ghetto." It was this network, she claimed, that helped her finish her Kenya Certificate of Secondary Education (KCSE) exams in 2006, finally completing secondary school.

> When I got that training, I learned that even if you are pregnant, even if you have given birth [as a young girl] that does not mean that it is the end of everything. When I finished my Form Four exams, after that, people were proud of me. I started seeing some of the girls who were stressed with life saying, "After all, I've become pregnant. I have a child. Look at my family situation. What will I do? My only option is to go for early marriage." That's where I would chip in and say, "No, you have other options. You are now eighteen years old. If you get married now, where do you think you will be in five years? Why can't you change your life and change your community?"

Eliza informally mentored other young women who experienced teenage pregnancy, urging them to think about their options beyond early marriage. As she put it, "For young women in the ghetto, marriage is often an issue of peer pressure. You feel as if you are pushed against the wall." Eliza's motto was that being single enabled a woman in the ghetto to think about her future. For her, that meant thinking about what it would take for her son to realize his potential and to eventually attain the status of manhood according to her cultural tradition.

> For me personally, getting married is not an issue but what's an issue is having my little boy ask me, "Where is my father?" You see, the other thing is in the ghetto, if you get married and you already have a child, that family won't see your child as part of the family. If I got married, my son wouldn't feel accepted into the family. And you know Kenyan men—even if you have a boyfriend, he'll not take care of your baby. So it's up to you as a mother to do it. First and foremost, the single mothers will think about their child. The relationship with men comes second. But the bigger issue for me is one day having my son be able to say, "There is my land." Having some property for him. ~~That is what I'm thinking of getting married.~~ If I can provide him with a good situation, having some land where he can go, he will never ask you, "Where is my dad" or things like that because I will have given him something of his own.

Here is where Eliza's story underscored the dialectics of identity for female youth living in the city. For her it would be paramount for Kevo to one day have land of his own. As a Luo, this was only possible through patrilineal heritage, where land was traditionally passed on from father to son. But without a father, a "bastard son" would never be given land by a father figure. Any new man Eliza would let into her life, she explained, would never accept, let alone adopt, Kevo as his own son. Eliza's goal, what drove her everyday ambitions, was the notion that she could one day afford to buy a plot of land for her son, preferably somewhere that fit the rural imaginary, away from the city (the country was colloquially referred to as *shags*). To have a claim to some land in *shags* was an important part of one's narrative because even for youth who were born and raised in the city, they were (their kin, their tribe, their family farm) nevertheless from *somewhere* upcountry. In this, she abided to traditions around gender and land inheritance. The means to this end would, however, be achieved by defying gendered norms of behavior and practice.

In 2008, Eliza was one of the few dozen waste workers in Nairobi popular neighborhoods who became involved with the social enterprise Community Cleaning Services (CCS), discussed in chapter 4. Eliza quickly went from being a team member of one of the CCS mobile cleaning teams (MCTs), to a team lead and mentor, to a salaried CCS professional responsible for training and following up with different CCS teams across Nairobi and reporting back to the Central CCS management team. By the time I met Eliza in 2009, she had become the sole breadwinner for her family, with her parents and siblings each out of work, and her six-year-old son in primary school.

THE COST OF DOING TOO WELL

In each ~~neighborhood~~ within Nairobi's popular neighborhoods, the informally marked territories known to youth groups as the *baze* (discussed in chapter 3) provided a public space for domestic, social, and business matters to converge. As described in chapter 3, the *baze* of youth groups served an important spatial and social function, enabling peer groups to combine moments of banter-filled loitering with a constant low-level flow of income generation that served as a notable form of shared provisioning for otherwise "unemployed" youth—in turn giving these youth a sense of place and legitimacy in the public space of the neighborhood. Eliza's street credibility

involved having the license to drop in on these youth groups whose every-
day practices blurred the lines between work, leisure, and idleness. She could
partake in their banter, versed in the macho street humor, and laughed
even when comments were misogynistic because she was always able to
add witty comebacks and made it clear that she refused to be the subject
of chauvinistic teasing.

Contrary to ~~Western-led~~ depictions of "successful" entrepreneurship
informed by neoclassical economic theories, Eliza's aspirations did not
include overtly maximizing growth. Eliza frequently evoked the potential
negative effects of doing "too well," just as other youth in Mathare had
done during my conversations with them. Eliza and I discussed the reasons
why youth in the *mtaa* were deliberately elusive about the details of their
livelihoods. As discussed in chapter 3, youth's individual strategic discre-
tion regarding income was tied to the *mtaa* logic of solidarity inherent
in everyday collective struggle. From the hustler's perspective, being part
of a collective offered the benefit of risk reduction by diversifying owner-
ship and reducing the traceability of any individual's gain from the entity.
The difficulty of group membership, however, transpired for those who
set themselves apart from group activities to pursue their individual ambi-
tions while retaining a sense of belonging to the *mtaa,* their base, and their
cohort. For Eliza, part of maintaining her hustler persona vis-à-vis her peers
within the *mtaa* required concealing the extent to which she was "doing
well" (or at other points over the years, the extent to which she incurred
losses).

Eliza had spent years struggling as a single mother pursuing various
kinds of informal work while trying to finish school and manage her fam-
ily obligations. When she started garbage collection work in 2005–6, her
entrepreneurial and resourceful capabilities coupled with ambitions to pro-
vide for her son as a single mother accelerated her productivity compared
to her peers. It was this motivation that also fast-tracked her trajectory
from member of a CCS team to lead entrepreneur with multiple teams in
Huruma, until she was finally hired by CCS as a full-time employee.

Her drive to prove herself within a male-dominated work culture
pushed her to work harder than her male peers and defied commonplace
outcomes of so many young single mothers in the hood. By her mid-
twenties, she was able to not only afford her son's school fees but also
provide for her entire family with whom she lived. But her place within
the traditional youth-elder hierarchy also meant that there would be no

foreseeable end to the obligation to provide for her parents and two older unemployed brothers. Once the pride of being the main breadwinner subsided, she realized that her "doing well" gave her brothers little incentive to actually find work and perpetuated a cycle of deference to her parents, who expected her to share her earnings with the whole family as part of the reciprocal exchange involved following years of child-care support and to adhering to the domestic duties of a daughter. As Daryl Collins et al. (2009, 2) state in their reflection on the vicissitudes of the informal economy, "You make more on some days, less on others, and often get no income at all. Moreover, the state offers limited help, and, when it does, the quality of assistance is apt to be low. Your greatest source of support is your family and community, though you'll most often have to rely on your own devices."

By early 2010, Eliza had saved up enough money to move out of her childhood home in Huruma, encouraged by a family friend to move far from the Mathare area to assert and protect her financial and personal space. Six months later, she sent her seven-year-old son to boarding school, which was considered in Kenya as a tremendous educational opportunity for any child; for anyone living in the "ghetto," sending one's child to boarding school was a way to avoid the substandard quality of education and available resources in the *mtaa* but also a way to move your kid away from the temptations of drugs, street crime, and other kinds of trouble perceived as endemic risks facing youth growing up in these under-resourced neighborhoods.

In theory, Eliza had "made it." But when she moved away to that neighboring low-income estate (Umoja) near Dandora, far away from her familiar *baze* and everyone she knew, she admitted to feeling lonely and detached. In 2012, two years after she made the decision to move, as we walked to her place one evening, I asked her if this neighborhood was starting to feel like home. To respond, she put it metaphorically: "This estate is my bedroom. But the *mtaa* in Huruma is still my sitting room." Her work and social ties remained in Huruma. It was where she spent her Sundays, where she went to get her hair braided, where she hung about with the guys at their respective *bazes* in-between jobs. Eliza's response to my question explained the social exclusion she felt from "doing *too* well," conflicting with the strong sense of belonging that resided in youth who hustled within their *baze* for the majority of their formative years. As Eliza defiantly claimed during that conversation, "It's important to leave the *mtaa* and your *baze* at some point because it's not everyone who will be happy with your progress."

Despite residing elsewhere, affording higher rent, and upgrading her living standards, Eliza continued her ties to the *mtaa,* and her hustles continued to operate from, across, and alongside the *mtaa*. It was ~~also~~ where she went to socialize. And for those who grew up in the *mtaa,* who worked (at least in part) where they lived, the refrain "in the ghetto, business is social" meant that accommodations could always be made to ensure everyone was provided for in some way, but at the same time there was a perceived success penalty. As long as everyone in your entourage was known to hustle in some form, the social economy ensured that no one would fall through the cracks, but that also meant that those who might do *too well* would become objects of excessive attention.

As this book has by now made clear, the *mtaa* is not merely a temporary "stop gap" for the emerging lower-middle classes of twenty-first-century postcolonial Nairobi. It is much more than a place of suffering, abjection, and harm. The *mtaa* is an urban form in its own right, where social, economic, and affective spaces are constantly being made and remade by residents' ordinary achievements and life-affirming ways. And yet this urban form is also constantly up against the fragility of gains, with constant reminders of vulnerability, loss, and setbacks.

After 2011, a series of unfortunate circumstances interrupted what had felt like a seemingly upward trajectory of the past three years. In 2012, Eliza's family's farm up-country tragically burned down one night. The following day, her entire savings (almost US$2,000) went toward emergency expenditures. She had been US$200 away from buying Kevo a plot of land she had had her eye on since 2008. Furthermore, in 2013, CCS had to close, and Eliza lost what had become a secure job with a salary and support network. Both events could have understandably completely destabilized Eliza. But this was not the case. Eliza immediately started another business, selling nonperishables in the now growing neighborhood where she lived, and she continued to work on sanitation-related projects across Nairobi, trying to keep the work of CCS going in some form. In 2014, she gave birth to her second child, Nicole. At the time, there was no explicit mention of the father in her correspondence. Instead, with a mischievous giggle over the phone, Eliza simply exclaimed, "Kevo needed a baby sister."

Eliza epitomized the following paradox: She recognized the risks and urban injustices of *mtaa* life, reflected in her instinct to leave for a time and do everything to send her son to boarding school so he would avoid growing up in the "ghetto." But ultimately she was committed to returning and

staying within the very neighborhood from which risks and harms emanated because alongside the risks and harms, a repository of resourcefulness, reciprocities, and recoveries made urban living possible despite it all. Eliza eventually moved back to Huruma in 2016. She continued to pay for her son's boarding school education, wishing him away from *mtaa* life, and yet in the meantime Eliza was raising her young daughter, Nicole, in the thick of it, in part because she could count on her support networks for ad hoc child-care support. But there was also another reason: "My daughter can learn how to be a little survivor," she once said proudly.

Eliza's own social navigation and hustle involved a careful balancing act, recognizing and taking advantage of the affirmative possibilities and skills associated with knowing how to hustle in the *mtaa,* something she wished her daughter to learn, but also knowing when it was time to get out, with the proviso that you could always return if need be. Notably, she started not telling most people where she "stayed" exactly. Whereas for some youth and even some women, taking part in collective sociality served as a vital support system, for Eliza, retaining a degree of discretion about certain matters, including her place of residence and livelihood specifics, became a vital source of self-preservation. Around this time, Eliza also took in a young teen named Stacey. Stacey's parents, who lived near Kisumu, had asked Eliza to "just take her as a house girl" because they were financially strained. Eliza told them that she could use Stacey's help with Nicole, but she assured them that she would not treat Stacey as "house help." Instead, she would raise Stacey as a second daughter, pay for her school fees, and ensure she had a future beyond domestic service.

Somehow, losing her savings and her stable CCS job did not pose catastrophic results for Eliza. She managed, in the face of "oncoming change," to navigate through it, to "adjust and attune" her "strategies and tactics" (Vigh 2009, 420) and hustle her way to the next opportunity. This included not only experimenting with different income opportunities but also knowing when to cut costs and move back to the *mtaa.* In some way, what seemed more difficult for Eliza was balancing her *époques* of sustained financial success and her place as a fellow "hustla" in the hood. Caring to maintain that balance kept Eliza in a kind of middle zone, where hustling was partly aspirational and filled with hopes to fight the gendered poverty traps but where losing one's identity as a hustler came at a social cost, including loneliness and isolation. Furthermore, it had become clear that even if things were going well, it would not necessarily last, so it was smarter to

keep several hustles on the go rather than assume that hustling was a thing of the past. It's harder to start the hustle engine again.

Eliza had become versed in the social enterprise hustle after her time with CCS and had acquired a good reputation among sanitation practitioners as someone who had in-depth experiential and local knowledge of the sanitation business and challenges at neighborhood levels. By 2016, Eliza's mixed livelihoods included a "day job" with the eco-sanitation social enterprise Sanergy, where she worked as a "field officer" with a strong reputation for understanding "community issues" related to urban environmental management. Here she was paid a wage and given a uniform, two markers of professionalism and formal employment in Nairobi. But despite periodic accolades and pay raises, Eliza expressed feeling like a foot soldier within the organization, and she expressed a dislike for the lack of input she had in certain operational decisions. As we sat together on a *matatu* one April afternoon in 2017, she explained,

> You see, I used to be field officer around my *baze* in Huruma and Mathare, where I know people and they know me. Then they said, Eliza, you go to Mukuru. But you see that is a place where I am not known and it is more difficult to feel safe and get people to listen to you, you get? But me, I know as long as I'm a field officer, I have to go where they say I need to go, and I have targets I need to make. I have ideas, but the decisions—they're made by the *sonko* [boss].

Work that takes place outside formal professional categories and qualifications is often characterized as "low-skilled." However, the work of hustling in Nairobi requires a broad range of skills and forms of tacit knowledge. Hustlers create their own cartographies of the city, translating between different vernaculars and institutional spaces; calling themselves "entrepreneurs" when it resonates with social enterprise investors, while self-identifying as *wahustla* back at the *baze* in order to foster a solidarity grounded in the shared experience of *mtaa* life. In a context where opportunities are contingent on being in the right place at the right time, hustlers are at once always on the move and yet can be found standing in place at particular times of the day, when it makes sense to be found and be seen at the *baze.* The ability to read the streets and know the local codes is a vital form of knowledge that can be taken for granted or undervalued

by external actors who think it is possible to operate in any popular neighborhood as long as you have the right (business) model.

"WHEN THE DAY HUSTLE GOES DOWN, THE NIGHT HUSTLE GOES UP"

Eliza took her job and her perception of the organizational hierarchy very seriously. She also knew having a wage was unique for people living in her neighborhood. But she increasingly expressed cynicism for the stalled and perhaps overly predictable trajectory of this job, where she would at best remain a foot soldier within the organization—that is, as long as she met the "targets." At the same time, Eliza's skepticism about her day job enabled her to hold on to a narrative of *hustling,* which meant finding a way to make a living but also being sly about your politics and your moral modes. As a woman, she also knew that talking about your hustle could be usefully ambiguous, and even a form of security, as she explained at her flat in Huruma one evening in 2017:

> You see, when I see those boys who snatch [steal belongings] at night, I walk alongside them and I say, *"Hey maboyz, mnafanya hustle? Mimi pia ninafanya hustle* [Hey my boys, are you guys hustling tonight?. Me too, I'm hustling].

In this moment, the "boyz" thought she meant that her hustle was sex work, a common form of "night hustle" among some women who are still out after dark. In order to stay safe after dark, a challenge for women in Kenyan cities and beyond (Datta 2012), identifying as a fellow "night hustler" was a form of "bluffing" (Newell 2012) that afforded her an ephemeral sense of safety through performed camaraderie and shared struggle. I sensed in Eliza's storytelling that this bluff was more than mere deceit: it was a way of forging a connection and affinity with the "bag-snatching boys" in the after-hours because, as she put it, "you know it's a real struggle right now, and when the day hustle goes down, the night hustle goes up."

In a piece titled "Domaines de la nuit et autorité onirique dans les maquis du Sud-Cameroon (1955–1958)," Achille Mbembe (1991) describes the importance of the "world of the night" and its associated invisibility (*jiibè, lièmb*) for the modalities of insurgency during the anti-colonial struggle for independence in Cameroon (1991). Mbembe explains that this world of the night and of invisibility structured the actions of numerous

African insurgencies. There is, we could argue, also a "world of the night and invisibility" associated with certain practices that are, "by day," stigmatized or criminalized (as were anti-colonial struggles in the 1950s in Cameroon, in Kenya, and elsewhere). Here, I am referring to the "world of the night" of sex workers and bag snatchers, who are in their own way struggling for economic self-determination and find an opening during the nighttime hours, in the world of the night.

Although Eliza was not a sex worker, letting other night hustlers think she was in that instance ensured mutual empathy with the young men who might have otherwise seen Eliza, a woman walking alone after dark, as an easy target. In this theatrical scenario, the bag-snatching boys and the sex workers were peers, both night *mahustla* whose "day hustle had gone down." Devoid of moral judgment for either line of work, Eliza's greeting demonstrated an expression of camaraderie that cunningly relied on (and transcended) performative gendered lines to manage potential risk. In the *mtaa,* a female sex worker doing her rounds elicited respect among others in the night economy, and the mutual respect among night *mahustla* was partly due to the lack of competition (though they sometimes targeted the same "clients"). Eliza underlined the fluid moral codes of the nighttime economy, where nocturnal hustlers operate side by side, respecting each other's craft. As Eliza explained, "even *matatus* let sex workers take a ride for free because they know she is at work so they give her a break." In other words, there is a profound solidarity in the "domain of the night" (Mbembe 1991), a shared understanding that the "night hustle" sometimes involved activities legally categorized as illegal or socially stigmatized as illicit, and the knowledge that you have a few hours of darkness before you can "feed your stomach" (and your children's) by morning, let alone pay your rent by the end of the month. The choice to engage in these nighttime hustles also reflects a shared intergenerational and multisituated understanding in underserved neighborhoods that hustling takes on myriad forms in part because nothing is ever fixed, so part of everyday navigation and endurance involves the ability to constantly adjust one's tactics and positionings (Simone 2018; Vigh 2009). Navigation and endurance also mean adjusting one's moral compass; the scenario Eliza described disrupted the presumption that certain hustle economies were de facto deemed more noble than others.

By day, Eliza straddled these different lifeworlds, her uniformed self hopping on a *matatu* to "go to work" but knowing that the duration of the

job was uncertain. But Eliza also recognized the "social thickness" (Ferguson 2006, 198) of the hustle as a double-edged sword. Place-based recognition—or street credibility—was key to being able to "make things happen" through hustling. On the other hand, Eliza's own experience with the success penalty highlights the *mtaa* logics of hustling that suppose a certain expectation of redistribution *from* those who make something *toward* others whose hustle "is down." Eliza managed her income very carefully, including figuring out how to recover from her losses. She paid for her children's school fees, started small businesses on the side, and upgraded her living situation when possible but was ready to downgrade as soon as money was tight. And as she put it in 2017, "It is best that people don't know where I stay exactly." At that time, Eliza was staying on the top floor of an eight-story tenement walk-up in Huruma. Kennedy, one of Eliza's closest male friends in the neighborhood, also lived on the top floor of a nearby building at one point. They both joked that it was the "penthouse," with the advantage that "no one knows exactly where you stay, and no one's wet laundry is dripping down on yours." The downside was that it was the first floor to run out of water during shortages. But that was a small price to pay for the perks of anonymity and a little privacy, two of the rarest commodities in the *mtaa*.

Though Eliza did not discount the value of a wage, her working identity was not tied to her day job with Sanergy. She still self-identified as a *hustla* among others in Nairobi whose everyday labor combined forms of remuneration and accumulation, unpaid social activism, an actively curated Facebook presence, and concerted efforts to "be seen" in her own neighborhood when it mattered and disappear when it suited. As time went one, Eliza's hustle continued in different forms. But in June 2019, she lost the "secure waged job" with Sanergy, unable to "meet the sales targets" of this social enterprise that had started to tighten its criteria for staying on the payroll. Eliza knew that these social enterprise gigs come and go in Nairobi, a city that has rapidly become the hub of sanitation entrepreneurship and business-led development. Something happens to the funding or there is staff turnover. When I asked her what she was going to do now that she had lost her main source of income, Eliza shrugged her shoulders, smiled, and said, "I'll always find something." Through the connections she had made with various NGOs and social enterprises in the past few years, she has been able to get contract work for shorter periods.

As if able to foresee what was to come, three months before losing her job, Eliza had decided to move out of the "penthouse" and back into the building where she grew up, where rent was cheaper, and where she knew the landlord well. This was not as much downgrading her living situation as it was a strategic move to manage the impending risk of her day hustle going down. This time she pointed out the perks of living "near the action" of the street. All the while, on Facebook, Eliza kept uploading selfies of prosaic moments "at work" in all its different iterations—from the office to the street—sometimes appearing to be inputting sales data on a spreadsheet wearing some kind of branded T-shirt, as if to signal a work uniform, while other photos performed an appearance of more ambiguous street-based activity that might be part of underground political reportage or just an ordinary Saturday morning getting ready to attend a local football match at the nearby stadium. The truth was often somewhere in between. Eventually one of Eliza's hustles included selling refreshments at local football matches. Negotiating access to the stadium as a mobile vendor of refreshments took political connections, savvy maneuvering, and skills in sales. Eliza continued to sign off on social media with the hashtag "Ghetto Gal Hustle."

INVESTING IN *SHAGS*

Eliza knew that performing the hustle took on particular forms of security provision for a woman. First, during moments of intertribal tension around pre- or postelection periods, she knew how to "switch on" multiple dialects of Sheng depending on whom she was with at the time, a kind of multilingual skill that has become part of her risk-mitigation strategies. As she explained, this was almost a matter of survival that any *wazaliwa* (those born here) cultivated, in order to camouflage their tribal identity when needed. The *wakucome* (those who have migrated to Nairobi from rural areas) were less adept at switching from Kikuyu to Luo, for example, which could be a disadvantage. Eliza explained that "for us youth, opportunity is where you stay [live], and you can hustle in a place where you stamp your authority," a kind of street credibility that was earned over time. Yet there was a success penalty, as any notable gains in the *mtaa* have to be redistributed somehow to those whose hustle "is down." So Eliza's steady and continued accumulation over the years (hampered by several setbacks from which she has always managed to recover) meant she had paid for her children's school fees, started other businesses on the side, and upgraded her living situation multiple times.

For Eliza, hustling was about knowing how to read social situations to adapt the barometer of one's battle. Eliza's hustle had included the careful coordination of "day jobs" (dealing with expat NGOs and social businesses on the one hand, and community customers on the other) and ad hoc labor (classified as casual, informal work), combined with various forms of social activism that fed into her street credibility and sometimes included slightly shady dealings in order to get things done or people out of trouble. As a longtime community activist, Eliza got called as a lead facilitator for human rights meetings, and during the contested elections in 2017 she started engaging in street-level photo journalism. She also knew when to march against the injustice of extrajudicial police brutality but also admitted that "police are not all bad" because "knowing officers in charge in your district" could give someone the necessary levers to bail out a friend who got arrested and was being detained. Hustling was knowing that nothing was fixed; any enemy could become an ally, just as any semblance of security could be overturned overnight.

By 2018, Eliza's livelihood diversification started to include a series of investments and side hustles, including small property investment in *shags* where she had built and rented out three small single-room units made of iron sheet and cement floor (with toilet blocks and shower units attached) on the family property of her new partner, David. David's parents allowed Eliza to use the family plot, in exchange for building and running a small property rental business. Eliza's brother initially gave her a loan of 200,000 KES (US$1,946), and as Eliza explained, "we hustled for the rest" as the upfront cost of 320,000 KES (US$3,114) was needed to build the units and the toilets. At that time, she had 60,000 KES (US$584) left to pay her brother back, confident that "once I can earn a profit, I'll expand and build more units." In a text sent in January 2022, Eliza exclaimed, "T! the house in shago, it's finally constructed!"

Eliza's investment in *shags,* in part, reflects the wider aspiration that most Nairobians have to have a plot of land somewhere outside the city. To have a foothold in *shags* was a marker of prestige, of smart investment, and a way of sustaining a connection to ancestral lands and Indigenous ecological knowledge, even if she identified as *wazaliwa* (those born here, in the city). Ben Page's (2021) long-term ethnographic work exploring the significance of migrants' investments in building a home in rural Cameroon is instructive here. He argues that these homes can reflect particular emotional ties to one's ancestral land, but perhaps more importantly, they

also perform a particular commitment to continual return and a material (re)connection between those who have stayed back in the village and those who have gone to the city or abroad. These homes therefore can encapsulate a kind of emotional and material connection between rural and urban residents, whose practices of homemaking and sense of belonging are deeply entangled with intergenerational migration patterns and ancestral ties. But beyond the emotional and the material, Eliza's relationship to *shags* also reflects another aspect of the hustle economy: the way in which *shags* becomes enrolled in the strategies of livelihood diversification among young Kenyans. In Grace Mwaura's (2017) piece on the "side-hustle" she tells the stories of several young Kenyans who are formally educated yet unable to access formal-sector jobs. They each pursue various temporary freelance jobs alongside volunteer gigs with development organizations, while continuously finding new training opportunities (usually connected to ICT) to add to the list of "skills" on their CV. For example, one of Mwaura's interlocutors, Wambaya, eventually invests in a greenhouse that was managed by his mother and a farmworker in Migori, Western Kenya, and with the money he has made and saved from his various temporary jobs, he buys two dairy cattle, which help generate enough revenue through milk sales to cover the farmworker's wages. Mwaura's argument is that stories like Wambaya's abound in Kenya, reflect the growing number of young people who "transition from one activity to another," seizing "contingent labour market opportunities while keeping an eye on possible future opportunities. Their strategies to remain employable yet entrepreneurially active are similar to the description of a side-hustle" (Mwaura 2017, 59). And for each of the participants in Mwaura's study, *shags* plays a key role in the portfolio of entrepreneurial investments, including the maintenance of ties between urban and rural belonging, between hustling in the city that includes digital and financial literacy, and finding what Mwaura calls an "opportunity space" in *shags,* affirming the value of staying connected to agricultural and rural economies, which continue to be the cornerstone of the Kenyan economy.

As Eliza's own investment in *shags* and as Mwaura's research illuminates, hustling is not a separate activity operating completely outside the wage, the institutional, or the acceptable. It includes the management of diverse livelihoods and a host of other commitments, including volunteer work and care obligations of various kinds (kin and nonkin relations). It is

the alongside, the diversification, the endurance to constantly keep trying to find an "opportunity space."

This chapter weaves together stories about a woman in the relatively male world I have depicted so far. I center the story of Eliza, one of my oldest and dearest female friends in Nairobi, who in many ways epitomizes and defies the logics of the hustle economy. Her journey included the impasses she faced as she aspired to do well—slowly accumulating some wealth so she could pay for her children's school fees and invest in a bit of property in *shags,* while remaining anchored within the collective *mtaa* lifeworld where she continues to "stay." In a way, Eliza's hustle has always incorporated a combination of waged and unwaged work, care and community work, with investments in the *mtaa* and others in *shags.* This amalgam of hustles has afforded Eliza a kind of local street credibility, which is in part rooted in the very ambiguity about how well she is doing at any given time and in her confidence that she will always find an "opportunity space" (Mwaura 2017). Although she has zigzagged in and out of sometimes waged but more often unwaged work, sometimes a combination of both, it was perhaps during the moments when she appeared to be working mostly outside the wage that the surreptitious dimension of her activities accommodated a kind of useful invisibility and flexibility that the waged jobs did not.

Her story shares some of the familiar characteristics of Mathare life for young women: as a young adult, Eliza fell pregnant at seventeen and became a single mother. But unlike many young girls in her situation, she was able to resist the path of early marriage or dropping out of school and staying at home. "In the ghetto," as she always referred to her neighborhood, Eliza was able to challenge the cultural norms that were perhaps less negotiable in rural areas, where "feminine futures" and young women's options tend to be more restricted and tied to heteronormative understandings of adulthood (Johnson 2018). But this was not just about the "city" being a more progressive place where women could challenge gendered norms. It is also important to recognize that Eliza had support from her family and her peer group during these critical points in her emerging adult life. This is not to reduce her agency but rather to reaffirm the role of relational ties, be they the kin relations that supported her through teen pregnancy and finishing school or her male friendship group that made

space for her to participate (and thrive) in the otherwise male-dominated spheres of the eco-hustle. As a single teen mother, Eliza finished school against the odds, and soon after she started to navigate the male-dominated waste business, recognizing that this was a good first-rung "opportunity space" for a young person who had just finished school in the *mtaa*. She was one of the few women who became a garbage collector, soon rising through the ranks, starting to manage plots, and hiring other youth under her, and she did this alongside various forms of gender-based community activism. She became a well-respected *hustla,* one of the guys, but also committed to helping teenage girls overcome the challenges and stigma associated with early pregnancy. She could be found both hanging out at the *baze* with the guys and spending hours of her Saturday afternoon getting her hair braided with the girls.

In 2023, Eliza updated me on Kevo. He was now studying at the university. It is difficult to say whether Kevo will get a secure job after he graduates, given that there are so many Kenyan university graduates struggling to find secure employment, as Mwaura (2017) shows. It is now as common to hear of "white-collar hustles" as it is to see street-based hustlers jumping onto the digitized gig economy. In a way, the emerging middle-class youth are the ones that seem to be struggling the most, as they have come to expect "good jobs" and a return on their (and their parents') investment in higher education.[2] But what is clear about Eliza's story is that she will likely stay in the *mtaa*—it is where she feels at home. But she has done everything possible for her son, Kevo, to have the option to leave the *mtaa* and find alternative pathways. This is the thing about the *mtaa*: there are some who stay and some who leave. It is as though Eliza's endurance in staying and making the *mtaa* work allowed for her to sustain investment in Kevo's chances to get out. This does not mean that life is automatically better outside the hood; sometimes it's the opposite. But Eliza, and many mothers like her, hope that it might be a little bit easier, or at least that it might provide a few more obvious stepping stones. Eliza's story relays the complicated dynamic of a single mother navigating the self-help "real" city, where the contradictions of modernity, makeshift urbanism, and the situated politics of struggle redefine the terms of urban dwelling on the "conspicuous margins" of the postcolonial city.
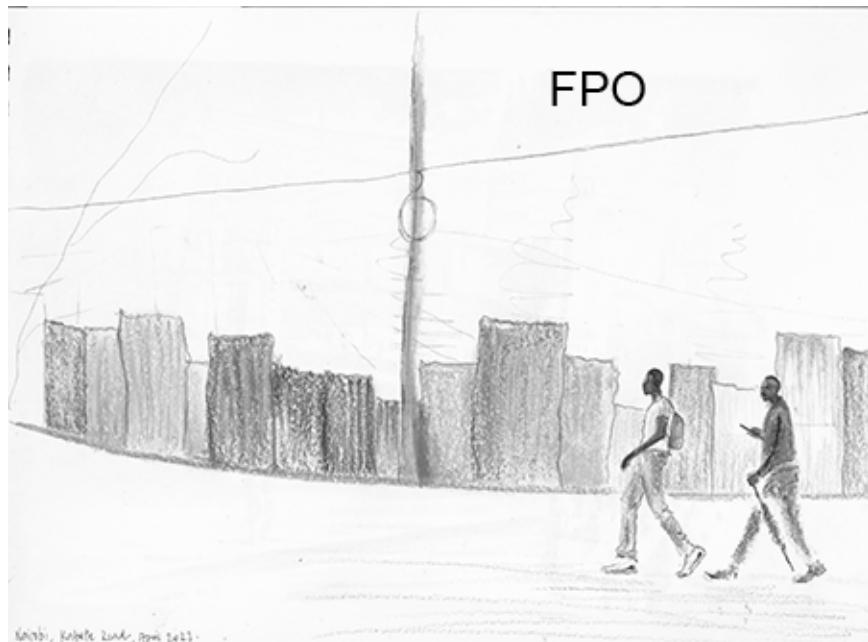
Walking from Kabete to the *matatu* stage, heading somewhere, April 2023

6 Stayers and Leavers

Building Up the Breakdown

> The Green City in the Sun may have turned into a concrete jungle, but it is still enchanting. And the spirit of its forebears, the hunters and the herders and the hunted, still live on.
>
> —Peter Kimani, *Nairobi Noir*

It was 3:30 a.m. in Huruma ward, one June morning in 2016. Three members of the youth group at the Kibichoi base, Kennedy, Mathenge, and Elias, were conducting their biweekly rounds of garbage collection. My friend Eliza had lent me her overalls and gloves. There were fifteen plots; most were eight-story walk-ups and a couple were *matabi* shanty structures. We had until 8 a.m. to get them all done. There was Kamba music playing loudly from the local bars, where sex workers stood outside languidly waiting for the late-night customers, as did the *boda boda* drivers, elbows digging into the seats of their motorcycles as they had another smoke. From outside we could see the shadows of drunken souls having a last drink inside the bar. Kennedy and his crew passed by the nocturnal slow pace of things with bemusement but fervor as they pushed the heavy handcart past the bars and up the hill, needing all the momentum they could muster, especially because this was rainy season and the ground was muddy and a pain to move through. In this "domain of the night" (Mbembe 1991), these different nocturnal spaces of labor and rhythms converged, each meeting a demand, each exhausting in their own way, each stigmatized lines of work.

An hour later, around 5 a.m., a ribbon of light appeared under the doors of ground-floor dwellings as some of the *mamas* started their morning chores—starting with the multiple steps involved in making morning tea (fire, boiling water, boiling milk, tea leaves, stirring constantly). The night

was over and the morning bustle was getting started. In the alleyways, young women tilted their bodies to one side, with both arms reaching across their torso to hold on to heavy twenty-liter Jerri cans of water fetched at the local water points, leaving flip-flop footprints in the dirt paths. On the road where pedestrians walked to and from their homes, uneven wooden tables were set up as working stations for the first hour of preparation involved in making *mandazis* (fried dough) and chapatis (flat bread)—mixing the flour, oil, and water; working the dough; and separating out the small balls of dough before frying. This hour of prep was public facing and the best form of marketing—as if to say: come in the next hour for freshly fried *mandazi*; the oil is getting hot. Geoffrey, who had been making and selling *mandazi* for the past twenty-eight years, timed his morning routine carefully because his stand was en route to the Kibichoi primary school, near the water point, and across from the corner where the guys gathered the collected household garbage before sorting through it and until the trucks arrived. His attention to craft in the making of each *mandazi* coupled efficiency of movement and dexterity. Each *mandazi* was perfectly formed, and without precise measurement he just managed to render each small ball of dough equal in size to all the others and make perfect hand-cut triangular shapes that only puffed into individuated forms once they hit the hot oil before being carefully placed in the wooden crate next to the working table. This small business included every stage of production, a one-man assembly line marked by speed and calm.

These were but just a few of the ordinary labors taking place by day in this popular neighborhood, coexisting as the backbone for the rest of the day's economic and social activity. Inevitably, something could go wrong—there could be a water shortage, the truck coming to take away the heaps of collected garbage might not arrive by 10 a.m. as planned, the start of the *mandazi* prep time might be delayed. In Nairobi, infrastructural breakdown, interruptions, and all manner of crises are routine features of everyday life (Mbembe and Roitman 1995). In popular neighborhoods where daily emergencies and interruptions are most acute, people's social and economic lives keep moving no matter what, adapting and contributing to the plural rhythms of this "concrete jungle" (Kimani 2020), forming a sonic and atmospheric mosaic of resourcefulness, collaborative adaptation, and self-sufficiency.

Amid these daily rhythms, the lives of youth experience all kinds of transitions. By 2016, many of my young interlocutors were transitioning

out of youthhood, and yet they were still experiencing a form of liminality—only it was no longer age based at all. It was based on the shifting expressions of hustling because the terrains and temporalities of hustling shift with the passing of time, adapting to the nonlinear and unpredictable vicissitudes of life. This chapter dwells on these shifts, starting with the mundanities of a day that wakes, the unforeseen emergencies that break the day, the labors involved in rebuilding and repair, and decisions youth make to either stay or leave the *mtaa* as time passes and they are no longer that young. Ultimately, this chapter reflects on how both "stayers" and "leavers" make things happen in different ways, and how both modalities of "staying" and "leaving" reflect ~~different~~ facets of hustling that are complementary rather than oppositional, as they are both relationally connected to the *mtaa* in their own way, invested in its safeguarding. Just as investing in a house "up-country" in *shags* might represent an emotional and material tie to one's ancestral land (Page 2021), as discussed in the previous chapter, youth who grew up in Nairobi's popular neighborhoods find their own ways to retain affective and material connections to the neighborhood *baze* and retain a certain kind of liminality even if they are no longer young. They engage in various forms of assembling resources, rebuilding what has broken down, and the making of plans.

BUILDINGS AND BREAKDOWN

Only a few months before that June 2016 morning, on April 29, 2016, an eight-story tenement structure built along the Mathare river collapsed, not far away from where we were working. According to official reports, the accident killed at least twenty-one people, injured more than seventy, and for days up to sixty-five people remained unaccounted for (N. Kariuki 2016). This building was like so many others of its kind in the area—the familiar tenement-style buildings Huchzermeyer (2011) describes in her writing on *tenement cities,* which have been central to the unregulated housing development in ~~popular neighborhoods~~, discussed in chapter 1.

In Nairobi's popular neighborhoods, the buildings that seem most sturdy and stable (compared to the horizontal *mabati* shacks) have, ironically, often been the first to topple over and turn into a scattered pile of rubble. In the building's collapse, the fragile infrastructure, lack of building regulation, and homegrown waste economy were simultaneously made immediately (and fatally) apparent. As Kennedy lamented, "Asking a landlord for a certificate of occupancy to check that the building is safe and meets proper

regulation is your right, but no landlord takes you seriously if you request to see one. There will always be someone else who will be willing to rent out a flat without making any demands" (June 13, 2016). Following the collapse, the immediate reaction was collective solidarity to help the affected families throughout the night and days that followed. But, in the weeks that followed, once the dust had settled, there was also an immediate opportunism to recover reusable materials. The forms of care integral to everyday forms of repair (Jackson 2014) are also entangled with pragmatic forms of resource recovery, such that navigating "broken worlds" involves a constant exercise of revaluation and reimagining.

Rubble quickly turned into revenue, ensuring that the high risks and potential loss (of life) associated with makeshift building practices at least yielded some returns. For weeks, scavenging of the debris continued, as fragments of a recent past were used for yet another cycle of tenuous (re)construction elsewhere. For a window of time, rubble was not merely debris that evoked loss of value, destruction of property, and displacement. It formed a web of possible futures and the literal building blocks of what could be done.

Kennedy and Lamb, who lived nearby, showed me the area in June 2016. That morning, Kennedy had invited me to join his crew on their biweekly garbage collection rounds, an ethnographic privilege that had taken me five years to earn. During those early morning hours, I accompanied Kennedy and his team through the alleyways in Huruma, running up and down the eight-story walk-up buildings to collect the burlap sacks full of household refuse and replacing them with clean empty ones. Later that day, Kennedy and Lamb showed me the site of that infamous collapse. They narrated their plans to build a green urban farm along the river, something that could benefit local residents, while providing an additional source of income for local youth groups involved in the local waste and circular economy. In that moment, standing amid the rubble, Kennedy and Lamb dreamed up a host of plans, which involved reading this rubble-scape with a double register: Both Kennedy and Lamb knew full well what it had destroyed (they were some of the first responders the night the tragic collapse happened). But they also saw what this space could become otherwise. Before rogue landlords with connections would rebuild another unregulated housing block, these Huruma youth, whose core livelihood depended on seeing the value of waste, imagined setting up a green farm along the riparian land, run by local youth groups—the ones who stay and keep imagining

what can be done from within the *mtaa,* even and sometimes especially amid ruination, rubble, and remains.

Residents living in these tenement-style buildings experience a variety of infrastructural breakdown on a daily basis, from the frequent blackouts to water shortages. Contingency plans are always on hand. Though a building collapse was a whole other level of breakdown, different degrees of breakdown and (re)building are integral to the "incomplete" (Guma 2020) infrastructural realities of popular neighborhoods. Both are aspects of everyday life that operate in tandem—the horrors of practical failures and infrastructural precarities are coupled with immediate cooperative efforts to work together under conditions of emergency and extraordinary solidarity. The collapse exposes the simultaneous chaos and efforts to rebuild. This is a material and metaphorical expression of a cycle in the *mtaa.* Seeing things break and trying to fix them is integral to daily life.

Amid the ordinariness of breakdown, normalized disruption, and emergencies of the everyday, a question lingers for every young person who grows up in Nairobi popular neighborhoods. When so much rests on one's ability to either tap into or contribute to the self-help logic of these streets in order to make a life, a living, and a mark, inevitably contending with the structural shortage of secure educational and work opportunities, do you stay or do you try to leave? This chapter complicates this question, showing that to leave does not necessarily mean to "get out" or "do better," and to stay does not necessarily mean to be "stuck." Rather, there is a kind of circularity to staying and leaving (indeed, many come and go for different reasons), a relationality (the choice to stay or leave is inextricably connected to social obligations and ties with those who stay), or a fraught subjectivity (the constant dilemmas associated with what it means to find belonging and being able to admit when doing "well"). There is a kind of breakdown literacy that does not necessarily involve immediate repair (Thieme 2021) but rather includes the ability to imagine what lies amid the rubble, what might be recovered and rebuilt, and whether the best way to put one's imagination to work is by staying or leaving.

OWNING LAND (THERE), MAKING DO (HERE)

The issues, aspirations, and realities of urban youth in Mathare have tended to be eclipsed by the agendas, louder voices, and "expert" knowledge of external institutions and actors, purporting to represent the interests of the urban poor. The work of social justice NGO Pamoja Trust (PT) provides a

useful example. Since the early 2000s, PT's fight for land tenure on behalf of squatter communities has been highly effective in fighting evictions and representing the legal rights of the urban poor. Along with its counterparts among the Slum / Shack Dwellers International (SDI) network, PT has promoted grassroots "community federations and city upgrading" efforts across popular neighborhoods, involving community-based mapping, enumerations, and saving schemes (Appadurai 2019; Weru 2004). These federations, regarded as a social movement, were called Muungano wa wanavijiji (Swahili for United Slum Dwellers). These grassroots efforts to mobilize and train residents in data collection techniques has highlighted the power of collective agency among marginalized residents of the city, and many of these efforts have figuratively and literally put these communities, their ignored neighborhoods, and their local infrastructures "on the map" of the city. Securing tenure is an integral objective to the organization's core mandate, so PT's grassroots tactics and methods for mobilizing communities—what was often evoked during staff meetings I attended as the "social process"—assumed that communities' needs and aspirations were primarily based on land and structure entitlement claims.[1]

Yet, on the ground, there was a generational rift between older community members partaking in these *Muungano* federations and the youth who seemed to remain either silent or absent from the process and especially the public deliberations. In November 2009, in one of my first conversations with Rosie Nyawira, who was the former youth program officer of PT, she explained, "Tenureship is not the issue of the youth. They care about job creation first and foremost, and don't participate in things like incremental saving schemes that go toward long-term tenureship or upgrading projects because they don't even know where they will be in two years!" This is not to say that youth did not mobilize as community activists and get politically engaged or that land tenure was not on youth's radar as a critical issue in their neighborhoods. But youth in Mathare manifested their claims in ways that were less concerned with the *material rights* associated with land and housing in their urban neighborhoods or the material rights to basic infrastructures and services. They were less at ease taking part in the large, formalized, ritualized, and hierarchically marked fundraising events known as *baraza* (Swahili for place or council) gatherings that took place in public spaces such as church halls, community centers, and open-air spaces able to accommodate large groups. These had become a common feature of everyday political culture in Kenya (Haugerud 1995),

and in the urban context, these forums served as a platform for "bottom-up" initiatives seeking community-based organization and some form of external support (organizational, financial, or motivational). But for youth, their issues of concern and focus had less to do with the "right to be housed" within the city and more to do with the right to *make, do, and be* in the city—albeit at the margins.

These evocations of "rights to the city," first introduced by Henri Lefebvre in 1968, necessitate brief clarification. While the concept "right to the city" offers stirring ideas about the "collective power to reshape the process of urbanization" (Harvey 2008, 23) and the possibilities of "bridging the urban divide" (UN-HABITAT 2008, xv), it is difficult to decipher what the practical implications of evoking such "rights" might be for youth living in popular neighborhoods, given their lack of legal representation and formal support in all realms of their lives (Attoh 2011). As described in the previous chapters, the young people whose lives I have followed since 2009 have consistently felt excluded from both representational politics and tenure claim-making processes. The "right to the city," for them, meant something else. According to AbdouMaliq Simone (2010b, 60), "the right to the city is not in the end reduced to the right to be maintained in the city—that is, to be housed and serviced. It must include the selective right to use the city as an arena of mutable aspirations, to varying degrees of realization." For youth in Mathare ~~and Huruma~~, *using* the city as an "arena of mutable aspirations" meant that the neighborhood, the *baze,* served as a terrain for possibility and maneuvers that were place based but not fixed or bound to material "structures" and infrastructures per se.

The modes of collective organizing among youth living in these neighborhoods was informed by, but not necessarily aligned with, rights-based discourses focusing primarily on land and housing. The aspirations were not about asserting "rights" in the sense often understood by human rights activists and development professionals. As Eliza explained in February 2012 during a homestay, identifying in that moment as a self-aware youth activist herself, "youth think about today, not tomorrow. So if they fight for their rights, it's about protesting something that is going on today." In the *mtaa,* the language itself of "rights" was associated with people from middle-class backgrounds, who were formally educated and perhaps either NGO professionals or trained human rights lawyers. To "claim rights" was, according to the young people I spent time with in and around Mathare, a

difficult concept to grasp because it did not seem "practical" and was not something they could afford to do. There is resonance here with the experiences of Ibrahim and Haile, whose street lives Marco Di Nunzio writes about. Di Nunzio (2019) shows that the very concept of "waithood" seems irrelevant to Ibrahim and Haile, who do not have the luxury of "waiting" and who do not think of waiting as a viable strategy. Neither do Ibrahim and Haile call for their "rights" to a city (Addis Ababa) that is "developing" by dispossession. The two young men, instead, engage in a continuous street-based hustle to get through their days. If they make any kind of claim, it is a claim to what Di Nunzio (2019) calls "the act of living" by using the street as a repository of resources and working through their marginality rather than making claims to be freed from it. In a different context, but resonating with what Ibrahim and Haile experience, Nairobi youth in popular neighborhoods manifest self-organized modes of provisioning, to *make and remake* their part of the city.

Over these past two decades, a kind of choreography has taken place, with some youth leaving the *mtaa*, while others stay. Both groups "make things happen" *for* their neighborhood, some doing so from within and others from outside. These maneuvers from within and from outside reflect commitments to improve the life chances of fellow and younger peers, but they are rarely related to securing urban tenure or upgrading housing structures as such. And yet those who have on the surface stayed behind are sometimes the very individuals who labor to secure a modest plot of land up-country, in *ushago* or *shags* (the countryside), and dream of building a home and tending to a small farming plot, "over there," as a kind of nest egg.

The following section explores the labors of youth who have not typically partaken in deliberations and efforts to secure land and housing tenure but who instead have prioritized developing and later sustaining youth-led community businesses. These community services, largely centered around collective management of waste and sanitation, or what I've called "eco-hustles," have been discussed in chapters 3 and 4. Here I reflect on the temporality of "making things happen," focusing on the relationship between individual life trajectories and the "autonomous and self-regulating networks" (Kinyanjui 2019, xiii) of the youth group and its situated practices around the *baze*. This expands our understanding of how Nairobi hustles evolve over time and how they intersect with individual working lives, aspirations, and plans. In the following section, we come back to

some of the individuals and youth groups introduced in the previous chapters to explore the maneuvers that shape the *mtaa* hustle, while going beyond income-generating pursuits. It also explains why for some youth, *staying* includes both shaping economic practices that have immediate returns in the absence of waged jobs and strategically taking on slower, more incremental, and longer-term investments.

THE STAYERS

Kennedy: The Quiet Leader

I first met Kennedy in 2009. He is a tall, slender Kikuyu man who always wears a trucker cap and can be found in either his work overalls or an ironed shirt and jeans. Kennedy has a gentle demeanor and could even pass for a shy person. But over the years I have learned that he is perhaps a little quiet at times because he is always planning, scheming, counting. As long as I have known him, Kennedy has remained the chairman of his local youth group, Kibichoi Youth Group, and unlike other youth in the waste collection business, he has always continued to actually collect garbage himself.

After that morning of garbage collection in 2016, I sat down with Kennedy and asked him to explain the breakdown of his garbage business. At the time, Kennedy managed fifteen plots, which was typical of youth group leaders who had been involved in the business for many years. Over time, any person in the garbage business went from starting as a collector to eventually managing a plot and then having a crew work for you. You build your business incrementally, one plot at a time. If you're a good leader, you start letting some of your crew (who show interest and potential) manage their own plot. In a way, being a "good leader" in this context means doing what other Kenyan leaders *don't do*: you let go of some power to *share* with others. In part you do this because it's a form of redistribution, but it's also a smart way to ensure you do not become the source of envy and bitterness.

Garbage collection happened twice a week. And the truck that came did two trips each time, from Huruma to Dandora, where the municipal dumpsite is located. That's four trips per week from that one Kibichoi *baze.* Each trip could carry fifteen tons of garbage, so sixty tons a week. "Monday is worse than Thursdays," Kennedy once explained, because it was after the weekend and people had consumed more (and discarded more). In each building (plot), there were 57 apartments on average. That's 855 households,

each paying 150 KES (US$1.15), a total of 128,250 KES (US$99) a month. The costs included "the sacs, paying the guys who collect and wash the sacs, and paying the lorry driver 2,000 KES per month." For each morning of work, the other waste collectors got about 500 KES each, considered a decent daily income for a "casual worker" in these neighborhoods.

When the truck driver finally arrived around 9 a.m. that June 2016 morning (Kennedy had been calling him since 7 a.m. to make sure he was coming), Kennedy asked him if he had had breakfast. And for the next twenty minutes, Kennedy and the truck driver sat together under the corrugated metal roof of Naomi's tea stall, next to Geoffrey's *mandazi* (fried dough) stand. This moment was anything but "small talk"; it was a careful investment in mutual trust. Kennedy later explained that the driver was a "friend" and there were no issues with him. But the driver was contracted by the city council. And if the city council failed to pay him, he would not come because he wouldn't have the money to hire the truck in the first place, let alone pay for gas and his time. Both men, Kennedy and the truck driver, depended on the cooperation of the city council, but in the meantime they had developed their own working relationship and deals, and the small acts of reciprocity such as the shared *mandazi* and chai at Kennedy's *baze* were an important social investment—maintaining a direct tie to the person who provided the bridge between the garbage economy operating in underserved neighborhoods and the fragile cooperation of the city council willing to outsource the collection of garbage so it could be taken away. That window of time, taking chai and *mandazi* before getting on with the task at hand (already delayed), was a vital "waste" of time. Inevitably, it was also performative. The two men were seen by all on the streetscape of Kibichoi *baze*. It was a subtle but important performance of the peculiar alliances across seemingly antagonistic entities—the youth in the popular neighborhoods; and anyone representing local government who had increasingly ignored these neighborhoods, was simply too underresourced to properly reach lower-income areas of the city, or (related to the previous point) might simply have no incentive to do so given the very minimal tax base of largely "informal" workers (Parnell and Pieterse 2014).

Kennedy's arrangement with the truck, and the social ritual associated with its arrival (as unpredictable as the timing could be), was the result of years of savvy political maneuvering on the part of Kennedy, who had been able to negotiate numerous forms of provisioning on behalf of his neighborhood over the years. Kennedy had cultivated strong relationships with

all the caretakers of the buildings he services and had a direct contact with the city council's youth officer, Susan Kimani, who in turn felt that she had a direct contact in a neighborhood where many middle-class Kenyans living and working in the other parts of the city never ventured into. As Kennedy put it, "Many organizations have a mission, but it doesn't match youth's reality and timescale. The unique thing about Susan's approach: *anakuja mtaani* [she comes to the ghetto], and she asks youth to take initiatives." In Kibichoi, there was also a water tank that had been "gifted" from the local MP of that constituency at the time, Margaret Wanjiru (also a religious leader and "bishop"). "I helped her during her campaign a while back," admitted Kennedy. He explained that the "Bishi" (as she was affectionately known to supportive youth in her constituency) "did a lot for us youth." For some local politicians, getting votes is often contingent on demonstrating certain material commitments to the otherwise underserved neighborhoods in their constituency. Here, it is not my place to judge Bishop Wanjiru's political stratagems to win over her constituency, but it is worth mentioning that Bishi has often recalled her own struggles with poverty and single motherhood as a way to connect with underresourced communities. Her effort to reach out to youth in particular and advance the case for improved access to water and sanitation in Mathare ~~and Huruma~~ "villages" has been received with much celebration among the majority of youth I have gotten to know. They have never been duped by the "political game," but they learned how to benefit from it for the common good. Bishi's "gifts" were always directed to a common resource, inviting youth groups to manage it and enabling not just a revenue-generating resource for youth but also cleverly facilitating a mechanism for stigmatized youth to gain some additional legitimacy and respect within their communities. Kennedy understood this well.

The water tank was placed in a crucial spot at the interstice of residential alleyways and the strip of commercial stalls a block away from the *matatu* stage. There was a fee to access water from this water point, but it was reasonable compared to most other water points in Mathare. It was also next to public toilets that were cleaned daily by Kennedy's youth group. They also ~~keep~~ chicken coops near the water point, and after the morning garbage collection the organic waste was brought to the chickens.

In 2017, Kennedy sent me a photo of the Kibichoi base and said, "T, look, the space that is always so muddy where we leave the handcarts, you see, they have come to pave the road there." When I saw him in person a few

months later, I asked Kennedy to explain how he managed to get the road paved. I knew there had to be some kind of deal. He said, "I was an eye for the MP." This was happening during the early stages of pre-election tensions across Mathare ~~and Huruma~~ communities. So "keeping youth busy" was a form of violence prevention, or what Jaremey McMullin (2022) would call "hustling as peace-building." Kennedy became the subcontractor of the roadworks at that time, and he figured that the best way to mitigate any tensions would be to ensure the pavement work benefited the whole surrounding community—including small business operators, the parents of children going to school, and laborers needing to push around heavy handcarts. At the same time, the cement work and every step involved in paving this strip of road needed to involve youth who were constantly in and out of work, including youth who teetered between "making" and "breaking" (Honwana and De Boeck 2005; G. Jones 2012). Kennedy made sure to give different young people work for three days at a time and then give work to another set of youth. This meant training new people each time, which could be regarded as "inefficient" by any business manager unversed in the "*mtaa* way" and its micro-politics. This was a pragmatic and opportunistic strategy of diversifying distribution (Ferguson 2015) among local youth.

Kennedy's quiet leadership combined with the strategic moral ambiguity of his occasional dealings with local politicians brought together the logics of social justice and social enterprise, a kind of discrete but radical social enterprise (Pieterse and Thieme 2022). The road had needed paving for years. It reflected the wider set of environmental *injustices* (Bullard 1994) affecting too many underserved popular neighborhoods. Figuring out a way to get the road paved would be a form of social and environmental justice. Ensuring that the modalities of getting it paved would render visible efforts to localize the labor involved, "putting youth to work" was an act of social enterprise because it involved investing in training and time. And unlike Kazi kwa Vijana, the tokenistic youth employment programs discussed in chapter 3, here youth were working where they lived, seeing the benefits of their labor, and performing their work in front of their elders and fellow residents. They got paid on time, and the work meant something. To echo Simone's (2004) notion of "people as infrastructure" and Ash Amin's (2014) "lively infrastructure," in this Kibichoi *baze* in 2017 the assemblage of people living and working there formed a particular kind of lively peopled infrastructure of production, reproduction, distribution,

care, improvisation, collection, transaction, sociality, rebuilding, and repair. Kennedy was an integral part of that infrastructure and understood that a paved road might mean less dust and less mud, but it would also mean more than that. The collective and plural forms of labor and maneuvers, overt and behind the scenes, that had made this happen ensured that the pavement of a popular pedestrian path would not only link homes, businesses, the primary school, the water point, the public toilets, the transit dumpsite, and the chai and *mandazi* stalls; it would also make everyday chores and life a little bit easier. Kennedy consciously or unconsciously managed to facilitate a connection between infrastructures of sociality, of care, and of material improvement.

This moment was significant for another reason. Around this time, younger youth were starting to make trouble across Mathare, contesting the established hierarchies of the garbage collection system. The teenage school dropouts who were neither in school nor in employment were seeing older youth "doing well" and felt "we need our share." Both Kennedy and Kaka, another youth leader in a neighboring ~~base~~ in Mlango Kubwa, explained that the younger youth wanted to "redraw the map" of garbage collection to "get a piece of the pie." This reflected a wider dynamic at play across different hustle economies in Nairobi, where there was an implicit understanding among different generations of youth that the older youth needed to provide for younger youth in the absence of other forms of support. That logic of intergenerational distribution and obligation is reflected in a careful negotiation between individual investments and collective returns.[2] That is partly why Kennedy has continuously persisted in *doing* the actual garbage collection rather than simply getting paid to *manage* a set of plots and outsource the manual labor to younger underlings. He has therefore remained a youth leader precisely because when it comes to the graft, he is always "one of the guys," who can at the same time use his political connections at the right moment to advocate for the commons. Kennedy was constantly, therefore, operating alone when it came to political maneuvers and deals but working in collectives and ensuring youth in the area were getting paid work. That combination of solitary and collective labor, short-term gains and long-term investment, made him stay in Huruma despite the fact that he very probably could have left a long time ago.

Kennedy's hustle was about *accumulation* within, for, and thanks to the *mtaa* economy. Kennedy was in his late thirties at the time I was writing

this book and continued to "get his hands dirty" each week doing those early morning garbage runs, sharing chai and *mandazis* with his workers but also with the truck driver. From there he would take his time getting cleaned up (I will always remember the scene of his messy bachelor pad but the meticulous care he put in every time he ironed a clean shirt) and usually rushed off to a "meeting" of some kind. As Eliza (introduced in chapter 5) once remarked, "It's all about connections. Everyone has connections, but people use them in different ways." Kennedy's leadership was evident, but he operated with discretion at all levels—from the dirty work to the political maneuvers as he deployed his connections as a youth group chairman in ways that continuously invested in building relationships of trust from above and below. He knew that Bishi was trying to "buy" votes in the last election, but his calculation factored in the need for a water tank in that part of his community. It wasn't all altruism. He managed those public toilets and wanted to keep the chicken healthy. Having access to water in that particular corner of the base was good for his business as much as it served his community. When I asked him one day in 2017 why he had invested in a secondhand shoe stall around the corner from the water point (one of his multiple businesses that seemed slightly at odds with the rest), he smiled and said, "I make sure to just have ladies' shoes in stock, because us men, we just have one pair of shoes each year, you know. The ladies, they like changing on different days." A business idea that seemed like an odd choice given Kennedy's focus on waste work actually made complete sense—it was another extension of the circular economy, and he had identified the more lucrative angle.

   In one of our conversations in 2017, he spoke about the importance of diversifying one's businesses "because you can't predict what's going to happen. If something happens to one of the buildings [like it gets renovated] there is no revenue on that plot. If chickens don't lay as many eggs or they are sick, no revenue." Diversification never stopped for youth who built their diversified livelihoods within the *mtaa*. In addition to the other businesses (with garbage as the main source of income), Kennedy had also invested since 2014 in a small local bar in Kibichoi, which reflected his respect but also business eye for leisure and the inextricable linkages between *kazi* (work) and "downtime," and the ways in which that nexus needed to happen at the *baze* in order to foster placemaking and to keep an eye on the guys. It is best to know where your workers are drinking if you want them to show up at work the next morning. But his own personal project, one

that did not involve the Kibichoi youth group and was not visible to his fellow Kibichoi and wider Huruma residents, was outside the *mtaa.* He started going up-country now and again to tend to a small plot where he was incrementally building and upgrading a small house. "It's a good investment," he said proudly in 2019, without knowing exactly what he would do with it yet. But still, Kennedy stayed in Kibichoi. As he said in April 2023, "You feel very established in your *baze.* If you have strong networks, you can change things."

Mtaani *Men or Just Old Boyz in the Hood?*

A few streets away from Kibichoi, in Mathare Number 10, the youth group discussed in chapters 3 and 4, known as Mathare Number 10 Youth Group (MANYGRO), had also created a mark at the nexus of social and material infrastructure. MANYGRO consisted of fellow veterans of the garbage collection economy, based in one of the poorer areas of Mathare in terms of its infrastructure, household average incomes, and exposure to environmental harms. Unlike Huruma, where Kennedy lived and worked, Mathare Number 10 was mostly made up of horizontal shacks, with fewer tenement-style walk-ups. During my last few field visits to Mathare Number 10 (in 2016, 2017, 2019, 2023), the MANYGRO youth I had met and spent time with between 2009 and 2012 had by now become "old boyz." They no longer operated out of a corrugated iron sheet lean-to as they used to but instead sat under the shade of a tree that had been planted during one of the "World Environment Day" community celebrations. MANYGRO had become well versed in the development lingo, well known to the likes of Pamoja Trust, which had identified a number of well-organized youth groups in the early 2000s, and they had kept engaging with these groups over time.

A virtuous cycle took place: once a youth group was known to one NGO, it tended to become known to others. Lynsey Farrell (2015, 10) has documented this Nairobi phenomenon poignantly through her in-depth ethnographic study of youth in Kibera who hustle in what she calls the "shadow aid economy" that emerged over the course of the twenty-first century as a by-product of Nairobi's growing NGO business. The "saturated NGO environment" (4) that Farrell describes has been especially acute in Kibera, where the concentration of NGO activity has tended to surpass that of other popular neighborhoods. But what Farrell terms the "NGO hustle" (140) was also integral to how some young people in Mathare coped with and experienced their own sense of liminality. The NGO hustle was,

as illustrated in chapters 3 and 4, interconnected with a range of other development-related interventions, including social enterprise initiatives (such as Community Cleaning Services). As such, these particular hustles shaped networks of reciprocity (Kinyanjui 2019) within the *mtaa* as well as connections beyond it. In turn, this created an apt terrain for potential opportunities that allowed certain savvy social sector hustlers to advance their own individual pathways *through* or *out of* the *mtaa* economy. It was never a guaranteed pathway out, but it was a pathway nonetheless, which informed the "criteria of respectability" (Farrell 2015, xi) of youth who became skilled navigators of multiple social and organizational environments, all the while often operating from or at some point returning to the *baze,* even if it was only to check in and assert seniority and enduring membership.

For example, MANYGRO members, especially the more socially gregarious and confident ones, had become savvy navigators of the NGO scene, which was one of the reasons why "World" [anything environmental] Days" tended to take place in areas like Mathare Number 10, where NGO workers could make an appearance to both celebrate the efforts of community-based organization and render visible (for a day at least) the need for greater support and attention. Over the past decade especially, these "World [water, handwashing, or toilet] Days" connected *mambo ya mtaani* (neighborhood issues) to global struggles and solidarities in other popular neighborhoods of the Majority World and to globally legible metrics such as the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Add to this the advent and acceleration of various social media platforms featuring photos "from the hood" with SDG hashtags, eliciting a trail of Instagram and Facebook likes.

The days after these "World Days," the *kawaida* (usual) days, perhaps a few relics of the celebrations would remain—artifacts like branded parasols, a few T-shirts, maybe a plaque. The tree was a particularly welcomed commemoration on World Environmental Day that year, and it was planted next to the M-Pesa kiosk that the MANYGRO members managed since 2016. That bit of social infrastructure—the tree and the M-Pesa kiosk situated at the bottom of the path that led to the *matatu* stage on Juja Road—was the outcome of years of investment in social relationships, in becoming known for regenerative community businesses and services. MANYGRO "old boyz" had earned the privilege of taking a seat under the shade of that tree, while one of the members (Daniel) manned the only M-Pesa kiosk in the area. Because diversification was the rule of the hustle game in the

mtaa, the kiosk also had a water tap that had been rerouted and served residents who came throughout the day to refill their Jerry cans for household use, and inside the kiosk, in 2019, the guys managed to get a refrigerator so they could also sell cold sodas. At the MANYGRO *baze,* you could as a local resident get water, get phone credit, send money to a family member up-country, and buy a cold drink (though this was reserved for special occasions for most). And of course, the water point in any neighborhood where water is accessed in a shared public space always ends up becoming the space for catching up on the gossip of the day, as everyone gathers and waits their turn to fill up their jerry can.

As time went on, with each visit back to Mathare it became clear that the MANYGRO members were all less of a collective now. Each of them had their own side hustles, including sometimes up-country (Mwaura 2017), as discussed in the previous section and chapter. They each spoke about their kids and joked that they were now "well fed" as they patted his *kitambe* (belly) and had "less time for [football] training." And yet a subset of MANYGRO, including at least a few of the older boyz, would consistently assemble under the tree on most days, at one point or another. In addition to socializing in close proximity to the M-Pesa kiosk / water point, they also had the view of the public toilet they used to clean daily and worked hard to negotiate control over in 2007. The sign of the social enterprise "Community Cleaning Services" discussed in chapter 4 was still on the door, faint but still there. There was no need really to freshen it up because people just knew it was the MANYGRO toilet. The faded sign was an affirmation of its former marketing efforts when it was a novel business and its present nonchalant endurance. No pretense needed. Younger youth who were recent school leavers (eighteen year olds) were the ones tasked with daily cleans now.

As Eliza remarked in April 2023, some youth groups give work to younger youth on an ad hoc basis, or "casual things." Other groups (and here she mentioned MANYGRO) "recruit youth to shape the next generation. . . . They won't let these youth go astray." As many of my Mathare friends explained throughout the years, youth growing up here were in need of mentors, motivation, something to do, and a sense of belonging. Of course, these things can come in many forms. In many villages of Mathare, some youth were getting pulled into crime and substance addiction. Many were getting killed by police who simply saw youth as "thugs" (Van Stapele 2019) and Mathare as a zone of "outlaw spaces" (Kimari 2020). In Mathare

Number 10, however, MANYGRO members had long understood that one of the challenges facing young men in particular was the gendered pressure to "provide" for your family and thus to either feel like a failure if you could not or resort to any means possible in order to do so (see Van Stapele 2021). In Mathare Number 10, through an attentiveness to home-grown youth-owned businesses focused on local services and peer-to-peer apprenticeship, MANYGRO had dealt with the security concerns that got so many youth in trouble and made residents feel unsafe. As one of the members remarked in April 2023, "we have turned this area into a crime-free zone." In doing so, they had managed over the years to defy the stigma associated with Mathare neighborhoods. Symbolically, the tree, the M-Pesa kiosk, the CCS toilet, and the modest urban farming patch a few meters away all served as vital "eyes on the street," as Jane Jacobs (1993, 54) described when writing about what held an "animated neighborhood" together and helped "keep the peace." As Jacobs remarked, there is nothing simple about keeping that peace. In this *baze* of Mathare 10, it helped that there were nodes of possible apprenticeship and mentorship for any youth who was a school leaver without a job but ready to hustle and learn a skill.

While the older MANYGRO boyz had upgraded and further diversified their portfolio of local businesses, they persisted in speaking about their hustles. In part, they were managing the carefully built but ultimately fragile hierarchies within the *baze* that had all started with their garbage collection and plastic recycling business in the early 2000s. They were now the *sonko* (boss) figures of these seemingly horizontal youth-led businesses, and they were aware that younger youth could feel left out. It was up to the old boyz to perform an intergenerational solidarity, which involved giving younger youth access to local opportunities in the way that they knew—all things related to basic services that were not provided by the state and could become forms of local service provision like waste collection, water vending, sanitation services, and so on.

At the same time, MANYGRO old boyz recognized the different aspirations and lived experiences of this younger generation, who "grew up with Google," as Edwin once remarked with a sigh, explaining that the digitally connected youth who grew up in and of the twenty-first century had a different conception of "hard work" as compared to their older brothers and fathers. Of course every generation tends to make this argument. But perhaps what was particular about this situation was that the generation of youth who grew up in the 1990s had seen Kenya's transition from a

single-party state to a multiparty state. They had witnessed the rise of NGO-isation (Choudry and Kapoor 2013) that accelerated from the early 1990s, before its recent decline, not least with the significant funding cuts of international development budgets following the austerity measures enacted due to the protracted effects of the financial crisis of 2008. They knew life before the digital revolution. They had pioneered youth-led home-grown businesses that were physically based in the *mtaa* and often deeply and literally entangled with the material (waste), the social (youth groups), and the spatial (the *baze*) infrastructures of their neighborhoods.

In contrast, the younger generation had literal and virtual windows that opened onto neighborhood, citywide, and global scenes. Their own stories and profiles were entangled with performative, multisituated stages thanks to the smartphones in their pockets. They had not known life without these devices. They embodied that paradox of modernity—where more young people today have access to a mobile phone than access to a safe, clean toilet option (UN-Habitat 2008). While the group of youth I first met in the early days of my fieldwork in 2009 would hang out in between jobs chatting with each other, using their Nokia brick phones only for quick texts and basic mobile money transactions, the younger youth I met in the second decade of the twenty-first century on my return trips to Nairobi usually hung out together while consulting their smartphones, not unlike their age mates in any other city of the world. Though they, too, spoke of their hustle, their ideas of *hustling* took on their own forms. Some wanted a "piece of the [waste economy] pie," but many also imagined alternative ways to hustle using digital platforms that reached beyond the *baze.* As my friend Mambo (himself a father of three boys) explained in April 2023, "Everything is going digital. Some are good innovations . . . but it's chang-ing youth's mentality."

Kaka: The Mlango Kubwa Paradox

One morning in 2016, I got off the *matatu* at the Mlango Kubwa Bar. I asked a group of young teens stationed along the street-side businesses near there if they'd seen Kaka from the Mathare Environmental Conser-vation Youth Group (MECYG)—they pointed up ahead and confirmed that he was around, "at the Peque *baze.*" Mlango Kubwa has been known over the years for being one of the hot spots in Mathare for gang violence, homeless street children, and police brutality. But it is also home to a vibrant *baze* where MECYG has elicited much attention in the past fifteen years. At

the *baze* locally known as Pequeninos, a palimpsest of various initiatives has targeted this area in the name of youth-led development. The youth groups around this area were some of the first to be involved in the *taka ni pato* (trash is cash) NGO-run schemes that tried to support homegrown youth-led garbage collection businesses. Supporting these household collection businesses back in 2005 included encouraging groups to see the value of sorting different kinds of waste that each had value: metal, paper, organic, and especially plastic materials. In 2007, the Ford Foundation, seeking to sponsor "youth entrepreneurship" in income-poor communities, partnered with the local Slum/Shack Dwellers International organization Pamoja Trust to provide Peque base with a plastic shredder. The intention was for this shredder to help youth groups add value to each kilogram of shredded plastic, that they could then resell to companies starting to recycle plastic in the industrial area.

On most days, the normalized state of breakdown in Mlango Kubwa called for some kind of continuous adjustments. Youth grew up learning how to adapt to what did not work as much as to understand how things worked. "Today there is no water," Kaka shared as we walked away from the Juja Road sounds. He had that demeanor I recognized, a look of concern coupled with nonchalance, making it seem like he and his peers had things under control. I started noticing the handcarts with jerry cans— always a sign that there was a water shortage and that someone was making a business of selling water when it didn't come out of the taps. As we passed the butcher at the corner, we veered off the paved road into the unpaved labyrinth leading to the *baze* where Kaka and his peer group spend hours of their day. A young boy was riding a bicycle three sizes too big for him, and as he couldn't sit on the seat and reach the peddles, he bopped up and down, his oversized flip-flops stuck to the pedals, his bottom swerving side to side as a young girl laughed on the roadside while she watched and provided loud commentary. Another child rode a scooter on the same path, her friends watching and chatting, and a few minutes later they swapped turns.

Children here always found objects to play with and made games of all sorts. The wheel pushed around by a stick as children ran alongside was a longtime favorite. But to see a bicycle and a scooter used for play was not something I had seen before. Kaka explained that there was a guy here who owned them, who probably found them half broken and left for trash in a wealthier part of the city. "You can fix anything in the ghetto, and then

you make money from it." The local children paid 10 KES (about US$0.01) for a ten-minute ride. To put this in perspective, 10 KES would fetch a cup of chai in this neighborhood or a *matatu* ride up Juja Road. The other kids waited their turn, but if they didn't have the money they found enjoyment in watching their friend have a go, the same way their older siblings found meaning in standing at the jobless corner while their friend *did* work. Any activity—be they running your business, doing domestic chores, playing, or even waiting—usually involved company: someone to watch your back, watch your goods, go fetch some change in case you need it for your customers, and importantly someone to banter with.

That morning in 2016, when I reached the *baze,* there was a group of young men draped over a few *boda boda* motorcycles just outside the social hall with the big sign over the door that reads Mathare Environmental Conservation Youth Group. The two youth wearing yellow vests were clearly the drivers, while the others hung out as wingmen. As long as I've come to this area, since 2009, the space just outside the social hall has always felt pretty male dominated. In 2009, young men hanging about outside the social hall during the late morning hours were often in between activities—they might have been doing garbage collection for their local area since early morning, and they would later sort through the recovered plastic—and working out how much they had in their inventory and whether it was enough to sell. A few years later, some of the youth group members turned to the *boda boda* hustle and used the space outside the social hall to park and wait for customers. Kenya had recently removed import duties on motorcycles, so these Indian-made motorcycles hit the Kenyan market in 2016, which created a whole new economy of motorcycle taxis across the city.[3] This became an off-shoot of the Uberized transport economy. You would not see many Ubers riding or stopping in these parts of the city, but the *boda boda* service was available to middle- and working-class Kenyans alike—so the motorcycles were seen navigating all over.

A few years later, one morning in April 2023, there was an elderly woman with a heavy bag of vegetables who was about to hitch a ride from one of the *boda boda* riders outside that *baze* in Mlango Kubwa and who had by now become a well-established presence in this corner of the *mtaa.* Though she was still strong, her body was worn down, her upper back was kyphotic, and her mobility was limited. Like so many other female elders working in the *mtaa,* the years of daily embodied labor involved being bent over to clean, to cook, and to arrange fruits and vegetables on the tarps

from which produce was sold on the roadside. She was too tired to smile but her sense of humor was intact, and the young men's demeanor of tough masculinity suddenly softened as they became deferent to their elder. They called her *shosho* (Kikuyu slang for grandmother), and the driver waited patiently for her to find the little peddle behind his standing leg so she could step on it with one foot, left arm holding on to his shoulder. She slowly got her other leg over the seat and adjusted her *kanga* skirt, and the other young man handed her the large burlap bag of vegetables. Older men might hold most of the power in Kenyan politics, but on the streets, older women commanded everyone's respect—everything and everyone slowed down for *shosho mtaani* (grandmother of the hood). With too little written down about the history of these neighborhoods that formed on the edges of the city and defied colonial and postcolonial urban planning, the *shoshos* are repositories of local oral knowledge.

Kaka and I walked into the youth group's social hall, where I had not been since my last visit. Inside the structure, there was a palimpsest of rough graffiti art on all the walls; one tag always jumped out at me in particular: "crazy world B carefull. None but prayers. One Love." This tag was a reminder of all the young lives lost through police or gang-related violence. To get to your thirtieth birthday in the *mtaa* was considered a feat. In contrast to the gritty graffiti, there was a wall that displayed a laminated board with a series of NGO, development agency, and multinational company logos: UN-Habitat, Samsung, USAID, and Comic Relief, among others. This made it seem as though these organizations had sponsored the social hall in some way. But spending time with Kaka and his peers at different intervals over the past ten years, and witnessing their Facebook feeds when I was away, has made me realize that the performativity of these displayed logos was not always reflected in the actual support the youth group (and others like them) received in practice. MECYG was one of the lucky organized youth groups that had been identified as "entrepreneurial," with "natural leaders," and it became for many organizations a channel through which particular interventions might operate.

Youth groups across popular neighborhoods had become well versed in the art of participatory workshops since the early 2000s. Indeed, the expansion of the MECYG social hall that took place between 2009 and 2013 provided an opportune space (bigger than any other public space aside from St. Theresa's Church up Juja Road) for external organizations wishing to engage community groups for various events. But these events and

workshops have historically tended to be one-offs, featuring a familiar pattern: an opening prayer and cordial welcome of guests, facilitation of break-out discussions, sodas and local female-owned catering businesses providing (and getting paid for making) lunch. Promises of follow-up were always made, a tour of the neighborhood was given following the workshop, photo ops were available outside the social hall (to later be posted on various Facebook pages), and then the "sponsor" would leave.

The cluster of organizations exhibited on that board was in effect more of an archive of external organizations that had come and gone. But these names gave a certain credibility to the group, whose members, as individuals and as a collective, had perfected their narrative—able to perform resilience or dejection depending on what response they wanted to elicit. In many ways, the occasional presence of external support or visits was just one of the various income-generating activities of these youth whose hustle economy comprised a portfolio of income-generating activities that each had their own specific function and form of redistributing gains and assigning leadership. Once a free lunch was organized, a participatory workshop held, a slum tour given, a photo op taken, and a report written a few months later, the logos on that wall were the lasting relics of these ephemeral encounters. The social hall would once more become underresourced and the youth for whom this *baze* was more of a home than where they slept had to find ways to be self-sufficient once more.

There was always something youth groups could do best without external support—manage residential garbage collection. This had always been a reliable stepping stone to other forms of provision and the foundation for diversified livelihoods. But Kaka and his peers had wanted to do more with the Peque social hall and its surrounds. To a degree, they did build a remarkable "social infrastructure" (Klinenberg 2018), a shared physical space that facilitated meaningful social encounters and sustained social relations, while enhancing the "respectability" of MECYG vis-à-vis neighboring residents and any visitors. Some of the MECYG members had become savvy social sector hustlers indeed.

The nearby businesses benefited from, and provided for, the local youth group. From the early days of my fieldwork (2009), when the social hall was but a small iron-sheet shack, to its later expanded form as a one-hundred-meter-square concrete structure, a small stall serving tea and food with three tables inside stood meters away. I remember when Mama Caro's stall was roughly the same size as the youth group's social hall. Later it would

seem tiny in comparison. Most MECYG youth group members who had engaged in residential garbage collection for the past twenty years made a ritualized pit stop at Mama Caro's for chai and a *chapo* at the end of the garbage collection rounds.[4] They were her best customers but she also had the license to boss them around—she wasn't quite a *shosho* but she could be their mother and as such she showed unconditional affection for these boys but was also exasperated by them sometimes. For the same reasons she would worry about the boys' welfare and ability to stay out of trouble and harm's way, she also knew that her stall would never be burgled. These boys were her vigilantes.

Challenges for MECYG included ~~intergroup disputes,~~ lack of reliable power, and lack of space to store the plastic before it was worth renting a truck to transport it to the industrial area, let alone managing the micro-politics of garbage collection among different youth groups meant to "share" the common resource of the shredder. But despite these obvious problems, some of the youth group members became savvy brokers with the NGO sponsors and even local government officials that started streaming into this hub for youth-led development innovation. Bishi (the local MP mentioned earlier) had also courted youth in this area during her political campaign, and in exchange for youth mobilization on her behalf, she contributed funds to the upgrading of the social hall that both stocked the plastic and was to become a community center for all to use.

In 2010, UN-Habitat urban planners and architects "without borders" decided to help design and build the social hall. Moved by the story that youth had excavated a small space formerly used as a community transit dumpsite near the youth group's *baze* in order to make a modest football pitch for local kids, UN-Habitat followed up with the sponsorship of a state-of-the-art football pitch in a part of the city where any space of recreation is absent or often takes place on top of or next to a landfill. UN-Habitat ~~has since that time~~ acquired a license, it seems~~,~~ to invite "guests" to parachute in whenever they please to "see for themselves" what a little investment in a poor neighborhood could bring. With each visit, members of the local youth group, MECYG, whom had become savvy ambassadors of their *baze,* showed the "slum tourists" around, let them take a few selfies, thanked them for all they had done, and continued to perform a combination of struggle and resilience. UN-Habitat has written a series of reports since then, a kind of self-congratulatory (partly deserved, partly inflated) ode to the power of investing in local placemaking, local leaders, and the

power of sport to bring communities together. All parties were implicated in the humanitarian hustle.

In several villages of Mathare, there have been "upgrading" schemes facilitated by solidarity networks (or "community federations") that have involved incremental community efforts to improve local housing infrastructures and shared amenities (Weru 2004). These have entailed a practice of accommodation and deliberation, what Arjun Appadurai (2019, 36) calls a "politics of patience" and a form of mobilization "from below." But among youth who hustle, and especially those who "know how to use their connections," the mobilization hasn't just happened from below (as it tends to among elders, still deferent to particular hierarchies and slow temporalities). The mobilization has happened from all sides, a kind of transversal provisioning. There are moral codes, and a language of morality is frequently evoked in everyday discourse, from the common expression "cleanliness is next to godliness" to the shunning of idleness. But to a degree, the moral economy of hustling is malleable and it gets stretched depending on the situation. You don't want to deal with the *wakubwa* (big men), but if you have an entry point to any elite's ear or sympathy, you hustle them too: the sympathetic MP, the UN-Habitat folks working on youth programs, the landlord of that building where you might get a cleaning contract, the nice lady at the City Council who actually cares about youth. In a way, it is the combination of mobilizations from below and from all sides that together forms what Ash Amin (2014, 157) calls "lively infrastructures," which in Mathare are the diverse formations and interventions undertaken by "micro-collectives" who find nodes of possibility for the making of claims. The *mtaa* needs both a politics of patience and a politics of *impatience,* the politics of accommodation and the politics of opposition.

Paradoxically, hustling is counterhegemonic, but at times it is deliberately *not* antiestablishment activism. It is pragmatic and opportunistic, and it is perhaps at the nexus of social justice and social enterprise—where "radical social enterprise" (Pieterse and Thieme 2022, 192) takes form— that the moral compass may stretch in different directions to get things done. For certain individuals within youth groups, hustling involves navigating eclectic constellations of potential "sponsors" (NGOs, social enterprises, and local politicians) to potentially access some support (whatever that may be) that would benefit the local commons. The hustle is thus a kind of *performance* that might enact yet also undo appearances of urban marginality: hustlers strain to raise funds to build a state-of-the-art football

pitch in the middle of their neighborhood where recreational space is a rarity, as is a community social hall. They find ways to connect their eco-hustles with other aspirations and logics that are rooted in commitments to placemaking, where collecting garbage is a lever to justifying and making space (literally and figuratively) for youth to congregate and play.

Kaka once explained to me the additional reason for supporting younger youth with job creation and the importance of knowing how to deal with NGOs and "sponsors." It was connected to knowing how to maintain "tight security" in an area that had and continued to fall into violent sparks. He said, "In Mlango, eighty *vijana* [youth] are involved in security and let police know. Most of them are reformed thugs. We call them retired. Then twenty to thirty do garbage collection in Peque. The chief, DO [district officer], landlords, and tenants have agreed to pay for security. They all pay 50 KES for security and 150 KES for garbage."

Over time, Kaka's remit as a local leader, hustling and dealing, took him to international UN-Habitat youth conferences; he became featured in numerous short documentaries and was frequently courted by international NGOs and development agencies to participate in various projects, workshops, and deliberations on topics such as gender-based violence, insecurity, and youth social enterprise. And yet, despite these notable interventions in Mlango that had supported the plastic recycling business in 2007 and the building of a community center in 2012 and a football pitch in 2015, another youth leader, who grew up alongside Kaka but who has not stayed in that neighborhood, says it isn't enough.

THE LEAVERS

Kahos

Edward (known among his friends as Kahos) was born and raised in Mlango by a single mother with five other siblings. He said of his childhood, "we were the poorest of the poor." But the fact that he both enjoyed school and was fortunate to find St. Theresa's church, where he could hide after school and take time to study, meant that Kahos got top grades in school. "It was my own victory, because Mama couldn't worry about my studies." Later a pastor at the local church was "sympathetic" and paid for Edward's school fees. He eventually made his way to the university. He remarked that alongside his commitment to school, there was the pressure to "do the macho thing" and have unprotected sex with his girlfriend. So in 2004, Kahos became a father. He was nineteen years old. His mother told him

that he was about to fall into the same cycle of early pregnancy and poverty. And for the first time she intervened and pushed him to continue his studies, helping Kahos by taking care of his son in the meantime. Kahos then took out student loans and studied law, feeling out of place, "me with my Sheng and looking streetwise." But he persisted and did well, interning with different labor rights advocacy centers, engaged in contractual work with the Kenya HR commission, and finally got a scholarship for an LLM in law at the University of Pretoria, where he received a distinction.

Despite these successes that "got him out" of the *mtaa,* Kahos always returned to the *baze.* ~~He could often be found in Peque, hanging out at the jobless corner with his childhood peers.~~ He once explained, "There is no place that makes me feel at home like being at the *baze* after a long day, seated with my childhood friends." Kahos did admit that the friendship group had gone through challenging dynamics over the years. He explained, "We were the pioneers of garbage collection. But even in the group there are grudges, and disputes, and there are unstated tensions when they see you doing well." In our conversations, Kahos humbly rejected the notion that his education made him important somehow: "Our system in Kenya has placed so much emphasis on formal education. It is an unjust scenario because there is little emphasis on other talents and skills." He alluded to his friends, all mostly school dropouts and formally unemployed but whose "talents" he saw as totally underutilized. At the same time, he was not easy on them. He claimed he had represented some of them in court (for their "thug" thing). He deplored the motivation of too many youth to have

> nice jeans, nice shoes, go to Reggae on Sunday. And the problem is if there is not work or no projects to keep you motivated, you come to terrorize at night. And the problem with thieves is that they kill patience. Easy money. So many underestimated how hard it was to keep garbage collection going. You know, customer relations and all that.

While he celebrated the resources that his *baze* had gotten over the years, he talked about the intergenerational rift that was happening. There were all sorts of business opportunities, from recycling to the little kiosk built into the social hall, but "if there is no regular income, you can't dictate the levels of commitment." Kahos explained how the "younger thugs" had started to assert their claim in the later 2010s, as if to say, "we belong here too." As someone who had a foot inside and outside the *mtaa,* Kahos

admitted that the older boys had been holding on to resources perhaps, and "redrawing the map" could be more equitable. Ultimately, he lamented the fact that "there is a football pitch but we don't have a library." The library was, for him, a symbolic but powerful resource that would allow younger youth to stop relying on "sponsors." Older youth like Kaka had learned how to hustle those sponsors, but the ~~young~~ youth ultimately had become too complacent. As another youth leader remarked, "what good is this public space if there is nothing to do?"

Kahos and I have deliberated over the years on the tensions between different youth from Mlango Kubwa and considered the different life trajectories that ultimately shaped his peers' relationship to their neighborhood and the claims and the mark they could make.[5] As Kahos explained one afternoon, Peque had identified the value of recovering, reselling, and recycling different materials of the collected waste, plastic being the most lucrative to sell to recycling companies in the industrial area. They were one of the first groups to sell shredded plastic. The other core income-generation activity for the group was a "pay-to-watch" service, held in the social hall ~~built on a reclaimed piece of land within the community~~, where residents of Mlango Kubwa ~~would~~ assemble together and pay to watch live European football league matches. After more than two decades of serving the community in various ways (from garbage collection to community outreach programs for street families, and keeping an "eye" on the street), Pequeninos has continued to operate as a local football club in a football league organized by the Mathare Youth Sports Association (MYSA). The group's model of generating income by serving ~~the~~ community and combined sporting activities was replicated by other youth groups in the larger Mathare area. These youth organizations and their activities collectively contributed to keeping Mathare relatively clean and safe by dissuading hundreds of youth from resorting to opportunistic crime for survival.

Today, the dynamics of this "self-help" city within the neoliberal city of Nairobi are changing. In Mlango Kubwa and in the wider Mathare, a significant number of youth (now middle-aged adults) who founded organizations such as Pequeninos are still holding on to their initial and now well-established neighborhood businesses, though their work would be classified as "non-standard" employment (ILO 2018). Their livelihoods and investments (and for some their reputation) depend on these homegrown hustles. Over the years, however, tensions have emerged between these (now older) pioneers of homegrown services and the younger generation

who are keen to tap into established youth-led businesses. The stayers like Kennedy, the MANYGRO old boyz, and Kaka have been grappling in their different styles with an intergenerational tension and reckoning, as a new cohort of young adults demand a share of the income-earning opportunities, if not a total takeover. They are challenging the original mapping of the community that allocated sections of the neighborhood to the founders, trying to make a claim to the territorial zoning of the eco-hustle. In the past five years, the tension between the stayers and these younger youth has been palpable and described by Kahos and other interlocutors as often on the verge of violence.

The leavers, on the other hand, who grew up with the stayers and were part of the founding youth organizations, have left the *mtaa* mainly thanks to opportunities like higher education, professional sports, and formal employment in Kenya or even beyond.[6] Yet many maintain a deep connection to the *mtaa* and keep returning, pulled back by strong family and friendship ties, the obligation to provide, and the attachment to the *baze,* despite all its vulnerabilities. Some have developed a personal brand that leverages both their local street credibility in the *mtaa* and external connections, which helped them campaign and even win political seats within Mathare in the 2022 general elections in Kenya. Both stayers and leavers who cofounded local CBOs have at different points consulted with international nongovernmental organizations (INGOs) and UN agencies "on behalf of urban poor youth."

For members of Pequeninos, Mlango Kubwa has thus become an economic and social melting pot for the stayers and leavers who are deeply connected to their hood. For both groups, Mlango Kubwa is a repository of social capital, belonging, and allegiances, but it is also an increasingly contested terrain contending with diverse youth imaginaries. This raises questions about the future of peaceful coexistence between peer groups who make claims to youth-led economies. In a way, this highlights a wider phenomenon with the self-help city, where different peer groups are constantly under pressure to find renewed forms of distribution, including intergenerational solidarity. This becomes part of a necessary calculation: to protect but also extend livelihood opportunities to new entrants into the local hustle economy, while continuing to provide vital basic services to residents who have come to depend on them. It is likely that the stayers holding on to the established community-based hustles will, sooner or later, be pressured to relinquish their hold of (or at least share) the garbage

collection territories to the new generation of youth, who will inevitably outnumber the older youth.

Jackson

From the perspective of youth who strongly identified with their local youth group and could often be found at the *baze* to find hustles or spend time hanging out in between jobs, being part of a collective offered the benefit of risk reduction by diversifying "ownership" and reducing the traceability of any individual gain from the entity. The difficulty of group membership, however, transpired for youth seeking to set themselves apart from group activities to pursue their individual ambitions while retaining a sense of "belonging" to the *mtaa,* their *baze,* and their cohort.

Jackson from Mlango Kubwa one day explained to me that he had "gotten lucky" a few years prior—given a second chance to finish school and leave behind what he referred to as a "life of group crime." Emphasizing the importance of mentors and role models for at-risk youth, he said, "If you have someone who shows that they believe in you, then it makes a big difference," inferring that this was not a luxury he had grown up with but one he would later encounter. Jackson eventually finished secondary school and pursued further qualifications, which led to formal employment in the city center. Faced with the chance to "get out of the hood" in every sense, Jackson instead made specific choices about which parts of the *mtaa* he would leave behind and which he would remain connected to. When I first met him, he had recently upgraded his living conditions to a "self-contained" apartment building (including sanitation facilities, running water, and electricity) outside Mathare, in the nearby lower-middle-class suburb of Pangani. He had a salaried "office job" in the city center (though I was never really sure what that entailed), and this is where we met on a few occasions to have a chat. Though we would meet over a chai in an extremely noisy café in the CBD, this afforded a space slightly removed from the *mtaa* to reflect on his trajectory and how he balanced having one foot in the *mtaa* and one foot outside it. I found it telling that despite the apartment in Pangani and the office job in the CBD, during my weekly visits to see the guys in Mlango Kubwa in my first year of fieldwork, he could often be found, especially during the weekday afternoons, back at the *baze.* He even admitted that he would change from his city work clothes to his "*mtaa* clothes" to hang out with his ~~childhood friends~~ at the *baze.*

Even though Jackson was no longer staying in the neighborhood, he was still an active member of MECYG, involved in the management of garbage collection and plastic recycling businesses, and often the first one to speak during group meetings of any kind. He was a savvy chameleon, and he seemed at ease in any group situation. During meetings he spoke passionately about the group's activities and their shared goals, affirmation of their commitment to working on their own, a kind of shared self-employment model (to borrow from Kinder's [2016] notion of "shared self-provision"). At the same time, during one-on-one conversations that took place outside the *mtaa,* out of earshot of the group, Jackson would open up about his personal life goals and aspirations. In Mlango Kubwa, he self-identified as a fellow *hustla,* one of the guys, and part of the city's fringe underworld. Outside the *mtaa,* he was a salaried professional proud to say he was providing a secure livelihood for his wife and son in the "main" city. I remember the look on his face when he followed that statement by specifying that he could pay for his baby's "pampers," reminding me that this was uncommon in the *mtaa.* At the same time, he insisted on maintaining his *hustla* persona vis-à-vis his peers when he was back at the *baze,* which required concealing or at least being discrete about the extent to which he was "doing well." And what I later would learn (as I had with Eliza's trajectory, discussed in chapter 5) was that the seemingly secure jobs could fall through at any point—making the hustle economy and the *mtaa* way the *actual* secure backup plan. It wasn't necessarily what would ever make you rich, but it was what you could always fall back on, so investing in local relational ties, the youth group in Jackson's case, required constant maintenance through hours of *kuzurura,* just hanging out with no major purpose other than passing the time with your peers. These hours of *kuzurura* were what ultimately gave him the ability to share some of the fruits of his individual successes (including his accounting skills, which would help the garbage collection business), and in turn this secured his own safety net in case the day job fell through. Time at the *baze* was what solidified relational obligations of redistributive solidarity.

In 2019, on a day that I was visiting the Peque *baze* to meet with Kaka and ~~his friends~~, Jackson appeared by chance. I hadn't seen him in years, and as I realized shortly after his arrival, neither had some of this childhood friends. Jackson was now living in *shags* (the countryside), and he proceeded to explain to his peers how glad he was to have left the city. It sounded like he was now living on ~~the~~ farm with his family—in a way, reversing the

usual rural to urban migration route. It was not clear whether he returned to Nairobi every so often to just check in with childhood friends or whether he still had a foothold in city hustles, including shares in Mlango Kubwa's main youth-led eco-hustle, the garbage economy. These are questions I wish I had had a chance to ask him, but it wasn't possible on that day, not in a group setting. What I did realize for the first time in that moment, as I and all his peers were listening to Jackson's monologue, was what a performer he was. I suppose he had been a performer the whole time. He was an NGO hustler and perhaps a savvy "research" hustler too. He had no difficulty answering difficult questions and seemed to enjoy my invitations to self-reflect on his own experience and analyze his circumstance and those of his peer group.

Ultimately, two childhood friends from Mlango Kubwa and the same *baze,* Kahos and Jackson, showed distinct styles of "leaving" and "returning." Jackson comes back to talk about his life outside the *mtaa,* perhaps to justify to himself and his peers why he chose to leave. Kahos comes back to check in with his childhood friends and ask about life in the *mtaa,* perhaps to remind himself about where he grew up and to remember who his closest friends are, even if he went to law school and is now finishing a PhD in a European university.

LEAVER OR STAYER WHO NO LONGER HUSTLES? MAMBO

In conversations with youth across Nairobi over the years, references to "role models" have consistently come up, with a tone of lamentation for the lack of "good role models" that youth could look up to. As my friend Mambo once remarked, for many youth in the *mtaa,* some local criminals were seen as role models because they demonstrated "independence," "drive," and "aggression." There was a kind of suspension of moral judgment when youth spoke about some of their older peers who had gotten into crime, acknowledging that they admired the particular attributes of a "good criminal." Ironically, these descriptors echo some of the qualities often associated with a "good entrepreneur," and in a way there was a blurred line between criminality and entrepreneurship, a point Alexa Clay and Kyra Maya Philips (2015) make in their book on the "misfit economy." Both exemplified livelihood pathways that required some form of detachment from conventional rules and authority. Therefore, a "good gangster" could become a role model for youth who did not have other figures in their lives who seemed to pay attention to them. As Mambo explained

somewhat cynically, "If the local gangster has money and a gun, he has power and seems cool." At the same time, youth who get into crime are constantly at risk of running into police—who have been ruthless with *mtaani* youth.

Mambo had strong feelings about this issue, as a father of three boys, a football coach, and someone who lives in a neighborhood where too many young people get shot by police. It was as though Mambo was trying to offer an alternative kind of role model for at-risk youth—he understood what was at stake and felt the urgency of the task. He also firmly believed that any young person could just as well head into a path of crime as they could a path of promise. It was all about the available structures of opportunity; it was not about whether or not a young person had propensities to deviance.

Mambo had gone through the stages of hand-to-mouth survival—especially during postelection violence in 2008 when he found himself out of work for months until he had 10 KES (US$0.13) to his name. But a few months following what seemed like an abyss of income poverty, he started building his livelihood strategy, first as a "lead entrepreneur" for the microfranchise Community Cleaning Services (CCS), and eventually earning a fixed salary as a "quality control professional" training other CCS teams and conducting in-field follow-up work (see chapter 4). He also served as a mentor for young men in his neighborhood through his local football club, where he was both a football coach for the youth leagues and a player on the club's team. He spoke about the fragile lines between "surviving," "living," and "thriving," and knew that at any moment youth could fall into one category or the other. Weekly, he followed up with youth who moved in and out of "gang life," where "you can get quick money." The perseverance and hard work required to do well in the waste management business was constantly faced with the other—quicker and easier—option: some form of crime.

When I first met Mambo in 2009, he was technically still considered a "youth," and yet he was already a father of three and had symbolically adopted three other young teenagers whose dying mothers had asked him to take care of their sons. With concern and self-imposed responsibility to young men around him, he once noted, "There is a wave of crime in my neighborhood. . . . I watch them closely and make sure they attend every [CCS] job, and every [football] training." Referring to youth who confided in him, he explained,

There's that level of trust. They tell me things, even their temptation to go into crime. . . . I tell you, just keeping them in school is a struggle! When the guys are easy to influence, they are likely targets. . . . The most important thing I can do is show them that they have options, alternatives to crime, and then I have to motivate them. [*smiles*] Sometimes they call me General.

One morning in 2010, I asked Mambo whether he thought of himself as a hustler, despite now earning a fixed income with CCS. "Oh yeah. I hustle every day! Hustle can be crime or work. It's that struggle that you find in the *mtaa*. It's the *mtaa* way." That ambiguous, deliberate space between work and crime reflected the struggle of youth in the *mtaa* to assert themselves in the hustle economy, along with the pride associated with the struggle itself. But what Mambo's statement also reflected was the vicissitudes of the hustle, his recognition that falling back into a survivalist mode or even into crime was a constant risk for anyone in the *mtaa,* no matter how responsible you tried to be.

After working with CCS for nearly five years, Mambo got a job working for Nairobi City Water Company (NCWC) as a meter supervisor. Much to his liking and relief, the work still involved going to the "field" and engaging with communities. Mambo knew he had a gift with people, and working in popular neighborhoods was much more interesting to him than any other part of Nairobi. In part, it was about the challenge of getting residents to realize that it was worth actually having a water meter and paying the water bills because, he explained as if rehearsing his pitch to skeptical residents, "once you do that, you can make demands on the service!"

Eliza (see chapter 5), who considered Mambo a good friend and with whom she had worked closely during the CCS years, once contrasted her continuous job insecurity with Mambo's situation: his job with the NCWC "set him up for life." Eliza remarked with no animosity but a recognition of distance: "Now Mambo isn't hustling any more. He now has a parastatal job. That one is a permanent job, and he can even have it until he retires." And yet, when I met with Mambo a few days later, it was clear that Mambo was still hyperaware of how fragile a semblance of security could be. He now had four children, four sets of school fees, and his wife's business to help support. And in a way he hustled with and within the structure of Nairobi City Water Company.

Mambo's hustle involved navigating both lifeworlds—his knowledge that in order to work in the *mtaa,* you had to contend with the rules of the

company and accept that both contexts were in many ways incompatible. "What's frustrating is the politics," lamented Mambo while sipping a coffee one afternoon in 2019 during one of his work breaks along Ngong Road. He explained that the NCWC was a corporate structure full of people who used to work for the county government before water was privatized in Nairobi. And the department that focused on popular neighborhoods, the one that Mambo considered most important in many ways, was of little concern to most of his NCWC colleagues. "No one sees it as important," partly because it was not lucrative. "You can't fill your pockets." And because there is a stigma associated with the popular neighborhoods, no one seems to want to work there. But Mambo always has. He enumerated different opportunities that would involve working with residents, including the so-called water cartels that are consistently defamed in mainstream media. These groups are primarily local networks of informal water providers. Mambo knew that some of these youth were the very same youth doing garbage collection with the likes of Kennedy, MANYGRO, and Kaka. They provide a service in areas that had gone for too long with water shortages and constant breakdowns of basic services. To Mambo, it was key to work *with* these water providers, not against them. At the same time, he was caught in a dilemma because he knew the *mtaa* youth; he had lived alongside them and worked closely with them. He knew hustlers from the *mtaa* would not want to abide by corporate ways and structures, and simultaneously what corporate structures would take the risk of paying attention to the practices and organizational logics of youth working and living in these neighborhoods, or understanding why residents resisted meter payments. The problem was mutual distrust and stigma. Mambo also found it perverse that all the water-related NGOs and development programs did not work with the NCWC. "Everyone is just doing their own thing. . . . Maybe they get together for World Water Day."

Mambo's way of not staying complacent was to continue coaching football to at-risk youth whose hustle could enable them to thrive just as much as it could get them shot by police if they were at the wrong place at the wrong time. He would never forget the young man who died in 2010, shot by a police officer in the back—one of the young men he had promised to look after. He still felt responsible for not having been able to protect him. To Mambo, despite the parastatal job and inevitable status he had acquired with this job, and the potential social distance between him and his friends from Mathare whose realities were increasingly different, it was still crucial

to stay close to the *feeling* of hustling "because it keeps your feet on the ground," as Mambo put it in 2023.

IT MATTERS WHERE YOU COME FROM, NOT WHERE YOU STAY: ROSIE

For some leavers, it's not so much that they return regularly to hang out with childhood peers on the stoop or rooftops; it's that they *evoke* the hood as a kind of badge of honor and legitimacy. Mathare youth sometimes poke fun at the middle-class youth who live in Buru Buru, a lower-middle-class housing estate, who (they argue) feel they have the license to evoke or document "ghetto life" because they too grew up in the nearby popular neighborhood Korogocho, or "Koch," as it is locally known. Buru Buru is also home to the rich repertoire of *matatu* repair technicians and graffiti artists tasked with decorating the ornately styled *manyanga* buses, and youth are known to use these *manyanga* buses as a proxy to social, personal, and "joy-riding" time (see Ference 2024, chapter 2). Buru Buru has become a hub for young creative talent. Some of the youth film and radio artists I have gotten to know over the years have hustled their way up into the creative industry as independent film or grassroots social movements with enough connections to funds to keep afloat and afford equipment and access to an office space but independent enough to operate without the hovering gaze or excessive attention of big sponsors. They feel legit in their reference to and stylistic allegiance with "ghetto struggles," all the while often using humor to recall the hardships of yesteryears, admitting they can't ever eat *githeri* (beans and maize) anymore because they had it too often as kids in school, associating it now with nothing more than a poor man's meal.

My first homestay host, Rosie, was exceedingly charming and we instantly became friends. But it was also clear that my homestay was a potential revenue source—as it should be. She was like an early Airbnb hostess for researchers wanting a legit experience in the *mtaa*. We cooked *githeri* together (Rosie had not grown out of *githeri* or perhaps never became middle-class enough to have that option), I spent hours with her daughter Ashley, and she came over my place with Ashley on several occasions. We did interviews together, focus groups too, but also separate fieldwork, and met up frequently in town at her favorite African restaurants to eat a copious lunch and debrief on the week's insights.

Rosie lived in a middle-income estate east of Mathare but always introduced herself as a girl of the *mtaa,* born and raised in Korogocho (Koch).

As a youth activist and community organizer, she evoked Koch every time she spoke with residents from Mathare, as if to say, "I am like you. I am from the other ghetto a few *matatu* stops away." This put people at ease, while establishing legitimacy. Her street credibility was based on having grown up in the *mtaa,* and even though she "got out" of income poverty, her personal narrative, grassroots activism, daily walkabouts in the *mtaa,* and neighboring residence kept her in touch with the realities of hustling youth. She had *left* Koch but was just next door, in a way. It was an upgrade but still in the struggling zone of the city. If being from the *mtaa* equated a kind of "badge," it also gave way to reverse prejudice toward young people in the city who romanticized and faked being from the *mtaa*. Where you eventually "stayed" mattered less than where you had grown up. Rosie definitely kept her badge.

THE LEAVER WHO HUSTLES FROM THE UNDERGROUND: SAMMY

Down the hill from Mathare Number 10, across the dilapidated bridge over the river, past Bondeni Primary School, and up the hill toward the police barracks (about a twenty-minute walk from Mathare Number 10), there was a place known as Kosovo. There I would visit Sammy Gitau, founder of the Mathare Community Resource Centre. The "Resource Centre," as it was called, was adjacent to the police barracks meters away from the Mathare Mental Hospital, and walking distance from Muthaiga, the wealthiest neighborhood in Nairobi, where most of the UN and US Embassy employees lived and worked.

Sammy's own personal life story and knowledge of Mathare included hustling in the street drug economy during his youth, witnessing the murder of his father, and, despite adversity, his persistent commitment to self-schooling and community activism in his later youth years. Whenever I met with Sammy, he was as much a confidant and sounding board as he was a key interlocutor. During our conversations, I found myself testing my field insights, and he shared his critical feedback and impressions on my interpretations of events and research findings. In turn, he seemed to be testing out his ideas on me—theorizing "the ghetto" and its various structures of power. He would literally map out his ideas on the walls of any space he occupied at the time, visualizing in great detail the relationship between the "big cats" and the "donkeys." He spoke in poetic allegories and metaphors to describe every actor in the city, from the government

ministries to the NGOs, to the corporations, media, upper-class elites, middle-class social climbers, and the *wananchi* (common man).

Sammy was voluntarily caught in a perpetual state of experience, observation, and analysis, a natural ethnographer and popular philosopher caught between life in the *mtaa* and self-styled scholarly reflection. Sammy spoke like a public intellectual and could carry on for hours, testing out his social commentary with anyone who would listen. At the same time, he was very private and somehow resisted getting himself out onto any official, professional "scene." He found it difficult to emotionally leave Mathare and at the same time felt like an outsider, partly because he seemed to see the wider dynamics of everything—from the bird's-eye view—rather than reflect on the ordinary small things of *mtaa* life. He spent a year at Manchester University pursuing a master's degree in international development with the potential to get hired by any number of large development organizations that would value his local knowledge, UK educational credentials, and gifted oratory skills. He had lived experience and a master's degree, Rasta dreadlocks, a charming smile, little round spectacles, and usually wore some kind of army jacket that recalled the likes of Argentine Marxist revolutionary Che Guevara. He was someone people wanted in the room.

But when he returned to Nairobi after that year in Manchester, he went right back to Mathare to tend to his resource center, squatting in an abandoned home on the edge of Mathare and Muthaiga, and was usually broke but somehow always managed never to run out of cigarettes. He refused to turn his small resource center into an NGO because to him that would be selling out, even if it might facilitate funds. He maintained an explicit politics of opposition, which eventually led to his resource center being closed. By 2019, Sammy had left Mathare for good and relocated further east of the city, near Dandora. From there he would be able to operate as a more effective underground activist, from outside the *mtaa*. But everyone in Mathare remembered Sammy well and knew that though he was no longer really ever *found* at the *bazes* anymore (Sammy loved walkabouts and checking in with different youth groups), he was somehow still *around* in people's imagination. He kept his Facebook profile and on occasion would post a poetic rant against this or that injustice, as his underground activism turned part digital. There were all kinds of interesting rumors about Sammy's underground activist exploits, which are not for me to spell out here. But they animated the imagination and gave hustlers permission

to think about their own politics and how to exercise their political agency, from above or below ground.

The experiences of the individuals featured in this chapter reflect the subjectivities and social relations that emerge around practices of *hustling* for youth who get older but stay rooted in their local terrains of operation, socialization, and experimentation. Across the different contexts described, in Huruma, Mathare Number 10, Mlango Kubwa, Korogocho, and Kosovo, hustling *over time* involves a number of particular dispositions and dilemmas associated with the prolongation of hustling into one's adulthood and beyond. For stayers and leavers across these *bazes,* there are logics and codes that are at play and at risk because navigating repeated forms of breakdown calls for systematic repair and care but also accommodations and adjustments that defy sticking to any plan or any norm. Both the stayers and the leavers, in different ways, are constantly on the move but also retain a certain discretion about where they are moving to. As we see with Eliza, Kennedy, Kaka, and Sammy, their hustle was often difficult to pin down even by friends and close peers (let alone the elders, the NGO workers, and even the curious ethnographer who keeps coming back). While plans can be made and futures imagined, plans are expected to be altered at best and broken most of the time, so in practice what "gets done" is never what was planned but rather what was put in place given the structures of opportunity at hand.

The chapter demonstrates how both stayers and leavers negotiate their relationship to the youth group and the *baze* toward which they have felt and built an attachment. Whether one stays or leaves, and how one returns if one leaves, what counts as group membership once one is no longer really a youth? The group is, for so many youth, a vital lifeline and support network, a source of work and training and mentorship. But for some, detachment from the youth groups becomes a lever to individual advancement. Perhaps Kennedy is an exception here because he always refers to his youth group, even though he is fiercely independent and operates both with the group and on his own accord.

The idea of "stayers and leavers" emerged around 2016 when it started to feel like my key interlocutors were transitioning out of youthhood but still experiencing a form of liminality that was no longer age based at all. It was during that time that different expressions of hustling in the *mtaa* for youth who are no longer that young became apparent. It was also during

this time that Kahos and I became friends, and over a number of long chats, we would debate this question of stayers and leavers, in part because he clearly felt torn about his own relationship to the *mtaa*. He was grateful for all the opportunities that enabled him to leave, but he would forever regard Mlango as home, and his childhood friends would continue to call him Kahos, "the fast one," while his professional name, Edward, would be pronounced by those who had not known him as one of six siblings growing up with a single mom at the heart of Peque *baze.* Numerous points emerged from these conversations with Kahos that are propositional in tone but not prescriptive. They advocate for things that work with the situated practices and knowledges (Haraway 1988) of the *mtaa.* This last section of the chapter is therefore written in the "we" form.

First, it seems clear to us, based on Kakos's lived experience and my ethnographic fieldwork, that youth groups in themselves are not only business collectives but also vital networks of support, mentoring, and knowledge sharing. Conventional capitalist economies tend to reward individual successes and gains, and yet as Mary Kinyanjui (2019) points out in her work on the *utu-ubuntu* business model, a cornerstone of informal economies in Kenya has always been mutuality and reciprocity—in other words, collective investments that build shared resources that can benefit the many. What, then, are the levers for leavers to invest in their hoods or campaign meaningfully on their behalf without being accused of "selling out" or going about it alone? Also, though youth may individually be classified as "underemployed" and "high school dropouts," how might the aggregate skill set of youth groups, as a collective of diverse service providers, be rendered more visible and employable beyond the hood? Access to information and particularly awareness of opportunities meant for youth and how to access these is pivotal. Kahos was very aware that he "got lucky" because he was both an enthusiastic learner at school and caught the attention of a few "well wishers" who wanted to give him a boost. But he recognized that he was an exception in that regard. Not enough youth have a quiet space to do homework after school or concentrate on studying for an exam, and not enough have mentors who invite them to imagine a future beyond what they see around them.

For example, individual youth as well as middle-aged adults who exit youth-led activities and organizations in popular neighborhoods would be eligible for the Access to Government Procurement Opportunities (AGPO) program, which in principle promises to have women, youth, and persons

with disabilities (PWDs) access 30 percent of government procurement opportunities.[7] However, applying for this program requires a certain confidence and bureaucratic literacy that youth from the hood don't necessarily have, nor do they know where to go for help.

Second, different aspirations between generations of youth need to be recognized and better understood. While residential waste management was important and innovative for the youth of the early 2000s, what matters to those of the 2020s? What local skills and resources can be harnessed for these younger youth, who are superconnected to digital platforms and see themselves as globalized cosmopolitan "ghetto boyz" and "ghetto gals" with shared struggles and solidarities to other hoods (Ntarangwi 2009; Weiss 2009)? And what has time done in terms of how they see the world? Here, capacity building focused on diverse forms of entrepreneurship and skills is essential for the sustainable expansion of existing hustles in neighborhoods like those in Mathare, while enabling access to programs such as the AGPO. At the same time, if local governments restrict the experimentation of existing and new hustles in the community with suffocating regulations or policing of the informality of these hustles, creativity will stall. The question is whether the social sector could fill the capacity gaps that hinder access and advancement for youth, their organizations, and their hustles.

Third, networking between youth organizations of different popular neighborhoods holds important potential for peer-to-peer sharing of knowledge and hustle experiences. For example, there is a long-overdue opportunity to leverage economies of scale for youth groups across Mathare who provide similar services such as household waste collection, disposal, and recycling. Together, they have stronger bargaining power in the market and can share costs and equipment. In turn, external actors and customers would more easily dare to invest in, and see the value of working with, community-based businesses. The alternative is a continued vicious circle of income streams and spending that stay within already low-income communities.

Fourth, the days of "NGO-isation" (Choudry and Kapoor 2013) that accelerated from the early 1990s is transitioning, not least with the funding cuts of international development budgets in the past decade (from countries like the UK, for example). Youth are tired of being foot soldiers for "slum touring" one-off NGO projects. Homegrown community activist organizations in Mathare like Ghetto Foundation or Mathare Social Justice

Centre are building alliances with other allies, including action researchers like Naomi Van Stapele and Wangui Kimari, to develop alternative mechanisms for support, mentorship, and collaboration. These are local organizations that are experimenting with innovative and decolonial pedagogies and programs of work outside mainstream educational and development paradigms. Additionally, there are other hybrid development models of collaboration and experimentation that have generated meaningful insights and outcomes. Chapter 4 gave the example of a sanitation social enterprise, Community Cleaning Services, and its collaboration with local youth groups. Around the same time that CCS started, the citizen-mapping collective Map Kibera started collaborating with local activists to create countercartographies of formally unmapped popular neighborhoods. On the surface, these are very different approaches (from action research to business-led to tech-driven), engaging a different set of external actors, and they cannot do everything (especially alone). But they share a participatory ethos, an effort to recognize and amplify residents' existing situated practices, and they exemplify some of the alternative schemas for doing community work and politics.

Finally, the leavers—with their qualifications and exposure to diverse sectors—have an important role to play, given their access to and potential influence in the hood. They are well placed to be role models and provide coaching to younger youth and their middle-aged peers who have stayed in the hood. Not all young people in popular neighborhoods can or want to be entrepreneurs. The leavers, with the combined lived experience of juggling survival through community-based hustles and striving to acquire skills needed in the formal job market, are in a good position to guide the younger generation in bridging their aspirations and the expectations of the job market. As Kahos argues, "our regular visits should not only be to extract from the hood—socially, politically, and economically—but also to give back to the space that was, and still is, our springboard."

As time passes and youth navigate life stages, deciding whether to stay or leave and on what terms, there are stories to tell about the everyday exploits that animate these streets. The next chapter focuses on the modes of storytelling that have accompanied and shifted with the hustle of the past decade. It sheds light on the performative dimension of the hustle economy and its (temporal, spatial, and digital) stages. It focuses on the storytellers, some stayers and some leavers, who together are forming the archives of the *mtaa* and reaching audiences beyond its ~~border~~.

Storytellers, Nairobi

7 Storytellers Performing the Hustle

Hip-Hop, Street Tours, and Digital Narrations

STAGES

In 2010, I collaborated with a local crew of young filmmakers known as Ghetto Films Trust to shoot a short low-budget documentary film we called *Story Yetu* (*Our Story*).[1] In June 2010, my brother, Sebastien, a music composer and teacher based in Berlin, came to Kenya to work with young musical artists to coproduce a set of collaborative music compositions that would be featured in the documentary film being shot in these same neighborhoods. Sebastien got to know a group of aspiring young artists between the ages of fifteen and twenty-five who had never had any formal music training but whose talent and street-oriented knowledge meant they had stories to tell and nothing to lose. Among this group were three young boys, Cheddaz, Kissmart, and Donga, barely eighteen years old at the time. They identified as artists and spent much of their day around a small container that had been repurposed as a makeshift recording studio and resource center in Kosovo, run by Sammy, the local activist and youth mentor who featured at the start of chapter 5 and in chapter 6. Kosovo was one of the most underresourced corners of Mathare yet eerily situated right next to the police barracks and near the infamous Mathari Mental Hospital, the only public mental health-care facility in Kenya. Together, Sebastien and the group of young artists spent more than two weeks working daily, putting together three music tracks, combining genres of local *genge* hip-hop and jazz influences, incorporating local sounds from the streets (the frying of *mandazi*, the *matatu* horns in the distance), and working with improvised instruments (other than Sebastien's acoustic guitar). Together the group decided on a name for the music credits: Mashanti. The name referred to

"My shanti" to evoke both the fact that the music was produced in a shack ~~but also that there is~~ pride associated with the ~~shack,~~ what can emerge from the prototypical makeshift ~~dwelling~~. Three tracks were composed for the documentary.

Years later, when booking an Airbnb for a return trip to Nairobi in 2016, I noticed that one of the first links to appear below Nairobi Airbnb when I did my first quick Google search was for Nairobi "street tours" with a social enterprise called Nai Nami. The faces of those three young friends featured as the Nai Nami image on the homepage of the website. In the meantime, I had followed each of these young men on Facebook since the early 2010s, seeing their progression as a local hip-hop group calling themselves Nairobeez. Over the course of a decade, their twenties, the young boys I had met in 2010 had gone from spitting rhymes for each other at the Kosovo *baze,* to hooking into a documentary project that would invite them to collaborate on the music score, to developing their own musical sound and furthering their musical education, to honing their entrepreneurial confidence while continuing to make "connections" both within and outside the *mtaa,* to being the first hit on the Nairobi Airbnb page by 2017.

This chapter explores the multiple stages on which youth perform their hustle and project localized storytelling and packaging of the *mtaa* (the hood) for citywide and international consumption. Here, the first generation of digitally connected youth tell the stories of everyday hustles and hustle to tell stories. Through their performance and engagement with various stages, the spatialities of the *mtaa* become entangled and stretched. This chapter connects music, digital platforms, and street-corner socialities of the *baze* to reflect on the particular mise-en-scène that emerges when youth "perform their agency" (Esson, Amankwaa, and Mensah 2021, 194) through forms of popular storytelling. As such, a set of hustle aesthetics are fashioned to make hustling look good and easy, while presenting a kind of "joyful militancy" (Montgomery and Bergman 2021) as an affirmation of life, play, and movement amid back-drops of breakdown and harm. Nick Montgomery and Carla Bergman (2021, 57) specify that joy is not the same as happiness, that "ridiculous thing we're all supposed to chase." No, joy is something else, something that can be generatively entangled with "everyday acts of resistance," "spaces of ethical questioning," and "grounds on which to build" (2) something otherwise. Joy is "the growth of people's capacity to do and feel new things. . . . It is *aesthetic*" (60), insofar as it evokes an intensity of the senses.

While most Nairobi youth in popular neighborhoods talk about life and labor as a form of hustle, some bear witness to ~~Nairobi~~ youth hustles and use creative repertoires to tell stories about the everyday hustles that animate "ghetto life" (Unseld 2021). These three youth I met during the filming of *Story Yetu* positioned themselves over time as witness bearers and storytellers. And their stories, over time, became one of their hustles. They used both digital mediums and their local street-oriented knowledge—one helping to market the other. ~~The three young men~~ went on to pursue musical training, ~~and~~ along the way they recognized that they could turn the art of storytelling into a livelihood—there was a business to be had by telling stories about the "ghetto" from the perspective of young people who had grown up in it and navigated every facet of street life (Di Nunzio 2019). There was honesty in recalling the days of petty crime as much as in recounting with pride the ways out of "that life." In the decade that followed, tapping into the video selfie culture and digital platforms that had become widely available across the globe among digitally connected youth, these three childhood friends were now using social media to market both their music and their stories.

While the chapters of the book so far have focused on the aspects of hustling that reflect efforts to make work, provide, redistribute, repair, and navigate everyday breakdown, this chapter focuses on a particular performative dimension of hustling, such that hustling involves the art of storytelling. Chapter 6, on *stayers and leavers,* examined how some "connected" youth have used their epistemic credibility to carve their pathways out of popular neighborhoods, while others have deliberately stayed back to focus on community development from the inside. This chapter builds on these reflections by further complicating the understanding of who stays and who leaves, ~~not only~~ by exploring not just what youth do and from where but also by paying attention to the particular stylized narrations that emanate from the *mtaa.* The chapter therefore offers a series of ethnographic ruminations on the entanglements of youth voices, street stories, and digital stages. The chapter explores the performative registers of hustling through digitally mediated youth-led stories that reach diverse "global" audiences with different effects. In some cases, these audiences are development "sponsors" or potential ones at that; in other cases, the intended audiences are other youth navigating their own precarious urban terrains in urban elsewheres (Kidula 2012; Ntarangwi 2009; Rollefson 2017; Weiss 2009).

Throughout the twentieth century, the discipline of cultural anthropology animated long-standing debates about what constitutes *culture* and how to go about interpreting and writing about situated cultural forms, knowledge systems, and particular places (Clifford and Marcus 1986; Geertz 1977). But as the study of culture(s) moved beyond the early anthropologists' fetish for the exoticized Indigenous other, it became clear that studying culture called for *seeing* culture and cultural production as an outcome of plural influences and encounters. Here the works of postcolonial theorists Edward Said, Stuart Hall, and Homi Bhabha have brought vital perspectives by examining and conceptualizing the modes of representation and "hybridities" of cultural formations that are intimately connected to the dynamics of power, knowledge, who has the authority to speak, and on whose behalf. Through Said, Hall, and Bhabha's writing (and indeed their own biographies), contemporary cultural formations appear as layered manifestations of histories and continuities of colonialism, entangled with anti-colonial struggles to form postcolonial diasporic encounters. In geographical studies focused on youth cultures, Doreen Massey (1998, 122–23) writes about the "spatial openness" of urban youth culture, positing that all youth cultures are "hybrid cultures." And as Cindy Katz's book *Growing Up Global* (2004) shows, when it comes to globalization and economic restructuring in the twenty-first century, there are threads that connect the experiences and subjectivities of young people across seemingly disparate contexts, from Sudan to New York City.

The forms of "hustling as storytelling" explored in this chapter involve making music tracks (particularly homegrown hip-hop) featuring local young artists who rhyme as much about structural violence *against youth* as about everyday joyful flirtatious banter *among youth*; and organizing street tours led by youth from the *mtaa* to share local youth knowledge with Nairobi visitors. There are three key stages involved here, avenues for reaching different audiences: *the street* (where the audience are fellow peers and community residents including elders, and where street life becomes the aestheticized backdrop of both photographic posts and music videos), *the studio* (the creative ~~and~~ production space where music tracks and local radio shows are recorded and edited, using various forms of digital media and equipment), and the *digitally mediated space* of *social media* along with digital platforms where social networks and opportunities to monetize stories form beyond the boundaries of the neighborhood.

A METHODOLOGICAL NOTE ABOUT THE DIGITAL AND THINKING WITH STORIES

Sometime in 1998, my undergraduate anthropology professor Kathryn March asked our small seminar class on "Life Stories" to think about the word *history*. HIS-story. She paused. It was a light-bulb moment for all these budding anthropologists in the room invited to dis-member the word *history* and separate the masculine pronoun HIS from the noun STORY. We realized that "history" as an academic discipline involved as much narrative, partial, gendered construction as did the "life stories" of an elderly illiterate street hawker might.[2] We went on to discuss who tended to write mainstream "history" books, who could get published, which stories tended to be told, and which ones reaffirmed dominant narratives and understandings of the past: *the white men who won the wars, and those who had time and could afford to write.* Hence we were invited in that class to delve into the counterhistories, the "her-stories" and "their-stories," and think about the range of ways stories are told beyond the published canon. What of oral histories and different genres of writing, our professor asked. This exercise made us reflect critically on the relative validity of any story—each partial, contingent, and grounded in "situated knowledge" (Haraway 1988), but it also made us realize that each story has its importance, its place, its voice, and perhaps its intended audience. And when we conduct an ethnography, perhaps we have to avoid trying to search for the "right" story because in a way some oral histories will incorporate elements of "tall tales."[3] The key, then, is to triangulate different narratives and at times to hold space for different stories that do not sit comfortably side by side, recognizing that each carries its own epistemic significance and lesson.

So what happens when the "telling [of] young lives" (Jeffrey and Dyson 2009) is informed by digitally mediated encounters that occur when there is physical distance, complementing in-person ethnographic fieldwork? As ethnographers returning to a field site over time, what can we learn and say about young lives whose intimate vacillations we cannot ever claim to know but whose carefully curated digital profiles present a form of auto-portraiture? What if the presentation involves using the real and raw backdrop of the everyday to fashion a particular portrayal of "ghetto life" that couples evocations of struggle and breakdown with joyful playfulness (Arora 2012, 2019)?

Urban ethnography in the twenty-first century poses a host of epistemic, ontological, and methodological conundrums. The role of digital life over

the past decade, since the start of my ongoing ethnographic engagement in Nairobi, has increasingly extended the temporality and spatiality of urban ethnographic research. Digital mediums of communication mean that over the past decade especially, one no longer really "leaves" the field. At the same time, how and when one "enters" the field or gets to know new interlocutors can combine face-to-face and remote communications. As methods themselves evolve when we incorporate digital devices, this then reconfigures both our methodological repertoire and the ways in which the social (and cultural) is performed with and through these technologies (Back 2012; Back and Puwar 2012; Ruppert, Law, and Savage 2013).

~~Having interlocutors who can reach out and be reached via WhatsApp or Facebook adds a particular form of punctuated access to selected windows into the lives of our interlocutors and friends.~~ These windows present different facets of lived experience and communication. For example, in the case of Facebook or Instagram posts, these tend to be highly curated auto-portraits, sent to a wider "friends" and "followers" network. Those who react, through "likes" and other emojis or actual responses, confirm having "seen" the post. To emoji or to add a textual response is to affirm and acknowledge, but it is nevertheless a public forum and inevitably somewhat impersonal in its profoundly performative dimension, as much as it can simulate a sense of solidarity and support. One-on-one WhatsApp texts and voice messages, in contrast, facilitate asynchronous personal communications that are stripped of artifice, less presentational, sometimes even deeply confessional and reflective. The text "thread" can become a precious archive of a conversation, more immediate than email but giving more consideration and time to pause between responses than a phone conversation. The WhatsApp group chat is a combination of both—less public and exposed than Facebook or Instagram but less intimate than the one-on-one exchange. And yet it can be a precious forum for sharing news, supportive accolades, and humorous banter among a selective group.

With the added ethical and personal responsibility that these forms of communication entail in terms of mutual boundary setting and maintenance of ties, this extension of fieldwork through digital platforms calls for new methodological considerations and taking seriously how these modes of communication inform the mutual sense of "knowing" about each other's lives and the traces they leave in the wake of seemingly ephemeral exchanges. To be clear, this chapter does not provide an ethnographic account of everyday uses and appropriations of global technologies; rather,

it focuses on the ways in which these technologies reveal particular capabilities for storytelling and telling particular stories about Nairobi hustles.

As this chapter reflects on three modalities of storytelling (social media posts, music, and street tours), it also involves different qualities and kinds of encounter. For example, with Eliza and Kennedy and Kaka (mentioned in previous chapters), I see how their Facebook posts present particular stories and I can triangulate the performative portrayal of self that appears online with the version of themselves that they present in real life with different people in their lives—from the NGO folks, to me the researcher turned friend, to their childhood peers at the *baze,* and with different family members. Eliza, for example, presents a version of herself on social media that leans into the persona of strong, independent single mother (whether or not she is single at the time), who is an activist, proud to be from the ghetto, and loves wordplay. Kaka posts on behalf of fellow youth struggling in the *mtaa,* often posting about events that promote youth resilience and youth-led community development. He is outside the UN-Habitat headquarters, or just about to head into a conference for youth leaders, or part of a group selfie featuring visitors who have come to see the efforts in Mlango Kubwa. For Kaka, his Facebook page is curated as though it represents a wider collective—an individual profile standing in for countless youth who have not had the chance to express themselves in front of a wider audience. Kaka knows this responsibility and his Facebook page is managed with his wider peer group in mind, while inevitably promoting his leadership and status, as humble as he may be.

It is not to suggest that there is *more* performance online than in real life, but certainly there are different qualities of presentation, different kinds of selection and curation involved. In both cases, particular aesthetics of hustling or doing well are projected depending on what's needed, and there is always a blurring of the lines between the real and the aspirational, a point that Sasha Newell (2012) makes in his ethnography of the "modernity bluff." Newell describes how his interlocutors in Côte d'Ivoire engaged in modes of conspicuous consumption to mask their precarious social and economic status. But this performance is not just about pretense; it is importantly reflective of the collective labors involved in blurring the distinction between the "real" precarity and the "fake" success. Inherent in the bluff, in other words, is a productive troubling of this binary between real and fake, struggle and success, and the wider point then is to show that everyone has a stake in making sure that it is impossible to distinguish one from

the other, or that perhaps they are completely dialectical. This dialectic between struggle and success is ~~then~~ reflected in the representational politics of storytelling through these multiple modalities and stages.

When it comes to the three young men I met in 2010 ~~during the production and recording of the documentary film~~, for several years I only kept in touch with them through Facebook, very aware that this was a selective, curated, and partial space for communicating and "seeing" how and what they were doing. More recently, since May 2023, I have gotten to know another group of young hip-hop artists in Nairobi through focus group discussions followed by primarily WhatsApp group communications. The WhatsApp group chat has become a space for them to share and promote their new tracks and videos, where they post a new track or upcoming gig and request for all in the group to promote and share with our respective networks. When I provide responses (and share with my own Nairobi-based contacts), I also pose questions about the musicality, the social commentary, and the creative process. It is with this in mind that I want to consider how the prism of social media and digital communication in itself informs and complicates ethnographic encounters and demands careful consideration when it comes to writing about what these encounters say about lives and young people in popular neighborhoods—in popular Nairobi. Here again, Glissant's (1997) notion of "opacity" is important for thinking about how stories emerge and how they might be understood, always with some degree of obscurity, such that to try and understand requires sitting with the unknowable and to simply *take in*.

I write this chapter ~~while~~ aware that the very focus on "storytelling" has multiple registers. The digital ways these stories are disseminated is key here, but there is also a strong dialectic between the digital stage and the everyday street stage—the two co-influence one another. The next sections explore how stories are told through the medium of social media, the medium of song, and the medium of a city tour. At the same time, stories are also told through the medium of an ethnographic encounter, a research interview, even a conversation between friends. Stories in all their forms therefore involve selective curation and editing, selective memory and choice about what gets foregrounded and what gets left out. It is not to say that a story is untruthful—~~it is to say that~~ the story itself is an interpretation and a particular recitation, describing and analyzing the connection between events and one's experience, perception, and emotional response to those events.[4]

GROWING UP DIGITAL

In African cities, youth popular culture reflects an amalgam of genres and influences, such that a rich repertoire of "intercultural and transnational formation" shapes particular forms of what Paul Gilroy (1993, ix) calls "black vernacular culture," reflecting an "inescapable hybridity and inter-mixture of ideas" (xi). These Afro-diasporic encounters inform the production of multivocal, multisituated popular culture, always coming from someplace but with echoes of other places. In other words, stories are "situated" (Haraway 1988), but ideas are derived from or connected to multiple elsewheres (Massey 1998). Here the sense of porosity and possibility is not one of newness per se but rather one of reconfiguration and repurposing: repurposing in the sense of recovery, rejigging, and reusing but also in the sense of "re" (Latin for *again*), finding a purpose, *again*.[5]

Multisituated stories with resonances of elsewheres and resonating *in* elsewheres include, for example, the British series *Top Boy,* about Afro-Caribbean youth navigating "road life" (Bakkali 2018) on a London housing estate, which youth in Nairobi mentioned to me with joy when I was in Nairobi in 2023. Connected to this, in Brad Weiss's (2009) ethnographic account of young men working and socializing in and around shanty-structure barbershops in popular neighborhoods of Dar Es Salaam, the stylized backdrop of graffiti art and music that fashioned the streets of urban Tanzania reflected a local genre of youth culture that referenced African American hip-hop icons to form a kind of street-based cosmopolitanism. Mario Schmidt (2024) writes about rural-urban migrants in Nairobi who constantly negotiate their aspirations and what is possible—aspirations informed by a variety of personal and global pressures that define particular conceptions of masculinity, in the face of the complex realities in their high-rise estates.

When I first started doing fieldwork in Nairobi in 2005, many young people had access to a "brick" phone, contributing bits of pay-as-you-go phone credit to a shared device, and a few had a Yahoo or Hotmail email addresses they would check every few weeks at a local internet café. When I later returned in 2009 to conduct my PhD fieldwork, the young people who would become my key interlocutors and friends all had a mobile phone of their own, and many had a Facebook account. Over the course of the 2010s, my key interlocutors have all gotten smartphones and become super-connected to digital platforms. Today, if many youth living in Mathare Valley are unable (or unwilling) to imagine living and working elsewhere,

they nevertheless project themselves and their neighborhood onto an imaginary global stage, through digital platforms that have increasingly become part of their everyday grammar and embodied experience.

The spaces in popular neighborhoods where youth were seen as "idle" a decade ago if they were on the jobless corner are now "connected," even during their states of waiting and *kuzurura* (hanging about, loitering). Hunched over their devices, Nairobi youth in these neighborhoods may still not have access to what the World Health Organization would regard an adequate toilet option, but they have access to WhatsApp and mobile banking services, and as a young man named Felix was explaining to me in 2019, "it doesn't even matter now if you can't finish high school [because you don't have school fees]; at least now we have Google." The subtext of Felix's comment and the conversation that ensued with his three friends all sitting at the *baze* in the middle of the day was this: the smartphone has helped youth access modalities of learning and working in the city even when they are "just sitting" on the jobless corner. As Julie Archambault (2017) shows in her ethnography of mobile use among youth in Mozambique, the smartphone can enable a "politics of pretense," enabling both social relations and forms of disguise. In the *mtaa,* the smartphone is simultaneously a technology of inclusion and one that facilitates ambiguity around the performance and "status" of (being in or at) work, leisure, planning, or just killing time.

While development practitioners speak of material poverty in these neighborhoods and the lack of educational facilities, young people who have grown up with smartphones have shaped a kind of leapfrog urbanism using global brand names as a synonym for various forms of connection, education, and information that they can access from the street stoop. Just as they say, "Now with Google I can teach myself about anything," in the "Education" section of their Facebook profiles, they humorously and proudly state, "Ghetto University." Together, the "Google" global and the "ghetto" local are enmeshed to produce a kind of street-based knowledge that is embedded in local social realities on the one hand and inflected with global echoes on the other (Weiss 2009). Google has become a kind of emic term for the endless online labyrinth of information that transcends class and economic status as the cost of smartphones and data bundles reaches the most under-resourced communities, and this allows youth from popular neighborhoods not only a window with a view of the rest of the world but also access to a stage on which they too can perform and curate

their cosmopolitan selves. In a lifeworld where a large number of teenagers do not finish secondary school due to a complex number of extenuating circumstances, and where the prospects of waged employment are scarce even when they do, the younger youth of Mathare have differentiated themselves from their older "brothers and sisters," the "youth" I first met more than a decade ago. For this new generation of youth, with a smartphone, some smarts, and some gall, many are trying to hustle their way out of joblessness through a nexus of work-leisure practice that is acutely aware that retaining street credibility and "ghetto" roots is perhaps now less about how "hard you can hustle" and instead how easy (and good) you make hustling look. All the while, as argued by Wendy Willems (2019) in her piece on "politics of things," there is an intimate connection between "publics" that are digitally constituted and the physical spaces in which these publics manifest themselves, such as the social infrastructure of the *baze.*

Here the hustle is actioned and experienced through the multivocal and multisituated creative practices of storytelling in different forms. The stories are autobiographical or about the collective "we," and the modes of getting these stories *out* and viewed (as well as heard) reflect the rapid rise of the digital (r)evolution that accelerated in the 2010s. This happened as music production and distribution became more digital and access to mobile phone and computer technology widened across income classes. There was a growing convergence of the digital economy and the endeavors to turn creative practices into livelihoods. But in addition to this, the art of storytelling is in itself a form of hustle insofar as storytelling from the *mtaa* has shaped a hybridized economy. It is at once hooked into the currency of informational capitalism via digital platforms, while also staying hyperconnected to situated genres of expression. Additionally, the presentation of stylized popular imaginaries gets projected via the mobile platforms of *matatu* vehicles, which in themselves feature graffiti art stories and play tunes that feature local artists, some of whom started by recording their tracks in the makeshift recording spaces of the *mtaa*. Here, the (lived) street, the (recording) studio, and the (digital) stage converge. The stage also has triple meaning here: the stage is metaphorical insofar as the urban resident watches the performance on the "digital" stage from wherever they are sitting in the city. The stage can be a physical place of (live) performance, and in Nairobi popular vernacular, the "stage" is also the place where *matatu* stop to let on and off passengers—a known place to regulars

but one that can change and is never really fixed. All these "stages" have animated the *mtaa* sounds, musical experiments, and media projections of young creatives from these popular neighborhoods. Yet the "audible infrastructures" (Devine and Boudreault-Fournier 2021) in Mathare have evolved, informed in part by everyday rhythms, sounds, and stories of the streets but also by the techno-digital-scapes that have intersected with these over the past twenty years. These audible infrastructures have shaped what Clovis Bergere (2017) calls a kind of "digital society," where youth carve out domains for debating politics via digital spheres to assert their participation in public discourse while experiencing sustained marginalization. Focusing on his ethnographic field site in Guinea, Bergere is drawing on Partha Chatterjee's (2004) distinction in *Politics of the Governed* between civil and political society, the latter being the sphere of the urban poor who create spaces of political contestation and participation when excluded from formal rights to citizenship and urban services. Connected to the idea of "digital society," the writings of Kenyan scholars George Ogola and Nanjala Nyabola have offered foundational analyses of digital life in Kenya, focusing on the "digital (dis)order" of the Twitter space, for example (Ogola 2023), and how "digital democracy" has advanced Africanized feminist politics (Nyabola 2018). The next section explores the particular creative expressions of digital society and democracy in homegrown hip-hop in Nairobi's popular neighborhoods, to illustrate this complicated tango between struggle and success, politics and play (Arora 2019; Newell 2012).

HUSTLING TO MAKE SONGS: *MTAANI* HIP-HOP

In Nairobi, youth popular culture is expressed through their everyday urban vernacular of Kenyan Swahili known as Sheng (Githiora 2018). The Kenyan hip-hop genre of genge that emerged in the late 1990s mirrored U.S. African American hip-hop styles and Jamaican ragga to form what would come to be known as *muziki wa vijana* (music of the youth) (Ntarangwi 2009). The creative performative practices of street linguistics through the constant wordplay of Sheng and *genge*'s "youth music" have formed a vibrant urban youth culture that provides an auto-portrait of everyday life in the city from the perspective of young people who were born and raised in Nairobi's popular neighborhoods, facing paradoxical economic, environmental, and social realities: on the one hand, young lives are cut off from formal institutional support (education, health care, and employment opportunities), but at the same time, they are the sources of investment

and attention by the myriad improvement schemes purporting to tackle the "youth crisis."

Since the 2010s, the concomitant rise of hybrid development schemes promoting social innovation and entrepreneurship, alongside the acceleration of information communication technology (ICT) services, has meant that Nairobi's popular neighborhoods are home to the marginalized majority of young people in the city—digital natives who are simultaneously superconnected to digital technologies and the most vulnerable when it comes to securing stable employment opportunities. As youth make work in all manner of ways using the resources at hand, the question being not "what job can I get?" but instead "how many hustles do I need?," part of the portfolio of mixed livelihoods includes, for some youth, the performance arts. The inner cities have long been "stages" where the art of the spoken word and the skill of telling a good story are integral to everyday survival in some cases and everyday banter. Hip-hop artists often allude to the connection between learning to spit rhymes on the streets and getting yourself out of trouble. It is also a mode of reclaiming one's history and asserting one's presence in the city, especially in the face not only of adversity but also of silencing, criminalization, and stigmatization. As George the Poet remarked on his podcast episode "Songs Make Jobs," "Young Black people can turn a difficult situation around by making music, and they have done so across the world."[6]

To tell one's story becomes, therefore, a vital living archive and, as George the Poet calls it, a form of education and ethnography in itself—where observations and representations of a place are told through the perspective of those living in it. These stories became vital repertoires for both members of the urban youth culture who may never leave their hood and those who do (see chapter 6). Both project imaginaries of shared cosmopolitanism with "global" youth (Weiss 2009), some staying anchored in place and some finding other stages beyond the "ghetto streets." It is against the backdrop of every city's inability (or unwillingness) to support marginalized young lives along with global economic restructuring of the past decades that structural injustice has deepened youth poverty. This is especially pronounced in the Majority World, and notably in African cities where there is such an acute concentration of vulnerability alongside relentless resourcefulness. As such, creative genres of youth-led storytelling across urbanscapes have not only emerged from the streets but also spoken to other youth across multiple elsewheres (Katz 2004; Massey 1998).

And in so doing, youth make claims that are at once symbolic, material, spatial, and social.[7]

Hip-hop in Nairobi is, as Felix Mutunga Ndaka (2023) argues, an "alternative archive," a mode of cultural production rooted in the lived experiences of popular neighborhoods and street-oriented knowledge. It relays the "struggle and insurgency" (Jay-Z 2010) of the streets in neighborhoods where marginalized communities are cut off from basic services and excluded from mainstream economic, political, and social life. Hip-hop is descriptive and analytical; it is portraiture and social commentary from the margins, though it can of course become folded into the commercial mainstream. In his piece "Lyrical Renegades," on the hip-hop tracks that emerged during the Covid-19 pandemic, Ndaka (2023) argues that the urban margins have always contended with overlapping crises—the pandemic was simply one among many. Consequently, these overlapping crises have always given way to creative survival strategies and constant combats against systems of oppression. During the pandemic, for example, the crackdown on the popular economies meant that there was a more acute "hunger virus" (as my friends lamented over WhatsApp texts in 2020) as opposed to fears of the Coronavirus. Across different moments and lived crises, Ndaka (2023) argues, hip-hop serves as a form of theorization. It theorizes everyday "ghetto life," it speaks truth to power, it alludes to hyperpolicing against young men at the neighborhood level, but it can also theorize wider systems of economic inequality, speaking about global capitalism or development. Hip-hop, therefore, has a way of becoming both representation and repertoire—holding space for oral histories, memories, and local knowledge.

Musical and spoken-word artists reflect on and represent themes and stories that speak about social, economic, and political lives of residents who are living at the margins but are vital members of the city—the *fundi* that repairs all things that break down, the service providers filling the gap when there is no "public" provision, the storytellers who provide a counternarrative to the dominant tropes depicting these parts of the city as spaces of negation. Importantly, the role of youth in hip-hop and all forms of artistic expression illustrates the refusal, defiance, and rejection to abide by the Kenyan gerontocracy—where all those in positions of political power are elders (often men) who do not represent the interests or the views of the marginalized majority demographic—the Kenyan landless, wageless youth. Elites in Kenya have throughout the colonial and postcolonial eras

systematically policed young male bodies and tried to quell their practices of resistance. From the Mau Mau freedom fighters in the years leading to independence, to the Mungiki gangs in the late twentieth century, to the twenty-first-century youth hanging around in the streets, youth masculinities have long been stigmatized for defying authority, subverting norms of propriety, and making trouble.

Hip-hop in Nairobi has therefore become a form of art, subversive activism, and a business. It is style and critique. As in many cities across the globe, it contests power structures and figures of authority, including symbols of the state personified through the police force. Hip-hop has carved out a space not only for "alternative archives" but also for alternative scripts (Rollefson 2017) of masculinity and belonging in the city. And at the same time, hip-hop refuses to be overwhelmed by lamentations and dejection. Through its tradition of wordplay, it inserts creative banter, humor, and wit into its lyrics, and its beats animate the street corners, *matatus,* and clubs where the tracks are performed and played. It therefore shifts from modes of heavy political and social commentary to modes of lightness and playful description of ordinary pleasures and pastimes.

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's seminal book *Decolonising the Mind* (1986) lamented the fact that European languages had dominated African literature, even in the postcolonial era. There has since been a long-standing debate concerning language in African literature. For example, Aimé Césaire (1947) and Édouard Glissant (1997) both expressed the complicated relationship between their Martinique roots and European education, and this came through in how they both played with the French language in their prose, both advocating for a creolized Black French. Chinua Achebe (2003) argued that writing in English enabled African writers to Africanize English by representing African voices and experiences and at the same time ensuring a wider readership beyond African readers. Kwani's 2015 literary festival, held in Nairobi, was titled "Beyond the Map of English: Writers in Conversation on Language" (Nderitu 2015). And Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's son Mukoma wa Ngũgĩ, now a professor of Africana studies at Cornell University, wrote a piece in conversation with his father's work titled "What Decolonising the Mind Means Today" (2018). In this piece, he both pays homage to and advances his father's work, explaining that "decolonising the mind became useful as a conceptual tool through which to understand the ways in which power imbalances were practiced as culturally encoded automated reflexes." He goes on to argue that "African languages have to move from

being primarily social languages to vehicles of political, cultural, and economic growth. . . . Our imaginations draw from our creolised cultures, and have had their own approaches to aesthetics." These debates are relevant to the politics of language of African hip-hop, which has become a vehicle not only of African languages but of African creolized vernacular like Sheng. What is notable here is that through the digital medium, these hip-hop tracks, in all their diversity, enable the hyperlocal vernaculars and experiences to reverberate beyond the *mtaa* streets—the expressive *mtaani* grammar reaches beyond linguistic and spatial borders, becoming perhaps a form of linguistic decolonization through its circulation.

Everyday street banter, through the urban vernacular and repartee of Sheng, has become material for creative youth practices of storytelling, and the streetscapes of the corrugated makeshift dwellings and loitering corners serve as the backdrop of DIY music videos featuring *mtaa* life. These videos include prosaic scenes featuring vignettes of ordinary residential, commercial, social, and working life that coexist in concert. These hip-hop tracks, now consistently accompanied by some kind of video production (ranging from the super-low-budget to high-tech production) turn the *mtaa* inside out, rendering it simultaneously a "spectacle" and a "dwelling place" (C. Richardson and Skott-Myhre 2012, 10) to defy the tropes that would present these neighborhoods as only one of the following: carceral, overpoliced or ignored, or a place of humanitarian spectacle and intervention. The scenes feature shared public spaces that move from wide-shot panoramic views of the neighborhood's hectic rhythms seen from a drone's-eye view, to the up-close and personal hand-held camera footage of individuals looking in the camera to remind the audience that "this shit is personal" as well as public and political. Here we see the "alternative archive" combining the playful as well as the resistance. These stories do not gloss over the struggles and the hassles, but it also depicts the hustle as entangled with ordinary joy, young life, young love, likes, emojis, vibes, and everything in between. Thus for Mathare youth versed in hustling their way through these different forms of *mtaa* life, this dwelling place becomes a stage to tell their stories. Inflected with stylized autobiographical content meant to reflect shared struggles and solidarities but also simple pleasures and pursuits, the tracks are simultaneously rooted in place and meant to travel, even if youth themselves cannot (Kidula 2012).

As Cornel West writes in his foreword to Derrick Darby and Tommie Shelby's book *Hip Hop and Philosophy: Rhyme 2 Reason* (2005, xi), hip-hop has forged "new ways of escaping social misery, and to explore novel responses

for meaning and feeling in a market-driven world." From American hip-hop (Perry 2004), to UK grime (Hancox 2019), to European hip-hop (Rollefson 2017), to East African *genge* (Ntarangwi 2009), talented urban youth have created Afro-diasporic sounds that are manifestations of rhythmic experimentations, bold artistic expression, and social commentary.[8] Hip-hop has been as much about playful entertainment shaping global popular culture as it has become a set of political and philosophical meditations on a particular time and place. As a genre, it is at once hyperlocalized in its place-based ethnographic descriptions and hyperglobal in its wider resonances with other urban contexts where marginalized youth experience equivalent challenges.

Its musical composition is equally simultaneously local and global insofar as lyrics are steeped in localized slang, wordplay, and inside references, while the art of sampling—where segments of existing music are incorporated into the new track to create something unique but with recognizable elements—creates a connection with other places and other times. Youth marginalized by formal institutions share certain experiences across cities, and through music they spread their rhymes and hook into each other's lived realities at diverse scales—first performing for each other on the street corner, then recording tracks in some kind of studio space with tech capabilities, then posting videos to reach a wider audience through digital technologies, and, if possible, going back to a "live" stage to perform the tracks that have come to be known by fans. Not all these steps happen each time, but some combination of these tends to. The key is moving between scales of relevance and reach.

In her book *Terraformed,* about inner-city Black youth in East London, Joy White (2020, 40) explains, "For Black youth in particular, the contemporary music scene is a site of emancipatory disruption where it is possible to take on a new identity as an artist, a performer, or an entrepreneur." Similarly, Rosalind Fredericks (2014) argues that hip-hop in Senegal has become a way for youth to assert their citizenship and agency by engaging with representative politics through subversive musical soundscapes, contesting authoritarian elders and rule. In Nairobi, *genge* hip-hop tracks are rehearsed on neighborhood streets with references to local tragicomedic happenings and then played on the *matatus,* as the first kind of dress rehearsal before wider dissemination.

On October 16, 2023, I received a text from one of the female members of a hip-hop group I've been following: Pause N Play X Wagala, based in

Mathare. Milly posted the link to one of their new tracks and YouTube videos, titled "social media."

> MILLY: Check out our new song: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jlgk
> kAiXHXo
> 🐌🐌🐌🐌
> Like
> share
> and subscribe

The video is a little over three minutes long. It starts with a bird's-eye view of Mathare streets (probably shot from a drone), with the opening beats punctuating the changing scenes that follow. We move from seeing the aerial view of the unpaved streets of Mathare and corrugated metal, to seeing a person from the waist down in a bright-orange boiler suit washing a car, to then seeing the panoramic view of the wider city of Nairobi. As the lyrics start, we now see a group of youth assembled together—we are now on the street. Female vocalists ask in Sheng, "Do you use Instagram? Do you follow TikTok and what about Snapchat?" and all the while we see youth not just looking at their own phones but clearly chatting about what they see on their phones, laughing and bantering about the *digital* social as they hang out in person, *being* social. We then see different representations of labor familiar to the popular economy in these neighborhoods: the street vendors preparing food snacks with their parasols and small modular stations, working in pairs and keeping their hands busy while singing and chatting and clearly combining livelihoods with liveliness.

The group of men we see in the next shot seem to be hanging out without clear indication of labor taking place, though we don't know if they're taking a break from work or just taking time to socialize. We see some handling khat leaves, the stimulant drugs commonly chewed by men and often sold on the street alongside comestible produce. Chewing khat is at once stigmatized and normalized, especially among young unemployed men (Di Nunzio 2019; Mains 2011), but in these neighborhoods it can also sometimes simply indicate the deliberate subversion of propriety and signal a chosen moment to visibly *not* be working. It is the in-between, the *kuzurura* (idling) with intent, and an unapologetic performance of leisure and not giving a fuck about judgment.

There is then a montage of images, shifting quickly from the female vocalists who are the street vendors preparing snacks and wearing an apron

as well as a short pink cropped pixie hairdo—they sing and look into the camera. Then we see the men, who are speaking and looking at their phones, their eyes bloodshot, high on khat. The beats pause and the instrumental section comes to the foreground, and here there is a repartee between the women and the men. They are not in the same physical space; they are, it seems, communicating via the smartphone, using social media to talk about social media and their respective "slay."

In this video, we see the ordinary street life of popular economies at work *and at play*. Work may be repetitive and arduous (we are especially reminded by this when we see a man hunched over, pulling a heavy *mkoko-teni* [handcart]), but it can also be playful when work space and time permit some degree of social banter in person as well as online. Here it is not about whether people are socializing in person or online but rather how the in-person and online are increasingly entangled, how the ordinary scenes of life become framed as worthy of "snaps" and "likes."

When I received Milly's text and viewed the video for the first time, I wanted to further understand the meaning of this track and its intended commentary. I asked Milly if she saw the track as a sort of criticism of social media or a celebration of it or a bit of both. I also wanted to know more about the gender dynamics at play. Milly replied:

> MILLY: It talks about how people know each other on Social media, flirt, post and all sorts of things.
>
> TATIANA: Do you think this use of social media for flirting, getting to know each other, humorous banter . . . does it go beyond the baze? Like does it allow youth to connect with others who live in other parts of town, or is it still about mtaani social networks? Like would a gal from Mathare flirt with a guy in Buru or Koch or Kariobangi? Or do youth date and flirt with others who stay closer to their side of town? I wonder if social media expands the dating/flirting scene and space, or is just another way to flirt online with the people you see on the streets at the baze in real life . . .
>
> MILLY: I think it connects both people from the same hood and from different hoods, just depends on your fan page coz to be honest, nowadays internet connects people more than any other platform.

As Milly explained, the track is about the uses of social media for flirting, getting to know one another. It showed these young people doing so in the midst of everyday ordinary practices—in the midst of the hustle, hustle as work, and hustle as anti-work—chewing khat and knowing that part of

hustling can mean not doing anything that advances one's prospect for income generation but instead asserts a collective right to just *be* in public space with other peers. The track also shows that the presence of female MCs in Nairobi's hip-hop is growing, as is women's agency to contest the macho behavior and be the ones *seen* as being both in work mode and able to hold their own when it comes to quick, witty repartee. Here the "ghetto gals" are asserting themselves in new ways, in part thanks to social media. The main vocalist in the video recalls the style of dress, hair, and gall of Salt-N-Pepa, one of the 1990s all-female hip-hop groups in the United States. But Milly and her girls are not just performing and rapping; they are doing so while working and hustling. Hustling is part of the dance, the rhythm, and the performance. Their hustle, apron, hard-boiled eggs, parasol, and all are part of the aesthetic and what gets included in the frame and the selfie. It is not cropped out or blurred; it is integral to the imaginary of the 2020s in Mathare.

Hip-hop has contended with misogyny in all hip-hop cultures but it has also seen female and nonbinary gender representation come onto the stage, and in Nairobi this has been happening at a rapid pace over the past decade. At the end of the video, we see a guy checking out a girl's ass, an all-too-familiar scenario that will perhaps make the female viewers think, "There we go again." But there was something deliberate here, as if to say, guys may always check out a girl's ass. The question is, will she be in a position to jokingly or firmly retort back (including checking out his ass)—if she is, the power balance is restored. And here the track may be suggesting that the question "Do you use Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat" is also a way of saying, "Because I do." And if you think you can check me out, let me make it clear that I can check you out too.

Here the works of Payal Arora (2012, 2019) and David Nemer (2022) resonate. Nemer's research in Brazil points to the vital and perhaps overlooked role of digital technologies in providing levers of sheer fun and pleasure among marginalized urban communities. Arora's writing on "can the 'Third World' come out to play" challenges understandings of ICT for development that equate the use of digital media purely with techno-optimistic discourses tied to development and economic goals. Yes, digital technologies can be used for political claims making (think Slum / Shack Dwellers International and the forms of "mobilization from below") and for "development," and yes, digital divides are a real issue to enabling both political and economic "freedoms" (Sen 1999). Building on Arora and Nemer's arguments, I would argue that this track and the video tell other

kinds of stories, beyond "digital society" (Bergere 2017) and "digital democracy" (Nyabola 2018): it points to the lightness that social media can bring; it reminds us to acknowledge that digital technologies can also be about enjoyment and social experimentation, while nudging changes in gendered power dynamics through humor and banter. It does not shy away from representing the everyday realities of *mtaa* life, but it does not impose a sentimentalism portraying this life as "misery" and makes no mention of hardship, poverty, or struggle. It does not bluff its way out of the *mtaa* as it is; instead, it uses the *mtaa* as the stage not to feature a story about basic infrastructures or violence or joblessness but to focus on the lightness and playfulness of *mtaa* everyday life and how social media inserts itself into (and perhaps even facilitates new kinds of) *mtaa* joy and play.

Here it is worth stressing that this track and its accompanying video story call for the suspension of excessive interpretation. As Susan Sontag (1966, 97) argues in her essay "Against Interpretation," "the task of interpretation is virtually one of translation. The interpreter says, Look, don't you see that X is really—or, really means—A? That Y is really B? That Z is really C?" Sontag says that "the effusion of interpretations of art today poisons our sensibilities" (98). She argues that by refusing to leave the work of art alone, we lose the ability to really "*see* more, to *hear* more, to *feel* more" (104). Rather than try to interpret the content of art, we must try to consider and describe its form. And for that, she writes toward the end of her essay, "we must recover our senses" (104). Going back to what Milly says to describe the track and the video: "*It talks about how people know each other on Social media, flirt, post and all sorts of things.*" The "all sorts of things" is notable here. It recalls the Latin expression *et cetera* (etc.), literally meaning "and the rest," used in many languages to mean "and other things." Et cetera often evokes "the rest" that might be imagined but needs no mention. Perhaps this is exactly what the track and video are implying: don't overread into this. We are just experimenting and expressing ourselves through these global platforms, familiar to every digitally literate young person across the globe, but doing so from *here,* in our everyday, self-help city. We flirt, we post, *et cetera.* That's it. Don't overread into it; just pay attention to the form.

POWER OF THE SELFIE: OUR STORIES, OUR STREETS

This section explores the temporal and spatial registers of the stylized digital auto-portraiture of the three young friends—Cheddaz, Kissmart, and

Donga—I met in 2010 during the filming of a documentary called *Story Yetu,* in collaboration with Ghetto Films Trust, when they worked with Sebastien to record a track titled "Everyday." These three youth in their late teens were from one of the poorest subneighborhoods of Mathare, known as Kosovo, infamous for its illegal brewing activities along the river. In "Everyday," they sing,

> *Lazima hustle,*
> *Tumia muscle,*
> *Kutafuta riziki*
>
> [you need to hustle
> use muscle
> to make a living][9]

The three childhood friends saw an opportunity to form a business out of the convergence between love for music, lived experience in all manners of hustling, living in a city with a vibrant tourist economy, and the expansive possibilities of the digital world to connect unlikely consumer-producer pairings. They were part of the generation of youth who were both landless and wageless, and at the same time, their formative years of education were not spent in formal schooling but instead on the street and online. They were the first active users of the African digital revolution such that they were at once precarious in relation to housing, work, and social status but vocal and visible on digital platforms. They were at once "stuck" in their neighborhoods, and yet their own stories and modes of representation were fashioned in relation to cosmopolitan elsewheres. Their own vernacular, music, artistic persuasions, and learning were locally grounded but also informed by global expressive articulations.

Consider the particular subjectivities and performative reach of a particular kind of the now widely familiar and globalized phenomenon of digital life—the "selfie." For Mathare youth, the selfie can serve as a mode of self-styled activism, auto-portraiture, and storytelling. It displays a counter-representation of neighborhood life, defying Afro-pessimistic portrayals that would only focus on infrastructural violence, informality, unregulated housing markets, and municipal underinvestment.

When I met Cheddaz, Kissmart, and Donga, they were spending their days around the makeshift recording studio in their neighborhood where

they worked on their rap rhymes and performed for each other and anyone who cared to listen. Their lyrics and beats were raw and real, but this local street poetry coming from the marginalized voices of youth was at the time largely unheard beyond their *baze,* a semipublic nondescript part of the neighborhood where these childhood friends gathered to form a kind of site-specific performative act to assert their turf as well as confirm their presence in the *mtaa.* This is where they passed the time or came back to, shaping everyday youth street culture while increasingly hooking into youth imaginaries beyond their *baze.*

Over the past decade, these three friends built their music, visibility, and a local storytelling business thanks to the rapid expansion of ICT across the city. During the months (and sometimes years) when I could not get myself to Kenya, I paid close attention to their curated online presence, eager to follow their progress as artists and more generally. I could see that they had built up their own hustle portfolio centered around creative practices, becoming a three-member boy band known among their social media circle as Nairobeez. Widening access to smartphones and affordable data bundles enabled creative youth like them to regularly upload video selfies onto Facebook and later Instagram. They performed stories from the streets of Mathare that did not sanitize the everyday realities but rather pointed out the beauty at the corrugated interstices, and they also regularly posted footage from the recording experiments to share the "behind the scenes" creative process—exposing the creative backstories of their "ghetto greenroom."

But this public performance still had limited reach or direct income opportunities, so in order to subsidize their music enterprise, they eventually connected with a wider base of potential customers through a digital platform during the growth of the Airbnb era of the 2010s. With the support of a social entrepreneur passionate about youth and popular culture, they coproduced a narrative that would appeal to Nairobi visitors interested in seeing the city beyond its familiar tourist landmarks. The three boys from Kosovo connected their local hustle with the digital economy, marketing themselves as three former street kids with in-depth local knowledge of the city center and its difficult-to-reach peripheral spaces. When avant-garde tourists on a budget and with a taste for grit log on to the Nairobi Airbnb page, they will come across the local "Nai Nami—Our Streets. Our Stories" private walking tours, where tickets can be booked for US$38 per person. This clever form of hustling found a bridge between local lived

realities and a global audience keen to take part in *off-piste* city tours tailored to visitors keen on seeing the city differently, through the eyes of youth with street-oriented expertise and experience.

In Mathare, youth hustles include combining a kind of hunt for ways to stay both economically active and credible on the streets. This can involve a particular performance where "making a living" also appears to contribute to a common cause or be read as an expression of community activism. While many youth living in Mathare have over the past three decades engaged at some stage of their young lives in the homegrown residential garbage collection economy as their stepping stone into working life (see chapter 3), a growing number of younger youth who have grown up digitally connected are turning to *genge* hip-hop to be both protagonists and activists of "ghetto life," becoming, as George the Poet put it, ethnographers with lived experience, describing and, as Ndaka (2023) suggests, theorizing their streets and telling their stories. As they do so, they expose the realities of everyday street life in Mathare in solidarity with other global "ghettos" (Rollefson 2017).

Consider the tag line "our street, our stories," particularly the possessive pronoun. It serves as an appropriation, a kind of "taking back." Under colonial rule, Nairobi as a whole could not have been their city. In the early postcolonial era, their neighborhood was systematically regarded by the international development and donor community as in dire need of upgrading, clean-up, order, and education. Others regarded it as a "self-help city" (Hake 1977), which was framed both in an affirmative sense because it meant people were auto-sufficient but also in a pejorative sense because it meant people were left to their own devices, underserved, and cut off from mainstream support. Therefore, to refer to the Nairobi streets as "our streets" signaled an important declaration of belonging and reclaiming—"we belong" to these streets, in the Central Business District of the main city, as much as the dusty streets of the hood. In turn, "these streets and stories" belong to us.

In other words, they placed themselves at the center of the story, the story of Nairobi as it is today, as it is being frequented today by fellow age mates and other visitors wanting to learn about the *real* Nairobi. It is no coincidence that the street tours start at the Hilton Hotel, just across from the National Archives. This positioning is telling—the Hilton Hotel, epitomizing privilege and a global brand of affluence in the hospitality sector, stands across the street from the National Archives, repository of decades'

worth of colonial and postcolonial documents and a curatorial space featuring Kenyan cultural artifacts. The starting point of the walking tour therefore faces both sides of Nairobi and the different facets of youth culture tout court: a stylized amalgam of cultural heritage, coloniality, decoloniality, and creolized expressions of global brands. That starting point on Mama Ngina Road is at once "easy to find" and highly symbolic.

In their music, Nairobeez performed everyday life as a kind of magic realism: rendering the ordinary a cosmopolitan ghetto style; and conversely, what might have seemed unattainable becomes banal. Here there is a connection between the modes of cultural production that took place in the United Kingdom with grime music (Hancox 2019) and that of *genge* hip-hop in Nairobi (Kidula 2012; Ntarangwi 2009), both emerging in concert with the rise of digital platforms and social media. Young aspiring artists of grime or *genge* did not get "signed" by producers but rather hacked their way onto the virtual stage through free-to-upload platforms, such as YouTube. They didn't need to sanitize their tracks; they could "spit rhymes" that retained their subversive edge, and they didn't speak about the ascent to fame and success but instead provided a real-time, graphic novel–style musical expression of street life and could do so in their vernacular. They retained the raw and grit of everyday violence on the street and the gall of youth who have nothing to lose and a story to tell.

Nairobeez used their *mtaa* as their backdrop, stage, and turf from which they produced music videos as a genre of auto-portraiture. They narrated their exploits with style but did not bluff about riches. It was more complex than that. In their photographic posts and music videos on social media, they have not painted a picture of hard-core struggles against historical dispossession and segregation the way some other hip-hop artists of the Black Atlantic have. Nairobeez have always done something different: they did not beautify or romanticize the ghetto but they rendered the ghetto beautiful, just as it was. One day, Donga posted a video featuring an ordinary morning scene along Nairobi River, taken from what is often considered one of the most precarious places to stay, in a shack along the river down Mathare Valley, near the *changa* brewers, near the accumulation of waste, near the potential floods during rainy season. On that morning, Donga documents the sounds of chickens roaming around the organic waste looking for scraps. He shows the movement and sonic murmurs of the river below and the morning sun piercing through the tall blades of grass. The camera slowly flips to show Donga's face. He laughs and says:

"Mathare!" and then his face goes serious as he pauses. "It is beautiful . . . It is my home!"

The three young men, who described themselves as former street kids, surviving on the streets through petty crime, had become artists, street tour guides, and entrepreneurs, now hiring other youth to give street tours. They were storytellers, portraying a particular kind of "ghetto style," integral to the generation of youth shaping the creative restyling of deep Sheng across the city, generating new ways of constantly redescribing and reaffirming their attachment to place, particularly the importance of this place. Mathare was fashioned as home, and the *baze* became a hyperlocalized expression of global youth culture in its hybrid, spatially open, unfinished forms.

On another occasion, Donga posted a selfie with his mother, who some twenty years ago would have been a teen mother like so many young women in Mathare (see chapter 5). Donga's mother looked tired and didn't smile for the selfie with her son, but she did stare back at the phone camera, acknowledging the moment. She was between morning chores, it seemed, and the corrugated metal shack they live in featured in the back, with a line of laundry hanging across the frame. This photo, posted on Instagram and Facebook, could be read as a curation of "this is what it is." It was not like Tracey Emin's art installation *My Bed* (shown at the Tate in 1998) because nothing about that "ghetto" scene was meant to appear messy or unkept. It exposed the mundane hardships of life in a neighborhood where even the prosaic cup of chai requires hours of labor and material cost and where youth are increasingly targets of police brutality, extrajudicial violence, and systemic underemployment. Thus these millennial self-proclaimed "ghetto boyz," who have grown up in Nairobi's popular neighborhoods with a smartphone in their pockets, know how to reach a world beyond their streets while appearing ever-more tied to, and proud of, their *baze,* from which they project shared struggles and solidarities with fights against many crises and injustices. In 2020, these same youth used their growing digital platform to showcase their localized allegiance to the global movement against police brutality against young Black bodies by posting selfies with makeshift masks that read, "Kenyan Black Lives Matter," another example of the ways in which they were constantly reworking global imaginaries and movements. At the same time, all this did not mean that they would forever "stay locally put." They could still evoke "Mathare" and "home"

but choose to move out of the ghetto. When I met with them in 2023, they admitted that they had moved out of Mathare, away from their Kosovo *baze,* saying that it was important to show other youth that it was possible to leave. It also seemed to be important for them—as an affirmation that they could leave the streets of their childhood and navigate other streets in the city. "My streets, my stories," from Mathare to the CBD and everything in between. It was through the navigation of tenuous times and spaces that the telling of their stories became a vital creative social practice. To quote João Biehl and Peter Locke (2017, ix), "The worlds on edge, and the open-endedness of people's becoming, is the very stuff of art."

This chapter has focused on the performative dimensions of *hustling* and some of the ways in which these are mobilized through various stages and produce different modes of storytelling that seek to reach different audiences. Through this, the chapter emphasizes that there really is no single hustle story, which perhaps is partly why it is so difficult to define and so plural in its manifestations.[10] The chapter also seeks to engage with some of the older and more recent debates about hip-hop and its place in popular culture, and the extent to which hip-hop is a form of political speech, social commentary and critique, playful poetic verse, or a form of creative expression among youth who find their place at the nexus of music and online media to talk about their ordinary travails, deeds, and exploits that coincide with playful commentary on the ordinary joys of everyday social life. This form of hustling as storytelling and storytelling as hustling is not just about commodifying the "ghetto"; as the street tours show, it is about projecting the magic realism of life in the ghetto and rendering it a little more visible, though not necessarily legible. Rendering more visible here operates at the nexus of the social sector hustles discussed in the previous chapter (see also Farrell 2015) and the representation of "real life" without the "filters." As such, the hustle plays with the dialectics of struggle and success, politics and playfulness, outrage and joy.

This chapter also illustrates how hustle carries a certain pragmatic realism as well as hopeful and joyful register. The hustle here carries an acknowledgment of the unavoidable reality that underpins both the hip-hop story and the street tours (and their connection): the reality is that hip-hop artists can't necessarily make a living just off their music—most can't anywhere in the world.[11] The work of Katrien Pype (2021) makes a relevant point about "digital creativity and urban entrapment in Kinshasa" when she argues that digital experiments cannot necessarily solve precarity, and

thus she cautions the celebratory rhetoric that sells the idea to many youth globally, but perhaps especially to young Africans (as part of an entrepreneurial development story), that finding "global" connections will "empower" youth and pull them out of poverty.

To illustrate this, just as we see with Milly and her peers in the video, there is a representation of doing music and spitting rhythms but also doing other work—ordinary work that many other Mathare folks do, among a host of other things. We see everyone hustling in the video, the key protagonists along with the other *wananchi* animating life on these streets. The creative labors are integrated into that web of mixed livelihoods. As for the street tours: the three boys from Mashanti realized this reality a while back. They did what all other youth hustlers do in the *mtaa*: they built on their existing base and expanded, diversifying their economic opportunities, but they did so on their own terms and grounded in what they know. They know these streets, and they have stories they know people will want to hear.

As Clive Chijioke Nwonka shows in *Black Boys: The Aesthetics of British Urban Film* (2023), hip-hop along with other representations of "the hood" in popular media tell street stories that people across the globe love to hear about, sometimes to the detriment of those living there. If the hood is glamorized in the hip-hop track (or the *Top Boy* series), it is stigmatized in lived practice. Nai Nami did not just reskill (the act of learning a new trade if the one you know is in decline, typical in contexts of deindustrialization, for example). They skilled out, spreading their skill as performers and storytellers to do city tours, and in the process gathered more fans, more followers, and more clicks, taking advantage of the fascination Nairobi tourists might have with the stories of youth from the hood, but in doing the tours, Nai Nami also bring the fetish fed from digital media culture down to the ground. The stories told online are triangulated with the real people in an actual physical space. Even if the street tours stylize the stories, even if there are elements of "emotional truth" in the narrations, they are doing their tours, and the work they're doing to bring in more youth to lead them is providing a modest catalyst for youth-led representation and economic progress.

In summary, this chapter has brought into conversation discussions of hip-hop, changes in digital tech over the past decade, and the ways in which storytelling has been informed by the cultural production of homegrown hip-hop and amplified by digital platforms to produce new kinds of

hustle in the city. Here it is worth reflecting on how this particular story—hip-hop, hustle, and the digital—connects to the previous chapters. The "dusk" of youthhood among those who had founded homegrown youth-led economies in the early 2000s centered around the value of waste has seen a shift—as explained in chapter 6, younger youth have made claims to a "piece of the pie." Claiming a piece of the pie in part meant demanding certain shares and access to the established (and in some cases lucrative) waste economy, but it has also meant finding other hustlescapes. As the young hip-hop artists discussed in this chapter show, creative hustles signify not only the importance of digital platforms as a global stage to reach a wider audience but also the gradual encroachment of the digital economy onto the *mtaa* economy. For the Nai Nami tours, these three childhood friends and the other youth they have trained have positioned themselves as expert guides of the "real city" (Pieterse 2011). This "real city" is not necessarily just the *mtaa* city or the CBD. Rather, it is the city that connects the ghettos, the CBD, the Silicone Savanah tech city, the shopping malls in Westlands, the designer cafés and restaurants. Nairobi is the all of it. The Nairobi "off the beaten track" is the interconnected city, where you can step into a *matatu* at the dusty Mathare Number 10 stage and eventually end up at the CBD, taking the next *matatu* to ABC café in Westlands. The storytellers who hustle and hustle to tell stories are the ones who know how to traverse *that* city. The hustle has, along the way, gone viral—from the *mtaa,* to the CBD, to the wider Nairobi and nation, and perhaps even globally too.

While youth in popular neighborhoods digitized and monetized the stories of the *mtaa* through music and street tours, forming an alternative popular archive, at the level of national politics, the story of *mtaa* hustle has, since 2020, been picked up and appropriated, notably by the current president, William Ruto. Did Ruto *validate* the story and shed light on the human ingenuity of the *mtaa* way, the way of the hustle, as a kind of *realpolitik*? Or did he co-opt the story and turn it into a political slogan as part of his populist political pitch? This is what the next and final chapter explores, along with wider concluding reflections.

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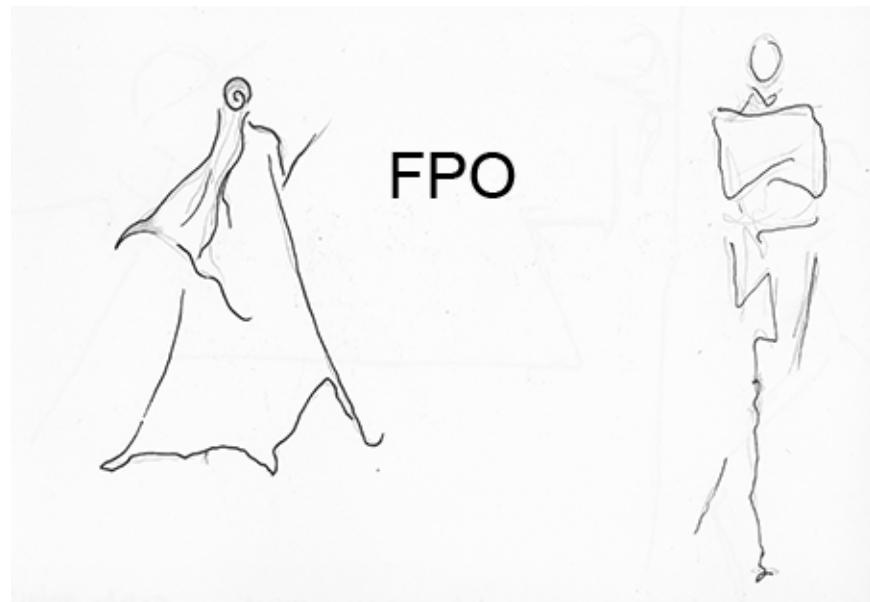
Agakhan walk, Nairobi Central Business District, April 5, 2023

Conclusion

Hustle Nation?

One afternoon in 2023, my friends Eliza, Kennedy, and Shei were explaining the nuances of the Sheng verbs *kusota* and *kuomoka* in a neighborhood café in Huruma. In her usual assertive and cheerful self, Eliza broke it down:

> You see, T, *nimesota* means "I'm struggling." *Nimeomoka* means "I'm doing better." And you will hear people ask, *"Umeomoka?"* This means "Have you made progress, are you rich?

As I scribbled on my little notepad, jotting all this down, I asked, "Do *kuhustle* [to hustle] and *kujaribu* [to try] come in here? Where do they fit?"

Kennedy took my pen and made an arrow on the page, connecting the words *nimesota* and *nimeomoka*, and said, "Hustling is what connects the struggle to the progress, *unaona* [you see]?"

In Nairobi today, that constant dance between struggle and progress underpins the choreography of hustling across spaces of the city, from the popular neighborhoods to the realms of middle-class Kenyans. It has become part of a cross-class vernacular, increasingly represented not merely as a survivalist strategy but as an important skill enabling people to move between experiences of struggle and moments of achievement—navigating a "lower middle income country" (LIMC) marked by limited formal employment prospects and profound inequality in terms of material infrastructure, urban development, and provisioning.[1] Yet this constant move between *kusota* and *kuomoka* also involves an ability to plug into the globalized fetish for innovation, digital literacy, and entrepreneurship.

The work of this book has involved acknowledging the ways in which the idea of hustling echoes other places and histories but also how it reflects particular logics and terrains in the Nairobi context. As the previous chapters have illustrated, hustling has become a narrative, an idea, an allegory, a practice, a performance, and a story about how everyday Kenyans navigate their reality in an affirmative way, while mitigating the ever-present risk that something might go wrong. As such, hustling has become a language of *action* and *resistance,* to make sense of diverse forms of adversity, uncertainty, and "incompleteness" (Guma 2020).

In the introduction, I argued that hustling is profoundly relational and spatial, echoing the argument made decades ago by Karl Polanyi (2001). Drawing on Polanyi's call to pay closer attention to the ways in which all economic processes are embedded in particular social relations and institutions, the chapters of this book illustrate how hustle economies are not just hyperlocal and disconnected from "modern" market economies—they are indeed deeply entangled with formal market economies and formal urban systems. But they are also profoundly embedded in particular social relations and place-based micro-politics of provisioning and care. Chapter 1 shows how the idea of hustling has connections to other histories and contexts, and in this it is a palimpsest concept. The rest of the chapters have unpacked some of the multiple ways in which Nairobi hustles reveal something particular about *this* city—how it moves and how people find ways to make things work when so much of the cityscape is in a simultaneous double state of breakdown and becoming (Fontein et al. 2024; Guma 2020; Thieme 2021).

Read together, these chapters *think with* Nairobi to argue that hustling offers an important commentary on marginalized youth's relationship to urban life in cities that have experienced urbanization without large-scale industrialization and employment opportunities, without widespread public basic infrastructure and services, and without social welfare programs. Each chapter has focused on different scenarios to show how hustling describes more than a singular precarious economic activity and how it operates in spaces beyond the lower end of the so-called informal economy. The book is essentially a multisituated conceptualization of hustle that seeks to encompass a more-than-economistic and legalistic reading of survivalist activities. As Simone (2013, 244) puts it, "what is nearly impossible to come to grips with is the simultaneity of immense infrastructural, political, and social problems with real legacies of residential skill in the construction of

viable built environments and livelihoods." Hustling in Nairobi's popular neighborhoods involves a vast repertoire of spatialized and temporally contingent forms of provisioning, distribution, and problem solving, finely tuned to a context where neither mainstream state nor market infrastructures are reliable.

As a constellation of strategies and performances of "real economies," hustling comprises an entanglement of logics, affirmations, contestations, and diasporic cultural hooks (chapter 1). It is economically, morally, and socially pluralistic, describing on the one hand modalities of making work outside (or alongside) waged labor, and on the other hand the multiple configurations of social, economic, and environmental activities that take place when youth engage in mixed livelihoods and establish a range of commitments in their neighborhood, against the historical backdrop of coloniality and underinvestment (chapter 2). These activities include the eco-hustles of youth who provide essential services in their neighborhoods, from garbage collection to servicing shared sanitation facilities. It involves self-organizing neighborhood "cleanup" events that occasionally affirm and render more public the labors of local water, sanitation, and waste workers (chapters 3 and 4). They include the NGO or social business hustles when youth attend NGO-driven workshops and business training sessions, learning about "entrepreneurship" but also learning how to appear entrepreneurial to potential sponsors, while staying embedded in local relational ties (chapters 4 and 5). It includes using some of that development and business language when facilitating grassroots meetings with other youth groups to strategize about shared community-oriented endeavors (chapters 6). It involves taking and posting community selfies to showcase the paradoxes of life "in the ghetto," to make sure that local news gets told by local residents, and goes a bit more global as youth have become savvy digital curators and storytellers. It brings street theater and hip-hop into social campaigns but also into leisure spaces so fun is had for its own sake because sometimes it's not always about being political (chapter 7). Many youth may be formally unemployed, but they are engaged in a constellation of activities that create value in a variety of ways and pose different kinds of risks, rewards, and attachments. Hustling produces more-than-economic value (McMullin 2022) and can be read as a kaleidoscopic urban practice and a multivocal narrative: hustling is tied to experiences of precarious labor, yes, but it is also a cultural, political, and affective articulation.

This final chapter offers a set of ruminations to open further dialogue about the conceptual, methodological, and analytical registers of hustle. The chapter offers a series of intentionally juxtaposed "fragments" (McFarlane 2021) of ethnographic encounters and reflections that complement and echo the ethnography of the preceding chapters, but these fragments also hang on their own in deliberate suspension, to invite pause as the book winds down. The narrative style here is inspired by the writings of Christina Sharpe (2023) and Kathleen Stewart (2009), where the juxtaposition of vignettes, short excerpts of field notes, and more than academic citations invite a particular kind of analytical sensibility—permission to refrain from "making sense" of the whole but rather to consider what happens when we think with ordinary fragments, moments, affects, and stories. What does this mode of thinking (and writing) do for what might be classically regarded as a "conclusion," especially if the intent is to do anything but *conclude*? I hope that this chapter might instead invite new openings.

In what follows, the question that runs through each fragment presented here is whether hustle is partly produced "from above" or "from below." Hustle is celebrated and mobilized "from above" via discourses of self-reliance and enterprise circulated by international NGOs, social businesses, populist politicians, and media. In contrast, the vernacular and urban practice of hustle move "from below" to the rest of the city, becoming an action-oriented self- (or even collective) narration that has remained appropriately ambiguous with regard to earnings, prospects, plans, modalities, rhythms, and outcomes. As the previous chapters illustrate, hustling has shaped Nairobi from below and been appropriated from above.

The following fragments start with a brief reflection on what hustling meant during the Covid pandemic in Kenya and how shifting hustlescapes in the pandemic economy produced global resonances and echoes that went beyond Nairobi and perhaps also boomeranged back. From there, I include an ambivalent and unfinished reflection on the effects of the current Kenyan president's incorporation of hustling into popular political vernacular. I ask what doing so has done or undone, acknowledging that there will be much more to be seen and say on this as events and political drama unfold in the months and years to come. The chapter then deliberately returns to the seeming antithesis of hustling—the idea of the "job"—to show that hustling in Nairobi, as it always has elsewhere (Valentine 1978), does not operate in isolation from other forms of work but rather entangles itself with various other stations and tempos of waged,

precarious, unwaged, and care work. Then the chapter pays homage to a friend who once reminded me about all the things that could be fixed in the most precarious environments where hustling has always been intimately connected to a foundational form of work: that of repair in all its senses. This becomes a moment in the chapter and indeed the book to dwell on life's ultimate fragility and the limits of repair, by thinking with the late and much-loved Rosie Nyawira. The final fragment sits with the concept of "remains," thinking about what remains when people, projects, and things have left, moved on, are beyond repair, or have become something else altogether. This "final" chapter therefore ends with openings, placing emphasis on remains as generative matters, and here a key opening is the plea to consider what "hustle studies" might offer our intellectual, empirical, and cultural practices, as one of the ways to navigate and think through these troubled and dynamic times.

HUSTLING THROUGH THE "HUNGER VIRUS"

Over the Covid-19 pandemic period, the numbers of Covid cases and deaths were relatively low in Nairobi, but the lockdown was ruthless.[2] "There is no coronavirus, there is a hunger virus," exclaimed a friend over the phone in April 2020. Another friend wrote to me, saying, "Some hustles have really suffered, but other new ones have come up" (WhatsApp communication, June 2020). Amid the crackdown on street economic activity and movements, people found ways to take their businesses off the street and into people's pockets. The *matatu* digitized payments, something many had tried to do for the past ten years (from MIT grads to Google) but couldn't. Youth groups, who did their best to stay economically active but had to find new sources of income, became frontline workers: they were the digitally savvy generation who were connected to the NGO, humanitarian, and activist networks whose staff were now working remotely. Mutual aid networks formed at speed, building on the local knowledge and ingenuity of youth born and raised in these neighborhoods, catering to the most vulnerable, and adapting their various hustles to provide vital sources of distribution and care. Campaigns to spread messages about proper hygiene circulated on social media, with hip-hop tracks and videos from young Mathare artists spitting rhymes like "Covid is real . . . hashtag sanitize." Street vendors, no longer able to operate on the street, started using their WhatsApp profile picture as a way to signal what goods they had to sell that day and where they could be found.

Since the Covid-19 pandemic, the notion of hustling has morphed in Kenya and globally. Already over the past decade in Kenya, hustling had started to move beyond the realms of popular economies, as ~~popular~~ references to one's "side-hustle" (Mwaura 2017) became folded into a growing number of middle-class university graduates' self-narrations as they developed their own strategies for generating income and "opportunity spaces" (Mwaura 2017, 52) in an uncertain labor market or created a back-up plan in case they lost their "day job."[3] But this became amplified during the pandemic and was not just happening in Nairobi. In 2021, I spoke with a *Wall Street Journal* reporter about a piece on the "pandemic economy." She mentioned that some of her New York City interlocutors in the finance sector spoke of "day trading" as their side hustle. It was also during the pandemic that Dolly Parton's hit song "9 to 5" was remastered for a Squarespace commercial during the U.S. Super Bowl in January 2021. Those alive during the 1980s might recall her famous feminist anthem (and theme song of the film with the same name) with the refrain "9 to 5 . . . gotta *work hard* to make a living," describing the gendered inequalities of the waged office city job. In 2021, the remastered track featured the adapted lyrics "5 to 9 . . . gotta *hustle* to make a living," with an advertisement that showed a diverse cohort of young professionals who come alive once they've "clocked off" the day job, as they each start to dance, imagine, and plan how to monetize their side passions (whether yoga instructing, landscape consulting, or catering). The point, of course, is that these "side hustlers" are going to need an affordable and user-friendly website to market their services. This humorous but quite telling reframing of the familiar track resonated more than ever with the wider postpandemic trends across labor markets and geographies, from Nairobi to New York. The world of work, in its spatial, temporal, organizational form, was shifting dramatically, as were narrations of work, including "hustle."

In the aftermath of the pandemic, after 2021, numerous articles came out debating the changes in the labor market and their short-, medium-, and long-term effects. For a while, news articles and podcasts unpacked the apparently rampant trends of the "great resignation" and "quiet quitting" in the protracted pandemic economy of the Minority World.[4] Some of these trends did not seem to make sense to those seeking to understand these shifts. In the 2023 UK employment statistics, for example, unfilled job vacancies were up, alongside rising unemployment in the context of a

cost-of-living crisis. According to a Deloitte survey conducted around that time, twenty-three thousand workers aged eighteen to thirty-eight expressed wanting to prioritize work-life balance when choosing an employer, and 75 percent preferred remote or hybrid work. The debates around universal basic income (UBI), which were fringe a few years ago, have seen a serious resurgence across political and academic forums.[5] To this, 2023 added a panic around the future of work as generative AI pushed well beyond automating industrial work and began encroaching on creative and "white-collar" work.[6] The UK, where I live and work, has seen a confluence of labor unions striking across sectors over these past few years, raising vital questions about what counts as *decent work* and what claims workers in certain long-standing sectors can still make. Here, the agentive moves to refuse work that is exploitative or seen to permit limited freedoms called for serious deliberations on people's relationship to work and increasingly nonnormative pathways to making a living.

Beyond the realms of the wage economy and its rapid shifts, as the world emerged from the thick of the pandemic, some Gen Z-ers who had embraced or at least popularized "hustle culture" hashtags in the second decade of the twenty-first century were now posting videos on social media that included anti-hustle declarations, equating refusing to hustle with a choice to orient their time and attention differently. In other words, while making hustling look easy and cool had become one version of the globalized performance of hustle positioned as deliberate detachment from the drudgery and predictability of waged work, the imperative to "hustle harder" is, in the postpandemic economy, not only questioned by some but increasingly called out for its own forms of exploitation and normalization of precarious labor markets (as discussed in chapter 1). And yet, across geographies the narrative of hustling and side hustles has continued to persist and has been, if anything, amplified in the postpandemic economy. Many of my own students admit, more than ever, to having side hustles (often plural) in order to subsidize their increasingly precarious student budgets and cope with rising costs of living. While few identify as "hustlers" per se, a growing number (especially final-year students close to graduation) admit that they identify as "hustling" when we have discussed this topic in class. In other words, the post- (if there is a post) pandemic era has further entrenched the logics of hustling—in affirmative as well as precarious dimensions and at different scales.

POPULIST HUSTLE

While those across popular and now middle-class economies hustle, so do political elites in various positions of power. It goes beyond the scope of this discussion to debate what kind of "hustler personae" political strongmen like Narendra Modi in India or Donald Trump in the United States portray in their performative public-facing modes. But what is relevant is the explicit and unapologetic way in which hustling has become folded into the contemporary populist pitch of Kenya's political class (Lockwood 2023).[7]

In the run-up to the 2022 presidential elections in Kenya, William Ruto, running for president in opposition and the eventual winner, spoke about Kenya as the "hustler nation." Speaking in Nyamira County in 2022, Ruto was quoted as saying, "Some people are telling us sons of hustlers cannot be president. That your father must be known. That he must be rich for you to become the president. We are telling them that even a child of a *boda boda* or a kiosk operator or *mtoto wa anayevuta mkokoteni* (child of a cart pusher) can lead this country" (Kahura and Akech 2020). In their piece, Kenyan journalists Dauti Kahura and Akoko Akech (2020) write about "the political movement that is seemingly sweeping the country: The Hustlers" and explain that Ruto's populist "wheelbarrownomics" (a word coined by Kenyan economist David Ndii) resonated with youth in low-income areas who felt like a politician was finally relating to their reality. They write,

> In a country that is teetering on the brink of economic meltdown, a youth bulge and political despair, this is music to the ears of a desperate youthful population . . . So why does Ruto proudly claim to be the "hustler-in-chief"? Hustler means different things to different people, but for many Kenyan youth, it signifies humble beginnings or means of eking out a living —respectable or otherwise. Being a hustler means one has found a way to stay afloat, particularly in hard economic times. The ambivalent feelings this word evokes match the legal and moral ambiguities that Ruto has built around his political career. The deputy president has the gall to identify with the very youth whose present and future the Jubilee government has committed to misery by mismanaging the economy. He is appealing to youthful voters who will comprise the majority of first-time voters in 2022. (Kahura and Akech 2020)

How was William Ruto different from his predecessors? Let's remember that the Jomo Kenyatta presidency (1963–78) saw the early years of

independence and the rise of the urban informal sector (K. Hart 1973; ILO 1972), with no real public housing or industrial employment programs; the Daniel Arap Moi years (1978–2002) legitimized the *jua kali* sector (King 1996) by promising shade and registration for small businesses but again did not push for major employment policies, instead normalizing light industries; and the Mwai Kibaki years (2002–3) were known for liberalizing the Kenyan economy and encouraging foreign investment as well as NGO activity, which only further deferred any real debate about youth employment. Youth became versed in development lingo and became expert participants of participatory workshops, and learned to mistrust any government-led programs claiming to "put worth to work," especially after the farcical promises of Kazi kwa Vijana (Work for Youth) that followed the 2007/8 postelection violence and was palliative and patchy at best (see chapter 3). The Uhuru Muigai Kenyatta years (2013–22) saw efforts focused on devolution, a policy and governance move influenced by international donors and the World Bank, claiming to distribute power and resources to local constituencies, with various degrees of success.[8] This push included explicit attention to "youth empowerment" under the National Youth Service (NYS, founded in 1964). But most of the initiatives were, again, perpetuating short-term opportunities in low-paying and low-skilled work. Ironically, many of the efforts involved public "cleanup" days that were said to "employ youth." Many of my interlocutors whose livelihoods depended on residential garbage collection and hard-earned community trust were frustrated by these NYS schemes that temporarily undercut the homegrown youth-led garbage economy. The cleanup schemes did not last long (these schemes never do), but they disrupted the local waste economy and again proved to youth in popular neighborhoods that they could not count on elite politicians to understand the youth hustle, let alone know how to support youth businesses. Then came Ruto.

The discourse of Ruto's campaign did not pretend to include promises of large-scale "youth employment" programs. Instead, he acknowledged Kenya's existing economic structures and embraced the logic and vernacular of *hustling.* He made it clear that hustling in Kenya had become an identity marker that transcended other forms of difference (including tribal affiliation), to the extent that in my conversations with Nairobians in 2023, many spoke about the current president's call to the "hustling classes" rather than to a particular tribal community, contrary to former political leaders. President Ruto's performed allyship with the hustling classes can be

interpreted as tokenistic and a clever campaign slogan by a populist politician (Lockwood 2023). But even as such, it reflects a notable shift in the popular imaginary.

Hustling in Kenya had been narrated and practiced as a collective and shared reality, even if the effects have been differentiated across individual lives and circumstances. It had gone from a largely popular and ordinary street-oriented vernacular to a term that has increasingly creeped into certain business advertising slogans. As shown by the sociolinguistic research of Annah Kariuki, Fridah Erastus Kanana, and Hildah Kebeya (2015), this reflects an increasingly common trend in Kenya, where certain Sheng terms and phrases are incorporated into certain business advertisements. What had previously been regarded as the language of Nairobi's urban youth (Githiora 2018) now features across the marketing campaigns of big corporate companies (including mobile phone and insurance companies as well as financial institutions) and NGOs who use Sheng to connect with their *wananchi* (common people) and attract maximum attention. As Kariuki, Kanana, and Kebeya (2015, 229) argue, this phenomenon indicates that the formerly stigmatized "non-standard, peer language" of Sheng has become destigmatized through its incorporation into twenty-first-century marketing campaigns. Certainly, the incorporation of "hustle" into marketing campaigns may reflect a destigmatisation of the Sheng terms *kuhustle* (to hustle) and *hustla* (hustler), but it also says something about who is seen as hustling. Here we see that *kuhustle* goes beyond the *mtaa* and beyond the lifeworlds of Nairobi's urban youth in popular economies. Take, for example, Premier Bank Kenya, a subsidiary of Premier Bank Limited, Somalia, described as a privately owned "Sharia-compliant commercial bank incorporated in Kenya in 2023 through the acquisition of the majority shares in First Community Bank" (Ambani 2023). Outside Nairobi in 2023, there was a billboard featuring an advertisement for Premier Bank with a young woman wearing a hijab, smiling while holding a plate full of *mandazi*. The campaign read: "New Beginnings mean believing in your hustle." The point is, while Ruto's "hustle populism" (Lockwood 2023) may have been highly performative (to the frustration of many!), it did loudly and explicitly elevate and recognize the value of hustle economies and the capabilities of those who hustle, regardless of their income class, tribal or religious affiliation, gender, and age. And yet, what did this elevation and recognition really mean in practice?

THE HUSTLER FUND, MICROLOANS, AND HUSTLE

Whether Ruto appropriated or elevated the narrative and practice of hustling is always an interesting question. We debated this with my friends in Mathare, every Uber driver I met, and anyone I had a conversation with on my ~~most recent~~ trip to Kenya, and the consensus was that Ruto had done a combination of both—appropriation and elevation. There is no doubt that he put hustling on the political map, and this label traveled beyond Kenya. When I saw my former PhD supervisor—someone who had all those years ago encouraged me to write about hustling if that was a major theme emerging from my fieldwork—at the University of Cambridge at an event in September 2022, he came up to me, saying, "Tatiana! Did you see that even the new Kenyan president now calls himself a hustler?" What is the implication of this, more broadly? It shows that hustling and its multiplicity of values can get extracted and abstracted, even marketized, at different scales. If hustling can become as much a self-narration as it is a practice and a story that can be marketed and sold (as a tour or through a song), if it can be "harnessed" for entrepreneurial projects by NGOs and social businesses, then it can be capitalized in more serious ways by the likes of Ruto and his administration. What does that do for the hustlers of the *mtaa*? The Hustler Fund may provide a useful answer to this question.

When Ruto came into office in 2022, one of the first initiatives his administration took was related to "financial inclusion." Ruto wanted to replace the current credit-access system with a graduated scoring system that did not leave out the poor from accessing cheap credit facilities. Access to cheaper credit was a key part of his campaign message. With public funds, Ruto established a low-interest, collateral-free loan scheme. The Hustler Fund was introduced in 2022 as a collateral-free financing product for micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises (MSMEs). The first time I heard of it was in the UK, when I happened to meet an Uber driver from Kenya shortly after Ruto was elected. He raved about the Hustler Fund. Anyone with a mobile number could access 500 KES (US$3.88) and needed to pay it back within fifteen days. With time, you could borrow more money each time. In my ~~last~~ trip to Nairobi in April 2023, I asked everyone I could what they thought of the Hustler Fund.

As one friend in Huruma explained, "The Hustler Fund was supposed to be 0 percent interest, but it's 8 percent interest. So people feel it's somebody's business." Among other friends across Mathare, the consensus was

as follows: people in the *mtaa* felt it was a joke. "What can I do with 500 shillings? I can't start anything with 500. I need 10,000." As start-up capital, 500 shillings was too little to make much of a difference because it's not earning any money, and yet it was too much to easily pay back quickly for someone living in the *kadogo economy*. It *was* a useful small amount that could be used as ad hoc working capital. For all the Uber drivers I met in Nairobi on that trip, the Hustler Fund was useful "to get fuel, then pay it back right away with the next job." ~~When I spoke with social justice activist Jack Makau from Slum/Shack Dwellers International, he said, "Give a hustler 10,000 shillings, they'll know what to do!"~~

During these conversations about the Hustler Fund, people also spoke about the other fintech services around. Safaricom had come out with Fuliza, pitching itself as a "lending scheme in a smart way." Fuliza offered instant assistance but you needed to pay it back immediately. Introduced in 2019, Fuliza was an overdraft mobile money product jointly operated by Safaricom and two of Kenya's largest banks, NCBA and Kenya Commercial Bank Limited (KBC). It was embedded within M-Pesa with an opt-in, with limits determined by a credit score. It was therefore a "short term digital loan product" and had a near perfect repayment rate because funds were automatically deducted once the customer received money via M-Pesa. M-Shwari was another short-term loan product that was jointly operated by Safaricom and NCBA. What my friends were describing here reflects the rise in "mobile phone-based lending" in Kenya, which has accelerated over the past few years, essentially financializing Kenya's popular mobile banking platforms such that "newfound credit provides necessary liquidity" (Donovan and Park 2022, 1064). Kevin Donovan and Emma Park argue persuasively that "digital lending sits at the nexus of public austerity and corporate monopoly" (1081). The negative effects of financialization and indebtedness notwithstanding, my friends in Mathare ~~and Huruma~~ were highlighting the ways in which they subverted these modes of financialization and debt "from below" (Zollmann 2020).

Once my friend David had finished explaining the different mobile lending platforms, he laughed and said, "But now you see, T . . . most of us have several SIM cards so we handle different mobile money options! That is what *we* call the Hustle Nation!" When I cross-checked this with other friends and interlocutors, indeed they also admitted that of course they have multiple SIM cards (you can legally have up to four), and if someone needs to send them money, people often say, "Use this number, not that

one" because if you have taken out a short-term loan with the Fuliza scheme but a friend is sending you money that you want to use toward a certain expense, you do not want the funds to be immediately deducted from your account to pay back the Fuliza debt. So you ask for the money to be sent by M-Pesa to another phone number. This is how people manage these small amounts of loans and debts. That is the hustle. What is clear, however, is that the Hustler Fund per se is a ruse and not necessarily helping the actual hustling class.[9] Instead, it is inserting itself into the situated practices of hustle diversification, using a label that performs allyship with the struggling working poor, seemingly masking its predatory logics.

It seems that the hustle involving digitally mediated small loans is not just about accessing "liquidity"; it is also about how to access multiple loans at the same time. There is much more to explore here. Thinking with the recent work of Julie Zollman (2020) on how Kenyans navigate financial scarcity, I am sitting with the following questions: To what extent should or could acknowledging the ingenuity of this savvy micro-loan hustle lead to more genuinely inclusive public and private (fintech) services to support and amplify existing hustles? And furthermore, how could the hustlers of the *mtaa* access a more meaningful amount of capital without falling into the traps of indebtedness, predatory lending, or individualistic profit seeking?

FROM HUSTLING TO THE JOB, AND BACK TO HUSTLING

Much of this book has dwelled on what takes place outside the wage, beyond the "proper job" (Ferguson and Li 2018). But in a way, it is perhaps ironic and appropriate to end with a note about the job. Here I quote the Kenyan musical artist Tetu Shani's 2020 track "Furukazi" (A full job) : *wallahi hakuna kazi . . . nilienda mbali nikachoka?* (For how much longer will the youth have to go to extreme lengths to make a living?). Shani's lamentation echoes the International Labour Organization's 2022 report on youth employment trends, which states,

> Globally, unemployment among young people is more than three times more common than among adults. In Africa, youth unemployment remains below the world average for both women and men. However, this fact masks substantial differences across the region, with youth unemployment ranging from almost 30 per cent in Northern Africa–where almost every other woman in the labour force is unemployed—down to 11 per cent in sub-Saharan

Africa (with no substantial difference between the sexes). Yet unemployment is an incomplete indicator of deficits in decent employment opportunities as it does not take into account employment quality. In sub-Saharan Africa, the low unemployment rates among young people partially reflect the fact that many cannot afford to stay unemployed but need to engage in insecure—often low-productivity—jobs for income.

There is no doubt that a celebration of hustling risks overlooking the inherent precarity and vulnerabilities associated with the perceived *need* to hustle in order to survive in the city and risks normalizing hustle economies as the contemporary mode of work. The following two short vignettes illustrate this point.

On the day in April 2023 when I boarded the *matatu* with Andrew heading away from the CBD (see the introduction), once he jumped off, I stood near the conductor, who was leaning against the side of the open doorway with his feet against the first step, so as to stay steady as the vehicle moved. He was counting cash and folding the bills of 50 and 100 KES (US$0.39 and 0.78) customers had given him, logging who needed change, all the while keeping an eye on the road as the *matatu* started to drive faster now that we'd gotten out of the city center traffic. As I was hanging on to the rail and trying to lock my feet to stand firm, he saw me staring at this ritual of folding money in this particular way. He looked back down and continued what he was doing, and then said, "You see, this is *my* hustle. But if I can get another job, I'll leave this *matatu* thing." I am fully aware that this comment could have been performative, expressed with the assumption that I would not perceive *this* job as a good job. Indeed, most Kenyans regard *matatu* work as dangerous work and *matatu* workers as a nuisance (Ference 2024). But it also signaled the disposition of young people in Nairobi—a disposition of adaptability and readiness to jump off and take on another job if it seems to offer better prospects. In the meantime, you stand in the doorway, holding on firmly, with a demeanor of nonchalance, folding what you can make.

Another scenario that took place during that same month made a similar point about the desirability of employment. I was at a restaurant in Westlands, on a rare evening on my own, with the company of my field notes. A table of six people arrived for dinner next to me, three women in their late thirties and forties, and a young teenage girl, a toddler, and an infant. I couldn't help but overhear some of their conversation, and the

teenage girl reminded me of my own daughter in some of her manner-isms. They all ordered a lot of food, a big seafood platter, and it felt like a big celebration of sorts. At the end of their meal, the woman gesturing to pay the bill gasped and said, "Oh my God, we've eaten for 15,000 shil-lings!" To put this in perspective, this is the amount that Eliza used to earn per month when she was employed. The woman then reassured every-one around the table, laughing nervously, "Don't worry, I've prepared for this . . ." and she put down her credit card. Everyone looked shocked, ner-vous, but elated at the same time. I tried to be discrete and kept focusing on my field notes and tea. But I thought I overheard that it might have been the teenage girl's birthday, so as they started to leave, I looked up at the teenage girl and said, "Have a good night! And happy birthday! Was it a birthday?" The girl smiles and says, "No, no. It's my mum. My mummy got a job."

I sat there for a while, thinking about what the girl said. I was putting together the proposal for this book at the time, and this scene was a beau-tiful provocation. As I was trying to tighten my conceptualization of *hustling,* a family (all women) was celebrating the fact that one of the two women had gotten a "full job." A salaried job. A job that would allow them to have a big meal out on a Friday night. So is "getting a job" still, despite the reality of the hustle in Nairobi, the marker of achievement? Probably yes. This echoes not only the rhetoric of many conference and policy debates on the "future of work" but also some of the popular discourses among both the political right and the left calling for more "decent jobs." As Eliza-beth Fouksman (2020) argues based on her research interviewing under-employed South Africans, a "moral economy" of work persists in many people's imaginations, even when the reality of a "full job" is neither guar-anteed nor easily sustained. So we have growing casualization of work on the one hand, and a "job creation" agenda on the other, with policy actors focusing on how to ensure a youthful African population will be able to secure decent jobs (Lawhon, Millington, and Stokes 2018). Employment remains the aspirational goal. And yet the reality may be something in between the *job* and the *gig.* The hustle is *not* the absence of jobs; it is the ability to move between the job and the absence of jobs, the ability to make something out of nothing, the ability to hold a job for as long as it may last while knowing that it may not, to understand how to figure out the next steps, and to constantly have a couple of plans on the side, just in case.

To what degree could "job creation" efforts take seriously the skills, knowledges, and experiences of hustling portfolios, such that the future of work does not become narrated as either the realm of "proper jobs" versus "nonstandard" work, or presume a wageless economy where the only choice is incessant hustling? This question connects to recent debates on universal basic income, and here it would be worth exploring how hustlescapes would shift or be reconfigured in a UBI scenario. What would that do for risk mitigation, the values and logics, the stature and the flexibility of hustling? In the meantime, does hustling become the proxy for what UBI offers, which is a basic financial safety net? As we saw in chapter 5 with Eliza, the hustle can be the secure safety net when jobs are either uncertain or compromise one's autonomy.

MUSEUM HILL HUSTLES

In April 2019, during a day spent at the Nairobi National Museum of Kenya with my two children, I took notice of three young men we greeted as we made our way to the museum compound. These young men, who must have been in their twenties, were hanging around the liminal spaces between the museum entrance and other buildings within the gated circumference of the compound—which included various offices of ethnographers, paleontologists, archaeologists, and conservation researchers. The National Museum is located on Museum Hill, near the bustling traffic on Uhuru Highway. Its physical location sits in between worlds—that of Westlands (with its shopping malls, fancy eateries, and cool clubs catering to middle- and upper-income residents) and that of the Central Business District, the administration center of Nairobi with myriad architectural echoes of its colonial past, its long-standing presence (and policing) of street hawkers, its cultural and retail amalgam of "tradition and modernity," with offerings catering to all budgets. The CBD is where anyone taking a public transport must pass through, changing *matatus* at one of the various stages. The museum's in-between location represents in many ways this encounter between different corners of the city, and anyone hanging around the museum can be discrete about where exactly in the city they "stay."

In that compound, you could be a researcher, a curious visitor, a staff member, or just someone wanting a little respite from the noisy traffic sounds. That's the thing about Nairobi—within minutes you can often manage to move away from the cacophony of urban soundscapes and find serenity in the courtyards or back gardens of even unremarkable venues.

It's a space of calm, with bird sounds, some shade under the tall trees, and some relative quiet. And once you are at that museum compound, on Museum Hill, no one knows if you stay in the *ghetto,* a middle-class estate, or the posh Runda neighborhood where the United Nations and other INGOs have their offices.

As the kids and I walked in, one of the three young men introduced himself after we greeted them and started walking with us up the hill. His name was Willis, and, after asking us where we were going ("the main museum," I said), he suggested that he could give the kids a tour inside the snake park after we were finished with our visit of the museum. My kids (who were nine and eleven at the time) were over the moon with Willis's proposition. "Yes, please!" they exclaimed in unison, turning to Willis and then to me, waiting for me to say okay. There were two simple reasons why I couldn't say "no thank you" or *siku ingine* (another day): First, for my kids, seeing the live reptiles seemed like a well-deserved reward following a visit to the museum's curatorial displays about Kenya's colonial history, its cultural diversity, and its wildlife. Second, as this book probably makes clear by now, I am sensitive to young people's ability and agility to invent some kind of work in this city without jobs. In that moment, on a day that was meant to be a personal day taking my kids to the museum on the first day back in Kenya since my prior trip in 2017, I realized once again that kids offer new insights into the city, and again, research intersects real life in surprising ways.

It wasn't clear that Willis was hired by the museum to offer his snake park tour services, but that didn't really matter. Later that day, I understood that he was *allowed* to run his private tours of the snake park because he clearly lured museum goers into the snake park, which was a separate space with its own entrance fee. Willis was bringing the snake park more business, and in exchange he hoped to get a tip at the end of the tour (having asked for nothing at the onset). Willis had extensive knowledge and passion for zoology and had an understanding with the snake park caretaker who had lived on-site for more than two decades. By the time we met the caretaker, it seemed completely logical that the African rock python he was holding would be wrapped around the neck of my son, who was completely delighted. My daughter, who was enamored with the chameleons, carried one around on her forearm the whole time we were there, until Willis broke the news, with a gentle laugh, that the chameleons were food for the crocodiles. To this day, both kids still remember all the "cool facts"

that Willis taught them about snakes and reptiles and other "misunderstood" creatures. When we were leaving the museum compound, Willis's two friends were still hanging around the gate. They too may have had a Museum Hill hustle, or perhaps they were just there to hang out with Willis, to pass the time. I will never know.

With the museum site behind us, we walked toward the *matatu* stage and waited for a while along Uhuru Highway. It was rush hour and all the *matatu* leaving from town had every seat filled, and where we were standing was neither the CBD or the typical stops where people got off in droves. While we waited, we spotted a little kiosk a few meters away from the roadside. Waiting can always lead to something, so we bought cold sodas (it was incredibly hot that day) and, as always with the purchase of a drink in a glass bottle, we made conversation with the guys hanging around the little kiosk along the roadside before returning our empties. Miki owned the shop, and his friend David said he was a researcher working as a "data collector" at the University of Nairobi; Samuel was a mechanic "without a shop" because, as he put it, "It's too expensive to rent a space, so I go and fix cars around . . ." Samuel went on to explain why he wasn't working out of a fixed car repair station like the ones you see operating in full view along the roads. "The problem is in Kenya it's difficult to get capital to start your own business."

That day on Museum Hill highlighted the ways in which hustling moves across the city. As the other chapters illustrate, hustling is perhaps most acute in popular neighborhoods where provisioning, distribution, and daily operations depend on small-scale homegrown businesses alongside a steady stream of improvised solutions to make things work. In those popular neighborhoods, the low levels of public support and uneven access to basic goods and services have long been an accepted reality, so the habitus of hustling has shaped particular skill sets and capabilities. But as Willis and his peers showed, there are countless youth across income classes throughout the city hustling: making work in some way, deploying the skills and knowledge they have, finding whatever points of access to particular spaces within the city they can get (e.g., the museum compound, the space around a roadside kiosk). During those hours of *making work,* labor is often intimately entangled with forms of sociality that might make the day's uncertain prospects a little more bearable, safe, and enjoyable, as they wait for a customer, a chance, a window to turn nothing into something. This social element of hustling also comes with the obligation to

share, recognizing that individual gains are always grounded in some kind of collective effort.

My friend Sammy Gitau once asked a rhetorical question that in many ways runs through this whole book: "Does hustling just become, for everyday Kenyans, a way of accepting our hardship?" During this Ruto administration, and more globally in the postpandemic and postwage world of the 2020s, I sit with Sammy's question. Does hustle entrench and normalize hardship? Or is it offering new articulations for making work, making life, and making meaning in changing times?

"EVERYTHING CAN BE FIXED IN THE GHETTO"

One afternoon, Rosie and I walked from *Jonsaga matatu* stage in Huruma toward a community event taking place on the football grounds. On our way there, Rosie's left sandal broke unexpectedly. The main strap gripping her foot had snapped off, leaving the shoe unwearable. I started looking around for a ~~secondhand~~ shoe vender. In Huruma, it is common to see street vendors selling second- and thirdhand shoes of all sizes and brands. I was naive to think we would be buying a "new" pair of shoes, that the flip-flops were broken.[10] Within two minutes, Rosie spotted a middle-aged *mzee* sitting on a corner with an open tattered leather briefcase, exposing carefully arranged scraps of fabric and string intermingled with a few sewing needles and various sharp objects. Neatly displayed on top of the upper rim of the briefcase were three small bottles of shoe polish.

With this "toolbox," in about fifteen minutes, the shoe *fundi* (handyman) sewed Rosie's broken strap to the sole with white string and wrapped a small piece of first-aid tape around the strap to smooth out the bit that would sit between her toes. I remember being impressed by the handiwork, the speed, and the meticulous manner with which the *fundi* managed to give Rosie's shoe yet another life. But Rosie was not as impressed, protesting that the white mending against the black strap of her flip-flops looked bad. "*Ngoja, ngoja*" (wait, wait), said the *fundi,* as he meticulously but with rapid dexterity covered the white tape with black shoe polish, minding the pink colored sole and successfully camouflaging the mended part of the shoe. After a couple of exchanges to negotiate the price, Rosie paid him 15 KES (US$0.12), and off we went to resume the course of our day. As I smiled in silence, mentally registering this vignette for that evening's field notes, Rosie let out one of her familiar contagious laughs and then said,

> You see, if I had been in Westlands when this happened, I would have had to go into a Bata shoe shop and purchased a new pair of shoes for 3,000 shillings. Here in the ghetto we can get everything fixed. There is always a *fundi* for everything, 'cause it's not just secondhand stuff in the *mtaa*. We fix and sell third- and fourthhand goods all the time. Things you think of as unusable *taka taka* in the rich neighborhoods, here you can always fix it and find a use for it.

That idea, *everything can be fixed in the ghetto,* has stayed with me since that day. It was said with such humor and pride (echoed a few years later when Kaka said the same about the old bicycle and scooter that the kids were riding in Mlango Kubwa). But as much as it is true that *so many things* that break find another use, another life, another pair of hands (or feet), that so many people learn how to mend, fix, repair, restore, repurpose in the *mtaa,* some things are beyond repair. Tragically, Rosie was diagnosed with stage 3 breast cancer in 2018. Despite huge collective efforts among friends near and far to raise funds for her treatment, drawing on her expansive network in the hood and beyond, Rosie didn't make it. No one could cure her cancer or reverse that fatal tragedy.

Rosie worked across most popular neighborhoods in Nairobi (and indeed beyond) at one point or another, through various NGO organizations, often hustling on temporary NGO contracts as a field officer or the facilitator of community meetings. Rosie was often the person tasked with complicated political and interpersonal navigations that could involve meetings with local authorities (the district officer or the local chief) and engaging with the most marginalized local residents, including street children idling on street corners.

Rosie directly and indirectly paved the way for countless young girls in Koch and the Mathare Valley area more broadly. At a time when women and girls continue to face extraordinary gendered adversity in countless ways, the role of women with public-facing roles who project a deep connection with the grassroots is of vital significance.[11] In addition to their work and advocacy, they shed a spotlight on the countless ordinary women and girls doing extraordinary work to guarantee some form of provision for their immediate kin as well as their solidarity networks. These include the sex workers to the illegal alcohol brewers, the female landlords who invested their earnings into modest *mabati* (shanty) structures when the time was right, the *mama mbogas* (greengrocers) who have occupied the same street corner for years or persist in finding a corner they can claim

if they keep being pushed aside (see Kinyanjui 2014, 2019), the young teen-age girl taking care of her younger siblings while pursuing her studies, the NGO and social enterprise hustlers, and the hip-hop performers. As Eliza reminds us (in chapter 5), *ghetto gals* are not just survivors. The *mtaa* is a space of risk and harm but also a space where countless feminists, ground-breakers, activists, entrepreneurs, and organizers shape meaningful counter-currents that operate within, through, and alongside the subversive margins of the city. What are the links between hustling and activism? What can hustle studies teach us about the way that those who repair, who see some-thing broken and get to fixing it, balance the dynamic precarious factors of their ways of being, repairing, surviving, thriving?

WHAT REMAINS IN THE WAKE

When I met with my friend Salim in 2023, exchanging views on how youth were doing in the *mtaa* and what was needed, he paused and said, "We just need a bunch of Rosies . . ." That same month, I met with a group of young women in their early twenties who go by "Dream girls." ~~They were attending a meeting at Luke Hotel~~. They were finding ways to combat gendered violence through their own hustles, their own artistic practices, their activism, their words. Like Rosie, they were finding strength and joy in their everyday militancy (Montgomery and Bergman 2021). Rosie's leg-acy and stories about her keep circulating among those who knew her and have animated the imagination of those who only knew *of* her, such that the idea itself of Rosie and the person she was endures. This absence / presence dualism points to the wider significance of what *remains* in the wake of lives (Sharpe 2016)—the wake of human lives, projects' lives, mate-rial lives. This book has reflected on people, projects, places, and pieces. How do the lives of all these things unfold and transform with time? What changes matter most, and what kinds of endurance make a difference? What are the *effects* of lives, efforts, and interventions that have formed out of or embedded themselves into situated hustle geographies?

As I reflect on the past fifteen years of engagement with different corners of Mathare and Nairobi more widely, I now sit with the traces of "left behinds" and wonder how to evaluate and value what remains. The remains of the various experiments discussed in this book include people-led initiatives and those of external organizations (including social justice organizations, NGOs, social businesses, and committed social work-ers connected to local government). They have all at one point or another

endeavored to work with communities in popular neighborhoods, to different degrees of success depending on the vantage point. The remains might include what is concretely left behind (such as an upgraded social hall, a public facility, a water tank, a toilet cleaning product, the tokenistic plaque), but it also includes the oral histories of a project or an event, what is remembered and by whom, and what gets folded back into local knowledge and evolving ~~hustles~~.

The remains include individual and collective attempts of various kinds to repair what is deemed broken, for any object that circulates in these neighborhoods (from phones to shoes to solar lamps) is immediately scrutinized for its potential fixability. It includes the community kitchens facilitating creative collaborations between youth and women's groups to organize mechanisms of provisioning for the most vulnerable residents in already underserved neighborhoods. It includes the peer-to-peer coaching that happens among youth in order to build not just self but *collective* esteem among childhood friendship groups who know that youth are too often marginalized and criminalized on the one hand, but on the other hand hailed as valuable change makers and "natural leaders." There are conversations about how to harness and invest in youth collective knowledge but also tense debates about when that knowledge (and youth's time) is at risk of being exploited. It also includes the countless daily efforts to maintain infrastructures in constant states of breakdown and how differently certain forms of shared provisioning might be read. Let me give an example to illustrate this latter point.

Some of the water and electricity providers have at different points been called "cartels." In 2023, a four-part documentary called *Ghetto Gava,* produced by independent media house Africa Uncensored, featured footage from undercover journalists who had been documenting electricity and water "cartels" in Nairobi's "biggest slums," Kibera and Mathare. The point here is not to assess the veracity of the documentary's narrative (which seeks to depict the criminality and corruption of these networks) but rather to point out that there are continuous competing discourses at play that raise questions about how "self-help" provision might be interpreted, at what cost, for whose benefit. By framing these groups as "cartels," it engages with a politics of blame: blaming the "criminal gangs" presumably exploiting ordinary residents, and blaming the government for letting hundreds of thousands of people live in at-risk environments where electrocution and water contamination is a daily reality.

Under another light, and another name, some youth refer to themselves or their fellow youth group members as *watu ya maji* or *watu ya stima* (water people or electricity people) and then describe what that involves as they evoke the skills of a yet another form of *fundi* (repairman) work that seeks to connect the "off-grid" neighborhoods to the city's metabolic energy flows. When *watu ya maji* and *watu ya stima* operate with infrastructures that are in constant breakdown, the line between creative bricolage, piracy, service provision, and potential harm is thin. Are these "water people" hacking water pipes to sell water one jerry can at a time during water shortages to blame? As with other hustles, it might depend on the optic, the narrative, the intent, and the moral economy at stake. What matters in the precarious present is that there is a need for a service or provision of some kind; there are people who need income, and there are creative ways to earn some income out of providing an unmet service, albeit subversively. Perhaps there is a spectrum, like with every other business and service, between those who are simply providing a service to their fellow residents and those who take advantage of the infrastructural shortages. Then there are the local residents who line up to get water and accept that under conditions of scarcity, neighborhood youth will be "making something small" while finding a way to get water to their mothers and sisters.

The remains of Community Cleaning Services (see chapter 4) include the faded "CCS" sign on the toilet door in Mathare Number 10 and the washed-out T-shirts from the *Story Yetu* documentary filming still worn by those who took part around Mathare and Huruma. The remains also reside in the transfer of local knowledge—knowledge about how to run a community-led cleaning business, including how to balance local provision of services and taking the business and the mission beyond the neighborhood scale. In Kevo Uduni, we see the new generation of youth leaders, for example. As Kevo explained in 2023, he was inspired by CCS in his young teens and is now running his own portfolio of circular businesses: a sanitation service and an urban agribusiness, including raising poultry, goats, and a vertical sac farm set up in the compound near his Huruma youth group *baze*. Every month, Kevo can be found leading discussions among a coalition of other youth groups across the city who are all focusing on waste management and circular economies.

The remains of NGO-led outreach events include the tree at the MANYGRO *baze* planted one year as part of the annual World Hand

Washing Day "celebration." The tree now provides some physical and figurative shade for older youth who are not quite becoming *wazee* (elders) yet but who are slowing down a little and letting their younger peers devise their own hustles under the "hot sun." The shade reflects the NGO hustle of the older youth, and the evolving relationships between one cohort of youth and another—shade represents one of the various ways in which youth claim a sense of place, and in this case, a changing sense of pace.

Finally, there are remains of all the stories about the various development projects that have taken place in the *mtaa,* which have become folded into local folklore about who was a founder of this or that initiative, or who was the key leader and contact person of one project or another. Some of these initiatives have slipped away or morphed into a different version of themselves, with different players involved. Some of these experiments, including unlikely alliances and bedfellows at times, have provided openings for other things to happen, for other engagements with everyday *mtaa* life and aspirations. Some of these initiatives have continued to hustle for funds from one external source of support or another. But across these diverse remains of interventions, collaborations, and connections, there is a shared effort to narrate, project, and perform a reclaiming of the homegrown, a detachment from the "sponsor" and the letting go of false promises.

Some of the organizational imaginations of how things could be did not necessarily pan out. But it is less the formal intention and its embodiment that matters. Perhaps it is the recalibration of these intentions into the realm of what is possible in the precarious present that remains more relevant and lasting. The *mtaa*, for all its vulnerabilities and volatilities, will continue to be a place for staying, dwelling, working, learning, consuming, cooking, sharing, playing, exchanging, lending, borrowing, dreaming, making, repairing, passing the time, and living life.

HUSTLE RECENTERED

As illustrated throughout these chapters, hustlers fill many vacuums in under-resourced contexts, shaping diverse forms of self-organized provisions, inventing diverse income opportunities, providing mentorship to vulnerable peers in the absence of other institutional support, and developing an array of creative endeavors across the arts, leisure, and recreational spaces that enhanced the city's popular culture. Read together, these chapters argue that hustles, in their plural forms, shape vital spaces of economic

life, activism, grassroots political mobilization, community-oriented care, and popular intellectual and cultural life. Hustle urbanism therefore dances between mixed livelihood pursuits, commitments to justice (economic, social, environmental, and spatial), and a kind of playfulness.

In Nairobi, there is a popular expression: *Tuko pamoja.* To break this down: The verb *kuwa* means "to be," and depending on the form of conjugation it can mean *to be* in the existential sense (to exist in a particular way) or in the spatial sense (to be in a place). As my Swahili teacher taught me years ago, *tuko* means "we are in a place." For example, *tuko nyumbani* means "we are at home." But if you say, for example, "we are cold," you would say *sisi ni baridi,* where "ni" means "are." So in "proper" Swahili, these two forms of grammatical conjugation signal the difference between ontological and spatial *being.* And yet, in Sheng, the popular slang vernacular spoken in Nairobi, grammatical conventions are constantly transgressed, such that the more colloquial way of conjugating the verb *kuwa* is to use the spatial meaning. So the common phrase *tuko pamoja* means "we are together." In what sense? That is the point. It can mean we are *in this place* together, but it is also used to infer that we are together in solidarity and together in mutual understanding. We exist and understand together, and we are in place together. *Tuko pamoja* is an apt metaphor for the spatial practice and relational matter of hustle. *Learning with* Nairobi hustles, then, is about recognizing the spatial and the ontological dimension of hustle, such that place and being are inextricably entangled. All the while, the specifics of place and being are always left somewhat ambiguous; what exactly that place and that way of being entail is never fully known and that's part of the point. We are together but each hustling our own unique hustles.

This book does not claim to provide solutions or offer conclusive assertions about what *should* or *could* happen. Such deliberations ~~would~~ require collective thinking and working through. This book instead provides openings for further deliberations, which could include addressing the following conundrums: How might we acknowledge the aspects of hustling that merit harnessing and praise, without missing the aspects that merit critical examination and caution—the forms of environmental, social, political, and economic injustice that shape the contexts for hustle economies to persist in the first place? Paying attention to hustling in its plural registers offers a way of *seeing* without presuming to *know,* being open to different imaginaries of life and work, and noticing different expressions of care,

aspiration, sustenance—without losing sight of the vulnerabilities and dis-possessions that can underpin (and even enable) hustle economies.

Let me reemphasize that this book is not encouraging people to hustle more; to do so would be to blindly celebrate hustles without acknowledging their inextricable ties to persistent structural dispossession and uncertainty, which would in turn normalize and romanticize hardship and injustices. This book is about encouraging us all to recognize the work that hustle is doing and to acknowledge that so many people are hustling in a variety of ways that often go unseen or undervalued, or become stigmatized when measured against narrow legalistic, economistic, moralizing parameters.

It is telling that it has been under the government of Ruto—the very politician whose campaign was built on the claim that Kenya was a "Hustler Nation"—that a series of weekly protests known locally as Maandamano took over the streets between the months of June and September 2024. These protests were different from others: they were not incited by the political opposition or any political elite persona. The protests were, as many proudly affirmed on X during those first few weeks in June, "leaderless and tribeless" and led by Gen Z, those born in the late 1990s and early 2000s who are the digitally literate, educated, but underemployed demographic who know their rights and are not afraid to speak out. Facing police vio-lence on several protest days, youth on X and in conversation frequently said that they had "nothing to lose." The protests started with the contes-tation of the 2024 finance bill, but it became much more than that in the end. These protests represented an emboldened politics of opposition, and as Rosebella Apollo, Jerry Okal, and Jack Makau (2024) argue, they "chal-lenged the established political order" that would have political elites be the primary holders of power. The protesters who took to the streets were coming from everywhere—from the intellectual middle-class university graduates to the Gen Z youth from the *mtaa*. Elders hung back and I heard many chuckle and admit that they were proud. They were curious and intrigued. They listened and let the youth speak, tweet, and chant. The wider implications of these protests and this moment are still uncertain as I finalize this conclusion. And I have wondered, since my most recent trip to Nairobi in June 2024, when the protests started, how this all connects to hustle urbanism. One thing is for sure: youth are hustling to make life work in the city, they are tired of having to hustle hard, and hustling is a skill that shapes diverse economic, social, political, and cultural articulations that are counterhegemonic, creative, sometimes discrete, and other times

loud. Perhaps declaring that Kenya was a Hustler Nation was to admit that the hustle is *real,* and it is not quiet.

Therefore, the plural stories of hustle, in their diasporic and intergenerational forms, are crucial to recenter, not just to acknowledge and study as fringe subjects. Hustling practices have for too long been overlooked, stigmatized, or dramatized because they did not fit the hegemonic schema of what was legally, economically, politically legible. To recenter them, in their diverse forms, means avoiding segregating our studies of urban economy and geography. I would like to see what we could call "hustle studies" become integral to the study of urban life, livelihoods, and popular culture. Doing this could enrich wider collective projects seeking to imagine and construct more just economic, social, political structures, grounded in existing practices that work with imperfect circumstances to forge more "viable" lives (Dyson and Jeffrey 2023). Here there is a careful balance to be struck: taking hustling seriously does not mean fetishizing a new bootstrapping uplift narrative, nor does it call for a moralizing discourse that would judge how hustling is operationalized, relying on criminological theories that criminalize or exceptionalize hustling practices. This book has tried to recognize its affirmative dimensions alongside the conditions that render individuals relationally precarious. As Bettylou Valentine (1978) explained in her ethnography of "hustling and other hard work" decades ago, hustling is relationally constituted, entangled with other forms of labor, from paid work to unremunerated household or community work. The contribution of hustlers in Nairobi, and beyond, cannot be overlooked. They may start and often take place at the margins, but they are not marginal.

Hustlers cannot be left to fend for themselves and their peers without more substantial access to resources that would allow them to amplify their existing talent, ideas, and small-scale enterprises. As a means to an end, hustle showcases not only the ingenuity of popular knowledge but also its propositional and hopeful registers. The heavy rains in April 2024 that flooded some of the most vulnerable communities in Nairobi were immediately met with grassroots emergency responders who continue to hustle for funds and resources from within their neighborhoods and beyond to provide for the families affected by the floods and those affected by the subsequent demolitions that occurred along the river's riparian land. From the Mathare Social Justice Centre, to Huruma's ghetto farmers, to the collective of women self-organizing community kitchens, countless groups of diverse organizational structure and visibility have provided care, repair,

river restoration plans, resistance, and resolve. They keep going. The disposition of hustling is one that recognizes the precarious present but also journeys into a future of potentials. Greater support for hustlers needs to come in diverse forms, but importantly it should not involve ignoring the hustle and promoting more "licit" and "acceptable" modes of work and conduct. We need hustle studies to *learn with* and design with the hustle rather than simply ask hustlers to become respectable entrepreneurs.

Hustling affords a sense of place and time and grants permission to not know exactly where we are headed. Part of the hustle is a deep and active attention to the spatial, relational, and temporal, alongside an acceptance of the unknown point of destination. The key is the dance between different modes and positions of being. As shown throughout these chapters, the logic of hustling goes beyond the binaries of job/no-job, beyond the idea that labors are remunerated or "productive" in an industrial capitalistic sense, beyond the formal/informal and self/collective dualities. It is about getting things done, working around problems that cannot be fixed at the point of manifestation. It's about staying with breakdown and building something otherwise. And in that, do we not all have something to learn from Nairobi's hustlers?

To study hustle is, to put it simply (but not to conclude), to pay close attention to what people are doing (and have always done) at the interstices, at the margins, in the rubble, in the meantime, and in spite of the trouble and the breakdown. To pay close attention without ever really knowing how they're doing it or what endless permutations and variations the form of hustling will take over time. To just try to learn and listen and notice and acknowledge that hustle matters.

Afterword

A Response

EDWARD KAHUTHIA MURIMI

This was written in March 2024, while Edward Kahuthia Murimi (Kahos) was finishing his PhD based at the Human Rights Centre of Ghent University.

I was born and bred in Mlango Kubwa, one of the villages or what are now called wards in Mathare. Throughout those formative years, I always had a "theory" or suspicion if you like. Whenever I saw a white person visit our ghetto and try to "embed" themselves among us, learn our language (including Sheng), I wholeheartedly believed they worked undercover for the CIA or MI6! This was because I wondered what interest a foreigner would have in the granular details of where and how we lived. So on that random afternoon when I first met Tatiana outside our *baze* (as we popularly called the social hall for the Pequeninos youth group), these are the kinds of suspicions I harbored. We did not say much at our first encounter, but I recall that someone next to me mentioned to her that I was a lawyer and a member of Pequeninos. I realized that Tatiana had noted that interesting piece of information in her mind as she smiled and walked away. That chance meeting would be the start of a friendship that has blossomed in different directions, transitioning from what I initially felt—a subject of her study—to a comrade who understood and respected us.

Preparing a "response" to Tatiana's book was not easy because of the mixed feelings that come with "studying" what is so familiar to me, enjoying the very detailed and accurate descriptions of what always was and remains mundane to me, the eye-opening "bigger picture" of why we as a community in Mlango Kubwa and the larger Mathare are where we are and what perpetuates our reality. I therefore thought it best to share, as I

read the text, what it reminded me about life in Mathare (as one of the "leavers" who regularly returns).

Tatiana's ethnographic work in Nairobi generally and specifically in Mathare is, in my view, a fair and accurate account of what transpires in my city and my hood. I say fair and accurate account, but not complete, because the fluidity in a field such as Mathare means the quest for certainty and completeness will always be postponed. As I read the book, the first sense I got was how respectful she was in and with her field of study. Aside from the necessary setting of the "scene" that the academy and convention demand, this book is essentially about the people that Tatiana met and befriended in Mathare. I appreciated her work for its respect for me and other interlocutors in the years of observation during her visits, stays, and returns to Mathare. We are not footnotes but at the heart of her work in Mathare, and it was clear that we were seen and heard through the accounts in the book. We were not just "studied"; there was respect and friendship, and even though we "gave access" informally, we did so consciously. When I read about her encounters with different actors in our community like my friends Kaka and the late Rosie, it was clear that what she was getting by way of information was not "performed," as individuals and groups commonly did when visitors and potential "sponsors" came, and Tatiana is spot on in picking out these performances. I credit this to the trust she earned with her interlocutors and the friendships that allowed genuine conversation.

The book wrestles with the question of who a hustler is and the apprehension that the elite have appropriated the term for self-serving interests, including those who have sought (and gotten to) high political offices, like President Ruto, on the currency of the hustler narrative (or rhetoric). To my mind, the idea of hustling has been with us longer than the linguistic genealogy of the term *hustla/hustler*. I would go as far as suggesting that Tatiana's efforts in Mathare make her a hustler. She comes to Nairobi the first time; she sniffs a possibility and returns to explore it further and does so relentlessly. Arguably, the hustler spirit rubbed off on the author because to hustle, in one sense and as her observations reveal, is to strive, to keep showing up even when what you come back to seems to stagnate. Repeated returns to the field of hustling eventually breed breakthrough for most hustlers in Nairobi, and it bred acceptance and paved the way for a clearer picture of Tatiana's "field." How she gained acceptance in Mathare is strikingly similar to how we admitted new members to Pequeninos. You see, at

Pequeninos there were two tiers of membership—the "founders" and those we recruited after the foundation of the youth group had been laid. The criterion for admitting additional members, although unstated, was simply those who had "hung around" our *baze* long enough and returned consistently. Having been vetted by their longevity with us, these "fresh recruits" could then be trusted; they could sit with us and listen to our stories, including incriminating ones. Tatiana was in a way "recruited" into Pequeninos, to Mlango Kubwa and Mathare at large. She had hustled her way through her own studies, her teaching, her writing, and into our hearts. This striving, or the "grit and persistence," as she describes it, makes her the quintessential hustler.

I really liked that Tatiana accurately picks this idea, in the storytellers chapter, of our hood being both a stage and a commodity. This reminded me of the word we actually use(d) in reference to the hood—*shamba* (Swahili for "farm"). We cultivated and harvested from the hood, and because of the limited acreage of the *shamba,* individuals and groups have to mark territory. So that public toilet is "managed" by Group A, and members of Group B have to respect this. For Group A, the toilet, which they charge members of the public to use for a small fee (in return for keeping it clean), is their *shamba.* Members of Youth Group X collected garbage in a particular "zone" exclusively because this was their *shamba* and Group Y could not extend services to this zone. The examples could go on. Even for the "roadside time killers" that Tatiana spots along Juja Road, I would argue that she misses to "see" that they essentially idle at their *shambas.* They "kill time" at strategic places of opportunity and are still "at work" while waiting. As some of the youth kill time at a shoe-shining place along Juja Road, the *makanga/dondaa* (conductor) in the *matatu* will get one of them to temporarily take charge (and be paid for it) as the conductor goes for lunch. There are numerous examples of this model of "work" or "going to work," but in sum, if you leave the house and assume the position of "ready to work," you always give yourself a chance to eat in Mathare and generally in Nairobi.

The idea of the hustle terrain being defined by shared street knowledge rooted in "entangled biographies that combine tragic and comedic moments" also struck a chord with me. It reminded me of the powerful role of storytelling in the trajectories that the lives of most young people in Mathare take. Tatiana may not have known this until now, but in my youth group, Pequeninos, the narrative we gave all visitors was the shiny,

acceptable one of being pioneers of garbage collection in Mlango Kubwa in the late 1990s and early 2000s. What a visitor could not have known is that at some stage, about 90 percent of our members engaged in crime as a side hustle to the main hustle of garbage collection. The way members of our group were recruited into crime, incredible as this may sound, was through storytelling. We had a few of our friends from other parts of Mathare (already engaging in crime) that regularly came to our *baze* and on most weeknights and weekends, they would tell colorful stories of how a robbery went in Nairobi's CBD, how dramatic the escapes were, how the police patrolling the CBD had to get their cut to allow our friends to operate with impunity, and so on. We were hooked to these narrations, and one by one, members who were hitherto only "garbage collectors" and footballers started joining the group that engaged in crime as their mainstay. This is how we lost more than a dozen members to police shootings, lynching or "mob justice," and long periods of incarceration. To these fallen soldiers, as we call them, may they continue resting in peace.

I have reflected on this history to also relate it to my appreciation of Tatiana's concession that she needed to "leave room for the unknowable" and that she could not always see what lies behind her ethnographic encounters in the hood. She is also right that those of us in the hood did not always know each other's hustles. One of the reasons why some hustles remained unknown was because some were extralegal or illegal and the less others knew about them, the safer for those involved. The other phenomenon was that there was/still is a lot of copying or replication of the other person's idea, and so to eliminate competition, you kept what you do to yourself or were at the very least vague on details. You protected your *shamba* this way. Part of the "unknowable" also relates to my own story of becoming a dad at the age of twenty, as narrated in the stayers and leavers chapter. There is a general practice in Kenya that a boy who completes primary school (at thirteen or fourteen years old) undergoes circumcision. There was a very particular and prevalent culture in Mathare in the 1990s where a boy who got circumcised was actively encouraged to have sex as the "final step" to his transition to manhood. I was subjected to the same pressure when my turn came and I had, for five or so years, to keep up with a lie to my peers that I had "done it." In Mathare, a pregnancy at twenty years old was/is not viewed by most as an "early pregnancy" and it shocks very few, if any. I remember that some of the girls I knew (in their early twenties) would be taunted as "barren" for not having

a child yet! So being a dad at twenty was normal and even expected in my community, the only universe I was familiar with before I left Mathare to study law at the University of Nairobi. That is why even with ethnographic work such as Tatiana's work, the question of "with which eyes or lenses" do we view Mathare (or any other field) is pertinent and how we label what we see even more important. For this reason, I appreciated that Tatiana reflects on her positionality and its attendant privilege, limitations, and biases.

My reflections are a tiny fraction of what stood out for me as I read the book. I would, overall, like my "review" of this book to be understood by the readers as a "thank-you note" to Tatiana. I thank her for zooming in to curate the "everyday" of Mathare and simultaneously zooming out to explain and connect our lived experiences to the broader social, economic, and political discourse. I thank Tatiana for problematizing the meaning of "work" and "jobs" in a hustle topography defined by informality and creativity that is too often neglected, if not criminalized. I thank her for "seeing" our industrious mothers in Mathare, the Mama Mboga street vendors who include my own mother, Mama Kahos, and whose roles are often rendered invisible. Without them, the hustler story in Mathare and Kenya as a whole is incomplete. Many of them may not be able to read this book but they teach us a great deal, and I'm grateful that Tatiana gave them a place at the table through her work. I thank her for spotlighting politicians who have failed us and preyed on us. I am grateful that she minces no words in calling out NGOs, INGOs, and multilateral agencies that come to Mathare to also hustle by piggybacking on the hustlers in the hood through box-ticking approaches. I am grateful for her eloquence on the unacceptable inequality, neglect, and exclusion of those at the margins of cities such as Nairobi. I thank her for fairly packaging the good, the bad, and the ugly of my hood and valorizing details of my home, Mathare, and the amazing individual narratives and perspectives from there as useful knowledge worth the time of those in and out of academia. I thank her for this scholarly articulation of the realities, plight, frustrations, hopes, and dreams of her interlocutors without appropriating their voices. I thank her for being a respectful and genuine friend of Mathare.

Acknowledgments

This book has been in the making for many years, and its completion marks a particular juncture along a series of journeys that have coalesced over time: journeys of research and professional trajectory; journeys of friendships made during and through research and "at work"; journeys of love, partnership, and motherhood. All of these have both interrupted different stages of the book writing and animated it continuously. There are so many people to thank. My attempt to do so here does not adequately reflect the depth of my gratitude to the vast web of friendships, mentorship, collaboration, support, and inspiration I have benefited from over the years. In no particular order . . .

First, there are those to thank at the University of Minnesota Press: Pieter Martin for being so responsive from the start and encouraging me to send in a proposal, Globalization and Community series editor Susan Clarke for constant encouragement and reading multiple versions of my manuscript, Anne Carter for editorial support during the production phase, and Rachel Moeller and the design team for working with me on the cover design; thanks also to Sheila McMahon for meticulous copyediting. I also want to thank Eric Lundgren from UMP and Lisa Trischler from the UCL Open Access Team, who made it possible for this book to become Open Access. This is my first book, and working with UMP has been a pleasure from start to finish. I feel very lucky.

Each stage of my academic training is reflected in some way in this book. My undergraduate professors at Cornell University in both the dance and anthropology departments encouraged me to question seemingly established norms and to explore with close attention the unstated, the

overlooked, the in-betweens. My law and anthropology professors and fellow peers at the London School of Economics made me question what counts as a legal category. My professors and colleagues in the geography department at the University of Cambridge made me realize that geography can be an empirical and theoretical playground and the most welcoming of disciplines.

I am grateful to Stuart Hart and Erik Simanis from Cornell University for bringing me on board a team project that gave me the chance to go to Kenya for the first time in 2005 and for inviting me into the early days of "inclusive business" deliberations. It made me appreciate the importance of listening to perspectives from seemingly disparate sectors and disciplines and has made me consider the efforts of practitioners from all sectors that have continued to make strides and in some cases push for radical reimaginings of what counts as "value."

The early stages of fieldwork were funded by an ESRC (Economic Social Research Council) Case Studentship award (2008–13), with SC Johnson as the institutional sponsor, thanks to John Langdell's support and curiosity. Subsequent trips to Kenya in 2016–17 were funded by a British Institute in Eastern Africa (BIEA) grant, which also allowed me to organize a workshop in 2017 that served as foundational for a special issue of *Africa* titled "Harnessing the Hustle." I am grateful to Archipel&Co for funding the "Hip Hop Mtaani Hustle" study that informed chapter 7. I thank my PhD supervisor, Bhaskar Vira, for his calm and supportive presence throughout my PhD and during my first lectureship at the University of Cambridge and as a fellow at Fitzwilliam College. I am grateful to Bhaskar and to Fitzwilliam College for granting me access during a term in 2023 as a visiting fellow to the beautiful Fitz library, where I spent several Sunday afternoons writing during an otherwise busy teaching term. That library, the Fitz gardens, and the café provided a vital oasis for the final stages of writing and thinking.

I am grateful to Nairobi friends who started as interlocutors, "contacts," and collaborators. There are so many people who have generously shared their time and stories with me. I'm sorry that I can't mention everyone's name here, but a special thank you to my oldest friends in Nairobi, Salim Mohamed, Sammy Gitau, and Joseph Njenga. Other friends welcomed me into their neighborhoods and homes: Eliza, Kennedy, Mambo, Kaka, Nathaniel, MANYGRO boys, especially Edwin, Wally, Mike, and Felix. I was lucky to meet Sammy from Dandora Recyclers during my 2023 trip, and

we've stayed in close contact ever since; the story of the "Dumpster Divas" is one that I look forward to following in the years to come. In Huruma, my thanks to Shei, Elias, Osodo, Kevo Uduny, Mama Diana, Oti, Oscar, and Humphrey. My thanks to Susan Kimani, the queen of social work done well and with passion, who reminded me that there are always things to be optimistic about. To Caro Odera, thank you for taking care of Zoë during fieldwork days that first year when she was so little, and for our friendship ever since. A few years into my fieldwork, I met Kahos, who would become a friend and a thinking buddy. Thank you for generously taking the time to write a response to the book. To Rosie, you are missed by so many of us. Thank you for your friendship, research collaboration between 2009 and 2011, and everything you did for youth in Nairobi. I hope that this book contributes to the archive of your life and legacy. Thanks to Rosie, I was fortunate to meet Pato Shomba and the Ghetto Films Trust crew in 2010, with whom two film collaborations ensued in 2010 and then in 2017. Thank you, Pato and David, especially for teaching me so much about the joys and labors of filming, for experimenting together to see what it could bring to ethnographic storytelling, and for your patient collaboration during the postproduction phase of those two projects. To the Nairobeez crew: thank you, Donga Man, Kissmart, and Moses for your brave and bold storytelling that has built a vital bridge between the local hood and wider audiences and for your honesty during difficult but important conversations. To my Swahili teacher, Mwalimu Judith Kiprop, thank you for all those hours of instruction during my first year of fieldwork, for giving me a love for the Swahili language and letting me appreciate both Swahili *sanifu* (proper Swahili) and its vernacular Sheng. I will continue to learn both in tandem and think of you with gratitude and humility. I have been inspired by the scholarship and activism of young Nairobi scholars, in particular, Wangui Kimari, Felix Mutunga Ndaka, Kamau Kairuri, and Mwangi Mwaura; there are many others. I thank Jackline Wanyonyi for research collaboration that fed into chapter 7 on hip-hop mtaani, Abu for research assistance on that fieldwork, and all the hip-hop artists who took part in those focus group discussions and shared their tracks and reflections.

There are numerous caring colleagues and friends who have at different stages asked about the book, commented on draft material, or simply offered encouragement, a listening ear, and a gentle push to keep going: Eszter Kovacs, Riam Kuyakanon Knapp, Kavita Ramakrishnan, Lizzie Richardson, Fabien Cante, James Cheshire, Rory Finnin, Ash Amin, Alan Latham, Tau

Tavengwa, and many more. I thank Mary Lawhon for being a stellar critical friend and reviewer of the manuscript; thank you for the careful and generous reads and the virtual coffee conversations. We met a year before I really started writing in Newcastle 2022 at the Royal Geographical Society (RGS) conference, and I'm so glad we have become friends since.

Thank you to others who have provided friendship, encouragement, and inspiring exchanges over the years, in the workplace, after the conference panel, at the park, or in the café: James Kneale, Tom Western, Ben Page, Jo Waters, Tariq Jazeel, Andrew Barry, Alan Latham, Pushpa Arabindoo, Jenny Robinson, Caz Bressey, Jason Dittmer, Claire Dwyer, Russell Hitchings, Mette Berg, Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, Emma Mawdsley, Charlotte Lemanski, Maan Barua, Claire Mercer, Will Monteith, Liz Fouksman, Philippa Williams, Colin McFarlane, David Menasce, Laurence Fontaine, Chance Bleu Montgomery, Nicky Padfield, Ruth Armstrong, Amy Ludlow, Anne Lally, Sara Muse, and Michale Bouskila-Chubb. I am grateful to Edgar Pieterse, Maliq Simone, Suzi Hall, Ash Amin, and Ann Varley, who have at different moments provided invaluable mentorship and support, inspiring me with their own writing, thinking, and creative practice. A special thank you to my friend Michele Lancione, whose intellectual generosity and shared passion for urban ethnography enabled several writing opportunities that gave me space for creative and experimental writing and thinking.

I have learned so much from thinking (and in some cases writing) with friends also doing ethnographic fieldwork in Nairobi: Lyndsey Farrell, Michele Osborn, and Naomi Van Stapele. A special thank you in particular to Meghan Ference, my dear friend and Nairobi fieldwork sister whom I met by chance at a seminar at the BIEA in Nairobi, back in 2009. I am grateful for our friendship and mutual support during those early days of fieldwork, subsequent job searches, early career hurdles, and personal ups and downs. I hold with utmost fondness and gratitude our year of monthly Zoom meetups between 2023 and 2024 to share our respective book chapters and provide mutual encouragement and pep talks amid our full-time teaching schedules.

The pressures of academia have become ever more acute over the past decade, and some of the demands are exhausting and all-consuming. But at its best, it is also an incredible privilege to work in a university environment, and here I want to thank my students especially. Teaching fuels our own continuous education and learning; it sharpens our thinking and gives

us a chance to relive our fieldwork by incorporating elements of our research into the classroom discussion. In turn, students give us a window into their lifeworlds as they navigate their own transitions into adulthood. I have learned so much from my students over the years, and many have engaged enthusiastically with the themes of this book during classroom discussions and over coffee around campus. A special thank you to Anpu, Samira, and Nikki for staying in touch all these years and for often asking about the book, and to the team of four undergraduate students—Lily, Caitlin, Cat, and Brandon—who did an independent study with me in the autumn of 2023, focused on hustle geographies. I am also grateful to all my master's students who have taken my class Precarious Urban Environment these past few years, which became a generative and collaborative space for thinking with several of the themes that underpin this book. Each year, our classroom discussions and your own ethnographic essays have been energizing and inspiring.

I've presented aspects of this work in various forums over the years—I am grateful to all participants for the provocative questions and comments that have enhanced my thinking and analysis. These opportunities helped refine my argument and I want to mention three events in particular that came at crucial times during the final year of writing the book: I am grateful to Sarah Hall for inviting me to give the Geoforum Annual Royal Geographical Society conference lecture in 2023, and I thank Suzi Hall and Clive Nwonka for their invaluable responses to that lecture, which came at the perfect time as I was finalizing one of the chapters of the book. I thank Min Tang, Ying Cheng, and Anuj Daga for inviting me to take part in the Youth on the Move Urban Studies Foundation lecture series and to all the participants on that January afternoon in 2024—I will never forget that two-hour Q&A discussion. I am grateful to Karin Schwiter and other labor geography colleagues at the University of Zurich for inviting me to give a seminar and workshop in March 2024 to talk about hustle geographies and urban ethnographic methods.

I can never thank my family enough, starting with my parents and siblings, for their patience and humor, for reminding me to write in a readable way, for bearing with me when I disappeared to write or tend to a deadline during family gatherings. Justin, my partner in all things, thank you for being with me from the very start, and being my best critic, best friend, always willing to chat about the book even when you were not in the mood, and for loving Kenya as much as I do. Sharing it has made this journey so

much more enjoyable. My kids, Zoë and Félix, were born during my PhD studies and have been an integral part of this writing and research journey. They bring life and joy to my world even when things seem quite dire. I thank Zoë for reading excerpts of the book during my last year of writing and giving me feedback notes that were always on point and brutally honest. It is moving to think that Zoë was born during the early days of my fieldwork and read draft excerpts in her secondary school years. I thank Félix for making me laugh daily, for wanting to learn Swahili, and for asking about my friends in Nairobi. You both have literally been along this book journey your entire lives—this is both a bit sad and very moving in a way. Sorry and thank you! I will never forget our trip as a family in 2019, when it became clear how the personal is completely intertwined in the fieldwork.

The book is written for diverse audiences. It is first written with my interlocutors in mind, whose perspectives and expressive articulations inform each chapter's theoretical orientation. The book is then written for my students, who are, as Les Back (2016) once described, "our first and most important audience." It is of course also written for my academic peers and scholars across the academy, from and with whom I have been fortunate to learn and dialogue since the start of this journey. I hope that the book is written in an accessible way, such that a wider public who might identify with hustling, or at least be curious about the social life and meaning of hustling, might also wish to read it. Ultimately the book seeks out a diverse audience precisely because hustling is relevant to many different groups of people and means different things to each person who identifies with its practice, narrative, and style. And yet it is currently undertheorized, and I hope this book demonstrates why it is worth taking seriously and merits a more prominent and nuanced place in academic, policy, and popular debate. So I thank, in advance, the readers who decide to crack its pages open and give it a go, for it is now time for me to let it go.

Notes

INTRODUCTION

    1. John Lewis, "Do not get lost in a sea of despair. Be hopeful, be optimistic. Our struggle is not the struggle of a day, a week, a month, or a year, it is the struggle of a lifetime. Never, ever be afraid to make some noise and get in good trouble, necessary trouble," X, June 27, 2018, https://x.com/repjohnlewis/status/1011991303599607808.

    2. This point echoes a long-standing argument most clearly articulated by Hungarian political economist Karl Polanyi (2001) in his seminal work *The Great Transformation,* first published in 1944, in which he argues that all economies are embedded in social relations and institutions. Critically examining the emergence of the modern market economy and modern nation-state, he points to the tension inherent in modern market economic logics that assume it is possible to dis-embed economic activity from social relations, through narratives such as "free trade." Polanyi's argument, as relevant today as ever, was as much theoretical as it was methodological, calling for a more grounded understanding of economic systems as inherently entangled with social structures and relations. For a complementary perspective, see William Davies's article "Antimarket," *London Review of Books,* April 4, 2024. Davies opens the piece by drawing on the work of French economic historian Fernand Braudel (1992), who differentiated "markets" from "capitalism." The former, he argued, is integral to "economic life," where relations of exchange and competition are transparent and where profits are minimal. In contrast, capitalism is the sphere of monopolies and concentrations of wealth and power.

    3. I'm drawing here on Kenna Lang Archer's book *Unruly Waters: A Social and Environmental History of the Brazos River* (2015), which examines the various attempts by developers and engineers to tame the Brazos River, which runs more than 1,200 miles from eastern New Mexico through the middle of Texas to the Gulf of Mexico. Waste in the densely populated neighborhoods of Nairobi is also "unruly" insofar as there have been various attempts to manage solid waste over the years (see chapter 3), but ultimately much of the city's residential waste is informally managed, and

attempts to control waste flows, let alone those who collect, resell, and repurpose waste, have continued to remain fragmented and locally organized. Though Mathare is often left behind when it comes to service provision, it is appropriate to borrow Archer's notion of "unruliness" to refer to the material flows (and visual, olfactic disturbance) of waste as beyond technocratic capture. Also, on the relationship between dense urban life and the effects of waste, see Tripathy and McFarlane 2022.

4. *Mboga* means vegetables in Swahili. Most often, the street vendors selling vegetables (and other fresh produce) have tended to be women, hence the popular name *mama mboga,* which literally means "mother of vegetables." As Kinyanjui (2014, 1) writes in her work on women and the informal economy in urban Africa, "one cannot speak of the informal economy in Africa without thinking about women" who dominate urban markets and "are responsible for a massive trade in food and clothes."

5. Part of the frustration with archival research related to popular neighborhoods was the relative absence of material. Robert Neurwirth makes this point in *Shadow Cities* (2005) explaining that there is often a dearth of archival information about residents who live in cities as squatters, where their material possessions—including letters, birth certificates, school diplomas, and the like—too often get lost or burnt, or stolen. Trying to understand what lies in the absence of information is part of the archaeological exercise, as Saidiya Hartman illustrates in *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments* (2021).

6. Anthropologists Gökçe Günel, Saiba Varma, and Chika Watanabe, in an essay written during the Covid-19 pandemic, propose the concept of "patchwork ethnography" to acknowledge the ways in which our personal and working lives impact ethnographic practice. This is a methodological and theoretical intervention, arguing that shorter, regular trips over time have validity and rigor, and must be taken seriously in an era where long-term sustained fieldwork is often increasingly difficult, especially for scholars with caretaking responsibilities and heavy teaching loads. Of course this "patchwork" approach will inevitably inform the quality and form of knowledge production and demands an honest conversation about what can be discerned over short, regular trips rather than longer one-off stays. I would argue that patchwork ethnography can work if it builds on a foundation of longer-term immersive ethnography.

7. For more on writing about and with fragments, see Kathleen Stewart's *Ordinary Affects* (2009), about the seemingly small, ordinary moments in everyday life that shape all kinds of politics; Christina Sharpe's *Ordinary Notes* (2023), which compiles brief personal and public notes that together present an immersive portrait of Black life; and Colin McFarlane's *Fragments of the City* (2021), which advocates for scholarship that embraces the incomplete, provisional, and emergent pieces of urban life that make their way into our writing and thinking.

8. See Robin Nagle's *Picking Up* (2013), in which she writes about her time as an ethnographer in residence with the New York City sanitation department, which included driving a garbage truck; and Kathleen Millar's ethnographic *Reclaiming the Discarded* (2018), where she often refers to conversations and encounters that took place while she was working on the municipal dump with her interlocutors.

9. The term *ghetto* refers to a particular place that can evoke a shared inter-generational condition of exclusion and marginality and can be vocalized to allude to one's specific historical ties to racialized segregation and spatial exclusion. In its everyday use, it highlights the relational position of marginality vis-à-vis the rest of the city but can also be reappropriated to connote a sense of place and belonging, at times even pride. Mitchell Duneier (2017) offers a sociological and historical analysis of *ghetto* as both a place and an enduring concept connected to Jewish and African American experience. I refer to the term only sparingly throughout the book, mostly when quoting my interlocutors. It is not my term to use to describe and name the parts of the city where my interlocutors stay and work.

10. I also stay away from seemingly more neutral but equally inappropriate terms such as *low-income* or *working-class,* simply because these neighborhoods are not necessarily linked to class-based ties or income-based wage economies. The term *popular* connotes several dimensions that are relevant to the parts of Nairobi that are discussed in these chapters and to the wider framing of hustle that takes place in neighborhoods that have elicited negative stereotypes and stigma in mainstream representation. They have also always been part of the city but cut off from its mainstream services; and in spite of (or because of) this, these neighborhoods have forged a strong sense of belonging, associational life, and off-grid economic activity that may take on social forms and appearances that differ from formal market, waged economies, while often being vital to the functioning of the city.

11. By using *Majority World,* we pay attention to the areas where the majority of the world's population live, where the majority of natural resources are located, and where both people and resources have been historically exploited and marginalized. The term *Majority World* recenters these oft peripheralized parts of the world.

12. This is a nod to Eric Klinenberg's 2018 book *Palaces for the People: How Social Infrastructure Can Help Fight Inequality, Polarization, and the Decline of Civic Life,* in which Klinenberg develops an argument about the importance of "social infrastructures" that provide physical spaces in urban public areas that facilitate and strengthen social ties.

1. CREOLIZING THE HUSTLE

1. *Oxford English Dictionary,* s.v. "hustle (v.), Etymology," accessed August 14, 2023, https://www.oed.com.

2. Racial capitalism is a concept originally mobilized by scholars of the "Black radical tradition"—associated with the social activism and intellectual work of Cedric Robinson (1983). Racial capitalism can be defined as an economic system of accumulation perpetuating racialized relations of inequality and hierarchy, and these span the globe through the history of colonization and other forms of domination, extraction, and exploitation.

3. In Ned Polsky's book *Hustler, Beats and Others* (1967), the chapter titled "The Hustler" draws on participant observation in the kinds of poolrooms depicted in Tevis's novel. Polsky's analysis is informed by his training in criminology, so it is perhaps unsurprising that his observations of the men engaging with pool and billiard games place particular emphasis on the "deceitful practices" of the players, who seek

to hide their skills from their opponents. In this study, hustling is framed as "morally deviant," not necessarily because of the deceitful practices as such but rather because this is how "the hustler" chooses to make a living—deviating from socially accepted conventions associated with "proper work" and certain norms of propriety. Although I refrain from engaging in any depth with criminological theories, I mention this book to highlight the ways in which "the hustler" has under certain light been described as "deviant" or "deceitful."

4. "If we examine the process of 'understanding' people and ideas from the perspective of Western thought, we discover that its basis is this requirement of transparency. In order to understand and thus accept you, I have to measure your solidity with the ideal scale providing me with grounds to make comparisons and, perhaps, judgments. I have to reduce. Accepting differences does, of course, upset the hierarchy of this scale. . . . But perhaps we need to bring an end to the very notion of a scale. Displace all reduction. Agree not merely to the right to difference but, carrying this further, agree also to the right to opacity" (Glissant 1997).

5. This book was never translated in English or other languages. It wasn't until his later work in the 1990s that his conceptualization of *précarité* (precarity) in relation to labor practices became more widely recognized and borrowed. At the end of the twentieth century, Bourdieu's focus had shifted away from the precarity of laborers in colonial (soon to be postcolonial) contexts where industrial capitalism had destroyed Indigenous economies and modes of working, to postindustrial economies of the Global North where the shifts in industrial capitalism meant off-shoring of manufacturing and growing forms of labor casualization.

6. Millar (2017, 2) emphasizes the distinction between three readings of precarity that are relevant to the analysis of the different registers of hustling: precarity as a labor condition, as a class category, and as a lived experience more broadly.

7. The NYC Studios *La Brega* podcast, episode 1 of season 1, is available (to listen, download, or read transcript) online at https://www.wnycstudios.org/podcasts/la-brega/articles/what-la-brega?tab=transcript.

8. During the 2018 World Cup, my Kenyan friends were rooting for France, joking that France's team was part African. They were not alone in this sentiment. On a segment for *The Daily Show,* South African comedian Trevor Noah defended a joke he had made soon after the 2018 World Cup final, when we declared that "Africa won the World Cup." Facing backlash, he felt it important to explain the nuance of that statement: on July 19, 2018, he explained, "basically if you don't understand, France is Africans' backup team. Once Senegal and Nigeria got knocked out, that's who we root for. . . . Black people all over the world were celebrating the Africanness of the French players."

9. See, for example, the collection *Nairobi Becoming* (Fontein et al. 2024), which deliberately refrains from presenting a coherent narrative about the city of Nairobi but instead intimates its constellation of uncertainties, provisionality, contingencies, and constant rapid change.

10. As William Julius Wilson (2009) explains in his work on race and poverty in the United States, American cities like Baltimore, Detroit, Los Angeles, and New

York experienced a confluence of de-investment, punitive housing policies toward Black residents, deindustrialization, and a global drug trade that made inner-city neighborhoods the perfect zone for both selling and consuming. This combined with persistent liberalization of gun laws and the highest rates of incarceration in the world, particularly targeting young men of color. In this context, affirmations of hustling recognize the constant risk to be killed by your peer group belonging to another gang or by police harboring institutional racialized prejudices against young Black men.

11. I borrow the term *conspicuous margins* from James Esson, who articulates the concepts in a *GeogPod* podcast interview with John Lyon, produced by the Geographical Association (episode 76, January 26, 2024, https://geography.org.uk/geogpod -the-gas-podcast/). Esson draws attention to people and places that have been historically and systematically peripheralized institutionally and discursively, despite providing vital knowledge, experience, and perspectives. His scholarship exemplifies the importance of a critical geography that engages directly with "conspicuous margins" to better understand the world, while building a more just scholarship.

2. SELF-HELP CITY

1. I allude to Kenyan presidential politics that dominate mainstream media and political discourse, drawing from the contested 2007 elections and postelection violence that ensued, and the presidential elections that followed in 2013, mired in controversy first due to allegations of fraud and second because the in-coming president, Uhuru Kenyatta (son of the first Kenyan president, Jomo Kenyatta), was finally declared the winner despite facing ongoing investigation by the International Criminal Court concerning his possible involvement in the 2008 postelection violence. William Ruto's 2022 election is equally controversial given his role in the same.

2. In Kenya, people refer to where they live as "where I stay." In Swahili, you say *"unakaa wapi*?" to ask "where do you stay?" This is interesting because it carries a subtle connotation about the realities of precarious urban residents who never really "live" in a particular home. They may live or be from a certain neighborhood, but when it comes to their residence, they refer to the place they "stay," assuming implicitly that they may at any moment have to stay elsewhere for one reason or another.

3. This point is based on a triangulation of responses from interviewees, who would mention moving around the same popular neighborhood multiple times since their arrival (elders) or birth (youth), depending on income stream. It is worth noting that Mathare did not neatly reflect an arrival city as a place of transience for most of my informants. Most were second- or third-generation urban residents, sons and daughters of parents who "arrived" in the years following independence and who have made the popular neighborhood their place of permanent, albeit tenuous residence. But even these sub-neighborhoods or subcommunities that "arrived" decades ago reflected both the tenuous nature of their settlement and the multifaceted reality of the everyday that goes far beyond matters of tenureship.

4. In *Kwani?,* a publication featuring Kenyan writers and poets to shape "a society that uses its stories to see itself more coherently," the 2008 part 2 edition included

poignant stories of postelection violence in different areas of Mathare, Kibera, and Korogocho to illustrate how "diluted milk in clear plastic bags, open sewers, shit in plastic bags (flying toilets), all these give rise to people's will" (Kahora 2008, 11). The scarcity of resources coupled with the "political games" of elites during times of disputed elections sparked ethnic violence in areas otherwise characterized by peaceful interethnic coexistence.

5. This figure comes from a former Mathare resident, political activist, and founder of Mathare Association, now seeking to rehabilitate the Mathare City Council toilets (interview, Nairobi, March 2010).

6. According to Peter Maangi Mitiambo (2011), the CDF is a community-oriented funding mechanism that was established in 2003, with the intention to allocate funds from the central government to target constituency-level projects and needs. As Mitiambo explains, the funding was meant to be controlled by a local politician, which also gave that politician power to determine funding priorities.

7. Ann Varley's piece "Postcolonialising Informality" (2013) cautions against both the formal/informal dualism that presents "slum" urbanism as the epitome of twenty-first-century anomie and the celebratory accounts of "impermanence" that point to the possibilities of informality. She calls for a ~~more~~ nuanced ethnographic inquiry that makes more room for listening to residents themselves to understand their own situated articulations and aspirations (to account for the variation of perceptions of informality as a lived experience) before either dismissing or romanticizing what it does conceptually.

8. In casual conversations with friends across Mathare, anecdotes about Moi frequently included nostalgic recollections of the distribution of free milk in schools across the country, presidential visits in the most remote and poor areas, and a populist rhetoric through song featured on a daily basis on the local radio.

9. Population Reference Bureau, accessed September 15, 2024, https://www.prb.org.

10. Though Huchzermeyer's (2011, 205) study does not focus in depth on the issue of sanitation and waste, she stresses the problem of inadequate infrastructure and services in one of her chapters on "the uncontrolled legitimacy of tenements in Nairobi," ~~using a few anecdotes from~~ interview respondents to illustrate the point that "refuse disposal is a growing challenge with the densification of Huruma." This section includes a passing mention of one household interviewee who happened to be the leader of a youth-led garbage collection business.

11. Here I use the term *auto-gestion* (French for "self-management"), drawing on Lefebvre's writing, which first introduced the term in 1966 in his essay "La problématique de l'autogestion," later translated as "Theoretical Problems of Autogestion" (2009, 138–52). At first the concept was articulated in relation to spaces of industrial labor, pointing to the mobilization of (factory) workers in their struggles to render the workplace less hierarchical, less unequal, calling for the democratization of institutions and decision-making. But the concept was extended to the idea of "self-management" in the city more widely as part of his "right to the city" argument. For Lefebvre, auto-gestion was a collective endeavor, a "system" directed toward the

continuous labor of collective action, so that people might be in greater control of their everyday lives, and in this sense, especially in the French context where the state was so present, the notion of auto-gestion was set in tension with the state. In the context of Nairobi, I argue that auto-gestion emerges in response to an absentee state, not in opposition to an oppressive state.

12. In February 2011, two elders in Mathare 10 were killed over disputes concerning the local public toilets.

3. STRAIGHT OUTTA DUMPSITE

1. See, for example, the vital work of the Mathare Social Justice Centre, which is continuously advocating for social and ecological rights on behalf of Mathare residents and building pan-African networks of people-led solidarity movements to combat shared struggles. Ongoing updates on its efforts can be found at https://www.matharesocialjustice.org.

2. Lynsey Farrell first spoke about the notion of "protracted liminality" in her talk at a British Institute of Eastern Africa seminar among PhD researchers in March 2010, drawing on Victor Turner's (1969) notion of liminality in relation to rites of passage. Farrell drew on Turner to argue that Kenyan youth in popular neighborhoods experienced continued and suspended liminality because they had a difficult time reaching the "other side" of the "in between." She developed this idea in her PhD dissertation, "Hustling NGOs" (completed in 2015).

3. CBOs vary in terms of size and structure, but they often share these common characteristics: they are nongovernmental, nonprofit, and nonpolitical organizations that are usually registered by the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection. Often associated with a particular neighborhood collective, CBOs are usually formed to address place-specific concerns shared by the group's members, who all live in relative proximity to one another. The top positions of the CBO are the chairperson, the secretary, and the treasurer. For youth groups, the CBO's chairman is often the appointed leader of the group. Although the roles of secretary and treasurer may rotate, the role of chairperson often remains the same for longer periods of time.

4. Methodologically, it was also always more feasible to get an answer to questions concerning income during a walkabout with one person rather than pose the question in a focus group discussion.

5. See, for example, Sarah Moore's (2009) work on the politics of garbage in Mexico; Kaveri Gill's (2010) work on the plastic economy in India's informal sector; Jeremia Njeru's (2006) work on the political ecology of plastic waste in Nairobi; Wilma Nchito and Garth Andrew Myers (2004) on the outcomes of community participation in "sustainable" waste management in Zambia; Mary Lawhon's (2012) work on e-waste governance in South Africa; Rosalind Fredericks (2019) on the political economy of garbage management and "garbage citizenship" in Dakar, Senegal; Kathleen Millar's (2018) work on waste pickers' relationship to life and labor on the dump in Rio, Brazil; Jacob Doherty's (2022) work on the "waste worlds" of Kampala; and Karen Hansen's (2000) work on the secondhand clothing economy in Zambia. Scholars also emphasize that the laborers who handle household and municipal refuse

may be routinely stigmatized and yet also deemed vital to the functioning of cities, as Gill (2010) analyzes in her ethnography of waste workers in Delhi and Nagle (2013) explains in her ethnography of New York sanitation workers.

6. James Baldwin made this statement during a filmed interview with Kenneth Clark in 1963, soon after a meeting Baldwin had with U.S. Attorney General Robert Kennedy.

7. Interview, Peter Ngau, April 2010; discussion based on his research and collaboration with the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) on municipal solid waste management.

8. See "Inclusive Waste Management in Cities," C40, accessed September 13, 2024, https://www.c40knowledgehub.org.

9. Ulrick Beck's (1992) risk-society thesis suggests that political struggles have not been about the distribution of goods but rather of "bads," including environmental and health risks.

10. For a short article explaining the story of the Zabbaleen, see Soth (2022).

11. How these boundaries are contested is something that is discussed in chapter 6, "Stayers and Leavers." Also, on the micropolitics of "permission" to access the resource of waste among waste workers, see Makina and Lawhon (2022).

12. See MAYSA's website, https://www.mysakenya.org/index.php/programs. For more on the connection between African youth and football in development, see P. Darby, Esson, and Ungruhe (2022).

13. The Kasarani Youth Congress was founded in 2007 as "a vibrant youth initiative with a mission to provide a shared platform for youth to ensure the improvement of their position and condition and address the socioeconomic political disorders that continue to subject them to desperation, injustices and inhuman living conditions" (email invitation sent on December 11, 2009, by KYC convenor for the launch of the audit report on Kazi kwa Vijana).

14. These figures are drawn from youth groups whose livelihood depended on garbage collection, including "hiring" street kids to collect garbage from the plots they manage. Given the challenges of getting youth to speak candidly about their earnings and what they paid others, I triangulated the information relating to wages with observations regarding qualitative indicators of relative wealth to assess the economic status of certain youth—notably, affording to live on your own, pay school fees, and purchase clothing.

15. Typically, "vertical" housing in low-income settlements are four-story buildings with about ten single-room apartments and one shared toilet and shower stall per floor.

16. Field notes during informal discussions with youth groups in Mlango Kubwa, Mathare Number 10, and Huruma, October 2009–March 2010.

17. Field notes triangulating interviews and informal conversations with three NCC staff and various Mathare youth residents and activists, April 2010.

18. Huruma is one of the six Mathare wards (Nairobi has eighty-five wards in total), and it produces the most household waste as the most highly dense low-income estate.

19. I draw on Bayat (2013), which examines how ordinary people assert their presence and resistance through "quiet encroachments" that Asef Bayat calls "non-movements." These encroachments reflect the risks associated with "louder" politics of dissent, but they also point to the alternative modalities of resistance that operate in unlikely spaces across the city and in unlikely ways.

20. Interview with Raphael Obonyo, youth activist and manager of Kasarani Youth Congress, for documentary *Story Yetu,* May 2010.

21. Informal conversation with cofounder of Community Cleaning Services, June 2010.

4. THE BUSINESS AND POLITICS OF SHIT

1. The term *sanitation ladder* was coined by the Joint Monitoring Program (JMP) for Water Supply and Sanitation of UNICEF and the World Health Organization (WHO) in 2002 as a way to monitor the progress toward Goal Number 7 of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). It is a term that has since been adopted by many sanitation practitioners when they refer to adequate sanitation monitoring.

2. See Tania Li's (2007) discussion of the discourses of "improvement" in development projects.

3. See, for example, https://businessfightspoverty.org, the website of Business Fights Poverty, the network of individuals and organizations applying business approaches to building more "equitable and resilient futures."

4. The definition of "adequate sanitation" from WHO is sanitation facilities that hygienically separate human waste from human contact and safely dispose of or treat human waste. This differs slightly from "improved sanitation," which has to do with separating human waste from human contact but can include different types of sanitation facilities ranging from flush to piped sewer systems, septic tank pit latrines, or pit latrines with slab or composting toilets. Notably, toilets that are shared or public use are not considered "improved" so one of the key criteria for "improved" (and certainly adequate) sanitation is that facilities be unshared. See "Sanitation," World Health Organization, accessed September 14, 2024, https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/sanitation.

5. There are four types of toilet facilities in Nairobi: (1) "Public convenience" toilets (found in town, marketplaces, in other words away from home); (2) "Community-based public" toilets provide the only source of public convenience for most people living in low-income settlements. The cost of these two types of "pay-per-use facilities" was usually 5 Kenyan shillings (KES) or 0.07 U.S. dollars (hence open defecation especially among children); (3) "Residential semi-private shared" toilets limit access to those living in a particular compound, building, or on a specific floor. The cost tends to be reflected in a higher monthly rent. (4) "Self-contained" toilets are enclosed within the apartments of the few higher-income residents living within and on the periphery of Mathare.

6. In 2009, an impact and advocacy organization called Map Kibera started working in Kibera, using citizen mapping to help train local communities in mapping key

resources in their neighborhoods. In spring 2010, one of the founders of Map Kibera presented at a British Institute of Eastern Africa seminar, where they shared these numbers following a sanitation mapping project with Kibera residents.

7. Interview conducted and recorded at corporate headquarters, May 2010.

8. Here I allude to the challenge posed starting in 2011 by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, which called for a major cross-sector investment to reimagine toilet options to address sanitation poverty. See "Reinvent the Toilet Challenge: A Brief History," accessed September 14, 2024, https://www.gatesfoundation.org. Also, on the significance of the toilet as a humanitarian object and development project, see Thieme and DeKoszmovszky (2021).

9. Here I'm thinking with scholars who advocate for "situated" approaches to the study of development or urban political ecology (see, for example, the situated UPE collective, https://www.situatedupe.net/authors/), drawing on Haraway's (1988) influential notion of "situated knowledges." A "situated" approach privileges grounded research that stays close to people's lived realities, agency, and own articulations.

5. GHETTO GAL

1. There are forty-two ethnic groups in Kenya. Luo people are the fourth-largest ethnic group in Kenya (after the Kikuyu, the Luhya, and the Kalenjin). During my years of fieldwork, I sat in on numerous occasions of friendly banter among neighborhood friends who poke fun at each other's ethnic identity. A common stereotype that was often core to this banter was that Kikuyu are the most entrepreneurial, while the Luo are the most learned. This was expressed in a telling example one day during the dry season in a discussion about how differently Kikuyu and Luo youth deal with periods of water shortage. Eliza (who is Luo) and Kennedy (who is Kikuyu), both close friends, joked that the Kikuyu will find a way to sell water, while the Luo will talk about their right to water and they'll go protest. Of course the friendly banter among good friends from different ethnic groups living in shared densely populated neighborhoods can contrast with very real intertribal violent conflict during moments of tension, ~~sometimes~~ incited by political elites. The 2007/8 postelection violence sticks in the popular imagination as a key example of this.

2. This is something that Craig Jeffrey (2010) has explored in his research with Indian middle-class university graduates caught in a state of "timepass" who engage in a range of "political entrepreneurship" as they strive to find jobs that meet their expectations. Similarly, Harry Pettit's (2023) work on the "labour of hope" outlines the drama of middle-class youth in Cairo, Egypt, who are caught in call center work while hoping to get a "proper" white-collar job they feel entitled to. And yet, in the aftermath of the Arab Spring, this seems like a distant and false promise, perhaps reflective of what Lauren Berlant (2011) calls "cruel optimism." In Nairobi, it remains to be seen whether middle-class youth will be forced to hustle alongside their working-class peers (albeit in different sectors and ways) or whether some will refuse to do so and be more prone to staying stuck in waithood. In a way, Eliza's son, Kevo, will be treading this fine line in these next few years.

6. STAYERS AND LEAVERS

1. These remarks are based on experience as a participant observer during numerous Pamoja Trust staff and community meetings between September 2009 and January 2010.

2. See Ference (2021) for a similar situation related to the *matatu* sector.

3. See Opondo and Kiprop (2018); and "Boda Bodas Are Critical to Kenya's Transport System. But They've Gone Rogue," *The Conversation,* March 17, 2022, https://theconversation.com.

4. *Chapo* is slang for *chapati,* a popular pan-fried flatbread that takes its name from the cuisine brought by Kenyans of South Asian descent during the colonial era.

5. These next three paragraphs reflect a conversation Kahos and I had in 2021, which we then turned into a coauthored short piece for *Rise Africa* (Murimi and Thieme 2021).

6. The Gulf countries are a common destination that provides an array of short- and medium-term work opportunities and much looser bordering regimes as compared to Europe or the United States.

7. See Access to Government Procurement Opportunities (AGPO) program, https://agpo.go.ke/pages/about-agpo.

7. STORYTELLERS PERFORMING THE HUSTLE

1. The documentary *Story Yetu* (*Our Story*), featuring these music tracks, is available at https://vimeo.com/25020458. It has been shown in local Nairobi venues, screened at the Cambridge African Film Festival in 2012, and used as a teaching tool since 2013.

2. One of the books on the syllabus for that class was *Translated Woman* by Ruth Behar (1993), about Behar's longtime friendship and ethnographic portraiture of Esperanza, a Mexican street hawker.

3. The concept of the "tall tale" is often discussed in early anthropology courses, especially when focusing on the power of myths across cultures and the ways in which every culture creates a variety of tall tales, myths, and plays on words to make sense of the world around them. Tall tales may carry exaggerated elements, but they also carry lessons and instruction and are often part of oral traditions of storytelling. See, for example, C. Myers and Hurston (2005).

4. There is a great *New Yorker* piece by Clare Malone (2023) that reflects on the recent controversy around Hasan Minhaj's "emotional truths" and the degree to which these are valid even if fabricated stories or whether they actually reproduce harmful stereotypes of ethnic minority groups that are poorly understood in mainstream media.

5. I'm thinking with Jason Farago's *New York Times* piece "Why Culture Has Come to a Standstill" (2023), which argues (without judgment) that the twenty-first century is the least innovative time for the arts in five hundred years.

6. George the Poet, "Songs Make Jobs," September 16, 2021, in *Have You Heard George's Podcast?,* podcast, 32 minutes, https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p09w1xd4.

7. I thank Gautam Bhan for his inspiring talk on November 16, 2023, at the Youth on the Move virtual seminar series, where he made a distinction between the spatial (residence) and the material (jobs) aspect of inequality in cities of the South and then explained that youth are increasingly making claims along social lines (matters of identity politics, belonging) rather than dwelling on housing or employment claims. I argue that hustling reflects the intersectionality of these.

8. Grime emerged before the advent of social media, and while it did rely on new internet platforms like Myspace and peer-to-peer downloads, in its early days it was primarily anchored to pirate radio and satellite TV and bootleg CDs. Malcolm James's *Sonic Intimacy* (2020) provides a useful discussion of what social media (namely YouTube) changed for the grime genre in London—and the politics of youth culture more generally.

9. Lyrics from "Everyday," track composed by Mashanti for *Story Yetu* documentary, 2010.

10. I echo here Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's ~~brilliant~~ 2009 essay (first delivered as a TED talk), "The Danger of a Single Story," referring to the "single story of Africa" that too often perpetuates particular narratives about the continent in mainstream, largely Western media. This also connects to Binyavanga Wainaina's (2022) satirical essay "How to Write about Africa," originally published in 2005.

11. This is a topic that George Mpanga, also known as George the Poet, explores ~~beautifully~~ in his podcast series, *Have You Heard George's Podcast?,* and in his current doctoral research at University College London based out of the Institute for Innovation and Public Purpose. Using podcasting as method, his action research and spoken word focus on "the value of Black art" and how rap music in particular could be a potential catalyst for social power and economic progress.

CONCLUSION

1. Since 2014 Kenya has been an LMIC, according to the World Bank. See World Bank Group, "Kenya: A Bigger, Better Economy," September 30, 2014, https://www.worldbank.org.

2. According to the Coronavirus Pandemic Country Profile from the "Our World in Data" database (accessed May 2024, https://ourworldindata.org/coronavirus), in April 2020, there was an average of 10 new Covid-19 cases a day in Kenya, compared to 28,021 a day in the United States or 4,424 in the United Kingdom (the two countries with the highest number of daily Covid cases worldwide). As of July 2022, Kenya had more than 334,500 cumulative confirmed cases of Covid-19, with 5,650 deaths associated with Covid-19 and 325,400 recoveries. As would be expected, Nairobi registered the highest number of cases. Of course, it is important to note that confirmed cases may be lower than the actual number of infections.

3. For more on middle-class youth coping with labor uncertainty and developing their own strategies and forms of planning, see Jeffrey (2010), focused on the active modes of waiting among educated unemployed youth in India that involve "improvisational skill" and "political entrepreneurship"; and Pettit (2023) on the rising labor precarity of middle-class youth in Cairo, who go from professional training

events to accepting prolonged periods of call center work in the hopes of getting "white-collar work" and acquiring a certain lifestyle they imagine as emblematic of "modernity." There is a distinction between the kinds of hustling that these middle-class youth across geographies take on (and what they accept to take on) and the hustle economies amid the popular classes.

4. Charlie Warzel and Anne Helen Peterson (2023) discuss the urgency of radically rethinking how people work when the space and time of the "office" and other physical locations of work are reconfigured and blurred. Their book considers white-collar work but raises relevant questions about wider globalized trends to requestion the future of work across sectors.

5. Mary Lawhon and Tyler McCreary (2023) rethink the politics, economics, and approaches to livelihoods across geographies. Their book includes a great chapter on UBI. For a summary of the 2023 Deloitte survey results, see "Deloitte's 2023 Gen Z and Millennial Survey Reveals Workplace Progress despite New Setbacks," May 17, 2023, https://www.deloitte.com/global/en/about/press-room/2023-gen-z-and-millenial-survey.html.

6. The actors' and writers' guilds strikes in Hollywood made global headlines and exemplified this panic and ensuing struggles to resist the potential obsolescence of certain kinds of labor in the face of AI.

7. Peter Lockwood's (2023) piece on "hustler populism" provides an apt analysis of Kenyan politics in the run-up to the elections.

8. According to certain practitioners, when discussing the topic of devolution, the lack of central control can add layers of bureaucracy that are challenging for certain sectors (like health care, for instance).

9. There is also no doubt that these mobile banking loans reflect a wider globalized system of predatory loans that systematically harm the most vulnerable and economically precarious groups. See, for example, Fraser (2018).

10. For a multisited ethnography of the flip-flop and its journey through the "backroads of globalisation," see Knowles (2015).

11. Sanitation and period poverty along with early marriage are the most common gendered adversities, and these are aggravated in times of crises. Dramatically, teen pregnancies rose sharply during the Covid pandemic, as did school dropout rates. See Gettleman and Raj (2020).

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