

# Making Art Work: Articulating Art and Urban Marginality in Kisumu, Kenya

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Articulating Art and Urban Marginality

In Kenya's third-largest city, Kisumu, situated on the shores of Lake Victoria, young people have embraced art (dance, music, poetry) *en masse*. George Collins, a spokesperson for an umbrella-body which unites Kisumu artists, estimates that one out of three youths in Kisumu are self-professed artists, an estimate borne out by my own observations. In this sense, the semantic field of "being an artist", in the context of my study, is akin to the German notion of *Lebenskünstler* (literally 'life artist', e.g. a person who knows how to make the best of life). In this thesis, I hope to account for the *way of the artist's* significant popularity among Kisumu youths by relating it to hustling and their various struggles to get by (Thieme 2017) in the face of sustained economic-structural violence and social suffering (Das 2000).

I will relate artistic practices to other similar processes of urban social creativity and inventiveness and argue that, in Kisumu, art has become an 'alternative' interpretation of work, and a way of organizing one's days and motivating oneself in the face of enduring mass unemployment and poor prospects. In a context in which the existing labour market affords few opportunities worth striving for, the prospect of glamorous, creative work in the entertainment industry has an additional allure. This does not mean that careers in the entertainment industry are elusive and some sort of cosmopolitan fantasy. Quite the opposite, Kisumu is known in Kenya as a 'creative hub' from which many of the leading figures in the country's entertainment industry have emerged, such as the singer Suzanne Owiyo, comedian Erick Omondi, rapper King Kaka, and countless others, who have used the entertainment business to form veritable commercial empires.

However, for many young people, the collective dream of establishing and being part of a thriving entertainment industry, has more immediate repercussions and relevance for their lives. In a city that is comparatively poor and structurally disadvantaged (Branch 2011: 295), the majority of young people find themselves in a terrifying void when they finish secondary school, as mass unemployment looms large, and the violence of the informal work world is a force which slum residents know only too well<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> The inhabitants of Kisumu's disadvantaged settlements like Obunga, Nyalenda and Manyatta, that lack most basic social and sanitary services, refer to their neighbourhoods either as *mtaani* (Kiswahili for 'in the streets'), as *slums*, or - more often - as *ghettos*. I use these three terms in this text interchangeably to refer to the relative economic deterioration of those settlements. These terms are often emotionally

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The economic disadvantage suffered by the entire region is manifested in Kisumu's particular spatial arrangement. Low-income settlements surround the city centre with its central business district and the adjacent, upmarket Milimani neighbourhood, like a belt. From Nyalenda in the south, to Manyatta in the east, and Obunga and Nyawita in the north of the town, the low-income estates house over 60 per cent of Kisumu's population (UN Habitat 2005: 16).

The young people growing up in the low-income settlements are painfully aware of the many obstacles they have to overcome on their path toward employment. Many told me that the most immediate and pressing was the phenomenon of "peer pressure": Pressure to engage in a "ghetto lifestyle" and marginal, often violent, economies surrounding theft, robbery, other forms of drug-related crime and prostitution, to name only the most obvious. The pressure to engage in such economies is accentuated by the fact that economic-structural violence and the particular forms of organized crime that it breeds, appears to be complemented, rather than curbed, by the police force, which is perceived by the majority of Kenyans as being corrupt to the core and suspected of colluding with leading criminal figures in the various estates. In such an environment, and especially in view of the pervasive "highway" of crime and drug-abuse, it is crucially important to remain positive (O'Neill and Fogarty-Valenzuela 2015) and uphold goals that translate into a purposeful day to day life. As my case studies emphasize, to many Kisumu artists, being an artist is as much about self-discipline as it is about communal support, two factors which are key to overcoming widespread personal challenges such as substance abuse and involvement with crime and violence.

The structures that would support a quest for employment, for example, institutions to facilitate professional orientation, offer counselling, or the services usually offered by employment agencies, are absent. Young people are often precluded from further training in formally accredited institutions by their lack of available funds. The largest employers of the young workforce are the small-scale trade and transport sectors. However, many young people perceive such opportunities as a dead end in terms of their aspirations for social mobility. The artists that I portray in this thesis find themselves forced to create new structures and understandings and new forms of urban culture, in order to better position themselves in social space, thereby also transforming

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charged, especially when used in conversations with 'outsiders', perceived to belong to a better-off social class. A strong sense of belonging is construed through these exact terms, whether through depreciation and shame for one's environment, or whether through a strong, self-assertive pride, which is why I stick with these terms for the purpose of this dissertation.

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urban society. Furthermore, the Kisumu artists described in this thesis belong to a generation that grew up in the 1990s, in societies that were still marked by structural adjustment (in general, see Ferguson 1999; for Kenya see Smith 2008) and in which there is a deep, palpable crisis of social reproduction (Weiss 2004). All the five artists portrayed are young people whose parents' generation enjoyed a greater degree of social and geographical mobility. Their fathers were civil servants, railways officers, senior clerks, police officers, or had jobs in the private sector with considerable security. Thus, the parents of all the five youths portrayed belonged to the urban salariat or were members of rural elites, a segment of society that East Africans themselves refer to as 'working class' (Cooper 1983, Prince 2013).

The artists portrayed all grew up in urban centres and their families placed great importance on their children's education. However, with the exception of Evans Aduwo, portrayed in Chapter two, they did not attain university or college degrees or diplomas due to lack of money. Nonetheless, at some point in their lives, all the artists had attended better schools, boarding schools or private schools and remember this time as a period of relative privilege. In addition to the many other motives that I discuss, I perceive in their aspirational efforts at cultural entrepreneurship, an attempt to re-establish a degree of security and material comfort that once seemed like a natural succession right to them. The structural adjustment policies that were implemented in the early 1990s brought about a societal crisis which completely disrupted their parents' lives, who either retrenched or went into (early) retirement.

From a Western academic's perspective, one would probably expect that the measures implemented and justified by a neoliberal ideology, would lead the urban youth in Kenya to utterly reject elements of such ideology. One would assume that incisive cuts such as the IMF-backed structural adjustment policies in the 1990s, would lead to pronounced anti-hegemonic positions, such as the positions of dependence theoreticians in Latin America from the 1960s onwards. These theoreticians articulated a subaltern position by highlighting the exploitative character of the world economic system (Senghaas 1977). From my data in Kisumu, there is no such plain rejection of the world economic system's more obvious ideological underpinnings or of development aid. Instead, I observed that central elements of an international discourse about work, such as the buzzwords "innovation" and "creativity", have been zealously adapted to Kisumu's lifeworld. Such notions were implied on a personal level, by expressing the perceived necessity of being "more creative" in order to establish a reliable income, in

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however humble a way, and were also salient on a collective level, in that Kisumu artists expressed a need for “innovation” in the city, for instance when discussing possible financial contributions for artistic initiatives, such as Kisumu Fashion Week, with county administration clerks. In other words, there are no clear-cut dichotomies or boundaries between ‘the West and the Rest’ (Hall 2008), between (former) metropole and colony, between global and local, or capitalist and anti-capitalist. Because of the composition and intricacy of this ‘postcolonial constellation’ (Enwezor 2003), I will approach the life and work(s) of the Kisumu artists, their guiding principles, beliefs, values, and their artistic practices and everyday strategies for survival, as openly as possible (see below).

Three specific artistic practices form the core of this thesis: Activism as well as its more art infused sibling, ‘artivism’, spoken word and fashion modelling. In order to show how making art and making do, co-constitute each other in Kisumu artists’ lives, I will use portraiture (Dyson and Jeffrey 2008) as a device to present the work, life and agency of one individual artist in each chapter. Single lives, as Arnold and Blackburn noted, may “reveal insights not just into the experiences and attitudes of the individuals directly concerned, but also of the wider society or social segment of which they are also part” (2005: 43). Focusing on individual lives allows me to delve to some extent, into the emotional economies underlying my informants’ artistic aspirations, a dimension that is often omitted in mainstream accounts of urban youth. This focus also enables me to bring the complexity caused by the different roles occupied by artistic youth to the forefront. At the same time, individual vignettes, as Jeffrey and Dyson wrote, “instil in readers empathy, respect, and understanding” (2008: 2) and I share the two authors’ concern about accessibility when I describe young peoples’ expressive practices in the chapters that follow.

Chapter two presents the first portrait of Evans Aduwo’s dual occupation as a gym trainer and organizer of activist activities. Chapter three is about a well-known Kisumu activist, Boniface Ogutu, who organizes marches through the city in order to re-articulate the image of Kisumu youth. Chapters four and five present the spoken word artists Janabii and Dawe Dawe, respectively. Janabii is one of the pioneering figures who helped to create the spoken word scene in Kisumu. Dawe Dawe started slightly later as Janabii’s mentee, and quickly became established as a Kisumu artist to watch, something that is especially due to his innovative use of Facebook to disseminate his



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poetry. Chapter six presents Winnie Juma, a Kisumu fashion model and model trainer, who is a central figure in the city's emerging fashion industry.

All of these artists have established themselves independently in their respective arts and refer to their continual efforts to make do and matter through these activities as being “self-employed”, or “self-made”. All have long since come to terms with the fact that neither public spending, nor development aid will have a significant impact on their economic marginalization. Becoming an artist is their response to their individual responsibility to be the proverbial author of their own destiny, in a country in which the political elites appear to be deliberately neglectful, and in a world system that silences the structural disadvantages that makes living up to this proverb so difficult. All the artists described have their own personal histories interlaced with difficult events and phases of financial suffering, some of which appear in the following pages. All of them have devoted enormous amounts of time and energy to their artistic and/or activist goals. While none of them would consider themselves to be highly successful or to have “made it,” in the sense of attaining financial security or even financial independence, they have all attained relative fame among a Kisumu urban audience. With the exception of Aduwo, who appears at the margins of the artistic community, all are considered as promising talents or leaders in their respective domains. Boniface Ogutu was at the forefront of recent activist initiatives in Kisumu and is frequently invited to forums and workshops to represent Kisumu youth. Janabii was elected as a Kenyan cultural ambassador during the biennial cultural competition organized by UNESCO and subsequently went to Paris to represent Kenyan cultural diversity at the UNESCO headquarters. Winnie Juma is regularly featured in local and national media reports about the promise of the city's nascent fashion industry.

They all share a certain reputation among Kisumu's audiences and are known among the artistic fraternity as leading figures in the Kisumu artistic youth movement. I also sensed a collective self-confidence in the way these young people related to the opportunities in the city and their own place therein, linking their personal growth to the becoming of the city. This dissertation is about their struggle to make do and matter, within Kisumu and beyond. However, describing the incredibly rich and varied lives of these young people, is not simply an exercise in narration. I contend that describing these lives may contribute to the existing and emerging literature on creativity and African urban culture. I will review some of the literature on art in Eastern African in the following section and then elaborate on creativity and articulation as conceptual

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devices, which may allow us to bring into conversation the literature on urban marginality, on the one hand, and art in African cities, on the other.<sup>2</sup>

### 1.2 Literature Review

For a long time, anthropology has had a quasi-monopoly on African art, to be assisted by art historians from the 1980s onwards. While anthropologists focused on art production with a long local or regional history, the art historians were more inclined to study art that was embedded in and spoke to an international art world. In the 1980s, the ‘crisis of representation’ made the idea of ‘traditional’ art, which was presumed to translate a culturally and geographically bound cosmos, obsolete. A whole generation of young scholars therefore turned to the more heterogeneous artistic practices in cities (Kasfir 2007: X). Nairobi’s varied artistic scene has been the subject of some scholarly research, however, most of it fails to embed the art works discussed in their social and aesthetic contexts.

Joanna Agthe’s catalogue *Wegzeichen/Signs* (1991) which presents the collection of East African art acquired by the Frankfurt Museum of Ethnography between 1974 and 1989, is paradigmatic in this respect. Writing an overview of East African art for this catalogue, meant focusing narrowly on those artists whose works had been acquired by the museum. A considerable amount of space is devoted to illustrations of these works, while the social and historical context is only mentioned briefly. For example, the summative thematic sections “Ways of Becoming an Artist”, “Life as an artist” or “The town as an artistic subject”, are less than 4 pages each. The catalogue’s rich illustrations are complemented with excerpts from interviews with the respective artists, which highlight elements of artists’ biographies while revealing little about their interaction with the wider social context. The same holds true for the catalogue *Dreaming in pictures*, which Agthe co-authored with London-based lecturer Elsbeth Joyce Court, in 2001 for an exhibition of the same title, of the Ugandan painter Jak Katarikawe’s works. Although the accompanying text contained many details about Katarikawe’s early life and venture into art, there was virtually nothing about the twenty years during which Katarikawe had been living in Nairobi at the time of publication.

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<sup>2</sup> Excerpts of the following section have been previously published: Unseld, F. 2017. ‘Art in Cities off the Map – Perspectives from Kisumu, Kenya’ in Ammann, C. and A. Sanogo ‘Secondary Cities – The Urban Middle Ground’, *Basel Papers on Political Transformations*, 11/12: 11 – 24.

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More often than not, artistic practices in Kenya are presented in isolation from the context from which they emerge. For example, event-like performances and interventions are mainly presented during the short moment in which the artists' engagement is made visible through the encounter with the public. Therefore, such approaches often fail to address the influence that important stakeholders, such as NGOs, politicians, artists and underprivileged communities, have on a given project (Odhiambo 2006). Specifically, the role of NGOs and their often problematic and overly instrumental or compartmentalized uses of art for development messages, merits further attention. Okuto and Smith (2017), in their brief description of applied theatre's contemporary challenges in Kenya, specifically refer to these problematic power dynamics, the colonial legacies and hierarchies, which constitute serious ethical problems for artistic practice, but are too often omitted in art scholarship.

Margaretta Swigert-Gacheru's *Creating Contemporary African Art: Art Networks in Urban Kenya* (2013) is arguably the most comprehensive and up-to-date account of Nairobi's current art world, being informed by the author's longstanding journalistic work for *Daily Nation* and *Business Daily*. Her thesis provides an extensive overview of Nairobi's dense networks of exhibition spaces galleries, conceptualized as art worlds, and draws on her personal involvement with Kenya's art scene. The book is invaluable in that Gacheru describes how individual actors, for example, the influential German art trader and gallerist Ruth Schaffner, almost single-handedly integrated Nairobi's contemporary art scene into global commercial circuits in the 1990s. In the main section of her thesis, she identifies four categories which she considers to be key for the success or failure of Kenyan artistic platforms. These categories are space, art supplies, skills training and marketing. Gacheru then discusses eight different workspaces/galleries which she describes in great detail, in terms of these four dimensions. She relies on data gained from observation and interviews, as well as a great deal of anecdotal evidence. Gacheru manages to vividly describe the structural barriers and humiliating experiences regularly experienced by Kenyan artists and gallerists when they bargain with influential individuals and institutions in the art market. However, her account suffers from her attempt to provide something approaching an instruction manual; in some places her critical assessment of the art spaces' shortcomings gives the book a slightly textbook character. In my opinion, this seems to be caused by a noble desire to provide Kenyan artists and gallerists with analytical knowledge about the mechanisms of commercial success, as well as an overview of the art market's often concealed

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structural barriers. However, from an ethnographic perspective, her account is limited to the (preliminary phase of) mapping artists and related institutions, which ultimately reduces her perspective to an approach which focuses primarily on art works in exhibition contexts.

The present thesis is aligned with recent calls for an ethnographic turn in scholarly research into contemporary art (Siegenthaler 2013). Approaching art with the assumption of artistic agency free of constraints, as an autonomous sphere in which actors work creatively in their separate ateliers toward an idealistic goal of self-realization, obviously amounts to the perpetuation of a longstanding myth (Kris and Kurz 1979, Ruppert 1998) which scarcely captures the life realities of the majority of artists around the globe. It occurs to me that especially in the Global South, the Western markets, audiences and consumers (i.e. expats, tourists) are prioritized over local audiences and patrons, as well as emerging institutions, in terms of reception processes.

In my analysis, I emphasize how artists in a neopatrimonial context actively try to become involved with patrons (i.e. local politicians, NGOs, expatriates, clients), in order to acquire social and financial capital. Particular emphasis is placed on how the everyday context and the social stigma of economic marginalization foster particular forms of artistic creativity, as well as more general forms of social inventiveness. Such a perspective presupposes that art does not emerge from a separate sphere, but is thoroughly embedded in the urban social worlds from which it emerges. In this regard, the work developed in this thesis is indebted to authors who have established this theme in other African cities (Diouf 2008; Mbembe and Nuttal 2008; Grabski 2009, 2017).

Grabski (2017) in her analysis of Dakar's art worlds' global involvements, argues in a similar vein when she states that "the city's art scene emerges from and is shaped by the opportunities of urban life" (*ibid.*: p.3), approaching this interrelation through a "close assessment of artistic production in relation to the dynamics of urbanization" (*ibid.*: p.12 - 13). In contrast to the Dakar art worlds described by Grabski, few artists in Kisumu can and do make a sustainable living from selling their art. Therefore, artistic practice in Kisumu remains intricately entwined with other livelihood strategies. For this reason, the question of how artists fit into the city's labour force (*ibid.*: p. 18), begs for a different answer. Making art in Kisumu may result in unexpected gains for young people, such as when Boniface Ogutu, the activist described in Chapter three, receives financial support for the materials used in his demonstration on behalf of the US embassy. Although my initial research interest largely overlapped

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with and was inspired by Grabski's work, it was reoriented by my research's different empirical basis, a secondary city like Kisumu. Although artists from Kisumu regularly enter the global art markets, as for example, Maggie Otieno, Paul Onditi or Kevin Oduor have done, such global careers are certainly the exception rather than the rule. "Talent," according to a phrase frequently heard among Kisumu artists, "does not pay"; indicating the potentialities of a young workforce whose abilities and tendencies are largely ignored by the economic system that they inhabit.

Secondary cities, like Kisumu, may help balance the accounts of studies on African urban culture which tend to focus on major or so-called *mega-cities*. As I have argued elsewhere (Unsel'd 2017), research in secondary cities may offer new understandings of how expressive culture shapes urban identities, precisely because these smaller cities lack their metropolitan counterparts' art infrastructure, thereby forcing us to focus on people and social infrastructures, rather than objects and exhibition spaces. In such smaller cities, where the institutionalization of art is particularly slow to arrive, an approach that focusses on sites and spaces for mediation, will almost certainly disappoint. In contrast, scholars can rely on a wealth of artistic initiatives in Nairobi. There are the international cultural institutions like the *Alliance Francaise*, *British Council* and *Goethe Institut*, which provide important platforms for rehearsals, drama and art exhibitions. These platforms are complemented by private initiatives such as the Michael Joseph Centre, a multi-purpose hall built by the country's telecommunication giant *Safaricom*, which, not least due to marketing considerations, is cheaply available to the up-and-coming of Nairobi's art scene. Finally, numerous galleries and exhibitions spaces like the *Go Down Arts Center*, *Banana Hill Art Gallery*, *Circle Art gallery*, as well as events with international scope like the *Kenya Art Fair*, form a complex and highly dynamic network of nodal points.

When I arrived in Kisumu in August 2015, I was worried by the apparent dearth of arts and reminded of some of my colleagues' reserved reactions to my project, who suggested that I would quickly get bored looking for cultural life in a city like Kisumu. The few community halls that exist in the neighbourhoods are mainly used for school functions and dramatic plays, or by the church for similar functions. The *British Council*, which had housed a busy theatre scene in Kisumu, closed its doors in 2007, and the *Alliance Française*, which hosted a weekly spoken word and music event until June 2015, lost all its influence on the local arts scene when they moved to a multi-story house in the city centre. It took some time to see the great flexibility of the local artists'

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scene and the artists' ability to sneak into diverse places and make do with the few resources available. As there are virtually no institutions and platforms in Kisumu to encourage artistic production, the city provides ample scope for examining the kinds of initiatives, workshops, art works and solidarities that emerge in a situation of non-existent or lacking resources.

All the five portraits presented in this thesis therefore reflect the makeshift character (Vasudevan 2015) of much of urban life in Kisumu, in which urban residents are "constantly putting together some workable form of income and inhabitation" (Simone and Pieterse 2017: xi). The makeshift practices and efforts by which Kisumu's urban residents creatively, and in the case of many young unemployed people *artistically*, make do and matter, do not necessarily lead to recognized, institutionalized sets of practices (*ibid.*: p. xi). More often than not, these practices are tentative in the sense that they point to "states of existence that might be" (*ibid.*: 11), and they produce a "doubleness" which "involves a sense of aspiration, of making things different, but also of seeing in what exists something other than what we think we are seeing." (*ibid.*: 11). Both artistic practices and makeshift urban efforts to make do and survive, therefore indicate "how different urban realities can be enacted or tested in trials, experiments or even play" (*ibid.*: 11).

At the same time, carrying out research in secondary cities like Kisumu has methodological advantages. The comparatively low levels of social density and complexity afford an overview that would take many years to obtain in a city like Nairobi. The process of devolution, i.e. the transfer of power from the central government to the regional administration, also provides greater closeness between urban actors and state actors, especially street-level clerks. This situation makes it possible to perceive how art and social inventiveness relate to the more recognized structures provided by the state, and how diverging efforts are negotiated between actors, illuminating the elusive 'doubleness' mentioned by Simone and Pieterse above.

In addition to secondary cities' potential for research on contemporary art and social inventiveness, there are many other reasons why we should be more concerned with their cultural dynamics. Secondary cities constitute connections between the local, mainly rural, space and the national and international cultural spaces. Secondary cities grow faster than most capital cities, especially in the Global South. They are expected to be tomorrow's urban hubs and are increasingly being considered in development

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policies (e.g. UN- Habitat 2016). When considered separately from metropolises, they still make up the vast majority of the urban sphere around the world. Even if they do not have a metropole's cultural vibrancy, secondary cities matter politically, if only due to their specific forms of parochialism.<sup>3</sup> Secondary cities' apparent 'ordinariness' make them a less attractive object of study, however their economic, political and cultural dynamics (which are bound to accelerate in the years to come) may prove central to the African continent's development. This makes studies of such places' urban history and sociology, and the ways in which art traditions and practices interact with the public, all the more relevant. Looking at artists and how they perceive the city, has become one of urban theory's tropes (Amin and Thrift 2012; Grierson and Sharp 2011) and the potential for non-normative theory has also been emphasized in the African context (Malaquais 2011). 'Non-normative' here mainly refers to the challenge of not relying on descriptive tools and heuristic concepts, which derive directly from Western processes of urbanization (Förster 2013).

In this thesis, I argue for an understanding of contemporary African art as situated in the urban social spaces from which it emerges. In African cities, art is increasingly being produced for both local and international audiences. Therefore, I will pay particular attention to the various markets and economic opportunities that artists consider as part of their aesthetic strategies. In her reference work, *African Art and the Colonial Encounter* (1999), Sydney Kasfir emphasizes the continuity of the structures, institutions and concepts which allow art from the African continent to continue to circulate in the world. Even though Kasfir's observation is still broadly true, I would like to address two important additions that have occurred since the time of publication of her book.

The first addition to consider regarding African art at the present time, concerns the hugely increased importance of social media. Artists in Kisumu not only establish various links to the urban space, but also to the surrounding world at large. Many marginal spaces in Africa cities, such as rooftops, backyards and even dumpsites, have become "studios," artistic sites from which young people record their art. Perhaps

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<sup>3</sup> David Bell and Mark Jayne made this point in their book *Small Cities* (2006). Their point was underscored by the course of history, when the English city Stoke-on-Trent, in which both authors worked and which they took as the starting point for their argument, turned out to be the city with the highest pro-Brexit vote (close to 70%). Kisumu as one of Kenya's opposition strongholds, is often perceived as voting *en bloc* along ethnic identification lines, though studies suggest a more nuanced behavior (see Elklit et al. 2014).

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publishing art on Facebook will not diminish the power of the gate-keepers in the global art industry, but using a social media platform such as Facebook, as an online gallery points to novel ways of exhibiting and interacting with urban audiences.

The second addition concerns the development aid industry and NGOs' importance as paramount patrons in the arts market, something which many artists consider in their aesthetic and economic strategies. While many artists (whether from Africa or beyond) see international cultural institutions and ultimately high-profile exhibition spaces as their goal, many small artistic initiatives are increasingly using elements of the Western humanitarian discourse to establish links to actors from this particular industry. As I will show throughout the thesis, bringing one's artistic works into line with the expectations of actors of the humanitarian complex has two main benefits. First, an NGO or a similar influential actor's patronage may enable artists to 'bend' the field of forces and increase their capacity to criticize social ills, while at the same time, escaping undesirable consequences, as evidenced in Chapters two, three and five. In other words, patronage may contribute to a greater degree of freedom of speech. Second, working for NGOs often involves payments that are higher than those local patrons can afford. Moreover, one job with an NGO may be followed by another, and active relationships to NGOs are in themselves often perceived as social capital, as they enhance an actor's social standing.

Few studies explicitly acknowledge the oppressive importance of donor institutions and Western actors in the context of contemporary art in Africa. Jayawardane (2019) delivered what almost amounts to a micro-sociological case study of such types of donor dependency. In her short and polemic report about her experience as a "minority"-speaker at a workshop on writing about African art in Uganda, Jayawardane reveals the structural inequalities that underly much African art(ists)'s integration into the global arts market. Such workshops, although designed to help overcome existing privileges, actually reproduce, "eye-wateringly unequal power relations that basically look too much like colonial-era relations", as Jayawardane's account makes very clear (p. 279). While such power structures are not the focus of this thesis, my attention was constantly drawn to such imbalances throughout the fieldwork and during the writing of it.

In this regard, I am indebted to critical perspectives on African art, such as Ilka Eickhoff's work (2013). Eickhoff undertakes something similar but adopts a macro-perspective, when she describes how in the context of the so-called Arab spring, the



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German *Goethe-Institut* in Kairo perpetuated longstanding discursive formations of ‘progress’ and ‘modernity,’ by framing specific selections of Egyptian art as ‘rebellious,’ while juxtaposing them with non-democratic others. By contextualizing the *Goethe-Institut*’s specific view of Egyptian art, Eickhof manages to illustrate the “complicated triangle of giving, receiving, and replying, or returning, which enforces and perpetuates (historic) power structures” (Eickhof 2014: 48).

In the context of my study, influential actors may be patrons, politicians or NGO staff. Through informal conversations, I have often been able to trace the personal dilemma experienced by artists between their preferred artistic agenda and their actual artistic practices; what they actually produce, under the influence of practical considerations and their complex creative environment. Ironically, so-called socially or politically engaged art is actually often analysed in an unengaged manner, moreover, one that often relies on reports of artistic practices rather than direct observation (Siegenthaler 2013). Because of such methodological shortcomings, articles often seem to reduce the artists’ agency to what they (presumably, based on a post-factum analysis) have attempted to express in a particular work or intervention.

Schneidermann (2016) is a notable exception to this paradigm. Schneidermann argues that in view of Ugandan musicians’ relationships to campaigning politicians, artists rarely adopt an attitude of *either* praise *or* protest. Schneidermann describes artists as “brokers”, who very consciously negotiate their relationships with such powerful institutions and actors. The balancing act needed to further one’s own artistic agenda, while also tactically adapting and sometimes even compromising one’s work, in order to create useful relationships with influential actors, may also be described as co-optation (Siegenthaler 2018).

In other words, it is essential to look at how artists, especially from poor, working- and lower middle-class backgrounds in urban Africa, use art to secure their survival with the limited or inadequate means available. Several of the artists I interviewed, stated that at some point in their lives, they had relied on development aid industry workshops to survive. Such workshops are usually accompanied by small hand-outs, so-called “sitting allowances” or “transport money”, without which many would remain largely unattended. Such sitting allowances must therefore be seen as payment for ‘performing’, acting ‘as if’ they were participating in the workshop out of genuine interest. Young and unemployed artists are particularly welcome participants at these workshops, as they are able to articulate different worldviews and bring them into

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conversation. The artists' participation in such workshops could for this reason, be seen as part of their artistic practice. Depending on their agendas, NGOs might request artistic work on quite specific subjects, such as Lake Victoria's eco-system, birth control or nutritional health. At the same time, I do not want to portray artists as simply 'hired guns' who receive money in exchange for their services, polishing the NGOs' image. I have participated in several workshops myself and although the artists revealed their emotional detachment before or after the event quite openly, they also often remarked that they had "learned something", and had valued a certain event for its content and the quality of information they had received. Just as Schneidermann argued in the context of politicians as patrons in Uganda, my contention is that NGOs must also be seen as actors to which artists entertain crucial as well as complex relationships.

For most Kisumu artists, the exclusion from the financial, intellectual, and social, resources that would facilitate access to the international art market, is part and parcel of their urban marginality. Although the image of the 'good life', achieved through access to this market is salient, the Kisumu artists' artistic practices aim at establishing relationships to local actors first; first and foremost, they target local audiences and the public. Their artistic practices are, as I have elaborated above, embedded in a range of livelihood strategies that people describe with the phrase *tunahustle* (Sheng, '*We are hustling*') (cf. Thieme 2017). In countless conversations with Kisumu artists, hustling appeared as art's 'other', the harsh and more grounded, flipside to the glossy aspirational efforts at cultural entrepreneurship that they engaged with every day. Winnie Juma, the fashion model and well-known event organizer from Kisumu, who I portray in Chapter six, was candid about her less glamorous everyday business, buying and re-selling second-hand clothing in the city's large open-air market. Like most of my interlocutors in Kisumu, a city where mass unemployment has become a perennial manifestation of urban crisis, Juma identifies as both artist and hustler, "There are no jobs in Kenya," she states matter-of-factly, "so you create one for yourself!"

The jobs that are created in the process, may relate to art in a narrower sense, such as gigs for performing artists or new markets for visual art. However, they may also entail new forms of urban culture associated with the particular livelihood strategy in question, such as introducing shisha hookah pipes to bars in Kisumu, or using a gym to create a new social space with an upward social dynamic (see Chapter two). To understand art as situated in urban space, at least in the case of Kisumu, primarily

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means acknowledging the involvement of art with other, sometimes competing, livelihood strategies. The particular emergence of artistic practices from urban marginality and the conditions under which they are produced, foster forms of art consumption that are particular to Kisumu.

One example of how the two seemingly opposed, agentic orientations of hustling on the one hand, and making art on the other, blend into each other, is that of the so-called painting-cypher. The poet Janabii, who is the focus of Chapter four, describes this particular form of event which was created to bring together artists and their respective audiences, in an attempt to cross-promote the talents of Kisumu artists. A *cypher*, in the spoken word subculture, is a poetry slam or competition in which poets perform their pieces in front of a live audience. Janabii explains that in this event, painters uncover a specific painting and the poets perform poetry referring to it, either written in advance during the event or composed live. As Janabii explains, this is done with a specific intention:

*A poet anachukua painting, alafu hiyo painting poets wanaiandikia kitu iko in line nayo, and that way unapata, both poet atagain fans ya ule painter, painter akileta audience wake kuhost show. Halafu mafans wa poet pia, watakua fans wa ule painter, the moment wameskia ile piece na iko fused na painting.*

A poet chooses a painting, then the poets write something in line with the painting. That way the poet gains the fans of that painter, as the painter brings his audience to the show. The fans of the poet, likewise, will be fans of the painter, as soon as they hear the piece that is fused with the painting.

It would be a fallacy to separate art from other livelihood strategies pursued by young adults inclined to art, as one would inevitably miss the inherent structural dynamics from which novel forms of art production and consumption emerge. For example, the spoken word program *Poetic Hour*, which became the focal point of Kisumu's artistic community, emerged from of these first tentative encounters between Kisumu's poets and painters. In a way, this perspective turns the often-quoted passage from Kwame Anthony Appiah's *In my Father's House* (1992) on its head:

Despite the overwhelming reality of economic decline; despite unimaginable poverty; despite wars, malnutrition, disease, and political instability, African cultural productivity grows apace: popular literatures, oral narrative and poetry, dance, drama, music, and visual art all thrive. (p. 157)

In view of my material from Kisumu, I contend that artistic practices abound in cities like it, not *despite* the experiences of urban marginality but precisely *because of* them. As will become very clear in this thesis, art and social creativity appear where situative

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challenges arise. Artistic practices, I contend, are fostered by experiences of urban marginality, and emerge in accordance with and from the rhythms of hardships. They do not appear *despite* chaos and social turmoil; instead, they attempt to temporarily overcome experiences of disturbance, confusion or uncertainty.

Even when artistic activities do not yield substantial gains over the years, the lived aspiration of the way-of-the-artist allows a sense of control over the flow of events in contexts of social volatility to be reclaimed. In Kisumu's streets, young people who, sadly, are used to the rhythms of continual setbacks, use art as a social platform that provides different forms of communal support. Likewise, art transforms 'empty' afternoons with no obligations, into an opportunity to hone their craft, thereby integrating experiences of stasis into a greater, forward-moving trajectory. Even where the new markers of social maturity under late capitalism, such as active participation in the *bling bling* culture (Baker 2011), remain elusive for years, the artistic aspirations of young adults speak of future promises of material prosperity and social significance. The conflation of affluence and significance, of wealth and visibility, of social and financial value has been only too clearly expressed in rap music and other contemporary popular cultures around the globe, for example, in the aphorism-cum-song-title by Los Angeles rapper Dom Kennedy: *If you don't make money, you don't make sense.*

Within my study, the hustling orientation and the artistic orientation are two sides of the same coin. Therefore, this thesis aims to describe how the hustle of being an artist, and conversely, the art of being a hustler, of making do and of making art, are intricately interrelated. Creativity originates from experiences of urban marginality, which Kisumu youth frame neutrally, as "challenges". As one artist told me in a peculiar grammar, which seemed to mimic the imponderable stream of trials and tribulations marking his life: "Living in Kenya is challenges out of more challenges!" In Kenya, where most youth describe their living conditions as "challenging", and where layers of multiple forms of violence have brought about the somewhat oxymoronic notion of an enduring crisis, it is therefore no surprise to find an effervescent youth culture. In the following section, I will explore some of the conceptual dimensions of creativity as part of human agency and as being captured in the social practice of articulation.

### 1.3 The Creativity of Action and Articulation

In their extensive treatment of human agency, Emirbayer and Mische (1998) emphasize challenging situations' role in human creativity. The authors demonstrate how new

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creative forms of acting arise in precisely those difficult situations which make an unreflected continuation of the habitual ways of doing, impossible:

As they respond to the challenges and uncertainties of social life, actors are capable of distancing themselves (at least in partial exploratory ways) from the schemas, habits, and traditions that constrain social identities and institutions (p. 984).

Emirbayer and Mische identify three temporal-relational contexts that correspond to certain agentic orientations, and which can help us to understand the relationships between challenges and uncertainty on the one hand, and forms of urban creativity, on the other. In their threefold model, the past dimension is associated with the sphere of habitual social action, the ways of acting that have already become sedimented and habituated and form the basis of everyday agency. This dimension comprises the routines with which we proceed through a normal day, without conscious thought, until we encounter a new and problematic situation that may not allow for the unreflected iteration of past routines. According to the authors, a practical-evaluative orientation prevails in the present dimension, in which present situations are judged and habituated forms of agency are adjusted to the present challenges. The future dimension is particularly interesting with regard to creativity, as it has an imaginative or projective quality, in which elements of past experiences and routines, as well as the presently experienced situation, are constantly rearticulated to form creative images of future developments. Of course, the three dimensions can only be neatly separated conceptually, as actors transition between them fluently in the course of carrying out concrete actions.

One important origin of uncertainty and of the unpredictable character of peoples' lifeworld in Kisumu, lies in the clientelistic nature of the political system. Engel and Erdmann (2006) have emphasized how neopatrimonialism contributes to systemic uncertainty. When dishonest or fraudulent conduct by those in power has become established as a social norm, everything from simple administrative activities to more important life events, such as getting a new job, may become highly unpredictable. Another extreme, albeit common, example of how the state and its administration's neglectful demeanour affects people's lives in unexpected ways, is the demolition of citizens' homes for the purpose of constructing new roads. During my stay in Kisumu, such 'spontaneous' demolitions occurred in Nyalenda, with announcements only being made to the residents a few hours prior to the demolition. In 2017, the so-called *Lwangni Beach*, a strip of seashore fish restaurants popular with tourists suffered the

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same fate. Journalists captured the outraged and despaired voices of the restaurant owners, many of whom had invested their life savings in their businesses.

This is just one out of the countless instances I recorded, in which an unreflected iteration of past routines, such as going to work in the morning, was no longer possible so that new future horizons had to be imagined based on the present situation and the means currently available. Remarkable ingenuity can often be found when hardships occur, and I often observed a striking resilience among young people in Kisumu, as well as an impressive capacity for re-orienting themselves to future possibilities. Emirbayer and Mische align themselves with the German sociologist Hans Joas, in maintaining that “human actors do not merely repeat past routines; they are also the inventors of new possibilities for thought and action” (983-4). Such creative-imaginative engagements with the future are often bracketed by the dominant models of social theory, especially teleological means-ends models which as Joas and Knöbl note, seem to be of rather surprising longevity in social and economic science (Joas and Knöbl 2013: 707-712). From Joas’ neopragmatic perspective, agency is not informed by benefit calculations and values that actors would contemplatively imagine before they act. Instead, new definitions of situations appear in the situative context of performing concrete actions (“im Handlungsvollzug”). Such new definitions of what is going on may suggest new means and ends for a given social situation and bring about new possibilities for actors to interact creatively (*ibid.*: p. 717).

While Joas’ point is a universal one, I contend that his argument is especially salient in contexts of urban marginality in which actors constantly reassess and re-evaluate situations and ‘feel their way’ through them. As Simone (2004) has argued, referring to the city of Johannesburg, it is through sociality that ‘expanded spaces of economic and cultural operation become available to residents of limited means’ (p. 407). In practice, this often means that one has to bargain and negotiate tirelessly, while constantly attempting to maximize the potential benefits of a given situation or interaction. Sometimes, I was compelled to speculate whether the overwhelming sociality that I experienced in Kisumu was not due to a large extent, to the actors’ unceasing attempts to obtain the maximum from every interaction, for instance by obtaining information or favours, or by generally accumulating social capital that might at some point, be converted into much needed support. In a lifeworld where a tiny favour, a hint, a recommendation, a small act of charity, may make the difference between being able to

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put food on the (family's) table or not, sociality briefly assumes an existential nature (I will explore this claim more fully in Chapter four).

Joas frames agency as being situationally embedded, thus emphasising the changeability and fluidity of concrete action, which he understands as evolving out of the situation and various actors' constantly updated interpretations of it (Joas and Knöbl 2013: 719). This improvisational characterization of agency, as processual and shifting, presupposes a delicate sense of one's social surroundings, the capacity to size other people up and to "feel them out" (see Chapter two). The changeability and room for interpretation, and hence for manoeuvre, tends to increase in environments of scarcity with a low degree of institutional integration. Germany immediately after the second world war, with black markets, may stand as a historic example that such types of do-it-yourself, makeshift-creative agency are not culturally specific, as some might feel compelled to claim, but that they typically appear whenever an institutional framework fails to address the citizens' vital needs.

In Africa, especially Western Africa, the excess of creativity associated with such lifeworlds has brought about the social type and cultural figure of the trickster, as the "creatively antinomian overreacher transgressing the artificial codes of society" (Ballinger 1989: 15; for a concise discussion see White 1999). In Kisumu, deceitful attitudes are described by the Swahili verb *kugonga* (lit. to hit; to deceive, to swindle) and its Sheng passive form *gongwad*, which is repeatedly heard during everyday interactions. Trickster, swindlers, and con men are also referred to as con artists, which sometimes seems a more accurate term for the creative feats through which they manage to extract money in unlikely situations (see 'the broker' described in Chapter two). The overwhelmingly young majority of urban dwellers, the 'youth', is restricted to a marginal position in a social space characterized by stark competition for limited resources, and creativity becomes a central dimension of social action. Con artists and real artists occupy liminal positions in their societies and draw on their imaginations to construct alternative means of accessing social respectability. In this sense, making art can also be understood as sort of *bluff* (see Chapter six), whereby young people try to overcome the blatant antagonism in their society, and the various structural barriers of exclusion, by creatively imagining new images of the future. The habitus of creatively reconfiguring received structures of thought and action has given rise to a prevailing attitude among urban youth in Kenya that reflects a broader social agency; the 'way of the artist' is nothing more than the clearest expression of this.

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However, as with any distinct group identity in society, the way of the artist does not stand uncontested. In Chapter two, which helps to map the position of artists in Kisumu's social space, I discuss the emic etymology of *busybodies* and *chameleons*, through which actors denounce an all-too changeable, fluid or creative attitude towards social life. Although having the flexibility to adapt to almost every new situation may be seen as a valuable skill, too much changeability and fluidity of action is often criticized on moral grounds, as indicating a lack of character. From my observation, I contend that this excessive creativity was often caused by feelings of anxiety or worry about actual or potential problems. Worry, in this sense, may be described in Joas' words, as a "reflective response to the challenge presented to us by the situation" (Joas 1996: 161) prompting intense processes of envisaging a more desirable future. I often participated in such moments of heightened creativity, such as when sitting together with artists at the Tumsifu center after night fall, when the busy activities of the day were over and the artists would 'make stories' for hours on end. The discussions meandered along countless scenarios for creating individual and collective efforts to 'strike it big' in the entertainment industry. This concurs with another of Joas' important observations, namely that the goals of human action are usually relatively undefined and only become specific in relation to the means available to the given actor (Joas 1996: 154). Again, Joas' observation seems particularly relevant in a context of urban marginality, where scarce means reduce the scope for action. The activist Ogotu once started a presentation about the youth movement he initiated with the words, "Our challenges start and end with financing". The same statement could have been made by any of the artists in this book, and probably by a majority of Kisumu residents. "The dimension of means in relation to the dimension of goals" Joas writes, "is in no way neutral. Only when we recognize that certain means are available to us do we discover goals which had not occurred to us before." I also observed this resetting of goals many times in Kisumu. Whether it is in the way Evans in Chapter two, deals with the complex repercussions of a car accident, or how Janabii, in Chapter four, accepts a bus ride offered to him in order to trigger 'lucky encounters' in town, this principle appears many times throughout this thesis.



## 1.4 Articulation as Social Practice

I understand the practices of and enunciations about the way of the artist as a discursive strategy, and therefore as being embedded in a broader struggle “to fix meaning on different levels of the social” (Jorgensen and Philipps 2002: 24) in an urban context that is characterized by blatant antagonisms. In order to assess the role and reach of artistic practices in the individual lives of the artists in this thesis, I will describe how these practices gain significance in relation to other quotidian practices, including those that are not explicitly related to art. In this sense, my approach may be likened to the perspective proposed by Paul Willis in the opening chapter of *The Ethnographic Imagination* (2007), tellingly entitled “Life as Art”:

I want to reclaim art as a living not textual thing, as inherently social and democratic. Art as an elegant and compressed practice of meaning-making is a defining and irreducible quality at the heart of everyday human practice and interaction. It is at the center of the commonplace human uses of objects, expressive and other, producing and investing meaningfulness in our relations with others and with the objects and materials around us. (p. 3)

Bringing together art as a “living not textual thing” that is at “the heart of everyday human practice” of meaning-making, requires a social discourse model that is *constitutive* of social reality, rather than *constituted* by it. Laclau and Mouffe’s (2001) theoretical work is particularly useful here. The discursive model developed by the two authors has been termed *post-Marxist*, because it rejects the idea centrally formulated in positions of historical materialism, whereby society appears as an “objective totality, in which the economy produces demarcated groups (classes) that have fixed relations to one another” (Jorgensen and Philipps 2002: 39). In Laclau and Mouffe’s model, society does not appear as a given, predetermined material reality that would exist prior to its discursive articulation. Instead, society or social reality, is continually produced in a constant and collective effort by various actors. According to Laclau and Mouffe, the discourse analyst’s task is not therefore to identify what groups ‘really’ make up society, but to plot the struggles to fix meaning which make social reality *appear* as if it were objective and natural (Jorgensen and Philipps 2002: 33). The concept of articulation is given a central role in their theory of social discourse:

[W]e will call *articulation* any practice establishing a relation among elements such that their identity is modified as a result of the articulatory practice. The structured totality resulting from the articulatory practice, we will call discourse (...). [W]e will call *element* any difference that is not discursively articulated (Laclau and Mouffe 2001: 105; italics in original).

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The concept of articulation's elegance lies in its double semantic, itself articulating two crucial ideas at a time. In a first step, the verb *to articulate*, according to the *Oxford Dictionary of English*, means to "express (an ideal or feeling) fluently and coherently." Importantly, the ways in which certain elements may be expressed in Laclau and Mouffe's conceptualization of articulation is not restricted to verbal utterances. As implied in the above quote by Willis, expression is not necessarily a textual or language-based activity but one that can be done through many other forms of communicative expression. This is an important difference to more conventional ways of understanding discourse analysis which understand discourse as semiotic systems such as language and images (Fairclough 1993: 138). Instead, the concept of social discourse associated with the practice of articulation extends its understanding of what the articulated elements may be, to all social phenomena (Jorgensen and Philipps 2002: 67). While in contemporary art scholarship object-centred approaches tend to be based on such semiotic systems, Laclau and Mouffe allow me to conceptualize "life as art," as Willis puts it, and to understand artistic practice as one practice of meaning-making among others. This distinction is important because the artistic practices discussed in this thesis vary greatly in the ways in which they communicate. From the clear demands of activism, derived from the constitution, to the playful and metaphorical use of language in spoken word, and finally to the embodied practices of fashion modelling, the artistic practices assessed in this thesis vary in the degree of explicitness with which they communicate.

Such a conceptually open approach to art and everyday social interaction obviously runs its own risk of convolution, as it extends the range of meaning-making practices considerably, for example, to include a grunting sound, a sudden gesture, or one's bodily presence in a moving crowd of demonstrators. I have circumvented this danger in this study to the best of my ability, by focusing on portraits and narrowing each chapter's scope to the agency of one individual artist (even though *Lebenskünstler* tend to wear different hats at different times). Regardless of how semantically open or closed the cultural elements in question may be, every act of articulation locates its subjects in social space and creates connections between people. As Willis once again points out, astutely:

[t]he elements of a cultural practice mutely 'speak' – clothes, body, style, demeanour, interaction, the use of commodities – of many things, but importantly of the actual social and physical locations of the cultural participants (2007: 12).

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In other words, each act of articulation not only tentatively reorganizes elements of social discourse, it also puts actors in changing, provisional relationships to each other. This dimension is captured by the second dimension of the verb ‘to articulate,’ which according to the *Oxford Dictionary of English* is “to form a joint”. This dimension is also particularly interesting when investigating art, as artists often occupy liminal positions in their societies. They may appear as representatives of society on one occasion, and as critical ‘outsiders’ on another. Artists link societal milieus, often adopting the positions of mediators and critics between conflicting cultural world-views, social values and political agendas. The practice of articulation enables me to capture the multiple, simultaneous connections that artists in Kisumu create by drawing on different elements, in art as well as in their daily lives. In this sense, making art establishes relationships between actors, creating shared meaning and possibly belonging. To articulate disparate elements is to interpret, bring into order, re-arrange, and re-frame the situations and challenges that may arise, by addressing them creatively.

The centrality of articulation as a practice stems from the fact that the context of my study is by no means a unified, ordered social space, but instead a fragmented social context with highly ambiguous political arenas, as the first two chapters about activist initiatives illustrate. For most young people, contemporary Kenya is a lifeworld that is no longer unified by an ensemble of necessary values and norms which the actors as members of one coherent society, would share. In fact, Mbembe and Roitman’s *Figures of the subject in times of crisis* (1995) is still cogent today, with its description of Cameroon in the early 1990s as an example of a post-colonial, neoliberal lifeworld which had gone awry and out of kilter. One point eloquently emphasized by the authors, is significant here, namely the particular physical and mental violence that arises from a ‘breakdown of meaning’ in such a setting, or to quote Mbembe and Roitman:

... the lack of coincidence between the everyday practice of life (*facticity*) and the corpus of significations or meanings (*ideality*) available to explain and interpret what happens [and] to act efficaciously” (Mbembe and Roitman 1995: 324; emphasis in original).

Even some 25 years later, a sort of postcolonial schizophrenia can be felt in Kenya, whereby formally ascribed meanings are very much at odds with the actual state of affairs. Young people experience these tensions acutely, as they attempt to move into social categories of adulthood. The pungent and concise language of spoken word is just

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one example of how young people manage to articulate the fissures and sutures in the social fabric.

The young people's ability to articulate and thereby create sociocultural realities and to imagine new positions for actors within social spaces and ways of acting efficaciously, is not only a resource in a merciless urban economy, it may also become a powerful tool for social transformation. Two protest movements in which popular artists played key roles, *Y'en a marre* in Senegal and *Le Balai Citoyen* in Burkina Faso, are evidence of the power of aesthetic articulations. There is also a noticeable shift from more conventional practices of political participation and protest, towards forms of artistic expression in Kenya, as space for political dissent becomes increasingly circumscribed. Dr. Hannah Schmidt, a political scientist with the German Institute of Global and Area Studies in Hamburg, states, much in line with my own observations:

Civil society in Kenya is on its knees, but it is not altogether dead. Activists have had to relocate their homes out of fears of arrest. Civil Society Organizations have had to close their offices. However, Civil society Organizations are also finding new ways of expressing dissent. They use music, paintings, and performances to voice criticism, and actively engage on social media too. Civil society groups continue to organise demonstrations against restrictions, and they seek to counter the narrative of the government by educating the public on how to distinguish facts from fake news (Schmidt 2018: 6).

By practicing articulation, Kisumu artists are challenging the predominant forms of physical and mental violence by establishing links between discursive elements that are silenced, suppressed or frowned upon. The vibrant, social creativity in African cities can be attributed to the plural nature of their lifeworlds, which is ultimately due to the population's intentional and systemic neglect by the powers that be (Chabal and Daloz 1999). Many of the articulations produced remain transitory, unfinished, or are actively sabotaged because of economic marginalization and lack of access to suitable resources. One example of this is a documentary, which has remained a fragment, which two Kisumu artists edited from footage that they had taken with a camera and a smartphone when interviewing victims of the police brutality which occurred in Kisumu and other Kenyan opposition strongholds, after the highly controversial general election in August 2017 (Amnesty 2017). The heart-breaking video fragment presents a different perspective as it shows only a handful of young men at Kondele roundabout, in the heart of Kisumu, rioting in front of three heavily-guarded, international journalists' cameras. The clips of the rioters were to end up on national and international media, as an

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illustration of the opposition voters' obstructive behaviour and a justification for the excessive violence perpetrated after the elections. However, the footage assembled by the two artists never circulated beyond their own computers, for reasons that lie firstly in its quality and secondly, but perhaps more importantly, in the potential risk to their personal safety if the footage were to be more widely circulated.

### 1.5 Research Practices

Switching from an approach which focusses on objects and exhibition spaces to one which centres around people and their agency, employing ethnographic research methods, taking into account the actual exchanges during artistic projects as well as the aesthetic processes and their impact, means engaging in longitudinal research. The material discussed in this thesis is based on about 13 months of field research in Kisumu, from September 2015 to March 2016 and from October 2016 to April 2017. I stayed in Kisumu for a further 10 months while writing up this dissertation, from late August 2017, shortly after the contested general elections, until to June 2018. While my main focus during this time was on preparing the first draft of this thesis, the fact that I lived with two Kisumu artists proved tremendously helpful for substantiating the data which I was writing up.

Like probably any anthropologist in a field situation, the ways in which I recorded data varied during the time that I was carrying out my research (Emerson et al. 2011: 17). During my first stay of seven months in Kisumu, I was primarily occupied with mapping the place of Kisumu artists in social space, and I adopted a more detached style and remained in an observing mode. I carried my notebook with me most of the time while I was observing routines that were unfamiliar to me, and jotted down notes during initial interviews and conversations. I increasingly relied on information gathered through observation and participation to gauge the social and aesthetic implications of the artistic practices at hand. This in turn paved the way for more informal conversations with artists which I recorded using a smartphone. These conversations, carefully triangulated with a growing amount of observations and knowledge about Kisumu's urban culture and social conventions, make up the bulk of data used in this thesis.

During the second research trip of six months, I switched to a more immersive style in that I postponed writing to the evenings, which enabled me to immerse myself more intensively in the "daily rhythms and ordinary concerns" thereby "increasing openness to others' ways of life" (Emerson et al. 2011: 18). During this time, I used a smartphone

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quite extensively to record everyday conversations, not only while at a specific site but also while moving around the city, which proved to be a fruitful manner of obtaining data that was closer to the Kisumu artists' actual experience. I also used my smartphone and camera to take snapshots of particular situations, encounters or sights that my collaborators pointed out to me. I organized the audio and visual data as if in a journal, as mementos. The combination of the photos and the recorded conversations, as well as the soundscapes contained in the audio recordings, proved tremendously helpful for recalling mental notes and insights that I had had on site. I relied on this data while organizing my notes in the evenings, as well as later on during the data analysis process at Basel University, where I transcribed many of the recordings. In this way, the data allowed me to re-immense myself in the moment but have a reflective detachment.

Unexpectedly, it was the technological devices, especially my camera and laptop, which allowed me to gain a greater degree of proximity to the Kisumu artists. Being able to provide high-quality photos and short video clips of artistic works and performances free of charge, was immediately seen as an advantage by most artists. As I had a fairly stable wireless internet connection where I was staying, I was able to provide them with photos taken during the day on the same night via WhatsApp. This led to many requests from artists to accompany them during excursions in the city, for performances at particularly beautiful leisure spots, or simply to events where artists performed. Being recognized as a 'photographer' allowed me to gradually transition from a primarily observing mode and being an 'outsider', to a more participative mode, when artists explained what they had in mind. Importantly, having an identified role allowed me to reduce my social anxieties over my 'outsider' status and feel more at ease at events, which in turn made it easier for me to connect with more and more artists. Photographing and filming artistic performances was also a 'mute' way of acknowledging their efforts and talents, paving the way for a shared perspective, for instance, while watching and discussing some of the footage on my laptop together. This process helped me to slowly reduce and overcome the emotional barriers that existed on both sides, resulting on the one hand, from my own extremely privileged situation, and on the other hand, from the cultural intimacy of artists in Kisumu as both unemployed and highly aspiring people. Complicated feelings like embarrassment and shame which arose on both sides over the important economic gap between me and my interlocutors, were tentatively and transitionally overcome by this shared and affirmative perspective on artistic practices, constructed with the help of technological

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devices. Light-hearted moments such as performing for the camera, mostly based on untested ideas or techniques, involved new and experimental experiences both for the artists and for myself and provided a basis for further discussions about aesthetic ideas and artistic processes.

While my knowledge of Swahili enabled me to gather a lot of contextual data, sometimes unbeknown to interlocutors, it did not contribute substantially to fostering relationships in Kisumu. I learned Swahili at Humboldt University in Berlin and during several stays in Coastal Tanzania, as well as during an exchange program at the Institute of Kiswahili and Foreign Languages at the State University of Zanzibar. Even though I was able to discuss all areas of my research in Swahili reasonably comfortably, my respondents would usually switch back to English, sometimes with the statement “your Swahili is better than mine!”, alluding to my use of *kiswahili sanifu* (classroom Swahili), even though I clearly lacked their fluency and spontaneity in language usage. It was only during my second field stay that I received classes in Sheng, the urban slang language combining Swahili, English and other Kenyan languages, widely used in multi-cultural Kenyan cities and particularly by youths (Samper 2002). Even though I never managed to converse comfortably in Sheng, my passive understanding of it enabled me to gather more contextual data and helped me take part in translating and analysing spoken word pieces in Sheng (see Chapters three and four). Because of Sheng’s importance in the context of my study and because I had the advantage of a prior knowledge of Standard Swahili, I prioritized passive fluency in Sheng over learning Dholuo, a Nilotic language, therefore my knowledge of this third important language in Kisumu remains negligible.

Towards the end of my second stay in early 2017, I embarked on a more comprehensive form of artistic collaboration with Dawe Dawe, the spoken word poet portrayed in Chapter four. The documentary *#Manyatta\_Is\_Manhattan*, which is attached to this thesis, is the result of what Estalella and Criado (2018) refer to as experimental collaboration. Co-producing the documentary together with Simon Njoroge and the spoken word artist Dawe Dawe, enabled me to overcome some of the emotional barriers which by and large, were the result of the economic gap between my own privileged situation and the Kisumu artists’ urban marginality, which I experienced most acutely while recording Dawe Dawe’s dramatic life history. Through the interaction of jointly narrating Dawe Dawe’s story, the awareness of our pronounced socio-economic differences faded increasingly into the background. Even the first phase of jointly

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planning the documentary, which we had already begun during my first field trip, provided me with useful information about the artist's relationship to the city. Planning the documentary, which was filmed and edited by Simon Njoroge, allowed us to talk about the importance of specific places in the city, where artists wanted to be filmed and interviewed, and provided an opportunity for tentative forms of epistemic collaboration, of 'making sense' of the artists' relationship to the city. Articulating my own ideas allowed me to test and come to understand the values that artists attached to specific aesthetic ideas in relation to the city. At the same time, my developing creative involvement made me worry that my relationship to the artists as 'informants' was "not as detached as it should be" (Estalella and Criado 2018: 3). In fact, as Massero-Guillarmon puts it in the same volume:

I had wanted to follow some artists' work, but I was invited to become a collaborator. I had imagined a fieldwork based on some kind of distance with the objects and subjects of study, but I had instead participated in the production of the very things I was studying (2018: 183).

Estalella and Criado encourage working through what they refer to as 'fieldwork devices' to engage one's counterparts in joint problematization. The process of producing the documentary was one such device, which enabled me to see through the myriad difficulties and barriers to finalizing such a product, which proved very important for my research overall.

Dawe Dawe articulates a number of different perspectives and worldviews in the documentary, all while tactically pursuing specific goals. My presentation of Dawe Dawe's life is based on the narrative structure which he developed jointly with myself and Simon Njoroge. In the corresponding chapter, I attempt to capture the different worldviews and narrative strategies by employing different registers of language, while at the same time explaining the more pragmatic pursuits and actual experiences behind the interface of the documentary. Rather than giving a detailed descriptive account of how the documentary came into being, I experiment with different types of writing in an attempt to construct a joint perspective on the poet's life. By drawing on film studies and literary analysis, as well as data that does not feature in the documentary, I experiment with different types of academic writing, "open to flux" (Malaquais 2010: 115), in order to capture the various articulations that Dawe Dawe constructs simultaneously on different levels. On my return to Switzerland, I was able to show the documentary several times in Basel and I used it as teaching material in a secondary



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school in Rämibühl (Zürich). I hope to be able to reach more schools and students in Europe, to complement the contents of my doctoral research presented in this thesis and make it more readily available.

In all the portraits presented, I have made an effort to discuss my findings with the artists concerned. In the case of Chapter four, about the poet Janabii, we collaborated in a joint presentation during a workshop about hustling in urban economies at the British Institute for Eastern Africa in Nairobi in March 2017. Janabii is a poet whose art also includes analysing and discussing his verses, and I am grateful to have been invited by the group of activist scholars who brought academic researchers and community activists and artists into discussion in their conference. In this sense, this thesis also responds to recent calls to reorient the academic discourse about arts in Africa by collaborating with artists, activists and writers based on the African continent (Simbao 2017). In each of the portraits, I also explain how participating in and jointly reflecting on the activities, has contributed to shaping this research.

I begin with a portrait of Evans Aduwo, the caretaker of the Tumsifu Center, the strategic research site where I conducted many of my first interviews and conversations. Evans was a central actor at the centre and by allowing the core group of Kisumu artists who had previously rehearsed in the nearby *Alliance Francaise* property to use the centre's ample garden, Evans helped to shape a vibrant if short-lived, creative space for the city's artistic youth. At the same time, Evans distanced himself from the artistic fraternity, as well as from parts of his own work as a political activist, to which he entertained an ambiguous relationship. Therefore, Evans' case is useful for mapping the place of Kisumu artists in Kisumu, both in physical and social space, as well as for introducing some of the emic concepts relating to the perception of youth in general and artists in particular, within the broader social fabric.

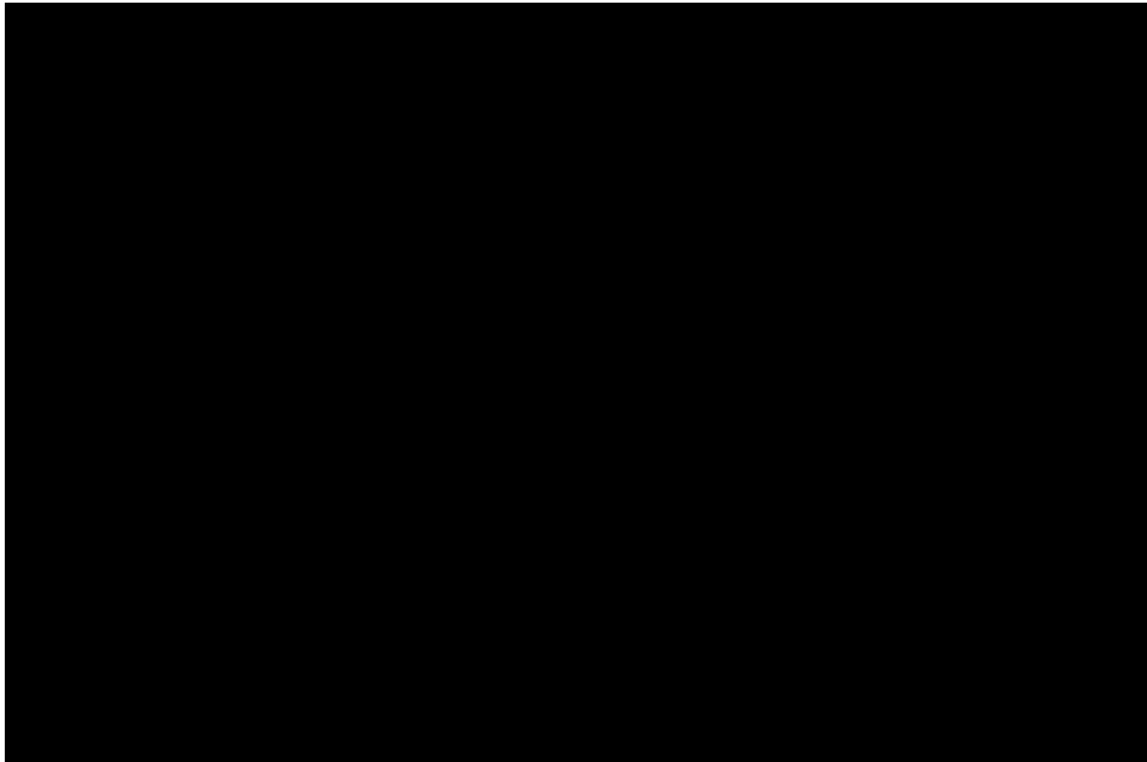
In addition to his work for NGOs in the field of political education, Evans ran a gym at the centre. I use Evans' portrait and my discussion of the bodybuilder subculture at the centre as a way to establish a comparative background for the artistic practices that will be described in the chapters that follow. As my discussion shows, the Tumsifu centre was a socially-mixed meeting place where different kinds of activities, such as artistic events, church choir rehearsals, a community trust, a car wash business, and weed-smoking youths converged, often at the same time. Its centrality, heterogeneity and easy accessibility made it an ideal starting point for my first forays into Kisumu's more established and emerging urban cultures. My discussion of bodybuilding emphasises

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some of the implicit notions of social rank as well as some of the tacit regulations governing the centre's social life. In preparation for my main argument in this thesis about artistic practices in Kisumu, the first portrait emphasises how strenuous exercise at the centre's gym can be understood as an alternative interpretation of work in a context of mass unemployment. Evans' efforts to make-do and matter, both in bodybuilding and in the fields of political education, mirror the broader urban creativity of Kisumu's *Lebenskünstler* and throw into relief the narrower artistic agency described in the later chapters. Despite his self-profession of being different to the artists, Evans was friends with many of them. His case serves as a prelude to this study, in that it reminds us that the creativity, shrewdness and resourcefulness that I attribute to Kisumu artists in the following pages, are traits that are by no means limited to the artistic fraternity, but which are instead characteristics of the imaginative and inventive side of Kisumu's urban life in general.

## 2. Evans Aduwo: Mapping Kisumu Artists in a Lifeworld of Uncertainty

With his shaved head, strong appearance and heavy metal bracelets, Evans Aduwo<sup>4</sup> (\*1984) projected a distinctly more grown up, masculine image than many of the artists at the centre, most of whom were in their early 20s and younger than him. One crucial difference between Evans and the other artists who spent time at the Tumsifu Center, was that he had a space at his disposal, the centre's entire premises, for which he exuded an air of responsibility. He had his office in one of the rooms, in which he received visitors, and opposite it, he ran a gym, his actual place of work for most of the time. The organization that Evans led together with two other men from the office, was a community trust called BAFOPE, short for *Baghdad for Peace*. The trust came into being with the help of the Catholic church, which had also given it office space inside the Tumsifu Center, which was the central meeting ground for Kisumu artists at that time.



**Figure 1:** The Tumsifu Center.  
Source: Author's photograph

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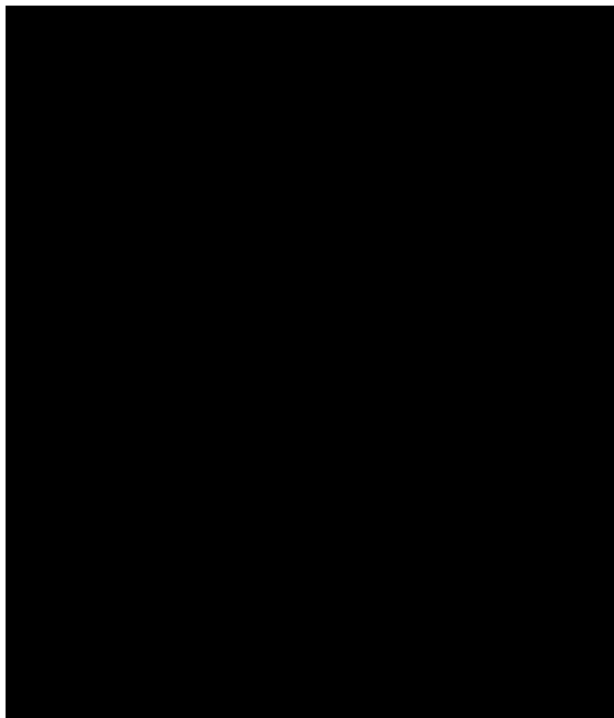
<sup>4</sup> In accordance with the conventional ways of relating in Kisumu, I use the personal names by which the people portrayed were usually referred to in the context of my study. Therefore, after introducing each person with their full names, I use first names (Evans, Boniface, Winnie) or artist names (Janabii, Dawe Dawe) throughout the portraits, rather than last names, which were employed very rarely.

The BAFOPE community trust was started with reformed members of the Baghdad Boys, a dreaded youth gang that had formed in Kisumu in the early 1990s during the introduction of multiparty democracy. Like other such ethnic, militant, political networks, the group was initially founded as a security organization, in the case of the Baghdad Boys, personalities surrounding the opposition leader, Jaramogi Oginga Odinga. Like its Gikuyu counterpart in Central Kenya, the Mungiki movement, Baghdad Boys expanded into an influential group that started to control large parts of the city's economy, taxing small-scale traders as well as imposing informal levies on the transport sector. The group's name is a reference to the First Iraq War, which was unprecedented in terms of global broadcasting; images of it apparently resonated with young men in Kisumu, who connected their own experiences of oppression to other such experiences around the globe.

Throughout the 1990s, Baghdad Boys were the main proponents of violent uprisings in the city and in clashes with the police. Therefore, in 2003, the group was approached and disbanded by the Church through the *National Council of Churches of Kenya* and the organisation *Catholics for Justice, Peace and Reconciliation*. The amorphous group was then divided into several chapters of youth groups which were given small credits for specific projects in order to transition from organized crime to worthwhile and profitable activities. Evans only joined BAFOPE much later, in 2011. Previously, he had found himself hustling at Kisumu's bus station, working as an "agent", carrying luggage and selling bus tickets, a far cry from his real aspirations, as he had already earned a BA degree in sociology from the University of Nairobi. The passing of his father, a railway employee, had forced him to interrupt his studies although he eventually completed them. Evans' former experience and his still existing networks at the bus park, enabled me to interview several of the workers and chairmen, as well as the bus park manager, Seth Ochieng, a former leader of the Baghdad Boys, who was then campaigning to become a Member of the County Administration for the sought-after, central Milimani ward. Judging from our strolls through that pulsating centre of Kisumu's activity, Evans must have had an extensive network because even now, years later, he seems to know a great many people there. Although Aili Marie Tripp in her 1997 influential study of the informal economy in Tanzania, was still able to write that for many Tanzanians who work and make do in the city, the hoe and the farm remained something to fall back on in times of hardship, the picture twenty years later in Kisumu is different. Even though Evans values his rural home in Busia county very much and

invests a sizable part of his income in a retirement home upcountry, he said, in the midst of the bustling bus park, “Fred, if things go worse, this is the place that I will always come back to”. For urban youths like Evans, if one’s creative projects for generating a better life in the city fail, the thing to fall back on is hustling in the small-scale economy.

Through his networks, Evans became aware that BAFOPE needed an educated person for the position of treasurer, someone able to read long documents and write up lengthy reports of the organisation’s activities for the Church. Evans obtained the position in 2011 and subsequently had a “recognized” occupation and workplace. Because his work at the office did not pay a fixed income, only “field allowances” for specific activities, Evans bought the gym that had already been installed in another room in the same building. The gym had also been one of the subsidized projects for reforming gang members into working men. The Tumsifu Center offered many artists and Evans even more so, a safe space that in a way sheltered its visitors from the all-too-ordinary misery and tedious cultural economy of street life in the ghettos.



**Figure 2:** Evans Aduwo at Tumsifu Center.  
Source: Author’s photograph

Evans was almost like a caretaker of the Tumsifu, where he could be found at any time of the day. As he was essentially running the gym facility by himself, and because there were significant gaps during the day when no one trained, his ‘duties’ involved, amongst other things, his physical presence and being there even when no one else was

and nothing was happening. Evans would open the place as early as 6 am, before sunrise, and train a first group of clients who worked out on their way to the office. Later in the morning, at around 10-11 am, a second group of people came in, often young men, some students, some self-employed, and others who were just hustling. The difference in social standing between the first and second groups was apparent from the high number of early morning clients who came in cars, while the second group mainly arrived on foot or motorbike-taxis. The different standing was also marked by the smell of weed that would often accompany training preparations later in the morning. There was usually nothing much to do around midday, and Evans would go to one of the nearby stalls for lunch, and then rest on the chairs in the office, or on one the training benches, dozing, yet always aware and ready to receive new clients, whether they were NGO representatives attempting to meet BAFOPE, or anyone else who wanted to see him. Because of the heat, the gym usually remained idle in the afternoon, until the evening, the peak time of day for visitors. Evan's gym would also be heavily frequented during after-work hours, when the large hall was used for various aerobic classes, mainly frequented by a working middle-class population.



**Figure 3:** The gym at the Tumsifu Center lying idle on a sunny afternoon.  
Source: Author's photograph

## 2.1 Social Life at the Tumsifu Center and Bodybuilding as an Alternative Interpretation of Work

Evans himself trained twice a day, during the day's two "rush hours" in the morning and the evening, together with his clients and bodybuilding partners, and this with great regularity. When Evans started initiating me into the gym, we debated the importance of regular training several times. Evans tirelessly emphasized the importance of working out daily to me. He had a rigid point of view: workouts had to be performed every single day of the week. "Training", Evans emphasized, "means to do something for yourself", and all of my humble attempts to persuade him that training every second day would suffice for my purposes of staying fit, were fobbed off. More than once he used his 'killer argument' bringing the debate to an end, dramatically rising his voice and hands, "Fred, it is your health!", once again establishing a connection between working(out) and physical as well as mental, well-being.

In the context of waithood (Honwana 2012, Masquelier 2013), something that heavily burdened the everyday lives of many of my interlocutors, to train daily is to counteract the oppressive atmosphere of mass unemployment. Training means defying the sluggishness of life in a city in which one's labour may be perceived as dispensable. Training regularly also displays a spirit of discipline, which is difficult to retain under such circumstances (Jahoda et al. 2009 [1933]). Interestingly, Evans often used economic terminology, describing training as an "investment" in one's "future", and speaking of the "maintenance" of the body, as if it were a machine requiring regular servicing. With its monthly (negotiable) subscription fee of KES 1500 (ca. 15 USD) Evans' gym was clearly more expensive than the so-called "ghetto gyms" in the low-income settlements, yet at the same time, considerably cheaper than the other, more extensively equipped upscale gyms in Milimani, costing between KES 6000-10000 (ca. USD 60-100). Thus, Evans exploited an important economic niche in the Kisumu's health market and at the same time, established a place with an unusual social mix.

According to Evans, subscribing to the gym means investing in one's own health and "maintaining" oneself, both externally, by shaping up and toning one's body, and internally, by taking care of oneself, establishing firm volition and discipline, necessary prerequisites for showing up every day for exercise. The movements performed during training had to be controlled, according to the adage "quality not quantity". Working out with dumbbells, long weights, or one's own body weight, pushing the weights repetitively to the point of physical exhaustion, entails an aspect of manual work,

similar to working in a production facility. Acting on one's circadian rhythms, regularly and with a constructive intention, greatly contributes to forming a sense of self, as I gathered from conversations around the gym about the benefits of working out. Especially in an everyday life marked by a high degree of unpredictability, where meeting even basic needs is often uncertain, the quotidian physical labour at the gym with its visceral rhythmicity, is something which can be relied on. Rhythm, as the anthropologist Julie Archambault states, "with its recurrence and tempo, brings an element of predictability, if not a degree of certainty, into a social environment otherwise marked by unpredictability" (2015: 129). Various kinds of training plans on the gym's wall proposed ways of structuring members' training efforts over certain time spans, and conversely, of framing one's temporal experience through stages of gym work and bodily development.

On the wall next to the door, there was a plan entitled "Beginner Weight Training", an Excel spreadsheet on faded, brown paper. The table had 31 rows numbered consecutively for the days of a month. Parts of the months were then grouped together and assigned to different parts of the body. Each group was then further divided into sub-categories and actual exercises to be performed on a given day. Hence the "legs" category was sub-divided into exercises such as back squats, leg extensions, leg curls, etc., and the "arms" section contained "incline biceps curls, reverse wrist curls" and the "preacher curl". The latter exercise's name comes from the exercising person's resemblance to an emphatically gesturing preacher: the two lower arms are stretched forward in a 90° angle, and then the dumbbells are drawn to the body repeatedly and simultaneously, as if the person were addressing a crowd while delivering a sermon.

The fact that this plan was more of a loose projection than a plan to be followed to the letter, was indicated by an alternative, handwritten interpretation which had been added to the table. In a concurrent attempt to equate the inculcation of the body with a cyclical time structure, seven weekdays were devoted to the aforementioned body parts, e.g. "day 1 = legs", "day 2 = chest", and so forth. To my knowledge, neither Evans nor any other member of the gym consulted the faded plan, but the idea of working consistently and in a structured manner toward a goal of better health and greater strength was agreed and accepted. So, there was a strong moral logic underpinning the work at the gym, in which the ideas of effort and regularity not only indicated an aspired ideal, but also a superior state, embodied in perfectly muscular, masculine bodies. The sheer amount of will power needed to pursue the bodybuilder's lifestyle,



and the willingness to train every or almost every, day, pumping to one's physical limit, creates a community of respect, a fraternity. As I will argue in a similar vein in the following chapters, for the community of artists in Kisumu, working out can be seen as an alternative interpretation of work in which a regular substitute activity opens up new ways of socializing and of attaining social respectability.

The idea of "progressing" in various ways through gym work was also embodied in the gym motto, the "pumping motto", also printed on an old A4 sheet and taped to the wall. Evans would refer to the motto all the time, tirelessly instilling the enduringly popular street slogan "No Pain, No Gain!" into the novices. This motto can also be found in many other places in the town, and is perhaps, like none other, indicative of the present day urban experience in the global South. Hustling citizens, forcing themselves into the roughest and most unlikely economic niches and forms of work, can attest to this embodied truth, whether they are hawkers marching through the dust at the bus station, an egg vendor, resisting the burning sun under an improvised shade, or a bus driver, navigating a severely damaged vehicle through gridlocked traffic and avoiding accidents and abyssal potholes in the street. A gym workout echoes the lessons of uncertain street life and the experience of the many unskilled workers, labouring in the dust or above the heat of the engines. The only certainty, or so it seems, is that without the painful or laborious effort, there will be no progress. The motto is also referenced in one of Dawe Dawe's poems, which I analyse in Chapter five. The rules governing the gym were also handwritten on a fading sheet reading, in all capital letters:

Polite Notice: Gym Rules: Dismantle and arrange the bells back on the rack after Use! Help keep the gym clean!! Stop being careless!!!

*Careless* is the word that Evans always used to describe a character trait that he particularly despised. Once he used it in the context of an incident of mob justice in Nyalenda that I had seen in a news report. We visited the scene of the incident during the day, it was not far from Evan's own house in Nyalenda. Evans then used the word *careless* to characterize the young man who had been lynched by enraged neighbours and residents. Reportedly, the man had lost his way in life and given in to addiction and drug-related crime. He had also not bothered to cover his tracks and repeatedly stolen from people in the direct vicinity of his home, until he was eventually caught in the act. "He was a very careless person" Evans uttered gravely, shaking his head in dismay. The young man's irresponsible way of life was the opposite of the watchful and attentive attitude that Evans wanted people in his gym to have. The mindful and respectful

attitude that Evans embodied, particularly vis-à-vis his clients in the gym, standing straight and behaving in a calm and resolute manner, were the exact opposite of such a way of life. This bid for a heedful attitude has to be seen against the backdrop of Luo culture in which a high degree of politeness and diplomacy is valued, an expectation that is sometimes very much at odds with everyday behaviour in the low-income settlements.

The fact that the gym was not simply a place for working out, but also a place for forging a respectable form of masculinity beyond crime, was apparent from other gym rules. Some of the rules would probably apply in most gyms around the world, such as “to be punctual and obedient to the instructor”, as well as attending in “proper sports and gym attire”. Other rules were more particular to some of the gym members’ ghetto background, like “to be faithful, available and teachable” and to “avoid abusive terms and funny or strange and provoking behaviours”. In other words, the gym is a place where a certain set of constructive values is conceived and performed with great regularity. It is interesting to note at this point, that the Baghdad Boys, a youth gang, or as Kenyan youth call it, a “group to survive”, was transformed through foreign intervention into a space that emphasizes an opposite set of values. In the following excerpt from an interview, Bam Ochieng, a theatre playwright, director and journalism student from Kisumu, expands on life in the slum of Manyatta, where he has lived more than thirty years. Bam’s memories of growing up in Manyatta highlight the importance of some of the values that are taught in Evans’ gym, such as perseverance and a firm volition:

I grew up in a ghetto, a ghetto called Manyatta. And like many of us who lived in that ghetto there were always limitations in terms of accessing basic needs like food at times, and instances where people would get thrown out of their houses by their landlords were very regular. It barely went a year without some of us experiencing that. And what that meant was that we were not going to compete fairly with other children who grew up in the leafy suburbs, or in areas considered to have a lot of resources. So in the ghetto I saw a lot of my friends, a lot of my peers, give up. They gave up in class six, they gave up in class five at times not voluntary, many instances involuntarily. Maybe by the death of their parents or peer influence, getting themselves in drugs, and I keep on saying not voluntary, just because of the need to survive by circumstances around them like in any other ghetto.

Bam’s statement illustrates how the experience of everyday structural violence contributes to a sense of being left behind, compared to other children, and to

immediate, visceral experiences of social and economic marginalization, such as being evicted as a family from one's home. In the following excerpt from the same interview, Bam describes how when growing up in Manyatta in the 1990s, youths like him found themselves confronted with two almost opposing options for getting through life: on the one hand, by becoming a strongman and joining the local youth gang, or on the other, by choosing the more constructive approach, which later on would lead Bam himself into the fields of art:

Then came up the issue of groups to survive. Around that time there was the issue of the Baghdad Boys, and this was in the early 1990s. Some of us who, some of my friends who had... who had a lot of mass, in terms of their body, who went to the gym, got into Baghdad so they would use their bodies to disrupt campaigns or to form cartels in the community. The neighbourhood that I was brought up in was not that very supportive. So as I grew up, I realized that I had the potential if I could join hands with other people who were lucky enough to probably have gotten some basic education to alleviate the lives of our friends who for one or two reasons could not be where we were. I was motivated by the fact that I know that the people who we had left behind needed a hand to get to where we were. Not that we were doing well but we had an advantage because we had some little education, some little exposure. I went to a high school where we had a number of people from different backgrounds, we had whites, Asians, the rich and the poor. So the background really made me walk on my two feet knowing that irrespective of where I come from, I also had a chance in life so I had an obligation to give back to the community.

In each of the following chapters, we will rediscover the sense of mission, of a more constructive approach and contributing to social life in the community. As stated earlier, all of the artists portrayed had enjoyed phases of privilege at some point in their lives, although certainly none of them went through life without experiencing the kinds of limitations that Bam alludes to. The above quote describes two almost opposite ways of responding to the structural violence that all of my interlocutors encountered at some point in their lives. Even though the Baghdad Boys was disbanded, other such organized groups of strongmen still exist, such as the American Marine and China Squad, who are said to be associated with the opposition and the reigning party, respectively.<sup>5</sup> Evans, who joined BAFOPE long after the Baghdad Boys' transformation into a foreign-funded community trust, had never been involved with the violent

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<sup>5</sup> Ojwang, J. 2012. 'Kisumu falls to 'China' and 'America' gangs', *capitalfm*, retrieved from <https://www.capitalfm.co.ke/news/2012/09/kisumu-falls-to-china-and-america-gangs/>, last accessed August 10, 2020.

activities of the gang, although people tended to believe that he was a reformed, former gang member. To me, it seemed that Evans never really wanted to publicly abandon this false image, perhaps because as I will elaborate shortly, he relied in many ways on a strongman's tactics and strategies, which he combined with his more progressive and constructive stance as a member of the BAFOPE trust. In his gym, Evans created a social space that emphasized *care*, in the sense of "the provision of what is necessary for the health, welfare, maintenance, and protection of someone or something" (*Oxford Dictionary of English*). Much like the artistic community itself, Evans' gym can be seen as a space that emphasizes growth and mutual respect and which is opposed to the violent and coercive social strategies pursued by local youth gangs. However, such a clear-cut assessment is simplistic and certainly debatable. As the following in-depth description of Evans' agency will show, there are many shades of grey between more individualistic and altruistic orientations. In my interlocutors' lives, the more immediate horizons of action associated with hustling and making do, provisioning the basic necessities of life, and the longer-arching horizons of their efforts at cultural entrepreneurship constantly meshed with, overlapped and informed each other. Therefore, in the following, I will provide further descriptions of Evans' fragilities and vulnerabilities and those of other people at the centre, in order to further describe how their agentic orientations of making do and making art can diverge or complement each other, depending on the situation.

Usually, the artists at the centre referred to Evans as the "manager" of the arts centre, even though the diocese had actually employed a caretaker who lived with his family in a small house in a corner of the premises. Despite the caretaker's more legitimate position and accountability to the church, Evans was the "go-to" person for all the different groups and actors whose paths crossed at the centre. Evans was also the person who had allowed the artistic group to sneak into the centre, when the generous support of the Kisumu branch of Alliance Française ended. Whenever I passed the centre, I could make out Evans' silhouette, standing straight, legs apart, arms crossed, talking with someone, or simply waiting in the shadow of a tree. Whether he was training in the gym or discussing something in the office, his attentive supervision hardly ever missed my arrival, and before I could even reach the office, he would already be leaning out of one of the windows, waving from afar.

To me, Evans appeared to be what Simone (2004: 416) calls *hyper-aware*, excessively attentive to the real and imagined opportunities and pitfalls of urban life. I found this

behaviour puzzling because with the office and the gym, Evans already had what most artists seemed to dream of: a place to go to, to call one's own, and hence a 'defined' occupation and a place in the city that would automatically translate into a recognized position in social space. I assume that because of this it was fundamentally important that Evans always remained alert and was constantly on the lookout for whoever was entering the premises and approaching the building, analysing their bodily posture and facial expression from afar, so that he could see whether the person was a potential customer for the gym, a troublemaker (e.g. thief, drug abuser), someone important (e.g. an official), or whether some other (un)favourable event was happening. The centre with its flow of people going in and out, sometimes passing each other in silence, sometimes offering hearty greetings, could deceive the unwary observer about the frictions that existed and the fragilities that some experienced in this context.

In February 2016, the then pulsating centre abruptly closed, at least with regards to the artists' activities and the poetry event program *Poetic Hour* that had been held there for about six months. The circumstances under which the change of management took place explain the continued alertness shown by Evans and others. The owner of the property, the Catholic Church, evicted them from the place from one day to the next, without indicating its reasons for doing so. The eviction obviously posed a considerable threat to Evans' fitness work and his work with the BAFUPE trust, as it meant the immediate loss of both his gym and office. As I found out in a later interview with a young woman who was involved with the Church, one reason for the eviction were reports of youths marijuana smoking, and of couples kissing behind the building, behaviour that the Church as an institution would hardly want to be associated with. Evans and others affected by the change of management, explained it with rumours that were circulating about the Church's economic activities. One rumour had it that the Church wanted to use the place to build student housing for the Catholic university. As I established in an interview with the centre's former owner, a member of one of the last remaining Goan families in Kisumu, it had been entrusted to the Church by the Goan community subject to certain conditions, including a stipulation to use the centre for youth activities, particularly sports. The donation came with a formal prohibition against exploiting the centre commercially. I see these regulatory intricacies as the main reason why the centre had become a niche that was left unexploited; no major economic exploitation was possible, all that could be demanded were lump sums from the small-businesses inside the centre, like Evans' gym. This juridical dimension, which people

referred to as the centre's "political side", was mirrored in other buildings in Kisumu, such as the Ofafa Hall and the Kisumu Social Center, albeit through varying circumstances. The Tumsifu Center with its designated purpose of youth activities and its open and spacious garden, was however particularly prone to intrusion and being utilized by outsiders.

The way in which the Church officials attempted to empty the place speaks volumes about the fragility of identities, not only those of the official and unofficial tenants but also of the Church itself as an institution. In February 2016, according to Evans and others' accounts, high church officials entered the centre one morning without prior notice, accompanied by security personnel with three huge German shepherd dogs. The officials, who usually only visited the premises once a year, during an annual ordination ceremony, then walked around the premises, as if inspecting it, and gave Evans and the other astounded tenants a verbal notice to vacate the place within three days. The tenants were furious and immediately decided to consult a lawyer. As Evans and the others were actually paying rent, they had legal rights as commercial tenants. The lawyer who took charge of the case allegedly exclaimed, "I love this case!" when Evans and the other tenants confirmed that they had kept the receipts for their rent payments safe. As tenants, Evans and the others were entitled to a written eviction notice and several months' time to move out. They went to court; no church representative appeared during the hearing and hence the Church was fined 75,000 KES (ca. 7500 USD) for disobeying a court hearing order. Even though I was already aware that landlords routinely performed such forced evictions in the low-income settlements, I was surprised to see such tactics being employed by high officials of the Kisumu archdiocese.

Evans was slightly reassured by the result of the court ruling, but still remained hyper-vigilant, scanning any intruders from afar for their possible agendas. Had he not been there when the church officials came to visit, he could have missed important information about what they wanted. Such information was only available by "seeing" them, or by questioning them indirectly in order to obtain information, a practice that is captured in the English language by the phrasal verb "to feel someone/something out" (Merriam Webster Online Dictionary). This practice of being bodily present, of 'seeing' for oneself, and getting a 'feeling' for a situation or person, is of interest here because it points to a crucial dimension of the type of agency portrayed in this work.

In the absence of reliable positions in social space, such as *student*, *trainee*, *employee*, or even simply *a person receiving income support*, the way in which one is perceived becomes crucially important. In this sense, training at Evans' gym is not just a leisure activity or for casual physical well-being, instead it provides a training, an *education* in "standing firmly" and successfully handling everyday relationships. In a context in which there is a constant struggle over positions and resources, 'acting the part' becomes tremendously important. The combination of hyper-vigilance and the practice of routinely feeling people out, even if only during short encounters in the street, is a basic trait of the practice described here as *hustling*. A finely tuned awareness of one's social surroundings is important for hustlers in general and artists in particular, especially in Kisumu, where the entertainment industry is still very much an emergent form of urban culture. Whether promoting possible projects at NGOs' doors, socializing with other, more successful artists in the business, or approaching street-level county government clerks, artists need to make personal connections and turn them to their own advantage. Navigating the city in this sense, becomes a skilful act of impression management and self-presentation (Goffmann 1959), of marketing and ultimately, a way of 'selling' oneself purposefully.

In order to show how I became more and more involved in these types of social practices myself, I would like to briefly relate an example which happened to me, an instance where I was 'felt out', as it were, in order to emphasise how in a context of institutional fragility, the body and the personality displayed through bodily features become more important. As in my case I was 'felt out' over the phone, I will relate only what I said and how my voice may have appeared, even though astute human beings are evidently able to discern bodily states in extremely subtle ways, simply by listening to the characteristics of a human voice. In this case, I had volunteered to help a Kisumu artist who had taught children at an orphanage for several weeks but been refused the payment for her services of 12,000 KES (ca. 120 USD), despite it having been agreed in a written contract. I was once again enraged by such provocative injustice; in this case the orphanage was managed by a well-funded, globally active NGO with headquarters in Austria. Simply the site of the orphanage in a remote suburb of Kisumu, seemed otherworldly in its sumptuousness. I learned from the artist-trainer that the NGO had also defaulted on payments to other practitioners, some of whom were barely surviving and had gone to the effort of walking for several hours to the distant orphanage every day for several weeks, all the while hoping to be paid at the end.

Here was a European NGO with immense funding, that was defaulting on payments and apparently, doing so quite systematically. After all, what was a young artist from the ghetto going to do in the face of such a powerful institution? Resorting to legal means is unlikely, when one can barely find enough money to pay for transport to the remote centre. I decided to step in and pay a lawyer to send a demand letter, duly delivered and signed by a court messenger. When the institution received the letter, it demanded to talk to me, “the friend who had helped”, after having felt-out the artist herself over the phone. Reluctantly, I took the call and was indirectly questioned in many ways. The person on the phone claimed that the NGO had such a “heartfelt and personal relationship” with the trainer, and seemed eager to know, without saying so explicitly, whether I was really planning to go ahead and sue the organization. I confirmed that I would take the necessary steps, although I was not actually planning to, as this would have meant incurring costs well in excess of the actual sum in dispute. Moreover, as the lawyer had informed me, the NGO had taken precautions and arranged the contract in such a way that it would probably not stand up in court. The NGO clerk mentioned this judicial loophole to me, again indirectly, to see how I would react, emotionally and verbally. Even though I tried to sound firm and confident, a slight trembling in my voice must have betrayed me because the clerk seemed to have guessed my thoughts. Despite my efforts, the NGO never paid the trainer and I never went to court. It must have been quite easy for the person to ‘read’ me, my motivation and psychological disposition in the case, and to make a good guess based on little hesitations and incidents of stuttering, about whether I was really going to go through with the case. This aspect of corporeality is part and parcel of everyday interaction, in a country where social infrastructure substitutes for many institutional gaps, and in a context where pervasive corruption furthers an atmosphere of uncertainty and distrust, as well as recourse to practices of ‘tricking’. Versatility in observing and controlling such corporeal minutiae is without doubt, a crucial skill in Kisumu’s urban economies.

Evan’s case was far more important with regard to his life situation, as well as that of the other trainers at the centre. At the same time, his situation turned out to be legally more advantageous. Perhaps the responsible personnel at the diocese had never really considered the judicial regulations in detail and assumed like the NGO in case of the artist-trainer, that after the officials’ tough, threatening display such small-scale business owners and tenants would not dare to think too much about the situation. Had Evans not been present on that day, it would have been difficult for him to guess at the



Church's real motives. Had he not been present when the church officials visited the centre, it would have been difficult for him to "see" that these people were, as he described it, "tense" and "not firm". The officials appeared uncertain and unsure of themselves, and Evans interpreted their bearing with the security personnel and the dogs as a sign of overprotectiveness and ultimately, of fear. This led him to assume that the officials were not feeling as certain of themselves as they pretended to be, which in turn encouraged him to have recourse to a lawyer. His bodily presence at the centre and his well-developed skill in feeling people out therefore made a big contribution to his economic and social survival at that time.

Having presented my own perspective of these interpersonal, hustling types of social action, which I identified by an ongoing process of intercultural comparison, it might be useful to also present the perspectives of young people in Kisumu themselves, who do not have access to the mainstream labour market. For instance, Evan's perspective on hustling was certainly ambiguous. He repeatedly distanced himself from artists, but also more explicitly, from "busybodies", meddlers or do-gooders, who pry excessively into other people's affairs. The busybody is a social type similar to the trickster, and so-called "agents" or "brokers", who interpose themselves between people and institutions, and who creatively make a profit from a given situation. Evans had very firm beliefs about work. He believed in fair pay for fair work and in a "No Pain, No Gain" attitude, whereby one deserves to receive a return for one's constancy and effort. Evans often evoked the terms *busybody*, *chameleon* or *shapeshifter* as a contrast to the necessity of adopting a resolute and unwavering position, first physically, then in social space, as a prerequisite for respectability.

Busybodies are people who are overly curious about other people's affairs, and specifically, privy to information that renders people vulnerable, or to material possessions which lend themselves to theft. Tellingly, the term implies an embodied quality, expressed in one's bodily appearance; Evans used the terms *chameleon* or *shapeshifter* synonymously with the term *busybody*. Busybodies may be found at all levels of society and the name designates those who eke out a living through deceitful routines, such as hawking water bottles filled with tap water, selling fake bus tickets, or *gongaring* (Sheng, *deceiving*) people in creative and imaginative ways. The term may also denote those of a more elevated standing, who might have a defined occupation or employment but who behave overly officiously, trying to portray a societal status that they do not really have. As we will see, activists and artists in Kisumu were also prone

to the social stigma of being considered busybodies, or in a similar vein, being dubbed *attention seekers*. I will return to the specific implications of the term in the domain of political activism in the following chapter. As will become clear throughout the chapters, articulating oneself in Kisumu's urban space and specifically, doing so in profitable ways, is always a delicate balancing act and an exercise in people pleasing. A delicate sense of one's social surroundings is required together with the ability to assess social situations correctly.

The busybody as a social type, seems to have by and large vanished in Europe since the introduction of the welfare state, but this is not to say that this type of behaviour would be cultural-specific. In *Jeder Stirbt für sich Allein* (2019), the German novelist Hans Fallada quite accurately describes such types during the immediate post-war, black-market era in Germany in 1945. In order to further define and contrast that from which Evans and the artists in general were distancing themselves, and as a further example of makeshift creative urban agency in Kisumu, I want to give a brief account of one young man who in my view, was almost an ideal type of this social category, a young man who I will call Moses.

From the first time Moses was introduced to me, I thought him troublesome. With his heightened sense of alertness and his restlessness, I found Moses to be fickle and I could understand why Evans would think of people like him as “busy” bodies, as people who try to give the impression that they are very busy, when they are really just stranded in life. Moses was interested in HipHop music and wrote lengthy, convoluted pieces, which flagellated the political elite as a corrupt, voracious lot. He was the perfect blend of hustler and artist, even though he did not seem to be particularly successful at either. Moses turned out to be quite an extreme example of someone who saw an opportunity in everything including, of course, myself. The way in which Moses tried to engage with me appeared insincere, and from the way that he pressed me to build rapport, I felt that his interest was really driven by ulterior motives. Moses would text me at all times of the day, and even kept hanging around the Tumsifu Center, where for some time, he seemed to be waiting for me. It was Evans who warned me that I should not frequent “busybodies” like him, people who always wanted to find out where I was, who I was with, or when I would be coming back. One instance in particular revealed how Moses was constantly trying to involve himself profitably with other actors in the city.

One day, a young woman joined the few artists who were hanging out at the centre. She asked whether anyone knew of training for photography in Kisumu. When Moses overheard this, he immediately jumped up and with an astonishing surge of confidence, and to the utter surprise of those who knew him, responded, “I teach photography”. The woman asked him how much the courses were and without hesitating for a second or blinking an eye, Moses said “10,000 KES” (100 USD). He answered the follow-up questions with equal calm, giving a little bit of detail about the duration and content of the program. When the lady asked about the school’s location, Moses was caught off guard, hesitating visibly for a second “We don’t have a location for now,” he stammered, to which the woman queried disappointedly, “Oh so you don’t have a location?”. Trying to win back the lost ground, Moses responded, “Ok, we have a small locale at the Tom Mboya school,” naming the city’s big labour college, and quite obviously making things up out of thin air. The lady, who seemed to have seen through his performance by this point, politely rebuked him, with the casual “Ooh, so let me come by one day,” but without asking the school’s precise location or asking Moses for his phone number.

I have no doubt that if the woman had accepted the deal, Moses would somehow have managed to deliver on his promise, by borrowing or renting a camera from someone and inventing a training on the spur of the moment. Improvisation and social creativity are staples for hustlers and artists and all the social types in between these two poles in Kisumu, and I have seen such shrewd and improvised advances many times. Moses’ way of talking was representative of many hustlers that I met. Often, when nobody knew what to say, Moses would jump up and begin one of his pep talks, trying to encourage whatever group he found himself in to see opportunity where none was apparent. I could not help but suspect that behind this move of investing a lot of energy in his peer group, lay a motive of later profiting from the social capital he acquired. From the perspective of mainstream Kisumu society, self-professed artists, who do not have yet built a reputation or attained visible signs of commercial success, are likely to be put into the same category as people like Moses. However, from a Kisumu artist’s point of view, Moses would be considered a hustler, or worse, an idler, “just another youth,” rather than an artist, as his efforts to grow artistically in the spoken word domain seemed limited. At the same time, as will be seen throughout the thesis, Kisumu artists are masters of articulation and like Moses, they do sometimes “shapeshift”, albeit in complex and skilful ways, to accommodate various actors, such as bar-owners, event

organizers, county administration staff, NGO representatives or other artists. By doing so, they advance their own artistic agendas and enhance their life outcomes, for example, by securing a slot to perform at an upcoming show, by becoming part of a new artistic project, or by striking up a conversation at a public event with an NGO employee.

Tellingly, Evans was adamant about distancing himself from Kisumu artists. When I inquired whether he was going to this or that event in town, he usually responded, mockingly, “Am I an artist?!” implicitly making it clear that he did not think much of the artists scene and their events. Evans distancing is interesting, because as the *de facto* manager of the Tumsifu Hall, he was the one who had let the artists ‘sneak’ into the centre. He also socialized with them and had many friends among the artists.

In the ambiguity between his discourse and attitude towards the arts, I see a certain discomfort with the more makeshift, creative dimension of his own agency, which arises out of the unpredictability and uncertainty of his own life. Despite his protestations, I always considered Evans to be part of the artistic fraternity in Kisumu, even if perhaps on its margins. Despite his slightly greater age and his conservative attitudes, Evans also had a creative and youthful approach to life and manoeuvred shrewdly and creatively in Kisumu’s urban social space.

With regard to the relationship between social space and physical space, another remark is appropriate here. Another way in which hustling and social instability were noticeable from an emic perspective, was through the practice of walking in the city. The young members of Amazon Theatrics, a drama group in the Manyatta slums, who were constantly looking for work with development actors, jokingly told me that they were once mockingly renamed by their fellows as the “Amazon Walking Group”. Their habit of what they would call “touring” the city, knocking on potential sponsors and employers’ doors, became legendary and Bilali, one of the actors, stressed the importance of the right choice of footwear for the work they are doing. Not without irony, he pointed to his so-called Maasai sandals, which are made from old car tyres and are reputed to be the most durable shoes for walking, even for long distances. As most artists propose services that are part of an emerging urban culture and sometimes not yet known by the potential clients (such as ideas for advertisements, participatory theatre plays, radio plays, new formats for night events), communicating their services to potential clients correctly is decisive. This involves, for the most part, meeting people personally, in order to persuade them. In Chapter three, I will briefly relate my own

experience of extended tours on foot, with the activist Boniface Ogutu. The youths from Amazon Theatrics laughingly imitated how they would dust off their clothes after their long inner-city walks, before knocking on the door of yet another organization. It was my subjective impression that travelling on foot in Kisumu is seen as a sign of low social standing. As I will discuss below, using cars as an example, means of mobility are perceived quite hierarchically in their interpretation of social value. I could observe that even those interlocutors who claimed to be having serious “money issues” would prefer to at least arrive at the centre by bicycle taxi, rather than to come on foot.

Due to my extensive walking “tours” of the city, I was not exempt from the social stigma of being a “busybody” myself. The length of time that my research required me to be in Kisumu was perplexing to many people because the scope and intent of my PhD project remained elusive to them, some people would ask me in surprise whether I was “still doing that research,” implying that I was taking my time. People also teased me, asking why I was walking “helou helou” (Dholuo ‘up and down’), and even a good friend received me by joking in Swahili “Fred, umelambwa na mbwa?” (“Fred, have you been bitten by a dog?”), implying that I might have contracted rabies, because of the way I was straying through the city every day, seemingly without direction. In Kisumu, those who can afford to travel by car, travel by car. Even though bicycles would be a suitable means of transport for many, considering Kisumu’s manageable size, they are so strongly associated with the *boda boda* bicycle taxis that cycling carries the stigma of low social status. It was an Indian lady who mirrored my own privileged subjective experience while walking in the city- People, primarily *boda boda* drivers but also other citizens, were bewildered that a *mzungu* or an Indian, who could obviously afford a car or individual transport, would prefer to walk. The heightened importance of having a physical material space to go to and to call one’s own becomes clear from this empirical evidence. For Evans, having a stable position in society was linked to having a stable physical address, a place where people looking for cooperation partners in Kisumu could find him. This also explains the great importance of the BAFUPE office, which was starkly disproportional to the amount of office work performed in it. The office was still tremendously important and precisely what differentiated Evans from the artists who found themselves hustling, going up and down looking for work, and who like a chameleon, would have to adjust to the agenda of anyone willing to exploit or back their entrepreneurial and artistic advances financially.

I found Evans' convictions about the representation of social stability and geographical and bodily firmness and robustness, encapsulated the UK gym equipment supplier Bodysculpture's slogan and their pictorial motto printed on the benches in his gym. In the image, the two sides of the motto "In Shape" and "In Control" are connected by the silhouette of a muscled male body forming an X with arms and legs, articulating the idea of shapeliness and control through the body. The importance of endurance was implied in the image by the company's founding date "SINCE 1965", itself showing some signs of tear and wear. It is noteworthy that Evans related bodily fitness to social validity, and the idea of being *in shape* to that of being *in control*. The opposite of this desirable state was often described with the phrase, being "at the mercy of people," commonly used by my informants to describe a situation of financial despair in which one finds oneself at the lowest point in the social ranks, and dependent on the charity of others for physical survival. From Evans' perspective, such a situation corresponds to a loss of control resulting in total dependency, in which one truly is "in no shape at all". For Evans, standing firm and prevailing over tough times and difficulties was central to his identity and approach to life. As will soon be apparent, Evans was nevertheless also eventually caught between the shifting sides. Despite all his proclaimed robustness, he was of course, himself used to hustling and to making ends meet, and he employed some shapeshifting and even trick tactics himself, all while tactically adjusting to different actors' diverging agendas.

Sometimes Evans openly and jokingly admitted that he was just another "busybody" himself, extending the same condemnation to myself and my research activity. During my second year in Kisumu, especially during the phases of writing, I would regularly go to the centre just to hang out, get some fresh air in the evenings and play frisbee with some of the artists. Evans would make friendly fun of me and accuse me of being "just another idler" and a busybody. Craig Jeffrey (2008: 957) noted that longitudinal research is also a form of waithood, and I also felt like a shapeshifting busybody more often than not, trying to reach out to many different artists at the same time, pushing to establish links between my research project and their various initiatives. This was especially true during my first months in the field, when my personality as a field researcher and the methods I was employing were only starting to develop (cf. Becker 1998). Of course, I noticed that I tended to gravitate naturally towards some initiatives because I found them more aesthetically appealing than others. However, as a researcher, I also had to explore initiatives which seemed representative of the Kisumu

artistic scene, even if they were less to my personal liking. The tension between my personal interest and my perceived duties as a researcher, was often noticeable to me, as having a ‘genuine’ interest quite obviously impacts on the quality of interaction. I can only speculate as to whether my own interest was noticeable to those I interacted with, although I tend to think that it was. If so, some artists may have also seen aspects of a “busybody” in me, when I was deliberately trying to adapt to and to sympathize with a given activity.

In the following case study, I will show how Evans draws on the different components of the type of makeshift social action that I have described so far and which I will continue to trace in the life and work(s) of several Kisumu artists throughout this thesis. Evans moves between being a *busybody*, somebody who is likely to be *gongwad* (Sheng ‘deceived; swindled to’), and a *mjanja*, (Swahili ‘street-smart hustler’) who shrewdly circumnavigates obstacles and juggles multiple sources of income, all while skilfully drawing on his social network. The event described below, a car accident, is seemingly unrelated to Evans activities as a gym trainer and his activities as a political activist which will be described later. Yet it allows us to zoom in on Evans’ struggle for social mobility, and illustrates how all his other activities also feed into his creative attempts to not only achieve an income, but also a stable position in a social space that is characterized by uncertainty and a great deal of unpredictability.

## 2.2 Social Mobility, an Accident and Bodies in Control

Evans had long aspired to be a car owner, and to understand this desire in context, it is important to note that in Kisumu car ownership is of great significance as a marker of social ascent. Because it arrived in African societies simultaneously with the colonial capitalist system, the motor car has become an “instrument that intrinsically represented enormous wealth” in many African societies (De Bruijn and van Dijk 2012). For example, the cultural significance of cars and car ownership is very obvious in Swahili language films, in which cars are shown approaching, turning, parking, and car doors open in seemingly endless sequences. Aileen Moyer (2003) even goes as far as to propose that class-distinctions in Tanzania can be understood from an emic point of view based on people’s relationships towards cars. Looking back to Dar Es Salaam in the early 2000s, when the effects of neoliberal policies were in full-swing and rapidly transforming urban space and culture, Moyer identified four categories of class that could be observed with regard to cars:

There was a class of people who owned cars, a class of people who were the drivers for those cars, a class of people who washed cars, and a class of people who approached cars looking for charity (p. 34).

Moyer's observation resonates strongly with the empirical evidence I gathered from observation and from interviews in Kisumu. A clear importance was attributed to the ownership of cars at the Tumsifu Center. Those clients going to the gym and the evening courses who owned cars, would park them conspicuously in front of and behind the building, outside the main entrance. Although Evans owned a motorbike, he did not own a car at that time and one of his stated desires was to “upgrade” as he would put it somewhat technically, to car ownership. As a key personality at the centre, Evans would get into clients and friends’ cars to listen to music and to have a drink, which was a regular routine, especially on Sundays. The cars made it possible to spend the day listening to music under the shade of a tree, not sitting on the cement circle outside the building, where anyone could join in, but in the comfort of the car’s more exclusive space. Having one’s car washed is a popular form of conspicuous consumption and in turn, a widespread form of menial labour in Kisumu. Many youths from the ghetto who find it difficult to enter the formal labour market, use it as a way of working their way up in the transport sector. For example, washing matatu minibus taxis presents opportunities for driving them, even if it is just to park them or to drive them closer to a water point. Such opportunities may open doors to connecting with driving squads and later, to becoming a driver oneself. There was also a carwash in the corner of the Tumsifu Center premises, equipped with one water cannister and a high-pressure pump. With its prices of 200 KES (ca. 2 USD) the car wash was clearly targeting the more well-to-do people who also frequented Evans’ gym. Despite the subtle class differences between Evans and the young men working at the car wash, the interaction was regular and heartfelt. As the gym trainer and reasonably popular person, Evans was invited into the cars of those who were passing time “raving”, drinking alcohol and sitting back while listening to music. Such an appreciative gesture would have never been shown to the “boys” who worked at the carwash, so although everyone was friendly, there were implicit notions of rank.

Such implicit notions of rank existed alongside gerontocratic categories of age and maturity. Hence the differentiation between “men” and mere “boys”, or between “senior” and “junior” men respectively. Evans used this differentiation a lot to refer to his own social positioning, which he brought up continuously. One day, we were strolling down from the centre to the central business district. We were on our way to



meet members of the TIVOLI Youth Group, one of the youth groups that had formed with a small loan from the Catholic church, and with whom Evans was planning to talk about a new economic project that the youth group was pursuing, namely the rental of plastic chairs in venues around town. As we strolled down Bonyo Road to the central business district on a sunny but still enjoyably fresh morning, Evans kept raising his hand to shake people's hands in passing, or lifting it up to his head to greet people he knew, sellers in shops, car drivers and passers-by, with a military like salute. As if to confirm the impression forming in my mind, he said "Fred, you know I'm a very *senior* person here!", emphasizing the adjective that links the two ideas of older age and higher rank.

The structuring principle of seniority was also apparent throughout my interviews with people from the transport industry, touts and drivers at the bus park, who also made clear how painstakingly real this concept was for them. According to Brian, a young conductor who lives around Carwash, and works at the eponymously named important bus station, plying the Carwash - Kibos route, the concept of seniority functions as an organizing principle in conflicts over the distribution of scarce work and even scarcer resources: "You will find we have 30 youths on the line who want to work with the Matatu. Sometimes the Matatus have problems. Now they fight, who works today, who works last, who works tomorrow. The problem is mostly, how to line up the work. Because all of them actually, they need that daily bread." When I asked Brian exactly how work shifts in and around matatu's were allotted, he drew on the concept: "You can make a list of line, (...) those who have been there for long, those who have been there two years, five years, now you find some being called seniors and juniors. Seniors are giving juniors hard time, juniors are having problems, they cannot make that daily bread." (Personal communication, 17.1.2017). This example shows that the following example of Evans' ambitions to drive a car and become more firmly established as "someone senior" was not an individual or isolated case, but can be taken as exemplary for many men's struggles to cement and display their social aspirations. The specific tribulations and strategies that Evans used, take us back to the previous discussion of how one's bodily potential plays into other agentic dimensions of everyday creativity.

In October 2016, Evans bought a used Peugeot Sedan that had a Toyota engine mounted in it. This was shortly before my second field trip to Kisumu, and it was with amazement that I saw a post on Facebook in which Evans proudly presented himself as part of the social class of car owners. Captioned "Moving to another level in life may

God be the almighty”, the photo shows him leaning against the car, legs apart, arms crossed, the white Peugeot half into the image, parked in front of his office at the Tumsifu Center, in front of his office.

The caption makes what the image already suggests abundantly clear: Evans has moved up to another social level, a fact that he presents with a touch of prosperity theology. Evans knew that most people would be surprised to see him as a car owner, as he was in a way, caught in the intermediate level between being a hustler and being a middle class. Many of Evan’s customers at the gym were considered part of this elusive category of better-off people, the key membership marker of which is perhaps car ownership. Evans clearly longed to be recognized as part of this privileged group but he also intended to send a positive signal to his friends at the centre, who were struggling with the basic necessities of life:

I wanted it to be a surprise and I wanted people to be proud of me... like... this guy can do something! You can do something from nothing. You know, when someone does something from nothing, my friend, you acknowledge that.

For Evans, car ownership clearly enhanced his standing in the community and allowed him to be seen as a role model. Moving from being someone who had to build everything from scratch to being a car owner, Evans implied, was a signal of hope to his friends and acquaintances, proof that even for those who came from a humble background, social mobility did not necessarily have to remain elusive. The social recognition Evans experienced was immediate; on the comment section of the post itself, user Shanice Otieno inquires, “Naona kama uko vizuri, parking mbele ya mlango ama ofisi ?” (Swahili ‘I see you are doing fine, is this the parking at the main entrance or at the office?’) - to which Evans responds, “ofisi”, followed by the affirmative exclamation “hee..he..” The comment illustrates a point that I did not realise when I started frequenting the Tumsifu Center and observing the seemingly chaotic and “free-floating” social life around the place. In a context of mass unemployment like Kisumu, markers of social differentiation such as who owns which type of a car, and more subtle differences, like who parks where, are at least as much important as, for example, being given a specific desk in a European open-plan office (e.g. near senior employees), or who gets to park nearest the entrance in a business’s car park.

Unfortunately, Evans’ social ascent was called into question rather quickly, when a friend, to whom he had lent the car for a mere 15 minute drive for a delivery of fresh eggs, hit a young man on a motorbike, thereby injuring the young man, and damaging

the car's bodywork and engine. Only a few days into his ownership, the accident ended Evan's euphoria and confronted him with a whole string of pressing "challenges" that called for immediate action. Most pressing was the young man's medical treatment; he had been thrown from his motorbike, though fortunately at a relatively low speed, so that he only suffered bruises and a hematoma on his leg. Evan's friend, who had caused the accident, ran away and denied all responsibility for it. As Evans had only bought the car recently, the insurance had not yet been transferred into his name, which made him financially highly vulnerable in respect of the car, and even more so regarding the young man's hospital bills. This was exacerbated by the fact that he had not yet paid for the car completely, which meant that the vehicle was not yet registered under his name. His newly articulated image of a man of a certain position was disintegrating quickly. After the accident, the car was towed away to the police station, causing yet more expense. As towed cars are parked outside the police station, with no supervision at night, they are often cannibalized for spare parts, again adding to the pressure on Evans to act quickly, and to carefully weigh up how to employ his limited resources to resolve the problem quickly.

Evans' stress levels rose quickly and for a number of days, in fact, weeks, every time I met him, he seemed distracted, he did not know where to start. This was mainly due to the unpredictable nature of the situation. Because of the lack of reliable institutions, in this case a dependable police force, who would duly record the case, other makeshift urban entrepreneurs were coming into the picture. According to Merriam Webster, a *con man* is "a person who tricks other people in order to get their money", and interestingly one synonym for the word is "con artist", which again emphasises both the connection postulated in this thesis between artistic inventiveness, and the pervasive, makeshift social creativity associated with hustling, navigating and making-do.

What Evans, who was himself not present at the scene of the accident, could not know, was that a broker, a so-called "ambulance chaser", had quickly arrived at the scene in order to scrutinize the parties involved in the accident, "feel them out" and make a short psychological evaluation of the actors, to see which parties could be exploited and manipulated. The father of the young man who had been hit by the car became the broker's target. He convinced him to take proceedings against the owner of the car to make money out of the accident. The father, who Evans later described as an uneducated person, consequently signed a document authorizing a law firm to represent

him and his son as plaintiffs. However, at this point, Evans knew nothing about these behind the scenes secret proceedings.

Evan's worries revolved mostly around his car; he was afraid it could be vandalized at night, hence increasing the repair costs. As he had sold his motorbike in order to finance the car, he was now back to being a pedestrian, a fact that he very much deplored, and even feared, because it meant walking back from central Milimani to the Nyalenda slums at around 10 pm in the evening, when the streets were deserted, especially in the less densely populated Milimani. To my surprise, muscular Evans described Milimani, the upscale neighbourhood where I was living for security reasons, as "more dangerous" than Nyalenda. At the time, the city including Milimani, experienced frequent power cuts that plunged the entire neighbourhood into darkness. As Milimani was empty of people at night and the houses were less accessible, i.e. equipped with fences, a person would be in the hands of fate if he met robbers in one of the streets. And indeed, reports of robberies abounded. That a well-connected bodybuilder like Evans was vulnerable, illustrates just how high the risk was for more vulnerable people, if they were forced to walk at night.

In terms of the case, Evans was in a position of dependency, not control; unable to formulate demands vis-à-vis the father: "I am at his mercy," is how he described his own situation, further explaining, "anything that he says, I just have to agree without looking at the bigger picture." At this point, the police had recorded the accident in their log but no legal action had been taken, and Evans was still expecting that "the case" would be settled out of court, "After achieving the objectivity maybe after the case has been withdrawn is when maybe I can start having my opinions also, but as for now, his opinion stands". Evans suffered because of his dependency on the victim's father and he had already paid almost 10,000 KES (ca. 100 USD) in instalments, towards the son's hospital bills, so that the father would settle the case and Evans could recover his car from the police station.

The whole incident had a big impact on his professional activities, slowly eating him up. Several times Evans said in my presence, "I have a lot on my mind", "I am not myself right now", and then:

You know this thing is really stressing me up [sic], I am there, I am here, I can't even concentrate like this workshop... it was a very good workshop but I could not concentrate cuz at times the phone rings and it is a call that you can't avoid.

As was typical for Evans himself, but also for Kisumu artists in general, he always attempted to frame the challenges he experienced as something positive. His attitude towards life was characterized by a remarkable degree of resilience, he simply added:

It is a challenge and for me, I like it. I like challenges because for me a challenge makes you stronger and it makes you think outside the box. It makes you look at life in a broader perspective.

To “think outside the box” is to explore ideas that are creative and unusual and not limited or controlled by rules or tradition. It is a phrase that I have often heard among young people in Kisumu. In a time in which creativity has become the buzz word in the globalized world of work and when the slogan of one of the highest valued enterprises in the world encourages people to “Think differently”, this phrase says as much about the value of innovation as the force of circumstance. As we will see shortly, Evans’ ability to look at a problem from different perspectives enabled him to gain momentum within the conflict.

Over time, Evans saw the chances that goodwill alone would lead to an amicable solution dwindle and began looking for other ways to solve the problem. As the current strategy of softening the old man up with donations was not working, Evans asked the police officers who trained at the gym for advice. One proposed solution was to tow the car back to the Tumsifu Center with one of the break-down trucks that operated from near the police station. As the case had not been officially settled, this solution was tantamount to stealing the car from the police and hoping that the police officers he knew would protect him. One problem with this solution was that the break-down trucks are associated with specific police officers, who use them as a convenient way of extorting money from people involved in accidents. And as Evans had not yet paid the initial break-down fee, the chances were high that his plea to the operators would be refused, or worse, immediately reported to police officers without his knowledge.

Therefore, Evans decided to employ a radically different strategy and communication towards the elderly man. At this point, it had become clear to him that the father had exaggerated his son’s injuries and was trying to take advantage of the situation. Where Evans saw some bruises and a hematoma, the father saw irremediable damage, claiming that his son would never be able to play soccer again. Every time when Evans left the hospital, after inquiring about the son’s condition, he would be raging and shout, “Never play soccer again, bullshit! Where is my car?!” But he acted with extreme politeness in front of the father, sympathizing with his every whim. At the same time,

he tried to get a clear view of the situation, one that was obviously not only based on facts, but even more on people's description of it. He contacted Dawe Dawe for this, the poet who is at the heart of Chapter four, and who at the time was working as a nurse at the same hospital. Dawe Dawe visited the son in disguise, pretending to be in charge and examining the medical problem, which he told Evans, was nothing out of the ordinary.

After weeks of up and down and contributing to the victim's hospital bills, Evans felt that the father had overstepped his mark. This was when he used his bodily capital and its potential violence to intimidate the father. Evans found out where the man was working, and that he was a coal seller, also in Nyalenda. So, he waited for the man one evening, as he was closing his small stall made of iron-sheets, and suddenly appearing out of the darkness, barred the old man's way. Evans greeted him with a facial expression of put-on politeness, "habari ya mzee?" ("how is the old man?"). According to Evans depiction of the events, the old man immediately started to tremble in both his body and voice, as Evans reminded him strongly that the whole issue had to come to an end.

Then with his trembling hands, the father handed Evans a piece of paper with a phone number, "Call this person, he somehow knows what is going on". "At this point," Evans related to me, reading the father's body language, "I realized this man is not in control". Following up with the number on the paper, Evans understood that all the time the old man had been following the instructions of a con man, or ambulance chaser, a busybody, whom he was now about to meet personally. When Evans related the encounter to me, sitting on a bench at the Tumsifu Center, he asked me to stand up so he could re-enact the encounter with the con artist in front of me. I could easily imagine how the trickster must have felt when Evans gave me an extra firm handshake, the pain of which immediately ran through my entire arm, while staring into my eyes with unflinching determination.

"I was looking him in the eye, you get?" Evans explained how he approached the situation with his imposing physicality, "You have to look people in the eye to let them know that you are not afraid." Nevertheless, the trickster attempted to extort money from Evans, "He was telling me something about excess something to deal with insurance that I am to pay, I don't want to know! I want my car back!" Evans' explanations were directed at impressing the person with his bodily capital, while at the same time feeling the person out. "You have to let them know that you are in control,"

Evans said, by which he again referring to the idea of physical stability, not trembling, or shapeshifting, but being solid as a rock because the image you portray with your body, your outer appearance, is supposed to be indicative of your inner state. Evans did not, however, explicitly threaten the trickster, although he nurtured fantasies of doing so. “After the exercise, I will deal with that guy! I will really deal with him and he will curse that day!” he exclaimed during our interview.

Strength can not only be portrayed by bodily size and attributes that are desirable for weight-lifters, such as pronounced shoulders, arms and chest but also by the eyes. Flickering eyes or a moving gaze can be interpreted in practically any bargaining situation, as a sign of nervousness and weakness. A handshake in which one opens one’s eyes slightly wider than usual and looks at the person very directly, immediately conjures a certain intensity. Such behaviour is part of street and gang culture, and through its glorification in HipHop music, has become a shared repertoire of social practice throughout what the French rapper Oxmo Puccino calls, “Les ghettos du monde”.

An example of this is the classic rap song *shook ones* by the New York duo Mobb Deep, a group that regularly appeared in the playlists that Evans and his friends listened to on Sundays. In the song, the rapper, Prodigy, refers to such bodily performances as part of a street culture in which you have to “keep your eyes open.” The rapper evokes an armed duel situation which involves “real niggas who ain't got no feelings,” again evoking the idea of an unwavering strength and masculinity. “We keep them shook crews runnin’, like they supposed to,” the rapper boasts of his ability to chase the members of other street gangs or groups away. Even if the rap song alludes to the use of arms in American inner cities, the duel situation depicted is comparable to Evans’ display of potential violence toward the ambulance chaser. The rapper also references subtle indications of fear that may lead to defeat: “I can see it inside your face / you're in the wrong place.” Even though Evans did not make use of other strongmen or weapons, he used his own body as a means of intimidation. The potential to exert physical violence is an important aspect of social life in Kisumu underlying many quotidian practices and negotiations, but also political articulations, such as the demonstration which I will describe in the last section of this chapter.

Intimidation alone did not get Evans his car back but he now knew that he had to find a solution by himself. Therefore, he fell back on his social network around the gym, where many police officers trained. Among them was a woman, a very senior officer,

who was known for her appetite for younger men and who had flirted openly with Evans. Despite his strong emphasis on values such as loyalty and reliability, Evans told me that he had playfully returned these signs of affection, and for a specific reason. A few weeks after he had got his vehicle back (I had been travelling in the meantime), he told me how the long process that I had followed closely over such a long time, had ultimately come to an end:

For me, I want that relation [with the female officer] to be a bit close because I am looking at the bigger picture, you remember that time my car was locked at the police station? So I was looking for somebody who was a bit influential that can help me and of course she did, because she was even asking me: 'I have been seeing this car, is this your car? What is that car doing there? Take this man to court so that he can be charged so that you can get your car.

Once again, a sound psychological evaluation of another actor in the city as well as delicately manoeuvring the other actor's expectations, brought the desired result. At the police station where there are apparently no limits to creativity, one of the officers then created a suitable solution, surprising Evans with his sudden question, "Are you ready to go to jail now?" Evans was charged with the smallest possible offense for which he could be fined, namely giving his vehicle to somebody without a driver's license. Evans symbolically went behind bars and paid a KES 2,000 (ca. USD 20) fine to be released immediately, so that the case could be closed. After this, as in many legislations around the world, he could not be charged with the same crime again. This gave Evans the comfort of legal safety without even having to use a lawyer. "Connections, my friend," Evans resumed the case triumphantly, "that is why I am saying in this world if you have built connections you have already built a foundation, then you are good to go, believe you me!"

In this second subchapter, I have used a very quotidian example, a small car accident, as a case study to show how specific situations confront actors with uncertainty while also frustrating and complicating their quest for social mobility. Despite the appearance of a free-floating meeting place where members of different social strata could come together, there were pronounced social differentiation processes existed at the Tumsifu Center. Although Evans distanced himself from the arts and from so-called busybodies, he drew on a similar repertoire in his wrangle with the victim's father and the ambulance chaser. The bodybuilder lifestyle provided Evans with a valuable repertoire, yet even a muscular body is only able to provide a limited sense of control, a fact that Evans was obliged to experience when facing the unpredictable situation of his own



dependency on the victim's father. Evans himself often linked the idea of creativity or the capacity to think differently, with a high degree of social maturity, indicated by having a "broader outlook" on things.

In the remainder of this chapter, I will focus on Evans' work as a political activist in order to delineate the "field of forces" (Norval 2015) in which political articulations may take place in Kisumu. My account of Evans' political activities emphasizes the ambiguity of political arenas in Kisumu and Evans, as an activist 'despite himself,' draws on different tactical behaviours in order to adjust to and to accommodate the various actors' expectations. This case study occurred early in my research, during my first month of field work in September 2015. The demonstration I will describe was co-organized by Evans and other people from the BAFOPE trust. In my account of the event, I emphasize the limitations confronting actors like Evans when they attempt to express discontent with the greater political system. In this case, the object of indignation was the increasing lack of security in the city, and connected with it, the general atmosphere of uncertainty, which the institutional framework was perceived to further.

### 2.3 Political Articulation and the Field of Forces in Kisumu

In September 2015, when I had just started my fieldwork in Kisumu and was frequenting the Tumsifu Center almost daily, insecurity had become the major subject of conversation. There were numerous reports of incidences of violence and most of the young women and men I met had either been the victims of such incidents themselves, especially violent robberies, or had people close to them who had become victims. Such incidents were peripheral to my personal experience, as I was staying in a highly secured upmarket complex near the central police station, only a stone's throw from the Tumsifu Center. Apart from hearing occasional gun shots at night, my experience of the violence was indirect and imparted to me by my interlocutors. There was a conspicuous difference between safety during the day and at night. While petty theft was common during the day, several robberies took place each night. Sadly, these robberies at people's homes often became violent and sometimes resulted in ordeals in which family members were injured, raped or killed in front of one another. The surge in violent robberies was such that an increasing number of indignant posts addressed the topic on social media. Travelling from Uganda and crossing the Kenyan border at night in January 2017 provided an interesting regional comparison in terms of safety. While on

the Ugandan side, even small town centres on the road from Kampala to Kisumu were full of people at night, the town centres on the Kenyan side were deserted, apart from a few dimly-lit shops with barred windows.

I tended to treat testimonies of insecurity as part of social discourse and as something that was somehow abstract, or removed from my own reality, which it was to some degree, as I was privileged to retreat behind the barbed wire of the place where I was staying at night. This distanced perception changed when one of the upcoming film makers in town showed me the wound he had suffered in an attack the night before. He and a friend had been assaulted by two robbers armed with a machete while crossing one of Kisumu's public parks in the late evening. He pulled up the short sleeves of his T-shirt to expose the long scar running over his upper arm, showing the fresh sutures of some twenty stitches. His facial expression remained with me. When he exposed the wound, he did not show the kind of victimhood I would have expected, a display of distress that would encourage compassion. Instead, he lifted his sleeve up quickly, brushing off what to me looked like a possibly traumatic injury, with an uneasy chuckle of embarrassment. As I will describe at a later point in this thesis, the young film maker's reaction mirrored to some extent the relative collective quietness and silence about the incidents of violence that people in Kisumu have been subjected to as part of highly ethicized, divisive politics. It was one of the important incidents which redirected my research into the articulation of art and structural-violence from early on, a direction which was reinforced following my involvement with Evans' activities as a political activist.

There was a group of concerned citizens who started to meet at the Tumsifu Center, to do something against the rising lack of security. One of them, Naphtaly Collins Onyango, had been part of the Baghdad Boys and a founding member of BAFOPE, but the others had not. Most were men in their 30s and 40s; most so I was told, had a history of involvement with local politics. Two ladies, a real estate manager in her mid-thirties, and a journalist and blogger in her twenties, were the exceptions to this rule. Some of the attendees were said to be associated with local politicians who were members of the Orange Democratic Movement, the party of the sitting county government. As usual, Evans would be around when the meetings took place at the centre and he would see that they could take place without any disturbances. He did not, however, take part in the meetings himself and seemed to somehow prefer to remain distanced from the proceedings.

The collective started an online presence on Facebook called *Kisumu County Security Watch*,<sup>6</sup> where people could share information about robberies, ongoing incidents, and where they would find the phone number of the Rapid Response Unit, a section of the police department established to handle such emergency situations. The page was started in August 2015 and quickly gathered over a thousand followers and became a digital blackboard for ongoing cases, which continues to be consulted to the present day. Sadly, at the time of writing, very similar cases of robbery and murder still abound on the blackboard, together with warnings about current rackets and con schemes. In their bid to articulate the citizens' indignations even more strongly, the group decided to organize a public demonstration. The first demonstration took place on August 21<sup>st</sup>, shortly before I arrived in Kisumu. Judging from the voices of the artists at the centre, a fair number of artists had joined the procession through the city centre. Although the county government had made a statement recognizing the issues raised by the demonstrators, concrete measures had still not been taken a month later. Therefore, the group of citizens restated their position in their petition addressed to both the OCS of Kisumu Central Police Station and the Governor of Kisumu, as follows:

Following a Public Demonstration and subsequent Petition to your office held on the 21<sup>st</sup> of August 2015 by Residents of Kisumu City and County over rising Insecurity. We the Residents of Kisumu City drawn from all residential areas [enumeration of different parts of the city] and others not mentioned do hereby give notice of a demonstration to be held on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of September 2015 due to unresolved issues as raised in our last petition.

In the citizens' perception, the rise in insecurity was an indication of an equivalent rise in police corruption, as thieves were suspected of colluding with police officers. Such rumours were aroused by incidents in which thieves were found with police weapons, allegedly rented from police, or when police-issued cartridges with serial numbers were found at the scenes of crimes following violent robberies, in which guns had been used for intimidation. Hence the petition demanded the "transfer of long serving police and administration officers who had stayed for more than three years in Kisumu station and had since become lethargic and relaxed in their duty or have become known to the criminals and their networks." Though some senior security officers had been moved in response to the first public demonstration, most of the observers I spoke to thought the changes were superficial.

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<sup>6</sup> The forum is still alive and accessible under <<https://www.facebook.com/Kisumu-County-Security-Watch-1624175391179204/>>, accessed 20 October 2019.

Moreover, the group of citizens demanded the implementation of the complete structural overhaul of the police force which had been stipulated in the country's new constitution, promulgated in 2010. According to this body of law, a newly decentralized metropolitan police department was to be tasked with coordinating security within the city and its environs. Most citizens were hopeful about the effects that such reforms could bring about. At the same time, they mocked the devolution procedure as being a mere chimera and as a process of "localizing corruption," as a middle-aged university lecturer explained to me. The protest group's needs were mainly practical in nature. Another demand was for an improvement in the response time for emergency calls, which in the citizens' experience, was too long. An example quoted in the petition concerned an MPESA-trader who died from gunshot wounds during a robbery inside his tiny stall just 200 meters away from Kondele police station. The perpetrators managed to escape on foot into the estates, which was seen as another sign of the police officers' incompetence, if not their direct involvement with the robbers.

Another demand concerned street lighting. Residents noted that some streets were dark despite having been recently equipped with new streetlights, which did not seem to work, and then became crime hotspots. Therefore, the petitioners proposed a directive that every house within the town should have security lights to light up the neighbourhoods. The same applied to incomplete buildings, so called "maghorofa machafu" (Swahili, 'dirty buildings'), unsurveilled or abandoned construction sites, where robbers lived and stored their loot. In 2015, Kisumu had a reasonable number of streetlights, even though their effectiveness varied greatly in the different parts of the city. In the city centre, the lights worked fairly reliably, but even the high-end Milimani neighbourhood where I lived during my first field stay, would regularly fall into darkness because of the rather frequent power cuts and breakdowns. Here, generators would kick in (or not, if they were not refuelled and maintained periodically), and light up the homes of those who could afford them, creating a luminous map of the haves and have-nots at night. In the slums, only the main streets were equipped with streetlighting and power cuts happened even more often.

One result of the lack of visibility and the resulting lack of safety, was that the city was relatively deserted at night. For example, the city centre was only populated by security personnel, sitting in front of the buildings they were guarding, children sleeping rough, so-called *chokora* or *ninjas*, and some motorbike taxis waiting for customers in groups at certain illuminated points. As many crimes were perpetrated using motorbikes as get

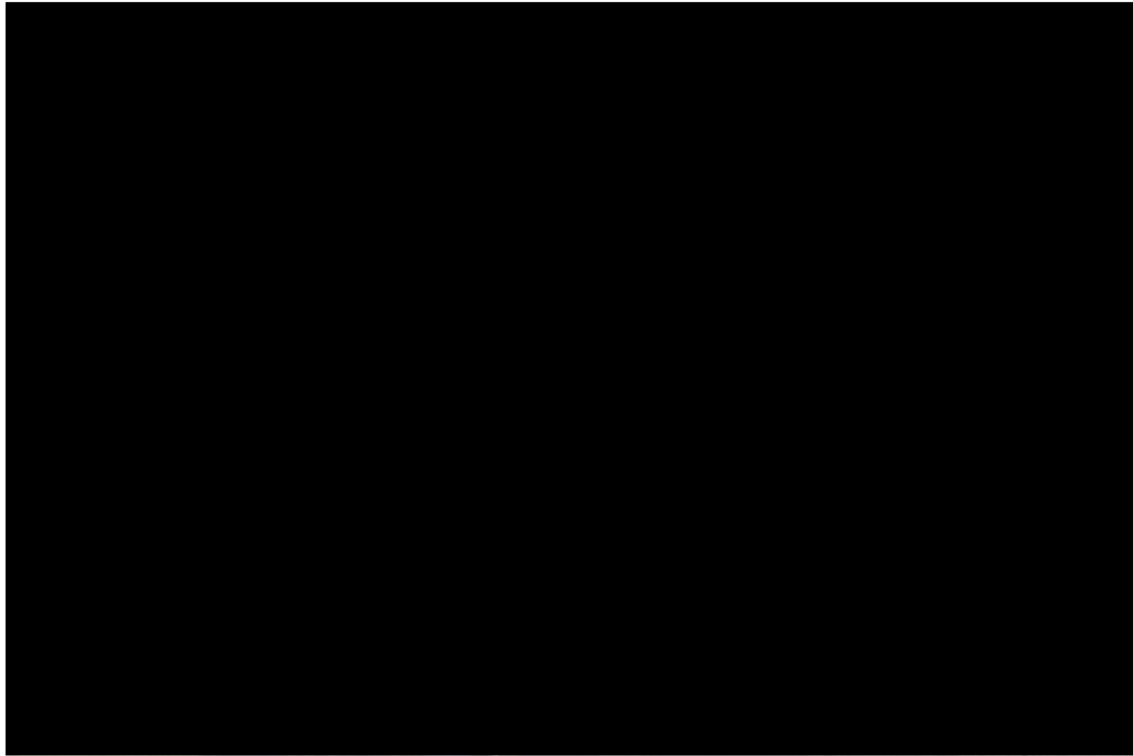
away vehicles, there was little trust toward motorbike taxis, and indeed young men generally, especially at night. This fact was also apparent from the usual “reached safe” messages and from the practice of taking photos of moto taxi license plates when seeing off friends after dusk.

Although the demonstration grew out of different citizens’ shared concerns, different actors had different stakes in it. The economic future of the BAFOPE trust, at this point, was far from secure. As the main donor, the Swedish Diakonia had identified issues with corruption within the Catholic Church, that had until then acted as a middle-man between BAFOPE and the Diakonia. Hence, the Diakonia decided to work directly with BAFOPE in an attempt to cut out the middle-man, and in order to achieve greater transparency and effectiveness of the allocated funds, equipping their office with a desktop computer and a printer, enabling the members of the organization to write reports and deliver details of their activities’ financing. It is important to note that as in many such civil-society organizations, BAFOPE members do not receive a fixed salary. Instead they receive what are called ‘field allowances’ for certain events, like workshops on political education, but also for a demonstration. They usually have a solid budget aimed at realizing such events, including so-called IEC-material (Information, Education and Communication). I discovered that Evans and other members of the trust would divert a certain amount of these funds into their own pockets, a fact they legitimized by arguing, I thought quiet convincingly, that they were only making up for their non-existent salaries. At the same time, BAFOPE was going through a decisive period, during which the Diakonia as the main sponsor, was emphasizing scrutiny and transparency due to the change in management, putting pressure on the members of the BAFOPE trust to behave like a “model” community-based organization.

Evans was of aware of the entrepreneurial character of his work and therefore understood activism pragmatically as another activity in a free market. He went so far as to talk about having a “portfolio” while doing civic work like this. “When BAFOPE was established,” Evans explained to me, “we received funds to prevent postelection violence outbreaks. Now where is postelection violence?” Evans’ question was rhetorical, implicitly alluding to the Tumsifu Center’s history, as a provisional camp for internally displaced people had been set up there after the mass displacements during the post-election violence in 2007/2008. Evans went on to answer the question himself, “It [post-election violence] is nowhere to be seen! We have to adapt our portfolio – and

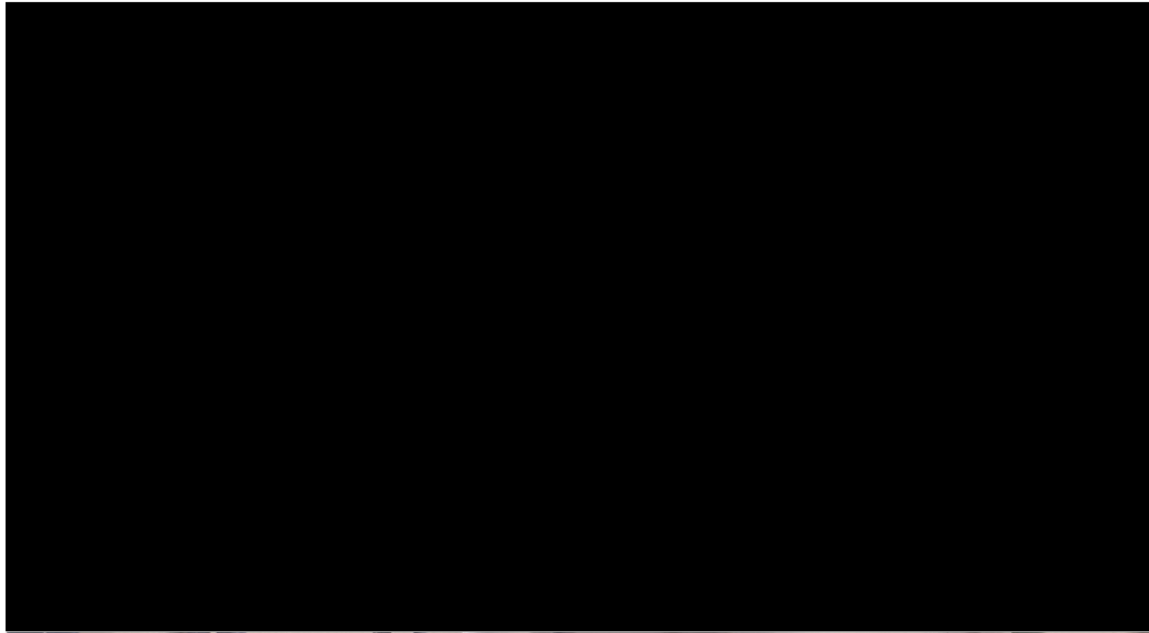
what is on the market now? Civic education, because this country is going through a political transition,” referring to the newly adopted constitution. Hence, the demonstration not only sent a reminder that “Kisumu Lives Matter”, as the main banner proclaimed in allusion to the #BlackLivesMatter movement, but handwritten signs also demanded the formation of the Metropolitan Police, as stipulated by the new constitution. Therefore, from Evans and BAFOPE’s point of view, the demonstration can be seen as an articulation of two different yet converging, interests: on the one hand, a solution to the surge in crime in Kisumu, by which all the people involved were at least indirectly affected, and on the other hand, a showpiece of their work as civic educators, to convince the Swedish donor of their ability to effectively mitigate political change in Kisumu. Keeping this starting point in mind, I now turn to a description of the demonstration on September 22<sup>nd</sup>2015.

On the day of the procession, only some 30 people gathered in front of Taifa Park, dressed in BAFOPE’s beige T-shirts with the organization’s slogan, “BAFOPE Development Trust: Youths for Peace: Enhancing Public Participation.” The atmosphere was excited, almost festive. People were making jokes, calling each other to order, greeting arriving participants with yells and laughter. Despite his central role within BAFOPE, Evans was nowhere to be seen. Evans only revealed to me later, that by then, it had already been clear to him that the demonstration had been compromised because he had found pallets of bottled water ready at the gathering point earlier in the morning. It was his job as an organiser, to make the arrangements and instead of being grateful for such unexpected help from unknown supporters, he grow more and more concerned. As is common for this type of procession, a group of moto-taxi drivers had been hired to join the procession, as *claqueurs*, or *honkers*, supporting the demonstration with the noise of the motorbike engines and if necessary, shielding the pedestrian demonstrators from vehicles on the road. This is usually done by police vehicles during a demonstration but as no police convoy had been provided, the demonstrators had to rely on the symbolic authority of one or two dozen motorbikes.



**Figure 4:** Motorbike drivers queuing and signing up as participants in the demonstration.  
Source: Author's photograph

A list was put on the back of one of the moto-taxi drivers on which the drivers' names were written down, so that at the end of the procession, the organizers could verify who had followed it right from the beginning. The procession set off into the city, equipped with handwritten "Metro Police" signboards, shrill whistles, and a banner demanding the end of "bloodshed" in Kisumu. Boniface Ogutu, who was planning his own procession addressing violence in the city, and myself were taking photos. Despite the lively appeal of the procession, a feeling of uneasiness pervaded the entire event. The initial excitement turned into rather tense agitation as we entered the city centre, where the procession was met by bystanders, most with frowning faces as the small group paraded, demonstrating for their basic democratic rights.



**Figure 5:** The ongoing demonstration. On the left side, holding a camera, is Boniface Ogutu.  
Source: Author's photograph

Not surprisingly, many artists decided not to come. In fact, like so many others, Evans had already heard about it on the streets. The young men from the BAFOPE youth group who ran stores all over the city centre, had already heard about it from other strongmen: The demonstration was going to be disrupted, as a warning to those who dared to speak up too loudly on political matters. Janabii, the poet whom I portray in Chapter four and whose close friend had suffered a severe machete attack, only joined the body of people briefly, greeting friends and acquaintances, before quickly disappearing again. Only afterwards would I understand why some of the artists from the centre would join in and just as quickly, disappear again. At the time, it surprised me, as they had commented extensively on the topic, on the lack of street lights, complaining that as artists who often walked the city at night after shows, they were particularly prone to violent attacks. When I asked David, an event-organizer from Nairobi, several days before the demonstration, whether he would join the demonstration, he asked me in disbelief, “Haven’t you heard it? An opposition politician has taken up the matter.” I replied, naively in retrospect, that I thought that was a timely initiative. I entirely missed the point, that in the Kenyan divide-and-rule politics where disorder and disruption have become political instruments, such a change of circumstances pointed to an escalation; I was about to find out for myself.

When I look at the short video clips I took of the procession, three years after the actual event, and what seems like a lifetime later, it is clear how fuzzy and ambiguous the



situation was. The remaining hard core, a group of vocal citizens, was demonstrating, yet their allegiances were not at all clear. Some of the protestors were wearing one of the symbols of protest, a large and heavy metal chain, symbolizing the bonds of Kisumu residents. In fact, this included one of the central figures who was allegedly one of the key moles on the pay-roll of the opposing political aspirant to the office of the governor. I had left the demonstration shortly before it was intercepted by a group of riot police and known goons equipped with *rungus*, heavy wooden bats, and entered a nearby mall to take some photos from the mall's first floor balcony. On the video clip I took from above, I could clearly see that some demonstrators were led away by people from outside the demonstration several minutes before the protestors clashed with the police, in order to protect them from the imminent clash. This, I later realized, was also a physical manifestation of clientelism: the distancing of the "moles" or "chameleons" from the original positions of the group now manifested in physical space, as they were lead out of the body of the manifestation, only a few minutes before the first canisters of tear gas exploded.

When Boniface Ogotu came running towards me, prompting me to take off my BAFUPE T- shirt, I also wanted to distance myself symbolically from the demonstration. He had spotted the group of Administration Police waiting further down the road. Before I could follow his advice, the ear-splitting sound of the tear gas canisters being fired made the whole procession turn around and flee. I ran as fast as I could with the crowd through the traffic jam which had formed behind the procession. The KCB roundabout is within walking, or in this case, running distance to the Tumsifu Center. I headed back to it, and saw other members of the procession slowly gathering. Slowly, the protesters converged under the large tree, where youths and artists were hanging around as usual, going about their business. Most of the artists there seemed almost indifferent towards our haste and the minor injuries that some had received. They remembered, "oh yeah, that demonstration", and then went back to their instruments or whatever they were doing. Such micro-sociological observations provided elements of explanation as to why there were no other or even bigger, protest movements in Kisumu despite its context of provocative economic injustice and its key corollary, crime. The fact that a small crowd of peaceful demonstrators was recklessly shot at with tear gas and some of them severely beaten with wooden bats, mainly by people in civilian clothing, so-called goons, was not really surprising to anyone except me. The reason for using goons and not exclusively officers from the Riot Police, was

to serve as a threat, “If you are hit by goon and you end up in a wheelchair,” one of the protestors explained, “you cannot blame the police for it.” According to the protestor, such cases would hardly stand a chance in a court of law. The deployment of known goons was an implied threat to the demonstrators, that the powers that be would coerce obedience by all means necessary.

The ordinariness of such forms of violence was apparent from the reactions of the artists at the centre, as well as those of the protesters themselves. Some ridiculed others, imitating how they had run, joking that at least now they had done enough sport for a while. Jokingly, they renamed the RDU (Rapid Deployment Unit) with which they had clashed, the Ranguma Defence Unit, as it had apparently become a personal protection unit for the sitting governor. The demonstration, they declared, had been a success. It was from under the same tree near the office where everybody had gathered, that an announcement was made in the presence of a journalist from the country’s biggest newspaper, the *Daily Nation*. It demanded the release of some of those arrested and the return of the motorbikes that had been seized, and repeated the initial demands for the formation of a metropolitan police. Evans was nowhere to be seen as the statement was made. His conspicuous absence intrigued me. I was curious to understand how social spaces could overlap so intensely at the Tumsifu Center, on physical site, while still remaining separate and not converging into a social formation. In fact, Evans was in hospital at the time of the announcement. He had received severe blows from the wooden bats as he joined the demonstrators briefly, shortly before they reached their target location in front of the governor’s office, to try to deliver a sachet of red colour to be used as a symbol of the bloodshed of Kisumu.

The random blow he suffered made it clear why so many had avoided the demonstration, even though it seemed to articulate a need that was on everybody’s mind. The artists and other actors who had been aware of the demonstration but decided not to participate, were simply aware of the threats associated with demonstrating, especially after the demonstration had been turned into a fully-fledged political confrontation. Evans apologetic explanation really brought out the co-optive character of his own relationship to the demonstration. He was partly responsible for the demonstration as part of BAFOPE, although he left the entire implementation to other actors in the field. Even though he attempted to distance himself from the demonstration as much as possible, he was of course still involved with the proceedings once its co-optive character became apparent. In his own defence, he stated “I was only bringing

some red colour,” referring to the colour that was supposed to be spread on the demonstrators’ beige T-Shirts, as a symbol of the blood that had been shed by Kisumu residents. Even though he was providing material that served as a central symbol to the demonstration, he still considered his own position to be distanced from the pool of protesters. His reaction to the brute force he had suffered at the hands of a police officer was therefore all the more furious. As soon as he got back to the Tumsifu Center, he borrowed a motorbike, put on a helmet, so as to remain unrecognized, and drove back to the scene of the incident, where he memorized the officer’s face. In the following days, Evans secretly revelled in revenge fantasies involving him and his tormentor. He shared with me how through his extensive network, he had collected all the necessary information about the officer, including his working hours, where he lived, and the route the man usually took to get home. Evans had identified spots on the route that did not have street lighting, and where speed bumps would force the officer to slow down, enabling him to attack. Evans was adamant in his quest for justice, and bluntly stated that he intended to kill the officer, at whose hands he could well have been paralyzed for life.

It is almost ironic that Evans, as someone who was actually responsible for the organization of a demonstration against such violent types of agency, would now switch back to the *modus operandi* of a strong-man or street gang member. I could not establish whether he really intended to kill the officer in question, although I assume he would have been capable to doing so, or whether it was a tactical move. Having spread the word of his intended revenge around the gym, where many police officers trained, it reached the police officer, who either on his colleagues’ advice or of his own volition, found his way to the Tumsifu Center. There he handed to Evans, shivering, as Evans emphasized, a sum of money as compensation for the pain caused. In this way Evans’ reputation was restored and he had got something out of the unfortunate event at the demonstration.

In a way, it was a way for him to *make sense* of the demonstration, despite his relational problem of solidarity towards it, whereby he had been a bit of a *chameleon* or *shapeshifter* himself, constantly weighing and re-evaluating the possible advantages and disadvantages of his position. But the fact that the police officer came to excuse himself and to pay compensation money, attested to the fact that Evans had a firm standing. Even amidst what he himself once referred to as “the murky waters of activism,” an

image that articulates a double instability, of shifting ground and concealed sight, Evans was ultimately able to attain some sense of control over the flow of events.

County Police Commander Joseph Chepkeittany later stated the demo was not as claimed by the activists, legal. According to the Police Commander, the demonstration was “politically motivated” and he warned residents against “being swayed into participating in activities that they did not understand,” hence denying the demonstrators their right to form their own opinions. Chepkeittany further infantilized the demonstrators in the national newspaper, based on technicalities, “We have dealt with crime tremendously since the reshuffling of security apparatus in the country. This demonstration was misplaced as it targeted the office of the governor which does not deal with insecurity.”

In their attempt to stage an authentic political articulation and make themselves visible in the city, the group of concerned citizens around the BAFOPE trust were caught in the crossfire of two major political forces, and of the few people who finally demonstrated, a good number were on the pay-rolls of either of those forces. Much later, I learned from another activist, that some of the demonstrators had apparently also visited the governor in his office, where the atmosphere had been “conducive”, the executive head of the county offering drinks from the office minibar, along with cash hand-outs.

The event’s only reverberation in local media was on a radio show, in which a Member of Parliament for Nyando province used my own presence for his slick argumentation. Falsely claiming the undue involvement of forces outside the government in Kisumu’s politics, the MP said that the dispersed demonstration had been foreign funded from the start. According to his argument, the “mzungu”, the white man with the camera, was clear evidence of foreign embassies intervening in local politics. Although I found this news rather unsettling and the government paranoia started to make me paranoid myself, others like Evans and Boniface Ogutu, laughed wholeheartedly at those phrases and tried to calm me down, saying that “this cannot go any further,” thus showing their own familiarity with such political intimidation measures.

## 2.4 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have provided a foundation and a context in which to position the specific types of agency perpetuated by various Kisumu artists. I have indicated the importance of physical locations in town with regard to “establishing” oneself more firmly in social space, a project which more often than not seems to be dependent on

successfully creating a “defined” or “recognizable” occupation. In a bid to secure such a position, Evans, as is characteristic of Kenyan youth, juggles several projects at once. His work with the BAFOPE trust provides him with a more formal affiliation to important actors like the Catholic church and (inter)national actors and hence, to wider economic opportunities. His work at the gym is his main source of income and by way of the bodybuilder subculture, it is also reflective of his own *modus operandi*. In line with my general assessment of the arts in Kisumu throughout this thesis, I have argued that working out at the gym is a way of introducing routine and rhythm into one’s life, which enables actors to establish a sense of control over their lives, and to create networks and socialize around constructive values. For instance, the gym’s social space is also a community centred around shared values, such as strength, endurance and perseverance. Such values compensate for the inadequate links between work and social respectability and in some sense, make up for the dismal composition of the labour market. At the same time, the collection of values described encourages the steadfast type of makeshift and survivalist agency described in this thesis.

At the same time, working out at the gym is also an investment in one’s appearance. The gym is one of the more obvious places where certain bodily repertoires are trained and entertained. The gym’s social world gives us an insight into the more subtle competition of social distinction and into everyday types of impression management and self-presentation in Kisumu. As identities are precarious and constantly in flux, it is important to “act the part” and “shape up.” In an economically fragile context, the performative aspects of social roles and more specifically, micro-gestural expressions such as the blink of an eye, may attain exceptional importance. The strenuous efforts made by most of my interlocutors to keenly perceive and interpret the structure of the very social spaces they inhabit, have the aim of attaining greater social visibility, stability and ultimately, more suitable economic opportunities. However, these are all crucially dependant on one’s ability to articulate, that is to make connections and to involve oneself advantageously with influential actors in the field.

Much like the activities of the artists presented in later chapters, Evans can be described as working in the ‘people business’, both with regards to his work as a health entrepreneur and his work for the community trust, BAFOPE. Resourceful connections to other actors in the field are essential for both activities and might often even prove to be of existential value. At the same time, like many artists, Evans does not simply encounter or distance himself from prevailing actors and alliances, he actively

contributes to and shapes various social spaces. By allowing the artists into the centre's premises, he helped to shape an artistic venue in Kisumu. By astutely positioning his gym in Kisumu's social space, considering pricing, location and equipment, Evans created an upwardly mobile social space in which he is the central figure. His gym is a place where different social strata converge and create opportunities for social mobility.

However, the two case studies, the accident and the demonstration, show that the way in which Evans articulates himself with other actors in the field doesn't only create expanded economic opportunities. Involving oneself resourcefully with other actors also counteracts possible hazards and may be seen as a risk minimization strategy. However, as I have attempted to show, the relationships forged by people like Evans are far from conflict-free. On the contrary, as the example of the demonstration shows, the local field of forces contains pressures and expectations from a host of actors, ranging from foreign donor organizations to the church, to local politicians, to well- or ill-disposed police officers, to peers and friends. In the end, everyone has their own set of personal convictions based on (in)direct experiences of violence or of structural injustices, which must be accommodated as part of the beleaguering social fabric.

Evans' staggering behaviour during the demonstration illustrates the dilemmas experienced by Kisumu artists and activists as they attempt to harmonize sometimes extremely divergent agendas. Articulating oneself along and across such societal conflict lines is like walking a tightrope; one must carefully scan and evaluate one's social surrounding, a process that may also involve a great deal of speculation and hence also uncertainty, specifically regarding certain actors' ulterior motives. The fear of being inwardly and outwardly torn between highly disparate expectations and mutually exclusive lines of solidarity is made apparent in the emic etymology of the *busybody* and *chameleon*, an image which points to the very visceral level of direct experience at which such structuring lines of social space are experienced. The following chapter deepens this inquiry into the field of forces in which political articulations may take place in Kisumu. It focusses on Boniface Ogotu's recent activist initiatives which also attempt to organize social space in more coherent ways, tentatively connecting the highly diverging discursive positions of different urban actors.

### 3. Boniface Ogutu: The (Im)possibilities of the Youth Rising

This chapter presents the recent activist initiatives in Kisumu launched by Boniface Ogutu, a photojournalist who organized marches through the city with fellow artists, activists and other young people. The chapter considers how Boniface built his position as a community activist in Kisumu in order to express the young people's burning concern about election-related violence. In doing so, the chapter focusses specifically on aspects of the "hustle" and of being an activist, which include juggling multiple sources of income, hand-to-mouth survival, as well as the art of articulating oneself with the available actors in the field, especially influential political actors. The movement that Boniface founded expressed dissent with the pre- and post-election violence in Kisumu in 2007/2008 and 2013. Spearheading this movement enabled Boniface to invent himself as a youth mobilizer and activist, and to build a reputation for work relating to youth and political education in Kisumu.

The chapter is divided into three parts. The first section paints a portrait of Boniface and establishes the intrinsic and extrinsic motives that inspired his move toward political activism, thereby establishing the experience of political violence from the perspective of a young man from Kisumu. The first section finishes with a discussion of the elements that Boniface articulated in the movement's founding performance. The second part then presents the first march through the city which Boniface spontaneously organized in December 2012, following incidences of pre-election violence. As this procession took place three years before my arrival in Kisumu for field work, I will rely on the very dense photo and video documentation of the event, which covers the procession almost in its entirety. In the third part, I will go further and contrast the first parade with its annual repeat in 2015, in order to discuss Boniface's agency in more detail, drawing on my data for that year obtained from participation and observation during the preparation of the march and the march itself.

The chapter highlights the different pressures and challenges regularly experienced by community activists like Boniface, and which proved difficult for *Sitarusha Mawe Tena*. In particular, the chapter emphasizes a dimension that is rarely discussed explicitly in political anthropology, namely how a dire economic position and hand-to-mouth survival impinge on the possibilities of articulation.

I argue that the reason why the movement's main articulation, captured in its name *Sitarusha Mawe Tena* (Swahili: "I won't throw stones again"), remained highly

contingent, is because it aimed to square the circle: in addition to its express request for political actors to adopt less disruptive means of conducting political affairs, it also aimed at a “declaration of dependence” (Ferguson 2015: 141-164) towards both political actors and foreign donor institutions. The somehow contradictory twin steps of, on the one hand, positioning oneself outside of the political machinery and stressing inclusive and violence-free political behaviour, and on the other, attempting to be integrated into the very same political system, led to moments of conflict. It is my contention that many other smaller movements of this type from the continent, pushing for political change, struggle to walk a similar tightrope in that they need to connect a wide range of opposing actors and expectations in the city.

### 3.1 Articulating a Stance Against Election-Related Violence

On the way to our first interview at his home in Mowlem, a suburban area in the southwestern outskirts of Kisumu along the Nairobi road, Boniface and I pass gigantic puddles of water, as Mowlem is a flooding area, and is always affected by the heavy rains in Kisumu’s rainy seasons. On the way, we pass the extensive construction site for the new bus park, where travellers to and from Nairobi will change into passenger vehicles, thereby reducing inner city traffic congestion. The opening of the bus park is eagerly awaited by local residents hoping for expanded economic opportunities.

During our conversations, Boniface traces the inspiration for his own activist initiatives back to his late father Ely Ogutu, who had a long career in public administration, which he ended as assistant director of children's services at the Ministry of Home Affairs. Ely Ogutu had passed away one year before our interview, and Boniface, who had already lost his mother 15 years previously, was still grieving. The father's long medical treatment had left the family in a dire financial situation, as they had been forced to mortgage the land on which Boniface lived with his stepmother, the very same compound in which we were now conducting the interview. Boniface remembered his father's passion for children and the downtrodden fondly, “I think there never was a time we lived alone as a family. Every now and then we would have destitute children. My father would just go to the street and speak to and bring a child, until he would find a place for the child, even if it was a government institution, or children’s home, because he was in charge of them in his work.”



His father's selfless and engaged attitude towards those in need made him rise through the ranks of the government administration where he started as a volunteer before being taken in as an employee, rising through the ranks to assistant director. As a consequence, Boniface lived in different areas of Kenya and attended different schools. During the four years of primary education, Boniface attended four different schools, changing almost every year. He was born in Kiambu, a small city in the Rift Valley region, and has lived in Nairobi and Kericho, as well as Nyakach, his home village on the border of Kisumu county, where he finished secondary school. Like all the other young people at the centre of this book, Boniface finds himself in a situation where in comparison to his parents' generation, he has much less geographical and social mobility, and the path to secure work remains highly elusive (for Kisumu, see Prince 2012; in general, see Steuer et al. 2017).

However, his varied upbringing makes Boniface a gifted communicator, a fact that I realize during our conversations, in which he extensively and eloquently reflects on his situation and the general situation of young people in Kisumu. Even if Boniface did not get a chance to fulfil his dream of studying at university, he seems remarkably comfortable articulating himself, never lacking the right phrase or word. The many changes in his exposure to different cultural contexts during his childhood enable Boniface to interact easily with others, as well having active and passive knowledge of several Kenyan languages. However, the many moves were apparently associated with a certain amount of solitude. Boniface explains that while he regularly made new friends, he did not have a "best friend". I found his statement, "all are my friends, but nobody is really close to me," indicative of his special position among Kisumu artists in the somewhat new and special role of a *community activist* and that his observation also mirrored some of the criticisms of his initiatives which I discuss below.

Boniface reminded me of my own upbringing as a son of a French mother and a German father in Germany, which had instilled in me my interest in the comparison and complementariness of cultural systems. Quite obviously Boniface had not only been sensitized by his upbringing in different cultural contexts, it had also made him discover the relative malleability of cultural systems in general. Attempting to situate my own understanding of his position as a young adult in Kisumu's contemporary society, Boniface told me about examples of the traditional rites of passage from different ethnic backgrounds, such as the Luhya circumcision ceremony.

More than a little nostalgia could be felt when Boniface depicted his own ethnic community's rite of passage, namely the removal of the lower teeth which was carried out in earlier times. In Boniface's portrayal, the extremely harsh rite was conducted to acquaint the upcoming generation with "real pain", in order to prepare them for the most difficult circumstances they could possibly face in life. I took his description of this rite and the subsequent initiation phase, during which boys are taken to a secluded place and taught about their role in society, as a comment on growing up in an urban context today, where such rites are essentially absent, and where establishing one's position in urban society is experienced as a burdensome and elusive task.

I see his reference back to such long-established practices as an expression of the key concern that Boniface shares with others of his age, namely the lack of integration into a society, in which social recognition and a position in social space is commonly associated with work and the notion of being a 'productive member' of society. As enduring mass unemployment makes such recognition difficult to attain, Kisumu artists like Boniface invent and shape their own positions, drawing on different elements from both the Kenyan context and cultural elements of a globalized world, in order to articulate makeshift identities and positions for themselves, thus adding considerably to the cultural variety and richness of the urban fabric.

Articulation of identities as a social survival mechanism, is particularly salient when actors are struggling for hand-to-mouth survival, commonly described in Kenya as hustling (Thieme 2017). With regret, Boniface showed me the cooking facilities in his bachelor hut, in which the cooking gas needed to be replaced, and the maize flour used to cook ugali had been attacked by a pest. The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) defines food insecurity as a situation in which a household's consistent access to adequate food is limited by a lack of money and other resources at times during the year. This definition applies to a certain extent to all of my informants who are used to the necessity of routinely skipping meals, or even going for a day without proper food. The far more drastic repercussions of the droughts in Northern Kenya, which combined with systemic poverty, have led to many cases of starvation in recent years, and to malnutrition in roughly a quarter million children (USAID 2015), can easily make us forget that food insecurity is also a common affliction in the urban centres, and particularly so in low-income settlements, where the main everyday concern of the many citizens who engage in various street struggles, is to get "something small" in order to be able to put food on the (family's) table.

Boniface's dire financial situation, akin to that of most jobless youths, contained an evident ethical dilemma for me, one that underlay my entire research, but which became acute during my participation in Boniface's day-to-day activities. As Boniface himself put it, "One of the big challenges we face is finance. Finance is everywhere. We don't get the finance to do all the things that we are planning to do". I remember at one of our first meetings during the preparation phase for the march through the city, I offered to invite Boniface for coffee. "Instead of you inviting me for coffee," Boniface replied with a compassionate smile, "could you just give me the money so I do some photocopies of the letters I want to hand out to potential sponsors?" The interaction was in a way representative for how Boniface operated in the preparatory phase of his planned procession through the city, using any money he could get hold of to make sure the march through the city would take place.

Some other measures that were part of the hustle for a grass-roots community activist like Boniface, were cutting down on transport wherever possible, taking long, tiring walks through the city instead of using transportation. The combination of not eating and drinking enough, walking long distances, part-time fasting, and impediments such as lacking the money to print, make photocopies, or make calls relevant to his activist activities, made Boniface work tenaciously. Often his hands were tied by financial constraints or his dependency on people "making time" for him and hearing him out. In practice, this meant that while Boniface was well used to long city walks under a fierce Kisumu sun, without meals and often without taking liquids on the way, I had to give in to my less well-trained body and create lunch breaks, which at least provided us with a small rest and a welcome break from the hard work of Kenyan community activist. When I asked why, despite the many difficulties that activism entailed, he had chosen to make it his primary activity, the normally eloquent Boniface had to search for the right words, once again citing his father's professional career as a reason why activism had become such an important part of his life:

So that my father's activities ushered me into... all this. I mean, I just love speaking for the downtrodden in life, you know, speaking for those who I feel, somehow, they can't speak their mind for some reason. Either they consider themselves low in society, or they consider themselves either poor, you know, yes. So, eeh, I've been doing a lot of advocacy and lobbying. I've been doing a lot of campaigns. Trying so much to use my talent. I'm an artist. I used to act while in high school. That was even the main concept behind the organization I formed.

Boniface's statement shows a characteristic similarity to that of Bam Ochieng, discussed in Chapter two, in which I proposed the distinction between strongmen and artists based on how Ochieng framed his own choice to become an artist growing up as a young man in Manyatta in the 1990s. While Boniface arrives at his own mission by way of continuing his father's lifelong professional quest ("speaking for the downtrodden in life"), like Ochieng, he essentially also articulates the idea of a socially slightly advantaged position in society, which at least existed while he was growing up. Boniface then connects this advantaged position to a specific artistic stance, an emancipatory, liberal conception of art, which comprises campaigning, advocating and lobbying for the less advantaged.

For Boniface, one way of attracting attention, becoming more visible in the urban economy and using his talent to foster his social networks, was to turn toward activist art. In 2012, he founded *Sitarusha Mawe Tena*, a youth movement, consisting primarily of the city's young artists. The movement, two of which's parades I will analyse shortly, formed in 2012 as a response to the 2008 post-election violence and to address the then growing political tensions before the 2013 general elections. During the marches through the city, the youth movement would carry out street mobilization in key hot spots. In collaboration with the police, the movement performed at the historically most charged centres, where many young lives had been lost in 2008. In order to explain how Boniface managed to launch the movement, I will now discuss the elements between which Boniface created a relationship, in order to express the youths' request for non-violent politics, as well as to advance his own standing as a social actor.

The central events that informed Boniface's political action and its central demand, namely non-violent politics, were incidences of post- and pre-election violence in Kenya. In 2007/2008, Boniface was staying in Migosi, near Kondele, where there was rampant looting and where the majority of the clashes between citizens and the police took place. Boniface remembers the gruesome acts of violence that he observed at the time which inspired his passion for journalism, and a curious, pro-active and investigative stance:

I remember when the commission that was set up to investigate the post-election violence came in Kisumu, the deaths were caused by the police. They shot the youths. By then I also had my passion in journalism. Though I didn't have a camera. But I really wanted to be a journalist, though I didn't know how to. But I would want to witness how some of these things were happening, and then I would want to tell, in case I was asked. So every morning, I would just move around the neighborhoods, to find out what really happened here. So there was

this one night when they announced that President Kibaki had won [on December 30, 2007], a lot of people came out to protest, and a lot of them were killed. And I remember, I moved very early in the morning the following day, and I saw a lot of bodies. Most of youths who I saw had been shot by the police. Some of the shots were so accurate, you see, the bullet would hit here [points to the middle of the forehead]. And imagine it was at night, so you see how they brought us assassins, people who were just meant to shoot to kill. In fact, for the Kisumu scenario, all the deaths were caused by the police. And even all the accused were the police, especially those who gave shoot to kill order.

In view of the systemic use of excessive police violence that I observed after the controversial elections in 2018, and the highly politicized Kriegler and Waki Reports (2009) addressing the post-election violence in 2007/2008, I understand the incidents of post-election violence in Kisumu in 2008 essentially as a politically intended, collective form of punishment, in which an entire ethnic community is made liable for the activities of its political representatives, in the case of Kisumu, the opposition coalition. One key method of perpetrating such ethnic violence was the extrajudicial killings by the police following the controversial shoot to kill order which was issued by Police Commissioner Major General Hussein Ali during the post-election violence 2007/2008 and referenced by Boniface in the statement above.

The biased portrayal of the violence in Kisumu in national media and even in official inquiries and reports, instilled in Boniface, like many Kenyan youths, a distrust of official media. Despite the great distance that many of my interlocutors kept to official media such as newspapers and news channels' online presences, I observed that many were noticeably well informed and that Facebook and WhatsApp were used as alternative news outlets (see also Chapter six). One particular WhatsApp group, that united many Kisumu artists, often provided something like a news ticker, real time updates on ongoing conflicts or possibly violent situations in Kisumu. With more than 200 young people signed up in a medium-sized city, there would always be someone close enough to ongoing events to provide updates and "unfiltered" news from the streets. Boniface also noted that many of the gruesome incidents he had observed during the pre-election violence in 2012, never found their way into the media. Once the international community has already adopted the country's government's official interpretation, it is difficult for a minority to change that narrative. For the many Kenyans who suffered in the post-election violence, the prosecutor's decision to withdraw the charges against president Uhuru Kenyatta at the International Criminal Court in The Hague in 2012, was the moment in which many abandoned their hopes for

a review of the atrocities and the traumatic experiences and memories caused by the events.

During my time in Kisumu, I found this gloomy period to be eerily absent from everyday discourse. The only times this historic juncture was invoked were through indirect references like, for instance, the neighbours explaining to me that the shy boy that played by himself in our courtyard every day and who seemed to have difficulty interacting with other children, had been taken in by one of the neighbours, who had found him, abandoned and possibly orphaned, at a public space in Kisumu during the days of the violence. Some stories are too difficult to tell. One of my first contacts in Kisumu, Martin, a middle-aged man who worked for a security firm, remembered the violent outbreaks in Naivasha following Kibaki's controversial election in 2007. Martin told me how he as a Luo, spent the following nights with his family at the police station, where his wife gave birth under tumultuous circumstances. His first-born son, who had been 4 years old at the time, was traumatized by the atrocious scenes he had witnessed, including the skewered heads of internally displaced people belonging to "the wrong tribe" at roadblocks. Martin recounted the family's eventful return to the ethnic homeland several times during the two years that we were in contact, and every time he would remember the story differently. In one version, the family was defended by people from the neighbourhood, in another, the family fled the place the very moment they received death threats targeting members of "foreign" ethnic communities, instead of going to the police station. I see Martin's difficulties in settling on a single story of his and his family's survival during those tragic moments, as a reflection of the collective silence surrounding those days.

Boniface's indignation was triggered by one specific incident of pre-election violence, namely the running battles between youths and police, which ensued following the assassination of the aspiring Luo politician, Shem Onyango Kwegu.<sup>7</sup> Kwegu, a candidate for the Kisumu Town Central parliamentary seat, was shot by thugs armed with G3 rifles in broad daylight in town. A newspaper article quotes the residents' hope "that Kwegu's death will not be part of the long list of influential people from the area whose murders have not been resolved to date,"<sup>8</sup> alluding to the long list of murdered Luo politicians in Kenya's post-colonial history. The police shot at least four people in

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<sup>7</sup> Kenya Citizen TV, 'Security Beefed up In Kisumu After Kwegu's Murder', retrieved from <[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RzRjuN1\\_sfM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RzRjuN1_sfM)>, accessed 10 August 2020.

<sup>8</sup> Okoth, D. 2013. 'Police say it was ordinary crime, residents and family think otherwise', *The Standard*, retrieved from <<https://www.standardmedia.co.ke/article/2000082196/police-say-it-was-ordinary-crime-residents-and-family-think-otherwise>>, accessed 10 August 2020.

the skirmishes surrounding the murder. Boniface had now observed innocent bystanders being killed in Kisumu several times. Even though the police maintained in their official statements that they had only shot rioters, never protesters, government inquiries into the post-election violence had already made it clear that most of the victims shot during the clashes in Kisumu had died from gunshot wounds to their backs, suggesting that they had fled and could not have posed a tangible threat to the police officers.

In the November 5<sup>th</sup>, 2012 edition, *The Standard* newspaper illustrated reactions to the Kwega murder with the kind of imagery that has come to define the kind of political reactions to be expected from the lakeside city: burning street barricades, a group of incensed young men holding fired police cartridges up to the camera, a middle-aged man visibly injured. The photo-series is subtitled “All the ingredients of the 2007/8 post-election violence were present - running battles, stone throwing, bonfires, bullets and murder. Let’s all pray Kisumu is not warming up for 2013” Boniface himself is in one of the photos, holding a police cartridge up to the camera, with an expression of outrage. Several weeks later, Boniface was to pick up his phone and start randomly calling his artist friends, in order to convince them to help him rally as many of the city’s youth as possible, in order to prevent a repeat of the cycle of election violence. Two specific incidents, which we will now turn to, provided Boniface with the elements to conceive a non-violent demonstration in town: one, the encounter with the international NGO, World Without Wars, and two, a state sponsored workshop concerning the question of how Kenya is perceived inside and outside of the country.

The terrifying incidents of that time made Boniface understand the consequences of political violence. In his quest to approach and oppose such atrocious acts, he soon became acquainted with Claudio Ronnellas, an Italian activist and member of the Humanist Movement, who worked for an NGO called A World Without Wars and Violence (WwW). The Humanist Movement was founded in 1969 by Mario Rodríguez Cobos, on an outpost of the Andes at the border between Argentina and Chile. The Humanist Movement is not a coherent institution but rather an international volunteer organization which has diverse bodies and individuals working on different fronts. The movement’s goal according to its website, is to “humanize the earth”, mainly by promoting nonviolence and non-discrimination, which also implies “a sentiment and a way of life”, namely “increased liberty and happiness in human beings”.<sup>9</sup> On its

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<sup>9</sup> Humanist Movement, ‘World without Wars and Violence’, retrieved from <<https://www.humanistmovement.net/?secc=6>>, accessed 10 August 2020.

website, the movement describes various possible nonviolent forms of political action for achieving its goals, including denunciation, disobedience, strikes, social boycott, amongst others.

Ronnellas became a friend, sent Boniface information material and had him participate in street processions in Nakuru and in Kisumu, where both men, along with a group of youths, planted trees at an orphan's home. In addition, Ronnellas encouraged Boniface to express his concerns in journalistic pieces, which he published on the Humanist Movement's online offering, called *presenza*. How much Boniface felt that he had profited from the encounter with Ronnellas and that it had indeed been a turning point in his biography as a youth, was apparent from our interviews. This is again indicative of the experiences I had with other Kisumu artists, such as for the spoken word poet Dawe Dawe, portrayed in Chapter five. For ambitious young people like them, who cannot afford an expensive university education, the workshops, training and information events offered by NGOs, as well as volunteer work for NGOs, provide learning experiences that are as much dreaded for their occasional monotony, as they are valued for providing knowledge, exposure and connections to the wider world. Boniface's immediate receptiveness to the Humanist Movement's line of thought, as presented to him by Ronnellas, is evocative of young people's general receptiveness to foreign ideas and offers, and hence also to the great impact of NGOs in Kenya. In fact, NGOs have become such an effective means of interfering in the actions of governments and administrations in postcolonial states like Kenya, that the in-between space in which they operate has been characterized as 'nongovernmental' (Mann 2015). In view of my data in Kisumu in general, and Boniface's encounter with WwW in particular, my contention is that one can hardly overstate the influence of NGOs in such places, where access to institutional resources, education, training and even simply books, is very restricted.

Another event which provided Boniface with an element necessary for articulating the idea of a youth movement came surprisingly, through government support. The Brand Kenya Board (BKB) is a state corporation which was established in March 2008, as an emergency solution during the post-election violence, with the mandate "to put in place an integrated coordinating mechanism for building and enhancing the Country's image



and national identity and rallying its citizens behind it”.<sup>10</sup> In October 2012, the BKB had a youth program, which sought to enable youths to become ambassadors who could change their communities’ images for the better. Boniface took part in one of the forums about leadership, peacebuilding and entrepreneurship, at which he was elected the youth ambassador to represent Kisumu County. The recognition Boniface received during the workshop, clearly stimulated him:

I think from the training is when I got the kick. That is when I really got inspired to do something of my own that was so relevant to my community, and which was fighting violence. So, at the summit, they were telling us how to brand Kenya. They were telling us how we can brand Kisumu. And I remember they were saying Kisumu is known for people who throw stones. Actually, it is known for stones throwing. Even if we have differences in football matches, the football fans will throw stones from this side. Or even if we just have petty issues, like demonstration, there always had to be incidences where the police and youths had to engage in running battles. The youths are pelting at the police and the police are shooting at the youth.

While the act of throwing stones may have given the demonstrators a sense of revolt and protest, its repercussions were devastating for Kisumu’s wider image. Boniface therefore accepted the encouragement to re-imagine his city’s image, conflating it with the NGO World without Wars’ vision of a violence-free environment. Inspired by the workshop, Boniface developed the idea of stones as “cultural fighting tools”, thus indicating the problematic protest behaviour that was at the root of Kisumu’s infamous reputation. Boniface vehemently opposed the image of Luos and Kisumu residents as stone throwers. Many of the young people to whom I spoke stated that in their view, it was more difficult to secure a job in the public sector with a Luo background, given the tensions in the distributive politics between Central and Western Kenya. Boniface once joked, half smiling, half in earnest, that if somebody from Kisumu went to a job interview in Nairobi carrying a laptop bag, people would automatically suspect him of carrying stones in it, rather than a laptop. In media discourse, the association between poverty and the recalcitrant character of the secondary city's inhabitants has come to define the city of Kisumu’s image, as well as, by extension, that of the ethnic community of Luo people generally. A state-sponsored workshop on how to market a country’s image is perhaps an unlikely source of activist ambitions. Nevertheless,

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<sup>10</sup> Retrieved from < <https://brandkenya.go.ke/the-made-in-kenya-initiative-made-in-kenya-brand-mark/>>, accessed 07 September 2018.

Boniface's reactions show that these workshops had a profound influence and impact on him, which empowered him and encouraged him to harness his very own agency:

At the summit, one thing I was taught, or what really inspired me, is I don't have to be an elected leader or to hold a certain position, to make a difference in my community. I can still do it at my own very low capacity. I'm sure from the interaction with me... I can even sometimes barely afford my meals, but I do such a normal thing, you know. I learned that I don't see an opportunity of making a difference pass by. If I just see it, I pick it up and make the difference.

I find it remarkable that even years after the workshop took place, this statement still reveals the sense of empowerment that Boniface gained in respect of his own agency. The interaction at the workshop, which apparently had a constructive atmosphere, resonated with Boniface. In fact, from the following statement, it seems that its resonance was so deep that he was able to derive a sense of identity based on his participation at it:

I felt like this really described me, who I was really inside, you know I didn't even know myself that way. But I really know that I really wanted to do something, and I really wanted to change my community. But just the realization, that, I don't need to be elected, I can do it at my own, small capacity. And the brand that Kisumu had of rioters, stone throwing youths, it really made me want to change that perception that people had.

One striking example of how the throwing of stones came to impact the city's image literally, is the façade of the Naivas supermarket, a Gikuyu-owned business, which was generally seen as a symbol of the structural economic injustices on the national level, so that it became a preferred target for rioters and looters. The Naivas and Tumaini supermarkets' window façades were smashed during the demonstrations for the reform of the Independent Electoral Body Commission in June 2016.

While for some, the resulting image of the façades in the city centre symbolized uncompromising dissent and the violent rejection of economic structures perceived to disadvantage and exploit the city's youth, the majority of city dwellers, including Boniface, saw the shattered façades as yet another symbol of the economic self-sabotage that was wrecking Kisumu's economic growth and the city's image. There has been a controversial discussion about how "destruction of property" was used as a key justification for excessive police brutality and the government authorities' use of live ammunition during election related riots in Kenya. Considering the truly provocative circumstances of economic exploitation, such violent expressions of dissent seem comprehensible, even if one would normally condemn any form of violence in political protest. A closer inspection of the demonstrators, however, shows that the apparent

resistance engendered by the demonstrations is usually simply another expression of patrimonialism.

Although it may be no surprise to anthropologists, it is very important to note that most of the demonstrators who take to the streets in Kisumu are usually paid by political patrons. While the patrimonial nature of the relationship between citizens and politicians becomes very apparent during the time immediately before elections, this does not apply to the monetary exchanges that incite demonstrations to the same extent. During times of political campaigning, politicians suddenly become “approachable”, leave their guarded vehicles and can be found walking the streets, even in the low-income settlements, with bundles of banknotes, handing out money to voters (usually 50 KES or 100 KES banknotes) (see Chapter five’s conclusion). Such material gifts are symbolic of their offer to “take care” of voters and an indication of their willingness to redistribute tax money to their electoral base. While such financial hand outs and presents are given to both men and women, the more restricted and guarded exchange situations between politicians and rioters usually target only men. Such occasions are usually advertised by word of mouth, announcing that a certain local politician will come through and address the crowd, perhaps even with speakers or a megaphone, from the top of his vehicle, inflame it and then hand out banknotes and alcohol in tiny plastic sachets. In Sheng this kind of exchange is described as “alitutolea form” (Kiswahili, *he [the big man] has given us a plan*), whereby *form* denotes any scheme or plan of action, that involves making or spending money. A frequent greeting among Sheng speaking youths in Kenya’s urban centres is “form iko aje?”, or simply “form?”, inquiring whether the person greeted has any plans, either to make or earn money, or perhaps money the person is willing to spend. From the evidence I gathered during one year of field work, I suggest that in the context of neopatrimonialism, expressing dissent through demonstrating and rioting in Kisumu is often perceived by demonstrators as a “job”. Once the politician has appeared, the crowd is then further incited and guided by the politicians’ agents on the street, so called “lieutenants”, who guide and determine the dynamic of the demonstration, possibly making further handouts along the way. In addition, such occasions provide a welcome change and a bit of variety in the repetitive and discouraging routine of joblessness, and the “fun” of the carnivalesque aspects of rioting, when anything goes, and when enduring crisis gives way to short-term catharsis.

While it is surely problematic, and not my goal, to frame any form of organized dissent coming from Kondele as a form of patrimonialism, I simply intend to caution the reader at this point against equating stone throwing youths with spontaneous unrest resulting from dissatisfaction with the status quo. While the dissatisfaction certainly exists, often (and indeed mainly) it is due to strategic interventions by high-standing politicians, who use their ability to call people in opposition strongholds on to the streets for various reasons, be it during negotiations on power sharing on the national level, or for more specific ends. I want to make this point by returning to the example of the supermarket façades, which were smashed by stones in June 2016. People's contrasting explanations of the events pointed to the instrumentalization of disorder about which Kisumu residents who were not involved with the demonstrations speculated. One detail that particularly sparked people's interest, was that some supermarkets were targeted by demonstrators, while others remained intact. For instance, the Tumaini supermarket branch in Kondele, the most violent place in town, remained intact. According to a popular explanation at the time, this was because the building rented by the supermarket branch belonged to the Odinga family. An erroneous version of the rumour stated that this was because the Tumaini supermarket chain belonged to the Odingas; it does not, although the chain had rented a building which is apparently part of the mighty family's portfolio. Several of my interlocutors offered the explanation that the riots against the Independent Electoral Body Commission, which took place across the whole country, had been instrumentalized and co-opted by political big men in Kisumu to support their turf wars over control over the biggest shopping centres in town. While I do not claim that such theories are true, I do take the statements as being indicative of people's general tendency to characterize the relationship between big men and members of the idle work force, as patrimonial. In his catalogue accompanying the *picha mtaani* photo exhibition about the 2007/2008 post-election violence in Kenya, Boniface Mwangi quotes young people who claim that they were given 100 KES (circa 1 USD) by big men as encouragement and payment for taking part in the ongoing murders of members of certain ethnic communities in hotspots of violence at the time. Such forlorn evidence suggests that a similar amount of money for "only" rioting and looting, is likely to be accepted in Kisumu.

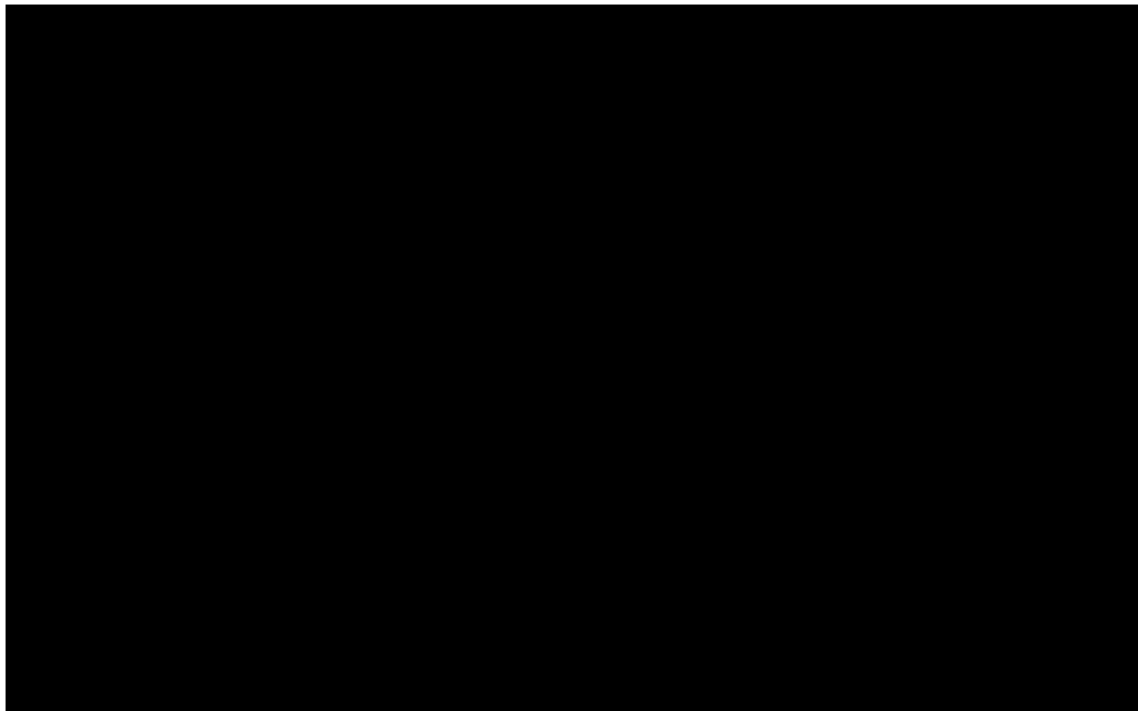
The small amount opens our eyes to just how easily political big men can manipulate the political stage and indeed, an entire city's expression of political will. Kenyan politicians, who are among the best-paid parliamentarians in the world, often receiving

many times their salary from lucrative side businesses, can easily stage such articulations on the political scene, making it much harder to articulate alternatives to the existing narrative. However, from the majority of the urban population's perspective, such demonstrations are pointless and most people dismiss them automatically. From my own observations, the demonstrations that took place in Kisumu on Mondays throughout August and September 2018, following the cases of systematic police violence, are a case in point. Despite the fact that most citizens were at least indirectly affected by the violence, the demonstrations comprised roughly 200 people, an almost negligible number for a city with a population thought to be close to one million. Furthermore, the demonstrators seemed to comprise the more destitute, as one interlocutor pointed out to me while we were observing the processions from a rooftop in town. Again, the demonstrators were joined by rough sleepers in numbers, who, as I could observe from my apartment window, were relishing battles with the police using slingshots, provoking the forces of order to shoot back with teargas grenades. Violent clashes were taking place with such regularity during that time, that they simply became part of urban life. I was surprised to find a *boda boda* bicycle taxi driver sleeping in Freedom Park, as many do after their morning shift, while a mere 100 meters away, on the Achieng' Oneko Road, police cars with armed officers were speeding after clusters of demonstrators through clouds of teargas.

Most demonstrations' dependence on and involvement with the system of patrimonialism, makes Boniface's demonstration more interesting because as the workshop advised, it targeted the image of Kisumu as a city, as well as the imaginary figure of the youth as protestor, turning, as it were, a central screw in the political discursive order. Calling the youth movement *Sitarusha Mawe Tena* (Kiswahili, *I will not throw stones again*) touched on the symbolism of stones and the mechanisms of dependency associated with it, a powerful hinge in the urban culture that everybody could easily associate with maintaining (dis)order in the city. In the next section, I will discuss the first *Sitarusha Mawe Tena* march through the city and how the different elements were articulated during the movement's first street mobilization in 2012.

### 3.2 “I won’t throw stones again” – The Genesis of a Kisumu Youth Movement

On December 8th 2012, a group of roughly 100 youths gathered on an open field close to the Kondele roundabout.<sup>11</sup> Mainly artists, they had heeded the call Boniface had made at the National Library some weeks earlier, when they had discussed the unfavourable image of Kisumu and particularly its youths, in the public media, in which they were regularly denounced as rioters and looters. The youths prepared for the demonstration on the open field at Carwash, Migosi, one of the hotspots where the post-election violence had begun. They painted their faces, some of them wore funny clothes, a man was disguised as pregnant woman, a girl in colourful clothes paraded on stilts. Almost all wore red T-shirts bearing the Brand Kenya Board logo.



**Figure 6:** The youth of *Sitarusha Mawe Tena* during the demonstration.  
Source: Boniface Ogutu

Whereas Evans’ *Baghdad for Peace* trust procession, discussed in Chapter two, was a straightforward procession, with clear demands derived from the Kenyan constitution, and familiar to a Western liberal understanding of political demonstration, the young people parading here were cheerful, holding signs stating “no violence”, chanting that

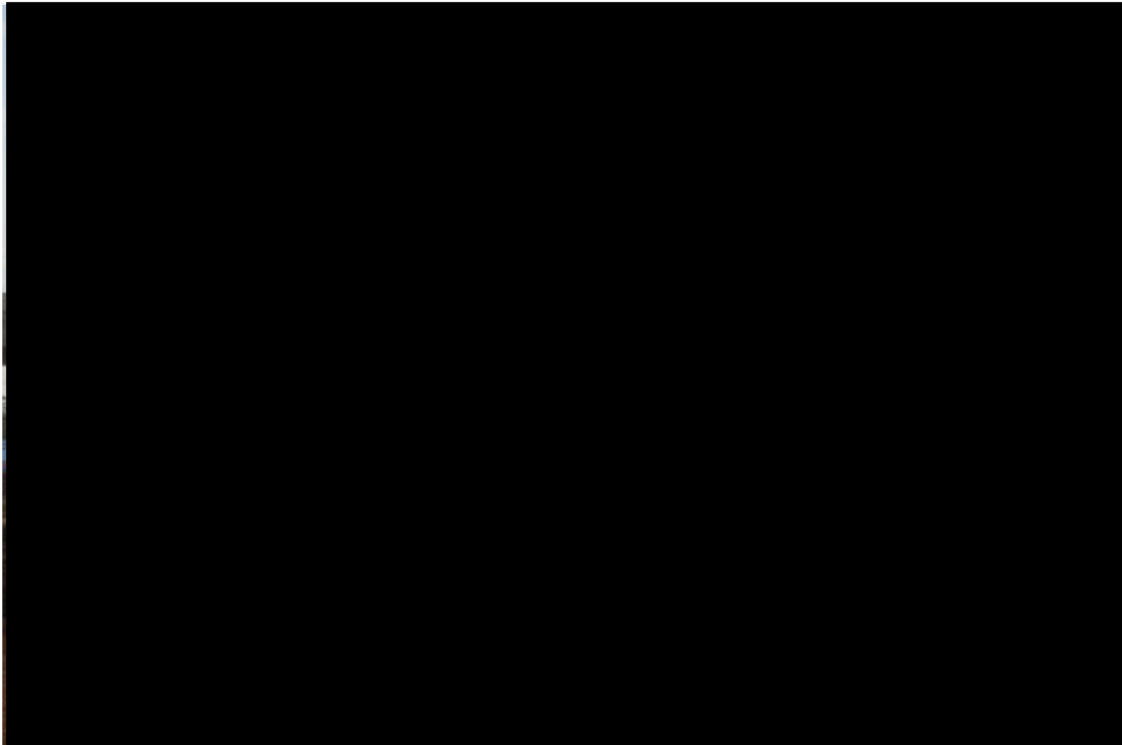
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<sup>11</sup> For the description and analysis of this march, I relied on the dense photographic and video coverage of the march through the city, which covers the procession almost in its entirety, and which Boniface kindly made available to me.

they would never pick up and throw stones again, seemingly exhilarated by the event and dancing comically at the stop-overs in suggestive ways. At some points, the chanting of the paroles took on what could have been interpreted as mildly aggressive overtones, and indeed a number of the bystanders seemed sceptical and observed the parade critically as it passed, with the traffic growing increasingly congested behind it, but all in all the procession gave the impression of young people enjoying themselves, putting themselves on display.

The whole procession quickly arrived at the Kondele overpass, which at that time was still being constructed by Chinese contractors. The crowd proceeded to the first in a series of stopovers, sending their message to the crowd and bystanders. Having formed an enormous circle, dancing and singing ensued, at times amplified and distorted by a megaphone. Kondele is the central place where the post-election violence spilled over in 2007/2008. At that time, the riots effectively brought the city's operations to a halt with malls and government buildings going up in flames. Kondele roundabout is a transit point for Kenyan lorries carrying commodities and crude oil to Uganda, and interestingly, the interruption of Kenya's trade obligation towards Uganda was one of the reasons invoked by the forces of order for why they had resorted to the use of live bullets during the crises.

The importance of Kondele as a place for Kisumu youths, cannot be overstated. It is an emblematic place often cited as the city's 'true' centre, as opposed to the Central Business District. Kondele ward comprises the neighbourhoods of Migosi and Obunga, but the image that Kondele automatically conjures up for Kisumu residents is definitely that of the central overpass fly-over connecting Bandani and Nyamasaria. It is a huge, bustling roundabout, a platform for construction material, vehicles and workers for hire, from which the town expands. Kondele as a place, conveys a sense of the city's tragic history (most victims during the 2007/2008 post-election violence died in the vicinity of the Kondele Police Station), its fraught presence as a converging point for the urban workforce, and its possible future, Kondele is the platform from which the city grows towards new margins.



**Figure 7:** Building material at the Kondele overpass construction.  
Source: Author's photograph

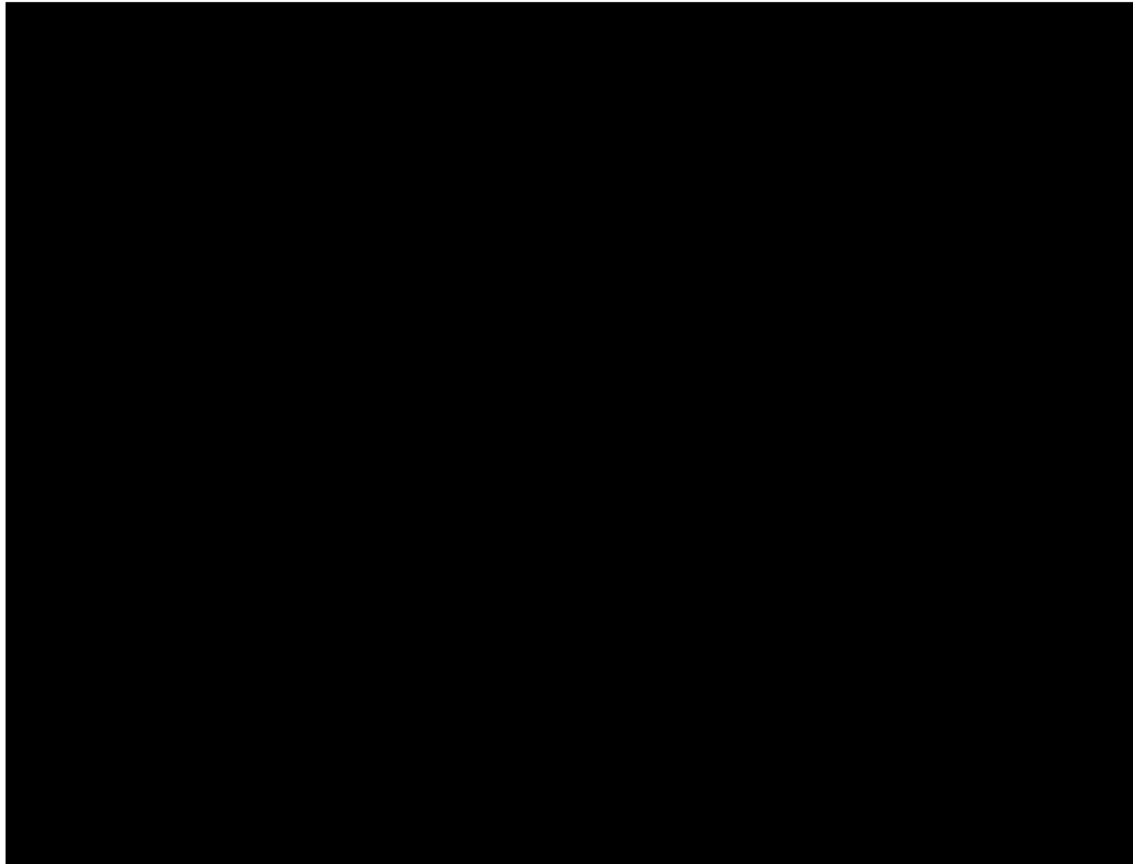
The parade's explicit message is succinct and self-limited to the idea of never throwing stones again. But the youthful joy and a feeling of exhilaration and liberation at this politically significant place, contains more than this message. The parade's emotive dimension is part of the articulation, which can only be understood by considering the event's location. By way of corporeal expressivity, an affective public address is realized, at a place that is associated with the burden of the past as well as with the 'heat' of the street in the present: motorbike drivers reluctantly waiting for clients, sweating vendors hawking their wares, street children roaming, and people lying idly, waiting for a chance or a lucky encounter in the city centre's bustle. At the place that has become the epicentre of political protest and a synonym for unrest and violence, the march by several dozen young people, enjoying themselves, laughing, running, triumphing, joyfully demanding politics free of violence, constitutes an exception. In order to describe the relevance of that day's intervention, we need to consider the site, Kondele and the moment, a few months before the general elections, as well as what Laclau and Mouffe refer to as the material character of every discursive structure, that is not limited to language, but also pervades institutions, rituals and practices (cf. Laclau and Mouffe 2001: 145). If the practices of throwing stones and of politically calculated street mobilizations are part of the hegemonic system at Kondele, then the crowd



parading down the central Jomo Kenyatta Highway was definitely a counter-hegemonic performance, and an unusual one at that.

The joyful atmosphere is apparent from the picture below, which shows a joyous young woman running, apparently holding one hand up, smiling gleefully. I chose this picture for one of my presentations of an earlier version of this chapter and only later discovered that Boniface had used exactly the same picture to convey a sense of the mood pervading the movement's first demonstration in a music video, created by the movement's singers and rappers. The song accompanying the music video is a HipHop hymn in a stately tempo, in which the singers and rappers express their rejection of acts of violence in an accusatory and solemn tone. In the video, just as in the parade, a link is constructed between political violence on the one hand, as indicated by video excerpts of the Red Cross tents that were erected for internally displaced people during the crisis in 2007/2008, and the young people on the other, presented as a creative, constructive and unified group. I consider this a validation of my intuitive approach to the material, that the photo revealed something of the emotions and the corporeal expressivity that was significant in the demonstration. The smiling woman is the opposite of the common portrayal of Kisumu youths, as grim, threatening, and potentially violent men.

The slightly chaotic demonstration that blocked the traffic also allowed the young people to cross the barriers between vehicles and passers-by, to start talking to car drivers and attract the attention of everyone on the Kenyatta highway that day. The joyful dancing, singing and expressive parade thus has a special character in this particular place, as if symbolically giving history a chance to repeat itself in a different form. The parade, innocent though may have appeared, shows a possible alternative to the grim and merciless economy, the tough and at times, demeaning way of speaking and relating at Kondele, thereby staging a different image of how on the one hand, life could be, and on the other, how one could articulate oneself performatively on the political level. Contradicting the established political field, in which there is apparently no alternative to violence, with the image of young people as being joyful and liberated, relates back to Ronnella's Humanist Movement approach, with its emphasis on sentiment and liberty and happiness in human beings.



**Figure 8:** A cheerful young woman during the first *Sitarusha Mawe Tena* procession.  
Source: Boniface Ogutu

Significant in this regard is the demonstrators' next stop-over at the next junction along the highway, between the city's biggest market and its central bus station. Here the young people proceeded to collect loose stones, stacking and cementing them into a pyramid shaped monument, symbolically preventing them from being used in possible further acts of violence. However unassuming the monument may be, and even if most passers-by at the junction are probably not familiar with its particular history, it is still a visible part of the public space today, a concrete manifestation of the movement's bid for an end to violence, and a site where the movement's subsequent annual iterations would stop. Mouffe uses the example of stones, emphasizing that depending on the discourse figuration in which a stone appears, it can be seen as a projectile, an object of art or as representing religion (Mouffe 2001: 13).

In the parade, the stones represent the fraught relationship between the powers that be and the city's youths. Stones also indicate the violence characterizing the momentous link between the two, and the move to cement loose stones can be seen as a symbolic way of ending the perennial game between political big men and youths. Following the advice and insights of the Brand Kenya Board workshop, Boniface's movement

attempted to re-brand Kisumu's youth as pacifist, using the same symbolism that defined them negatively in the discursive field, while also sending a signal to the political leaders. During the month after the event, Boniface started to collect statements for a documentary project about his movement, in which he had people from all walks of life but especially high officials, make the *Sitarusha Mawe Tena* pledge on camera. One special example of this occurred when a small group of artists surrounding Boniface performed during the Kisumu Hindu Council in 2013. The leaders of the Indian community had made election violence one of the meeting's topics, as the general elections were approaching fast. The youths got the entire group of invitees, including then governor, Jack Ranguma and other high officials, to make the pledge as part of the youths' performance and presentation on stage. The situation reveals something about the shrewdness of the discursive twist that Boniface gave to the movement's slogan. While neither the OCS of the police, who was interviewed in his office, nor Kisumu's governor Ranguma, had ever thrown stones personally, the confessional, self-referring statement did not miss its effect as a public invitation to inquire deeply into one's own consciousness. Even though the documentary about the movement was never finally edited or released, the gathering of the material, wringing the pledge from the lips of the visibly stressed politicians, is in itself, a purposeful and powerful articulation.

The group also made their pledge at the stopovers during the demonstration, on their way to the city centre, and sang the national anthem, as well as using the national flag. When I asked Boniface about the use of the flag during his 2015 procession, he replied, not without irony, "the flag helps people to get into the mood". On some of the video material it seems evident that the atmosphere was as much solemn as it was tongue-in-cheek, when people raised their right arms in a most sincere manner, pledging to never throw stones again. Boniface still uses one of his photos of this situation, showing a revolutionary aesthetic, as the title image of his Facebook site, itself an important platform for his activities. The image seems to express great unity and it is interesting to note how the overpass construction site serves as a vanishing point in the image's composition, as if, it could be argued, to link the group's struggle to the city's growth and becoming.



**Figure 9:** The youth of *Sitarusha Mawe Tena* converging at the Kondele overpass construction, then still under construction.  
Source: Boniface Ogutu

After this, the movement had a short moment of proliferation. On the day after the demonstration, Kisumu's *boda boda* saccos, the city's powerful umbrella associations, demanded that the poor infrastructure be upgraded. It was directly affecting their revenue, as the saccos incurred high costs for the vehicles' maintenance. Such demonstrations often turn violent, and Boniface himself was surprised that the demonstrators took up the paroles they had heard the day before, shouting that they would not throw stones but they did want change.

This is what Laclau and Mouffe describe as *chains of equivalence* (2001: xviii), in order to describe the link between different social groups or movements. The term is the authors' counterproposal to the term *class*, which in classical Marxist theory implies a shared consciousness. 'Chains of equivalence' emphasizes that groups may act jointly and organize themselves, even though their respective political agendas remain distinct, which was also the case in Kisumu, where there was no further cooperation between the artists and the members of the transport sector. After having identified the key elements that helped Boniface to shape the *Sitarusha Mawe Tena* movement and examined the key performatory elements of the movement's articulation, I will now turn to the

preparation and execution of the repeat of the march through the city, which took place on October 2nd, the international day of non-violence.

### 3.3 Hand-to-Mouth Activism and the Articulation of Protest

When I first went to Kisumu in September 2015, I had not been able to identify many artists' initiatives in advance as, apart from artists' individual Facebook accounts, their visibility on the internet was still limited. I had seen some initiatives, like the Creative Band Kenya and Kisumu Art House, and I was aware of the burgeoning fashion industry. However, I realized that researching this from a distance was difficult. I met Boniface for the first time at the Tumsifu Center, where he was one of the artists who regularly hung out there, using the office, electricity and the internet as a base for his explorations into the city. I was surprised to find that all the artists, the reformed gang members, and also the leader of such activist initiatives, all worked from one site. One of the first meetings Boniface organized for the current edition of the march through the city was held in the BAFOPE office described in Chapter two. Apart from myself and Boniface, the meeting was also attended by Winnie Juma (portrayed in Chapter six) and Janabii (portrayed in Chapter four).

During the several days when I accompanied Boniface on his quest to secure potential partners and sponsors, as well as artists who were to make specific commitments, I realized the difficulty of muddling through the organizational part of his initiative while at the same time, living from hand to mouth. The money urgently needed for 'airtime', cell phone credit used to arrange appointments and secure support, and the money for transport and impromptu meetings, had to be scrimped and saved, often at the expense of other basic needs such as food. Related to the issue of finance, was the delicate interdependency between artists, in which a climate of individualism prevailed to a certain extent, and where interaction often seemed to involve firm expectations of material reciprocity. Only much later did I understand how much the tension between solidarity and self-interest impacted on the relationships between Boniface and the other artists during the preparation for his event. I noticed what seemed to me to be a lack of zeal, even during our first meeting with Winnie Juma and Janabii. Janabii seemed absent minded and restless when we discussed the budget and left the room several times while Winnie Juma also seemed to be under pressure in some way. This was four years after the movement had started, and we were discussing the fourth edition of the march in support of non-violence. I speculated that the decrease in energy was simply a

result of the difficulty of keeping such a movement running. After all, once the excitement of a new, complex task like the movement wears off and gives way to the various challenges of financing, motivation can disappear quickly. Nevertheless, I understood at subsequent meetings that the uncertainty surrounding Boniface's relationships with other actors, artists, clerks and organizations, was very much structural, and a political climate became apparent in some situations: I soon came to realize that co-operating with other actors was not only about selfless, altruist engagement but equally about a give and take between various stakeholders.

This became abundantly clear during a meeting with Ruth Odinga, who was the vice-governor of Kisumu at the time and the sister of Raila Odinga. Boniface had arranged a meeting with the high official during which he asked Odinga to support his event by waving the flag to start the youth march on October 2nd. Boniface emphasized several times that this would be an "honour" for the movement. At the same time, the event would have provided publicity for Odinga herself among the youth, and the expectation was that her "support" in briefly attending and "flagging off" the event, would also entail financial contributions. The meeting took place in the vice-governor's office in the Huduma Center. Boniface and I were accompanied by Winnie Juma, who intended to pitch her most recent project, a small public library, to Odinga, and Bina, a young woman who was planning a fashion event in Kisumu. The conversation with Odinga took place in a friendly atmosphere, even if the difference in status between the vice-governor and us was pronounced; for instance, she referred to us as "her children". From my personal point of view, the conversation took a bizarre turn when Odinga told us how difficult it was for her to cope emotionally with the fact that her children were far away, namely at boarding schools in the United Kingdom. The artists reacted to Odinga's statement with slight smiles. On several occasions, I observed how state officials translated the distinctive imbalance of wealth and power between them and the Kisumu artists, i.e. 'mere' citizens, into a behaviour that revealed an exaggerated sense of their own importance and abilities. Especially in situations in which citizens approach politicians as supplicants, such exaggerated behaviour leads those with the upper hand in the negotiations to emphasize the patrimonial character of the relationship. However, in Boniface's case, no explicit plea for financial support was made during the meeting and he only told me of his expectations afterwards. Boniface's behaviour was more indirect and subtle, even though he also clearly communicated signs of subordination. During the meeting, I became self-consciously aware that I was

also joining the behavioural group dynamic, expressing my subordination to the high official by nervous laughter and most probably other subtle sign language of which I was unaware at the time.

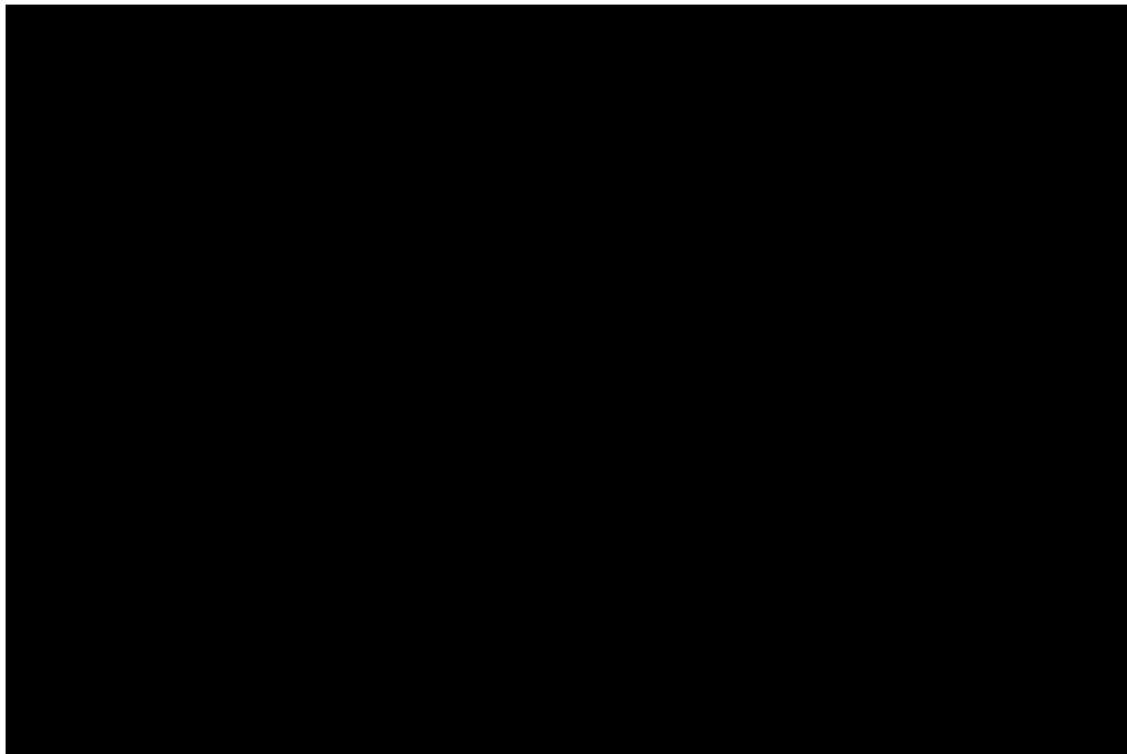
Boniface did not explicitly ask for financial contributions, however it was clear that his request that the high official flag off the event was also an offer, which also served her interests, as this was an opportunity for her to enhance her public relations with the young electoral base. While this move might be framed as a declaration of dependence (Ferguson 2015), I suggest that patrimonial relationships such as during Boniface's meeting with Odinga, are better captured as articulations, as the concept leaves the question of the relationships' exact character open. While the notion of dependency invokes subordination, which is certainly part of such relationships, it also suggests weakness, over-reliance and even helplessness on the supplicants' side, which tends to negate their room for manoeuvre to actively shape the relationships by creating and offering attractive services to those in power.

The concept of articulation acknowledges that the relationship's character is basically contingent and prone to change, which is why I understand Boniface's meeting as an articulation, an attempt to substantiate his relationship with the politician, in whatever way possible. A second dimension of his quest, which he did not make explicit to Odinga or me but which may well have played a substantial role for him, was the element of protection and safety that accompanies having a powerful patron presiding over such an event. As we have seen in Chapter two, demonstrations in Kisumu often become violent, and the plea to the vice-governor to openly support the project would have ensured state support. Boniface's effort must therefore be seen in a context characterized by uncertainty, which is systematically fostered by political clientelism, as Engel and Erdmann note:

Political clientelism (...) is a child of uncertain prospects. A client needs a patron for protection either to avoid something or to assist in gaining something which otherwise would not be obtainable. In short, developing a clientelist network it is a means to gain protection and to achieve goals in a situation of societal uncertainty created by public institutions which may behave in ways that are not calculable (2006: p. 21).

Despite the conversation's open ending, the meeting was declared a success and when I asked why Boniface had chosen to invite the other artists to the meeting, he explained that it was part of the exchange economy between artists. To the extent that Boniface used his networks to offer access to potentially lucrative sponsors, he expected the two

young women to return his favour in the near future, for example by offering him a job as a photographer at their events. During the meeting, Odinga's secretary took a picture of us all with my camera. Afterwards, we joked about it with Boniface because everybody in the picture was smiling except for him; his tense face made obvious just how important the interaction with the politician was to him.



**Figure 10:** During the meeting with the Vice-Governor: From left to right: Winnie Juma, Boniface Ogutu, Vice-governor Ruth Odinga, Bina, the author.  
Source: Vice-governor's secretary

The pressure on Boniface increased in the days that followed, as the uncertainty concerning several artists' participation continued: many of Boniface's calls were not returned, and, as I have observed for many events organised by Kisumu artists, there was a cloud of uncertainty regarding the entire event's feasibility until the actual day. In particular, there were doubts about the potential sponsors' financial pledge. Apart from a small, reliable core team, Boniface was trying to work out who was going to help and why.

A further cultural factor that greatly contributed to the mood of uncertainty, was the actors' reluctance to refuse Boniface's requests directly. Individuals or representatives of organizations would almost always respond positively to requests, at least signalling their interest in cooperating. A lot of time and energy was spent in working out whether the signs of interest would translate into actual acts of support. This form of politeness



and tendency to respond positively, would often lead to hours being lost from our already packed schedule, for instance, because a possible collaborator would agree to attend a meeting and then fail to appear and not accept calls, instead of turning down the offer in the first place. If this happens several times with the same person, and several times in a week, it leads to a tremendous amount of inefficiency and lost time. I never really understood why the actors, regardless of the existing hierarchies, would never say “no” to each other and prefer to leave the other actor in uncertainty, instead of expressing criticism or outright opposition. While this form of cultural politeness might have an important social function, for instance, it encourages the other actor to continue to cultivate the relationship, it greatly increased the unpredictability that the artists were already struggling with, particularly when organizing events.

Another institutional actor with which Boniface had previously related and about whose possible involvement he was concerned, was the United States Department of State’s Young African Leaders Initiative Network (YALI), which former US president Barack Obama launched in 2010. The program provides young, aspiring, vocal individuals in various African countries with professional development opportunities through workshops and student exchange programs. The head of YALI at the time had recognized Boniface’s activities and recommended that he contact the US embassy for potential financial support. The contact had only been established two weeks before the event, perhaps rather short notice for a large administration like the US embassy in Kenya. A few days before the event, the embassy signalled its willingness to finance the demonstrators T-shirts, 60 pieces, at a rate of 10 USD each. Despite being excited about this good news, Boniface still found himself more or less penniless several days before the event, and uncertain whether the sponsors, especially the vice-governor and the US embassy, would honour their promises. The spirit of unity displayed during the movement’s first demonstration seemed to be waning as a good number of the participants did not show up for meetings as they had promised, and were now either not answering calls or hastily calling to say that they were still “on their way”, two hours after the agreed time. Institutionalizing an activist youth movement needs stamina, even when the required resources, basic infrastructure and financing, are available. However, Boniface’s struggle was clearly of another order; he was cutting down on his food and other expenses like transport, so as to divert every available penny into the organization of the event, which in practice mainly meant buying more airtime. In addition, Boniface also needed to print a large banner with the movement’s

declaration and the supporters' logos on it, so as to publicly create the link between the movement and the actors that were supporting it. Without a proper banner, Boniface contended, "the march is going to look like a big joke". Even though he was also planning to have hand-written placards with the movement's slogans, the banner was crucial, as he explained.

Nowadays, donor institutions often work with "locals" and "people on the ground," who verify events by way of attendees' signatures and photos. Photos gain an evidential character in the process, and they are often used ambivalently, to say the least, by the development aid funding campaigns that tap into powerful (post)colonial discursive formations and imaginations. As the number of foreign aid workers in Kenya was reduced as part of the neoliberal downsizing policies of the 1990s, more and more Kenyans have replaced the Euro-American expatriates in the NGO business, at a time when the actual financial amounts dispensed to people in need have also reduced drastically (see Cooper 2009). It was also clear in Boniface's case that the US embassy would not send any personnel, foreign, Kenyan or otherwise, all the way from Nairobi to Kisumu in order to verify whether the march had taken place as stated and whether the demonstrators had worn the sponsored T-shirts. Boniface expected that they would ask for photos, which he would then gladly provide. Even though I have little empirical evidence to support this claim, I hypothesize that with the reduction of the numbers of foreign aid workers in Africa, the visual documentation of aid work has become even more important, and that photographs of aid, as part of international advertising campaigns, have come to assume a sort of hyperreal character, whereby the signifier, the documentation part, becomes more important than what is actually signified, the actual act of aid that is portrayed. As a countercheck on the visual evidence of the activities, donors also consult the social media accounts of the actors they work with, on which photos, likes and comments provide a measure of additional evidence of the agreed activities. Therefore, the banner was very important for *Sitarusha Mawe Tena*, as it was not only a visual expression of the reciprocity that Boniface had forged with multiple stakeholders, whose logos were to be printed on it, but also because photographs were a prerequisite for later financial reimbursement.

I remember one particularly exhausting day during the preparation that for me, really captured the mood of action that pervaded the entire phase. I had shadowed Boniface for several days, and my legs were starting to feel tired. The long inner-city walks under the scorching sun, often hungry, fatigued and dehydrated, and the many setbacks, the

mood of uncertainty regarding not only sponsors but also fellow artists' possible involvement, was affecting our motivation. The dragging conversations and tough negotiations with possible sponsors, together with the dire economic situation that was causing us to walk in the first place, made the whole process more and more tenuous. I remember one point when I really felt like giving up. We had been walking since morning to get the banner printed, first to one shop in the northern part of the city, where the price was higher than expected, then to another shop that had been suggested to us, only to find that they did not even have the necessary equipment. The march was drawing closer and we did not seem to be getting anywhere. Even though people generally responded favourably to Boniface's propositions, we had not got any further with regard to financing. Boniface's struggle, which could have easily been solved with some 50-100 USD, felt unnecessary to me as a privileged observer, and the repeated experience of approaching high officials or other sponsors, for support made me experience the movement's dependency first-hand. One particularly strong example occurred when we went to the Acacia Hotel, the most expensive address in the city, where Boniface delivered a letter announcing the march to the governor, who was well-known for being a permanent guest at the city's most expensive hotels. After arriving at the hotel, tired and worn out, we dusted off our clothes in the car park and passed through the security checks. Entering the noble hotel's air-conditioned lobby, taking in the clean atmosphere and the sumptuous interior design, being greeted by numerous servants in livery, was as close as I could get to experiencing for myself the provoking financial inequalities between the youths and the political elites. The letter was again warmly received but the reciprocity that Boniface had forged on multiple levels, was yet to materialize as anything tangible.

Thanks to a small financial contribution from myself and Boniface's powers of persuasion, we finally managed to get the banner printed at little cost. On our way home, Boniface made us wait, even though a number of busses to our shared direction passed by. He waited to find a bus where he knew the conductor operating the vehicle, who would treat him as a *mtu wa routi* (Sheng, 'a man of the route', see also p. 118), meaning that if he clung onto the open vehicle from the outside, like the conductors who plied the route, he could travel at no cost at all. For me, the image was a metaphor of Boniface's *modus operandi*, operating at little or no cost, moving from site to site through the city, fiercely and at breakneck speed, attempting to connect the dots,

articulating the relevant elements by making use of the social infrastructure, his personal networks and non-financial resources, such as his rhetoric and persuasiveness. The uncertainty continued when we met up the next morning at daybreak, in front of the Kondele police station, near Kondele roundabout, where Boniface had erected a stand-up banner stand for his organization *Sitarusha Mawe Tena*. Slowly, people in white T-shirts began to converge and started to cheer each other up, using a megaphone, singing ad hoc paroles and performing dance choreographies. The march's kick off was delayed for several hours, as the vice-governor did not appear. For the group of some thirty demonstrators, all dressed in white, the waiting came to an end when Odinga finally responded to Boniface's calls, explaining that she had had to fly to Nairobi and could not make it. She had appointed a Member of the County Parliament as her representative, who joined the crowd shortly afterwards and flagged off the event. Though the vice-governor's cancellation had taken some of the energy out of the demonstration, it was nevertheless a lively parade, with youths on skateboards holding up the Kenyan flag, impromptu dancing on the streets, and white bracelets being tied to bystanders' arms, as visual proof of the movement's outreach.

The march's banner was white, with two doves of peace above the central text, "International Day of Non-Violence". The sponsors at the bottom of the banner included the Government of Kenya, The Kenyan Red Cross and the Civil Society Organization Network. Each of the corners had another logo at the same height as the doves. On the left side was that of the movement, an adaptation of an iconic graffiti of a protestor by the British street artist, Banksy. In the movement's version, the protestor is holding a miniature of the Kenyan flag in his hands, rather than a Molotov cocktail, or a flower. The YALI network's logo appeared on the upper right corner, perhaps the most cherished sponsor and about which Boniface had reasons to be optimistic. In my personal view, the visual depiction of the elements on the banner expresses one of the underlying tensions that affected the movement's later development. Torn between its genuine desire for change on the one hand, and the necessity of raising financial support on the other, the movement struggled. Caught between the desire to change and to act differently in public space, while also requiring financial support and protection from institutions that would guarantee the procession's safety, the entire movement seemed to become entangled with the same patrimonial practices that it had originally sought to denounce.

Interestingly, just like his namesake and prominent photo-journalist role model from Nairobi, Boniface Mwangi, Boniface faced criticism that he was an “attention seeker,” a term akin to the terms *chameleon* and *busybody* already discussed in portrait one, implying that Boniface involved himself with important actors out of self-interest, rather than a genuine desire to change. In almost every online post that Boniface Mwangi publishes exposing ongoing corruption scandals or other societal ills, the comment section is usually full of comments from online trolls. Many of Mwangi’s critics saw his move to stand as a candidate for the position of Member of Parliament for one of the constituencies in Nairobi County in 2018, as a confirmation of their criticism, despite his emphasis on fighting corruption. In my view, such criticisms mirror the delicate involvement faced by community activists like Boniface in the contexts in which they operate, where they are not only concerned with their genuine activism and journalistic desire for change, but also with their own material survival and personal safety.

The financial resources pledged by the US embassy finally arrived about two weeks after the event. Obviously, Boniface could have used the 600 USD far better during the event’s preparation phase but he did not complain. The money was a substantial sum which would support him for a number of weeks, if not months. Boniface had invested his personal resources, primarily time and money, heavily in the procession and told me that he now felt that he was in a dilemma. On the one hand, he wanted to re-invest part of the money into the local arts industry and distribute it to friends who had supported the action. On the other, he also had pressing needs, like buying food, some new clothes and another photo-camera, which would enable him to access better paid jobs as an event photographer, thereby cross-financing his activist initiatives. In addition to all these needs, Boniface mentioned sick family members who were relying on him for help with their medical expenses, which in the end, seemed to be what Boniface considered the most pressing factor of all.

### 3.4 Conclusion

As we have seen, rallying people to a common cause in a context that is marked by patrimonialism and mass unemployment, is by no means a simple task. If we want to understand the struggles that community activists like Boniface and the artists of the youth movement, SRMT, contend with, we need to consider the hustle of being an activist/artist, and how forms of art and activism are intertwined with the everyday

street struggles of those concerned. In particular, we need to look at how artists juggle their desire for change with very rational and pragmatic decisions regarding their relationships to powerful patrons, which have an immediate effect on their material well-being and the safety of a planned intervention. If we wish to understand political practices in a country like Kenya and an opposition stronghold like Kisumu better, it would be a mistake to simply assume that all actors have the freedom to act. As the BAFUPE demonstration discussed in Chapter two shows, violence inflicted by police and hired goons constitutes a field of forces which make political articulation a dangerous field of activity. The position of being a community activist can also be conflictual, socially. As we have seen, Boniface needed to juggle various expectations and guidelines, in order to make his processions work and create “deals”, not only with political patrons like the vice-governor but also with influential foreign NGOs like the US embassy’s YALI initiative. As a result, we need to consider the tightrope that activists walk by trying to please all sides; political actors who are expecting obedience, foreign actors wanting resolute criticism and peers and artists who want their concerns voiced while also hoping to be compensated for their active involvement. Boniface relies on all these actors at once: the state for safety and recognition, foreign NGOs for financial contributions and recommendation letters (used as references for further work opportunities), and his peers for signalling a broad support for his cause. In this chapter, I have tried to show in detail how Boniface Ogutu created a social position for himself as a community activist in the city of Kisumu. I have presented his intrinsic motivations and his quest for a social position and social recognition, which are difficult to attain in a context marked by mass unemployment. Boniface’s extrinsic motivations for founding the movement included namely his first-hand experience of structural political violence following elections, as well as his interactions with foreign NGOs and offers from state organizations like the Brand Kenya Board. The tension that Boniface faces in his work, juggling multiple and at times, opposed actors, is in my view representative of many other similar such initiatives across the African continent. In my opinion, it would be a mistake to only focus on those protest movements which can be credited with contributing successfully to large-scale political transformations such as *Y’en a marre* in Senegal and *Le Balai Citoyen* in Burkina Faso. In my opinion, much can be learnt about the enduring crisis of young people on the African continent by focusing on how smaller, grass-roots youth movements like *Sitarusha Mawe Tena*, struggle with and creatively overcome the systemic challenges that they set out to change.

#### 4. Brian “Janabii” Omondi: One Week in the Life of an Artist, or: Rhythms of the Unemployed

This chapter presents the life and work of Janabii, a poet who was at the centre of endeavours to build up a spoken word scene in Kisumu. This chapter was originally conceived as an article for a special issue of *Africa* (Cambridge) and has been accepted for publication. The special issue was inspired by a workshop at the British Institute for Eastern Africa in March 2017. Under the title *Harnessing the Hustle*, the workshop explored the important actor category of *hustling*, which has surfaced regularly in my own research, and which resonates with other articulations of shrewd improvisation and frugal innovation such as the “DIY city” (Neuwirth 2011), the “misfit economy” (Clay & Phillips 2015) and “social navigation” (Vigh 2006, 2009). Although Kisumu is definitely an artistic hub, the way in which artistic young people make their way in the city *tout court*, speaks to wider conditions of hustling amongst urban youth in other Kenyan cities, especially Nairobi. The challenge that hustling as an actor’s category poses, is that it forces us to understand what unemployed people and those in various ‘waiting’ situations, actually do on a day-to-day basis, and how they make sense of their own agency in relation to ‘work’ and other spheres of daily life. To this end, this paper explores the interrelation between the struggle to survive and the artistic imaginary in the life and writings of a Kisumu spoken word artist, Janabii. He has been at the centre of efforts to establish a spoken word scene in Kisumu and has spent several years in limbo, oscillating between glittering performances, eagerly displayed on social media, and his less glamorous daily life, marked by functional homelessness and a refusal to surrender to the violence of Kenya’s informal work world. I worked with two different sets of data to unravel both the structural and experiential dimensions of Janabii’s life; one is empirical material gathered during a week spent shadowing Janabii, documenting how his struggle for physical survival and emotional well-being interrelates with his artistic aspirations. The second data set is one of Janabii’s poems, *Broken Glasses*, which the artist chose to perform during the workshop at the British Institute for Eastern Africa that prompted this special issue. Excerpts from the poem and my literary analysis thereof, are used as running captions throughout the text, in order to give it a more direct voice (cf. Malaquais 2011). I am grateful for Janabii’s willingness to engage in such an ‘experimental collaboration’ (Estalella and Criado 2018), which included co-analysing the poem and reflecting on his life-history.

My particular interest in this article is to explore how a self-imposed rhythm, or *rhythmization* (Dobler 2016), affects the internal experience of unemployment. Rhythm is used as a heuristic tool for viewing the ‘convergence of waves and currents’ (Lefebvre, 1991: 91–2) of Janabii’s movement through and connection with Kisumu’s social fabric. Making art gives Janabii not only an interpretative framework in which he situates his struggle to get by, but also, more practically, a schedule and rhythm which structures his everyday life. If unemployment and insecure work are often described as modes of waiting (Honwana 2012), the question arises, how do actors influence such temporalities and impose their own rhythm, for example, by making art? Instead of thinking of waiting as isolated events, such as tea-making rituals (Masquelier 2013) or as ‘timepass’ on urban street corners (Jeffrey 2010), I propose thinking of waiting as the pervading mood of everyday efforts to make do and matter.

By following Janabii throughout one week in his life, I focus on a narrower time frame, which in turn enables me to identify how crucial encounters and moments of articulation emerge from the flow of social interaction. More than any of the other chapters, the material that follows illustrates the emphasis that Hans Joas places on the changeability and fluidity of concrete action, especially when new means or actors affect one’s interpretation of a given situation. Spending time with Janabii during moments when no significant activity was going on, enabled me to participate in the practices of waiting and of ‘killing time’ to some extent. The sense of contingency that prevailed in Janabii’s particularly precarious life circumstances, forced him to constantly make decisions in order to open up new prospects for the day, and to make way for possibly fruitful encounters with other actors.

Introducing rhythm into one’s life, either through the verbal metric of poetry or the various actions associated with navigating a city, is to anchor oneself amid rapidly shifting waves and currents. In order to depict the specific temporal experience of enduring unemployment and how moments of articulation emerge out of it, I have kept the chronological structure of the material and organized this chapter along the seven weekdays, from Monday to Sunday. Before I delve into the empirical material of this chapter, I want to take this opportunity to present in its entirety the Spoken Word piece *Broken Glasses* that I use throughout the chapter:



**Broken Glasses, poem and translation by Brian Oundo, artist name Janabii.**

1 *Mi ni generation ya ile cd ilipasuka*  
2 *Mashairi na methali zilisha nidefine, staongezea kwa ya mgema* [L] [SEP]  
3 *Spendi kufuata masharti ndio maana mi uspeak offkey na off beat*  
4 *Budangu alinidisown juu ya mpango wa kando* [L] [SEP]  
5 *So Mi uwa juu ya mihadarati*  
6 *Ka si mihadarati ni juu ya ma skandal*  
7 *Madha alishindwa kunihandle* [L] [SEP]  
8 *Serikali ika nimishandle* [L] [SEP]  
9 *Kenye najua ni kuexpose skandal za Waiganjo na Waiguru* [L] [SEP]  
10 *Na poetry za Uhuru*  
11 *Mau Mau walisahaulika*  
12 *Sikuizi ni kina Vera Sidika*  
13 *Kenya kabila ni certificate ya kuajiriwa* [L] [SEP]  
14 *Matatu inachezea abiria ngoma za.... party na ajatia* [L] [SEP]  
15 *amekua akikimbia kutafuta picha ya Moi na Kenyatta ndio wanadada*  
*wamfungulie sidiria* [L] [SEP]  
16 *Picha ya Wangari Maathai kuhanang kwa nyumba ya mhuzaji makaa* [L] [SEP]  
17 *Ni ishara pesa za kina Biwot, Moi, Kenyatta* [L] [SEP]  
18 *kugawiwa wakenya wanalala bila kitu tumboni kutia*  
19 *Nina fear watajaribu kuninyamazisha before hii poetry ifike kwa media* [L] [SEP]  
20 *But sijali juu utakua umeniskiza* [L] [SEP]  
21 *Familia wanalia mtoto wao mmoja amepotea njia*

1 I'm that generation of the broken CD  
2 Poetry and riddle have defined who I am, I won't overpraise myself  
3 I never like to follow rules that's why I speak off-key and off-beat  
4 my dad disowned me because of his side chick  
5 so I'm always on drugs [L] [SEP]  
6 if it's not drugs, I am out causing some scandal [L] [SEP]  
7 my mom couldn't handle me  
8 so now the government is mishandling me  
9 What I know is using poetry to expose scandals like Waiganjo's and Waiguru's  
10 Using poetry of Uhuru [L] [SEP]  
11 Our freedom fighting heroes are long forgotten [L] [SEP]  
12 These days socialites are more appealing [L] [SEP]  
13 In Kenya you are employed by tribe  
14 Party music in the mini-bus and I'm starving, didn't get to eat the whole day  
15 one spends one's time chasing banknotes, in order to chase skirts  
16 Wangari Maathai's portrait hanging in a charcoal seller's house  
17 That would be a sign that tycoons like Biwot, Moi, Kenyatta  
18 finally share their money with Kenyans who sleep hungry  
19 I fear the government will try to silence me before this poetry gets to the media  
20 but I don't care, because you will have heard me  
21 The family mourns their only child who has lost his way

#### 4.1 Monday Morning Blues and the Absence of Obligation

When I met Janabii on a bright Monday morning in Migosi, a low-income neighbourhood in the North of Kisumu, he was just moving out of a tiny, corrugated iron shop-cum-bedsitter that he had shared with two flat mates. The place had been ‘evacuated’ by the landlord, signifying another forced shift for Janabii, this time to the place we were about to visit. While it had been comparatively easy to record Janabii’s life story and artistic endeavours, and those of other Kisumu artists, it had taken time for me to be invited to the other, more mundane side of their everyday lives in the structurally disadvantaged neighbourhoods that they referred to as ‘the ghetto’.

Upon arriving at Janabii’s new place, the first sight was of a number of mattresses piled up in the house’s compound for airing. With the windows covered, the inside of the house was congested, more mattresses and clothes lay around in disarray. When I asked him which bed was his, Janabii replied with a smile that he was free to choose any. We spent the morning behind the house where the fellow occupants sat on the skeleton of a couch and the house threw a tiny patch of shade near midday. Janabii rolled marijuana joints, carefully separating the flowers from the stems in a rice basket, then crushing the buds and removing the kernels. The swift movements of his hands as he rolled up the preparation with a paper, pen and banknote, showed that this was a habitual activity.

Janabii is a son of working-class parents and grew up in various low-income settlements in Nairobi, Mombasa and Nyakach (Kisumu County). He never received his secondary school certificate because of outstanding school fees and describes his chances of getting regular employment as low. After finishing school, he tried his hand at different types of labour that could be considered *hustling* in a narrower, Kenyan sense of the term: hard labour, for example, hawking homemade juice at a local market under the fierce sun. Janabii remembers passing out in stairways after pushing wheelbarrows with building material to the upper floors during his short time on a construction site. ‘The money was hardly enough to provide for rent and food,’ he said, summing up why he had left the sector shortly afterwards. The violence experienced on the body under capitalism is a recurring concern addressed by Lefebvre in his writing (2015: 2) and Janabii’s embodied labour evoked above may be described in Lefebvre’s terminology as ‘brutal arrhythmia’— moments in which ‘rhythms “of the other” make rhythms “of the self” impossible’ (*ibid.*: 105-106).

However, on that morning in Migosi, the atmosphere was not such a moment of rupture. Although a fight had taken place over a mattress during the night, a story recounted to

everyone’s amusement, the occupants seemed relaxed but faintly aloof. When I asked Janabii whether the shared household provided him with something of a surrogate family, he rejected the idea: ‘It is a half family... a family to get high and drunk...’. In the end, the community, with its appeal of an intimate brotherhood, appeared to be a rather pragmatic union, organized around essential needs like accommodation, entertainment, including illicit substances, and food. Despite the casual bonding and ostentatious inactivity, the spectre of the mainstream economy was still present in their reference to themselves as ‘machimney’ (chimneys), an allusion to their almost industrial smoking habit.

Janabii’s poem *Broken Glasses*, at the beginning of this paper, aims to make sense of the predicament of a generation that finds itself trapped in a state oscillating between forced and deliberate idleness, between phases of intense physical labour and indolence, between a refusal to live the present, and a strong desire for a brighter future. In the poem, the narrator tries to determine his own position, struggling to situate himself in the broader picture of Kenyan life realities. In doing so, the poem pinpoints cracks in the social fabric, and above all, the rupture of family ties, identifying them as a root cause for the narrator’s inability to situate and support himself in a satisfying way.

The title *Broken Glasses* suggests the aftermath of a fight, or a break-in, with broken things lying around, fragments that may or may not fit together anymore. The first line introduces the narrator as a representative of his generation, literally as the generation itself, born as the result of a mishap with a broken condom:

1     *Mi ni generation ya ile cd ilipasuka*  
      I’m that generation of the broken CD

The abbreviation ‘CD’ is widely used in Kenya for condoms, and the image of a broken condom strongly evokes the idea of a complicated belonging, of a generation born by accident, or by chance. With this troubling image, the narrator places an existential doubt at the very beginning of the piece: Was I supposed to exist? Was I supposed to live this way? Several of my informants indicated they had experienced such existential doubts at some point in their lives. In a double entendre, the abbreviation CD may also allude to the (now almost obsolete) music compact disc, as if to evoke the soundtrack of a generation coming from a broken CD, stuck in the player and jumping in violent loops of undesired repetition. Broken glass also conjures up the image of a broken mirror,

reflecting the countenance of a disturbed generation, a first generation of ‘digital natives’ growing up ‘in the hood’; a generation that is better connected than ever before, yet collectively ostracized like never before, and experiencing the ‘crisis of reproduction’ (Weiss 2004) as intimate and existential trouble.

The U.S. rap artist J-Cole, who was also part of the playlist that morning, raises this conundrum of obstructed social mobility, when he echoes the voices of the know-it-alls in his own neighbourhood in Virginia: ‘They tellin’ niggas, “sell dope, rap or go to the NBA”’<sup>12</sup>. In a cultural logic that surrenders to its exclusion from the dominant economy, the only options seem to be becoming a criminal (or *hustler*, as those involved in the US’s inner-city, illicit street economy refer to themselves), an artist, or an athlete. Rap-music productions worldwide frequently combine the figures of the hyper-masculine gangster/hustler and the celebrated artist, yet a more sensitive figure of a poet emerges from Janabii’s poem, with its subtle references to Swahili proverbs. A figure whose playful approach to language and rhythm contrasts with society’s rigid rules:

- 2 *Mashairi na methali zilisha nidefine, staongezea kwa ya mgema*  
Poetry and proverbs have defined who I am, I won’t overpraise myself
- 3 *Spendi kufuata masharti ndio maana mi uspeak off key na off beat.*  
I don’t like to follow rules that’s why I speak off-key and off-beat

Here the poet detaches himself from society’s constraining rules and language, thereby constituting his own rhythm and melody, his own sequence of incidental notes, events and pulses. Sociological literature has confirmed the oppressive atmosphere and the collective pull towards idleness, that tend to develop in societies affected by mass unemployment (Jahoda et al. 2009 [1933]). The ability to establish one’s own patterns of movement and sense of time under such circumstances, for instance by adopting the path of an artist, who flourishes both *apart* from and *as part* of, society, may therefore serve as a powerful reminder of one’s ability to act.

On this particular Monday morning, Janabii decided to focus on an upcoming event on Thursday night, an elegant gala night, addressing the city’s artistic youth. Janabii had run a spoken word programme with the event’s organizing team, *Talent Industry*, and

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<sup>12</sup> J. Cole. 2016. *Immortal, 4 Your Eyez Only*. Dreamville.

was now hoping to secure a small job with them. A fellow artist and singer who was at the rehearsal space had also let him know that she ‘wanted to talk to him,’ leaving him with a hazy expectation of some sort of opportunity. The pendulum now swung from the morning’s inaction and detachment to a more industrious mood. As soon as we had decided to set off to the event rehearsals, Janabii spontaneously decided to change direction, in order to squeeze in a quick shower at a friend’s place, anticipating, as I later discovered, a change of social environments. Janabii met the friend in question at a movie shop to get the keys to his place, and quickly and discretely discuss ‘ile maneno yetu’ (Sheng, ‘a common concern’), in this case, a small marijuana deal. As the friend was penniless, the deal had to wait. The encounter was typical of how Janabii combed through the city all week. Whenever he met someone, and it happened frequently, he would give the interaction a personal touch by stressing their interdependence, thereby imbuing casual encounters with a sense of possibility and reciprocity.

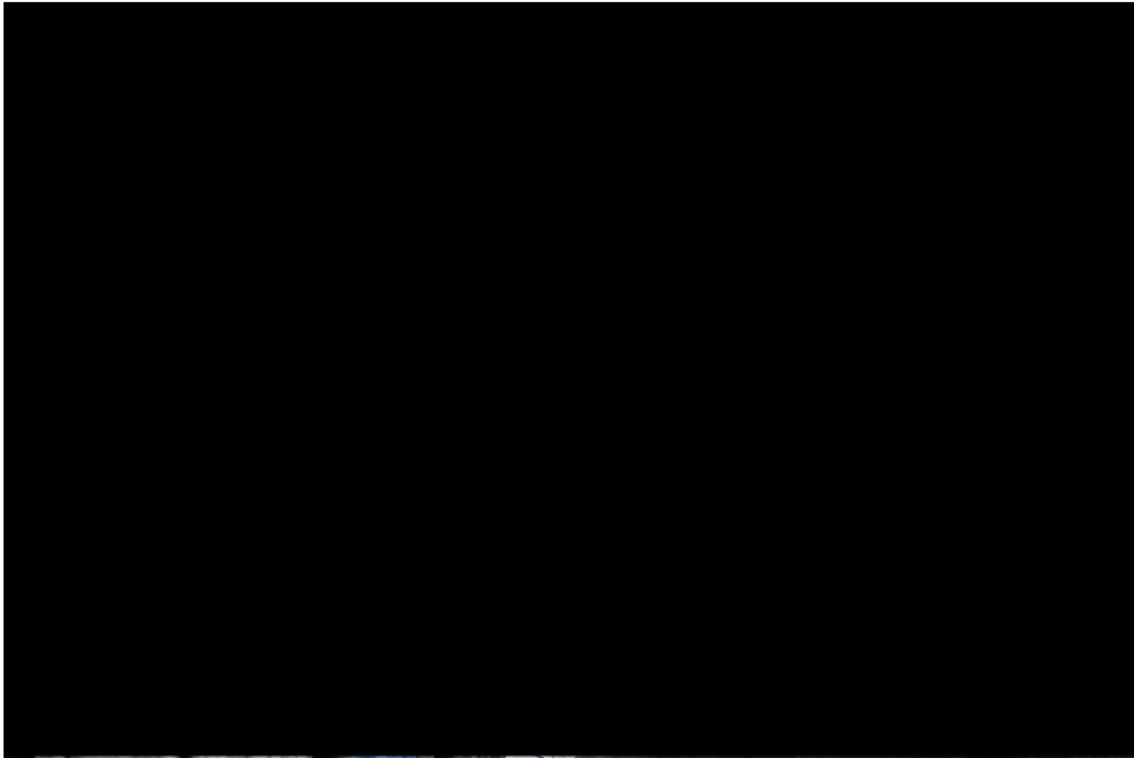
When we reached the rehearsal space, a youth centre run by an American non-governmental organization (NGO), we found a very different space to the shared tenement. A throng of young people cheerfully crowded around the door, watching their friends perform. The difference between the two spaces was reflected in peoples’ effort to dress stylishly, but also more subtly, in the way that they related to each other. Whereas in Migosi the young men seemed oblivious to much of what was going on around them, at the rehearsal space everybody was acknowledged with clamour and sharp humour, often bordering on ridicule.

Godfrey Kedogo, one of Janabii’s collaborators, ran the rehearsal with strict discipline. Each performance was criticised, often harshly so. The verbal flagellation bore a clear resemblance to Euro-American TV formats like *American Idol*, *Hell’s Kitchen* by British TV cook Gordon Ramsay, or Donald Trump’s notorious *The Apprentice*, in which participants compete fiercely and withstand considerable humiliation, in order to win a chance in the industry. Janabii took a seat in the corner, visibly enjoying the third floor’s breeze and taking in the pulsating live music. With its strict organization and the performers cheering each other on, the rehearsal was reminiscent of an island in the midst of Kisumu’s merciless economy, a place where individual talent was not only acknowledged, but strongly encouraged, and where it was possible to unwind without the use of recreational drugs. The afternoon went by without any of the opportunities materialising. Rather than proposing an intriguing collaboration, the young female singer merely sought relationship advice. The event manager, who Janabii wanted to ask

for a job, was nowhere to be seen. Although he had signalled an opportunity to Janabii, he was now refusing to answer his calls. Another Kisumu artist referred to this stonewalling strategy as ‘psychological warfare’, in which the ‘employer’ delays or obstructs requests for work by being evasive. By leaving the other person uncertain over a period of time, he signals to the ‘employee’ that they are dispensable, thereby increasing the pressure to make a less favourable deal. The manager’s silence continued to be a source of constant worry and bouts of jitters for Janabii in the days that followed. For the moment, it seemed that the only merits of the lengthy afternoon at the centre were the cool evening breeze and the stories and jokes that offered us some sort of escape.

#### 4.2 Tuesday: Overcoming Waiting

When I met Janabii the next morning at ‘his’ place in Migosi, the habitual social life was taking its course. We spent the day inside the house, playing cards and ‘making stories’, centered around, the daring character of one or the other occupant. Stories of party life alternated with tales of tricking police officers and eventful nights in custody. I started to doubt my idea of following Janabii for a week, imagining how I would write about adolescent excesses for a paper about ‘hustling’ in urban economies. In fact, the uneventful manner in which the day passed brought me face to face with a tormenting feeling that had followed me through much of my field work in Kisumu, when financial limitations forced my collaborators into inaction, and ideas, grand or small, could not be implemented due to a lack of basic infrastructures. Financial difficulties resulting from a robbery, sickness or financial obligations often forced artists into sustained periods of inactivity during which they disappeared off the social radar. Their artistic identity, however, usually remained intact, and the refrain became that they had had to ‘lay low’ for a little while, due to various ‘challenges.’



**Figure 11:** Janabii browsing through some Facebook threads as the fellow Migosi occupants play cards.

Source: Author's photography

When caught in such prolonged spells of inactivity and unproductivity, the Kisumu artists drew on art as an explanatory frame of reference, suggesting that artistic talent needed ‘patience’ and ‘endurance’ to mature, as well as intrinsic motivation and lots of self-discipline. In other words, making art nurtures a positive and confident perspective on seeking jobs that in Kisumu’s economy, can remain elusive for many years (Prince 2013). Being an artist and making art one’s ‘main hustle’ transforms petty jobs, like working part-time at a barber shop, hawking second-hand clothes in the city centre or selling weed, into ‘side hustles’. Sometimes the pulses of art and hustle harmonise, for instance if a fashion model sells second-hand clothes for an event to one of her mentees, or a spoken word artist supplies a music producer with weed in exchange for a recording session. However, it seemed to me that most of the time their artistic trajectory provided the youth with a sort of ‘backbeat’, a rhythm used particularly in jazz and popular music that strongly accents one of the normally unaccented beats of the bar. By re-framing ‘empty’ time as an opportunity to develop their craft, artists introduce rhythm into their lives and integrate moments of demanding labour, insecure work or phases of inactivity, into a measured, forward-moving rhythm leading to personal development and artistic maturity.

On that Tuesday, for instance, the sustained experience of waiting, seeing the sunlight slowly wander from one side of the room to the other, without any significant prospects for the day opening up, caused me to become restless and was almost physically painful. The rhythm analyst, Lefebvre writes, ‘thinks with his body, not in the abstract, but in lived temporality’ (2015: 31). I also sensed a certain ennui growing in Janabii, sitting on the corner of a bed, bowed over his 2G Nokia phone, browsing through some Facebook threads. However, he brightened up, suddenly reinvigorated, when I asked him about the poem he wanted to perform during an upcoming event. We then had a long and stimulating discussion about his poem and general work.

This joint upswing in our activity allowed me to grasp how creating (or in this case, discussing) a poem, a coherent whole piece with significance, rhythm and meaning, leads to an experience of oneself as creative and productive. When Janabii recited his poetry *a capella* in a quiet corner of the house, rhymes re-joined rhythm and brought back a sense of spontaneity and immediacy which I had been missing during the day. Between the fast-paced lines, intentional pauses and minute hand gestures, for example, to emphasize a question posed, Janabii’s ‘instinct for rhythm’ (Lefebvre 2015: 74) and the rhythms of his body put us back into command over our lived time. In contrast to the rather trite routine of the morning, I found our conversation refreshing, and a sort of flow. Janabii’s face had brightened up too, and judging from his exultant humour when he walked me down the alley to the bus station after dusk, our conversation had also given him a welcome escape from boredom.<sup>13</sup>

#### 4.3 Wednesday: Starving, Hedonism and an Open Secret

When I returned the next morning, there was only one day left until the gala night, and Janabii had still not heard from the organizers. The uncertainty surrounding the rare opportunity had been a constant source of worry and preying on his mind. At 10:57 am, a short message on his phone came as a relief: ‘Hi, was suggesting if you could assist with online marketing and uploading pics while the event is ongoing. Though have cash issue but can get you one K [Ksh1000, circa USD10].’ Janabii had hoped for a more favourable arrangement but accepted the proposition immediately. He was instantly energised by being part of the organizing team and decided to leave for the rehearsals immediately, which raised the issue of transport.

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<sup>13</sup> Even though it could have been revealing, I did not spend the night in the shared tenement because the continual movement during the day obliged me to make more thorough notes at night.



We had to change *matatus* (shared minibus taxis) to get to the rehearsals and, hungry as Janabii was, he was not inclined to pay the full Ksh20 fare for each of the two stretches but instead, the negotiable rate of Ksh10 for each of them. Having the correct coins would enhance his bargaining power, he explained. Such micro-bargaining situations are part and parcel of the everyday hustle for many Kenyans. Astonishing solidarities are forged on *matatu* benches, where passengers may ask each other ‘uko na ngapi?’ (Swahili, ‘how much do you have?’) so that they can pay the conductor jointly, thereby increasing the pressure on him to accept the usual fare, even during rush hour or for longer, inner-city distances.

Janabii's artistic and Rastafarian identity, embodied in his youthful attire and baby dreadlocks, actually helped him to navigate the city, as it often led to free rides on *matatu* buses. Conductors often identified Janabii as *msanii*, which translates from Swahili as ‘artist,’ but as Janabii explained, also captures the broader idea of ‘someone dressed popularly’. Other conductors acknowledged his Rastafarian identity with the greeting ‘*niaje ras?*’ (Sheng, ‘What's up, Rastafarian?’), and encouraged the ever-smiling Janabii to board their vehicle. This even happened when he had no money, and sometimes even when he had not originally intended to board a vehicle. When he alighted at his destination, the conductor would jovially inform the bus that ‘*ras hana [kitu] leo*’ (Swahili, ‘the Rastafarian doesn't have the fare today’), thus displaying his benevolence towards another hustler in front of the passengers, and even his willingness to redistribute resources along specific lines of solidarity.

To feel good and to make others feel good, or in more sociological terms, ‘to seek maximal emotional energy in interaction rituals’ (Collins 2005: xiii), is a fundamental human motif. This is particularly true in environments of scarcity. As Simone (2004) argued referring to the city of Johannesburg, it is through sociality that ‘expanded spaces of economic and cultural operation become available to residents of limited means’ (p. 407). Janabii navigated such social spaces with verve, making the best use of both his limited economic resources and his contagious emotional energy. For example, Janabii told me that a bag of khat leaves,<sup>14</sup> worth Ksh 50 [ca. USD 0,5] could go a long way, if he shared and chewed them together with the *matatu* operators waiting and ‘killing time’ at the bus station. The plant causes euphoria and talkativeness and distorts

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<sup>14</sup> Khat (*Catha edulis*) is a flowering plant native to the Horn of Africa and a common recreational drug that young men in particular, chew.

time perception. After the joint experience of chewing the leaves for several hours, the *matatu* operators considered Janabii to be one of theirs, or ‘mtu wa routi’ (Sheng, ‘a man of the bus route’), occasionally offering him free transport in return.

It is precisely there, in a *matatu* taxi, that the narrator of Janabii’s poem seems to actually enter the poem. The entry is evident from the difference between the Swahili/Sheng original and the poet’s English translation: the third-person marker *ha-* of the original *hajatia* ([s]he is starving) is translated in English into the first person, ‘I am starving’. In a *matatu* is where worlds collide, and where the tension between one’s inability to afford a meal and the daring hedonism of the blasting music is experienced:

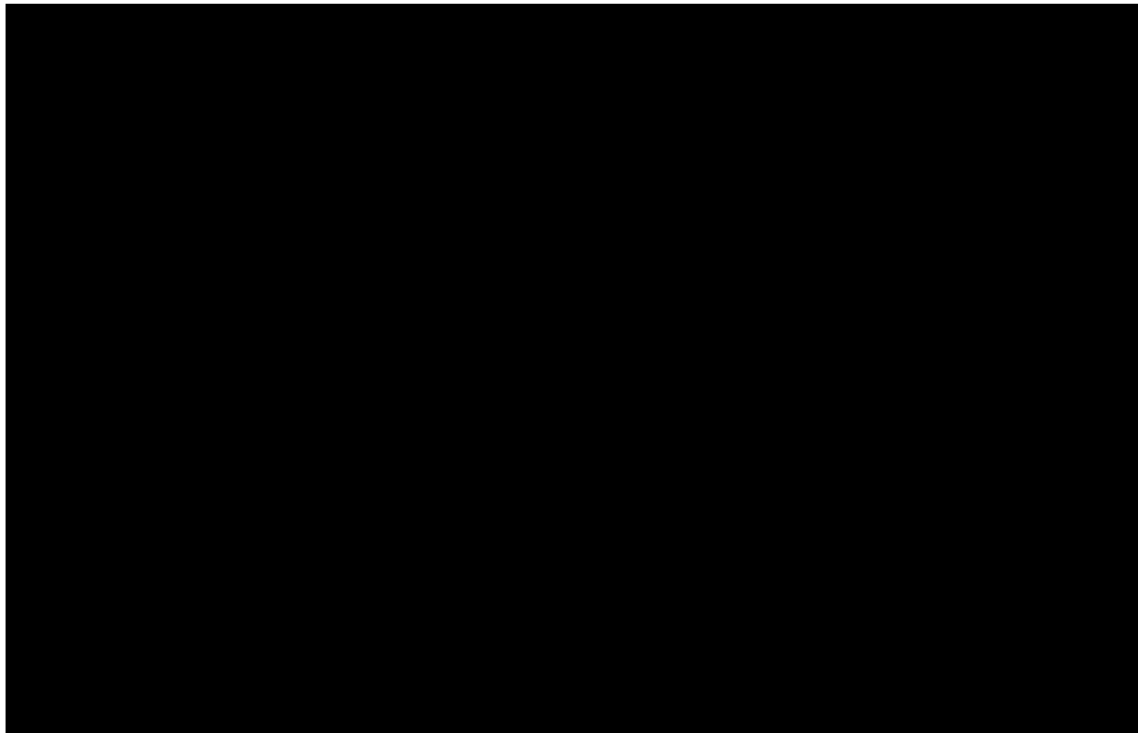
- 14 *Matatu inachezea abiria ngoma za.... party na hajatia* <sup>[1]</sup><sub>[SEP]</sub>  
Party music in the mini-bus and I’m starving, didn’t get to eat the whole day
- 15 *amekua akikimbia kutafuta picha ya Moi na Kenyatta ndio wanadada*  
*wamfungulie sidiria*  
one spends one’s time chasing banknotes, in order to chase skirts

Using banknotes as a metonymy, the hustler is described as chasing ‘the pictures of Moi and Kenyatta,’ whose portraits adorn Kenyan bills, as in the American slang for money ‘dead presidents’. The metonymy can be read as an allusion to the neo-patrimonial state, in which money essentially flows along political networks of loyalty, and where alignment with establishment personalities is necessary in order to hustle successfully and to ‘make it in life’. The money earned, or so the poem implies, is not used to buy food, but rather to have transactional sex. The motif of hunger as the hustle’s driving force and mood for action returns at the end of the poem, in line 19, hand-in-hand with a feeling of victimisation and, in the particular case of the poet, a fear of censorship.

Such fears are far from being abstractions in Janabii’s life. Following the highly controversial general election in August 2017, some four months after the week we spent together, well-orchestrated acts of police brutality occurred in Kisumu and other Kenyan opposition strongholds (Amnesty 2017). When Janabii subsequently posted critical comments to his 5,000 followers on social media, he was quickly intercepted by plain clothes officers, who introduced themselves as ‘*mkono wa sheria*’ (Swahili, ‘the arm of the law’), and locked Janabii in a police cell where they shaved his locks and beard by force. After this threat to his (unscathed) life, Janabii went silent for some time. The incident speaks volumes about the discursive silencing of economic and political violence in Kenya and the particular vulnerability of young men from the low-

income neighbourhoods. The further events and discussions that took place when we finally made it to the rehearsal space on that Wednesday afternoon, were illuminating in this regard.

Arriving at the venue, we had the good fortune to meet the choreographer, Ozzy, who had interrupted the gala rehearsals for a lunchbreak. Ozzy had secured a job with an international NGO in Tanzania and invited us and another poet for lunch in bar that was officially closed. Food and cold beers were served while the TV showed President Uhuru Kenyatta’s address on the state of the nation, his last and highly militaristic address before the general elections later the same year. ‘Political power’, Lefebvre writes, ‘knows how to utilise and manipulate time, dates and time-tables’ (2015: 78). As the only guests in the officially closed bar, we were enjoyably asynchronous to the authorities’ attempt to enforce uniformity on the rhythms of the social body. Slightly euphoric about such an unexpected and rare treat, everyone sipped their beer while discussing the ‘hustle’ in a country in which the most pressing problems, as the news ticker informed us, were insecurity, corruption and hunger.



**Figure 12:** At the bar watching the presidential address. From left to right: Janabii, Choreographer Hosea “Ozzy” Odindo and poet David “Dawe Dawe” Weda.  
Source: Author’s photograph

The closed bar opened up a comfortable space for freedom of expression which all three were quick to exploit, ridiculing the pompous ceremony and military parade, and hooting at the euphemisms in the overblown presidential address that described Kenya’s economy as ‘resilient’. They all agreed that the political challenge of unemployment and the problems faced by the hustling majority of the population, were left out of the media discourse and even systematically silenced by intimidation. Ozzy suggested that often even wives and children did not know how the head of the household earned a living:

You only know your dad leaves in the morning, he comes back, and for some reason he manages to pay school fees. Most kids do not know what their parents do. It’s like it is almost not allowed. I will slap your face if you ask me what I do!

Ozzy’s statement suggests that the discursive silencing of the hustle in Kenya is mirrored in the intimate realms of friendship and family. In Janabii’s poem, adjusting to the space between the government of Kenya and one’s family, is tantamount to choosing between a rock and a hard place. The complicity of the family and a generally hostile environment is constructed in the poem through the word ‘scandal’ (l.6), linking a child’s wrongdoings at home with corruption scandals about political heavy-weights (l.9). This sort of zoom-out is connected through the identical rhymes in two lines, 7 and 8, again, likening parental failure to the aggression of the state.

6     *Ka si mihadarati ni juu ya ma skandal* <sup>[L]</sup><sub>[SEP]</sub>  
if it’s not drugs, I am out causing some scandal<sub>[SEP]</sub>

7     *Madha alishindwa kunihandle* <sup>[L]</sup><sub>[SEP]</sub>  
my mom couldn’t handle me<sub>[SEP]</sub>

8     *Serikali ika nimishandle* <sup>[L]</sup><sub>[SEP]</sub>  
so the government is mishandling me<sub>[SEP]</sub>

9     *Kenye najua ni kuexpose skandal za Waiganjo na Waiguru* <sup>[L]</sup><sub>[SEP]</sub>  
What I know is using poetry to expose government scandals like Waiganjo's and  
Waiguru's<sub>[SEP]</sub>

As soon as we got back to the youth centre, anticipation of the following day’s event made itself felt, and the artists started fooling around with some of the props for their performances. Meanwhile, Janabii framed the invitation for lunch as part of his personal exchange network, again highlighting the distributive quality of the hustle:

Like they say, when you have it, don't eat on your own. Share with others, because you will also need it someday. Not because it is important to share, but because you will also need that favour someday. So people don't really share because they feel like sharing, but they share because they know they'll need favours...

Being part of the Kisumu artists' social space had provided Janabii with a job, a task for the week, a treat at the bar, thus helping to end the day on an emotional high.

#### 4.4 Thursday: A Job with a Promise

Thursday was the day of the gala and the waiting finally came to an end. In Kisumu, such events are mainly held in exclusive venues that differ sharply from the everyday life in the slums. The event was firmly rooted in the city's political economy, as it was part of a campaign by a candidate for the county office of the women's representative (a portfolio which entails the inefaceable category of 'the youth'). The venue, a state-of-the-art cinema, was still being set up when we got there and everybody was busy with preparations. Kedogo, whom we had met at the rehearsal space, was now acting as the stage manager and sweating visibly, the show's programme in hand, as he furiously sent everyone not performing out of the hall. The anticipation and tension rose during the hours that followed, hitting a peak just before the curtain was raised. I could not help but think that the event formed a notable counterpoint to Janabii's daily life, in which he often felt insufficiently challenged and lacked opportunities to make use of his natural abilities.

Janabii became increasingly absorbed in handling the event's live online communication, strolling through the rows, taking pictures of the fashionable youths whose glamorous appearance seemed to belie the many hardships dominating their daily lives. The politician's distant speech as she handed out the cash prizes at the end of the night, did not lessen the palpable euphoria in the hall. In pulsating performances, in tune with international dance productions, the Kisumu artists had made a clear statement about the change that they, 'the urban youth of Kenya', wanted to see in the next legislative period, namely a thriving entertainment industry. The gala night was the most hectic and intense moment in the rhythm of Janabii's week. Even if such jobs are scarce and accompanied by a lot of volunteer work, they are regularly interpreted as a promise of a future creative economy that would make such jobs the norm, rather than the exception. The seemingly menial, public relations job allowed Janabii to help

remould the image of Kisumu youth, pointing crucially to the multiple layers of storytelling and performative practices involved in hustling.

#### 4.5 Friday: Free-fall and a Difficult Surrender

The night and after-party were now the release after the gala night’s tension. We headed to a well-known pub, accompanied by the gospel-rap celebrity Collo, the star of the event. After the previous days’ hustle, ordering grilled meat at a rooftop bar felt we were now ‘living the life.’ Judging from the buoyant mood, it seemed that the collective vision of a more glamorous life, conjured by the event, was now naturally unfolding into real life. Hard-won cash prizes were quickly liquefied into rounds of cold beers. Long after I had returned to where I was staying, in the early morning hours, and after Janabii had locked half of his earnings into an electronic savings account, he decided to go for another drink with a friend. According to his account, one drink turned into a drinking spree through Kisumu’s drinking dens that lasted until the next evening.<sup>15</sup> The home-brewed spirit, *Chang’aa*, is usually consumed on the private premises where it is produced, adding yet another base to Janabii’s personal map of the city. We had once visited such a ‘Mama’ who entertained us and other customers in her living-room. On that occasion, she had provided Janabii with a Bluetooth speaker, so that he could play his own music from his phone, adding to the impression of being at home.

Janabii’s account of the day left the impression of drifting freely, roaming around town on the motorbike that his friend relied on for his income: ‘We were going with the wind... flowing anywhere...’. As became apparent from our conversation, the joy ride through the city’s illicit pubs marked the difficult transition from the gala night’s enticing collective fantasy, to mundane reality. The event’s high-energy and the effortless flow state experienced during the night, receded to again make room for the feeling of physical and mental tiredness commonly associated with hustling. Janabii regretted that he had been unable to go to work on Friday evening, when he usually offers shisha hookahs at a pub, because he felt too exhausted.

#### 4.6 Saturday: Uniting Artists and Youths

On Saturday morning, Janabii and I met at the Kisumu Museum to attend a meeting of the Kisumu Arts and Cultural Guild, an umbrella body representing Kisumu artists. The

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<sup>15</sup> I was not able to get in touch with Janabii on this day and only met him the day after, on Saturday, where he recounted (and I recorded) the past events.

meeting was a straightforward attempt to organize artists along more political lines, connecting the fates of artists to the general problems of unemployment and neglect by the county government. The main presentation used the terms ‘artists’ and ‘youths’ interchangeably, in statements such as ‘three quarters of the population is under 30 years old so basically it is a youthful and artistic city’. Such numbers must of course be treated with caution, but the presentation undoubtedly had a point, when it stated that youths and artists together comprised ‘a great number of registered voters, [...] plagued with myriad socio-economic issues’.

The guild had made previous attempts to institutionalize the existing solidarities between artists, by defining mutual responsibilities in the event of accidents, illness and death. Like many other such associations in the small-scale economy, the guild was trying to make up for non-existent social security and many members’ lack of health insurance. Despite strong presentations and a structured meeting, the attendance was low and Janabii seemed detached, as was usual for him during such more political initiatives. He later commented that he was ‘sceptical’ of such ‘attempts to politicise.’ His generally dismissive stance is indicative of a pervasive attitude in the city. As the city’s political culture is steeped in clientelism, any attempt to organize around common issues is, at the very least, met with suspicion.

#### 4.7 Sunday: The Weight of Social Interaction

On Sunday, I met Janabii at a friend's shop in Lolwe, an up-and-coming, middle-class community. The shop offers video games and printing services and Janabii occasionally helps customers out and earns a few coins. However, on this particular day, everything was quiet as we sat front of the shop, chatting the day away, with customers passing by and countless matches of football being played on the gaming consoles behind us. A good number of passing friends and acquaintances came over to greet Janabii. As a popular youth it is not uncommon for Janabii to interact with dozens of people on his journeys through the neighbourhood.

Listening to that day’s recordings, I realized how strongly Janabii’s social life is cadenced by social interactions. The interactions with friends and passers-by in front of the shop invariably appeared sincere and heartfelt. All the interactions started with inquiries of each other’s state, which elicited unanimously positive responses. Lefebvre recommends recording interviews and background noises, enabling us to reflect on the fugitive effects of rhythm (2015: 79). The more intently I listened to that day’s recorded

conversations, the more attention I paid to the substance of the seemingly offhand greetings. Forming a regular counterpoint to our own discussion, the short and vivid exchanges had rhythm, steadily swinging back-and-forth, yet pushing each other to another climax, an agreeing sound or an expression of surprise, with theatrical interjections and comical moments causing abrupt laughter. Acoustically, the exchanges blended into the city’s broader sound, pausing when noisy vehicles passed, and filling silences with nonverbal sounds such as finger snapping, tongue clicking, lips smacking, weaving the conversation into the city’s soundscape.

Some of the interaction had appeared so inconsequential that its seriousness had escaped me on site and only became evident upon closer inspection. For example, there was Willy, on whose couch Janabii had slept for months a long time ago. They had not been in contact and Willy had suffered a number of hardships. His house had burnt down, followed by a separation from his wife which left him with their only child and the financial responsibilities of a single parent. On top of that, a young man, who had stayed in his place to share the fixed costs, had recently died. In Kisumu’s streets, young adults and hustlers who are sadly used to the rhythms of continual setbacks, manage to wrap grief and pain in almost pleasurable exchanges. Janabii would take in such information with attentiveness and pause, but always bring the conversation back to an edifying point or positive perspective, such as complimenting Willy’s overall appearance and demeanour:

Janabii:        *Ni fiti kuwa ume-maintain pia.*  
                    (It’s good to see you are keeping up and looking good)

Willy:         *Nime-maintain? Bwana, ey, lazima bwana!*  
                    (You think so? Of course, man, it’s a must!)

If the experience of getting by in a Kenyan city like Kisumu consists of unsettling and disorienting fragmented rhythms, akin to the noise produced by a broken CD, then Janabii’s social life as an artist can be seen as an anchor, grounding him within the greater social body, with the unflinching recurrence of such encounters contributing to a sense of equilibrium.

#### 4.8 Conclusion

This chapter focuses on rhythm as a possible resource for exploring the specific, temporally dense entanglement of an artist/hustler with the lifeworld of a Kenyan city



whose daily ebbs and flows echo those of other African cities. Rhythm, much like articulation, is a general concept that brings together different dimensions of human action, biological, psychological, social, to describe facets of everyday life that do not often feature in mainstream accounts of urban experience. For Lefebvre, it was important that the rhythmanalytical project should never constitute a ‘separate science’ (2015: 79). Similarly, as I have shown, Janabii’s hustle never ends, whether he is enjoying an unexpected meal with friends, taking the bus, sporting a specific hairdo, or laying down on a mattress at night. From his perspective, every moment of the day and week is part of the greater game of survival, chance and mood that is the hustle. The dangers of such an all-encompassing conceptualization were of course, known to Lefebvre. Concluding his own ‘Attempt at the Rhythmanalysis of Mediterranean Cities’ in 1987, he states:

The rhythmanalytical project applied to the urban can seem disparate, because it appeals to, in order to bring together, notions and aspects that analysis too often keeps separate: time and space, the public and the private, the state-political and the intimate; it places itself sometimes in one point of view and in a certain perspective, sometimes in another (2015: 106).

I have tried to circumvent the danger of convolution as much as possible by retaining the chronological structure of the material and by focusing, as I did throughout the chapters, on one individual artist. From the perspective proposed in this chapter, there seem to be two possible ways forward: the first option would be to focus even more closely on the artist’s subjectivity, as well as the particular emotions, encounters, and junctures, that inform his actions and the flow of events in a given day.

The second option would be to broaden the focus, taking into account how the rhythms performed by Janabii build on the performativity (Fischer-Lichte 2009, 2012) of rhythm in Kisumu, on the common practices already established by other citizens in the past around hustling and spending time. I have briefly touched on the rhythms of conflict and alliance, on arrhythmia and eurhythmia, when Janabii’s relative detachment, floating and *laissez-faire* give way to more determined and forceful rhythms, when he is actively seeking and generating encounters and opportunities. However, a broader perspective would also need to account for how Janabii synchronizes with public rhythms, such as the sudden eruption of violence during elections, or the economy’s interminable stagnation during the month preceding elections, when the city’s financial resources usually flow into political campaigns.

In a lifeworld of scarcity, such as Kisumu’s low-income settlements, the ‘simple’ capacity to give one’s life a rhythm, a direction and meaning, and to oppose the senselessness of everyday structural-economic violence, becomes a valuable asset in an urban economy of micro (im)material exchanges. As a *msanii*, an artist and popular youth, the ability to create eurhythmy, to feel good and to make others feel good, brings vital emotional rewards. Whether it is during live performances, encounters with friends, or when interacting with taxi operators, this ability is essential for Janabii’s redistributive networks, through which he secures material favours, such as a meal at a pub, free transport, and a roof over his head.

Following Janabii uninterruptedly throughout one week has had welcome methodological consequences for this research. It forced me to open up my own scientific deliberations to Janabii and others who ‘do hustle’, in order to understand and represent their various street struggles from their own perspective. Shadowing Janabii for one week required me to take a back seat and to ‘float’ (Venkatesh 2013) to a much greater extent than I had been willing to do in my previous fieldwork, opening up important vistas into an everyday that is often created one moment at a time, precisely because nearly everything is contingent upon the moves one makes. Hustling as a type of social action, like articulation, is processual and changeable in nature and it requires a highly developed sensitivity to one’s surroundings as well as finely tuned social skills. The following chapter extends our inquiry into how young people in Kisumu use Spoken Word to cope with forms of marginalization more effectively. The following chapter uses the example of Dawe Dawe, one of Janabii’s former mentees, to explore novel ways of using Spoken Word across various platforms and media, in order to connect with urban audiences.

## 5. David “Dawe Dawe” Weda: Articulating Urban Progress and Personal Growth

This chapter examines the life and work of the Kisumu artist Dawe Dawe, whose range of artistic work is particularly diverse. Initially rooted in Spoken Word, Dawe Dawe’s art has evolved and crossed over into various media and genres. In 2016, the poet started #Manyatta\_Is\_Manhattan, an ongoing series on Facebook which provides him with a publishing platform for all kinds of observations and expressions, ranging from written poetry, to images with witty captions and sarcastic descriptions of and comments on, social life in Manyatta, the large shantytown in the East of Kisumu. As part of the series, Dawe Dawe recorded a series of short video clips with his smartphone, of himself performing Spoken Word pieces. The series, which I will discuss in the second half of the chapter, was hailed by a young urban audience and allowed him to establish links with important actors in the media business and aid industry, as well as to political patrons.

Moreover, during the final months of my fieldwork, in early 2017, Dawe Dawe and I started working on a documentary portraying his life and work. After countless discussions about the project, the documentary was finally planned and scripted by Dawe Dawe and then realized by Simon Njoroge, a film maker from Nairobi, with occasional support from me. I consider the documentary, which the reader will find attached to this thesis, to be an experimental collaboration, i.e. an artistic intervention that turns the field into a site for epistemic collaboration (Estella and Criado 2018). Co-creating the 27-minute film allowed me to engage more deeply with Dawe Dawe’s work and, as I will argue later, obtain insights into aspects of his propensity to articulate himself, which I would otherwise not have gained. The documentary narrates the poet’s difficult coming of age in the country’s largest slum settlement and by being infused with the poet’s own Spoken Word pieces, shows how art subsequently “saved his life,” and elevated him to his current role of artist and social educator. Following Simbao’s call (2017) for collaboration with artists, activists and writers based on the African continent, this chapter is based on the narration proposed by Dawe Dawe and Simon Njoroge in their joint production, even though I complement it substantially with contextual data gathered during interviews and conversations, as well as from participation and observation.

Drawing *inter alia* on methods derived from film studies and literary analysis, the chapter starts with a vignette. It discusses the beginning of the documentary, which

evokes the chapter’s key themes, such as masculinity and self-doubt, the precariousness of social ties, and the interrelationship of violence and respectability. There is a sense of building up in various ways that cuts through Dawe Dawe’s work and which becomes visible in the documentary in the architecture of the poet’s body and its reflection in built urban space, as well as in the cultural form of the documentary itself, which the poetry in motion takes on. By articulating Manyatta with Manhattan, this imagined elsewhere, composed of countless bits of global media, the poet deepens his artistic inquiry into what Manyatta, described as a “diamond in the rough”, could and should become, once it has been “polished”. The development is also reflected in the poet’s life history; he rose from the lowest end of the social order, from being a criminal and subsequently an inmate of Nairobi Remand Prison, to being an artist considered by many youths in Kisumu to be a spokesman for his generation.

### 5.1 #Manyatta\_Is\_Manhattan: A Life in Spoken Word

The sun rises over Manyatta, the sprawling estate that comprises the better part of the Eastern outskirts of Kisumu. We are at Kondele flyover, the nodal point and political hotspot, which unintentionally became the city’s foremost landmark and connects the slums of Obunga, Migosi and Manyatta. The streetlamps rise up into the clear morning sky like huge antennae. Standing in the middle of the flyover, perceiving nothing but the massive, curved concrete structure under the broad sky, one feels removed from Kisumu. It is almost as if one could be somewhere, anywhere, in any city around the world. At six in the morning, the flyover looks like an urban planner’s fantasy come true: a perfectly empty, urban space under the sky. When approaching the railing, several of the multi-storey buildings that have sprung up in recent years come into focus. We see the morning mist and the swirls of dust sweeping over the awakening neighbourhood. The silhouette of a man with a sturdy, muscular physique appears. The young man is wearing an athletic jersey, a large wooden necklace, as he jogs, pushing along on the concrete structure, doing his usual morning routine. The young man is David Weda (b.1991), whose artist name is Dawe Dawe (a contraction of his first and last name): he is a Spoken Word artist, and the scene described above is the beginning of the documentary *#Manyatta\_Is\_Manhattan – A life in Spoken Word in Kenya*.

Once Dawe Dawe’s silhouette has appeared on the flyover, a voice appears from the off. It is the poet’s own voice, performing one of his pieces, in a smouldering, intense, story teller’s voice. It is daybreak, and the city is slowly waking up, cars are driving up,

people walking the street. The poetry recited at the beginning of the documentary plunges us into the narrator’s psyche and emotions, confronting the viewer/listener with the narrator’s internal doubts and worries, as life in the city begins to unfold:

*Am I really man enough? Cuz all I see is a man in cuffs*

The piece begins with a moment after a crime scene, in which the narrator appears to be dragged away by police officers, handcuffed, a scene that the poet himself has experienced several times, many times in fact, in his own life. The opening question questions the validity of the narrator’s masculinity, and the listener is quickly led into the deeper layers of the city:

*Hands behind my back / back to the walls / walls have ears...*

Through associative connections the narrator seems to lead the viewer beneath the surfaces of the city, and behind the walls that he is leaning against, reminding one of Sarah Nuttall’s brilliant analysis of surfaces in South African fictional city spaces (Nuttall 2011). In Dawe Dawe’s poem *walls have ears* is rhymed with *personal fears*, those that arise in a setting that seems to be densely crowded, possibly claustrophobic, evoking a sense of confinement, similar to the pencil drawings of Nikomambo, in whose atelier Dawe Dawe often seeks artistic refuge.

As the narrator battles with “peer pressure” and “social standards”, he feels depressed and even “emotionally engineered”, connecting his difficult emotional state to the almost automatic responses to present day stimuli, to the social conditioning that almost forces him into a downward emotional spiral. Like many ordinary citizens, employed or unemployed, the artist is also struggling to define his own place in society. Yet in the poem, a particularly uncanny maze-like quality of patterns and hedges appears, when Dawe Dawe’s lines lead us from one association to another, from one confusing surface to the next. The narrator himself seems confused, referring to his own utterances as *the weird thoughts of a weirdo with a weird hairdo*, apparently perfectly aware that he falls outside the social maps and the commonly accepted social conventions. In the following line, the narrator references the shaky emotional ground he finds himself on, struggling with an “unreliable confidence” that somehow, paradoxically, is “betraying” itself, undermining his own efforts and attempts.

*unreliable confidence, betraying your confidence*

The first part of the piece speaks of internal doubts and of the problem of being one’s own “greatest enemy”. However, in the following four lines, we are led through the

circle of distancing and encounters between the narrator and external actors in the city. Speaking to himself and to the reader at the same time, the following words erupt from the narrator:

*You sold your trust so cheap  
now you are emotionally hurt so deep  
that's why I'm armed to the teeth  
but I still hold my tongue*

From trust, in the first line, which appears as a precious commodity that is too easily squandered, we move to deceit in the second line, perhaps arising from a simple transaction in the city, or from someone close to the narrator. From there, in the third line, a new guardedness and watchfulness arises, described as being *armed to the teeth*. Despite this defensiveness, he is still open for encounters, although cautiously, tentatively, as one who now keeps his thoughts to himself. Even if the narrator's hands are still in cuffs, reminding the listener of his very own oppression, he has “untied [his] tongue”, and this for a specific reason:

*cuz we have heroes who died but they are still unsung*

This line can be understood as a reverence to the murdered, anti-colonial, resistance fighters and opposition politicians, who left their lives fighting for the greater good, well aware of the dangers entailed in their struggle. Immediately, the poet ties the unpleasant, past, historical juncture to the rugged, makeshift, survivalist nature of contemporary urban life; the result of this very history. The present point in time is characterized by the absence of anything that could be aesthetically pleasing to the senses or the mind, and a moment that demands self-reliance and perseverance from citizens in their daily struggle to survive and to make ends meet:

*nothing beautiful, everything is hand-some*

This line uses a technique that is particularly popular among Kisumu poets, who like to dwell on words, stretching them phonetically, morphing the words, so as to change their semantic content. Here the poet juxtaposes the adjective beautiful with the adjective *handsome*, which through his emphasis on the word *hand*, becomes *hand-some*[thing], as in the phrase *hand to mouth*, which follows in the next line. By morphing the adjective *handsome* into *hand-some*, the poet linguistically emulates the character of much of urban life around him, the do-it-yourself character of the many welding and woodworking workshops around Kondele, where *fundi* (Swahili, *local repairmen*)

repair, recycle and produce with their hands, often in a processual manner, without a plan for the specific work progress, relying on their imagination and the sheer physicality of the materials at hand.

*hand to mouth, north to south*

The processual flow is continued in the second part of the line which mirrors the beginning in its syntax, pushing it a little further semantically. *North to South* is used here like the colloquial phrase *East West*, as a synonym for any and all places, as if to say, there is no escaping this, you have to make it happen, and, as the following line seems to suggest, this at all cost:

*If you want some, get ready to part with some ransom*

If you want *some*, if you want to make money, the poem implies, you have to be ready to exert violence, firstly toward yourself, simply forcing yourself to get up in the morning, possibly hungry, without a plan of where to go or whom to turn to, knowing that if you want to gain something, then as Dawe Dawe later puts it in the documentary, “somebody will have to lose something”. The poem sketches a lifeworld in which disorder has become a political instrument (Chabal and Daloz 1999) and where the lines between illegal and legal, corrupt and honest, the righteous and the reprobate, are increasingly blurred (Comaroff 2016: x - xi). Gaining something, it seems, will cause you, or for that matter, someone else, pain.

*what you are worth is equivalent of respect you gain*

*no pain, no gain*

*it is no paying, no gain*

The poem closes with the statement that one’s social worth and respectability is based on the admiration and validation received from others. Respectability has an immaterial quality and is something that can be actively produced, attained, accomplished, for example, an artist’s reputation. However, in Kisumu’s lifeworld, one’s respectability is intimately and indeed, painfully, tied to the gains, the *value*, monetary and otherwise, that one generates. We encountered the phrase *no pain, no gain* in Chapter two as the pumping motto at Evan’s gym. In the example of the poem, Dawe Dawe repeats the motto twice, the second time again emphasising the word *pain*, morphing the noun into the verb *paying*, thereby articulating the social suffering, the physical affliction and visceral intensity of the currency, around which the whole neighbourhood revolves.

*Embodying Urban Progress*

Visually speaking, the documentary introduces the poet right within the tension between the two very different poles in his life. On one side of the flyover, where we see the poet jogging, is the student housing in which David Weda leads his civic life. Simultaneously, his one room apartment doubles as creative lab; the house’s rooftop is a space where he records selfie-spoken-word pieces, which are then shared on social media. On the other side of the flyover are the Kenya Medical Training Centre buildings, where David Weda is training to be a medical nurse.

The opening at the flyover reminds me of the famous passage that opens the “Walking in the City” chapter in Michel Certeau’s seminal book, *Arts de faire* (1980). In the passage, the author attempts, full of relish, to fathom New York as an urban space, and even apparently as *the urban tout court*, from this privileged aerial viewpoint on top of the World Trade Center. As clumsy as the comparison may appear to a reader who has never visited Kisumu, the flyover in Kondele, in the north of the city, has become an important symbol of Western urban development, and a vantage point from which one can ponder the city’s future development. The flyover construction’s popularity among Kisumu citizens was even emphasised in a news clip on national media, which documented the tactical, altered use of the construction by urban citizens. Even though the construction has no space at all allocated to pedestrians, and is therefore a dangerous place for walking, Kisumu citizens have turned the landmark construction into a popular leisure spot and viewing point, giving a different meaning, as the moderator jokes, to the word *flyover*<sup>16</sup>. At the documentary’s beginning, Dawe Dawe is also sitting on top of the flyover, using it as a vantage point over the awakening city, in his bid to read and depict it, offering inroads into the very sociocultural reality that governs his daily life.

In the documentary’s beginning, there is an interesting sense of connecting the poet’s body with the landmark building and the city at large in the background. On his running trail, the poet passes a graffiti of his hashtag #Manyatta\_Is\_Manhattan, sprayed in blue paint on the waist-high wall of the concrete structure. Afterwards, he is filmed backlit, appearing as a black silhouette in front of Manyatta, while stretching himself after his exercise, preparing to ‘attack’ the new day. The documentary uses these visual effects to

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<sup>16</sup> KTN News Kenya ‘Residents turn flyover into a viewing point of Kisumu city’, retrieved from <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8EGVdN1yWqQ>>, accessed 7.10.2019.



establish a connection between the poet’s physical and mental work, his efforts to make-do and matter, and city life, thereby linking his personal growth to the development of the city.

The construction of the poet as an embodiment of Manyatta, appears again, in a particularly pronounced way, when the poet explains his motivation behind the hashtag #Manyatta\_Is\_Manhattan later on in the documentary (from minute 15:44). In the passage, Dawe Dawe encounters a local salesman who offers a weighing service using an old, heavy, repaired metal scale. The poet steps on the balance in front of the flyover’s massive walls, as his voice from off stage starts to explain: “#Manyatta\_Is\_Manhattan indicates that Manyatta is upgrading... albeit in a slow pace,” as the visual shows him stepping onto the rusty scale, followed by a close-up of the needle climbing. “But it’s upgrading to something better...”, the remote voice continues, as his face is shown under his baseball cap’s peak, looking down on the scale. A close-up of his body accompanies every positive attribute that the poet ascribes to Manyatta: “[Manyatta is upgrading to...] something worth visiting” (close-up of the poet’s face), “something worth mentioning” (close-up of his large wooden necklace), “...where one can feel proud to associate with Manyatta...” (close-up of another detail of the artistic necklace, in which wooden and glass balls are held together by metal wire).

By visually fusing the poet’s body with the cityscape, the documentary articulates the poet’s aspiration to stand for Manyatta, to become a figurehead for the needs and aspirations of its inhabitants. As stated in the introduction, the ability to ‘represent’ one’s neighbourhood and to make the needs of the population visible and audible, often becomes a stepping stone towards political positions. As I will show at the end of the chapter, Dawe Dawe also established links to the political establishment during the process of shooting the documentary, so as to maximize the potential effects of the cultural capital that such a compelling artistic project can bring about.

Strategic calculations, however, were not the origin of Dawe Dawe’s empowering venture into poetry. Quite the opposite, he states at the beginning of the documentary, “Poetry is a way of life, it grants me a chance to escape...it is my other drug”. The role of art in Dawe Dawe’s life is primarily therapeutic. The first part of the quote mirrors Evans’ statement in Chapter two (“corruption is a way of life”) in which Evans similarly affirms and validates a specific type of behaviour which deviates from mainstream cultural norms. Evans’ makeshift entrepreneurial efforts in both

bodybuilding and the organization of workshops, do not correspond to conventional ideas about employment, and neither do the vigorous attempts of the other artists discussed in this thesis. For them, as for Dawe Dawe, art grants them a “chance to escape,” not least from the cultural matrix of how one has to transition into adulthood and its associated definitions of social respectability.

The second part of the quote points to the psychological relief, poetry’s almost therapeutic function, when the rhythms of performing or writing rhymes enable Dawe Dawe to distance himself from unpleasant realities and to break free from a feeling of confinement. This cathartic dimension implicitly links poetry to smoking weed, when the poet refers to poetry as his “other drug”. In order to illustrate the mental and emotional strain of ghetto life as a driving force behind Dawe Dawe’s creativity, I quote the poet from an interview in which he linked the discomfort of life in the ghetto to the resulting need for distraction. During the conversation, we talked about parenting in the ghetto and Dawe Dawe mentioned the sense of confinement often experienced in crowded housing, as well as the tensions and domestic violence that arise from a lack of resources. Talking about his earlier life in Kibera, one Nairobi’s largest and most infamous slums, the poet recounts:

You see, me I have seen people fighting with their fathers physically, war. My friend who we were arrested with, he was fighting his father, who is a habitual drunkard. The mom is a drunkard too. All of them, the brothers and the sisters, you see it is fucked, you kind of put yourself in their shoes and you start wondering like wawawawa! This is now crazy, cuz they are living in a shanty in a small house, and you are living there, you, your parents plus your siblings, your elder sister who also has her children like two kids are all there, so when it comes to sleeping time, the table is turned upside down and put next to the door. People are sleeping down here others in the chair, others are under the chair, your parents are just there, only the curtain is what is separating, then they start quarrelling. You see, they start fighting there your dad is pushed down by your mum cuz your mum is heavily built but your dad is frail, he is pushed down... it is crazy. That is why when someone wakes up now, he just wants to go out, find some weed and escape.

The particularly taxing social environment of low-income settlements turns distraction, as the quote aptly illustrates, into something of an existential need, and it is not surprising that art with its relieving, at times escapist, potential, is often juxtaposed with crime, which is more often than not the corollary of the slums’ other ‘evasion machine’, drugs. For example, the use of marijuana is widespread in Kisumu’s low-income settlements, much like the empty plastic alcohol sachets that litter virtually every street in town, and which together with other forms of debris, have become an integral part of

the city’s infrastructure. For Dawe Dawe, poetry is a complement to smoking marijuana, another means of processing, releasing, and thereby providing relief, from stress or repressed emotions. He achieves this effect not only by writing and performing poetry himself, but also through a poet’s “way of life”, by being part of a growing network of young poets who share their poetry, performed or written, on Facebook and who invite each other to spoken word events. “When I grab a pen,” Dawe Dawe explains, “or when I read other people’s works, and essays, I do feel refreshed, replenished, rejuvenated”.

### *Rural-Urban and Urban-Urban Divides*

Immediately after the introduction, the documentary follows the poet into his sanctum, a rented room in student housing right next to the Kondele flyover. Sitting in front of his desk, the poet begins to introduce himself, “I come from a very big family... polygamous. I come from the small house, the last house, the fourth house”. It is notable that the artist, who many young people in Kisumu see as a role model embodying an urban lifestyle, introduces himself by detailing his family ties. One aspect that shaped the poet’s life considerably, and which remains implicit in his narration in the documentary, is the rupture of kinship ties. While the poet does not air his dirty linen in public, his introductory statement, that he comes from his family’s fourth and last house, indicates a situation of relative disadvantage to his peers. Like many of my informants (e.g. Boniface, Janabii), Dawe Dawe grew up in different parts of the country. He was born in Nairobi and educated in the capital while staying in his mother’s household in Mathare, a socially mixed neighbourhood in the north of Nairobi. His mother was his father’s fourth wife and his father would only spend a few days at their Mathare home each week. When his father retired, the family was forced to move to their rural homestead in Magoya, a small village in Siyaha County, a two-hour drive north of Kisumu. For Dawe Dawe this was an extreme change in itself, from growing up as a child in a financially stable situation in a cosmopolitan, socially-mixed neighbourhood, to going back to *ushago* (Sheng, *rural homeland*), a setting marked by poverty and in comparison, a very reduced diversity of lifestyles and outlooks. Many of my informants have experienced their parents’ generation’s retrenchment or retirement as a social descent or setback (Evans, Boniface, Winnie). Dawe Dawe remembers how people in Nairobi warned him before the move, that he was “going to suffer”. In the countryside, his mother turned to brewing alcohol, which was distilled at the compound

and sold illicitly. Dawe Dawe still admires the way his mother was able to fend for her ten children in such a financially deprived environment, acknowledging that “she was a fighter!”. In my informants from Kisumu’s imagination, the urban centre of Luoland, *Ushago* is at the same time dreaded for its poverty and lack of economic opportunities and revered as a place of belonging. *Ushago* is one’s place of origin, the origin of one’s family, and a place to withdraw to outside the bustle of the city, where, depending on one’s family’s situation with regard to land-owning, one may hope to one day build a retirement home and live “the good life”.

Dawe Dawe’s childhood in Magoya was marked by his experience of shrinking opportunities and he was deeply aware of the competition between siblings in the four wives’ homestead, each of whom had on average ten children. Coming from the “hao ya mwisho” (Sheng, *the last house*) meant that he had siblings who biologically speaking, could have been his aunts and uncles. The competition was especially pronounced between the boys, who would share dinner at one of the elder brothers’ *simba* (Dholuo, *bachelor’s hut*). Dawe Dawe remembers, for example, how one of his brothers blew out the only candle and sent him to the main house to light it again, only for Dawe Dawe to find that all the food had gone when he returned. His adjustment to the more rugged rural environment also included learning how to eat food which was still “burning hot”, because waiting for it to cool down would have often meant not eating at all. This was, as it turned out, a preparation for the fight for survival he experienced several years later in the shantytown of Kibera, as well as during his prison sentence. Another way in which being of the “last house” marks one’s trajectory is in respect of the inheritance patterns in Luo culture, whereby land is allocated proportionally in size from the first to the last born. Parker MacDonald Shipton (2009) explains this pattern of inheritance in his book *Mortgaging the Ancestors*, using the example of a monogamous homestead:

If there is more than one son in a monogamous homestead, the eldest takes land in front of or to the right of the entrance, and the second son takes land on the left. The third receives land to the right and center again, but farther from the father’s homestead. The fourth son, if there is one, goes to the left but farther from the paternal homestead than the second. Further sons alternate right and left. While elder sons might thus receive larger shares than the younger ones, the youngest takes over the personal garden (*mondo*) kept by the father for his own use—as if as a consolation prize (p. 93).

In a polygamous homestead, such as that in which Dawe Dawe grew up, the inheritance pattern is essentially the same, except that the parcels that would be allotted to one child in a monogamous homestead, would be allotted to one ‘house’, and then further divided

between the children of that house. In Dawe Dawe’s personal case, this would mean that even though the family’s homestead was relatively extensive, he would only inherit a small piece of land, as the land allotted to his mother’s ‘house’ would be further divided between him and his seven siblings alive today. Considering this background, the term “consolation prize” is actually appropriate here. The advancement of siblings from other houses marked the poet and imbued him with a sense of self-reliance from early on:

These guys had new uniforms for I was using their old ones, so you can imagine the feeling. You go to school in the morning together, you are having an old uniform and even oversized clothes, because these guys were older than me and they have nice, nice shirts, nice shoes and new bags and you are going to the same school. And you are like that is it man, that is life.

The feeling of disadvantage flows through the life story interviews I conducted with Dawe Dawe; while visiting his family in Magoya during Christmas 2016, the poet complained about his family’s lack of understanding for his artistic work. In front of his mother, he told me in English, clearly enough for everybody to understand, that he would have to wait for “it [art] to make sense”, in other words, to achieve some commercial success, before his family could appreciate what he was doing. The moment illustrates the element of estrangement from their families often experienced by young people who follow their passion for art seriously; they are often confronted with expectations that they should contribute financially as quickly and as much as possible. At the same time, for me, it was an uncanny moment when Dawe Dawe used my presence and my sustained interest in his activities as social proof that he was on to something bigger.

As a sibling from the last house, he described himself as having been deprived of access to his father as a child. His now late father was often away and delegated tasks to the elder sons who acted as proxies between him and Dawe Dawe, often to the poet’s detriment. The standards set by his father as a member of the middle-class and rural elite, continue to guide Dawe Dawe. The poet often contrasted his ambitions for cultural entrepreneurship with the prospect of working in a health facility after finishing his training, referring to the latter as hard, underpaid work, or in his own words, as “slaving”. On the one hand, accepting a nurse’s salary would grant him some security for covering basic needs. On the other hand, entering the profession would mean social stagnation and falling behind the status that his father had already achieved through his work as a criminal investigator. The precarity of the health profession was made

blatantly evident by the strikes being held by medical nurses in Kenya at that time, demanding better payment and, in many instances, the payment of months of unpaid salaries. Dawe Dawe’s rejection of “casual” labour again parallels the attitudes of other informants (Evans, Aduwo, Winnie), many of whom grew up living a “better life” in their parents’ households, before their parents were affected by the widespread mass retrenchments of the time, or by (early) retirement.

Accordingly, Dawe Dawe wanted to further his education and study after finishing secondary school and applied to several universities and scholarships. While his family encouraged him to study, it made no financial contribution toward his goal, much to his disappointment. In a bid to avoid “stagnating” in the rural environment, Dawe Dawe moved to the capital to look for wider opportunities. Once again, the rupture with his kin and the absence of any form of support caught him by surprise. While he had hoped for temporary accommodation and provisional support from some of his more well-off brothers, this was refused and he moved into a shared tenement in Nairobi’s infamous shanty town, Kibera.

#### *Urban Marginality and Art in a Nairobi Slum*

Dawe Dawe’s experience in Kibera mirrors that of many young people who move to the capital in search of a better life. In Kenya, this modern-day urban *rite de passage* and adventure, is often expressed in the idiom of an artistic journey. Artistic becoming in this context, stands for the fluid identity of someone searching for a position, a place to claim and make their own, and generally for the rejection of traditional cultural scripts and expectations. In many ways the artistic identity reflects the creative, makeshift character of young people’s lives when they are forced to improvise and juggle multiple sources of income (Thieme 2017), thereby pioneering and championing a lifestyle that is more often than not, radically different from that of their parents.

The intimate and widespread connection between art and urban marginality in the Kenyan urban low-income context, was taken up by the Kenyan film director David Gitonga in the dramatic feature film *Nairobi Half-Life*. The story recounts the journey of a young man, Mwas, who moves from his parents’ rural home into the capital, hustling, hawking action-movies, which, as an aspiring actor, he acts out for his potential customers. Virtually all of my informants knew and cherished the film for its accuracy in depicting the struggles of urban Kenyan youth, especially as Mwas

discovers that Nairobi is not just glamour and opportunities, but that there is also the tough street life of everyday survival.

The fact that so many young people choose to live in a slum like Kibera, despite its extreme living conditions, with crowded tenements, lack of basic services, open sewers and rampant criminality, reveals just how hopeless the rural setting is generally considered to be in terms of social mobility. Like Mwas in the film, Dawe Dawe found himself with his back against the wall in a metropolis characterized by a merciless economy, and in a bid to secure his survival, he resorted to crime. For more than a year, Dawe Dawe lived the life of a hoodlum, robbing people at night with a plastic gun bought from a video games shop and eventually served a one-year prison sentence, before finally being acquitted and released.

In the documentary, perhaps somewhat unexpectedly, Dawe Dawe at first refers to his time in Kibera as an “awesome time” because it was when he was “staying with the boys”. Fresh from high-school, this new life and especially the new-found camaraderie with others of his age, must have given him a sense of freedom. Despite the living conditions in Kibera, which he diplomatically describes as “deplorable”, Dawe Dawe felt that the time had come to finally do what *he* wanted to do. Kibera abounded with talent, whether in football, dance, or rap music, and was a place that was as much inspiring as it was difficult to navigate. Jobs were hard to get and the proliferating talent displayed by young people in the neighbourhood would rarely translate into payment. In the documentary, the dilemma Dawe Dawe faced at this time is poetically crafted through the eyes of a friend, Okoth, who had just been murdered in an act of mob justice:

1 *Alikuwa 19 years old...ndio alikuwa amemaliza fourth*  
2 *Alikuwa analive a double life... alikuwa anajuggle them both*  
3 *Alikuwa my roommate ...nikistay Mathare north*  
4 *Alikuwa my best friend...*  
5 *jinake ilikuwa ni Okoth*  
6 *Unacheiki mtaa yetu kulikuwa na mentality eti huwezi get wera kwa ofe*  
7 *Ikabidi maboiz wote waanze kuroll na ma Fe*  
8 *Marobbery kwa ma MPESA na ma Cyber café*  
9 *Saa hii beshte yangu amesafirishwa jongomeo bila hata fare*  
10 *Life is not fair... but Okoth hakuwai care*  
11 *Alikuwa miracle baby but si wa Gilbert Deya*  
12 *Na stuff alikuwa ana do hata shetani mwenyewe hawezi dare*  
14 *juu alijiamini*  
16 *Come sorrow - Come pain*  
17 *Some sun - Come rain*  
18 *hadi mapoliticans walikuwa wanamtumia kama hooligan times za campaign*  
19 *juu Alikuwa roho juu*  
20 *Maini katikati*  
21 *Na ball mbili zimehang hapo chini*  
22 *Saa hizi siwezi imagine beshte yangu amedoz lifeless hapo chini*

1 He was 19 years old fresh from high school...  
2 He was living a double life... he was juggling them both  
3 He was my roommate when I was staying in Mathare North  
4 He was my best friend  
5 His name is Okoth  
6 You see, in our turf there was a mentality  
7 that we can't get work in the offices  
8 So every youth had to roll with a gun  
9 Robbery in MPESAs and Cyber Cafes  
10 Right now my friend has been hauled to  
11 the skies without paying the fare  
12 Life is not fair, But Okoth never cared  
13 He was a miracle baby but not from Gilbert Deya  
14 and the stuff he used to do even the devil himself cannot dare  
15 He believed in himself  
16 Come sorrow - Come pain  
17 Some sun - Come rain  
18 Even politicians used him as a hooligan during the times of campaigns  
19 He had his heart up  
20 Liver in the middle  
21 and two balls hanging down there  
22 Right now, I can't believe that my friend is lying lifeless down there



The poem evokes the tension between extremely divergent expectations, between on the one hand, the mainstream cultural expectations of attaining a ‘real’ white-collar office job, and on the other, those of securing survival and making ends meet, at any cost necessary. The poem’s hero, Okoth, lies *lifeless* before the shocked narrator. The friend is described as having had unshakable determination and a high belief in himself, but these characteristics, the poem seems to imply, are not necessarily sufficient for navigating the extreme lifeworld of a slum like Kibera.

The poem describes the starting point for many young people who finish secondary school and find themselves confronted with the structural-economic violence of their exclusion from mainstream economy at a young age. In the documentary, Dawe Dawe recalls the dilemma that the poem brings to light: “Jobs were scarce and talents were not paying, so a lot of youths opted for an easier way out. And that easier way for many was crime.” Okoth’s *double life* reflects once again the differentiation between “strongmen” and “artists”, proposed by Bam Ochieng in Chapter two. Okoth “juggles” the different lives, one in which he may be trying to make ends meet, *hustling*, and one in which he has become an outright criminal, doing things even “the devil himself cannot dare,” such as robbing people at night or beating up people as part of a political aspirant’s “political campaign”. A little later in the documentary, Dawe Dawe changes his initial, positive assessment of his experience in Kibera as he relates to the structural violence inherent in the shantytown:

Life in Kibera was tricky, it was survival of the fittest. One has to eat, and for you to eat, you have to go to the streets, and in the streets, someone had to lose something for you to eat.

The overwhelming intensity and often-times traumatic dimension of Dawe Dawe’s experience in Kibera was apparent to me from the way he often spoke about it. When remembering this episode of his life, he usually recounted it in a stream-of-consciousness manner, in which episodes and bouts of information would gush out of him. The particular hardships he had endured alongside many other Kenyan youths, were difficult for me to relate to and also difficult for him to tell me about. At one point, Dawe Dawe noted that revisiting this part of his life in our conversations was emotionally challenging for him. In his haunting memories, the shantytown appears as a place where violence is omnipresent and death lurks around every corner. Even the shantytown’s simple infrastructure is deadly, with open, illegal electrical wiring that would regularly electrocute people, children or animals, especially during the rainy

season. Dawe Dawe stayed in the direct vicinity to Kibera’s railway line, an infrastructure landmark that is the origin of the neighbourhood’s nickname “namba nane” (Swahili, *number eight*), and which appears in his memories as an infrastructure of death:

Like you see where we lived, was next to the railway line. Have you ever seen someone ran over by a train? Like this half is out, the legs are out, the intestines are exposed, the head is twisted like this, then you are like waaah, and it is daytime, people are watching, even the children are watching, then the cops will just come and pick the pieces, then they forget a finger, the finger will be there like for three weeks and that is it. As for me, I have seen like six people who just died. Others are suicide, they are just there and wait as they train approaches they jump under, others are killed then placed in the railway line cuz everyday a train must pass, so in the morning people will be like ...’ ah this person alikanyagwa na [was run over by a] train ...’ that is how crazy it is. That is how crazy crazy crazy it is ... Then there was a thief who was caught, do you know what they did to him, they took his leg tied it on the railway line and left. So the train comes and shwaa .... amputation man ... he has one leg right now...

In Kibera, violence and death were integral parts of Dawe Dawe’s everyday experience. Meeting his friends at the corner and receiving the news that this or the other friend had died, or that the young local woman whom he had been “eyeing” had been the victim of a multiple perpetrator rape. By going out every other night, armed with a fake gun and waylaying people returning from their work in the city, Dawe Dawe was himself deeply involved with and part of Kibera’s violence. It is a world that is difficult to describe in words, whether for an academic like myself, or a poet with a gift for language like Dawe Dawe (see the vocalization *waaaaaah* and the repetition of *crazy* in the above quote). Kleinman and Das (1997) accurately describe social violence as “the devastating injuries that social force inflicts on human experience” (p. ix). The sheer brutality of Dawe Dawe’s experience reminded me most poignantly of the difficulties of representing the struggles and suffering of those who are less privileged from my own highly privileged, background. How I am to speak, I asked myself then as well as during the writing of this dissertation, when the poet himself is struggling for words? How am I to speak of a situation in which physical and mental violence has produced dislocated lifeworlds? “It didn’t matter to me,” Dawe Dawe recalls the meaninglessness and senselessness of the life that he experienced at the time, “cuz for me, I considered myself a dead man, I knew I could die anytime”. Having seen one of his best friends die in an act of mob justice, the poet knew that it was only a matter of time before he would end up either in jail, or dead in the street. Whether running away from police or an

angry mob, the poet was well aware that death was imminent, and could catch up with him at any time:

I was finding myself in robbery situations, gun shots and stuff. Mob justice, for me I have ran man, I have ran, like two instances, not two, many many, so many. When you are running you know that your life is on the line, you are dying, you have seen people die, and you know that today is your day.

Dawe Dawe’s experience is again mirrored in the film *Nairobi Half-Life*, when the main character Mwas discovers the illegal practices of so-called “killer cops”, police officers who draconically rule over and exploit disadvantaged neighbourhoods in collusion with local gangs. When Mwas confronts one of his partners in crime, asking how such systematic dehumanization can be possible, his friend retorts unemotionally, “si sisi ni maitu tu?” (Swahili, *don’t you know we are just corpses?*). The phrase encapsulates the admission that the lives of young people from the ghetto are disposable. This is illustrated forcefully in the film when at the end of the film the gang surrounding the main character is locked in an unoccupied building by the rogue police officers, who are dropping the dead bodies of random young men at crime hotspots, to deliver ‘proof’ that the police have hunted down alleged thieves. The Dutch anthropologist Naomi van Staepelen, has for many years conducted research in Nairobi ghettos such as Mathare (Staepelen 2019) and her work as an activist with the Kibera Justice Centre shows that such excessively brutal and illegal practices are an integral part of the exercise of control over the low-income settlements in Nairobi.

Dawe Dawe’s plight as a young man without any support system in Kibera, is strongly expressed in the documentary. As he remembers his friends who died, the poet is shown at a crowded junction in Kibera, a dark sky over the myriad *mabati* (Swahili *corrugated iron*) structures, wires hanging loosely in the air. The poet stands alone in a camouflage sweater, large sunglasses covering his face, motionless. In the background, people are going about their daily affairs, one person carries a jerry can, a mother walks her daughter over the railway line and past a dumpsite. At this point in the narration, the viewer grasps that Dawe Dawe’s case is not exceptional in itself, but rather a reflection of everyday life for many urban Kenyan youths. A child passes in front of him, as he stares into a void. As the poet’s voice, off set, recounts how criminality at one point became his everyday life and ‘normal’, the viewer can see this deeply disturbing experience is still engraved on his face.



**Figure 13:** Dawe Dawe visiting his former neighbourhood of Kibera in 2017.  
Source: Still from documentary

*NGOs, Art and the Creation of New Horizons*

In 2011, Dawe Dawe was finally caught during a robbery in an upmarket Nairobi neighbourhood. Going to jail was a new experience for him but one that he had heard about many times. On the street corners where he used to hang out with his peers, going to jail under conditions of mass incarceration, has become a *rite of passage* (for the US, see Green 2016) and nurtures the already strong connections between inmate prison culture and ‘street’ culture. In the documentary, Dawe Dawe glosses over his prison experience but in our conversations, he revealed the importance of this episode in his life. Strikingly, the poet stated that at the time he had been “curious” about going to prison. As indicated above, there was nothing in Dawe Dawe’s life which could have made him anticipate an improvement of his living conditions, and considering the extreme circumstances of his life at the time, the poet viewed the prospect of going to prison as a potential turning-point in his life. The statement that the poet considered himself a “dead man” points to an absence of imagination about future horizons, particularly those in which he would figure as a well-integrated, respected member of society. The overall confusion at this point in his life, might also have contributed to his ‘interest’ in jail, as he perceived his life to be an irremediable situation from which it was impossible to extricate himself. Dawe Dawe’s interest might also have been piqued by the many stories he had heard from peers, from improbable stories of smuggling, to successful escapes, to the brute violence among inmates. Moreover, as a child, he had

devoured the novels of the former bank robber turned writer, John Kiriamiti, who penned the majority of his legendary literary work in jail and enjoyed great success with Kenyan youths during the 1980s and 1990s. In perhaps his best-known book, *My Life in Crime*, the author describes his experience as a criminal and his consequent life-sentence in a maximum-security prison. Many of Dawe Dawe’s friends as well as one of his brothers, had served jail sentences, so the idea of “doing time” in prison was certainly not unfamiliar to him.

As in Dawe Dawe’s accounts of life in Kibera, Kiriamiti used the adjective “crazy” frequently, indicating a lifeworld that is disjointed, devoid of meaning, and often bordering on the absurd. Despite the superficial order consisting of inmate numbers, cell numbers, headcounts, prayers and a strict schedule, Dawe Dawe describes his experience in jail as being marked by a high degree of uncertainty. Few inmates had legal representation and Dawe Dawe, like most of them, was left in uncertainty about details relating to his case and the date of his court hearing, especially as he did not have a court-appointed counsel. In a sense, the ‘stuckedness’ and the oppressive pull of idleness in Kibera would continue inside jail, where according to Dawe Dawe “people wait all the time”, to go out, for their turn to shower, for the headcount to finish, or, once locked in the cell in the middle of the afternoon, for the day to end and the next day to start. Dawe Dawe illustrated the extreme time regime in jail with the following observations:

Sometimes you will find that the complainant is coming to court with kids who were born after the sentence... or after coming from court and given like four or three months to the next hearing you just go for the drugs, Tegretol, Haloperidol those psychotics, you take like three then you go to sleep for one week, you wake up, eat a bit, then go back to sleep just for days to pass. Because time is not passing, 24 hours feels like one week, time doesn’t move, especially when you are in jail, because at around three the door is already closed, and you can’t see out, you don’t even know what time it is...

Once again, we encounter the oxymoronic idea of ‘living dead,’ one who remains stuck, vegetating in prison using tranquilizers and antipsychotics, while life continues for others. Curiously however, although Dawe Dawe depicts certain aspects of his experience in jail as dreadful, sluggish routine, other aspects point to the ‘creative’ side of prison life. As a criminal, his life was already highly contingent and involved a lot of ingenuity and shrewdness, or, in Swahili *ujanja*. As a *mjanja* (Sheng, *street-smart hustler*), Dawe Dawe had to strategize and plan, where to waylay people, at what time of the day, in cooperation with how many others, and which props and exit routes to

use. Which places are ‘conducive’, which places are prone to set-ups by police or by groups of neighbours retaliating against local surges in crime? Likewise, vigilance is needed in jail, whether one is involved in smuggling, consuming drugs, or in just about any social interaction. The simple circumstance of misreading a social situation and “upsetting” someone Dawe Dawe remembers, could easily result in being stabbed, for instance, with a sharpened toothbrush, which given the delayed and superficial health treatment available in jail, would probably cause death. Extreme forms of creativity include examples of escapes that may or may not involve a lot of imagination, as well as crude strategies, like self-inflicted injuries. The preparation of a defence without any legal support is another example of the makeshift creativity required in the context of unreliable institutions. Dawe Dawe relied on older inmates and so-called “prison birds” who knew the usual legal procedures inside-out, in order to pick up the “court lingo”. Even though the poet prides himself on having defended himself honourably, he does not attribute the fact that he was acquitted after one year to the idiomatic expressions he used in front of the judge but to the fact that he never injured his victims physically. Dawe Dawe was acquitted after one year and released but yet again, he was painfully reminded that he was all by himself when he met one of his elder brothers, who had encouraged him to come to Nairobi and on whose support he had been desperately counting:

So my brother, he never wanted to see me, he told me, to go back to Kibera. I had no house, I had nothing. You know how much he gave me? 200/- [KES] man, two hundred only. I had nothing, I was there in the middle of Nairobi with 200/- in my pocket, nikapanda matatu hadi [I hopped on a matatu up to] Kibera 30/-, nikabaki na [remaining with]] 170/-. I haven’t eaten anything, nikakula lunch ya [so I ate lunch worth] 30/-. I was remaining with 130/-. So that guy to me it is like he wanted me to go back to the gang, cuz I needed cash, like go back to the gang, start robbing people and get killed or go back to jail or something, you see, that is how it translated to me. And my brother who was living in Kibera, I could not go to his place cuz he didn’t call me, so he can just tell me “bwana you know what, I didn’t call you”. So, I was just there, no job, I was living with Dan and that is what I was doing. I was selling the scrap metals to get cash, no experience no nothing in the street, no school, so for me, I knew I would die anytime.

The documentary re-enacts his difficult transition back into slum life, when Dawe Dawe walks back into the Kibera beneath the Langata overpass construction, which was given the nickname “the great wall of Langata” for its symbolic significance as a boundary wall between Kibera and the better-off Langata neighbourhood. Back in Kibera, in an effort to escape his former criminal lifestyle, Dawe gathered and sold scrap metal and

tried his hand at what anthropologist David Graeber (2019) refers to as “Bullshit Jobs”, for example, working as an usher at a Korean restaurant: “My job was just wearing a suit,” Dawe Dawe recalls the experience, “and standing like this [imitates upright posture], from 9 am to 9 pm”.

His peers were still involved in crime and in the same state of affairs, while Dawe Dawe felt a need to distance and “revive” himself, “I was on the verge of reform and of major temptations,” he recalls this time, and in prison he started “conversing with god,” asking him for a “second chance”. It seemed that Dawe Dawe’s prayers were answered when against all the odds and even against his own expectations, he was accepted as an intern at the Kibera Film School. The motto of the NGO that attracted funding from all over the world was “Transforming Lives of African Youth Through Film”. As in Boniface’s biography, the importance of this learning experience as a turning-point in Dawe Dawe’s biography, can hardly be overstated. As he explains:

Then after a week I was called, I went there and now in that place I found some meaning now in life there. You see at first I was living like I could die anytime and stuff and then from then it was like ok, there is something that I can do, there is something that I can do in life, that I can put out there, cuz I always knew that there was something in me that I can do, something that I can give in life. I really didn’t know what it was, but I knew it was in art, cuz by then my heart was fully in art.

The phrase Dawe Dawe uses in the documentary is reflective of the general social discourse among young people. In Sheng, he explains “niliona naeza do kitu ingine positive” (*I saw that I could do something else, something positive*). This type of phrase can often be heard among young people in Kisumu, expressing their desire to do something meaningful which may contribute to a bettering of their living conditions. This “different way” is often conceived of as an artistic engagement, “a way out”, and an “escape”, from the unwanted repetition of a life deemed not worth living. One immediate advantage of the training at the film school was that it separated Dawe Dawe from his peers and his daily routine of consuming khat and weed and meeting with “the boys”, chatting and chewing the day away, only to go out at night to rob people, in order to be able to maintain this lifestyle.

So in the film school, I would go there, since I didn’t have money for lunch, I would stay there from 8:00 am and come out at 9:00 pm, spend there like 13 hours in that place then I would feel very good, and that really cut my association with those guys. And from there, I would really get exposed and get to view life from a different dimension. And again, in that place we would get exposed to great mentors, you see, people from Hollywood, they would come talk to you about film, and I was there like this is it, this is it!

The poet’s statement echoes Boniface’s similarly life-changing experience at the state sponsored workshop, which enabled him to experience himself as a “changed” person. The training provided Dawe Dawe with an interest and enthusiasm for arts, which in turn enabled him to perceive his life and his role in a different light:

From the talks by those mentors, from the workshops we were attending, and the things we were doing, made me to have a totally different mindset now. I was different. Now this is the thing. So, I was just there writing scripts, doing documentaries and stuff, and we had a very good team, our class was very supportive, people were really nice.

The quote again illustrates the enactment of “supportiveness,” i.e. the provision of encouragement and emotional help to others instead of the harmful and self-centred types of action associated with crime and some forms of hustling. As in Boniface’s experience (see Chapter three), or in the rehearsal space organized by Kedogo (see Chapter four), such training spaces with their ‘deviant’ social organization, can lead to a radical change in mindset and attitudes, and possibly to the birth of new values. Supportiveness is one element constantly mentioned by Kisumu artists as part of the image of the society that they were propagating. Supportiveness may come in many shapes in forms, as in the micro-(im)material exchange networks discussed in Chapter four, in the willingness to teach someone a particular skill, such as an instrument, or simply displaying enthusiasm for the ideas and plans expressed by a peer. The need to support “one’s own” was often mentioned by Kisumu artists as a reason for supporting specific events by peers, for example, by buying tickets. This sometimes led to the almost comical situation in which one artist would ask another to buy a ticket for their event, after which the other artist would in turn ask the first to also buy a ticket for theirs. On other occasions, artists would express their support for one another by performing for free at specific events or by attending and “gracing” an event, and having a particularly cheerful attitude towards it. Hence, supportiveness as a value, becomes an important element in the image of the social evoked by Kisumu artists. As such values inherently entail broader ideas, like individual growth, artistic development or expressivity in general, these values may feed into and inform the broader social fabric. The fact that Kisumu artists see themselves as contributing to society in a positive way, and even to be educating society, is apparent from phrases in Sheng like that used by Dawe Dawe at this point in the documentary.

The tremendous influence of NGOs in Kenya is underlined by a further detail. When I asked Dawe Dawe how he had made ends meet during the training at the film school,



given that he did not have an income, he hesitated in a mix of embarrassment and amusement, “aaaah... it was funny. Actually, sitting allowances. You know, from the school you can go to these workshops [where] at the end you need to sign.” Janabii also made the same statement, saying that many artists he knew, including himself, had actually “survived” at one point in their lives from the cash handouts after workshops. Young people and particularly artists, are welcome as participants and as the target audience for such workshops, as their analytical and rhetoric skills enable them to grasp the topic quickly and make welcome contributions. Such workshops, like those mentioned in Chapter two, are often conceived as some sort of public assembly, at which members of the so-called ‘civil society’ are supposed to make voluntary interludes, acting out, as it were, their appreciation of democratic processes. I have asked many artists how they felt about these kinds of workshops and most dismissed them as something unimportant. However, from the evidence above, as well as from the other chapters, my contention is that many NGO’s exert great influence in their social contexts through their work and that they are strongly involved in the process of forming new values and attitudes.

Inasmuch as Dawe Dawe would have loved to start practicing his newly found art, there was no one to employ him as an assistant, and his family, as in the biographies of most Kisumu artists, opposed his new infatuation with art vehemently. His family, whom Dawe Dawe had by then already “written off” following several conflictual encounters, now urged him to go to Kisumu to start training as a medical nurse. As Dawe Dawe explains in the documentary, his family wanted to separate him from his companions in Kibera, as well as seeing him in a “real” job. Dawe Dawe did not know what awaited him in Kisumu, and actually postponed his decision whether or not to enrol at the school until the very last day possible. The documentary depicts the poet’s new start in Kisumu by filming him sitting on the wall of a fallen down building in Manyatta, reading his own lyrics on his phone. The scene captures the uncertainty that the poet says characterized his life at the time.

In Kisumu, Dawe Dawe quickly came across Janabii and the city’s small Spoken Word scene, which is also shown in the short videoclip from national TV, which is shown in the documentary. The poet quickly built a reputation for himself in Kisumu for spoken word poetry, usually performed in the self-organized event program, *Poetic Hour*. The program in Kisumu attracted some one hundred youths on a weekly basis, and was complemented by ad-hoc poetry slams in the streets of the city’s central business

district, at which the never-ending production of poetry was presented to friends and curious members of the general urban public. In the documentary, Dawe Dawe remembers his first performance as a moment of heightened energy and vitality. In his description, his first performance resembles what the psychologist Abraham Maslow called “peak experiences” (Maslow 1964), by which the psychologist describes a euphoric mental state during which one is deeply moved and may gain important insights into one’s life. Dawe Dawe remembers,

*This is the first time niliwahi ever perform, but from hiyo performance nilifeel kuna vile... kuna energy nilikuwa nina-emit... at least nilipata naeza ku do kitu... at least nilipata naeza kuwa na purpose.*

This is the first time I ever performed, but from that I performance I felt how.. there is an energy I emit... at least I got to do something... at least I got to have a purpose.

From the first time I met Dawe Dawe, I was struck by his marked confidence and his seemingly anxiety-free personality, which may not be surprising given his dramatic biography. When Dawe Dawe performs on stage, this personality trait translates into an acute presence. However, performance space is always scarce and difficult to find in Kisumu, and the *Poetic Hour* spoken word program also suffered from numerous and lengthy interruptions due to problems with space. At times, it seemed that the program, which was organized by young people for young people, was being openly sabotaged by the city’s powerful patrons. Spoken word is a liminal activity or art genre in Kisumu and even Nairobi, where a larger group of performers and their audience meet at the National Theatre for the so-called *Poetry After Lunch* program. Despite the Nairobi program’s popularity, the organizers never managed to get access to the theatre’s much bigger hall and still perform their program in a tiny corner of the theatre’s premises. The problem of gaining access to venues in which to perform one’s art, has contributed to social media’s marked importance in Kisumu. As I discussed in the introduction, Facebook, in particular, serves the up-and-coming of Kenya’s art scene as an online gallery; a gallery where art may be exhibited and criticised in novel ways. As I will show below, Dawe Dawe is one of the artists who has managed to use social media as a platform with great sophistication and command and for rather specific effects.

In the remainder of this chapter, I focus on his use and his performances published as part of his online series *#Manyatta\_Is\_Manhattan*, in which the poet published gripping, often sarcastic, comments on the daily lives and struggles of Manyatta’s inhabitants. Dawe Dawe created the hashtag in 2016 and received recognition from

several bloggers and social media personalities across the country, with whom the vivid scenes and ironic comments on Kenyan city life had resonated. In 2018, Weda added a series of video performances to this series which were conceived as a sub-series, presenting short clips of him performing some of his pieces. Weda filmed the short ‘selfie’ video-clips, few are longer than one minute, himself with his smartphone; they show him on the roof of the student housing block where he lives in Manyatta.

The decision to turn to performing poetry in cyber-space is also connected with the difficulty of obtaining payment for shows. When Dawe Dawe started recording his pieces in February 2018, using a smartphone, there was no program dedicated to spoken word in Kisumu and he turned down the few commercial offers he received to perform at events because of the meagre fees being offered. As a trained medical nurse, David Weda has an important advantage over many of his fellow artist in Kisumu. Although finding a steady job which actually pays at the end of the month, is very difficult, providing care services on a self-employed basis in the slums always provides Dawe Dawe with a little income and stability. Rather than offering his performances under value, Weda at one point decided to only perform for a minimum fee of 5,000 KES [ca. 50 USD], thereby enhancing his “market value”. As the creative industry in Kisumu is still in its infancy, bookings that are accompanied by such a fee are rare and hard to get. Recording his own performances with his smartphone and releasing them on social media, enabled Weda to break out of the cycle of performing for free or for the almost proverbial, lunch and T-shirt, that is often offered by the foreign organizations which use artists in various “sensitization” programs or by the County government, which often includes artists in their events to symbolically include the youth. Facebook gave Dawe Dawe a different forum and much more direct access to his audience, mostly highly-connected youths, enabling him to release some of his work as part of his popular *#Manyatta\_Is\_Manhattan* series on Facebook. In my discussion of his online series, I show how this strategy has enabled Dawe Dawe to articulate himself on different levels, and with different actors in the city.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> The following section of this chapter has in part been published in a working paper jointly written with Franziska Jenni: Jenni, F. and F. Unseld. 2019. ‘Art on Rooftops – Aesthetics of Articulation in African Cities’ in Förster, T. and F. Siegenthaler ‘Aesthetics of Articulation’, *Basel Papers on Political Transformations*, 18/19: 7 – 32.

## 5.2 Articulating Pictures and People through a Social Media Campaign

Dawe Dawe’s ‘selfie’-videos of his spoken word performances are coarse, rugged, and direct. In his (to date) eight pieces of poetry in Dholuo language, Dawe Dawe addresses established themes and topics in local popular music (Prince 2006). A dominant theme is the ambiguity of romance and sexual relationships (and social relationships in general), as well as the crisis of social reproduction (Weiss 2004) which runs deeply through the poet’s life and art.

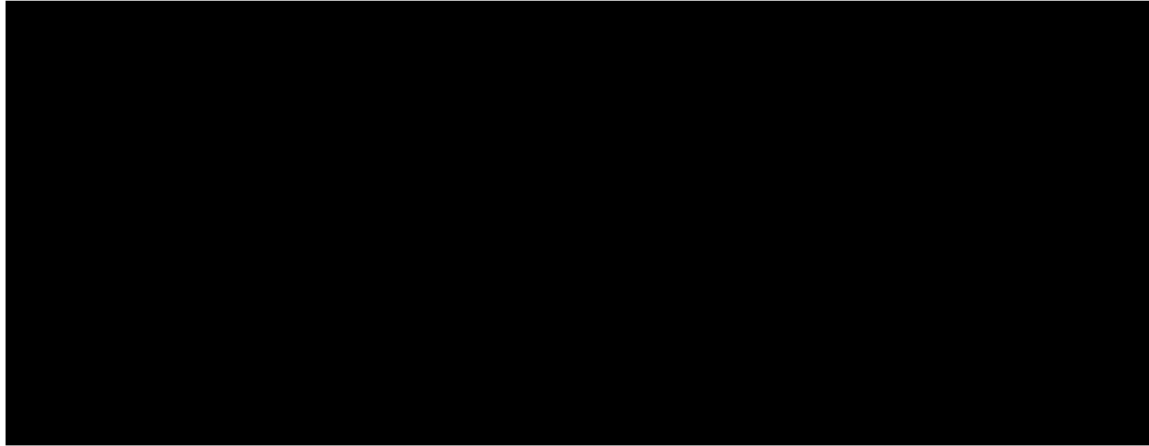
In the following, I will analyse the first piece in his series and demonstrate how, through specific textual and performative means, the artist joins disparate elements into a convincing communication situation, articulating an artistic genre that establishes the artist as part of both a Luo cultural sphere and the realm of the global hip-hop movement. Dawe Dawe’s series involves strong links with Kisumu and offer insights into the perception of urban citizens in general. The specific virtual embeddedness and the fruitful communication situation created by Dawe Dawe in his works, result in a deep involvement with his urban audiences, both off- and online.

During my interpretation of the series, I will identify three moments in the unfolding of Dawe Dawe’s artistic procedure, that I frame as moments of articulation (Förster, under review). The first moment describes how the poet constitutes his artistic voice by examining how he links different images of the social. The second moment goes a step further. In his series, Dawe Dawe challenges hegemonic discourses by bringing the latent discursive elements that normally remain silenced to the fore, for example, those surrounding gender-based violence. To do this, the poet draws on discursive formations that are mainly introduced by NGOs and international development agencies, thereby establishing links to this important economic market. In the third and final moment, the artist goes even further, assuming an outright socio-political stance. In his series, Dawe Dawe connects with another artist and activist in town and that episode in his series takes on an explicitly political character.

### *‘The Spirits Are Speaking’ - Making an Artistic Position*

The title of each piece in Dawe Dawe’s series is simply the series’ title followed by a Roman numeral: *Juogi Wuoyo I* is a love song, addressed in a very lovesick but also accusatory tone, to his beloved, who has chosen to leave for wealthier competitors. It is a fervent complaint, marked by both feelings of shame and tenderness towards the

former partner. The first four lines establish the poem’s conflict, the loss of the beloved, and the narrator’s nostalgic retrospective incited by his feelings of heartbreak and grief.



**Figure 14:** Dawe Dawe performing *Juogi Wuoyo I*.  
Source: Stills from poet’s self-filmed performance

- 1 *Baby rwak lepi wadhi ba e show*
  - 2 *Baby be iparo ka watugo ‘by sho’*
  - 3 *I love you baby*
  - 4 *But I can’t have you baby*
- 
- 1 Baby dress up and let’s go to the show
  - 2 Baby do you recall us playing ‘by sho’?
  - 3 I love you baby
  - 4 But I can’t have you baby

The beginning of this first part of the series begins with a clever and rather concealed comment on the speaker’s situation, through which the poet attempts to establish his artistic persona. The first line *Baby rwak lepi wadhi ba e show*, (Dholuo *Baby dress up and let’s go to the show*), is a reference to a Benga song by the late Okatch Biggie. Through the reference, the poet situates his own hip-hop-derived spoken word within a longer local tradition of Luo poetry and music, which has provided a vivid socio-cultural commentary on Kenyan history throughout the centuries (Ogude 2012).

The poem’s second line further weaves the rooftop performance into a local context. *Baby be iparo ka watugo ‘by sho’*, (Dholuo *Baby do you recall us playing ‘by sho’?*) again evokes an intimate, heartfelt relationship, that is now in the past: The narrator asks his beloved whether she recalls playing ‘by sho’, a hand-clapping, co-ordination game usually played by children. In this way, the poet evokes the innocent character of a relationship that lies in the past, perhaps a childhood or teenage love. By referring to the popular game, the poet evokes a broadly shared, collective memory, at least for

listeners of his own generation, as well as the more recent social media phenomenon surrounding the game. The game is commonly accompanied by a rhyme. The story of the rhyme lyrics went viral when the real lyrics, which apparently stemmed from South Africa, were published on social media together with the common, makeshift ‘translation’ (an approximation really) into the most similar sounding English word, which rendered the original lyrics more or less meaningless. The clarification went viral on Facebook with the caption, “You’ve been singing it wrong all these years”.

Dawe Dawe references this well-known language imbroglio and raises questions about communication in general, both on- and offline, between protagonist and beloved, and between online poetry and its audience. Dawe Dawe or *Juogi* wisely indicates the possibility of his performance being lost in translation, a real risk considering his choice of the local language Dholuo (see below). The communication situation, or at least its visual aspect, using the background of the roof as a setting, is mentioned by two viewers. In the video, Weda uses a selfie portrait’s typical framing, holding the camera slightly upward with his right arm, so that he fills the better part of the frame. The most visible differences between the episodes are the different colours of his shirts. As Weda slowly moves around, we see the unfinished walls of the upper floor of the house where he is staying, with steel girders pointing to the sky. Facebook user Ododo Lameck comments in Swahili on the place in one of the episodes posted on Facebook, *hamko kwa building, mko nje ya building, ‘you are not inside the building, you are outside the building,’* followed by laughing smileys.

The user’s comment alludes to the staple phrase in hip-hop culture, “I’m in the house”. The phrase is used by rappers to indicate their immediate presence, their *Dasein*, their *being-there*, in the situational context of the performance, be it on stage or on a record. The user’s comment suggests lighthearted deprecation of the rooftop as a set, revealed through the (sub-cultural) pun, “you are not in the house, you are outside the house”. Dawe Dawe replies to the comment indirectly, *haha hii ni holy grounds*, ‘haha, these are holy grounds,’ jokingly imbuing the performance space, with an exaggerated sense of importance. This is very much in keeping with the hip-hop sub-culture’s reverence for urban margins, such as street corners, back alleys, etc.

The importance of the seemingly trivial question about the place and setup where the performance was recorded, is taken up in yet another reply to user Ododo Lameck’s original comment. User Jimmy Mwendwa comments in Swahili, *wako outstanding ama??? kuuliza tu*, (*‘They are outstanding, right? Just asking’*), followed by laughing

smileys. The comment again refers to the contentious question of the space from which the poet is speaking. This user’s comment is a pun playing on the double meaning of the English verb ‘to stand out’, which denotes both something that physically protrudes, like a rooftop, and someone with exceptional qualities or abilities, like the performer in the video. When the user comments that the performance is ‘outstanding’, this is again a playful, mischievous but really approving, meta-comment on Dawe Dawe’s shrewd combination of performative abilities and use of social media.

The danger of getting lost in translation when using this new communication channel becomes understandable when one considers the social creativity involved in performing a poetry piece that owes as much to Benga music of the 1990s as it does to the spoken word performance style established by U.S. rap label, Def Jam, during the same decade. The decisive factor in establishing a link between the two poetic traditions, which may seem as far apart stylistically as they are geographically, is the use of the Dholuo language. Dawe Dawe and his mentor and peer-poet Brian Oundo, alias Janabii, with whom I also shared many conversations, both pioneered this style.

Dholuo is one out of the three languages habitually spoken in Kisumu. Often used interchangeably with English, Swahili and Sheng, an urban slang language combining Swahili, English and other Kenyan languages. For this reason, it is effectively understood in Kisumu in varying degrees by different actors, especially because it is often the last language to be taught to children, as English and Swahili are considered more valuable for a child’s future. Dawe Dawe grew up in his rural home in Siaya, in the north of Kisumu and has a ‘deep’ understanding of the language which may not be understood equally well by all his listeners. “I have to dig a lot of sources to inspire me to come up with a Luo piece, listen to Luo radio shows, Luo songs, new vocabularies... when I’m back in the countryside I ask a lot of questions... like, what does such and such word mean?”

His desire to work with his home region’s very cultural roots in turn demands a special effort from the audience. Members of the audience at the poetry events that I attended in Kisumu reported having problems understanding Dawe Dawe’s lyrics and even asking the poet about the meaning of specific words after performances. In this sense, Weda not only establishes links to global media, but also looks to the culture of the rural hinterland, in order to anchor his art. He takes the calculated risk of droppings in the reception process, but has the advantage of aligning himself with the Luo media sphere of local TV and radio stations.

After the exposition of the topic, the subject of the piece unfolds, namely the protagonist’s failure to retain his beloved because of his financial limitations. The narrator’s rejection by his beloved for financially more able competitors, is the poem’s central conflict.

1     *Nikech ntie jok moheri*  
2     *Ma oro ni gha Ferrari*  
3     *Mar idho ferry*  
4     *Ma koniga ni JuoGi giri gi be jokmaseri?*  
5     *JuoGi cha be ok en serious*

1     Cuz there are guys who love you  
2     Who send you taxis  
3     To board ferries  
4     Guys who tell you that JuoGi is not eligible to be your suitor?  
5     JuoGi doesn’t seem serious

In this somewhat ironic panegyric, the hero appears terrified by the idea that his rivals are able to send his beloved money for transport. Instead of using the more neutral term taxi, the poet uses the colloquial street-level loan word Ferrari, used for transport in general, whether by private means or bus. There is a fine line between self-mockery and bitterness as the poet invokes this experience of a decomposing masculinity, in a context in which structural economic violence has transformed the idea of a male breadwinner into an aspirational ideal. The pressures of the financial limitations that crush the narrator’s need and desire, later on in the poem, lead the hero, in the romantic tradition, to suicidal thoughts and the edge of insanity because of his unrequited attempts. Dawe Dawe ultimately stands and remains alone on his rooftop. There is no crowd of friends and bystanders to cheer him up and performatively approve his recital. He is entirely alone, up for his own approval, and later, perhaps, the anticipated approval on Facebook.

Publishing one’s performances on Facebook and performing in solitude, may allow the poet to try out types of topics and performance which he would not otherwise have tried in the more conventional forum of the *Poetic Hour* live event program. Through the mediatization of his performance, Dawe Dawe is taking part in a new process of making the self, using self(ie)-art to create a digital *doppelgänger*. Weda does not use his usual stage name, Dawe Dawe, for the present cycle but that of his other artistic persona, *Juogi*, (Dholuo, *the spirit*), hence the title of the series *Juogi Wuoyo* (Dholuo, ‘the spirits are speaking’). This adds another layer to the speaking situation, whereby the



writer establishes a plurality of voices. In a stream-of-consciousness like internal monologue, the narrator imitates the voices of the competitors badmouthing him in front of his beloved one, voices who sarcastically frown upon the narrator’s financial insecurity and social significance, so that the narrator refers to himself in Dholuo in the third person: *JuoGi cha be ok en serious* (‘JuoGi doesn’t seem serious’). The speaking situation is further fragmented when one considers that the performance was posted on Dawe Dawe’s Facebook page but filmed on the rooftop of the house where David Weda lives his everyday life. Within the seemingly mundane performance, the purportedly indivisible individuum is divided into self and digital other. This strategy, whether chosen consciously or not, establishes a distance between the speaker, audience, and the emotions that are palpable throughout the piece. The poet establishes a delicate and fruitful communication situation by ‘filtering’ the heartfelt complaint through different physical and digital identities and presences. The audience that is factored into the solitary performance on the rooftop, only arrives after the moment of production, when the video has been uploaded into cyberspace. In his performance on the rooftop, Dawe Dawe draws on discourses from global media but also weaves it into a local sphere of media circulation, using characteristic modes of expression, such as lyrics from popular Benga songs or local idioms, like a “Ben 10”.

*Challenging dominant discourse through an international aesthetic of protest*

In a second step, Dawe Dawe uses his art to draw on elements of humanitarian discourses and the development industry in order to establish links to specific emancipatory liberal discourses (largely silenced in Kenya), thereby aligning himself with an international aesthetic of protest.

In his series, Dawe Dawe also takes up the thread of a Western humanitarian discourse, in order to criticize gender-based violence on the one hand, and to establish links with powerful NGOs in the field on the other. *Juogi Wuoyo IV* is a rather detailed rendition of the sexual defilement of Akinyi, a class 8 pupil, by her uncle. The piece is narrated by someone close to Akinyi, perhaps a sibling or a boyfriend, who finds himself face to face with the weeping girl in the morning. The narrator presses until Akinyi opens up and tells the story of her uncle’s ceaseless abuse through threats, intimidation, bribery, and sexual harassment. At 2½ minutes, the chilling piece is by far the longest in the series. The detailed story of Akinyi’s plight, culminating in her being locked in the

house “where no one can testify” with her uncle “running his hands over her frame”, and forcing himself on her.

The poet explores this violation to its fullest extent, using local imagery to render the brutal act visual in Dholuo: *Awuoro tong’ ma kochuyo ranbolo to nyaka wuog ka leny*, (‘I wonder how the spear goes into a banana tree and comes out shiny’). To describe a minor’s sexual defilement by a family member in such vivid detail amounts to great vulgarity, especially in a cultural context in which sexual explicitness is strongly discouraged. The Benga artist Okatch Biggy, whom the poet references twice in his first piece, can be considered a source of inspiration here. Biggy’s lewd style of Benga was heavily criticized, for example in productions like his posthumous hit *Adhiambo Nyakobura*, from 1998, in which his detailed description of an erotic scene forced the audience to mentally undress the singer’s lover, Adhiambo. By describing a scene of defilement in similar detail, Dawe Dawe uses this established device to make sexual violence against women a subject in unexpected ways.

Weda relates to latent discourses, discourses that exist but are not manifest or fully expressed. For example, there was a wave of indignation over teenage pregnancies in Kenya in 2018. Media reports abounded when many of the pupils, most of them 12 to 13 years of age, came to the primary examination pregnant, with a handful of students even giving birth during the three-day exam period. In a newspaper article, Education Cabinet Secretary Amina Mohamed admits that, “...preliminary statistics show that the magnitude of the problem [of teenage pregnancies] is far bigger than we had initially thought. We are staring at a national challenge in the face.”<sup>18</sup>

The poet is aware of how superficial political inquiries into such matters can be. Rape and sexual violence are a capillary problem in Kenya, caused by a complex mixture of factors including the country’s colonial history, economic injustice, social attitudes, and law. Any political reaction is likely to simply pay lip service to a problem that is difficult to contain in a context of economic impoverishment such as Kisumu’s low-income settlements. At the time of my research in Kisumu, gossip was circulating about a motorbike taxi driver in Manyatta who had allegedly persuaded teenage female school pupils to consent to sex with him simply by promising to buy them slippers or school text books. Dawe Dawe’s poetic piece mirrors such depraved arrangements in that Akinyi’s uncle, who had taken her in and was taking care of her education financially,

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<sup>18</sup> Wamuswa, N. 2018. ‘Number of teenage pregnancies higher than thought’, *The Standart*, retrieved from <<https://www.standardmedia.co.ke/article/2001303295/number-of-teenage-pregnancies-higher-than-thought>>, accessed 02.09.2019.

promises her new slippers to persuade her to give in to sexual contact. User Biko Steve comments on the video, thunderstruck: “Dagi rwako slippers ema kelo wach” (Dholuo, ‘Could slippers be the reason for all this?’), to which Dawe Dawe, in confirmation, simply replies “champat”, which is the Dholuo word for the cheap and light rubber sandals in question.

The piece illustrates the vicious cycle experienced by many (half-)orphans in Kisumu and similar contexts when they are taken in by their extended families. They find themselves at the lower end of the social order in these situations and often experience hardship, having to assume the roles of maids and houseworkers. As I learned in several interviews with young women in Kisumu, their precarious stability is often dependent upon their reaction to their patrons’ sexual advances, which, in turn, are difficult to speak of or address because of their ongoing economic dependence on the perpetrators of the violence.

One of the organisations furthering this issue is the Kenyan branch of Amnesty International, which Dawe Dawe joined after strongly identifying with the NGO’s work. His affiliation with Amnesty International has enabled him to perform several times at different occasions, for example, in the filled auditorium of Nairobi University. The NGO also partnered with the Kisumu spoken word program, *Poetic Hour*, supporting the frail artistic platform financially and in return, encouraging the poets to tackle sensitive topics such as terrorism, police brutality, or in this case, violence against women, which are part of the NGO’s program and portfolio. While voicing such topics publicly may be understood by state actors as a provocation, the NGO offers some, at least temporary, safety, contributing to the creation of a convenient space for free expression. Such performances are also comparatively well paid, paying on average between 30 and 100 USD per performance. Dawe Dawe, like most Kisumu artists nowadays, actively attempts to establish links with the NGO sector because they are among the few patrons offering better paid jobs.

The fact that more socio-political stances may also be interesting to media corporations, is apparent from the reaction to the very first episode posted on Facebook. The comment is from Aduda Cele, a Kenyan media personality who owns a media production house; he tells Dawe Dawe “manya,” (Dholuo, ‘come look for me’), apparently taking an active interest in his new production. The possible broader relevance of Weda’s work is also suggested in the next comment from Norman Simon,

who states that such pieces would be suitable and of interest to national media: “U should appear in KTN artistic Tuesday or Thursdays!”

Most Kisumu artists, like Dawe Dawe, produce for a local market while at the same time (without contradiction), their pronouncements address an international emancipatory discourse, in which they are simultaneously taking part. By doing so, they are furthering their chances of making their work visible to possible patrons and unlocking potentially available jobs in the NGO sector. Artists in Kisumu, as Schneidermann (2016) noted for Ugandan musicians and their relationships to politicians, rarely adopt an attitude of *either* praise *or* protest. Rather they have to be thought of as “brokers”, who very consciously negotiate their relationships with such powerful institutions and actors. The examples of Dawe Dawe’s work, as well as the reactions from members of his online audience, shows that the artists are managing to do two things at once: First, they are relating to actors and potential economic markets in the field of humanitarianism and second, they are doing so from a distinctly local perspective that appeals to both local and international audiences.

#### *Articulating solidarity in times of crisis*

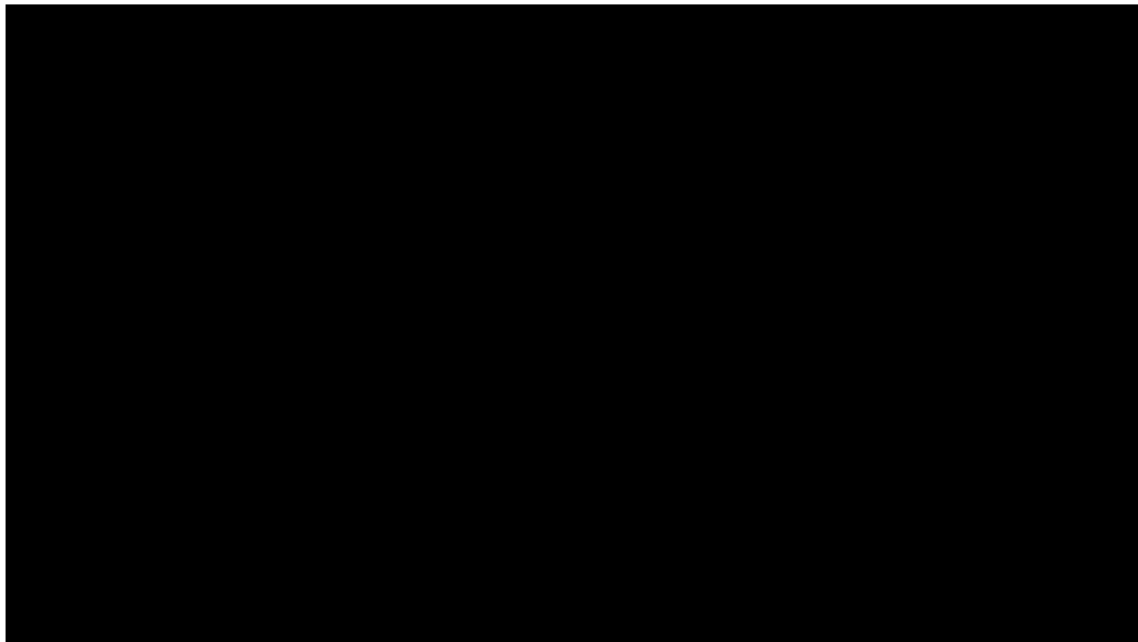
The last section of this paper examines how Dawe Dawe, from his initially remote standpoint on the rooftop, establishes links to other actors in the city in order to reflect the broader socio-political landscape. He expresses his discontent with the Government of Kenya’s blatant disregard for the law at the time by connecting his works with larger societal issues, and at the same time, increases the reach of his articulations.

In part VI of his series, Dawe Dawe quite literally carries his concerns out into the city by leaving the secure retreat of the rooftop for the whirlwind of events at the Kondele roundabout, the informal heart of the city, a convergence point for the adjacent low-income settlements. In March 2018, the Kisumu activist Boniface Ogutu (see Chapter three) started a hunger strike at the Kondele fly-over which lasted nearly seven days. The reason for this act was the forced deportation of the last opposition candidate, the lawyer Miguna Miguna, who at the time had seemed bold and popular enough to stand a chance against President Uhuru. Uhuru had just begun his infamous collaboration (or collusion, as many believed) with opposition leader, Raila Odinga. Boniface staged the hunger strike against the incumbent government’s blatant disregard of court orders and the constitution. In consequence, Boniface managed to appear in several national prime time television news shows. He declared he would not leave the roundabout and refused

to eat until Miguna was allowed to return to Kenya. The flyover’s massive pillar in the video’s background shows posters with many signatures. Capital letters in the colours of the Kenyan flag declare, “Hunger strike in the support of Miguna Miguna”.

The sixth part of Dawe Dawe’s *Juogi Wuoyo* series on Facebook is the only one with a descriptive title, “JuoGi wuoyo Kondele. In solidarity with Brother Boniface Ogutu Akach in his day 6 of hunger strike. Uphold the rule of Law and respect the constitution.” By adopting Boniface’s slogan, Dawe Dawe links the two performers, the activist and the artist, around an agenda of equivalence in their indignation at the disrespect for the constitution and the rule of law.

As stated above, the Kondele overpass construction has become a landmark in Kisumu and almost the city’s cultural identifier, in that Kisumu is often represented as a city of rioters and Kondele is usually the starting point for the riots, lootings, and other forms of protest. In this way, the place of articulation is again crucial. Boniface constructs a relationship between the fly-over as Kisumu’s cultural identifier, and its potential for protest in support of the last remaining politician, who was believed to be charismatic enough to bring back justice at that time. Dawe Dawe, in turn, extends this relationship of solidarity by establishing a link between the hunger strike at Kondele and his social media campaign on life in Manyatta.



**Figure 15:** In Part VI of his series, the poet leaves the rooftop and joins Kisumu activist Boniface Ogutu during his hunger strike under the Kondele overpass construction. Source: Still from Facebook video stream

The 20 second clip shows an excerpt of Dawe Dawe performing his piece alongside percussionist Kwach Rading. The video clip, recorded with a smartphone, shows the pillar with the posters in the background, Boniface and the musicians are separated from the audience and onlookers by a small rope.

Boniface does not really appear in the video. He is lying on the floor, his head only occasionally appearing at the lower right end of the screen. Dawe Dawe’s lyrics, address the curious onlookers rather directly:

1     *Pod idai ni idich*  
2     *to Bonnie ma wuod Akach ma wuod Nyakach*  
3     *riyo kech*  
4     *E tie round about*  
5     *Bang madho amuna*  
6     *Idai ni toki tek ka mar miguna miguna*  
7     *Omera surrender your passport*  
8     *Kichopo e airport*  
9     *nono wanyalo deport*  
10    *I ma onge transport*

1     You still claim that you are very busy  
2     Yet Bonnie, the son of Akach from Nyakach  
3     Is on a hunger strike  
4     Under the flyover in the roundabout  
5     You drink a lot of booze  
6     And then develop the tough demeanor of Miguna Miguna  
7     Hey surrender your passport  
8     After reaching the airport  
9     Or else you will be deported  
10    And we won’t even charge you the transport

The communication situation is different to the poems on the rooftop. Dawe Dawe now addresses the audience in a confrontational tone, a way of speaking that predominates in the small-scale businesses and the transport sector around Kondele: *Pod idai ni idich* (‘You still claim that you are very busy’), is a typical reproach, rebuking someone for being a busybody, an idler, a good-for-nothing. The reproach is re-constructed in the poem by contrasting the busybody with Boniface, or “Bonnie”, dignified by the detailing of his descent from Nyakach, who is on a hunger strike for the greater good.

Through his performance, a link is established to an international discursive formation of protest by Boniface’s decision to go on hunger strike at Kondele roundabout (one thinks of Mahatma Gandhi) as a means of making his indignation visible. In a country where food insecurity is a major concern for the majority, and in a region that is

comparatively poor (Branch 2011: 295) and susceptible to drought, the voluntary renunciation of food, however noble the principle, is prone to be ridiculed and may seem absurd to some. On the other hand, several elements of the performance are in line with the national discourse about Kisumu’s place in political culture: the performance’s subtly clownish dimension, the defiance in Boniface’s one-against-all attitude, and his firm belief in an underdog victory, match the popular conception of Kisumu’s defiance well.

In his poem, Dawe Dawe contrasts Boniface’s noble action with the everyday bearing of citizens around Kondele, who appear as interfering busybodies, as meddling or prying persona, who become intoxicated and then develop the “tough demeanor of Miguna Miguna”. Dawe Dawe’s performance is cunning. If a local activist on a hunger strike at Kondele is likely to be ignored or laughed at, perhaps even subjected to aggression, then taking a stand for the controversial politician Miguna, is not likely to yield support either. In this sense, both artists, however semantically open their politically charged claims may appear, need to be seen to be taking a tremendous performative risk.

Dawe Dawe’s trick is to confront the ‘typical’ bystander at Kondele (read: ‘rowdy’) and locate Miguna’s tough and rebellious character within the bystanders themselves. The poet thereby establishes a connection that is both surprising and, in its cheekiness, difficult to reject. The poet literally puts the audience in Miguna’s shoes, pushing the listeners towards a position of solidarity: *Omera!*, (Dholuo, ‘hey [you]!’), “surrender your passport!”, further threatening the audience in Dholuo: “wanyalo deport / I ma onge transport” (‘you will be deported / and we won’t even charge you the transport’). Again, simply but cleverly, the poet links greater political concerns, the forced deportation of an opposition politician, with the intimate, everyday economic concern about a lack of money for transport, which is likely to be familiar to many of the bystanders at the bus station. Instead of making an intellectual comment on the situation or further criticising it, Dawe Dawe strategically weaves the audience into his poem. The poet addresses the listeners individually, articulating their individual hardship with the broader socio-political crisis of the day.

Whether consciously planned or not, this type of direct address also works on Facebook, where the recipient of the short excerpt usually watch the performance alone. In contrast to Dawe Dawe’s performances discussed above, in which he addresses more subjective, intimate, and emotional topics in the solitude of the rooftop, the direct

address and the fact that the performance relates him to other actors, another artist/activist, an opposition politician and urban citizens, gives this video an appellative character. It also shows that the performance at hand, though performed alone and consumed individually through the interface of the communication giant, is not an idle pastime but a deeply political practice.

### 5.3 Conclusion

I want to close this chapter with a special moment of articulation that occurred towards the end of my field work, which coincided with the finalizing of the documentary, and which, I believe, reflects and condenses much of what has been said about Dawe Dawe’s agency in this chapter. In early April 2017, at a time when Okong’o had almost finished editing the documentary, Dawe Dawe called me one morning with a clear sense of urgency. For several days, he had been preparing the ground for a meeting with Joachim Oketch, a nominated candidate for the position of the Member of the County Administration (MCA) for Kondele. Oketch, who was soon to win the seat, was known in Kisumu for his close association with Kondele’s youth, especially because he operates several matatu minibuses. The extravagantly decorated minibus-taxis bear the name “Swagga”, which also became the name by which Oketch was known on the political stage. Dawe Dawe had approached Oketch several months earlier, and used the production’s promising trailer to tempt Oketch to become part of the project. After the meeting, the politician had given Dawe Dawe some funds to facilitate the project’s finalization. Dawe Dawe used the money to travel to Nairobi in order to shoot the parts about his life in Kibera in their original location.

However, on this cloudy April day in Kisumu’s rainy season, the politician agreed to meet us on his campaign trail in the *vichorochoro* (Swahili, ‘*back alleys*’) of Coner Mbaya in Manyatta. Dawe Dawe had promised the politician that he could be part of the documentary, and now I was to film an interview between the two, to provide Okong’o with footage to cut into the final product. As soon as the campaign team and the procession of followers consisting mainly of women and children, were settled, I started recording as Dawe Dawe shot questions at the politician, who seemed to reply as sincerely as possible. During the interview, the politician expressed his admiration for the artistic agenda that the poet had coined with his hashtag. He accepted the artist’s invitation to speak and linked himself to the idea of “upgrading” Manyatta, invoking his own rise from being a matatu entrepreneur to a political aspirant as evidence of his



ability to improve the state of affairs. During the interview, the poet seemed to ‘test’ the politician, asking directly about the uncomfortable topic of drug addiction and the politician’s plans for addressing the pervasive plague in Manyatta. Another topic addressed by the poet, which should be of interest to the youthful public and electoral body, was the importance of the arts in the politicians’ agenda. Oketch assured the inquisitive poet that he was planning to create jobs and if possible, a “talent innovation centre,” in collaboration with the governor, which would foster talents in sports and arts from a tender age. After the interview, the politician stepped onto a concrete structure in the middle of the road and quickly addressed the crowd. After his impromptu address, his assistants lined up in front of him to be given bundles of KES 50 notes. Oketch indicated to the moving crowd that they should line up and walk one by one through a narrow passage in front of him, whereby everybody would be given a note. Once all the members of the crowd had passed through the passage, the gathering quickly dispersed as the politician and his team hastened to their next venue.



**Figure 16:** Dawe Dawe shaking hands with Joachim “Swagga” Oketch, who later became MCA for Kondele Ward.

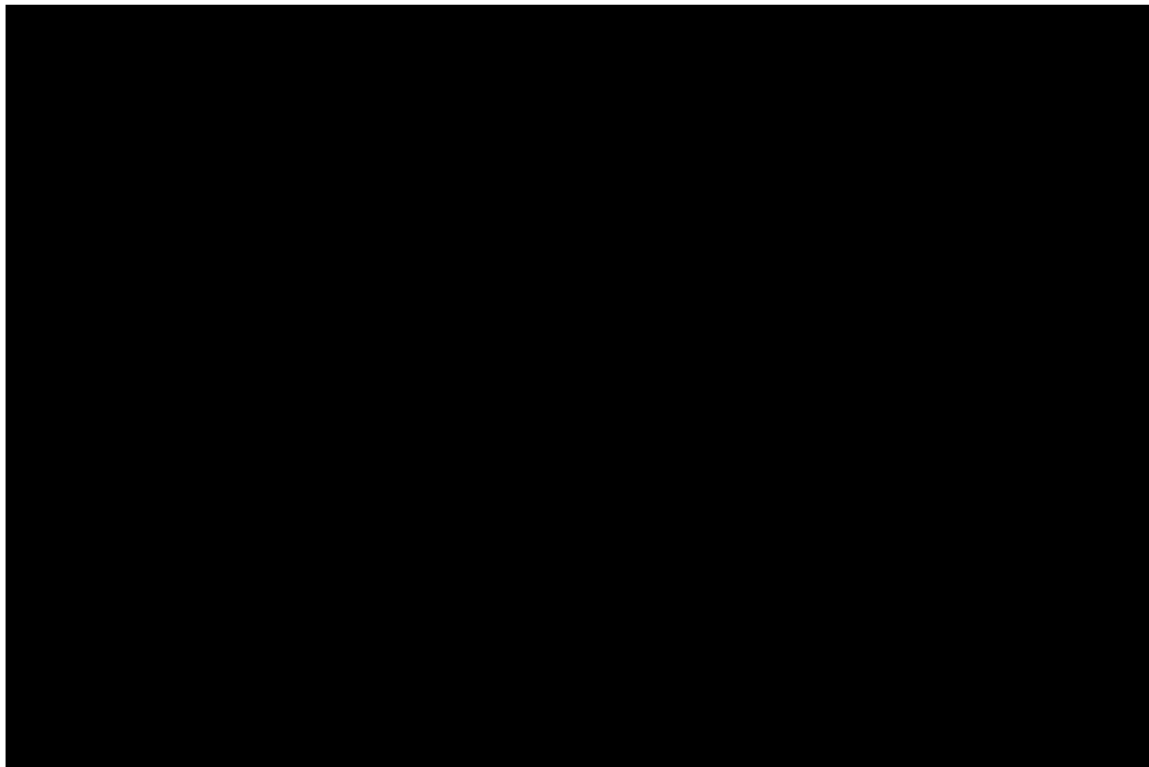
Source: Screenshot of Facebook post; author’s photograph

The example illustrates how Kisumu artists use their artistic productions actively and tactically to involve themselves profitably with powerful actors in the field. Although Dawe Dawe was able to establish links to personalities in the media business as well as to the NGO Amnesty International, through his online series, he successfully bargained with the soon-to-be MCA of Kondele for support for his project. Even though Okong’o declined to include the material in the documentary for logistical reasons, the encounter between the poet and the politician demonstrates how artists turn their symbolic capital, their expressive abilities, and their online following into assets. The next day, the poet published a photo which I had taken of him and Oketch for his Facebook audience with the simple caption “Manhattanians!”, indicating his allegiance to the political aspirant.

The video material of the encounter between Dawe Dawe and Oketch illustrates the advantages of experimental collaborations, such as the documentary. If I had not been deeply involved in the process of producing the documentary, I would not have gathered the same insights into the artist’s ‘exploitation’ of this collaborative produce, and it is unlikely that Dawe Dawe would have called me for the more intimate dealings surrounding his craft, such as the encounter with the politician. At the same time, the specific situation also gave me an opportunity to observe a politician handing out what could be referred to as “campaign goodies” while campaigning and making pre-election promises. Once the short interview between the two men was over and I had shut down my camera, Dawe Dawe asked me to hand it to him so that he could film this example of ‘redistributive’ politics, which in Manyatta, as in probably most parts of the world, is associated with a certain degree of cultural intimacy if not shame. Personally, I would not have dared to film the scene under the watchful eyes of many of the followers from the shantytown. The carefully filmed videoclip of that scene attests to the training that Dawe Dawe received in recording visual material. To me, it is also a reminder of the potential of such experimental collaborations.

## 6. Winnie Juma – Artist, Influencer, Social Entrepreneur

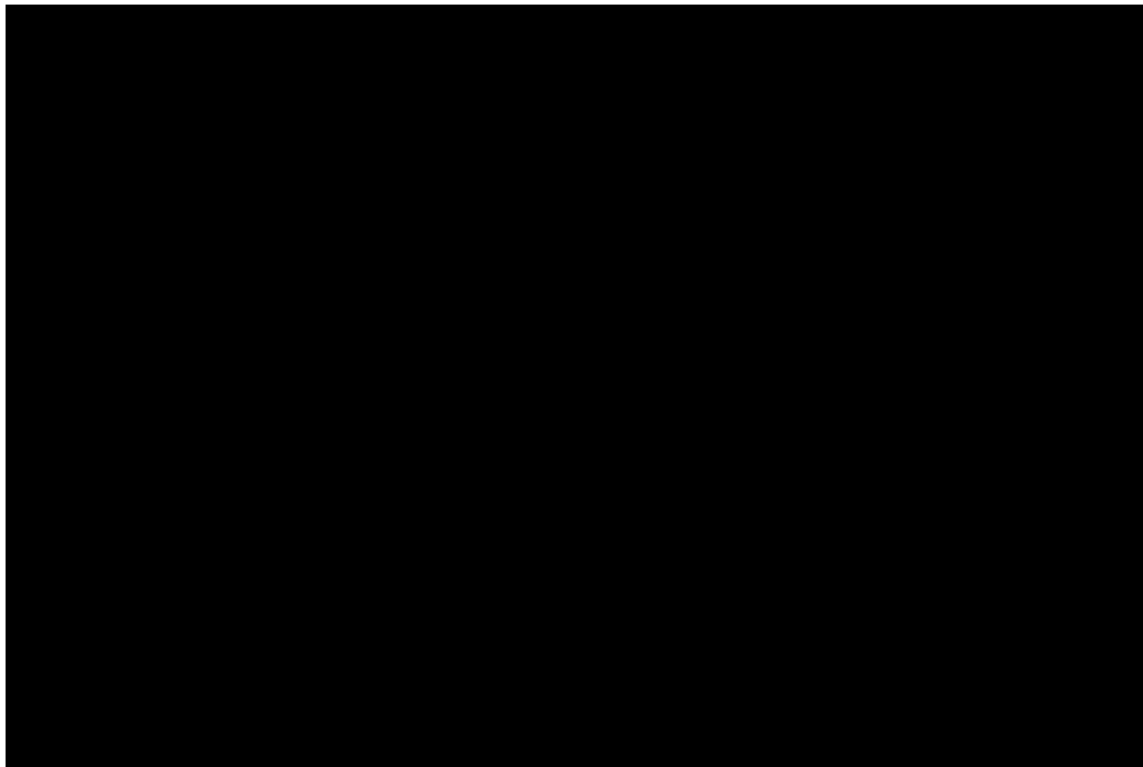
As usual when I meet her, Winnie Juma acts with a strict resolve, as she leads me through the narrow passages in Nyalenda Kilo, at the heart of Kisumu’s largest low-income settlement in the city’s south. Dressed in plain black jeans and a black and white blouse, this slender woman may appear delicate from a distance, yet in person, she radiates a silent and intense determination. We pass through fences and openings, crossing the courtyards of groups of houses, ducking under clothes lines, passing fire places and cows, chickens and other livestock. We arrive at a collection of three rectangular mud houses with corrugated iron roofs. Winnie starts unearthing a bunch of keys from her yellow handbag as she approaches one of the doors. An inscription on the slat door, drawn in big black letters reads: “You, *yaani wewe* (Swahili, ‘yeah you’], No! Food, Today.”



**Figure 17:** Winnie Juma on the phone during her itinerary through Nyalenda.  
Source: Author’s photograph

The inscription is a reminder of both the dire living conditions in Nyalenda and its inhabitants’ often triumphant humour. As usual, Winnie is in a hurry, she has other meetings to attend, concerning her upcoming event, Face of Nyalenda, for which she needs to sell tickets. I am fascinated by the multitude of activities and different hats that

this woman wears. Winnie refers to herself as a fashion model, event organizer, human-rights defender and change maker, as well as being the owner of one of Kisumu’s few modelling agencies, called simply ‘Elegant’. Her latest project is to establish the very first public community library for children in the Nyalenda slums, right here in the house in front of us.



**Figure 18:** Inscription on the door of one of the houses we visit for setting up a community library.

Source: Author’s photograph

As we enter the dusty house, Winnie tries to see whether it could become a library. She has already visited several places but many had “issues”, they were too small or in a bad neighbourhood, or yet again, difficult to reach. We take measurements in order to get an estimate from one of the *fundis* (Swahili, ‘*repairmen*’) for shelves and furniture to hold the books Winnie has collected so far, which are currently stacked up in her house. I think it takes imagination to see a fully functional community library in this grimy mud house, which is in desperate need of renovation.

As we stand in front of the house in the fierce January sun, I ask her whether she sometimes gets discouraged, Winnie sternly replies, “I don’t”. She tells me that the former occupants were evicted by the landlord due to lack of funds. When I again ask her where she take the perseverance from, to see a library where others do not, she replies, “From the fact that I had it all, and I have gotten to a point where I don’t have it

at all”. And then more to herself than to me, “The house still needs work,” brushing her hand over the desolate wall. As if this has brought back memories of her own hardships, she adds, “and from the fact that I can lose it all. I want something that even if I lose everything, I will have something to fall back on.” Looking at the notepad on her phone, which lists quotes and estimates from various fundi for renovation and furniture, I grasp that we are talking about the considerable philanthropic effort required to turn Winnie’s dream of a library into reality. To myself, I wonder how her desire to promote other people’s welfare will contribute to her own material safety and overall wellbeing. The answer to this lies in the art of articulation, as Winnie advocates it, and which is at the centre of this chapter.

This chapter examines the life and work of Winnie Juma, better known to her friends as Winnie Wenger Walcott. Her artist’s name is composed of the names of two famous British football trainers, playfully emphasizing her identity as a coach in a very profitable domain, namely fashion modelling. In this chapter, I focus on Winnie’s use of fashion modelling and the embodiment of certain types of femininity, to rearticulate existing social discourses about class, gender and individual agency. The chapter is structured in three parts which illustrate different dimensions of Winnie’s artistic work. In the first section, I introduce Winnie by analysing her appearance on national TV in 2017, emphasizing how she uses aspects of embodiment to articulate herself as a personality with Nyalenda and the various pressing needs of its inhabitants, such as access to educational resources. The second section is then dedicated to her trademark event, *Face of Nyalenda*. In my analysis of the event, I discuss the cultural politics behind urban audiences in Kisumu’s recent infatuation with beauty pageants, a flourishing business in which Winnie as an event organizer, modelling trainer and judge, is able to position herself centrally. For Winnie, modelling is more than just catwalk techniques and posing. In her agency, she grounds her mentees in the arts of self-presentation and successfully relating to people, all while using the same techniques to expand her own reach on social media and in society at large. In the third section, I discuss a performance that Winnie gave shooting a Facebook-Live video, which was still a novel feature at that time, in which she takes onlookers and viewers from Kisumu, Kenya and abroad, on a 20-minute walk through Nyalenda. It is important to consider the time and space of this seemingly unimportant and inconspicuous video clip as it occurred at an important political juncture. A few days after the country’s highly controversial, repeat elections in 2017, the entire country was

waiting for Raila Odinga's address concerning the ongoing political stalemate. Nyalenda, one of the country's most volatile opposition strongholds, had appeared in the media many times, in the context of the excessive police violence that had shaken the neighbourhood in the days following the announcement of the initial election results. I discuss how Winnie used these video interventions and online interactions to successfully reposition herself as a spokesperson for this large neighbourhood, connecting herself with people from different walks of life and various places around the world. To an even greater extent than in previous chapters, I consider Winnie's entire persona as part of her artistic effort. She very much embodies her art, and her body and personality are the 'site' on which she articulates various elements. Whereas Boniface, in Chapter three, presented claims that were derived directly from the Kenyan Constitution, and in Chapters four and five, Janabii and Dawe Dawe could rely on the playful language of rhetoric, as I will soon show, Winnie uses aspects of embodiment and the display of a distinct personality both off and on stage, in her daily efforts to articulate discursive elements and by the same token, associate herself with different actors in the city.

## 6.1 Aestheticizing Progress and Social Cohesion

In April 2017, Winnie Juma received a special opportunity. She was offered a slot on Kenya's prime late-night show by Daniel 'Churchill' Ndambuki, which is broadcast on Sunday evenings on NTV. The show features the country's best stand-up comedians and is moderated by its host, Churchill, himself one of the pioneers of East-Africa's entertainment industry. The show is known as a springboard for the country's leading comedians, such as Eric Omondi who also grew up in Kisumu and is perhaps Kenya's most prominent comedian. During his shows, Eric Omondi regularly expresses gratitude to Churchill, who apparently cast him from the streets of Nairobi, promoting him from the level of a 'have-not' to the country's most elite circles where he now performs in front of presidents during national ceremonies, as well as live on national TV. In 2017, the Churchill Show ventured into special regional editions; Winnie Juma was contacted for the Kisumu edition, to present her work to a broader audience. By analysing this short excerpt<sup>19</sup>, I show how performatively, by way of embodiment, Winnie articulates elements that situate her as both a young woman from the slums and a modern business

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<sup>19</sup> Churchill Show, 'Winnie Wenger at Churchill Show Kisumu', retrieved from <[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_6JLiEWkMoQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_6JLiEWkMoQ)>.

woman who organizes events and helps to connect Kisumu to the wider world of a global fashion economy.

During the TV-show, the host does not even introduce Winnie himself. Instead, he invites her onto the stage, stating a woman is coming “who has a wonderful story,” and asking her to introduce herself. As very quickly becomes clear, Winnie’s introduction of herself is part of her project and integral to the trajectory entailed in her “story”. As she walks onto the stage in a very composed way, Winnie gives the audience a taste of her runway experience, strutting in white high-heels, flaunting the tunic of an African cloth over a long-sleeved blue dress. As she takes the microphone, she appears relaxed, firm and slightly aloof. In her introduction, she presents her upcoming event ‘Face of Nyalenda’ and her desire to rearticulate the public’s opinion of Nyalenda.

My name is Winnie, my friends call me Winnie Wenger Walcott, I come from the ‘best’ slum in Kisumu, it is called Nyalenda. Last year, we had an initiative called Face of Nyalenda. Face of Nyalenda was to change the mindset of the people of Kisumu, as of Kenya as a whole, because Nyalenda has been known for the same same reasons, that Kibera is known for: thuggery, insecurity, and dirty, filthy life. We started the Face of Nyalenda initiative to do a books drive, and we started a small community library for our kids in the slums.

Winnie presents a powerful narrative about the possibility of progress and education’s potential for transforming a neighbourhood, along with the public perception of it. Winnie’s successful transformation of her own self, evident from her sophisticated appearance, acts as evidence that such transformation is possible. The model appears as an expression and proof that the image she is about to articulate is possible. The moderator, slightly reticent, as if he does not want to shatter the audience’s forming image of this slender, radiant woman, just throws in brief questions, such as “mnatao wapi hizo vitabu?” (Swahili, ‘Where do you get books from?’). Winnie’s answer to this question illustrates the seemingly subordinate role that modelling plays in her work:

We did an event, I am a model by profession. So I incorporate modelling into my events. So we did an event, to look for the face that would represent Nyalenda as a community. The first event we did, we collected two thousand books, because entry to that event, was a textbook or a storybook. So this is how we got our first lot of books.

It is worth noting the unusual grammatical organization in the above quote. As Winnie is about to articulate the idea of an event, “to look for the face that would represent Nyalenda,” she intuitively makes two explicatory insertions. While the original phrase begins with “We did an event...” she fits in the following two additions:

Insertion 1: I am a model by profession

Insertion 2: So I incorporate modelling into my events.

The two insertions are made incidentally, in a throw away manner, before Winnie resumes the initial sentence. This way, she introduces the idea of modelling as being part of the events, and indeed as the vehicle for articulating various elements. The use of the verb (*to incorporate*) is of interest here. To *incorporate*, means to *form into a body*, and is derived from the late Latin *incorporat-* ‘embodied’. Winnie uses modelling to “combine ingredients into one substance” (another meaning of *to incorporate*), projecting various messages onto the bodies of her beauty pageant participants, much as she does herself during the interview. Fashion modelling becomes the vehicle for expressing a given purpose at a given time. It is both about helping the community and quite pragmatically, starting with oneself, about actively transforming oneself and thereby enhancing one’s own life chances. It is about empowering young women in the same way that Winnie has empowered herself through fashion modelling, by becoming a ‘look’ and subsequently earning the right to express herself and to take part in public in a broader way, as I will show shortly. At this point, members of the Kenyan audience may understand, implicitly, that her event not only targets the fashion industry, photographers, designers and magazines, for as many would guess, Kisumu’s fashion industry is not yet fully economically viable. As is evident from her presentation, Winnie relies on philanthropy, on investments made by well-wishers and supporters, who may also profit from their investments into her work of aestheticizing, as I will explore below. By introducing the idea of modelling incidentally, in a sub-clause, Winnie makes the more subtle layer of her performance explicit, although she does it as if it were a minor accompaniment to her work, and not an essential fact.

When Churchill asks whether the said library is situated in Nyalenda, Winnie responds, still with the same adamance and with an emphatic and drawn out “yes,” then diverts the question towards the initiative’s target audience, “We have a special group of kids that come to the library. They are not just everyday kids, they are kids that gave birth,” once again she makes an insertion at this point, that relates back to her own embodiment of her mission. She states, “I am a mother by the way,” before she pauses unerringly, for applause, as the moderator adds, “Wow, congrats!”. Winnie reacts with a determined “thank you” before she returns to the Nyalenda girls, “they gave birth, and they didn’t go back to school. So, they come back to read.”



By articulating the life histories of so many teenage mothers from the slums, while at the same time embodying this same rite of passage into premature adulthood, Winnie proves implicitly, through her perfect grooming and her radiance on stage, that such circumstances need not be an impediment to one's personal growth. It is not, however, simply embodiment but also a question of words and of rhetoric. In her presentation, much like development aid industry actors in their marketing campaigns, Winnie cleverly draws on metaphors to illustrate the lack of accessibility to suitable education by stating, "you see, these kids want to quench their thirst for education. And that is what drives me every day," again pairing an acute (physical) lack with her own almost biologically determined, urge. She finishes the 5-minute interview (a monologue, really), by once again articulating her own personal motivation with the acute lack suffered by Nyalenda's citizens. Her rhetoric gains the quality of a motivational talk as she stirs up the imagination of the audience in the room with a sense of what would be possible, if everybody present would now join hands in a concerted effort:

I want to imagine a scenario where, all of us, in this room today, could donate just one book. We are over a thousand people in this room today. Just imagine what that can do to those kids in Nyalenda. Because this is not just an initiative, that we are going to stop at Nyalenda. We have two other slums in Kisumu. Which we would like to broaden our wings, to also fulfil their thirst. If they could donate books, I would personally go around town and pick the books. We are on Facebook, the page is Face of Nyalenda.

Winnie herself, through her presence on stage, is evidence that social ascent is possible. Her seemingly natural confidence, the result of countless hours of arduous training, combined with her strong determination, speak to the idea of self-empowerment through self-reliance, which is pervasive in Kenya's national culture (Mbithi and Rasmusson 1977). By using embodiment and rhetoric, Winnie articulates the very carnal suffering of Nyalenda's citizens with a powerful trajectory of solidarity and growth; through her looks, she is herself evidence that her fabulous tale is really possible. Implicitly, yet perhaps most importantly, Winnie's performance establishes a connection between the reduced life expectations of Kenyan slum dwellers and a worldly-wise, urbane and glamorous lifestyle. As the MC was to remark on stage, during her event which I discuss below, "Education makes the poor and the rich connect!" My contention is that part of what makes Winnie's performance so persuasive is that she presents a project of growth through education, while at the same time performing a sophisticated, embodied knowledge about the fashioning of the self. Although this knowledge is not likely to be found in textbooks, it is something that

Winnie passes on to her mentees in the framework of her modelling agency, Elegant. Such knowledge presupposes an extensive familiarity with fashion trends and corporeal expressivity.

A tiny yet significant example of how Winnie uses her performance to bring together the different worlds evoked above, is her hair, which is shaved short all over. On the one hand, such a hairstyle is conventional for school girls in Nyalenda, as well as for many women who cannot afford costly extensions, let alone wigs. On the other hand, in the media world where news anchors and moderators usually sport expensive hair styles, her shaved head gives Winnie a rather ‘edgy’ look which perfectly reflects her stance as a hands-on change-maker from the slums. At her events, she usually dresses sharply in plain black, perhaps with a selected piece made of African fabric and only appears on stage briefly, leaving the limelight to her models and mentees. In this context, her hair style appears to be a reference to the radical simplicity that seems to be *de rigueur* among fashion designers around the globe, an example of accomplished understatement and a nod to the simple chic of ‘true’ fashion. Winnie’s performance may also be seen as part of a multi-media strategy to become an ‘influencer’, i.e. someone who gets paid for presenting specific content to their online followers.

According to the collaboratively written, online encyclopaedia Wikipedia, the recent phenomenon of influencer content on social media may be framed as a new variety of testimonial advertising. However, such a definition ignores the most important parts of an influencer’s work. Influencers use their aesthetics to build large online followings and even in today’s entertainment industry, few artists rise to fame without first laying a foundation for their popularity through various social media channels. Usually such aesthetics portray an attractive lifestyle, demonstrated by healthy, trained bodies, participation at glamorous events, and travel to luxurious and exotic destinations. The social capital gained from the attention of scores of potential consumers may then be used to advertise specific goods or services and is thereby translated into financial capital. Often influencers, for example, fashion models, engage in barter in that they receive selected designer clothes or luxury items ‘for free’ but have to wear them conspicuously on their online accounts. The website [influencermarketinghub.com](http://influencermarketinghub.com), makes a crucial distinction in this context, “It is important to note that these individuals are not merely marketing tools, but rather social relationship assets with which brands

can collaborate to achieve their marketing objectives.”<sup>20</sup> As illustrated in the previous chapters, in a context of economic scarcity in which social infrastructures regularly assure the very basic amenities of life for many inhabitants, social relationships become crucial assets. Therefore, in the context of this chapter, “relationship assets” will denote not only someone like Winnie’s wealth of followers but also the potential relationships to people higher up the social hierarchy, such as politicians, corporations and development aid staff. While Winnie’s online following (currently 5,000 followers on her personal account) could theoretically be exploited for corporate ends, the models and ushers used by Kenyan corporates for advertisements or marketing events, are usually recruited from Nairobi. This may be the reason why neither Winnie nor any of the other artists in this thesis, identify as being ‘influencers’ or alternatively, ‘instagramers’. At the same time, almost all artists and especially fashion models, use their online accounts to circulate visual material about their aestheticized selves, in order to involve themselves in urban life more beneficially.

## 6.2 “Face of Nyalenda” – Amusement, Ornamentation and the Promise of Social Change

In December 2016, Winnie’s event, Face of Nyalenda, was set to take place in Pandpieri, one of the biggest secondary schools in Nyalenda, far from the more opulent, glamorous places in town that were usually booked for such an event. Face of Nyalenda, essentially a beauty pageant and book drive, was one of Winnie’s more philanthropically oriented events. A brief exploration of the venue’s space is valuable for understanding such an event’s economic underpinnings. Pandpieri school is a material manifestation of the different important economic articulations that constitute space in Kisumu. The large public school is situated along the Ring Road, the road that divides Nyalenda, originally an ‘informal’ settlement, from the previously ‘formal’ part of town, Milimani, which was reserved for the colonial population. Even today, Ring Road appears as a straight grey tarmac line on satellite photos dividing Milimani’s spacious green lots from the infinitely smaller, complex, winding built space that is Nyalenda. Pandpieri school is situated in Oboch, a neighbourhood in Western Nyalenda near Tom Mboya College, the city’s biggest labour college.

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<sup>20</sup> Influencer Marketing Hub, ‘What is an Influencer?’, retrieved from <<https://influencermarketinghub.com/what-is-an-influencer/>>, accessed 10 August 2020.

Pandpieri articulates complex financial streams from various actors and different corners of the world. The German KfW development bank contributed to building the school, as it has to various other schools in Kenya, accommodating a total of 37,000 pupils. As they go to school in the early morning, at daybreak, the students will probably pass under one of the giant floodlights which illuminate what were previously hotspots of crime and violence. These were kindly provided by the French Development Bank, which also contributes to the renovation of various model schools in Kisumu. Furthermore, anyone approaching the school from Ring Road will notice the walls surrounding the extensive school property, which serve as advertising space with adverts being painted directly onto them. At the time of the event, the walls displayed Coca-Cola's red and white trademark logo. Equator Bottlers Company, a bottling and distribution subsidiary of the global soft drink empire, maintains a state-of-the-art plant in Kisumu, on the other side of the lake, which realises some 40% of the company's production for the Kenyan market. In other words, a student entering the school to participate in ordinary school life on any day of the week, will become entangled in a network of global financial streams, multilateral state cooperation, and local politics. The Face of Nyalenda event sought to rearticulate the relationship between Nyalenda's inhabitants, specifically, the eight young women contesting the beauty pageant, and this wider world.

Upon entering, I pass a movable wall with miniatures of the Face of Nyalenda logo printed on it. Soon after the event, the red carpet in front of the wall will be crowded with people having their photos taken as visual evidence of their participation in the event and their association with the spheres surrounding it. Music is blasting from the large school yard. Reggaeton and other fast-moving dance music is regularly turned down so that the MC can make distorted announcements and welcome the crowd. In the middle of the school yard, a slightly elevated cement footbridge connecting the two rectangular, corrugated iron roofed, school buildings, has been transformed into a catwalk. Some hundred plastic chairs have been set up on both sides of the divide. The public consists of school children, parents, neighbours, friends and families of the participants, curious onlookers, and a fair number of Kisumu artists. At one end of the catwalk, the three judges sit on black chairs at an imposing wooden desk borrowed from one of the classrooms, with sheets for marking the participants' performances. They have a sheet of paper with a column for each of the participants, who will be judged in each round according to the sartorial theme of the round (50 marks), their confidence

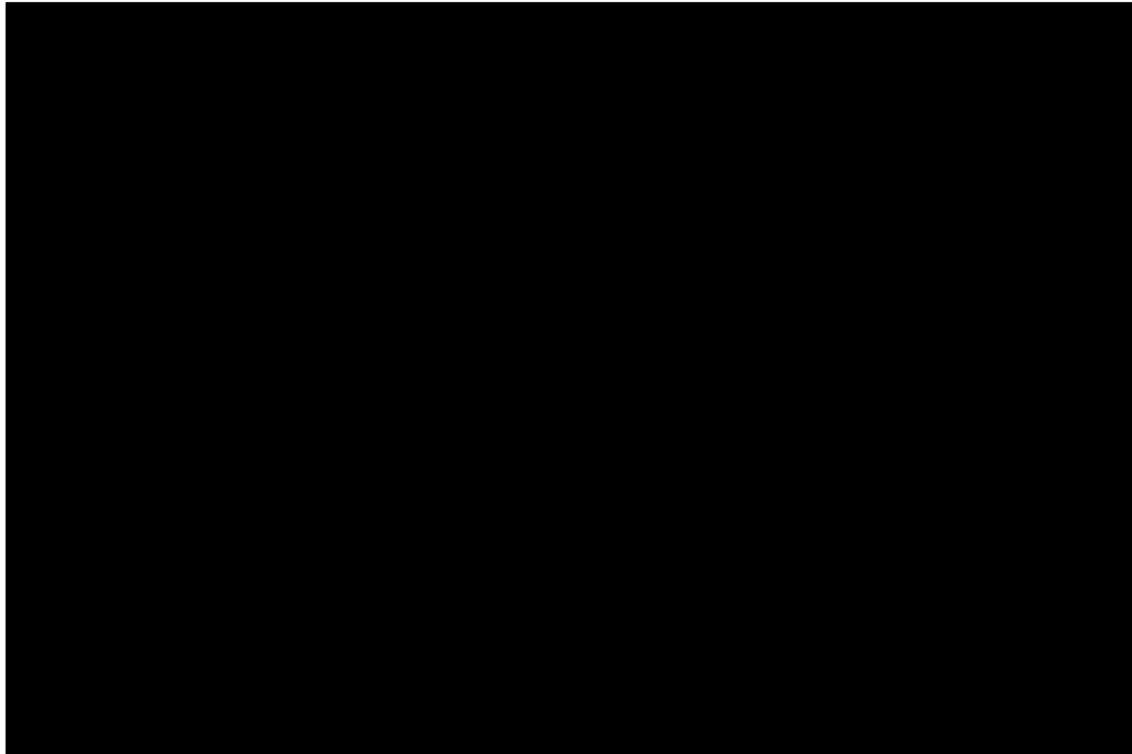
(15 marks), their stage management skills (15 marks), and their runway walk (20 marks).

A black cover cordons off the backstage area at the other end of the catwalk, where the footbridge leads into the school building, from whence the models will soon appear one by one. With its grassroots activism for children's education, Face of Nyalenda is far more modest in its dimensions and pretensions than Kisumu Fashion Week, in which Winnie is always involved, or one of her more upmarket events, organized in the city's smart hotels and shopping malls. The difference between Face of Nyalenda and other such events, is the fact that it is free of charge. While every guest is asked to donate a book, there is no reception desk at the gate. In contrast, entering one of the city's smart hotels or malls would be a far from ordinary practice for some of the young women who are about to parade on the catwalk, and would be considered intimidating or at least, very exciting. "Some of them don't even have internet phones," one Kisumu artists whispers into my ear during the event, to emphasise how empowering the practices unfolding in front of our eyes are for some of the young women, or perhaps, how dearly they are in need of connection. I remember the happy anticipation of some of the visitors with whom I shared the lift at the Tuff Foam Shopping Mall, as we went upstairs to where the 4th edition of Kisumu Fashion Week was taking place. The excitement and nervousness rose to a maximum, and we were clearly entering a specific realm of joy and relaxation. While the uptown decorum of the shopping mall with its sharp contrast to the everyday etiquette of the slums, afforded Kisumu Fashion Week a contemporary and cosmopolitan sense of propriety, Face of Nyalenda operated on the very same grounds from which it sought to distinguish itself.

Eight young women from Nyalenda were about to compete in the beauty pageant for the title, the Face of Nyalenda. The winners and runners-up had been promised one year of training in Winnie's modelling agency, Elegant, free of charge. Considering that Winnie charges KSH 2,500 [ca. USD 25] per month, this was a once in a lifetime chance to jumpstart a career in Kisumu's fashion modelling industry. Winnie had scouted the contestants beforehand. She knew some of them from Nyalenda, others had taken part in her interventions in Nyalenda, such as a drive for school uniforms, and some had responded to her call on Facebook to audition for the event. Winnie had trained the models herself at the Tumsifu Center, where she acquainted them with the basics of the modelling game. I had visited some of the training sessions and witnessed the young women's great excitement and anticipation about the event.

Winnie had taught her mentees how to parade along the hall in long strides while counting their steps. She taught them the skill of reaching a certain point in the hall in a specific number of steps, while making it all look perfectly natural. The contenders would often burst into collective laughter when they became self-conscious about aspects of their walk, or when a fixed number of steps made them stop at very different points in the hall. First walking in groups helped to remove some of the tension associated with the prestigious practice. Walking in pairs allowed them to get a “feel” for each other’s walks. Practicing on the catwalk is very much an apprenticeship, where one learns through observation and imitation. Observing how a pair perform their runway walk and the step-and-turn at the end of the imaginary runway, indicated by one of Winnie’s sandals, allows the contenders’ walks to be compared and their strong points identified. The atmosphere is light hearted, and everybody laughs a lot as Winnie instructs the models where to look, what to do with their arms, and how to turn more effectively. The models are giddy. All are wearing casual clothes and only the notoriously hard to master, high heels betray the fact that this is training for the catwalk. During the event, however, the models had to go out one by one, alone, ready for the audience’s critical appraisal.

The transformation of the women who were to appear from behind the cordoned-off backstage area did not miss its intended effect of “stunning” (or “wowing”) the crowd. With their made-up faces, dressed in their best, the young women take the stage and bewitch the audience with their chic looks, just as celebrities would. Jessi, model Nr. 6, comes on stage in a skin-tight, long blue evening dress with a tulip-shaped lower part and a deep backline with an elegant cross fastening. Meanwhile, the DJ lays it on thick. The song “Shorty”, by the US RnB singer Donnell Jones, blasts from the speakers and plunges the whole scene into an atmosphere of intimate affection. There is more than a hint of moral suspicion in the air as Jessi turns her shapely body in the golden afternoon sun, looking expectantly into the distance. Even the photographer at the end of the runway puts down his camera and gazes at the woman with an incredulous shake of his head. Jessi walks towards the judges’ table, with a light smile on her face, taking every step with confidence. There is a special magic during such performances that is constantly renewed as one after the other, the models enter the stage, wearing sparkling jewellery, shiny dresses and perfect make up. The DJ plays slow, sensual RnB music, as the MC evaluates the models’ performance and continues to seduce the crowd.



**Figure 19:** Jessi, Model Nr. 6, doing her catwalk during the last round of the Face of Nyalenda contest.

Source: Author's photograph.

Still, not all the models seem to walk with the sense of lightness and ease that characterized Jessi's walk. Other participants show their nervousness, it is visible in their hesitant gestures and facial expressions. Model Nr. 3, curvaceous and with strong makeup, holds a black handbag with a golden handle anxiously in her hand as she crosses the footbridge with a surprisingly grim expression on her face. The pulsating music is a powerful glue that frames the performances as part of a global pop cultural realm, with its sweeping promises of affluence and autonomy. At the same time, the contestants must live up to the privilege that they are performatively asserting. The young woman flaunting her brilliant evening dress somehow looks out of place in this dusty schoolyard, even though I am temporarily immersed in the emotional appeal of her performance. As my rational mind condemns the scene for what based on my aesthetic preferences, I consider excessive sentimentality, I find myself touched and moved by the healthy if fragile, sense of pride and self-respect that the young woman portrays.

The crowd is only temporarily engaged, there is a flow of people in and out of the event, especially during the lengthy breaks, while the models prepare for the next round. Some visitors turn to their phones, some leave for food and some leave for good. The attention usually increases again during the rounds. The crowd's mixture of boredom

and excitement was something I could observe during other artistic events in Kisumu, as well as that experienced by artists when waiting long hours for their performance, and even longer for their payment at the very end of the event. Winnie gives her mentees a challenging task by transplanting the event into the heart of Nyalenda. To me, the difference between Face of Nyalenda and the many other upmarket fashion events I witnessed in the city centre, is its location. While it is one thing to perform elegantly in front of fashionable youths and peers, it is quite another thing to do so in front of the gathered neighbourhood. Children from the neighbourhood are playing in the dust in their torn clothes and some of the young mothers, who have evidently also dressed up for the event, are examining every model carefully with curiosity and a touch of disdain, from a corner of the school yard. Every new round recreates a buzzing space, almost like a different reality that is brought into existence performatively, as the participants take part in what Judith Butler in her analysis of the New York drag scene, calls a “contesting of realness” (1997: 388). It is a reality that is transitory, coming into being momentarily, if, and only if, the model’s performance is convincing.

In Butler’s case study, the contesting of realness relates to the prevailing notions of a heterosexual gendered matrix that the participants in a New York drag ball seek to inhabit and to authenticate for themselves. In Nyalenda, the young women’s performances do not oppose the prevailing patriarchal conventions about gender. On the contrary, the performances seem to validate the existing norms, as they entail an element of active objectification. The Nyalenda models’ hyperbole and performative hyper-femininity is an attempt at class first, in terms of both style (classiness) and social and economic standing. The contestants’ glamorous performances are a claim to a different status which approximates the contestants transitionally, experimentally and performatively to the norm that they seek to occupy, which is one of affluence and abundance.

It is perhaps this double relationship to both the male gaze and desire, and a simultaneous claim to affluence, that make such performances morally acceptable, even if not all the potential moral doubts are resolved. Raising a young woman from being a slum dweller to a modern ‘city girl’ evidently enhances her chances of finding the “imaginary man”, who as Butler writes, “will designate a class and race primitive that promises permanent shelter from [...] poverty.” (1997: 387). However, there is also a readily perceivable clear sense of joy and empowerment in the models as they strut up and down the catwalk, as if, perhaps, modelling provides them with a chance to subvert



the particular forms of structural disadvantages that they regularly experience. Nyalenda's inhabitants are routinely concerned with the bare minima of life, with food, transport, school fees, diapers, basic sanitary amenities. The staging of contemporary forms of female power, which owe much to black pop divas like Beyoncé and Rihanna, says as much about these young women's joy as it does about entrapment and feelings of powerlessness. The creative interplay between the images of wealth in one of the neighbourhood's sites of social reproduction, creates a cultural ambiguity about the young women's status, in which they were obviously thriving.

Such contesting of realness, and indeed performance in general, as Butler notes, always entails the possibility of failure. Butler even goes as far as to refer to the "constitutive failure of the performative" (1997: 382). Indeed, the smallest glitch such as slipping on a crack in the catwalk, may make the difference between a convincing and a failed performance. The attempt to performatively inhabit this aspired conformity of affluence and a subject position in a global consumer culture can be quickly ruined, especially when walking with high heels on an uneven concrete floor with tiny holes in it.

Becoming and being a fashion model is to some degree, *bluff*, as Sasha Newell (2012a) explained for young people in urban Côte d'Ivoire. The *bluffeurs* took their inspiration from the Congolese sapeurs (*Société des Ambianceurs et des Personnes Élégantes*) movement, whose use of style for the purpose of self-fashioning can be seen as a way of objecting to one's position in social space. Even though the Kisumu artists lack the extremely expensive, original designer clothes, the contenders' outfits are impeccable. Of course, the crowd is aware of the performative aspect, that the young women's symbolic transformation from 'grass to grace,' as an idiomatic expression puts it, is a 'trick'. As Ashley Mears remarks in her book *Pricing Beauty*, the word *glamour* stems from the medieval Celtic *glamer*, denoting a spell or magic charm that is "cast to blur the eyes and make objects appear different from, and usually better from, their true nature" (2011: 5). As with the *bluffeurs*, the people in Kisumu know that the extremely well-groomed comedian or the MC hyping up the crowd at such an event, is really from a low-income settlement. Indeed, the low-income residents' attitudes and lifestyle is an inexhaustible staple for Kenyan stand-up comedians, many of whom like Eric Omondi, Otoyoy or Jalang'o, rose from poverty to fortune through comedy. Their intimate acquaintance with the attitudes and lifestyles surrounding hustling are their strongest attraction for urban Kenyan audiences. The public's knowledge of the artist's 'real' (in some cases 'former') social standing, as Newell notes, is irrelevant. The bluff is "about

demonstrating the taste, the connoisseurship, of someone who had the means to live that way all the time. And it was this facility with the symbolization of luxury for which they were respected” (2012b: 47).

In the case of fashion events in Kisumu, like Face of Nyalenda, the ability to display such connoisseurship, takes the form of a contest. These events’ aesthetic interest lies in the fact that there are several rounds in which participants contest for realness and hope to avoid the pitfalls of performative failure. The rounds’ themes are frequently repeated across fashion events in Kisumu and usually include a “cultural” round, in which the models evoke some sense of ‘traditional’ culture, wearing pieces made of natural materials, organic face paints and accessories, such as gourds from a calabash tree. The “creative” round invites all types of designs, preferably involving unusual and recycled objects, such as balloons, straws, pages from a newspaper and so on. More often than not, the events include an “official” round, in which contestants parade in professional attire, appearing as engineers, athletes, flight attendants or doctors.

The aspect of realness is not necessarily limited to the performative dimension. The way in which the events enable young people to express what they imagine and act it out in front of an audience, mirrors the Kisumu artists’ *modus operandi* in their everyday lives, with which they creatively establish new structures and social facts that work to their benefit. There are, in other words, direct links allowing the performative knowledge associated with fashion modelling to feed into the artists’ daily lives, especially in the ways they create job opportunities for themselves, mainly by articulating themselves with others. Some of the more established Kisumu models, such as Winnie herself, Hyral Matete, or male models Kish Roberts and Derrick Lumumba, have managed to secure some of the rare jobs in advertisements, with their extraordinary rewards-to-effort ratio. Such opportunities greatly enhance a model’s standing in the Kisumu fashion scene and satisfy collective expectations of access to a better life. The skills of presenting well and relating with ease, effectively being one’s own brand ambassador, unlock new opportunities and even access to the white-collar salariat. Winnie Okal, who used to train with Elegant models, managed to secure a job as a secretary with a real estate company in town. Her transformation from being a young woman from a humble background in Ahero, a small town some 30 km outside Kisumu, to being a ‘city girl’ with a fixed income mimicked her transformation during fashion events. In our conversations, she stated emphatically that her experience with modelling had provided her with the manners, appearance and ‘look’ which such a

position, in interactive service, required. Derrick Lumumba, perhaps Kisumu's best-known male model, managed to secure a job as a salesperson in Kisumu's Woolworth's store in the West End Mall. When I talked to Derrick about his passion for modelling, his enthusiasm for fashion came through as strongly as his desire to pass something valuable on to the 'upcoming generation', in which Derrick who is in his late 20s no longer includes himself. As we chat in the sophisticated corridors of the mall over a frozen yoghurt, Derrick mentions in passing how modelling has provided him with the relational links that proved to be crucial for his own career, "I love fashion and I believe I am talented. There are people that... like for example this job I got it though this [modelling]. The shop manager saw me on social media, he friend requested me and I accepted. He was this random contact but later on we met at [Kisumu] Fashion Week, he told me 'you guy, we work at Woolworth's'... and that is how it started".

If the 'official' theme at Kisumu modelling events evokes images of a modern working world, the final round in the city's beauty pageants is usually the evening wear category, in which the participants display the utmost elegance. In this round, which is also the last at the Face of Nyalenda event, the women dress in long evening gowns. Winnie decides to combine this final display round with questions from the judges which the models have to answer. The models line up and respond, with as much charm as possible, while all the time exhibiting an idealized version of themselves. Sheila Odida, one of the judges who won the Miss Tourism and Miss Kisumu competitions, asks model Nr. 5, "What is your name and what is the chief aim of this event?" provoking a laborious answer about the difficulty of accessing educational materials. The event's philanthropic dimension pinpointed one of the questions that had haunted me throughout much of my research in Kisumu.

During the early stage of my fieldwork, I dismissed many Kisumu artists' philanthropic efforts. I disregarded them as being a façade for entering profitable relationships with the powerful development aid sector in Kisumu. To me, such tactical involvements were side projects that could sustain the artists while they were doing their 'actual' artistic work. I at first thought that the intentional links that the artists thereby created were unworthy of serious consideration. This misjudgement stemmed partly from the fact that I had been deceived, or successfully led to believe, depending on one's point of view, by the Kisumu artists' appearances and their performances of success. The well-groomed impressions they gave would often give absolutely no clue to their frequently humble backgrounds. Winnie, just like Derrick Lumumba and Sandra Orwa, the young

woman who eventually won the Face of Nyalenda contest, all grew up as full orphans. They had all, as Winnie put it, “tasted poverty” from an early age on. For Winnie herself, this experience must have been a particularly bitter pill to swallow as part of her family actually belongs to the country’s elite circles; her uncle Bernhard Chunga, occupied the position of the chief justice of Kenya until 2003. After her father’s passing when she was 11, and that of her mother in the following year, Winnie was taken in by another relative. Her relative’s inappropriate advances forced Winnie to move on and fend for herself, at a time when she was pregnant and hence particularly vulnerable. In an interview with the local buzz magazine *capitalfm*<sup>21</sup>, Winnie expands on her own precarious access to education as a child. She remembers the kindness of a neighbour, who used to take her in as well as other particularly vulnerable children who did not have electricity in their homes and for this simple reason, often failed to do their homework in the evenings after school.

Growing up in Nyalenda was never about talent. It was all about the books I missed, and the opportunities that could have led me to where I wanted to be. It has never escaped my mind that someone was willing to give us space to undertake our homework. That simple gesture gave me the inspiration to do what I am doing today. Through this project, I have stretched out my hand to hold the hands of many children. I clearly remember that not long ago, somebody stretched out his hand for me to hold by giving space to me and others to undertake homework.

In a conversation that took place several weeks after she had won the Face of Nyalenda competition and become one of Winnie’s ‘mentees’, Sandra expanded a little on the significance of Winnie’s drive for education. As part of the “next crop of models,” Sandra also articulated the idea of intergenerational solidarity. Even though she is 21, and her mentor Winnie, like Derrick, is in her late-twenties, Sandra depicts her own experience of growing up in Nyalenda as being crucially different from that of the generation before. Sandra uses an us/them distinction, as she indicates how the city’s infrastructure and the public schools have improved in recent years:

Winnie knows many challenges. Actually, them they learnt before us. Us, we went to school when at least there were lights. For them, there were no lights. Then, within the estates there were no lights as well, so they could use the small lamps. You know, for them there were no books (...) they did not have books so they could share books. Maybe for us, maybe we suffered but for her ...

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<sup>21</sup> Retrieved from <<https://www.capitalfm.co.ke/thesauce/face-nyalenda-reading-program-offers-kisumuslum-facelift/>>, accessed August 10 2020.

sometimes back the schools were not providing books. For us, we went to school when the schools were providing the books and the ratio was like one book for five people but it was there. But for them, it was never there. So I think that is when she also wants to give something back to the community.

Sandra's perspective illustrates how a small gesture or tiny detail, like a functioning light bulb, can make a big difference in someone's life and future trajectory in a Kenyan low-income settlement. Her comment reminds us that even though the event's philanthropic dimension is of course a strategic characteristic with the aim of tying in other urban actors, a small institution like the library, would undoubtedly have a sizable impact on the lives of individual Nyalenda citizens. On a symbolic level, the way in which the library articulates existing inequalities mirrors other, similar initiatives. Instead of addressing economic hardships and the very carnal suffering of some Kisumu residents directly, the Kisumu artists usually create openings that other actors can connect with, by pointing out the available potentials, rather than the existing limitations. It always takes more than one to form a relationship and the Kisumu artists do not necessarily create connections per se but opportunities for associations with other actors. The articulations that Kisumu artists propose that other actors join, are very much contingent. Whether such offers will produce the desired response and result in a steady relationship, is as uncertain as the relationship's potential to bring about structural change once it has formed.

One anecdote that Winnie shared with me is an example of the arbitrariness and unpredictability of the process of linking up with state actors. When she was advertising her project of building the community library, Winnie was contacted by the County Administration. The relevant CS declared her interest in the project and indicated the County's willingness to support it. However, what initially appeared to be a promising offer turned rather bitter when the CS revealed the design that she had in mind. In fact, the County had received funding to establish several community libraries, much like the one that Winnie had in mind. In return for their support, the County requested that Winnie should advertise her library project as one of the County's 'model libraries', supposedly a forerunner of other libraries to come. The funds for these future libraries, the Kisumu artists presumed, had long since disappeared. Winnie was still willing to attend the meeting proposed by the CS, to listen to and discuss her propositions. After all, the process of establishing the library was proving difficult, especially because of the fixed costs for rent, electricity and a small payment to the librarian who assisted the users at the weekends. Although the proposition had already been formulated to be very

much in the County's interests, the CS postponed the meeting at the very last minute, thereby ruining Winnie's busy schedule. The unreasonable proposition and the CS's behaviour once again illustrate the seemingly unbridgeable gulf between facticity and ideality, that Mbembe and Roitmann identify in African societies, where there is often a yawning gap between fact and description.

In Winnie's view, the fact that the County did not enter the negotiation solely as a benefactor, but also with the intention of acquitting itself in the inquest into the delay in implementing the libraries, made the cancellation of the appointment even more impolite. Nevertheless, she was interested in having a constructive working relationship with the County, even if it meant making a concession in advance, such as giving the County a say in her treasured project. In the case of the CS, the meeting was never rescheduled, yet this never deterred Winnie from proceeding.

The deceptions and the potential sponsors' unwillingness to fulfil their wordy promises, was one of the recurring issues faced by the Kisumu artists. In fact, similar to the sales business, where a seller has to promote a product to many potential clients before sealing a deal, many of the connections proposed by Kisumu artists were not made. However, this did not deter them from continuing to create art works and events proposing what was deemed to be a more coherent and satisfactory way of organizing social relationships than the status quo. According to Charles Taylor (2004), how people imagine they fit together with others is central to how people imagine their existence and social worlds. One way in which Winnie implicitly articulates a more coherent organization of social links through her events, is through the idea of intergenerational solidarity, which Sandra mentioned in the quote above. Solidarity between 'generations' of artists is often emphasized, for example, the "new crop of models" like Sandra, the winner of Face of Nyalenda, and the slightly older and more established, models like Winnie and Derrick.

In this sense, the image behind Winnie's event is at variance with the broader structure of society, in which gerontocratic privilege is frequently cited as a main source of social inequality. In the beauty pageant, young women who are entirely new to the industry are supported by the industry's leaders who groom them for higher things. In Kisumu's art industry, exactly the opposite was frequently lamented across all art genres; that established artists did *not* make way for upcoming artists, hindering, rather than promoting their peers' talents and potentials. In this way, the arts industry mirrors the broader structures of inequality and at the same time, provides a social space where this

collective concern can be claimed and expressed. In the fashion industry, for example, upcoming models could be discouraged from going to an audition if they knew that one of their mentors would also be there. Therefore, some model agency owners make a point of not attending auditions where they would compete with their mentees. For this reason, Winnie also does not model during her events but switches into the role of the event organizer. She only appears briefly at the end of the event, dressed in plain black, much like designers at fashion events around the globe, only appearing on stage briefly to express their gratitude. Winnie puts herself in a favourable light by presenting herself as someone who cares about and caters for Nyalenda's future generation. At the same time, she articulates an image of the social through her event that is at variance with the established image of Nyalenda's youth and their elected leaders, which is an image characterized by broken links and systemic neglect. While the audience judges the models on the runway for their various skills and catwalk technique, Winnie's efforts are judged by different criteria. Apart from providing diversion and amusement to an urban audience, Winnie is expected to articulate an image of the social that is appealing and convincing at the same time.

To understand how events such as Face of Nyalenda implicitly articulate images of the social, it is important to consider the members of the audience's involvement, as well as that of special guests during the shows. In addition to the images of prosperity projected by the models in the various rounds, the guests are also woven into the structure of the events, a fact that often contributes to their lengthy character. The events' seemingly clear-cut, stripped-down design, in which the audience is clearly separated from the runway, belies the spontaneous and seemingly undirected game of seeing and being seen and of the interactions between performers and guests. The boundary between models and audience further disappears on the red carpet after the event, on which the participants may take photos. The photos are usually published on Facebook, where they fulfil a similar demand for amusement and ornamentation as the tabloid press and 'buzz'-magazines in Europe, which document which celebrities or starlets visited a certain event. More importantly, some of the guests are invited on stage during such events, becoming an element of the articulation themselves.

Typically, the MC, who has to ensure the seamless flow of the event, will consult with the event organizer beforehand as well as during the event, about which guests need to be publicly recognized. There seem to be implicit rules governing how this recognition usually proceeds. First of all, guests have a function in the event's dramaturgy, as they

serve as ‘fillers’ and are usually called on stage during the breaks, for example while the models are changing their outfits. The more important the guest, the more often they will be mentioned. The timing of a given guest’s interlude also reflects that person’s social significance. Usually, the later a person is called on stage during the event, the more important they are. Or alternatively, the person might have made a more significant contribution to the event therefore be invited on stage at a later point. Very important persons, like top county officials, would only make brief appearances. An event’s flow would be interrupted immediately for them, so that they could address the crowd before immediately leaving to continue with their schedule. In this respect, artistic events in Kisumu also constitute moments of encounter between state actors and representatives of the city’s youth. In some cases, events also serve as a platform, facilitating a public exchange between the two sides. For instance, during Kisumu Fashion Week 2015, the MC invited the Director of Culture, the person responsible for cultural programming within the County, onto the stage. A guest then confronted the director with his recent experience of the thriving cultural weeks in Turkana (Northern Kenya) and Kwale County (Coastal Kenya). He asked, “Are we going to see any of this in Kisumu? We want answers! Why don’t we have a cultural week in Kisumu, when we have all these talents?” which provoked instant cheering and applause from the crowd. The director, overwhelmed, resorted to an evasive answer. However, such confrontations are rare and VIPs usually profit from such events by displaying their generosity and active interest in the activities of the city’s youth.

For instance, Winnie invited Joachim “Swagga” Oketch, the popular politician whom I introduced at the end of the last chapter, to her Plus Size Fashion Affair event in 2017, held at Kisumu Hotel. Oketch’s popularity among the Kisumu electorate stems from his closeness to the youth and his own roots as a creative entrepreneur in the transport industry. By ‘gracing’ Winnie’s event, sitting in an exposed position on a plush couch at the end of the runway, the politician supported it, while also profiting from his exposure at such an original artistic production by the city’s youth. Winnie must surely have profited from her cooperation with Oketch, by gaining privileged access to the top-level official. Because of the clientelist nature of much of the city’s politics, the offices of local politicians are usually crowded with many visitors intending to ask them for financial support. As Hyral Matete, who runs a modelling agency for children and managed to send one of her mentees to take part in a modelling competition overseas, explains, “We do not expect our politicians to build roads. We expect them to support



us in our projects. Perhaps it's a mindset we should change. I am not sure." Matete managed to arouse the interest of Dorothy Nyong'o, the wife of Kisumu governor Anyang Nyong'o. In exchange for online publicity on Matete's Facebook account, "Mama County" agreed to sponsor the mentee's flight overseas so that she could take part in the competition. Dawe Dawe, Hyral Matete and Winnie Juma all manage to secure privileged access to local politicians through their artistic projects. As they collaborate with influential patrons, they offer these patrons opportunities to connect with young audiences. Whether it is Dawe Dawe's straightforward interview with Oketch, or Winnie's silent accreditation of the politician during her event, at which he was given an opportunity to speak, these tentative links improve the chances of more favourable life outcomes for Kisumu artists considerably. At the same time, they force these influential actors to consider and acknowledge the young people's concerns and crises. However frail such relationships may sometimes prove to be, they can become the starting point of a more interconnected social space. As we have seen in Chapter three, during the encounter between Boniface Ogutu and the vice-governor, such linkages may become the starting points for mutually beneficial relationships between different people or groups. Boniface invited Winnie to take part in the meeting, so that she could pitch her project to the top official. In return, Boniface could expect that Winnie would return the act of kindness either by giving him a photography job or perhaps by facilitating his involvement with another important actor in town. This point illustrates yet again, that making art in Kisumu is always part of an individualist hustle, geared towards securing one's material safety, and simultaneously, part of a collective effort to re-imagine city life and make the relevant authorities pay attention to the citizens' needs.

As Face of Nyalenda was something of a 'street' edition of Winnie's events, none of the VIPs who usually graced her more upmarket events were present. A local rapper represented the neighbourhood's youthful male population, while a mother whose children sang a song, could be seen as symbolically representing the neighbourhood's families. The interludes sometimes seem random but they are as important as the models' performances and together, form the expression of the event's intent and content. One of the guests during Face of Nyalenda was a police officer in full uniform, who had been especially invited to the event. The officer in question had an obvious theatrical bent, coming on stage and greeting the crowd with the energy of a performer. The officer then took one of the models by the hand, leading her onto the stage for an

impromptu dance. Such brief moments of the performative tentatively rearticulate those aspects of the social imaginary concerning the relationship between the Nyalenda residents and the police. This linkage is usually defined by violent clashes between the opposing sides during election periods. During such clashes, the rioting citizens' crude weapons, stones and slingshots, forcefully meet the armoured vehicles, teargas and live bullets of the forces of order on nearby Ring Road. However haphazard the officer's impromptu performance appeared at the time, it fit with the various other elements articulated during the event perfectly, to form the symbolic proposition of a tentative reorganization of social links.

One last way in which the events explicitly articulate links with other urban actors, without the use of words, is when sponsors are acknowledged with signboards. At Kisumu Fashion Week, all the models came out for a final walk at the end of the event, each carrying a sign board naming one of the main sponsors. Like the so-called 'ring girls' in boxing competitions, who carry cards indicating the round number, the Kisumu models carried large cardboards that read "County Government of KSM", or "Orange" for the French telecommunications corporation. Another sponsor was KMET, a Kisumu-based NGO focusing on reproductive and maternal health. The KMET signboard was actually a poster, referring to different methods of contraception in both English and Swahili. The NGO receives funds by the US-based organization Planned Parenthood Global, as well as from the Government of Kenya, thereby also making these bigger actors stakeholders in the event to a certain extent. By claiming a new kind of visibility, members of Kisumu's fashion industry implicitly claim some sense of reciprocity. The models become walking signboards, which performatively and tentatively, articulate Kisumu youth with the powers that be, from the city's patrons to global donor institutions. The emergent fashion industry's practitioners propose an aesthetically appealing and much more attractive image of the social than has hitherto existed and in which influential actors are eager to take part. The ideas of progress and building up contained in the activities of Kisumu's fashion industry then mirror the philanthropic efforts that Winnie has put at the centre of her activity.

As I have shown in this main section of this chapter, Winnie uses her event series and campaign, Face of Nyalenda, as a way of articulating the low-income settlement with global financial flows and a glamorous, worldly-wise lifestyle. Winnie herself figures centrally in this proposed image of the social, as she is the embodiment of the articulation, performatively creating the 'missing link' between "rich and poor". The

performance of affluence and abundance is of course a ‘bluff’ which is well understood by all the actors involved. Nevertheless, if one performs the bluff well enough, and that is of course the goal, it may actually function as a bridge into a new reality as expressed in the adage ‘fake it till you make it’. If you can convince other urban actors that you are the trendiest person in town, you will actually be that person, which may open up tremendous opportunities in the entertainment industry and the style and aesthetic labour markets, of which Derrick Lumumba and Winnie Okal are proof. It is a magical moment when the motivational slogans on the wall, the waiting and months or even years of perseverance, start to pay off. Suddenly, making art not only makes the week more manageable, more pleasurable. Not only does it help to find communal support among other distressed young people; suddenly, art begins to ‘make sense’ from a financial point of view and what may have appeared to be delusions of grandeur from a slum perspective, like having a salaried job in one of the city’s malls, may become an actual opportunity.

For Winnie, who has long since won her spurs in the modelling game, part of the profit from her sustained activity in the fashion industry is her access to the city’s elite population, to which she already belongs to a certain extent. Winnie’s philanthropic efforts, a result of her own life story marked by experiences of hardship, provide a connecting device for politicians, business people and the more affluent in general. This is where many Kisumu artists’ seemingly paradoxical logic of ‘helping others’ in order to ‘help oneself’, comes into play. Every time an artist articulates aspects of a more suitable image of the social, this articulation proposes a re-organization of social links, typically with the artist as a central figure. The aesthetic appeal and salience of her events have made Winnie a sought-after person in town, whose activities are attractive for patrons wanting to stage themselves in front of urban audiences. By constantly trying out new types of events and proposing new spaces for urban audiences and various actors to come together, Kisumu artists are generating a new economy of attention, accompanied by its own fair share of power and influence, its own symbols and rites and its own specialized performative knowledges.

In the remaining section of this chapter, I examine a further example of Winnie’s work in representing Nyalenda; I will analyse and discuss a video that Winnie produced herself using Facebook-Live, a 20-minute video of her casually strolling through Nyalenda during which she interacts with her digital audience. After having sketched out the scope of her activities in general terms, this video now enables me to convey a

sense of how Winnie connects with other actors on her itineraries through town. The video is basically a short excerpt from her everyday life, shot on location, so to speak but at the same time, it is a carefully chosen angle, an adaptation of her activities to the digital realm. The video enables me to illustrate the varied ways in which Winnie articulates herself, appealing once again to other people to show solidarity and reciprocity by becoming involved in her artistic and philanthropic efforts. As we will see, transposing her habitual way of articulating herself into a digital live broadcast, considerably enlarges her pool of people to interact with.

### 6.3 Political Violence, Philanthropy and the Joys of Social Media

In the late morning hours of October 31<sup>st</sup>, 2017, Winnie decided to broadcast a live video on her Facebook account, something that was then a new feature on the platform. The resulting video, which can still be accessed from her timeline, is similar to Dawe Dawe's performances described in the last chapter. Using a selfie-angle, Winnie takes the viewer on what seems to be a random stroll through Nyalenda on a sunny day. Like Dawe Dawe, she uses the device of imagined geographies, as the video is somewhat puzzlingly entitled *Nyalenda Muthaiga*, likening the low-income settlement to Muthaiga, the so-called "Beverly Hills of Nairobi" and the seat of the country's financial aristocracy. With a live broadcast, it is also important to consider the time of the performance. The video was transmitted on Tuesday, October 31<sup>st</sup> 2017, five days after the repeat general election, which the sitting government won with an overwhelming majority following the opposition party's appeal to its base to refrain from voting. On that particular day, the entire country was eagerly awaiting an address by the opposition leader Raila Odinga, who was to indicate "the way forward".

The video is almost a re-enactment of how Winnie usually combs through the city on her way to and from meetings, greeting and interacting with people. She introduces her own performance by stating, "as we wait for Baba [Raila Odinga] to talk," thus explicitly situating the video's content in the ongoing political crisis. In a surprisingly light mood, or perhaps carefully chosen indifference, Winnie informs her digital audience, whose numbers increase during the 20-minute video, that she is preparing for her upcoming event, Face of Nyalenda, very much as she would when meeting actual people in town. Winnie created the broadcast at an important political juncture, at a time of truly tectonic shifts in Kenyan politics, following the controversial general elections of August 2017. The opposition coalition party, National Super Alliance (NASA), had

accused the government of having rigged the election process, notably based on issues with the Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission (IEBC). Both Kenyans and election observers were surprised when the Kenyan Supreme Court confirmed these objections and ordered a repeat election to be held within 90 days. As most of the opposition party's demands to ensure a fair election process were ignored, the NASA alliance withdrew from the repeat electoral process, plunging the country deeper into constitutional crisis. Winnie went live with her seemingly innocent video at exactly the highpoint of the political stalemate. Although the trials of strength between Uhuru and Odinga were to culminate several months later in the infamous 'handshake' (often satirically dubbed 'handcheque' in the media), which estranged a sizable part of Odinga's electorate as the opposition leader was now visibly colluding with the government, in late October 2017, Odinga still seemed determined to oppose the Kenyan government and vigorously pursue his fight to become 'the people's president' and the new head of state.

During that time, Facebook became a very important means of communication as an alternative media outlet. The excessive use of police violence which was largely downplayed on national and international media, triggered a stream of videos, mainly recorded from hiding places with smartphones and showing the police and army marching into opposition strongholds. The door-to-door searches and systemic and excessive police brutality which occurred during the days after the initial election, in August 2017, were reflected in a wave of chilling and in many instances gruesome, videos. On Facebook, many of these videos contained viewer discretion warnings because of their violent content.

At that time, Kenya and Kisumu made it onto the front pages of some international newspapers and magazines. While following the events online from Germany, I continued to comment in the international media which were generally adopting the mainstream version of Kenyan national media, although it appeared to be firmly under government control and was making the crimes committed appear less serious. This time was a considerable learning experience for me regarding the dynamics of international media, on which some actors undoubtedly have more influence than others. The former US secretary of state John Kerry was prominent among the observers of the repeat election process in Kenya. In a live TV-broadcast concerning the opposition party's concern that more than one million deceased persons might still be registered as voters, Kerry quipped, "The people who voted were alive. I didn't see any

dead people walking around”<sup>22</sup>. The distinguished US envoy’s outspoken support for the sitting government triggered speculation about political machinations. Three days prior to the initial general election, the Kenyan Government had allocated a tender for the Nairobi-to-Mombasa expressway, a truly enormous USD 3 billion infrastructure project worth approximately 10% the country’s GDP, to a US engineering firm, Bechtel. Eventually, the US-embassy in Nairobi felt compelled to dismiss the rumours that the allocation of the huge tender, which never went through a vetting process or tender award, was nothing more than a ‘thank you’ from the Kenyan government for unspecified services.<sup>23</sup>

Winnie’s performance must therefore be seen in the context of alternative media reports on Facebook. Technology proved to be of seminal importance in the ongoing shifts in the Kenyan political landscape. The 2017 general elections were the first to be carried out electronically. The process was financed by a group of donor countries headed by the United States, and the question of the opposition party’s access to the servers that were provided by a French technology company, proved to be highly contentious. Facebook’s importance as a resource for news on the most recent developments on the ground, was reinforced by the fact that many TV channels were providing livestreams of important events, such as statements from the opposition alliance concerning the electoral process. By making these events available to anybody with a smartphone, the reach of these events was considerably wider than if they had only been broadcast on TV.

Winnie’s performance in her video betrays the sense of emergency and urgency that prevailed at the time, at least from the media perspective. When Winnie starts the video, filming herself from a slightly higher perspective, she is at first, accompanied by another young woman. Both women smile eagerly at the camera and wave and wink. Neither Winnie nor her friend say anything at the beginning, creating the effect of a vacuum. As her friend moves out of frame to join other people, Winnie starts talking, little by little, with calm reserve. As she continues to gesticulate, she only says an innocent, “Hi people,” before falling back into an intense silence. As if to reject any

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<sup>22</sup>Retrieved from

<<https://www.facebook.com/NTVKenya/photos/a.80240814057.71846.51790559057/10154330127264058/?ty>>, accessed August 10 2020.

<sup>23</sup> GCR Staff, 2017, ‘US rejects Kenyan press criticism of 3\$bn Bechtel roads deal’. Retrieved from <<http://www.globalconstructionreview.com/news/us-rejects-kenyan-press-criticism-3bn-bechtel-road/>>, accessed October 27 2019.

expectations of an explicit message or content on her behalf, Winnie repeatedly says “kuzurua tu,” (Swahili, ‘just roaming’), in a low, soft voice, at the same time showing a sense of contentment. Pursing her lips, Winnie looks questioningly into the camera, emanating a sense of confidence, of lightness, and a sense of playful seduction. The video is refreshingly different from the pictures that Winnie and other Kisumu fashion models usually post, which often appear staged and heavily edited, taken at stylish places in the city. In contrast, the unedited video, broadcast live and showing Nyalenda in passing in the background, has a sense of authenticity and even normalcy, once again bridging the gap between glamour and ghetto. In the context of an ongoing landmark political transition, in which a great number of Nyalenda’s inhabitants have been mishandled by the forces of order, Winnie’s message seems to lie in her marked coolness, her pronounced casualness. The majority of Nyalenda’s citizens’ homes had been raided in the days following the initial election and if someone had not become a victim of the arbitrary violence themselves, their neighbours or someone close to them had. At the time it was common to overhear conversations in the street in which people would laughingly tell of how their families or neighbours had been chased out of their compound and beaten by police officers on the street. It was difficult for me to understand how they could recount these events as if telling a joke. The multiple historic incidents of violence have plunged people into feelings of powerlessness about their lives and their loved ones many times before. I imagined that this was simply the latest expression of the structural inequalities that Kenyans from the low-income settlements have been subjected to historically. This young woman, deliberately choosing to wear a plunging décolletage that never left the shot, was clearly not about to abandon her efforts to portray a different image of Nyalenda, one that speaks of confidence, of control over one’s life and even of pride. As I watched the video for the first time from Germany where I was staying at the time, I was surprised by the sense of normalcy captured in the video. I was amazed how peaceful the neighbourhood really was. I was immediately transported to Nyalenda and reminded of the many walks which I had taken with Winnie in Kisumu, as she interacted with dozens of people during the day. I was relieved to see that despite the sombre images on international media, the atmosphere in Nyalenda somehow seemed to be good.

As Winnie continues on her walk, several other people start to watch the video. Even though such live-videos can be watched after the initial broadcast, there is a special, shared sense of space resulting from joining a ‘watch party’ on the platform. By uniting

several viewers from Kisumu and beyond, many of whom were personally known to me, Winnie created a space that reflected the lived experience in the slums at that particular juncture very differently. Those who had followed her online account were aware of Winnie’s ongoing engagement for Nyalenda during this difficult time. Winnie had visited the distressed families of women who had been sexually assaulted or raped, a fact that did also not make it into the country’s news pages. Winnie then published posts about the incidents on her Facebook page, encouraging people from the area to support the families in whatever way they could.

In this video, Winnie quite literally appears as the ‘face’ of Nyalenda, embodying the slogan of her event series and campaign, by giving the Nyalenda citizens’ suffering a voice. Surprisingly, it was an infant from Nyalenda, the six-month old baby Samantha Upendo, who become the face of the victims of the police violence in the media sphere at the time. According to Reuters, the infant was sleeping with her mother in the early morning of August 13th, 2017, when police officers “forced the door open a crack, fired in teargas and battered the choking baby and her parents with batons”<sup>24</sup>. From my interviews with Kisumu artists a few months later, I gathered that the police’s excessively brutal door to door searches had been systematically engineered as a warning, a pre-emptive strike of sorts, to intimidate citizens in the opposition strongholds and stop them demonstrating. Samantha Upendo became a symbol of the injustice and arbitrariness of the violence against innocent people. Her name also represented the children in other Kenyan ghettos who were tragically killed by stray bullets and the like during these events. As the Upendo case became particularly mediatized, the family was provided with a single room in an upmarket hospital, unlike the many other Nyalenda residents who may not have been able to afford quality medical services. During this time, people were in dire need of a sense of normalcy and a return to everyday life. “Everything is back to normal,” people hastened to tell me when I returned for my longest stay, in late August 2017, only a few weeks after the initial elections. Then, the anti-IEBC demonstrations were still rocking the city centre every week, at a time when many were still nursing their physical wounds from these events, let alone starting to deal with their emotional scars. Winnie’s video can be seen as catering to this public demand for normalcy and perhaps even an aestheticized

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<sup>24</sup> Fick, M. and Katharine Houreld, 2017, ‘Kenya’s post-election deaths raise questions over police brutality’. Retrieved from: <<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-kenya-election-police/kenya-post-election-deaths-raise-questions-over-police-brutality-idUSKCN1AU1ZD>>, accessed August 11, 2020.



version of the ‘Nyalenda-experience’, at a time when sombre images of victimhood predominated in the media.

In her determined way, Winnie uses her ironic articulation of Nyalenda with Muthaiga to indicate a sense of development in Nyalenda that even surprises some of the people from the area who have joined the watch party. When Winnie walks in front of a block of recently built, multi-storey apartment houses, something people do not expect in this large neighbourhood which mainly consists of mud houses and corrugated iron structures, the user Asen Binnocently asks which side of Nyalenda this ‘Muthaiga’ was supposed to be. Winnie replies, scolding him:

Asen B you can't be staying in Nyalenda without being acquainted with Muthaiga. Muthaiga is this side that has storey buildings. Not the kind of Nyalenda we have on our other side.

After using the device of the elite suburb to playfully allude to Nyalenda’s emerging, sophisticated, urbane façade, Winnie turns it around, joking, “This is Muthaiga, where Keegan stays,” referring to the photojournalist and photo activist from New Zealand. Trent Keegan’s corpse was found in Nairobi in 2008, after he had received threats related to his ongoing work on cases of land dispossession and the forceful resettlement of Maasai herders in Kenya. Despite the fact that this event had happened 10 years earlier, the case had not escaped public memory and Winnie seems to implicitly indicate the historicity of privilege and oppression. Although it is perhaps improbable to spontaneously articulate a connection between Nyalenda slum dwellers and a relatively privileged, white male photo-activist, murdered over his attempt to bring ongoing cases of injustice to public attention, the snappy reference may serve to explain why Winnie does not address any of the recent upheavals explicitly, as this could put her in danger. As we have already seen in Chapter four, when Janabii was intercepted by plain clothes police officers concerning his indignant posts on Facebook, the field of forces in Kenya is increasingly tightly knit and especially so during election periods. For the moment, Winnie’s performance suggests, being normal is already an achievement, a win, a small triumph. While many Facebook posts concerning the political situation were closed with the Hashtag #alutacontinua, Winnie uses a more subtle approach than such political rallying cries. Her performance, however, displays a powerful sense of joyful opposition and of stability amidst much uncertainty.

In the meantime, the performance moves from such global connections back to the hyper-local, such as when just as if meeting Winnie in real-life, the user Coliq asks in a comment whether he can place an “order” with her in the comment section. Winnie replies, “Coliq, what kind of orders do you need? If it is eggs then I can make it,” switching smoothly between her aspirational efforts in the creative industry and the daily realities of the hustle. Some viewers from Nyalenda are perturbed by the puzzling comparison and even seem unable to locate the particular place in the large neighbourhood. The user Aredi, for instance, asks exactly where the place is, to which Winnie replies at length to pinpoint it, “Aredi, this is not Western. This is past Five ways, on your way to Dunga as you approach the Lake. Next to where Scope used to live.” Despite verifying the actual place, Winnie continues in her playful redescription of it, again likening it to its leafy metropolitan counterpart, “Aredi this is Nyalenda. Which Nyalenda do you guys live in? This is Muthaiga!”

From such very local connections, the space Winnie creates in her online performance opens up again when the user Benjamin Morris comments live from the US, “Make sure you visit Michigan!” to which Winnie replies, “I will be coming pretty soon, God willing, things are opening up”. When talking about the US, Winnie jokingly adds, “which USA, Ugenya, Siaya, Alego?”, naming the three towns in Northern Nyanza, which together make up the abbreviation USA, thus further spinning the device of imagined geographies. Northern Nyanza has a special relationship to the US, after all former US-president Barack Obama traces his origins to the region. Bringing these imagined geographies into conversation is a local running gag. During the US presidential election in 2012, there was even a mock election here in which Obama was also elected president, even before the US election results had been published. “Dholuo”, a popular joke in Kisumu went at the time, “is one of the most powerful languages in the world, as it is the only language spoken in the White House!” By referring to these popular discursive formations, Winnie is repeatedly playfully, ironically and jokingly, probing the real nature of Nyanza, Kisumu and Nyalenda’s place in the world. At the same time, the high-spirited energy behind her performance defies the reductionist representations of Nyalenda as either violent looters or victims of police action. Winnie in her lightness, does not deny the fact that Nyalenda inhabitants have experienced suffering but her performance restates a sense of wholeness and of beauty, by reminding us of Nyalenda ’s other side, the pleasantly sunny noon several weeks after those events.

Winnie holds the camera in a selfie-perspective and she is in the centre of the image so that, in a way, we perceive Nyalenda through her, next to her, behind her, children playing, the streets, we see *mtaani*, we see the corners, the small pathways, sometimes she widens the angle, so as to catch some more vistas and views into the neighbourhood. She interacts with the online crowd as she walks, as if it were the most normal thing to do. At the same time, such new types of interactions and the space opened up by the performance, also defy the dominating narratives of the powerlessness of youth from the ghetto. The image of young people that Winnie articulates in front of her online audience, not only expresses dissent and knows what it wants, but also looks good doing it. Videos like this, allow her to position herself in the process of building up the city, and also to embody this urban progress and the city's growth, which is also an expression of individual growth.

All in all, the video again emphasises the complexity of Winnie's practice of articulation. Winnie derives her authority to speak about and for Nyalenda from her own immediacy with the place (cf. Grabski 2013: 267). By embodying an upgraded version of Nyalenda and aestheticizing the Nyalenda experience, Winnie becomes a spokesperson for the neighbourhood, which in turn allows her to tap into several emerging markets. First, there is the nascent entertainment industry catering to the urban public's increasing demand for amusement and ornamentation. Second is the public's demand for empowering narratives of progress and 'building up' the city, narratives which Winnie manages to project like few other artists in town. Third, Winnie's own philanthropic efforts and her solidarity (towards those less fortunate, towards those who lack access to education, towards the upcoming generation of models...) appeal to the rich redistributive networks comprised of political patrons, the more affluent strata of society and Kenyans living abroad. Winnie caters to their desire to experience and associate themselves with an 'ideal' version of Nyalenda that fits neatly into a globalized world. Because of the attractiveness of her aestheticizing work, Winnie is able to convert social capital into financial capital, for instance by recognizing well-wishers, supporters and sponsors during acknowledgements on stage or during her online presences. This works in the opposite direction for her 'relationships assets', who convert their financial capital into social salience, by associating themselves with Winnie's carefully crafted images of the social and her refined narratives of urban growth and social progress. Therefore, philanthropy as a rationale behind Winnie's aspirations for financial stability and material safety, can be

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explained by the argument that it gives her a ‘wealth of people’ and relationship assets who may provide opportunities for social ascent as well as something to “fall back on” in times of crisis.

## 7. Concluding Remarks

This thesis depicts and discusses the material realities and symbolic terms of those young people in Kisumu for whom the way of the artist has become a means of working around their marginalization and positioning themselves more favourably in the city's social space. Necessity, as the well-known proverb goes, is the mother of invention, and urban life in Kisumu is by no means an exception. I have postulated a link between the predicament of the city's young people, their wants and needs, and their strategies for addressing the numerous obstacles in their everyday lives in creative and artistic ways.

This will hardly come as a surprise to any reader familiar with the literature about youth on the African continent. What is surprising, however, is that despite the very evident and recognized connection between urban marginality and proliferating youth cultures there, few studies have set out to conceptualize this relationship in more thorough ways. Given that art from the African continent, at least in its appearances in the cultural economy of the global arts market, often invokes its own genesis out of marginalization, whether through assemblages of waste, recuperation (Grabski 2017), so-called junk art, or diverse forms of re- and up-cycling, it seems only logical to explore this relationship by focussing on artistic practices.

This thesis is therefore an effort to trace the various efforts and street struggles of Kisumu youth with an artistic inclination, to make do and matter in ways that deviate from mainstream economic models, the 'formal' world of work, to which their lack of educational, social and financial resources deny them access. Many feel pressured to participate in the alternative and often violent, economies that thrive in the low-income settlements, such as the transport sector, construction work, (drug-related) crime, brewing illicit liquor, or prostitution.

I propose in this thesis that to make art in such a context is to turn away from such economies and assume a constructive and positive stance in life. The Kisumu artists prioritise self-discipline and a sense of communal support between themselves and other artistic youth; in this respect they mirror the cultural agency of evangelical protestants in South America (Smilde 2007). Art provides them with an idiom through which it is possible to address existing challenges, and "an effective means for withdrawal from situations of violence" (p. 5). The structural barriers and different layers of violence which my interlocutors framed as "challenges," have been adopted in this thesis as key elements to explore the specifics of their everyday agency and their

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artistic processes. In this sense, I have invoked the German term *Lebenskünstler*, which neatly describes the interface between everyday shrewdness, makeshift economic acumen and artistic innovativeness that characterizes the agency of youth in Kisumu. As I have attempted to demonstrate, the way of the artist in Kisumu is a bluff and a gamble, on social recognition, on enhancing one's networks, and in due course, on achieving better life outcomes. The fact that Kisumu youth try their luck in genres that are intrinsically characterized by a high degree of uncertainty such as activism, spoken word and fashion modelling, speaks of the seriousness of the gridlock in which they find themselves.

Building on the work of Emirbayer and Mische (1998), I understand "challenges" essentially as situations in which the habituated forms of agency may not be applied without further adaptation, and hence some sort of imaginative and creative effort is required. I have indicated several structural barriers that underlie the symbolic struggles of Kisumu artists, such as the difficulties experienced in moving into the socially ascribed categories of adulthood. The structural context of protracted youth then translates into various situational challenges, such as Evans' aspirations of car ownership, Boniface's ambition to become a renowned activist, or Janabii's elusive quest for a place of his own. Reminding ourselves of the contingency of even the most difficult situative context, redirects our attention to the more general forms of creativity, as well as to the artistic types of agency that such situations may invite. The 'miracle' solution to nearly any challenge, as Evans triumphantly states at the end of Chapter two, is a resourceful involvement with other urban actors because, "if you build connections you have built a fundament, [and] you are good to go!" This is one of the central assumptions of this thesis, namely that the Kisumu artists' cultural aspirations and artistic efforts are to a large extent geared towards fostering relationships that may enable them to overcome some of their challenges. In order to explore how artists from different genres cultivate and nurture relationships, thereby building the body social, in each of the portraits, I have used the first, that of Evans Aduwo, to lay a foundation of how Kisumu's youths come into being in the social worlds they inhabit.

The first portrait describes the literal groundwork undertaken by the young people in order to "stand firmly" in a volatile social context. I have proposed that art in Kisumu be understood as an alternative interpretation of work and consequently, it is only logical to assume that artistic practices and an artist's lifestyle also demand alternative forms of 'schooling' and transmission of knowledge. The example of Evans' gym and

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the short portrayal of the bodybuilding subculture, served as a comparative background to making art, as it is another social practice through which young people position themselves in social space, structure their days, organize peer support and socialize around constructive values. The socially highly regulated space in and around the gym may, as I argue throughout the thesis for Kisumu's art in general, be interpreted as an attempt to establish a sense of control over the flow of events in their lives.

The fashioning of the self and impression management, are extremely important in a context of mass unemployment. Defining and defending one's social position and sometimes, as in Evans' case, one's physical location in the city, demands constant attention and energy. By introducing the thesis with Evans' identity as a "strongman" and his associated bodily repertoires, I was able to magnify this aspect of corporeality, which I considered throughout the portraits. As I discussed briefly in the context of fashion modelling in Chapter six, being an artist is essentially a 'bluff', and the material appearance of one's participation in city life become an important index of one's social position. Hence such seemingly trivial matters as where and how one moves through the city, how one appears physically, and how well one controls and reads corporeal minutiae, immediately reflect one's position in social space.

With recourse to Hans Joas, I emphasized that agency is not something that starts as an idea and then directs the body, as rational, goal-oriented models of human agency would have it. Many of our actions take place automatically and the body is, amongst many other things, a formidable device for storing habituated types of action. Many of the challenges that interrupted a given course of action occurred on this very visceral level, such as when Evans was hit by a police officer and had to rush to hospital, or when Boniface had to cut short some of his activities because he had had nothing to eat during the day and became fatigued.

I described in Chapter two how becoming socially visible, let alone experiencing social recognition, is intrinsically tied to having a "recognizable occupation", rather than the makeshift forms of creating incomes by various means which Kenyans refer to as "hustling". As such recognizable occupations remain elusive for most, a Kisumu artist invests heavily in himself, in order to transition from being seen as a hustler, or worse, an idler, to embodying whatever image of prosperity is most salient in his context, such as a successful career in the entertainment industry, or being a social entrepreneur.

Laclau and Mouffe's concept of articulation has allowed me to go through the circular process of mapping the young artists' place in Kisumu's social world many times.

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Laclau and Mouffe's theory enables us to think of discursive elements and social space as essentially one sphere, as every element invoked by an urban actor positions them as part of a social field. This approach has enabled me to emphasize the dimension of social connectivity of artistic practices in Kisumu, as the dimension in which I see the primary purpose of the efforts I discuss. As I have argued, reducing the articulations presented in this thesis to their logical content would mean completely missing the point. The articulations presented, from the admonishment to stop hurling stones as sign of protest, to a rape case poetically retold in almost unbearable detail, to a runway walk, elegantly performed in front of some of the city's political elite, render ongoing injustices and marginalized positions visible. Their ultimate intention however, is to connect with urban actors who have the power to influence structural barriers, and hence also the capacity to bring about the desired and intended results.

The political articulation by concerned Kisumu residents, described in Chapter two and which Evans *volens nolens* helped to stage, illustrates the tensions, doubts and dilemmas associated with such tactical involvements. In a space as antagonistic as Kisumu's ambiguous political arena, a person's ability to stand up for something and join forces with other actors around a common concern, is likely to be tested. In the context of marginal urban economies, standing one's ground definitely requires unwavering "strength of character", as Evans put it, as opposed to the undirected activities of a "busybody" or prying meddler. The example of Boniface Ogotu helped me to further expand on the sometimes insurmountable fragmentations of social space, called to our attention by the concept of articulation.

The articulations at the core of Boniface's activist initiatives, described in Chapter three, emphasize the difficulty of making clear political statements while attempting to reorganize social space in more coherent ways. Boniface's youth movement is perhaps the most remarkable example of 'people pleasing' among the portraits presented. Boniface's life history, the genesis of his activism in a state-sponsored workshop, and the comparison of two of his marches through the city, enabled me to demonstrate how demanding joining discursive elements and urban actors can be. Like all the other artists portrayed, Boniface's parents had enjoyed a far more stable employment situation, his father having made a career in the Ministry for Social Affairs. In my analysis of Boniface's work as a political agitator, I emphasize on the one hand, his more short-term street struggles to make do, and on the other, his more longstanding goals of achieving social recognition and associating with high ranking political figures. As with



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Evans' occasional work as a workshop organizer and educator, Boniface did not receive any monetary recompense for his activities and hence, like many other 'volunteer' workers, he had to re-appropriate some of the funds in order to eke out a living. His particular marginalization and the resulting attempt to articulate himself with various actors advantageously, also influenced the aesthetics of his work. Boniface had to reconcile political actors expecting obedience, foreign actors wanting resolute criticism and visual evidence of 'impact,' and peers wishing to express their concerns in purposeful ways. Therefore, with *Sitarusha Mawe Tena*, Boniface created a youth movement that simultaneously articulated a criticism of the disruptive political practices during the election process while implicitly expressing a demand for support, when approaching members of the state administration. The movement's slogan, which targets the youth not the state, mirrors this cautious, double-edged approach. Adopting a particularly wide concept of what an artistic practice is, enabled me to show how the movement, albeit on a different level of communication, confronted politicians such as Kisumu's governor with their plea for more just and inclusive politics, when they made him recite the movement's oath on camera. Despite such creative and unconventional measures, the movement's articulation did not bridge the existing cracks in the body social for long, despite being pursued with much enthusiasm. The task of connecting many diverging actors such as politicians, NGOs, US embassy personnel, peers and other citizens, is indeed daunting for someone who is essentially on their own and whose 'office' is the smartphone in their pocket.

One anecdote illustrates the nearly impossible tightrope walk performed by community activists like Boniface. On the same day as the second demonstration that I described in Chapter three, Boniface had been invited for a job interview with Premier Skills, a joint project by the British Council and the Premier League that uses football-based activities to "develop a brighter future for young people around the world."<sup>25</sup> Attempting, as usual, to make the best out of any given opportunity, Boniface waited until the procession passed the place where the job interview was to take place and managed to present himself in full activist attire, plain white clothes and a whistle around his neck, and was subsequently given the job allowing him to create a side income throughout the following year. Much like other niche entrepreneurs, Boniface created an opening for himself, by introducing a new social practice to Kisumu's urban space; activist initiatives with an internationally recognizable aesthetic of protest. As I have shown by

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<sup>25</sup> Retrieved from <<https://premierSkills.britishcouncil.org/>>, accessed August 11, 2020.

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comparing two processions, activism is hard work for Boniface, as the positions he attempts to reconcile are very different. Considering the very restricted means with which he operates, I am astonished by the initiative's efficacy, even if the movement did not result in a more stable social formation.

Boniface's example also allowed me to further illustrate the complicated analogies between work and art, which I trace throughout the thesis. If his activist activities are his main occupation and main source of income, these are reasons for identifying activism in Kisumu as a niche economy. The basic requirements of a formal employment situation include workplace safety, social security, recognition for one's labour, financial recompense and some sort of potential for personal development. In the alternative interpretations of work in Kisumu, young people like Boniface need to gather these basic requirements from different actors, who often have highly divergent expectations. Boniface needed to assuage the police and state actors to grant his procession safety, he needed to consider his peers' demands for support and social recognition, he needed to comply with the expectations of actors from the development aid industry in order to be financially rewarded, and with yet more, different actors from that same industry, to secure future opportunities.

The practice of articulation, as all five portraits make clear across different genres, is a balancing act between conformity and protest. Every act of articulation requires a delicate sense for one's social environment and an attempt to align the views of different actors. The varying symbolism of stones as a central element in Boniface's articulation, underlines how divergent and in this case even opposed, the positions of actors in the field of political discourse are. For some, such as state actors and the police, stones may represent undue, violent forms of protest, while for others, like the urban youths who supported Boniface's processions, stones signify the forms of staged protest and patrimonial dependency that they resent. If Chapter three allowed me to sketch out the stalemate between some of the principal actors in Kisumu's urban life, then Chapter four, about the Spoken Word artist Janabii, explored how existing structural injustices impact the subjectivities and specifically, the temporal dimension of young people's experience in Kisumu.

Chapter four was originally conceived as a contribution to a special issue about hustling, the makeshift types of entrepreneurial creativity which enable the citizens of Kisumu and others across the continent to carve out a living for themselves. The chapter addresses the emerging literature about various modes of waiting, as well as rhythm as a

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form and a possible structuring principle for research. Despite its initially different conceptual interest, the chapter makes an important contribution to the thesis' overall thematic focus. By following Janabii for one entire week, from Monday to Sunday, I was able to uncover some of the improvisational and contingent social infrastructures in Kisumu's urban life. It became apparent that the wide range of social practices subsumed by Kenya's urban dwellers under the term *hustling*, overlaps to a large extent with the conceptual aspect of articulation which considers how people connect with each other. Following Janabii throughout his daily interactions enabled me to show how embodying the social type of *msanii*, an 'artist' or 'popular youth', opens up crucial opportunities in a life defined by limited economic means. The concept of articulation with its double insistence on what people express and on how they come together, is very appropriate, even in these most modest circumstances of life. For a 'ghetto poet' like Janabii, even the other occupants of a temporarily shared tenement can become an audience, who reward the beauty of well spun verse and a welcome distancing from a tedious everyday life, with a place to live and rest. At the same time, the chapter warns of the temporal dimension of the youth crisis, the predicament of not attaining adulthood, of never 'growing up' in social terms. By bringing together my own writing, based on my experience of the week I shared with Janabii, and his poetry, as well as our joint discussions about it, I have attempted to bring out in this chapter, perhaps more than in any of the other portraits, the particular feeling of 'stuckedness' which Janabii eloquently articulates in his poetry, and which he overcomes time and again through his highly intuitive way of living.

To articulate is to restore sense, and being able to contribute something meaningful may quickly become an asset in a world in which violence and a feeling of senselessness prevail. I describe Janabii's capacity to 'feel good' and to make others feel good as examples of this, whether he is connecting with an audience during a live performance, encountering friends in the street, or joining taxi operators who reward the poet for giving them a welcome break from boredom. Janabii's case serves as a further illustration of Joas' important claim that agency has to be understood as situationally embedded, and that the concrete action we carry out in our everyday lives is much more changeable and fluid than we might think. In the atmosphere of mass unemployment, the *contingency*, which Joas claims for any given situation, may of course assume an almost oppressive character. Under the particular pressures of food insecurity and other aspects of urban marginalization, actors have a particularly acute awareness of the

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means available, and how they may change a given situation. Janabii almost managed to turn this awareness into a lifestyle. It was only as I gradually became willing to *float* (Venkatesh 2013), that I was able to perceive the extent to which Janabii *flowed*, for instance when agreeing to take a bus ride to town, simply because it was offered to him.

Considering the intuitive ways in which urban actors come together and form redistributive networks, forces us to pay very close attention to the quality of the links between actors. I have referred to Collins' work (2005) to emphasize how the social connectivity aspect of articulation is dominated by immaterial exchanges, such as emotional rewards or spending time together, which may lead to certain material favours, such as a free meal, a ride to town, or a roof over one's head. Taking Janabii's particularly precarious life circumstances as an example, the chapter illustrates how those who are young, gifted and unemployed, make art to autonomously introduce rhythm into their lives, and with it, also a sense of direction and purpose. The Austrian psychiatrist and concentration camp survivor, Victor Frankl (1995), famously argued that having a purpose in life to feel positive about, was essential for surviving the most adverse of environments. By providing such a purpose, a task and a schedule, the artistic lifestyle transforms the experience of hustling and of un(der)employment, when empty periods of time with 'nothing to do' turn into preparation phases for an event, and afternoons with no obligations turn into opportunities to hone one's craft.

Chapter five expanded the inquiry into how Spoken Word enables young people in Kisumu to cope more effectively with adversity and difficulty. Dawe Dawe uses several platforms and media for his poetic art and notably, Facebook, with his hashtag campaign #Manyatta\_Is\_Manhattan. In contrast to the portrait of Janabii, the chapter illustrates the breadth of agency and differences in ways of articulating oneself throughout the same art genre. The chapter is based on the documentary #Manyatta\_Is\_Manhattan, *A Life in Spoken Word*, which I co-produced with Simon Njoroge and Dawe Dawe himself, and which became a joint device for engaging in more extensive conversations about the creative process. Because of its important place in the documentary, Chapter five expands on Dawe Dawe's dramatic life history, especially during his 'un-years' as a young man in the Kibera slum in Nairobi. Elaborating on Dawe Dawe's experience of that time helps to put the hardships experienced by Kisumu's youths into perspective. Despite the many layers of structural violence in my description of the hustle in Kisumu, the first part of the chapter shows that there are still other places in Kenya, that are even worse to live in. Dawe Dawe's

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life history compounded the difficulties I experienced when recording, emotionally processing, and writing about incidents of violence in Kisumu. Many of the experiences he related to me seemed impossible for me to express in the form of my research; research which often appeared to me in this context to be just another aspect of my extreme privilege. Basing the chapter about Dawe Dawe on the jointly produced documentary allowed me to have the artist relate his experiences of violence himself through performance. The documentary creates a deep and very visceral relationship between Manyatta with its various ways of ‘building up’ and the poet as an embodiment and epitome of the city’s neighbourhood. In his bid to integrate Manyatta into the planetary urban sphere, Dawe Dawe must also build himself up, simultaneously, in order to predict the low-income settlement’s pending transformation convincingly.

The second half of Chapter five traces the transformation of the poet’s campaign for Manyatta across different platforms, such as online video performances, written posts and comments on Facebook, and impromptu appearances in front of a live audience in the town. The social media campaign illustrates this broader tendency for many upcoming artists in African cities to use urban border spaces for their art production. On a continent where the institutionalisation of art is slow to come, this way of compensating for a lack of suitable rehearsal spaces and studios is nowadays complemented by the use of social media as digital publishing platforms. The spectrum of art presented on social media ranges from paintings, spoken word, and fashion design, to dance and theatre. Dawe Dawe uses the combination of a marginal urban space and Facebook as a platform, with great sophistication and command and to rather precise effect. It is art that does not necessarily adhere to the established global art discourse and which is aimed at both local and international audiences, to which (at least technically), his works are always accessible. Considering the artists’ life worlds and their economic and creative environments, directs out attention to the various markets and economic opportunities that they consider as part of their aesthetic strategies. Like Boniface, Dawe Dawe draws on discursive formations that are by and large introduced by NGOs and international development agencies, in his case, those surrounding gender-based violence. As in Boniface’s case, we observe the twin moves of drawing on the authority of such discursive formations in order to highlight discursive elements that normally remain silenced and denouncing structural injustices, while at the same time opening up avenues into these potentially profitable sectors.

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The visibility of his Facebook campaign proved Dawe Dawe's popularity with urban audiences, enabling him to articulate himself successfully with the political aspirant who made a financial contribution to the making of the documentary. The encounter between the politician and the poet, described at the end of the chapter, again illustrates how the concept of articulation with its double emphasis on expressivity and connectivity, surpasses approaches that focus on objects and/or exhibition spaces. The process of articulation does not conceive an art work's possible impact on the social space in a sequential way, where an art work is produced in a first step, and impacts social space in a second. Instead, as in the geometrical shape of a double helix, the two sides of articulation run in parallel throughout the creation and reception processes and constantly re-position the urban actors. In view of the material presented, I argue that the social efficacy of art lies in the way it reconfigures the social connectivity of urban actors. I explore this mechanism further in Chapter six, using the example of Kisumu's fashion industry and the events organized by Winnie Juma, who also incorporates her audiences as part of the articulatory process in highly creative ways.

Winnie Juma's work, discussed in Chapter six, is perhaps closer to an *oeuvre d'art totale* than that of any other of the artists discussed. To a certain extent, every artist becomes an articulation. As I show in my analysis of her appearance on national TV, Winnie embodies her narratives which she expresses through different communication channels and across different media. Not only her dress and movement, her body and hairstyle, but her entire personality, performatively draw together elements that symbolically bridge and bring into dialogue the reduced life expectations of Nyalenda's slum dwellers and a worldly-wise and glamorous lifestyle. Winnie aestheticizes herself (as a model) while simultaneously aestheticizing her philanthropic work of building up the city, as I show in a detailed discussion of her appearance on a TV broadcast, in which she shares her carefully developed narrative of urban growth and social progress.

My analysis of Winnie's fashion modelling event enables me to explain the dynamics of Kisumu's fashion industry in some depth, indicating the differences that exist between an upcoming and established model, between a model trainer and a judge, as well as between an honorary guest and the event organizer. By referring to the work of Judith Butler, I showed how the competition for realness between fashion models in their performance of prosperity and abundance, articulates the contenders' urban marginality with the opportunities extended by the city, both symbolically and factually. By drawing on interviews conducted with other Kisumu fashion models, I showed how

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fashion modelling is far more than an artistic resource and that it instead becomes a highly pragmatic repertoire through which models access further opportunities in the city's economy.

After discussing Dawe Dawe's use of social media in Chapter five, the last part of Chapter six presents yet another nuanced use of Facebook as a means of assembling followers behind a specific cause. As perhaps the most obvious Kisumu version of an instagrammer/influencer, Winnie is not paid directly by companies to market and advertise their product or services. Instead she amasses social capital through her aestheticizing work, building what is referred to in marketing jargon as "relational assets", which help her to advance in city life. Part of Winnie's strategy lies in demonstrating solidarity toward the less fortunate, toward those who lack access to education, or simply toward the new generation of 'upcoming' models. Such solidarity calls for reciprocity and encourages so-called well-wishers and supporters to invest in her aestheticizing work. In return for their investment, people are 'recognized' on Winnie's social media accounts and during her events, which gives further social salience to the core ideas of Winnie's campaigns for equal ease of access to resources and opportunities, regardless of gender or economic standing. Through Winnie's example, I was able to show how the Kisumu artists use their intimate acquaintance with the global style markets to turn social capital into financial capital, and classiness into an enhanced social and economic standing.

I have related this ability to foster practical relationships to the idea of social infrastructures and assemblages mentioned by Simone, the tactical and often concealed social networks and services that make post-colonial urban living viable in the first place. The "merry go round" saving rounds employed in many associations of women traders would be an example of such forms of infrastructure. Winnie Juma was also involved with such a communal micro-loan system, called "siri ya jikoni" (Swahili, 'the kitchen's secret'), which enabled her to buy food stuff in larger quantities from time to time, and hence at more favourable prices. However, Winnie Juma's agency as an event organizer and a key person in Kisumu's fashion industry, goes even further. Of the artists portrayed, Winnie is perhaps closest to having star status or a widespread popularity with the city's audiences and she draws on many different elements to ensure her upward mobility. Winnie's carefully crafted activities touch on social entrepreneurship, philanthropy, art and skilful social media communication, in order to articulate a compelling narrative about impoverishment and urban development, which

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draws in actors from Kisumu, Kenya and abroad. Like Dawe Dawe and Boniface, Winnie aestheticizes the neighbourhood's experience as she articulates an alternative image of the young, counteracting the mainstream narratives of dependency and prevailing images of victimhood.

The artistic practices of Kisumu's youth described in this thesis, are edifying both in the sense of being morally or intellectually instructive, and in the literal sense of 'building up', whether in an actual built form, such as a community library, or in the form of social networks between Kisumu's youth and influential actors in the town. Adopting a wide concept of what constitutes an artistic practice, has enabled me to explore the Kisumu artists' lifeworld more fully and also in moments when they were not necessarily practicing their work. Complementing the young people in Kisumu's artistic efforts with contextual information obtained from months of participation and countless informal conversations with artists and other social actors, enabled me to describe the artists' role and their work in society from their contemporaries' perspective.

The conceptual focus on expressivity on the one hand, and the 'hustle' of connecting with other urban actors to secure one's survival, put the efforts made by the Kisumu youth that I describe in the realm of "hybrid" entrepreneurs and the "misfit economy" (Clay and Philipps 2006). This is where I see the most promising avenues for future research. The artists portrayed in this thesis envision systematic social change and articulate the roots of society's ills, yet while doing so, they inhabit a new social frontier, often referred to as the "emerging fourth sector" (Kelley 2009: 338). Organizations like Face of Nyalenda, essentially a one-woman social enterprise, increasingly blur the lines between three economic sectors that are usually kept apart conceptually, namely the public (government), private (business) and the social (non-profit) sector. Describing artistic practices through the conceptual lens of articulation highlights the many parallels and overlaps between artists and other so-called 'change makers' and social entrepreneurs. Face of Nyalenda bypasses old-style legal forms and established communication channels, and, as I have shown, it re-articulates conventional processes of democracy as well. Considering the creativity of action from a broader perspective, including both artistic creativity and social inventiveness, opens up the perspective of how various resources, discursive elements and actors are *actually* articulated in the "field" and "on the ground." Young people in Kisumu relentlessly and creatively work to put together some form of income. At the same time, they build up their cities and re-articulate the image of the social in their society in crucial ways. It is



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my contention that actors like the artists portrayed in this thesis do not only deserve more financial support, to make their worthwhile projects work, but that their initiatives also merit more research to understand social change and the potential efficacy of their projects from their own point of view.

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