

# ***“Disco Dreads”***

Self-fashioning through Consumption  
in Uganda’s Hip Hop Scene

Image-making, Branding and Belonging  
in Fragile Sites

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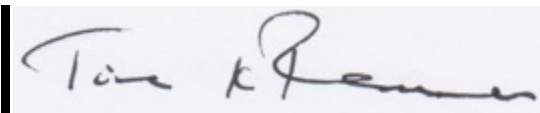
## DECLARATION OF AUTHORSHIP

I, Simran Singh, hereby declare that this thesis and the work presented therein is entirely my own. Where I have consulted the work of others, it is clearly stated.

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis explores interactions between self-fashioning and consumption in the hip hop scene in Uganda. In the performances of musical and social life, hip hop reveals first, tactile interactions between ideas and objects, subjective and relational to processes of consumption and production. Second, these interactions find expression through enactments of activism and hedonism, aspects which hip hop as global cultural product consistently and problematically engages with. This acts as a critical space to contemplate wider social formations and historical processes. In this thesis, such interactions are interrogated through aspects of self-fashioning, mapped through the visual in the form of image and brand showing how these preoccupations, while a first glance divergent, come from a place of belonging, which is wanting a better life.

This project is an interdisciplinary one. Choosing a visual focus with which to engage with this sonic culture, I rely on ethnographic data gathered in the field combined with digital ethnography. I draw on scholarship from ethnomusicology, popular music studies, media and cultural studies and perspectives from post-colonial studies to reveal a dialogue between plenitude and paucity. This is a conversation informed by the images and imagery of hip hop, its music, its media narratives and mythologies, set against a backdrop of deep socio-economic inequity and thus, profound fragility.

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## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction to thesis**

#### **“that chick with the kicks”**

This thesis explores interactions between self-fashioning and consumption in the hip hop scene in Uganda. In musical and in social life, hip hop reveals first, tactile interactions between ideas and objects, subjective and relational to processes of consumption. Second, these interactions find expression through enactments of activism and excess, aspects which hip hop as global expressive culture and symbolic instrument consistently and problematically engages with. These preoccupations come from the same place, which is wanting something better out of life. In this study, these aspects are critically discussed from the perspective of self-fashioning, and mapped through image-making, branding, and belonging. Through this, I reveal a dialogue between plenitude, in the form of musical and social life, and material paucity, in the form of a lack of employment, resources and infrastructure. This relationship acts as a critical space to contemplate wider social formations and historical processes, and in doing so, forms an interrogation informed by the images and imagery of hip hop, its music, its media narratives and pop-cultural mythologies set against a backdrop of deep socio-economic inequity and thus, profound fragility.

This project is an interdisciplinary one. I rely on ethnographic data gathered in Uganda, based on two field trips, the first at the end of 2014 and the second, in 2015, along with digital ethnography conducted through the course of this research project<sup>1</sup>. My association with Uganda began in 2011 and as such, this project reflects the understandings and experiences gathered from living and working in the country for a period of six years, encompassing the time frame of this doctoral project as well. In critical analysis, I draw on scholarship from ethnomusicology, popular music studies, media and cultural studies and perspectives from post-colonial studies.

In wider social and economic terms, Uganda is a site of profound structural violence characterised by its particular historical legacy of prolonged civil war, ethnic conflict,

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<sup>1</sup> Details will be included in the methodology chapter, including dates and time frames.

structural violence in the form of extreme poverty, deeply contested resources and an HIV/AIDS epidemic, exacerbated through corruption, a lack of employment opportunities and basic infrastructure such as healthcare (Dolan 2013, Lomo and Hovil 2004, Mamdani 1997, Weingratz 2010, Finnström 2008 *et al.*).

Uganda satisfies aspects of the fragile state discourse, which points towards regimes and structures that inhibit the expression of political dissent, through a lack of democratic political participation, repression of the public sphere or with physical violence (Collier 2007, Andersen 2008 *et al.*). However, Uganda presents two notable counterpoints to such definitions, as it has a vibrant media culture and has seen relative peace for the past eleven years. This, along with the focus on musical and social life in spaces of social and economic inequity, pointed me towards seeing it as a fragile site, particularly in the context of the hip hop scene and the preoccupations of activism and excess that outlie it. In sites such as these, individuals and communities out of necessity must negotiate this fragility through avenues for economic sustainability and social stability, strivings which I explore through this study on hip hop.

Previous to my PhD research, I undertook a Masters in Media and International Development. My dissertation investigated conflict reportage in fragile states. I was able to conduct field work and carry out qualitative research in Uganda, and was fortunate to contact and build a network of individuals and organisations in the media, music and development. At the start of this project, building on this, my initial research interest involved viewing Uganda's contemporary music scene as a site for the emergence of an informal civil society (Singh-Grewal 2017)<sup>2</sup>. This provided particular cogency in the interrogation of activism based around hip hop.

However, in the hip hop scene and its musical and social life, along with activism, I encountered interactions through forms of excess such as conspicuous consumption, hedonism and escape in the form of music and social life. Such juxtapositions can be found in hip hop as an expressive culture, which has led to the genre's emergence as a successful symbolic instrument in the combining of both preoccupations, variously voiced in the terms of conscious and commercial hip hop (Chang 2005, Murray 2014, Perry 2008 *et al.*). The

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<sup>2</sup> Forthcoming, Hip Hop as Civil Society in *Songs of Social Protest*, Rowman and Littlefield, London, 2017

choice of describing these tendencies from the frame of excess and activism, rather than conscious or commercial, is due to the fact that in Uganda, as this thesis will show, first, such tendencies come from a similar place of wanting something better from life. More to the point, in Uganda, within the hip hop scene, regardless of enactments in musical and social life, is an awareness and amalgamation of these two understandings based in hip hop culture, informing the local practice as a whole.

This led me to consider how these concerns and behaviours shed light on individual negotiations of inequity through the pursuit of material wealth and acquisition in addition to activism through hip hop in Uganda. Evocations of status through symbols, found in image and branding, are used to indicate commercial advancement and cultural influence, pointing towards a specific critical engagement with the relationships individuals form with consumer objects and the meanings thus imbued in them. Along with this, I encountered an ubiquity of the terminology of entrepreneurship, personal initiative and enterprise, such as those encountered in marketing, advertising and public relations, each with their own promise of mobility and success amongst those running both commercial enterprises such as recording studios and nightclubs, as well as community empowerment initiatives through hip hop. I was able to locate how this played out through hip hop, in social and musical life.

In order to critically interrogate such spaces, Arjun Appadurai argues for a transdisciplinary approach that includes and combines methodological approaches that consider the capability of the media, alongside anthropology's remit on the actual, lived experience of people (1996). This assertion is cogent to this study on hip hop in Uganda in that it provides a theoretical context to correctly understand the global and cultural processes which inform lived and mediated experience. Applying this methodological view to my own critical analysis, mapped first, through the uses of image, I will show how people negotiate and formulate their own spaces for gratification and satisfaction in their musical and social lives, arranged around the creation of exceptionality through excess and activism. Second, in these spaces of gratification and satisfaction and in the creation of exceptionality through excess and activism, there occurs a harnessing of the imagination through processes similar to branding, where sound and image are made distinct through the curation of specific defining attributes. Third, linking image and brand are strivings for belonging through a hip hop practice in service of social and economic stability. Each of these aspects occur in negotiations with the fragilities engendered by a disorganisation of opportunity in the

commercial music scene and due to a wider social and economic paucity in Uganda. Pointing towards a dialogue between plenitude and paucity, these strivings eventually find substance through a fashioning of self through the consumption of hip hop, which takes place in equal veracity through mediated and lived experience.

This dialogue is critically mapped in this study through image, branding and belonging; these fashionings reveal what Douglas Holt calls an “open-ended process of self creation” (2004:65). Based on a creation of distinctiveness in an emotional process wherein a system of meaning finds form, in a process similar to branding, in music and in image, these fashionings are informed by the consumption and production of hip hop and are manifested through tendencies towards activism and excess. Such processes and practices are mediated and constructed by individuals and communities, as performers and artists, activists and entrepreneurs, in the form of musical and social collectives such as record labels and community organisations in Uganda.

Along with this, I heard the word ‘hustle’ constantly in the hip hop scene in Kampala, the capital and a vibrant urban centre, variously used to describe the process of crafting a song, the business of getting a band to the venue, of negotiating transport fees, and in the choice of what clothes to wear to best evoke the image of oneself in one’s mind, and in the projection of a distinctive visual, musical and social identity, to audiences on stage and through the media. In Uganda, the music industry provides what I term, a free-for-all market. It is disorganised, with no protection in the form of copyright, and very little by way of corporate machinery to drive it, local media outlets such as television and radio often requiring payment to broadcast a new track or video, the only exceptions being for established superstars. In order to ‘hustle’, or to succeed commercially, in varied extents and capacities, music-makers are required to function as brands and enterprises.

Hip hop artists, as with other popular genres such as dancehall, function not just as musicians here. They establish and manage record labels, releasing music and garnering commercial performances from these efforts, creating and marketing their brands in the public and private spheres, in search of monetary stability and creative sustenance.



*Figure 1: Near Nakumatt Supermarket, Kampala*



*Figure 2: A busy market on the outskirts of the city*

In this fragility of opportunity and stability, preoccupations with style or ‘swag’, money or ‘hustle’, and the pop-mythology of hip hop stardom, are seemingly motivated equally by excess and escapism, on the one hand, and on the other, activism and the pursuit of social justice. Such distinctions find enactment in the spectacular in the form of hip hop performances occurring under the purview of social initiatives planned by international NGO’s for example, and others, representing grassroots social change, and yet others, that celebrate conspicuous consumption through sponsorship from liquor and lifestyle brands.

Representative of Uganda’s commercial music scene is Deuces, a venue and record label in Kampala. At the nightclub, you will find prominent members of Uganda’s music scene, including producers and performers. Deuces hosts live and recorded music nights such as Wash Wednesdays which is a dancehall night, and Hip Hop Mondays, hosted by Atlas, Uganda’s best known rapper in the English language. Each time I attended an event at Deuces, I found the space filled to capacity with several local celebrities from the music scene in attendance. At first, what struck me was the impartiality of the space. People from the music scene had their own tables, unlike the others such as myself who were standing or dancing, but as such, to one who did not know, what set the celebrities apart was mainly the fact that they had seating and how they dressed, styled to include both the ‘bling-bling’ hip hop aesthetic in the form of prominent gold jewellery, designer and sportswear brands, combined with ‘African’ elements such as colourful beads, dreadlocks, printed designs and animal print. Outside the bar, are sports cars and 4x4’s, parked next to hawkers and vendors selling cigarettes and food in order to make a living. Within, are brands of expensive liquor, clearly signalling the capability to partake in conspicuous consumption, in contrast to those on the outside forced to trade on a subsistence level to get by.

Deuces is one of many successful music venues. From these observations, a dialogue between plenitude and paucity emerges, becoming a worthwhile way to understand Uganda’s hip hop scene. As stated earlier, paucity marks the structural conditions one encounters in everyday life. In stark contrast, is a plenitude of recording studios, often shacks labelled as such, with equipment and sound systems for hire. There is a plenitude of social spaces such as nightclubs for the enjoyment of music in the form of live performances and recorded music events. And finally, there is a plenitude of digital technologies available through mobile telephony. In the harnessing of these capabilities, individuals create their own

plenitude of musical and social life, representing hip hop in Uganda through music and imagery.

Along with a vibrancy of musical and social life such as that found in Kampala's nightlife, is a plenitude of transnational development and aid organisations, visible through their office signage in gated communities located in some of the city's wealthiest districts. Amongst other issues of socio-economic fragility, such as education and poverty, there is the question of the HIV/AIDS epidemic in Uganda, which has left many families and communities bereft, both emotionally and economically. Everywhere in Kampala are public service billboards reminding one to practice safe sex, or abstinence with the blessing of the USAID, in the case of the latter.

The 21<sup>st</sup> century saw agendas of international development located as a vital component of democratisation, good governance and neoliberal reform (Hammett 2014, Willems 2011), meaning that such concerns inform the activities of these transnational organisations in Uganda. It is worth noting that a preponderance of transnational development initiatives and entities in Uganda is signalled by such a presence described in the preceding chapter, and this influence extends into the hip hop scene as well.

For example, I was struck by the savvy marketing that certain rappers deployed in the promotion of their brands, specifically aimed at the articulation and enactment of concerns of development and democracy, in musical text and performance. On one occasion, I was told by a rapper, known for a similar stance, that if I paid a certain fee, they would organise a gig, which I could then duly observe and analyse, as they had done for another researcher in the past. I did not take up this offer. In terms of image, there was a clear understanding of the power of perception, where the stance of resistance was mobilised in service of gaining paid gigs from NGO's, which in turn lauded these stances as authentic expressions of socio-politically aware youth. This, I observed at a hip hop performance which occurred under the larger purview of an event organised by a well-known transnational aid organisation on the issue of gender inequality. At the same time, I encountered a vehement opposition to such practices, where members of the hip hop scene stated that they did not run a "hip hop NGO".

Nonetheless, such interactions revealed a 'hustle' all of its own, where Uganda's reliance on donor funding and support through international NGO's has produced a field of creative

expression and commercial enterprise, based on the garnering of status through the blessings of transnational development entities. Given the poverty and struggle in everyday life, such alliances are understandable. However, they can be implicated in the propagation of perceptions of dependency that beset perceptions of Uganda, and the continent of Africa as a whole. As Ferguson states, these “converge around the question of ‘Africa’” (2006:4), as an entity, confounding in its scope and obfuscating in its encounters, inhibited by categorisations and metaphors such as the dark side (Stiglitz 2001), satanic geographies (Smith 1997), or even more damning, a black hole of the information economy (Castells 2000, cf. Ferguson 2006). Such representations have led to Africa being escribed as a continent “trying to extricate itself from cultural imperialism”, embodied in paternalistic attitudes, as noted in ideologically saturated terms such as the “charity business” and the development ‘industry’ (Monga 1996:165).

This thesis responds to such conceptions in challenge. As stated previously, no doubt these issues of development are real; however, I also found a plenitude of entrepreneurial activities and creative practices, bolstered, in many cases by digital technology in the form of mobile telephony. This reflects Kwame Appiah, who writes in *The Postcolonial and The Postmodern*, that, “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” (1991:157). Following Mbembe’s perspectives (2001), this study contributes towards scholarship based on an elucidation of contemporary social life. I have chosen a differentiation from dominant narratives, notably those from development perspectives and those from neoliberalism, and yet others, that focus on an ideology of difference. In a consideration of popular forms such as hip hop, embedded as they are in an economic space, we locate enactments of fashion and music, leisure activities, in nightclubs and in other social spaces, mediated by patterns of consumption. In these conjunctions are areas of belonging that challenge the discourses of rupture and destitution used to discuss issues of society and self in Africa.

In regard to issues of development, I found independently mobilised grassroots activist initiatives specifically based on challenging social and economic fragility on their own terms through hip hop, shunning the terms of commercial success such as those found at Deuces.





*Figure 3: A View from a boda-boda, near Muyenga, Kampala*



*Figure 4: Driving into the city. Note the brand new highway and shanty towns alongside*

Notable amongst these is the Bavubuka Foundation, Uganda's longest running hip hop initiative. The word *Bavubuka* means youth in Luganda and its mandate is based around the concerns of education and empowerment in response to material paucity, in the form of a lack of employment, resources and infrastructure. Similarly, there are several rappers such as Uganda's most successful hip hop artist, GNL Zamba, and St. Nelly Sade, a young rapper in his early twenties, who through their own brands are able to act as hip hop 'educators' and entertainers, simultaneously gaining sustainable commercial success in the form of album sales and paid performances.

These issues of activism such as those informed by development issues, and excess in the form of conspicuous consumption, inform the contemporary music scene. Inclusive of both these strivings of excess and activism, the hip hop scene includes musicians and performers born and raised in Uganda, as well as individuals from the diaspora. I was told in an interview with a young photographer and journalist, Gilbert Frank Daniels, the 'UG hip hop archivist' and member of the Bavubuka Foundation, that "without the diaspora, where would be no hip hop in Uganda<sup>3</sup>", a thought similarly expressed by a senior music journalist at a radio station. This generation in Ugandan hip hop is now aged between 35 to 45. Encounters with hip hop occurred in North America in the 1990s, as a result of their families' forced migrations during the Amin years. An eventual return to Uganda in the nineties showed a continued association with hip hop locally, and I was able to meet with many of these hip hop 'elders' as they are sometimes referred to, and three of these individuals form the focus of the chapter on image.

In response to these varied encounters in the field, as an ethnomusicologist and scholar of popular music, and based on my own career as creative director of a branding firm in the fashion and luxury segment in India, I found myself drawn to aspects of 'aspirationalism' in emerging economies and what they say about forms of reflexivity and mobility, both real and imagined, engendered by the consumption of goods and ideas. At first glance, the obvious contrasts between plenitude and paucity, such as those I observed in Kampala's nightlife, might appear jarring. Those who revel in material capabilities enacted through consumption may seem opportunistic, but in such strivings are possibilities to renegotiate the terms of success in what are often harshly conservative spaces. These are complicated negotiations

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<sup>3</sup> Interview, 4.12.2014

with and in contrast to the difficulties of everyday life engendered by a wider socio-economic fragility. Such interactions, I believe, will give one a profound insight into people and places, and how structures of deep inequality are negotiated into something less so. This study aims to show this dynamic relationship in a critical exploration about what hip hop meant to the people I met with and got to know.

However, what established my street cred, as it were, was something else entirely. In the field, at first, it felt like I was waiting for field research to happen to me, waiting for serious insights into the world of Ugandan hip hop. Soon, my trepidation about whether I would be accepted as a researcher where strangers lived and worked, proved very quickly to be unfounded. I found an extraordinary courtesy amongst Ugandan society both in and out of the music scene. Ugandan society values politeness and I was mindful of adopting the standard greeting of “hello, how are you?”, waiting for a response and a similar questioning to which I answered, before introducing myself or launching into a volley of questions at social and musical gatherings. Once introductions were made, I found very little hesitancy in the exchanging of phone numbers and few problems with setting up of subsequent interviews, save for those around the fixing of times, which seemed to be best described as random and contingent upon what else happened that day or which party was on the night before. These encounters ranged from those with Ugandan dancehall superstars such as Bebe Cool, and Radio and Weasel, to struggling rappers and session musicians. Regardless of such differences, information was shared and friendships struck, for which my gratitude is significant.

Very soon, I realized hip hop was happening all around me, in the recording studios and nightclubs I ventured into and was invited to spend time ‘hanging out’. At studios, runners would come in with new CD’s from rival artists, gossip and anecdotes being shared about what was happening just that minute, who had changed their image to make it more current, who had more ‘swag’, who had made a killing with a newly released track and who had made alliance with whom or the opposite. These were shared over packets of my Rex cigarettes, a Kenyan brand, known for their potency over Dunhills, which are favoured by expats and the upwardly mobile. These Rex cigarettes, I shared happily as I was self-conscious about being a smoker.

It was very warm in Kampala, and since my schedule at any time of the day or evening was seldom fixed, I hired a motorcycle taxi or *boda-boda*<sup>4</sup>, as it is locally known. Driven by a gentleman named Rajab, it was a chariot, perfect to negotiate bumper to bumper traffic on red earth roads, occasionally tarmacked, but heavily potholed regardless. Kampala is spread over seven hills and quite often, getting from studio to gig meant that I had to travel significant distances in fairly dusty conditions. At first I wore flip-flops, but then decided to wear my running shoes, which are Puma limited edition Usain Bolts, in the colours of the Jamaican flag, which are in turn associated with Rastafarianism in popular musical culture in Uganda, including hip hop and dancehall. Much of the music scene in Uganda, along with an engagement with hip hop's 'bling-bling' aesthetic described at Deuces, shows a strong visual and stylistic identification with Rastafarian culture in modes of appearance such as dreadlocks and the distinctive colours of red, gold and green. I will critically discuss the significance of these identifications over the course of this thesis.

For the moment, I would like to bring to note that musicians such as Bobi Wine, arguably Uganda's most successful popstar, and now an elected representative of a Kampala constituency won in a landslide victory<sup>5</sup>, have, through performance and in the media, identified with the 'rastaman' as a symbol of resistance to oppression. Bobi Wine's dreadlocks were part and parcel of this image. The star now sports a buzz cut, but it is worth noting that that Uganda is a fairly conservative society. Such modes of appearance are considered deviant due to the association with marijuana smoking, which is perceived as degenerate, causing those who partake to "run mad on the roads"<sup>6</sup>.

However, for now, it is important to also remember that similar stylisations of hair and clothing in the colours of red, gold and green are considered cool. In the words of famed producer, Legend P. Muziki, who will reappear in this literature review and to whom I owe the title of this thesis, braided hairdos, with each braided section finished with a bead, are called "disco dreads"<sup>7</sup>. In the case of Mr. Muziki, these beads were red, gold and green. These disco dreads are carefully coiffed in salons and sported by both men and women and they lend 'swag', as do a pair of 'cool kicks', as I found out. My shoes, worn for the purpose

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<sup>4</sup> According to local knowledge, motorcycles were used to and still do, ply both people and goods across Uganda up to the Kenyan border, hence the word *boda-boda*, which comes from "border to border".

<sup>5</sup> [http://www.newvision.co.ug/new\\_vision/news/1456687/bobi-wine-wins-kyandondo-east-seat](http://www.newvision.co.ug/new_vision/news/1456687/bobi-wine-wins-kyandondo-east-seat), 29.6.2017

<sup>6</sup> A speaker who preferred to remain anonymous, 06.12.2015.

<sup>7</sup> Interview at Fenon Studios, Kampala, 18.12.2015

of comfort, became a symbol of ‘street cred’. From being “that Indian chick”, I became “that chick with the kicks.”



*Figure 5: My street cred*

### **Self-fashioning through consumption: theoretical frames**

At its foundation, this thesis is informed by hip hop’s own powerful visual aesthetic, made globally accessible through the media. Deftly described here, the genre “is a visually progressive art form in and of itself that continually fights for the control of its image. Hip-hop is all about visual agency” (Murray 2014:5). As Houston A. Baker, Jr. states, the place of the symbolic, such as in the form of imagery in Afro-American cultures including hip hop, provides avenues for the comprehension of “expressive cultures in its plenitude” (1987:1). Along with this, is the symbolic place of the political economy of the sign (Baudrillard 1981), where material goods, such as consumer objects and commodities, point towards the formation of ideology and the relationships such objects denote to modes of production and consumption.

In dialogue with this relationship, drawing on Jameson’s conception of “the invention and projection of a global cognitive mapping on a social as well as a spatial scale” (1991:47),

Lipsitz states that hip hop exists as “global cultural practice” (1994:27). Ephemeral yet hardy, hip hop carries “images, ideas and icons” of significance which shape “new social movements emerging in response to the imperatives of global capital” (*ibid.*). Here, hip hop forms an ideology, which, as Jameson describes as, is a mystification, a “kind of subjective picture of things” (1971:182), often unrelated to the external world itself. For this reason, I show how hip hop in Uganda becomes a space of subjective imaginings and re-imaginings, mythic in scope and powerful in the self-fashionings it encloses, occurring in contrast to and in challenge of the immediate circumstances of everyday life.

I will return to the significance of the word ‘mythic’ a little later in this text. At this point, I make this assertion based on hip hop’s global commercial dominance which was established in the 1990s. Today, hip hop is a visible and widely disseminated conduit of imagery, iconography and information on a tremendous scale, its reach and extent showing the genre’s significance as a multi-billion-dollar industry (Perry 2008:295), in a spectacular brand of entertainment all of its own. Visible and audible in the stylisation of fashion, music, art and consumer goods such as headphones, trainers, liquor and cars, hip hop is a form of popular culture, which through commercial success and influence forms an integral component of the world-wide entertainment industry. Commercially mediated, hip hop extends successfully from music into film, television and corporate merchandising, in a global flow of its own, mediated and propagated by capitalism and culture.

Narratives of excess and transgression and the rhetoric of emancipation and activism are integral components of hip hop’s expressive culture, described in the terms of conscious and commercial (Chang 2005 *et al.*). These often occur side by side in a simultaneous integration, such as in the musical and cultural oeuvres of superstars such as Tupac, a figure whose image appeared time and time again in Uganda.

The place of such divergences in hip hop can be understood through Baker’s theorisation on mastery of form and deformation of mastery. In *Modernism and the Harlem Renaissance* (1987), drawing on Booker T. Washington and W. E. B. DuBois, he discusses their deployment of strategies of discourse in the forms of mastery and deformation in an understanding of the specific place of black popular forms of culture in critical race theory. Mastery or skill and finesse in the articulation of the spoken word is fairly straightforward, in that it creates a space and audience for these articulations. However, deformation of mastery

becomes a transgressive and resistant process where the folk and the popular merge with the terms of high culture. Powerfully linking both is the idea of a mask, which allows performers to appear as though they are carrying out accustomed and stereotypical roles while coding the original and subversive into these familiar images.

Looking at hip hop in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, one could replace the terms of high culture with those of tremendous monetary acquisition and success engendered by global corporate cultures, within which are located entertainment industries, and which further encompass popular musical cultures such as hip hop. In the consideration of hip hop in Uganda, if we see activism as a mastery of form and excess as a deformation of form, their correspondence is not surprising. As Baker asserts, the relationship between the two is a complicated discursive relationship, where “a horizontal axis of mastery implies a coexistent point on a vertical axis of deformation” (1987:94), suggesting therefore, that each lends itself to the situation of the other. Furthermore, each involves a staking out of an independent voice, in the form of fragile yet tenacious public spheres and spaces in relation to paucity, in terms of material and cultural marginalisation, made more so because of the ability enclosed in such articulations to disclose without revealing.

Similarly, Derek Conrad Murray (2014), states in his paper on hip hop’s visual aesthetic of materialistic excess, “Global capitalism and revolution are like oil and water, but in hip hop they’re akin to Siamese twins” (5). This is a thought presciently put forward by Angela McRobbie, who states that “Dallas is destined to sit alongside images of black revolt” (1994:21), predicting, in fact, the success of television shows such as *Empire*, which places hip hop as a central theme around which is arranged imagery of lavish material success. Hip hop thus, has emerged as a successful symbolic instrument which combines and normalises both preoccupations of activism and excess within a global capitalist system (Chang 2005, Murray 2014, Perry 2008 *et al.*).

These two preoccupations, of activism and excess, are alive and well in Uganda, regardless of the success and failure of those involved and in the endeavours located around these concerns. In the contemplation of the socioeconomic and sociopolitical groundings of such concerns, Baker refers to Franz Fanon’s “dying colonialism”, wherein “this death of colonialism and sounds a note of liberation to which hundreds of millions of formerly colonised, darker peoples of the world can march” (1987:96). All is not so sanguine, as

advanced capitalism has lent itself in many ways to further relegation of the nations and peoples of the Global South, amongst which Uganda comprises, exacerbating and engendering social and economic fragilities tangible in wider processes and practices in every day of life.

Nonetheless, hip hop continues to provide people far flung from its origins in the Bronx with spaces for musical and social expression often in contrast to the circumstances of difficulty apprehended in their daily lives. Admittedly, the roots of the genre go far beyond its South Bronx origins, its influence first, as an emotive aesthetic force can arguably be attributed to its emergence in a site of structural violence (Rose 1994, *et al.*). Second, Perry (2008), moving beyond questions of cultural consumption and reproduction, argues that hip hop has a particular resonance in the making of black diasporic subjects in and of themselves, correctly attributing such an influence in part to its hyper-commodification as a global cultural form.

In this regard, Taylor argues that the notion of identity seen through the frame of consumption is a powerful way for individuals to locate themselves in a wider consumer culture (2015). Here, the term identity relates to personal conceptions of one's individuality in an encompassing consumer culture. Acknowledging criticisms of neoliberalism, such as David Harvey's, who argues that this individualism has in turn been part of a neoliberal strategy of exploitation which has inhibited the successful organisation of labour (Harvey 2010), Taylor goes on to say that identity is nonetheless constructed by the social actor as a practice and action engendered in part through processes of consumption. These are aspects and influences that can be mapped through self-fashioning amongst fans and practitioners of hip hop in Uganda, in negotiations of fragility, in the form of the political past and the socio-economic present.

As this thesis will show, in Uganda, the hip hop scene is informed by a plentiful consumption of images and imagery in hip hop, and its music, mediascapes and mythologies, through both lived and mediated experience. Due to its hyper-commodification, hip hop acts as its own global 'mediascape'. Mediascapes are sites that encompass the distribution of the electronic capabilities to produce and disseminate information such as newspapers, magazines, television, film, in the form of production studios and communication channels (Appadurai 1990: 289-299). These "images of the world" (Appadurai 1990:299) are created by these media. They involve complicated interactions and emphases, based on mode, hardware and



audience, in turn forming a distinct “landscape of images” (*ibid.*). Notable of this mediascape is a confabulation of effect, where the world of commodities and the world of news is conflated and mixed. The real and fictional are blurred; as a result, audiences are likely to construct “imagined worlds, which are chimerical aesthetic, even fantastic objects” (*ibid.*). Mediascapes thus, tend to be image-centred, narrative-based accounts of “strips of reality”; the uses of these imagined experiences and fantastical constructions, is that they offer to those who experience them and transform them, as producers and consumers, a series of elements such as characters, plots and textual forms. From these scripts, emerge “imagined lives, their own and others living in other places”; these are proto narratives of possible lives, fantasies which form and focus the desire of acquisition and movement (*ibid.*).

Hip hop provides large and complex repertoires of images and narratives to viewers across the globe, which they then fashion into understandings that reflect their own interaction with this imagery. The recognition of these capabilities indicates hip hop’s expanding global reach as a commodified cultural form. It also shows an influence that continues to be propagated in and through flows of people, wealth and information. Because of this, and because of the histories of the people involved in this study, which I discuss in detail in the chapter on image, hip hop in Uganda thus, forms an ethnoscape. An ethnoscape is a space whose cultural contours suggest a process constantly mobilised to reflect shifting and negotiated conceptions of identity. This is a process which finds voice and vision through the imagination of deterritorialised viewers to create diasporic public spheres (Appudurai 1990, 1996).

Seeing hip hop as mediascape and ethnoscape leads to questions of representation in public spheres. As Eric K. Watts states, on spectacular consumption encoded into gangsta rap, such narratives describe “a process through which the lifeworld of the artist, the meaning of representation, and the operations of the culture industry get transformed based upon terms generated by public consumption of the art” (1997:43). Following Watts, the ideas encoded into the imagery of hip hop provides that space to link the artist, his world, the meanings we make of such representations, and the things we learn about the world from them. In this thesis, representation lends itself towards understanding the place of self-fashioning in the lifeworld of the Ugandan hip hop scene and how consumption of hip hop as global mediascape informs and shapes this sonic culture locally and the preoccupations that underlie it.

Similarly, Stuart Hall's scholarly repertoire on representation in popular culture provides an insight into the potent uses of forms of consciousness thus engendered. Particularly powerful is his elegiac understanding of popular culture as "profoundly mythic" arena; commodified and stereotyped, as it may be, it is nonetheless, a space "where we find who we really are, the truth of our experience" (Hall 1993:382). This is because of its particular quality as "theatre of popular desires, a theatre of popular fantasies" (*ibid.*). These capabilities imbue our interactions with sites and forms of popular culture as spaces where "we discover and play with the identification of ourselves, where we are imagined, where we are represented, not only to the audiences out there who do not get the message, but to ourselves for the first time" (*ibid.*).

Due to this powerful ability, I have, with deliberation, used the term pop-mythology to describe aspects of hip hop that capture the imagination. Baker describes myth as "narratives explaining the origin and nature of the world by reference to the acts and intentions of supernatural beings" (1987: 115-116). In this, myth and mythology are distinguished from historical trajectories, and are unbounded by the constraints of time and space that restrict historical narratives. Drawing on Victor Turner's *Myth and Symbol*, where "in myth is a limitless freedom, a symbolic act of freedom of action which is denied to the norm-bound incumbent of a status in a social structure" (1968:577), Baker makes the case that the imagery inherent to myth, shows a "countermanding of social norms by symbolic means" (1987:116).

In hip hop, superstars such as Tupac provide their own mythologies. Unknowable to us, save through channels of mediatised narratives and imagery, such figures become supernatural beings akin to those found in myth because they subvert and interpellate dominant historical narratives through their successes, opening up space for other narratives thus far neglected and ignored. As Lipsitz states in his work, *Footsteps in the Dark* (2007), popular music acts as an alternative archive of history, through the shared memory, aspirations and experiences of people excluded from formal narratives (xi), while also allowing 'heroes' in the form of stars, to emerge from these alternative histories. Stars and celebrities, in addition compensate for and replace the "need for personal power, control (and success)" (McRobbie 1994:92), yearnings for which in Uganda show movements towards forms of plenitude in a space of deep material paucity.

The place of stardom is important as most of my key stakeholders in this research project are well-known and well-regarded in Uganda's music scene. They occupy a level of local celebrity and in many ways, and in some ways, embody the vital place that individuals and celebrities, or "stars, megastars" (Taylor 2015:15) occupy in a hip hop context of a global cultural fabric of consumption. Against a wider understanding of stardom, first, such individuals signal a production of value, personal and material as plenitude, conveyed variously through "abundance, plethora, excess, surfeit" (Taylor 2015:14).

In hip hop, such stars emerge in the image of the moguls, representing the most rarefied echelons of wealth and celebrity (Smith 2003). The image of the mogul, in Uganda and elsewhere, represents a rarefied echelon of influence, acquired through a deft management of distinctive and deserving advantage. These 'moguls' live and represent forms of attainment, of activism and of excess, both symbolically projected through their success. The critical vitality of this figure, I, in this study, apply to the analysis of image, placed against Ugandan hip hop's twin preoccupations of excess in the form of economic gain and activism in the striving for social justice. This is in accordance with hip hop as a brand of spectacular entertainment encoded into which is the convergence of cultural influence and commercial success articulated in the vocabulary of excess and activism.

Second, as asserted previously, the contemplation of hip hop's stars and megastars such as those embodied in the image of the hip hop mogul shows a creation and management of distinctiveness. This links to the idea that musicians can act as brands, overriding genre and sound; this understanding is not new, neither is the notion that brand conformity and recognition in the context of the musician may outweigh genre and style (Taylor 2015). However, viewing people as brands allows one to draw into focus those signs and symbols deployed in the communication of meaning against wider social and economic formations. This is not dissimilar to the branding of products and occurs as an emotional process. It is a process that is dynamic in its inclusion of "anthropology, imagination, sensory experiences, and visionary approach to change" (Wheeler 2009 [2012]:6), all leveraged in the gaining of recognition and loyalty, through the creation and projection of kinds of imagery in service of a consolidation of meaning.

In a critical consideration of such imagery, Jean Baudrillard (1993) argues that “post-industrial societies have perfected modes of artistic replication so as to nearly eradicate the relationship between the sign and the signified, modifying the essence of both” (cf. Watts 1997:43). In dialogue, Sasha Newell states in his interrogation of brands as masks in Cote D’Ivoire (2013) that abstract, largely immaterial images of ‘people’ replace the social relations once held between producer and consumer. As the materiality of the object is reduced to a copy in mass production, its qualitative uniqueness must be reasserted at the level of the brand.

However, hip hop is no mere consumer object. It is instead a spectacular brand of entertainment, in its narratives and culture, in the ideas and objects that inflect it, and the brands and people that populate it. As a hyper-commodified form of popular culture, the power of hip hop is magnified precisely through this proliferation and replication of imagery through representations and presentations that encompass creative expression, commercial success and cultural influence, where Baker’s mask of mastery and deformation shows us the ability that these have as both interrogation and resistance to inequity in all its forms.

In this study, this conception draws into focus enactments that “represent intermeshed cultural logics in which local understandings of performative magic merge with the anxieties over authenticity and imitative reproduction at the heart of capitalist economies” (Newell 2013:140). This raises a discussion on what comprises an authenticity of representation in musical and social life. However, as show in critical detail in the chapter on image, rather than reducing interactions to oppositions between real and fake, instead, these appropriations point to novel and subjective uses and meanings amongst those amongst whom we find them, showing us negotiations with capitalism and its inequities, through excess and/or activism.

Juxtaposed against this, as Watt’s states, imagery signifies a way of life, a way of thinking, a way of being, finding hip hop embodiment in megastars such as Tupac, the significance of whose image in Uganda I will discuss in the chapter on belonging. This is because people become brands, as entities or individuals who are the incarnation of qualities that define consumer objects and cultures, both musical and social. As a result, such personifications and enactments and the relationships we form with them, capture strivings for meaning and mobility, including those of social and economic belonging. Subsequently, we adopt these

signs, found in musical cultures, brands of consumer objects and celebrities, as part of our identities in engagement with wider consumer cultures (McCracken 2005).

From such understandings, in Ugandan hip hop emerge forms of movement and acquisition which Appadurai calls proto-narratives of possible lives, mapped here through self-fashioning through consumption. These are reflected in narratives of excess and of activism, showing negotiations of aspiration and resistance, which in turn reveal, individual negotiations of inequity on a large scale, cognisant with those found in the genre's history and present.

For example, in Uganda, many rappers, both involved in activism through hip hop and others, more concerned with commercial success, shared with me their own encounters with and understandings of the hip hop ideal of 'Knowledge of Self'. Experienced amongst my stakeholders in the form of mediated encounters and through lived experience, in hip hop, this knowledge alludes to an understanding of one's individual worth and place, and a critical consciousness about black history and the roots of racial oppression and exclusion (Chang 2005 *et al.*). Along with this, were celebrations of conspicuous consumption and an appreciation of hip hop's 'bling-bling' aesthetic too as described in the nightclub at the start of this thesis, similarly understood through subjective encounters through media and in life. The semantics of this term had a role to play in the conception of this critical interrogation of self-fashioning, along with behaviours of consumption in the hip hop context, each informing the beginnings of my inquiry into aspects of self-fashioning through consumption.

Thus, while several understandings on popular music, such as those on branding and imagery discussed here are drawn from spaces of advanced capitalism, I add that they are equally relevant in this study because hip hop in Uganda owes itself in a substantial way to a plenitude of global flows of imagery, people and information in dialogue with expressive cultures in spaces of advanced capitalism in the form of American hip hop. This occurs first, through the media; second, via diasporic experiences, each forming and informing the hip hop scene with a particular emphasis on subjective and individual experiences, thus, manifesting belonging through identifications with hip hop.

Through these trajectories, therefore, hip hop in Uganda reveals strivings towards belonging. Along with image and branding, this study views these strivings from the perspectives of the

“core dimensions of life, the pillars of identity and sociability” (Chabal 2009:23), embodied in ‘Being, Belonging and Believing’, where hip hop allows individuals to mobilise and articulate present struggles, from which in turn emerge “contemporary political activisms and creative expressions” (Ramnarine 2007:2). Ramnarine goes on to state that “experiences and articulations of a plural, changing consciousness...shape diasporic subjectivities.” These forms of movement in turn lead to “different ways of thinking about belonging together” (2007:5-6). First, hip hop becomes a space for belonging to response to migrations, real and imagined, creative and actual. These migrations include those of people in the form of diaspora, and of musical forms and ideas through the media.

Second, given the harsh social and economic relegation that occurs in everyday life in Uganda, hip hop shows us ways to gauge how individuals grapple with spaces of social and economic marginalisation engendered by material paucity in a search for belonging in the form of stability through creative and commercial enterprise. In Uganda, thus, as this thesis will show, hip hop is an acknowledgment of how the movements of people, ideas and objects across geographical constraints, both forced and free, point us towards the extraordinary resilience of individuals and communities in the challenging of exile and rupture. In Ugandan hip hop, identification and interrogation of cultural boundaries provide both a tangible link to the past and a grasp of the future and its possibilities.

These movements, both real and imagined, occur in seemingly disorganised yet dynamic ways, particularly in the global South, where the terms of capitalism take novel and surprising forms in the hands of and with effect to individuals and society (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999, 2001). For example, economic transition to neoliberalism in several parts of Africa has transformed the way that musicians, and promoters relate to each other and to audiences. Along with encounters with American hip hop, this takes place in the form of interactions with popular musical forms from other parts of Africa, notably contemporary Nigerian Afrobeats, which is similarly informed by global musical and social processes.

These relationships are explicated in the next chapter, where, based on studies conducted in the past, I discuss the emergence of popular music forms in Uganda in the mid-twentieth century. As an idiom, hip hop is a shift away from previous guitar based styles, relying more on syncopated electronic sonic formats. These forms, like those that preceded it, are easily transmitted through traditional media such as radio and also through unofficial, that is to say,

pirated compilations. However, in the present day, digital media has allowed for the proliferation of new formats such as MP3, engendering an unprecedented ease of access and transmission. These modes of transmission are akin to Appadurai's conception of technoscapes (1996), which theorises the reach and power of technology to elicit the diffusion of imagery and information at an unprecedented scale and speed. In this, the commodification of music and competition among artists, producers and distributors has created a vibrant musical space, rife with piracy but nonetheless, dynamic in terms of access to music technology and musical releases, a situation that is relevant to Uganda too.

Returning to the the idea that hip hop acts as global cognitive mapping on a social as well as a spatial scale, in turn engendering cultural processes and creative practices (Lipsitz 1991), in this plenitude of musical resources and opportunity, in Uganda, like elsewhere in East Africa, through hip hop, we find strivings towards meaning and belonging in musical and social life, enabling individuals to mobilise and articulate strivings and struggles. Locally made hip hop has created a space for belonging for both artists and audiences who use music to express social and political views, gain economic advantage and thus, challenge systems of paucity and ensuing fragility.

Studies on hip hop in Africa have explored these strivings in various ways. In this regard, Mwenda Ntarangwi's volume, *East African Hip Hop: Youth, Culture and Globalisation* (2000) examines hip hop music as a transnational and regional phenomenon in equal measure, placing the emergence of hip hop as a genre in Africa in the 1980s. Second, Eric Charry's anthology, *Hip Hop Africa: New African Music in a Globalizing World* (2013), traces hip hop's movement to Africa, focusing on significant exchanges between Senegal, France and the USA. The former focuses on Kenya, Tanzania and briefly, Uganda, and the latter, has a more continental approach with case studies from Ghana, Senegal, Côte d'Ivoire, Malawi, Nigeria as well as East Africa.

Charting the historical milieu of African hip hop from the 1980s and 1990s, these anthologies go beyond African American roots, and instead shows how structural, textual and stylistic features, such as metaphor, are shared with traditional types of expressive musical and performative culture. Contextualising youth agency and globalisation as the fulcrum of these styles of hip hop, Ntarangwi and Charry show how these new musical forms transcend traditional geographical barriers to create new idioms through which trans-global and African

identities and contemporary cultures flourish through sound and imagery.

This is relevant to Uganda too, as such capabilities inform this thesis' focus on image, branding and belonging, mapped through the analysis of musical and social life. At the same time, both volumes view hip hop as a lens through which to consider youth mobilisation in critique of neoliberal fundamentalism. In social and cultural interpretation of events and situations, popular forms of music thus serve as mapping through which “youth tend everywhere to occupy the innovative, uncharted borderlands along which the global meets the local” (Comaroffs 2006: 308). The hip hop scene in Uganda cannot be viewed as a youth culture primarily, as stated earlier, those prominent in the hip hop scene are their mid-thirties to mid-forties. Nonetheless, a large percentage of Uganda's population is under the age of 30, meaning that such capabilities ascribed to hip hop are relevant to understanding the place of the genre in this country too.

In their overarching themes, these explorations are similar to those I found in Uganda, in that they speak to transnational cultural spaces such as mediascapes and ethnoscapes discussed previously, while acknowledging and engaging with the global political economy of consumption engendered through neoliberalism and globalisation. As this thesis will show, in hip hop in Uganda, we find a similar incorporation of global influences into local cultural and musical products and forms, where expressions take “different forms in different locations as processes of domestication, (and) re-contextualise and reshape them to address local concerns” (de Boeck and Honwana 2005: 12). This recontextualisation and reshaping in engagement with local concerns is critically focused in this study as belonging, as a means to gain community and frame one's place within it. These indicate new and innovative negotiations of social and economic issues, engendered by an awareness of wider processes and events, occurring in spaces of rapid economic and social change.

These particular qualities of amalgamation against the framework of rapid social and economic change include the musical in the form of local forms of hip hop and rap in Africa, often sung in the vernacular and seasoned with Jamaican dancehall, Caribbean zouk, and Congolese soukous, creating imagery and narratives in rich, local renditions of hip hop culture (Mitchell 2001), which we find in Uganda.

In addition, hip hop's popularity in Africa as a space for belonging can be understood



through this capability, “the treatment of the song as a form of speech utterance arises not only from stylistic considerations or from consciousness of the analogous feature of speech and music; it is also inspired by the importance of the song as an avenue of verbal communication, a medium for creative verbal expressions which can reflect both personal and social experience” (Nketia 1975: 189). This understanding holds true in Uganda, particularly in the contemplation of the local hip hop brand, Lugaflow, whose distinctive quality is the use of wordplay and rhyme in the Luganda language, focused towards the creation and consolidation of a sense of belonging through creative and commercial enterprise in the hip hop context. I will discuss this local hip hop form in the chapters on branding and belonging in some depth.

Thus, in many ways, Nketia’s understanding on the potentialities in music finds consonance with a notable quality in global hip hop culture, which is its ability to express first, the idea that the role of the performer and artist is not only to make music but also to ‘represent the real’ by embodying and expressing the authentic subjectivity of his or her place in the world (Eisenberg 2012, Forman 2002, Bennett 2000). In keeping with research that shows how hip hop provides a means by which, people “formalise their ideas, represent themselves, and achieve their goals” (Rollefson 2011), such representations bring with them the capability to articulate and bring forward narratives which may otherwise be relegated to the margins of social and economic representation from they emerge, and in doing so, create spaces for belonging, through action and engagement in musical and in social life.

Similarly, Alex Perullo examines the hugely popular hip hop derived Bongo Flava scene in Tanzania, where the genre works both as music and a ‘lifestyle’, aiding activism, demonstrated through artists’ commitment to reaching out to urban youth, fostering communities to support and educate one another (2005). Bongo Flava, called “the music of the young generation” (*muziki wa kizazi kipya*) evolved in the 1990s with tremendous commercial success. Similar to the Ugandan Lugaflow, in that it includes influences from American hip hop music and has developed a local identity, with lyrics that use Swahili and slang expressions (Reuster-Jahn 2007, Englert 2008). This rise of popular hip hop culture during the 1990s saw a sort of moral panic in the public scrutiny of youth in Tanzania. On the one hand, conceptions of music in the media and public discourses saw young people labelled as hooligans (*wahuni*), associated with violence, hostility and disruptive behaviour. However, Perullo’s study on hooliganism and community in Tanzania documents how young people

used hip hop to confront these stereotypes through politically and socially relevant lyrics. Lyrics used Swahili and slang expressions to convey and carry contemporary cultural meaning (Reuster-Jahn 2007, 2008), making hip hop a critical medium of social belonging, enabling a sense of inclusion and community (Perullo 2005), which we will find in Uganda too as I discuss in the chapter on belonging.

This has particular relevance as in Perullo's study, like in Uganda, a diversity of style and stance shows hip hop to be a cultural form, involved in public discourse, acting in relation to consumption and production, focused ultimately on belonging on account of these qualities.

In these studies, the place of activism and empowerment in locally produced hip hop is privileged; this study aims to add to these understandings of hip hop, while also taking into consideration the more commercially minded, and therefore, seemingly superficial renditions of hip hop, which while frivolous in their concerns, are equally dynamic in the musical and social life they inform. This is because, such acts simultaneously confront the rupture and destitution associated with such spaces of social and economic marginalisation such as one finds in studies on development in sub-Saharan Africa. These are indeed disjunctures, where the modes of Appadurai's mediascapes, ethnoscapas and technoscapes (1990), amongst other formations, where unequal representations occur in the form of goods, information and wealth.

Nevertheless, in this regard, in Africa, music has been considered a potentially radical space (Allen 2004), as first, it is the most widely appreciated art form on the continent. Second, it is a site for collective and individual agency. Third, the political power of music on the continent lies fundamentally not in protest anthems or praise songs, instead, as Mbembe argues in relation to Congolese music (2005), the social enjoyment of music in political and social circumstances in which the individual's humanity seems not to be recognised, in that it is encompassed within a profound social and economic fragility, in the wider scheme of things and in the everyday, making such an enjoyment an essential contestation of that denial.

On the basis of these assertions, I argue that hip hop in Uganda has become a space for personal identification and pleasure to those involved. Here, McRobbie's *Postmodernism and Popular Culture* (1994), provided an optimism of critical analysis I found cogent in my analysis of Uganda's hip hop scene, based as it is on the understanding that we act not as

dupes of consumer cultures, but rather as active agents in a pursuit for meaning through various forms of gratification and significance. This assertion is supported by Ugandan hip hop's co-optation of global cultural flows into distinctive local artistic production, in turn exhibiting explorations of identity and place through musical and social life. Individual and collective acts of consumption and production in the form of making and listening to tracks as well as watching music videos, performing and attending gigs, signify acts of belonging occurring in plenitude, confounding and challenging the backdrop of profound paucity in Uganda. Such processes and practices are potent in their capacity for transformation, encompassing the musical, social and economic, simultaneously confronting the rupture and destitution associated with spaces of social and economic fragility through the imagination.

This finds consonance with the Comaroffs, who refer to "the rise of new forms of enchantment" (2001:3), in a consideration of the forms that global capitalism takes in local contexts. Here, issues of consumption, and individual preferences and choice, first, challenge a "constitutive relationship of production to consumption" (*ibid.*). Second, we find "complex, poetically rich, culturally informed imaginings" negotiating "structural conditions and subjective perceptions" (2001:11). The importance of these relationships in the contemplation of global popular cultures, both material and musical, is they are neither disingenuous nor homogenising in their local effects and manifestations.

The aim thus, is to show how such understandings of the power and reach of popular music extend into spaces in a manner which at first, might appear surprising, but are no less potent in developing our understandings of how individuals and communities grapple with global systems such as capitalism in everyday practices and processes of creativity and commerce, focused by excess or activism as the case may be. Such concerns allow us insight into the reach, extent and role of the creative and cultural industries in the developing world, which are economically expansive and creatively dynamic. In response to these strivings, I will, in this thesis, show the 'hustle' behind the image, or the ways in which people try to 'get paid' through their musical life, in a dialogue sometimes contentious and other times, consonant with the questions of inequity that cause one to have to 'hustle' in the first place.

I make this assertion based on the effect that economic stability, even in its most basic comprehension, has on our sense of security, of self and place. This is a relationship which Amartya Sen in *Development as Freedom*, elucidates as one between "commodities and

capabilities”, in turn drawing into focus, “our economic wealth and ability to live as we would like” (2001:13). Simply put, the enactments I discuss come from wanting a better life.

In conclusion, I would like to show how the consumption and production of hip hop speaks to social and political issues through the popular idiom in Uganda, albeit in a manner that rather than confrontational, provided a sly and humorous critique. During his previous election campaign, President Museveni featured in a hip hop video, *Do you want another Rap?* freely available on Youtube<sup>8</sup>. The origins of this video feature once again, Legend P. Muziki. Working at Fenon productions, one of Uganda’s largest and most successful studios, he told me that the studio provided sound infrastructure for a political rally<sup>9</sup>. He then recorded and sampled elements of the President’s speech to create this track. This was duly shared with His Excellency and then released to the wider public with his blessing. It was meant to capture the attention of the younger voting populace. And it did, though possibly not in the manner that was hoped for, as word on the street is that most found the title “do you want another slap<sup>10</sup>” more appropriate, alluding perhaps to the heavy handed authoritarianism that marks out Uganda’s contemporary political situation.

I include this anecdote there, as in its humour, it shows an optimism of intent veiled and circumspect but no less potent in its challenge to hostile circumstances. With this in mind, this thesis will show, through its concerns of image-making, branding and of belonging in hip hop, how the signs and symbols encoded into the genre interact vividly with the meanings people make of these, finding representation in musical and in social life, in a negotiation of a plenitude found in musical and social life against material and economic paucity. In Uganda, these representations convey their meaning through renditions of lifestyle and personality informed by the consumption of ideas and objects in a hip hop lifeworld, as Watts describes. Such diverse frames of reference have lent themselves to a plenitude of imaginings and representations potent in challenging social and economic fragility.

Through this thesis thus, I hope to challenge the pessimism inherent to the post-colonial project. As described by J. Griffith Rollefson’s reading of Bhabha, in a “reading of postmodernity, the postcolonial world is both an end-time environment and a rebirth of the

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<sup>8</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6Bw9TPA9k0M>, published 27.10.2010

<sup>9</sup> Interview, 3.12.2015

<sup>10</sup> Anonymous, 20.12.2015

world from the empty shell, the rotting corpse of the West” (2007:317). While a thorough interrogation of this assertion is beyond the remit of this text, Bhabha’s “rotting corpse of the West” is neither so rotten nor so empty, as popular emanations such as hip hop show.

Instead, in many ways, I found these hip hop self-fashionings cognisant with Achille Mbembe’s (2001) statement, which in its poetry remains no less powerful and suggestive of forms of being. Here, “instead of the individual, there are entities, captives of magical signs, amid an enchanted and mysterious universe in which the power of invocation and evocation replaces the power of production, and in which fantasy and caprice coexist not only with the possibility of disaster but with its reality” (4).

Seeing hip hop as that enchanted and mysterious universe, I would argue contra Mbembe to say that from these qualities arise a unique framing, where invocation and evocation becomes a site for production in a fashioning of a hip hop self. Here, imagination gives one the tools to circumvent the possibility of disaster through art and economics. This phrase, art and economics is similarly used by Baker (1987), where he describes the ‘blues matrix’ as a network which mediates poverty and abundance (8-9). In a parallel fashion, the hip hop scene in Uganda acts as one such network, which I engage with specifically as self-fashioning through consumption, conceptualising and articulating the apprehension of systems of inequity through the consumption of hip hop. To those involved, there is always, the question of making money, on your own terms and through what gives you pleasure and artistic fulfilment. There are alternatives to conventional modes of employment such as those provided by 9-5 office jobs, which in Uganda are hard to come by.

So, you might come from there and be this, but you can become that, if you try hard enough. You can make it happen through hiphop, or “hiphaap”, as it is called in Uganda. As such, it is all imagination. How it works, as this study will show, is ‘real’.

## **Thesis outline**

Chapter 1 provides an insight into key concerns that inform this thesis. I introduce a framing of self-fashioning through consumption in fragile sites. This approach is based first, on account of Uganda's vibrant yet disorganised music scene, within which this study on hip hop is located. Second is, Uganda's relevance as site of deep social and economic inequity engendered by maldevelopment. From this emerges a dialogue between plenitude and paucity, variously indicated through a plethora of musical and social happenings in contrast to a wider material scarcity in the form of jobs, facilities and infrastructure.

Against this backdrop, I present theoretical frames relevant to this thesis. Relying on seminal scholarship in popular music studies and in media and cultural studies, as well as studies on hip hop in Africa and based on hip hop's dominance as multi-billion-dollar industry, I discuss hip hop as an expressive culture which adeptly encompasses narratives of activism and of excess. Both emphases integrate commercial success and cultural influence via global flows of musical texts and visual imagery. The concerns of image, branding and belonging are discussed, the relationships between which show a wider dialogue between the movements of people, objects and ideas, revealing trajectories which facilitate subjective engagements with musical cultures and in the social life located therein. Each of these aspects is linked to the striving for of a better life, apprehended through the imagination in a similar awareness of social and economic inequity in Uganda.

Chapter 2 presents a review of scholarly literature on music in Uganda, showing it to be both a function and result of global and local historical trajectories. A review of research on music in Uganda over these decades in the mid- 20<sup>th</sup> century to the 21<sup>st</sup> century shows an extensive interest in musical forms, including performance and instrumentation analysed through perspectives that comprise anthropology, ethnomusicology, media, popular music, development and performance studies. This chapter shows first, a richness of musical tradition, plentiful in the amalgamation of influences and forms, while revealing a relationship with wider political, social and economic processes, such as colonialism and capitalism. In Uganda, a history of violent civil conflict has engendered a profound social and economic fragility. At the same time, economic liberalisation and the growth of the mediasphere shows how popular music forms in Uganda, including hip hop, owes much to visual and sonic flows of information and technology on a global scale, as well as to the diaspora. This understanding reveals that the tendencies that inform the hip hop scene,

specifically hedonism and activism, originate from an awareness of Uganda's contemporary economic and social issues, in turn a result of its political histories.

Chapter 3 presents an outline of the methodology deployed in this study beginning with the place of the visual to show how objects such as commodities speak to strivings for a better life. I share methodological tools and groupings such as friendships in the field, the location of epistemic community, the uses of ethnography and phenomenology and the place of the digital, finally, finishing with visual collaborations in the form of album covers as method through which to engage with image, branding and belonging.

Chapter 4 on image first interrogates biographies of individuals active in the hip hop scene, in an analysis of public persona and lived experience. Choosing to focus on Gasuza Lwanga, Atlas da African and Silas 'Babaluku', all in their late thirties to mid forties, these individuals form part of the first generation of hip hop artists in Uganda and have each achieved a level of commercial and critical success. Here, encounters with hip hop occurred in North America in the 1990s, as a result of their families' forced migrations during the Amin years. Their return saw a continuation of careers in hip hop locally. In analysis of their musical and social personas, I explore visual markers that inflect their image, in terms of dress and comportment; this is then juxtaposed against information gathered in interviews, with me and in the media, on how they see themselves and their hip hop vocations. The motif of the mogul in hip hop culture is used to bring into focus social formations against wider milieus of paucity in contrast and adjacent to plenitude, in a discussion which explores the nature and uses of forms of subterfuge in the performance of musical and social life. Thereafter, specific to these individuals, I explore hip hop and its interaction with terms of diasporic consciousness, to show how we may find within these undertakings, the imagining and fashioning of a hip hop self, global in its construction and focused in the projection of distinctiveness and underlined by the pursuit of belonging.

Chapter 4 focuses on branding, relying on ethnographic data gained from time spent in recording studios, nightclubs and gigs. Beginning first with the idea that hip hop in Uganda functions as its own brand and culture, such enactments are informed by the image described in the preceding chapter, each occurring within a system of meaning which lends itself to belonging for those involved. I describe how individuals, under the aegis of organisations such as record labels, specific performance initiatives and through associations with

nightclubs act as differentiated brands within this wider system. In service of this argument, I share accounts from Rogue Elephant studio, where Gasuza was co-partner at the time, at Deuces nightclub, where Atlas continues to host Hip Hop Mondays, and finally, The Annual Hip Hop Summit in 2014, organised by Babaluku's Bavubuka Foundation. Through the frame of branding, we find enactments of self-fashioning through consumption, in an analysis of the creation of distinctiveness and deserving advantage in and through hip hop culture in Uganda, acting in negotiation of socio-economic fragility.

Encompassing the endeavours described in Chapter 4 and Chapter 5 are musical and social formations, which on the one hand are motivated by hedonism and excess, and on the other, emancipation and activism. As the discussions included in these chapters will show, these tendencies originate from the same place, which is in negotiation with forms of plenitude in relation to social and economic paucity in Uganda.

In chapter 6 on belonging, I present data on a younger, emergent generation of hip hop performers or 'practitioners', as they choose to refer to themselves, whose encounters with the genre occurred locally, and the ways in which they negotiate struggle and hardship through self-fashionings based on belonging. Viewing such fashionings in the context of identity and place, I show how conceptions of distinctiveness such as those found in branding combine the global and local in musical and social life. Choosing to focus on community initiatives that aim to provide belonging through hip hop, I share an account of Galaxy Breakdance Project in Uganda to make clear the level and extent of social and economic difficulty young people face. I then explore what the Ugandan hip hop 'practice' means to those involved and showed how these local musings and enactments find consonance and inspiration from hip hop's knowledge of self. Sharing information from conversations with young hip hop practitioners, including Nelly St. Sade, Spyda, Chimey, Taye and Esther, I show how Ugandan hip hop, particularly in Lugaflow, and in the success of GNL Zamba, Uganda's most commercially successful hip hop artist shows a plenitude of musical and social imaginings and initiatives in contrast to material paucity, informed ultimately by the need to create credible and sustainable musical, social and economic mobility and stability through hip hop.

Chapter 7 views the music video as hip hop spectacular, focusing on those created by Rogue Elephant studios. These music videos are a visible manifestation of brand, image and



belonging in contrast to and in conversation with forms of fragility in contemporary Kampala. Plentiful visual depictions in the form of imagery point us towards the self-fashionings informed by commodities, brands and modes of style, as do musical texts. These are specifically informed by the brand of musical collective that is Rogue Elephant. Lyrics show us narratives explicating struggles and hopes in a paucity of commercial opportunity, while the city of Kampala served as backdrop to these narratives. Finally, I discuss French Montana's smash hit video, *Unforgettable*, shot in Uganda, to show how representations of Africa act as a form of 'ghetto-sublime'. This leads to questionings of representations of Africa and how these allow us to conceive of wider issues of global inequity and the economic and social fragility these forms of inequity engender.

I conclude with chapter 8. I bring together key arguments made in the preceding chapters to show how self-fashioning through consumption, engaged with through the frames of image, branding and belonging allows us to appreciate a wider dialogue between plenitude and paucity. Through this, I present contributions towards existing scholarship and suggest spaces for further research. Showing the importance of this inquiry, I show how excess and activism in hip hop emerge from the same spaces of knowledge and resistance, in turn revealing the ways in which individuals and communities face and challenge social and economic difficulties through creative enterprise, in an attempt to make a better musical and social life in these circumstances.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Music in Uganda**

#### **Patronage to persecution: a brief overview of Uganda's music**

This chapter begins with an extensive review of scholarly work on Uganda's music, including the traditional and the popular and amalgamations of the two, beginning with the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century through to the 21<sup>st</sup>. In order to reflect the scope of Uganda's musical life, this review is broadly segregated by chronology, beginning with the most recent. This review of research on music in Uganda over these decades in the mid to late 20<sup>th</sup> century, continuing into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, shows extensive interest in traditional musical forms, including performance, instrumentation and musical text. Equally noteworthy are folk and popular music and performance, critically analysed through perspectives that include anthropology, ethnomusicology, media, popular music, development and performance studies. This chapter pays attention to each of these approaches.

I begin first with the assertion that in order to arrive at a meaningful interpretation of Uganda's musical history, the scholar must be first, aware of its complicated political and social legacies (Cooke and Kasule 1999). From a historical perspective, music in Uganda reveals influences that range from patronage to persecution, such as the benefaction of musical traditions located in royal kingdoms, subsequently replaced by the state sponsorship in newly independent Uganda. Thus, this review will show how Uganda's musical cultures have shifted contours in dialogue with these circumstances. In Uganda, like elsewhere in Africa, in the past, defining what constitutes the popular, what it is, who makes it, whom is for, has been problematic, as diversities of the forms of popular music have been matched only by an absence of widely accepted names for its genres, hindering the appearance of reliable nomenclatures (Agawu 2003), an aspect which a significant body of scholarship included here attempts to explicate through description and documentation. Because of this, we observe popular forms have been inventive and syncretic in keeping with Karin Barber's (1987) conception of popular arts in Africa, characterised by inclusiveness and apparent elasticity.

Furthermore, as this review of literature on music in Uganda will show, due to political

upheaval and subsequent loss of life and livelihood, there is a tendency in this body of scholarly literature towards accounts that veer toward the descriptive more than the analytical. This is understandable as Uganda's rich musical traditions and social life therein suffered in terms of knowledge and practice in the decades of war and thus, there is a need to provide and create forms of knowledge and practice. Nonetheless, in this review, what emerges is a plenitude of musical forms and traditions in Uganda, in conversation with a paucity of social, political and economic stability.

In these histories of Uganda's music traditions, we find discursive spaces for the inclusion of individuals and communities, often marginalised due to a resultant social, political and economic fragility. In the documentation of subjective individual and collective narratives, music, both popular and traditional, has served as counterweight to mainstream discourses which are often oppressive in their social and economic impact. In the marking of these spaces, in musical and in social life, is an interrogation of the ways and means negotiations towards meaning and belonging take place, taking into consideration the inequities engendered by colonialism and capitalism.

In spite of this troubled past, contemporary Uganda's popular music scenes such as hip hop, provide a rich space for critical engagement through music and the media in interaction with art and economics. Music in Uganda, particularly in the emergence of popular forms shows a similar dexterity of influence and amalgamation that one finds in contemporary studies on hip hop in Africa, described in the preceding chapter. This leads to the need for a more critical engagement in relation to wider contemporary processes such as global flows of information, goods and people, as described by Appadurai's theory of mediascape and ethnoscapas (1990,1996), for example, and what such processes tell us about meaning and belonging in a localised context, allowing individuals to mobilise and articulate present struggles, from which in turn emerge contemporary political activisms and creative expressions (Ramnarine 2007:2). These are aspects that this study apprehends, through an analysis of self-fashioning through consumption in fragile sites.

For the moment, I would like to emphasise that Uganda's popular culture is one that "grew from a history of state hegemony, state blessing and popular cultural reconstructions that had local and global configurations" (Ssewakiryanga & Isabirye 2006:37). Political turmoil followed closely after Uganda's independence in 1962, with the advent of military dictator

Idi Amin in 1972 and his successors Godfrey Binaisa, Paulo Muwanga, Brigadier Okello and Milton Obote, creating social and economic rupture with profound effect on the population. In the seventies and eighties, hundreds of thousands of Ugandans lost their lives or were compelled to flee.

When asked what had happened then, Christine Kiganda, a scholar of traditional oral arts who had returned in the early seventies from Los Angeles where she studied literature and folklore, says, "We tried to dodge bullets" (quoted in Cooke and Kasule 1999:6). During this time "performances deemed critical of the state were suppressed with the same force as political activists" (Ssewakiryanga & Isabirye 2006:55); a history of violence and terror then wrought Uganda's cultural production and pleasure.

This continued up till 1986 with the start of Yoweri Museveni's post-authoritarian regime, which subsequently saw globalisation, economic liberalisation and the arrival of an urban elite and middle class, as well as the liberalisation of and subsequent growth of a mediasphere, with particular emphasis on FM radio. In 1987 however, Alice Lakwena, a self-proclaimed prophetess, launched an insurgency called the Holy Spirit Movement in northern Uganda, and in 1988, Joseph Kony, took over at the head of what became the Lord's Resistance Army. A seventeen year long civil war between the LRA and the Ugandan army had devastating effects on the Acholi population in the north, with actual and structural violence once again arbitrating cultural production and meaning.

In order to correctly represent the extraordinary scope of Uganda's musical history, this review divided into four sections. The first section, *Global influences, the birth of a music industry and an FM revolution*, examines scholarly work on music in Uganda from the late eighties, through to the present day, located around discussions that include popular music and globalisation, socio-political change, identity, and the rise of the mass media. These studies clearly show how the consumption of media has informed contemporary popular music scenes, but do not engage with these relationships in significant critical depth. Nonetheless, they provide a valuable documentation of Uganda's musical and social life post 1986.

The second section, *Imagining the popular*, shows the emergence of popular musical forms, and the challenges inherent in categorising and mapping popular genres given the country's

tumultuous history. Here too, we find a relationship between media, in the form of cassette tapes, and in the movements of people, aspects which inform Uganda's current hip hop scene. Due to these movements, we can gauge that popular music in Uganda does not easily fit Beier's (1985) three-dimensional model of the traditional, the high/elite and the folk/popular alluded to previously. Studies on post-independent Uganda's music, including those on the popular and 'neo-traditional' (Kubik 1981), are similarly, largely descriptive, and have grappled with the challenges inherent in categorising and mapping popular genres given the country's tumultuous history.

The third section, *Investigating the traditional*, examines Uganda's rich and diverse musical heritage dating back to its colonial history, showing a vitality of musical traditions. Research at the time in the context of Uganda, positioned music as cultural study, and was therefore, rooted in anthropology. These texts provide a valuable repository of Uganda's musical traditions as the years that followed independence were marked by war, displacement and the loss of life and resultant damage to the practice of these musical traditions.

The fourth section, *Music as Message*, includes music in development and humanitarian initiatives in Uganda, in the form of applied ethnomusicology studies with particular emphasis on music in the context of development including initiatives around HIV/AIDS awareness and activism, and post-conflict reconstruction. Here, music has enabled the inclusion of those inhabiting spaces of social and economic paucity and subsequent fragility engendered by war, poverty and illness. The importance of these spaces to this study is to show what shapes and outlines contemporary concerns within the context of activism in hip hop.

### **Global influences, the birth of a music industry and an FM revolution: 1986 onwards**

1986 marked Yoweri Museveni's take-over and the promise of what he called a 'fundamental change'. This rhetoric captured the imagination of the population, and guerrilla fighters, turned liberators marked their victory with music. A song called *Omotoo Nawakaa* (Gunfire is ringing!), played on the only national TV and radio station as the battle for Kampala took place on 25<sup>th</sup> January 1986. Richard Ssewakiryanga & Joel Isabirye's, *'From war cacophonies to rhythms of peace': Popular cultural music in post-1986 Uganda* (2006) is a

lucid and evocative account of contemporary popular music in relation to politics in the country. It presents an insight into movements and actors in the musical scene that set the stage for the contemporary music industry. This is useful as it is a discussion on popular music in Uganda which finds critical mediation through issues such as massive political and social change and the start of a lucrative, if informal music industry, the latter continuing onwards to the present day. Noteworthy theoretical emphases in scholarship at this time are globalisation, economic liberalisation and the arrival of an urban elite and middle class, liberalisation of and subsequent growth of the Ugandan mediasphere, FM radio stations in particular, aspects which find interrogation the studies on hip hop in Africa discussed previously (Ntarangwi 2000, Charry 2013 *et al.*).

The new comparatively liberal political regime provided an unprecedented degree of freedom. Venues for live performance combined with the proliferation of recording studios, nightclubs and karaoke bars, as did a new culture of optimism and openness. In most instances at the time, well-known musicians owned recording studios, or deejayed at nightclubs and on radio stations, as well as promoted concerts and events, a trend that continues today too. Instances follow: former Afrigo Band and Big Five Band member, Tony Ssenko established the recording studio, Angel Sounds in 1989. Musician Peter Ssematimba set up a recording studio, Dungeon Studio, known for recording young vernacular talent, and staged music festivals and gigs. DJ Henry Rota of Rainbow Disco Sounds, who played at the Sheraton Hotel in Kampala, ran one of the first mobile discos in Uganda that experimented with overlaying *Kadongo Kamu* tracks with reggae. *Kadongo Kamu* is a uniquely Ugandan popular music form, which combines traditional elements with western influenced guitar styles. It owes its roots to *Kayanda* court music in the Baganda court, and I will discuss its emergence between the fifties and the eighties in a subsequent section.

*Kadongo Kamu* became popular at discotheques and nightclubs in Kampala during the 80's. Artists such Lord Fred Ssebatta, who still performs, added disco rhythms, inspired by chart hits in Europe and America. Ssewakiryanga and Isabirye (2006) credit Tony Ssenko, DJ Rota and Steve Jean as crucial toward the development of this new "disco-mix" sound. This synthesis created a form that younger audiences related to and enjoyed, influencing its popularity. The two genres of Band Music, with its call-and-response style, and *Kadongo Kamu*, with its story-telling or narrative style, underwent tremendous change in musical style, but also retained distinctive features, most outstanding of which are the textual style and

formal structure. After 1986, *Kadongo Kamu* artists cut professionally produced recordings for commercial distribution, allowing local acts to compete with western releases. A new ‘disco-mix’ improvised a new modern sound, mixing *Kadongo Kamu* with disco beats and was designed for an urban audience. Songs were shortened to a radio-friendly 3-to-5-minutes. This music is sometimes referred to as Ugandan Afro Beat (but bears no resemblance to Nigerian Afro Beat). Well-known artists are Jo Tabula and Lord Fred Ssebatta. Ssebatta still performs, and was one of the key artists to transform the genre into a disco-friendly phenomenon.

Such amalgamations continued through to the nineties; youth singing groups in urban high schools and at university staged music shows and covered the latest R&B and hip hop hits, inspired by MTV and the then, recently available MNET pay TV channel. One such musical ensemble, Muyenga Youths, named after a location in Kampala, were the foundation of a group called Perfect Generation, famous for the popular single *Kakookolo*, with lyrics drawn from traditional *Kiganda* folklore. Artists known for such amalgamations continue to win commercial success and garner critical favour today, the most noteworthy example of which is GNL Zamba, Uganda’s most successful hip hop artist, who I discuss in the chapters on branding and belonging. Other similar examples include Shanks Vivi Dee, originally a back-up singer for Big Five Band in Kampala, who cut Luganda songs in the ragga genre, and *Bundu*, a rap track based on traditional folklore, produced at Kasiwukiri Studio by Steve Jean.

At this time, what was by far the most significant milestone for the popular music industry was the liberalisation of radio. Music that used to be accessible only on expensive cassette tapes, was now available to anyone with a radio set, free of charge (Ssewakiryanga 1999). Sanyu FM opened in December 1993, and only played global hits, basing its identity in hip hop, R & B and dancehall. On 1<sup>st</sup> January 1994, Capital FM opened. Styled on western FM formats, these stations targeted the educated, urban elite. Presenters spoke English and personality cults developed around them. In 1996, Peter Ssematimba, a DJ at Capital Radio, went independent and set up Central Broadcasting Radio (popularly known as *Radio y’obujajja* or The Ancestors’ Radio). Central alludes to Kampala’s geographical location in the country, as well as the fact that the Buganda Kingdom was traditionally the fulcrum of power in Uganda. Unlike Sanyu and Capital, Central stocked music in local languages.

This meant that *Kadongo Kamu* performers got airtime and local language presenters were quickly in demand.

Finally, the city's nightlife created a vibrant space for audiences, performers, producers, promoters, DJ's and entrepreneurs, a trend which continues into the present in Kampala. Night clubs brought together a population that had at the time, been deeply divided along race and ethnic lines, such as the Asian community, in day to day life, creating a space where entertainment and music formed the basis of shared experience. This in turn suggests a creating of space where negotiations of identity and place occur through the consumption and production of popular music, where ideals and identities find representation through and in the media, most prominent at the time, being FM radio. Key figures include DJ Berry at Sheraton Kampala, DJ Charlie of the mobile Soul Disco and Charlie Lubega, promoter, occasional DJ, and owner of Ange Noir Discotheque (which still exists), with its 600-800 head capacity. Like in contemporary hip hop in Uganda, we can see how musicians in the past acted as brands in their own right, using their local celebrity to encompass enterprise and art in the form of events, studios and recordings.

In this space of change, both social and economic, karaoke nights also allowed audiences to act as performers and subjectively participate in and negotiate with identity, modernity and creativity in spaces such as Sabrina's Bar and Restaurant, owned by musician, Hope Mukasa, who also set up a recording studio to promote local music. Sabrina's remains a fixture in Kampala, and is considered one of the city's very first hip hop venues, and I will provide an ethnographic account of the space in contemporary hip hop later in this thesis. Karaoke provided a discursive space that redefined popular tastes and launched local stars such as Luther-'T'-Luboyera, Lillian Kyeyune, Juliana Kanyomozi of Prim n' Propa fame and Robert Ssegawa who continue to perform with commercial success.

Musically, these popular music amalgamations moved away from the traditional, raising questions on whether such formats were a dilution of an original form. Debates revolved around questions of representation and authenticity on the basis of this assimilation of the Western musical form within a Ugandan one. This hybridisation of music in Uganda is presented as an unequivocally positive development by Richard Ssewakiryanga (1999). Citing globalisation as a means towards agency amongst urban youth, the author discusses how cultural encounters arbitrated by African-American music shaped conceptions of



identity and the formation of a global consciousness as well as the tastes of a generation (Ssewakiryanga 2004). In many ways, this understanding serves as a precursor to the concerns of this thesis too, where we form our identities in engagement with wider consumer cultures, in the formation of a 'global self', adept in the curation of identified attributes and unrestricted by local, temporal circumstances (McCracken 2005).

These music scenes and the activities of participation encompassed by consumption and production therein were significant negotiations of extreme fragility. For many of these audiences and performers, was an immediate history of exile or hiding under the threat of extreme violence. These music scenes were not simply entertainment but also a means to create a world that permitted artistic freedom and experience, away from a troubled political history and ensuing social and economic rupture. Music afforded a space for personal identification and pleasure (McRobbie 1994), revealing strivings towards meaning and belonging. Kampala's nightlife and the musical and social life contained within, allowed individuals to mobilise and articulate past and present struggles through creative expression in an understanding of contemporary politics at the time (Ramnarine 2007).

The liberalisation of and subsequent growth of the Ugandan mediasphere, particularly FM now lent itself to the formation what Appadurai's defines as mediascape and ethnoscape (1990). Uganda saw the distribution of the electronic capabilities to produce and disseminate information, in a wider space where many people had now returned home to Uganda after decades of civil conflict. In this relative peace, even more were now in a process of negotiation with shifting conceptions of identity wrought by deterritorialisation as a result of war. In relation to the newly emerging music industry, Ssewakiryanga and Isabirye attribute these new mediascapes, such as those informed by FM radio for example, with an "aesthetic liberalisation" (2006:64), Nannyonga-Tamusuza (2006) takes a less sanguine approach to this nascent music industry. Her view is that radio stations played hits from US and UK charts, marginalising Ugandan musicians. Referring to power elites, she argues that DJ's functioned as arbitrators of taste on FM and at clubs, refusing to consider what listeners actually wanted to hear. This was an arbitration that was political, made so by the fact that most successful DJ's owned studios or were musicians themselves. In addition, artists had to pay stations to play their music and receive airtime, a situation which continues today, meaning that the majority of less established musicians struggled to afford to record music and then, broadcast their music on air.

The question of elites continues in the contemporary Ugandan music scene as a fairly recent investigation into the Pearl of Africa Music or PAM awards discusses the politics of competition and the construction of the popular viewed through the framework of hegemony (Asaasira 2012). This argument is based on the establishment of genres and artists arbitrated by notions of excellence. Such hierarchical segregations point to an exclusion of those genres and artists less known to audiences, and exclusion which extends into those which does not easily slot into one category or another. This is a situation made more complicated because categorisations are not easy due to intersections and juxtapositions of local genres, as well as in local adaptations of western popular music genres in Uganda (Nannyonga-Tamusuza 2006). Second, media platforms usually require less established musicians to pay for airtime, meaning that newer artists struggle to find a platform for release. Adaptations and juxtapositions have underlined popular music forms and continue to do so through to the present day, where in many cases we see dancehall artists guesting on hip hop tracks, and hip hop artists including aspects from the dancehall scene, including guest appearances from established stars to reach a wider audience.

However, awards such as Pearl of Africa have encouraged musicians to make more releases, and therefore, lent themselves to improvements in commercial music production. Awards such as these may also assist in the creation and maintenance of an inventory of popular music in Uganda over the years. This is a singularly important task. While the Centre for Basic Research (CBR) has established a collection of Ugandan popular music (Isabirye 2004), based on commercial recordings, radio broadcasts and coverage in the newspaper, the lack of institutionalised recording industries and murky copyright legislation in preceding decades, a situation which continues at the time of writing this thesis, hinders the creating and maintaining of comprehensive records.

This is a loss made more keen when one notes the historical emergence of popular forms in Uganda. Kubik refers to these as the emergence of ‘neo-traditional’ forms of music in 1945 (1981:87). These historically combined the old with the new in keeping with Karin Barber’s (1987) conception of popular arts in Africa, characterised by extensiveness and flexibility in musical form and practice, informed by the movements of musical forms and people, not unlike the hip hop scene in Uganda today. However, unlike the present day, where new media and the internet provide emerging talent with platforms of creative expression and consolidation and repositories for their work, the decades from the 1950s through to the

1980s saw conflict and a subsequent loss of life and livelihood for many that constituted Uganda's populace. At the same time, was a difficulty in categorisation and capturing of these new music forms meaning that accounts and recordings of these times were lost. Against this backdrop, in the next section, I provide an account of the beginnings of Uganda's popular music scenes and traditions.

### **Imagining the popular: 1950s – 1980s**

Discussions on the beginnings of popular music in Uganda start with the analysis of what Kubik refers to as the emergence of 'neo-traditional' forms of music in 1945 (1981:87). These forms are also located at the start of discussions on the nature of popular music in the country, and largely, focus on musical forms that evolved from the traditional, from the time frame of the fifties until the eighties when Yoweri Museveni came to power.

Here too, we find themes such as globalisation, liberalisation and the role of media such as recording technology and resultant mobility of musical forms, in the form of cassette tapes. The development of various 'new' musical genres ran parallel with an evolving social consciousness that culminated in independence and a novel sense of national identity; they occupy spaces that include both the folk and the popular. In the Western model, the birth of popular culture comes after the industrial revolution, replacing rural folk-culture "with high literary and artistic traditions of the post-revolution Europe". No such trajectory can be attributed to the popular arts in Africa, therefore it is neither "wholly 'traditional'", nor "'elite' or 'modern'" (Barber 1997).

This crucial tension is best exemplified by the tendency to define popular culture by what it is not, as is done in Ulli Beier's three-dimensional model (1985), where traditional art is fixed and community driven; high art is for the trained, and therefore the elite, and popular art is carefree, irreverent and not burdened by metaphysical speculation.

In the consideration of the beginnings of Uganda's contemporary popular music traditions in relation to such definitions, Kubik apprehends this tension quite simply by suggesting that musical forms which arose in this connection were 'popular' in the sense that they were appreciated by broad sections of society (1981). This view is echoed by musician, Juliet

Ssesanga of the Big Five musical group, in an interview, that popular music is “music appreciated by many people” (1998, quoted in Nannyonga-Tamusuza 2006:37).

However, the problem of contextualising the popular is not purely epistemological, as music in post-independence Uganda suffered as a direct effect of state sanctioned terror, meaning that musicians and audiences lacked means and venues. Musical texts were censored and artists were persecuted. An example of this is the case of pop idol Jimmy Katumba, who sang with his band the Ebonies in the 1980s. Severely beaten by Obote’s security people, the singer fled to the United States.

The breakdown of infrastructure that came with political turmoil meant that very little by way of documentation, cataloguing and archiving of musical texts, genres and recordings occurred. Significant music from the sixties through to the eighties, was lost as the state-owned Radio Uganda was unable to sustain a sound archive, as it had no air-conditioning or even tapes. This was the precise situation I encountered at a radio station in Western Uganda, where I conducted field research on my MA dissertation on conflict reportage in fragile sites. Here, recordings of reports were apparently lost or vanished when the station moved to another building.

Returning to Radio Uganda, tapes were erased and reused as a matter of course. The political culture of fear meant that artists kept their works in private collections and opted to stage live performances of which no records were kept (Breitinger 1999). This strategy kept the State Research Bureau at bay as popular music archives exist mostly in personal collections of individuals and a few private organisations (Nannyonga-Tamusuza 2006). These difficulties were not helped by overlaps and crossovers in musical styles, which significantly hindered subsequent categorising of specific genres (*ibid.*). It is perhaps for this reason, that academic writings on popular music in Uganda that focus on this time frame similarly lean more towards the descriptive rather than the analytical.

Nevertheless, in post-independence Uganda, musical migrations and ingenuity in the face of hostile socio-political circumstances fostered a hybridisation of African and Western, traditional and modern, as shown in Kubik’s understandings of the ‘neo-traditional’ (1981), with results that were both unique and derivative. This analysis of Uganda’s popular music is

reflected in discussions on first, the uniquely Ugandan music called *Kadongo Kamu*, which has roots in *Kayanda* court music in the Baganda court, and second, what came to be called ‘band music’ in Uganda. Colonial church music is a significant influence on both these forms. Joseph Kyagambiddwa, was regarded as “the pioneer of African church music in East Africa” (Kubik 1981:84), and he published a significant work on the traditional music of Baganda, *African Music from the Source of the Nile*. Simply understood, church music, brought in by colonisers and missionaries, was amongst the first to use compositions with texts in local languages in combination with indigenous instruments coupled with pianos, guitars, western drums and brass instruments and European harmonies. What this created was a community driven musical space that existed in both urban and rural spaces, which was both original and familiar, a situation which I encountered through my father’s work, where he revived a Jazz band at a tea estate he oversaw.

The uniquely Ugandan musical production, *Kadongo Kamu* was equally influenced by Western instrumentation and African styles, and is an adaptation of modern and traditional forms. The phrase *Kadongo Kamu*, literally means ‘one little guitar’, and the style makes use of the indigenous bowl lyre and the one-string guitar. The style dates back to the early fifties, and like Band music in Uganda, which I will discuss subsequently, it owes its development to a combination of authority sanctioned approval, which was in this case, the Baganda court, and diverse cultural musical influences. *Kadongo Kamu*’s precursor, *Kayanda* also originated in the Baganda court, and was performed with solo voices, three electric guitars including lead, rhythm, and bass, and keyboard, with each of these instruments replicating traditional instruments, namely, the *ndongo* or lyre, the *ngoma* or drums, and the *madinda* or log xylophone, adapting the distinctive *baakisimba* drum rhythms on the bass guitar. *Baakisimba* is a musical tradition unique to the Baganda, and is a music and dance genre, as well as a name for a drum set. Here too, in terms of influences, Peter Cooke (1998) reports how, by the sixties, the Kabaka, had established his own Western-style military band, while traditional music was mainly performed at special court ceremonies. Musicians, Dan Mugula and Matiya Luyima. Luyima (2000, quoted in Nannyonga-Tamusuza 2006:47) say: “*Kadongo Kamu* did not originate from within, it came from Kenya and was brought by the Jalu who worked on the Uganda Railway. When we copied it from them, we changed it and made it our own.”

However, unlike band music, which was essentially dance music, *Kadongo Kamu*’s most

distinctive attribute is its lyricality. Songs involve long and complex narratives which are lent further depth by the nature of the Luganda language in which it is performed, aspects which inform the local hip hop genre, *LugaFlow*. Known for word-play, metaphors and double meanings, traditionally, these songs use these qualities as well as storytelling, wit and ribald humour to present their subject to audiences. On account of these lyrical qualities and the capacity for wordplay inherent to the genre, scholarly work has explored questions of identity, particularly in relation to the cultural in relation to the national, given that *Kadongo Kamu* bears close ties with Baganda (Nannyonga-Tamusuza 2006). Specific aspects include how the genre focuses on identity formation in a new and diversified society, as a means of expression, and as a representation of values and meanings. A second aspect closely scrutinised is that of gender and power relations between the sexes (*Ibid.*, Ssewakiryanga and Isabirye 2006). This is in part due to the gendered nature of traditional performance *Kadongo Kamu* has its roots in, particularly in *Baakisimba* performance (Nannyonga- Tamusuza 2003, 2005). These studies have contributed to both ethnomusicology and ethnochoreology through the integrative analysis of music and dance, and has added to comprehensions of music, dance, and gender in Buganda, and elsewhere in Africa.

Gendered analysis also brings politics into focus, in the sense that during Amin's rule, artists were heavily censored, and any song remotely seen as critical of the state was banned and its performers prosecuted. As a result of this persecution, most songs of this genre dealt with love and domestic matters, and therefore, with gender relations. However, various levels of meanings meant that musicians, such as Chris Ssebadduka, a well-known proponent of the genre in the seventies, using themes of love and relationships as metaphors for political issues, in a manner was a veiled critique of the state (Ssewakiryanga and Isabirye 2006). An example of this is *Okuzaala Lumbe* (Giving Birth is a Problem). He talks about how the process of giving birth is fraught with danger for women. He advises the menfolk not to celebrate when their wives are pregnant, but only at dawn when they have given birth. Ssewakiryanga and Isabirye (2006:56) argue that people read this as strong critique of Idi Amin and his attempts at statebuilding. They go on to say, "Ugandans had celebrated when Amin took over state power in 1971, but it was clear that there were many problems to which Ssebadduka referred, in his veiled language, as the sicknesses of a pregnant woman" (*ibid.*).

Here, the framework of theatrical performance in Uganda included popular forms of music as an integral feature. Theatre, through a semiotic construction of meaning and through farce,

served as a political commentary in the face of repression (Mbowa 1996, Breitinger 1999). An example of this, amongst several others, is Luganda dramatist Wycliffe Kiyingi's 1961 radio drama series *Wokulira* (By the Time You Grow Up You Have Experienced Amazing Things), which alluded to Obote's unconstitutional activities. The result was the immediate arrest of his cast and banning of the play. A form that deserves mention briefly at this point is *Katamba*. A traditional popular performance genre, also rooted in the Baganda court, this musical form is largely theatrical in nature. *Katamba* continues to inform the contemporary entertainment industry in its amalgamation of musical and theatrical performance. Richard Ssewakiryanga and Joel Isabirye argue that like Band Music and *Kadongo Kamu*, *Katamba*, has changed in character, form and content, retaining some elements of the traditional yet responding to new forms of entertainment

In conjunction, the rise of state sanctioned and sponsored music and dance events saw ensembles such as *Heartbeat of Africa* and military Jazz bands. While each focused on national identity, the former did so by putting together a selection of traditional musics, which were however, adapted for the viewing and listening pleasures of foreign audiences. The latter was a crucial means by which cultural forms in support of the ideology of nationalism were promoted, by constructing so-called 'national' genres. Amin, called on Ugandans to disavow any form of relationship with "British imperialists and Zionist Israelis" (Ssewakiryanga & Isabirye 2006:37), and during his regime, established military bands in all barracks. Amongst these were accomplished ensembles such as Malire Jazz Band and Simba Battalion Jazz Band. Members later became popular fixtures in the musical scene in Kampala, instances of which include Moses Matovu, of the famous Afrigo Band, who came from the President's jazz band, and the well-known performer, Tony Ssenkebejje, who had an association with military jazz bands.

Clearly, these Ugandan musicians and performers of what later came to be called 'band music', had their roots in the military band tradition, but were also, with the import of records in the fifties, significantly influenced by the new guitar music coming out of Zaire, such as that of Mwenda Jean Bosco and Losta Abelo. The earliest forms of this genre drew inspiration from Cuban rumba music, seen as it was as a non-Western music, Marxist and therefore non-imperialist. In Uganda, and in east Africa, each country adapted this form to create its own unmistakable stylistic identity.

This is important, as in the current day, Zairean Afrojazz is considered to be one of the most influential forms of popular music in modern Africa in its proliferation in the continent. The Congolese style revolutionised guitar-playing techniques. After independence in 1960, Zaire saw superstars such as Franco and his group OK Jazz, Rochereau Tabu, Jean Bokelo and others, come into their own and the electric guitar became increasingly prominent (Kubik 1964). This intra-African music movement was facilitated in the establishment of the mass media, Radio Uganda (in 1954) and later Uganda Television (in 1963). This mass media reached a wide audience and Latin American and Caribbean music was also made accessible to Ugandan musicians for the first time.

The emergence of popular music genres in Uganda showed an intra-African view informed by an awareness of global or ‘western’ forms through the media, not dissimilar to how hip hop is used as space for belonging as I show later in this thesis. This continental focus continues today with Ugandan musicians looking within the continent for inspiration and commercial success. A compelling case today is contemporary Nigerian Afrobeat which dominates the popular musical landscape in Africa, in the terms of commercial success, as a whole. In sound, it has a distinct character, and will discuss this in relation to contemporary hip hop in Uganda in the chapter on branding.

In the sixties however, this new popular music was denigrated at the time by institutionalised musical instruction, and rejected as cheap, banal and as imitative of American pop music (Kubik 1964). However, the dissemination of these new popular music forms through records and broadcasts set the stage for a generation of young musicians who reinterpreted them through their traditional musical heritage. These influences are acknowledged by Bukonya (2004), a member of Bbuye Kigoowa Galimasane (BKG) 49 Jazz Band. He explains in an interview, how ‘band music’ is essentially dance music that encompasses aspects of a number of foreign genres, both African and Western; rumba, quickstep, bossanova, country, slow waltz, samba, highlife, tango, conga, polka and jazz are set off by a variety of instruments, including the harp, double bass, accordion, trumpets and drums.

In conclusion, thus, based on this scholarship, it is correct to see popular musical practice and performance in Uganda as inventive and syncretic. Because of this, the three-dimensional model of the traditional, the high/elite and the folk/popular discussed earlier cannot adequately categorise these developments. Furthermore, these musical genres, whether



traditional, folk or popular can neither be easily categorised as fixed and elite, or carefree and irreverent, challenging epistemological attempts at fixing genre. Nonetheless, the amalgamations of these qualities could not have taken form without a foundation of an extensive traditional musical heritage, which I explore in the following section.

### **Investigating the traditional**

Significant research took place in the fifties and sixties on traditional forms of music in Uganda. The Uganda protectorate was unequivocally accorded high praise by ethnomusicologists, equally for the alive” (Kubik 1968:59). This view was mirrored by John Blacking, who visited many parts of Uganda, and was similarly struck by the vitality of musical traditions (1965).

Research at the time in the context of Uganda, positioned music as cultural study, and was therefore, rooted in anthropology. Nketia's *Music of Africa* (1974), provides a view of academic tradition of the times, showing the study of African music placed in a cultural, more than a musical, study. This method followed Merriam's theoretical and methodological axis (1960, 1977), wherein the foundation for the analysis of music was in its in function, use as well as instrument types and song text. Scholars therefore focused largely on performance and sociocultural aspects of music, its laws and conventions studied, but always in relation to the peoples who imbued the musical form with meaning. The method relied on first-hand interactions with musicians. This approach was comparative, with scholars drawing parallels between non-western musics, and was not from the standpoint and science of musicology.

Several anthropological and theoretical studies provide clear examples of Uganda's rich and varied musical heritage. One of the most prolific scholars was Klaus P. Wachsmann, with *An Approach to African Music* published in 1936. Other works that focus on tribal performing arts and folk musical cultures unique to Uganda (Wachsmann 1954, 1956, Trowell and Wachsmann 1957). The Baganda kingdom received much attention, particularly with respect to musical forms and traditions in the royal court and ceremonial practices associated with and located in it (Anderson 1968, Kafumbe 2006). This interest was not surprising as the king, Kabaka Muteesa II was a great patron of music, and the number of musicians at the court signified both power and wealth. The coronation event saw over 220 drummers, and a

band of trumpeteers and 74 praise drummers preceded the Kabaka at public processions. This court ensemble was possibly the largest in the world, as seven groups of musicians, adept at various kinds of instruments such as the lyre, flute, drum, harp and xylophone, lived within the palace walls that performed at various times of each day (Cooke 1996). Studies focused on instruments and ensembles, like the *Entenga* drum (Anderson 1976), the xylophone (Kubik 1964, Anderson 1968) and the drum chime (Wachsmann 1965). Numerous studies continue to examine the *Kiganda* style of music (Wachsmann 1971, Gray 1992, Nannyonga-Tamusuza 2002, 2005), which influenced the development of *Kadongo Kamu*, the uniquely Ugandan popular genre discussed previously.

Studies focused on instruments and regions, particularly such as those on the *Kiganda* Xylophone, known as *Entaala* or *Amadinda*, in Southern Uganda (Kubik 1964), the largest of its kind and quite unlike any other in East Africa (Anderson 1968). The distinctive transverse flute or *Ludaya*, played in Gisu in Eastern Uganda received attention (Cooke 1971). Elsewhere in East Africa transverse flutes - presumably of Arab origin - are played only among coastal tribes in Kenya and possibly among the Pogoro of East Central Tanzania (Wachsmann 1953). The music of the kingdom of Ankole was explored; this included identifying instruments such as the trough zither (*Enanga*) and a bamboo flute (*Omubanda*), rattles of various kinds and the remarkable use of the water pot (*Nyungu*) used a rhythmic accompaniment, as well as documenting ceremonial musical practice and tradition in the court, in particular the use of the sacred drum (Thiel 1966, 1967).

It is important to note that scholarly studies on musical practices of ethnic groups within the Uganda protectorate indicate and reveal varied cultural identities and practices which became politicised post-independence. A key example of this occurred in 1966, when Milton Obote attacked the Baganda court, the traditional stronghold of political and economic power in colonial times. Troops, under orders from Idi Amin, destroyed the palace and burnt ceremonial drums and other court instruments. The elite royal musicians fled, and musical practices were left in disarray. The *Kabaka* or king, went into exile in Britain where he remained until he died (Kafumbe 2006, Cooke 1996, Nannyonga-Tamusuza 2002).

In 1967, all kingdoms were abolished, including the Bunyoro-Kitara, Toro and Ankole courts. What this effectively did, in the case of the Bunyoro for example, was that traditional music and dance could not be performed, as these performances were beholden to ceremony

and ritual in the court (Mbiti 1975, Aning 1973). Without the royal mandate these performances ceased in villages as well, and in the 27 years that followed, these musical skills and knowledge failed to be passed on to a younger generation of musicians and performers (Kahunde 2012).

Such research, including that which positions music as cultural study, and is therefore, rooted in anthropology, fostered the preservation of these musical traditions through the cataloguing of musical forms, song texts and of instruments. For instance, Wachsmann, as curator of the Uganda Museum at Kampala, reported in 1953, “the museum contains a representation of artefacts from practically every tribe in the Protectorate” (Trowel & Wachsmann 1953:i, *cf.* Nannyonga-Tamusuza 2006). A few years earlier, in a report published by the African Music Society in 1949, describes an exhibition of Ugandan instruments in Nairobi, Kenya curated by Wachsmann in this capacity, as outstanding. The event featured demonstrations by practitioners, and displayed instruments that were characteristic of the Uganda, including the Kiganda Xylophone or *Entaala* or *Amadinda*, the Bowl-lyre or *Endongo*, and the Bow-harp or *Enanga*.

Wachsmann’s recordings on royal music and dance of Bunyoro-Kitara were crucial towards constructing a revival of sorts (Kahunde 2012). The importance of these recordings cannot be overstated as they serve as repositories of cultural knowledge. They inform recent efforts in ‘sound repatriation’, which see music as means by which this knowledge is returned to communities of origin, done through accessible audio formats, such as MP3 files (Nannyonga-Tamusuza and Weintraub 2012). This is crucial seen from the perspective of the cataclysmic disruption that marked the decades following independence. For example, tape copies of Wachsmann’s recordings from the sixties, originally stored at the British Institute of Recorded Sound, (integrated into the British Library in 1983, and later renamed the British Library Sound Archive), were sent to the Uganda Museum in Kampala at that time. However, the Museum lacked equipment to play these. The lack of means to preserve these thereafter rendered the sound indecipherable due to neglect and wear, a situation that was only rectified in 2009 when MP3 copies were presented to Makerere University (Nannyonga-Tamusuza and Weintraub 2009).

There are several criticisms of an approach that views the presentation of music in anthropological terms, notably that it is processed as a cultural artefact and understood as a

cultural phenomenon, rather than a lived, historical musical process, resulting in an unequal understanding of both the music and the life around it (Kidula 2006). In response, I would argue that given Uganda's complex socio-political relationship with its musical forms, both understandings are of value towards understanding contemporary social formations and how these continue to influence popular forms today. Research on traditional music, because of its anthropological bent continues to provide scholars like myself with an informative background on the exceptional nature of Uganda's instrumentation and rich historicity of musical traditions and social life practiced therein. A large part of these traditions have been lost due to decades of conflict. These efforts at cataloguing, archiving, recording and preserving this plenitude of traditional musical cultures gain significance when seen from the perspective of the upheaval and violence, and subsequently, the terrible ruptures and traumas that the people of Uganda and their art forms suffered, in the years that followed independence in 1962.

These studies also provided a much needed alternative discourse to colonial notions of cultural and racial superiority, crudely exemplified in J. M. Duncan's report "*Bach in Baganda-Land: An Impression of the Uganda Jubilee*" published in 1929, which states "it has for some time been realised by students of African problems, that the black races possess a definite aptitude for musical aptitude. Naturally, this attitude is most highly developed where the natives have longest experienced the stimulus of European education" (924). Nonetheless, the post-colonial critique which argues that such scholarly approaches display a fascination with the 'traditional', and in doing so subjugate studies on African arts to dominant Western discourses (Hountondji 1983, Mudimbe 1988) is appropriate. The focus on the 'otherness' of traditional music, was a fetishisation of difference, which in turn alienated the student and practitioner; it created an ambivalence within Africa to the arts and music of the continent (Agawu 2003). This view is mirrored by Baganda court musician, Peter Ssempaka, who collaborated with Peter Cooke on many occasions, who says the Uganda Museum houses musicians who perform live "music which was performed by our great grandparents" (Ssempeke 1999, quoted by Nannyonga-Tamusuza 2006:37). Finally, the emphasis on the traditional, in part as a representation and revival of national identity, particularly in the time following independence in 1962, neglected popular forms of music (Nannyonga-Tamusuza 2006). This meant that widely heard forms of music failed to be recognised by institutions, academia and archivists (Agawu 2003).

To conclude, history shows Waschmann's assertion in 1956, that Uganda was inhabited by a population of many nationalities but united politically and economically, to be a false understanding of Uganda's complex post-colonial legacy, in spite of the optimism of initiatives such as Heart Beat of Africa. Here, a troupe of dancers and musicians represented the cultures of various ethnic groups in Uganda and performed at location around the world. Heartbeat won international acclaim at Expo'67, after celebrated performances in Cairo, the 1965 Commonwealth Art Festival in Britain and in Greece and Yugoslavia. The troupe received support from the Ministry of Information, Broadcasting and Tourism, Makerere University and indeed, the office of the President, Milton Obote, and was meant to represent national pride and unity in a newly independent African country, and show the world that a renaissance of African culture was underway (Hanna and Hanna 1968). Sadly, this display was not a lasting sign of cohesive national identity. Instead, seen from the perspective of the turmoil that marked the decades that followed, it was an ersatz construction of national solidarity, which failed to safeguard the various peoples, their traditions and cultures in post-independence Uganda.

In the case of Uganda, Franz Fanon's "dying colonialism" (1965), showed itself in a celebration of cultural tradition derided and condescended to by colonialists, while simultaneously revealing the fragility of its newly independent state structures, which soon fell apart, arguably damaging the sanctity and preservation of these self-same traditions through violent civil war and terrible loss of life that dragged on for decades after.

Given these circumstances, scholarly research of the time serves as a vital reminder of cultural and musical heritage. Along with this, is the ability of musical traditions recounted here to create a space for the inclusion of narratives in dialogue with political, social and economic issues. This is a capability which bring us back to the 21<sup>st</sup> century in this review. The next section discusses music as message. This is an important aspect as it explicates the concerns that outlie discourses of activism in Uganda's contemporary hip hop scene.

### **Music as message in the 21<sup>st</sup> century**

The HIV/AIDS epidemic in Uganda is a crucial starting point of a review on music and activism, an aspect that has engendered an outlying social and economic fragility in

contemporary Uganda, in the loss of life and livelihood.

The late Philly Bongoley Lutaaya, a renowned Ugandan musician is remembered for a public declaration of his HIV positive status at the time when the disease was treated with animosity and fear, and the campaign he undertook was to raise awareness about the disease and associated prejudice. His legacy, as an accomplished and much loved musician, central to the revival of Ugandan popular music in the post-civil war era (Isabirye 2008), provided a platform for an HIV/AIDS awareness campaign with the Swedish and Ugandan Red Cross at a time when the illness was shrouded in stigma and prejudice. His music and the documentaries he made helped shape perceptions of the disease, provided information on prevention and mostly crucially, helped fight stigmatisation, which was the greatest hindrance towards managing this epidemic. He died of the disease in 1989. Subsequently, a government-adopted policy on safe sexual behaviour was advocated in Uganda throughout the 1990s, with success in so far as at the time, the incidence of new HIV infections amongst the populace showed a decline.

Gregory Barz in *Singing for Life: HIV/AIDS and Music in Uganda* (2006), a study at the forefront of applied ethnomusicology at the time, describes in sensitive and lucid detail, research on local efforts, strategies and interventions with regard to HIV/AIDS in Uganda. This influential work grounds itself with information and statistics on the epidemic within a specific timeframe, and uses extensive quotations of songs as well as interviews with practitioners, activists and those affected by the virus and its societal impact. It imparts an urgency towards first, providing knowledge to those at risk; second, informing non-governmental organisations about the positive contribution music can make to the lives of those infected, and finally, to make known to the world the human faces and voices of Uganda's HIV/AIDS epidemic. The central treatise of this work is that music works as a means of communication, about a disease that has no cure, and against which, prevention is the only means of protection. Music can educate, and so, protects the audience from HIV. Issues dealt with, include the ethics of representing those living with HIV/AIDS; "living positively" with the disease; and the situation of music in discourses on HIV/AIDS. Focusing on women and youth, he discusses strategies and performances in the fight against the epidemic. On faith, he addresses the misconception of the disease as retribution for sin while also acknowledging community support from the church through musical performance. Most vitally, Barz talks about the loss of collective memory that comes from a generation lost to

the disease. 'Re-memorying' becomes a process through which music and performance can create a sense of continuity to mitigate this tragic loss of life, and eventually, help toward community regeneration.

Criticisms include the subordination of musical form to language, and the difficulty in quantifying and manifesting sustained behaviour change over a period of time. The focus on subjective voices over that of contextualisation and discussion, means that the study can be fragmented and unstructured, limiting the empirical and theoretical grounding of arguments (Stige 2008). However, this work manages to present the human cost of the epidemic, while firmly grounding musical performance within the framework of transactional communication. The consequences of this human cost we find in Chapter 6 on belonging, where, along with problems such as drug abuse and unemployment, youth in Uganda have also had to tackle the loss of loved ones and resultant livelihoods.

In a similar relation to applied ethnomusicology, Theatre for Development (TfD) has received attention in Uganda. The country has a historical tradition of political and social engagement through theatre in which music functions as an integral feature of theatrical performance. In the past two decades particularly, TfD makes extensive use of local songs and dances performed within, or as an adjunct to, community dramas devised for the purpose of exploring development issues in the context of these specific communities and the problems within them. Song and dance, introduced at the beginning and end of performances, provide background, attraction and entertainment around messages of social change, an aspect I observed during my field research at an event organised by an international NGO in Kampala on gender and violence.

The actual efficacy of such events and initiatives is contentious, particularly in the context of sustained behaviour change. It is however, correct to say that TfD has been particularly relevant in northern Uganda. Here, it was set against a backdrop of the devastating 17-year-long war that left some 400,000 people living in camps, the largest population of internally displaced people in the world (Finnström 2008 *et al.*). The civilian cost was exacerbated by dependency on food relief, human rights abuses committed with impunity by both army and rebels, and state services such as schools, security, roads, health neglected to the point of non-existence. This has been described as the cultural genocide of the Acholi.

Organised TfD projects on post conflict rehabilitation in many ways enabled a subjective articulation of lived experience embedded in cultural performance, providing an invaluable documentation of voices and narratives that would have been lost.

Significant examples of this include Judy El-Bushra & Chris Dolan's review *Don't Touch, Just Listen!, on popular performance in northern Uganda* (2007). It explores how 'indigenous performance forms' mobilise popular enthusiasm, serve as a people's history and reflect their world view. It goes on to identify how external actors, including governments, activists and NGO's use these popular forms of expression in the service of their agendas. Examples of popular performance draw on older traditions of songs and proverbs, and radio dramas to address the 'modern' life in displaced camps. These explore HIV/AIDS education and awareness, as well as counselling and support towards surviving individual and societal trauma that included displacement and extreme violence. Acholi youth use *lukeme* performance, a traditional outlet for dissent, to create cultural narratives through lyrics. In a performance in July 2001, for example, subjects included the hopelessness of life in displaced camps, the moral decline of Acholi society in the camps, the failure of the LRA rebels under Joseph Kony to accept the Government's amnesty, and delight in the election of a popular MP whose campaign had been marred by violent provocation from his opponent.

Tania Kaiser in *Songs, Discos and Dancing in Kiryandongo, Uganda* (2006), discusses, in an anthropological study of musical and dance forms in the Kiryandongo Refugee Settlement, how these are employed to express and negotiate identity, social transformation and political turmoil in ways that are active, dynamic and contribute to the creation of new social relations and norms. This is done through song lyrics that comment on the conflict, displacement and insecurity; dancing lends insight into the changing gender roles and social relations. Spaces of personal enjoyment such as discos in these camps are also those within which inter-generational conflict and inter-ethnic relations are find articulation and enactment. Both studies show how in the context of conflict, insecurity and displacement, musical performance creates a space where personal narratives and experiences are expressed and cultural identity negotiated, asserted and explored, in relation to political and social upheaval and issues.



In a similar fashion, more recent explorations on traditional forms using participant observation found several impressive groups that played the large *Embaire* xylophone in the eastern regions of Bugwere and Busoga, together with several drums, shakers, panpipes and a tube fiddle, accompanied by dancers. Larger instruments, with 20 or 21 keys, performed by as many as six players were found to exist (Micklem, Cooke & Stone 1999). The Lango people, in the north, of the Luo tribe, received attention (Cooke 1998), namely on account of the ensemble playing of lamellaphones in groups of up to 20 instruments, in combination with a type of bow harp. Later, of note in combining the traditional with the modern is the musician Fabiano from northern Uganda (Phonogram Archive, Vienna, recorded by Kubik in 1961), who plays 'guitar style' on the *lukeme* (lamellophone). In recent times, the people and the region suffered both because of the recent civil war and the depredations of Karimojong cattle rustlers. A study on the Lango people, in the north (Cooke 1998), is interesting in that these traditional instruments appear in popular musical groups that play at contemporary 'beer parties' in the region, and are similarly musically influenced by popular Congolese guitar music, while retaining their own particular characteristics. Lyrically, *lukeme* musical texts in Acholi addressed subjects that dealt with the war, such as one about Joseph Kony, child abduction and the plight of refugees (El-Bushra & Chris Dolan 2007), in response to similar issues TfD initiatives described earlier tackled.

On the issues alluded to previously, first, on the efficacy of musical initiatives such as those described within the applied ethnomusicology in the development context remit, first is that, 'indigenous' forms might appear attractive from the perspective of development as they seem to convey an authenticity of social experience and musical form.

These however, are urged and abetted, at the same time by outsiders who may not fully comprehend the exact nature and depth of these forms, which is a challenge in terms of measuring the success of such initiatives. Nonetheless, musical performance can represent "a subaltern view of change, a set of 'messages'...to an audience of peers using a familiar idiom in the hope of influencing change" (El-Bushra and Dolan 2007:47), an aspect which I observed being attempted at the event alluded to in a preceding chapter, which provided a hip hop performance amongst others that used theatre and dance to address issues of gender inequity.

In response to these issues, the musical initiatives discussed here comprise of performances which originate and operate in an autonomous space which performers, individual and collective, define and present their own 'message'. The ability to create this autonomous space brings with it the potentiality for community mobilisation and the inclusion of individual narratives in and through shared experiences. This an assertion that this study on hip hop supports and shares first, in the development of a cogent methodology in the field and subsequently, as a critical means by which individuals articulate and enact forms of belonging in relation to the structures of inequity one encounters in Uganda takes place.

Based on these capabilities, it is correct to say that contemporary hip hop in Uganda brings with it the conveyance and consolidation of contemporary cultural meaning (Reuster-Jahn 2007, 2008), making it a critical medium of social empowerment that has enabled a sense of inclusion and community (Perullo 2005).

In conclusion, I provide instances from the dancehall scene in Uganda which provide critique of socio-economic and political issues in mainstream popular spheres. I include these here as while dancehall is the dominant commercial genre, individuals active in the hip hop scene, as rappers, producers and music video directors for example, have worked with those situated in the dancehall scene as well. Second, both genres share common concerns in the terms of commercial success in Uganda's disorganised musical industry described in the introduction, and finally, in the wider social and economic issues that outlie and inform the popular music scene in Uganda, discussed in this thesis, from the perspectives of excess and activism.

From this perspective, notable is the song *Kiwaani*, by Bobi Wine, who as stated earlier has been elected to government office by popular vote. Released in 2007, it came to represent an indictment of widespread corruption in the government. The word itself means 'fake', and has come into use as popular word to describe something that is fraudulent or suspicious. Shot in a Kampala street, the video shows the singer as a sort of everyman, albeit in a Rastafarian hat, who appears to reflect and project the concerns of his audience, as they nod and dance to the lyrics in lively participation. Through humour and farce, the tableaux in this video show mockery and distrust of individuals, who are obviously 'faking it'. The fact that the title of the song came to be used in common parlance thereafter, ensured that the song entered the zeitgeist of the times. It clearly captured a widely-held concern of the Ugandan people, that of corruption and a lack of accountability from the state. Jorg Weingratz, cites

this song in his paper, “*Fake capitalism? The dynamics of neoliberal moral restructuring and pseudo-development: the case of Uganda*” (2010), to show how destructive norms and malpractice in Ugandan society and economy, invoked amongst the public, a sense of ‘moral degeneration’, ‘moral decay’, ‘moral decadence’, a ‘rotten society’, and ‘fake’. A huge hit, the track went on to win the 2007 Pearl of Africa Music award for the best Afrobeat single.

Another high profile song was banned on grounds of slander for a time by the Uganda Communication Commission<sup>11</sup>, or rather, the ‘mis-Communication’ Commission according to Mr. Wine. The song, *Tugambire ku Jennifer* (please talk to Jennifer), criticizes Mayor of Kampala, Jennifer Musisi's policies. These include forced evictions of slum dwellers and the curtailing the activities of street hawkers on the ground of health and safety issues. Wine argues in the song that such measures will only make the situation worse, as they will displace people who are just barely surviving as it is. Children who supplement their families’ earnings through petty businesses in order to pay for school fees will be compelled to join a life of crime.

These are similar concerns to those articulated by young hip hop practitioners who speak from their own experience in the chapter on belonging, showing us the hardships that ordinary people face in Uganda. Second, I include these instances here to indicate the concerns of excess and activism that outlie the hip hop scene.

In the case of Bobi Wine, there may appear to be an obvious contrast between singing songs on behalf so to speak, of the poorest sections of society and his own fairly lavish lifestyle. However, his appeal lies in the story of his rise to fame. He grew up as Robert Ssentamu Kyagulanyi in the Kamocha slum in Kampala. In his own words, in an interview in November 2012, he was raised by a single mother who struggled to make 2 dollars a day. He sold drinking water in the streets in order to pay for his school fees, and eventually graduated from university with a bachelor’s degree he did exceptionally well in before rising to the upper echelons of the music business, a success that has positively influenced his political win in Kampala too.

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<sup>11</sup> <https://www.theguardian.com/media/greenslade/2012/sep/26/freedom-of-speech-uganda>, The Guardian, 26.9.2012

Nevertheless, Bobi Wine's musical and social narratives points towards a larger alienation that is both an indictment of the state's inability to provide for its subjects as well as of social and economic struggle engendered by global inequalities. The hip hop scene I will discuss acts in apprehension to these fragilities as well. Issues of social and economic development form the focus of musical and social life, showing how tendencies towards excess and activism, in musical cultures and in social life, go hand in hand in spaces of structural paucity, such as those described in these musical texts.

In sum, Uganda's historical legacy has had an influence on how music is played, performed and experienced in Uganda. The historicity of its musical tradition has a plenitude of depth and variety, as shown in studies based on region and musical practice. The development of recent indigenous forms such as *Kandongo Kamu* and Band music in the fifties, sixties and seventies, points to adept amalgamation of the traditional, folk and popular, while recent explorations show a vibrancy in the appreciation and practice of the popular music genre. Through a plenitude of relationships such as court traditions, state patronage and persecution, the development of popular forms has borne testament to social and political change in Uganda, showing it to be a site for contemporary participation.

Hip hop in Uganda, like the popular musical forms I have discussed, in certain ways and in varied capacities, grapples with social, economic and political issues, creating a space for participation amongst the populace where previously none existed. The analysis of Uganda's music provides an understanding of the specific contexts and ways in which musical performances are created and consumed, and how communities and individuals find new meanings and connotations.

As this thesis will show, in Ugandan hip hop these take place through the one hand the pursuit of excess, and on the other, through activism. Both trajectories occur as a result of hip hop's encompassing of the two, and from the capability inherent to expressive cultures, of representations of self and society. In Uganda, this is a capability which is reflected in the richness and plenitude of its popular and traditional musical cultures set against a paucity of stability, encompassing the political, social and economic.

## Chapter 3

### METHODOLOGY

#### A Porsche's place



*Figure 5: The entrance to Deuces*

At the start of my field research, I found myself at Deuces, a nightclub in Kampala, for the first time at an event called Wash Wednesdays described in the introduction to this thesis. As it happened, that evening saw a significant number of well-known people from the music industry, both hip hop and dancehall in attendance, and I was able to meet several of these individuals and start to begin to build my own social network. The music scene in Uganda is remarkably convivial as I shared earlier, and this evening was no exception. Accompanied by Mys Natty and Gasuza, who I connected with at Rogue Elephant studios and who will reappear prominently as this thesis unfolds, we arrived at 1 AM, which in the Kampala night

life scene, I was told was early. This gave me chance to chat with Gasuza and Mys Natty and observe and talk with others who were around.

In many instances, my identity as scholar was met with bemused looks as clearly here were people out to party and how and why anyone would find this worthy of study seemed to be odd. But then, since I was foreign, perhaps that could be the reason why I would take it upon myself to do such a thing, not unlike ‘those ones’<sup>12</sup> for example, who take up cycling from Kampala to Jinja while buses and bikes race past covering them with the red ‘*murram*’ dust that often serves as tarmac on these roads. Later on, I kept it simple and referred to my research as the ‘Party PhD’ to those curious. That night the music was too loud to really talk much to anyone, but I was able to collect phone numbers and introduce myself, enthusiastic about my research and the music and people around me.

Eventually around 8 AM, the sun bright after the uniquely short equatorial sunrise, it became time to leave finally. The club wouldn’t shut as the morning crowd filtered in, some just to sit and talk, others with their breakfast of Rolex, a flatbread roll of chapatti and egg, and still others having their first beer of the day. Parked on the side of the road and glittering in the sun was a Porsche 911 Carrera, a coupe sports car in an alarming shade of incandescent indigo. This was Radio’s ride, and one he bought, he told me, only after he had bought his mother, who had raised him on a her own, struggling financially in the ‘ghetto’, a house.

This vehicle, rendered almost two dimensional in its shade of purple in the bright outdoor light, seemed incongruous. Designed to be driven at high speed on highways, here it was, near a narrow pot-holed tarmac road that branched off into still narrower dirt lanes.

Undaunted, Radio got in and said he would meet us at Mys Natty’s home where the ‘after party’ was happening. The rest of us got onto *boda-boda*’s and sped off while the sports car made its laborious way, slowed down by crowds of passers-by on their way to work and the bumps and ravines in the road.

Looking over my shoulder, I was struck by how beautiful the car looked, sometimes purple and other times blue depending on light or shade, against the red earth and the green plantain trees, street vendors and people in suits milling past. A few recognised Radio through the

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<sup>12</sup> a commonly used English phrase in Uganda, used to denote slightly odd people doing incongruous things.

tinted black windows and he waved, used to and unfazed by the attention. To the famous pop star, this car was a representation of and reward for his achievements both creative and economic, rendered no less by the lack of utility it actually provided. More practical perhaps would be the Toyota Landcruiser, a 4x4 vehicle designed for bad roads and favoured by international development organisations.

In any case, this vehicle seemed to me a tangible sign of the popstar's accomplishments, an object that served as a reminder and visible link to an idea of plentiful success through musical practice in a space of paucity where most struggle to buy a bicycle. A fanciful choice in its lack of utility, it also showed how the imagination can imbue products with a magical quality, bestowed through subjective experiences of pleasure and achievement, far removed from the circumstances that immediately surround them.

Here, in the contemplation of such consumer objects, I found agreement in McRobbie, who states that “the interest in consumerism, for example, has led to an extrapolation of cultural objects out of the context of their usefulness (or their materiality)” (1994:26). Reducing these inanimate objects to those which function “in a sort of vacuum of aesthetic pleasure and personal style” (*ibid.*), fails to take into consideration their role in social relations. Consumers in this context are not cultural dupes; such choices act in service of strivings for meaning on their own terms in their lives, and these objects become symbolic representations of such successes. These objects are rendered in vivid colour by the lived experience of their owners. Similarly, the trainers I wore, in retrospect, acted as a mode of methodology, in that the appreciation of this choice of practical footwear from others I encountered, acted as a first point of contact, allowing for introductions and subsequently, associations from which conversations on Uganda's hip hop scene could commence.

As stated previously, my personal focus in the entire project is underlined by my own interest in aspects of the visual. As Lipsitz states, “In a society where advertising, entertainment, public relations, and political communications perpetually promise fulfilment, happiness and security, the truth can be hard to find” (2007:xiv). In Ugandan hip hop, preoccupations with style or ‘swag’, money or ‘hustle’, and the pop-mythology of stardom, are a form of truth in themselves. This is because visual and stylistic symbols in the forms of ideas, brands and goods are enacted and imagined through self-fashioning, showing a plenitude of forms of

cultural consumption and production, truthful in their subjective representations of belonging through art and economics.

In order to develop a cogent methodological framework that grappled with these interactions in musical and social life, my approach took an engagement through collaborations in the form of branding design. First, I used photography shared with my stakeholders, examples of which are included, and collaborated with a well known rapper in the design of album cover. Second, the visual served as critical space, as objects encountered in the field and in media narratives, upon reflection as the the project developed, acted as symbolic representations of concerns and emphases in the musical and social life of the hip hop scene, enabling me to build a theoretical framework to support my findings of self-fashioning through consumption.

This methodology, in order to engage with self-fashioning through hip hop, from the perspectives of image, branding and belonging, commenced first with the establishment of belonging. First thus, is the importance of relationships established in the field, from which emerged an epistemic hip hop community. From this, issues of representation relevant to image-making and in branding, and the creation and consolidation of distinction in musical and social life, through activism and excess, found interrogation through the uses and purposes of the ethnographic approach, complimented by video recordings of interviews and performances. Each of the three aspects found clarity and cogency through discussions such as semi-structured interviews and conversations. These were employed to gather phenomenological data, the findings from which were then triangulated with media and musical texts. Finally, combining aspects of all these elements, is digital ethnography and its capability towards maintaining an ongoing dialogue with my informants in the field in a kind of virtual belonging.

Scholarly work from the field of ethnomusicology was invaluable in combining these varied intersections of interest. This methodology was informed by Barz and Cooley's work, *Shadows in the Field* (2008), and my approach owes a great deal to the scholars featured in the anthology. Basing my studies on the fact that ethnomusicology is an inherently interdisciplinary discipline that has been said to gain from a diversity and plurality of approaches (Cooley 2008), I agreed with the assertion that ethnomusicologists are in a unique position to question established goals and methods of the social sciences and to explore new perspectives. I was particularly inspired by the emphasis on understanding the lived



experience of people making music. Jeff Titon's (1996) chapter goes on to describe other emphases, such as the importance of an expansion in narrative representation that is descriptive, interpretive, and evocative (Kisliuk 1991); in sharing authority and authorship with our informants, who are often our teachers, consultants, friends, or all three (Guilbault 1993), and an awareness of history, along with the questions of power relationships, ethics and identity.

Acknowledging such capabilities, Titon (1996) discusses a willingness to explore various media, including film, video, and hypertext, to better represent people making music, which I do as a branding designer. An active participation as a musical and cultural advocate brings with it a responsibility towards working with music-cultures and the people within these to have better lives so that their music, ideally, may flourish (Sheehy 1992). This has particular resonance too in spaces where ethnography goes digital. Ultimately, ethnography's epistemological remit remains the same, which is about telling social stories (Murthy 2008). Thus, like Walter Benjamin's (1969:84) 'storyteller', we have 'something to tell about' (cf. Murthy 2008), about, as Arrested Development put it in 1992, "people everyday",<sup>13</sup> their musical and social lives.

### **Friendship and the Field**

The most crucial component of this study is fieldwork that engages with individuals and communities, functioning as a vital observational and experiential aspect of the ethnographic process. Viewing the field as the primary conceptual place of knowing makes it a privileged epistemological space for data collection. In theory, it becomes the locus where methods will be applied, but is also, a fundamentally valued and extraordinarily human occupation with the capacity of bringing together scholar, scholarship and life (Cooley 2008).

Informed fieldwork, rich in detail and immediate experience, hinges on collaboration during ethnographic research, so in accordance with Jeff Titon's work, I focused my approach as one that arises from the phenomenological epistemology for ethnomusicology defined as knowing people making music (Cook 2008, Titon 1996). Grounding fieldwork in friendships

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<sup>13</sup> Arrested Development, *People Everyday*, 3 Years, 5 Months & 2 Days in the Life Of..., 1992, Cooltempo records

originates from my experiences of music and previous field research in Uganda, which are also a result of visits and social connections and associations over a period of six years. Here, knowledge of the hip hop scene was experiential and ineluctably linked to personal and social interactions, becoming a part of my musical being-in-the-world; it was also a social being-in-the-world where personal associations and relationships created goodwill and empathy.

Cooley (2008) interrogates the complex question of who is a proper spokesperson for the culture being studied through the three kinds of information that Malinowski (1935), specified for social anthropology. These are texts (songs and pieces), structures (the system of required behaviour in musical activity, and the system of ideas underlying musical activity), and most crucially, how these structures are actually observed in everyday life. First, these can be located in aspects such as who talks to whom and what forms the basis of these conversations in musical life. Second, if the field is a bounded place populated by insiders who share views about music, musical practices, and the life that occurs around these, it also becomes the place where we, as scholars and outsiders go to encounter these insiders and their life and culture. We then explain to other outsiders the relationship between music and culture posited by our own theoretical standpoints (Rice 1996).

Such spaces in the field, such as those inhabited by the insider and/or outsider, will and do shift as research is conducted, raising the question of how such dynamics influence field research. In this regard, the sociability I found amongst my Ugandan consultants is significant. As stated at the introduction of this thesis, social life in Uganda is based around politeness, which is gracious and welcoming in its capability towards building social networks. The extent to which the openness in sharing phone numbers, time and personal stories informed this project cannot be overstated. From my original point of contact with a small group of musicians, based on initial friendships maintained through personal and social associations, I was able to extend and build a wide network of acquaintances and, as this project developed, many became my friends.

As my network of stakeholders and informants expanded, the result of established associations with 'insiders', I viewed the building of subsequent horizontal social connections through participatory research strategies inspired by Paulo Freire (1982). These research strategies uphold a transparency in relationships, data collection situations such as interviews and discussions and meticulous documentation of events, interactions and

experiences.

These strategies were arranged around the fact that relationships between fieldworkers and those who are the subjects of fieldwork bring identities to the encounter which are then cast in a variety of roles (Titon 1985:1995). Here, as Titon states, occurs a kind of contractual relationship, implicit or explicit, in which each party helps the other. While a combination of friendship and 'tacit contract' is helpful, viewing one's scholarly duties as those that are ethically based on the professional was important, and was maintained here in the form of due and documented consent, written or verbal. Similarly, a familiarity with aspects of ethics and representations in data gathering methodology was extremely helpful in maintaining professional conduct in terms of the ethics of representation.

I found that my personal association with Uganda also helped to mitigate the tensions between my background as an 'outsider' researcher, and the 'insiders' I encountered during my field work. Since, I was not quite an outsider and a little bit of an insider, social and musical connections were relevant towards the location of and participation in commercially minded hip hop events such as the night at Deuces recounted at the start of this section, as well as grassroots hip hop initiatives such as Galaxy Breakdance. The latter aimed to include young people from severely socially and economically marginalised spaces.

From this, I felt that an approach based on creating and maintaining social associations favoured the ownership from the perspectives of my informants in their emotional and discursive share in the research project, which helped me join the hip hop community as researcher, observer and supporter. It can be argued that an inherent power asymmetry exists in so far as the researcher's academic training and research agenda leads discussions and monopolises interpretation. Here, in terms of social encounters and in terms of musical associations, I would argue that by dependence on participants for having a research project at all, quite mitigated any advantages I might have appeared to have, as I was reliant on their knowledge in order to develop my own. This assertion I make, based on the eminently practical terms of what went on in Uganda's hip hop scene.

As the anecdote at the start of this project shows, my presence did not go unnoticed, and second, did influence to some degree the behaviour and views expressed by the participants at first. However, the robustness of the popular music scene in Kampala continues with or

without research or researcher. In this milieu, grounding my research in friendship in the field created a space of creativity and security at its inception; I felt privileged to be part of the music scene in my own capacity as researcher and designer, and in this documentation of it, hope to have presented sensitive portrayals of all those concerned.

### **The epistemic community**

Building on social relationships, the next step in my methodology was to locate an ‘epistemic community’. Here, taking my cues from studies in applied ethnomusicology, I use the phrase to refer to a collective of people—including, ethnomusicologists, musicians, community members who work together toward solving and analysing a particular problem or issue-area whose terms are epistemologically defined (developed from Haas 1992, cited in Harrison 2012). From this perspective, the framing of an epistemic community offers a theoretical underpinning for understanding and organising coordinated actions. One can further apply Harrison’s understanding of community as one constituted by a network of people with “expertise and ability in a particular domain and an authoritative or working claim to knowledge within that domain or issue-area” (2012:521).

This was particularly useful when I encountered spaces of activism in hip hop such as the Bavubuka foundation. Here, the actions of individuals and groups are informed by the goal of community betterment and welfare. This was also cogent in the consideration of the hip hop scene in general, regardless of whether musical and social initiatives were motivated by activist concerns, where the word community featured prominently is discussion and discourse. This was because record labels in particular formed their own communities, with several artists working closely together, and in collaboration too. As this thesis will show, these communities function as differentiated entities, distinct in their music, image and social life, motivated by expertise and ability within the domain of hip hop in Uganda.

In terms of contextualising what I found through my various interactions in the field, I was similarly able to adapt shared experiences in my research project to the framework Harrison (2012) uses to discuss commonalities in an epistemic community. These include shared normative beliefs, which provide a rationale for social action; shared causal beliefs, based on practices leading or contributing to a problem or set of problems which then serve as the

basis for explaining various linkages between possible actions and desired outcomes; shared or accepted notions of analysis for the action; and most importantly, a common enterprise, defined as a set of common practices associated with the problem or problems to which their competence is directed, presumably out of the conviction that human welfare will be enhanced as a consequence.

In this study, this common enterprise, as a set of common practices associated with the problem or problems to which their competence is directed, is ultimately how people in Uganda find happiness through hip hop. Through the music they make and the social life they create out of it, is a belonging, acknowledging both the successes and sometimes, failure of these goals. From this emerged a comprehensive framework in the analysis of shared experience in the form of similarity and common ground in beliefs and practices, in turn drawn from individual experiences. More importantly, however, it revealed direction for deeper investigations into areas of disagreement, which in this project, took the form of divergences such as activism and excess.

While the issue of music or associated applied ethnomusicology research as a means toward solving concrete problems is a complicated one (Harrison 2012), seeing music as a space for collective action helped me define my own role. As time went by, I found myself as a member of this community too as a hip hop scholar and branding designer. As a fan of the genre, I was able to keenly identify where certain processes in musical and social life originated as practice and philosophy, and subsequently found focus in the achievement of individual and collective aims, which lent itself to an epistemologically and critically comprehensive foundation in the field.

Because of these reasons, viewing the hip hop scene as an epistemic community of belonging, based on a love and appreciation for the genre, which then focused creative expression, in turn mapped through musical and social life, was useful in understanding motive and rationale amongst those I found myself spending time with in the field. Many of the individuals who formed this epistemic community occupy positions of respect and influence in the music scene due to their long experience as musicians and artists.

As stated previously, through prior social connections with these individuals, I found an immediate ease of access in many initial situations such as those in nightclubs such as

Deuces, subsequently opening doors to spaces I would not have access to relying on my own social connections.

Thereafter, the challenge of access and correct representation from data gathered on the ground, I then grappled with through a method that combines ethnography and phenomenology in the consideration of shared experiences.

### **Ethnographic phenomenology**

From the foundation of building a social network based on personal relationships, and in the recognition of an epistemic community, I located my methodology as one useful in first, the description the socio-musical lives of my research participants, and second, a dialogic exploration through personal narratives of lived experience.

These subjective relationships, I discuss from the perspective of image to describe the performers I worked with, each of whom is a local celebrity. Building on this, I relied on data gained from interviews and conversations, in the media and in face-to-face discussions, to lend a nuanced analysis of image. Adding to these insights, through ethnographic phenomenology, I was able to see how aspects of their image found enactment, critically engaged with through branding in the analysis of musical and in social life, the aims and efficacy of which I discuss from the perspective of belonging. From these analyses, I was able to link each of these aspects as self-fashioning through consumption in the hip hop scene in this fragile site.

Berger (2008), in his contribution to *Shadows in the Field*, uses ideas from phenomenology and practice theory to provide approaches to ethnomusicological ethnography that are applicable not only to popular music but to music scholarship as a whole. Berger links the dynamics of structure and agency found in practice theory together with the questions of perception, meaning, and experience important to ethnomusicology and to phenomenology. This perspective proved useful in the framing of my research at its outset, drawing into focus what Berger calls the twin perils of dehumanisation and deification in ethnographic representation. Discussing the role of power in ethnomusicological research, Berger states that the world we live is one of crushing inequity, and therefore, fragility, and that practice

theory allows one to understand the workings of power, without reifying society or denying agency. Berger discusses Giddens's theory of structuration (1984). Here, society is seen as constituted by people's actions, which in turn take place in the context of past actions and behaviours and a larger social world, which shapes and informs them. Structure is constituted by agency, agency is informed by structure; the dialectic between the two is the method by which social life is reproduced and transformed. If socio-musical meaning is actively and socially constituted and differential, the analysis of motivations for actions and interactions with each other and their environments should be considered indispensable to understanding music in/and social life. From these understandings, I was able to, through my interest in visual representations located within this sonic culture, found in objects and goods, and style and fashion, critically engage with negotiations of wider and everyday inequity found in Uganda, framed in this project as a dialogue between paucity and plenitude.

Methods to gain understandings of these workings amongst my stakeholders, both individual and collective, were ethnography and phenomenology. Ethnography consists of a description and interpretation of culture, where culture is a system in which social events, behaviours, institutions, or processes form a context within which these processes can be intelligibly described (Geertz 1973:14). Relying on ethnography, I provide thick descriptions of musical performance and the social settings these are conducted in. The reason for this is that within the context of performance, at a recording studio, at a gig or even at a nightclub, it is important to bring forward the participants' organisation of attention to the music and the situation as a whole. I took my direction from some of the questions Berger (2008) raises, such as which elements of the music including lyric and sound are the foci of the participant's attention; what place do the visual appearance and behaviour of the participants have in the performance; which of the performers dominates the show, if any, and how is the experience of the event organised across its temporal length?

Phenomenology accords emphases to an immediate, tangible, sensory life-world and the perception of this, which grounds knowledge in lived experience (Ihde 1986, cf. Titon 1996), opening the way for multiple dialogues of realities in phenomenologically weighted representations of people making music (*ibid.*). Within subjective notions of experience lie shared experiences between individuals and domains. These shared spaces include those aspects one may explore through participant-observation, such as ethnographies of music performance, and others, through dialogic techniques, such as interviews which reveal

individual social experiences and histories. These shared areas provide one with points of commonality that lent themselves well to the wider sociological concerns of this study, which are the ways and means individuals negotiate their way in spaces of, as Berger correctly puts it, crushing inequity. Such descriptions and conversations revealed a plenitude of personal experiences and provided an immediate sense of how wider social and political issues of paucity such as inequality, poverty and conflict may have affected the lives of people and those close to them, and how such fragilities were then negotiated, through excess or activism as the case may be.

With this in mind, where relevant I discuss sections of song texts, but I do not focus primarily on them as language has been considered inherently unstable, signifying multiple meanings and subject to differing interpretations. This is also due to the fact that many aspects of my research tools deal primarily with the communication of personal experience through language. In the analysis of musical and social life, I triangulate this with a focus on the enactment of performance, and social settings it takes place in, in an exploration of what is said and done and how these articulations and enactments act in cohesion or in dissonance as the case may be.

This in turn, one again, reflected details of shared experiences as well as individual reactions and narratives embedded in these commonalities of occurrence. The reason for this was to gauge how, as Lipsitz, states in his work, *Footsteps in the Dark* (2007), popular music acts as alternative archives of history, through the shared memory, aspirations and experiences of people excluded from formal narratives (xi), discussed in the preceding chapter. This is what he terms, hidden histories and long fetches (vii), the latter alluding to the distance between a wave's point of origin and its point of arrival. Shared experiences worked effectively as a fulcrum from which to contextualise my field research because first, in relation to problems of the insider/outsider, phenomenological approaches to music inquiry see the constitution of meaning in music as an open-ended process, not unlike Douglas Holt's understanding that consumption serves as an open-ended process of self creation. This is a dynamic process of discovery and change, in performance, in listening and reflecting, rather than a static conception of being (Berger 2008).

Here, critical dialogic and reflexive techniques such as interviews, allowed me to share and discover meanings as a researcher together with my research participants, thus, creating



shared experiences in turn facilitated by associations of belonging made over the previous years. Second, phenomenological methods allowed for experiences and perceptions of individual perspectives, lending themselves well to questions of self-framing through hip hop, both within and without the diaspora. The inclusion of such narratives, through critical dialogue challenges structural or normative assumptions. This is important, as while ethnography alone might place the researcher as an outsider, ethnographic phenomenology in its inclusion of individual narratives, in addition to description, interpretation and analysis, creates a discursive space for those stories excluded from the wide sweep of historical and political narratives, while simultaneously revealing the effects these may have on individuals and communities.

In this regard, a work that is of great influence to me is *Rumba Rules* by Bob White (2008), on music in Kinshasa in the Democratic Republic of Congo; he is, with great sensitivity, able to convey a credible sense of the social and political realities in the Congo at the time. Weaving descriptions of musical performances and of group dynamics of the band he had an association with, he provides an intense depiction of his own personal experiences and vivid characterisations of those he works with, against of portrayal of Kinshasa at the time. I hope to have brought this immediacy of richness and depth to my study too, and to have provided a narrative weighted in the descriptive ethnography of a music-culture, which invites the reader to share, imaginatively, in the experiences that are represented (Titon 1996).

### **Web 2.0 or social networking**

Due to length of this project and its engagement with aspects of hypertext such as image and branding, over a period of time, I began to rely extensively on digital ethnography. Digital technology served as a cornerstone of my recording methodology as stated earlier, in the forms of videos of ethnographic sites and the recording of interviews and research sites. This was supplemented by high resolution photographs taken on my iPhone included in this text, vital in the putting of names to faces and in the sharing of atmosphere and scene.

In this research project, there is no doubt that a combination of physical and digital ethnography gave me a larger and more “exciting array of methods to tell social stories” (Murthy 2008:845). Younger members of the hip hop scene, or as they call themselves,

‘practitioners’, notably Gilbert Frank Daniels, use film and photography to meticulously document musical events, workshops and community outreach programmes. Digital ethnography also served in a continuation of conversations on mediums such as Facebook messenger and Skype, and as a tangible and visual way to gauge my informants’ musical activities via the platform of Facebook, lending itself to a sense of virtual belonging for myself within Uganda’s hip hop scene. Web 2.0 or social networking, in the form of the internet’s interactive phase served this project well, in the understanding that when a computer network connects people or organisations, it is a social network (Garton et al., 1999:75). Through ‘friends’ and ‘friends of friends’ occurred a mapping of these networks and I was able to stay in contact with people in Uganda, who consistently use Facebook to share new tracks, videos and promotional images for songs, albums and events.

As a researcher, this has allowed me to stay current with events in Uganda while overseas. This occurred first, through digital technologies, plentiful through mobile telephony in Uganda, and through flows of visual information on social media. On the question of the digital divide where access to these technologies remains stratified by issues of social class and economic capability, in Kampala, mobile phones are connected to the web, mainly in the form of pay-as-you-go data packs, within the reach of most individuals I encountered. Data packs occasionally run out mid-conversation and have to be replenished, however, the capability is present, consistently and widely used. I found that platforms such as Facebook, engendered a plenitude of communication, focusing the voices of respondents through representation on social media.

I wish to address the concern that digital ethnography can function as covert practice, and therefore, raises questions on the ethics of such a method. Respondent-led aspects of Web 2.0 or social networking are considered as possible transpositions of researcher/subject roles (Murthy 2008: 845). These postings however, served as a kind of public sphere, as without exception, posts used in the marketing of music and events were shared to the Facebook public, regardless of whether one was a ‘friend’ or not.

Such documentation is innovative, and provides an archive of tangible public narratives. This not only aids in the gauging popularity or interest, for example in terms of likes and comments, but also provided an array of discursive visual materials and methods I could use in my research, particularly in the critical analysis of how image interacted with branding and

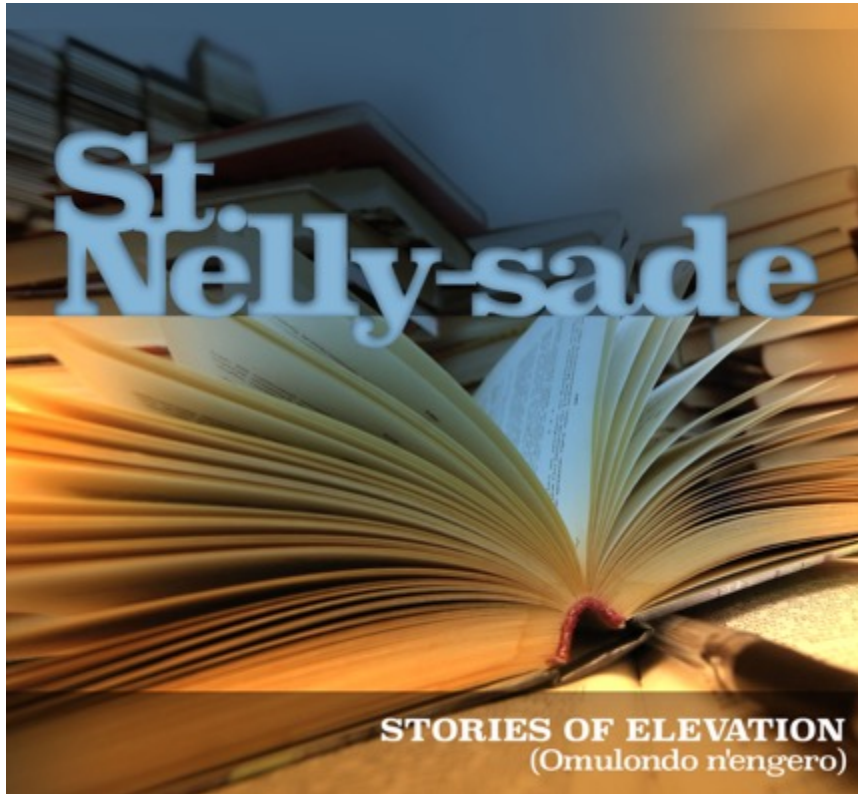
how these connections were leveraged towards creating a sense of belonging in the hip hop context for those involved.

### **Visualising hip hop**

Supporting these assertions, I would like to conclude with my own collaboration with St. Nelly Sade. A young rapper in his mid-twenties, he started as one of Babaluku's, founder of the Lugaflow hip hop movement, protégées, but then went on to establish his own successful solo career, performing at gatherings as varied as community initiatives such as Galaxy Breakdance, at commercial venues such as the comedy club, Laftaz in central Kampala, and at events with audiences of up to 10,000 such as the Buzz Leavers gig and at beach festivals along Lake Victoria in Entebbe. These gigs are lucrative, album sales not so much, though Nelly told me he made 20,000 UG Shillings from the 2015 album, *Stories of Elevation*. As a hip hop performer, Nelly is known for a clean living image, and for music that is socially conscious. Respected for his adept rhyming in Luganda, he uses humour and word play often, for which I observed appreciation at several performances; his clean-cut image and good looks mean that he has a significant female following too.

I had returned to London after my first field trip and Nelly got in touch over WhatsApp asking if I could quickly design the cover for this album. At first, I was keen we use a photograph of him, as he was becoming a well-known brand himself. He, however, said he wanted a visual of the *mulondo* root, traditionally associated with the acquisition of male sexual prowess. As such, it is an unprepossessing looking plant so we then decided to use the imagery of a book, taking our cues from KRS-One's *Gospel of Hip Hop*.

At the time, Nelly's brand was focused on an approach towards education and activism through hip hop, a gravitas which we hoped to convey with the slightly academic tone taken by image, juxtaposed with a modern font that, while evoking a type written font which was trendy at the time. I then, developed typography for the album title and artist's name and with a little bit of manipulation on a visual taken from the internet on Photoshop, we had our artwork in place. The decision to make this legend so large was mine as I felt that this was an opportunity for Nelly to leverage his own brand recognition amongst fans.



*Figure 6: Nelly's album artwork*



*Figure 7: The single artwork*

We were able to communicate with each other and share visuals quickly thanks to our mobile phones; the fact that our artwork was low resolution did not hinder the printed version either as Urban Aksent studios, who helped produce the album were using digital printing technology for the actual CD covers. I was also able to to send Nelly a visual without the legends shown below for the back of the album where tracks would be listed.

Similarly, in April 2017, Nelly, in a collaboration with another young rapper, Nutty Neithan, commercially successful because of a more dancehall sound, released a single, called *Can't Put Me Down*. Nelly once again texted me on WhatsApp, asking if I could put together something the next day. I was watching a boxing match at York Hall here in London that day but got in touch the next, and was informed that we had a bit more time as “my man has gone to the village.”<sup>14</sup>

I did not ask what implications this had to the artwork as time was short and I wanted to help my friend. Nelly just wanted a type face. I was not convinced as I felt that a photograph of the two rappers would showcase the collaboration far better. Nelly agreed but said that only had this picture, shown below, shot on mobile phone, taken for a laugh. I asked that he send it anyway. I was taken with Nutty's jumper and was able to work on the colours to bring out contrast while also mimicking a slightly faded filter currently fashionable on Instagram. Nelly was very pleased with the results, and on my suggestion we used bright red as a border and in the type. As this was going to be released on Facebook, we decided we wanted an image that stood out on this visually heavy platform.

The whole process was smooth because Nelly trusted my artistic vision for his brand. I wanted imagery that was current making sure his brand dominated the visual. My first questions in both cases, were “what are you thinking visually” and what colours, if any, would you prefer. Thereafter, after listening to the track, I was able to then gauge the album's mood, or rather, vibe and put together a visual representation of that. Second, we both understood each other when it came to hip hop, although we do not always agree on each others choices! In the hip hop mediaspace, for Nelly, it is Nas and Mobb Deep and the gritty realism in their lyricism and sound that is of interest to him. For me, it is aspects of image,

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<sup>14</sup> This is a phrase I came across often, and it was usually in the context of individuals leaving the city to return home to gain spiritual intervention or advice to face medical, familial or economic issues. WhatsApp conversation, 8.4.2017

conveyed in style such as the slickness of A\$AP Rocky and the subversiveness of Young Thug.

From these varied interests, I was able to draw on ideas and imagery I had seen elsewhere, on album covers and posters, to create a certain visual language for Nelly that he felt was uniquely his own in the Ugandan hip hop milieu. It was also meant to look 'cool', as Nelly is considered a pretty cool guy and is well liked and respected by his peers and fans. This was a feeling that we felt was conveyed through our choices of visual imagery, colour palettes and type.

The experience of collaboration on the visual representation of this rapper's work points towards what emerged as key method of this research project, which in McRobbie's words is ability of "the single, richly coded image" to give way to the "textual thickness and the visual density of everyday life" (1994, 12). Here, negotiating mine and Nelly's schedules from across the world, pointed to the everyday in ways such as the man who went to the village and gave us more time, and the choice of the photos, informal and yet, to our mind, authentic in its representation of Nelly's hip hop image in Kampala's music scene and in the joy of successful collaborative creative effort with someone whose vision you 'get' and managing to achieve this through communicating via chat on a mobile phone. Through the process of creating this image and the contemplation of this process, I was able to picture other complex relations such as the marking of its physical and virtual place "within the world of commodities, its sequencing, and its audience as well as consumers" (*ibid.*). This was because this musical creation was ultimately one that was meant for an audience's consumption. This drew attention to the specific images used to showcase this musical product, the meaning it might or might not produce to others who view it.

Digital technology was essential in this process, both as methodology and a creative process, aspects which, are arguably intertwined and relational. The technoscape (Appadurai 1990) is provided allowed me to bring my own skills as branding designer to this project, allowing for an effective, if unusual, participation strategy and method. Like my respondents, I was able to use a range of technologies and resources facilitated by the internet. Unlike my respondents, I used this in the creation of my own visual language, using other images and inspirations rather than musical texts they create through listening, sampling and rapping.

## Practical tools and concerns in the field

Field research was conducted over two specific field trips first from October 2014 through to January 2015, and then again in November 2015 to January 2016, enhanced and augmented by my association with Uganda in the preceding years, and subsequently too. This segmented field research lent itself well to my own processes of reflection and study as I was able to compare experiences and progress, both mine and the people this thesis talks about, lending nuance and depth to my understanding of this study.

Over the course of my field research, I kept comprehensive field notes and reflective journals. Given that fieldwork is as much a personally transformative and subjective experience, these field notes helped me chart my progress and later, reflect on the process, of being an individual working as part of my epistemic community. Through these shared experiences, albeit from different perspectives, between researcher and participants over a period of time, emerged the identification and coalescing of themes as they developed and took shape in this thesis. As stated earlier, informed written and/or verbal consent allowed for a form of structure to be imposed on these relationships and where and when necessary, due consent, written and or/verbal was taken at the very outset

In this regard, documentation held a prominent position, as reiterated by *The Society for Ethnomusicology* manual (Fargion 2001). Data collection took the form of qualitative methods such as participant observation, open-ended and semi-structured interviews. Open ended and semi structured interviews explored in-depth experiences and motivations of participants. Interviews were recorded, in audio and video format, and to insure that first, all interactions are on record and no detail was lost, as certain facts may not be immediately identifiable as important to the study. This also ensured that I was able develop my skills as an interviewer and identify weaknesses in my approach early on. A formal approach to interviewing was worthwhile at first. I began with questions about personal reasons for being involved in music, to start with, and why these individuals have chosen to be involved with socio-political issues or not. Subsequently, as time went by and as relationships were formed, these interactions took on the form of conversations, which too were recorded when possible, and on other occasions, details taken down in the form of field notes. On occasion, I asked my participants to translate words and phrases in Luganda to English, but English is widely understood and spoken in Kampala so I did not encounter issues with the language.

Here, my own interest in photography served very well, as I was able to capture moods and personalities and thus added an aspect of emotional texture that I was able to revisit and reflect on as time went by. Video similarly served as a vital methodological tool. The first aspect was to collect video footage of performances and interviews, as research documentation I could revisit later. This was primarily for my own records and recorded using a Nikon D3100 and an iPhone. For my research project documentation, I was able to record several interviews and performances. This was crucial in that venues for interviews quite often changed and so did appointments with musicians. This fluidity on occasion, engendered a sense of instability and I found that organising field notes and video recordings during occasions when plans changed suddenly helped focus a sense of composure and control on an everyday basis.

Uganda has a vibrant media sphere. The collection and analysis of media resources in the form of journalistic accounts and news, including interviews with musicians, gig and album reviews as well as coverage of music and charity events were of great use in locating popular venues and artists, artists' representations of themselves and their views on issues as well as getting an overall sense of music scenes in the city, which will in turn help me keep an ear to the ground, so to speak. To me, all of these steps served as a form of 'triangulation', or obtaining information in many ways. The hope was that this methodology would utilise observations made through an extended period of time, from multiple sources of data, implying multiple techniques for on varying perspectives on complex issues and events.

Other practical concerns such as travelling to Uganda and living there were fairly straightforward. My parents lived there at the time and I had a place to stay and safe transport in the city in the form of privately contracted motorcycle taxi or '*boda-boda*'. My funds including the Reid Scholarship and Overseas Research from Royal Holloway were adequate in covering such expenditure, which was supplemented by travel awards covering airfare from London and back on both occasions. Similarly, issues of personal safety did not loom large. Kampala is by and large a safe city, and with common sense and company one does not normally face crime or violence at music venues or concerts.

The practical tools and concerns outlined above, served as a tangible way for me to map both ruptures and continuities in the hip hop scene in Uganda. The research project focuses, following Lipsitz's (2007) understanding, on music as evocative of response, on people in



time and making music, on creativity, perception and consumption in contemporary everyday life, interacting from the margins to recognised narratives. These are complex issues and I hope I have actively engaged with them. I saw my role as consonant with Tilton's understanding of ethnomusicology in the public interest as work that "involves and empowers music-makers and music-cultures in collaborative projects that present, represent, and affect the cultural flow of music throughout the world" (1992:315), which I have attempted to do through visual encounters with this sonic culture in Uganda.

Finally, I have been inspired by Gage Averill's work in Haiti (2008) and the approach he describes as 'gonzo ethnography'. Allusions to Hunter S. Thompson's incendiary writing and investigative styles aside, I was moved by Averill's emotional and critical engagement with his subject. He describes how much of his field research took place in bars, carnival and country fairs, all which are "locales for the dedicated pursuit of simple pleasures" (xxi). He admits to a level of partisanship in that fact that Haiti, the location of his research, and its problems could not leave one unmoved, which I too found in my life in Uganda. In addition to a stylistic and intellectual admiration, the scope and political commitment of his work has informed much of how I view my project.

In the context of this methodology, I too believe that "dialogic ethnography implies a subject position that allows the ethnographer to engage in a sympathetic, culturally informed dialogue of cultures without suspending entirely his or own critical judgment" (Averill 2008:xxi). With this in mind, I hope that the techniques of research and writing outlined here make this research project critically sound and compelling in subject matter and treatment.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Image-making and the Ugandan hip hop ‘mogul’**

#### **The mogul’s visual density**

This chapter discusses image, its creation and construction, and the ways in which it finds enactment, through the concerns of activism and hedonism. I analyse image in the context of self-fashioning, constructed from lived experience and through media encounters with hip hop and its culture. This chapter uses a critical approach that employs the visual in the gauging of ethnographic data in the form of hip hop pose and performance supplemented by information shared over interviews, in social and musical life. This is based on the consumption and production of symbols and signs used to convey significance and originality through this expressive culture.

Against this backdrop, I show how personas function on two levels. The image is projected visually through modes of fashion in personal stylisation. These are underpinned by narratives in the public sphere and in interviews with me, constructed through their lives and art, drawing on their lived experience which is mediated by the pop-mythology of hip hop. From this discussion, emerges a dialogue between the real and fake, in representation and in enactment, showing us negotiations between plenitude and paucity. Second, this reveals the nature of diaspora in Ugandan hip hop, and its relevance to the musical and social lives encompassed by it. Finally, we find a fashioning of a hip hop self, based on distinction and differentiation, global in the terms of its construction and representation.

In service of this argument, I share biographical accounts of three individuals, Gasuza Lwanga, Atlas da African and Silas ‘Babaluku’. In their late thirties to mid-forties, these individuals form part of the first generation of hip hop artists in Uganda and have each achieved a level of commercial and critical success, the details of which I discuss in this chapter. For the three men I discuss, encounters with hip hop occurred in North America in the 1990s, as a result of their families’ forced migrations during the Amin years. These individuals come from privileged backgrounds, with each connected by birth to royal kingdoms, and were children during Idi Amin’s rule in Uganda. Their families occupied elite positions through birth and rank, and were targeted by Amin, with family members

incarcerated or killed. Adolescence of privilege and entitlement in Uganda changed to circumstances of economic hardship and social experiences as refugees, and finally, an eventual return home in the nineties. Their return saw a continuation of their careers in Uganda. In the contemporary and current hip hop scene in Uganda, Gasuza, Atlas and Babaluku each have a unique hip hop brand, the details of which will discuss in the following chapter on branding, and have influenced younger musicians who I discuss in the chapter on aspects of belonging. For many rappers born and brought up in Uganda, encounters with the genre occur through the media, peers and local figures such as the three individuals I discuss. In this, these three individuals provide a microcosmic view that is representative of the hip hop scene in Uganda, its poses and performances and the preoccupations that underlie these.

My case studies are well-known figures in Kampala, each having achieved some form of commercial success. Tacit in their successes is the knowledge that image is in turn, produced as a result of first, lived experience of musical expression and in social life, which forms, in Appadurai's terms (1990, 1996), a hip hop ethnoscape. This is mediated by the pop-mythology of hip hop, which acts as a mediascape (*ibid.*), in the consumption of mediated imagery, narratives and music. In this chapter, the Ugandan hip hop space is formed of subjective imaginings of these encounters, and of knowledge gained through lived experiences as artists and musicians, as the diaspora and as Ugandans at home in the country of their birth.

Against this backdrop, I arrange self-fashionings located through the image of these three performers against a critical approach shaped by post-modern approaches to media and cultural studies. Hip hop is composed of its own visual vocabulary of symbols and signs, forms of which thrive and flourish in Ugandan hip hop. McRobbie's work on popular culture (1994), shows the potential of the image in providing a "textual thickness and visual density" (12) to everyday life, as discussed in the preceding chapter. Here is the ability to produce meaning through image by revealing social relations in the marking out of space within the world of commodities and in the social and musical life around these. This allows us to comprehend how symbols of capitalist acquisition may be apprehended by individuals as aspects to aspire to, or those to discard as part of a system that fosters inequity.

These are apprehendings in negotiation with plenitude and paucity. In order to explicate these interactions through image and imagery, I engage with Christopher Holmes Smith's

scholarship on the hip hop mogul (2003). This figure, typically male and entrepreneurial, holds his position of prestige through both cultural influence and personal wealth. Consequently, the mogul can be viewed as a symbol of mainstream power, who occupies a position of inclusion within “elite social networks and cosmopolitan cultural formations” (Smith 2003:673), revealing a dramatic tension of representation between the few that have and the rest that do not.

These understandings are then juxtaposed against the place of simulacrum and deception in the post-colony (Mbembe 1991, Newell 2013 *et al.*), particularly in the use of objects and ideas, in the form of images and brands. Mbembe states that popular visual cultures, including photography and cinema, modify how individuals perceive each other; fashion and modes of style provide new modes of individual representation, and finally, modes of speech fashion novel forms of public expression. A similar thought is echoed by Karin Barber, who states, “words are not the only form of representation or expression. People establish and convey meaning through clothing, dance, music, gesture, and though complex rituals which often defy verbal exegesis” (2007:3). The particularities contained within representations enable these to command attention and capture the imaginations of both viewed and viewer.

Along with this, is the place of spectacular consumption (Watts 1997) and the rhetoric of emancipation in hip hop (Harvey 2012), showing how these representations and enactments act towards the projection of distinction in service of evoking a better life. From this contemplation, emerges the nature of the diaspora in the context of Ugandan hip hop, which acts as a space of mobility and meaning in the consideration of identity (Ramnarine 2007). This understanding, in turn points towards the fashioning of a hip hop self arranged around forms of distinction, global in its construction. Thus, we see how self-fashionings of excess and activism serve as indices of negotiations of social and economic fragility, in turn originating from the self-same space of an awareness of the such relationships between paucity and plenitude

### **“fake-ass bling” - the image of excess**

I begin first with Gasuza Lwanga. A musician and rapper, he is also an accomplished fashion and celebrity photographer and music video director. These professional attributes have

engendered several professional associations, particularly with Atlas da African, who I discuss a little later in this text. Gasuza has appeared on several tracks and music videos, which he has directed as well, in this collaboration as with others. He has worked with and founded production companies, significant of which are Market Makers and Rogue Elephant, amongst which the latter forms part of my ethnographic research in the next chapter on branding. He has only recently had a break-out hit of his own, the track *Sober*, the video and lyrics of which I will discuss in Chapter 7, along with two additional tracks. Gasuza belongs to the upper echelons of the Baganda tribe which historically formed the dominant kingdom in Uganda and was thus, the seat of power. Today, on the basis of this history, Gasuza occupies a place of privilege in contemporary Ugandan society through circumstances of birth.

Gasuza has had a career that spans almost two decades. It includes a stretch at the iconic Def Jam records, where he worked in New York in the 90's, although the exact details of his position are unclear. As a performer during that time, he was part of an ensemble that opened for well known artists such as the Roots and De La Soul. In his words, "the other act got signed, we didn't<sup>15</sup>". In our interviews, his reminiscing was peppered with vivid anecdotes of encounters with hip hop celebrities, some at the height of their success and others at the cusp of it, such as "that time when "Kanye West waited for days at the reception", mixtape in hand, parties with Sean "Puffy" Combs when he was dating Jennifer Lopez, being in a rap 'cypher' with RZA of WuTang Clan, a meeting with Tupac Shakur at a recording studio, and shared a particular regard for the rapper, Sean Price. These reminiscences were filled with humour and colourful descriptions, all of which provided an extremely enjoyable insight into Gasuza's own love for and extremely vocal opinions on the genre and his engagement with it.

Back home in Kampala, Gasuza has been part of the music scene for years, and is well known in both the music and nightlife scenes, talking about his lifestyle and art, he says on many occasions, "I am hip hop". He also refers on several occasions to the "fake-ass bling" he favours as jewellery, a shiny tinsel medallion with the signature Versace medusa head, an imitation or counterfeit reproduction of the fashion house's logo. This piece of jewellery is an integral part of his image, and one that has a particular capacity to evoke and invoke a

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<sup>15</sup> Interview, 15.11.2014

lifestyle, a visual style, a fashion statement. This piece of jewellery is also a sly and humorous critique of a lavish lifestyle. To him, it was, exactly what he said, “fake-ass bling”. However, it is a symbol which serves as a means to project wealth and currency through the evocation of an awareness of the modes and fashions from mainstream hip hop today.

In the contemplation of the particular place of this article of jewellery, what emerges is hip hop’s significance as a multi-billion-dollar global industry (Perry 2008:295, Murray 2004 *et al.*). As stated in the introduction to this thesis, hip hop is a visible and widely disseminated conduit of a plenitude of imagery. Commercially mediated, the cultural form extends successfully from music into film, television and corporate merchandising. In the reach and extent of its influence, hip hop can be conceived of as a cultural system or mediascape (Appadurai 1996) located within the global flow of wealth, power and images that capitalism generates. This encompasses a dialogic relationship between hip hop and capitalism that includes displays of economic wealth and the evocation of status through material success (Murray 2004).

Hip hop culture has the dubious distinction of being an extremely successful mechanism of “extracting profit from consumption habits” (Smith 2003:676). A garish display of wealth in the form of gold chains is one aspect of hip hop’s unabashed celebration of narcissistic and decadent excess. This obsession with materialism has dominated the genre in recent years, and “bling-bling” has become the aesthetic of choice, projected through imagery of conspicuous consumption that veers on the absurd, often placing sexual pleasure and consumer purchases at the centre of the social world (Lipsitz 2007:180). Arguably, the sexism, misogyny and materialism one finds in hip hop serves as a conduit for commercial successes such as corporate synergy and high profits for investors (Lipsitz 2007:181). This raises the issue then, as Lipsitz asserts, given that hip hop stars and entrepreneurs in many cases, appear to be driven by wealth and the pursuit of pleasure, is hip hop more significant as marketing category than as a cultural and political force (Lipsitz 2007: 181-182).

Hip hop does indeed suggest a particular success in terms of perspectives from marketing, notably in the creation of brands and branding, which I discuss in the next chapter. However, reducing hip hop to a marketing force is not accurate as this research indicates a veracity of cultural influence in Uganda which is linked to the genre’s commercial success, but is in fact,

not solely derived from this, as the emergence of the genre can be located in the diasporic experiences described in this chapter.



*Figure 8: Gasuza in his signature 'swag'*

Furthermore, consumers form their own relationships with goods, including musical commodities as active agents of their own pleasure (McRobbie 1994), indicating that rather than a marketing tool, hip hop is more cogently viewed as a space for meaning, albeit one that is a component of the global entertainment industry.

Furthermore, through its particular tropes of celebrity and excess, hip hop's commercial popularity manages to convey a depth to the acts of consumption that are embraced by it. Here, mainstream hip hop conveys meaning through alterity, which occurs through the embrace of materialism, rather than its rejection (Murray 2004). This is in no small part due to the fact that this aesthetic also encodes within itself, through its occasional hallucinatory

gratuitousness and vulgarity, a powerful critique of capitalism that transcends satire. In Uganda, this alterity stands incongruous against the poverty and paucity one encounters in every day life, yet it is understandable as something to aspire to, as objects such as Radio's Porsche described in the methodology chapter, serve as tangible symbols of a successful way out of socio-economic fragility.

In post-colonial sites such as Uganda, Sasha Newell links qualities of simultaneously real and fake, as encountered through Gasuza's gold chain, to what he terms "a figurative logic of the mask...at work in contemporary public performances, a kind of visual grammar informing the work of image-making illusions" (2013:20). This conception draws into focus enactments that "represent intermeshed cultural logics in which local understandings of performative magic merge with the anxieties over authenticity and imitative reproduction at the heart of capitalist economies." (Newell 2013:140). As the Comaroffs put it, "post-colonies are quite literally associated with a counterfeit modernity, a modernity of counterfeit" (2006:13). To gauge the uses of such counterfeiting, Bhabha makes the case that these forms of mimicry are constructed around an ambivalence (1984). Mimicry, and the subterfuge thus encoded into it, acts a double articulation, which is both a representation of difference and one of disavowal, acting as a challenge and a critique of structures of dominance and the structures of knowledge that keep their authority in place. Mimicry thus, acts as an upturning of such domination. In dialogue, Newell articulates the need for circumspection, arguing that mimetic performances of these acts, or what he terms the 'bluff' in the post-colony are neither mere re-enactments of tradition using symbolic objects of progress (Friedman 1994), nor simply assertions of association (Ferguson 2006). As Bhabha states, "to be true to a self one must learn to a little untrue, out-of-joint with the signification of cultural generalizability" (1994: 195-196), showing instead, that these are appropriations that point to novel and subjective uses and meanings amongst those amongst whom we find them.

Here, we find engagements with the acquisition of symbols of mass prestige (Silverstein and Fiske 2003), where middle-class consumers attempt to trade up to higher levels of quality and taste", in order to "buy in" to the "emerging paradigms of accessible luxury and social status" (Smith 2003:674). While Smith remains focused on the United States, motifs of mass prestige, two words which, when clubbed together, at first glance might appear a contradiction in terms, encapsulate what the Comaroff's call the "Gucci-gloved fist" (2001:4), in their discussion on capitalism in the global South. This goes, hand in hand, as it



were, with Adam Smith's 'invisible hand' (1827), the metaphor from which capitalism emerges. In many ways, the promises of abundance that define advanced capitalism have circumvented the post-colonial state, such as Uganda, which remains a deeply poor country, in spite of displays of wealth one might encounter in nightclubs and gigs. Here, the authority previously embodied in colonial subjugation, can be supplanted with the overweening reach of capitalism, where one is compelled to be part of this system of inequity, in order to survive, whether you choose to be or not.

In this wider milieu, for Newell, if the aim is not subterfuge, it is instead "a positive and constructive act (*meaning that*) we are no longer in the realm of the poser but rather of the performer" (2013:140). In other words, the pose holds in itself a performance, and Gasuza is aware that his image, formed of such visual markers, owes itself to the power of representation rather than its weight in gold, or gilt as the case may be. It is not simply a matter of imagination however; made in China, these pieces of costume jewellery are not inexpensive in Kampala. In Uganda, Gasuza's gold chain, as Newell says, "is a demonstration of the superior person one would embody all the time if one had the money for it, a display of potential" (2012:1). This pose and the performance encoded into it is not merely an act of concerted deception, or a sleight of hand meant to draw the viewer into the illusion. It is partly so, but again, one must return to the reality of the fact, that this gilt chain is not cheap in Kampala. To put it simply, everyone knows it is fake, but everyone also knows it is expensive.

It is also worthwhile to note that the anxiety around authentic expression in capitalist spaces is not limited to the post-colony, as we find a similar tension in Jameson's (1984) indictment of the superficial as indicative of a depthlessness or waning of effect in the form of post-modern pastiche. This pastiche is "blank parody" (1984:114), devoid of emotive capacity and creative ingenuity. This is not the case here. The image, of which this gold chain forms part of is a combination of dress, attitude, physical comportment, and spendthrift practices; encoded into this 'bluff' is a performance of success that far overreaches the actual financial ability and mettle of the actor. However, it serves as a demonstration of the cultural knowledge and taste of the urbanised citizen (Newell 2013), which indeed, Gasuza is, demonstrated through his birth and in the hip hop experiences recounted through celebrity and cultural encounters, shared from his time in New York. Nonetheless, Gasuza, like many other rappers is not a hip hop megastar, such as the comportment of which he emulates, nor is

he the mogul such as the celebrities he reminisces about. His reality is one of struggle and fragility, where paucity takes the form of a yearning for the elusive breakout hit and the celebrity this would bestow in the context of the hip hop stars he met and worked with in his youth in New York. Nonetheless, this “fake it, ‘til you make it” attitude is embodied in the plentiful insinuations of ‘swag’ or swagger, his image conveys.

This dialogic interaction between real and fake in the evocation of status and superiority came to the fore in a more mundane manner on another occasion. I was in a taxi with Gasuza, driving through Muyenga, an affluent part of Kampala. Telling me of the success of his new track, ‘Sober’, he leaned out of the window and waved at *boda* drivers parked on the side of the road. They immediately recognised him, and yelled back, “African Sober”, which is what he is called lately. This an ironic moniker as his, and others like him, lifestyles have featured every now and again in the pages of tabloids such as Red Pepper, a publication known for the luridness of its own, quite fantastical reportage of public figures. Sobriety is not the first thing one would associate with him. This aspect of his lifestyle, that of excess, is part and parcel and a very visible feature of the image he projects, as is the case with Atlas da African.

Here, questions of wealth and acquisition in hip hop, whether these attributes are shunned or embraced, provide their own dramatic tension in a dilemma of representation. The fact that Gasuza can pursue a lifestyle that allows him to pursue hedonistic choices is indicative of his success and means far above those compelled to drive motorcycle taxis for a living.

At the same time his popularity indicates that these representations can serve as a proxy for the strivings of those who have substantially less. Thus, the question of real or not, in no way hinders the importance of the act itself, as in this pose is encoded a performance of success in hip hop terms. This is because, as Lipstiz correctly states, the successful popular music performer is rewarded for this masquerade, and by extension, for successful deception (2007:xviii). These rewards include not only monetary inducements, but the promise of cultural influence through the recognition of an authentic performance. As Baker puts it, “the performance, therefore, mediates one of the prevalent of all antimonies of cultural investigation – creativity and commerce” (1987:9).

This is a performance of creativity that is informed by commercial success and the trappings that accompany it. It extends from the musical and social, insinuating itself between the private and public in its self-fashioning. This is emphasized in Gasuza’s statement, “I am hip

hop”, an assertion he makes time and time again. For Gasuza, to his own mind, this public persona is a self-fashioning based on a private and beloved association with hip hop. It reveals its own subjective representation, one that is self-perpetuating, and in its constant enactment and reenactment, it muddles and confounds demarcations between the simulated and the real. Relying on the imagery of mainstream hip hop and the memory of his own experiences, Gasuza fashions his own likeness. Just as the image evokes a particular reaction from those who view it, it also imbues what or whom is being viewed with the facility to consolidate prestige and generate significance mainly because it denotes both knowledge and style, superior or separate from the wider public, as represented for example, by the *boda-boda* drivers.

Gasuza’s most recent association is with Deuces, the label Atlas da African is with, after having left Rogue Elephant, a studio he helped found, in acrimonious circumstances. Atlas a commercially successful rapper in Kampala, and lauded as such by his peers. Building on aspects of prestige, in negotiation with the real and the fake, the next section explores Atlas’ image.

### **“Never did crime, never did time”- the gangsta image**

Atlas da African is crown prince to the Ankole kingdom in Uganda and a Google search shows us images of him on stage in full hip hop pose and performance, side by side with pictures of him posed in a business suit next to President Museveni. Crown prince is a titular title, as the royalty of these antecedents is not officially recognised by the state as one that has an authority in matters of governance. A celebrity across all of east Africa, Atlas is often featured in local tabloids. Amongst fans and other musicians, he is appreciated as a rapper who raps in nimble and commanding English; the narratives he shares about being ‘hardcore’ are received as ‘real’ or representative of his experiences rather than bogus posturing. A commercially projected image of hedonism that flirts with the idea of a ‘gangsta’ criminality, sits quite comfortably in the public sphere as it appears to align itself with what is expected from Atlas’ own experience in hip hop, based more on an evocation of the past through lyrics and imagery, which I discuss a little later in this text, than the tangible present of his life in Uganda.

Prince Eddie Igimura, or as he is better known, Atlas da African, ascribes the choice of nomenclature to the nickname given him by his peers as a teenager in North America. Because of his family's travels after they fled Amin, he displayed a knowledge of countries and places his peers had no idea existed, a story which now forms part of his Ugandan hip hop mythology. He came of age in Canada; newspaper reports suggest that Jay-Z, the hip hop megastar at one point acknowledged his skills, on account of a success at a rap battle in Toronto, and industry gossip includes a collaboration with Canadian superstar Drake<sup>16</sup>.

A collaboration with cult NYC rappers, Smif-n-Wessun indicate a musical history that showed some promise. Shot in Kampala and New York, the video is directed by Gasuza. In this collaboration, Atlas talks about his family, "Daddy was a general, Idi Amin put a hit on my dad, my bloodline's gone, but I'm living life to the fullest," while also implicating the current regimes failures in statements such as "our government is failing us"<sup>17</sup>. In his music, he talks about his struggles of displacement and then, criminality in lyrics such as, "never did crime, never did time, never owed a hundred grand before nine"<sup>18</sup>.

Similarly, a promotional picture, also shot by Gasuza, shows him seated on a bed in a plush apartment. Off to one side is a female figure, apparently sleeping, her face obscured by bedclothes, and on the other side is what appears to be an AK-47 rifle, dollar bills fanned out next to it. The choice of the specific prop of a gun as visual inflection, along with the lyrics described earlier, form an evocation of the lifestyle projected by hardcore gangsta rappers, and is an indicator of the 'gangsta' lifestyle, Atlas raps about, referring to his life in North America earlier

Lyrics from more recent work celebrate hedonism, an example of which is a collaboration with dancehall superstar Chameleone<sup>19</sup>, in a video that has been watched almost 30,000 times at the time of writing this. This is Atlas' biggest hit thus far. Beginning with chimes and horns from a synthesizer, the beat is stripped down, with a bassline reminiscent of commercial hip hop in the 2000s. This fairly minimal sonic format serves well in the showcasing of Atlas' flow, which is compelling, as well as the hook or the chorus. The

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<sup>16</sup> <http://ugblizz.com/ugandan-rapper-atlas-recording-a-song-with-drake/>, UGBlizz, 24.1.2016

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O1vaEDWgyZk>, published 27.4.2011

<sup>18</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AuemUALnw3c>, published 7.3.2014

<sup>19</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=54EHmfPgWC4>, published 9.5.2014

chorus, sung by Chameleone, is inflected with a dancehall influenced patois, arguably, to draw in Chameleone's fan base.

I include the lyrics in entirety below:

I get a funny feeling when am forced to deal with middlemen  
Wait for me fly you're being senior citizen,  
Uganda life's real yeah am swerving on the rail  
With too bad bars and high heels and miniskirts (fly)  
Past Kabalaga on Gabba headed to Deuces  
Champagne flowing like water go ahead and order (nothing)  
Dressed in Versace these haters they can't stop me  
Mad coz when I pull up the Rolly his shawty watch me,  
Kampala am a Capone  
Already blew 1000 a day what can you say? (Nothing)  
The club is on Smash, UG girls got bodies  
Fuck a Buggatti, I woke up in a new punani  
So where the whole club last night was made real  
Hangover, headaches, water and Advils  
Lean with it rock with it lean with it  
Lean with it rock with it pockets gat 20 stacks

(Chorus)

I see di time or they flashing on the bling bling bling  
I've been proposed too but never took the ring ring  
VIP sitting will be treated like the kings ahh ahh ahh  
In every way see mi champagne the bottle pops  
Haters hating but they forced to give it props  
He make his music so they can hear the tops ahh ahh ahh

[Verse 2]

Back to downtown from Owino up to Kololo  
Catch me out Simba Casino spending pesa  
Solo, gambling and scrambling for paper  
Ballin like the Lakers am Kobe you cannot control me  
So rock on ice, wrist on ice  
You only live once nigga this is my life  
Fresher than a shower, money and the power  
Used to struggle, used to hustle, now it's bottles by the hour  
Dedication, hard work, integrity and loyalty success soon come  
Hope the money doesn't spoil me  
Addicted to the cash, fainted for the dollars  
Deuces Entertainment Young hustlers discarded  
Supermodels by the dozen  
You're really aint nothing  
Be careful who you touch  
I put ya body in the ocean  
Beef is like lasagne it comes in many layers,  
The game never changes hommie only the players

(Chorus)

[Verse 3]

Black boy stunting hard with all his cars foreign  
Had the white on the grill  
I felt like George Foreman, fourth quarter I was Jordan  
My whole team scoring  
Called papi made a purchase early every three mornings  
Jay gave me props but it didn't mean much  
I was still out the next night selling my stuff  
Waiting on a deal and I talk of records  
Platinum make a mill  
I was trapped before rapping  
Duffle bag boy blue jeans and white Ts

Like the Tower of Pisa, my chopper make you lean  
Don't believe me ask God I went hard  
Worldwide famous, pictures with the stars  
Did the Hummers and the summers,  
Crashed a few Benzes  
Lost a few friends got back a few Exs  
None of y'all rappers did it like me  
First day out of jail was in an SUV

Here, he raps about “sunglasses and Advil”, “parties in Kololo”, an upmarket neighbourhood of restaurants, clubs, foreign embassies and the headquarters of large international aid organisations such as the UN, and “spending pesa” in the casino, while talking about doing down rivals, beautiful women and allusions to drug consumption. In Atlas' musical oeuvre, we see an evocation of the ‘street’ in urban America, which he draws on from what are apparently his own lived experiences in Canada, indicted through slang, the names of places, personalities and brands of cars, liquor and clothing. At the same time, this track is a clear celebration of life in Kampala, in the calling out of neighborhoods, activities, brands and the forms of success he enjoys, not unlike those found in mainstream American hip hop, while also informing the listener that his struggles are now overcome because he is home.

The representation of Atlas, in pose and performance occurs in the cadences and imagery of gangsta rap (Anderson 1994). Arguably, such representations are found compelling across the world as they serve as “rhetorical resources for the discursively captured and occupied sites of urban survival and conquest” (Watts 1997:44). The power of these representations is that they point towards universal strivings and struggles for meaning and place, often in circumstances which in their cruelty are indeed, devoid and devouring of personal and social meaning. The imagery of the gangsta rap narrative or life-world that Atlas so adeptly uses points towards what Watts refers to as “spectacular consumption” (*ibid.*), where artists and audiences, in replication and consumption, attempt to live large in a manner that behooves the hip hop stars they draw inspiration from. Here, we find, similar to Lipsitz's successful masquerader, a performance of the ‘street’, far removed from Kampala's, which is potent in representation to those who behold it, as it is a means by which is conveyed success over

struggle, not unlike the hip hop moguls in urban America's hip hop mediascape (Smith 2003).

In actual fact, there is nothing truly 'gangsta' about Atlas, nor has he reached the rarefied spaces of celebrity and wealth that the mogul-like figure of Jay-Z, a rapper that Atlas holds in high esteem, compels. As stated earlier, embodied in the motif of the hip hop mogul are aspects of prestige, which emerge first, from "elite social networks and cosmopolitan cultural formations" (Smith 2003:673). Atlas is well placed to do this as a rapper in Uganda. Like the actual hip hop moguls he emulates, particularly Jay-Z, he occupies a space of prominence through the capturing of social volatility and cultural visibility through prestige (Smith 2003). The mogul does this in terms of mass mediation and cultural influence, and amongst my case studies in Uganda, this happens additionally through an elevated standing in society as a result of their circumstances of birth.

Thus, the figure of the mogul, typically male and entrepreneurial, holds his position of stature through cultural power and personal affluence. The mogul and his entourage of "talented minions" (Smith 2013:680) thus, may revel in public displays of ostensible wealth. In the mirroring of mogul like proclivities, Atlas is fashioning a local image and narrative that seeks to elevate himself as hip hop artist, his music and lifestyle choices. Atlas as a member of the Deuces line-up of rappers and public figures, is the star of this enterprise, a position in turn bolstered by the support and presence of other members of this entourage. As performer on a stage, he occupies a space of prominent visibility, and his commercial achievements indicate a recognition which hinges on advantage of one over several others. His position is also one of volatility in the violence he alludes to, in the calling out of 'haters' and rivals, in reveling in the spoils of his success. These, along with an implied privilege given voice in the recounting of social spaces such as casinos and affluent neighborhoods, all serve their purpose in a generation of social recognition, as do symbols such as brands of liquor and clothing.

This exhibition is only spectacular when viewed in contrast to "the ranks of the downtrodden" (ibid.) from whence he has or has claimed to emerge from. This is done through the evocation of success and status denoting superiority over others, albeit through transgression, a combination which is impeccably embodied in the hip hop mogul. However, this kind of social recognition evokes also the understanding that it can only emerge from an



exceptionality from others who, in recognition and contemplation occupy spaces of very little privilege in contrast.

Atlas does not claim to emerge from the downtrodden in Uganda, but he does leverage the motifs of hardship and subsequent overcoming in hip hop through the personal narratives he includes in his musical oeuvre. This is a strange and indeed incongruous pairing of privilege and suffering; these travails are the result of his family's rank in Uganda, which veered from stable to persecuted and back again, as a result of political fragility. This combination appears to work successfully for Atlas' image, perhaps because in the articulation and enactment of his personal narrative, he becomes a symbol of success rather than alienation. Like the mogul, he then appeals to those ranks and their conditions of adversity, voicing these conditions through bravado and swagger, simultaneously, indicating that he embodies a competitive advantage that has allowed him to do as such. For better or worse, Atlas' star power leverages a realisation of mobility and acquisition through the evocation of superiority. Tacit to such evocations, is that his position in Uganda is one in contrast to that occupied by the wider populace which is significantly less affluent and influential, in both money and status.

Based on this, both Gasuza and Atlas occupy their position through a cultural influence in hip hop, in turn, related to their personal lineages. I observed their authority, explicit in terms of directing the musical efforts of employees who were deferential in the creative process at the recording studio Gasuza was co-partner at, for instance. Gasuza and Atlas project images of entitled affluence and notoriety through their musical and social life. In the promulgation of gossip and lyrical content that celebrate narratives of wealth, power, sex and violence lies a celebration similar to the excesses of mainstream American hip hop lifestyle disseminated by global media. The 'bad boy' image is integral to Atlas and Gasuza's image in terms of how they are perceived by the public. In person, both artists are extremely affable and not threatening in the least. Certain dubious personal choices may be construed as morally reprehensible, self-destructive and socially irresponsible, but by no means can they be categorized in the terms of hard criminality such as those uncomfortably glorified in hip hop's 'gangsta' culture such as those described by Watts (1997).

This leveraged more of the evocation of personal wealth and prestige through lifestyle, than the actual reality of it. With regard to the uses of such simulation, I consider Mbembe's

exploration of image occurs through a focus on the autocrat. Mbembe elucidates, in a consideration of African masking practices, that the image serves as a link to the metaphysical, conjoining the corporeal with the spirit plane, or that of the shades. In this, the image is a charm and incantation, performance and reality. Thus, it represents and becomes multiple realities. The image, in its capacity for representation, is imbued with magical qualities, such as "...double sight, imagination, even fabrication that consisted in clothing the signs with appearances of the thing of which they were precisely the metaphor" (2001:153). In this manner, "in spite of the scale of the transformations and the discontinuities, an imaginary world has remained (146)." Building on such potentialities, Mbembe articulates the relationship between the oral, the written and the visual with realities it evokes. Here, "what is special about an image is its "likeness"- that is, its ability to annex and mime what it represents" (142).

This discussion on the attributes and uses of image is useful in the consideration of image in popular culture, contingent as it is to what Mbembe terms, networks of meaning. In this imaginary world, one could replace the spirit and shades Mbembe speaks of with the signs and symbols of hip hop, such as those brandished by Gasuza in the form of gilt chains, and replicas of automatic rifles. I make this assertion based also on Baker's understanding of the mask within a mastery and deformation of form in expressive cultures (1987). In its ability to reveal a reality only knowable and known to those who can identify the symbols encoded into it, such imagery, in musical life and in social life, finds place in Mbembe's conception of that which links the image and the multiple realities it represents. This imagery is less about exactitude of representation, acting instead, as metaphors, in negotiation of every day realities. These realities in Uganda, are manifold and often manifest themselves cheek-by-jowl, such as in the form of exclusive nightclubs next to shacks used for petty trading, and motorcycle taxis vying for space in traffic jams along with 4x4 Land Cruisers on potholed roads.

Thus, while Atlas and Gasuza appear to revel in the spoils of the Siamese twinning of hip hop and capitalism that Murray discusses (2014), in the form of jewellery and in the imagery of a violent and decadent urban life-world, my next case study, rejects these entirely, but is no less capable of mobilising through imagination, the formulation of a Ugandan hip hop lifeworld, and therefore, mogul-like in his image-making.

**“Give them a food programme, everyone got you a programme”  
the image of emancipation**

Silas ‘Babaluku’ is credited with being one of the founders of the Lugaflow ‘movement’, a practice based on rapping in Luganda, with preoccupations based on documenting and discussing local issues and problems and ways in which to negotiate these. The word comes from *Lugha*, which means language in Swahili. The intention was the creation of an ‘indigenous’ Ugandan hip hop sound; lyrically, the aim was to develop a sort of commentary on problems in Uganda over the past four decades, namely corruption, the AIDS epidemic and the civil war in the north, issues which, as the literature review has shown, have influenced popular and contemporary music in Uganda.

His music has been met with critical acclaim and he has acted as mentor to several successful, younger local artists including St.Nelly Sade, Bana Mutibwa and Cyno MC. Babaluku has been the subject of other scholarly work, such as Mwenda Ntwarangwi’s volume, *East African Hip Hop* published in 2009, and he is often referred to as the very first rapper in Uganda.

The 2007 film, *Diamonds in the Rough*, documents this Ugandan “hip hop revolution”, and features Babaluku while he was a member of the Bataka Squad. The word 'Bataka' means native. Formerly the Bataka Underground, the group was formed by Babaluku (a.k.a. Sniperous MC), Saba Saba aka Krazy Native and Big Poppa Momo MC. Founded in the mid-1990s, it was one of the earliest hip hop groups in Uganda, with the three founder members born and raised in Kampala. The film showcases this collective and their music, which addressed the “daily struggles and triumphs of African life”. This was part of an homage to African culture paid through the use of native language and musical references to traditional music and drumming, all set within the globally appreciated musical framework that hip hop provides.

According to the film, the agenda is two-pronged – to speak about issues that affect the people and to get the new sound heard out of the country. Talking about “what people say on the street”, it is a way of empowering those who’s voices aren’t heard.



*Figure 9: Babaluku on stage at the hip hop summit*

Shows such as one at the pediatric HIV ward at the Mulago hospital in Kampala, were a way of lending support while gigs in Brooklyn, Washington and San Francisco aimed to reveal to new audiences the sounds and stories from the country.

All of this provided this ‘underground’ movement with a credible platform and Bataka Squad found critical acclaim. In 2005, Saba Saba’s track *Tujja babya* was the first Lugaflo single to be nominated for the Pearl of Africa Music Awards in the best hip hop artist & best hip hop song categories. The video, shot in the slums of Kisenyi, depicted daily life on the streets in Kampala's poorest neighborhood. At the same time, the crews’ involvement with matters social and political found notice too. Babaluku was invited as guest speaker at The

Peace Building Conference in Washington DC<sup>20</sup>. In 2007, Babaluku won the Pearl of Africa Best hip hop single. Babaluku spoke to me about making the hit track *UTAKE Anthem*, an East African collaboration with AY from Tanzania and Juacali from Kenya, which won the best Hip Hop Single category at the 2007 PAM awards. *UTAKE* stands for Uganda, Tanzania and Kenya, and is standard nomenclature for talking about music from the region. In an interview, he tells me, at the time, “nobody was rapping”, but the track was a huge success. This was then an example of going “back to the source”, where (we) “keep coming together, bringing things together”<sup>21</sup>. *UTAKE Anthem* combines a reggae beat inflected by a synthesised whistling tune that brings to mind the track *Gin and Juice* by Snoop Dogg and Dr. Dre. In total, the song is memorable as it has an uplifting sound which is conducive to both the dance floor in a nightclub and in relaxation, heard at times of private leisure over one’s headphone.

The idea of “bringing things together” in Babaluku’s mind also forms the ethos of the Bavubuku foundation, which he founded and which is the longest running hip hop organisation in Uganda. Between 2003 and to the time of writing this, the Bavubuka Foundation has run Uganda's Annual Hip Hop Summit in Kampala. The foundation has a number of other initiatives such as Bavubuka Scholarship Fund, Bavubuka Indigenous Hip Hop Entrepreneur Fund, Bavubuka Kids for Kids Indigenous Hip Hop Program, B-Global Indigenous Hip Hop Gathering 2013 and the UG Hip Hop Archivist. According to the website, this non-profit organisation sees its mandate as that which “believes in connecting youth with music and the arts can transform lives and unify diverse communities. We are dedicated to creating spaces and educational programs that will nurture and empower a new generation of leaders in Uganda and all of Africa, who will use their voices to communicate positive messages and affect positive change in their communities and the world<sup>22</sup>.” The mandate is clear. However, it has been difficult to gauge the effects beyond the hip hop scene in terms of widespread social change.

Nonetheless, Babaluku remains a compelling character in his approach to local manifestations of hip hop and the ways in which he sees it as a space for meaning. When I

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<sup>20</sup> <https://bavubuka.wordpress.com/about/>, accessed 29.4.2015; additional details here included from this website

<sup>21</sup> 22.12.2014, other quotes included from this interaction.

<sup>22</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/BGlobalIndigenousHipHop/>, accessed 13.4.2015

asked him about the commitment to Lugaflow and to activism through the genre, he said, “I grew up in a generation that was stripped of language, man, I (felt like I) really don't belong nowhere”. His first visit to Uganda was in 1995, at the age of fourteen for his father’s funeral. At the time, he connected to the music scene in Uganda, he went “clubbing, with a crew of 20”. Later, speaking about an occasion where, upon his return at the airport, his dreadlocks were met with disapproval, he feels that “even my own people don't like the way I look when I am coming home.” In spite of this, his visits back home facilitated a reconnection with a “chunk of Africa”.<sup>23</sup>

In reaction to growing up “stripped of language” and in the importance of Lugaflow as force for social change, Baba echoes Fanon, who states that being colonised by a language has larger implications for one’s consciousness: “To speak ... means above all to assume a culture, to support the weight of a civilisation” (1952, 17-18). Such an image is embodied through the practice of hip hop, within which lies the potential to become what he calls, a ‘movement’, for social justice through empowerment and education in Uganda. This is conceived as such in the recognition that formulations and constructions of knowledge have originated from spaces of power and privilege for a few, in a form of violence enacted upon the colonised (Fanon 1963). In Uganda, he sees the hip hop ‘practice’ as that which facilitates a knowledge of history, acknowledging the oppression of colonialism. Focusing on themes such as liberation and belief, he points towards the “ideology and formation” of thinkers such as Marcus Garvey and his belief of repatriation and returning to the continent, and in political leaders such as Patrice Lumumba and his role in Zaire’s freedom from colonialism.

This assertion is given weight by Babaluku’s own recounting of his sense of disenfranchisement and discomfort effected by experiences of racism, first, in what he calls, the colonial mentality in Uganda, and second, in his allusions to life in North America. This in turn lent itself to Babaluku’s particular focus which is on socio-economic fragility in everyday life in Uganda. This is a stand on Africa’s continued marginalisation, engendered, in his view, by slavery, colonialism and inequalities of global economic flows and structural violence, embodied in the statement, “(we think) our voices have no power because there are no powerful people to tell us we are powerful.” This is because of “the past 52 years of colonial mentality, (and) no beauty in being anything that looks like you...being black is

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<sup>23</sup> Interview, 22.12.2014. Additionally, all quotes in this chapter are included from this conversation

ugly, (you) work as a servant, (you are a) third class citizen.” This continues in a system both national and transnational, that gives you, “false information. (You) still look at your country as an ugly country... the system you working in does not instil a sense of pride, (or create) sustainability.” Instead, you are told “give them a food programme, everyone got you a programme.” On his life in North America, he laughs and says when you think of America you think of “beauty, gold etc... (you think you) got a bit of opportunity...you don't hear about the nightmare.” Coming back to Uganda was “my last option”. In spite of occupying a privileged place in Uganda because of his background, he “felt more at home in the ghetto,” because it had a “similar strength of the strife I knew from the other side.” After “11 years of going back to the concrete jungle, Africa was an escape for me, I was tired, I couldn't push anymore, I felt like I was failing at everything.”

For Babaluku, the association with hip hop is formed of two personal journeys of belonging. The first in his discovery of hip hop on “college radio” growing up in Canada. The second, in his homecoming back to Uganda and Africa. Linking both, he shared with me how he came to see his role as a hip hop performer; these were experiences, “formative experiences, (of) fighting to be, fighting to fit in, (means that) now I am comfortable anywhere”. These led to the realisation that, “it's my mind that matters...(this) gives you the opportunity to not sell yourself short.”

In the poses and performances that make up Babaluku's image, we find modes of clothing and embellishment that represent hip hop in the vocabulary of signs and symbols, fashioned in the evocation of resistance and emancipation through activism. Rather than “fake-ass bling”, however, Babaluku favours signs and symbols that signal an association with ideas of racial liberation and emancipation through colours and symbols used to embellish clothing and the body. Favouring dreadlocks down to his waist, he and those one encounters at the Bavubuka foundation wore T-shirts emblazoned with legends such ‘Power to the People’, and ‘Spoken Truth’, with graphics of soundsystems and urban cityscapes, printed through the initiative. Amongst other rappers who work with him through the foundation, one finds Zulu Nation medallions and African print tunics, complementing trainers or “kicks”, as they were called. Of particular ubiquity, are the Rastafarian colours of red, gold and green which featured prominently on wristbands and on detailing on loose fitting denim.

In the contemplation of Babaluku's image, symbols such as dreadlocks and the red, gold and green of Rastafari, are all deployed in the evoking of an ideal of hip hop in the specific context of the idea of Africa. The incorporation of these visual elements in the hip hop scene indicates a knowledge of resistance to racism through popular culture, through the signaling of motifs associated with Pan-African consciousness and pride (Henry 2012). The adoption of elements associated with Rastafarianism in the local hip hop scene shows how expressive musical cultures opens space for a worldview that fosters an affirmative consciousness and culture of belonging amongst the African diaspora (Henry 2012). This aspect, of an alternative conception of Africa as a space of knowledge and power, finds voice in discussions amongst younger rappers featured in the chapter on belonging, where I discuss the significance of why such modes are adopted in Uganda in greater detail through the critical analysis of ethnographic material. At this point, I would like to point out that locally, such modes act as an oppositional stance as the association with Rastafari encompasses the use of marijuana. This is considered deviant in Uganda's mainstream culture, which remains conservative and largely Christian. The word for a marijuana smoker is the same as that used to describe a madman. These connections are known to those in Uganda, and are used to signal an alterity, one that imbues those who adopt these stances with a superiority above those constrained within conventional expectations and understandings.

I would like to emphasise that just as Gasuza and Atlas deploy symbols in service of their image, signaling a knowledge of hip hop, so too does Babaluku, albeit in different ways. As Sasha Newell states, these are demonstrations of taste and knowledge such as in the choice of dress and comportment that are largely the purview of urban cosmopolitan individuals (2013). In a consideration of Babaluku, the obvious divergences between real and fake are less clear and more complex than they are with Gasuza and Atlas. Whereas Gasuza and Atlas rely on their awareness of the accoutrements of hip hop celebrity, Babaluku articulates and shares in the media and in life, a shunning of the trappings of capitalism through an engagement with narratives of emancipation and resistance. For Gasuza and Atlas, representation occurs through an image of hedonism and abandonment in the trappings of capitalist success.

Again, the uses of image here are less about exactitude and more about evocation. Within this dialectic of excess and activism, are evocations that lie as much in unreality as those of flamboyant materialism, in so far as they as they are removed from temporal circumstances



limited by time and place. The hip hop image that Babaluku inhabits and enacts is formed of representations based on a rhetoric of emancipation, rooted in imaginings of Africa. This, in turn is informed and expressed through a pride in Uganda's heritage, such as belief in ancestors and spiritual practices therein. In many ways, his image is that of a stylised rendition of Africa; it is one which leverages the traditional in its acknowledge of local belief, juxtaposed with a contemporary awareness of issues of social and economic paucity that marks Uganda. His image is that of hip hop pioneer, whose calling is based on an engagement with concerns such as the history of racial prejudice and colonial subjugation in relation to the African continent, and in contemporary economic and social inequality in Uganda. In pose and performance, these represent a disenchantment and frustration with power structures in Uganda, expressed through discussions on unemployment, poverty and corruption, articulated in interviews in the public sphere.

However, Lugaflow is still beholden to other genres on the charts, in so far as first, dancehall continues to dominate charts, followed by more 'commercial' hip hop artists. What is also important to note at this point, is that the terming of the Lugaflow Movement as such, as opposed to sub-genre or genre, points to a hope or ambition of widespread social change. This, as of this point in time remains nascent. Nonetheless, for this individual, hip hop came to represent the means to uplift. Here, hip hop forms an arbitration between forms of understanding and knowledge, all negotiated through disparity. For Babaluku, it articulates the need for a confrontation in the form of knowledge, rejecting submission and docility, in calculated resistance to subjugation and exploitation based on a colonial history of violence and continued capitalist exploitation. In his view is a rejection of the discourses of violence and materialism that dominate aspects of the genre and its popularity. Hence, he no longer "does (just) music". So whilst, for Gasuza and Atlas, their image appears to resonate with the spoils of capitalism, for Babaluku, it is a rejection of what it represents.

Babaluku presides over a band of younger rappers, who share similar articulations of these narratives, indicating a cultural influence like the conventional mogul and his 'posses'. Unlike the more conventional pose and performance of the mogul which relies on evocations of material plenitude, his persona is one that symbolises inclusion within hip hop through a resistance towards the spoils of capitalism. Nevertheless, his performative authenticity and authority comes from a knowledge and skill of hip hop, as performer and activist mogul-like in stature in Uganda, through both commercial success and cultural influence, bolstered by

the presence of a cabal of supporters and well-wishers, who were present at the Hip Hop Summit I discuss in the following chapter. Babaluku brings his own manner of conflict in the hip hop scene at odds with the framing of hip hop as a movement in Uganda. His precise fixation on *Lugaflow*, on his terms, has created a schism in hip hop in terms of alienating those who focus on aspects of spectacular consumption. The exact words of one rapper were, “we do music, not run a hip hop NGO.”<sup>24</sup>

From this contrast of intent, disagreements throw into relief how these Ugandan hip hop moguls project a sense of superiority of one over the other, understood through their preoccupations and concerns, with each figure representing one or more aspects of what hip hop can and should be in Uganda today. Babaluku, in his influence and in his work, has fashioned a unique hip hop space based on subjective understandings of hip hop in the context of activism for social justice in Uganda. From this perspective, Babaluku is Uganda’s activist hip hop mogul, and one who constructs an image most focused on the establishment of such a brand of hip hop. This, we find in Chapter 5, on branding, and in Chapter 6, which explores local hip hop amongst a younger generation. To Gasuza, Atlas and Babaluku, their image is a representation of how they approach their vocations. These strivings have less to do with the representation of a stable reality, but more to do with the invocation and imagining of opportunity, which are no less powerful for being so. This provides its own tension in the contemplation of social formations which I discuss in the subsequent section.

### **Social formations, simulation and the mogul**

In many ways, Mbembe and Newell are concerned with the juxtaposition of the corporeal and the ineffable. For the former, it is the interaction between the object of the mask and the power it symbolises. For the latter, it is the use of consumer brands and the financial success and economic mobility they symbolise. For both thinkers, we find how symbols and signs can be used to evoke the imagined and form the real through these elicitations. Through relations of similarity, the image is imbued with the ability to be more than it is, which is correct for these three individuals. How this takes place is through the creation of a space where, “the invisible was in the visible, and vice versa, not as a matter of artifice, but as one

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<sup>24</sup> a respondent who preferred to remain anonymous. 12.12.2016

and the same and as external reality simultaneously—as the image of the thing and the imagined thing, at the same time” (Mbembe 2001:152).

In this sense, the hip hop image I discuss functions as a simulacrum, but powerful for that reason. Here, narratives of transgression and rhetoric of emancipation must necessarily be conceived of in terms of performativity. In the image’s “potential for opacity, simulacrum, and distortion” (Mbembe 2001:142), through evocations of wealth or through exhortations for change, is a critique of everyday difficulties and struggles engendered by widespread social and economic hardship. Through this process, in negotiations with capitalism and its inequities, the hip hop mogul emerges as a symbol of social mobility and economic mediation (Smith 2003). First, because he creates spaces for narratives that are substantially less represented in the wider schemata of capitalism, such as Uganda’s which this project intends to provide through its interest in hip hop. Second, he brings the promise that it is possible to acquire the trappings of success, the terms of which he establishes on his own terms, through one’s music and art. Here, the Ugandan hip hop mogul is less constrained with the actuality of wealth and influence, but instead functions in a space where these capabilities are evoked through the apparent projection of forms of distinction. The mogul-like image thus constructed also shields from the viewer the actual difficulty musicians in Uganda have such as to get paid, as the country has no copyright laws to protect musicians.

This is not fakery, in the terms of *Kiwaani*, as Bobi Wine put it, in his song discussed in the literature review. The word itself means ‘fake’, and has come into use as popular word to describe something that is fraudulent or suspicious. Instead, Gasuza’s gilt chain is a visible depiction of imaginary wealth and status; as an affected adoption, it manages to convey and render these imaginings of success in real terms. The successful pose and performance, one which may well be rich with artistic license, requires not exactitude but imagination, both in the part of the viewer and the viewed. Clothed in signs and symbols, these images hold their power through acts of fantasy and imagination, both for the performer and the observer for this reason, regardless of accuracy of representation. Put another way, their relationship with hip hop is what crafts the image, in pose and performance, comprised of signs and symbols drawn from hip hop and the mythologies encoded into it. The image serves as metaphor, but one which, in its figurative faculty, provides a power of projection, not least because it is a demonstration of cultural knowledge and taste in a hip hop pose and performance.

As stated earlier, in Uganda, one encounters profound social and economical inequality. Against this paucity, hip hop now presents its own plenitude of opportunity for fashioning new or unusual perspectives for change. This is made possible through individual relationships with hip hop, conveyed through self-fashionings, in turn, based on deserving distinctiveness. Because of this, the “moguls vision of gilded glory” (Smith 2013:680), in Uganda and elsewhere, in its apparent opulence is competitive and exclusive. It is for the few marked by talent and prestige, regardless of the means by which they acquire these qualities. In Uganda, the motif of the mogul now serves as effective identification, packaging and symbolic management of an expressive culture. He becomes a tangible hip hop manifestation of intangible hopes and dreams, of successful strivings made so through this deserving advantage. This is a form of branding, and one I discuss in detail in the next chapter, where the Ugandan hip hop mogul captures a charge in the ability to draw in disparate sensibilities and spheres, as the three individuals shown here do, in their images of excess, of being hard-core, of being activists with a more evolved and enlightened world view.

Thus, in representational terms the image of the mogul in Ugandan hip hop is one which captures the packaging of possibility through the suggestion of exceptionality. Because of this capability, there is a social and economic dimension to mogul’s strivings as they act as lens through which one can consider issues including social identity, opportunity and mobility and the ideological tensions inherent to these. The Ugandan hip hop mogul, like the ‘real’ moguls of the hip hop world thus, reveals a complex multifacetedness of position. He becomes a sublimation of social possibility (Smith 2003). This is because he serves as first, as a symbol of the multitudes of ordinary people, but one whom is managed to go several steps further in influence and respect from these throngs. The image that these three individuals project could all cynically be considered a simulated reference to constituencies in order to frame a performative authenticity. First, the symbols that generate and emanate from social recognition can arguably be deployed in service of those individuals and groups, such as the group of motorcycle taxi drivers cheering Gasuza on, who do not occupy similar standings in terms of mass mediation and cultural influence, but also to gain their support.

Here, I would like to emphasize that both renditions of image, on the one hand, celebrating materialism, and on the other in resistance to it, originate from the same place. They are cast against a reality where many do not have the tools to acquire this reflexivity and movement. In the first preoccupation, an aspiration towards mobility and acquisition as markers of

prestige can only gain credibility in comparison to those with less. In the second, one can only be in a position to challenge materialism *after* you have the ability to put a square meal a day in your belly. In other words, the luxury of such preoccupations only comes when you occupy a space above those living on a subsistence level. On the basis of this relationship, the preoccupations underlying Uganda's hip hop moguls may seem disassociated but exist in simultaneous and plentifully layered capacities, and only thus, because of the paucity of material wealth that marks everyday life for most in Uganda.

As a result of this, I argue that this is an 'utopian' fixation that represents materialist preoccupations whilst taking into account a disenfranchisement of lifestyle and community. A fixation with capitalist "commodity culture and upward social mobility" (Smith 2003:679) such as those insinuated in the image of Atlas and Gasuza only comes from the realisation that for most there is very little. Conversely, a fascination with capitalism can take the form of vociferous criticism such as Babaluku's. Atlas, Gasuza and Babaluku, like the mogul, might and do offer critique of those in less rarefied spaces from their own vantage points of exceptionality. This is a marriage of social mobility and social change, which shows the figure of the mogul as one that symbolises inclusion within and resistance towards the mainstream. This is in part because in these spaces of social formation, individuals form part of various communities, which are part and parcel of a wider social field, but at the same time they are excluded from wider formations of prestige and stature in the creation and arbitration of knowledge and influence. Consider the place of Ugandan hip hop on a global scale. It does not exist in representation, but in Uganda, I encountered tracks, such as those whose videos I discuss in chapter 7, that would fit in sound and imagery with those on global hip hop charts. For Gasuza, Atlas and Babaluku, an apparent superiority in terms of their association with Ugandan hip hop also comes from a diasporic identity. Here, lived diasporic experience is important, and this is an aspect I will discuss in the next section.

The mogul therefore appears to transcend the harshness and rupture from whence he has emerged. From these origins and trajectories, the mogul can only remain a success if he is able to "adapt the volatile images of the street he will cease to exist as a viable figure of commercial and cultural enterprise" (Smith 2003:682). The street in the case of my case studies is composed of Uganda in dialogue with North America, filtered through their subjective experiences, rendered in the "accents of America's various ghetto" (Smith

2003:679) formations, all of which the three individuals I discuss have numbered part of, as refugees, migrants and as young black men.

This, along with social formations viewed from the frames of inclusion and exclusion, in the creation and arbitration of knowledge and influence leads one to discussions on the diasporic in relation to hip hop. As this chapter has shown, experiences such as these have contributed towards self-fashioning in image, based as they are on distinction through cultural knowledge. From this final statement, I would like to move this discussion to the consideration of self-fashioning, informed by the consumption of hip hop in relation to the nature of diasporic identity, and how this can, like negotiations between real and fake, be viewed as an expressive and constructive creative and social process.

### **Diasporic imaginings and global self/s**

Against this backdrop, for the three individuals I discuss, self-fashioning in the form of image is rendered in credible terms because it is fashioned of signs and language; the elements and markers it uses connects these forms with specific knowledge and culture, through arrangements of meaning taken from hip hop. Amongst these individuals, the image thus, can be seen as dependent on an evocation of status, through first, symbols that, on the one the hand, signify the trappings of material success, and on the other, others that signal resistance and emancipation.

In all three cases, each divergent pose is given weight through a sort of ‘street-cred’ established through the demonstration of cultural knowledge and taste in a hip hop pose and performance that resonates through these symbols. Most crucially, in accounts of their personal histories one finds in their image an implication of accuracy drawn from lived experience as musical members of a mobile diaspora. Hip hop in Uganda serves as both mediascape and ethnoscape, where in the case of the former we see a confabulation of effect. Here, in case of the image of each of these men, the real and fictional are blurred, where self-fashioning can be understood through a dialogue with “imagined worlds, which are chimerical aesthetic, even fantastic objects” (Appadurai 1990:299). Hip hop serves as that magical, fantastical space, where to those who experience it and transform it, as producers and consumers, it provides a plenitude of elements such as characters, plots and textual

forms, such as Gasuza's reminiscing about hip hop stars and celebrities, In Atlas' calling out of places, goods and brands, and in Babaluku's construction of Pan-African hip hop worldview of racial pride and resistance to oppression. From this plenitude emerges "imagined lives, their own and others living in other places", in form of image, working as "proto-narratives of possible lives", fantasies which form and focus the desire for acquisition and movement (*ibid.*). This shows us how in the image is self-fashioning capable of challenging and negotiating forms of plenitude, in the form of tangible success and intangible imaginings, in relation to wider social and economic paucity.

Linked to this, in the diasporic nature of the lives of these three individuals we find hip hop acting as ethnoscape; it is a site where we find plentiful processes and practices, mobilising identities, shifting and negotiated, finding voice and vision through the imagination of deterritorialised viewers to create diasporic public spheres (Appudurai 1996). Ramnarine argues that "musical practice is a way of dislodging the essentialisms that shape how people think of themselves" (2007:14); it has a representational ambiguity, which enables multiple interpretations. In these acts of individual representation and interpretation through musical endeavours, are fashioned narratives of belonging, made up equally of subjective experiences of history and politics, and imaginings made of the encounters with "sounds circulating in transnational spaces, increasingly transmitted through a variety of media" (2007:13). Thus, Ramnarine correctly asserts, "in the diaspora, people often feel connections to places in which they both do and do not live" (2007:6).

These callings towards a sense of belonging find voice in Gasuza's reminiscing about the hip hop career he almost had, and in Babaluku's yearning for a homeland where, upon arriving he still found himself cast as the 'Other', and in Atlas' calling out to the affluent neighbourhoods he frequents today while boasting about the 'hood he has successfully evaded. In Uganda's hip hop scene, I found that people hold those connections to the past, to fashion imaginings of a present, in a packaging of possibility for the future. The phrase packaging of possibility has been serendipitously used by both Ramnarine (2007:17) in her work on forms of belonging in the diaspora, and by Smith (2003) on the hip hop mogul and his ascendancy as a figure of success, to discuss the ways in which individuals locate themselves and their aspirations in wider social formations through music, albeit viewed from different frames.

What links the two is the suggestion of successful self-fashioning through musical practice and in the social processes thus, encompassed. In the harnessing of multiple subjectivities which transcend both time and place, such self-fashioning challenges, in agreement with Ramnarine, “static formulations of identity and the polarities of either inclusion and exclusion” (2007:6). Moving beyond theorisations of identity construction and the politics of cultural practices in terms of the ‘in-between’, the hybrid (Bhabha 1994) or the ‘intercultural’ (Barucha 2001). Ramnarine argues that “musical practice as a way of dislodging the essentialisms that shape how people think of themselves” (2007:14).

Returning to Perry’s estimation of hip hop as an aesthetic with a global emotive force, I observed over my field research, how narratives of struggle, upliftment and resistance resonated with my stakeholders, along with an identification with a black musical culture, all of which are aspects capably incorporated into hip hop as an expressive culture. Perry (2008) discusses this in terms of Raymond Williams’ shared structure of feeling (1977), to contextual issues of racial affinity, articulation and belonging. He states that hip hop can be seen “globally is an increasingly important conduit for just all kinds of transnational black identification and emergent subjectivities that have historically constituted the African diaspora as a lived social formation” (Perry 2008:297). Perry makes the case that the performative contours of hip hop mobilise “notions of black self in ways” that are “contested and transcendent of nationally bound hegemonically prescriptive racial framings”, and is thus, “paramount if not vitally constitutive of such black self fashions” (2008:295). While attributing hip hop with such sweeping powers may be overstating the case, Perry correctly attributes its influence in part to its hyper commodification as a global cultural form. Moving beyond questions of cultural consumption and reproduction, he argues that the making of “black diasporic subjects in and of themselves” (*ibid.*) is a function of hip hop’s expanding global reach as a commodified cultural form, which in turn has a role to play in the construction and understanding of identity.

I would like to focus this discussion on consumption and self-fashioning, informed by identity as a personal conception of one’s individuality. Here, the assertion that consumption is an “open- ended project of self creation” (Taylor 2000:65, see also Warde 1997, cf. Taylor 2014), is useful along with Grant McCracken’s idea of “expansionary individualism” (2008:293) to contextualise these fashionings. This is the act of consuming various identities in a process of self-transformation; these are “transformational routines,” by which he means



“set of conventions by which an individual is changed” (McCracken 2008:xxii). A focus on the postmodern indicates transformations that “open up new kinds of multiplicity and fluidity to the individual” (McCracken 2008:xxiii). The ‘post-modern’ self is an entity that possesses certain attributes, all of which are appropriate in considering the hip hop performers I discuss. These are as follows: first, the self is porous as is the world, where individuals move across categories of time, space, and cultures. Second, individuals see themselves capable of creating and narrating their selfhood, with the right and ability to negotiate the cultural categories that define them. The performativity inherent in the image of each of these individuals signals movement across boundaries and cultures, in their choice of attire, the narratives in their music and in the American inflections of their accents. These individuals are fashioned of many selves, in a construction that favours exploration over authenticity in any one, yet comprised of subjective experiences at different times and different places as diasporic entities. Such processes of transformation are motivated by factors, some agential or free and others that are forced (McCracken 2008:306, cf. Taylor 2014:68).

The idea of force and transformation as crucial to the emergence of this global self become particularly evocative when one considered the forced migration present in the histories of the individuals this chapter discusses. It is from these forced global excursions that Gasuza, Atlas and Babaluku encountered hip hop in the terms that they did, fashioning their contemporary image in a self composed of such encounters in, as stated earlier, the accents of America’s various ghetto formations. How these individuals framed these encounters in their own minds came from a space of self empowerment and focused self invention, successfully differentiating these myriad experiences as aspects of their image in the contemporary Ugandan hip hop space.

In Uganda, hip hop thus serves as a signifier of a visualised musical identity for individuals and communities, a relationship which, in the case of Gasuza, Atlas and Babaluku, originated largely on account of diasporic movements of individuals, families and communities on account of civil war. Here, Paul Gilroy’s scholarship on interactions and negotiations of power and agency becomes useful. The reflexivity and reinvention that marks the social reality of diaspora functions as identification and communicative interchange (Gilroy 1993, Henry 2012). Hip hop, via the social workings of the diaspora, becomes a “productive technology in the current global mapping and moving of black political imaginaries” marshalling transnationally attuned identities in the making of “diasporic subjects to the

performative lens of hip hop” (Perry 2008:310). In this, hip hop is a powerful means of the construction and articulation of identities, which I map through self-fashioning, in turn influencing and shaping contemporary forms of diasporic consciousness and subjectivity, underlined by understandings of belonging. Within this frame, through Ugandan hip hop, we find, “new sounds inspired by their new environments”, rendering in tangible terms, “overlapping domains of complex geographies and temporalities of belonging” (Ramnarine 2007:12). More specifically, we find the use of the concept of ‘mobilised diaspora’ (Edwards 2001), which here privileges the agential and active framing of globally conscious subjects and social movements, in a process that it is not dissimilar to McCracken’s global self, discussed earlier.

As a result, I argue that this contemplation of a global self, at the very outset, requires one to view the nature of the diasporic as a space of belonging, given voice through musical practices. I draw on Ramnarine’s argument (2007), which instead of viewing these forced excursions in terms of “dispossession, disconnection, fragmentation or fracture” (5), states that we recognise that musical practices provide us with a potent space for “telling stories about connections and particularities” (*ibid.*). Here, we find, an “aesthetic, expressive and performance medium”, which allows us to interrogate, through a contemplation of the diasporic imagination, “complex question about boundaries, identities and politics” (Ramnarine 2007:12).

The diasporic experiences and imaginings seen through the lens of hip hop, composed in the biographies of the three individuals I discuss all point to a sense of agency borne of global migration and encounters. For Atlas, it is in his name. Gasuza declared on one occasion, “you could throw me in Iceland and I’d still fit in<sup>25</sup>”, and for Babaluku, Africa became home additionally because elsewhere failed to be. Here, we find self-fashioning, in terms of attitude, clothing and image as “a medium for working through the complex experience of moving in and out of multiple social contexts and identities while at the same time offering a symbolic universe for the construction of personal identity and character” (Erlmann 1996:257), where hip hop becomes a symbolic universe of richness and depth. These self-fashionings form global mappings via the dynamics of diasporic fashionings of identity and belonging, multilayered in a plenitude of diversity and difference, yet united by hip hop.

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<sup>25</sup> Discussion, Hip Hop Summit, 22.12.2014

Finally, McCracken concludes his discussion on self and transformation with the emergence of a new 'global self'. This self is one which seeks new definitional choices, "credulous in trying them on, mobile in its incorporation of diverse and improbable materials, adroit in its embrace of several at once, skilful in managing the portfolio of selves that is the result, and sturdy enough to live with the ideational and emotional turbulence that must ensue" (2008:293 cf. Taylor 2015:68-69). Thus, this global self is one which is a "presumptuous self, seeing itself as a master of its own fate, as the author of its own circumstances, as the rightful inventor of the self. It claims all experience as its province, all definitions of the self as its domain" (2008:294 cf. Taylor 2015:69). This is a brave assertion, and one that puts much caveat in the individual and architect of one's destiny; it does indeed, hold a version of truth in it, if the success of these three individuals as hip hop artists, in musical and in social life in Uganda is anything to go by.

Taylor is insightful in pointing out that McCracken's "supremely agential self" (2015:69), seems the purview of those privileged to belong in the middle classes and above. Correct and astute in this observation, he states that such transformations and explorations remain the luxury of those with economic capital enough to create and narrate themselves in this manner, particularly when viewing these acts from the perspective of consumption of identities. Gasuza, Atlas and Babaluku may have struggled with experiences of marginalisation as young men; at this point however, they remain firmly as part of Uganda's elite, through birth as well as through the artistic and commercial status and influence they have. It is also worthwhile to note that the confidence and belief I encountered in underlying these Ugandan 'global self/s', belonging only came from a space of non-belonging, of a loss of a conception of a home, wherever that was, changed and changing but still part of one, throwing into relief considerations of imbalanced relations of power between people, be it in local privilege or global marginalisation.

Here, Perry's assertion that the performative lens of hip hop operates as a key paradigm of identity and politics is indeed correct. In this way, relating musical forms to concurrent social processes is not only a means by which one can understand the historicity of social and political change through narratives in musical texts and forms, but also a way in which one can perceive multiple histories that depend on the subject positions and varied experiences of those involved (Turino 2000). As I have shown in this chapter, from such an awareness

emerges an agential framing of self in the context of hip hop. Thus, in Ugandan hip hop, from the fragility of exile and loss in the past, comes a resilience of the present and the packaging of future possibility.

### **Multiplicities of consciousness**

In conclusion, each artist I discuss directs his image, focused on distinctiveness, in a management that reflects his own subjective fashioning of self. These attributes all convey a larger than life perception, mogul-like in its representation. This allows us to first, consider such representations as insight into social formations in Uganda posed around a fragility borne of negotiations between plenitude and paucity. Second, in these individual biographies, hip hop, in production and consumption, acts as site for the articulation of lived diasporic experience, revealing self-framing and fashioning that points towards the emergence of a global self.

This supremely confident global self, borne of the consumption of hip hop identities, free or forced as the case may be, when juxtaposed against the hip hop mogul comes to represent a commodity culture with the spectacular aura of racial and ethnic authenticity (Smith 2003:684). He is a “speculative con”, the “disciplined self-made man” (Smith 2003:681), in that his power comes from articulating a quest for commercial acquisition and cultural influence in the vocabulary of the street, leveraging this quest off the very conditions he hopes to escape whilst valorising them. Such preoccupations reveal him to be, what what Smith refers to “as an entrancing figurehead of racial double consciousness with the capitalist twist” (*ibid.*). This critique, as speculative con within a fabric of double consciousness applies to the three men I discuss to some extent, with their experiences in North America intrinsic to and underlying the precise manner in which each is able to leverage their distinctive hip hop image in Uganda.

However, based on Newell and Mbembe’s critique on the role of image as an exercise in productive subterfuge and the inherent capability and enjoyment in hip hop I found amongst these men, I challenge the pessimism of Smith’s double consciousness with a capitalist twist. This is because, in these negotiations lie, as Ramnarine states, “the experiences and articulations of a plural, changing consciousness that shape diasporic subjectivities.” This in

turn might lead to different ways of thinking about belonging together” (2007:5-6). Her reference to ‘consciousness’ points towards understanding it as a political concept through which people “claim their rights to belong, not just to ‘homelands’ left, but ‘homelands’ inhabited” (2007:5). Drawing on Du Bois’s notion of ‘double consciousness’ as the “peculiar sensation’ of ‘always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others’, of feeling ‘two-ness” (2008 [1903]), she makes a case for diasporic identification and interrogation of cultural and ethnic boundaries, which in negotiation provides both a tangible link to the past and an agential grasp of the future and its potential. This lends itself to a “contemporary variation” of ‘double consciousness, where we might view these transformations as those in the realm of ‘multiple subjectivity’. Ramnarine outlines this as a “concept that emphasises process, practice and experience”; from this perspective, diaspora becomes “a practice in which multiple subjectivities are rehearsed and experienced” (2007:5-6). Thus, this multiplicity, which she also conceives of in terms of ‘multi-local belonging’ (Ramnarine 1996), emphasises the permeability of boundaries and identities.

Based on such interactions and gauged from my encounters in the field, I did not find a two-ness amongst the individuals I discuss, rather a multiple reflexivity of approach, expressed in a wholeness of self-fashioning, comprised of myriad experiences, which then evoked a sense of belonging in one’s music and in life. Due to this, the hip hop image I found amongst these men challenges Bhabha’s view that the “access to the image of identity is only ever possible in the negation of any sense of originality or plenitude” (1994:51). Rather, these processes of displacement and differentiation act not as liminal spaces, as Bhabha asserts but actual spaces of hip hop belonging, measured through cultural influence and commercial success, constrained no doubt by the vagaries of Uganda’s music industry, but nonetheless as tangible as the weight of Gasuza’s faux-Versace ‘swag’, Atlas’ weekly appearances on a Monday at Deuces, and in Babaluku’s continuing fashioning of Uganda’s Lugaflow movement.

The use of image thus, is a means to gather multiple states of belonging such as those embodied in McCracken’s global self, I provide Fredric Jameson’s “broken, fractured shadow of a man” (cf. McRobbie 1994:26). I do this in argument not agreement. The consumption of contemporary commercialised leisure in the forms of images, ideas and objects in hip hop could indicate disintegration, and in reflection taking the form of a schizophrenic subject. Instead, what I found is not a fragmented self but rather, a successful self-fashioning, acting as consolidations and constructions of experience, with stylistic

markers serving as confections and inflections of representation. No doubt, these interactions between self and image while influential are inherently unstable and tenuous, and therefore function in the realm of fragility, in that they are not static, but rather, act as representations of a state of shifting awareness. The power of the image here, comes from a plenitude of personal narratives that have struggled against a paucity of inclusion and legitimation. The need for participation in the social order is expressed variously through material acquisition or through activism in the pursuit of social justice. Such strivings, which we can locate through self-fashioning, challenge ideas of fragmentation and fragility, not least on account because of the capability and resilience they evoke in dealing with rupture and discord one finds in Uganda, in the hip hop scene and in daily life.

Finally, against Jameson, Stuart Hall makes the compelling case that it is precisely this decentring of consciousness encountered in his own experience, which allowed his own sense of black identity to emerge strongly. Here, lending weight to McCracken's conception of a global self, he says, "Now that, in the postmodern age, you all feel so dispersed I become centred. What I've thought of as dispersed and fragmented comes, paradoxically, to be the representative modern condition! This is coming home with a vengeance" (McRobbie 1994:10). The image of the three men I discuss, here indicates a representation of precisely this sort of home-coming and belonging, formed of diasporic lived experience and the plentiful consumption of hip hop, in turn, fostering a mapping of a global self against the framework of hip hop culture. This is, in Uganda, sustained by a mogul-like self-fashioning. Such representations are powerful in that they expose questions of social and economic inequity, whilst revealing individual attempts at apprehending and negotiating the fragilities engendered by this inequity.

With this mind, I show how image finds enactment in the following chapter, critically discussed through perspectives from branding. Viewing hip hop as both culture and brand, I provide ethnographic interrogations of studios, nightclubs and gigs in Kampala, in spaces where each of these Ugandan hip hop moguls calls their own. Through this, I show how these enactments similarly point us toward potent negotiations of social and economic fragility through self-fashioning, in a dialogic relationship between plenitude and paucity.

## Chapter 5

### Branding hip hop in Uganda

#### **“the infernal noise of music from discotheques and bars”<sup>26</sup>**

This chapter provides the argument that hip hop functions as a brand in Uganda. The image described in the preceding chapter is formed of distinct attributes, mapped through style, imagery, narrative and sound located through hip hop pose and performance. These subsequently find enactment in social life and in musical life. This takes place in a manner similar to branding, which is based on the creation of distinctiveness in relation to systems of meaning; this, one can locate in the forms of sonic features, modes of clothing, and in acts of performativity in musical and in social life, encompassing associations which are both musical and social. In this capacity, I describe how hip hop artists, both individual and collective, act as differentiated brands within this wider system under the aegis of organisations such as record labels, specific performance initiatives and through associations with nightclubs. This is based on the understanding that hip hop acts as a brand of culture which lends itself to forms of belonging for those involved in Uganda, mapped in this chapter through branding, the uses of which form the focus of the following chapter.

In this chapter, the argument that Ugandan hip hop acts as a brand is mapped through specific associations with hip hop as culture, made tangible and engaging in enactment, in musical and social life. This is a leveraging of recognition from differentiation, manifested in the curating of characteristics and characters who populate it (Wheeler 2012, [2009]). The Ugandan hip hop brands I discuss here are variously expressed and enacted through activism and hedonism, showing self-fashioning through consumption, in and through hip hop culture.

Thus, beginning first with the idea that hip hop in Uganda functions as its own brand or system of meaning, I show how ethnographic material builds on biographical data presented in the previous chapter, integrated with data from interviews where relevant, showing negotiations of social and economic fragility through self-fashioning, in a dialogic relationship between plenitude, in the form of musical and social life and wider social and

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<sup>26</sup> Achille Mbembe, 2001, *On the Post Colony*, p.47

economic issues of paucity. In service of this argument, I share accounts from Rogue Elephant studio, where Gasuza was co-partner at the time, at Deuces nightclub, where Atlas continues to host Hip Hop Mondays, and finally, the Annual Hip Hop Summit in 2014, organised by Babaluku's Bavubuka Foundation. This forms a Ugandan brand of hip hop which conveys associations with hip hop as a wider culture in emotionally convincing terms, expressed and enacted through activism and excess as the case may be. In this way, this chapter will show that the idea of a hip hop brand can be extended to an abundance of musical collectives in service of activism and social justice as well as commercial enterprises as these act of forms of differentiation, mobilised to gain recognition amongst audiences, consumers and producers.

As stated earlier, in Uganda, paucity marks the structural conditions one encounters in every day life. In stark contrast, is a plenitude of recording studios. There is a plenitude of social spaces such as nightclubs for the enjoyment of music in the form of live performances and recorded music events. And finally, digital technologies available through mobile telephony, allow individuals to create their own plenitude of sound and image. All this works in representation of hip hop in Uganda through an evocation of differentiated capability in a space of material fragility. The question of fragility is apprehended here, through acts of meaning through and in hip hop, which additionally work as resistance to circumstances of paucity, through rejection or confrontation. Against Uganda's economic paucity, I show a social plenitude, where the aim is to gain a better life through an aspiration towards distinctiveness.

The interrogation of image in the preceding chapter is developed further through ethnographic accounts of events and happenings. Each of the three individuals discussed previously, Gasuza, Atlas and Babaluku, serves as focal figure in these happenings. This allows us to observe and comprehend how hip hop in Uganda acts as a brand based on musical and social connections, built on a shared system of meaning in order to provide a distinctive identity. Thus, the concerns inherent to this chapter are the social relationships and interactions occurring in creative spaces aimed towards the production of first, a distinctive hip hop commodity, in form of tracks, videos and live performances.

The aim here to to explore social and musical spaces where the image discussed previously finds enactment, and what that reveals about the spaces these enactments occur in. Vital to



this fabric are individuals and celebrities, or “stars, megastars” (Taylor 2015:15), whose success allows them to live and represent the forms of attainment valorised in this Ugandan hip hop milieu, such as those articulated in the preceding chapter. I refer here to hip hop’s twin preoccupations of economic gain and social justice. Uganda’s hip hop scene has its own renditions of stardom and aspiration towards such success, enhanced or diminished as this chapter will show, depending on performances of whom is watching whom and to what ends. The emphasis thus revealed returns us to dialogic interactions between plenitude and paucity and the actions those in the hip hop scene take to manifest a better life for themselves.

Building on the previous chapter of image, this argument is aimed first, in part, to elucidate further the theme of self-fashioning through consumption. Like in the previous chapter, we find that while the twin aspirations of celebrity and excess, and activism and social justice fail to emerge in the scale and depth that those involved would wish to see it, the hip hop space is nonetheless one that provides fertile ground for self-fashioning in a wider social and economic context of inequity and fragility.

### **Rogue Elephant**

I begin first with an ethnographic account of an evening at Rogue Elephant studio and its personnel. This was my first introduction to the hip hop scene in Uganda. It was the 17<sup>th</sup> of November 2014 and I had arrived in Kampala to conduct my field research. I had just met my first point of contact, a lady called Pamela Reynell, who goes by the name of Mys Natty. She has had a varied career, initially fronting one of Kampala’s best known reggae bands, the Blood Brothers. At this point in her musical career, she had been involved with singing the ‘hooks’ for several hip hop tracks in collaboration with Atlas da African and Gasuza. The three have had a personal friendship of long standing, the dynamics of which formed the cornerstone of a creative relationship too.

Mys Natty and I joined Gasuza and Atlas at a bar called Wine Garage in Muyenga, an affluent part of Kampala. Several others were present including EasyTex Peter, a sound engineer and now, producer, who worked at Rogue Elephant and has had a decade long career working with hip hop stars as well as dancehall superstars such as Bobi Wine, Bebe Cool and Jose Chameleone. After introductions and a few drinks, we drove to the studio. On

the way, a USB stick with rough mixes of current tracks was played on the car stereo, with much excited and good humoured discussion on how to improve them. These mixes sounded complete on the car stereo, particularly the track *Party Tonight*, featuring Mys Natty and Gasuza, which I discuss in chapter 7, along with its video. Slickly produced, there was an attention to details in the clarity of the overall sound, including the basic beat, and the harmonic and melodic features that inflected it. This supported and bolstered the vocal hook, making for a simple but catchy tune clearly designed for the dance floor through the use of a syncopated electronic rhythmic structure.

Rogue Elephant Studio is located in the basement of Nakumatt Oasis Mall in Kampala City Centre. It is a shopping mall, named eponymously after the 24-hour supermarket located in it. This studio is placed as a brand within a brand, though this was not planned. Rogue Elephant was co-owned by Gasuza and an individual who runs Pearl of Africa Travels, built from social associations. The decision to refer to the studio as a brand is one that I have not imposed upon it, rather it was the term used by Gasuza and his associates<sup>27</sup>. The studio has a logo, or a brand identity comprised of a visual of a stylized elephant which features in signage on the space, in music videos and in the form of call-outs in tracks produced here, forming the basis of a visible, recognisable brand identity in and through sound and imagery. In the case of the former, this brand identity is clearly expressed through a sample of the sound of an elephant trumpeting in each of track produced by Gasuza. In the case of the latter, we find the logo of the studio featured at the conclusion of music videos similarly produced, examples of which I share in chapter 7.

Rogue Elephant advertises itself as a creative agency for film, photography and music. Gasuza himself, as stated in the previous chapter, is also a well-known music video director and photographer and the business relies on these services through commercial contracts. The studio space itself is small, there is a desk with a computer and equipment and a microphone, all enclosed by walls painted a deep red. There is a small reception, the wall of which displays photographs of musicians, all of which were shot by Gasuza. There is a landing above the studio space, where several more MacBooks are placed.

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<sup>27</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vMR3-b66bnM>, published 7.11.2014, this is a virtual tour of the studio for a local television station.

Gasuza refers to this studio as ‘the cube’, a name I will use in this text too, and spends most of his time there, ostensibly recording music. It also serves as a space for people to ‘hang out’ in, with beers and marijuana cigarettes being passed around regardless of people rehearsing or recording. The mall security personnel turn a blind eye to the comings and going.

The tracks being produced at this time made use of a variety of sampling software and vocals with no live instrumentation at all. That evening, producer, Gasuza and sound engineer, Eazytex get to work refining the beats for the track. Working on an iMac, they used Traktor DJ software. I understood that this software package, developed by Native Instruments, afforded the artists with facilities such as looping, effects, beat detection and automatic synchronisation of tracks along with a 4-channel mixer. On this occasion, samples formed the basis of the sonic structure of the track, including a selection from the American hip hop group, the Neptunes. In many ways, this formed the foundation of the Rogue Elephant sound as well, which is slickly produced and reminiscent of hip hop from the East Coast of the States in the early-to-mid 2000s. In many ways, this choice is a reflection of Gasuza’s experiences in hip hop in New York shared in the last chapter, where he also completed an undergraduate degree at NYU.

Krims in *Rap music and the poetics of identity*, states that “the sonic organisation of rap music—both the rapping itself and the musical tracks that accompany it—is directly and profoundly implicated in rap’s cultural workings (resistant or otherwise), especially in the formation of identities’ (2000:2). This is true in this case, as one could infer that Rogue Elephants signature sound reflects Gasuza’s own diasporic experience in hip hop described in the preceding chapter. As such, it serves as a link between his musical past and present, subtly presenting an expression of Gasuza’s own ‘global’ hip hop identity in this capacity. Here, Gasuza and Easytex, sample and therefore, borrow ‘segments’ to fashion and structure a sonic organisation. This interaction is similar to Justin A. Williams theorising on the nature of what he terms ‘imagined communities’ in hip hop (2013). Arguing that such formations comprise of the genre’s foundations, these communities are interpretative communities, which bring their own experiences to the understanding and creation of hip hop texts in interactions that include listening, creating and interpreting (2014).

Similarly, the use of samples from the Neptunes does not take away from the creative practice of crafting the song, because as Shusterman states, ‘[a]rtistic appropriation is the

historical source of hip-hop music and still remains the core of its technique and a central feature of its aesthetic form and message' (2000:202, cf. Williams 2014). Here, borrowing and sampling are an integral component of hip hop sonic texts, and rather than limiting or generic in their capabilities, instead provide artists with a plenitude of sonic resources to draw on and use as they see fit.

In Uganda, there is exists a strong tradition of live music as shown in the literature review in Chapter 2. However, studio space and time can be limited and therefore, expensive, and smaller studios such as Rogue Elephant can use such digital tools of appropriation to demonstrate and fashion their own sonic signature. Here, sampling has arguably transformed the making and listening of music (Williams 2014), because such appropriation takes the form of a plenitude of possibilities in sonic organisation, substantiated by similar potentialities in rhythmic structure. Like in Gasuza's image discussed in the previous chapter, the focus lies not in mimicry, or real opposed to fake. Instead, a more cogent view is one where digital technology allows for the curation of sonic attributes, similar to the choices made in personal fashion and style, for example. So, in Uganda's hip hop scene, if one can afford digital software, one may harness a plenitude of possible sounds, in negotiation of say, a paucity of rehearsal spaces, time and resources in the form of fees for backing musicians. For Rogue Elephant, such potentialities have allowed the studio to form its own brand in sound and image.

I will discuss exactly how it functions as brand, taking into account, musical and social activities, a little later in this text. On this occasion, I would like to assert that, the beat provided a solid anchor in the form of rhythmic structure. The only jarring addition was the use of keys in the intro, which dated the entire track as this brought to mind generic pop from the 90s, and when asked, I said so. Later that evening, this sample was removed, as the artists reached the agreement that a more stripped back sonic arrangement would allow the hook and bars to stand out.

Mys Natty records the hook for this track several times, until the producers and her are satisfied. Easytex plays the segment of track over and over again until he is satisfied with the sound. Atlas Da African is writing verses for the rap over it. On this occasion, all appear to have an excellent working relationship, and they obtain the results they need quite quickly with Eazytex reassuring Mys Natty, as she records her vocals several times, "just be easy,

feel the music”. At the same time, discussions between Easytex and Gasuza are intense but a sense of levity is provided in their conversation with gentle insults being exchanged, such as Gasuza implying he was sick of circular discussions, with the statement “for ten hours a day I see his face”, and Easytex finally deferring to Gasuza’s creative directions with the statement, “I am just the cleaner here.”

We step out for a cigarette. By now, it is quite late, after 2 AM. Stepping out of studio is a view of the deserted car park, where a lone janitor is sweeping the dust of the day. Gasuza muses, “look at him, sweeping the dust, it just lands in the same place...that’s all that we do in Uganda, sweep the dust and it lands where it was in the first place”. To this, Mys Natty replies, “you need to sweep the dust to keep things clean, and then the next day again, rather than just let it sit there.” This exchange encapsulated the creative processes and commercial struggles as a whole in Kampala, where on one hand, musicians attempt to produce of a credible body of work and on the other, where the odds of ‘making it big’ are slim, but nonetheless, one keeps trying. At Rogue Elephant, the studio has a roster of musicians who record there, and it also provides music production services for hire, but until now, regardless of the individual success of these personalities, the brand has not been able to have a break out hit all of its own.

What appears to make sense of these fragile circumstances in the context of personal success are personas and lifestyles that suggest the hedonism of mainstream hip hop attainment as represented by the hip hop mogul. Based around these self-fashionings is the creation of a lived experience of the kind of musical accomplishment and attainment that has thus far, proven elusive in reality but is nonetheless potent in evocation and enjoyment. The studio is, at the end, a creative space from the production of first, a hip hop commodity, in the form of tracks and videos; second, it forms an association with a hip hop culture that thrives in performances and narratives of mainstream success, in evocations of wealth and power, such as those presented in Gasuza’s own image. Linking the two is a range of social relations, which one may locate through the ethnographies included here, such as in the social relations revealed by EasyTex’s deference to Gasuza’s creative direction.

However, from this juxtaposition, reducing Rogue Elephant’s creative output as mere commodity fails to take into consideration the emotional investment put into the creation of commodities such as tracks and videos. First, commodities are single, discrete products,

while brands are sources of production engaged in a range of production activities (Lash and Lury 2007:6). It can be said that the studio only exists on account of a wider relationship with capitalism which facilitates the creation of consumers and commercial transactions through this shopping mall in the first place. In its most obvious role engendered through its location, Rogue Elephant can be seen as a brand, involved in sources of production that are employed in a range of production activities (Lash and Lury 2007:6), in this instance, films and tracks. These forms and ranges of production are uniquely characteristic of capitalism (*Ibid.*:7). Second, Lash and Lury allege that brands are emblematic of today's capitalism creating a regime of power that produces "inequalities, disparities and deception" (cf. Taylor 2015:55, 2007:7). In this study, the aim is not a moral criticism of the uses of deception; as shown in the preceding chapter, deception, in its myriad forms has its own uses in the management of mythology and subjective emotional connections in musical and social life. Because of this, I would like to draw attention to Rogue Elephant as a brand that orchestrates emotional connections amongst those who work within it, based on social connections, gaining effectiveness in a presentation of "distinctive imagery, language, and associations" to capture the attention and engender a subjective identification with consumers as well as producers such as musicians and artists (Wheeler 2009:2). We will find this capability found in branding shown in detail in chapter 7, which focuses on the music video as hip hop spectacular.

Gasuza's brand, as discussed in the previous chapter, influences the studio in his capacity as creative director of Rogue Elephant studio. In this, Rogue Elephant becomes a source of production, or brand, which in Lash and Lury's (2007) terms, is employed in a range of creative and production activities, such as music, photography and film, distinct in its identity and imagery. Under Gasuza's role as creative director, the studio is a space, where in the directing of acts in others as shown in the preceding paragraph, and in himself, Rogue Elephant becomes the brand that subsequently serves as a platform for the programming of these activities in time and space. The studio thus, acts as a brand, forming its own social relationship, functioning as "a set of relations between products in time" (Wheeler 2009:2), mediating a supply and demand of products, through the "organisation, co-ordination and integration of the use of information" (Wheeler 2009:4), with information here, being both skills and knowledge of sonic media and hip hop culture as a whole.

Based on this, I would like to assert that the commodities and culture of Rogue Elephant form a brand of its own, and one which in enactment, shows us how musicians in Uganda attempt to tackle the social and economic fragilities of everyday life through a musical and social life, as insinuated in the “sweeping of dust” exchange. This also appears in the conversation between Gasuza and EazyTex, and while the former referring to the latter as a cleaner was in jest, it is correct that Gasuza holds a position of prestige and influence most basically over Easy Tex as creative director. This authority is explicit in terms of directing the creative efforts of employees such as EasyTex, who are deferential in the creative process, creating a form of distinctiveness emerging from Gasuza’s place within “elite social networks and cosmopolitan cultural formations” discussed earlier (Smith 2003:673). Along with this, as a member of the diaspora such as Mys Natty and Atlas, with whom he collaborates with on an equal footing, he holds a position of authority on the subject and practice of hip hop. From this creation of distinctiveness, borne partly from the diaspora, we see the brand that is Rogue Elephant based also on social networks, which have an emotional association to those concerned.

This is also correct in that the producers and consumers are interchangeable and often one and the same, as the artists rely on each other for positive feedback and inspiration, with tracks often not finding wide release other than Youtube. Regardless of its success or failure as commercial undertaking, the studio forms its own hip hop brand, its sound driven by Gasuza’s own self-fashioned image and standing in social networks within music circles. It is also cogent to think of the those who populate it as brands in their own right; Mys Natty is an established vocalist in Kampala, fronting a successful reggae band called the Blood Brothers, and owning a record label, Bushfire Records. EasyTex is known as a superlative sound engineer, able to give a sonic form to the musical vision the personalities he works with ask for. Such public reputations embodied in their brands are obviously underlined by their own renditions of how they fashion their selves around this. These find enactment in their roles in the context of this social space and relations facilitated by it. In its establishment and in its continued workings, Rogue Elephant was formed from these social relations and continues to serve as site of similar connections and enactments.

Branding is an ideology that is engaged in a dialectic of production and consumption within these relations (Banet-Weiser 2012:4). Brands thus, are entities which cannot be limited to mere objects and commodities. In the case of this studio, the producers or the brands

themselves are involved in a process of production of music. This is in turn facilitated by processes of social connection and association. The lack of wide commercial success that the studio's musical output has received in no way takes away from its social influence and standing, which comes by association from individuals such as Gasuza, Mys Natty and Atlas, each of whom is well respected in the hip hop scene. These associations, indicate a form of branding, that fits with the aim, according to Wheeler, to build awareness and lure loyalty. Tacit in all of this is the generation of competitive advantage and opportunity through the indication of a superior and more deserving entity, embodied through social relations.

These social relationships can also be viewed in part through the connections people form and subsequently enact with signs and symbols of consumption (Taylor 2015). As Taylor states, "Brands aren't simply names of objects, but objects that carry meaning for people as things that make sense to them and communicate their sense of who they are to others" (54). This particular ability then, when viewing musicians as brands, allows one to draw into focus on issues of a wider social and cultural relations. Mbembe, in his treatise on nature of power and domination, suggests that this is "a specific system of signs, a particular way of fabricating simulacra or re-forming stereotypes" (2001:102). He refers to "the whole political economy of the body" (2001:128), where citizens and subjects in the circumstances of daily life reproduce an epistemology "in all the minor circumstances of daily life, such as social networks, cults and secret societies, culinary practices, leisure activities, modes of consumption, dress styles, rhetorical devices" (*ibid.*).

Here, I focus not on issues of power, but instead, on how subjects in such sites use this plethora of practices, in particular those of social networks, leisure activities and modes of consumption. All mediated by hip hop, these could be said to fabricate a simulacrum that is both an escape and a symptom of the difficulties of everyday life in Uganda, such as alluded to in the "sweeping the dust" exchange noted earlier. While the individual uses of a simulacrum of power and wealth as indicated by the hip hop mogul have been discussed in the preceding chapter, this simulacrum extends in to social scenes.

Building on Mbembe's discussion of the epistemology in social life, I would like to focus on the hip hop scene at Rogue Elephant as a social network, located and made distinctive through the hip hop brand and culture of this studio. Here, the dimensions of the studio not only enclose avenues of culture embodied in creative expression, but also provides a secure



space where leisure activities, both legal and illegal may take place and friendships be shared amongst those who frequent it. Through this, the brand that is Rogue Elephant serves as venue for the performance of a social network defined by individual and subjective relationships with hip hop.

These are formed by the many acts that people practice artfully or unbeknownst, in enactments of a certain hip hop image. In this context, these enactments are several; for instance, the act of putting on a specific brand of headphones to arrange a track, of singing a particular segment of a song over and over, of a particular handshake to greet a favoured friend, in the choice of only one particular brand of vodka and mango juice as a beverage before recording a track, and of rolling a joint and passing it around to those seated.

Motivated by subjective renditions of hip hop, we may see musicians as brands as articulated previously, but also more mundane, how objects and commodities, such as liquor, clothing, musical equipment and jewellery, act as embellishments used to construct and accentuate these branded individuals. To those who frequent it, the cube is not simply a place of employment, such as for EasyTex, but instead a sanctuary, where these enactments of their own hip hop lifestyles can take place in a secure environment.

Those who frequent the studio to make music or to spend their free time there form their own network of trusted individuals at Rogue Elephant. This was made evident in the nature of their friendships, musical collaborations and conversations I observed. Whilst each individual inhabits their own sphere in other aspects of their lives, including profession, family and home, and many come from varied socio-economic backgrounds, in the studio, the proximities that these might obstruct elsewhere, fall away in the studio. The cube then become an almost egalitarian space, removed from mores and norms that might otherwise dictate social interactions and relationships.

The cube is a social network that opens space for dialogue. Lengthy discussions on music take place and industry gossip is shared. These dialogues have as much to do with the construction of a Ugandan hip hop brand, as through this, knowledge and experiences with the genre, both real and imagined are put on display, through braggadocio or in camaraderie, and in the acts of writing songs and making tracks. The studio's substance then seems motivated ultimately by an inherently emotional relationship between it and its inhabitants, where a product, which in this case is hip hop, becomes both culture and brand. It is space

removed from the issues that individuals encounter in the other spaces of their lives, and through this, it becomes a site of imaging, imagining and enactment, far bigger than its humble confines.

Thus, the space becomes a site of the performance of a hip hop brand. This enactment cannot exist without the confines of the space to shield it from the outside world; nonetheless, it is these enactments of subjective choices and aspiration that elevates the space, from mere room to something else. The cube then is a geographical space, which is bounded by temporality but nonetheless where these hip hop dreams, regardless of success and failure in the 'real world', may be enacted.

At the same time, the studio is ensconced in a shopping mall, peopled in the day by shoppers, families and office workers, and in the evening, by security guards, who appear unconcerned by the fragmented schedules, movements of people and activities conducted in the studio space then. It is thus, differentiated from the other commercial enterprises it stands side by side with. The studio is open for business in the day, but the actual creative processes tend to operate in a state of nocturnal liminality, with no precise idea of what exactly is going to happen next, who is going to appear when and what is going to take place, until the moment, as it were, arrives, an event that is coordinated over mobile phone provided there is battery power in the devices. This ambiguity, determined as it is on the whims and vagaries of the talent in question, means that the studio seems released from the confines of time and space.

More to the point, the business façade of the space, which is no doubt, as much a part of its dimensions in the real world, inhabits another space, within which anything can happen and nothing too. This is similar to Mbembe's discussion on forms of political improvisation (2001), which are idiosyncratic and defined by a propensity to excess and disproportion. This idea of improvisation can be extended to the cube, mirrored in its activities and imaginings, owing however, as much, if not more, to a sense of a hip hop culture and consciousness. In the end, a space is just that, a space, empty without its inhabitants.

In this sense, this space brings to mind Mbembe's conception of several, multi-layered 'public spaces' in the post colony (2001). These spaces are enmeshed in capricious realities and shifting perceptions, depending on whom these spaces are peopled by, whom inhabits and whom observes, all occurring in an uneasy intimacy. Peopled by the individuals that it is,

this small room, becomes a creative haven, a space for leisure, friendship and collaboration, equally removed and embedded in the day to day reality of retail spaces and commerce.

While Mbembe's concern is the role of these spaces and behaviours in the negotiation of tyranny, I hesitate to come to that conclusion. Instead perhaps, one could suggest a broader perspective, where in this is a negotiation with the tyranny of boredom. The maldevelopment of the Ugandan state no doubt exacerbates a frustration with the vagaries of day to day life, but it is this very lack of structure and authority that characterizes Rogue Elephant, providing a fertile space for creativity, regardless of the promise of commercial success. The adoption and adaptation of hip hop's cultural signs is at odds with the mainstream, which in Uganda is largely conservative. In many ways, Rogue Elephant's hip hop scene can largely be considered escapist. The hip hop culture and brand thus mapped through Rogue Elephant raises, as John Fiske asks, the vital questions of what is escaped from, why escape is necessary, and what is escaped from (2011). To McRobbie, fantasy is a private, intimate experience and part of a strategy of resistance or opposition. It is a bounding of those areas that cannot be totally dominated (1994:184). In this capability, it is also a means of representation whose privacy and intimacy act equally potently on the meanings of social experience such as those embodied in public representations of language and the media. The interaction between the public and the private here can be gauged in self-fashionings, where an outward persona is created of private musings, based on the location of oneself in the consumption and production of a Ugandan hip hop mediascape, an imaginative space which finds particular form in this thesis through music videos.

The Ugandan hip hop culture and brand in the cube captures these public and private aspects, private in the fashioning of self, but public in its musical and social enactment, in the forms of tracks, videos and the life experienced around these. This is because subjective experience is as real as any other experience. I was present on many occasions when Atlas, Mys Natty and Gasuza recorded their own tracks. Going over segments over and over again, I noted a meticulous attention to detail, to the vocals, the flow, the rhythmic structures and overall sonic organisation, with each of them was completely immersed in the process of music making. Almost excessive in their dedication, in spite of knowing fully well that these tracks may not find wide release, this was nonetheless clearly a fulfilling creative process to all those involved. Gasuza uses this space to conduct his own mogul like self-fashioning too in his directing of activities, bearing in mind that the other fixture, notably EasyTex, is the

producer who refers to himself as a ‘cleaner’. As stated earlier, this kind of social recognition evokes also the understanding that it can only emerge from exceptionality, from others who, in recognition and contemplation occupy spaces of very little privilege in contrast. These are the spaces of fragility that the cube provides escape from.

If the cube provides a private enactment of the hip hop culture and brand as those involved saw it, which in turn was informed by their enactments of their own self-fashioning mapped against a musical and social life of hip hop, the nightclub provides a more public representation and demonstration of these social relationships of power and privilege.

Next, I present an ethnography of an evening at a nightclub. I use this example as it shows us the projection of image, in place, as site of enactment of this imagining. Why the nightclub serves as a means by which to bring together image and action is that, unlike the concealment of the cube and the private fashionings of self here, imaginings at the nightclub take place specifically in the public realm, in that performances here are duly held up for consumption to an audience present. In spaces such as this, there occurs a recognition from peers, curated to form part of a superior posse. This differentiation, in its most obvious form, is embodied through an inclusion into social and musical groups such as those dictated by record labels; this inclusion is similarly demonstrated through exclusivity in terms of segregated spaces such as VIP tables and in conspicuous consumption, signified through brands such as those of liquor and clothing. At the same time, in stark relief is adulation and recognition from those who are not included in this opulent representation of status. These segregations however, are not fixed in their hierarchies as the following section will show, shifting and changing depending on who is present.

### **Hip hop Monday hosted by Atlas at Deuces**

I had attended several of these events mainly because Atlas hosts them and the evening is promoted by the promise that he takes the mic late in the evening for impromptu performances. Deuces has been a fixture in Kampala’s nightlife for several years, and is owned by the eponymous record label, branded as Deuces Entertainment Group or DEG, as it is known. This entity functions explicitly as a brand, beginning first with the venue and the studio. It has a roster of artists from the diaspora, including a gentleman named Kay, who

appears to be the owner and in charge of operations. In the hip hop scene, these are rappers who “rap in English”, and are by and large appreciated for their skill in this language. Amongst these rappers, Atlas is by far the biggest draw, and in interviews with several people, indicated that he commanded respect for his skills and in the ‘real’ representation of his own experiences in north America.

It seemed to me that the Deuces brand gained credibility on account of Atlas, and as such, he is the most visible face of this brand, functioning as a brand in his own right, in that he has a distinct and therefore, valued image and sound, as the previous chapter discusses.

Deuces is in Kansanga, a part of Kampala that is known for its nightlife, with bars and restaurants open through the day and through the night. On a few occasions, I arrived early, that is to say, at 1 AM, and it was an hour or so before the place became lively, filled to capacity only by around 3 AM. Amongst those representing the music scene, these individuals are conspicuous as they tend to occupy the best seats with table service and are usually there with crews and posses, who are, in Kampala-speak, ‘swagged out’, meaning the gentlemen in flamboyant hairdos and gold jewellery, the ladies in over the top glamour, brightly coloured shiny lycra and animal prints. Events at Deuces are an unabashed celebrating of conspicuous consumption, alcohol and entertainment, with the space packed to the rafters with revellers looking for a good time. Nightlife in Kampala certainly seems to mirror a certain hedonism where the focus is on dancing, drinking and socialising with music serving as a backdrop to this. Several interviews with musicians, found statements like, “If a man hasn't had his lunch because he only has money for a beer in the evening, he doesn't want to be reminded of it. He wants to forget.”<sup>28</sup>

All of this occurs side by side with distinctly humble enterprise. Street vendors sell *rolex*, rolled chapatti and eggs, and *nyamachoma*, grilled meat, and packets of Rex and Sportsman cigarettes. The sides of the road bristle with *boda-bodas* while cars jostle for parking. It is on a busy road and, at the time I frequented this space, one walked in through a small entrance after being vigorously frisked by a large and enthusiastic female bouncer. There is seating in a veranda-like space, where one can smoke *shisha*. Another doorway leads to the inside of the club which is open air.

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<sup>28</sup> Personal conversation with an informant who preferred to remain anonymous, 5.12.2014

*Figure 10: The bar at Deuces*



*Figure 11: Atlas' video launch*



The floors are dirt and there are two extremely busy bars just as one walks in. Up a flight of stairs there is another space where there are pool tables, the balcony of which looks over the tables in the space below. Another raised platform serves as a dance floor and occasional stage and the DJ decks are located here, as is another bar. Signage from the locally brewed brand, Bell Lager provides the backdrop. Bamboo fencing segregates the spaces and there are palm trees visible above. The clientele is interesting, and relatively prosperous, a mixture of faces from all over East Africa, Sudanese and Ethiopian, and elsewhere, apart from the music scene.

Hip Hop Mondays are weekly events, branded as such, as dancehall and Nigerian Afrobeat generally dominates the charts and the airwaves. Exclusive yet insular, the hip hop scene in Deuces relies on a small coterie of rappers, producers and fixers to provide a visible face and audible presence to its brand. One evening, Ugandan dancehall star Pallaso arrives along with Davido, the Nigerian superstar who had just performed a sold out stadium concert in Kampala and whose smash hit, *Skelewu* was on heavy rotation in Uganda and across Africa. They came in flanked by bodyguards and that caused some excitement with nightclub goers of whom there were over hundred crammed into a fairly small space.

At this time, Ugandan music producers were, in the words of Ronnie Lwanga, Resident DJ at the Sheraton Hotel and producer at Fenon Studios, Kampala's best known studio, "obsessed with the Nigerian sound<sup>29</sup>." This occasion, like in other interactions at studios, made clear that within the Ugandan music scene, artists were less inclined to take inspiration from hits on global charts for example. Instead, the view seemed focused on Africa's extremely vibrant and dynamic popular music scenes. Along with the domination of the 'Nigerian sound', I was told that Angolan producers were most current or fashionable, with genres such Angolan *kudoru*, a techno genre capturing sonic imaginations at the time.

The DJ at Deuces immediately turned down the hip hop track he was spinning and instead, put on Davido's hit *Skelewu*, which had the crowd on it feet. This Nigerian 'sound' as Lwanga put it, is immediately recognisable. With a trademark minimalist techno rhythm, it is designed for the dance floor. *Skelewu* in particular is a significant example, first for its popularity, and second, for its extremely catchy rhythm and sonic structure. The beat seems

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<sup>29</sup> conversation, 25.11.2014

to swivel around a stripped down base, the rhythm punctuated by a maracas like sonic inflection, the potency of which made Davido's rapping on the track seem almost incidental. The Deuces sound system sounded fuzzy and indistinct, made more so by the sound of people talking and laughing. In spite of this, this track cut right through the hubbub, its distinctive beat audible through the crowds.

This did not go down well with the DEG table where I happened to be sitting that evening. Atlas took the mic and said to the DJ "this is Uganda, not Nigeria," and the music was duly changed. He acknowledged the other two stars' presence in the club, and then started rapping, still seated at his table, but much of it was unintelligible because of the noise in the club. Unlike the Nigerian track, these backing tracks were dominated by a significantly slower bass-line, serving as background sound rather than a centrestage track. Bottles of Courvoisier were ostentatiously put on the table, because as I was told by the person seated next to me, "we have to show the Nigerians that us Ugandans also know how to party."

All this got the required reaction, as Davido and Pallaso and their contingents who were standing upstairs as there was no seating, were now leaning over the balcony looking slightly bemused. At this stage, they leaned over the balcony asking for the microphone, but Atlas refused with good humour, staying instead that if they wanted it, they would have to come down and get it. This drama caused much amusement in the club, and the evening continued until early that morning. Someone mentioned later that the deejay was fired the instant he played the Davido track. The music continued so I am uncertain that this was the case. Some days later, I asked about this deejay and I was told he was hired again that morning.

This incident, while amusing and entertaining to all present, provides an insight into Atlas's hip hop brand. Established first, as deserving and dominant through hierarchies enacted between the stars and the attendees in the conspicuousness of status symbols accorded to the Deuces label entourage. Second, is a levying for stardom between the stars themselves, as was shown between the Nigerian and Ugandan contingents. Here, we find a selection of networks that simultaneously facilitate engagement while marginalising groups, forms and geographies, contained within a wider context of power, wealth and imagery (Castell 1996). If one goes by notions of stardom and popularity, the Nigerian music industry dominates the popular African soundscape, whereas Uganda does not. All of what occurred at the nightclub that evening, is an enactment of a hip hop image, but one which hinges off these in the



context of simulacrum. This is simply because, the brand that is Davido is that of a superstar well known across Africa and elsewhere, whereas Atlas, who displays mogul like tendencies in his music, and in his standing in Kampala, is not. It is only in this nightclub, owned by the label he is signed to, and the authority conveyed by the ownership of the microphone, where one artist can enact his fantasy of supremacy over the other artist.

I return here to the hip hop brand as represented in the figure of the mogul. The mogul does this in terms of mass mediation and cultural influence, all of which Atlas is well placed to do as a rapper in Uganda. He is truly mogul-like only in contrast and in competition, his stature growing or receding depending on who he is cast against. In the presence of Davido, he might be somewhat diminished, but the night was his after all, so in the jostling for a status that occurred, Atlas played off Davido's celebrity to assert his own. Cast against Davido's stature, Atlas exerts a subordinate power toward the construction of meaning based around his own deserving image. The purpose of this is one which hinges on advantage of one over several others, as suggested by the night he hosts and the manner in which he represents his label, with or without the microphone. In the act of rapping into the microphone, Atlas is constructing his own brand, as rapper and the image of a star. That evening, the incident was recorded and duly noted by those in the audience, adding another layer to his image, as that of the David against an industry goliath.

Here, this power to construct meanings, pleasures, and social identities that *differ* from those proposed by the structures of domination is crucial, and the area within which it is exercised is that of representation (Fiske, 1987 [2002]). Atlas might visually convey, through renditions of lifestyles and personality, a comportment of celebrity and stardom that serves and deserve forms of plenitude. At Deuces, these representations are signified through brands of objects and goods, such as clothing and alcohol, and services, as suggested by VIP spaces cordoned off from the rest. Within the nightclub, artists project themselves as brands not only through musical performance, but also in modes of dress and affectations dictated by fashion as described earlier, and in their choices of liquor, signaling through brands and other symbols, the networks they are part of, and these networks might be better than others. These objects serve as symbols, which are at once used to signal a production of value, personal and material, and plenitude. From this, Atlas can be viewed as central signifier to a cultural fabric of consumption in Uganda's hip hop scene where he becomes one of Taylor's "stars (and) megastars" (2015:15), whose success allows them to live and represent the forms of

attainment valorised in this milieu. We find indicators of plenitude in the form of expensive liquor and clothing and subsequent projection of status, in a manner that celebrates the excesses of a mainstream American hip hop brand and culture disseminated in the media. In this, the figure of Atlas represents social formations which reveal aspirations towards mobility and acquisition; his position of advantage can only be credibly cast against a reality where many do not have the tools to acquire this reflexivity and movement similar to those presented in his image, described in the preceding chapter.

Such processes of consumption ensconced in this nightclub are based around negotiations of image, in turn linked to conceptions of status and wealth. However, in themselves, they are not successful in their demonstration of the stratospheric wealth and celebrity one finds in American hip hop, even if they are inspired by these elicitations. They are largely and actually symbolic, a reality which explicitly reveals itself in the location. Regardless of its elicitations of conspicuous consumption, when the sun comes up, we find mud floors, and no roof to speak of. It is an urban space, at the edges of which are hawkers attempting to make a living which is barely subsistence. The evocations and invocations of the night fade by 9 am when the last of the revellers leaves. Hip hop Mondays at Deuces are fantasies finding representation through representations of plenitude which can be gauged as such, only in contrast to daily paucity that dominates every day life.

The importance of this hip hop culture and brand based on wealth and celebrity in Uganda, is that there is no neat separation between material and social experience from the meanings given to them. In everyday life, our experience is precisely what we make of it and how we do so (Fiske 1987 [2002]). What we find here is a resistance to every day restriction conveyed through escapism. This is a resistance to Davido's celebrity as a marker of commercial success, to poverty and difficulty as an insurmountable fact. Popular culture is a provoker of fantasy on the part of those subordinated; most typically, it is an attempt to exert some control over representation. For Fiske, these fantasies are no longer an escape but instead, a confrontation of a social reality and its embodiment in social relations. The power that so imbues it comes from what meanings are made and *who* has the power and the ability to make them (*ibid.*).

Here, we see Atlas exercising control over his own perceived position. We also see his myriad audiences exerting control over their everyday circumstances by being in attendance

at Deuces. In Uganda, this hip hop culture and brand now speaks to negotiations between plenitude and paucity, mediated by processes of consumption, in so far as as who can afford to buy what. So, such displays of plenitude are beyond the economic reach of most present at the venue at any given night. Just as the nightclub serves as one of Mbembe's multi-layered, shifting 'public spaces', it is a likely stage for this Ugandan hip hop mogul's fantasy too. This hip hop brand now finds representation through self-fashioning in the public sphere as performance, and through image, simultaneously combining both aspects of private and public.

In this way, social networks, leisure activities and modes of consumption encompassed at this nightclub fabricate a simulacrum of a domain different from day to day life. The nightclub functions as a sort of 'cube'. Not unlike the studio discussed previously, individuals may inhabit other spheres during the day, but in the evenings at the club, these divergences cease to matter and the stress of daily life is discarded. For some, I observed that, on account of its precise capacity to provide avenues of escape through music, alcohol and sociability, the venue becomes more 'real' than the other spaces individuals might inhabit. For people involved in the music scene, this is certainly pertinent. For instance, the fact that musicians network and build alliances leveraged through social camps and musical collaborations at the venue shows that the space is firmly embedded in their lived reality, divorced as it might be from normative 9-5 lives in Uganda.

The nightclub now, is first and foremost a place for leisure and escape, which functions completely in the realm of nocturnal liminality. Freed from the constraints of recording that the cube must fulfil regardless of the erraticism of when, how and whom participates, the sole purpose of this venue is to provide entertainment and gratification, through music and social life. The nightclub becomes a public space, where private fantasies such as those dreamt up in the cube, may be enacted, becoming a hip hop culture and brand in performance. Within the club, is a small room, deemed the VIP room. With no specific luxuries to set it apart, it functions more as a private space, set within a public space. This too is a construct, imagined rather than tangible, in so far as there are no particular extravagances to be found in the VIP room; its purpose is to delineate hierarchies of status, a fact that all in the club are aware of. The nightclub here, in its dialectic of public and private, serves as one of Mbembe's multi-layered 'public spaces' (2001), ephemeral and shifting in its properties and perception, depending on whom these spaces are peopled by, who inhabits and who observes. The

Deuces brand is based on the evocation of prestige through people and place in representation.

This slipperiness of position in the Deuces brand is made more so by a practical lack of organisation and cohesion, in spite of Atlas' mogul-like evocations. This was clear on the occasion of the launch of Atlas' new video, featuring a well known singer called Lilian Mbabazi. Lilian was part of Uganda's most successful 'girl band', Blu3, and is currently a bankable star, with hit songs and regular performances at Kampala's up market venues, such as Big Mike's in Kololo, several of which I attended. Like Atlas' shows at Deuce's, there is no cover charge. Unlike Atlas', Lilian performs with a full band. They play a tight set, including her tracks, such as the Hit, *Kawa Kawa*, which Gasuza produced and shot the video for, and covers of songs by Jill Scott and Erykah Badu.

The collaboration with Atlas was called *A New Day*, and I was told, was the most expensive video shot in Uganda thus far. The video and the song was to be launched at Deuces, and I arrived at midnight that evening. The venue was crowded, as is usual and as expected that day, but when I reached, I was told that Atlas had not arrived. He was apparently on his way. Much later, when he finally reached with his entourage, I was told that somebody had brought the wrong CD, which delayed the proceedings by at least an hour. I understood that this was not a tactic to build anticipation but rather, an actual error. In the end the CD arrived, with the video broadcast through a projector on the wall, making it a little unclear and fuzzy. The music too was not turned up loud enough to overpower the volume of the crowd, which by now was packed into the venue, with many standing around the bar, and vying for seating in the much coveted tables. Overall, the event did not live up to the hype, with technical difficulties and human error culpable in the underwhelming nature of this launch. Lilian too was not in attendance, making the entire show appear slightly ill thought through and therefore, disappointing.

In spite of this, everyone present seemed to have a grand time of it. The shambolic organisation of the event described seemed in no part to take away from Atlas' star power. Atlas captures a charge in the ability to draw in disparate sensibilities and spheres, which at first glance, may seem disassociated but exist in simultaneous and multi-layered capacities. To understand the potency of Atlas' brand, Fiske's (2011) discussion on popular culture's correspondence with two kinds of social power is useful. The first is semiotic power, or the

power to construct meanings, pleasures, and social identities, and the second is social power or the power to construct a socioeconomic system. While the two may function in an autonomous manner, the hip hop scene in Uganda indicates a close relationship between the two in its commercial success and cultural appeal. In the case of Atlas, he conveys meaning to his hip hop brand through the allusion to a culture of mobility and acquisition. He represents the embodiment of deserving advantage, conveyed through his craft and his social standing as crown prince too.

As Lipsitz succinctly puts it, “deception is part of the work that popular music performs” (2007: xvii). All entertainers assume personas onstage and the commercialisation of these capabilities offers monetary inducement and reward to these successful masqueraders. The idea that Atlas is a successful brand also finds resonance with Lash and Lury’s allegation earlier that brands are emblematic of today’s capitalism, thus creating a regime of power that produces “inequalities, disparities and deception” (cf. 2007:7, Taylor 2015:55). These forms of deception are potent as they serve not just avenues of escape but rather provide the ability to form representations of the world in keeping with one’s desires. The event was a social gathering, a party, where the focus was as much on the music video as on enjoyment amongst those present. Many of the audience were there not for the launch. Instead it appeared that they chose to be present as they would on a Saturday night, to play pool for money, and to listen to music, enjoy the atmosphere and meet with friends. As stated earlier, Deuces remains an egalitarian space, with no special homage conferred to Atlas outside of his coterie, save for that as a successful performer. Nonetheless, as part of the evenings entertainment, he too forms part of audience’s subjective comprehensions of an enjoyable world. His brand can also be seen as a representation of having a good time and enjoying the good life, regardless of the circumstances in everyday life. This is the embodiment of a hip hop culture embodied in the Atlas brand.

### **The Annual Uganda Hip Hop Summit**

From this, I shift perspective to Babaluku and the event he convened at the same time. We find here too, distinctiveness and the evocation of deserving advantage. These, however, are voiced in concerns around questions of social justice and activism. Distinctiveness and deserving advantage here comes from a rejection of material and commercial preoccupations,

and instead, shows itself through a focus on issues such as education and tackling unemployment with particular emphasis on youth through hip hop. This I learnt from lengthy discussions with younger rappers, which I share in the following chapter, for whom hip hop has become a culture and brand focused toward the explicit negotiation of economic and social hardship and poverty that one finds in Uganda.

In stark contrast to the conspicuous consumption at Deuces was the culmination of the annual Hip Hop Summit that year. The summit is an annual occurrence. It is organised by Silas ‘Babaluku’, introduced in the previous chapter, and forms part of the Bavubuka Foundation’s activities. According to its Facebook page, the event is “Designed to celebrate, preserve and archive the history of Hip Hop as a contributing platform to the awakening of strength in the youth voice of Uganda. The B-Global vision is to empower and educate the youth to lay foundations upon which their communities can grow, build and be transformed, through engagement and practice of the Hip Hop culture<sup>30</sup>.”

The theme for this year’s summit was ‘Back to the Source’, in turn acting as brand identity for the event. This brand was made tangible and distinctive in the fact that it was based around the performance of hip hop. In its preoccupation with social empowerment and education, it leverages recognition from differentiation. The event is also framed in terms of distinctiveness and advantage, in its precise use of the phrase, the “annual Uganda hip hop summit”; in this is an indication of an overarching cohesiveness based around social justice through hip hop. This is manifested in the curating of characteristics and characters who populate it. Satisfying Wheeler’s understanding of brand identity, provided at the introduction to this chapter, what we find here, is a subjective management of meaning, unifying disparate aspects into a cogent system (2012, [2009]). Hip hop serves as a system of meaning within which individuals interact with the aims outlined by the foundation.

The Annual Hip Hop Summit happenings serve as flagship event of the Lugaflow brand. Furthermore, as this ethnography will show, the Summit also provided a space to showcase brands within a brand in its inclusion of diverse performers. The final evening comprised of a gig at Sabrina’s pub in Kampala on the 25th of December.

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<sup>30</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/b2thesource/>, Accessed 3.3.2015

*Figure 12: Sabrina's pub*



*Figure 13: Gilbert rigging up sound and light for the show*



Promotions through flyers and online promised performances by several of Uganda’s best known hip hop artists representing various labels and contingents. These included GNL Zamba and members of his Baboon Forest Crew. Also performing was Mun G, a young rapper whom I had met at the shoot for his video through St. Nelly Sade. Nelly is an original member of the Bavubuka Allstarz, established some year earlier under Babaluku’s mentorship, and presently, a rapper both commercially successful and critically acclaimed. Other hip hop artists expected were Lyrical GMC, the “godfather of Ugandan hip hop” and Atlas Da African and Bruiser Badnews of Deuces Entertainment Group (DEG), a label which



also owns the nightclub described previously. Tickets for tonight's show at Sabrina's were UGX 5000 which seemed very reasonable indeed.

I arrived at Sabrina's pub at around 5 in the evening. Present at this time were, amongst a few others, Gilbert, the UG hip hop archivist, a young rapper going by the name of Spyda MC and Zak from Talanta Youth Movement in Jinja, all members of Bavubuka Foundation. I had met with these individuals previously, and will share my interactions with these young people in the next chapter. That evening, I was looking forward to being part of this gathering, not only because it promised to bring them all together in performance but also because it was an opportunity to engage in a dialogue with the Lugaflow hip hop movement in Uganda.

I was told that others, including Babaluku were on their way, and in the meanwhile, Gilbert was involved with setting up sound and lights and organising the space for the show later. Sabrina's, as stated in the literature review, is located in the heart of Kampala city centre and has been the city's earliest and most well known hip hop venue. The entrance to the venue is through a fairly nondescript door on Kampala Road and is a bit hard to find unless you know it. However, once you walk through a narrow passage you enter the actual venue which is very large and quite charming.

A sixties Volkswagen beetle was suspended from the ceiling and there was a large raised area with a bar running along the side from which the stage is clearly visible. Between this area and the stage was another space on a level a meter below, where sound mixers were set up, with plenty of space for members of the audience just at the lip of the stage. The space opened up into a veranda and small patch of lawn, with a few ubiquitous avocado trees, all fitting up to 500 people comfortably. An enclosed space near the garden had a large TV screen, pool tables and a second bar stocked with Nile and Tusker branded beer coolers.

By 7 that evening, Babaluku and Black Lion along with a few others had arrived. In the meantime, I was able to have one on one interactions with other members of the group whom I had met in previously, including Spyda, Taye, Zak, Chimey and Esther and learn more about them and the various groups and initiatives they were part of. These discussions also, I include in the following chapter.

For the moment, it was early evening and there was music on. It was a mix of Lugaflow tracks over the years as well as classic American hip hop from the 90s and 2000s. I noted

tracks from Method Man, Dr. Dre and Nas. Things were busy, mainly with the organisation of infrastructure such as setting up the sound system and sorting out glitches with the internet. DJ Apeman, one of Kampala's best known hip hop deejays was arranging his turntables and laptop onstage to the left of the audience and Matteo, a member of the Italian chapter of the Universal Zulu Nation Organisation, was working on a graffiti canvas on the right. A Bavubuka banner was draped around Apeman's booth, with the legend the Future of Uganda printed on it. The front of the stage has A3 size prints of photographs of Bavubuka initiatives including Ghetto to Ghetto Cyphers and other events from the hip hop summit, branding the space through visual representations of the event, and serving as a backdrop to the imminent musical performances.

A group of about fifteen individuals began a 'cypher' around the year's theme, Back to the Source, while the sound, lights and stage were being organized. Clustered around a boom box near the stage, this was a lively group. However, the crowd at the venue was quite thin, but I assumed that would change as the evening progressed. The show eventually began at about ten that evening, I had heard that the proceedings were due to start by 6 but as Spyda said, "we were on Africa time." All the artists whom had actively participated in the summit's events this year joined Babaluku on the stage. The artists had recorded a new track for the summit, including arrangements by an instrumentalist named Giovanni, with the aim to move the Ugandan hip hop sound to one that included indigenous instruments and arrangements. They did not however play this to us that evening for reasons that were unclear, and this track was not shared online thereafter. The performances then began with Spyda taking over as master of ceremonies and DJ Apeman on the decks. The sound system was extremely loud but as such, did not provide clarity and definition of sound, meaning that the music was fuzzy and indistinct. For the most part, the basic beat in the rhythmic structure was clearly audible to the detriment of other sonic attributes. In some ways, this worked to the vocalist's advantage as this meant that audiences focused on the rappers and singers rather than the beat. Unlike the night at Deuces, those in attendance seemed less inclined to dance and socialise. Instead, their attention was focused on personalities on stage and the lyrical texts of the performances. Sonic arrangements reflected backing tracks from hip hop in the nineties, with a simple breakbeat, overlaid by a repetitive keyboard harmony. This was somewhat monotonous in terms of sound, but worked to the advantage of the vocalists on stage, allowing the rappers' flow to dominate the audience's attention, who were responsive with shouts and cheers throughout performances.



*Figure 14: Setting the stage*



*Figure 15: the cypher*

One of the first performances was BANTU Clan. Chimey, shared his vision for the ensemble as a “full hip hop band”. The name stands for Brothers Navigating Towards Unity, and came together in 2013 at the Hip Hop Bootcamp, a cultural event focused on young people that is supported the Bayimba Foundation. Bayimba too is brand, according to their website, “focuses on uplifting arts and culture in Uganda through cultural exchange and creativity”<sup>31</sup>. With the the support of a number of international development NGO’s and sponsorship from Club beer amongst others, the foundation hosts festivals, training and workshops for “aspiring artists, and to facilitate creative development.”

With BANTU Clan, the aim was to eventually have a live band that integrates African instruments, in particular the *Baksimba* drum from the Baganda tradition in Uganda and the *Benga* from Kenya, fronted by the four existing MC’s, in order to establish a “brand”, in Chimey’s words with a pan-African reach, that “educates” through a “signature African sound”<sup>32</sup>. Collaborations were underway with South African and Kenyan producers to achieve that. The other emphasis is on language, with Chimey rapping in Lusoga, TK 15 in Luganda and Kendie Lava, who is from Zimbabwe in Shona. That evening however, the MC’s were supported by a DJ. Against a sonic back drops of break beats inflected by a funk guitar sample on one occasion and on another, by a sample of traditional Baganda drumming, the performance is energetic in terms of interaction with the male members in particular through gesture and call and response. Babaluku joins them on stage, and occasionally steps in to emphasise a verse, but largely lets the younger MC’s take centre stage and is content to stay at the back of the stage.

Next, Taye and Spyda perform as a duo and their performance is vigorous in physical gesture and emphasis. Supported by a backing track that brought to mind Nas’ *Illmatic*, a stripped down groove occasionally inflected by synth harmonies served as a foil to the duo. At one point, the DJ included a sample of female vocal harmonies in a traditional Ugandan style, which was high pitched and ululating. These juxtapositions worked well as there was small selection of sonic features, and they worked in tandem rather than as a jarring pastiche of sounds.

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<sup>31</sup> <http://bayimba.org/about/>, accessed 5.3.2015

<sup>32</sup> Interview, 24.12.2014

Over the course of about twenty minutes, Spyda danced and the two appeared as a tag team, with each following the other verse for verse and move for move. The audience seemed to enjoy this interplay. Spyda was the more animated of the two and jumped and danced using all the floor space of the stage. The two work closely with the Bavubuka Foundation and drive the Ghetto to Ghetto Cypher tour, a series of ‘guerrilla’ hip hop performances in Kampala’s slums or ‘ghettoes’, as they are called locally. This experience is visible in their engagement with the crowd in shouts and gestures, and in the physicality of the performance. The audience cheers them on enthusiastically and quite often there are laughs, when a particular statement is shouted out.

It became clear however, that the MC’s from BANTU Clan and, to an extent Taye and Spyda too, were not experienced with being mic’ed on stage, which may be a result of most live performances thus far taking place in the context of grassroots youth initiatives such as the Ghetto to Ghetto Cypher tours. As result of this, the vocal delivery of shouts and yells which would ordinarily be powerful do not come through with clarity over the speakers. This inexperience was obvious when compared with performances from GNL Zamba and Lyrical GMC, both established commercial stars in Uganda, who performed much later that evening.

By around twelve that night the venue had filled. Given the numbers it could accommodate, the numbers were not substantial. At the most, one hundred individuals were present. A large number were supporters of and performers from Baboon Forest Entertainment, GNL Zamba’s record label and crew. I had interviewed GNL a few weeks, and so was keen to see him perform. He said this evening, his presence at the concert, in which he was appearing pro bono was a way to “share the love and show support to the hip hop community<sup>33</sup>.” Baboon Forest has a number of young rappers signed to the label, generally respected for their commercial viability as well as skills amongst their peers, even amongst those who disdain commercial music. Amongst these is Jora MC, who has collaborated with Taye on a musical project called Borda to Borda, through YAEP! or Young Artists Exchange Project which is a worldwide society of young musicians, based in Uganda and Switzerland. Amongst the two contingents was much camaraderie and apparent support. Also present was Lyrical GMC, who is known as the ‘godfather of UG hip hop’.

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<sup>33</sup> conversation at the summit, 25.12.2014

Here, like at Rogue Elephant and Deuces, occurred a recognition from peers, each curated to form part of an accomplished group and collaborations therein. Within these recognitions, was the tacit understanding, that some perhaps were more experienced and therefore, commercially accomplished than others. This differentiation was visible in aspects of clothing and style too. The Baboon Forest performers were all dressed in current hip hop fashion, skinny trousers, a lot of black, shiny fabrics and quantities of gold jewellery. GNL himself was in a sharp suit with a large gold medallion, his hair in tight ponytail. The look was urban, affluent and sleek. As performers, their experience in large commercial venues and in the recording studio was obvious in the quality of supporting production. They brought their own backing tracks for accompanying beats, and these were extremely current, musical arrangements reflected trends in terms of American hip hop on charts around the globe such as Drake and Kendrick Lamar.

Jora MC in particular was an aggressive performer whose delivery was powerful but precise over the loudspeakers. There was a certain spareness of movement unlike the younger MC's who took over the stage sometimes to detriment of their delivery. Gesturing over beats that had the audience singing along and dancing too, it was a tight performance that immediately raised the tempo of the evening.

He was followed by Lyrical GMC, whose style was clearly a nod to the G-Funk sound from the West Coast, Nate Dogg's vocal style in particular. An excellent vocalist, he sang in English and at one point turned to the DJ to adjust volume levels of the backing track. His appearance on the show was much appreciated by the audience, as the choice of songs he performed included hits from the past decade as well as tracks from his new album.

Ensembles such as Bantu Clan, and the duo, Taye and Sypda, made use of what they saw as African elements in the form of drum and vocal samples and locally made tunics in east-African prints. These were incorporated into a global hip hop aesthetic encountered through the consumption of media and through artists like Babaluku. Here, the sampling of classic breakbeats, acted as a "foundational instance of musical Signifyin(g)" (Williams 2014:192), showing an awareness of hip hop's sonic history and then using it, as homage and as a reimagined creative product. For these artists, this approach is also informed by a distinctive mandate in the use of a local hip hop practice of social justice and activism, made visible through sound and image in their performances that evening. Details of these underpinnings I

discuss in the following chapter. For the moment, I wish to emphasise how each performance embodies a brand distinct from the other. In a similar fashion, more commercially minded artists took their cues from current American hip hop and in performance, made it their own. The two did not act in discord however, instead, adding a variety within this showcase of Ugandan hip hop.

Towards the end of the show, GNL's performance seemed to be much anticipated with cheers from the audience when he was announced. Unlike the other MC's that evening his set was entirely Ugandan Afrobeat or *Kindangali*, described in the literature review, in terms of backing tracks. Unlike the other performers, GNL's sonic style was clearly Ugandan. He was extremely energetic on stage, and the tempo of the backing tracks he used got the audience dancing. Once again, his interactions with the the audience took the form of call and response, with key words from his tracks accompanied by the audience. Between tracks, he congratulated Babaluku on putting together the event over several years and on the socially conscious messages he stood for. He also had words of encouragement for the younger MC's, both in terms of skills and vision. However, he made very clear at the end of performance that artists need to be paid for their shows, stating that (they should) "never do a show without being paid," signaling again to the fragility of position these rappers and musicians occupied in actual economic terms, in terms of building a commercially successful and viable brand through their musical practice.

Soon after GNL's performance, he and his supporters left the venue, meaning that the space was suddenly quite empty. St. Nelly Sade and Cyno MC had arrived, but not to perform and their reasons for this were quite simply, they had not been asked to do so. Bar sales were slim as the Bavubuka contingent did not drink alcohol, save for Spyda, who had a beer. From previous conversations, a lot of these young people clearly saw alcohol as a social ill, and this was not surprising given narratives of poverty, crime and drug abuse I heard about in the slums that many of these young men grew up in. There was still no sign of the DEG artists. I met Eazytex, resident producer at Rogue Elephant. He said Atlas and Bruiser would make their way by and by. As it transpired, they didn't. The reasons for this were, first they were not being paid for this appearance, and second, the situation was made murkier by their assertion that their names were put on the bill for the night without them being asked about whether or not they would make an appearance.



*Figure 16: at the summit gig. From left, EazyTex, GNL, a friend, Lyrical GMC*



*Figure 17: Jora MC on stage*



The night ended with a performance by Black Lion, a Canadian rapper, who is also Babaluku's brother, and Babaluku on stage, with just a few of us present.

At the summit, there appeared a discord between the vision of the Lugaflow brand and its enactment. Clearly, in this event lies the negotiation of dominant and subordinate positions, the dominant position first, being American hip hop's continued global supremacy as commercial product. Second, in Uganda, the hip hop summit not only had to contend with dancehall's ascendancy on the charts, but also the escapism provided through acts such as Atlas, and venues such as Deuces. The only way that Lugaflow can challenge these positions is by presenting itself, through its concerns of activism and social justice and in the adoption of local language as more noble or deserving of notice. At this point, Lugaflow is a niche product with a narrow audience, and therefore, not fully consonant with the wider aims of empowerment and education, qualities which are important and relevant to all. Underlying these aims, as the next chapter will show, along with the goals of social justice and activism, is the clear requirement to make a living.

First, the brand and culture at this event can be located in the adoption of modes of clothing in persona, the combining of the Luganda language with the musical framework of hip hop, and the choice of nomenclature used by musical artists and collectives. This points towards what Stuart Hall calls, "selective appropriation, incorporation, and rearticulation of European ideologies, cultures, and institutions" (1993 [2006]:379), only here it is not a European ideology but a hip hop culture and brand based on the genre's mainstream prominence and American roots. These appropriations, incorporations, and rearticulations also point us towards self-fashionings. Hall refers to "the rhetorical stylisation of the body, forms of occupying an alien social space, heightened expressions, hairstyles, ways of walking, standing and talking, and a means of constituting and sustaining camaraderie and community" (*ibid.*). All of these aspects come into play in the performances described above. These can be identified most due to the nature of musical performance where gestures and movement are to some degree exaggerated for the benefit of presentation.

Such emphases allow us to see how, in this location, we find in hip hop, "a partial synchronisation, of engagement across cultural boundaries, of the confluence of more than one cultural tradition" (*ibid.*). Examples can be found in the choice of stage clothing favoured by Spyda and Taye with its combination of denim and African print; in Lyrical

GMC's backing tracks and the American inflection to the accent he adopts while rapping, and in GNL's use of an Afrobeat rhythm upon which he overlays his 16 bar verses. These are important confluences and point us towards the plentiful ways in which self-fashioning, through music and in social life, shows us aspects of branding and belonging, garnered through a juxtaposition of the local and the global.

From this statement, I would like to draw attention to the fact that the genre of Lugaflow projects itself as a strong brand based on a distinct identity. Branding is a process that is inherently emotional, its aim thus, is to build awareness and lure loyalty; tacit in all of this is the generation of competitive advantage and opportunity through the indication of a superior and more deserving entity (Wheeler, 2009, [2012]:31). Similarly, brand identity is tangible and appeals to the senses, it motivates recognition accentuated by differentiation, all through the subjective management of meaning, unifying disparate aspects into a cogent system (Taylor 2015).

From the examples given above, first, we see a distinct stylisation in the genre of Lugaflow that attempts to combine the Ugandan, in the form of language and sonic features with the global through hip hop. In combining various elements into a unified genre, it simultaneously provides a space of meaning for those involved. The Lugaflow brand leverages its uniqueness through its use of language and in the case of GNL Zamba, in the deft use of the Ugandan popular musical form, *Kindangali*. The hip hop summit, as flagship event of the brand, was successful in building awareness and recognition through heavy promotion online. It is credible in actually gathering all these artists under one umbrella for the performance. The event clearly signalled an emphasis on the social role played by brands, in that branding can be viewed as an ideology that both draws on and produces social and cultural relations (Banet-Weiser 2012:4). Here, the Lugaflow brand in formed of a plentiful discourse in the language of social justice and activism in resistance to social and economic paucity

Where Uganda's hip hop summit fell short was in the space of measureable results if the event audience was any indication. The lack of attendees saves for friends and well wishers at the summit indicated that there is first, a lack of cohesion in the hip hop community and second, regardless of what was being said, in terms of entertainment, the acts tonight were not perceived of as a draw for a night out. In contrast, hip hop nights on Mondays at Deuces are packed, with little space to stand between revellers.

## **A Ugandan hip hop brand and culture**

Nevertheless, in the seemingly divergent spaces of the nightclub and the summit, occurs a similarity in the enactments of persona and image in service of the hip hop brand artists represent. Hip hop functions as its own brand with relatable traits that a culture can claim to possess. This in facilitates connection, alliance and novelty, in musical and social life, in the form of music, fashion, lifestyle, art and philosophy, each of which can then be deployed by hip hop artists to create their own points of inflection and differentiation.

As Justin William states, hip hop can be defined by “the sheer density and variety of intertextualities” (2013:167), meaning that its characteristics of sampling, in the acts of borrowing, as cultural homage and as creative practice lend itself to complex and powerful interactions between local and global communities linking each and the other. From this perspective, “borrowing is hip-hop culture’s most widespread, and arguably most effective, way of celebrating itself” (2013:171). Thinking forward from this potentialities, we can see hip hop as brand or a system of meaning, whose foundation is in its sonic dexterity and versatility, made more so by digital technology in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, in turn, enabling a plenitude of points of access and connection in an unprecedented manner.

Along with this, in Uganda are aspects of fashion and style, facilitating and representing musical and social connection in private and public spaces. Based on this, these hip hop musicians and performers, simultaneously build alliances, whilst shunning others; they emphasize traits and attributes, whilst rejecting others, to gain systems of engagement and advantage, in the form of musical collaborations and collectives, based on shared systems of meaning embodied in their brands.

Such forms of engagement extend into social spaces and choices. At the summit, it is correct to say that these young rappers were aware of the terms by which they were perceived and so adopted a self-fashioning, stylised to showcase their own distinctiveness. Amongst the established artists, these individuals function as enterprises, in the form of leading labels and studios for example, with interactions similarly dictated and defined. So, on the one hand you have alliances, between musicians, between musicians and record labels, such as GNL, Jora MC and the Baboon Forest label, between musicians and recording studios, such as Atlas and Deuces, and Gasuza and Rogue Elephant, and between musicians and charitable

organisations, such as Bavubuka Foundation. In this way, the artists I discuss can be said to operate as brands might.

That musicians can and do act as brands, overriding genre and sound is not a new understanding, neither is the perception that brand conformity and recognition in the context of the commercially successful musician may outweigh genre and style (Taylor 2015). However, viewing musicians as brands allows one to draw into focus those signs and symbols deployed in the communication of meaning against a wider social and economic context. As stated at the start of this thesis, these can and are used to signal a production of value, personal and material, as plenitude and abundance within a fabric of consumption (Taylor 2015:14). These signs and symbols, used to convey such forms of distinction include variously, consumer goods and services, such as products and information, each conveying their meaning through branding and advertising. These are visually conveyed through renditions of lifestyles and in the personas that in turn serve and deserve these forms of plenitude.

All of these are relationships dictated by the suitability of brand interaction, or in other words, if it fits with the image/s. In many ways, these relationships show us the ‘hustle’ behind the image. In the cases of both established and younger musicians in Uganda, their hip hop brand is composed of qualities articulated through their sound and image, in a management of distinctiveness, successfully enacted in the performance of a culture, both in musical and in social life. This must be effectively leveraged to gain maximum traction in the form of collaborations, sales and audience appreciation. It remains to be seen whether any of the young rappers, featured here and in the next chapter, achieve the level of celebrity in terms of commercial success and as cults of personality that the more established artists I discuss, have.

This discussion on how hip hop musicians compose their brands against a wider milieu of hip hop culture, in pose and in performance, relying on subjective and differentiated modes of self-fashioning to do so, needs to recognize the chaotic nature of the music industry. Along with this is the fragility of wider social formations in Uganda, characterised by a paucity caused by maldevelopment and inequity, engendered first by colonialism, subsequently exacerbated by widespread civil unrest and war, and continuing in the country’s dependency on foreign aid and intervention from transnational development entities. As seen in the

literature review, such trajectories have greatly influenced Uganda's music scenes and the social life around them. In many ways, hip hop is an interdiscursive space acting in resistance and negotiation of such fragilities, where cultural competencies come into play. Cultural competency is the repertory of discursive strategies, the scope of knowledge, that a viewer brings to acts of consumption, focusing and creating meaning from a work. Social structures determine what sets of discourses or interpretative strategies individuals bring to their encounters with popular culture and cultural competency helps determine the boundaries to meaning construction (Bobo 1997). Against the backdrop of social marginalisation and economic fragility, what we see is the Ugandan hip hop artist becoming both consumer and producer, staking out forms of cultural competency based on his or her own subjective and actual association with hip hop culture in a search of belonging, an aspect I will discuss in detail in the next chapter. He or she will 'consume' attributes, in so far as assimilate and adapt desirable qualities, which are then fashioned or 'produced' into traits, both tangible and ephemeral. These work in favour of a hip hop brand, the culture of which one can gauge in musical life and in social life, in the form of performances, collaborations and tracks.

These brands of hip hop, mapped through self-fashioning, in pose and performance, as ideology and as enterprise, become an enactment of imagination, a means which individuals cope with the vagaries of existence, and articulate hopes and dreams. Along the way, comes also the possibility of destruction, in the form of robbery at a studio, in musical collaborations and creative partnerships that fall apart and in alcoholism and addiction in an immediate fragility too. Against this backdrop, hip hop as culture and brand becomes useful as a way out from the banal and the restrictive found in everyday struggles. This is played out against a wider backdrop of creativity, commerce and the "hustle" of making it all work in a way that attracts material success as well.

Here, like in the previous chapter on image, it is not about 'faking it', instead, personas and lifestyles serve as invocations and evocations of possibilities, where hip hop dreams can come true. Material paucity being a defining characteristic of life in day to day Uganda, individuals are beholden to the vagaries and inequities of having to make a living. Against this, competition for resources in the form of commercial success and the economic capabilities this endows one with is fierce. It is for this reason, I agree with Taylor who argues that it is an "intense, frequent, and dominant strategy... (as)...every commodity in neoliberal capitalism is treated as a brand or potential brand, for this is the only way a

consumer economy knows how to introduce products to mass audiences and manage them (2015:55).” He is writing about spaces of advanced capitalism such as north America, however, this argument is relevant to Uganda too particularly in the contemplation of musical entities as those that comprise it, require some degree of commercial success based on perceived capability and novelty. As Taylor states, “Brands aren’t simply names of objects, but objects that carry meaning for people as things that make sense to them and communicate their sense of who they are to others” (*ibid.*). For those involved in Ugandan hip hop, the musical commodities and culture they produce and consume, are imbued with meaning as they are their personal creations first, and second, these are lent credibility through subjective encounters with hip hop, in lived experience and mediated representations, and combinations of the two as well. Through this, hip hop in Uganda becomes a brand, rather than a product, which forms a culture, be it one that favours excess or activism, interacting firmly with the market too, in that these artists all need some degree of commercial success in order to make a living from their craft.

In this study, within hip hop’s dialectic of commercial and conscious, are evocations composed of signs and symbols uniquely its own, mediated and propagated by poses and performances, simultaneously and successfully manufacturing its own ethos. This suggests an organisation and arrangements of symbols in a system that conveys meaning, finding voice equally in conspicuous consumption and critique of the system of capitalism. The place of divergences of excess and activism in hip hop as culture, as stated in the introduction, finds cogency through Baker’s theorisation on mastery of form and deformation of mastery, showing also how the two are closely linked, yet distinct in their uses and attributes, in a relationship not dissimilar to branding in that such divergences are practices of resistance, that fashion systems of meanings, which on occasion may seem obscure or esoteric, to those involved. As Baker asserts each lends itself to the situation of the other (1987:94). In hip hop, these are often voiced through an apparent ideology of self-determination and non-conformity, which as David Harvey would have us believe, points towards artistic freedom as an important component of the neoliberalisation of culture (2006:42).

Nonetheless, in its harnessing of the plentiful signs and symbols of capitalism, hip hop serves as particular cultural system of its own, and one which provides new and innovative ways in which to see mastery and deformation from the terms of capitalism and as resistant spaces, made more so, because they are ensconced within systems of domination, simultaneously

challenging and upholding them. If one views the genre as brand, it has a cultural and critical significance of aesthetic distinctness and emotive capability. In a similar vein, Lipsitz makes the important point that “these ephemeral works of popular culture go beyond their role as commodities. Instead, hip hop like other black musical forms provide a compelling example of how contemporary commercialised leisure carry images, ideas and icons of important political significance”. While acknowledging that this influence is due to the “profit making calculations” of music industries, these expressions, such as those that occur in Uganda, a space of deep material paucity, have direct relevance to “new social movements emerging in response to the imperatives of global capital and its attendant austerity and oppression” (1994). The means by which it does so can be explored through scholarship which has not only focused on the cultural politics of hip hop’s production and consumption within the United States, but also in the ways in which it acts a flash point for the dynamics of social and cultural formations, in Africa and elsewhere (Mitchell 2001, Condry 2006, Osumare 2007 et al.).

Lugaflow points to just such an awareness with its concerns of social justice. It is also mobilised by the consumption of contemporary commercialised hip hop in the forms of images, ideas and objects in hip hop to interact with questions of self-fashioning. This assertion is given weight by Chapter 6, which will show, for the handful of younger individuals working in and with Lugaflow, in music and in social life, it has provided a distinctive space for the development of their musical expression and in the showcase of self-stylisation, combined with a savvy instinct for marketing this through social media and in live performance. Informed by Babaluku in many cases, their reactions to hip hop as a brand is emotional and tangible, the brand becoming culture, interacting firmly with the market. Their continued efforts, regardless of large audiences or not, are aimed to build awareness and lure loyalty. Tacit in all of this is the generation of advantage and opportunity through the indication of a superior and more deserving entity. This is conveyed in Lugaflow by the taking of an apparently elevated moral and philosophical stand in the agenda of social activism, just as the Deuces and Rogue Elephant contingents do so by signalling an awareness of hip hop through their own tropes of conspicuous consumption. Against this backdrop, the Ugandan hip hop brand serves an ideology that is engaged in a dialectic of production and consumption within these relations (Banet-Weiser 2012:4), both social and economic.

This critical interrogation through branding thus, involves the subjective management of meaning, unifying disparate aspects into a cogent system (Wheeler 2012, [2009]). Due to this, following Mbembe's perspectives (2001), on what he terms the new nativism, this chapter aims to contribute towards knowledge production in an interpretation of contemporary social life differentiated from dominant narratives, notably those from the development perspectives and those from neoliberalism and those that focus on nativism or an ideology of difference par excellence. The music industry in Uganda is no doubt an economic space, and like other economic spaces is characterised by an assortment of organising principles, networks and institutions, all composed through social practices in specific spaces.

Here, I focus on social practices, with spatial contexts evoked through ethnographic accounts. This requires forays into the interstices of innumerable informal spaces of leisure which Mbembe refers to somewhat disparagingly as spaces where, "there is the infernal noise of music from discotheques and bars" (2001:47). Informal or otherwise, in popular forms of culture, such as fashion and music, leisure activities, in nightclubs and in social spaces mediated by patterns of consumption, we find spaces that challenge the discourses of rupture and destitution used to discuss issues of society and self in Africa. Driven by social actors, who in negotiation and interaction reveal formal, informal and overlapping boundaries, this is a process that finds voice through representations and material practices which I interrogate as forms of branding.

Such enactments follow Sasha Newells argument (2013), which bases itself in Robert Moore's insightful commentary on a fragility of position found in the semiotic combinations that underlie the idea of a brand. Newell makes the case that brands work most effectively as as composites of 'tangible, material things (products, commodities) with "immaterial" forms of value (brand names, logos, images)" (Moore 2003:334). Against this framework, it is individuals who form a subjective relationship between the object and names it is called, or are called on to give. This, we do in consumption of these objects and values, but also in our contemplation of the persons who represent these objects. Some of these associations are explicit, in the presentation of brand ambassadors. In relationships such as those arranged around hip hop, these may serve as culture, taking the form of personalities we emulate and admire, and in music, videos, clothing we like and in other ways of making meaning, these associations are more subtle, subjective and therefore, fragile. Here, I have shown how such associations between culture and brands, and the imagery around these entities and processes,



work as an enactment of self-fashioning, based on the relationships one might form with the musical forms and social life, we feel most at home in.

To conclude, these spaces, Rogue Elephant and Deuces, and the event of the hip hop summit, while seemingly divergent, speak to Uganda's wider issues of socio-economic paucity where hardship and struggle mark daily life. In the former, there is sense of a need to forget or disregard these struggles, through the creation of a hip hop brand, in the form of a culture that at once provides creative gratification and social haven. However, the apparent egalitarianism that runs through the nightclub is also be a result of the fact that Uganda is a poor country and as such, does yet have the starkly visible segregations of wealth and power conveyed through commercial spaces that provide products and services within the reach of an exclusive few. At the same time, the luxury of playing into a hip hop brand described within it remains the privilege of those who have the resources and time to do so such as Atlas and Gasuza and their friends and partners. On the other hand, Babaluku and his hip hop brand and culture, is one that roots itself in contrast to these circumstances of privilege. Brand development continues for each; for Gasuza, it is in the insinuating of himself once more into the world of contemporary American hip hop through French Montana's video, which I discuss in the final chapter. For Babaluku, it is in his associations with academia in North America recently. In both instances, each of these individuals has worked with his brand, a brand that reflects how he sees himself. However, there could be a failure in the message of both their brands as thus far, the vision promised either commercial success or widespread social change has not been realized and mobilised on the scale evoked through their ambition. Nonetheless, hip hop as a brand and culture resonates profoundly in Uganda, in particularly novel fashions with younger 'practitioners', introduced in this chapter, such as Nelly St. Sade, Spyda and Taye, Chimey, which is the term they use to describe themselves. With this in mind, I explore in the next chapter, aspects of belonging through hip hop.

## **Chapter 6**

### **Hip hop and belonging in Uganda**

#### **Networks of the image-world**

This chapter chooses a particular focus on local hip hop in Kampala. By local, I mean young men and women, born and raised in Uganda, whose encounters with the genre occurred in Uganda through the media and contemporary figures such as those described in the previous chapters. This grouping largely comprises of a youthful demographic, from the ages 20 – 35, all active in Kampala. The key concern of this chapter is belonging through hip hop, in a discussion located in what Patrick Chabal calls the “core dimensions of life, the pillars of identity and sociability” (2009:23), embodied in ‘Being, Belonging and Believing’, where each cannot be conceived of without the other. In this chapter, self-fashioning through consumption finds focus through discussions on identity and place, showing how these framings interact with a plenitude of ideas and influences from hip hop. These include ideas such as Knowledge of Self, in juxtaposition with roles and responses in hip hop framed around ideas of Africa, occurring in negotiation with social and economic fragility in Uganda. From this, this chapter shows how aspects of activism emerge and are conceived of in the local hip hop scene.

This chapter reveals similar concerns as the preceding chapter; informed by image-making and branding, hip hop acts as plentiful space of self-fashioning, in a resultant negotiation of a paucity of resources in the form of harsh social and economic circumstances. Here, I focus on aspects of belonging to show how hip hop provides this to these young people, as individuals and as members of a community. As this chapter will show, the idea of a community is one that is first, linked through shared socio-economic circumstances, in form of deprivation in the specific site of the Ugandan ‘ghetto’, a term used by my respondents. Furthermore, the term includes those who practice and appreciate hip hop. In this contemplation, I am in agreement with Hall, who paraphrasing Gramsci, says, that the optimism of the will, completely surpasses the pessimism of the intellect (1993). In spite of the problems of day-to-day-life, this phrase captured the mood and the tone of hip hop scene of Uganda, which I will represent as successfully as possible in this chapter.

This approach is informed by arguments such as Cornel West's, who is correct to describe "rap as *the* black post modernist cultural practice", praising its "tremendous *articulation*.... syncopated with the African drumbeat, the American funk, into an American postmodernist product" (2009:386). As Hall states, post-modernism is not a new cultural epoch, but only modernism in the street (Hall 1993). If hip hop is the "strength of street knowledge" as American rap group, N.W.A in their seminal track, *Straight Outta Compton*, will have, both Hall and West are correct in their estimation of hip hop as a practice exemplary in the shifting of the terms of the popular. Here, we find, popular practices, toward everyday practices, toward local narratives, toward the challenging and renegotiation of hierarchies and grand narratives (Hall 1993). In this regard, hip hop in Uganda does this whilst serving as its own narrative of activism in Uganda.

Hip hop's global grand narrative has its superstars often modelled as maverick rebels and 'moguls', who by capability and sheer, for lack of a better word, individualism, succeed spectacularly towards capitalist acquisition and cultural influence. The idea of acquisition needs no explanation, but consider influence. Take Tupac, and the mythology around him. This was an influence I found repeatedly in Uganda, in interviews with hip hop musicians, in pictures pasted on the walls of recording studios, in specials at nightclubs, and incongruously, in a museum of the Ankole kingdom.

In many ways, Tupac's musical oeuvre successfully captures the hedonism and violence that defines gangsta rap, in tracks such as *California Love*, while also providing social commentary and scathing political critique on what it means to be a young black male in America. Obviously, Tupac's global influence is linked first and foremost, to flows of information including the visual, via the media, and a musical repertoire of hits, only being as such, due to record labels releasing these in the first place, embodied in a hip hop mediascape. The economics behind these mythologies is irrefutable, but the influence represented in the imagery around his life and untimely death shows us ways of seeing the world around us. As stated at the start of this thesis, I draw on Baker, who describes myth as "narratives explaining the origin and nature of the world by reference to the acts and intentions of supernatural beings" (1984: 115-116). In hip hop, these take the form of celebrities, or "stars, megastars" (Taylor 2015:15), situated within a global cultural fabric of consumption.

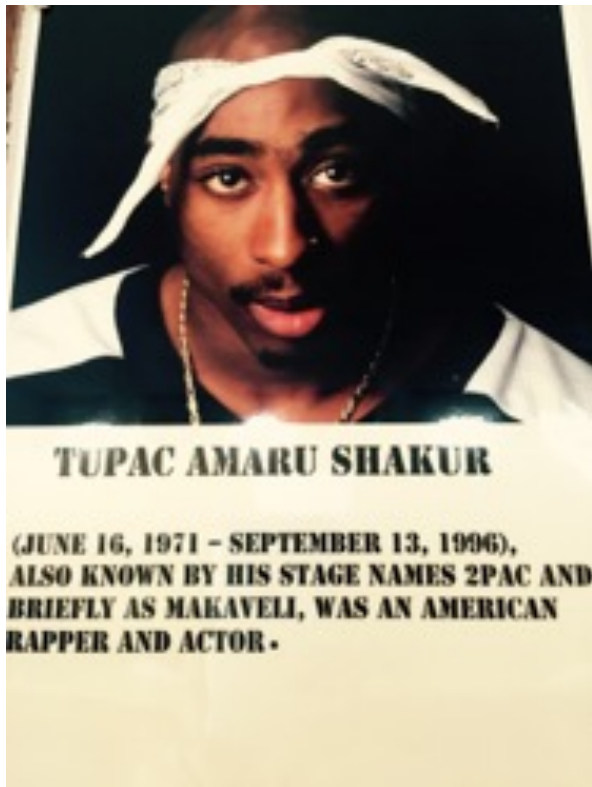


Figure 18: Tupac, commemorated in a museum to the Ankole Kingdom



Figure 19: Tupac on a taxivan in Kampala, image courtesy Gilbert Frank Daniels



Figure 20: Nelly at Urban Aksent studio with Tupac in the background. Note his West Side shirt

In doing so, they subvert and interpellate dominant historical narratives through their successes, opening up space for other narratives thus far neglected and ignored. To understand Tupac's place in the formation of image in Uganda, it is also useful to consider Susan Sontag, who places the visual in the form of the photograph, as that which retains something of the magical. Photography, or rather the image thus captured, should "retain within it the hint of the past, the need of sentimentality, the inevitability of death and thus also the meaning of change and loss" (Sontag 1977, cf. McRobbie 1994:92). This 'image-world' represents reality better than reality itself, where images such as Tupac's, of stars and celebrities, compensate for and replace the "need for personal power, control (and success)" (*ibid.*). Images work as aspects of popular culture, insinuating into spaces of leisure of pleasure, while also bearing testament to cycles of capital, where products and people, stars and celebrities, become the objects of consumption and desire.

I include this discussion here, as in Uganda, as shown in the photographs included in this chapter, the image of Tupac appeared and reappeared in the field, pointing me to consider how the likeness of superstar interacted with subjective strivings for mobility and resilience. Like elsewhere in Africa, such as in Sierra Leone (Tucker 2013), the image of the American

rapper brings with it a cultural aesthetic which interacts with aspects of consumption, aspiration and desire. In Uganda, these subjective interactions with hip hop occur through its global reach via musical and visual texts in the media and in the narratives of its superstars such as Tupac, through mediascapes and technoscapes, global in their mapping; second, through dialogic encounters with the diaspora. Two key themes emerge from these interactions, both of which are inter-related. The first is of challenging social and economic hardship engendered by material paucity, in the social realm through the formation of community, and in the economic, through enterprise, each informed by a 'hip hop practice'. The means by which this is focused is through a sense of a hip hop self, which speaks to themes of knowledge and empowerment as 'hip hop practitioner'. Second, from this, emerges a dialogue between the local in the form of what it means to be Ugandan and African, and between the global, in the form of hip hop, taking form in local musical narratives and social initiatives.

With this in mind, I begin with an ethnographic account of the Galaxy Breakdance Project in Uganda. This is followed by the Hip Hop Summit gathering at Jinja, finishing with a section on GNL Zamba, Uganda's most commercially successful hip hop artist, introduced in performance in the previous chapter.

### **Galaxy Breakdance**

The night of the culminating performance of Hip Hop Summit, described in the previous chapter, failed to draw in the numbers that I had observed at the Galaxy Breakdance final in Kawempe, an extremely poor area on the outer edges of Kampala. Nelly St. Sade was performing at the event pro-bono and I accompanied him. We got on a *boda-boda* and after driving some distance, turned off onto a dirt track, dodging chickens and meandering our way through the shanty town. It was Sunday evening and so, market day, with hawkers selling food and everyday utility items such as plastic buckets, and flip-flops and second hand clothes. We got to what was called the clubhouse, which had about a hundred and fifty young people already there.

Taye and Spyda were making introductions of competing teams on the stage and Gilbert was filming this event. I met Esther for the first time that evening; she is a journalist and

photographer, who runs Galaxy Breakdance whilst completing a bachelor's degree in journalism from Makerere University. These three individuals, along with others, reappear later in this text.

The project was set up in 2008 with the aim to provide free lessons on MCing, breakdance and graffiti to “disadvantaged kids from the slums<sup>34</sup>”, as Esther told me, on Sundays and holidays and the initiative at the time hosted about 50-80 young people. She told me she wanted to do something for the community in spite of being intimidated by being of the few women amongst her contemporaries involved in hip hop. Inspired by this musical culture and its particular emphasis on forms of knowledge, she focuses this initiative as part of a way to achieve her goal of becoming a documentary filmmaker.

The event was extremely enjoyable, mainly because of the palpable excitement in the audiences. The space itself was more an empty hall than clubhouse, though there was a badly tended football pitch next to it. In the main space were a few pool tables and a bar at which one could procure soft drinks. Generators were running a sound system from a makeshift stage, videos of a breakdance event held earlier that year were being broadcast through a projector onto the wall behind the stage. The stage had enough space to allow teams of break-dancers to compete, and their supporters were seated and standing around in the audience. Each team came onto stage, after their breaking session of about five minutes to each contestant, and individual winners were announced by a panel of judges. These winners went on through to higher stages of the competition. At the end of the competition, the winner was announced but the judges had a tough decision to make and so, took their time. In between sessions and through the deliberation, Taye kept the music going, which was mix of Lugaflow and American hip hop.

The culmination of the show was Nelly's performance which lasted about twenty minutes. The choice of track discussed various neighbourhoods in Kampala, to show kinship with these spaces and to critique, with humour, the governments failures in providing infrastructure and services. Nelly's performance had the audience cheering and laughing at particular turns of phrase. The performer had turned down a paid appearance at a commercial venue in Entebbe, because he “would rather do this for free, than be paid” for that

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<sup>34</sup> Interview, 15.12.2014

performance. He appeared to be well liked amongst his peers, with several discussions on future performances and other community events such as this one.

Although a team of dancers from Galaxy performed at the Summit, they did not have their supporters with them, and the summit as a whole was not able to attract the young people whom had been present at this final in Kawempe. Two practical reasons for this was first, distance and second, money. Most of the young people from Kawempe could not afford transport to get to the venue or even the price of a ticket, and so, could not attend.

That was a pity as in Kawempe, there seemed a large and enthusiastic appreciation for hip hop, its music and the dance forms associated with it. I include the Galaxy Breakdance mission statement from their Facebook page<sup>35</sup>, as it is printed online, with no correction of typographic and grammatical errors. This is in order to represent this non-profit organisation in its own words and also to show exactly the social and economic limitations these young people perceive in their immediate environment:

“Our Mission is to reach out to different youth in different communities share different ideas mostly in poor communities like Streets,Ghettos,Slums,Orphanage centers,schools,Youth centers and develop the youth's ideas through dancing,street entrepreneurship,teaching then English.Our mission was based on the lifestyle and lard ship that Ugandan abandoned kids pass through and also the youth communities to keep ourselves together, avoid drug abuse,thefty,misbehaving,joining bad peer groups.Through our mission we do believe that also lives of different kids can change through Breakdance and oher Elements of Hip Hop.Getting sponsorship,jobs,making friends and also get adoption,we do believe in the death and resuration of Jesus Christ so these young abounded kids who have been experienced to family neglects,HIV/AIDS, stigma and other different problems.Through Hip hop we believe their lives can be changed,their figures shall start to be seen,recognized in thir families and societies.We believe that we can make the world a better place for them.”

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<sup>35</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/Galaxy-Dance-project-Uganda-103766733031032/>, accessed 3.2.2017



The errors in this statement show clearly, first the immediate problems that young people face, such as petty crime and drug abuse, while also revealing a problem of basic education and wider issues of the HIV/AIDS epidemic and socio-economic relegation. This initiative, as well as others, which I will discuss under the aegis of the annual Hip Hop Summit gathering, are not dissimilar to ‘activist interventions’ in the ghettos of South Africa and Brazil, which locates grassroots interventions within the domain of development practice. The aim here is to “provide havens of safety and learning for poor children and youth; sites where an alternative socialisation and sense of place are fostered because of hip hop’s fifth element – knowledge of self” (Pardue 2004:429). The idea of ‘knowledge of self’, is considered the ‘fifth element’, and in hip hop, alludes to an understanding of one’s individual worth and place, and a “critical consciousness about black history and the roots of racial oppression and exclusion” (Pieterse 2010:433). Rather than an immediate engagement with issues of race and violence, in Uganda, the specific emphasis is on community building in spaces of poverty and subsequent deprivation.

I was informed that the most severe limitation amongst young people growing up in sites such as Kawempe is poverty, leading to a lack of education and subsequent employment. As a result, drug abuse and petty crime are endemic, and police harassment is routine. In interviews with hip hop practitioners, many of whom grew up and continue to live and work in ‘ghettos’ like this one, credit the betterment of their own personal circumstances to encounters with hip hop through breakdance and through music. According to Babaluku, the hip hop practice is one through which one can find ways to say, “I own my turf . . . cats in the ghetto are like, I didn't go to school, but this is my story”; through hip hop, “you know what you are standing for”<sup>36</sup>, with practical results such as keeping off drugs for example.

In spaces such as Kawempe, hip hop serves in the fostering of community. Initiatives such as Galaxy seem to do so with a degree of success, based on the enthusiasm of the audience and dancers, as well as in the sheer numbers in attendance that evening. Breakdancing in hip hop is purposefully and intentionally evocative of meaning in gesture and text, composed of a stylisation of movement, invoked through the occupation of space.

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<sup>36</sup> Speech, hip hop summit gathering, Jinja 22.12.2014



*Figure 21: Nelly and friends*



*Figure 22: The stage and audience*

Identified as “Hi-Tech Combat Literature” (Spady *et al.* 1999:114), in the words of rapper Ice-T, hip hop’s linguistic veracity is powerful in its ability to provide narratives to everyday struggles, and thereby, give a face and a voice to the people who make these narratives. Here, in the simulated confrontation that break-dancing affords, the body itself is performance. Gesture, movement, and style become sites for self-fashioning, through physical expression and ideally, economic gain, through paid performances.

The focus intended through this inclusion is crucial as it reveals plainly how difficult it is for young people in Uganda to survive. Spaces like Kawempe are sites of extreme socio-economic paucity. This aspect informs the qualities and articulations on the hip hop practice, which I will explore in detail in the following section. Such enactments integrate a dialogue between paucity and plenitude, and the means by which one negotiates this fragility of day-to-day life through a fashioning of a hip hop self that both integrates itself with and supports the community from which it emerges from.

### **Knowledge of self/hood**

Day four of the 12<sup>th</sup> Hip Hop Summit took place under a mango tree in a football field in the town of Jinja. Established in 1907, the town is some fifty miles from Kampala and is Uganda’s second largest city after the capital. Meaning ‘Place of Rocks’, it is located on the banks of Lake Victoria, and is close to the source of the Nile, as the river emerges from the lake making its way up the continent. In this sense, the choice of the city was befitting to the Hip Hop Summit theme of ‘Back to the Source’. The aim of this excursion was to share personal experiences and to reflect on what it meant to go ‘Back to the Source’. Because of this, it provided interactions that were normally restricted to interviews and therefore, was crucial in identifying how those in attendance located themselves in the Ugandan hip hop scene and consequently, how this related to their current social and economic concerns.

By the time I arrived at Jinja, night was falling. Gilbert and the others were late in leaving Kampala and he suggested I get in touch with someone called Cloud Fred in Jinja to sort out the next day’s itinerary and venue. Cloud is part of the Talanta Youth Movement, a hip hop education initiative in Jinja, and I would be meeting him for the first time the next day. When we spoke, he confessed that he was unsure of what the next day’s plan was and maybe, to call

at around ten when the others as arrived. This was as expected, as shown in the ethnographies presented previously, with musical happenings in Uganda, plans take shape gradually and schedules can be extended quite elastically. Eventually, when everything is ready, things happen, as I had got used to from time spent in the cube. As it transpired, the rest of the contingent finally arrived in Jinja by privately hired minivan only at eleven that night, and when I spoke to a tired Gilbert, we sensibly decided to talk again the next morning and take it from there.

In the meanwhile, I was able to connect with Gasuza that evening. On the television was news about civil unrest over Ferguson shooting verdict in the United States. I found myself in an intense discussion on black identity, racial violence and diasporic experiences in the States. Not surprisingly, the themes of race and consciousness, albeit in the specific frame of Uganda's place in the world, surfaced several times at the summit the following day, underlying the summit's themes of entrepreneurship and leadership through hip hop.

The next morning, I rang Gilbert. He said that the plan was to congregate at the field near the church of St. Jude's. Since I didn't know it, Chimey MC of Bantu Clan was kind enough to meet us at a fuel pump in the city centre. I hadn't met Chimey before though, but connecting was simple as we both had mobile phones. He got in car with us and directed us to the field. It was a sunny but windy day. We drove up to find about twenty-five individuals under a mango tree. The gathering included several individuals from the diaspora, including those from Canada and Denmark, rappers from Kenya and Italy, and from various parts of Uganda too, in an age demographic ranging from early twenties to forties. I was one of two women, the second being Esther Mbabazi, who runs the Galaxy Breakdance Project described earlier. Babaluku and Gilbert were filming the event.

The gathering was mixed as it provided a juxtaposition of diasporic and local narratives, as well as revealed hierarchies in age and musical experience, exemplified in Gilbert's use of the term 'hip hop elders' to introduce Gasuza and Babaluku before they addressed the gathering. Nonetheless, in the bringing together of these disparate individuals including myself, there was a sense of a community in our gathering, united by hip hop most obviously, but also in the fact that our selection of individuals had each chosen to take time out of schedules to meet outside of Kampala in a group.

To start the morning's discussion, Babaluku outlined a practice of leadership, or in taking control of one's circumstances, to serve as an example of resilience to oneself and the community to which one belongs. An important concern in Uganda, particularly for young people is the problem of unemployment. Consequent social, economic and political paucity means that, "A lot of young people in Uganda die in silence."<sup>37</sup> This problem, according to Babaluku is both a function of paucity and one that is continually compounded by its existence. It results in "youth without vision, confused, somewhere but nowhere still trying to find themselves". Calling attention to the meaning of the word *Bavubuka* in Luganda, which is youth, he suggests that the future of Uganda depends on knowledge and empowerment. Here, is the "next generation of hip hop." Elements of hip hop culture such as MCing and B-Boying could be "a blank platform that is waiting for leaders like you to plug in and take your position" (sic). This summit thus, was an opportunity to "redefine, reinvent recreate hip hop." The aim was to interrogate a practice from "a hip hop context," that included, "speech, formation, (to) understand the power beyond that" ...manifests itself in a practice that is powerful and able to create "results".

At this stage however, Babaluku's statements failed to articulate a specific plan of action that combined practical means and methods, but instead, focused on the importance of gaining knowledge and understanding through hip hop culture. Nevertheless, those present in the audience clearly seemed to listen and agree with several affirmatives through this speech, particularly at junctures where Babaluku focused on the potentiality, both in musical creativity and effecting social change through community engagement.

The session drew to close with a cypher around the words Back to the Source. Several members of the gathering formed a circle; this was inclusive, anyone who chose to join in, did. Some of us chose to stay out of it. I did mainly because I was more concerned with filming every minute and others, because they chose to enjoy the show. This was a good cypher, with Black Lion rapping in English, Gasuza in Luganda and English, Spyda in Luganda, and still others, such as Chimey MC in Busoga and another in Rutoro, another in Swahili. Not everyone understood each language; the aim seems more to show off one's skills, often as loudly as possible, and have a good time. Verses were for the most part well

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<sup>37</sup> Speech, hip hop summit gathering, Jinia, 22.1.2014. All quotes included here are from this narrative.

received with shouts and laughs punctuated by collective yells of “back..back..back to the source”.

We then disbanded for lunch. The afternoon session began with a bit of confusion. I arrived at the football field to find a game in progress. A few minutes later, a minivan with the rest of the hip hop contingent drew up and I got in. Once again we came to a large park. Across the road was the Indian temple Jinja is known for. Marabou storks circled overhead and occasionally alighted on trees, looking like old men in shabby black suits. Gilbert began the proceedings suggesting a “small exercise to bring again our mind and our energies”, mainly because it had been a plentiful lunch of “too much *matooke* and *posho*.” We assembled in a circle and the session began with stretching and jumping, and each member of group stretched out and clapped the hand of the one next to them to “pass on the energy”. Breath control exercises to enable better ‘spitting’ and to enable one’s voice to carry were enthusiastically received too. Once these exercises were done, we sat down to begin the evening’s discussion. Each individual was to introduce themselves and state why they were at the summit. Then, the individual on their left was to again introduce the previous speaker, recount their agenda, and then introduce themselves.

The aim was to facilitate a discussion on what the Ugandan ‘hip hop practice’ meant to each individual present. The emphasis appeared to be on a formulation and articulation of the ways in which people locate themselves in order to find a sense of belonging through hip hop. First, a sense of social responsibility found expression in a focus on community betterment, at the same time balancing ruminations and anxieties about making a living, or ‘hustling’. These questionings of the practice of hip hop as individuals, part of community and society, point towards processes of self-fashioning, beginning first with a hip hop practice, which serves as conviction and principle by which to live one’s art, influencing music and social activities in the form of community initiatives. Second, from these emerged articulations on a hip hop self-fashioning, which served as a negotiation between a local Ugandan and African identity with a global one, in interactions through the consumption of global hip hop culture.



*Figure 23: Babaluku in Jinja*



*Figure 24: The Cypher*

For Esther, a journalist and photographer, who runs Galaxy Breakdance Project, says this knowledge “means being you, truly know who are, ready to share in your own expression.” A practitioner could be a “dancer, hip hop artist, photographer.... anyone who practices any element of hip hop and believes.” The Ugandan hip hop practitioner who can then ‘overstand’<sup>38</sup> is an individual, who can, for Spyda MC, “is a person, who is not shy about hip hop no matter how people try to demoralise him, a brother.” However, he laughs and says, “man you guys talk too much” before he thinks and says his piece. This statement, in turn made the rest of us smile, setting the tone of the afternoon, where serious discussion found interludes of joking asides and good-natured interruptions in the form of cheers and laughter.

Chimey MC, of Bantu Clan, referring to the role of the MC in the origins of the genre through, where the initials stand for ‘Mic Controllers’, he says that “we control the crowd, what you speak, what you tell the community, that matters. As an MC (these are), totally different conversations...(it is) not about your hit single, it’s about your impact to the community...the power is in our voices....use our voices to change our community, and take it back to our community.” He finishes with “hip hop defines life, if you follow the principles of hip hop”...(embodied in Zulu Nation’s)... “declaration of peace, understand all the principles, you will become true to yourself and authentic to yourselves. Big up to Zulu Nation!”<sup>39</sup>

Taye interrogates his understanding of a Ugandan hip hop practitioner, by reflecting on concerns around complicated and fragmented histories. He says, the problem in Uganda is that, “we don't know about our culture. We have the tools which hip hop gave us, but we don't know what to use our tools for, we can't speak in the interest of the land (because we don't know our culture)”. Hip hop must “represent the land where you come from, in tune with culture that meets through hip hop, to express and manifest.” He calls this synthesis a “crash collision”, which in its ideal manifestation is a space where one can “be able to create more.” Here, it is “the practice that does the magic,” forming a self that combines awareness of history, with the ability to manifest desires in the future, and hip hop becomes the tool with which to do so.

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<sup>38</sup> Universal Zulu Nation Organisation: from consciousness within and personal transformations engendered thus, could one “overstand”, that is “comprehend and confront the injustice of world by manifesting one’s power” (Chang 2005:101, 106)

<sup>39</sup> see previous footnote.





*Figure 25: Spyda MC*



*Figure 26: Chimey of BANTU CLAN*

Both Spyda and Taye have had long associations with hip hop in Kampala. Spyda too grew up in a slum, in his case, Kisenyi. He ascribes to Rastafari, and sees it as an authentic ‘African cultural and spiritual practice’ in his own words, and I will critically discuss juxtapositions of Pan-African conceptions in the hip hop context a little later in this text. Taye, talking to me on another occasion said, about how he sees his own hip hop practice, that his “art is (his) language” and in this, “We have the tools which hip hop gave us”<sup>40</sup>.

With this in mind, they run the Ghetto to Ghetto Cypher project. Like Spyda, Taye grew up in the ghetto, Kamokya, in his case, where self styled ‘Ghetto President’ and dancehall superstar Bobi wine grew up and still has his recording studio. Inspired by music from an early age, Taye is influenced by acts such as Mos Def, Common, De la Soul and KRS-One, and he conceived of a musical initiative called SLUM, or Social Lessons Useful for the Mind in order to challenge economic and social inequality where he grew up through education. These aspects which helped focus the Ghetto to Ghetto Cypher Project. These are ‘guerrilla’ musical events, with the duo rapping over recorded break-beats. Audiences at these impromptu gigs are invited to join in in performance. Starting out, they decided to “freestyle anywhere”. The intention was to draw in audiences, as a group of vigorously singing and dancing individuals with portable sound systems will tend to do. Second, according to Spyda and Taye, is a dialogue on “the struggles and issues in daily life”, aimed at “poor communities” with the intention to “improve conditions” through discussion and expression.

Similarly, Chimey, of the band BANTU Clan, became involved with Babaluku and his Bavubuka foundation in 2011 at a freestyling rap battle event. He says as he was starting out, Babuluku helped with teaching him “some formulas about how to rap”. On one occasion, he played Chimey at track by Busta Rhymes, and then rapped it back translated into Luganda, but with a similar delivery. This sharing of music and ideas about hip hop culture “touched (him) deeply”. He credits Babaluku with being a mentor to “kids who are less advantaged” and in turn, feels inspired to the same through his music. For Chimey, this is important on a personal level, as he is Busoga from Jinja, an area that is considered by many in Kampala to be backward, and plagued by jiggers, an affliction that is associated with the city.

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<sup>40</sup> Interview, 24.12.2014, other quotes included from this discussion.



*Figure 27: Gilbert, the UG hip hop archivist*



*Figure 28: the hip hop practice discussion*

For Chimey, the taunts and jeers he received growing up was “psychological torture”<sup>41</sup>. By combining different languages as he does with his band, he hopes to present an integrated hip hop ensemble that transcends ethnic divisions and reaches a wider audience. His skilled delivery and conscious subject matter is a way of projecting an image that moves away from stereotypes.

In many ways, such interactions are consonant with Chabal’s statement, that individuals conceive of themselves in terms of “multiple and multifaceted relations which link them with others within ever expanding and overlapping concentric circles of identity” (2009:43). In Uganda, like in Kenya, these rappers project an urban identity often voiced in the terms of American hip hop culture for example, such as in the use of the word ‘hustle’, but also display a strong ethnic consciousness (Samper 2004). Ethnicity here, includes tribal groups in Uganda, such as the case of Chimey, encompasses in as well in larger, Ugandan identity, and an African one too. This is consonant with Mazrui and Mazrui’s writing on cosmopolitanism and ethnicity in Kenya, where individuals do not cease to identify with ethnic affiliation, but instead, assimilate this identity within an increasingly global one (1995). This is also relevant in considering the cypher I described earlier in its use of local languages in Uganda along with English and Swahili. Here, “shared experiences or shared ancestry, (has a way of) transforming negative ascription, such as described by Chimey as psychological torture growing up, into positive affirmation and a vehicle for building identification with a common “us” instead of an isolated “me” (Lipsitz 2007:192), which Chimey does with his band, BANTU clan. As described in the previous chapter, as a “brand”, with a “full African sound.” Lipsitz’s statement accurately interrogates the interaction of musical identities, which in the case of how this band is conceived of, are plentiful, in that first, one may locate a Ugandan identity, integrated with a Pan-African one in the form of vocalists from Kenya and Zimbabwe as well as the inclusion of drums from Uganda and Kenya, all informed by the consumption of American hip hop.

As one can gauge from Taye’s musings on what the hip hop practice should be, these subjective relationships with hip hop go beyond interactions in the form of experience through the media, instead, extending into juxtapositions of social and economic framings in Uganda. As this chapter will show, these framings include concerns that are national,

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<sup>41</sup> interview, 25.12.2014. Other quotes included from this conversation.

continental and global in terms of paucity and struggle and finally, emancipation from these conditions of paucity.

Samper, in his work on rappers in Kenya (2004) uses Paul Gilroy's concept of (1993) 'diasporic intimacy' to describe these musical and social encounters. In Uganda too, while young musicians face poverty and structural inequality in day-to-day life, they encounter transnational cultures which interrogate these very same struggles in other contexts, be it in terms of 'hustling' to make ends meet, or as in Spyda's experience of police corruption. Samper draws on Lipsitz's argument that there is a "diasporic conversation within hip-hop ... [which is] built on the imagination and ingenuity of slum dwellers from around the globe suffering from the effects of the international austerity economy" (Lipsitz 1994:27). While in Uganda, the roots of structural inequality are far beyond the current economic crises, the narratives of struggle, upliftment and resistance as well as pride and identification with a strong black musical and cultural form resonate deeply, in the inspirations these young rappers cite as formative.

In this, through the hip hop practice, we also find cognisance with Chabal's work on the development of hybrid concepts, drawn from as they are from tradition and modernity, and the formal and informal, in which he states that what is thought to be the public good is the product of the reciprocal influence of local and global aspirations on an ethical plane, which then guides social action (2009). The question of action in terms of intervention for the betterment of society are located here on initiatives such as Galaxy Breakdance and the Hip Hop Summit as a whole.

Returning to the consumption of hip hop as culture, this discussion seemed to be based on the hip hop ideal of 'Knowledge of self', the 'fifth element' of hip hop; it is one of the five core elements of the genre (though this is disputed), namely, emceeing/rapping, DJing, graffiti art, breakdancing. Crucially, it alludes to an understanding of one's individual worth and place, and a critical consciousness about black history and the roots of racial oppression and exclusion. The term 'Knowledge of Self', is attributed to Afrika Bambaataa and his Universal Zulu Nation Organisation, which he established in 1975 in the deeply troubled Bronx area in New York City. It was a core belief of Bambaataa's Zulu Nation, the credo of which was expressed in the Seven Infinity Lessons; here, to the question, "What is the job of a Zulu?", is the answer, the ability, "to survive in life", and to "teach (each) other truth (Knowledge,

Wisdom and Understanding)” (Chang 2005:101), along with “Peace, Love, Unity and Having Fun” (*ibid.* 105). These Hip hop Zulus, had to know themselves, that is to say, gain knowledge of self. Only from consciousness within and personal transformations engendered thus, could one “overstand”, that is “comprehend and confront the injustice of world by manifesting one’s power” (*ibid.* 106). The Infinity Lessons thus established a code of conduct, or way of life, which begins first, with individual self affirmation. This must come through a process of recognition of culture and pride in one’s self.

Against hip hop’s historical mythologies such as this, at the Hip Hop Summit in Uganda, these hip hop ‘heads’ sought to find themselves, their place and pride, both, reflected and viewed, through the lens of the genre’s cultural influence and global popularity. While the relationship between the diaspora and those in the hip hop scene born and raised in Uganda includes direct interactions and encounters, a wider interaction with the genre of hip hop occurs through encounters through the media and mythology of popular cultural forms. For hip hop practitioners such as Chimey, Spyda and Taye, they appear to take their cues from the pioneers of the hip hop genre and movement in America, similarly informed by Babaluku and his mentorship in hip hop. These hip hop practitioners, both young and old, from the diaspora as well as the local, in turn looked to those American hip hop counterparts from the seventies, for whom Africa became an almost mythical entity for validation and pride, acknowledged as the mother continent. For these young Ugandans, they found in hip hop an engagement with shared concerns such as the history of racial prejudice and colonial subjugation. From this emerges, a hip hop stance in Uganda, based on the idea of a return to Africa through as shown through studies on Rastafari and Reggae music (Henry 2012). Today, this preoccupation whilst originating outside of the continent, nonetheless, provides space for the fashioning and farming of a hip hop self in the world that did not necessarily include rappers “emulating MTV”, as Black Lion said to the gathering<sup>42</sup>, but nonetheless, took form through the consumption of hip hop’s music and imagery via global flows of media.

This discussion also points to a composition of brands as understood as a system of meaning against a wider situation of hip hop culture. As stated in the preceding chapter, hip hop is an interdiscursive space acting in resistance and negotiation Uganda’s paucity, where cultural

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<sup>42</sup> Speech, 22.12.2014

competencies become relevant. These include a repertoire of discursive strategies, a range of knowledge, that one brings to consumption, focusing and creating meaning, and therefore, belonging. Against the backdrop of social marginalisation and economic fragility, the Ugandan hip hop practitioner acts as both consumer and producer, venturing practices of cultural competency based on his or her own subjective and actual connection with hip hop culture. These practitioners ‘consume’ attributes; they assimilate and adapt desirable qualities, which are then fashioned or ‘produced’ into traits. Here, I found an ability to connect, through dialogic encounters, with multiplicities of past and present, linking African heritage, in personal narratives and in participation, to the trajectory and course of a musical culture. These work in favour of a hip hop brand, the culture of which one can gauge in musical life and in social life, in the form of performances, collaborations and tracks. In this capacity, these young hip hop practitioners show a reflexivity of identity and place in their own theorising on their place in the world, forming ‘imagined communities’ in Ugandan hip hop (Williams 2014).

Such formations comprise of the genre’s foundations; as interpretative communities, such formations additionally bring their own experiences to the understanding and creation of hip hop texts in interactions that include listening, creating and interpreting (2014). From a social point of view, we see a kind of ‘borrowing and sampling’, in the conceptualisation of ideas on belonging through hip hop, akin to the creation of sonic texts. Here, interactions with hip hop, mediated and lived, provide these practitioners with a plenitude of musical and social resources to draw on and use as they see fit. Returning to West, in his praise for hip hop’s stylistic inventiveness cited at the start of this chapter, this reflexivity in the Ugandan hip hop practice, in musical and social life, should not come as a surprise as the genre holds within its roots the potential to be thus.

In their articulations on the hip hop practice, self-fashioning emerge with an emotional immediacy which suggests a search for belonging, in the articulations of community and one’s role within it, given sustenance through encounters with hip hop. These strivings for belonging in Uganda’s hip hop scene, as Hall states, forms part of those popular practices, toward everyday practices, toward local narratives, which act as a decentring of old hierarchies and the grand narratives associated with them (1993). In Uganda, the old hierarchies and grand narratives of the dominance of American commercial hip hop, thus stands challenged, in these local forms of hip hop musical culture and social life, which

borrow and blend with aplomb. In doing so, the hip hop practice also challenges the old hierarchies and grand narratives of suffering, looming large above Lipsitz's ingenious slum dwellers.

Iwilade's (2013) argument is correct in that what emerges from this process is a hip hop scene that has emerged from an acute awareness of global discourses of development and democracy, which at the same time, is formed and informed by local dimensions of exclusion and disempowerment. These discourses, located in hip hop narratives of self-fashioning in Uganda, can thus be seen as a claiming of space for belonging, fostering inclusion and empowerment in resistance to social and economic hardship. Based on this system of meaning, hip hop acts also as brand, fostering these self-fashionings against a wider space of paucity. In addition, this Ugandan hip hop self in the form of a practitioner, is not forged in isolation, but instead, finds articulation in a conversation between individual and community, creating and sustaining a dialogue between wider issues of belonging in society.

In some ways, Grant McCracken's idea of "expansionary individualism" (2008:293), becomes useful once again to contextualise these fashionings. As stated in the consideration of diasporic self-fashioning discussed in the chapter on image, this is the act of consuming various identities in a process of self-transformation. These are "transformational routines," or a "set of conventions by which an individual is changed" (McCracken 2008:xxii). This indicates transformations that "open up new kinds of multiplicity and fluidity to the individual" (McCracken 2008:xxiii). Whereas, for Gasuza, Babaluku and Atlas, such fashionings are borne of transformations rendered through actual migrations, through hip hop in the the local Ugandan scene, we see self-fashionings based on migrations of imagination, in turn informed by the consumption of hip hop. These are no less potent, as in such musings, we may identify a curation of many selves, in a construction that favours exploration over authenticity in any one, yet comprised of subjective experiences at different times and different places (McCracken 2008:306, cf. Taylor 2014:68). Such a multiplicity emphasises the permeability of boundaries and identities, which we may understand as 'multi-local belonging' (Ramnarine 1996), showing negotiations of static conceptions of identity and place.

Furthermore, these preoccupations on the nature of the Ugandan hip hop practice focuses critical inquiry in two ways. The first finds voice in Cornel West's assertion that the present



moment has three general co-ordinates towards our understanding of popular cultures and the means by which one locates its apprehendings: the first is the displacement of European models of high culture. Second, is the emergence of the United States as the centre of global cultural production and circulation. Within this, is an emergence of shifts and displacements on, as Stuart Hall emphasises, *definitions* of culture, pointing towards American mainstream popular culture and its mass cultural, image-mediated and technological forms. The third aspect is the decolonisation of the Third World, culturally marked by the emergence of decolonised sensibilities (Hall 1993).

In this study, it is the second and the third aspects that are cogent towards understanding the hip hop ‘practice’ described in this chapter. As this thesis consistently shows, hip hop is an example of a mainstream American popular cultural form that clearly and artlessly is inextricably linked to flows of people, money and information. It forms both a mediaspace, and its dissemination is inextricably linked to the reach and extent of technoscapes (Appadurai 1990), in the form of global configurations of technology in turn transmitting configurations of information, fluid, reflexive and mobile. In Uganda, such arrangements take form as local cultural production in the form of hip hop, and in modes of circulation via the digital in the form of social media. These forms of production and circulation can be ascribed to these wider flows of people, money and information, while simultaneously challenging these through the emergence of narratives and representations which originate from the so-called Third World.

Here, Hall is correct to include the impact of civil rights and black struggles on the decolonisation of the minds of the people of the black diaspora (*ibid.*). I say partly because the awareness of racial discrimination encountered amongst individuals from the diaspora I describe in preceding chapters continues to influence their current strivings, and I will provide an example of this in the final chapter. At the same time, amongst those hip hop practitioners not included in this diasporic grouping, is a clear understanding that the history of colonialism locates within it, oppression and exploitation based on racial prejudice.

However, amongst those active in the hip hop scene, born and raised in Uganda, racial discrimination as experienced by the diaspora remains almost an abstraction, viewed with a distance that can almost be considered ambivalent. This is not an ambivalence of apathy, but

one engendered by more pressing concerns such as Uganda's extremely problematic political processes, police corruption and the constant 'hustling' to make ends meet on a daily basis.

In the words of Spyda MC, when I asked him how he was doing, "the sun is shining on my pocket"<sup>43</sup>, meaning that it is empty, devoid of coin and currency. More cogent thus, amongst these hip hop practitioners is an awareness of Uganda's paucity of socio-economic resources, formed through daily hardship that comes from poverty, whilst noting that issues have their own co-relation to the country's relegation on the global capitalist stage, caused in part due to the ravages of colonialism.

In the self-fashioning based on popular cultural forms such as we find in Uganda, we find two contextual dialogues: a global one in which a dichotomy between the West and Africa is played out, in attempts to enact an internationally prescribed social order in the form of capitalism and democracy, and a local one informed by a desire for social mobility through economic stability, and subsequently, and the right to belonging, in the form of wider recognition and participation through questionings of identity and place, particularly for young people. These strivings towards mobility and stability in the realm of the social and economic in Uganda are discussed in the next section.

### **Hustling**

At the heart of the hip hop scene is the need to find a way to make a living from music. This does not preclude social justice but instead, is part and parcel of it, creating a Ugandan hip hop brand, in the form of Lugaflow discussed in a preceding chapter. This form is deployed in the public sphere with a strong emphasis on its precise and differentiated characteristic of activism. Practically speaking, against the milieu of paucity, hip hop in the context of activism, provides a practical means towards using one's skills to move beyond economic limitations, informed by community improvement and social responsibility. To quote Babaluku, "The word keeps you in motion to keep you continuing to be the best that you are...B-boys, MC's, ...you see him rapping and he (also) runs that market stand." The hip

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<sup>43</sup> Skype call, 3.2.2017

hop community also becomes a space of economic empowerment, where hip hop can “dispense skills, bring communities together”<sup>44</sup>.

An example of this is in Taye and Spyda’s cultivation of farmland. They shared with me how young men from villages were selling off ancestral land in order to buy a *boda-boda* or a motorcycle taxi in order to make a living in the city. They found this troubling because this exchange did not guarantee economic stability. Instead, one had to work long hours, bribe police, all in order to live a hand-to-mouth existence in a shanty town in the city. So, in order to lead by example and have a degree of stability and sustainability in their lives, along with their music and involvement with community initiatives such as the Ghetto to Ghetto Cypher Tour, they cultivate land in the outskirts of Kampala with food crops. This small enterprise yielded returns, in the form of food for themselves and their communities, including the hip hop collective they form part of, which they are able to sell in the market too. In the description of this enterprise, both young men took this as a way of bettering their own lives and circumstances, through a degree of economic independence in a manner that they felt served their community too in terms of tangible rewards but also in the setting of an example to others similarly deprived. In this context, the making of money was seen and is actually a positive constructive action, bettering the overall social stability and sustainability of the community it provided for.

At the summit, however, these discussions took a somewhat different tone. A few attendees expressed a discomfort with mainstream hip hop culture that, in its elevation of ‘gangsta’ motifs implicated in glorifying criminality and therefore, is a continued oppression of the “black race”, in the words of Black Lion. The underlying theme, either discussed explicitly or alluded to ultimately was that of commercial success. Whereas superstars like Jay-Z and Kanye West and their “ghetto fabulous” images may represent a certain slice of the pie, the tension keenly felt at the hip hop summit that of ‘representing’ first, the marginalised in a modern, urban African context and second, reconciling that with the aspiration towards a success displayed in carnivalesque displays of “bling” and celebrations of conspicuous consumption such as those on MTV and in hip hop in Uganda too, such as found in Deuces for example. At this point, Gasuza makes the point that an affluent image attracted a certain quality of musical opportunity. Identifying the conundrum of successfully, in image and in

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<sup>44</sup> speech, hip hop summit in Jinja, 22.12.2014

sound, negotiating an identity and musical practice that is informed on one hand, by the commercial success and sound of the contemporary African-American hip hop scene and on the other, by an “authentic,” African or indeed, Ugandan sound, he drew attention to his involvement with the hip hop scene in the States in the late 90s, as opening act for the Roots and De La Soul. He maintained strongly that commercial success is not in itself a bad thing, and invited the audience, “if they have a bit of money,<sup>45</sup>” to record some music at his studio, Rogue Elephant in Kampala, successfully manoeuvring his own brand into the proceedings.

Nonetheless, to these young hip hop practitioners who do not indeed have a “bit of money” to spend on a basic recording, the Lugaflow notion then becomes a practical form of progression. Babaluku provides a mandate - in his words, the “Lugaflow generation” is represented by “young leaders to lead the communities they come from”. Referring to the Bavubuka Foundation initiative, that introduces and includes marginalised young people in the slums in Kampala to hip hop culture, he manifests “vision..(where) you are able to see yourself bigger, vision gives influence.” How one creates these spaces with the potential for empowerment is in “first and foremost, the ground step, how do we come together? The initial beginning platform of dealing with your authentic self comes with capacity to organise, governise, and build so that you can have a following you can influence.” Through discipline is the potential for growth. Through example is the ability to convince and influence, “have morals, values, set your standards know what you are standing for” and, “the people that you have mentored, too to move forward.”

While these statements fail to provide specific tools and mechanisms to those listening to achieve these aims, they clearly provide inspiration and imagination to those he mentors, as shared previously. This is in part because Babaluku represents a diasporic identity which, in relation to popular culture, embodies the transnational movements of people, products, capital and culture. These movements hold potentialities for novel social formations, alternative to a hostile mainstream. The influence of the diasporic on Ugandan hip hop points to the emergence also an ‘inter-discourse’, a concept developed by Michel Pêcheux (Bobo 1997:369), where Babaluku exemplifies the “specific space, the specific moment when subjects bring their histories to bear on meaning production in a text” (Morley 1980 [2005]:164).

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<sup>45</sup> Speech, hip hop summit, Jinja, 22.12.2014.

Stuart Hall presciently described such potentialities of belonging through popular culture. He reflects on popular culture as peripheral but productive space. It provides an opening of spaces of dominance to those presently marginalised, a capability which is “the result of the cultural politics of difference, of the production of new identities, of the appearance of new subjects on the political and cultural stage” (1993:376), such as we find in the Ugandan Lugaflow, and in the preceding articulations on what the Ugandan hip hop practice is and should be. Hip hop has been established as a dominant commercial genre; from its beginnings in a site of profound structural violence, hip hop can be considered as a perfect example of a kind of reclamation, in that it occupies a space of success in an emergence from one representative of paucity, and this capability, rather than the ghetto-fabulous narratives of hip hop on MTV, seems to underlie the movements for belonging in Uganda’s Lugaflow hip hop scene described here.

This history, combined with its tremendous commercial success, indicates that the ideas hip hop holds within it arguably provide individuals and communities such as those in Uganda a novel sets of tools with which to develop a sense of personal and cultural belonging, with the practical concern of challenging socio-economic fragility. This is what Hall refers to as global post-modern aesthetic, as the “ordering of different aesthetic morals, social aesthetics, the ordering of culture that open up culture to the play of power” (1993:376).

What we find then is popular culture’s unique characteristic, which is to fix the authenticity of popular forms, based on the experience of communities within which they emerge from and from which they base their strength (Hall 1993:377-78). Here, I would argue that rather than a fixing, what we have is state of play, or what McRobbie refers to as that playful disposition put forward at the introduction to this thesis. The innate joyfulness present in the experience of music forms the foundation of this assertion. This was reinforced by a similar joyfulness I found expressive of the particular hip hop musical and social life I describe in Uganda, resistant and reflexive towards hardship and fragility in the everyday and in the structural.



*Figure 29: Hip Hop elders, Gasuza and Babaluku*

These musings on what the Ugandan hip hop practice could and should be at the hip hop summit also form a negotiation of a series of different and distinct positionalities, based on profound subjective identification. Hall wagers that the difficulty in such negotiations lies in the proliferation of a field of identities and antagonisms. These can act in discord and dissonance with each other, dislocating relations and engendering rupture (1993:381). I would argue otherwise, and in service of this I would like to introduce a very well known rapper in Uganda. The reason for this, is this figure, in many ways links the apparent agendas of individuals such as Atlas and Gasuza on the one hand, and on the other, Babaluku. Arguably one of Uganda's most commercially viable hip hop artists, along with Navio, GNL's music, unlike Navio's, has a distinctly local sound, with him rapping in Luganda over Ugandan Afrobeat in the Kidangali style in many instances.

GNL was discovered on the youth empowerment platform Hip Hop Canvas, an event that was conceived of by Shadrack Kuteesa, Uganda's first hip hop promoter. GNL was then signed to Kuteesa's Platinum Entertainment label. Shadrack had facilitated my meeting with GNL and had also agreed to be interviewed, interactions which gave me an insight into the history of locally formed hip hop culture in Uganda. GNL is credited with having the first sold out hip hop concert in Uganda, and has had significant commercial success in terms of radio airplay with songs such as *Khoi Khoi* and *Soda*. *Khoi Khoi* is from the eponymous album in 2008 was sung in Luganda over hip hop beats with an intro in English. It begins with the anecdotal, of childhood memories, "around the fireplace, I remember times spent with my grandmother, family and elders,"<sup>46</sup> *Khoi Khoi* is "finding meaning in the suffering and strife, to find answers to the riddles of life". The song's popularity has been ascribed to the fact that it takes a local proverb about the "riddles of life" and through that shares GNL's own story in a manner that many could relate to in terms of subject matter.

GNL is a hip hop brand who seems most at ease with socially conscious messages and commercial success. I use the word brand, as he owns a record label and online broadcasting platform called Baboon TV, in addition to a distinct sound and image in the hip hop scene, described in the preceding chapter. I had interviewed GNL at his home a few weeks earlier, which also serves as recording studio home to the headquarters of his own Baboon Forest Label. A young man of about 35, GNL had just returned from a visit to California and shared his personal journey as a hip hop artist on Uganda.

Unlike Gasuza, Atlas and Babaluku, GNL's heritage is not diasporic. He grew up middle class in Kampala, and after completing his education at Makerere University, decided to pursue a career in music much to his family's initial chagrin, because he "refused to get a government job, why a sane person would refuse a paying job to just go hustle. Music was a hustle, there was no money." Referring to politics in the music industry, he says the problem is that in "hip hop right now, everybody is trying to chase a hit. (There is the) rapper, then there is a hip hop artist." The industry is "growing, taking off, there are so many talented people," but to him, there exists a complete mismanagement of infrastructure. For example, no copyright law means that artists don't earn "royalties, so we have radios, asking artists for money to spin their records."

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<sup>46</sup> All quotes included from an interview, 14.12.2014

When asked about hip hop's celebration of conspicuous consumption, he says, referring to American hip hop, "they have something to say. (It is about) upliftment, encouragement to get money, but you understand where that longing comes from, a place of desperation," a statement I agree with. In terms of creative vision, GNL said he made the *Khoi Khoi* album, as "music to represent Africans, represent Ugandans, because I was never going to be JAY Z, I was never going to be NAS, I was never going to be Ludacris, I wanted to be creating music for the people I grew up around. I decided to write *Khoi Khoi* about my personal struggles." Here "life is throwing me a riddle and I am trying to find an answer, staying in a place where my roof is leaking, my mattress is on the floor, but when I look up at the sky, I see the stars writing my name in the sky, you get me?" So he "dreams of that moment (to) keep on going, I feel it in my essence, keep digging until I strike gold."

For GNL, musically, "the whole theme is bridging the gap between traditional and modernity". (his) music is about peace, (it is) not cynical". He believes strongly in his music's ability to educate and inform, an example of which is what he calls a "cautionary tale." Here, the experience is of how he "lost an auntie to AIDS, she became so small, that was traumatising, she was a very beautiful woman and we saw her die. People need to listen to this story but it needs to be a cautionary tale to the youth, but against stigma." He feels music can achieve this, hip hop in particular, as "hip hop is a force for social change, (it is the) voice of the youth, (a) type of music that can change the world. This happens in two ways, first as genre it is "not limited...you are allowed to paint a picture with words. In the first verse is 16 bars, I can tell my story, the second, my emotions," and so on. The focus on language means that, "you, yourself are a star".

GNL's own brand and narrative demonstrates how "recombinant artistic and spatial practices can create unexpected identifications and important affiliations" (Lipsitz 2007:244). Viewing his approach toward his music which combines rapping in 16 bars overlaid onto *Kidangali* backing tracks, to shows a synthesis which can also be viewed as spatial, as each aspect represents certain places of origin. In the drawing of large numbers in terms of audience, GNL provides a filling of space in a literal fashion too. While the musical and textual combinations of his songs show these unexpected identifications, these then, extend into social and economic spaces, forming an abundance of associations and affiliations in confrontation of wider issues of structural paucity in Uganda.



With regard to confrontations of social and economic fragility, Kuteesa and GNL continue to maintain a friendship and a professional relationship with the latter serving as creative head of their Reach a Hand Organisation. The organisation has the following mandate, “at Reach a Hand Uganda we believe all young people should have the opportunity to reach their full potential, contributing to society and have a voice in the decisions of policies and programs that affect them. A youth-to-youth approach and youth participation is proven to be effective in empowering and inspiring even the most vulnerable and needy youth in defining and achieving future goals<sup>47</sup>”.

As a spokesperson for social causes and in relation to support he has received and given international organisations such as the British council, and others sponsored by USAID, he says he helps “organisations to get their message out - GNL as an icon to promote condom use. I am going to pull a crowd of 5000, 10,000 or go to a school or a university, my music is a platform (for) youth behaviour change, (which is) against drug use, kids stay in school.” While the efficacy of such top-down initiatives aimed at behaviour change, remains contested and problematic, GNL comes across as sincere in his belief that he has a responsibility towards society and in his capability that he can indeed, influence young people to perhaps make certain choices and decisions. He says “when you are speaking from a place of truth, people relate to that, doesn't matter whether you have a hit song.” However, he is only going to “pull a crowd of 5000, 10,000” if he is indeed, a hit maker.

Finally, again referring to the place hip hop has had in terms of social and economic segregations and formations in Uganda, he says, “Most rappers are educated and they can teach”. This segregation is what Babaluku refers to as three levels, the elite, and/or gated community complex, restricted to those of the diaspora and others with wealth and privilege and then finally, the grassroots level, referring to marginalised youth in the ghetto such as in fact, Spyda, Taye, Bana, Cyno, Nelly and BANTU Clan. In many ways GNL's choices support Lipsitz's assertion that artistic and spatial practices such as he describes show us “important possibilities for renegotiating social hierarchies and social identities” (2007:253), in that in many situations, hip hop artists use their positions of influence, obtained through success of birth, or often both, to address paucity amongst those less privileged. Lipsitz goes on to say that musicians often do this, “as entrepreneurs interested in commercial success

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<sup>47</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/reachahand/>, accessed 9.3.2015

rather than as critical theorists” (*ibid.*), a statement which can aptly be used to contextualise how hip hop artists in Uganda such as GNL go about their agendas too.

This is because, in many ways, GNL seems to have successfully negotiated the conundrum between commercial and ‘conscious’ hip hop in Uganda. GNL has since launched a media initiative call Baboon TV, with the aim to do videos and film to promote himself and the label. Their latest offering is a documentary called Legend of the Zamba, and GNL refers to himself as the Ghetto storyteller. The film is irreverent and features footage at various studios and with well known commercial producers, namely Benon from Swangz Avenue, known in the industry for its relentless churning out of hits, which are mainly dancehall inspired. While GNL makes his hip hop credentials explicit, but is also market savvy enough to know that collaborations with successful musicians who have a more mainstream sound, such as Blu3, Radio and Weasel and Bobi Wine, allowing him to capture the attention of a wider audience. In this way and through his subject matter, he seems adept at managing his portfolio of abilities and skills towards personal commercial success while also satisfying a proclivity towards activism too.

Lipsitz describes capitalism as an economic and social system that produces “distinctly new kinds of people in order to meet the new forms of production, distribution and consumption” (2007:xiv). This, he ascribes to the emergence of linked and integrated production, distribution and consumption, such as engendered by the internet for example, in turn enabling a creative interplay between music consumer and producers, overturning and challenging the rigidity of these roles (2007:238). This in turn leads to a differentiation amongst products, such as those I describe through branding in the previous chapter. This lends itself to “the development of specific, specialised, and even customised desires among consumers” (*ibid.*). GNL’s musical oeuvre of hip hop combined with *Kidangali* is indicative of such trends. In his self-fashioning, as local hip hop performer, his success points to the emergence or indeed, consolidation of a musical category in Uganda that could only come to be from first, the consumption of global popular forms as well as an obscure local one, amongst both artists and audiences, or producers and consumers.

This is an example of a creative and entrepreneurial community of which he is the figurehead, adeptly interacting with processes of consumption to fashion a novel musical

product, creating an original sense of musical and social belonging through his hip hop practice.

### **Imaginings and reimaginings**

In conclusion, what we have found through Uganda's local hip hop scene, is a paucity of opportunity in Uganda's ghettos, a potential from which these young hip hop practitioners have conceived a plenitude of social and economic anticipation and creative ambition. While popular culture has become a dominant global culture and at the same time, an arena of commodification, linking culture through industry to the circuits of power and capital (Hall 1993), rather than seeing a homogenisation and stereotyping, places like Uganda, while no doubt, still marginalised from these dominant circuits, show a reflexive re-working of popular cultural forms. What we find here is diversity of experience "within and between communities, regions, country and city, across national cultures, between diasporas" (Hall 1993:381) providing options of place, position and location for and through popular culture. Representations of marginalised perspectives in music are thus appropriated, pointing to both an amalgamation of transnational cultural forms, and a juxtaposition of this in local contexts. Such musings emerged strongly at discussion at discussions on what the Ugandan hip hop practice could and should be at the hip hop summit. Second, the youthful hip hop scene showed an enthusiasm of inclusion and enjoyment that surpassed events that focused on members of the diaspora.

These aspirations find remarkable visual representation too. At this time, younger practitioners, notably Gilbert Frank Daniels, use film and photography to meticulously document musical events, workshops and community outreach programmes. As a researcher, this has allowed me to stay current with events in Uganda while overseas. Through digital technologies, plentiful through mobile telephony in Uganda, individuals create their own plenitude of imagery, created in their own images, successfully representing hip hop in Uganda, through flows of visual information on social media. This documentation is innovative, and provides an archive of tangible public narrative of efforts at social change and musical enterprise. Social media has become a tool for these young people to harness their own space in the public sphere through the production and consumption of their

Ugandan hip hop brands, showing how musical and social formations such as we find in Uganda's hip hop scene transit from the ephemeral to the real.

This bears testament to Lipsitz, who credits the tremendous reach, scope and regimentation of new technologies with the ability to drive creative expression. The simultaneity of “new machines, materials and social relations” (2007:253) are capable of generating new forms of expressive, while deftly providing formats in the form of music and inspiration to those far flung and further from the centres of power and influence. These novel forms are now based precisely on differences “among and between local circumstances and contexts” (2007:253), such as those exemplified in Lugaflow and in GNL's commercial and critical success.

Thus, as these anecdotes show, for these younger rappers, the hip hop self they fashion and the musical and social brands in the form of enterprises they eventually hope to build is constituted of first, the imagery that exists in hip-hop, encountered through global superstars in the media, and through famous local artists such as GNL, Babaluku and Atlas. Through these encounters arise an ongoing discussion on how they see themselves as young hip hop practitioners in Uganda today, best reflected through their own understandings, encounters and love of hip hop.

The foundation of these endeavours is based on questions of belonging, based on what one must be, what one must do, and how would one go about achieving what they desire. As shown in the previous chapter, these young hip hop practitioners too realise themselves as brands, as entities conceived of and mobilised in search of social and economic belonging. Through conversations and discussions with each other, subjective imaginings and reimaginings of figures and concepts in hip hop find cognisance with actual issues and concerns encountered in day to day life, in the hope of challenging widespread structural social and economic relegation. In this discussion, I have attempted to show the inner workings of this process of self-fashioning through hip hop revealing it to be emotional and visionary as a successful brand should be, but one rooted in a consolidation of belonging, formed of an awareness of the both the milieu they emerge from and the hopes for how it should be in the future.

## Chapter 7

### Hip hop Spectacular

#### The Music Video

This chapter explores the hip hop music video in Uganda. It is a coda to the thesis and it combines each of the aspects discussed in the preceding chapters. The music video is an image, in motion, composed of other imagery, of individuals and objects; it is a branded creative and musical product, composed to showcase a particular entity through distinctiveness of sound and vision. Finally, in combining time and place, it represents belonging. In each of these three visual texts, this representation of belonging is captured in the city of Kampala, which serves as a backdrop. Here, we find a Ugandan mediascape (Appadurai 1990), forming a distinct image-centred, narrative-based account of reality, making use of imagined experiences and fantastical constructions (*ibid.*). Based on this, this chapter is a deep interrogation of a tangible aspect of lived experience (McRobbie 1994), with media imagery as the fulcrum with which to do so.

Guy Debord (1981, 1994) describes a stage of capitalism which is defined by a society enthralled and saturated with the image/s. This is a media and consumer society, organized around the production and consumption of images, commodities, and staged events. The spectacle becomes a conception with which to describe this society, and includes the packaging, promotion, and display of commodities as well as the production of media. Here, the seductive power of the spectacle lies in the promises of wealth and success it suggests; it embraces individuals that constitute society through semiotics of entertainment and information, driven by modes of consumption and production in the fashioning of the represented self.

In many ways, this understanding can be extended to the musicians I discuss, on account of first, the inherent performativity of their craft and their lives, played out in the scenes they inhabit, and the ‘hustle’ of making it in the music business. As Debord would have it, the Ugandan hip hop spectacle exists both as consequence and cause of the fertile field of the economy, and the ways in which people operate within and in negotiation with it, and so it is the product that dominates and defines the spectacular. Lefebvre (1984 [1971]) argues that

this leads to a certain dereliction in the human experience, because it presents a form of reality that is marked by the ubiquity of consumption and the valorisation of profit above all. I counter that on account of the performativity that is inherent to the practice of expressive cultures one finds in the musical and social life of the hip hop scene in Uganda, instead, one can find, critique and celebration of precisely these qualities rather than an alienation. Second, these visual artifacts, in most cases fail in the acquisition of conventional forms of profit in the form of monetary reward for their makers; rather, they act as musical expressions and visual representations of personal desires and longings that form the self and its fashionings described in this thesis. This assertion is informed by Stuart Hall's elegiac understanding of popular culture as a "profoundly mythic" arena. Commodified and stereotyped, as it may be, it is nonetheless, a space "where we find who we really are, the truth of our experience" (Hall 1993:382. This is because of its particular quality as "theatre of popular desires, a theatre of popular fantasies." These capabilities imbue our interactions with sites and forms of popular culture as spaces where "we discover and play with the identification of ourselves, where we are imagined, where we are represented, not only to the audiences out there who do not get the message, but to ourselves for the first time" (*ibid.*).

With this in mind, I begin with an ethnographic account of an encounter at a radio station to show how the music industry vis-à-vis the media in Uganda, operates, to set context for the use and deployment of music videos by artists. Subsequently, I discuss several music videos created by Rogue Elephant, to argue how the music video is a site of spectacle in service of the enactment of a larger hip hop culture and brand in Uganda, which at once real and fantastical, and in this capacity, these visual texts act as spaces of subjective belonging based on and located in the Rogue Elephant brand. These are spectacular displays, which through the visual, reveal flows of commodities, capital, technology, and cultural forms. Visual depictions point us towards these self-fashionings informed by commodities, brands and style. Lyrics show us narratives which explicate past and present struggles, and hopes and dreams for belonging in the future.

Various, each of these visual texts brings together the elements of self-fashioning and consumption, in ways that include the imagery of glamour and wealth, and in other cases, through lyrical themes of hedonism, obsession and heartbreak. Shot on location in nightclubs and often interspersed with videos of Kampala at night, a visual aesthetic emerges, constructed out of footage that is made of an unmediated 'reality' of the spaces its depicts,

but which is then, through the artists own subjective reimaginings, a creative space of fantasy, in so far, because at the very least, none of it is real, but as Hall states, no less potent for this reason.

Thus, this chapter explores the uses and significance of Ugandan hip hop music videos in order to put forward the idea of hip hop spectacular. I choose this approach because videos are both limited by time, in so far as they last a certain time frame. However, the nature of these expressions means that we can revisit them, time and time again, making these forms fluid in their temporality yet captured in time.

Finally, I share French Montana's smash hit video, *Unforgettable*, shot in Uganda, in a discussion representations of Africa and how these allow us to conceive of individual strivings and negotiations through representation in Uganda, of wider socio-economic fragility and forms of inequity thus, engendered.

### **Party Tonight**

It was late one evening in November 2014, and I was at Rogue Elephant, or as it is known by those who frequent it, the cube. A 21-year-old fixer and promoter, Junix, arrived at the studio with a copy of a CD from a well-known recording company, with the latest release from one of Uganda's biggest stars, obtained from a radio station that was due to play a track by Rogue Elephant the next day for the first time. The track on the CD in question, had already received airplay. More exciting than the track itself, was the gossip around it, where another star had allegedly masterminded a theft of equipment and unreleased music from the artists whose track we heard that evening. The track was going to be a hit, everyone decided, grudgingly, but not on the dint of excellence, but more the back of the fact that it was a new track from established artists, and that audiences were happy to listen to 'more of the same.' At this point, the lack of slickness in these artists' music videos was discussed. This is not surprising, because Gasuza is not only a musician, but a well regarded fashion photographer and video director too. Regardless of this criticism, the episode created a fair degree of optimism in the cube, because this meant that people were tuning into this radio station, and perhaps, a share of the audience could therefore be leveraged to deliver their track as the hit that the studio needed.

Rogue Elephant had brokered an arrangement with WBS radio in Kampala. The radio station forms part of Wavah Broadcasting Services TV Station. Founded in 1997, it began broadcasting in 1999. The station, had on this occasion, the sole rights to broadcast on air, the commentary for the much anticipated, Uganda vs. Ghana football match in the Africa Cup qualifiers. Dennis Mwanda, the head of programming for the station, has had a long association with Mys Natty and Gasuza, as friend and supporter over the course of their various musical and creative endeavours. The plan for the day was to release the new Rogue Elephant track, *I Wanna Know*, which combined vocals and rap in Luganda and English, during half time, with a short interview with the artists too. No video has been made for this track.

That afternoon the mood in Kampala was electric, with supporters in jeeps and *boda-bodas* heading to Nyamboole Stadium, individuals in face paint and the Uganda team jerseys, waving the national flag, serving as its own spectacle on the crowded roads to the stadium. It was the rainy season, so a storm seemed imminent but that did not seem to dampen spirits; instead, there was a buzz, which may have been the result of the electricity in the atmosphere from the storm. The promise of roads being blocked by traffic as is the case when it rains, meant that drivers were spurred into getting to the stadium well before the game started. WBS is located in Naguru, perched on a hill overlooking the city, but getting there, as I did on a motorcycle taxi, meant that I too had to jostle for space on the roads along with the football fans. I formed part of the cavalcade for some of the way before turning off towards the station.

The station is an impressive building, large and busy, and here I met Dennis Mawanda, who proved to be a mine of information on the workings of the music industry in Uganda. The Rogue Elephant crew arrived shortly after and made their way to the recording booth. Whilst launching their new track during half time, Gasuza and Mys Natty made sure to mention the new video they had made, for another track, called *Party Tonight*<sup>48</sup>, which forms the beginning of my discussion on music video here.

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<sup>48</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OGZhXgXlfKI>, published 27.9.2014



Gasuza raps lyrics over an EDM beat, with Mys Natty singing the hook, which is the name of the song. I gathered from our conversations, that the song is equal parts inspired by Donna Summer's *I Feel Love* and what was 'current' on the western charts, specifically, syncopated electronic beats. For Rogue Elephant, it is an attempt at creating a radio friendly song that fits into Kampala's nightclub playlists. By this measure it is successful. However, commercially it wasn't the break out hit that they hoped it would be. This could be on account of the fact that it fit neither into the dancehall sound that nightclubs favour, nor into the hip hop bracket that younger audiences seem to gravitate towards. Nonetheless, it is an upbeat track, well produced and well suited to the dance floor. It was also ahead of its time not just in Uganda, because by the next year, EDM based tracks dominated the global charts, and indeed continue to do so, such as French Montana's *Unforgettable* which I discuss later in this chapter.

The video is set in a garden, with palm trees and ornamental plantain trees conveying a tropical lushness. It opens with a shot of Gasuza in shades, fashionably dressed in casual clothes and distinctive slip-on loafers, edged with gold. The camera focuses on his gold watch and chain, as he holds a glass of champagne, with the lyrics sung by Mys Natty, "tonight, tonight, we're going to party all night." The song contains lyrics that are enticement to a good time, and not much more, as suggested in "stepped in the club, the mood was right, paper in my pocket, I'm doing alright". Alcohol is alluded to in "one shot, two shot", and "coke and rum, after the show"; sexual references are included at various points, but are not depicted in the video at all. Instead, what we have are shots framed by palm fronds and close ups of glasses of champagne, gold watches, designer sunglasses, disco balls, the actors and players smiling and laughing against string of lights in soft focus. An atmosphere of ease and wealth is projected through images of glamour and affluence, embodied in jewellery, watches, fashionable clothing and shoes, and in couples flirting and men and women dancing and smiling into the camera. As one viewer said later, "the star of the video is Gasuza's shoes, man!"<sup>49</sup>

Through the course of the video, Gasuza smiles and raps into the camera, brandishing, at various points a fan of 100 dollar bills and bottles of champagne, while Mys Natty projects the studied sultry aloofness of a fashion model. As such there is no narrative to speak of; in

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<sup>49</sup> a respondent who chose to remain anonymous.

the video, it is ambiguous whether the space is a nightclub or private party, but what is clear is that this is a social event. Colour shots of Gasuza and Mys Natty are interspersed with black and white shots of actors drinking and laughing, of Gasuza singing into a microphone and playing pool. The video features cameos from well known figures in the Ugandan music and entertainment industry, such as producer, Washington, DeeJay Global, rapper Atlas da African and TV personality Shiela Salofte. The video is a slick production, successful in its evocation of colourful congeniality, conveying an air of relaxation, confidence and pleasure, through the performances of those featured.

Debord puts forward the idea of spectacular time. In this critique of time as commodity, he states that the lived experience of time is replaced by an image of time; the subjective experience of time in terms of quality and value is transformed into that of a unit, which in this sort of quantification, becomes transactionary, regimented and standardized (1994, no. 149). A function and result of production and consumptions, what we now have is the packaging and the selling of “‘fully-equipped’ blocks of time” (no. 152), with particular emphasis on the economy of leisure and by extension, social activities, to constantly excite and stimulate forms of gratification. No doubt, the quantifications of time and space, abstractions, are given tangible form through the music video. The music video is indeed the quintessential block of time, which encapsulates the promise and pursuit of enjoyment that leisure activities depicted within it symbolize. In this video, the use of symbols of wealth point us towards flows of commodities and capital, as the music video is not only a form of creative expression, it is also a commodity, intended to deliver fame and wealth in its reception. It mirrors this endeavor through tropes such as wads of dollar bills, bottles of champagne and fashionably dressed female singers all suggesting an upward mobility.

These aspects are brought into focus through consumer goods, indicating social relations and behaviours through acts of consumption. In many ways, these are representations of stereotypes. Stuart Hall in his critique of popular culture, which as a dominant form of global culture becomes the scene of commodification, “of the industries where culture enters directly into the circuits of dominant technology – the circuits of power of capital” (1993:378). As a result, it is a space of stereotyping and formulaic homogenisation, with narratives and representation becoming the purview of those in an established position of cultural dominance. In this case, this is hardly true, as this music video is an attempt at joining those echelons of commercial success by employing analogous imagery. What is

correct is the use of fairly formulaic visual tropes to convey this aspiration. However, the presence of friends and collaborators, who describe each other as friends, indicates that the performances of social pleasure are not simulated, but instead, authentic representations of enjoyment. In the hip hop scene in Uganda, Gasuza, due to the length of his career, has tremendous credibility as film maker and photographer but as viable commercial musician, his influence is substantially less. It is for these reasons, that we still find in these preoccupations a plenitude in the form of articulation and enactment of an underlying struggle in relation to paucity, a point I return to in the following two videos.

The imagery that is used as means to show success in material and in social life in *Party Tonight* also represents Rogue Elephant as a successful brand, regardless of a hit, showing the capability of a certain lifestyle through consumption. Depicted in the images and signs of this video are representations of pleasure and fantasy. These promise personal validation and social advancement through the acquisition of commodities and in the exercise of lifestyle choices. These elements of style are used effectively in the music video of *Party Tonight*, in the forms of liquor, clothing, jewellery. They are stylistic inflections in service of the fantasy of wealth and success in the video, making use of objects indicating capital accumulation. The video is also comprised of images of individuals, dressed in a certain way and saying and doing certain things; these images of individuals are stylized and seductive renditions of themselves and their activities. This narrative then facilitates a commodification of social life and leisure activities, in the choice of these actors in the music video, made so because the individuals I discuss operate in the domain of local celebrity, and the imagery is done so in service of the advancement of their careers.

In this arena, promotional tools such as music videos borrow from marketing, advertising and public relations, presenting their own promise of mobility and success. As Stuart Hall (1993) states in his discussion on what constitutes the black in popular culture, the repertoire of style, which might be considered to be “the mere husk, the wrapping, the sugarcoating on the pill – has become *itself* the subject of what is going on” (378). This, in itself is not a bad thing. In this case, I suggest that we view this style as indicative first, of the Ugandan diaspora which celebrates associations with the so-called West; second, in Kampala locally, style finds expression through the phrase ‘swag’. This is a compliment, which comes from the word swagger and it used to indicate superior knowledge of fashion and taste, celebrating

the means to procure these items. It is an expression of flamboyant confidence evoked through clothing and comportment.

Furthermore, music is a cultural product, a commodity from which some profit and others lose (Ramnarine 2007: 23). As Appiah states, “to sell oneself and one’s products as art in the marketplace, one must, above all, clear a space in which one is distinguished from other producers and products – and one does this by the construction and the marking of differences” (Appiah 1996: 59, c.f. Ramnarine 2007:68). In the case of *Party Tonight*, this distinction is conveyed through the tropes it uses and the cast of characters featured. At the same time, it clearly refers to and is inspired by other musical and visual texts. In many ways, this music video is better contextualised by Collins (1993), who takes a post-modern view. He reflects on popular films to argue that the audience comprises of knowing bricoleurs. Here the old is not simply replaced by the new, but is recycled for circulation together with the new. In the case of this video, there is nothing new about the visual imagery. The musical composition too takes its cues from a source, specifically Donna Summer’s *I feel love*, remade to show current global trends in the form of EDM, or electronic dance music. Collins (1993) is correct in identifying that an increasing number of texts and technologies serve as both reflections and contributions. These are signs, reconfigured by those who see, know and use them, to reflect their own experiences. Such changes go beyond understandings of audience competence and narrative techniques, for example, instead showing us, an array of cultural competencies that come into play, not unlike Sasha Newell’s perpetrators of the bluff (2013), cited in chapter 4 on image, who make use of the materials at hand, and the knowledge of symbolism encoded into perceptions of these objects and ideas, through the use of brands and masks to convey an act of positive subterfuge. It is also useful to note that Gasuza brandishes a bottle of Frizzenti, a rather pedestrian brand of bubbly wine, rather than say, Moët, which is the genuine article when it comes to brands of expensive champagne.

With regard to simulacrum, the video of *Party Tonight*, in my discussions with Gasuza and Mys Natty, this video and track are uniquely Gasuza and Mys Natty’s own creative product, composed of their experience and knowledge, reconstituted to make a new and exciting commodity. The intent was tongue in cheek, with the video shoot acting as means for theatrical performance and for a party amongst friends, the capturing of which was intending to provide a platform for a hit. The actors mimic and simulate enjoyment for the camera, or in this case, it appears that it is not simulation at all. Given the long associations and

friendships shared by those on camera, it would be correct to assume that these are not simulations, but instead, a capturing of these social relations as they actually are. The enjoyment shown in the video, underlined by long-standing social connections indicates a belonging through the experience of the good life. Ultimately, however it is a staged set piece regardless of the 'realness' of the relationships shared by the individuals in it.

Nonetheless, the production and consumption of such imagery allows us to picture complex relations with which to locate the text, or the image, and allow it to produce meaning. This occurs in its inclusion of objects and goods and in the social networks it depicts. Through this capability, it is a capturing of time and space within the world of commodities, capable of entralling its audience as well as consumers (McRobbie 1994:13). As a way to create meaning, it relies on the presentation of an image or persona based on a performance of self-fashioning, formulated from lived experience, both musical and social, evoking through social interaction, a space of attainment and aspiration.

Thus, the self-fashioning depicted here is based on the use of consumer objects and lifestyle goods, and an experience of a social life. In this video, it is clothing and shoes that further this cause. Elizabeth Wilson (1990) provides a view on aspects of fashion. Wilson makes a compelling case for the uses of clothing as powerful self-fashioning tool. She states that rather than reducing this focus to that of a narcissistic self regard, "it places a line around the shifting, vulnerable and indeterminate contours of the body, acts as armour, as carapace" (1990, cf. McRobbie 1994:448-9). It is equally costume, uniform and camouflage, which as mask and disguise provides a form for the body to actually manifest itself as tangible persona in representation. Drawing on Kaja Silverman (1986), who views clothing and other kinds of ornamentation as a means by which the body is made culturally visible, Wilson states that from this capability comes meaningful form, where clothing, in articulating the body, simultaneously articulates the self. Thus, the power of the finished appearance as depicted in these music videos is that it is an elaborate construction, both bodily and mental, of a fashioning of self, rather than simple narcissism.



*Figure 30: Still from Party Tonight, Gasuza and Mys Natty*



*Figure 31: Still from Crash and Burn, as above*

This challenges Debord's conception of the spectacle, which posits that individuals held in thrall by the 'image society' become passive spectators, consuming images overshadowed by the capitalist machine. Similarly, Appadurai shows us, in his conception of the mediascape, that the "images of the world" (1990:299) thus represented and transmitted offer to those who experience them and transform them, as producers and consumers, the potential for imagined lives. These are plentiful narratives of possible lives showing us fantasies which form and focus the desire of acquisition and movement (*ibid.*), in negotiation with a paucity of opportunity and acclaim in the terms of widespread commercial success. Nonetheless, the notion that reality is substituted by a selection of images, which in their projection, succeed in making themselves regarded as the quintessence of reality is an interesting one, when one applies this to a music video. This is a form of intoxication, not dissimilar to the separation from reality that the alcohol and other such intoxicants provide.

### *Sober*

This leads me to the second visual text of this chapter. The second video is of the track, *Sober*<sup>50</sup>. For Gasuza, it is personal, and discusses his own issues with alcohol and substance use. Both an allegory to his struggles and a reflection of himself, it presents the other side, if you will, of 'Party Tonight'. The video has received some airplay, and bestowed recognition on Gasuza, as shared in the anecdote in chapter 3 on image, where he was recognised by *boda-boda* drivers who called him "African Sober." This track is muted and melodic, with Gasuza rapping and singing the hook as well, evoking both a sense of loss and a sense of understanding in the musical composition.

Uploaded onto YouTube on the 4<sup>th</sup> of July 2015, the video opens with the Rogue Elephant logo, and the legend, 'a short film, starring Gasuza, soundtrack by Eazy Tex'. The film follows with a shot of alcohol being poured into a sink, down the drain. We see Gasuza, facing his reflection, in front of a bathroom mirror, he washes his face, wipes it, staring at his own image, dressed in a blazer and T-shirt and gold chain.

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<sup>50</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BU3JgZuOuSU>, published 4.5.2015

We cut to him, stood against a background of city lights at nights, in sunglasses, the gold chain and a t-shirt, with the TV show, *Breaking Bad*, branding visibly prominent on it. He looks toward the camera, and says, “I’m done drinking, I’m sober now.” We see the legend on the screen, ‘directed by Atlas and Gasuza’. The next shot shows Gasuza walking, it is daytime, he is still dressed in the clothing we see in the opening shot. Cars drive past as he walks along the side of the road. He sings about heartbreak, but then says, “he’s a G, and can deal with it,” stopping briefly to buy a bottle of water from a street vendor. He goes on, “breaking up, just like I like her, no make up”, and we cut to a shot of a drawer being opened to reveal pills in zip lock bags being removed by someone. The verse continues, “told the truth, made a fool of myself”, the camera cuts to the watch on his wrist, “best kind of drug, when I’m with you, it’s my life, ask me to change it, I’m not perfect, I’m a little faulty.” We see pills and what appears to be marijuana being flushed down a toilet. The camera cuts to Gasuza against city lights as in the second shot of the video, he raises his glass, and says, “and I’m not sober, I’m twisted.”

The chorus, “now that I’m sober, got the feeling that its over”, plays over shots of Gasuza walking down the street, grasping hands with passers-by, presumably those who recognise him, exchanging fist bumps with *boda-boda* drivers. Shot in Kansanga, outside the Deuces nightclub, the sign for which is prominent in one shot, the walk in the video is particularly evocative, capturing snapshots of Kampala. As Gasuza walks down the road, we see billboards and twisted electric lines, against the backdrop of rainclouds and the hills upon which the city is built. We see ordinary people on their way to work, going out their business, we see street vendors and *boda* drivers posed against their motorbikes, we see homes and guesthouses flanking the road, along with petrol pump and kiosks for mobile phone data and airtime top-ups.

The video then cuts to Gasuza indoors, pouring a shot of whiskey into a plastic cup, staring, concentrating on the act, intercut with scenes outlines above. The next verse begins, “drink more beer, bottle after bottle...I wanted to drown my sorrows, I found out they could swim...addiction is a habit, you got the bug.” We then cut to shots of Gasuza, laughing and embracing a friend, again pouring alcohol into plastic cups. The scene shifts back and forth between the backdrop of city lights and the street in the morning, overlaid by the words, “bright lights, everything shines, so high, turn up the volume, turn up the amp, rogue elephant, that’s my camp”.



The camera cuts to a shot of Gasuza lighting a cigarette, his hands shaking. We see a fridge being opened, camera is placed inside, revealing a bottle of Smirnoff vodka and cans of Tusker beer, the warning against excessive alcohol consumption in the foreground. Gasuza stares into the fridge and by extension into the camera, as if pondering whether to take one out, which he does, shaking his head slightly. The verse goes, “sipping like it’s a message in a bottle, tequila shots, full throttle...I’m high as hell, on my god, I’m in hell”. We cut to a shot of a full ashtray, packet of Dunhill cigarettes placed next to it, a tabloid newspaper with the headline visible, “top celebs in Illuminati Society”.

The camera cuts to him and Eazy-Tex, in a living room, drinking beer with bored expressions on their faces. They sit on leather sofas, carvings of iguanas on the wall and Djembe drums placed on the ground, the coffee table crowded with cans. The verse goes on, “popping pills, smoking more calms me down, half pound, got from uptown, bartender, another brew, stuck to this bar, like I was glue.”

The video then ends with the chorus, we are back with Gasuza and now, Eazy-Tex, against the backdrop of city lights, smiling into the camera and dancing, like none of this matters and like he does not have a care in the world. At one point, he points to his T-shirt and grins. Gasuza has been drinking steadily through this video and one can assume that at this point the aim is to let the effects show as some sort of visual coda to this video. The final shot is of a black screen, with the words printed in white capital letters, “Excessive alcohol impairs your judgement. Drink responsibly.”

In many ways this video is a pastiche of images, explicitly featuring the names of brands of alcohol and of a television show as symbols of the artist’s concerns in this video. The use of these symbols as representation and style overlaid onto ‘real’ shots of Kampala’s streets are a form of pastiche. They serve in only accentuating “a disengagement with the real, and an evasion of social responsibility” (Hebdige 1988, Cf. McRobbie 18), made more so by the lyrics which articulate an escapism from the present through intoxication and an inability to emotionally comprehend the fragmentation of a relationship. Gasuza’s pastiche modifies the banality of liquor, cigarette and media brands, arranging their logos as metaphor and critique of his apparent condition. In doing so, and in the embracing of this pastiche, he delivers a “small defiant pleasure in being dressed up” (McRobbie 1994), in the smiles and swagger of his comportment, in contrast to the conditions of loss and intoxication he sings about.

Nonetheless, in the narratives of addiction and loss, this association then elevates the pastiche into something more personal, and perhaps, from the banal to the profound. This is an assertion given weight by the choice of allowing the camera to capture its the frame, a wider milieu of economic struggle and hardship in the form of the streets that he aimlessly and knowingly wanders through.

I include the detail of this video because, on the one hand is imagery that reveals a reality of the city of Kampala, in its depictions of petty traders and everyday people earning meagre livelihoods through difficult and arduous occupations, the pickings from which are lean and often erratic in their paucity. On the other hand, we have an plentiful and indulgent selection of intoxicants, which are also symbols of the means to acquire these substances in the first place. Juxtaposing these images against the image of glamour portrayed in the visuals of *Party Tonight* reveals the hip hop spectacle for what it is, the privilege of a lucky few in circumstances that are economically challenging to the say the least, for the rest.

The themes in *Sober* suggest a rendition of Jameson's fragmented subjectivity and rupture, the result of global capitalism, sundering subjects at the margins from themselves (1984). At the same time, Gasuza can also be said to represent those voices from the margins, Uganda's, hip hop's and the combination of the two, through his own visual and musical lens. Due to this, *Sober* is a representation of an ethnoscape (Appudurai 1990), whose cultural contours suggest a process constantly mobilised to reflect shifting and negotiated conceptions of identity, which in Gasuza's case are specifically Ugandan and diasporic, finding articulation in the American intonation of the English language he uses to express himself. The ethnoscape in *Sober* reveals itself to be a process of searching, for voice and vision through the imagination of such deterritorialised viewers in the creation of diasporic public spheres, in turn capturing spaces of representation.

Considering his hedonistic image in Kampala's hip hop scene and the ways in which he describes his musical and social choices as discussed in chapter 4, the line between artifice, art and autobiography are blurred to the extreme. Along with the "practised sincerity of the pop performer", (McRobbie 1994:19) this video serves as references to 'real' life and emotions, and is thus, more than stylistic mannerism. Rather than Jameson's stultifying depthlessness, from this perspective, this music video becomes a form of artistic catharsis rather than blank parody. As McRobbie correctly states, Jameson's concerns are focused

toward art rather than popular culture. This space admittedly contains its own overlaps and contradictions. However, in the realm of popular culture audiences and consumers, which Gasuza undoubtedly is, literally in the case of the substances we see him ingesting and the newspaper we see him reading, along with being producer of this track and video, we see a challenging of the passivity one could ascribe to the lyrical and visual themes we encounter here. At the same time, the camaraderie Gasuza displays amongst those disenfranchised from him in his intoxicated misery, who simultaneously appear more integrated in their daily lives indicates a belonging, a point brought home by the statement, that Rogue Elephant is Gasuza's camp.

Returning to the dislocated realities represented here in Gasuza's conflicted pursuit of sobriety, they point us towards a plenitude of imagery in the media on a global scale. Now, unreality, not unlike intoxication, is within everyone's grasp (Eco 1984). Hip hop can be implicated in the furthering of its own pastiches of style, variously vulgar, occasionally sublime and often both at the same time. Against this backdrop, "glamour, glitter and gloss should not so easily be relegated to the insistently apolitical" (McRobbie 1994:19), nor should escapist fantasies such as *Sober*. Instead, such preoccupations then reveal a subversive or critical potential, a potential Lipsitz ascribes to artists, who do so as entrepreneurs interested in commercial success rather than as critical theorists (2007:252).

Viewing the real and the fantastic within the frame of these two examples, as Hall said, in his reading of the carnivalesque according to Bakhtin (2010 [1981]), we find here not an upturning of two things which remain locked within an oppositional relationship; it is rather, a cross-cut of what Bakhtin calls the dialogic. This form of the dialogic occurs in these ways. The lyricism in this track and the visual treatment of video reveals Gasuza as postmodern culture's decentred subject. Here, ties are severed in the form of the sundering of a relationship, and the inebriation the subject now finds himself in. These qualities however, create space for new and varied bondings, which occur here first, in the realm of creative expression, in music and imagery, and in the images of random passersby who acknowledge his presence. For this reason, bell hooks states, "to some extent, ruptures, surfaces, contextuality, and a host of other happenings create gaps that make space for oppositional practices" (1990:394).

These oppositional practices, in *Sober* and *Party Tonight*, take form in ‘ghetto fabulous’ fantastical narratives of conspicuous consumption. These are escapist, but as discussed in the previous chapter, escapism has its own uses as oppositional practice, precisely because it is escapist. In Uganda, where poverty and hardship remain the norm and the larger social milieu is largely Christian and conservative, narratives that celebrate sex, money and power, along with obliteration through intoxication, serve as critique to such a mainstream, a mainstream which no doubt, can be implicated in social formations and economic impediments that include some to the exclusion of others.

### *Crash and Burn*

At this point, I introduce a third video into this narrative. *Crash and Burn*<sup>51</sup> by Mys Natty features both Atlas Da African and Gasuza, and as such, it is a collaboration borne of their long standing musical associations and personal friendships. It is a song about a failed relationship that includes lyrical narratives from each of the three musicians, with Atlas providing a verse on his own struggles, Mys Natty, the hook, and finally, a verse from Gasuza.

The video opens with Atlas in a suit, on a balcony, city lights in the background. He begins, “Living life fast, wondering when it our time to pass, Hennessy, weed, rockstar like Johnny Cash...they wanna know why I don’t sleep, now I gotta learn on a higher level, (I was) a boy used to be a rebel, reminiscing on my past days, wishing I was changing my own ways...crash and burn.” Next we have Mys Natty, in a stylish yellow and black jacket in an African print, singing the hook, “..why you start hating on me, putting the blame on me, see through your tricks...something there child you don’t know, you’re gonna have to learn...now you turn on me suspiciously, mistrustingly (*sic*), abusing me...I won’t take it no more, gonna even the score..crash and burn”. The video cuts to Gasuza and Mys Natty, posed against a wall, while, Atlas and Gasuza, provide an inflection in the phrase, “pump on the brakes..” Mys Natty is wearing a head dress of cowries and a fantastical mask of make-up, and Gasuza is a khaki coat with yellow, red and green epaulettes and wristbands. The camera occasionally focuses on the jewellery Mys Natty is wearing. Again, as in the other videos, the

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<sup>51</sup> <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NRlpLks7dxE>, published 10.11.2010

artists are dressed in fashionable attire. In my discussions with them, this was part of the image that they sought to project, one that combined elements of style that were equally affluent and bohemian in their references. The final verse is Gasuza's, "Blame yourself instead of me, 'Cos our love is gone, that's why I wrote this song, asking myself what when wrong, Suitcase packed, I'm out the front door, you go your way and I'll go mine." The camera focuses on Gasuza shaking his head and moving his hands in a gesture of finality.

What is interesting is how, in an interview, both Gasuza and Mys Natty shook their heads and laughed about how most of their songs were "sad songs", this one in particular, though they did not say this was inspired by any particular events in their various lives. Instead, it was an allegory to perhaps, emotions felt at various points and situations in their lives. One can find, in the lyrics about loss and heartbreak a deeper sense of alienation and separation, perhaps, the result of collaborations and partnerships falling asunder, personal struggles, and hope and plans being derailed as a result of these things. This is pertinent to the imagery in the video, which apart from those of the artists described previously, includes shots of the city at night, evocative in the same way those in *Sober* are. Here, we see billboards and lit signage, such as those of brands of nightclubs, pool halls and casinos, the names of which are visible in vivid branded images. We see hawkers selling *nyama-choma* or grilled meat and mobile phone kiosks, the crowded hustle and bustle of these spaces of commerce, contrasted with shots of Mys Natty and Atlas, each alone in a shot, standing, watching and walking in glamourously attired isolation, excluded yet in the midst of flurries of activity and action.

In this video, we find a sense of removal simultaneous with an embedding in spaces of social life and commercial transaction. Debord would say this is the result of this commodification of experience. This music video is a commodification of the experience of loss; it is a spectacle, in the packaging of these emotions in a standard block of time, inflected by images of fashion and urban landscape. Second, these visuals include markets and spaces where goods are exchanged, Third, brands of liquor and television shows feature as symbolic markers in the song and the mood the video hopes to evoke. This view provides its own critique of social relations engendered by capitalism and the inequities it generates, in the alienation that the main characters display from those around them, working and walking in attire that is distinctly less glossy than theirs.

However, the concept of alienation as one that sunders the artist from his craft and the viewer from society, fails to take into consideration the creativity necessary to create this musical and visual text, which I view as potent forms of representation, in that they serve as ‘wish-images’, where subjective articulations take the form of a search for belonging.

### **Wish-images**

More useful then, in the contemplation of these music videos is McRobbie, who provides a compelling critique of Walter Benjamin’s ruminations on the photographic image (1994:99); she states that, “the photograph connects the past with the present by supplying the ‘pulse’, the rhythm and the motion of historical process, not as an unbroken chain but as a jumble of fragments and ‘snapshots’”. For Benjamin, in ‘*The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction*’ (1968), the emergence of a mass market for art and a relational technological reproducibility, is a celebration of and sundering of art’s “ritual, originality, aura and eternal value” (*ibid*). However, Benjamin’s shows a distinct pleasure in aspects of the experience of urban life, in the exploration of spaces of commerce and leisure and fascination with the displayed commodity. From this, emerges a crucial contemplation of the meaning inherent to such objects and the social relations they reveal (McRobbie 1994:102).

For Benjamin, there is a reconstruction of the capacity for experience in the consideration of these wish-images, located in objects of consumer culture, which the music video is, as are the symbols that populate and inflect it (McRobbie 1994:108-109). McRobbie provides contextualization through the inclusion of Susan Buck-Morss’s work, *The Dialectics of Seeing* (1991). She makes the case for the contents of the wish-images of consumer capitalism (McRobbie 1994:107) as a yearning for the utopias of folk-lore and fairytales. From this perspective, both the utopian fixations of activism in the form of widespread social change, and excess in the mirroring of the hip hop mogul’s largesse and lifestyle in Uganda, show us a similar space of origin, which is the desire for a better life. This is a ‘mode of enchantment’, where under the the promise of rationalisation and organisation in urban modernity, is a “a kind of undergrowth of chaos and abundance” (McRobbie 1994:108). These videos provide a view of Kampala that is uniquely the product of Mys Natty, Gasuza and Atlas’ subjective imaginings of themselves as musicians and entertainers, informed by their own personal experiences of living and working in the city. Because they are visual

texts, these are chaotic and abundant in the inclusion of signs and symbols. Kampala forms a mythical landscape where consumer goods take on the weight of iconographic signs and symbols in a space of wider material paucity. Objects in the forms of brands, and individuals in the form of ‘stars’ compose part of this dream vocabulary, contextualised in a plenitude of such motifs and figures, capabilities which are actively mobilised by Gasuza, Mys Natty and Atlas in the visual landscape of their musical dreamscape of *Crash and Burn*, and in the preceding two videos, through personal style and fashion, props and backdrops, and in the slickness of cinematography.

Buck-Morss states that the dream state acts as removal of the individual from others while simultaneously propagating shared or collective experience. From this we can view the the spectacle as neither a set of geographic sites nor a collection of images but a “social relationship mediated by images” (Debord, 1994, no. 4, cf Gotham, 2005). The complexity of an immense variety of flows, networks and forms challenge formulations of social, spatial and temporal passivity, whilst raising question on how individuals react to and inequities of commodification and capital accumulation. In Ugandan hip hop, shared or collective experience takes the form of an availability of technically produced images. In this study, this takes place by virtue of mass availability through the internet and in the production of “dream material” in the form of tracks and videos. As this thesis has shown, in Uganda much of the dissemination and promotion of these music videos occurs on the internet, through social media channels such as Facebook and Youtube, with artists managing their own pages, rather than through traditional media such as radio and television.

These texts are cultural forms that are uniquely Ugandan, but nonetheless informed by global hip hop culture, in their musicality, lyrical content and visual preoccupations. The importance of these channels cannot be overestimated to these artists, as, in Uganda, musicians are required to pay radio and TV stations to play their music. The only exceptions to this rule are artists with established commercial success. This, along with the fact that Uganda does not actually have laws to safeguard intellectual property, means that a hit song on the radio, will have several facsimiles, mostly comprising of the same ‘beat’ out very quickly. This knowledge, along with financial restrictions imposed by traditional media outlet policies to popular music, means that artists are quick to put their music out on social media, nonetheless vocalising a resentment with the status quo. Similarly, music videos are produced by the artist’s personal funds, or in the case of Rogue Elephant, from earnings from other more

lucrative projects. In this way, technology is key in the creation and dissemination of these visual texts, through media, traditional and new, acting as a challenge to the fragility inherent to these arrangements.

In response to this instability, in *Party Tonight*, we find celebration; in both *Sober* and *Crash and Burn* we confront the the image of the 'ruin'. This is the other side of "consumer splendor...deadly, repetitious and even hellish in its endless evocation of novelty" (McRobbie 1994:109). The image of the 'ruin' is a symbol of the fragility of consumer culture, and by extension, the individual experience embedded in this culture, made more visible because it originates in a space of material paucity for most, and therefore, socio-economic fragility on a wider scale. The dereliction of human experience lives side by side in celebration of it through fantasy, always underlined by consumption, of culture and commodity, and in production, in a self sustaining cycle of subjective experience, in the pursuit and hustle for success. Inherent then, to these wish-images is a dialectic between privilege in the form of self-fashionings amongst the characters who people these tales and a "more equal society free from scarcity and conflict" (*ibid.*). Benjamin's concern is mobilizing these desires through technological potential into a kind of social transformation towards this end, rather than remain as a soporific dream-state.

As this thesis consistently shows, the dream state of the hip hop culture and brand in Uganda, whether it takes the form of activism or of escapism, is dynamic rather than subdued. Here, it is packaged in the hip hop spectacular video, at once real and fantastical in its nature, and one that relies on the use of consumption and commodity to make its point. This Ugandan mediascape is a confabulation of effect, where the real and fictional are blurred, becoming an image-centred, narrative-based accounts of versions of reality, mobilised by imagined experiences and fantastical constructions. Comprised of a plenitude of elements such as characters, plots and textual forms, these versions of reality are based in the unavoidable reality of social and economic paucity in Uganda.

Nonetheless, for Debord, the particular power of the commodified image in the form of the spectacle lay in its ability to form and focus a worldview that materialized into an objective reality mediated by consumption. This is its unique specialisation of power. In his *1998 Commentaries*, Debord outlines three kinds of spectacles. The first is the concentrated spectacle, leveraged solely in service of the ideology of political power, such as that of the



totalitarian regime. The second is the diffuse spectacle, which he considers a particularly American brand of the spectacle; this is focused on a display of economic power, associated with advanced capitalism and the copiousness of commodity, akin to the commodity phantasmagoria described by Walter Benjamin previously (1968). The phantasmagoria of the commodity spectacle became a strategy by which capitalism ensures its own enduring existence, using conspicuous consumption and the lure of advertising, displays, and commodity abundance, to depoliticize the masses and assign them a passive role in public affairs. The former operates through violence, the latter, through seduction.

Finally, is the integrated spectacle. Of these, it is the third that is most relevant to this study. The integrated spectacle represents a spectacular consumer society, the imposition of which is global in its reach and ideology. This is the commodity's final transmutation, where the conception and allocation of value, is one that is not beholden to its use. The spectacle now represents corporate capital's way of deluding and intoxicating people with the illusion of commodity culture, an allegation that Lipsitz makes of hip hop in reducing it to mere marketing category. Nonetheless, these forms of subjectivity in terms of value are theoretically significant given assertions that consumption is an imperative method of enfranchisement in capitalist society (Giroux 1991), as aspect discussed in a consideration of the hip hop mogul and the strivings he captures.

Estimation on the power of the commodified image in the form of hip hop's imagery on such a huge analytical scale, provides us with a way to gauge Uganda's interactions with capitalism on a global stage, and therefore, confront the social and economic fragility that underlines everyday life here. In order to do this, I provide, French Montana's smash hit, *Unforgettable* released early in 2017, and shot on location in its entirety in Uganda.

### **Playing to the ghetto sublime**

Well-known American rapper, French Montana shot the video to a global smash hit in Uganda. The song is called *Unforgettable* and features Swae Lee of the American duo, Rae Sremmurd. The city of Kampala features prominently, particularly its ghettos. As such, the video is rife with trite clichés such as dancing African children, who are incredibly vital performers, shot against a backdrop of a shanty town, and later, ominous looking gunmen and

what appears to be young men panning for gold at gunpoint. One scene is shot in a bar, Montana crooning over a pool table while an attractive female accompanies him. Indistinct and shadowy in the background is Gasuza, playing the proverbial ‘badman’. He is a sinister, one dimensional figure, out of focus and participating as an observer, whose passivity only adds to an air of vague menace. He has not shared with me the circumstances of how he managed to insinuate himself into this visual narrative, but I was informed that particular scene is a ‘plug’ for a video, the track for which features American superstar, Future.

In the writing of this thesis, this music video could not have come at a better time, as Gasuza’s appearance in the manner in which it happened allows me to point towards issues with representation found in the image of Africa in popular culture. Gasuza might appear mogul like in the Kampala hip hop scene, but here, as foil to the famous American, he becomes a cipher (as opposed to a member of a cypher). At the same time, his inclusion in this video would suggest that he has indeed, a certain hip hop credibility that allowed for him to share the video screen with this famous rapper. The image of Gasuza in this video serves as a symbol of how him and the others I discuss, interact with questions of representation in relation to the continent.

French Montana’s video showcases a sort of “ghetto sublime” (Smith 2003:681) version of Uganda, a backdrop of ghettos, guns, girls and safari. The term refers to evocations such as those common in gangsta rap. In such presentations, the negative imagery of Uganda is a conduit and flashpoint for what Smith refers to as “ghetto sublime” (Smith 2003:681) in his discussion of the hip hop mogul. In such presentations is the experience of a form of “social danger of truly monumental proportions, while simultaneously providing a safe remove from the object of our fascination” (*ibid.*).

This sense of social danger is evoked in a compounded fashion in Montana’s representation of Uganda as fragile symbol of poverty and violence, which we then view through the lens of the established pop star’s image. Here, he frolics with slum children and later, shoots pool with sultry beauties, before, finally, he is accosted, at gun point by what appears to be a leftover extra from the film *Blood Diamond*. In this dramatic narrative, Gasuza now functions as a prop, just as this erroneous image of Uganda does. He himself is not mogul-like here in the manner he is represented in his own videos, but instead cuts rather a more minion-like figure.

Regardless of mogul or minion like, to Gasuza, this act of representation is once more an inclusion into the world of mainstream American hip hop. Here is politics of pleasure that appears to revel in “often ill begotten wealth, street corner prestige and explicit sexual titillation” (Smith 2003:679); this is the ghetto sublime that Gasuza’s shadowy figure at the edges of French Montana’s music video inhabits, a ghetto sublime made more dangerous and attractive because it is Uganda.

Nonetheless, in his very passivity, Gasuza shows a rejection of Debord’s passive spectator. what we find through this spectacular show is an experiential potential, in which one may find a transcendence of one’s immediate circumstances, through the interpolation of narratives of fantasy and imagination, which is precisely what Gasuza does in his role in this video. As such, these aspects return us to the mogul’s utopia discussed in the first chapter, which is packaged and leveraged off of an identity shifting or layering through image, playing up all these themes in a masterful way, regardless of accident or design. This and the sheer success of French Montana’s track points towards a fundamental mechanism of the integrated spectacle.

As exemplified by the spectacular consumer society, this is the ability to focus collective attention, be it through the appreciation of musical cultures, and the modes of consumption such as fashion and lifestyle these are enacted through, for example. The fantastical, imaginative qualities of spectacular consumption from this perspective supports the view that reality cannot be distinguished from the spectacle as asserted by DeBord (1994), and more recently, Baudrillard (1983). For Baudrillard, it is a world of signs which are disconnected from its referents, which we find in French Montana’s no doubt, well-intentioned but ultimately, banal portrayal of Uganda. This world, where Uganda is a ghetto-sublime prop, operates through seduction, in a celebration of surface. The image of Uganda here, engages viewers, while discouraging the pursuit of meaning and preventing any level of inquiry beyond the shallow. Because of this, French Montana’s video, in its representation of Uganda, colludes with discussions on the continent of Africa. As Ferguson states, these “converge around the question of ‘Africa’” (2006:4), as an entity, confounding in its scope and obfuscating in its encounters, inhibited by categorisations and metaphors such as the dark side (Stiglitz 2001), satanic geographies (Smith 1997), or even more damning, a black hole of the information economy (Castells 2000, cf. Ferguson 2006).

No doubt, Africa's distinctive and problematic relationship with issues of development has a role to play in these perceptions, with specific regional formations and patterns such as those found in Uganda's widespread poverty and history of violence each presenting its own space for analysis of this sort of wretchedness. This critical engagement we find in the literature review of this thesis, where development initiatives have used efforts from applied ethnomusicology to mitigate the effects of violence, poverty and illness. As stated previously, this analysis can no doubt be traced to the neoliberal project on the continent, which while fostering a relationship with wider political discourse and economic flows, can also be implicated in social and economic inequality, political instability and dishonesty, and a wider issue of a fragility engendered by maldevelopment. This is as much to do with the continent's participation, and nations' corresponding economic agendas, willing or otherwise in the global neoliberal arena, with the involvement of international monetary institutions such as the IMF and the World Bank, and ensuing social, political and economic implications.

These issues also find resonance in Achille Mbembe's work on the nature of modernity in Africa (2001), where he alludes to a conflict between a cosmopolitan and a nativist idea of African identity and culture. This is a result of the implosion in urban and rural economies, and a sundering in formal and informal economies characteristic of the immediate post-colonial period. Instead, what we have is what he calls a fractured economy, composed a varying points of connections, whilst maintaining complex relations with international circuits, at once tenuous and hardy. These frameworks of simultaneous inclusion and exclusion can easily be applied to Africa and its continued marginalisation on an economic, social and cultural stage. French Montana's video provides an image of precisely these varied connections, where Uganda provides a stage for the popstar-rapper's vision, remaining a prop almost farcical in the elements curated to showcase this vision. The video clearly had a large budget and as I was told by Gasuza, all those featured were rewarded financially. The dancing children went on to perform at this year's BET awards.

Regardless of this, the treatment of the image of Uganda here is adequately described in Stuart Hall's indictment of the forms in which black people and black communities and traditions appear and are represented in popular culture. In these similarly "deformed, incorporated, and inauthentic" representations such as in Montana's ghetto sublime are sites

of strategic contestation. I make this assertion as in the video we see “the figures and the repertoires on which popular culture draws, the experiences that stand behind them” (Hall 1993:378), in the form of the dancing slum children, famous in their own right from Ugandan artist, Eddy Kenzo’s Pan-African hit, *Sitya Loss*; in Ugandan hip hop star Navio<sup>52</sup>, cheerleading the Americans, Gasuza, deprived of form and substance in a shorn context as shady ‘badman’.

This video can be implicated in the reiteration of the dark continent trope, similar to the the spectacle of American musical forms from the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century, that “stereotyped, amplified, and ultimately capitalised on tropes of black superstition” (Rollefson 2008:86). Here, instead of black superstition, we find negatives clichés associated with the continent of Africa, such as wild eyed mercenaries brandishing automatic rifles, slum children smiling through poverty and emaciation and in nameless human forms panning for gold in the jungle. Nonetheless, in this mainstream popular video, we find, “elements of a discourse that is different – other forms of life, other forms of representations” (Hall 1993:378), made so at its very simplest, through the inclusion of Uganda. Contrasted against the visual imagery of *Unforgettable*, Gasuza’s videos, in their representations of contemporary Kampala, in their images of celebration or regret, as the case may be, are more truthful, in their representations of self-fashioning amongst the principal characters, their use of the city and its ordinary people as they are, as backdrops and foils.

My analysis is not necessarily an indictment of corporate culture industries such as those represented by the success of *Unforgettable*, but in the context of Uganda, it is useful to consider David Harvey’s work (1988, 1989) which posits spectacular celebrations, such as festivals and carnivals are useful in the generation of profit and investment, but also work as a tool of pacification, in the form of ideological control, in the form of ‘bread and circuses’.

Overwhelmingly, those I spoke to in Uganda were pleased that their country and people found representation in a successful vehicle on the world stage, though a few, jeered at how suddenly all of Uganda knew who “this” French Montana is, pleased with the crumbs of inclusion that this video provided on a global stage. However, it is fair to assume, that the

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<sup>52</sup> Navio is a very successful hip hop star in Uganda and also a member a of the diaspora. I was unable to include him in this thesis as he was away in tour on both occasions I conducted my field work.

lions share of the millions made from the success of this smash hit, did not in fact go to Uganda, but instead to the recording company and celebrity behind it. This conception of spectacular celebration is cogent towards seeing the reception to Montana's music video too.

In my interviews with several people, the themes of forgetting through enjoyment, the harshness and bleakness of economic and social issues, as well as the disenfranchisement and indeed, passivity, that the political situation has fostered featured time and time again. From this, Gasuza's visual texts too point towards a forgetting of these circumstances through their focus on personal pleasure and pain.

However, perspectives such as Harvey's fail to consider the unique vibrancy, in musical and social life, and the painstaking strivings toward a better life through art and economics, I met in the field. Here, imagination gives one the tools to circumvent the possibility of disaster through art and economics. As Baker states, this is a network which mediates poverty and abundance (1987:8-9). In a parallel fashion, the hip hop scene in Uganda acts as one such network, which I engage with specifically through self-fashioning in the image of excess and activism. Just as the difficulties one encounters provide a consideration on large scale issues such as globalisation, modernity, worldwide inequality, and social justice, so too, does the emergence of economies of pleasure and enjoyment, albeit unstructured and occasionally, shadowy and dubious, in their formations.

Gasuza's role in this video is representative of these spaces of enjoyment and leisure in Uganda as are those he has directed. In this sense, the spectacle is a result of these consequences in its representation of individual reimaginings at odds with poverty and hardship that most suffer in Uganda. It is thus, a conjoining of separations of plenitude and paucity, made so through the consumption and production of renditions of global hip hop culture. So, in many ways, against this backdrop, we can consider the hip hop spectacle in Kampala to be a violent seduction, or a seductive violence, in that both the promise and the threat it holds for the sanctity of individual hopes and dreams and the success or failure of these.

To conclude, Debord's concept of the spectacle involves a distinction between passivity and activity and consumption and production, condemning lifeless consumption of spectacle as an alienation from human potentiality for creativity and imagination. This spectacle

engenders passivity and pacification through submissive consumption. It is an estrangement from the production of one's own life, of art from life, and consumption from human needs and self-directing activity, as individuals catatonically witness the spectacles of social life from within the privacy of their homes (#25 and #26). The correlative to the spectacle for Debord is the spectator, the viewer and consumer of a social system predicated on submission and conformity. Challenging Debord's passive spectator, we find in Ugandan hip hop the antithesis of passivity in beautifully crafted musical texts and forms, in the stylish imagery used to showcase these, in the valiant attempts to generate measurable results, in the form of record sales, chart hits and in well-playing gigs, such as the anecdote at the start of this chapter shows. Thus, Gasuza's repertoire of music videos shows that what at first glance seems shallow also serves as a site for an inquiry that deals with profound questions on the nature of inequity. This is an inquiry made more intense in a space that allows the superficial as credible, such as the music video.

In Ugandan hip hop, in the consumption and production of music, text and images, and in the wide spaces between success and failure, we find spectacles that are both an affirmation and an invocation of subjective spaces of meaning, in the articulation of personal struggles, pleasures and desires. Encompassed in the Rogue Elephant brand, rather than submissive or conformist, these attempts are based on the creation of distinctiveness in service of belonging in the form of commercial and critical success.

## **Chapter 8**

### **Conclusion**

#### **Self-fashioning through consumption in Uganda's hip hop scene**

This study has shown how hip hop in Uganda lends itself to self-fashionings informed by the consumption of objects and ideas. Hip hop in Uganda shows a musical and social life primed by the images and imagery of this global expressive culture, its music, its media narratives and mythologies. The hip hop scene reveals tactile interactions between representations and renditions of self, subjective and relational to processes of consumption and production, interactions which, in this study, find expression through enactments of activism and hedonism. As a global cultural product, hip hop's musical narratives, visual imagery and popular mythologies encompass both of these tendencies, each pointing toward strivings for a life less ordinary. In this project, thus, these concerns have shown us how individuals and communities face and challenge social and economic difficulties through creative enterprise in their musical and social lives.

Against this backdrop, I make the argument that hip hop in Uganda shows us how these negotiations of fragility occur through self-fashioning; in these acts are located what Douglas Holt calls an open-ended process of self creation (2004), which occur in musical and social life through the consumption and production of ideas and objects, where hip hop works through lived experience as well as through mediated encounters, equal and authentic in the subjective potency of these meetings. In this, hip hop shows a richness of creativity and expression, in the identification, curation and enactment of distinctive characteristics that stand in contrast and critique of profound fragility engendered by social and economic paucity. In locations such as Uganda, such strivings emerge from the same space of an awareness and challenge of inequity. Distinctions such as activism and hedonism both reveal negotiations of circumstances of social and economic hardship and constraint, set against a wider marginalisation on a global scale. Such constructions and enactments, in the form of self-fashioning lead us to think about the ways in which people try to make something better out of their lives.



In Uganda, as this study has shown, there exists a dialogic relationship between plenitude and paucity. This I found compelling in its visual potency. I mean this in the simplest sense. It is what you see around you. Crowded market places are filled with goods, bunches of lavish green plantain arranged on the ground, assortments of rubber flip flops in a dozen colours heaped in profusion, placed next to cheap plastic goods made in China, such as buckets, baskets and water jugs, pay-as-you-go mobile data packs fanned out like winning lottery tickets, as people weave in and out, buying, selling and touting, all this for a subsistence level income and similarly, within such a budget.

This is both an abundance of supplies and scarcity of resources, which one finds equally in the hip hop scene. As I have recounted, there is plethora of releases from recording studios, some large in scale and others, shacks in the market, renting equipment and talent for a nominal fee, with tracks borrowing and sampling from the latest hits, both local and global, with abandon. Digital technology is accessible to anyone with a mobile phone, users on social media platforms such as Facebook creating and sharing a wealth of imagery and information. Nightclubs and bars offer expensive liquor to those who can afford it; for others, there is locally brewed *waragi*. Regardless of your means, you might find a place at a pool table where you may play for money, if so you wish, even though you will probably be invited to join sooner if you are stylishly attired for the occasion.

In response to this, I have attempted in this thesis, to show the ‘hustle’ behind the image, or the ways in which people try to ‘get paid’ through their musical and social life, in a dialogue sometimes contentious and other times, consonant with the question of inequity that cause one to have to ‘hustle’ in the first place. These are aspects I have intended to capture through the photographs included in this text, and which I hope the ethnographic nature of this inquiry has allowed me to give voice, mapped through the critical approaches of image, branding and belonging.

This study thus, begins with an inquiry into the uses of image, informed and focused by the consumption and production of hip hop in Uganda. Second, based on the uses of image, I showed how in Ugandan hip hop occurs a harnessing of the imagination through processes similar to branding, where sound and image are made distinct through the curation of specific defining attributes. Third, linking image and brand are strivings for belonging through a hip hop practice in service of social and economic stability and growth. These are representations

of distinction in musical and in social life, found in a curation of attributes focused in the articulation and enactment of belonging in space of profound fragility, in the political past and the socio-economic present. These yearnings in Uganda show movements towards forms of plenitude in musical and in social life in a space of deep material paucity. We see this in a performance of self-fashioning, formulated from lived and mediated experience, finding form through the consumption of hip hop.

As stated at the start of this thesis, this project is an interdisciplinary one. Relying on scholarship from the fields of ethnomusicology and popular music studies and from media and cultural studies, notably from perspectives of the post-modern and post-colonial, I hope to provide an insight into the ways and means individuals and communities from spaces marginalised on a wider capitalist stage, apprehend and negotiate subsequent inequities through creative and cultural practices which go hand in hand with processes of consumption and production.

The decision to engage with a sonic culture from the perspective of the visual is in part due to my experience as branding designer, a role which I was able to include as part of my wider methodology through collaboration and documentation. From a critical perspective, this role and approach showed me the way in which representations of objects and ideas in musical and social life are used to convey distinction, taste and prestige through personal choices, revealing in turn negotiations with formations of privilege and the lack thereof. Against the fragility of opportunity and stability found Uganda's hip hop scene and in the issues that outlie it, through and in this research project, I found an optimism about the future. Uganda continues to be a poor country, yet one which is at once included through access to flows of information and media, and excluded in representation and in wealth. From this, we find a dialogue between plenitude, in the form of flows of media and music and the meanings people make of these, and paucity, in the form of material goods and services, against a backdrop of wider socio-economic fragility.

On account of this approach and varied interests, I provide a contribution, first, to the discipline of ethnomusicology through my focus on the ethnographic study of a popular music genre in Uganda, and second, to the area of hip hop studies, representing hip hop in Uganda within wider scholarship on the genre in Africa. Third, I provide contributions to media and cultural studies, informed by post-colonial and post-modern perspectives. In this

regard, I hope to contribute towards studies on popular music in spaces thus far categorised as the ‘developing world’, by drawing on seminal studies on music in sites of advanced capitalism. Amongst others cited over the course of this text, Lipsitz in *Footsteps in the Dark* (2007), explores a comparable reflexivity of approach as we have found in Ugandan hip hop, in terms of genre and form attributed to global flows of wealth and technology, at once inclusive and relegating in their reach and scope. Nevertheless, as we have seen, a simultaneity of “new machines, materials and social relations” (Lipsitz 2007:253) is capable of generating new forms of the expressive, while deftly providing a plenitude of formats in the form of music, media and inspiration to those in spaces of paucity, far flung and further from the centres of power and influence. These practices and processes pay testament to the tremendous reach, scope and regimentation of new technologies with the ability to drive creative expression. These novel forms are now based precisely on differences “among and between local circumstances and contexts” (2007:253), such as we have found in Ugandan hip hop’s tendencies toward both activism and excess. My aim, thus, building on the concerns relevant to such studies, is to show how structures of inequality may be negotiated through acts of performativity and representation inherent to creative and commercial popular practices, by individuals and communities in the developing world.

Noting these aims, this concluding chapter first brings forward the overarching theme of self-fashioning through consumption in Uganda’s hip hop scene, emphasising the argument that such acts and enactments in musical and in social life hold within them constructive and potent representations and ideas, which in turn show us negotiations of everyday and wider inequities by individuals and communities. Interrogated in this study through image-making, branding and belonging, I provide a summation of these approaches and interests dealt with over the course of the chapters in this study, to show how each lends itself to understanding Uganda’s contemporary hip hop milieu, while acknowledging its rich musical and social histories. Thereafter, in support of my argument, I revisit key theoretical frames and concerns to show how in such enactments lies a form of the hip hop mythic, global in its construction and conception. From this, the following section explores the wider uses of this research, showing spaces of further interest and potential interrogation, with particular possibilities with regard to development studies and political economy. This is followed by a summative discussion on the importance of this study and its interests within the frame of hip hop as global cultural form with much emotive and aesthetic depth, relevant to the consideration of the effects of colonialism and capitalism.

As we have seen in the literature review, popular music forms in Uganda, including hip hop, owe much to visual, musical and social flows of information and technology on a global scale, as to its diaspora, members of which feature prominently in this study. From a social point of view, in Uganda, the potentialities in popular music including hip hop, whether created for commerce and leisure or for spaces of activism and social justice can be attributed to its rich musical history. This heritage, over the years came to combine the popular and the traditional, lending itself to vibrant and plentiful contemporary musical practices and spaces, through which these practices have flourished in spite of significant political and social upheaval and economic paucity.

In order to elucidate this dialogue, I have first interrogated biographies of individuals active in the hip hop scene, framed from the perspectives of image in an analysis of mediated and lived experience. Choosing to focus on Gasuza Lwanga, Atlas da African and Silas ‘Babaluku’, all in their late thirties to mid-forties, these individuals number the first generation of hip hop artists in Uganda, having each achieved a level of commercial and critical success. Encounters with hip hop occurred in North America in the 1990s, as a result of their families’ forced migrations during the violence of the Amin years. The motif of the mogul in hip hop culture was used to show how prestige and status, understood from representations of excess or activism, act as an elucidation of social formations against wider milieus of inequality. From this, showing how simulacrum and apparent deception act as creative and constructive imaginative processes in negotiation with capitalism and its inequities, I discuss issues of diaspora and consciousness, to reveal how we may find within these undertakings the imaginings of a hip hop self, global in its construction.

Next, relying on ethnographic data, I showed how this image finds enactment in performances, in social life and in musical life, at nightclubs and gigs in a manner similar to branding. Here, beginning first with the idea that hip hop in Uganda functions as its own brand of culture via a system of meaning, I described how individuals, under the aegis of organisations such as record labels, specific performance initiatives and through associations with nightclubs act as differentiated brands within this wider system. In service of this argument, I shared accounts from Rogue Elephant studio, where Gasuza was co-partner at the time, at Deuces nightclub, where Atlas continues to host Hip Hop Mondays, and finally, The Annual Hip Hop Summit in 2014, organised by Babaluku’s Bavubuka Foundation. What

shaped this approach was the ubiquity of the terminology of entrepreneurship, personal initiative and enterprise, I encountered in the field, such as those encountered in marketing, advertising and public relations, each with their own promise of mobility and success. Thus, like in the preceding chapter on image, through branding we find an analysis of the creation of distinctiveness and deserving advantage in and through hip hop culture in Uganda, acting in negotiation of socio-economic fragility.

I then argued for a hip hop context of belonging, combining the global and local, in music and in image. Presenting data on a younger generation of hip hop performers, whose encounters with the genre occurred locally, I discussed the ways in which they negotiate questions of everyday hardship engendered by profound socio-economic fragility. Choosing to focus on hip hop community initiatives, I shared an account of Galaxy Breakdance Project in Uganda to make clear the level and extent of social and economic difficulty young people face. I then explored what the Ugandan hip hop ‘practice’ means to those involved and showed how these local musings and enactments find consonance and inspiration from hip hop’s fifth element – knowledge of self. I show how Ugandan hip hop, particularly Lugaflow, shows a dialogue between the local and the global, lending itself to self-fashionings that are both original and inspired. GNL Zamba, Uganda’s most commercially successful hip hop artist, provided us with a tangible example of such amalgamations whilst also deftly combining commercial success and social activism. In this regard, first, we find a similar dexterity in the curation of distinct attributes informed by the hip hop practice, such as we have found in the preceding chapter, and second, in the fashioning of a hip hop self, at once global in its conception and curation.

Finally, I presented the music video as hip hop spectacular, in a visible manifestation of brand, image and belonging in contrast to and in conversation with forms of fragility in contemporary Kampala. Visual and musical depictions in the form of Ugandan mediascapes, pointed us towards the self-fashionings informed by commodities, brands and modes of style. Lyrics showed us narratives explicating struggles and hopes, while the city of Kampala served as backdrop to these narratives. I then discussed French Montana’s video, *Unforgettable*, shot in Uganda, as a way to think of representations of Africa and how these allow us to conceive of wider issues of global inequity and the economic and social fragility these forms of inequity engender.

Through this discussion on self-fashioning through consumption, the aim is to show how the power and reach of popular music extends into spaces in a manner which at first, might appear surprising, but are no less potent in developing our understandings of how individuals and communities grapple with global systems such as capitalism in every day practices and processes of creativity and commerce. Furthermore, hip hop in Uganda serves as a reflection of how global political, social and economic processes have a localised impact. In musical and social life, hip hop has been particularly vital in the incorporation of global influences into local cultural products, as shown in studies on the genre in Africa cited at the start of this thesis. These particular qualities of amalgamation act against the framework of rapid social and economic change, changes which have been mapped in Uganda, through liberalisation and the expansion of the mediasphere, interpellated by violent civil conflicts preceded by colonial legacies. These issues, particularly of security and development in the past have led to problems with social and economic stability that continue to beset the country, while liberalisation has opened up space for novel interactions with popular forms of culture via the media.

In its location in Uganda, a fragile site of profound socio-economic paucity and a political history of violence, the hip hop scene points us towards the extraordinary resilience of individuals and communities in the challenging of exile and strife. Hip hop articulates the tension experienced by people forced to exist in multiple worlds due to changing social and economic conditions and political arbitrariness.

Due to this, identification and interrogation of popular cultural boundaries through forms of representation in musical and social life provide both a tangible link to the past and a grasp of the future and its possibilities. These hip hop self-fashionings are relevant in the consideration of both diasporic experiences, and those forged in the local context; here, we find lived and mediated engagements with global consumer cultures, given voice and vision by the hope for social and economic stability and change, showing how such processes and practices are compelling in their ability to encompass the musical, social and economic.

## The place of the hip hop mythic

In sum, hip hop exists as global cultural practice. As I have shown, hip hop in its commercial success and cultural appeal, is an influential brand of popular culture all of its own.

Evanescence yet enduring, it transmits images, ideas and icons of consequence in that they have their own impact and influence on social formations, which in turn respond to global flows of wealth and information (Lipsitz 1994). Hip hop's hyper-commodification shows it to act as its own global 'mediascape' (Appadurai 1990: 289-299), with a large and complex repertoire of images and narratives transmitted to viewers, which they then fashion into understandings that reflect their own interaction with this imagery. Along with this hyper-commodified reach, its emotive, musical and aesthetic weight can be attributed to its emergence in a site of structural violence in the South Bronx in New York City (Rose 1994, *et al.*). In explorations of the postcolonial through hip hop, we find amalgamations and representations global in scale and scope, aligning the genre with Jameson's conception of the creation and projection of a perceptive construct, on a social as well as a dimensional scale, global in its reach (1991). Within this global mapping, underpinning its popularity and crucial to understanding hip hop's reach and influence, are musical and visual texts made accessible through the media. Such intersections are marked by the reach and extent of global flows of money, information and people.

Due to this, hip hop has been ascribed with the capability of strident protest, giving voice to struggles against prejudice and exclusion. One example of this can be found in Rollefson's *Blackara's postcolonial hip hop critique in the City of Light* (2011), which explores hip hop in Paris, to reveal it as politically powerful and commercially successful form of expression for those amongst the diaspora and the descendants of immigrants from the Global South.

In this regard, a contemplation of hip hop's renditions on a global stage shows, as Perry (2008) argues, a particular resonance in the forming and focusing of self-fashioning. Interrogating these capabilities, I have begun this enquiry with the compelling nature of hip hop's own powerful aesthetic as my rationale (Murray 2014). In hip hop, this aesthetic includes nihilistic narratives such as those in gangsta rap, the hedonism portrayed in commercial imagery, as well as narratives of empowerment drawn from the genre's beginnings, all of which this study on Uganda explicates, showing that narratives of

transgression and the rhetoric of emancipation are an integral component of hip hop's expressive culture.

Hip hop, in its origins of resistance and its continued flourishing as conscious or commercial, straddling both tremendous commercial success and cultural influence, continues to combine and normalise both preoccupations of activism and hedonism within a global capitalist system. Hip hop provides visual and musical representations of excess and activism, in its renditions of commercial and conscious. Within the former, is a relish of capitalism's spoils through fashion, style and appreciation of conspicuous consumption as exemplified in the phrase 'bling-bling'; within the latter, are powerful narratives of emancipation against racial prejudice and oppression, such as found in the hip hop ideal of Knowledge of Self (Chang 2005 *et al.*). Due to this, hip hop is representative of a visual agency, fully understanding the power of the visual image and its impact on "ideological perceptions" (Murray 2014:5). As a multi-billion-dollar industry, it raises questions of resistance encoded into and combined with strivings for commercial success and cultural influence.

Against this capability, hip hop's celebrity superstars, supported by their music and imagery, unknowable to most of us save for flows of information through the media, become mythic entities. In hip hop, superstars such as Tupac provide their own powerful mythologies of success and stardom, subverting and interpellating dominant historical narratives through accomplishment in the forms of commercial success and cultural influence. Such potency challenges the view that hip hop's "claims of authenticity are rendered pure myth and all surface" in their narcissism (Murray 2014:15). In any case, the place of the mythic is one of profound potency. As Baker states, myth embraces narratives explaining the origin and nature of the world by reference to "the acts and intentions of supernatural beings" (1987: 115-116). As Turner shows, in myth, is a "limitless freedom, a symbolic act of freedom of action which is denied to the norm-bound incumbent of a status in a social structure" (1968:577). Myth and mythology, distinguished from historical trajectories, are freed from the restrictions of time and space that contain historical narratives. In becoming mythic, hip hop's superstars command space for narratives thus far neglected and ignored.

Furthermore, as Stuart Hall states, popular culture is that mythic arena where representation shows us not only how we see the world, but how we ourselves are. Hip hop, like other forms of popular music, therefore, acts as an alternative archive of history, through the shared



memory, aspirations and experiences of people excluded from formal narratives (Lipsitz 2007:xi), and its heroes compensate for and replace the “need for personal power, control (and success)” (McRobbie 1994:92). This in turn allow us to conceive of negotiations between identities and forms of representation, apprehended by subjective and imaginative creative processes.

From such trajectories, the larger issue then is what does the consumption and production of the imagery and music of hip hop allow us to perceive about the world around us, and how do we make that perception work for us, not as passive dupes of consumer cultures, but active participants and agents in the enjoyment of a popular cultural form. The importance of forms of self-fashioning through consumption in this regard can be understood through Tim Taylor’s discussion on consumption and identity (2015).

Here, the term identity serves as a means to consider personal conceptions of one’s individuality in an encompassing consumer culture. Taylor shows us, through a particular focus on the rise of discourses and practices of identity in the context of neoliberal capitalism, how such constructions are not always based on a given and foregone cultural attribute but are instead dependent on consumption. Taylor argues that the notion of identity seen through the frame of consumption is a powerful way for individuals to locate themselves in this consumer culture (2015). Similarly, Manuel Castells’s discusses contemporary conceptions of identity as “the process by which a social actor recognises itself and constructs meaning primarily on the basis of a given cultural attribute or set of attributes, to the exclusion of a broader reference to other social structures” (1996:22). Identity is constructed by the social actor as a practice of agency engendered in part through processes of consumption.

This view of consumption shows how certain commodities, certain means of communication and ensembles act as global mappings of preference and pleasure; brands of footwear, clothing, hairstyles and cellular phones, all serve as means of self identification and representation, such as we have found in this critical discussion on Uganda’s hip hop scene, in the forming and forging of emotional connections based on systems of meanings inherent to these objects, which in turn inform processes of branding (Wheeler 2009).

Amongst these commodities no less salient is the consumption of music, particularly in the form of images and imagery via global channels of information, through both lived and mediated experience. While the Taylor remains focused on the United States, hip hop's particular attribute as global cultural commodity of much commercial substance, makes this a cogent statement in the context of spaces such as Uganda too, where individuals and communities curate characteristics thus encountered to form hip hop self-fashionings through practices of consumption and processes of production.

In this study, these curations are in turn informed by aspects of the mythic in hip hop, its superstars and ideals finding representation through the imagination of consumers and producers of this cultural form. In Uganda, thus, hip hop forms along with a mediascape, an ethnoscape as well, as it is a space whose cultural contours reflect a mobilisation of shifting and negotiated conceptions of identity, in a process which finds voice and vision through the imagination of deterritorialised viewers (Appudurai 1996). Thus, hip hop, in the form of lived and mediated experience, is an acknowledgment of the movements of people, ideas and objects across geographical constraints, both forced and free.

Self-fashioning through the consumption of hip hop shows us proto-narratives of possible lives, because in these fashionings, we observe how these movements allow individuals to mobilise and articulate present struggles, from which in turn emerge "contemporary political activisms and creative expressions" (Ramnarine 2007:2), showing us how these forms of movement in turn lead to "different ways of thinking about belonging together" (Ramnarine 2007:5-6). This focus on hip hop in Uganda, explored variously through activism and excess, therefore, shows us not the shallow surface of narcissistic contemplation, but instead, the potency of perception. The place of the hip hop mythic is vital in understanding the genre's reach and extent in Uganda as the relationship between the imagery of success, embodied in hip hop's superstars, and the reaction it evokes or reveals is a powerful one as it captures subjective understandings of meaning in conversation with wider issues of representation, which in turn are affected by issues of socio-economic plenitude and paucity and the spaces in between.

Thus, this study on Uganda's hip hop scene focuses on the imaginative sense that people make out of imagery and information, in musical and social life. Processes and practices of imaginative representation which I describe from the perspective of branding, such as those

found in conspicuous consumption at venues such as Deuces, and in the activist aspirations of Lugaflow as movement for social change, allow us to perceive and compose renditions of self which then enable us to challenge those very circumstances that hold us back. In this harnessing of hip hop's precise quality as a powerful brand in a global consumer culture and one that encompasses both activism and excess, in Uganda, individuals create their own plenitude of sound and image in interaction with a global cultural product, successfully representing hip hop in Uganda, in a process that is a constant re-imagining of conceptions of self and identity (Rollefson 2007).

These are strivings which I map through self-fashioning through consumption, of music and ideas, amongst fans and practitioners of hip hop in Uganda, based on the creation and management of distinction. From this, in Uganda, through hip hop, we find a plenitude of renditions of self (McCracken 1997), suffused with signs (Baudrillard 1983), showing us self-fashioning through consumption in negotiation of socio-economic fragility. Mapped through image and branding, this study has explored subjective explorations of meaning and belonging through hip hop, given representation and voice through renditions of lifestyle and personality that serve and deserve forms of plenitude, in a space of material paucity. In conception and perception, self-fashioning, arranged around the creation of exceptionality and differentiated through excess and activism, shows us how individuals and communities negotiate and formulate their own spaces for gratification and satisfaction in their musical and social lives.

### **“an antidote to the dark vision of the postcolonial novelist”**

As stated at the start of this thesis, I have chosen a differentiation from dominant narratives, notably those from development perspectives, those from neoliberalism, and those that focus on difference.

Following Mbembe's perspectives (2001), this study contributes towards scholarship based on an elucidation of contemporary social life. As we have seen, the hip hop scene in Uganda is an economic space, and like other economic spaces manifests a multiplicity of organising principles, networks and institutions, gauged through social practices in specific spaces (*ibid.*). In a consideration of popular forms such as hip hop, embedded as they are in an

economic space, we locate enactments of fashion and music informed by brands of goods and objects, leisure activities, in nightclubs and in other social spaces, mediated by patterns of consumption, which in turn influence articulations and conceptions of kinds of social change. In spite of the divergences of activism and excess, the focus here is not on dissimilarity but rather, on pleasure and participation, because in Ugandan hip hop, these patterns of consumption reveal negotiations of inequity on a local and global scale.

Such forms of inequity are manifested in a visible dependency on western intervention embodied in a plenitude of international development organisations, showing a presence indelible in lived and imagined experience in Uganda. Such interactions were indicated in the introduction, where Uganda's reliance on donor funding and support through international NGO's has produced a field of creative expression and commercial enterprise in hip hop, based on the acquiring of paid gigs as well as influence in the form of cultural commendation from transnational development entities.

This dynamic I encountered one evening at the cube, when a young man burst in, excited about a new release and industry gossip around it. He saw me and stopped, wide-eyed, and said, "Oh look! A *mzungu*! Please! Please! Can you adopt me!" I goggled back at him, dumbstruck, but my initial bewilderment quickly turned to hilarity, as everyone including this young man saw this as the humourous exchange it was intended to be. This was Ronnie Lwanga, a famous deejay and producer in his own right, who then, became part of my hip hop epistemic community. Gasuza corrected him, and said I was a *muhindi*, which the local term for a person of Indian descent. Ronnie did not much care either way as the fact that I was based in London was *mzungu*, or white person, enough. I include this anecdote, which was one that made me laugh a great deal at the time and later too in reminiscence, as a way to signal that in Uganda these hierarchies of dependency and dominance find an interrogation in musical and social life, borne of an awareness of systems of inequity, an aspect which I will return to in the next section.

The humour of this anecdote aside, Uganda has serious issues with development, which go beyond issues of representation in the form of tropes and questionings of 'darkness' and backwardness (Ferguson 2006, Stiglitz 2001, Smith 1997, Castells 2000, Monga 1996 *et al.*). In the consideration of initiatives for development in Uganda, there is a tendency towards a lack of an autonomous existence and self-sustaining capability due to a dependence on

foreign funds, resources and donors and the state itself. Most of these entities are in turn dependent on government support to implement development programmes, and more so, their presence in the country is permitted (or not) by the state (Makumbe 1998). Along with this, the ideological domination of neoliberalism in the form of structural adjustment programs placed the market as moderator and stabiliser of economic and political processes (Comaroff & Comaroff 1999), raising questions on how the community centred outlook that informs the mandate of a significant number of development initiatives, would fit in with its emphases on the individual, rights and the supremacy of the market, in spaces such as Uganda where most live on edges of these processes, in spaces of economic and social marginalisation.

In response to these issues, hip hop shows poses and performances in musical and in social life which originate and operate in a space where performers, individual and collective, define and present their own musical and visual texts and performances, challenging issues of representation and social and economic marginalisation on their own terms. This ability brings with it the potentiality for community mobilisation and the inclusion of individual narratives in and through shared experiences, such as we found in the hip hop practice. Based on these capabilities, hip hop in Uganda brings with it the conveyance and consolidation of contemporary cultural meaning (Reuster-Jahn 2007, 2008), making it a critical medium of social empowerment that has enabled a sense of inclusion and community (Perullo 2005), in challenge of a social conservatism one finds in Uganda, which in turn reflects a rigidity of political structures, with both therefore associated with the socio-economic relegation one finds in day to day life. Hip hop serves as a critical means by which individuals articulate and enact forms of belonging, be it through activism and excess, in relation to the structures of inequity one encounters in Uganda takes place.

In this regard, hip hop in Uganda would provide a fertile field of inquiry within disciplines such as applied ethnomusicology, such as those cited in the literature review, adding to seminal scholarship such as Gregory Barz's. The hip hop scene would similarly provide a veracity of data from the perspectives of development studies, first, in the interrogation of grassroots initiatives for change, and second, for the nature and extent of the interactions between the local hip hop scene and transnational development entities.

The escapism evoked through narratives of conspicuous consumption and hedonism in the Ugandan hip hop spectacular of the music video for example, are strivings against a

marginalisation engendered in part due to failures of development. Such acts simultaneously confront the rupture and destitution associated with such spaces of social and economic marginalisation. This study on hip hop, with its concern of contemporary cultural production of Uganda, therefore, hopes to provide an “an antidote to the dark vision of the postcolonial novelist” (Appiah 1991:157). It is this juxtaposition between ruin and splendour that hip hop in Uganda corrals, occupying one of Ekeh’s several ‘public spaces’, where multiple realities exist side by side, overlapping and intersecting; in its enjoyment is a form of resistance that subverts the subjection of abject poverty.

The importance of the approaches deployed in this study is that, in Uganda, and elsewhere, these representations and material practices lead us to issues of wealth accumulation, consumption, individual preferences and choice, raising questions on how these affect current social struggles. Jean Comaroff and John L. Comaroff (2001), in their volume on the forms and nature that global capitalism takes in local contexts refer to what they term an “epochal shift in the constitutive relationship of production to consumption” (3), and therefore of, labour and capital. Capitalism captures a signifying and enabling that links enhanced modes of economic development and a resultant social and individual freedom for individuals and communities, even if that freedom can be limited to that of having the monetary ability to exercise some sort of choice and control over one’s own circumstances.

I will return to this assertion in the next section. At this point I would like to emphasise that, in spite of this restriction, to the Comaroffs’, capitalism can hold inherent to its nature, the capacity to transform spaces of the marginalisation and disempowerment, in what they refer to as “the rise of new forms of enchantment” a result of the forms and nature that global capitalism takes in the developing world (2001:3), cited at the start of this thesis. While the Comaroffs are referring to magical rites and practices, this statement holds the implication that the understanding of enchantment is that which is mobilised by imagination. The imaginings such as we find in Uganda’s hip hop scene are also a “response to a world gone awry”, suggesting that the only route to tangible success lies in forms of knowledge that transgress the “conventional, the rational, the moral” (Comaroffs 2001:24), which hip hop can be seen as. In this capacity, hip hop is a site where transgressive interpolations such as those celebrating hedonistic narratives can, and must, be articulated.

This study aims to elucidate forms of critical understanding that engage with the imagination, and the ways in which individuals negotiate and formulate their own spaces for gratification and satisfaction, tangibly linked to the flow of images, ideas, objects, people and money as described in the form of the hip hop mythic, in the face of hostile social and economic circumstances. Hip hop in Uganda is one form of imagination, apprehended and enacted by individuals and society; transformations of marginalisation and disempowerment occur in the hip hop scene in Uganda through both creative practice and commercial enterprise. Here, processes of consumption and production, through attempts at enterprise, are interpellated by the pursuit of leisure and pleasure, on the one hand, and on the other, a more equitable distribution of the advantages conferred from knowledge and economic stability.

Furthermore, this opens up a space for further questionings, where research could include the quantitative tools that a political economist would use to gauge exactly how much money there is in this sort of musical and social ‘hustle’ in the first place. This would allow us insight into the reach, extent and role of the creative and cultural industries in the developing world, which are economically expansive and creatively dynamic. Hip hop occupies a vital space of meaning, where brands of products and of causes represent a form of belonging to audiences and performers, and consumers and producers. A further interrogation of these interactions from the perspectives of the business behind them would be a fascinating and developing field of research, particularly in the global south, where the terms of capitalism take novel and surprising forms in hands of and with effect to individuals and society (Comaroff and Comaroff 1999, 2001).

As this study has shown, in these conjunctions are areas of belonging, driven by social and musical actors. These negotiations and interactions reveal formal, informal and overlapping boundaries, in a process that finds voice through representations and material practices. Individual and collective acts of belonging and pleasure in the form of tracks, gigs and music videos, each bound to the consumption and production of hip hop, confound and challenge the backdrop of profound inequity in Uganda. Due to this, hip hop provides significant insight into wider negotiations between the uneasy relationship of plenitude and paucity in Uganda, such as between capitalism and development, the inequities these encompass and the lives of people caught between them.

## Emergence

In Ugandan hip hop, finding voice through activism and excess, in these self-fashionings through consumption is a distinct awareness of issues with development, understood as borne of the inequities of colonialism in the past and further exacerbated by global processes of capitalism in the present. This awareness can be understood in part due to the nature and extent of hip hop's reach, returning us to Baker's influential theorisation on mastery of form and deformation of mastery (1987) which discusses the specific place of resistance in black popular forms of culture. This occurs in a transgressive and resistant process where the folk and the popular merge with the terms of high culture.

As stated at the start of this thesis, one could replace the terms of high culture with those of tremendous monetary acquisition and success engendered by global corporate cultures, within which are located entertainment industries, and which further encompass popular musical cultures such as hip hop. I make this assertion, because linking both mastery and deformation is the mask, where in the performativity of accustomed and stereotypical roles in musical and in social life is a coding of the original and subversive into the familiar. Furthermore, each involves a staking out of an independent voice, in the form of fragile yet stubborn voices and spaces borne of paucity, in terms of material and cultural marginalisation, made more so because of the ability enclosed in such articulations to disclose without revealing.

In the Ugandan hip hop scene, the place of excess and activism may also be framed as resistance framed in terms of diversity, where social groups exercise a representation of difference within systems of domination (Fiske 1987). Such strivings find consonance with Fiske's (2002) conception of resistance, which in turn corresponds with two dominant kinds of social power. The first is semiotic power, or the power to construct meanings, pleasures, and social identities, and the second is social power or the power to construct a socioeconomic system.

While the two may occasionally function in an autonomous manner, as we have seen, the hip hop scene in Uganda indicates a close relationship between the two in commercial and cultural appeal, aspects which I hope this research has adequately represented. More to the point, this interaction shows how both excess and escapism, and activism, come from the



same place, which is wanting something better out of life. In Ugandan hip hop, these interactions inherently show both a plenitude, in musical expression and creative thought, working against a paucity of material opportunity, relying on acts of creativity and imagination. These interactions occur not just side by side, but often in close cohesion.

A compelling example of this relationship can be found in an unreleased track, which is a collaboration between Babaluku and Gasuza, called *Insurgency*. Along with the text, is a sonic arrangement best described as reminiscent of Nas' *Illmatic*, where a pared down beat is inflected by the notes of a piano, allowing the vocals to take dominate the narrative. Gasuza shared a rough cut with me, and I include excerpts of the lyrics below:

The future will have no pity for those men who  
Possessing the exceptional privilege of speaking words of truth to their oppressors  
Have taken refuge in an attitude of passivity in mute indifference  
And sometimes a cold complicity

(chorus)

It's a state of emergency  
Can you feel the urgency?  
It's a state of emergency  
We need an insurgency

Welcome to the sounds from the source of the Nile  
God bless all men, women and child

Africa has been poor for a while  
The answer lies in the heart of the evil mankind  
For how long are we goin' be stuck in the slump

This is our home, got gold, got diamonds, got coffee, got tea, got rubber  
Our iron makes steel, so why are we broke  
Cus' robbers been takin' it free  
Time to start taxin' them

And chargin' them a fee

Doing it for my people

I'm doing this shit for me

God bless Africa

God bless UG

I'm an African

The fight is against the master

Not the one that makes deals with the master

We gotta decide if we wanna move forward

Shut down anything moving movin us backwards

(chorus)

It's a state of emergency

Can you feel the urgency?

It's a state of emergency

We need an insurgency

This articulation of struggle and the critique of the circumstances around them, indicates an awareness of patterns of profound disjuncture located in colonial oppression and capitalist exploitation in Uganda, and in Africa. This is a contested identification and realisation of one's place and role in the world, expressed and articulated through hip hop, both a scathing indictment of the "attitude of passivity in mute indifference/and sometimes a cold complicity" in the face of such circumstances, and an articulation of belonging to and from Uganda and the African continent.

This choice of the word 'emergency' is opportune in the space it opens for a specific critical engagement. As Homi Bhabha states in his introduction to Fanon's *Black Skin White Masks* (1986 [1952]), a state of emergency, such as these men describe is also "always a state of emergence" (xi). The struggle against colonialism and its legacies is predicated on the fact that such legacies are based in an oppression of one over another, in an arbitration of

knowledge that segregates that which is deserving, in a form of discrimination that extends beyond knowledge into our very humanity.

In post-colonial understandings of hip hop as a global genre of cultural significance (Lipsitz 1994, Rollefson 2017 *et al.*) and tremendous commercial acquisition, this expressive culture is a continuing emergence of forms of knowledge, rendered in the “language of revolutionary awareness” (Bhabha 1986:xi). Hip hop in Uganda, in activism and in excess, points to new forms of emergence, of kinds of knowledge, of economic gain and the means to acquire them, and of pleasure and enjoyment far removed from the travails of such histories. Because of these capabilities, couched within a wider system of capitalism, hip hop is nonetheless, potent in its capability of challenging the fragility of wider social formations, apprehended and negotiated in the hands of individuals and communities.

In this regard, drawing on Clifford Geertz’s work on the “cultural dimension” of religion (1973:89), Taylor provides a vocabulary of signs and symbols to discuss how neoliberal capitalism can be conceived of as a cultural system (2015). In summation, I apply this framework to hip hop, acknowledging that the genre provides its own negotiation of capitalism in general, be it through the revelling of its spoils or in rejection. In this study, within hip hop’s dialectic of commercial and conscious, framed as excess and activism, are evocations composed of signs and symbols uniquely re-imagined it’s own, in the form of brands of clothes, articles of jewellery, and in the red, gold and green representative of the ideal of Africa, global in its construction. Mediated and propagated by poses and performances, simultaneously and successfully manufacturing its own ethos, hip hop forms a cultural system composed of organisations and arrangements of symbols that convey meaning for social actors, finding voice equally in conspicuous consumption and critique of the system of capitalism.

Hip hop’s *relationship* to capitalism, which is that of tremendous monetary acquisition and success engendered by global corporate cultures, within which are located entertainment industries, and which further encompass popular musical cultures such as hip hop, shows us that neoliberal capitalism is “a cultural system that has become as powerful and pervasive”; it is a “system, with its own logic and symbols, its own independence relative to any individual” (Taylor 2015:13). An important aspect of systems such as these is that their functioning extends further than any apprehension of one single individual; their existence is

ubiquitous, and whether people desire or choose to serve as components in this system, they are enmeshed in no small measure. Similarly, as the Comaroffs' (2001) state, in fragile sites such as Uganda, the need to attain economic stability occurs often in the most basic sense, in that it is related to survival, revealing thus the obligation to choose capitalism as the only system. Here, individuals and communities are components of a system that requires an accumulation of wealth, couched in terms of political stability and economic development. As stated in the introduction, this is a relationship which Amartya Sen in *Development as Freedom*, elucidates as one between "commodities and capabilities", which links, "our economic wealth and ability to live as we would like" (2001:13).

Because of this, an interrogation of this system should comprise of ethnographic and analytical perspectives on individual social actors and what is meaningful for them, leading to a subjective apprehension of the system of a whole, which is what this research on hip hop intends to show. Such apprehensions shape how individuals and groups arrange and align themselves in this system, whilst promoting ideologies that shape perspectives of the world, and the rightness of it being as such. In hip hop, these are often voiced through an apparent ideology of self-determination and non-conformity, which as David Harvey would have us believe, points towards apparent artistic freedom as indicative of a wider social and economic limitation, which is an important component of the neoliberalisation of culture (2006:42).

In spite of such criticisms, ultimately, for those I encountered in the field, expressions in and on hip hop are founded in their own subjective relationships with the genre, as music and mythology. In musical and in social life, hip hop has both material and philosophical markers; people reconfigure these to make their own meanings. What emerges from these relationships and subsequent self-fashionings, are local Ugandan hip hop brands informed by hedonistic abandon as well as in those of social activism, with distinct attributes, aimed at facilitating belonging in the form of a system of meaning for those involved. Interrogated thus, through image-making, branding and belonging, in subjective imaginings, and in the image/s/ery that these imaginings find form and facilitate, one finds exceptionality. Evoked through self-fashioning, in service of forms of plenitude, such as money or status or both, in dialogue with material paucity, these are mobilised through an evocation of differentiated capability, in the form of excess and activism, showing us how individuals and communities act in negotiation of profound social and economic fragility.

I conclude with Achille Mbembe's statement, from which I began my journey of critical inquiry, which in its poetry is potent and expressive of forms of being in the world. He states, "instead of the individual, there are entities, captives of magical signs, amid an enchanted and mysterious universe in which the power of invocation and evocation replaces the power of production, and in which fantasy and caprice coexist not only with the possibility of disaster but with its reality" (2001:4). Seeing hip hop as that enchanted and mysterious universe, formed of signs and symbols uniquely its own, I argue that from these qualities of invocation and evocation, which we encounter through processes of consumption, arises a powerful framing and fashioning of a hip hop self, global in its construction, challenging both caprice and calamity.

Here, in the stories that Babaluku, Gasuza, Atlas, Taye, GNL, Spyda and Nelly, to name a few of the people who populate this text, have shared with us, in the narrative of each of their lives, we find a mapping of the histories and trajectories of nations and of the world, showing us, how no individual is too small or too fragile to make a difference to the world we live in. Here, it is imagination which gives us the instruments to circumvent, through art and economics, the philosophical, personal and political fragilities we encounter in the everyday of a deeply unequal world.



Figure 32: Driving to Kampala, halfway there.

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