

Embodiment, Emplacement, and Lyrical Discourse from Eastlands, Nairobi

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Why are certain aesthetic choices made in the production of hip hop recordings? Why are certain sound effects (the click-click-boom! of gun shots) and vocal effects (echoing) commonplace in studio productions of hip hop music? What determines which language is spoken, what words are used and which idioms invoked? If hip hop is a global “culture” that has certain identifiable characteristics, how do we measure variation within that culture? In other words, how do artists and producers in the studio make decisions on when to follow generic conventions of global hip hop and when to inflect their productions with an aesthetic which resonates with (imagined) local or national audiences? Finally, how do the decisions made at the site of production mediate social processes happening in local communities?

I spent summer 2011 exploring these questions in relation to a group of musicians from eastern Nairobi. Since the 1990s, this relatively small but influential group of young men has been producing a particular style of revolutionary hip hop songs. Lyrical tropes common to this music include paying homage to fighters in the Mau Mau war, and leaders of black consciousness in the Americas such as Malcolm X, Marcus Garvey and Bob Marley. The artists continually reference “struggle,” “unity” and “revolution” in their lyrics. They revile the powerful and corrupt politicians that let them starve or die of AIDS. They castigate the thugs who steal and rape in their neighborhood. And they constantly situate their voice within the marginalized place from which they come. Above all, these urban poets are avid observers of social inequali-



ties and their music offers a highly stylized voice for moral and political reform.

I visited a number of places which are important sites of sociality for these young men including: the neighborhood *maskani* (public gathering place), the Kenyan National Theatre, live concerts/hip hop events and two recording studios. I made several visits to a community-based organization (CBO) in Dandora which was initiated by a couple of hip hop musicians/activists from the community. Additionally, I began the work of collecting recordings of songs by these musicians then transcribing and translating them.

Towards the end of my stay in Nairobi I was invited to a local studio by a friend and hip hop musician named Judge. Together we wrote and recorded a song with two additional rappers, Kaktus and Ekori. The process of participating in the writing a producing of a song was informative. I intend to return to Nairobi in 2012 to begin fieldwork

for my dissertation. I will continue to explore the sociality of the studio and try to understand what goes into making decisions about poetics and the aesthetics of sound in the making of revolutionary hip hop.



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