

Rhythms of the unemployed: making art and making do through spoken word in Kisumu, Kenya

Frederik Unsel

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

*Mi ni generation ya ile CD ilipasuka
Mashairi na methali zilisha nidefine, staongezea kwa ya mgema
Spendi kufuata masharti ndio maana mi uspeak offkey na off beat
Budangu alinidisown juu ya mpango wa kando
So Mi uwa juu ya mihadarati
Ka si mihadarati ni juu ya ma scandal
Madha alishindwa kunihandle
Serikali ika nimishandle
Kenye najua ni kuexpose scandal za Waiganjo na Waiguru
Na poetry za Uhuru
Mau Mau walisahaulika
Sikuizi ni kina Vera Sidika
Kenya kabila ni certificate ya kuajiriwa
Matatu inachezea abiria ngoma za ... party na hajatia
Amekua akikimbia kutafuta picha ya Moi na Kenyatta ndio wanadada wamfungulie sidiria
Picha ya Wangari Maathai kuhang kwa nyumba ya mhuzaji makaa
Ni ishara pesa za kina Bivot, Moi, Kenyatta
Kugawiwa wakenya wanalala bila kitu tumboni kutia
Nina fear watajaribu kuninyamazisha before hii poetry ifike kwa media
But sijali juu utakua uneniskiza
Familia wanalia mtoto wao mmoja amepotea njia*

*I'm that generation of the broken CD
Poetry and proverbs have defined who I am, I won't overpraise myself
I don't like to follow rules that's why I speak off-key and off-beat
My dad disowned me because of his side chick
So I'm always on drugs
If it's not drugs, I am out causing some scandal
My mom couldn't handle me
So now the government is mishandling me
What I know is using poetry to expose scandals like Waiganjo's and Waiguru's
Using poetry of Uhuru
Our freedom fighting heroes are long forgotten*

Frederik Unsel is a PhD candidate at the Institute for Social Anthropology at University Basel, Switzerland. His PhD focuses on artists in the context of political and economic violence in Kisumu, western Kenya. It is part of the research project ‘Art/Articulation: Art and the Formation of Social Space in African Cities’, funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation. Email: frederik.unsel@unibas.ch

© The Author(s), 2021. Published by Cambridge University Press on behalf of International African Institute. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution licence (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

*These days socialites are more appealing
 In Kenya you are employed by tribe
 Party music in the minibus and I'm starving, didn't get to eat the whole day
 One spends one's time chasing banknotes, in order to chase skirts
 Wangari Maathai's portrait hanging in a charcoal seller's house
 That would be a sign that tycoons like Bwot, Moi, Kenyatta
 Finally share their money with Kenyans who sleep hungry
 I fear the government will try to silence me before this poetry gets to the media
 But I don't care, because you will have heard me
 The family mourns their only child who has lost his way*

In the low-income settlements of Kisumu, Kenya's third-largest city, many young people who are struggling with un(der)employment refer to their everyday activities, mainly geared to generating an improvised income, as 'hustling'. Simultaneously, for many of them, art (dance, music, poetry) is central to their lives. George Collins, a spokesperson for an umbrella body uniting Kisumu artists, estimates that one in three youths in Kisumu consider themselves to be artists, an estimate that matches my own observations. In this article, I hope to account for the significant popularity of the *way of the artist* among Kisumu's youths by relating it to hustling and their various struggles to get by (Thieme 2018) in the face of sustained economic and structural violence and social suffering (Das 2000).

The challenge posed by hustling as an actor's category is that it forces us to understand what unemployed people and those in various 'waiting' situations actually do on a day-to-day basis, and how they make sense of their own agency in relation to 'work' and other spheres of daily life. To this end, this article explores the interrelation between the struggle to survive and the artistic imaginary in the life and writings of a Kisumu spoken word artist, Janabii. He has been at the centre of efforts to establish a spoken word scene in Kisumu and has spent several years in limbo, oscillating between glittering performances, eagerly displayed on social media, and his less glamorous daily life, marked by functional homelessness and a refusal to surrender to the violence of Kenya's world of informal work. While Kisumu is definitely an artistic hub, the way in which artistic young people make their way in the city *tout court* speaks to wider conditions of hustling among urban youth in other Kenyan cities, especially Nairobi.

The material discussed in this article is based on eighteen months of doctoral research on art in Kisumu carried out between 2015 and 2018. My broader research explores how artists articulate art and urban marginality, and how the latter fosters social inventiveness and artistic expressivity. In countless conversations with Kisumu artists, hustling appeared as art's 'other' – the harsh, more grounded flipside to their aspirational efforts at cultural entrepreneurship. For example, Winnie Juma, a fashion model and event organizer from Kisumu, was candid about her less glamorous everyday trade, reselling second-hand clothes from the city's open-air market. Like most of my interlocutors in Kisumu, a city in which mass unemployment has become a perennial manifestation of urban crisis, Juma identifies as *both* artist and hustler. 'There are no jobs in Kenya,' she states matter-of-factly, 'so you create one for yourself!'

In order to show how making art and hustling mesh as co-constituents in the lives of Kisumu artists, I use portraiture (Dyson and Jeffrey 2008) as a device

to present one individual artist's case. As Arnold and Blackburn note, single lives may 'reveal insights not just into the experiences and attitudes of the individuals directly concerned, but also of the wider society or social segment of which they are also part' (2004: 43). I worked with two different sets of data to unravel both the structural and experiential dimensions of Janabii's life; one set comprises empirical material gathered during a week spent shadowing Janabii, documenting how his struggle for physical survival and emotional well-being interrelates with his artistic aspirations. The second dataset is one of Janabii's poems, 'Broken Glasses', which the artist chose to perform during the workshop at the British Institute for Eastern Africa that prompted this special issue. Excerpts from the poem, and my literary analysis of it, are used as running captions throughout the text, in order to give it a more direct voice (cf. Malaquais 2011). I am grateful for Janabii's willingness to engage in such an 'experimental collaboration' (Estalella and Sánchez Criado 2018), which included co-analysing the poem and reflecting on his life history. Our joint venture follows recent calls to reorient the academic discourse about arts in Africa by collaborating with artists, activists and writers based on the African continent (Simbao 2017).

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

Hustling as an emic concept is related to the influential theoretical work by anthropologist Henrik Vigh on social navigation (2006; 2009). Vigh implicitly but repeatedly emphasizes the need to pay attention to the various forms of rhythm taken by social action in such contexts. Like the French philosopher Henri Lefebvre in his seminal book on rhythm (2015), Vigh draws on the analogy of 'waves', extrapolating it to his maritime metaphor of navigation, of planning and directing one's course amid the 'constant currents, shifts, pulls and undertows of societal (mis)dynamics' (Vigh 2009: 426). Vigh locates his departure from more conventional models of social action, namely Bourdieu's socio-cultural fields, in the 'dense temporality within practice' (*ibid.*: 430) in contexts where the 'speed and acceleration of change' (*ibid.*: 428) forces actors to attend to the 'immediate social flows and shifts' (*ibid.*: 426). I contend that the dense but 'analytically elusive' (*ibid.*: 426) temporality of social navigation and hustling is best explored through detailed descriptions of social action in its processual nature.

Introducing rhythm into one's life, through either the verbal metric of poetry or the various actions associated with navigating a city, is to anchor oneself amid rapidly shifting waves and currents. Rhythm, as the anthropologist Julie Archambault puts it, 'with its recurrence and tempo, brings an element of

predictability, if not a degree of certainty, into a social environment otherwise marked by unpredictability' (2015: 129). Therefore, rather than following the logical steps of a conceptual argument, the structure of this article follows the temporal structure of the material at hand – a week in the life of an artist/hustler – by following Janabii for seven days, from Monday to Sunday. It became apparent from my data that hustling is much more than the ability to react immediately to emergency-type situations. Like navigation, hustling is a processual and changeable type of social action, yet it combines a delicate navigation of one's social surroundings with coping with periods of waiting and stylizing the experience of un(der)employment. Therefore, my goal in this article is to describe how, for Janabii, spoken word is a device for 'doing' the hustle and for bridging periods of 'waiting', as well as a way of stylizing, expressing and narrating the hustle as a specific, temporally dense, entanglement with the life world of an African city.

Monday morning blues and the absence of obligation

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

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

Janabii is a son of working-class parents and grew up in various low-income settlements in Nairobi, Mombasa and Nyakach (Kisumu County). He never received his secondary school certificate because of outstanding school fees and describes his chances of getting regular employment as low. After finishing school, he tried his hand at different types of labour that could be considered *hustling* in a narrow, Kenyan sense of the term: hard labour, for example, hawking homemade juice at a local market under the fierce sun. Janabii remembers passing out in stairways after pushing wheelbarrows with building materials to the upper floors during his short time on a construction site. 'The money was hardly enough to provide for rent and food,' he said, summing up why he had left the sector shortly afterwards. The violence experienced on the body under

capitalism is a recurring concern addressed by Lefebvre in his writing (2015: 2) and Janabii's embodied labour may be described in Lefebvre's terminology as 'brutal arrhythmia' – moments in which 'rhythms "of the other" make rhythms "of the self" impossible' (*ibid.*: 105–6).

However, on that morning in Migosi, the atmosphere was not such a moment of rupture. Although a fight had taken place over a mattress during the night, a story recounted to everyone's amusement, the occupants seemed relaxed but faintly aloof. When I asked Janabii whether the shared household provided him with something of a surrogate family, he rejected the idea: 'It is a half family ... a family to get high and drunk.' In the end, the community, with its appeal of an intimate brotherhood, appeared to be a rather pragmatic union, organized around essential needs such as accommodation, entertainment, including illicit substances, and food. Despite the casual bonding and ostentatious inactivity, the spectre of the mainstream economy was still present in their reference to themselves as '*machimney*' (chimneys), an allusion to their almost industrial smoking habit.

Poetic reflections of the hustle

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

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

Mi ni generation ya ile CD ilipasuka
I'm that generation of the broken CD

The abbreviation 'CD' is widely used in Kenya for condoms, and the image of a broken condom strongly evokes the idea of a complicated belonging, of a generation born by accident or by chance. With this troubling image, the narrator places an existential doubt at the very beginning of the piece: was I supposed to exist? Was I supposed to live this way? Several of my informants indicated that they had experienced such existential doubts at some point in their lives. In a double entendre, the abbreviation CD may also allude to the (now almost obsolete) music compact disc, as if to evoke the soundtrack of a generation coming from a broken CD, stuck in the player and jumping in violent loops of undesired repetition. Broken glass also conjures up the image of a broken mirror, reflecting the countenance of a disturbed generation, a first generation of 'digital natives' growing up 'in the hood'; a generation that is better connected than ever before, yet collectively ostracized like never before, and experiencing the 'crisis of reproduction' (Weiss 2004) as intimate and existential trouble.

The US rap artist J-Cole, whose music played on repeat at the tenement in Migosi on that Monday morning, raises this conundrum of obstructed social mobility when he echoes the voices of the know-it-alls in his own neighbourhood in Virginia: ‘They tellin’ niggas, “sell dope, rap or go to the NBA.”’¹ In a cultural logic that surrenders to its exclusion from the dominant economy, the only options seem to be becoming a criminal (or *hustler*, as those involved in the US’s inner-city, illicit street economy refer to themselves), an artist, or an athlete. Rap-music productions worldwide frequently combine the figures of the hyper-masculine gangster/hustler and the celebrated artist, yet a more sensitive figure of a poet emerges from Janabii’s poem, with its subtle references to Swahili proverbs. It is a figure whose playful approach to language and rhythm contrasts with society’s rigid rules:

Mashairi na methali zilisha nidefine, staongezea kwa ya mgema
Poetry and proverbs have defined who I am, I won’t overpraise myself

Spendi kufuata masharti ndio maana mi uspeak offkey na off beat
I don’t like to follow rules that’s why I speak off-key and off-beat

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

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

When we reached the rehearsal space, a youth centre run by an American non-governmental organization (NGO), we found a very different space to the shared

¹J. Cole, ‘Immortal’ on the album *4 Your Eyez Only* (Dreamville, 2016).

tenement. A throng of young people cheerfully crowded around the door, watching their friends perform. The difference between the two spaces was reflected in people's effort to dress stylishly, but also more subtly in the way in which they related to each other. Whereas in Migosi the young men seemed oblivious to much of what was going on around them, at the rehearsal space everybody was acknowledged with clamour and sharp humour, often bordering on ridicule.

Godfrey Kedogo, one of Janabii's collaborators, ran the rehearsal with strict discipline. Each performance was criticized, often harshly so. The verbal flagellation bore a clear resemblance to Euro-American TV formats such as *American Idol*, *Hell's Kitchen* by British TV chef Gordon Ramsay, or Donald Trump's notorious *The Apprentice*, in which participants compete fiercely and withstand considerable humiliation in order to win a chance in the industry. Janabii took a seat in the corner, visibly enjoying the third floor's breeze and taking in the pulsating live music. With its strict organization and the performers cheering each other on, the rehearsal was reminiscent of an island in the midst of Kisumu's merciless economy, a place where individual talent was not only acknowledged but strongly encouraged, and where it was possible to unwind without the use of recreational drugs. The afternoon went by without any of the opportunities materializing. Rather than proposing an intriguing collaboration, the young female singer merely sought relationship advice. The event manager, who Janabii wanted to ask for a job, was nowhere to be seen. Although he had signalled an opportunity to Janabii, he was now refusing to answer his calls. Another Kisumu artist referred to this stonewalling strategy as 'psychological warfare', in which the 'employer' delays or obstructs requests for work by being evasive. By leaving the other person uncertain over a period of time, he signals to the 'employee' that they are dispensable, thereby increasing the pressure to make a less favourable deal. The manager's silence continued to be a source of constant worry and bouts of jitters for Janabii in the days that followed. For the moment, it seemed that the merits of the lengthy afternoon at the centre were the cool evening breeze, the socializing, and the performances that offered us some sort of escape.

Tuesday: overcoming waiting

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

however, usually remained intact, and the refrain became that they had had to 'lie low' for a little while, due to various 'challenges'.

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

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

This joint upswing in our activity allowed me to grasp how creating (or, in this case, discussing) a poem, a coherent piece with significance, rhythm and meaning, leads to an experience of oneself as creative and productive. When Janabii recited his poetry a cappella in a quiet corner of the house, rhymes re-joined rhythm and brought back a sense of spontaneity and immediacy that I had been missing during the day. Between the fast-paced lines, intentional pauses and minute hand gestures, for example to emphasize a question posed, Janabii's 'instinct for rhythm' (Lefebvre 2015: 74) and the rhythms of his body put us back in command of our lived time. In contrast to the rather trite routine of the morning, I found our conversation refreshing, and a sort of flow. Janabii's face had brightened up, too, and judging from his exultant humour when he walked me down the alley to the bus station after dusk, our conversation had also given him a welcome escape from boredom.²

²Even though it could have been revealing, I did not spend the night in the shared tenement because the continual movement during the day obliged me to make more thorough notes at night.

Wednesday: starving, hedonism and an open secret

When I returned the next morning, there was only one day left until the gala night, and Janabii had still not heard from the organizers. The uncertainty surrounding the rare opportunity had been a constant source of worry and had been preying on his mind. At 10.57 a.m., a short message on his phone came as a relief: ‘Hi, was suggesting if you could assist with online marketing and uploading pics while the event is ongoing. Though have cash issue but can get you one K [KSh 1,000; approximately US\$10].’ Janabii had hoped for a more favourable arrangement but accepted the proposition immediately. He was instantly energized by being part of the organizing team and decided to leave for the rehearsals immediately, which raised the issue of transport.

We had to change *matatus* (shared minibus taxis) to get to the rehearsals and, hungry as Janabii was, he was not inclined to pay the full KSh 20 fare for each of the two stretches but instead the negotiable rate of KSh 10 for each of them. Having the correct coins would enhance his bargaining power, he explained. Such micro-bargaining situations are part and parcel of the everyday hustle for many Kenyans. Astonishing solidarities are forged on *matatu* benches, where passengers may ask each other ‘*Uko na ngapi?*’ (‘How much do you have?’ in Swahili) so that they can pay the conductor jointly, thereby increasing the pressure on him to accept the usual fare, even during rush hour or for longer, inner-city journeys.

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

To feel good and to make others feel good – or, in more sociological terms, ‘to seek maximal emotional energy in interaction rituals’ (Collins 2005: xiii) – is a fundamental human motif. This is particularly true in environments of scarcity. As Simone argued with reference to the city of Johannesburg, it is through sociality that ‘expanded spaces of economic and cultural operation become available to residents of limited means’ (2004: 407). Janabii navigated such social spaces with verve, making the best use of both his limited economic resources and his contagious emotional energy. For example, Janabii told me that a bag of khat leaves,³ worth KSh 50 (approximately US\$0.50), could go a long way if he shared and chewed them together with the *matatu* operators waiting and ‘killing time’ at the bus station. The plant causes euphoria and talkativeness and distorts time perception. After the joint experience of chewing the leaves for several hours, the

³Khat (*Catha edulis*) is a flowering plant native to the Horn of Africa and a common recreational drug that young men, in particular, chew.

matatu operators considered Janabii to be one of them, or ‘*mtu wa routi*’ (*Sheng*: ‘a man of the bus route’), occasionally offering him free transport in return.

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

Matatu inachezea abiria ngoma za ... party na hajatia
Party music in the minibus and I'm starving, didn't get to eat the whole day

Amekua akikimbia kutafuta picha ya Moi na Kenyatta ndio wanadada
 wamfungulie sidiria
One spends one's time chasing banknotes, in order to chase skirts

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

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

Hustling as an open secret

Arriving at the venue, we had the good fortune to meet the choreographer, Ozzy, who had interrupted the gala rehearsals for a lunchbreak. Ozzy had secured a job with an international NGO in Tanzania and invited us and another poet for lunch in a bar that was officially closed. Food and cold beers were served while the TV showed President Uhuru Kenyatta’s address on the state of the nation, his last and highly militaristic speech before the general elections later the same year. ‘Political

power,' Lefebvre writes, 'knows how to utilise and manipulate time, dates and time-tables' (2015: 78). As the only guests in the officially closed bar, we were enjoyably asynchronous to the authorities' attempt to enforce uniformity on the rhythms of the social body. Slightly euphoric about such an unexpected and rare treat, everyone sipped their beer while discussing the 'hustle' in a country in which the most pressing problems, as the news ticker informed us, were insecurity, corruption and hunger.

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

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

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

Ka si mihadarati ni juu ya ma scandal
If it's not drugs, I am out causing some scandal

Madha alishindwa kunihandle
My mom couldn't handle me

Serikali ika nimishandle
So now the government is mishandling me

Kenye najua ni kuexpose scandal za Waiganjo na Waiguru
What I know is using poetry to expose scandals like Waiganjo's and Waiguru's

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

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

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

Thursday: a job with a promise

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

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

Friday: free fall and a difficult surrender

The night and after-party were now the release after the gala night's tension. We headed to a well-known pub, accompanied by the gospel-rap celebrity Collo, the star of the event. After the previous days' hustle, ordering grilled meat at a rooftop bar felt like we were now 'living the life'. Judging from the buoyant mood, it seemed that the collective vision of a more glamorous life that had been conjured by the event was now naturally unfolding in real life. Hard-won cash prizes were quickly liquefied into rounds of cold beers. Long after I had returned to where I was staying, in the early morning hours, and after Janabii had locked half of his

earnings into an electronic savings account, he decided to go for another drink with a friend. According to his account, one drink turned into a drinking spree through Kisumu's drinking dens that lasted until the next evening.⁴ The home-brewed spirit, *chang'aa*, is usually consumed on private premises where it is produced, adding yet another base to Janabii's personal map of the city. We had once visited such a 'mama' who entertained us and other customers in her living room. On that occasion, she had provided Janabii with a Bluetooth speaker, so that he could play his own music from his phone, adding to the impression of being at home.

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

Saturday: uniting artists and youths

On Saturday morning, Janabii and I met at the Kisumu Museum to attend a meeting of the Kisumu Arts and Cultural Guild, an umbrella body representing Kisumu artists. The meeting was a straightforward attempt to organize artists along more political lines, connecting the fates of artists to the general problems of unemployment and neglect by the county government. The main presentation used the terms 'artists' and 'youths' interchangeably, in statements such as 'three-quarters of the population is under thirty years old so basically it is a youthful and artistic city'. Such numbers must be treated with caution, but the presentation undoubtedly had a point when it stated that youths and artists together comprised 'a great number of registered voters ... plagued with myriad socio-economic issues'.

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

⁴I was not able to get in touch with Janabii on this day but met him the day after, on Saturday, when he recounted (and I recorded) the past events.

Sunday: the weight of social interaction

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

Listening to that day's recordings, I realized how strongly Janabii's social life is cadenced by social interactions. The interactions with friends and passers-by in front of the shop invariably appeared sincere and heartfelt. They all started with inquiries of each other's state, which elicited unanimously positive responses. Lefebvre recommends recording interviews and background noises, enabling us to reflect on the fugitive effects of rhythm (2015: 79). The more intently I listened to that day's recorded conversations, the more attention I paid to the substance of the seemingly offhand greetings. Forming a regular counterpoint to our own discussion, the short and vivid exchanges had rhythm, steadily swinging back and forth, yet each person pushing the other to another climax, a sound of agreement or an expression of surprise, with theatrical interjections and comical moments causing abrupt laughter. Acoustically, the exchanges blended into the city's broader sound, pausing when noisy vehicles passed, and filling silences with non-verbal sounds such as finger snapping, tongue clicking, lip smacking, weaving the conversation into the city's soundscape.

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

Janabii: *Ni fiti kuwa ume-maintain pia.* [It's good to see you are keeping up and looking good.]

Willy: *Nime-maintain? Bwana, ey, lazima bwana!* [You think so? Of course, man, it's a must!]

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

Conclusion

The fluency with which Janabii interacted with people on that Sunday echoes the main point that I made in my discussion of a week in his life. Making art enables those who are young, gifted and unemployed to autonomously introduce rhythm into their lives, and, with it, a sense of direction and purpose. The Austrian psychiatrist and concentration camp survivor Viktor Frankl (1995) famously argued that for survival in the most adverse of environments, it is essential to have a purpose in life about which one feels positively. The artistic lifestyle transforms the experience of hustling and un(der)employment by providing such purpose, a task and a schedule: empty periods of time with ‘nothing to do’ turn into preparation phases for an event, and afternoons with no obligations are opportunities to hone one’s craft.

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

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

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

The second option would be to broaden the focus, taking into account how the rhythms performed by Janabii build on the performativity (Fischer-Lichte 2009; 2012) of rhythm in Kisumu, on the common practices already established by other citizens in the past around hustling and spending time. I have briefly touched on the rhythms of alliance and conflict, when Janabii’s relative detachment, floating and *laissez-faire* give way to more determined and forceful rhythms, when he is actively seeking and generating encounters and opportunities. However, a broader perspective would also need to account for how Janabii

synchronizes with public rhythms, such as the sudden eruption of violence during elections, or the economy's interminable stagnation during the month preceding elections, when the city's financial resources usually flow into political campaigns.

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

Taking the emic concept of hustling seriously has had welcome methodological consequences for this research, which draws on collaborative approaches with an interlocutor whose craft not only includes making verse but also the pleasure of analysing and discussing the significance of his rhymes. It forced me to open up my own scientific deliberations to Janabii and others who 'do hustle', in order to understand and represent their various street struggles from their own perspective. Shadowing Janabii for a week required me to take a back seat and to 'float' (Venkatesh 2013) to a much greater extent than I had been willing to do in my previous fieldwork, opening up important vistas into an everyday that is often created one moment at a time, precisely because nearly everything is contingent upon the moves one makes. Hustling as a type of social action, like navigation, is processual and changeable in nature and it requires a highly developed sensitivity to one's surroundings as well as finely tuned social skills. Together with the cultural intimacy and even secrecy surrounding hustling, this makes the hustle both a compelling and a challenging field of research.

References

- Amnesty International (2017) "'Kill those criminals": security forces violations in Kenya's August 2017 elections'. London: Amnesty International <<http://www.amnestykenya.org/media-centre/news-releases/kill-criminals-security-forces-violations-kenyas-august-2017-elections.html>>, accessed 17 November 2017.
- Archambault, J. (2015) 'Rhythms of uncertainty and the pleasures of anticipation' in E. Cooper and D. Pratten (eds), *Ethnographies of Uncertainty in Africa*. Basingstoke and New York NY: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Arnold, D. and S. Blackburn (2004) *Telling Lives in India: biography, autobiography, and life history*. Bloomington IN: Indiana University Press.
- Collins, R. (2005) *Interaction Ritual Chains*. Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Das, V. (2000) *Violence and Subjectivity*. London: University of California Press.
- Dobler, G. (2016) "'Work and rhythm" revisited: rhythms and experience in northern Namibian peasant work', *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 22 (4): 864–83.

- Dyson J. and C. Jeffrey (eds) (2008) *Telling Young Lives: portraits of global youth*. Philadelphia PA: Temple University Press.
- Estalella, A. and T. Sánchez Criado (eds) (2018) *Experimental Collaborations: ethnography through fieldwork devices*. New York NY: Berghahn Books.
- Fischer-Lichte, E. (2009) 'Culture as performance', *Modern Austrian Literature* 42 (3): 1–10.
- Fischer-Lichte, E. (2012) *Performativität: Eine Einführung*. Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag.
- Frankl, V. (1995) *Man's Search for Meaning: an introduction to logotherapy*. Washington DC: Washington Square Press.
- Honwana, A. (2012) *The Time of Youth: work, social change, and politics in Africa*. Boulder CO and London: Kumarian Press.
- Jahoda, M., P. F. Lazarsfeld and H. Zeisel (2009 [1933]) *Die Arbeitslosen von Marienthal: Ein soziographischer Versuch über die Wirkungen langandauernder Arbeitslosigkeit*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.
- Jeffrey, C. (2010) *Timepass: youth, class, and the politics of waiting in India*. Stanford CA: Stanford University Press.
- Lefebvre, H. (1991) *The Production of Space*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Lefebvre, H. (2015) *Rhythmanalysis: space, time, and everyday life*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Malaquais, D. (2011) 'Anti-teleology: re-mapping the imag(in)ed city' in N. Edjabe and E. Pieterse (eds), *African Cities Reader II: mobilities and fixtures*. Cape Town: African Centre for Cities and Chimurenga.
- Masquelier, A. (2013) 'Teatime: boredom and the temporalities of young men in Niger', *Africa* 83 (3): 470–91.
- Prince, R. J. (2013) "'Tarmacking" in the Millennium City: spatial and temporal trajectories of "empowerment" in Kenya', *Africa* 83 (4): 582–605.
- Simbao, R. (2017) 'Situating Africa: an alter-geopolitics of knowledge, or Chapungu rises', *African Arts* 50 (2): 1–9.
- Simone, A. (2004) 'People as infrastructure: intersecting fragments in Johannesburg', *Public Culture* 16 (3): 407–29.
- Thieme, T. A. (2018) 'The hustle economy: informality, uncertainty and the geographies of getting by', *Progress in Human Geography* 42 (4): 529–48.
- Venkatesh, S. (2013) *Floating City: a rogue sociologist lost and found in New York's underground economy*. New York NY: Penguin Books.
- Vigh, H. (2006) 'Social death and violent life chances: youth mobilization and social navigation in Bissau City' in C. Christiansen, M. Utas and H. Vigh (eds), *Navigating Youth, Generating Adulthood: social becoming in an African context*. Uppsala: Nordiska Afrikainstitutet.
- Vigh, H. (2009) 'Motion squared: a second look at the concept of social navigation', *Anthropological Theory* 9 (4): 419–38.
- Weiss, B. (ed.) (2004) *Producing African Futures: ritual and reproduction in a neo-liberal age*. Leiden: Brill.

Abstract

Young people from the low-income settlements in Kenya's third-largest city, Kisumu, struggling with unemployment refer to their efforts to generate a

livelihood as 'hustling'. At the same time, many of them put art (dance, music, poetry) at the centre of their lives. This article attempts to account for the significant popularity of the arts among Kisumu's youth. It understands the 'way of the artist' as an alternative interpretation of work and a framework in which people situate their experiences of unemployment, waiting and insecure work. To examine this framework in action, the article follows Janabii, a poet who has been at the centre of attempts to establish a spoken word scene in Kisumu. Janabii has spent several years in limbo, oscillating between glittering performances and a more discreet daily life, marked by functional homelessness and a refusal to surrender to the violence of Kenya's informal world of work. The article contributes to recent studies about hustling by combining an ethnography of a week in Janabii's life with a literary analysis of excerpts from one of his poems, in order to elucidate how his struggles to get by are narrated and stylized through a spoken word, artistic imaginary that interrelates with his everyday life.

Résumé

A Kisumu, troisième ville du Kenya, les jeunes des quartiers défavorisés parlent de « débrouille » pour décrire leur quotidien face au chômage et au défi de gagner leur vie. Mais cela n'empêche pas bon nombre d'entre eux de mettre l'art (danse, musique, poésie) au centre de leur existence. Cet article tente de décrire et d'expliquer la passion de ces jeunes pour l'art. A Kisumu, « la vie d'artiste » est en effet considérée comme une conception alternative du travail et un cadre d'activités leur permettant de pallier l'expérience du chômage, de l'attente et de la précarité du travail. Pour cette analyse, nous suivrons Janabii dans son quotidien; il est poète, et au centre d'une nouvelle culture du *spoken word* à Kisumu. Depuis longtemps, sa vie est faite d'aléas, entre de brillantes performances et un quotidien beaucoup plus terre à terre, marqué par l'absence de domicile personnel mais aussi par le refus de la violence qui sévit sur le marché du travail informel au Kenya. Cet article contribue aux travaux de recherche menés récemment sur la débrouille, en associant d'une part la description ethnographique d'une semaine dans la vie de Janabii et de l'autre l'analyse littéraire d'extraits d'un de ses poèmes, qui illustre, grâce au style de son langage et à son imaginaire artistique, sa lutte contre l'adversité et les défis de son quotidien.