Moving Targets: Meanings of Mobility in Metropolitan Nairobi

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Moving Targets:
Meanings of Mobility in Metropolitan Nairobi

by

Meghan Elizabeth Ference

A dissertation presented to the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences of Washington University in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

May 2013

St. Louis, Missouri

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List of Abbreviations
BRT – Bus Rapid Transit
KBS – Kenya Bus Service
KBS Ltd. – Kenya Bus Service Management Limited
KRA – Kenya Revenue Authority
KTN – Kenya Television Network
MADCOWA – Matatu Drivers and Conductors Welfare Association
MOA – Matatu Owners Association
MPESA – Mobile PESA (money)
MVOA – Mombasa Vehicles Owners Association
MVDA – Mombasa Vehicle Drivers Association
MWA – Matatu Welfare Association
NCC – Nairobi City Council
PRT – Private Rapid Transit
PSV – Public Service Vehicle
TKK – Toa Kitu Kidogo (remove a little something; a phrase that connotes corruption)
TLB – Transport Licensing Board
VOA – Vehicles Owner Association

Glossary
Askari - guard, soldier
-Beba – to carry
Chai – tea, also can mean a bribe
Chapati – Indian flatbread common in Kenya
Daladala – Tanzanian mini-bus taxis
Dere - driver
Duka - shop
Engsh – urban youth language, spoken in Westlands, Nairobi
Githaka - land
Ganya – a nice matatu
Jambazi - gangster
-jenga – to build
Jikoni - kitchen
Jo – Man, Pal
Jua kali – hot sun, the Swahili name for the informal sector
Kamjesh – The gang of unemployed matatu operators who are subsidized by matatus
Kiosk – shop, shed
Makanga - conductor
Malaya - prostitute
Manamba - conductor
Manyanga – a nice matatu
Matatu – a mini bus taxi in Kenya
Mathree – matatu (Sheng)
Maruti – a small, seven-seater matatu
Mlami – person of European descent (Sheng)
Mlengo – when a matatu leaves the stage without a full vehicle
Mungiki – ethnically homogenous, Kikuyu vigilante gang known to terrorize matatus
Mwisha – end
Mzungu – person of European descent (Swahili)
Nyayo - footstep
Peni – one ten-cent coin in the colonial era
Poa - cool
Probox – a new type of matatu, without a flat front
Sanifu – proper swahili
Sare - uniforms (Swahili), free (Sheng)
Sheng - urban youth language meaning Swahili and English slang.
Skwad – a complete trip for a matatu, from the neighborhood to town and back
Sonko – market (Swahili), a man with means (Sheng)
Tao - town
Tiga Wana – leave your foolishness (a Kikuyu admonition)
Uhuru – freedom, independence
Vako – to get a free ride on a matatu
Wabenzi – the people of the Mercedes Benz, meaning elite people
Walevi - drunk
Wananchi – citizens
Wasichana – young women
Watoto - children
-zunguka – to go around

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Sammy Wambua writes a column in Kenya’s widely read *Daily Nation* newspaper under the moniker of “The Sentinel.” In a 2009 column entitled, “Disciplining the Reckless Matatu Driver,” Wambua describes a harrowing experience he had in one of Kenya’s informal, mini-bus taxis. He claims, “It was just a matter of time before we were transferred to a hearse from the Toyota” but argues he “was not about to be killed by a dread-locked, twig chewing, twit” (*Daily Nation*, 25 March 2009).¹ Throughout the brief piece he refers to the driver as a “lunatic” and even prompts Kenyans to act with physical violence towards matatu operators when he implores them with this homicidal plea: “Good Kenyans, it is incumbent on you to grab any speeding PSV (Public Service Vehicle) driver by the head and twist it until he sees his back” (*Daily Nation*, 25 March 2009). How breaking the neck of the driver will ensure better discipline in the industry is not clear from the article, but it echoes familiar sentiment from the general Kenyan population – matatu operators are undisciplined, reckless people who are putting everyone at risk, and they should be punished. Newspaper pieces like this are common and increase in number and intensity anytime transport policy comes up for debate in Parliament or a transport strike occurs.

Matatu (in Kenya), *daladala* (in Tanzania), *songa kidogo* (in Rwanda) and *trostro* (in Ghana) are different names for mini-bus taxis, which emerged as a grassroots response to inefficient colonial bus services.² This type of transportation is not unique to African countries. Mini-bus (14-32 passengers) and midi-bus (32-48 passengers) taxis are common in Turkey, and

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¹ The “twig” that Wambua is referring to is *mirrah*, a leafy narcotic that is chewed in East Africa and the Middle East to stimulate conversation. It is classified as a narcotic Type II in the US. For a full discussion on the role of Mirrah in the East African economy and its negative perception throughout the rest of the world see Anderson et al. 2007 and Carrier 2005, 2007.
² *Songa kidogo* simply means “scoot over” in Swahili, highlighting not only a visceral experience of squeezing into a seat next to another person, but also reflects the grassroots nature of these informal systems.
Jamaica, Philippines, Russia and Chile and Indonesia. The emergence of this particular mode of transportation often develops from gaps left by the state that are filled by private enterprise or informal entities, the epitome of late capitalism. The presence of these mobile systems is not novel, but what is exceptional to Kenya’s case is that it is the only country in Africa where the buses were never successfully nationalized after independence (Kumar and Barrett 2008: xi).

In Kenya, the vehicles that filled the gap left by the inept colonial infrastructure acted as more than just modes of transportation, they became crucial spaces of exchange, interaction, production and consumption that seemed to perpetually exist just out of the reach of the state. The ability to stay on the edges of state control was an important part of providing mobility for people in a colonial city, underneath an inefficient monopoly system of passenger transport. Throughout the past fifty years, informal transport operators have developed a particular set of skills and strategies to enable them to slip between the fingers of, who were first the agents of the colonial bus company and later, the traffic police, city council askaris (soldiers or guards), gang members and hijackers that populate Nairobi’s streets. This skill set includes a complex constellation of practices honed in Nairobi’s unique urban environment, practices that are simultaneously esteemed and condemned by the very population that depends on them.

Currently, the matatu industry carries nearly 80% of the urban population in Nairobi on a daily basis (Chitere 2004; Klopp 2011). It is, by far, the most popular form of transportation,

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3 A version of the informal collective taxi is even running in Brooklyn, New York and was an important transport option during the devastation of the city’s transit system during Hurricane Sandy in 2012 (Katherine Hejtmanek, Personal Communication, December 2012).
4 There was an attempt to have a national bus service under the second president of Kenya, Daniel Arap Moi’s creation, Nyayo Bus, which will be covered in later chapters of this dissertation.
5 Lee quotes a different number, reporting that only 70% of the population take matatus on a daily basis (quoted in Mutongi 2006: 553), and Salon and Gulyani (2010: 642) make a fine
costing on average 20 to 60 KSh ($0.25 to $0.75 USD) for a one-way trip to most of Nairobi’s neighborhoods and its suburbs, but it is not necessarily cheap for the average Kenyan (Salon and Gulyani 2010: 642). Because the vehicles are all privately owned and operated, the fares are often irregular and can change with the weather. For example, during the rainy season, and often in the middle of a downpour, matatu fares can double and triple. A 50 KSh (less than $1 USD) ride becomes 150 KSh (over $2 USD), but passengers only discover this when they enter the vehicle. Often, people cannot afford, or are unwilling to pay the heightened fare, and conductors will not hesitate to force passengers back out into the pouring rain. For this reason, and many more, tension and negative feelings flowing from passengers to matatu operators is palpable and constant.

The men and women of the informal transportation sector (the largest workforce in Kenya and the focus of this study) are increasingly put at risk by this stigma. This workforce is not only large, employing at least 160,000 people, but it is also young, for the most part employing people, mostly men, under the age of thirty-five years of age (Chitere and Kibua 2004; Chitere 2004; Khayesi 1997). Just like matatus, youth are often “making and breaking” the boundaries of society (Honwana and DeBoeck 2005). The official number of employees for the 40,000 matatus in all of Kenya is 160,000 workers. The math is simple: one driver and one conductor for each of the two eight-hour shifts. Jackson, a veteran matatu driver, had a different equation with which to think about the population of the sector, calculating that “each matatu employs one hundred people,” yielding a total closer to about 400,000 people because he

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6 The overwhelming majority of matatu workers, drivers, conductors and loaders are men. However, in the past decade there has been a steady increase in female matatu conductors, but there are still very few female drivers.
included the police, the owners and the hustlers that feed off the industry (personal communication, 2010). Jackson may not have been able to show his work, but his arithmetic seems closer to the real number of people who work in this sector than was the official statistic.

Although they provide the majority of transportation in Kenya daily, they are constantly critiqued and blamed for what is perceived to be the dreadful state of a broken system. Of the 40,000 matatus in Kenya, 15,000 traverse Nairobi’s streets daily employing a driver and conductor (someone who rides along in the vehicle, opening doors and collecting fares), and subsidizing the owners of the vehicles, the managers of the stages (where people board and depart buses), police officers (many of whom secretly own matatus), city council askaris (guards who enforce a long list of city by-laws by demanding fines) and the hawkers and hustlers that sell tea, fruit salad, pirated music, mirrah and banghi to those just mentioned. These are the people who populate this dissertation.

For matatu operators in Nairobi’s post-colonial landscape there are roadblocks, both physical and social, at every turn. Physically, the streets are simply too small for the amount of traffic moving through the city and potholed roads cause punctures and are rough on vehicles. Social tolls are paid to powerful and dangerous outside actors in order to keep the system moving through the city unrestricted. By paying bribes to either cops, or gangsters, or both, operators keep the system moving, and with repetition the everyday practices of corruption are embedded into the social landscape to such a point that they become routinized and banalized. The general public derides this constant participation in corruption by matatu operators, even though the passengers themselves often promote and encourage, if not demand, matatu operators continue their various corrupt and illicit practices. J. P. Olivier de Sardan captures the perpetual paradox

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7 Bhangi is the slang term for marijuana.
that matatu operators find themselves in with the insight that, while corruption is stigmatized in words, it is practiced in fact (1999: 29).

**Nairobi, Kenya**

In 2005 and 2006, I compared the mini-bus taxi economies in Uganda, Tanzania and Kenya before deciding to focus on Kenya’s matatus. During this time, I also compared the matatu businesses in the cities of Mombasa and Nairobi before deciding to focus my dissertation research in Nairobi. Kenya’s matatu vehicles are initially set apart from the taxis in Uganda and the daladala in Tanzania because they were covered with paintings, designs and slogans, which were both globally and locally sourced from current popular culture. The vehicles seemed to act as the public’s commentary on the city and the world. A local rap artist with the Kenyan hip-hop collective *Ukoo Flani Mau Mau*, Zakah, described the relationship of matatu design to Nairobi’s aesthetic, “Paris has graffiti on walls, we put our graffiti on matatus…that way it moves, everyone can see it” (personal communication, 2008).

![Figure 1.1: Two matatus with elaborate designs and slogans. These are unique to Nairobi (source: https://www.facebook.com/pages/MATATU/53633910347).](image-url)
Nairobi has been an active battleground for securing people’s rights to use, move through and dwell in space, from its inception in 1899. Nairobi was originally off-limits to the native African population and was meant to be a city for Europeans only. By 1910, the native population in the city had climbed into the thousands (Hirst 1994; White 1990; Bujra 1975). Therefore, as historical geographer Brenda Yeoh eloquently explains, “The colonial urban landscape is hence not simply a palimpsest reflecting the impress of asymmetrical power relations undergirding colonial society, but also a terrain of discipline and resistance” (1996: 10).

This history has shaped ideas about the city as a place that is exclusionary and insecure. Even now, when travelers pass through Nairobi on their way to a safari or to climb Mt. Kilimanjaro, they are warned about Nairobi, often being told about its infamous nickname: Nairobbery.

This contested terrain is plain to see in the development of the built environment of Nairobi and in the planning and building of institutions to regulate movement, which dominated colonial thinking about transport from the mid-1930s. In Nairobi, two institutions in particular are important: the Transport Licensing Board (TLB) and the Kenya Bus Service (KBS). According to the archived report on the co-ordination and regulation of transport in the colony, the colonial government not only constructed the TLB but also offered KBS a monopoly over passenger transport services in Nairobi, in exchange for a 25% share in the company, for fifty years (KNA 1936). These institutions epitomized the colonial mindset in Nairobi during the mid-1930s, and were also sites of contestation that show the contradictions of colonialism and the fragmenting of colonial policy. Furthermore, the interior spaces of the KBS vehicles offered a unique, shared, and intimate space that is not often found in the colonial record, allowing those vehicles to serve as an alternative urban archive for glimpses into Kenya’s colonial past, just as matatus may offer insight into contemporary Kenya, offering lessons for the future.
The informal taxis that emerged to meet the growing demand of the population in the late 1950s were called “pirate taxis” by the newspapers and in the colonial records because they were operating in direct opposition to the KBS monopoly. These pirate vehicles came to be known as matatus over time, as they consistently offered a cheaper fare than KBS – by one peni, a ten-cent piece in colonial Nairobi (see figure 1.2). KBS charged four peni coins for a ride, or mapeni manne (nne means four). Operating informally, a pirate vehicle charged only three coins, and in Swahili and Kikuyu, three is tatu. The complete phrase then, mapeni matatu (personal communication 2006, 2010).  

Figure 1.2: Three peni coins, or mapeni matatu, the origin of the name for Nairobi’s informal taxis (source: photo by author).  

8 A version of this story is told in every written piece on matatus, with some variation.
A good friend Mudathir told me this version of the story and he also gave provided the coins and Professor Nzuga, linguistic professor and author of Sheng dictionary, later corroborated this story in 2010. However, there are many different stories or versions of this story in all matatu literature (Chitere 2004; Aduwo 1990; Khayesi 1997). Because the sector pre-dated an independent Kenya, it was one of the early arenas where ideas about safety, responsibility, efficiency, discipline, risk, competition and being a ‘proper’ Kenyan were explicitly debated in the 1960s. Using mobility as a proxy people began publically asking questions about what kind of nation they wanted to be: one that endorses dangerous pirates who provide necessary services or one that stays loyal to the colonial contracts of the KBS monopoly?

Often these parliamentary debates pitted ideas of safety and efficiency on the side of rational and modern KBS, against the pirate taxis drivers who embraced risk, criminality and chaos, but who were offering citizens the services they needed. People needed the pirates because the colonial infrastructure that was left to them was completely unable to render services at the level needed. By the 1970s, in the midst of an intense period of urbanization that the government could not provide for nor support, the informal economy provided the services needed to fill the gap left open by the state. Matatus were, and still are, a substantial portion of the informal economy, which in the face of mounting urban struggle, was embraced leading Kenya’s first president, Jomo Kenyatta on Madaraka Day, in 1973 when he finally decriminalized the sector (Mutongi 2006: 553).9

In the 1980s, during the rise of neoliberal economic policy and structural adjustment programs, Kenyan citizens were increasingly left to fend for themselves, as state services were

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9 Madaraka Day is a national holiday celebrating the transfer of governmental powers and offices from British control to Kenyan control. It is often described as Kenya’s independence day.
cut and their currency lost value. During this era, the second president of Kenya, Daniel Arap Moi, ruled Kenya with an authoritarian regime that crushed dissent (Haugerud 1997: 81), was known to torture people in the basement of government buildings (Wrong 2009) and send spies into college classrooms to report back on any opposing political views being disseminated to young people (Owiti, personal communication, 2003). Under this regime, associations between people and interactions were limited; groups of any kind were difficult to form and any meeting of more than two or three people required permission from the government. During this matatus became one of the only spaces where Kenyans of all kinds could interact with each other out from under the dangerous eyes of the Moi regime. While Moi was silencing people by tactics like slum demolitions, matatus were playing and passing cassette tapes with political speeches and music, commenting on the politics of the day from slum demolition to ethnic violence (Haugerud 1997).

The matatu sector has almost uniformly resisted any type of reform throughout this entire period and has grown to dominate the transport market with an aura of machismo, danger, risk and criminality. What has resulted from this are policies that hinge on the public’s negative perception of the informal transport worker, so changes (including the consolidation of urban space or the sale of thousands of seatbelts) benefiting a tiny group of powerful and wealthy elite politicians and business owners, are cast as technological solutions for the benefit of the common good (Harvey 2005; Ong 2006). All of this is done while simultaneously putting Kenya’s largest, and in some respects most vulnerable, workforce at risk.
Moving Targets

Kenda Mutongi suggests, commuters often push matatu operators to break rules and then use the operators, and the matatu business in general, as a scapegoat and excuse for their own transgressions, claiming that through this scapegoating Kenyan society is participating constituting a “culture of blaming” (2006: 549). However, when Mutongi argues that matatu operators are “scapegoats,” it leaves one with the impression that the operators are being blamed for the wrongdoings of others through little fault of their own. Instead, I argue that the concept of occupational stigma, and the social processes that give rise to this stigmatization, offers more analytical traction to enable us to look at Kenyan society with more breadth and depth.

Sociologist Everett Hughes evoked the term “dirty work” to refer to tasks and occupations that are likely to be perceived as disgusting or degrading (1962). Hughes also observed that society delegates dirty work to groups who act as agents on society’s behalf, and then society stigmatizes them, as passengers often do in matatus. Although they are scapegoated, matatu operators realize some of what they are doing is wrong, or at least they recognize and articulate the corruption practices they are involved in are problematic, although they do not have much room to choose not to participate when working in the sector. In Kenya, and other developing nations with widespread corruption, it seems to “function like the grease necessary for turning the wheels of a notoriously inefficient bureaucracy” (Nye, 1967: 417).

When corruption is routinized and embedded into the fabric of everyday life, it is often legitimized by the perpetrators, and the briber, embezzler or corrupter has “good reasons” for his or her actions and can easily dismiss themselves of all culpability and illegitimacy (Olivier de Sardan 1999: 34). Part of the way that Kenyans dismiss this culpability is by having the matatu operator break rules on their behalf, then blaming the operators to free themselves of the shame.
Unfortunately, seeing as the majority of the matatu workforce is under thirty-five, this specific social process is even more dangerous and troubling. Mutongi is correct in exposing the paradox implicit in Kenya’s “culture of blaming,” whereby the public uses the sectors young workforce as a scapegoat, but the concept and process of stigma exposes the human costs and the structural agents responsible for real human suffering. Even the title of Mutongi’s piece, “Thugs or Entrepreneurs?” reveals a need for further analysis because the answer seems to be that matatu operators are not one or the other, but both (2006).

Erving Goffman, who pioneered the sociological study of the concept of stigma in 1963, wrote a short book entitled *Stigma: Notes on the management of spoiled identity*, where he defines the term stigma as, “an attribute that is deeply discrediting” to the perceived social identity of an individual (1963b: 3). The person possessing this attribute is “reduced…from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one” and therefore has a spoiled social identity (Goffman 1963b: 3). He urges scholars to approach the concept through a language of relationships, specifically through a “special kind of relationship between attribute and stereotype” and names three broad categories of stigma: physical deformity, stigma of race, nation and religion and lastly blemishes of individual character (Goffman 1963b: 4). Matatu crewmembers fall under this last category of stigma. That of people with blemished individual characters, which are perceived to have abnormal passions and underhanded beliefs.

Goffman’s essay is specifically concerned with what he calls “mixed contacts” between those who are stigmatized and their interaction with those who do not suffer the stigma, whom he refers to “normals” (1963b: 5). Goffman describes these mixed social situations, as unanchored interactions where the stigmatized person has a sense of not knowing what the others present are “really thinking about him” which can lead to a fear of strangers and the feeling of
inferiority, but also remarks that “instead of cowering, the stigmatized individual may attempt to approach mixed contacts with hostile bravado” or the stigmatized person can sometimes “vacillate between cowering and bravado” as interactions “run amok” (1963b: 14-18). In many descriptions of matatu crews, this type of bravado is depicted and is often a marker of why crewmembers should be feared and disciplined, as in this characterization by a Daily Nation correspondent “Nothing illustrates the matatu chaos better than the phenomenon of the tout. He is loud and self-assertive in a menacing way, and is quick to show the middle finger to other motorists, especially those who try to resist his ways” (10 January 2010).

The sociological definition of stigma as a concept has five interrelated components: 1) people label and distinguish human difference, 2) dominant cultural beliefs link labeled persons to undesirable characteristics or negative stereotypes, 3) labeled persons are put in distinct categories, 4) labeled persons experience status loss and discrimination and 5) stigmatization is contingent on social, economic and political power (Link and Phelan 2001: 363). Although this multifaceted definition makes great strides towards incorporating much of the literature into a working conceptualization of stigma, anthropologists provide the missing piece of this definition, which incorporates “moral experiences” of actors in a local world (Yang et al. 2007: 1530). For anthropologists, stigma is a social process “embedded in the interpretive engagements of social actors, involving cultural meanings, affective states, roles and ideal types” and they see “both stigmatizers and the stigmatized as sharing the same social space…bound together in getting things done”(Yang et al. 2007: 1530).

Anthropologists further argue that “stigmatizing someone is…a highly pragmatic, even tactical response to perceived threats, real dangers or fear of the unknown” and this is why stigma is dangerous, durable and difficult to undo (Yang et al. 2007: 1528). Perhaps this helps to
explain the motivation of the Sentinel’s call to “all good Kenyans” to attack PSV drivers because for the stigmatizer, “stigma seems to be an effective and natural response, emergent not only as an act of self-preservation or psychological defense, but also in the existential or moral experience that one is being threatened” (Yang et al. 2007: 1528). Matatu operators are both physically and morally threatening. Not only because of the danger and risk of physical harm that they and their passengers experience on the road, but also because of their participation and implication in a variety of illegal activities.

*The Puzzles of Work Stigma*

Another important commonality of the dirty workers anthropologists add to Hughes’ typology was that all occupations are both necessary and polluting (Ashforth and Kreiner 1999: 415). In spite of all this, studies have shown that dirty workers have very high occupational pride and workplace esteem in the face of this stigma. Furthermore, Trice and Beyer’s research shows how workplace culture is, actually, strengthened by stigma (1993). This is also the case with matatu operators.

In order to solve the puzzle of social solidarity in the face of stigma it is important to delineate clearly between the different types of dirty work and the different types of negative attributes, or “taints” attached to particular work (Ashforth and Kreiner 1999: 415). According to the authors, there are three types of “taint” that differentiate dirty work – physical, social and moral. Physical taint comes from having a job that is viscerally and physically repulsive (garbage men, gravediggers, funeral directors) and social taint characterizes the jobs that are in connected to a stigmatized population (nurses) or are in service to others (butlers, waiters), which people see as degrading. The moral taint is found where “an occupation is generally regarded as
somewhat sinful or of dubious virtue – employing methods that are deceptive, intrusive, confrontational or otherwise defy forms of civility” (Ashforth and Kreiner 1999: 415). Exotic dancers, prostitutes and pawnbrokers are listed in the authors’ category of morally tainted dirty workers. I would add matatu operators to this group. It was precisely the bewilderment at the realization that, in some places in the world, driving a bus could be a morally tainted profession, which first interested me in this topic.

Studies of stigma in Africa are generally relegated to HIV status (Kalichman and Sabayi 2003; Jewkes 2006) and other physical ailments (see Vlassoff et al. 2000 for work on the stigma of onchocercal skin disease; Baskind and Birbeck 2005 on epilepsy; Cruz et al. 2011 on albinism) that are tainted both physically and morally. Perhaps the closest comparison comes from research on blacksmiths (Makarius 1968), who are revered and feared in many societies. The stigma of the blacksmith is usually analyzed in comparison to the concept of caste in India, focusing on the stable rules of exclusion, such as caste exogamy, instead of on stigma specifically (Todd 1977; Tamari 1991; McNaughton 1993). Another occupational group that experiences some scholarly attention for their low occupational status and stigma in Kenya are sex workers (White 1990; Chernoff 2003).

In Kenya, sex work is woven into the fabric of everyday life and includes a wider range of domestic work than in the United States (see Sanders 2005). Women who are labeled “sex workers” or malaya (prostitutes) will also wash clothes, cook meals and even clean for their customers, intertwining elements of sex work and domestic labor and blurring the boundaries between them (White 1990). Facilitating this erosion and dissolution of the separation between boundaries of legal and illegal everyday practices is what Olivier de Sardan calls “the over-monetarization of social life” whereby “personal relationships take on a permanent monetary
form...and everyday forms of sociability require a lot of cash” (1999: 45). This concept
crosscuts relationships that also help legitimate corrupt practices in the matatu sector.

It is important look at how cultural contexts shape occupational stigma. What specific
practices, histories and cultural logics shape social processes of occupational stigma? In the case
of sex work, it might seem fairly straightforward seeing that sexuality and sexual practices are
both biologically necessary but can also be polluting, both physically (through sexually
transmitted diseases) and symbolically (transgressing gender roles, religious norms). But, in the
case of mini-bus taxi drivers, the enduring stigma they experience seems somewhat surprising
and complex.

Matatu operators provide the necessary services of mobility in a city that depends on
them, but where their occupational “taint” lies is a more complicated and fascinating factor.
What are the specific practices that taint their work? Is this tainting moral, physical, or social, or
more likely all of the above? Matatu operators could be seen as physically polluting because the
vehicles may be spitting out black smoke and guzzling diesel gas. They also disseminate slang
youth languages, hip-hop music and urban styles of dress and comportment, which could be and
is sometimes seen, as social pollution. And they are morally tainted by the corruption that
characterizes matatu work. It is this moral taint, and the stigma that stems from it that is most
dangerous, and in the case of the matatu operators who I worked with, a productive force.

Returning to the puzzle of social solidarity in the face of stigma, and even increased
group pride and occupational esteem in the face of occupational taint, how does occupational
stigma create solidarity and workplace esteem? Studies have shown that “precisely because of
the salience of dirty work” that strong cultures tend to coalesce around the occupation as a whole
or among work groups (Ashcroft and Kreiner 1999: 419). Additionally, and importantly for
matatu operators, studies also show that the perception of a shared threat or danger also fosters cohesion, particularly when there is an antagonistic quality to interactions with the non-stigmatized, as in the case of abortion workers (Forsyth 1986). I expand on this particular idea later in the dissertation when I talk about the dangerous bonds that bring matatu operators together (chapter 8). “The process through which subcultures are formed is more likely to be realized under certain conditions” and for our purposes we will focus on five conditions that are at work in the matatu sector (Ashcroft and Kreiner 1999: 421). They are 1) collective socialization, 2) high task interdependency, 3) physical proximity between individuals 4) group longevity and 5) inherent danger, which adds to sense of threat and separateness. This results in strong work cultures that have “social resources needed to counteract the influence of wider cultures in which the occupation or workgroup is embedded” (Ashcroft and Kreiner 1999: 421).

For the sociologists who usually study workplace stigma for purposes of managerial science and organizational psychology the work of creating ideologies through three overlapping processes of reframing, recalibrating and refocusing (Ashcroft and Kreiner 1999: 421). Reframing, the most effective source of solidarity among dirty workers, include two processes the workers use to transform the meanings of their occupations from negative to positive, or at least neutral, and to justify their jobs. The first process, infusing, allows individuals to infuse work with different meanings, like when construction workers infuse their manual labor with traditional notions of masculinity. Another tactic whereby the worker attempts to neutralize their actions, for example by denying that there are any real victims, or that they are merely providing a need for society. These workplace ideologies are the key mechanisms for workers in stigmatized occupations to create and maintain solidarity as workers use them to “assert positive value in the face of a claim to contrary” (Scott and Lyman 1968: 51).
Matatu operators often reframe their work by both infusing practices with notions of masculinity, and they neutralize their constant participation in corruption by legitimating it as a time saver or risk management mechanism. Operators also deal with corruption specifically by employing another technique of justification called “recalibration” -- by adjusting standards of behaviors; large problems become minimized (like corruption in the matatu industry is not a big deal), or small tasks become important (doctors and nurses in hospitals talking about how they depend on orderlies to make the system work) (Ashforth and Kreiner 1999: 422). The last tactic, refocusing, happens when a worker moves the concentration from a stigmatized aspect of the job to a non-stigmatized aspect, or when they switch the focus from the job they do now to their long-term goals. Exotic dancers do this when they say that they are working to pay off their college education (Forsyth and Deshotels 1998).

For all of this effort, there is very little external legitimacy of the ideologies that dirty workers create outside of their occupational groups. They are often more powerful for the people on the inside of the workforce to foster self-esteem and solidarity. But perhaps, over time the sociability of these occupational groups can “foster a collective sense of relative deprivation, injustice and resentment…leading them to agitate for substantive change in the stigmatizing conditions of work as well as reward and prestige” (Ashforth and Kreiner 1999: 429).

My research shows that this is happening among some of the matatu operators I worked closely with during my fieldwork, who were part of an association for and by matatu operators: The Matatu Drivers and Conductors Welfare Association (MADCOWA). Joining, paying dues and being an active participant in MADCOWA was one of the ways that the solidarity of matatu crews best expressed its potential for creating and marinating an urban space for an emergent positive politics. For people who are stigmatized “the relationship of the stigmatized individual
to the informal community and the formal organizations of his own kind is…crucial” (Goffman 1963b: 38). If you are a registered member of MADCOWA and your dues are up to date, they will assist you with the dangers of being a matatu operator, namely arrest and physical injury. In, theory, within MADCOWA ethnicity, age and sex is not supposed to matter, and as far as what I observed it did not.10 The executive board of MADCOWA consists of drivers and conductors who travel throughout the country putting on workshops for matatu operators and holding meetings to discuss things such as politics, traffic policy and collective action. As a wide countrywide organization they are not that well known, but there are certain routes where they are extremely well represented. The route I happened to work on, route #48 to Kileleshwa was one of the “pilot routes” for MADCOWA in Nairobi and had the highest number of members (George, personal communication, 2010). MADCOWA not only provides practical help to matatu operators who suffer work related injuries or problems, but it also lays bare possibilities for alternative ways to link inequality and human suffering to urban space.

For matatu operators in Kenya, their occupation’s moral taint comes from the everyday participation in the widespread and various practices of “corruption complex,” which is deeply embedded in the matatu sector itself. Corruption, not easily defined, is a complex of illicit practices associated with state functions that contradict that official ethics of public property or public service and the like” and can include different “techniques” of corruption from paying bribes to civil servants and public officials dipping into the public purse (Olivier de Sardan 1999: 26-27). It is not helpful then to talk about this complex as either petty or major corruption, but one must understand corruption as a complex of behaviors and social processes that are

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10 I base this claim largely on the fact that there were several women in the executive committee of MADCOWA as well as members from every ethnic group. Equality, non-discrimination and tolerance are their watchwords. I will expand on this in chapter 8.
undergirded by certain sociocultural logics. These logics help explain why matatu operators are both thugs and entrepreneurs.

**The logics of corruption**

No government is free from corruption, but the frequency, form and function, however, differ greatly throughout the world. Scholars of corruption have also noted commonalities in all forms of governance from pro-Western one-party regimes to military regimes and personal dictatorships, and are also generally understood to be good for business interests because it makes for more efficient dealings in inefficient bureaucracies (Nye 1967; Johnston 1986). And for business interests, it is seen to be beneficial to economic development in many cases, including both the Untied States and Russia (Nye 1967: 417). These authors argue that corrupt practices are more widespread in developing countries because of the following three conditions, all which are present in Kenya, 1) the crisis of African states (massive unemployment, irresponsible ruling elite), 2) the underpayment of civil servants, and 3) widespread clientalism (stemming from international development and the patron/client relationships that it engenders), which is favorable to corruption and has been widely introduced by the development complex as often discussed by anthropologists of development (Haugerud 1997; Ferguson 1999).

Olivier de Sardan makes a grim prediction though, that because of these factors and because “the more it develops the more it becomes engrained in social habits,” corruption cannot be reversed (1999: 32). Olivier de Sardan sets out a framework of sociocultural logics that undergird corrupt practices and embed them in the daily lives of people, which is both fruitful and problematic. But what is important about his theory of corruption’s intractability in African nations, is that it explains why, although it is highly condemned in words and public
proclamation, it is practiced constantly. It also helps explain why matatu operators are the targets of Kenya’s “culture of blaming,” but also why this stigma may actually provide a potentially radical and powerful space for a positive politics of inclusivity and solidarity in the face of an increasingly risky neoliberal governmentality at work in modern Kenya.

Delineating exactly what defines corruption is, or is not, is difficult – is it the fifty-shilling note you slip the city traffic police to continue on your way? Or, is it the use of public decrees and by-laws to line private pockets of public officials? It is both, and everything in between. Practices that come under the corruption complex (although widely loathed in speech) are legitimized by their perpetrators at the borderline between what corruption is, and what it is not. This framework can then explain what Mutongi describes as scapegoating and the culture of blaming by showing how “whoever practices corruption auto-legitimates his own behavior, by presenting himself, for example as a victim of a system in which he is bound to this kind of practice to avoid wasting time/and or an insupportable amount of money, being penalized or condemned to inactivity” (Olivier de Sardan 1999: 29).

For Olivier de Sardan and others, sociocultural logics help embed corruption in the daily lives of the participants through practices that are not even connected to corruption. These logics are not meant to imply that “culture” or “society” is bounded or unchanging, which somehow bind actors to a structure without agency. On the contrary, these are social pressures that exist largely as an outcrop of colonialism. The sociocultural logics most at play in the lives of the matatu operators in Nairobi are negotiation, gift-giving, redistributive accumulation, predatory authority and solidarity (Olivier de Sardan 1999: 29).

Larissa Lomnitz wrote a nuanced analysis on corruption that occurs in the informal sectors of three nations (Chile, Soviet Union and Mexico) theorizing that all informal sectors
run on the socially imbedded functions involving loyalty, trust and solidarity. Her argument rests on the premises that the intrinsic part of the informal economy exposes the weaknesses of the formal economy (Lomnitz 1988: 43), in the same way that corruption greases the wheels of an inefficient bureaucracy. Her analysis is based in the informal economy’s opposition to the state and she describes how “informal activities are socially embedded transactions that obey a cultural logic that differs from the state’s logic” (1998: 43). For Lomnitz, as well as Olivier de Sardan, cultural logics are dynamically at work in the informal economy and the daily lives of many urban African residents.

The role played by these logics in the generalization and banalization of corruption is hard to ignore, and they are usually combined, “thus dissolving juridically reprehensible practices into the fabric of similar and socially commonplace practices, which happened to be accepted and even esteemed (Olivier de Sardan 1999: 44). The logics do not necessarily force people to engage in corruption however, while exerting pressure on social actors, allow for an acceptability of corruption. Looking at the everyday practices of corruption into the larger fabric of everyday practices “expressing positive logics from the perspective of habitual social norms” (Olivier de Sardan 1999:36).

Two facilitating factors crosscut these logics – the over-monetarization of social relationships, mentioned above, and shame – and work to keep corruption embedded in people’s everyday lives (Olivier de Sardan 1999: 29). It is in this formulation of shame that we can learn much from the current and potential role of Africa’s dirty workers. Olivier de Sardan claims that because of the face-to-face nature of African societies coupled with the monetarization of personal relationships, shame plays a crucial role in perpetuating corruption. Shame, Olivier de Sardan, explains, “is a major form of social control in Africa…and is social morality, a morality
based on other people’s opinions, rather than one based on an individual examination of conscience” (1999: 46). He argues that shame promotes corruption to save face with family or friends. In other words, not getting something like a license, or school certificates, will cause shame and thus feed the cycle of corruption. This is possible the case in rural environments when constantly surrounded by family and close relatives. But in the urban milieu, shame, and its role in facilitating corruption, is not so straightforward.

Many matatu operators do feel shame in connected to their jobs, and they are increasingly aware and critical of it. In a way, they continue to be oppositional and innovators by 1) articulating corruption often, by collectively organizing, calling strikes and complaining about the system and 2) are already shamed by the corruption that is built into their jobs. So shame does not act in the same facilitating way that Olivier de Sardan theorizes. This is both rooted in the transportation sector’s historical legacy of grassroots and oppositional political activity in Kenya. As this dissertation will show, matatu operators use their stigma, and shame, to “reframe” the corrupt practices of their occupation by infusing them with “masculine” qualities and also by “neutralizing” their behaviors by denying that there are real victims to their acts of bribery (Ashforth and Kreiner 2006: 422).

Because matatus have no “face” to save in the name of corruption due to their stigma, and because occupational stigma actually reinforces workforce esteem as discussed above, matatu operators are ideally placed to confront corrupt practices, which they do (Goffman 1963a). In other words, their stigma actually produces a unique space for emergent forms of positive politics that are more inclusive over all, and far better suited for the changing milieu of the urban environment of Nairobi. In this framework, matatu operators can potentially challenge and expose the gaps that exist between the accepted model of good governance and the
sociocultural logics that run through norms and practices of everyday life. Their urban sociability offers an alternate view of to the fundamentalism and “puritanical” movements that Olivier de Sardan proposes as the only means left, with which to change the present course of affairs, and root out corruption in global cities (1999: 48).

**Structures of Responsibility**

How do urban anthropologists explain these complexities of their field sites? How do we capture the social exclusions that characterize everyday life for these city’s increasing populations? How do researchers of cities locate blame and responsibility for human suffering when “what happens is not a person or a policy but fleeting set of social arrangements (Rodgers and O’Neill 2012: 402)? Scholars conceptualize one answer to these challenges as “infrastructural violence” whereby,

Infrastructure emerges as an ideal ethnographic site for theorizing how broad and abstract social orderings such as the state, citizenship, criminality, ethnicity and class play out concretely at the level of everyday practice, revealing how such relationships of power and hierarchy translate to palpable forms of physical and emotional harm (Rodgers and O’Neil 2012: 402).

Included in the definitions of structural violence are ideas about how the urban design and planning of the built environment of cities reflect power inequality (Yeoh 1996; Mabogunje 1981).

In his polemical piece, *Against Space*, Tim Ingold argues against the notion of “space” as a useful term to describe the world we live in. He argues that the overuse of this imprecise language comes from a problem of modern thinking that turns “pathways along which life is lived into boundaries within which it is enclosed” (Ingold 2009: 30). He argues, the idea of space as a topic sometimes obscures important research questions and analysis on lived urban
experiences because of a lack of specificity. Therefore, my focus on *mobility* implies a user-centered perspective in a fluid world of practice. This dissertation attempts to focus on what Peter Wynn Kirby calls “human scale movement,” which is often overlooked by social scientists in favor of studying important macro-movements like diaspora, transnational flows and international trade (2009). For Kirby, “movement and change – aggressively regulated, channeled, and even denied in the creation and maintenance of social institutions and the structuration of social relations – are the reviving undercurrent fluctuating through social life. (2009: 1).

The focus on matatus allows for what James Scott describes as using infrastructures as “a vector of control” where state, local and global practices converge through “development” (1998: 2). My research contributes to this emerging research topic through approaching the ideas of suffering and urban social life through concrete terms. By showing how “structural forms of violence flows through material infrastructural forms and social suffering is experienced in material forms” (Rodgers and O’Neill 2012: 402) by drawing on the concept of “structural violence” which makes violence social, not merely an individual experience (Farmer 2004). James Ferguson articulates how this focus on structures is invoking “structure” less as a base and more as a way to engage power inequality, as in Foucault’s “infra-power,” by explaining that work on infrastructural systems is “closer to the domain of engineering with infrastructure set up of (often literally) concrete arrangement that both coexists with and enable or facilitate other such arrangements” (Ferguson 2012: 559). These everyday stories expose an array of struggles and suffering in the mundane functioning of urban life. These ethnographies are important because a “strictly neoliberal view of the world, that can see only individuals linked by markets
and governed by state, cannot identify the processes of structural violence and exclusion” (Ferguson 2012: 559).

As mentioned earlier, stigma can take a toll on the “life chances” of its targets. This means stigmatized people struggle to obtain resources that are salient to their life – housing, medical care, educational opportunities. Take for example the following story from Steve, a key cultural consultant, trusted friend and matatu driver, as he relays one such story of discrimination due to his occupation.

There was a time I remember, that I wanted to rent a house, independent. So I went to the landlady. She told me there’s a room, and it’s going for 2,000. And then…before we finalized the deal, she…she asked me, “what do you do?” “Well, honestly…” Ok, I am honest, I…I didn’t know, it will cost something. I said, “I work in matatus, I’m a matatu driver.” And that was the end of it. Yeah. She told me “there’s no house (personal communication 2010).

Steve learned his lesson after that experience and understood that not all money was created equal and even if he could afford the house, the way he acquired his wealth, was morally tainted.

Steve “Frost” 11

Although Steve may have learned his lesson about saying too much to landlords, he was not resigned to accept the stigma of his job. 12 This is part of the reason why he joined MADCOWA in 2008 when they chose his route, Kilelshwa route #48, as a pilot route (personal communication, 2010). The following excerpt is from one of my earliest conversations with Steve, which we had in a private taxi that Steve was driving because matatus were striking. Steve

11 Steve will always be Steve Frost to me because that is how I entered his name into my phone when we met. I continued to call him that from that point on. He did not mind and found it funny. When I left the field he made a point of giving me a bracelet with the word FROST beaded into the leather strap.

12 For an interesting parallel of discrimination in the United States see John Baugh’s work on linguistic discrimination in the housing market in St. Louis (Baugh 2003).
and I spent almost all day in traffic due to the strike, which prompted many good discussions about the state of urban transportation in Nairobi.

**MF**: MADCOWA?

**Steve**: Of which, in my route #48, I am vice-chairman.

**MF**: Really? (Loudly, surprised)

**Steve**: Uh-huh. You know when you come up with an idea like that—we want to protest, yeah?—and you send it to the other crews...cause we have one thing in common, whatever the experience of the matatu driver on this end, it is the same, same thing, the experience on the other end. Ok, except, not up-country, but in Nairobi we have that one thing in common.

**MF**: Do you have meetings? (For MADCOWA)

**Steve**: Yeah! *(Voice going way up).* We have meetings! We have um, we write minutes and what have you. What we don’t have, cause we just started the other day after...actually we were trying to find a solution to the, in not coming in conflict with the government, collecting views from the stakeholders actually. We can have a bargain you know, we don’t want to be in conflict with...you *(meaning the government)*. We are encouraging our members to have the proper documents and what have you. So *(again, meaning the government)* we need your support. So, where do you see us? Where is the problem with us?

We want a transparent system. The court fines should be harmonized. The highest offense is not around 60,000, 30,000, it should be 5,000. This 5,000, you should be given a ticket, like in your places *(to me)*, you get a tickets. It’s OK if you are given a ticket, you are told to go pay this amount to KRA on whatever day that is. That would be better…but they are not giving us a chance to talk to them, you see?

**MF**: The government?

**Steve**: Yeah, the government. So when you organize such things and you demonstrate, that one becomes illegal demonstration, huh?

**MF**: then there can be violence…

**Steve**: You know, it is a protest…and most of the time protests are...leads to...you know...

**MF**: violence?
Steve: Yeah, Violence. Because you are trying to release the pent up pressure in you, you see?

Steve Langat, a thirty-two year old matatu driver, with a one-year old daughter drove the vehicle “Frost,” which was named by the owner, a refrigerator repairman. On Sundays near the end of my fieldwork, under Steve’s tutelage, I worked as Frost’s conductor on the Kileleshwa route #48. Two weeks after leaving Kenya, a drunk driver, in a Sport Utility Vehicle (SUV), hit Frost head-on, smashing the driver’s side of the vehicle badly. Steve was taken to the closest hospital, a private one near his middle-upper class route, but they rejected treatment for his shattered leg because he could not afford the hospital’s fees. From there, Steve was sent to the public hospital where he waited several hours to be seen. By the time he finally was, it was too late to save his leg and it was amputated. Steve lost his life a few weeks later due to complications of the surgery. The hospital refused to release Steve’s body to his family until after his bill was paid. The bill was over 500,000 KSh ($6,000 USD). Steve’s average monthly salary was 14,000 KSh ($200 USD). The young man who hit Frost that Sunday morning was driving his father’s SUV home from a bar where he had passed out a few hours before. He was uninjured in the crash.
Figure 1.3: The wreckage of Frost, the vehicle Steve was driving when a drunk driver hit him head-on (Photo: Ken Abuje, 2010).

Through tragic stories like Steve’s that are undoubtedly numerous in all sectors of stigmatized work in Kenya and throughout the world, we can “rediscovering the brute materiality that the such infrastructural systems produce” and a more “muscular way of thinking about materiality as forms of exclusion and deprivation” (Ferguson 2012: 559). However, the crucial contribution of using this analytical framework for the case the matatu sector in Kenya is to show how infrastructural violence captures the ways that urban populations, including various elements of society, define their understandings of justice spatially as a “right to the city” (Lefebvre 1991; Harvey 1990). Through these new “structures of responsibility” articulating agents of suffering opens up a “potential space for imagining more positive politics” (Ferguson 2012: 402).
**Spatialized States**

Fredrick Cooper warns scholars of African states against the temptation “of being overly institutional in ones analysis to look for a state (bureaucracy, executive, military, legislature) attempting to rule over and interact with civil society” (2002: 157). Neoliberal governmentality may then prove to be an especially apt concept to apply to the complexities of the state in Africa because there have long been multiple sites of power in social domains, both vertical and horizontal axis of power (lineage systems, peer groups, strict gender roles) (Cooper 2002). In order to capture the elusiveness of the African state implied in Cooper’s warning, this dissertation attempts to locate the elusive and somewhat decentered or unstable state through what Ferguson and Gupta describe as practices of “state spacialization,” and the degrees to which it is “encompassing” or not (2002).

The paradox of the neoliberal state in theory (protecting and promoting private property) and in practice (using state interventions into sectors to increase their own personal odds at succeeding in that sector) results in the state being “spatialized,” as it is simultaneously rolled back to make way for investment and increasingly “encompassing” through what Fredrick Cooper has called the “international imperialism” of powerful non-governmental entities (from the British East Africa Company to the World Bank) (Cooper in Ferguson and Gupta 2002: 992). Another major tension in the neoliberal state theoretically, is that it tends to become authoritarian in the face of social solidarity as it is “forced to intervene, sometimes repressively, thus denying the very freedoms it is supposed to uphold” (Harvey 2005: 69).

Theoretically, neoliberal states should favor strong individual property rights as they depend on the market to solve all social problems (Harvey 2005: 64). However there are major tensions between the neoliberal state in theory and in practice. Major problems include how to
interpret monopoly power (like the benefit of having one provider for power grids) or market failure as in when individuals or groups shed liability (pollution runoff, driver leaving vehicle stranded in the middle of the road after an accident). Another tension is how neoliberal states tend to rely on technological fixes for complex social and structural problems (one example of this was “Smart Bus” in Nairobi that replaced the conductor with a card machine that people could swipe for payment). The last major contradiction in the neoliberal state in theory is that it tends to become authoritarian because in the face of social solidarity “the state is forced to intervene, sometimes repressively, thus denying the very freedoms it is supposed to uphold. In this situation, however, the neoliberal state can marshal one secret weapon: international competition and globalization can be used to discipline movements opposed to the neoliberal agenda within individual states. If that fails, then the state must resort to persuasion, propaganda or when necessary raw force and police power to suppress opposition to neoliberalism” resulting in “the freedom of the masses would be restricted in favor of the few (Harvey 2005: 70).

The neoliberal state in practice, therefore, faces extensive and deeply seated contradictions resulting in structural changes of the political and social landscape. In practice, the neoliberal state is unstable due to factors related to the need to create a good space for investment. The Michuki Rules, which I expand on in chapter 5, illustrate this paradox of Kenya as a neoliberal state because they were highly interventionist government policies that actually benefitted Michuki’s chances for competitive success in the matatu industry.

Governmentality is a term introduced by Michele Foucault to conceptualize all the processes by which a conduct of a population is governed: by institutions and agencies, discourses, norms, identities, and by self-regulation, or “the conduct of conduct” (Dean quoted in Ferguson and Gupta 2002: 989). Foucault, being interested in mechanisms of governing that
cross cut domains of state and non-state institutions, highlights that governmentality is not a strictly “negative relationship to state power, one characterized entirely by discipline and regulation” but more importantly focuses on its productive tendencies (Ferguson and Gupta 2002: 980). Because formulations of governmentality are somewhat anchored in the European nation-state, neoliberal or “transnational governmentality” extends the discussion of governments that are being set up on a global scale. Neoliberal governmentality, then, includes the international restructuring initiatives of the WTO and structural adjustment programs in conjunction with state elites, but also includes the constellations of international aid workers, NGOs and international investors as well as grassroots activists.

A major part of the way that the neoliberal state is “spatially encompassing,” to use Ferguson’s concept, especially in Africa is through the economic regulation of what Janet Roitman calls “fiscal disobedience” (2005). For Roitman, and surely many other scholars around Africa and in other developing countries, being faced with what she calls the paradox of living that was marked by the contradictions of dispossession and wealth creation made an impact on her research questions. She saw that the wealth creators were “those who have ben forced to circulate incessantly for lack of resources are those who have etched out the frontiers of wealth creation” (Roiitman 2005: 14). In her experience the people on the “frontiers of wealth creation,” were the young, mobile men, who had been negotiating the constant fluctuation of wealth and poverty that has characterized most of their lives. These young men lived on the edge, both physically and economically. They were also on the edges of citizenship. They were the traders, the counterfeiters, and the mobile workers who knew many languages, had many passports and traversed borders constantly. Much like matatu operators, mobility affords them economic
freedom in the informal economy, but also makes them targets just out of reach of the spatializing state.

Ferguson and Gupta argue that the ethnography of spatial practices can show how the state is perceived both “vertically” powerful, by creating a sense that it is above other social forms; it is “encompassing” because it seems to be everywhere at any time (2002). In Kenya, the spatialization of the state of sporadic, at times strong and at times almost non-existent. Much of this is directly tied to mobility, and who has access to it. For Ferguson and Gupta, the Indian state was “encompassing” when agents would swoop in on the workers unexpectedly because they had vehicles (2002: 985). In Kenya, it is the matatu operators who have the privilege of mobility in most circumstances. When driving in Kenya it is common to see the police flagging down drivers, pulling them over and then asking for a ride to the police station. Another example is a bit more frightening, when people call the police they often have to have a car in order to go pick the police up in order to get their help. These “spatial” practices of the state then are important in locating just where and through what agents infrastructural violence and responsibility can be located.

However, just because the state rolls back in terms of its formal services it can often come out stronger in different domains such as its dependence on unaccountable global institutions of “development” like the World Bank. The paradox of the neoliberal state in theory (protecting and promoting private property) and in practice (using state interventions into sectors to increase their own personal odds at succeeding in that sector) results in the state being “spatialized,” as it is simultaneously rolled back to make way for investment and increasingly “encompassing” through what Fredrick Cooper has called the “international imperialism” of
powerful non-governmental entities (from the British East Africa Company to the World Bank) (Cooper in Ferguson and Gupta 2002: 992).

As governments attempt to control urban space through planning and development of the built environment, the innovative way people move in and around that space and what they use it for changes in unexpected and potentially subversive ways. The operators of urban transport in Nairobi live at this intersection of movement and change. Part of their job is to create shortcuts and to know alternate routes as to avoid roadblocks and congestion. Often when they lead the way, others follow.\(^\text{13}\) To control human movement is to control human interaction, labor, production, sexual desire, the spread of news and the exchange of language and ideas. Controlling movement and interaction between different groups was a key part of colonial rule in the British Empire in East Africa (Meyers 2003). The historical and social trajectory of transportation policy and the local responses to it, by workers and owners in this industry, has developed alongside cultural, economic and linguistic strategies that keep Kenya’s population moving.

**Social Processes of the Informal Economy**

In 1970, Keith Hart coined the phrase “informal economy” in his analysis of the income of migrant workers in Ghana. Hart initially approached the project by examining the statistics on income and realized that it was impossible for the people he was studying to survive on the income they earned because most were underemployed or unemployed. Eventually he came to realize that the people he was studying accessed income informally, through channels and

\(^\text{13}\) For example, during strikes or times of heavy congestion, private drivers will often watch for what matatus are doing and follow their lead, even if it means breaking some traffic rules (like jumping medians or going the wrong way down streets to re route).
economies invisible to bureaucracy and unregulated by law. For more than thirty years, Hart has been rethinking and problematizing the phrase “informal economy” along with other Africanist scholars (King 1996; Tripp 1997, MacGaffey and Ganga 1987, 1991, 2000). MacGaffey and Ganga use the term “second economy” instead of informal economy but, as with Hart, emphasize the large scale of its influence in daily life for most Congolese people:

In Congo-Kinshasa, the dominance of the second-economy enterprise in housing construction, transportation, and small retailers and service enterprises… the dependence of the cities functions on such enterprises have represented a change in the economic base of the subordinates classes in the last 30 years. (2000: 171)

The most important element of the informal economy is not its existence, nor the particular name it is called, but the social institutions that frame the way it works. A study of the informal economy also adds opportunities to examine processes of corruption, reciprocity, patronage and indebtedness (Shipton 2007; Chabol and Daloz 1999).

The sectors of the informal economy fluctuate and are negotiated materially and symbolically. For some scholars, the informal economy is a site of resistance to the state and a sign of a powerful of civil society (Tripp 1997; MacGaffey and Ganga 2000). For others, the importance lies in the socially imbedded behaviors used by individuals who create and maintain status hierarchies, and the processes of stigmatization and struggle that add to our understanding of the heterogeneity within the informal economy (Lomnitz 1988). For Kenya, the informal economy is an important part of the political economy of relationships, including the sociocultural logics of corruption discussed earlier.

MacGaffey and Ganga were also concerned with the chaos in global economic movements in the face of political and economic structures that retain power and influence (2000: 166). They found that traders utilized resources by way of social networks, like many
members of the informal economy, and they depended on innovative ways of social organization. This social organization often emphasized indebtedness, obligation and reliance over an extended period of time (MacGaffey and Ganga 2000: 13, Shipton 2007; Chabol and Daloz 1999). The global trade networks that their subjects were involved in depended on personal ties based on kinship, ethnicity, nationality, and friendship. These trade networks were “not structured and permanent but are activated when they are needed by individuals” (MacGaffey and Ganga 2000: 12).

In theorizing the state-society relationship, Tripp (1997) casts the informal economy as a signal of non-compliance discussing societal withdraw from the state in response to two functioning political realms: the legitimate realm, which is the primordial public realm based on kinship ties, and the civic public realm and she claims that this realm is illegitimate because it represents the state (1997: 26). Therefore, like Lomnitz, the emphasis was on the way civil society can realize their agency more effectively through functions of the informal economy that undermine the state.

Tripp discussed two types of regulation for informal economies, those that are burdens for the poor and those that are successful and accomplish their intentions (1997: 23). She briefly mentioned the daladala bus wars in Tanzania in the mid-1980s offering this as an example of the regulation that does not work for the majority of people and it exhibits one of the most powerful parts of informal economies -- the citizen’s ability to accumulate capital independent of the state. This case study is important because Tanzania is the Southern neighbor of Kenya, but whereas Tanzania had a socialist post-independence government Kenya was capitalist. By 1983, the state run bus system had become very inefficient and the private, informal buses were on the rise. By 1988 Tanzanian buses were dwindling and legal buses
struggled more than illegal (unregistered) ones (Tripp 1997: 161). These regulations were an effort by the state to get a cut of transport profit in the form of taxes from this sector, as was the case in Kenya in 2004. But, by 1991, unregistered taxis, the Tanzanian daladala, ruled the roadways, like matatus rule Kenya’s roadways now.

It often seems like there are matatus everywhere, lining the streets, passing one another and honking while young men hang out of the door and call for passengers over booming music. But, in reality, out of the 550,000 vehicles on Nairobi roads only 15,000 are matatus (Klopp 2011: 3). However, studies from the past three decades show that, in fact, matatus are responsible for 15% fewer accidents than are private cars (Chitere and Kibua 2004; Kahyesi 1997). Additionally, private automobile ownership is on the rise, and now nearly 20% of the households in Nairobi own at least one private automobile (Salon and Gulyani 2010: 642). This increase in private cars and new drivers results in more accidents than are due to matatus (Salon and Gulyani 2010: 642), and when coupled with the unique nature of Nairobi’s inefficient post-colonial topography, bears primary responsibility for the infamous traffic jams as well. Even though matatu crews provide a crucial service for the people of Nairobi and do not cause as many accidents as private vehicles, Matatu operators are still vilified by the government, media and general commuting public.

However, through this struggle, transport operators in Nairobi develop bonds with other members of their group. The relationship crewmembers have with other crewmembers includes both cooperation and conflict. There are elements of healthy competition, masculine showboating and convivial chatter as well as deeper bonds built through the danger of the job.

14 Lee claims that matatus cause nearly 95% of the accidents in Kenya in 1990 (quoted in Mutongi 2006: 550), but more recent studies show that matatus, in Nairobi especially, have been causing less accidents as private car ownership is on the rise (Salon and Gulyani 2010).
itself. Goffman emphasizes how “persons who have a particular stigma tend to have similar
learning experiences regarding their plight, and similar changes in the conception of self – a
similar moral career that is both cause and effect of commitment to a similar sequence of
personal adjustments” (1963b: 32).

**Sheng: Transforming Public and Private Space**

Solidarity is a common concept one finds in the logics that undergird both corruption practices
and the entire informal economy in general (Lomnitz 1998; Tripp 1997). The last crucial piece to
understanding how solidarity is built in the matatu sector is through the linguistic practice called
Sheng. Sheng is an urban dialect; some call it an urban youth language that uses a Swahili
grammatical base with a variety of loan words from English and many of Kenya’s multiple
ethnic languages.¹⁵ Sheng is spoken all over Nairobi but matatu crews are known to create and
disseminate much of the new phrases and words (Samper 2002, 2004). Sometimes operators use
what is called “deep Sheng,” which is a collection of code words that only a small number of
people know (Samper 2004). For example, a driver and conductor may develop their own deep
Sheng that no one else understands. Deep Sheng is often used to talk about pretty female without
their knowledge. However, another important function of deep Sheng for matatu operators is a
protective one, so that gang members and police do not understand them. The safety in Sheng
that matatu crews’ share is a marker of the bonds they build through experiencing the daily life
of risk, danger, solidarity and new space of possible politics in their worlds.

¹⁵ There is a healthy debate around what category of language Sheng falls under: pidgin, dialect,
slang, which is beyond the scope of this paper but for more about this interesting debate (see
Abdulaziz and Osinde 1997, Githiora 2002, Githinji 2006). For my purposes here I will be using
the definition of Sheng that David Samper (2002) puts forth.
Scholars show that Sheng, *Engsh*, and other urban youth languages, are important methods of using stigma, or a stigmatized identity, to build solidarity (Githinji 2006; Githiora 2002) through a process by which, “youth build deviant vocabulary on top of existing codes” (Kiessling and Mousse 2004: 303). In Nairobi Sheng and its opposite, Engsh, are both well documented (Abdulaziz and Osinde 1997); Sheng, spoken in the Eastlands part of Nairobi and incorporating more Swahili than English, and Engsh, a response to Sheng, is spoken by young people living in the Westlands of Kenya. Sheng and Engsh have been shown to promote “covert prestige” among speakers who use the language to exclude others from understanding (Kiessling and Mous 2004: 303).

However, importantly, Sheng does not only exclude, it also is inclusive because urban youth languages borrow from all ethnic languages available which allows for inter-ethnic associations, or what some scholars call an inter-ethnic bridge (Kiessling and Mous 2004: 331). Like Janet Roitman’s, fiscal deviants traversing across borders and thus allowing for an interregional subjectivity to emerge, the urban nature of Sheng opens a simultaneously public and private space to express new urban issues in new urban words. These urban youth languages, like Sheng and Engsh, are international, global and local all at once, incorporating words from all over the world brought to people’s lips courtesy of global popular culture. Scholars understand youth languages to be a response to the postcolonial situation, but some linguistic forms, Sheng included, emerged well before independence in the 1940s (Nzuga, personal communication, 2009). Another way to think about the integration of the local and the global in Sheng is to think African youth languages as “an identity creating reaction *towards* globalization (Kiessler and Mous 2004: 332, emphasis in original).
Nairobi Sheng, which is most abundantly produced, used and disseminated through matatus, is an important way that matatu operators build solidarity, not only amongst each other but also broadly across the large and growing population of youth. Sheng, and the many other urban youth languages in Africa, can be “viewed as an emergent, noninstitutionalized project that is on the brink of establishing new identities” (Kiessler and Mous 2004: 335). These languages are just markers of a larger movement towards urban cosmopolitanisms, which are characterized by enormous technological changes and dynamic forms of urban progressiveness.

**Roadmap to the text**

After a discussion of my research methods in chapter 2, chapters 3 and 4 consider the historical context of transportation in Kenya. Chapter 3 discusses the ways that the colonial government and European settlers attempted, and failed, to control movement through transport policy in much the same way that the Kenyan government did in 2004 (Chapter 5). Inequality was continually built into the urban environment of colonial Nairobi, and the transportation sector was a site of struggle. The colonial institutions meant to control the mobility, and therefore interaction of its subjects, gave rise to pirate taxis, the precursors of matatus, as an unexpected, but rational response to colonial inefficiency. This chapter also begins to trace the origins of occupational stigma as it was formulated in the radical politics of colonial Nairobi, and also aims to discuss the ways that the interior space of public transportation vehicles become “stages” for public performances of emergent urban identities.

Chapter 4 picks up chronologically at independence and the transfer of power in the early 1960s, and ends with the rise of neoliberal economic policies that ravaged Kenya, and other African countries throughout the 1980s, bringing about the informal or secondary
economy. By the 1970s the informal economy was providing over half of the “work” for the African population. It is in this informal environment where matatus thrive and the codes of matatu employment (corruption, traffic rule breaking, overloading) become integrated, embedded and accepted into the sector. In this chapter I characterize Nairobi as an environment of risk, both physically and economically. I also continue the theme of how the matatu vehicle is an important space for the expression of ideas, by focusing on the role they played during Moi’s oppressive regime in the late 1980s and 1990s. The chapter ends with a discussion of how the risky environment of informality breeds multiple risk management strategies, like visibility practices, which ensure higher profits and easier movement throughout the city, while using the exterior space of the matatu as a way to express ideas freely, openly and in a meaningful way for the owners of the vehicles, who design them.

Chapter 5 focuses on how powerful political actors and wealthy business interests use Kenya’s transportation policies (seatbelts, uniforms and the franchise model) to consolidate profits into their own hands, restrict access to urban space and reproduce matatu stigma. Showing how develop narratives touted by the World Bank perpetually undermine existent systems in order to promote their own policies, which act as agents of ‘development’ and neoliberal governementality by offering technological solutions to social, historical and political problems.

Chapter 6 shows how everyday corruption practices are embedded in Kenyan daily life and legitimated through the matatu sector, and why this promotes and perpetuates the culture of blaming and scapegoating experienced by Nairobi’s informal transportation workforce. I take corruption on in this chapter as a “complex” of practices that includes both major and minor corruption, and everything in between. I use several sociocultural logics to frame the different
social processes that keep corruption embedded in daily life such as, negotiation, redistributive accumulation, predatory authority and the over-monetarization of personal relationships. However, I then use the logics of shame and solidarity to offer a possible alternative to the grim predictions of unending corruption in Africa.

The last two chapters then, sketch out these possible alternatives and why they provide an important new way to understand the way that occupational stigma can result in solidarity and self-esteem through daily work practices. The stigma itself becomes a productive force in the daily lives of young urban Kenyans, especially when it comes to popular culture and creative linguistic forms that reflect a globalized world. This stigma can not only produce “stages” for new urban performances to be played out, but it can also provide a solidarity that can, and already has given rise to what James Ferguson calls “spaces for positive politics” (2012). Chapter 7 discusses how the interior space of the matatu is an important space for the emergence, performance, production and consumption of new urban subjectivities and identities. It also explains how the transformation of public space to private space through the linguistic practices of the urban youth language sheng is a active generator for interethnic bridges and an open and tolerant community, while simultaneously experiencing widespread marginalization. Chapter 8 discusses the formation of new associations and interest groups in the matatu sector, which are articulating the emergent positive politics Ferguson contemplates. In the face of constant stigmatization and are actually using their outsider status for political and sometimes personal gain. Importantly for Kenya, some of these social groups are extremely inclusive, welcoming all genders, ethnicities, ages, nationalities and races.\textsuperscript{16}

\textsuperscript{16} By the end of my fieldwork, I was accepted into Kileleshwa route #48 MADCOWA association due to my friendship with the Steve Frost, the association chairman. In addition to my (part-time) employment and (full-time) hanging around with matatu workers, my presence
CHAPTER 2: METHODS ON THE MOVE

“Sometimes they kind of like, talk bad about a girl doing it [joyriding]... its like not doing anything, its more like jobless, you’re jobless... they kind of take a bad picture of this. Like she should be doing something important with her life other than going round, round, round, round with the car” (Maryam, 2008: Nairobi).

Joyriding

The fact that I could travel to and from Kenya with relative ease was not lost on my friends and interviewees. What made this even more confusing and frustrating to many is invoked in Maryam’s quote above. Perhaps, in the earliest phases of my research, the most accurate emic description of my experience of the matatu sector was as a “joyrider.” A joyrider is a young, usually upper-middle class student, male or female, who rides Nairobi’s urban transportation system as a leisure or recreational activity. Many people expected to see me, a white woman, taking a private taxi, a safari bus or driving my own 4-wheel drive, off-road vehicle -- common modes of transportation for tourists, ex-pats and researchers in Nairobi. When I told people that I had come all the way from the United States to study the matatu sector they often laughed in my face, asking me if there were not more important issues that could benefit from such well-funded research. Often, but not always, when I mentioned that the matatu sector was the largest employer of youth in the country and carried nearly 80% of the population daily, they would stop laughing, give me a grave look, and ask me how I thought they could improve their terrible transport sector. They were most always troubled by their shoddy system and wanted me to give

seemed to exemplify, for some, the tolerance of the community. Steve informed me later that in his speech he said that matatu work is open to everyone and anyone, from any ethnic group because “we even have a white lady from the states working in the sector” (personal communication, 2013).

17 A joyrider can also be someone who pays extra money to ride around in the vehicle chewing mirrah. This practice is called “chew and chill” and usually costs around 500 KsH ($7 USD). Other joyriders ride free of charge. For this dissertation the idea of joyriding will simply refer to using the vehicle as a leisure activity that may, or may not cost the passenger more, or less, money.
them my best advice. Often, the only thing I could think to say was that the answer for Nairobi’s transportation problems could be found in matatus, not doing away with them. With that they usually clicked their tongue (a common sound to signal annoyance) and walked away.

Participants

I used interdisciplinary methods to gather data from people working and using the matatu sector to answer my questions concerning the relationships of people to space, movement and how specific environments facilitate unique forms of interaction. In order to answer these questions I conducted ethnographic and archival research in various fields (matatu vehicles, stages, bus stops), settings (garages, workshops, homes, bars, restaurants, clubs, kiosks) and document repositories in both official (Kenya National Archives, British National Archives, British Library) and unofficial collections (Stagecoach business archives, Malcolm Chase’s personal collection).

I conducted one hundred and seventy-three semi-structured interviews with participants that lasted from one to three hours. The participants varied due to the large and diverse make-up of the working population. The specific breakdown of participants in interviews is as follows: thirty-seven conductors, thirty-two drivers and thirty-five owners. The remaining sixty-nine interviews are with a variety of other workers including eleven touts, seven graphic designers, six route or stage managers, three trustees, six clerical workers for matatu organizations, two Disc Jockeys, four self identified ‘hustlers,’ and one police officer. I interview twenty-nine passengers including professionals, students, informal workers, joyriders, prostitutes and foreigners.
One of the key aspects of my work is the ethnographic data I have collected on owners, a notoriously elusive group. For Matteo Rizzo (2002) and others, meeting with the owners of these informal transportation systems proves difficult for a variety of reasons, including stigmatization, danger and fear (Mutongi 2006). I met with many owners, allowing me an important insight into the relationships between these two groups: the informal transport worker and their bosses in the informal sector, the vehicle owner. This tense relationship complicates understandings of the way generational tension plays into the informal economy.

It is important to note here that I was never successful having a research assistant but the reasons surrounding the experiences are telling. At various points of my research, 2008, 2009 and 2010, I hired a research assistant to help me gain entrance to the sector and to help translate Sheng and Kikuyu during interviews. However, before long a problem crept up in each case, the matatu workers did not want to talk to the Kenyan researchers because they assumed that they were looking down on them. All three of these assistants were men, which had a major effect on the type of people I met and talked to and how they talked to my Kenyan research assistants and I. For example, when addressing me, many operators would say that they felt comfortable telling me how things worked because I was not going to start a matatu in Kenya and I was not going to look down on them. Many informants assumed my three male research assistants (educated, holding papers and asking questions in collusion with a white woman) seemed to attract a more macho and aggressive crowd. I was glad to have their opinions as well, but over the fieldwork a few important key informants who were very different from the representations of matatu operators, were the ones I kept returning to. Additionally, other people were scared of the matatu operators and owners that I was friendly with, which limited my ability to recruit female research assistants. Due to this I had to get creative with my methodology.
Although I did not have success in finding a research assistant I was lucky to have a balanced and faithful group of key informants and friends. These were people in various levels and positions in the matatu industry with whom I spoke at length over a period of months, or years, and whom I eventually became close with. Much of my nuanced understanding of things comes from the many short conversations that I shared with these various people. Many of these people will appear and reappear throughout the dissertation. However, one group of participants must be expanded upon here – the members the Matatu Drivers and Conductors Welfare Association (MADCOWA) of Kileleshwa route #48. The focus group I held with several MADCOWA members in June 2010, near the end of my fieldwork, and their transcribed conversation that appears here, weaves this dissertation together at crucial junctures, and articulates some of the most complicated elements of the sector with humor and clarity. At the same time, it shows how the members of the sector disagree on topics and how they reinforce their own workplace ideologies and cultural logics.

The members of this focus group will be described here because it is important to know what is behind their comments as you move through the text. For example, there are two Georges, who could not be more different – George, a driver, in his late forties, who was on the national MADCOWA executive board at the time of my fieldwork, while Rasta George, a conductor who is called that by everyone because he has long dreadlocks and loves reggae music, was twenty-five at the time of this conversation. Their comments are suffused with these details, as the reader may come to realize. The other participants were: Gladys, a young woman in her mid-twenties who had been working in the sector for about two years; Wilson, a thirty year old male, who had a good sense of humor but also a rough temper at times; James, a
conductor who was in his twenties and extremely critical of the government; and Finally, Steve Frost. 18

As different as this group of people seems, they were all members of MADCOWA and they all worked on route #48, the route that I also worked on briefly. In short, these were my coworkers with whom I spoke often, and this conversation is just one example of many other unrecorded and untranscribed hours of stimulating, funny, well informed, passionate discussions we often had in the mini-vans as they were parked at the stages, waiting to be filled up.

There were an additional seventy-five survey participants that responded to a short questionnaire and then participated in a short discussion of approximately fifteen to twenty minutes long. These surveys were administered in the introductory phases of fieldwork when I was gaining entry to a new route. It would typically entail going to different matatu stages or terminals at 10am to 3pm, between the morning and the evening rush hours, with a newspaper and some questionnaires. I sat at the terminal and read the paper and inevitably someone would ask me where I was going, assuming I was lost or did not understand how the system worked. I would answer in Swahili that I was studying matatu workers and had a questionnaire I would like to get answered. Maybe they could help me? Before long, there was a group of people hovering around, some taking questionnaires and going off to fill them out on their own, and some talking to me while filling them out, while others had me fill them out for them. (This was one of the parts where having a research assistant was helpful, especially when my Swahili was limited.)

18 I know this about Wilson because I witnessed it first hand. At an earlier point in my fieldwork I had gotten into a verbal argument with him before meeting Steve and working on route #48. He told me that he would not drop me off at the museum that day, but he only told me this after I had gotten in the vehicle. Annoyed, I refused to pay him the full fare, resulting in him kicking me out of the vehicle. Later, when I recognized him while talking with Steve, he was told who I was and he offered me an apology, later becoming one of my closest friends on the route.
The questionnaires were short and translated in simple Swahili asking for name, age, the name and route number of the matatu one works on, years employed in the industry, level of education and home neighborhood. It also included variations on questions about the positive and negative aspects of the industry and had a place to sign informed consent and provide a phone number if one was interested.

**Matatus in everyday life**

In addition to these participants I had countless informal and unstructured conversations with people about matatus while on and off the vehicle. It is impossible to report exactly how many numbers of matatu rides I took in the six years that I researched this project, but a conservative estimate would be at least six hundred; that would be two matatu rides a day for the nearly three years that I lived there. I collected hundreds of documents from newspapers, business, personal and government archives as well as two trade magazines devoted to the matatu sector: *Matatu Today* and *Matatu News*.

The cultural, historical and ethnographic data is voluminous, but the writing and analysis are sparse. The sector’s sheer size and scale presents substantial ethnographic challenges. My spirit was nearly crushed on a number of occasions as I contemplated rendering this massive system, cultural, economic, spatial, historical, and dangerous, in all of its glory. One way that I attempted to meet these challenges and to understand the complexity was through conducting go-along ethnography, a mixed method of walking or riding with an informant as they tell you what the landscape means to them (Kusenbach 2003; Carpiano 2007). Using this method, along with other spatial data, was an important part of getting at the meaning of landmarks, spaces, districts and movement throughout Nairobi diverse urban environment.
I have thought of these neighborhood differences in terms of matatus as a route identity, meaning that each route is associated to an area of town which includes a cluster of neighborhoods all with varied dialects, practices, codes, cultures, ethnic biases, class biases, networks and, therefore, reputation or identity. Some of this identity is rooted in the earliest urban settlements in Nairobi when Africans were still officially restricted from settlement in the city limits. Much of the Eastlands, for example, were informal settlements that were built and demolished time and again during the early colonial era starting around 1910 and reaching a devastating apex during the 1950s when the large Kikuyu population in Nairobi were detained.

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19 This is my own terminology. None of my informants ever mentioned a “route identity” but agreed with me when I suggested there was one. Also, I understand the complications in the usefulness of the term “identity” is limited analytically at times (see Brubaker and Cooper 2000), this term for the stylization of each route combined with the reputation it carried seems to best be captured by this phrase.
and abused at the hands of British colonial officers as well as the African loyalist during the civil war known as Mau Mau.

I also saw how different routes had different practices and some were more dangerous than others. For example, I was sitting in the back corner seat of a fourteen-seater matatu next to a slightly open window when I heard some mumbling and then, “…huyu mlami, Jo” from outside the window. My ears perked up because that is Sheng for “…that white person, man.” I instinctively tightened my purse around my wrist when a hand reached through the window with force and grabbed firmly for my handbag, which he had obviously seen sitting in my lap and was commenting on when I overheard him. We had a brief tug of war, and then the hand disappeared back into the night. This happened at the stage for the South B neighborhood. I was always more careful at that stage after that incident and saw that as one of the ways that routes are known for different levels of insecurity and, therefore experience different levels of negative repute.

Like any other resident of Nairobi the first thing I had to learn when moving to a new area was how the matatu system worked. Where were the closest stops and how long were the trips to town? All this had to be learned with every new neighborhood (below, is just a few graphic representations of the complexity of the matatu system. But in reality there are no maps or guides to the matatu system. It is just something people know.
Figure 2.2: This is a representation of the matatu system in Nairobi (source: Standard Media Group).

Figure 2.3: A representation of the Southern and Western Suburbs (source: Standard Media Group).
Embodied Ethnography and Mobile Methods

My residence in these various neighborhoods was an important element for my understanding of the spatial vocabulary used in Nairobi, both linguistically and phenomenologically. By living and traveling in and out of these neighborhoods I learned how people physically made the world by moving through it (Buscher and Urry 2009). I was not only observing people’s movements, but also moving with them and sharing embodied practices and the intimate space of these vehicles on a daily basis. I am not claiming that I know the inside and out of every neighborhood I visited, but I do know how to move inside and out of all of these neighborhoods, which proved important for my understanding of Nairobi as an integrated whole, made up of unique parts.

An important marker of neighborhood and route identity is marked linguistically. In Nairobi there are various lexicons of Sheng, the urban dialect of Swahili in Nairobi, depending in which neighborhood one resides. Often, those outside of the neighborhood do not understand the neighborhood dialects. Sometimes the slight lilt in the way someone is speaking will code them from Buru Buru or from Westlands.20 (Githinji 2006; Abdulaziz and Osinde 1997; Samper 2002). Sheng combines Swahili grammar and loan words from English and Kenya’s ethnic languages like Kikuyu and Luhya, It is also well documented that matatu workers are key disseminators of the neologisms of the dialect. The movement of the workers through the many neighborhoods of Nairobi while talking and listening to people all day results in the spread of new words and phrases picked up throughout the city and spread throughout the commuting public (Samper 2002). There are three main characteristics of Sheng that are important to the dissertation: first, it is ephemeral and always changing; second, it is associated with Nairobi

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20 These two neighborhoods are known in Nairobi to use more English in their Sheng, thus marking higher levels of education and a more middle-class population consisting of professionals that use English in their everyday lives (Abdulaziz and Osinde 1997).
youth, although each generation of Nairobi residents has their own sheng; and lastly, matatus are key disseminators and creators of Sheng neologisms (Samper 2002; Githiora 2002; Kiessling and Mous 2004).

For these reasons, there are limits to my data and analysis because of the way that matatu workers speak. In 2005 and 2006, for hundreds I studied Swahili sanifu, or proper Swahili, on the coast of Kenya. This works well at Embassy functions and museum events, but on the streets of Nairobi, speakers, especially matatu operators, use extremely advanced codes. Also, I soon realized as I started to work around the matatu sector that much of what was spoken was Kikuyu, or Kikuyu inspired Sheng. I started to learn some Kikuyu phrases important to the matatu sector such as tiga wana, meaning, leave that child’s play, which is something one operator yells at another driver (matatu or private vehicle) when they do something foolish. Therefore, it did prove difficult to pick up some of the constant banter because of the way that they would slip in and out of Kikuyu, Swahili, Sheng English and other languages.

**Mapping Movement**

My use of the term mapping is multi-dimensional. It is about the power dynamics and inequalities that are reflected in the mapping process, which are linked to the built environment and urban planning. Therefore, mapping in this dissertation, is not simply an objective, Cartesian rendering of space, but about the use of space and how people constantly make it, remake it and contest it. One way that I attempted to get at the ways people understand and render their own mobility was through “cognitive mapping” (see Kirby and Figure 6). The ways that operators know each element of their route, every pothole and every turn, is because of the nature of driving in Nairobi; it is never the same from one day, or route, to the next. The hand drawn maps
below represent a small sample of what Kevin Lynch might call the operators’ maps of “wayfinding,” meaning “a consistent use and organization of definite sensory cues from the external environment“ (1960).

![Diagram of a cognitive map](source)

**Figure 2.4: An example of a cognitive map, by a driver from route #44**

*Source: Christopher*

The cognitive maps that operators drew highlight the important parts of their routes. Admittedly, there are issues with this method as some people are more talented and comfortable with artistic forms. Also, many were in a hurry, trying to finish before their vehicle filled. But some elements of the city and their daily life can be gleaned from the renderings. One of the first glaring elements drawn is Muthurwa Market Stage, where the buses all stop.
The next “map” has an interesting graphic design of a matatu drawn for me. Globe cinema is represented as the central point of many roads but its obvious that they organize their route through the roundabouts.
Cognitive maps can also be important for what is not there or what is in the forefront of the mapper’s mind. In Figure 8, the vehicle itself gets ample time towards its representation, alluding to the importance of the vehicle itself as well as the space of the city streets.
The go-along method was another way that I collected spatial data from matatu operators. As Margarethe Kusenbach explains, go-alongs, or in my case ride-alongs, are a unique method because one can “combine participant observation and interviewing…in order to access some of the transcendental and reflexive aspects of lived experience in situ” (2003: 456, italics in original). This was how I spent much of my time with key informants, as they were often at work. I rode with them in their vehicles asking them about the route and they would point out landmarks that they were interested in remembering, often telling me a story about what happened here or there. Many of these stories were to point out violent or risky interactions with police, hikackers, jambazi (thugs), walevi (drunks), Mungiki members or just ‘mad’ customers.21

Kusenbach describes several levels of perception that are made visible through these mobile methods. She identifies five different arenas where go-alongs provide unique and privileged access: 1) perception and perceptive filters that guide experiences, 2) spatial practices and the various degrees of engagement with the environment people have or do not have, 3) biographies that are constructed while moving through physical space and accessing associations while doing it, 4) social architecture and the mosaics of hierarchies that may or may not be mentioned specifically in interviews and, 5) social realms and naturally occurring patterned and variations of social encounters (2003: 468-76). In my experience, numbers four and five were best explored using this method because when I attempted to ask people about their use of

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21 ‘Mad’ in Kenya means a person with mental illness who might get very erratic or out of control in the vehicle. This differs from another problematic character featured in matatu operator’s stories. Drunken people are often the most irritating and potentially dangerous passengers to have as customers. (See Rebekah Lee 2011) for work on double deaths, or road deaths that occur on the way to funerals when the mourning family is drunk and causes accidents, which include all of the people in the vehicle they rented for the occasion (the driver is usually killed as well).
“urban space” I often received blank stares. These terms were not emic terms, therefore many of the discussions I had with operators were not about space per se, but how they use it.

From Joyrider to Conductor: death, risk and informal work

Trust is not “just a state of mind, or a once and for all accepted dependability, but an ongoing practical achievement” (Buscher and Urry 2009: 99). Trust is built over time when people observe repeatedly, and probe behavior in different situations. Every move people make is an account for their actions. This is especially true in the matatu industry.

Working as a conductor on a matatu in Nairobi happened very naturally, although it was an unplanned event. It proved to be a crucial part of my empathic transformation as an anthropologist in the urban environment. I had an important realization early in my first shift. It was that I saw everyone as a customer. My inexperience was obvious to many because I did things such as ask people, who were clearly not going to town, if they wanted a ride. I called beba, beba (carry, carry) to everyone, but after a few trips, Steve pointed out some specific things I needed to pay attention to. The first thing I should watch for --shoes. Just this cut down on quite a few mistaken passengers, but he alerted me their handbags and the way they walked, with or without a purpose. Steve knew people on his route and he knew, at least a little bit about their schedules.

Additionally, I finally understood how difficult the actual work was, especially for someone who may not be good at math or thinking on his or her feet. It was hard to hold money and count change for twelve people on a constantly rotating basis while opening and closing the
door, making jokes with people, watching out for cops and listening to the driver. After the first trips I got used to all the people laughing at Steve and I, and we seemed to drive around endlessly picking people up on the way to town and dropping them off comfortably and easily. On a Sunday shift we each made about 250 KSh to 500 KSh ($3 to $6 USD) and we would buy lunch at a small kiosk for 20 KSh, buy the Sunday paper for 40 KSh, and then sit and talk while waiting for our turn at the stage. It was important to me to trust, and be trusted, by the operators in order to work with them, especially Steve. We built a good rapport and we were good friends.

Steve’s death was the tragic denouement of my fieldwork. In August 2010, I had a going away party with my researcher colleagues, mostly white and American or European. We had each invited people that were important to our research. Several friends invited Kenyan film crews who had collaborated on documentaries, local politicians that they had befriended and other Kenyan research collaborators from the National Museums of Kenya or University of Nairobi. My colleagues were working in informal settlements or slums, like Kibera and Mathare, with entrepreneurs and local community leaders, but they did not invite their research participants. Because their focus was on poverty they did not want to seem like they were showing off to their informants or put our host at risk for anything unexpected as well. Steve was my guest of honor. People asked before the party if I would be bringing a bunch of matatu guys, alluding to their bad reputations. When I answered that I would be inviting Steve over they seemed nervous. However, he was the life of the party making it a point to talk to nearly everyone and he was extremely well liked. I use this story because although I realize that Steve was extremely kind, likable, genuine and sincerely good person, he was killed because of the sector’s reputation and stigma, which is increasingly used to maintain political discussions about

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22 It felt a lot like waitressing, having to deal with every type of person while not letting anyone rip you off.
movement and control of urban space. But it is not just Steve. Research on matatus in Kenya show that when matatus get into accidents they are almost always fatal to the driver (Muyia 1995).

In Steve’s case, he was not killed in the accident and even his crushed leg could have been saved if he was admitted at the first hospital he went to, the private one that turned him away. The stigma from his work and uniform helped kill him. When the hospital staff saw that he was a matatu driver, although his leg was crushed and he was no doubt in an extreme amount of pain, knowing that he could not pay and perhaps even assuming it was his fault, they sent him away. This cost him his leg, which cost him his life. This is the type of effect that stigma has (Goffman 1963b; Link and Phelan 2001). The stigmatized do indeed see a decrease in life chances and in order to fully understand why this stigma surrounded the matatu sector; I had to look at the colonial archives that told the story of how the matatus came to be and why they were hated in this way.

**Archival Research and Social History**

I have attempted to look at matatus as an alternative urban archive with which to engage some classic questions about the nature of empire in order to get further insight into the current issues plaguing post-colonial cities. In order to break out of a presentist perspective on my data I decided to spend significant amounts of time in the Kenyan National Archives (KNA) located in Nairobi. I researched the KBS monopoly and looked at folders filled with complaints about the service. The complaints themselves prove to be an interesting commentary on colonial Kenya. The one class, one fare rule, a by-law passed in 1956 that ended the separation of races on KBS. The reaction to this by-law and the way that the scenes on the bus are described offer a diverse
glimpse into Kenya’s past. I used primary documents from the colonial administration to inform my interviews and to contextualize what I was hearing in the stories I was told. Social historians embrace looking outside the archive folders, in places like restaurants or buses, and the people populating them is where one finds living stories of belonging and surviving reflected in the past. By using a combination of methodologies and questions I hope to give an initial study of the sector the rigorous examination it deserves.

I was told that if researching matatu was easy than it would have been done by now. Kenyan historians and other scholars often make mention of transportation and its role in society but only in passing. There are very few book-length studies on transportation in general, neither in Kenya nor Africa more broadly.\(^\text{23}\) I think this is partly due to the lack of importance given to bus services and the endless, seemingly meaningless paper trail it creates, through tickets and timetables. However, as transportation becomes more of an issue in the daily life of any urban resident, the historical antecedents of the systems in place today, especially the unplanned ones like matatus, become key places to look at the construction of identities in society.

For example, a group of European, settler women calling themselves "The Housewives," took it upon themselves to represent European commuter interests to KBS management. Armed with their own stationary, they wrote several letters complaining about the state of the bus and the actions of the Africans that were riding alongside, driving or collecting fares. In order to get a better sense of the practices of legibility that were used by the colonial administration in Kenya when it came to transportation I collected maps from the survey department in Kenya from 1905 to the present. In the Department of Scientific and Industrial Research (DSIR) records I also

\(^{23}\) For a rare exception see striking Chalcraft’s book on transportation and craft guilds in Egypt, 1863 – 1914 (2005).
found that the British Empire took careful consideration of several of its colonies transport systems worked.

Figure 2: This small notecard with the contact information for the Housewives was stuck in the files between complaint letters from 1956 (source: Kenyan National Archive).

During my time in the United Kingdom, I visited the British National Archives at Kew, formerly known as the Public Records Office (PRO) and I also traveled to Scotland to meet with the Stagecoach Company and look at their business archives. I had contacted several bus enthusiasts in the area who had their own private archives, and I had the privilege of meeting one such enthusiast and visiting his personal archive.

Malcolm Chase was stationed in Nairobi, Kenya for a number of years between 1970 and 1989. He has written several articles on the role of United Transport (the owner of KBS in Kenya and of Stagecoach in London, as well as a variety of other holdings throughout the empire during the early twentieth century). I was invited to Mr. Chase’s home to see his KBS archival room, which his wife had built for him for his retirement three years previous to my visit in 2011. He had been collecting everything he could on KBS and the buses they used. His interest was more
on the actual vehicle pictures of buses in Kenya and other African countries he had visited. He had also traded with friends and other enthusiasts and almost unbeknownst to him had one of the most complete and intact archives of colonial transport history in the world. His wife was deeply amused at my interest in his “little bus collection hobby” (personal communication, 2011). However, I barely had time to scratch the surface of his archive, it promises to hold some interesting surprises in what seems like an eccentric hobby.

The figure below is one example of the possible datum that can be salvaged from these private collections.

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Figure 3: An interesting rendering of Nairobi’s fare zones from a KBS flyer in 1982 (source: Malcom Chase personal archives).

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Conclusion

The challenges of studying people’s experiences of “space” and the matatu sector were too many to name. But a few do need to be mentioned. The idea of “space” was often too abstract for many people (in Kenya or the US) to understand and articulate in the way that would be helpful for this project. Therefore I tried to see how people used space physically, how they performed in it and also how they talked around it without directly expressing the abstract terms I was looking for.

The second challenge of the study is that the focus on mobility and urban transportation is the sheer number of participants. Nearly every member of society, operator, owner, passenger had intense feelings about matatus, but perhaps the most intense opinions, usually negative came from people who never even ride matatus, private vehicle owners. These people had no shortage of disparaging things to say about the sector and its owners, operator’s and users. Therefore, the massive size of the system was only secondarily massive when compared to the number of people who had an “expert” opinion about transportation.
CHAPTER 3: MONOPOLIES OF MOVEMENT

The word for a person of European descent in Swahili, mzungu, connotes movement. Mzungu comes from the verb, kuzunguka, to move around; therefore, an mzungu is one who moves around. Race is connected to movement and access to mobility because early colonial administrators depended on roads and motor vehicles in an attempt to spread their will over a subject population. Colonial officials used African labor to build roads for their purposes. The irony of this inequality is captured in a reference to a colonial administrator by a road laborer in colonial Tanzania, “He made us work long hours on the roads, and he was the only one who had a motorcar” (Gewald et al. 2009: 5).

The link between race and mobility is even stronger in the Sheng version of the word for European, mlami, which comes from lami, the black tarmac that covers main roads. The urban dialect emerged in Nairobi as early as the 1940s, although it is often seen strictly as a “youth” language, it should be more broadly understood as a coded language that facilitates exclusion and engenders privacy between speakers (Mutonya 2007, Mutonya and Parsons 2004). Paul Nzuga, a language professor, a United Nations translator and the author of a Sheng dictionary, explained that the word mlami is an older Sheng word that is brilliantly coded for exclusion because even if one knew Swahili, and knew that lami meant road (connoting movement), as many of the colonial officers and European settlers did, it would still be an obtuse connection because the tarmac is black. As an mlami, I still enjoyed unequal privileges of mobility to move in and out of Nairobi in a way that many of the people I knew in Kenya could not.

24 Personal Communication, Paul Nzuga, November 2009. Prof. Nguza compared the writing of the Sheng dictionary with “drawing a cloud” because Sheng changes so quickly that it defies definition.
The lack of literature on the subject of colonial or contemporary mobility in the humanities and the social sciences gives the impression that matatus, and transportation services in general, are a self-evident process of going from point A to point B, which does not require, or deserve, scholarly attention, especially from non-engineers like anthropologists or historians. But, research shows, “The introduction of motor cars is one of the most important factors of change on the African continent in the twentieth century” (Gewald et al. 2009: 5). One sociolinguistic practice that emerged in my fieldwork while conducting oral history interviews corroborates this assertion; many of the older drivers in the matatu sector, instead of recalling the year an event happened, referred to the codes on the number plates of newly registered vehicles coming into the country at that time. In other words, they used the vehicle number plates to chart the passage of time.

The Transport Licensing Board (TLB) in Kenya assigns number plates to vehicles when they are initially registered in Kenya, starting in the early 1930s, with plates numbered KAA 000 and moving through all the letter and number combinations until they reach KZZ 999. At the end of my fieldwork, in 2010, the newest cars were registered as KQA. When people saw a brand new car, they would often look at the number plate and mention how fast time was going, saying how not long ago number plates were starting with KNA. These plates are registered to the vehicles, not the people. Therefore, when Jesse, a sixty-year old driver who had been in the matatu sector for nearly forty years answered interview questions about when something happened he almost always answered in “number plate time” instead of providing a chronological date. This is just one of the ways that matatus, and movement and transport in

25 “Number plate time” is my own term.
general, can act as a sort of alternative archive of Kenya history and how vehicles are woven into the ways that people understand Kenya’s past.

The Origins of Stigma

Ed Mwangi, the son of Mary and John Mwangi, perhaps the most successful transport operators in Nairobi, posed a question to me that had been troubling him. Exasperated, he asked, “If matatus were here before independence, why do Kenyans hate them so much? They are part of being Kenyan” (personal communication, 2010). Generally, transportation is part of national and metropolitan conversations worldwide. In Nairobi, people overlook these dreaded vehicles’ and their operators’ important role in Kenya’s past and refuse to see how the sector was a logical response to the inefficiencies of empire. Kenda Mutungi’s 2006 article argues that the “perceptions” of matatu operators has changed over time, from a historical golden age beginning in 1973, with the decriminalization of matatus by Kenya’s first president, Jomo Kenyatta.

I argue, however, that if we extend the timeline further back in time, it is apparent that the “perceptions” of matatu operators were far more complicated than Mutungi leads us to believe. Due to their foundation in providing a service, passenger transport, that was in direct breach of the monopoly held by KBS in Nairobi from 1934, the providers of this service were negatively labeled “pirates” and became the targets of the institutions that controlled mobility in the colony, the KBS and TLB. What is even more complicated about the origins of the sector, and the complex origins of the “perceptions” of transportation providers in Kenya, is that pirate taxis emerged from a neighborhood called Makadara, one of the first officially sanctioned and subsidized African settlements in Nairobi (White 1990). What makes the emergence of the pirate
taxis from here intriguing is that Makadara was a gift to loyal Kikuyus by the colonial administration in 1953, to remain on the side of the crown during Mau Mau (White 1990: 145).

By starting the narrative around perceptions in 1973, we miss several important factors that contribute to their stigmatization and the culture of blaming she describes. I use primary documents from the colonial era to set the context for the emergence of the informal transportation industry in Kenya and to identify the influences for the policies around controlling urban space, which consistently pivot on transportation and mobility. This chapter links the regulations on mobility, individuals, and urban space in Nairobi during the era of British colonialism to the transportation issues that currently affect Nairobi. The debates about transportation in colonial Kenya acted as proxies for larger concerns about safety, racial tension, inequality and empire. The buses themselves were intimate, transitional, and uniquely overlooked spaces for a variety of fears and tensions to be aggravated and expressed through interactions between the Nairobi public at large; a public that included a mix of Europeans, Asians and Africans all staking out claims to the city in their own segregated parts of town. The KBS vehicles were a place to meet, whether you liked it or not. By exploring the limits of colonial “legibility” this chapter shows how the lack of practical infrastructural services in colonial Nairobi provided the groundwork for the matatu sector to not only emerge, but to work for the citizenry (Scott 1998).

**Colonial Legibility in Kenya**

The buses that served early residents of Nairobi (1935 – 1960) were key spaces of transition, both in reference to the movement between one place and another, but also in the way that they allowed for people to change and shift their identity and role. There was a sort of equality in the
space of the bus, which allowed for the interaction between these four women to occur; and for it to happen in Nairobi streets, but without being in public. Spaces of transportation, thus, can serve as alternative archives where social historians of the post-colony can explore the tension in the boundary between public and private space.

Fredrick Cooper poses a question of African urbanization regarding the relationship of particular types of space to particular social processes when he asks, who can define urban space and “how are forms of space connected to forms of protest?” (1983: 26). That question runs through this project, just as it has for African historians studying Nairobi settlement patterns. They have taken it on by looking closely at the experiences of settlement, both by women working in Nairobi during the early days of informal African settlement (doing domestic or sex work) and by male railway employees who were settled in single rooms, with tiny dimensions, meant to house one man alone, without a family unit (Hay and Harris 2007; White 1990).

Migrant workers came to Nairobi from a wide area. When they arrived, they found small enclaves of people with whom they shared a common language, but they were also thrust into a diverse and plural group of Africans in the new urban environment (Bravman 1998). The women who populated the informal settlements in early Nairobi were not the wives of migrant laborers but women coming to the city for their own reasons. They performed domestic duties for the migrant workers who passed through, providing intimate physical contact as well as food, cleaning and laundry services (White 1990).

A crucial aspect of subjugation is controlling people’s movements, thus controlling their interactions, conversations and their exchange of ideas. Benjamin Lawrance points out that it is important to address the “physical geography of the African colonial experience” through understanding how “mobility advances the significance and complexity of physical geography,
demography, and population movements for the formation and diffusion of ideas of community” (2007: 6-9).

Nairobi’s unique urban history of uneven and unplanned settlement provides a context for the emergence of the informal transportation sector. The ways people moved in between places of settlement, the paths and the roads they walked down, become written in the landscape through pedestrian paths that become big enough for bicycles and that then became unofficial roads for the *maruti* and eventually they are named and put on a map. This organic way of finding one’s path through space is in direct opposition to what James Scott describes as legibility. For Scott, controlling mobility and sedentarization was “the state’s attempt to make society legible, to arrange the population in ways that simplified the classic state functions of taxation, conscription, and prevention of rebellion” (1998: 2). By posing the question, what practices do states use to make their subject populations and their landscapes legible? What are the spatial responses to this legibility? As Ferguson and Gupta may ask, where are the spatial practices of the state that work towards creating and maintain legibility?

Transportation and movement have always characterized *Enkare Nairobi* – the place of cool waters.\(^ {26} \) Initially, Nairobi was like the other safari camps on the route inland, from the coast. Two camps in particular, Voi and Dagoretti, were both well established by 1850. (Hirst 1994: 12). Thousands of traders passed through each camp, and sometimes they stayed for months at a time. In the 1890s, the Ugandan Railways bosses chose to make Nairobi their last work stop before the train descended the Mau escarpment at the edge of the Rift Valley (Hirst 1994: 12). For the first several years of its existence, Nairobi was little more than a railway work camp, but by 1906 there were over 13,000 people living there (White 1990).

\(^{26}\) *Enkare Nairobi* comes from the Maa language, the language of the Maasai ethnic group.
Since its inception, the colonial city was a contested space characterized by its racialized inequality (Yeoh 1996). Early in the colonial project, in an effort to make sense of the many different groups of people populating the space between the port in Mombasa and Lake Victoria, the colonial government set up a system of “legibility” that directly linked ethnic identity to space – the Native Reserves. Access to land was directly connected to ethnic identity and that identity was then spatialized. These racist and simplistic ideas about African socialization and identity resulted in the adoption of colonial protocol that linked identity with space in an ethnic geography, called the Native Reserve system. This idea of separation was built on the assumption that ethnicity was the key identifying factor for members of native populations in Africa. African people were believed to be so deeply “tribal” that upon too much interaction with Europeans, or people of different ethnicities, they would suffer a psychological breakdown; the term for this experience was “detribalization” and “detribalized natives” were a problematic category for the colonial administration throughout their stay on the continent. (see Berman and Lonsdale 1992; Spear and Waller 1993). Supposedly, detribalization would eventually lead to violent revolution and rebellion. The idea that ethnicities are bounded groups was symbolized by their bounded and isolated homelands. Therefore the colonial logic followed that interaction was dangerous and movement encouraged interaction, therefore movement was dangerous and had to be controlled.

Africans in the reserves were not allowed to live anywhere but in their own designated area, among their own ethnic group. However, many of the reserves were too small for adequate farming pushing people to other reserves looking for land to farm or other resources (Peterson 2004). The lack of space, combined with the colonial tax system, the hut tax initiated in 1904, meant to encourage African labor for European settler farms and ranches, motivated movement
to other reserves, which could possibly have more land or resources (Spear and Waller 1993). Africans moving into another group’s native reserve was illegal and the colonial government termed the offense “infiltration” (Parsons 2011). This illegal movement allowed for some relief from the overcrowding in the reserves. African migrant laborers were expected to return to their native reserve after they completed their work tenure as domestic servants in the white areas or as agricultural laborers on white farms. But, ethnic members migrated to other reserves and were often adopted or incorporated to the community. When this practice was discovered to be widespread, the colonial government, unable to stop the practice, renamed it *interpenetration* and allowed it (Parsons 2011).

This separation of people on to lands with people that spoke the same language and shared an ethnic identity is flawed on so many levels that cannot be addresses here in this paper (see Iliffe 1979; Spear 2003). But the key flawed assumption undergirding this colonial policy is that ethnicity is fixed and primordial. Ethnic identity is part and parcel of the colonial project as it aimed to get people to affiliate with one group or another (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1992). But in the urban milieu, processes of identification, especially with regards to ethnicity shift. The city of Nairobi itself, meant to be a European enclave of modern urbanism, quickly became a diverse and plural arena where various interests fought for access to resources, space and services.

*Zoning Inequality in Nairobi, 1899-1930*

Nairobi was officially off-limits to the native African population. The city of Nairobi was supposed to grow from a railroad camp to a proper colonial “garden city,” the modern marvel of urbanity with tree-lined boulevards, plenty of parking and no native people (Meyers 2003). Ideally, Nairobi would have resembled a European reserve, but by 1914, there were over 18,000
Africans living there (Bujra, 1975). It was impossible to completely police the entire city of Nairobi because people were living and dwelling along the boundaries, the edges and the cracks of town (Cooper 1983). If the colonial government recognized that people were settling around the city, they would have to provide for them or at least do something to make them leave. However, if the administration just largely ignored the people and their problems, they would not have to contribute to their well being, nor would they have to acknowledge them at all. That is until the settlements got too big and the people there got too comfortable. When they finally did recognize an informal population growing, especially before 1930, they would just demolish the settlement forcing people to scatter and rebuild (White 1990) These invisible Africans slept underneath verandahs and in the alleys of Nairobi, while the Indian population was crowded into three acres of area downtown (Hirst 1994).

As the population of Nairobi grew and diversified the city became less like the “garden city in the sun” that European settlers and colonial administrators had imagined and full of both Africans from the surrounding areas, and Asians who came as laborers with the railways (Meyers 2003: 35) The Asian residents of Nairobi represented the first set of problems in the city as they lived relatively close to the central business district, on River Road, where they were packed into small spaces without proper sanitation. A 1914 report on sanitation denounced the health and contagion of the Indian bazaar called for its demolition (KNA 1914).27 The discussion around Nairobi urban planning at this time was mostly concerned with dealing with the Indian population who were allowed to be there but unwanted. The sanitation report does not deal as extensively with the African populations because there were still restrictions on African settlement coupled with demolitions and informal settlements.

27 The Indian Bazaar section of town is now the area of River Road, a notoriously dangerous neighborhood.
The Asian population in Kenya, and especially in Nairobi was the buffer class (Meyers 2003) and those who stayed in Nairobi after the railroad was built (some 40,000 returned to India after it was finished) owned shops and were allowed to grow pyrethrum, an early cash crop in Kenya that the native African population was not allowed to grow (Katz 2008). This created a tension between Indians and Africans in Nairobi that persists today. Asians also held high posts in the government at times like urban planners and managers of large businesses like the KBS (Meyers 2003). In the modern dream of an exclusively European garden city in the sun, the Indian population was the major threat in the early years of Nairobi’s existence. The exclusionary planning practices that have persisted were developed to deal with the “Indian problem” in the town center where the Indian Bazaar was in full force; and Eric Dutton, a colonial planner, articulated his concern when he rhetorically asks, “how many Europeans would want to live next to an Indian” (Meyers 2003)?

The way that the city was increasingly populated with diverse people seemed to be out of control for the city government. They were also dealing with another settlement problem inside the borders of the city. This time, however, it was not informal and therefore easily demolished in the middle of the night like the others. Kibera, one of the larger informal settlements in Kenya is an excellent case study of the way that urban space in Nairobi has long been contested terrain, since it the first Sudanese soldiers settled there in 1911 (Parsons 1997). The government had given a space inside of Nairobi, near the Army barracks, to some Sudanese soldiers who had served in the King’s African Rifles (KAR). Populations like the Sudanese were often used during the early colonial conquests, from the 1880s through the turn of the century. Using “native” soldiers from different locations on the continent was cheaper and more efficient than sending massive numbers of troops to the continent (Parsons 1997). After fighting in WWI these soldiers
settled in Nairobi; they were displaced from their Sudanese home and did not fit the criteria of a native population for the Kenyan colony either. These “detribalized” Africans, as they were known, were given a parcel of land, called Kibera, to call their own until they died. After these soldiers died the government would take the land back, but over the next several years there was a massive influx into Kibera by Africans from other “native” ethnic groups (Parsons 2007). They settled in Kibera because it was viewed as a place within the city limits that was outside of colonial control. By the late 1930s the soldiers of Kibera were asked to fight again for the crown in the Second World War, further entrenching the colonial government into a relationship with the Sudanese detribalized natives in Nairobi.

The first thirty years of the British presence in East Africa, colonialism was uneven throughout the new colonies in East Africa. Some areas were heavily populated with colonial administrators and European settlers, while the residents in other areas may have no idea that they had been colonized until nearly two or three decades after the fact (Bravman 1998). Nairobi, however, was one place that was heavily populated with Europeans, Asians and Africans by the 1930s. There were settlements and African locations, with brothels, shops, dukas and increasing congestion from the private vehicles crawling all over the city.

**Monopolizing Movement: Institutions of Control, 1934 - 1948**

Although much of Nairobi’s current congestion is blamed on matatus, Nairobi has always had a traffic issue. By the 1930s Nairobi was not only congested with people, but with cars. In 1929 Nairobi had the highest rate of cars per capita in the world (Hirst 1994). From 1936, transport, traffic, and parking in Nairobi was becoming a problem and the government started to organize the city center through pushing commuters and bus stops further away from the Central Business
District (CBD) (KNA 1936). At this time, the colonial government, paid more attention to parking than to driving or transportation for the masses. There were also more accidents and reckless drivers. In 1938 the Kenya Welfare Association sent a letter complaining about drunk driving on the roads in Nairobi. Reginald Mombasa writes, “It is felt that all citizens of Nairobi of all races have the right to feel assured that the authorities are taking all of the necessary steps to protect them from careless drivers or from drivers incapacitated through alcohol” (KNA 1938).

As the colony grew and was populated the need for a public transportation system was becoming apparent. Not only because of the drunk driving, but also for the parking (KNA 1937). The city was not built for the amount of cars that were being parked along its narrow thoroughfares. By the mid-1930s the idea of investing in the colony was looking better to British companies as long as they were being promised a monopoly over the business they would start, which they were. The idea that transport needed to be coordinated was a popular idea in Britain and was being developed in Kenya (KNA 1936). For passenger road service, two institutions were created and discussed at length in the 1936 document: the monopoly of the Kenya Bus Service Limited Company and the erection of a powerful Transport Licensing Board (TLB), which would be in charge of licensing all vehicles in Kenya.

*The Kenya Bus Service (KBS)*

The Kenya Bus Service (KBS) was the sole provider of transport in the city enjoying a monopoly that began in 1934 (August 2, 1934) and was slated to last until 1985 (KNA 1947). A UK based company, United Transport Overseas Services Limited (United Transport), was the company that owned KBS. They also owned Stagecoach, a large bus company in Britain, with buses all over
London (Wolmar 1999). In 1934, when this agreement was made, the company imported thirteen buses for twelve routes throughout the busiest parts of the city, and at this time, there were approximately 50,000 residents of Nairobi (Hirst 1994: 95). It seems as though the company never caught up with demand from this early mismatch. Most of the population in these very early years just walked wherever they needed to go and did not use the few buses that were available (Nzuga, Jesse, personal communication, 2010). Indeed Nairobi was smaller, only 18 km$^2$ at this time, by the 1940s, the city limits were expanding, along with the population. As the city limits grew, so did the area serviced by KBS buses (Hirst 1994).

![Figure 3.1: A Kenya Bus Service inspection in 1948 (source: Greg Constantine).](image)

In 1949, according to a KBS Bus operations account, there were only 140 drivers and 140 conductors employed by KBS (all native) (KNA 1949). This means that there were probably around seventy buses functioning at a time for a growing population of over 50,000.
Figure 3.2: The KBS routes for Nairobi in 1941, when the population was in the nearing 90,000 residents (source: Malcom Chase Archive)

Not only were there not enough buses, but also they were expensive to use. In 1956, in a series of letters exchanged between A.F. Kirby, the managing director of East African Railways and Harbours and H.B. Havelock, the Minister for Local Government. In these letters, Havelock describes his concern for how much it was costing the residents of Makadara to get to work in the CBD and he was curious if the railway would be of any help (KNA 1956f). They could not.

The combination of high costs and bad service made an impression on many entrepreneurial Africans after the Second World War, who thought that providing transportation would be a good investment. Reports from this era say that African drivers were the most difficult to demobilize from the military duty the reason was widely rumored to be that they were
fond of their jobs as drivers and knew that upon returning, would be kept from motor vehicles and mobility again (Parsons 2003). Soldiers returning from WWII were often applying, and being rejected from licensing through the Transport Licensing Board (TLB) causing perpetual frustration for those trying to work in the city.

_The Transport Licensing Board (TLB)_

In conjunction with the monopoly on movement in Nairobi through KBS, the Transport Licensing Board (TLB) was created in 1936, under the Co-ordination of the Transport Ordinance (KNA 1936). In classic fashion, the document was nearly an exact replica of the one used in London in 1923. Just as current development prescriptives are taken from one location (London) to another (Nairobi) with entirely different circumstances, not only shows how long this attempt has not worked, but also how little we have learned from the past. This Co-ordination of Transport document called for a group of people, a licensing board, who could regulate transportation licensing in the city and the broader colony to regulate competition on different routes and in different areas. The 1936 report from the committee recommends that the board should be made up of the “highest caliber of people” because they would “possess very wide powers” (KNA 1936). They also make it a point to say that the members of the board should have no interest in transport.

In 1936, as KBS maintained their small fleet of buses and their growing circumference of service, perpetually unable to meet demand, the TLB had little to do and had few applicants. However, when veterans returned from WWII, where they had been drivers, there was a popular idea going around the population, that they should get licenses, buy cheap vehicles from the military and start transport services to supplement the growing number of invisible African
residents living in and around Nairobi (Parsons 2003). Just as the report of 1936 had foreseen, the TLB was instrumental in shutting out the African veterans from the transport industry and successfully protecting the interests of KBS.

Moving Radical Politics to and from Nairobi: Kikuyu taxis

In Kikuyu agricultural society, land (*githaka*), and the transfer of land to different age-sets or generations (*mbari*) is an important part of the life cycle (Peterson 2004; Rosberg and Nottingham 1966; Berman and Loundsdale 1992). The land North of Nairobi that was later taken over by European settlers was purchased from the Dorobo, a foraging forest group that gathers honey and other forest goods and trades them with their neighbors, the Maasai pastoralists and the agriculturalist groups, like the Kikuyu (Cronk 2004). The other land settled by Kikuyus had been supposedly free of other groups (Rosberg and Nottingham 1966: 145). Githaka is passed down to sons from elder men in their lineage group by giving a piece of their own. When land was plentiful this was an easier, though not casual or non-ritualized affair, but much more difficult after the colonial engagement and the settler appropriation of large tracts of previously Kikuyu githaka.

Also, in order for this budding off process to occur, the recipient of the land must be married (which requires initial capital). Only then, upon receipt of land and marriage, can a Kikuyu man could become an adult (Rosberg and Nottingham 1966: 148). After the Second World War however, demobilized soldiers came back to a different Kenya, where the war effort had promoted the expansion of settler agriculture (Rosberg and Nottingham 1966: 195). Therefore, there was even less land for these returning soldiers than there had been when they left, prompting more exodus from the reserves to the nearby city of Nairobi. This lack of land
then, not only compromised their day to day living, forcing them to move to the city, but because they had no land (but money to spend) they were kept from getting married and attaining adulthood, leading to a what Lonsdale describes as a crisis in the “moral economy” of Kikuyu society (1992).

By the mid to late 1940s things were changing in Nairobi in a number of ways with the influx of Kikuyu veterans (Furedi 1973). Their idleness fueled growing nationalist and anti-colonial feelings, especially among these Kikuyu, who were largely displaced by European settlement just outside of Nairobi, but were by no means the only African people in Nairobi at this time (recall the Sudanese soldiers in Kibera) (Berman and Lonsdale 1992). Many of the soldiers returning with money that they could not spend on wives, land and children applied for licenses, and were roundly rejected, at the TLB. 28 These men resorted to driving private taxis. The Kikuyu taxis association, and the Allied Transport Workers Union, formed an important political base for the Mau Mau movement that depended deeply on their mobility.

The Allied Transport Workers Union was the first and largest workers’ union in Kenya (Spencer 1985). Throughout the 1940s, leaders used this block of workers to spread political thought and action in Nairobi. As Frank Furedi (1973) and Spencer (1985) note, this union of taxi drivers, mostly veterans, worked to radicalize the nationalist political movement that was coalescing in Nairobi. The importance of movement and mobility cannot be overlooked at this junction because the taxis were key in carrying political leaders as well as political thought from the city to the countryside. As the movement grew, the taxi drivers were the first group of people to take the Mau Mau oath and in turn greatly facilitated the oathing of others in and around the

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28 It is important to point out here that the monopoly agreement that KBS held in Nairobi was for passenger transport over eight passengers. The soldiers were attempting to apply for licenses to register lorry vehicles that the army was selling off, in order to start transport businesses (Parsons 2003).
city, throughout the late 1940s and early 1950s, up until the Emergency in 1952 (Spencer 1985). Using the Kikuyu taxis, radical politics in Nairobi were on the move, and the taxi drivers gave them the freedom of movement and mobility to spread the message.

Eventually the colonial administration recognized the power, and the danger of the type of mobility Kikuyu taxis provided, because they called for strict controls of the borders for any Kikuyu person traveling in a motor vehicle. There were, “limitations on the number of Kikuyu allowed to travel in motor vehicles. Persons coming to Nairobi daily must either walk or use the public transport services” (PRO 1956). Also, Kikuyu taxis were forced to put a yellow stripe on their cars (Lonsdale, personal communication, 2011). In 2004, under the Michuki rules, a set of regulations for matatus, every one was required to put a yellow stripe on the side of their vehicle. This stripe essentially marks them as oppositional or rebellious and even dangerous vehicles, just as the Kikuyu taxis were in the colonial era. Just as in contemporary Kenya, where technological answers to social problems are repeatedly pushed on to the population through neoliberal policies, the colonial administration in post-war Kenya saw the answer to the social problems through economic development, which could be guided under the government’s watchful hand. Through the economic development society’s racialist values could give way to class values (Rosberg and Nottingham 1966: 203).

*The Master Plan*

Another way to control movement, not necessarily through institutions controlling mobility specifically, like granting licenses or painting stripes on vehicles, is through the institutions of urban planning. The colonial landscape was one of inequality, which was built into the environment, yet contested at every turn (Yeoh 1996). As noted earlier, Nairobi was officially
off-limits to an African who was not accounted for and employed. The city was not meant to be an integrated, diverse urban metropolis. It was meant to be a white city in the sun.

By 1944, with growing unrest in Nairobi, and throughout the colony in general, Sir Phillip Mitchell was sworn in as Governor and brought with him an idea that Africans were backwards, they needed to be civilized and eventually enjoy some autonomy with the British as mere trustees, staying behind to watch over their wards (Rosberg and Nottingham 1966: 198). In order to achieve this he was armed with the conceptual weapon of “multi-racialism” and economic development. Mitchell wanted to override the pesky racial tension between the radical nationalists and the European settlers by focusing on economic production and keeping everyone separate but equal.

The concept of multiracialism was built into the environment through the work of urban planners, with the help of sociologists. Two reports are of interest for Nairobi’s foray into multiracial planning: a 1945 report by Mary Parker, a sociologist, and the Master Plan of 1948 (KNA 1948). After Parker’s report, the team that was put in charge to develop Nairobi’s Master Plan included a sociologist, in addition to an engineer, architect and urban planner; the sociologist on the planning committee was supposed to deal with the social “interactions” in the city. Both Parker’s report and the Master Plan called for a multiracialism that allowed the different “cultures” and “races” to have their own separate estates or “locations,” self-contained neighborhoods that held everything in one place so that people would not have to leave their area and “interact” with people of a different culture or race (KNA 1948: 45-49). The plan called for separate but equal development of city structures. By 1948, the idea was that “economic development” for the world’s poor was long overdue. In this way, the colonial operation turned back to exploiting the colonies for resources during wartime (Parsons 2010). However, urban
planners in Nairobi did play lip service to this new realm of tolerance and anti-fascist sentiment, which attempted to make colonialism more palatable by introducing the idea of multiculturalism.

Figure 3.3: 1948 map of the ethnic settlements in Nairobi. European neighborhoods are marked pink, Asian neighborhoods are marked yellow and "native" areas are marked orange. Pink, yellow and orange striped areas mark spaces used by all “races” (Source: Nairobi Master Plan 1948).

The last Master plan was created in 1948. Since then there have been several theoretical master plans proposed (see Vision 2030 in chapter 5 for the latest incarnation of the Master Plan), but none have never been implemented in Nairobi. The politics of planning affects who has access to urban spaces and who is provided for in them, which is an important process of “legibility” (Scott 1998). Who is represented on a map and who is not, and how these representations come to exist, offers important insights into the way the state thinks about its constituents.
In 1948, while Nairobi was being planned in a way as to promote peaceful multicultural living, separate but equal under colonialism, unrest was building and becoming more militant. The taxi drivers, and other members of Kikuyu associations increased their use of mass oathing as a way of strengthening solidarity and achieving unity in times of hardship (Rosberg and Nottingham 1966: 241). As these tensions grew the Kikuyu fragmentation became better defined and by the early 1950s, more moderate Kikuyu politicians, like Jomo Kenyatta, were spreading their disapproval regarding oathing and violence as a means to gaining political representation. But the movement was well underway and the secret society was growing and gaining momentum, largely facilitated by the Kikuyu taxi drivers who were able to disseminate ideas and messages from the city to the reserves, thus coalescing a somewhat fragmented operation. The movement was easily infiltrated by criminal elements that were used to gather guns and supplies and before long, violence broke out in a powerful way. On October 7, 1952, Senior Chief Waruhiru, a Christian and leading government spokesperson was assassinated. With this news, the colonial administration declared the colony under a “state of Emergency.” Throughout the 1950s in Kenya, “as the full weight of government power was brought to bear, the assertive character of radical politics was transformed into a desperate resistance” that cost many lives and caused much suffering until it was defeated in 1960 (Rosberg and Nottingham 1966: 277).

Disrupting Colonial Space: Drawing new lines of legibility

In 1956, still in the midst of Mau Mau, in Nairobi the colonial government descended on the African population of the city and searched their homes and private quarters and terrorized large portions of the urban African population looking for pass violations among other things. It was the Emergency and the Mau Mau fear was widespread and outlandish. In the context of the
Emergency and ‘Operation anvil’ the metropolitan experience was full of tension and anxiety. KBS was being criticized be everyone, from Africans heading to work to European housewives going to town to shop.

![People in Nairobi waiting at a bus stop in 1960](source: Kenya National Archives)

**Figure 3.4**: People in Nairobi waiting at a bus stop in 1960 (*source Kenya National Archives*)

![The same bus stop when a KBS bus pulls up](source: Kenya National Archives)

**Figure 3.5**: The same bus stop when a KBS bus pulls up, which seems inadequate for the number of passengers waiting (*Source: Kenya National Archives*)

**Gendered spaces**

In 1956, on nearly the same day that the newspaper announced a new, ladies only bus stop, the organization calling themselves “The Housewives” penned letters to the Mayor of Nairobi with
complaints from their members about KBS, and some suggestions as to how to provide better transportation (KNA 1956a). They call for more European supervision at the bus terminals and also demand buses for Europeans only. The group had successfully lobbied for a lady’s only bus stop to be set up at peak times “at the Nairobi premises of Muter and Oswald Ltd. In between 4pm and 5:15pm on weekdays and 12:30pm and 1:15pm on Saturdays and it will include women of all races” (East African Standard, 19 June 1956). They use this leeway of having a ladies only bus stop to start being more aggressive when it comes to other transport policies that they may dislike.

In a letter to a concerned group of settler women in Nairobi, who called themselves “The Housewives,” a fellow European woman narrates a story of what happened to her and a friend on a double-decker bus in Nairobi one day in 1956. She wrote, “A young Nubian woman pushed us
aside and put her huge basket of bottles right in the doorway of the first class section while she went upstairs” (KNA 1956a). The letter describes how the European woman asked the Nubian woman to move the bottles, and how she refused, and then, how she complained to the African Inspectors and the conductor, all whom declined to intervene on her and her friend’s behalf. Her friend,

Tried to move it [the basket of bottles] herself but before she could move it a second and older Nubian woman pushed her way past me and thumped my friend on her back with a closed fist so hard that she nearly fell headlong over the basket, but just managed to catch the side of the door in time. Without hesitating I gave the woman 6 of my best on her back! She turned round and seized me by the front of my blouse and raised her fist to strike me. My friend gave her a good smack. The woman then realized it was a good idea to leave me alone, and picked up the basket and we were allowed to enter and sit down. (Underline in original) (KNA 1956a).

The letter ends by saying that there should be a bus for Europeans only and that because KBS was owned by a London Bus Company there should be no problem implementing that practice in Kenya. This letter came with others to the Mayors office in response to a proposal by the Kenya Bus Company to make all their buses “One class, One Fare,” meaning, there would no longer be a separation between first and second class areas or rates (KNA 1956d). Previous to this proposal in 1956, KBS vehicles carried native passengers in the second-class cabins, while Europeans rode in first class.

The debate around the one class, one fare transportation policy is an example of the ways that transportation, especially in the colonial era, was not always under colonial surveillance, especially with regards to the close and intimate, shared space of the bus. Take for example, another letter in the file, this one written by a European man of seventy. As distasteful as the racism in his writing is, it gives some insight into the feelings and sensations of colonial Nairobi at this tense time in history. He writes,
Recently I boarded the bus at Kilimani School and had to stand all the way to Nairobi whilst seven Africans (adults) and five children occupied first class seats. And I am over 70 years of age! Travelling on most buses is becoming a nightmare, and unfortunately cannot be avoided by many Housewives and elderly people. To make the buses all one class will allow “shenzies Kabisa” as well as all other Africans to sit anywhere and, because of dirt, smell and rudeness, make present conditions more tolerable than ever. The way Kenya Bus Company acts leads one to the conclusion that because they have had a monopoly for several years and because most of their profit is from African passengers, they totally disregard the European public and treat them with disdain…The anti-white spirit among the Africans is growing and present conditions of travel in buses is accentuating it daily. I speak as a resident of over forty years, and as one who worked among them for over thirty years (KNA 1956e).  

The one class, one fare policy, here captured in a folder holding complaint letters about the Kenya Bus Service, says much more about Nairobi during the last years of colonial rule than one might previously think. Bus complaint letters are not the most riveting of sources, but they can provide insight regarding uses of the vehicle space that spans the public/private dichotomy. These complaint letters lend much insight into the way that the city, and the infrastructural elements of the metropolis, function as a place to have diverse and dynamic interactions while negotiating the built environment of inequality.

One Class, One Fare

Between 1953 and 1959 the fare for first class was 15 to 20 cents and 2nd class was 10 to 15 cents. Third class was called the “minimum fare” and was an even lower fare meant for low-income people only (KNA 1960). However, in 1956, there was a move to make all KBS buses one class and one fare for all passengers. As this document shows, the one class, one fare proposal never came to be. Perhaps it was the growing power of “The Housewives” over transport policy in Nairobi? They had successfully lobbied for the ladies only bus stops. In this

29 Shenzie kabisa is a common insult, meaning a completely stupid person.
way they have found that the bus, and transportation in general can be a place, or an arena for them to assert their influence and an easy place for the colonial government to give in. And it seemed to work in spite of resistance by the management as well as the city council as the following documents show.

When the Mayor received the letters from the Housewives in 1956 telling of their members’ negative experiences on the buses he discounted them fairly off handedly in a memo in his own hand on 20 June, 1956.

I do not think there is any comment I can usefully make on this question, which crops up again and again. It is a local government problem only because the city council may license a company and give them a monopoly. But basically the problem is an economic one (KNA 1956c).

This response is common throughout the empire. It both pushes blame on to some other institution and also comes to rest on the bottom line of empire: doing everything as cheaply as possible. In the same week, the management of KBS responds to the complaints mentioned above and wrote,

Facts must be faced. Segregation of races or the introduction of buses for one race only would be unacceptable in present-day Kenya. Special buses for Europeans would not be an economic proposition so, therefore, the Bus company would not entertain the idea…no one can expect the behavior of the African to conform with that of the British people – ever (KNA 1956c).

It seems as though both of these men were looking at the cheaper side of doing things and just doing away with the dual system as segregation was going out of fashion. However, when one looks at the documents from 1960, it clearly shows that there are still two classes and two fares on KBS vehicles.
The Emergence of Pirate Taxis on the Eve of Independence, 1959-60.

Colonial control of spaces was incomplete, and, at times, incoherent. But as the informal settlements in of Africans in Nairobi became impossible to ignore and in the wake of the Emergency and Operation Anvil, the advent of pirate taxis is completely understandable. The particular neighborhood from which the matatu sector emerged, however, is a bit harder to reconcile. Pirate taxis emerged in the gap that the KBS monopoly left insofar as African locations were concerned. As the above photos imply, there was much more demand in the African Estates than the KBS was willing or able to provide service for (see figures 3.4 and 3.5). The pirate taxis emerged from a tradition of political opposition during Mau Mau and carried that stigma with them into the informal world of illegal transportation for the Kenyan labor force leading into Independence.

Makadara

Interestingly the pirate taxis emerged out of the Makadara settlement, which was an official African location that housed Kikuyus who had been cleared of Mau Mau influence (White 1990). An important feature of Makadara is that it was developed as a reward for loyal Kikuyus who were displaced and suffered under Emergency. The scheme included a subsidy for new residents to buy home building supplies from government suppliers at a reduced rate (White 1990). In a departure from other African settlements in Nairobi at the same time, Makadara’s residents largely worked in some capacity outside of Makadara neighborhood itself. In contrast to many of the other neighborhoods where Africans lived at the time (Pumwani, Eastleigh, Buru Buru), which had fully functioning internal economies that existed and thrived within the community itself, income could be generated without leaving the settlement. Thus, even though
Makadara was a loyal Kikuyu neighborhood, the residents’ inability to get to and from work trumped their obedience. Looked at from this angle it is clear to see why pirate taxis, a seemingly heavy-handed label for carpooling, was a logical and completely rational response to colonial inadequacies.

A letter from 21 November 1956, written by W.B. Havelock, The Minister of Local Government, Health and Housing, stated that he was “getting rather worried at the financial burden which the African has to carry in Nairobi” and that he heard “that it costs seventy cents to travel from Makadara to the City Center… and this 1.40 shillings a day adds up to around 35 shillings a month,” which “is a very big bite out of the average wage of 120 shillings a month” (underline in original) (KNA 1956f). This letter is written to A.F. Kirby, General Manager of the Railway. Havelock is wondering whether the Railway can offer a service on the Nanyuki line that carries passengers from the outlying Nairobi Estates into the Nairobi Station and if there is any way to reduce the cost. Havelock says that the bus company will not reduce the cost without a subsidy and Havelock says “he will be discussing this with the Mayor.” When Kirby responded to Havelock’s letter he admits that he is aware of the problems with passenger transport but was not able to take it over at that time (KNA 1956f).

The context within which the matatu industry emerged was fertile for action and innovation of this sort. With the independence on the horizon and the Mau Mau nightmare fading into the past, developing a “working nation” was of utmost importance.

Mr. Chun’s Complaints

In April of 1960, Mr. C.E. Chun, the traffic manager of Kenya Bus Service (KBS), observed a pirate taxi picking up passengers from the Landies Road bus station in Nairobi at 11:15am. Mr.
Chun was irritated at the gall of the operator carrying passengers in total disregard of the KBS transport monopoly and was exasperated that he “actually picked up and set down inside the bus station” in plain sight of KBS management. The next day he wrote a letter of complaint to the Officer in Charge at the Nairobi Traffic Police and copied the correspondence to the Transport Licensing Board (TLB) as well as the Nairobi City Council (KNA 1960b). In a memo to police, the City Council stated that the Bedford van in question was “one of about 12 vehicles that regularly operate from the road reserve opposite to the Machakos bus station” providing unsanctioned transportation (KNA 1960b).

A few days later, the Chief City Inspector responded to Mr. Chun’s complaint. He wrote that “the activities described do not offend the city by-laws” and he regretted to report that the police
could not take any action against them (KNA 1960b). Shortly after this correspondence, Mr. Chun amplified his surveillance and reporting tactics. In his second letter of complaint to the Traffic Police, he wrote that KBS management was “becoming seriously alarmed at the amount of piracy which is occurring” on their Makadara route (KNA 1960c). These unlicensed vehicles operated throughout the morning and evening peak times and, according to his estimates, had caused the KBS to lose over 2000 passengers a day. Like his first complaint, this letter was copied to the Nairobi City Council and the TLB. In his reply, the Inspector explained again that no action could be taken against the unlicensed vehicles because “there are no by-laws to cover it…the by-laws deal only with vehicles licensed as Public Service Vehicles, which of course the offending vehicles are not” (KNA 1960c).

From the 1960s the pirate taxis gained popularity with the general African population and spread to other African estates. Not only were they more efficient than the KBS, which stuck to timetables and had fewer services, also, they were cheaper. The KBS fares increased on 6 May 1960, on May 9th, just six days later, some “30 cars, taxis, vans and lorries began to operate a service at one-minute intervals from Makadara and Duke Street or Reata Road throughout the morning peak period and almost the same number in the reverse direction in the evening peak period” (KNA 1960c). This letter is written to the Town Clerk of Nairobi and also to the Officer in charge for the Traffic police and in it is from KBS. There is a very interesting appendix to this letter that is a table showing the one minute intervals and has documented the number plates of the vehicles “carrying over 200 passengers” in that half-hour between 6:30am and 7:00am (KNA 1960c). At the end of the letter and the report the KBS implies that they will no longer provide service if this illegal operation does not stop. As one can see from the chart there are two vehicles that actually make two trips before the KBS bus returns to pick up more passengers.
This marks a departure from the radical taxi operators in the 1940s and represents a broader undermining of colonial operations by even loyal Kenyan subjects in the years leading up to Independence. At the same time it shows that the city government, who had a stake in the KBS,
as well as the police knew about the pirate taxis but chose not to do anything about them as they were becoming a necessary part of the efficient functioning of the city because as the African population grew they were still largely ignored and denied services by the colonial government. This process also has had long-term effects with regards to police corruption that plagues the industry now because the pirate taxis were not legal but necessary and therefore paying police to turn a blind eye became imbedded in the industry from its inception.

Conclusion: Putting the pirate in pirate taxis, 1961 – 1963

Unsanctioned or pirate movement was a rational and pragmatic response to the restrictions placed on African movement and mobility by the colonial administration. Transportation, whether in the form of the colonial bus system KBS, pirate taxis or Kikuyu taxis, represents an important part of Kenya’s history. Transportation, movement and mobility can offer an interesting angle into the things that happen in between the binaries of collaboration and resistance, loyalist and rebel, formal and informal and thinking of transportation as a world of transition has a sort of ephemeral quality that opens it up as a space of interactions and possibilities. Even the loyal Kikuyu residents of Makadara were not able to survive within the constraints of the colonial bus services that were just not enough. By pushing African urban residents to provide the necessary services for themselves and their associated the origins of stigma were set in motion.

I offer one last example of how the colonial administration engendered and promoted the proliferation of the matatu pirate industry at the dawn of independence. By using the case of Samuel Githu, a loyal Kikuyu bus owner who had been boycotted since the Emergency and wanted to get his license back and perhaps switch routes (KNA 1961). The TLB was not being
agreeable. He had voluntarily given his previous license to the administration during the Emergency and surrendered to all the tests to inspect his degree of loyalty to Mau Mau and the crown. He was found to be loyal to the crown and not a threat to the colonial regime. He even helped during the campaign against Mau Mau during the 1950s by offering his vehicle over to the use of the homeguards. However, when the Emergency ended he reapplied for his license, but was refused several times (KNA 1961).

The next chapter follows the historical trajectory of the pirate taxis as they become matatus and are discussed widely in Kenya’s post-colonial government until they are legalized and recognized by the first president Jomo Kenyatta. Their emergence and proliferation, the sheer demand that they met was a larger marker of the failure of uhuru (independence) thus, the arguments for and against the legalization of the vehicles become a proxy for a larger discussion of Kenya and the type of nation they wanted to become. Meanwhile, what the colonial government built was in no way an infrastructure built to last so that what Kenyatta inherited in a newly independent Kenya was a nation without infrastructure that was essentially no different from the colonial regime in its goals and how it operated.

The British also accepted and endorsed Kenyatta because they knew he would be open to private enterprise and capitalism keeping Kenya firmly within the global economic system as it was set up during colonialism without changing much. Therefore, Kenyatta could not do much to follow through with the promises of independence. He eventually had to admit that his government could not even begin to try and provide for the needs of its citizenry. The squatter problem was one that they could only hire one administrator to deal with and they could not even follow through with his recommendations (Sun 2012). In the same way, the eventual decriminalization of matatus was a then, not a sign that Kenyatta thought pirate taxi operators
were the best example of a business that Kenya had to offer, as Mutongi might have us believe, but the decriminalization of pirate taxis had much more to do with a dependence on the informal economy to provide things that he and his government could not.
Kenda Mutongi’s 2006 article, “Thugs or Entrepreneurs?: changing perceptions of the matatu industry in Kenya, 1973 to the present,” insightfully concludes that Kenyan society, at large, uses the matatu system and the operators as an excuse for their own transgressions. However, Mutongi incorrectly assumes that when Kenyatta decriminalized the sector in 1973, that he did so simply because he thought the “operators were doing a terrific job of contributing to the development of a new nation that had recently emerged out of the shambles of colonialism” (2006: 549) More likely, Kenyatta was accepting the fact that there was little his administration could offer the citizenry by way of investment in transportation, or any infrastructure at all (see Sun 2012). In addition to Kenyatta, she also assumes that society more broadly had a positive perception of the matatu operators. Mutongi claims that the “their favorable reputation turned sour in the early 1980s,” but, as this and the previous chapter show, the reputation of the pirate taxi operators, who came to be known as “matatu” operators by the late 1960s, had been tainted long before the 1980s (2006: 553).

Mutongi argues that the matatu operators are “scapegoats,” which gives the impression that the operators are being blamed for the wrongdoings of others, but through little fault of their own. I argue, however, that the process of stigmatization makes more analytical sense when thinking about the matatu operators role in Kenya society over time, which can further elucidate the complex nature of what Mutongi labels a “culture of blaming,” which shrouds all dialogue and critical thinking around matatus (2006: 566). Blame is directly related to the historical development of the matatu industry as a space of transgression during the end of colonial rule and in the early years of independence. It is the practices that are embedded in the industry (breaking road rules, colluding with vigilante gangs and participation in police bribery) that
perpetuate the stigmatization process of the matatu operators. When matatu operators break the rules, they know they are doing it. What is overlooked is that they have little choice about whether or not to take that action because, which I will discuss later (chapter 6), this “choiceless choice” is also an outcome of living in an uncertain, and thus dangerous time (Giddens 1991),

**Nairobi’s “Risky” Landscape**

According to Anthony Giddens, an “environment of risk” is one characterized not by nature’s dangers, but by man-made risks, which result from individual actions and collectively affect large numbers of people (1990: 35). The environment of risk aptly describes Nairobi’s urban environment, both in concrete terms (lack of proper or equitable planning as discussed in chapter 3), but also in economic ones, which is the focus of this chapter. Because of the nature of Kenya’s transition to independence, the transition government inherited the colonial inefficiencies with regards to infrastructure. The decriminalization, or deregulation, of the matatu sector in 1973 by Kenyatta, was therefore a marked embrace of the informal economy, and hence an admittance to an inefficient bureaucracy (Sun 2012).

In this chapter, I examine how, in the post-colonial context, from the failed promises of Kenyatta’s *uhuru*, to Moi’s twenty-two year dictatorial and torturous regime, created not only a “gatekeeper state” as Fredrick Cooper argues (2002), but also a “risk society” (Beck et al. 1995). A “risk society” as explained by Ulrich Beck, is a particular stage in “modernity” at which the uncertainty of life in conjunction with social ideas of “danger” and “safety” that have been produced in industrial society.

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30 Uncertainty in daily life that challenge ideas of public safety

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30 Although many historians are uncomfortable with the term modernity and rightly critique its use as being vague and not engaging with ever changing historical processes in a helpful way, I use it here to facilitate discussing the urban milieu of Nairobi, which many would argue is a site
push society to become increasingly “reflexive, which is to say it becomes a theme and a problem for itself” (1995: 7-8), which neatly compliments Mutongi’s paradox of blame in the matatu sector. Often theories of modernity are not applied to African contexts, because of the predominantly rural subsistence strategies used by the majority of the population and because of the unique factors of the colonial and post-colonial contexts. For this study, however, framing Nairobi, and the residents of the city and its suburbs (3-4 million people) as an “environment of risk” and a “society of risk” is appropriate, because Nairobi is very much a place where uncertainty abounds and lives are ruled not by absolutes, but probabilities (Beck et. al. 1995: 11).

In Beck’s formulation, a risk society is also a self-critical society, and from this perspective it is possible to trace the trajectory representations (in the public realm – newspapers, parliamentary debates, photos, discussions) of the matatu sector. The end of colonialism and the birth of an independent nation was a time when there were countless expectations and promises in the hearts and minds of Kenyans (Sun 2012; Akare 1971). By the 1970s the informal economy was being embraced by scholars and politicians alike, and the previously outlawed pirate sector was legitimated in the eyes of the state – on Madaraka Day, the day that marks Kenya’s independence. Kenyatta’s pronouncement could be seen on the one hand, holding up Kenyan entrepreneurship by ending the monopoly held by the British owned KBS, or as an elitist giving up on the common citizen in the face of his own administration’s failures to provide proper transport and other spoils of independence.

When Moi took over the presidency 1979, after Kenyatta’s death, the global economy placed him in what Fredrick Cooper calls a “gatekeeper” position, a person who has the power to regulate the flow of wealth, usually in the form of foreign aid, to his country, his friends and
himself in the process (2002). And he did. By the end of 1980s, after the structural adjustment programs (SAPs) took their toll on the population, Moi tried and failed at every type of business, even the transportation business. He developed a government transportation fleet of buses called *Nyayo* Bus, which eventually went under due to “corruption” and “poor management” (James, personal communication, 2010). At its most paranoid extremes during the late 1980s and 1990s, Moi’s authoritarian regime, which lasted from 1979 until 2001, a permit was required for any gathering of people, and of course it was never granted to any group the government viewed as a threat, which was nearly everyone (see Haugerud 1997: 86). The space of the matatu remained outside of the reach of the state, just as it had when dealing with the colonial administration, which never even acknowledged it when it emerged. The vehicles became a collective space where the cassette tapes of oppositional speeches and songs were consumed, discussed, dismantled and reassembled as they moved throughout the city streets (Haugerud 1997).

This chapter continues to trace the origins of the matatu sector’s occupational stigma and some of the possible legacies of the negative stereotypes surrounding the workers. When John Mwangi Jr. asked me, “If matatus have been here since before independence, why do people hate them so much,” I had no answer (chapter 1). His question implied that matatus are just as Kenyan as anything else, but hated nonetheless. As a reflexive risk society, whereby society becomes “a theme and a problem for itself,” Nairobi’s matatus have become that theme and problem that everyone is involved in, afraid of, guilty for and blaming, in order to gain some sort of control over the uncertainty of their everyday experience in an environment of risk (Beck et al. 1995: 7). Although they may realize that it is a constellation of factors that works against their ability to move easily throughout Nairobi, yet, they are an easy proxy to use to discuss the larger, and ultimately more extreme, inability of the government to provide for the citizenry.
Putting the pirate in matatu, 1960-1973

In the following section I use documents from the Kenya National Archives (KNA), as well as from the archive of the *Daily Nation* newspaper, to capture public the public discussion of the transportation sector at independence, and in the decades afterward. The parliamentary debates around transportation, the requests to local government to rethink the KBS monopoly and the eventual legalization, or decriminalization, of the pirate taxi sector by Kenyatta offer an interesting angle on the transition from colony to nation. Throughout the 1960s, pirate taxi drivers were repeatedly reported in the newspaper for criminal activities. They were being arrested, fined, beaten up or they were wanted for beating up others and/or stealing fares without taking people to their desired destination. From its inception, the informal transportation sector has been fiercely competitive and, although unregulated by the formal government, beholden to rules and norms of its own. As the number of vehicles and operators grew, the debates also grew louder and more polarized; each side used transport as a screen onto which to project their vision of independence and proper Kenyan behavior. Interestingly the following articles trace common traffic complaints still plaguing Nairobi transport operators today.

Recalling the case of Sammy Githu from the last chapter is relevant here as it becomes apparent in the early 1960s, after the Emergency ends and Nairobi is repopulating with Kikuyus, many of them in Makadara Estate, that even if you supported the colonial administration, they would not, or perhaps more precisely could not, help you. Perhaps someone like Samuel Githu who had been a loyal colonial subject, would be tempted to illegally operate a transport service for his neighbors in Makadara, who also had to get to work and could not wait or afford to take the KBS that poorly serviced their neighborhood? These pirate taxis proliferated because they were necessary and as much as the colonial government wanted to maintain that they were in
gross violation of the monopoly agreement, they also needed them to pick up their slack when it came to moving “a working nation.”

The first complaints of pirate taxis were made in 1960, but the police response said that this had come up the year prior, in 1959. By May of 1961, a large-scale police operation was launched against the pirate taxis and “over 80 vehicles were taken to the police vehicle examination center at Wilson Airport, of which 72 were found to be unroadworthy” and one inspector described the vehicles as “death traps” (Daily Nation, 25 May 1961). These police crackdowns, like the ones that captured over eighty vehicles were common in the years just before independence as the local government had to protect their investment in the KBS monopoly. But, in reality, who were these pirates? And where were they getting all of these unroadworthy vehicles anyway?

Over the next two years, as the crackdowns continue these questions can be answered through the newspaper reports. In March of 1962, Magistrate Thompson fined Thuo Mariga, a pirate taxi man, 800 KSh for driving from Makadara Estate to Nairobi (Daily Nation, 27 March 1962). It was reported, “Mariga stopped the vehicle at Makadara bus stop and asked two plain clothes police officers if they wanted a ride to Nairobi. Upon entering the city center, Mariga asked them each for 30 cents as fare” (Daily Nation, 27 March 1962). Reports on similar police crackdowns on pirate taxi drivers revealed that many of the drivers rounded up by the police were, “drivers of private firms using their vehicles as taxies on the way to work” (Daily Nation, 23 July 1963). Therefore, the common “pirate” was someone who was using their access to a private car to give fellow workers a ride to work. Most of the time, the vehicles were said to be unroadworthy, and the drivers agreed to get their vehicles in proper condition. This, carpooling,

31 This was a common slogan for the Moi era, Kenya cast as a “working nation.”
32 Please note that thirty cents is mapeni matatu (chapter 1).
to use the parlance of our times, was in direct violation of the KBS monopoly agreement that had been set in 1934. The men operating the vehicles were “pirates” because they were stealing customers from the KBS, and ultimately the Nairobi City Council (NCC). As the city limits expanded and the residents of the outer, Eastland suburbs became more integrated with the city center, there were no by-laws in place to govern these settlements and the NCC and the British company, United Transport, were at odds with one another regarding the franchise agreement. In these outer suburbs, because of the lack of by-laws, police could not, and did not, enforce the KBS monopoly. It seems very possible that it was not only easy for the police in Nairobi to overlook the crime of carpooling, but that it was also necessary as the city buckled under the weight of increased urbanization on the eve of independence.

By the end of 1963, it seems that pirate transportation was nearly out of control and instead of actually stopping pirate taxis, the government to fining them more and more. In November, 1963, the *Daily Nation* reported that there was “another pirate taximan charged 89 pounds,” quoting the Magistrate who said, “Such iniquitous practices must be stopped and discouraged as they strike at the very route of the organization of public service vehicles” (*Daily Nation*, 8 November 1963). The Superintendent of police also said it was a problem and that it was “unhealthy competition for regular taxis” (*Daily Nation*, 8 November 1963). In August, two more pirate taximen were convicted of carrying passengers without a license. Joseph Mwangi Nderi of Nairobi was fined one hundred and forty pounds on eight counts and admitted sixteen previous convictions (*Daily Nation*, 26 August 1964). John Rubia Kairo was fined twenty-five pounds for carrying five passengers between Kiambu and Nairobi, where he had charged each passenger one shilling. The Magistrate said that if it were within his powers he would give the drivers jail time (*Daily Nation*, 26 August 1964).
As independence came and went, the city boomed and the pirate taxis started showing up in the newspaper in more violent and extreme cases. One could infer that the carpools throughout the city were becoming common, so there were more public discussions of bad experiences and only the extreme cases became interesting to report on. It also shows the increasingly harsh penalties from fines to prison sentences for these deviant drivers. For example, in October 1964, a pirate taxi driver was arrested and charged with nine months imprisonment. He had already been convicted three times for overloading and drunk driving. The accused said that the car was not his, but his friend’s car who was serving a prison sentence (*Daily Nation*, 20 October 1964). In July of 1963, there was a murder trial for two men, pirate taxi drivers, who had killed a customer who had argued with them over the fare. The men hit the passenger and left him in the street naked. When the two men were picked up they had articles of clothing from the victim (*Daily Nation*, 23 July 1963). These cases carried with them a warning and implicit moral sanction, if you ride one of these and you are hurt, you deserved it.

Although Kenda Mutongi describes the changing perception of matatu operators as shifting from good (entrepreneurial Kenyans in 1973 when Kenyatta legalized them) to bad and scary (in the 1980s and 1990s as informal cartels took over the sector), it is apparent here that there was nothing good to say about pirate taxis from the beginning. I am not claiming that most Nairobi residents think of these early pirate taxis when they think of matatus, but the way that the sector developed foundationally, in violation of the KBS monopoly, engendered particular practices that actually perpetuate the negative perception of the crews. The sector itself did not start in a positive light. If we continue to trace the media representations of pirate taxis through this period, after independence, there is a shift in the way that the pirate taxi operators conduct themselves as a group. They begin to use their collectivity to fight the system.
Protests were on the rise amongst African workers in Kenya just after the transfer of power in Kenya. In January 1964, there was a protest staged by two hundred people, all summoned by traffic offenses (*Daily Nation*, 9 January 1964). They gathered outside the Kiambu Courthouse and they complained that Africans were being fined more than Europeans and Asians. The protest was eventually broken after the spokesperson, Mr. Thuo Gichea, talked to the Magistrate, who said that each case would be heard on its own merits and the reason for the hefty fines was due to the fact that, “some people were being charged five times a week and were not repenting,” while Gicheha responded that many of the drivers were having a hard times as they were “still paying hire-purchase for their cars” (*Daily Nation*, 9 January 1964). The Magistrate said the fines do not usually exceed one hundred shillings unless the offense is serious one, like refusing to stop when a policeman signals you to do so.\(^{33}\)

In March of 1965, pirate taxi operators refused the title of “pirates” and protested in Nairobi because the city council accused them of using their vehicles to carry passengers without the proper licenses (*Daily Nation*, 1 March 1965). A few days later on March 9\(^{th}\), the police responded with a crackdown citing the by-laws of 1963, which says “any owner of a vehicle who permits such a vehicle to be on hire without a license shall be guilty of an offense. Any person who drives such a vehicle on hire shall also be guilty of an offence” (*Daily Nation*, 10 March 1965). Any person found guilty was liable of a fifty-pound fine and/or a month in jail. The council instructed the city inspectorate to launch a campaign to enforce the by-laws, but they had not yet decided what to do with the citizens that enabled the pirate taxi business by demanding

\(^{33}\) It should be mentioned here that due to the small budget the police force gets in Kenya, officers rarely have access to a vehicle in order to chase down offenders. This is still true in Nairobi and is a common occurrence in the sector. For example, if you pass a police officer and he waves your vehicle down you can pass him and not stop. He does not have a vehicle to chase you with. However, sometimes, matatu operators will wave at the cop to communicate that he will stop the next time around. And sure enough, they usually do.
their services. The council was contemplating legal actions against these offenders (*Daily Nation*, 10 March 1965). Here, the council was already faced with the problem of public endorsement of these vehicles in practice, while vilifying them in the media.

A week or so later the Mombasa Vehicles and Drivers Association (MVDA) national general secretary, Mr. D. M. J. Korokoro, appealed to the municipal council to enact by-laws restricting pirate taxis. Korokoro was showing support of the March 9th statement by the council about the punishment for illegal taxis. He was adamant about them taking away business from properly licensed taxis (*Daily Nation*, 19 March 1965). Later that year in July, Korokoro passed a draft of the Traffic and Transport Bill in Mombasa, which would “check the activities of pirate taxi drivers, who, he claimed were interfering with his members’ businesses” (*Daily Nation*, 5 July 1965).

By 1965 and 1966, several years since the transfer of power, the city was opened up to everyone when Kenyatta finally removing the native reserve system, Nairobi was experiencing massive urbanization. This was good business for the city council because they shared ownership of KBS and they benefitted from the monopoly, which could be profitable in a bustling city. Urban immigration was happening fast and residents in the African locations, like Makadara, were starting to reject the idea that they were continually criminals, arrested and fined, for giving and taking rides when the buses were full or slow, and when they could take a cheaper ride with a neighbor on their way to work. Take for example this question, which was submitted to the Minister for Power and Communications, November of 1966 by Mr. Shikuku.

In view of the fact that many people who work in towns use Kenya Bus Service buses as their means of transport to their place of work fail to reach their place of work on time especially during the rain season, due to either the said buses coming late or when full; will the Minister consider abolishing the present monopoly which is being enjoyed by the Kenya Bus Service so as the allow any African Company to spring up (KNA 1966)?
At the time that this is being requested, KBS and the city council were tightening their grip on the profits from the transportation monopoly. However it seems fairly obvious over time that there was no way to maintain the monopoly when there was so much human traffic in the city.

There were constantly meetings about the “franchise monopoly agreement” between KBS and NCC (previously the municipal council) stating and restating the terms of the agreement, as in the following excerpt from the minutes of the meetings between the NCC and KBS.

During the continuance of the Franchise the Council shall prohibit the carrying on by any person or corporation other than the company of any service for the carriage of passengers for hire or reward within the said city and shall not itself carry on such service without prejudice to a) the right of any person to ply for hire within the said city with any public vehicle or other vehicle duly licensed to carry not more than six passengers and b) the right of any person to carry for hire or reward in any duly licensed vehicle passengers departing to or arriving from any place outside the limits of the said City (KNA 1968).

In the same set of minutes, the company proposed that “the concession given to school children to travel at half fare, which over the years has extended to students, many of whom are were considerably over school age, has led to abuse” and therefore they propose to limit the passes to students under the age of eighteen (KNA 1968). Needless to say, United Transport, the company that owned KBS, was not interested in giving anything away or losing any money to pirates encroaching on their market share.

The magistrates labeled the pirate taxis, “unhealthy competition,” but the taxis were also meeting growing demand. This spokesperson for the pirate taxis, Mr. Peter Gitau, articulates what is to become known as the informal economy when he says, “we as private taxi drivers are jobless and we think we can only earn our living by operating such jobs without the interference in other people’s jobs” (Daily Nation, 9 February 1967). As the pirate taxis became a common feature of Nairobi’s landscape, the culture of blame was already being deployed in an attempt to explain the ubiquitous Nairobi congestion. Sub-Inspector R. M. Wafula claimed that the pirate
taxis were the cause of congestion on Racecourse Road and “were a constant headache as some cannot even observe the simplest traffic rules” (*Daily Nation*, 7 March 1967)! The pirate taxis presence grew as demand for them grew, and they filled in the gaps left by the lack of services.

Over the Easter holiday in 1968, the pirate taxis got a boost in business and a justification for their existence when the KBS operators waged a strike, demanding their own Easter holiday. They thought it was unfair that they had to work when everyone else was at home with *chapatti* (*Daily Nation*, 16 April 1968). The pirate taxis moved into fill the void of transport for the passengers traveling in Nairobi and up country and showed the residents of Nairobi exactly what they were there for.

*Parliamentary Debates, 1969 - 1973*

In July of 1969, Mr. Ngala, Minister for Power and Communications, was fighting for the Traffic Bill (Amendment of Laws) to cut death on the roads. Ngala stated, “We did not fight for uhuru so that people can be slaughtered on the roads” (*Daily Nation*, 19 June 1969). Ironically, this is the MP who received the request to end the KBS monopoly, from Mr. Shikuka in 1966. The traffic bill was his answer. It was a strict set of regulations that empowered the registrar of motor vehicles at the TLB to revoke the license of a sick person, so that upon recovery they must sit the exam again. The bill also proposed an increase in fines for pirate taxis up to five hundred pounds and an optional twelve months in jail (*Daily Nation*, 19 June 1969). It also increased fines for other violations such as, over speeding, over loading, traveling on unauthorized routes and picking/dropping passengers at unpermitted stops. In addition, every vehicle was required to have insurance and to have it displayed on the windscreen. Ngala said, “to put a car without insurance on the road is like putting a vicious wild animal among children” (*Daily Nation*, 19
June 1969). Essentially, the traffic bill of 1969, proposed by Ngala was an earlier version of the Michuki Rules, which will be covered in detail in the next chapter.

One important, and seemingly outlandish, part of the bill proposed that repeat offenders should forfeit their vehicle to the police. The MP for Nakuru, Mr. Mark Mwithaga, rightly claimed that this clause, providing for the forfeiture of cars, “was very arrogant” (*Daily Nation*, 19 June 1969). The bill had other opponents; several other MPs claimed that the pirate taxis were run by poor people who had failed to secure employment and that it was not only drivers who caused accidents, but bad roads, narrow bridges and inadequate signage (*Daily Nation*, 19 June 1969). They were arguing over and articulating the same issues of the informal economy that are still being debated. The MPs argued that could look outside and see these vehicles providing rides, a desperately needed service to the very people (clerks, couriers, printers) who make the government function. But this fight was not easily won.

As the year went on and the 1960s came to a close, the pirate taxis were proliferating throughout the entire country. The increase in pirate taxis became a talking point in the Kisumu municipal council who vowed to wipe out their existence in the town (*Daily Nation*, 3 October 1969). A report by the Development and Works Committee of the Kitale Municipal Council showed that the increase in pirate taxis, and the laxity with which they are dealt, was discouraging other taxi operators to buy licenses. The Council made fifteen licenses available for taxis and only seven had been purchased so far that year (*Daily Nation*, 12 November 1969). Obviously there was no real need to buy a license for taxis when you could operate without them.

In November 1970 the debate heated back up with the return to the proposal for the Traffic Amendment Bill, championed by Minister of Power and Communication, Mr. Ngala. He
urged private and commercial vehicle owners to make safety a priority. He said, “Matatus (pirate taxis) are dangerous. Don’t use them and those who use them must stop” (Daily Nation, 26 November 1970). The Minister for Information and Broadcasting, Mr. Z. Case, challenged him by saying, some pirate taxis “were rendering a service that buses were not. Those of them that were in good condition should be allowed to operate and be subjected to police checks like other passenger vehicles” (Daily Nation, 26 November 1970). The case was seconded by Mr. D. Kioko, MP for Mombasa West, who also said that if matatus were road worthy, they should operate. But Ngala did not back down, and on December 8, 1970, he warned matatu operators that the coming year would be very hard for them warning, “very soon the Government intends to introduce very firm measures designed to do away with matatus or any unlicensed vehicles that currently operate very dangerously on our roads and are susceptible to accidents because they are badly managed, overloaded, very defective and are driven very recklessly” (Daily Nation, 9 December 1970).

But there was mounting support on the other side. A month later, Mr. Chege, the General Secretary of the Transport and Allied Worker’s Union, and all 24,000 of its members, came to agree with Kioko; matatus should operate. After stating that present bus services were inadequate, he said, “We fully support the whole idea of licensing and insuring these vehicles. It must be acknowledged that they are rendering an important social service – it’s simply true that hundreds of Nairobians would be greatly inconvenienced if the matatus were put off the road abruptly” (Daily Nation, 26 January 1971). In addition to the larger Transport and Allied Worker’s Union, an association with the interests of the pirate vehicles, by this point commonly referred to as matatus, emerged called, The Matatu Owners Association (MOA). In 1971, the MOA Chairman, Mr. Joseph Mwaura offered a fleet of fifty eight vans to transport all wananchi
(Kenyan citizens) who come to the city center for a loyalty demonstration and said, “matatus will start as early as 4am from all residential estates and will reach as far as Thika, Kiambu, Kabete and Kamkunji” (Daily Nation, 26 June 1971).

By July 1971, there were reported to be over one hundred matatus operating in the Nairobi area. Superintendent in charge of traffic, J.J. Magera, chastised the public by placing the responsibility on to the citizens of Nairobi and not on the constellation of elements that made the demand for matatus so high in the first place. Magera said, “People who use matatus do so at their own risk because few are roadworthy,” but the MOA Chairman, Mwaura, disagreed and responded by saying that matatus, “are never a danger to the public but the government has not issued us with licenses so as to recognize our existence” (Daily Nation, 13 July 1971). By November of 1971, more MPs started lobbying the government to license pirate taxis because they recognized a need for the service. Mrs. Grace Onyango (Kisumu) raised the motion first and she was supported by ex-Nairobi Mayor, Mr. Charles Rubia, acting as the Assistant Minister of Education. Rubia told the House “matatus would not be successful if to some extent if there was no demand for them by the people” (Daily Nation, 24 November 1971). Rubia further urged the legislature to look at the issue objectively, “a situation was developing where Africans were being squeezed out of the transportation business in Nairobi, with some big companies owning large firms and fleets” and Mrs. Onyango added the “unemployment was one reason for the increase in unlicensed matatus while, on the other hand, they provided employment” (Daily Nation, 24 November 1971). This articulation and identification of the informal or unregulated economy means that it was well underway many years before the government recognized it and therefore had already developed ritual, or habitual, practices characterized by its existence on the outskirts of the law.
By 1972, the informal economies all over Africa, and the world, were gaining scholarly attention and in 1973 when Kenya’s first president, Jomo Kenyatta, decriminalized the pirate taxis, known by then as matatus, it was another admittance that the informal sector would have to be legitimized and embraced. Theoretically, when colonial forces attempted to control uses of the urban environment it opened up places for Africans to create new ways of working a framework of colonial oppression to their advantages. By the beginning of 1973, there was a growing atmosphere of hopelessness that ultimately gave way to the decriminalization of matatus (Akare 1971).

December of 1972, General Secretary of the Vehicle Owner’s Association of Mombasa, Mr. Korokoro reported that many members have threatened to remove their meters and operate as pirate taxis. They were threatening the Mombasa municipal council were not doing enough to reign in the illegal matatu operators (Daily Nation, 12 December 1972). In April of 1973, two hundred and sixty “yellow band” taxi operators in Nairobi went on strike because their vehicles were held in inspection for up to two months when the pirate taxis were operating freely (Daily Nation, 3 April 1973). The idea that one did not have to take formal channels to operate a transportation business in Kenya spread throughout the country. A decade after independence, Kenyatta was struggling to meet the needs of the citizenry in many ways. Even if he could recognize a problem that needed attention, he often had no resources to divert to the problem (see Sun 2012).

On Madaraka Day, Jomo Kenyatta made an announcement and a presidential decree that matatus were not required to get a license if they were three tons or under, but the president stressed that they should “drive carefully” (Daily Nation, 2 June 1973). Several months after matatus were essentially decriminalized, Charles Njonjo, then Attorney General went to the
public to plead his concern for commuters riding matatus. He advised people to “never step foot into a matatu as they are overcrowded and dangerous, but by this time matatus were in full swing and they would continue to grow (Daily Nation, 10 October 1973). The decriminalization of the matatu sector could be seen as an abandonment of the promises of independence. Matatus won people over, not because they were fierce competitors, but because the NCC was trying to hold on to the monopoly profits while still bowing to the British company’s demands. At the same time Kenyatta was facing the facts that he was going to have to embrace the informal economy after a decade of failing to deliver the promises of independence.

An undercover Nation Magazine feature by Martin Njoroge is an early journey into the underworld of matatus. Njoroge went on several matatu journeys in 1970, as an investigative reporter for the Daily Nation. He writes that he, “Was left in no doubt about why they are so popular,” because it took him both less money and less time to get to his destinations in Eastleigh and Kariobangi (Daily Nation, 11 June 1970). He describes the vans as “equipped with wooden forms that serve as seats for passengers,” stating that one van can seat up to thirty people and reports from interviews that, “most users were against any move to clamp down on the matatus” because “had it not been for their operations about half of the city workers living in the locations or in the suburbs would be late for work every day” (Daily Nation, 11 June 1970). Njoroge reported on the stigma already present in the sector when he states that, “Many matatu owners did not want to talk about their businesses and some said they preferred an honest living to engaging in criminal activity” (Daily Nation, 11 June 1970). The commuters complained that the Nairobi City Council did not allow the country buses to go to the city center and that the bus

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34 Ironically, in 2009, nearly forty years later I interviewed Njonjo’s nephew, who had worked on a matatu during his adolescence just to “see if he could do it” (Benji, personal communication 2009).
station was built too far from the main city area so causing inconvenience for up-country people working in the city. Njoroge describes the relationship between the pirate taxis and the police at this point: “It is amusing to watch the matatus play hid and seek with the police. When one sights a police van they speed away. Often, when the driver knows he’s been spotted, he will ask all passengers to alight before the police arrive and then there is no proof that there were passengers” *(Daily Nation*, 11 June 1970).

In July there was another police crackdown, this time collecting twenty cars. It is said that the drivers “could be seen warning others behind them of the police checkpoint ahead” *(Daily Nation*, 11 July 1970). The practice of warning each other of police checkpoints has since developed into a complex set of hand signals used by matatu operators for a number of different scenarios. For example, when passing a vehicle on your route coming the opposite way, the driver can ask how many passengers are waiting, by putting his hand out of the window, palm up, indicating a question. The answer from the driver or conductor is an open palm or a closed fist, the former being an empty stage (meaning no passengers waiting for a ride) and the latter meaning a full stage (meaning many passengers are waiting). Another common hand motion exchanged between matatus, where the hands are crossed over one another making an X across the chest, means there is some sort of congestion ahead.35

**The development of oppositional space, 1980 - 2001**

Jomo Kenyatta died in 1978, and the vice president, Daniel Arap Moi, a schoolteacher from the Rift Valley became Kenya’s second president. He struggled early to make a strong impression of

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35 I say this is a common sign because I have taught friends in Nairobi to watch out for it when driving and on a number of occasions they have been informed of some sort of traffic congestion far in advance by matatu operator hand signals.
historical legitimacy without having Kenyatta’s charisma and revolutionary biography. One way he did this was by embracing patron client relationships through the incorporation of the informal sector in Kenya (see Haugerud 1997). The informal sector, referred to in Kenya as *jua kali* (hot sun) was officially incorporated into the national economic plan in 1985, a process Kenneth King calls the “Kenyanization of the informal economy” (1996: 28). Moi embraced artisans, particularly mechanics, in several public demonstrations of support shown by making visits to their make-shift garages and sheds, or *kiosks*, and promising them ownership of their structures in the near future (King 1996: 24). This was also the time, however, when Moi was using the informal economy to provide for the citizenry while he squandered development funds on shady investments.36

But by the end of the 1980s, Moi’s relationship with informal transportation workers soured in light of his increasingly authoritarian and oppressive approach to opposition, marked by his banning of the Matatu Vehicle Owners Association (MVOA) (Chitere and Kibua 2004: 5). Throughout the late 1980s and early 1990s, news of slum clearances and oppressive government actions spread through the public in the form of cassette tapes containing political commentary, speeches and popular music in support of multi-party politics (Haugerud 1997: 28). When Moi heard about this “seditious music” playing in matatus he banned all music in the collective taxis, but once out of the reach of the state and on the street, matatus continued to blast popular forms of music and political commentary (Haugerud 1997: 30).

In the face of mounting pressure against the one-party state in Kenya, the reach of Moi’s declarations banning people from gathering together without a permit, or playing music in their

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36 For example, Moi made a shady deal with a global investment firm to build a large skyscraper in the middle of Uhuru Park in 1985. The only reason it was not built and the park destroyed was because Wangari Maathai organized hundreds of women to protest in the park by holding hands and sitting for days in a hunger strike. Eventually, she won and no building was built.
cars, was limited by the collective and mobile space of the matatu. For Haugerud, matatu operators were “creative channels for expressing versions of current history that differs from the scripts” (1997: 45). Just as in the colonial era when the KBS buses opened up a unique public space where private tensions and struggles (physical and symbolic) were worked out, the matatus of Moi’s era were also spaces to share or openly debate politics that had no space in everyday life. As Moi’s dictatorial ways increased throughout the 1980s and 1990s, matatus became one of the only spaces where people could gather somewhat freely. Political opposition activists would tape record political rallies and speeches and would circulate them to matatu drivers who would play them for their passengers.

As it gradually became accepted to own and operate informal transportation vehicles, the government increasingly debated the safety versus necessity of the vehicles. Throughout Moi’s twenty-two years in office, the relationship with the informal economy was dynamic. At times, the administration would be touting the benefits of the informal economy and the “Jua-Kalification” of Nairobi, while clearing hawkers and demolishing markets (King 1996; Haugerud 1997). In this environment, the matatu industry resisted any real regulations on safety or capital accumulation, and for many years operated any way they wanted, as Moi and his cronies collected the profits from his role as the head of the gatekeeper state.

An older driver told a story about how things were different under Moi. He recounted a time when there was a big push to limit the number of standing passengers in the 1990s; Moi responded by telling all matatu owners to add a bar to the ceiling of their vehicles so that standing passengers could hold on to it for safety (Jesse, personal communication, 2010). In Nairobi today, it is still common for many mini-buses that carry over thirty people to have a bar
on the ceiling to hold on to. Instead of supporting the regulations, he embraced the informal and risky elements of the sector, thus further embedding and legitimating all practices of the informal economy, including the corruption that was already entangled in the sectors everyday business.

What resulted was a dangerous environment that truly solidified the occupational stigma that currently seems impossible to rid from the sector or its operators. Mutongi was correct in citing the 1980s as a turning point whereby, in the vacuum of state power route associations emerged that used informal, and often secretive, coercive and even violent means to control the industry (2006: 553). Powerful players started to enter and take control of the industry, but it is important to be precise about the variation in the owner population. Although the (in)famous owners are somewhat elusive characters, protected from visibility by the wealth they get from their fleets of vehicles, there are still a vast array of small-scale owners, with various ownership styles, who have flourished and failed in the sector. I will introduce some of those owners later in this chapter.

By the 1980s and 1990s, it was well known that transportation was, as Roitman suggests, an economic “frontier” where unregulated wealth production blossomed for both major and minor players (2005). Even Moi started a bus company called, 

Nyayo

Bus, and subsidized it through government funds. Thinking he could improve on the sector, he employed youth corps to operate the buses and stages, trained them in driving and customer service, so that the conductors were friendly and moral (Gitu, personal communication, 2009). Nyayo Bus was

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37 It is helpful not only to hold on to when the vehicle is moving, but also when you are coming to a stop and you need to make your way from the back to the front of the bus.

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Nyayo

means footprint and was another one of Moi’s political slogans. It symbolized following in his footprint and letting him lead the way. Following behind without saying anything and offering up your complete trust (Haugerud 1997: 82).
supposed to provide cheaper, better transportation in the face of the matatu sector, which after thirty years operating in the informal sector was in need of a makeover. Nyayo Bus was supposed to do it through competition; they would offer cheaper fares and better service. It was supposed to make an enjoyable, moral and comfortable ride for the citizenry, but eventually, it went under because of “corruption and poor management” (Peter, personal communication, 2010).

_Hip-Hoppositional_

Exploiting the matatu vehicle’s mobility as a way to stay on the edge of state control and utilizing the shared, interior space of the vehicle as a productive place for popular culture and oppositional politics in the form of music, drama and debate was fully realized in a particularly creative, urban way with the first appearance of _manyangas_, around 1989 (personal communication, 2009, 2010). The first manyangas emerged with themes and music systems with music from all around Africa and American hip-hop blaring from their speakers. Here, Tony, an unemployed matatu worker defines a manyanga (personal communication, 2008).

_T_: ok, to most people manyanga, manyanga is a good matatu. Ok, something beautiful...like this, you see (points to manyanga at Globe where we are having the interview)

_MF_: Indomitable (reading the name of the matatu he pointed out)

_T_: You would call it a manyanga because you know, it is beautiful. You have the small Nissans and you know, you call them manyanga with the colorings and the music, so manyanga doesn’t just stand for a big bus. A manyanga stands for something _nice_. A _nice_ matatu. That is manyanga, yeah.

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39 _Manyanga_, is a term that means anything new and beautiful. It is a common term in the matatu sector to signify heavy investment in the graphics and Audio/Visual systems in the vehicle. Another term for a _manyanga_, or a nice matatu is _ganya_, which is a common Sheng variation achieved here by switching the /g/ and /y/.
MF: Yeah

T: The money, as in what you get in the evening after work, is...you know cause most customers prefer taking manyangas to these other ordinary matatus. You know, you have many customers that would like to go watch in the DVDs, the screen, listening to music, the loud music, you have other customers that don’t like the music, you know. But they are quite few, there are quite few of them. So at the end of the day you find that the manyanga has more money than the ordinary.

The historical significance of matatus’ emergence from under the colonial transport monopoly and their Jua Kali growth has allowed the sector to function within their own sets of norms; and they have outlasted other, alternative, transport options while resisting reform. Since the 1960s, the growth of pirate taxis depended on poaching customers from the KBS buses in direct violation of the franchise agreement that gave them a monopoly on passenger transport in Nairobi making them a space of opposition, an illegal and unofficial space. Mobility and carrying people together in the enclosed space of a car and its radio, as Moi later found out, can be extremely dangerous.

Matatus, then, developed as spaces of opposition. I use this term largely to imply that matatus, like pirate taxis, and to some degree Kikuyu taxis, developed in opposition to the government at the time, both colonial and post-colonial. Depending on who is in power, the vehicles are both safe and dangerous, but they continue to be spaces where commonly accepted ideas and underground, subversive notions are bounced off one another. This is yet another way to understand the culture of blaming. This blame for the transgressions of the passengers is, in essence the transgression of all of society, the politicians and the passengers, the owners and drivers and the police.
Practices of Visibility

Since the 1990s the matatu sector has only increased its capacity for political and social commentary through creative expression in exterior and interior vehicle design (wa Mungai 2003). Bright patterns, airbrushed images of pop stars, athletes, international and local musicians, actors, religious verses, perfectly rendered team logos, political slogans, recent jokes and satire adorned the vehicles throughout the 1990s.

Figure 4.1: A matatu in Nairobi with an Obama decal covering the majority of the back window. This was taken in the summer of 2008 just after he was nominated as the democratic candidate for the presidency (source: photo by author).

When owners take their vehicles to be built, decorated, painted and wired for video/audio people say that the vehicle, *iko jikoni*, is ‘in the kitchen.’ The process was described to me in Sheng as, “*Gari imefika jikoni, halafu it is fried and wakati imeiva imeenda*”. This phrase, ‘the car arrives in the kitchen, then it is fried and when it is ready, it goes’, uses *imeiva*, a verb specifically used to describe food being ready to eat. The *matatu* that is decorated is said to be like food because it is good and *tamu*, (sweet), like food, and in many ways, it is also consumed. This process of decorating a vehicle to attract the most attention on the streets of Nairobi is a
common and expensive investment filled with interesting processes of new forms of urban identity expression.

The vehicles are not just nice to look at with their airbrushed portraits of global and local celebrities, but this process also provides many jobs for those who are artistically inclined. In 2006, I met a designer named Jackson who worked out of a corrugated iron shack that he used as a garage. The tools of the trade are scattered around the area: an airbrush gun, tubes of paint, and Xacto knives for cutting out stickers and embellishments, often made of fluorescent colors that shine in the lights of nighttime traffic. For Jackson, in 2006, the role of designer was indispensable, “This is the role of the jikoni in the matatu industry -- job creation. Then, at the end of the day, that fly matatu will have no problem getting the three thousand a day that the owner expects” (Jackson, personal communication, 2006). Jackson is directly relating the decoration and graphics to attract customers and increase business, thus making more money to pay the owner with and manage the risk of daily life. This is precisely why the design of matatus is crucial to the discussion of its historical legacy of opposition, but also the risk and danger these moving images and symbols mean for the future.
Matatu owners pay great sums and invest heavily for their vision to come to life. The owners also know this and try to use their individual identity to attract those like them to their vehicles. In a way it is a branding cycle that works together to create informal sector jobs in engineering, graphic arts and design while feeding the expression of people’s individuality. Owners not only enjoy it but also spend quite a lot on it. On average it takes 1.2 to 1.6 million shillings ($15,000 USD) to get a matatu on the road.

Naming and decorating their matatu, their investment, is a serious endeavor for owners. The process of building a vehicle to one’s specifications is about empowerment, however small and personal. It is like a billboard with your values, interests and beliefs publicized for all to see. For many, like Zakah, it is a “moving graffiti wall” and a mobile piece of art (personal
communication 2008). It is an important way that many Kenyans add meaning to their lives through their daily movements in the skeleton of a colonial city that seems to still not want them there.

The following ethnographic examples come from times that I spent talking with owners, a somewhat elusive group in the matatu sector. These owners enjoyed telling me about their process regarding creating, managing and maintaining their matatu’s image. Dick Hebdige discusses the “general ‘aestheticisation’ of everyday life…achieved through the intervention of the Image, through the conflation of the ‘public’ and the ‘personal’ display” (1988: 149). It is important on the streets of Nairobi like any major urban center space both public and private is constantly contested. Visibility, the act of being seen or perceived easily, is an important element of today’s matatu industry in order to manage the risk. As Tony and Jackson explain, a beautiful manyanga will attract many customers, so finding the owners’ targets and enough money to pay off police is easier in a beautiful matatu. In Nairobi’s environment of risk then, visibility practices can be understood as a risk management strategy.

*The Christian, the Muslim and the Rock*

Naming matatus is a special event and people put quite a bit of thought into it. It has certain significance to those who participate in the practice. Kenya’s collective taxis are always named. In Uganda and Tanzania, this aesthetic tradition does not exist, but in Kenya, a name, and often a motif or theme, is crucial to having a successful matatu. When I first encountered matatus I assumed that the crew had something to do with the naming of the vehicle that they worked on because they seemed so youth oriented. I understood how wrong I was when I experienced the full impact of the matatu naming process one afternoon in 2006.
I was with three members of the Mombasa Matatu Owners Association (MOA) and each of these three owners had several matatus, each plying different routes through the city. During our interview we discussed the serious head wound that one of the owners had received at the hands of a *jambazi* (thug) who attacked him while he was parking his vehicles for the night. We all agreed that this was not an easy business. These men were not juvenile or immature; they were responsible, savvy businessmen. In Kenya’s transport sector you have to be. When it came to speaking about their vehicles however, they were like children, giddy with excitement.

Unexpectedly, we ended up taking a ride to find their respective matatus. I asked each owner what the name of their vehicle was and what it looked like so we could keep watch for it. First, the owner with the head wound told me he had nine matatus, all called “Resurrection”. He explained that, “you know I am a Christian, so mine is called Resurrection” to represent what is important to him (Kamau, personal communication, 2006). The next owner, a tall, thin, middle aged man, wearing a *kanzu*, the white Muslim dress for men, told me that he had three vehicles and they were all named, “‘Habiba’…a traditional Islamic name for a beautiful woman” (personal communication, 2006). The third owner laughed a little as he told me the name of his three matatus --“The Rock” (personal communication, 2006) because he loved professional wrestling.40

The way that each of these men identified with the naming of their vehicle and how they told me the reasons for their specific name was fascinating and important for understanding how transportation practices in Kenya tie so closely to identity. Because naming the vehicles and knowing they are out on the street is a completely different thing than *seeing* them in action. We chased down Resurrection, Habiba and The Rock, that afternoon. We talked and laughed at how

40 “The Rock” is the name of a famous professional wrestler. The vehicle had other slogans pertaining to wrestling to complete the motif.
these owners had no idea who they might find driving their vehicles, but when they saw them there was significant pride in showing me how they looked on the street. Knowing that they owned this vehicle and could stop the driver and talk or check up on them was an interesting type of endeavor, a chase almost. I found these qualities similar across the board for owners. It was not just these three men who, perhaps it could be argued, were exhibiting a masculine trait surrounding cars and self-esteem or expression (Best 2006) as the female owners I knew also enjoyed and took great pride and care making sure their private politics were publicized on their vehicles.

**Turning the Tydes**

Joyce, for example, whom I met in Nairobi in 2007, had just joined route #44 the year before, and I had befriended her brother Chalo who was driving her vehicle, “Tydes.” Joyce told me that she wanted to name her vehicle Tydes because she was a Christian, and she wanted to “take her Christianity to the street” (personal communication, 2007).\(^{41}\) She decorated her vehicle with passages from scripture and preferred to have her brothers, who she employed to drive, only play gospel music. She wanted this because she figured that people like her, who wanted a particular type of commute, a Christian one (of the Baptist persuasion), could and would choose her vehicles over others. In other words, different identities are put on sale for people to purchase. If one choose Joyce’s Tydes every day, and even waits for it at times, neighbors, friends and parents may come to associate that person with the Christian beliefs and music that covers the vehicle of choice. The same goes for the infamous matatu that runs through Eastleigh called “Global Terror,” which is adorned with pictures of Osama Bin Laden and George W. Bush with

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\(^{41}\) I believe that name Tydes, was perhaps an incorrect translation of “tithes”, the act of giving a part of ones income to support a religious institution or deity.
the words “war criminals” splashed on the side. If one rides that every day and prefers to promote this matatu, something about one’s identity may be gleaned from that practice. The way Joyce understood the practices of visibility in the matatus sector is communicated when she says:

You have to come up with something unique because the customers like what they see first before they come in. So that is why we did it as a Christian bus and we tried to do something different. Nobody has done this decoration with Christian things. So I told my designers to work on something different, like it has a lot of God information…and they researched for sometime, they had to look at scripture (personal communication, 2007).

Joyce said that sometimes she sees images on matatus that she does not want to see and uses Tydes to combat those negative images with Christian ones.

Celebrity Touts

It is not just the faces that are painted on the outside of the vehicle that are important for the attractiveness of the matatu, but the one peering at you from behind the window and wheel. The “famous operator” is one of the factors that passengers contemplate while choosing which matatu to take (EZ, personal communication, 2005). In the publication Matatu Today a contest called “matatu poa” (cool matatu) rewarded a driver, Patrick Theuri with a Nissan mini-van, essentially a matatu, and an interview in the magazine as he had received the most called in votes (April 2006)! He was chosen for being well known throughout his neighborhood, and also polite. Matatu operators supply an important public service and over time, they become well-known fixtures in and around their routes. This can be good and bad, because even as they are recognizable, which can lead to all kinds of positive outcomes, they are also accountable to the passengers they carry, and word travels fast when someone steps over the line.

Being known all over town is an important part of being a Nairobi resident. This way, being a matatu driver is one of the best and worst jobs for this. This visibility drives some of the
employment of younger Kenyans, like EZ, whom I met in 2006. I asked him what the best part of being a conductor was, and he responded matter-of-factly, “because you are known and you know people,” glancing over at his friend as if the answer was obvious. He told me that when you know people, and are known, you are safe anywhere you go (personal communication, 2006).

This corresponds to a conversation that I had with Tony, an unemployed tout, conductor and driver, describes knowing people, and being known, as a defense against physical violence. He frames being known as a protective measure in the risky environment of Nairobi. During this interview, a friend of Tony’s was nearby, listening, and at times, offering his opinion. I did not know him well, but his name is John (personal communication 2008).

**Tony:** It is true, it is true, because, I mean, we here...we have people. I mean we have people, we live together. We are always together; you know, day in and day out, yeah? I mean, we have been in this Globe Cinema roundabout (a main matatu stage in Nairobi) for how many years? Since 2003? (asking John, who is off to the side)

**John:** five years...

**Tony:** about five, six years. And before that, we knew each other in town, you know, so I don’t expect someone to come and...hit him (pointing to John) while I just stand there. You know? I mean...I would have to act. I would want to know what is happening. I wouldn’t stand there and watch John and him fight. I know them, but if the other guy is not known around here then definitely it will not cause a commotion. Yeah? And people will want to know what is going on. If the other guy is not known, here, then, definitely he is in big shit...big, big trouble.

The use of visibility to further one’s personal ambitions is an important part of the job for many of young men and can actually have financial payoffs as, Patrick, the “matatu poa” winner showed. This financial payoff works as a risk management strategy by providing more money to pay off the cops and other outside actors. Having well known crewmembers is important for owners of vehicles too, and they will often go to great lengths to poach crewmembers who have
large followings. Martin, an owner I knew, made a habit of poaching drivers and conductors who were known on a route. He would offer them a few thousand shillings ($20 to $40 USD) to switch to his new and “loaded” matatu (Martin, personal communication, 2008). Being known and having a following is also relayed well through Maryam’s description of supporting a matatu worker whom she knows,

He is a childhood friend and we grew up together but then again, more like a brother. And that matatu, we are used to it, we just get on it because he is working there. So it is more like promoting him. The more people that are coming because of him the more it is like…if the owner sees that Abda is not on today I am going to have less people (personal communication, 2008).

Just as being seen, being known and becoming recognizable can attract customers and engender self-esteem and pride for many matatu operators, but if this leads to machismo or if the operator is just a “bad apple” and their visibility works against them and they are held accountable. Here, Maryam describes a common practice of Nairobi passengers, the prejudice and the precise knowledge and timing of particular matatu operators.

Maryam: Oh yeah, there are specific ones. When my cousin was like, I am not getting in that matatu ever again. Cause what the driver did…I’m not gonna get on it. So when the driver came and she was like, He’s there…I am not getting on. So when he’s not there she will get on but when he’s there she is not getting on.

MF: So you recognize people…?

Maryam: yeah, cause there are like specific, like for example, to me there is this matatu the one called ICE. The black one, and in the afternoon I don’t want to get on it cause the driver right now is an asshole. Oh my God. There was this time I wanted to get on and the tout said like, ‘30 shillings’, I said ‘I know’ and he was like OK. So, people started to get off and I waited for them to get off and then I get on. I am like near to put my leg on and he is like… whoosh… and drives away and I am like ‘what’s wrong with him?’ And then the tout starts calling me and I am like ‘I am not getting on’.
Figure 4.3: The infamous ICE matatu. Notice the motif is time, or perhaps broken time, as the sprockets and springs decorating the exterior could be from a broken watch (source: http://judynyokabi.wordpress.com/2010/02/25/kenyan-matatu-rides).

This fame can work both ways for matatu operators. Below, Maryam describes how working on a matatu and having celebrity status can result in more positive attention from the potential mates. Here, we are discussing why touts would be attractive to some women.

Yeeaahh…some, some… touts are like a celeb. I am told that some touts are like celebs because they are known in like all of Eastleigh and in town and some other places. So they are like, “if I become his chick” I go on his matatu even when he’s not there, um no matter where they are they are gonna get on the matatu and the matatus gonna stop and do what they want cause she is so and so’s girlfriend. They do it for the fun, they say it is fun. He’s busy unlike the other boys are and for like half of the day he’s like and during the night he is like away so you can do whatever you want. Unlike the one who comes to your home…

Therefore, the idea of being known is then transferred to the young women who have relationships with matatu operators. This is an important concept because being known is good for matatu operators in terms of business and safety, but to be known in Nairobi in general is an important thing. The culture of celebrity, both local and global, looms large in Kenya, so, for
both women and men, being seen and being known is extremely important. I have found in my research that much of this is about the possibility of meeting people and then getting opportunities to do other things.\textsuperscript{42}

\textbf{Conclusion: The Stigma of Risky Business}

In the book \textit{Fiscal Disobedience}, Janet Roitman argues that governments always regulate the economic activates of the populations at the edge of wealth creation (2005). People who are creating new forms of wealth are always going to push the limits of what the government feels comfortable with. She highlights that the people on the edge of this are the mobile people who can push the limits of proper economic behavior and licit and illicit activities.

Scholars of Kenya who are studying the matatu sector, many who have been riding in matatus for much of their lives, have also commented on the crews’ transgressions, mentioning “their misogynistic language, their overcrowding, their playing of loud music, their speeding, their rough-handling of passengers” (Mutongi 2006: 549). Mbugua wa Mungai and David Samper point out that sharing negative matatu stories, or Personal Experience Narratives (PENs), is a way for Nairobi residents to process the trauma that often occurs on their commutes (2002). The authors collected sixty-one PENs from Nairobi residents about negative experiences they had in matatus, ranging from poor customer service to violent hijackings and rape (wa Mungai and Samper 2006: 54). The stories vividly describe some of the terrifying experiences that many of these urban, middle to upper class residents feel when they have been the victims of crime.

\textsuperscript{42} For example, many people whom I met during my research cited meeting me, a white, Swahili speaking woman who was curious about matatus as on of the strange, and dare I say wonderful occurrences that can happen unexpectedly in the industry.
while in a matatu. Out of the sixty-one narratives however, forty fell into the category, “business as usual,” marking what commuters described as matatu crews’ rude, obnoxious, verbally and physically abusive behaviors and disobeying road rules (wa Mungai and Samper 2006: 53). Out of the other twenty stories that described more violent experiences, ranging from pick pocketing and extortion to abduction and even gang rape, there was only one narrative where the perpetrator of the crime was the matatu worker. Fifteen of these stories fell into the second category, “dealings with other actors,” while five of the six narratives in the third category, “abductions” featured outside actors as well (wa Mungai and Samper 2006: 53). Still, the negative perception of matatu drivers by middle and upper class passengers often obscures the risk that operators themselves experience on a daily basis.

When Giddens asserts that in an environment of risk “collectively affects large numbers of people,” PENs expose something more grim than obnoxious when thinking about why the young conductors say rude things in coded languages. It is the constant engagement that this large sector of the population has with the “outside actors’ of the matatu industry (police, thugs, gang members). There is no denying that in a service workforce of over 160,000 members (400,000 estimated) there are many unsavory characters, which is what the majority of the PENs capture, but the authors overlook the wider implications of their own data, which shows that the majority of criminal acts and violent conflicts overwhelmingly come from “outside actors” making matatu workers survivors and victims of trauma too (wa Mungai and Samper 2006; Chitere and Kibua 2004).43

43 By implying that matatu workers as people with “No Mercy and No Remorse” misrepresents the population and reifies the stigma that is increasing the risky environment that matatus seem to be the scapegoat for (wa Mungai and Samper 2006).
Although the safe and efficient movement of urban residents is a crucial and growing planning imperative, transport policy usually pivots on disciplining matatu operators instead of approaching the wider problems of infrastructure, corruption, generational tensions and transparency in government. The safety of stigma allows matatus to be a place of opposition and the workforce to be feared (for better or worse). They use their stigma as a way to cloak their collectivities and some have, over time, come to understand how their image and their numbers can be politicized and used as leverage against the powers that be, who want to now only take their sector away, but want to use their stigma, thus endangering their lives to do it.

Much of the stigma and blame directed at matatu operators is aimed at the skills and practices involved in negotiating Nairobi’s environment of risk. In other words, they are stigmatized for practices which can be taken as risk management strategies like disregarding traffic rules, speaking in coded languages and fending off “outside actors” with bribes. Negotiating engagement with official and unofficial “outside actors” is like maneuvering around various roadblocks and operators develop unique skills and learn cultural knowledge systems that are important to their survival in this very insecure and risky job environment. From avoiding potholed roads and traffic jams to dodging arrests and bodily harm at the hands of police and criminals, matatu operators must learn new, and often morally ambiguous ways of being in the world. Matatu operators have limited individual control over the environment of risk within which they operate daily and their negotiation of Nairobi’s unique and ever present roadblocks are generally overlooked and misunderstood by the general public, policy makers and scholars alike. Ironically, the stigma that these risk management strategies perpetuates results in an increased marginalization of workers and a decrease in status and subsequently “life chances” including economic growth, access to education and health care, which can contribute to increase
in preventable death (Link and Phelan 2001:363; Yang et al. 2007). Nairobi’s environment of risk, and the constant negotiation of these official and unofficial roadblocks, are elements embedded in the roots of the sector and built into the informal structure, which is an important reason why matatus have resisted reform since before Kenya’s independence.

Other, unofficial actors like Mungiki, and other gangs of various size, strength and form, also manipulate quasi-formality by financial extortion. However, for Mungiki who are ethnocentrically Kikuyu, there are added dimensions that motivate their actions on matatus including tensions around generational entitlement (Anderson 2002; Wamue 2001). This closed political atmosphere put matatus in a unique position to be a productive meeting place for Kenyan citizens in both rural and urban context.
CHAPTER 5: FRANCHISING PRIVILEGE

A powerful tool policy experts and interested parties (lobbying groups, government officials, wealthy investors) depend on to promote “development blueprints” is the negative perception of existing systems (Roe 1991). As James Ferguson put it so succinctly, “Development needs problems it can solve” (1999: 8). This means the perpetual failure of the matatu operators and of the system itself further legitimates the regulatory practices and subsequent adoption of policies that enrich a wealthy and powerful few over the interest of the many. Allowing the system to decay in order to gain support of the community only benefits those who are rich enough not to need the public sector. By exploiting the negative reputation of matatu operators, and leaning on the distrust of the industry by Kenyan citizens, a small group of powerful people have systematically enacted policies that redirect transportation profits into the hands of the elite, while harming the very people the policies are supposed to protect.

Regard the following two examples from newspaper pullouts regarding transport policy in Nairobi. The first one from March 21, 2004, is from a full two-page advertisement taken out in the Daily Nation newspaper just over six weeks after the Michuki Rules went into effect. It claims that due to the rules, fewer matatus are functioning and the government needs more people to invest in matatus, 20,000 more matatus to be specific (Daily Nation, 21 March 24).
This advertisement claims that because of transport minister, John “no-nonsense” Michuki’s strict enforcement of Legal Notice #161, owners of legally registered matatus are NOW **assured** of making a reasonable **profit** each month” (*Daily Nation*, 21 March 2004, emphasis in original).

There are many important lessons the workshop will cover, like how to avoid “bribing traffic officers, arbitrary arrests of drivers and conductors and how to make a profit” from your new fourteen-seater mini-bus (*Daily Nation*, 21 March 2004).

Now, take the next piece from *The Standard* newspaper, only a few years later in July 2007, which promotes the Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) system for the future of “sustainable transport” in Nairobi.
The pullout suggests that in order to create more sustainable transport in Nairobi (the infamous congestion pictured above) the city should do away completely with small matatus, like the 40,000, fourteen-seater vehicles that were just promoted by the government a few years before, and invest in larger buses, like the ones pictured above in the upper right hand corner of (figure 5.2). In other words, the policy solutions to Nairobi’s transport woes were shifting again, from promoting small vans to pushing big in just a few short years. However, it was not merely a suggestion for the Sunday newspaper. In 2008, the government announced a systematic plan that would phase out every fourteen-seater matatu in the city and replace them with buses with a carrying capacity of over sixty, by the year 2012. If you were one of the unlucky people who followed the government’s lead in 2004 and purchased some fourteen-seaters to “make a profit everyday,” reading and hearing about the phase-out might feel like a slap in the face.
In the years following this newspaper pullout, the rumors of a fourteen-seater matatu phase-out floated around the stages where I worked, but every year I returned to see fourteen-seaters still traversing the city. Eventually, it became a phantom that was always looming, but never realized. But at the start of 2012, the TLB stopped registering fourteen-seater matatus as Public Service Vehicles (PSVs) and shortly thereafter, in February 2012, a group of very angry matatu owners protested in Nyauhuru, and successfully halted, the government’s plan to phase-out smaller, fourteen-seater mini-bus version of matatus (Daily Nation, 12 February 2012). According to matatu owners, the 14-seather phase-out policy promoted unemployment and discrimination, and squeezed out the small-scale investor in favor of wealthy fleet owners who could afford bigger investments in bigger vehicles. Transport workers complained that the measure would cost them their jobs and, because of the cumbersome size of the vehicles, it would actually increase congestion, not relieve it. They also claimed that those in charge of developing transport policy were simply serving their own privileged interests.

The last complaint was founded on the belief that the premiere architect of the aforementioned transport policy #161, John Michuki, was a major shareholder in one of the largest bus companies in Nairobi (a bus company that ran only big busses that seated over sixty people) at the time that he was making and implementing transport policies that moved in that direction.44 Michuki framed transportation regulations strictly in terms of safety and efficiency, but they also exemplified government based policies that increasingly fell along neoliberal lines (Harvey 2005) as he “cast market-based solutions to social problems in strictly technical terms” while eliding the political and ideological interests motivating the policy decisions (Ong 2006: 6). Michuki’s approach to success in the transport business contrasted sharply with the approach

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44 Michuki was also rumored to have a relative in the seatbelt business while he was demanding every matatu vehicle to put seat belts in their vehicles, one of the most unpopular regulations.
of the small-scale owners, like those protesting in Nyauhuru, who succeeded in the informal sector by carving out their own social niches and filling customer demand creatively. These small-scale owners, like Joyce, are similarly to matatu drivers and conductors, seen as threatening to the government because of the unregulated wealth they create in this sector.

In many African states, like Cameroon where Janet Roitman works and in Kenya, state control is very much interested in unregulated wealth creation. These “men in movement…who are perpetually crossing borders, circulating between various national capitals, roaming the expanses of the bush, traversing mountain paths and switching deftly between myriad currencies…are constantly inventing ways of making money” (Roitman 2005:15). This population is composed of all nationalities in the Chad Basin and is therefore connected to all the regional markets. Like the mobile matatu men, just out of the reach of state control, Roitman’s mobile men,

Establish and participate in a network of economic exchanges and employment relations that found a significant mode of accumulation in the region. Generally interpreted as beyond state control and extending the category of the ‘population flottante’ – ones at the frontier of wealth creation – in this time of neoliberal governmentality have become the targets of state regulatory control. These targets of regulation reflect contemporary transformations regarding the frontiers of wealth, but the modalities of state regulatory authority and success are an unstable form of power (2005: 14).

In this chapter, I explore three policy elements that are more akin to everyday practices of corruption but on a large, state scale– seatbelts, uniforms and the franchise model. These three specific policies, or policy elements, are touch points that expose the contradictions of the neoliberal state as it functions, and malfunctions, in Nairobi. Seatbelts and uniforms were both part of Legal Notice #161; the 2004 safety regulation bylaw widely known as the “Michuki Rules,” which will be greatly elaborated on in this chapter. The franchise model is a policy that is being put in place currently by systematically dismantling the small-scale, independent owner,
matatu business; a major phase of this dismantling being the fourteen-seater matatu phase just discussed.

Michuki Rules

In February 2004, John Michuki, longtime Kenyan politician and acting transport Minister in the popularly elected National Rainbow Coalition (NARC) government, passed a bylaw, officially known as Legal Notice #161, which was a set of safety regulations meant to reform the infamously stubborn matatu sector. Michuki was riding on the momentum of Mwai Kibaki’s election, which was the first peaceful transfer of power in Kenya in over twenty years of dictatorial rule by Kenya’s second president, Daniel Arap Moi. The NARC administration’s commitment to transport reform and their conclusions about how to improve the system pivoted on restructuring the “undisciplined” mini-bus sector (Daily Nation, 23 January 2004). When matatu owners said they would strike to protest the new regulations, Michuki held his ground, and on the first working day of February 2004, the regulations took effect. There were hardly any matatus on the roads. Instead, they were full of private cars and throngs of people walking. For that entire first week, and the months following, matatus were a constant topic of conversation.45

The regulations called for several new mechanical changes for vehicles and changes for personnel in the vehicles. Vehicle changes included the installation of speed governors, a paint job and seat belts. The personnel regulations required drivers and conductors to wear uniforms and to obtain several government certificates. Since 2004, these rules, encompassed under Legal

45 I remember looking out from the truck I was in at the people walked in the rain in their suits and ties, soaked to the bone the first few days of the regulation. From that time until the time I left in June of 2004, I spoke to people about matatus daily and it dominated local and national news.
Notice #161, have come to be known as the “Michuki Rules.” They were unprecedentedly successful as far as transportation regulations have gone in Kenya.

Figure 5.3: John Michuki at a press conference discussing Legal Notice #161, a bylaw that matatu owners and operators follow a new set of safety regulations, in 2004. (source: Fredrick Onyango)

Figure 5.4: The insurance certificates, licenses and other stickers that need to be displayed for traffic police in order to be sanctioned a roadworthy vehicle nearly impair the visibility of the driver, ironically rendering it unroadworthy (Source: photo by author).

There have been at least six different major campaigns to reform transportation throughout Kenya’s history, none of which were effective. This includes the first initiative to monopolize transport in 1934 in order to secure British investment in the colony, and the rise and
fall of Moi’s government fleet, Nyayo Bus, which went out of business in early 1990s, as well as several safety campaigns that failed or were thwarted by informal transport organizations (often called cartels but comprised of route associations, groups, gangs, companies, lobbyists, police). These failed attempts were the reason the Michuki Rules were so groundbreaking and widely applauded.

Many people believed that Michuki was the only Minister that could get anything done in Kenya taking the matatu industry as the prime example of his efficacy.

**Rasta George:** When me, I used to enter the routes, it was very early, 2000, I think I came here in 2000, me I came here in 2000, maybe 2001. And, by that time, in the route. Eh, it was hard, it was dangerous, because even more there was… people used to be beaten. You know that time? People, we are not seating…there were no fourteen-seaters. We were eighteen.

**MF:** But in the same vehicle?

**Rasta George:** In the same vehicle, eighteen, there were! *(Wilson and Steve laughing in agreement)*. We did not, we did not used to…to close the door in that vehicle. Even in town, we used to hang out the door. George: to hang outside…*(laughing)*. Even in the city…hanging, hanging…you see, at the door hanging, maybe six people are hanging…the matatu is still…

**Steve:** That’s why…Michuki is regarded as a ….is a revolution…

**MF:** A revolutionary…

**Rasta George:** Cause, he revolutes from that state to…now, to where we are…

John Michuki’s background and his relationship to both transportation and the control of space in general are important for understanding why he was able to make headway in transportation reform when others were not. Michuki’s father and father-in-law were chiefs in the Fort Hall areas the Kikuyu Reserve during the colonial era *(Branch 2009: 171)*. A chief was an agent of colonialism through “indirect rule” held considerable access to power and resources *(Lugard 1965)*. During the early independence era as the District Commissioner for Nyeri was also “the
most vocal supporter of the Tribal Police” even after the force was tainted by its assistance in oppressive acts during the Emergency (Branch 2009: 173).46 This longstanding appreciation for the rule of law, even the oppressive colonial brand of it, no doubt still shaped Michuki’s approach to policy reform in 2004, as it had in 1963.

Michuki was educated and socialized into ideas pervasive under colonial rule. Later in life, he was a familiar face in Kenya’s national government and became a wealthy man, eventually owning and operating the large and impressive Windsor Resort Hotel and Golf Course. The mere existence of Windsor is one of the main reasons for Michuki’s perceived incorruptibility; he was considered “too rich to be bought” (Erastus Badokufa, personal communication, 2006).

**Seatbelts**

One of the least popular “safety” regulations in the Michuki Rules called for the installation of seat belts for each seat in the vehicle. The seat belts frustrated owners for a number of reasons. In Nairobi, due to congestion, passengers do not travel far enough or fast enough to warrant their use. Additionally, people do not use them because they lie on the floor of the vehicle and get dirty; when it comes time to put them on it seems like a messy and needless measure (Mudy, personal communication, 2006). Moreover, not only matatu workers, but also passengers can be arrested or fined for not wearing seatbelts. When there is a police crackdown people have been dragged to jail on their morning commute for not having money to pay a seatbelt fine.

Steve: Like, uh, ok…several times…most of my customers…(laughing)...there are times when there are crackdowns of seatbelts. I think two times I have been caught without my…(pointing to seatbelt)...my, my customers…taken to central police station.

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46 The “Tribal Police,” also known as the “homeguard” are the native security forces used to discipline their fellow Africans in the name of the crown (Anderson 2005:86).
MF: With all the customers?

Steve: Yes, all the customers…

Kenyans are generally more comfortable if the operator is the only one held accountable—even if they contribute to an operator’s bad behavior (Mutongi 2006).

Seat belts were also a point of contention during the regulations because a rumor emerged that Michuki had a relative in the seatbelt import business. Even if this is merely a rumor, rumors are an important way that public perception is shaped in Kenya (Haugerud 1997). The possible scenarios that people create about powerful people are important, especially when times are cloudy and chaotic (Osborne 2008). The seatbelt rumor indexed the nepotistic practices common in Kenyan politics but also implied that this particular regulation was needless and must be benefiting someone in particular. By 2006 seatbelts were infrequently used in the vehicles. They often resembled old, dried ropes hanging along the seats, dragging on the floor, caked with mud. Still, while riding in a matatu during a police crackdown, passengers can be seen putting the seatbelts across their laps when police approach the vehicle.

Seatbelt policy is one example of how efforts to improve safety were experienced by the public and industry as merely mechanisms for getting more money from the government. Although this was merely the perception and experience of the general public, the way that policy initiatives work in Kenya, are always looked at with suspicion (Wrong 2009).

Regulating Individuals

There is no formal education certificate required to work in the matatu sector. This means that matatus are a significant area for informal job creation, especially for young people who may have left school before finishing. As unemployment in Kenya is widespread, more graduates of
secondary school and even some colleges are finding work in the transportation industry. This population of young, sometimes uneducated men, are continually represented as risky and rude, and although the Michuki Rules were ostensibly about regulating “safety” they also allowed for politicians interested in transport business to trace, tax and regulate small portions of transport profits out of the pockets of these informal workers and into their own. In order to avoid these taxes and fines, the matatu sector’s young employees tend to use social networks, usually built in their neighborhoods, to spread the profits from their work in the matatu industry.

As other scholars of Africa’s informal economy note, the most important element of the informal economy is not its existence but the social institutions framing the way it works (Lomnitz 1998; Tripp 1997; King 1996). Matatu workers use these social networks to train new workers and to sometimes climb a hierarchy from tout (loader), to conductor to driver, and eventually, if so preferred, to owner.47 They do this by helping each other and building networks of solidarity through participation in “redistributive accumulation” (Olivier de Sardan 1999). In other words, the informal transportation system is made up of a network of young people passing off small amounts of money to one another throughout the day as much as is it is about providing transportation to the masses.

To review, there are three main roles for individuals working in and around a matatu vehicle: the driver, the conductor, and the tout. The driver operates the vehicle from behind the wheel and is required to wear a navy blue vest or blue shirt as a uniform. Drivers are also generally older than most conductors and touts, and often have most of the necessary certificates and licenses in place. The other two employment categories, the conductor and tout, are harder to strictly delineate (Aduwo 1990). A conductor, or manamba, is the person who stays in the

47 In 2005-2006 I did a ten-month study on how the Michuki Rules affected the youth workforce in Mombasa and Nairobi, which is where much of this specific data comes from.
vehicle, takes money from passengers and opens and shuts the door. They also call for passengers while on the route. Although conductors have to call for passengers to fill their vehicle, a tout, or loader, is someone who strictly stays at a particular stage or bus stop, usually at the main termini in town or at the mwisho, the end of the route. The tout calls passengers and gets paid 10 to 30 KSh ($0.25 USD) for each matatu they fill, depending on the amount of passengers in the vehicle when it leaves the stage.

Tony, an occasional tout, conductor and sometimes driver, describes the social and economic process around touting in the following quote:

Ok, touting is basically just calling out for customers...for a particular vehicle. Yeah...uh, well, you get paid for that. But at the same time as you get paid, there are other people who are dependent on that pay. The city council, the police...you know, so, I mean that a matatu will get full...he (the conductor) will pay you, like, twenty shillings and you have to part with like ten, or maybe even the whole twenty, so you end up doing zero work. (personal communication, 2008)

Here we see a trickle up process of economic redistribution, as the conductor will pay Tony a little bit of money to do something he does not want to do. He pays a small fee for that. By controlling these practices and making touting illegal, a new avenue of corruption is opened as the police can squeeze a tout for his small payments. This is accepted by Tony when he says that there are people “dependent” on the money he is making, again implying that he redistributing capital to those who need it, the agents of the government. It is telling because he is not necessarily angry, just resigned to give away his earnings. He also equates keeping the money with doing work. If he was left with no money, he characterized it as doing no work that day, even if he had already earned money through his actions. These little bits of money come and go easily from many different actors, so these wealth creators on this frontier come up with myriad ways to make “their daily bread” (personal communication, 2005). Keeping in mind Roitman’s
work, the following practice is described at length here because of the way it illustrates these mobile spaces of matatus as “frontiers” as and moving targets.

**Skwads: The mobile nature of unregulated economic frontiers**

In the practice of the *skwad or skwadi*, the ways matatu workers use social networks as an informal economic strategy is illustrated. A skwad refers to one complete trip between the city center terminal (Globe Cinema, Odeon Stage, Muthurwa Market) and the neighborhood terminal (Dandora, Buru Buru, Kileleshwa). As the vehicle enters the *mwisho*, or the neighborhood terminal, to the inexperienced matatu passenger, it can seem like a game of scary musical chairs with the driver, conductor and tout all changing position. As the remaining passengers get out of the vehicle, the driver often emerges from behind the wheel, as the conductor takes the driver’s place and a tout, or loader, jumps into the vacant conductor’s spot at the open door. This seems to happen without the vehicle ever coming to a complete stop. The mwisho is often shaped as a loop and the vehicle will drive around slowly, calling for passengers through the neighborhood.

![Figure 5.5: The green line shows route #44, which has a loop at the end of the route (mwisho). These loops are where most "on the job training" happens and where skwad exchanges occur (source: Nick Kendall).](image)

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As the vehicle approaches the road back to town, the crewmembers will take their original places. The driver returns to his seat behind the wheel, while the conductor climbs back to the door and slips a coin into the loader’s hand as he returns to the side of the road to await another round.  

Sometimes, the loaders, who jump into the vehicle for a *skwad* are not inexperienced or “in training,” as one might assume. They are often under- or unemployed. They may be former matatu drivers or conductors whose vehicles are broken down, in the police station parking lot, at the mechanic or simply no longer in service. These floating workers may just fill the vehicle and call passengers at the mwisho, but sometimes they go with the matatu all the way to town and back for one skwad. One skwad, depending on the route, earns the crewmember anywhere from fifty to one hundred shillings ($1 to $1.20 USD) and may take thirty to ninety minutes to complete.

Skwads, therefore, are a crucial part of the informal and slippery nature of matatu work and serve both social and economic functions. Skwads also allow for the regular drivers or conductors to take a break or to have a flexible schedule if the need arises without the vehicle losing money. By taking one or two skwads a day, new workers learn the job and experienced workers make a few shillings. Because the matatu industry is filled with non-contracted employees, informal workers, the skwad is a way for many people to work off of one vehicle. This widespread practice is perceived as extremely dangerous as it is equated with unlicensed drivers putting everyone at risk. This may be true at times, but social networks are in place to

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48 Unfortunately, this is also the point at which the loader might encounter another actor (police, askari) and be arrested or have to give up his small earnings.
49 I made this mistake when I assumed that I could observe training for a conductor. When I showed up it turned out that I was the trainee and would learn on the job.
50 These are also the individuals who often make up the group *Kamjesh* that I discuss more in depth in the next chapter.
regulate the individuals who takes skwads. For example, route #44 and route #48 associations, stress that every person who takes a vehicle for a skwad should have all their certificates up to date. This becomes the responsibility of the skwad taker and the person who gives the vehicle over to the skwad. The association was asking its members, matatu operators, to take on this responsibility of policing certificates before letting someone take their vehicles (personal communication 2010).

**Uniforms: Reproducing Stigma**

The Michuki Rules, at least in part, helped to regulate practices like skwads and redirect even those small profits into the hands of the state, whether into the palms of police officers or clerks, or to the Kenya Revenue Board (KRB) in the form of certificate fees and estimated taxes. The uniforms and certificates cost each employee a relatively hefty fee of 5,000 KSh ($70 USD) altogether. The Michuki Rules called for operators to mark themselves by wearing a uniform and by hanging 8 x 10 portrait of their face on the windscreen so that passengers will know that the person driving the vehicle is the person who is supposed to be driving is the one who is driving. This way people know the person is authorized to be driving. The uniforms also make sure passengers do not pay money to the wrong person.

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51 The average daily income for a driver is 600 KSh ($7 USD). In Kenya at the time of my research a liter of gas was 80 KSh ($1 USD), soda 50 KSh, one kilogram of meat 250 KSh ($4 USD).
But operators often complained that the uniform opened them up to ridicule in other parts of the city and their social life. Again, the policy does serve a function, so that one does not give their money to the wrong person (as had happened in the past) but it is also results in stigmatizing operators.

**Rasta George**: They don’t like us, they don’t love us, they don’t love our job. Where do you earn your life? (*As if he was being asked by a potential in-law*). A hustler. It is better. People they will look at you. We keep quiet.

**James**: You just say I am a hustler

**Rasta**: Even a hustler is better.

**James**: You have to remove this uniform, if you are going to an office you have to remove this uniform, either you carry it from home or you…they’ll just say conductor, eh…(*waving his hand away like he was disgusted*).

**Rasta**: yeah, you are just a conductor.

But the matatu uniform is not just a marker to warn potential father-in-laws that this possible future son is an obvious criminal or bad character. These uniforms mark the matatu operators adding to their stigmatization. As covered in the introduction, one of the major outcomes of
stigma as a persistent moral predicament (Yang et. al. 2002; Link and Phalen 2001) is that it has an underestimated and important affects on life chances, meaning careers, earnings, social ties, housing, medical care and life itself (Link and Phalen 2001: 381). For Steve, the matatu uniform did decrease his life chances and, at least partially, contributed to his death.

When Steve was brought to the nearest hospital after his accident, carried by some passengers and some strangers, his leg was shattered, crushed, mangled. He was refused entry to the hospital because he did not have the money for the initial fee, and they knew by looking at him that he would not have the money on the salary of a matatu driver.52 Steve was in and out of consciousness, and must have been in excruciating pain, but they sent him away. It was reported to me that the administrative staff refused Steve off handedly because, as general public opinion holds, it was probably Steve’s fault anyway, being the driver of a menacing matatu. Whatever the case, Steve was sent away from that hospital and by the time he arrived at Kenyatta hospital, the public hospital, his leg was too far gone and had to be amputated. The blood clot from that surgery killed him two weeks later.

The processes of stigmatization are not just an individual experience as Goffman tends to focus on, but are also part of larger social processes and are moral experiences grounded in social space (Yang et al. 2002: 1525). There are powerful structural institutions and agents invested in perpetuating the stigmatization of entire groups of people.

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52 The hospital, not that expensive by Western standards needed about 2,000 KSh ($30 USD) to initially admit someone. For Steve, that was quite an exorbitant amount of cash to have on his person, especially on a Sunday morning.
The uniform requirement that accompanies the Michuki Rules can now be understood as more than just a way to signal that you are paying the correct person on your vehicle, and is even more complex than just a case of government streamlining as is also mentioned as the justification for these policies in order to make room for better investment for a more modern Kenya. The uniform can also be seen as a stigma marker that was systematically placed on a large population of unregulated workers on the “frontiers” of wealth production. The uniforms were required because of the bad behaviors of the crews, in a response to the stigma (so you know who is supposed to be driving the car). They are marked with their scarlet uniform so that people will know what to expect from their negative interactions, thus perpetuating and reproducing the stigma. This takes on an entirely new burden when thinking of not getting respect from in laws versus being refused from a hospital after a near fatal collision. These are examples of the structural and infrastructural outcomes of stigma in the risky environment produced in part by Kenya’s unstable neoliberal state.
As mentioned earlier, a major contradiction of the neoliberal state in theory and practice is that it tends to become authoritarian in the face of social solidarity as it is “forced to intervene, sometimes repressively,” to ensure good investment opportunities and, “thus denying the very freedoms it is supposed to uphold” (Harvey 2005: 69). If the state then fails to successfully discipline movements opposed to the neoliberal agenda with international competition and globalization they will “resort to persuasion, propaganda or when necessary raw force and police power to suppress opposition to neoliberalism” (Harvey 2005: 69). With regards to Michuki and the Kenyan state, this authoritarianism was fully realized in the disputed and deeply flawed 2007 election, which led to post-election violence (PEV) that rocked Kenya for months after the results.

**Post-Election Violence and the Rule of Michuki**

By March 2006, the fever of the Michuki Rules had died down, and John Michuki was performing his new government role as Minister of Internal Security. People watching the Kenyan Television Network (KTN), a channel that was highly critical of the government, saw a grainy video of masked men in black, carrying guns, raiding the offices and destroying the newspaper’s press, burning copies ready for distribution and beating staff members (Nyabuga 2007). A few days later, journalists from KTN asked John Michuki about the incident live, on camera. He took responsibility for his actions but had no remorse, instead he responded by warning that “if you rattle a snake, you must prepare to be bitten” (Nyabuga 2007). Michuki was provoked by some critical comments made about the government on the station.

Aggressive and oppressive actions like these continued during the lead-up to the highly anticipated and polarizing 2007 elections, between the incumbent, Mwai Kibaki and the
opposition leader, Raila Odinga. In late December 2007, days after a deeply flawed election, Mwai Kibaki was sworn in for a second term as Kenya’s president by a handful of politically powerful elites in the back garden of Kenya’s State House. John Michuki was one of the few present. For nearly two months after this event, violent clashes tore through urban and rural Kenya, infamously culminating in the heinous act of burning down a church with over fifty women and children inside (Wrong 2009). A power sharing agreement between President Kibaki and Prime Minister Odinga was reached in February of 2008, and kept Michuki in the cabinet as a minister and close advisor and confidant to the president (Wrong 2009). Just as the “tribal police” were tainted after the Emergency in the 1960s, Kibaki’s “rainbow coalition” that promised so much for the peaceful unity of an interethnic Kenya, was also tainted by this authoritarianism that was supposed to gone with Moi.53

As he moved through ministries, Michuki never strayed too far from the transportation sector that he had successfully “disciplined” years before. An example of this came in 2009, when Michuki, this time in the role of Minister of Environment, NEMA, the National Environmental Management Authority, implemented a by-law regulating the amount of noise made in the city; if you were over seventy decibels you were liable to a 350,000 shilling fine and up to eighteen months in jail (20 November 2009). It was not only criminal for matatus to play loud music, but also for clubs, bars, private parties and even church services to project sounds above a particular decibel level. His disciplinary actions seemed to be spreading. For matatu owners and operators, it was simply another avenue for police officers and the Nairobi City Council to harass matatu operators and collect money from them.

53 Although a provisional part of this dissertation, the longevity of politicians in Kenya is astounding. Even in the face of explicit violence and corruption on the part of the politician in question, their intractability has been evinced most recent in the most recent election of a convicted war criminal as their new president (Uhuru Kenyatta, the son of Jomo) in March 2013.
Again, in early 2010, soon after the regulation on noise pollution went into effect, Michuki tackled the matatu sector by requiring all matatus to be painted a single color (see figures below). This policy restricted one of the most unique aesthetic traditions in the East African region, and put a significant number of young artists out of work. But, matatus also have a long history of supplying space for critical commentary on every topic from local politics to global scandals. I like the way that Steve articulates here, the ability of the vehicle to act as a canvas where current events can be splashed.

MF: What do you think about the lack of graffiti in the sector nowadays?

Steve: Mhya…it’s bad

MF: Why?

Steve: cause when you see graffiti…you kind of see culture, Nairobi culture. Cause sometimes they are political, so…you constrain what is in society. Something like that? There is a message in all the colors.

Just as in the KTN raid, then, Michuki, and the Kibaki government in general, seemed increasingly determined to control ideas and their movement. This meant controlling, or attempting to control, matatus and what is consumed in and around them. Although, this move is never cast this way from the perspective of politicians, instead, it is spun as a streamlining technique to make the transportation sector, and Nairobi’s urban landscape, an “attractive place for investment” (Kenyan government 2008).
Figure 5.8: Before photo of particularly expressive matatu art. Note the airbrushed portrait of Che Guevara on the side of the larger vehicle (source: https://encrypted-tbn2.gstatic.com/images).

Figure 5.9: After Michuki demanded that all matatu vehicles be painted one color (source: Claudia Pursals)

Regulating Space, Regulating Movement

The dashboard pictures, the uniforms and the certificates mark each worker’s legitimacy in the eyes of the state by limiting the access of illegitimate workers to money, as well as particular urban spaces. Shortly after the Michuki Rules were put into place in 2004, the government started allowing the biggest bus companies preferential access to particular areas of Nairobi’s city center, including the smaller area around the Parliament buildings known as the Central
Business District (CBD). The CBD is an important space in Nairobi’s urban milieu, particularly in terms of aesthetical concerns because it contains the large international hotels, government buildings and national monuments. The CBD is “off-limits” to a majority of the matatu sector because starting in 2005 the TLB began to require a permit to enter. In order to get a CBD permit the applicant must have a fleet of over one hundred and fifty buses, and all of the buses have to have a seating capacity of over sixty people. These two requirements, along with an application and a hefty fee, will secure the necessary permits needed to operate in the CBD.

Figure 5.10: Map of Nairobi’s central business district (CBD). The blue line marks the area that regular matatus are not allowed to enter. The red line shows the routes of the CBD permit holding bus companies (source: Mike Mueller).
Considering the average *matatu* owner only owns one or two vehicles, the idea that one must have a *fleet* is extremely exclusionary. They could be seen as what Ong calls “technologies of subjection – government policies that aim to police urban space, movement, travel because they differentially regulate groups for ‘optimal production’ through spatial practices that engage market forces” (2006:6).

In 2010, there were only three major transport companies that operated in the CBD. One of these large companies called “Citi Hoppa” was partly owned by John Michuki (*East African Standard*, 27 October 2003). Michuki in his government role repeatedly stacked the deck in his favor in the name of protecting society and disciplining those deemed risky. As a major shareholder of Citi Hoppa at this time, and until the time of his death in 201, Michuki’s bus company, Citi Hoppa, directly benefited from the transport policies that he passed.

KBS Ltd. Management and Citi Hoppa work under the franchise model and both have real and symbolic links to the colonial era. The other franchise company, KBS Management Ltd. specifically targeted the colonial nostalgia embedded in the brand of Kenya Bus Service, dating back to the colonial monopoly in 1934. Edward, an executive at KBS Ltd. missed some crucial historical irony of the company’s brilliant branding decision because of the lack of efficient service that plagued the colonial bus company, subsequently giving rise to the pirate taxi industry, and subsequently the matatu industry that he was trying to reform (personal communication 2010). KBS Ltd. and Citi Hoppa both employ the franchise model in that they

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54 One more company, “MOA Compliant” (owned by Simon Kimutai, Chairman of the Matatu Owners Association (MOA)) was on the rise but at the time of my research had not yet received their CBD permit. Having this permit and operating within the CBD is what I hold as the criteria of what I term a “big bus company,” and the World Bank describes as a “franchise model.”  
55 Although at this moment in time I have no “official” proof of his ownership (signed contract, written contract, explicit quoted statements), but it is widely documented by the national media and in daily conversations in Kenya.
attract investors who buy buses, paint the buses in the colors of the company and then hand it over to the company to operate and manage for an additional monthly fee.

There are positive and negative perspectives on this from the small-scale owners point of view. Take Joyce, owner of the Christian manyanga Tydes, who described how she weighed her options of private ownership, with the franchise model as such:

When I decided to go to matatu initially I didn’t have this idea. I wanted to take it to City Hoppa so they could [learn for me].56 But when I decided to go to matatu I didn’t have the idea of what I came up with. I just bought the bus and it takes several months to make. So on the finishing I realized I don’t have to go to City Hoppa cause I have to pay 2,000 every day for management and there is an entrance fee of about 50,000. So I calculated so if I manage it I can pay them 500 a day. So why lose 1,500 a day? (Personal communication, 2007)

Although most people initially saw John Michuki as a revolutionary savior, going against the classic neoliberal practices that normally are understood to withdraw state services, it is apparent in hindsight that many of his interventions were just exposing the contradictions of neoliberal governmentality, as scholars theorize (Harvey 2005; Ong 2006). The new modality that sees the state not necessarily withdrawing, but being even more “encompassing” through various institutions like the World Bank, which will be discussed in the coming next section (Ferguson and Gupta 2002). It is impossible to know for sure because of his death in 2011, but it seems as though Michuki was an ideal agent of neoliberal governmentality, especially when, through the last few regulations he made as a cabinet minister of any kind, so neatly paved the way for his own company’s success through the adoption of the franchise model, one of development’s newest “blueprints” (Roe 1991).

56 Here, Joyce just means that she wanted them to teach her the business. We were speaking in English, which is not her first, second, or maybe even third language of preference.
Franchising Privilege

Before starting the franchise, Edward, operations manager for KBS Management Limited (KBS Ltd.), wanted to connect his new bus company’s colonial brand with the “privilege” of working within the CBD. By using this somewhat strange reference to colonial exclusivity (examined in chapter 3) he surmised that he would attract more customers, which would also help make up for the overhead that comes with owning a company (personal communication, 2010). He explained that it is important to regulate competition through things like privileged space because larger transport companies pay more taxes: they pay advance tax, income tax and employee benefits for those on the payroll. He offered this pithy justification for the exclusivity of the CBD permit framework when he said, “to give the city shape, you have to have a company” (personal communication 2010). In other words, transportation, planning and the aesthetic of the city must not be left to the general citizen, small-scale matatu owner, or urban planning and government institutions, but to a wealthy company’s interests.

The CBD permit allows big buses to drive down Moi Avenue and up City Hall Way, all other matatus, those without a permit, cannot go North of Tom Mboya, East of Haile Selassie Avenue or West of University Way (refer to figure 2.1). Edward believed KBS Ltd. deserved to get special treatment because he wanted to “standardize the privilege” of working in the CBD. But enjoying this privilege for the three bus companies was not enough to even the competition between the franchises with their massive overheads and the small-scale owners who had to stay out of the city center. In 2010 this was just one of the choices of transport that were available in Nairobi. The phase-out of 2012, was an all out conscription of transportation options in Nairobi, modeled after one idea (big busses, franchise models) that is being applied to every crowded city in the developing world.
One size fits all development

The 2008 World Bank Report, Stuck in Traffic: Urban Transport in Africa, containing transportation data from fourteen African cities found that all of the major cities studied used a majority of mini-bus or midi-bus taxis to move their population (Kumar and Barrett). Public-Private partnerships from outside companies, like SC Johnson providing toilets in the Mathare slums, is an increasingly popular approach to development in Nairobi (Thieme 2011). The transport sector has different parameters regarding the public/private distinction because the informality of the sector means that no one owns it, so no one can really negotiate its appropriation, although many different groups try (MOA, MWA, MADCOWA).

Out of the fourteen African cities that have a majority mini- or midi-bus taxi sector providing their public transportation, Nairobi’s transportation sector is the only one to have retained private bus ownership since independence (Kumar and Barrett 2008: xi). Other countries usually tried and failed at having a state subsidized bus system at one point or another since their independence, which is precisely when the informal bus owners expanded in the market due to the inefficiency suffered at the hands of the nationalized system. Nairobi is different in this way because private property and private rights have always outweighed the good of the public (Klopp 1999, 2008). Part of the narrative surrounding Kenya’s decolonization is that the structural change of the government at the time of independence was not that different from the colonial government that came before it (Ogot and Ochieng 1995; Mutongi 2006).

The World Bank’s report framed this finding as a major development problem, stating that although mini-buses have become the dominant form of transport they are “far from an unalloyed good” (Kumar and Barrett 2008: 10). The authors cite the following reasons as the main problems, which will be addressed and solved with bigger buses: traffic congestion, safety
and emissions, unpredictability in fares and schedules, poor maintenance practices, “perverse incentives” and comfort (2008: 11). It is worthwhile to take each one of these problems in turn because of how the ethnographic data complicates the Bank’s understanding of the problem and the solution.57

First, congestion is a complicated matter, which is the result of multiple historical factors including the colonial legacy of poor urban planning. Out of the 550,000 vehicles on Nairobi roads only 15,000 are matatus (Klopp 2012: 3). Private automobile ownership is on the rise and currently nearly twenty percent of the households in Nairobi own at least one private automobile (Salon and Gulyani 2010: 642). Additionally, studies from the past three decades continually show that matatus are responsible for fifteen percent fewer accidents than private cars (Chitere and Kibua 2004). This increase in private cars, and new drivers, results in more accidents than matatus and when coupled with the unique nature of Nairobi’s post-colonial built environment, is more closely related to the root cause of the infamous Nairobi congestion.

Secondly, the problem of poorly maintained vehicles with dangerously high emissions are not automatically solved with bigger buses. Size does not guarantee that they will not be second-hand or poorly maintained vehicles producing fewer emissions.

Third, the unpredictable nature of transportation is more than just an African mini-bus problem. Travel and transport are often universally unpredictable. However, the connection of this irregularity with another critique of mini-bus transport operators, that they are motivated by “perverse incentives” is important (Kumar and Barrett 2008: xiv). According to the World Bank report, in most countries sampled, Kenya included, this term refers to how, because vehicles are

57 It should be made clear that the idea for bigger buses and the franchise system proposed by the World Bank’s report is not necessarily a Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) network. The implication is that with bigger buses the transition to BRT development is easier, but the initial phase focus is on bigger buses displacing the mini-bus sectors.
charged a small amount of money every time they leave the terminal, operators force their passengers to sit in the vehicle, waiting for the bus to fill up with passengers before it goes, which can sometimes take hours (Kumar and Barrett 2008: 15). The act of allowing passengers to wait in a hot vehicle, framed as a perverse incentive, is used as an important piece of evidence showing how poor management in mini-bus transport businesses hurt the citizenry. But being stuck on the tarmac at any international airport in the European Union can be as excruciating as sitting in a matatu in Nairobi. Thus, transport irregularity is framed as a development problem as well as a management problem.

Anthropological inquiry and methodology can offer some insight into the development narratives surrounding the matatu industry in Nairobi. Matatu operators manage various kinds of perverse incentives in such a way as to protect themselves while making things efficient for the passengers. Often, this is built into the informality and flexibility of the system, which is lost in reports like the Kumar and Barrett’s (2008). These reports often miss the informal structures that manage and regulate customer service in the transportation sector, like the common practice called *kuenda mlengo*, meaning that the matatu leaves the terminal stage before it is full, while picking up a few passengers on the way. The way it works is that there is a board with the plate numbers of each vehicle. When it was someone’s turn, they would simply place a sign on top of the vehicle to indicate which one was filling up. When that vehicle left the stage, one referred to the board and whatever vehicle was next on the list and at the stage would get the sign put on its roof signaling to passengers that it would be the next vehicle to be leaving the stage.
Therefore, to go mlengo, meant that you skipped your turn on the board and just left the stage and picked up some passengers as you went. There was a fine to go mlengo because you were breaking the rules and cutting in line. On some routes, this was managed severely by a route manager who held operators accountable for missing a turn. The problem with the World Bank reports and prescriptions, then, is that they make management a personal, and personnel, problem and not an issue of system, scale or history.
Size Matters: the fourteen-seater phase out

The fourteen-seater vehicles make up a majority of the mini-bus taxi sector in Nairobi (and throughout Africa), but in January 2012, the Transport Licensing Board (TLB) stopped registering them as passenger service vehicles (PSV). From then on, only a bus with a seating capacity of over forty-two people could be registered as a PSV.

The phase-out raises a number of concerns in addition to the small-scale investors who will be unable to enter the industry in the future. There are no provisions, yet, as to where the old vehicles will go, although, they will most likely go to service rural routes, the roads where most of the ghastly road accidents occur (often due to a combination of the perils of long-distance driving and mechanical failures) (George, personal communication, 2010). Additionally, many of Nairobi’s oldest neighborhoods have small roads that could never sustain these large vehicles in the first place, because they were built in the colonial era to accommodate private vehicles belonging to European settlers and colonialists (see chapter 3). As the competing and fragmented interests battle to shape the city through transport policy, it is clear that they have not thought about Nairobi’s physical limitations, the interests of the commuters, or operators.

The World Bank suggested that in all fourteen cities that now depend on mini- or midi-bus transportation, that bigger buses would “Provide greater comfort, safety and speed” given that “they can be managed efficiently and sustainably,” meaning municipal governments must be prepared to “repair their roadways, improve traffic management practices and ensure the economic viability of large-vehicle services through subsidies” (Kumar and Barrett 2008: xv, 11). However, for most African cities, particularly Nairobi, these conditions do not exist. The idea that bigger buses are generically better suited to all diverse African cities, from Lagos to Nairobi, presents a good example of what anthropologists of development have called
“development narratives” or “off-the-shelf” development projects, which lending institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank promote (McMichael 2000, Roe 1991). If it works in Colombia and China, it will work anywhere in Africa, too.58

While people who never ride buses demand the need for bigger buses, even smaller minibus taxis are proliferating on Nairobi’s official and unofficial roads. These miniature versions of matatus started to appear during my fieldwork shuttling passengers through the secondary roads in the East suburbs of Nairobi, in 2009. There are currently two types of smaller vehicles in Nairobi: the maruti and the probox. I rode a maruti, the tiny vehicles that only hold five passengers, while it wound a course from one main road to another by way of what was actually a pedestrian path, littered with people and little shops, or dukas, selling fruit and phone cards. The path was just big enough for the little vehicle to maneuver down on its way to drop people at their next bus stop, thus acting as a shuttle between main commuter paths.

The probox, (shown in figure below), made its first appearance in Nairobi in 2011 and is increasingly prevalent on various routes. It holds seven people and has an extended front hood, in contrast to the flat fronted Nissans. The flat front often proves to be fatal for the driver and other passengers in the front seat (Muyia 1995).

58 Development narratives have a long history in Africa, even before the neoliberal era of structural adjustment, and this history frames the current situation for matatus in Nairobi. In the early 1940s, British politicians attempted to restructure the colonies through failing modernization projects called colonial “development” projects, which often expropriated massive tracts of land and led to more intrusion, meddling and alienation of local populations than first intended (Parsons 2010: 330-5). One of the most heinous of these development projects was the Tanzanian groundnut scheme (Hogendorn and Scott 1981).
The mere existence of the maruti and the probox complicates the “bigger is better” transportation paradigm touted by the Kenyan government and development experts at the World Bank. Their view is as follows: large, streamlined buses are the only proper way to travel in Nairobi. However, Nairobi, as well as other post-colonial urban centers, houses plural societies in contested and perpetually changing built urban environments, which benefits more from flexibility than rigid constraints (Yeoh 1996). Big buses seemingly provide safer, more predictable and more efficient transportation in the eyes of development experts and investors alike. This recommendation is then translated nationally and implemented locally. From the World Bank, universal problems are diagnosed and a “one size-fits all” solution is prescribed and attached to economic packages in the form of aid or investment (Roe 1991).

The permit required for legal entry into the CBD, and the structural steps taken towards the eventual phase-out of fourteen-seater matatus, has followed in a long line of transport regulations undertaken in the name of safety, efficiency, and most importantly, privilege. The
Michuki Rules of 2004, and the subsequent regulations and recommendations for the transportation sector from the World Bank, implied that no one in the matatu sector was already doing what the government proposed -- operating big buses. However, the very framework from which the Michuki Rules were lifted was an idea borne of the entrepreneurial savvy of two of the most successful informal transportation entrepreneurs in Nairobi – John and Mary Mwangi, otherwise known as “Double M.”

The Mwangi Rules

The “Michuki Rules” probably should have been called the “Mwangi Rules.” Double M’s “Express Connection” bus line is the third big bus company with a CBD permit, but it is not owned and operated like a franchise. It is a family business. The couple, Mary and John Mwangi, built their fleet of over one hundred and fifty matatus one vehicle at a time (Mary Mwangi, personal communication, 2010). They started their firm in 1979, building vehicles from the wheel base to the paintjobs for other matatu operators. Eventually, they entered the passenger transport business themselves in 1986. Their Double M enterprise grew into one of the most successful businesses in Kenya, providing a model of bus transport for the developing world.

Before the Michuki Rules, Mary Mwangi, the managing director of Express Connections Bus Services, was focused on filling a growing demand in her middle-class neighborhood of Buru Buru. Buru Buru is a commuter dense neighborhood located in the Eastlands of Nairobi and is well known for its joyriders and manyanga culture. She wanted to emphasize respect and comfort in her transport services saying, “my service is like a cross between executive transport

59 Double M is the name of the body-building business that the Mwangi’s still run, fabricating vehicles for others in their workshops and garages, this part of the business is run by John Mwangi. Express Connections, the transport business that has the third CBD permit alongside of Citi Hoppa and KBS Ltd. is managed by Mary Mwangi (personal communication, 2010).
and manyanga” (personal communication, 2010). The Mwangi’s Express Connection started in 2001 in Buru Buru, and unlike its competitors, played no music, issued tickets for each passenger and only allowed seated passengers. The Mwangi’s trained each of their staff to their specifications and required them to wear a uniform of blue shirts, black ties and black sweater vests for conductors and purple shirts for drivers. They hired many women and young people who had never worked in the sector before and gave their employees a salary that they could count on, daily, so that they were less tempted to steal and would instead budget their money (Mary Mwangi, personal communication, 2010).

By the early 2000s, Express Connection’s big purple buses multiplied on route #58, and spread to other routes. Soon, Michuki’s government task force on transportation called on the Mwangis, and other owners, for input for the 2004 safety regulations. Although the government met with the Mwangis, they were still stunned by the disruptive impacts of the regulations. Their vehicles were ready for Legal Notice #161 when February 2004 arrived, except for the seatbelts. They were fined just like anyone else and made to spend the exorbitant amount on the thousands of belts for their large fleet of vehicles. Also, Express Connection’s employees were arrested or “fined” for not wearing the correct color of uniform, although Mary Mwangi had come up with the practice of uniforms in Nairobi transport in the first place. Eventually she won this battle and was able to keep her preferred color combination: purple shirts for drivers and blue for conductors accented with black vests and pants.

Mary lamented that although some of the Michuki Rules have helped the sector, she generally saw it creating a problem for her business (personal communication 2010). Her success came in identifying a group of people who wanted to have a different choice of transport
experience. They wanted a quiet ride to work in contrast with the young commuters from Buru Buru who preferred a *manyanga* that played loud music and videos in the relentless traffic jam. Thus, first, Michuki mined Mary Mwangi for ideas about her successful business and then worked over time to readjust the transport industry to fit this image. He invested in his own transport company that was a direct rival to the Mwangi’s product. By using government policies to stack the deck in his favor Michuki undermine the very middle class entrepreneur that the Vision 2030 plan and the World Bank claim to be supporting.

*Vision 2030*

After the Moi years, Kibaki (an economist) aimed to get Kenya back on the path to economic growth via the “Vision 2030” development plan, officially adopted on October 30, 2006 by Kibaki (Kenyan government 2006). The document is a Kenyan national translation of global neoliberal policies into familiar African development narratives. After the violence that shook Kenya in 2007 and 2008, Kenyan leaders and politicians attempted to “plan their way out” of the mess, according to Jacqueline Klopp (2012: 12). A piece of supplemental literature to Vision 2030 was published entitled, “A Summary of Key Investment Opportunities in Kenya,” explaining that transportation was a key area for investment because the budget cannot meet the demand (Kenyan government 2008). The Vision 2030 plan invites both foreign and private investment to the transport sector by supplying and managing larger buses to form a light rail or Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) system like the one operating in, Bogata, Colombia and Guangzhou, China (See Hustwit 2011).  

60 The film *Urbanized* shows how BRT in both Bogotá and Guangzhou function to relieve the city of congestion. In a lengthy interview with the Mayor of Bogotá he makes a fundamentally
maintained portion of highway, which is exclusively for big buses carrying commuters. This system works well and has eased congestion in these two cities. When BRT is combined with other policies such as shared bicycles, more bike lanes and lit pedestrian walkways can heavily reduce the congestion in even the most populated urban environments (Hustwit 2011).

Similarly to Kenya, the collective taxis of South Africa represent a subversive sector that is also a point of pride for the African population. The BRT is seen as a revival of oppressive colonial policies surrounding the question of who is allowed to provide transportation for which populations. In Johannesburg, South Africa, the owners of the informal taxi system protested against the introduction of the BRT system (Graeff 2009). The informal transportation sector in Johannesburg especially, enjoys a historical legacy as a particularly African enterprise, operating for the African population during apartheid; they are still referred to as, “black taxis” (Blom-Hansen 2006; Meshack Khosa 1995). For both practical and social reasons it is important to keep matatus in mind when planning the future of Nairobi, as they will be the ones providing services for many neighborhoods that systems, like the BRT, will not reach.

The absence of pedestrians, a BRT system and any form of collective mini-bus taxis along the highway that adorns the cover of the Vision 2030 document (figure 5.14) clearly shows how the government sees the future role of matatus and pedestrians. There are other transport futures to be imagined for Nairobi besides this view of wide, paved streets without buses or pedestrians. They might include creative answers to smaller spaces, but, often, development narratives go bigger, not smaller.

...important assertion when he says, “when you build more roads, you don't congestion, you get more cars, and more congestion” (Hustwit, 2011).
Figure 5.14: The cover of the investment supplement that accompanies Vision 2030, Kenya's development plan. The large, empty highways show no pedestrians and only one public service vehicle (source: Kenyan government 2006).

In the case of small-scale transportation operators in Nairobi who are being forced to become investors in larger franchise operations, bigger is not better, just more exclusive (Kumar and Barrett 2008). The franchise approach was adopted into the national transportation plan for Nairobi under the Vision 2030 document that aims to “transform Kenya into a newly industrializing, middle-income country providing a high quality of life for all of its citizens by the year 2030” (Kenyan government 2006). However, it is this middle-income sector of the economy that suffers the most from this policy. This World Bank’s critique sets up another justification for the adoption the franchise model, which promotes the bigger bus paradigm by negating the system already in place.
Conclusion

The irony of transport policy leads to bigger questions of governmentality and neo-liberalism in Kenya. In contrast to many of the owners who built their matatu businesses in the informal sector through years of experience and trial and error, the government and other powerful, elite actors have attempted to shift control of transport profits into their own hands through policies that are widely accepted as “good governance” and parroted by institutions, such as the World Bank and IMF. Kibaki’s administration promoted an idea of a nation built around a strong middle-class, but many of the policies undermined these very people. People like John and Mary Mwangi created jobs and moved the population, and largely built the transport model that inspired the same government regulations that are now used to make it hard for the next generation of Mwangis to enter the business. The road to Vision 2030 will likely not be as smooth as it may seem in the picture, especially when it comes to transportation reform. As Jacqueline Klopp points out (2011), urban transportation decisions are usually made by people who never use the system, which may be why there are no pedestrians or matatus in Kenya’s future, only big buses managed by elite special interests in the good of the nation.
CHAPTER 6: ROADBLOCKS AND RISKY BUSINESS

“We don’t trust policeman...cause sometimes you get to the stage and some, [conductors] they disappear. They disappear. That is why no one trusts the government”
(Rasta George, Nairobi, 2010).

Although movement in Nairobi is the framework of this dissertation, lack of movement is more often the driving force behind life in Nairobi. Anyone who has ever been to, or through, Nairobi can attest to the intense congestion that clogs the city’s roads. Twice a day, nearly every day, there is a traffic jam that lasts for one to three hours on average. This four to six hour period of restricted movement is referred to as “the jam” and is a constant topic of conversation. Managing this congestion, especially in public service vehicles, while getting passengers where they need to go and meeting daily targets for owners, promotes negative behaviors, like participating in police corruption and collusion with criminal gangs, for which matatu operators are stigmatized.\(^6\)

As if the physical congestion and lack of adequate roads and road maintenance was not problematic enough for these workers, there is also an informal duty on mobility in the city of Nairobi. Matatu operators are levied by both sanctioned state officials acting on the government’s behalf (police, city council *askaris*) and also by unofficial, informal groups (Mungiki, *Kamjesh*) that prey on the availability of liquid cash flowing through the thousands of hands and pockets of conductors and drivers in the moving vehicles. These “outside actors” populate the environment of risk in Nairobi (see wa Mungai and Samper 2006; chapter 4) lie in

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\(^{6}\) As mentioned in the introduction, matatus are routinely blamed for Nairobi’s congestion, but when they go on strike, which they often do in order to protest the corrupt practices that this chapter focuses on, it becomes glaringly obvious that the congestion would be unbearable if there were no functioning public transportation service. The increase in private cars and drivers on city streets, some of which were built in the colonial era, makes transportation strikes and the practices that they expose even more loathed and simultaneously embedded.
wait at strategic places (near bus stops, construction points, roundabouts, speed bumps) where drivers must slow down. Traffic police routinely stop matatus in Nairobi, in a somewhat casual manner, quietly talking to the driver and inspecting the vehicle until the driver hands them their license and before long the matatu is on its way. What may not be obvious to the foreigner or the untrained eye is that the licenses are usually accompanied with a 100-200 KSh note ($1-2 USD) for the police officer. It has reached such a formalized level of accepted illegality that many experienced and familiar police and drivers use the electronic banking system MPESA to transfer money from one account to another through their mobile phones instead of exchanging cash on the street.  

![Traffic officer discussing the matatu’s arrest as it is towed to the police station](photo by author)

Although the corruption described above is common all over the world, the form and function of corruption in developing countries is distinct from European and North American

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MPESA is not quite an acronym. *Pesa* means money in Swahili, and the letter M stands for mobile. MPESA is a fascinating topic on its own from a technological perspective and has been widely lauded as an astounding innovation for mobile banking in developing countries.
versions (see Leys 1975). Scholars further differentiate the corruption in Africa from Latin America and Asia because of the specific nature of contemporary African states and the extent that corruption affects them (Olivier de Sardan 1999: 25-6; Haugerud 1997). This chapter draws on the work of Olivier De Sardan, who urges scholars to study corruption from the “everyday experiences of the actors and participants involved,” whereby the “moral economy of corruption” is embedded in sociocultural logics of negotiation, gift-giving, solidarity, predatory authority and redistributive accumulation (1999: 25). The matatu sector offers an ideal window into these social mechanisms of corruption and the processes of legitimation as seen from the actors’ point of view, which embeds corruption in everyday practices. The informal roots of the matatu sector are broadly highlighted by what he, and others describe as the “logics of negotiation,” which not only concerns a simple matter of negotiation within the limits of a set of stable rules accepted on all sides (like bartering price), but is extended to a negotiation of the rules themselves (Olivier de Sardan 1999:36; Berry).

This chapter explains how matatu operators perceive their participation in corruption as legitimate risk management practices in accordance with these logics, and how this compounds and complicates their stigmatized position. It furthers the broad dissertation argument that the urban transportation sector in Kenya is a profound site of changing forms of meaning making through self-reflexive processes of identification and new forms of urban sociability and subjectivity (Giddens 1991). It does so by showing how matatu operators both perpetuate and legitimate corruption and are also finding new, specifically urban ways of opposing and resisting corruption.
Understanding Corruption: Greasing the wheels of movement in the city

The moral economy of corruption is defined as, “the subtle restitution of the value systems and cultural codes which permit a justification of corruption by those who practice it and anchor corruption in everyday practice” and it includes a “complex of illicit practices associated with state functions that contradict that official ethics of public property or public service and the like” (Olivier de Sardan 1999: 26-7). This “corruption complex” can include different “techniques” of corruption, from paying bribes to civil servants to public officials dipping into the public purse – thus including both “petty” and “major” corruption. Although often discussed in this way, petty and major corruption techniques are not merely two opposing poles, but part of a continuum of practice. With repetition, these practices are generalized and banalized -- “stigmatized in words and practiced in fact” (Olivier de Sardan 1999: 29).

The matatu industry can be understood as a corruption complex because it includes both poles of “petty” and “major” corruption practices while including various positions on the continuum in between those poles. Thus, understanding the motivations and sociocultural logics of the matatu corruption complex allows for further articulation and clarification of the paradox of the “culture of blaming” that Mutongi aptly describes (2006), “because the widespread stigmatization of corruption, public and private is practiced by all” (Olivier de Sardan 1999: 29).

In spite of unanimous condemnation of corruption and no matter the differences in the idiosyncrasies of regime type, from dictatorship to democracy, corruption accommodates all (Bayart 1992). As for business interests, corruption seems to “function like the grease necessary for turning the wheels of a notoriously inefficient bureaucracy” (Nye 1967: 418).
As more official regulations like Michuki Rules, are put into place, the avenues of corruption are increasingly harder to maneuver through. The variety of things that a police officer can arrest matatus for is almost endless; I was told more than once, “Every matatu on this road is guilty” (personal communication, 2009, 2010). Because no matatu vehicle is truly roadworthy, according to Kenya’s official road rules and regulations, in order to operate in the business one must be willing to pay a bribe or go to jail. As Steve complained, “they can always take you in and charge you with touting. And, in a court of law, you can never prove you are not touting” (personal communication, 2010).

Practices which come under the corruption complex (although widely loathed) are legitimized by their perpetrators and the borderline between what is corruption and what is not fluctuates, depending on the contexts of the actors involved. This legitimization process explains why the “culture of blaming” and the widespread scapegoating of the matatu sector persists
because “whoever practices corruption auto-legitimates his own behavior, by presenting himself, for example as a victim of a system in which he is bound to this kind of practice to avoid wasting time/and or an insupportable amount of money, being penalized or condemned to inactivity (Olivier de Sardan 1999: 35). Steve articulated this process further in the following excerpt:

**Steve**: The issue of corruption is ripe on our roads, OK. We are compelled to be corrupt cause whenever the traffic officer (*laughing and whispering*) come here and tell you “I’m going to charge you with the offense of obstruction and what…” In the court of law goes for 10,000, or 10 to 15,000…and uh, this askari will need 1,000 or 1,500. OK! It’s not right, but what do I do? One thing, in a court of law, you lose a lot of time, you waste a lot of time. You know in a court of law…seatbelts, uh, mostly charged from 500 to 300. It’s a small amount, but uh, the time – you take the whole day. As in, you are arrested in the morning, most of them, they arrest you at 7:30 to 8:00am –

**MF**: Ugh, before work…

**Steve**: sadly, yeah. You miss work. Cause in the…you’ll be released at around 3 or 4pm in the evening.

**MF**: for a seat belt…

**Steve**: (*laughing*) for a seat belt…

Steve articulates the efficiency of corruption in this discussion of time and illustrates how the inefficiency of the state is used as a justification for corruption.

Participating in corrupt practices for time saving on the road is a common occurrence among all drivers, not just matatu drivers. I offer the following anecdote of my own participation in corrupt practices to further elucidate how both corruptor and coruptee use *time itself* as a negotiating tool. The vehicle I was driving in Kenya had a cracked windshield, a violation of the traffic rules and regulations for roadworthy vehicles. My vehicle, like most other vehicles on Kenyan roads was unroadworthy. I had been pulled over twice and had lost my temper when the police told me that I would have to go to the police station, impound my car, call someone to pick me up and then come to court and pay to get it out after having the windscreen fixed, of
course. Another option was to pay the fine, there and then, with whatever I had in my wallet, which was a singular thousand shilling note ($14 USD). I did. I was angry about it, but I was in a hurry that day and had no friends to come and pick me up. I admittedly paid the bribe because it was easier, but I did not feel great afterwards, and I complained to Steve.

He laughed and gave me the following advice: when the officer pulls you over, be very happy to see him and act like you have all the time in the world. I told Steve that it would be impossible for me to do this with the Kenyan police, but he implored me to try. Not long after this I was stopped again on the same road as the previous times. I was sure they knew me as the white woman with the cracked windshield who gets mad very easily and pays hefty bribes. But this time, when I was pulled over, I smiled. And when he told me that I would have to go to the police station with him, I opened the passenger side door to offer him the front seat and asked him which way to go. The officer smiled, got in the car and the moment he sat in the seat he looked at me and asked if it would be alright if “we just forgot about it for now?” To which I replied that it would indeed be fine with me. We shook hands and he got out of the car.

When I told Steve the story, he laughed and explained the logic behind the tactic’s success. It centered on the experience, or perceived experience of time. If you seem in a hurry, then the police know you will pay to get on your way. If you seem like you have all the time in the world, you can spend all day at court without worry. The police officer is then put in the position of losing out on making money from people who will simply pay bribes as he accompanies you to the proper authorities. In Nairobi, there is a high probability that the person

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63 Many police do not have their own vehicles, as mentioned earlier in this dissertation. They have to get rides from the people who they pull over or from the tow truck that comes to take the vehicle away.
driving the private car behind you is in a hurry and will pay the hundred shillings and go.\textsuperscript{64} The manipulation of time, and exploiting one’s sense of urgency, is a crucial element of the corruption complex of techniques. Once I understood this, I never paid a bribe to the traffic officers on my way home again, but I also realized why matatu operators were never free of paying; they were \textit{always} hurried and racing to meet their targets.

The economics of matatu ownership is generally organized by daily targets that crews are expected to meet. The target amount usually comes from research done by the owner before joining the route (personal communication, 2007, 2008). For most routes in Nairobi, a fourteen-seater mini-bus the owner will expect 3,500 KSh ($50 USD) at the end of each day, for bigger vehicles 5,000 KSh ($75 USD) is the average (Chitere and Kibua 2004). The owner will also expect the vehicle to be returned with a full tank of gas, which can cost around 3,000 KSh ($45 USD) as well. Whatever is left over from this target is split between the driver and conductor. It usually works out to around 500-600 KSh ($8-9 USD) a day. However, the payoffs to “outside actors” can cost up to 500 KSh ($8 USD) or more, a day. This drain on the bottom line is much of the reason why matatu operators break road rules in the first place in order to make their targets. Therefore, the briber, embezzler or corrupter has “good reasons” for his or her actions and can easily dismiss themselves of all culpability and illegitimacy, leading to the widely adopted habit of blaming matatu drivers for nearly everything that is wrong with Kenyan society.

\textsuperscript{64} Although I just mentioned that I paid a thousand shillings, most Kenyans I relayed this story to were most appalled by the amount I had paid (1,000 KSh), not the paying of it. They all said they would often pay bribes, but never that much, which was less about not having that much money on them, but more about the skill with which they could negotiate the price of their bribe in a way that I could not, at least at that time.
Instead of analyzing the social processes of everyday corruption through the ambiguous dichotomy of stigmatization/self-justification, Olivier de Sardan insists on pinpointing a number of practices that in and of themselves have little to do with corruption, but allow for its generalization, banalisation and ubiquity. This then allows for the reintegration of corruption into the larger fabric of everyday practices “expressing positive logics from the perspective of habitual social norms” (Olivier de Sardan 1999: 36).

In his analysis, Olivier de Sardan, highlights five sociocultural logics that allow for the acceptance of corrupt practices in everyday life: 1) the logics of negotiation, 2) the logics of gift giving, 3) the logics of redistributive accumulation, 4) the logics of solidarity networks and 5)
the logics of predatory authority, all of which will be discussed throughout this chapter (1999: 36-44). It is important to note that the author is not using these logics as unchanging since the pre-colonial era or existing in a vacuum, but is emphasizing how they logics overlap and are crosscut with other social factors like the over-monetization of personal relationships and the role of shame, which I will come to later.

One concept is of particular importance here for understanding the role of police, and to some extent other state actors, like John Michuki, is the sociocultural logics of “predatory authority” whereby the perpetrators see corrupt interactions as not simply a matter of personal choice, but a right they are afforded by their office and their position of power (Olivier de Sardan 1999: 42, emphasis added). Non-payment or low payment for services explains some of the reason why public civil servants need to subsidize their incomes with corrupt practices, but perhaps the “colonially appointed chiefs and indigenous auxiliaries who enjoyed a wide margin of arbitrary actions” had something to do with it as well (Olivier de Sardan 1999: 42)?

The scarcity of “an ethic of the public service” within African civil services (not in words, but in practice) has often been pointed out by scholars of Africa, whereby the youthfulness of these states and of their apparatus, as well as the traumatizing experience of colonialism, are to some degree responsible (Cooper 1994; 2002). At the same time, scholars argue that there is actually little “public” space in African villages in the ways that Western NGOs and economists understand it because there are multiple groups (lineage groups, peer groups, ritual societies) that have no general interest for “communal” or “public” spaces or services (Olivier de Sardan 1999: 31). Additionally, the people who were supposed to look out for this general interest were colonial agents who propped up themselves and their social networks. As for the post-colonial regimes, these have propelled into existence a local elite
“wearing the boots of the European dominators,” so that from the top to the bottom of the state apparatus, those in positions of power who claim the right to levy tribute has undergone rapid expansion (Olivier de Sardan 1999: 42).

Those with the power to levy tribute have expanded in Nairobi to the point that it is hard to avoid these actors for transportation operators, as illustrated in the following discussion.

**MF:** Does harassment by police bother you?

**Rasta George:** a lot…

**James:** …they bother us a lot…

**George:** Askaris are a major problem…

**Wilson:** City Council askaris

**MF:** City Council askaris are even worse than the traffic police?

**George:** yeah, worse…

**Wilson:** Then there is Rhino…

**James:** yeah.

**MF:** Those are undercover police?

**James:** Yeah.

**Rasta George:** …undercover…

**MF:** But they are police though?

**Rasta George:** yeah.

**MF:** Ok, then there are…. askaris, kaanjo, NCC, “corruption is evil”… and then there are regular traffic police? ⁶⁵ And from what I understand…*(attempting to go on)*

**Steve:** and then…there are *(interrupting me)*… rhino, A.P.

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⁶⁵ Askaris work for Nairobi City Council (NCC) and they give many tickets and fines and take many bribes from matatu operators. They also wear bright yellow jackets with the phrase “CORRUPTION IS EVIL” in green, block letters across the back.
MF: A.P.? (*never hearing of this one, I was surprised*) What do they look like?

Steve: They are also undercover but at times… they wear a uniform.

MF: with a blue hat…?

Rasta George: No with a black hat…with a jungle…

MF: Oh with camouflage?

Rasta George: yeah, camouflage.

MF: So you have to deal with all of those people every day? Which ones are the worst?

Gladys: All of them are worst (*like that was a very silly question to ask*).

The idea that there are so many officially sanctioned actors that can demand bribes from matatu operators speaks directly to Olivier de Sardan’s point of rapidly expanding arenas of officially sanctioned levies. In many ways these state actors have become simply tollbooths, or roadblocks, that the matatu operator engages with as an everyday part of their job. But, for every repeated interaction, however seemingly calm and routinized, there is a threat of violence, bodily harm or loss of freedom looming and it does not take much resistance to spark an escalation that may lead to pain, arrest or even death.

Even among the rampant system of pay outs to all of these official actors, it is highly likely that most matatu workers will have been arrested at some point by either the traffic police, NCC askaris, or members of the “Rhino” squad, an undercover unit of traffic police expressly designed to catch matatu operators and passengers violating traffic laws. As one driver put it while laughing in my face, “Of course I have been arrested. I am a matatu driver. It is part of my job” (*Kim, personal communication, 2010*). When a driver is arrested, the matatu is taken to the police station and kept until someone comes to bail the vehicle and the driver out, often in that
order. If they cannot pay, and the owner does not come to get the operator out of jail, they can spend months in a cell for traffic offenses. The new Kenyan constitution, passed in 2010, has a stipulation that PSV operators cannot be jailed for over six months for traffic offenses (personal communication 2010).

MF: Do they keep matatu drivers in jail for more than 6 months? (surprised, and a little skeptical).

Rasta George: yeah…

George: yeah…there are some that have been in there more than that

Rasta George: even 18 months.

MF: 18 months in jail? (again, surprised)

Rasta George: yeah.

Steve: When you argue with these policemen, depending what is said, when he takes you with him, there will be like seven counts…

Rasta George: Contravening if you cant pay the 18,000 then three months…obstruction…8,000…four months…no uniform…one month…so many…

For many scholars, corruption, once embedded into a society cannot be reversed (see Chabal and Daloz, 1999) and “the more it develops the more it becomes engrained in social habits” (Olivier de Sardan 1999: 32). Three sets of factors affect the irreversibility of corruption in African states: 1) the crisis of African states in terms of massive unemployment and irresponsible ruling elite, 2) underpayment of civil servants and 3) routes of clientalism, which are favorable to corruption and have been widely introduced by the development complex, as often discussed by anthropologists of development at length (Haugerud 1997; Olivier de Sadarn 1999: 32). Indeed, the entrenchment is apparent, as police have been key actors in the sector since the beginning, over fifty years ago. Recall the complaint from Mr. Chun to the police inspector who admitted to
knowing about the pirates but not being able to do anything about them, in 1960, and the Nation’s undercover (see chapters 3 and 4). From then, the practice has just grown.

Another version of “predatory authority” can be illustrated in the widespread understanding that many matatu operators work on the reported 40% of matatus that police own (Matatu Today, April 2006). It is difficult to trust these statistics, as it is illegal for police to own matatus according to the Public Officers and Ethics Act passed in 2006 (James, personal communication, 2020). Officers tend to hide the fact that they are in the transport business, at least for a little while. James, a senior member of the transport police I interviewed denied owning a matatu for several hours before admitting he had been in the industry for years and owned three matatus.

Once he opened up, he was casual about the deeply rooted connection between police and matatus. He said “During Moi, it was fine for police to line their pockets with money from the matatu industry, now…” he trailed off shaking his head no and waving his hand (James, personal communication, 2009). Still, once he heard that I had been moonlighting as a conductor on route #48, with Steve’s vehicle, Frost, he did assure me that I would not get in trouble if I worked on his matatu. By working on a vehicle owned by a police officer, you do not spend all day in the court or jail cell, like other operators do. Police often hide their ownership of a matatu and even their colleagues do not know they have one. They send people in their place to get the matatu out of jail, if they even find themselves there, which many reportedly do not.

MF: are there still a lot of police that own matatus?

James: yeeeeeah (like I just asked a ridiculous question)

George: yeah, but through proxies…so they never go to court.

MF: yeah, even me, I met one…
George: such matatus are not even arrested by the way…because it belongs to them.

Working for a police owner has other privileges, as Tony points out in the following conversation (personal communication, 2007).

MF: The owners, they can be anybody?

Tony: Anybody

MF: women, men, wazee (old people)

Tony: Anybody.

MF: vijana? (young men)

Tony: anyone, anyone (laughing)…President

MF: Kibaki! (The president at the time)

Tony: ANYONE!

MF: MICHUKI!

Tony: …most of these matatus are owned by police, by policemen.

MF: Michuki! (Calling back to John, a friend of Tony’s present for the interview who is still agreeing with me that Michuki owns matatus).

Tony: So they get a phone call, they release it. Whooosh (hand motion to show it is gone) and it’s off, you know. It’s advantageous cause you…get arrested and you say, “my boss…is a…”

MF: Makarau (cop, in Sheng)

Tony: …is a big boss” (finishing his sentence). So I wont worry much, even if they out me in jail, he’ll just come and tell them, “Hey! He’s my worker, OK. So, get out! Go back to work!”
Figure 8: The trade magazine, Matatu Today, covering the issues concerning the sector. A prominent issue is the role of police officers in the industry (source: Matatu Today).

Thus, the relationship between police and matatu operators is deeply connected and intertwined, mutually constituted through their illicit economic relationship. This speaks not only to the lives experiences of corruption from the actors’ point of view but also the ways that these practices and the stigmatization process is built, embedded and then exploited. By continuing to open up avenues of corruption and promote inefficient government practices in the name of the public good, corruption will not only make sense but it will be optimal. Corruption, in this way then, is
not really a choice, but a business practice and risk management strategy to stay out of jail and to meet economic targets.

_Utanijenga (you will build me): Mungiki, Kamjesh and Generational Tension_

The vigilante gang called Mungiki is one of the most widely publicized and terrifying facets of the matatu sector to come about in the past decade. Mungiki is an ethnically homogenous Kikuyu group, characterized both by rural religious tenets and urban political activity; they were also responsible for a deadly turf war with rival groups for control of large portions of Nairobi’s matatu sector in 2001 (Anderson 2002: 538). Although a deep discussion of Mungiki’s changing political face is beyond the scope of this dissertation, the group are said to have emerged as followers of the “Tent of the Living God” religious sect in 1987 (Wamue 2001: 455). There are other gangs that prey on the matatu sector but they are not as widespread as Mungiki. Also, because of the well-publicized battles that Mungiki has had over matatu stages and routes, and their horrific and gruesome acts of violence against matatu operators, they are heavily associated with the matatu industry (Anderson 2002).

Not all routes have to deal with Mungiki members, but several routes are under almost constant surveillance by the group.

**Rasta George:** you know, in Kileleshwa, there is no…uh, in our routes we don’t have those people who used to harass people. If you go to Embakasi, there is another group called Mungiki, you know them, eh?

**MF:** yeah

**Rasta George:** and there, you have to follow their rules if you live there. But in Kileleshwa you don’t have those people.

**Steve:** Plus, in Kileleshwa, there are no slums…lots of government officials so you will get arrested. If you do something wrong…
Rasta: yeah, these things are caused by slums. By the poverty.

George: So let us compare these other places. I have worked almost a third of the routes operating matatus. The situation in central Kenya…it is very, very …because there are sort of small GODs and you have to go as part of what they want. You can be threatened

Steve: Not even threatened. You can be killed

Rasta: You can disappear

George: Yes, threats come first. Like in Dandora, Kayole, Embakasi, Wangigi, Dagoretti

Steve: I had a friend who told me once, in Dandora…the owners of the vehicles are taken there and you are told, “you will pay.” Then they started to have war and [the owners] were slapped. Every morning you pay 700. So to work in those routes, you have to be hard-core.

MF: Then you have a bad reputation

Steve: Yes, the Mungiki, they are being feared by traffic police.

Route #105 to Kikuyu, was one particular route that I worked on, which was almost entirely controlled by Mungiki. Many people I interviewed would not even mention the name Mungiki; they simply referred to those individuals involved as “members” and were very afraid of their wrath. Jackson, a veteran driver, forty-six years of age with several children, was particularly vocal about Mungiki’s tactics on route #105, where he lived and worked.

While slowly drawing his thumb across his neck, he warned, “if you don’t pay, they will whip you and sometimes they can even burn your matatu or kill you” (personal communication, 2009). Jackson told me that each matatu paid 200 KSh per day, usually in the morning, and that you knew whom to pay because of they had signs that marked them, like the way they wore their hats and the language they used. The hat, a baseball cap, was worn with a straight bill, high set on the head. This was one physical marker of members, according to Jackson and others on route #105 (personal communication, 2009).
When I asked how Mungiki kept track of who had paid and who had not, Jackson pointed to the ashtray. I opened it and pulled out two small, colored, scraps of paper, which I was informed, were receipts issued by the members. Just as payments to police were becoming more formalized, so were payments to Mungiki, as they are now issuing receipts.

Figure 9: The receipts that Mungiki members issued on route 105. The strips are about as long as match sticks (source: photo by author).

Jackson, offered great insight to the way that generational tension contributes to a personal moral struggle and ambivalence when he said,

For me, maybe 60% should continue, and 40%, I support it. For one, I support it because most of them they are members of my tribe and if I say I recommend they all get killed, there will be no generation because they are the youngest generation. I can say that they take my…they demand it, so if they assess you and they write a note and they tell you, threaten you, if have a business, “You are ancestors, so you are our blood, we have nothing, we are not working, so we need our share, you have to share the money (personal communication, 2010).

What these young Mungiki members seem to be articulating is related to the Kikuyu concepts *githaka* (land) and *ituika* (generational change and turnover), which were major social tension that contributed to the escalation of “Mau Mau” (Peterson 2004; Lonsdale and Berman 1992: 344; see chapter 3).
In Kikuyu culture, it is important for the elder generation to help the younger generation by handing down land, but during colonialism and the displacement of Kikuyu people by European settlers, it was increasingly difficult for the older generation to hand anything down, causing resentment and escalating unease over time. Part of *githaka ituika* (generational turnover of land) was to “convert personal wealth into collective peace… and was said to happen every thirty years” (Lonsdale and Berman 1992: 344-5). When this stopped happening the younger generation rebelled, articulating the alienation of land and rights at the hands of European colonialists and Kikuyu loyalists. This tension is especially palpable for Jackson, as a Kikuyu, facing terrorism from members of his own ethnic group he feels as though he does owe them something because he is an elder.

One comment made by a young, Kikuyu, conductor named Maina summed up the expectations of young people towards elders like Jackson when he explained, “We are not bad people. The owners know we are stealing from them. It is not really stealing… we say, *utanijenga*, you will build me. They know that they need to help us. So it is not stealing” (personal communication, 2010). There is a constant adjustment in the relationship between owners and conductors that takes into account this subsidy without necessarily trying to end it. The logic of gift giving and the logic of redistributive accumulation best explain this practice of “building others,” that Maina describes. Gift giving and sharing are moral duties (Mauss [1950] 1990), and in African societies especially important for family members, and others (neighbors, friends) both in higher and lower social strata and to refuse either to give a gift or to redistribute what you have accumulated can bring bad luck as well as social disapproval leading to jealousy.

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66 I discuss these concepts in more depth in chapter 3.
67 It only dawned on me when writing this dissertation that Maina, and actually many of my informants and friends in the matatu sector, probably identified as Mungiki.
and witchcraft (in some African societies and nations more than others) (Shipton 2007). These overlapping logics of gift-giving and redistributive distribution are apparent in the ways that Mungiki, and others, articulate their practices.

Another group that is reported to prey just as fiercely on the matatu industry as Mungiki is a group called Kamjesh. From the data I gathered on these groups, it seems as though Kamjesh is not ethnically driven, except maybe to explicitly include Luo and Luhya people as a measure to combat the ethnic Kikuyu homogeneity of Mungiki. I encountered a Kamjesh member in 2008, in Nairobi, at Globe Cinema roundabout stage where he was working as a loader, or tout. After refusing his offer for a ride we struck up a conversation. When I mentioned Mungiki and Kamjesh he exclaimed, “I am Kamjesh!” I said something about him being too friendly to be in a gang like that. He informed me that Kamjesh is not a gang like Mungiki, it is more like a support group for unemployed matatu operators (Bena, personal communication, 2008).

Kamjesh, he claimed, was simply the unemployed drivers and conductors who wait for skwads all day (skwads are discussed in depth in chapter 5). This trickle down economic practice allows operators to a) take breaks and, b) spread the wealth to those a little less fortunate. These young people, matatu operators, are taking care of other young people in need through a care taking practice, which is supported by the logic of redistributive accumulation. How then did Kamjesh get this reputation and why were they misunderstood to be violent? In response to that question, he laughed and held up his right hand to show that four of his fingers were gone. He said that Kamjesh has had to defend routes from Mungiki takeovers, which has resulted in their bad reputation (Bena, personal communication, 2008).

Other matatu operators characterized the group in this way as well, as a support network of sorts for those who were out of work, many of whom readily admitted to being in Kamjesh.
This was important, of course, because of the nature of informal work of matatus anyone can be out of work at anytime. Kamjesh membership just means that you are more likely to get a few shillings at the end of each day than other young, unemployed, Kenyan men. The legitimacy of Kamjesh’s type of corruption differs from that of Mungiki in the eyes of matatu operators because of the differences in work ethics between the two groups. In addition to the unrestrained violence, matatu operators complain about Mungiki because the members get paid without actually doing much work in the industry, whereas Kamjesh members are inside members of the workforce and appreciated as such.68

The roles played by these logics in the generalization and banalisation of corruption are hard to ignore and they are usually combined, “thus dissolving juridically reprehensible practices into the fabric of similar and socially commonplace practices, which happened to be accepted and even esteemed (Olivier de Sardan 1999: 44), explaining the simultaneous awe and loathing matatu operators receive for their maneuvering skills. These logics do not necessarily force people to engage in corruption; they do, however, exert pressure on social actors while allowing for an acceptability of corruption. In this milieu then, the owners and operators are seemingly perpetually at odds with each other due to the combined factors of the owner 1) giving away their expensive investment (vehicle) to someone else to drive all day 2) while knowing Nairobi’s environment of risk and 3) knowing that their will likely be, not only mechanical expenses, but also incur social ones as well.

68 I write “much” here because Jesse, a veteran driver, had informed me that the only good thing that Mungiki did for the matatu industry was to regulate the routes and who could be on them. The government later succeeded in doing this by requiring matatu operators to paint the numbers of their route on the side of their vehicle, but this was not until 2004. Mungiki had succeeded in an informal regulation of routes by keeping track of the vehicles that had paid to be on the route. Seeing a vehicle that had not paid in a neighborhood that Mungiki ran, there would be trouble.
Trust: The Paradoxical relationship between owners and crewmembers

When I asked one of the large matatu fleet owners if the gas pumps he owned and operated saved the crews’ money when filling up at the end of the day. His response surprised me at the time, “Actually, I raise the prices a little because I know the driver and conductor have already [stolen] and will take more if they know the gas is cheap. So I raise it up a little” (Peter, personal communication, 2010).

The lack of job security and trust is a fundamental tension that pervades owner-crew interactions. One owner put it like this, “this is the only business I know of where the investor has no power…at all. This industry makes people cheat…because there is no accounts” (Gitau, personal communication, 2009)! It is the participation in these risky behaviors and corrupt practices that leads to the perception that all matatu people are bad people, criminals, gangsters with loose morals, and this stigma is combated with bravado by the crews (Goffman 1963b). It is not a new cycle but one that is historically rooted in the roles that informal transport operators have always experienced in Nairobi. Although many people will blame the youth, it has been this way since before Kenya’s independence (see chapter 3).

The relationship between owners and operators is often strained, while owners do their best to maintain elusive and incomplete control over the risky nature of the matatu industry. Again the sector’s informal status and large scope makes matatu ownership a unique and personal experience that each owner handles differently. Some are deeply engaged with their employees well being and attempt to pay them living-wages, collect them promptly from jail or the hospital if they are hurt and even help them with their uniforms (Francis, personal communication, 2007). While others may not even know the names of most of their employees

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69 As already discussed there are many owners who are police. In this section, I am focusing on the owners who are not police and are generally small-scale owners of one or two vehicles.
and essentially rely on one manager or trustee that hands out matatu work on a first-come first-serve basis (Peter, personal communication, 2010).

Tony describes the way informal work structures the nature of the relationship between owners and workers, which in many cases, includes structures of generational tension because of the age difference and class differences between the owners and conductors.

There is no difference between workers. This matatu work, we call it a contract job. It is not permanent. Today I'll be driving this, tomorrow I'll be driving that. Today I'll work with this matatu, at the end of the day I'll go see the boss and maybe he won't be happy with what we made and he'll just tell me, straight to my face, “Hey. Listen, I’m not happy about it…so tomorrow, find your own way, OK? So I mean, in the morning, I just wake up, go to the stage and you know...just wait. Something will come up. So we call it a contract job, but we don’t hold grudges with them. Cause, I mean, he’ll sack me today and after a week or two he’ll see...there is no alternative. He’ll say, “Ok, fine. Even if he made a mistake once or twice, I mean (click, a sound made to signal annoyance or, in this case, resign) just come to work (personal communication, 2008).

Trust between owner and employee can, however be built over time. Steve, who had worked on Frost for two years, was happy with his relationship with the vehicle’s owner. Even in these informal economies where the rules are constantly negotiated people can and do develop good working relationships. Steve places an emphasis on “seriousness” is key to having a trusted relationship with the owner.

**Steve:** I have been with the same owner...two years.

**MF:** So, that is a long time...you must trust him?

**Steve:** Actually...it starts with his trust...then I trust...it is a bonding. You know...you are given a vehicle worth 500,000 to a million shillings that’s a...great investment. There must be trust. Whatever the motive...there must be trust.

**MF:** how’d you meet?

**Steve:** Just accidentally, someone was looking for a matatu driver. You know, a serious one...(dropping his voice low for emphasis on serious)...I told him, I’m serious, you know, then he told me, “OK, I don’t have to know whether you are serious, but with time...time will tell if you are serious.” And that is when I ended up his driver.
Most of the time this is not the case. The relationship of owner and conductor is a bit antagonistic at times as the following excerpt illustrates. While in Kikuyu, Jackson and I were talking matatus over fruit salad when two men shouted across to us that they were matatu owners. Jackson and I went over to hear what they had to say and it took no time to arrive at the topic of trust between owners and the crews of their matatus.

MF: And you don’t trust them?

Owner1: You can’t trust them…they are not to be trusted. They are…they are very untrustworthy.

MF: But why? Kwa nini? You mean to say that this man (pointing to Jackson) is untrustworthy.

Owner1: Not as a man…

MF…but as a driver?

Owner1: …not as a driver. As a matatu driver. This industry…makes people change.

MF: How?

Owner2: It’s like, it’s like… it’s like…they live in a different world than the other people. Once you get there…you get impressions. Assume you are a new driver, a new conductor, you get impressed by the people you find there. They are saying, I can’t go home with less than 1,000 in the evening…they don’t give a shit if you…whether…(trailing off)

Owner1: (interrupting)…bad business…

Owner2: There are no accounts, you know.

Owner1: The matatu is not about the money…it is about…it is for a week, it can be great, it looks like it is stabilizing, so you go back…it is a cycle…

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70 Kikuyu is a suburb of Nairobi, as well as an ethnic group.
This cycle takes power away from the owner in many interesting ways. They have to trust young people with their million shilling vehicles, while knowing that their employees are going to take a little off the top. Olivier de Sardan argues that this “over-monetarization” is a symptom of one of the major cross-cutting factors contributing to the widespread practice of corruption of social life because “personal relationships take on a permanent monetary form…in Africa, everyday forms of sociability require a lot of cash” contrasting to European forms of sociability which shy away from monetary support and exchange (1999: 45).

The problem of over-monetarization in personal relationships is also illustrated by which people are not hired. Ethnographic and survey data reflects this tension in that there is a bias against owners hiring individuals from their own families or ethnic groups (Muyia 1995: 31). Mary Mwangi, one of the most successful, independent matatu company owners corroborated Muyia’s findings, when she told me that although she had many members of her family and ethnic group working for her, “the matatu business is difficult, but it is even worse when you are employing members of your own family” (personal communication, 2010). She explained that they do not respect you as much as someone you do not know and they assume you understand each other and relate closely just because you speak the same mother tongue.

That is not to say that sharing language is not an important part of corruption practices, as the widening margin of negotiation there is always some sort of verbal sparring that accompanies the practices of corruption, which is one way corruption works itself into everyday life (Olivier de Sardan 1999: 37). In Kenya, there is an entire lexicon for idiomatic expressions regarding to corruption practices, the most common being to refer to a bribe as chai (tea) or as TKK meaning, toa kitu kidogo (give something small). The negotiation of illegal activities becomes a common conversation when encountering anyone in a position of authority (Olivier de Sardan 1999: 37).
But language, especially in the matatu industry, ties people together in a celebration of their outsider group status and builds trust in the privacy that the language provides. In this way Sheng, the urban dialect of Nairobi, acts as another risk management skill or safety measure in the face of this risky environment full of corrupt practices.

Matatu operators often use Sheng to talk about the possible undercover police that could be around or boarding the vehicle (Rhino squad), or they could be discussing people already on the vehicle. It is well-documented that speaking Sheng (especially new words and phrases) is a way to attract urban women in Nairobi (Samper 2002; Abdulaziz and Osinde 1997). However, nowhere is there a discussion in the ways that it also protects these operators in a dangerous environment and acts as another risk management strategy. Sheng, especially “Deep Sheng” a form of the dialect that users create between themselves, which is unintelligible to others around, even in public spaces. Sheng is an important feature of the matatu operators lives; it is the glue that runs through the sector and binds relationships together.

I will explore the topic of language and its role in creating public and private spaces more in the next two chapters, but first there a discussion of the most fruitful and problematic parts of Olivier de Sardan’s work is necessary and particularly useful for the following chapters. The sociocultural logics covered so far (negotiation, gift giving, predatory authority and redistributive accumulation) undergird corruptive practices and are complicated by the more general monetarization of social relationships. These logics are corroborated by my research in the matatu industry in many ways and these concepts of social interaction help to clarify the paradox of Kenya’s “culture of blaming” and scapegoating by discussing how the everydayness of the corruption complex in society produces a condemnation of corruption that is as widespread as the practice of it. The final two concepts discussed here – the logics of the solidarity network and
the facilitating factor of shame – are both fruitful and problematic for understanding the matatu industry and the wider role of stigma on the moral worlds of the urban workers. The logics of solidarity networks and the facilitating work of shame for the perpetuation of corruption, as Olivier de Sardan argues, may actually be the two most important weapons used in the fight against corruption by matatu operators.

**Shifting Logics of Shame and Solidarity**

Shame, Olivier de Sardan explains, “is a major form of social control in Africa…and is social morality, a morality based on other people’s opinions, rather than one based on an individual examination of conscience” (1999: 46). He argues that shame promotes corruption as people do whatever is necessary to save face with family or friends. In other words, not getting something like a gift or even school certificate will cause shame and thus feed the cycle of corruption. This is generally true, especially in a rural environment when family and close relatives surround you, but in the urban milieu shame is not so cut and dry. However, for matatu operators, they are already stigmatized and have no “face” to save (Yang et al. 2007).

Yet, many matatu operators do feel shame for the practices in the corruption complex of their jobs. The operators I worked with on route #48, continue the legacy of transportation workers in Nairobi who consistently transgressed the accepted norms of behavior as dictated by various regimes, from the Kikuyu taxis in the 1940s (chapter 3), to the pirate taxis in Makadara in the 1960s (chapter 3) to the seditious musical venues of the 1980s (chapter 4). A growing number of matatu operators, epitomized in the route 48 MADCOWA route association, are 1) articulating corruption often by calling strikes and complaining about the system publicly and 2) are shamed by the corruption that is already built into their jobs. They are then, challenging that
very shame, and ultimately their own stigma, by joining together as a group to win respect and challenge the predatory authority that has become integrated into their everyday life. In this framework, matatus challenge and expose the gaps that exist between the accepted model of “good governance” and the sociocultural logics that run through norms and practices of everyday life that promote corruption.

The logics of the solidarity network explain how the practices of MADCOWA, who protect the matatu operators using dues paid weekly by matatu operators. “The importance of these networks of sociability in Africa, in particular in urban areas, goes far beyond the family framework, which is however, as we all know, widely extended and replete with pressures and solicitations which can hardly be ignored” (Olivier de Sardan 1999: 40). As they become more integrated and used to their daily moral negotiations matatu operators also find ways to bond and cooperate. The system becomes a generalized exchange network. They know that it is through each other that they will find sympathy and understanding, and that through their relationships of risk they develop dangerous, but strong, bonds (chapter 8). These bonds offer an alternate view of the fundamentalism and “puritanical” movements that the author proposes as the only means to change the present course of affairs with regards to corruption in Africa (Olivier de Sardan 1999: 48). But, perhaps, with groups like MADCOWA beginning to collectively act and better articulate the problem of corruption without the complicating factor of shame holding them back. In this way, their stigma actually works for them in some ways, which is the topic of the next two chapters.

As roadblocks make it more risky and costly to move through the city, drivers, especially matatu drivers, have more responsibility to take care of themselves and each other. Negotiating this risk and carrying the burden of responsibility for the commuting public, matatu drivers are
scapegoated and stigmatized. But they are also at risk. This risky situation is embedded in the sector’s core and because of this, informal transportation provides its own of insight into Kenya’s historical narrative.
CHAPTER 7: IN BETWEEN THE SEATS

In this chapter I show how the interior space of matatus is transformed from a Public Service Vehicle (PSV) to a private, at times intimate, space where the “urban youth” of Nairobi create, debate, perform, produce and negotiate their risky, and somewhat disappointing, urban lives. Although the public bus stops in Nairobi are referred to as “stages,” and for many touts and passengers even it is a place of performance, but this chapter argues that the interior space of these vehicles is also a “stage” where urban specific identities are performed. These identities can range from the more “traditional” ones, emphasizing religion or ethnicity to the “urban,” which includes fandom for wrestling celebrities or global hip-hop stars, influenced by colliding local and global popular culture. In this chapter, I choose to focus on how urban specific gender identities, informed by both masculine and feminine notions and practices, are performed in the intimately public space of the matatu.

This intimately public space of the matatu vehicle, or of any urban transportation vessel for that matter, becomes a space of transition. It is an unexpected space where anything can happen (recall the fierce and intimate interaction between the Nubian women and the European “housewives” during the height of Kenya’s Emergency discussed in chapter 3), but that may only last for a few fleeting seconds between one stop and the next. But how does the actual transformation of space occur? As I will argue near the end of this chapter, the linguistic

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71 As mentioned in other places in this dissertation, “youth” in Nairobi is a problematic category as it includes everyone under the age of thirty-five, which in Kenya is a majority of the population as nearly 61% of the population is under the age of twenty-four (https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ke.htm).
72 “Space of transition” is my own term that attempts to encompass the ephemerality of the vehicle and the fleeting nature of the interactions experienced by people inside of it.
73 The personal ads of urban periodicals (Village Voice in New York, The Stranger in Seattle) are filled with people looking for someone they had a momentary interaction with on the bus or the subway train.
practices involving the creation and dissemination of Sheng -- by matatu operators, and their youth passengers -- creates a unique, private, intimate, and safe space for the performance of new, urban based identities.

**Intersections of Public and Private Space**

In increasingly crowded cities, everywhere you turn can be a struggle for personal space, for privacy, as we are increasingly surveilled at all times. As urban residents enjoy private moments at a café table reading their paper, or in a seat on the bus sending a text message they constantly embody and maintain a public persona (Goffman 1963a). Therefore, in order for some youth to develop and maintain an urban persona “private space is in many ways becoming open space, public space” and vice versa (Nandrea 1995: 115). In Nairobi, public space has been private since the founding of the city in 1899 by the British East Africa Company and rapidly turned into the political center of the British Empire in East Africa. As a colonial city it was off limits to the native population and treated like a native reserve for colonialists (see chapter 4).

The transportation sector in Nairobi is a site of struggle over public and private space in many layered ways. At a structural level, competing ownership models (private ownership versus franchise management) show the tension of inequality in Kenya. In the eyes of the state and to some extent the public, private vehicle owners are not responsible enough to run the transport sector because they use risky business practices to regulate the industry. The other choice is the franchise model, where just a handful of companies run the sector for the public good as they, being the largest and most wealthy fleet owners seemingly are the natural ones for the job.

This tension between public and private is not just played out structurally or systemically, but each matatu vehicle itself is an exploration into the habitual stylizations of an urban, young
Kenyan population. The space of individual matatus also acts as a site to work out the messiness that results when public and private domains blur. For these reasons, the site of matatus, as a public urban institution, and as a public space where private habits and stylizations of the self are produced and perfected, is an important and unique place to find people working out their private selves publicly, and their public selves privately.

The following poem was sent to me in July 2007 through a long line of email forwards. The author is unknown, but the message attached said, “This one is a long poem from a true Kenyan lady fed up with the hustle & bustle of the city.” I use this poem to open this chapter because it so aptly conveys the feeling of being on a matatu in all of its intimacy, ambiguity, risk and excitement.

*I Call It Culture (Matatu)*

*Call it basic transportation, a means
Minibus, Nissan, shaq, bus, the means
Call it the bitter option
Tariffs that change like a woman’s moods
Peak, bamba fifty (Peak, bring fifty shillings)
Off peak, ni ashu tu (Off peak, it is only twenty shillings)
I am still on the prepaid service
And as I take my seat in the matatu
The tout aka Kange taps me (Kange = conductor)
I haven’t even warmed my seat yet
Manze ngoja kwanza niwarm kiti (Wait, man, first I warm the seat)
How I wish I was on the postpaid
My own ride, not just a car
How I dread it
The humiliation of walking and waiting
Jammed network like Thika road in the morning
Congested in traffic I cannot even connect home in time
Taking route no. 11
From Industrial area to Kibera
From Halle Selassie to Pangani
A walking nation
Waiting in a never ending queue like the Mau Mau*
Our parents outside villages collecting passbooks
The humiliation of waiting for a matatu
Like waiting to take a piss
Some funny guy breathing down my neck
Breath stinking like the korogosho dumpsite
The harassed look on my face
The guy is violating me
I can practically feel his!!!! Thing
Swelling, pushing on my butt!!!!
The coming look on his face
Is enough to make me feel like I have been raped in broad day light
I warn him as I move in front
Ah! Unanisikuma! (Ah! You pushed me!)
The guy smiles
I shift my hips, as if dancing a jog
A dance with no beat
Like Rock or Ballet
As some lady cuts in line just in front of me
Hey you!
Who do you think you are?
Why are you hiking me?
Panga Laini Kama wale wengine (Form a smooth line all you people)
These queues, this many
Can’t live with them
Can’t live without them
Like a nagging woman
Who happens to be the mother
Of your kids.
I call it a way of life
I call it a culture
A mad, mathree, menace culture
Tell me
How many of your friends spin or drive
Whatever jisty name you want to call it
Drive even towards the end month
When Mwezi uko corner (the month is just around the corner)
Call it figure of speech
What does a corner have to do with the month?
Just say that you are broke
To the point that after queuing for an hour
You are told, “Mat ni Finje” (the matatu is now fifty shillings)
The look on your face,
Like someone walked in when
You were committing an unnatural act
I call it a culture
Always carrying extra fare
On three occasions
Rainy days, end month and intended strike
A drizzle, dark clouds even flying shit from a roving crow
Wee Kunanyesha JO!! Fare sasa ni finji (Hey, its raining, man. The fare is fifty)
The Kange shouts
Like we have won the war against AIDS and aid
It was just a crow
End of the month is the worst
Peak starting from 3pm
Like the sema tariff
Tutasema nini sisi (What are we saying to you all)
Just giving the Kange a menacing look
‘Kazi yako hainisaidii’ (Your work helps no one)
A sticker on the mat says it for him
‘Hatucheki na wathii, tunacheka na mbuzi’ (We don’t watch the people, we watch the goats)
I call it a culture, with its own language
Beba, Kwachu, dondoa muthii (Carry, Catch, Jump)
They may not have conceived it, but they carried it
In their mind, wombs, tongues
Manze, Jo! Skia hii story! (Man, Dude! Listen to this story!)
Unto us, a sheng was born
Our language, our way of life, our culture

--- Author Unknown, Nairobi, 2007
(Translations of Sheng, by M. Ference)

This poem precisely captures the public tone around the matatu experience. It starts as a menace, as a violent sexual assault, “a rape.” It moves through these violent descriptions of the matatu industry, but most of the villains are the other commuters. The man pushing against her, the woman who pushes her in the vehicle, they are both descriptions of the Kenyan public. Then back to the matatu business and the irregularity of it all, while wishing for a private car, being on the post paid system and being able to have the comfort of avoiding being on a matatu with the conductors. But, by the end, she is claiming the language and the culture and talking about the rude conductors as caring mothers, bringing Sheng, this unique language that seems to capture so perfectly the urban experience of Nairobi, to fruition.
Transforming public and private space through Sheng

The poem above illustrates the discomfort experienced in the blurring of public and private boundaries. These boundaries are often worked out on people, in ways that make them uncomfortable. But in spite of this, there is still something important about what matatu operators have done and continue to do with language and what it means for new forms of sociability in Nairobi. By using Sheng to make a private space, for themselves but also for urban youth in Nairobi they allow for a more open and inclusive space for the formation of solidarity networks which, as Harvey claims, is “hated by neoliberalism” (2005: 68). These networks of solidarity are opened through the use of sheng. By creating this private space between people with a strictly urban dialect sourcing words from various ethnic languages of Kenya, is radically democratic and open. While speaking in one’s ethnic language is a way for people to bond with familiar people, Sheng, being an urban dialect with much accepted innovation opens it up to be an new urban lingua franca between different groups.

In the following section I focus on how the growing role of women in the industry can illustrate this open space of the matatu industry for shifting gender roles and subjectivities. The next chapter will explain how Sheng facilitates solidarity networks of an even more dangerous kind than between men and women – interethnic solidarity. As Roland Kiessling and Maarten Mous, and other scholars show, urban youth languages, in which they include both Engsh and Sheng as “languages,” create a “group identity” by being simultaneously exclusive, of mainstream society, and inclusive of other speakers (2004: 311). They also regard urban youth languages as “an inter-ethnic bridge” (Kiessling and Mous 2004: 315). Because urban youth languages like Sheng borrow from all ethnic languages available its polyvocality allows for interethnic associations.
At the same time, the authors who compare eight urban youth languages from throughout the continent note a gender component that is interesting for the matatu operators especially; namely, that urban youth languages are more often spoken, perpetuated and disseminated through males. However, because the urban youth language Sheng is also the “technical language” of the matatu sector it can employ the inclusivity of the language to include more women users than the other languages do (Kiessling and Mous 2004). By learning these new languages, like Sheng and Engsh, people become a member of a collectivity that does not mark membership by gender or ethnicity and offer, “new solidarities that cut across ethnic absolutism and dominant ideologies” (Kiessling and Mous 2004: 332). Like the fiercely elegant poem in the beginning of this section shows, Sheng can be wielded by Nairobi’s young urban citizen to accelerate a new urban progressiveness through linguistic change.

Performing Urban Masculinity and “getting out of the shy”

In the limited studies on informal urban transportation in Africa, dangerous urban masculinity is an important and pervasive theme running through the work (Mutongi 2006; wa Mungai 2006; see Rizzo 2002, for Tanzania; see Meshack Khosa 1997, for South Africa). The work surrounding gender violence in Nairobi matatus is exclusively situated around male operators (drivers, conductors, or touts) harassing female passengers. As I have argued throughout the dissertation, the work of the matatu industry is risky and therefore stigmatized by the public. Bad driving behavior and participation in corruption, extortion and petty theft are all business practices that create negative perceptions. However, there is an important flip side to the experience of stigmatization, which Goffman talks about as the attraction of deviant groups to
deviant groupies or those people who are drawn to the stigmatized group precisely because of the stigmatized characteristics (1963b).

I will discuss performance here in terms of gendered performance and the different ways that operators, both male and female, as well as some passengers, construct, learn and perform urban masculinity in the vehicle. As Judith Butler points out, “gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceed; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time – and identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts” (1988: 519, italics in original). Transportation is one of the most repetitive acts of urban Kenyans’ lives.

Day in and day out operators learn the rules of the game and the tricks of the trade, including how to pay off police, collude with gangsters, and skim off their bosses bottom line. Perhaps these risky practices engender a confidence that accompanies breaking the law with impunity on a daily basis. The following excerpt illustrates how people are transformed by these practices and the matatu sector in general.

**Rasta George**: When people used to come into the matatu industry they used to be very shy, and when they come into matatus they come out of that shy, and that shy goes, See?

**MF**: So it gives people, what we would say, confidence?

**Rasta George**: Yeah, confidence.

**MF**: Was that your case? *(joking because he is a very talkative person)*

**Gladys**: He would not be able to talk to… *(motioning to the entire table, playing along with my joke of George’s shyness).*

**Rasta George**: Most of us…when we come in the matatu industry, eh, you know most of them they don’t know many parts of the country…but when they get in matatu industry…Cause you can get a job and get out of Nairobi and you can have someone hire you and go some place like Eldoret and see parts of the city…you have not seen.

**MF**: So you became like a tourist
Rasta George: Yeah you see things you would never see if you are not into matatu industry.

Matatu operators then grow and transform from seeing different parts of the country and meeting many different people and being “famous conductors” around town and their neighborhoods. They lose their shyness and gain confidence because of the interactions they have with people.

Additionally, many women perceive some of the bravado the operators display as attractive and it has been well documented in the Kenyan media and in conversations that matatu operators often, “got some of the best women in Kenya” (Albo, personal communication, 2009). This was often a point of contention among young people in Nairobi, especially young, single, professional men who were looking for a girlfriend. Whenever they heard of a matatu operator having a beautiful girlfriend they were upset. The following conversation explains a bit of the mysterious attraction of matatu operators.

Steve: I think…I think…this is my honest opinion.

MF: Tell me your honest opinion (sarcastically)

Steve: (laughing) You know the conductors...mostly they [women] like conductors. Maybe somebody might be cute. But in the conductor, the masculinity becomes dominant.

MF: Tell me how…I’m a conductor and I’m not really masculine (Wilson laughing loudly at his statement)

Steve: (laughing)…uh…like talking straight. Like, “I like you.”

MF: ah…no beating around the bush…

Steve: haha (laughing loudly)...yeah, no beating (assuming I just made a sexual joke, which I was unaware of at the time)...um, and then you are a lady, you feel weak inside and I don’t know what, what...“Today, what you are wearing looks smart” and...

Rasta George: “…it looks smart…”

MF: So just giving compliments and
Rasta George: yeah, yeah…

MF: So what, are other Kenyans shy? Or would they just not say that?

Rasta George: yeah…

Many: yeah…

Rasta George: yeah, most people, I tell you, get out of the shy when they came to be in the matatu industry…

George: when they get out of the industry, they are very, very confident. People even tell you, in this industry, that they are God-fearing and that they go to church every Sunday. But when they enter in…

Rasta George: …they forget about the church.

George: …they forget all about the church. They start talking nasty things. At least some that I knew back in the day…(laughing and trailing off)

Rasta George: Yeah, even some they come wearing that white something…

MF: Turba?  

Rasta George: yeah, turban, for church. When they enter the matatu industry those inatoa (they remove it).

Here, Rasta George offers the economic motivation as a simplistic answer to why women like matatu operators, but Steve correctly complicates women’s attraction to matatu operators by making women more than just economic actors:

Rasta George: Its because you have money. Money makes us to change. Money…cause if you have money, you can buy what you want you can even buy wasichana (women).

Gladys: (the only woman at the table besides myself laughs loudly at this and adds)…ha, even buy watoto (children).

George: and sometimes, when they are riding on your vehicle, see sometimes, they just will…don’t…waenda sari (frustrated at how to translate into English).  

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74 These are the Seventh Day Adventist (SDA) church followers who wear white turbans on their heads.
MF: when you give young girls rides for free?

Rasta George: yeah… *sare*…if you have a lady somewhere, you tell the conductor, that lady there, don’t ask money from that lady. When the lady comes out and sees…eh, the driver told me not pay… (*Wilson laughs loudly at this in a mischievous way*).  

Rasta: and she… (*laughing and trailing off*)

MF: and then it’s ok… (*many laughing*)

Wilson: yeah, its ok… (*laughing*)

Rasta George:…then its another business… (*laughing*)

MF: So you can do things for them?

Rasta George:….yeah

Steve refuses to let this mischaracterization of women continue and addresses the flaw in their thinking. IF women just wanted money, then young professional guys would do well. He is still articulating the masculinity that matatu operators are known for.

Steve:….nooo, there’s nothing…. (*loudly speaking up*). Ok, most of the…uh, the guys who are working this white-collar job, uh… it’s not like you can find a man, telling you…”you know what, I like that lady”…and you, you (*looking at me as a woman*) kind of connect to that.

MF: yeah, cause they’re [the white collar workers] a little afraid?

Steve: yeah… cause they are a little afraid. And to some extent…they can even pay you to go and talk for them…

MF: We call that being a wingman…

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75 *Sare*, directly translates into “uniform” but throughout the years, the Sheng meaning when referring to matatus means “free.” The connection is that young school girls and boys in uniforms used to ride for free under Moi in the 1980s. However, because the matatu sector was unregulated and rougher at that time, *sare* came to have a sexual connotation with free rides for schoolgirls. If you are in a uniform and you expect to ride for free, you would often have to give a sexual favor in return.

76 This is, what I think is an allusion to prostitution, which is also a closely connected and stigmatized group of workers.
Rasta George: yeah…wingman

Steve: *(asking me sarcastically in reference to earlier discussions we had about anthropology)* is that a human universal?

MF: women like it when you talk to them.

Steve: yeah, they do. They do. When they think you are interested…they feel good.

MF: yes, matatu people can make you feel good…or bad…

Rasta George: …or bad…

MF: If someone is abusing you…

Rasta George: even touching…you can, in a matatu you can see a lady and then touch his [??] back, they are still crazy…

George: No *(to me, sensing that I don’t understand what Rasta George is talking about)*. You know when you are entering a matatu and I touch your back, I feel very confident when I touch your back, you are just getting in the matatu, you have seen that…?

MF: yeah, they are always like…get in! *(I am referring to how matatu operators kind of gather people in to their vehicles and sometimes put their hand on their back, gently pushing you in to the vehicle)*.

Wilson: …yeah, get in…

George: So the ladies feel…they hold their purses very tight.

Wilson: If you are fighting for a passenger that is the best technique you can use.

MF: fighting for a passenger? *(Again, I am slow to understand that he means if you re competing or fighting for a girl, touching her back is a way for you to let her know you like her)*

Wilson: *(sensing my confusion)*…not fighting for a passenger…but

MF: oh, so you touch a passenger and then you know…they know…you like them?

Wilson: yeah…

Steve: yeah, you [the female passenger] know the guy is…tender. You know? This guy is kind of tender, friendly.
Again, Steve articulates how he sees matatu masculinity in the smallest touches or words. In a way the matatu industry is a teacher of masculinity by way of facing danger and building confidence, especially with words.

Many friends of mine who were professionals in other fields or of an upper class background, born and raised in Nairobi, but often educated abroad, had worked on matatus at some point in their younger life for the experience itself. These young men wanted to see if they could do it, nearly as a right of passage. (Benny Njonjo, Pato Shobz, personal communication with 2006, 2010).

The following section takes up the perspective of the female passengers towards the matatu operators and how some young women characterize their experiences inside the vehicle where these new urban masculinities are being performed, pushing the limits of public and private space. In such a specific space, the smallest touch on a female passenger’s back can become both an important and troublesome part of daily life for many people.

**Intimate Interiors**

Maryam, a young female passenger from Eastleigh, a neighborhood known for both their large Somali refugee population and their flamboyant matatus, parallels the poem that started this chapter in her ambivalent attitude toward matatus. She also exemplifies the ways that passengers use the matatu space as their own private retreat.

**MF:** Do you have any favorite matatus?

**Maryam:** umm…the only other one I like is call “limousine”…

**MF:** Limousine

**Maryam:** The Maroon one. You’ve seen it?
MF: Yeah.

Maryam: Yeah, it’s maroon

MF: Why do you like that one?

Maryam: oh, I don’t…I was more like drawn to the color of it and at the same time, the calligraphy and the pictures. And at the time, it used to play best crunk music.

MF: Oh, you like the crunk?

Maryam: Yeah, I was into the crunk. So I was like oooh, the only matatu I can get on and who is going to play crunk at this time is this matatu. So I can get on this. But sometimes when I’m bored… they put on the bass…it is way (thumbs up, shaking head yes)...at the same time it is not good for the ears, but at the same time when your bored, stressed…it helps. Like, your mind is dented and I feel like relaxing, that’s what you do. Actually, so like according to me that is what I would say…

MF: Yeah, so it helps you like relax and forget about your problems?

Maryam: Yeah, for a while…then maybe I will know what to do then. So, yeah, it goes like that.

MF: …what’s the difference, listening to music on a matatu and listening to music at home?

Maryam: umm…the difference is there, because at home you don’t have the bass.

MF: ok

Maryam: yeah, you don’t have the bass and at the same time it is hard to go to the studio and say I want this type of song…to follow this song…

MF: the nice mix…

Maryam: Yeah, the nice mix. But in the matatu it’s like, just there. It follows up, one hit after the other after the other. Goes like that. Yeah.

Maryam touches on the ways that urban aesthetics in matatus function on multiple levels. She talks positively about the name, the color and the music it plays inside, although she denies liking it. She also talks about the release of stress that you can find in the music of the matatu.
In the first issue of a new publication about the industry called *Matatu Today* Lydia Gatambu also claims the cathartic matatu experience because “the music eases off the accumulated stress” of the day (May 2006). In an interview in the same publication, Mr. Lenny, a successful Kenyan recording artist, was asked if music was important in the matatu industry. Mr. Lenny answered “I regard entertainment highly; a matatu with no music can be so boring. I believe music eases tension and helps one to relax” (May 2006). When meeting with a theater designer who wanted to put on a play about the world of matatus, a brilliant Kenyan artist admitted that he had “read all the important books in my life in a matatu” (George, personal communication, 2010). This space of consumption has a practical purpose in that it entertains you while you commute home in a traffic jam that could last several hours. It is a repetitive experience where you can attempt to shape parts of who you are through choosing the matatu and choosing how to perform once inside of them.

Once you have boarded the vehicle, the intimate experience of sharing space with other diverse people overtakes you and almost anything can happen. It is often traumatic and invigorating, mundane and quotidian, powerful and insignificant all at once. As discussed earlier in this dissertation, the colonial bus, the pirate taxis and the matatus have historically been a crucial place to work out various forms of identification in the varied realms of religion, politics, and sexuality. The physical altercation between the Nubian and European women at the height of the Emergency in 1952 showed how the colonial bus was a particularly important place for interaction between groups who would normally not interact in a non-policed way. The use of matatus during the 1980s to play “seditious music” that mixed ethnic songs with political speeches voicing oppositional politics in a single party state was one of last places to have a conversation that was not surveilled. Matatus were one of the few places that were out of the
reach of the state due to their mobility. Many matatu passengers (some called joyriders) ride the informal transportation system’s vehicles as a leisure activity where they pursue their own interests and identities in an arena that is still out of reach of authorities, making matatus a risky but exciting place to be for young people exploring their choices in a modern world.

The above figure is a matatu conductor showing me the video screen that the owner had just installed in their vehicle. This is a common occurrence in Nairobi. Video screens are an important feature for the matatus to attract business because during the traffic jam, watching music videos help to pass the time. Many young people like it, and even expect it in the vehicles that they ride as they dread being bored (Mains 2008). However, these videos often have explicit content, here is Maryam, a young female passenger, explaining the experience of publicly consuming sexually explicit music and music videos.

**MF**: And do you like the videos?
Maryam: Ummm…nah, not all. Some I find very, very offensive.

MF: Really?

Maryam: Yeah, it’s really, really offensive. The local ones, the specific ones, the artists that we go for, not like all of them are like…it’s nice…but the others, like, I’m not into the women, the black Americans, and some others. Oh my God…the Jamaicans, Oh Lord…they dance. It is like…for a guy to see that I can really dance, to grade the video like, wow there is so much creativity in this video doesn’t mean I have to expose my body for it to be like…wow that is awesome.

MF: So, they show too much skin…?

Maryam: Too much, too much, too much…

MF: So, if you are in a matatu and then you are around your friends or other young people and you see something like that coming on do you feel funny?

Maryam: Yeah, sometimes it can be like, embarrassing…cause I remember this one time I was with Ana and we were coming to Eastleigh. And there was this video and it was like, Lil Wayne and he was singing and some of the words were like really, really offensive and they kind of…her facial expression like changed. And I liked the song in the beginning but the middle and the end and the video was like whoa! There was like…I just looked at Ana, and I just looked at Ana like I pretended didn’t know what was going on, and I was embarrassed, this is horrible. Ok, some things you are not supposed to be showing. Ok, maybe some of the people can’t understand, but seeing, seeing…My God! It’s like…you see and its like oh! Yeah, when you see something, even if you can’t understand the language, when you see it, its like oh, ok and they get the wrong impression about women. That’s the thing.

MF: So it is a little embarrassing…

Maryam: Yeah, it is a little embarrassing because I am a woman. Oh my God.
The way that gender is constructed for some women in matatus differs depending on where you live. There are many religious women and men on route #9, Maryam’s neighborhood route. However, for route #58 and #23, Buru Buru neighborhood, there is a different approach in the ways that young sexual identity is performed. Here Maryam describes some of the other girls who experience matatu rides differently.

**Maryam:** I’m told there are different kinds of girls. That is how the touts put it. There are different kinds of girls. There’s the ones who carry themselves with respect. And there’s the others that just don’t care. Do whatever they want in the matatu. Laugh with the touts, even like, flirt with the touts. Doing weird stuff, like porno or something.

**MF:** uh-mmm

**Maryam:** So it is like that. And the others carry themselves with respect so they just treat you like a brother or sister. So when you tell them ‘Hi’, they say ‘Hi’ and that’s it. The end of the conversation. ‘How are you?’… ‘I’m fine’… and then they show the serious face like, ‘I don’t want to be messing with you so don’t be messing with me. ‘Hi, Hi’ is enough for me. But others will be going like ‘Hiiii!’ (In a high-pitched voice and waving her hand daintily)...screaming, shouting. It’s like she knows the guy for like two hours and she is like, ‘can I have your phone number’, and he’s a tout. So, he is like…ooohh this is the easy girl you want.
The women who prefer to be around matatu operators are actually quite numerous in neighborhoods like Buru Buru (a middle class commuter neighborhood where there are many nice matatus with “famous” conductors). For example, a young woman I met in Buru Buru during 2005 was known around the neighborhood for exclusively dating men who drove or worked as conductors on matatus. She was very explicit about liking drivers, but could not articulate why. I eventually met her boyfriend, Njoroge, who said that many women like drivers and conductors because of the way they talked Sheng and because they have money and a ride (personal communication, 2010). Maryam has something to say about dating a conductor as well (personal communication, 2010).

**MF:** Ok. So do you know any girls that have touts as boyfriends?

**Maryam:** Some. I know some but they keep like secretly. But they don’t want some of their friends to know or their family to know about it. It is like a big, big, BIG thing.

**MF:** To have a tout as a boyfriend?

**M:** Yeah. It is a big thing and it’s not a good picture. They’ll be like ‘it’s not good’ because they are never serious with one woman. They are into other women from different tribes. They don’t care. They go clubbing, do whatever they want.

**MF:** Uh-mm

**M:** They do some different kind of drug stuff…thy go like that.

**MF:** So, for your family it is not good…to?

**M:** No, not good until maybe he finds a different job. They will say, “Wasn’t he a tout?” and then you are like “he used to be but he stopped and now he does this and this. Hey…but if he’s a tout…no one even wants to…hear about it. They will be like, “I want you to stay away from that boy, I want you to stay away from that guy.” That’s how it’s gonna be.

Although having a matatu conductor for a boyfriend is not good in Maryam’s eyes, and she voices the common opinion of the public that I also heard during my time in Kenya, the informal
economy, and the space of the matatu allows for alternative kinds of gender expressions, new kinds of youth categories and practices to emerge. The narratives above are common in the matatu literature that focuses on the violence, and/or sexual relationships between male conductors and female passengers. The next and final section of this chapter explores a more complicated process of identification for women especially related to employment practices in the historically male dominated transportation sector.

**Shifts and struggles around matatu work**

In 2007, I was happy to finally have met one of the few female matatu conductors that I had been hearing about. Rachel was twenty-seven and a mother of two. She had been in the matatu sector for three years, since the Michuki Rules of 2004 (see chapter 3). She was in a maroon uniform, with long blonde extensions braided into her hair. She spoke good Swahili and had a shy demeanor, but a strong voice.

**MF:** Why did you choose matatu work?

**Rachel:** The way I see it, work is work. It’s not bad work, it’s good work. I get a seat, and I get everything I need. *Kila kitu yote* (Every single thing)

**MF:** *Unapenda* customers? (You like the customers?)

**Rachel:** *Na penda customers. Sana.* (I really love the customers). And these (*looking out of the matatu where we were sitting at the hustle and bustle going on in the stage around us*) are *kama* brothers *yangu*. (And these… are like my brothers)

**MF:** do you get harassed? (*It is clear to hear in my voice that I am a bit surprised that she was so happy with her easy job. Her answer is somewhat defensive in tone because of this*)

**Rachel:** No! *Nimezoeza. Ninajitetea. Skia, ni kazi mzuri...inapiga kuwa malaiya. Napenda kwangu. Nafundisha kuendesha, kidogo kidogo.* (No! I am used to it. I can defend myself. Listen, this is good work. It beats being a whore (laughing) and I love my people. I am learning to drive, little by little).
Tony knew Rachel at this time and I talked to both of them together and separately. Tony was out of work and just hanging around the stage, whereas Rachel was working and therefore in and out of the stage. After she left, he and I spoke and addressed some of his thoughts of women in the industry.

**Tony:** Well, yes, there is a difference. There is a difference because, uh, like now, if you go to Rachel’s vehicle, if you see the driver, who is driving Rachel’s vehicle, he’s an mzee, he’s an old man, yeah? So, he’s not the kind of a person who…you know, who would be in a hurry to do things. But, me, at my age, I want someone who can…do things in a hurry. If you are picking or dropping passengers, you know, do it quickly…

**MF:** So the ladies are more shy? *(Although this interview was conducted in English, I seem to not have wanted to promote this characterization of women. Tony’s response shows his attempt to agree with me, but also clarify.)*

**Tony:** Yeah, they are more shy…and slow.

**John:** …and they are bullied, like some people don’t want to pay and they can get pushy

**Tony:** Yeah, that’s the thing, as a driver, while I’m there, I need somebody, anyone, there at the door so if anyone brings problems you know, you just tell me, ‘Hey Tony! There is someone here who doesn’t want to pay.’ I’ll pull the vehicle by the side, ‘Why don’t you want to pay?’

**John**…cause they can’t change *matire* (tires). You are the one who has to change the tire. As in, she is just sitting there, looking at you, doing nothing…

**Tony:** *(interrupting John)*… some of our ladies here, they don’t know such kind of things like changing tires.

**MF:** But…some they know! *(Loudly, defensively)*… Are there some ladies that know?

**Tony**…um, very few

**John**…very few….

Interestingly enough, a few weeks later, I met another young woman who was small and spritely and seemed to be everywhere all the time. Shikoo worked as a conductor and sometimes driver on route 32/42 to Dandora, one of the more dangerous neighborhoods in Nairobi, known for
being a hot bed of Mungiki activity. Also known as being the place for the city dumpsite, meaning you can smell Dandora well before you arrive. This unpleasantness has repercussions for social interaction and the place can be a little bit tense for people who are not known.

Although this interview was conducted at Globe Cinema a year later, in 2008, Shikoo was seemingly speaking directly to Tony and John’s criticisms of women in the workplace.

**MF:** *Watu wanasema kazi hii ni ngumu kwa wasichana.* (People say that matatu work is difficult for women.)

**Shikoo:** *Si ngumu, si ngumu. Wakianza ni ngumu lakini ukizoeza si ngumu, rahisi sana...nowadays.* (It is not hard. When you begin, it is hard, but if you are used to it, it is not hard. It is very easy… nowadays)

*(a little later in the same interview)*

**MF:** *Lakini, kwa wasichana? (But for women?)*

**Shikoo:** *Hukuna kazi sifanyi...as long as you understand the job. Utapata msichana anaweza kipiga tire...na nafanya mechanics.* (There is no job women cannot do…as long as you understand the job, you can get a woman. She can change a tire…and I am doing mechanics.)

**MF:** *Unaweza? (You can?)*

**Shikoo:** *(laughing)...yeah, I can (in English). Gari imepata punctya naenda chini na miguu kubadilisha. Najua vipi kutegenza.* (If the car gets a puncture, I can get down low with my legs and change (the tire). I know how to repair).

**MF.** *Mechanics ni sehemu ya elimu yako? (Mechanics is part of your course?)*

**Shikoo:** *Yeah...Nafanya kidogo hapa na hapa. Niko free...sitaki kazi nyingine. Niko na watu wengi na marafiki wengi.* (Yeah…I do a little here and there. I am free. I don’t want another job. I have so many people and so many friends.)
Figure 7.3: Cover of trade magazine Matatu Today found in Nairobi in 2008. This is the first volume so the use of a woman conductor is more about the novelty of it than because it is a common sight (source: Matatu Today).

As more women get into the matatu industry and they see it is a viable option for themselves they are adopting different ways of performing, dressing, speaking, and using the matatu vehicle and the industry in general to carve out a new niche for herself. With the change over time, it is obvious that women of all kinds are answering to the limitations men put on them like changing a tire.

When I met Ruth in 2009 at Globe Cinema I was fairly used to seeing women around and we became friendly. She always had a pleasant smile and was constantly asking me about my love life and about having children. I noticed how Ruth used her femininity to her advantage in a
male dominated system, not in the same way as Shikoo did, through adopting mechanic skills, but by capitalizing on the stigma of male matatu operators to her benefit.

**MF:** Do you find it difficult to yell at customers?

**Ruth:** Sometimes it is easier for men to call passengers, but then they see me and they say, ‘Madame.’ (When she says this she stands back and kind of bows, like a gentleman would do to a lady in Victorian England, and then we laugh). They just see that I will not make mistakes by causing problems.

**MF:** Do you think they trust you more?

**Ruth:** Yes, they trust me more because young men...they will bring problems.

Here Ruth actually engages the stigma that is hurled at the occupation as a reason she is successful and enjoys her job. The matatu industry is one that blurs the boundaries of proper space usage from inhabiting a frontier of unregulated economic activity both in the transitional spaces of the city and of economic practices and sociability. In matatus, public is private and private is public. Due to the open and public nature of the sector, which is ironically fueled by coded linguistic practices meant to create private spaces of interaction between young urban Kenyans. This space facilitates other structural changes in providing new opportunities for women in the sector. As Mary Mwangi exemplifies, the sector is not only changing for women, but being changed by women.

**Conclusion**

The public acts of taking transportation in Nairobi (choosing a vehicle, entering, riding and exiting) and the shared space of matatu interiors are increasingly intimate arenas for interaction and the negotiation, creation and performance of various kinds of identities. This shared space, and the social interactions that occur in the matatu, push the boundaries of public and private
while these new boundaries are worked out on people, passengers and operators alike, often in unwanted or unwelcomed ways.

The matatu sector is not just facilitating various gender identities and performances, but is also facilitating other forms of political and ethnic interactions, which is very important for Kenya in light of history of ethnic violence in Kenya. This will be the focus of the last and final chapter. I use the Route 48 MADCOWA group as an example of a possible alternative future to the fundamentalist one that Olivier de Sardan grimly predicts will be needed to change corruption practices through creating emergent realms and arenas of interethnic, urban sociability. These bonds are forged in the risky environment of Nairobi’s streets, inside the safety of their individual vehicle where they consume and produce popular culture together. The role of these urban forms of sociability is an important part of the ways that informal workers organize their lives and futures, while managing the risk and danger they face daily. In summary, I offer another lively quote from Maryam that offers a good transition from the themes of this chapter to the themes in the next. The ways that stigma can effect life chances and the social processes and mechanisms that buoy that somewhat challenging position.

Maryam: At that same time touts, some of them may be bad people but a lot of times people don’t understand them. They don’t know as to why this person would be doing this job. Some may not have been able to finish up school because they lost their fees. Some might be doing it, as to just earn something to get something to eat. But nobody understands that, no matter how hard they try…especially the older people. It is better that he is the one carrying the goods instead of doing a job like that.

MF: yeah…it is just looked down upon?

Maryam: Yeah, it is looked at as something useless, even if I am working it is like it is very hard. This one time I was in Garissa and Abditafah like, hugged me and I was like ‘Stupid, don’t do that!’ and this man was like, ‘do you know that boy?’ and I was like ‘yes, I know him’ and he was like, ‘how do you know him? Is he related to you?’ ‘Yes, he is my cousin.’ ‘Are you sure?’ I’m like, ‘YES!’ and I was like, ‘do you know him?’ He said ‘yeah, I know him’ and I was like, ‘oh, you met him on the road, right?’ He was like, ‘yeah’ and he gave me the impression that I shouldn’t be talking to such people. And
I was like, ‘these people they have families for God’s sake. They are people they are like us, they are like you.’ I said, ‘you should not look down upon them just because they are touts.’ They’re like, ‘nah, they are no good.’ That’s the thing.
CHAPTER 8: DANGEROUS BONDS

If you write something positive about us...it’s like you are a devil’s advocate. If you write anything positive about us, they may say...you don’t know anything about these people (Steve, Nairobi, 2010)

Following from the previous chapter, showing how stigma can work for matatu workers and how they can push the boundaries of public and private space by using their own linguistic forms, I use this final chapter to discuss the implications for the possible positive politics that can, and indeed are emerging from this shared, intimately public space. The creation and maintenance of solidarity networks and networks of sociability are especially important in urban Africa as the family networks break down upon urbanization (see Bravman 1998; Kiessling and Mous 2004). Although, solidarity networks, as well as shame theoretically perpetuate corrupt practices the matatu operators are stigmatized shame does not work the same way (Olivier de Sardan 1999).

As Goffman might say, matatu operators have no “face” to save (1963a). Thus, their stigma is actually giving voice to speak against corruption as they try to take back and redesign who they are as a community. This is happening in Nairobi under the umbrella organization of the Matatu Drivers and Conductors Welfare Association (MADCOWA). However, not all routes knew about MADCOWA or were interested in paying their weekly dues and joining the community. Route #48, perhaps because of its route location in the upper class neighborhood of Kileleshwa, was by far, the strongest route represented in the entire MADCOWA organization (George, personal communication, 2010). The route associations are another misunderstood realm of the matatu industry such as this description illustrates, “Without reference to any authority, matatu touts will organize themselves into vicious cartels, practicing restrictive

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77 They claimed this, but I also saw the logbook where they have all the individual routes separated and their members filed individually. The route #48 file was much larger than the other files.

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practices with powers to levy charges on operators and new entrants – more or less like a parallel revenue authority” (Daily Nation, 10 January 2010).

Part of the experience of stigmatization that Goffman theorizes when talking about the lived experiences of a “spoiled identity” is apparent in the bravado, or showing off, that permeates the sector (1963b). But he also makes a point that “the relationship of the stigmatized individual to the informal community or formal organizations of his own kind is crucial” (1963b: 38). All of these things are important parts of the matatu operator’s specific skill set when facing the uncertainty of life. With the constant growth of workers in the informal sector, in the developing world, people who do difficult and risky jobs for their society, whether society actually values it or not, are becoming visible, brave, and increasingly aware of their crucial position in the political landscape. This has recently happened in Nairobi’s Makadara neighborhood when they elected to Parliament Mike “Sonko,” local matatu celebrity.

Matatu Funeral

For matatu workers in Nairobi, jumping aboard a moving vehicle is an important point of pride. There is a Sheng word for it, which is of Kikuyu origin -- *dandia*. The opposite of this, *dandoka*, also Kikuyu, means to alight or depart a moving vehicle.\(^78\) There is also a beautiful saying, that is proper Swahili but often used in the matatu industry in order to describe when either of these actions goes wrong, *utakula nyaynya*, (you will eat a tomato), which is a vivid warning against hitting your face on the pavement in such a way that you stand up with a mouth full of blood.

The danger and the costs of the risky environment are usually taken out on the body of the matatu operator. A large number of matatus mini-buses are flat in the front and the engine

\(^78\) Both of these words have other meanings in Kikuyu, but they are pronounced in the same way and there is not switching of syllables, like in other instances described within this dissertation.
block sits underneath the two front seats. This works well for maneuvering the vehicle, but not in head on collisions, which make up a majority of the fatal matatu accidents, especially on rural roads (Muyia 1995).

Nugugi wa Thiongo, Kenya’s most lauded writer, has a short story called *Mercedes Funeral*, about the death of the dream of Uhuru and it uses the imagery of a Mercedes Benz vehicle because the elite class of Kenyans that enjoyed the fruits of independence were referred to as *wabenzi* (the people of the benz) because they were always seen in the luxury vehicles. The wabenzi represent one side of the inequality and corruption that plagues Kenya. Perhaps, the *watu wa matatu* (people of the matatu) represents the other side?

When I heard of Steve’s death, I returned to Kenya to help convince the hospital to release Steve’s body for burial (when I say help, I mean with money). When I arrived I went to route #48 and I saw George and Rasta George. They were very sad, but busy. They were milling around with a notebook collecting money from each matatu after each route, as well as each driver and conductor individually at the end of the day. The contribution was for a fund to get Steve’s body out of the hospital and into the ground. They were doing this every day until they got his body out of the hospital. They had raised 80,000 KSh ($1,100 USD) by the time that I arrived, only a few days after his death.

Like much else surrounding the matatu sector, route association practices like this are a misunderstood realm of the matatu industry, often assumed that this economic redistribution is coercive, because sometimes it is. But matatu workers creatively reimagine themselves, both as individuals and as groups, in response to everyday engagement with job specific challenges as they facilitate the changes of urban environments that are being shaped and reshaped in the face
of urbanization. Unfortunately, these negative stereotypes can have real human costs as Steve’s death tragically exemplifies.

MADCOWA practices can look like extortion to some, or they look like a union or a SACCO to others, possible owing something to Olivier’s formulation of over-monetarization because economic practices are so widespread and integrated into every part of life. MADCOWA aims to formalize themselves in the face of their stigma, using tools of bureaucracy like forms and receipts, similar the Mungiki’s receipts.

![Figure 8.1: The registration form for MADCOWA route #48 (source: MADCOWA).](image)

This form must be accompanied by two hundred shillings and the promise to pay dues every month from the wages earned in the industry. These dues provide services that matatu operators are in desperate need of: insurance against injury, death, massive fines and jail time.
Divide and Conquer: MOA v MWA and collective action

During one of the first conversations I had with Steve in his private car during the matatu strike when we first met in 2009, Steve was telling me that he had a part in organizing the collective action through MADCOWA. Just before this he had cryptically told me that “it was going to be worse,” punctuating the statement with his signature laugh. I immediately thought that I may have gotten in the car with a terrorist? He went on to say that his group had thought about parking many buses in the middle of the highways in the dead of night and abandoning them, so that in the morning, “no one would be able to get anywhere in any vehicle” (personal communication, 2009).

The matatu industry, although generally fragmented by private ownership, comes together at times for collective action often under one of the two main matatu transport lobbying groups, the Matatu Welfare Association (MWA) or the Matatu Owners Association (MOA). The daily newspapers often confuse these two groups and their executive committees, leading the general public to also be confused and indifferent as to what these groups do, except for represent the interests of criminals (personal communication 2010). There are, however, key differences that put these groups at odds with each other most of the time.

The main point of contention is that the MOA complains the MWA are not actually matatu owners, just people who make money off of matatus, which is probably true when taken into account with this brief excerpt, which follows (personal communication, 2010),

George: Part of the reason why we are not seen through…owners are also doing bad stuff. We have two associations of owners, look at MOA…went into business then, they wanted to break down Kimutai, so when he came in he destabilized the industry. It was political. MWA came out as a strong association.

79 This thought briefly flashed through my mind because Al Qaeda and Al Shabbab, both international terrorist groups, have a presence in East Africa, especially on Kenya’s coast.
Steve: Moi used to do that. If you were strong he would have a plan B

Rasta George: divide and Rule...like Britain

Figure 8.2: A political cartoon illustrates the rivalry between the chairmen of the two most prominent matatu lobbying groups the Matatu Owners Association, headed by Simon Kimutai (driving the hearse) and the Matatu Welfare Association's chairman Dickson Mbugua (source: Nairobi Star).

Two days into the strike, Prime Minister Raila Odinga called a meeting with the MWA, and together they formed a committee to assess transport issues in Nairobi (Daily Nation, 2009).

Figure 8.3: A political cartoon commenting on the strike and how it will probably blow up in the already weary matatu operators' faces (source: The Standard).
Dickson Mbugua, Chairman of the MWA, however, was interested in the transportation industry and shaping it as a business. As he talked with Prime Minister Raila Odinga, he renewed his support for the fourteen-seater phase out and the introduction of large buses that are owned, operated and managed by a large franchise company instead of the single owners who have one or two vehicles.

The owners associations are just that, associations that protects the interest of the owners. The important element of this collective action, then, is that it usually, as the cartoon by Stano indicates, really only cost the matatu operators a few days of work and more bad attitudes to sort through when you get back on the job. In this way they dig their own graves. However, there is an emergent group in MADCOWA that opens up possibilities, and indeed new realties, for this workforce. For the rest of this chapter, that third important group will be the focus.

Dangerous Bonds

The morally ambiguous world of risky business that crewmembers negotiate daily results in a stigma that does in fact affect their life chances and brings the possibility of imprisonment and death to the fore. The average matatu crewmember will have to negotiate a series of illegal, dangerous and compromising transactions on a daily basis. These interactions and transactions are all too readily witnessed and often over-simplified by the general commuting public and mainstream media. What is not so regularly apparent is the human face of this large sector of Kenyan workers who struggle personally, and as a group, with the risk and ambivalence of their occupation.

The relationship crewmembers have with one another includes both cooperation and conflict. There are elements of healthy competition, masculine showboating and convivial
chatter as well as deeper bonds built through the danger of the job itself. Goffman emphasizes how persons who are outsiders or have “a particular stigma tend to have similar learning experiences regarding their plight, and similar changes in the conception of self – a similar moral career that is both cause and effect of commitment to a similar sequence of personal adjustments” (1963b: 32).

MF: And do you always have the same conductors?

Steve: Conductor (sighing deeply and laughing) is another…biggest…headache (laughing). Cause most of them, they get to interact with the customer more than the driver. Some of them, you might hear them speaking, arguing, with the customers and being arrogant. Plus, on top of that, whatever he is not being transparent. You find that at the end of the day he removed, like, um…500, and he expects, uh, you, you share the salary you are getting in the evening so that one becomes unfair.

MF: So you don’t trust your conductor?

Steve: Actually, I don’t, I don’t…I don’t. Ok, actually, I don’t like changing them regularly but I’m forced to change them. There are those who are serious, but that person who is serious – a serious guy, is one who is working somewhere. So, that is it…

MF: So this guy is kind of a thief?

Steve: Uh, yeah…uh, let’s say it is mischief (laughing) yeah. I don’t have a conductor I can really trust at the moment, but I used to have, I used to have. Uh and then, sometimes the vehicle can develop problems and what and what. He was not faithful enough to wait for this vehicle to be fixed. He went to another vehicle.

MF: So how do you find a new conductor?

Steve: so easy, come in the morning without a conductor. There are many, let me say, idlers – those people who look for somewhere for a day. So there are many but they don’t have manners (trailing off, laughing).

In order to build trust with the high turn around in matatus, operators employ techniques to build trust with their conductor.
**Rasta George:** maybe you see a driver and conductor. A driver, when he going there, going to Morengo or taking people here or there and maybe he is taking three-ninety shillings. You can get some conductors telling the driver we have say they have three-fifty. And the driver knows that money is three-ninety.

**Steve:** So…you are counting

**Rasta George:** you are counting, you are counting and that is where the trust is coming

Steve: so you can do it like randomly, like three times, tomorrow one time…if you are getting incorrect amounts.

So, then how is trust and solidarity built? Many people assume that it is predicated on ethnic connections. However, the following data confounds this…

**MF:** does employment have o do with ethnicity?

**Many:**…no, no…

**George:** no…this [sector] is very accommodating

**MF:** Is this the only industry that is like that?

**Steve:** (after a pause)…in fact, it is

**Rasta George:** Cause you can get someone who is Jaluo, and they are working with a Kisii, a jaluo working with a Kikuyu, a Kikuyu working with a…kalenjin, *nani* (whoever).

Steve: Not even working…cause I’m carrying you. When I am carrying passengers I don’t tell them…if you are not Kalenjin, then don’t get in here…

**MF:** right, so it is an equalizer…

**Steve:** yeah, we don’t…discriminate

**MF:** why? Even I can be a *makanga* (conductor), which is crazy.

**Steve:** *to me* it is not crazy, but it is good. We have so many things in common, when it comes to this big nation, this society, against the government.

**Wilson:** we have a common set of problems…

**MF:** and that overrides your ethnicity?

**Many:** yeah…
The tolerance does not end with coworkers though, which also provides further hope for the possible futures of developing urban environments. Take Steve’s broader discussion of tolerance in the matatu industry when he talks about how his vehicle, by nature of being public is open to all. The speech and registration form below attempts to lie out the mission of the association, highlighting its commitment to the members of the sector and highlighting different and emergent structures of responsibility (Ferguson 2012).

Figure 8.4: MADCOWA registration form. Their motto on the back: Together We Can

When I asked the route 48 crew about their experience of stigma, or of the perception that, as Gladys says, “most people think that if you are a matatu person, you are a bad person” (personal communication, 2010). I asked them what they could do to fight their stigma and the responded with a lively articulation of their visions for the sector.
George: so, we are trying to change the perception

MF: How are you going to do that?

Wilson: By forming a union

Rasta George: by an organization

George: you have seen our offices…

MF: 48 is a big part of MADCOWA, a small group, what about the rest? Compared to other neighborhoods…

George: 48, that is a pilot route.

Rasta George: you know, in Kileleshwa, there is no…uh, in our routes we don’t have those people who used to harass people (meaning Mungiki).

George: we are reaching out…to these members. We have to work with some government officers and entice these people. We want to show them that we are actually working for them. And that we want to…

Rasta: to change

MF: do you think they will want to?

Wilson: I think…I also think, government doesn’t want it.

MF: doesn’t want you to be more professional?

Wilson: yeah, more profession and then to have political aspects, you see? Cause if, when we come…united all in Kenya. MADCOWA

MF: that is a lot of people

George: more than teachers!

Wilson: yeah, yeah, but the problem is…is sponsor. Cause these people don’t have money in the rural areas, or a sponsor…

George: we might not get all these people, but we might get some. We are going to Buru and have a seminar…we are sponsored by USAID, so when these people go to set the ground, most of these people they don’t want to talk to them and they see them they are in suits. They are also drivers and conductors. We are collecting many many information. And we could even get a president! (laughing)
George seemed to be joking here, but he may not be that far off base. In 2011, a thirty-five year old Kenyan man named Mike Sonko ran for parliamentary election representing the Makadara constituency, one of the oldest African locations in Nairobi and the birthplace of matatus. Sonko implicitly connected his campaign and political platform to this matatu legacy by using his own matatu business to raise awareness of his campaign in Nairobi. Sonko owned several *manyangas* that were famous through Nairobi for being extremely spectacular and he used them to gain favor, particularly with the youth, by providing free rides and helping to get conductors and other young people out of jail (Matmania.wordpress.com/tag/mike-Sonko). He ran on a platform of helping the poor, urban youth and, if elected to represent Makadara, he would fight for the rights of matatu workers and commuters. For instance, one day I could not help but to notice another of his well-known vehicles on Joogoo Road because it had a large video screen facing *out* of the back window, playing music videos for the people outside of the vehicle, who were presumably stuck in traffic behind his matatu. This was part of how Sonko used his vehicles and their public presence as part of his personal campaign.

I first heard about Mike Sonko when I noticed his vehicle on the street. It caught my attention because it had a large video screen on the back window facing *out*, to traffic *behind* his vehicle. This is how the route #48 crew saw his campaign,

**George:** There is another man, in Buru Buru…I think he is going to run in this election in Makadara.

**Steve:** *(explaining to me)* He has very bad vehicles…manyangas a lot of music, graffiti.

**James:** This man…

**MF:** Is this Ruff Cutz?

**James:** uh, no…this is a KBA *(referring to the number plate)*, it has been written on top, man eat man society. That vehicle was pimped to the extant that…that person was not impressed in the income he was going to get. His interest was to show off. That used to
be taken every month…they change the colors, they add many things…and you see that is very expensive. The paint that he uses…the paint that the vehicle uses is very very expensive.

Steve: Plus, the rims, the tires…

Rasta George: everything

Steve: not for investment…for show off…

Rasta George: Screens inside…every seat there is a screen…inside

George: And up front there is a giant one…

MF: Wow

James: so you look at this person. He just wants to show off that he has a lot of money.

Steve: cause such kind of matatu attracts the young generation…

George: yeah, and at the same time that will not be arrested by police. Those ones are immune to arrest by police.

James: yeah…

MF: so that guy just wants to be famous.

George: yeah…Mike Munga…

Rasta George: yeah…Mike.

George: Those are the people…who are not ready to see that for us…the industry is changing…cause even if you arrest his driver for not wearing uniform, he doesn’t care. He just goes to bail him out. He doesn’t care. H’s got so much money. And even the police don’t even fear him.

Rasta George: He even has an advocate. A lawyer…

MF: Wow…

Steve: cause…in our industry, when you have a lawyer, you can uh, you…

Rasta George: police will fear you!

Steve:…yeah. Cause most of the time, they, you have to win the case.
MF: lawyers scare police and they know who have lawyers.

Mike Sonko’s real name is Gideon Mbuvi Kioko, but sonko, in Sheng, (a man of means). He embodies the urban hip-hop style that characterizes his matatus. In parliamentary meetings, he can be seen wearing heavy gold chains, designer t-shirts and coats, and baseball caps tilted to the side. However, he is an outspoken member of parliament having spoken over two hundred and fifty times (The Standard, 18 March 2013). Commentators have also been increasingly impressed with his dexterity reciting Bible verses and articles from the Kenyan constitution in his comments surrounding the 2013 election. Mike Sonko’s election to Kenya’s parliament offers a point to conclude this dissertation because he offers a glimpse into a possible, and frankly probable, future in Kenya. Not only is he harnessing the power of the informal transportation sector’s workforce and sympathizers into a politically conscious, voting population, but he is also embracing the status that comes with stigmatization and using it to his advantage.

80 Kenyan legislators are already some of the best paid on the continent, with a tax-free monthly salary of some $13,000 USD (Al Jazeera, October 2012).
This attempt to turn away from ethnic divisions is a broadly shared characteristic among young people in Nairobi. For example, on the 2009 census, when asked for their ethnicity, many young people protested by saying their ethnicity was, “Kenyan” (personal communication, 2009).\textsuperscript{81} This was a message from the youth, to the government in the wake of the 2007-8 post-election violence. In this way, the matatu industry, because of its connection to youth is a potential powerhouse.

**Conclusions**

MADCOWA has ingeniously taken its outsider status, which comes from matatu employment and in the idea of being together as a group, they are realizing anything is possible. From large-scale collective action in strikes that get the Prime Ministers attention to affordable insurance in case of accident or injury. Can we see the role of matatu organizations as new forms of social

\textsuperscript{81} I witnessed a number of census interviews because it was happening just as I arrived in Kenya, August 2009.
movements? They are increasingly providing more services that would have been previously offered by the government or an NGO. They are taking on development goals when they plan their events. In 2010, they held a month long campaigns across the country talking about HIV testing and education. They were also looking to invest their money in some oil advertising. They were well aware of the importance that they needed.
CHAPTER 9: CONCLUSIONS AND COLLISIONS

I end this dissertation with a brief case study of Masdar City, Abu Dhabi, a hyper-planned, corporate, eco-city in the middle of the United Arab Emirates; a city that could not be any more different than the Nairobi this dissertation has invoked up to this point. Masdar City lay before urban planners, private business and environmental activists alike as a Shangri-la, where if you can dream it, you can build it. Money is no object because the city is financially backed by a global energy giant (Masdar Corporation), and although the desert is not the most hospitable environment in which to build a city, it offers a challenging, but unimpeded urban landscape to experiment with technologies of the future.\(^{82}\)

In Masdar city, and many new cities that are in the early stages of creative development and/or are currently being built, a novel and innovative transportation system is key to the city’s marketing strategy. For Masdar City, the transportation system that would represent the height of technology, clean energy, sustainability and comfort was the Private Rapid Transit (PRT) system. The PRT system is made up of “electric-powered, automated, single-cabin vehicles that offer the privacy, comfort and non-stop travel of a taxi service, and the reliability and sustainability of a public transport system” (http://masdarcity.ae/en/62/sustainability-and-the-city/transportation/ 2013). The PRT pods run on magnetic tracks that are built one level below the city, a costly enterprise.

After an initial pilot run between Masdar University and the university’s parking lot, a length of about eight hundred meters, the idea of PRT for the entire city was scrapped. The PRT

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\(^{82}\) The information about Masdar City and PRT transportation is from a paper given by Gökçe Günel, entitled, “"An Expensive Toy: Experiments in Transportation at Abu Dhabi’s Masdar City,” given at the Department of Anthropology, at Washington University in St. Louis, March 1, 2013.
line from the university to the parking lot was kept functioning as a type of novelty ride for the two hundred students, staff and faculty at the small university. Even though, in theory, the PRT's magnetic rail system produces no emissions and was the epitome of sustainable “private” transport in future planned cities, it proved to be too costly to implement in any large-scale way.

Figure 9.1: Masdar city’s proposed Private Rapid Transit (PRT) system is made up of these pods that run on a magnetic track as to have zero emissions (source: http://singularityhub.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/02/Masdar-City-PRT.jpg)

The disparate cases of the Masdar city’s PRT and Kenya’s matatu sector provide alternate and colliding views of transportation futures, playing out in vastly different environments; a supremely planned and fabricated city like Masdar, and the unplanned, post-colonial, urban dynamism of Nairobi. But there are important parallels that can be drawn between them as well, because both projects highlight the connection between transportation and new urban subjectivities.

Like the PRT in Masdar city, the big bus paradigm is part of a novel marketing plan to usher the image of Nairobi as a modern city into investors’ purviews. The PRT failed in Masdar
because it was not a practical, cost-efficient way to provide transportation to the city, even when it was optimally planned. That was precisely the problem, it was nearly too high-tech to be appropriate for everyday use and was eventually relegated to being seen as an “expensive toy” (Günel 2013). Issues with the PRT (breakdowns, malfunctions, not sitting with who you wanted) would prompt students to regret not just using the low-tech option of their legs as transportation mode of choice. For the students at Masdar University, riding the PRT was participating in play, like a joyride, but not a viable transportation option. The PRT is an example of the perfectly planned failure. So what can we take from this?

One irony perhaps best illustrates the possible futures for the unplanned cities of the world -- Masdar’s PRT attempted to make something that was “fun” (enjoyable for the designers, developers, planners and commuters), also practical. It failed. The matatu, on the other hand, is practical, and people have (arguably) made it fun, by transforming it into a site of “play,” but not as an activity as much as creating a sentiment or atmosphere of play (Malaby 2009).83 The PRT was pitted as a comfortable, private space that has all the trappings of first-world luxury without the carbon footprint, whereas, the matatu is a death trap that is not only destroying the social landscape of Nairobi, but the moral fabric of Kenyan society. But the matatu will not go away, and the PRT cannot get started.

It is not enough to say simply that high-tech, hyper-planned, expensive, development solutions often elide the holistic human experience, from SAPs to PRTs. Anthropologists have somewhat hastily opposed studies of “play” with those of “work,” when perhaps we can, like

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83 I say arguably because many people think matatus are death traps, however most people also realize that there is some element of entertainment that every Kenyan appreciates in their transportation choice. Whether it is the loud bass system of a manyanga, or the suit and tie service of Double M’s Express Connection commuter bus. A ride in Nairobi, is never just a ride, it is meant to be an experience.
corruption, see them as parts of a complex continuum of urban life. For matatu operators, this is surely part of their daily work process -- turning work, risky, dangerous, morally tainted work, into some sort of enjoyable activity, that at times resembles an atmosphere of “play.” This transformation of space from public to private through Sheng adds to this atmosphere of play, by incorporating verbal sparring to the otherwise playful din of activities they engage in, and are stigmatized for, like hanging in and out of the door, yelling at strangers and friends on the streets and flirting openly with members of the opposite sex.

The transformation of space from work to play, from public to private, from outsider to insider, is ultimately a social process that this dissertation takes as one of its themes. This transformation of space, and the people in it (at least for the short time they are in it and perhaps long after they emerge) is most important in its potential for the transformation of other elements of society as well. Take MADCOWA for instance, or the election of Mike Sonko to Kenyan Parliament, both instances use as their foundation, a solidarity constructed through stigma, and the social cohesion that results from being excluded and morally tainted.

Therefore, these transformations of unique urban space through infrastructural systems like transportation, allow for a widespread solidarity that is increasingly inclusive, especially in the realms of gender and ethnicity, because of its foundation in stigma. The urban nature of these moving vehicles and their operators, that are simultaneously a little fun and a little scary (or a lot fun and a lot scary), allows for a very open space to create, negotiate, and perform new urban subjectivities that speak to a potential cosmopolitanism and progressiveness. It offers an attractive alternative to the “fundamentalist and puritanical” organizations and social movements that Olivier de Sardan claims are the only way to root out Africa’s widespread corruption. Can MADCOWA offer some sort of alternative to Olivier de Sardan’s African Taliban? Can their
reappropriation of shame be a weapon in the fight against corruption, instead of a daily legitimization of it? After spending many years with some of these workers, who are constantly trying to make their risky job, fun – I think they can.

Yet another parallel can be drawn between the PRT and matatu as Public Service Vehicles (PSVs), which is the PRT’s focus on privacy. Just as I showed in this dissertation, matatus are *intimately public spaces* in a way that a private vehicle or a PRT pod could never be. Perhaps we should think less about promoting a privacy that is probably more and more fleeting in an increasingly populated urban world, and more about the ways that collectivity, or the public intimacy of transportation, can be used to create more equitable urban spaces, with regards to infrastructural systems. In Nairobi’s environment of risk, people are forced to constantly be reflective about choosing their identities at every turn. Beck and Giddens refer to this process as “individualization,” not in the sense of isolation, alienation, loneliness and disconnection, but rather that everyone has to make their own biographies. In other words, individualization is the “disintegration of certainties and the compulsion to make new certainties in an increasingly risky and uncertain environment” (Beck et al. 1994: 14).

Mike Sonko is just one example of what this individualization process can look like as he attempts to paint himself as a defender of the youth and a proponent of the public good through his matatu business. Part of this individualization calls upon the person to constitute herself or himself as an individual, “to plan, understand, design and act – or to suffer the consequences, which will have been self-inflicted in case of failure and resulting in decisions, possible undecideable decision, certainly not free ones, but forced by others and wrested out of oneself, under models that lead to dilemmas” (Beck 1994: 14-16). Matatu operators are faced with the acts of individualization and the dilemmas that accompany them as they constantly make choices.
and decisions that are “not free” but must be made, and the outcome, positive or negative, is the
direct responsibility of the individual.

As I showed in the first part of this dissertation, Nairobi has a long history of spatial
exclusion, negligence and inequality in its built environment due to the historical legacy of
colonial urban planning. The matatu system emerged in the often, unanticipated openings of that
built colonial city’s exclusionary landscape. The matatu sector is still evolving, disturbing and
moving within those openings, and the government’s sweeping attempts at regulation over the
past decade show a revived effort at exclusionary urban planning in the interests of those in
power and at the cost of the actual users of the city.

The matatu industry resists reform because it fills the needs of the citizenry in a
sustainable way, as opposed to the bigger is better bus paradigm that is touted by the World Bank
as a “development blueprint” suitable for fourteen of the largest cities in Africa. Neoliberal
governmentality in Kenya is perpetuated through transport policy because government actors and
powerful business interests with political connections consistently co-opt state supported policies
to increase their own private interests. This process, then, increases the risks to the citizenry,
operators and commuters, which include some of the most vulnerable people in the population.
These transportation development policies consolidate transportation wealth into the hands of a
small elite and out of the hands of thousands of individual Kenyan owners, under the claim that it
is for their own good.

The constitutive space of collective taxis influences new patterns of urban sociability.
The physical space of the matatu vehicle, and collective transportation in general, allows for
private interactions between people in a public arena. The nature of mobility allows for the
vehicle’s space to be more open to intimacy, interaction and sociability, than other spaces in both
colonial and current eras. As the periphery and city center move further apart with urbanization, one of the most important ways people experience urban Nairobi is by moving through it.

Mike Sonko and the PRTs highlight how transportation systems are continually reaching out of the realm of simple utilitarianism and into the arenas of popular cultural production, sociability and self-identification. The enclosed space of the vehicle and the sheer amount of time that urban residents spend in transportation vehicles all over the world cannot be overlooked.

**The Possibilities of Public Intimacy**

I argue in this dissertation that the matatu sector in Nairobi uses particular processes of stigmatization as a cohesive mechanism. According to Goffman, “persons who have a particular stigma tend to have similar learning experiences regarding their plight, and similar changes in conception of self – a similar ‘moral character’ that is both cause and effect of commitment to a similar sequence of personal adjustments” (1963: 32). These “personal adjustments” could be interpreted as the ways that matatu operators bend road rules, leading to the perpetuation of negative behavior, which can result in dangerous experiences of arrest, financial extortion, and physical and sexual violence. Through these shared risks, crews build trust relationships with each other. And, in the case of Nairobi’s matatu operators, this cohesion can lend itself to increased inclusiveness and political power.

In Nairobi, collective taxi drivers sacrifice their reputations for their employment. Their identities are stigmatized or “spoiled” when they are marked as an operator of urban transport thus inviting marginalization, exclusion and, most importantly, a decrease in their life chances. The stigma process articulates around the risky business practices that are embedded in the
sector. These practices stem from the historical legacy of illegality that comes from the violation of the colonial monopoly. In other words, in order for operators to gain skills needed to be a “good” matatu operator, or to move through Nairobi (physical and social landscape) fluidly, they adopt many “bad” behaviors. Balancing elements of customer service with illegal or illicit business practices is a legacy of informal transport in Kenya and has resulted in a widespread, negative perception of matatu operators by the media, government, general public and even in scholarship. The structure of the system has historically meant that corruption is part of this and therefore, so is stigmatization. However, despite their stigmatization, the skill set that these operators possess is one of the most useful in Nairobi because moving through town is key to being urban for many Kenyans in rural and urban areas.  

The ambivalence often felt through matatu work and the effects of stigmatization on this working population result in an increased chance of death/suffering. Dealing with risk management practices (corruption, theft and collusion with gangsters/hijackers) gives operators a sense of moral ambivalence and shame that can also present as bravado. As Goffman illustrates, “instead of cowering, the stigmatized person may attempt to approach mixed contacts with hostile bravado…and sometimes the stigmatized persona vacillates from cowering to bravado, racing from one to the other” (1963: 17-18, italics added by author).

The election of Mike Sonko to parliament speaks to this outsider group cohesion that although may be seen as working against the social order, has become part of it. His embodiment of the matatu lifestyle, and the subsequent rumors and derision aimed at him, actually galvanized a large cross-section of youth in and around Nairobi into a viable political entity and voting block. He used his personal wealth and celebrity from his matatu business to rise to a position of

84 When rural youth in Kenya, where asked what it meant to be ‘urban’, many spontaneously shouted out the single word: “matatu!” (Farrell, personal communication, 2010).
(relative) power. Although he has been lauded at times for his spoken arguments, he is also haunted by the hostile bravado that is stereotypical of the matatu worker in the public eyes.

With the increased interaction social boundaries are increasingly worked out in these vehicles and on the passengers. The crews often experience complex ambivalences surrounding their stigma, but because of the informality of the sector passengers are often caught in the middle. They are often the victims, perpetrators and perpetuators of bad public transportation behavior in Kenya. At the most local level, matatus and any form of transportation, especially in an unplanned city, provide important spaces wherein people are working out the uncertain and risky modern world and experiencing different visions of urbanity.

The public intimacy of shared mobile spaces, from collective taxis in developing countries to tiny PRT pods in the most highly planned cities of the future, is an increasingly important element of urban planning. The changing nature of urban life is that social interaction is changing and mediated by an increasing array of outside actors. Transportation can offer a dreaded nightmare every morning and afternoon or it can be a space of leisure and enjoyment, depending on a multitude of factors. What is common is that mobility is a key trope with which urban residents act out and experience their worlds. Transportation becomes a key site of self-identification and sociability in every city around the world and even in cities that are not yet created. This ethnography of Nairobi’s collective taxis explores the macro and micro-movements of Kenya’s urban transport sector and the strategies, choices, decisions and tactics that contribute to the behavior and norms expressed in and around these vehicles.


Kenyan government


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