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Chronic Mobb Asks a Blessing: Apocalyptic Hip-Hop in a Time of Crisis

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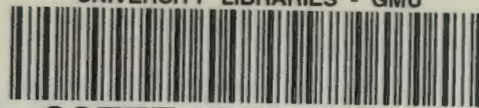
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Figuring

Globalization and the Temporalities of Children and Youth



School for Advanced Research Advanced Seminar Series

Edited by Jennifer Cole and Deborah Durham

Contributors Anne Allison, Ann Anagnost, Jennifer Cole, Deborah Durham, Paula S. Fass, Constance A. Flanagan, Tobias Hecht, Barrie Thorne, Brad Weiss

Figuring the Future

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Chronic Mobb Asks a Blessing

Apocalyptic Hip-Hop and the Global Crisis

Brad Weiss

In the summer of 2000, I returned to Arusha in northern Tanzania armed with a copy of *The Source*, the self-described “magazine of hip-hop music, culture and politics,” which I expected would be a hit with many of the young men I knew in town. Indeed, this large glossy issue quickly circulated through the streets of the city center, and many of the young men—and a few young women—who combed through it valued it especially as a source of stylistic inspiration. The magazine was lauded as *katalogi* (“catalogue”; see also Cole, chapter 5, this volume, on the use of this term in Madagascar). In contemporary street Kiswahili, *katalogi* refers primarily to a way of dressing in contemporary, youth-oriented clothing and accessories, as well as to the multiple media through which such fashions are displayed. One afternoon, a month after my arrival, I sat down to peruse *The Source* with a few guys who were hanging out in front of a kiosk. As one of them flipped through its pages, he made comments typical of other such browsers: “I don’t like those pants,” “Those shoes are fierce,” “That Eminem is crazy!” But he slowed down to read an interview with the artist Q-tip, MC for the crew Tribe Called Quest.¹ Tapping the accompanying picture with his knuckle, he noted, “*Huyu, anapiga swala tano* [This guy hits five prayers].” That is, he prays five times a day. This remark points to ways in which participation in the stylistic possibilities of hip-hop—its

music, culture, and politics—also provides a great many youth in Arusha with a means of defining and affirming their religious affiliations.

Such stylistic possibilities are especially significant—perhaps even pressing—concerns in contemporary Arusha. At the turn of the twenty-first century, Tanzania, particularly the Aru-Meru region in which Arusha is situated, has been engaged in highly public and often turbulent deliberations over the nature and meaning of religious association and spiritual practice. In the early 1990s, fractious and openly violent conflicts within the dominant Lutheran diocese across Mount Meru and Mount Kilimanjaro attracted the attention of national church and state authorities (Baroin 1996). By the end of the decade, contentions had been further fueled by Pentecostal fervor, which today attracts an interest across the region that goes far beyond internecine Lutheran conflicts. Moreover, religious affiliation has had an abiding significance in the historical transformation of Arusha's social and spatial organization. Colonial policies promoted the presence of Muslim "Swahili" traders as proper urbanites in the residential areas of Arusha town. Inhabitants of mountain communities from Kilimanjaro and Meru were assumed to be rural peoples and therefore outsiders and migrants in town (Peligal 1999).

Today, however, many descendants of the long-standing urban Muslim residents (as well as Muslims who come from areas all across northern and central Tanzania to work and live in Arusha) frequently see themselves as besieged by what they understand to be powerful, privileged, external forces—in particular, Chagga and Asian entrepreneurs. Indeed, turmoil surrounding national electoral processes in 1995 and 2000 prompted many of Arusha's Muslims to insist that their very citizenship is at risk. "This is becoming a Christian nation" is how many young Muslim men in Arusha assessed the contemporary political climate. Just for good measure, as well as ecumenical scope, I would also note a broad, if not consuming, concern within contemporary Arusha for the resurgence of malevolent spiritual forces of various forms. Meruhani spirits from the Indian Ocean threaten the fertility of newly betrothed women in town. Even the *Arusha Times* reported that "(t)en female pupils [ages nine to thirteen, both Christians and Muslims] of the Naura primary school in Arusha municipality, recently collapsed in fits of hysteria after allegedly being strangled by what they believed to be 'demons'" (Nkwame 2002; see also Smith 2001 for similar events in southeastern Kenya).

My purpose in citing these tensions is not to introduce a wider discussion of the nature of sectarian conflict in Arusha. Still less do I hope to characterize a range of specific positions—Lutheran, Pentecostal, Muslim—

as they emerge in these interactions.² Rather, I want to emphasize a repeated observation about contemporary Tanzania (Baroin 1996; Kelsall n.d.; Stambach 2000): in a period of rather densely articulated and rapid social, political, economic, and cultural transformations, discourses emphasizing problems of religious affiliation and identity have come to the fore in the Tanzanian public sphere. I argue that these religious discourses, as well as their current predominance, are best understood not as responses to the shifting Tanzanian landscape but as implicated in the changes the discourses themselves articulate. My central concern, therefore, is an understanding of how religiosity is (re-)created within dynamic sociocultural fields such as those prevailing in Arusha today.

Consider, for example, the range of social processes that greatly accelerated in Tanzania during the 1990s: the proliferation of print and electronic media across the nation; the collapse of what were already tenuous public services as a condition of Structural Adjustment; the official rejection of African Socialism (Ujamaa) and the consequent meager, but nonetheless powerful, influx of capital into formal sectors of the economy; the institution of multiparty democracy and the attendant crises of both presidential electoral cycles; the continuing spread of the HIV/AIDS epidemic throughout the nation. This litany at once locates a specific history of contemporary Tanzanian society and politics and also gives evidence of the effects and implications of globalization. Indeed, the intersection of popular cultural practices with contentious religious affiliation is a prominent site on this local–global terrain—perhaps especially so for youth, who feature both as targets and agents of these powerful social projects. My contention is that, by situating current spiritual concerns within these simultaneously local and global processes as intrinsic, constitutive dimensions of diverse and extensive transformations—in Tanzania and elsewhere—it becomes possible to problematize the prominence of these religious discourses and, further, to draw attention to the ways that spirituality has been reconceived by these recent historical shifts.

POP CULTURE, POST-SOCIALISM, OR YOUTH IN TANZANIA

By now, a host of critical studies on the African production of modernity (Barber 1997; Burke 1996; Comaroff and Comaroff 1993; Geschiere 1997; Larkin 1997; Masquelier 2001; Meyer 1998; Piot 1999; Weiss 1996) has made it impossible to assert that the kind of religious claims made in Tanzania today are vestiges of recalcitrant tradition that provide a moral compass in a sea of global change. Further, when we talk about popular

culture in its globalized forms, it is important to recognize that these modes of cultural production include not only FuBu sweatshirts and Fila sneakers, Destiny's Child and the Disney empire, but also circulating cassettes of eminent Maalams and stadium-filled revival services. It is especially interesting to note that, within this multitude of disparate forms, current popular practices in urban Tanzania reveal important *convergences* of what are routinely seen as oppositional discourses, such as morality and desire, piety and pleasure, or devotional practices and katalogi clothing as represented through *The Source*. Because my argument concerns the reformulation of religiosity in urban Tanzania, I am especially interested in the confluence of these seemingly contradictory discourses and practices, which hip-hop performance often embodies. A close examination of this confluence reveals how themes of piety and moral caution structure the possibilities of the hip-hop world and, reciprocally, how global hip-hop reformulates religious commitments.

Recognizing and articulating the conjunction between religiosity and rap within urban Tanzanian popular culture is hardly a narrowly circumscribed endeavor. Hip-hop incorporates a wide array of activities including modes of dress, dance, visual arts such as graffiti and tattooing, and sonic forms such as DJ mixing and scratching. All are present to some degree in Arusha. As diffuse as hip-hop is, the field of religion (if such a discrete entity exists) is even more expansive, amorphous, and intensely debated. I do not presume that hip-hop and religion are distinct forms brought together in a specific time and place, but I do describe how their themes create each other in concrete social practice. I recognize the risk that this convergence of concerns articulated (often quite explicitly, as I will indicate) on the scene in Arusha, when scrutinized, simply dissolves as a phenomenon or dissipates into the broad context of culture. I cannot hope to offer a definitive take on hip-hop and religion that will demonstrate their mutual construction in Tanzania. Still, I argue that there are certain core themes and dynamics in the practices I describe and that these serve to define and create the character of "living the life" in its religious and hip-hop senses.

The hip-hop/religion convergence also points to some important issues for the more general study of youth within prevailing globalized conditions. A number of scholars have recognized that the circumstances faced by young people around the world today have been profoundly shaped by widespread neoliberal, political-economic reforms. "The cumulative impact" of these reforms, writes Cole (2004:573), "has been to create contradictions for youth by simultaneously targeting them as consumers

and making them particularly vulnerable to socioeconomic exclusion” (Comaroff and Comaroff 2000b; Weiss 2004; see also Cole, chapter 5, this volume). My argument here addresses one of the broader problems posed throughout this work—why youth now?—by situating it within the general tension between exclusion and inclusion, a tension exacerbated and specified in the recent history of Tanzanian economy and society. I would note, along these lines, that the young men whom I interviewed (more than women),³ who work and hang out in the “informal sector”—the barber-shops, “saloons,” bars, and bus stands—constitute a large audience for the consumption of hip-hop media and commodities *and* are among the most deeply interested in the current maelstrom of urban Tanzanian religious discourses. Indeed, groups of young barbers took me to the rap shows in Arusha, where verses about religious righteousness and moral caution were enthusiastically performed and received.

This coupling of moralism with consumerism indicates, as we shall see, that a profound ambivalence accompanies the neoliberal production of “value as self-fashioning” (a theme reiterated in many of these chapters; see especially Thorne, Cole, and Allison, chapters 4, 5, and 8, respectively). A contradictory consciousness that shapes the experience of youth is manifest at several levels. In part, those who most fully endorse the prospects of global cultural production exemplified by hip-hop are also most acutely aware of how severely limited their access to that world is. This leads to a sense of frustration, and occasionally despair, that is palpable in most social milieus in Arusha. Moreover, a simultaneous embrace and mistrust of such social projects as education, the media, political reform, the market, and commodity forms is apparent in this ambivalence. The most prevalent and celebrated forms of social engagement—to wit, those that promote such consumerist self-fashioning—are also subject to widespread *critique* as unsatisfying, illusory, and (as we shall see) unreal sources of value. In other words, youth often sense that they are confronting a crisis and, further, that the very resources that might permit them to overcome that crisis may be inaccessible—or worse, *illegitimate*.

THEORIZING THE GLOBAL HIP-HOP NATION

Only in recent years have the scholars of hip-hop begun seriously to examine the global dissemination and production of its musical and cultural forms. This is not simply because hip-hop went global well after it had already gained a tremendous following in the United States (in Tanzania, there has been a flourishing hip-hop scene since the early 1990s). Rather, it reflects a core concern of hip-hop artists and aficionados, one that many

of its analysts have taken up as a theoretical principle. This concern is what might be called a relentless commitment to locality, a notion that what is probably *the* critical feature of hip-hop performance, crucial to its aesthetic and even moral value, is its authenticity. In particular, a great many devotees of rap most appreciate what they call the “realness” of its performance. As Krims (2000) indicates, the qualities of authenticity and realness are characteristically expressed in judgments that are firmly tied to time and especially to place. Krims observes: “It is not at all an obscurity, among listeners, to refer to someone as having an ‘old school flow,’ or even an ‘early 90s West Coast flow,’ or a ‘new-style Queens flow.’ Such terms are fodder for record company ads, artist interviews, song lyrics, and discussions among fans” (Krims 2000:44; see also Forman 2002:passim). Even a figure such as Eminem, often vilified as a crass, commercial misappropriator of African American practices, can be lauded for his authenticity:

Three kinds of authenticity are initially evident [in hip-hop]. First, there’s a concern with being true to oneself. Rap illustrates self-creation and individuality as a value. Next, there’s the question of location or place. Rap prioritizes artists’ local allegiances and territorial identities. Finally, the question becomes whether a performer has the requisite relation and proximity to an original source of rap. Eminem is firmly grounded in these three kinds of authenticity. [Armstrong 2004:340]

Although such essentially aesthetic categories are indispensable to an understanding of hip-hop’s cultural productions (in everything from the self-identification of performers and audiences to the international marketing of a potent commodity), a concern with bona fide origins is central to many analytical assessments of worldwide hip-hop. Russell Potter writes: “As [hip-hop] gains audiences around the world, there is always the danger that it will be appropriated in such a way that its histories will be obscured, and its messages replaced with others” (Potter 1995:146). It is as though global rap music were an imitation (notably pale) of the Ur sounds created in the South Bronx of the 1970s.

Recent scholarly works have challenged the assumption of African American origins as a critical feature of hip-hop’s authentic character, a character that is at risk of being diluted and misrepresented through hip-hop’s mass mediation. The works of Krims and the comprehensive collection *That’s the Joint!* (Forman and Neal 2004), as well as the essays collected in Tony Mitchell’s volume *Global Noise* (2001), for example, argue that a concern with the putatively essential and original qualities of hip-hop dis-

ables our understanding of its truly global realizations. In general, these critiques of authenticity follow from what are now pervasive anthropological perspectives on globalization more generally. Global hip-hop is shown to participate in the worldwide production of locality through a process of “indigenization,” which involves the assertive appropriation of rap music and hip-hop forms by performers who incorporate local linguistic and musical idioms, as well as wider popular (especially) political concerns, in the creation of a hybrid art form (see Mitchell 2001:passim). In Urla’s eloquent discussion of one Basque group, she writes: “Negu Gorriak’s performances of a hybrid Basque rap may [best be] understood not as an Americanization or imitation but as a strategic deployment of signifiers that affords youth a window into their own situation and what it shares with that of racialized minorities” (Urla 2001:181). Concerns with authenticity in the transnational context of hip-hop performance may be less relevant to its productive possibilities than are the dynamics of rap as a kind of global idiom through which profoundly local conflicts can be reimagined and acted upon.

These critiques of appropriation as inauthenticity are crucial. Indeed, related critiques have a long and important, if frequently overlooked, history in the social-scientific understanding of African social practice in particular (Mitchell 1956; Ranger 1975). Yet I am reluctant to dismiss altogether the relevance of authenticity as a principle of cultural production. A number of critics have recognized the ways that images, like pastiche, when used as interpretive categories, have the effect of dehistoricizing the material they are intended to address (Gilroy 1994; Mitchell 2001:10). Arguments emphasizing the capacity of performers to select among an array of idioms, vernaculars, styles, and sounds tend to extract these processes of recombination from the contexts—both meaningful and material—in which they are possible. This runs the risk of celebrating what are highly specific notions of freedom and value embedded in consumerist models of choice. Further, it is not entirely clear that hybridity and ludic indeterminacy are the terms through which practice is made meaningful in the lives of those engaged in these activities. In Friedman’s characteristically polemical discussion, he asks:

If the city landscapes in Stockholm now combine ethnically and linguistically mixed populations and store signs in American English, if we observe (at the airport) the Nigerian, Congolese or Papua New Guinean sporting a can of Coke and a hamburger...is this to be interpreted as creolization in the sense of

cultural mixture? Is it to be interpreted as hybridity in the sense of the liminal sphere between the modern Western and the pre-modern, non-Western.... What is really going on in such referred-to realities? Does anyone have to ask or is the observation enough? What about other peoples' experiences, intentionalities and lives? Are not such hybrids defined as such because they seem to be betwixt and between our own "modern Western" categories, i.e., hybrids for us? [Friedman 2000:640–641]

This critique of the hybrid as an unexamined premise of our own social and analytical categories is crucial, not simply as a corrective to over-theorized and underinvestigated models of globalization, but also because this critique makes it possible to address the ways in which these apparently plural realities are experienced and increasingly valued in much of the world. The notion of authenticity as an *analytical* category that establishes a kind of genealogical distinction between the original and the imitation, or the pure and the contaminated, is certainly not valuable. However, it seems equally crucial to recognize that some understanding of authenticity as a category of *interpretive* judgment is central—especially in popular cultural circles—to contemporary notions of taste, experience, and, more broadly, social being. Affirmations of authenticity—expressed in hip-hop circles in Arusha, and elsewhere, as a concern for realness—have flourished rather than dissipated with the ready availability of a global and manifold set of styles and images. These values, this concern for allegiance to an unmediated, "true" reality, increasingly dominate the lived experience of those caught up in transnational processes such as global hip-hop, as well as reformist Islam and evangelical Christianity. The commitment to realness and the anxieties about its beleaguered condition in the world today therefore offer a means for exploring the conjuncture of these diverse moral discourses across a range of popular cultural practices in contemporary urban Tanzania.

THE ONE TRUE RELIGION AND REALITY RAP

Many contemporary religious inclinations in Arusha, as in much of (especially urban) Africa, emphasize the importance of specific, fixed attributes of identity—authenticity, in effect—as foundational dimensions of social and personal being. Put more succinctly, participants in popular Muslim and Christian practices insist that their way of life is more "true" and more accurately reflects reality than do other sectarian and secular positions. In the summer of 2000, I regularly engaged in conversations with

groups of young men deeply committed to securing my personal salvation by persuading me that Islam is, as they put it, “the only true religion.” These discussions generally focused on what I would characterize as hyper-rationalist critiques of Christian dogma (as these Muslims understood it): for example, rejections of the Trinity as counter to the doctrine of monotheism; dismissals of Christ’s divinity as a violation of the fundamental distinction between human materiality and God’s transcendence; assertions that Christians elevate their clergy to the status of divinity. These rationalist critiques were paired with an insistence on the absolute veracity of the Koran, not just as a sacred text but also as an encyclopedic source of all human knowledge. As I have indicated elsewhere (Weiss 2004), these young men described the Koran as a guide for living but also as a source of empirically verifiable knowledge. “*Kila kitu kimeshaandikwa ndani* [Everything has already been written in it]” is how many put it. Indeed, they framed the Koran as a guide for proper scientific investigation, its fore-known truths awaiting demonstration by research. Many of the Muslims I know demonstrated this experimental attitude with Internet reports about scientific practice in the West inspired by readings of the Koran.

Claims like the ones made to me in Arusha indicate that many contemporary young Muslims, as Swedenburg (2001:70) suggests in his discussion of French Muslim rap, increasingly understand Islam as “an attitude that [is] very rational and scientific, but most importantly, mystical.” In effect, the mystical character of Islam is revealed and confirmed by the rational and empirical truths that a true understanding of Islam discloses. The irrefutable truths revealed in the Koran and already proven through human historical observation also provide evidence, for many of the young Muslims I know, of the certainty of Koranic revelations yet to come. At the turn of the twentieth century, it was not surprising to find that these same young men asserting the *scientific* proof of Koranic authority also were offering predictions about the “End of Days” (*Nusu Kyama* in Kiswahili), citing obvious contemporary evidence that portends the appearance of a false God and world destroyer who will reign over humanity before the righteous are granted celestial immortality. Apocalyptic assertions such as these have a long history throughout the Muslim and Christian worlds; they are by no means novel in this context. What is compelling, though, are the ways that such mystical and transhistorical assertions are explicitly tied to the empirical and rational validity of the Koranic text. Such apocalyptic visions, in other words, are embedded in pronouncements about the *broader* integrity and authority of the Koran. This textual absolutism—in urban Tanzania and elsewhere (Masquelier 1999)—

becomes critical grounds on which adherence to Islam as a true and invariant practice, that is, as the authentic religious identity, is proclaimed.⁴

Supreme truth and authenticity are often posited as critical features of what Tillich calls the “ultimate concerns” of religion. In the world of hip-hop, notions of truth and authenticity are equally crucial analytics. Forman notes: “The boundaries between real or authentic cultural identities and those deemed inauthentic are carefully policed from within the hip-hop culture, and the delineations that define ‘the real’ are taken with deadly seriousness by those who ascribe to hip-hop’s cultural influences” (Forman 2002:xviii). Fans of widely divergent hip-hop styles and rap music genres recognize this pronounced identification of authenticity with the real (Krimms 2000:54–61). Yet all such stylistic variations and virtues are said to constitute ways of “keeping it real” and thus assert the preeminence of authenticity—in the guise of realness—as a shared symbolic value.

In urban Tanzania, these concerns and commitments are equally important to hip-hop. One young man, Rahim, told me why he thought rap was so popular in Arusha and why he himself had composed rap verses: “It’s a voice [*sauti*]. Youth have no voice. You cannot get a minister or a businessman in an office to hear your complaints, so you need a loud voice. You need to ‘represent’ the youth.” In keeping with this construction of truth and its symbolic assertion, Rahim added, “We need to speak about REALITY as it is for youth, and rap is the music that has this voice.” Rahim’s assertions depend upon an understanding of an unassailable truth, a “reality,” as he puts it in English, or *hali halisi* in Kiswahili, using terms and claims lifted directly from a widespread hip-hop vernacular. More specifically, and somewhat paradoxically, I would argue, Rahim insists that this raw, unmediated reality actually requires some means of demonstrating its truth in order to realize its implications. That is, it requires a “voice” to give expression to this truth. Further, this voice is characterized not as a style, as interpretation, or even as a *way* of knowing and speaking, but simply as an embodiment of the fundamental reality it expresses. Voice here is evidence of the authenticity with which it speaks. Voice is unassailable because it is a true expression of lived reality as it actually is.

To give voice in this way is—to use Rahim’s language, a vernacular (in English) plucked from the global hip-hop order he extols—to “represent.” This term in such usages is understood *not* as a means of speaking on behalf of some under-represented, voiceless constituency, but as a way of expressing a commitment to the truth of the reality that the constituency lives. Krimms describes American hip-hop sounds: “If one of the principal validating strategies of rap music involves ‘representing’ and ‘keeping it

real’—in other words, deploying authenticity symbolically—then that ethos is formed (and reflected) differently in each [rap] genre” (Krimms 2000:48). Further, modes of hip-hop performance that emphasize the immediate and unmediated character of reality are equally concerned with the importance of giving voice to that (otherwise unvoiced and under-represented) reality through rap music. This is exemplified in such claims as Chuck D’s celebrated celebration of rap as “the black CNN we never had” (Forman 2002:251) and MC Eiht’s statement “I just talk about the ‘hood. That’s just spittin’ the real” (Forman 2002:93). Here is a characteristic tension in hip-hop cultural production, plainly evident in urban Tanzanian accounts as well. On one hand, representing, or giving voice, is a direct embodied expression (“a loud voice,” “spittin’ the real”) that partakes of a given and incontrovertibly true reality. On the other hand, it is a means of confirming and establishing—literally creating—the specific qualities and character of the real itself (Dinwoodie 1998). Indeed, the realness of the voices that represent are constantly subject to scrutiny and critique by those they would claim to represent. This tension is rather different from the much ballyhooed crisis of representation, for it is the real itself that is explicitly embraced as an authentic truth and is also the subject of perpetual challenge and (as Forman puts it) policing by those who participate in hip-hop’s performances. For these participants, reality seems uncertain and therefore at risk.

KNOWING REALITY

The sense of reality being at risk—an apocalyptic contention intrinsic in the perpetual efforts of hip-hop participants to assure that reality is acknowledged, that voices are representing, keeping it real—both transcends and connects global and local orders of meaning and practice. Such a shared *and* differentiated perspective clearly posits some notion of authenticity as a central symbolic quality, even as the paramount value. Yet I would also insist that this notion of authenticity is not concerned with adhering to the foundational tenets of some originary source of meaning, or an essential way of being, that is either incompatible with other modalities or in danger of being diluted or corrupted by those who would appropriate it. Shiite Muslims in Arusha, for example, can embrace the Koran as the unvarnished truth without feeling the need to immerse themselves in Arabic *or* to renounce the significance of other social-cultural products—hip-hop clothing, rap music, the popular press—as inauthentic scourges of meaning. In fact, the Koran is grasped by these young Muslims as an immediate expression of their own concrete existence—a body of knowledge

that is confirmed in their own sensible world of experience—giving this text its “sacred” character and also its ultimate reality. The Koran, to use a familiar vocabulary, “represents” their “reality.”

The thematic of authenticity is as evident in hip-hop’s commitment to keeping it real as it is in the fascination (on the part of many of those also in the hip-hop world) with apocalyptic pronouncements. An understanding of the real as a phenomenon that is in danger of displacement or even disappearance plays a prominent part in reconfiguring social worlds in Arusha and in reconstituting religiosity as well. What this perceived assault on reality indicates is a broadly shared ontology. In turn, this implies that there is actual ontological work to be done by popular practice, as an audience and as a congregation. Participation goes beyond upholding abstract, even sacred, principles, or maintaining moral strictures, or accurately reflecting the circumstances of one’s peers. It requires engaging in these practices as a means of sustaining reality. This ontological crisis demands, in particular, that you make your voice an expression of your being-in-the-world so that your identity, or self-representation, partakes of the reality it upholds.

For many youth in Arusha today, this specific dynamic is a feature of both hip-hop performance and religious devotion. To describe this dynamic, I first sketch out certain features of participation in popular culture in Arusha more generally. I then show how these modes of participation serve as important means of demonstrating and concretizing the sociocultural process of establishing authenticity and the real. I also show how the themes of realness and its fugitive character are given a voice that is realized in certain performances of popular culture, embodying specific qualities of this “real” world. To illustrate the process, I show how voice is explicitly realized in the verses of the Tanzania rap music—both mass-mediated and less widely distributed—that I heard in Arusha in the summer of 2000. A number of English- and Kiswahili-language tabloids are readily available in Arusha. Some of these are published in Tanzania, and many of the most popular come from Kenya. I found that many young men and women kept scrapbooks made up of materials culled from these media. Occasionally, these scrapbooks—simply called *daftari*, or notebooks—were highly intertextual, consisting of notes received from friends, headlines pulled from multiple papers, and photos of the celebrities, which were often subsequently removed to decorate a family sitting room or a workplace. The most consistent feature in the dozen or so notebooks that people shared with me was the page after page of carefully handwritten copies of the lyrics published in these Sunday papers.

This kind of writing practice, which has a long history among school goers in East Africa (see Fugelsang 1994; R. Thornton, personal communication, November 2000), provides a glimpse into convergences in contemporary urban Tanzanian popular culture. The youth who keep these notebooks regard them with a telling significance. Most people I asked told me that they wrote out the lyrics because such exercises are “educational” (*yanafundisha*). This notion of the educational value of participating in popular culture resonates with the meanings that audiences, for a variety of popular practices in Arusha, give to their actions. As I have discussed elsewhere (Weiss in press), audiences for radio and videos, especially internationally distributed soap operas, routinely describe the experience of reception as one that is “educational.” When I asked people what a soap opera or rap lyrics taught them, they invariably answered that they learn about their “surroundings” or “environment” (*mazingira*) through forms like these. Some participants said that they learned of disparities between the surroundings of Arusha and the ones represented in popular media. Others said that they learned of parallels between changing circumstances in urban African life and the life depicted in these mediated products. In both cases, education cultivates an awareness of interconnections among circumstances and the possibilities (and impossibilities) of establishing and sustaining those interconnections. More than just identifying with or desiring the celebrated world represented in popular media, audiences such as those in Arusha seek to understand their own experience as a part of that powerful reality and, in many respects, to make *their* world one specific circumstance *within* that overarching context.

The concern with an awareness of one’s transforming surroundings, with the claim that participation in popular culture constitutes a critical means of developing such acumen, is a prominent theme in hip-hop globally and in Arusha. Groups of performers who fashion themselves as practitioners of reality-based rap often emphasize the role of consciousness-raising in their performances, seeing hip-hop as an educational vehicle. Such consciousness-raising is often linked to the Nation of Islam, which has a significant following in American hip-hop. Consider the “5 percent nation,” which “refers to the idea...that at any given time, only 5 percent of any population are politically aware enough to be influential” (Krimms 2000:96–97). In keeping with this claim, many hip-hop performers self-consciously seek to constitute this 5 percent nation in order to shape a wider politics. The extent to which these specific ideas inform the global development of hip-hop, even among explicitly Muslim rappers and audiences, is open to considerable debate (Swedenburg 2001). In Arusha, as

indicated above, many Muslim youth are aware of the religious affiliations of hip-hop celebrities and embrace the Muslim identity of those (such as Wu-Tang Clan, Nas, and Mike Tyson) who identify with the Nation of Islam.

The theological particulars of the Nation of Islam are, to my knowledge, irrelevant in the Tanzanian case. What is absolutely crucial to hip-hop in this context is its concern with consciousness-raising as a political project. In Arusha, the notion of awareness is captured in a self-descriptive term used by many who follow hip-hop: *MaMental*. *MaMental* is a Kiswahili neologism derived from the English word *mental* and has currency in some hip-hop circles as a term that refers to intellectual activity and indicates understanding or insight.⁵ This autonym might be approximated as “The Knowing Ones” or “The Thinkers.” Those who take part in hip-hop performance in urban Tanzania clearly understand themselves to be working to develop a form of consciousness, a theme that resonates with wider understandings of popular culture practice in Arusha. This stance is condensed and objectified in the “mental” condition of these youth.

The critical self-awareness embraced by hip-hop participants illuminates a more general concern with authenticity, the real, and the proper modes of expressing or representing it. These urban youth characterize the relevance of their own actions in terms of “knowing” qualities. Their acts are valid and legitimate so long as they seek to achieve and communicate an awareness of the world. In this way, reality and its representation go hand in hand. Popular expressions, or voices, are real insofar as they articulate an awareness of and insight into changing circumstances; the real is defined as the object of thinking and knowing as valued actions. The concerns with tireless thinking as a means of “keeping it real” further suggest a crucial aspect of authenticity as it is understood and acted upon in Arusha. If thinking and being conscious are vital to sustaining a commitment to reality, then this implies that reality is threatened by a pervasive lack of awareness, a vast unknowing. In urban Tanzania, the threat to the real from ignorance and unthinking action is a deeply felt problematic, one that characterizes a great many contemporary lives.

LOSING YOUR WAY, KEEPING IT REAL

To demonstrate the force of this concern with the fugitive character of reality, the threat of ignorance, and the value of the authentic, let me return to my initial discussion about the prominence of religious interests and practices in Arusha. Pentecostalism in Aru-Meru has attracted the most scholarly attention (Baroin 1996; Stambach 2000), but there is also a renewed interest in Islam, motivated and structured in broadly similar

ways. Let me offer the brief testimony of two young men I know—one affiliated with the Assemblies of God and the other a Sunni Muslim. Each confronted a spiritual crisis in order to indicate how the real and ways of knowing it are grasped as part of contemporary religiosity. The first man, Michael, in his late twenties, worked as a security guard in town and had become a preacher in his church. He came to the Assemblies of God, he said, after leading a wayward life. He had been a trader in the black market all across Tanzania for many years and lived, in his own words, a life of “debauchery and nonsense [*usherati, na maisha ya ovyo*].” His life changed when his father became very ill and Michael was called home by his family. Back at home in Aru-Meru, Michael began to hear about the activities of the Assemblies of God, which, as he put it, “had answers to all the questions about what to *do* in life.” This was in contrast to the Lutheran faith, which never offered any concrete solutions. “They don’t care!” he told me. “If you come with questions, they just tell you to pray, but they won’t help.” Pentecostals, however, showed him that the Bible has answers to everything that can happen “as you live your life.” Even a young woman in his village had been instantly cured of demonic possession by the utterance “*Yesu ni Bwana* [Jesus is Lord]” at an Assemblies of God prayer meeting. “Today,” said Michael, “this woman has become a success and has given birth to many children.”

The next account comes from a younger man, Ibrahim, who at age eighteen was just beyond secondary school age. Ibra came from the oldest Muslim residential zone in Arusha, from a family with more financial means than many but of wildly shifting economic fortunes. He lived in a matrifocal compound presided over by his mother’s mother, along with his mother, her sisters, and their children. Ibra attended classes in tourism at one of the numerous “technical colleges” that offer such classes in the area. But he had also had the opportunity to attend secondary schools in Kenya, an opportunity that he lost, by his own account, because of his bad behavior. His mother, however, told me that he was unable to continue because the family could no longer provide the school fees.⁶ I had known Ibra to be a dedicated “thug” (*muhuni*), in his own words, a denizen of one of the numerous barbershops that have sprung up all around town, places of informal gathering and meager economic prospects for thousands of young men. But I also found in the summer of 2000 that he had become a devout Muslim, attending prayers at his neighborhood mosque five times a day. When I asked Ibra why he had taken up his faith, he told me that he had returned to Islam after getting kicked out of school for the last time the preceding year. He told me that he had “lost his way” (*nimepotea njia*)

and he was returning to what he had known since he was a child. All the trouble he had gotten into at school and especially the “sins” of smoking *bhanghi* (pot) had not improved his life at all. “Life changes [*Maisha yan-abadilika*],” he told me, “and these changes make you search for the right way [*njia ya kweli*].” On a subsequent occasion, Ibra took me to his mother’s sitting room, where he showed me texts, published in Kuwait, on how to pray and the proper meanings of Islam. He told me that he had known the proper rites since he was a child but he enjoyed seeing them published in an imported text and written in English.

These brief accounts recapitulate a number of themes I have described. The centrality of the Bible, for example, as a text in which all of experience is found exemplifies the textual absolutism also attributed to the Koran. The way that a Kuwaiti text written in English situates Ibra’s direct, bodily praxis in a global context also recalls the significance of education as a mode of forging connections between disparate circumstances. In each account, the truth of an authentic reality is held to be incontestable. Undoubtedly, there are important dimensions of these men’s histories that should be distinguished; these men’s religious experiences are not identical, nor simply tokens of a common type. But they do point to a shared set of concerns, a way of characterizing existential crises and their practical resolution that informs each of these perspectives. Both Michael and Ibra determine what is “the real” through a specific way of knowing, one that confirms the truth of what they know and the authenticity of their expression of this knowledge (in the form of Michael’s preaching and Ibra’s daily prayers, each a mode of voicing faith). Each man describes coming to an awareness of the truth through his encounter with falsehood and nonsense. Each lost his way and became aware of that deviation by “coming back,” returning to the proper condition to which he had access all along. Michael returns home only to be “born again,” and Ibra rediscovers a Muslim practice he had known since childhood. Michael self-consciously rejects his past Lutheranism as inadequate, and Ibra embraces a familiar faith.

In both instances, “the real” is an entity that has always been present and that they had only to recognize in order to acquire. At the same time, what *allows* this recognition to take place is the aberration—the debauchery, the *bhanghi*, the nonsense—through which they come to a clearer understanding. Losing one’s way validates and authenticates the value of “the real” to which one returns. Moreover, the themes of aimlessness and nonsense as dimensions of knowledge confirm, yet again, the apocalyptic premise that “the real” is at risk. Therefore, such experiences of deviation

are *routinely* incorporated into renewed understanding of the truth and frequently characterize the authenticity of the voice. Such voices speak with greater authority—that is, are more real—because of how they came to their insights into that reality, the *hali halisi*, as it is lived today. Again, the real and ways of representing it are mutually constituted.

These concerns are paramount in a revitalized spirituality and in the popular music of Arusha. Consider the song that probably received the most airplay across Tanzania in the summer of 2000, “Chemsha Bongo” (literally, “Boil Your Brain,” or “Think Hard”) by Hard Blasterz Crew. The very title of the song immediately denotes the value of thinking and knowing. It also connotes ties to place through its association with *bongo* (brain), a colloquial term for Dar es Salaam, an appellation that further indicates the centrality of thinking to popular cultural practice. This song was the first track from the album *Funga Kazi* (Finish the Job), which plainly implies the qualities of “hardness” and “toughness” predominant in this kind of reality rap. The song begins with the chorus:⁷

Savior, I offer my soul. Free me from this chaos.

If I fool with this life today, I’ll go to bed hungry.

Think hard before you are trapped. You’ll be amazed.

Think hard before you are trapped. You’ll be astonished.

The chorus neatly encapsulates the crisis (a world of chaos and foolishness), which might be resolved by thinking through one’s predicament in the hopes of salvation. The lyrics of “Chemsha Bongo” elaborate on this process, describing in detail the world of chaos and a failure to properly think about the consequences of such nonsense. The song describes the life of a young man, J, who comes from a loving and modestly well-to-do home and is drawn through his desire for “the sweetness of life” (*utamu wa maisha*) to forget his respect for his parents and elders. Instead, he pursues a life of beautiful women, crates of beer, and a posse of followers (*wapambe*, literally, “those who decorate”). Eventually, these infinite desires lead him to the pursuit of crime, a life on the run in Zanzibar, and the accumulation of debts. His friends, who once celebrated his arrival at the bars and clubs, now say, “*Cheki J arosto amesha zeeka* [Check out J. He’s already grown old].”

In the concluding verse, J’s parents are killed in a bad accident, and J’s first thought is one that actually cheers him up (*Nikajipa moyo*): “I knew I’d inherit wealth because of this disaster [*Nikajua nitarithi mali kutokana na hayo maafa*].” Suddenly, J is overcome with astonishment at his relatives. In an act akin to divine intervention (“*Vilianza kutokea vizingiti na sielewi vilipo ibuka* [They started to break through the floodgates. I don’t understand

where they popped up]”), all his remaining family begin fighting over money, and he realizes, too late, that he is as good as dead. Horrified by this epiphany, J addresses his listeners and reminds them of the importance of religious devotion:

Rich people, pray to God before you depart.
Man is like a flower. He sprouts and he dies.
And money is like a devil.
If you have it, you can never be found worthy.

The song concludes with a horrifying vision of corporeal damnation:

Friends, I cry. I’ve already been undone.
Right here I smell of sweat. I’m entirely spoiled.
My body is like a piece of cassava that’s been scraped down.

and an ecumenical call for renewed spiritual commitment in order to avoid the disasters that J faced:

It’s true what they say about the Prodigal Son.
The Bible and Qur-aan, they say the remorseful are forgiven.
Angry citizens still want to take me for a thrashing.
They wanted to burn me. They’ve soaked me in oil.
Say your prayers, and search every hour and every minute.
Don’t hope to find, my brother, what I found.

The poetic structure, as well as central textual features of “Chemsha Bongo,” produce a narrative through which an authentic voice is created. The narrator, J (many listeners will recognize *J* is the actual nom de guerre—Nigga J—of the rapper), recounts his own experience. He starts by reporting that he will condense his entire life in these verses (“*Kwa kifupi* [In short]”), beginning with the way he was raised. J’s childhood is focused especially on education and is clearly situated in a social world of “parents” and “wise elders.” Yet the very comforts of his life plant the seeds of his ultimate undoing: “*Maisha yalikuwa matamu nilisahau yote haramu* [Life was sweet. I forgot all that was forbidden].” This statement, early in the song, establishes the central tension in the overall narrative; in effect, J’s life is shaped by his forgetting. The significance of “forgetting” is concretized in a series of contrasts: his parents and elders, present in the initial and concluding verses, are replaced by the “chicks” (*mademu*) and “posse” (*wapambe*) with whom J runs in the body of the song. Poetically, J’s life is motivated by sweetness, in contrast to the foul stench of those who would restrain or

impede him. This sweetness is literally embodied in the foods J enjoys and provides for his crew—especially roast pork and beer (*kiti moto na bia*)—foods that are specifically forbidden (*haramu*), directly exemplifying what he has forgotten. Ultimately, these same poetic devices are inverted. J’s very body and blood emit the odor of death, and his body, which had enjoyed the expensive foods of the sweet life, becomes “like a piece of cassava that’s been scraped away” (the cheapest, most common and flavorless of foods).

Underlying these contrasts, and in many respects at the root of J’s forgetting, is the fate of J’s “intelligence” (*akili*). J begins his life showing his intelligence, heading straight to school. His intelligence, though, soon gives way to the power of money. When elders cleverly advise him, he hears them as “speaking in riddles.” His money “was like a hammer [*fedha kwangu ni kama nyundo*]” used to destroy all in his way. Facing a life of crime to maintain the lifestyle he has pursued, J is cut off from the wealth of his parents. The parents try to shift the focus of his ambitions:

Only my parents tried to show me that my inheritance is education.

I decided that you study in order to get money.

From this moment forward, J’s life is in rapid decline as he “eats” his wealth. Women who once fell all over him now laugh at how he has aged. “Poverty comes knocking [*Umasikini umepiga hodi*].” In the end, J’s fatal transformation is revealed as his “head starts to spin [*Akili ilianza kuniruka*],” (literally, “My intelligence passed over me”) and his relatives bitterly fight over the money of their dead kin. “*Kwa kifupihl*”: in short, as J would have it, love of money destroys the possibility of learning. Only after he has been destroyed by this monetary pursuit, literally undone, is he able to offer a lesson for others, one that reaffirms, in the “name of truth,” the power of prayer, the need for repentance and perpetual devotion to God. In so doing, J also reaffirms the centrality of education and intelligence to acquiring the real, by rendering his own life as an illustration, indeed, an embodiment of this process. A further illustration of this point is that J has now gone solo with a hit release, “Machozi, Jasho, Na Damu [Tears, Sweat, and Blood],” with the new moniker Professor J. Moreover, the voice through which he articulates these changes exemplifies the total process of education, one that has forgotten the truth, lost its way, and is fully achieved upon its return to an ever-present and authentic reality.

“Chemsha Bongo” was (and remains) one of the most popular rap songs in Tanzania, but it is by no means unique in its explicit and strikingly apocalyptic message. All the informal crews in Arusha told me that they

liked to listen to and create verses about *dini* (religion). One duo with whom I worked for several weeks called itself Chronic Mobb. The two young men were eighteen years old, Nesto Dogg and Spidah Killa. When I first met Nesto, he was living with his mother and grandmother in a small pair of rented rooms in one of the most notoriously dangerous areas of town, near the open-air market. Nesto was still finishing primary school, working intermittently at a barbershop near his home, and hoping to find a way to get to secondary school. His father, who lived in Dar, had taken a second wife, leaving the members of Nesto's house to scramble for resources where they could. The following year, I met up with Nesto when he performed with Spidah at a local weekly rap competition. He told me that he had not been able to continue with school but that he and Spidah, who had long been friends, were still barbering—and regularly going to the Tanzanite mines at Mererani, *kutafuta mkwanja* (looking for cash). Spidah and Nesto were quite taken with stories about those who had struck it rich in the mines. They were equally amused by reports of how easily these fortunes were blown. Nesto's mother was also working "in the bush" (*porini*), vernacular for working at the mines, in her case not as a miner but as an aspiring gem trader.

Chronic Mobb, like many crews in Arusha, generally describe the "message" (*ujumbe*) of their verses in terms of the "lessons" (*mafundisho*) and "intelligence" (*akili*) through which they hope the audience will "become aware" (*watakuwa*, "mental"). A number of groups further linked these concerns with religion and concretized this connection, as did Chronic Mobb, by beginning their performance with widely recognized Christian hymns. The following song by Chronic Mobb takes its title from such a hymn, "Katika Viumbe Vyote Vilivyo Umbwa [Of All Creatures Created]." The first two lines are from the hymn:

In all of God's creation,
Man was created above all others.

Chronic Mobb sings these lines several times before launching into its own verses. Nesto told me that they like to use the hymn in order to "stir up" and "enliven" (*kuchangamka*) the audience, a technique that had the effect of generating audience participation on most of the occasions I saw Chronic Mobb perform (figure 9.1). This performative quality is plainly the "message" of their verses as well. "Katika Viumbe Vyote" is not presented as a narrative, and Nesto and Spidah do not describe their own conditions as object lessons in the way J does. Still, there are clear parallels between this rap and "Chemsha Bongo" in the immediacy of experience as

this is represented in the verses. In each of the two verses, performed by Nesto and Spidah in sequence, the rappers address their audience through reference to their own bodily condition. In turn, these bodily conditions are grasped as generic human conditions, presented as indisputable evidence of our “created” condition. Nesto begins by lamenting how “sad” and “tired” he is and warns: “Let’s not be stupid [*Tusiwe akili fyatu*],” but instead recognize that we were actually created. Like J, who forgets his initial condition of intelligence, Nesto asserts that “we don’t remember” who created us and what that requires of us. Creation is confirmed as both real and orderly, with Man above all others and God above Man. The initial lines of Spidah’s verse reiterate these claims, urging people to remember their created condition and directly describing the hierarchy of the human body (“With a head to think with and eyes to see/A nose for smelling, ears to hear”) as self-evident proof of this creation.

Having established the forgotten fact of creation, Nesto and Spidah go on to detail the ways in which this creation is directly subverted in contemporary life.

But even though the Lord created us,
I see the disgrace of men lying with men
Until chicks are barren
And even little girls have abortions.

Nesto further denounces the inversion of age hierarchies, decrying “kids beating their mothers” and “old folks tripped up.” Spidah’s verses follow the same pattern of inversion of the proper order:

We have ears, but we don’t hear.
Prophets guide us, but we don’t follow.

In both verses, the persuasive force of the claims lies in the reality of our own “created” bodies. Nesto “sees” and “meets” the corporeal disgraces he describes, and Spidah’s lament is the subversion of the body itself (“We have ears, but we don’t hear”). In turn, Nesto and Spidah each call for a renewed bodily connection to divinity, “speaking from the heart” so that we will “put his will in our hearts.” Whereas J offers his own life course as exemplary evidence of his spiritual claims, Nesto and Spidah (who would seem to exempt *themselves* from the horrors they decry) validate the realness of their assertions through the body, showing how the body is tangible proof of God’s creation, how the presence of evil is manifest in the deviant condition of the contemporary body, and how the body also offers us a means to address these failures and remember our created condition.



FIGURE 9.1

Popular rap crew Chronic Mobb at a concert in Arusha, Tanzania.

CONCLUSIONS

In verses like those of “Chemsha Bongo” and “Katika Viumbe Vyote,” the themes of religious devotion and spiritual crisis are hard-hitting and direct. There is no mistaking the call for an immediate return to divine guidance in a troubled world. Indeed, both Hard Blasterz Crew and Chronic Mobb make ecumenical pleas for the necessity of faith, extolling the Bible and Koran, churches and mosques, acting in “the name of Jesus,” and asking for a Muslim blessing (*omba dua*). Not all of Tanzanian hip-hop is so manifestly concerned with religious matters, but these are clearly dominant themes in popular urban music. As the work of Remes (1999), Perullo (2005), and Stroeken (2005) reveals, rap music has become immensely popular across Tanzania, and rap produced in Tanzania has even been seen as a distinctively local product, known as Bongo Flava. Rap is widely seen as “an important means for marginalized Tanzanian youth to address mass audiences” (Perullo 2005:77). The theme of corruption is popular today, one of the many *ujumbe mkali* (strong, or fierce, messages) of Bongo Flava. Here, too, corruption is seen as *hali halisi*, as Mr. II raps in his composition of the same name (cited in Perullo 2005:81):

Siasa ni mchezo mchafu.

Wanataka umaarufu.

Politics is a dirty game.

They just want to be famous.

Wanasiasa wa Bongo wengi waongo. Lots of Tanzanian politicians
are liars.

Here, the theme of corruption is described as both an unvarnished examination of the harsh truth of “reality” (*hali halisi*) and a facade that distorts reality. I would argue, therefore, that the power of rap performances such as “Hali Halisi,” “Chemsha Bongo,” and “Katika Viumbe Vyote” illustrates the extent to which religiosity itself has been rendered meaningful and pertinent through its mutual constitution with hip-hop and, undoubtedly, other globalized modes of cultural production. The themes of losing your way in a world of nonsense and returning to or remembering a more complete truth are certainly long-standing narratives in both Islam and Christianity. Navigating these movements by the use of “intelligence” and “education,” through which you become “conscious” of your life’s condition, is now a standardized strategy exemplified in spiritual chronicles, soap opera fans’ self-accounts, and rap lyrics. All these motifs strongly resonate with the fundamental purpose of keeping it real that pervades hip-hop sensibilities wherever they are found.

Equally important is that these broadly shared, categorical understandings are concretized in the actual performance; these are not merely semantic parallels, for they are underpinned by distinctive pragmatics. The “realness” of these accounts is more than a conceptual assertion or even an avowal of faith. It is embedded in the forms of articulation through which the *voices* making these claims are created, so as to partake of the “realness” they bespeak. That is, the authentic character of their ontological positions is plainly exhibited in the representation of that reality. This wedding of representation to reality is illustrated, as I have indicated, by J’s account of his own forgetting and consequent physical destruction and in Chronic Mobb’s equally embodied poetics, which demonstrates facts of divine creation in the forms of human suffering, experience, and evil. These features of the voices deployed in these raps are further grounded in the musical poetics of their performances. Of notable concern are “hardness,” “toughness,” and “endurance”—qualities especially beloved by young, un(der)-employed men—which are exemplified in the names *Hard Blasterz* and *Chronic Mobb* (*chronic*, according to Nesto and Spidah, signifying tireless effort and diligence). The musical features of these rapper performances—rapid delivery or “flow” of the verses, dense clustering of note values driving a percussive rhythm forward, and layering of heavy beats with light, dissonant electronic sounds (the keyboard accompaniment to *Hard Blasterz*)—all generate “hardness” (Krimms 2000:71–75). This hardness is

further contrasted with other popular musical genres in Tanzania, especially *taarab*, which rappers and their fans claim is “weak” and “soft.” This hardness indicates the commitment of the performers and is intended to suggest, as do the textual features of their lyrical forms, a directness of expression and the unmediated character of experience. The truth of the reality these verses describe is meant to be intrinsic to its very utterance.

The global proliferation of popular cultural products such as hip-hop, evangelical Christianity, and Muslim reform are characterized not by a celebratory embrace of pluralistic choices, but by a firm attachment to an ontological truth, an assertion of the presence of authentic forces at work in human experience. In this sense, these cultural forces are akin to what Geschiere and Nyamnjoh (2000:423) describe as “a general obsession with autochthony,” a quest to secure a vague, unspecified access to an originary force that establishes clear lines of political inclusion and exclusion. This obsession, like the workings of hip-hop and popular religiosity I have described in Arusha, is seen as “the flip side of globalization” (Geschiere and Nyamnjoh 2000:424) as mobility and dispersal are paired to the formation of new and more impermeable boundaries. The claims of urban Tanzanian religiosity expressed in hip-hop as I have described them are more profound and, in some ways, more troubling than the identity politics of autochthony. These Tanzanian claims insist not simply on difference at the levels of identity (indeed, they sometimes call for a certain ecumenicism, uniting all who follow God), but on a new grounding in a truer reality. They call, as well, for distinctive ways of knowing that reality, ways of using one’s intelligence under conditions as they actually are.

What is troubling about this pronounced affirmation, this attachment to the real as an authentic way of being and doing, is the precarious nature of reality as it is defined. In a discourse that makes the very commitment to keeping it real the only legitimate mode of action, challenges to sell-outs, selfishness, and insincerity abound. But the crisis decried in Arusha is not simply a failure to toe the line of a doctrine; it is rather the threat—or perhaps the promise—that reality itself is under siege. Hard Blasterz Crew and Chronic Mobb offer explicitly apocalyptic accounts of the world as they find it. This message is part of their hardness, their directness, their realism. Moreover, this apocalyptic prospect is tied to the way of knowing reality (using one’s intelligence and being educated) that this mode of reality rap defends. Indeed, in the case of Chronic Mobb, the truth that the singers put forth for MaMental (The Knowing Ones) to embrace is the consciousness of our pending obliteration. We must confront reality as it is: “the end of the world is near,” but those who ask forgiveness for their sins

will go to heaven. Although Hard Blasterz seems somewhat less worried about the end of the world, the critical act the crew calls for is “asking forgiveness.” In either case, a final judgment looms.

How can we account for the tenuous nature of reality? Why is the apocalypse so potent and present a force in the lives of these young Tanzanian men? Apocalyptic pronouncements are nothing new in the worlds of either Christendom or Islam, yet simply assimilating these current dynamics to that recurrent legacy tells us little that is particular either to this specific historical moment or to the concrete terms in which the End of Days is understood and expressed. At the same time, it would be reductionist in the extreme to appeal to globalization, late capitalism, neoliberalism, or any of the other social scientific rubrics through which contemporary political economies are decried, as the underlying *source* of these profoundly spiritual and ontological claims. These verses may lament economic and social marginalization, but they are most concerned with educating humanity about its pending doom. Most important, if we want to read these popular movements as veiled critiques of shifting structures of political economy, then we must also recognize that these movements are captivated by the possibilities of these shifts. Hard Blasterz Crew plainly shows the considerable allure of mademu and wapambe (chicks and a posse), crates of beer, and gold-trimmed Benzs, even as it fears their influence. Spidah Killah and Nesto Dogg declaim the importance of asking a blessing and begging forgiveness for our sins, yet they gear up each month to dig in the local Tanzanite mines, hoping for that huge score, which they fully expect will evaporate as soon as they grab it.

Perhaps it is this latter dynamic that reveals something of the apocalyptic force of the present moment and manifests its contradictory characteristics in the experience of youth. More than simply the material constraints and abjection of global economic reforms, it is the nature of the possibilities these offer—the impossible dreams, the concreteness of excess, the massive jackpot—that seems exquisitely and uniquely *real* yet simultaneously evanescent, indeed, *necessarily* evanescent. This is value meant for destruction, a windfall intended for obliteration. More than economic limitations, the current moment institutes a mode of materializing and signifying value that is all-consuming and always consumed. I am hesitant to offer such tidy explanations for the apocalypse. Still, I would suggest that such a perspective alerts us to particular ways of being and doing that are increasingly commonplace in our world, modes of knowing the truth and acting on it, of representing the world and keeping it real.

Notes

1. Crews consist of young men who compose lyrics or perform at rap concerts and competitions in town. Rap competitions for local crews are held in a number of venues in Arusha. A few nightclubs and hotels with performance venues occasionally host local hip-hop artists. The rap competitions I attended took place in a small club associated with the downtown movie theater. Local groups performed on consecutive weekends for a small cash prize sponsored by the club owners. Some rappers from Arusha—most notably, X Plastaz (whose members were barbers in town)—signed with producers from the Netherlands and have received international recognition.
2. Indeed, as we shall see for some in Arusha, the distinction between these positions is paramount, whereas for others the lines of delineation are much more fluid and contextual.
3. I have written elsewhere about the masculinist ethos that pervades barbershops (Weiss 2004, in press). Here I would note that the exaggerated masculinity of barbershops—in which their interest in hip-hop is a central theme—bespeaks an attempt to give purpose to male bodies and relations in a neoliberal world where the men's productive capacity is extremely tenuous (see also Buford 1993; Cole, chapter 5, this volume).
4. I would add that I had remarkably similar discussions with Pentecostal Christians in Arusha about the scientific and mystical character of the Bible.
5. See, for example, the UK group Fun-Da-Mental. In Arusha, *MaMental* is also incorporated into the names of local rap groups and appears in rap lyrics.
6. Primary education is fully funded in Tanzania, but secondary school—especially secondary school in Kenya—requires fees.
7. See the appendix for English translations of the full Swahili texts.