

BOOK REVIEW

Mwenda Ntarangwi. *The Street is My Pulpit: Hip Hop and Christianity in Kenya*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2016. xx + 180 pp. Photographs. Bibliography. Index. \$25.00. Paper. ISBN: 978-0252081552.

Mwenda Ntarangwi's *The Street is My Pulpit: Hip Hop and Christianity in Kenya* features Juliani, the energetic, creative, economically successful rapper from the impoverished Nairobi neighborhood of Dandora. Ntarangwi's body of work joins other scholars such as Mbũgwa wa Mũngai, Jean Kidula, Joyce Nyairo, and Kimani Njogu in creating a rich body of scholarship about hip hop and popular music in Kenya. *The Street* explores the intersection of hip hop, Christianity, and youth culture. Ntarangwi uses autoethnography in both its conventional sense—to enrich our knowledge of a given society—and more importantly as a method to center and investigate Juliani as a “storyteller.” Ntarangwi's noteworthy ethnographic gesture prioritizes this artist's story in a cultural arena where hip hop is often blasted as American mimicry. The study thoroughly explores the complexities of one artist's aesthetic choices and musical ingenuities, and in so doing indirectly challenges surface level assumptions about the genre of hip hop.

Juliani writes the foreword to the book, in line with Ntarangwi's conscientious goal of “[letting] Juliani do quite a bit of introducing his own work,” which sets the stage for the rapper's collaborative presence (xv). Chapter 1 elaborates on the fundamental objective of the book, which is to explore “the role one hip hop artist plays in a counterdiscourse to Christianity's conservative posture in Kenya” (3). Ntarangwi smartly distances himself from the faulty anthropological positioning of the researcher as supposedly objective, by stating that the project “blurs any assumed distance between object and subject” (3). He identifies as a Christian, seemingly to contextualize his interrogation of the religion. He furthermore explains the close friendship he shares with Juliani, leaving the reader wondering if Juliani will also be critiqued.

In Chapters 2 and 3, the author elaborates on the argument that Juliani's music enjoys a presence in many of Christianity's conservative manifestations, such as the “prevalence of prosperity gospel and a focus on personal piety” (32). Ntarangwi provides important information about how missionary-introduced Christianity engendered dichotomies and divisions, such as European Christianity vs. traditional cultural practices, earthly

life vs. the afterlife, and the association of ethnicity with specific denominations. The author's enlightening discussion on the ethnicization of Christian denominations supplies a context that is imperative for understanding how religion is politicized in Kenya. In fact, even more information, including how ethnicity and Christianity often frame power, would have enhanced this section. Ntarangwi states that Juliani's hip hop intervenes by "[providing] Christianity a contested arena for self-expression and indigenization" (62). Referencing songs like "Rimz Timz" and "Friend Request," the author captures the way that the rapper "[uses] hip hop as a medium that weaves these two worlds [the church and the street] together" (40).

The last three body chapters discuss Juliani's approaches to community betterment, economic self-empowerment, and caution- or restraint-based sexual practices for young people. The author's colorful descriptions of the Kama Si Sisi campaign, the Mtaa Challenge, and connections to fans via social media reveal Juliani's sincere relationship with his customer base, his creative sales methods, and his community-based initiatives. This analysis, however, would be enhanced by considering Juliani's embrasure of neoliberalism's precepts, including his notion that poor people need initiative and "work ethic," as well as his business model-driven community projects (70–71; 84–86). Related to this, I am extremely interested in what Ntarangwi would say about Juliani, for example, rapping in front of a Nairobi Securities Exchange (NSE) digital display screen in the music video, "Exponential Potential," a sure nod to mainstream and conformist notions of success (the album's mention occurs in Chapters 4 and 5). These observations coincide with the author's general insinuations that Juliani's definition of the "streets" or "mitaa" refers to everyday life outside of Sunday church, rather than hip hop's customary reference to the hood or ghetto.

Ntarangwi proves convincingly that Juliani pushes Christianity in non-conventional directions, most specifically in songs containing lyrics about sex and desire that appear side-by-side with religious themes. Yet, I likewise anticipated an elaboration on Ntarangwi's brief remark in the concluding chapter that Juliani "challenges conservative Christianity but also affirms some of its principles" (142). I am curious as to how Juliani's inclinations to uphold conservative Christianity, especially concerning gender and sexuality, impact his musical project. What additionally seems to be evident is that Juliani's practice of Christianity through hip hop is very similar to many other forms of African spirituality that are practiced on the continent and, indeed, throughout the diaspora. As the author notes, African cultural practices have leaned heavily toward the exercise of spirituality and/or religion as a part of and not separate from everyday life. This means that perhaps Juliani's configuration of hip hop and Christianity is situated within a broader commonplace practice of Africana spiritualities. Therefore, how might Apostle Paul, the Nairobi street preacher who espouses biblical thought on public transportation (as discussed in Chapter 4) be similar to Juliani (82–83)? Locating the rapper, as well as conservative Christianity, within the long and complex history of African Christianity can solidify Ntarangwi's argument.

Ntarangwi has taken on the difficult task of researching and writing about a particular artist, and in so doing enlightens his readers about yet another critical slice of Nairobi's diverse and vibrant music culture. *The Street* contributes to other studies on a particular artist or group in Kenyan popular music scholarship, for instance the work by Joyce Nyairo in exploring the Nairobi City Ensemble and her article with James Ogude examining Gidi Gidi Maji Maji's "Unbwogable." Moreover, this book should be read alongside several other publications, especially: Msia Clark and Mickie Koster's volume, *Hip Hop and Social Change in Africa: Ni Wakati*, as well as Eric Charry's *Hip Hop Africa: New African Music in a Globalizing World*, and H. Samy Alim et al.'s *Global Linguistic Flows: Hip Hop Cultures, Youth Identities, and the Politics of Language*.

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For more reading on this subject, see:

- King, Elisabeth. 2018. "What Kenyan Youth Want and Why It Matters for Peace." *African Studies Review* 61 (1):134–57. doi:10.1017/asr.2017.98.
- Peck, RaShelle R. 2018. "Love, Struggle, and Compromises: The Political Seriousness of Nairobi Underground Hip Hop." *African Studies Review* 61 (2):111–33. doi:10.1017/asr.2017.143.