"ART ON WHEELS"

A Semiotic and Visual Discourse Analysis of Graffiti on Nairobi's Matatus

FRANK MUTULU

ABSTRACT

In a patriarchal society such as Kenya, the measure of manhood lies in the man's ability to provide. The advent of neoliberal capitalism in the 1980s facilitated women's entry into the labour market. This destabilised the patriarchal order and led to what Ammann & Staudacher (2021) termed a 'crisis of masculinity'. In 1984, coinciding with the rise of neoliberalism, the Kenyan Government licenced matatus—privately-owned, public service buses—which hitherto operated as 'pirate' taxis. This project postulates that graffiti emblazoned on the bodies of matatus represent expressions of a distinctively masculine culture that embodies machismo and that the matatu men are pushing back against the effects of neoliberal capitalism on the labour market. Employing a semiotic and visual discourse analysis on purposefully sampled matatu graffiti lays bare the discourse that circulates within the matatu subculture and the ideologies it reinforces. The project primarily draws on the concepts of machismo, hegemonic masculinities, subcultures and cultural resistance to unearth several key findings. First, the graffiti on matatus—directly or through intertextual references—often objectify women or depicts them as abject. Second, they point to a phallic obsession where the gun—as a choice symbol of masculinity— is often depicted in the subculture's matatu graffiti. Third, the matatu men employ style and humour as forms of cultural resistance. Paradoxically, the findings reveal that on the one hand, they reject the effects of neoliberal capitalism, yet, on the other, they harbour a yearning for its symbols – property, cars and a lavish lifestyle. Therefore, by confirming the project's hypothesis, this dissertation enriches the existing body of knowledge on the sociocultural implications of graffiti, by addressing the gap in scholarly discourse on machismo in Africa and situating it within the context of cultural resistance.

INTRODUCTION

Privately-owned minibuses or vans—known as *matatus*—have dominated Kenya's public service road transport since the early 1960s (Mutongi, 2017). Nairobi's *matatus* are ubiquitous and conspicuous. They weave through traffic and drive on pavements, if need be, with blaring music and the occasional tout hanging out of the often-times open door like a jockey, always on the lookout for additional passengers (Olopade, 2014). *Matatus* visually draw the eyes of onlookers through their flashy lights and flamboyant graffiti emblazoned on their bodies. The more ornate, the more popular they are, especially with youthful passengers.

Before the age of smartphones, affordable high-speed internet and YouTube, one of the most enjoyable opportunities for the urban youth to catch up with the latest hip-hop music was on a *matatu* ride. For me, this opportunity presented itself organically in mid-2000 when my mother's work schedule and the Nairobi traffic made it untenable for her to pick me up at the end of each school day. I grew up in Buruburu, an enviable suburb that was home to 'Route 58' *matatus*, which were indisputably the flashiest in Nairobi at the time. For this reason, I excitedly volunteered to be taking a 'Route 44' *matatu* from school to the Nairobi Central Business District (CBD), followed by a '58' to get home. Weeks later, my mother begrudgingly gave in to my proposal.

Boarding the most raucous *matatus* as they darted through traffic was a thrilling commuter experience, but as I settled into the routine, I developed an interest in the graffiti that was featured inside and outside these Public Service Vehicles (PSVs). My attention was split between getting to learn the lyrics to the latest hit songs and reading the graffiti messages. I maintained a scrapbook where I recorded interesting graffiti messages or images that I saw over the next year and a half before proceeding to a boarding high school. The arrangement remained as before: dropped off at school at the beginning of the term and made my way back home for mid-term and school holidays. In 2005, my final year of high school, I boarded a *matatu* that had a flatscreen TV. The song *Kenyan Gal, Kenyan Boy* (Hijri & Wairegi, 2004) by local music duo 'Necessary Noize' blasted through the speakers, and I lip-synced along to the lyrics as I watched the music video for the first time. Interestingly, the song is an ode to the

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matatu culture. The song celebrates a metropolitan love between a Kenyan boy and a Kenyan girl that blossomed after an encounter in a *matatu*. After my attention was released from the then-spellbinding video, I saw the graffiti message that has stayed with me for years: *'No airbags on board, we die like men'*.[1] Shocked by what I now understand to be gallows humour, my teenage self wondered whether men died a different death from women and more importantly why the artist assumed only men boarded *matatus*?

Almost 20 years later, this Kenyan boy has aged past the legal youth bracket. The racket of *matatu* music is now unbearable. Advancement of age dictates a preference for music in low tones. But the memory of that specific graffiti message has not faded, nor has my interest in the inspiration behind graffiti messages waned. Through this dissertation, I seek to appease the curiosity of a younger self and move cultural studies from Western-centred research by contributing to African academic literature on *matatu* graffiti. By conducting a visual discourse and semiotic analysis on a sample of *matatu* graffiti images, I intend to establish whether and how these art pieces on wheels serve as a subcultural expression of a distinctively masculine identity that embodies machismo; and whether this subculture also or primarily constitutes a form of resistance to neoliberal capitalism's effects on the labour market. In a patriarchal society such as Kenya (Muthuki, 2006; Maseno & Kilonzo, 2011), the measure of manhood lies in the ability to provide (Silberschmidt, 2001). Could the machismo be a manifestation of the anxieties of the working-class '*matatu* men' keen to demonstrate that they too, 'are men' and able to make a living and provide outside formal employment?

THEORETICAL CHAPTER

At the heart of my project lies an interest in understanding whether graffiti on the bodies of *matatus* are expressions of the subculture pushing back against the impact of neoliberal capitalism on the labour market. To explore this hypothesis, I will journey through literature

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[1] Due to speeding and overloading, *matatus* are considered to be the leading cause of the 3,000 annual deaths attributed to road carnage in Kenya (Habyarimana & William, 2012). In the absence of alternative public transportation options like trams or commuter trains within the city, both men and women without private vehicles contend with the risk, religiously boarding *matatus* for their mobility. So central are *matatus* that whenever they go on strike, Nairobi comes to a near standstill, compelling a majority of the residents to traverse on foot to reach their workplaces (Mutongi, 2017).

on theories of gender, resistance and collective identity. My literature review shall therefore be structured into five sections. The first section provides a historical context. The second will explore the concepts of machismo and masculinities through post-structuralist theoretical literature, while the third deals with subcultures and cultural resistance. The fourth shall review literature specific to *matatu* with respect to the concepts explored. Finally, the last section shall detail my conceptual framework and specify the research question that this project seeks to answer.

Historical Context

To understand the entry of *matatus* into Nairobi's public transport domain, this literature review begins with a quick recap of Kenya's colonial and postcolonial history. When Kenya was a British protectorate and colony between 1895 and 1963 (Stichter, 1977), the movement of Africans was vigilantly controlled, especially in Nairobi (Mutongi, 2017). In 1934, the UK-based Overseas Transport Company (OTC) introduced the Kenya Bus Service (KBS) as a public transport system to cater to the increasing number of white colonial settlers. Africans who worked for the white settlers were expected to walk to and from work as their mobility was curtailed further by the high fares charged on the KBS, which intentionally priced them out (ibid.).

About one year after the 1952 onset of the *Mau Mau* uprising against the British colonial government, the first *matatus* began to operate as 'pirate' taxis because the Nairobi by-laws then recognised the KBS as the sole public transport operator (Lee-Smith, 1989). Earlier versions of *matatus* were a far cry from the ornate ones that dominate Nairobi streets in the present day. In the backstreets of Nairobi's River Road, 'dilapidated Ford Transit vans, unsteady Austins and Peugeots, wonky Volkswagen Kombis, and converted old pickups' (Mutongi, 2017: 28) were brought back to life by budding entrepreneurs who saw a growing public transportation demand amongst Kenyan locals that they could fulfil. Forgoing comfort, personal space and safety, passengers paid the standard three ten-cent coins as fare to the city, which was significantly lower than the charge on the KBS (ibid.). It is from the ethnic Kikuyu

phrase '*mang'otore matatu*' meaning 'three ten-cent coins' and the popularity of this lower fare that the name *matatu* emerged and stuck (wa-Mungai, 2003).

As 1963 independence approached, restrictions on Africans' movements were lifted, leading to increased migration from rural Kenya to the city, Nairobi, in pursuit of employment. By 1965 approximately 400,000 Africans in Nairobi needed a means of getting to work or were in search of transportation (Werlin, 1975). Owing to the limited number of buses owned by KBS, illegal *matatus* continued to gain favour with passengers because of their flexibility and affordability (Mutongi, 2017). Historically, therefore, unregulated and unlicenced *matatus* can be seen to be a product of popular subversion of an official transport system. In a bid to remedy regulatory neglect, the government passed a law in 1984 that required all *matatus* to be inspected and licenced (ibid.).

Having situated the entry of *matatus* into the public service transport domain and allusions of displays of bravado by the *matatu* men made in my introduction, I will now explore literature on the concept of machismo. This exploration will serve as my project's foundation for analysing any potential depictions of machismo, if any, through graffiti on *matatus*.

Machismo

The concept of machismo is fundamental to my project. Initially theorised in the mid-20th century, with its roots established in Latin American culture, machismo has variously been described by scholars as a standard of behaviour for men in Latin American culture or as a system of behaviour that endorses male superiority and dominance over women (Mosher, 1991; Hernandez, 2003); and for the most part, it has been used in a pejorative manner that can be linked to the contemporary concept of hypermasculinity (Arciniega, Anderson, Tovar-Blank, & Tracey, 2008). This negative depiction can be traced back to the foremost authors (Paz, 1961; Ramos, 1962) who theorised machismo as stemming from the traumatic psychohistorical impact of the Spanish conquest in Mexico. This conquest was characterised by the rape of Indian women by the Spanish conquerors (Ramos, 1962). In *Profile of Man and Culture in Mexico,* Ramos (1962: 59) psychoanalysed the Mexican *pelado,* who he perceived to be 'less than a proletarian in economic hierarchy', observing that the dissolute, penniless working-class man

suffers from an inferiority complex which he conceals by being aggressive, sexist and pompous. The writer further contends that the macho man's 'terminology abounds in sexual allusions which reveal his phallic obsession; the sexual organ becomes symbolic of masculine force' (ibid.: 59-60). Scholars aligned with Ramos' school of thought have described macho men as womanising, violent, chauvinistic and prone to domineering women by perceiving their value reductively; to offer pleasure to men as well as bear and nurture children (Imhof, 1979; Anders, 1993; Mayo & Resnick, 1996). The reductive view of women as sexual objects provides the intersection between machismo and Mulvey's (1975) concept of the male gaze. Mulvey argues that women in patriarchal cultures are hypersexualised 'to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness'* (Mulvey, 1975: 11) for the pleasure of heterosexual men.

Mexican folklorist Mendoza (1962), cited in Paredes (1971), further complicates the concept by arguing that there are two kinds of machismo: the 'false' one discussed above, which is characterised by '[s]upermanliness that conceals an *inferiority complex'* (ibid.: 18, *my emphasis*) and an 'authentic [one], characterized by true courage, presence of mind, generosity, stoicism, heroism' (ibid.: 18). The debate—whether machismo is unidimensional (negative), as theorised by Ramos and Paz or bidimensional (both positive and negative), as argued by Mendoza—has been the subject of raging debate among scholars, and no universal agreement has been reached. However, Arciniega *et al.* (2008) observe that some academics have opted to feature the positive attributes under the concept of *caballerismo,* which is related to chivalry. Nevertheless, increasing scholarship in sociology has been gravitating toward the fuller construction of machismo, which adopts positive descriptors such as diligence, emotional awareness, family protection, honour and responsibility (Mirandé, 1988; Casas, Wagenheim, Banchero, & Mendoza-Romero, 1994).

Moving beyond pyschohistorical theories or simply seeing machismo as defined positively or negatively, what role does it play in structuring society and shaping people's psyches? In the Cuban context, De La Torre (1999) observes that machismo is recruited to perpetuate oppression along class, racial and gender lines. He argues that the macho is elite, white and Cuban male, with all those who fall short of this categorisation being the effeminate 'other'. For instance, a Cuban of African descent occupies the social stature of a woman irrespective

of their gender. Similarly, in the Nicaraguan context, Sternberg (2000: 91) describes machismo as 'a cult of the male' that thrives on homophobia, paternalism, and domination of women. Following Sternberg and De La Torre, I contend that the ideology of machismo heavily relies on women's subordination, impinging on dimensions of race, class, gender, sexuality and the body to produce a field of social relations that legitimises the exertion of power over others.

Whereas this literature review has thus far solely focused on machismo in the Latin American context, 'the perspective [of] machismo is not now and may never have been solely a Hispanic phenomenon' (Casas *et al.,* 1994: 318). As such, it has been studied in contexts such as the US and Canada (Paredes, 1971; Opazo, 2008). For instance, Paredes (1971) makes the connection between the North American cowboy and the Mexican macho citing the former's affinity to the revolver as a phallic symbol of power, akin to oversized hats and conspicuous boots. Crucial also to this project is the realisation that although divergent in the dimensions of machismo, foremost theorists agree that it stems from an inferiority complex, a psychoanalytic terminology drawn from Freud's (1933) notion of the 'complexes', hence *my emphasis* above. But I find it necessary to note that it is 'not that the Mexican *is* inferior, but rather that he *feels* inferior' (Ramos, 1962: 57, *emphasis not mine*).

While there is very little literature on machismo in Africa, the broader related concept of masculinities continues to receive growing scholarly attention. My project shall now delve into a review of literature on the concept of masculinities broadly and then home in on masculinities in Africa to establish potential commonalities between the concepts of machismo and masculinities.

Masculinities

In her seminal book *Masculinities,* Connell (1995) took forward discourse in the field of gender by shifting focus from its preoccupation with gender roles, to a system of gender relations. She argued that masculinity is a social construct that is acted out differently depending on prevailing socio-historical contexts (ibid.). In line with Connell's view, and agreeing with Amman & Staudacher (2021), my project views masculinities through a post-structuralist lens noting that they may be shaped by social or cultural factors that often result in multiple,

complex and sometimes contradictory experiences as opposed to fixed male identities. Destabilising the traditional binary of femininity and masculinity, Connell (1987, 1995) developed the concept of hegemonic *masculinity* that draws on Gramsci's (1971) notion of hegemony, which describes how powerful social groups employ ideology to perpetuate and legitimise power over others and to win the consent of the dominated to this dominion. Similarly, hegemonic masculinity 'is always constructed in relation to various subordinated masculinities as well as in relation to women' (Connell R. W., 1987: 183). Aligning with traits of the Cuban macho discussed by De La Torre (1999), in many parts of the postcolonial world, this dominant form of masculinity favours white (or white-adjacent), able-bodied, heterosexual and economically empowered men in society, situating them hierarchically superior to men who do not possess these traits and to the female 'other'. Hence, this makes a crucial link between these two concepts. The debate surrounding the concept of hegemonic masculinity has been in vogue for decades attracting critics along the way (Beasley, 2008; Hearn & Morrell, 2012).[2] Connell & Messerschmidt (2005) reformulated the concept to reflect that there are various *hegemonic masculinities* just as there are varying masculinities.

The preceding subset of literature that suggest masculinities are not static and they indeed do vary through space and time, is essential for my project; it dispels the longstanding assumption that all men are equal and that women are all subservient to men. In view of the foregoing, I will now explore literature on masculinity in Africa, which serves as the wider geographical context for this research project.

Crisis of Masculinity in Africa

The subfield of masculinities in the West has gained a lot of traction over the decades. In contrast, this work has been slowly gaining momentum in Africa. More surprising is the fact that while Western scholarship contends that there exist multiple masculinities, '[p]ossibly on no other continent are men and masculinities depicted more homogenously than in Africa'

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[2] For instance, Hearn & Morrell (2012), called into question the monolithic conceptualisation of hegemonic masculinity arguing that it neither takes into consideration marked differences in history, socio-economic and geopolitical location that would result in divergent conceptions of privileged manhood nor counter-hegemonic forms of masculinity.

(Ammann & Staudacher, 2021: 760). This could be attributed to the reductive Western tradition that treats Africa as a country rather than a continent and homogenises its cultures and peoples. As a result, a discourse of 'African masculinity', which is stereotypically associated with domination, infidelity and domestic violence, exists (ibid.).

In *African Masculinities,* Ouzgane & Morrell (2005) note that African masculinities must be understood by principally appreciating their diversity and, thereafter, their similarities such as potential access to what Connell (1995: 79) termed the *patriarchal dividend*. Connell (ibid.) defines the patriarchal dividend as the 'advantage men in general gain from the overall subordination of women.' By this definition, masculinity is conceptualised in terms of relations to hegemony, authority and subordination. The argument's premise is that men receive a reward in the form of power, status or material benefits for participating in the gender order. Silberschmidt (2001) however cautions that the form of patriarchy prevalent in Africa should not only be perceived in terms of benefits but also in the expectations and responsibilities demanded of men. Therefore, men falling short of their masculine ideal, and ending up being characterised by the inability to meet obligations—such as paying dowry, being family breadwinners and building a house—leads to a 'crisis of masculinity' among young African men (Ammann & Staudacher, 2021).

Ignoring theories which tie the erstwhile crisis to colonial domination and humiliation of Black African men (Morrell, 1998; Epprecht, 2007), Perry (2005: 209) suggests the crisis began in the mid-1980s linking it to 'the neoliberal reforms [which] removed men's edge' by creating opportunities for women to trade and penetrate the labour market. Wolof men in Senegal, where Perry conducted her study, reportedly bemoaned the postcolonial destabilisation of patriarchal power and modernity, claiming that there has been an upheaval of life as they knew it. Cohen & Atieno-Odhiambo (1989) similarly documented waning masculine dominance among the Luo community in Siaya, rural Kenya.

Having identified the nuances of hegemonic masculinities and the crisis of masculinity in Africa as theorised by various scholars in the literature, I am persuaded to examine whether there is a link between the masculine (macho) expressions of the *matatu* graffiti subculture and some form of cultural resistance to neoliberal capitalism which threatens traditional

hegemonic culture that draws its power from economic status and patriarchy, to create zones of conflict between different classed versions of masculinity and the entry of women into the middle and upper class, respectively. Is this conflict embodied in a certain manner through 'art on wheels'? How do members of the Nairobi *matatu* subculture react to their shifting centrality in the face of neoliberal capitalism? Such change is always met with resistance. This project shall next concern itself with literature on subcultures, particularly how style is used as a form of communication and a means of resistance against the dominant culture. This is premised on my speculation that the stylish graffiti under investigation are not neutral texts.

Subcultures and Cultural Resistance

> *As individuals express their life, so they are. What they are, therefore, coincides*
> *with their production, both with what they produce and with how they produce.*
> *(Marx, 1970: 42)*

My project focuses on visual expressions of a transport subculture that expresses itself as macho. The notion of subculture insinuates that a larger concept of 'culture' must be understood first. Hall, Clarke, Jefferson & Roberts (2003: 10) in *Subcultures, Cultures and Class* define culture as:

> *the peculiar and distinctive 'way of life' of [a] group or class, the meanings, values*
> *and ideas embodied in institutions, in social relations, in systems of beliefs, in*
> *mores and customs, in the uses of objects and material life.*

My invocation of Marx at the head of this section points to the centrality of class in understanding culture, which was the focus of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) to which Hall *et al.* belong. In this view, society is stratified into classes based on their historical conditions and materiality, with ideologies of the dominant class being pervasive.

Following Marx and Gramsci, we can posit here that most cultures are hierarchical, with a dominant cultural group and others in subordination and contestation to it (ibid.). Subcultures

are, therefore, 'smaller, more localised and differentiated structures, within one or other of the larger cultural networks' (ibid.:13). Hence, the subordinated order is in a constant dialectic struggle; negotiating, resisting or seeking to overthrow the hegemony of the dominant culture. Hebdige (1979: 17) from the Birmingham School argues that the conflict is rarely brazen but 'is expressed obliquely, in style.' This view of covert cultural resistance has been echoed by various scholars (Thompson, 1965; Hall, Clarke, Jefferson, & Roberts, 2003). According to Hebdige, resistance through style is the underpinning of subcultures, making their subversion stand out. Inasmuch as they are distinct, even peculiar, subcultures have traces of the dominant culture; as such, they are not easily discernible. In his book, *Subcultures: Meaning of Style,* Hebdige (1979) details the 'spectacular' subculture of the punks who stand out with their distinct dressing and obsession with wearing safety pins. Noting the appropriation of everyday commodities as signs into subcultures' repertoires of resistance, the cultural theorist invites scholars to employ a Barthesean semiotic approach to understand their subversive denotative and connotative meanings.

Although Buckingham (2019) has called into question Hebdige's emphasis on spectacular subcultures cautioning that not all subcultures rely on spectacle, and this is true, my project takes up Hebdige's invitation to consider how "'humble objects' [are] magically appropriated; 'stolen' by subordinate groups and made to carry 'secret' meanings" (ibid.: 18). I will examine how the bodies of *matatus*—which, in a sense, I consider to be 'humble objects' that ought to merely be a mode of transportation—are appropriated by the subculture to carry cultural messages encoded as graffiti. Aligning with Marx (1970: 42), I will analyse a sample of graffiti on the bodies of *matatus* to better understand the subculture in terms of 'what they produce' as they 'express their life.' Next, I delve into literature on graffiti—focusing on how it has been employed as a form of resistance to oppressive systems—which aligns seamlessly with the trajectory of this dissertation.

Graffiti as Resistance to Oppressive Sociocultural and Political Structures

Schacter (2008: 35) describes graffiti as the 'most ubiquitous sources of visual culture in the contemporary urban metropolis', but debates regarding its legality in the urban space have

been raging since its current iterations first appeared in Philadelphia in the late 1960s (Cronin & Hetherington, 2008; Schacter, 2008; McAuliffe, 2012). While some view it as vandalism and an anathema to organised spaces, others consider it public artistic expression (Schacter, 2008). It is clear that graffiti is a two-pronged fork: Some people consider it an art form that contributes to the beautification of public spaces, whereas others consider it an urban blight, a meaningless misdemeanour that ought to be punished. If we consider it an art form, or a form of expression, then it must serve to express certain aspects of the lives of those who produce it.

Having highlighted the central argument surrounding graffiti, what are they, and how do they constitute resistance? Graffiti is derived from the Italian word *sgraffito* meaning etching (Lockett, 2010), typically comprising stylised text and images on any surface in the public domain 'produced with writing instruments, spray paint, or sharp instruments for etching' (Waldner & Dobratz, 2013: 377). Previously considered a subcultural exercise of 'visual terror' (Rosewarne, 2004), Ferrell (2021 [1993]: 173) asserts that, 'graffiti writing confirms that resistance without creativity—resistance as a source of analytic, intellectualized machinery of opposition—may not be worth the trouble.'

Indeed, as a form of cultural resistance, graffiti was used in Northern Ireland by Catholic youths to castigate British rule (Rolston, 1991); in the West Bank by Palestinians during the intifada (Peteet, 1996); and currently on the Abu Dis wall that separates Israel and the West Bank (Hanauer, 2011). Peteet (1996: 140), for instance, observed that graffiti employed by Palestinians during the intifada between the 1980s and 1990s was a 'critical component of a complex and diffuse attempt to overthrow hierarchy.' This sustained discursive effort that lasted close to two decades suggests that a group or subculture's resistance efforts through graffiti may not bear immediate results. Furthermore, Peteet's assertion of a 'complex' process infers that other forms of resistance may have been employed alongside the strategic use of graffiti. The main finding of the literature around graffiti as resistance is that it has served to bring out the cultural protests and political resistance of various subcultures in different parts of the globe. The *matatu* subculture is unique to Kenya, and it would be interesting to examine how this unique form of 'art on wheels' foments cultural resistance to neoliberal capitalism's

effect on the labour market. Therefore, this project will refine its focus to review literature concerning *matatus,* in relation to the concepts discussed in the previous sections, to identify potential research gaps.

Matatu Subculture, Masculinities and Neoliberalism

The view of *matatu* as a subculture has been extensively theorised by Mbugua wa-Mungai, who leads much of the literature on the 'art on wheels' that are *matatus*. Right from his doctoral dissertation, *Identity Politics in Nairobi Matatu Folklore* (wa-Mungai, 2003) to his sustained publications on the subject (wa-Mungai, 2009; 2013), the Kenyan literary scholar, has unrelentingly referred to the collective members of the *matatu* subculture as '*matatu* men'. Agreeing with wa-Mungai, the referent in singularity, '*matatu* man', has been adopted by Mutongi (2006; 2017). Although wa-Mungai (2009) admits that legislation has made it permissible for women to be *matatu* crew, he asserts that it remains a gendered space—and by extension, a predominantly male-dominated subculture—characterised by sexism and ambivalence toward women.

As this project has already established that subcultures have traces of the dominant culture in them, I contend that patriarchy, which is rife in Kenya's traditional cultures, contributes to this subculture's subordination of women. Indeed, wa-Mungai (2003) makes an interesting connection between *matatu* men's affinity to hip-hop culture, which I alluded to in the introduction of this project. He argues that the relationship between the two cultures stems from their common patriarchal roots that seek to silence women, adding that hip-hop is a fertile site for sexist language that *matatu* men recruit into their masculinity project (ibid.). It is however the progressive loss of patriarchal material wealth and women's upward mobility— evident through ownership of property, including personal vehicles—credited to neoliberalism that seem to upset the *matatu* men the most (wa-Mungai, 2003). As victims of neoliberal capitalism, which constructs economic hierarchies, working-class *matatu* men are relegated to the margins of social respectability (wa-Mungai, 2013). As such, they resort to the subversive subculture in attempts to redeem their normative respectability by commandeering the *matatu* economics. This urge for upward mobility to cure the crisis of

masculinity is exemplified by their love for speed and reckless driving to make more trips and innovating subversive *sheng* language (a local patois) to share information among crews to evade police who are notorious for demanding bribes from them. In wa-Mungai's (2009: 269) words, 'for even as the sub-culture strikes an anti-mainstream pose it simultaneously expresses a deep yearning for the symbols of the mainstream.'

Matatu Graffiti

Ogude & Nyairo (2007) describe the artistic role of *matatu* graffiti as subaltern agency that talks back to society subversively. The limited number of scholars who have paid attention to *matatu* graffiti seem to agree that the art form serves as a tool for social commentary (Wango, 2020; Muna, 2022). For instance, Wango's (2020) research established a link between hip-hop and *matatu* subculture, terming the relationship as 'symbiotic', straddling in between mutualism (reciprocated benefits) and commensalism (*matatu* subculture benefits significantly more from hip-hop culture). Without detailing his methodological approach and analytical framework, which I find problematic, the scholar draws on hip-hop graffiti and employs intertextuality to invoke lyrics of depicted artists to identify various themes—liberation, transformative occurrences, equality and revolution—as the social commentary availed (ibid). While conducting research for this project, it is only Mwangi's article, *The Incomplete Rebellion* (2010), which intended to explore contemporary cultural appropriations of the *Mau Mau* struggle for independence in Kenya, that I found to overtly but inadvertently associate *matatu* graffiti with resistance. Although his research was not *matatu*-centric, as it analysed apparel, a commemorative statue of a freedom fighter, local Kenyan music and a music group's name, he identified a *matatu* that bore the name '*Mau Mau*' and graffiti that support the cause. Mwangi (ibid.) contends that the graffiti on the *matatu* evokes the history of decolonisation, the trauma of colonialism and the sustained need to repulse neocolonialism.

Conceptual Framework and Research Question

This project is anchored on the tensions between patriarchy and neoliberalism in Kenya. It is concerned with how the *matatu* men react and express themselves, as patriarchal ideologies

and masculine dominance cede ground to increasingly entrenched neoliberal ideologies in society. Unprecedented change is almost always accompanied by resistance. The intricate review of literature for this project has unearthed the destabilised traditional power relations between men and women. As such, it shall employ an ideological approach to make sense of these conflicting ideologies and power dynamics expressed through graffiti.

My conceptual framework, then, relies on the concepts of machismo (Paz, 1961; Ramos, 1962; Paredes, 1971), hegemonic masculinities (Connell, 1995), and subcultures and cultural resistance (Hebdige, 1979). Since the preceding literature review has made the link between machismo and the concept of the male gaze, I will draw on the critical concepts of the male gaze (Mulvey, 1975) and abjection (Kristeva, 1982). Mulvey (1975) argues that women in patriarchal cultures are hypersexualised for the pleasure of heterosexual men. Kristeva (1982: 4) theorises the abject as the ambiguous, that which 'disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules.'

The explorative journey undertaken through this literature review has identified and detailed several gaps in existing scholarship that this project seeks to remedy. For example, while literature on machismo in Latin America and some global north contexts abound, few studies have theorised it through an African lens. Even fewer, if any, have explored its possible link to cultural resistance. Similarly, while some studies from Kenya have focused on *matatu* graffiti, it is surprising that only one appears to have made the connection to possible cultural resistance. Therefore, the objective of this project is to bridge this gap by contributing to this fascinating, yet under-researched area. It also aims to lend an ear to the *matatu* men and be their voice.

Thus, this project seeks to answer the following research question:

To what extent are graffiti on Nairobi's *matatus* expressions of a subculture of machismo and a form of cultural resistance to neoliberal capitalism's effect on the labour market?

METHODOLOGIES AND RESEARCH DESIGN

This chapter presents the research methodologies employed in my project and justifications for their suitability in addressing the research question posed in the previous chapter. Next, it highlights their limitations and how these were overcome. Finally, it presents my research design, ethical considerations and reflexivity.

METHODOLOGIES

Visual Semiotic Analysis

Visual semiotics as a methodology seeks to understand the communicative aspects of signs in social life (Saussure, 1983 [1916]). As mentioned in the theoretical literature review, this project takes up Hebdige's (1979) invitation to consider a Barthesean semiotic approach in deciphering the denotative and connotative meanings of the *matatu* subculture's graffiti. According to Roland Barthes (1999), whose influential work in the field builds on foundational Saussurean semiotics, images bear layers of cultural code in the form of signs and symbols. Therefore, a Barthesean visual semiotic analysis approach involves peeling back these layers through two levels in the meaning-making process. The first level is the denotative level, essentially the literal meaning of the sign or object of the image, while the second is the connotative level which is the symbolic (Barthes, 1999). Hence, the denotative relies on the common-sense elements that can be observed in an image, whereas the connotative interpretations are subjective, drawing on personal feelings, lived experiences and academic knowledge (Hilander, 2016c). Through this two-step process, the semiotician can 'lay bare the prejudices beneath the smooth surface of the beautiful' (Iversen, 1986: 84).

Because a visual semiotic analysis can be conducted on any type of visual material (Rose, 2001), I selected it to analyse *matatu* graffiti. I considered it an appropriate methodology for this project because it enabled me to address two essential questions: what is the subculture depicting through graffiti, and what are the hidden messages behind these expressions? In addition to these strengths, a crucial aspect of the Barthesean approach—which recognizes polysemy of images, especially at the connotative level—is the notion of 'anchorage', where

the creator of an image directs the audience to a preferred meaning through a caption (Barthes, 1999). This tool was essential in this study since graffiti artists often use stylised text as standalone bearers of meaning or complementary to visual images. However, the critical limitation of this methodology in van Leeuwen's (2001: 117) words is 'Barthian visual semiotics remains restricted to textual arguments.' Therefore, this shortcoming means that I could not comprehensively address my research question, as my data analysis would have to rely solely on what is depicted in the graffiti images. To remedy this weakness, I elected to combine visual semiotic analysis with visual discourse analysis since the latter permits the researcher to 'go out of the text'.

Visual Discourse Analysis

According to Foucault (1972), discourse is a way of describing the world that shapes how we understand it and how we act in it. VDA as a research method, seeks to understand how social elements or views of the world are constructed through images (Rose, 2001). This suggests that discourses are a product of social construction, and therefore their analysis demands an understanding of the social contexts and histories within which they are produced. As such, while VDA is concerned with the image itself, it also grants the researcher access to sociological theories outside the image. Hence, a combination of visual semiotics and VDA allowed me to sufficiently address this project's research question. This was made possible by recruiting my conceptual framework that aided in demystifying the ideological tensions between patriarchy and neoliberalism and the attendant power shifts between men and women. Indeed, Foucault (1972) observes that discourses have power produced through discursive visuality. Agreeing with Foucault's notion of discursive power and specific to this project, Armstrong (1996: 28) affirms that an image is 'at least potentially a site of resistance and recalcitrance.'

In addition to going beyond the text, VDA employs intertextuality as a conceptual tool, which Rose (2001) describes as the making of meaning of an image in relation to other texts or images. Inasmuch as this is a strength, I noted that it could be a potential weakness of the visual methodology. The intertextual web may make it difficult to determine where to draw the line

and stop (ibid.). This means that the researcher may be distracted by reading too much into images and their intertextual referents. To remedy this, I reflexively employed modesty in making analytical connections, as Tonkiss (1998) advises.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Analytical Framework

The point of convergence between visual semiotics and VDA is their primary interest in the image itself. Therefore, this preoccupation invites the researcher first to consider analysis from a semiotic approach. In view of this, the itinerary of my analysis made four interconnected and, in some instances, overlapping stops. It began by determining and stating what is denoted by the respective graffiti images in my sample. The next stop, which Barthes (1999) says builds on the first level, involved identifying what the graffiti images connote. In identifying implied meanings at the second level, semiotic analysis intersected with discourse analysis to unearth the subversive ideologies coded into the discursive construct. The final stop, where applicable, drew on the conceptual tools availed by the two methodologies: anchorage and intertextuality. The former affirmed and/or guided me toward the preferred meaning of the images, while the latter led me to make new meanings. It is important to emphasise that due to the complexity involved in interpreting visual data (Rose, 2001), I was keen to adhere to this framework in analysis but not always sequentially.

Sampling and Data Collection

The field of observation of this study was graffiti imagery on Nairobi *matatus*. These images are publicly available on the Instagram Page, *'Matwana Culture'* https://www.instagram.com/matwanaculture/ (active since September 2013), which has been documenting *matatu* culture for nearly a decade for cultural appreciation and posterity. As of 25th July 2023, the page featured 26,043 posts of *matatus* and graffiti. Because of the breadth of data availed by 'Matwana Culture' for this research, I considered Rose's (2001: 73) guidance that 'semiologists choose their images on the basis of how conceptually interesting they are.'

As such, this pointed me toward purposeful sampling to get a manageable sample size from the source. This sampling procedure necessitated the selection of '*information-rich cases* for study in depth' (Patton, 1990: 169). To narrow down the sampling size, I confined data collection to posts made from March 2020 to June 2023. I chose March 2020 as the starting point due to its significance as the period when COVID-19 was first detected in Kenya, resulting in significant upheavals in the labour market. My weighted assumption was that this turbulence potentially inspired the production of conceptually rich graffiti of interest to my project. Since semiotic analysis, which is the methodological foundation of this project, is not concerned with a statistically representative sampling strategy (Rose, 2001); I selected seven images for in-depth analysis. These graffiti images varied in composition: four were standalone visuals, two were visuals complemented by anchoring text and one was text only. Furthermore, to ensure a more authentic representation, I selected samples that incorporated elements of Swahili and Sheng, the lingua franca of the *matatu* subculture. The table below summarises the sampled graffiti images.

Table 1: Summary of Sampled Graffiti

SHORTENED CAPTION	DATE PUBLISHED	'LIKES' (as of 25th July 2023)
Unmasked	21st May, 2021	226
Mambo Mafia	14th November, 2020	1,730
Wera Ishapangwa	10th June, 2021	1,000
Hell Heaven	15th June, 2022	3,449
Steam Punk	18th January, 2023	2,645
Dethrone	11th February, 2023	665
Rolls Royce	21st April, 2023	445

Reflexivity

The practice of reflexivity involves the researcher's introspection and making apparent how their social positioning and biases may have influenced the framing of the research question,

data collection, or analysis (Rose, 2001). In this regard, echoing what I mentioned in this project's introductory chapter is essential. My interest in *matatu* graffiti stems from my teenage years, and this has been translated into this project's research agenda. My positionality as a middle-class Kenyan man who aligns with Marxist thinking means that I am partial to the working-class and, therefore, to the *matatu* men. This positionality is complicated by the fact that I am a feminist, having been raised by a strong African lone mother who instilled these ideals in me. Therefore, these potential biases are in opposition to one another. While I am partial to the working-class *matatu* men and keen to understand their expressions, I do not support their subordination of women. To overcome said potential biases, I conducted my research adhering to my research design and employed reflexive modesty in my analytical journey, as guided by Tonkiss (1998).

Ethical Considerations

In her book chapter *Instagram,* Laestadius (2017) discusses how researchers can ethically benefit from the affordances of the social media platform. She argues that it is permissible for researchers to manually download or obtain screen grabs from publicly accessible data through Instagram's user interface. However, for good measure, this project acknowledged the source through academic citational practices. In addition, this research project which does not include human subjects was approved by my supervisor, having been found to adhere to LSE's Research Ethics. I therefore do not foresee any ethical issues.

RESULTS AND INTERPRETATION

This chapter presents a detailed analysis of the seven sampled graffiti images and a comprehensive interpretation of the findings. Given that '[t]he meanings of signs are extraordinarily complex' (Rose, 2001: 92), purpose-specific and deeply contextual, each graffiti image was subjected to individual analysis to gain a profound understanding and appreciation of the conceptual complexities that are central to my project. As outlined by the research question, this project had two main objectives: first, to establish the extent to which graffiti on Nairobi's *matatus* are expressions of a masculine subculture that embodies

machismo, and second, whether these expressions constitute cultural resistance to the impacts of neoliberalism on the labour market. Consequently, this chapter shall be structured into two sections. The first section presents independent analyses and findings of each sample image, followed by a collective and comparative discussion of the findings. Annotated versions of three sampled graffiti images are available in Appendix I.

Sample 1

Sample Graffiti Image 1 (below) is a 'narrative representation' portraying the subject engaging in an activity or action (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). The graffiti image denotes a woman gazing and pointing a gun, seemingly at the viewer. Positioned at the centre, she stands against an intricately detailed and articulated background that is predominantly red to the left and black to the right.

At the second level of signification, the image connotes empowerment, strength and resilience, symbolised by the middle-aged woman as the central subject. Her age is 'just right', neither too young to portray innocence or weakness, nor is she too old to suggest frailty. To further affirm the notion of empowerment, the woman's gaze is directed at the viewer to 'create a visual form of direct address' (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006: 117) that seems to demand their entry into some type of relation with her. To interpret the nature of this demanded relationship, two elements can be considered: her facial expression and gesture. She exudes cold disdain which is characterised by an arrogant sneer. Moreover, she is holding the gun with a raised one-handed side grip with the barrel of the gun pointing slightly downwards. Therefore, these elements signal rebellion or defiance against authority or conventional norms, as she asserts her power and demands a subordinate relationship from the viewer. Despite her tough exterior, the frontal angle and neutral colours accentuate her red lips, long black hair, and slender physique, conforming to conventional notions of female beauty. She is coded for visual pleasure, making her the object of the male gaze (Mulvey, 1975), aligning with machismo's reductive view of women.
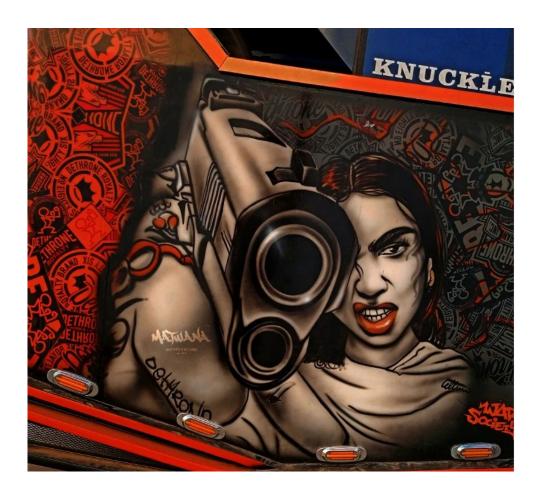
Figure 1: Graffiti image denoting a woman gazing directly at the viewer and pointing a gun.

Source: @matwanaculture (Matwana Culture, 2023)

Furthermore, the background on both sides of the woman's portrait is interspersed with randomly placed circles bearing the text 'DETHRONE ROYALTY'. Anchorage, as a conceptual tool, pushes us towards what Hall (1980: 134) termed as 'preferred meaning' and discursive interpretation of the graffiti image.

In the sociocultural and discursive context of the Nairobi *matatu* subculture, this image signifies increasing women's agency and economic empowerment, posing a threat to the patriarchal order. The text 'DETHRONE ROYALTY' implies that women are on a mission to challenge the cult of machismo and hegemonic forms of masculinity, dismantling the privilege characterised by patriarchal dividend as theorised by Connell (1995). Additionally, the *matatu* men's portrayal of the gun aligns with Ramos' (1962) theorisation of the concept of machismo and the macho man's association with the phallic symbol as a preferred emblem of masculinity. It reinforces Paredes' (1971) link between the North American cowboy and the macho man's

affinity for the revolver. Therefore, the woman's depiction holding and pointing the phallic symbol of power demonstrates agency, resistance and willingness to fight for her space.

Sample 2

Figure 2: Graffiti image denoting a woman holding a massive gun. Source: @matwanaculture (Matwana Culture, 2023)

At the first level of signification, Sample Graffiti Image 2 (above) denotes a woman holding a massive gun, constituting a narrative representation. Similar to Sample 1, the subject establishes a connection with the viewer by posing and gazing back directly. Positioned in the foreground for 'salience' she becomes the focal point (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006), while the background depicts an industrial complex with billowing smoke disappearing into the sky.

The image connotes an attractive middle-aged woman who embodies a crisis of duality. Firstly, she seems to exist in two distinct time periods. On the one hand, her dress and hair suggest modernity and the present age. On the other hand, clutching the rotary machine gun across her torso and donning the classical top hat evoke a bygone era. Secondly, she embodies a dual identity: is she a woman or a machine? Despite her direct gaze at the viewer, her left eye is covered by her hair reminiscent of the stereotypical pirate's eyepatch. Her left hand, rather than being replaced with a hook as pirates are depicted in popular culture, is substituted with an iron hand that matches the rotary machine gun's gold and silver theme. Therefore, the woman appears to be a blend of machine and human, torn between two time periods. Nevertheless, her femininity and sexuality are emphasised by the slit revealing her thigh and lacy garter, as the black dress accentuates her petite body contour, conforming to normative female beauty standards to satisfy masculine scopophilia. Mulvey (1975) describes scopophilia, a Freudian psychoanalytic concept, as the sexual pleasure derived from looking at a person, as in this case, or object.

Within the context of the Nairobi *matatu* subculture, this image's duality suggests a transition from a traditionally male-dominant culture toward a system that provides equal opportunities for women. However, this shift is marred with tensions as it disrupts the established gender order. The woman wielding the high-calibre gun, a phallic symbol attributed to machismo, infers that there is a struggle in this transition, challenging hegemonic masculinities, the oppressive structure of subordination, as theorised by Connell & Messerschmidt (2005). Additionally, she is portrayed as abject occupying a liminal space 'where meaning collapses' (Kristeva, 1982: 2). Neither fully human nor machine, she represents a distortion of the ideal and nurturing woman—that machismo idealises—due to the influence of neoliberal capitalism depicted by the industries in the graffiti's backdrop. Despite this abject portrayal, she is objectified and sexualised for the heterosexual male gaze.

Sample 3

Figure 3: Graffiti image denoting juxtaposition of portraits of two men. Source: @matwanaculture

(Matwana Culture, 2020)

In the first order of signification (denotation) Sample Image 3 (above) presents a juxtaposition of portraits of two men. The portrait on the left appears to be in the background while the foreground depicts a collection of houses. To the right, a superimposed portrait of a man holding a gun is centred on and set against a backdrop of cars, skyscrapers and other people engaged in various actions. Because the portraits are depictions of famous persons, they produce some meaning at the first order of signification which Danielsson (2010: 17) refers to as 'simple indexical denotation.' Therefore, the portrait on the left denotes Colombian drug lord and head of the Medellín Cartel, Pablo Escobar while the right denotes American gangster and head of the Chicago Outfit, Alphonse 'Al' Capone.

Moving to the second order of signification (connotation), Escobar's averted gaze constitutes an 'offer' graffiti image where 'the represented participant is the object of the viewer's dispassionate scrutiny. No contact is made. The viewer's role is that of an invisible onlooker' (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006: 119). His averted gaze creates an aura of mystery and intrigue inviting the viewer to uncover hidden secrets. The placement of his portrait, high in the sky, next to the clouds, suggests his elevated status. The absence of framing or dividing line between his portrait and the vast property below him conveys a sense of oneness and ownership (Jewitt & Oyama, 2014). This symbolises his immense wealth derived from the narcotics trade which made him one of the most powerful men in the world in the 70s and 80s (Mollison, 2007).

In contrast, Al Capone's moderately close-up portrait engages with the viewer with a frontal angle, suggesting his inclination to take action (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006). His direct gaze and poised finger on the trigger of a machine gun indicate his readiness to protect what belongs to him. Placed at the centre of the backdrop, his portrait acts as the central force holding marginal elements together signifying his ownership and subservience of the other individuals depicted (Jewitt & Oyama, 2014). It also signifies his centrality in the Chicago Outfit.

Within the context of the Nairobi *matatu* subculture, these graffiti images serve as a powerful inspiration for the working-class *matatu* men. From an intertextual perspective, the lives of the two organised crime dons resonate with the aspirations of the *matatu* men. Like many *matatu* men, both Al Capone and Escobar dropped out of school at different levels. Soon after the end of their formal education, the former started off as a working-class man in a munition factory (History.com Editors, 2009), while the latter turned to crime (Bowden, 2001). What the *matatu* men yearn for, however, are the trappings of success and, by extension, hegemonic masculinity status that Al Capone and Escobar achieved without adhering to normative societal expectations, such as completing formal education and then seeking formal employment. Although ethically questionable, their rise to power and material success exemplifies how a previously subordinated form of masculinity can become counter-hegemonic to attain hegemonic status. Therefore, this notion supports Connell &

Messerschmidt's (2005) reformulation of the concept of hegemonic *masculinity* to hegemonic *masculinities*. In my view, material success becomes a dominant trait in the pursuit of hegemonic status within a postcolonial an increasingly neoliberal capitalistic society.

Finally, in addition to the gun's symbolic representation as a phallic object, Escobar's macho nature is further exemplified through intertextual references, highlighting his notorious reputation as a womaniser, which is evident in his multiple mistresses (Henao, 2019).

Sample 4

Sample Graffiti Image 4 (below) denotes a close-up image of a woman peeling back a layer of her skin, like a mask, from her face revealing another woman behind iron bars. This 'narrative representation' (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006: 45) showcases the subject engaging in the action of unveiling what lies under the 'mask'.

At the second order of signification, this sample graffiti connotes a process of conscientisation, a concept coined by Freire (1970). Conscientisation refers to the active process of attaining critical awareness of sociocultural structures and the empowerment of individuals to confront oppressive circumstances. In the image, conscientisation is implied since the woman portrayed behind bars is the same person in the portrait peeling back the mask albeit at different points in her life. The Victorian-era hairstyle and dressing in the version of the woman behind bars suggest the past, characterised by entrapment and despair. In contrast, the woman in the main portrait gazes directly at the viewer with a sense of agency and awareness. Her knowing gaze is seemingly declaring, 'You had me trapped but now I'm conscious and liberated.'

Figure 4: Graffiti denoting a close-up image of a woman peeling back a mask from her face. Source: @matwanaculture (Matwana Culture, 2021)

Despite the graffiti's abstract nature, the woman has been depicted with blonde hair, an intentional choice that is more attractive to the heterosexual male (Sorokowski, 2006). Consequently, she is coded for appeal and the object of the male gaze as theorised by Mulvey (1975).

Within the context of the *matatu* subculture, the image suggests that the patriarchal order, which privileges men, is being challenged, leading to women's empowerment. Therefore, the *matatu* men acknowledge a shift in power dynamics.

Sample 5

Sample Image 5 (below) denotes a man holding a crumbling building, that has just been attacked, in the palm of his hand. According to Kress & van Leeuwen (2006), a vectoral pattern is evident when participants or elements of an image are linked through either performing an action on the other. In this case, the vectoral relationship is established by the man's hand and further emphasised by his gaze fixed upon the building. His gaze, directed away from the viewer, seemingly invites scrutiny of other elements within the image. In addition to the vectoral pattern established, the graffiti comprises stylised text across the top area.

Figure 5: Graffiti denoting a man holding a crumbling building in his palm. Source: @matwanaculture (Matwana Culture, 2022)

The building in the image connotes the US White House, symbolising the citadel of power. The impact of a plane strike partially destroys the right wing of the White House, resulting in

a dense, mushroom cloud rising into the air. The man holding the damaged building bears an uncanny resemblance to the current US President, Joe Biden. His facial expression reveals mixed emotions—disbelief, rage and sadness—at the destruction of the US, symbolised by the White House. The black suit and tie he wears connote mourning.

Drawing on anchorage to deduce the preferred meaning of the image, two sets of text are significant: 'HAINISHTUI' and 'Nobody can TUNYA us'. '*Hainishtui*' is Swahili for 'it does not scare me' while 'Nobody can *tunya* us' is English mixed with the subversive Sheng language used by *matatu* men which translates to 'nobody can control us'. Both sets of phrases clearly suggest the audacious and pompous nature of the *matatu* men, aligning with Ramos' (1962) argument that this behaviour often conceals an underlying inferiority complex observed in macho men.

Finally, an analysis of the image combined with the texts within the sociocultural setup implies that the *matatu* men are rejecting US imperialism and control. They assert their fearlessness in confronting the US which may be intertextually referenced as a major proponent and exemplar of neoliberal capitalism in the world.

Sample 6

At the first order of signification, Sample Image 6 (below) denotes a man confidently holding a cigar. Following Danielsson (2010), the graffiti depicts a famous person, allowing further denotative meaning to be derived. This 'narrative representation' (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2006: 45) features Rick Ross, a well-known American rapper, engaging in the act of smoking. His gaze is averted, making no contact with the viewer.

Moving to the connotative level, the graffiti image of Rick Ross symbolises wealth, success, power and influence, particularly within the hip-hop culture. To emphasise his aura of power and superiority, the producer employs a low angle (Martin, 1968) making Ross seem imposing. The presence of a cigar in his left hand, likely a Cuban, represents sophistication and luxury.

Interestingly, Ross' averted gaze from the viewer, combined with the display of his wealth, suggests feigned modesty encouraging the viewer to explore other elements within the image.

His flashy jewellery, commonly known as 'bling' or 'ice' in hip-hop culture, along with his tattoos, symbolise machismo, aligning with Paredes' (1971) theorisation of the macho as boastful in speech and self-presentation which could be concealing an inferiority complex.
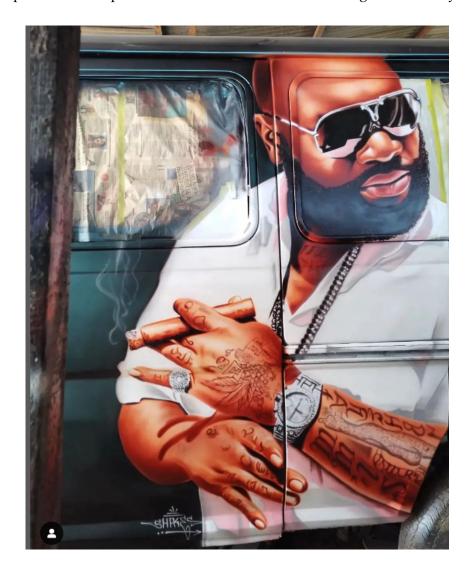

Figure 6: Graffiti image denoting American Rapper, Rick Ross. Source: @matwanaculture (Matwana Culture, 2023)

Within the Nairobi *matatu* subculture, this graffiti image may resonate with the ethos of hip-hop culture, promoting non-conformity while achieving success. From an intertextual point of view, the image could be interpreted as representing aspiration, drawing from Rick Ross' music, where he often raps about his journey from humble beginnings to success. Moreover, *matatu* men draw inspiration from his accomplishments as a black man in America, which challenge the conventional norms of hegemonic masculinity. Previously, having been

considered the 'other' in mainstream society, Rick Ross achieves dominant status through counter-hegemonic discourse in his hip-hop music, further fuelling their admiration.

Sample 7

Figure 7: Graffiti denoting Swahili text written in bold capital letters. Source: @matwanaculture
(Matwana Culture, 2021)

At the denotative level, Sample Image 7 (above) features the Swahili phrase *'KELELE YA BOSI NDIO UTAMU WA KAZI'* boldly written in capital letters. This white graffiti adorns a *matatu's* transparent window, which creates a neutral background that emphasises the text.

Swahili is widely spoken among the *matatu* men, serving as a lingua franca. The phrase which translates to 'a quarrelsome boss makes the workplace enjoyable' is laced with sarcasm, connoting that the inverse is true: a difficult boss makes the workplace unpleasant.

This phrase exemplifies the humour—self-deprecating at times—and sarcasm prevalent in the discourse of the Nairobi *matatu* subculture. Through this graffiti, the *matatu* men playfully imply that they are better off in their working-class roles without the direct supervision and conflict with bosses, in contrast to '*hao watu wa kunyonga tai'* (those people who wear ties), referring to individuals in formal employment. This 'us' vs. 'them' rhetoric hints at the prevailing inequalities and existential tensions between classed versions of masculinity and increasingly empowered women that result in the neoliberal capitalistic labour market. Therefore, the *matatu* men employ humour as both a form of resistance and a coping mechanism to navigate their crisis of masculinity (Ammann & Staudacher, 2021) at the margins of social respectability.

DISCUSSION

The preceding section provided a detailed analysis of each sampled graffiti, propelling this project forward. As a result, interesting patterns and discoveries emerged in my quest to establish whether the graffiti displayed on *matatus* foment a distinct masculine subculture that embodies machismo and whether these expressions constitute cultural resistance to neoliberal capitalism's impact on the labour market. To comprehensively address the research question, this section engages in collective and comparative discussion.

This discussion begins by highlighting that machismo—identified either directly or through intertextuality—emerged predominantly in six of the seven samples. The trope of the macho man characterised by his phallic obsession and affinity for guns as a display of his manliness, was distinctly visible in Samples 1 to 3, following theories advanced by Ramos (1962) and Paredes (1971). Interestingly, in Samples 1 and 2, the *matatu* subculture portrayed guns as being wielded by women, signifying a challenge to the cult of machismo and attendant patriarchal ideology. While other traits associated with machismo were identified in the analysis, such as an inferiority complex (Sample 6) and ostentatious bravado (Sample 5), Mendoza's (1962) cited in Paredes (1971) conceptualisation of an 'authentic' machismo, which carries positive traits such as honour and protection of women, was notably absent. On the contrary, women were presented reductively and, to quote Paredes (ibid.: 18), with an

'ambivalence…varying from an abject and tearful posture to brutal disdain.' Notably, though devoid of intertextual reference or caption for anchorage, Sample 4 stood out. This evocative graffiti image showcased the *matatu* subculture's acknowledgement of women's conscientisation and empowerment. It serves as the subculture's recognition of women's agency and their rise against years of domination under the cult of machismo. It is important to note that in addition to gender, machismo also intersects with dimensions of class, race and sexuality to produce a field of social relations (De La Torre, 1999).

Cultural resistance, present in Samples 3, 5, 6 and 7, emerged in two distinct senses. The first sense is evident in Samples 3 and 6, where the subculture's immortalisation of figures like cartel bosses Al Capone and Pablo Escobar, as well as American rapper, Rick Ross, points to the celebration of non-conformity and defiance to societal ideals. The *matatu* men's decision to feature portraits of these figures, in my view, mirrors the way governments erect monuments in honour of their founding figures and freedom fighters. Despite their race, questionable morality and working-class roots, these individuals managed to achieve a semblance of hegemonic masculinity insofar as wealth, power and influence are concerned. This scenario reveals a layer of complexity within Connell's (1995) concept of hegemonic masculinities which, as outlined in my literature review, privileges white (or white-adjacent), able-bodied, heterosexual and economically empowered men in society. I make a case for the extension of the concept of hegemonic masculinities to include 'African hegemonic masculinities', for theorisation within postcolonial and capitalistic countries where often, economic status is given primacy over factors like religion, race, ethnicity and sexuality. I am cognisant of the risk of homogenising African societies and agree that hegemonic masculinities are shaped by sociocultural factors that result in multiple experiences. However, following Ouzgane & Morrell (2005) I note that masculinities should be understood both in terms of their differences and *similarities.* Accordingly, I propose an extension of the theory that emphasises the common socioeconomic factors in postcolonial and capitalistic societies, which in my view, fetishise economic superiority over other traits related to hegemonic masculinities. Therefore, this theoretical extension would then offer a new perspective to explore the nuances of African hegemonic masculinities.

Having demonstrated the first sense through which the graffiti images function as manifestations of counterhegemonic discourses and cultural resistance within the subculture, this raises the question: cultural resistance against what? The answer lies in the second form of cultural resistance revealed in this project. Unlike the previous discussion which featured well-known public figures symbolising non-conformity as resistance, Samples 3 and 7 showcase blatant resistance. Sample 3 points to the rejection (and destruction) of the US as a symbol of capitalism, while Sample 7 underscores the tensions perpetuated by neoliberalism in the labour market. Following Hebdige (1979), one could interpret *matatus* as innocent objects that the subaltern subculture subtly encodes with messages of resistance through style. Beyond style, Sample 7 suggests that resistance can be conveyed obliquely through humour, as posited by several scholars (Sharp, 1973; Mulkay, 1988; James, 2014).

Paradoxically, while the subculture resists capitalism and its consequences, it yearns to possess its symbols, as evinced by Samples 3 and 6—property, expensive jewellery, guns and a life of luxury. Therefore, this paradox points to the unjust world created by neoliberal capitalism and the subaltern subculture's seemingly helpless complicity as they navigate their daily lives.

CONCLUSION

This research project set out to establish whether the graffiti featured on Nairobi's *matatus* represents a distinctively masculine subculture that embodies machismo and whether this subculture primarily constitutes a form of resistance to the impact of neoliberal capitalism on the labour market. After a comprehensive literature review, and careful formulation of my conceptual framework and research design, I conducted a semiotic and visual discourse analysis on seven purposefully sampled graffiti images. The tropes of machismo which manifested in the analysis resonate with the negative theorisations of the concept by key theorists, Paz (1961) and Ramos (1962), while cultural resistance was found to be conducted obliquely through style and humour.

The findings of this research lead us to conclude that—to a significant extent—the *matatu* subculture embodies a cult of machismo. Similarly, compelling evidence demonstrates that

the subculture subtly foments cultural resistance to the effects of neoliberal capitalism on the labour market. These findings are of great importance because they dispel prevailing 'commonsense' wisdom that the flashy graffiti only serve to attract more passengers to board the 'art on wheels'. While the graffiti do have visual appeal, they also serve as this subculture's discursive canvas, which reflect coded ideologies and are therefore not neutral texts.

However, in undertaking this project, some challenges and limitations were encountered. Despite being confident in the purposeful sampling strategy employed, which focused on selecting conceptually rich data, the risk of confirmation bias existed. To remedy this, I reflexively incorporated flexibility in the data selection process. This led to the discovery of the interesting paradox characterised by the subculture's simultaneous resistance to neoliberal capitalism's impact on the labour market and a desire for its trappings. This served as an interesting 'eureka' moment for this study.

Moreover, while semiotics and visual discourse analysis prove to be a potent combination in the analysis of visual data, the interpretation of such data remains inherently complex and subjective, as highlighted by Rose (2001). Because some of the samples examined did not contain anchor texts guiding to the preferred meanings (Hall, 1980), multiple interpretations could arise from these due to the polysemic nature of texts. Future research might consider complementing the visual methodologies with interviews to ground interpretations within the lived experiences of the *matatu* subculture, mitigating the potential for overdeterminism and excessive subjectivity.

An organised group of female graffiti artists known as Graffiti Girls Kenya—whose work I encountered during my research but could not include in my project—would provide a fertile site for such research. Future scholars may wish to conduct interview-based research with the group or individual members to better understand their motivation for painting street art and the ideologies encoded in their works.

While conducting the analysis and in the foregoing comparative discussion, I proposed extending the concept of hegemonic masculinities, to incorporate a unique theorisation of 'African hegemonic masculinities' in postcolonial and capitalistic contexts. A crucial starting

point for such an initiative would be acknowledging the historical colonial extraction of Africa's natural and human resources and the continued extraction of its wealth through imbalances in trade and aid geopolitics, as grounds for commonality across much of the continent. These realities and prevailing socioeconomic factors which continue to impoverish Africa, make the case for the hierarchical ordering of traits of African hegemonic masculinities an interesting area of study. However, this opportunity for future research does not imply endorsement of the privilege that hegemonic status accords some based on mostly immutable traits.

This dissertation has demonstrated how—in a postcolonial and capitalist context—class struggles and gender dynamics play out. It indicates that within such contexts, these tensions manifest in the form of creative cultural resistance, as Ferrell (2021 [1993]) pointed out. Furthermore, the findings it has presented have challenged 'conventional wisdom' on the role of *matatu* graffiti and could inform policy interventions to restore the dignity of the *matatu* men by reeling them in from the margins of social respectability and alleviating their feelings of inferiority. Therefore, in addition to being of interest to policymakers—by providing a fresh lens through which to understand the subculture—it contributes to the body of knowledge on the sociocultural implications of graffiti, by theorising machismo in Africa and situating it within the context of cultural resistance.

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APPENDIX

Annotated Images

Sample 1

URL
https://www.instagram.com/p/Cog7lA7KowM/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igshid=MzRlODBiNWFlZA%3D%3D

Anchorage: 'Dethrone Royalty' points us to view women as agentic- resisting oppressive ideologies: machismo, patriarchy and hegemonic masculinities (sarcastically referred to as "royalty")

Denotation: woman looking directly at viewer, pointing a gun

Connotation: gaze is directed at the viewer as a form of direct address. Connotes boldness and resistance

Connotation – the gun is a phallic symbol associated with machismo (Ramos & Paredes). Appropriation by woman suggests power dynamics between the genders.

Connotation: red lipstick symbolises desire and sexuality, making her object of the male gaze (Mulvey, 1975)

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Sample 2

URL

https://www.instagram.com/p/Cni_gE5NHWH/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igshid=MzRlODBiNWFlZA%3D%3D

Connotation: Industrial complex with smoke billowing representing capitalism.
Connotation 2: Chimney is shaped like a phallic object penetrating the skies. phallic obsession = machismo

Denotation - a woman holding a massive gun

Connotation: Metal hand holding the rotary gun creates a feeling of abjection. Is she machine or human? Paredes (1971) links machismo to abjection

Intertextuality: Hair covering her left eye intertextually referencing pirate's eyepatch signifies rebellion, non-conformity

Connotation: Slit on dress revealing her thigh and lacy garter are made to satisfy masculine scopophilia in line with machismo which objectifies and sexualises women

Sample 5

URL

https://www.instagram.com/p/CthFjYxtvpn/?utm_source=ig_web_copy_link&igshid=MzRlODBiN WFlZA%3D%3D

Anchorage – Nobody can TUNYA us is Sheng and English for "Nobody can control us" – rejecting US imperialism and policies

Anchorage – 'HAINISHTUI' is Swahili for "It doesn't scare me". The subculture demonstrates its fearlessness in resisting or rejecting US policies

Denotation - man holding a crumbling building, that has just been attacked, in the palm of his hand

Connotation – The White House connotes the US, which in this context signifies exemplars of imperialism and neoliberal capitalism

Connotation – a protester holding a placard signifying cultural resistance against the US and neoliberal capitalism it represents.

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