



Twerking as Resistance: Peeling Back the Ethic of Wamlambezi

By Christine Mungai



In April 2018, a video of what seemed to be a pair of teenagers having, or simulating, sex at the back of a car – maybe an Uber? – went viral under the hashtag [#IfkieWazazi](#). The girl is sitting on the boy's lap, the boy is holding a phone in front of them, recording video, selfie-style. The moral panic was swift and shrill – the head-shaking and finger-wagging, the familiar lament *watoto wa siku hizi* (kids these days), plus the rather grand *where are we heading as a society*. But what stood out the most for me was the expression on their faces. They – the girl especially – were smiling through it all, looking straight into the camera as they had sex in the back of a moving car in broad daylight. Their joy was both disturbing and complicated: a combination of ordinary teenage mischief and something else, something deeper and more transgressive.

It was play and defiance, an outrageous commandeering of a quasi-public space with lewd behaviour, recorded for posterity and then dispatched directly to parents – '*ifikiewazazi*' means 'let this get to [the] parents'. Or maybe, *make sure* this gets to the parents.

Ratchet: *noun, verb, adjective*

1. To be ghetto, real, gutter, nasty
2. It's whatever, bout it, etc

[[As defined](#) by producer PhunkDawg on the liner notes of the CD "Do The Ratchet", featuring rapper

Lil Boosie, 2004. Shreveport, Louisiana].

#IfikieWazazi went viral; by now it was not just the video, but also a barrage of images of teenagers posing in highly suggestive positions, arched backs, pouty lips and all. In the chaos of virality, it was difficult to discern whether #ifikiewazazi was to be read as warning (to the kids by the parents and parental figures) and a taunt (to the parents, by the kids), or both.

Soon after, the song '[Lamba Lolo](#)' by the rap group Ethic was released. None of them seemed a day over 21. They were (obviously) singing about fellatio, over a poorly produced track. The music video, especially, is of the aesthetic that I call Nairobi Grime - dusty streets, *mabati* shops and unfinished buildings in the background.

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They seemed like they just walked out of their houses on an errand to buy milk and a matchbox. It was, in short, scruffy and unpretentious. In the next few months, catching many off guard, came this new wave of Kenyan music, in which the ratchetery was turned all the way up. In most of these videos, it was just a catchy hook, the *mtaa* backdrop, and lots and lots of twerking. The rest, as they say, is history, but a living kind of history.

In the late 1980s and into the 1990s, the city of Atlanta would come to a standstill once a year with what came to be known as *Freaknik*. It began as an event for students from the prestigious, historically Black colleges of Morehouse and Spelman to come together and network during spring break; the suffix "nik" hints it was envisioned that the networking would take place in a picnic-like setting.

But quickly, the "freak" part would eclipse any corporate or straight-laced intentions that the event might originally have had. It evolved into a prolific cultural and sexual celebration, that brought in Black students from all over the country, as well as artists, musicians, and residents of Atlanta from all socio-economic classes, to party hard. Atlanta's city official government pushed back against the festival with violence, intimidation, and attempts at co-optation until *Freaknik* was ultimately banned.

That this was happening in the city of Atlanta was highly disruptive to the sensibilities of a city that was known as America's "Black Mecca", where a wealthy Black middle-class had emerged as far back as the 1940s. The street where Martin Luther King Jr. had grown up - Auburn Avenue - was called "the richest Negro street in the world."

King himself was born into a respectable middle-class family that did not struggle materially, unlike the majority of Black families in the US at the time, as James Baldwin wrote in his [1961 profile of King in Harper's Magazine](#). The Black bourgeoisie of Atlanta were proper, they esteemed certain ways of dressing and speaking; they were respectable folk and believed that this would allow them to live a life of dignity in the segregated South.

This worked, to some extent - Atlanta was one of the few cities in the South that seemingly "peacefully" transitioned out of segregation, the Black elite had already built substantial wealth and were on hand to integrate into the city structure. Most of all, the Black bourgeoisie cautioned against disrupting day-to-day business even as the Black community pressed for civil rights, writes Sarah Abdelaziz in her thesis [Ratcheting a Way Out of the Respectable: Genealogical Interventions](#)

[Into Atlanta's Respectability Politics](#). "They believed that through negotiations, business deals, and moral pleas, they could advance political progress."

Two decades later, a new generation of young Atlantans began enthusiastically inhabit a form of Black sexual leisure Abdelaziz calls a "mass rupture in respectability politics", a kind of "undomesticated Black communal eroticism." In her words:

Cars littered the streets, blocking intersections and highways, as people recreated a city center wherever it suited them. Black women danced on top of cars with or without clothes on and became a central spectacle of the event, defying sexual and racial mores (Thompson, 2007). To the white fear of a singular Black body, Freaknik answered with thousands, not only in numbers, but with a loudness. Freaknikers literally ratcheted up all that capitalism and the project of whiteness fear: the unabashed engagement in sexual leisure at the direct cost of circuits of capital.

Freaknik, in her analysis, was a pushback against the surveillance that is demanded by respectability politics that characterised Atlanta, by enlisting in the tactics of "evasion, subversion, play and exhibitionism." It was an attempt to snatch some joy in a context where neoliberal policies had left the class oppressions intact even as Black people had been granted civil rights, and where mass incarceration was ensnaring more and more Black people in its grim dragnet. And although most Freaknikers may not have been able articulate what they were doing in such elegant political terms, that doesn't mean it was any less so.

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The personal is political, especially if your existence has already been *politicized*. Sexual energy is life energy, my friend Ciru Ngigi reminds me, and Audre Lorde understood the erotic as not only a sexual pleasure, but as a way to "deeply connect with the self and with others radically, so as to empower the ability to fight for and manifest liberation."

In moments like this, one escapes, even temporarily, the constraining norms of a society where your worth is determined by how much labour can be extracted out of you, and where existing as Black means that true social worth is always tantalizingly out of your reach. In so doing, there is an insurgent possibility that there can be life after social death, that there can be [life beyond nihilism](#).

It is, the [Black Ratchet Imagination](#) - a form of redemption can be grasped as one inhabits one's body fully and unashamedly, not easily reducible to mere "acting out", the ratchet [is an attempt](#) to "to reclaim space, refuse binary identities, subvert language [and] create economic opportunities with new economies."

Six months ago, economist and public intellectual David Ndi [revisited](#) the *Kenya at the Crossroads: Scenarios for our Future* report that had been written in 1998, when the Kenyan economy was in free fall. At that time, President Daniel arap Moi was clocking two decades in power, there was public dilapidation everywhere you looked.

Darius Okolla captures the mood of despondency [in his article exploring](#) the 1990s deterioration of his hometown Kitale- "it was subtle, gradual, almost imperceptible, and forever disguised as the typical wear and tear of urban spaces - but it was more than that. It was thievery, corruption, and disenfranchisement, shoving it down the path of visible decline; a depreciative spectacle masked by

rural docility and the often-accepted rural poverty.”

The premise of the *Scenarios* project was that “Kenya had reached the limits of its chosen political and economic models”, that is, what Ndiir calls an “enclave economy” as set in place during British colonialism – a small corporatized economy of formal enterprises, good schools and prim urban neighbourhoods (it is telling that we call our neighbourhoods ‘estates’, as if in our imagination they are, in fact, country manors ruled over by lords and barons). On the outside of this small elite and privileged core is the “native sector” of the excluded African masses.

After independence in 1963, the privileged core was vacated by the British, and an African elite moved in to replace them. If you had a university education, you went straight to the top of the public or corporate sector and your future was pretty much secured; even with a secondary education you could live comfortably.

However by the end of the 1980s, the formal sector had stagnated and was struggling to absorb the ever-increasing numbers of university graduates. Catastrophe was only averted when the economy was liberalised in the early 1990s, leading to the explosion in the informal sector. The jua kali and mitumba businesses, the second-hand cars from Dubai, the stalls and ‘exhibitions’ were like opening a safety valve on a pressure cooker – they staved off social unrest and bought Kenya a few more years of stability.

Fast-forward three decades, and the Kenya National Bureau of Statistics shows that the economically active population (age 15-64) are 25 million, a five-fold increase from 1990. Yet, as Ndiir writes, the formal wage employment is estimated at just 2.7 million, and its contribution to total employment is down to 8.5 percent, from 25 percent in 1990.

Meanwhile, 125,000 students graduate from university every year – an astonishing 63 times the rate three decades ago, yet the formal sector is absorbing less than 100,000 a year. Once again, Kenya is balancing on a delicate precipice, a society of rising tensions where upward social mobility is becoming more and more of a mirage.

Today’s 18-year-olds are coming of age in a society with bizarre and normalized dysfunction. They watched as the country ushered in a new constitution only to eviscerate it. They live in a city presided over by a governor whose rise to power is only comparable to the plot in a crime fiction novel.

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These teenagers watched as a country celebrated students’ mass failure in national examinations, starting in 2016 when tough-talking Cabinet Secretary Fred Matiang’i defeated the so-called cartels and their shadowy, dormitory-burning ways, and delivered a ‘clean’ examination – just 141 A grades, compared to over 2,000 the previous year. In 2018, [more students](#) — 30,840 of them — only managed a grade E (a flat failure) than those who scored a combined A, A-, B+ and B, who total 28,403. This is not a normal distribution – the bell curve of grading would predict that the majority should get an average, C grade. The sharp skew at the lower end is not how normal classrooms perform.

In any sane country, this would prompt a somber reflection, maybe even a day of national mourning. At the very least, any teacher whose class failed her exam *en masse* would at least have to re-evaluate either the content or her teaching methods. And, if the scripts were being marked by

external examiners, it would not be unreasonable to suspect that one's students are being deliberately made to fail.

These 18-year-olds instead saw the country cheer as some subjects record [a failure rate of 90 percent and higher](#). They have been watching as a hairdresser [carted away](#) millions of shillings of public funds in sacks, and as reports of poisonous (poisoned?) [sugar, maize, milk](#) and [meat](#) flood TV headlines and nothing substantial happens. They have been watching as political leaders shift alliances without batting an eyelid, and with such speed that it can give you whiplash, where someone condemned as the devil and an ogre today can be described as "my friend" and "a safe pair of hands" tomorrow.

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It is a bleak new dispensation. We have been telling them to work hard, be God-fearing, modest, respectful and focus on their education, but *kwa ground vitu ni different*.

It is against this backdrop that we now must consider the chants of *wamlambezi*, *wamnyonyez*. If we steady our gaze on the nihilism and purposelessness that our young people have been forced - by the older generation - to inhabit, then their lewd chants and booty-shaking becomes less an indictment on their morals and more on our own. It is, in fact, appropriate to regretfully mutter *wazazi wa siku hizi* (Today's parents). And it is not like every generation doesn't have its own lustful excesses - many of today's horrified parents did the same, or worse, at Jam Sessions or Safari Sevens. They sang along to *Nampenda John* and *Manyake, all sizes*. The only difference is that there were no camera phones then.

As one 23-year-old told me, the only morality our society cares about is the sexual one, yet the rest of our existence is incredibly immoral. The young people of today are gleefully forcing that hypocrisy to collapse on itself, by intentionally being as ratchet as possible - so over-the-top and outrageous that they becomes impossible to ignore. Because really, what's the worst that could happen? "Shame and embarrassment is not the worst thing. We've experienced worse. What is there to protect?" she said to me. It is, as Kalundi Serumaga once [wrote](#), that poverty is the worst violence, the greatest shame and the constant embarrassment.

Like Freaknik in Atlanta a generation ago, the *wamlambezi* wave - by this I mean the wave of this extremely ratchet music - is a pushback against the bleak logics of a society that defiles in so many other ways, a society that ruthlessly forecloses on opportunities for the young and poor in particular. *Kwa ground ni different*: social amenities like public parks, playgrounds and social halls have grabbed or left to decay, jobs and opportunities are hoarded for the politically connected, and there is the constant exhortation to entrepreneur oneself out of structural poverty.

It leaves one, then with only the Internet and one's body as the last arenas that one can live, not just exist, but *really live*, with the all the thrill and joy that capitalism, classism and racism tells us will never be ours. This is the possibility of alternative life that the ratchet offers - a way of being in the world that seeks to live in pleasure, purpose and joy - full humanity, and that above all refuses to participate in the fraudulent prescription that in Kenya, of all places, personal comportment and sexual restraint will define one's life chances and opportunities. Anyone who went to an upmarket private school in Nairobi knows how ratchet wealthy children can be, with no lasting consequences.

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In the end, however, the ratchet in isolation will not save us either. The personal transgression of mores governing dress, speech, sexuality and decorum do not make a revolution – the oppressive structures that corral black life into nihilistic corners are a product of laws, politics, the justice system, theology and economics, all of which should be engaged with, for the purposes of expanding freedom. And although Freaknik was banned by the city of Atlanta, that was not before it started losing its own appeal because of increasing incidents of sexual harassment and even assault during the festival, in contrast to its playful and liberating beginnings.

In the end, the ratchet cannot be an end in itself. It is only a means of carving out new ways of relating to ourselves, and each other. The ratchet only offers possibilities, as Abdelaziz concluded, “we would be mistaken to not pay attention to these *gasps of alternative life* in our present predicament.” The emphasis is mine.

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