



Busted Cultural Myths and Nairobi Nights: A Critical Analysis of Gendered Social Media Spaces in Kenya

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Abstract

This article explores how Ciku Muiruri, a prominent radio personality, and Sue Maisha, a Nairobi-based prostitute utilize new media in the form of blogs, Facebook groups, and traditional media outlets to express alternative versions of female sexuality contra to existing narratives in Kenya's cultural and media landscape. Further, an overview of audience perceptions was conducted. The critical analysis reveals that while new media forms provide new spaces for self-expression, Ciku and Sue also confront issues of agency and authenticity online. Overall, audience reception of Ciku and Sue celebrates their courageous mediated self-disclosure. Taken together, they offer a refreshing and yet cautionary insight into the workings of love and religion in urban Kenya.

Key Words: Kenya, blogging, Facebook, sexuality, social media, Web 2.0

Résumé

Le présent article explore comment Ciku Muiruri, une éminente personnalité de la radio, et Sue Maisha, une prostituée de Nairobi, utilisent les nouveaux médias sous forme de blogs et de groupes Facebook, ainsi que les médias traditionnels, pour exprimer d'autres versions de la sexualité féminine contraires aux récits existants dans le paysage culturel et médiatique kenyan. En outre, un aperçu général des perceptions du public a été réalisé. L'analyse critique révèle que si les nouvelles formes de médias offrent de nouveaux espaces d'expression personnelle, Ciku et Sue sont également confrontés à des problèmes d'agentivité et d'authenticité en ligne. Dans l'ensemble, l'accueil par le public de Ciku et Sue célèbre leur courageux dévoilement

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de soi à travers les médias. Ensemble, ils offrent un aperçu original, et cependant prudent, de la façon dont l'amour et la religion sont vécus en milieu urbain kenyan.

Mots clés : Kenya, blogging, Facebook, sexualité, médias sociaux, Web 2.0

Introduction

Issues of African women's voices and agency have long been at the forefront of efforts to locate appropriate theoretical approaches to the study of gender in Africa (D'Almeida 1994; Kolawole 2004; Ogundipe-Leslie 1994, and many more). Efforts to uncover unexplored sites of African women's self-expression such as proverbs and folktales now also include popular forms of expression such as African hip-hop (Mwangi and Mbure 2009). This article advances this charge to explore how two female players propel women's voices in the Kenyan media landscape.

The study explores how Ciku Muiruri, a prominent radio personality, and Sue Maisha, a Nairobi-based prostitute, create gendered media spaces in contemporary urban Kenya. These spaces are identified as the radio segment *Busted* and its related Facebook groups, alongside the blog *Ciku's Diary* (2008) and Sue's blog *Nairobi Nights* (2011-2012). Three goals guide this essay: (a) How do Ciku and Sue construct authenticity in their chosen medium? (b) How do readers, listeners, and fans make sense of these gendered media products? and (c) What do Ciku and Sue tell us about love in the post-colonial urban context?

I aim to demonstrate the rhetorical strategies deployed in *Busted* and *Nairobi Nights* to form an authentic account of female sexuality. Further, I aim to highlight the diverse opportunities new and social media such as blogs and Facebook promise (yet do not always deliver) for the historically marginalised female voice, especially as it pertains to sexuality. Lastly, I argue that gendered spaces such as those occupied by Ciku and Sue create new audience communities and are an opportune site to interrogate conformist, deviant, and emancipatory narratives of urban love in contemporary Africa. The findings reported in this essay are based on three primary sources of data: first, a textual analysis of blog entries, Facebook user comments on *Busted* groups and *Classic FM's* Facebook fan page; second, six in-depth interviews conducted with three female and three male fans of *Busted* and another five male fans of *Nairobi Nights*; and lastly, this study presents descriptive results of an online survey of 35 *Busted* fans.

The State of Web 2.0 in Kenya

Kenya has been experiencing steady gains in Internet usage and penetration over the last decade. Data from 2011, released by the Communications Commission of Kenya (CCK), estimates that there are currently 14.3 million Internet users, a 14 per cent increase from the previous year. Regular Internet access (subscriptions) is estimated at 5.42 million or 13.2 percent of the population. This figure is exponentially higher than the 3.2 rate reported five years ago (Mäkinen and Kuira 2008). However, despite the rapid growth in digital connectivity, gender differences in media use and retrogressive attitudes about female participation prevail.

The National Council for Science and Technology (NCST), a government body, is charged with ensuring equal access to technology and science. However, retrogressive cultural attitudes to female competence in science and technology still exist. As Orchardson-Mazrui (2006:157) aptly notes, many Kenyans believe that ‘girls by their very nature do not have an aptitude for the sciences’. It is little wonder therefore that the role of women in technology (as inventors, users, or content producers) is rarely recognised or highlighted in the media or in national ICT debates. In addition to anti-social attitudes towards women’s participation in science and technology, findings of digital media use in Kenya suggest that gender gaps are present. For example, a 2009 national survey of 2000 Kenyan adults by *AudienceScapes* indicated that women are less likely than men to report having used the Internet or mobile phones. The survey asked respondents to indicate which media source they had used in the past week. The results indicated that 17 per cent of men had accessed the Internet, compared to only 8 per cent of women. Moreover, 26 per cent of men were more likely to have used Short Messaging Service (SMS) compared to 19 per cent of women. This trend was also noted for other mainstream media such as radio, television and newspapers, with women reporting less usage than men across board.

A benefit offered by new media platforms is their potential to dissolve previously centralized power centres as the monopoly of news media sources (Chaffe and Metzger 2001). One way in which new media may shift power from mainstream media is in the alternative avenues for self-expression they offer. Chaffe and Metzger (2001) also note that on the digital platform, users are motivated by self-actualisation, often seeking networks to sustain relationships with individuals with whom they share interests. Self-representation, however, becomes a complicated affair online. For example, when we consider Kenya’s digital presence, Mäkinen

and Kuira (2008) note that the online presence is strongly influenced by Kenyan citizens living overseas. Ciku and Sue are in many ways symbols of gendered and local attempts at self-representation.

Sociability, or the ability to connect with others, is one of Web 2.0's most recognised features. The by-products of this feature include social media forms such as the micro-blogging network Twitter, the photo stream service Flickr, and social networking site Facebook. Han (2011) has pointed out that perhaps the most enduring and pervasive product of Web 2.0 is blogging. A blog is defined as 'a frequently updated Web-based chronological publication, a log of personal thoughts and Web links, a mixture of what is happening on the Web and the world out there' (Lovink 2007:3). Regardless of subject, matter, blogs often offer a combination of personal entries and pictures, producing an endless supply of feel-good writing (Parthasarathy 2009). The beginning of the 21st century appears to mark the rise of blogging in Kenya¹, with the debut in 2004 of *Begins at Home* (<http://beginsathome.com>), Mshairi (<http://www.mshairi.com/>) and Kenya Pundit (www.kenyanpundit.com) in 2005, and Bankelele (<http://www.bankelele.co.ke/>) in 2006. One of the most powerful aspects of blogs is their ability to harness single-issue audiences, and the Kenyan Blogs Webring (KBW) which came into being in 2004, allowed early Kenyan blogs to form an online collective, potentially consolidating like-minded readers. More recently, the Bloggers Association of Kenya (BAKE) has extended KBW's early efforts by offering syndication and legal representation services to bloggers and by creating the BAKE Awards in 2012 to celebrate blogging by individuals of Kenyan origin and those based in Kenya. In the next section, I explore the nature of both *Busted* and *Nairobi Nights*, introduce Ciku and Sue and review the meanings members of the Kenyan audience discover in them.

Radio and the Rise of Sex on the Airwaves

Radio in Africa has long been upheld as the ideal medium for the advancement of the development agenda, as it reaches more masses than any other medium, transcending both the rural and the urban divide (Gumucio-Dagrón 2001). The liberalisation of the airwaves in the 1990s led to not only an increase in the number of private radio and television stations but also increased competition among stations for listeners (Odhiambo 2002). Scholars have also argued that the media in Kenya has long had an urban bias (Frederiksen 1991), speaking to the needs of the urban population and ignoring the voices of rural inhabitants. This comes as no surprise if one considers that the introduction of radio in the colonial era was informed by a development agenda rooted in modernisation theory (Boyd 1984).

In a modern-day battle for listeners, urban radio stations have found innovative ways to draw in a loyal listenership. Call-ins have become a staple of Kenyan radio stations but in the past decade decreased rates for cellular talk and short messaging have also led to increased listener participation. In addition to encouraging listeners to call in with requests, radio stations invented a diverse range of contests with giveaways, ranging from gift hampers to hard cash. *Busted* exists in the media landscape as a ‘participatory’ show in which listeners are invited to call in and comment on the bust of the day. To call *Busted* a radio show would be an exaggeration. The show is a short segment (usually no more than five minutes) embedded in Ciku’s rush-hour show *Drive Time*. Although the segment lasts only a few minutes on air, the bust of the day is replayed during *Classic FM*’s morning talk show hosted by Maina Kageni, arguably Kenya’s most prominent male radio personality. It is also repeated throughout the day, thereby ensuring the shockwaves it emits radiate throughout the day. Select *Busted* audio clips continue their perpetual existence online through sites like *YouTube*. I now turn to a brief introduction of the show’s charismatic host, Ciku.

Ciku’s Journey to the Studio

Wanjiku Muiruri, or Ciku as she is popularly known, is a *Classic FM* radio personality. She also authors a feature magazine column in Kenya’s most read newspaper, *The Daily Nation Saturday*, often based on the *Busted* program segment. Ciku also maintains a blog (<http://cikusdiary.blogspot.com/>) although the blog has not been active since 15 December 2008. Ciku, like many other Kenyan media personalities, has worked at several radio stations starting out on *Capital FM*. She had a short stint at *Easy FM* and currently hosts *Drive Time*, a rush hour show on *Classic FM*. She was also a co-host of *Big Four Fans*, a show on the Kenya Broadcasting Corporation (KBC). In her blog, Ciku tells the reader that the last real man left standing is her dad:

I will search till the ends of the earth to find a man who is half the man my father was. If I find him, I will consider myself well and truly blessed, for such men, are precious stones. Rare and priceless (August 2008, About Me).

Ciku’s favourite movies are trilogies: *The Godfather*, *The Lord of The Rings* and *Pirates of the Caribbean*. Ciku’s musical taste is eccentric, from Prince, Bob Marley, Linkin Park, Luther Vandross and Otis Reading, to Anita Baker and Tupac Shakur. On her favourite books, Ciku tells us

she has had a love affair with Shakespeare for many years. Ciku would be considered an upper-class Third World Woman struggling to make an on-air connection with the masses. A dropout of Oxford Business College in the United Kingdom, Ciku's life took a downward turn when her father died and her elder brother absconded with the family wealth, hence denying her the chance to complete her education.

Survey results of *Busted* fans revealed that 54 per cent (n = 18) of individuals listened to *Busted* at least one day a week, 37 per cent (n = 12) listened to *Busted* at least 2-4 times a week and 14 per cent (n = 5) listened to *Busted* for 5-8 days a week. The majority of listeners (71%, n = 25) tuned in to the show in a *Matatu* (public service vehicle) or other place during the live airing. Others listened to the show on YouTube (23%, n = 29). The majority of fans (60%, n = 21) were most likely to talk about *Busted* with their friends; some fans were most likely to do nothing (26%, n = 10); or talk to work colleagues (25%, n = 9). Fans were least likely to post a Facebook status on *Busted* (n = 2) after listening to the show. In examining the convergence between Facebook and *Busted*, 54 per cent (n = 19) participants indicated that they comment on Classic FM's Facebook page 1-3 days per week. Fans were equally likely to share links related to *Busted* (51%, n = 18) and visit *Classic FM's* Facebook page (49%, n = 19). Of those surveyed, 49 percent (n = 17) were, 29 per cent (n = 10) were male and 23 per cent (n = 8) did not indicate their gender. Overall, the survey findings provide a glimpse into the demographic make-up of a portion of the readers. Although convergence of radio and Facebook is apparent, this small sample is more descriptive than definitive of expected patterns in the *Busted* audience base. I now turn to a discussion of *Nairobi Nights* and its narrator, Sue Maisha.

***Nairobi Nights* as a Confessional on Nairobi's Prostitution Industry**

The debut blog entry titled 'I can't feel your thing' (3 January 2011) stirs the reader's appetite for juicy and explosive details of sex work in the infamous alleys of Nairobi's Koinange Street. Yet, Sue Maisha's blog *Nairobi Nights* offers much more. In sixty-two episodic chunks written over a period of 15 months, Sue, without restraint, invites us to take a glimpse into a complex, contradictory, heartbreaking, and uplifting experience of a sex worker in post-colonial urban Africa. The stories are both political and indifferent, conforming and deviant. Sue manages to chronicle the naughty, dark side of urban love with wit, tenacity and uncensored sentiment all culminating in her last blog entry on Tuesday,

27 March 2012, in which she declares, 'I am out of there completely.' The blog (<http://www.nairobinights.info/>) has over 430 followers and the average number of comments per blog entry exceeds 15. The blog features a total of 91 blog entries. Of these, 68 per cent ($n = 62$) are what Sue names 'episodes' or autobiographical accounts of sexual encounters, self-reflexive musings, and charged responses to readers comments. The rest of the entries feature excerpts of columns written by Sue on other media platforms, most prominently *UP Magazine*, and excerpts and promotions for *A Few Things I Know About Sex*, Sue's 'blook' or a book derived from blog content (Attwood 2009). As Kreutz (2009:29) points out, blogs often link to each other to form 'new networks and information pathways'. Sue anchors her blog to the Kenyan Blogs Webring (KBW).

Audience Perceptions of *Nairobi Nights*

Five in-depth interviews were conducted with fans of *Nairobi Nights*. Participants were recruited through Sue's Facebook fan page and the actual blog site (www.nairobinights.com). All fans were male, and four of them resided in Nairobi. One of the participants resided in the coastal city of Mombasa. The male fans were all between the ages of 25-35. Phone interviews lasted between 20-45 minutes and transcripts yielded a total of ten single-spaced pages. Participants were asked to share their opinions about *Nairobi Nights*, Sue and blogging. Participants were also asked to share whether or not they felt the blog had a positive or negative influence on *Nairobi Nights* and Kenyans. Overall, the participants had a favourable reception of the blog. The blog was primarily favoured because of the insight it offered on prostitution:

The life of prostitution, it's something that I have always thought of. I have never got a prostitute but I have always been interested about being with a prostitute, so it gives me the feel of coming across one or being with one. Furthermore, it is not easy to get a prostitute who is educated, eloquent and intelligent. That made it more interesting and for me to read about it (Simon, 33, Mombasa).

Even though the participants had a positive reception of the blog, at least two participants said that they doubted whether or not a prostitute had actually authored the entries on the blog. Specifically, they pointed out that Sue's eloquence and writing was outstanding. Simon from Mombasa for example, pointed out, 'I do not know if she is a prostitute or a very good writer'. However, their doubts on her identity did not hinder their enjoyment of the blog.

Fans of Nairobi Nights described Sue as a courageous and honest individual, as illustrated below:

I think she (Sue) is very honest about what she does. I think she is very confident in what she does. I think she is a good person. She is courageous, talking about what many people would consider not so good (James, 32, Nairobi).

I think she (Sue) is quite courageous, and I think she is proud of what she does because according to her, I think she has no regrets about the job (Tony, 25, Nairobi).

Fans of *Nairobi Nights* highlighted the slow pace of adoption of blogging among Kenyans. All five participants read more than two Kenyan blogs on a regular basis. When asked about how they felt about Kenyan blogs, there were mixed appraisals. The blogs were viewed as an alternative to mainstream media sources:

I think (blogging) is a practice that is gaining popularity by the day. It highlights issues that may not be reflected in the mass media. Issues that are not given priority and maybe they are issues that need to be addressed (Tony, 25, Nairobi).

I think (blogging) is necessary because it gives us information. It is not like the main Kenyan media houses, they do not disseminate information we need to know. I think blogs are more frank (John, 28, Nairobi).

Some participants viewed Kenyan blogs as being less professional than blogs from outside of Kenya (primarily American and British):

Kenyan bloggers are not usually well informed. Some of them write heresy and at least they should substantiate their claims (James, 32, Nairobi).

I think Kenyan blogs are not so professional in the way they are done. They don't countercheck some of their stories. Also, some Kenyan blogs recycle information from other blogs (John, 28, Nairobi).

Blogging in Kenya was also seen as an avenue for local expression:

Kenyan blogs express the feelings of the people. If anyone wants to know what is going on in the minds of the people, it is a good place to start. The local blog is about a humble person trying to make it through life... I can solve this for you, everyday things. The Kenyan blogs are more about the everyday, what is happening *hapamtaani* (on the ground) (Simon, 33, Mombasa).

Participants were asked if there were any differences between Kenyan male and female bloggers. Overall, individuals indicated that determining the gender of the blogger was often difficult and they could not therefore point out any gender differences. However, two participants pointed out that reading Kenyan blogs written by females was more enjoyable, compared to those written by males:

I would say I enjoy blogs written by females like Sue because they are better written are more realistic and more truthful (Chris, 25, Nairobi).

Kenyan female bloggers are more passionate in their blogging. You can actually feel what they are writing from the ones I have read. The male guys, maybe it is how we are made, but it's like the guy was just typing it on his way somewhere on his phone (laughs) (Simon, 33, Mombasa).

When asked if they felt *Nairobi Nights* had a positive or a negative effect on society, individuals had mixed reactions. Three participants said that determining the impact of the blog would be difficult because of the highly individualised consumption of blogs. Two participants described the blog as having a positive effect on society. This positive effect was seen in the blog's ability to provide an intimate insight into the life of prostitutes. However, the insights in their honest depiction of criminal acts (e.g. stealing from and drugging clients) were also seen as having the potential to produce a negative perception of prostitutes:

I think the blog has a positive effect on to the people who read it because it gives them an insight into prostitution. Sometimes the blog talks about Sue, and how sometimes they (prostitutes) steal from clients and I think the blog might give a negative perception of prostitutes (James, 32, Nairobi).

In summary, male fans of *Nairobi Nights* had a positive reception to the blog and viewed the blogging culture as a growing area of self-expression in the Kenyan society. The absence of female fans may suggest that the blog has few female followers, or women do not have as easy access to the blog as men do.

Themes in *Nairobi Nights* and *Ciku's Diary*

Emergent themes in *Nairobi Nights* were explored through a discourse analysis of 28 random entries (40 single-spaced pages) with each of the 15 months represented by at least one entry and a maximum of three entries. The analysis of *Busted* is based on listener comments on *Classic FM's* Facebook from July October 2010, Ciku's blog entries in *Ciku's*

Diary (<http://cikusdiary.blogspot.com/>) and selected transcripts from the show. To discover dominant themes, Owen's (1984) threefold criteria of identification of themes: recurrence, repetition and forcefulness were utilised. Repetition refers to the extent to which different concepts are found in one or more portions of the story but are used to refer to the same concept, or process. Forcefulness refers to the extent to which the teller emphasises a specific concept through inflection, volume increase or dramatic pauses. In the case of written content, forcefulness may be observed by, among others, the use of uppercase, or exclamation marks. The last criterion refers to the extent to which key phrases, identities and ideas re-emerge through the telling.

Authenticity and Promiscuous Subjectivity

The 'problem of representation' has long been at the foreground of critical issues among so-called Third World feminists (I prefer the term post-colonial feminists). Among the key thinkers is Narayan (1997), who posits that many Western imaginations of women, and other aspects of life in the global South, are colonialist. That is, Western representations often provide ahistorical accounts, imbued with cultural forces, which are deemed static and therefore primordial. Beoku-Betts and Njambi (2005:114) more specifically summarise the stereotypical images of African women 'as ignorant, exotic, and highly sexualised'. One response to the issue of representation is to advocate opportunities for self-representation. The rise of grant-funded soap operas, radio stations, and even newspapers can be linked to the recognition that media liberalisation has also provided (especially at the beginning of the 21st century), an opportunity for women in Africa to develop social change programming as part of a larger effort to improve their subordinate social position. The digital age, however, has provided an infrastructure for limitless self-representation outside of the social change communication framework. Such opportunities escape the often costly and formulaic entertainment education media product. From music studios set up in slum areas, garage-type rap/hip-hop groups and bands, to blogs, the Internet has transformed and increased the range of previously marginalised narratives and voices. The 'dark continent' is continually proving to be not so digitally in the dark through a large social networking presence (mostly accessed on mobiles), numerous blogging Africans and technological innovations and apps such as *M-Pesa* and *Ushahidi*. Although a cause to celebrate, these contributions should not obscure the stark reality that most individuals in Africa remain on the dusty sidelines of the information superhighway.

Ciku and Sue's self-representational efforts are examined against a background of historically marginalised women's mediated narration almost always embroiled in a long struggle for legitimacy. Both women attend to the issue of authenticity in their respective gendered spaces. Attempts at authenticity and accounts of subjectivity are explored in the subsequent section.

Language and/as Authenticity: Ciku's Tweng

Despite the fact that she hails from a well-off background, Ciku seems to make a concerted effort to reduce the real or imagined distance between her and her listeners. A common rhetorical tool amongst female bloggers is the use of second-person address, deliberately, to 'assume a sympathetic community' (Handyside 2012:47). If there is a sympathetic community to Ciku, her blog entries suggest she is implicating a female audience. In Ciku's discussion of infidelity on her blog, there appears to be a deliberate effort not only to encourage women to voice their frustrations in interpersonal relationships but also to acknowledge their own role in the cheating game. The choice to address both genders can be seen as an example of African womanism which shies away from the 'us versus them' mentality, recognising that power does not only function from a patriarchal lens and that both women and men fall victim of globalisation (Busheikin1997). Ciku does not acknowledge her privileged class position, and tackles both male and female cheats on her show and blog.

Another rhetorical strategy used by Ciku is to appeal to the least common denominator of infidelity and the demographics of the individuals she has 'busted'. She acknowledges intersectionality of her victims to suggest that infidelity, especially in Kenya, transcends class, education, and economic background. In fact, in one of her blog entries, one of her victims is the wife of a prominent lecturer at a local university.

In a very similar fashion, Sue makes connections with her audience by asserting that there is a common denominator to all women. 'We all have P' she states. The repeated use of the collectives 'we' and 'us' are commonplace on the blog entries, almost always used to refer to the group identity of the prostitute community.

Despite Ciku's prominent position as a radio personality, some listeners question her authenticity, redirecting her attention to the marker of Western influence – her accent. On one Facebook 'hater' page, a listener criticises her Kenyan-British accent; 'we don't need your *tweng* in the morning'. Foreign accents are highly favoured by many radio

personalities who want to sound like their Western counterparts or have, in fact spent a substantial amount of time abroad.

What is interesting about the question of accent as a marker of authenticity is that the success of *Busted* depends on Ciku's ability to deceive cheats with her voice. Ciku often adopts a common or *kawaida* Kenyan accent and sometimes pretends to speak like a rural Kenyan woman to deceive her victims. When asked what he thought of Ciku, one interviewee made reference to her voice:

For me she is a winner, she has a gift. There are those who would leave *Classic FM* it would fail. Someone like Ciku, if she left, no one would continue her show. I think Ciku is a winner. That one is a gift. Because the way she changes her voice. For example, today she talks like a *kambibi* (wife). Tomorrow she talks like *amkamba*. That is a gift. It's very hard to figure out her voice (Kris, male, 26).

As suggested by the quotes below, listeners interpreted Ciku as a pleasant, courageous, and talented presenter:

With Ciku, she does it (hosting) without fearing. She doesn't want to know the person she is dealing with. She just calls them and I think that she is courageous (Geraldine, female, 20).

She is very good and nice at her job. She finds some very interesting ways of doing her job in order to bust people (Anne, female, 21).

She is courageous; I mean she is able to command a person until *anaingia* box (gets trapped). Her voice, she has a way of using it until you find that you've been busted (Kim, male, 23).

One listener commented on Ciku's courage and related it to the potential danger she were may face if she was to meet one of those shamed on her show:

Ciku is daring. Let's say, she is talking to a guy who finds that he has been busted. And these guys who have been busted can do anything to her and yet she keeps going (Adam, male, 21).

Ciku confronts issues of authenticity both on and off the air. In an interview with the Kenyan magazine *True Love*, Ciku talks about sometimes having regrets for giving her daughter a *mzungu* (white) name. She says, 'I should have given her a nice African name. But at least she has dreadlocks' (Mumo 2010). Ciku seems to deal with tensions similar to those articulated by Narayan (1997) of women in non-Western

contexts who, because of their contact with the West, may be considered betrayers of their own culture.

Spivak (1985) argues that, in the post-colonial context, the many forces of subordination include the ideological construction of gender burden – the Third World woman. The lack of agency is one of the many consequences of retrogressive gender norms. In her blog, however, Ciku appears to situate her position as one of great agency. It can be argued that Ciku invokes Campbell's (2005) definition of agency in its collective nature. Ciku acknowledges the need for Kenyan women to rise above the expectations and ideological shackles of bad marriages, extra-marital relationships, and a host of other oppressive forces:

Now that we have understood who and what we are we should either embrace it fully (bring on the whips and the handcuffs!) or say enough already. Say enough of abusive relationships. Yes we can. Say enough of being trodden on. Yes we can. Say enough of being cheated on. Yes we can. Say enough of settling for second place and get your own man. Yes we can. Say enough of settling with a man who's not good enough for you. Yes we can. Say enough of always putting him first. Yes we can. Say enough of lousy sex. Yes we can. Alleluia to that one my sisters! (28November 2008 *Good Guys Finish Last*).

Authenticity and the 'Real' Experience in Nairobi Nights

Whereas Ciku relies on the collective 'we' to summon agency in her blog, Sue's attempts at agency in *Nairobi Nights* feature the repeated use of first-person narration. In her narration, the first person 'I' also signifies an attempt to underline her agency but also to contest oppositional representations of her subject position. Throughout the blog entries, there are multiple references to Sue's own subjectivity, and agency. In one entry, she outlines the days of her life when she fantasises and role-plays another self. She admits that on occasion, she pretends to be 'a successful young working woman' who visits 'classy, serene' uptown bars. Upon sharing her role-playing behaviour with her gynaecologist, the response she received could not be, in her opinion, any more bizarre:

I mentioned it as a by-the-way. I was surprised by how shocked she was.

She even suggested I should be seen by a psychiatrist friend of hers. I laughed.

I have no mental problems. I know what I am doing and at no one time have I ever imagined it as bizarre. Yet, beyond the feeling of satisfaction, I have no logical explanation for my acting. But this could be one of the things that beat, logic. I am okay with the way I live presently. I don't really aspire to live the lives I act. It's not a fantasy but simply I am happy to experience the career life in my own way (Episode 21: Role Playing, April 2011).

In rejecting the doctor's reaction Sue is also legitimising her life choices with the use of phrases such as 'I am okay' and 'I am happy'. In the blog entries, there are references to moments of self-reflexivity most of which reveal themselves in the use of phrases used to chronicle instances of an examined existence. Throughout the entries, Sue sees herself as engaging 'camouflage prostitution', 'veiled prostitution' or 'prostitution proper', to when she eventually feels like a 'real prostitute'.

Attempts of authenticity by sex bloggers often exist in a 'self-defeating dialectic' in which the claim to a real experience is accompanied by 'naming and defining oppressive others' (Handyside 2012:52). Handyside notes that this is true for the sex narratives of Bridget Jones and Bitchy Jones. In *Nairobi Nights*, Sue repeatedly makes reference to a collective of oppressive forces in the 'Street ecosystem':

The Street ecosystem looks more like a union of the low of society; low in terms of income, power and perceptions. There are the Street people and children. There are also the watchmen and late night hawkers. Then there are the clients and us. Others who form the ecosystem include the city council *askari* and police who we consider parasites (17 September 2011 *Episode 45: The Present Tension*).

From the initial reading, it would appear that Sue's oppressors include the police and the city council officers. However, later in the same entry, the oppressors become the saviours in a dialectic which extends beyond that experienced by Bridget and Bitchy:

A girl needs to feel protected even when on the Street. She also needs to be informed when she has dropped her guard and the police or city council *askari* are around. Also, once in a while, a man in a car or walking will come and try harassing a girl. Or a girl pinches the pocket of any of such during a promised cosy session in a dark alley or car. A man might discover and try to manhandle a girl. She only needs let out a cry and the man will not know what befell him. *Rungus*, fists and shoes will land on him. By agreeing to be at the bottom of the Street chain of command

vis-a-vis the ecosystem, the girls are guaranteed of protection. Still, sometimes, a girl has to pay for the protection. The method of payment depends on a girl. Sometimes it's in cash or kind (17 September 2011 *Episode 45: The Present Tension*).

Felski (1998:87-88) argues the 'authentic self' is itself very much a social product, and the attempt to assert its privileged autonomy can merely undermine its profound dependence upon the cultural and ideological systems through which it is constituted. Sue's entry however suggests that this dialectic is distinctively complicated in the post-colonial urban space. The city council officers, for example, offer protection, yet in another instance harass the girls. That this dialectic is self-defeating is in its ability to offer any neat explanation of the complex and contradictory existence of the girls on the street. The duality of roles in the African context, particularly as it relates to the interdependence of relationships between men and women has been highlighted elsewhere (Mama 1995; Mbire-Barungi 1999) and Sue's chronicle of life of the street suggests a similar duality.

Sue and Ciku make an attempt to authenticate their subjectivity and resist oppositional imaginings of their identity and, similarly, listeners often make an attempt to do the same. One female interviewer had this to say about Ciku:

I can't stand her [Ciku] on the radio. Honestly, I feel like it is hard to think of her separate from the show. Yet, I feel like if it was Maina (another male host on Classic FM) who was hosting *Busted* I would probably dislike him too. I guess she is just doing her job (Flora, female, 31).

Blogging, Ray (2007:98) posits, can be on one hand a 'solitary pursuit' and on the other a sort of 'public confession'. In *Nairobi Nights*, we see many instances in which these dual goals emerge in Sue's candid introspection:

Many times, when writing, I am in a soul scratching state; and when writing about why I became a prostitute, I find myself not able to relate to tales of misfortune and a poor background. It's not surprising then, a few sentences later, I realise I have no explanation that is 'acceptable' or 'good' (Episode 16: *Why I Become a Prostitute – An Attempt*, February 2011).

Sue is not only telling us about her own internal attempts to arrive at answers but she is also alluding to a 'state', perhaps both cognitive and emotional, which only delivers in flux.

Pederson (2005) has suggested that women are drawn to blogs because they offer a safer cyberspace compared to discussion boards or chat rooms. It can be argued that *Nairobi Nights* provides one such space in terms of offering physical safety. News videos of prostitutes being stoned as they have attempted to embarrass clients who have failed to pay at their place of work are not rare in Kenyan newspapers and television news broadcasts. The online prostitute narrative escapes, potentially only for the amount of time taken to type up entries, this harsh material reality. The blog also offers social safety by allowing Sue to speak back to 'societal expectations' or perceptions of prostitution. In this sense, *Nairobi Nights* is also a form of public confessional (Ray 2007). It allows Sue to tell us of the instance where she broke the 8th commandment and got away with it, or the time she deliberately used news bytes from the British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) radio to puncture a client's inflated ego. Confessions also include experimenting with sedatives; breaking her own rule, and bringing a client back to her home.

Ciku, perhaps due to the multiple avenues for self-expression (Facebook, *Busted*, and *Ciku's Diary*), is short-changed in the confessionals, compared to Sue. It may be that the 'public confessions' of those caught on *Busted* deflate from her own personal reflections, although in her early blog entries she confesses to having privileged knowledge of some of those she has busted.

Representing Sexuality

A key characteristic of women's sexual narratives in media is the 'claim to represent women's sexuality' (Attwood 2009:13). Attwood suggests that this is done either by referring to an essential female sexual identity, to contemporary urban life or to the *zeitgeist*. In *Nairobi Nights* there is a strong claim to represent not women's sexuality but men's.

Overall, the portrayal of African (and Kenyan) sexuality privileges male sexual assertiveness and female subordination (Kameri-Mbote 2002; Subbo 2002) and often hinges on discretion and silence (Arnfred 2004). This perception is often reinforced in cultural images, including mediated ones, of women in Kenya (Orchardson-Mazrui 2006). The gender inequality in issues of sexuality are manifest in the high prevalence of sexual violence against women and young girls in Kenya, in the problematic media coverage of women as 'victims' of sexual violence and the cultural stigma against women who report incidents of sexual violence (Orchardson-Mazrui 2006). Further, sexuality is often discussed in the context of HIV and AIDS. Orchardson-Mazrui (2006) notes that male control features prominently in

condom advertisements in the media in Kenya. The focus of male sexual prowess essentially shifts the power dynamic in the sexual relationship and inadvertently making the 'condom itself a weapon of male domination' (Orchardson-Mazrui 2006:157). In sum, the narrative of sexuality in Kenya is rarely celebratory of female sexuality, focusing instead on the male as the controlling and sexually assertive partner.

Sue and Ciku both make attempts to rewrite the narrative of African female sexuality in their semi-autobiographical blog entries. These entries sideline, as the central focus, male sexual prowess to bring to light intimate feelings and collective ululations of female sexual freedom. Sue tells us she is in it for the money and that she has reconciled the fact that her good education may not be enough to land her a good job and career. Attwood (2009:14) observes that the appeal of the call girl can be traced to their characterisation as the 'feisty, self-determining heroine' who may be facing economic hardship and yet also emerges as sexually insatiable. Sue's take on this insatiability is both contradictory and complex. In one blog entry she declares:

A significant source of happiness in any career is in doing what one enjoys. I do enjoy what I do, but I have to admit not as immensely as I used to say a year ago. What has changed? ... I may have reached some sort of plateau.

The problem is this is a career, which has swallowed me; I don't feel like quitting until I am literally laid down. In light of this, I will acknowledge I am not as happy as I used to be. Although I still have lots of interesting and rather challenging mental games with men, I don't clap when I triumph, neither do I grieve unnecessarily when I fail. I mean I have lost most of the emotions, which come with winning and losing (July 2011 Episode 37: 'Unhappy? Maybe Yes').

In the episode 37 post, there is no outright admission of a female celebrating the moment and act of sex. Sue further separates herself from a sexually voracious working girl in the post below:

I have previously said that I don't care much for sex, especially the fun part of it. But that does not mean I do not have urges. I do. My clients whether good or bad, help satisfy my sex urges, and I feel naturally whole again (19 October 2011, Episode 49: 'My Retirement Plan').

Ciku does not lay claim to represent urban love or sexuality in general. However, listeners take note of her role as, among others, a gatekeeper, home wrecker, and marriage expert. The segment initially only busted

men who were cheating on their wives and Ciku was often branded a 'man-hater' by one Facebook group that opposed her show. Listener comments included statements such as 'Ciku should let African men be African men' as they sympathised with the men who had been busted on the show. However, over the years, Ciku has also caught women on the show. She talks about several of her female victims on her blog and rationalises that it is the men who started it all and now women are aboard the cheating train.

Urban Religiosity and the Spiritual Role of a Prostitute

This article closes with a discussion of the place of religion in the ongoing debate of the sexploitation on the airwaves and online. In one of the most famous episodes of *Busted*, Ciku pretends to be a born-again rural Christian seeking to make peace with God since her HIV diagnosis (*Busted*, 21 October 2010).

Ciku informs a woman that she has been praying about her husband's infidelity and just wanted to make things right. She tells the cheat that she has recently been tested for HIV and was found to be positive. The cheat who had previously denied having a sexual relationship with her boss suddenly changes her story. Ciku jumps in and asks if she has been using (condom) protection. The woman, caught in the moment, says no. At this point the woman's husband, whom Ciku introduces as her own doctor, interjects:

Ciku: "Am even here with my doctor, why don't u talk to him, he will give u more information"

Agnes' husband: "Hello"

Agnes: "Who am I speaking to?"

Agnes' husband: "Agnes...Agnes r u serious?"

Agnes: "Oh my God"

Agnes' husband: "What? Stop saying Oh my God. Are you serious?"

Agnes: "It's not what you thinking"

Agnes' husband: "What do u mean? I've heard everything"

Agnes: "Oh my God..wh... am confused... whats going on?"

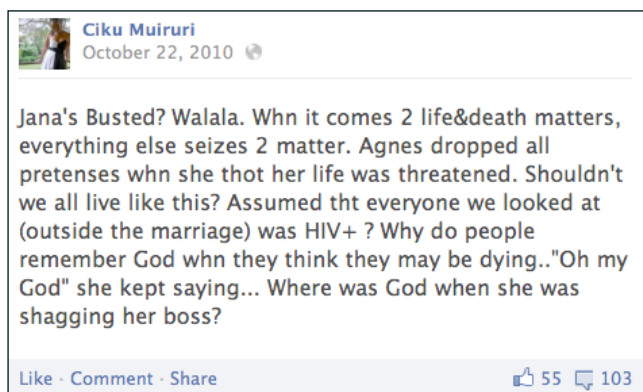
Agnes' husband: "Ok wait wait ... what?"

Agnes: "Oh my God" beep beep (disconnects phone).

On Classic FM's Facebook Page, fans pray for Agnes and ask other listeners not to be self-righteous in the biblical 'first to cast the stone'

sense. As Figure 1 shows, Ciku's own status update, following the Agnes episode, is critical of Agnes' use of religion as a refuge:

Figure 1: Ciku's Status Update after Agnes' Episode



Religion, as indicated in Ciku's status update, is mocked as a sorry excuse for one's behaviour. In a sort of public rebuke, callers call in with all sorts of comments. One caller says, "Shit! That woman is f@&*!d! She should just go kill herself because she's in so much s*@t!" Another caller says, "So what? Should we feel any different just because it was a woman who got busted?" Another caller says, "that justice served is justified." Other Facebook users join in the mockery, suggesting that Agnes, the busted wife, should have been calling out 'Oh My Satan'.

Religion also emerges in Sue's autobiographical entries. Sue identifies the 'spiritual' aspect of sex in contemporary Nairobi and sees herself as providing a spiritual service to men.

Sex is getting to that special level. So the sex manual which is able to capture this higher level of present day sex will be the ultimate. And the woman who is able to get to the spiritual level sex will remain relevant (11 November 2011, Episode 52: A Sex Manual).

In this blog entry, Sue, in a prophetic voice, is alluding to imminent changes in the sexual skyline of urban Kenya. She often positions herself as an expert on urban sex, and in rare moments, urban marriages. This positioning is often subtle, but occasionally, becomes blatantly bold:

Men come to us because they want to get something out of themselves. And not the product of their balls for if that was the case, they would fare better, saving time and money by playing with themselves. It's something

intangible, what the priests here call *pepo*, some sort of ‘demon’. Men come to us possessed by stress, frustrations, mid-life crisis, career stagnation, work challenges and we exorcise them in a more pleasurable way, which doesn’t involve sitting on a pew for hours listening to a man or woman blaming your spiritual afflictions on your refusal to give tithes (19 January 2011, Episode 10: *The Spiritual Role of a Prostitute*).

In *Nairobi Nights*, entries chronicle shifting economic and social structures and the role of sex in this intricate web of changes in Nairobi. Sue’s online sexual narrative does not exist in a vacuum, and as Silberschmidt’s (2004) work on sexuality in East Africa suggests, any attempt to understand changes in sexuality, masculinity and femininity in the East African context must confront changing social, political, and economic structures. Sue offers a prognosis of change in the urban man overworked, stressed, and seemingly consolable only by something other than a hot meal or care from a significant other. At this point, Sue makes the case as to why men set aside a few thousand shillings for this spiritual ‘pleasure’ experience with a prostitute:

But why a prostitute? Unfortunately it’s because a prostitute is considered to be close to the dark of the earth; a somehow priest of darkness, but more formal and effective than witchdoctors. Men sex prostitute with some roughness, haste, urgency and complexity not shown anywhere else. I see the difference always when sleeping with a man who doesn’t know I am a prostitute and one who knows. The face of a man after a session with a prostitute, is that of relieve and freshness, something which I can bet my money making organ can’t be noted after a time with the kept woman. (19 January 2011, Episode 10: *The Spiritual Role of a Prostitute*).

If there is a ‘spiritual role’ of a prostitute, Sue sees it like glue that holds intact a frail social fabric:

It might be a little hard to get all this, but like with all matters spiritual only those who honestly practise a faith understand it. Remove prostitutes and the productivity of the country would be affected; families would break up, and more people would end up in asylums. The call for the government to legalise our trade should not be because we are to pay taxes, but because we contribute to the well being of the nation, same as churches (19 January 2011, Episode 10: *The Spiritual Role of a Prostitute*).

At least two readers of *Nairobi Nights* reverberated Sue’s sentiments about her integral role in society, describing prostitutes as ‘needed’ and ‘very important’ in our society. Sue’s description of spiritualism and

prostitution suggests a new form of faith in post-colonial urban Africa. The kind that one of Sue's white clients thinks 'she needs more than he does' as he hands her a King James Bible at the end of a session; the kind that requires souls to be delivered, not in open-air sermons or in white-clad holy spaces but in alleys and rooms on dark *Nairobi Nights*. Religion is very much alive in the confessional gendered spaces offered by *Busted* and *Ciku*.

Conclusion

Busted and *Nairobi Nights* are gendered media spaces which offer previously marginalised narratives for new communities in the online and convergent media space. These media products exist as alternatives in a male-dominated media landscape, and have the potential to challenge dominant narratives and social norms of male sexual control. *Busted*, in its exploration of sex and infidelity, invades the 'private realm' to make promiscuity public in Nairobi. These spaces, especially *Nairobi Nights*, can be seen as an attempt to resist representations of African sexuality that pivot on savagery, male assertiveness, and female subordination (Arnfred 2004; Haram 2004). The communities (both fans and opponents) engage the show and blog in similar and divergent ways. *Ciku* is seen by some as a 'home wrecker' yet celebrated by others as a 'genius'. Sue in *Nairobi Nights* uses blogging to provide a rare narrative of female sexuality through the lens of prostitution and its place in the urban space. Readers are mixed in their reception of this seminal story. Some fans celebrate, others rebuke her as a demon-possessed woman in need of Jesus, and yet others admire her intellect and her superior writing skills. With a loyal following of regulars, *Busted* and *Nairobi Nights* foster conversations, and provide a pretense-free new media environment where individuals can enter and leave at will without penalty (less so in *Busted*) and therefore provide a form of mediated 'third place' between the real and the virtual (Oldenburg 1999).

One of the ways in which social networking technologies have changed social interactions is that they have allowed us to engage in voyeuristic pleasure (Bauman 2008). Bauman, for example, argues that Facebook users are motivated to use the site because it allows them to compare themselves to others and to do so at a distance in order to achieve social efficacy. Fan comments on Classic FM's Facebook page suggest that voyeurism is evident. In particular, users seem to espouse mediated voyeurism '...the consumption of revealing images of and information about others' apparently real and unguarded lives, often yet

not always for purposes of entertainment but frequently at the expense of privacy and discourse' (Calvert 2000:1). *Busted*, in particular, provides voyeuristic entertainment by undermining the privacy of those whose cell phone numbers are provided to Ciku by their suspecting spouses.

Further, *Busted* and *Nairobi Nights* can be said to produce a form of intertextuality whereby audiences and media products cross-reference each other (McQuail 2005). On two occasions, Sue mentions how radio stations in Kenya cover sex and prostitution. In the first instance, she responds to a radio story regarding a well-educated former University of Nairobi student now turned prostitute. In the second instance, she alludes to an important observation:

...BBC, the station I prefer listening to because most of the local stations will in one way or another end up reminding me of my work. And I don't want to be reminded so much of it (20 January 2012, Episode 57: January Mind Games).

Sue's experience with radio stations underscores the prevalence of sex on the airwaves, and the voyeuristic pleasures listeners are encouraged to derive from its presence.

Keen (2007:36), an ardent critic of the Internet, cautions that Web 2.0 'threatens to turn our intellectual traditions and institutions upside down'. *Nairobi Nights* offers an unapologetic chronicle of the life of prostitution in Nairobi and urban Kenya, and has, to a certain extent, succeeded in breaking cultural myths and norms of prostitution. Ciku's *Busted* and Sue's *Nairobi Nights* exist alongside such forums to offer a new form of symbolic expression that creates communal conversations about the intricacies of sex, love, politics and faith in contemporary African cities. These new and social media spaces have the potential to be the future sites of contest and public discourse of gender norms and sexual narratives in the digital era in urban Africa.

Notes

1. The blurring of clear claims to Kenyan authenticity, identity, and nation in the digital age makes it difficult to distinguish between Kenyan bloggers who are Kenyan-based and blogs about Kenya.

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