

PRECARITY, ENTREPRENEURIALISM,
AND INNOVATION IN NAIROBI

Throughout her career, Zippy Kimundu has boldly seized unconventional opportunities. Kimundu began studying mass communication and TV production and, following her education, moved to Uganda. She realized that working in Kenya, she was getting jobs where she would be “someone’s assistant, first learning, an intern getting coffee, but I knew if I went somewhere I would step right in and work . . . So I moved to Uganda for that reason.” And once in Uganda she worked as an editor and head of post-production for a company. She says: “I was doing mostly social documentaries . . . and then little bit by bit [I] got also into directing.” While in Uganda she also studied for another degree, in public administration, as a backup plan given the uncertainty of her film career.¹

A pivotal moment in her career came when she attended Maisha Film Lab as an editor. While at Maisha, Kimundu met and was inspired by “amazing people from all over the world” and was taught by “Spike Lee’s crew based in Uganda” and producer Lydia Dean Pilcher (who is an Academy Award nominee and has a long working relationship with Mira Nair). She also credits her attendance at New York University, Tisch School of the Arts Asia, to Mira Nair’s support in recommending her. She spoke about the kind of exposure Maisha gave her—both in the sense of working with international caliber crews and getting into important film schools, but also at the level of creative storytelling:

I guess before I went to film school I didn’t know what kind of stories I wanted to tell basically. Because my background was basically social documentaries, which means a lot of NGO stuff. . . . But just for me, the interaction and the exposure to the outside world made me realize that I had unique stories. I appreciated more where I came from, and everything that I think of now felt special.²

This exposure was essential to the development of her unique creative voice and for realizing that her stories and experiences could make interesting

films. She has since been involved in a wide variety of projects—as befits a creative hustler. For instance, she worked as codirector with Mira Nair on the short documentary *A Fork, a Spoon, and a Knight* (2014). She was thrilled by the learning opportunity posed by being on set with Nair (“this amazing big-time director”), the symbolic capital she would gain because of her new status as codirector with Nair, and also the connections and opportunities that have come out of the project. The second major project is the Disney film *Queen of Katwe* (2016) directed by Mira Nair, in which Kimundu was the assistant editor to Barry Brown. She had never been on a Hollywood film set previously, and that opportunity was worth pursuing even though it meant temporarily sidelining her directorial skills. She sees herself primarily as a director, but being a creative hustler in Nairobi means seizing every possible opportunity for growth and career advancement.

Throughout her career, she has entrepreneurially seized “novel opportunities to initiate new forms of generating income in the realm of cultural production,”³ as befits a cultural entrepreneur, particularly through building networks with other filmmakers and film organizations from across the world that can potentially help further her career. Alongside this entrepreneurialism, she has diversified her possibilities to lay out a safety net—whether through studying for an alternate degree or building additional skills (such as advancing her editing skills instead of purely focusing on directing)—that would see her through potentially precarious times, as befits a hustler. Kimundu is not alone in this approach, and Nairobi-based female filmmakers are united by their shared approach to work: creative and entrepreneurial hustling.

Entrepreneurial activity in cultural and creatives industries is highly gendered. Reimer’s study of U.K. design agencies, for example, shows how “understandings of creativity, knowledge, innovation and craft may be presented in a gender-neutral guise but in fact often rest on assumptions about a distinctively masculine subject.”⁴ Definitions of successful entrepreneurship disproportionately focus on measuring success financially, and studies of African entrepreneurs often exclude women entirely because of this.⁵ Entrepreneurial discourses, in general, have an implied masculine subject and thus position women at a deficit; because of this, “entrepreneurship cannot be adequately analysed from a gender neutral perspective.”⁶ We need to explicitly foreground women’s experiences as entrepreneurs, and how they hustle to succeed in their industries.

Nairobi-based female filmmakers work in a precarious labor market where they must be constantly attuned to the potential of new opportunities to develop their ideas into films. Their process has precedents; Sembène's practice of "mégotage"—scrounging for cigarette butts, raising bits of money wherever possible, through personal or family savings or loans, perhaps from local businesses or the government⁷—certainly comes to mind. But hustling is more than "scrounging" in the absence of better opportunities and more cultural support (for instance, from the state in terms of cultural grants); it is a creative practice in its own right.

HUSTLING IN NAIROBI

To get their films made in Nairobi, filmmakers must hustle. The filmmakers we have met in this book are middle-class and transnationally connected, so at first they seem rather different from the classic hustlers described in the cultural studies canon. For example, Stuart Hall and others locate hustling in urban ghettos and describe it as "that range of informal dealing, semi-legal practices, rackets and small-time crime" that are an *alternative* to the respectable route of hard labour and low wages" usually open to workers in these spaces.⁸ In subsequent years the concept of hustling has migrated to describe a much larger variety of activities that are not shady or semi-legal—such as educated young Kenyans starting farms alongside other occupations, the performance that aspiring social media influencers do to make themselves visible to brands, the hopeful work of creatives in Accra, or how young people in Ghana use their mobile phones as a tool for navigating precarity.⁹ Socioeconomically marginalized young people in Nairobi also manage their precarious circumstances through hustling. For example, young people in the informal settlement of Kibera strategically manipulate the many NGOs operating in Kibera for their own material benefit.¹⁰ Similarly, young people in Mathare created trash-collecting businesses as a way of profiting from the government's failure to collect trash. They saw a potential profit opportunity that they could exploit in the pervasive garbage if they formed businesses to collect it, which they did.¹¹ These hustlers reclaimed their agency in precarious circumstances.

Nairobi-based female filmmakers neither live in "ghettos" nor work in modes involving questionable legality, but they do entrepreneurially negotiate precarity. This allows us to see them as hustlers even when the degree

of precarity they experience is very different from Nairobians living in Kibera or Mathare, for example.

It is possible to keep human agency in focus while still exploring the underpinning structural conditions that may inform our choices. As philosopher Judith Butler insists: “our acts are not self-generated, but conditioned. We are at once acted upon and acting. . . . Being acted upon is not fully continuous with acting, and in this way the forces that act upon us are not finally responsible for what we do.”¹² Jennifer Gatero, for example, had done most of her work in television but had also produced corporate videos and documentaries because she had to. She said:

If I was so flooded with TV series work then I wouldn't really have to do anything else, but you see in between projects—maybe I finished a project in February and my next project is in June—what am I going to do in the meantime? You know what I mean? So maybe in a way the industry is not big enough for specialization.¹³

The industry may be too small for specialization, but Gatero could still hustle within it to try to create the kinds of projects she wanted to work on. She had previously done only corporate documentaries—“nothing exciting,” in her words—and was enthused to be embarking on her first independent documentary project about a group of people in Majengo (an informal settlement in Nairobi). She described it as “a reality show where we follow them around. Sort of *Keeping up with the Kardashians*, or keeping up with people who live in absolute poverty.” She was clearly excited at the prospect.

I'm looking forward to doing more of the stuff that I'm passionate about. And that's going to be so exciting for me. . . . I'm just going to run myself to the ground until I have to take up a paid project again. Until I have to be at the point where I'm like, “Okay, if I don't take up a paid project now I'm going to starve to death.” I'm going to get to that point.¹⁴

She was confident in her success and was willing to take the risk of embarking on a new kind of production to create the kind of career she wanted.

Hustling is an activity, but hustlers must have a particular attitude in order to succeed. In his book on urban nightlife in Philadelphia, sociologist David Grazian suggests what this attitude looks like: “A combination of hard-nosed aggression and stylistic finesse, the art of the hustle requires the smooth magician's skills of sleight of hand and deceptive trickery. The hustler relies on the seasoned politician's self-confidence and golden tongue, the hungry

gambler's appetite for profit and risk, and the calculated, manipulative machinations of the con artist."¹⁵ As opposed to the informality and questionable legality of the hustle described by Hall et al., Grazian describes hustling as a practice individuals can employ for various sorts of gain—in this case picking up romantic or sexual partners—not necessarily one of survival. Hustling is a creative practice where individual actors make use of their various skills to achieve their goals, though the goals, skills, and legal context of each hustle may differ. Self-confidence and a stomach for risk are vital for the hustler.

Nairobi-based female filmmakers are artists, but as screen media entrepreneurs they must also be business people. Thinking like a business person is then also vital, as the example of Isabel Munyua will show. Isabel Munyua, and her company Dream Catcher, which she runs with her husband Martin, are deeply committed to creating screen media content “that will put Kenya in a positive light” and doing what it takes to make a successful business out of creating this kind of work. A particularly interesting example of their work is the TV show *Dads Can Cook* (the show's principle was “to put men in the kitchen for a change”). It was first bought by Kiss TV and then by M-Net, and she wanted to duplicate it “for other markets around Africa.” To be successful in this endeavor requires careful thought and planning:

When you are creating, it's a business. Let's be honest and look at it from a business-side point of view. . . . So first things first is research. If you are going to do it for [the African] Continent then you need to get some statistics on what the Continent actually watches. What may work for Kenya may not necessarily work for Ethiopia, for instance. Or may not work for West Africa. So, the issue of finding a common thing, a common denominator for all these regions is what is actually needed, is research. . . . Which is why with something like *Dads Can Cook*, we actually did ask.¹⁶

Rather than hoping the show would be popular, she set out to study those markets. She passionately emphasized the business of creativity and felt that Nairobi-based filmmakers needed to think more carefully about the business of what they create.

You are creating content for an audience and it needs to sell. For it to sell it needs to appeal to people. So they can watch it. So others can pay for it. You know what I mean? It's a whole cycle. But until we get that aspect of it we will be forever making films to put on our shelves. And watching them with our families. For personal use.¹⁷

Addressing problems in distribution meant careful planning in production, that is, doing research on how to make content for the broadest distribution possible.

In Nairobi and elsewhere, creative workers must constantly be attuned to the possibility of future work, especially considering the increasing pervasiveness of short-term contracts in the creative industries over long-term employment.¹⁸ They must always be on the lookout for future work opportunities, both during work and in their leisure time.¹⁹ In Nollywood, for example, “with modest pay from any individual movie, workers make a living mainly through quantity, and some can be found working nearly every day, ending one movie project to begin another.”²⁰ Diversifying their skill sets can be critical to being able to continue working. Ever the entrepreneurial hustler, after her filmmaking degree in directing and writing Philippa Ndisi-Herrmann learned to operate her own camera as a way of diversifying her skills so that she could always keep working.²¹ When we met, she was also exploring how to integrate her practices as a writer, photographer, and painter into her work. Hustlers need to be comfortable improvising and finding new ways to generate income, and a key marker of the hustler is that they are someone “who relies on their own resources and must not only be comfortable with, but thrive as they juggle multiple vocational roles.”²²

We can see this mode of working in multiple ways. Veteran filmmaker Dommie Yambo-Odotte felt moving from job to job could affect industry growth because it made it hard to learn from each project. She described the perspective of cameramen always looking for the next job (as an example):

You’re constantly on the move. You don’t stop for one moment to say, “How did I perform?” You know, view the film. “Dommie [Yambo-Odotte], what did you think about the images? Did I do it right? Next time maybe before we go can we try . . . ?” You see, because . . . the more you work the better skills you should grow. . . . Because we are hustling we are not looking at every assignment as another platform of growth. It’s every assignment as a platform for the next assignment.²³

On the other hand, young filmmaker Lucille Kahara felt that the industry condition where “you can’t just focus on one thing” (e.g., fiction film, documentary, or music videos instead of all three) was actually beneficial for her personally:

I try to do different things simply because it will keep me interested. I don't know about other people. I think for other people it might be a pure financial thing where you have to do commercials in order to . . . pay your rent, pay your bills, and all that stuff. Then if there's something extra then you can focus on doing some more creative things. But, for me, I just want to learn different things and meet different people, and that's how I feel like I'll learn and I'll grow.²⁴

Again, we see that having a particular attitude is important for women engaged in hustling work—they must be someone who thrives on juggling different ventures. For the hustler, precarity is a constraint that can generate creativity, learning, and growth.²⁵

Creatives must adapt to the artistic constraints posed by their working environments, and the ability to find financing is one such constraint.²⁶ Ng'endo Mukii—famous for her short film *Yellow Fever*—is well aware of how her work fits within existing funding schemes, and she uses that knowledge to her benefit. While it is undoubtedly true that “both African and non-African financial backers have their objectives and are not likely to provide support for film projects that do not fit in with their own larger concerns,”²⁷ these objectives are not necessarily in opposition to the concerns of the filmmaker. As Mukii noted about her own work, “I can apply for grants because I know that some of what I want to already do fits into what people are interested in.” Furthermore, she wants to do “artsy” work that is “different” and knows that her artistic agenda is one that requires international financial input and is facilitated by it. This is not true of all Kenyan filmmakers, and animators with commercial ideas can work outside the system of transnational film funding. She compared herself to a colleague working on commercializable animation: “He doesn't need to care about getting funds, he doesn't have to write applications, he doesn't have to try to find which strand his film would fit into, or look for co-production. He just does his stuff.”²⁸

She wanted to work on “artsy” projects and made the calculated trade-off to pursue a business model (using transnational funding) that would allow her to do so. She would have to think about funder agendas and navigate complicated grant systems, but doing so was worth it to her, at least for the present.²⁹

The creative industries are inherently risky because every creative product is new, and thus it is uncertain how consumers will actually value new creative products (e.g., films) in advance of actually seeing them.³⁰ However,

risk and opportunity are not spread evenly and we have to account for this inequality. We can see this particularly in how various filmmakers in Nairobi negotiate work with NGOs and other development organizations. To begin to understand the different working conditions of working-class and middle-class filmmakers, it is first necessary to see them in their respective relationships to Nairobi's transnational development networks.

Making films and promotional videos for various NGOs and development organizations is a prominent form of employment for Nairobi-based female filmmakers. NGOs (here a shorthand for the development industry more broadly) are an essential client for local filmmakers. Making NGO films is frequently framed as creating a "double bind" where the film projects with funding are commissioned by NGOs with specific goals, "but these projects are not necessarily the projects with which filmmakers themselves want constantly to be involved in the way that NGOs require."³¹ Part of the reason why this type of work is seen negatively is because it does not fit with the romantic conception of creativity because it is not about self-expression.³² All filmmakers can gain skills and experience through working on these projects (at least in the early stages of their careers), and this training is particularly important for female filmmakers.³³

However, this is not to say that commissioned films cannot be works of art in their own right. Ng'endo Mukii's short animated film *This Migrant Business* (2015), for instance, works with a clear brief to present a didactic message, but while the content is simple, its formal experimentation is highly unusual. Mukii described balancing her artistic process with the demands of a commissioner who wants a specific piece of work. Sometimes the process is an easy partnership, but at other times it is much more difficult. Her signature style is experimental animation, and the process of making it involves experimenting and testing out different techniques.

When I'm working for other people it becomes a bit mysterious and irritating for them. They can't really see what the final thing will be. . . . Right now I'm working on this NGO film. It is a short piece on migration. I'm sort of playing with it and experimenting with it. But at the same time they want something solid. How's this going to look? And I find that very constricting in terms of how I think. And at the same time I understand that they don't know what I'm doing. And it's a waste of time from their perspective to keep doing this exploration. It's a bit of a balance, I think. When I'm working I just think: "Let me test this out and see if it works."³⁴

This relationship between filmmakers and the development industry has been ongoing since at least the 1980s when Anne Mungai made several issue-based documentaries for television,³⁵ and some Nairobi-based female filmmakers are even development actors in their own right. Dommie Yambo-Odotte, for instance, is the executive director of the nonprofit organization Development through Media, which was founded in 1997 and seeks to effect social change in Kenya through media initiatives. Yambo-Odotte was extremely passionate about the value of filmmaking work for creating social change in Kenya and had devoted herself to the task across decades:

It's been many years and there have been many trials, many failures, many heartaches, but right now in my career I know one thing for sure: I'm completely convinced that as a medium of expression film is the way to go, especially in Africa. . . . Because film as a medium of expression can either . . . support positive development or it can actually destroy. We know in Africa, for example, you know that some of the radio programs we have had have caused genocide, have caused postelection violence even in our own country. But how can we steer away from that, there, by looking at film as a medium of expressing gender issues, development concerns, and just really providing civic education so that the population can become strong enough to engage almost at an equal level with decision makers? So that's really where I want to go. So the work that I'm working on right now will really be supporting that kind of engagement.³⁶

Message-based filmmaking or “edutainment” can be highly valuable both as a way of generating an income and for expressing creative and intellectual goals, as the examples of Mukii and Yambo-Odotte show.³⁷

Yet NGOs are only the clients of particular filmmakers; in other cases filmmakers are the beneficiaries of NGO work. A key distinction in determining the “client” or “beneficiary” status of each filmmaker is their class position. All filmmakers, middle-class and working-class, must hustle to continue working. The difference between these groups rests on the networks they are able to access to go about their work, and the scope of those networks is largely class-determined.

The distinction between working-class and middle-class filmmaking is aptly demonstrated by McNamara's discussion of a workshop that took place at Slum-TV in the context of the 2012 Slum Film Festival.³⁸ In it, four speakers were invited from different sectors of what McNamara calls Nairobi's professional screen media industries. Two speakers—Cajetan Boy

and Bonny Katei—advocated for the importance of telling “Kenyan” stories, yet they were challenged by “subsistence” filmmakers like Idha Nancy. McNamara recalls, in response to Boy’s “commenting idealistically that if young Kenyans wanted to make films, they should simply go out and make them and not be burdened by the interests of funders . . . Idha Nancy, a member of the Slum-TV cooperative, responded irritably that ‘we want to make films. We’re just waiting for somebody to give us the money,’” thus reflecting a fundamental tension between the aspiration to make films and the material resources to do so. While Boy was concerned with the *kind* of films being made, the “subsistence” filmmakers were concerned with being able to make *any* film.³⁹ As the examples from Nairobi show, sometimes being *able* to make an NGO film, and correspondingly an income, is a privilege. Unlike working-class filmmakers, such as those McNamara describes at Slum-TV, Nairobi-based female filmmakers are middle-class and have the life experiences and networks that render them familiar to potential clients—be they white-collar Kenyans or the expatriates who so frequently work for development organizations. In sociologist Pierre Bourdieu’s terms, Nairobi-based female filmmakers have the cultural and social capital that working-class filmmakers lack.⁴⁰

Nairobi-based female filmmakers occupy a specific space in Nairobi’s screen media ecosystem, and it is one that is defined in large part by class position. As opposed to working-class filmmakers dependent on external resources (from development agencies) to make any films, Nairobi-based female filmmakers have the class position and transnational connections to sustain careers as filmmakers (often through working for development organizations) even as they struggle to finance future creative projects.

LEANING IN TO PIRACY

A cornerstone of hustling is dealing with existing problems in innovative ways. As I have suggested throughout this book, finding profitable markets for the films of Nairobi-based female filmmakers is very difficult. The challenges posed by piracy reflect how Nairobi-based female filmmakers work around or “lean in” to those problems.

Nairobi is a city where you can buy pirate copies of any new release for 50 KES (\$0.40) while waiting in your car, in DVD shops, or from street hawkers at the entrances to shops and malls across the city—from the

Central Business District to the upscale suburb of Karen. Not only that, for a slightly higher price you can have specially selected pirated DVDs delivered to your home or office, meaning you can easily access any film content through making a simple phone call or sending an SMS. Then there is the phenomenon of pirate film distribution over the Internet, where anyone with a fast enough broadband connection can freely and easily access pirated content. Interestingly, despite the ease of accessing pirated copies of foreign films, “piracy of local movies is contained, done very cautiously, or as part of a pragmatic agreement” between producer and pirate because, while piracy of foreign movies is evidently tolerated, this situation is not the same for local content, and regulators make some effort to ensure unauthorized distributors of local content are punished.⁴¹ While pirated copies of films usually sell for 50 KES in Nairobi, local films sell for 100–200 KES. In some cases, DVDs of locally made films can cost as much as 800 KES (\$7), as was the case when I acquired a copy of *Nairobi Half Life* from a small video rental store and shop in Prestige Plaza. Local films must thus compete in an uneven market where they need to justify their higher cost.

A pirate media economy (of mostly foreign content) is flourishing in Nairobi, with great impact on local content production because, as Barbara Karuna succinctly put it, the pirates “make content too cheap.” She elaborated:

And that effects how people value local content. 'Cause they're thinking, why should I pay 800 KES to watch *Nairobi Half Life*, when I can watch what's the biggest movie right now? *Birdman*, or *The Grand Budapest Hotel*, or *Selma* for 50 KES? Why would I do that? . . . So, distribution becomes a problem because if we were to seriously produce stuff for the purpose of distribution in this country it would come to a certain cost, which would always, always, always be more than that 50 KES disk, and that's a problem.⁴²

The problem with film piracy is that it makes the market uncompetitive. Legitimate producers are pushed out because they cannot compete with cheap pirated DVDs and free Internet copies, as is the case elsewhere in Africa. In Ghana, the importation of pirated copies of Nigerian films also created a crisis in local film production in the early 2000s because producers could not compete with the far cheaper Nigerian products.⁴³ The Nollywood distribution system has long been recognized as having a problematic relationship with pirate film distribution, and Nigerian producers must actively develop new strategies to counter its effects.⁴⁴

In a critique of Hollywood industry estimates about the impact of unauthorized film distribution on their businesses, Ramon Lobato makes the important point that arguments that “presumed that for each movie accessed illegally, a legitimate version of the same film went unsold” are “dubious” because they disregard “the influence of pricing levels and distributive contingencies in media consumption.”⁴⁵ Pirated content can also be a means by which consumers who are unable to afford legitimate copies can watch films.⁴⁶ In Nigeria, illegitimate and legitimate films cost the same amount, so getting people to buy legitimate films is a matter of making them more accessible than unauthorized copies, and, accordingly, the issue in Nollywood piracy “is not social deviance but distributive accessibility.”⁴⁷ It thus seems likely that many consumers in Nairobi buy unauthorized copies of movies because they are what is available and what they can afford.

Piracy is seen by local filmmakers as a significant obstacle to profitable film distribution in Nairobi, but it is also something that filmmakers are working to innovate around. Emily Wanja thought about piracy pragmatically: “piracy is a problem everywhere in the world” and because “you can’t eliminate them by yourself” you need to find a way to do something like “pirate your own stuff or work with the pirates.” She felt “you got to keep going even when you know [piracy is] there and do what you can to fight that. But in the meantime also just see how much you can maximize your returns even with its presence.”⁴⁸

Appie Matere has used a film distribution model that recognizes that buying pirated film copies can be a matter of accessibility, where some consumers can only afford to access content at pirate prices. In her model, a producer would cater to two markets—one that can afford legitimate DVD prices and one that cannot, and networks of pirate film distribution would be used to serve those who cannot afford legitimate DVDs. While working with Baraka Films on *Project Daddy*, she used this “two market” model to address the issue of pirate film distribution. She suggested essentially “pirating” their own film by bringing DVDs to some of her merchandiser contacts and selling copies for about 20 KES (\$0.17). By her recollection, they sold about 1,000 tapes that way. Then, they took the film to Simon Nduti of Nduti One-Stop Shop, who, according to Matere, is “a distributor in Riverwood and I think one of the biggest pirates.”⁴⁹ They gave him the master DVD in exchange for 200,000 KES (\$1,735) and left him to make and distribute copies as he saw fit. Alongside this pirate model addressing

the needs of a low-income market, they also made a higher-quality tape for distribution in more upscale markets like Textbook Centre and the upscale grocery store Nakumatt where it would be sold for a higher price. The upper-middle-class audiences who frequent more expensive shops are unlikely to ever be in the places that sell the cheaper DVDs.⁵⁰ Using the “two market” distribution model is something she intends to do in the future: as she says, “I think that can work. I’m going to try that on my next film.”⁵¹

Jackie Lebo, like Matere, also seeks to find a way to cash in on unauthorized film distribution. At her company Content House they have “adopted the ‘lean in’ strategy where you . . . work with the piracy.” Her plan for distributing their latest film, *The Last Fight*, was to sell DVDs in “uptown areas” where people can afford to “buy the DVDs at market price,” and the festival circuit, and adopt what she described as a “controlled release on the Internet” where she would presumably attempt to reach pay-TV platforms. Thus far, this distribution strategy is standard. The interesting part of Lebo’s plan is what she intends to do next, and this is to give the film to pirates “to have them distribute it around. Because we have to balance between at least getting some money from the film, but also having it seen very widely.” In the first phase of distribution they would attempt to make money from the film, but in the second their focus would be on audience building and they would encourage viewers of pirated copies to engage with the film on social media through talking about it on Twitter or liking the film’s Facebook page. This is a solution to the challenges posed by piracy that takes place over the long term. She said this was

because you are not going to stop piracy by yourself right now, and the government does not show an appetite for changing that right now. So I think you just, you work with it. Lean in. And as long as you get your first run, as long as you understand where you’re going to get at least your first revenue back, then just make sure that you are building an audience though piracy. Like the musicians, they’ve stopped following the pirates, because the more piracy you have, the more people come to your concert. You just transform the piracy into a revenue stream, which is your concert. So that’s what we are trying to do. Transform them into numbers [so] that you can demonstrate numbers are behind me when you go to someone who has money.⁵²

Lebo is adopting what Lobato would call a *laissez-faire* approach to piracy. In this perspective “copyright protects one kind of economic activity but, in doing so, stifles the possibility of other, perhaps more creative,

revenue-generating arrangements,” for example, product placement deals.⁵³ Crucially for the Nairobi context, pirate distribution “also breeds demand for cinema in demographics that may one day ripen into viable formal markets.”⁵⁴

Lebo is clearly hoping for the Kenyan market to “ripen” and that her strategy will breed audiences in the long term:

We’ll try to make as much money as we can, especially from the people from this side of town who can buy it. But once it’s done that cycle, we just give it away. There is no point in holding on to it . . . just build audiences so that you can be ready for that day when it somehow translates into revenue.⁵⁵

Importantly, however, the potential in this model exists in part because of the funding models for many of the film by Nairobi-based female filmmakers. Most films made in East and Southern Africa (except South Africa) are donor-funded.⁵⁶ As Lebo says, “we’re still at a place where most of our projects are funded because they’re important,” not because they will be profit-making entertainment.⁵⁷ *The Last Fight* was funded by the Ford Foundation, so making a profit through the film was secondary to making a social impact with it. In this case, demonstrating the ability to reach wide audiences within the community the film could “help” is essential to generating future income through future grants from other developmental organizations.

Nairobi-based female filmmakers, as the examples of Matere and Lebo show, are hustling on the line between formal and informal, licit and illicit practices in their responses to pirate film distribution. They rely on networks built to profit from copyright infringement to distribute their films as widely as possible—and reap the financial rewards that can come from that increase in spectatorship. The formal and informal are vitally interconnected in all film industries.⁵⁸ Even the production of Hollywood studio films, a highly formal enterprise, “still involves many kinds of informal activity, including unpaid cameo appearances, shooting in unregulated third world sites and harnessing the promotional power of fans.”⁵⁹ Nairobi-based female filmmakers are thus working within a global filmmaking context where formal and informal practices are imbricated with one another. Their case suggests that normative approaches to unauthorized distribution—where piracy is seen as inherently bad—are limited. Rather, we should be attuned to how film entrepreneurs cope with informality to generate unique new business models that address their specific local circumstances.⁶⁰

Filmmakers can and have made use of pirate film distribution to further their own agendas, and particularly to cultivate new audiences for their films. This does not mean, however, that they do not seek more formal structures to help generate other profitable distribution pathways. In 1993 Dommie Yambo-Odotte made the documentary *If Women Counted* about women in elected positions. The film needed to be distributed to its planned beneficiary communities, and an initial distribution of 200 copies “was the seed” that generated thousands of pirated copies. She said at the time that this pirate distribution “didn’t matter to me so much because it was a donor-funded project; it wasn’t supposed to be a profit-making one.” Over the years she has changed her mind and now believes that “funding of films . . . should be connected to a distribution plan as well. That I can tell you for a fact.” Now, even for donor-funded films, she believes plans for profitable distribution are essential.⁶¹

Nairobi-based female filmmakers display a distinct entrepreneurialism in approaching the (global) issue of film piracy, because rather than relying on the state or other institutions to change the regulatory environment or clamp down on this mode of distribution, they hustle to transform their own circumstances and, correspondingly, both cope with and profit from the precarity caused by piracy.

WORKING THROUGH PRECARIOUS MEDIA INDUSTRIES

Workers in creative and cultural industries are often described as caught between their desire for self-fulfillment—doing something they love—and the precarious drudgery of work in creative professions.⁶² Precarious work has been a defining preoccupation of research on the creative and cultural industries. This literature suggests that workers are working *now* in “bad” jobs because they are *hopeful* that the future will be better, but that it is a “cruel optimism” because that desired future of “good” work is impossible to reach.⁶³ Creatives “come with a training in what could be called sacrificial labor. This means they are predisposed to accept nonmonetary rewards—the gratification of producing art—as partial compensation for their work, thereby discounting the cash price of their labor. Indeed it is fair to say that the largest subsidy to the arts has always come from arts workers themselves, underselling themselves in anticipation of future career rewards.”⁶⁴ In this view, workers are trapped in a precarious limbo from which they cannot escape and for which

they blame themselves.⁶⁵ There is little scope in this line of critical thinking for valuing creative professions or for understanding why it is that so many creatives profess to find meaning in their work.

Precarious labor is not simply a condition of cultural and creative industries, but has gained a much wider application in the neoliberal era, and the term “precarity” has come to refer broadly to insecure and low-wage work.⁶⁶ Curtin and Sanson go so far as to suggest that all workers, globally, from the most marginal to elites, “must ready themselves for iterative change and persistent contingency as standard employment and its associated entitlements become artifacts of a bygone industrial era. Precarious livelihoods are indicative of a new world order of social and economic instability.”⁶⁷ However, we must ask the vital question put forward by Ferguson and Li: “for whom is present-day instability in work and income an alarming shift . . . ? For whom is precariousness not just routine, but unremarkable?”⁶⁸

The vision of “standard employment” with associated benefits critiqued above is highly idealized, and this ideal has never been the norm in most places. For workers in the global South, the *opposite* of “standard employment” has rather been the norm, and, indeed, for racialized people and women “standard employment” has not been the norm in the global North either.⁶⁹ We thus cannot approach precarious work in the creative industries in Nairobi with this normative framework. The concepts of informality and precarity are concepts of *absence* and describe what is *not* taking place, rather than what *is*.⁷⁰ Workers in a state of protracted liminality and marginality—where “proper jobs” of salaried labor and benefits are out of reach—can and do find work that “fits their terms” and through which they build meaningful lives in the present.⁷¹ The lens of hustling allows us to see what *is* taking place.

Rather than being seduced into working against their own interests by “do what you love” narratives,⁷² Nairobi-based female filmmakers make careful and creative hustling choices to define their own futures. Filmmakers may want the autonomy and creativity that comes with creative professions, but they also know the stakes of pursuing them. Jennifer Gatero, for example, was willing to create a rift with her parents to pursue filmmaking because the alternative did not fit into how she would define a good life:

I quit university to go to film school. I knew university was not for me. . . .
I was supposed to be doing a bachelor’s of commerce, and the more I was in

school the more . . . I saw such a bare life ahead of me. Because I was like, “What do people in BComm do exactly? And what jobs do you get? I’m going to be like an accountant?” It was so depressing. So I knew that I wanted to be a creative because I’ve been a writer since I was [small].⁷³

Her mother initially refused to support her in going to film school, so Gatero quit university without telling her, later creating the “biggest fight,” and a rift that healed only once Gatero had established herself in the industry.

I left school, I got a job, I started my own company. So she started to see, okay fine, you know, I’m doing something with my life. Her friends are telling her, “Oh you know I see your daughter’s shows on TV” and then now she’s saying, “Oh okay, okay, so this is something.”⁷⁴

Gatero’s story fits into a narrative of creatives aspiring to work in industries where they get to “do what they love” instead of working in boring, hum-drum jobs, but only to a point. She did not pursue her profession naively, since it involved real risk to pursue what she wanted to do.

Different roles in the film industry have different degrees of precarity associated with them. According to Judy Kibinge, “if you are in a supplier’s role you will always be fine because there will always be people who need things, who want to rent things, who need your services”; but, on the other hand, “it is much more vague if you are writing, if you are actually the creative, or you want to own a creator’s role as opposed to a supplier’s role.”⁷⁵ Filmmakers need to be willing to embrace precarity to pursue their creative ambitions.

Through hustling they exercise their agency. They work and strategize to create opportunities for themselves so that they can make the kinds of films they want. As we saw in chapter 1, Hawa Essuman has experimented in a wide range of screen media formats. All of this fits into her pursuit of her creative vision:

You figure out what you do until you make the next film you want to make. Because all eyes are to the film. So you do what you need to do, in order to have the film, and not just the film, but the film as you want it. It goes back to what I was saying before. You just do what you need to do to do what you want.

This mode of working—doing what you need to do to do what you want to do—is shared by all Nairobi-based female filmmakers. Paying critical attention to the work they have to do, as opposed to their finished, stylistically

internationalized films, is vital to understanding how any of it comes to be made in the first place. Essuman, like other filmmakers, chooses to hustle, and in so doing exercises her agency and right to define success in her own terms.⁷⁶ The same was true for Njoki Muhoho. When I met her, she was working on the post-production of a talk show she was calling *Maisha* that would celebrate life in Kenya. She was willing to be exacting in the process so that she could create precisely the show she wanted:

I'm in post-production. It has taken me so long to finish post because I am very, very, fussy on the quality of my productions. . . . I'm on my third editor now. We gave the whole series to one editor, then another, then another. I went to my sound editor and wasn't happy . . . so I told him, hold on, I'm going back to the drawing board and recutting it. And I'm happy.⁷⁷

Ordinary workers might not care about what they produce, but creatives care “vitaly about the originality displayed, the technical prowess demonstrated, the resolution and harmony achieved in the creative act.”⁷⁸ This was clearly true in Muhoho's case. Through working another job she could produce exactly the kind of content she wanted. She felt she did not have to produce content quickly or in a large volume: “I keep saying I don't have too. I have another job, I do this because I love it. And I don't have to prove to anybody anything.”⁷⁹

Precarious situations can directly facilitate creativity.⁸⁰ Feminist studies scholar Heather Berg and feminist film and media scholar Constance Penley's study of the adult film industry in California's San Fernando Valley is particularly instructive in this regard. They employ the term “creative precarity” to describe “the resourceful ways porn workers resist, navigate, and exploit the precarity they confront,” and also suggest that while precarity is something these workers struggle with, “some porn workers describe precarity as both a potential job benefit and what allows them to be creative.”⁸¹ We can see filmmaker Lucille Kahara's work in a similar way. Kahara had temporarily left the film industry because she had grown increasingly frustrated with her working conditions as a producer. She says:

I was pretty frustrated with the industry because people kept calling me for jobs and then they never went through, or they ended up changing their mind about something and not letting me know, and I would change my schedule and prepare to do that work, and then suddenly things are not happening. I can't work like this anymore.⁸²

She left the industry, and the country, to go to culinary school in Canada.

So at the moment I want to blend the two. I want to do food shows. Then also now with the digital migration I want to see if I can actually get a channel on TV. Just do whatever I want to do. Because I'm tired of having to wait for jobs from other people. I want to create my own thing. And do something different.⁸³

When faced with precarious freelance working conditions she hustled to create the kind of work she wanted—where she could do “whatever I want to do.”

While celebrating the agency of hustlers entrepreneurially working through precarity is vital, we do not want to run the risk of glorifying precarity, as frequently happens in popular publications compelling people to start a side hustle.⁸⁴ We must not gloss over the fact that risk has been increasingly foisted on the individual worker, or that precarious circumstances compel some creatives into becoming entrepreneurs.⁸⁵ Hustlers work with agency in precarious circumstances, but that does not mean those precarious circumstances should be allowed to exist (by governments, employers, etc.). Indeed, creating precarious working condition works directly to the benefit of particular groups.⁸⁶ Entrepreneurship may allow some groups to control their own destinies, but it can also be a way powerful organizations and governments “download responsibility to ordinary people” and in so doing abdicate their own responsibility to care for those people.⁸⁷ Entrepreneurial discourses of innovation, flexibility, and daring risk taking must be firmly grounded in a recognition of the precarity through which Nairobi-based female filmmakers, and many other workers, must hustle.

DOCUBOX: BUILDING BUSINESS SKILLS AND A FILM VIEWING CULTURE IN NAIROBI

Creative and cultural industries are not a government priority in Kenya,⁸⁸ so Nairobi-based female filmmakers hustle in an environment where there are few institutional mechanisms designed to support them. Within this context, a significant development in the industry in recent years has been the formation of Docubox—the East African Documentary Film Fund, an institution that provides funding and nonfinancial support to local filmmakers. Docubox directly addresses many issues that make filmmaking a precarious activity in Nairobi, as we shall see.

Rather than being only and always individualistic, creatives in precarious circumstances care about each other and how they can work together to improve their industries, and this kind of communal solidarity is foundational for both individual careers and the functioning of the wider creative economy in these local spaces.⁸⁹ Docubox's approach to the film milieu in Nairobi is underpinned by an ethics of care where mentorship of individual filmmakers as well as support for the wider filmmaking (and viewing) community in Nairobi is central. The organization is community-oriented, and this communal support for female filmmakers is important. For Guadeloupean filmmaker Sarah Maldoror—the first woman to have directed a fiction feature film in Africa (*Sambizanga*, 1972)—the shared experience of being women does not result in the solidarity necessary to be seen as a collective of filmmakers. She does not feel African female filmmakers are a sisterhood, saying, instead, “But we are not sisters, really, we are each in our own isolation making films.”⁹⁰ Community-building initiatives are necessary to make a strong and supportive “sisterhood” of female filmmakers, and we can see Docubox as one such initiative.

Judy Kibinge is the executive director and became involved with Docubox because she “understands what it is to be stuck.” The Docubox model works by granting filmmakers various amounts of money to develop documentary film projects. In Docubox's first year, twelve film projects were selected, and each grantee was given \$2,500 to make a trailer of their project. After that, six films were shortlisted to be given up to \$25,000.⁹¹ However, the value of Docubox extends far beyond the financial support filmmakers receive through the fund. Docubox collaborates with its filmmakers, including holding events such as master classes and informal get-togethers to workshop ideas and get feedback, and taking them to the Sheffield Documentary Film Festival in the United Kingdom in 2014 to pitch their films. Docubox, through various initiatives, directly addresses key issues in the filmmaking hustle of Nairobi-based female filmmakers.

The idea for an East African documentary film fund began with Joyce Nairo, program manager at the Ford Foundation in Nairobi and a Kenyan academic. Through the Ford Foundation, Nairo had raised \$380,000 and gave Kibinge “such an open brief” to develop the fund so that it responded to “our situation” rather than modeling it after another film fund. Kibinge's research on creating the fund involved meeting with people from the IDFA Bertha Fund and from Hot Docs (two important film funds that support

African documentary filmmaking), but she said that “then at some point you realize, okay, it’s really great to have these, like, points of reference, but you can be your own thing . . . you can do it with heart, you can have fun.” Kibinge initially agreed to do the research necessary to set up the film fund, believing that she was not suited to running it given that, as she puts it, she “[didn’t] know anything about running funds.” She describes initially being “entangled” with Docubox because she had researched it and set it up, but then realizing

what just an amazing honor it is to set up a thing which is exactly the thing that you need as a filmmaker . . . You’re actually setting up a thing to answer the thing you’ve been looking for, for ten years, but now for other people, which is pretty cool. . . . Over time it’s evolved more and more into the thing that I think we need.⁹²

A consistently mentioned benefit of Docubox is that it has created a supportive community of filmmakers who can then learn and grow together and help each other.⁹³ Jackie Lebo stated: “We all support each other. We hang out. But in terms of just an informed perspective on your work, I think Docubox has been the most helpful.”⁹⁴ She feels Docubox filmmakers are able to give informed opinions on each other’s work because they share the common knowledge base that was provided through Docubox training. “Docubox has been so wonderful” for Philippa Ndisi-Herrmann, because Kibinge

has been very inclusive, very supportive; she’s encouraged a lot of group meetings and film screenings. . . . It has meant that, as a spin-off, we are able to call somebody up who is part of the Docubox family and say, “Can you give me advice on this?” or “What do you think about this?”⁹⁵

Making Docubox a collaborative space where filmmakers help and learn from each other is obviously by design, and this atmosphere is fostered because of local industry conditions where, according to Kibinge “people need to collaborate” because in

this kind of market, you just can’t do this thing by yourself because you’ll never have that free camera you need; you have to have some people who you are like “You guys, are you free? Can we shoot things for a little bit? Or just look at my idea and tell me truly, truly is it making sense?”⁹⁶

The structure of Docubox is formed to be responsive to the conditions of the local filmmaking hustle, and while one way is through creating a

supportive and collaborative space, another is through providing training to filmmakers. In order to understand the value of Docubox training, it is first necessary to examine the film-training landscape in Nairobi.

Throughout my interviews with Nairobi-based female filmmakers, a common narrative I encountered was that the existing film schools in Nairobi offered inadequate training, leaving recent graduates with few useful skills and producers facing a shortage of qualified talent. Despite the recent proliferation of film schools and departments in Nairobi,⁹⁷ in describing the quality of film education at university level in Kenya, Njoki Muhoho said:

What's the quality of your education? Crap. I use the word "crap" to describe it. They don't have the resources. How can you teach film and you don't have cameras? How can you teach film and you yourself have never made a film? They have theater people. People from the National Theatre, from the Phoenix Theatre, are the ones that are heads of departments.⁹⁸

Dommie Yambo-Odotte stated that "if you can compare the quality of training today and the quality of training when I trained [in the 1980s at KIMC], of course they are worlds apart."⁹⁹ And this is because "the population has exploded of people who are interested in trying the film industry," but at the same time "the infrastructure hasn't really grown" and people "who want the quick bucks will set up a film school."¹⁰⁰ Film training echoes the wider tertiary education market in Kenya where, "in the last decade, the number of profit-driven tertiary institutions in Kenya has risen. Instead of improving the quality of workers they issue certificates and diplomas that mean little."¹⁰¹ In Yambo-Odotte's class there were nine students, and "it was a seriously hands-on kind of training," but now, she said, perhaps a touch hyperbolically, "they graduate without ever handling a camera and they are DOPs." Much like other established producers running companies, her knowledge of the current film-training environment in Nairobi comes from hiring recent graduates. She says:

After they finish school they are looking for employment so they will come to institutions like ours. So you say like, "Okay, I was given chances myself when I was growing, let me try and give a chance here." But then you realize, gosh, it will take about a year or two before somebody really gets to the level of the kind of quality we are looking at.¹⁰²

Njoki Muhoho similarly described having to teach the students that come to her production company for work "from scratch" because "they

know nothing.”¹⁰³ Isabel Munyua pointed to a lack of engagement between training institutions and filmmaking businesses and a resulting disconnect between the skills taught and those required to work. She works with college student interns at her company Dream Catcher Productions, and describes having to train them for the first six months of their work because they lack specialized skills and instead can do a little bit of everything.¹⁰⁴ Of course, not all training programs are the same, and Toni Kamau described her education at the now-defunct Mohammed Amin Foundation as “amazing” because it was “hands-on training” in “small classrooms” with “really good teachers.” She also said, “I’m not saying it’s the only film school that produces good guys, but there are a lot of really good people that came out of the Mohammed Amin Foundation.”¹⁰⁵

Similarly, recent graduates also point out the inadequacies of their film-school training and how this makes them unprepared for the local job market. Wangechi Ngugi studied mass communication at a local college called Nairobi Institute of Business Studies. She said: “Initially, I didn’t want to go into a college because the local colleges here are all about making money” and there will be classes of “fifty students, or seventy, and there’s one camera, and then there’s a small studio [laughs] to go and experiment.” While working, after a time:

it got to a point I stopped sending out my CV because I realized I’ve done all these modules, right, but they are all theoretical . . . so when someone looks at your resume they’re thinking oh wow! This person has done so much. You know, I need an editor you should probably call her in, but I don’t know how to edit [laughs]. Because you didn’t get a chance to be taught properly.¹⁰⁶

She describes how it was embarrassing to have such a discrepancy between the education she could list on paper and the skills she had actually been taught. In response, she started approaching internships explicitly asking for training, and it was that on-the-job training, rather than her formal education, that got her where she is today. Given the lack of adequate film schools in Nairobi, aspiring filmmakers must strategize to develop their skills in alternative ways.

Docubox actively seeks to mentor its filmmakers by bringing in international talent to give master classes and workshops. Ng’endo Mukii, a Docubox grantee, stated that “the value of that mentorship is immense” because it involved “having people with eyes that have gone through so

much refinement” giving “personal critique” on their films. It is important to keep in mind here that at the point she became involved with Docubox, Mukii had trained at the Rhode Island School of Design and the Royal College of Art in London, so was already a highly skilled and trained filmmaker. Mukii described that what they learned through Docubox workshops, “you’re not even going to learn in an art school or film school” (at least not art-focused ones like the ones she attended). At these schools,

you’re not learning about what you’re meant to do when you go to a film festival, how you’re meant to organize meetings with people, kind of hounding producers, you don’t learn about that stuff. You don’t learn about the funds, where you can get funds.¹⁰⁷

But Docubox does address these skills, so through Docubox “you’re just opening your mind to something beyond you making stuff.” Docubox took its grantees to the 2014 Sheffield International Documentary Festival, and as Mukii says:

I did not know what to do at a festival before then. I’ve been to many festivals and networked supposedly, and met people. But I think some of the benefit I’ve gotten from doing that was by chance. . . . When we went to Sheffield with Docubox we were armed: with our films, little pamphlets, little DVDs to give to people. We had practiced what our synopsis was, what our film was about, what strands our films could possibly fit into. We had meetings set up.¹⁰⁸

Previously, she would attend festivals that showed her film (*Yellow Fever*), but would not be prepared to pitch her next project. She described people asking to see her next project with a mind to developing collaborations, but when she did not have anything to show them, she could “see them turning off.”¹⁰⁹ She incidentally met a producer at Sheffield and at the time of our interview was actively developing a project with him, and even though she met him by chance, and not as part of an arranged meeting, she was prepared to capitalize on the chance opportunity specifically because of the preparation she received through Docubox.¹¹⁰

Nairobi-based female filmmakers must hustle to seize every possible opportunity to work and make their films. Funding from international film festivals abroad is one important opportunity, as we have seen, yet it is also a very competitive environment to navigate. Zippy Kimundu described going to IDFA and Sheffield to fund-raise, “but it’s crazy because you go there and it’s all these people going for the same pots of money! It’s really

hard.”¹¹ Navigating this competitive market requires a specific skill set, and these are business skills, not necessarily creative ones. These examples show how much being a successful filmmaker is not about being an artist capable of creating beautiful films, but rather about being a hustler capable of producing, promoting, and distributing them.

Making high-quality, creative documentaries is a key objective of Docu-box, and one at which it has been very successful. The films *New Moon* (dir. Ndisi-Herrmann, 2018), *I Am Samuel* (dir. Murimi, 2020), and *The Letter* (dir. Christopher King and Maia Lekow, 2019) are all powerful, character-driven documentaries displaying the highest level of creative craftsmanship. *The Letter* and *I Am Samuel* have social messages, but through intimately following their protagonists for long periods of time they avoid a conventional expository didacticism. With *New Moon*, Ndisi-Herrmann initially intended to make a more conventional documentary about the construction of a port in the coastal town of Lamu, Kenya, but over the course of years of production she shifted gears and the final film is a personal exploration of her conversion to Sufi Islam while also presenting a poetic view of life in Lamu.

However, Docubox goes beyond supporting its grantees in making creative documentaries, and a final important initiative of theirs is running monthly public screenings of creative documentaries so that a much wider public can also learn about the possibilities of the documentary film medium. I was lucky to attend one such “Docubox Presents” screening at Pawa254. The audience gathered to watch *Virunga*. Every seat of the theater was filled, and people stood or sat on the floor to fill every available space in the room. Alongside screening the film, Docubox hosted a Q&A with one of the film’s protagonists, Mélanie Gouby. Through the event of the film screening and Q&A the audience was given the opportunity to develop a deeper appreciation of the art of documentary filmmaking. Importantly, Docubox also accounted for difficulties in accessing the screening as they arranged three bus trips to take people from Pawa254 back into town after the screening (starting at 9:00 p.m. and then every half hour after that). Initially, Docubox hosted screenings at Shalom House, the location of their office, which is a compound that includes a bar and restaurant and space to set up an outdoor screen, but they relocated to Pawa254 because it was difficult for the audience to reach Shalom House because of Nairobi’s traffic (Shalom House is on the busy Ngong Road). Eventually

moving to Pawa254 also recognized the potential of collaboration in the industry because, as Kibinge says, “We’re all in the same boat. We are. And we’re all trying to grow the same thing. And we’re all struggling with the same issues, so why not get to know each other better and support each other’s work?”¹¹²

Kibinge described Kenyan filmmakers as not knowing how to make good documentary films, and they “make really bad” documentaries because they “make a lot of NGO films” and “a lot of corporate films.” Importantly, however, she insisted that this situation is no one’s fault because good documentaries are not available for local viewing.¹¹³ Screening creative documentaries thus directly addresses a production problem in the industry.

CONCLUSION

Hustling is part of the common vernacular for talking about precarious work today. It has migrated from a term used predominantly to describe informal and sometimes illegal work at the margins of society to being broadly used—as is demonstrated by the vast quantity of self-help literature on how to hustle geared firmly toward the Euro-American middle class. Yet despite this common usage, the concept of hustling as a modern mode of work has not been sufficiently theorized. By building on seminal studies of hustling at the margins, such as those of geographer Tatiana Thieme, and keeping the significance of class sharply in focus, I have contributed new understanding not only of what it means to hustle in Africa, but what it means to hustle in the precarious world of modern work.

Keeping both local and transnational perspectives in focus is vital to understanding the creative hustle of Nairobi-based female filmmakers. In comparison to hustling waste workers in Mathare or NGO hustlers in Kibera, the middle-class, transnationally connected Nairobi-based female filmmakers appear remarkably privileged.¹¹⁴ For those in informal settlements, “the ‘hustle’ infers a constant pragmatic search for alternative structures of opportunity outside formal education, employment, and service provision,”¹¹⁵ and while workers in creative and cultural industries may not all face a lack of education and service provision, they increasingly do have to search for employment that is ever more short-term, unstable, and precarious. Film and media scholars Michael Curtin and Kevin Sanson note that “today’s increasingly mobile and globally dispersed mode of

production thrives (indeed, depends) on interregional competition, driving down pay rates, benefits, and job satisfaction for media workers around the world.”¹¹⁶ Nairobi-based female filmmakers are part of this global filmmaking system, and, as such, it is essential to situate their creative labor within this global framework, just as we must also examine them in relation to hustlers experiencing greater precarity.

As I have shown in this chapter, hustling is born out of precarity, but as a practice it transcends those conditions in an innovative way to constantly adapt to local and transnational forces that shape Nairobi’s filmmaking environment at any given moment. In the African art-house tradition, “it usually takes a nearly lunatic commitment on the part of an individual to get a film made”; the filmmaker may simultaneously have several positions within the project, and “there are no supporting, let alone competing structures, no standing machinery of production.”¹¹⁷ Nairobi-based female filmmakers’ experiences are certainly intelligible within this frame, as they must be extremely committed to their projects and adopt multiple positions in their production and distribution.

Nairobi-based female filmmakers—like workers in creative and cultural industries across the world—experience job precarity and work to address these circumstances through their individual hustling practices. They often have very diverse careers spanning different formats, mediums, and genres of screen media production, and this results from their entrepreneurial approach to work. Filmmakers must strategize to reduce the instability caused by unpredictable funding, and this is where they hustle to create opportunities that will reduce their instability in the long term—be that through developing audiences using the mechanisms of unauthorized film distribution or training filmmakers to be business people as well as better creatives through organizations like Docubox.

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