“Nairobi is a shot of whisky”. Sex, space and sophistication

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‘This is Nairobi! If there is a miracle in the idea of life it is this: that we are able to exist for a time, in defiance of chaos. … For us, life is about having a fluid disposition. Nairobi is a shot of whisky.’ — Binyavanga Wainaina1

‘Cosmopolitanism is an adventure and an ideal.’ Kwame Anthony Appiah2

[1] *Discovering home* by Binyavanga Wainaina (2003: 10).
[2] Cosmopolitanism by Kwame Anthony Appiah (2006: xx).

> It's a Friday afternoon somewhere October 2001 and I receive a text message from Tom: "Hey Gal, what's up? Am in desperate need of Tusker [Kenyan brewed beer]. Can you pick me up from the office at 7?" It's a call I must not ignore, so much is clear. I am used to receiving such messages, women typically write me, or seduce me to meet with them, with "many stories to tell, must talk to you".
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> Tom's text message signals of a long evening of meeting people at various places in Nairobi, drinking Tusker with pride, and coursing the city searching for the "hottest place of the nite". Ethnography is a reciprocal venture and the silent agreement between my informants and me is that I need their stories while they need my car, presence, or feedback. It's a pleasant and productive agreement.

At the time I met Tom I was living in Nairobi for a year to study the lifestyles of young professionals like him, aged between twenty and thirty years. My aim was to study their search for a new sexual morality by focussing on their love and sexual lives—both ideas and practices—to find out how sexuality was embedded in social relations and meanings, and, therefore, how sexuality was related to processes of social transformation. A small group of young female and male professionals in Nairobi, including information and communication technology (ICT) professionals, accountants and junior NGO staff, represent an emerging social group that is not clearly defined but is nonetheless still recognizable. Born and raised in Nairobi, they have garnered the higher education necessary to take advantage of postcolonial opportunities and to pursue professional careers and middle-class lifestyles. Their llives manifest a cosmopolitan ethos that unites the cultural, financial and political flows within and between non-Western and Western societies (Appadurai 1996; Ferguson 1999).

Young professionals' taste in music, fashion, humour and social concerns signals their appreciation of multiple modes of being (Nyairo 2005). They see themselves as the *avant garde* of Kenya and their ensuing lifestyles testify to the reconfiguration of culture, gender and sexuality that has been taking place in postcolonial Kenya. As the historical reconfigurations of gender and sexuality coalesce in a particular way in the lifestyles of the young Nairobi professionals, it can be said that they embody emergent new subjectivities. These new modes of being and knowing are particularly manifested in relation to sexuality. During my research in 2001-2 and 2004, many young professionals explained their choices regarding courtship and marriage in relation, and sometimes in opposition, to the lives of their parents. Many described their parents' marriages as old-fashioned and aspired different kind of relationships, "modern" ones (Spronk 2011). Important aspects of their lifestyle are reflected in having a "fast life" and in the ideal of a "modern marriage" at some point in the future. Since they delay marriage because of their careers and living conditions, they tend to have temporary sexual relations. These relationships are possible since sex involving the use of contraceptives does not lead to reproduction. As will become clear, sexuality as a realm of exploration,

pleasure and agency is related in particular ways to their lives as young professionals. Strengthened by their independent financial position, they form a social group of women and men who implicitly and explicitly critique conventional gender roles. A consequence is that people tend to accuse them of being 'westernised' and 'un-African'. This accusation cuts deep, as they consider themselves to be very conscious of their cultural identity, being the trendsetters of "sophistication" and "being modern the African way" (Spronk 2009b).

> After seven o'clock in the evening drive into the car park of the Chancery Building and I let Tom know that his taxi driver has arrived. After a while he gets into the car with two female and one male colleague who are quickly introduced and we head to one of the *Kengeles* bars, at the time *the* place to have one's after-office beer to "drink the day away". Tom has been in touch with others to let them know that we will be at *Kengeles West*, hoping that he is able to "gather a crowd". *Kengeles* is a bar where one finds Nairobi's self-respecting hip and ambitious yuppies. It's spacious, tastefully designed with a large bar and a huge mirror reflecting the line of drinks and customers drinking at the bar. There is also a bar facing the street where one can look through huge windows downwards at the fleet of cars making up the traffic jam.

In the (recent) literature about cosmopolitanism, there is a trend to describe it as the cultural habitus of globalization, and many times ethnic or culturally diverse global cities are often invoked to visualise and materialise the concept. The term is evoked in different ways and a major distinction is made between pointing at increasing awareness of global interconnections—cosmopolitanisation— and a normative orientation towards difference which represents the globalising of minds—cosmopolitanism (Devadason 2010). Wardle has drawn out four kinds of cosmopolitanism: as a perceptual ability, as an identity politics, as a pan-human ontology, and as a transformative personal capacity (2010). I will concentrate on the first and the last kinds here, despite the promising quality of the other two. I am interested to investigate cosmopolitanism beyond the experience of diversity (Appiah 2006), or a competence and ideology that is marked by a personal ability to make one's way in other cultures (Hannerz 1990). Drawing on the work of these and other authors, I intend to study cosmopolitanism as the result of the mutually constitutive intersection between particular aspirational values and a specific perceptual ability. Young professionals in Nairobi are not cosmopolitans because of a cultural orientation to the West induced by the transnational space the city of Nairobi is, but because they embody particular reconfigurations of gender, sexuality and culture characteristic of (post)colonial Kenya. Being the products of particular (post)colonial transformations, they both perceive the world different compared to other Kenyans and as a result aspire partly different goals. Their cosmopolitan ethos is thus the result of their specific social position and it demonstrates a process of self-conscious interweaving of global and local perspectives. Cosmopolitanism as such is dialectical and transformative.

I hope to show this process by looking at the way they unconsciously course the city on an evening out, in other words, how they practice the city of Nairobi's nightlife scene. I will follow young professionals' nightly trajectories searching for the 'hottest' place through Nairobi. Their choices and experiences reflect webs of knowing and being in the world that they call "being modern the African way". Sexuality plays a salient role herein. Campbell (1987) has argued how the spirit of modern consumerism is linked to an eagerness for new experiences, a hedonistic orientation and infinite desires. The power of consumerism is that it works via the registers of pleasure and intimacy and in a particular way places love and sexuality at the centre of consumer desires. The connections between consumer capitalism, contemporary lifestyles and self-expression are of significance for understanding the lives of young professionals. They are *avant garde* and sexuality is the mode to experience and express differentness, while the nightlife scene is the arena to meet and enjoy, hence be.

> Typically, on Friday afternoons there is a hectic emailing, sms messaging, and phoning to announce where one goes, while simultaneously carefully sounding out where others might go in case the crowd is disappointing where one ended up. Making an appointment on an evening basically means fixing a time and finding out at the moment where the rest is.
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> Martha calls: "Hey, what are you and Vic [my partner] up to? In for a drink?"We agree to meet at nine, as she first wants to go home and change dress. We will call and link up.

Sophistication: the hip and ambitious in Nairobi

> Martha (aged 24 in 2001) was a tall, composed and good-looking woman. She was living on her own in a tiny apartment in lower middle class South B. In the year we met, she was working as an accountant for an international tourist company to save money to continue her studies. She managed to secure a scholarship for one year and left for a pilot school in Sidney, Australia, later that year. She was very passionate about becoming a pilot; it had always been a dream. She anticipated that flying would give her an immense sense of freedom and she dreamt of working for Doctors without Borders in Kenya. Her departure for Sidney was a dream come true. She had never had a 'committed' relationship and would joke about whether she would ever have one because she was not 'an easy lady'.
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> Both her parents came from the Meru ethnic group. Among some of the Meru, it is customary to circumcize women and several of Martha's cousins are circumcised, as well as her mother and aunts. Her father decided not to circumcize her sisters and her, which made them stand out among their relatives. 'My dad refused to have us circumcised because he was an intelligent and educated man, you know, exposed to the world, and he refused to agree with his sisters and mother to have us circumcised. We stood out'. According to Martha, the fact that they stood out, that some cousins regarded them as 'inferior', made her sisters and her look out for role models other than their own aunts. It also made them 'independent of

mind and in our walk in life'. Her mother has always encouraged them to do well in school and Martha and her sisters have become successful professionals.

Martha was eager to make something of her life. For her, 'African womanhood' was an important point of reference in our discussions. Her sense of self was grounded in her confidence of womanhood as being independent, critical and persevering. In her late teens, she used to be more of a 'tomboy' and she avoided attention from men by wearing baggy clothes and being a little rough in her manners. She used to associate femininity with being dependent on men's appreciation: 'African women learn to find confidence in being someone's wife, mother or sisters [hissing between her teeth]. With due respect to my mother, my sister and me cannot live like that. It's not always easy, but we have to search for new ways [of] being woman'. Since her job at the tourist company, she got to appreciate herself in a new light: 'It was as if an undiscovered part of myself was explored. I was valued for my work and it made me a proud woman. I started to dress up and I enjoyed it. I had learned to hide my body and now I learned to be proud of it. I am a beautiful woman and I should enjoy that!'

As Martha stated, she got to believe that 'if you are normal, you are sexually active' and it was 'adventure' that 'drove her' to have sex. Through having sex, she got to 'appreciate her body' in an ultimately positive sense. This appreciation of her female physique made her an even 'stronger' woman because she discovered aspects of her womanhood she had not known before. She also learned to appreciate herself as a professional, which positively reframed her gendered sense of self. As such, she began to approach sexual desire as a subset of her sense of self. According to her, through time, she distinguished between 'real intimate sex which involves my emotions, body and soul' and 'convenient [lustful] sex'. This positive approach to sex did not mean she approved of any kind of sexual relationship though, as she stood for a certain moral standard.

A characteristic pattern in these young people's background is that their grandfathers were among the first migrant labourers to Nairobi or to settler farms, while their grandmothers stayed behind at rural homesteads. Male labour migration considerably affected marriages, sexual patterns, family life and community participation. This grandparent generation was eager to educate at least a few of their children, and many sent children to mission schools in rural areas. These mission school-educated children, the parents of the young professionals in this study, were among the first group of Kenyans to receive formal education, which allowed them to work in the administration of the newly independent nation-state. Many of them migrated to Nairobi to work. Within this parent generation, the pattern of the nuclear family was introduced as they became more and more involved in life in the city while their bond with their rural "homes" weakened. For the children of this second generation, the young professionals, bonds with rural homes became even weaker. Their parents' efforts to incorporate them into activities at "home" diminished as the focus on city life grew. Urbanization, education and professionalization marked these families' lives.

In short, with every generation, the practical and symbolical relations between women and men started shifting, hence resulting in shifting constructions of gender, and, eventually, in new self-perceptions or different ways of being and knowing. Traditionally, marriage was a social institution to maintain relations of reciprocity and obligation between ethnic groups in Kenya. But changes in the criteria and process of partner selection—in the past as well as nowadays—reflect the transformations that have been taking place in the social organization of African societies for generations. The young professionals in this study were therefore the products of particularly favourable circumstances that were only applicable to a small emerging middle class in postcolonial Kenya. As a result, they represent postcolonial transformations (Kanogo 2005; Mutongi 2007; Robertson 1997; Thomas 2003; White 1990), and in their ensuing lifestyles, constructions of gender, sexuality and culture continue to shift, engendering different modes of being. As such, they can be seen as being in the vanguard in terms of reconfigurations of gender, sexuality and culture.

> Tom had just graduated from university with a first degree in Law and was working at a local nongovernmental organization. He grew up in a comfortable middle-class family. Due to the mental illness of his father, the family income decreased drastically and he "learned to manage something by working hard". Tom had become very cynical about relationships with women, he 'did not believe in it anymore'. I nevertheless perceived that he was searching for a 'love relationship' because he would endlessly analyse his broken affairs. For the ten months we worked together I saw him 'very much in love' or 'happy' with a woman, as well as 'frustrated' and 'disappointed' before breaking up with someone. He 'needed' sex and he explained that as men have a higher testosterone level compared to women, they therefore naturally have more sex: 'A man cannot deny his sexual urges'. However, he grew more and more dissatisfied with casual sexual encounters. Once, on a Sunday morning, he came distressed to our house. He looked haggard and was in a bad mood. Finally he started to talk. He had taken a girl to his house and when he woke up in the morning he was so disappointed with himself, even disgusted. He had not liked her very much and still he took her home. It had become a habit of his to look for a woman on lonely evenings and it annoyed him. He felt 'ashamed' of not being able to control his sexual urge; it reflected a 'weak' character. Overall, however, he took pride in sexually satisfying a woman because he made many efforts to 'learn about women's bodies and their orgasms'. He measured the quality of a sexual encounter by his ability to sexually satisfy the woman in question. If a woman would get up within one minute after the climax to 'do her hair or make a cup of tea, I know she either faked [an orgasm] or I didn't manage to find the right spot'. He liked to satisfy women orally, especially so because for certain women oral sex is somewhat a taboo. 'I love to see a woman grappling a cushion or the sheet because they are so so hot, trying not to scream out loud'. Having oral sex with a woman meant being unconventional to Tom, as it is generally perceived to be filthy.[i] He considered being a 'good lover' as an asset of a contemporary man: 'As a modern man you have to know how to please a woman, you cannot be focussed on your pleasure only, like our fathers did… polygamy…'.

The label 'young professionals' applies to a relatively small social group of young adults that is not part of the larger impoverished population or the smaller political-economic elite. These young adults come from backgrounds ranging from lower to upper middle class, though these differences tend to be levelled once they enter their professional fields.3 Their parents occupy typical lower middle class positions such as teachers, lower ranking managers, or civil servants, while they themselves mainly seek careers in the private sector. These young professionals are born in Nairobi, unlike their parents who migrated to Nairobi later in life after independence in 1963. As such, this group is not the first generation to be born and raised in the city, but its scale is fairly recent. What is most remarkable is that a significant number of these young professionals do not speak a local language, since their parents spoke to them in English or in Kiswahili (the lingua franca of East Africa) from childhood onwards. Among themselves they speak English, Kiswahili and Sheng—the slang of their youth subculture, made up of different ethnic languages, Kiswahili and English.4 They actively date people from different ethnic groups. The basis of their social life is trans-ethnic, and so are their neighbourhoods, churches and their professional lives. However, within their families, they are less vocal about their trans-ethnic attitudes since the older generations tend to be more mono-ethnically oriented.

Depending on factors such as the availability of scholarships to pursue an education, certain individuals or families have been able to improve their socio-economic status. Even within the families of young professionals there are large disparities in career development, creating structures of obligation. For example, Martha's parents managed to get their children to university to attain a first degree, and from there on the sisters managed to make a career, while the brothers did not manage to do so. Martha was able to attend a pilot school in Australia through acquiring a scholarship, while her younger brother was trying to make ends meet by means of a small trade. Her sister was working at an international bank as a junior manager and had married a lecturer at a university. Her elder brother relocated to Meru to work on their family farm because for three years he did not manage to find a job with his first degree in sociology. Many young professionals have similar differences in their family and when they are able to, they pay for their sisters and brothers to pursue further education as well. As a group they often have more in common regarding socio-economic characteristics than compared with their families.

The distinctive aspect of this group of people is that they seek careers in the private sectors where they are able to work their way up. They generally have

[3] The elite in Kenya are people with family capital, the political-economical ruling elite of Kenya, who do not have to work themselves up via education and jobs as these young professionals need to.
[4] *Sheng* has not replaced local languages. Instead, it is a 'fusing of tongues' that is testament to postcolonial Kenya: '…[it] attests to the multiple and fluid identities that are increasingly defining postcolonial, particularly urban, Kenya' (Nyairo & Ogude 2005: 239).

some kind of higher education, whether it is a university degree or a college certificate, as almost all parents invested significantly to provide their children with education. Because of the limited means of the parents and relatives, they go to national public schools, rather than to private schools. There is a strong incentive to work hard in secondary schools because entrance into a university is dependent on the results of the secondary school exams. University loans are accessible to all candidates selected for university entrance, while every year the brightest candidates from Kenya receive scholarships provided by different non-governmental organisations or churches. For those who are not able to enter university, various colleges and private institutions are available to pursue a qualification. Michael (aged 27 in 2001), for example, could only afford a few courses in web design at a private college during the ICT boom in the late 1990s. Since then he has worked in several ICT companies and developed a career by pursuing further courses and 'working hard to prove what you are worth', as he put it. Education continues to play a significant role in the lives of both women and men even when they are employed, as 27 out of the 49 people in this study were pursuing a degree or course after working hours in 2001.

These young professionals are generally financially independent because of their more or less stable jobs. However, this stability is relative. As they do not generally come from backgrounds with wider networks based on patronage, they are more dependent on the irregularities of the employment market. Especially the ICT sector has proven to be unreliable. Whereas Njeri (aged 26 in 2001) has made an amazing career out of nothing within the ICT sector, for others it meant being employed for short term contracts only, with intervals of months of unemployment. Like other Kenyans, young professionals are also vulnerable to the irregularities of employers, as there are hardly any regulations and laws securing the position of employees. In 2001, the majority of people I met were looking out for better jobs. The main reason was that they felt they were being underpaid; this was followed by the problem of working below their qualifications and objectionable working conditions such as unpaid overtime. Young professionals are generally very mobile with regard to jobs. Some changed jobs up to five times in 2001 because of only being able to acquire short term contracts or because of the continuous search for a better position. Some are very good in networking and by 'hopping' they hope to find the right job; these people are not mobile because they are forced to be, like some others. Tom (aged 26) for example, left a relatively well paid job for a short but very well paid contract with UNICEF and he made sure he was employed again soon afterwards. On the other hand others like Dawn (aged 27 in 2001) and Robart (aged 23 in 2001) could not secure a stable job as accountants in the tourism sector and feared for their financial security.

> In *Kengeles* we start the nite with toasting Tusker and before I can chat with Tom's colleagues I am approached by a very noisy Njeri who ignores

> the rest of my table mates with "ah gal, have missed you soooooo much, good to see you here!" and before I know I am ushered to the next table where her friends are seated and I am introduced. She whispers into my ear "I told you about this one hot guy no? Well, what do you think?" and she looks at me expectantly, "isn't he awesome?". I get another Tusker, we chat a little and after a while I return to my old table, to find that Tom's colleagues are gone and that Tom has joined a group of former colleagues whom I also know. Peter greets me with "hey prof, still studying the amorous lives of the natives?"—the way he always does, the amusement of the others. The group is high spirited, almost noisy. Tom will be content with this crowd, I think. It's almost nine o'clock by now and some of us start talking about food.

These young adults distinguish themselves by way of fashionable dress, liberal attitudes and non-conventional relationships. Women typically dress in skirt suits or trousers suits when at work, which is more formal compared to the trendy, sexy or chic outfits they wear after work and during weekends. Women's hair styling is a major way to distinguish them as fashionable. Daring women keep their hair very short or braid their hair in lines, which is associated with children or old-fashioned simple hair styling. Other hair styles range from using fake hair, 'extensions', to making long braids or having longer locks of hair. People are very consciously maintaining a well-kept image not only in relation to dress but also with regard to manicured hands (and feet) and maintaining a good figure. A significant majority work out in the gym to keep in good physical shape, or swim in one of the many pools of the international hotels. Exercising, however, depends on their incomes and is therefore indicative as to how far they have been able to develop their careers. Besides working on their physiques, men are also fashion conscious. They invariably wear suits at work, while outside the office they take care to wear fashionable shirts, trousers, shoes and gadgets such as mobile phones. The best present I could give a man was eau de cologne. These young adults have unlimited access to the Internet via their work and hence communicate with friends and relatives abroad, while staying in tune with global trends by surfing the Internet, reading magazines, listening to music and watching films. Their role models are black American actors such as Denzel Washington, TV personalities such as Oprah Winfrey, or the icon Nelson Mandela. Their liking for music ranges from Congolese Lingala, American R&B, local hip hop, gospel, to the South African musician Brenda Fassie. It is, in short, a bustling world of sophistication and lifestyle options with its own signifiers and representations of a present day identity.

The fact that they work in the private sector, which is not tainted with the aura of parochialism like the government sector, contributes to their sense of being explorers of a fashionable way of living. Often they work with foreigners from different continents. They perceive themselves as part of a global subculture consisting of fashionable dress, the latest music and other crazes put forward by the transnational media such as magazines, TV, films and the Internet. Because of their financial means, they are a small minority who are able to participate in this

subculture, and hence they perceive themselves as trendsetters in Nairobi. They are ambitious to reach certain goals with regard to their careers as well as their personal lives, and they approach life with the arrogance of successful youth. Fashionable dressing, going out and progressive attitudes are important markers of their contemporary personality; as "sophisticated" or "modern". Models are generally admired as the embodiment of the latest vogue and illustrations of "sophistication", but they are not necessarily seen as examples to be followed. Instead, the role models of young professionals are the small elite of very successful professionals like young lawyers, directors, or TV personalities who appear regularly in the print media as success stories. Young professionals who are starting out, look up to these ones and also consider themselves as belonging to the same group of explorers. According to Michael (aged 27): 'I am only a small worm, now, but what we are, what we represent, is that the sky is the limit!' To 'have a life' is a credo for many people.

> It takes another 20 minutes before we decide where to go —to have fastfood or not—, and finally we leave for a "garden restaurant", an open-air place very unlike *Kengeles* and where Nairobians of all walks of life meet. We have *nyama choma* [roasted goat meat] and *ugali* [maize dish], eat with our hands, listen to Lingala music, and take turns by telling boisterous jokes. Meanwhile I receive urgent messages of Joyce "Hey, where are u?? Come and save me from a quiet nite!!" I don't feel like driving all the way to the neighbourhood South B, moreover, I'd rather stay and follow this group tonight and I must disappointment her. She will ignore me for two weeks or so. Tom is very busy; he retreats from the group every now and then, making fanatic phone calls. After a while he comes up to me and asks for my phone because his credits are finished: "Please, please, PLEASE help me. You know why… it's this girl, you know I have been chasing her". After the phone call Tom starts asking where we proceed to and tries to convince the group to go to *Psych*, a nightclub. Others are not very keen and suggest going to *Kluphouse*, another nightclub. We pay and walk to the cars and the debate where the best music is being played at the moment hasn't settled yet. The discussion centres on the qualities of the DJ's, the "funky" or "slow" ambiance of *Psyche* versus *Kluphouse* and the group decides to split. I join Tom to *Psych*, *Kluphouse* is too mediocre for him; "teenagers also get there these days", and he believes he can impress his date better with a visit to *Psych*, which has an aura of kinkiness. First we need to pick up Maureen, Tom's date, from a bar where she is having a drink with friends. Nyambura and Tina join us in the car, two women who "follow the fun". As there has been no time to change office clothes, they take their tops from their bags ("a woman needs to be prepared") and change and do their make-up in the car. Tom is seated at the passenger seat and is not allowed to look behind but threatens to do so. We get into higher and higher spheres.

"Sophistication" is young professionals' buzzword, and they are careful to display a carefully tended wordly yet Tusker-flavoured style: Well, yes, of course we are sophisticated, we *know* how to dress, to behave, to… to… put me in Bangkok and I will manage, invite me to Amsterdam and I will blend", Tom once told me.

I interpret young professionals' lifestyles not merely as expression, but as realising and maintaining subjective realities. I use lifestyle, inspired by Ferguson's 'cultural style', as a descriptive notion to elaborate on their dress, bodily disposition, consumption patterns—style as self-presentation—as well as an analytic term to point to their lives as signifying practice (1999).5 Ferguson, criticising essentialist ideas of unchanging rural 'Africans' unable to adapt to urban situations, uses the term 'cultural style' to account for the urban culture of the Zambian Copperbelt. Instead of seeing style as a 'secondary manifestation or a prior identity which style then expresses', he uses style as 'a signifying practice' that marks 'socially significant positions and allegiances'. '[I]t is not simply a matter of choosing a style to fit the occasion, for the availability of such choices depends on internalised capabilities of performative competence and ease that must be achieved, not adopted' (1999: 96). He criticises the idea that culture is the ideational content of expressive behaviour, and advocates moving away from the quest to locate underlying 'real' identities and orientations. This approach helps us to understand young professionals' lives in various ways. First, cultivating a viable style requires investment: firstly in the figurative sense of investment—in appreciating the social changes one embodies; and secondly in the literal sense—in manners, speech, social contacts and so forth. More importantly, the notion of cultural style 'breaks with the old dualist concern with traditional and modern orientation' by making it possible to talk about cultural difference without implying that 'modern' is 'western'. Perceiving young professionals' lifestyles as signifying practice implies understanding their local and cosmopolitan experiences and

[5] Young professionals are proud to be icons of a global subculture that focuses on fashion, music and dating, while at the same time they are wary about it. Their desire to act out a present day lifestyle often coincides with certain western modes, such as designer labels or music. But because in their understanding these products originate from a 'western' source, they feel compelled to reject them. Burke analyses a similar deep ambivalence towards consumerism in Zimbabwe (Burke 1996: Miller 1992). In both Zimbabwe and Nairobi, certain consumer items are closely associated with privilege and come to represent social mobility. However, there are also strong negative associations with 'western' style consumption patterns because of their 'non-African' character, engendering anxieties about the 'erosion of tradition' which exist alongside the desire for the 'modern'. Young professionals react defensively to accusations of 'westernisation' directed against themselves. But these accusations also get to the heart of the matter they are struggling with: which is that they embody a range of new possibilities but that the cost of this privilege is cultural change. The phrase 'westernisation' needs closer attention though. It implies that culture is a stationary set of practices and ideas and it conceals that cultures in Kenya have a long history of hybrid change. The expression, therefore, points at a deep ambivalence towards capitalism, in terms of the opportunities and of the ruptures it generates. Their lives are set against the background of fierce debates about the importance of cultural heritage, whereby matters of sexuality become projected upon the sense of belonging in a fast changing world. Young professionals are often the target of moral guardians decrying the "loss of cultural roots" and their (hedonistic) lifestyles serve as self-evident substantiation. They are accused for being "westernised". According to Ferguson (1999: 214), it is "dangerous" to be "fashionable" in Africa because of the disrespect that this implies for non-fashionable modes of being.

manifestations as coeval social phenomena (cf. Fabian 1983). Their lives go beyond dualist perceptions of 'modern' and 'traditional'.[6]

Young professionals, especially the women, are engaged in a process of 'aesthetisation' that is constitutive of de-traditionalisation of gender and its transformations regarding conventional gender and sexuality constructions (Adkins 2002). Sex and sophistication are two sides of the same coin.

Sex: pleasure and self-realisation

> Maureen is somewhat intimidated by the fact that Tom is picking her up with a load of women, but joins us nevertheless, leaving her friends behind. We get to *Psych* and Tina is unstoppable; the moment she sees the dance floor she is gone. I watch her dancing and chatting with different people, she attracts much attention. She is obviously keeping away men who show an interest in her. When I ask her why she does that she replies that "am just in the mood for dancing, no sex tonight". Tom, meanwhile, is busy charming Maureen, he has no time for us anymore. In the meantime, the group that left us at the restaurant has also come to Psych as "Kluphouse was slow tonight" —"I told you so", sneered Tom. We are with a small crowd now, others join us, and we take over the dance floor with Tina as our dancing queen. People drink, some go out to smoke a joint, and as the evening progresses women and men become more intimate; kissing, dancing erotically, slowly couples are being formed. Except for Tina and me. My own partner has sms-ed me about my whereabouts and is coursing the city to Psych too with other friends.

The majority of young professionals is unmarried, preferring to delay marriage until they are around thirty. Delaying marriage and reproduction enables women and men to focus on their careers, to save in order to start their married lives in middle-class style, and/or postpone the responsibilities that come with married life. Such delays prolong dating and the maintenance of casual relationships. Dating, in fact, is an important element in their lives and they actively date people of different ethnic groups and nationalities. Though unmarried, they are often financially independent from their parents due to their relatively stable and lucrative jobs. This independence enables them to live on their own, and enjoy consumer lifestyles. Especially for women this independence grants them more leeway from normative expectations. Familial relations are not unimportant but, generally, young professionals make their own decisions and then try to convince their parents to respect those choices, rather than involving them directly in the decision-making process.

[6] The fact that they nonetheless continue to articulate these dualist notions, highlights how, in discourse, they need these binary oppositions because any discussion about modernity is based on them.

In contrast to their parents' marriage, both female and male young professionals emphasized how they desired more egalitarian and companionate relationships. For example, Dorcas (aged 30 in 2001) explained that "We all have to accept that my generation of women is not like our mothers' generation." She had just ended a difficult relationship with a boyfriend who had urged her to accept domestic subservience by invoking her obligation to "African womanhood." Her ex-boyfriend's behaviour reminded her of her father's domineering presence and her mother's subdued manner. His insistence that sex was "her marital duty" especially infuriated her: it not only signified the "lousy lover" he was as he did not know "how to make love to a woman," it also showed his "backward" position as a man. Men expressed similar desires to craft relationships differently than their parents. I met Maurice (then aged 27) at a moment when he had just been approached by a woman who offered to be his second girlfriend, outside of his committed relationship. Some of his male friends encouraged him to take this opportunity. He, however, explained he could not start an affair with another woman because of his love for his girlfriend, Nyambura:

> We, the men of these days, have to make choices. We cannot live any more like our fathers; I believe it's not right to be polygamous. I am a modern man. I love Nyambura and I respect her, our sex life is like… a mystical thing, not just release… the way you make love expresses… makes me feel man of course, it makes you feel alive, but also… is crucial to what kind of man you are.

Professional women's and men's lives testify to the fact that societal transformations result in the remodelling of gender roles. As a result, ssexuality is crucial in the development of contemporary notions of selfhood among young adults such as described here.

The various stages that female young professionals go through in their sexual relationships with men, show that among young professionals there are parallels between processes of contemporary identity formation, developing a sense of self as a 'modern' woman, and appropriating sexuality as central to self-expression. These women are searching for alternative ways of relating to men through a reconstruction of gender roles; the biographies in my study depict a continuum in the women's quest for a new sexual morality as the premise for engendering a new society. It is remarkable how fast women incorporate ideas about sexuality and sexual practices as soon as there is some space to do so. In general, women enjoy their lives to the full and approach life in general with the arrogance of youth. 'Having fun' is the foremost goal while they are young enough not to be bothered about social responsibilities. They enjoy being 'sexy', flirting, challenging men with a self-confident attitude and having, or trying to have, a satisfying sex life. They exploit the potentialities of sexual allure as much as they

can. In short, the notion of sexuality as self-expression for women is being sounded out in Nairobi. They acknowledge sexual desire as natural and thereby appropriate—in the sense of making it their own—the notion of sexual pleasure as integral to their sense of self. Sexual pleasure, then, becomes a desire that is related to their status as career women, but above all to possibilities generated by being relatively independent from social control, sometimes literally; like having the possibility to have lovers over in their home.[7] Female young professionals can now occupy a space that was formerly reserved for men, notably the public space of the work floor—through their professions they can also embody characteristics previously defined as male, like executive power. Their increasing participation in the public arena is an obvious manifestation of the impact of societal transformations on gender roles.

Dominant discourses in Kenya represent female sexuality only in relation to procreation. Married motherhood is perceived as ultimate womanhood and women who are married and/or mothers achieve the status of respectability. Accordingly, female pleasure is represented as nonexistent before marriage, and as passive thereafter. As a result, any talk about women's sexual desires in dominant discourse exists only in terms of the capacity for reproduction, or else as something devouring and lethal as in the case of 'prostitutes'. Women's sexual reputations are framed around these notions, as women take care not to appear sexually assertive, which translates into a typically aloof attitude that is articulated as playing hard to get. However, a discourse on sexual intimacy is growing, where sex is described as an embodied sensation (Spronk 2011). Women take up this discourse, acknowledging female sexual desire independent of procreation and hence making sexual desire intrinsic to femininity. Women's narrative of self-awakening points at the process how 'knowledge of the self [is] gained through repeated reflection on the internality of desire' (Lorway 2008: 27). Notions like 'sexual passion', 'feeling sexy', 'having sex with body and soul' or 'making love', employed by the women as well as the media, reflect this process.

[7] However, they build on this aspect of femininity in the context of a prevailing negative discourse on women's sexual desire. As a result, in order to guard their sexual reputation, women often express ambiguity about sexuality towards men. Sex, after all, remains an ambiguous pleasure. I can say from my research that, in general, the younger the women, the more they care about their sexual reputation, and the older the women, the more assertive they are about sexual pleasure. With age, women's confidence about their sexuality grows. The older women get, the more they learn to deal with conventional expectation, i.e. to be less bothered by it. The older women get, the more openly they criticize the dominant ideology, which inevitably evokes a reaction in which independent women are labelled as being 'not real women'.[7] Their resulting lifestyles become targets for efforts by society at large, to try and regain social control. Their independence, therefore, is situational; depending on the relative space per situation. They express themselves as sexual subjects within a framework of remaining virtuous: resulting in an aloof attitude or 'play hard to get' when engaging with a potential partner. They adopt a strategic and flexibly deferential attitude that reflects conformity to the norm to compensate or balance their lifestyles, which are associated with nonconformity. Such behaviour cannot be explained as being only strategic however; certain conformities have also become part of their personal make-up.

The biographies of women are structured by a popular story of 'falling in love'. In this discourse sex is linked to love in the construction of sexuality. Women define love mostly as intimacy; companionship, mutual trust and sexual passion. In such a construction of sexuality, women have to develop a personal sexual narrative reflecting their preferences and justifications in relation to sexual practices and ideas. In the absence of a positive discourse on women's sexual desires, women appropriate notions of sexual desire and pleasure by actively invoking the discourse on love. The way they define intimacy as a bodily experience contributes to the way sexual desire becomes a matter of the self, of the sexual subject. Sexual pleasure, then, becomes a positive self-identifier for a contemporary independent woman. Young professional women appropriate sexual pleasure as indexical to their contemporary gendered sense of self. Sex, then, becomes central to identity and sexual intimacy also becomes fundamental to self-expression in relation to others, in this case men. For women it appears to be crucial that they feel appreciated and/or sexually attractive and that they feel close to somebody whom they appreciate. Men are therefore integral to this process.

Men occupy an ambiguous position in women's lives as lovers, friends and future husbands, as well as figures of authority and social control. As a group, young professional men are responsive to women's quest for sounding out new ways of relating. They also embody social changes and particular desires as a result of their particular position in Kenyan society. Embodying change, they challenge dominant notions of masculinity and in doing so, develop new models of how to be 'men'. They also desire a change in gender relationships because, as they see it, they cannot live like their fathers did. However, what it means to be a man in Nairobi today is not so easily definable. Dominant notions of masculinity are the result of the gender order, which has its roots in the patriarchal ideology that ascribed men a public and dominant role and which defined sex as constitutive to masculinity. However, since (early) colonialism, the material base of patriarchal ideologies is being disrupted and resulting in changing gender patterns (Silberschmidt 2001), while its discourse has not followed suit. In short, gender roles have changed as men are not the only providers, and as a result gender definitions are shifting as women and men aspire more egalitarian relationships. Many men experience personal conflict in this regard, as they still partly embody the patriarchal ideology, while being critical of it at the same time.

The majority of young professional men have managed to develop a masculine sense of self in a context of changing gender constructions. Most of them have managed to withstand pressures which associate manhood with dominance over women, or sexual prowess with having multiple sexual partners, or reproducing double standards. They do this mainly by drawing on the same patriarchal discourses emphasising a man's responsibility; as such, their masculine

sense of self is rooted in notions of accountability and inducing respect by working hard and developing a career. One area that is available for reasserting masculinity in both the conventional manner and in a new fashion is sex. The power of sex remains indisputable, and a contemporary man is expected to be a skilful sex partner. Further, constructions of being a proper lover imply that men's sexualities become related to sex as a mutual endeavour, whereas sex used to be spoken about as a 'marital duty' that men 'take on'. In the search for a new sexuality, women and men meet another to have a fulfilling sex life.

All these men defined mutual sexual pleasure as constitutive to their relationships with women, but they reacted in two ways to these transformations. One group of men has come to define sexual pleasure as central to intimacy, to a relationship based on emotional involvement and support. Men like Maurice were focussed on intimacy, mutual trust and companionship in their sexual lives. As such, sexual intimacy becomes a matter of themselves as sexual subjects in a symbolic interaction with another subject. Framed by a narrative of love, they seek intimacy as a means to self-realization and they justify their behaviour by defining themselves as being contemporary men in contrast to 'traditional' men. A second group has come to define sexual pleasure as an extension of the hegemonic understanding of potent male sexuality. Sexual prowess then becomes redefined as the ability to satisfy women sexually. It reflects positively on their abilities as men if they can be a 'good lover'. As such, the woman's sexual pleasure is also central to intimacy, though for these men it does not necessarily imply emotional involvement, and companionship. Nevertheless, all men recounted how intimacy was crucial for maintaining a 'committed' relationship. However, many men explained how they could not yet engage in such a relationship because of other demands placed on them, mainly the pressure to develop a career and acquire wealth (see also Smith 2007).

In popular definitions of sexuality, sex is linked to love instead of to reproduction, ethnic compatibility or marriage. What is most notable is that women, in contrast to conventional discourse, also recognize sex as natural, as an embodied element of growing into adulthood. They thus recognize sexual desire as crucial to their identity as women, instead of understanding sexual desire in relation to (married) motherhood. For men, sexual desire has always been understood as self-evident and "natural" in conventional discourse; sex is normatively understood as individual achievement. But there is now more to sex for men because their sexual potential is also connected to their partner's sexual pleasure. In contrast to the popular idea that "sex is a marital duty," which is interpreted among many young female professionals as enforcing the sexual subordination of women, the "modern" duty is the fulfilment of a mutual orgasm. (Spronk 2009a). Personal and mutual sexual happiness are represented as progressive qualities, as well as a symbol for a successful relationship.

In short, young professionals' sexual biographies show how modes of being and knowing are engendered. Technologies of the self—such as fashion, social etiquette, progressive attitudes or sexual knowledge—become a key event of self-identification. As Campbell (1987) has shown, capitalism operates predominantly through the modes of new experiences, a hedonistic orientation and infinite desires, all which are exemplified in Nairobi's nightlife and the dating practices of young professionals. Eroticism plays a generative role in people's intimate and public lives; it is constitutive to Nairobian aesthetics of the hip and ambitious.

Space: the young and the restless

> Psych is indeed the hot place of town, literally. It's packed and we need to go outdoors every now and then to get a bit of fresh air. At Two o'clock Tina and I decide to move on to *the Carnivore*, a more spacious and upmarket club nearby, it's *Soul Nite* and we want to dance some more. We announce that the car is going. Some decide to join us, a small group decides to go to *Cactus*, a new bar, to sound out how it's like. I hesitate, I would also like to try *Cactus*, but decide not to. Tom asks me whether I can drop him and his date at his house first but I refuse, it's on the other side of town. It's very busy in *the Carnivore* too. It's clear that the salaries have been paid; the time of the month that people go out more. *Carnivore* is the place to watch and be seen; "sophisticated to the top" says Tina and she exchanges her kinky mode to chic, and as if she had not been dancing frantically she approaches the bar and looks at an obviously wealthy man, who offers her a drink. Then she turns and tells him that she is with friends and we all get drinks. Tina and my partner join the dance floor and the chic queen attracts again a lot of attention. *Carnivore* is a place visited by Westerners and Tina receives much attention from while men. I don't see Tom anymore.

Nairobi is what one can call a 'worlding' city (Simone 2001; see also Simone 2005), reflecting the practice of the global homogenisation of urban space in Africa. In African Urban Studies, many scholars focus mainly on the poor, while this study explores the relatively wealthy urbanites. Nairobi is the regional headquarters of international banks, non-governmental organisations and transnational corporations and a major site for accounting, legal and informational services. The cityscape is dominated by office developments, shopping malls and hotels. White collar employment is expanding, as are residential areas for the middle class and wealthy elite. These developments are taking place alongside the emergence of the media and entertainment centres. At the same time, these formal and modern manifestations coexist with the informal ways of living and working that are characteristic of the lower classes of the Nairobi populace. According to Simone, more and more Africans living in cities are left without coherent traditional local and national structures because of their material deconstruction. As a result, a

certain 'worlding' has been enforced on them so that they see themselves operating as urban citizens who seek out the global world in their local context.

In effect, a young professional subculture has developed that displays a vibrant cosmopolitan consumer culture. Their financial ability plays a major role in their ability to spend on clothing and recreation including going out to the dozens of bars, clubs and restaurants that dot the urban nightscape. Although not all young professionals go out on a weekly basis, a majority do, and the Nairobi nightlife is mainly determined by the shifting popularity of music and places that are considered most hip. Friday and Saturday are 'the nites' to go out dancing and people meet up in small groups and travel to different places on a single night, depending where the 'fun' is. An enjoyable evening out can include nyama choma and ugali (roasted meat and pounded maize meal) in an open air residential restaurant, to be followed by dancing in one of the many stylish clubs such as Carnivore or Klup House, while others like to dine at one of the restaurants and continue to a hip bar or watch a late night movie at the cinema. Often, people meet after office hours to have a drink at places such as Kengeles, which is in fact only visited by young professionals, or have a snack at Steers, a trendy fast food restaurant. As a group they have created a 'scene' in clubs, bars or sports centres where they meet their peers.

Leisure, intrinsically related to contemporary consumer societies, is crucial to the lifestyles of young professionals. It provides the niche in contemporary Kenyan society to 'have a life' based on the commercialisation of amusement. It is also the realm where young adults create a new sexual morality. According to Parker (1991), the desire for sexual experience is based on what he calls an 'ideology of the erotic'. To paraphrase Parker, this system of erotic meanings examines the diverse possibilities for sexual pleasure that other dominant ways of conceptualising sexual life have largely ignored or restricted. This means that if in dominant discourses sex is confined to marriage in Nairobi, the possibilities outside marriage—how, when, with whom and how often to have sex—designate a domain of sexual pleasure. As the influence of the family, religious institutions, and the state, that have functioned as the chief regulators of sexual life weaken, new territory has been opened up for sexual exploration and experimentation in the nightlife. The newly emerging sexual culture among young professionals celebrates this new territory to the full. This subculture is (so to speak) pregnant with eroticism, an eroticism that is intrinsic to the way amusement is being globally construed by way of dress, music and dating in the media. Biaya explains the pull of this leisure by its global character: 'Given the legitimacy with which eroticism is imbued by the centrality of leisure to capital, the circulation of Western eroticism [representations of love and sexuality in the media, RS] has brought a compelling authority to bear on the practices [of] modern African urban subjects…' (Biaya 2000: 710).

Eroticism is at the heart of contemporary global lifestyles, linking sexual pleasure and entertainment. This eroticism thrives within the realm of the imaginary, which is played upon in the nightlife scene. 'Going out' entails a promise of 'letting go' by dancing, flirting, meeting people and generally 'having fun', which is frowned upon by society at large. The erotic framework of nightlife is focused on the possibility of transgression—of transgressing norms, of inviting a certain kind of risk of being detected as subversive. As Parker (1991) has highlighted, the notion of transgression is central to the constitution of desire, excitement and ultimately sexual pleasure. To them, sexuality reflects a space to re-enact their femininity and masculinity by claiming entitlement to sexual pleasure through the practice of flirting, dating, dancing, drinking.

Conclusion

> It's three in the morning now and most of us need to be at the office by nine, as Saturday morning is an office day for most companies in Nairobi. I am always amazed how they manage going out on Fridays and being in the office next day. It's "a slow office day", they tell me, they dress in casual clothing and basically do the work that has been left of the week. I believe it's the energising shot of the *nites* that make them going. I "flash" [phone and when picked up put it down] Tom to let him know we are going. He is waiting for us at the car. We split up in groups divided over the different cars and leave. Tom obviously hasn't managed to convince Maureen of joining him home, and he proposes to have a last drink at some small bar on the way, but nobody reacts. I drop everybody at their homes and go home as well. In the morning I receive a sms from Njeri; "got him. He is gooood in bed. Lots to tell".

Young professionals in Nairobi picture themselves as Kenyans with a cosmopolitan attitude, calling themselves Africans. Africanness to them means testifying to an African or black commonality that they are proud of; it is about a kind of sociality by which they claim entitlement to Kenyanness as part of a larger African universe, dressing in elaborate west African dress or enjoying *nyama choma* (roasted meat) and a Tusker (local beer brand) before going out. Nicknaming, greeting practices, the rich popular culture, food preferences, flirting practices, and sexual pleasure area identity badges that signify the particular Nairobian culture that is their life-world. As the historical reconfigurations of gender and sexuality coalesce in a particular way in the lifestyles of the young Nairobi professionals, it can be said that they embody emergent new subjectivities. Sexuality has become central for young professionals as part of their self-expression as modern subjects, but at the same time conventional social actors also place sexuality centrally by connecting "proper morality" with cultural heritage and Africanness.

Thus Nairobi is a site reflecting the effects of a 'stylisation of consumption' (Mbembe 2004: 400). The nightlife scene is a space and an experience; it *is* a shot of whiskey. Coursing the city for the "hottest place", frantically phoning where "the crowd is", dancing, drinking, meeting and greeting and flirting, and being seen, parallels the transitory situation of the group of young professionals: neither "westernised" nor provincially local. The question is how fleeting their position is and whether they will settle down as they grow older, as many observers claim, or whether their "being modern the African way" is more permanent.

I predict the latter. The hip hop song "*Uhuki*" by the popular Hardstone, is exemplary for the experience of being young professional in Nairobi. The song is based on the lyrics of a traditional Gîkûyû folksong and on a remix of Marvin Gaye's award winning hit 'Sexual healing' (see Nyairo (2005) for an interesting analysis). The soothing and seducing tune and iconic meaning of Gaye's hit is irresistible for young professionals; the moment they heard it they would move *en masse* to the dance floor. Although almost none of them recognised the words of the folksong, the localness or Kenyanness of it was what mattered. Listening and dancing to the song was a physical experience where their being the products of social transformations coincided; hey embody new ways of being and knowing concerning gender, sexuality and culture. Their cosmopolitanism reflects the dialectic between specific perceptual ability and particular aspirational values.

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