"No Mercy, No Remorse": Personal Experience Narratives about Public Passenger Transportation in Nairobi, Kenya

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"No Mercy, No Remorse": Personal Experience Narratives about Public Passenger Transportation in Nairobi, Kenya

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Personal experience narratives about riding on Kenya's public passenger vehicles, commonly called matatu, *form part of Nairobi residents' everyday conversations. These first-person, single-episodic narratives describe experiences of verbal and physical abuse, theft, hijacking, and violence, and women use them to describe sexual harassment and rape. Personal experience narratives help Nairobi's commuters cope with traumatic events and deal with the anger and frustration associated with riding in* matatu, *and they function as an informal information system. They provide strategies for dealing with the problems and personal risks associated with* matatu, *and articulate a powerful commentary on life in a large, African metropolis.*

Introduction

When residents of Nairobi get together for good and friendly talk among family, friends, and coworkers, conversations often turn to peoples' experiences onboard public passenger vehicles (*matatu*),[1] privately owned vans and minibuses,[2] which ferry commuters throughout Kenya. *Matatu* personal experience narratives (henceforth *matatu* PEN) are a common, everyday, and pervasive element of Kenyan discourse. They recount tellers' experiences with verbal and physical abuse, theft, and hijacking; women relate stories of sexual harassment, beatings, and rape. People tell these narratives for the first time soon after the event takes place, but continue repeating the story in conversations as warranted. For example, after Peter and his wife Joyce were hijacked (see below), they narrated the story—first to the police, then to their neighbors as soon as they got home, and finally to their family when they went to the rural countryside on a weekend visit. Peter has narrated the story many times since then, usually when people

talk about their experiences on *matatu*. When he told us his story, it was a well-polished, oft-told tale; however, *matatu* PEN have no specifically assigned place in conversational structures. People usually bring them up as part of a conversation whenever they wish—when a memory is triggered, or as part of a group of stories related to *matatu*. It is common for people to compare notes on what happened to them, especially immediately after an incident, when they arrive at home or meet up with friends. The telling of one *matatu* PEN might invite the telling of several more stories related to the general topic.

Nairobi commuters tell stories as a strategy for coping with their daily transport headaches. Storytelling helps Nairobi residents deal with traumatic experiences and manage the anger and frustration that arise from riding on *matatu* and dealing with *manamba*, the young men who work on *matatu*. Each time a *matatu* PEN is told, the narrators feel "less threatened by the traumatic experience as they relive it, domesticate it, bring it under control" (Abrahams 2005:77). Storytelling restores the teller's self-esteem, and imposes order and a sense of control to the urban chaos that Nairobi can be. Furthermore, *matatu* PEN comment on daily life in Nairobi and articulate its residents' worldview. We begin this study by describing the folkloric genre of personal experience narratives, and then look into the *matatu* industry and its employees, the *manamba*. Finally, we explore the role that *matatu* PEN play in Nairobi's residents' daily lives.

In our fieldwork for our respective dissertations, we conducted more than a hundred interviews with a wide variety of people. After an interview, we would often sit and share a soda or a beer with the interviewees; at these moments, conversational flow usually led us to *matatu* narratives.. As folklorists, we realized that these performances are an important element in Kenyans' storytelling tradition. We began to listen for and to collect these narratives. The stories came from two sources. First, as part of Samper's dissertation on Sheng, a youth argotic register, young people were encouraged to share a *matatu* PEN in Sheng to record this argot's usage, much in the manner that Labov and Welletzky (1967) used personal experience narratives in their research. In this way, we collected forty-two narratives from a wide variety of Nairobi's young people (twenty women and twenty-two men), including narratives from twenty-three *manambas* (all men); however, for this study, since the PEN of *manambas* have different functions, we concentrated only on passengers' stories. Our second source was family, friends, and acquaintances we had met outside of our dissertation work.

Once we decided to pursue this study, we interviewed family, friends, and acquaintances in a more systematic way. For example, Peter and Joyce are friends from Kenyatta University, and we first heard their story during a birthday celebration as part of an exchange of *matatu* narratives. We then, on a different occasion, recorded their narrative. Sometimes one of our respondents would recommend one of their friends or a family member who had experienced an interesting or traumatic event onboard *matatu*. This is how we met, interviewed, and recorded Yayha's narrative (see

below). Beyond those interviewed directly for our dissertation research, we conducted another seventeen interviews and recording sessions specifically to collect *matatu* PEN (ten women and seven men). We invited interview candidates to a restaurant for dinner or drinks. The interview process was informal, since most were relatives, friends, and acquaintances. After an initial chat, we would bring out a tape recorder and ask the respondent to narrate his or her experience. After the performance, we asked questions, but not systematically. Because our method was informal, we do not claim any statistically reliable sampling of Nairobi's residents. Collecting narratives from intimates, however, meant that a level of trust was already established, making it easier for individuals to recount traumatic experiences; for example, Peris's story (see below). We maintained a friendly atmosphere by interviewing and recording in homes or restaurants over drinks or a meal, so that—the presence of the tape recorder notwithstanding—respondents narrated to friends, not to researchers. This method in itself could be a drawback because there are questions one can ask with the detachment of a researcher that one cannot ask as a friend or relative (of course, there are also question we could ask as friends that we could not ask as researchers). The number and homogeneity of our respondents are another drawback to our collection process. Our sample is limited, but to acquire a coherent body of data, we found that focusing on young adults and adults of the middle class (students and professionals), who are obliged to ride this form of transport every business day to school or work, was productive. We strove for diversity in sex and age, and believe that even though our sample is small, it is largely representative of residents' experiences.

We recorded sixty-one narratives, but listened to about another fifty during casual conversations. Of the recorded narratives, forty were about what we termed "Business as Usual," a category that includes stories of accidents, reckless driving, overcrowding, and confrontations with *manamba*—disputes over fare, paying twice, consequence of not having the fare, and verbal and physical abuse by the *manamba*. Another fifteen we classified as "Dealings with Other Actors" independent of the *matatu*, such as other passengers, police, and criminals; this group includes stories of sexual harassment, pickpocketing, and getting conned for the fare. The last six were abduction narratives, involving passengers not only kidnapped by hijackers, but also by *manamba* for not paying the fare (see Diana's story below). These are etic categories; our questions did not uncover an emic classification system for PEN.

The title of our paper comes from the name of one of Nairobi's public passenger vehicles. *Matatu* are painted different colors and have names, symbols, cartoons, and other images *designed*[3] on them. Their designs articulate a powerful, relevant, and timely social, political, economic, and cultural commentary (Mungai 2004). *Matatu* sport images such as the Marlboro cowboy and cigarettes, whales, American football and basketball team logos, British soccer team logos, portraits of world celebrities, and professional wrestling figures; however, since about 2002, the visual

symbols or names of *matatu* have predominantly come from African American hiphop culture, including fashion labels, hiphop groups and stars, and song titles. The pithy name of one *matatu*—clearly visible on its side, front, and back—sums up the world of the *matatu*: No Mercy, No Remorse.

Personal Experience Narratives in Folkloristics

Kristin Langellier suggests that "in everyday talk, we tell stories, or personal narratives, about our experiences—the mundane happenings of an ordinary day and extraordinary events that mark our lives" (1989:243). Similarly, Sandra Stahl defines personal experience narratives as "prose narrative account[s] of the performer's experience" (1977:268). Almost unnoticed in daily discourse, personal experience narratives are part of our quotidian, mundane, normal life. Although any experience may form the basis of a story, not all incidents we live through are worthy of becoming a story. Only "a happening which is sufficiently removed from the everyday flow of life . . . [is] used as a point of reference for later discussion" (Abrahams 2005:76).

In folkloristics, PEN are performed stories. They recount a single episode in an individual's life—as opposed to an oral history, a personal medical history, or a life story—and constitute part of a person's storytelling repertoire. Oral histories, medical histories, and life stories, though based on personal experiences, are usually elicited by a professional, such as a researcher, a medical professional, or a social worker, and they tend not to be single episodes or spontaneous elements within conversations. In other words, oral histories are not usually part of a person's storytelling repertoire; they surface only during specific circumstances, such as medical interviews. They may be narrative, but they are not necessarily "story." The distinction here is a performative one. According to Harold Scheub, a "story has to do with emotions: that is the meaning of the story, it is the essence of storytelling" (1998:8) and includes repetition, tropes, patterning, motifs, and rhythm. With PEN, there is a "breakthrough into performance," in which the storyteller takes responsibility for the performance and the audience judges the competence of the performance based on culturally established aesthetic principles (Bauman 1977). Narrating a life or medical history does not usually involve this element, or at least is not judged by an audience. Therefore, the performative frame of PEN is structurally different from that of oral histories.

PEN are stories told in the first person, recounting experiences in the narrator's own life, and narrated as true because they are often based on real incidents. Therefore, they

> "belong" to the tellers because they are the ones responsible for recognizing in their own experiences something that is "story worthy" and for bringing their perception of those experiences together with the conventions of "story"

in appropriate contexts and thus creating identifiable self-contained narratives. (Stahl 1977:268).

As Stahl has argued, individuals tell PEN out of a need to share the experiences on which the narrative is based.

For people who have suffered a traumatic experience or other event out of the ordinary, PEN are therapeutic. Psychologists have recently begun to employ personal narratives, as well as folktales and myths, in therapy. Narrative therapy's primary method includes using "people's expressions of their experiences of life" (White 2001). The work of Eleanor Wachs (1988) and Timothy Tangherlini (1998) on the PEN of crime victims and paramedics, respectively, show how these stories facilitate coping, making sense of traumatic experiences, and more importantly, helping people regain a sense of control in their lives.

Both tellers and their audiences benefit from the narrated experience. The audience participates in a direct experience, which leads to what Donald Braid calls experiential meaning, a process of engagement that results in the listeners' incorporating the narrated experience into a "resource for living their own lives" (1996:26). As we show below, experiential meaning is created through *matatu* PEN which assists Nairobi residents in navigating the complexities of urban life.

Some details specific to *matatu* PEN are left out of the narration, are taken for granted, or are the givens of a *matatu* ride. These include conditions aboard the *matatu*: overcrowding, speeding, reckless driving, loud music, and details about individual *manamba*, even in stories where *manamba* play a central role. The *manamba's* attitude, behavior, motives, and character are often neither described nor discussed, but assumed. Besides loading passengers, *manamba* collect the fare and keep order; in the process, they can be verbally and physically abusive. They are therefore, in a sense, stock characters, like the hare or the hyena, which behave in predictable patterns in Kenyan folktales. Thus, as characters, the *manamba* are predetermined or even overdetermined. This is a significant point for our argument, since by not relating the personal attributes of an individual *manamba*, the teller creates distances through depersonalization. For the teller, this is a tactic for psychologically erasing, or at least blocking, the source of danger. Such erasure functions as one of the primary functions of *matatu* PEN; erasure makes it easier for both teller and audience to react with detachment the next time they come face to face with a *manamba*, since, in any case, he is "just another one of those," a bad type, about whose predictable behavior the passenger is forewarned. In this way, storytelling in relation to *manamba* is done from the perspective of the trickster's dupe.

In the following narrative, Anastasia, a woman more than forty years old, was tricked by someone she believes was the *manamba*, but may have in fact been a different man; either that, or the driver was in on the scam. Telling the story with the benefit of hindsight, Anastasia draws out a clear moral in the last line.

> One morning as I was waiting for a *matatu* at the bus stop to go to work, I saw a smartly dressed man walk towards me. He stopped a few meters away and greeted me. I was hesitant at first but decided to respond, [and] within a few minutes we had become acquainted and were talking like friends. A *matatu* came and we both boarded it. He sat at the seat next to the driver and asked me not to pay as he would pay for me. The journey was fast, and within a few minutes we had reached our destination. I was among the first passengers to alight, as I did not want to be late for work. Hardly had my foot touched the ground than the tout was on my back. He demanded that I pay my fare. I asked him if the man who had sat at the front seat had paid for me, but he said the man had alighted at the previous stage with instructions that I pay for him. I became enraged and scared; accusing the tout of lying. He became angry and roughed me. I did not want to create a scene, as I could see a few onlookers staring at us, and immediately gave him the only money I had in my pocket: a thousand-shilling note. He asked me to wait as he goes to look for change. I waited for about 20 minutes and started getting suspicious. I asked the driver where he had gone. He had no idea of where the tout had gone to. He said that he did not know the man. It struck me that I had not even bothered to look at the tout, as I was busy thinking about my luck. I did not have any memory of the man I had given my money [to]. I resolved to be very observant and cautious of strangers. (Personal communication, 2001)

From stories such as this one, the audience knows that the *manamba* is rude and physically abusive. Anastasia is therefore not chided for giving the thousand-shilling note to a person who was behaving like a *manamba*—she was in danger and can therefore be forgiven. Knowing the *manamba* as a stock character and not as an individual worked against her. In general, when it comes to *matatu*, you just can't win.

The *Matatu* Industry and the *Manamba*

Matatu are small-scale, privately owned enterprises, which operate informally in Kenya, outside government regulation and supervision. Some Nissan and Toyota vans and minibuses that serve as *matatu* are new, in good mechanical shape, and usually serve the more affluent areas of Nairobi, while other vehicles are in desperate need of repair or reconditioning. The *matatu* industry began in the 1950s as an illegal operation in competition with Kenya Bus Service (KBS), which had a monopoly on passenger transportation granted by the then Municipality of Nairobi in the early

1930s. In the 1950s and 60s, *matatu* did not make a dent in KBS profits, but in the 1970s they did, to the extent that KBS and other large-scale bus operators sent a delegation to President Jomo Kenyatta in an attempt to curb private entrepreneurs. As the story goes, Kenyatta in essence said, "If you can't beat them, join them" (Muigai wa Gachanja, personal communication, 2003). The *matatu* thus became a legitimate, if not necessarily legal, business. In 1981, there were in Nairobi an estimated 1,704 *matatu*, which carried 263,000 passengers daily, up from 217 *matatu* carrying 38,000 passengers in 1971 (Aduwo and Obudho 1992). By 1990, *matatu* had carved out 52 percent of the Nairobi passenger-transportation market share, up from only 16 percent in 1973 (Aduwo and Obudho 1992:125, table 5). In a survey conducted in 1990, *matatu* proved more available and flexible, and had more seating space than KBS buses (Kemuma, Murunga, and Khayesi 2002). Consequently, current estimates give Nairobi *matatu* a 60 percent share of the passenger-transport industry (Kemuma, Murunga, and Khayesi 2002:3), with 6,000 of the estimated national total of 24,000 *matatu* operating in Nairobi (Khayesi 1999).

The *matatu* "is central in the movement of people and goods in rural and urban areas in Kenya" (Khayesi 1999). *Matatu* are the primary, and for most the sole, method for Kenyans to commute to and from work, and to and from upcountry homes; the buses formerly owned by KBS[4] cannot handle the thousands of people moving in and around Nairobi daily. *Matatu* have a well-earned reputation for recklessness, speeding, and packing in passengers to double and triple normal vehicle capacity. In fact, the *matatu* motto is *Iko Nafasi* "There Is Always Room For One More." As two social scientists in Kenya have commented, "*matatus* [*sic*] do not follow the highway code, but the 'My Way Code'" (Shorter and Onyancha 1997:65). In the drive for profit, safety is disregarded. Turnbridge, a BBC journalist, observed: "Racing for time and battling stiff competition, safety is invariably thrown to the wind. Pity the pedestrian who is in the way as a *matatu* tries to skip the queue of traffic by speeding along the pavement [sidewalk]" (1998:54). Thus, a brash aggressiveness, egged on by the *manamba*'s loud bang on the side and shouts of *faya* (street slang for 'go'), has become the hallmark of *matatu* work.

At the center of *matatu* culture is the *manamba*, whose "self-confident behavior . . . their acrobatics, show, and harangues in starting or bringing a car to a halt, whistling and announcing of destinations, etc.[,] . . . animate the *Matatu* stages of Nairobi and other towns across Kenya" (Graebner 1992:3). Also known as *makanga*, *manamba* are young men—there are only a few women[5]—who tout for passengers (in itself illegal under City of Nairobi bylaws), help them get on the vehicle, and sometimes eject them. *Manamba* have a paradoxical bad boy image simultaneously despised and admired: on the one hand, they have a well-deserved reputation in Kenya as rude, ruthless, and verbally and physically abusive; on the other hand, they are seen as romantic figures, resisting the establishment—an image inherited from the history of the industry. For young women, *manamba* are the

bottom of the barrel—a female cabinet minister warned schoolgirls to work hard at their studies, lest they find themselves marrying *makanga* (Mungai 1996), but in some circles they are admired as popular-culture trendsetters. *Manamba* have a lot of cultural capital, particularly among urban youth (Samper 2002). They occupy a central place in daily interactions, since, as one Nairobi resident commented, "unless you go about town in a chauffeur-driven Benz, you must deal with *manambas* every day" (Muigai wa Gachanja, personal communication, 2002). However, even in a chauffeured limousine, one still encounters *manamba*—in traffic snarl-ups. Anyone remotely connected to the road as a social space in Nairobi must take note of the *matatu* and their *manamba*. As a result, the most frequent *matatu* stories focus on interactions with *manamba*, encounters that usually go badly for the commuter.

Manamba employ their own version of Sheng, a youth argotic sociolect, which blends English and Kiswahili primarily, but also borrows from local languages, including Gikuyu and Luhya (see Samper 2002). Their use of this sociolect is part of the verbal performative repertoire that they use to harass their passengers and other road users. Esther, a 23-year-old woman who is studying in a secretarial college in Nairobi, told us how once a *manamba's* verbal harangue was so intimidating that she had to alight miles before her destination. She said:

> It was so embarrassing, 'cause he started shouting with very abusive language, so the only alternative I had was to alight and go *nyumbani* ['home' (Kiswahili)], even though it was quite some distance from home already. I was harassed and abused and all that; he used all kinds of names to call me. It's vulgar language; I don't think I can say. (Personal communication, 2001).

The *matatu* is a closed environment, a place of vulnerability; it is public, crowded, and devoid of private space. Passengers are, as one researcher put it, "captive travelers" (Aduwo 1990). Loud music, usually rap or reggae, disorients them. As soon as they board a *matatu*, they are under the control of a *manamba*, who tells them where to sit or stand. The use of Kiswahili imperatives, such as "*kaa vizuri*" "*toka*," "*songa*," and the inevitable "*lete pesa*,"[6] shows the asymmetry of power relations inside a *matatu*. The tone of voice in which these orders are delivered leaves no doubt as to *manamba's* authority. *Manamba* often fill their *matatu* to overflowing, since more passengers means more pay.[7] In these circumstances, passengers feel threatened as their personal space is invaded and find themselves hemmed in from all sides. Overcrowding contributes to psychological stress from head-splitting music, sometimes-rude fellow passengers, anxieties related to the recklessness at which the vehicle is speeding, and other pressures. In the words of Munene, a *matatu* passenger, "Every time I alight from one of these disco *matatu* that fly on the road, I have a

problem reorienting myself to life on earth. I arrive at work feeling tired, as if I have been beaten with a huge stick all over the body, particularly on the ears and the head. It's like I have come back from hell. No wonder *makanga* are all madmen!" (personal communication, 2003). For Wangeci, another passenger, arriving at her destination necessitates her removing her shoes and flexing her shin muscles first, because "the *matatu* on my route move at such terrible speeds I keep applying imaginary brakes involuntarily. It's like I am literally driving the vehicle, and this just wears me down, since as a teacher I have to stand in class the whole day" (personal communication, 2002). Such stress is exacerbated by the awareness that whether they like it or not, passengers often have to rely on the same *matatu* to get them home at the end of the day.

When people board a *matatu*, they surrender all personal control; they are at the mercy of the *manamba*. Violence is never far away in a *matatu*, and failure to do what the *manamba* says can result in literally being thrown off the *matatu*. During casual conversation, a university professor reported having seen a passenger thrown off a moving *matatu* and severely hurt. When a fellow passenger is in trouble with a *manamba*, others tend not to interfere. I. J. P. Loeffler, a Kenyan surgeon, who has had to deal with victims of crashes involving *matatu*, notes that passengers "do not intervene, do not assert themselves—they'd rather just pray—because they fear the man at the helm and his henchmen. They fear, too, the other patrons—who knows?—may prefer to support the proceedings" (2000). Even if there is no physical abuse, there is always the likelihood of verbal abuse. *Manamba* are adept at verbally attacking people. Their use of vulgar language in verbal assaults is a tactical device, since they are aware of the fact that the average *matatu* traveler would go to any lengths to avoid trading "dirty words" with the crew; such an action would invite insults even more vulgar. In several *matatu* PEN, people are so embarrassed by this verbal tirade that they alight at the next stop and take another *matatu*.

Apart from *manamba* threats that have come to be seen as normal, wide-ranging violations are directed at female passengers. Men may take the opportunity to "feel them up," rub their hands or thighs against them, or enclose them in the crook of an arm placed against the seat's backrest. A male passenger might deliberately stand in front of a seated woman, thus forcing her legs apart, or simply look over the top of her blouse into her cleavage. During an informal chat, one woman related how one day she got home only to find that someone had ejaculated on her skirt. When her husband found out, he was so infuriated that he offered to buy her a car immediately so she would never have to ride a *matatu* again. However, this option is available to only a few in Kenya; even those who own cars find it cheaper to travel by *matatu*, saving on the cost of gas, wear and tear on badly potholed roads, and parking, and minimizing the risk that their cars will be involved in an accident. In another *matatu* PEN, the respondent, a short lady, told how, standing in the aisle between the seats, she felt a taller man pushing his crotch into and against her armpit, forcing her to scream

for help. After a thorough tongue-lashing, the man was made to alight at the next stop—which happened to be his stop. This type of sexual harassment is common, but pales in comparison to rape by *manamba* or hijackers, a crime that many Kenyan women have suffered. In one incident in 2000, six Nairobi nurses were raped after their *matatu* had been hijacked by armed men and taken to an isolated place (Mugo 2000). Mama Elizabeth, a 52-year-old small-scale trader of fresh produce, told us a horrifying story. The *matatu* in which she was riding had been hijacked; the hijackers had taken the passengers to a desolate area and raped one of them:

> But what really shocked me is what those gangsters did to one lady, who is almost the age of my older child, Elizabeth. She was undressed and gang-raped as everyone was watching with bare eyes. She was being raped while one would take turns to watch over her with a torchlight, so that whoever was raping her would see what he is doing, and the others stood by laughing. (Personal communication, 2002)

Mama Elizabeth later heard that the young woman had committed suicide.

Violence on *matatu* can come from internal as well as external agents, and crews can be victims as well as perpetrators. *Manamba* have suffered hijackings, robberies, and beatings.[8] Even the police have been a source of this violence: there are numerous cases of policemen assaulting *matatu* crews. Often, quarrels between police and crews arise out of the crews' refusal to give a bribe, or the "right" amount of it, or the claim that the obligatory "tea"[9] offering has not been made to the police for the day. In such circumstances, physical violence may be used to right the situation, the *matatu* will be detained, or, as often as not, the driver's license will be confiscated to make the driver go back and "see" the police.

Since the *matatu* industry has a high capital turnover, mafia-like cartels engage in feuds for control of the business. The most vicious of these cartels are Mungiki, Kamjesh, and, lately Taliban, which have reportedly operated under politicians' protection and, particularly on the most profitable routes, have been organized by senior active and retired policemen, who run their own *matatu* on such routes. Cartels are not mere criminal outfits: they have deep connections to political activity and social issues.[10] The predominant cartel, Mungiki, besides being a criminal outfit, claims to be a religious organization founded on Islamic principles. Through violence and public disorder, it has sought to achieve its goals—meaning that it has unleashed even more terror as it extorts protection money from *matatu* workers. One must understand the ongoing environment of threats, violence, and tension to appreciate the general aggression with which *manamba* deal with their passengers.

Additionally, passenger trauma comes from myriad sources, direct and indirect, on or off *matatu*. Beyond the *matatu*, Kenyan roads evoke fear in many people, *matatu* travelers and other road-users alike. Danger spots

have come to be associated with evil spirits—a mechanism expressive of latent fears, not just about the occult, but also about daily perils, such as crashes, tire bursts, and hijackings.[11] *Matatu* PEN address mainly the most visible of these threats (*manamba* and robbers); road spirits feature in these narratives infrequently because the circumstances necessary to motivate their telling are not generally afforded in casual performance occasions.

The Function of *Matatu* PEN in the Lives of Nairobi Residents

For Kenyans, and especially for Nairobi's residents, *matatu* PEN have several, important functions. First, they serve as an informal information system—through them, Nairobi residents know which *matatu* routes are currently targeted by hijackers and robbers, or which *matatu* have especially rude or abusive *manamba*, or on which *matatu* pickpockets are operating. To be sure, the youth use PEN to inform their peers about which *matatu* have smart crews, and which ones play the latest (best) hiphop music or have DVD players; however, the latter are not the regular material of ordinary PEN, most of which tend toward the retelling of traumatic experiences. For example, Diana, an 18-year-old professional stage dancer for the famous rap duo of GidiGidi MajiMaji, is kidnapped because she does not have the fare.

> I had come to town to buy chips, and I boarded a *matatu* called "Wicked Men." The man [*manamba*] started coming to ask for money; this tout was asking for money. It reached my turn. I didn't have money, and I was eating chips. "Oh boy!" I said, "God, I don't know what I will do." This guy told me to alight from the *matatu* or he takes me to the police station. I said, "I can't do that." [I thought to myself] let me talk to him; that way I will go home, and I will talk to my brother to give me money. "Enough," [the *manamba* said]. It made me mad. Now when I arrived home, when I was about to reach home, he told me he is taking me to the police station, or [I] am not coming out. I—I didn't have any otherwise; I sat inside the . . . *matatu*. I went in that *matatu* till town. Then he told me that I will have to give him *kitu moja* [something], so that he will leave me, he told me to wait until he finishes his work; then we will go with him to his place. Now, I didn't have any otherwise. We reached his place at night. [When] he went to the toilet, it forced me to get out quick, to escape. Wah! I escaped. I tell you next time he saw me, he stole from me with his friends. That was the worst experience I will ever see in all my life. (Personal communication, 2001)

In her narrative, she is careful to mention the name of the *matatu*, "Wicked Men," so that her friends can avoid it. Beyond the experience of kidnap and

near rape, this story illustrates several lessons about riding on *matatu* and dealing with *manamba* that commuters learn from stories such as this one. In her case, going to the police was not an option. particularly since she is likely to be thought of as a prostitute who is backing out of a deal with the *manamba* and she risks arrest and being treated as a prostitute. There are few female police officers in Kenya, and thus the probability of facing an unsympathetic policeman in any station is high. Usually, the *matatu* in such a case is driven into a police station where the crew has a working relationship with a friendly policeman, who will be expected to "fix" the offending culprit. A young man told a story in which he and some friends, thinking that they had numbers on their side, refused to pay for a *matatu* ride. The *matatu* drove into a police station, where he and his friends were to be arrested, but the friends managed to jump out a window and escape (Pascal, personal communication, 2001). It took several days and bribes for his family to get him out of jail. Second, *manamba* rarely accept passengers' excuses, and all the passengers' attempts to persuade them fail and sometimes lead to more problems. The *manamba* we talked to had no sympathy or patience with passengers that tried to go "*sare*," a Sheng word meaning "for free." Third, the apathy of Diana's fellow passengers shows that one cannot count on assistance from others—an important lesson found in *matatu* PEN. Thus, the space inside a *matatu* can suddenly appear vast and desolate, with only the *manamba* and the errant customer staring at each other, the latter obviously a loser in the asymmetry of power relations.

The advice presented in the narratives comes from lived experience. *Matatu* PEN function as cautionary tales of what to do and not to do; passengers are advised be aware of their surroundings and fellow passengers. Like folklore in general, PEN construct a body of knowledge and wisdom that people can draw upon for behavioral guidelines and create "mechanisms by which people psychologically prepare for the unexpected and handle the situation" (Langellier 1989:245). *Matatu* PEN provide Kenyans with information so that they can be well informed and feel safer as they deal with the anxieties of riding in *matatu*. Furthermore, they help commuters prepare for the worst, much in line with the Kiswahili saying *Ujuzi wapita nguvu* "Knowledge surpasses brawn." Diana's story provides a strategy for dealing with similar situations, even if the strategy is only an example of what not to do. Ultimately, the message may be for one to remain calm while patiently planning one's escape. Like the crime-victim narratives explored by Eleanor Wachs (1988), *matatu* PEN provide information about cultural and social rules for riding in *matatu* and for living in Nairobi.

Matatu PEN help victims of *matatu* violence deal with the trauma associated with the event. This benefit of PEN was noted as far back as the second World War. In his report to the Army Chief of Staff, General George C. Marshall (1946) noted the emotional benefits of debriefing combat troops on the battlefield were "spiritual purging" and "morale building experiences." Battlefield debriefing allowed soldiers to construct a narrative, a verbal representation of their recent combat experience. Today, psychologists

are aware of the positive role of storytelling in debriefing victims of crime or people who have suffered traumatic experiences (Mitchell 1983; Pennebaker and Seagal 1999; Robinson and Mitchell 1993; Rose et al. 1999). In a society with little tradition of or availability of psychological-counseling services, storytelling partially addresses this need. Particularly because of the heightened crises that individuals face in Nairobi, *matatu* PEN serve there as an informal mode of psychological debriefing. Narration allows people to release some of the emotional impact of trauma. Narrating these experiences to a sympathetic audience provides an outlet for pent-up negative emotions. As our discussion below shows, this type of storytelling gives structure to, and imposes order on, chaotic experiences, emotions, and events. *Matatu* PEN, like narratives in general, are a "way of introducing some kind of order in the face of the chaotic nature of experience" (Gonçalves and Machado 1999:1180). By narrating her hijack experience, Peris, a 30-year-old secondary-school teacher, found empathy and sympathy, and so came to terms with her experience.

> I could not have suspected the scene to me [that] joined us in the Nissan. It was around 7:15, and all I was thinking about was the weekend that had just started. There were six passengers in the Nissan: myself, one of the women, and four men. Just before the Nissan left to Juja, six men joined us, and I can't remember well where they came from because, when I was waiting for the Nissan, I had not seen them stand somewhere near me; so when they entered, the vehicle was almost full, and now I thank God that we would not take any longer on our way. Before we had even reached Ruiru, the driver asked one of the men passengers, who I had found in the vehicle, to collect our fare, since he was all alone, so I realized that there was no conductor in the vehicle.
>
> The six men who had joined us had sat one next to me, and the other five had occupied the back seat.

Peris then describes the swift and violent take over of the vehicle by the six men. While one man drove, the other took anything of value from the passengers, including one woman's shoes.

> Just some distance from Ruiru, the vehicle turned left, and so I knew we had left Thika Road. The men were talking of million[s] of shillings that they were going to collect somewhere—not really collect, to rob—and so all they needed from us was our money and the vehicle, in which they would travel to where they were going to do the robbery, so I quietly thanked God because I knew that they had no time to do anything to us like beating us, asking us to remove our clothes, or even raping us.

So after the vehicle left Thika Road, all I can remember was the terrifying speed. The man was driving like he was a drunkard, and I can remember one of the thugs telling him to drive slowly, since if the vehicle overturned and they died, they would have missed that one million bob. So there was the long drive. I can't quite tell for how long we traveled, but it took quite some time, like half an hour. Then one of the men told the one who was driving in Kikuyu to just take us in the place where they had taken the other passengers last week. So l knew it was a gang that was used to carjacking along Thika Road, and that previous week they had still robbed other people of goods and money along the same route. So the man drove to a place they were calling Gathage, which I later learned it is in Gatundu, and in a thicket of bushes, . . . which I could not recognize at first, the vehicle was stopped. The bushes were coffee trees, and we were all ordered out, each one of us showing our pocket for the thugs to make sure that there was no money left. I was so terrified that I gave them even my jacket so that they could look for themselves. The man searched and threw the jacket back to me, saying that if they had time, they would have dealt with us—which I do not quite know what it meant.

In about five minutes, I can remember the men chasing us inside the thicket until they made sure where we were lying we would not see them leave, or even see the vehicle. I lay somewhere on the soil now, near the man who was driving at first. The driver, now he was a good man I can say, and looked like he was in his forties. OK, he was terrified also, but he proved to be helpful to me and that other woman. My problem first was being at least convinced that the thugs had left and the four men we were left with were innocent and had nothing to do with those gangsters. I could not quite tell whether it was a plot by the four plus the six gangsters until the driver removed his driving license and told me that he had come from Nakuru and that he was going to sleep at Thika, waiting for the following day so that he could start his journey to Nakuru again. So after all, I knew the Nissan was not one of the Thika Nissan we are used to, but it was from Nakuru, and the driver was not very conversant with the routes along the Thika Road, so we were left there lying on the soil and the men trembling, since some had been asked to give out their jackets also, and they had no shoes.

Peris ends the description of the hijacking by describing how they walked to a nearby police station. She remembers the police as unsympathetic. The police declined to take their statement arguing that the hijacking happened

outside their jurisdiction and Peris and the other victims were then taken to another station.

> I was glad that at least I would land where I was going, although now apart from the fact that I had no money, I had been so terrified to even think about what I was going to do in Juja. The police Land Rover took about ten minutes to reach Juja, and since I was the only person who was going to Juja, I was taken to my boyfriend's house. They knocked at the door and made sure that someone had opened for me. When I was safe in the house, the vehicle left, but no one took time to explain to my boyfriend what had happened to us. It was now around ten thirty, and I knew he was also very terrified, since he had lost all the hope of me going to his place that day. So the vehicle left, and I was left in the house now to start again and narrate to him all that had happened. I can remember it took some time for me to even convince him that we had not been raped or beaten and that I was safe. (Personal communication, 2001)

Peris says that each time she has told the story it has been easier; she feels a little better about herself, and less scared. Her use of the present tense to interpret and comment on this incident ("I can say," "I don't think," "I can remember") psychologically reestablishes her place within the happenings. She evaluates the friendly driver, calls to mind her knowledge of the notorious, robbery-prone Thika Road, and finds solace in the hope that even amid danger, there is always going to be a helpful person. The trauma of the episode is mediated by way of narrative performance; through it, she avoids a cynical view of the episode.

In a different but relevant context, Elaine Lawless (2001) finds that storytelling helps battered and abused women regain a sense of self: narration empowers women. A teller's use of a narrative as a means of taking control over an incident in which the teller had no control is a significant element in psychological healing:

> This process [of constructing stories] allows one to organize and remember events in coherent fashion while integrating thoughts and feelings. In essence, this gives individuals a sense of predictability and control over their lives. Once an experience has structure and meaning, it would follow that emotional effects of that experience are manageable. Constructing stories facilitates a sense of resolution. (Pennebaker and Seagal 1999:1243)

In other words, narration is an active process; through narration we can reinscribe agency and control over events in which we were passive

participants. As Wolfenstein argues, "Narration is thus like a play in that one can assume control over the repetition of an event which in its occurrence ran counter to one's wishes" (1957:139). And as the event is ordered in narrative, so are the emotional effects of the experience managed, ordered, and controlled.

However, as "completely spontaneous" (Mitchell 1983:37) informal debriefing sessions, these do not follow the six-phase structure of a critical-incident-stress debriefing as set out by Robyn Robinson and Jeffrey Mitchell (1993), nor do they benefit from a trained psychologist who provides patients with resources for use in the future. Research has found that one short debriefing session, formal or informal, is not very effective in preventing post-traumatic stress symptoms in victims of violent crime (Rose et al. 1999). Therefore, the effectiveness of PEN in dealing with traumatic experiences cannot be assumed. This experience has left Peris with a deep emotional and psychological scar, one that was reflected in her storytelling. She narrated her story in a whispered, emotionless monotone. Diana's story of kidnapping and near rape demonstrates that time, distance, and storytelling do not heal completely the wounds of a traumatic experience. When she narrated the moment of her kidnapping, Diana stuttered and found the storytelling difficult. She was reliving that frightening moment and had not yet reached the stage when narration of traumatic events "eventually allows disturbing experiences to subside gradually from conscious thought" (Pennebaker and Seagal 1999:1243). Nonetheless, at the very least, Diana's and Peris's stories are marks of survival (Wachs 1988:73): even if their psychological scars have not healed, the telling of their PEN is a step toward reestablishing mental balance. As Lawless (2001) suggests, by actively voicing their experience, narration offers women healing power.

Anger and frustration are the most common emotions that grow out of people's interaction with *matatu* and *manamba*—anger at the ill-treatment by *manamba*, at being hemmed in, and at being treated without respect. Evelyn, also a secretarial college student, became upset when she found that the seat promised by the *manamba* for the ride into town was not available and that she would have to stand in a crowded *matatu*. This incident made her so angry that when we met her in town (downtown Nairobi), she told us this story immediately:

> In fact, when I was coming, the *makanga* told me I will get a seat, and inside there was none. Then it's like I went there and I was like I stood there in front 'cause I knew somebody was coming out, so I was mad. It's like I didn't get a seat, so I was asking, "You—you've lied to me, 'cause if I wanted to go out of that car," but it's like I was mad, but I told him I won't pay full price 'cause I didn't get a seat. (Personal communication, 2001).

Evelyn vented her frustration to a sympathetic audience. Through narration, Evelyn reestablishes control over events she could not control.

In another example, Georgina, a 25-year-old accountant, is angry at the whole *matatu* business because she was late getting to work for three consecutive days because of *matatu*. First, one *matatu* ran out of gas; second, a careless driver caused an accident, an argument ensued and (even though she enjoyed what happened to the owner of the fancy, expensive car) it made her late for work and made her angry; third, a drunk driver crashed into the *matatu*. When she told us this story, she was livid:

> Listen, this week I do not know what bad luck has fallen on me with these *matatu* guys. Another one escaped with my money yesterday. We met a JJ [Jaluo Jeuri "an arrogant Luo"). Monday, I was carried by a drunk driver. But today was deadly [tremendous]; that is why I am late for my job. I climbed *matatu*, another one from Kayole; it was charging us thirty bob, and that is all the money I had. Now I squeezed myself inside knowing I will reach my job. We left smoothly and because we knew the main road had a traffic jam, we asked driver to bypass the [main] road to avoid that jam. Rain had hit yesterday night, so there was sizeable mud. While we still had not made it to the main road, the *matatu* went quiet just in the middle of the road. Driver shouted that fuel "had died." He told his *manamba* to get a jerry can and go to a petrol station and get four hundred and fifty shillings of fuel. Now all us passengers, we were in crucial time. If we waited just a little, we would be late for job. We told driver we cannot wait; if he gives us our money and we could board another *matatu*. Driver said it is okay, but the tout does not [return the money]. [When the *manamba* returned,] we started to ask for our money. But the tout started to say he cannot return thirty bob, maybe twenty because there we'll get *matatu* for twenty. Guys, because they want their thirty bob, started to harass[12] the tout. Another old man started catching that tout's shirt, wanting he be given money *chap chap* [quick quick]. Other passengers also started to harass that tout. [When the tout saw what he was up against,] he caught his legs and ran away. Guys tried to follow him running but where? The guy was clever; no person could get him. Now we returned [to the *matatu*], and we started to harass the driver, and he cries he doesn't have any [money]. And guys they jammed [got upset], and they pierced all four tires of that *matatu*—all four. It remained stuck on the ground; we ended that way. But the story has not ended. I did not have any money also. I was defeated and now I will do what? I started to beat route 11 ["walk on foot"]. I am tired now, and I don't even know

> how I will get to work. Yesterday when I came to work, there was also a jam, but it was moving. I was on a *matatu*. I don't know where the driver's brain was when he hit a range rover. It was in front of him, but it was not much of a hit. In fact, it had only a small scratch that you could wipe with piece of cloth and it disappears. She [the passenger in the Range Rover] cries *woooi*! The owner [of the Range Rover]was a guy from Rainbow [a movement within the government, opposed to the president's choice of his successor]. The guy alighted, as he says [to the] driver of the *matatu* [that he] must give him thousands of shillings. It must be painted where it was hit. Driver and tout of *matatu* showed him they don't have money. Maybe they give him five hundred because that scratch is small. Jaluo Jeuri ["arrogant Luo Range Rover owner"] refused; he was saying that another car of his must be returned to the dealer. The driver and tout refused completely now. Jaluo decided to call the police. He took his mobile and moved aside to call the police on his mobile. While he was talking on the mobile, a street boy came from I don't know where and stole the mobile. Jaluo started following him, running. Driver told us to return to the *matatu*, and we ended getting away, and we were left enjoying deadly! The other day, I climbed another *matatu* coming to town, but the driver was drunk. The *matatu* almost hit another car without reason, but we relaxed because we did not know yet the driver was not his own [was drunk]. A little ahead, even we had not gone like one kilometer, we are surprised the *matatu* has entered tunnel beside the road. We alighted to check what was up, only the driver to stand was a problem. He is drunk, and then he is claiming he has only drunk porridge,[13] and he smells of alcohol deadly. Even the tout knows to drive; he is the one who dropped us in town. (Personal communication, 2002)

Georgina's PEN shows that passengers are complicit in the "shortcuts" of the *matatu* world: they urge the driver to take a deviation, but all of them get stranded; however, despite all Georgina goes through, she tells it with apparent good humor, even savoring her delight at the arrogant Luo man's double loss. Since he is rich and loses to a street boy, Georgina, her fellow passengers, and even the crew see a just chastisement for his arrogance—hence the passengers are "left enjoying deadly" [tremendously]. By telling it this way, censure is made of the rich man, and the solidarity of the "poor" *matatu* travelers becomes unified around their common distaste at his lack of consideration. Georgina's PEN at this point is an apt comment on the temporary and unusual solidarities that sometimes develop in a *matatu*, establishing a temporary community that remains so only for the duration of one's trip. Sometimes temporal victories can be scored, but often, and

more realistically, the *manamba* wins. Georgina's narration of the JJ's plight is a celebration of one such moment of an unusual collective triumph. It demonstrates the construction of emotional distance through the process of narration and humor.

Regular cases of robbery and abuse by *manamba* and fellow passengers are another cause of anger. *Manamba* will unexpectedly raise fares, especially when commuter traffic is unusually heavy, or when there is a special event at a social or sport arena. Rain in Nairobi causes untold anxiety to commuters, not so much for the puddles that follow, but because *matatu* fares are automatically adjusted upward. Sometimes passengers are not dropped off where they wish, or are even forced to alight in the middle of dangerous traffic. Frustration grows because Nairobi residents are powerless to effect change; most of them feel helpless and just sit in the vehicle, quietly suffering the situation. Even the government has proved impotent in its attempts to curb *matatu* behavior. Efforts to enforce regulation have resulted in general strikes, ending in violent confrontation between *matatu* workers and police (Siringi 2001). These strikes usually bring Nairobi to a standstill, disrupting the economy, since *matatu* are the primary mode of transport for the majority of workers and businesspeople in Kenya. It is frustrating because there is no alternative: there are no government buses, and the few privately owned ones do not offer service to many of Kenya's estates and suburbs, where the majority of workers live. There is frustration at the fact that if a *matatu* crew mistreats a person, the only recourse is taking the situation into one's hands; the law is of little or no help. Since bribery is an acknowledged part of the protection racket involving *matatu* operators and the police (Muiruri 2002), filing a criminal charge is useless. Sometimes young men will express anger and frustration at *matatu* through violence (one of the reasons behind much of the antagonism between *manamba* and university students), but this option is not available to most people. Expressing anger or frustration in any nonviolent manner, or expressing any type of will or resistance, may result in violence. One *manamba* said that if a passenger shows "courage," he must respond by showing his courage (Samper 2002). By "courage," he clearly meant a violent response, either physical or verbal. A woman related a story of how a middle-aged man was thrown out of a moving *matatu* because he had refused to pay the fare twice; he had apparently already paid, and the *manamba* wanted him to pay again. No one dared interfere, lest they too be thrown out of the *matatu*. All these factors contribute to passengers' anger and frustration, feelings that grow because most *manamba* show neither mercy nor remorse.

Through PEN, Nairobi residents can deal with this anger and frustration. Narration externalizes and objectifies anger; it makes it a thing, manageable and controllable. It is an outlet, a safety valve, through which anger can be vented and therefore managed; however, these stories may in fact generate more anxiety and fear. Yiannis Gabriel (1991) suggests that some PEN do not act as a means of venting pent-up anxiety, but may produce more of it. Nevertheless, the value of expressing anger to a sympathetic audience

in a safe, culturally sanctioned way should not be underestimated; however, this anger management does happen at a distance.[14]

Inside a *matatu*, one suffers a loss of self-esteem and a loss of identity because one is effectively without a voice. Narration allows one to reclaim one's voice, and thus one's identity, as well as one's self-esteem. Storytelling gives narrators the opportunity to craft a coherent, cohesive narrative, a narrative through which a coherent and cohesive self can be represented (see Lawless 2001). Even though PEN do not afford an opportunity for real revenge on *matatu* and *manamba*, a sense of self-esteem might be regained through narrative revenge; this revenge is distanced, spatially and temporally, but it is fulfilling anyway.

Sometimes a person's revenge is lived vicariously by others. Lucy, a young woman in her early twenties, who works as a waitress in downtown Nairobi, tells of how she was able to get a *manamba* fired after he had stolen her money:

> There is a time when my wallet was stolen, and it was sitting with that guy; he was a *makanga*. And then I opened the purse and I forgot to close, and as I was coming out, I felt my bag was too light. When I went to check my wallet, it was gone, so I tried to go back to the *matatu* again complaining to the driver what had happened, but I went to the owner. The owner is my neighbor; then the *makanga* was sacked. (Personal communication, 2001)

It is with great relish that she tells this story, and it is received with laughter and a quiet sense of justice. However, this revenge was taken at a distance: to get satisfaction, she had to tell her neighbor, the owner of that particular *matatu*. Direct action toward the *manamba* at the time of the theft was not an option. In fact, she spoke to the driver about the theft, not directly to the *manamba*.

In the following story, Yayha, a 42-year-old bank teller, regains his self-esteem by standing up to the harassment inflicted by *manamba*. The police, often a villain in narratives, here functions to legitimate the passengers' actions. One of the stories we heard in which fellow-passengers come to the aid of one of their own, it is, in a way, advocating for collective action as a way to deal with and change the behavior of "*matatu* guys."

> One day I was traveling to Busia Town from my up-country home in Webuye, in Western Kenya. I was to meet my dad later in the evening, so I boarded a Nissan *matatu* from the Webuye Bus terminus, often referred to as Webuye Airport. The tout was calling passengers, announcing that the fare from Webuye to Busia would be 120 shillings. I entered the *matatu* and sat next to the door. And the *matatu* set off. Suddenly, a male traveler emerged running towards the *matatu* as

it was leaving the bus stop, wanting to board the same *matatu*, but it was full. The *matatu* tout ordered the driver to stop. He peeped inside the car. There was no space, as it was full, but [he] asked me to squeeze so that I can create space for the man. I asked how and where would the man sit, and resisted. Everybody else turned silent as the battle of words between the tout and me continued. The tout now turned violent, but I still held on to my guns that I would not move, as the *matatu* was full. Suddenly, all the other passengers ganged in support of me. People from outside also started milling up around the *matatu* to find out what was going on. The tout ordered me to chuck out if I wasn't going to squeeze for the man, but I refused and still insisted that I was only going to alight at my destination. All the other passengers supported me and also threatened to alight if I was forcibly ejected. Finally, we were the victors, and the man was left behind as we set on with our journey. Guys were so happy, and one seated next to me lamented that to end the continuous harassment by *matatu* touts, we ought to stand firm. To our amusement, the tout suddenly announced on the way that we shall now have to pay 150 as bus fare, instead of 120 announced earlier. We all fiercely objected, and it turned into shouting, but the tout still said we are going to pay the new fare. By then, we had covered about fifty kilometers, which was about half our journey. Suddenly, one of the passengers asked the tout that the car stop. The driver of the *matatu* stopped the car, and the passenger stepped down, caught the tout by his collars of the shirt, and set on him with blows and slaps. The driver of the *matatu* also chucked out and went to the rescue of his tout. He hit the passenger with some metal bar used for changing the vehicle tires. The man bled profusely. On seeing this, we also jumped into the brawl, and now the war was between passengers and the *matatu* crew, and we really taught them a lesson. We then tied them by the ropes, and they were only rescued by a traffic policeman who was passing by. He asked us what the problem was; we explained to him. He handcuffed the tout and the driver, and bundled them in the back of a waiting police car. He then decided to drive us himself for our bravery, and said it was the only way to end harassment by these *matatu* guys. We never paid; we actually traveled free of charge. (Personal communication, 2002)

Yayha's story is interesting in its uniqueness. Other than Lucy's story, it was the only time in which passengers got the better of *manamba*. We first heard about Yayha's experience from a mutual friend, Khaemba, who told us a version of this story from a third-person perspective. In a sense, Yayha's

passenger revolt has become legendary. If commuters cannot directly fight back, they will do so from a safe distance through narratives like this one and Lucy's.

Regina Bendix (1990), writing on earthquake narratives, argues that PEN restore order out of chaos. Narration provides a structure (a beginning, middle, and end) to unstructured chaotic events; it organizes complex emotional experiences (Pennebaker and Seagal 1999). PEN, according to Timothy Tangherlini (1998), provide closure to what are often unstructured and open-ended experiences. Through storytelling, the victim "can appear victorious over situations they could not control. . . . Relating their role in the story is a way for them to bring the danger under control and reclaim their self-esteem" (Wachs 1988:73). Like crime victims' narratives in New York, the telling of PEN allows people to humanize the problem, reduce a nebulous fear of crime, and attempt to gain control over their lives and actions.

In the following story, Raymond, a 37-year-old Nairobi office worker, can "bring the danger under control" twice. First, there is the fear and danger of the drive into Nairobi from his country home, and then there is the fear of riding to his Nairobi house in another *matatu*. Raymond, who has a cast on his right arm, has had to tell this story many times when friends and coworkers have asked him about the cast.

> I had a very bad accident with some *matatu* last weekend. That is why I have been put in this bandage by the doctor. In fact, I have a bone fracture that may take some time to heal. But I thank God this is the only injury I sustained during the accident; several other people were critically injured. First, it started with the Nissan *matatu* I boarded from shags ["upcountry" (Sheng, from Gikuyu *gicagi* "village")] in Nyahururu. The driver was looking quite drunk, and I did not even think he would get us safe to Nairobi, but we had no choice, since this was the only *matatu* to Nairobi left, and most of us were reporting back to Nairobi the next day, so we had to risk rather than lose our jobs, cause this would mean no more food for our families, so finally, the *matatu* was full and we set [out] on our journey.
>
> The road from Nyahururu to Nairobi is quite scrappy and full of potholes that requires [*sic*] one to drive very slowly, but our driver was unbelievably driving so fast at a minimum speed of say 120 kilometers per hour, and since I was seated next to him, I was so scared seeing him speed that fast and hitting the potholes, I just started saying my final prayers, believing we were going to die. I tried to tell him to reduce speed, but this seemed to upset him, and he told me to shut up, or he stops the vehicle and I step out. He told me mockingly that he has been a driver on that route for fifteen years.

Suddenly, I looked up the *matatu,* and there was some writing stuck on the sides of the *matatu* reading: "God knows the dangers of the way, but he still declares that he is the way, the truth, and the life." I found it very funny and a bit consoling in the circumstances, so I decided to close my eyes and just hope that we get to Nairobi safely.

We drove at an awful speed, hitting all the potholes, and in another two hours (instead of the usual three hours) we were in Nairobi City, thanks be to the good Lord. In fact, when we arrived to Nairobi, I decided to go to church directly and thank God for having allowed me safely to Nairobi, given the great number of fatal accidents on Kenyan roads due to reckless driving. I had not been to church for close to five years, but that day I prayed for up to one hour in thanksgiving, since I had been terribly shaken. Then I went to pick our *matatu* to my house to meet my family.

The worst was to happen. First of all, this *matatu* I boarded had been on the police most-wanted list for having committed a traffic offence. Later and when asked to stop, the driver refused, and he was just returning to town for the first time. So it was spotted by some traffic police, and when asked to stop, the driver refused for the second time, so the police decided to chase it in their vehicle, and still the driver would not give up, so we went. Soon, other police vehicles gave chase also, but still the driver was determined that they would not arrest him. It eventually became like a Hollywood movie, being chased by about four police cars with their sirens blaring. We were all shaken in the *matatu,* and women with their kids crying and shouting for the driver to stop; we even thought the police would open fire on us. After driving through the wrong directions, disobeying all the traffic lights, and sending most pedestrians running helter-skelter for their dear lives, as well as jumping over several pavements [sidewalks], the brave *matatu* driver managed to outsmart the police, and we were now driving towards our estate.

Then suddenly, before we could even start to breathe again, we heard a loud bang; our *matatu* had hit a small car, and before we could even come to terms with it, our vehicle was rolling all over on the sides of the road. We rolled like seven times. Many of us were badly damaged, and had it not been for good Samaritans who came and immediately broke the doors of the *matatu* I believe some us would even have died from suffocation, especially the little children. Among the rescuers were also thieves and pickpockets, who stole from us in the process. I lost a lot of money, and so did the other passengers. I lost also my traveling bag. I even

> wondered where my God was, given that I had just gone to church to pray to him to thank him for arriving in Nairobi safely, thinking that I had finally reached home safely. The driver and *makanga* of the *matatu* disappeared immediately after the accident; I presume they were not hurt. This was my worst *matatu* experience that I will never ever forget. (Personal communication, 2001)

A wild ride is brought under control through ordered narration. Regaining a sense of control over what were at the time chaotic experiences, retroactively to establish order and coherence, is an important psychological outcome of PEN.

Some *matatu* PEN are told with laughter. In Raymond's story, the sticker with the religious slogan was a moment in the narrative where his audience laughed. Laughter works to create distance and allows the teller to gain some control. Further, the tension that has been built up in the telling is allowed to slacken, as a necessary stage before more bad news is related.

Peter and Joyce are doctoral candidates at Kenyatta University. They were hijacked in a *matatu* in March of 1998. In their narrative, humor surfaces several times, and even both co-narrators pause to contemplate the moment, as everyone, the tellers included, breaks into laughter. When Peter tells of their being tied up to a coffee bush, their fear of being killed or his wife raped, he laughs briefly. Humor at the end of the narrative allows him to reclaim control and to distance himself from the fear and anxiety he felt at the time, which resurfaces when telling the story. Indeed, his face is momentarily expressionless, particularly at the most traumatic points, the fear of rape for example, a reflection of internal anxiety at the memory. The image of the hijacked group walking barefoot and in their underwear to the police station was told to elicit laughter, and indeed he and his wife laughed during that episode, with his wife making the most fun of that situation. The details of the commandeering of the vehicle are similar to those of Peris's story. We pick up Peter's narrative after the hijacking of the *matatu* and after he, his wife, and fellow passengers had been driven to a remote location:

> So we drove for about ten kilometers to Ruiru, past Ruiru, and then they took a junction after Ruiru town towards a coffee plantation. At that time, they had already picked everyone's money, and so there we went to about let's say about three kilometers from the main road; that's where they stopped, so when they stopped, they told us "now here we are going to murder you people." They told us to come out with our hands up in the air so we just came out of the vehicle with our hands lifted up and then from there once we were out of the vehicle, we were told to kneel down so we just knelt down

and the guy told us now "start." I don't know what to say is it walking on your knees or crawling on your knees into the coffee plantation, [recording unclear] so we just went on our knees, and they were behind us if you slow down, they will just whip you, and then you were forced to go for some meters; then from there they told us to stop, and then we were told to lie down on our stomachs, and that's what we did. We just lay on our stomachs, and from there they started giving threats: "We are going to rape you, we are going to do this and that to the women, we are going to murder you, so just say your final prayers." So then one of their fellows, the commander of the troop (he seemed to be the captain), he told them "Now today we are not going to kill anyone; we are not going to rape; then what happens when we kill someone? We just want to leave them here and we go away; tonight is not for murder." So they just tore our clothes, what we were wearing, and then they used the same to tie us. Our hands were tied at the back, our legs were tied together, and then also we were gagged; they just gagged us and we couldn't scream, so then from there they dragged every individual to a coffee plant, to a coffee tree, and then we were carried [by our] legs. [Laughs.] The feet were on the trees, and then the head was facing downwards. They left us now there, and they had picked most of our items; those were jackets [recording unclear], good wristwatches, all of them. They had to pick them, so we just went back to the *matatu,* and they stuck there for about thirty minutes. They were just now going through the documents that they picked from the jackets, and from there the trousers and whatever they had they were going through them; the ones they didn't have the need for they threw them away, and then after that they drove off, but before they left, they told the driver not to worry, because where he parks the vehicle is where he will find it [recording unclear]. That means there were people who knew the operation of the *matatu* crew, [because they had told him] "You will just find your vehicle parked at Githurai." So, one of the fellows we were with was seriously injured. Apparently, the guys were speaking Kikuyu and him, he was not a Kikuyu; he couldn't understand their language, so when they start [talking, he was just] opening his mouth [and] was just staring at them and then they would beat him cause they were arguing 'cause he was just ignoring their orders, so he was beaten up, and that was the only person who was seriously injured.

The rest of us, we just got away with minor bruises, especially on the chest, because we were dragged. My shirt had been torn, and then I was dragged around the ground as they

went to tie me at the coffee tree, so that's what made me get injured, but the rest of us were just having some minor injuries. So then going back from there, [we first] climbed [out of the coffee trees and walked toward the other] side, away [from the coffee plantation], back to the road, and to a police station. We didn't know where we were; no one knew where we were, so we just started walking blindly [laughs] from that spot. After walking for some few minutes, we came across some fellows, some watchmen in the farm; those are the ones who guided us to the main road, and from there we walked to the police station in various degrees of nakedness [laughs] because our dresses—whatever we were dressing in—had been cut into ropes to tie us up. So we went to the police station and reported our ordeal. (Personal communication, 2001)

Through comedy, Peter could "objectify the experience and reduce some of the emotional trauma that often accompanies victimization, allowing [victims] to cope with the event" (Wachs 1988:75). Laughter helps Peter and Joyce make light of their ordeal. By shifting between moods and narrators, they help each other come to terms with their experience. Their telling, like Peris's and Diana's, is a testimony to survival; even if they didn't do anything to resist their assailants, their having survived their ordeal and having regaled others with its harrowing details imbues the audience with the confidence that with due patience, similar horrors can be survived.

Conclusion

Matatu PEN illuminate an important element of life in Nairobi, and about Kenyan society. They are summed up in the philosophy of the *matatu*, or *matatuism*, a credo that encourages people to flout the laws, to do whatever it takes to get ahead in life. At the heart of *matatuism* is the *matatu*, which symbolize "exploitation, dehumanisation, deprivation of rights[,] and bad governance[,] as well as . . . the lack of enlightenment and the lack of empowerment of the people" (Loeffler 2000).

The philosophy of *matutuism* extends from the *matatu* into business and politics:

> *Matatuism* is rampant also in our contemporary politics. Laws and rules, civility and taste are disregarded. The ruling parties have elevated *matatu* behavior to policy, by which they want to beat traffic in the great rush hour before elections, [*sic*] they overtake on either side, jump red lights, hoot and blink and coerce, and commit all imaginable and unimaginable offences. (Loeffler 2000)

Kenyans assume that successful politicians and businessmen have gotten where they are by having broken the law, circumvented the rules, and run down their competition. Whether Loeffler's contention holds as an across-the-board rule is debatable, but the prosecution of corruption cases beginning in February of 2003 under a new government points to the fact that wanton graft was a route to wealth for many of Kenya's elite in the previous regime. This culture of impunity had a trickle-down effect, nurturing acts of lawlessness evident in other sectors of society, of which *matatu* violence is the most visible example (Kemuma, Murunga, and Khayesi 2002), with one Nairobi *matatu* aptly sporting the name Anarchy.

PEN are one way through which this anarchy is domesticated and brought under control:

> People not only think repeatedly about a disastrous experience, afterwards, they are also apt to talk a great deal about it. . . . Narration is thus like a play in that one can assume control over the repetition of an event which in its occurrence ran counter to one's wishes. . . . Here is again the turning of passivity into activity: from being the helpless victim[,] one becomes the effective storyteller. . . . The great orderliness of a verbal account as compared with inchoate and bewildering impressions is also reassuring. (Wolfenstein 1957:139)

PEN about commuting on *matatu* form part of Kenyans' narrative tradition. Kenyans tell these stories to friends and relatives to give each other important information about the public transportation system—often its perils, but sometimes its thrills. Through storytelling, Kenyans cope with traumatic experience and manage the anger and frustration that arise from riding on *matatu* and dealing with *manamba*. Storytelling not only restores the teller's self-esteem, but brings order and a sense of control to the chaos that Kenyan public transport has been for a long time.

By sharing these stories, Nairobi residents express a common fear about *matatu* and living in Nairobi—which requires one to be able to put aside fear in order to cope, work, play, and live. Narratives about violence and crime on *matatu* help people distance themselves from fear, accepting the fact that victimization is part of urban life. Through stories of individual experiences with crime and violence, people express and discover their own vulnerability. From this realization, they develop strategies for living. These narratives act as a way of training the city's greenhorns, acculturating them to Nairobi's urbanism. *Matutu* PEN are a demonstration of a society's creation of a creative strategy for handling potentially dangerous events and feelings.

Roger Abrahams argues, "The more personal and conversationally appropriate a story is, the more important it is to discover what is interesting about it" (2005:76). Through the mundane and ubiquitous, we discover the profound and meaningful. This essay is about how Kenyans "keep

company with one another" (Abrahams 2005:2). As an exploration into cultural praxis, into the poetics of everyday life, it illustrates how everyday forms of discourse, such as PEN, constitute a resource for understanding people's shared lives. Through narratives such as these, we can understand how people "energetically construct a social reality out of the details of [their] own experiences" (Abrahams 2005:79).

NOTES

1. A version of the paper was presented at the American Folklore Society Meeting in Anchorage, Alaska, in October of 2001. We would like to acknowledge the support and friendship of our *mwalimu* [teacher], Muigai wa Gachanja.

2. The name *matatu* is Gikuyu in origin, referring to the three ten-cent coins (*mang'otore matatũ*) that was the fare when these vehicles began operating, in the 1950s (Aduwo 1990); however, the word is often presumed to be Kiswahili and is used as such. It is a noncount noun in both languages; therefore, we have not added the English plural ending, as is done in common Kenyan usage. The same applies to *manamba,* since we do not find a compelling reason to use add a pluralizing finite /s/. In writing, both words are given a pluralizing /s/; but in speech, the common practice is not to use it. A new, gaily colored minibus type of *matatu* was previously called *manyanga,* but is now simply called *dot.com,* in keeping with the generational distinction of their clientele. Old *matatu* are popularly dubbed *mtumba,* the name for used clothes that form a thriving trading activity in the open-air market next to Nairobi's Central Bus Station, popularly known as Machakos Airport: it is from there that buses "take off" at dangerous speeds to all corners of Kenya.

3. The artists who do this work are known throughout the *matatu* business as *designers.* Their work, including the names, is known as *designs,* and is never called *pictures.* Those we talked to hold fine-art diplomas, accounting for the perceptible improvement in the quality of *matatu* designs since 2002. See Mungai 2004.

4. KBS was sold off to a consortium of local investors in 1998. The City Council of Nairobi no longer holds shares in the new company, Metro Services, and thus the basis for which KBS had been granted a monopoly no longer exists and has been challenged in court by the Matatu Welfare Association and private bus owners.

5. There have been reports of one or two female *manamba* and a few female owner-drivers, but this job is socially defined as a male-only space. It is mandatory for the owner's name and address to be displayed on the *matatu* door; and as these names indicate, women own a significant number of these *matatu,* but do not run them.

6. These orders translate as "sit properly," "get off," "push," and "bring the money," respectively.

7. As of 3 October 2003, rules imposed by the Minister of Transportation, John Michuki, seem to have curtailed the practice of overcrowding. Standing passengers are no longer allowed. Since we collected most of our narratives before the implementation of these rules, imagine crowded conditions while reading these narratives.

8. In September 2002, the *manamba* of a Limuru-bound *matatu* narrated to us how his *matatu* had been hijacked and, displaying the welts on his clean-shaven scalp,

demonstrated how he had been pistol-whipped just under an hour before. He and his mate had not bothered to report the crime to the police, as reporting it would have been a waste of time; the police are seen as acting in cahoots with such criminals. This view is confirmed by an official Kenya Police admission that rogue officers acted in concert with criminals who hijacked the *matatu* of those who refused to offer bribes or protection money (Muiruri and Njeru 2003). The police have a thorough grasp of the spots most vulnerable to hijackings (Kahura 2003b).

9. Throughout Kenya, the Kiswahili word for tea, *chai,* is the euphemism for a bribe. Alternatively, it is known, again in Kiswahili, as KK, short for *kitu kidogo* "something small," a phrase widely disseminated by Eric Wainaina's 2002 award-winning popular song "Nchi ya Kitu Kidogo" (Country of Something Small). As of December 2002, the standard bribe at a police check was 50 Kenya shillings (U.S. $0.64); however, this was besides the protection money paid to police every morning. This figure was arrived at by checking the denomination of the note the *manamba* crumpled in their fists for onward passage to the police every time they were stopped, on both city and noncity routes. The more lucrative routes tended to attract a higher bribe amount—a phenomenon also reported by Khayesi (2002). Taking the bribe to the police is called "seeing" them. An officially commissioned investigation of corruption within the police force, conducted by its anticorruption unit found officers of the Traffic Department the most corrupt in the force (Muiruri 2002).

10. For information on *mungiki,* see Anderson 2002; Kagwanja 2003; Khayesi 2002; Mathiu 1999; Muganda 2001; Muiruri and Njeru 2003; Mulumby 1998a, 1998b; Muune 1998; Opala 1998; Wabala 2003; and Wamue 2001.

11. A few kilometers from the city center on Thika Road at Ruaraka is the Alsopps Descent, where a bridge passes over the River Ruaka. Every time an accident occurs at that spot, rumors begin doing the rounds, particularly in *matatu,* to the effect that thirsty "evil spirits" were abroad looking for human blood at the time of the accident. "Gods of the river" have been blamed by the Meru people for numerous mishaps that have happened on the Nithi River bridge since 1985 (Murigi 2003). It is common knowledge that such "accidents" arise from some form of visible structural fault in the road design, human error, poor driving conditions, and equally poorly maintained vehicles, particularly *matatu* (Kahura 2003a; Kimani and Ng'etich 2003; Mkawale 2003); however, talk about bloodthirsty spirits always comes up in conversations centering on road accidents involving massive loss of life, particularly within the context of Satanism, a lively part of current Kenyan public discourse.

12. The word Georgina uses here, *kuhanda,* is in Sheng. It is borrowed from Gikuyu and refers to a quarrel, marked by rising tempers.

13. There is a joke here on porridge. Some of the cheap locally produced brews are marketed as *chakula kinywaji* 'food drink', thick as gruel. Many *matatu* drivers, particularly in Nairobi's Eastlands, will take a helping of it in the morning to serve a dual purpose: to kill fatigue and ward off hunger.

14. We think the idea of distance is important. *Matatu* PEN put distance—spatial, temporal, emotional, psychological—between the narrator and the events. This distance enables a resumption of control.

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