

**‘NAI-ROB-ME’ ‘NAI-BEG-ME’ ‘NAI-SHANTY’
HISTORICIZING SPACE-SUBJECTIVITY CONNECTIONS IN NAIROBI
FROM ITS RUINS**

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Abstract

What can personal histories from poor urban settlements in Nairobi tell us about the history and future of this city? How do these entangled life stories belie vogue narratives of phenomena such as rural-urban migration, urban-development and postcoloniality, while also shedding light on the durability of empire? Through an ethnographic and archival exploration of the poor urban settlement of Mathare, located close to central Nairobi, I argue that urban planning emerges from within an assemblage of imperial political, social, economic and ecological ideas and practices, to produce what I term ecologies of exclusion. In essence, these planning interventions, materializing from within epistemologies of empire, co-constitutively manifest as neglect and force in Nairobi's margins to create and sustain inequality in certain neighbourhoods—its ruins. In addition, I show how, both now and in the past, this mode of urban governance conjures up and sustains negative stereotypical subjectivities about certain populations in order to legitimize inequalities within its formal spatial management practices. Furthermore, contemporary colonial modes of urban planning require a constant and ever more forceful militarization of poor urban spaces. Notwithstanding this now naturalized violent space-subjectivity enterprise, those who have long been categorized as the “robbers,” “beggars” and “shanty dwellers” of Nairobi engage with and emerge from these ruins of empire through unexpected ethical and political projects. And, from within their urban struggles, they render alternative subjectivities of self and space that articulate more grounded narrations of the history and possible futures of this city.

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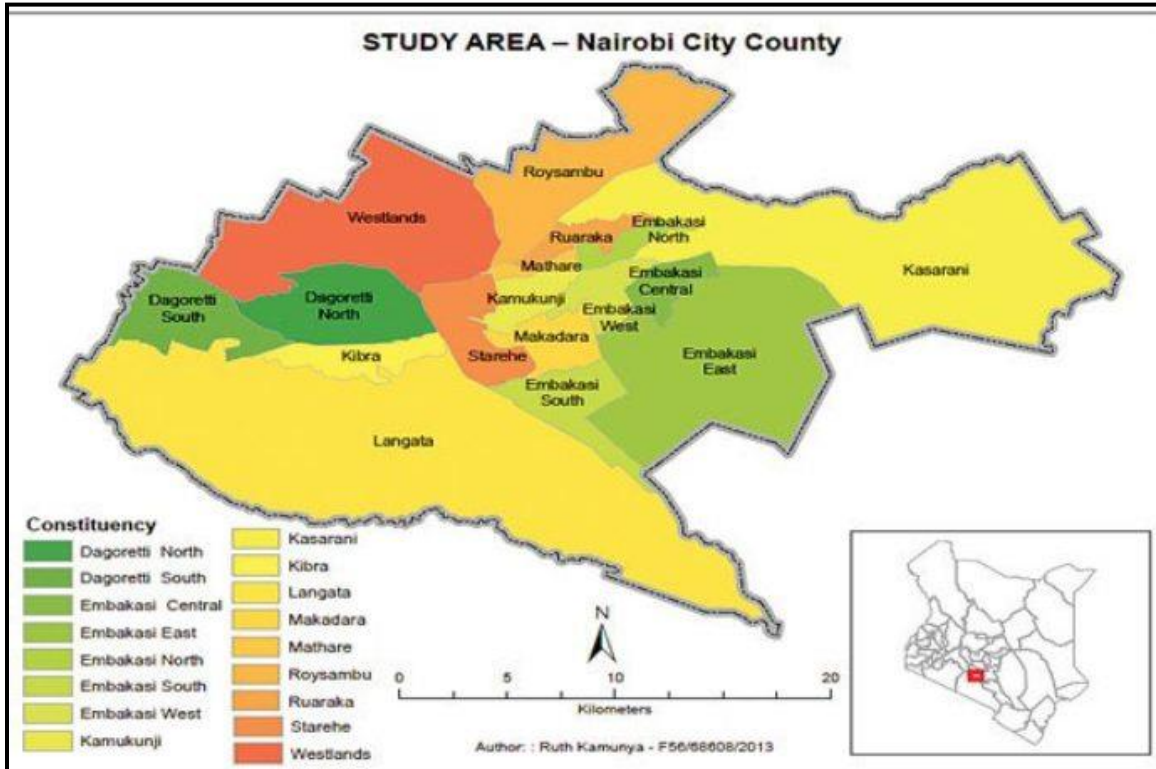
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Figure 1: Aerial View of Mathare, 2017.



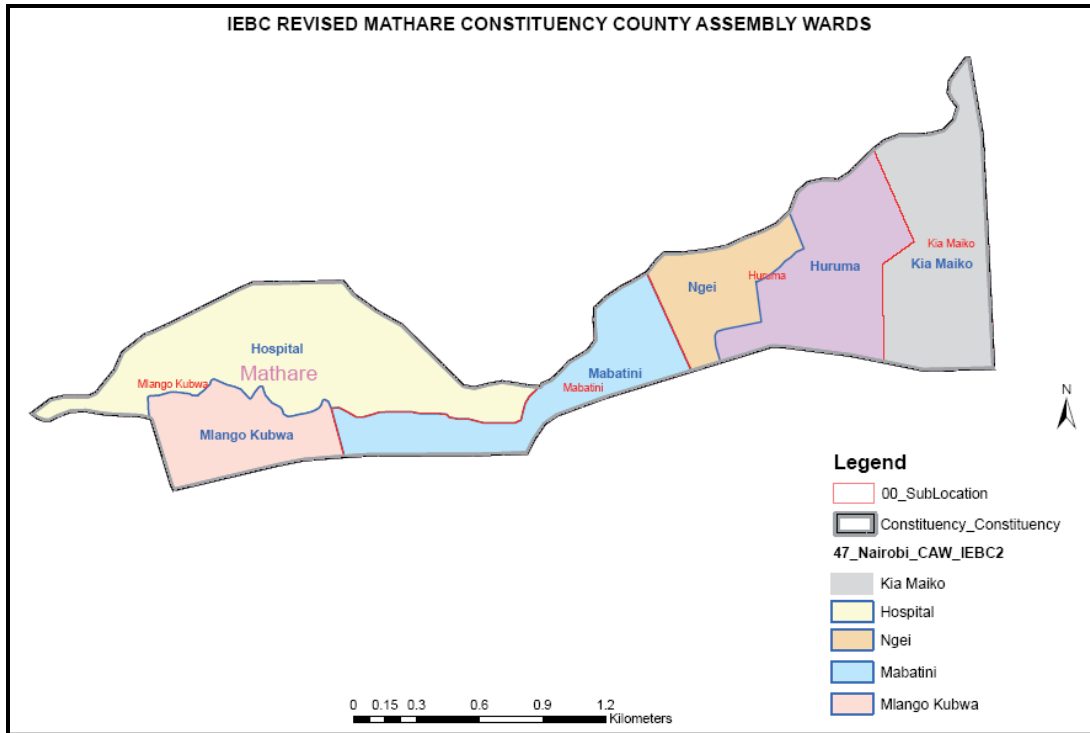
Source: Google maps (2017).

Figure 2: Map of Nairobi Parliamentary Constituencies



Source: Kenya News: <http://kenyannews.co.ke/county-news/jubilee-nasa-in-life-and-death-combat-for-city/> (2017)

Figure 3: Map of Mathare Wards



Source: Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission (IEBC) Kenya (2013).

Introduction: “Mathare is not Nairobi”

The rust was a gift from rain, a gift from the neglect of politics.
Kojo Laing, *Search Sweet Country*

We continue to inhabit the logic, inscribed in space and sustained at gunpoint, of the colonial city. The spatial order that structures who counts, and who doesn't, continues to be fundamentally racist. There is no plan for us to move into a post-colonial urban order. In so far as there is a plan being pieced together, frequently in practice rather than policy and legislation, its logic is clear. To contain the situation by recourse to the eminently colonial strategy of normalising violence as a central tool of governance for certain categories of people.

Richard Pithouse, “They die there, it matters not where, nor how.”

But, in most ways, African cities remain ruined and generous in their capacity to remake the times to come.

AbdouMaliq Simone, “Waiting in African cities.”

I met Mwanake early one Saturday morning after having waited almost interminably for a *matatu* to take me downtown from Karen. I was definitely late: public transportation is, at best, erratic from the leafy suburb where my father has chosen to live out his retirement.¹ Still, what was more intriguing than my late arrival in a ramshackle *matatu* from a very posh quarter was that my interlocutor was waiting for me close to central Nairobi. This part of the city is quite different from Mathare, which was his home, the place where most of the circuits of his life were conducted, and which he and his peers referred to as *Ghetto*². I definitely needed an explanation for this.

We had decided to meet at the Tom Mboya statue recently erected close to the National Archives. This monument, emblematic of the post-independence and post- “second liberation”³ formal rearticulation of Kenya’s political history (see Larsen 2011), appeared to be a deliberate placation by the government. I read it, as other Nairobi dwellers probably did, as a strategic

¹ I talk about my positionality and its impact on the research process in Chapter 1.

² In this dissertation I take up the use of the term “Ghetto” as it is employed by (principally young) residents to reference a disadvantaged area of the city, but one that produces its own positive socialities that enable what Van Stapele (2015) calls “ghetto pride.”

³ Second liberation is a term frequently used by civil society activists in Kenya to denote the struggle for multipartism, the results of which led to the reinstatement of a multi-party system in 1992, and the watershed removal of Daniel Arap Moi, the second post-independence president who ruled for 24 years, in 2002.

memorialization of one of the less contentious non-Kikuyu public figures who were killed mysteriously during the early Kenyatta regime. Erected in the general area where this individual was assassinated, this monument also had the unintended effect of being a boundary marker, ossifying the border that signals the end of *tao ya juu* or “uptown”—which is formally referred to as the central business district (CBD), —and the beginning of *tao ya chini*, or “lowertown”—a geography of higher density and less “order” where illegal and legal transactions are often indistinguishable.

Just behind the statue bearing the same name, and a stone’s throw away from the Hilton Hotel, Tom Mboya Street marks the beginning of what Wa Mungai (2013) refers to as the “third world”: the many warrens of small businesses, matatu terminals and the alcohol, crime and sex dens popularized in Kenyan literature from the 1970s onwards (Nelson 1997; Kurtz 1998). Through their own situated lexicon reflecting verticality and importance, many of my interlocutors had branded the more prosperous side of the Tom Mboya border “uptown,” and its less well-off neighbour to the East “lowertown.”⁴ Since they seemed more at ease in this “third world,” it was here that I met many of my research consultants when they came to this part of the city. Mathare, as quite a few of them would tell me, was not the *true* Nairobi, such that a mere fifteen-minute car journey was seen to index completely different urban settings, different countries, another world. And when we did actually “arrive” in Nairobi, we would navigate many of the estuaries of this constantly overflowing part of town—spilling over with people, traffic and the din of every kind of animated enterprise—to attend to whatever goal we had scheduled for that day.

⁴ Both uptown and lowertown are my English translations of what would read in the Kiswahili youth slang, or *Sheng*, as *tao ya juu* and *tao ya chini* respectively.

Having thought that today would proceed more or less along the lines of these previous city forays, I was therefore surprised to hear that Mwanake had spent the morning posted so close to the avenues of uptown, and that it was here that he and I would pass the hours together. As it turned out, he was here awaiting remuneration for his participation in a drainage project funded (and by all accounts ill-conceived) by the County of Nairobi⁵ that he had maneuvered himself into getting selected for. Against the backdrop of looming El Niño rains, the County had allocated a significant sum of money for “preparation” in the city. What this looked like in Mathare was the extension of a long trench alongside Juja Road (the only fully paved street dividing Mathare from Eastleigh) but no actual infrastructure development or improvement for residents of Mathare itself. Never mind that when they came, these rains would have minimal impact on the thoroughfare—the flooding, rock and mudslides and cholera that barreled through this former quarry generated much more devastation in residents’ houses and lives than on this road. What was also unclear was why, after so many seasons of heavy showers and the desperation these had brought on, these palliative efforts were happening only now. Someone, somewhere, clearly wanted to score some political and/or monetary points.

Whatever the motivation, this was the remedial action proposed by city managers. And because of a combination of personal and social characteristics—his leadership and mobilization abilities, family and ethnic connections and his reputation as, in his own words, a “former gangster”—Mwanake was able to get himself onto the roster of the few Mathare residents from each ward who would be involved in digging the roadside gully. His cohort met early every

⁵ With the implementation of the 2010 constitution in 2013, a process heralded by elections conducted in accordance with the provisions of this new constitution, Kenya took up devolution and its eight former provinces were split into 47 counties, with Nairobi province becoming the County of Nairobi. One of the core motivations behind devolution was to bring government closer to “the people” and enable a more equitable sharing of national wealth across the country. While this has happened to an extent, devolution has also signalled a host of other problems, and corruption and ethnic bias, the most cited ills to be targeted by devolution, have not disappeared from government operations.

morning for a few weeks at the Chief's office in Mlango Kubwa, equipped with gumboots and their own spades. They would then walk train-like to the section of Juja Road that needed attending to that day, and from there, when no one was watching, would duck in and out surreptitiously to attend to other business.

I was to see more of Mwanake's jockeying abilities in the days to come: he had a tenacious agility that was locally referred to as "hustling" (see Thieme 2013; Kimari 2015) and which he described once as just "trying and trying." These dogged skills were further evidenced by his participation in the China-funded and managed construction of the County trunk sewage line that had to pass alongside Mathare and its river (in this role he could take on tasks as diverse as "finding women" for the Chinese foremen as well as mitigating the calamity of eviction for those who lived by the river's bank), and the allegiances he made with politicians he did not believe in. In these latter machinations, he would entangle himself deeper and deeper in the shifting loyalties and paradoxical alliances of both big- and small-P politics. Most of all, though, it was his dexterity and power as a community leader with a key role in various youth associations that I saw most often, and that saved me on more than one occasion.

Walking with Mwanake from the Tom Mboya statue and in the CBD brought a different rhythm to my everyday navigations of this city. Although I was usually quite relaxed and confident when in uptown, today I was to mirror the aloofness of my interlocutor. Unlike his pace in Mathare, here his strides were long and determined, and he bore an intense countenance as if expecting harassment just for being there. Throughout our movements, I struggled simultaneously to keep up with his step while also seeking to decipher the meaning of his unusual comportment.

As we crossed Koinange Street on the way to *Uhuru* (Freedom) Park, to “get clean air” at his suggestion, Mwanake pointed in the direction of the nightclub he had frequented when he was a “gangster,” but that he and his friends would later abandon because the presence of “too many politicians” made them all uneasy. He chuckled as he talked about the time his mother, a part-time illegal alcohol brewer and street cleaner, saw him face off with the police as she swept a city avenue close to where we were now standing. After witnessing her only surviving son (the other had been killed by the police a few years earlier) in such an animated car shoot-out with security forces, she had to spend a few weeks in the hospital recovering from shock. Her medical stay, he explained, was one of the main reasons Mwanake had “reformed.”

It was not lost on him that the real work of El Niño preparation was being done by Mathare-based village and ward committees. And even as he worked to dig the drain and was being paid a minimum amount of money by a middle-woman who, it appeared, may not even have worked for the county government, he was very aware of the massive corruption rumoured to be an intricate part of these disaster management allocations. As but one example, the government’s financial plan for the potential victims of El Niño included thousands of bars of soap that were budgeted to cost 37,500 Kenya shillings (KES) or about \$370 USD (Ndanu, 2015) each, while the average monthly wage in Kenya stood at 6500 KES (\$65 USD)—just one-sixth of a single proposed unit of soap (Macharia 2013).

Since its early days, Nairobi’s administration has not been immune to these accusations of financial malfeasance. Anderson (2005) details how in the 1950s colonial city administrators used public monies to build swimming pools for their own residences, and engaged in numerous nepotistic contracting ventures. More recently, in 2015 the Governor of Nairobi, Evans Kidero, reportedly allocated fifty million KES to give the city a “face lift” for U.S. President Obama’s

“homecoming,” a significant portion of which went towards planting a few kilometres of what has come to be known as “Kidero grass” (BBC 2015). Mwanake, though, knew intimately the follies of urban governance. He was one of a third generation of Mathare dwellers—his grandmother arrived in her teens and his mother was born there (see Chapter 3 for more on these matrilineal households in Mathare)—and none of his family members could remember having heard of any great amount of money being spent in the area where they lived.⁶ Moreover, the paltry thousands allocated to extend the Juja Road drain stood in stark contrast to both formal and informal County of Nairobi allocations, whether destined for city grass or otherwise.

The reasons for this neglect, for being “forgotten,” were a medley of ethnic, social and political circumstances that Mwanake thoughtfully relayed to me as we sat in the park and waited for the phone alert that would announce the arrival of his wages at the county government office. Sipping mango juice we had just bought in a middle-class café that he had only just heard about, and watching me drink coffee from this same café I was ashamed to know so intimately, he told me:

Mathare people are *Matigari*. We are the people who have remained who have the bad blood of *Mau Mau* and that is why they have forgotten us because our blood is bad. Especially these children of single mothers, they say we need to go. But we come together, and that bad blood is running through our veins.

⁶ The only region of Mathare that has, to my knowledge, received significant attention and monies directed towards improvement is the 4A area that was the focus of an Anglican Church led slum upgrading scheme started in the early 1990s, and that collapsed due to violent resident opposition in the early 2000s. Rodriguez-Torres (2010) details the controversy surrounding this project that was catalyzed, to a great extent, by the revelation that the government had transferred ownership of this area of Mathare to the Anglican Church, which had advocated for the German development monies that funded this project. It is important to note that the Kenyan government only came on board in 1994, about three years after the improvement discussions had started (Rodriguez-Torres 2010). I visited Mathare 4A a few times during my two-year fieldwork period and saw the stone houses, though not in the number or quality anticipated by residents, that were erected as part of this Church-led project. Notwithstanding the fact that the residents, who are predominantly Luo (this area is often referred to as the “Luo side”), have acquired some stone houses, in many cases they are smaller than the 10 square-metres of those in other areas. More importantly, like the majority of their Mathare neighbours they still do not have formal water or sanitation facilities.

He later added: “You know Mathare is not even on the map of Nairobi?”⁷

Image 1: Uhuru Park



Source: Nairobians.net (2014)

⁷ It was widely acknowledged that Mathare is not included in the general maps of Nairobi, at least the ones sold in shops. Quite a few residents remarked on this to me as though to further emphasize that this area was not in Nairobi: to stress how they had been so completely forgotten that they were not even included in city maps despite the existence of Mathare for much longer than many other neighbourhoods. When I asked a UN Habitat employee and planner, who works extensively in Mathare, about this he stated: “Yes [...] don’t forget that if Mathare now appears in the Nairobi city map it is because of a community map. Mathare was never there; it was a green area in the maps that were there, and you can still buy the maps at the tourist shops and Mathare valley will be a fantastic green area crossed by two rivers, you know, close to a forest, and it looks like a very nice place to live. So all the slums appearing recently in maps, it is because of the modern output of community mapping [by residents] that has led to the city acknowledging them and addressing their issues” (Claudio Torres, personal communication). As I argue throughout this dissertation, and confirmed by these statements highlighting cartographic neglect, Mathare has been formerly neglected but it is residents who are putting their home, quite literally, on the map.

While sitting in the park we were approached by a number of street children who appeared to be living with their families amidst the bougainvillea hedges and the shelter of the jacaranda and acacia trees. Mwanake would talk with those who visited us and discourage some of their activities with the empathy and admonishment of someone who understands and also cares: “Stop sniffing glue, you are a beauty!” he told one young woman who asked for the remains of his mango juice. He knew these young people and many others in a similar position. They were part of the legions he referenced when he expressed: “If you stand on Juja road at 9 pm you will see the whole world coming to Mathare—even the street person with their bag!” These were figures of oscillating fortunes whose urban histories started in or close to Mathare, and who remain connected to the area. This urban crowd includes domestic workers, construction and factory workers, sex workers, matatu industry employees, hawkers, street cleaners, and others, who would walk home after a long day at work, sometimes, as one focus group revealed, to find that home no longer existed, having been consumed by fire, flooding, or a County bulldozer’s claws.

In the majority of our extended conversations, Mwanake would weave in critical reflections on Nairobi. Granted, this apparently deliberate urban pedagogy may have been partly due to my positionality, my ability to come in to and leave Mathare as I pleased and the ways this highlighted the stark contrast between our material conditions; a charge that was furthered when he said to me: “You do not sleep how I sleep, and you do not eat what I have to eat.” Along with highlighting our differences, however, the way these stream-of-consciousness commentaries arose made me think that they were not solely, if at all, denouncements rehearsed for my benefit, but rather part of his everyday speech. While they may have been (re)framed in a way my middle-class ears could understand, it was not only for me that he said: “Nairobi is the

most beautiful city in East Africa. But only 25 percent are super rich and 75 percent fill up the ghettos.” Or: “You know, Wangui, this [Mathare] is the valley of death, you know how hard it is to get a ticket to uptown? It is like going abroad. Very few manage to make it out.”

Indeed, very few residents are ever able to leave. Some of my interlocutors felt that they were so low in every hierarchy that there was “nowhere left to fall” (Bafata, personal communication). Yet, even in the face of daily struggles they would still grasp for little “lines of flight” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987) to confront what could be interpreted as their “continued dehumanization” (Vargas 2006, 49). The escapes sought were at once haunting, tragic, contradictory and humorous. In one instance, one of Mwanake’s friends told me, laughing, that, yes, Mathare people are the overburdened labourers who hold up the city, the linchpin for its every machination, but they are also the people who “give the police work!” On another day he added: “These are people who don’t follow instructions. If you put a sign here that says don’t piss, people will piss, and what’s more they will even poo!”

Mwanake finally got the phone call about his wages but it was premature, a false alarm, as we were to find out later. As soon as it came in, the voice on the other end pronouncing “she is coming,” we rushed to the county government office and encountered at least a dozen or so other residents awaiting the same outcome on the veranda. The fact that the people who had planted the grass for Obama, three months before the drainage work in Mathare began, were also there to get paid, was not a cause for inspiration. But, still, we bided our time with expectation. *Hi vita tutashinda na hope*—this war we will win with hope—was the command from a previous community meeting that was to haunt us as we waited. In the same position, we were to find out, was Tasha, who we found sitting on a stool placed against the wall of an older and seemingly vacant colonial era building. She was using its slightly extended roof awning to shelter both

herself and the toddler in her arms from the afternoon sun. Tasha could not have been more than twenty-five years of age but was already a widow. We greeted mother and child as we passed and Mwanake later told me that her husband, a close acquaintance and peer, had been killed in what he called “friendly fire” (for more on this war-inspired lexicon see Chapter 5).

We finally found some shady steps to sit on close to the VIP entrance of the main county office. Interestingly, we were now directly across the road from the Kenyatta International Convention Centre (KICC); a convening hub known for hosting many local and international conferences, and the workplace of senators since 2013. This building was commissioned by Mzee Jomo Kenyatta, Kenya’s first president (and father of the current president), in the late 1960s, and finally finished in 1973. With a height of 28 floors, it was the tallest building in Kenya until the early 2000s, and undoubtedly existed not only as a symbol of the senior Kenyatta’s rule, but also of Kenya’s reach for postcolonial modernity through pastiche (Larsen 2011, 2012). Jackson, another interlocutor, had mentioned that many of the rocks used to construct this centre had come from Mathare when it still had some functioning quarries. Although the temporalities of the building of this centre and Mathare’s quarry era did not necessarily align in either my head or the archives, the fact that Jackson associated Nairobi’s most iconic building with the materiality of his home, a ruin, was symbolic. This is especially significant when one considers that some of Jackson’s friends from Mathare were almost prevented from entering the KICC grounds during a local festival a year before, until they were saved by one of the organizers, and likely would be completely barred now despite its importance as an everyday local tourist site.

“If this woman does not come soon we will riot and throw stones in town!” declared Mwanake. We were now tired of waiting, and as much as I wanted to support my friend (and

briefly entertained the possibility of throwing a few rocks in the direction of the County office), I was going to be late for the weekly gathering of Mekatilili Movement in Mathare. Fearing this, I decided to leave and told Mwanake that I would give his apologies to those at the meeting. He said he understood and told me that if he got the 17,000 KES (\$170 USD) payment he was expecting, we could later go for reggae night at a very infamous lowertown nightclub called Monte Carlo. Only for that reason did I hope that he would not get paid.

For the second time that day I was late for a meeting. Mekatilili's gathering was well under way by the time I arrived, but I had not missed much because the issues on the agenda were always the same: more cases of police harassment, extrajudicial killings and land grabbing. Every day there was a new sequence of events that brought all of these grave phenomena together in an apparently new instantiation. However, on closer examination the provenance of these weighty spatial configurations was revealed as one long, unending event of imperial "duress" (Stoler 2016) in Mathare.

By the time Mwanake showed up an hour or so after I did, the meeting was more or less concluded. He seemed distant and sullen, and when I met him outside as we all prepared to go our separate ways, he expressed anger that despite his long wait at the county office no one had been paid. He was, however, not surprised; it was far from the first time that the city had forgotten Mathare.

A Forgotten Ruin

I had and was to have many days like the one described above, filled with hours of seemingly mundane walks and conversations with interlocutors. These interactions always seemed to bring us back to their space and to what it meant for their lives to be from Mathare—how, despite the

many rhizomatic⁸ trajectories of their everyday existence, their origins were both a key determinant of how they were received by others, and an interpolation within Nairobi writ large that demanded a response. While other local “slums” are subject to similar representations, Mathare is consistently constructed as a more extreme immoral geography. In this sense, there are definitely hierarchies of (im)morality applied to Mathare that legitimize its exclusion vis-à-vis other poor urban settlements and Nairobi broadly. For instance, whereas residents of the more renowned Kibera are more likely to be seen as “deserving poor,” who at one time had the “will of the crown” to remain on their land (see Parsons 1997; see also Meirelles’ 2005 feature film *The Constant Gardener*), Mathare is often conjured as the place where “the real thugs live.”⁹ These criminals are depicted as the children of “wicked women” (see Chapter 3), whose only destiny is to become the robbers, beggars, and shanty dwellers of Nairobi.

My core objective in this dissertation is to examine how Mathare residents think about being both “forgotten” and criminalized, and how the narratives they weave indicate what they experience as the “durability of empire” (Stoler 2013, 2016). As part of this process I draw attention to how their experiences in Mathare sit in tension with the expectations contained in recent planning documents for Nairobi as a whole, such as the *Integrated Urban Development Masterplan for the City of Nairobi* (NIUPLAN) (County of Nairobi and the Japanese International Cooperation Agency [JICA] 2014),¹⁰ the Kenyan government’s *Nairobi Metro 2030: A World Class African Metropolis* (2008) and other, similarly aspirational, national

⁸ I use rhizome in the sense of Deleuze and Guattari (1987) to highlight the multiple and crosscutting processes that produce and are central to any event. Rhizomes can take on many unanticipated directions.

⁹ I attribute this phrase to Francesco Colona, a doctoral student at the University of Amsterdam, who heard it spoken by the private security guards he was patrolling with during his fieldwork in Nairobi in 2015.

¹⁰ Even if it supposedly integrates meaningful participation at every stage (NIUPLAN 2014), in the 221 pages of the main planning document we still do not seem to see or hear much about the 60–70% of the population of Nairobi who live in the poor zones that take up only 6% of its geography. Instead we encounter the globally sanctioned trademarks of what a city should look like: the fervent ambition to be “world-class” that endures as a “regulating fiction” for much of urban life (Robinson 2002).

documents with titles such as *Vision 2030*, and regional projects such as the *Programme for Infrastructure Development in Africa* (PIDA) which is currently being implemented by the African Development Bank (AfDB, n.d.). In both dialogue and practice, these designs energize a “world-class aesthetic discourse” (Ghertner 2011), while also bringing forth the painful realization that a 42-kilometre superhighway will be built faster than a house for a single mother. As one example, the *Nairobi Metro 2030 Vision Plan* sets a goal as definitive as having a “Nairobi Philharmonic Orchestra” (Government of Kenya 2008, 79), but makes no pronouncements whatsoever about the exact number of toilets, clean water taps, clinics and access bridges that will be established for the city’s most vulnerable inhabitants.

It is my position that Mathare residents’ narrativizations of their lives in the context of hypermodern city developments highlight what they see as the continuation of empire. These grounded discourses are local “worldings”¹¹ contesting the ongoing colonial project that I theorize here, informed by Stoler (2008, 2013, 2016), as a process of imperial ruination in the *longue durée*. When this colonial enterprise is incorporated into the governance of space, in both discursive and material forms, it creates a ruin and simultaneously upholds a symbiosis between Mathare space and its residents, essentially engendering a space-subjectivity enterprise that in a “cognitive feedback loop” (Vargas 2006, 51, 63) maps the decaying environment onto residents’ bodies and subjectivities. In such a process, residents are constructed through a space portrayed as decaying and degenerate, and vice-versa. And since this co-constitution of residents and their geography is established over decades, urban planning both formally and informally (see Chapter 2) is influenced by these entangled ideas of space and subjects. It is my argument, therefore, that

¹¹ Here I use the term *worlding* in the sense of Roy and Ong (2011, 11-12) to “identify the projects and practices that instantiate some vision of the world in formation.” These are heterogeneous and ambitious everyday practices that remap power because they “creatively imagine and shape alternative social visions and configurations—that is, ‘worlds’—than what already exist in a given context.” For a specific focus on worldings in Africa see Simone (2001a).

since urban governance is animated overwhelmingly by these co-determining ideas about and practices for Mathare space and its subjects, it is fundamentally a space-subjectivity enterprise.

I build on these local narratives of home, these grounded historical analyses, to show how the stigmatization of Mathare and its residents derives from colonial notions and practices of politics, economics, ecology and society that assemble together to territorialize the city of Nairobi. Borrowing from the work of Deleuze and Guattari (1987), I use the concept of assemblage to capture heterogeneous phenomena, broadly categorized here as political, social, ecological and economic, that in their comingling produce Nairobi, and chart itineraries that may bleed into these groupings or generate surplus beyond them. In so doing I take up assemblage as both a descriptor and a concept, since it refuses the privileging of any one factor in the making of this city in favour of shedding light on the “uneven topography of trajectories that cross or engage each other to different extents over time” (Anderson and McFarlane 2011, 125).

As a case in point, when an interlocutor shouts, as one did while we stood by the ruins of a suspicious conflagration in Bondeni ward, that “Uhuru is the cause of this fire,” he is not simply charging the current president with watching while residents live in inadequate and highly flammable houses. Neither is he merely referencing that this combustibility is exacerbated by a high population density, chronic lack of water or even the fact that neither the military airbase across the road nor the Nairobi fire brigade came to their rescue.¹² Rather, in emplacing Uhuru Kenyatta firmly as the progenitor of this fire this interlocutor is spinning a historical account that upholds Uhuru as the “rot that remains” (Stoler 2008) from the colonial period. The current president is the son of the first post-independence president, Mzee Jomo Kenyatta, and as

¹² The fire brigade rarely comes to Mathare, although it is less than four kilometres away from the main fire station. Most recently when it did come in December 2016, in response to a fire that had engulfed over 50 households and displacing over 500 people, it arrived late and with no water, and so was promptly dismissed by angry residents who sent it on its way with a barrage of stones.

the senior Kenyatta's legacy is increasingly problematized in the present, he is being transformed in perception from an icon of anti-colonial struggle into a Mau Mau traitor — a turncoat of the independence struggle.¹³ Because of this betrayal, the children and grandchildren of those who were part of the Kenya Land and Freedom Army now swell the ranks of both the urban and rural landless and poor (Wa Thiong'o 1987). When these descendants explicitly take up the identity of *Matigari*, as Mwanake did while we were sitting in the ironically named Freedom Park, they situate themselves in opposition to those with power in the government, whom they see as the children of British loyalists who stole the independence that their elite parents neither fought for nor wanted. Therefore, when Uhuru Kenyatta's name is evoked by the ruins of a fire in Mathare, he ultimately personifies imperial ruination in the *longue durée*.

Yet, despite the reinstantiations of empire in their everyday life, residents, and principally young residents, draw from the *Matigari* identity and their own experiences of survival to assemble what I contend is an ethico-political project for space and subjects. Informed by what they understand as the widespread unethical depiction of their space and person, residents reinterpret themselves in space through a grounded ethics informed by the histories of this locale. This re-estimation of themselves, against the backdrop of the negative stereotypes about Mathare and its residents, is at once an ethical project enacted through and because of space, as well as a political undertaking since the situated reconfiguration of the hegemonic ethics imposed on them targets renewed space and subjectivities. To these ends, since they live through the negative space-subjectivity enterprise that is urban spatial management in Mathare and Nairobi as a whole, they take up co-constitutive spatial and identity practices that allow a reframing of how they and their space are hailed. These efforts help establish an alternative socio-political consciousness about who they are, what they go through because they live in Mathare, and how

¹³ The Mau Mau were also known as the Kenya Land and Freedom Army.

their life choices should be understood. What is more, this multidimensional and co-indicative ethical and political project deterritorializes the legitimacy of hegemonic city regimes and narratives. These are, for example, currently fashionable tropes about “rural-urban migration,” “urban-development,” and “postcoloniality” that circulate about the city. Akin to the movements of “peasants, sharecroppers, and squatters” that Roy (2011, 327) discusses, this project enrolls their geography and experiences to make “visible the displacement and dispossession” inherent in the models and tropes of urbanization taken up by city managers. I contend that when the stories residents tell about themselves and their space are combined with the important and imperfect material work they take up in order to improve their environment, they render alternative subjectivities of self and space that articulate more grounded and fuller narrations of the history and possible futures of Mathare and the city as a whole.

To convey this grounded narrativization of urban planning in Mathare, I tie together phenomena that can at first glance appear too disparate to be interrelated: pigs and water, cholera and extrajudicial killings, teenage pregnancies and access to toilets, house fires and gangsters. I do this to convey the rhizomatic but associated (re)instantiations of empire that residents identify as associated and that come together to shape Mathare space and subjects. In making these connections, I put forward three principal arguments in this dissertation.

The first of these is that urban planning is shaped by an imperial assemblage constituted by colonial ideas and practices of ecology, economics, politics and society. When these notions and practices come together in Nairobi, they territorialize a particular organization of space, a process of *imperial ruination*. This is an ordering of space that produces not only *ruins*, but also what I identify in this dissertation as *ecologies of exclusion*. These dynamics embedded in territory come into being and are supplemented by certain ideas, within urban planning discourse

and practices, about the people who live in these spaces. This co-functioning of environmental dynamics and representations of residents allows me to understand urban spatial management in Nairobi as a *space-subjectivity enterprise*. In essence, the polluted and uneven geography of Mathare, enabled by a colonial assemblage, comes to emblemize its residents, and this imagined symbiosis between the poor environment and the ostensibly poor character of residents informs what I term here an *urban spatial management of both neglect and force* in Mathare.

Following on this, my second main contention is that this neglect is evident in the lack of basic services in the area, despite its existence for over eight decades, and moreover that force is increasingly apparent in the intensifying hyper-policing and militarization of Mathare's space. This contrasts dramatically with the backdrop of "world-class" city aspirations that have proliferated in what is seen as a neoliberal period.¹⁴ The increased cases of extrajudicial killings, illegal detentions and police harassment evidence the worsening trend of militarized violence in these ruins, and ultimately registering the police as de facto urban forms of infrastructure and infrastructure management.

The third chief claim of this dissertation is that notwithstanding the violence of both neglect and force, residents seek to *detrterritorialize* these normalized spatial practices, even for a moment, by (*re*)territorializing a situated ethico-political project intended to contest the multi-scale effects of urban planning in Mathare. Their project draws on alternative histories and subjecthoods that are directed towards, and also supplemented by, practical efforts for spatial improvement. This work is comprised of both "machinic assemblages" and "collective

¹⁴ My use of the term here does not mean I read it as happening the same way everywhere. Heeding the injunctions by Roy and Ong (2011) and Weinstein (2014), in their discussions of the global in Asia and elsewhere, I am partial to their understanding of neoliberalism as a global process that is provincialized in different contexts.

assemblages of enunciation” (Deleuze and Guattari 1987).¹⁵ Together these “messy-labours” (Simone 2015) of residents and their consciousness raising subjectivities and lexicon(s) greatly impact both the Mathare environment and its residents’ senses of selves, and all these actions potentiate different histories and futures for those who have long been characterized as the “robbers” “beggars” and “shanty dwellers” of Nairobi in its entirety.

Brief Literature Review of Nairobi

Over the last few decades, there has been an increase in literature, from both academics and advocates, which interrogates various aspects of Nairobi’s spatial organization. For the most part, this work adheres to the “developmental” trend in studies on the urban spaces of the global south that Roy and Ong (2011) and Abram and Weszkalnys (2011, 6) discern, albeit via different entry points. A survey of work that uses a more historical and anthropological lens would include Etherton (1976), Mitullah (1992), Dafe (2009) and Huchzermeyer (2007) who attend to the political economy of housing in the city; Amnesty’s (2013) discussions of forced evictions and structural poverty; Manji (2015) and Myers (2015) which focus on the hegemony of world class city narratives; Nyairo’s (2006) and Wa Mungai’s (2013) interventions analyzing the cultural symbols urban youth create and deploy; Katumanga’s (2005) treatise on the connections between crime and a bandit economy inaugurated by the adoption of Structural Adjustment Programmes (SAPs); Chege’s (1981) description of the highly fraught election processes in “slums”; Thieme’s (2013, 2015) discussions of Mathare youths’ “waste work”; Van Stapele’s (2015) study of working gangs of young men in Mathare; Kurtz’s (1998) examination of the large role

¹⁵ Informed by Deleuze and Guattari (1987), I use machinic assemblages to refer to the multidimensional physical work residents take up to improve their terrain, while collective assemblages of enunciation is enrolled to index the language residents use to symbolically alter the status quo. Here, as in Deleuze and Guattari (1987), these assemblages, machinic and expressive, are inseparable and come together to bring about the effects desired by their protagonists, although can also proceed in unanticipated directions.

that Nairobi has played in popular Kenyan literature; Charton-Bigot's and Rodriguez-Torres's (2010) collection of essays that represent Nairobi as a "fragmented city," and Robertson's (1997) account of the role that women hawkers have played in shaping both commerce and habitation in this urban context.

These are but a few examples from a gradually expanding research arena that has Nairobi in front focus. While these authors all offer orientation to my work and are important interventions documenting the various practices in and of this urban locale, what they lack for my own project is a perspective that connects Nairobi's present abjections to its historical governance. The seminal monographs by Hake (1977) and White (1990) do much to chronicle the multiple forces at play in the city, and to detail how these have spatialized particular representations and life chances in the East of Nairobi. Furthermore, both White's (1990) and Nelson's (1994, 1996, 1997) foregroundings of women's experiences offer an immeasurably important lens into any study of this setting. As a result, the detailed historical and ethnographic scholarship offered by these three scholars has substantially informed my own project and steered me towards the ideas this dissertation proposes. When read together they provide a comprehensive chronology of the "advanced marginalization" (Wacquant 2008) of Mathare and, above all, the "plurality of local experiments and dogged mobilizations" (Pieterse 2011, 3) that residents have always engaged in to transcend these conditions. Anchored in the background they provide, my work augments their findings by stressing the relationships between imperial ideas and practices of space and subjectivity and the role they play in creating and sustaining Mathare. At the same time, I demonstrate how territory and subject positions are also mobilized and acted on by residents, essentially as "articulations of subject-power" (Roy 2011, 318), to contest the history of government neglect and force.

In this work, I recognize the “promissory note” (Abram and Weszkalnys 2011, 3) implied in urban planning documents and processes, and in the projects that ensue, whether these flounder completely or merely fall far short of what appears in their designs (Roy 2009; Roy and Ong 2011). Certainly, I also understand that “the vagaries of urban fate cannot be reduced to the workings of universal laws established by capitalism or colonial history,” and that tropes of “planetary capitalism” and “subaltern resistances” are insufficient to describe either the actual messiness of urban space (Ong 2011, 1) or the “intersecting webs of governance and political power” that bring both change and stability in the slum and beyond (Weinstein 2014, 4). Nor do I contest the notion that increasing demographic pressures and a contracting public purse are also catalysts for what Pieterse (2011) terms “slum urbanism.” What is more, I also agree with Roy’s (2009, 84) assertion, using the example of India, that planning is often in itself an “informalized entity” constituted by “deregulation, ambiguity and exception.” Notwithstanding the widely acknowledged uncertainties of spatial management, what I do wish to examine here is, on one hand, why some spaces, and especially Mathare, are historically deprived of even the most basic urban rights guaranteed elsewhere in Nairobi, along with, on the other hand, the various “practices, discourses, technologies, and artifacts produced by planning” (Abram and Weszkalnys 2011, 2) that legitimate service delivery in some neighbourhoods and abandonment in others. Put differently, if planning, as both a document and exercise, is said to organize a particular relationship between a state and its citizens, how is longstanding *non*-planning understood by some of those residents? Undergirding this inquiry is the hypothesis that “slums exist because of these formal institutions, not in spite of them, and must be understood in relation to them” (Weinstein 2014, 10; Roy 2009).

In working towards these three ends, I dwell in the stories Mathare residents tell to make some meaning of their space with reference to Nairobi, and to demonstrate the “indelible if invisible” gash, the “force exerted on muscle and mind” (Stoler 2016, 6) that is brought to bear in these situated tropes, but also rallied by the people of Mathare to ensure both survival and redemption. Though their abandonment is not expressed as a formal mission in any government or county plan, it is felt, as elsewhere, most acutely through absences: the material deficit of essential utilities as well as the symbolic invisibility of their locale on Nairobi maps. It is also experienced through unmitigated force. As the people of Mathare connect the many nodes in their lives—territorial stigmatization, lack of opportunities, disease, police killings, and so on—a portrait forms that makes their neglect incontrovertible. To talk about it they reach beyond notions of deregulation and ambiguity, and instead narrativize *exception*. The stories told about this abandonment contain “flashbacks” (Hunt 2008) of empire in all the forms in which it becomes known in their lives—mimetic and otherwise: landlessness, poverty, missing children, unpaid wages and inadequate infrastructure, among others. The way they map the personal constellations of empire resonates with Bissell’s (2011a, 152) observation in Zanzibar. He writes:

To grasp the roots of town planning we must first go back to a moment when it did not exist as a distinct practice, being combined instead with related modes of inquiry that only later developed into distinct fields (medicine, anthropology, geography, natural history, and biology, among others). Without tracing the connections between late Enlightenment philosophy, the emergence of the natural and human sciences and the growth of Western imperialism, we cannot fully understand the preoccupations that eventually drove urban planning.

Bissell’s (2011a) work highlights the diverse colonial ideas and practices that have historically fed urban spatial management and that make necessary a multidimensional ethico-political project to respond to it. As such, through an exercise that recognizes an “analytics of structure”

but gives more salience to “an analytics of assemblage” (Ong 2011, 4), I foreground how Mathare residents speak of their abandonment, the histories it conjures for them, and the space-subjectivity work they engage in to remake past, present and future.

Methods

With these goals in mind, I draw primarily from assemblage theory (Deleuze and Guattari 1987), discussions on imperial ruination and duress (Stoler 2008, 2013, 2016), geography and urban political ecology (Heynen, Kaika and Swyngedouw 2006; Lawhon, Ernston and Silver 2013), and both Mathare-based and national narratives about Matigari. I am also influenced by the anthropology of violence as discussed by Farmer (1996, 2003, 2004) and Scheper-Hughes (1993, 2003), along with the anthropology of the urban and urban planning as explored by authors such as Bissell (2011a, 2011b), Gandolfo (2009), De Boeck and Plissart (2004), Caldeira (2000), Caldeira and Holston (2005), Holston (2009), Perry (2005), Hoffman (2007), Vargas (2006), Wacquant (2008, 2014), Weiss (2009), Auyero (2000), Abrams and Weszkalny (2011), Rodgers and O’Neill (2012) and Fassin (2013). Diverse interrogations of postcolonial spaces, as taken up by scholars such as Fanon (1961) and Mbembe (2001) who are often placed within the open field that is postcolonial studies, also inform this work. Chapter 1 demonstrates how all these lines of inquiry come together to scaffold the three main arguments I put forward in this dissertation.

These complementary theoretical approaches help nuance my findings from close to two years of fieldwork in Nairobi, between January 2014 and January 2016, and build on a decade of community organizing in and around the constituency of Mathare. During these months in the field I conducted 37 recorded interviews. These were conversations with twenty-five young people, between the ages of 21 and 28 years; eight elderly female *cucu* (grandmother) residents

of Village One who had lived in Mathare for between 40 and 70 years; three senior male activists in their mid- to late forties; one UN-Habitat planner, and a programme director at the *Médecins Sans Frontières* (MSF) clinic on the Mathare border with Eastleigh. I also draw from five focus groups, four of which involved women only, including one comprised solely of women human rights defenders. The dozens of events I attended during these months in the field also allowed me to incorporate an “evenemential” perspective (Sahlins 2004) in this project. Some of these functions were the International Day for the Street Child celebration held on April 12, 2015, the Mathare Youth Dialogue on Extrajudicial Killings, which took place in Bondeni on June 26, 2015, the Kia Maiko Land Grabbing and Extrajudicial Killings Forum on July 25, 2015, and the Political Accountability and Social Justice Forum that took place, in Mathare, on October 10 of the same year. Additionally, I attended a minimum of two youth group meetings a week, primarily with the Mekatilili Movement mentioned earlier (see page 15), and had informal conversations with hundreds of residents on various occasions including during Ramadan, and at locations such as homes, bars, churches, schools, clinics, the police station, and numerous impromptu meeting places around this geography where an easy (or not so easy) banter came to hold dominion. I also met with the Senior Chief of Mathare, police officers in Huruma ward, and activists from both Kangemi and Korogocho, two other poor urban settlements in the west and east of the city respectively.

Ongoing discussions with other academics, researchers and NGO employees also helped orient many of the ideas I am working through in this dissertation. My brief and terse exchange with the deputy mayor of Nairobi during the 2015 World Habitat Day celebrations also did much to affirm the informal but formal neglect and force that shape everyday life for the poor majority of residents of the city. Even his parsimonious but diplomatic denial of the fate of most city

dwellers, and the more elite preoccupations of the more middle-class crowd in attendance (“traffic” was high if not first on their list of urban issues), were powerful reminders of how uneven governance and inequality materialize in Nairobi.

The wide range of residents I spoke with in Mathare allowed me to grasp intergenerational, interethnic and gendered experiences of space over the last several decades, and how these inform the stories young people tell about themselves and their geography. But inevitably, it was exchanges with those who do not live there, including my own family, coupled with a longitudinal survey of *Daily Nation* newspaper articles on Mathare from 1960 to 2016, that really revealed how it has been and continues to be framed by those outside of its borders. In a later section in the next chapter, I elaborate on the methods, impromptu trajectories and challenges that arose while collecting data, giving particular attention to how my positionality as a young, Kikuyu, middle-class and single woman had shifting bearing on this fieldwork process.

As I flesh out my three main arguments in the chapters that follow, I hope to bring to life all the discussions and theoretical engagements that come together in this research project. Though many fieldwork moments with interlocutors privileged themes such as loss, violence, desperation, historical abandonment, single motherhood, the absence of basic services and stagnating youth aspirations, these encounters were also spliced with quick laughter, solidarity, cunning, gossip and determination—the sum of what Stoler (2008, 2013) refers to as “vitality” and Biehl and Locke (2010, 318) understand as “life force.” Even as these moments are funneled through theory, it is my hope that the work offers both the sentience and the excess of all these lived experiences and, perhaps more importantly, that it shows the resilience of those who are forced to live in city margins but who nevertheless, through many minor and unanticipated

escapes, seek to curtail, however temporarily, the ruination that territorializes their space and attempts to foreclose their subjectivities.

Chapter Summaries

Chapter 1 establishes the key areas of theorization and concepts that anchor my arguments. Here I explain why and how I suture the theories I am calling upon, the concepts they allow me to develop, and how all of this has a bearing on the methods central to the fieldwork process.

The subsequent two chapters offer a historical perspective of Nairobi to ground the itineraries of force and neglect that I contend have historically constituted urban planning in the city. Chapter 2 begins with a brief review of literature on Nairobi, and goes on to trace its genealogies of planning, from 1898 to 2014, and the political, economic, ecological and social dynamics that convened to create what I call both a ruin and an ecology of exclusion. Chapter 3 speaks more precisely to Mathare as a “ghetto of women.”¹⁶ Since it is a settlement that has historically been populated primarily by women, I attend to how their experiences in space have greatly influenced political, ecological, social and economic practices for and representations of Mathare, both local and external, in the *longue durée*. Ultimately, without these women there would be no Mathare as we know it today. As such, the historical portrayal of their lives given here provides the formative layer through which to understand the spatial practices and subjectivities discussed in subsequent chapters. Therefore, following the work of White (1990) and Nelson (1997), I pay tribute to the role of women in establishing Mathare and, more specific to my larger discussion of the role of negative stereotypes in legitimating state neglect, I show how representations of Mathare women as “wicked” provide the initial layer in the positionings

¹⁶ See footnote 3 for my definition of ghetto.

that circulate about Mathare residents as amoral: depictions of both “pollution” and “imminent threat” (Vargas 2006, 63). Essentially, in this chapter I put forward that what is seen by others as the natural comportment of the women who have historically inhabited this part of the city—prostitution, alcohol brewing and single motherhood—provides the roots for the undesirable subject positions imposed on all residents, and feed an urban planning paradigm of neglect and force. This chapter is a prelude to the larger discussion of subjectivities that appears in Chapter 5.

Through an ethnographic immersion in the circumstances surrounding a cheap water pump in Bondeni, Mathare, Chapter 4, the “Story of a Pump,” gives life to the three main arguments being put forward, and constructs a graphic and visceral suturing of the political, ecological, economic and social ruination that assembles in this space. Above all, it demonstrates the possibilities that residents fight for and can gain, however briefly, even amidst tragedy. I use a story format as the vector through which to convey my arguments in this chapter—and principally the comingling of imperial economic, ecological, social and political trajectories—since the circumstances detailed were conveyed to me through stories; tales that are part of the narratives residents tell about themselves and their space that are at the heart of this dissertation.

It is in Chapter 5 that I build on the theory, histories and ethnography advanced in the earlier chapters to elaborate on the connections between space and subject formation in Mathare. Here, I attend to youth groups as important mediums for understanding the impacts of the space-subjectivity enterprise that, through mutual reinforcement, becomes understood as normative planning. Furthermore, I detail the situated ethico-political project to transform both the environment and how its residents think about themselves, to show the ways in which this machinic and expressive project for home deploys both ideological and material practices that generate two broad and related identities: *masafara* and *watu wa mtaa*. Translated respectively to

sufferer and people of the ghetto, these identifications draw on specific histories and experiences to promote a particular consciousness of self and space that, even if only for a moment, deterritorializes the hegemony of the tropes constantly at play about them and within their environment.

In addition, this chapter makes the case for how the co-incident and co-indication of both a sufferer and a ghetto identity inaugurate a situated combat lexicon that I term *war-talk*.¹⁷ I argue that war-talk is a sober evidencing of existing and anticipated violence that congeals in Mathare: the ongoing imperial ruination that has made it a battleground. Notwithstanding the anxiety war-talk conveys about this area, I contend that because it does not grant conclusive victory to the state or the conditions residents face—by refusing to emplace residents as either fully victims or absolute victors—it also affirms the resilience and potential of those who are kept on the margins of city life. As such, it is a witnessing, an elegy, but one always inflected by the tragic possibility seen to be a vital feature of this ruin. While in these battles Mathare residents may get “precarious stability” and the “right to stay put” in “limbo” (Weinstein 2014), war-talk is a powerful window through which we can discern not only how empire is manifested and understood locally and in the present, but also the militarization of daily life and the multifaceted ethico-political project steered by youth which opens up other visions of space and subjects that can generate much needed lines of flight.

¹⁷Since 2015 I made note of the combat references I heard in Mathare and defined them as war-talk. I was therefore pleasantly surprised to note that Arundhati Roy, writing about the militarization of everyday life in India and globally in her book *War Talk* (2003), makes use of the same term twelve years before it became part of my own PhD research project. Notwithstanding this, akin to Roy’s (2003) focus on militarization in India, I reflect on the normalization of brutal physical violence in Mathare and how this standardizes war vernacular and practice here and in other ecologies of exclusion. I am very grateful to committee member Wenona Giles for directing me to the Roy (2003) citation.

In the final section of this work, the Conclusion, I revisit my main arguments, the particular themes addressed in each chapter and offer suggestions for future work that seeks to engage with the ruins of Nairobi.

Conclusion

This dissertation as a whole looks not so much at what urban spatial management commits to doing in Nairobi, but what it omits—the places it keeps off its maps. It seeks to unravel the logics that territorialize a spatial management that commissions omission in certain places, and to demonstrate how central to this process is the co-functioning of space and subjectivities. Towards these ends, it does what Bissell (2011a) describes as “drawing connections and juxtaposing phenomena that are both diffuse and distant, never readily given or apparent” (Bissell 2011a, 11). Similar links among the array of empire’s manifestations feature in Mathare residents’ stories, prompting me to juxtapose a variety of seemingly disconnected events: land grabbing and alcoholism; water and prostitution; teenage pregnancies and electrical fires.

Against the backdrop of recent master planning documents in Nairobi, and even a New Urban Agenda (UN Habitat 2016), it behooves us to listen to how the majority of urban dwellers encounter this city, to what they see as its changes but also to its violent remains. Their stories show how they live through “recursive histories” —simultaneously partial, modified and amplified experiences of empire that “circle back and implicate one another again” (Stoler 2016, 24- 27)—while continually seeing to etch a vital existence on the landscape where they dare to stay. By remaining, they also gesture to other issues connected to but larger than their geography: the need for national land reform, more inclusive citizenship and human rights in Kenya, as well as other related concerns. As these topics become citational references in the

variety of itineraries they use to stay put both physically and mentally, the people of Mathare tether themselves to a project that, as Simone's (2008, 100) quote earlier prods us to see, allows them to "remain ruined and generous in their capacity to remake the times to come," for home and beyond.

Chapter 1: Conceptual, Theoretical and Methodological Framework

Introduction

Much has been written about the coloniality of urban landscapes in Africa, and their genesis within the colonial enterprise (see Mitchell 1991; Myers 2003, 2015; Bissell 2011a, 2011b; Demissie 2012). However, much less work, in Africa or elsewhere, has dealt with how the architectures produced by urban spatial management shape the subjectivities of residents; the co-constituting relationship between materiality, politics and the “subjectivity of urban existence” (Yiftachel 2009, 95; Cahill 2007). These are the ways in which, as one writer put it, buildings are taken to “melt into the physical bodies of people,” their inner lives creating “avenues and streets of the metaphysical lives of people, and the architectures of bodies” that are manufactured, although not totally, by particular geographies (Wainaina 2011, viii; xii). In theorizing the collapsing of bodies in architectures, and vice-versa, my main tools are the “tin roofs” and “dust, dirt and prostitutes” (Mangua 1971, 15) of Mathare and its neighbouring areas in the Eastern part of the city habitually referred to as Eastlands. In public and official discourse in Kenya, tin roofs and prostitutes are seen to animate each other in a relationship that has endured for decades. In such an existence, the “dirt” of Mathare references the presumed immoral character of its residents and vice-versa, and together with the tropes of tin roofs and prostitution it acts as a metaphor to indicate all that is imagined as urban degeneracy. Against this background, I explore how the “shanty” dwellings of Mathare are imagined as producing an equally derelict and depraved subject, and how these socio-spatial productions of problematic subjectivities impact how residents are allowed to live within the urban form that is Nairobi.

In attending to this conjured symbiosis between material and metaphysical lives in Mathare, a core argument of this dissertation is that urban planning legitimates its abandonment

of unequal spaces by reproducing negative subjectivities about those whom it fixes into them. In the specific case of Mathare, even as it normalizes a spatial neglect that produces shanties, it also engages in destructive characterizations of the residents who live in those spaces as worthy only of temporary and inadequate infrastructure. These “Nai-shanty” positionings emerge from an assemblage constituted by shifting imperial economic, social and political discourses and practices that trade in ideas about certain Nairobi residents, and in communion with articulations about versions of nature found in urban settings. In their convening and intersections, these co-constituting discourses territorialize an urban planning that operationalizes uneven, inequitable landscapes by creating and sustaining environments of neglect, and inevitably spatializing “civil stratification” (Yiftachel 2009, 93). For Yiftachel, it is in relying on a set of discriminatory notions that urban spatial management

becomes a powerful governing tool with which to shape people’s lives and subjectivities. Planning (or lack of) provides the authorities with a set of technologies with which they can legalize, criminalize, incorporate or evict. Planning categories and mechanisms allow the loci of power to construct or destroy, “whiten” or “blacken” urban development and populations. (2009, 96)

To explore the processes intrinsic to civil stratification in Mathare and Nairobi broadly, I historicize these urban planning technologies and the thinking behind them (James 2010) through the narratives residents tell about their lives and their space. By paying attention to how circuits of power territorialized by urban planning are intimately experienced by its most neglected constituents, I uphold the importance of these marginalized perspectives often absent from scholarly literature. Towards these ends I interrogate the “institutional rationalities” (Ralph 2014, 42) of urban spatial management primarily from local everyday tropes, but with reference to archival and national planning documents. I do so in order to reflect on how these formal spatial practices of force and neglect inform the three main arguments (put forward in the Introduction)

that are the principle vectors through which I channel Mathare experiences of urban governance. These propositions allow me to draw attention to the imperial ruination implicit in urban planning: a space-subjectivity interplay anchored in a colonial assemblage that persists in the *longue durée*. In essence, this “long-running drama” (Manji 2015, 207)¹⁸ of institutionalized spatial management creates a Mathare that is at once within and without the city: and an indisputable space of separate incorporation (Yiftachel 2009) of a kind that Roy (2011, 235), with reference to Mouffe (2000, 12), calls the “constitutive outside.” Akin to geographies as far off as the Lower East Side of New York (Cahill 2007), the Treme area of New Orleans (Regis 2001), and Chicago’s South Side (Ralph 2014), this is a space of blight connected to broader urban limits through various modes of interdependent marginalization that also requires the constant force and threat of a police presence. The historical criminalization of both space and residents justifies the increasing militarization of Mathare and other poor urban geographies, and particularly in this period of “democracy” (see Caldeira [2000] for this in Brazil). In such a scenario, insofar as the police are the most visible face of the state and the upholders of colonial city logics of segregation and neglect, I contend that they act as *de facto* urban managers and embodied infrastructures. Nevertheless, despite these conditions of neglect and force, residents engage in creative ethico-political projects, thereby populating a “multiplicity of plot lines” (De Boeck 2004, 113); situated escapes that seek to reimagine and remake both local space and subjecthoods.

¹⁸ My interpretation is that Manji (2015) discusses the “next act of this long-running drama” of urban neglect and displacement as being central to a gerontocratic paternalism characteristic of the post-independence period. I would argue that this drama has a much earlier genesis, with provenance in the initial colonial imprints of the city of Nairobi.

Image 2: Village One, Mathare, 2016.



The image shows a neighborhood in Mathare roughly two weeks after a joint police and County of Nairobi “operation bulldozer” action to forcibly facilitate the building of a throughfare connecting Juja and Thika roads. According to one observer, “It was nasty—they are very feisty down by the river in Village One, they’d resisted over the years and were not going to give in to a new road [from Mau Mau on to Thika] without a fight. Live ammunition and tear gas and the shacks came down.” Source: Author’s personal archive.

As I attend to the abiding impact of colonial spatial management in Nairobi, I am guided by two foundational questions. First, how do everyday life stories from Mathare show the relationships between colonial and postcolonial urban spatial management regimes? Second, how do residents engage with dominant material and discursive practices for and about Mathare in order to bring about other possibilities for the present and future? Working through the various rhizomatic tales, images and landscapes of Nairobi which compel these two questions, I am drawn to ask a third question, one that has come to haunt this entire project: *How is the value of life determined by spatial management grids that decide not only who lives and who dies, but how those people who are left to die must live?*

In thinking about these connections between space and subjectivity across decades, I have found a number of theoretical approaches useful. The following segment touches on these conceptual pathways and maps out the work that they do together for this analysis. Next is a section called “On Space,” where I examine how these approaches help me theorize the environment in Mathare as a ruin. As I flesh out the meaning of this conceptualization, I also develop two metaphors that I contend emerge from ruination processes. The first is the associated identity of the *relic* which I also place within my second metaphor, and which I term an *ecology of exclusion*. Following this comes “On Subjectivity”: there I work through the various theoretical discussions that inform my use of this term. It is that discussion that unpacks the Matigari identity which, in my view, shapes senses of self/ves in Mathare, and connects it to the metaphors ruin, relic and ecologies of exclusion. Subsequent to this, I build on my introductory discussion to reflect on the methods that emerged from combining these theoretical approaches, and how this framing lends itself in turn to a greater understanding of the relationship between space and subjectivity in Mathare. The chapter ends with a summary of the theoretical pathways that scaffold my argument and briefly touches on how they offer a mooring for the chapters that follow.

Theoretical Map

To create a framework for my analysis I connect together several areas of theorization from the canon and beyond. Within the discipline, I draw from the anthropology of empire as explored by scholars such as Stoler (2008, 2013, 2016) and Collins (2008). Specifically, I have found instructive their analytical category of the *ruin*, particularly when it is applied to the geography of Mathare. It is through these discussions of the ruin that I have developed the associated figure

of the *relic*, which I use to construct a conceptual scaffolding for the subjectivities imagined as persisting in this and similar locales. I am also influenced by the anthropology of violence as discussed by authors such as Farmer (1996, 2003, 2004), Scheper-Hughes (1993) and Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois (2004). Their theorization of structural violence is important for this work because it brings to the fore the grave impacts and intersections of pervasive structures of power, including class, gender and race, and the situated manifestations of this in everyday life. These layered discussions of violence assert that “an anthropology that tallies the body count must of course look at the dead and those left for dead” (Farmer 2004, 306). The deep and wide historicity implicit in such a call guides me to consider what Nairobi residents count and why within urban spatial management regimes, while also looking at the kinds of death that have been enabled by the city’s abandonments. Overall, structural violence becomes a pathway for me to correlate multiple phenomena normalized in ruins: life chances and the absence of water, child deaths and tin houses, and land grabbing and extrajudicial killings by the police.

To anchor my discussions of Mathare, and Nairobi as a whole, I also draw from the anthropology of the urban as explored by authors such as Bissell (2011a), Gandolfo (2009), De Boeck and Plissart (2004), Demissie (2012) and Weiss (2009). Primarily, I am informed by the ways these monographs show the material sedimentation and the omnipresent hauntings in the city of past times, and how this creates lives lived amidst struggles with many ghosts. I am also directed by related discussions within the discipline that focus on the connections between gentrification, morality and subject formation in neighbourhoods of blight. Such work includes Collins (2008), James (2010), Vargas (2010), Alves (2013) and Ralph (2014). The theses on “territorial stigmatization”¹⁹ offered by Wacquant (2007, 2008) and Wacquant, Slater and Pereira

¹⁹ Territorial stigmatization is discussed as “action through collective representation fastened on place” (Wacquant, Slater and Pereira 2014, 1278). This focus on representations of space further shapes my discussion of urban

(2014), among others, also offer greater understanding and comparison of the processes that create “stain” in multiple areas of assumed “sociomoral purgatory” (Wacquant, Slater and Pereira (2014, 1271), while also giving rise to the punitive measures that result from these harmful portrayals. Interrogating how “noxious representations of space are produced, diffused, and harnessed in the field of power, by bureaucratic and commercial agencies, as well as in everyday life in ways that alter social identity, strategy, and structure” (Wacquant, Slater and Pereira 2014, 1273), is also a key goal of this project and therefore necessitates my engagement with this literature. Together, all these cited explorations of urban space bring out the thinking behind urban spatial governance in a diversity of locations, and the many connected trajectories, in daily lived experience as well as interior processes, that emerge from the relationships between geographies and subjects.

I am also influenced by diverse interrogations of postcolonial spaces as they have been taken up by scholars often placed within the wide horizon that is postcolonial studies, and whose ideas often inform and complement the conceptual propositions within the anthropologies mentioned above. These are, for example, the works of Fanon (1961), Wa Thiong'o (1987, 1994) and Mbembe (2001). In addition, in exploring the accretion of meanings in postcolonial urban environments I engage with diverse studies in geography and urban political ecology (UPE), such as the works of Myers (2003, 2015), Heynen, Kaika and Swyngedouw (2006), Swyngedouw (1996), Zimmer (2010), Lawhon, Ernston, and Silver (2013) and Heynen (2016). Without a doubt, urban political ecology has been a useful bridge to relate the “natural” environment to other dynamics implicit within city making, and how they all come together to render an urban nature of grave inequity (Lawhon, Ernston and Silver 2013, 500). This is

planning as a space-subjectivity enterprise, as it calls on us to ease not only the material burden in ruins but “also the press of symbolic domination in the metropolis.”

because although it is rooted in the materialism of Marxism, “UPE has incorporated aspects of poststructuralism to better describe how capitalism mobilizes a multitude of things, discourses, and people—into hybrids, assemblages or quasi-objects—to stabilize infrastructures, modes of governing, and problem definition” (Lawhon, Ernston and Silver 2013, 501). A perspective that privileges a multitude of things makes sense for considering the ways in which my ongoing observations in the field, as well as a variety of sources within the scant archival record, made it apparent that ecology played a vital role in the initial zoning of the city of Nairobi (Hake 1977; Demissie 2012). These nature-human relations were also evident in my discussions with both older and younger Mathare residents who often made unsolicited references to the environment as a way of indexing changes, on multiple registers, that have occurred in their lives. In these narrations, it became evident that the Mathare ecology was an important vector through which residents thought about their own experiences as individuals and as a collective. As a result, and heeding the prompts from urban political ecology scholars to (re)insert the environment back into discussions of urban spaces, I privilege ecology as a key constituent of the assemblage that territorializes urban spatial management in Nairobi and in Mathare. In this sense, historical ideas and practices of ecology come together with political, social and economic dynamics to bear upon landscapes, and in this way producing certain spatial outcomes.

Thinking with urban political ecology has also helped me develop a useful conceptual metaphor; *ecology of exclusion* is a key categorization that I employ in order to foreground nature in discussions of urban spatial management. While theorizations of the ruin and processes of ruination make it evident that inbuilt within these concepts are particular modes of violence, the role of nature in shaping both this site and political project is not always examined. Furthermore, beyond simply capturing notions of nature as such, this metaphor attends to how

the multiple marginalizations that condense in spaces like Mathare become part of the contours of this terrain. In addition, it helps express how ecological decay is also a result of the assembling that territorializes planning, and therefore it both intersects with and is compounded by the often cited social, political and economic violences that are co-constitutive.

Alongside these academic theorizations are my readings of fictional works that attend to everyday life in postcolonial Nairobi, and Kenya as a whole. These have allowed me to grasp, more acutely, the vast contours, memories and socio-materialities of this city, as well as the “poesis of the ordinary” (Stewart 2008, 74) that provokes the rhizomatic currents of life in the specific urban context of Mathare. This literature gives depth to what Simone (2011, 362) refers to as the “hundreds of small deals, small transactions, and provisional accommodations worked out in backroom banquet halls, behind food stalls in night markets, in glitzy rundown casinos, and in the courtyards of neighborhood mosques—all places where different claims, tactics, and senses of things intersect.” This coterie of urban activity is what he elsewhere names “people as infrastructure” (Simone 2004). Some of the literature on Nairobi privileged here are the works of Mwangi (1973, 1977), Mangua (1971), Wa Thiong'o (1987) and Oludhe–Macgoye (2000).

These writings give ethnographic depth to my depictions of the city, and equip me with the language to expand on another key metaphor within this work: *Matigari*. *Matigari* is a Gĩkũyũ²⁰ language expression that, notwithstanding its much older provenance, now has a symbiotic relationship with the Mau Mau people and movement, in that it identifies those who “survived the bullets” of colonialism and is extended to encompass Kenya’s poor who have not received any of the benefits of independence (Wa Thiong'o 1987). *Matigari* becomes an active parable in my work since both Mau Mau and *Matigari* are frequent framings of self and

²⁰ Gĩkũyũ is used to reference the language of the Kikuyu people, while Kikuyu is used to reference the ethnic community.

community in what is often referred to as the Kikuyu side of Mathare where I spent the most time. This is largely due to the history of Mathare as the Mau Mau “headquarters” (see Chapter 3) in Nairobi, as well as a result of the struggles for land that have shaped the lives of the majority poor in Kenya for decades.

Moreover, even amidst tense relations between generations, Matigari has become a popular metaphor for collective consciousness and reflection: a discursive communion between the past and present that serves as an emblematic recalling. In this way Matigari is both a question and an answer to explain the inherited social order that characterizes their present situations—a material and semiotic explanation of everyday life. It concentrates what Mbembe and Roitman (1995, 324) referred to as “systems of intelligibility to which people refer in order to construct a more or less clear idea of the causes of phenomena and their effects, to determine the domain of what is possible and feasible, as well as the logics of efficacious action.” Essentially, by using this charged referent to convey their life conditions, Mathare’s residents articulate the persistent effects and affects of the past in the production of the contemporary lives that they embody. This articulation also becomes a way to position themselves on one side of the national debate about the betrayal of independence by the *ngati*—those who were loyal to the British and are seen to remain close to power (see also Branch 2009). The ways in which Matigari serves to “sacralize urban space” (Regis 2001, 766) echo dynamics in some poor black neighbourhoods of New Orleans, in that residents are “linking communal identities to the courage and defiance of those who have gone before them” (ibid.). The sacralization of Mau Mau through Matigari is particularly fraught, because it was not unbanned as an organization until 2003, and only in 2015 did the Mau Mau receive any formal memorial and monument in their honour. Yet, despite decades of state sanctioned indifference, Mathare residents have

immortalized Mau Mau for decades. Beyond the narratives discussed here that bring these anti-colonial experiences to bear on the daily life of Mathare dwellers, another grand commemoration of them is Mau Mau Road; the only formal pathway that opens up the heart of Mathare valley (see also Jones forthcoming) and whose toponym captures the importance of this history in this location.

Image 3 Mau Mau Road



Source: author's personal archive.

While both colonial and postcolonial elites were immortalized in buildings and streets around town (Laragh 2012), it was here in city ruins that the Mau Mau are remembered as part of a “critical moral consciousness” (Regis 2001,763) that, I contend, feeds into a youth oriented ethico-political project for space and subjects (see Chapter 5). These commemorations show that even as time proceeds the past is never forgotten in Mathare. Rather, it is invoked as part of a

refusal to be obliterated by the historical structural forces that mould people's lives. The dead, therefore, are vehemently (re)inscribed onto this landscape, and in these material and discursive processes connections are made between their deaths and those of the present that take on both similar and different intensities. Therefore, given the histories implicit in the term, Matigari is at once a framing device and a mnemonic, and becomes a useful tool to link depictions of life across these different registers—social, economic, ecological and political—and temporal moments. In assembling the key parables Mathare residents communicate about their lives, it is also a story that “has no fixed time. Yesterday, the day before yesterday, last week . . . last year or ten years ago” (Wa Thiong'o 1987).

Joining these theorizations together to articulate the assemblage that shapes Nairobi allows me to attend to its various impacts on space and subjectivity across time. Assemblage is a useful framing because it explores the co-constitution and complicity between humans and non-humans, material and signs, and the macro and micro processes that can obtain from this relationship. In allowing for the co-functioning of the multiple lines that can constitute ecology, politics, society and economics, the manifold directions whose “intense continuities” can territorialize urban spatial management, assemblage has utility for “analysing the interrelation between power, politics and space” (Muller 2015, 29). Significantly, it allows for this associational work without creating hierarchies in the dimensions that mould urban settings across time and scale (Muller 2015). In this way, different “regimes of signs” and “states” have the power to conjointly enunciate specific events (Deleuze and Guattari 1987). Furthermore, thinking with assemblages compels us to map out not only how actors can be “ever more entangled in the assemblage, becoming complicit in reproducing instead of razing it” (Muller 2015, 37), but also how they can potentiate other agential paths by engaging in processes of

territorialization, deterritorialization and reterritorialization—lines of flight without an overdetermined direction. Bringing together these different theoretical threads from anthropology, with concerns in geography, urban political ecology and postcolonial literature, and doing so within a fluid and adaptive assemblage, allows me to illuminate how heterogeneous material practices, ideas and embodied expressions produce the city. These elements trace lines to empire and even in their mutation congeal in a continuity that creates particular materializations of space. This is a coming together of diverse but interwoven components, “multiple determinations that are not reducible to a single logic” (Ong and Collier 2005, 12) but that plateau in ways that allow the emergence of a specific form of urban governance: a spatial management regime that appears intent on (re)instantiating imperial processes of neglect and force.

Working with these complementary approaches has prompted me to both borrow and develop metaphors that are fundamental to this work: the *ruin* and the *relic*, *ecology of exclusion* and *Matigari*. While I develop others in Chapter 5, these four thread the core arguments that run through this dissertation, and are a vocabulary employed to capture the principal processes that shape space and subjectivity in Nairobi. These metaphors do not have steadfast boundaries; they bleed into each other, operate in tension, and often take on unexpected trajectories. Nonetheless, they remain instructive vectors to think about the co-constitutions between space and subjectivity in Mathare, and Nairobi broadly. It is in drawing from the aforementioned approaches and concepts that I am able to anchor them, and a greater discussion of the areas of theorization that engendered these metaphors follows below.

On Space

Both in public discourse and in the archival record, Mathare is imagined through a number of registers. On a socio-political index it is constructed, as a recent Member of Parliament for the area decreed, as a site of “criminals and prostitutes” (Kimari 2015). Current and not so current alcohol raids have also firmly entrenched it as the headquarters of illegal brew in the city. And while it is, from time to time, empathized with for being a “slum” or “unplanned settlement” (NIUPLAN/JICA 2014, 2-4; Médard 2010), there is also an unspoken insistence that it is undeserving of basic services due to the amorality that is affixed in its setting. This framing of poor neighbourhoods as sites teeming with immorality is echoed in locations as distant as the South Side of Chicago (Ralph 2014), Delhi (Ramakrishnan 2014) and Rio de Janeiro (Alves 2013). Because of the harmful characterizations of these spaces, assembled from within an array of historical processes, the complexities of these neighbourhoods are not considered, and neither are the socialities and “networks of care, conviviality, and solid community involvement [that] are plentiful” (Ramos-Zayas 2011, 90).

Furthermore, the illegal status conferred to this site is often extended to Mathare’s economic activities. And certainly, while much of the visible commerce is an interminable number of small-unlicensed businesses that include vegetable stands, clothing and shoe stalls (Nelson 1997), it is true that many larger trades are mired in more legal proscription. In this regard, one of Mathare’s most lucrative forms of commerce is *chang’aa* brewing (Van Stapele 2015). Since at least the 1960s²¹ this area has been the site of large-scale *chang’aa* production, and thus its reputation as a haven of illegal alcohol is not entirely unwarranted. Notwithstanding this, however, it is imperative to consider the broader political economies that compel young

²¹ This is discerned from surveys of newspaper articles on Mathare from 1960 to 2015. In these journalistic accounts it is consistently portrayed as a geography of illegal alcohol brewing.

people to join alcohol work groups since, as Van Stapele's (2015) monograph judiciously demonstrates, it is often the absence of more formal employment opportunities that leads young men to take on this backbreaking and toxic labour. To a lesser extent, Mathare is also infamous for its drug trade, and the section known as Nigeria in Mlango Kubwa ward is the heart of this market in the constituency.²²

Ecologically Mathare is often conjured as a place of waste and a graveyard of nature. Both residents and outsiders alike use the term *slum*, perhaps with differing motives, to evoke pervasive images of decaying uneven landscapes and informal infrastructures of “auto-construction” (Holston 2009). What is evident from these imaginings of Mathare's version of nature is that its iconicity is always a bio-physicality of overflowing, rotting excess: a filthy wasteland (Wa Mungai 2013, 175). Furthermore, while there are variations in the forms of architecture in the constituency, much of its landscape consists of predominantly “impermanent”²³ buildings that cover the terrain, constructed on or around layers of garbage that have accumulated over the years. These conditions are exacerbated by the lack of sufficient sanitation blocks and an absent sewerage system despite the existence of this settlement for over eight decades (Hake 1977, Thieme 2015, Van Stapele 2015, Médard 2010).

Connecting these various representations makes it evident that the majority of external lenses applied to Mathare conjure it as a place of decay. Grave depictions of this space—as rife with illegality, waste, criminality—inform popular imaginaries constructed by weaving together

²² In Chapter 5, I analyze the colloquial naming of certain sites in Mathare to reflect on how these appellations register what I am term *war-talk*. In that section I posit that it is important to attend to the insights offered by a war vernacular employed by residents. In this case, Nigeria is imagined, in Kenya and elsewhere, as the locus of significant illegal trade, not least of all in narcotics, and I can only imagine that this representation is what provoked the name Nigeria for this local drug site in Mathare.

²³ I use impermanence within quotation marks since given the longevity of these structures, and the fact that they are built and rebuilt over decades, it is highly contradictory that literature on “slums” reinforces the alleged informality of this and other poor urban settlements.

economic, social, political and ecological registers. In such an existence, it effectively becomes a garbage heap of empire; the extreme anti-city that Nairobi, the “green city in the sun” that now aspires to “world-class city” status, has never formally sanctioned (see Myers 2015; Manji 2015; Robinson 2006). Like the Congo, and by extension Kinshasa, Mathare is a “negative image” of the ostensibly Western or modern self that Nairobi seeks to perform (De Boeck and Plissart 2004, 22). Discursively it is, therefore, positioned as immanently atavistic, significantly lower on an evolutionary scale and embodying the antithesis of the modern liberal subjectivities that city administrators are keen to direct residents towards. Ultimately, it is a ruin.

Ruins

The city constantly activates and undergoes the effervescent push and pull of destruction and regeneration.

Filip De Boeck and Marie-Françoise Plissart,
Kinshasa: Tales of the Invisible City.

How do metaphors of ruin and ruination contribute to a theorization of the relationship between urban spatial management and subjectivity? The principal contention of this dissertation is that urban spatial management in Nairobi is a territorialization of social, economic, political and ecological notions and practices derived from within the epistemologies of empire. These elements, while not stable, congeal together and plateau in urban planning process in ways that ensure the encoding of specific dynamics in the landscape. These imprinted power relations materialize grids that are imagined as having equivalence with particular moral conditions; the extreme manifestation of this urban zoning is the ruin, with its attendant degenerate subjectivities. Ruination, therefore, comes to be through multiple intersecting processes, in which inhere the openness and fluidity characteristic of assemblages—the ability to territorialize, deterritorialize and reterritorialize in diverse conditions and moments. To these ends, I think with

the metaphors of ruins and ruination, using them to discuss how urban planning's assemblage fosters certain subjectivities over decades in ways that allow it to maintain itself as the hallmark mode of urban governance in Nairobi. This form of management of the city, by enabling a symbiotic relationship between space and subjectivity, is a ruination that relies on and is sustained by certain popular positionings of people living in ruins. And yet, notwithstanding this manifestation of what Weizman (2003) terms slow violence,—imperial ruination that becomes entrenched in the landscape—ruins are also sites of regeneration as residents engage with the violence of these city grids through their own tenacity: Weizman's (2003) "toolbox." This is an armoury animated by minor actions, the "weapons of the weak" (Scott 1985), that question the totalizing power of this space-subjectivity enterprise through movements that subsequently render alternative histories and futures for Mathare, and indeed for Nairobi in general.

The city is a site of "multiple articulations" within "a plural field of multi-layered patchworks" (Simone 2015, 2). Yet, even while these are in motion, they congeal in ways that have a great bearing on urban morphology and expression. As emphasized earlier, an important derivative of these territorializing articulations in Nairobi is the ruin. Informed by Stoler (2008, 2013, 2016) and Collins (2008), my conceptualization of the metaphor ruin and its corollary, ruination, is that they indicate both a space and an ongoing project—the condensing of particular processes also engulfed in other enduring paths. This is an important framing for this discussion because I attend to the formal management of urban space as an assemblage of material and signs caught within metamorphosing entanglements that territorialize in imperial ways. In this regard, the various directions of the present and future come together in ways that call up the past and help us to

trace the fragile and durable substance and signs, the visible and visceral senses in which the effects of empire are reactivated and remain. But ruination is more than a process. It

is also a political project that lays waste to certain peoples and places, relations, and things. To think with ruins of empire is to emphasize less the artifacts of empire as dead matter or remnants of a defunct regime than to attend to their reappropriations and strategic and active positioning within the politics of the present. (Stoler 2013, 196)

My work focuses on these “durable substance(s) and signs” of imperial spatial management projects, on how they are said to shape Mathare residents’ subjectivities, and on how these circulated positionings are engaged by residents in ways that bring about different self and community possibilities. In focusing on this ruin, I also track the “protracted quality of decimation in people’s lives” and “the new exposures and enduring damage” (Stoler 2008, 196), which in this period take on labels that hide their emergence within empire, while simultaneously (re)engendering moments still haunted by imperial ghosts.

What is more, ruins are an important metaphor to theorize Mathare’s spatial management because demographically, while they take up the smallest surface area in Nairobi, are the most densely populated sections of this metropolis and yet have historically always been seen as the anti-city—geographies stuck in the past and that need to be led towards modernity. This, therefore, provokes tension between the currents that simultaneously recognize such areas as the ‘past’ and those that discuss them as spaces of decay that do not deserve a history beyond understandings of rural-urban migration. Moreover, in this city that is relentlessly pursuing world-class city status, they are seen as impediments to this ranking and their “potential for generation” (James 2010) is buried within layers of negative associations that are reappropriated in the *longue durée*. Ruins then, in both effect and affect, become like the analytical category of blackness that Simone (2015, 6) deploys: “the freight of all that must be dredged and evacuated in order for a sense of stillness and sufficiency to hang as atmosphere on the infrastructures of

the urban.” Essentially, these are the geographies to move away from as the city looks towards “2030, 2040 [and] 2050.”²⁴

The instrumentality of ruins for this analysis also lies in the liminality they exude. At once, they are sites where decay becomes natural and normalized, but they also contain possibilities of redemption (Stoler 2008, 2013). Similar to Simone’s (2015, 2-7) “areas of blackness,” we see that ruins are spaces that are “always broken, but always resounding” and coincide a “double inhabitation” of both “enforcement and freedom.” The productive tension between death and regeneration captures what I am continually (re)learning about Mathare: that despite the territorialization of neglect and force, there is a vitality that remains immanent in the fabric of everyday life, a spatial spirit that does not want to die. As Stewart (2008) contends, this is a “*potential*—a *something* waiting to happen in disparate and incommensurate objects, registers, circulations, and publics” (Stewart 2008, 72; italics in original). I understand this potential to be the vitality of Mathare, the afterlives of a ruin that even in its decay embodies “possibilities of plenitude” (Stewart 2008, 80). Evidencing this is the staunch refusal of Mathare to just disappear, even amidst great tragedy (see Chapters 4 and 5) that sees residents living with “too many centuries on [their] back at the same time” (Laing 2011, 43). For that reason, like Stoler (2013, 198), I move to consider “ruins as epicenters of renewed claims, as history in a spirited voice, as sites that animate new possibilities, bids for entitlement, and unexpected political projects.” It is in these acts across many temporal scales that ruins regenerate unexpected urban and subjectivity possibilities. In their agentive efforts to improve this space (both material and discursive), residents expand and play with what I term here the character of the relic: an identity, I argue, that is a corollary of the ruin since it is implicit in popular

²⁴ During an event celebrating World Habitat Day the deputy mayor of Nairobi, Jonathan Mueke, spoke about how the city is planning for “2030, 2040 and 2050,” but did not speak of the parts of the city that were still living within the inequities of the past that were still being reinstated in the present.

sentiments about Mathare dwellers. Though related to the subjective categories I consider in a later section, this metaphor is addressed below because it is a derivative of the ruin, since relics are habitually constructed as fundamental vestiges of geographies of debris.

Relics

Life is not fair when we have seen some other people living the good life and us, here, it is like not living. I don't feel we are existing. Whereas other people are humans, are we humans? We see ourselves as like nothing.

Peris Jones, *Silhouette City*

I complement the metaphor of the ruin with a figure I term the relic. Certainly, embedded in any debris we expect to find relics, and the popularly sanctioned social and moral diagnosis of Mathare configures its residents, similarly, as remnants of an unwanted city, thereby biologizing the detritus of these discarded parts of urban space. Like relics, Mathare residents, for a variety of reasons that I discuss below, are imagined as remains. They are not quite human, perhaps even “ex-human” (Biehl and Locke 2010, 318), the unstable and distrusted artifacts of a once-upon-a-time humanity. In applying the relic as a key metaphor, I suggest that like the material vestiges of ruins, they are viewed as if moulded by everything they have contacted within their environment. As a result, all manner of offensive secretions and decaying matter is seen to reproduce in their sinews, especially as their environment gets worse —their impurity is never in question and is always multiplying. They personify a patchwork of ambiguous substances that render subjectivities of ambivalence, and they are viewed as trickster personalities (Wa Mungai 2013) that evidence the co-constitution of subject and their environment in what is, in turn, tacitly understood as a garbage heap of empire.

Without a doubt, to the outside world Mathare residents biologize all the social and epidemiological transgressions imagined to persist in the city, in a condition akin to that of the

“gypsies” discussed by Sibley (1995, 27-28) and what Jones (forthcoming, 23) describes as “silhouettes devoid of character.” This habitual mapping of space to bodies and vice-versa popularizes specific spatial languages about ruins. In this sense, there occurs a “slip between metaphor and material object, between infrastructure and imagery, between remnants of matter and mind” (Stoler 2013, 203). As such, the crime, prostitution and other illegal economies established here are not upheld as the consequences of structural violence, but as hereditary through space, as if imprinted in DNA that has specific spatial chromosomes. And though their resilience is recognized, empathized with and even applauded from time to time, for the most part, like relics in a museum, they are not celebrated but confined. This encampment is itself a ruin, a former quarry that is home to almost half a million residents considered aliens in their own city, and who are always being hunted even if they sustain the very backbone of Nairobi. This is a life of shuttling back and forth between the assembling processes of a ruination of “selective non-planning” (Yiftachel 2009, 90) that compels an existence lived in the “crossfires” of the larger city (see Chapter 5 for more on these experiences).

The metaphor does not end there. The very landscape of Mathare is built using relics—many houses are constructed with what is other people’s debris, hunted and gathered from a wide range of city geographies, such as old metal garbage cans taken from the central business district, cartons abandoned by supermarkets and the *mabati* corrugated iron sheets, ravaged over and over by fire until they turn a rusty copper colour, and repeatedly salvaged and put to use over and over again. These remains from frequent and traumatic conflagrations thus embody the life histories of this space, amplified by their rusty façade, and in their constant survival become agents in creating social meaning.

Even while they live their lives at the intersection of many grave situations—facing consistent threats of eviction, a lack of basic services and police violence (Amnesty 2013; Manji 2015; Van Stapele 2015; Jones et al. 2017; Price et al. 2016)—like most relics, Mathare residents do not behave well. Similar to the “posthumous” triumph of the African Burial Ground in New York (Rothstein 2010), they show up when they are not meant to, and often enact some type of offense to established order. They are also known to take oaths against the government and get in the way of “development.”²⁵ For the most part, however, like true relics they work on surviving in their abandonment, and they do this in and through many complicated and contradictory entanglements. And despite the constant de-and-recomposition of this geography, the never-ending rubble, they have managed to do so for over eight decades,

Evidencing this is the significant population of women in Village One who are over 80 years old.²⁶ Their survival illustrates not only their longevity but, as well, the ability of relics to navigate intense processes of ruination. Therefore, borrowing from Simone’s (2015) portrayal of spaces of blackness, I argue that the relic has

learned to live in the implosion of old orders grinding to a halt, of being the example that teaches a populace how to watch what happens when a portion of its citizenry is unmoored from the basic supports of life. It has learned to live with incessant transience, quickly deciding how to recoup opportunity from sudden detours and foreclosures [...]. It has learned to traverse the built environment in ways that infrastructure would normally prevent. (Simone 2015, 7-8)

In sum they hold on, and in this enduring cultivate a life force (Biehl and Locke 2010) that charges against and within the “implosions” and reassemblings that orient ruination.

²⁵ There are many examples of anti-government activity in Mathare, and some of these will be taken up in the subsequent history chapter as well as Chapter 5.

²⁶ There are more women than men in this age group. One research collaborator says it is because men died during the Mau Mau period, and this situation is replicated in the present where many young men have been killed by the police.

It is for these reasons that I think with both ruins and relics. But in addition, relics are also used normatively as mnemonic devices that act as bridges between different historical moments. It is in this way that they can shed light on key gaps in established tropes, while also unsettling dominant discursive patterns and physical practices in and about space. As they provide new insights and sharpen old ones, they potentiate unexpected engagements, and in so doing destabilize the assemblage that territorializes urban planning's ecologies of exclusion.

Ecology of Exclusion

Here it is not just the police that will kill you, the environment can kill you as well.
Murogi (personal communication).

As mentioned earlier, nature, in a variety of forms, was referenced by interlocutors throughout my fieldwork in Mathare. Whether it was included in descriptions of the garbage and other forms of waste that made many tributaries throughout this geography, or in the unsolicited parables of environmental decay expressed to index changes in individual and collective experiences of life, nature was a key part of the texture of residents' stories. Interestingly, much academic writing on Mathare does not foreground nature in its analyses (see Hake 1977; Médard 2010; Van Stapele 2015). While the extensive environmental pollution in Mathare is affirmed in these discussions, with the exception of Otiso (2005), there does not appear to be due attention directed to the particular human-nature metabolisms that brought forth this specific urban environment. This reproduces what many urban political ecology scholars assert is the false dichotomy that separates the city from nature in studies that focus on urban areas. It is further concerning that theorizing about these spaces has also been blind to the hybridity of the urban that results from its construction within human-nature interactions—"socio-metabolic processes" dependent on

the “circulation of matter, value and representations” and embedded within a particular political-economy (Heynen, Kaika and Swyngedouw 2006, xiv, 7). Central to these processes are power relations that regulate whose nature is to be urbanized, and the uneven socio-ecological landscapes that result from these determinations. As a result, UPE scholars emphasize a tracing of these metabolic trajectories over time and through a mapping that makes evident the connections between society, culture, politics, economics and ecology. For these purposes, UPE draws on “multiple currents of theory” that permit us to excavate the “deep historical spatial logics of the ‘ghetto’” (Heynen 2016, 2-5). By demonstrating the mutual imbrication of the elements that assemble the city, they demonstrate how the urban is constituted in the co-articulation of social processes, material metabolism and spatial forms (Smith 2006; Lawhon, Ernston and Silver 2013; Swyngedouw 1996; Heynen, Kaika and Swyngedouw 2006).

Guided by these lines of thought, I uphold nature as a key agentive constituent of the assemblage that territorializes urban planning. When scaled to Nairobi, imperial ideas about nature were a central motive for the simultaneous neglect and exploitation of the space that is now Mathare, and more generally all of Eastlands, and intersected with economic, social, and political functions of empire. As such, I heed the prompts to historicize urban nature and to recognize uneven city landscapes as moulded by the environment in ways that entangle them within broader relations of power and thereby speak to the territorialization of hegemony. With regard to Mathare, whose provenance as an old quarry is evidenced by a landscape that is, still, literally disembowelled, I connect this pitting of the terrain with the ongoing neglect that allows it to remain an eroded and constantly eroding landscape. Working within urban political ecology de-naturalizes this landscape, and shifts the blame for environmental decay away from its

residents by making apparent the logics underpinning the (re)productions of nature in the *longue durée* (Swyngedouw 1996; Heynen, Kaika and Swyngedouw 2006).

In tracing the history of this uneven terrain, Mathare emerges for me as an *ecology of exclusion*. Such ecologies are geographies that are materialized through the interplay of socio-political and economic disenfranchisement that operates in tandem with severe environmental crises. In these parts of the city the combined exclusion concentrated in the spatial form generates a particular intensity that is continually re-established over time, and principally through an urban planning of neglect and force (Thrift 2004; Rasmussen 2010b). It then becomes a nature of “disaster vulnerability” (Murray 2009), a risk-prone environment open to dangerous socio-natural outcomes which are habitually ignored by the media and more prosperous city dwellers unless they are spectacular in their force,²⁷ or extend to other parts of the city. What is more, who survives these disasters is also part of the discriminatory “social calculus” encoded in urban spaces (Heynen 2016; Médard 2010; Murray 2009; Smith 2006).

As mentioned earlier, this differentiation on all registers leads to particular spatial languages about these poor urban sites. In this regard, they are often depicted as “a dilapidated and crimogenic anachronism” that is also a “haven of single mothers” (James 2010; see also Caldeira 2000 and Goldstein 2003 for this in Brazil). Ecology of exclusion brings together these situated spatial conditions and circulated subjectivities (for example, crime, cholera, overcrowding, bedbugs, monster rats, fetid and toxic sewage and sexual violence) to show how they are naturalized in this environment, and through processes that legitimate both their hypervisibility and invisibility. What results, then, is a space that is both forcefully off the map

²⁷ As a brief example, in the first two weeks of March 2016 I heard of about five fires in Mathare, none of which was attended to by the fire department. These events confirm that there are at least two fires a month here, all of which go unreported in the media unless they are as spectacular as the fire that killed over 100 people in Mukuru slum in the South B area.

and where disinvestment is most violent. This metaphor bodes well with other conceptual devices that seek to capture specific aspects of spatial exclusion, such as Yiftachel's (2009) "gray spaces," Sibleys (1995) "geographies of exclusion," Biehl's (2005) "zones of social abandonment," De Boeck and Plissart's (2004, 84) "geography of shortages, of lack and of loss," Mbembe and Roitman's (1995) "geography of the crisis" and Simone's (2015) "areas of blackness." However, while informed by these theoretical devices, an ecology of exclusion differs from them because it foregrounds nature to show how long-term imperial ruination impacts the environment and creates natures that are said to mirror specific subjectivities.

By capturing these varied but interconnected violences that are now seen to be part of the environment of Mathare, ecology of exclusion becomes a useful tool to interrogate the natures naturalized by larger "power geometries" upheld in the city (Heynen, Kaika and Swyngedouw 2006, 11-12). It includes and connects the killings by the police and the environment that were emphasized by Murogi, the interlocutor quoted earlier; that is, all the normalized ways of living and dying in this ruin are witnessed by this metaphor.

To include the full range of ways in which nature was taken up in Mathare, ecology of exclusion also takes into consideration what more orthodox strains of UPE may call into question; in this vein I take nature to include those spiritual references to the immaterial environment that I often heard during my fieldwork. For instance, one interlocutor mentioned frequently that he is "blessed by nature,"²⁸ and another would speak about the unseen world that made itself known when its mediums "bash on the mabati walls and keep people awake at night."²⁹ Allusions to nature as a mystical guide were also articulated through visceral parables such as: "Mathare is a river, is a movement, and we will swim, eat and even bathe from it" or

²⁸ Murogi, personal communication.

²⁹ Mutumia wa hinya 1, personal communication.

even: “before there were clean water springs and now there are none.”³⁰ The local meanings assigned to these physical and non-physical social natures emphasize, as Garuba (2005, 285) does, that “an animistic understanding of the world applied to the practice of everyday life has often provided avenues of agency for the dispossessed in colonial and postcolonial Africa.” As is demonstrated throughout this dissertation, resident’s *natures*, in the dual sense of the word, become a key site from which to wage struggles for home and its subjects.

These various metaphysical conceptualizations of natures contribute to the city’s material landscape, and catalogue the experiences of those who live within the grids of an imperial urban planning. Therefore, while I draw attention to the decaying socio-material landscape of Mathare, which remains the most obvious symbol of its abandonment, I also privilege these intense otherworldly ecologies. That the stones from this old quarry were used to develop many of the buildings within the functioning core of Nairobi—from the law courts that condemn many residents to the gallows, to Muthaiga the exclusive neighbourhood where various embassies and their staff are established—also creates instantiations of Mathare throughout the city (Jones forthcoming; Chiuri 1978). As such, collapsed within ecologies of exclusion are both material and non-physical natures, and this coupling allows us to engage with urban planning through all the registers in which it impacts the lives of Mathare residents, including through subjectivity.

On Subjectivity

I have learned something about adaptation.
Murogi (personal communication).

When the jungle changes the monkey changes with it.
Anonymous Mathare resident (personal communication).

³⁰ Cucu Wanjohi, personal communication.

A core goal of this dissertation is to make the link between popularized subjectivities about people who live in poor urban spaces, to consider how these legitimize a planning of neglect and force and the ways in which this space-subjectivity enterprise operates and is territorialized by an assemblage of intersecting imperial logics. I intend to show that while it is often negative popular positionings that inform urban spatial management in city ruins, subjects may take them up or contest them in ways that can crack through what Biehl and Locke (2010, 323-330) term “rigid social field[s].” In this pursuit of escapes, residents work to “reverse the formula” and, in these actions, bring about other subjectivities of self and space that portend new possibilities for the urban future (see Chapter 5).

These contestations are provoked through itineraries that may affirm popular ideas about them (for example, gangster), in order to protect themselves (see Simone 2015 and also Ralph 2014) or to create other “meaningful social worlds” (Goffman 2014, 109). Certainly, they open up new conditions that contribute to a collective enunciation that provokes alternative valuations of self and community. These bids for subject and space, which draw from both the past and the present, license futures and histories for Mathare that are never otherwise imagined by outsiders. Principally in Chapter 5, I examine these material and discursive practices and argue that they echo the “renegade dreams” that Ralph (2014) speaks about, as well as the complicated but determined resilience of communities on the margins documented by a wide number of scholars (see, for example, Holston 2009; Regis 2001; Cahill 2007; Rasmussen 2010b; Van Stapele 2015; Ramakrishnan 2014).

In an earlier section, I set out the theoretical approaches and the attendant spatial metaphors that emerge from this interdisciplinary framing. I now elaborate on the specific subjectivity debates within anthropology and postcolonial studies that inform my theorizing of

subject formation, as well as the grounded figure of Matigari that is often used to reflect on and capture both group and individual identities in Mathare.

Subjectivity

In this dissertation, subjectivity is taken as the “inner life processes and affective states” of subjects (Biehl, Good and Kleinman 2007, 6). It is at once the condition of being a subject as well as one’s ideas about this subjecthood; it is the sum of one’s perceptions, experiences and understandings that come from both individuation and intersubjectivity (see also Hall 2000; Werbner 2002; Lau and Scales 2016). Throughout people’s lives, their ideas about self will change as they negotiate many structures in a bid to create their own paths for conformity or rebellion. Attending to this, Boellstorff (2005) articulates subjectivity as a combination of “the various senses of self—erotics, assumptions about one’s life course, and so forth—that obtain when occupying a subject position, whether partially or completely, temporarily or permanently” (Boellstorff 2005, 10).

Furthermore, as many cross-disciplinary debates have shown:

Subjectivity does not merely speak as resistance, nor is it simply spoken (or silenced) by power. It continually forms, and returns in the complex play of bodily, linguistic, political, and psychological dimensions of human experience, within and against new infrastructures, value systems, and the transforming afflictions and injustices of today. (Biehl and Locke 2010, 323)

Everyday life in Mathare, within and against infrastructures, weaves in these now quotidian practices of transforming afflictions and injustices. One cannot live a life of impending flooding, cholera, insufficient housing, police violence and fire without repeatedly constituting and reconstituting the self. For that reason, also in focus here are the multiple directions of these

transformations: adaptive and defiant qualities of personhood that will shape Mathare, and Nairobi, for years to come.

In privileging subjectivity as a multisensorial experience, I also use it interchangeably with the term *sense* or *senses of self*. This referent allows us to consider all the “embodied sensibilities” (Overholtzer and Robin 2015, 4) that obtain from living in the ruin. Such an approach gives more flesh and gravitas to statements such as that of one interlocutor who stated: “If I cut my wrists and my blood drips on the floor it will spell G.H.E.T.T.O” (Muigi, personal communication 2016; see also Van Stapele 2015, 95 for similar testimonials about “Mathare blood”). My reading of this is that locally there exists a visceral association between space and interiority that operates on many levels, and generates an emotional geography moulded by the way residents live and are pushed to live in this Nairobi quarter.

Following from disciplinary preoccupations that permit ideas of a static “native” culture to have such authority, theorizations of subjectivity are taken as a means to appreciate the diversity of individual experiences and ideas of self within structures. This is what Saravi and Makowski (2011, 316), with reference to Dewilde (2003), refer to as “rediscovering the subject”: putting individual agency back into the centre of an analysis that has so often focused on overly deterministic categories such as culture. Privileging the subject allows us to recognize the “multi-scale experiences” (Ramos-Zayas 2011, 86) of personhood, the ways it is overlaid and intersected by other unstable historical identities such as ethnicity and class (Lau and Scales 2016). It is in this way that subjectivity can become a bridge to connect both shared experiences of togetherness and everyday constructions of the self. These functions of subjectivity are important for my analysis since I look at local narratives about collective experiences of space vis-à-vis urban spatial management, while also recognizing the individuated experiences of

power in this landscape. In Mathare, for example, the latter are determined by material class differentiation, as evidenced by the stone houses near the road and the less durable mabati houses located close to the river. What is more, how a person encounters power is influenced by their gender identity, ethnicity, age and social networks, among other factors. For these reasons, while I attend to how those popular subjectivities that are said to be reflective of Mathare residents writ large can impact urban planning, alongside the collective ways these positionings are contested, I also dwell in the narratives of individual residents and allow for their agential practices to pierce through the collective enunciations of life in this ecology of exclusion.

Both the collective injury from and the individuated responses to colonial processes are registered by postcolonial theorists such as Fanon (1961) and Wa Thiong'o (1987, 1994). These scholars attend to the breadth and depth of the wounds that are harboured in and because of formerly colonial situations, and which result in subjectivities of crisis (Mbembe and Roitman 1995). Related to these postcolonial debates, and perhaps informed by them, subjectivity has habitually been imbued with the hierarchies, violence and anxieties that link together subjection and the subject (Del Vecchio-Good et al. 2008, 2). The currents of power that scaffold this concept make evident the meta nature of forces of authority that are “intertwine[d] with particular configurations of political, economic” and even “medical institutions” connected to the colonial (Biehl, Good and Kleinman 2007, 8). These ideas of subjectivity as influenced significantly by an enduring institutionalized subordination, or “duress” (see Stoler 2016), are shared by Jensen (2008) who, in discussing coloured identity in apartheid Cape Town, reports that senses of self were heavily framed “within overarching structures of domination” (Jensen 2008, 195). Theorizing the self through these multiple scales allows us to place the political at

the heart of the psychological and the psychological at the heart of these subjugating structures (Del Vecchio-Good et al. 2008, 3).

Notwithstanding its broad utility, subjectivity as a concept has various shortcomings. Concerning group subjectivities, it is important that the researcher (also subject to their own bias) not reify totalitarian models such as what Roy (2011) ironically refers to as the “habitus of the dispossessed.” Similarly, the focus on subjection as over determinative of senses of self may downplay other non-oppressive yet critical experiences in people’s lives. As Hall (2001) argues, subjects do not always respond to the positions (and emotions) through which they are hailed. Certainly, these weaknesses implicit in the application of subjectivity also highlight the power imbalances inherent in speculating about another’s sense of self, and, inevitably, gesture towards the bigger question embedded within much critical southern inquiry: just who has the right and privilege to engage in this theorizing of (unfailing southern) others anyway?

Even with these limitations, subjectivity remains an important concept to help us think about how urban environments cast the psychic spaces of their residents, as well as the dialogical relationship that results from the interactions between city and urban subject interiors. In sites such as Mathare, where many intersecting exclusions plateau simultaneously, the focus on structural subjection is not without merit. At the same time, subjectivity allows for the mapping of both group and individuated senses of self that, together and apart, give multiple insights into the co-constitutions of space and personhood.

The kind of portrait that I want to sketch in this dissertation is one that shows, principally through residents’ narratives, how the multiple impediments waged by the configurations of urban planning—a “plateau of power” (Swyngedouw 1996, 80)—shape daily life in this ecology of exclusion. Notwithstanding the violence of this situation, I show how subjectivities, collective

and individual, of nuanced escapes are provoked. These are “worldings” (Roy and Ong 2011) which can be “world altering” (Biehl and Locke 2010, 317). For this reason, subjectivity is employed here to help illustrate the lines of flight, or becomings, established by everyday actions in Mathare, and that allow for complexity, redemption and survivals in this urban ruin.

One identity through which both group and individual experiences are channeled in Mathare, to arm and disarm against popularized subjectivities, is that of Matigari. This is an inherently intersectional figure that knots ecological, economic, social and political exclusions. Matigari emerged from within Gĩkũyũ oral narratives and, while these persist in present-day Mathare, the identifier as such is now more formally documented in the historical, political and literary works that follow Mau Mau memorializations among Kenya’s poor (Wa Thiong'o 1987, Wa Thiong'o and Jaggi 1989; Gikandi 1991). Recognizing its specific ethnic and class inflections, I take up Matigari to help theorize residents’ narratives about life in Mathare, principally because this is a community where the Mau Mau are recalled in many situated interactions. Since Matigari is not a bounded identity—it can and has been taken up and used in numerous disparate situations—I am able to chart the vitality of individuals who are “plotting their own paths” and “exceeding destiny” (Biehl and Locke 2010, 346), while still drawing on the hauntings of Matigari to engage in their own subjective itineraries in Mathare.

Matigari

The dead have not agreed to be meaningless for the living.

Filip De Boeck and Marie-Françoise Plissart,
Kinshasa: Tales of the Invisible City.

Thinking with ruins, relics and ecologies of exclusion helps situate the vocalizations by Mathare residents that they are part of a long process of neglect. These complementary conceptual metaphors offer an entry point into local narrative practices (White 2001) that speak of

abandonment but also of possibility. A key moniker, a vernacular locus, used to symbolize and personify these experiences of ruination is Matigari. At once an identity marker and a mnemonic device, this figure operates as a visceral descriptor of daily life as well as a call to action.

Though it has provenance in a mundane Kikuyu term for “leftovers of food or dregs in drinks” (Gikandi 1991), Matigari is now a heavily politicized expression firmly embedded in postcolonial Gĩkũyũ oral practices. Certainly, this is a consequence of being most famously theorized in the literary work of Wa Thiong'o (1987) of the same name. In this story that follows the journey of a character named *Matigari ma Njiruungi*, “patriots who survived the bullets”, Wa Thiong'o (1987) depicts the contemporary conditions of the Mau Mau and their descendants. Through this poetic portrayal that begins when Matigari, a former Mau Mau fighter, leaves the forest (the foremost battle space of the Kenya Land and Freedom Army/Mau Mau), we understand that he represents the majority poor in Kenya who have been duped into a neo-colonial project by those who collaborated with the British—the ngati, *gikunia* and their descendants.³¹ Matigari, therefore, refers to those who survived the colonial wars but are still embroiled in the duress of this period because independence has not brought them truth and justice. The protagonist of Wa Thiong'o's (1987) tale personifies these struggles; the daily strife of those who made sacrifices for Kenya's freedom only to find that it meant the continuation of empire, albeit with African faces at its helm (Wa Thiong'o 1987; Gikandi 1991; Wa Mungai 2013; Rasmussen 2010a, 33; Jones forthcoming).

While explicitly indicative of a class positioning, Matigari is also a cultural framing. The ethnic tenor of this identity is reified amongst Mathare's large Kikuyu population. This

³¹ Ngati is the Gĩkũyũ name for the African militarized forces that were part of the ‘native’ colonial force. It is often thought to be a shortened corruption of the word ‘homeguard.’ Gikunia is the Gĩkũyũ name for the collaborator-informants of the colonial government who used to identify Mau Mau in line ups. The gikunia covered their heads in sacks, with slits for the eyes, to protect their identity as informants (see Anderson 2005).

significant Kikuyu demographic is explained often by Nairobi's proximity to the Kikuyu traditional homeland (a dominance also evidenced by the use of Kikuyu terms for local topographic features such as the river – *ruui*), as well as formative urban events during the struggle for independence that are discussed in Chapters 2 and 3 (see also Hake 1977 and White 1990 for more on the Kikuyu presence in Mathare). Even the name Mathare, notwithstanding the different stories about its origin, is derived from the Gĩkũyũ language.³² Similar “contemplative juxtapositions” (Ralph 2014) are witnessed in Kinshasa (De Boeck and Plissart 2004, 103) and New Orleans (Regis 2001) where (hi)stories are part of an active creation of the present in poor neighbourhoods. This recollection creates ties to the past to as make sense of the present-day, while also charging contemporary situations with a more urgent emotional inflection.

I heard numerous interlocutors in Mathare reference the bad blood which they imagined animated them, and this heritage was held responsible for why they are seen as a perpetual threat by the ngati descended government. In these accounts, a Matigari identity implies different streams of the same Kikuyu blood; it is a material and semiotic shorthand that establishes biological difference between those in power and the *real* Mau Mau now living in the detritus of Nairobi. Primarily, however, it conveys a message about the colonial logics that underpin life in Kenya and that extend to how the city is organized. It is in this way that Matigari helps nuance the figure of the relic by overlaying it with experiences of empire in Mathare and the whole of Nairobi, and imbricating it within larger post-independence debates about land, inequality and identity. Coincidentally, two critical scenes in Wa Thiong'o's (1987) novel depict Matigari

³² The word Mathare is very close to the Gĩkũyũ word for branches: *matari*. Hake (1977, 10) states that it is derived from the Kikuyu word for Dracena trees. One other genesis story for Mathare that I encountered was that it means “the crazy people.” This latter story is, in some ways, consistently re-established by the existence of the oldest mental hospital in Kenya a few feet from the Mathare River, and abutting the valley based dwellings. My attention was also drawn to the similarity between the word Mathare and Matigari, as well as other stories that I am unable to take up here.

children scavenging among garbage heaps and sleeping in the rusting remains of cars in the peripheries of the city. These two vistas concentrate in them the very conditions and intersecting iconicity for what I discuss here as ruins, ecologies of exclusion and the relic.

Considering oneself, and being considered, as Matigari therefore employs a “speech of returns” (Ochoa 2007, 473), what Nichols (1983, 16) calls “cadences like the living [but] parables of the dead,” that is essentially a conversation about empire’s inequities. Captured through popular narratives, this has enabled an existence where “nothing [is] strictly time bound, nor fenced off about the Mau Mau conflict of the 1950s” (Jones forthcoming, 7). Consequently, there is interplay between this “deeply felt” collective story and one’s everyday experiences that contribute to and draw from this shared identity (see also Rasmussen 2010a). This intentional self-positioning that indexes the endurance of imperial formations thus forms a social field for “mediating subjective worlds and social realities” that “not only represents who “we” are in relation to others, but who “we” are in relation to ourselves through time—past, present and future” (White 2001, 496). As a result, when Matigari is taken up individually or collectively in the now, and when it is projected backward or forward, this identity can embody an agenda for socio-political action.

Much of the urban fight against both Mau Mau and Mungiki³³ took place in Mathare and elsewhere in Eastlands (Anderson 2005). Therefore, residents’ evocations of the Mau Mau,

³³ Mungiki is a Kikuyu-centered sociopolitical movement in Kenya that was outlawed as a dangerous cult following the election of President Mwai Kibaki in 2002. Mungiki position themselves as the children and inheritors of Mau Mau. The name “Mungiki” means “multitude” in the Gikūyū language. It is predominantly a Kikuyu movement that combines religious, political, “criminal” and social aspects in the pursuit of what they believe is a better Kenyan society. The “sect,” as it is often formerly referred to, was banned in 2002, and since then the police have been linked to the disappearance and murder of thousands of Kenyan youth who they claim to have suspected of being Mungiki. Mathare was a key site for these government battles against Mungiki. While extrajudicial killings by the police are normalized in the country [see Chapter 5 for more on this]—evidenced by the periodic ‘shoot to kill’ orders issued at various moments of the nation’s history [for one example see Kagwanja (2005, 107)]—very few human rights reports have been able to document the frequency and full extent of these killings that occur in an ongoing manner. One organization, the Oscar Foundation Free Legal Clinic, did release a report in 2008 that

similar to those of Mwanake, our protagonist in the Introduction, are not mere nostalgia; they are intentional speech acts to index entanglements in what are locally narrativized as the same battles fought by the Kenya Land and Freedom Army in Mathare and elsewhere in Kenya (see Chapter 3 for more of this history). Against this background, the term Mau Mau takes on paradigmatic force in spaces of neglect around Nairobi, and principally those in the east of the city.

Evidencing this, in one instance Simon, an interlocutor in his late twenties, observed that

The current Mathare didn't exist in the previous plan. It is believed that it was a place of asylum for the Mau Mau who fled. From then on, they came up with structures they felt were appropriate. The government was reluctant to implement its projects and thus in turn Mathare became a mess. This has brought issues, especially in planning because people are forced to move to pave way for infrastructures like road constructions. Amenities like social care are not there, such as county clinics. People from Mathare have to go to government clinics or Mathare North District Hospital. They are forced to go to private owned clinics or depend on self-treatment. We live by grace. It's a struggle for existence.

In a similar vein, Eunice, a community organizer in her early twenties, stated:

I think the people responsible for Mathare are the British because they are the ones who took land away from the communities. They forced them to establish a slum in Mathare. I also think the leaders who came immediately after independence are responsible because they did not return the land back to the original owners. And politicians to date, they keep promising people that they will change issues but they don't, so I think they are also responsible.

The now mundane recursive speeches through which Mau Mau and coloniality are called up texture experiences of social space. It is therefore not surprising that Mathare is the only place in Nairobi where there is a Mau Mau Road (see Image 3), and, from my knowledge, one that has existed for decades. Here, memory, subjecthood and everyday experiences in space are woven into each other to create geographical socio-materialities that interrupt “the present with incessant flashes of the past” (Ralph 2014, 61), provoke a “break in linear time” (Wa Thiong'o

reported at least eight thousand young men had been killed by the police in what was, ostensibly, a crackdown on Mungiki in a span of a few years. One year after this report was released, human rights lawyer Oscar Kingara and his collaborative researcher John Paul Oulu were assassinated in what is generally understood as an example of the very extrajudicial killings they sought tirelessly to document.

and Jaggi (1989, 247) and compel residents and observers alike to “transit back and forth” between temporal moments (White 2001, 506). These flashes, breaks and transitions are personified by the Matigari figure, whose experiences make evident colonial duress in our present (Wa Thiong'o and Jaggi 1989).

Theorizing the popular recovery of Matigari, Gikandi (1991, 161) comments on how this haunting figure has “become a signifier of ‘Mau Mau’ and [come] to function, on a higher discursive level, as a trope mediating the colonial past and the postcolonial moment.” As gestured to by Gikandi (1991), at the heart of Matigari is an emphasis on “remains” and this focus has expanded to include the colonial. Certainly, these two emphases lend themselves to an examination of the colonial leftovers (re)produced by urban spatial management in Nairobi, and provoke the question: What remains, and how have they endured?

Coupling ruins, relics, ecologies of exclusion and Matigari allows me to theoretically frame resident’s narratives about the *longue durée* of the imperial in their space. What is more, bringing together these concepts allows me to recognize and piece together the multi-scalar impacts of empire on space, and what this means for subject formation.

Methodology

How does one engage the very concrete efforts that constructed the city with all the layers of physical and cultural memory that new regimes usually attempt to cover up, and all that the city does not show, either because its inhabitants are prohibited from paying attention or because whatever is considered normative or spectacular in city life has to get rid of the messy labor and politics that brought it about?

AbdouMaliq Simone, “It’s Just the City After All!”

In seeking to interrogate the messy labour and politics that shaped and still shape Nairobi, and with specific regard to its ecologies of exclusion, my research methods are anchored in the theoretical approaches discussed in the previous two sections. While working mostly with an orthodox anthropological toolbox, because of my focus on imperial histories in urban space I

also borrowed techniques from both geography and history. Employed over a two-year fieldwork process, these methods included literature reviews, participant observation, field notes, oral histories, semi-structured interviews and life histories, archival visits, media analysis, participatory action research forums, cognitive mappings and “go-alongs” (Kusenbach 2003). Used in combination, these tools allowed me to piece together a comprehensive patchwork of lived experiences from urban planning’s ruins; “people-centred evidence” (Ralph 2014) about what it must mean to live at the crossroads of Nairobi’s most sinister neglect and force.

This fieldwork foray began with archival visits to the Kenya National Archives. I was also able to find some useful historical material in the newspaper repositories of Nairobi’s McMillan library, while resources garnered from the Nation Newspaper Library, especially articles from the 1970s to the present, worked to complement these older sources immensely. Though there is, undoubtedly, a dearth of official correspondence and reports that focus on Mathare in the Kenya National Archives, there are a few available letters to and between colonial administrators who dealt with land acquisition and leasing for this area and neighbouring Eastleigh. A significant portion of this correspondence also deals with events surrounding the Mathare Mental Hospital, which, since its founding in 1910, remains the only psychiatric hospital in Kenya. Notwithstanding the very real deficiency of archival information on Mathare, the records available confirm the multiple ethnic layers of Mathare, and highlight the early Kenyan Asian inhabitants involved in quarry development and eventual morphological transformation of this terrain. Their presence is corroborated by mentions in key literature (Hake

1977; White 1990), as well as the endurance of the houses said to be of “Indian style” that dot Juja Road from Pangani to Huruma, spanning more than half the length of the constituency.³⁴

Image 4: “Aziz Building,” 2015.



This building, constructed in 1939, is located at the westernmost end of Pangani on Juja Road, a few hundred metres away from the Mlango Kubwa ward of Mathare. Source: author’s private archive (2015).

From another interlocutor I heard about the Italian prisoners of war, interned in Kenya from Ethiopia during and after the Second World War (1941–1946), who built what are understood to be flood walls along a section of the Mathare River bank³⁵ (see also White 1990, 147–150).³⁶

These various transformations of Mathare morphology confirm the different actors and actions

³⁴ Even the Senior Chief’s office, the foremost government administration unit in Mathare, is located in one of these houses, and, in this specific case, one that is rumoured to have been owned by one of the more prosperous Kenyan Asian quarry owners in the early decades of the twentieth century.

³⁵ There are two rivers in Mathare: the Getathuru and the Mathare river. However, residents often speak of *river* in the singular form, likely because these two rivers meet early in this geography, and flow as one for much of the length of the constituency.

³⁶ This was mentioned to me by an urban planner who currently works with UN-Habitat. See Moore and Fedorowich (2002) for more on Italian prisoners of war in Kenya

that are at work in this urban ruin, and which cumulatively territorialize imperial assemblages of the city.

While in the archives, I was also able to access the 1948 master plan for Nairobi (White at al.). This document explicitly highlighted how colonial ideologies were the lynchpin for Nairobi's spatial grids (see also Rasmussen 2010b; Otiso 2005, and my discussion in Chapter 3) and made evident the economic, social and political rationales offered to uphold these directives. Moreover, through this plan I was able to trace how the city's most recent planning document, the *Nairobi Integrated Urban Development Master Plan* (NIUPLAN) (JICA 2014), persists in the tenor of its 1948 predecessor, albeit through provincialized neoliberal expressions that trade in an "Africa Rising" narrative (Manji 2015).

The catalogues for official "native housing" (see Image 5 and Chapter 3 for a discussion of these), available in both the Kenya National Archives and the McMillan library, also speak unequivocally to the institutionalized link between space and subjects. Certainly, through these pre-independence designs, as in the 1948 master plan, what is evident is a "pedagogical urbanism" (Berney 2011) intent on "improving natives," though only some natives, through the built environment.

Image 5: Makongeni house, interior view, 1946



Source: Ernest A Vasey (1946) "The housing of Africans in the Urban Areas of Kenya"

In this regard, I read these graphic plans for Makongeni (see Image 5), Ziwani and Mombasa as upholding two assumptions intrinsic to urban governance in Colonial Kenya. One is the notion that African subjects needed correcting, and that European style housing could do this; the second is a cognate supposition, central to my arguments in this dissertation, that those who were not governed in the same way, and who were denied housing and service provisions, were not worth correcting and could be neglected.

My research in the national archives was complemented by productive explorations in the library of the Daily Nation newspaper. There I was able to track how Mathare, both as a

character and as a space, has been constructed in the media from 1960 through to 2015. Reviewing these articles chronologically allowed me to track how its subjectivities and environment were increasingly merged with each other, and the ways in which this influenced the multiple formal urban interventions (and declarations) that were documented in the media but never materialized. Through this review, it became clear that if ever there was an archetype of urban decay and degeneracy in Kenya, Mathare constituted it.

Furthermore, the pictures included in these articles facilitated a more visual registration of the ongoing challenges that frame life in this ecology of exclusion—the persistence of ruination. At the same time, both the graphic imprints and the journalistic pieces often brought forward a host of Mathare voices that conveyed Matigari anguish, but also demonstrated the wilful determination involved in piecing life back together again amidst widespread processes of stigmatization and erasure. These voices from the archives, many of which only just managed to pierce the litany of negative press, permitted the long-term everyday life experiences of Mathare residents to be illuminated, and were useful when used in concert with interview data. Holston (2009, 249) advocates for the “combination of history and ethnography” to avoid subscribing to the “bird’s eye view of history” that governs global depictions of “slums” everywhere. Notwithstanding Holston’s focus on Brazil, in the Mathare context both the historic work described above and the ethnographic tactics explained below worked to prevent such one-dimensional and un-nuanced depictions of Mathare subjects and their space. Above all, they gave me insights into the possibilities that persevere even amidst the differentiated citizenships reproduced by imperial ruination in the *longue durée*.

During the fieldwork process, I took part in innumerable informal conversations, conducted 37 recorded interviews, convened five focus groups and helped organize numerous

public participatory forums. As reflected on briefly in the introduction, I intentionally included a cross section of Mathare residents as interlocutors in this research process. Elderly women who had lived there for over half a century, male and female youth who were involved in a variety of community based activities, parents, small business owners, water porters, vegetable sellers, sex workers, reformed and unreformed criminals, among others, all offered crucial perspectives that I channelled towards a better understanding of what constitutes the everyday in Mathare. Like the life experiences told to Biehl and Locke (2010), all the stories that were relayed to me help moor my main arguments. With them I am able to map out the in situ “incremental practices” (Lawhon, Ernston and Silver 2013) against the unpredictability of daily life, while also witnessing the “generative force that propelled new trajectories” (Ralph 2014, 17) amidst widespread structural violence.

These actions are the “vital experimentation” that “life bricolage” (Biehl and Locke 2010, 336) necessitates, and they gave me many lessons. Akin to Ralph’s (2014) fieldwork learnings, I was consistently challenged to extend my understandings of “how to build social bonds, how to listen to people’s desires, and how to learn from the ways people imagined alternative futures” (Ralph 2014, xvii-xviii). I am deeply thankful for this access to the life support infrastructures, both impromptu imaginings and hardened bricolage, which Mathare residents offered me during my fieldwork in their community. This generosity elicited a range of implications, but the most constant outcome was a usually silent question to which I am still unable to give a definitive response. When spoken it was often posed as follows: *And so now that you have this information how are you going to use it to change our lives?* This is a question that I battle with daily, and I am fortunate that my interlocutors in Mathare never let it escape my conscience.

While every day was different, I was able to get through the “limits of narrativity” (Kusenbach 2003, 462) characteristic of interviews by engaging in community organizing and “mobile ethnography” (Saravi and Makowski 2011, 320). The latter technique is what Kusenbach (2003) broadly categorizes as “go-alongs”: processes of ethnography in motion that sanction greater “phenomenological sensibility.” These intentional perambulations with interviewees generate more qualitative perspectives into “how individuals comprehend and engage their physical and social environments in everyday life” (Kusenbach 2003, 456).

Certainly, during my walks with residents through many standard paths, their stream-of-consciousness responses provoked by certain segments of the landscape in a kind of “routinized rupture” (James 2008) impressed upon me the multiple spatial practices, biographies and relationships that can condense in one seemingly ordinary area. By way of illustration, through go-alongs with different interlocutors I learned that one fifty metre stretch along the river was, at once, the principal site for brewing illegal alcohol, the spot where Michael was shot by the police, the place where Gitz’s father’s house was burned down, a garbage dump, a contested space facing “grabbing,” and a swimming pool for young children. What is more, since the post-election violence of 2008³⁷ the river also acts as a physical and biological boundary, dividing the Kikuyu side, along Juja Road, from the Luo side (see Van Stapele 2015 and Price et al. 2016).

These personal and unsolicited valuations of space mentioned unremarkably during walk-about

³⁷ The post-election violence of late 2007 and early 2008 was provoked by what is often read as ethnic contestations of the December 2007 election results that reinstated the incumbent Kikuyu president Mwai Kibaki, while denying victory to long-term opposition leader Raila Odinga (of Luo origin). Over 1000 people were killed and 600,000 displaced during the period of violence that ensued after the pronouncement of the final voter outcome in this same month (see OHCHR 2008). While the actual number of dead, displaced and injured in Mathare is not officially documented, even though it has been referred to as the “ground zero” of these events (Corburn and Makau 2016, 170), what is certain is that this violence ossified spatial and subject ethnic boundaries that were previously more fluid, and fomented a fear that has been reignited during the lead-up to every subsequent election period (see Van Stapele 2015). Despite the peace and justice work conducted by many community associations since 2008, these fears still exist and many residents are expressing trepidation over the forthcoming 2017 elections.

became thereafter a story without words that would reinscribe the tapestry of biography and environment in my subsequent journeys around this terrain, while also speaking to larger events that territorialize this urban context.

I coupled the techniques discussed above with impromptu hair braiding, “deep hanging out” and fundraiser and funeral attendance; the latter two, unfortunately, became events that I attended with some frequency. Because of this participation in both mundane and major community occasions, I could map the many layers of this territory, including its ethnic plateaus. These cognitive and literal mappings are research tools emphasized by classical ethnography and geography, as well as many Deleuzian reflections, and through them I gained another form of “intelligence”: an understanding of the “roiling maelstroms of affect” (Thrift 2004, 57) that shape Mathare. The research stories that were obtained through these methods are documented in hundreds of pages of field notes whose richness has allowed me to develop the metaphors central to this dissertation. These notations also allowed new themes to become evident and unfold in their writing, drawing me towards other interesting and alternative routes. All these research practices were supplemented by my attention to the mediums of creative life—such as songs, poetry, situated slang and dramaturgy—that many young people from Nairobi’s margins use to express themselves, and which provide a visceral window into what shapes their interiority(ies) (see Chapter 5 for more on these youth performances).

Even so, as a non-resident I did encounter many obstacles throughout my fieldwork in Mathare. This is principally due to my positionality as a middle-class Kenyan woman who does not live in a poor urban settlement and so is unaware of many “codes of the street” (Anderson 1999), both here and in similar locations. Furthermore, it is indisputable that class power and gender are marked on my body in ways that do not go away, and these embodiments can affect

even the most basic of fieldwork procedures. Therefore, though anthropology at “home” can allow for more reflexive and intimate ethnographic procedures, because of our methods and, above all, our material privilege in relation to our fieldwork communities, researchers will always stick out (Tsuda 1998; Jacobs-Huey 2002). One key research interlocutor would convey to me how some of his friends, unsure of my purpose in Mathare, initially suggested that I was a *karau*—the slang word for the police. Another maintained that it was also important for someone local to do an “ethnography of [the] middle-class family life” that I belonged to. It was only with time and after they had got to hear snippets of information about my history in Huruma ward and the larger constituency,³⁸ and my current work with the Mathare Social Justice Centre (MSJC), that these youths cast me in a more positive light. While not being taken as the police was a positioning I preferred, in some places I was alternatively understood as either an NGO worker, an irredeemable spinster who needed desperately to get married, and/or the girlfriend of one youth leader. All these identities came with their own sets of tribulations that would wax and wane unpredictably throughout the fieldwork period (Chapter 4, “The Story of a Pump” offers glimpses into some of the implications of how I was framed).

These experiences are not unlike those documented by Tsuda (1998) and Jacobs-Huey (2002), who argue that being from the same place as one’s informants is not a guarantee of insider status, because class, gender and other situational privileges are always defining the research process. In some extreme cases, the “native” ethnographer can be accused of “airing dirty laundry” in public (Jacobs-Huey 2002, 794). This is especially dangerous in an area like Mathare where “dirty laundry” can be a matter of life and death, imprisonment and/or additional

³⁸ I have been volunteering with a community centre in Huruma ward since 2008. This ward is situated in the eastern most part of what is now Mathare constituency. My PhD research activities, however, were mostly in the area historically known as Mathare Valley, although I engaged with residents from all of the six wards including Huruma.

surveillance for one's interlocutors. Consequently, the multiple constraints, exigencies and roles that these ethnographers may have to perform simultaneously can lead to experiences of "psychic tension and dissonance" (Tsuda 1998; Jacobs-Huey 2002). Without a doubt, I had to manage identities during my fieldwork, principally because of the various entry points that my material positioning could ensure, such as the numerous doors to NGOs and sometimes government agencies, an identity card to bail out a loved one, and the small monies that were urgently required at various times. For the most part, however, I was to remain the harmless *babi* or "punk" (read middle-class) young woman who once had dreadlocks³⁹ long enough and thick enough to confer some level of street credibility. By virtue of this status, I learned, without too many repercussions, when I needed to remain silent and listen, be consistently reflexive and laugh at what some people saw as my "whiteness."

A weighty message communicated to me often and in multiple ways was that I should not even imagine that my interlocutors were merely "native informants" or "data gatherers." In fact, a community leader once asked me: "Do you just want a native informant as a rubber stamp or do you want participatory justice?" (echoes of this are found in Ralph 2014; Biehl 2005; Biehl and Locke 2010, and Collins 2008). Undoubtedly, othered neighbourhoods such as Mathare are usually the sites where researchers and NGO workers appear suddenly to collect information and disappear soon after, leaving vague promises of assistance in their wake. What tends to happen thereafter is that the data is published in glossy reports far away from Mathare, and in ventures that benefit only these researchers and their organizations (Jones et al. 2017). The residents I worked with were extremely critical of these 'tourists' and expressed great distrust of undertakings that appeared similar. As a result, these abrupt and top-down research practices,

³⁹ Without a doubt, the fact that I had long natural dreadlocks for over ten years allowed people to read me as against the system. Whether I was conscious of this or not, it worked to my benefit on many occasions, and particularly with youth who used reggae culture as a central focus in their lives.

occurring against the background of much stigmatization in Mathare, provoked the messages and questions interrogating my motivations in Mathare, as well as a call to “cure the mentality of native informant, that extracts information without building skills for community social struggle.”⁴⁰

There were amazing days and disastrous ones; my commitment to foregrounding the experiences of the urban poor vis-à-vis urban planning did not always render easy lessons. In regard to methods, these disasters ranged from the paucity of data on Mathare in the archives to the opaque and intractable bureaucracy of government offices. These circumstances speak to the inability to “translate” methods,⁴¹ a subject that informs Parnell and Piertese’s (2015, 4) call for an “experimental form of methodological pragmatism” when doing research on the African continent. Methodological impasses were combined with some of the ethical complications of conducting research in a settlement largely constructed as illegal and that was replete with human rights violations. From an emotional vantage, the bad days revolved around fires, deaths, forced evictions and general violence that would accrete in emotionally intense ways. I have a visual catalogue that documents many of these moments, some of which are included here, and that re-invoke particular feelings and memories. The pictures of group scenes, especially those of young people, capture instances in “performative historicization” (Collins 2013, 163) and what Ralph (2014, 16) calls “history as emergent,” “everywhere” and “palpable, alive.” These are routine enactments of life that in their reflections on the past also speak to possibilities for the future. It is through these vistas that I became more viscerally attuned to

⁴⁰ Email correspondence from Gacheke Gachihi.

⁴¹ On one occasion, some of my interlocutors told a group of elderly women that I had gone to speak with them because I didn’t have a grandmother and I missed one. This interpretation of my presence, although not overwhelmingly untrue and arguably a deep psychoanalytic reading of me as researcher, conveys some of the difficulties involved in explaining our work to our fieldwork communities.

what people are “left with”: to what remains, to the aftershocks of empire, to the material and social afterlife of structures, sensibilities, and things. Such effects reside in the corroded hollows of landscapes, in the gutted infrastructures of segregated cityscapes and in the microecologies of matter and mind. The focus then is not on inert remains but on their vital refiguration. (Stoler 2008, 194)

Conclusion

In the landscape of Mathare, literally and metaphorically corroded and hollow, I combined the methods discussed above to examine how the remains of empire territorialize particular urban formations in Nairobi. This is a historical administration of space that deploys subjectivities informed by larger imperial social, ecological, political and economic dynamics to create and sustain areas of large-scale urban abandonment, creating what I term here as an ecology of exclusion. The residents of these areas are left to negotiate the imperial refrains that fix them perpetually as a problem, and they do this through the only means they are left with (see Chapters 4 and 5). Their material and enunciatory engagements in space inevitably recast these popular positionings of them and the histories and futures they imply, to develop different pasts, presents and futures. Mine, therefore, is a task akin to Stoler’s (2008): “to track the composition and decomposition of people’s lives, their movement between decay, melancholy and agentive engagement” (Stoler 2008, 205). I do this to get at both the visible and invisible costs of Matigari life in this ruin, but also their spirited interventions and unexpected signals that make evident the vitality immanent in being relics; that ruination, however long or severe, can never fully uproot those who are determined to remain.

Blending areas of theorization in anthropology, geography, history and postcolonial studies with Mathare resident narratives and popular literature on Nairobi creates a framework that comprehensively attends to the assemblage that territorializes this city. Key to this framing

are particular metaphors—the ruin, ruination, ecologies of exclusion, relic and Matigari—that when put in communication with each other speak to the thinking behind materializations of, and unexpected engagements with, the space-subjectivity enterprise that constitutes urban planning in Nairobi. These conceptual tools show the long-term, symbiotic, “totalizing characterizations” (Holston 2009, 250) that Mathare’s residents decry, because they merge them and their environment in ways that legitimate a spatial management of abandonment. But those characterizations and that merging do not foreclose the possibilities of everyday life in Mathare. Instead, they register decay while also upholding the potential that is intrinsic to the work residents do to recast space and subjectivities. Both the material and expressive engagements of Mathare space by its residents will be discussed in Chapters 4 and 5. For now, it is to the imperial history that has produced the space-subjectivity enterprise that I now turn.

Chapter 2: History of Urban Planning in Nairobi 1898–2014

Introduction

Images from three colonial Pathé video recordings⁴² depict scenes of eviction in Mathare. In one of these visual missives a bulldozer traverses the terrain in inviolate movements, forcefully uprooting the mud and mabati walls and roofs of shack houses. These cave in all too easily. In *Police Swoop on Shanty Villages* (British Pathé 1953; Image 6), British officers inspect the demolition work from the sidelines and watch as a stream of humanity, mostly women and children, moves unsure through these ruins. Parents carry babies and household remains on their bodies, while their young children who can walk huddle close to them. Some of the evicted residents have tied a patchwork of rescued roofing materials across their foreheads with rope; others are balancing these remains on the top of their heads. They seem to be pushing forward, though at the same time uncertain about where they are going, and still unable to grasp that their homes were demolished in one fell swoop of the machine's claw.

⁴² I thank committee member Zulfikar Hirji for bringing my attention to the British Pathé archive. The Pathé archive is a repository of historical British films, including those taken in its former colonies. The films cited here are *Evacuation of a Shanty Town 1953*; *Assignment Mau Mau 1953*; and *Police Swoop on Shanty Villages 1953*. All of these are available on the official British Pathé website: www.britishpathe.com.

Image 6. Demolition crew at work in Mathare, 1953.



Source: British Pathé archive, documentary film—*Police Swoop on Shanty Villages* (1953).

Sixty years later, those images of removal echo as a kind of recursive “miniature history of the city itself” (White 1990, 72); Image 7), taken in 2015, mirrors those scenes from more than half a century earlier. It is as if the film is still playing, its images being repeated, and the colonial bulldozer has never left.

Image 7: Forced evictions in Mathare, 2015.



Source: *David Kariuki* (2016).

Stoler (2013, 21) argues that ruins “may involve forced removal of populations and new zones of uninhabitable space, reassigning inhabitable space, and dictating how people are supposed to live in them. As such, these ruin-making endeavors are typically state projects, ones that are often strategic, nation building, and politically charged.” Many stories that were shared with me during my fieldwork period, as well as my own witnessing, confirmed this mode of governing through ruination, the unfailing threat and reality of “reassigning” space that ensures a life of insecurity for those who dwell in areas that can so easily be declared uninhabitable. The two images above, six decades apart, condense and convey the persistent imperial ontologies of space and its attendant displacements in Nairobi. They offer a graphic representation of the

making of ruins central to the narratives told by Mathare residents: a spatial governance of whim and inconsistency but mostly of neglect and violence. At the same time, they also register the capacity of poor urban dwellers to pick up the pieces, to continue, like Matigari, surviving the bullets.

In this chapter, my goal is to document a history of Mathare anchored from within past and present chronicles of the city. To these ends, I choose key moments in the urban governance history of Nairobi from 1898 to 2014, to show how imperial logics territorialize the city both materially and discursively. I show here how it is the coalescence of imperial factors in this space over time—political, social, ecological and economic—that has produced and keeps producing Mathare as an ecology of exclusion. Essentially, if the built environment is meant to *do* something, I also argue that the *un*-built environment performs a certain kind of work. In this case, I discount institutionalized bromides about putative urban service delivery problems and, by historicizing the asymmetric spatial management in this severely underserved area of Nairobi, I flesh out my argument that urban planning is embedded in forms of *longue durée* imperial ruination that territorialize it as a negative space-subjectivity enterprise. As such, I turn my attention to how complementary ideas about Mathare space and subjects develop, accrete, and expand over the years to continue legitimating an urban planning of neglect and force.

To track these spatial processes, I divide my consideration of this history between two chapters. The first part traces the conjoined histories of Nairobi and Mathare, and in mapping out these trajectories I demonstrate the multi-scalar ways in which social, ecological, political and economic ideas and practices interact to produce space both materially and discursively. Particular attention is directed towards demonstrating how these dynamics create and sustain ecologies of exclusion, while also broaching the militarization of space that this requires in the

present moment (a lengthier discussion of the force of urban planning is saved for Chapter 5). In this regard, the fundamental role of the Nairobi police in activities such as land-grabbing and forced evictions is registered here and noted widely (Manji 2015, 207; Médard 2010; Amnesty 2013; Klopp 2008). That they are the most visible state agent against the backdrop of service invisibility in Mathare makes them important actors to include in this history of space. While guided by resident narratives, these spatial accounts of Nairobi and Mathare are also substantially informed by urban planning documents and historical sources.

I quickly learned that mother and woman were central figures in my interlocutors' lives, and appeared to be the fulcrum around which much social, ecological, political and economic life turned in Mathare. There were very few origin stories heard here that did not feature the arrival (either literal or metaphorical) of a mother. For these reasons, Chapter 3 attends to the gendered experiences that shaped Eastlands broadly, and that contribute to making Mathare a “ghetto of women” (Van Stapele 2015). Many authors have recognized the large population of pioneer women in Nairobi since it was a “tin town,” as well as the disproportionate number of female-headed households in the city compared to the rural areas (Hake 1977; White 1990; Robertson 1997; Lonsdale 2001, 12-19). These scholars also highlight the “immoral turpitude” these early forerunners were said to embody—the “wickedness of urban life” (Lonsdale 2001, 207)—in contrast to the fairly bucolic and sacrosanct images that frame discussions about women in rural areas, and the ways in which these socialities were seen to shape the city.

Certainly, single mothers and their children together continue to make up the majority of the population here (see Andvig and Barasa 2014; Van Stapele 2015; and Jones forthcoming), and fieldwork forays also proved that they dominate the groupings of both the longest and the most elderly residents in the area. As a result, it is through women that most residents trace their

genealogies. This is both a bio-cultural and socio-economic descent because it is usually older women who control housing and local work opportunities and who confer ethnic identity—a task most natural in the broad absence of fathers in this area (Van Stapele 2015; White 1990).

Furthermore, in terms of both emotional and reproductive labours, as elsewhere it is women of all generations who are left to deal with the aftermath of the many socio-spatial hazards that obliterate youth of both sexes in the ghetto, just as it is their “tortured wombs”⁴³ which brought them forth. These now normalized spatialized dangers are recognized as a combination of disease (for example tuberculosis, HIV/AIDS, and cholera), alcoholism, violent crime, and police killings. Road accidents, building collapse, domestic violence and persistent fires are also registered more and more as causes of mortality in Mathare (Van Stapele 2015; Hake 1977; Mangua 1971). Therefore, across spheres—social, biological and politico-economic—women are key orienting figures in these city ruins and their importance and ubiquity is indexed in many ways. One noteworthy and symbolic tribute is through the large number of young men who, though embedded in a widespread and institutionalized patriarchy, change their last names to show and declare that they are “son[s] of a woman” (Mangua 1971).

It is because of these quantitative and qualitatively reasons that I devote Chapter 3 to centering the narratives by and about Mathare women. These accounts show the ways in which ideas about women in Mathare inform the institutionalized neglect faced by residents and, in addition, demonstrate the very real ways in which they are left to pick up the pieces left by state violence. Since it is women who have most consistently negotiated these urban dynamics in the *longue durée*, privileging how they face, narrate, and seek to unravel empire in space gives us a

⁴³ This is an expression that was used by a Mathare raised activist as he reflected on the generational trauma of growing up in this space, and one that was imprinted in residents from their first gendered home –the womb.

better picture of the trajectories of urban governance in Mathare and the city at large, and their location in the ethico-political projects deployed to deterritorialize ruination.

Ultimately, despite the proscriptions of a colonial and patriarchal city that in both formal and informal ways prevented women from living here (see Chapter 3), it is predominantly women who set up residence in Mathare and survived and keep surviving for over eight decades. Therefore, without their economic, ecological, political and social practices, there would be no Mathare space or subjectivities as we know them today. It is for these reasons that the subsequent chapter is devoted to detailing their histories in this locality, and this functions as a prelude to a larger discussion of subjectivity that occurs in Chapter 5.

The following section on the history of Nairobi traces its beginnings from just a cluster of tents, erected to temporarily house railway personnel, to its present postcolonial iteration. I do this to excavate the initial and (re)instantiating logics that create spaces such as Mathare, and, above all, to illustrate how this ongoing imperial ruination relies on a space-subjectivity enterprise that is continuously reshaped by residents, in ways that inaugurate more grounded histories and futures for this ecology of exclusion.

Nai-robbery, Nai-shanty and Nai-beggary

The monikers for Nairobi are many, but rarely do they gesture towards the vision of a tropical “Garden City” or “Green City in the Sun” that all successive colonial and postcolonial city administrations have sought for this metropolis. Even the new master plan recognizes the negative names associated with this space, *Nai-robbery* being one of the more infamous but not singular in its derision of this city. Notwithstanding the large reach of these negative metropolitan labels, it is in the east where the pollution of Nairobi is said to accrete more severely, and that is the perceived source of all its contaminating emanations. In sum, this is the

area that affixes robbery, shanty dwelling, and beggary to all the moral panic imaginaries about this urban geography.

For its residents, Nairobi is both yielding and unyielding; it is a city where as many doors are open as are closed, and where all sorts of miracles of survival take place. In this regard, it is both a place of unimaginable prosperity and concomitantly a “self-help city” of “don’t-die survival” (Hake 1977; De Lame 2010). These contradictions are noted most viscerally in popular Kenyan literature written since independence, the majority of whose authors privilege Nairobi as both the site of their tales and the locus of important national processes. In these writings, the city is portrayed as a hybrid of “hope and home.” Yet, its multiple contours that “overlay, interweave and swirl together in fascinating and chaotic ways” also speak to the subjectivities said to come out of this city, and particularly from its “underbelly” (Kurtz 1998, 5–8).

From a bird’s-eye view, some areas of Nairobi look to have been modelled on the rolling pastures of the Oxfordshire countryside, replete with architectures that replicate the pageantry of monarchical “fantasy, grandeur and arrogance” (Demissie 2012, 1). While they echo these fantasies, the city’s more contemporary architectures have been animated by “world-class city” aspirations ever since city managers established these global urban ideals as the “regulating fiction” for our current moment (Robinson 2002). As a result, the city is increasingly marked by super-highways and hyper-modernist buildings that gesture towards the twenty-first century: “the more general framework of globalization and postmodernist architecture” (Amutabi 2012, 330; see also JICA 2014; Manji 2015; Myers 2015). Even as they overlap with the imperatives of late colonialism, these latest constructions are conjured as part of a more recent “developmental impulse” that has become the spectacular hallmark of Kenya’s neoliberal vision (Manji 2015). Still, notwithstanding their impress, these architectures always end abruptly outside the central

business district, where they give way to the jarring realities of Nairobi's unequal spatial governance—these ruins where 70 percent of city residents live: the habitual remains of what Fanon (1961) referred to as the *cit  indig ne*. These are the parts that the urban relies on but forgets, the parts that are overcrowded, underserved, and abandoned to high occurrences of alarming health statistics, sexual and domestic violence, political turbulence and grave pollution levels (Hake 1977, 27; JICA 2014, 5-13, 73; M dard 2010; Rodriguez- Torres 2010; Amnesty 2013; Klopp 2008).⁴⁴ It is these areas of “dramatic contrasts” (Kurtz 1998, 79) that are seen as the stain on the tapestry of Nairobi's prosperity, and Mathare remains one of the most infamous exemplars of these conditions.

Enkare Nyrobi, the “place of cool waters,” was a swampy though picturesque meeting point between the fluid Maasai and Kikuyu borders. Situated halfway between Kampala and Mombasa, it was initially just a stop on the way to serve more pressing imperial British interests in Uganda, and never actually intended to be one of empire's chief commercial outposts (Hake 1977; White 1990; Owuor and Mbatia 2008, 1-2). Even so, when the railroad reached this site in 1898, a development characterized by the violence of forced labours,⁴⁵ it was here that the blueprints of an imperial city were established. A railway camp was set up because it offered a cool and adequately watered terrain for building a railway station, and it is the arrangement of this initial cluster of tents that imprinted Nairobi's spatial order for years to come (Chiuri 1978; Hake 1977; White 1990; White, Silberman and Anderson 1948; Owuor and Mbatia 2008).

Following the arrival of the track line, efforts were soon directed towards making this

⁴⁴ The NIUPLAN documents that in various segments of Mathare constituency there are 1000 people per hectare of land (480 per acre), while in the leafier suburbs of Karen and Muthaiga the estimate is 5 people per hectare (JICA 2014, 73). These metrics indicate the intense overcrowding that is characteristic of Mathare, and Eastlands broadly.

⁴⁵ The grave labour conditions involved in building the Kenya-Uganda railway, the “lunatic express” as it was dubbed, led to the deaths of thousands of the indentured workers from India who were brought in to construct it by the British.

savannah landscape legible, and one of the first contributions to Nairobi's built environment was the railway headquarters that stands to this day (Amutabi 2012, 327; Kurtz 1990, 77; Hake 1977). The initial mapping of these architectures was outlined in the 1898 *Plan for a Railway Town* and the 1899 *Plan for Railway Staff Quarters* (Owuor and Mbatia 2008). And this railway town grew. By 1900 it was incorporated as the township of Nairobi as it expanded to include African villages such as Kileleshwa and Buruburu; toponyms that endure decades after the destruction of these sites (White 1990). The population of this East African protectorate city were of primarily African, South Asian and European origin, and in 1901 their cumulative population reached eight thousand people—a figure that was to increase by almost 80 percent over the next five years. European settlement was encouraged by its second commissioner, Sir Charles Eliot (1901-04), since Mother England was anxious to get back debt accrued from building the railway, while also seeking to ensure that this new British outpost became self-sustaining (White 1990, 35). Protectorate-sanctioned narratives, of a “white man's country” of abandon and lordship over natives and a vast savannah full of wildlife, did much to encourage European settlement in Kenya (Jackson 2011; Robertson 1997, 16; Amutabi 2012, 334). More locally, Nairobi's population growth also coincided with rural disasters, specifically rinderpest (cattle plague) and famine, which compelled many of those impacted to come to the city to find the monies needed to replenish agricultural stocks and households. An obligatory hut tax imposed by the British in 1901 further intensified this march to the city since many rural Africans came looking to access cash to pay for these new financial burdens. For a large demographic, migration to Nairobi was often a temporary venture (Hake 1977; White 1990). Nevertheless, because of these coinciding events, the city grew economically, demographically and racially. Deeply embedded within the initial transformations of Nairobi were the South

Asian migrants, the “colonized middle” who, in their own employ or that of empire, would maintain “mid-level subject positions” in this new colony (Myers 2003, 27).

Occurring in tandem with its expansion were efforts to make the city more functional for imperial enterprise. This facilitated the emergence of a more intentional socio-spatial engineering that inserted racialization into all vital urban processes. One early manifestation of this foundational racialization was the burning of the Indian Bazaar three times by 1907 by the municipality. To buttress these actions in the public perception, disease became a powerful metaphor used to enforce segregation. Myths about contagions attached to certain “races” abounded and were mapped onto geography. The circulation of these bio-medical tropes reflected global trends,⁴⁶ and it was *The Simpson Report* of 1913 that, in rallying disease as a sufficient motivator, called explicitly for racial separation in both residential and commercial areas (Hake 1977, 39). This fear of biological contamination was also firmly anchored within a moral economy that sought to prevent the coexistence of Africans and “lower-class Asiatics,” in order to foil the possibility of socio-sexual transgressions against the colour line (White 1990, 46; Hake 1977). An excavation of these entangled city logics, as I offer here, makes evident the co-constitution of multiple imperial preoccupations—political, economic, socio-biological and ecological—that came together to engender the assemblage that territorializes Nairobi (Robertson 1997; White 1990; Hake 1977). Highlighting this interplay of interconnected stimuli, White (1990, 48) contends that

medical arguments may have provided the evidence, but property values and political pressure provided the motivation for successful African removals. By 1920 the value of residential land—especially land with good drainage, essential to the control of malaria—may have meant more to the Municipality than smallpox.

⁴⁶ See for example De Boeck and Plissart’s (2004) discussion of this in Congo and Caldeira’s (2000) history of the Higienopolis neighbourhood in São Paulo, Brazil.

Though there were earlier calls for segregation illustrated by the 1913 *Simpson Report*, as White (1920) points out above, it was in the 1920s that legislation and planning entrenched the racial zoning that formally legitimated African displacements. In a review of planning documents for Nairobi, Médard (2010) details the incremental nature and multiple formations of apartheid that were in these colonial blueprints. The *Nairobi Area Town Planning Memorandum* (1927),⁴⁷ in contrast to earlier designs, did not use any euphemisms for racial separation and unambiguously emphasized this segregation as a function of empire. Akin to the 1927 strategy, the 1948 *Nairobi, Master Plan for A Colonial Capital* (White, Silberman and Anderson) was the work of South African planners. This South African orientation would only wane in the 1950s as the result of a bolstered British administrative presence in the emergency period (see Harris and Parnell 2012; Hake 1977, 26). Interestingly, this latter plan avoids the explicit racial narrative unmistakable in its 1927 predecessor, as well as that of its progenitors' birthplace, even though it was launched in the same year that apartheid was formally legislated in South Africa. Instead, it purports to speak to the specific nuances of Nairobi's many interracial interests. As an example, this plan states:

The Master Plan however, is able to be completely neutral on the subject of racial segregation by being confined to the principles of planning which take their measure on the human and technical needs. It is concerned with the satisfaction of wants which all men require such as privacy, open space, education, protection from through-traffic, water supplies, etc. The more attention that can be devoted to what is common to man the more likely are we to concentrate on what can to-day be planned in the light of reason while leaving to political and educational action and to the individual to sort out the rest. If the plan has a bias it is this humanistic one. (White, Silberman and Anderson 1948, 49)

⁴⁷ It is important to note that scholars like Amutabi (2012), as well as the NIUPLAN, date this plan to 1926 and call it the 1926 *Plan for a Settler Capital*. I have decided to heed Médard's chronology as she discusses formal urban management in greater detail than any other source I have found. Kurtz (1998) also refers to a *Feetham Report* and the *Williams Report* of 1926 and 1907 respectively, but does not provide details on the specific objectives of any of these planning documents.

Even amidst these claims to a humanistic bias, Nairobi “was a perfect Apartheid city without trying” (Lonsdale 2001, 220); the racialized residential zoning and road networks established over the years were left unchanged by the 1948 master plan (Corburn and Makau 2016, 162). By this token, “privacy, open space, education, protection from through-traffic [and] water supplies” were not, in fact, made available for all, and remained imperceptible infrastructures for the majority of Nairobi’s residents (Médard 2010; Slaughter 2004).

What was explicit in this plan, however, was the pursuance of a Garden City model⁴⁸ in a bid to improve the grid layout that characterized the city (White, Silberman and Anderson 1948, 45; Corburn and Makau 2016, 163). Glimpses of this spatial objective are evident in the centre of town, but completely undetectable in the neighbourhoods east of the central business district. It is in this latter city that limited formal “native housing,” in the form of bachelor lodgings, was constructed in the period between the 1927 and 1945 plans (Hake 1977, 45; 64; White 1990; Lonsdale 2001, 212). These dormitories became an early model for what was to count as African housing in the inter-war period. They were extremely unpopular with the predominantly male labourers, their target demographic, and their inadequacy was even registered by W. McGregor Ross, the director of Public Works from 1900 to 1922, who stated that his department did more for oxen than had been done for native housing (quoted in White 1990, 47). Similarly to the labour housing units in Walvis Bay, Namibia which were constructed by an imperial South Africa, these buildings fundamentally “designated a specific vision of socio-spatial relationships” which constructed their residents as migrant labour (Byerley 2015, 523; Harris and Parnell 2012, 143; see also Amutabi 2012).

⁴⁸ The Garden City model is a planning ideal that was proposed by Sir Ebenezer Howard, an Englishman, in the late nineteenth century. It advocates for the construction of “compact” communities surrounded by greenbelts, in a bid to enhance human nature interactions and avoid the unhealthy nature and overcrowding of industrial(ized) cities. This planning model was immensely popular and has inspired a host of garden cities all over the world.

In a change of strategy, and with a bid to establish ethnicized and class differentiation among the urban African population, the post-war “nuclear family housing” neighbourhoods of Ziwani, Mbotela and Kaloleni (1945-1952)⁴⁹ were put up principally for “black, Christian, civil servants,” loyalist elites, and soldiers back from the Second World War (White 1990, 144). These planned spaces included welfare clubs and sports halls, and were to be occupied by 15,000 Africans seen as able to partake in the social activities deemed “civic” by the colonial state (Anderson 2005, 186- 188). Yet, even this housing, “built to standards that no European would have tolerated,” remained small and insufficient for the demand (ibid., 225-29). Symbolically, however, these architectures were the material articulation of a shift in focus, from housing as a sanitation issue to accommodation as a means to control African class formation. In its assertion that “there is more to stone houses than bricks and mortar,” even the master plan of 1948 highlights the use of spatial management to entrench particular behaviours that when internalized would create subjects amenable to empire (White, Silberman and Anderson 1948, 34).

Kurtz (1998, 79) refers to this change in approach as a movement from “neglect and containment” to a more “deliberate policy of government paternalism.” In sum, it is a form of interventionism which upholds the built environment as a corrective, a vector through which to insert a specific tribe and class consciousness that imposes, among other things, a gendered domesticity deemed powerful enough to curb the follies of venereal disease and teenage prostitution (Hake 1977, 67; White 1990, 127, 157). But even as a remedial measure these stone houses were in short supply. Part of the narrative conveyed to explain their scarcity was that they were too expensive for a city with limited funds and, as well, the few that were built and rented

⁴⁹ Others are Bondeni (1942), Bahati (1950), Gorofani (1952), Makadara (1954), Mbotela, Maringo (1955), Jerusalem (1958) and Jericho Lumumba (1962) (Owuor and Mbatia 2008).

did not render sufficient monies to cover the costs incurred during the construction process.⁵⁰ Whether due to these administrative excuses or an unofficial policy of abandonment, a large scope of the 1948 plan was never realized (Harris and Parnell 2012, 143), a situation most pronounced in what are still the ruins of this urban locale.

What was taken up with vigour, however, and as a direct result of the perceived risks during the emergency period (1952–1960), were slum evictions and demolitions in the African city. These violent displacements had long been part of the sanctioned repertoire to ensure Nairobi’s expansion, evident as early as the demolition of the Indian bazaar in 1902.⁵¹ Nonetheless, it was during the emergency period that they became more widespread and spectacular (Andvig and Barasa 2014; Klopp 2008; White 1990; Anderson 2005). The Mathare demolitions of 1953 and those of Operation Anvil in the same area in 1954, the latter an event that constructed the “largest urban cordon and search action ever mounted” in Nairobi (Anderson 2005, 200),⁵² were part of this cycle of institutionalized demolitions rarely accompanied by compensation or alternative housing provisions (Robertson 1997; Hake 1977, White 1990; Klopp 2008). While the scale and spectacle of the 1954 siege, conducted to clear the city of Mau Mau adherents, was not repeated, large sections of the historical native location remained in a legal twilight in the immediate post-independence period. Remarking on this in the early 1970s, Hake (1977, 248; 99) comments that the formal post-independence governance practices here

⁵⁰ With reference to the late 1940s and early 1950s, when housing for nuclear African families became a priority of the government, Hake (1977, 45) documents a Legislative Council vote that approved £40,000 to be directed towards housing for African employees of the state, and £586,430 for the accommodation of expatriate officials. Such a directive illustrates that there was, indeed, sufficient purse to implement better infrastructure in the “native location,” but that imperial racial imperatives prevented such developments.

⁵¹ Kurtz (1999, 78) also discusses a 1901 Nairobi municipality convention that made legal the forcible removal of people deemed unauthorized.

⁵² Elaborating on the displacements of Operation Anvil, Anderson (2005, 200–212) discusses how Nairobi effectively became a “closed district” for one month; buses were cancelled, barbed wire enclosures were erected and, on the initial morning of the operation it was declared that “no African would leave Bahati, Pumwani or Kariakor [...] except in the back of a caged lorry” (Anderson 2005, 201).

remained “ambiguous, half-hearted, confused and self-contradictory” with little change “since 1922, when the Municipal Council discussed native squatters on Kikuyu Road.”

Equally, Owuor and Mbatia (2008) do not see a rupture between the first post-independence urban plan, the *1973 Nairobi Metropolitan Growth Strategy*, and previous colonial spatial designs. Thirty years after Hake’s (1977) analysis, they trace how this postcolonial proposal developed from within the nascent Nairobi Urban Study Group and mapped out the development of Nairobi until the year 2000. Its recommendations included the pursuit of “realistic” housing programmes and the extension of city boundaries; it also encouraged the growth of satellite cities. Irrespective of some of the more equalizing interventions proposed in this plan, Owuor and Mbatia (2008, 4) contend that this policy guide

supported the interests of the hegemonic class alliance of the local bourgeoisie and the multinational corporations [. . . since] the interests of the urban majority seem to have been neglected as segregation was enhanced based on economic and class lines as opposed to racial and class lines. In the process, the urban majority were marginalized further and informalization thrived since the late 1970s to date.

Neither the 1988 Nairobi City Commission Development Plan nor the strategies that came out of the “Nairobi We Want” forum of 1993, a convention that assembled “stakeholders, professionals and ordinary citizens,” brought about any substantive changes for the ruins of the city (Owuor and Mbatia 2008, 4). As a consequence, the majority of Nairobi’s residents have continued to be their own infrastructure, finding innovative ways to provide services for their neighbourhoods in light of the inability, or unwillingness, of the county administration to do so (Médard 2010; Torres-Rodriguez 2010; Corburn and Makau 2016; see also Silver 2015 for this in Ghana). Casting a more sympathetic light on formal spatial practices in Nairobi, Médard (2010) points out the bureaucratic complications that arise when county planning and national development plans cannot be reconciled, or when relevant ministries and the county

administration are informed by differing guidelines or party politics (see also Klopp 2008). Certainly, these are important considerations. All the same, Médard's account of violent slum evictions by both the city council and the administrative police (see Chapters 4, 5 for more on this), do much to signpost the constant and rhizomatic qualities of imperial ruination in this urban space.

It remains to be seen whether the recently launched and much heralded *Nairobi Integrated Urban Development Master Plan 2014-2030* (JICA 2014), the progeny of the national development plan *Kenya Vision 2030*, will initiate the drastic changes required in the city. So far, due to the hegemonic “global” and “world-class city” prescriptions adhered to, enabling what Roy (2009, 821) refers to as a “Darwinian ecology of cities,” this most recent proposal has only inspired what Myers (2015) calls a “jaundiced optimism.” Within this most recent instantiation of a spatial management that assumes that planners know best, an “ideological colonial segregationist movement and functional planning” regime still reigns supreme (Médard 2010, 27). Even when they actually appear in the NIUPLAN, ecologies of exclusion are appended to statements that reference removal and resettlement. This enduring symbiosis between “slums” and “clearance” raises concern and belies the assertions to participatory planning that are one of its central tropes (JICA 2014, 6–28).⁵³

As images 6 and 7 portray, formal spatial practices in Nairobi appear to have changed little, and in many spaces they persist as a refrain of duress. Though numerous formal spatial proposals have been unveiled over the last century of this city's existence—in 1898, 1913, 1927, 1948, 1973 and 2014,—imperial ruination, in this case territorialized by a space-subjectivity

⁵³See also Caldeira and Holston's (2005) work that speaks to the concurrent and contradictory democratization and neoliberalization of urban space in Brazil, and that is echoed by Ramakrishnan's (2014) work on neoliberal Delhi.

enterprise, still gives epistemic guidance to urban governance in Nairobi. How these assemble to produce Mathare, materially and metaphysically, is what I examine in the following section.

Mathare

From up here the shanty town appears just as a rubbish heap of paper, scrap iron, dust and smoke. Appearances are deceptive. Down there live enough construction labourers, unlicensed fruit peddlers and illicit liquor brewers to cause concern to the whole city police. It can be nightmarish hunting for vagrants down there. Almost everyone is a vagrant, that is including women and children. And they drink chang'aa and smoke bhang, two things that cannot stand the sight of a policeman. A few coppers have got themselves knocked cold by unknown assailants down there. Coppers find it easier to follow behind the City Council constabulary who have the right to raze the place down any day in the interest of public health. In the resulting smoke and chaos the policemen descend into the forbidden valley, make a few desperate arrests, then scramble out before the place regenerates into solid, obstinate, granite resistance to law and order.

Meja Mwangi, *Going Down River Road*.

While Mathare constituency is popularly constructed as a town of temporary ten-by-ten foot shacks and, as the above quote conveys, the home of Nairobi's most unlawful denizens, I argue here that it has emerged from a long history of being excluded from both colonial and postcolonial urban spatial management. Recall that particular ecological histories, intersected by imperial economics, politics and socio-cultural ideas and practices, legitimated that the east of the city was labelled a malaria prone flood plain and therefore unsuitable for European settlement. Moreover, the construction of sewage treatment plants and noxious industry would further entrench the environmental differences in Nairobi's racial geographies (White 1990, Otiso 2005; Hake 1976, 88; Owuor and Mbatia 2008, 3). Hake (1977) notes the unevenness of this landscape:

the large area of high ground and ridges (on which building costs were cheaper and drainage healthier) between the streams to the west and north had been chosen for the building of estates reserved by covenant or otherwise for European occupation. Plots were normally one acre, but in some cases half an acre. The 10,400 Europeans lived at so low a density that the figure for the whole town was 4.8 persons per acre, for a total population (1944) of 108,900. To the north-east, the estates in which the town's 34,300 Asians lived were laid out with from two to twelve houses to the acre. To the south-east, the small area reserved for "natives" sheltered many of the town's 64,200 Africans. (Hake 1977, 57)

Certainly, urban experiences here and elsewhere indicate that even with the stark contrasts in living conditions colonial boundaries were never always hard and fast (Myers 2003; White 1990; Lonsdale 2001). Even so, these racialized ecologies were vehemently mapped onto resident bodies, facilitating co-constitutive tropes about human and environmental natures in Nairobi (Otiso 2005; Hake 1976, 88). Gesturing, perhaps unconsciously, to this merger of people and their environment, Anderson (2005, 182) states that “squalid and crime infested, Eastlands was for Africans [and] it has been this way since the early 1900s.” Other scholars index Mathare as an “abyss of disrepute” (Jones forthcoming, 11), and its position as the “crescendo of lawlessness” is restated by Hake (1977, 60). Forasmuch as these descriptors have endured in both archival and public discourse, they have informed and reinforced an urban planning of force and neglect.

The Mwangi (1977) quotation that begins this section does much to illustrate the tenacious characterizations of an area that is only three square kilometres in size. As the hollowed-out landscape of much of this territory demonstrates, and as local oral narratives document, Mathare was previously a quarry site and its rocks were used to build many of Nairobi’s early landmark structures. Human settlement was documented in Mathare Valley⁵⁴ from as early as 1921 (Chiuri 1978; Corburn and Makau 2016, 163) and this likely occurred in tandem with the populating of the neighbouring Muslim village of Pangani.⁵⁵ Many of those who were working in this stone mine later settled in its vicinity. Initially they lived in the cave dwellings made possible by the gouged-out rock, only later receiving permission to build shacks

⁵⁴ Mathare constituency has six wards: these are Huruma, Ngei, Mabatini, Hospital, Mathare and Kia Maiko.

⁵⁵ It is important to note that Eastleigh and Pangani, firmly abutting original African locations such as Pumwani and Mathare, were also home to “Indians, Goans, Seychellois and Somalis” (White 1990, 97). Pangani was one of the earliest urban African villages and was established at the turn of the twentieth century by migrants from the coast and other “detrified” Muslim converts. It was demolished when spatial segregation became more rigidly enforced from the 1920s onwards, to make room for an Indian area.

as residences around the quarry's perimeters (Chiuri 1978; Jones forthcoming; Médard 2010, 42). Andvig and Barasa (2014, 44) document that commercial stone mining continued to operate long into the 1940s, and was conducted alongside the subsistence agriculture practices of Mathare residents. Small-scale cultivation was, and still is, common in and around various villages and occurs principally close to the river's banks. It was the unsystematic habitation and un-urban survival industries of its occupants that initiated what White (1990, 97) describes as "a squatter settlement with no legitimacy at all."

Even with the strict pass laws and surveillance that worked to hinder the residence of Africans in Nairobi, in the form of the infamous *kipande*, vagrancy ordinances, curfews and the like, Mathare persisted. Up until the emergency period, city managers more or less ignored this and other African settlements because they housed the labour needed for the colonial city (Hake 1977, 36–41; Amutabi 2012; White, Silberman and Anderson 1948, 6; Chiuri 1978, 4; Anderson 2005, 182; White 1990). As a result, its inhabitants rapidly increased in number in the 1940s and 50s, but so did its reputation for anti-social activity as it was seen to be populated by undesirables and agitators. These aspersions were not entirely unwarranted: when Eastlands became known as "Mau Mau's beating heart" in Nairobi, Mathare was regarded as one of its most notorious epicentres. And since the Mau Mau "menace" was "more intensely fought in the alleyways of Eastlands than in any other part of central Kenya" (Anderson 2005, 200; Hake 1977, 61, 47), Operation Anvil⁵⁶ greatly impacted Mathare and its surrounding communities.

This month-long urban siege involved the bulldozing of this neighbourhood and the detention of

⁵⁶ Operation Anvil took place in 1954 and was one of the colonial military operations to control the Mau Mau rebellion during the emergency period (1952–1960). One of its masterstroke activities in Nairobi involved the clearance of Kikuyus from the city and therefore also from Mathare valley. The impetus for these displacements was that Mathare was a Kikuyu stronghold, and documented as being the site for large amounts of Mau Mau activity (oaths, courts and storage of firearms). It was due to this perceived association with the Mau Mau movement that the colonial administration saw fit to bulldoze the settlement and send many of its predominantly Kikuyu residents to detention camps (Anderson 2005; Chiuri 1978, 6; Hake 1977; White 1990).

thousands of Kikuyu (including Meru and Embu) and others suspected of being Mau Mau supporters (Chiuri 1978, 6). Anderson (2005, 205-224) estimates that more than half of the Kikuyu in Nairobi were detained without trial, actions that were justified by “an attitude of mind that pervaded the security forces. The Kikuyu had come to be seen as a kind of sub-species a group that could only make claims to an inferior kind of humanity.”

Many of the detained would make their way back to Mathare at the end of the eight-year emergency season. Their goal was to try life anew; they had no rural land and, at the very least, thought that they could try to gain an economic foothold in the city. Nonetheless, on their return they found Nairobi modelled on the very same imperatives that had compelled their earlier dislocation. Their homecoming is metaphorized in the story of Matigari: they had survived the forest (read the anti-colonial fight) and its bullets, but when they came back to the city they did not find the truth and justice that was promised (see Chapter 1 for the allegory of Matigari). Instead, the immediate postcolonial period continued to (re)produce a space that was incredibly underserved, overcrowded and still, nevertheless, raided regularly for tax collection (Hake 1977, 161). Pathologically it endures as a place of “parasites”—criminals, prostitutes and producers of illegal alcohol—that, in straddling a super highway and two main arteries into the city, casts a long shadow over the prosperities of this modernizing urban space (Hake 1977; Chiuri 1978).

It is my argument that these conditions firmly derive from within the complicities of the state, that is, from the institutionalized production of informality through processes McFarlane (2012) reads as bricolage and speculative urbanism. To this list I would add abandonment and the extralegal actions adopted as normal urban practice—essentially neglect and force. Against this background, Mathare is omitted from the development trends seen in other parts of the city

and is, quite literally, off the urban map. This prompts a situation where it is a necessary geography, and yet planning continues *around* it, without ever bestowing any of the service benefits guaranteed in the constitution and implied from its location within the county's jurisdiction.⁵⁷ The lack of land tenure security exacerbates this state of affairs and contributes to sustaining one of "the most difficult urban environments in East Africa" (Muungano Support Trust 2012, 4).

Yet there have always been many resident-led efforts directed towards achieving a more just urban environment. These actions are described poetically, as Corburn and Makau (2016, 184) do, as an "unfinished symphony" for power and recognition, or in blunter terms as the "illegal" improvization and "development from below" that have become the daily enterprise of much of the "third-world" (Hake 1977; Bayat 1997, 2000; Simone 2004).

Such efforts, however, come up against significant inattention and/or opposition (see Chapter 4 for an ethnographic illustration of this). Hake's (1977) monograph is littered with descriptions of Mathare resident encounters with what Holston (2009, 249) refers to as "imperial regimes of policy and knowledge." As but one example, the cooperative land purchasing efforts of 1969-70 were frustrated by land registration irregularities and tenant exploitation, subsequently prompting many court battles (Hake 1977; Médard 2010).

Equally, in terms of water provision, Hake (1977) describes an instance where locals and their MP collaborated to lay pipes within a yard of the city's water arteries, in a bid to get formal access to this system. This was in the same decade that an average of 870 residents shared the same water tap and there were roughly 136 people to each latrine (Corburn and Makau 2016, 164). Despite these collective efforts, the city declined to include Mathare in the water network,

⁵⁷ Article 43 of the constitution guarantees all Kenyans clean water and sanitation, but these services are still unavailable for the vast majority of citizens.

and their inflexibility incited a question that was widely asked in response: “Who, then, was responsible if they drank impure water?” (Hake 1977, 161).

Regardless of these tireless struggles for improvement, ultimately residents have continued to be blamed for their structural woes. Until the end of the 1960s Kenyatta would “encourage” them to go back to the countryside to prevent Nairobi from looking like a “slum” (Médard 2010, 48). This discourse reveals how poor city dwellers are trapped by tropes about their irresponsible rural-urban migration and ungovernability once in the city. These common framings build on those established in the colonial period, but also take on gravities associated with the present “democratic moment.” With reference to Brazil, although also applicable in this context, Holston (2009, 246) discusses the “entanglement of democracy with its counters, in which new kinds of urban citizens arise to expand democratic citizenships and new forms of urban violence and inequality erode them” (see also Caldeira 2000; Caldeira and Holston 2005; and Comaroff and Comaroff 2006 for this in South Africa). Certainly, events such as Operation Anvil speak to the militarization of urban space on a scale unseen before, and principally for the east of Nairobi. Notwithstanding the specificities of that period, its *longue durée* moments persist and innovate, bringing into being newer forms of urban violence established less as spectacular and more as convention. The normalization of police killings and violence in this area since the early 2000s are some of these imperial novelties (see Kenya National Commission on Human Rights [KNCHR] 2008; Price et al. 2016). Because they are waged consistently, ostensibly to protect city space and property, they complement abandonment and become part of the regular repertoire of urban governance in poor urban settlements. Against a backdrop of neglect, these police spatialities enforce inequality in terms of both service delivery and law. That the police are the most visible face of the government in these settlements does much to establish their role

as de facto urban planners and infrastructure. Accordingly, urban spatial management is narrated locally as both historical neglect and pervasive force. This state of affairs affirms how the global reach of the penalization and surveillance of poor neighbourhoods is intensified by the spatial practices of neoliberalism (Goffman 2014; Ralph 2014; Wacquant 2008; Yonucu 2008).

Through these often highly disproportionate interventions, the state uses violence and the threat of violence to regulate areas like Mathare historically assumed to be lawless (Fassin 2013). In discussing hyper-policing and surveillance in the *banlieus* of Paris, and with particular regard to the policy environment that governed them, Fassin (2013, xv) states:

These policies were not meant to be implemented everywhere towards everyone: they concerned certain territories and certain populations. Geographically the outer cities with their housing projects, and socially, the working-class youth belonging to ethnic minorities, were their main targets. Law enforcement served as the key institution for regulating these territories and taming these populations partially abandoned by the state, the politics of which had largely contributed to the situation of segregation and stigmatization.

That the interplay of stigmatization and segregation legitimate hyper-policing is certain, and this is indisputable even when a cautionary note must be extended to prevent the reification of any simple state-society imaginaries (Garmany 2014). Furthermore, in light of the female centric histories of Mathare and Eastlands more generally, what also must be interrogated are the forms of female “ungovernability” that have provided fertile ground for the situation of “social control rather than social provision” in Mathare (Hake 1977, 40). Kurtz (1998, 99) argues that a reading of popular novels anchored in the city indicates that “Nairobi is the whore who destroys traditional male-female roles and time-honored family structures.” The whore, however, is always from a specific Nairobi; from settings such as Mathare and never from the more prosperous neighbourhoods west of the central business district.

In the next chapter, I trace how the space-subjectivity enterprise that territorializes Nairobi draws on such ideas about women in Mathare as prostitutes, alcohol brewers and single

mothers who only give birth to criminals. I also attend to how local women provide alternative framings of their history to reference the limited choices they face and how the assembling dynamics that materialize their geography affect their livelihood choices and those of their children. Above all, I intend to show how these histories of women provide a beacon for youth as they engage in ethico-political projects to improve their space and elevate their subjecthood. Specifically, the figure of the mother becomes central to their theorizing of the grave material impacts of neglect and force, while also orienting the subjectivities they take up in order to contest these modes of urban planning in their community. This discussion in that chapter lays the ground work for what follows: Chapters 4 and 5, which more ethnographically confer the material and enunciatory projects Mathare residents, and principally youth, engage in to improve their space while also countering the robber, beggar and shanty dweller subjectivities historically imposed on them.

Conclusion

The objective of this chapter has been to track the imperial ruination of Mathare through an examination of master plans for Nairobi, as well as key events such as Operation Anvil, in order first to demonstrate how these formal interventions work in tandem with and are informed by popular framings of Mathare residents, and second to establish what they have meant for the ecology of exclusion. In addition, I have fleshed out how an assemblage constituted by political, economic, social and ecological ideas and practices of empire have animated and territorialized urban planning in Nairobi broadly. Because of the longstanding role of subjectivity in informing the governance of space in Mathare, I understand spatial management in this area to be a space-subjectivity enterprise that unfolds through both neglect and force. The chapter has also briefly

attended to the punitive spatial governance intensified in the period referred to as neoliberal and democratic, through trends that are echoed in other cities globally. These discussions moor my theorization of Mathare as embedded in processes of ruination and its residents as relics and Matigari—forgotten, victimized, but always engaged in processes of reclamation.

A focus on neglect and force and how they influence resident actions for space and subjectivity is taken up more comprehensively in Chapters 4 and 5. Chapter 3, which follows next, is a centering of the histories of women in Mathare and an elaboration of their role(s) in producing both space and subjects in this urban ruin.

Chapter 3: A Ghetto of Women

Introduction

The ghetto is our mother. It raised us we are proud of that.
Naomi Van Stapele, “Respectable ‘Illegality’.”

Mother of Bones’s face is the colour of the shacks, dirty brown, like it was made to match.
NoViolet Bulawayo, *We Need New Names*.

I am the son of woman and I’ll repeat it till your elephant ears ache. Never had a dad in my blinking life.
Charles Mangua, *Son of Woman*.

At a political accountability meeting in Hospital Ward, Mathare in October 2015, the participants vigorously debated the lack of leadership both in their constituency and in the nation. They reviewed the corrupt nature and inaccessibility of a range of individuals and bodies from the Member of Parliament (MP) to the Member(s) of the County Assembly (MCA) and argued, most emphatically, that these representatives could not really be from the area because they did not have a “mother in the ghetto.” As these voices spoke against the multiple problems plaguing the area, they also revealed the centrality of *mother* in Mathare: the character around which a multiplicity of spatial relations revolves. Below is an excerpt from this community dialogue which stresses the iconicity of this figure in Mathare.

Young man: “Ai these rich people keep coming here and they don’t even have a mother in the ghetto!” “Next time if we are going to vote someone in they have to come and stand and show that they have a mother from the ghetto!”

Audience: “Yes!”

Young man: “They have to bring her here!”

Audience member: “We need to stop voting in tourists!”

In response to these discussions, one young woman declared with fervour: “These people need to be told that *Mathare si ya mamako*—Mathare is not their mother’s property!”

From these statements, both humorous and poignant, it is markedly evident that mothers, much more than any other family member, are the key orienting figures in this settlement. As

demonstrated by White (1990), Nelson (1995, 1996, 1997), Fredericksen (2002) and Van Stapele (2015), and very explicit during my fieldwork process, in Mathare women confer ethnicity, tenure rights and local work opportunities; it is through them that most residents trace their biological, cultural and socio-economic descent. The reasons for this are mentioned briefly in earlier chapters and will be further explored in this section, where I attend to Mathare as a “ghetto of women.” It is my intention here to chronicle the large influence that women have had in evolving space and socialities in this poor urban settlement, and argue that, ultimately, their long-term tenure and position as single mothers has made them instrumental to the mouldings of geography and subjects in this location. Essentially, because it is they who have overwhelmingly cast environment and subjects in Mathare over the last eight decades, any discussion on the relationship between space and subjectivity, and the vibrant youth ethico-political projects inaugurated to reshape these dynamics, must be anchored in the histories of women in this location. Therefore, directed by local appraisals which place women at the centre of spatial and subject belonging, I take the position that it is the historical views about them—as sex workers and alcohol brewers with “short futures,” and no husbands but “plenty of bastards” (Akare 1981)—that provide the formative roots for the negative positionings circulated about Mathare residents more generally. Similar to the “talk of crime” in Brazil (Caldeira 2000), these unfavourable subjectivities organize the city and generate a range of costly implications, all of which propel weighty misrecognitions that sustain and exacerbate this ecology of exclusion. It is these enduring tropes about women that precede and thus both inform and intersect with other ostensibly spatial identities (such as that of criminal), which, I contend, have helped catalyze the particular modes of urban governance in this area.

As the space worsens over time so do the ways it is spoken about, reinforcing a territorial stigmatization that takes on eugenic and Malthusian dimensions. The narration of geography through what are seen as the mores of its women (captured by the exaggerated phrase of Mangua (1971, 2) — “I was conceived on a quid and then my mother drank it!”), together with other ethno-historical and class intersections examined earlier, incite much of the othering done about this place. Moreover, since women are the largest demographic here, it is their life experiences as relics and Matigari, those left behind, that most acutely chronicle both imperial ruination and the vital possibility inherent in those ruins.

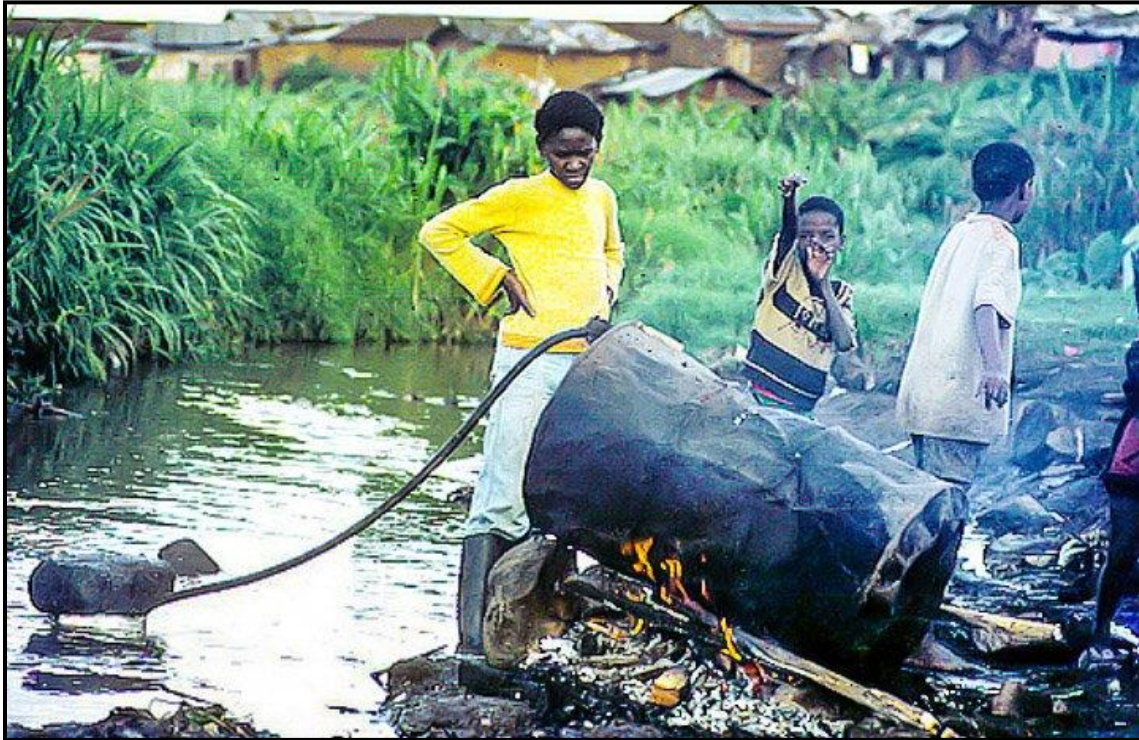
I begin by briefly charting out the histories of women in Nairobi’s Eastlands area, with a specific focus on Mathare. Following this is a discussion about Mathare women’s practices and how their everyday experiences shape both geography and subjects. In that discussion I dwell in some of the life trajectories said to affirm their amorality and trace how these inform how this space is governed. I conclude by restating the salience of women in Mathare, and by summarising how their gendered experiences orient the material and enunciatory ethico-political projects youth take up to contest ongoing ruination, both of which are examined in Chapters 4 and 5.

Urban Pioneers

The invocation of the mother figure, in relation to Mathare politics and in local life broadly, works well with the feminist historicizations of Nairobi by White (1990), Nelson (1995), Robertson (1997) and Fredericksen (2002). This literature firmly situates women, and principally single mothers, as pioneer actors in the east of the city, destabilizing official records of life in Nairobi that have rarely considered the perspectives of women. Through my fieldwork findings,

I am able to extend their emplacement of women in the centre of urban life. In that regard, I take the position that the depiction of what is seen externally as the exemplar of Mathare woman—

Image 8: Female Chang'aa Brewer and Child in Mathare, 1981



Source: @HistoryKE twitter page (2017).

single mother, sex worker, alcohol brewer (Image 8), and cunning alcoholic or drug user—broadly sanctions the stigmatization of this space. If, as Kurtz (1998, 99) argues, the city of Nairobi is a “whore” that causes the destruction of traditional gender roles and family structures, and if, as Nelson (1995, 147) confers, “the most powerful and pervasive stereotype in many of these novels [on Nairobi] is that of the wicked urban women”, it is in the east of the city where these tropes of whoreishness and wickedness have the greatest purchase. In their extensive mapping, they have cascading ramifications on a diversity of spatial relations, even when they do

not include wider political economy analyses that would contextualize the limitations to life choices and chances that obtain principally for Mathare women.

Further, as these stories of female immorality and extreme non-traditional individuation morph and intersect with other political, ecological, social and economic framings, they ossify gendered stigmatization in this area, so much so that a former MP for Mathare could declare all its women “prostitutes” who “give birth to criminals and prostitutes.”⁵⁸ Through this singularly blunt statement, it becomes evident how assumptions of spatial depravity—the view that women are the progenitors of all situated vice—is transferred. The ubiquity of these notions raises the question: How did women in Mathare attain such a deleterious reputation and what impact does it have on local space and subjectivities?

On the one hand, these poor representations are related to the general characterizations of slum and slum residents globally. In discussing the “spatialization of virtue” implicit in the governance of European cities in the nineteenth century, Osborne and Rose (1999, 743) convey how the diagrammers of the city believed that

[t]here seems to be a negative spiral of interaction between milieu and character. Poor character, which may be inherited from one’s forbears, led not only to conduct and ways of living that degraded ones’ surrounding milieu; it also led one to gravitate towards a certain kind of milieu, which itself has an effect upon character—an effect which, in turn, might be passed down to future generations through a weakened constitution, and through the ways in which one rears one’s children and the habits one inculcates in them.

Undoubtedly, the perceived symbiosis between character and milieu in Mathare owes some provenance to these nineteenth-century beliefs imprinted in European cities. However, added to these enduring global tropes are situational nuances that layer pre-established notions of slums and their inhabitants. To attend to these textures, general and situated, in Mathare, I draw from both academic and fictional literature of Nairobi to shed light on the historically gendered

⁵⁸ James Macharia, personal communication.

language used about it, the bearing this is said to have on future generations, and what all this means for relationships with others both in and out of their space. Above all, it is the layered portrayals of women featured in popular literature on Nairobi that offers a more insightful nuancing of how their experiences form the point of departure for the subjectivities seen as tied to this part of Nairobi; in sum how gendered language becomes a useful vector to understand the valuations of particular city space and subjects.

Women in Nairobi

Both Hake (1977) and White (1990) describe the young women who, from 1896 to 1901 during the construction of the Kenya-Uganda railway, followed the railway caravans travelling from Mombasa to Nairobi and onward to Kisumu. The provisory railways stations erected along the way led to the development of proto-urban sites where young women, initially propelled from their homes by the socio-economic effects of rinderpest and famine (see Chapter 2), would engage in shifting sex work and trade in an effort to save their rural households (White 1990). As Nairobi, a seasonal swamp turned railway town, expanded, it began to host increasing numbers of urban female pioneers. There were those who came following the aforementioned crises, but others also came for the purpose of escaping restrictive patriarchal households whose dynamics were aggravated by the incremental immersion of African life into an imperial capitalist economic system (White 1990; Robertson 1997; Nelson 1995). Davison and Macharia (1999, 212) put forward that it is much too reductionist to describe urban women's agency at the turn of the century (and beyond) as simply "caught between the jaws of patriarchy and capitalism." Nonetheless, whatever brought women to the city, there is little doubt that once in Nairobi they had to contend with more restrictive laws than their male counterparts, both because their proper

place was seen (by the colonial government and urban ethnic associations alike) to be the rural areas, as well as for other reasons that are linked to both capitalism and patriarchy.

While African men were allowed a limited stay in the city if they were working, African female residence was policed quite closely. By seeking to establish themselves in urban spaces, these females embodied the worst fears of the colonial regime: the gradual displacement of a rural domestic scene to the city that in gesturing towards urban permanence, led to the perception of an increasing population of “diseased, detribalized and degenerate” natives (White 1990; Campbell 2007). This pathologization of women who were not under male control, and who, additionally, were not part of a “respectable” working class, motivated their repatriations back to the rural areas by “tribal organizations” and the government alike—they were just not meant to be merely adrift in town (Lonsdale 2001; White 1990). Because of this attentiveness to urban women’s bodies in the early colonial period, archival records have an uneven register of females who were, mostly, sex workers or domestic staff, with barely any recognition of other trades they may have taken up as part of their everyday activities (Lonsdale 2001; Fredericksen 2002).

Irrespective of what they chose to do while in Nairobi, what is certain is that many of them did stay. White (1990) describes some of the strategies women used to remain in the city legally. These include attaining a false *ayah* (nanny) letter of employment from a European man, offering collective bribes to police when caught engaging in trade or doing sex work⁵⁹ and, especially, conducting most of their socio-economic activities in the twilight of the “native” city. Their astute navigations in Majengo, Pumwani, Mathare, Buru Buru and Eastleigh enabled

⁵⁹ White (1990) discusses the wealth of some of the urban pioneer women involved in sex work before the Second World War, and the working groups, principally ethnic, that they would form to help with housing, childcare and the everyday contingencies of urban life. These associations also raised bail money when any member was arrested for prostitution. The author further documents the influence some of these all female groups had over male dominated ethnic associations, principally because of the financial largesse they provided that stemmed from their rootedness in the city.

women to become a significant percentage of Nairobi's permanent residents from the early twentieth century onward. Even despite the restrictions they faced, the colonial government recognized that they provided the semblance of domestic life needed to make male tenure in the city more comfortable and productive. What is more, since most had established residences in Eastlands, male migrant labour could live with them and this inadvertently cured some of the "native" housing pressures in Nairobi (White 1990). This mixture of ambivalence and surveillance engendered a situation where the real number of these urban pioneers was unknown, and often underestimated in government records. All the same, their longstanding tenure and shrewdness in the urban environment is substantiated by the property many women managed to accumulate and transfer to their children, many of whom were female (White 1990; Lonsdale 2001; Fredericksen 2002).

Certainly, the population of men in the city was always higher than that of women. Yet, women were the more permanent of these city dwellers while men migrated in and out depending on employment opportunities. These trends are illustrated by demographics in Kileleshwa village where, before its demolition in the early 1920s, many of the residents were African women. When the village was demolished they were moved to native locations, first Pangani and then Pumwani, where they became a key section of the initial builders and owners of houses (White 1990, 46–48, 66). Endorsing these trajectories, Lonsdale (2002, 217) reports that in 1938 36% of Pangani village householders were women and that 40 years later "70% of Pumwani's house-owners had accumulated the necessary capital by working as prostitutes." Within these neighbourhoods, a short distance from Mathare, these women created "distinctively urban, matrifocal, household[s]" (Lonsdale 2001, 218) and what Fredericksen 2001, 223) terms a "de facto matrilineal succession of matriarchal families." As they passed on their houses, mainly

to their female children, they consolidated matrifocal and matrilineal lineages across generations. Kariuki and Nelson (2006, 196) discuss what they say was an increase in female-headed households in Nairobi in the 70s and 80s, that encouraged increased levels of cooperation between clusters of mothers. This heavy female orientation and collaboration was still apparent when I did my fieldwork, and, in view of worsening spatial conditions, more urgent.

Even with these areas that are the “mother” of Nairobi (Akare 1981), the city is still deeply inflected by discourses which endorse women as the channels of all urban depravity; their ostensibly, inveterate lascivious nature is taken as a handy exemplar of all of Nairobi’s wickedness. Essentially, all the city’s behavioural follies are seen to congeal in the bodies of women from the east, from whence they are transferred, by nature and nurture, to their “two shilling children” (Akare 1981, 163). Stressing this, Fredericksen (2002, 223) states that while it is agreed that “Kenyan women had a decisive influence on informal urban structures and institutions, and came to influence African ideas of what constitutes a town [...] research has not, however, transformed either the representation (and commonly held view) of the city as an immoral space, or reversed the negative image of urban women as a social category.”

Voicing similar thoughts after two decades of fieldwork in Mathare, Nelson (1996) explores how a gendered immorality forms the crux of Kenyan fiction about Nairobi in the 1970s and 1980s. At the heart of these accounts are two related binary oppositions: men vs women, and rural vs urban. Implicit in these binaries was an underlying “traditional” and colonial inflected trope asserting the rural as the proper place of African women, and therefore compelling the counterpoint that women in the city were without virtue: improper. It is beyond question that these hegemonic binaries were also ideas about production and productivity. Rural areas were seen as productive spaces for women since they would plant, harvest, transmit traditions to

children, take care of the elderly and so on. Since they lacked this bio-cultural and socio-economic grounding in Nairobi, the city was therefore imagined as a space of counterproductivity for women, an ecology of corrupt(ing) knowledge (Nelson 1996). For these reasons, in the popular catalogues of the 70s and 80 written principally by university educated Kenyan men,⁶⁰ urban women emerged as scheming Delilah figures who would catalyze the trajectories of blameless men seduced into a “fall from Eden.” And it was the ruins of Nairobi that best set the scene for this perceived conniving; it was from here that they beckoned most aggressively to their victims, while surrounded by interminable hordes of children deemed “bastards” (Akare 1981; Mangua 1971; Mwangi 1977).

Whereas urbanity and women have been reconciled in other Nairobi neighbourhoods, where a privileged colonial and now postcolonial domesticity is the norm, for ecologies of exclusion such as Mathare the spectre of the degenerate urban woman still circulates extensively. Such notions have extensive impact on an intimate level such as when, as a few informants shared, non-local men refuse to marry local women they have had relationships with—and often children—because they come from Mathare. It is this same trafficking of negative subjectivities, empty of critical historical analysis, which upholds Mathare women’s wombs as the key vectors for their spatial marginality.

Nonetheless, despite the discourses that work to limit intimate and public fortunes for women, it is through a combination of small informal yet demanding activities—the shifting operation of food and vegetable stalls, domestic services, “selling their kiosk” (sex work), alcohol brewing and sometimes crime—that Mathare women have dedicated themselves to establishing “respectable lives” (Fredericksen 2001; Robertson 1997; White 1990; Nelson 1995). Still, while many have achieved significant independence, their pursuit of economic, social and

⁶⁰See, for example, Mangua (1971) and Akare (1981).

sometimes political self-determination has not been easy by any measure. For most of the women I met, it has involved very violent processes.

Even if many women did come to Eastlands by themselves or with other female companions, and chose to live as single women, the relative absence of adult men stems not just from these circumstances but also from other structural events such as political violence, mass incarceration, illness and crime. As explained in the previous chapters, Mathare has historically been characterized, for better or worse, as a predominantly ethnic Kikuyu settlement of the unrespectable poor (Hake 1977; White 1990). During the emergency period (1952-1960), large numbers of poor Gĩkũyũ, Meru and Embu men were detained for long periods, and many of them were tortured and even killed (Anderson 2005; Elkins 2005). The demolition of Mathare and separation of families during this emergency season, with men sent to detention camps and women sent to reserve villages, is understood locally to be one reason for the shortage of elderly men and the inordinate presence of older single women.

In recent years, the pervasive extra-legal executions by police of young men in the area who belong to a cohort dubbed “thugs” or “suspected criminals,” has led to the disappearance of hundreds of young men in Mathare and, indeed, thousands throughout Kenya (Independent Medical Legal Unit [IMLU] 2016; Van Stapele 2015). The Mungiki raids in the early 2000s, whose brutality is documented even by government-funded human rights organizations (see KNCHR 2008), were some of the more notable incidences of state sanctioned killings in Kenya.⁶¹ As the activities of some of the youth groups in Chapters 4 and 5 will illustrate, these events are anything but singular in nature and persist as ordinary everyday stories of this space.

⁶¹ At least twice a month during my close to two-year fieldwork period in Mathare, I would hear of a young person who had been killed by the police. The May 2015 execution of a 17-year-old young man, Stephen Gichuru, whom I had known since he was nine, was a particularly hard fieldwork moment. To put it in perspective, all my informants

When asked about the disproportionate number of women and children to men in Mathare, Wanjira, in her early twenties, stated:

Because our men have been killed, especially in the 2007 elections. Men were being beaten [so] brutally that the next day they couldn't walk, and they were being beaten when their women and children were watching. My father hid under our shop so when the police came they didn't find my father, they found my mother. She was carrying my small brother but he was relatively big, so she was just carrying him so that he is not beaten by police. So they didn't beat him up, but men were beaten . . . they were paralyzed . . . They came during the 2007 skirmishes. That was the most brutal act in the history of Mathare since I was born, and I witnessed it. Men were lying down on the road, from the river down they were being beaten, stepped on and all other things. Nobody wants to remember that in Mathare.

Interviewer: So from your own experience, how many young people do you know who have been killed?

Very many growing up, very many young people have been killed in Mathare. The ones that I know are about 50, really.

Intracommunity violence layers these manifestations of structural violence endemic in this part of Nairobi. The high rates of sexual assault, robbery, gang violence, mob justice, alcoholism and sexually transmitted diseases that occur against a backdrop of inadequate housing, healthcare and sanitation facilities, among other inequities, create a situation where both life expectancy and life chances are limited for all. As elsewhere, women of all generations are left to deal with the consequences of this extreme spatialized life, effectively reproducing, on all fronts—social, political, economic and ecological—a ghetto of women. Since young people in Mathare are born into such a gendered landscape, they understand both space and themselves through the lives of women here. Therefore, the material and expressive practices that feed into the ethico-political projects they take up for space and subjects, have women's experiences, their survivals in Mathare, as their foundation.

knew someone who had died in similar manner, and of those whom I spent the most time with, more than a third had either a sibling, child or spouse who had been killed by the police.

The Gendered Everyday, Space and Subjectivity

When relaying their Mathare “origin” stories, a large majority of my interviewees talked about the arrival of a female relative, be it a mother or grandmother, as the moment that marked their initial embeddedness in this space. A significant number of females also talked about their own entrance, either accompanied or soon followed by a sister or friend. In these genesis narratives, one can discern the centrality of a maternal female figure who functions as a symbolic door through which all local processes must pass through and are shaped. These stories of arrival share the same female-centric consciousness as a legend told to me by a feminist researcher who did fieldwork in this area in the early 1970s.⁶² During her time here, this scholar was told how women saved Mathare by petitioning against the total demolition of this poor settlement that was to happen in the early post-independence years. Rumor has it that a group of elderly Kikuyu *Nyakinyua* dancers from Mathare, the traditional dance group that would entertain official state guests, sought audience with the president when they heard about the impending destruction of their community by the city council. When they were allowed to speak with *Mzee*, as the president was colloquially known, they conveyed to him that they were Mau Mau veterans, and that the small houses they had built in Mathare were their only *shambas* (farms) since they had been displaced and lost their rural land rights in the colonial period. In line with what are seen as his typical Gĩkũyũ aphoristic pronunciations, Kenyatta made a statement that can be captured in English as, “He who fought the bees gets to keep the honey.” Though veiled, the message was clear: because they had contributed to the efforts that brought forth an independent Kenya, these women could keep their *shambas*. Following this cryptic statement, Mzee made one phone call⁶³

⁶² I am very grateful to Professor Nici Nelson of Goldsmiths University for sharing this story with me, various versions of which I also heard while I was in the field.

⁶³ In many popular narrations of Kenyatta’s [ethnic] patrimonialism, it is often his “one phone call” that saves the day. See Wa Mungai (2013) on a similar popular story about how Kenyatta saved the Nairobi Matatu industry after the introduction of the Kenya Bus Services (KBS) in the 1970s.

with which he stayed what would have been the total demolition of this settlement and, with this same patrimonial sleight of hand, allocated some land in Mathare to the same Nyakinyua dancers who had sought his audience.⁶⁴

All the same, even if it is women who continuously save this space and are the fulcrum around which most socio-spatial relations turn, the material and discursive landscape they encounter and shape renders an obstacle ridden urban journey. Lonsdale (2001, 212) does suggest that in both South Africa and Kenya women took up town life “with greater ease than men.” But while this confidence in their urban navigations is not baseless, many of my female interlocutors spoke more about the problems than the ease they faced as poor single women in Nairobi, especially since spatial vagaries take on additional proportions for them. Emphasizing this, Dorcas offered this information:

Yes, you can get that a single mother is a 15-year-old girl, 20 years and others. People even give birth at 13 years, so we want the government to look at that issue. The oldest single mother in Mathare is 35 years old; that is the oldest, because we start giving birth at 13 years.

And consequently, according to Muthoni,

In my opinion the biggest issue here is unemployment which will make you indulge in wrong things. Things like I leave my children sleeping and I go searching in town. So if you find someone telling you he has 2,000 [shillings], you will sleep with him and this is because of the problems, because of the children you have left in the house. But if you had a husband who was responsible for those children we wouldn't do some of the things, is it? I think that is the biggest problem. Another thing is one day we were coming from town and we found that a fire had burnt down everything. Children were removed from the house but there is nothing you were left with. We as single mothers go through a lot: someone gets you pregnant but does not take responsibility, also unemployment.

These two windows into the everyday lives of women here bring together in space a number of political, economic, social and ecological concerns, and show how these multiple trajectories

⁶⁴ Chege (1981) offers another version of the Mathare rescue story and regards the then MP Muniyua Waiyaki as the actual hero who prevented the scheduled demolitions of the early 1960s. He suggests that this was part of an election ploy by Waiyaki to keep the support of his poorest constituents.

assemble and direct their lives and those of their children. They also invariably validate the uncritical imaginaries of women in Mathare, who, while they do not engage in anything less upstanding than men, are left with the biggest symbol of out of wedlock relations: their “bastard” children. These public positionings of women are then (re)targeted at their offspring, through acts that accrete in very sinister ways. In this scenario, supposed female immorality is advanced in popularized discourse as the prime vehicle for deviant families. Speaking to the spatialized criminology projected on their children, one young mother stated: “It is very bad because when they [police] come here they say we are the ones who gave birth to the thieves and we are hiding them because we are the parents. If you tell them there is a robbery they tell you to kill them so that they can come for the body” (Eunice, personal communication).

I argue that these cumulative discourses of women and their children, a consequence of their stigmatized subjectivities, have their material articulations in the uneven terrain of Mathare. Earlier I painted a picture of the lack of water, sanitation and sewerage facilities, waste and inadequate housing that characterizes this geography (See Chapter 1 and 2). I now elaborate on what this chronic underservicing means and how it is used in the lives of women and their children to attend to both material and metaphysical terrains.

Inadequate housing, most of which is a patchwork of constantly re-salvaged material, is prone to damage, flammable and easily carried away by the elements (wind and rain floods). What is more, the distance of homes from toilets requires tenants to leave their houses at inconvenient hours of the day and night, making them vulnerable to sexual violence (for this elsewhere in Nairobi see Action Aid 2013). This connection between distant and poor sanitation facilities and insecurity for women should not be understated. As one participant exhorted:

It’s an issue. I wish you were in Mathare. I have three ladies who were raped in the toilet in Mlango Kubwa. I went to chief and he said “that is not the time to go to the toilet”! I

went to DO [District Officer] and he said “but it happened at 8 pm.” That is not late! One lady [then] came with her daughter who she said was raped by three guys in the toilet and she said she wanted to shift from her place because the culprits who did it would kill her if they know I had gone to the chief. And so I said I could call them here and she said no and that I should just help her get medication and then she’d leave her house and go somewhere else. (Mwikali, focus group 1)

In some instances, informal toilet and ablution facilities, because of the exploitative and unregulated profits they can generate, become proxy sites for what really are elite power battles. The police intervene in these contestations but rarely on the side of those who need these services the most, despite the widely recognized realities of what the dearth of these services means for women. Their (in)action mobilizes community narratives that more emphatically point to the links between a lack of infrastructure and violence, neglect and force, evoking the still unanswered question put forward by one interlocutor: “there used to be a toilet here, it was demolished in front of the police. If they demolish a toilet that helps everyone in the village, where is this security for the poor?”

Even amidst the absence of basic services in Mathare, it is living under the constant threat of eviction that more decidedly shapes ideas of self as Matigari, and best illustrates for residents the *longue durée* of an imperial urban—its many tempos. The virtually identical pictures of evictions sixty years apart discussed in Chapter 2, stress the (re)instantiating modes of colonial duress in the management of Nairobi that consistently deny generations of residents formal tenure in the city. Furthermore, the political economy of the slum, a situated nexus of national and transnational forces, contributes to making daily life more tenuous. These fraught political and economic processes are manifest in, for example, the illicit land occupations and displacements for road building that have occurred (Médard 2010; Manji 2015). As they assemble in different ways across time and space, these factors have shifting but powerful salience on the ground. Despite the history of women in this area that situates them as key actors

in many Mathare trajectories, they are not sufficiently influential to force a recalibration of this local political economy—one that is exacerbated by an institutionalized patriarchy.

All the same, since it is the lack of land tenure security that is the locus and the underpinning for both anxieties and power struggles in this space, it is that which should be seen as the most crucial node in the moulding of spatial experiences and subject belonging. Though interiorities are cast in and against situated experiences of neglect, family history, cultural memory, amongst other processes, the institutional informalization of their land and housing strikes at the heart of what it means to be Matigari.

Making these connections in her own life, Esther, a key interlocutor whose 10-square-foot house had recently been halved by an infamous female land grabber when I visited her in October 2015, stated:

The main problem is that there is no way that someone can just claim this is their place and fence it without the chief knowing about it. That is why the government is involved. So the people who are supposed to protect you are the ones destroying you. That is how you find that a woman tells you to just move out and not peacefully. You can come and find it is burnt or you find me killed in the house because they know I am a loud mouth and I won't move willingly. The chief, DO, village elders, land and settlement officials all know about it. When the chief came here I spoke with a lot of pain because I am 30 years old, my father was born here in 1952. My grandmother came here when she was 13 years during the colonial times, was married and gave birth to my father in 1952. I was born here and I have a 14-year-old boy. How do you think I can get out of here? I have no documents, but the chief, DO and other people who know my background have already disowned me because I don't have anything to give them. Even when the road was being built, houses were demolished and no one could speak. The government is also corrupt because the chief and village elders are on the rich woman's side. I have the power to speak by mouth but when we go back to the office they ask me for the documents. And I will not have any because my parents are dead, so I just move. (Esther, focus group 2)

From this statement, Esther registers long-term ties to Mathare but also the persistent threat of eviction that haunts her life despite these longstanding links to territory. Furthermore, the disregard for family trajectories, institutionalized and evident in the neglect directed towards

her and others by multiple levels of the government administration, shows how the lack of legal rights to land becomes a way of denying identity and belonging in the city, especially as associated with women.

Nevertheless, though the majority live with the consistent threat of displacement, some women have been able to benefit from the exploitative informality that regulates this space. In a chapter where she follows the oscillating tides of an all-female savings group in Mathare, from 1971 to 1990, Nelson (1995) details how members thrived due to their own initiative, dedication and homogeneity (they were mainly Kikuyu), but also due to the networks of patronage afforded to them. In this case, as in the case of the Nyakinyua dancers mentioned earlier, it was proximity to the official ruling party—the Kenya African National Union (KANU)—that would guarantee access to scarce resources. This network paved the way for group registration, premier banking and lending services and land rights in a context where these resources were very scarce. For others, intimate relationships with members of the local male elite proved just as fruitful. In one instance Nelson (1995, 51) documents these events:

In 1973 a small but significant area of “rehousing development” was created further to the east, out along the Juja road extension. Several hundred low-cost housing units and site-and service plots were available for rehousing Mathare residents in order that the units they already owned could be torn down. The number of the units in the scheme was derisory, and inevitably competition for the limited number of plots and houses was high. It was the political leaders and their closest clients who “qualified.” One prominent local politician received a house, as did his wife, his girlfriend, his grown-up daughter and his secretary.

Here, what is interesting is that even corrupt spatial practices, such as in the example above, reinscribe matrifocal patterns of residence in Mathare.

In large measure, however, it is principally their own place- and space-making strategies that confer territory and identities to their children. As I watched a ten-year-old girl and her mother clean raw chicken heads, place them in a bucket from where they would later be stuffed

with potato and onion to make *michogi* (stuffed and fried chicken heads) and then sold, Muruthi said to me: “In Mathare you occupy the same space where your mother worked and you fight and you say it is yours.” I later learned that the mother of this young mother had been engaged in the same trade and in the same place before she passed it on to her daughter. When that ten-year-old autonomously assumes the position of her mother, she will mark the production of three generations of women who would have “owned” and worked in exactly the same spot on Mau Mau Road.

These everyday gendered actions enacted by successive generations of women from the same family animate this landscape. Their practices, for better or worse, become the base upon which geography and subjects form and reform, anchoring the rhizomatic itineraries of individual and collective identification(s) that are taken up in Chapter 5. It is from these foundations that an ethico-political project is waged: their historical actions on and in space, combined with the subjectivities through which they are configured, form the material and expressive building blocks for community group and individual praxis focused on transforming Mathare.

I would even suggest that the popular phenomena of young men in Mathare taking up their mother’s first name as their surname is part of this unofficial youth space-subjectivity recalibration. Rather, as they become “Simon wa Wanjaa” or Moses wa Wanjiku” they affirm that they are indeed sons of women. This devoted tribute to matrifocal lineage, while indicating that the city is their father—and that is not a good heritage (Nelson 1996) —upholds the centrality of motherhood, challenges and inverts the gaze that proscribes the morality and materiality of women and, above all, confirms that Mathare is, first and foremost, a ghetto of women.

Conclusion

Discussions about the underbelly of Nairobi have historically engaged in a “representational language” (Demissie 2012, 3) that dwells in the supposed inveterate lasciviousness of its women. In the introduction, I quoted an interlocutor, Mwanake, as he talked about the stigma faced not just as Matigari in Mathare, but also as children of single mothers. I have argued here that it is women’s experiences in Eastlands, and the ways these are read, that establish the formative layer of the popularly sanctioned subjectivities about Mathare residents. These prefigurative identities spill over into many scales and, I contend, cumulatively legitimate the territorialization of an urban planning of neglect and force in these parts of Nairobi. This register of discredit is encountered largely through land tenure insecurity that brings forth a host of implications for women and their children. These everyday spatial violences range from no toilets to police executions. Women are the epicentre of all these experiences, since youth’s material and enunciatory escapes, and their other ethico-political projects in and for Mathare, all build on the space that women arrived in, claimed, shaped, and sought to improve over decades, and target the imposed subjectivities whose foundations are the tales of “wicked whores” established about their mothers.

In the next two chapters I attend to how young people in Mathare work to resist the materiality of these circulating subjectivities. To do this I focus on the work they do in trying to compensate for the neglect of urban planning, as well as the situated metaphors they use to offer more emic analyses of their life situations. These local practices and vernacular reclaim and reshape histories and expected futures of Mathare and, above all, locate residents as important actors in the transformations of this city. Through these youth-led material and discursive shapings of space, groups and individuals take on subjectivities of “subversion, accommodation,

appropriation, neglect and destruction [...] which contest the hegemony of colonial architecture and urban planning schemes” (Demissie 2012, 5). Chapter 4, the story of a pump, is an ethnographic depiction of one instance where young people in Mathare respond to the neglect and force of urban planning. In their actions they highlight the *longue durée* of empire, its territorialization through the persistent absence of basic services coupled with the increasing militarization of their home. At the same time, this incident indexes not only the duress, resulting from colonial divide-and-rule and that is recalled in the speech of returns of one interlocutor, but, above all, the vitality and tragic possibility immanent in ruins and that gestures towards other redemptive futures for this city.

Chapter 4: The Story of a Pump: Life, Death and Afterlives in an Urban Planning of “Divide and Rule”

This chapter takes up a storytelling format in order to ground the orality through which the coloniality of space was conveyed to me in Mathare. Without a doubt it was stories told to me of everyday life in this place, stories that were connected to other moments past and present, which helped me theorize how imperial ruination unfolds in this environment. For this reason, this chapter is a tribute to those narrative forms I encountered everyday: the ironies, violences and potential they brought together to speak of ruin but also of possibility – however tragic. I would even argue that these stories provide a sort of metaphysical life-support infrastructure for residents; constitute one of a plethora of situated tools that help them survive being forgotten in Mathare.

The “Story of a Pump” that I tell here has assembled various rhizomatic trajectories of a simple pump, courses made necessary by the long-term lack of water in this community and whose absence makes evident the neglect of urban planning over decades, as well as its most vehement and extreme force in the present. This story brings together the three main arguments I make in this dissertation, and does its best to show not only the material efforts that Mathare residents take up for their community, but, as well, the enunciative work sutured to these physical labours. Together, these situated “decolonizations” makes evident the relationship between language, human experience and perception or reality (Wa Thiong’o 1994, 25), and as an ethico-political project bring about lines of flight for Matigari, minor escapes, that show the vitalities and life force of this ruin.

Life

The people of Nairobi have, however, a way of defying the most hopeless situations by adopting simple yet unorthodox expedients.

Andrew Hake, *African Metropolis*.

Divide and rule is what is going on like imperialists. What we need to do is to multiply.
Muruthi (personal communication).

Everything in Kenya is a story, but not a small story.

JW (personal communication).

And what do stories afford anyway? A way of living in the world in the aftermath of catastrophe and devastation?

Saidiya Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts."

The pump was stolen, and by the usual suspects—it became the cash cow of both the police and the Nairobi City Water and Sewerage Company (NCWSC). They had taken it once before, less than two months after it was purchased (and undoubtedly after they had caught wind of its small prosperities for those often deemed the criminals and prostitutes of Nairobi) and released it only after Kariuki's one night detention and 5,000 KES had gone into the bottomless vacuum of the police station in question. For that arbitrary levy, there were no receipts issued and no documentation, only reprimands for a community who, it seemed, should not even feel entitled to water. There was also no protest, but only more bitter resignation at this "terror as usual," coupled with the "paternalist theatre of deference to survive" (Klopp 2008, 307).

This February morning, however, the winds had changed. I was not sure what had provoked this crescendo, the unexpected but in some ways probable climax of events, but it likely had something to do with a state administration that was prone to excess. Perhaps the young people had not been caught unawares? Maybe it was the heat of a waning African summer? Or could it be the hunger of Njaa-nuary?⁶⁵

⁶⁵ Njaa in Kiswahili language means "hunger" and so, after what is usually a very expensive December holiday season and the paying of school fees for another year in January, at the start of the year Kenyans humorously add "nj" to "anuary", to denote what January actually is—a month of being hungry.

While running battles are not new in this place, whose residents have conducted oathing ceremonies⁶⁶ against the government in both colonial and independence periods, I do not know what singular thread or moment can account for the electricity that turned that day into the tipping point. Whatever it was, this time the pump would find its way back to Mathare, but not without a story that unraveled other connected tales of empire's spatial management and its postcolonial afterlives. Through a series of events this machine, a cheap and simple contraption from the Davis & Shirliff store (whose website promises "water and energy solutions for Africa"⁶⁷) made evident the imperial assemblage that territorializes the city and shapes poor urban lives. As it brought together such seemingly disparate entities as pigs, water and death, this little infrastructure conveyed the (re)instantiation of imperial formations (Stoler 2008, 2013) in Nairobi, but, most of all, the minor triumphs and tragedies of Mathare residents' struggle to change an urban form still heavily entangled in empire.

The first time I heard about this pump was sometime a few months earlier, in September of 2015. This was just after I had come back from a trip to Northern Kenya, and when my alleged romance with one of my research collaborators was at its peak. The operative word here, do note, is alleged; almost everyone thought I was his girlfriend—why else would I spend so much time in the company of this well-known, previously feared but now reformed community activist? It did not help that he was a popular young man, and so the story-mills of crowded ghetto life worked hard to feed hungry ears. And because of the swiftness with which these tales travelled, I lived in fear that one day his actual girlfriend would catch me unawares and

⁶⁶ Oathing ceremonies to swear allegiance to the Mau Mau and an anti-colonial cause were common in the emergency period. Known in Gĩkũyũ language as *kunyua muma*, the oaths referred to here draw from Kikuyu rituals and are often used to unite and enforce secrecy. More recently, oaths were also used by the Mungiki to establish unity, kinship and secrecy in the face of government opposition to this group.

⁶⁷ <https://www.davisandshirliff.com/>

emphasize to me, in many ways I did not want to know, who *really* was the sweetheart of our young protagonist. That, though, is another story.

So it was in the same month that I had come back to town, and was relentlessly seeking to de-energize these tales of the ostensive passion between myself and collaborator which abounded in the community, that the pump became the focus of the efforts of a youth group I will call Zion. Composed of members who are the remains of a generation that has barely managed to survive the structural onslaughts constitutive of the ruins in Mathare, these are determined youth working to maneuver the formal informalities of life on the margins. Here they navigate life in a space that is gravely overcrowded, underserviced and abandoned to high incidences of alarming health statistics, sexual and domestic violence, political turbulence and disturbing levels of pollution. In the face of large-scale historical abandonment by the County of Nairobi, it is essentially only through their messy labours, imperfect but important strategies to adapt to their environment, that they survive.

Although deeply immersed within the unpredictability of such an existence, this group had managed to acquire a space by the Mathare River, close to its confluence with the Gethathuru tributary. On these banks they reared some of the fattest pigs that I had ever seen. They joked that the pigs were as problematic as their owners, for these egregious mammals meandered through the settlement, staking claim to roads, garbage heaps, trenches and riverbanks. Zion members took turns making sure that the pigs made it back into their sheds at night, a job that required lots of chasing, prodding and not-so-veiled threats. In a bid to expand and improve on these already somewhat successful investments, someone proposed that they could buy a water pump which they could plug into the “illegal” water system of Mathare. This

would allow them to operate a car wash that they could advertise to their diverse networks, and help meet the additional goal of increasing and improving the pig business.

I got back just in time to go to the fundraiser for this little machine. And so on a clear Saturday afternoon, after a few of the usual meetings in and around the area, I attended the *harambee*. By the time I arrived, people were vibrating to the tempo of loud music. Everyone was there; mothers, sisters, children, hairdressers, *chang'aa* brewers, sometime-thieves and sex workers—everyone. They all came out to support a project whose plenitudes would inevitably circulate and touch a majority of the households in their ward. A very talented and well-respected DJ who had lost his arm in the post-election skirmishes was also in attendance, and I greeted him in bashful ignorance of this history.

Zion was charging an entrance fee of 100 KES (\$1) to partake in the dancing and comedy that was scheduled for the evening. This is no small amount in Mathare, and for many people, if not most, it was the equivalent to half a day's wages. Still they came. As part of the fee all were served an enormous portion of rice and meat, as well as gibes, songs and spoken recollections that memorialized those who had gone before them and the complex histories of this particular community

The dancing was animated, effortlessly caressing the bass of reggae and *kapuka* sounds. Group after group took to the stage to display their dance skills, with each collective building on the hype of the previous performance. A local artist called Danito then took the microphone and sang about how the government “won't even allow young people to sell tomatoes in a shack.” It was after his performance that I heard the following joke:

Twins from Runda meet on Friday and ask each other,
“Whose party are we going to today?”

Twins from Mathare meet on Friday ask each other,
“Whose funeral are we going to today?”

Attendees laughed at this joke made by the local comedian, while knowing full well that it was a true reflection of the differences between Runda and Mathare, which are divided by less than five kilometres but comprise spatial dimensions that render much difference in life chances. Knowingly the performer had assembled a tragicomedy vernacular that captured the spatialities of life and death in Nairobi. It was a making fun that is “a language in itself, used to climb from a national quiet desperation” (Kahora 2012, 48), a joke that, like the humour of female *faveladas* in Rio de Janeiro that (Goldstein 2003, 12) discusses, is “borne within the material and ideological circumstances of the people.”

I left at around 7:00 pm, having paid the VIP rate to sit on the same wooden bench as the DJ. This was much less impressive than the efforts of unemployed Chichi who came by with all her children, or those of Muruthi who had rallied all and sundry, including myself, to come by. The constantly filling money basket was evidence of the streams of people who showed up and contributed what they could, from their very tiny margins, to support the purchase of this pump.

Shortly after this fundraiser, the much-desired contraption was bought from the shop that promised “water and energy solutions for Africa,” and its procurement initiated the conjoined fortunes of mammals and machines. Pigs and pumps were to be this youth group’s investments, their entangled gambles for the future, and the messy labours they undertook to achieve their aims symbolically captured the hope for change in this historical ecology of exclusion.

Multiplication

It was only a few weeks after the initial kidnapping of the pump, a month after it was bought, that it was taken again. The losses from the earlier abduction had barely been recouped and now, one more time, the life support it gave the car wash members and their families was interrupted.

As usual, representatives from the Nairobi City Water and Sewerage Company arrived with their arrogant posturings. Their intentions were the same as last time: to confiscate the pump because it was allowing illegal city residents to “steal” water from the main network—water that in their eyes had been paid for by hardworking citizens of Nairobi, none of whom could possibly live in Mathare. As part of this confrontation, they attempted to cart Zion car wash members, who happened to be in the vicinity, to the nearest police station. These young people would then be charged for whatever violation was deemed relevant in the moment; certainly, the penal code for this demographic could borrow from any number of fictitious encounters or expedients.

In these selective interpretations of city code, what was never even reflected on was why residents in Mathare have never been the recipients of formal water provision, even in the face of their longstanding tenure in the city and despite their being surrounded by neighbourhoods that have had this service for decades. Naturally, the absence of water caused an illegal tapping into the formal water network—illegal, but essential for basic survival. Curiously, as it happens, it is outside Mathare where much more spectacular abuses of this service grid are in play; scandals involving churches and even the International Committee for the Red Cross (ICRC), said to cost the city millions of shillings each month, are but two examples of this large-scale water extraction that continues with impunity.⁶⁸ When the amounts corporations owe for water are compared to the insignificant sums generated by the small scale tapping that happens in Mathare, the discriminatory arbitrariness of county legislation enforcement becomes even more apparent. More than likely, these brash city officials had come to Mathare looking for a bribe, came seeking to personalize the ongoing marketization of public goods that has become mundane. What they were not prepared for was the multiplication of city kin.

⁶⁸ Mutambo, A. (2016) “Red Cross, churches on notice over unpaid water bills.” *Daily Nation*. Accessed June 1, 2016. <http://www.nation.co.ke/news/Red-Cross--churches-put-on-notice-over-water-bills/1056-3320934-1189xtoz/index.html>.

A *Nairobi News* article from February 1, 2016, titled “Chaos in Mathare as residents protest crackdown on illegal connections,” reported:

Transport on Juja Road was on Monday disrupted near the Moi Airbase Eastleigh after youth from Mathare slums engaged police in running battles. The youth were protesting the confiscation of their car wash equipment by personnel from the Nairobi Water and Sewerage Company. The youth were reportedly found using illegal water connections to run car wash business. Police were forced to shoot in the air and lobe teargas canisters to disperse the rioting youth. One of the youth, Peter Njuguna, told journalists that they were using water from a burst pipe to wash cars and the water company had no grounds to take away their equipment. “This is a community car wash and the entire community contributed in buying the machine,” he told journalists. “We saw a burst water pipe and saw no need of letting the water go to waste and we decided to use it to make a few coin.” Reuben Ruheni added: “We have agreed to end the riots and have selected a few of us to go and get the machine from Pangani police station. If they refuse to give it back then we will engage in riots until we get back the machine. [sic]⁶⁹

Image 9: Photo essay from the February 1, 2016 issue of the *Daily Nation*.



Source: *The Daily Nation* (2016)

⁶⁹ Karanja, S. (2016) Chaos in Mathare as residents protest crackdown on illegal connections. . Accessed June 1, 2016. <http://nairobinews.nation.co.ke/news/chaos-mathare-crackdown-illegal-water-connections/>. (accessed 1 June 2016).

These protests, that involved the coordinated thrashing of police officers, continued for most of that February morning. As usual, there was a “competing definition of affairs” (Anderson 1999, 20). But what was agreed upon, by rumour mills and the administration alike, was that the county water officials were chased out of the settlement with stones and kicks, and were soon followed by the police officers who had boastfully accompanied them, but who then struggled to remove a colleague who had been knocked unconscious in the melee. For the observing public this was the kind of incivility typical of that “made in Mathare,” and it added more fodder for its stigmatization. Regardless of what explanatory plotlines gained the most purchase that day, what was certain was that a few hours after the protest began the pump was returned to the youth group and the car wash was back on.

Death

Muruthi was very drunk at Nyambu’s wake—and much earlier than people should be intoxicated at any pre-funeral gathering. Nyambu had been in a focus group with me a few months before, though I could barely remember her. Did she come before or after Marley had staggered in with the man she had picked up for the night and deposited in the mass of garrulous and intimidating women, only later dragging him along to finally fulfill her end of the bargain? Was she there the day before the funeral of Mureu, who had collapsed suddenly and had his big toe eaten by a rat before anyone could find him? I remembered her only vaguely, and now she was dead from something people could not identify. All that was said was “*alikuwa mgonjwa tu.*” She was just sick. Who knew what Nyambu, or Mureu for that matter, had died from? Who really knows what people die from here where death is so normal and there is a funeral every Friday—this is not Runda, remember?

Drunk and likely mouthing obscenities, Muruthi was certainly too unruly for the vigil. Taking the responsibility of his older brother into his own hands, 17-year-old James decided to cart him off so that he could sober up in time for the funeral the next day. As they walked, James balanced Muruthi's lanky inebriated figure on his shoulder, and on finding a familiar house dumped him on the bed to get some sleep. Yet, even in his inebriation, Muruthi remembered hearing the shots of the revanchist regime.

It is said that James got back to the wake just as the police arrived on their revenge mission. They arrived in an unmarked car, turned off the engine and in the fading light of dusk directed full headlights onto the elements of the funeral gathering that had assembled outside of Nyambu's home. Caught in the full glare of the car's burning illumination many were initially too stunned to move. Having temporarily immobilized them, the police then started shooting indiscriminately at those they could make out. They came only with gun-speak, determined to find those who had the effrontery to have participated in the pump protests the day before. For them, as has become custom, the only profile of a target they seemed to require was "young man from Mathare." Still, they were not selective about where or whom they shot. Their bullets pierced through mabati houses where mothers cooked, and across open spaces where children had been playing moments earlier. They were there for a span of only minutes but left behind a bullet ridden landscape, and one dead and four critically injured young people.

James ran and ran after the police came and scattered people at Nyambu's wake, no doubt aware of the pogroms they unleashed only in ruins like Mathare. It was only as he arrived at a house of a neighbour that he realized he had been shot. He died as he sat down abruptly against the wall of this home, likely both stunned and in pain. In this action, his young blood rushed to

the uneven terrain of this old quarry. And against the old soil and residues of many decades, his blood created a water-like stream not too far from where the pump was connected.

Recursive Histories

In using water as an entity to think with, Swyngedouw (1996, 67) says that we can narrate

many interrelated tales of the city: the story of its people and the powerful socio-ecological processes that produce the urban and its spaces of privilege and exclusion; of participation and marginality; of rats and bankers; of water-borne diseases and speculation in water industry related futures and options; of chemical, physical and biological reactions and transformations; of the global hydrological cycle and global warming; of the capital, machinations and strategies of dam builders; of urban land developers; of the knowledges of the engineers; of the passage from river to urban reservoir.

If we follow the rhizomatic trajectories of an illegal pump in an illegal space filled with illegal people—also tales of water—we can connect the stories to their roots in the imperial foundations of Nairobi. Pigs, youth groups, riots, water, gossip, urban master plans, James’s blood, and “solutions for Africa” are all entangled in an assemblage that consistently reproduces a colonial city. Unfortunately, because of the hegemonic discursive regimes that are articulated with and through an urban planning of neglect and force, effectively launching a negative space-subjectivity enterprise, the only story we hear is that of the illegal pump and its illegitimate water connections. These are tropes that become part of the “psychological warfare” (Weizman 2003) rendered against the Mathare space and its denizens, prefigurative subjectivities that limit life chances, and, indeed, even life itself. City managers deny the silent speech of the pump; it is a story without words that stresses and connects survival in historical ecologies of exclusion with livelihoods that are further jeopardized by a neoliberal conceptualization of the urban along with its attendant militaristic regimes. It is by partaking in this muting that a cheap pump can become a killing machine whose impact cascades into many scales. The recursive nature of these

entanglements is noted by residents who in speeches of return highlight the colonial continuities of space—the same insult over and over again. As Muruthi asserted in an interview after the death of James: “divide-and-rule is what is going on like imperialists, what we need to do is to multiply.”

Through this ordinary story (really a very ordinary thread in the complex fabric of Mathare) we can discern how empire assembles in space and through ecological, economic, social and political co-constitutions. If we take the absence of water as a window into these dynamics, we can see how the *longue durée* lack of water provision in Mathare prompts socio-economic activities (such as the tapping of water) deemed illegal, and that, in this colonial city, are seen to legitimize the denial of any rights (political or otherwise) for residents of ruins. As socio-material articulations of the past and present, the circumstances that surround this water pump reveal not only that Nairobi is still engulfed in imperial ruination, or the inordinate violence that is sanctioned by city managers in this neoliberal period. What they ultimately disclose is the unwavering resolve of those who *are* remains or relics to persevere: to *remain in* the ruins, and to shape that terrain, as well as its associated tropes about it and about them, even amidst tragedy.

Afterlives

June 2016. The car wash continues as part of the entrepreneurship strategies of Zion youth group. Many livelihoods are still dependant on its existence and although police are still shooting people in the area, they have not shown up to the car wash since James’s death. Instead, something interesting has occurred; the chief of police of a nearby police station now brings his car to be washed by the group. He engages the group members in small talk and salutes them when he departs. James is still dead, there is still no formal water system in the area, the

“hegemony of caricatures” (Kurtz 1998, 116) said to mirror resident subjectivities continues in public and official discourse, and Mathare is still a ruin. Somehow, though, a new story is unfolding. The presence of the chief of police, an unexpected ally, is some form of overture. And that the youth group members are *actually* washing his car is definitely some kind of truce.

The pump, where in this chapter I have territorialized my gaze, has brought life, and death, and now also afterlife—some possibility, some potential—in this sure tragicomedy. It has concentrated the “multitude of everyday materialities” (Garmany 2014, 1246) that come together in Mathare—ecological, political, social and economic—and plateau in urban governance regimes. Many of these situations are heartbreaking, but even in their devastation they contain some immanent potential and posthumous vitality; they are emblematic of the kinds of minor triumph in which “tragedy has always been implicit” (Baldwin, 1971).

I did not go to James’s funeral, but I doubt that the people there spoke of his demise as related to the workings of a basic water pump. For many, I am sure, it became just another inevitable death of a poor person in a poor people’s place—the kinds of death which become insignificant because of the spatial dimensions in which they inhere. Yet, through his body, just like the pump, we can untangle the convenings of empire that produce Nairobi and circulate the misrecognitions that still characterize its formal spatial practices, the urban governance that pretends the majority of people do not exist while simultaneously making their existence a battleground. Both this neglect and force can be seen as a state of permanent war, as the youth actions and metaphors I turn to in the next chapter express, and this story of a pump is but one of its possible allegories. At the same time, that the Zion youth group and their car wash still exist shows the incremental potentials garnered by the multiplications and resilience of Matigari—the defiance of relics—even amidst imperial duress. These are struggles for life, amidst widespread

death, that, as I show in the next chapter, will always reach forth for afterlives even within these urban plannings of divide and rule.

Chapter 5: *Masafara and Watu wa Mtaa*

[I]ndeed, even when poor city-dwellers fail to overturn the 'rituals of marginality' that bind them to the governing elite, their collective action continually engenders new meanings and multistranded exchanges that open up a possible space for collective demands and social critique.

Loïc Wacquant, *Urban Outcast*.

We need to attend to more than the "enunciative function" of the subject: subjectivity does not merely speak as resistance, nor is it simply spoken (or silenced) by power. It continually forms and returns in the complex play of bodily, linguistic, political, and psychological dimensions of human experience, within and against new infrastructures, value systems, and the transforming afflictions and injustices of today.

João Biehl and Peter Locke,

"Deleuze and the Anthropology of Becoming."

Introduction

One late afternoon in 2015, as we were walking up the hill of the former quarry that is now the urban settlement of Mathare, Muigi stopped to point at the shacks, made of corrugated iron sheets, which surrounded us. As he touched the rough, rusted copper coloured mabati sheets of the house closest to his right, he said to me and Kinuthia: "People call these houses shanties and that is why we call ourselves the people of shanties." This was not the first time he had blurred the material and the metaphoric when describing his connection with his home, as this member of the Zion group was the very same person who had earlier announced: "If I cut my wrists and my blood drips on the floor it will spell G.H.E.T.T.O." The merging and transmission of environment and identity, with the principal goal of socio-spatial improvements, is what I dwell in here. Certainly, local ideas of self in Mathare may draw on and invert the larger framings imposed on them. However, for the most part, as I put forward in this chapter, what primarily takes place is that residents develop more layered and creative identifiers informed by, but also signifiers of, the different spatial histories and futures they see for their community. As the Biehl and Locke (2010, 323) quotation at the beginning of this chapter conveys, ideas of self may assemble and disassemble in a "complex play of bodily, linguistic, political, and psychological

dimensions of human experience, within and against new infrastructures.” Informed by this perspective on subject formation, I show how selves are assembled and disassembled in the work of youth groups who seek to deflect “ruinous forms of attention” (Collins 2013, 163). Their intentional interplay of dimensions in this geography recognizes and responds to the space-subjectivity enterprise that is urban planning. And in this way they potentiate an ethical and political project that charts creative and novel trajectories for this ecology of exclusion that include both new selves and new infrastructures.

In this chapter, I look at how senses of self in Mathare are moulded by an environment that is continuously formed and reformed by neglect and force. In this pursuit, I argue here that the ways in which residents, and principally youth, describe themselves form part of a grounded toolbox, and they use the tools from that kit to constitute a situated ethico-political project that targets spatial and subject reclamation. Key to this process is the adoption and intentional deployment of space specific identities that, at once, illustrate their marginalization, but also affirm their resilience, defiance and effrontery in this ruin.

To think through subject formation in Mathare, I look at the work of local youth groups and identify how their material and expressive work—machinic and enunciative labours in a Deleuzian vocabulary—foster the two identities I discuss here: *masafara* and *watu wa mtaa*. *Masafara* is translated here as “sufferers” or sufferer in the singular form, and *watu wa mtaa* is recognized as “people of the ghetto” or, when referencing an individual, “person of the ghetto.”⁷⁰ To give additional insights into the relationship between space and subjectivity in Mathare, I also focus on a localized visceral vernacular that I term war-talk. War-talk refers to a recurrent combat language that I detect in youth speech, and principally in male youth speech, and I

⁷⁰ In this work I use Swahili and English terms interchangeably in both singular and plural forms.

contend that its frequent appearance in this discourse positions it as a window into the conditions that activate local youth identities. To that end, it is my contention that war-talk develops from within the generative tension provoked by these youths' simultaneous adaptation of the two aforementioned identities. As a language that captures the many vagaries of this environment and its impact on subjects, it becomes, essentially, a meditation on self and space and the co-constitutive relationship between the two. At its core, war-talk affirms what is locally narrativized as the continuation of a colonial class war whose stakes are always higher for the poor. Correspondingly, Mau Mau and Matigari references haunt this speech that emplaces the police as empire's most visible protagonist. At the same time, while it indexes imperial duress, this vernacular intentionally registers the tenacity of those who have survived, and who keep surviving, the ruination that territorializes the city of Nairobi.

With these goals in mind, I pay attention to how youth's bottom-up practices for home privilege, in large part, taking on these *masafara* and *watu wa mtaa* identities, and associated speech patterns, in ways that respond to both the abandonment and the force of urban planning in Mathare. I turn to youth not only because are they the largest demographic in the country and on the continent (see Diouf 2003; Burgess 2005), but principally since they are the actors most explicitly engaged in acting on the landscape of Mathare and the many related tropes about this area. As Diouf (2003, 2) puts it, "their integration into society, in terms of both civic responsibility and membership, has had enormous economic, cultural, political and social consequences," and to this I would add spatial impact. These "consequences" also make evident that "young people bear on their bodies, in their heads, and in their hearts the most gaping wounds and the craziest dreams and hopes of African societies" (Diouf 2003, 10). It is because of the ways in which they take on these civic responsibilities, wounds and dreams, and the many

spatial ways in which they express them, that youth are one of the demographics I uphold as most important in (re)shaping the space-subjectivity enterprise that produces Mathare. This material and expressive work acts on both the morphological and interior textures of this space to rethink and reconfigure past, present and future possibilities for this part of the city, and these practices build on the experiences of women historicized in Chapter 3. Above all, the subjecthood(s) youth take on and the vernacular they create when embodying these identities are essentially an active witnessing of historical socio-spatial neglect; one that is an inventory of imperial (re)instantiations but also upholds the stubborn durability and vitality of those left to city ruin(s).

A survey of the Daily Nation Newspaper from the early 1960s until 2016 makes explicit the popular imaginaries that exist about Mathare people. Even an untheorized discourse analysis will make out the endurance of certain negative words throughout the decades: crime and/or criminal, alcohol, prostitution and slum. And these stubborn characterizations—of robbers, shanty-dwellers and beggars—have ossified and gained ground every year. While it would be an exaggeration to say that there are no articles related to other matters such as constant fires, insufficient housing, cholera and the general decay of living conditions, the negative depictions prevail and help entrench Mathare residents as the exemplars of urban living gone wrong.⁷¹ In the following pages I discuss how youth narrate what it means to be “made in Mathare” against the backdrop of the subjectivities peddled in the media and normalized city tropes. I detail here how they put on, take off and refract these discourses about them, and what all this means for their (un)built environment. As the story of a pump shows, the work that youth take on in this

⁷¹ In the *Daily Nation* archives in Nairobi I went through articles from 1959 to 2015 that included the word “Mathare.” Using Mathare as my key search term brought up articles on themes as diverse as elections, government tenders for urban development (none that appeared to bear fruits) and even funeral announcements. Nonetheless, even in this coterie of pages dedicated to Mathare, the majority focused on criminal activity and overwhelmingly reaffirmed what is seen as the poor character(s) of its residents.

space goes beyond filling in the service vacuums of a ruin. The work of the Zion youth group, for example, draws on spatial kinships anchored in the shared experiences of political, ecological, economic and social abandonment. Because of the urban dynamics that assemble and territorialize in their part of Nairobi, Zion members were forced to engage simultaneously in actual physical water provision and in protesting unequal treatment by county officials who represent them in deleterious ways.

Other groups, as is made clear in this chapter, are forced to take up very similar tasks. Here, both informal service provision and protest are privileged as co-dependent tactics to deterritorialize the space-subjectivity enterprise that is urban planning. These efforts for home stitch together physical acts and local narratives to point out the signs of empire's ongoing refrain. In joining the past and the present, in denouncements such as those that speak of or allude to division and conquest, youth draw on the situated identities of Matigari and Mau Mau, and these self-positionings generate alternative readings of the city. Furthermore, these local narrativizations situate them as urban dwellers with legitimate claims to city tenure, even as and principally because it has embroiled them in consecutive struggles over the years. Despite the multi-scalar neglect and force that they face, residents insist, still, on making life in these ruins. This is done, as Chapter 4 shows, by coupling often unorthodox material and discursive practices which rhizomatically "engender new meanings and multistranded exchanges that open up possible space for collective demands and social critique" (Wacquant 2008, 12).

In the next section, I describe some of the group formations that have been established in Mathare since independence, and show how these previous organizing practices inform and yet differ from the youth work currently taking place and which I privilege in this dissertation. This brief history is supplemented by ethnographic snapshots of the work done by some of the

community based organizations I worked with, and sets the stage for a larger examination of the two broad spatial identities I understand as taken up by youth in Mathare: masafara and watu wa mtaa. Following this, I unpack war-talk and elaborate on its instrumentality as a device that, at once, explains, contests and witnesses colonial logics in space. I conclude by drawing connections between these discussions on Mathare youth practices, spatial-subjectivities and war-talk to the larger arguments put forward in this dissertation.

Youth Groups

I know life is hard. We should not listen to the people who came here to promise us better life, rather we should depend on ourselves because it is us who have the power to sustain ourselves, and change starts with us. Let's be content with the little we get. We should unite as youths and life will be better.

Mueni (personal communication).

The name Mathare creates a lot of shivers in people's mind. To some people, it is a place known to be associated with so many vices but that's not the case as it is. Mathare Slum has got so many great talents and people who are willing to transform the community and its environs in a positive way.

Richard Chapia, "Mathare Heroes Awards 2015."

Being part of a youth group in Mathare presupposes situated knowledge and a nuanced understanding of the area. This is a knowledge that surpasses the general information that comes from being a "walking class" urban youth, and also differs from that required in the downtown core; it is a particular mental and emotional geography with resonances in other poor parts of Nairobi. Evidencing the importance of being deeply cognizant of these local lifeworlds, one interlocutor told me about an employee from the Kenya Power and Lighting Company (KPLC) who insisted on fiddling with the illegal electricity connections established in one village in Hospital ward. Here, multiple entangled cables were intertwined creating a murky network of wire with no decipherable beginning or end. Innumerable residents, including my research consultant, had warned the utility worker not to interfere with these intricate ghetto fibers

because he was not privy to the specific ways the lines crisscrossed terrain and households. He did not heed the advice. The next time my interlocutor saw him this worker was standing outside an inhabited but incomplete tenement block in the higher ridges of Kosovo, and had clearly been electrocuted as there was “smoke rising from his body” (Muchangi, personal communication).

While perhaps a singular case, the story above offers insights into the kinds of material knowings and cartographies that cast youth actions in Mathare. It is chosen because it draws attention both to how daily life is shaped by experiences of a lack of infrastructure and also to the grounded innovations taken up to fill this void that inevitably mould local thoughts and practices. In particular, with regard to electricity, the occasions where children have lost limbs or even died after having been accidentally caught up in these electric webs work to map residents’ consciousness in ways that can come only from living in this geography; simply put, they have crucial experiential and practical knowledge that outsiders such as the utility worker are unable to grasp.

A large majority of the youth groups I worked with and heard about in Mathare had two key things in common.⁷² The first is social homogeneity. This is usually a result of living in the same ward, and sometimes of having shared ethnic, age (including circumcision cohort) and gender affiliations. These shared connections allowed for common understandings of what it means to grow up as a young person in Mathare, and played a significant role in determining the kinds of projects taken up by local youth groups (see also Van Stapele 2015 on the composition of working alcohol gangs in Mathare). The second similarity is that the vast majority of the work done by these groups has changed the terrain of Mathare in one way or another, demonstrating how both social and spatial improvement have comprised coinciding targets of these groups. As

⁷² These findings echo Nelson’s (1995) insights from her work over almost two decades with a successful women’s savings group in Mathare.

one of the quotes that began this section affirms: “Mathare slum has got so many great talents and people who are willing to transform the *community* and [its] *environs* in a positive way” (Chapia 2015, my italics). My own experience as a middle-class Kenyan allows me to identify the popularity of such entities as book clubs, investment groups, charity work and so on, amongst my age and class demographic, in contrast to the collective work that many young people in Mathare do that directly impacts their environment. Examples of this are the car wash and water pump project started by the Zion youth group, and the garbage collection initiatives launched by Getto Green that will be discussed in a following section (see also Thieme’s work (2013, 2015) on youth involved in the waste economy and toilet cleaning services in Mathare).

Furthermore, whatever goals a group chose, their success would inevitably be shaped by geography. This not only references how knowledge of their environment influences group objectives, but, as well, the limited space that is available for organizing and conducting activities, due to overcrowding, inadequate meeting venues, uneven rocky terrain, insecurity and other factors. Nevertheless, the improvement efforts of these youth associations often resulted in the establishment of collective meeting spaces, however temporary, to ensure the sustainability of their work and that they could foster other groups with similar aims in this “self-help city.”

Self-Help City

In his seminal monograph on Mathare, Hake (1977) included this neighbourhood in the urban zone he christened the “self-help” city.⁷³ This moniker invokes abandonment but also the enterprise of poor residents who strive to make sure they get through the hurdles of everyday life. These are casual labourers: “traders, hawkers, artisans, food vendors, cobblers, illegal

⁷³ Although he did not provide maps or verbal boundaries for the geographies he captured in the term, from his descriptions throughout the book and his focus on Mathare I understand this area to refer to the neighbourhoods that begin on the eastern margins of the city centre. This is essentially the old “native city” where *jua kali* enterprises (literally meaning work done under the “hot sun”) and informal housing prevail.

brewers, prostitutes [and] market women” who earn their living in Mathare, and other settlements, and who know “no other home” (Chege 1981, 75). Forty years since Hake’s book was published, and in a period characterized by a less sympathetic political economy (due to the exacerbating impacts of over three decades of neoliberal policies), the same legacy of informality has been transferred to their children (Hake 1977; Akare 1981; Nelson 1995; Katumanga 2005; Van Stapele 2015).

Notwithstanding this inheritance, the spirit of self-help continues in Mathare. Older groups still take on the “self-help” or “welfare” society and group appellations that were popular in the early post-independence harambee era when self-reliance was stressed. Mbithi and Rasmusson (1977) discuss some of the pre-colonial and pre-independence ethnic formations that both preceded and birthed the post-independence emphasis on pulling together (see also Ngau 1987). While the origins of the term harambee are contested⁷⁴ and its pre-colonial and colonial practices are vast, these scholars contend that it was popularized as a Kiswahili expression by Mzee Jomo Kenyatta during his 1963 Independence Day speech,⁷⁵ in which he emphasized the need for communities to work collectively so that Kenya could be self-reliant. In this national address, the president told the new citizens of Kenya: You must know that Kenyatta alone cannot give you everything. All things we must do together to develop our country, to get education for our children, to have doctors, to build roads, to improve or provide all day-to-day essentials” (as quoted in Mbithi and Rasmusson 1977, 146). Ngau (1987, 526) argues that the immediate postcolonial focus on self-help for development emerged against a backdrop of ideological

⁷⁴ While it has now been incorporated into Kiswahili language, it is said that the term harambee is derived from the Hindi expression that is a veneration to the Hindu God *Ambee*; this is *har, har, ambee* or “praise, praise Ambee” that was often sung by the South Asian Hindu railway labourers who were working on the Kenya-Uganda railway line. When the likely provenance of this expression was brought to light years after Kenyatta’s death, it is said to have angered conservative Christians who were uncomfortable with its roots. Notwithstanding this etymology, harambee was used as a slogan of the first post-independence government and has wide usage even today.

⁷⁵ Jomo Kenyatta. “Independence Day address” (speech, Nairobi, December 12, 1963).

negotiations in the sunset years of colonial rule and immediately after independence, and was readily adopted in light of the “high expectations” of the citizens of this new republic. Though it is recalled as the championing slogan of Kenyatta Senior’s regime, the harambee ethos is still called upon in a variety of public fora and remains inscribed on the Kenyan Coat of Arms up to the present day.

There are other collective efforts in Mathare and nationally that, notwithstanding their similar telos and ethos, do not take on the designations popularized by the culture of bottom-up-development. Examples of these are the various *chamas*⁷⁶ or groupings for saving (money merry-go-rounds), small businesses, funerals, and other functions that bring together networks of residents. In the early post-independence period the most successful of these formations sought alliances with political elites whose patronage allowed for their power and influence in Mathare (see Chege 1981; Nelson 1995; Hake 1977). While many of these larger collective projects were co-opted for state purposes in the first few decades after independence (see Ngau 1987), there were many groups that both then and now intentionally work outside of the government’s remit.

During fieldwork, it became clear to me that the youth groups I worked with were motivated by a genuine recognition of the fact that it was they, as young people, who were needed to positively shape both community and self. It is possible that their parents were involved in the earlier self-help associations that may have benefited from political patronage, and it is likely that this first set of local post-independence groups demonstrated the organizational scaffolding that contemporary youth groups have later replicated. However, the current spatial work youth engage in is distinguished from these adult formations, by virtue of

⁷⁶ Chama is a broad Swahili word, similar to the Gikũyũ *kiama*, which can be used to describe formations as diverse as a political party, women’s church group, young men’s savings collectives and the like.

being explicitly linked to both individual and collective transformation and, at least with the groups I worked with, simultaneously distanced from ruling party politics.

In response to my question about why she joined a youth group, one young female Mathare resident called Eunice stated:

I think nowadays there are a lot of organizations set up, like media organizations, for example Maji Mazuri foundation. They distract young people from doing negative things in the society like crime and prostitution, and give them a dream to live by.

This local “dream to live by” spoke louder to young people than the hegemonic apparitions of a modern city contained in national development documents such as the Kenya Vision 2030 and the new master plan (NIUPLAN) for Nairobi (JICA 2014). Underscoring these sentiments, when asked about what he thought about the NIUPLAN, one youth group leader stated: “Master plan? We do not want any more masters. They are going to build a sewage line but they don’t even build toilets. We need houses!” (Muchangi, personal communication).

From both these comments we can discern the speakers’ preoccupation with some of the socialities and materialities in Mathare. Their concerns focus on addressing inadequate architectures, and fostering aspirational ones composed of conjoined material and metaphysical desires that want to chart their own course without masters. What these young people have foregrounded in their speech lies in stark contrast to both the fixation of formal urban governance on large infrastructure projects, and to the ventures in support of broad national development goals that many earlier post-independence self-help groups in Mathare took up. As they thread together desires for both self and space, dreams and toilets, youth group practices relay a more overt political commentary on their situation vis-à-vis the government than those of their parents. That they have more education than previous generations, and also that they came of age within the democratic openings afforded by events such as the end of the Moi dictatorship

(2002) and the 2010 constitution touted for its inclusive bill of rights,⁷⁷ also affords them greater latitude to maintain their critique of the state. In this more overt political front they are “remixing socialities,” assembling and “disassembling” (Simone 2008, 98) stories and symbols from a diverse array of influences (including Mau Mau, reggae, Pan Africanism, hip hop and others) to anchor their Mathare activism (see also Honwana 2012 for similar youth practices in Senegal, Tunisia, Mozambique and South Africa). The use of ideological bricolage to legitimate their projects likely played a part in the shift in identity from one generation to the next. This is a significant shift: from the appellations of shanty dweller, slum dweller and self-help taken up by their parents, to that of “ghetto” boys and girls active in youth groups (see also Van Stapele’s 2015 discussion of Ghetto Pride”). As one older activist from Mathare shared,

Let us just say that from 1990 the youths opened their minds because in the 1960s—1980s very few people from Mathare went to school. But from 1990 people started going to school and knew the meaning of unity—that’s when they formed those groups. Mathare now has very many youth groups and I am so happy. I was [formally] registering those groups for them. (Kiki, personal communication)

Furthermore, the provincializing of diverse symbols and strategies make evident the openings brought about by the globalization of goods and ideas that, in Mathare and beyond, allow for more boundless conceptions of self and more novel relationships with the postcolonial city. As the youth practices discussed here demonstrate, young people appropriate from a medley of local and transnational spaces to configure new and hybrid signs for self and collective expression, protest and even entrepreneurship (Ntarangwi 2009, 632; Weiss 2009; Streicker 1997; Hodgson

⁷⁷Multiparty democracy was reestablished in 1992, and the 2002 national elections brought about an end to the Daniel Arap Moi dictatorship. This democratization of political participation paralleled a rise in the prominence of the NGOsphere (See Piot [2010] for more on this in Togo). In 2010, a new progressive constitution that institutionalized the devolution of power was promulgated. It was imagined that all these watershed processes would signal greater political participation by young people nationally, and indeed that did happen. That said, without diminishing some of the openings that these changes have brought about for some, the young people interviewed for this project still feel that both formal and informal civil society spaces remain unwelcoming to the poor and less educated.

2011; Comaroff and Comaroff 2009). However, these opportunities for more complex subject formation are accompanied by deprivations enabled by a constricting economy—a direct result of those very same neoliberal processes heralded by interventions such as Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) implemented from the early 1980s onward. This is what Katumanga (2005) refers to as the predation of a “bandit economy”: a political and economic process that has led to such widespread unemployment among youth that it has resulted in a class divide between generations in Kenya (see also Kagwanja 2005; Rasmussen 2010a). Correspondingly, when they come together in youth groups, and often acting as the stimulus to join these youth associations, young people are informed by both openings and precarity, and this guides the material and expressive work they do for their community.

Two broad youth identities taken up by youth in Mathare, anchored in the possibilities and predations of the present moment—and ultimately drawing on the experiences of the pioneer women in this area, are *masafara* and *watu wa mtaa*. The identities of sufferer and proud ghetto dweller may at first glance appear to oppose one another, but they are interconnected identifications that are functions of what I argue is a grounded ethico-political project in Mathare. Since they are often positioned as the detritus of the city—robbers, beggars and shanty dwellers—the work they do together is intended to show that being “made in Mathare,” as a popular local t-shirt expresses, is not a bad thing. Constituting both a text and a physical act, this t-shirt captures the alternative views young people hold about the supposed synchronicities between Mathare geography and the psycho-social profile of its residents. Above all, it is an example of the intentional work they do to simultaneously reconfigure space and narratives about themselves. This is a project in which Mathare residents merge action and narrative to respond to the abandonment they face, and in so doing potentiate different futures not only for

Mathare but also for Nairobi as a whole. To elaborate on this youth praxis, in the following section I discuss my experiences with the local collectives I spent the most time with; these are an environmental association called Getto Green and a human rights and social justice collective I refer to here as the Mekatilili Movement.⁷⁸ I also draw from interviews and conversations with dozens of Mathare youth to shed light on how they seek to reshape their space, and how these actions constitute a material and enunciative critique of an imperial urban spatial management derived from an equally unjust and colonial national governance regime.

Mathare Youth Groups

Don't think about what the community can do for you, think about what you can do for the community. Moses (personal communication)

Our happiness is trying to change the image so that people not only see the bad in us, but also the good side. Kiki (personal communication).

A key question in all my interviews with young people was whether they were involved in any type of association, currently or in the past. All the youth I had extended interviews with, and even those I met casually in and around this community, responded in the affirmative. While these groups may take on a general mandate, such as Getto Green's "empowering and nurturing youth talents in the ghetto" (Getto Green 2012), all of them did much more than their mission statement implied. By the same token, the group Getto Green

was formed by youth of Huruma grogan village which has fifty members registered under the group. The group is involved garbage collection and disposal, acrobat, performing and classical arts, providing security to the community members also we assist in the Christ chapel orphanage by nurturing their talents and also involving them in the co-curriculum activities getto green is also involved in walk against crime in Nairobi Kenya. [sic] (Getto Green 2012)

⁷⁸ I chose to use a pseudonym here for the group I refer to as Mekatilili Movement but not for Getto Green because of the sensitive nature of what I share here about the former. Relatedly, Getto Green are featured, without concern for their safety, in a bevy of publications that use their group name, including a recent article in *The Guardian* by Fentress (2014), and so I did not use a fictitious moniker for the group.

The varied functions that these groups take up make evident the multiple scales they believe they must act on in order to address the exclusions that characterize Mathare. As one of its founding members shared with me,

I am 29 years old and I come from Kia Maiko in Mathare. I run an organization called *Get To Green* [popularly known as Getto Green] and which is made up of 34 members of which all of them are reformed. How are they reformed? Like me, they were criminals, and the other boys were criminals and the girls were going to “town” [as sex workers]. But now through *Get To Green* we have managed to initiate programs which bring in income. The programs include garbage collection, advocacy, selling fruits in town and a car wash.

Anyway, we now have a little land [after lobbying a county official] that we rent out for car wash; we also rent out the *mkokotenis* (wheelbarrows/carts) and we save money. I have a cart which I use throughout the week and then there are others that I rent out to three men and women who work in the market in town in a place after *Muthurwa*. They sell fruits and things like onions and, at the end of the day, they help the group a lot to grow itself and they also encourage other young people to do work. That is what I like. Another thing is that the organization has been able to empower youth even though they are from a very humble background. This empowering involves giving them confidence to go to a bank, to open an account, to be doing transactions and dealing with customers and clients that come from the garbage collection. To me, that is empowerment.

Both the group narrative and the interview excerpt from this founding member of Getto Green illustrate the connection in Mathare between spatial improvement and subject formation through nurturing and empowerment. In the same breath, group members talk about garbage collection and “fostering talents”; being “reformed” and community development projects; a “growing” group and the self-esteem needed to open a bank account. These declarations evidence both the interior and external dimensions targeted by these youthful bids for spatial improvement—the imbrication of ecology and consciousness.

In this regard, Getto Green is similar to most of the other community organizations that “have come due to health and the environment” (Chindi, personal communication). The Madoya Tumaini Youth Group, which was formed to unite people after the post-election violence, also carries out “garbage collection, planting of trees and bamboos, education/counseling of the

young girls dropping out of school and training on entrepreneurship and savings” (Achieng, personal communication). While also targeting transformation in both space and personhood(s), the Mekatilili Movement (Mekatilili) intervenes in the environment, albeit in a less direct way than groups such as Getto Green and Madoya Tumaini Youth Group. The core mandate of this community based organization is to document the human rights violations that arise from the tensions between state abandonment and hyper-policing. These violations take the form of forced evictions, land grabbing and extrajudicial killings, among others. Mekatilili intentionally takes on these foci since these abuses are rampant in Mathare, yet remain chronically underreported by larger human rights organizations.⁷⁹

In recording and advocating against injustices, this group wants to keep residents safe from the rampant extralegal police actions, while also chronicling them to show the longer history of these incidences that, in their aggregation, illuminate the particular relationship(s) between Mathare dwellers and the government. Information collected is also used to contest the popular tropes about residents that legitimate this deadly targeting—what group members understand as the criminalization of poverty. Fundamentally, what Mekatili seeks is a cessation of the violent operations of the police and related forces, the recognition of Mathare residents as citizens whose life choices are delimited by structural violences, and the acknowledgement and provision of the basic services they deserve. To these ends, the participatory research on human

⁷⁹ Many young people I worked with in Mathare knew of at least one peer who had been killed by the police. Often these youths were framed as thugs and so their deaths, in a context where a shoot-to-kill policy is normalized by the government and despite the rights guaranteed in the 2010 constitution, were not registered as any grave transgression of human rights. This is particularly the case in ruins such as Mathare that are deemed deviant. In the Mekatilili Movement, at least one third of members had had a close member of the family or friend killed by the police before the victim had reached 25 years of age. There are ongoing media campaigns to highlight the extent of these police executions, however, many of them, for a variety of reasons such as the very real danger that surrounds advocacy around these killings, do not attend to the historical extent and impact of these police transgressions (see also Caldeira 2000 for a similar problem in Brazil). This is coupled with a bureaucratic local human rights network that is reluctant to document these executions, often because this is not work which would be considered fundable by their donors (see Jones et al. 2017).

rights violations that is their core task is also intended to provide a powerful model for advocacy in other ecologies of exclusion in the city.

The excavation of older Mathare and national histories by members of Mekatilili, through reclaiming identities such as Mau Mau and Matigari, locates their mission in the youthful ethical and political project that I examine in this chapter. For instance, as members document the circumstances surrounding the killings of young people in the area, some of whom may have been caught stealing, they stress the limited opportunities available to them and emphasize that the larger crime is that Mathare has been allowed to endure amidst worsening conditions for over three generations—and indeed, that this ruin exists at all. In discussing the work of resident associations in Chicago’s East side, Ralph (2014) declares: “I had to recognize how the gang could sometimes symbolize all the ills of the community, but how at other times a person’s gang affiliation became submerged within the larger issue of dislocation” (Ralph 2014, 9). Similarly, Mekatilili draws attention to the ills and the dislocations enabled by a multi-scalar ruination—economic, political, ecological and social—and calls for a corrective of the popular narratives about Mathare that “omits the neighbourhood abundance of life” (ibid.). They also work determinedly to show that the rationale behind many of the “illegal” livelihood choices of young people reflects what Lonsdale (2000, 5–16) calls “agency in tight corners.”

As part of these efforts, akin to the Neighbourhood Coalition profiled by Ralph (2014, 49), Mekatilili not only inverts

governmental rationalities based on their comprehensive understanding of them, [but in addition] the members of the coalition mobilize the most “disreputable” among them to contest the influential nexus and to display the vast reach of their social network [. . .]. In sum, the Neighbourhood Coalition considers the hidden virtues of the troublesome to be their secret weapon.

More than two-thirds of the group members come from single-mother households or are orphans, and of eleven of the longstanding male members, six have been imprisoned or detained for varying offenses for periods of up to ten years. A similar number have engaged in robbery, weapon and drug trafficking and the brewing of chang'aa. In addition, in their desire to protect their homes, a few took part in the post-election violence that rocked Mathare in 2008. While the scars from these weighty pasts persist, these experiences of life here constitute “hidden virtues” which are rallied to contest the “everyday rituals of segregation” (Caldeira 2000, 209) that youth encounter within and without this geography. Fundamentally, they are, as one interlocutor stated, “training,” so that “despite the past we can work for the future” (Moses, personal communication).

Community forums and everyday conversations help Mekatilili members piece together the rhizomatic manifestations of structural violence in Mathare. Through these dialogues, a grounded political economy of the violations they face is established and explained through local experiences. An excerpt from a community event report from October 2015 (Mekatilili 2015) is a good illustration of this:

The turn up was very good; around 150 people from the community assembled in the Democratic Party hall where the forum was held. The major themes that came up during the discussion were poor sanitation and drainage, poverty, police brutality, political unaccountability, tribalism, corruption, extrajudicial killings and insecurity. Also the youths in Mathare are now jobless following the National Youth Service scandal of CS Ann Waiguru. These jobs were very very important to the youths; they kept them busy and earned them some money and this enabled them to afford basic needs and pay rent. When the jobs were stopped many youths became desperate since they have little or no qualification for decent jobs and resorted to stealing. This is when extrajudicial killings happen at a high rate and that's how we lose the vibrant youths of Mathare.

In the year I spent with Mekatilili, they consistently articulated the connection between the quality of their space and police brutality. Recall also that they attributed these extralegal violations to the popular representations of Mathare youth as thugs, working hard to dispel them.

In the brief 2015 report cited above, they offer a political economy of the death they are facing, associating “poor sanitation and drainage, poverty, police brutality, political unaccountability” with unemployment, stealing and subsequent loss of the “vibrant youths of Mathare.” Beyond documenting a community gathering that sought to strategize the way forward for political accountability, especially in view of the elections in 2017, this statement gives insights into how the negative ecological, economic, social and political conditions of life come together to impact lives and livelihoods. Also evident here is the relationship between socio-spatial conditions and the stories young people in Mathare tell about themselves. As Katumanga (2005, 508) documents, to the state these young people constitute a “pool of disaffected youth” who are open to being incorporated into many “bandit” political and economic projects. In contrast, as Mekatilili highlights, stealing may be one of the few options open to them, and consequently they take issue with the fact that the agency they take up to make these choices is never considered as such by people external to the area.

Similar to the *Maes de Maio* group in São Paulo, Brazil that Alves (2013) discusses, Mekatilili are responding to a “necropolitical governance” in *longue durée*. They do this by repurposing and expanding the identities directed at them, in order to bring about a more situated “political spatiality” and to engage in a multidimensional politics which seeks not only to change how they are interpolated, but also to stop the abandonment and associated force that constitute how they are governed. This is equally a material and an ideological project, enacted both *in* and *because of* that space, which desires a multiplicity of change: in how Mathare residents think about themselves and their actions; in how they act on and think about their space; and finally, in how this space-subjectivity dialectic is understood by outsiders. Locating this ethical and political project is an acute sense of historical belonging in Mathare through which residents

recognize these “tenacious forms of resistance” (Alves 2014, 335), particularly when they do not see anyone else fighting for them. How do the efforts of these youth—bridging actions for environment, personal and collective change—translate to how residents think about self and community? What kinds of biographies does this space-subjectivity labour provide for them?

Subjectivities

To counter the popular tropes that frame their lives, it is necessary that Mathare residents situate themselves in response to these narratives. To do this, I argue here that to a considerable extent the youth of this ruin locate themselves, individually and in groups, through broad identity categories. These are *masafara* or sufferer and *watu wa mtaa* or people of the ghetto (see also Nyairo 2006, 88; Van Stapele 2015). The former is a title that captures their abandonment and position as ‘sufferers’ who are embroiled in the vicissitudes of slum life; the interminable manifestations of structural and symbolic violence brought about by the co-determining economic, ecological, political and social issues they face. The *watu wa mtaa* designation also gestures to this neglect, but more so establishes their ability to survive and endure through a variety of local strategies. It is an identity category that while registering their class position, also indexes the creativity and resilience needed to live in this part of the city. What is more, it also presupposes a certain type of hardy biological make-up in those born and living here; a materiality that confers a genealogically provoked cunning and robust comportment that is inextinguishable no matter how hard one tries—and even if one eventually moves from this area. Both identities, though not invented in Mathare since they are popular Eastlands Sheng phrases, are taken up by youth here in particular ways, and it is how they are put to use in space and for space that I attend to in this section.

The processual, discursive and fluid ways in which young people in Mathare construct their identity evokes discussions by Hall (2000) when, in his paper titled “Who Needs Identity,” he emphasizes that modes of belonging and identification are always being formed, are “never completed.” It is for these reasons that I draw on these two broad categories of *masafara* and *watu wa mtaa* to capture a diversity of self and community positionings that are always in the making. It is important to note, however, that even in their fluidity they account for the ongoing historical dynamics that create ecologies of exclusion such as Mathare, and in so doing make apparent how these forces are manifest in the lives of youth principally. These descriptions of self and community showcase two resounding points on the continuum of Mathare youth identities, with regard to how they locate themselves in and against the more prosperous city. *Safara*, as its English translation conveys, connotes the precariousness of the social, political, ecological and economic environment that, correspondingly, makes inhabitants suffer. Identifying as a person (*mtu*) or people (*watu*) from the ghetto (*mtaa*) extends the figure of an embodied sufferer, placing less emphasis on individuals’ pain and more on the “hidden virtues of the troublesome” (Ralph 2014, 49). Correspondingly, it simultaneously conveys the industry, confidence, cunning and creativity that residents embody even while living in such harsh conditions. Van Stapele (2015) refers to this as “ghetto pride,” and points out that while this sense of worth can sometimes (re)entrench negative masculinities, it is also a strategic affront to residents of more affluent neighbourhoods because it explicitly asserts that people are stronger, more hardworking and daring because they live the ghetto.

Essentially these two subject categories become a “counter-hegemonic site of resistance and rebellion” (Honwana 2012, 86), a kind of counter-public, and operate simultaneously in a productive tension as complementary opposites. Rather, in a context where the “hegemony of

caricatures” (Kurtz 1998, 116) influences an urban planning of neglect and force, Mathare residents resist these modes of spatial governance by constructing their own representations that, informed by and akin to Matigari, comprise a call to action. In effect, through this spatialized nomenclature, residents engage in a grounded ethico-political project with the goal of potentiating new subject and spatial foundations for this community.

Masafara

The youths are like Israelites moving from Egypt going to nowhere. They lack support and skills. Most of them end up in the villages. It's challenging because most of them, by circumstance, are forced to engage in criminal activities like smuggling. Those in groups do car washes, agriculture, and medium to small enterprises. Others manage toilets built by the Community Development Fund [CDF]. But most of them work in the villages and majority of them have no source for their livelihoods and are therefore forced to take whatever comes to them by chance.

Simon (personal communication).

The people here are poor, unskilled and their housing is rundown. There is no tap water, roads, electricity or garbage disposal. Health care and education, if they exist, cannot cope with the influx of people because of natural population growth and rural urban exodus. This is Mathare, where there are rats, crowded dwellings and day labourers. Here too, desperate and broken souls are to be found. I went to Mathare which is a mere 10 minute drive from the city centre. I arrived at nine o'clock on a Sunday morning. The area was already clustered with people looking for something to start the day. There seemed nothing in the rundown shacks to provide much employment. Dazed, sad and dangerous slum life was already in action at 9 a.m. Unemployment, poverty and delinquency stare back at you wide-eyed. Problems buzz around here like flies around a carcass. Walking through Mathare, I saw a portrait of a typical slum-dweller; it is a young adult, a school dropout usually under-employed or employed in manual jobs, and although informed about politics, is highly distrustful of it. Life here seems to proceed smoothly, but a closer scrutiny shows that the crime rate is high. There are more drug addicts, the percentage of those infected with venereal diseases is high and infant mortality too. This is not surprising as poverty has erected obstacles in the path of human development. Only a few avenues are open to them. For the young people, the only option is crime.

Hilary Araga, Letter to the Editor, *Daily Nation*, December 2, 1988.

It was a slow walk through Kambi Moto, Huruma⁸⁰ one afternoon in late June 2015. One of my interlocutors had called to say that Esther had received notice: she would be evicted from a house

⁸⁰ Of all the six wards in Mathare, Huruma is the most densely populated with precarious tenement blocks that do not adhere to basic city building codes. These unstable constructions constitute a huge reserve of the stone accommodation for the working poor and lower middle-class Nairobi residents (see Dafe 2009), and are often referred to as “concrete slums.” The weak foundation of many of these building is exacerbated by the overcrowding

she had lived in since she was born 30 years ago. Now as I sought to find out what had happened, my journey was frequently interrupted by others who approached me to ask about the circumstances surrounding what seemed like her likely displacement. Esther's 100 square-foot tin shack where she lived with her children was now tightly positioned between the fraught slum upgrading housing projects built by Pamoja Trust, and the commercial buildings that some corrupt landlords were able to erect after they had acquired the land through very dubious machinations (Gachihi et al. 2015; also see Image 10).

Image 10: Esther's house, 2015, surrounded by recently built, flimsy "concrete slums."

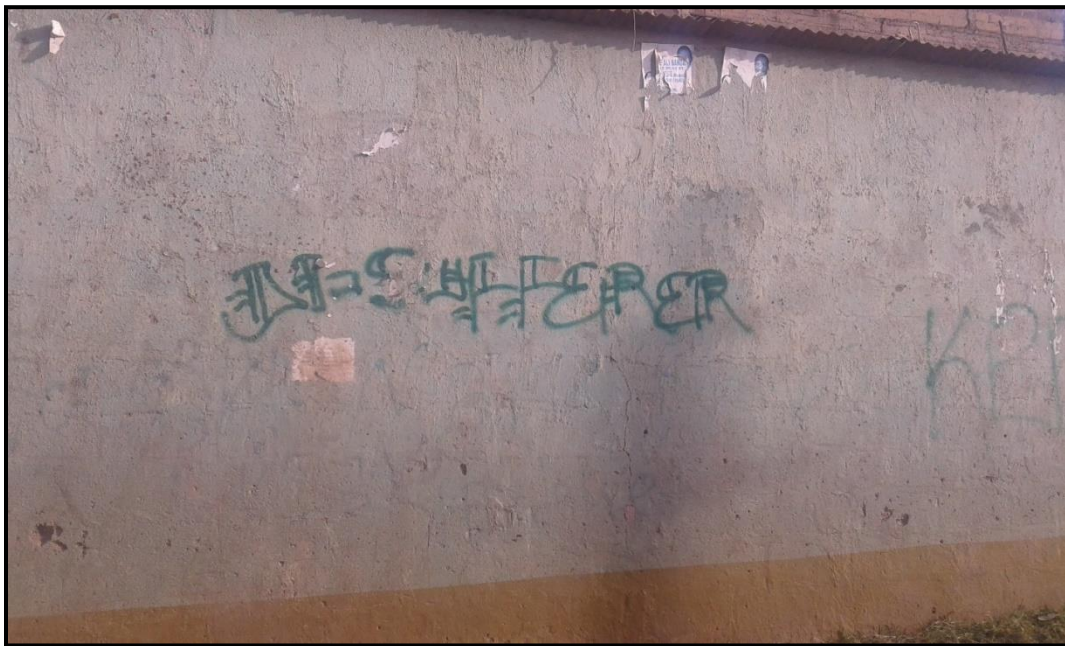


Source: author's personal archive.

of tenants, and the insufficiency of toilet facilities for these thousands of people. Due to these poor foundations and overcrowding, building collapse is not an uncommon event. But the April 2016 collapse of a building built on a riparian reserve, that killed over 30 people, was a tipping point that led to increased attention to the unstable tenement blocks in the area, as well as a crackdown on the corruption at the County of Nairobi office (formerly city hall) which facilitates the evasion of construction code by building owners. Although some unsteady buildings have been demolished since as part of this regulatory process, Mathare is still dotted with many similarly unsafe housing units.

Apart from her home, there were only a few houses still standing, their residents seeking to withstand the not-so-veiled threats to make them move that came from powerful landlords, backed by the provincial administration in the area. When I finally arrived at Esther’s, these residents spoke to me of all the ways they had tried to seek redress, and the highs and lows of that process. Nevertheless, because they had no money to line the pockets of the Ward Chief, go to court to contest the eviction, and no documentation to show that they had lived here for decades, they would suffer whatever fate threw at them, and that would likely be eviction. As I took pictures of the tall buildings surrounding their homes with my camera phone, in the hope of using these for a small human rights report that I would later contribute to, I noticed that on the adjacent wall someone, likely a young person, had painted the word “M-Sufferer” (Image 11).

Image 11: Graffiti on Mathare wall, 2015



The script reads “M-Sufferer” – or Masafara. Source: author’s personal archive

The inscription of this word on an unsteady and crumbling wall across from Esther’s house seemed to capture not only her present living conditions but also an embodied position—a sense

of self for many in this area—held by those unable to overcome what appeared to be the unrelenting suffering framing their lives.

The term sufferer, in the variety of versions in which it can be impressed, was not new to me. It had long been popularized by the Sheng youth language predominantly spoken in Eastlands and, as a result, presenters at Ghetto Radio, Nairobi's only Sheng radio station “set up to reveal a fuller picture of urban Ghetto life” (Ghetto Radio 2017), litter much of their speech with this phrase when they are identifying youth from Nairobi's ghettos. This term can be charged with a diversity of inflections—sadness, anger, irony and even jest. All the same, at its most basic level, it stresses the devastation wrought by socio-economic precarity at the level of interiority.

Though they have increasing knowledge of the trends of globalized youth culture around the world, young people here are also conscious of the intensifying economic uncertainty for them and those around them. What is more, they are all the time more unable to partake either in the local rites of passage to adulthood—broadly seen as secure jobs and family life— or in the globalized youth lifestyles that by now have become familiar (Honwana 2012; Comaroff and Comaroff 2000; De Boeck and Plissart 2005; Diouf 2003; Weiss 2009). These contradictions are inherent in the identity of the safara, and make them feel, as expressed in Simon's quote above, as though they are “Israelites moving from Egypt [and] going to nowhere.” Not too dissimilar to the experiences of young black men in the South Side of Chicago, youth in Mathare, and principally young males, decry their “advanced marginality” and vent that “respectable adulthood” is increasingly harder to reach despite their best efforts (Wacquant 2008). As Mweru said to me,

Yes they [youths] face a lot of discrimination. To give you my own view, there is discrimination and that is why I was planning to initiate a program of anti-

discrimination, because there is discrimination in the social, political and economic parts of life. And this makes the youth of Mathare to be criminals, to be prostitutes [. . .]. And so people like the police say “oh so you the see the youths in Mathare can do nothing but steal?” But it is not about the youth in Mathare liking stealing. It is the youth who steal to have something to put on their table at the end of the day—yes!

Furthermore, the stigma associated with being a safara limits the intimate life of this demographic, and it is in this sphere that it is felt very acutely. One interlocutor in a public forum held by Mekatilili talked about the anxiety associated with “telling your girlfriend where you live.” In a similar vein, Moses shared with me once: “there is nothing you fear worse like when you are in a club in Westlands⁸¹ just being a man and someone [a young woman] asks you where you are from!”⁸² Their concern with being recognized as from Mathare when they are in more middle and upper-class areas, where they may be unsure of that area’s street codes and also where identifying with home can signal danger, really imprints itself on and in young residents. Underscoring this, as well as the evolutionary dimensions in which the feel they are conjured in these quarters, the same research collaborator humorously said to me: “I am a chimpanzee in a tree and I need you to make me *Homo sapiens*” (Muruthi, personal communication). Equally, a number of young females I spoke with had been left by their non-local partners because young women from Mathare were not seen as truly marriageable, but rather as suitable only for informal dalliances or impermanent “Nairobi marriages.” All these fears and experiences are part of the intimate reverberations of “spatial taint” (Wacquant et al 2014, 1271) which animate local understandings of what it means to be a sufferer from Mathare.

At the same time, safara identity is established through bricolage: informed simultaneously by situated experiences of poverty, ghetto identifications derived from both reggae and hip hop, local renderings of Mau Mau legacies, and other influences. These

⁸¹ Westlands is an upper-middle class area where many of Nairobi’s popular entertainment spots for elites and expatriates are located.

⁸² Wacquant (2008) speaks about similar anxieties expressed by men from Chicago’s ghettos and Paris’s *banlieus*.

inspirations prompt a fabric of local interconnected subjectivities that have clear geographical boundaries—a spatialized youth class identity that cuts across ethnic affiliation (for more on this in Senegal, Mozambique, Tunisia and South Africa see Honwana 2012). While not understating the staying power of ethnic mobilization, and especially during key political moments such as elections, the economic uncertainty faced by youth has no ethnic allegiance; it is borne by young people from all parts of Kenya. Emphasizing this fact, in order to contest the popular narrative of Kikuyu dominance as seen in Raila’s call for “41 against 1,”⁸³ one Kikuyu interlocutor relayed to me: “I became Kikuyu by accident because it has never helped me.” (Wanja, personal communication).

The extralegal actions by the police in places like Mathare also impress upon sufferers the very fine line between life and death that they need to navigate because of their subject positions (Van Stapele 2015; MSJC 2017; Jones et al. 2017; see also section on war-talk). All of this “discrimination in the social, political and economic spheres” of life as Mweru mentions above, precipitates a particular intersubjective embodiment of space; a generational corporeality informed by a very ghetto-centric mental map of the city. Smiley’s (2013) findings in Dar es Salaam confirm that its residents’ movements are still inflected by the racial and class segregations established during colonialism. I would extend the same argument to the motions of Mathare youth whose lives revolve around a specific cartography where, for most, home and lower-town⁸⁴ are the only geographies they traverse comfortably. Paradoxically, it is in these

⁸³ The “41 against 1” statement was allegedly a rallying call by Raila Odinga, the current leader of the opposition, to encourage the other 41 (out of 42) ethnic groups in Kenya to rally against the Kikuyu. From my knowledge he is supposed to have expressed these sentiments before the 2007 elections, and the violence that followed them is said to owe some impetus to this statement.

⁸⁴ As touched on in the introduction, many safara youth I spoke with distinguished between *tao ya juu* or uptown, usually seen as the functioning and more middle-class core of the central business district, and *tao ya chini* or “lower town,” which begins at Tom Mboya Street and includes the geographies it abuts and which move the city eastward. This is also where the everyday commerce and matatu travel of most city dwellers takes place, and is the part of town monumentalized by Meja Mwangi’s (1977) seminal novel *Going Down River Road*. It is also the territory Wa

same spaces where they are most easily targeted and killed with impunity (MSJC 2017; Mwangi 2017). These youth mental maps echo the restrictions imposed on those from the native city during the colonial period. Above all, in emphasizing the symbiosis between subject and environment these cartographies further underscore that youth biographies are assembled but also constricted by the experiences of life in a terrain produced by urban planning's long-term abandonment. This is principally because, as De Boeck and Plissart (2004, 181) contend for street youth in Kinshasa, "their material horizon, the singularity of their space, and the social geography of their lives, often only extend to the corner of the street or the borderline between one neighbourhood and the next." For these reasons, the relationship between a sense of self and one's home territory should not be underestimated. The connections between a lack of basic services and overcrowded living, for instance, were correlated locally with the constellation of situations said to be emblematic of sufferer living. In Mathare these are phenomena such as teenage pregnancies, participation in crime, unemployment, disease, street children and police brutality: life experiences that led one interlocutor to comment forlornly, "Some of us are living but some of us are just surviving" (Michuki, personal communication).

Alexandrakis (forthcoming) documents similar subject positions within an extremely marginalized Roma compound in Athens, Greece. There, the precarities resulting from the many complex failures of neoliberal policies have exacerbated what was already uncertain life for an already poor and stigmatized population situated on the margins of Greek society (Alexandrakis 2013, forthcoming). In attending to the divergences in the lifeworlds of adults and youth in this Roma locality, Alexandrakis observes: "The difference in the way the two groups perceived the

Mungai (2013) documents as the "third world." Even the older architecture in this area stands in stark contrast to the more recent and taller buildings of the downtown core, evidencing what Graham (2016) refers to as the politics of verticality— 'the politics of looking down'—inscribed in many urban spaces around the world.

risk of displacement was subtle, but produced observable differences in the way they conducted themselves and related to the physical space of the compound” (Alexandrakis forthcoming, 15). In effect, by acting out their suffering and identifying as a generation who suffer, acts punctuated by the now material distinctions between generations, young Roma in this Greek compound performed a different relationship to space than did adults, and the variance in both responses to socio-spatial phenomena was stark.

Interestingly, the very same spatial conditions that produce the *safara* persona also give birth to the ghetto pride that summons a defiant *watu wa mtaa* or “people of the ghetto” identity. Also associated with the figure of *Matigari* considered earlier, this ghetto moniker builds on the history of resistance, along with the ability and determination to remain—to withstand tough situations. This recognition of tenacity is often understood to confer a superiority over Nairobi’s more privileged inhabitants who could not survive what Mathare residents endure every day. It is important to note that this ghetto subject position does not invert the identity of sufferer, but rather is an augmentation applied depending on the situation. The generative tension that inheres in these two concomitant identities, that is, the sufferer and the person of the ghetto, enables a subjecthood that is “simultaneously strategic and self-exploitative, simultaneously a political agent and a subject of the neoliberal grand slam” (Roy 2009, 827). These contradictions also engender a particular vocabulary that I term *war-talk*. Below I discuss the dynamics believed to motivate the popular ghetto identity, and describe the language that develops out of the productive tension generated by the embodiment of both subject positions. This youthful vernacular is a way of speaking that borrows from popular war speech, and when provincialized in Mathare, it stresses the imperial ruination that catalyzes suffering, but, above all, the creative resilience of those forced to live in ruins.

Watu wa Mtaa

Mathare ni nyumbani

Mathare is home

Talanta ni nyumbani

There is talent at home

Mathare ni mtaa

Mathare is a ghetto

Madame huwanga juu

The women are top rated

Macharlie huwanga na swagger

The young men have a lot of swagger

Mathare All Stars, “Mathare Ndio Nyumbani.”

Even as they define themselves as safaras, Eastlands youth remain the progenitors of much creative and rebellious national youth culture. From *genge* music to Sheng, they are acknowledged as the dynamic spring from which many urban and national trends are born (Ntarangwi 2009; Wa Mungai 2013). Being from the ghetto, therefore, while designating a class belonging that is not widely valued, also connotes, for both men and women, a nuanced hardiness, savvy, imagination and enterprise.

As a “topographic lexicon,”⁸⁵ *watu wa mtaa* becomes a statement about the socio-cultural relationship between subjects and their space; it is an indication that they come from, and give form to, a geography of “swagger”, “talent” and “top-rated” women. These readings of self and community are much more than a gut response to an external moral lens that rarely recognizes the dynamism in Mathare. Instead, and as I argue throughout this chapter, it is central to a larger ethico-political project located in and intended to improve their environment from the ground up. A ghetto identity complements a sufferer subject position not only by further gesturing towards the structural limitations that frame the lives of residents, and legitimating the choices they have

⁸⁵ While Wacquant (2008, 1) used this term to refer to the designations assigned to “stigmatized neighbourhoods situated at the very bottom of the hierarchical system of places that compose the metropolis,” I use it to capture the self-descriptions that residents use to reference their becoming through their home spaces.

to make within them, but in addition by emphasizing certain among the attributes of Mathare residents that are considered positive and redemptive, and said not to exist among higher classes. Here, we are reminded once more of Ralph's (2014, 49) "hidden virtues of the troublesome." These are, for example, "hustler" abilities, a strong masculinity, and resilience amidst scarcity. With regard to masculinity, there is the assertion that real men only exist in mtaa and that those in middle-class neighbourhoods are only posturing—remaining "punks" and "babis" (see also Van Stapele 2015).

Both of these situated senses of self are key points along the "crossroad of identities" employed by youth as they engage in "negotiating structural and individual interpretations of their everyday experiences" (Cahill 2007, 212). What is more, they imprint in youths' interiority an emotional infrastructure of hope and determination that is wielded in a diversity of ways to cushion against daily life, while simultaneously contributing to a non-material armour. A theological interpretation may explain the positioning of sufferer as sacred, insofar as it registers real, almost religious, struggles within and against oppressive structures. In such a reading, the person of the ghetto appellation would be held as the profane version of this identity, since it privileges a strong personality and cunning: what Wa Mungai (2013) refers to as the trickster personality of many Eastlands youth, particularly those involved in the matatu industry. In this regard, the task of this mtaa designation is not only to absolve them from the projections upon them and invert these, but also to create space where other self and collective characters of authority can be performed. At its core, it serves as a philosophizing vocabulary that builds in solidarities, assertions of power, contradictions, explanations and, importantly, renewal. For these reasons, I agree with Simone's (2015, 3-4) provocation that not only do situated ways of declaring belonging show a determination to "hang on, even transmogrify into that which is

despised so as to keep from disappearing,” but they also compel a “body politic in order to animate it in such a way as to cull from it new vitalities, ideas and potential.” These “vitalities” are exalted in common phrases that praise “blood group G,” meaning genge or ghetto, and “Mathare *damu*”—Mathare blood. Such a visceral discourse comes not just from recognizing the ghetto as one’s mother and Sheng as a mother tongue, but equally from an appreciation of the positive qualities that this provenance can confer.

Ghetto pride was evident in many statements I encountered in my forays within Mathare. From infrastructure comparisons with higher class neighbourhoods that remarked upon the shrewdness of residents even in their poverty (“when the lights go off in Muthaiga they don’t go off here!”), to statements gesturing to the spiritual nourishment implicit in this environment and that feeds them even in death (“when I die and go to heaven I will look for Mathare because that is all I know”), such positive valuations of home were omnipresent. Above all, these considerations of Mathare were embedded in the work that residents did to change both inside and outside perceptions of Mathare, principally by using specific socio-spatial subject itineraries.

While sufferer may be an instinctive identity, immediately felt by residents labouring through the numbing repetition that underlies the everyday in Mathare, *watu wa mtaa*, in contrast, was an explicitly conscientizing vernacular. As such, taking pride in being a person from the ghetto was part of a consciousness building, reverberating both Freire’s (2000) “pedagogy of the oppressed” and Biko’s (2002) “black consciousness,” to accept oneself and recognize, through a situated moral lens, the possibility that came from being “made in Mathare.” As an example, the various talent shows put on by youth associations, such as “Mr. and Miss Ghetto,” were organized “so that people do not hate themselves” (Kiki, personal communication). Furthermore, they were an important demonstration that “we were not just

Mathare people like the way so many people looked at us” (Van Stapele 2015, 119). Speaking about the impact of the numerous youth groups in the area, Okocha shared these comments:

You know what, from these outreach programmes, it makes most of them identify themselves. They see they have both eyes, hands, legs, even if they live in the ghetto. And since there are people who live in the uptown area who don't have eyes, time will tell that anything is possible. Mathare has produced many people like David Waithaka who works with the IMF, and there is this CEO of Kenya Premier League Limited, Jack Omuda. He is from here.

There are people from Mathare, during celebrations like Labour Day, we meet at the depot [a popular soccer field] so even if someone is from the ghetto and doesn't value themselves they are encouraged. You find people who have gone far due to football, others education, others for church related programs. Absalom Okinyi is now a Surgeon. Patrick Kusimba current chief prison officer—all from Mathare. And so during those days you feel encouraged. You accept yourself.

To take up the mental and physical swagger that is condensed in the descriptor *mtu wa mtaa*, was a demonstration of self-acceptance, as well as of the potentials within this ecology of exclusion and others like it. In addition, the hyper-confidence in the attributes of, for example, creativity and economic enterprise mentioned earlier should not be read as overcompensation for what is assumed to be lacking in this constituency. Instead, they must be seen as intrinsic to a grounded youth ethical and political project intent on reconfiguring all that their geography implies—political, economic, social and ecological marginality. Fundamentally, this youth work is a multifaceted conscientization that is conducted for and works through this space.

A conversation I had with three Mathare youth leaders about how their environment determines how they live and think about themselves allowed me to grasp the personal and political utility of a ghetto identity, notwithstanding the deep attachments to home that it proffered. A snapshot of this conversation is below:

Youth Leader 1: Mathare shapes you to be a go-getter, you are not afraid to die.

Youth Leader 2: From the time I was born and found myself in a cardboard house, I knew I had to fight for my rights.

Youth Leader 3: You ask yourself “why do people have water and electricity and I don’t?”

Youth Leader 1: To grow up in a mabati house that is all they see. All the kids want windows. If you grow up without a window you can’t hear anything and you can’t see anything. But you shake from the gunshots because those can cut you open. What happens is that you have to think of yourself like no one else will.

This thinking of self in ways “no one else will” is evident even in some of the names chosen by youth associations. Examples of these group titles are “Ghetto Marvelous” and “Change Makers. The importance of an explicit and intentional language for self-creation was also emphasized to Ventakesh (2008, 43) during his fieldwork in the South Side of Chicago. In an exchange with one of his interlocutors, he was chastened with the following statement: “We live in a community understand? Not the projects—I hate that word. We live in a Community.”

At the same time, however, like most identities the mtaa pride position is never constant, and always contingent on time and space. In his monograph that focuses on two different young men in Mathare, Jones (forthcoming) speaks about the self-esteem issues that this demographic face outside of home, but how, in contrast, they act like “lions” when they come back to their own territory. In Mathare, more than in the unfamiliar uptown, they are able to assert a street-smart awareness and sense of pride at having survived the violence that layers this ecology of exclusion (see Cahill 2007 for a similar trend among female youth facing gentrification in the Lower East Side of New York). In the ruin, they can rally each other through an encouraging Sheng language and encourage each other to keep *roho juu* (spirits high), *kaa ngumu* (stay strong) and *vuta mguu* (pull their legs and keep moving). Through this deep play they deterritorialize urban regimes and, even if just for a moment, shift the loci of power closer to them.

However, the persistence of war-talk indicates an ongoing anxiety alongside the optimism and confidence central to the mtaa identity. This vocabulary makes evident what youth see as the continuation of war in their space, as manifested in the very real negotiations for life and death they make on a daily basis. This consistent referencing of combat is established through a variety of naming and narrative practices that index the consequences of this war, but also concurrently the defiance, agility, and sense of possibility implicit in being from Mathare. It is my argument that this combat vernacular develops in a situation where residents think of themselves as both sufferers and defiant people from the ghetto; it becomes a bridge for the concomitant cataloguing of victimization, resistance and everything in between. For that reason, war-talk should be considered another view into how space impacts subject formation and vice-versa, here in the form of youth identities that shift between safara and watu wa mtaa. Above all, through the insights it renders into the relationship between how subjects think about themselves and their environment, this vocabulary is a call to think critically about the imperial ruination that has made Mathare a battleground in *longue durée*. However, since it offers no foregone conclusions about just who the winner of this war is, war-talk also affirms the resilience and vitality of those who come from ruin(s).

War-Talk

In a discussion that connects “maps” of people and places in Nairobi, Nyairo (2006, 87–89) identifies how contemporary youth songs have fostered imaginaries about particular parts of the city and the people who live within them. These kinds of songs constitute “engagements with class differentiation” that “[open] up the frontiers of place,” and, what is more, capture “the spatial and the social geography of these areas” to offer “a better understanding of the people

who inhabit these spaces, and of the pleasures and dreams that daily lubricate their existence.” As a result, “from these songs we also learn that space is a central element in the formation of character.”

Echoing these sentiments through performance, Batata, a popular hip-hop artist from Mathare, includes the following lyrics in the chorus of his song *Wanafik* (“Comrades”)⁸⁶

Ghetto ghetto, is the life we have been used to
Just chilling in Kosovo
Life is normal . . . yeah. There is no problem
It is a must be that we live life like soldiers [. . .]

Similarly, the reggae song *Mayut wa Today* (“The Youth of Today”) by Danito, also a popular Mathare artist, brings home in the refrain that

The youth of today, eh
They get problems every day
The youth of today, eh
They are abused every day [. . .]
This generation is really hurting⁸⁷

Borrowing from Nyairo’s (2006) discussions, I look at how the war vocabulary used in these songs and in everyday conversations gives us broader vistas into “the spatial and the social geography of these areas” (Nyairo 2006, 88). Essentially, this is a language developed by youth who concurrently take up subject positions as sufferer and person of the ghetto, as evidenced by Batata’s assertion that life must be lived as “soldiers” and Danito’s lamentation of constant harassment. I argue that by facilitating a common and graphic language, war-talk channels the feelings of being at war, both now and in the past, that result from living in an neglected yet hyper-policed environment. As a lexicon informed by Mathare youth subjectivities, and a derivative of Matigari (see Chapter 2), it is, in addition, a symbol of where these youth stand in relation to enduring national debates on class, land and identities.

⁸⁷ Translation of both song excerpts is mine.

Against this background, war-talk is also a witnessing of local agency. It articulates interpretations of Mathare geography and its subjects that move beyond those commonly imposed on them. In this sense, its locutions function as a bridge that brings together the collateral damage of this war, internal and external wounds, and the multiplicity of grounded plotlines through which young residents navigate conditions of siege. As a sign of space, this language, a kind of warfare imaginary, underscores the separate incorporation of Mathare into the larger city, further mooring local feelings of a protracted and intentional abandonment by the state. Nevertheless, the dexterity of war-talk presents its users as neither fully victims nor victors; rather, it relays the complicated everyday escapes of a population who are determined to survive in their own place in the city. In this stubborn endurance, informed by a diversity of spatial tensions, they potentiate alternative material and ideological landscapes for Mathare and Nairobi as a whole, even when, as is seen in the story of a pump (Chapter 4), these possibilities can be tragic.

Although from time to time I would hear women use some combat terms, war-talk is a largely male-centric vernacular. Without a doubt, it peppers the every-day speech of young men more than any other demographic in Mathare. Beyond the explicit declarations of combat such as: “Here in ghetto, we men live in a warzone” (see Mathare resident in Van Stapele 2015, 124), there are other battleground metaphors used frequently by young males. These are idiomatic expressions such as “I went into exile,” “I am the last man standing,” “he died due to friendly fire,” “you must camouflage and conceal yourself from the police,” and “radar” (in the sense of detection). These local phrases are enrolled in a variety of formats. In one scenario, explaining why he had to “go into exile,” Muiro gave a number of justifications: “When the forest changes the monkey has to change as well” was his initial answer. Later he added: “Youth are

camouflaging to save their lives . . . being drunk and dirty is important because the police do not want to see anyone looking clean. In order to save your life you need to be dirty or drunk because if you are clean and you wear fashionable clothes they will say you are a thief (Muir, personal communication 2016).”⁸⁸ Other constant references to *moto*, or fire, such as the “ghetto is hot” being caught in, or killed by “crossfire,” and even “divide and rule” (as discussed in Chapter 4) give emphasis to the stamp of war in local consciousness.

Notwithstanding the bluntness of their speech, as an oratory device this language is more patent when it animates the colloquial naming of certain spaces. The localities of “Kosovo,” “Kismayu” and “Baghdad” are but three examples of this spatialized war nomenclature in Mathare. Elsewhere in Eastlands, and for similar reasons, we find “Balkans” in Korogocho, “Biafra” in Eastleigh (where, according to Rachel, “every young man has been killed by a police bullet and has left a young single mother”), and “Somalia” in Dandora. The names of these sites intentionally reference not only a critical historical event in some distant location, but, above all, the war conditions seen to parallel and be permanently indexed by those labels. When mapped onto Mathare and other neighbouring urban sites in Eastlands, these names give us insights into how residents consider their space a combat zone.

Observing a similar discourse in the early 1960s and 1970s, Hake (1977) maintained that

In Nairobi a distinction must be drawn between these young people who are studying and working in order to become accepted members of the adult world, and those who appeared to be so alienated from that world that they were setting up a counter-culture of their own. It was members of this second group who were to be found amongst the teenagers of the self-help city. The names which they gave to their gangs and to the localities which they frequented were an indication of the psychological distance which they felt between themselves and the established society of the modern city. This did not mean, of course, that these were necessarily criminal gangs. There were groups known as

⁸⁸ There are a number of cases where young people who wear flashy jewellery, or “bling,” have been detained by the police for allegedly possessing jewellery they cannot afford. Many of these young people have even been shot and killed during these interactions with police officers.

Mafia, the Black Muslims and the F.B.I. The names of the sectors of Pumwani included Sophiatown, singled out for demolition by the South African Government and a symbol of the establishment's persecution of a minority, Katanga (or Katanga Base), a classic example of a break-away group and, not far from Pumwani, a carton-settlement arose called Biafra. The City Council social hall at Bahati, which was a centre of activities for a number of groups, was nicknamed "Alaska," symbolic of the idea of being frozen out of society. (Hake 1977, 208)

Forty years later, the names of many of the 89 "criminal gangs" recently banned in Kenya also incorporate combat expressions and geographies. Examples of these are the "Gaza Boys," "Taliban" and "Swat"⁸⁹ groups (Zadock 2016). Reflecting on a similar phenomenon in the dumpsite community⁹⁰ of Korogocho in 2015, one Eastlands community activist known as Toothbrush stated:

Let's say maybe you are strong and tough and you dominate one area. So there is a base where you will be. At every base there is a flag; flags of those countries which are often at war. Places like Somalia. And you will find that the flag of Somalia has been put there, the flag of Rwanda has been flown, and the flag of Burundi has been put up. (PASGR 2015)

Evident from both excerpts, like poor youth in Kinshasa, is that this generation in Nairobi can "recycle and generate surprising, oftentimes embodied, cultural vocabularies and aesthetics" that reflect "social history while providing a subversive comment upon the banalization of violence, the militarization of society, the apocalyptic gale-force sound and fury of the city's constant religious transfiguration, and the material hardships in today's urbanscape (De Boeck and Plissart 2004, 40). Bringing all of these different experiences to bear in language allows them to map such place names as Kuwait, Sarajevo, Kosovo, Chechnya, Afghanistan and

⁸⁹ See more of this in: Angira Zadock (2016). "Interior Cabinet Secretary outlaws 89 criminal gangs." *Daily Nation*, December 31st 2016. Available at: <http://www.nation.co.ke/news/Government-bans-89-criminal-gangs/1056-3502650-t8jv2iz/>

⁹⁰ Korogocho in Eastlands is home to the largest county garbage dumpsite in Nairobi. About two tonnes of garbage are dumped there every day, and over a thousand people are said to live in and make their living through this dumpsite (PASGR 2015).

Baghdad onto their own urban locales (De Boeck and Plissart 2004, 35). De Boeck and Plissart (2004) interpret this spatial speech as a process of renaming to reclaim—the imprinting of a personal stamp on contested terrain—that mirrors what both the colonial government and Mobutu, the second post-independence president, did in Kinshasa and Congo as a whole. Inherently then, in this reclamation, these war spaces “become sites of opposition against the official order” (De Boeck and Plissart 2004, 35). I would add that, as in Kenya, this naming also reveals a warlike social calculus that youth engage in, thereby upholding war-talk as an important register of socio-material experiences in Mathare.

Since it condenses longer histories of siege, the *longue durée* vagaries of Matigari life, this situated language can be projected backward and forward. Diouf’s (2003) suggestion that youth see themselves “as bearers of the twofold project of modernity and the return to the sources of African cultures” (Diouf 2003, 4-5) is equally relevant here when thinking about the layers of historical experience referenced in war-talk. I argue, however, that what overwhelmingly motivates this combat language is the aggressive response to poverty, as auxiliary to neglect, that has characterized Mathare since its early days. Moreover, as conditions worsen, the violent penalization of poverty intensifies. Therefore, references to the Mau Mau moment in war-talk draw more from comparisons with the militarized governance of Mathare seen in the emergency period (see Chapter 3 for more on this), and, though still important, less from the traditional gaze implicit in these anticolonial mobilizations. It is the endurance of a colonial force, a martial ruination, that looms large in war-talk and gains more purchase in a situation where both poverty and police violence are increasing.

In a case that reflects both Diouf’s (2003) and my arguments, one interlocutor, in establishing his steadfast opposition to the government, shouted: “They burned my grandfather!”

It was only after further probing that I realized this was a reference to Chief Waiyaki wa Hinga, an anti-imperialist traditional Gĩkũyũ chief who was killed by the colonial government in the late nineteenth century. Drawing from the same universe of localized understanding, JJ shared the following during our interview: “What I would say is that Mathare has a lot of injustices that started before we were born. The colonialists started, and then other governments continued. Some women in Village One would say they had five children and now they have none.”

In this interview excerpt, JJ makes indirect reference to the extralegal and forceful actions of the police; it is their normalized adoption of extrajudicial killings that can account for the missing children from Village One. Through these practices, the police have become the signature reinforcers of an imperial mode of spatial management since it is they who most explicitly encode social, economic, political and ecological borders in Mathare. Events discussed in previous chapters chronicle how these forces are deeply imbricated in the space-subjectivity enterprise that I argue constitutes urban planning in Nairobi. Their violent reification of Mathare caricatures, seen in the rampant cases of police brutality and extrajudicial killings, as well as their interventions in the informal delivery of basic services (see Chapter 4), feed into a nexus of historical actions understood to perpetuate war in this location.

Police Actions as War

Rasmussen (2010b, 25) argues that “the criticism of the urban planning and management of Nairobi points to a decrease in state control in the informal settlements of the city—that citizens become alienated from the state as an effect of the lacking service delivery and protection.” A key argument of this dissertation is that the state, through the County of Nairobi administration, appears and is narrativized in Mathare less as a provider of services and more as a purveyor of

violence through what I argue is an urban planning of neglect and force. In this mode of normalized urban governance in Mathare, the police are used increasingly to enforce city logics, in ways that see them effectively become urban managers and but also, in the absence of basic utilities, an embodied stand in for infrastructure. That is, in a context where there are no elementary facilities they are the tool that the government furnishes most readily, in turn advancing a martial response to urban neglect, as opposed to addressing issues in socio-economic or political ways. As a feature of this response, they offer important fortification of this area should those who are abandoned choose to show their discontent in richer parts of the city. The four police stations that surround Mathare⁹¹ (the smallest constituency in Nairobi at only three square kilometres) further corroborate the role of the police in the direct urban governance of ecologies of exclusion in Nairobi. It is this hyper-policing and hyper-surveillance that they deliver which, I argue, greatly inform the war sentiments held by local youth.

Not a day would pass in Mathare without me hearing a complaint about the police. The two interview excerpts below are worth quoting at length because they underscore how the unconstitutional actions of police significantly orient the lives of Mathare residents, and motivate the proliferation of war-talk.

Muchangi is a community activist involved in various collective local enterprises. He is 31 years old, and was born and still lives in Kia Maiko, Huruma. In the narrative below, recorded in 2014, he responds to a question I asked about the role of the police in Mathare.

Yes that is a very big issue in fact. In fact yesterday . . . the way I am talking today it is like I have a cold. I don't have a cold; I am very healthy. Yesterday I was engaged in violence by a police and the reason I was engaged in violence by the police was because the police was harassing a person and the police officer was very drunk. And I was there with Anthony and I told Anthony: "Here is a police officer and he is drunk and he is harassing a person and this person should just go and work." And so we went there and

⁹¹ These are Pangani, Muthaiga, Kariobangi and Huruma police stations.

told the police, "Police, you are drunk and go first and fall asleep." The owner of the motorcycle [who was being disturbed by the police] said: "He is demanding for a receipt of 2014 and it is here, here it is." And then I told the officer: "Officer by the way you know you are not doing good." And then he became mad and caught me. But we told the motorcycle guy "Go! go!" He went. But I believe we did a good thing at the end of the day because he wanted money from that guy.

But then he took me to the police station and he engaged me in violence and assault. Seriously! I even have witnesses who were there and saw what was going on there. And then the OCS [Officer in Command of Station] came and called me and released me and told me "Here is 100 shillings, go and buy Panadol." That 100 shilling I even gave it to my friend and said, "Go and eat lunch." The OCS gave me 100 shillings to buy Panadol because he said, "I think you are hurting a lot." I said "Cool officer, but this thing we have to address. If we don't deal with it today we will still deal with it." Now about the people now . . .

This is symbolic, that is what happens here. If I had a camera I would be taking photos of violations of rights. In 2006, and this is what happens, they arrested me and charged me with murder and robbery with violence. And I had not killed, and I had not even robbed the person that they said I did. So that's what they do. Very very many people in prison in Kamiti and in Industrial area and it is only that they lack the money to give the police, because this is a market at the end of the day. If someone is arrested at the end of the day they give three thousand, ten thousand and a hundred thousand. Like now the other day I was given information that there is somewhere that Al-Shabaab comes and people come from Somalia and then they are taken to a certain house, and then the officers were given this information. After they went there they arrested those people. You know what? They didn't even reach the police station because they were given two hundred thousand shillings on the road. You know Al Shabaab have money. And then now what can the police tell us about fighting terrorism?

The police still continue catching youth. In my group we were 35. One of my members was killed in 2013 last year. The police killed him without any just cause. They caught him sitting down eating *khat*. He was caught in Kia Maiko. And also close to Bondeni there is an officer called Gitonga, and there is another one nicknamed Stupid. They caught some youths just sitting down on some chairs. Those chairs now have holes because of gun shots. If you are caught sitting down you are shot. That's what they do. And then they have one black plastic toy gun here. I have seen it. After they killed three young boys here I saw it. There is a certain police man who came with it and put it there and then the chief came and saw, the chief who just passed here his senior, and then he came and saw and said, "Oh they had a gun." But the young boys . . . And in the shop that I showed you the other day, they had even surrendered. The young boy was saying "Please just catch me and take me to jail" but the officer shot him ten times.

In the whole of Africa, Mathare is where the practical is happening. All those other places people just hear about it. They hear it once per year someone was killed. But in Mathare it is practical. The police were exercising their extrajudicial discretion through

killing young boys . . . So when boys hear that they say us we also need to look for guns because even the police it is them who make the guns come here. It becomes like this.

Rebecca is a journalist from Mathare. She is 36 years old. Her narrative below on the police emerged naturally in the interview process, and echoes the war accounts provided by Muchangi.

I was born in Mathare in 1982. I have grown there. I grew up when my mother was selling chang'aa. Back then that is what we were doing; selling it to make ends meet, and that is what took me to school. At least my mum had realised the importance of school because she did not get the chance to read so she pushed me so hard to go to school. She even physically punished me to make me grasp things. Life at home as people who sell illegal brew had its own challenges, especially with the police. They would come arrest people, beat people and harass people. At one point when I was in class 3 my mum was arrested for 6 months so I didn't know where she was. I was told by my aunt that my mum was in my rural home hustling and relaxing. So I didn't visit her in prison. When she came back she was looking very well and it did not hit me that she had been in prison. That was the life growing up in Mathare [. . .].

That brings the challenge with police. For young men especially it is becoming increasingly difficult for them to have any associations with the police because the reason they are doing this is the police are killing young people, and especially men. Of recent, a group of young men, between 12 and 16 years old, can gang up together and form a gang because they want to look good and to have money in their pockets. They want to have a life that is different from other young men, or a life from what the media is portraying. A young man called Augo was a known criminal and his father attested to it during an interview. He says he knew his son was into crime but he had not gotten to a place where he had arms; he was a petty thief who was dirty. For him the criminals with guns are well dressed and live a high-class life because they have the money. He died.

These two interview accounts portray the violent presence of the police in this area, the fear they establish that compels feelings of endless siege among residents, and principally male youth. Stories from other interlocutors relayed how families would report the killing of their children at the police station, only to be told to pay for the bullets that had executed them (see MSJC 2017). In another instance, one mother was given a list of other young men to be targeted when she went to protest the killing of her 16-year-old son by the police (see also Jones et al. 2017).

In his examination of policing practices in Paris’s *banlieus*, Fassin (2013, 41) argues that “via a rhetoric that sidesteps the issues of segregation and inequality to focus purely on disorder and violence, the social question is transformed into a martial question. The politics of the projects becomes a politics of war.” The number of police deployed in the frequent raids in Mathare (see Image 12), also works to spectacularize actions that can be read as “urban guerilla war” (ibid.).

Image 12: Police and GSU battalions. Mathare, March 7, 2016.



These forces were preparing to conduct an alcohol raid. Source: author’s personal archive.

Alongside all this, it is important to point out that war analogies have purchase beyond urban ruins; they have also been extensively propagated by the present Uhuru Kenyatta administration. Commenting on this phenomenon on the global scale, Graham (2005, 388) notes the rise of military urbanism and states that at its core is the “widespread metaphorization of war

as the perpetual and boundless condition of urban societies—against drugs, against crime, against terror, against insecurity itself.” Constant references by government representatives and the media to the war(s) against alcohol, crime, and even Al-Shabaab speak to the prevalence of these combat idioms. What all these metaphors have in common, in both their local and global iterations, is the sites where this war is territorialized: geographies that evidence Graham’s (2005, 394) observation that “hyper-inequalities and urban militarization are mutually reinforcing.” The 31 young men killed by the police between December 24 of 2016 and January 2 of 2017 (Mwangi 2017) attest to the extent of this military urbanism.

The militancy and violence of the police notwithstanding, the crime and violence conducted by Mathare residents cannot be ignored. It is important to recognize, however, that it too is likely woven into the local war analogies. In a survey on insecurity that I conducted in March 2016, residents stated that they turned to both the police and gangs/vigilante groups for protection. Results for Mlango Kubwa ward confirmed that 76 percent of the respondents would call the police if they needed protection, while 32 percent said they would seek help from other security groups. At the same time, 42 percent identified the police as the most distrusted security actor, whereas 40 percent answered that it was vigilante groups in whom they had the least confidence.⁹² Also registered in these surveys were frequent episodes of inter-youth violence, mob justice and sexual assault,⁹³ events that made clear the high levels of intra-community violence in Mathare (Kimari and Jones 2016). Attesting to this in our interview, Rebecca reported a case where

⁹² I conducted these surveys with Peris Jones as part of a project examining informal security actors in Mathare.

⁹³ A manager at the local Mathare/Eastleigh branch of Doctors Without Borders (MSF) reported attending to upwards of 200 new cases of sexual assault every month. This number is not inclusive of the other roughly 200 persons they see who come for follow-up treatment and counseling. This allows for a total of at least 400 persons seeking treatment for sexual violence related incidents every month (Wariera, personal communication).

Abedi, also called Mzae, used to sell *mandazis* with the mum. He was around 17 years old. That day he was coming from his rounds. He was fetching water for his mum as he lived with her. He would do casual work for people. As he was coming he was surrounded by a group of boys. They asked for money and stabbed him almost 10 times. This really infuriated the people because they said the police are killing their young men but also young men are killing people within the community. And people are now thinking of forming vigilante groups as has happened in Mlango Kubwa, where they are saying they have to form their own security and they are fed up with these young men who think they deserve to steal money from people—money they have not worked for. So there is acknowledgement that if they do not solve this together as a community, the police won't and the government won't.

Because they are “fed up” with young men similar to those Rebecca discusses above, some residents welcome the police killings of those caught stealing because they believe that it reduces the rate of crime in their area (Nusra, personal communication). Moreover, a complete distrust of the justice system, seen as corrupt and inefficient, is said to motivate the lynchings, stonings and beatings that characterize the frequent bouts of mob justice in Mathare.

The post-election violence of 2008 added to the intra-community violence discussed above by Rebecca and others, although it unfolded in qualities and quantities heretofore never witnessed in Mathare. While there was violence throughout the nation, its manifestations in this locality led to the death and displacement of many. The principal protagonists of these transgressions were the youth involved in various ward based gangs whom Chege (1981, 83) had earlier termed “lumpen proletariat” and a “mob” who would “serve any cause, ignoble or otherwise, as long as the price was right.” For residents of Mathare, the events of December 2007 and January 2008 went beyond the monetary “price” highlighted by Chege (1981), as they were clashes deeply inflected by political and economic frustrations, which, at that moment, were channelled through ethnic antagonisms.

Whatever the impetus of this period of conflict, the resulting scars in the people and their landscape remain deep. Alluding to the violent episodes that took place during this period in a

song entitled “Safer City,” popular local artist Danito urges youth to drop the metal bars (*chuma*), guns and the fire (*nare*) and to bring about a safer city and “cool ghetto” (*ghetto fiti*) free of “war and crime.” Launched a year before the 2013 elections, the call for peace in Danito’s song predictably resonated with youth, but also made clear how young people are also the purveyors of feelings of siege in Mathare. Furthermore, the high levels of trauma (referred to by one interlocutor as the situation where the “struggle gets in the brain”), manifested through mental health challenges, alcoholism and drug abuse, also makes apparent the intersecting impacts of the war conditions residents identify and navigate every day. With particular regard to the widespread alcohol abuse, another slang name for *chang’aa* is *machizi ya simba*—“the tears of a lion.” The emotions of loss animating this poignant phrase do much to point towards the interior and exterior devastation wrought by structural violence in this community. And my appreciation of this was further elicited when a youth leader struggling with bouts of alcoholism solemnly stated: “Wangu, you do not know the life we live here. That is why we boys have to drink” (Nyaga, personal communication).

Whereas in their own capacities both residents and state functionaries express feelings of war, it is also important to emphasize that the assumed lines between the police and youth involved in crime, and residents broadly, are often “porous” (Garmany 2014). For example, local gang, alcohol and drug bosses often pay the police and the local chiefs to ignore their activities, a fee jokingly referred to as “taxes.” In addition, at times inept politicians are rescued from angry residents by a feared local group, and will reciprocate with money for community projects or for help with political mobilization. Similarly, women human rights defenders might foster a relationship with a local police officer considered “friendlier” and who can intervene on their behalf when they want action against a local community member, state administrator or even

another police officer (see Price et al. 2016). What is more, the police are likely to have family members who live in Mathare; indeed, they may themselves live in close proximity. All of these situations illustrate that resolute “state-society imaginaries,” canalized through simple victim and oppressor dichotomies, are often misplaced (Garmany 2014).

Nonetheless, when it comes to the governance of urban space, the most violent actions of the police are enacted only in areas like Mathare; the spatiality of their most brute and extralegal force is undeniable (Caldeira 2000; Garmany 2014; Goffman 2014; Van Stapele 2015). Quoted in Garmany (2014, 1243), Herbert (1996, 567) states that: “The police are such a central component of [state] infrastructure that their successful control of space is a foundation upon which modern state power rests.” Although they may not be aware of the content of urban master plans, or associated national development designs, the police have full discretion to forcefully encode colonial spatial logics. Their role as a feature of the imperial management of the city is manifested locally through their critical position in the space-subjectivity enterprise; they protect historical neglect and its attendant spatial subjectivities by normalizing force in Mathare.

The military airport right opposite Bondeni ward, the four police stations surrounding Mathare, and the permanent police checkpoint on Juja Road, in conjunction with the frequent raids by highly armed and aggressive police officers, are entities and events that entrench Mathare as a geography of criminal subjects. This martial governance in turn fosters an environment where residents, akin to those in Philadelphia’s ghettos, constantly feel like suspects and fugitives (Goffman 2014). In an assessment of policing and space in Fortaleza, Brazil, Garmany (2014, 1245) argued that “understanding the material effects of state-society imaginaries are important for understanding space more generally.” Here, local ideas about the police are woven into stories about urban neglect as a whole, and understood to have their

material articulation in the spatial conditions of this territory. However, the effects of these imaginaries go beyond the material, since they crudely cast the non-material landscapes of residents. So much so that the informally formal shoot-to-kill policy that has been documented from as early as 1969 (Hake 1977, 202)⁹⁴ and frequently enacted before any “criminal” or “suspect” has been charged with an offense, has invoked a visceral lament by many mothers who “do not see a reason to give birth” (MSJC 2015).

Conclusion

Writing about young women’s experiences of gentrification on the Lower East Side of New York, Cahill (2007, 215) talks about the “war stories” of displacement that these teenagers have embraced to discuss the anxieties they feel about their constantly changing neighbourhood. Similarly, the high level of youth incarceration and death in the South Side of Chicago where, for many young men, surviving to adulthood is taken as an incredible feat, has led residents to describe this area as a “warzone” (Wacquant 2008, 210). A combat grammar was also used in a Zambian mining town in the 1950s where, against the backdrop of the Korean War (1950-1953), black miners referred to their strike against a South African owned company as Korea—a term that essentially became a “copperbelt slang expression, meaning warfare or strife” (Epstein 1958, 138). And in Kinshasa, decades of war and the militarization of urban space have bled into

⁹⁴ While extrajudicial killings by the police are normalized in Kenya—evidenced by the periodic “shoot to kill” orders issued at various moments of the nation’s history (for one example see Kagwanja 2005,107)—very few human rights reports have been able to document the frequency and full extent of these killings which occur on an ongoing basis. Early support for these actions from governments and citizens, are evident in some of Mzee Kenyatta senior’s Independence Day speeches that, at one point or another, spoke of harsh penalties for criminals and received overwhelming applause. On a legal front, in 1971 the death penalty was seen as an appropriate punitive measure for people convicted of robbery with violence (Hake 1977, 202). The recently promulgated 2010 Constitution includes a Bill of Rights that upholds the rights of a detained person, but while these contemporary legal provisions make extrajudicial killings unconstitutional in law, executions by formal security forces have not stopped. As they continue to persist unabated, these killings are also reminiscent of colonial treatment of African city dwellers, particularly during the emergency period in Kenya (1952 -1960).

church vernacular, such that preachers now refer to themselves as “generals” and their congregations as “garrisons of God, armies of salvation, launching evangelization crusades” (De Boeck 2004, 119). Also in Kinshasa, the fact that street children must use drugs and other ritualistic practices to turn themselves into “war machines,” just so they can survive the stresses of this post-war city, illustrates the appropriateness of war as a referent for urban living under various levels of siege.

In Mathare, as in the cases above and akin to the character of Matigari, I understand war-talk to be the vernacular of local “systems of intelligibility to which people refer in order to construct a more or less clear idea of the causes of phenomena and their effects, to determine the domain of what is possible and feasible, as well as the logics of efficacious action” (Mbembe and Roitman 1995, 324). Since they bring together local narratives that connect historical events across various moments in time, the complementary subject positions of *masafara* and *watu wa mtaa* can likewise be understood as systems of intelligibility that detail situated trajectories of cause and effect in Mathare, but, above all, chart possibilities for the specific efficacious actions much needed in this locale.

As I have argued in this chapter, the taking up of these two broad identities, largely by youth and their associations, is part of an ethical and political project that has as its goal improvements to both space and subjects. These counter-hegemonic subject positions are mapped onto a space that is constantly being improved by those who adopt them, and together the assembling of machinic and enunciatory efforts allows the crafting of alternative narratives and material articulations of territory and community. Interrogations into youth subjectivity in Mathare, therefore, require that one dwell in the layered terrain that births and houses both *safara* and *ghetto* identities, and also that attention is paid to the complex ways in which relations

between the state and Mathare are analyzed by residents, and principally youth. One of the mediums produced by the simultaneous embodiment of these identities is war-talk. War-talk, therefore, becomes a crucial vector for appraising the socio-spatial relationships generated by imperial duress. This grounded and affective vernacular composes and decomposes lives, challenging and expanding what are ostensibly axiomatic subjectivities of Mathare residents. In this sense, it is a code language that explains what a safara must do in “the line of duty.” Along with this, however, it also incorporates the trickster “exiles” that young, principally, men of the ghetto sometimes have to undergo as part of their normal circuits in this environment. Certainly, it is a gendered language as it overwhelmingly references the experiences of young men in Mathare. Moreover, that a “real ghetto man” is considered one who has seen the inside of a jail cell also works to provide fertile ground for the masculinized war imaginaries captured by this youth lexicon.

Of particular significance for this chapter, and the larger arguments put forward in this dissertation, is war-talk’s attachment to and origin within certain geographies. As I have sought to document here, its point of departure is the relationship between space and subjects.

Therefore, it is essentially a meditation on how Mathare residents experience their urban environment(s) and how this terrain shapes how they think about themselves. To these ends, war-talk highlights what Kurtz (1998, 84) calls “new forms of identification,” in ways that can “suggest new avenues of political action and expression” and “contribute to the birth of a social consciousness.” What is more, “in a city where personal space is at a premium,” war-talk, like Sheng, “is a means of creating a linguistic space” (ibid.).

Echoing Ochoa’s (2007) reflections on the Palo Kongo religion in Cuba, young men in Eastlands turn the language of war “towards new understandings”(Ochoa 2007, 479). Through

looping in “flashbacks” of empire (Hunt 2008) that haunt their spatial experiences as safara and watu wa mtaa, Mathare youth engage in a speech that registers not just the long-term decay normalized in the spatial arrangements of the city, but also, and above all, the perpetual possibility that they and their geography inhere. Though community potential is indexed and rallied through this identity-based language that upholds Mathare as a place of “heroes” that will “resist evictions ghetto style,” on a spatial front this is evident in the small improvements for home enabled by the incremental work of youth associations. The story of a pump told in Chapter 4 chronicles one such spatial gain, even amidst tragedy, and the examples of youth group work discussed in this chapter conveys more instances of the material “messy labours” and enunciatory consciousness raising activities that deterritorialize, however temporarily, an urban planning of neglect and force.

Even in its word play, war-talk is not so cavalier as to underestimate the violence that can be enacted in Mathare, not only through neglect in the form of an absence of basic infrastructure, but also via a brute force that becomes part of the “everyday functioning” (Caldeira 2000, 209) of the city and registers a permanent condition of war. At the same time, I argue here that this everyday lexicon complements the subject positions of sufferer and person of the ghetto by intentionally seeking to destabilize the degenerative narratives of self and community. By the same token, this language further accentuates the connections between space and subjectivity, with particular regard to how these inform urban planning and, more importantly, to how residents appreciate and re-appropriate this relationship to engender alternative material and subjective articulations for their lives. Together these grounded senses of self and their associated vocabulary offer lines of flight (Deleuze and Guattari 1987) in the form of more rhizomatic itineraries that allow those deemed the robbers, beggars and shanty dwellers of the

city to actively engage the long-term spatial ruination, and to reposition themselves materially and metaphysically in the past, present and future.

Conclusion

Recursive histories may be about not only how imperial formations call on their earlier manifestations but, more importantly how those who live them move in and around the constraints imposed—the visions failed and the desperate, indignant, and defiant acts that duress can produce.

Ann Laura Stoler, *Duress: Imperial Durabilities in Our Times*.

On August 25, 2016 there was a water protest in Mathare and a resolution was prepared for dissemination. Community members from the six wards sent a message, which I set out (unedited) below, to all concerned through the online phone platform WhatsApp:

25th August 2016 Mathare protest resolution. Let's petition government to remove Nairobi water company CEO for failing to supply adequate, clean and safe water. For several months now residents of Mathare and other informal settlements have lacked sufficient, clean and safe water to drink and for use on their day to day activity at their house, due to cartel surrounding the business and incompetency man power. For example residents of Mathare, Mashimoni, Huruma and Ngai in average are forced to purchase water for at least Ksh 20 per 20ltr up from Ksh 5 per 20ltrs on normal days. Today on 25th August 2016 resident of Mathare staged a protest along Juja road to demand the reconnecting of water pipes that has led to water shortage for Mathare for almost 2 weeks. Resident blocked road with tires, rocks, mukokoteni, and human shield from as early as 8am to 3pm in a bid to attract the attention of the relevant authority. The bid by Pangani OCPD, Huruma AP commander and deputy OCS to stop the angry protesters mostly comprised of women and children did not succeed in return they opted to arrest Richard Bonke whom they later released unconditional after public opted to continue with the protest over night. Most of the protesters claimed they have not bathed for 3 days due to lack of water, other claim they haven't cleaned their kids uniform keeping in mind school are opening next week, Mzee Onyango, and Mutisia claimed their kids are now admitted hospital due to poor hygiene due to lack of water. The demo stopped at around 3:30pm after some area started receiving some traces of tap water and the release of Richard Bonke. Note: this 3rd protest in four months over inadequate water supply, result have been the safe the pipes are reconnected after several hours. This were some of the resolution. 1. We will be back to the street in case of water shortage and supply since is the only solution with immediate answer. 2. A bid to open a long time camp across Nairobi on right to clean and safe water. 3. To develop a petition to impeach Nairobi water company for failing to execute his mandate to give clean safe and adequate water to Nairobi resident. Thanks Signed by Francis Sakwa, Elizabeth Ombetho Mushoki Emily Kwamboka Jobles Jobe Susan Nyabera Gidich. [sic]

It is important to note that residents were not protesting the ongoing lack of water from taps in their own houses, but the absence of water in the few communal and “illegal” water points that dot the landscape, and that are infrastructures usually shared by hundreds if not thousands of people (Dafe 2009).

We are coming to the centenary of Mathare’s existence, but the protest documented above highlights that it is still not adequately connected to the larger city water grid. These resident actions for water, that bring together ecological, social, economic and political trajectories and circumstances, register the persistent violences of neglect and force. They are recursive histories intensified by violent interventions by the police and, moreover, in this case they resulted in the detention of one of the protest organizers. At the same time, however, the fact that this was the third water-related protest in four months illustrates that these unfoldings of empire are also being responded to by “the desperate, indignant, and defiant acts that duress can produce” (Stoler 2016, 35).

In this dissertation I have put forward three main arguments. First, urban planning in Nairobi is the territorialization of an imperial assemblage that creates ruins, such as Mathare, principally through engagement in a negative space-subjectivity enterprise. Essentially, through processes of imperial ruination, a space (re)produced as decay is mapped onto its residents, and the tropes about those residents’ amorality are then held to be not only reflective but also the cause of the degeneracy of the space. Together, the co-functioning of the materiality of unequal space and the ostensible prefigurative subjectivities of its dwellers justifies a formal urban governance of neglect and force. This uncritical dialogical relationship makes ruins: spaces that, by foregrounding ecology, I also characterize as ecologies of exclusion because they condense

multiple marginalizations—political, economic, social and ecological—that over the years appear to take form and reproduce in the very terrain.

In my second main argument, I point to the increasing militarization of poor urban areas in a contemporary period often defined as both neoliberal and democratic. The youth identities of *masafara* and *watu wa mtaa* and their attendant language war-talk, a localized combat idiom, provide important insights into how this militarized neglect of particular areas shapes subjectivities. While attending to the uncertainty and anxiety these subject positions and language may convey, I also address the ways in which they are implicated in an ethico-political project steered by youth, predominantly through involvement in associations that pursue the intention of simultaneously improving the environment and enhancing how residents think about themselves. This work for territory and local senses of self draws from the Matigari histories that layer this geography and inform the messy labours and complex orality of those who live here, via anti-colonial positionings that more recently have been further supplemented by bricolage stories of struggle drawing from reggae, hip hop, Pan-Africanism and other sources.

My final argument is that despite imperial duress, and the hyper-policing that is one of its most forceful tools, Mathare residents are at once charting directions that unsettle histories long told about the city's margins, and unleashing alternative urban futures that are “waiting in the wings, nascent, perhaps pressing” (Stewart 2008, 80). What this confirms is that relics will not behave well (as evidenced by the fact that Matigari residents continue to threaten to have more water protests and to impeach the CEO of the city water company), and it is ruins, not centres, that “are the ground on which histories are contested and remade” (Stoler 2016, 355). Certainly this is the case in Mathare.

In Chapter 1 I theorized the concepts and metaphors that suture and anchor my three main arguments. These are imperial ruination, ruins, relics, Matigari and ecologies of exclusion. I also discussed how diverse literatures and lines of inquiry initially informed my methods in the field, and later scaffolded my understandings of the forces that produce urban space and subjects. The second chapter traces key events in the formal history of urban planning in Nairobi, from 1898 to 2014, to track the political, ecological, social and economic ideas and practices of empire that assemble and territorialize this city. Tracking this genesis of Nairobi allowed me to demonstrate how ruins are made, and, in turn, how prefigurative characterizations interact with the environment to create and sustain ecologies of exclusion. In Chapter 3 I place women at the centre of Mathare space and subjectivities to show, first, how ideas about their practices form the foundation for the caricatures about residents, and second, how their experiences then become the foundation from which ethical and political claims are made, principally by youth, for Mathare. Chapter 4 is an ethnographic portrayal of the everyday neglect and force that residents encounter, and their vital responses to these events despite the tragedy that this implies in their environment.

Chapter 5 pays particular attention to how spatial events, like those described in Chapter 4, orient the lives of Mathare dwellers and direct their labours for space and subjects. Building on the work of women, it is youth, and principally youth groups, who are the actors most involved in initiatives that have the explicit aim of improving their environment. As such, this chapter focuses on what I argue is a youth-led ethical and political project to inaugurate a new “material and imaginative order” (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991, 38), through situated machinic and enunciatory assemblages. The identities youth take on as part of this space and subjectivity work, as sufferers and people of the ghetto, are essentially meditations on the historical

experiences of Mathare residents. Ultimately, these local descriptions of self illuminate the connections between, on one hand, the embattled reflections of 80-year-old Monica Njeri about her more than six decades in Village One, where she has never “seen the government,” and, on the other hand, the plight of the youth group car wash in Bondeni whose members were constantly besieged by the police, often fatally, for “dragging water from the main pipes” — water that should have been in place decades ago.

These youth subject positions are critical to the aggregating narratives residents tell about themselves and their home environment. By redirecting our gaze to the persistence of empire, as manifested in the colonial duress that has othered them, they challenge the productivity of ostensibly benign and technocratic master plans that speak of world-class city aspirations. Above all, however, they remain in an unfinished struggle that every day looks for new lines of flight to challenge their exclusion, claim their right to the city and, fundamentally, their humanity.

What is at stake in these minor yet meaningful escapes is not merely the creation and presentation of more agentic histories about themselves. Nor is it simply a fight against the “incorrigibility of natural endowment and the possibility of human improvement” (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991, 40). Not at all. What is in play here is a larger target: the urge to make clear that what they are resisting is empire – that there has been no rupture for them despite postcolonial planning documents that speak of new independent and nationalistic modernities.

Furthermore, the popular subjectivities that have persisted as explanatory devices about residents try to deny the legitimacy of their discernment of imperial ruination, just as the silent speech of the water pump was denied (see Chapter 4). Nevertheless, against the rhizomatic assemblages of empire—political, ecological, social and economic—the people of Mathare are taking up multiple courses that plateau together to engender renewed space and subjectivities. In

this “unreal space’ that “spawns unreal language” (Kurtz 1998, 84) they are generating alternative identities, languages, youth groups and material labours. These remaking projects are invocations of unique material and expressive forms, and future research in Mathare might look at how these machinic and enunciatory initiatives evolve over time to take on new itineraries for ruins and people, while still responding to empire and its recursive (re)animations.

Mwanake, who we met in the introduction, and his wife are going to have their third child in a few months. In these labours, they are producing what is in effect a fourth generation of Mathare dwellers. For this new very young cohort of residents, the stories continue; Mau Mau and Matigari are still narrativized in a forgotten Mathare. Against the serial tales told about Mathare residents, this most recent generation will learn that they have “bad blood” and thus will be subject to what appears to be a “genetically inherited violence” (Kinyatti, personal communication). This spatial DNA—the product of specific ecological, political, social and economic dynamics assembled in space—is so prevalent that even without reason “you [can] start suspecting yourself that the police is looking for you” (Nyerere, personal communication). As is evident, these stories of the past become conjoined to stories of a beleaguered present to create forms of intelligibility that merit attention and, fundamentally, ask us to resist the “comforting contention that there really is no imperial order of things” (Stoler 2016, 26).

Within the frame of the stories they tell about their urban space, residents engage in multidimensional efforts to improve their material and immaterial landscapes. On a different scale, these labours responds to problematic national issues such as unemployment, landlessness and the militarization of daily life for many in the country. For researchers like myself, Mathare narratives also make evident the inadequacy and vacuity of the formal meaning-making work that has been done on Nairobi that intentionally misrecognizes them in terms that deflect

empire—robbers, shanty dwellers and beggars. Despite these technocratic and imperial regimes of policy and knowledge (Holston 2009, 249) that proliferate, especially, in the context of world class city aspirations, residents navigate the space-subjectivity nexus which territorializes urban planning in order to make more grounded futures. These practices echo what Smith (2011, 26), reflecting on the work of small-scale miners in Congo, deems associated productive and imaginative work, and in many imperfect but important ways these messy labours in Mathare are launching new interiority and infrastructure arrangements. In so doing, the residents of this place are creating another physical and cognitive map of their home, other spatial and subject visions, and, above all, other more just urban world(s).

Glossary of Kiswahili, Sheng and Kikuyu terms⁹⁵

Ayah. A nanny.

Babi. An unaware or naïve middle-class person.

Bhang. Marijuana.

Chama(s). Small scale savings/business association(s).

Chang'aa. Illegal alcoholic brew. Chang'aa is often the livelihood for many in Mathare and other poor urban settlements.

Chuma. Metal bars.

Cucu. Grandmother (Kikuyu).

Damu. Blood.

Enkare Nyrobi. Place of cool waters (Maasai), the original name for Nairobi.

Genge. Local popular music that is sung in a mix of styles and languages.

Ghetto fiti. Cool ghetto.

Gikunia. Traitors of the Mau Mau (Kikuyu).

Harambee. Pulling together.

Jua kali. Literally, “hot sun.” Used to refer to informal industry done in the hot sun.

Kaa ngumu. Persevere.

Kapuka. A youth centred popular music style that borrows from hip hop, reggae and local influences and with a set of repetitive recognizable beats.

Karau. Police officer.

Khat. The leaves of a shrub, commonly consumed as a stimulant or intoxicant.

Kipande. Identity card.

Mabati. Corrugated iron sheets.

Machozi ya simba. “Tears of a lion.” Synonym for chang'aa.

Mandazi. Popular fried doughnut-like pastry.

⁹⁵ Unless stated otherwise, all of these are Kiswahili or hybrid Kiswahili and English slang urban terms referred to as *Sheng*.

Matatu. Public transport buses that are creatively decorated and popular with youth.

Matigari. Poor and landless people who are “remains” or descendants of Mau Mau.

Mau Mau. The more common name for the Kenya Land and Freedom Army who fought for Kenya’s independence.

Michogi. Stuffed and deep-fried chicken heads.

Miraa. Khat

Mkokoteni. Wheelbarrow.

Mtaa. Ghetto.

Mtu. Person.

Nare. Fire. May also refer to gunshots.

Ngati. Kenyans who sided and worked with the British colonial administration.

Roho juu. Elevated spirits.

Ruui. River (Kikuyu).

Safara. Sufferer.

Shamba. Farmland.

Sheng. A slang language that is a mixture of both Kiswahili and English.

Tao ya chini. Literally “lower town.” The more densely populated and less corporate looking parts of the margins of Nairobi’s central business district.

Tao ya juu. Literally “uptown.” Used to refer to the central business district of Nairobi.

Vuta mguu. Keep moving; don’t give up.

Watu. People. Plural form of mtu.

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