

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Mobility and marginalization via the Nairobi expressway

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Abstract

To inhabit the city is to inhabit a layered and contentious space, a space whose meaning cannot be comprehended without closely navigating its layers. This article analyses two images and representations – a tweet and a song – as narrative forms that reveal the palimpsestic nature of Nairobi in the context of the city’s expressway, which was constructed between September 2020 and July 2022. I read the expressway as a physical infrastructure for mobility as well as a material and metaphorical representation of urban marginalization, which at the same time materializes various forms of social marginalization and exclusion that predate it. The narrative forms, critically analysed together, underscore the palimpsestic nature of the city that would otherwise be obscured should readers be blinded by the iconicity of the expressway. I consider both the images, the tweet and the song alongside the arguments of Michel de Certeau, Karin Barber and Setha Low on urban aesthetics. While de Certeau provides lenses through which we understand the practices of everyday life in the city, Barber makes a case for urban infrastructure and the growth of popular culture, and Low focuses on how power relations influence the social construction of space. Ultimately, I argue for a reading of urban spaces using a synthesized literary approach as a nuanced way of understanding such spaces. This approach weaves together different media and approaches – both textual and visual – in its reading of the materialities of urban spaces and how meaning is constructed and contested within those spaces.

Résumé

Habiter la ville, c’est habiter un espace stratifié et conflictuel, un espace dont le sens ne peut être saisi sans une exploration minutieuse de ses strates. Cet article analyse deux images et représentations (un tweet et une chanson) en tant que formes narratives révélant la nature palimpsestique de la ville de Nairobi dans le contexte de l’autoroute de Nairobi, construite entre septembre 2020 et juillet 2022. L’auteur interprète l’autoroute comme une infrastructure physique de mobilité ainsi qu’une représentation matérielle et métaphorique de la marginalisation urbaine qui matérialise simultanément diverses formes de marginalisation et d’exclusion sociales antérieures. Ces formes narratives, analysées ensemble de manière critique, soulignent la nature palimpsestique de la ville, que le lecteur occulterait s’il était aveuglé par l’iconicité de l’autoroute. L’auteur examine les images, le tweet et la chanson

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parallèlement aux arguments de Michel de Certeau, de Karin Barber et de Setha Low sur l'esthétique urbaine. Tandis que de Certeau propose des perspectives permettant de comprendre les pratiques de la vie quotidienne en ville, Barber défend l'infrastructure urbaine et le développement de la culture populaire, et Low s'intéresse à l'influence des relations de pouvoir sur la construction sociale de l'espace. Enfin, l'auteur défend une lecture des espaces urbains fondée sur une approche littéraire synthétisée, comme moyen nuancé de les appréhender. Cette approche tisse des liens entre différents supports et approches, tant textuels que visuels, pour interpréter les matérialités des espaces urbains et la manière dont le sens s'y construit et s'y conteste.

Resumo

Habitar a cidade é habitar um espaço estratificado e controverso, um espaço cujo significado não pode ser compreendido sem se navegar de perto pelas suas camadas. Este artigo analisa duas imagens e representações – um tweet e uma canção – como formas narrativas que revelam a natureza palimpséstica da cidade de Nairobi no contexto da via rápida de Nairobi, que foi construída entre setembro de 2020 e julho de 2022. Leio a via rápida como uma infraestrutura física para a mobilidade, bem como uma representação material e metafórica da marginalização urbana, que ao mesmo tempo materializa várias formas de marginalização e exclusão social que lhe são anteriores. As formas narrativas, analisadas criticamente em conjunto, sublinham a natureza palimpséstica da cidade que, de outra forma, seria obscurecida se os leitores ficassem cegos pela iconicidade da via rápida. Considero as imagens, o tweet e a canção em conjunto com os argumentos de Michel de Certeau, Karin Barber e Setha Low sobre a estética urbana. Enquanto de Certeau fornece lentes através das quais compreendemos as práticas da vida quotidiana na cidade, Barber defende as infraestruturas urbanas e o crescimento da cultura popular, e Low centra-se na forma como as relações de poder influenciam a construção social do espaço. Em última análise, defendo uma leitura dos espaços urbanos utilizando uma abordagem literária sintetizada como uma forma matizada de compreender esses espaços. Esta abordagem combina diferentes meios e abordagens – tanto textuais como visuais – na sua leitura das materialidades dos espaços urbanos e da forma como o significado é construído e contestado nesses espaços.

Introduction

Scholarly debates on urban aesthetics have long grappled with the conceptual relationship between space and place. While earlier theoretical formulations distinguished these terms – often treating place as a fixed, inanimate entity and space as dynamic and lived – recent scholarship has increasingly critiqued and collapsed this dichotomy. Rather than viewing space and place as opposites, contemporary perspectives emphasize their mutual entanglement: material infrastructures shape meanings, but representations, narratives and everyday practices also actively constitute urban realities.

Michel de Certeau's (2011) analysis of urban life offers a valuable framework for understanding this interplay. He argues that cities are not merely inanimate landscapes but are continually animated and redefined through the narratives that circulate within them. Stories shape and reshape urban perceptions, turning the built environment into a dynamic space of meaning making. As de Certeau suggests, 'A space exists when one takes into consideration vectors of direction, velocities, and

time variables ... It is actuated by the ensemble of movements deployed within it' (*ibid.*: 117). This insight underscores how human mobility and storytelling together produce a fluid, ever-changing experience of the city. Importantly, de Certeau does not simply position narratives as secondary to material infrastructures but rather sees them as integral to the formation of urban spaces. He states: 'Stories thus carry out a labour that constantly transforms places into spaces or spaces into places' (*ibid.*: 118). The vitality of urban life, in this view, depends on the interplay between material and discursive dimensions. Where narratives wane, he warns, urban spaces risk becoming formless and indistinct: 'deprived of narrations (as one sees it happen in both the city and the countryside), the group or the individual regresses toward the disquieting, fatalistic experience of a formless, indistinct, and nocturnal totality' (*ibid.*: 123). Rather than reifying a rigid space/place dichotomy, this approach recognizes that representations, stories and embodied encounters with urban infrastructures work together to shape how cities are experienced and understood. While material aspects of the city certainly inform meaning making, narratives and images remain central to the constitution of urban space itself.

In *Spatializing Culture* (Low 2016), Setha Low offers a crucial addition to de Certeau's theorization of urban space. Her reading continues the conceptualization of space as an embodied entity whose meaning is subject to transformations and contestations due to the relationships that take place within it. 'Space, in my rendering, is pre-eminently social, produced by bodies and groups of people, as well as historical and political forces,' she argues (*ibid.*: 33). The fact that the construction of space is determined by human interactions makes it susceptible not just to multiple interpretations but also to power relations. The power relations that mark inhabiting and experiencing the city are often 'embedded in race, class, gender inequality; disputed claims to history, heritage and collective memory; limited access to territory and resources' (*ibid.*: 69). A critical examination of the social construction of space reveals the imbalances that permeate the city.

The elevated expressway cutting through the heart of Nairobi exists, undeniably, as concrete and asphalt. It also exists, however, as a highly contested road network in which the satirical song of comedians and the sardonic tweets of social critics vie with the empty promises of politicians for narrative control. The expressway is also a multilayered space of mobility and marginalization. By bringing literary methods to bear on urban studies, this article adds to existing scholarship on East African urban scholarship, which, over recent decades, has moved from material and political economy approaches towards a focus on the informal and the invisible, and, more recently, towards the complex entanglement of materialities and meaning between people and the built environment, political economy and politics. It is an article that weaves conceptions of the 'stuff of cities' à la Fontein and Smith, who think through the implications of the 'material turn' (Fontein and Smith 2023: 5) in controverting scholarship on urban studies that has been influenced by articulations about the 'invisible' and the 'improvisational' (*ibid.*: 2), at the expense of the tangible and material dimensions of urban life. The question here then is this: what do literary methods force us to contend with in East African urban scholarship? Having provided the theoretical underpinnings for this article, the succeeding arguments here weave together aspects of scholarship on East African urbanisms and infrastructures that focus on material and digital infrastructures.

The defining logic behind the construction of the Nairobi expressway was the desire to reinvent and reimagine a modernized¹ Nairobi as a world-class metropolis by ‘plugging in’ an infrastructure that does not take into consideration public needs (Guma *et al.* 2023: 2552). It is a desire rooted in the conception of the city as an ever evolving process that is never complete and whose multiplicities are always contested, as Fontein and Smith (2023: 10) argue. The Nairobi expressway is a 27 kilometre elevated road that runs straight across the centre of the city, from the Jomo Kenyatta International Airport, along Mombasa Road, to Waiyaki Way; it eventually terminates at James Gichuru Road in Kiambu County. The expressway signals material advancement at the expense of ordinary citizens, elsewhere referred to as the forgotten ‘people’² who constitute most of the middle- and lower-class population. Economic and geographical class distinctions between the upper class and the lower class are manifest and materialized through the expressway. This subsequently became the motivation for an online campaign expressed using the hashtag #UpperDeckPeopleKE.

#UpperDeckPeopleKE was first coined by the Kenyan economist David Ndii (2020) to refer to the ‘many well-to-do’ Kenyans who see themselves and their experiences as far removed from the experiences of the poor – those who are referred to as the #LowerDeckPeopleKE. Kenyans on Twitter (now X) quickly adopted and adapted the hashtag to refer to a larger culture of protest against the economic inequalities and unjust power relations that inform life in Nairobi. Indeed, while Ndii provides an economic interpretation of the hashtag #UpperDeckPeopleKE, my analysis in this article approaches it from a cultural perspective, offering a critique that highlights the palimpsestic nature of urban spaces, which acknowledges that the materials of the city are not inert. They are accumulations of histories and they retain memories, as well as structuring urban futures. They are sites from which the being of a city is read in all its complexities. What this article does is explore this nature and read the ways in which different cultural actors contest singular and linear narratives of progress. In this case, then, the expressway serves a material infrastructure imbricated in both local and geopolitical concerns (Kimari and Lesutis 2022: 59) and at the same time serves as an aesthetic form that speaks of urban relations and provides avenues for social appraisal of a range of issues.

#UpperDeckPeopleKE: the expressway and infrastructures of marginalization in Nairobi

This section provides a visual analysis of a photographic representation of the Nairobi expressway and its resultant discriminations. I build on Graham and Marvin’s argument that configurations of infrastructure are often imbued with ‘biased struggles’, since the ‘construction of spaces of mobility and flow for some always involves the construction of barriers for others’ (Graham and Marvin 2001: 11). My reading of the photograph in this section demonstrates de Certeau’s ‘solar

¹ Constance Smith (2022) discusses the anxieties of modernization materialized in Nairobi city and the impulse for reinvention, which often creates aspirations of advancement for the citizenry, yet these aspirations are simultaneously imbricated with disenfranchisement by the local authorities.

² ‘Nairobi: did the expressway forget about “people”’, African City Planner, 8 November 2022 <<https://africancityplanner.com/nairobi-did-the-expressway-forget-about-people/>>.



Figure 1. A section of the Nairobi expressway running above Waiyaki Way, with *matatus* lining the road and improvised passenger pick-up points. In the background, to the right, is the Westlands area, with OneAfrica Place and PwC Towers prominent.

Eye’ – namely, a bird’s eye view that looks down onto the city. The ‘solar Eye’ visualizes the city as an already finished text, framing Nairobi as the famed ‘Green City in the Sun’, as its common moniker has it.

Figure 1 is attributed to Boniface Mwangi, who posted it on Twitter (now X) as a lamentation on the exclusionary attributes of the expressway. He accompanied the photograph with a text that stated: ‘Nairobi, upper deck for the bourgeoisie and lower deck for the proletariat. Footpaths are also non-existent.’³ The photograph provides a critical orientation of Nairobi, with the expressway cutting diagonally from the east (at the photograph’s right) to the west (on the left). To the east is the central business district (CBD), where Nairobi’s administrative and commercial hubs are located; to the west, also captured in the image, is Westlands, which is an extension of Nairobi’s commercial hub and also offers residential options within areas termed the ‘leafy suburbs’. At the foot of the expressway is Waiyaki Way. Whereas Waiyaki Way extends into Nairobi’s CBD, the expressway does not provide an alternative route since its conception and construction were meant to reduce the time motorists spend on the road heading to and from the airport.

³ Boniface Mwangi, ‘Nairobi, upper deck for the bourgeoisie and lower deck for the proletariat. Footpaths are also non-existent’, @bonifacemwangi, Twitter, 25 August 2022 <twitter.com/bonifacemwangi/status/1562744872779788292>.

The photograph and the tweet were meant to portray the class divisions that characterize Nairobi city and are signalled by the expressway. That Mwangi begins the post by invoking Nairobi foregrounds the palimpsestic attributes of the city as marked by the elevated highway, which privileges one class as it disenfranchises another. As the author suggests, the enchantment of the expressway should not occlude the complexities of the inequalities evident in Nairobi.

The author of the tweet, whom we read as the photographer, must have been standing at the top of a commercial building in Westlands. The panoramic view of Westlands and its surroundings, as captured in the image, indexes the arguments of Michel de Certeau (2011), who argues that to be lifted off the ground is to be taken 'out of the city's grasp'. The panoramic view transforms the city into a 'text that lies before one's eyes. It allows one to read it, to be a solar Eye, looking down like a god' (*ibid.*: 92). Indeed, reading the 'text' (image) of the city before us foregrounds its splendour, characterized by the presence of the high-rise buildings that appear to the right of the image. To be a 'god' looking at Westlands positions one in a place where one easily notices the grand buildings and pleasant structures that occupy the place.

However, on closer inspection one notices the finer and more unpleasant details of the city captured in the image. Does this then speak to the idea of the city as a place of contradictions? De Certeau echoes this sense of contradictions within the city by contrasting the majesty of the perceptions that arise from the 'solar Eye' when he wonders, 'Must one finally fall back into the *dark space* where crowds move back and forth, crowds that though visible from on high, are themselves unable to see down below? An Icarian fall' (de Certeau 2011: 93). In answering this question, I argue that the city is palimpsestic. The position one occupies dictates what one experiences. From above, one can see below and make a text of what one sees, like a god. From below, the dark space, one's vision is much more circumscribed; one does not occupy a position of privilege. Applying de Certeau's and my argument on the city to the image being read, one sees that the splendour of the city is evident through the expressway and the mirrored buildings. The scale of these structures obscures those who walk in the city because they occupy positions of less privilege. These biased scales in the image create what I would call barriers of perception, and these participate in creating urban perceptions that favour products of modernization at the expense of the ruins left in its wake.

A proper walk in the city, as seen in this image, occurs when we take the 'Icarian fall' into the 'dark spaces' where the palimpsestic histories of Nairobi become evident. To walk in the city is thus to experience the city and its sensibilities in their totality. Taking the Icarian fall transforms the walker into the 'solar Eye'. A reading of the image attests to a deeper comprehension that occurs when we first descend from the modernist impressions of the expressway and walk through the history of Nairobi.

Nairobi is a city that is built along colonially imposed and inherited racial lines. This history stems from the city's colonial legacy: British settlers occupied the greener areas of Nairobi, largely the western parts of the city, or the 'leafy suburbs'; South Asians, who had worked on the railway line from Mombasa to Uganda, lived in the eastern parts of the city, where they also established their businesses; and Africans, or 'natives' as they were called, precariously lived in 'illegal and informal settlements' wherever they could, since the city was not meant for them (Charton-Bigot and Rodriguez-Torres 2010: ix). After independence, the areas reserved for the

colonialists were inhabited by wealthy blacks while South Asians retained their areas of habitation. The racial reorganization of the city did not erase the racial imprint embossed by the colonial order.

With this context in mind, I now turn to the dark spaces captured in the image. The dark spaces are represented by Waiyaki Way and those who use it: the pedestrians and the yellow buses below the elevated highway. The yellow buses – *matatus*⁴ – are the public means of transport in the city and belong to cooperatives (called savings and credit cooperatives or SACCOs). The drivers of these buses are employees of these cooperatives. Looking at the two roads in the image, it is evident that the expressway is properly maintained, with proper lighting and clearly marked lanes, and flowers planted in the middle. Waiyaki Way is a stark contrast to this. The buses do not have a bus stop where they can pick up and drop off passengers. Instead, they must squeeze themselves into the middle of the road beside an open drain, and pedestrians must risk their lives to catch a ride back home. Just as buses have had to improvise stops, pedestrians too must improvise walkways. Their improvisation is traceable across the road and along the open ditches in the dirt-filled spaces that were abandoned once the construction of the elevated highway was complete. Whereas users of the expressway enjoy the comforts of having the road all to themselves, the users of Waiyaki Way must share the little there is with each other. In the image, one can see motorcycles riding along Waiyaki Way without designated pathways, thus predisposing users to the risk of road accidents.

While the environments captured in the image try to portray a city that coexists with nature, the construction of the expressway attests to a different narrative. Along the road, one can see a solitary palm tree standing. Before the construction of the expressway, Waiyaki Way was lined with such trees and many others of different species. The trees provided a cool corridor between Nairobi CBD and the leafy suburbs of Westlands, but they were cut down to pave the way for the expressway. It took a public outcry for the president of the country to intervene and save one of Nairobi's oldest trees⁵ that was located on the road from being cut down, an ecological reading echoed by Maina and Cirolia (2023).

In concluding this section, I am drawn to the 'Green City in the Sun' as a name that refers to Nairobi's ecology and at the same time indexes its colonial history. The moniker identifies the city as a uniquely positioned urban space in which nature thrives alongside modernization. The 'Green City in the Sun' was a way of naming the city from the early twentieth century due to its blending with 'natural forests, savannah grasslands, and three rivers'.⁶ The Nairobi expressway, which is plugged into the city, challenges this idea of the city through the ecological damage linked to

⁴ Kenda Mutongi's *Matatu* provides a nuanced historical reading of the centrality of the *matatu* business in Nairobi and its influence in the daily lives of the urban population. She argues that '*matatus* are so much part of life in the city that it is no exaggeration to say that modern Nairobi could not have taken shape without the invention of these colourful contraptions. The two cannot be separated' (2017: 5).

⁵ 'Kenya's president saves century-old fig tree from highway', Reuters, 11 November 2020 <<https://www.cnn.com/2020/11/11/africa/kenya-president-china-fig-tree/index.html>>.

⁶ 'Restoring Nairobi to a Green City in the Sun', KIPPRA, 29 November 2022 <<https://kippra.or.ke/restoring-nairobi-to-a-green-city-in-the-sun/#:~:text=Nairobi%20was%20once%20renowned%20as,Mathare%20River%2C%20and%20Nairobi%20River>>.

its construction. As a marker of modernization, the expressway is not just an avenue for mobility but a new way through which material infrastructure influences identification.

Of webs and walls: the Nairobi expressway as a metaphor for urban habitation

In this section, I analyse the combination of word and image in a tweet. I consider digital infrastructures, exploring how the expressway, now referenced as a hashtag, ‘travels’ across social media and is deployed as a metaphor for social conditions in urban spaces.

Access to different forms of infrastructure in urban spaces informs the scope and ease of mobility. In many instances, those who inhabit the ‘dark spaces’ in urban settings à la de Certeau (#LowerDeckPeopleKE) do not have much access to the infrastructures that inform urban living, since these spaces are largely dependent on one’s social status. Access to the internet, as an infrastructure of urban habitation, is largely subject to economic status. For the occupants of the upper decks, social media is a window onto the world and in some instances an avenue for political engagement. For the occupants of the lower deck, it is a distraction from their daily labours, an unnecessary luxury. This assertion, however, is not an absolute, since quite often there are conflations between those who have access to social media, with the difference being how they use it. Tully and Ekdale (2014) read social media as sites that are not just used for leisure but for both social and utilitarian purposes as well. The use of hashtags creates some degree of filiation among Kenyans who drive online conversations by creating room for political exchange and alternative viewpoints on contemporary issues (*ibid.*: 70). Indeed, while bonds exist online, the ties may be weak, but they remain useful in shaping social thought and political action.

Arguments about Twitter (X) as both a mediative site and a site for political and critical discourse are echoed in the tweet by Ancent Kituku (Figure 2), which offers a view into the lives of the poor of the city, displaced in the wake of the Nairobi expressway. The tweet embeds within it two hashtags that form part of an online political discourse and critical thinking on governance and nation building brought about by the construction of the expressway. Referencing an apparent class divide in the city, the author uses #UpperDeckPeopleKE and #LowerDeckPeopleKE to illuminate the differences between poor and rich. Further still, the tweet is reminiscent of de Certeau’s solar Eye, which offers a glimpse into the dynamics of urban habitation from an elevated distance. From his vantage point, the author, who inhabits the upper deck, narrates what is happening to the poor in the ‘dark spaces’ and leaves critical interpretation to his audience. The author’s engagement with the textual and visual composition of the tweet confers agency on the disenfranchised whose plight would otherwise remain unknown had he not weaved his narrative using the two hashtags. While the bonds between him and the victims of demolition are undeniably inexistent and weak, the hashtags remain useful in shaping critical thought and political action.

The textual composition of the tweet orients the readers’ perceptions of inequalities and class differences across the city. The visual composition, on the other hand, deconstructs this relationship by suggesting fluidity of class and gender constructs. This tweet points to two issues: access to and mediation in social media. With respect to access to social media, it is evident that those who occupy the lower



Ancent Kituku, MD, PhD, FCPATH-ECSA @Kituku2 · May 9, 2020 ...

I picked this pic from social media.

A classic case of the huge class divide.

The [#UpperDeckPeopleKE](#) class playing golf. The [#LowerDeckPeopleKE](#) pondering where to go after their houses were demolished.

[#SaturdayThoughts](#)



Figure 2. Seeing and siting inequality: on one side, golfers leisurely stroll through manicured lawns; on the other, displaced families anxiously wait beside jerrycans and rubble, uncertain of where to go next.

deck do not have the luxury of accessing social media and posting about their lives since their houses have been demolished, as indicated in the narrative. This leads to the idea of mediation by the author. The mediator signs off his tweet with the hashtag [#SaturdayThoughts](#), implying that, at the weekend, he has the time to ponder about something and on this day the 'huge class divide' that marks the city was part of his thoughts. While thinking, in such circumstances, may be seen as an act of leisure comparable to the playing of golf by the upper deck people, the author uses his access to social media to amplify the struggles of those on the lower deck, thus becoming a mediator between rich and poor. The narrative also reveals that there are others involved in the act of mediation. The author points out that he 'picked' the image from social media, meaning that someone else had uploaded it, even though we do not get to read what accompanied their post.

The textual composition of the tweet also gestures towards notions of labour, as seen in the following words: 'playing', 'thoughts', 'demolished'. The narrative reveals who does the playing (the upper deck golfers) and who does the thinking (the author of the tweet) but leaves the identity of those who did the demolishing to the speculation of the audience. While the demolition of the houses could have been done by those who belong to the lower deck, the orders certainly came from one who belongs to the upper deck (the authorities). The fact that the playful or contemplative labour of the upper deck is made visible implies that theirs is a pleasurable venture and should be admired, hence the need for visibility. The labour of the lower deck, on

the other hand, is presumably an eyesore and thus its constant erasure or marginalization.

The tenses used in the textual narrative also speak to the divisions between the upper deck people and the lower deck people. 'Playing' is used in the present continuous form, meaning that those involved will continue in their leisure, whereas 'demolished' is used in the past tense, suggesting that there is nothing else left for the poor to salvage; their fate, in a sense, has been determined. With the framing of the tenses in mind, I turn to the visual narrative and focus on how it reveals the divide between rich and poor and how this affects their aspirations. The ensuing visual reading traces the contradictions of urban development, which simultaneously projects a glorious future yet is still haunted by the challenges of development. Smith argues that the futuristic promise of urban development is 'simultaneously close at hand and impossibly far off' (Smith 2017: 31). The daily experiences of Nairobi residents 'do not match up with the panoramas and new beginnings envisioned by Vision 2030' (*ibid.*: 38) but are instead imbricated in an 'ambivalence of what regeneration might mean', considering the simultaneous possibilities of better living conditions and an improved economy, and the anxieties of 'what will happen at their expense' (*ibid.*: 31). This nuanced reading of the complexities attendant on urbanization invokes the question that is critical to the visual reading that follows.

A cursory glance at this image reveals two things. One, the golfers and the labourers occupy the same space in the image. Two, it is only on consideration of the framing and angles of the image that the differences emerge. The wealthy, represented by the golfers, occupy an open and expansive space while the poor appear crumpled beneath the picture. A wall definitively separates the two groups. Engaging in a leisure activity, the rich appear to be walking towards a horizon, which implies that their aspirations are endless. This contrasts with the depiction of the poor, who, both literally and figuratively, have their backs against the wall and have limited space for mobility. The portrayal of the lower class with their backs against the wall reflects Smith's (2017) reading of the anxieties attendant on urbanization. This anxiety is evident in their faces after the demolition of their houses to make way for development.⁷ The scale and the angular representations in the image emerge as metaphors for the urban condition. The upper class seem to have unlimited access to urban spaces while the lower class have limited and restricted access. Access for the upper class is a matter of preference (what they want), while for the lower class it is a matter of necessity (what they can make do with). Making do in this instance resonates with Thieme *et al.*'s (2021) assertions about hustling culture as an antidote to capitalism. Like the photographer, who inadvertently (or not) decides how much space the upper class and the lower class get within the frame, social structures make room for the wealthy while the poor *have to* squeeze themselves in.

Thieme *et al.*'s (2021) conception of hustling as a need to assert agency in the midst of capitalism could also be stretched and read as a desire motivated by the need to navigate and cope with gender constraints. Hustling is a condition that gestures towards the transgression of norms in the struggle to assert agency. As Thieme *et al.*

⁷ In an editorial, Wangui Kimari and Constance Cap discuss the human cost of constructing the Nairobi expressway, which led to the forceful eviction of about 40,000 city dwellers and the demolition of their dwellings (Kimari and Cap *n.d.*).

put it, hustling is ‘courageously life affirming in the face of racial capitalism’ (*ibid.*: 9). Considering this, the image we read reveals these transgressions in the struggle to assert agency when we locate the woman who stands alongside the men. The men are seen standing on the left-hand side while the women and children stand on the right, with an invisible wall separating them. An incongruence or transgression appears as one woman is seen standing together with the men. On the side of the women are jerrycans, which are used to ferry and store water, while on the side of the men are demolished iron sheet structures, which in informal urban settings are used to construct houses and in some instances shops and hotels. The woman standing together with the men represents a certain fluidity in the gender barriers that exist within society and the ease with which they are crossed in the desire to navigate gender constraints. Here, then, I posit that hustling and the image of the woman alongside the men are ‘courageously life affirming’ in a context of inherent gender divisions. The caddie accompanying the golfers is a representation of the transgression embedded in hustling as well. The golfers appear to be walking *together* whereas the caddie is not part of the group. In this instance, he is a labourer for, rather than a partaker in, the leisure activity. The distance between the caddie and the golfers speaks of an invisible wall that exists between the two classes and a suggestion that, despite being closer to the golfers, he *belongs* with the lower class on the other side of the wall. Like the woman, the caddie also seems to have crossed an invisible class wall.

Inasmuch as the arguments about metaphorical representations of the Nairobi expressway have demonstrated the divisions that exist between rich and poor, sometimes the lines dividing them are blurry and can be crossed. The textual account in the tweet speaks of a crossing between these divisions when we consider the author’s image and the image of the poor. It is evident that – unlike the rich in the middle of the picture who have their backs turned against both the poor and the readers of the image – both the author, as pictured in the profile picture, and the poor face the readers. Even though power structures are bent on making the poor invisible, the fact that the poor face the readers makes them more visible compared with the rich, who are facing away. The motive of the textual narrative is to make the poor visible, and this finds its grounding when both the ‘subject’ and the ‘object’ face their audience. In a situation where the verdict against the poor seems to have been rendered with finality (their houses, after all, have already been demolished), the author reopens the issue, invoking the mediative nature of social media and at the same time granting agency again to the disenfranchised.

The structuring of the textual account also resembles the physical wall evident in the visual account. The wall is read as a metaphor for the different levels of segregation associated with urban dwelling. At the same time, there is a resemblance between it and the way in which the textual account is rendered. The author could have rendered his account in prose format but, for maximum effect, he constructs it like a physical wall so that each line builds on and communicates a specific idea to his readers, just like a poem would. The third line in the textual composition puts two opposing sides on the same plane: the #UpperDeckPeopleKE and the #LowerDeckPeopleKE. Every effort has been made to highlight in the image the

differences between them, but this verse puts them together. This verse, as I see it, is reminiscent of the ground on which both the rich and the poor walk or stand.

The physical structure of the wall is also meant to emphasize class differences and make them visible and tangible, but the textual structure of the post, even though it bears some similarity to the wall, does the opposite. It crosses the divide between poor and rich, places them on the same level, and communicates the plight of the poor. The author – who, insofar as he too has time for weekend leisure, occupies the same space as the wealthy – transgresses an unspoken pact of ‘turning his back on’ the poor and erects a poetic wall that highlights the struggles of the lower deck people. We may read the author, then, as analogous to the woman standing among the men, or the caddie among the golfers: that is, as someone who crosses gender, class and infrastructural boundaries. Even though the wall creates borders between both groups, poetry crosses them and does not celebrate the violence being meted out against the poor but instead protests against them.

Forms of promise: protesting promise in ‘Maua ya Expressway’

This penultimate section turns to a third media form to further explore the different meanings and sentiments materialized by the expressway. The media form is a satirical song, ‘Maua ya Expressway’,⁸ released online in 2022 by Terrence Creative. Terrence Creative is an improvisational band made up of three comedians who go by the stage names Terrence, Mammito and Awinja. The three satirize urban living on social media platforms. The song, inferring from the views garnered on YouTube, was a hit, having accumulated over half a million views, over 30,000 likes and over 3,000 comments. I continue my arguments on urban habitation by reading the Nairobi expressway as metaphorically represented in the song. The shift in media, from sight to sound, entails a shift in sensory modes, as the ear becomes much more central to our spatial understanding of the city. The metaphorical reading of the song is made possible by what I call the ‘sounds of Nairobi’ and forms of promise. The sounds, I argue, take what de Certeau called the Icarian fall into the dark depths of the city and reveal the finer textures that make up Nairobi city at the ground level, beyond and below the physical infrastructures that dominate its solar landscape. *Form*, as used in this section, considers both the physical form – as seen in the concreteness of the expressway – and the aesthetic form – where the interpretation of the lyrics of ‘Maua ya Expressway’ accounts for its poetic form.

Brian Larkin argues that technologies are always ‘metaphors as well as technical objects’ (Larkin 2018: 179). While technologies and infrastructures may be literal on the surface, they represent various social dynamics that are only evident when they are analysed critically. In this regard, Larkin argues that ‘infrastructures are material assemblages caught in political formations whose power in society derives from their technical functions. But they also operate aesthetically, and their aesthetic address constitutes a political action that is linked to, but differs from, their material operations’ (*ibid.*: 175). Larkin’s position on the aesthetics of material infrastructure is reminiscent of Kimari and Lesutis’s (2022) argument about the imbrications of urban

⁸ See ‘Maua ya Expressway’, from Calif Records, YouTube, 5 August 2022, <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sE8CGBR44js>>, accessed 16 June 2023.

infrastructure in geopolitical struggles. Indeed, while Kimari and Lesutis offer a reading that underscores the 'geopolitical anxieties between the US and China that continue and will continue to be territorialized in Kenya's reach for future infrastructure', I am drawn to their argument about how these forms of infrastructure are contested by 'local voices' (*ibid.*: 59) and 'continue to be subject to withering criticism from ordinary citizens, who question the viability of infrastructure-led development' (*ibid.*: 62).

The expressway's power comes from its technical functions, which regulate access often based on social status. In its materiality, the expressway cuts across Kenya's capital city and shapes the ways in which Nairobi's landscape is perceived both locally and internationally. The aesthetic function of the expressway is, however, rendered in the song 'Maua ya Expressway', which is a 'local voice' that embeds satire as a response to the failed promises of the expressway, questions the viability of such infrastructure and highlights the failures of the Kenyan government. The protest expressed in the song constitutes a form of political action through which the artists demand economic accountability. Whereas the infrastructural form of the expressway fulfils a (geo)political promise, it simultaneously transgresses a social promise. It is this transgression that invokes public criticism through artistic form in song. Both forms – material and aesthetic – engage in a *poesis* and *aisthesis*, whereby, as Larkin argues, *poesis* brings 'something into being in the world by creating a way of doing and making, and *aisthesis*, how it is those things produce modes of felt experience' (Larkin 2018: 176).

The aesthetic form of the song is a rendering of the cityscape in the wake of the Nairobi expressway. Poetically, and in terms of form, the song is composed in free verse. It does not adhere to the formal conventions of poetry with regard to being composed in stanzas. The song echoes Stephen Kern's argument about infrastructures as forms that 'contribute to our sense of being in time, feeling cut off from the flow of history, attached to the past, isolated in the present, or rushing toward a future' (cited in Larkin 2018: 176). While the physical form asserts its visual presence in Kenya's capital city and the government's rush towards the future, the song reflects on the isolation that emerges from this rush. It contributes to our sense of being in time by tying together the future and the present in its lyrics. The physical form will be evident for all to see in the decades to come, but the song calls attention to the present realities of living in Nairobi city. The artists in this case perform a twofold duty. The first is that they become both performers and chroniclers of their time. This duty is indicative of the arguments of p'Bitek, who asserts that it is artists who 'form the consciousness of their time' (p'Bitek 1986: 39) by responding intuitively to what is happening. The second duty performed by the artists echoes AbdouMaliq Simone's notion of people as infrastructure in urban spaces whereby, just as physical infrastructures provide for access and movement within urban spaces, people do the same as well. Simone argues that 'conjunctions of heterogenous activities, modes of production, and institutional forms constitute highly mobile and provisional possibilities for how people live and make things, how they use the urban environment and collaborate with one another' (Simone 2004: 410).

In constructing the consciousness of their time, the artists provide a framework for comprehending Nairobi city. The song is not just a representation of the Nairobi expressway but a collaborative and mediative effort between the artists, as those who

have an audience and offer a public voice of criticism, and those who do not. The artists voice the complaints of the marginalized lower deck people who have been excluded from the promise of the expressway both physically and financially in that they must contend with an infrastructure built using public resources, yet it privileges only the well-to-do few.

The first stanza of the song is a testament to this mediative effort of trying to petition the government to lower the cost of living. In filming the song's performance, the artists are positioned below the expressway, hence holding a similar position to those they speak for, both literally and metaphorically. Having the expressway above them accentuates the song's argument as a petition to the government since it is those who occupy positions of privilege who have access to the road. The artists see those who use the expressway as gods (as users are predominantly affluent and the political elites), and, by positioning themselves below them, they make the act of petitioning more evident.

The artists sing:

Kiswahili

Kausha, Kausha
Bei ya Ugali
Kaushaa, Kaushaa
Bei ya mafuta
Kausha, Kausha
Siasa mbaya
Kaushaa, Kaushaa
Ubinafsi
Kaushaa, Kaushaa
Kunyonga

Translation⁹

Dry up, dry up
The cost of maize flour
Dry up, dry up
The cost of oil
Dry up, dry up
Bad politics
Dry up, dry up
Selfishness
Dry up, dry up
Masturbation

This stanza is a reference to the flowers along the expressway that have dried up. The potted flowers were placed around the pillars that hold up the expressway in a bid to beautify the structure (Ngenoh 2022), and the artists take them to be representations of Kenyan society. Symbolically, the flowers represent poor Kenyans who hold up the wealthier ones despite their struggles. The flowers also represent a Kenyan society that has been riddled by the rising costs of basic commodities such as maize flour and cooking oil, a decay of the moral fabric, and susceptibility to retrogressive political ideologies and selfishness. It is these social conditions that the artists are petitioning for an end to and from which they may seek temporary relief, just as lower deck men who have been unable to establish families might hide behind the expressway support pillars to masturbate. 'Kausha', as expressed in this stanza, is a petition to an unknown addressee to expedite the easing of the burdens poor Kenyans are facing; inasmuch as the artists do not expressly state to whom the petitions are addressed, one can deduce that they are addressing the leaders of society. Their strategic positioning below the expressway indicates this, since it is an infrastructure favoured by the leaders and as such their positioning signals their proximity to power.

⁹ All translations, unless specified otherwise, are my own.

The second stanza departs from the pattern set in the first. Whereas in the first stanza the petitions were addressed to the local authorities, in the second the artists direct them to God.

Kiswahili

Bwana naomba
Unikumbuke
Nimekaukiwa kabisa
Sina pesa
Sina mpenzi
Sina gari wala fomu, nimekauka
Amekauka kama maua ya expressway

Translation

Lord, I pray
That you may remember me
I am completely broke
I have no money
I have no lover
I have neither a car nor any plans
I am as dry as the expressway flowers

The invocation of, and to, God is evident when the artists begin the verse with '*Bwana naomba*', which hints at the stanza being a supplication of sorts. The second stanza focuses on what I would call the affective conditions of the performers. These are the problems the performers, and those they represent, face every day. This is unlike the first stanza, which focused on the exteriorities, petitioning an unknown addressee to lower the cost of living. The performers' focus on their interiorities in the stanza is evident in the repeated use of the pronouns '*Zangu*' and '*wangu*' elsewhere in the song, both meaning 'mine', subsequently taking a self-reflexive turn in their pleas. The problems the performers face include conflicts with their employers, having enemies, debts and even relationship issues. It is these that they are petitioning God to help dry up.

A second contrast between the first and second stanzas is also evident when we consider to whom the supplications are being made. In their performance, the artists seem to suggest that the problems facing Kenya (the exteriorities) are to be solved by the leadership of the country, who are not worthy of being mentioned. The problems facing the performers, on the other hand (the interiorities), can be solved only by God, and it is for this reason that they directly call on his intervention.

Here, I turn to de Certeau's concepts of the solar Eye and the Icarian fall to discuss those who are petitioned in the song: government leaders and God. The solar Eye implies that the view is omniscient, that the seen and felt experiences of those walking in the city are within the scope of those who occupy privileged positions. However much this could be the case, I argue that the omniscient eye is limited in its perception of the ground level of the city. The omniscient eye perceives that which is larger in scale, since this is what is privileged in its sight. The same is true of government leaders, who, as Larkin (2018) argues, engage in building grand infrastructure projects as a way of making and fulfilling a political promise to the citizenry. Grand infrastructure is privileged in the sight of the political elite since it signals the achievements and progress of administrations and at the same time entrenches discrimination, just as the Nairobi expressway does. It is in the Icarian fall that the affective experiences of the city are made manifest. Pedestrians experience the frustrations and discriminations of urban living and are in many instances rendered voiceless, hence the mediative efforts by artists to create an invisible infrastructure that connects the privileged and the disregarded. This effort points us,

then, to Simone's (2004) argument about the collaborative networks that exist in urban environments when people act as infrastructure.

'Maua ya Expressway' is a petition for the stabilization of the Kenyan economy and a re-establishment of the moral fabric. The symbolic functions of the dried-up flowers are twofold. First, they inspire protest against social and economic conditions that are going backwards; and second, they offer motivations for a desirable future. This assertion is evident in the verses below by the female artists, in which they 'pray' that they may have better prospects in their marriages and relationships.

Kiswahili

Ndoa yangu?
Isikauke kama maua ya expressway
Maisha bora?
Isikauke kama maua ya expressway
Mapenzi tamu tamu?
Isikauke kama maua ya expressway
Wasichana warembo?
Wasikauke kama maua ya expressway

Translation

My marriage?
May it not dry up like the expressway flowers
A good life?
May it not dry up like the expressway flowers
A sweet love life?
May it not dry up like the expressway flowers
Beautiful women?
May they not dry up like the expressway
flowers

The verses paint a family-oriented picture in which the artists intersect the material and the affective. The artists use the flowers to reflect on their marriages and love lives. While these verses paint a rosy picture of the future, the preceding verses speak of the moral degradation prevalent in the city. In these verses, the artists sing '*Wababa wangu/Wasikauke kama maua ya expressway*'. '*Wababa*' in the literal sense would mean 'fathers', but its colloquialization in this verse, which is also a reflection of urban language, means elderly and wealthy men who engage in extramarital affairs with young women. These verses suggest that, while we celebrate the hope of love, we are also confronted with the challenges of infidelity. The same is true of the expressway, in that, while we celebrate the construction of a magnificent road, we are confronted with the challenges of exclusionary practices enforced by it. That the material inspires the affective is testament to the artist's creativity and the extent to which taking the Icarian fall not only enhances an embodiment of space but also reveals the fabric that holds it together as well.

It is also ironic that the expressway, which was meant to spruce up the image of the city, is a metaphor for the problems faced by the 'walkers' of the city. The artists pull back the veil of glamour that may have been drawn by the expressway and remind citizens of the issues facing the country, while also reflecting on their own problems. In doing this, the artists portray the symptomatic effects of plug-in urbanism à la Guma *et al.* (2023). The role the song plays in this instance is similar to the role that 'zooming in' plays in visual analyses. 'Zooming in' transforms the city into a text and makes urban sensibilities visible to the viewer. The viewer, like de Certeau's walker, creates and knows the cityscapes. The artists, in this reading, are the walkers who navigate the layers of Nairobi, by taking an Icarian fall and embracing the grasp of the city. They participate in ensuring that the grasp of Nairobi is felt by those who may never walk it. The image, and the scale of the objects within it, may

blur some items out, but not so the song. It engages the expressway not as an object of admiration but as a source of anguish.

My reading of Nairobi in this article has reflected two contrasting perceptions of the city among those who inhabit it.

Conclusion

Scholarship on East African urbanisms has largely been driven by a focus on the informal and the invisible, and, of late, increasingly on their entanglement with the materialities of cities (Fontein and Smith 2023). What this article has done is to bring a synthesized reading of different media using literary methods to conceptualize urban spaces. The literary methods adopted have been demonstrated by reading an image, a tweet and a satirical song, critically analysing how they engage with urban experiences in the context of the Nairobi expressway. What this literary approach has demonstrated is a reckoning with the histories of urban spaces and the politics that shape their construction and sustenance. The literary approach has provided a nuanced reading of urban spaces beyond the continuing prevalence of older material, political, and political economy studies by evoking ecological readings, gender readings and class distinctions. At the heart of the literary approach is the affective, which is suitably articulated in forms of literary expression that simultaneously index urban materialities and the felt experience of those living in urban spaces. This literary approach does not discredit studies of materiality but engages them in the quest to understand the evolution and perception of urban spaces.

The deployment of a literary approach in this article provides a nuanced view of urban scholarship and builds on older literary frameworks to challenge current and emerging approaches in urban scholarship. As demonstrated in this article, the Icarian fall is not entirely a fall from glory where all is lost, as Greek mythology and de Certeau suggest. Within the frameworks of literary methods, it is a fall into urban perception through which urban sensibilities come undone. The meanings of urban spaces, which are always under construction, are grasped through readings within this framework.

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