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Politics of Informality and Anti-Urban Discourse: Meja Mwangi's Projection of Postcolonial Nairobi in *Going Down River Road*

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Abstract

This article examines how Meja Mwangi's *Going Down River Road* portrays informality as a political mechanism in which postcolonial elites in Nairobi reasserted colonial logics to control urban citizenship, produce systematic economic precarity, regulate urban belonging, and sustain exclusion and marginalisation. For many Africans, the city was envisioned as an emblem of opportunity and modernity. It was within these urban discourses that grievances against colonial rule were articulated. However, the emergent postcolonial African city has proven difficult to distinguish from its colonial counterpart. Elites who came to power after colonisation continued to imagine urban spaces through colonial logics and frameworks. Employing Achille Mbembe's concept of "necropolitics", this paper argues that the postcolonial state regulates urban informality not simply as a response to socioeconomic pressures but as a strategic means of controlling urban citizenship by determining who has the right to live, work, and exist in the city. By criminalising informal labour, housing, and migration, postcolonial authorities perpetuate what Mbembe regards as the politics of life and death, whereby some groups are granted full access to urban life. In contrast, others are left to fend for themselves. In this regard, Mwangi depicts the lived experiences of marginalised urbanites in Nairobi from a 'necropolitical' perspective, framing their lived urban experience as "a form of death-in-life", particularly when they forge alternative means of survival that deviate from the state's prescribed formalities. Centring on postcolonial insights, this paper employs qualitative methods, particularly close reading alongside textual and contextual analysis, to examine how Mwangi challenges the continuities between colonial and postcolonial regimes of control, hence underscoring the agency of the marginalised to capture the sense of inclusion. Generally, this article argues that the novel portrays informality as a political machinery of controlling urban citizenship, allowing accessibility while systematically reproducing exclusion and marginalisation in which inequality is controlled rather than resolved.

Keywords:
Informality, postcolonial Nairobi, anti-urbanism, necropolitics, agency.

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Introduction

Studies on the politics of informal settlements in postcolonial Africa reveal that "many African cities still bear the scars of colonialism" (Myers 2011, p. 28). Despite the expectations that independence would usher in social and economic inclusion for the African majority, especially within urban centres, postcolonial realities have often mirrored colonial politics of exclusions and marginalisation. For many Africans, the city was envisioned as an emblem of opportunity and modernity, and it was within these urban discourses that grievances against colonial rule were most widely articulated. However, the emergent postcolonial African city has, in many cases, proven difficult to distinguish from its colonial counterpart. Elites who came to power after colonisation often continued to perceive urban spaces through colonial logics and frameworks.

Theoretical Framework

The analysis is central to Mbembe's concept of necropolitics, which draws on Michael Foucault's idea of "biopower"[1]. This paper extends Mbembe's (2003) concept of necropolitics beyond the literal politics to explain the sovereign's expression of control, manifested in "its power and the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die" (pp. 11-14). This paper advances necropolitical discussion on the politics of killing to include practices of slow death, symbolic erasure, and social abandonment; the forms of governance through which the postcolonial Kenyan state determines who may fully access the city and who is condemned to precarious existence. With this focus, the analysis explores not only how states regulate life, but also how they authorise who has the right to live and who is deprived of that right. Through analysis, this paper explores how states use regulations that determine the boundaries of urban citizenship through spatial and economic control. In the context of postcolonial Nairobi, the concept of necropolitics guides in revealing how elites use urban planning, informal housing policies, and labour practices to produce what João Biehl (2005) treats as "zones of abandonment" (p.4) and socioeconomic exclusion, the mechanisms through which the state decides who may dwell, work, or die in the city. In Mwangi's *Going Down River Road,* these logics are embodied in the depiction of informal workers, including migrants, casual labourers, and vendors, whose lives are rendered precarious by both spatial marginalisation and economic neglect.

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[1] Foucault explains this concept as the way in which the power of the ancient sovereign rested on its control over its subjects through the dual process of the "right to take life or let live." In modern states, however, biopower is exercised through the imposition of regulations and control over individuals by creating mechanisms that either allow one to live or expose them to conditions that accelerate death. Foucault notes that the key difference between ancient sovereign power and modern state power lies in this shift: "the ancient right to take life or let live was replaced by a power to *foster* life or *disallow* it to the point of death". See also Michael Foucault in *The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1: An Introduction*, (1976)

Adding to Mbembe's insights is Mahmood Mamdani's theorisation of the postcolonial state as a "bifurcated state"—a dual system of governance in which urban areas were governed by civil law for citizens (typically settlers and elites). In contrast, rural areas were governed by customary law for subjects (Africans/tribes) (1996). This created two kinds of political identities. Firstly, the *citizen*, governed by a modern legal system, usually lives in urban settings. Secondly, the subject, governed by tradition and authority, is often confined to rural areas under indirect rule. In this way, urban citizenship was barely accessible to ordinary citizens, the ones Mandani refers to as *subjects*. Such division created precarious urban experiences for those not authorised by law as legitimate urban citizens. As for Kenya, for instance, Frank Furedi (1975) argues that the colonial regime's violent response to urban anti-colonial movements was starkly demonstrated "on 19 April 1953, the shanties in the Mathari Valley area, seen as a key area of support for the Mau Mau rebellion, were destroyed, making 7,000 people homeless" (p. 285). Subsequent demolitions in 1954 further displaced an additional 24,000 Kikuyu, Embu, and Meru people (Klopp 2008, p. 297). These demolitions, rather than ending with independence, were adopted into the postcolonial political landscape. What happened after independence, and what did Jomo Kenyatta's regime do? Here, Mamdani contends that this bifurcation practice was undone in the postcolonial era, and postcolonial elites gained access to the city's modern life while depriving the underprivileged urban population, especially in cities such as Nairobi. Urban migrants in postcolonial Nairobi remained "subjects" rather than full "citizens", governed not by rights but by exclusionary policies, marginalisation, and informal regulation, particularly in informal settlements. When Kenya gained its independence, "the slum demolition remained part of the repertoire of politics" (Klopp 2008, p.297). The Kenyatta regime used it as a political weapon for keeping city migrants in check, hence intensifying the social and economic gap between the underprivileged and the elites. With this theoretical perspective, this article considers the depiction of the politics of informality in Going Down River Road as a dual process: firstly, as tools for controlling urban citizenship, and as a strategy for socio-economic agency.

Whereas Mbembe and Mamdani's theoretical insights help us read state-driven exclusion and control, AbdouMaliq Simone's (2004) concept of "people as infrastructure" (p. 407) offers a useful counterpoint to state-regulated urban planning by highlighting how marginalised populations engage the city through improvised networks, practices, and relations that challenge formal structures and propose alternative pathways for socio-economic transformation. In *Going Down River Road,* the characters' informal labour networks, affective solidarities, and everyday hustles subvert the idealised and collective imagination of the city as a space accessible only to salaried individuals. Instead, urban survival becomes a process of continual negotiation, where individuals carve out spaces of belonging through alternative economies, mobility, and improvisation. This form of urban engagement exemplifies Simone's idea that African urban life is held together not only by official institutions but also by fluid, unpredictable, and embodied practices of social reproduction. Through the depiction of characters' struggle and negotiation with urban life, this paper explores how Mwangi's narrative "emphasises economic collaboration among residents seemingly marginalised from and immiserated by urban life" (Simone 2004, p. 407). Therefore, this paper underscores the agency of the marginalised population in early postcolonial Nairobi in their quest for policy reform, capturing the sense of inclusion and visibility.

Writing Postcolonial Nairobi as a City Haunted by its Colonial Past

Going Down River Road is Meja Mwangi's powerful urban narrative that explores what Sarah Smiley (2013) considers "the pitfalls of urban life" (p. 215) in postcolonial Nairobi, Kenya. It centres on Ben Wachira, a disillusioned young man, and his friend Ocholla, both of whom struggle to navigate life in a socially and economically stratified city. Ben's struggle for survival deepens after he is dismissed from the Pan African Insurance Company (Mwangi 1976, p. 15), revealing that he had previously been discharged from military service for his involvement in a bank robbery. As Ben realises that "it would be impossible to get a job in civil services" (ibid.), he joins a group of casual labourers employed by Patel and Chakur Contractors, working on construction sites such as the Development House and, later, the Sunshine Tourist Hotel in Nairobi. However, in this paper, the reading of Ben does not intend to either romanticise his choice or celebrate his criminality, rather it seeks to examine the representation of Ben alongside other characters as products of a broken postcolonial promise revealed through their experience of the city. Ben moves in with his girlfriend Wini; an ex-prostitute who now works as a secretary at Messers and Jones Company (p. 126) and her son, Baby. The three live in a single rented room in a dilapidated building on Grogan Road, marked by poor infrastructure and overcrowding. However, Wini eventually abandons both Ben and her son as she runs away with her boss, Mr Caldwell. Left unable to pay rent, Ben is forced to move out of the rented room and seek shelter with Ocholla in a makeshift residence in the Nairobi Valley, along River Road.

Through the intertwined struggles of Ben, Ocholla, Wini, and Baby, the narrative critiques the Kenyatta regime of the 1970s, which deliberately politicised urban settlement as a tool for controlling and determining who is a *citizen* and a *subject*. In the words of Ayo Kehinde (2007), *Going Down River Road* serves as a powerful commentary on "the plight of the masses in neocolonial societies"(p. 229), revealing the pain, despair, and frustration experienced by the urban underclass as they attempt to survive the harsh realities of postcolonial city life. Framing, *Going Down River Road* through a necropolitical lens, Nairobi city is depicted as a space whose forms of governance produce boundaries and zones of abandonment, thereby classifying its dwellers according to their categories and status (Mbembe 2003, pp. 25-26). The underprivileged are confined to a zone where life is rendered disposable through systemic neglect, infrastructural abandonment, and economic exclusion; the same tactic colonialists used to control urban citizenship. The narrative becomes more than a reflection on poverty, especially for the urban poor, whose survival in the city is a representation of state violence exercised through force and by normalisation of urban spatial zones where some lives are protected while others are left to decline.

In the narrative, Mwangi reveals that the colonial historical legacies of Nairobi as a settler city were reflected in the early postcolonial context of Kenya, where the postcolonial regime inherited the colonial urban policies for controlling urban migration, thereby keeping Nairobi resembling its colonial past. Within this reality, Mamdani's notion of the recreation of a bifurcated state in postcolonial Africa holds meaning. For him, "although the bifurcated state created with colonialism was deracialized after independence, it was not democratised, [in so many ways the attempt for self-rule] reproduced a part of that legacy, thereby creating its own variety of despotism" (1996, p.30). David Yenjela (2017), advances this discussion by observing that "*Going Down River Road* engages with the slum demolition of 1970s during Jomo Kenyatta's regime [whereby through] demolition of the informal settlements, the Kenyatta regime was trying to [maintain the colonial urban image of Nairobi] acceptable to the West, but at the expense of the underprivileged urbanites" (p.158). This paper extends Yenjela's argument by interpreting these demolitions and all forms of anti-urbanism as necropolitical acts where the sovereignty "has power and the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die" (Mbembe 2003, p.11). The analysis of *Going Down River Road* in this paper interprets all acts of marginalisation as forms of social, political, and psychological death. More importantly, this paper understands all government practices that intentionally lead to insignificance and the unrecognition of certain groups as forms of social death. Thus, these forms of death are either imposed slowly, via systematic poverty, eviction, illness or abruptly, via enforced displacement and state sanctions. For the case of *Going Down River Road,* these individuals are exposed to both slow death and being deprived of access to basic social services, hence rendering them in a health-threatening condition. Abrupt death is observed through physical and psychological distress manifested through state violence such as demolition, evictions and burning their makeshift homes to ashes. As Kinuthia Macharia (1992) notes, this urban hostility reflects the desire of "Kenyan leaders to prove that they could maintain law and order" (p.228), even in the absence of colonial masters.

Mwangi uses the labour trope to expose how the politics of exclusion structure Nairobi's postcolonial economy. In the narrative, the urban poor and underpaid are trapped at the margins of the city's economy, caught within a capitalist system they cannot compete in. Through the symbolic use of the Development House, the central site around which much of the plot revolves, and the proposed Sunshine Tourist Hotel, Mwangi critiques a city divided along lines of class, race, and wealth. This division results in an unequal urban experience, where the majority of the population, particularly the marginalised, remain excluded from the benefits of economic development. At the Development House construction site, Mwangi's description of job classifications reveals a stark social stratification that echoes the colonial mentality. The narrator says, "There were different job classifications on the site…Asians and a few Africans…did the specialised jobs. The labourers' class constituted the majority of people on the site. Ben and Ocholla belonged to this group" (p.13). This language not only reflects the racial and class divisions in the urban workforce but also signals the persistence of hierarchical labour structures that shape access to economic stability in the postcolonial city. In this regard, Nicholas Kamau Goro (2025, p. 5) interprets Mwangi's representation of labour as a "deferred dream", arguing that the postcolonial state, rather than fulfilling the promises of independence, reproduces disappointment through policies that systematically generate inequality. As Goro further observes, "Nairobi emerges not as a city of opportunity but as a space of deferred citizenship, where the young are present but unrecognised, visible but unacknowledged—a postcolonial urban landscape that reproduces colonial logics of exclusion under the guise of independence" (p. 7). Within this framework, underpaid labourers such as Ben and Ocholla are exposed to a precarious urban existence marked by exploitation, the absence of contracts, a lack of job security, and meagre wages that confine them to unstable survival strategies. The persistence of these labour conditions demonstrates how colonial hierarchies of work and value are carried into the postcolonial context, where African workers remain structurally marginalised within the very urban economy they sustain. Under such conditions, individuals such as Ben and Ocholla inhabit informal settlements and engage in informal employment not out of choice but as a consequence of governance failures that neglect the socio-economic needs of citizens.

The meagre wages earned by these casual workers, such as Ben and Ocholla, are insufficient to afford decent housing in Nairobi. For Ocholla, these low wages prevent him from renting a home, forcing him to settle in a slum in the Nairobi Valley. He admits to "having two wives" and several children in the village (p. 69), all of whom depend on his earnings. However, his wages are too low to support either his urban life or his family in the village. This economic strain leads Ocholla to abandon his family, only for them to later join him in the city (p. 209). The arrival of his family worsens his already precarious situation, illustrating the recurring nature of poverty in the urban context. In this context, Mwangi uses the term "development" ironically to highlight the disparity between the city's outward progress and the reality for its impoverished residents. While large-scale development projects like the Development House and the

Sunshine Tourist Hotel are symbols of modernisation, they also perpetuate inequality by reinforcing social and economic divisions. The narrative challenges the capitalist city's failure to provide equitable opportunities for all, demonstrating that for those on the margins of economic development, realising one's potential is nearly impossible. Through this lens, *Going Down River Road* underscores how, in a socially and economically stratified city, the underprivileged are not only excluded from economic progress but are also actively obstructed from achieving upward mobility.

In *Going Down River Road,* Mwangi employs the condition of urban housing, particularly the rented single room where Ben, Wini and Baby live. It is depicted as a symbolic representation of the broader experiences of those occupying the margins of Nairobi's urban economy. The shambolic dwelling where these characters reside reflects both material deprivation and structural precarity, shaping the lives of marginalised urban residents. Sharing a similar view, Jairus Omuteche argues that the housing conditions in which Wini, Baby, and Ocholla reside "evidence stagnation and neglect, and the failure of the postcolonial nation to move forward, reinvent itself and build a progressive society for its citizens" (2024, p. 245). Such conditions foreground the spatial inequalities embedded within the city, hence illustrating how urban residence becomes closely tied to social and economic abandonment, with the state playing a central role in shaping the conditions of its citizens. For example, Wini, despite working as a secretary for a private company in the city centre, can only afford to rent a single room on the city's periphery, which she shares with Ben and her son. The physical structure and conditions of this rented room reflect the larger reality of life on the urban fringe: crowded, inadequate, and marked by infrastructural neglect. All tenants in the building are forced to share basic facilities, such as the toilet and the shower, which are unsanitary and unsafe. The narrator describes the communal washroom as "dark, cold and stale-smelling as usual… slimy green fungus grew on the outer edges of the floor and spread some way up to the walls" (p.6). The sensory language here conveys dual messages of discomfort. It serves as a symbol that underscores the public health risks and environmental degradation that accompany poverty and spatial marginalisation in the postcolonial city.

When Wini disappears, Ben becomes unable to pay the rent, resulting in his eviction. This moment reveals how early postcolonial urban policies rendered the urban poor economically and socially vulnerable. Lacking access to land ownership or affordable housing, such individuals are not only victims of urban governance policies but also "subjects to the power of influential landlords" (Klopp 2008, p. 297), with little or no ability to contest exploitative rental practices. Mwangi dramatises this relationship through Ben's encounter with his landlord, who is referred to as "the big man" and is rumoured to be "standing for elections... parliamentary election" (p.180). His political influence makes him largely untouchable, and his tenants powerless. Ben is eventually evicted not for any breach of contract but because "the landlord wants to raise the rent again [and so Ben is] throw[n] out so that the new tenant pays more" (p. 179). In this context, housing becomes a mechanism of control through which elites assert their power and regulations to determine who may live in the city and who may not.

Informal Settlements and Economies as Productions of Social Neglect

Mwangi critiques a postcolonial Nairobi shaped by spatial injustice and capitalist accumulation, where the underpaid and working poor, like Ben and Ocholla, cannot compete for decent housing. Unable to afford planned dwellings, they are pushed into what Biehl regards as "zones of social abandonment" (2005, p. 4): the illegal or informal settlements that are simultaneously criminalised by the state to discourage rural-urban migration. The result is a cyclical pattern of exclusion, in which people experiencing poverty are denied access to the formal city yet are indispensable to its construction and maintenance.

The city council's demolition of informal hotel shacks "to make room for something more useful to the economy of the nation… without warning" (p. 180) and without offering any alternative sites for business relocation exemplifies the state's refusal to recognise and legitimise informal economies. Their removal of these local businesses symbolically suggests a sense of social neglect that renders the owners invisible and unrecognisable to the city's economy. The destruction of informal businesses, many of which are African-owned and serve the working class, illustrates how the post-independence state continues to marginalise small-scale economic actors. This systematic neglect has contributed to a class-based urban structure in which African entrepreneurs remain economically vulnerable because the government fails to recognise the informal sector as a legitimate and vital component of urban life. As Macharia (1992) notes, "since independence…the Kenya African National Union (KANU) Government has been remarkably slow to acknowledge the significance of those small-scale business activities" (p. 221). Reading Mwangi's narrative through this lens, one can argue that early postcolonial Nairobi reproduces colonial models of exclusion. The continued rejection of informal enterprise exposes the urban underclass to economic precarity, depriving them of access to services and protections enjoyed by those operating within formalised commercial enterprises.

Then, the language used to justify the demolitions is framed as acts of national development, which further reflects what Stuart Hall (1996) identifies as the rhetoric of "gentrification" (p. 55), whereby the urban poor are systematically displaced under the guise of progress. Projects such as "a new tourist hotel, a sky-scraper" (Mwangi 1976, p.219) are promoted as signs of modernisation, yet the benefits of such developments remain deeply unequal. The underlying logic of "regeneration, (re)investment, and renovation" conceals the question Hall poses: "who gains and who loses?" (1996, p. 56). In the world Mwangi portrays, the answer is clear. The narrator emphasises that those whose livelihoods were erased to make way for the tourist hotel will never reap its benefits; they are economically excluded from accessing the very spaces they help build: "they would never afford a cup of tea," and they "build offices they would never be allowed into once completed" (Mwangi 1976, p. 214). Through this critique, Mwangi draws a parallel between postcolonial Nairobi and its colonial past. Despite the political transition to independence, urban space continues to be organised in ways that prioritise elite economic interests while downgrading the majority of African inhabitants to the periphery, socially, economically, and spatially.

The demolition of informal businesses in Mwangi's *Going Down River Road* symbolises the systemic exclusion of the urban underclass from participating meaningfully in the city's economy, while simultaneously reinforcing the privileges of the middle and upper classes. As Klopp (2008) argues, slum demolitions in post-independence Nairobi carried dual political motives: first, they were used as tools of political patronage, wherein "politicians protected [slum dwellers] from demolition" in exchange for electoral support; and second, they served as mechanisms to "reward wealthy supporters with land or punish opponents" (p. 297). These conflicting dynamics are echoed in Mwangi's narrative, where the state justifies the destruction of informal spaces such as roadside hotels and kiosks by invoking the rhetoric of national development and modernisation, claiming the land is needed for the construction of a tourist hotel. Yet the eviction of informal economic actors, as Klopp notes, can also be read as part of a broader strategy by the postcolonial regime to regulate and control urban life.

In a different context, Yenjela (2017) interprets Mwangi's characters as "urban castaways," individuals who inhabit the city without being fully incorporated into its social or economic structures (2023, p. 8). From this perspective, the state implicitly delineates who belongs in the city and under what conditions of participation. Mwangi challenges this exclusionary urban logic by foregrounding the essential roles of informal entrepreneurs, such as shoeshine operators, food hawkers, roadside hotel operators, and mechanics. Yenjela reads the resilience of these characters amid urban precarity as the novelist's strategy to "envision reforms," suggesting that informal practices constitute alternative modes of survival and adaptation (*ibid.*). Thus, Mwangi's characters are not marginal figures but central to the functioning of urban life, particularly for the working poor. For instance, casual labourers at the Development House construction site depend heavily on shanty hotels such as Tree Bottom and Special for their daily meals, illustrating how informal economies sustain the city's everyday operations. The destruction of these establishments throws their already-precarious lives into further instability. Thus, such businesses are not just sites of survival; they are expressions of agency, creativity, and collective life-making, especially in places where survival requires effort, resilience, and strategic intelligence. Simone's concept of "people as infrastructure" provides a useful model for understanding that urban life in African cities is sustained not only by formal institutions but also by improvised networks, fluid practices, and shared vulnerability. Such attempts to survive are imposed by the marginalised in the face of the harsh realities of urban life. This is what Mwangi's narrative emphasises.

Ben's frustration intensifies when he remarks on the state's decision "to demolish three hotels [just] to build a single…tourist hotel" (p. 222). The irony is critical: the erasure of local, affordable food vendors in favour of elite developments not only eliminates vital services for labourers but also actively contributes to their hardship and hunger. It further exemplifies the state's structural violence. For these workers, the demolished hotels represent more than physical structures; they are lifelines, enabling daily survival within a hostile urban economy. Mwangi thus uses these acts of demolition to expose the contradictions in the postcolonial state's development discourse: projects designed to attract foreign capital and middle-class consumption come at the cost of displacing and further impoverishing those already on the margins. By portraying the dependence of urban labourers on informal service providers, *Going Down River Road* calls attention to the importance of integrating the informal sector into the urban economy rather than criminalising or displacing it. In doing so, Mwangi resists the exclusionary logic of postcolonial urban planning and reclaims the agency and dignity of Nairobi's working poor.

Drawing on the above scenario, Mwangi's Going Down River Road portrays early postcolonial Nairobi as a capitalist city that prioritises medium- and large-scale economic enterprises. The demolition of three local hotels to give room for the construction of a tourist hotel demonstrates the state's impatience with the informal sector. It also reveals what Macharia (1992) terms as the regime's negligence "of those in the lowest income", while "busy promoting a capitalistic mode of production" (p.229). The tourist hotel further suggests the regime's ambition to use foreign currency as a means to strengthen the national economy at the expense of underclass urbanites who are struggling to have space in the capitalist city. On this, the narrative is set against Kenyatta's regime for envisioning the city with a capitalist eye that could lead to the economic success of a few individuals, especially the middle and upper classes. The failure of the Kenyatta regime to promote those in lower-income groups is challenged by food hawkers, local hotel managers, shoeshine operators, and mechanics who continue to negotiate survival through informal businesses. In other words, the narrative challenges the nation's economic ideology, which has failed its people, but instead has embraced the minority group at the cost of the masses. This means that the regime has failed to define its people's socio-economic needs in relation to the nature and condition of African urban economies.

When Kenya attained independence in 1963, the governance of Nairobi was placed under the Nairobi City Council, whose mandate included overseeing urban planning, infrastructure development, public service provision, and housing regulation. However, the Council's failure to establish "a formal system of governance in informal settlements" (Prince Guma, 2016, p. 37) left large sections of the urban population, particularly those operating informal businesses and living in unplanned settlements, without legal recognition or access to essential services. As previously discussed, the politics of demolition in postcolonial Nairobi evoke the 1939 colonial Public Health Act, a legal instrument historically used to marginalise underprivileged urban populations under the guise of public health. Its continued application after independence reflects a troubling continuity between colonial and postcolonial governance, especially in the treatment of the urban poor.

This persistence of exclusion sparked critical responses from Kenya's literary scene, particularly in the early post-independence period. In his play *This Time Tomorrow*, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o gives voice to the urban underclass disillusioned by Jomo Kenyatta's regime. The demolition of the "Uhuru Market" shanties by the City Council, justified as a health measure, becomes a symbolic act of betrayal, reinforcing the suffering of citizens unable to compete in the increasingly capitalist urban economy. Characters like Njang'o and Wanjiro, much like Ben and Ocholla in Mwangi's *Going Down River Road*, embody the vulnerability of those displaced by state-sanctioned urban planning that privileges elite interests over collective welfare. In this context, Mwangi's narrative exposes the growing socio-economic tensions between the city's formal and informal sectors. When the narrator notes that the informal hotel workers are "hungry and angry" (p. 219), the phrase carries a layered meaning. They are "angry" because, despite their efforts to claim space and contribute to the urban economy, they remain invisible and unrecognised by the city's power structures. Simultaneously, they are "hungry" both literally, due to the loss of their means of sustenance, and metaphorically, as they are denied the right to economic survival in the formal city. The refusal by these hotel workers to vacate their demolished spaces despite police orders constitutes an act of resistance that underscores the need for policy reform. Their persistence signals Mwangi's appeal for a more inclusive urban framework; one that accommodates both formal and informal workers and acknowledges the central role of the underclass in the everyday functioning of Nairobi.

The negligence of the areas inhabited by those on the fringes intensifies the politics of division, thereby discouraging urban belonging for certain populations. The images of the stinking smell of "a heap of excrement" (p.64) along River Road demonstrate the mismanagement and negligence of the place. Again, this depiction recalls Mbembe's idea of "life-in-death," in which postcolonial African governance systems and policies have been blamed for determining who prospers and who is left to struggle, along with the associated risks of neglecting certain populations, particularly the underprivileged. The narrator says, "the place [where the likes of Ocholla, Baby, Wini and Ben live] is crowded with its usual mass of haunted hungry faces, poverty-hypnotised faces, hateful faces and the fragrant stink of unwashed bodies and burst sewers" (*ibid.*). This description underscores the city's overpopulation and its role in ushering in economic imbalance between rural and urban areas. The narrator continues to describe the place as "one place where there will be people left after doomsday. They have survived repeated police clean-ups" (*ibid.*). This depiction typifies the nature of postcolonial cities where everything in the postcolonial urban spaces is "overloading; [that is to say] overloading of public transport, overloading of the living accommodation, beginning with the lightly packed house. Everything leads to excess…sounds and noise…of car horns…of traders…of crowd surrounding quarrelling neighbours" (Mbembe 2001, p. 47). As everything keeps overloading, the state loses competence to deal with and control the situation; hence, a lack of proper public health management, as exemplified in the narrative. Situating the narrative in its context, those living along River Road, on the outskirts of the city, and in other undesirable places become vulnerable to urban insecurities, forced by their social and economic conditions to occupy such marginal zones. In other words, reading Nairobi through the lives of the underprivileged, such as Ben, Ocholla, Wini, and Baby, is like saying these characters live in what Mbembe regards as a death zone: a space limited and excluded from urban modernity, exposed to violence/brutality, and systematically denied access to the benefits of "promises of independence". Nairobi is far from being a space of emancipation, because it again recalls colonial tactics of exclusion where survival requires resilience and improvisation.

In challenging the colonial residential legacy and asserting the right to urban space, Mwangi's *Going Down River Road* portrays the defiance of the urban poor who resist the City Council's persistent campaign to demolish shanty dwellings along the Nairobi Valley. The narrator captures this resilience, stating that "there is something malignant about shanty huts. They go up in the smoke at dawn, spring to life again by twilight. One cannot just keep them down…char them as many times as you like. They mushroom back just as many times" (p. 204). This imagery underscores not only the physical resilience of the shanty dwellers but also their unbending will to reclaim space in a city that seeks to displace them. The repeated act of "remaking the broken homes" (*ibid.*) immediately after their destruction reveals the city as a site of refuge despite its hostility. It highlights the shanty dwellers' unwavering desire for recognition, inclusion, and belonging within the urban mainstream. Simone insists that there is a way in which the marginalised can be positively defined; instead of viewing them as a threat to urban life, "something else…might be happening" (2004: p. 407). These people might be understood as productive in the city's socio-economic and cultural relations. Thus, their rebellion challenges the postcolonial anti-urban ideology that continues to view informal dwellings and rural migrants as threats to urban order. These acts of reconstruction signal a refusal to accept invisibility and exclusion. In doing so, they reclaim space and visibility in a city that seeks to erase them. More importantly, they call for formal recognition of their presence through policies that could enable them to access city life more fully than they are experiencing.

Informality, Survival Strategies, and the Moral Flattening of Urban Life

In their attempt to confront urban predicaments and postcolonial disillusionment, the urban poor in *Going Down River Road* find that opportunities for social and economic advancement are profoundly limited within the rigidly stratified urban environment. In response to these conditions of hardship and marginalisation, urban inhabitants adopt alternative, often self-destructive, coping strategies to reconcile their failures, frustrations, and disappointments. For instance, when "the owners of food kiosks were banned" (p. 177) from selling what the state deemed "insanitary food," many of them turned to alcoholism as a means of dealing with their anger, hunger, and despair, the emotions directly stemming from the state's exclusionary urban policies. As the narrator observes, "at Karara Centre the atmosphere grew quietly hostile. Half of the regular patrons were vegetable hawkers and insanitary food kiosk managers. They were now idle and aggressive…hungry and very angry" (*ibid.*). Karara Centre thus emerges as an ambiguous space: at once a refuge and a site of social decay. It functions as a kind of release valve, bringing together individuals from the city's fringe, barmaids, prostitutes, robbers, casual workers, drunkards, and even some low-ranking civil servants. Though they come from different sectors, they are united by shared experiences of poverty, loneliness, social rejection, and the overarching weight of economic hardship. Yet this communal gathering does not lead to a collective political awakening; instead, it serves as an emotional escape from a system that offers no material remedy. In this condition, they are exposed to a kind of social death. When their sources of livelihood are destroyed, they become victims of urban precarity, unable to meet their basic needs and left to bear the burden of deepening social and economic frustration. Similarly, adopting a humanistic approach to the novel, Martha Flavian Ombati argues, "drinking alcohol seems to be a way of helping these casual workers not to think of the dehumanising working conditions" (2022, p. 1046). From this perspective, informality produces not only economic insecurity but also emotional flattening, a condition in which marginalised subjects struggle to imagine viable futures beyond immediate survival.

Ironically, while the state heavily regulates and demolishes informal food kiosks and settlements in the name of public health, it largely ignores or even tacitly permits the rampant spread of alcohol consumption in spaces like Karara Centre. This selective enforcement suggests a possible neo-colonial strategy: the toleration of alcoholism as a mechanism for keeping the underclass subdued and politically inactive. By encouraging escapism rather than engagement, the ruling elites avoid confronting the root causes of urban discontent. In this light, the city becomes an unsecured and decaying space, populated by those whose disillusionment has rendered them unable or unwilling to question their socio-political marginalisation. This political detachment is embodied most clearly in characters like Machore, whose occasional efforts to raise political awareness among his fellow labourers are either dismissed or ignored. His voice is silenced not by state repression but by the workers' own disillusionment and internalised sense of defeat. The narrator wonders how, in such a disappointing situation, none of the workers "takes Machore serious[ly]]" (p. 61), despite his efforts to awaken them politically. The narrative thus portrays a mass of urban poor who have grown so accustomed to struggle that they no longer imagine an alternative way out. Their inability to grasp or act upon Macherey's insight suggests a broader sense of political unconsciousness: an erosion of hope and a failure to recognise their own capacity to demand socio-economic change. While this portrayal may be interpreted as a critique of postcolonial governance and its alienating effects, it also opens the narrative to criticism. One might argue that Mwangi's depiction of the underclass as politically naive flattens the complexity of resistance and underestimates the resilience and potential agency of the urban poor. Nevertheless, the narrative captures the profound alienation that systemic marginalisation imposes, revealing how social conditions can erode not only material well-being but also the consciousness needed to demand political transformation.

In the course of sustaining living and challenging their situation in the city, Nairobi is portrayed as a site of moral corruption and value decadence as 'sugar-daddies' use their wealth to trap "sugar-babies" who are economically desperate. For instance, Wini abandons her lover (Ben) and son (Baby) in pursuit of a new way to survive, running away with her boss, Mr Caldwell (a white man). She could not afford to care for both Ben and Baby, as she "paid rent, bought food" (p. 14) and sometimes gave Ben money, who was constantly broke following his poorly paid wages at the Development House. On her way to explore life in another way and to bury her economic frustrations, Wini disappears and never comes back. In this context, Wini can be read as a character who is in search of both emotional and material securities; the things she realises that Ben cannot afford to provide. Her act of abandoning her son at a very tender age denotes the cruelty of the city. In this context, Baby is an emblem of the poor urban population, neglected and left to fend for themselves, with little assistance from the authorities.

This portrayal resonates with Mbembe's necropolitical perspective, which critiques how postcolonial African states create systematic conditions of abandonment and socio-economic neglect that force people experiencing poverty to seek survival on their own. Baby's abandonment by both parents exemplifies this neglect, rendering him vulnerable to the dangers of urban precariousness. Wini's individualistic attitude, as she chooses to abandon her little one for the sake of having a good life with a white man, can be read as a symbol for the new class of elites and rulers who have betrayed the masses for the sake of their personal gains. Wini's betrayal of her son resembles that of Mama Rukia, a character in Mtobwa's *Dar es Salaam Usiku* (translated: *Dar es Salaam by Night),* who abandons her little daughter Rukia only to escape parental responsibilities due to economic hardship. When life becomes unbearable, Mama Rukia runs away, leaving her five-year-old Rukia behind, and she never returns. With this portrayal, the image of the city becomes hostile to family life, creating family fractures and disintegration whose roots lie in economic precarity and the unpredictability of urban existence, particularly among marginalised populations.

Thus, *Going Down River Road* critiques the postcolonial Kenyan state's failure to break from the colonial legacy of exclusionary urban governance. In addition, by centring the lives of Nairobi's urban underclass, the narrative exposes how spatial and economic inequalities persist in post-independence Kenya under the guise of development. Mwangi's portrayal of demolition, eviction, and the informal economy reveals how the state uses capitalist urban planning policies as a form of political control, marginalising the subject, yet the most vital to the city's functioning. The novel further demonstrates how informality becomes a mechanism through which moral consciousness is flattened, as conditions of economic precarity constrain individuals' capacity to imagine viable futures beyond immediate survival. The narrative ultimately calls for an inclusive rethinking of urban citizenship—one that affirms the right of people with low incomes to the city and challenges the violence of both colonial and postcolonial necropolitics.

Conclusion

Mwangi's *Going Down River Road* offers an image of postcolonial Nairobi as a city built on contradiction: a space that promises modernity, opportunity, and progress, yet simultaneously denies these very ideals to the majority who inhabit its informal margins. However, the rebellion and resistance portrayed in the lives of the underprivileged reveal an alternative dimension through which their struggle can be understood as an assertion of agency. Their repeated reconstruction of informal dwellings becomes a symbolic act of reclaiming visibility and asserting citizenship in a space where the poor are otherwise rendered unwanted. The narrative, therefore, calls for a fundamental rethinking of urban policy, especially the politics surrounding informality and settlement. As Yenjela (2017) argues, the narrative challenges "the continuity of exclusionary colonial histories in post-independent Kenya" (p.160), revealing how postcolonial governance often mirrors the colonial state's spatial exclusions. The demolition of informal settlements is understood as a necropolitical act intended to prevent the marginalised from accessing the privileges of urban life. Yet the refusal of these communities to disappear brings to our attention a counter-politics of informality: one rooted in agency, improvisation, and a reimagining of urban belonging. Yet the refusal of shanty dwellers to vacate their informal homes functions as what Syned Mthatiwa and Emmanuel Ngwira (2019) identify as "a reminder of the attempt to normalise informality in African cities" (p. 78). Their resistance calls into question antagonism between the formal and informal sectors, suggesting that informality must be understood from the context of African historical urban dynamics.

The act of rebuilding destroyed homes reflects a reimagining of the African city; one that acknowledges and accommodates its historical, socio-economic, and political complexities. In doing so, the narrative suggests an alternative model of urbanisation, distinct from Western trajectories, and rooted in the realities of postcolonial African states. This reconstruction becomes a form of spatial narratives, one that insists African cities should be theorised on their own terms, responsive to their unique histories and struggles rather than confined to imported urban ideals. In writing about postcolonial African city dynamics, Mbembe and Nuttal (2004) propose for 'revisiting' the available philosophy of urban space that would contextualise and locate the African city in its socio-political environment in a way that "helps us to revise our readings of cities elsewhere" (p. 361). This idea emphasises the need to understand the nature of African urban dynamics and to contextualise them within their socioeconomic environment. In a different context, but holding a similar view, Fasssil Demissie (2007) argues for "the need to theorise about the postcolonial…African city" (p. 156) to study its forms of urbanity and how it deviates from the available philosophies and theories that define cities elsewhere. Thus, Mwangi's portrayal of Nairobi's urban governance is a reminder that the inherited colonial urban governance structures need refinement to capture the rhythm and reality of everyday life, especially for those inhabiting its margins.

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