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Activists, care work, and the ‘cry of the ghetto’ in Nairobi, Kenya

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ABSTRACT Community activists living and organizing in Nairobi’s harshest geographies are tasked not only with intervening for ‘justice’ but also with (re)establishing care and emotion in landscapes devastated by both colonial and neoliberal divestments and violence. When they act to demand and bridge actions to ensure, for example, water, sanitation and an end to extrajudicial killings, they take on multiple material and affective roles in these neighborhoods. This article argues that as they seek to comfort families, protest the county administration and report violations, amongst other daily interventions, they target not just the reinstatement of basic rights, but also the reinsertion of care and emotion in environments where a normalized (and militarized) precarity has denied the legitimacy of these sentiments. The goal here is not only to ask ‘whatever happened to empathy?’, but, above all, to attend to how it is actively discouraged in particular situations and sites, and how activists are then tasked with incorporating intentional emotional and care labors in their everyday material and discursive practices in order to restore empathy in and for their neighborhoods. This article is informed by over a decade of fieldwork in Mathare ‘slum,’ as well as interviews and participant observation with activists from a cross section of poor urban settlements in the city of Nairobi.

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Introduction

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

When the police descended on poor urban neighborhoods, dubbed ‘slums’, in Kisumu and Nairobi the evening of August 11th 2017 after the “official”¹ presidential election results had just been announced, they left behind numerous injured and officially 24 dead citizens. These victims included two minors: a 9 year old and a baby of 6 months (KNCHR, 2017a). The police were seemingly not troubled by the questions asked by some citizens and leading human rights organizations about the unconstitutionality of this violence, and, in fact, denied it initially. When they finally, through their spokesman, offered a response, they claimed that theirs was a measured reaction to “acts of arson and thuggery” (Rajab, 2017). The spatiality of their extralegal force, however, was undeniable.

In targeting these spaces of historical neglect, which during the electoral violence were termed “opposition strongholds,” their actions were essentially the continuation of a normalized forceful governance in poor settlements, where the police become de facto forms of urban infrastructure and spatial management (Kimari, 2017). Through these practices that are from an imperial toolbox in *longue durée*, the police have essentially become the hallmark of a (post) colonial mode of urban governance since in the historical withdrawal of the government—whose absence is registered through the dearth of basic services—it is they who most explicitly encode social, economic, political and ecological borders; a boundary making that is in essence the determination of who lives and who dies in Kenya’s cities.

That “the police are such a central component of [state] infrastructure that their successful control of space is a foundation upon which modern state power rests” (Herbert, 1996, p 567) is not disputed in this paper. I call attention to their violent practices for a related but different reason, however. What I would like to show here is how their actions in Nairobi’s marginalized areas are bolstered by popular imaginaries about those who live in poor urban spaces. Essentially, through a “cognitive feedback loop” (Vargas, 2006, p 51), the decaying environment produced by years of government neglect is mapped onto residents’ bodies and subjectivities. In such a process, residents are constructed through a space portrayed as decaying and degenerate, and vice-versa. As a consequence, the register of discredit circulating in these particular spaces gains purchase through descriptors such as thief (and the female version is prostitute) which work to strip away any form of citizenship rights residents can claim to have. What is more, these immaterial positionings operate in such a way that those who are killed in extralegal action during a legal assembly in slums are cast as “criminals” whose right to life can be withdrawn without debate or remorse. Undoubtedly, this is a militarization of poor urban space witnessed not just in Kenya but elsewhere, and this state of affairs affirms the global reach of the penalization and surveillance of poor neighborhoods intensified by the situated spatial practices of neoliberalism (Wacquant, 2008, 2014; Ralph, 2014; Yonucu, 2008). But particular to this scenario, and no doubt inflected by its own cultural layers, is the lack of empathy directed to these victims of extralegal police action. My goal here, therefore, is to show how local activists, prompted by this lack of care and emotion, intentionally incorporate narratives for empathy in their multiscale material work for justice. Here I ask, akin to Hollan and Throop (2008), not ‘whatever happened to empathy?’, but also attend to how it is actively discouraged in specific situations in poor urban settlements, such as after these extrajudicial killings, and how activists are then tasked with incorporating

intentional care labors in their material practices in order to restore more positive emotions and care in their home spaces.

The devaluation of the subjects who live in ghettos such as Mathare is regularly reproduced to the extent that it becomes part of the ecology of this community, although from time to time residents, depending on the scale of an unfortunate “socio-natural outcome” (Murray, 2009)—i.e., cholera, hunger, fire, building collapse, or floods,—are conjured as “deserving poor.” In the case of police killings however, any sort of “affective attunement” from the outside world is laid aside, and the narratives about criminals getting what they deserve reign supreme. Because of this, local activists have to remedy the material gaps wrought by long-term structural divestments, as well as the emotional expropriations—for both residents and their space—by the state and larger public. For these reasons, despite those killed and injured by the police immediately after the announcement of the August 2017 election results, in both official and widely sanctioned discourse these victims remain criminals, and their deaths are considered underserving of organized lament or empathy beyond the locations where they occurred (see Jones et al., 2017; Van Staple, 2015).

This ethnographic article draws from my research on the planning histories of and experiences within the marginalized spaces of Nairobi, and is also informed by a decade of community organizing in the poor urban settlement of Mathare in the East of the city. The wide range of residents I continue to engage with in these regions of Nairobi have allowed me to grasp the intergenerational, interethnic and gendered experiences of space over the last several decades, and, pertinent to this paper, the emotions that inform the stories residents tell about themselves and their geography. It was also the exchanges with those who do not live in poor urban settlements, including my own family, which made evident the affective layers and misrecognitions which circulate about poor urban residents. The body counts that supplement these local lamentations, an unending tally, as well as the dearth of academic work on cities in Africa dedicated to understanding how urban spaces are shaped by emotions (or lack of), multiple ontologies of resistance (Wilhelm-Solomon et al., 2017) and the arduous care labors of local activists, also prompted the development of this article.

While there has been significant research into how colonial epistemologies (with attendant racialized sentiments) shaped the geographies of Nairobi (see, for example, White, 1990; Medard, 2010; Lonsdale, 2001; Anderson 2005) and other work that targets postcolonial exclusions and the neoliberal city (c.f. Manji, 2015; Myers, 2015; Hake, 1977; Huchzermeyer, 2007; Dafe, 2009), these efforts do not make explicit the role of the emotional imaginaries that sustain these exclusions. Though informed by the socio-political contexts documented by the interdisciplinary literature mentioned above, this paper extends their analyses to show how particular subject positionings, imperial reinstantiations (Stoler, 2008, 2013), are mobilized to discourage empathy, and how these make evident the particular emotions that continue to violently shape specific city spaces and lives.

I agree with (Brown and Pickerill (2009), p 28) that emotions are central to activist processes, and inevitably these are a complex assemblages constituted by experiences which are “multifarious, shifting and exist in a number of very different moments.” Within this paper I focus on one emotion and in one specific moment: this is empathy and in situations of extrajudicial killings in Nairobi’s poor urban settlements, with a specific focus on Mathare. Though anthropologists are still “unsettled” about how to define empathy (Zembylas, 2013), it is recognized as a “first person-like perspective on another that involves an emotional, embodied, or experiential aspect” produced through intersubjective dialog (Hollan and Throop, 2008, p 391;

Zembylas, 2013). A broader definition from the Oxford dictionary states that it is “the ability to understand and share the feelings of another” (OED, 2017). Since it is my position that the emotions directed towards victims of extrajudicial killings in slums are motivated by an express refusal to “understand” and “share” the effects of long-term material and emotional divestments in poor urban neighborhoods, this explanation of empathy anchors the arguments I make in this paper. My discussion of empathy here also reveals the historical “metacommunication” (Hollan and Throop, 2008) normalized about these sites and their residents which entrenches a specific way of knowing and feeling them, one that discourages positive emotions and care for both spaces and subjects. The incident below with “Rashid” gives a visceral register of the larger public’s reluctance to act with empathy after an extrajudicial killing in a location close to Mathare, and how this shapes the efforts of activists who work to respond to the “cry of the ghetto.”

Rashid

In early April 2017, a plain clothed police officer attached to Pangani police station in Nairobi shot dead two young men from the neighborhood of Eastleigh. This act was committed amid a crowd of residents of all ages, and captured in a cell phone video that was shared widely. This video (See Fig. 1), which spread like wildfire, was reported on by a number of media outlets. However, notwithstanding the proof that the officer had, in broad daylight, executed and not detained a suspect in accordance with the Rights of Arrested Persons (Articles 48–51) detailed in the 2010 Constitution, a majority of the newspapers framed their reporting of this incident in language that legitimized the actions of the police officer named Rashid.

Instead of largescale outcry, headings such as “Why Officer Filmed Killing Teenager is ‘Loved’ in Eastleigh”³ and “Meet the police officer who Boldly executed two teenage gang members in Eastleigh”⁴ prevailed. Even while the case was taken up as an explicit act of police abuse of power by the Independent Policing Oversight Authority (IPOA),⁵ a majority of the Nairobi residents interviewed in the media or speaking on twitter — also an indicator of class standing— responded in favor of the executions of these young men. A popular response was that the youths killed were “gang members” who “lived by the gun and so should die by the gun.”⁶

Fig. 1 Rashid killing young man: Screen grab from anonymous viral video of police officer Rashid executing a young man from Eastleigh, Nairobi even after this “suspect” had surrendered. This figure is not covered by Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.² The image is reproduced under the terms of fair use

Until now, Rashid has never been charged or suspended, and brazenly took part in the most recent post-election killings in Mathare in August 2017 (Aloyce, personal communication).

The Independent Medico-Legal Unit (IMLU) in Kenya, whose mandate is “litigation, medical and psychosocial rehabilitation of survivors of torture” (IMLU, 2017), has documented 122 cases of summary executions by the police between January and December 2016. The vast majority of these killings were committed in Nairobi. Over 3 years, between 2013–2016, they report that 612 persons, overwhelmingly young males, were executed by the police (IMLU, 2016). Figures collected by Mathare Social Justice Center (MSJC), through both participatory action research and newspaper analysis by its members, indicate a figure of over 850 persons killed during a comparable time period. This is an almost 40% difference in the two tallies, one by a formal NGO and the other by Mathare activists. And despite the gravity of both of these body counts, irrespective of the marked variation in numbers, both official organizations and local community activists face an uphill battle trying to prosecute officers involved, as well as get a commitment from the state to stop these killings.

Inevitably, it is in the neighborhoods of the victims where the task for justice is more pronounced as residents struggle not just for the recognition of these deaths that are often denied or responded to with a veritable jungle of red tape and rhetoric—much of it risky (see Jones et al., 2017; MSJC, 2017), but also to (re)deploy emotion and care, empathy, towards victims, their families and the community at large. After incidents such as these, where the basic right to life of these young men is negated, even in the face of obvious transgressions of the rule of law by a public officer, local activists not only have to try and seek redress through murky legal processes, but also engage in an ontological and emotional “refusal to be damned” (Chari, 2017, p 169; see also Alves, 2014a for similar events in Brazil): a combined material and metaphysical charge against the prevailing necropolitical politics in their neighborhoods.

The cry of the ghetto

“We can smell blood stains on the ground” – Mwanake (personal communication).

Long before I had been to Mathare, Korogocho and Manyatta, I had heard the stereotypes about them and other ‘slum’ areas, all of which are embedded in historical hierarchies of (im)morality applied to legitimize their exclusion vis-a-vis the larger city. Because of these emotionally charged narratives reflected through landscapes of produced decay, like other residents of Nairobi my interactions with and in the city are shaped by material and imaginative orders that are immersed in and enroll “roiling maelstroms of affect” (Thrift, 2004, p 57) into the very topography of this urban space. These processes in turn mold a city with differentiated emotional geographies and attendant registers of suffering. As a consequence, this affective layering produces a way of knowing: “systems of intelligibility to which people refer in order to construct a more or less clear idea of the causes of phenomena and their effects, to determine the domain of what is possible and feasible, as well as the logics of efficacious action” (Mbembe and Roitman, 1995, p 324). Since these spaces and their residents are constructed as criminal—as both cause and effect—I argue that they are made intelligible by outsiders through the negative feelings usually mobilized to respond to criminality. The “efficacious” sentiment taken up by non-residents therefore, in response to imagined misconduct, is overwhelmingly a lack of care and emotion.

In these parts of Nairobi, the combined exclusion concentrated in the spatial form generates a particular intensity which is

continually re-established, and principally through neglect and force. As the space worsens over time, so do the ways it is spoken about, reinforcing a territorial stigmatization which takes on eugenic and Malthusian inflections and that derives from the dialog between the pervasive material and imaginative order(s). This co-constitution between the material and the metaphysical produces areas like Mathare and associated spatial languages and emotions about these poor urban sites: they become immoral, crimogenic spaces of the “ex-human” (Biehl and Locke, 2010, p 318) and thus subject to an embodied and visceral antipathy.

On the one hand, these poor representations of communities, that bolster extralegal actions by the police, have resonance with the general characterizations of poor urban residents globally. In discussing the “spatialization of virtue” implicit in the governance of European cities in the nineteenth century, Osborne, Nikolas (1999), p 743) convey how the diagrammers of the city believed that:

There seems to be a negative spiral of interaction between milieu and character.

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

Undoubtedly, the perceived symbiosis between character and milieu in Nairobi's ghettos owes some provenance to these nineteenth-century beliefs imprinted in European cities, which were globalized in the colonial period. However, added to these enduring tropes are situational nuances that layer pre-established notions of slums globally. The ways in which these representations accrete and take on new dimensions of “spatial taint” (Wacquant, 2014) lead to the “difficulty and slipperiness of empathy” (Hartman, 1997, p 18) for the residents of Nairobi's poor urban settlements.

Hollan (2008) and Throop (2010) have argued that empathy is never an “all or nothing affair” and, what's more, “it is very seldom a simple matter to say at what point, in what way, and for whom a particular experience or interaction can be deemed to be empathetic or not.” Moreover, “even in those moments when empathy clearly has failed, differing modes of intersubjective engagement still remain that do not foreclose possibilities for new moments of empathetic connection to arise” (Throop, 2010, p 781).

As residents of Mathare move from one funeral to the next, and ask each other “Who is Next?” (MSJC, 2017), it becomes difficult to discern when these novel instances of empathetic connection will emerge. They associate this lack of empathy with the systematic neglect they have been facing for years: it is a structured emotional disconnect which allows them to make the link between a lack of basic services and extrajudicial killings. If there is, indeed, an “empathic continuum” (Hollan, 2008, p 484), which is in tension with the view put forward here about the explicit lack of care and emotion, isn't it possible then that communities facing extrajudicial killings are only offered the most extreme range of this continuum, its final almost negligible point?

Speaking to the social and emotional distance through which they are hailed, one long-time activist in Mathare put it this way:

Life in Mathare is full of struggles. Because Mathare is discriminated by the government and when police hear you are from Mathare, they brand you a thief, and when they

get to Mathare, they know people in Mathare have no rights and that is how the government has secluded them (Okocha, personal communication).

Similarly MSJC, 2017 stated in their report:

We are always up against the historical narrative that paints young people as thieves, an analysis that criminalizes poverty by not considering the limited choices available to those forced to the margins of our societies (MSJC, 2017, p 8).

Building on Fanon, Alves (2014a) discusses the tensions which emerge when one imagines that black Brazilian bodies are included within the remit of civil society. He argues that these ‘other’ bodies, found predominantly in favelas, are not considered human and therefore cannot be counted in the discourses and practices of human rights since their humanity represents an “ontological impossibility.” At the same time, it is exactly this exclusion which situates them in the tragic but also powerful position of expanding our interrogations into what being both human—in life and death— and having rights has meant historically, and especially in “post” slavery communities.

Tracking the history of poor urban settlements in Nairobi allows one to extend the position of Alves (2014a). These are geographies which are forced off its map: remain caught in what Alves (2014a) argues is a “double negation”—neither human nor citizen—despite their extensive lifespan and the fact that they house a significant majority of the city's residents. What this double negation means for poor Nairobi dwellers is that they are hypervisibilized in the gunspeak of police, while remaining invisible in the empathic continuum which creates value in the larger city.

However, as Hall (2000) argues, subjects do not always succumb to the positions (and emotions) through which they are hailed. Recognizing that their work entails not only putting an end to the violations they live each day but, essentially, as Alves (2014a, 2014b) gestures towards, make their humanity unquestionable, local activists engage in both material and immaterial labors to fight the injustices in their communities. To these ends, to restore empathy in their home spaces they offer narratives and organize activities to build and celebrate situated socialities of care, unity, talent and potential. The excerpt shared below, from an interview with a popular Mathare activist, conveys the intricate labors of care and emotion that community members incorporate into their daily practices to alleviate the stings of structural violence. It also makes evident the non-local discourses which frame their lives and enable both a social and emotional detachment between these sites and more prosperous parts of Nairobi.

Interviewer: When did you enter into community work?

Respondent: First of all, I was raised in poverty, I was in the streets before so I know the life, and I was saved by the late Father Grogan who removed me from the streets and took me to school and I read to the best of my ability. He worked with the street boys. We used to walk with him on the road at night, talking to street children. He is the founder of *Undugu Society of Kenya* and I was one of them. We used to walk with him at night, I carried his bag and I saw how he worked, talking to kids and that's when I liked the job and I have done it for 30 years.

Interviewer: You know it well then...

Respondent: I like it because I like winning. Out of ten, one child or two will accept to go to the center, and with that I am giving back to the community.

Interviewer: Do you think Mathare is in Nairobi or there is a big difference?

Respondent: It is in Nairobi but we don't see as if it is in Nairobi because when I am in Mathare I usually say I am going to Nairobi. Mathare is a slum.

Interviewer: When your mother got to Mathare, was it the same situation?

Respondent: No, that time it was better but they still feared going to Nairobi and at the time going to Nairobi if you were dirty was a crime and you were arrested, but we understand we are not in Nairobi, we are in Mathare slum and it is not in Nairobi because it is not recognized.

Interviewer: Why is it not recognized according to you?

Respondent: It is because the name Mathare is associated with bad things, theft, filth, poverty, so there is no plan that anything positive can be said about it, only bad things. I would even like it removed from Nairobi, they say it is in Kiambu, because Kiambu is close to Nairobi. There is no need to say it is in Nairobi because anything said does not paint a positive picture [...].

People from the town see people from Mathare as thieves, they think we are a threat to them. There are places you go to and when you say you are from Mathare you are not respected, it just means you are a thief [...]

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

In order to change this image, other community organizers also emphasize that “no one is born a thief in the womb”; that they are not “just Mathare people like the way so many people looked at us” (Van Staple, 2015, p 119); that their “right is not dead” (Mwende, personal communication) and that they need to think of themselves like “no one else will” in order to survive both the physical and emotional violences constitutive of their geography. Furthermore, they assert that: “Though the name Mathare creates a lot of shivers in people’s mind. To some people, it is a place known to be associated with so many vices but that’s not the case as it is. Mathare Slum has got so many great talents and people who are willing to transform the community and its environs in a positive way” [sic] (Chapia, 2015).

As becomes evident through the above account, seeking to understand and share the feelings of another, essentially reclaiming empathy both inside and outside the community, was an intentional practice embedded in the work of local youth groups. It became apparent during my long-term fieldwork that understanding self and others and taking pride in being a person from the ghetto was part of a consciousness building, reverberating both Freire’s (2000) “pedagogy of the oppressed” and Biko’s (2002) “black consciousness,” to accept oneself and recognize, through a situated moral lens, the possibility that came from being born in these spaces. In this case, accepting oneself also required the understanding that one was worthy of positive emotions and care—that you could be recognized through a more compassionate lens despite your origins. As an example, the various talent shows put on by youth associations, such as “Mr. and Miss Ghetto,” were organized “so that people do not hate themselves” (Kiki, personal communication). Explicitly highlighting the empathic goals of these activities, Okocha shared these comments:

You know what, from these outreach programmes (youth initiatives), it makes most of them identify themselves. They see they have both eyes, hands, legs, even if they live in the ghetto. And since there are people who live in the uptown area who don’t have eyes, time will tell that anything is possible.

There are people from Mathare, during celebrations like Labor Day, we meet at the depot (field), so even if someone is from the ghetto and doesn’t value themselves they are

encouraged. You find people who have gone far due to football, others education, others for church related programs. Absalom Okinyi is now a Surgeon. Patrick Kusimba current chief prison officer—all from Mathare. And so during those days you feel encouraged. You accept yourself.

These efforts for acceptance, emotional and material solidarity become even more imperative against the persistent incidences of extrajudicial killings by the police. The post-election extralegal executions that occurred after the repeat presidential elections of October 2017, further evidence the need for the multifaceted labors of local activists.

October 2017 repeat presidential elections

16 bullets

18 bullets

10 bullets

(Fieldnotes after a focus group; list depicting the number of bullets used to kill 3 Mathare youth in 2017)

In a move that surprised many at home and abroad, the Kenyan Supreme Court annulled the August 8th 2017 presidential election results after a petition from the opposition because, they argued, the ballot process was neither “transparent nor verifiable” (Burke, 2017). A repeat presidential election was then ordered to happen within sixty days of their judgment on September 1st 2017. The embattled Independent Electoral and Boundaries Commission (IEBC), the agency tasked with coordinating the polls, finally confirmed the rerun election would take place on October 26th 2017 after barely managing to navigate internal implosions and significant external pressures—including an extrajudicial killing of one of their own⁷ (BBC, 2017). Though the death toll from the protracted August ballot process and its aftermath (57 persons according to KNCHR, 2017a)⁸ evidenced the inordinate police violence that was meted out without just cause against the poor and which, above all, should not happen again, the October process regrettably rendered more casualties. Reporting on these, the Kenya National Commission on Human Rights (KNCHR), (2017b) stated that:

While it was expected that the second poll would—especially following the orders by the Supreme Court that the repeat Presidential poll be held in strict conformity with the law—be a reflection of enhanced and more accountable electoral processes and procedures, just as was the case before the annulment, a number of misgivings continued to plague the second round of elections, further pushing Kenya’s electoral democracy into the realm of a mirage of unmet expectations [...]

Over 30 people were said to be killed in the lead up to the October poll -- from September 1st when the August elections were annulled to the end of October 2017, and a score from between both election dates stands at, at least, 92 persons killed, with the vast majority executed by the police (KNCHR, 2017b). With the high number of missing or unknown bodies reported, the numerous casualties, and even the fear which may have prevented many from collecting data (See MSJC, 2017b), these numbers are likely to rise. This violence may have been prompted by what Berman and Lonsdale (1992, p 116) referred to, though with reference to the colony, as “the surface expression of more profound underlying social forces, i.e., as the concrete example of the development of the forms of the state derived from the particular contradictions of capital accumulation and class struggles [...]” More recently, others have defined these trends as part of the “neocolonial” (Mkangi, 2004) realities constitutive of the modern

African experience, or made reference to the African postcolony as a site with its own internal coherence, and which is given to provocation, improvisation and violence (Mbembe, 2001).

Regardless of whatever notions gain theoretical purchase and are understood to be reflective of the ongoing dominance of force and death in the city of Nairobi, what remains undeniable is that the most brute and extralegal police force is enacted in geographies long shaped by both material and emotional divestments. These are abrogations which continue to frame and impact residents negatively. As a consequence, the incremental practical solidarities taken up by local activists to enable and anchor survivals necessitate a commitment to (re)asserting the emotional value of poor urban dwellers. Within these emotion and care labors for home enacted by local activists, the experiences of the poor are deemed worthy and are reinscribed with a more positive valence. It is through these practices that their “cry” becomes a demand, an enjoinder that they should be considered human and must also be privy to the “understanding” and “sharing” which generates empathy.

Conclusion

Tumekata Kupiga Magoti
We have refused to kneel down
Mbele ya hawa wauaji
Infront of the killers
Bila shaka sisi pia ni watu
Without a doubt we are also human beings
Hali ya utumwa tumeikataa...
We have refused this slavery...
Verse from Wimbo wa Mapambano: Popular activist
anthem in Kenya

The colonial and postcolonial divestments that mold Nairobi produce uneven landscapes anchored in particular emotional geographies. These affective spaces are sustained by imaginaries about the environment and the people within them, making the most marginalized urban sites prone to extrajudicial killings. Though historically the popular subject positionings in Mathare and similar areas were those of “diseased, detribalized and degenerate” natives (White, 1990), in the contemporary period these framings morph into more explicit class narratives which emphasize the immorality of residents. I focus here on how the violences enabled by a normalized “civil stratification” (Yiftachel, 2009, p 93)—reproduced in a cognitive feedback loop that requires both discourse and practice—motivate a lack of empathy towards victims of police extralegal killings and their families, prompting local activists to layer their material work for justice with emotion and care labors.

Though, as discussed here, poor urban residents continue to be subject to these extralegal executions, empathy towards victims and their communities is actively discouraged in popular discourse. Since these are moments, akin to those documented by Zembylas (2013, p 19), where “resistance to empathy is often powerful and the negative emotions toward the ‘enemy-other’ are rather strong,” can we insist on empathy as both “understanding another” and “another’s desire to be understood” (Throop, 2010, p 775)? In the face of these killings, though Mathare residents can speak of their desire to be understood, can they really refer to an external will to understand and share with them?

I have argued here that the lack of empathy is one manifestation of the larger structural neglect manifest in the historic absence of basic services, and which is reinforced by popularized ideas about certain environments and their residents. While other situated events prompt aspects of “mutuality in recurrent loss” (Hollan and Throop, 2008, p 396), extrajudicial killings operate in

an emotional blind spot that requires local activists to give residents “a dream to live by” (Eunice, personal communication)

Taking up this multidimensional response to what is essentially “necropolitical governance” (Alves, 2014b) in *longue durée*, activists empathically contextualize the identities directed at them in order to bring about more intra and inter community solidarity. These intersubjective engagements that target how they are imagined, as “thieves” and “criminals,” are critical means to change how they are interpolated, especially when these readings of them can signal death. Enacted both in and *because of* their space, their care labors potentiate a change not only in how residents think about themselves and their actions, but in how others connect with them, targeting the possibility of an “affective attunement” with the outside world which intends to restore their right to life on all occasions.

This remains a daunting task. Not least because victims of police killings appear to be “in ontological opposition to the very definition of humanity around which human rights, civil society, and the rule of law are defined” (Alves, 2014b, p 151). Notwithstanding the pervasive threat posed by officers such as Rashid who continue to operate with such sinister abandon, the dedicated and obstacle ridden engagements of local activists to reframe themselves as subjects deserving of both life and care continue to be important, and remain the most consistent initiatives attending to the cry of the ghetto.

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Notes

- 1 These election results were subsequently nullified on September 1st 2017, and it is for these reasons that I put official results in quotation marks above.
- 2 The video is still on an anonymous YouTube channel, and is available online.
- 3 <http://nairobibusiness.nation.co.ke/news/officer-filmed-killing-teenager/>
- 4 <https://www.tuko.co.ke/235675-meet-police-officer-boldly-executed-teenage-gang-members-eastleigh.html>
- 5 See news about this in the April 2, 2017 Daily Nation edition available here: <https://www.nation.co.ke/news/Ipoa-to-observe-transparency-in-probe-into-Eastleigh-killing/1056-3874834-xhr1ebz/index.html>
- 6 See, as but one example, the cited twitter comments, as well as the subsequent comments after this Capital FM article: <http://www.capitalfm.co.ke/news/2017/04/was-extra-judicial-killing-of-eastleigh-thugs-justified-kenyans-divided/>
- 7 Chris Msando, the IEBC IT manager in charge of the new computerized voting system, was found dead a few days before the August 8th elections. An autopsy showed that he had been severely tortured and strangled (see BBC, 2017).
- 8 Amnesty International and Human Rights Watch (2017) report this figure as at least 33 persons.

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Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analyzed during the current study.

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