



Missing the Forest for the Trees: Mathare's Environmental Apartheid

By Oyunga Pala



On 12th May 2018, President Uhuru Kenyatta [launched](#) the National Tree Planting Day under the slogan “*Panda Miti, Penda Kenya*”. It was another of those Jubilee-ese slogans that ring hollow. The event took place in Kamkunji sub-county at the Moi Forces Academy in the Eastlands part of Nairobi. This was the government’s knee-jerk response to the heavy long rains season that sparked an environmental crisis around the country. There were 32 counties affected and over 300,000 Kenyans were displaced. [In his official speech](#), the President repeated the familiar pledge to achieve at least ten per cent forest cover, as required by the constitution, and to mitigate the effects of climate change.

The news reporting of the event focused on the power politics between Nairobi governor Mike Sonko Mbuvi and Environmental Cabinet Secretary Keriako Tobiko. Two weeks after the launch, [news reports](#) were awash with the latest financial scandal. Sh2 billion allocated to establish the green school project in all 47 counties under the auspices of the Kenya Forest Service (KFS) had been embezzled. A task force chaired by Marion Wakanyi Kamau of the Green Belt Movement released a [report](#) that revealed that Kenya’s forest depletion occurred at an alarming rate of about 5,000 hectares annually and which implicated KFS personnel. Kenyans, numbed by the numerous other cases of grand theft in the Jubilee government, hardly reacted.

Kenya, the birthplace of the [Green Belt Movement](#) and its illustrious founder, Nobel laureate [Wangari Maathai](#), remains stuck in the optics of environmental activism. Reforestation is an activity that the media reduces to a “tree planting exercise” and has evolved into an elite pastime where prominent personalities pose for photo opportunities in formal dress next to freshly planted trees. Public forests have been privatised and primed for plunder by those tasked to protect them while corporates, NGOs and politicians plant thousands of trees in cosmetic public relations and corporate social responsibility activities without evoking any of the ecological consciousness that Wangari Maathai dedicated her life to raising. Of the several Wangari Maathai quotes I regurgitate, this particular one sticks:

“Anyone can dig a hole and plant a tree. But make sure it survives. You have to nurture it, you have to water it, you have to keep at it until it becomes rooted so that it can take of itself. There are so many enemies of trees.”

Planting trees is easy. Taking care of them requires a different level of commitment. This was Wangari’s enduring message and the one lesson my country fails to learn. This much I know because I have been involved in an urban afforestation project with Mathare Green Movement (MGM), a campaign of the Mathare Social Justice Centre (MSJC).

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The two Nairobis

In August 2017, a group of concerned Kenyans from Mathare got together and decided that they were going to plant trees in memory of all their colleagues who fell to police bullets. Over months, the activity evolved into a concerted effort at ecological and social justice using the tree as a symbol of regeneration and resistance to structural oppression.

Planting trees in Mathare is a process and not an event because the soils of this informal settlement have lost their capacity to sustain trees. [Mathare Valley](#) is an infamous slum, a crucible of suffering where white tourists arrive in droves to marvel at the resilience of its residents and to photograph the miracle of optimism. The shanty structures, a canopy of rusty brown *mabati* roofs separated by narrow alleys dropping down precarious rocky slopes, is home to multitudes. Broken souls exist alongside delightful children. Complete despondence rides alongside cheerfulness and the kaleidoscope of intense human interaction has made Mathare a location of extremes with no middle ground to stand on.

The physical environment is devoid of life-sustaining features. The further east you go in Nairobi, the poorer the neighbourhoods become. The absence of basic amenities and greenery and the human congestion and neglect evoke caricatures of a dystopian city. Martin Oduor, a member of MGM, tried to conduct a tree census and came to the disturbing estimate of about one tree for every 1,200 residents.

The Mathare river is turbid, dark grey and sickly – an open sewer that occasionally turns rogue on its residents, sweeping all in its path. The extent of the long-term socio-environmental damage has created the existing spectacle of human suffering that draws in “saviours and observers” from around the world fascinated by the resilience of the residents. Children, accustomed to the white benevolent visitor on a poverty safari, switch character to become entitled beggars peddling the

currency of hopelessness.

Mathare is a perfect illustration of Nairobi's environmental segregation. The informal settlement is surrounded on both sides by a leafy green belt. To get a sense of what I prefer to call environmental apartheid, one only has to shift one's gaze to the thick wall of green that is the Muthaiga suburb to the west of Mathare.

The wealthy districts of Nairobi abut its poorer districts from where they draw much of their domestic labour: Muthaiga has Mathare, Karen has Kibera, Loresho has Kangemi, Lavington has Kawangware. A similar pattern is observed in the city's greenery. From an aerial point of view, the classes are separated by a green belt. All of Nairobi's best-kept public green spaces - Karura Forest, Nairobi Arboretum, City Park - are in the affluent parts of the city and maintain restricted access. The neighbourhoods to the east of the city centre have minimal public spaces and, where available, we find dusty fields with no green cover.

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The reality of trees as the markers of aristocratic privilege in Nairobi's urban spaces is rooted in the colonial state. Between 1906 and 1926, Nairobi was colonised to serve the interests of the white settler population. Eighty per cent of the city's residential land was reserved for its white elite. The two Nairobi's were divided into residential areas for Europeans and Asians, and peripheral housing for African labour as an afterthought. One white half of Nairobi was serviced and the other black half was neglected. The colonial zoning policy created a pattern of racial and class segregation and social stratification that persist to this day.

The 1948 [Master Plan for a Colonial Capital](#) and the 1973 Metropolitan Growth Strategy employed segregation principles to maintain racial and class divisions. After independence in 1963, the white neighbourhoods of Karen, Lavington and Muthaiga became accessible to the emerging moneyed African and Asian upper classes who, rather than reverse the social apartheid, opted for the retention of colonial governance structures.

To cater for the unserved poor masses, an informal modernism emerged in Nairobi, created with the sole intent of exploiting vulnerable city residents. Rural-to-urban migration brought a large influx of people to the city in search of a better life who found themselves trapped in "slums" and denied social mobility by the rigid class structures. The lack of formal housing gave rise to informal settlements operating outside the legal framework and, therefore, subjected to gross violations of rights and a culture of exploitation.

Kenyan filmmaker [Tosh Gitonga](#) illustrates the desperation of rural-to-urban migrants and the plight that awaits "*shags-modos*" in the brutal class-restricted spaces of Nairobi in the captivating film, [Nairobi Half Life](#). Today the primitive accumulation and land expropriation of the post-colonial state has led to 70 per cent of Nairobi's population of 4 million living on 5 per cent of the city's land area. Mathare's 500,000 residents fight for dignity in an area that is barely 3 square kilometres.

Anti-human environmentalism

In his forthcoming book, *Paracitations: Genre, Foreign Bodies, and the Ethics of Co-habitation*, Kenyan scholar Samson Opondo describes the economic security and greenness (which had previously been a manifestation of whiteness) becoming inscribed on a class-based identity complete with a rhetoric of "threat". When we see trees from the purely conservation ideology of the state, we

fail to problematise the socio-economic and historical contexts within which possession and dispossession and threats emerge.

The environmental culture in Kenya is essentially anti-human. The native continues to be a threat to green spaces and must be forcibly relocated to the reserves and this access to greenery must be monitored. Public forests are protected by armies with guns and access is restricted by high fees. Opondo further notes in his 2008 paper, "[Genre and the African City: The Politics and Poetics of Urban Rhythms](#)", that Nairobi's hides (in the open) an ugly history of racial segregation based on the South African model of Ebenezer Howard's Garden City concept where greening of the city corresponded with creation of structures of racial exclusion.

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In both South Africa and Kenya, the impoverished masses cluster in shanty towns where environmental rights only come to bear during hostile weather crisis management. Gacheke Gachihi of Mathare Social Justice Centre says, " Our suffering is invisible." In Kenya's election cycle, the slum areas are hotspots that are heavily policed and a ready tinder box of ethnic rivalry, police brutality and gang violence. After every election cycle, we witness the cessation of hostilities, the withdrawal of corporate media from the spectacle of mass violence of poor against poor, state crackdown on protesting poor masses, and lockdowns.

Elections spell death, destruction and despair for the residents of Mathare. In the lead-up to August 2017 bungled elections, Mathare was marked as a "hotspot" that was heavily policed by rogue units who relish brutalising residents under siege. When it all simmers down, the politicians invariably end up negotiating new pacts, leaving residents to fall back on resilience. As soon as they turn their backs, the slow violence resumes, felt only by those within who are invisible to those on the outside - a violence that is exacerbated by an environment that is metaphorically lined with unexploded landmines. The environmentally dispossessed only make the news in the midst of great tragedy and calamities.

Hunting grounds

In the book, [Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor](#), author Rob Nixon shed lights on the inattention to calamities "that are slow and long lasting, continuously dispensing devastation but without the necessary spectacle required to raise public outrage or sustain the fleeting attention (that) spans breaking news corporate media spectacles."

Therefore, it is no surprise that the Kenyan public remains unaware of the humanitarian crisis in the form of extrajudicial killings in Nairobi's slums. The MSJC brought this to light in 2017 after the launch of "[Who is Next: A Participatory Action Report Against the Normalisation of Extrajudicial Executions in Mathare](#)". Between 2013 and 2015, over 803 cases were documented.

The report was the first major concerted effort by a grassroots movement to raise awareness about the reality of extrajudicial executions. Despite the moderate buzz created in human rights spaces, the killings have not stopped. The policing culture persists. In the month of May 2018, for instance, Wilfred Olal of the Dandora Justice Center reported that 15 young men had been gunned down. Justice for the victims is a long shot. Wangui Kimaru, a researcher at MSJC, told me that there have been only 4 convictions despite 9,000 cases being forwarded to the Independent Policing Oversight Authority (IPOA).

Human rights defender Kennedy Chindi says that there are between 10 to 15 cases of young men reported missing or killed by police every month in Nairobi's informal settlements. Cases of police threats and intimidation deter the aggrieved from coming forward with information. "Everyone knows the killers but no one even dares call them by their names," says Wyban Mwangi, a young musician. Instead, they use a codename, "Mjamaa", for even in a valley of hundreds of thousands, the walls have ears. The names Hesity of Kayole and Rashid are whispered and the youth live in dread of *who is next?*

The Bill of Rights in the [Kenyan constitution](#) guarantees every person the right to life. However, in an unequal society, the rights of the poor come with no guarantees. The normalisation of the extrajudicial killings is an existential generational crisis. Amnesty International, Haki Africa and emerging grassroots organisations in Mathare, Dandora and Kayole have harrowing documentation of enforced disappearances and deaths that are often attributed to the police.

Encounter killings have turned urban ghettos into legalised hunting grounds, no different from the death match in the dystopian *Hunger Games* trilogy by American novelist Suzanne Collins. Or perhaps *District 9*, a South African sci-fi feature by Neill Blomkamp that astutely explores social segregation in a scathing satirical analysis of urban populations treated with the level of vile contempt reserved for pests. In Kenya, Tosh Gitonga's *Nairobi Half Life* dramatises this unofficial routine killing of young males in a complex narrative of the cyclical violence of toxic masculinity where the line between the criminal and the police is blurry.

Researcher Naomi Van Stapele, in her book [Respectable "Illegality": Gangs, Masculinities and Belonging in a Nairobi Ghetto](#), explained that the killings in Mathare continue without raising any public outrage because the dead are labelled as criminals or thugs, which justifies the executions. "Let the police do their work", is the divorced public response. No one advocates for the killing of perpetrators of grand theft, but the children of the poor, the petty criminals (vermin) must be eliminated on the strength of suspicion. In the words of Trevor Noah, they are "born a crime". In middle class circles, a conversation with a journalist friend turned into a sermon heavy on class snobbery. "Kenya's ghetto mentality is what is holding those people in slums back." Then he cherry-picked the example of musician Juliani as the mascot of possibility.

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Local media has made a profession of reporting poverty through derogatory frames. Therefore, the numerous reports, occasional protests against police harassment and demonstrations do not draw media attention or public solidarity beyond the spectacle of tragedy.

Structural violence

These examples show that the slum ecology harbours systemic and structural violence that is silent. Johan Galtung, the celebrated Norwegian mathematician and sociologist, coined the term "structural violence", which may be described as a form of violence wherein some social structure or social institution may harm people by preventing them from meeting their basic needs.

Like soil erosion, the effects of structural violence are not immediately obvious. Because its consequences only become evident in the distant future, there is little incentive for long-term solutions. Zangi, a resident of Mathare notes that it does not matter who comes to power; the problem is the system and the police culture. The problem is also the enabling physical environment

that legitimises extrajudicial killings.

The Kenyan version of “electoral democracy” thrives in violent geographies. The problems of social justice are too many, too complex and not sexy enough for short-term political strategists who live for the optics in between elections to sustain popularity. Remedial environmental policy takes years. The benefits cannot be accrued in one political cycle and are certainly not bankable in the transactional nature of Kenyan politics. Article 42 of the constitution confers the right to a clean and healthy environment but is yet to interrogate systemic issues. The issues of the environment may be important but they not urgent.

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Therefore, to muster the political will needed to implement real change is difficult in a country where leaders cannot think beyond the next election. There are no immediate political rewards for planning to avert a human catastrophe. In nature terms, no one wants to plant a tree under whose shade they won't sit or whose fruit they won't eat. Long-term benefits may accrue for others and that is just not smart business in this instant gratification culture where exploitation and extractation is a privatised enterprise.

It is this context that we have to broaden the idea of what violence is. Personal violence is a consequence of structural violence. Lack of basic resources leads to competition that degenerates into violence in the quest for dominance. Gangs in urban ghettos organise around resources that leverage power and influence. Public toilets, garbage collection, water points, electricity connection and security are centres of frequent conflict. Kenyans awake to the economic and political realities of the 80s and 90s can track back how the slow violence of neoliberal policies began as a benign condition known as Structural Adjustment Program.

Beyond counting and documenting the victims of slow daily violence, the Mathare Green Movement is conscripting nature's healing powers to challenge and alleviate the long-term effects of and sustain attention towards social injustice causes. Those grassroots environmental activists that Wangari Maathai called “foresters without degrees” are at the forefront of plotting new futures, imagining new worlds and planting ideas of hope. Wangari Maathai underscored the need to keep environmentalism connected to global questions of human rights and social justice.

In a letter smuggled from a Nigerian jail, the writer-activist Ken Saro-Wiwa [wrote](#): “The environment is man's first right.” That notion seems to have been forgotten in urban ecologies and serves as a focal point in articulating the experiences of oppressed people who are rendered invisible in the national economy and silenced when they demand to be heard.

Seeds of peace

Wangari Maathai's Green Belt Movement brought a new discourse to the public consciousness, linking the slow violence of environmental degradation to its consequences, while at the same time proposing a public participatory methodology to advance environmental recovery. The Mathare Green Movement's focus is young men facing the threat of extrajudicial executions who plant trees to reclaim lost life and dignify in the memory of peers labeled as criminal and forgotten after death.

The lesson of the Green Belt Movement is that poverty does not operate in a vacuum. Prof. Maathai's brilliance was making clear the link between the collapse of the environmental economy and its support systems, on the one hand, and its revival as a strategy for eradicating poverty, on the other. She correctly diagnosed that corrupt exploitation of resources impacted vulnerable masses directly

and insisted that environmentalism of the poor is inseparable from redistributive justice

Like the Green Belt Movement, the theatre of the tree gives the Mathare Green Movement a new vocabulary that is loaded with civic duty. Prof. Maathai called it “doing my little thing”. It is fitting that the new millennial generation of her disciples would emerge from Kenya’s marginalised urban spaces. Planting, not merely trees, but the seeds of life, healing, ideas, courage, hope and solidarity.

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The greening campaigns create the connection between environmental injustice and the erosion of social justice; the link between a healthy environment and quality of life. A tree has a right to grow to maturity, to fruit and bloom as every young life does in Mathare.

Planting trees in this spirit is more than a public relations exercise; it is work towards changing spaces so that they are less vulnerable to the elements and the forces that exploit the sense of deprivation. Importantly, it is the deliberate and conscious action of engaging in intergenerational optimism and responsibility, and accepting that we may never sit under the shade of the trees we plant.

Just as violence in Nairobi’s urban ghettos is continuous and slow, so does healing through tree planting have to be a continuous process. Urban reforestation that is people-centred is the primary symbolic vehicle for demanding ecological and social justice. The slow and deliberate effort of rehabilitating green spaces forces one to examine the systemic challenges that sustain these conditions. These young men choose to be eco-warriors, creating an enabling environment, restoring dignity and demanding the right to life from a state that minimises their existence. Wangari Maathai called it planting “seeds of peace” to stop the poverty profiling that disproportionately targets the poor. The existing structures of slow violence is why politicians consistently exploit the tensions in Nairobi’s slums during election cycles, easily igniting violence because below the surface, old antagonisms linger unresolved.

The [Chipko movement](#), which originated in the Himalayan region of Uttar Pradesh in India in the 1970s, gained notoreity as a non-violent social and ecological movement whose members protected trees by hugging them to discourage loggers.

They are no trees to hug in Mathare. However, following in the footsteps of Wangari Maathai, the young people of Mathare will one day pass down trees of peace that stand for their right to security and protection from a state that terrorises its own citizens.

The lasting solution to ending direct and indirect violence against young lives is by addressing the conditions that perpetuate the cycle of violence. Planting trees we must, but we can no longer fail to see the forest.

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