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4 At Home with Nairobi's Working Poor: Reading Meja Mwangi's Urban Novels

Introduction

The well-being of urban residents depends on access to a suitable place to live, in a healthy environment, and within reach of work opportunities and services. To ensure that adequate housing is available and that it can fulfil its potential roles in tackling poverty and increasing prosperity, *infrastructure, a flourishing urban economy, supportive social networks, and political voice are needed, as well as a house* (a dwelling and the land on which it sits).¹

These statements, with which Carole Rakodi begins a comprehensive and revealing study on gendered inequalities in access to land and housing in cities of the Global South, essentially contain a utopia that is an unredeemed fiction for the vast majority of urban populations in the so-called developing world if measured against their real living and housing conditions. The core of this utopia is “adequate housing” and its “potential roles in tackling poverty and increasing prosperity.” Apart from its central concern to make gender aspects of urban living clear, to create knowledge and awareness about inequality and to discuss effective means of overcoming these, Rakodi's report also offers an introduction to what housing means socially, economically, and symbolically: “Houses are not merely physical artefacts with practical functions and economic value. They also provide people with a sense of their own worth, enhance their sense of belonging, and empower them to act.”²

It is interesting that in the list of factors that Rakodi defines as essential for the realization of this utopia, the material and actual living space, the “house”, comes last. The “house” only makes sense in this utopia insofar as it stands and is perceived in a dynamic fabric of social, material, and political factors, as part of a network that points beyond the actual, individual living space and with which it is connected. It is also interesting that the study attaches a central role to the political voice in the implementation of the utopian potential of urban

1 Carole Rakodi, “Addressing Gendered Inequalities in Housing,” in *Gender, Asset Accumulation and Just Cities: Pathways to Transformation?*, ed. Caroline O. N. Moser (London: Routledge, 2015), 81, emphasis added.

2 Rakodi, “Addressing Gendered Inequalities in Housing,” 82.

Note: The work for this contribution was supported by the Austrian Science Fund (FWF) V 554 Richter Programme.

living space. One factor which is curiously missing in this list, but which in a way builds a bridge between the material and social dimensions of housing and the political voice, is the production of knowledge on housing conditions and on ways to improve them. In other words, between the lived and experienced realities of urban living and the political voice, which ideally represents them adequately and speaks for their improvement, processes of knowledge formation and transfer inscribe themselves as part of which Rakodi's study itself can be seen.³ Many normative assumptions exist about the living conditions of people of low income, who make up the vast majority in African larger cities. These assumptions are largely based on media representations of large "slum" areas in Asia, Africa and Latin America, and the myths they produce.⁴ In popular European discourses on Africa, the "slum" has become the epitome of urban poverty. It stands for population explosion, urban mismanagement, poverty, crime, and insurmountable problems. Some of these normative assumptions are summarized and described in the report *The Seven Myths of "Slums."*⁵ On the other hand, there are a number of efforts to break these myths, which are based on simplifying and stereotyping representations. In this article I take Rakodi's general observations on what housing means in processes of urban development as a starting point in reading two novels by the Kenyan writer Meja Mwangi, both published in the 1970s. Even though published four decades ago, these texts are still relevant in the way they tell stories of urban life from below.⁶ Listening to

3 The study is based on a commissioned review, which the author, as she mentions in the endnote, prepared for the World Bank's follow-up to the 2012 World Development Report on *Gender, Equality and Development* published in 2014 as Carole Rakodi, "Expanding Women's Access to Land and Housing in Urban Areas," in *Women's Voice, Agency, and Participation Research Series 8* (Washington, DC: World Bank Group, 2014). The annual World Development Reports inform and shape – or at least are meant to inform and shape – economic and social policies around the globe. We can describe this work as an utterance from the intersection of academic social research, political feminism, and the global governance of capitalist development. What comes across as a smooth overlapping of these three realms of knowing and speaking – in themselves further divided into a multitude of differing voices, subjectivities, and interests – circumscribes in fact a contested and loaded terrain of conflicting interests, players, and epistemologies.

4 Adam W. Parsons, *The Seven Myths of "Slums": Challenging Popular Prejudices about the World's Urban Poor* (Share the World's Resources (STWR), 2010).

5 Parsons, *The Seven Myths of "Slums."*

6 Both novels were recently re-edited in revised versions by the author. Meja Mwangi, *The Cockroach Dance* (HM Books Intl., 2013) and Meja Mwangi, *Down River Road* (HM Books Intl., 2014). This article does not provide the space to compare the original and the revised versions, although this would be an interesting study. In the revisions, Mwangi kind of "updated" the stories through inserting signifiers like mobile phones or substituting the venereal disease,

what these novels tell about houses in low-income neighborhoods in the Nairobi of the 1970s, and about the space people live in, I discuss ways in which housing in these novels emerges as a subject of narration. Furthermore, I am interested in how the novelistic representation connects to larger stories of urbanization and in what ways it contributes to understanding and reading processes of urbanization and urban development.⁷ To that aim, Mwangi's novels will be brought into dialogue with studies and debates from the fields of development studies,⁸ developmental journalism,⁹ and urban anthropology.¹⁰ In 2008, the Indian-Kenyan journalist and writer Rasna Warah published a collection of essays, most of them written by African writers, activists and intellectuals, entitled *Missionaries, Mercenaries and Misfits* to present an alternative view of the development industry in Africa. Warah herself introduces the compilation by describing her own discomfort as a member of the United Nations Human Settlements Program (UN-HABITAT), when she conducted interviews in Nairobi's largest slum settlement Kibera as part of a global slum analysis. In particular, she describes the situation with an interviewee, Mberita Katela, whose story was later published in a UN-HABITAT publication and taken up by the American author and urbanist Mike Davis for his book *Planet of Slums*.¹¹ The story, as Warah¹² explains, had thus been given credit to successfully represent the living conditions of urban poor. At

which befalls the customers of sex workers in *The Cockroach Dance*, through HIV. The fascinating thing about these revisions is that the basic plots, which remain the same, do not lose meaning in this transfer from the 1970s to the twenty-first century. Rather, they reveal that the social realities the novels portray do not make less sense today than they did 40 years ago.

7 This chapter was written in the course of a research project on concepts of development in postcolonial Kenyan writing, which I currently conduct at the University of Vienna, Department of African Studies. In this project, I investigate how Kenyan writers responded to political discourses on "development" and how they witnessed the international development industry in their writing on the one hand, while on the other hand I approach their works as a site of development theory, in the way it had been suggested by Adams and Mayes: "We can refer to concepts of 'development' for contemporary Africa drawn from the spheres of political economics and philosophy, as well as from literature itself." Anne V. Adams and Janis A. Mayes, "African Literature and Development: Mapping Intersections," in *Mapping Intersections: African Literature and Africa's Development*, ed. Anne V. Adams et al. (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1998), 4.

8 Rakodi, "Addressing Gendered Inequalities in Housing."

9 Rasna Warah, "Nairobi's Slums: Where Life for Women is Nasty, Brutish and Short," *Habitat Debate* 8/4 (2002): 16.

10 Nici Nelson, "Representations of Men and Women, City and Town in Kenyan Novels of the 1970s and 1980s," *African Languages and Cultures* 9/2 (1996).

11 Mike Davis, *Planet of Slums* (London: Verso, 2006).

12 Rasna Warah, "The Development Myth," in *Missionaries, Mercenaries and Misfits: An Anthology*, ed. Rasna Warah (Central Milton Keynes: Author House, 2008), 4.

the same time, this representation was from the outset marked by an ethical problem, which she describes as follows:

I was sub-consciously doing what many people in the so-called development industry do: I was objectifying her, seeing her as part of a problem that needed to be solved so that she could be neatly compartmentalized into a 'target group' category. This allowed me to perceive her as being 'different' from me and bestowed on her an 'otherness' that clearly placed her as my inferior, worthy of my sympathy.

My argument here is that fiction and literary analysis are means of questioning and disrupting objectifying approaches towards people in low-income livelihoods. As I will show with regard to Mwangi's novels, they do so not only on the basis of sociological information they provide – since every piece of good fiction always works with and engages with the realm of facts – but also by the very means of literary writing, allowing the reader to witness processes of urbanization through (re)created voices and subjectivities commonly excluded from or objectified in knowledge production on urban development. In the words of Jini Kim Watson, “literary and cultural texts offer a unique window onto the rich worldviews of postcolonial subjects, too often constructed as mere objects of reform.”¹³

Tracing Social and Economic Change Through City Novels: Meja Mwangi

In his book-length study on the emergence of the Nairobi city novel, Roger Kurtz understands and explains the city and the novel in postcolonial East Africa as products of the same processes of economic change.¹⁴ His comprehensive discussion of Anglophone novels from the 1960s to the 1990s shows how challenges, problems, and perspectives of urbanization in post-independence Kenya have been continually reflected in the development of the urban novel as a genre. Reading the city through the novel and vice versa, he summarizes the most significant influences that characterize both as “the fundamental

¹³ Jini Kim Watson, “‘We Want You to Ask Us First’: Development, International Aid and the Politics of Indebtedness,” in *Negotiating Normativity: Postcolonial Appropriations, Contestations, and Transformations*, ed. Nikita Dhawan et al. (Switzerland: Springer International Publishing, 2016), 241.

¹⁴ John Roger Kurtz, *Urban Obsessions, Urban Fears: The Postcolonial Kenyan Novel* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, 1998).

experience of the colonial encounter, the political reality of the East-West superpower conflict and its aftermath, the economic constraints of international capital, and the underlying heritage of indigenous African traditions.” These impacts “overlay, interweave and swirl together in fascinating and chaotic ways. City and novel are products of these realities and their interactions. City and novel – *the constructed environment and the creative environment* – at the same time influence and shape those interactions.”¹⁵

One author who captured this conjunction of the constructed environment and the creative environment in his writing like few others before was Meja Mwangi with his early Nairobi trilogy *Kill Me Quick*,¹⁶ *Going Down River Road*,¹⁷ and *The Cockroach Dance*.¹⁸ Mwangi strongly contributed to the popularization of Anglophone writing in East Africa in the 1970s and to moving it out of academic circles. His name is tightly connected with the postcolonial urban novel – “postcolonial” here understood not as a temporal, but as an analytical category for textual and narrative strategies moving beyond the legacies of cultural colonization¹⁹ – and a new type of character described as the “Mwangian man”, usually a young, urban, well-educated man who subsists on poorly paid jobs or tries to get his share of the unequally distributed wealth through criminal and criminalized action.²⁰ This character is the main focalizer in Mwangi’s Nairobi trilogy, portraying lives in unstable and informal working and housing conditions at the margins of global and national capitalist market economies. For reasons of space, we put our focus on the latter two novels of the trilogy. What makes them particularly interesting here is that they both use houses as central signifiers and paradigms for different faces of urban development: the “Development House” in *Going Down River Road* and the “Dacca House” in *The Cockroach Dance*. The “Development House” in *Going Down River Road* is a twenty-five-story commercial building whose construction forms the plot of the novel. As a metaphor, it stands for the unreconciled division between labor and capitalist growth in

¹⁵ Kurtz, *Urban Obsessions*, 7–8, emphasis added.

¹⁶ Meja Mwangi, *Kill Me Quick* (London: Heinemann Educational, 1973).

¹⁷ Meja Mwangi, *Going Down River Road* (London; Nairobi; Ibadan; Lusaka: Heinemann, 1976).

¹⁸ Meja Mwangi, *The Cockroach Dance* (Nairobi: Longman, 1979). The novel was first published in 1979 by Longman, Nairobi. All quotations in this book chapter refer to the re-edition in the Longman African classics series, published in 1989.

¹⁹ Stuart Hall, “When Was ‘The Post-Colonial’? Thinking at the Limit,” in *The Postcolonial Question: Common Skies, Divided Horizons*, ed. Iain Chambers et al. (London: Routledge, 1996), 242–260.

²⁰ Kurtz, *Urban Obsessions*. Tom Odhiambo, “Kenyan Popular Fiction in English and the Melodramas of the Underdog,” *Research in African Literatures* 39/4 (2008).

Kenya after independence. Looking at capitalist development from the perspective of the construction workers, Mwangi creates “development” as a narrative space where class distinctions and unequal distribution of wealth and power become manifest. The construction site emerges as a microcosm which reflects hierarchies of class, “race”, and gender in post-independence Nairobi.²¹

The “Dacca House” of *The Cockroach Dance*, in contrast, is a shabby and heavily overpriced residential house. The building is home to a crowd of people representing diverse faces and stories of urban survival in a rundown neighborhood in Nairobi. Through the novel, the story evokes the development of a private housing market for Africans moving to Nairobi in the 1960s and 1970s. Housing and living conditions at the lower ranks of the urban society had already been a major concern in *Going Down River Road*. In *The Cockroach Dance*, Mwangi moves this theme to the center of the novel, making also visible how closely interrelated these two stories – the story of post-independence capitalist development and the story of urban housing – have been.

Households Found Down River Road

Addressing gendered inequalities in access to land and housing in the Global South, Rakodi²² takes issue with the category of the “household”. Conventional analyses of the roles housing plays in livelihood strategies – thus her critique – focus on households, lacking interest in and understanding of the complex, diverse, and changing social relationships which become objectified and rendered invisible in the seemingly neutral concept of the “household”. In fact, the author foregrounds her argument for a gender-sensitive approach in planning and evaluating measures of urban housing with an epistemological problem, captured in the sober statement: “Problems arise when the concept of a ‘household’ is taken to be unproblematic.” She responds to that problem arguing that “[p]atterns of social relations within and beyond the households in which people live are key to both understanding gender inequalities in access to and control over real property and explaining the outcomes of urban policies and reforms.”²³ Opening up the concept of the “household”, her work challenges the assumption of universally practicable measures and abstract

²¹ Martina Kopf, “Encountering Development in East African Fiction,” *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 54, no. 3 (2019).

²² Rakodi, “Addressing Gendered Inequalities in Housing,” 82.

²³ Rakodi, “Addressing Gendered Inequalities in Housing,” 82.

solutions, creating instead a highly diversified narrative of access to and control over land and houses, varying enormously between households, cities, and countries.

If we want to take a non-normative look at patterns of social relations within and beyond households, it is instructive to turn to Meja Mwangi's novels. *Going Down River Road* covers a period of about two to three years during which Ben, the central character, changes place several times. There are a couple of diverse household constellations portrayed in the novel, and none of them fits into normative family schemes.

The first picture of Nairobi which the novel shows is a single room, modestly furnished with a bed, a baby's crib, a bedside table, a paraffin stove, and a transistor radio, in a residential house with toilets and a shower room shared by all tenants. It is, as we learn later, Wini's flat, located in Ngara, a lower middle-income neighborhood, two miles from the city center. Wini is a young woman who the protagonist Ben meets in a bar on the day of his release from a white-collar job. At the time, she lives in the flat with her four-year-old son, Baby, whom she gave birth to as a teenage mother at the age of 14. After Wini's friend, with whom she shared the room, got married, she finances the rent – as she openly admits to Ben – through relationships with men she meets in bars. These facts make her a whore in Ben's perception – through which the story is largely focalized. However, this does not prevent him from moving in with her and her son Baby a little later. Ben's moving occurs in parallel to his social decline from a former soldier and later employee of an insurance company, which he has to leave due to his involvement in an armed robbery, to a cheap contract worker on a construction site. The first household of which the novel draws a picture thus is managed and financed by an African woman in her early twenties, a mother who works as a secretary for a private company and attends further training in the evening to improve her position.

Ben contributes – as the novel suggests – nothing or in any case not enough to the household income. In fact, it is Wini who gives him accommodation and lodging and who supports him while he is in vain looking for a job.²⁴ The constellation lasts for about two years, during which Wini finances the rent not only with her income from the company, but also through occasional sex with the landlord and a relationship with her white superior. Ben only finds out about her arrangement with the landlord after Wini, pregnant by her superior, leaves him and her first son to marry the father of her second child. Only then, when he has to interact with the landlord on his own and tries to obtain

²⁴ Mwangi, *Going Down River Road*, 3.

postponement of rent, does he gain clarity about it and the sensitive reader becomes aware of Wini's previous distress. I say "the sensitive reader" because the novel offers little reason to empathize with the female protagonist. Rather, filtered through Ben's perception and his masculinist attitude, she embodies a morally at least ambiguous, if not ruthlessly upward, mobility.

Ocholla, Ben's friend and buddy at the construction site, lives in a shack. This becomes the subject of a short dialogue for the first time in the novel, when Ben, after one of the many evening boozes with Ocholla, thinks it is time to go home, and the latter replies that he no longer has a home because his shack was burned down by the City Council. Ocholla is a Luo worker, whose two wives with their children continue to live in the village. The two households – Ocholla's single shack and the polygamous household of his wives – remain connected through Ocholla's increasingly rare visits and through his wives' letters and their repeated demands to receive a share of his wage. After Wini's disappearance – explained only later through a letter left at the office for Ben to find, in which she asked him to bring her son to an orphanage and enclosed a check to provide for the costs – Ben and Baby continue to live in the one-room-flat until they are being evicted, ostensibly for renting without contract but more likely for the landlord to upgrade the room for higher rent. With Wini's check flushed down the toilet in an outburst of anger, Ben and Baby remain without shelter. After trying in vain to leave the crying child with an elderly woman who works as a vegetable hawker and lives next door, Ben takes the boy with him. With their nightly walk along the Nairobi River to the shanty town – as it is referred to in the novel – where Ocholla lives, and the lights of the distant downtown in their backs, the novel creates a powerful image of a silent exodus, signifying a further social decline.

After the loss of Wini's room, Ocholla's shack becomes the new home for the protagonist. The two men and the boy share the narrow, single space of the shack built on bare earth, described as follows: "The small hut is bare of furniture. Ocholla's few bits of clothing hang from nails on the walls. At one end near the smouldering fire is the crockery, a few tin mugs and utensils and a collection of bottles of various shapes and sizes. On the other side are the rags spread out to make a bed."²⁵

Interestingly, in Mwangi's narration this male-only household becomes more of a home to the protagonist than any other household constellation in the novel, finding expression in shared warm meals of *Sukuma Wiki*²⁶ in the

²⁵ Mwangi, *Going Down River Road*, 162.

²⁶ Swahili expression for a leafy green vegetable and Kenyan staple diet, literally translated as "pushing the week".

evening, the child ultimately stopping to urinate on the sleeping mat at night, and the two men suspending their disastrous drinking tours – getting drunk on cheap, high-percentage alcohol outside the shack – and being with the boy instead, sleeping next to them.

The household constellation is short-lived. Its first, abrupt, end comes one morning when the health police knock on the door, ask the residents to immediately clear the shack and burn down the entire shanty town, allegedly for being built on land owned by the City Council. The evening of the same day, Ocholla and Ben rebuild a less solid version of the shack out of the remains. The second, permanent, end arrives when shortly after Ocholla's wives stand in front of the door, their small belongings and their children with them. They had been forced to leave the village after a drought and a cattle disease had taken all their livestock and supplies. The crisis their arrival means to the male-only household is vividly brought across in the following lines:

Ben eats slowly, thoughtfully. He is not going to let anyone's family ruin his dinner. He tries not to look directly at the famished eyes all on his family meal. Then he starts to get embarrassed by all those little eyes glued to his plate. Finally he becomes infuriated, offensive. He dislikes them, almost hates them. They have no right to lock in on his hut like this, violate the peace and quiet. And did they have to come so many, all of them. Did they have to come at all? Bitches! Ocholla struggles on, determined not to let them run him down. He is clearly not allowing them to drag him into the urine-sodden family swamp. 'Don't tread on my bed,' Baby orders an emaciated child lost in the background gloom. The little girl has no idea that the rags she is standing on are Baby's territorial grounds and must not be trespassed upon.²⁷

For a brief period, the shack of the size which was originally meant to shelter one man takes in the latter's workmate, a motherless child, one elder, and one younger woman with an unidentified number of children, among them three babies. The situation erupts into a conflict between the two very different and competing household constellations that cluster in the narrow square. For a period of three months they find an arrangement to coexist on the grounds that each party expects the other to leave. Both Ben and the two women put pressure on Ocholla, who is torn between the demands of his friend and those of his wives, but finally chooses his wives and children. At the end of the novel it is clear to Ben that he has to find a new place to live for himself and Wini's son, whom he now finances to attend school. That his living situation will improve socially in comparison to that of Ocholla and his family can be assumed from the different incomes that the two friends disclose to each other at the end:

²⁷ Mwangi, *Going Down River Road*, 185.

Ben, promoted to foreman, receives a wage increase of 50 Kenyan shillings, while that of Ocholla is only ten shillings, which, as he bitterly comments, makes about a tenth of what would make a meaningful family income.

What can we read from the novelistic representation of these constellations? On the level of content, the novel makes a statement on African lower income livelihoods in post-independent Nairobi which contains in a nutshell the following social diagnosis: first, none of the protagonists' formal wage work creates the income that would afford him or her decent housing. Secondly, housing means for the protagonists a source of constant stress and strain. On the one hand, this concerns the quality of living space – represented by smells, the lack and malfunctioning of sanitary services and narrowness – and on the other hand this concerns the precariousness and instability of housing, as a consequence of insecure tenancies, the illegalization of housing and the resulting threat of eviction. The third observation which can be drawn from the novel is that a “household” is not a stable but a fluid, dynamic category. Fourth, if we think of the peaceful image the novel draws of Ben's living in the shack with Ocholla and Baby, what makes a house a “home” is not only determined by material factors but by the quality of the social relationships between those who inhabit it.

Housing Madness: *The Cockroach Dance*

In *The Cockroach Dance* Mwangi moves the issue of housing to the center of the narrative. In fact, the novel has two central protagonists: Dusman Gonzaga, another version of the angry young, educated African man who struggles for a living in the economy of urban capitalist development, and “Dacca House”, the block he lives in. Rather than the story of individuals, *The Cockroach Dance* sets out to narrate the story of an urban habitat, which right from the beginning of the novel is given a personality of its own. Even before the reader meets any of the novel's characters, she is introduced to the violence of the material structure which shapes and dominates their lives. The novel starts with a detailed and sensual account of what it feels, smells, and sounds like to wake up on an ordinary morning in an overcrowded one-story building, with one toilet and one shower shared among an estimated crowd of 200 tenants and a motor garage on the ground floor.

There is no dawn in Dacca House. The new day arrives abruptly, unheralded, with a violence like that of a small earthquake, a sudden explosion that lasts all day. The tenants are all inveterate early risers. Most of them rise, almost before they have slept, in a vain attempt to beat the rush for the one cold shower in the block. . . The others, the numerous faceless

ones, turn their radios on full blast and go resolutely back to sleep until the queue outside the shower room has dwindled sufficiently to allow for a quick shower. Thus long before the rest of Grogan Road starts stirring from sleep, Dacca House is fully engaged in the helpless process of existing – frying pans locked horns with the perpetual odour issuing with an almost audible hiss from the overflowing garbage cans and the toilet out in the yard.²⁸

The “Dacca House” of the novel offers a window into the history of urban settlement and of social and ethnic stratification at the shore of the Nairobi river. Originally, the fictional house was built by Kachra Samat, an Indian immigrant who came as a railway worker to Kenya during the reign of the British Empire. With other compatriots, he settled down on land granted to them by the colonial government and built the house as a one-floor building, with a drapery store selling Indian textiles on the ground floor and 15 rooms for his extensive family on the upper floor. Mwangi describes the building in great detail, its L-shape giving every room a door and a window opening into the yard, and connecting doors between all the rooms.²⁹ With increasing wealth and the removal of *de jure* racial segregation in independent Kenya, the Indian families moved to the formerly whites-only suburbs, leaving Grogan Road to a steadily growing African population. The neighborhood had in the meantime lost attraction to the wealthy, with the moving in of motor garages and the increasing pollution of the river through lack of canalization. Samat eventually sells the house to Tumbo Kubwa, meaning “big belly” in Swahili,³⁰ an African businessman who sees his chance in the residential needs of the quickly growing African population. The novel makes of this change of ownership an ardent critique of a rising African capitalist upper class in independent Kenya taking advantage of their entry into the urban housing market:

Tumbo Kubwa was one of the first few Africans ever to open their eyes after the long slumber induced on the natives by colonialism. As soon as he realised that the winds of change and fortune were blowing hard, he unfurled his creased sails and struck out into the future of property investment. Roving on Grogan Road, his eyes landed on Kachra Samat’s building. At once he saw the potential that lay behind the humble, cracked facade of Dacca House. Buried inside the mottled concrete walls were hundreds of thousands of easy shillings. All he had to do was get together his resources and borrow a little from the newly-formed, non-discriminatory credit companies.³¹

²⁸ Mwangi, *The Cockroach Dance*, s.n.

²⁹ Mwangi, *The Cockroach Dance*, 79.

³⁰ As in many of his novels, Meja Mwangi names his novel characters ironically with Swahili expressions as a means of characterization.

³¹ Mwangi, *The Cockroach Dance*, 83.

Immediately after the bargain the new landlord expels the Indian tenants from the house and gets a handful of contract workers to remake the building. Once they finished their job, the original 15 rooms had been turned into 30 single rooms, with one shared toilet and shower in the courtyard, and the previous bathroom turned into a flat as well. Mwangi paints a vivid picture of the day a mass of new tenants move in, scrambling for the rooms.³² Even before the renovations had been finished, the whole house was rented out, with some flats promised to more than one tenant. Without having done any advertisement, the new landlord leaves the place at the end of the day, making ten times the amount out of it the former proprietor had collected each month.

Besides evoking the history of African urban settlement in Nairobi, the "Dacca House" also represents the emergence of a particular modern African urban identity. This is achieved most vividly in a scene at a police station when Dusman is asked to identify himself during an interrogation:

'Home address?'

'Dacca House,' Dusman said.

They all looked up at him the inspector with a curious frown while the constable scowled angrily.

'Dacca what?' he yelled.

'House,' Dusman said calmly. . . .

'Home address.' The constable banged the desk with his fist so hard the station vibrated and the inspector looked down with disapproval.

The detective inspector had great self control.

. . .

'What he wants,' he said to Dusman, 'is your home address in the country.'

'I live in Dacca House,' Dusman said to him. 'I have no other home.'

. . .

'Where do your parents live?'

'They are dead.'

'Where did they live?'

'What does it matter where they lived,' Dusman said. 'My home is in Dacca House, Grogan Road. Haven't you guys ever heard of an urban African? I am one!'

. . .

The inspector looked him up and down and nodded to himself.

'What tribe are you?' he asked finally.

'It makes no difference,' Dusman said.

'Tribal origin?'

'What difference does it make?' Dusman asked. 'I have to be plotted out on a map like a bloody hill or a river? . . .'³³

³² Mwangi, *The Cockroach Dance*, 85.

³³ Mwangi, *The Cockroach Dance*, 335–336.

The dialogue is interesting on more than one level. We can read it as a sign of civil resistance against a power regime that survived from colonial rule to the postcolonial state. Just as *Going Down River Road* bears witness to colonial patterns of labor migration being continued as part of postcolonial capitalist development, this scene in *The Cockroach Dance* testifies to the continued restriction of urban space for Africans in the Nairobi of independence. In *Going Down River Road*, the living conditions of the workers – represented by Ocholla – are characterized by the illegalization and precarization of housing. Ocholla retains the status of a migrant in his own country, whose polygamous family continues to live in the country and is largely responsible for its own subsistence. Neither he nor the extended household of which he remains a part are meant to stay in the city beyond the limited period of his work contracts. In *The Cockroach Dance* Dusman reclaims that urban space as his home, thereby resisting the construction of African identity as primordially rooted in rural society and tribal culture.

Like in *Going Down River Road*, Mwangi focalizes the plot almost entirely through the eyes of the main character, Dusman Gonzaga. As readers, hence, we experience this story of urban housing through the eyes and senses of those who people the narrative. More than in the previous novel, in *The Cockroach Dance* Mwangi leaves the realistic narrative mode and works with hyperbole and satire. Dusman, the protagonist, works at the City Council and reads parking meters. Everything drives him mad: his job; the cockroaches that at night invade the shabby room he shares with Toto, a bank employee, and swarm in a choreography he tries to make sense of; the behavior of the other tenants; their efforts to organize a private life in the absurdly narrow and overcrowded space; their vain attempts of having a sexual life in some sort of intimacy. His madness culminates in his daily encounter with a tenant who everyone just calls “the Bathroom Man”. The young man shares with his wife and a mentally disabled child the room that used to be the bathroom in the former house and was converted into a single flat by the landlord. The windowless room offers just enough space for the one bed the whole family sleeps in – brought into the room with utter effort – and is next to the block’s only toilet. The violence inherent in the housing situation is reflected in the unsettling effect it produces on Dusman’s mind. What his social environment increasingly declares him mad for, however, are not so much his violent outbursts of anger but the questions he asks. With these questions, which revolve around the existence of the tenants, Mwangi opens up a reflective space within the narration. This level of reflection is further enhanced by dialogues with a white psychiatrist, Dr. Bates, whom the protagonist pays regular visits at the instigation of his superior. Throughout the narration Dusman confronts the doctor with an epistemological

problem, which is also a deeply humanist problem, caused by his living next door to the Bathroom Man and his family. Dusman repeatedly addresses the problem these inhuman living conditions pose to him as a daily witness:

'You ... you don't understand,' he [Dusman, MK] said gravely, 'You just don't understand.' Dusman was almost certain now. He would never get one honest answer to his numerous questions. Questions that had plagued him ever since he moved into Dacca House and met the Bathroom Man. Questions like – before he became the Bathroom Man, what was he? Who was he? And what would he become if he tired of, and quit being the Bathroom Man? Would he ever quit it? What was he really like behind that subdued black face of his? What did he say to his wife when they retreated into the bathroom when he loved her? [...] Did he kiss her, [...] promise to some day take her out of the lonely bathroom into the bigger rooms with the rest of the human race? What did he really say to her? Did he talk to her at all? Did he ever... play with his soft-brained off-spring? Did it ever ask, or even wonder why they lived alone in a bathroom by the smelly toilet?³⁴

These questions could well be at the beginning of an anthropological or journalistic study on the living conditions of working poor in Nairobi. In the novel, however, they have a different function. First and foremost, they lead us away from reading the text exclusively as a source of information, as a simple description of a social reality. Instead, they open additional levels of meaning, inviting to be read in more than one way. Through these questions, the narrative makes those of whom it speaks subjects not only of their actions, but also of their knowledge of themselves and the conditions of their existence.

Let us turn again to the ethical problem Rasna Warah described when researching her study of housing conditions in Kibera. In a retrospective reflection she problematized the research situation which foregrounded her study:

As I sat on one of two small stools in Mberita's tiny wattle, daub and tin shack – which was only marginally bigger than my bathroom at home – I found myself asking her the most intimate details about her life, questions that I myself would not have entertained: what she ate for breakfast, how many people she shared her shack with and, most important of all, where she defecated. Through this exercise, I found out that she shared one stinking pit latrine with some 100 of her neighbours and that the latrine was located less than 10 metres from her shack, which she shared with her daughter and two grandchildren.³⁵

The article based on that interview had been published under the title "Nairobi's Slums: Where Life for Women is Nasty, Brutish, and Short."³⁶ With regard to the information it gives, this article is comparable to Mwangi's novels. It describes in

³⁴ Mwangi, *The Cockroach Dance*, 137–138.

³⁵ Warah, "The Development Myth," 3.

³⁶ Warah, "Nairobi's Slums."

detail and seemingly comprehensible to the reader a typical daily routine in the life of a resident of Kibera, who maintains herself and her children through the trade of *sukuma wiki* and cigarettes. In her later critique of the generation of knowledge in the development industry she herself was part of when writing the article, Warah was going to trial with her work stricter than she had to. The article is brief, sober, and it speaks of the effort to present the living and working situation of a woman who lives and survives under extreme conditions based on the material facts in as much detail as possible. Other than Warah's self-criticism would suggest, the text shows nothing of a patronizing attitude and, on the contrary, portrays without judging. However, while her narrative represents a massive social, political, and human problem, the narration itself is apparently unproblematic. It leaves the reader with the impression that she had been given an adequate representation. What has disappeared from it is Mberita Katela as an acting, speaking, and thinking subject, as well as any awareness of the fact that her existence raises questions that lead and must lead to the limits of understanding. In other words, the text in UN-HABITAT, which had been received as a successful representation of urban poverty, did not offer the epistemological tools neither for the writer nor for the reader to meaningfully contain the ethical and epistemological problem which form necessarily part of the representation.

The novelistic dialogues between Dusman and Dr. Baker in *The Cockroach Dance* – all their seeming irony and absurdity notwithstanding – fulfil this function. In his sessions with Dr. Baker, Dusman repeatedly tries to explain what living in Dacca House means for the tenants. He tries to make meaning out of their experience and he tries to convey this meaning to the other – in this case represented by the white doctor – which is basically what fiction and narrative do: giving meaning to the realities people live with. From Dusman's perspective this conversation is from the outset limited by an imbalance: the doctor *thinks* he can understand Dusman's story from what he knows, while Dusman *knows* of the limits of the doctor's knowledge. The conversation forms a metatext to the actual plot by means of which the narration points to the incommensurability of the social reality it portrays. What returns in these dialogues is the communicative situation described by Warah above, which gives rise to the bulk of representations of marginalized people in canonical development literature.

All Households are Gendered

We started our reflection on how Mwangi's novels can contribute to understanding the housing conditions of Nairobi's working poor and to asking the

right questions with Rakodi's report on gendered inequalities in urban housing. The question which inevitably arises from this starting point is how do the novels deal with gendered inequalities? One dimension that we have only touched on so far, but that is fundamental to any understanding of how social relations interfere with and shape urban housing, is the simple fact that – as Rakodi³⁷ states – all households are gendered. We can make the same observation for the novel: all novels are gendered. This is also and especially true of Mwangi's urban novels. The identities of his male protagonists – like Ben and Ocholla in *Going Down River Road* as well as Dusman and his roommate Toto in *The Cockroach Dance* – are strongly defined through their notions of masculinity and their macho attitude towards women.

In an interesting study Nici Nelson³⁸ – urban anthropologist and former consultant of development and aid agencies in East Africa with a focus on gender and development, urban livelihoods in the informal sector, marriage and households – compared Nairobi city novels of the 1970s, including Mwangi's texts, with the self-representations of low-income women in Mathare Valley. In her study, Nelson describes Mathare Valley as an “informal sector’ suburb”, the women she interviewed made their living as “hawkers, street cleaners, barmaids, house servants, sex workers or beer brewers.”³⁹

In 1970s Kenya the discourse on women in the city was, as Nelson states, mainly defined by three stereotypes, showing the urban woman either as “wicked”, as “competent” or as “betrayed”.⁴⁰ She particularly takes issue with the stereotype of the “wicked woman”, which represented urban women as corrupt, promiscuous, and self-centered. As Nelson notes, this was a widespread discourse at the time: “This [the ‘wicked urban woman’ representation, MK] was a very common representation of urban women in Kenya in this period. The letters to the editor of newspapers, the pronouncements of politicians and the discourses of ordinary so-called respectable people all created and recreated this stereotype.”⁴¹

Nelson notes that popular discourse among the Mathare dwellers was similar to the discourse in media and fiction with regard to its dominating themes, namely gender relations and their transformation through urbanization and rural exodus. They differed, however, in their assessments of urban women. Her interviewees sharply rejected the “wicked urban woman” stereotype,

37 Rakodi, “Addressing Gendered Inequalities in Housing,” 81.

38 Nelson, “Representations of Men and Women,” 145–168.

39 Nelson, “Representations of Men and Women,” 162.

40 Nelson, “Representations of Men and Women,” 147–151.

41 Nelson, “Representations of Men and Women,” 162.

which became most evident in differing assessments of commercialized sex: “They certainly defined urban women as hard-working, reliable, independent and strong. Sex work was cleared of all immoral connotations. It was referred to as ‘selling from one’s kiosk’, a reference to owning a small shop. To put it another way, they were defining sex work as the commercialization of one of the reproductive roles of wives.”⁴²

Nelson explains the normative power of the “wicked urban woman” stereotype with the rapid social and economic changes that Kenya underwent during this period and with the fact that women in the cities increasingly became rivals to men in terms of jobs and income. According to her interpretation, Mwangi’s novels nourished this stereotype in being heavily biased in their portrayal of women.

In fact, gender discourse in Mwangi’s novels is more complex than Nelson’s interpretation would suggest, and – what makes it particularly interesting with regard to the subject of urban housing – this discourse altered from the earlier novel *Going Down River Road* to its sequel *The Cockroach Dance*. If we compare the two texts with regard to their central female characters, we will notice that in *Going Down River Road* they have a voice and they are agents of change. This is especially true of Wini and Ocholla’s wives. Wini is a strong and contradictory character who speaks in her own voice. Ocholla’s wives, too, unfold a strong presence. They support each other, oppose the will of their husband, move to Nairobi on their own initiative, claim their space in the shack that Ocholla and Ben built for themselves and immediately take action to create their own income. Even though their representation is filtered through Ben and Ocholla’s masculinist gaze, these literary portrayals reveal the initiative and agency of African women of lower income with which they countered the structural restrictions on their urban existence imposed by colonial and sexist legislation in Nairobi. The novel, biased as it may be, nevertheless includes a narrative of the particular struggle that women had to fight in order to stand their ground in poor urban livelihoods, which they did sometimes alongside with African men, sometimes in dependence and conflict with them, sometimes in open resistance.⁴³ In *The Cockroach Dance*, however, this narrative has almost disappeared, erased from the fictional plot. When it comes to the representation of female agency *The Cockroach Dance* falls behind Mwangi’s earlier novel *Going Down River Road*.

⁴² Nelson, “Representations of Men and Women,” 163.

⁴³ These particular struggles of women have been increasingly acknowledged and brought to the fore through feminist research since the 1980s (see for instance White’s book-length study on prostitution in colonial Nairobi). Luise White, *The Comforts of Home: Prostitution in Colonial Nairobi* (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 1990).

This is all the more remarkable since the later novel, when read against the wider history of urban settlement by the marginalized African population in post-independent Nairobi, captures moments of transition from individual suffering and discontent to collective struggle and resistance: The cure Dusman eventually finds for his madness is that he tries to initiate a rent boycott, and the novel has one of its major turning points when the Bathroom Man, the embodiment of silent endurance, decides to join the petition and puts his name under it. This act of self-representation is accompanied by the following dialogue:

'Where did you learn to write like that?' Dusman marvelled.

'I was an apprentice at a village polytechnic,' he said slightly uncomfortably.

I will be damned, Dusman thought. Who could ever have guessed.

'They threw me out before the end of the course,' the Bathroom Man said.

'Why?'

'I made a girl pregnant.'

Dusman looked up smiling, surprised.

'My wife,' the Bathroom Man said quickly.

Having said more than he had ever said to a neighbour before in his life, the Bathroom Man was confused and a little embarrassed. But he was not afraid any more. He would never be afraid again. He returned Dusman's pen and without another word went back to his room.⁴⁴

With the development of the Bathroom Man, the novel describes the coming into being of a political voice, which, as we remember, is one of the factors which Rakodi defines as essential for housing to fulfill its potential roles in tackling poverty and increasing prosperity. The novel accords this development, however, solely to the male subject; the agent of change is clearly and solely male. The female subject in the novel, the Bathroom Man's wife – although she plays a significant role throughout the narration – remains silent, without a voice of her own. Her story remains represented in her husband's narration, and at no point is she given a voice and a subjectivity for self-representation. This becomes most evident in the last scene, showing Dusman during an invitation for dinner with the couple, who finally succeeded in leaving the turned-into-rental-property, windowless bathroom behind and moving to a larger room in the same block:

Too excited to eat herself, the woman served the men then shyly turned her attention to other things while they ate. She did not speak unless spoken to. She was a very pretty woman, more beautiful than she had appeared from outside the bathroom house. When Dusman finally belched and thanked her for the tastiest meal he had had for a long while, the woman's face lit up like a lamp and he was very happy both for her and her

44 Mwangi, *The Cockroach Dance*, 381.

husband. She was a full woman now, accomplished by the fact that she now had a house to live in, to clean and spend the day in, and to invite friends to. They were a genuinely happy couple.⁴⁵

This social utopia – and it must be understood as a utopia, since even though the couple succeeded in moving to a better room, the general living conditions in the block give hardly reason to believe that it would make anyone happy to spend the day in – thus clearly marks a regression with regard to women's voices and subjectivities in the larger story of urban housing. To illustrate this, let us once again turn to the earlier novel, *Going Down River Road*, where Wini, right from the first chapter, is given a voice to speak and to represent her story, fragmented though, in dialogue with Ben:

'Where do you live?' Ben asked.
 'Ngara. You?'
 'In town.'
 'Where in town?'
 'River Road.' ...
 'Good house.'
 'Not too bad,' he said, having in mind the roach epidemic and the blocked toilet.
 'I would love to live in town,' she dropped.
 ...
 'Do you live alone?' he asked. She nodded.
 'I used to live with a friend and split the rent. She got married.'
 'And how do you pay the rent now?'
 'From men. Men like you.'
 'Do they pay a lot?'
 She smiled slyly.
 'It depends.'
 'On what?'
 'On whether I like them or not.'⁴⁶

This dialogue in a nightclub is followed by a night spent together in Ben's flat, after which Wini reveals to him that she is a mother. Again, the novelistic account allows her to give a version which subverts the stereotype of the "wicked urban woman", which Nelson identified in her study:

'You have a child?' he asked soberly.
 'Four years old.'
 'But you are hardly. . . it is unbelievable.'
 'I was fourteen, still in school,' she said and shrugged. 'I was so scared having a baby.'
 ...

⁴⁵ Mwangi, *The Cockroach Dance*, 383.

⁴⁶ Mwangi, *Going Down River Road*, 15.

'My boyfriend was not even interested,' she added, 'men are such brutes. He just ran off and never came back to see the fruit of his beautiful labour. He was so scared too. It is surprising how men are afraid of nothing until a baby threatens. You should have seen his face when I told him.'⁴⁷

As it becomes evident in these brief passages, the devaluing portrayal of women pointed out by Nelson is counter-balanced by the self-representation of female characters. This self-representation, however, is getting weaker in the later novel. If we juxtapose the two main female characters – Wini in *Going Down River Road* and the Bathroom Man's wife in *The Cockroach Dance* – we notice how one speaks while the other remains silent and shy. Both were teenage mothers and each leads a life of utter harshness in the respective novel. The difference lies in the concept of a household which is conveyed through them. Wini embodies a self-determined and self-financed access to housing. The other, tellingly nameless woman is represented as a "housewife". The change in the novels' gender discourse thus bears witness to the adoption of a Western role model by an emerging African urban middle class, the married "housewife" who unites patriarchal values from her culture of origin and from Western modernity. While *Going Down River Road* is still relatively revealing about the struggles women from lower income groups have led in Nairobi's poor livelihoods, these struggles – and with them, female agency – are pushed to the margin in *The Cockroach Dance*. We find an echo of this struggle in the nameless sex workers, the "amazons" – as they are referred to in the novel – with whom Dusman and his roommate Toto literally lead physical fights. With the Bathroom Man's wife, however, a type of womanhood – the urban middle-class "housewife" – moves to the center of the narration that did not exist in the previous novel. In *The Cockroach Dance* we find a consolidation of gender roles linked to the desired consolidation of housing.

Conclusion

With this discussion of Meja Mwangi's Nairobi novels we intended to show the potentials of fiction to testify to the living and working conditions that characterize the daily struggle for the life and survival of the vast majority of men and women in African metropolises. Our focus was on the two novels *Going Down River Road* and *The Cockroach Dance* as two examples from African fiction, which tell the story of urban livelihoods from below. We analyzed the two

⁴⁷ Mwangi, *Going Down River Road*, 24.

novels under three aspects: first, at the level of sociological information they provide, we described the household constellations reflected in *Going Down River Road*. Second, in the section “Housing Madness” our interest was in the particular modes of literary representation, and third, we took issue with the novels’ discourse on gender. On the level of content, the novels open up the social dynamics of living space shared among the sexes and generations. Read as a source of knowledge the novels go beyond being mere reflections or documentations of social facts, however. As we showed with regard to their narrative strategies, they constitute creative responses to the social imbalances they witness. In Mwangi’s novels, we encounter socially and economically marginalized people neither as a target group nor as objects of reform. We do not encounter them as part of a problem, nor does the narrative take a charitable or patronizing attitude towards them. Third, by means of feminist analysis, we have pointed out that although the novels break down normative approaches to low-income livelihoods on the one hand, they transport gender ideologies on the other hand through which they themselves generate gender stereotypes that ultimately determine unequal access to housing. In academic research, we can look at these stories in terms of “what” they tell about the history of urbanization. We can also look at them, however – as Nancy Rose Hunt suggests in her methodological approach to fiction as a source of knowledge in historical and social sciences – in terms of the questions they pose.⁴⁸

If we look at African writing with an interest in urban development in mind, we will find an abundance of stories that runs through them, capturing how people have witnessed processes of urbanization. The story of housing is one key experience in that. With a look at the classics of twentieth-century African novels, reflections of urban housing range from the portrait of Igbo-neighborhoods in Lagos in the 1940s in Buchi Emecheta’s *Joys of Motherhood*⁴⁹ to the racially segregated township in Dambudzo Marechera’s *House of Hunger*⁵⁰ or Yvonne Vera’s *Butterfly Burning*⁵¹; from urban homelessness in Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye’s *Street Life*⁵² up to the depiction of African migrants’ livelihoods in Alexandria, Johannesburg in Binyavanga Wainaina’s *One Day I Will Write About*

48 Nancy Rose Hunt, “Between Fiction and History: Modes of Writing Abortion in Africa,” *Cahiers d’études africaines* 186 (2007).

49 Buchi Emecheta, *The Joys of Motherhood* (London: Heinemann, 1980).

50 Dambudzo Marechera, *House of Hunger: Short Stories* (London: Heinemann Educational, 1978).

51 Yvonne Vera, *Butterfly Burning* (Harare, Zimbabwe: Baobab Books, 1998).

52 Marjorie Oludhe Macgoye, *Street Life* (Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers, 1993).

This Place.⁵³ It is a story of urban housing narrated from inside perspectives, informed by autobiographical knowledge⁵⁴ and/or careful research.⁵⁵ Contrasting with the utter scarcity of material wealth and space, which housing in urban areas continues to mean for a vast majority of people, African writing offers an abundance of stories and cultural representations reflecting on the past and presence of urban living. Fiction and narrative provide a medium to “develop” individual and collective experiences, to uncover the resilience, creativities, and desires they contain and to translate them into knowledge. This richness of lived and reflected experience is currently gaining ground and importance through the digital transformation of African writing and the new opportunities for publishing it provides.⁵⁶

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53 Binyavanga Wainaina, *One Day I Will Write About This Place* (London: Granta, 2011).

54 Marechera, *House of Hunger*; Wainaina, *One Day I Will Write About This Place*.

55 Vera, *Butterfly Burning*; Macgoye, *Street Life*.

56 Shola Adenekan, “Transnationalism and the Agenda of African Literature in a Digital Age,” *Matatu* 45 (2014).

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