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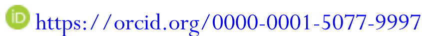
SHACKLE CITY: Capture and the (Im)Possibility of Nairobi Life

WANGUI KIMARI
American University, Nairobi
African Centre for Cities (ACC), University of Cape Town


https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5077-9997

They say the chains are gone
but we see the shackles

Dorphanage, *We March*, 2025

In the span of less than two weeks, ostensibly prompted by the youth-led anti-finance bill protests that started on June 18, 2024, 24 people had been killed by the Kenyan police, 627 were arrested, and 32 were abducted. Many other missing and injured were confirmed, and a significant number of them have suffered fates that are still unknown (Kinyanjui 2024). The vast majority of the dead, disappeared and abducted during and beyond this period were under thirty years of age, constituting a generation that is now increasingly familiar with the terrors of our police state.

For President Ruto and his administration, the capture and killings of these young people were legitimate actions to contain and silence what he termed

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"treasonous" elements (Madowo et al. 2024); a necessary response to what the state deemed novel conditions—an unprecedented cross class, interethnic, multitudinous youth uprising. Yet, many observers of this current moment shared that these events were redolent of earlier regimes and invoked decades of dictatorship under Kenyatta (1963–1978) and Moi (1978–2002); "Return of state abductions; how state abductions have unleashed terror" read one headline (Wasuna 2024).

In this essay, however, I take us back to times that precede those of our first two post-independence regimes, and even that of formal colonial control, and argue that these state actions are the outcome "of [a] society that developed from the meeting and confrontation of masters and slaves" (Cooper 1977, xi). Here, I take the position that what I call *the promise of enshacklement*, which prevails in the (im)materialities of the city of Nairobi—this is, the ever present potential for the curtailing of freedom and the ubiquity of tangible forms of bondage (the handcuffs, prison cages, police sequester in both mobile [cars] and fixed [police stations] forms, the county *askari* officers, etc.), stem from a much longer genealogy than the postcolonial or colonial excesses they are understood as signaling. This promise, which is related to other phenomena such as forced disappearances and extrajudicial killings, is a consequence of the afterlives of slavery. And, certainly, while the periods of slavery and the colonial have porous boundaries, I distinguish these two eras since the Scramble for Africa, formerly launched by the Berlin Conference of 1884–1885, allowed for a situation where, in the words of a Lagos newspaper of the time, "a forcible possession of our land has taken the place of a forcible possession of our person" (Gathara 2019). Surely, while feigning an abolitionist commitment to end the slave trade (Getachew 2019), the Berlin Conference formerly marked the catalyzation of what Gathara (2019) refers to as the "rules for the conquest and partition of Africa." It is this seeming transition—from a more intense trade in humans to a more committed parceling out of the continent—that allows me to hold, however tenuously, this permeable separation between the formal periods of enslavement and colonization.

In centering the shackle as animating the promise I elaborate on here, it is my position that the materialization of an urban landscape replete with both the specter and reality of capture affirms not just of the events of a repressive postcolonial state or the formal British colonial era in Kenya, which has been well documented over the last two decades (see, for example, Elkins 2005; Anderson 2005), but, as well, the centuries of enslavement preceding these periods. This is even as:

> references to slavery largely disappear from written sources, both mission and official, once colonialism was fully established; in other words, at the point when reference to continuing servitude would have undermined the narrative of East African colonialism as a successful abolitionist intervention. (Becker et al. 2023, 132)

Without a doubt, at the state level, whether in curricula, heritage management, or on the international stage, recollections of centuries of slavery in East Africa are "unwelcome in the discourse of post-colonial nationhood" (Becker et al. 2023, 133; c.f. Kiriama 2022). The dead, sought by Hartman (2008) in Ghana, are here too, but, to a much greater extent, rarely reclaimed (c.f. Cousin et al 2024).

Yet, from the chains still visible in a subterranean "slave pen" in the town of Shimoni; the presence of a bell to warn "residents of slave ships sighted in the creek of Mombasa" that still hangs, albeit in replica, in a Mombasa market (Shah 2024), and, even, the normalized application of the words *mwungana* [free person] (Cooper 1977) and *vibarua* (Meier 2024) in daily lexicon (the latter a term historically used to reference the lowest of the enslaved class in the late nineteenth–century East African Coast), underscores that, despite silence about the chattel trade in this region, we are still living in its time—the time of the shackle.

Slavery's afterlives in Nairobi, and in particular the potential of capture, are shored-up by the intentional carceral brick and mortar of the colonial and postcolonial periods; the high walls, barbed wire, impromptu detention sites, illegal raids, numerous police posts, "smart" surveillance, and more, which are key features of its landscapes. For these reasons, in this essay it is my position that for those connected and generational lives that were not meant to be free—the enslaved, the African and, now, low-income dweller, the city's privileged built environment ensures they know only too well that enshacklement is the promise for they who are understood as out of place in and having the potential to breach Nairobi's exclusive zones. This promise notwithstanding, though urban governance regimes are informed by the logics of the shackle and proceed via material and intangible forces that encourage modalities of self-regulation, as in the time of slavery, capture is never certain or total since residents navigate means to elude enclosures and create possibilities of life in this urban space (c.f. Mikidady 2023).

In the following section, *The Promise*, I discuss how Nairobi's environment is shaped by earlier slave economies and will elaborate on how this reality

intersects with colonial and postcolonial carceral urban practices. The intention is to evidence how the promise of enshacklement and its corollaries—extrajudicial killings, hyper policing, the dominance of private security forces, abductions etc.—become established in this city as normal operations, and, I would argue, de facto urban governance interventions. In the final section, *The (Im)Possibility of Nairobi Life*, I convey how those who are forced to be cautious residents of Nairobi, continue to challenge, however temporarily, the capture immanent to this shackle city.

THE PROMISE

From 1850, the northern route, passing through Ngong close to the Nairobi River, was increasingly developed in spite of the fierce reputation of the Maasai and Wakwavi. Arab and Somali traders, sometimes financed by Indian Banyans at the coast, penetrated up-country in search not only of ivory, but also of porters who would carry it to the coast and then themselves be sold as slaves.

Hake, *African Metropolis*

Writing in a publication launched to mark the jubilee history of Nairobi in 1950, James Smart (1950) notes that not only are "Nairobi's beginnings, then [. . .] linked with the reason for the exploitation of the East African territories," but, importantly, it was the narratives of the verdant "charm" of this region, brought back by both "slave traders" and "explorers," which catalyzed the imperial desires to occupy it. Hake (1977, 15), too, documents that this form of bondage saw the traffic of "500–1,000 persons every month" from 1850, and in an enterprise that developed the "Northern route" occupied by many of Nairobi's present-day geographies. These chronicles offer glimpses into the history of a nascent colonial urban territory where "old slave-traders [had] skirted the forest" previously, and possible bones of the enslaved were unearthed in the subsequent excavations for new roads once a railway town was more formally established (Smart 1950, 9).

What did this threat of bondage by slave traders entail? What messages are carried in the osseous remains of the enslaved who were disinterred and how are they reflected in the current "promise" I speak of? Writing about the "horrors" of the slave trade in East Africa in 1909, Basil Cave, the British Consul General for German East Africa, documents some of these conditions albeit through a narrative that centers the role of Britain in stemming them. In this missive he conveys:

> What those horrors were it is scarcely necessary to recall; the sudden attacks by bands of armed Arabs on unprepared and defenceless villages in the interior of Africa; the ruthless slaughter of the aged and infirm; the march of the raw slaves in chains and yokes, beaten and half starved, to the Coast, the sick and weaklings left by the roadside to die or to become a prey to wild beasts; the transit to Zanzibar and sale in open market; and, in many cases, the transport in native dhows to Arabia, over-crowded, battened down in foul holds and starving, the dead and dying mixed with the living; these are some of the things which, for those who have only heard or read of them, live in the imagination, and which those who have seen them can never forget. (Cave 1909, 21)

Equally, in Frere Town, a community in the coastal city of Mombasa that was started for enslaved persons "freed" by the British, May Riziki Oliver shares memories of this enshacklement passed down by previous generations:[1]

> When they were taken they were chained . . . *mlolongo* [in a line]. Now when they are in the boat, when you try to stabilize yourself, and when you try to run, you are being taken and thrown into water. So many of them died on their way from Tanzania to here.

Despite the historical ubiquity of enslavement in this region, as is evident from the above witnessing and the reconstitution of slave conditions through various "conscriptions" following its ostensive "abolition" (Getachew 2019; Rodney 1983), more recent postcolonial chronicles of the emergence of (colonial) Nairobi firmly begin with the establishment of an imperial "railway camp" (see Ogot and Ogot 2020; Owuor and Mbatia 2008),[2] and rarely draw us back to the "Northern route" and the chattel caravans of the enslaved that mapped out future East African transit channels and towns (Cooper 1977; Alpers 2004). Confirming these origins, Kiriama writes:

> The slave trade caravans into the interior of Kenya followed several routes and these were mostly in well-watered and easy terrain. Stopovers for caravans were established where there was easy access to food and these centers have now grown into big cosmopolitan towns, for example, Machakos, Kitui, Kibwezi and Mariakani in the interior and the rest of the coastline towns [. . .]

> The caravan routes inevitably gave rise to caravan towns, where the traders would rest and at the same time replenish their supplies. Such caravan towns included Kibwezi and Mtito Andei (whose name is interesting because, in the local Kikamba language, it means a place of vultures. It is said that the slave traders usually left sick and weak slaves in the open camp that they had established here, and if they died, they had nobody to bury them other than the vultures, who would feast on the bodies). The other towns were Kitui and Machakos, also found along the present Mombasa Nairobi highway. (Kiriama 2022, 47–48)

The imperative to highlight these foundations of our towns becomes more pressing when one learns that slavery in the region was only abolished in 1907 (Cooper 1977), just over a hundred years ago. That is why toponyms registering violent ecologies of the slave trade, "the place of vultures" detailed above as but one example, endure. And, also why I contend that the promise of enshacklement—the omnipresent potential of strictures on one's freedom and particularly for the descendants of the traded—is so pervasive in local urban spaces. In place of the "old slave route," in place of the "vultures," are modes of "control, containment and punishment" (Pfingst and Kimari 2021) firmly established as the modus operandi of Nairobi and Kenya's secondary urban regions.

SHACKLE CITY

Following its designation as a train depot by the Imperial British East African Company (IBEAC), the land that the Maasai had named Enkare Nyrobi, the place of cool waters, was to become Nairobi in 1898; the headquarters of a territory that was to be propelled by the extractive pursuits of a colonial locomotive enterprise (Ogot and Ogot 2020; Owuor and Mbatia 2008). Progressively, the inchoate forms of a more formal carceral urban landscape were established as the railway town grew, and as its built environment was to layer on to former slave encampments, tracks, and routes.

As the city proceeded, so did its administration's bid to establish legitimacy, "order" and control through various articulations of spatial enclosure. Here, then, modalities to establish this promise of enshacklement included public health dictates prompted by various situated iterations of a racialized "sanitation syndrome" (Swanson 1977), multiple municipal bylaws that encouraged arrest if contravened by the "native," and the augmentation of a police force and policing architectures that were set-up when Kenya was merely a protectorate in

1887, preceding even its status as a colony (Wolf 1973, 41). In 1910, this police force, less than 12 years after Nairobi's official designation as a colonial railway town, already numbered 2,000 (Deflem 1994, 54; Wolf 1973), for an urban population that could not have exceeded 15,000 people (Myers 1973).

Evidencing these conditions, throughout the first sixty years of colonial Nairobi's existence, both African oral histories and yearly municipal reports register the ubiquity of the shackle. These latter accounts are filled with tallies of "natives" fined or detained for a number of council offences, including contravening prohibitions on trade (such as operating a food kiosk without a license or driving a hand cart down the "wrong side of the road"), urban residency without a permit, unpaid hut tax, and other misdeeds that overlapped with the local "rogue and vagabond" laws whose probable genealogy was the 1824 U.K. Vagrancy Act that criminalized practices, predominantly of the poor and racialized, seen as "idle," "vagrant," "rogue" and more.[3] Fundamentally, what was being targeted here was not just what was seen as the cultures of the "native" out of place in the urban, but African freedom—and, ultimately, the African. Speaking to parallel practices in the Caribbean, Heron, building on Walcott (2021), writes:

> When British slavery legally ended (1834–1838), nominally free Black labourers of the Antilles were coerced—with vagrancy and land tenure laws [. . .]—into low wage labour and economic insecurity exacerbated by imperial neglect and neo-colonial "underdevelopment"; the very conditions that eventually drive descendants of enslaved people to board boats for post-war Britain. (Philogene Heron 2022, 1255–1256)

In Kenya, the legacies of the provincialization of this 1824 Act create the conditions of possibility for a situation where, in 2025, young people can still, on a daily basis, be charged with offences such as "vagrancy," "loitering," " nuisance," "disorderly" behavior, "causing affray," and "begging."[4] While "fouling the air" and "fouling water" may be crimes that did not survive to feature on the penal codes of the present day, essentially, even the supposed violations that remain make clear the ever present potential for capture in the city, with the police having access to an array of misdeeds to charge you with should your sojourns appear to contravene Nairobi's colonial logics.

In the pre-independence period, the policing and implementation of these offenses were accompanied by raids, impromptu detentions, the establishment of *kipande* passbooks as permits for "native" travel (as in apartheid South Africa),

household visits, and various forms of multi-scalar surveillance (Anderson 2005; Pfingst and Kimari 2021). Currently, even magistrates in local courts convey that in a day of 100 pleas, at least 50 percent of them are for these same misdemeanors.[5] Such forms of superintendence, enacted in and because of the city, reproduce a status quo where the end goal is that, as a human rights lawyer declared, "everything is about imprisonment."

Without a doubt, the demographics represented in Kenya's remand prisons, who are there not only because of these classed and racialized colonial offences that remain in our penal code but, as well, for their coinciding inability to pay bail or acquire legal representation (Gathara 2020), evidence the reality that it is not just the criminalization of acts but *persons*, and persons in particular spaces, which undergirds these laws that both portray and inform the formative rationales of Kenya's urban landscapes.

During the emergency period (1952–1960), the threat of the African—both the Kenya Land and Freedom Army (also known as the Mau Mau) fighter in the forest, and even those assumed to be their sympathizers in the city and villages—led to an increase in the severity of state violence for those understood as against the established "order." No longer was one just, perhaps, a "rogue" or "vagrant," but being further marked as Mau Mau legitimized more extreme gendered violence. Rebisz (2024) and others detail the forceful detention and enclosure—often expressed in more cloaked terms such as "villagization"—of women and girls, coupled with sexual and related corporeal violations. For men, detention or death in or beyond the gaols, many of which still function as the holding pens for today's vagrant, was the established norm (see also Elkins 2005; Anderson 2005).

It is also critical to emphasize that these forms of torture and incarceration were not just about the person; they were also about the city and who was meant to reside in it. Evidencing this, Ese and Ese write:

> On 20 October 1952, the Colonial Government declared a state of emergency throughout Kenya which lasted until 1960. In Nairobi, armed conflicts ensued in the struggle to control both urban space and its population. The British completely altered their approach to African urbanity in this period, cordoning off housing areas with barbed wire, restricting movement, and implementing ethnic segregation [. . .] This radically changed the African urban landscape in Nairobi with most of the African urban areas becoming war zones, besieged by the colonial authorities. (Ese and Ese 2020, 145)

Nairobi, for many, still remains a war zone; the post-independence years upheld the rationales of the past: from the violence of the slave caravan and the horrors of colonial incursions, to the normalized carceral habitation patterns of the city, the reterritorializations of these logics and practices in urban space prompts feelings of "siege" among many residents—the presentiment of "war anytime, anywhere" for young people (Kimari 2020; c.f. Hake 1977, 208). Undoubtedly, these circumstances spatialize a "nervous condition" for a multitude of geographies and those that reside within them.

Such anxieties about the city, I argue here, are tied to this enduring possibility of enclosure, which echoes the earlier practices of the chattel trade wagons that created and traversed the "Northern route." In this terrain where slavers "skirted" forests, colonial forces imposed passbooks, and the police are currently de facto urban infrastructure that controls movement, access to services and, even, life itself (Kimari 2024), the likelihood of capture in Nairobi remains a common threat across decades; a connective tissue that enables similar unsettled urban embodiments for over a century, but also foments shared bids for dissent. Certainly, the proliferating spaces of control and containment and the promise of enshacklement that they enable, necessitate that "slavery's living presence is recognized and made visible" (Philogene Heron 2022) by those inhabiting but without the legitimacy of the city.

THE (IM)POSSIBILITY OF NAIROBI LIFE

> This is the intimacy of our age with theirs—an unfinished struggle. To what end does one conjure the ghost of slavery, if not to incite the hopes of transforming the present?
>
> Hartman, *Lose Your Mother*

> *IMF, World Bank, Stop the Modern Day Slavery*
>
> Activist placard, June 2024 Protests in Nairobi

Gates with spikes, electric fences, private security guards; these are some of the normalized infrastructures of enclosure that feature in a significant number of Nairobi's geographies, constituting both a warning of, and actual tools for, enshacklement. During the anti-finance bill protests of June and July 2024,

these instruments were augmented with more impromptu detention spaces, plain-clothed police officers, weaponized water tanks, and state sanctioned vigilante abduction squads. This period in our postcolonial moment can, surely, be considered a zenith of what I argue here is a "shackle city"—an urban landscape where the likelihood of capture is a necessary consideration for many residents as they leave their homes every morning.

Almost a year after the peak of these manifestations, abductions and illegal arrests continue unabated, signaling that they are not merely the techniques of a particular political episode, but, rather, part of an established repertoire: that of arbitrary seizure by state or affiliated private security forces set in motion by the tangible and intangible enslavement/colonial/postcolonial carceral landscapes of the city (c.f. Brankamp 2022; Pfingst and Kimari 2021; Kimari 2020). Without a doubt, the majority of Nairobi's residents of all sexes can convey common stories of encounters with the police at all hours of the day; contact that often precipitates the unleashing of multiple forms of restrictive equipment—handcuffs, ropes, cages, as but a few examples—and, ultimately, body confinement.

Analogously, Gathara (2020), highlighting the pervasive threat of arrest and imprisonment of "natives" in the colonial period, excavates the following personal narrative of enshacklement from a 1933 colonial commission report. Within these pages, one Ishmael Ithongo reports:

> Once I was arrested by a District Officer on account of my hat because I did not see him approaching. He came from behind and threw it down. I asked him why because I did not know him. He called an *askari* and asked for my name. It was in a district outside. He asked me, "Don't you know the law here that you should take off your hat when you see a white man?" Then he asked me, "Have you got your *kipandi* [native identity document/passbook]?' I said "No, Sir." So I was sent to prison. . . When an *askari* thinks that you look smart he asks if you have your *kipandi*. I have seen natives who are going to church in the morning who have changed their coat and forgotten their *kipandi*. They meet an *askari*. "Have you got your *kipandi*?" "No." "Ah right" and they are marched off to prison.[6]

Close to eight decades after Ithongo's statement, a young man from the settlement of Mathare in Nairobi offered similar sentiments when he shared: "Youth are camouflaging to save their lives [. . .] being drunk and dirty is important because the police do not want to see anyone looking clean. In order to save your

life, you need to be dirty or drunk because if you are clean and you wear fashionable clothes they will say you are a thief" (Mweru, personal communication 2016). Even fictional chronicles of Nairobi life, though to a lesser extent urban scholarship, register this daily reality primarily for those seen as out of place in the city, and this is a condition which distinctly intersects with class (see, for example, Mangua 1971; Mwangi 1976) and race. Those in the bullseye of the shackle's dragnet include young men from low-income urban settlements (Van Stapele 2016), hawkers (Dragsted 2019), sex workers (Mbote et al. 2020), Muslim youth (Al-Bulushi 2021; Glück 2017), sexual minorities (Wairuri 2025) and other marginalized demographics whose tenure and citizenship in Nairobi is often contested. Consequently, these Nairobians develop contingency plans should they meet with the primary vectors of capture—the police. And these are situated tactics oriented around who they will call if these encounters degenerate, how much money they will bribe, and, above all, decisions about where they should or should not wander to evade likely enclosure (c.f. Price et al. 2016). Surely, then, in this city, the pervasive infrastructures of apprehension—from impromptu detention bays, to the ubiquitous police and their handcuffs, and even the over 2,000 Huawei surveillance cameras across Nairobi[7]—continue the shackling of the past, layering the landscape with materialities and immaterialities that prompt affective experiences of terror.

In the same areas where caravans of enslaved people traversed, now pedestrian convoys or truckloads of detained persons are transported every day, echoing the memories from Frere Town shared above. Illustrating this, a short survey, conducted as part of a collaborative project in 2022 to ascertain the risk of arbitrary detentions in Nairobi, represents these realities quantitatively.[8] Of the 40 people who responded, with an average age of 23 years, 65.1 percent had at one point been arrested by the police as they went about their wage-supplying activities, and, from the testimonies offered, these were unwarranted seizures. Here, then, whether part of a normalized repertoire of harassment or the rent-seeking bids of the police, these apprehensions were justified by the punitive, racialized and classed vernacular of the 1824 Vagrancy Act, even when more than 75 percent of those detained were not booked for anything at the police station; they may have been arrested temporarily until a bribe was made either before they reached this facility or sometime after. In whatever scenario, the effects suffered and enunciated can be said to mirror, to a smaller extent, those faced by communities that endured enslavement in the preceding centuries—that is, familial stress and trauma. Certainly, besides the loss of a day or

more of wages and the personal and collective "nervous conditions" that emerged as a consequence, these Nairobi residents became further (re)acquainted with this urban agglomeration as a site of holding pens, "too many dungeons" (Hartman 2008)—a landscape of containment.

Since colonial Nairobi "was a perfect Apartheid city without trying" (Lonsdale 2001, 220), its brick and mortar were and are effectively corralled to facilitate detention. These cement and stone machinations imposed on the tread and track of slave economies, and that were oriented by railway-led zoning priorities, allowed for the arrangement of the initial cluster of locomotive encampment tents to imprint Nairobi's spatial order for years to come (Chiuri 1978; Hake 1977; White 1990). Ultimately, the city would then come to be "designate[d as] a specific vision of socio-spatial relationships" (Byerley 2015, 523; Harris, Parnell, and Demissie 2012, 143; see also Amutabi 2012); one, I would argue, which prioritized the ability to apprehend and monitor, enclose and detain, those it has historically sought to exclude.

The raids, evictions, torture, and killings that are at the extreme end of the capture continuum make more spectacular a normalized trend. Unquestionably, one can contend that Operation Anvil, a colonial military intervention during the emergency period in 1954, which facilitated the "largest urban cordon and search action ever mounted" in the country (Anderson 2005, 200), or the recent abductions of citizens during the June and July 2024 protests, are more acutely evocative of the endemic seizure of the period of enslavement—the same promise of capture that led to the establishment of a warning bell in Mombasa town, and that displaced communities to hilltops, caves, and deeper into the hinterland as bids for protection (Kiriama 2022; Hartman 2008).

Prior to the abolition of slavery in the region, "the traumata of capture, transportation, and sale severed slaves from the social fabric of their original communities" (Cooper 1977, 5). Currently, over a hundred years later, the anxiety of potential "capture" and "transportation," I would argue, highlights an enduring logic of the prevalent (im)materialities of the city, and "the daily struggle between masters and slaves to alter the demands being made upon slaves and whatever rights and privileges they may have" (Cooper 1977, 15). Assuredly, the concomitant battles to evade slavery's dragnets and to restore community social fabric(s) endures. Here, then, those for whom the city was not imagined—the African, the poor, the woman, the migrant—persist, despite the impossibilities of this tenure. While the enclosures have proliferated, over a million Kenyans still took to the street during the anti-finance bill protests. Importantly, it is also

during this time that I heard analogies of enslavement being used more widely in public life to reference this political and spatial moment—a ghost conjured, using Hartman's (2008) words, to "incite the hopes of transforming the present." This was evident when, for instance, protestors enunciated their refusal, as one placard announced, of the shackles of international financial institutions: "*IMF, World Bank, Stop the Modern Day Slavery*" (Lawal 2024). Or when participating activists asserted that they were against "debt slavery" (Kalevera 2024), and were on the streets "slaving for a country I love" (Muia 2024). These recognitions that slavery is still very much in our present, and yet the continued defiance to challenge this and reclaim an exclusive built environment despite the promise of enshacklement, really breathes life into, as Cooper (1977) shared, the bids for those in bondage to "alter the demands being made upon slaves."

What is at stake during such political moments, which, in a frightening, albeit predictable, outcome exacerbate rather than reduce the potential for the shackle, are the efforts to make life possible in Nairobi and beyond. Interestingly, whether knowingly or unwittingly, residents drew on longer histories as they encountered and sought to navigate the capture that makes visible the reinstantiating (Stoler 2008) afterlives of slavery, which, through many grave articulations, scaffold both colonial and postcolonial spatial excess.

Many scenes condense these continuities; those marginal bodies born in towns that emerged along the former slave routes are still subject to detention and exploitation; the descendants of freed enslaved in Frere Town, Mombasa, continue to petition actively to get identity documents so as to be recognized as Kenyans towards drawing from the minimal bounties of citizenship; and significant finances and infrastructures of the state and its urban administrations are unrelentingly dedicated towards body seizure—from those implicated in the production of multiple fine regimes to the labor involved in staffing and servicing the expanding and expansive formal and shadow units of apprehension (the police, the county forces, the water police unit, and other state vigilante formations). Undoubtedly, all of these events highlight a formal urban rationale still heavily reliant on shackling for its operations. But that the vast majority of the city are still here, seeking to make lives as they evade daily dragnets, registers the (im)possibilities they are determined to enact within and in between moments of capture.

CONCLUSION

"Are you taking me across an ocean"? This question was asked repeatedly to filmmaker Saitabao Kaiyare when he approached residents of Murang'a, Kenya,

during a process to interrogate the restitution misadventures of African artifacts from European museums.[9] While, a national silence about slavery is upheld, with the ongoing state violence in the urban paralleled primarily to that of the colonial period and early post-independence regimes, these "signposts from the past" (Becker at al. 2023), enunciatory gestures that encapsulate an affective even if unconscious terror-filled memory of enslavement, highlight how we are still in its time; that pervasive fears of corporeal seizure scaffold experiences in all of our towns and draw from much earlier chattel ages censored in national forms of memorialization.

Nairobi has had many descriptors over the years. Originally known by the Maasai toponym Enkare Nyrobi, the "place of cool waters," it has since aspired to be a "colonial capital," a "green city in the sun," the headquarters of the "Silicon Savannah," and, even, less flatteringly, been identified as "Nairobbery" by virtue of the crime that made it infamous in the 1990s. In all of these periods, however, in spite of the fashion of its multiple labels, it has always been a place of capture.

In this essay, I have sought to detail what I term the promise of enshacklement in the city of Nairobi. This is a violent promissory reach that emerges as an afterlife of slavery, not merely colonial or postcolonial excess as is often pronounced in public fora, and engulfs other towns. While the formal built environment of this capital, a "perfect apartheid city without trying," was established during the formal period of British settler colonialism, it layers onto the geographies and centuries of a genocidal trade in humans. This is borne out in the tracks that slave caravans developed, and which are now national thoroughfares dotted by towns that were resting stops for these wagons and the vultures that would eat the enslaved bodies they left for dead. Ultimately, in this metropolis established in territory where slavers skirted forests, perhaps, if one digs deep enough, we can still find the osseous remains of those who were the raw material for this chattel enterprise. Informed by this history, within these pages I have argued that Nairobi's landscape remains charged with a fear of capture established during earlier enslavement economies, and which is upheld and legitimated by architectures and urban operations that prioritize enclosure.

The native location of early twentieth-century Nairobi is now our "slum" governed by inordinate surveillance, harassment and evictions; holding pens abound across various parts of the city (Kimari 2024), and the formal pursuit of "world class" urban ideals has led to the expansion of private and shadow security formations and their attendant "smart city" interventions (see Glück 2017). Yet,

I contend that, even with the enduring promise of enshacklement that shapes everyday navigations for the majority of residents, just like the *watoro*, grand and petit maroons of the Indian Ocean world (Alpers 2004), Nairobi's denizens seek to make life in this restrictive landscape. Their daily unwelcome tread, while maybe cautious, stamps the declarations in Meta Davis Cumberbatch's famous poem: "Shackled? No shackles can bind me! Enslaved? I am free! [. . .] . You captor vile who would enslave me; You are shackled. I am free!"[10]

ABSTRACT

Across Kenya's towns, and, in particular, its capital city Nairobi, pervasive architectures of enclosure have endured and expanded. Here, the high city walls and gates, barbed wire fences, police roadblocks, and impromptu security checks are but a few examples of the restrictive infrastructures that are reproduced in the city's built environment. Without a doubt, all of these architectures are there to offer a visceral warning to those who continue to have to justify their presence in the city—working class youth and the "slum dweller," for example, who know too well that enshacklement is the promise for those who are understood as having the potential to breach these exclusive zones. In this context, the simple presence of this demographic is interpreted as a threat, and the reinstantiating logics of the city, therefore, portend capture. Building on ethnographic research from over a decade, in this essay I argue that the formal governance regimes of Nairobi have historically used what I term the promise of enshacklement to maintain the unjust operations of this city. And, in doing so, the pervasive specters of the shackle and capture, arguably afterlives of slavery, shape the (im)possibilities of daily life for the majority of Nairobi's dwellers. [Nairobi; afterlives of slavery; police; Kenya; slavery; Africa]

NOTES

1. May Riziki Oliver shares this in a news segment clip by Cousin, Renouil and Bizot (2024).
2. I would also add that none of my own previous writings, which draw on the history of Nairobi, attend to this history of slavery. This is a grave omission and emerges primarily because the vast majority of historical chronicles of the city do not reference this past. I am eager to remedy this absence in my present and future work.
3. See more from the continental Petty Offences Campaign: https://decrimpovertystatus.org/petty-offences-in-africa/
4. See more from the continental Petty Offences Campaign: https://decrimpovertystatus.org/petty-offences-in-africa/
5. Communication by Judge Njagi, "Petty Offences Forum," Nairobi.
6. *Kipande* means identity document; it was launched in the colonial period, and Africans were required to carry it everywhere, akin to the apartheid passbook in South Africa. This document registered details—ethnicity, employment status, birthplace etc.—that would determine if the person was legally allowed to be in certain areas. It also had specific bearing on whether they could reside in Nairobi, for example. Currently, in many low-income areas of the city, the police still stop youth for no reason, as the

white man in the above narrative, and ask for their *kipandi*; these practices are, certainly, redolent of the colonial period and the experience of Ithongo above.

7. See Wangari (2023).
8. This survey was done as part of the safety and security research for the African Cities Research Consortium (ACRC), and which was co-led in Nairobi by Zoltán Glück and myself.
9. See more in the film *If Objects Could Speak* (2021) directed by Saitabao Kaiyare.
10. From the poem "A Child of Nature (Negro of the Caribbean)," sourced from the volume edited by Busby, *New Daughters of Africa* (2019, 26).

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