Africa (2024), **94**, 594–612
doi:10.1017/S0001972024000597

IAI AFRICA

RESEARCH ARTICLE

'I can't segregate myself': self-narrating and 'small boundary' work in Nairobi's ghettos

Jean-Baptiste Lanne[1] and Marie-Emmanuelle Pommerolle[2]

[1]Centre d'étude en sciences sociales sur les mondes africains, américains et asiatiques (Cessma), University Paris Cité, Paris, France and [2]Institut des mondes africains (IMAf), University Paris 1 – Panthéon Sorbonne, Paris, France
Corresponding author: Jean-Baptiste Lanne; Emails: jean-baptiste.lanne@u-paris.fr; Marie-Emmanuelle.Pommerolle@univ-paris1.fr

Abstract

This article explores the trajectories and narratives of people who have exited marginalized urban spaces in Nairobi to move through other social spaces in the city, or abroad. Claiming to belong to the 'ghetto', an idiom that refers to both a local space of exclusion and a globalized cultural and political imaginary, our interlocutors embrace the contradictions of this belonging in their everyday experiences. The careers they have built in different fields (art, activism, sport, academia) identify them as figures of social success and make them question their relationships with those around them. Defining their aspirations as intimately linked with the ghetto, but perceiving it as a strong constraint, they are not cutting ties with the place they come from. Drawing on qualitative fieldwork that pays attention to both their self-narratives and their writing, we propose the notion of 'small boundaries' to describe how social and spatial mobility from the ghetto produces, for each individual in a different way, an intimate cleavage within the self. We then propose to unpack this specific self as a configuration of three types of distancing (social, spatial and self-distancing) that allow both their aspirations and their obligations to coexist in everyday life.

Résumé

Cet article explore les trajectoires et les récits de personnes qui ont quitté les espaces urbains marginalisés de Nairobi pour parcourir d'autres espaces sociaux de la ville ou à l'étranger. Se réclamant du « ghetto », idiome qui renvoie à la fois à un espace local d'exclusion et à un imaginaire culturel et politique mondialisé, nos interlocuteurs s'accommodent des contradictions de cette appartenance dans leurs expériences quotidiennes. Les carrières qu'ils ont construites dans différents domaines (art, militantisme, sport, milieu universitaire) les identifient comme des modèles de réussite sociale et les amènent à s'interroger sur leurs relations avec leur entourage. Définissant leurs aspirations comme intimement liées au ghetto, mais le percevant comme une contrainte forte, ils ne coupent pas les liens avec leur lieu d'origine. En s'appuyant sur des travaux de terrain qualitatifs qui prêtent attention aux récits personnels et aux écrits de leurs interlocuteurs, les auteurs proposent la notion de

« petites frontières » pour décrire comment la mobilité sociale et spatiale depuis le ghetto produit, différemment pour chaque personne, un clivage intime du soi. Ils proposent ensuite de décomposer ce soi spécifique en trois types de distanciation (sociale, spatiale et auto-distanciation) qui permettent de faire coexister leurs aspirations et leurs obligations dans la vie quotidienne.

Resumo

Este artigo explora as trajectórias e narrativas de pessoas que saíram de espaços urbanos marginalizados em Nairobi para se deslocarem por outros espaços sociais na cidade ou no estrangeiro. Afirmando pertencer ao 'gueto', uma expressão idiomática que se refere tanto a um espaço local de exclusão como a um imaginário cultural e político globalizado, os nossos interlocutores abraçam as contradições desta pertença nas suas experiências quotidianas. As carreiras que construíram em diferentes áreas (arte, ativismo, desporto, academia) identificam-nos como figuras de sucesso social e fazem-nos questionar as suas relações com os que os rodeiam. Definindo as suas aspirações como intimamente ligadas ao gueto, mas encarando-o como um forte constrangimento, não cortam os laços com o local de onde provêm. Com base num trabalho de campo qualitativo que presta atenção tanto às suas auto-narrativas como à sua escrita, propomos a noção de 'pequenas fronteiras' para descrever a forma como a mobilidade social e espacial a partir do gueto produz, para cada indivíduo e de forma diferente, uma clivagem íntima no interior do eu. Em seguida, propomos desvendar este eu específico como uma configuração de três tipos de distanciamento (social, espacial e autodistanciamento) que permitem a coexistência das suas aspirações e das suas obrigações na vida quotidiana.

Introduction

In July 2021, two years after our first meeting, we sit face to face with Chege[1] in his art studio, perched on the second floor of a large iron-sheet house in Mukuru, a deprived neighbourhood in Nairobi. We look around: the place has not changed much. There are still the same paintings on the wall and the same jumble of materials and books. However, something has changed in Chege's face. When we left him in 2019, he was radiant, full of energy and combativity. There is now a touch of melancholy in his eyes. After we last met, Chege was invited as an international artist to take part in an exhibition in Italy, in early 2020. On his hasty return in February 2020, when the country was in the early stages of the pandemic, he was accused by both local authorities in Mukuru and his neighbours of introducing Covid into the area.[2] This deeply affected him, especially as this kind of accusation was often directed at the upper classes, who have the privilege of travelling. Chege defines himself as a child of the 'ghetto' who lives among his community and is deeply committed to them. He is also an international artist, who travels and exhibits his paintings to 'give voice to the society', especially to its most vulnerable groups. During our most recent interview he

[1] All names have been changed.

[2] As has been observed in several contexts, the early stages of the Covid-19 pandemic led to rumours and narratives blaming travellers and people identified as foreigners for spreading the disease (Dionne and Turkmen 2020). For the Kenyan context, see 'Let xenophobia, ignorance not cloud responses to coronavirus', *Daily Nation*, 2 March 2020.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0001972024000597 Published online by Cambridge University Press

told us, 'I can't segregate myself' – metaphorically incorporating within his own psyche the urban divides between unequal social and material worlds.[3] These words illustrate the intimate contradictions of those who, although socially and ethically rooted in an often stigmatized and marginalized urban world, have the experience of crossing its boundaries.

Locating its gaze on Nairobi, this article explores how living in cities requires us to question the distance that separates us from others, and how this questioning produces a particular sense of self. In an early work, Simone pointed out that the experience of the city and the complexity of the links it creates with others confront individuals with their own contradictions and shake their certainties (2001). Drawing empirically on African cities while broadening her view to a more universal level, Moore (2020) goes further by defining the city as 'a problematization itself'. She suggests that the experience of living in the city – particularly the perception of inequalities, the fragility and interdependence of the lives of people around them, and the pace of change – is a source of deep inner questioning for the subject. This requires residents to develop an 'ethical imagination' – a process of thought and practice that attempts to answer questions such as 'who am I for myself and others; what do I want; what can I hope for; what must I do?' (*ibid.*: 26). A recent body of work has highlighted how marginalized residents of African cities, despite severe constraints, develop a sense of ethics and a desire to 'live meaningfully' (Di Nunzio 2019: 18) through collective struggle, solidarity and transmission (Monteith 2018; Di Nunzio 2019; Thieme *et al.* 2021). This sense of ethics can also be used to justify distancing oneself from others for the sake of financial independence, privacy or even the integrity of relationships (Landau and Freemantle 2016; Neumark 2017; Lockwood 2023). Distance from others, and the meaning we give to that distance, is often at the heart of urban life in Nairobi, like elsewhere.

We propose to explore this process of self-making in relation to other people and places through the trajectories and self-narratives of individuals coming from urban margins who are able to circulate across the city, and/or travel abroad. Claiming to belong to the 'ghetto',[4] but having the privilege of being able to exit it (albeit usually temporarily), our interlocutors fully embrace these contradictions of the city, notably its pervading material, social and emotional inequalities. How can these fragmented experiences be held together? In this text, we propose the concept of 'small boundary' to explore how subjects undertake practical and narrative operations to deal with those lived contradictions. We especially explore how, in their daily lives but also in their reflexive activities, they negotiate ambivalent pressures to either keep a distance or engage fully with 'their' ghetto.

To undertake this research, we investigated the trajectories and narratives of six men and two women between 2019 and 2022. All were born and raised in Nairobi ghettos and are constructing their own trajectories within various different social worlds (art, sport, activism and academia). They, and their close social circles, mostly describe their careers as based on a singular talent that developed outside of school. All symbolize a form of social success: besides Chege, we worked with Lizzie, a thirty-year-old singer; Paul, a middle-aged academic and non-governmental organization

[3] Interview, 19 July 2021.

[4] This expression is discussed in more detail below.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0001972024000597 Published online by Cambridge University Press

(NGO) professional; David, a yoga teacher in his thirties: 'Sputnik', a DJ and music producer of a similar age; Wambui, a young NGO activist; Georges, a forty-year-old soccer coach; and Wilson, in his fifties, the informal leader of Kariua, a tiny ghetto in the city centre.

We had known most of them for years before this fieldwork. These long-term relationships allowed us to consider specific passages in their stories in the light of what we already knew about them and to capture variations over time. With the exception of just one of our interlocutors, the practice of writing has been at the core of our methodology. Indeed, we found that our interlocutors all attach particular importance to writing. Lizzie uses writing on social media as a personal outlet and Chege wants his poem to be published, while Paul has written a book on his experience as a 'Young Ghetto Boy'. Writing was a way to share a mode of expression that makes sense to them, which we always combined with interviews and ethnographic observations.

We first document the lived contradictions and tensions of claiming to belong to the ghetto while circulating in the city. In Nairobi, the 'ghetto' provides a form of iconic identity but refers also to the harsh material constraints and social obligations of an urban margin. We thus develop the concept of 'small boundary' to describe the practical and narrative operations our interlocutors undertake to hold together a sense of self while experiencing the multiple contradictions of the ghetto and of their movements beyond it. In the second section, we detail the individual ways in which our research participants configured their 'small boundaries' over time. Each of the three vignettes presented in this section allows us to glimpse a singular construction of the self, which draws specific lines of demarcation within the collective narrative of the ghetto. In the third section, we expand this analysis to dissect this boundary work as an intimate configuration of three forms of distancing: spatial, social and self-distancing. This configuration is specific to each individual and fluctuates over time and depending on socio-spatial contexts. It unveils a seemingly paradoxical mechanism: by building one or other of these distances, people can be involved in the ghetto in a more serene and meaningful way.

Framing small boundaries in Nairobi's ghettos

In Nairobi, the claim to belong to the ghetto allows residents to subscribe to a collective identity that is historically and spatially anchored and projected globally. However, anchoring oneself in this belonging also means coming to terms with a series of contradictions that generate antagonistic forms of daily engagement. In this first section, we propose to unpack the concept of 'small boundaries' to describe how residents perform an everyday work of selection and distancing between the different commitments and aspirations associated with ghetto identity.

Lizzie, Paul and Sputnik were all born and raised in Kibera, one of Africa's largest and most iconic slums, about ten kilometres west of the city centre. Allocated to Nubian veterans by the British colonial authorities at the beginning of the twentieth century, the land has since become a multicultural receptacle for urban migration and, over the past forty years, a bastion of protest against successive regimes. The vast Mathare 'slums', Wambui's birthplace, share this ongoing history of struggle against oppression, from the first secret hideouts of Mau Mau fighters against British

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0001972024000597 Published online by Cambridge University Press

rule in the 1950s to the protests and whistleblowing initiatives of activists against police extra-judicial killings in 2010–20 (Kimari 2018; Ndung'u 2022). Paul was born in Korogocho, a slum that sprang up in the east of the city in the 1970s as a result of a programme of forced resettlement by the Kenyan government to remove the urban poor from the city centre (IFRA Nairobi 2011; Dennis 2015). For Chege, the emergence of Mukuru, where he grew up, is more directly linked to the city's industrial history in the early 1980s, when many of the workers employed in the factories in the industrial area were looking for accommodation close to their workplaces. The intense need for cheap labour did not prevent evictions from the very first years of the settlement's existence (Wanjiru and Matsubara 2017). Unlike the others, Wilson's place, known as Kariua, is an inconspicuous village of just 800 people, in the form of a few interstitial iron-sheet houses between large apartment blocks just outside the city centre.

However incomplete, the history of each of these settlements is unique. But they share a physical and emotional landscape. This is due to the illegal and insecure status of their occupation, their distance from public services and the often harsh living conditions they experience. The interest shown in these spaces by international and national actors since the 1990s has reinforced the image of a homogeneous and coherent state of 'slums' and 'informal settlements'. Residents, a wider Nairobi and Kenyan popular culture, and academics have supported this coherent representation through the shared idiom of 'ghetto' to refer to these marginalized places. The term used by our interlocutors was conveyed through *sheng*, a 'youth language' that has become a vernacular language in Nairobi and beyond (Githiora 2018). Influenced by the codes of hip-hop and reggae cultures from North America and the Caribbean, the ghetto idiom has become a way of making sense of the country's socio-economic disparities and of forging a shared identity. Scholars have documented how the ghetto experience in Nairobi powerfully conditions specific identities (Wamucii 2011), singular forms of citizenship and masculinities (van Stapele 2016), evocative toponymy (Wanjiru and Matsubara 2017), or specific languages of 'war talk' (Kimari 2020). However, the ghetto refers not only to a mythologized margin that gives symbolic meaning to identities and actions. It also circulates as a 'popular commodity' (Linke 2012) within multiple spaces across the city. It does so through songs, films, radio and artworks, as well as through dress codes and ways of speaking and moving. As these signs circulate, they can be hybridized to fit into different – even mainstream – urban worlds.

For our interlocutors, claiming to belong to the ghetto is an asset in their spatial and social navigation. They can refer to a globally understood symbol of marginalization, autonomy and creativity; they can also stand out from what is normally seen as the 'mass' (Morales-Moreno 2011). They are proud of coming from 'their' ghetto, but also of having been able to leave. This ambivalent belonging is reflected in their individual narratives, which point to fundamental contradictions as they straddle different worlds.

Far from offering a coherent picture of the ghetto as either a place of abjection or a place of invention, our interlocutors point to the inherent tensions of their lives in the ghetto. First, they evoke the multiple contradictions surrounding their social obligations and their individual and professional aspirations. The ghetto as a site of reciprocity, solidarity and social obligations is a common feature identified in the academic literature on informal livelihoods (Meagher 2006; Njeri 2019; Ference 2021).

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However, our interlocutors tell a longer story of their own generosity and its rewards, reflecting strong expectations of the myriad social institutions intervening in the ghettos (Deacon 2012; Di Nunzio 2019; Dolan and Rajak 2016). In the name of participation and ownership (Rigon 2014), individuals targeted by these institutions (churches, community-based organizations, international aid projects) are expected to contribute their time and skills. Volunteering is thus central to their life trajectories, but it is a socially constructed preference (Bourdieu 1987). It becomes a moral compass that too often distracts them from their own aspirations. One of the communitarian dimensions of their self-fulfilment lies in the transmission of what they see as the core values that underpin their own life trajectories. They are all very involved in intergenerational and educational activities to promote their passion and drive change from within the community. But they are often alone in this endeavour. Their parents, often single mothers, want to leave their urban settlement for 'the village', rural homes remaining a place of peace and belonging in some ghetto residents' aspirations (Falkingham *et al.* 2012). Many of their peers died prematurely, victims of police extra-judicial killings – particularly young men (van Stapele 2016) – or gang violence, or succumbed to diseases linked to poor access to healthcare. In addition, the mentoring programmes in which they are involved promote social change among the youth by focusing on their individual trajectories. These narratives, based on individual success, can reinforce the feeling that the role is too heavy to bear alone.

A second set of contradictions lies in the gap between the distressing material conditions in which they live and their need for concentration and intimacy. Scholarship has recently acknowledged that living in the urban margins requires imagination on the part of the subject, particularly in terms of an ability to imagine the future (Vigh 2009). Yet it also acknowledges that material and social constraints make it very difficult to maintain and nurture imagination (Di Nunzio 2019). The lack of personal space tangibly hinders the inner lives of our interlocutors. And they frame their life trajectories as an individual struggle for their own space, sometimes assimilated into or framed as a struggle for dignity. Reflecting on his discovery of yoga, David explains how it offered him a small space, his mat, to escape the busy and tense life of the ghetto:

> Coming from the slum, yoga is a place of concentration. Homes are very squeezed and there is so much tension. People hold a lot of tension physically. Yoga is the only place where we could play and release tension and stress. We don't have grounds. In yoga you express yourself, you laugh. That's how I moved from hustling and tension to concentration. I can shout, I have freedom on my mat, on my life. Even to say what I feel, I learned it.[5]

David's description of releasing physical and psychological tensions on his mat echoes anthropological discussions on how contemporary individuals deal with their 'fragmented selves'. Van Wolputte (2004) proposes the expression of 'body-self' to denote 'an embodied process of self-making' that emerges from the interaction between incorporated social background, psychological work and embodied daily

[5] Interview, 19 July 2019.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0001972024000597 Published online by Cambridge University Press

experiences. In contemporary societies, he argues, body-selves are not experienced as coherent and assembled units: 'This contemporary body-self is fragmentary, often incoherent and inconsistent, precisely because it arises from contradictory and paradoxical experiences, social tensions, and conflicts that have one thing in common: They are real, that is, experienced' (*ibid.*: 263).

How to understand these 'embodied uncertainties' experienced by our interlocutors, navigating social and spatial radical heterogeneities? Following Morris, we seek to document how people 'organise and offer structure and continuity to experience' (1994; quoted in Van Wolputte 2004) through daily practices and narratives. We develop the concept of 'small boundaries' to explore the practical and narrative operations people undertake to enable them to hold together their sense of self while experiencing the multiple contradictions and tensions of the ghetto and their circulation in other social worlds.

'Boundaries' are imaginative and physical delimitations which both separate and bind together spaces, objects and people (Amilhat-Szary 2015). In the existing literature, boundaries are understood at a variety of scales. They may refer to the practical and discursive work of creating social distance and hierarchical divisions (Barth 1969; Schilling 2017; Mercer 2020; Lockwood 2023). They also designate more intimate demarcations between family and close friends, on the one hand, and the rest of society on the other (Jamieson 2005). They may also refer to an 'intimate cleavage' that runs through the self in the case of social mobility and inner tensions (Lahire 2008). We refer to drawing small boundaries as those practical and narrative operations aimed at dealing with lived contradictions. More precisely, it designates the process by which individuals delineate the dimensions of the ghetto with which they identify, and thus select the social obligations to which they feel committed, and those they prefer to avoid or reject. The drawing of small boundaries is not an act of clear and definitive detachment from the ghetto. It is rather a positioning achieved not by rupture with 'others', but by cleavage within the self.

For our interlocutors, drawing small boundaries is not about establishing a fixed and rigid 'I and them' position, but rather about specifying when, where and in which circumstances an 'I for them', an 'I through them' and an 'I independently of them' can coexist within the self. In other words, it is about asking which place the ghetto occupies in the life of an individual who derives identity and legitimacy from it but does not restrict him- or herself to it, nor wish to be restricted by it.

Drawing small boundaries is not only an interiorized or self-reflexive operation. It is also material, spatial and temporal, as well as practical and embodied. It is expressed on a varied array of terrains: the division of daily time (when do I work for my community and when for myself?), and the fragmentation of places within the city, the public and the private, or the different socio-professional spheres (I'm doing social work with others in my neighbourhood, but when it comes to my art, I isolate myself). Finally, small boundaries keep changing over time. Our interlocutors often evoke decisive moments, such as socializing experiences outside the ghetto, or events affecting their close circles, such as the death of a relative, that played a major role in reconfiguring their small boundaries. They also point out more latent changes due to interiorized disappointments or a generalized feeling of tiredness. By continually reconfiguring their small boundaries, individuals keep redefining their ghetto and thus their ethical engagement with it.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0001972024000597 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Narrating small boundaries: three vignettes

In this section, we detail personal ways of configuring small boundaries over time. Three vignettes are presented here: of Lizzie, Wilson and Chege. Each allows us to glimpse a singular construction of the self, which draws specific lines of demarcation within the collective narratives of the ghetto.

Lizzie: can a 'ghetto queen' really exist?

The second time we met Lizzie, in July 2021, we watched one of her most recent video clips for her song 'Rungu ya Karao' ('Police baton') together. The video shows a rather ridiculous police officer playing around with his *rungu* (knobkerry/baton), threatening the singer with sometimes sexual gestures. Shot in Ayani, Kibera, with a policeman playing himself, this comic video and song were inspired by the curfew imposed during the pandemic, which gave additional opportunities for police officers to abuse people. Inspired by the immediate experience of the ghetto, the song also expresses Lizzie's unique way of describing her neighbourhood, and especially its social and gender relations: she looks at them with kindness, distance and irony. Portraying herself as a 'ghetto queen', with her songs aired on TV and radio, Lizzie narrates her ten-year career as a struggle to separate from and reconcile with the ghetto as a harsh material and psychological condition, a crucial inspiration for her art, and a place of transmission.

At the start of her career, Lizzie lived her success from within the ghetto; she recalls listening to her own hits played on the radio in her shack in Kambi Muru, an extremely deprived location in Kibera, and struggling to believe what she heard. But the contradiction between fame on the airwaves and her daily life in Kambi Muru became increasingly untenable. Her producer promised her money, but it never materialized. She had to borrow to get to the shows where she was performing, and she struggled to make ends meet. She felt manipulated and unrecognized. She also feared that she would not live up to the image people had of her on the outside, and that she would be judged. She remembers a conversation with someone from a wealthy area a few miles away from Kibera, during which she realized how heavily this outside view weighed on her:

> They expected me to be living a very good life, so this guy also told me like we were in somewhere and he was like '[Lizzie] where do you live?' I was like 'living in Kibera'. He said 'You're living in Kibera?' and I was like 'Yes' and 'No, you're not supposed to be living in Kibera' and I say 'What do you mean?' He says, 'Oh my God, the songs that you've made, your manager even drives a Mercedes-Benz and you are living a shitty life down!'[6]

Deeply affected by other people's opinions, she had spent a year in self-imposed isolation in Kibera, building a hermetic border with the world of her art. She stayed in her room, not answering anyone's calls, and she sent her young son away with her mother. After emerging from this period of 'depression' (her word), she moved away from Kibera and planned to send her son to a boarding school. Only then was she able

[6] Interview, 21 July 2021.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0001972024000597 Published online by Cambridge University Press

to write and record again. But distancing herself from dire living conditions did not ease the strain of being a single mother from a very humble background trying to navigate a poorly regulated and often sexist industry. She accepted a weekly job as a karaoke hostess on an avenue bordering Kibera. She loved the job, but it was not enough to pay the bills, so she agreed to clean the bathrooms in the same club on Fridays and Saturdays. People would recognize her there, even if she wore a turban in an attempt to go unnoticed. However, she was not ashamed as she had been before. She accepted that she needed the work to make a decent living while the rap industry in the ghetto was not able to fulfil its responsibilities vis-à-vis its artists.

Lizzie's investment in the industry has since deepened: she has cut ties with her producer, become her own manager, and registered with regulatory and representative bodies. These steps in the professionalization of her career are accompanied by a new posture towards young people in the ghetto. In the media and during events, she likes to answer young artists' questions about her career and to give advice: 'You know, since I've branded myself like I'm a lady from the ghetto, the ghetto queen, you don't have those snobbish-snobbish behaviour – you have to be open with everyone and just speak with everyone.'[7]

Being an icon of the ghetto entails playing by its norms, but Lizzie has enough experience to adhere to some and not others. This struggle of self-definition is particularly apparent in the way she attempts to shift gender boundaries. Because Lizzie 'just wanted to become an artist so badly',[8] she accepted that she had to play by the gender rules imposed by the ghetto rap industry: she started by moving roughly and wearing ragged trousers. Her female condition became obvious when she was pregnant: her producer manifested his discontent by offering her poorly paid jobs, while local gossips were asking why she could not marry instead of singing. But Lizzie has gradually reclaimed the codes of femininity that go hand in hand with her core artistic tastes. Having learned to sing in churches, she loves gospel and soul music. When she had the opportunity to host karaoke, she enjoyed singing 1960s hits, wearing tight dresses and high heels. Her songs continue to mix hip-hop beats, but her lyrics avoid male chauvinism and are much more subtle. And she is regularly invited by NGOs to sing at events promoting women's rights. She is inventing her role as a ghetto queen together with her own definition of the ghetto: a place where women set up the codes of womanhood; a place where extensive social relations and transmission are both an obligation and an enjoyable exercise; but also a place to put at a distance, so that she can sustain her own artistic projects and her peace of mind.

Wilson: at work for all, alone in sacrifice

At first glance, Wilson puts no boundaries between himself and 'his' ghetto of Kariua. Whenever we visited him in this small slum, just 200 metres from Nairobi Central Business District, three or four young men, smoking ganja (cannabis) and busy repairing *matatus* (minibuses), left their activities to escort us to the 'office'. The fifty-eight-year-old man welcomed us there, in a tiny iron-sheet room halfway along Kariua's only street. Inside, there are piles of stuff: both everyday items (dishes,

[7] Interview, 5 August 2021.
[8] Fieldnotes, 16 July 2019.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0001972024000597 Published online by Cambridge University Press

clothing, gas bottles and water containers) and the official documents that Wilson keeps safe for his community. Hanging on the wall, (now former) President Kenyatta's portrait reminds us of the official character of the place. A worn-out curtain barely separates the private space for sleeping from the space for receiving visitors. Visitors are constantly knocking on the door, asking for help with fundraising or to register a child at school.

Wilson says he founded Kariua in 1979. Abandoned by his parents, marked from his early years by his erratic journey from his birthplace, Mombasa, to the Nairobi streets, he finally reconnected with a sister who was living in a small group of squatters' houses on the muddy banks of the Nairobi River. With the help of a few others, he obtained agreement from the Nairobi City Council in 1984 that the squatter camp should be tarmacked and officially recognized as a village. From then on, Kariua has been characterized by its small size (approximately 800 inhabitants) and its social and spatial proximity to Globe Roundabout, a spot renowned for street children.[9] Wilson is wholly committed to helping street children to settle in Kariua and get a basic education, a job and official documents. To him, the ghetto is 'a reconstructed family' and 'a place where you can get cleaned', both physically and psychologically.[10] People there call him either '*mdhamini*' ('someone who helps others' in Kiswahili) or '*gwakwa*' ('mine' in Gikuyu). 'I'm theirs,' says Wilson.

Of his role with the people of Kariua, Wilson says: 'I'm their bridge, to connect them with others, and even the outside world.'[11] He spends a lot of time outside the ghetto, accompanying young people to the National Registration Bureau, getting places for street children in orphanages around the country, testifying at the hospital when girls have been sexually abused, or visiting community members in Kamiti Central prison. He also controls access to the community, whether for national media, NGOs or local politicians.

To play his bridging role, Wilson draws on a diverse range of skills and assets. He has writing and linguistic skills and benefits from an extensive network of NGOs, institutions and private companies, which he knows through training programmes. His legitimacy derives notably from his long-term relationship with the ghetto's assistant chief (a member of the local administration), who endorsed him as 'a person of reputable character and a leader' in an official letter.[12] Over time, Wilson has also developed incisive knowledge of civil rights as well as a good understanding of institutional hierarchies, which allows him to get the attention of a high-ranking police officer or, if necessary, a member of parliament, in order to overcome bureaucratic resistance. Wilson has developed the art not only of bridging, but also of the shortcut.

Despite his complete commitment, Wilson maintains an intimate boundary with his community. This appears through omissions. He hardly ever talks about the people who took care of him, helped him go to school, or opened the doors of the NGO network to him. In his narrative, everything seems to happen by personal decision. For instance: 'I write many letters, many letters. You know it's like that because I went

[9] *The Star*, 19 August 2021.
[10] Interview, 18 July 2019.
[11] *Ibid*.
[12] Letter of 4 July 2019, Wilson's personal archives.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0001972024000597 Published online by Cambridge University Press

to school. Just on myself I decided I will go to school.'[13] Or again: 'You know, I was living there [in the early days of Kariua], that's why I decided I'll do something to other people who are still living there; because when I was there, there was no one to take care of me, like the way I'm taking care of them.'[14] In telling the story in this way, he gets out of the ghetto's mutual aid community. He helps everyone, belongs to everyone, but remains unique, as he is the only one who is not helped. This tension clearly appears when – on rare occasions – he talks about intimate issues, notably his own health. While he constantly accompanies people to hospital, he flatly refuses to be accompanied by anyone from Kariua and maintains a very high degree of opacity about his health concerns:

> Don't show your people you have this problem, and they are depending on you. So, you have to be strong, to keep the secrets of your body, not telling them: 'I'm feeling bad, what ...' The time you are telling them this, they are still waiting for you.[15]

Wilson places himself in a 'sacrificial' position towards the ghetto (his word). He remains the one who helps, but he cannot be helped, accompanied or listened to in return. This position, lived and felt as a vocation (that of a father or a spiritual leader), gives him at the same time a non-shared legitimacy in Kariua. As he has nothing to obtain from the ghetto community, he is also the only one who can speak for it and lead it to better days. This mechanism, where sacrifice and power are ontologically intertwined (Agamben 1998), works by keeping safe the cleavage within the self: I share everything (my time, my skills, my belongings)/I do not share anything (power, legitimacy). However, this cleavage is fragile: the fall of one side would necessarily lead to the fall of the other. This intimate conception of the ghetto as a space where everything is shared – except power – functions both as a moral compass, maintaining his commitment to others, and as a space for his singular ambition.

Chege: discourse on voluntary servitude

Chege's world is, and he wants it to be, boundaryless. Born, raised and still living in Lunga Lunga, a neighbourhood of Mukuru, Chege travels around Kenya and the world to exhibit his paintings. The prize awarded at a prestigious art fair in 2022 to the Wajukuu Collective, which he founded in 2003, was for a work called 'Killing Fear of the Unknown'. A dark architectural installation of rusty corrugated iron, depicting homes in marginalized urban areas, it hosted a variety of individual artworks, including Chege's, which denounces contemporary capitalist democracy. Encouraging collective endeavours but keeping space for individual creativity, raising awareness of lives in the ghetto but emphasizing universal alienation, this artwork reveals Chege's struggle to reconcile his life as an artist with belonging to a deprived and demanding community.

[13] Interview, 18 July 2019.
[14] *Ibid*.
[15] Interview, 26 July 2021.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0001972024000597 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Chege's artistic career was at first about trying to gain credibility and 'give a face to [his] community which people can relate with',[16] and very soon about detaching himself from being the voice of the ghetto. As a founder of the Wajukuu Collective at the age of seventeen, Chege faced hostility and violence from the authorities and local people. This is the consequence of a moral ordering process, long organized by the state, which plays on the internal divisions of the residents of Nairobi's slums (Colona 2020; van Stapele 2020) and indiscriminately categorizes young men as 'gangsters' and 'thugs' – especially if they display practices considered deviant from the dominant order (smoking, wearing dreadlocks, presumed idleness, practising art, etc.). Young artists often fall victim to this categorization and have to gain the trust of the art world outside their neighbourhood. Once connected to this world, Chege's art struck observers due to its darkness and its distinctive style and techniques, far from the 'naive' paintings that encourage the exotic tastes of expatriate connoisseurs (Whalley 2012). After working on identity, he went on to a 'stateless series' marked by his encounter with refugees in Berlin, his unknown family background, and his conception of the ghetto as a metaphor for internal migration and relegation. He then returned to a reflection on the self. His art delivers a message far deeper than the ghetto (to other selves) and far beyond it (to other citizens).

However, his location at the heart of Lunga Lunga, which he had chosen but questioned during our second round of interviews, forces him to give concrete definition to the community and the extent of his obligations to it.

> Okay, I was telling you before that we are trying to separate social and art, because we came to realize we are the one who formed Wajukuu, and the purpose of founding Wajukuu was ... to show the resilience and the role of art in the society ... That's the meaning and people are losing it ... those who don't do art. They don't see it.[17]

'Trying to separate social and art' has become a leitmotiv in Chege's life. Meaning 'grandchildren', Wajukuu was meant to give opportunities to the then young artists – who were deprived of any role models – and also to open up perspectives for the ghetto's children, by providing them with artistic experiences. But this social endeavour and its success progressively invaded Chege's life, with few rewards and increasing disadvantages. On the one hand, the authorities started to turn against him, fearing that his reputation would enable him to play a political role in the upcoming local elections. On the other hand, local people have been demanding more and more, while showing little respect for artists – treating them as 'evil'. His main project now is to settle a few metres away from the Wajukuu community hall and create a distance from daily community work. This segmentation of his life contradicts the usual injunction to individuals in the ghetto to mix their skills with social engagement. His capacity to demarcate himself lies in the external resources he can now mobilize in each sphere of his life. But this is an unending endeavour, and sometimes Chege prefers to resolve the contradictions and misunderstandings by defining his own self as one made to serve others – even, and preferably, if they don't

[16] Fieldnotes, 8 July 2019.
[17] Interview, 19 July 2021.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0001972024000597 Published online by Cambridge University Press

understand him, because 'those who don't understand are those who fuel your creation.'[18]

Intimate configurations of distancing

Chege's, Wilson's and Lizzie's vignettes document three ways of walking the tightrope between engagement and distance from the ghetto. In doing so, they contribute to better understanding of what small boundaries may actually refer to. Drawing on these elements and echoing others, we propose here to analytically dissect this boundary work as an intimate configuration of three forms of distancing: spatial, social and self-distancing. This configuration is specific to each individual and fluctuates across time and socio-spatial contexts. It unveils a seemingly paradoxical mechanism: by building one or other of these distances, people can be involved in the ghetto in a more serene and meaningful way. For instance, a momentary spatial distancing can lead to a renewed social proximity. Long-term work on self-distancing can help one to choose to stay physically in the ghetto, in close proximity with others and facing their constant demands. Small boundaries are configurations of distance that allow people to come to terms with the ambiguous legacy of coming from the urban margins, while having the privilege to project themselves elsewhere.

Spatial distancing can take different forms and timeframes: moving out of the ghetto, travelling abroad for a special occasion, or travelling back and forth between the ghetto and the outside on a regular basis. Almost all our interlocutors attach great importance to the question of space. When they look at what we have noted from our previous interviews, they often start by revising the names of the places they come from or have visited and the dates of their journeys. This says a lot about the importance of space and spatial distancing in the never fixed construction of both their story and their engagement. First, spatial distancing means a movement where the ghetto can be recognized as a point of departure – a learning space from which people have acquired social skills that they can take with them and project into other places. David recalls a trip to the USA for a yoga course:

> That life taught me also out here how to live with people because, uh, even if I go to US today somehow I get to know how to live with people from what I learned in the slum. Sometimes you have to speak up, sometimes you have to back off, sometimes you have to be loving, sometimes you have to stand up for yourself, so all these things it … [pause] When we travel I try to live with people from a place of harmony but not being a victim.[19]

Spatial distancing is also a matter of coming back after being absent for a while. This comeback participates in what Read calls 'narratives of emplacement' (Read 2012): narratives that intimately link one's story to the story of a particular place. The act of leaving, of moving away from a place, temporarily or for good, paradoxically serves to enable the individual to reformulate why they choose to return or to maintain some form of permanent link, however tenuous, with that place. Yet this permanence

[18] *Ibid*.

[19] Interview, 22 July 2021.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0001972024000597 Published online by Cambridge University Press

doesn't mean a return to an unassailable rootedness. Doreen Massey's comprehension of what a place is may be of some help here. For Massey (2005), a place is not a specific location in space; rather, it is an *event*. Place means the experience at a particular moment of the confrontation between the trajectory of a subject (who has travelled, seen other places, taken on memories and values) and the trajectories of other people who have stayed put, living other experiences. Places, she argues, 'change us, not through visceral belongings ... but through the practising of place, the negotiation of intersecting trajectories; place as an arena where negotiation is forced upon us' (*ibid.*: 154). Those who have the privilege of spatial distancing, then, do not come back to the same 'here', simply because they are no longer the same 'I'. Coming back means loading the place of return with the experiences one had outside, and thus rethinking one's affective, social and political engagement with it. Chege, for example, having travelled in Europe to promote his art, was struck by the similar human condition that exists between migrants in Europe and people in Nairobi ghettos. David's repeated participation in yoga courses in the USA made him aware of the infantilizing mentorship of NGOs that weighs on the African urban poor. On another scale, Lizzie felt the need to move to a quieter place, on the outskirts of Kibera, so that she could continue to take a serene and committed look at life in the ghetto in her songs. Spatial distancing, then, is not simply an act of rupture by setting boundaries through space and mobility, but rather an experience of renegotiating what binds someone to a particular place.

Social distancing constitutes a second leitmotiv of their narratives. Social distancing here refers to the decision to weaken accountability links with a part of their entourage, whether it be their family or members of their immediate social environment. Social anthropologists have recently advocated for a more complex understanding of social obligations in contemporary African societies, abandoning the paradigm that social relations, particularly among the poor, were necessarily guided by relationships of dependence, altruism and mutual aid. Peter Lockwood's concept of 'class closure' (2023) describes, for instance, how those who are upwardly mobile avoid social redistribution by invoking a labour ethic (one has to generate one's own gain 'from beyond the neighbourhood'). This extraction from the social obligations of place is similarly noted by Landau and Freemantle (2016), who evoke 'usufruct ethics' that guide newcomers' sense of belonging in South African and Kenyan urban peripheries. Residents do not feel the need to be part of the city or to be responsible to their neighbours; they are content to use their passage through the city as a pragmatic means of accessing its (financial) fruits, in order to project themselves towards a new stage in their lives.

Interestingly, Tom Neumark proposes the concept of 'detachment' in his ethnographic work with women facing extremely fragile economic conditions in Korogocho. Detachment, he writes, 'is not just an absence or a form of relationship, but also an ethical practice that involves the *care* for the relationships that constitute the self' (2017: 749). Both refraining from asking for financial help and not systematically redistributing are ways of preserving all the other dimensions that make up a social relationship, which are often threatened by the prevalence of financial need. While agreeing with this, our argument positions itself at a slightly different level. When they talk about social distancing, our interlocutors are referring less to withdrawing from mutual financial support than to extracting themselves

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0001972024000597 Published online by Cambridge University Press

from the dominant narratives of the ghetto. One of these narratives, for example, always links an individual's success to a blurring of the lines between personal entrepreneurship and social work (see, for instance, Thieme 2015; Dolan and Rajak 2016). In opposition to this, our interlocutors seek to socially exist for what they each aspire to be – artist, activist, athlete, academic – in a sort of ordinariness of their conditions, without necessarily being labelled as an 'artist for the poor' or an 'athlete for the community'. It is often an experience of spatial distancing and the possibility of valuing their talents in other social contexts that have enabled them to conceive this ordinariness. This small boundary work – detaching their main activity from their social obligations – does not prevent them from maintaining assistance and commitment to their entourage. However, they claim that this involves a different sphere of their lives: at different times, in different places, and engaging a distinct facet of themselves.

A third form of distancing, self-distancing, accompanies spatial and social distancing. Here we call self-distancing an act of reflexivity on the part of the subject who seeks to create moments of distance from the flow of their daily activities in order to give intelligible meaning and ethical direction to the fragmented experience of life (Morris 1994; Van Wolputte 2004). For our interlocutors, this act of reflexivity is often associated with the practice of writing. Ethnographies of 'grassroots literacy' (Blommaert 2008) – i.e. writing practices that take place in everyday life, without the intention of being a writer – have revealed the role that this practice can play at times when the subject finds him- or herself in a state of psychological or social uncertainty. This echoes Lahire's work on writing to-do lists as a means of regaining self-confidence (2011: 115–39). First, writing is not necessarily an act of unification of the subject through a linear narrative, but rather a practice that allows us to welcome into ourselves, with serenity, the cracks, holes, inconsistencies and traumatic repetitions linked to our life's journey (Lorimer 2003; Tamas 2009; De Leeuw 2017). As Gibson-Graham suggests (2008), writing can also be identified as a work of 'resubjectification': a practice that enables the subject to create and perform alternative worlds. Writing, then, is not only a work of *representation*, but also a process of *projection*: by writing, what do I have the power to make happen? As Cameron puts it: '[S]tories do not simply represent, in that sense, they affect, they *move*' (2012: 581). For our interlocutors, writing practices, or relations with the writing of others, can take different forms. These include the most personal – such as posts on social networks, lyrics, poems, diaries, autobiographical texts – but also the importance given to administrative texts such as certificates or official endorsement letters.

During our interviews, our interlocutors were particularly concerned with the choice of words to describe themselves, sometimes referring to other writing they had previously produced. In many cases, we find that this specific relationship to writing coincides with moments in their lives characterized by a process of spatial and/or social distancing. Paul, for example, has written an autobiographical book about growing up in Korogocho, published early in the 2010s, years after he left the ghetto, to which he had rarely returned. The content of the book oscillates between personal elements from his childhood and attempts to achieve distance through scientific objectification and academic codes. The text bears witness both to a desire for filiation (I come from there) and to a desire to dissect all the structural forces that

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0001972024000597 Published online by Cambridge University Press

weigh on Korogocho's inhabitants as subjects, and from which he has extracted himself through his critical eye (like government policies that might portray them as a 'nuisance', international media that might 'sensationalize' them, or aid programmes that constitute them as 'recipients'). In a different vein, Lizzie has started writing on Facebook after a year of withdrawing into herself in her home in Kibera. It was in these messages that she wrote, for the first time, about the psychological difficulties of having to conform to her role as a ghetto icon. These Facebook posts marked the end of her isolation and the beginning of her recovery, which coincided with a move to a neighbourhood adjacent to the ghetto. In her testimony she writes herself in order to distance herself from the writing of others, in this case journalists.

> All this time I was afraid to talk about this because I knew they [journalists] were going to judge me. So for the first time I was breaking that cocoon, I was like I'm sick and tired. I'm sick and tired and I don't care about you guys. What you're going to think about me? Yeah, I don't care about the consequences. Go on, write! Go on, write! You have something to write. Now go on, write about it in your article and they did. They wrote pages, different newspapers, they wrote pieces. [Lizzie] is depressed. They wrote a lot of things ... But, you know, once I opened my mouth and I spoke about this I felt like as if there's some heavy burden that was lifted.[20]

The 'Go on, write!' request is apparently a double address, to herself and to the journalists. Through writing, she reconciles with a part of herself (accepting her depression), while at the same time emotionally distancing herself from her public self as the powerful icon that the ghetto media had built.

Writing is obviously not the only form of self-distancing. Self-distancing emerges in the everyday through an extended array of practices: being ironic, sharing moments of humour with peers, experiencing changes in attitude depending on the audience, switching language, looking at the past through photographs of lost loved ones. All our interlocutors speak of these moments when they experience a fragmented self between contradictory injunctions, differentiated spaces or disjointed times. As Van Wolputte puts it: 'We all are Creoles of sorts: hybrid, divided, polyphonic, and parodic – a pastiche of our Selves' (2004: 263). From the ghetto specifically, experiencing this polyphonic self requires an act of distance towards the stereotypical characterizations that accompanied their early socialization: the Survivor, the Repentant, the Good Samaritan, the Deserving, the Recipient of Aid, the Voice of the Community. Depending on the configuration, this work of self-distancing prepares, coincides with or follows moments of social or spatial distancing.

Conclusion

It is worth recalling that Lizzie, Wilson and Chege, as well as other participants in this research, do not exactly fit the common stereotypes of African urban 'ghetto hustlers', nor do they belong to a distinct social category. They display different levels of social success and receive different levels of acknowledgement from their peers

[20] Interview, July 2021.

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0001972024000597 Published online by Cambridge University Press

and their social environment. In that sense, their trajectories and narrations cannot be compared. Nevertheless, their common experience of crossing social worlds makes them share a sharp self-reflexivity and a strong feeling of social discomfort.

Admittedly, this uncomfortable positioning of the self is not unique and can be experienced by different people in many different urban contexts. Yet, it is precisely their liminal or straddling position in Nairobi, one of Africa's most fragmented cities, that makes visible their 'small boundary' work with particular acuity. This echoes a growing literature on boundary work that examines the social distancing processes linked to wealth accumulation and the creation of social contradictions. Yet, because of their individual and fragile social status and their attachment to the 'ghetto', our interlocutors are torn by ambivalent tensions that they attempt to solve through processes of subtle distancing from their social background.

First, social distancing makes possible, through fragile configurations, the coexistence of both aspirations and obligations. These boundaries are reflected in concrete practices that are visible in space and time. They also involve a moral and social dimension, as they attempt to define to whom in the ghetto accountability is due, or is not due. Second, exploring their self-distancing work is a way of advocating for closer examination of the intense psychological distress that comes with living at the thresholds of different social worlds. This effort is reflected in feelings of constant fatigue, guilt, sacrifice, isolation, inhibition of traumas or temporary suppression of a part of oneself.

Finally, the work of spatial distancing, through daily commutes or trips abroad, transforms our interlocutors' apprehension of the place to which they claim to belong. This process contributes to the renewal of collective narratives of the ghetto. In the first section, we recalled the ambivalence of the ghetto, as a place where contradictions are experienced on a daily basis. Being raised in the ghetto means being torn between attachment to shared narratives and the desire to distance oneself from them when they become too restrictive. Our interlocutors carry this ambivalence with them in their mobility. On the one hand, circulating between different spheres, they participate, through their discourses, self-presentations and sometimes artistic productions, in a progressive work of nuancing common narratives of the ghetto and making them more complex. On the other hand, ghetto narratives can become a resource for them, once they can prove that they have experienced the ghetto's hardships. Thus, drawing small boundaries is also a means of reactivating some stigmas associated with the ghetto, often precisely those that serve the exceptionalism of their trajectories.

Acknowledgements. We are deeply grateful to our research participants for their generosity with their time and knowledge. We are also grateful to our colleague Fathima Azmiya for our partnership on this project, as well as to the two anonymous reviewers for engaging comments. We would like to thank the Institut français de recherches en Afrique (IFRA in Nairobi) and the Pamoja programme (under the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the French Ministry of Higher Education and Research and the Kenyan National Research Fund) which funded this project.

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Jean-Baptiste Lanne is an Associate Professor in Urban and Social Geography in the Department of Geography at Université Paris Cité. He is a member of the Centre for Social Sciences Studies on the African, American and Asian worlds (CESSMA). His work focuses on the self-narratives of stigmatized residents and precarious workers in contemporary urban Kenya, using critical creative methodologies.

Marie-Emmanuelle Pommerolle is an Associate Professor in Political Science in the Department of Political Science at University Paris 1 – Panthéon Sorbonne. She is a member of the Institut des mondes africains (IMAf). Among other issues, her work deals with social mobilization in authoritarian and/or strongly unequal situations.

Cite this article: Lanne, J.-B. and Pommerolle, M.-E. (2024). '"I can't segregate myself": self-narrating and 'small boundary' work in Nairobi's ghettos'. *Africa* **94**, 594–612. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0001972024000597