Living the *Pharmakon*: Waste Pickers and the Politics of Residual Futuring At Gioto Dumpsite in Nakuru, Kenya

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Abstract

This article develops a pharmacological reading of Gioto, the municipal dumpsite of Nakuru, Kenya, to examine how waste pickers navigate waste worlds as sites of remedy, poison, and scapegoating. Drawing on ethnographic research, I trace how successive histories of dispossession, industrial decline, and more recent efforts to privatise waste management have progressively severed waste pickers' relations with land, livelihoods, and urban space, and now threaten their access to waste itself. I approach these processes as a thinning of relations that also unfolds temporally, disconnecting waste pickers from Nakuru's history and casting them as toxic, disposable, or trapped in a present without a viable future. Rather than allowing these representations to determine what kinds of life and futures are possible at the dump, I examine how waste pickers themselves apprehend and act upon its material possibilities. I focus particularly on *migodi*, who excavate the dump's older strata in search of recyclable materials. Their excavations, I argue, destratify the dump and bring its sedimented histories into renewed relation with the present. In doing so, Gioto's waste pickers turn the dump's material strata and the histories they evoke into grounds for asserting their urban belonging and apprehending alternative futures.

Introduction

Hilton Estate is in Nakuru, Kenya, a secondary city 160 kilometres northwest of the capital, Nairobi. Between the fence of the city's Gioto dumpsite and a line of houses there is a buffer zone, often referred to locally as a "no-man's-land." Makeshift shelters built from wood, plastic, old blankets, and scavenged materials crowd this strip of land, where many of Gioto's waste pickers live. The buffer zone extends from the social hall next to the Nakuru-Kabarak road to the prison boundary, reaching about 50 metres across at its widest point.

Ben appears carrying a large sack over his shoulder. "I'll be back later; let me empty this first," he shouts as he heads towards his home. There, he empties plastic bottles, bones, copper wires, and glass onto the ground. Once carefully sorted, these materials will be sold by weight to Harrison, a local middleman in the recycling industry. "On a good day, I can make 700 shillings, and that covers my rent," Ben explains. The value of what he collects depends on fluctuating scrap prices: plastic bottles currently fetch 25 shillings per kilo, glass bottles 8 shillings, bones 5 shillings, while copper brings in a lucrative 800 shillings per kilo. Coloured glass is not yet collected because the local recycling plant only processes clear glass, though Ben hopes another plant might open soon, bringing competition and better prices.

Further along the buffer zone, Amos rushes towards a newly arrived truck carrying cartons. New arrivals quickly attract groups of waste pickers, who swarm around the trucks to claim valuable materials before they disappear. Near the dumpsite's perimeter fence, Mama Njeri is busy weighing scrap unloaded from another truck while her daughter meticulously records each transaction in a notebook. Displaced during Kenya's 2007 post-election violence, Mama Njeri eventually settled in Gioto, where she built a thriving scrap business. She now buys everything from glass and metal to bones and cartons and owns two scrap yards. The second is located outside the dumpsite in an area called Kiamunyi, allowing her to collect scrap from surrounding areas before it reaches the landfill.

Nearby, Waingo and Joel are hard at work in an excavation pit, digging for zinc discarded by the now-closed Eveready battery factory. The material is highly valuable when found in pure form. Joel pulls material from the pit while Waingo cleans off the excess dirt and sorts the zinc into bags. "The zinc is not pure," Waingo explains. On one occasion, however, they hit the jackpot, bringing around 100 kilos of pure zinc to the surface. He laughs as he recalls the excitement of the discovery. As they pack up for the day, the conversation turns to where they will sell their haul. They no longer sell exclusively to Harrison, but also to Kamzee, a former worker of Harrison's who now owns his own scrap yard.

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The above vignette introduces the central theme of this paper: a pharmacological reading of Nakuru's dumpsite, Gioto. My analysis builds on a growing literature that has challenged representations of waste pickers as marginal actors operating outside the city's formal systems. Scholars working on waste work have shown how waste pickers sustain urban systems as embodied and vital waste infrastructure (Lima 2023a; Gutberlet and Carenzo 2020; Doherty 2021; Fredericks 2018), claim waste as a commons (O'Hare 2022), develop alternative forms of environmental governance (José zapata Campos et al. 2021), and contest processes of enclosure and exclusion generated by the formalisation of waste economies (O'Hare 2022, 2019; Samson 2015). This article is primarily concerned with how Gioto's stratigraphy has become the material and mnemonic substrate from which waste pickers make claims to urban belonging, historical justice, and future possibility. What counts as "waste" in my analysis includes both material garbage and the lived experiences of waste pickers who have themselves

been made residual to city life. Samson's (2015: 817-24) account of waste pickers at a landfill in Soweto, South Africa is insightful here. She examines how waste pickers transformed what was considered a "commodity cemetery" into a "resource mine". She argues that attempts to enclose the dump entailed forms of "epistemic dispossession" whereby the state appropriated the knowledge that allows waste pickers to transform waste into a valuable resource while erasing them as the producers of that knowledge.

Where Samson considers the resource mine to "re-cast the waste as valuable and the dump as a site for the production of value" (Samson 2015: 814), at Gioto this type of mining is practised quite literally. Changes in municipal waste management have increasingly pushed some waste pickers, such as Waingo and Joel, from surface picking and sorting towards digging into the dump's older strata in search of materials with residual value. Yet digging down also means digging back in time. The waste pickers featured in this article often reminisced about the failed resettlement schemes and broken development promises that had excluded them from the city's formal economy and pushed them into recycling livelihoods in the first place. As they learned to read the dump's sedimented layers, the materials they unearthed became mnemonic anchors through which they connected their own life trajectories to Nakuru's buried industrial past. In recovering value from discarded materials, waste pickers also uncovered the histories embedded in the dump and their own position within them. I argue that this mnemonic work disrupts the temporal separations through which particular histories, livelihoods, and people are rendered obsolete, reopening possibilities for inhabiting and making futures in a city that increasingly excludes them.

My analysis draws on the polysemic notion of the *pharmakon*, which refers to a remedy, a poison, and a scapegoat. Waste pickers simultaneously embody all three of these attributes: they are indispensable to urban waste's transformation into value (remedy), associated with the toxicity and disorder of urban waste (poison), and made to bear the burden of the city's failures to manage its own residues (scapegoat). I am particularly inspired by Langwick's (2026: 1-4, 226-27) reading of the *pharmakon*, which locates its ambivalence within historically constituted relations among bodies, land, plants, soils, ancestors, and extractive histories. She argues that toxicity takes shape by thinning relations through dispossession, extraction, ecological depletion, and the severing of bodies and landscapes from the histories and forms of knowledge that sustain them. Conversely, remedy takes shape in practices of thickening and repair that reconnect bodies, landscapes, memories, and more-than-human life. She argues that healing in a toxic world is not inherently about eliminating toxicity or restoring an imagined state of purity but rather entails cultivating forms of "ongoingness" (ibid.) through the continual reassembly of damaged relations. I argue that waste pickers cultivate such ongoingness by reassembling the relations between waste, memory, and urban life that dominant practices of waste governance seek to sever.

Langwick (2026: 8, 16–17) builds on Arnold's (2016) notion of the "imperial *pharmakon*" that captures how imperial science, law, and economy have historically shaped what counts as toxicity, remedy, legitimate knowledge, and justice. One way the imperial *pharmakon* operated was through the partitioning of relations whereby "bodies were separated from lands, plants were separated from ancestors, and social relations were separated from physical being" (Langwick 2026: 119). Lima (2023a) draws a connection between the idea of separating relations and modern waste epistemology by showing how dominant waste imaginaries "separate waste from their particular sociocultural context" (2023a: 9), turning historically and socially situated understandings of waste into seemingly universal categories organised around hygienist notions of cleanliness and purity. Waste governance assimilates those who handle waste with dirt and disease, turning them into the city's *pharmakoi* or scapegoats onto whom the disorder and toxicity of urban waste are displaced, thereby reducing the *pharmakon's* ambivalence to its poisonous dimensions and legitimating waste pickers'

dispossession and displacement (e.g. Reno 2009; Lima 2023b, 2023a; Fredericks 2018; O'Hare 2022).

My analysis gains traction in the ways in which my interlocutors contested these separations. By delving into the dump's strata, they reconnected unearthed waste to the social, historical, and moral worlds from which municipal governance sought to detach it. Rather than being governed *as* residues (see Hecht 2023 on "residual governance"; Samson 2015 on "human waste"), my interlocutors governed *through* them, repurposing and reimagining waste and the histories it indexed as grounds for claims about urban belonging. This resonates with a recent call to pay more attention to how material substances themselves participate in producing urban possibilities (Fontein and Smith 2023). As Fontein (2015: 9) puts it, the city's political and social life "find traction in their entanglement with materialities of milieu."

These materialities of milieu have historical roots. The struggles over toxicity, value, and urban belonging traced in this article are entangled with what Peša (2023) calls "toxic coloniality" or the lingering traces of colonialism's toxic legacies that keep on shaping contemporary life on the continent (also see Stoler 2013 on "ruins" and "ruination"). The unequal distribution of these toxic residues readily lends itself to a necropolitical reading in which histories of dispossession and infrastructural abandonment expose some populations to harm and render their lives expendable to dominant projects of urban order. Yet such a reading would risk reproducing the very separations my pharmacological approach seeks to unsettle, casting waste pickers as "living dead" (Mbembe 2003: 40), suspended at the boundary between life and non-life—a point to which I will return. As Samson (2015) also cautions, framings of waste pickers through abandonment and surplus can obscure their "epistemic and social agency" (Samson 2015: 814) as "generators of knowledge and transformers of social reality" (Samson 2015: 827). What interests me instead is how sedimented hierarchies were destratified from within the dump, that is, how waste pickers dug into, exposed, and reworked the material and social strata through which some materials, histories, and lives have been rendered residual.

I layer my analysis onto the dump itself: first, I explore its subsurface sediments as the afterlives of broken promises of postcolonial resettlements and modernity; then, I trace how toxic exposure is at once moralised and reworked as grounds for presence at, and access to, the dump; and finally, drawing on Yusoff's (2017) notion of destratification, I examine how waste pickers' excavation of the dump brings buried histories back into circulation and unsettles the social hierarchies sedimented within them.

This article is based on more than 30 months of fieldwork. During some of my earlier research (Rahier 2024, 2023, 2021), I came to know families who grew up on the dumpsite. My interest in the dumpsite's social world grew as part of a broader research project on pyrethrum revival programmes in Eastern Africa. The Pyrethrum Board of Kenya was once a major employer for some of the families now living at Gioto, and the company disposed of large volumes of waste at the dumpsite in the 1980s and 1990s. Tracing the remains of the former pyrethrum industry led me to the dumpsite, where I conducted participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and participatory mapping. I also used lifelogging techniques to video-record waste pickers as they dug through the dump. All names of interlocutors are pseudonyms. Some biographical and identifying details have been modified or omitted to protect participants' anonymity.

"Recycling Without Waste Pickers Is Garbage"

In 2022, the Kenyan government introduced the Sustainable Waste Management Act (Government of Kenya 2022), which requires waste segregation at its source, formalises the registration and licensing of waste service providers, and mandates county governments to establish Material Recovery Facilities (MRFs). Subsequent Extended Producer Responsibility

(EPR) regulations introduced in 2024 explicitly sought to integrate waste pickers into the formal waste-management value chain (Government of Kenya 2024). Yet despite these commitments to inclusion, my interlocutors worried that the emerging recycling economy would inevitably restrict their access to recyclable materials.

Opening Gioto to new forms of accumulation meant enclosing the dump and dispossessing the communities who recycled there informally, often under the guise of public health or sanitation concerns. This process is what O'Hare (2022) terms "hygienic enclosure" (see also Fredericks 2021: 159; Samson 2015: 822). At the time of fieldwork, enclosure increasingly occurred upstream, as private waste collection companies began intercepting valuable materials long before they reached the dump. Zapata Campos et al. (2023: 1270–71) similarly observe how enclosure happens as soon as waste's value becomes visible and the waste previously accessed collectively is brought under state or private control and transformed into commodities. My interlocutors traced the expansion of private waste collectors to a former governor of Nakuru, widely believed to have financial interests in the business. They recalled that he was said to have allowed waste collectors working for his company to compensate themselves by selling valuable materials recovered during collection.

In January 2024, a month before the observations in the opening vignette of this article, the frustrations of Gioto's waste pickers culminated in public protests under the slogan: "recycling without waste pickers is garbage." They protested the exclusionary effects of the city's greening efforts and rejected a future in which their histories, livelihoods, and lifeworlds had no place. Fredericks (2018: 4) describes this as a "refusal to be refuse", a reference to how her interlocutors living on a dumpsite in Dakar, Senegal rejected the disposability assigned to their labour and bodies and turned waste into a medium of political claim-making. The protests in Nakuru similarly challenged waste pickers' contradictory position as disposable figures onto whom the city displaced its waste, yet whose labour remains indispensable to the city's functioning—a city's *pharmakoi*. To understand how Nakuru's waste pickers came to occupy this contradictory position of indispensability and disposability, I first turn to my interlocutors' life histories to situate their experiences within broader histories of displacement and dispossession.

Land, Resettlement, and Dispossession

Under British rule, vast tracts of arable land in the Rift Valley were set aside for European settlers, which led to the eviction of indigenous populations from their ancestral homelands. After independence, Kenya's first government implemented land redistribution initiatives to break up these colonial-era estates and relocate the many displaced communities. Under these resettlement schemes, vast settler-owned farms were divided into smaller plots for small-scale farming (Thurston 1987). But the land quickly "got tired" (*ardhi imechoka* in Swahili) due to erosion following years of intensifying smallholder agriculture on increasingly smaller plots.[1] Kenya's agrarian economies eventually collapsed under agrochemical dependency, structural adjustment programmes, and falling global commodity prices. Resettlement schemes and the resulting pressure on the land also contributed to broader patterns of ethnic conflict and political patronage, as they often reinforced, rather than resolved,

[1] Geissler and Prince (2010) argue that the 1980s in Kenya was marked by authoritarian rule, widespread corruption, economic austerity, and a deteriorating economy, all conditions that deeply undermined the promises and aspirations of independence. During this time, mortality rose sharply due to worsening poverty and the spread of HIV/AIDS. According to their study among JoUhero communities in Western Kenya, the HIV/AIDS epidemic became entangled with broader concerns such as soil degradation, changes in family structures, and economic hardship. They capture how local references to "the land is dying" referred to a sense of diminishing vitality and life that affected people and environments.

colonial injustices and fuelled inter-ethnic tensions and grievances over land ownership and political favouritism (Kanyinga 2009). Elections became high-stakes contests in which political elites mobilised ethnic identity to gain control over state power and redistribute land and resources (Klopp 2001). Nakuru, as the capital of the Rift Valley, became the epicentre of these tensions. The city's agricultural hinterland, such as Molo and Njoro, was at the heart of Kenya's colonial plantation economies and when resettlement schemes left many farmers landless and the soil exhausted, accumulated frustration among farmers led to waves of violent clashes in the region. The most brutal evidence of this is remembered by many Nakuruans as the 2007–2008 post-election violence that devastated the Nakuru hinterland, as well as the violent elections held in 1991-1992, 1997, and 2002 (Branch 2011).

Dispossessed and disillusioned by the agrarian futures promised during decolonisation, many farming families fled to Nakuru in search of subsistence and stability. Many of Gioto's current waste pickers are descendants of these families. They worked as manual labourers in the city's once-thriving industries, such as pyrethrum processing, the Kenya Seed Company, and factories such as Eveready Batteries, Eliotts Bakeries, and the Sam-Con Limited steel factory. The city's industrial peak, from the 1970s to the mid-1990s, was a period of economic growth and high employment. Nakuru's central location and rich agricultural hinterland made it a major hub for processing food, animal feeds, textiles, and Kenya's agrochemical sector. Pyrethrum, a cash crop used to produce a natural insecticide, was once celebrated as the country's "white gold". Yet over the last few decades, many of these industries have either significantly downsized or shut down completely. Eveready East Africa, for instance, ceased operations in Nakuru in 2014. The pyrethrum market also collapsed, though efforts are underway to revive the industry. This industrial decline unfolded amid market liberalisation programmes introduced from the 1980s onwards, which progressively opened Kenya's previously protected manufacturing sector to international competition and cheaper imports (Himbara 1994; Rono 2002). What remains of Nakuru's industrial heydays are traces of these former industries, such as the zinc fragments dug up and sold by Waingo and Joel, alongside the high levels of heavy metals that continue to pollute the soil and water bodies (e.g., Nantongo et al. 2024).

My interlocutors recalled how their parents or grandparents first sought refuge in the city's informal settlements like Biafra, Soweto, Bangladesh, City Carton, Githiga, and Kenya Meat. These neighbourhoods were established on public land such as road reserves, former railway land, and other government-owned property. But as Nakuru's economy began to erode from the 1980s onwards, factories closed, and unemployment rose sharply (Rono 2002: 87-89). Many already displaced communities were left without stable livelihoods once again. When most of the land on which these informal settlements were built was eventually sold off, they ended up moving to the dumpsite, where they began piecing together new lives by reworking waste into value.

Take Gitahi, for example, a waste picker born in 1972 in Biafra. He reminisced about how his parents had relocated from Karatina in Nyeri (Central Kenya) to Biafra, drawn by job opportunities at Kenya Seed Limited and the Kenya Cereals Board, both thriving companies at the time. While the dome-shaped silos that used to store cereal still exist, much of Biafra has disappeared. From Kiwanja, a local drinking den on Gioto's cliff overlooking the city's Industrial Area, Gitahi traced the contours of the former Biafra settlement. He recalled how, during heavy rains, stormwater carried loaves of bread and packets of milk into Biafra. As a child, he would visit Gioto after school and on weekends with friends to scavenge for food. Biafra eventually disappeared after much of the land was sold under former President Moi to members of his entourage, forcing Gitahi and his family to relocate to Gioto.

"Kamatimu": Who Gets to Own the Future?

When they talked about this violent history of dispossession, waste pickers frequently used the term "*kamatimu*"[2] to describe those who benefited from the land resettlement programmes. The term evoked memories of Kenyans who sided, or were believed to have sided, with the colonial government and served in the Home Guard during the Mau Mau uprising against colonial rule (Clough 1998: 78; see Anderson 2005 for a broader history of Mau Mau). In my interlocutors' accounts, these colonial loyalties continued to shape postcolonial inequalities, as those associated with the *kamatimu*, or their descendants, were believed to have secured positions of political and economic privilege. Such perceptions fuelled resentment among *wananchi* (ordinary citizens), who felt that the benefits of independence had been captured by those who had opposed the struggle for land and freedom.

Invoking the figure of the *kamatimu* thus brought histories of dispossession into the present, as memories of colonial struggle continued to shape how my interlocutors experienced and interpreted contemporary political and moral inequalities. Some waste pickers even openly identified as contemporary Mau Mau, proudly situating their struggles within a longer legacy of resistance to what they perceived as the colonial and oligarchic oppression embodied by the *kamatimu*. During fieldwork, these claims resonated with broader political activism among Kenya's "hustlers" that challenged the so-called Kenyan "deep state". This reached a peak during the widespread Gen Z protests of 2024, when young Kenyans mobilised against new forms of taxation amid a sense of increasing economic pressure. Like many Kenyans, my interlocutors saw the new taxation measures as evidence of a growing gap between the lifeworlds of the political elite and the everyday struggles of ordinary citizens. Moore et al. (2026: n.p.) describe the Gen Z protests as young Kenyans "protesting a history" of enduring colonial and postcolonial structures that continue to reproduce economic hardship and political inequality. For my interlocutors, the figure of the *kamatimu* gave this history a tangible face, personifying the historical legacies of exclusion that had denied ordinary citizens their share of the promises of development and, ultimately, their claim to Kenya's future. Similar sentiments informed their protests against the privatisation of the recycling industry.

Claims about Kenya's history and its unfulfilled promises took on particular meaning through more personal memories of dispossession. Njoroge, for instance, was raised in Hilton, the area described in the opening vignette. Like many other women in Hilton, his mother brewed an illicit alcoholic beverage called *busaa*. Njoroge recalled how they often had to flee police raids targeting *busaa* dens. Hilton got its name from residents who compared its elevated view of Nakuru town and the lake to the Hilton Hotel in Nairobi, which served as a symbol of a post-colonial new African modernism associated with elite consumption and global prestige (Smith 2023: n.p.). Njoroge's brother recalled that the land was once owned by white Kenyans and was gradually subdivided through a series of informal transactions, claims of inheritance, and suspected bribery in the 1970s-90s. Many of the current residents lack formalised title deeds and live there informally. The result is decades of uncertainty, contested ownership, and, at times, violence between residents and authorities. Nevertheless, many waste pickers see their continued occupation of this land as an act of resistance against elite capture and dispossession.

Remaining on contested land was also a way of positioning themselves in relation to an increasingly uncertain future. This was particularly visible at the western edge of Hilton, in an area known as Galilaya (sometimes called "Gaza"). Some residents had managed to purchase land elsewhere using savings earned in the recycling industry. Galilaya is located just next to the main dumping area. According to Njoroge's oldest brother, Baba Kamau, Galilaya's history dates back to the 1980s–90s, when a lorry repairman named Maina, nicknamed "Mrefu", settled there after being repeatedly displaced from other informal settlements in Nakuru. His

[2] Clough (1998: 261) translates *kamatimu* as "little spears", a term used to refer to the Home Guard.

arrival marked the beginning of the settlement's expansion into what are now Galilaya proper and Gumba. Land tenure there remains uncertain. Residents consider the area government land under the jurisdiction of Nakuru Prison, and local authorities have previously laid claim to adjacent parcels. Despite this uncertainty, residents continue to live there and generally consider eviction unlikely. Some residents acquired plots in Menengai, the volcano bordering the dumpsite to the north, where geothermal exploration by the Geothermal Development Company of Kenya has made land ownership increasingly attractive (Rahier 2026b). Yet despite legally owning land in the caldera, they continued to maintain temporary dwellings in Galilaya. While several attributed this to emotional attachment, Njoroge argued that many also anticipated eventual government-led relocation and compensation—a future they did not want to forgo. Remaining in Galilaya thus became a way of securing a stake in Gioto's future redevelopment.

Similar anticipatory strategies emerged around access to waste itself. In response to eviction threats and growing uncertainty over access to recyclable materials, some of Gioto's waste pickers organised into formal associations to protect their rights and secure their livelihoods. The largest of these is the Nakuru County Waste Pickers Association (NACOWAPIA), which represents waste pickers from dumpsites across Naivasha, Nakuru, Molo, and Gilgil. Its members have secured designated waste-collection zones in the affiliated cities and towns and established formal representation in government discussions about the future of dumpsites. Nevertheless, some of my interlocutors distanced themselves from NACOWAPIA. Waingo and Joel, for instance, expressed deep mistrust of what a privatised future would hold and feared a loss of autonomy over their lives and work. They noted that groups such as NACOWAPIA often favoured certain individuals for potential employment under private investors. They feared this could further exclude large parts of the community and reproduce the patterns of displacement they had long experienced. Rather than empowering waste pickers, they saw such interventions as another way of binding them to the oligarchic forces seeking to control the waste management sector, ultimately deepening their exploitation.

These concerns also extend beyond the particular politics of Gioto. Inquiry into "plastic credit" schemes in Kenya (McGlone, Ogembo, and Wakibia 2025) revealed how formal environmental offset mechanisms marketed under labels such as "Net Zero Plastic" can reproduce the very patterns of dispossession that waste pickers have been protesting against. Under such schemes, multinational brands purchase credits from projects that claim to improve waste pickers' livelihoods. Yet my interlocutors complained that these projects delivered little to no tangible improvement in wages or working conditions. The schemes echo broader patterns in contemporary sustainable governance, whereby the complex, relational work of managing waste is translated into abstract, tradable units that circulate far from the sites of labour.

What is at stake for my interlocutors across these struggles over land and access to waste is control over the relations through which value is produced and a place in the city's future is secured. Attempts to reorganise these relations risk producing new forms of separation and dispossession that mimic the imperial *pharmakon*. As Brownell (2014) shows for Dar es Salaam, Tanzania, infrastructures of dirt and disposal have long been central to how order, exclusion, and belonging are staged in African cities. In colonial and postcolonial Tanzania, she argues, waste discourse was mobilised to discipline urban citizens and mark the margins of legitimate urban belonging. Sanitation infrastructures became political instruments that both promised modern progress and produced marginal populations. A similar tension is at work in Nakuru. The histories traced above can be read as successive acts of separating waste picker families from land, agrarian livelihoods, industrial employment, urban settlements, and, now, through the formalisation of recycling, potentially from waste itself. In this sense, Nakuru's

imperial *pharmakon* continues to be reproduced through an emerging urban order that promises cleanliness, formalisation, and progress through renewed practices of separation.

Yet Gioto also reveals the limits of this ordering. The continued presence of waste pickers at Gioto—and their reliance on the material residues of the city's past development—trouble the linear trajectories of urban and industrial modernisation on which postcolonial promises of progress have rested (see Comaroff and Comaroff 1993 on the contradictions of postcolonial modernity; Ferguson 1999 on the collapse of anticipated trajectories of industrial modernisation). It is precisely within this contradiction that waste pickers' pharmacological position becomes visible. They remain indispensable to the city's functioning while simultaneously embodying the disorder and toxicity that contemporary efforts to produce a cleaner, more formalised city seek to eliminate.

Waste Pickers as Poison and Scapegoat

To understand how this broader context relates to the political and affective dimensions of waste and residue in Nakuru, Lima's (2023b) notion of "residual infrastructures" is useful. The concept highlights how the material residues of urban life become entangled with the marginalised spaces and populations through which they are processed. These residual infrastructures remain integral to the city's functioning, even as they are neglected, rendered invisible, or pushed to its margins. Writing about a Ugandan landfill, Doherty similarly describes such spaces as "para-sites," or "contact zones that exist with and alongside mainstreams, although hardly on equal terms, facilitating flows while diverting materials toward unanticipated ends" (Doherty 2019: S323). What makes such residual spaces politically unsettling is precisely that neither the materials nor the people relegated to them remain neatly contained in these spaces. They continue to circulate through the city, troubling the municipality's attempts to separate waste from worth and toxicity from purity. At Gioto, this failure of containment became both materially tangible and morally charged.

Efforts to "contain" Gioto reflected a growing public perception of the landfill as a chaotic, uncontrolled space filled with "madness" and "excess" that threatened to spill over into the rest of the city. These perceptions emerged alongside rising concerns over waste accumulation in Kenya from the 1990s onwards. By the 2000s, a growing "war on plastics" culminated in the 2017 ban on single-use plastic bags (Meiu 2020: 232). Gioto had played a pivotal role in the campaign that preceded the ban. Plastic waste frequently washed back into the city during heavy rains due to the landfill's location on the slopes of Menengai volcano. Activists used footage of this spillage to campaign for the ban, drawing renewed attention to Gioto and, with it, to the residues of abandoned promises of industrial and urban progress, nation-building, and modernist planning, as well as the toxic living conditions in nearby informal settlements. The spillages came to materialise the city's failure to contain the residues of the city's failed "past futures" (see Geissler 2023 on the material persistence of abandoned modernist promises). In this sense, they exemplified Doherty's (2019: 323) notion of dumpsites sometimes diverting materials – and attention – towards unexpected ends, exposing the unresolved tensions between urban futuring and the historical foundations on which these futures were being built. Residues therefore circulated materially, affectively and politically. In doing so, certain groups became morally and materially burdened with the city's toxicity. Waste, intoxication, idleness, criminality and madness became increasingly associated with the communities inhabiting the dump.

Gioto's madness

The "madness" that Nakuruans associate with Gioto is part of a broader belief in a sharp rise in so-called "zombies" wandering the streets of Nakuru (Rahier 2024: 18). Kenyan urban centres are increasingly seen as overwhelmed by the pressures of late capitalism, which fuel heightened toxicity, economic hardship, and widespread stress (ibid.). The figure of the zombie is a common expression of this madness. A state of zombification is associated with the idea of "boiled brains" (*akili imechomwa* in Swahili), caused by heightened stress and manifesting as fatigue or bodily overheating (ibid.). Madness can equally result from a lack of clear direction in life, often described among my Gikuyu interlocutors with the idiom *gīthīūrùrī*, which depicts a halted life flow and a corporeal and spatiotemporal blockage that can leave one directionless (ibid.). The most tangible manifestation of zombification, however, was drunk people wandering the streets, usually high on illicit brews such as *kumi kumi* or *chang'aa.* Gioto's reputation as a hotspot for the production and distribution of these illicit alcoholic brews reinforced perceptions of the dumpsite as a source of madness and, more broadly, of Kenya's "zombification."

Njuguna, a healer and herbalist who grew up on the dumpsite but later secured land bordering the Menengai volcano, believed the roots of madness lay in the aforementioned experiences of displacement and resettlement. Njuguna attributed madness to ancestral curses and the loss of ties to land, which deprived people of ancestral guidance. He described this as a situation in which people were "trapped" (*-tegwa* in Swahili), with confusion and disorientation passed down across generations. As a result, many youths ended up being caught in prolonged states of "idleness" – what has been broadly theorised as "waithood" (Honwana 2014) – and often drifted aimlessly between bars and food joints, either intoxicated or under the influence of drugs. The disconnection from land, lineage, and stability, Njuguna argued, lay at the heart of the zombification of society.

Njuguna's account refers back to the imperial *pharmakon* described above, but from the perspective of its temporal afterlives. The figure of the zombie provides a particularly useful lens through which to unpack this temporal dimension. De Boeck (2026: 52-53), writing about Kinshasa, in the Democratic Republic of the Congo, situates the "zombification of the living" within an urban temporality of prolonged crisis, in which relations between the living and the dead have become unsettled and the production of ancestrality itself has been incapacitated. Ideas about being "trapped," directionless, or caught in a halted life flow, as described by Njuguna, similarly suggest a disturbance in the relations through which past, present, and future are connected. To identify Gioto and its inhabitants with zombification is to cast them as people whose movement leads nowhere; figures trapped in repetition, intoxication, and an extended present rather than capable of making futures of their own. The moralisation of Gioto thus works spatially as well as temporally, projecting a perceived absence of a future onto the people associated with the dump. As Brownell's (2014) analysis discussed earlier suggests, dirt and disposal participate in marking the boundaries of legitimate urban belonging. At Gioto, this spatial exclusion is intertwined with temporal foreclosure, as the dump's perceived excess and disorder reinforce the image of its inhabitants as caught in intoxication, moral decay, and a present from which no viable future seems to emerge.

These kinds of moralisations of Gioto also take explicitly religious forms. My Pentecostal interlocutors, for instance, saw Gioto as one of Nakuru's epicentres for devil worship. In response, they organised nightly prayer watches as part of what they call "spiritual warfare" to combat the devil's presence in the city (see Rahier 2026a: 103-32). There is an intriguing resonance here with Simone's (2026) description of the city as a "witch", a promising machine in which the possibilities of making a life are inseparable from the precarities and destructive attachments urban life produces. Like the *pharmakon*, Simone's figure of the "witch" holds promise and danger together within the very relations through which urban life is sustained. Pentecostal narratives of devil worship offer a particularly explicit

example of how this relational complexity is actively reduced. The entangled relations through which toxicity and healing, waste and livelihood, past and future are constituted become reduced to a singular moral frame in which Gioto's dangers are apprehended primarily as manifestations of the devil.

The city responded to Gioto's perceived disorder with a different form of containment. In an attempt to "deal with" Gioto's madness, officials stepped up police raids and tightened control over the dump's daily operations. When I visited Gioto in the summer of 2026, Njoroge described how police had killed one of Gioto's waste pickers, fuelling renewed tensions between residents and the city government. He explained that the intensified police presence had turned the dump into a no-go zone, making it increasingly difficult for outsiders to visit, especially now that waste pickers had organised into informal patrols. Official narratives, meanwhile, focused on the potential risks and hazards of scavenging on the dumpsite as the main argument for plans to shut it down. Waste pickers dismissed these claims and saw them as another attempt to police their lives and labour.

In discussing safety and health issues, my interlocutors compared themselves to marabou storks (also see Doherty 2019) and claimed that they came to smell of waste and became one with the dump. "These storks are afraid of you, but they will fight for scraps with us," Waingo said, highlighting the difference between his relationship to the dump and mine. A parallel can be drawn with Fredericks' (2021: 12) observations in Dakar, where she saw that "[c]laims to bodily protection are, thus, political claims to the right to the dump commons, rooted in the dialectic between porosity and inoculation." She describes how "toxic solidarities" (ibid.: 8) form among waste pickers through shared exposure to hazardous materials and their collective struggle to survive in a dangerous, marginalised environment. Other scholars working on chemical exposure and toxicity have described similar relations in terms of "chemical kinship" and "chemosociality" (Balayannis and Garnett 2020; Shapiro and Kirksey 2017). Such forms of belonging could persist long after leaving the dump. Even waste pickers like Njoroge, who had been away from the landfill for many years, continued to view themselves as part of a waste community united by their tolerance for the hazards of life there, which they believed had made them less vulnerable to illness or occult attacks more generally.

Accounts of bodily adaptation to toxicity could again be read through the figure of the zombie, in which waste pickers' bodies appear so saturated with toxicity that the distinction between life and non-life begins to collapse, leaving them seemingly alive yet suspended in a condition in which life no longer moves towards a meaningful future. This necropolitical (Mbembe 2019) reading draws attention to how political power operates through the deliberate production and maintenance of conditions in which certain populations are disproportionately exposed to environmental degradation, toxic substances, and institutional neglect, systematically undermining their possibilities for living well (see also Nixon 2011; Davies, Isakjee, and Dhesi 2017; Davies 2018). Yet this kind of analysis risks reproducing the same thinning of relational complexity described above in relation to Pentecostal and governmental narratives of Gioto. Notions of toxicity and death would again determine in advance what kinds of life can be forged there. This turns what waste pickers describe as inoculation, solidarity, and belonging into evidence of precisely the disorder from which the city supposedly must escape. It forecloses the possibility that toxicity, waste, and exposure might also mutate into relations through which life is made and sustained at the margins of dominant city life.

De Boeck's (2026: 67) account of "mutations" in Kinshasa, drawing on Povinelli's (2016) geontologies, offers an alternative way to understand how "the capacity to mutate is at the heart of our relationship with this new Anthropocenic world". He asks what happens when living entails developing new somatic, sensory, and technical capacities through the very materials and exposures that threaten life in the first place. Returning to Fredericks' (2021: 12) notion of inoculation, my interlocutors' accounts of toxic solidarities at Gioto can similarly be

read as sharing the capacity to weave bodies, waste, and microbes into new relations through which Gioto becomes a viable world. In becoming inoculated to the dump's smells, textures, and toxicity, they cultivate the capacity to read and act upon future possibilities that escape the moral registers of contamination, survival, and purification imposed on them. Waingo's earlier comparison with the marabou storks exemplifies this well. Our conversation formed part of a broader discussion about the future he aspired to and how he worked towards it from the dump. His familiarity with Gioto allowed him to perceive possibilities that remained unavailable to many. Rather than projecting a future for Gioto through plans, scenarios, or expert knowledge, he—and many others I engaged with—drew on embodied repertoires, bodily memory, and vernacular knowledge to feel their way towards what might come next. As I have argued elsewhere, such future-making can be understood as a multisensorial practice through which possible futures are sensed and made tangible through embodied encounters (Rahier 2023).

Simone (2026: 12–13) describes this as "incipience", a steering in the present through which possibilities are acted upon before their outcomes become clear. Such an orientation shifts attention away from whether life amid toxicity is damaged, zombified, or resilient, and towards how futures are kept open under conditions that continually threaten to foreclose them. In what follows, I turn to the material and temporal dimensions of this incipience, examining how Gioto's *migodi* read and act upon possibilities sedimented in the dump's strata while reworking relations between past, present, and future.

"Kusoma mchanga": Reading Gioto's Strata

One form of waste picking specific to Gioto is embodied in the figure of the *migodi.* The Swahili term *migodi* usually refers to gold miners, but in Gioto it describes young men who dig trenches up to 20 feet deep to sift through stratified layers of waste in search of valuable materials. As recyclable items become harder to find in the waste brought to the dump site, *migodi* such as Waingo and Joel have shifted to digging through older industrial waste deposits for valuable metals like zinc and copper left behind by Nakuru's former industries. Most waste pickers focus on a specific recycling niche, such as glass bottles or plastics, and are grouped into associations. In contrast, *migodi* work independently and are considered the renegades of the dump. Most are sons of families living in Hilton, which has given them long-standing familiarity with Gioto and its changing landscape. Waingo and Joel, for instance, established their dig sites atop one of Gioto's primary gullies on the slopes of Menengai volcano, which is where waste was initially dumped when the landfill opened in 1972. Over the last decades, the dump has therefore become something of a municipal geological record of the city's industrial past. Its accumulated layers contain valuable pockets of materials for those skilled in locating and extracting them from deep within the landfill. This resembles Fredericks' (2021: 5) observations at a landfill in Dakar, where "the dump is viewed simultaneously as a shared resource and history—a sedimented artefactual record of Senegal's postcolonial period [waste pickers] expertly excavate, archive, and deploy to get ahead in a cut-throat economy."

Waingo and Joel explained that their work as *migodi* involves "reading the layers" (*kusoma mchanga* in Swahili). They work in shifts: one person digs, another transports the materials, and a third sorts the items. In September 2024, Waingo's pit was already about two metres deep and revealed several distinct layers: topsoil, a dense stratum of polythene and plastics, followed by black soil and a brownish ash layer. They traced this ash to the notorious fires of the 1980s and 1990s, when piles of sawmill waste ignited during Nakuru's dry season. This layer signalled the possibility of finding zinc, as these fires coincided with a period when the Eveready factory used to dispose of large quantities of zinc waste in the older gullies of the dumpsite. As they dug their vertical trenches, they carefully read the changing layers of waste

for signs of what might lie beneath or alongside them. Some materials served as temporal markers. They, for instance, joked that when they came across large numbers of unused condom packages, they knew they had reached the 1990s and 2000s, when HIV/AIDS prevention campaigns had brought condoms to Nakuru in large quantities.

Whenever a pocket of zinc was found near the ash layer, they would make horizontal tunnels joined by vertical trenches in order to extract the recyclable material. Some of the metals had already deteriorated with age and were therefore worthless. Occasionally, Waingo would unearth well-preserved newspapers, some dating back to 1978, which provided further temporal markers for navigating the strata. Many *migodi* also recalled the remarkable story of a miner who had unearthed an entire scrap car, said to have been dumped at Gioto after one of Kenya's legendary Safari Rallies, going as far back as 1954.

Excavation is a process of significant trial and error. Over time, bulldozers have flattened the soil at Gioto to make room for more dumping, making it difficult to determine where specific materials were originally dumped. *Migodi* therefore often relied on the memories of older community members to decide where to dig. They are often best suited to recall where Nakuru's previous industries dumped their waste in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s when recycling was still relatively limited. As excavation deepens, the risks also increase. The first few metres are generally safe for digging, as these contain plastic fibres from Nakuru's plastic era which help prevent the pits from collapsing. Deeper down, however, spontaneous fires may be ignited by trapped gases, while low oxygen levels and harmful fumes pose serious health risks. In order to navigate these dangers, *migodi* often rely on local healers, such as Njuguna, to maintain their physical and spiritual well-being. Yet, tragedies do still occur, despite precautions being taken.For example, Waingo had lost someone close to him in a pit fire.

These accounts of Gioto's *migodi* narrow the analytical lens to the scale of the dump's strata. Most striking about their accounts of "reading" these layers is the temporal work allowing them to situate themselves and the objects recovered within Nakuru's changing industrial and social history. Zinc, for instance, relates to the period when the Eveready factory was in its prime in Nakuru; ash indexed fires in the 1980s and 1990s; and condoms refer to the HIV/AIDS pandemic. The strata therefore served as material coordinates for locating different moments in the city's past and for bringing them into relation with the present. In this respect, the objects unearthed by *migodi* resemble what Geissler (2023: 7–8) calls "anachronistic objects" which "remain and accumulate as markers of particular times, cross between and link successive historical strata like archaeological artefacts". Geissler draws on the analogy with archaeological stratigraphy to describe how material traces mediate between different historical periods, carrying past aspirations, expectations, and temporal dispositions into the present.

At Gioto, this stratigraphy can be taken quite literally. The relationship between material strata and social memory operates in two directions: older residents' recollections of dumping locations guided *migodi* to specific pockets of recyclables, while the objects they recovered prompted the life histories and stories this article covers as far as displacement, industrial decline, and the city's changing waste economies are concerned. These interactions between present and past draw attention to what Serres and Latour (1995: 60) describe as time that is "folded" rather than being linear. Just like their analogy of how crumpling a flat handkerchief brings two distant, opposite points on its surface into direct physical contact, the physical excavation of Gioto's temporally ordered strata brings historically distant moments to the surface—and therefore into the present. Past promises of industrial employment and urban modernisation thus fold into the waste pickers' present struggles over land, livelihoods, and their place in the city's future. The "reverberations" (Navaro et al. 2021) of Nakuru's past become perceptible in the unearthed matter such as zinc, ash, and other industrial debris, which evoked memories of factory work and industrial decline, the disappearance of settlements such

as Biafra, experiences of displacement, and contemporary struggles over who has a place in Nakuru's future. Digging through the dump's strata brings the past back into circulation in the present, materially, politically, and mnemonically.

To further unpack this convergence of material stratigraphy, urban history, and biography, I turn to Yusoff's (2017) notion of "geosocial strata". She builds on Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) theorisation of geological layers as entangled with social and political processes that shape power, subjectivity, and history. Yusoff develops this concept to critique the Anthropocene as a "wild destratification" driven by capital's desire to penetrate the planet's fossil substrata and unleash geological forces for energy production and wealth accumulation. She argues that this destratification simultaneously reshapes social and political relations and produces what she calls "geosocial formations" that link geological strata to histories of extraction, racialisation, dispossession, and capital accumulation. Yusoff presents destratification as a double problem: while the Earth's material strata have been violently opened up by extractive capitalism and therefore require restratification, socially sedimented hierarchies remain in urgent need of destratification.

The latter is what the practices of Gioto's *migodi* allow me to trace ethnographically. In contrast to the sanitised images and blueprints through which urban futures are projected by urban redevelopment projects (see De Boeck 2011 on "spectral politics"), *migodi* apprehended the present and possible alternative futures through their engagements with the city's history as sedimented at Gioto, which is increasingly obscured by efforts to enclose and sanitise the dump. By destratifying the dump, *migodi* exposed fractures in Nakuru's present and mnemonically produced relationships between pasts and futures that unsettle the linear temporalities of urban modernisation. As Agamben (2009: 52–54) suggests, such fractures can become meeting places between different historical times, allowing the past to be read in unforeseen ways.

Agamben's (2007) concept of "profanation" is equally insightful here. Drawing on Roman law, he understands consecration (*sacrare*) as the removal of things from general human use, while profanation (*profanare*) reverses this separation, making them available for common use again. Under late capitalism, he argues, this logic of separation has become generalised, extending across objects, activities, and social relations and increasingly foreclosing possibilities for their use (Agamben 2007: 28–29); in the case of Gioto, this is exemplified by the threat of enclosure through the formalisation and privatisation of recycling. Crucially, profanation does not restore things to their previously prescribed uses but instead makes what has been separated available for new and unforeseen uses. *Migodi's* destratification of the dump can be understood as profanatory because it interrupted the separations and geosocial stratifications imposed by dominant waste governance, which designated discarded materials as useless and waste pickers and their livelihoods as disposable or obsolete. By excavating the dump and bringing unearthed objects into new relations of livelihood, memory, and potential future use, they challenged the apparent finality of these classifications. This does not mean their activities escaped the capitalist logic that organised waste and its value at Gioto, but rather that they reopened possibilities within the very conditions produced by the imperial pharmakon, which rendered their lives and the waste they work with residual in the first place.

Such possibilities were not confined to the excavations by *migodi*. Although Njoroge no longer lived at Gioto, he never shied away from showing me how objects, that I too easily discarded, were in fact full of potential. One such example was a heavy piece of rubber his wife had collected beside the access road to the Menengai volcano, where the Geothermal Development Company of Kenya drills for heat to produce electricity (Rahier 2026b). He was unsure what the rubber had been used for, but based on its weight and material properties, he assumed it had served as insulation to reduce vibrations on the drilling platforms. He set it aside, convinced it would serve him at some point. What distinguished Njoroge's way of

engaging with these objects from mine was not, as such, his capacity to recognise their potential, but the openness to unforeseen possibilities that characterised how he went about daily life. Rather than approaching objects through a linear trajectory from production and use to eventual disposal, he treated their multiple possible affordances as an opening towards uses that had yet to emerge; Geissler (2023: 6) refers to an object's "latent future", an unfulfilled expectation that outlives their design. In Agamben's (2007: 31–32) terms, Njoroge's practice may be understood as a form of profanation insofar as it suspended the rubber's association with its presumed industrial function, thereby keeping it available for alternative uses, and thus alternative futures. He allowed it to remain, for the time being, a "means without an end", — embodying Simone et al.'s (2026: 12–13) idea of "incipience," or "knowing before knowing," which implies a vernacular orientation that senses and holds open futures in the immediate material environment without demanding a guaranteed outcome. The same applies to the dump's strata, the past of which does not prescribe their future. Once materially destratified, the objects they contained became available for multiple interpretations of their histories, new connections with waste pickers' life stories, and unforeseen uses that their original functions could not exhaust.

Concluding Notes

The histories of dispossession, industrial decline, and waste governance traced in this article speak to the enduring legacies of colonial extraction and capitalist accumulation that continue to shape African environments and livelihoods; what Peša (2023) terms "toxic coloniality". Building on Sultana's (2022: 2) observation that "a sense of despair, suffocation, stagnation, abandonment, and regression co-exist with that of revolutionary potentiality, alternative possibilities, collectivizing, worldmaking, and critical hope," Peša argues that violent histories of extractive capitalism and toxicity do not foreclose possibilities for alternative forms of worldmaking. Rather, attending to these histories and their enduring legacies can reveal forms of resistance and alternatives to extractivism that have existed all along. To understand how such toxic legacies mutate, we must look beyond the environmental harm they continue to cause and examine how people rework colonialism's toxic inheritances into viable lifeworlds. In the case of Gioto, such an approach is necessary to avoid reproducing the very separations produced by the city's dominant waste imaginaries, which detach waste from the sociocultural relations that give it meaning, what Langwick (2026) calls a "thinning" of relations—a severing of bodies, materials, livelihoods, and forms of knowledge from their social, historical, and ecological contexts. This thinning also operates temporally and reinforces an apparent separation between past and present that renders waste pickers' histories, livelihoods, and future-making obsolete.

One way this temporal thinning takes shape is through the moralisation of waste pickers as "zombies", trapped in repetition, intoxication, and a halted life flow. It positions them in a present from which no viable future can emerge—De Boeck (2005, 2026) calls this temporality an "apocalyptic interlude" of endless suffering. These moralisations produce a systemic unfuturing, whereby waste pickers are being "absented" (Simone et al. 2026: 18–22) from future-making processes, rendering their lives disposable in the present. Yet rather than inhabiting the toxic endpoint of histories of dispossession and failed development, my interlocutors persistently apprehend and act on the possibilities that waste affords, without knowing where this might lead. Their waste work destratifies the dump's material histories and unsettles the chronological order through which the city distinguishes its past from its present. Agamben (2009: 40) describes this as taking a position that does not fully coincide with dominant projections of the present. Through "disconnection and […] anachronism", one becomes "more capable than others of perceiving and grasping their own time." He calls this

"contemporariness", or "a singular relationship with one's own time, which adheres to it and, at the same time, keeps a distance from it" (ibid.: 41). The contemporary is he who unveils what dominant representations of the present leave invisible; what disappears beneath modernity's homogenising image of itself.

At stake is therefore the power to determine which histories matter for the city's future. In turn, my interlocutor's labour is simultaneously material and mnemonic, thickening relations among bodies, materials, memories, and histories that the city's waste governance seeks to pull apart. They cultivated future possibilities within the toxic ruins of the city's past—what Langwick (2026: 226-27) calls sustaining "ongoingness" amidst toxicity. And by doing so, they learned to live and act within the *pharmakon's* ambivalence, keeping life going under conditions that continually threaten to foreclose it.

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