

## 4. Position(ality)

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After laying out the spatial and processual theoretical base and introducing the methodology of comparing (countertopology), I will now clarify and discuss further methodological aspects of the study in Part III of this book. This includes a combination of the methods applied, decisions on sampling strategies made, and reflections about the power dynamics connected to my positionality as and beyond being an adult, white European researcher.

After listening to so many childhood stories, I have come to realise that I have, on the one hand, gathered enormously deep and multi-sensorial impressions from the lives of those who shared these with me – so multi-layered that I cannot even process it all in this book. On the other hand, I have such a lack of common life experience with many of them that I must again question my legitimacy to speak here. To engage with these asymmetries, I connect to Edward Said's call for critical reflections on power structures within research processes, which he stresses by raising the question of '*Who speaks? For what and to whom?*' (1989: 212). Whereas Edward Said's works focus on postcolonial power structures in the context of what he framed as Orientalism (Said 1978), my reflections build on and precede this scope and consider the problem of adultism in research with children. Aiming to take the discussion towards a critical reflection on positionality beyond the 'neutral' façade of the researcher, I add another aspect to Edward Said's question and ask, *How does one speak?*

While biographical and oral history research has explored questions around agency, belonging, gender, and class, it has neglected the importance of space and its inseparability with time. Moreover, memory studies have long neglected postcolonial contexts and entanglements (Rothberg 2013; de Wolff 2021). When we furthermore look at the absence of children's voices within these research traditions, the questions of *Whose biographical material do we have?* and, most importantly, *Whose do we not have and why?* cannot be overstated. In the context of the multi-sited comparison that I undertake here, many intersectional categories appear and make the reflections about relations of positionality extremely complex. This is also because some of these categories appear as rather decentral on the local scale, while in the global comparison they make visible how unequally all the speakers are positioned in this world. In order not to lose sight of this ambiguity, I find Eric Sheppard's proposal for an extension of the positionality framework beneficial.

In response to Richa Nager and Susan Geiger's characterisation of this framework as including 'social situated-ness [...] in terms of gender, race, class, sexuality and other axes of social difference' (2000: 2), Sheppard notes: 'Geographic situatedness is missing from this list, and that is the aspect of positionality that I emphasize here (I could use geopotentiality, but that term seems excessive).' (Sheppard 2002: 318) I find this perspective very helpful for carefully handling the transnational comparison between middle-class childhoods in Nairobi and Berlin. This is because Sheppard's emphasis on geographical (and at the same time geopolitical) position helps me to theoretically frame what I said before in the beginning of Chapter 2, which stands in close relation to my study's comparative design: 'A Mayan wristband worn by a Californian youth and an American t-shirt worn by a Guatemalan teenager are not symmetrical in the power relations they inscribe' (Ansell 2009: 196). I agree that geopotentiality seems excessive, but the emphasis is also necessary. We might reach the same when emphasising position by adding brackets: position(ality).

Position(ality) is a term that emphasises the ambivalent role of the geographical position at the basis of each intersectional reading of a person's situatedness. It is ambivalent because, on the one hand, the geographical position we inhabit can be very powerful and must be considered, yet it is important not to reify these positions. The brackets in position(ality) therefore point to the need to look at both. In the context of my research and its methodological design, I was first confronted with the question of what position(ality) and subalternity mean. Beyond some theoretical insights, the following reflections will be widely based on my experiences in the field.

Most research underlies the asymmetry of the positions of the 'researcher' and the 'researched'. In the vast majority of cases, this asymmetry goes along with writings, such as publications, in which we hear very little about the position(ality) of the researcher. But there are also exceptions, such as that in which, for example, ethnographic fieldwork can, at times, lead to very long and intense encounters in which ethnographers might live within a small community and are also subjected to all kinds of investigations from that group (e.g. Heike Behrend 2020). But no matter how collaborative, autoethnographic, shared, etc. the research process is, it is clear who the ethnographer is, and as such they hold a strong power. This asymmetry also characterised the relations between the speakers and myself. Yet I realised that the obvious reasons for these asymmetries in theory – e.g. white researcher vs Black speaker – did not always prove to be obvious in practice. This made me reflect on the categories of postcolonial subalternity, which seemed questionable as a permanent state of oppression or as generally connected (in the sense that [post]colonial equals subaltern). This also made me see subversive practices that challenged the research process as asymmetric – reflections that are, at times, better framed mutually as 'ours' (the speaker's and mine), as some aspects of position(ality) were openly talked about. This connects to my first reaction to Edward Said's question of '*Who speaks?*' which he poses to make us aware of the silence and invisibility that comes with the researcher's often-claimed neutrality. So besides trying not to hide myself, in the following I will also explain how much I have managed to let those who shared their childhood stories with me speak for themselves. Therefore, and overall, I would rather explore how postcolonial subjectivity (instead of subalternity) varies within the biographical material and reflects children's societal positions in its discourse.

## 4.1 Who Speaks?

This subchapter has to be read as a continuation of the autoethnographic notes at the beginning of this book, which in academia is also called a monograph. Monograph – a term that in the context of a critical reflection of position(ality) in research settings seems rather odd, considering the many speakers, as well as everyone named in the acknowledgements who contributed to this project. What also contributed to it was my project affiliation at the CRC 1265 (AO5, Phase I), which to some extent predetermined my study contexts of Nairobi and Berlin and where during the first year and before I went to Kenya, I often struggled over whether I was legitimised to carry out the research there. This insecurity added to the already existing and similar question regarding the power imbalances between me and children, which I had been dealing with from the outset of my academic work. At some point, I started to see the relations between these two problems and felt the urge to make this discomfort a subject of my study. Anna Amelina, in this context, somewhat frankly asks, '[s]hould we, [...] suggest revolutionary change and replace the figure of the “non-migrant” researcher with the figure of the “migrant researcher” to enhance alternative and counterhegemonic knowledge production?' (Amelina 2022: 16), and finds this scenario rather insufficient, not least because it would bring the 'danger of essentialization of researchers' biographies' (ibid.: 16).

*I am a white working-class child, the first to study in my family. I am a mzungu in Kenya. I am a mother who grew up in a Catholic village in the former East Germany. When I met the speakers in 2019 and 2020, I was between 31 and 32 years old.*

These attributes suggest, but do not guarantee, that I have much in common with other working-class children, mothers, and people who are my age or grew up in rural areas of the former east or are also *wazungu* (plural of *mzungu*) in Kenya. Yet all these attributes matter, because they either privilege or underprivilege me, shape my ways of (un)belonging to specific environments, such as the forest, the Catholic 'community', small-scaled spaces, or 'the east', and therefore render my life experience either quite different from or similar to that of the speakers. Even if these categories are as tricky as they are useful for understanding power structures that produce social difference, in the following I will try to map some of the structural asymmetries underlying my research:

- Child/Adult
- BPoC/White
- Global South/Global North
- Middle Class/Working Class
- Local/*Mzungu*
- Parent/Non-parent
- Women/Man
- East/West
- Rural/Urban

What should be clear from this exercise is that the asymmetries between speakers and myself are not easily captured. How can one's position(ality) be addressed and reflected on systematically, when '[o]ne cannot "be" either a cell or molecule – or a woman, colonized person, laborer, and so on –' and when '[v]ision is always a question of the power to see and perhaps of the violence implicit in our visualizing practices' (Haraway 1988: 585)? What system could be established when people are, as Haraway suggests, not one but many – some of them by choice and some by the violence implicit in our visualising or reading practices. I don't read you in the same way the person passing down at the street might read you. You don't visualise me as my sister friend would visualise me – in fact, I am a completely different person to both of you. Although envisioning and reading are context-specific, at the same time they are not pure nor innocent of the institutionalised representations of 'the other', which are partly also established within academic knowledge production deeply rooted in Eurocentrism and its colonial pasts, presents, and futures.

Beyond the methodological and ethical debate on children's agency and their vulnerable position during research settings and within the adult-child binary, Imane Kostet calls for the need 'to approach children as social actors who are also able to impact adults' (Kostet 2021: 4). To understand power not as static but as shifting constellations, Imane Kostet reflects on moments during interviews with children where she 'got vulnerable' due to her background as a 'female minority ethnic researcher with a working-class background in Flanders (Belgium)' (ibid.: 3). In the context of my research with young and old, female and male, Kenyans and Germans, Ghanian-Germans and French-Kenyans, etc., I also noted these variously shifting asymmetric power constellations during the continuous temporal and spatial border-crossing between Nairobi and Berlin.

In general, the research methods created incredibly intimate situations that could sometimes resonate but also be in dissonance with episodes from my own biography. In the latter context, for example, I should admit that I grew up in a Catholic village, and many of my relatives were and are staunch Christians. To me, the religious and often para-religious practices and rituals of that village 'community', which I experienced during my childhood, seemed opposed to us and contradictory and made me feel estranged. This caused me to be rather reserved or unable to engage with the importance of church in the lives of many speakers. One speaker, for example, invited me to her First Communion. I was flattered by the invitation to her important day, but immediately felt inner resistance. When I arrived there, I found a seat at the back. When I looked around, I realised it was not enough to be here with this ambivalence in me; I was also the only white person. I wanted to be invisible. When the white pastor and his altar boys entered the church, an incredibly strong iconology surrendered them, somewhat breathtaking in an intimidating sense. I directly felt how I was immediately linked with them along the physical marker of being white and felt a great urge to leave. But before I could, the pastor had noticed me and approached me to greet me personally, finally making me hyper visible to everyone in that church. I was overwhelmed with feelings I had never felt before. In that moment, my face resisted smiling – a moment that was watched by the entire congregation, including the family that had invited me. As soon as the pastor and his boys reached the altar, I fled, not to feel better but to feel incredibly ashamed.

Why am I sharing this story here? Because it shows the depth of the problem raised by Edward Said's question, and because I must admit that the empirical analysis is rather short on religiosity, as I do not feel like an appropriate speaker in that context. Connected to this church experience is another type of intimacy that comes with the problem of lost integrity. While the above examples point out the intimacy in the direct encounters with the speakers, other forms of intimacy, which appeared in daily life during my stays in Nairobi, were not always welcome. This intimacy concerns the violence of being looked at or addressed in public spaces in Nairobi. My identity in the field was permanently co-produced by people's words and gaze as the white female 'other', as whom I was constantly subjected to shifting appellations (Althusser 1976; Butler 1997), being seen or approached as wealthy, attractive, strange, young, powerful, silly, vulnerable, exotic, boring, supreme, superficial, etc. While these shifting gazes often challenged me, depressed me, and at times frightened me, they also helped me to understand the asymmetrical condition established within the colonial historical process as a base for our encounter.

## 4.2 The Speakers

I refer to the protagonists of this study as 'speakers', first, because all of them spoke to me, regardless of their age (four or 62 years). Speaking was the main mode of engaging with their childhood stories, even though a mapping exercise – illustrating and drawing – was part of this engagement, as were participant observations in many of their homes during and after the interview, and sometimes during trips I joined on their everyday routes. I do not find it appropriate to call them 'informants' or 'interviewees' in a more common sense, because the former suggests a distance between the researcher and the researched that was surely crossed many times in the encounters I had in the field and through the sheer fact that sharing the story of one's childhood cannot be accurately framed by the practice of 'informing'. I was not *informed* about their lives; it was an act of *sharing*. Due to the open and narrative character of the biographical narration, in which the speakers could decide what, to what extent, and how they wanted to share their (hi)story with me, they can also not accurately be framed as 'interviewees', as it does not quite grasp the partly dialogical character of our encounters, in which the roles were often reversed, for example when at the end of the biographical narration I was asked to share my (hi)story in return. Second, both 'interviewees' and 'informants' are rather passive. At maximum, they have a secondary role. This 'monograph', on the contrary, is highly collective and would never have existed without the trust and involvement of each of them. They are the protagonists. With their oral and visual storytelling, they actively participate in the processes of worlding and rewording. I am just piecing them together into an assemblage, trying to lay open the topologies I followed to link them up with. I archive and de-archive. I initiate and frame. I curate and coordinate this multi-biography.

*But I also act violently.*

I decide who speaks and who does not. By giving voice to one, I automatically mute the other – even if I intend to let those speak who seemed to me unheard. As a researcher, I will always choose and collect and represent, and there is always a degree of violence in this, which has many but colonial historical entanglements.

#### 4.2.1 Sampling

The speakers are 46 individuals who shared their childhood stories with me. The youngest of these speakers was four, and the oldest was 62 years old. I have assembled them into a contrastive case design in which I do not treat Berlin and Nairobi as two cases but each speaker as one case. This case design is important to me, because my aim was to compare not Nairobi and Berlin but the entanglement of each of the speakers' lives – not in a single globality but within situated globalities. Treating each speaker as a single case allowed me to compare the entire corpus of material along different lines of social difference.

The sampling group covered 36 speakers from Nairobi (4–62 yrs) and 10 speakers from Berlin (9–58 yrs). The Nairobi sampling group was composed of 20 female- and 16 male-assigned speakers. The Berliner sampling group included 5 female- and 5 male-assigned speakers. The following Table 4 shows the age distribution of the sampling in total.

*Table 4: Age distribution of total sampling.*

| Age Group | Ages Included  | Total Frequency of Speakers |
|-----------|----------------|-----------------------------|
| 0–5       | 4              | 1                           |
| 6–10      | 8, 9, 10       | 9                           |
| 11–15     | 11, 12, 13, 15 | 9                           |
| 16–20     | -              | -                           |
| 21–25     | 21, 24         | 3                           |
| 26–30     | 26, 28         | 3                           |
| 31–35     | 31, 23, 33, 35 | 5                           |
| 36–40     | 38, 39         | 4                           |
| 41–45     | 41             | 2                           |
| 46–50     | 49, 50         | 3                           |
| 51–55     | 51             | 1                           |
| 56–60     | 57, 58         | 4                           |
| 61–65     | 62             | 2                           |

Source: Table by the author.

The number of cases differs between cities. Although I planned that the number of cases in the Nairobi sample would outweigh that in the Berliner sample, mostly

because I lack background in this generally empirically underrepresented context, the COVID-19 pandemic ended my fieldwork in Berlin earlier than expected. Despite being a shock initially, I do not see this as problematic now, especially because of the excessive overrepresentation of German and European middle-class childhoods in studies concerned with children's spatial relations. The following table shows the monthly family income in economic spectrums per city and gives an insight into the contrastive case design regarding socio-economic situatedness.

Table 5: Monthly family income.

| Spectrum (Location)                | Monthly Amount (Net)           | Total Frequency |
|------------------------------------|--------------------------------|-----------------|
| 1 <sup>st</sup> spectrum (Nairobi) | 15,000–80,000 KES <sup>1</sup> | 25%             |
| 2 <sup>nd</sup> spectrum (Nairobi) | 80,000–300,000 KES             | 42%             |
| 3 <sup>rd</sup> spectrum (Nairobi) | 300,000–500,000 KES            | 25%             |
| 4 <sup>th</sup> spectrum (Nairobi) | Above 500,000 KES              | 8%              |
| 1 <sup>st</sup> spectrum (Berlin)  | 1,000–4,000 EUR                | 10%             |
| 2 <sup>nd</sup> spectrum (Berlin)  | 4,000–7,000 EUR                | 50%             |
| 3 <sup>rd</sup> spectrum (Berlin)  | 7,000–10,000 EUR               | 30%             |
| 4 <sup>th</sup> spectrum (Berlin)  | Above 10,000 EUR               | 10%             |

Source: Table by the author.

As Table 5 shows, the 2<sup>nd</sup> spectrum is always the strongest, followed by the 3<sup>rd</sup>. These two groups mark the lower-, middle-, and upper-middle-class spectrum of the sampling and are repeatedly compared to the first and second spectrum at its margins. 'Family income' is understood here, first, by care constellations that vary between heteronormative single-family models, separate parents in two households, patchwork constellations (for example, polygamous fathers), extended-family households (aunts/uncles and grandparents), and households with/ without (permanently residing) domestic workers. Although family income is designated here beyond the income of two parents, most speakers in the second and third spectrum spent their childhoods in heteronormative household and family constellations. Second, 'income' refers to the approximate total amount of monthly income that was collectively earned by the respective care constellation. The two sample maps in Figure 14 and 15 show that the most contrastive case design covers a variety of neighbourhoods in both cities, including places of residence in both the former West and East Berlin, as well as Westlands and Eastlands in Nairobi.

1 KES means Kenyan shilling (1,495 KES = 10 EUR).

Figure 14: Sample map with places of residence during childhood in Nairobi.



Source: Illustration by the author.

Figure 15: Sample map with places of residence during childhood in Berlin.



Source: Illustration by the author.

### 4.2.2 Field Access

My fieldwork in Nairobi and Berlin was structured by the fieldwork I simultaneously conducted in the context of my project affiliation at CRC 1265 (Ao5, Phase I). Unlike what might be usual in the context of a PhD realised within an externally funded research project, I did not base my study on the project-affiliated material but conducted material that was independent from it. Although people who were participating in the study of the CRC's subproject were not additionally interviewed for my study, it happened that a child I interviewed for my PhD project had a parent, aunt, or grandmother whom I also interviewed for the subproject. These relations were one way of accessing the field. In Nairobi, other connections were retrieved from the University of Nairobi, where I had forged cooperation between the local Chair of Sociology and Chair of Political Science and the Chair of Sociology of Space at my home university, the Technical University of Berlin. As a research fellow at the Bayreuth Academy of Advanced African Studies in 2018, I was introduced to Kenyan researchers, one of whom connected me to a speaker who organised several contacts in Nairobi on the basis of a paid contract organised through the project affiliation with CRC 1265. Additionally, a master's student from the same university who was doing field research in Nairobi's middle-class milieus provided connections.

I received big support throughout my first stay in Nairobi from my roommate, whom I met at my first accommodation. He supported me with my research and field access. His support was later institutionalised by a contract with the Technical University of Berlin to conduct a couple of exemplary interviews as a local. This position(ality)-shift provided me more insight into the power asymmetries within the research encounters and allowed me to see how the narrations change when a local interviews a local. The results show that surprisingly little difference could be observed throughout the interview situations. Minor differences regarded the common knowledge about local aspects. The speakers knew that I did not grow up either in Nairobi or in Kenya. Therefore, I was often asked during the recording if I was familiar with the context of their subjects. As I did not, these contexts were spelled out to me, which would not be the case with the local research assistant. So the very fact that I am a foreigner allowed me to hear their very personal ideas, descriptions, and feelings about the most ordinary things, which would otherwise have been handled as common knowledge and not mentioned between two locals. Nonetheless, it is important to note that this research assistant only interviewed two children in my project; these reflections should therefore also be seen as contextualised by his skills in engaging with children in such situations, instead of leading to fast assumptions about the irrelevance of position(ality) here. As the two children knew that their recording was going to be shared with a researcher from Germany, it is furthermore questionable whether he appeared as himself or was already contextualised as an 'other' by this aspect. Beyond this, people I met at local (European) institutions such as the Goethe Institute, the Alliance Française, the French Institute for Research in Africa, and the local Kuona Artist Collective also provided connections in Nairobi. In addition, I found two speakers through an announcement I posted on the search/offering boards of small malls and shopping centres, and I met one speaker on the dancefloor of a club. The



noting that her research ‘deals with stories of rather un-heroic entanglements and cultural misunderstandings, of conflicts and failures’ (translated from Behrend 2020: 11). What drives her work is reflections of what she frames as the ‘inverse gaze’<sup>2</sup> (translated from *ibid.*: 14), which can be understood as the reversed perspective from which she as the ethnographer is looked at by those who are the subjects of ‘her’ research. I would like to situate my research in this tradition, and generally in the tradition of those moving ‘towards shared research’ (Haller/Zingerli 2020). This is to avoid what bell hooks once aptly framed when she wrote,

[n]o need to hear your voice when I can talk about you better than you can speak about yourself. No need to hear your voice. Only tell me about your pain. I want to know your story. And then I will tell it back to you in a new way. Tell it back to you in such a way that it has become mine, my own. Re-writing you, I write myself anew. I am still author, authority. I am still colonizer, the speaking subject, and you are now at the center of my talk. (bell hooks 1990: 343)

Most of the time, if at all, those who are the subjects of a study are introduced to the reader through a certain contextualisation of their backgrounds. But whereas people sometimes share their life stories as the material basis for an analysis, the researchers stay silent and barely visible. As such, they are predominantly mediated as people we also know a lot about, as we can easily download their professional biography (CV) online. Yet this visibility renders their personal biography somewhat invisible. This is problematic, as it also makes scholars emotion- and affectless and hides their vulnerability in the research process. There is no neutrality of knowledge. Knowledge is intersectional and powerful. But why are we so hesitant to emphasise our role in this power relation? When we tell a story, we ultimately tell a story about ourselves; otherwise, we’ve done a great deal of work to hide it. And this work of hiding seems to have a very contradictory function and value in the social sciences. Through language, we hide and claim that ‘this work shows ...’, ‘the analysis came to the conclusion that ...’ or ‘the data indicates that ...’.

In the context of my study, in which many people shared some very personal (hi)stories with me, I also shared mine when the speakers reversed the situation. These instances tempted me out of my position of researcher and enabled fairness in sharing. Often, comparisons were made once I had shared insight into my life. Such moments I experienced in Nairobi are extremely important encounters, often provoking us to uncover the reciprocal gaze from which we looked at each other or how we imagined our ‘backgrounds’ – a gaze that often proved on both sides to be biased and prejudiced. These moments encouraged me to trace the linkages between our geographically distant yet sometimes strangely related lives. The following example shows why this reciprocal sharing is important and also helps to overcome asymmetrical power constellations. When I met 62-year-old Pepe in the garden of the Alliance Française in the Central Business District in Nairobi, he seemed confused about the situation I put him into. Although he

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2 Heike Behrend’s interest in the inverse is inspired by the works of a relatively small German francophone research tradition called ‘inverse ethnography’, which Julius Lips, among others, founded in 1937 (for more insight, see Julius 1973).

soon relaxed and dived deep into his childhood narration, he only dared to assure himself of who I was at the end of the interview – when the recording device was switched off. From my appearance, he had read me as a teenager, barely 20 years old, and this confused him, as he had imagined a PhD student from Germany to be nothing like me. That confusion opened a space for him to ask me further questions about myself. Space to share parts of my story with him. But it also created an important mirror to me. This and many other similar encounters made me realise how diverse the intersectional patterns that condition the power structures of research processes are. But it also made me realise how eager the speakers were to know me. To know who they had just shared their most personal memories and experiences with.

This practice of sharing is important during the research process and beyond. At times, sharing mattered in ways in which the very condition of sharing was that I ‘was taken under investigation’ to see if I was reliable and trustworthy. This renders questions visible, such as *How do I introduce myself and my research? How much or how little do I say up front?* Paul Mecheril et al. precisely point out that it is also about ‘which opportunities the researcher gives to the interviewee through their act of interviewing and what kind of thematic-social space is suggested to them’ (translated from 2003: 93). All in all, I met with an impressive amount of agency from those who shared their (hi)stories with me – agency to not only turn the roles of ‘researcher’ and ‘speaker’ around, to navigate within what I had prepared or planned for our encounter, but also to alter it. Giving this freedom to change the situation and to modify it towards their needs was an important aspect of what it can mean to forge research towards a shared experience. I was able to realise this process of altering by generally planning a very open session in which there was plenty of space for the speakers to decide what to share with me in the context of their childhood or by reversing the roles, but also by leaving the management of time to them, according to their needs, capacities, and preferences. In practice, this meant that speakers could end their narration after 30 minutes (which was rarely the case) or, if we could not finish during our first meeting, we could meet again the next day.

Sharing did not only occur during our encounters. Sharing mattered in many moments, such as in making the documents I had collected for my research accessible to them, but also in keeping them strictly confidential from others. Sharing also mattered beyond these moments, because what struck me most is that many of the speakers I have maintained contact with regularly ask me if I have finished my writing and remind me to share it with them. I imagine a truly shared research practice in which the research does not end but picks up speed once this part of sharing is reached. From there it will be important to get feedback about my ways of assembling, contextualising, describing, and interpreting their spatial relations and to reverse the gaze once again to understand how the speakers feel depicted by my writing. Besides this being one of the greatest motivations during my writing, it inspired me to anticipate future research in which I would like to carry my writings back to them. One such project is a work in process in the form of a mini comic – which will be published in a graphic essay on the classed meanings of home and conditions of housing – where two young speakers meet in a fictitious story based on their biographical interviews and maps and take one another on a tour around their poor and wealthy neighbourhoods, sharing what they like, their fears and future anticipations.

But how else and how more generally can a shared experience of research be reached? What data collection practices are suited to avoid amplifying the power constellations on which research is based, generally and specifically? In the context of these questions, I asked myself whether, for example, the method of participant observation is really that innocent. Within my academic peer practice, I have often had the impression that when it comes to research ethics and research data management, the method of participant observation has been handled as the least invasive one when it comes to the problem of privacy and data rights of the research participants. This was mostly justified by the idea that observing people and taking notes produces much less personal data than an interview transcript or even a photograph that directly depicts the person. But I wonder whether it is not the 'indirect' aspect in particular that is at the same time most prone to conflict. Yes, we are just watching, but as Fred Moten and Wu Tsang highlight, '[t]here is no non-violent way to look at somebody' (Moten/Tsang 2018: 650). Is it not precisely observation that creates power constellations that are utterly asymmetrical, where the person observed is in some sense kept in a passive position, where unlike in a conversation they cannot follow what is collected from them? Field observations create documents that are much less accessible to those who are studied. Observational notes, on the contrary, are something much more biased by the position(ality) of the researcher. During and after my fieldwork, many speakers asked me to share the material with them. So at some point I started to share the material with the speakers from the outset. Some of those whom I had not shared it with at the beginning later reached out to me, and their requests came with very touching purposes. One speaker wanted to use the recording to write her autobiography, while the son of another speaker, who had passed away, asked me to share the recording to help him prepare his mother's eulogy. Being able to share the material collected is therefore an enormously important aspect of transparency. In research with children, this applies even more, as they might listen to the recording later in their lives.

Another aspect of sharing is connected with data security and consent. Although signed consent forms from a legal guardian are required for children under 18<sup>3</sup> in Kenya and for children under 16 in Germany, this seemed dissatisfactory in the social-theoretical context in which I frame childhood (*spatial becoming*). Therefore, I designed an additional consent form (Figure 16) for those who were below this age.

The process of giving consent was scheduled before the interview, and it was emphasised that consent could still be withdrawn after the interview. As a ritual, this process served as more than an act of signing. It created an additional space to get to know one another and to 'warm up' together. The information sheet and consent form addressed the young speakers directly. Most of the time, the children received the consent documents before they met me, so they knew what to expect and could decide to participate without the pressure my direct presence might have caused. They read the text themselves, or it was read to them by their parents or me. The process of introducing myself and the project and the act of signing meant winning extra time to talk and ensuring that children were comfortable in the situation. This care seemed very important to me, al-

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3 There are currently debates about lowering the age of consent in Kenya to 16 years.

though my overall experience was that most children were thrilled to be listened to; they appreciated being listened to and did not take it for granted.

Figure 16: Example of consent form for speakers younger than 16 years old.

Claudia Mock, M.A. | PhD Candidate at the Collaborative Research Centre 1265 „Re-Figuration of Spaces“  
Technical University of Berlin | Department of Sociology | Faculty 6 Planning Building Environment |  
Ernst-Reuter-Platz 1, 10587 Berlin | E-Mail: [claudia.mock@tu-berlin.de](mailto:claudia.mock@tu-berlin.de)



Child Consent Form

My name is ..... I am ...../4... years old  
and I would like to participate in the research project „Childhoods Nairobi Berlin“.  
I understand that I am free to say if I don't want to participate in the project at  
any time without consequences. My actual Name should be replaced with the  
following project name ..... Claudia has  
informed me about the procedure of the project and I agree that excerpts of my  
interview, my drawings, maps and photographs can be published in books and  
articles and can be furthermore used for future research.

.....

Place, Date

.....

Signature

Source: Generated by the author.

While gathering material, I was exposed to what Cindi Katz describes as people's 'fleshy, messy, and indeterminate stuff of everyday life' (2001a: 710). Even though I met most of the speakers only once or twice, the encounters often felt very deep, and this experience resonated with how many speakers wrapped up their experience by saying, 'This was therapeutic!' or 'This was healing!'. While their voices still reverberated in my ears, I was already gone, many miles away from them. Whenever I changed my geographical location, I saw these (hi)stories from elsewhere. I was near and far. This helped me to reflect about all the impressions left in me, but it also felt strange to just come and go, when

people had shared so much with me. But the intimacy went further: In the moment of our encounters and this process of sharing, a secret, a self-realisation, a future vision, or a dream was sometimes revealed. Some speakers shared things with me that they had not shared with anyone before. While often the recording device stands as a material agent that keeps a formal distance between researcher and speaker, in many instances this material agency was circumvented when speakers asked me to stop the recording, such as when their narration included a political statement or a very personal aspect of the story, for example regarding feelings of shame. These moments showed me how much agency a device like this has in the process of sharing, but also how it is possible for speakers to share beyond it, which I acknowledged as a sign of trust.