

Auto-Ethnographic Notes

This narrative assemblage of interview passages gives an insight into diverse figurations of home. Furthermore, it hints at how these figurations are entangled when spaces suddenly start to look, smell, or feel alike, even though they are in geographically distant places, such as the streets in front of semi-detached houses in Buruburu (Nairobi) and Zehlendorf (Berlin). I wish I could keep silent and listen forever. But I also appear in their stories, and they appear in mine. So, who am I in this narrative assemblage?

Am I even legitimised to speak for those I will speak about in the following?

In *Representing the Colonized*, Edward Said criticises that the questions ‘Who speaks? For what and to whom?’ are not asked or at most appear as a strategic choice (Said 1989: 212). Leaving ‘the field’ and writing the process of my knowledge production into a structured table of contents of a monograph or, even more generally, into written form has, at times, felt violent to me. Violent in the sense that it takes away the speakers’ voices, their laughter, their gulping, and the sound of them cleaning their throat when speaking. But also the voice of the bird singing or the noise of dense traffic in the background. This muting process already starts when an interview is transcribed. Throughout the process of transforming the lived experiences from the field into a book, we translate and, in doing so, merge multi-sensorial and often highly emotional processes into reduced forms of knowledge. My emotions were also reduced in this process. My emotions as a *mzungu*.¹ As a white woman. As Claudia. Nairobi was a new place to me, but the biographical stories I collected in Berlin – where I have been living for 17 years – changed my relationship with that city as well, because the childhood memories and experiences of others inten-

1 *Mzungu* is a Bantu word that means ‘wanderer’ and became connected to European, Indian, and Arabic traders and explorers during the 18th century. It is used in predominantly Swahili-speaking nations, such as Kenya. Today *mzungu* addresses or refers to foreigners and generally to white people. My personal experience in Kenya was that I would be called *mzungu* daily, as either directly referred to or indirectly spoken about.

sified my knowledge drastically. The oral and visual (hi)stories² influenced my awareness of spatial aspects of childhood, parenthood, and motherhood, and on a very personal account. Ultimately, my experience of motherhood, changed my way of writing.

How can I write about the (hi)stories of people I am not legitimised to write about without legitimising myself with 'strategic choices'? How can my way of writing help to enact the experiences and memories that people shared with me instead of further reducing their atmospheric attachments? How can my writing uncover how these (hi)stories relate to a wider spatial figuration beyond the global divide and, in that way, counter the 'representation of the colonised' as the only possible narration?

In Nairobi I am many. But I am also a *mzungu* – and thus a person who, as Chola, one of the speakers, put it, ‘came by the boat’. *Kizungu ilikuja na meli* is a Kiswahili saying that translates as ‘the English came by boat’. Although I arrived by plane, I belong to the social and material cultures that ‘came by the boat’ and were hegemonic throughout processes of colonisation. This is on the one hand because I am white, European educated and funded; and on the other because as such, I come to *collect* (hi)stories – one of the topmost colonial practices, next to collecting artefacts. Collecting is not innocent. It connects to times when white Europeans looted cultural property across the world. How can I disentangle my ways of collecting from those of colonialists? This question will follow me and the readers throughout this book and reoccur at unexpected points.

Perhaps I can start to disentangle my way of collecting from that of colonialism by admitting that *I came by the boat* – a boat that set out in shallow waters. Shallow in the way in which ‘Paul Gilroy describes a critical position which corresponds to [Abdulrazak] Gurnah’s fictional perspectivism, a “lowly watery orientation” that rejects “high-altitude theorizing”; as he points out, “water flows down, not up” (Gilroy 2018: 10 citing Gurnah, cited in Lavery 2021: 115).

Calm ripples without crests.

My orientation is one that moves. It doesn't travel, as travelling is more or less based on coordinated destinations. I move as and to where the waters carry me. The waters are the oral and visual (hi)stories that the speakers shared with me. I am not looting, I am searching. I am not chasing, I am following.

I follow the waters' rhythm. I follow their voices, silence, and laughter,
ripple by ripple,

wave back (!),

back, back, back,

ripple,

ripple,

ripple,

ripple,

ripple,

2 Oral and visual (hi)stories refer to my empirical material: biographical narrations and maps. I refer to them as (hi)stories because I see their storytelling and mapping as a part of history-making framed as people's history (Rudé 1967).

ripple,
swell.
ripple, ripple, ripple.

In this way, I won't presume but encounter the axioms of power that relate these (hi)stories. I listen to the waters. Topological time-spaces will be the (anti-)trophies of my (anti-)travels. The journey is not mine. It is collective. My boat's navigation system is not strongly led by my ideas but by the (hi)stories of the biographical speakers that provide the waters that carry me, my project, my legibility to write and ride as

ripples come
and
ripples go.

I ride my boat so that it could, at any moment, run dry, because the waters could easily turn flow to ebb. Withdraw their consent and take my legitimization away. I get lost. I realise I am not made for water. I get moved across the multi-biography ocean that I created but never ruled. There is a thin line between these orders of interpretation. But I try to make their thinness as visible as possible:

wave, back (!).

Boat. Waters. Ocean. Journey. I sound pathetic! The way I write oscillates between images of colonial masters and refugees. What a paradox it is that they share the same waters.

The flat waters turn into waves. In front of me a man appears in the water. He stretches out his arm towards me. Not an arm, a mutilated remnant of an arm. Scarred skin on the remains of his ulna and radius, grasping at my hands like a crab. Powerful. Powerless.

I want to save him, pull him into the boat, but another man, dressed in a blue-collar shirt, approaches and yells at me: Let him go! If you save him, you will only save his suffering. You are preserving the system. Let him go!

I am afraid of him. I am afraid of both. I let him go. A storm arises; the waves turn into uncontrolled masses of water. Everything is water now. Darkness.

I wake up and find myself still in the boat, which is barely moving. The waters are calm again.

Days of slow motion. Days of wondering, not how I failed to save the men, not how I was frightened by the other. I wonder why I am so surprised to meet a man like him, filled with bourgeois cold, here on the Indian Ocean. Why would I expect him elsewhere and under a different sky, under a different skin?

I meet pink swarms of butterflies in bluer skies,
clear blue waters turning into green,
coral reefs and all kinds of things my eyes have never seen.
The ocean of childhood memories, so innocent and virulent,

wave back!

The waters also face me with my inner, non-innocent assumptions and positive racisms. Being a guest in the ocean of childhood memories feels less like retarding, unlearning, regressing, releasing. I do not only travel in space, but I also travel in time.

I wake up in the past. It is January the 5th, 2019. I am in the clouds. A man is sitting next to me on the plane from Istanbul to Nairobi. He is Ahmad from Mogadishu. We are about to land. It is the first time that I am going to Nairobi. Ahmad seems to pick up on a conversation we had before my nap and insists that it won't be safe finding my way to my accommodation on my own. He is speechless when I say that nobody will come to pick me up from the airport. It worries him so much that he finally proposes to drop me off there on his way to Eastleigh. His kind act causes me to feel like someone who needs refuge while he is on his way to a neighbourhood that is densely populated by Somali refugees, some of them his relatives. Positions alternate.

Much of what I thought I knew until then crumbles already. In the following, more common logics falter; even knowledge from postcolonial readings can seem misleading. Stuttering. Discomfort and dissonance. I am a *mzungu*, and I am understanding more and more what this means. I realise that I won't get far with what I know, yet I realise that it is not simply about learning something new. I need to un-learn.

wave, back (!). Remember Ahmad, the kind man from Mogadishu!

During my research between Nairobi and Berlin, between de-legitimation and legitimization, I felt very vulnerable towards the many positions ascribed to me from outside. Although I was legitimated to speak for Berlin, the question of whether I was legitimated to speak for Nairobi was conceived very differently. As a childhood researcher, I always wonder whether I am legitimated to speak *for*³ children.

In time, I figured out that I will never resolve the tension described above. I will move with and against colonial powers of pasts, presents, and futures. I am caught up in the neo- and postcolonial entanglements of Western academic thought and practice, and I reproduce them when I am sent to Kenya to do research funded by the German Research Foundation. The power given to me could have been given to someone else. No matter how much I try to find ways to harness this tension – no matter if honestly or as 'strategic choice' – I will partly remain the colonial figure, and this is the most vivid limitation of my work.

3 I follow the suggestion of the new social studies of childhood and the sociology of childhood in that I always aim to speak *with* and not *for* children. But still, I believe that the process of academic language production always results in a speaking *for*, no matter how much voice we give the speakers, narrators of informants, or interviewees that we are working with. This is why I write *for*.