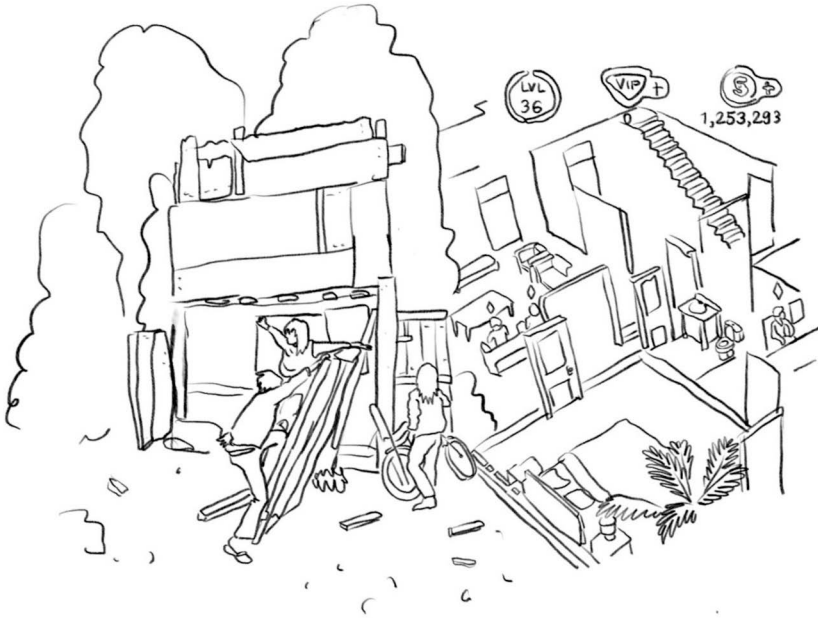


## Preface

---

I was born in 1987, and my sister only arrived in 2003. When my sister was still very young, she often commented on my lifestyle in very accurate and illuminating ways. I often felt that I became a playful child engaging in that world with her, where one object constantly figurates into something else. Being 16 years older also turned me into her parent every time our/her parents left the house. Age was no longer what it had meant before. It became relative, while at the same time, it mattered more than ever before. Through her arrival, not only did the generational order change, but it also imported powerful new spatial orders. I observed in her what I had partly gone through 16 years before, in the same village and the same single-family house. This constellation brought back many childhood memories, making me realise how things had changed. When I was seven years old, I had a group of friends with whom I spent a lot of time building huts in the forest after school and during weekends. When my sister was seven years old, friendships were confined by the school hours and facilities. It was no longer fashionable to visit each other beyond that. Neither her nor her friends were allowed to go to the woods to play. The woods were now reserved for family walks. 'Nowadays, the woods are no longer safe', parents would say. Walking through that forest today, I realise how small it is compared to when I was seven. Besides this, I have become a stranger to it. As a child, I had much more orientation there. As usual, I walk the same repetitive tour to take a break and breathe fresh air. While I walk, I think that back then, time felt different. Today, I can estimate how long my walk will take. Back then, time was not measurable like that. Back then, time felt different because I went there not to take a break but to be there. We were so agile then. With no formal education in constructing and building, we erected several homes in the forest that accommodated our play for several summers. Some of their remnants are still there today. When my sister was seven, she she excessively played *The Sims*. *The Sims* is a series of so-called life simulation video games in which players build homes for virtual human characters who reside in the same city and whose lifestyles and lifepaths are narrated by the players throughout the game. While both of us played home, I played it all over the village and in the woods, while her play was confined to the single-family house and the garden – a social topology mirrored on the other side of the screen.

Figure 1: Making home in the village in the 1990s and in the 2000s.



Source: Drawing by the author.

\*\*\*

'We go to school, then come home. Then if you have no homework, we go and use a gadget, like we go watch TV or play games on the computer or on the phone, or on the tablet'. (Nuhu, 9 yrs, \*2010, male, Maziwa, Nairobi)

Urban societies around the world are increasingly creating environments designed to be safe for children, where they can be educated and entertained. Whereas historically children were much more visible in urban public spaces all across the world, today they spend a lot of time in domestic spaces, which are, as Nuhu's example illustrates, increasingly equipped with media and technologies. This spatial figuration of childhood is strongly affected by and entangled with neoliberal urban planning and securitisation, which create childhoods marked by segregation, confinement, and isolation. This trend, noticeable since the 1960s and amplified through the new media accessible for children since the 1990s, reflects a spatial figuration of childhood that is accompanied by changing figures of the child and altering ideas of a 'good' life and 'good' childhood. Recent studies highlight the global pervasiveness of this phenomenon, yet they largely miss what I wish to focus on here: This figuration can only be accurately understood as contextualised by global inequalities, such as class differences. This book engages with this gap and explores the changing figures of childhood contextualised by class. Drawing on biographical interviews, mental mappings, and architectural ethnography, conducted with

people aged four to 62 years from Berlin and Nairobi, the study reveals how security discourses intertwine with bourgeois values and architectures, reshaping spatial figurations of childhoods in these cities in surprisingly similar ways since 1960. The findings highlight that dichotomies, such as urban and rural or private and public, that urban middle-class topologies inscribed into the city as a means of dealing with anthropocentric urban issues, such as traffic, social inequalities, and environmental decay, are answered with securitisation (e.g., gated housing and private play spaces), reproducing the child-adult binary. Childhood appears in this context as a spatial crisis in which children are patronised and disempowered in the name of protection, especially in middle- and upper-class milieus. The book engages with these middle-classed ways of acknowledging and grappling with urban insecurities and concludes that bourgeois lifestyles connect with exclusionary (topo)logics where urban spaces are increasingly organised around discourses of risk, control, and protection, creating 'safe spaces' where segregation then becomes a form of temporal crisis management, shielding privileged children from environmental and social collapse. From this perspective, 'child-friendly' or 'safe' spaces appear motivated by dangers and the preservation of individual physical health, rather than being part of a radical transformation towards a more just city marked by intergenerational spatial justice. This figuration of childhoods connected to securitisation entails a class paradox: when middle-class children gain mobility across the city by being chauffeured and spending time indoors, they do not just lose orientation but also contact with the social and multi-sensory fabric of the city. In times in which cities are increasingly erecting child-free zones (e.g., Seoul), this book exposes adultism as part of anthropocentrism and calls for reimagining cities through the lens of intergenerational spatial justice.

As part of this reimagining, this book grapples with the spatial crisis of childhood, characterised by the growing social and material child-adult binary, by re-centring age as a category of social difference in the following three contexts. The *first* context is social and spatial theory, where I rethink and further conceptualise childhood theory beyond the generational order to also include a spatial order. The *second* context is intersectionality, in which I re-centre age as a category that has thus far been marginalised and draw on its relation to class. The *third* context is that of global inequalities, in which I focus on the situation of children, as well as their situatedness (Haraway 1988), with the aim of developing more careful and responsible comparative methodologies. These re-centrings are not all entirely new but merge for the first time in this book as theoretically and empirically grounded in a comprehensive comparative study of the spatial changes of childhoods since the 1960s.<sup>1</sup>

\* \* \*

---

1 This book is based on my PhD project, which was affiliated with the Collaborative Research Centre 'Re-Figuration of Spaces' (CRC 1265) at the Technical University of Berlin, where I worked on the subproject 'Biographies of the Middle Classes: Spatial Experience and Meaning in the Life Course Narrative' (AO5, Phase I) between April 2018 and February 2021. The choice of comparing Nairobi and Berlin is contextualised by the subproject, which carried out empirical research in Germany and Kenya with a focus on Nairobi and Berlin.

Until now, childhood and class have been conceptualised primarily through an understanding of culture as associated with the boundaries of nations or along the Global South and North divide. But how do globalisation processes, such as social media, architectural transfer, and the privatisation of urban landscapes, circulate imaginations of the good life and its socio-material manifestation and, as such, affect childhood globally? How does the 'good' materialise in space, for example in architecture, and how do these 'good architectures' reciprocally perform or suggest what is desirable? Which spaces emerge for children in the modern parts of diverse societies, and which might disappear over time?

I assume that children worldwide grow up in situated globalities (Law 2004, cited in Blok 2010: 508) whose multi-scalar entanglements are becoming increasingly visible and tangible, as we can see in the example of the 'Fridays for Future' movement. With this spatial inquiry, I aim to contribute to deconstructing the binary representation of childhoods according to the global divide in which children from the Global North appear overprotected, while children from the Global South often are portrayed as victimised (cf. Abebe/Ofosu-Kusi 2016: 304–305). Inherent in this is a focus on majorities, which leads to the invisibility of local minorities, even though these local minorities are increasing in number on a global scale (for example, emerging global middle classes). Looking at childhood under the condition of 'global inequality' (Milanovic 2016; Weiß 2017) allows me to explore what it is that entangles different societies or individual aspects of them – their pasts, presents, and futures – from a largely unexplored perspective. The empirical basis for this analysis encompassed narrative-biographical interviews and map drawings conducted with 46 people aged four to 62 years. The participants, referred to as speakers (see subchapter 4.2), narrated and mapped their childhood stories by emphasising the spaces that were important to them. In addition, I collected ethnographic material about their homes and housing types. To understand how, on the basis of this material, the spatial orders of childhoods have been figured from the 1960s until today and beyond their respective cities, I have contextualised my research with the following three questions:

- a) Which social topologies (for example, field, enclave, route) appear in the material
  - as middle class-specific,
  - in one or both urban contexts, and
  - across time or specific to a certain time (1960s to 2020)?
- b) Which type of spatial practice is dominant in the context of these social topologies, and hence, which spatial figures (for example, territory or network) do they produce?
- c) What does this spatial figuration tell us about normative concepts of 'good' childhood in middle-class milieus, and how do they alter the position of children in the Anthropocene?

\*\*\*

The theoretical conceptualisation of childhood as a classed spatio-temporal order is developed here in a performative manner of transdisciplinary discourse and beyond the confines of academic language. By setting up a theatre play of socio-spatial debate, I developed a theoretical base and heuristic that does not only allow for a detailed and tailored analysis of the figuration of childhood in the context of my study but also serves as an extension of socio-spatial theorization that synthesises areas of spatial discourse that have so far run parallel to and unconnected with one another into a structured as well as open topology of spatial figuration. This topology is applied empirically in a trans-generational, translocal, and cross-classed comparative case design and addresses important gaps within childhood studies, providing important insights into the empirically insufficiently grounded discourse on collective orientations of global middle classes (GMC) from the perspective of childhood and social reproduction (for more, see Mock/Weidenhaus 2022), and thus informing a globalisation research that is often too obsessed with the market economy (cf. Katz 2001a: 710).

But the multi-sited research I advocate here also raises challenges and questions: *How do I, as an adult, talk with and about children and for childhood? How do I, as a white person, talk with and about Black people and people of colour? How do I, with my rural working-class background, talk with and about people who grew up in urban middle-class settings?* These questions not only accompanied the writing but continuously challenged me during the research process. Besides reflections about the asymmetrical power constellations between myself and the speakers, I reflected on my methodological choices and concluded that biographical research, which enables the speakers to develop their narrations and relevance settings, is key to tackling the power asymmetry inherent in empirical research designs.

**Overview** The journey the readers are taken on through this book does not follow a strictly linear structure, nor is the book written in academic language and style throughout but also includes poetry, fictitious playwriting, and auto-ethnographic notes. This multi-modal writing style was necessary, as some things could not be said in genuinely academic language, which does not offer the appropriate terms, words, expressions, and atmospheres. This is, amongst other things, because many topics are emotional and complex and therefore not accurately expressible through the sometimes cold and rational tone of academic writing. Through the auto-ethnographic elements, I appear not only as the researcher but also as one of the speakers and aim through that to make my power in this project visible.

**PART I: Childhood in Situated Globalities** Part I of this book is structured into two chapters. The first chapter looks at the theoretical conceptualisation of childhood within childhood research and builds on the attempt of the new social studies of childhood to overcome the adult-child binary by conceptualising children beyond their state of becoming. Instead of following this conception, I propose to denaturalise not childhood but adulthood by framing people of all ages in a state of becoming. Furthermore, I stress the importance of acknowledging childhood as a spatial order beyond and entwined with its more common conception as a generational order. I therefore frame the human condition as 'spatial becoming'. With a critical stance towards adultism, I stress the need to look at the figures of the child within the Anthropocene, better framed by Toby Rollo as '*adultocene*' (2016:

242), within their entanglements with colonialism and capitalism, where the figure of the child as becoming and as human capital developed.

The second chapter expounds the role of class in this study and introduces a concept of class based on the assumption that a globally connecting pattern of middle-class subjectivity is that people have to and can invest in their status in order to remain middle class. This notion is closely related to the figures of the bourgeois child as not yet being but still becoming (development) and as a form of human capital. With this focus on cultural-historical aspects of middle-class subjectivity, I aim to add empirical weight to the insight that global cultural patterns shape middle classness, uncovering previously largely invisible (hi)stories of bourgeois childhoods in cities of the Global South, such as in Nairobi. Connected to that, I briefly introduce the current discourse on the global middle classes, expose its limitations and research gaps, and dismantle the modernisation myths inherent in it. Such myths reproduce bourgeois patterns of childhood globally and feed the Anthropocene crisis by promoting development and progress, while overshadowing other possible narratives of caring as alternative ways of world-making and -repairing.

**PART II: Countertopological Figurations (Methodology and Spatial Theory)** Part II frames the processual and spatial theoretical basis of the study in a way, led by the reoccurring question *'Am I legitimised to speak for those I will speak for in the following?'* and extending it to *'Which theories and methodologies are legitimised to speak for those they will speak for in the following?'*. Stressing the need to grapple with such an endeavour collectively and collaboratively, I draw inspiration from the 'string figure' metaphor proposed by Donna Haraway (2016), first, to highlight the complex network of (usually) invisible actors that impact a research process and, second, to describe the necessary collaboration across different academic fields needed to tackle the complexity of spatial realities. To move the idea of string figures beyond being a metaphor, I then engage in a playwriting that brings together actors from post-mathematical topology, critical urban theory, sociology of space, science and technology studies, actor-network theory and new materialism to gather at the Lieberose Desert in Brandenburg. There, under harsh climatic conditions, a debate about the current status of space in social sciences heats up and, in the process, develops the spatial theoretical part of this book and opens it to a wider audience, where spatial figuration is made tangible and applicable through transdisciplinary exchange.

**PART III: Who Speaks? How, for What, and to Whom?** Part III is devoted to the methods of conducting and analysing and reframes the earlier question as follows: *Which methods are legitimised to speak for those they will speak for in the following?* This question is discussed under the premise of position(ality) and elaborates on the complex and specific asymmetrical power constellations underlying the research process (Chapter 4). Led by Edward Said's provocative question, 'Who speaks? For what and to whom?' (1989: 212), to which I add the dimension of *how* – the ways in which it is spoken – I contextualise myself and the speakers and identify the *how* as *sharing*, which I elaborate on by reflecting on the condi-

tions of sharing that I set with my methods and through the feedback the speakers gave on the experience of sharing their (hi)stories.<sup>2</sup>

The fifth chapter situates this process of sharing within methodological discussions in decolonial studies and actor-network theory, which stress the importance of reflecting on the power of methods to order worlds and on the capacity of methods to reach the plurality of worlds beyond white and Eurocentric ways of collecting material. Connected to these reflections, in the subchapters that follow, I introduce my multimodal methodological triangulation of biographical interviews, mental maps, and architectural ethnography.

Chapter 6 engages with my ways of handling the multimodal material collected for the empirical analysis and establishes four steps to analyse the ‘messy’ material, encompassing how I inductively developed spatial codes that were identified as scales, which structure the empirical analysis. I furthermore explain how I apply my theoretical framework of spatial becoming to the material to reconstruct the social topologies of middle-class childhoods with respect to spatial practices, social topologies, and spatial figures.

**PART IV: Fluid Subjectivities, Territorialised Housing, and Avoidant Mobilities** Part IV is the last part of the book and is divided into an empirical chapter (7) and a concluding chapter (8). The presentation of the results in the empirical chapter unfolds along a scalar entanglement: (a) the scale of the subject and body (subchapter 7.1), (b) the scale of home (subchapter 7.2), (c) the scale of the city (subchapter 7.3). The scale of subject and body engages with children’s corporeal becoming, looks at classed subjectivation processes related to changing biographical future orientations, playing cultures, and forms of discipline and control. The scale of home offers a profound insight into the classed changing practices of housing and home-making, which draws on the performative agency of the built environment, evident in different housing types. Finally, the scale of city engages with the social topologies of children’s spatial mobilities paired with a shift in the perception of security and safety, revealing the access of children to public spaces to be strongly related to class differences, which are additionally shaped by the historical east-west divide that characterises both cities. This multi-scalar figuration reveals the dominance of the spatial figures of territories and fluid spaces, as well as the increasing figuration of voids in the spatial relations of middle-class children’s relations to the city.

The concluding Chapter 8 begins with discussing the historical persistence of the three scales in middle-class contexts and from there dives into a deeper reflection about fluids, territories and voids, which were identified as spatial figures that become increasingly constitutive for middle class childhoods in both locales. Connected to this figuration a class paradox arises: As middle-class children gain mobility across the city, their contact to its messy, multisensory fabric shrinks and is increasingly replaced by artificial environments that often compensate their loss of urban realities within hyperreal environments. Here, I question whether discourses in which middle-class children are associated with environmentalism and democracy and are – not only since Fridays for Future – increasingly becoming bearers of hope for a better future are viable when these

---

2 It remains to be considered how the speakers perceive what is written about their (hi)stories. This is a question for future research.

children are surrounded by material cultures and spaces that are often located right next to or are even a part of the centres (and symptoms) of capitalist extraction, such as shopping malls. The book ends with a critical reflection on the efforts to create more and more specialised 'safe spaces' for children by accounting for their power to constitute children in a state of becoming and to reinforce adultism, beyond their function of protecting children. From there, I advocate for deeper structural changes towards intergenerational spatial justice in cities, as well as for the centralisation of childhood within capitalist critical spatial studies.