Speaking Through Houses: Interweaving Biography, Property and Personhood in Urban Zimbabwe

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Introduction

Houses speak. In the pages that follow, I will be «speaking through houses» as well as listening to, and to some extent translating, what houses themselves «say», what they express and how they express themselves in different tones and tongues. I combine this with biographical sensibilities and methodological practices that help reflect upon the changing materialities and socialities of the house-as-building and its multiple layers of social-symbolic and political-economic significance for those who people or have peopled or in other ways engaged closely with it

over time. This, I suggest, offers productive ways of thinking about two sets of co-constitutive relationships I have been concerned with academically for several decades, and have explored to some extent in both rural and urban settings in Zimbabwe and elsewhere in Southern African, especially under conditions of displacement and crisis. These are, on the one hand, the relationship between state making and citizenship (Hammar 2001, 2008, 2018; Hammar and Raftopoulos 2003), and on the other, between property and personhood (Hammar 2002, 2017a, 2017b). It is the latter that receives most attention here.

These orientations have coincided with a growing interest in the wider «critical learning» advantages (Yiftachel 2016) of studying certain buildings through an approach I refer to as *the biography of a building*. This interest was sparked initially in 2012 then deepened in 2017, through encounters with the Harare Passport Office where I spent long hours over several days each time renewing my passport. I had known the building that housed the Passport Office in an entirely different era, namely in the

early 1980s, just after independence. It was part of the Makombe government complex where I worked then as a Planning Officer for a ministry concerned primarily with community development and what was then called «women's affairs». At the time, I was a bureaucratic insider within a proudly well-functioning state. Three decades later, and notably well into the second decade of Zimbabwe's hellish political and economic crisis that began in earnest in 2000 (Hammar and Raftopoulos 2003), I was one among thousands of frustrated citizen-clients anxiously queueing along poorly lit corridors for crucial documents we could only access through rigorous preparation, calculated bargaining and endless waiting.

Though not planned as research, much was learned during those endless hours within the now-Kafkaesque maze of corridors, while simultaneously subjected to and witnessing its complex bureaucratic entanglements and practices. What struck me acutely in the messy present of the 2010s, was the dramatic contrast of a remembered highly ordered bureaucratic past of the early 1980s. It was a contrast between a now of dilapidated furniture, dirty floor-tiles and stashes of empty Coke bottles on the desks of staff struggling to deliver some level of service under dire conditions, and a then of well-polished floors, regimented filing routines and disciplined, service-minded civil servants. At the time, I was aware that this one building, in

this one moment, offered more than a single portrait of localized physical and institutional decay. Rather, with the advantage of my own dual biographical perspective on place and practice, it raised a larger set of questions about what the changing life of this particular building could help reveal about the long trajectory of the Zimbabwe state over time and its changing relationship to its citizenry. This generated a strong analytical curiosity in the simultaneous, interweaving biographies of particular public buildings and states that I was keen to test-out but have had limited opportunity to pursue.[2]

Yet as with any buildings, while seemingly solid, houses are a constantly changing composite, generated through a dynamic articulation between material, social, symbolic, corporeal and emotional elements. They «speak» in multiple languages, both directly and indirectly, express-

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2 One inspiration in this mode is Danny Hoffman's richly textured and beautifully illustrated *Monrovia Modern* (2017). Drawing on architecture, photography and anthropology, Hoffman uses the ruins of four iconic modernist buildings in Monrovia, Liberia, to examine the relationship between the built environment and political imagination. He does so by casting his eye upon the buildings' material forms, and their relationships to those who temporarily occupied, guarded and/or were evicted from them during and after Liberia's periods of civil war through much of the 1990s.

ing themselves through both human and non-human actions, reactions, and interactions.[3] They speak, for example, through the actual sounds they contain or generate (be this the sound of creaking floors, rain-battered windows, laughter, music, whispers); through scents (such as food cooking, fresh laundry, damp walls); through the objects they contain and display (furniture, photographs on walls, dead flowers in a cracked vase, an array of books); through shifts in light and dark (changing times of day; the use of a bare lightbulb; a paraffin lamp); through the varied movements and energies of bodies in daily or nightly activity, as well as through absences, acknowledged or merely felt. Cumulatively, through all this, houses narrate their complex stories. Additionally, as already mentioned, houses speak of and from wider histories, structures and processes and their effects on the biographical lives of and within them. In contemporary Zimbabwe, the lives of houses are differentially interwoven, for example, with histories of colonial and post-colonial urban planning policies and practices; with sustained structures of class, race and gender differentiation; with shifting trends in national economic growth and decline and elite accumulation; with deep structural and political crisis and mass displacement; with the cultural politics of identity, belonging and exclusion and contested patterns and possibilities of differentiated citizenship.

In pursing the conceptual pathways prompted by the notion of «speaking through houses», I recognise the strong resonances with aspects of the work of Janet Carsten and her «anthropology of the house».[4] Thinking along similar relational lines, I echo Carsten's suggestion of «the multiple entanglements that houses illuminate between the lives and relations that are enacted within them and the historically inflected social and political contexts in which they are situated. Houses [as she says] are not only embedded in the biographies of their inhabitants and vice versa, they embody the interconnections between individual trajectories, kinship and the state» (Carsten 2018: 103). Similarly too, I argue that a single house is never an island in either time or space. It is always multiply located: in relation to a specific physical place and broader social

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3 Thanks to Rita Kesselring for thoughtfully pointing out some of these important distinctions.

4 Here, I thank Julia Pauli, University of Hamburg, for introducing me – a latecomer – to Carsten's important scholarship. Additionally, I thank Erdmute Alber, Andrea Behrends and others in discussions at Bayreuth University in January 2020, for further stimulating my thinking about houses and kinship more broadly, including reflections on the different temporalities of generational belonging.

space, and to both linear chronological time and the uneven temporalities of life and politics as a whole. As such, a house is always «in conversation» – literally and metaphorically – with so much more than just itself and its most visible structure, occupants, location, status and uses.

In this lecture, I explore both conceptually and empirically the question of how property and personhood are related. Both concepts have long and varied theoretical histories, and in a later section I address some of their most resonant meanings in relation to my approach to houses. This includes their multi-dimensional and relational qualities, and the contextual, contingent and uncertain nature of the relationship between them. However, first I start by tracing the intellectual journey that underpins my general interest in property and personhood.. Following the conceptual discussion, I turn to the methodological possibilities offered by the biography of a building, and specifically the biography of a house. Finally, and partly in the mode of an auto-ethnography, I focus empirically on the biography of a particular house located in Luveve, one of the older working-class, high-density townships of Zimbabwe's second city, Bulawayo. This is a house with which I have been closely connected for over four decades.

Journeying towards Property and Personhood

For far longer than I realized previously, my work has been consistently attentive to the shifting relationships of people to property in different settings, in particular to physical property such as rural agricultural land and residential plots, and later to urban plots and houses. My research since the late 1990s has explored selected dimensions of the relationship between property, citizenship and the state, and the relationship between property and personhood; and my current focus includes identification documents as forms of property (Hammar 2018). Most often, I have examined these dynamics in contexts of disruption or crisis of some kind, among dislocated and often illegalised residents of either rural or urban peripheries.

During my doctoral research over twenty years ago, for example, I explored the violent eviction by a rural local council of small-scale migrant farmers in Zimbabwe's north-western agrarian margins (Hammar 2001). Here, the council had seen fit to redefine the farmers as squatters, in so doing criminalizing them and their homes as a means to legitimise their eviction to the council's material and political benefit. The council burned down full granaries and some sleeping huts in the process and several hundred families were forcibly removed and dumped on the road

some forty kilometres away with what belongings they could salvage. A year later, when my fieldwork began, these evicted families had managed to return to their former homes but under uncertain conditions. During visits and interviews at their homesteads, some of the families made a point of bringing out bags of charred clothes, pots and cooking utensils tucked under plastic sheets along the wall of their thatched huts, to underscore what had happened. The still-pungent scent of smoke forcefully underscored the violence of their removal, and the precariousness of their return.

A subsequent research project in the early to mid-2000s examined the reluctant or in some cases forced migration of evicted white Zimbabwean commercial farmers during the height of Zimbabwe's land invasions, across the border to Mozambique. Among other things, it focused on their ambivalent yet determined efforts to «become Mozambicanised» and find a new foothold for their lives and livelihoods under precarious conditions (Hammar 2010, 2017b). Yet even as these displaced farming families in Manica Province in western Mozambique made what adaptations they could to an often-described «disorder» in their new settings, what was striking were the ways in which they sought to reconstruct a familiar (and selectively reimagined) sense of order «Zimbabwe-style», not least through their homes and in their gardens. This seemed, at least partly, to be a way to counter what they perceived to be the danger of their own declining «standards».

From around 2012, my work began to focus on urban displacement and resettlement in and around Zimbabwe's second city, Bulawayo, in the context of extreme and chronic economic and political crisis. Specifically, I examined one rather unique case of former, long-term urban «squatters»[5] resettled by the Bulawayo City Council in the urban periphery. This was in response to pressure from informal settlers themselves, local church groups and the International Organisation for Migration (IOM), with IOM providing funds to build actual houses at the new site. In such deeply uncertain times as post-2000 Zimbabwe, this case of urban resettlement exposed rather painfully what I have described elsewhere as the many «paradoxes of propertied citizenship», setting dreams of «proper» lives – anticipated through becoming propertied – against new forms of marginalization and persistent poverty

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5 In Zimbabwe, the term «squatter» is commonly used by the authorities to illegalise and even more actively criminalise informal settlers. In the case referred to here, this was also a designation that these settlers carried with them, and which others in the new resettlement area they were moved to applied to them disparagingly. Transitioning into ‹propertied› status through being allocated houses in the new resettlement site, was key to countering this pejorative labelling.

(Hammar 2017a). Part of the double-sidedness in this case links to the widespread lack of official identity documents amongst those resettled, needed in order to validate and secure property ownership status. Nonetheless, the case revealed how the prospect, and for some the reality, of *owning one's own home*, affects both experiences of citizenship (here, defining citizenship very simply as *a sense of rights*), and of personhood (defined for now simply as a sense of being). I shall return to these themes later.

In approaching these various contexts, I have worked consistently with a *relationa*l sensibility that emphasises the interconnectedness between the different dimensions of sociological worlds. This has meant, for example, focusing on multi-positioned actors, and across multiple scales and temporalities, and paying attention to the articulation between broader structural conditions and processes on the one hand, and the more intimately lived experiences of everyday life in given places on the other. The concrete application of these rather abstract approaches will be demonstrated further when I discuss the specific case of the house in Luveve.

Thinking through Property and Personhood

This section offers a selective discussion of the notions of, respectively, property and personhood. As with most concepts, each is forged in a situated crucible of multiple and contested meanings and applications. My aim below is to point to certain ways of thinking about these two concepts that inform or mirror my own approach, and which are helpful in reading some of the empirical realities I have engaged with, rather than aiming to provide overly narrow definitions to apply to an abstract problematic.

Property

In the introduction to their edited volume entitled *Changing Properties of Property*, Benda-Beckmann et al (2009) describe property as that which «concerns the organisation and legitimation of rights and obligations with respect to goods that are regarded as valuable» (2009: 2). Similarly, economic anthropologists Bill Maurer and Gabrielle Schwab (2006: 9) note that when something becomes *formalised as property* – be this an object, an idea, a building, a body – with either individual or collective rights of «ownership» attached to it, it becomes «alienable» (that is, capable of being sold or transferred). In other words, it becomes a commodity, or at least commodifiable. *Becoming property* necessarily establishes a *relational value* of one thing relative to another, or in some cases in relation to a market.

But as many scholars have noted, property is clearly relational in a *non-economic* sense too. Property relations are embedded in other social relations (von Benda-Beckmann et al, 2009), and this gives them symbolic and emotional as well as material or market value. Inevitably then, almost everywhere property is contested. Those who have rights to own (or use) certain things, resources, spaces and so on, have them in relation to other rights they do or do not have, as well as to the rights of others to or over such property. In other words, we need to think of property not simply in terms of a single relationship. Furthermore we need to conceive of wider *property systems or regimes* with their own particular sets of rules, norms and terms of ownership and negotiation, at multiple scales. So for example, we know that in many African contexts there are both formal and informal and visible and invisible property regimes operating simultaneously. Formalised statutory and customary property systems frequently co-exist. Ownership of one form of property, such as agricultural land for example, may overlap in complex ways with implicit «ownership» (manifested as control or usufruct rights) over the bodies of wives, children or poorer relatives for reproductive and/or physical labour.

Nonetheless Maurer and Schwab are convinced that there is a changing «arithmetic» of self and ownership in our contemporary world of accelerating privatisation and globalisation. This is reflected in the title of their volume, *Acceleration Possession. Global Futures of Property* and Personhood in which they suggest that the various dimensions that constitute personhood are increasingly being «brought within the ambit of the capitalist marketplace» (Maurer and Schwab 2006: 8-9). This kind of generalised claim needs to be contextualised and nuanced in relation to specific places

and times within widely differentiated social worlds. It needs to pay greater attention to the explicitly political dimensions of property systems, marked in situated ways not least by party politics, authoritarianism and militarised elites. These are key factors shaping contemporary forms of property accumulation, ownership and security in Zimbabwe, for example, simultaneously shaping the nature of personhood. In addition, Maurer and Schwab's generalisation tends to underplay some of the more personal and intimate aspects and diversity of ordinary people's relationships to property and personhood.

Returning to the broadly accepted argument that property rights are as much social, cultural and political relationships as they are legal or economic, such insights and perspectives are often associated with a generic «Africa» or other seemingly exoticised systems «elsewhere». Yet writing in the Stanford Law Review in 1982, American legal scholar Margaret Radin, in discussing legal disputes over property rights in the USA, refers to the use of what she terms «the personhood perspective». With this she captures something seemingly fundamental – or fundamentally personal – about the close relationship between property and personhood:

Most people possess certain objects they feel are almost part of themselves. These objects are closely bound up with personhood because they are part of the way we constitute ourselves as continuing personal entities in the world. They may be as different as people are different, but some common examples might be a wedding ring, a portrait, an heirloom, or a house. (Radin 1982: 959)

While the nature of attachments to or identification with material objects and their meanings cannot be assumed in a cross-cultural sense, what stands out in Radin's insight is the commonality of the personal dimension of constituted selves in relation to property. To uncover the specificities of such relations requires investigation into the everyday, intimate textures of property and property dynamics, and their implications for personhood.

From a more sceptical perspective, John Berger offers a cautionary note. «People *believe* in property», he writes, however «… in essence they only believe in *the illusion of protection* which property gives» (Berger 2013: 18; italics added). Undoubtedly, there is much evidence of so-called property rights, and the *promise* of property, being far from certain or secure in practice. Millions of those evicted and displaced across the world can attest to this. Yet in relatively stable situations, or even in certain kinds of crisis settings, such a belief in property's redemptive promise is meaningful as a form of what one might call *anticipatory investment*, which can have important social, moral, political and practical effects. This was evident among those who were allocated plots and houses in

the post-displacement resettlement site on the periphery of Bulawayo that I mentioned earlier. Many of those resettled were former long-term squatters who had lived illegally and under conditions of precarity most of their lives. For them, the anticipated houses in particular offered the possibility of *propertied citizenship* (Hammar 2017a), and with this, the prospect of transitioning – as they noted themselves – to a more legitimate, decent and dignified form of life and personhood. At the core of this envisaged transformation was a combination of official *recognition* of their right to decent housing, and the actual (or at least prospective) *ownership* of the house itself.

Such optimism about a more physically and legally secure and respectful future was sustained for some years, but was complicated by the fact that the move to the resettlement site itself brought with it other forms of uncertainty and impoverishment. This was partly due to Zimbabwe's ever-deepening economic crisis, and the site's distance from Bulawayo and hence from the only available livelihood options in the informal sector. It was also due to the critical lack of identity documents among a large percentage of the resettled community. For those in this position, it undermined their ability to formalise ownership of their new houses, in turn directly interrupting the full realisation of becoming formally propertied or «proper» citizens (Hammar 2017a).

Personhood

Although already having touched partly on questions of personhood above, I now discuss it more directly. Earlier, I talked of personhood in short-hand as a «sense of being», distinguishing it from «a sense of rights» attached to the notion of citizenship. These senses are not mutually exclusive, especially not when one thinks about citizenship and citizen-making in their more substantive forms (Holston 2009; Neveu et al 2011). However, for now I will leave aside a more detailed discussion of what this distinction implies conceptually and empirically, and concentrate instead on some of the broader debates at play with respect to personhood.

Scholars, especially African and Africanist anthropologists and philosophers, are generally attuned to the academic debates around competing conceptualisations and interpretations of personhood. I do not pretend to address these extensively here. But a key feature of such debates, according to Maurer and Schwab (2006), is an ever-present tension between post-Enlightenment, Western-liberal notions of personhood, and African-collective notions of personhood. Within the former (often generalising) framework of personhood, the person or «the self» is largely defined (and to some extent judged) by metaphysical notions of human dignity and individual autonomy, and the freedom to decide and act on one's own behalf and to make independent claims, not least to rights.

By contrast, African frameworks of personhood are commonly portrayed in terms of normative forms of communalism, whereby «a community, based on its values, obligations, and social recognition, may shape an individual's identity and choices» (Ikuenobe 2015: 1005). However, Ikuenobe (2015) proposes that the distinction between the two different framings is over-stated. More specifically, he argues that relations between individuals and community in African traditions «are not inconsistent with the idea of autonomy» (2015: 1005). He emphasises instead the notion of «relational autonomy» which offers an *alternative* reading of the «free and self-governing» person, whereby

such a person is socially constituted and embedded in a social environment, culture, or tradition that indicates value commitments, social obligations, personal relationships, and mutual dependencies. The African view of relational autonomy is defined and bolstered by communal realities, relationships, values, obligations, and modes of meaning. These social relationships and obligations not only shape individuals' rational options, choices, and decisions but also give meaning to the notion of a free choice. (Ikuenobe 2015: 1005)

Adding to this, Jean and John Comaroff (2001: 268) argue that African notions of personhood are «infinitely more complicated» than the universalising, singularising and teleological Euro-American version of «the autonomous individual». They note, furthermore, that «the continent, as diverse as it is large, has spawned alternative modernities in which very different notions of selfhood, civility, and publicity have taken root» (2001: 268). James Ferguson (2015) also reminds us that not all liberal notions of personhood on the African continent simply echo Euro-American roots. He points out that there are also post-colonial ideas and ideals of liberation – such as from tyranny, colonialism, and various forms of racism or patriarchal domination – that have similarly embraced yet also differ from «Western» liberal ideas of freedom and self-governing.

Such diversity across space and time raises important questions about the situatedness and contingency of what affords people a sense of dignity and selfhood in life. To illustrate this, I draw here on the long-term research of South African anthropologist Fiona Ross (2010) conducted in an informal settlement on the outskirts of Cape Town. Referred to by some as a «squalid» shanty town, it is in fact called, somewhat paradoxically, The Park. Ross's work focuses to a large extent on the relationship between housing and decency (called «*ordentlikkheid*» in Afrikaans), examining the everyday making and unmaking of personhood within a post-apartheid squatter community. From among the many conversations Ross records, she shares the following exchange that took place between Janine and Wilma, two neighbours in The Park. In response to a question that Janine poses to Wilma about why she preferred to keep her nephew from Port Elizabeth from visiting her, Wilma replies:

«I don't really want my real family to [visit]. You know, they do visit me, and no one's ever had a problem, but whenever I go home, my sister would say, ‹Oh no, you're obsessed with that shack of yours›. But it's a house, it's my home. It might be a shack but it's my home and I'm proud of it. When I asked her where her house is, she couldn't answer me. But it's true, I love my shack but they can't seem to understand that. Look, when I left home, I also didn't understand, because I grew up in a brick house.» (Ross 2010: 22)

Wilma is conscious of being a «shack dweller» and how that is viewed through a moralising lens. This is something she herself had internalised previously, before this became her own reality and she viewed it with different eyes. Ross's sustained ethnographic work looks closely at both the ideas and lived experiences of certain kinds of houses in an historically deeply racialised, classed and gendered context. Through such intimacies of attachment and loss related to property and place, she helps us understand

13

the complicated relationships people have both to themselves and to their kin and community, alongside to property itself, as Radin (1982) earlier pointed out.

A different Africa-based perspective on personhood is provided by Daivi Rodima-Taylor (2013) in her work on market women in Kenya and their contingent modes of sociality. She concludes that for these women, «personhood seems predicated on facilitating an assemblage of transitory connections and relations through directing material and relationship flows» (2013: 91). Echoing Ikuenobe (2015), Rodima-Taylor takes a relational approach to personhood that allows one to see more clearly the ambiguities between notions of *individual sovereignty and personal autonomy* on the one hand, and on the other, strategies and practices of *belonging, community and connectedness* beyond oneself. These ambiguities generate a combination of tensions, accommodations and/or social avoidances, as well as transformations of the person and their own ideas of personhood. In a similar vein, Ferguson (2015) points to certain contexts in which overt and paradoxical aspirations for dependency under conditions of precarity may supersede – or run alongside – an individual's aspirations for personal sovereignty. All of these examples challenge vernacular Euro-American modernist assumptions about personhood and autonomy.

In summary, drawing on these different perspectives, we might think about property and personhood each as multi-dimensional and relational domains in themselves, and the relationship between them being contextual, contingent and uncertain. Furthermore, we might see them as simultaneously formal and informal, and both constraining and enabling. What this points to is the need for close empirical examination of specific manifestations and interpretations of property and personhood, through which a broader set of reflections and arguments might be developed.

The Biography of a Building: Methodological Possibilities

I proceed here to reflect on the biography of a building in terms of its methodological possibilities. Over the years, since that dramatic encounter between past and present in the Harare Passport Office in 2012, I have continued to think about and, to a limited extent, test out various biographical techniques in relation to understanding buildings, while continually asking myself *what insights might such an approach offer* with respect to wider structures and processes. This particular question remains open. However, what seems evident is that using my personal relationship to a particular building provided an instructive starting point. This has largely entailed weaving together parts of my own biography with that of the building/s of interest to me. This is consistent with Fiona Ross's proposition that anthropological knowledge «demands a kind of intimacy» (2010: 10). Yet even though a pre-existing personal familiarity and intimate engagement with a given building is valuable for such a biographical method, it is certainly not always feasible nor is it a prerequisite. Practically speaking though, what does the biography of a building (potentially) entail, methodologically? Specifically, what might the biography of a house demand methodologically? On the one hand, one might trace its legal or administrative trajectories as «property», say through various bureaucratic documents, or follow its physical-material developments through planning drawings, photographs or oral histories. However, as already implied, a detailed biography ideally entails a researcher's physical presence in or experience of the said building, allowing for real-time ethnographic encounters with the space, its occupants, and its multiple textures and dynamics. And since buildings both hide and reveal, one needs to be attentive both to those aspects that are more immediately visible and accessible, and to those that lie beneath the surface/s, whether intentionally or unintentionally hidden.

Beyond its materialities, a house is inevitably a complex social and emotional space: filled with both the ordinary and the extraordinary dimensions of making or unmaking everyday life; a space simultaneously holding hopes and dreams, losses and mourning, wounds and healing. Houses are spaces always in motion, sometimes in commotion, always undergoing change. Thus treating a house simultaneously biographically and ethnographically as the subject of investigation requires using all one's senses and sensitivities. It requires paying attention to aural as

well as visual signs of how the house «speaks», noting its multi-layered physical, social and personal narratives, alongside its wider historical, spatial and structural context. Each situated house requires gathering data on the following:

- **Space and location:** For example, what kind of neighbourhood is the house situated in; what is the history of its construction and emergence; and what of the nature of the neighbourhood, the street, the neighbours?
- **Exterior materialities:** What is the exterior form of the structure; what is it built from; what constitutes its exterior (walls, roof, doors, windows, yard, gate and so on); how large or small is it; what number and size of rooms, and how have these changed over time?
- **Interior materialities:** What do the walls look like (plastered, painted or exposed; cracked or smooth); what hangs on the walls (religious symbols, paintings, photographs); what kind of furniture or equipment does it contain and how are these arranged; what is the floor made of, and what's on it; what kind of windows are there, and are there curtains or other ways of creating privacy?
- **Sensory dimensions:** What smells and sounds dominate the house at different times of the day; what kind of lighting is used; what temperatures dominate and which kind of heating if any is there at different times of the year?

- **The occupants:** Who are its residents; who owns or occupies the building, for how long; how are the residents differentiated; what kind of sociality and emotional tone dominates; how is the space distributed and used – for living, for livelihoods, for prayer, as a sanctuary, as a meeting place?
- **Temporalities:** What understandings and expressions of the past, present and future are manifested in the house; what are the different temporal rhythms of its respective occupants of different genders and generations; where are they in their respective life trajectories, and in terms of their memories, plans, hopes, dreams?

There are numerous ethnographic methods through which to collect data on the various dimensions of a given house. Sustained or recurring presence is key if possible, in order to closely observe, quietly listen, casually converse, consciously interview, and intuitively experience all its stories. I have not, myself, purposively or consistently applied all of the above methods and questions as part of an explicit investigation. Many of these practices started off as intuitive rather than conscious research strategies. They have evolved slowly through lived research experience, and only gradually come to be defined overtly as methodological and analytical practices related to the biography of a house. In the process, they have helped me expand my understanding of how property and personhood shape one another.

The House on Bekasi Road

I turn now to the specific biography of the house on Bekasi Road in Luveve that has been a core place on my own life-map for over forty years.

Backstory: 1960-1977

Initially, the house stood as a distant, unreachable place I had never seen but constantly imagined and longed for. It belonged to Sophie Mugwagwa, bought for her by my biological parents in 1977 in lieu of a pension, following their difficult decision to leave the country (then still Rhodesia).

The national liberation war was then at its height and the hoped-for transition to an independent black majority-ruled Zimbabwe was not yet in-sight. Both my brothers had left the country a few years earlier, re-fusing to be conscripted into the white-minority army of Ian Smith. The strain of waiting for political change finally prompted my parents' decision to follow suit, taking a re-luctant seventeen-year old daughter with them. By then, Sophie had worked for my family for over sixteen years. Her employment began in 1960 when she arrived in Harare (then Salisbury) in a similar way to that of many other young, black rural women who came to town to seek work and a future. Born in 1927 in rural Mberengwa in the middle of the

country, in her early thirties she had been abandoned by her husband for giving birth to a stillborn child and for having no others. Both employment and living options were extremely limited – in such colonial times for both black men and women in urban areas, especially for women (Barnes 1997). However, with some mission schooling, Sophie was in a relatively good position to secure domestic work. This she found with my white, Jewish, middle-class family just a year after I was born. Our deep, lifelong bond was set from then on.

We experienced the first years of our relationship in the context of the house in which I grew up, in suburban Harare, close to the university where my mother taught in the Department of Adult Education and my father in the Medical School. The house was a rather unremarkable one-story, three-bedroom bungalow with a fairly large front garden and generous vegetable patch in the back yard. Quite typical for its time and place, one corner of the plot housed a set of structures euphemistically called the «domestic quarters». These were made up of a number of rooms for each of several workers, and shared ablution facilities. It was in Sophie's room that I spent a great deal of my early childhood. On hot summer days I would sit close to her – she in a small brown armchair, me on the cool, polished stone floor – drawing or reading or playing Jacks, aware of the curved metal feet of her bed resting on bricks, a few inches off the floor. We would sing Ndebele songs, or listen to the radio while she crocheted or read newspapers or her bible. We would drink hot, sweet milky tea and eat *sadza* (maize-meal) together. This is where I felt most at home. In later years, when my three older siblings were either away at boarding school or university, and my parents were traveling or just out on a Saturday night, we'd spend long hours together in the main house. She would show me how to knit or I would cook for us, or we would exchange stories or watch TV together.

Sophie was the person I was emotionally closest and most committed to. We took care of each other in our different ways in different eras of our lives. I considered her my real mother. She had no biological children of her own, and unquestioningly we claimed an absolute belonging to one another. Yet in the 1960s and 70s, in some senses it was an illicit relationship, one that my instincts as a child compelled me to keep hidden in terms of the extent of our mutual love and devotion that competed to some extent with that of my licit, biological family. Even if mine was a politically progressive family – explicitly opposed to racism and minority white rule – the wider racialised, classed and gendered structuring of space, relationships and economic possibilities inevitably framed what could or couldn't be said or revealed in those times. In this context, Sophie and I had no publicly recognised kinship entitlements to one another.

When my parents decided to leave Zimbabwe in early 1977, I was only seventeen and had no choice but to go with. After an initial period with them, I was able to work and travel independently before eventually studying. For her part, after our departure Sophie relocated to Bulawayo and settled into her new life and her house on Bekasi Road. Our separation, which lasted six years, was excruciating for us both. She had no phone in her house in Luveve, but we wrote to each other regularly on thin, blue air-letters. Finally after graduating with my first degree I was able to return to newly-independent Zimbabwe in early 1983 where I found my first job in one of the ministries of the new government. And at last we could be reunited.

In the meantime, in acquiring a house of her own as a single woman in her early fifties, Sophie transitioned structurally from being the occupant of a small room at the back of my parents' home, doing both the domestic and emotional labour of taking care of a white family, to becoming an independent, propertied urban citizen living life on her own terms. The fact of owning her own house in Luveve provided her with a profound sense of control and authority over her own life. She had no husband, and was a safe distance from the patriarchal structures in rural Mberengwa. At the same time she retained strong links with her extended rural-based family, regularly visiting them and maintaining her own small herd of cattle there. She

was also a committed Methodist, active in her church and community in Luveve.

Returning Home, 1983

When finally I returned to post-independence in Zimbabwe in 1983, I was able to visit Sophie in Luveve for the first time, and stay with in her home on Bekasi Road.

When I remember that home-coming now, I close my eyes to see better.

Sophie at the gate, Bekasi Road circa 1985
(photo by the author)

You standing at the metal gate in your front yard, waiting for me, the house as backdrop. A lemon tree in full fruit and neat rows of green chimolio growing in the sandy back yard. You ululating as I approach you. The neighbourhood children slowly drawing near, clearly at ease with you, unabashedly peering at the white stranger you are embracing fiercely.

Later, from a low glass cabinet along one wall in your small sitting room, you take out a familiar brown pottery casserole dish, one among several household items given to you when we'd left in '77. As a child, my mother used to serve lamb curry in it regularly on Sunday nights, to a group of close family friends. Now, you use it to serve your own delicious beef stew, which we eat together with hot, steaming mounds of sadza cooked in a black enamel pot on the small stove in the kitchen. On the floor, a slightly worn Chinese silk carpet. My grandparents had it brought back for us from a trip they made to Hong Kong in the mid-60s: on it the image of a proud golden lion framed by deep blue sky.

Two small brown sofas, unevenly upholstered, with white cotton doilies you'd crocheted hung over their backs and arms, meet at right angles against walls painted a light turquoise blue. On the opposite wall, photographs pinned closely together in a large frame. Some are studio photos of you, dressed in your finest. Others are of my siblings and I sent from long distances over the years. But the distance between us has evaporated now.

Over the next twenty-five years, until Sophie's death in 2008, we spent whatever time we could with one another. For fourteen of those years I lived and worked full-time in Harare, and we would take turns to visit one another. My visits with her in the house in Bekasi Road were especially important. However, there would be later years when I was abroad for long periods while undertaking my graduate studies in Denmark, or working in Sweden. This would coincide with Zimbabwe's unrelenting political and economic crisis that began in 2000 and which dramatically reshaped life in Luveve as elsewhere. Prior to this, although far from ideal, the 1980s and 90s unfolded in less all-encompassing crisis, and the house in Bekasi Road flourished.

Uneven Directions:
1980s and 1990s

The 1980s were considered «the development decade» in Zimbabwe. As already mentioned, I was living in Harare, the capital, busy working on various government development programmes that took me across the country. Sophie would travel too during those years, taking buses into deep rural parts of Matabeleland to sell clothes. She used these earnings to supplement the income from tenants to whom she rented out two additional exterior rooms at the house on Bekasi Road, which helped her pay council rates and her other bills. Much of Matabeleland during the early to mid-1980s was the site of mass killings, torture and disappearances by the Zanu-ruled state of Robert Mugabe, of mostly Ndebele-speaking people accused of being «dissidents» (Vambe 2012; Ngwenya and Harris 2015). The violence, perpetrated by Mugabe's North Korean-trained Fifth Brigade soldiers was a form of ethnopoliticide aimed at wiping out support for the then opposition, ZAPU, whose main base was in this region. The atmosphere of fear and self-silencing this created in those times – prior to the Unity Accord in 1987 – was felt strongly even in urban Bulawayo. Like many others, Sophie rarely mentioned what she'd seen or heard during her travels.

In the meantime, the energy of the house inevitably changed with a child in it. It had always been a welcoming place filled with lively conversation among Sophie's friends and neighbours. But over the coming two decades it would also become a cross-generational household, shared by a mature woman moving into older age, and a young girl moving into teenagehood and then young womanhood. At the same time, I would occupy the position of the middle generation of this organically evolving, socially-made family, which deepened through regular encounters during the 1990s. The level of direct contact began to lessen after 1997, once I began to study on Denmark for my PhD, although for the first few years I came back to Zimbabwe for long periods of fieldwork.

Crisis Years:
2000 – 2020

Kudzai was in her late teens at the start of Zimbabwe's major political and economic crisis during the first half of the 2000s, and moved into early womanhood as the crisis continued to escalate and deepen in the 2010s. By the mid-2000s, things were desperate for everyone. Township tenants could barely pay rent, and cash, food and jobs were scarce everywhere. With my help, Sophie and Kudzai managed to keep going. But Sophie became desperately ill at one of the worst moments of the crisis in 2008, when inflation was in the trillions of percent, electoral violence was unprecedented, and public services were a mere shadow of former times. I was not living in Zimbabwe then, but came at least

Kudzai, Bekasi Road, 2012 (photo by the author)

annually both for personal reasons and to do research. On my last few visits Sophie and I had talked about the importance of her making a formal, written will so as to leave the house to Kudzai. Fortunately she managed to do this, with close friends and neighbours acting as witnesses at the Magistrate's Court. When Sophie died, this important act directly spared Kudzai from being evicted by relatives who felt more entitled to the house than she.

Indeed, at Sophie's death in April 2008 at the age of 81, the house became Kudzai's. She was then only 23. The relatives did come, to bury and mourn Sophie, and in some way to collect their dues. But they would not get the house, even if some expected to. This was legally secured for Kudzai. Yet in anticipation of the rituals of redistribution among family members, in the last weeks of her life Sophie had carefully planned the precise allocation of money, clothes, cooking pots and other household possessions to specific individuals, giving Kudzai exact instructions as to how this should be done. Kudzai followed this to the letter. It was an odd sensation the first time I returned to the house after Sophie's death to find much of the furniture and more personal household objects I'd been so familiar with for decades, gone. It was certainly sparser in some

Kudzai and family, Bekasi Road 2017
(photo by the author)

ways. Yet it was filled with both familiar and new sounds and smells, rhythms and rituals, plans and disappointments, shadow and light. Together with her husband and three children, and in spite of Zimbabwe's perpetually precarious times, Kudzai has made the space her own: a lived-in home; a site of ever-changing, complex family dynamics, reflecting generational life-cycles alongside the shifting and increasingly unpredictable fates of Zimbabweans more generally.

Kudzai is now 35. A few years ago she was able to complete a diploma in Early Childhood Learning (ECL) from Bulawayo Teacher's College. Soon after graduating she was compelled to accept the only work available as an ECL teacher. This is at a deep rural school in Nkayi, almost a day's journey from Bulawayo. She could only come home about once a month and during school holidays. For the rest of the time, her children – one of whom is under four – were being taken care of by her husband who, at the time, drove a taxi on the night shift. Things were already strained at home in multiple ways, but worsened as the post-Mugabe political regime (late 2017 onwards) led to a worsening economy. Taxi driving was no longer viable, and Kudzai's husband is now trying his hand at running a small bar on the outskirts of Bulawayo. In the meantime, the value of Kudzai's own salary under inflation rates of close to 800% has made it doubtful whether to keep her job or not. During most of 2020, COVID effectively closed most schools, which meant she has spent much more time living at home again. Consequently, the house has revived its strong family-centeredness, with her at its centre.

Attachments and Freedoms

On one of my trips home to Zimbabwe in April 2017, nine years after Sophie had left us, I recorded an interview with Kudzai, asking her about her relationship to the house and what it meant to her. It was an emotional conversation for both of us.

«This house», she said, «the relationship that we have, I don't know how to explain it. It's where all my memories are buried. This is the only home that I've known. ... I grew up here for as long as I can remember. I have great attachment to this house.

To me home means ... a place that gives you comfort, a place that you find happiness. A place that ... you know, that you feel free to be, that you can express even your feelings, everything. Being able to do what you want, yes, freely.»

I asked her what it meant to actually *own* the house.

«To me it means so much, so much», she replied. «I have a place to live with my kids. I don't even know how I can express what it means to me.

I felt honoured to get the house. Without Sophie leaving the house to me, I don't think I would have anything. She left me a place to stay. She always said that one day, when I'm gone, you'll have the house. It means you can support your children. And that's exactly what happened. Even if I face some challenges, I don't have to worry about a place to stay.»

Kudzai's responses speak pointedly both to histories of belonging, security and deep attachment to place and persons, alongside notions of autonomy, freedom, and a sense of the future (through her children) that she would not otherwise have been able to imagine without owning the house. But of course, as already suggested, the relationship between property and personhood is not a simple equation. There are the constant exigencies of life in crisis-ridden Zimbabwe; of having to live far from her three children and husband; of trying to find ways to make ends meet; of dealing with what Ross calls the «improvisational quality» of social and family relations and of struggles to «hold together a daily life worth living» (2010: 207). As mentioned, all this has been far from smooth sailing in recent years. Yet in the end, Kudzai has the *house*. It is in her name (an occasional point of contention with her husband). And it will carry her and her children into the future with at least some level of

Conclusion

stability and certainty, no matter what. It is also deeply important to me, too, that the house remains secure for her, and in turn remains a stable presence in my own life. It is at the heart of my own internal compass.

Kudzai, Evidence and Amanda, Bekasi Road, 2018 (photo by Eric Hombore)

In conclusion, I must return to the question of what the biography of a house potentially offers. Admittedly, in speaking of and through the house at Bekasi Road I have not delivered a systematic or comprehensive account of all its dimensions, and all that it has to tell, as might be implied if one were to apply fully the methodological practices listed earlier. Nonetheless, I would argue that the potential of such a method overall offers valuable analytical pointers towards a deeper observation – and hopefully deeper knowing – of how a particular house or any other kind of building works on multiple levels; of how it speaks, and what it is saying.

Clearly, the «biography of a building» approach is not a stand-alone method. It overlaps with and complements other, especially anthropological methods. Returning to Ross, she talks of anthropology as «a form of disciplined curiosity» (2010: 9): «In its attentiveness to social life», she reasons, «ethnography offers the tools for a careful, sensitive and sensible assessment of people's lives and contexts» (ibid.). Viewing this from the position of a proponent and practitioner of critical African Studies, grounded intrinsically in a relational and interdisciplinary approach, this additionally implies an attentiveness inclusive of ‹people's intimate lives and contexts›. At the same time, in addition to using these combined

lenses to explore the relationship between property and personhood, there is a need to pay attention to connections between the intimate, internal lived experiences of and in buildings and longer external histories and wider structural, social, political, spatial realities. I have been convinced for some time that pursuing a biographical approach to buildings – combining anthropological methods with an eye and ear for the larger structural stories – is a productive way to unfold and make sense of the relationship between property and personhood, as well as the relationship between property, state and citizenship more broadly. I am hoping to convince you of the same.

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Die Basler Ethnologie hatte schon lange vor dem 100-jährigen Bestehen der akademischen Ethnologie in Basel (seit 1914) einen gewaltigen intellektuellen Einfluss auf die globale Anthropologie. Zu den **wichtigsten anthropologischen Vordenkern** in Basel gehörte **Johann Jakob Bachofen-Burckhardt**, studierter Jurist und Professor für römisches Recht an der Universität Basel. In seinem 1861 erschienenen Hauptwerk «Das Mutterrecht» stellte er grundlegende Fragen nach der Geschichte und dem Verhältnis der Geschlechter. Er wertete das Matriarchat positiv – damals ein Bruch mit dem dominierenden Patriarchat und entschieden gegen den damaligen anthropologischen Mainstream gedacht. Bachofen wurde mehrfach wiederentdeckt (Ludwig Klages, Rainer Maria Rilke und Walter Benjamin). Seine Thesen sicherten ihm noch in den 1970er Jahren eine intensive Rezeption seitens der Frauenbewegung. Heute werden die Fragen, die Bachofen stellte, anders beantwortet. Relevant sind sie jedoch geblieben. In Anlehnung an diese Tradition stellt die jährlich stattfindende Bachofen Lecture Grundfragen der Ethnologie neu.

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