



MASTER'S THESIS

# *Global lives, local homes*

*An ethnography on how  
expatriates construct a place  
of home in Nairobi, Kenya*

*Jasper Steggink*





Utrecht University

## *Global lives, local homes*

*An ethnography on how expatriates construct  
a place of home in Nairobi, Kenya*

Master's thesis

Cultural Anthropology: Sustainable Citizenship

Jasper Stegink (6306667)

Supervisor: Dr. Tessa Diphorn

Cover photo taken from Johnny Miller's series "Unequal Scenes" (2018).

Submitted to the Department of Cultural Anthropology of Utrecht University  
as part of the requirements for the degree of Master of Science on August 14, 2019.



# *Acknowledgements*

Through conversations with less privileged Nairobians I learned not to feel guilty for leading a privileged life but rather to feel grateful. As a fieldworker, I was grateful for being able to go to Kenya. In this same manner, I am grateful for having the means to study cultural anthropology and to write this master's thesis. While education ought to be a right, it remains to be a privilege.

I would like to thank those who took the time to speak to me during my fieldwork period. I would not have managed to develop a broad network if it was not for the social group I “landed” in. My thanks go out to my housemates and all of their friends. They have been welcoming and warm. Special thanks to my buddy Chris.

I would like to thank my supervisor, Tessa Diphorn, for her support and great guidance. Her unstoppable energy and enthusiasm gave me a lot of confidence and continuously showed me I was on the right path. Her concise and relevant feedback brought forth additional insights while she also helped me to stay focused on the most important elements of the thesis.

Special thanks to my girlfriend, Marrit, who visited me in Nairobi, but would have gone to the Moon if I chose to venture out there. She always stood behind my choice to start studying cultural anthropology. Her love and support mean the world to me. Also, a big thanks to my incredibly supportive and loving mother, Ineke. Additionally, I would like to thank Anouk, David and Lucy for providing me with feedback on my thesis. Last but not least, thanks to my friends – Jesse and Martijn – and fellow students – Gezina, Ilse, Kyra, Teun and Zef – that were on the side line during the creative process.



# *Table of contents*

<i>Introduction</i>	9
<i>The mobile elite</i>	9
<i>Green City in the Sun</i>	10
<i>A place of home</i>	12
<i>Reflexive sociology</i>	13
<i>Research aim and structure of the thesis</i>	15
<i>Methodology and operationalization</i>	17
<i>Research paradigm</i>	17
<i>Research location and data collection</i>	18
<i>Expatriates in Nairobi</i>	19
<i>1. Arriving in Nairobi</i>	21
<i>Careers and expat bubbles</i>	22
<i>Adventure and chaos</i>	24
<i>Conclusion</i>	27
<i>2. The structures of Nairobi</i>	29
<i>Residential segregation mapped out</i>	30
<i>Strengthening the safe/unsafe dichotomy</i>	32
<i>Thank you for reminding me</i>	38
<i>Conclusion</i>	41
<i>3. Settling in</i>	42
<i>Fish in water</i>	42
<i>Longing to belong</i>	46
<i>A stranger to the community</i>	47
<i>Conclusion</i>	49
<i>Conclusion: Home</i>	50
<i>Final notes</i>	51
<i>Limitations and suggestions</i>	52
<i>Bibliography</i>	54
<i>Appendix 1 – Informed consent form</i>	59
<i>Appendix 2 – List of interviewees</i>	60





# Introduction

## *The mobile elite*

I remember the first time I booked a flight to go abroad for an extended period. Alone, in search of something more than the life I was living. The rush I felt after clicking “confirm” showed me that I had made the right decision. Coming back fifteen months later, after having backpacked on the other side of the world, I tried my best to become an *expat*, a “highly skilled temporary migrant” (van Bochove and Engbersen 2015, 295) who, having established an internationally oriented career, is accustomed to living in a different country. I dreamt of an adventurous career, with friends all over the globe. I also started to identify myself as a cosmopolitan, someone who “find[s] the world within their reach irresistibly attractive” (Bauman 1998, 92). Stereotypically, my “openness to new experiences [was] a vocation” (Hannerz 1990, 243). The urge to explore was simply too strong to let me stay where I was, and I had the financial means to do so. After my first experience abroad, I chose to live in Melbourne, Australia for a year and, shortly after, I landed a job as a project manager for a Dutch NGO<sup>1</sup> with a project in Pokhara, Nepal, where I stayed on and off for five years. I worked there, lived there, and met many other foreigners. Ironically, I managed to stay abroad for a lengthy amount of time, but hardly made any effort to connect to the “local culture.” I did not learn the local language, and I only had a few Nepali friends. Therefore, critically looking back on my time as an expatriate, it became apparent that I mostly lived in a so-called “expatriate bubble” (Fechter 2007, 167); a migrant enclave, in which I mostly socialized with people from my own “culture.” Reflecting on these times abroad, I now wonder if I truly was a cosmopolitan, or if I just longed for a home away from home.

In the introduction of the article *Beyond Cosmopolitanism and Expat Bubbles*, van Bochove and Engbersen (2015) similarly point out the conflicting discrepancy between home and away. They describe how two conflicting narratives are dominant in the scholarly work on expats. The first narrative centres around the *cosmopolitan*, the citizen of the world, who is “comfortable in many places and able to understand and bridge the differences among them” (Kanter 1995, 22–23). The second narrative is the *expat bubble* – “the socially, geographically and architecturally (segre)gated forms of dwelling that often characterize expatriate life forms [...], where everyday life is experienced as cut-off from the rest of society and culture and thus more or less artificial” (Jansson 2016, 430). Fechter (2007) contends that many of the people living in such a bubble “do not feel comfortable everywhere and are not that open to different cultures and lifestyles either. Rather, they only feel at home in their own expatriate ‘bubble’”

---

<sup>1</sup> The name of the NGO is Namasté Foundation. Namasté Foundation invests in trainings and loans for women in Nepal.

(in van Bochove and Engbersen 2015, 295). Judging from these two narratives, the specifics of the lifeworlds of expatriates seem to be ambiguous.

Bochove and Engbersen (2015, 306) argue that the two narratives are not mutually exclusive: “expatriates often display characteristics of both types and combine particularistic ties – with people who are like them – with more universalistic, cosmopolitan ties.” Yet the practical negotiation between the two narratives might not be as self-evident as theoretically described. Expatriate acts of positioning within a broader, foreign society are thereby bound to cause friction between ideals of shared humanity and inclusivity (linked to the narrative of the cosmopolitan), and notions of exclusivity and inequality (as described traits of the expat bubble). This is especially relevant when this negotiation takes place in a developing country, with expatriates from a more privileged context, in this case the Western world – Europe, North America or Australia – with the financial means to travel.

Studying mobile elites places this thesis in a discussion about (white/western) privilege in the context of social inequality. It described the implications of having privilege; of having an “invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, maps, passports, codebooks, visas, clothes, tools and blank checks” (McIntosh 2018, 91). Indirectly, this thesis adheres to the ways in which western mobile elites are able to migrate and build a home in many foreign countries with relative ease, opposed to the at often times difficult process when attempted the other way around. This thesis thereby highlights the unequal distribution of power and privilege across the globe. Ultimately, this thesis describes the way in which social order is constructed and maintained within and across generations, taking the construction of a place of home as done by western expatriates as an example of this dynamic.

Furthermore, expatriate arrivals – and thereby their acts of positioning themselves within a broader society – will happen on an increasingly larger scale, as we move into a time of unprecedented human migration. A recent publication of the UN World Tourism Organization (2019, 17) states that there were 1.3 billion international legal passenger arrivals in 2017, and that number will continue to grow steadily. While many of these global travellers will eventually go back to their place of origin, I was curious to discover more about the experiences of those who settle abroad and (attempt to) create a home in an unfamiliar place, and how such an attempt collides with notions of cosmopolitanism. Therefore, I chose to observe, understand and conceptualize how expatriates are constructing their place in society in a city which first of all attracts many foreigners, and secondly, where acts of positioning by foreigners have been – and remain to be – prominently visible. This reasoning brought me to study the privileged lifestyle of western expatriates in the East African city of Nairobi, Kenya.

### *Green City in the Sun*

With a vibrant economy and acting as the hub to the rest of East Africa, “the Green City in the Sun” (Wood 1988) Nairobi is a booming place for transnational businesses, NGO’s and embassies (Junior Worldmark Encyclopedia of World Cities 2019; Embassypages 2019). Situated on the equator, but at

an altitude of almost 1800 meters above sea level, the city has a comfortable climate. Because of its cosmopolitan appeal, and English as an official language, Nairobi attracts expats from all over the world. An estimated 12.000 expatriate NGO workers live in the Kenyan capital alone (M. Anderson 2017), not including those operating in other occupational branches. Throughout my fieldwork I also met expatriates that worked for start-up companies, in the renewable energy sector, or as (creative) freelancers. These expatriates can often be found in the more affluent, historically white neighbourhoods, mostly living in gated communities or high-rise apartments in the western or northern part of the city.

It must be noted that Nairobi is a city of contrasts. Upscale neighbourhoods are side by side with large slums such as Mathare and Kibera. K'Akumu and Olima (2007) write that 55-65 per cent of the total population live in informal settlements. However, they note, “together with low-income housing estates, informal settlements occupy just over five per cent of the land designated for residential purposes” (2007, 93). The average income of the people living in these slums is 39 dollar per month (Desgroppes and Taupin 2011, 9). Nairobi's extreme income diversity can be linked to its high rates of violent crime (Fajnzylber, Lederman, and Loayza 2002). Robberies and physical assaults are common (LeBas 2013, 245). Because of the high crime rates in the city, it earned the dubious nickname “Nairobbery” (Junior Worldmark Encyclopedia of World Cities 2019). Additional to the rate of violent crime is the constant risk of terrorism (Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken 2019). The most recent terrorist act was on January 15, 2019, claimed by Somali Islamist militant group Al-Shabaab. Men armed with guns and explosives attacked *duisitD2*, a Nairobi hotel and office building, causing multiple fatalities (Sevenzo, Karimi, and Smith-Spark 2019). These serious public safety concerns have affected the kind of social circles that expats develop. In line with the aforementioned observation of Jansson (2016, 430), these social circles have the tendency to feel cut-off from the rest of society and are therefore considered bubble-like.

Adding to this, is the notion that non-black western expatriates who do venture into the public space, often encounter acts of *Othering*. Acts of *Othering* – the creation of an in-group and an out-group (Staszak 2008, 1)<sup>2</sup> – widens the gap between expatriate and local Kenyan. Although there are many Kenyans who look beyond the colour of one's skin when interacting with expatriates, there is not one day where a non-black foreigner is not reminded of their differences when engaging in public life. Such accounts tend to clash with expatriate ideals of shared humanity and cosmopolitanism and form an obstacle for those trying to construct a place of home.

---

<sup>2</sup> The concept of *Othering* is further discussed in chapter two.

## *A place of home*

This thesis is about how privileged early-career young western expatriates position themselves within the structure of the city of Nairobi, situated in a time where mobility is increasing (Eriksen 2007, 8). Such an act of positioning oneself can be seen as the construction of a place of home. By arguing how expatriates are constructing a place of home within Nairobi, I situate myself in the literary debate revolving around the meaning of home. Discussing this seemingly simple concept, one quickly discovers its wide variety of connotations. Mallet (2004, 65) summarizes the ambiguity of the term, when she asks: “Is home (a) place(s), (a) space(s), feeling(s), practices, and/or an active state of state of being in the world?” Mentionable contribution to this discussion are Cieraad’s (1999) fundamental writing on the anthropology of domestic space; an extensive literature review by Mallett (2004); and the phenomenological ethnography *At Home in the World* (1995) by anthropologist Michael Jackson. Jackson’s book holds a fascination for one’s experiences of being at home in the world, disregarding fixed notions of countries, communities or cultures. In his book, he develops an understanding of home while following a group of Warlpiri aboriginals through the Australian desert. Through his interaction with the Warlpiri, Jackson discovers that being at home has less to do with a geographical place, than with comfort in a way of acting, for he writes: “But in the end, home is not a place that is given, but an experience born of what one makes of what is given” (1995, 377). Although different in size and scope than the intentions of this thesis, Jackson’s writing shows how the concept of home can build a bridge between lifeworlds, even when they seem very far apart.

Mallett (2004) writes that anthropological literature describing the experience of expats show that notions about migration are fundamentally connected with notions of home. These notions are in turn linked to ideas about “dependency, inter-dependence and autonomy, continuity and dis/location” (2004, 77). Home, whether it is detailed as a dwelling, a homeland, or even a constellation of relationships, is understood as a “spatial and relational realm from which people venture into the world and to which they generally hope to return” (2004, 77). For Ginsburg (in Mallett 2004) home is less about “where you are from” and “more about where you are going” (2004, 77). The interpretation of these authors show that home is a meaning making process; one that is not bound to a particular location. Because of this, the concept lends itself for examining the experiences of expatriates in Nairobi and, at the same time, shows that a better understanding of these experiences is not necessarily confined to *only* expatriates, but can be applied to other situations in which notions of home are constructed. This is in line with Ahmed (1999), who rejects the idea that home and away are oppositional concepts, but rather understands boundaries between home and away as permeable. “[W]hen one moves away from home the movement itself occurs in relation to home, it is part of the very ‘constitution’ of home itself” (in Mallett 2004, 79). The latter, the constitution of home, is what I understand as a description of what expatriates do when living in the Nairobi expat bubble, for they cannot disregard their context. Their identity, capital, hopes and aspirations strongly influence how they experience their lives in Nairobi.

Furthermore, the notion of home is of sizable social significance, for where we live and how we live are important determinants of our social position (Short 1999, x). Home is a site in the social organization of space. “It is where space becomes place” (1999, x) and where social class is constructed, challenged and altered. A better understanding of the experience and construction of home can therefore be applied to many, if not all, sites where negotiations of social identities take place. Yet, my contribution within this debate lays within the characteristics of the subject group. Expatriates are considered the “mobile elite” (Lindell and Fast 2016, 435), and their privileged lifestyles have received relatively less attention than many others that are on the move (Jansson 2016, 424). Jansson notes that social scientists have a responsibility to look just as reflexively into the lives of the mobile elites, which expats are a part of, as into lives of those that are marginalized (2016, 422). While scholarly discussions about geographical mobility and belonging are plentiful, “studying up” (Nader 1972, 284) on expats and their experiences on feelings of home seem to be much less debated. As stated by Elliott and Urry (2010): “what is absent [...] is any sustained consideration of the ‘experiential texture’ of the lives of globals, as well as the richly networked individualism that such lives entail” (2010, 62). Thus, describing how expatriates experience and construct a place of home in Nairobi, shows how they are situated within the structure of Kenyan society. It also shows how they themselves construct, challenge and alter the space they occupy, and how they negotiate their social identity in an ongoing struggle of social class.

Additionally, the concept of home needs to be readdressed to heed the call on what Sheller and Urry (2006) describe as the “mobility turn” (2006, 207); a new emergent paradigm within social sciences that refuses to see anything “as static, fixed and given” (2006, 212), by taking into account the increased global movement which plays a gradually bigger part in people’s lives. The English word “home” is derived from the Anglo-Saxon word *ham*, meaning village, estate or town (Mallett 2004, 65), historically a static and fixed social structure. Although this way of understanding home is already problematized, the concept needs to be further analysed in a more dynamic perspective, especially in a time where the scale of human migration is unprecedented. Therefore, this thesis is a contribution to thinking about home while acknowledging the mobile social relationships of the contemporary world.

### *Reflexive sociology*

In order to describe the construction of a place of home as done by the mobile elite in a dynamic way, I make use of an analytical framework that can fully capture this process. According to multiple scholars, Pierre Bourdieu’s (1986) *reflexive sociology* is both relevant and appropriate for this (see Elliot and Urry 2010; Jansson 2016; Weenink 2008; Kaufmann 2002). Bourdieu’s theoretical tools are valuable because they can be used to conceptualize social life in a dynamic way. Savage and Williams (in Jansson 2016) show that *field theory* – which is part of reflexive sociology – “provides a new means of understanding elites [e.g. expatriates], not as fixed, traditional pillars, but as a group of intermediaries whose power rests on being able to forge connections and bridge gaps” (in Jansson 2016, 426).

The philosophical context of Bourdieu's work is important to mention, because it helps to explain his concepts, but also because the structure of this thesis is fundamentally derived from it. Bourdieu sought to combine the post-modern and existential outlook on social life – in which the subject is *free to move* within an apparent meaningless or absurd world (Manning 1973, 201; Sartre 1946) – and the structuralist notion of for example Lévi-Strauss (1962), which implies *structures* in society that underlie all the things that humans do, think, perceive, and feel (Nutini 1971, 538). Bourdieu called these opposing views “the absurd opposition between individual and society” (Bourdieu 1990a, 65), and he sought to connect these two poles in his social theory.<sup>3</sup>

Bourdieu's reflexive sociology is based on a number of concepts. For this study, the key concepts *forms of capital*, *the field* and *habitus* are most relevant. These concepts are applied to the empirical data that I have retrieved from my fieldwork and will be used throughout the thesis. Yet, in this subsection I provide a basic explanation on the aforementioned key concepts.

Bourdieu argues that the social world is occupied by actors who have a stake in its operation. To determine their place within this space, these actors use different *forms of capital* (2012, 374); resources which are seen as valuable by other actors within that social space. They can be seen as the foundation of social life, and it is what determines your role in the social world. It is the currency that buys you a higher position in society. As written in his 1986 essay *Forms of Capital*, Bourdieu distinguishes three (or four, when counting symbolic capital) forms of capital: economic capital, cultural capital, social capital and, to a lesser extent, symbolic capital. *Economic capital* is the command over economic resources, such as cash or assets (1986, 46–47). *Cultural capital* consists of knowledge, experience or connections that a person has in the course of their lives that enable them to exceed someone with a different set of knowledge, experience or conceptions (1986, 47–48). *Social capital* are the resources based on group membership, relationships and networks based on influence and support (1986, 51). Lastly, *symbolic capital*, although hardly described in this essay, refers to resources available to an individual on the basis of honour, prestige or recognition (1986, 56).

The second major concept is the *field*. A field is a “social universe freed from a certain number of the constraints that characterize the encompassing social universe” (Bourdieu 2005, 33), or the figurative place on which the social life takes place. It is a network of historical and current relations between objective positions that are anchored in capital. The positions in fields are taken by the aforementioned actors who have a stake in the operation of the field. These positions are determined by the amount of capital they have. There are many overlapping fields (e.g. art, education, law, religion), each with their own logic and rules that govern the game of the field (Bourdieu 1986, 50).

Although the third concept, *habitus*, is difficult to briefly define, it comes down to people's ingrained habits, skills and dispositions (Bourdieu 1977, 72). It is the way actors interact with the social

---

<sup>3</sup> I describe the structure of the thesis more coherently in the segment *Research aim and structure of the thesis* of this introduction.

world around them. The habits and skills these agents have are often shared with people with comparable backgrounds. Lizardo (2004) connects habitus, actors (holding capital) and the field, as she writes: “*habitus is itself a generative dynamic structure* [emphasis in original] that adapts and accommodates itself to *another* dynamic mesolevel structure composed primarily of other actors, situated practices and durable institutions” (Lizardo 2004, 376).

With the use of Bourdieu’s theory, I perceive the free moving expatriates as *actors* who differentiate themselves from the Kenyan society through *forms of capital* yet are also influenced by the structure of the city. These dynamics creates a specific field; the expat bubble. The concept of *habitus* is used to connect these two poles (the expat and his livelihood). Habitus can be seen as the *relationship* between the actors (the free moving western expatriates) who inhabit a social field (the expat bubble, created through characterized structures of Nairobi). Habitus is thereby linked to the construction of a place of home.

### *Research aim and structure of the thesis*

This thesis consists of three chapters; the first focusing on the actors (expatriates), the second on the field and its structures (the expat community, formed by the structures of the city), and the third on how these two interrelate (the construction of a place of home).

Furthermore, the chapters follows a chronological order, which underlines the process that many expatriates in Nairobi go through: from arriving in the city; to finding their place within the city while discovering the boundaries of their mobility; to making the decision to either stay or leave, based on their ability to construct a home.

Chapter one focusses on the actors (expatriates) that arrive in a specific field; the Nairobi expatriate community. I discuss the motivational reasons why they come to Nairobi while seeing them as *free moving* subjects. I discuss both expatriates that primarily come to Nairobi in benefit of their career, stereotypically consciously staying in the expat bubble, and more cosmopolitan minded expatriates, primarily searching to experience life in a different culture. Yet, I describe that both archetypes uphold notions of both narratives, in line with findings by Bochove and Engbersen (2015). And, more importantly, I recognize that both archetypal reasons expatriates have to come to Nairobi will clash with the *structuring force* (chapter two) of the city, regardless of their practical goals, driving them towards the expat bubble.

Chapter two looks more closely at the *structure* of the city of Nairobi, and how Nairobi’s built environment influences the expatriate experience. I describe how the lifeworlds of expatriates are shaped by the historical context in which they find themselves; the residential segregation, safety issues present in the city, and forms of Othering they encounter in public life. Also, I describe how stories of expatriates tend to use a safe/unsafe rhetoric that strengthens the notions of unsafety outside of the expatriate livelihood.

In chapter three I describe the different relationships expatriates have with the expat bubble, and how these relationships contribute to the construction of a place of home in Nairobi. For this, I highlight both expatriates that have normalized and internalized their position within the structure of Nairobi and set them against expatriates that do not see themselves constructing a place of home within that same society. Adding to this, I describe how I experienced this same process. In this chapter, I differentiate between expatriates that choose to stay (longer) in Nairobi, and those that choose to either go to another foreign place, or back to their native country. Through this differentiating description, I end up with a clearer understanding of how expatriates construct a place of home in Nairobi.

Lastly, I tie all three chapters together in the conclusion. I briefly summarize the previous chapters and give my final thoughts on what the final argument of this thesis implies for those who lead a privileged lifestyle. In the last segment of the conclusion I discuss the limitations and give suggestions for further research.

Yet before I do all this, I describe the methods applied in this field of study. In the following methodology and operationalization segment, I give a description of the research paradigm, the research location, the data collection, and general information on expatriates as the subject group of this research.



# *Methodology and operationalization*

During my time in Nairobi, my main goal was to live life like an expatriate would. For roughly three and a half months<sup>4</sup> I conducted ethnographic fieldwork on the expatriate lifestyle. Compared to the lives of the majority of the local Nairobians, this way of living is exceptionally luxurious, not only in terms of surrounding and activities, but also in terms of having time to *be there* in the first place. I recall my last interaction with a Kenyan while going through customs at *Jomo Kenyatta International Airport*. The immigration officer asked me what the purpose of my stay was. I told him it was for tourism, since any other answer would amount in a lot of hassle.

“Tourism?” he asked, “for three and a half months?”

“Yes” I answered confidently.

With a slight judgmental undertone, he noted, “Wow, you must be so rich,” after which he stamped my passport and let me through to the boarding area.<sup>5</sup>

While in the Netherlands I would probably not be considered wealthy, the fact that I am able to do fieldwork abroad already puts me in a different socio-economic stratum than many people in Kenya, whether I like it or not. This notion had implications for my entire time in Nairobi. In a sense, I am what I chose to observe, namely a privileged westerner already with the means to move abroad *out of free choice*. I figured it would be best to use my positionality to my advantage, since others would categorize me as an expat anyway. As Chavez (2008, 479) describes, insider positionality allows an observer to move around freely in the field of study, facilitates natural interaction, and makes recognizing emotional and linguistic aspects of the participants easier, which I can all confirm.

## *Research paradigm*

In my understanding, you cannot properly practice social sciences without understanding its core epistemological dispute, described by Rosenberg (2016, 11) as “whether predictive success should be a necessary condition for knowledge, as in natural science, or whether we should adopt a different theory of knowledge to assess the progress of the social sciences.” I believe that the discipline of anthropology should refrain from the pursuit of predictive knowledge, but ought to solely focus on interpretation and emancipation, mainly because understanding human behaviour may alleviate the human suffering, whereas prediction will most likely result in harmful manipulation and control of social life. The sort of

---

<sup>4</sup> I lived in Nairobi from 31-01-2019 till 12-05-2019.

<sup>5</sup> Fieldnotes, Jomo Kenyatta International Airport, 12-05-2019.

understanding cultural anthropology provides, “enhances our lives without necessarily enabling us to control our own, or for that matter others’ lives, any better” (2016, 8).

Adding to this, Rosenberg argues that it is difficult to claim any form of objectivity in social science. It is widely held that objectivity requires neutrality, and many philosophers raise questions whether neutrality is possible in social science (2016, 493). Knowing this, two options arise: either strive for (the highest degree of) neutrality/objectivity; or make the research intersubjective, incorporating both the perspective of researcher and subject; Self and Other. I chose for the latter, which is why I consciously incorporated my own perspective in the second half of the third chapter, in which I describe how I experienced the construction of a place of home in Nairobi.

### *Research location and data collection*

Already before the start of my fieldwork, I managed to find a room in a house where only expatriates live, situated in the neighbourhood Lavington. I chose the house in Lavington, since I knew much of my fieldwork would take place in the more affluent neighbourhoods of Nairobi, which Lavington is one of. Lavington is part of a larger area together with the neighbourhoods Maziwa, Kilimani and Upper Hill, west of the Central Business District (CBD), and Westlands, Parklands and Gigiri, north of the CBD. This larger area is where pretty much all expatriate related activities took place.

Western expatriates spend their time in very specific areas, and partly I had to get access to these areas by becoming part of a network. In the first week of my fieldwork period I got invited to a house party. Here I met people whom I hung out with for many hours in the months after. The broader network expanded by snowball sampling (O’Reilly 2009, 198); meeting friends of friends. Much of my data was collected by visiting expatriate homes, in Nairobi’s cafés, bars, upmarket restaurants, and nightclubs – the spaces of expatriate sociality – and during the occasional weekend trip outside the city. I went to the coastal region three times during my stay in Kenya, and once to a wildlife sanctuary. During these social moments, I often actively approached people to have an informal conversation about the expatriate community (2009, 18). I never formally asked consent for these informal conversations but did always introduced myself as a researcher researching the expats in Nairobi. Often, they respond with “Ha! So, you’re researching *me?*” Such positive reactions immediately broke the ice and made further conversations possible. When I thought someone with whom I already build up rapport had to offer new insights on the expat community, I asked for a semi-structured interview. Before the interview started, I had the interviewee fill out a digitalized informed consent form<sup>6</sup>. I assured confidentiality and explained that I will anonymize their identities. Therefore, all names mentioned are pseudonyms. All but one of the interviews have been recorded which gave me the possibility to note down probe questions (O’Reilly 2009, 126–27). I lightly followed a topic list during the majority of the interviews, and used

---

<sup>6</sup> The informed consent form is attached as appendix 1.

the probes to find out more about the experience of the interviewee (Starks and Brown Trinidad 2007, 1375). In total, I had informal conversations with 100+ people that were either within the subject group, or on the fringes of it, and I held 25 semi-structured interviews.

Although the act of building rapport is often described as a way of gaining the trust of the informants (O'Reilly 2009, 176), I have experienced the act of building rapport as a two-way process where I, too, had to get acquainted with the community which I became part of, but mostly, I had to become familiar with my role as a researcher, and I needed the trust of others to reach that position. The role of being a researcher was new to me and felt rather conflicting with building a trustworthy friendship.

On one occasion, I wrongfully criticized the ways in which some expatriates interacted with Kenyan locals. Getting called out on being judgmental – while actually being in a position of naivety and unacquaintance – has been the biggest struggle with my role as a researcher and has made the process of building rapport at times painstakingly difficult and emotionally demanding. About this, O'Reilly notes that “[w]e think we can summarize what we observe better than they can, and this must come out at some point” (2009, 178). Nonetheless, the trials and tribulations regarding the built relationships within the field did provide me with some of the most valuable lessons learned and made the importance of thoughtfulness, diplomacy and having tact clear, all while it did not obstruct with my overall data collection.

### *Expatriates in Nairobi*

The relative ease with which I was able to collect empirical data – and take advantage of my positionality – lays bare a more controversial side to being seen as an expat. Namely, during my fieldwork I was technically a student who carried out research while being on a tourist visa. I was not a “highly skilled temporary migrant,” which is how Bochove and Engbersen describe an expat (2015, 295). Yet, the difference in self-identification did not seem to matter. By others, I was presumably categorized on the basis of my socio-economic status and the colour of my skin. This underlying dynamic is the reason why the word expatriate is often seen as a laden one. Basically, the word *expatriate* is a combination of the Latin words *ex* (“out of”) and *patria* (“native country, fatherland”). Note that this term differentiates itself from the word migrant, which is defined as “A person who comes to live permanently in a foreign country” (Oxford Dictionaries 2019). The variety in which the terms are used for different groups of foreigners is sometimes seen as implying underlining meanings about wealth, motives for moving, duration of stay, nationality, and ethnicity or race. Many have noted that labelling people as either expatriate or immigrant is a dubious task and that the word has had, or still has, racist connotations (Secorun Palet 2015; Remarque Koutonin 2015; Tulshyan 2015; Briggs 2018). I have not neglected this controversy, but rather sought to use the implications of the term to explore the different axis on which

the expat community is constructed, and to see how people living the “expatriate lifestyle” give meaning to their position within a foreign society.

Expats and the expat bubble are both analytical concepts. They are social constructs that change meaning depending on the context. Empirically, it is impossible to tell whether a person is or is not an expat, or whether or not they are part of the expat bubble. Highly skilled temporary migrants come to work in Nairobi from all over the world, and therefore it has to be noted that I, too, have differentiated on the basis of one’s socio-economic status and ethnicity. Since my research would take a completely different turn if my focus would be on *all* expatriates in Nairobi – there is, for example, a large Indian and Chinese community present – I wouldn’t know how to practically execute my task. Therefore, I chose to focus on westerners that came to work and live in Nairobi. At first, I also differentiated on the basis of duration of stay in Nairobi, interviewing only people who stayed there longer than roughly one and a half years, but after a while I developed an interest in the expatriate “journey,” the process which expatriates go through when moving abroad, and I thus interviewed expats in different segments of this process.

All expats that ended up being my subjects were employed in the Kenyan capital, although some were doing an unpaid internship at the UN. Because these internships were described as a stepping stone towards a career within the UN and consisted of high-skilled work, I did consider them as expatriates. Age wise, I mostly interacted with expatriates that were in my age group (25-35 years old), mainly because this is an age in which most expats in Nairobi do not have responsibilities (e.g. a family or a mortgage) that might be an obstacle in pursuing a cosmopolitan lifestyle. Practically all participants spoke fluent English. For the sake of readability, I re-punctuated and slightly edited some of the quotes.

During my research, I used the word “expat bubble” sparingly, for I did not want to fall into the bias of presuming the social life of expats as bubble-like, as in closed off from the rest of society, when that might not be the case. If I was in doubt about whether or not the person I spoke to was experiencing their social life as bubble-like, I used “expat community” instead, which has a more open connotation, yet in this thesis I do use the word bubble, for I came to understand that most westerner expatriates in Nairobi do experience their livelihood as segregated and cut-off from the broader society.

In the introduction, I briefly addressed that I had to “study up” (Nader 1972, 284). Although my main focus group within this study are indeed the privileged expats that experience the expat bubble, their experience of the expat bubble is in many ways intertwined with that of the local Nairobiian. I chose to interact with local Nairobiians to better understand the boundaries of the expatriate lifeworlds, to understand the context in which the expat bubble is situated, and to see how this bubble is structured in relation to those who are excluded from it. This involved not only studying up, but also “down” and “sideways” (Nader 1972, 285). Practically, I held numerous informal conversations with Kenyans during everyday life, of which some turned into a semi-structured interview. In total I conducted five semi-structured interviews with people who would not be considered an expat but did provide me with new insights on the topic.

# 1. Arriving in Nairobi

*“[W]hen one moves away from home the movement itself occurs in relation to home, it is part of the very ‘constitution’ of home itself” (in Mallett 2004, 79).*

*My plane landed in the middle of the night. 3:30 am. Although the trip was 10+ hours, with a layover in Cairo, it felt more like teleportation. Physically I was in Kenya, yet mentally I was still back home.*

*I woke up in a hotel room feeling empty and somewhat confused after just a few hours of sleep. Disillusioned, I started asking myself what brought me to Nairobi. I started doubting my underlying reason for going abroad. Sure, I want to know more about privileged forms of mobility, and to practice my fieldwork skills, and part of the reason is to figure out whether or not I would want to pursue a career on this side of the world. But why here? Why so far away from home? My standard answer would be “for the thrill of adventure,” yet what is adventurous about waking up in a hotel room with air-conditioning, knowing breakfast will be served in just a minute?*

*If the confusion persisted, I would’ve stayed in my room the entire day. Luckily it didn’t. I got up, packed a small backpack for the day, and went down to the front desk to ask what there was to do around the neighbourhood. The receptionist told me one of the staff members, Jayden, was just going for a walk and that he would happily show me around the Central Business District.<sup>7</sup>*

For me, this was the start of the expatriate life that I would live for the following three and a half months. I felt grateful to be able to enjoy the privilege of staying abroad for an extended period of time; but I also felt guilt, knowing that a large part of the population in the host country does not enjoy this privilege. Trying to put my own reasons and accompanying feelings into perspective, and curious on how Nairobi expatriates experience this same discrepancy, I began asking the expats I met to reflect on the reasons for coming to the city.

Studies show that the movement and settlement of expats is generally portrayed as being distinctively “different to the standard migration/immigration story” (Favell 2008, 100). Kennedy (2004) notes that

---

<sup>7</sup> Fieldnotes, Khwesa Bed and Breakfast, 01-02-2019.

“whereas classic migrants move because of harsh economic or political pressures and depend closely on family or ethnic ties, highly skilled workers move out of free choice and are not ‘encapsulated’ within communities based on ‘primordial’ bonds” (in van Bochove and Engbersen 2015, 296). Expats are free moving subjects; they move because they want to. Therefore, I asked for their motivating reasons – as opposed to normative or explanatory reasons – for them to come to Nairobi (Alvarez 2016). I soon discovered that their primary reason can be categorized in two archetypes, which I will highlight in both segments of this chapter.

In the first segment, I describe how career opportunities drive expatriates to Nairobi. I will show that, with having a clear goal in mind, such expatriates can be characterized as *organization men* (or women)<sup>8</sup>, a term coined by Hannerz (1990), whose “lives are strongly dominated by their occupation” (van Bochove and Engbersen 2015, 295). Their jobs made them move abroad, and their social contacts are frequently work-related as well. This archetype is closely linked to the narrative of the *expat bubble* (2015, 295), as mentioned in the introduction.

In the second segment I look into the other side of the spectrum, describing the *cosmopolitan* expatriate – for whom a job is merely an instrument that gives them the possibility to pursue their real interest, namely “experiencing life in different parts of the world” (2015, 302). I describe the cosmopolitan quest for seeking “adventure” in Nairobi, and the conflict that arises when their romanticized ideals clash with the reality of the city. In line with Bochove and Engbersen (2015, 306) – who argue that both narratives (*organization men* and *cosmopolitan*) are not mutually exclusive – I describe how *organization men* can uphold notions of cosmopolitanism at the same time, and vice versa. However, more importantly, I argue that both categories push the expatriate into the direction of a segregated life in Nairobi, which in itself is a first step towards finding a place where they can construct a home.

## *Careers and expat bubbles*

Asking why someone is in Nairobi is a question you can ask each time you meet someone new, but often the real motivation often comes to light after the initial introductory phase. This happened during my first in-depth semi-structured interview, which I had with Sophia<sup>9</sup>, a Parisian journalist working for the International French Radio. We chatted twice before, once when I was still in the Netherlands, during which we briefly talked about her occupation, and once during a house party in my first week in Nairobi. A week later we met up at *CHEKAFE - Japanese Sweet Factory*, a Japanese restaurant tucked away in one of the quieter streets of Lavington, where we had an in-depth conversation about her experiences. Arriving at the restaurant, chiming bells and soft Japanese tunes welcomed me to the bright and airy terrace seating. The place felt miles away from the polluted streets that I, until then, knew

---

<sup>8</sup> For the sake of readability, the remainder of the text uses the term “organization men” to refer to both men and women.

<sup>9</sup> Interview, Sophia, 06-02-2019.

Nairobi for. Sophia came to Kenya because the radio station had a vacancy to work as a freelancer while being based in Nairobi. When the interview took place, she was about to go back to France after staying in the capital for two and a half years.

“I would never come here if I didn’t have a job, I never heard of Kenya before actually,” she mentioned, when I ask her how she ended up here.

She continues: “I was more interested in Western Africa. I have been in Senegal and discovered I wanted to become a journalist on Western Africa. And when they told me ‘Kenya’ it was just because they had a spot here. I had no attraction whatsoever to this country before. I just said like ‘okay you have a spot there, so I go.’”

Sophia stresses that, just like her, many others come to the city for work, to accomplish something: “I was proving that I could be this French correspondent. Others are proving they can be a businessman or businesswoman... It’s usually stuff that you can’t do at home. It’s more exciting and it’s easier to make a business and to have high responsibilities [in Nairobi].”

Knowing that expatriates are defined as “highly skilled temporary migrants” (van Bochove and Engbersen 2015, 295), it is not surprising that they come to build a career. And we can say that for Sophia “migration [was] the instrument to establish an international working career” (2015, 302).

What intrigued me during the conversation, was that Sophia spoke negatively about the city she has been living in. She sums up: “I just hate Nairobi. It’s like the worst city to live in. You have no public space. It’s a violent city. You have to take cars all the time. It’s super polluted and very segregated.” Also, the material culture did not appeal to her: “The food is not great, the literature is not great, and the music neither.”

The way she, as did others I spoke to, described the hardships she faced during her time in Nairobi, made it seem as if she perceived her foray as the liminal phase of a rite of passage. The outcome of this process would be an increase of both cultural and symbolic capital in her professional field, which made her stay worthwhile. Through moving to Nairobi, she was trying to prove she could endure an arguably difficult task she voluntarily chose to take up. More specifically, she would gain certain skills that are valued in the journalistic field, and she would improve her reputation as a professional.

It is important to note that the increase in cultural and symbolic capital that Sophia seeks, to further develop as an international correspondent, is relevant in the field of journalism. It is not in the field of expatriates per se, although having a “cool job”<sup>10</sup>, as she calls it during the interview, does contribute to an increase of symbolic capital in the expatriate social circles as well. Besides partaking in the field of journalism, she also partakes in the field of expatriates. Participation in one field does not rule out participation in another. For as mentioned in the introduction, Bourdieu (1986, 50) describes that there are many overlapping fields.

---

<sup>10</sup> Interview, Sophia, 06-02-2019.

Sophia's conflicting experience – focusing on an international career while not particularly enjoying the city – is what I observed with many other expatriates in Nairobi. Generally, the city of Nairobi was not perceived as a pleasant place to be. The pollution, security issues, and seemingly endless traffic jams were the most frequently mentioned complaints. Practically everyone I interviewed came to Nairobi for a job, often with the notion that working internationally would benefit their career. Logically, if expatriates come to Nairobi for their careers, yet find the city challenging to live in, it makes sense that they spend their spare time increasing their social capital through networking with other expatriates, while enjoying a place of comfort and familiarity.

Sophia's exemplar description adheres to the archetypal image of expatriates in Nairobi as “organization men” (Hannerz 1990; in van Bochove and Engbersen 2015, 297). This type, first of all, do not travel because it is their vocation, but rather because either their employer wants them to and it is deemed beneficial for their careers and secondly, expatriates do not necessarily celebrate diversity but enjoy a lifestyle within a homogeneous expat community instead (2015, 297). However, I noticed that describing expatriates solely as organization men would oversimplify the expatriate level of participation in Kenyan society (2015, 297). The nature and scale of expatriate's involvement in Nairobi is very different per individual. Sophia, too, showed interest in the culture, but was disappointed by certain aspects of it. Also, the fact that they do travel to Nairobi shows that they are open to new experiences, thus writing them off as “not celebrating diversity” (in 2015, 297) would neglect their motivational reasons to be interested in a career in a different culture in the first place. They do portray aspects of cosmopolitanism, yet the expat community is both convenient and appealing for them, for it fulfils the needs they have when pursuing their primary objective; the betterment of their career.

### *Adventure and chaos*

In the previous segment, I briefly described the archetype of the Nairobi organization men, who conveniently dwell in the expat bubble, yet do uphold notions of cosmopolitanism. Opposite to this is the archetype of the Nairobi expatriate as a cosmopolitan – a type in search of thrill and excitement, to escape the mundane and to live out the adventurer imaginary. For them, going to “the Green City in the Sun” is a perfect way of leading an adventurous lifestyle. Kenya has English as an official language yet holds a distinctly different culture; the country offers both professional opportunities while it is also being well-known for its wildlife and safaris, turning weekend trips into adventurous photogenetic escapades. But their romanticized quest can take quite a different turn when their exploratory imaginaries come in conflict with the reality of the city they chose to live in, and as a result, they too, end up residing in the expat bubble.



One of the expatriates that described a strong urge to venture into the unknown was Freddie<sup>11</sup>, a Frenchman in his late 20s who had difficulty finding a job in the renewable energy sector in Berlin but found one in Nairobi. We held the interview on the balcony of his spacious apartment, which he shared with four other expatriates, one of which being his girlfriend. With the apartment facing west, one could enjoy a spectacular sunset on every clear day. He offered me a craft beer, had one himself, and rolled a joint for himself right before the interview started. The interview started with me referring to the first time we met, when I explained what I was doing in Nairobi. He responded very enthusiastically at that time, saying that he had been reflecting a lot about his life in Nairobi. During the interview, I came to know that his reflectivity came from a collision between his ideals, expectations, and the reality he faced while living in Nairobi. I started by asking how he made the decision to go to Kenya.

“So, I started with Africa, I didn’t want to go to West Africa because I don’t want to speak French. I wanted to work in English. I didn’t want to go to Northern Africa, because that wasn’t the shock I was pursuing,” Freddie explained.

“You wanted to go to a completely different culture?” I ask him. “For what reason exactly?”

“To know what it’s like. [...] I was thinking about the continent of Africa and I was like, ‘I want the real thing!’” he says, enthusiastically clapping his hands together once.

Freddie expressed an eagerness to experience a culture shock. He had an urge to challenge himself through living an adventurous life in a country with a distinctly different culture. His openness would bridge the gap between himself and the Other. Being able to speak English, he would have no excuse to not have Kenyan friends, and therefore his imaginary would consist of him accepting this new, foreign culture while being accepted by his hosts. But the reality turned out differently. After having lived in Nairobi for two years, he wants to leave Kenya.

He reflects on the experience by saying: “I have mixed feelings about this country, about this experience. [...] Maybe if I would redo it, I would select another country.”

“What makes you say that?” I asked him.

“Because that cultural shock was almost too much,” he responds, admittedly.

His reaction to the difference in culture is common. In scientific terms, the word “culture shock,” coined by Oberg (1960), is used to describe distress caused by living in a different culture. Taft (1977) describes a “culture shock” as having six different characteristics, including: “the strain of adapting to the new culture, a sense of loss, confusion in role expectations and self-identity, a feeling of being rejected by members of the new culture, and anxiety and feelings of impotence due to not being able to cope with the new environment” (in Pantelidou and Craig 2006, 777). The main predictor of a culture shock is the culture distance, “the degree to which the culture of the country of origin is different from the new culture” (2006, 777). Other important predictors are the amount of discrimination from the locals, the level of fluency in the local language, and the age and personality of the expatriate (2006,

---

<sup>11</sup> Interview, Freddie, 13-03-2019.

777). The openness with which Freddie entered the country might not have been enough to bridge the gap between the two cultures. I continued to dig deeper by asking him how he could cope with this.

“I understood that the only way to accept living in this country would be to create an even thicker bubble; living in a white community which only white people – or very wealthy Kenyans – can afford to live.”<sup>12</sup>

“So, is this something that you’d pursue?” I ask him.

“No, that’s something that I especially want to escape by leaving Kenya. [...]”

“Why?”

“I feel like a hypocrite. [...] I feel like I’m enjoying the good sides of the country and I’m avoiding all the bad sides [...] I’m creating my own luxury reality, and I think it’s fake.”

Freddie’s presupposed image of the expatriate lifestyle presumably created a false expectation of what his life in Nairobi would be like, and this expectation collided with the reality he found once he moved abroad. To deal with his culture shock, he created a lifestyle that included further secluding himself from Kenyan reality, which at the same time was against his principles.

Freddie mentions that he began avoiding “the bad sides” of the city. Paradoxically, because the city is often regarded as unsafe, one can also derive symbolic capital from subverting others’ expectations by moving here, setting oneself apart from the rest within a field by experiencing something exceptional. This can be seen in Freddie’s quest to live where he can find “the real thing;” striving to create an image around oneself as being brave and as a citizen of the world, knowing that people back home would acknowledge this.

For myself as well, it was the “roughness” of living in Nairobi that had a strange appeal and drew me to the metropole. The thrill of the city was mostly present during the initial “honeymoon” phase of my migration, in which the culture is new and exciting and the dreams and expectations about the future seem to be coming true (van Tonder 2013, 346). Challenging the notions of insecurity and showing that I am flexible enough to deal with the chaotic nature of some of the city’s neighbourhoods gave me a rush, a strong feeling of being alive. The dusty streets combined with an African sunset painted a picturesque image. The chaotic traffic exhilarated me and put my familiarly structured Dutch lifestyle into perspective.

The fascination with insecurity and chaos under the veil of adventure is something that Oscar<sup>13</sup> could not understand. Oscar is a Mexican native who studied both in Canada and the Netherlands, and who started working in Nairobi because his Dutch girlfriend found a position there. He spoke with great passion about his home country, yet throughout his early twenties he experienced the dangerous side of Mexico. As a civilian during the Mexican drug war, he experienced chaos and violence close up. He had a bag full of thrilling stories that he extrovertedly shared during our interview.

---

<sup>12</sup> This quote is edited for readability purposes.

<sup>13</sup> Interview, Oscar, 24-03-2019.

“It was awful man. If you ask me how many dead bodies I’ve seen, I would have no idea. Yeah, it was crazy. Like, bullets flying. I know people that disappeared. I’ve seen the bodies. Had a gun to my head two times. It’s insane.”

Where western expatriates can complain about the overly structured lives they live in their native country and perceive life in Nairobi as exciting and adventurous, perhaps willing to trade places, Oscar notes that they are only partially involved in the chaotic society they deem exhilarating.

“Expats, especially from Europe say: ‘I love it. I love the [Nairobian] chaos. It’s so adventurous. It’s so disorganized. [...] I love it [since] the Netherlands is so boring,’”<sup>14</sup>

Replying to his own remark, Oscar says: “Yeah! I love that shit!”

“They’re like: ‘what do you mean, like you’re from Mexico?’” he says, acting out the conversation. “Man, I’ve had enough of the chaos. I’ve had 25 years of chaos. People that say that [they like chaos] haven’t been personally affected by it in a negative way,”<sup>15</sup> he concludes.

Although it goes without saying that no expatriate actually *wants* the same unrest and violence that Oscar experienced, I highlight his perspective to emphasize that the level of involvement in society is – for most expatriates – only to a certain (comfortable) degree. And that, given their privileged mobility, they practically always have the possibility of withdrawing from the situation they are in. This is what Oscar recognizes as well:

“Every now and then they (expatriates) jump over that fence and they mingle in the chaos and they go back. They haven’t had to live in it. Man, I’ve lost friends to the chaos. I’ve seen my mom with a gun to her head because of the chaos. Fuck the chaos. Give me boring, man, give me organized, give me trams that come on time. Give me this predictable life... Give me *rain*, man! I want it all. I want this boring, grey life because I’ve had enough of it.”

The thrill and excitement that one seeks when having “adventure” as a reason to come to Nairobi, can have someone gloss over the realness of danger within the city. The difference between expectation and reality triggered a culture shock for Freddie. I, too, saw myself restructure my life in such a way just so I didn’t feel constantly at risk when engaging in public life. It wasn’t until I came back to the Netherlands that I noticed how tiresome this feeling of insecurity was, all while I thought I would enjoy the thrill that comes with challenging such notions. It seemed to me that the more one has romanticized making Nairobi their home, the harder it becomes to face the actual structures of society the expatriates find themselves in, resulting in a retreat towards the safer expat community.

## *Conclusion*

The aim of this chapter was to describe the motivating reasons expatriates have to come to Nairobi. These reasons can be linked to the two dominant ways in which expatriates are portrayed in the

---

<sup>14</sup> This quote is edited for readability purposes.

<sup>15</sup> This quote is edited for readability purposes.

literature; either as organization men, or cosmopolitans (van Bochove and Engbersen 2015, 295). I showed how these dominant narratives, with their accompanying motivational reasons, are actually applicable to many expatriates that move to Nairobi, and that these narratives do not cancel each other out; organization men can uphold cosmopolitan ideals, and expatriates as cosmopolitans can find themselves living secluded lives that are more often associated with the narrative of organization men.

Expatriates coming to Nairobi to pursue a career portrayed their undertaking as a struggle – as a rite of passage – through which one hopes to gain cultural and symbolic capital within their occupational field, either abroad or in their native country. The expat community, bringing both safety and comfort, can be a great way for these organization men to increase their position within their occupational field, or to spend time in the city without having to actively live through the liminal phase of their own initiated rite of passage.

Yet motivational reasons to go to Nairobi can also arise from an urge to venture into the world. This can be seen in the more cosmopolitan oriented narrative, in which expatriates voice the need to explore and to bridge gaps between cultures while romanticizing the expatriate lifestyle. Once they realize how Kenyan society is truly structured, and where they stand within this structure, they often find themselves falling back on that which is known – the expatriate community and its comforts – even if this goes against their own principles or social identity. How the characteristics of Nairobi structure expatriate livelihoods is further detailed in the next chapter.

Both narratives are present in the lives of the expatriates that I encountered in Nairobi. Yet what I saw as significant, is that both the typical organization men and cosmopolitan are driven towards living a segregated and secluded life. Whether this is intentional and beneficial, as shown for the organization men, or because their reasons and ideals come in conflict with the reality of the city, as for the typical cosmopolitan, they often find themselves living in the same neighbourhoods, enjoying the same parties and with a similar level of integration into Kenyan society.

## 2. *The structures of Nairobi*

*“Ha! You’re researching people who don’t integrate, and those who try to integrate but fail miserably.”<sup>16</sup>*

*On the 7th of March I went to Mercado, a Mexican restaurant, together with Oscar and his girlfriend. The restaurant was on the terrace floor in the Kenrail Towers in Westlands – Nairobi’s social and entertainment centre for expatriates and wealthy Kenyans. The place became somewhat our staple hangout on Thursdays, for they had a 2-for-1 margherita happy hour, during which we generously splurged. There were some friends and acquaintances of Oscar as well. I spoke to a Mexican ambassador and his wife. And a few expatriates who were working for the UN I briefly discussed the phenomenon of expat bubbles with one woman. She was visiting Nairobi and was based in Iraq herself. She described her life in Bagdad as an extremely closed community, completely segregated from the rest of the country. This particular community had a mall; shops; restaurants and cafés – everything you’d need for a comfortable life. If she wanted to go outside of the compound, she needed military guidance to do so. The picture she sketched contrasted with the expatriate lifestyle in Nairobi, where people are at least able to move around rather freely within the city.*

*After dinner I was supposed to meet up with a friend of mine, Emily, for a beer at the Alchemist Bar, but she told me she had to stay home to comfort her house mate, who saw someone get shot in the Nairobi streets.<sup>17</sup>*

The lifeworlds of expatriates in Nairobi are relatively spacious, and not as confined as for example the community life of expatriates in Iraq, as described by the UN worker. Yet expatriates in Nairobi are still restricted in their movement and, feelings of unsafety are a big contributor to this. The city has characteristics that give structure to the field in which expatriates can dwell. As opposed to the previous chapter – where I described the reasons free moving expatriates have when for coming to Nairobi shape their environment – this chapter looks how the city shapes the ways in which expatriates are constructing their livelihood.

---

<sup>16</sup> Fieldnotes. Comment of a UN employee, after told him I did research about the expat bubble, 28-02-2019.

<sup>17</sup> Fieldnotes, Mercado - Mexican Kitchen and Bar, 01-03-2019.

Abigail<sup>18</sup>, one of my first interviewees with whom I discussed the expat bubble, noted: “[the expat bubble] is both self-imposed and not really wanted.” Many expatriates have the urge to engage with local Nairobians yet see obstacles to fulfil this desire. I came to understand that this has to do with the position expatriates hold within the city of Nairobi. Their position is on one side determined through the Bourdieusian capital expatriates bring when coming to Nairobi, and on the other through the structure of the city. Expatriates often have enough economic capital (i.e. wealth) to be considered elite; their cultural capital distinguishes them from most Kenyan locals (in their speech, taste and mannerisms); and they cannot change the colour of their skin – as symbolic capital; prestige associated with race (Stoebenau 2009, 2045) – which heavily influences how they experience the city.

Also, the city has many characteristics that are reactionary to the capital that expatriates hold. In this chapter I discuss the city’s historical context and residential segregation; the city’s security issues; and the Othering as experienced by expats. All of which influences expatriates’ livelihood.

The order in which these characteristics are discussed also shows how the social lives of expatriates become more and more confined – first by showing how the city is inherently separated; secondly by describing the presence of a safe/unsafe dichotomy within one part of the city; and thirdly by showing how expatriate involvement in public life is restricted, even in the “safe” neighbourhoods. What is left is a clearer picture of the space in which expatriates’ dwell; the expat bubble.

I work towards outlining this expat bubble as a Bourdieusian field. Yet, it has to be understood that the Bourdieusian field is figurative. Such a field does not have strict special dimensions (Bourdieu 2005, 33). More importantly, I describe the way the actors (expatriates) are able to behave within this figurative field. This gives the field characteristics in which not all expatriates feel enough at ease to construct a place of home, yet this will be discussed in chapter three.

### *Residential segregation mapped out*

Nairobi is often described as a divided (K’Akumu and Olima 2007, 88), or splintered city (Boniburini 2015, 4). Before going to Nairobi, I heard about the problematic levels of poverty and inequality that are present in the city. Yet what I did not expect, was the radical residential segregation, which can even be recognized – although unnuanced – when looking at the city from above. Figure 1 shows a satellite image of Nairobi, which reveals this characteristic peculiarity of the Kenyan capital.<sup>19</sup>

---

<sup>18</sup> Interview, Abigail, 13-02-2019.

<sup>19</sup> I would like to stress that a complete dichotomist interpretation of the satellite image (figure 1) would be unnuanced. There is both poverty and wealth present on both the east- and westside of the city, and the whole of the city is interconnected and interdependent. The image is merely a rough starting point to depict the favored areas in which expatriates dwell.



Figure 1: Satellite map of Nairobi, composed of images from *Apple Maps*, an image from the article *Production of Hegemony and Production of Space in Nairobi* (Boniburini 2015, 20).

To get to know Nairobi, the Central Business District (CBD) is a perfect point of reference. Located in the middle of the city, a walk towards either of four cardinal points would bring about an immensely different experience of Nairobi. When I looked at the satellite image for the first time (figure 1), what struck me the most was the colour difference.

The eastern part of the city seems greyish. The tightly packed streets, the concrete low rises, and corrugated tin roofs seen from above remind of a computer motherboard. Zooming in on the most densely populated spots reveals a maze of alleyways connecting a multitude of slum houses, or informal settlements, in which over 60 per cent of the total population of Nairobi lives (K'Akumu and Olima 2007, 93).

To the west of the CBD, the aerial view shows a more greenish hue. The houses on this side of the city are more spread out, creating more room for trees to grow. This area is significantly less densely populated. Zooming in on the affluent residential areas shows predominantly red tiled roofs, wider streets, parking areas and the occasional mall. This part seems a lot opener, as if there is more air to breathe.

The dotted line, separating the east and west side of the city, is derived from Boniburini's (2015, 20) article *Production of Hegemony and Production of Space in Nairobi*, who writes that east of the line more than 39 per cent of the people live below the poverty line, versus less than 39 per cent west of the line.

While a radical east versus west dichotomist interpretation of Nairobi's structure is "inappropriate" (Boniburini 2015, 19), for there is dependency and interaction between both sides of the city, the difference in colour mainly shows Nairobi's distinct residential segregation and thereby an uneven dividedness of privileges (2015, 19). With the historical context in mind, and with Cape Town, South Africa as a case study, Lemanski (2004) defined segregation as: "urban spatial design meant to achieve a measure of residential separation between the politically and economically dominant white population and the indigenous black people" (in K'Akumu and Olima 2007, 89). Being officially colonized by the British between 1920 to 1963 (2007, 87), but already influenced by British rule at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, British policies have shaped Nairobi immensely, especially considering the fact that the city was founded by the colonial authorities in 1899 (Greenway and Monsma 1989, 163). Like in Cape Town, bringing race into play is relevant to the city of Nairobi, where the British administration also sought to "limit people's freedom of choice to live where they wished; for the sole purpose of promoting social identities for political purposes" (2007, 89). What originated in racial segregation has become economic residential segregation – segregation based on economic capital. However, the racial part remains (partially) visible. There remain to be clusters of white people living in what used to be white residential areas. The expatriates I met favoured these now affluent neighbourhoods, where they live alongside wealthy Kenyans.

The residential segregation of Nairobi is the first characteristic of the city that pushes western expatriates towards a specific area. Although racial segregation is a thing of the past, and the spatial dimensions of the expat bubble are fluid and intangible, the historical context of the city continues to create a (restrictive) space in which expatriates construct their place of home. In the next segment, I discuss how this space is further restricted through security issues.

### *Strengthening the safe/unsafe dichotomy*

In the following segment I describe the second characteristic, which is much linked to the first; the construction of a safe/unsafe dichotomy due to security issues. This dichotomy is both created through institutions like the UN, and by stories expatriates tell. This constructed dichotomy further restricts expat movement; the institutionalized boundaries specify where expatriates can live within the what used to be white residential areas, and the stories expatriates tell strengthen a safe/unsafe narrative of parts of Nairobi.

#### THE UN BLUE ZONE

Fajnzyblber, Lederman and Loayza (2002) saw a strong correlation between inequality and violent crime, which they found after analysing data sets provided by the World Bank, the United Nations and others (2002, 25). Although data from the World Bank shows that the inequality in Kenya is decreasing (World Bank 2019), the differences in income within Nairobi remain big enough to still expect a high occurrence



of violent crime. Additionally, Papaioannou (2017, 2) writes that the theoretical link between poverty and crime is well established (yet the empirical basis of these claims are speculative at best). Such reports contribute to the notion that economically poor neighbourhoods in Nairobi are unsafe, as opposed to its affluent neighbourhoods. The United Nations Office at Nairobi has built upon this notion and has institutionalized the areas in which expatriates ought to live. Expats who now come to Nairobi to work for the UN are “strongly advised” (UN-Habitat 2015, 4) to find accommodation in areas that are within the “UN Blue zone.” These designated zones consist of an area north-west of the city, in which the more affluent neighbourhoods are situated, like Westlands, Kileleshwa, Gigiri, Lavington, and Karen, in the south-west (figure 2). These areas are of a low-density, high-income population (K’Akumu and Olima 2007, 93). Practically all the expatriates I have met during my field work were living within the UN Blue zone.



Figure 2: Satellite map including the UN Blue zone, composed of images from *Apple Maps*, an image from the article *Production of Hegemony and Production of Space in Nairobi* (Boniburini 2015, 20) and the UN booklet *General Information on Internship at the United Nations Headquarters in Nairobi, Kenya* (UN-Habitat 2015, 15).

## EXERCISING SECURITY

Much like comparing the eastern part with the western part of the city, comparing the inside of the UN Blue zone with the areas outside of it, is a doubtful exercise. Making a blunt safe/unsafe dichotomy would do no justice to the places which are unfamiliar to many expatriates, but I do think it is reasonable to say that there is a difference in material and architectural manifestations of security inside the UN

Blue zone, as opposed to outside of it. Olima (2013) notes that since “the government is unable to guarantee their security,” Nairobi residents see themselves as responsible for their own security measures (2013, 298), and expatriates are no exception. Since the state cannot provide the security needed by the people, a Goldsteinian view of security is welcoming, meaning “the multiple ways in which security configured and deployed – not only by states and authorized speakers but by communities, groups, and individuals – in their engagements with other local actors and with arms of the state itself” (Goldstein 2010, 492). I saw three main ways in which Nairobi expatriates exercise security measures, which I will list here.

First of all, the *fortification* of Nairobi’s built environment, especially within the UN Blue zone. Recalling the first time I walked through the more affluent areas, I expected to be able to look at the most beautiful houses of Nairobi but found myself being disappointed at seeing mostly gates. Sure, the houses are there, but the view is often obstructed by large concrete wall, metal doors or bushes overgrowing the perimeter. Glimpses of what is behind the gates show either luxury apartment blocks or spacious villas, often surrounded by trees. This is in line with Constance Smith’s article (2015), who shows through consideration of two different neighbourhoods (Spring Valley, inside the UN Blue zone and Kaloleni, a neighbourhood outside of it), how Nairobi’s built environment “reflects and helps to shape notions of (in)security” (2015, 135). Smith writes that residents in both, if not all, areas despair the presence of violent crime (2015, 144; Olima 2013), but it is in the more affluent parts where the new gated communities and securitized apartments are not only being built, but also marketed as an “aesthetic community insulated from a supposedly chaotic public sphere” (in Smith 2015, 145). Notions of exclusivity and aspiring aesthetics surrounding securitized enclaves go beyond the idea that security measures are only practical and built simply driven by fear. It gained an aspirational quality for those with the economic capital to acquire it (2015, 153).

Secondly, the unmissable presence of (*private*) *security guards*. You can find them at every mall, every supermarket, every high-end eatery, or guarding private compounds within the UN Blue zone. More often than not, they conduct security searches on individuals trying to access such places. The intensity of the search varies from place to place. Sometimes a quick frisk or a scan with a hand held metal detector is sufficient, while occasionally a more airport style search in which I had to place my bag on a conveyer belt and walk through a full body scanner myself was the norm. Whether this contributes to a greater feeling of safety is questionable. But the presence in itself strengthens the reason and desire to stay within the UN Blue zone, for it implies a criminal Other (Smith 2015, 142). Yet, the presence of (*private*) security guards is only partly a protection from the criminal Other. The terrorist attacks on the *Westgate Mall* in 2013 and, more recently, the 2019 *DusitD2* complex, shook the country and made many realize that safety, even inside heavily guarded malls, is relative. About the 2013 *Westgate Mall* attack, Smith writes: ‘malls are no longer the same spaces of leisure and relaxation, no longer regarded as refuges in a city with sky-high rates of robbery and mugging’ (2015, 143). Arguably, these happenings are a factor that push expatriates away from the public areas and further into fortified,

private enclaves, limiting the mobility of expatriates within the city and thereby confining them to safe yet more expensive spaces where they can construct a home.

Thirdly, *avoiding public space* through, for example, the religious use of peer-to-peer ridesharing apps like *Uber* or *Bolt*. Even for the shortest distances, both inside and outside the UN Blue zone. On a Sunday afternoon I found myself in Westlands, a neighbourhood popular with expatriates as a place to live and enjoy their leisure time. Right outside the fashionable club *The Alchemist Bar*, Kenyan kids in raggedy shirts and sweaters were begging for money. It's something you cannot go around when you arrive at the bar. I watched a young, white couple walk outside of *The Alchemist Bar* exactly at the same time an ordered ride-sharing car drove up front. No interaction with the Kenyan kids whatsoever. The impeccable timing of the whole ordeal made it seem like a practiced dance, with perfect timing of all involved. Efficiency seemed to be a priority – not a moment too long in the public space.<sup>20</sup> The use of either taxis or popular ride-sharing cars can diminish the moments of engagement in public space, using economic capital to remain in a safe haven. One can arrange a pickup right at your door, even from inside a gated community, and one can be driven right to the entrance of the destination.

Expatriates that I spoke to that nonetheless did come in close contact with the dangers of living in Nairobi often adjusted their lifestyle in such a way that the chance of it happening again would be significantly less. Exemplar of this is Ethan<sup>21</sup>, an American who lived on and off in Nairobi while working in outside the city. He recalls a being “robbed at gunpoint in 2013,” his first year in the city. This incident gave him what he describes as PTSD [Posttraumatic stress disorder]. “I think that’s a very strong word, but they have effects on you,” he notes. I asked him what changed for him, after the assault.

“I walked around a lot less after [the incident]. [...] I took steps over time to just live more secure, basically spending more money to live a certain way, to feel safer. Just so [danger] isn’t a constant stress. Also living in nicer places with nice security or taking more taxis and things. I wouldn’t mind walking around in a normal city, but here it just doesn’t feel safe, really.”

The same goes for George<sup>22</sup>, an Englishman with a fascination for East Africa. He describes that he too encountered moments of unsafety. “I’ve had like a couple of incidents. Someone pulling a gun. It’s scary, but in a strange way I think I’ve gotten over it fairly quickly,” he tells me. While he did not suffer mentally from the incident, he did consciously create more of a safe haven with the use of his economic capital. “After dark, I won’t walk around. I get an *Uber* anywhere. I can only do that because I’ve got the money to do that. If I didn’t have the money, I would stay indoors.”

He continues: “You are living this ultra-luxury life in a country which has a high degree of extreme poverty, so you have to be aware of that.”

The luxury life makes you more prone to encounter burglaries and robberies, thus there is a necessity to counter these dangers, leading to fortification, tight security, and less involvement in the

---

<sup>20</sup> Fieldnotes, The Alchemist Bar, Westlands, 24-02-2019.

<sup>21</sup> Interview, Ethan, 04-03-2019.

<sup>22</sup> Interview, George, 19-02-2019.

public space, even within the UN Blue zone. Having the means to alter their lifestyles, both Ethan and George can structure their day to day activities in such a way that they run less risk of coming into contact with the dangerous side of Nairobi. This restructuring of their day to day activities further moves them away from the harshness that Nairobi can possess and into more secluded spaces.

#### STORIES ABOUT UNSAFETY

If you want to hear thrilling stories, you should ask an expatriate about the Nairobi night life. During my fieldwork period, there were three popular places to go out for expats; *Muze*, a dark, Berlin-esque nightclub playing mostly techno music; *The Alchemist Bar*, which promotes itself as a “creative hub,” hosting movie nights, open mic nights and the occasional dance party; and *J’s Fresh Bar & Kitchen* (*J’s* for short), an immensely popular bar and restaurant where live bands also play.

“Have you been to *J’s* on Thursday?” asked Jack<sup>23</sup>, a Kenyan native who studied in the U.S., went back home and was currently dating an expatriate.

“No, not yet” I replied.

“So, *J’s* on a Thursday is an expat networking event. That’s the best way to describe it. And it’s kind of amazing [...]. It’s always the same people talking to the same people, and you can see that as a reflection in the way companies are organized here, too. It’s one of those ‘I’m starting a company, you’ll be on my board, I’ll be on your board’ type situations. That’s literally it.”

I went to *J’s* on a Thursday a few weeks later. I arrived at the venue around nine or ten in the evening. The place was packed. It was decorated with ferns, bamboo and other big green plants which made the atmosphere laid back and cosy. There was a podium where a band was performing, there were multiple bars, people were sitting at picnic tables and the outside area had a massive television screen. There were indeed many, many foreigners. I heard that locals jokingly refer to a Thursday night at *J’s* as a “blizzard”<sup>24</sup> – a party where the majority of people are white. While there are certainly black Kenyans present, the place sure can seem like the centre of the white enclave in Nairobi. The following day, I wrote down the following sentence in my journal: “It’s hard for me to say anything about this place, because it doesn’t feel foreign at all. The music, the people, the drinks, it all feels ‘normal’ to me.”<sup>25</sup>

While these places are great for networking among expatriates the more thrilling stories are often about the more “local” places, such as Oscar’s<sup>26</sup> anecdotal night out, together with a Kenyan friend of his:

“I was at a bar with a friend from Kenya. I walked in. Nobody checked me. Got a beer. Talked with [my friend]. A guy walked in with a knife this big...” Oscar said, holding his hands roughly 30

---

<sup>23</sup> Interview, Jack, 28-02-2019.

<sup>24</sup> Interview, Ethan, 04-03-2019.

<sup>25</sup> Fieldnotes, *J’s* Fresh Bar & Kitchen, 07-03-2019.

<sup>26</sup> Interview, Oscar, 24-03-2019.

centimetres apart, “and stabbed another guy in the bathroom. And I was like, ‘That would never happen at *J’s!*’ (laughing). So yeah, expats definitely enjoy more security.”

As previously mentioned, since expats tend to have more economic capital, they go to places that enjoy more security, but because others also presuppose expats have more economic capital, they are more vulnerable when they do venture outside the more affluent suburbs. This is shown through another anecdote of Oscar:

“I was at a bar with another friend at *105 Republik*<sup>27</sup> [...]. I remember we walked in, nobody checked us, anything. We sat at the bar, drinking a beer. A lady next to us looked really drunk. She was dressing really sexy and stuff. [Suddenly] she put something in my drink, just in front of my face. And I was like, ‘What the fuck,’ and she said, ‘Hey do you want to buy me a drink? I’m like, ‘What? I just saw you put something in my drink!’”<sup>28</sup>

“No, I didn’t,” Oscar continues, acting out the conversation.

“My eyes are right here, man! I’m not blind!”

“She ran away, and I grabbed her by the arm, and I was like, ‘Hey man, buy me another drink. What the fuck.’ She started becoming very angry, yelling something. [...] That sort of thing would never happen at *the Alchemist* or *J’s*. So, I was like, ‘Ah, so this is going out in a Kenyan bar.’ Especially as a *mzungu* [white person]. There were a lot of people, but she saw *me*, and she walked up to *me*.”

The drug that the woman had put in Oscar’s drink was most likely *Rohypnol*<sup>29</sup>, or flunitrazepam (Kejitan 2018). This is a drug that goes with the Swahili street name of *mchele*, which translates to rice.

Oscar continues: “There’s this thing called *mchele* in Swahili and it means rice. It’s roofies. So, people joke about going to the bar with an avocado, so they can have [rice] with avocado and eat it. But [rice] is slang for the drug they put in your drink. It’s so common that girls do that to men.”

I ask why these girls would do such things.

“To get to their wallet. They pass out. So, what they [men] do, is they put their hands on their beer like this,” Oscar closes a beer bottle with their thumb. “You don’t see that in *J’s*.”<sup>30</sup>

During our conversation about the unsafety of going out in places outside the expat bubble, Oscar mentioned “You don’t see that in *J’s*” multiple times. By the stories he told, he strengthened the safe/unsafe dichotomy of going out inside the expat bubble as opposed to outside of it. It is this rhetoric of danger that I similarly heard from other expats as well. Stories about them going to “local” places – a place where mostly Kenyan locals go. Stories that differentiate between us and them, comparing “their lifestyle” to “our lifestyle.” Such stories become a structuring force by itself, especially when shared among other expatriates. Hearing such stories, I, too, became hesitant to go out in “local” bars. The

---

<sup>27</sup> A bar in the western outskirts of Nairobi, far outside the UN Blue zone.

<sup>28</sup> This quote is edited for readability purposes.

<sup>29</sup> A medical article describing the effects of the drug states that: “some patients may have no recollection of any awakenings occurring in the six to eight hours during which the drug extends its action” (Schwartz and Weaver 1998, 321).

<sup>30</sup> This quote is edited for readability purposes.

times that I did go, I remember being on guard even while nothing really exciting happened – influenced by the danger rhetoric of others.

### *Thank you for reminding me*

In the previous segment, I showed that the space where expats are likely to stay are reduced to specific spaces in the city. The majority of the city is either deemed unattractive or unsafe for anyone who has the means to free choose where they want to live. Their luxurious lifestyle is in this sense restricting. In this segment, I describe how expatriates – even within the UN Blue zone – can at least have the feeling that they ought not to reside in the place of their choice. This segment looks into the experience of expatriates being *Othered* by local Nairobians, and how such acts obstructs attempts to integrate into Kenyan society. And how expatriates also deploy Othering on locals. This is the last major element that characterizes the expatriate livelihood.

“[I]f you really pay attention, you’ll see three types of looks: you see the guy who is surprised to see you; the guy who’s happy; and the guy who’s telling you: ‘fuck off.’ The last one really gets to you,” says Freddie<sup>31</sup>, describing his day to day interactions with local Kenyans.

Some cosmopolitan minded expatriates have the intention to integrate into Kenyan society, or at least, as Freddie describes it, to not fall “into the trap” of the expatriate community. He described the trap as “not per se having Kenyan friends, not per se talking Swahili.” Yet Freddie notes that even if he did learn Swahili – which some expatriates do try – he reckons he would still be perceived as the outsider, solely based on the colour of his skin.

“You’re still the white guy walking in the street,” he says.

“During the day most people around me are black, so sometimes I tend to forget that I’m white. [I feel like] I’m part of them, I like to believe that I’m part of them. Yet then I see them look at me, [which tells me:] ‘yeah, no, I’m white,’”<sup>32</sup> he says, laughing. “Thank you for reminding me.”

There is one word in Swahili that destroys idealistic dreams of shared humanity for many newly arrived expatriates. A word that burns the bridge with which expats hope to cross the cultural differences. That word is *mzungu*. After I arrived, I soon learned that the word means “white man,” or “European man,” although it is often applied to women as well. A quick Google search shows that the word literary means “someone who roams around,” or “wanderer” (I. Anderson 2011), but in everyday use, the meaning is less romantic. The connotation of the term itself is neither negative nor positive, thus not pejorative in itself, but has a multi-layered meaning – depending on the context and tone. Yet, no matter the connotation, no matter the wording, the term *mzungu* is a quick reminder that there is a difference between the Kenyan and the expat.

---

<sup>31</sup> Interview, Freddie, 13-03-2019.

<sup>32</sup> This quote is edited for readability purposes.

Being called *mzungu* as an expatriate or encountering a prejudicial gaze, as with Freddie, are tangible forms of Othering. Othering is defined by Staszak (2008, 1) as “transforming a difference into otherness so as to create an in-group and an out-group.” Othering is experienced by every non-black expatriate in Nairobi, but the level of intensity depends on your appearance. Abigail<sup>33</sup>, an Asian American who worked as a photo- and video journalist, describes the intense encounters she has while walking the Nairobi streets.

“Nairobi can be very difficult. [T]here is a lot racism, not like hateful racism. But racism against Asian looking people. I get a lot of people saying ‘ching chong’ to my face, laughing at me. It’s kind of a thing that I had to get used to, but it’s very frustrating.”

“Ching chong” is commonly a pejorative term used to mock people of Chinese ancestry, or other East Asians or Southeast Asians perceived to be Chinese. Although some Kenyans told me it simply meant “Chinese person,” yelling out people’s ethnicity can nonetheless be perceived as a condescending and divisive act, just as *mzungu* can feel that way for white people. It is understandable that such interactions with locals can wear one down quickly. Abigail had been living in Nairobi for roughly two and a half years and her time in the city had almost come to an end. The Othering, along with multiple occasions of male harassment she encountered while filming on the street, became part of the reason she is leaving the country.

“I got really frustrated by this at some point. I realized it’s very difficult to not be seen as the Other here. As if you’re a foreigner. Even if I learned Swahili, even if I really embed myself, you’d always be seen as the Other. It can really feel like us and them,” Abigail summarizes.

She notes the discrepancy between expatriate intentions and the experienced forms of Othering: “I think a lot of my friends don’t want to be in a bubble. So, there is a feeling of guilt. [Y]ou do feel like the Other. And then you’re Othering yourself and they’re Othering you. And you’re like: ‘I’m Othering myself more and I feel guilty about it, cause then I’m living out the stereotype, and that I don’t want to, but you’re Othering me!’ So, yeah, it’s a feeling of guilt.”

Abigail has the urge to integrate, to engage, but is unable to fulfil this urge. Due to her appearance she is pushed into a role she does not want to take on – the role of the expat living in a bubble.

Contrasting with the Othering experienced by non-black expatriates, is the story of Ayomide<sup>34</sup>, a Nigerian-born, MIT trained chemical engineer, currently living and working in Kenya. I had an interview with her after reading her blog *About Being the Majority* (Fatunde 2019), in which she – as the title describes – talks about her experience of becoming part of the majority.

---

<sup>33</sup> Interview, Abigail, 13-02-2019.

<sup>34</sup> Interview, Ayomide, 16-04-2019. Because I refer to a blog post on which she states her full name, I do not use a pseudonym to anonymize her identity. I have full consent to do so.

*“I have been insecure about [my appearance] for so long but I didn’t realize the extent of this insecurity until I came to Kenya.*

*I spent an evening with a gaggle of expats (a word I somewhat detest that I only use for its utility) some months ago that left a lingering bitter taste in my mouth that I couldn’t quite place. I remember feeling small and out of place [...]. Instinctually, [I placed] myself in the secondary position, wondering if I would be enough to hold their interest. [...]. Essentially, transferring all my understandings of white gaze all the way from Boston to Nairobi, Kenya and feeling small because I once again found myself in the position of the minority [...].*

*But it took coming to this country and being surrounded by black women for me to see that. Seeing braids, bright-coloured kitenge prints, and glistening dark skin be normalized. What am I saying? Not normalized. CELEBRATED. Looking around and finding it impossible to deny the beauty of all the women I see, and thus impossible to deny my own. It’s exhilarating” (Fatunde 2019).*

Ayomide describes the “exhilarating” experience of, once again, becoming part of the majority. While on the contrary, many non-black western expatriates experience becoming the minority instead, sometimes for the first time in their lives. Staszak (2008, 1) writes that “only dominant groups are in the position to impose their categories in the matter” and experiencing the implications of not being part of this dominant group, coming to terms with this feeling, can be a confusing or even frustrating experience. Even if one is perceived as wealthy and privileged by the person who imposes the Otherness. For most western expatriates, it is a feeling of not-belonging in a city where they are (actively) trying to belong, trying to construct a place of home. And it is this feeling that pushes them more towards a place of familiarity, a place where they *do* feel at home, even it is against their principles – as Freddie described in chapter one – making them fall into the “trap” of the expat bubble.

While I showed here that expatriates are Othered by local Nairobians, expatriates themselves also contribute to this process. George<sup>35</sup> describes the exclusive nature of the expatriate community:

“[P]eople are brought together through a series of fairly common reference points, similar values and shared understanding. So, if people within that group perceive that you do not have those reference points, those shared preferences, that common understanding, you are less likely to be able to join that group. It’s very exclusionary.”

He continues to explain what he means by the latter: “There are probably few places on earth where you hear people talk more about the importance of inclusion than in the expat bubble. While we live one of the most exclusionary lives. [...] We often reference the value of importance of inclusion

---

<sup>35</sup> Interview, George, 19-02-2019.



and diversity, yet, our lifestyles do not reflect. We are paradoxically highly valuing [inclusion] yet living lives which are highly exclusionary.”

## *Conclusion*

In this chapter, I outlined the expat bubble as a figurative Bourdieusian field. While the focus was partly on geography, I want to stress that the expat bubble-as-field does not have strict special dimensions (Bourdieu 2005, 33), What it does have, is characterizing elements to which the actors (expatriates) need to relate. I showed that disregards their privilege and mobility, expatriates are bound to dwell in specific spaces within the city. These spaces are created through three different push and pull mechanisms that influences the expatriate lifeworlds. The first one being the historical trajectories of Nairobi – colonialist racially segregating policies, from which post-colonial economic segregation emerged. The second mechanism is the notion of insecurity, on the street, but also within places of leisure; and thirdly, the multiple forms of Othering as done by local Nairobians as well as by expatriates. These mechanisms not only confine expatriate movement, but more importantly define the characteristics of the Bourdieusian field in which the expatriates find themselves, and to which they have to relate in order to construct a place of home.

Rob’s<sup>36</sup> aforementioned comment – the paradox between having inclusive values while living an exclusionary life – rings true to me. While there might be other values present in other different social groups within expatriate circles in Nairobi, I did observe these same values, and the same paradox with the people I spend the most time with. I see this as the expatriate example of, in the words of Bourdieu: “the absurd opposition between individual and society” (1990a, 65). The clash between the values, expectations, and different forms of capital of the individuals coming to Nairobi, and the characteristics of the structure of the city they chose to build a place of home in. What is needed to succeed in constructing a place of home situated in such a paradoxical situation is described in the third and last chapter of this thesis.

---

<sup>36</sup> Interview, George, 19-02-2019.

### 3. *Settling in*

*“To be rooted is perhaps the most important and least recognized need of the human soul”* – Simone Weil (1987, 41).

In the previous chapters I set the stage for the last part of this thesis. I described the motivational reasons expatriates have for coming to Nairobi in chapter one, and the ways in which the structure of this city influence the spatial dimensions of the expatriate lifestyle in chapter two. Simultaneously, I mapped out the elements that characterize the expatriate bubble as a Bourdieusian field. In this third and last chapter, I describe how these two main elements relate.

In line with Bourdieu’s notion of *habitus*, I show the relationship between the actors (the expatriates), and the social fields they inhabit (the Nairobi expatriate community), and how the dynamic between the two relates to the construction of a place of home. I argue that those who have developed a certain “feel for the game,” (Bourdieu 1990a, 108) – dispositions that are similar to other expatriates and in some way *work* within the structure of the city – are likely to acknowledge Nairobi as a place of home. This opposes those who do not feel like a fish in water in the field in which they dwell, which I have been one of. I describe both, thereby taking into account my own experience, to finally come to a clearer description on how the construction of a place of home comes into being within the city of Nairobi.

#### *Fish in water*

When I asked Harry<sup>37</sup> whether he thinks an expat bubble exists, he started laughing and said:

“Yes, of course.”

“Yeah?” I replied, hoping for a more detailed answer.

“Yeah, but I don’t think it’s one bubble. I think it’s multiple bubbles,” after which he started to describe the diversity within the expat community. He described bubbles on the basis of the particular neighbourhoods, expatriate age, occupation, nationality and duration of stay.

“People staying here for two years, for five years, for ten years... They will mainly hang out with ‘ten-year people.’”

In the previous chapters, I have used a rather generalizing way of describing western expatriates in Nairobi. Therefore, I hereby want to stress that although there are broad similarities within expatriate

---

<sup>37</sup> Interview, Harry, 25-02-2019.

circles (e.g. coming to Nairobi for a career and/or in search of a cosmopolitan lifestyle, as discussed in chapter one), it remains difficult to write about the “typical” expatriate. Perhaps even more now we are living in an increasingly globalizing world, the backgrounds of those who come to Kenya are arguably becoming more and more diverse. Therefore, looking at all the expatriates I spoke to, it is difficult to pinpoint exactly what the “expatriate culture” is. Also, as Harry points out, there are many different subgroups of expatriates; a multiplicity of bubbles, so to speak. Yet, all these bubbles function within the structure of the broader Nairobi society. And, as I have described in chapter two, this structure has specific characteristics that influence the lifeworlds of expatriates in Nairobi.

I have met expatriates that are continuously positioning themselves within the broader society, and they have been doing this with a certain ease, a certain disposition. They more or less have, in reference to Bourdieu (1992; 1977), developed habits and ideas that are characteristic to being an expatriate in Nairobi. Their habitus has come in sync with the field they inhabit. While this is an ongoing process, a continuous positioning of oneself in a specific space, they developed a disposition that fits the norm of the expatriate bubble. This interconnectedness between a habitus and the field, between the habits, skills and disposition of the expat and the expat community he or she is part of, is described by Bourdieu with the metaphor of a “fish in water,” as he writes: [S]ocial reality exists, so to speak, twice, in things and in minds, in fields and in habitus, outside and inside social [actors]. And when habitus encounters a social world of which it is the product, it is like a ‘fish in water:’ it does not feel the weight of the water and it takes the world about itself for granted” (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992, 127). In the following segment, I will briefly address those by who fit this description, starting with Barbara and Susan, two employees of the UN Office in Nairobi.

A few weeks prior to our interview, I was invited by Barbara to attend the UN Environment Assembly<sup>38</sup> at the UN Office in Nairobi. This gave me the chance to walk around the green, lush UN campus, which houses UNEP<sup>39</sup> and UN-Habitat<sup>40</sup>, and to feel the differences in atmosphere compared to the public streets of Nairobi. Walking around the highly secured campus was yet another example of the steep inequality that is present in the city. As many expatriates were faced with this same steep economic inequality, I noticed one needs to assume an attitude to come to terms with living in the midst of it. And this attitude is what contributes to becoming a “fish in water.” – a habitus that fits its field. I have had many discussions about living a luxurious and privileged lifestyle in a place where poverty is present, and this became a recurring theme in many of my interviews, including the one with Susan and Barbara. I asked them if their views on having more privilege – as opposed to many Kenyans – change over time.

Susan explains: “I feel like I’m judging less. If you live in Europe, [economic] differences and inequalities might not be so prevalent, but they’re still there and your life is still very much built on

---

<sup>38</sup> The UN Environment Assembly was held on 14-03-2019.

<sup>39</sup> United Nations Environment Programme.

<sup>40</sup> United Nations Human Settlement Programme.

them. Like, there's this whole term: 'We've outsourced the class conflict,' which is true. We don't see the people that produce our clothes, but they're still in terrible sweatshops, and you're the one trying to buy the t-shirt even a little less expensive."

Barbara notes: "I think you just *live* it; you know? Before [coming to Nairobi] you conceptually knew that an educated white person in Africa has a lot of privileges, and here you experience it."

"It's still there, [even when you're in Europe]" Susan adds. "Here [Nairobi] you see it much better. And maybe that's better because it makes you reflect; it forces you think about it. It screams in your face. [...]"

"I totally agree," says Barbara. She reflects on being back in Paris for a short time: "All these people think that this is a normal life, having wine on a terrace, surrounded by all these boutiques [...]"

"And then suddenly Europe seems fake, [...]" Susan concludes.

With her last sentence, Susan – and similarly Barbara – shows she adopted a new disposition that more closely reflects her life in Nairobi; one that put living in Europe in a new perspective. Earlier in the interview Susan said she had trouble changing her perspective when she experienced living amidst the inequality. She mentions she was judging the family in which her white Kenyan born boyfriend grew up in, saying: "You also have to learn not to judge when people live with such discrepancy and such inequality, and are accepting that on a daily basis." But her outlook changed, she now likes the realism of her life in Nairobi, showing her that the world is unequal, and that she *is* part of a bubble, whether she is in Europe or in Africa. In Nairobi she is just more aware of this. While changing her disposition took time and can be perceived as an ongoing struggle since ethical questions regarding facing the economic inequality will remain nonetheless, she does show a willingness to alter her perspective, which makes the construction of a place of home easier for her.

Not only is the discrepancy between the privileged and the poor prominently visible in Nairobi, the perceived inequality also lies at the basis of virtually all elements that characterize the structure of the expatriate field. Those who are faced with this inequality make tangible and empirically observable examples of adaptation to a new habitus. Therefore, dealing with privilege and perceived inequality is the subject of practically all examples listed in this segment, the next one being Madison.

Madison<sup>41</sup>, a Dutch expat, described a gradual process of normalization during an interview. She told me that she was hypothetically considering living outside the affluent neighbourhoods. She noticed that she is currently hardly integrated into Kenyan society, but since she was living "like a king;" enjoying a fancy apartment with pool, she did not feel like giving this up.

"I was looking around, looking at how other expats live, who are also my friends, and I thought: 'oh, well, maybe this [luxurious] lifestyle is *normal*.' [...] Yet, in a way it doesn't feel normal at all, to

---

<sup>41</sup> Interview, Madison, translated from Dutch, 17-04-2019.

live in such a way. [...] I'm very curious about what it would be like to go back to the Netherlands; if I would miss this lifestyle, or if it is something that I have here, just because it fits the context."<sup>42</sup>

Habitus is described by Bourdieu himself as “[s]ystems of durable, transposable dispositions, *structured structures* predisposed to function as *structuring structures*, that is, as principles which generate and organize practices and representations that can be objectively adapted to their outcomes without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the *operations* necessary in order to attain them. Objectively “regulated” and “regular” without being in any way the product of obedience to rules, they can be collectively orchestrated without being the product of the organizing action of a conductor” (Bourdieu 1990b, 53). Especially the last sentence explains the variety in which these structuring and structured dispositions can be indefinitely varied. I understand it as an unguided process of normalization within a community, collectively yet unconsciously positioning themselves in a broader society, of which Madison’s story is an example. She adjusted her sense of what is “normal” in accordance to the expat community in which she lives, not in accordance to what is “normal” in the broader society. She notes that the way she lives would definitely not be “normal” in the Netherlands. Madison found herself affected by those around her, who have structured her lifestyle, her construction of a place of home, while her lifestyle has become a structuring structure by itself for those around her.

Abigail<sup>43</sup>, who took great care in creating a social space around her with people that made her feel at home, and who stayed for two-plus years in Nairobi, notes reflectively: “I find a home in this community because these people [other expatriates] feel so like me. Well, not like me, everybody feels quite different [...], just the same open-minded explorative perspective on the world. So, for me, every step in my life I found a community that represents me better. Or I’m growing in to that person that belongs in that community, could be both.”

She recalled feeling alienated when she revisited her hometown in the US.

“[I]t’s like a reverse culture shock. Going home and seeing the things that matter to people, don’t *really* matter. Materialism, and everything. Plenty of materialism here as well, but yeah, it’s kind of a puzzle that doesn’t exactly fit anymore. So, I guess that’s why you start to feel at home here. With your community you’re growing in the same direction.”

Her embodied field (the Nairobi expat bubble) differed from the field Abigail encountered when she visited her hometown, as if she became a stranger to her previous community. Since she points towards the observed materialism within her former field, it is likely that her experience gave rise to encounter the differences in habitat – exposing the previously known social structures as a façade for her.

---

<sup>42</sup> This quote is translated from Dutch.

<sup>43</sup> Interview, Abigail, 13-02-2019.

Bear in mind that the habitus needed to construct a place of home *fits* the structure of the city. The expatriates that are used as an example in this segment, saw their habitus change towards one that fits more closely the structures of the field which they inhabit better. They all were susceptible to this change, making change easier for them to feel it home.

Not all expatriates that I met were this susceptible to a change in their habitus, at least not from the very start. The following segment describes the experiences of Sophia and Freddie, who both had a major problem with accepting the position they had within the Kenyan society, and therefore experienced difficulties in constructing a place of home.

### *Longing to belong*

Much like Abigail's experience of her revisiting her home town, some expatriates coming to Nairobi experience a similar discrepancy between two fields. Sophia<sup>44</sup>, for example, did not feel like she belonged in the field she became part of in Nairobi, during her first year in the city.

"I was a bit put off by the fact that you can rent a house on the beach with 12 white people while you're in Africa. As expats, this is what you would do most of the weekends. You go with 12 or 15 expats and you rent this amazing house. In the first year, this made me uncomfortable. I was like 'What the fuck is this, this is really rich stuff, all these white people together.' [I was] kind of very judgmental of [my social group] which I wasn't really close to in my first year, and I did not feel understood."

But, also for Sophia, a change occurred after she started to connect with the people she was living with, who were "really there" for her when two of her best friends left Nairobi, leaving her in tears.

"I started to do more expat stuff [...]. After one year I accepted being a white person in the bubble and it became actually enjoyable."

It was not until after the first year in Nairobi that Sophia started to construct a place of home. This opposes Freddie's<sup>45</sup> experience, who described in chapter two that he did not feel at home in Nairobi. He also saw living a privileged life segregated from the rest of society as a problem, yet one he could or would not overcome. I asked whether he could justify his luxurious lifestyle by thinking "that's just the way society is structured."

"I would hate that, [...]" he said. "I would feel very uncomfortable living like this, being in a country where people starve to death, struggling from one season to the other because of the crops. Because of climate change. Because of the lack of electricity. Because school fees, health bills. That is just not a problem for you [as an expatriate]. You don't even think about it [as being a problem]."

Once again, the inequality in the country created a rift between his habitus and the expat community, which Freddie could not overcome. This opposes the previous examples of Barbara, Susan,

---

<sup>44</sup> Interview, Sophia, 13-02-2019.

<sup>45</sup> Interview, Freddie, 13-03-2019.

Madison, and even Abigail and Sophia, to some degree, for they either positively changed their perspective on the inequality, perceiving life in Kenya as “more real,” or simply accepted their place in society as a privileged westerner living in an expat community. Sophia, in this sense, has also had issues with her position as a white person in Kenya, but changed her disposition through contact with her peers. She finally started to see Nairobi as “a” place of home (chapter one). Freddie, on the other hand, was unable to alter his stance on the matter and has thereby never felt at home in the city.

I would like to add one more example, namely George’s<sup>46</sup> attempt to construct a place of home in Nairobi. When I asked him if he started to perceive Nairobi as a place of home, he said the short answer is “No.” For him, the main reason for this is the transient nature of the community he found himself in. He mentions he had about seven “very close friends” in the space of three months, who all came and went. After going through the cycle of becoming friends, altering one’s disposition, finding new structures to dwell in and eventually losing that again, he became “exhausted”. “I can’t do it again, I can’t make that group of friends again,” he notes.

The transient nature of the expatriate bubble is in this sense a great example of the journey expatriates go through when they are faced with significant changes within their social circle, but it can definitely be an obstacle for expatriates to construct a place of home. As shown in the more successful attempts, it mostly took time and contact with peers to find a habitus that aligns with the structures of the field. When the contact with peers is too fleeting, one has arguably more difficulty in forming habits, values and skills that contribute to the development towards this habitus.

### *A stranger to the community*

As mentioned in the methodology, I came to Nairobi to live the expatriate lifestyle for three and a half months. While this is a short time for someone to arrive, settle in, and make an attempt to construct a home, I do think my experiences have value. They gave me a glimpse of what it would be like to migrate to a developing country, to face the inequality and come to terms with the position one has within society. Also, it showed me the transient nature of the expat bubble. In the following segment, I thus briefly reflect on my personal experiences, on why I had yet to start to feel at home, and which factors contributed to my inability to do so.

I experienced the ethical dilemmas that came into play when living a privileged life in Nairobi as very confusing, not knowing exactly how to behave towards less privileged locals. It raised questions about whether or not to give money to those that clearly need it; whether or not to bargain when shopping; how to react when someone charges more because I am a (privileged) foreigner; or whether it was

---

<sup>46</sup> Interview, George, 19-03-2019.

justified for me to be in Nairobi in the first place. It felt as if I had to learn through observing what others (expatriates) were doing in such cases and were thinking about such issues. For me, this amounted to experiencing the Nairobi life with a steep learning curve. To not lose face in front of locals, I discussed the social rules with those I deemed as equals, ergo: other expatriates. How to behave and position oneself within the Nairobi society was therefore a recurring subject when talking to expatriates. I tried to create certainty out of an uncertain situation by measuring myself alongside their stances, values and mannerisms. So, in this regard, I could see myself altering my dispositions, adapting a habitus that more closely fits the structures of the Nairobi expat bubble.

I strongly experienced the Nairobi expat community as bubble-like. It often felt like an all-encompassing social group within a specific stratum, which at worst could feel suffocating. I found myself “landing” in an expatriate social group during my arrival, meeting people through house parties in my first week. And while having this large network at my disposal was pleasant, the interconnectedness of all my newly made contacts gave it a closed off and bubble-like feeling. Therefore, I can also understand that if one does not recognize similar habits or skills, or a similar background to the expatriates in the social group they find themselves in from the start, and therefore is not open to adapt to their habitus, the construction of a place of home becomes increasingly more difficult.

*After a quiet yet relaxing Saturday, I got ready to enjoy the second day of Africa Nouveau; a music festival at Ngong Racecourse, just outside the city. I bought tickets for the whole weekend. Around 4pm, I took an Uber to the festival terrain together with Amelia, a Belgian expat whom I connected with at the start of my fieldwork. I noticed that both Amelia and I felt the need to distance ourselves from the social circle we met each other in. To create our own space, with our own friends. It is my fifth week in Nairobi, and I had the urge to make this place my home.*

*Amelia saw some familiar faces right after we arrived at the festival. I introduced myself to Evelyn, Ruth and Charlie, three Parisian expatriates. We chatted about my research subject, and a few other topics. Evelyn worked in the social sciences and was very interested in my observations on the expat community. It was great to interact with people outside the social group that was becoming familiar to me.*

*Later in the afternoon roughly ten other familiar faces – expats who I met at previous parties – joined the group. Olivia, who was in my current friend group, was noticeably pleased to see Evelyn. Surprised by their visible familiarity, I asked: “Huh? Do you two know each other?” Wittingly, Olivia replied with: “Ha! You thought you found people outside the social circle!”<sup>47</sup>*

---

<sup>47</sup> Fieldnotes, Africa Nouveau Festival, 09-03-2019.



The people I interacted with, especially in the first couple of weeks of my stay, were mostly expatriates that lived in the country for a relatively extensive time, many being close to a two-year mark. Most of them already developed a habitus that is more in sync with a Nairobi expatriate way of life. Because I had an objective – researching the dynamics of the expatriate community – I became quite critical towards their position in Kenyan society. I was asking questions that I was not supposed to ask, and questioned relationships that had a longstanding history. I presume that due to me being unacquainted with inequality, my analytical outlook was regarded as judgmental. As a result, I became the outsider, a stranger to the community. This broadened the gap between me and my peers, therefore making it increasingly difficult to connect. This also made me unwilling to adapt to their habitus and made it impossible for me to construct a place of home. I longed to like a fish in water again, to be in a place where I would not have to adjust. Knowing my departure was merely a couple of months away did not help either, for it had me focusing on my familiar social circle, and thereby decreased my dependency to other expatriates. No new place of home was constructed.

## *Conclusion*

I have seen that Nairobi expatriates construct a place of home in accordance with those they deem as equals on the basis of economic, cultural and symbolic capital. Through normalization of their privileged lifestyle, they not only create a segregated sphere – the expat bubble – but also co-create a habitus that fits the social environment they find themselves in.

The transient nature of the expatriate field in Nairobi clearly shows how the habitus can be “structuring structures,” having “the ability to generate practices adjusted to specific situations” (Bourdieu 1996, 5). They reflect that which is needed for western expatriates to construct a place of home within Nairobi. The specific characteristics of the habitus are thus a reflection of the structure of the city, which was discussed in chapter two. In this sense, the ways in which expatriates construct a place of home can be generalized, yet in Nairobi it happens through adaptation to the specific structures that characterize the city and give shape to the expat bubble.

# Conclusion: Home

*Ubi bene ibi patria* (“Homeland is where (life) is good”) – Latin expression

In this thesis, I contributed to a better understanding of the process of how western expatriates construct a place of home in Nairobi. I have done this through an in-depth study of western mobile elites who migrated to the Kenyan capital. By describing the friction between expatriate ideals and the structures of the Kenyan capital, and how this friction gives shape to a specific livelihood; the Nairobi expat bubble. Furthermore, I described both successful and unsuccessful attempts to construct a home, linking Bourdieu’s notion of habitus to the process expatriates go through. In this last segment, the conclusion, I tie all previous arguments together to construct one final statement. Furthermore, I discuss the limitations of this thesis and will provide suggestions for further research.

## CHAPTER 1 – ARRIVING IN NAIROBI

The aim of chapter one was to describe the motivating reasons of *free moving* expatriates have to come to Nairobi. These reasons can be linked to the two dominant ways in which expatriates are portrayed in the literature; either as organization men living in expat bubbles, or as cosmopolitans (van Bochove and Engbersen 2015, 295).

1. Organization men hope to gain cultural and/or symbolic capital within their occupational field. The safety and comfort of the expat bubble let career driven expatriates increase their capital without having to actively engage with Nairobi society.
2. The romanticized cosmopolitan quest of expatriates seeking “adventure” in Nairobi clashes with the reality of the city. Acknowledging the dangers of Nairobi, they find themselves falling back on the expatriate community and its comforts, even if this goes against their own principles.

These two dominant narratives do not cancel each other out. I demonstrated that both are driven towards living a secluded life with a similar level of integration in the broader Kenyan society.

## CHAPTER 2 – THE STRUCTURES OF NAIROBI

In chapter two I outlined the expat bubble as a figurative Bourdieusian field, created in accordance with the *structures* of the city of Nairobi. Disregarding their privilege – and through their differentiation in capital – expatriates are bound to dwell in specific spaces within the city. These spaces are created through three different characteristics that influences the expatriate lifeworlds:

1. The historical colonialist policies that caused racial segregation, from which post-colonial economic residential segregation emerged, remains to shape expatriate spaces. Western expatriates can afford to live in affluent neighbourhoods; the formerly white residential areas.
2. The construction of a safe/unsafe dichotomy by expatriates. Within the UN Blue zone, expatriates structure their livelihood through fortification, the presence of security guards and by avoiding public space. Thrilling stories by present and past expatriates further strengthen the dichotomy.
3. The Othering, done by local Nairobians as well as by expatriates, further obstructs attempts to integrate into Kenyan society.

While the spatial dimensions of the expat bubble are fluid and intangible, the mentioned characteristics do shape the livelihood of the expatriates. They define the characteristics of the expat bubble as a Bourdieusian field, in which expatriates attempt to construct a place of home.

### CHAPTER 3 – SETTLING IN

In chapter three I show how the relation between expatriates, and the Nairobi expatriate bubble assists in the expatriate attempt to construct a place of home. I argue for a specific adaptive habitus that *fits* within the characteristics of the field; the expat bubble. This fittingness is mainly on the basis of coming to terms with having a privileged position within the broader society. Concluding:

1. Expatriates willing to change their disposition through contact with peers – and thereby forming a habitus – found themselves constructing a place of home.
2. This opposes those who were unwilling or unable to alter their disposition – and thereby failed to form a habitus that fits the field.
3. Personally, I was unwilling to change my disposition because I did not see my social group as peers through which I could normalize my life in Nairobi. I remained a stranger to the community.

A place of home is constructed in accordance to those who expatriates deem as equal. The structure of the city shapes a very specific field, and thereby a specific habitus that *fits* in this field. This habitus is formed through interaction and adaptation between expatriates that are in a similar same position.

### *Final notes*

I was weary when I started writing about the meaning of home. I saw the concept as ambiguous and thought I was bound to arrive at a platitude in the line of “home is where the heart is,” or any other quote that would highlight the subjectivity of the term. Yet, through close examination of the transient expatriate community, and with the use of Bourdieu’s reflexive sociology, I started seeing a pattern in the way expatriates position themselves within the broader society, which showed me the construction of a place of home – and thereby the meaning of home – could have theoretical value, especially when perceived through the lens of Bourdieu’s reflexive sociology.

Because expatriates come to a place where they do not know the social rules, they are arguably in a state of disorientation. This disorientation is for a large part driven by being unacquainted with seeing inequality and having a privileged position in Nairobi. The state of disorientation makes them cling to those who have already faced the same questions the newcomers encounter. Newcomers learn from the veterans, adapting to their ways. They are being handed the baton of the previous generation of expatriates, which, in turn, they will hand over in a later stage. This opposes newcomers who are unwilling to adhere to the structuring power of the expat community. They remain in a place of disorientation and will seek their place of home elsewhere.

In this thesis I showed the specific circumstances under which the baton is handed over to the next generation of expatriates. By doing so, and by building on Bourdieu's reflexive sociology, the expatriate construction of a place of home thereby shows the nuanced way in which power is conveyed and social order is preserved within and across generations. Thus, when a home is constructed in the context of the western expat bubble in Nairobi, *home is the figurative space where the preservation of social order takes place*. This meaning of the term combines Short's notion of home as a space where social class is constructed, challenged and altered (1999, x), without disregarding the relational context of those who are constructing a home, as noted by Ahmed (in Mallett 2004, 79)<sup>48</sup>.

This closing remark also encapsulates the social implications of this thesis; that the specific circumstances under which social order is transferred can vary, but power differentiation is maintained. This implies that those who are privileged and in power remain to be so as long as the status quo is unchallenged. In the words of Peggy McIntosh (2018, 98), the privileged ones ought to ask themselves what they will do with such knowledge: "[I]t is an open question whether we will choose to use unearned advantage to weaken hidden systems of advantage, and whether we will use any of our arbitrarily awarded power to try to reconstruct power systems on a broader base." An active stance in fighting social and economic inequality is both a needed and crucial driver for change. Responsibility is a by-product of having privilege in an unequal social world.

### *Limitations and suggestions*

I observed that the construction of a place of home is a relatively time-consuming process. Because of this, expatriates that have been living in Nairobi for five years tend to have a completely different view on their place in society than those who only stayed there for a year. Let alone those who were there for merely three and a half months, as I did. Therefore, the first limitation is that I have not been able to experience the construction of a place of home to a full extent. I wrote in chapter three that I did not feel at home in Nairobi. So much of the data has been derived from listening to those who have. Complete immersion in the expatriate lifeworld, and thereby a true insider ethnography (O'Reilly 2009, 111), has

---

<sup>48</sup> Referring back to the introduction (*A place of home*).

been practically impossible, for I cannot completely shed the “backpacker mentality”<sup>49</sup> that comes with a short-term stay. I can imagine that I have overlooked certain characteristics of the city that play a significant part in shaping expatriate livelihoods, because my short-term stay has caused a bias. A practicality that would help to overcome this limitation, would be to have a second opinion by a long-term staying expatriate, to see if they recognize themselves in the process I describe. Therefore, I suggest further research should be done by an anthropologist who either has been a Nairobi expatriate for five plus years (complete insider); or who is a Kenyan local (complete outsider) – to strive for a cross-checked perspective.

Furthermore, the fundamental theory within this thesis states that expatriates create a certain “feel for the game” that fits the structures of the expat community (Bourdieu 1990a, 108). This is done through interaction with those who they see as equal, in this case other expatriates. But since globalization is causing an increasingly interconnected world (Eriksen 2007, 8), the interaction of expatriates might also for a great deal consist of communication with people that live outside of Kenya. The use of social media, and proprietary videotelephony has already changed the experience of migration and will continue to do so in the future. This has not been incorporated in my research. How digital media supports or conflicts a construction of a place of home abroad is thereby a suggestion for further research.

Lastly, and most importantly, since the concluding societal repercussion state that responsibility is a by-product of having privilege, this thesis becomes a call for future (anthropologic) research on how to lessen or end the social inequality that is present in Nairobi. While this problem is systematic and change might take many decades, its social significance makes further research pressing.

---

<sup>49</sup> Interview, Oliver, 20-02-2019.

# Bibliography

- Ahmed, Sara. 1999. "Home and Away: Narratives of Migration and Estrangement." *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 2 (3): 329–47.
- Alvarez, Maria. 2016. "Reasons for Action: Justification, Motivation, Explanation." Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy. 2016. <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/reasons-just-vs-expl/>.
- Anderson, Ian. 2011. "Mzungu! Mzungu! Muzungu!" Polishing Peanuts. 2011. <http://polishingpeanuts.com/volunteer-abroad/mzungu-mzungu-muzungu/>.
- Anderson, Mark. 2017. "NGOs: Blessing or Curse?" The Africa Report. 2017. <https://www.theafricareport.com/777/ngos-blessing-or-curse/>.
- Bauman, Zygmunt. 1998. *Globalization: The Human Consequences*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Bochove, Marianne van, and Godfried Engbersen. 2015. "Beyond Cosmopolitanism and Expat Bubbles: Challenging Dominant Representations of Knowledge Workers and Trailing Spouses." *Population, Space and Place* 21 (4): 295–309.
- Boniburini, Ilaria. 2015. "Production of Hegemony and Production of Space in Nairobi." *Territoire En Mouvement* 27: 2–20.
- Bourdieu, Pierre. 1977. *Outline of a Theory of Practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- . 1986. "The Forms of Capital." In *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, edited by John Richardson, 241–58. Westport: Greenwood.
- . 1990a. *In Other Words: Essays Towards a Reflexive Sociology*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- . 1990b. *The Logic of Practice*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- . 1996. *The Field of Cultural Production*. Edited by Randal Johnson. New York: Columbia University Press.
- . 2005. "The Political Field, the Social Science Field, and Journalistic Field." In *Bourdieu and the Journalistic Field*, edited by R. Benson and E. Neveu, 29–47. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Bourdieu, Pierre, and Loïc Wacquant. 1992. *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Briggs, Emma. 2018. "Migrants Are Migrants." Medium. 2018. <https://medium.com/bigger-picture/migrants-are-migrants-c11e5d3b47c9>.
- Chavez, Christina. 2008. "Conceptualizing from the Inside: Advantages, Complications, and Demands on Insider Positionality." *The Qualitative Report* 13 (3): 474–94.
- Cieraad, Irene. 1999. *At Home: An Anthropology of Domestic Space*. New York: Syracuse University Press.
- Desgropes, Amélie, and Sophie Taupin. 2011. "Kibera: The Biggest Slum in Africa?" *Les Cahiers de*

- l'Afrique de l'Est* 44: 23–34.
- Elliot, Anthony, and John Urry. 2010. *Mobile Lives*. London: Routledge.
- Embassypages. 2019. “Kenya Embassies & Consulates.” Embassypages. 2019. <https://www.embassypages.com/kenya>.
- Eriksen, Thomas Hylland. 2007. *Globalization: The Key Concepts*. Oxford: Berg Publishers.
- Fajnzylber, Pablo, Daniel Lederman, and Norman Loayza. 2002. “Inequality and Violent Crime.” *The Journal of Law and Economics* 45 (1): 1–39.
- Fatunde, Ayomide. 2019. “About Being the Majority.” Toxically Feminine. 2019. <https://toxicallyfeminine.com/blog/2019/2/10/about-being-the-majority>.
- Favell, A. 2008. *Eurostars and Eurocities: Free Movement and Mobility in an Integrating Europe*. Malden: Blackwell.
- Fechter, Anne-Meike. 2007. *Transnational Lives: Expatriates in Indonesia*. Hampshire: Ashgate Publishing Limited.
- Goldstein, Daniel M. 2010. “Toward a Critical Anthropology of Security.” *Current Anthropology* 51 (4): 487–517.
- Greenway, Roger S., and Timothy M. Monsma. 1989. *Cities: Missions' New Frontier*. Kentwood: Baker Book House.
- Hannerz, U. 1990. “Cosmopolitans and Locals in World Culture.” *Theory, Culture Society* 7: 237–51.
- Jackson, Michael. 1995. *At Home in the World*. Berkeley: Dure University Press.
- Jansson, André. 2016. “Mobile Elites: Understanding the Ambiguous Lifeworlds of Sojourners, Dwellers and Homecomers.” *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 19 (5): 421–34.
- Junior Worldmark Encyclopedia of World Cities. 2019. “Nairobi.” Encyclopedia. 2019. <https://www.encyclopedia.com/places/africa/kenyan-political-geography/nairobi>.
- K'Akumu, O. A., and W. H.A. Olima. 2007. “The Dynamics and Implications of Residential Segregation in Nairobi.” *Habitat International* 31 (1): 87–99.
- Kanter, R.M. 1995. *World Class: Thriving Locally in the Global Economy*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Kaufmann, V. 2002. *Re-Thinking Mobility: Contemporary Sociology*. Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Limited.
- Kejitan, Vincent. 2018. “The Dangerous Drug Used to Spike Drinks in Night Clubs.” Standard Media. 2018. <https://www.standardmedia.co.ke/ureport/article/2001295690/the-dangerous-drug-used-to-spike-drinks-in-night-clubs>.
- Kennedy, P. 2004. “Making Global Society: Friendship Networks among Transnational Professionals in the Building Design Industry.” *Global Networks* 4: 157–79.
- LeBas, Adrienne. 2013. “Violence and Urban Order in Nairobi, Kenya and Lagos, Nigeria.” *Studies in Comparative International Development* 48 (3): 240–62.
- Lemanski, Charlotte. 2004. “A New Apartheid? Urban Spatiality, (Fear of) Crime, and Segregation in

- Cape Town, South Africa.” *Environment&Urbanization* 16 (2): 101–12.
- Lévi-Strauss, Claude. 1962. *The Savage Mind*. Paris: Librairie Plon.
- Lindell, Johan, and Karin Fast. 2016. “The Elastic Mobility of Business Elites – Negotiating the ‘Home’ and ‘Away’ Continuum.” *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 19 (5): 435–49.
- Lizardo, Omar. 2004. “The Cognitive Origins of Bourdieu’s Habitus.” *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour* 34 (4): 375–401.
- Mallett, Shelley. 2004. “Understanding Home: A Critical Review of the Literature.” *The Sociological Review* 52 (1): 62–89.
- Manning, Peter K. 1973. “Existential Sociology.” *The Sociological Quarterly* 14 (2): 200–225.
- McIntosh, Peggy. 2018. “White Privilege and Male Privilege.” In *Privilege*, 28–40. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Miller, Johnny. 2018. “Unequal Scenes.” *Unequal Scenes*. 2018. <https://unequalscenes.com/nairobi>.
- Ministerie van Buitenlandse Zaken. 2019. “Reisadvies Kenia.” *Nederland Wereldwijd*. 2019. <https://www.nederlandwereldwijd.nl/landen/kenia/reizen/reisadvies>.
- Nader, Laura. 1972. “Up the Anthropologist: Perspectives Gained from Studying Up.” In *Reinventing Anthropology*, edited by Dell Hymes, 284–311. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Nutini, Hugo G. 1971. “The Ideological Bases of Lévi-Strauss’s Structuralism.” *American Anthropologist* 73 (3): 537–44.
- O’Reilly, Karen. 2009. *Ethnographic Methods*. 1st ed. New York: Sage Publications Ltd.
- Oberg, K. 1960. “Cultural Shock: Adjustment to New Cultural Environments.” *Practical Anthropology* 7: 177–82.
- Olima, Washington. 2013. “Residents’ Participation in Neighbourhood Management and Maintenance: Experiences and Lessons from Nairobi, Kenya.” *Housing Symposium* 3: 293–305.
- Oxford Dictionaries. 2019. “Definition of Immigrant in English.” Oxford University Press. 2019. <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/immigrant>.
- Pantelidou, Stella, and Tom K.J. Craig. 2006. “Culture Shock and Social Support: A Survey in Greek Migrant Students.” *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology* 41 (10): 777–81.
- Papaioannou, Kostadis J. 2017. “‘Hunger Makes a Thief of Any Man’: Poverty and Crime in British Colonial Asia.” *European Review of Economic History* 21 (1): 1–28.
- Remarque Koutonin, Mawuna. 2015. “Why Are White People Expats When the Rest of Us Are Immigrants?” *The Guardian*. 2015. <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development-professionals-network/2015/mar/13/white-people-expats-immigrants-migration>.
- Rosenberg, Alexander. 2016. *Philosophy of Social Science*. 5th ed. Boulder: Westview Press.
- Sartre, Jean-Paul. 1946. *Existentialism Is a Humanism*. Paris: Les Editions Nagel.
- Schwartz, Richard H., and Andrea B. Weaver. 1998. “Rohypnol, the Date Rape Drug.” *Clinical Pediatrics* 37 (5): 321.
- Secorun Palet, Laura. 2015. “Let’s Kill off ‘Expats.’” *OZY*. 2015. <https://www.ozy.com/immodest->



- proposal/lets-kill-off-expat/62611.
- Sevenzo, Farai, Faith Karimi, and Laura Smith-Spark. 2019. "At Least 21 Killed as Kenya Hotel Siege Is Declared Over." CNN. 2019. <https://edition.cnn.com/2019/01/16/africa/kenya-hotel-complex-terror-attack/index.html>.
- Sheller, Mimi, and John Urry. 2006. "The New Mobilities Paradigm." *Environment and Planning A* 38 (2): 207–26.
- Short, John Rennie. 1999. "Foreword." In *At Home: An Anthropology of Domestic Space*, ix–x. New York: Syracuse University Press.
- Smith, Constance. 2015. "'They Are Just Terrorists': Constructing Security Claims in Nairobi." *Etnofoor* 27 (2): 133–55.
- Starks, Helene, and Susan Brown Trinidad. 2007. "Choose Your Method: A Comparison of Phenomenology, Discourse Analysis, and Grounded Theory." *Qualitative Health Research* 17 (10): 1372–80.
- Staszak, Jean-François. 2008. "Other / Otherness." *Publié Dans International Encyclopedia of Human Geography* Elsevier.: 1–7.
- Stoebenau, Kirsten. 2009. "Symbolic Capital and Health: The Case of Women's Sex Work in Antananarivo, Madagascar." *Social Science and Medicine* 68 (11): 2045–52.
- Taft, R. 1977. "Coping with Unfamiliar Cultures." In *Studies in Cross-Cultural Psychology*, edited by N. Warren, vol. 1. London: Academic Press.
- Tonder, Christian L. van. 2013. "Migration as Personal Transition." *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences* 82: 342–50.
- Tulshyan, Ruchika. 2015. "'Expat' Under Fire: The Word Is Not Racist, Argues A Global Nomad." *The Wall Street Journal*. 2015. <https://blogs.wsj.com/expat/2015/04/02/expat-under-fire-a-global-nomad-argues-against-those-saying-its-racist/>.
- UN-Habitat. 2015. "General Information on Internship at the United Nations Headquarters in Nairobi, Kenya." Nairobi: UN-Habitat.
- Weenink, D. 2008. "Cosmopolitanism as a Form of Capital: Parents Preparing Their Children for a Globalizing World." *Sociology* 42 (6): 1089–1106.
- Weil, Simone. 1987. *The Need for Roots: Prelude to a Declaration of Duties Towards Mankind*. New York: Ark.
- Willig, Ida. 2012. "Newsroom Ethnography in a Field Perspective." *Journalism* 14 (3): 372–87.
- Wood, Barbara. 1988. *Green City in the Sun*. Random Hou. New York.
- World Bank. 2019. "GINI Index (World Bank Estimate)." World Bank, Development Research Group. 2019. <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SI.POV.GINI>.
- World Tourism Organization and United Nations Environment Programme. 2019. "Baseline Report on the Integration of Sustainable Consumption and Production Patterns into Tourism Policies." Madrid.



# *Appendix 1 – Informed consent form*

I volunteer to participate in a research project conducted by Jasper Steggink, master student: Sustainable Citizenship / Cultural Anthropology / Utrecht University, The Netherlands. I understand that the project is designed to gather information about the expat bubble in Nairobi, Kenya.

1. The researcher for this study is Jasper Steggink who can be reached at:  
j.steggink@students.uu.nl | +31 (0)6 31 09 82 55 | +254 (0)70 1699 346

You can always contact the researcher for:

- If you have questions, concerns, or complaints;
- If you think the research has harmed you, or
- If you wish to withdraw from the study.

2. My participation in this project is voluntary. I understand that I will not be paid for my participation. I may withdraw and discontinue participation at any time without penalty.
3. If I feel uncomfortable in any way during the interview session, I have the right to decline to answer any question or to end the interview.
4. Participation involves being interviewed by Jasper Steggink (student Master Sustainable Citizenship: Cultural Anthropology, Utrecht University). The interview will last approximately 45-60 minutes. Notes will be written during the interview. An audio tape of the interview and subsequent dialogue will be made. If I don't want to be taped, I have the right to decline and only written notes will be taken.
5. I understand that the researcher Jasper Steggink will not identify me by my full name in any reports using information obtained from this interview, and that my confidentiality as a participant in this study will remain secure. If I, however, have the feeling that my personal situation as a participant is uncomfortable, I have the right to decline the publication of this interview in the master thesis.
6. This interview will be analysed by the researcher and may be reviewed by thesis committee of Utrecht University. They can be reached at Utrecht University - Dept. of Anthropology / Padualaan 14 / 3584 CH Utrecht / The Netherlands / Ph.: +31 30 2534588 / Fax: +31 30 2534666
7. I have read and understood the explanation provided to me. I have had all my questions answered to my satisfaction, and I voluntarily agree to participate in this study. My signature below indicates my permission to take part in this research. I will be provided with a copy of this consent form.

\_\_\_\_\_  
My Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of the researcher  
(Jasper Steggink)

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

For further information, please contact:  
Jasper Steggink | j.steggink@students.uu.nl  
+31 (0)6 31 09 82 55 | +254 (0)70 1699 346

## *Appendix 2 – List of interviewees*

I conducted semi-structured interviews with the following people:

<i>Date</i>	<i>Name (pseudonym)</i>	<i>Native country</i>
06-02-2019	Sophia	France
11-02-2019	Arya	Sweden
13-02-2019	Abigail	U.S.
15-02-2019	Theo	Kenya
18-02-2019	Ivy	U.S.
19-02-2019	George	U.K.
20-02-2019	Oliver	Denmark
25-02-2019	Harry	Ireland
28-02-2019	Jack	Kenya
04-03-2019	Ethan	U.S.
13-03-2019	Freddie	France
18-03-2019	Noah	Kenya
20-03-2019	Barbara	Spain
20-03-2019	Susan	Germany
21-03-2019	Dorothy	Spain
23-03-2019	Linda	Mexico
24-03-2019	Oscar	Mexico
16-04-2019	Ayomide	Nigeria
17-04-2019	Madison	The Netherlands
26-04-2019	Grace	Spain
26-04-2019	Isla	Spain
26-04-2019	Perla	Spain
26-04-2019	Doris	Germany
06-05-2019	Amelia	Belgium