

Title:

Smiling in the face of Precarity:
Housing and Eviction in Hangberg, South Africa

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COMPULSORY DECLARATION

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Abstract:

Much has been written about housing and eviction in South Africa, and they are issues present throughout most of South Africa's recent history. The demolition of places such as Sophiatown or District Six has become some of the most common imagery reflecting the brutality of apartheid South Africa. Yet, evictions and a lack of affordable housing, has been a common feature of the post-apartheid South African city as well. In Hangberg evictions and housing were part of the struggle of ordinary life. With a lack of affordable housing the people living in Hangberg had started to build houses of their own, which in turn made them targets for evictions. To build a house for yourself meant that you might risk violent reprisals from the state. Thus suffering was part of ordinary life for the people I worked with. In the midst of suffering, however, they still aspired towards bettering their lives. I follow Chabal's (2009) argument that it is necessary to both recognise the ways in which people smile and suffer. This is to recognise and honour the ways in which people cope with their suffering. I argue that their smiling can be framed through the notion of agency and aspirations, and their suffering can be framed with the concept of precarity. Focusing on smiling and aspiring allows for an understanding of the capacity which people have to improve their own lives. It is in my opinion a tool for empowering people's voices and agency. Precarity allows us, on the other hand, to understand the multiplicity of constriction and oppression. Through an ethnographic study of housing and eviction in Hangberg, both precarity and aspirations are brought forward as processes shaping human existence. Through their aspirations the people I worked with smiled at the precarity they faced in their ordinary lives. They built houses they were proud of; houses that they imagined would protect them from the sickness and suffering they experienced. Their houses were both a way of improving their lives, but also an attempt at creating a home in Hangberg and a sense of stability. I also reflect on the affect the distribution of precarity had on the people of Hangberg as subjects of the state.

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Chapter one: Introduction

1.0 Background

Much has been written about housing and eviction in South Africa. Both evictions and housing are issues present throughout most of South Africa's recent history. The demolition of places such as Sophiatown or District Six¹ has become some of the most common imagery reflecting the brutality of apartheid South Africa. Yet, evictions and a lack of affordable housing, has been a common feature of the post-apartheid South African city as well. This is, therefore, a topic that continues to receive attention from academics and activists. Besteman (2008) argues that the political change of the 1990's did not bring the life improvements that ordinary South Africans were hoping for. Various texts have already written about the topics of eviction, transformation and housing in the context of the South African city in recent years (Swilling, Humphries and Schubane 1991; Spiegel, Watson and Wilkinson 1996; Oldfield 2000; Cross 1999, 2001; Ross 2005; 2009 Huchzermeyer and Karam 2006; Besteman 2008; Oldfield and Zweig 2010; Banks 2011). What might this dissertation have to add to this large body of literature?

I wish to add to this debate both the analytical concept of precarity as a means of unwrapping the complexities of housing and eviction, and I also wish to bring the notion of agency, through aspirations, into this framework. In line with Oldfield's (2000) argument, I wish to analyse the capacity people have for improving their own lives. I choose to do my research in Hangberg as it was a community that was well established, but which at the same time had the presence of evictions. My intention with the research was to understand the way in which people experienced evictions as a part of ordinary life, but I soon came to realise that understanding housing was central to understanding evictions. Hangberg is situated in the relatively affluent suburb of Hout bay (Institute for Justice and reconciliation 2009).

Hout Bay is small town close to Cape Town, South Africa, on the western coast of the Cape peninsula. The larger Hout Bay area is in many ways a microcosm of South Africa as a whole. During the South African apartheid era it was political practice to place people in what was constructed as four distinct racial categories. These were named "Black", "Coloured",

¹ Areas in Johannesburg and Cape Town from which people were forcefully removed.

“Indian” and “White”. Under the Group areas act of the 1950s these population groups were defined and categorised as racially different were legally segregated. This is a segregation that to a large degree is still present in post-apartheid South Africa, including the Hout Bay area (Institute for Justice and reconciliation 2009). Hout Bay consists of a town centre (or the Hout Bay village) where most of the residents are affluent and are mostly people who would be considered “white”² in the South African context, and two townships. The townships are less affluent and are themselves segregated along the apartheid notions of race. The one, Imizamo Yethu consists mostly of people who are considered “black”, and the other, Hangberg, is mostly inhabited by people who, during apartheid, were classified as “coloured”³. Most of the inhabitants were dependent on the local fishing industry, either directly or indirectly⁴. All over South Africa there is a constant issue where the demand for state subsidised housing is outstripping the supply (Thorn and Oldfield 2011:521). The resources of the state are also not adequate for the infrastructural development needed (Cross 2001). How can life move forward when housing is just not available and when the state cannot deliver security and stability? In fact the state, through evictions, is taking part in creating the instability that people face. What kind of political subject (Foucault 1982) does this create? These are the questions that I set out to answer in this dissertation.

1.1 A settlement out of place: A tale of the divided city

The Hangberg Township was created when the local city council built 44 new houses for people who were at that time classified as “coloured” people and living in the Hout Bay Village. After the Group Areas Act of 1950, the rest of the people categorised as “coloured” were moved from the village to Hangberg, as the Hout Bay village became an area for the people categorised as “white” (Institute for Justice and reconciliation 2009). Since the 1950s, working in the fish processing plants on the harbour or on fishing boats has been the main source of income for the residents of Hangberg as fishing became the main industry in the

² White was the category constructed during apartheid to classify all people seen as of European heritage. This was also the category of people who made up most of the political and economic elite of apartheid South Africa.

³ The relationship between Imizamo Yethu and Hangberg was deeply affected by the status in which the categories “coloured” and “black” held in both apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa. There is a large amount of writing on what it means to be “coloured” in South Africa; Adhikari (2005), Jorritsma (2011) and others. The relationship between the two townships, Hangberg and Imizamo Yethu is something that requires further investigation though.

⁴ People who did not fish or work in one of the factories where often dependent on someone who did fish or sold goods or services to those who lived of fishing.

area. "The increased exploitation of Coloured and African fishing labour after the Second World War created an extremely poor and dependent labour force, incapable of ensuring its own housing needs." (Froestad 2005:338). At the same time, people were being actively forced further away from the Hout Bay village while still staying close enough to serve as a labour reserve. By the 1980's all the people categorised as coloured had been moved, some several times, until they were all residing within what today constitutes Hangberg.

To get to Hangberg from where I lived in the middle of the urban centre of Cape Town I would take the Hout Bay bus that followed the coastal route down the Cape peninsula. This route takes you through the extremely affluent suburbs of Camps bay and Llandudno where the hills are covered in grandiose houses all the way down to the ocean. The bus is filled with women from working class areas further away from the city centre⁵, working in the shops and houses along the way. After passing Llandudno, the bus I was taking entered the Hout Bay Village, another area of privilege and wealth. After this, a stretch of open land is passed, and the Hout Bay Harbour is revealed, offering the first glimpses of Hangberg beyond. The -community is characterised by several sections of tired-looking and crowded apartment buildings from the 1960's and 70's.

As you come closer to Hangberg, you will start to see what is known in South Africa as "shacks"⁶ squeezed in between the apartment buildings and brick houses. The contrast of Hangberg with the rest of Hout Bay is clearly noticeable, as it bears more resemblance to some of the poorer and densely populated communities on the Cape flats than with the houses of the surrounding suburbs. It reflected very clearly the huge disparity in wealth that prevails in post-apartheid South Africa. It also becomes clear, as I reflect upon what I saw during my research, that Hangberg was a "settlement out of place", as its level of affluence did not match its seaside location. Standing in Hangberg I could see the large houses and the luxury apartments across the bay. Commenting on the view; Brent, a resident of Hangberg whom I had come to know, told me that the people across the bay wished that they lived in Hangberg because then their view would be of the nice houses on the other side instead of the run-down ones in Hangberg, which had the aesthetics of a township. This, he theorised, was why they

⁵ The area known as the "Cape flats" which encompasses the larger townships of Cape Town.

⁶ I will address the terminology for houses and supposed informal houses (locally called "shacks") later in this chapter.

wanted the residents living in Hangberg to move.

As the title suggests, the central theme of this dissertation is evictions and housing, particularly the way these evictions and issues of housing were a constant part of how the people I worked with experienced their everyday life. Historically, Hangberg was formed as a result of the series of forced removals carried out during apartheid, as a result of the group areas act. The end of apartheid in the 1990's did not mean the end of evictions, however, and they are now justified under notions of market economics and environmental protection instead of the apartheid notion of race. Here people continue to be forcefully removed. This led to a clash between most of the community and the local government in September 2010, sometimes referred to as the battle for Hangberg. Several residents were seriously injured and more than 30 houses destroyed⁷. Throughout my research several residents were threatened with long jail sentences if they did not move out of their houses.

Evictions do, therefore, not only form the historical background which shaped the lives of the people I worked with, but remains a current issue. The question that I asked at the beginning of my research was: How do people experience life during evictions? It is a simple question, but I wished to answer it in a way that showed the desperation of people's situations while still not reducing them to victims of it. For some of the people I met, the situation seemed desperate and impossible, and I could not help but wonder how people managed to continue with life in the midst of such hardship. This is how I came to see that people smile and suffer at the same time. Evictions were also not the only form of struggle facing the people that I worked with. Most of them had few opportunities of finding a stable source of income and a mix between casual employment and various creative enterprises were the most common ways of making a living. Hangberg has over the last two decades seen a decline in both permanent and semi-permanent employment (Hartnack 2008).

Since the end of apartheid, failed urban development and de-industrialisation has transformed the old working class into something more like what Wacquant (2009) describes as the precariate (Banks 2011:241). Hangberg was created as a settlement, for people removed from the Hout Bay village, to serve as a pool of cheap labour for the fish processing plants on the Hout Bay harbours (Froestad 2005). Several of these factories had over the last decade closed

⁷ <http://www.iol.co.za/news/south-africa/western-cape/chaos-reigns-as-residents-and-cops-clash-1.680820?ot=inmsa.ArticlePrintPageLayout.ot> (22.09.2010)

down, and a strict quota system for fishing had made working as a fisherman more difficult and less accessible. Fishing was made even more of an unstable source of income by the fact that it was seasonal. With the absence of regular and stable means of making a living in Hangberg, life was already difficult. Added to these issues is the lack of any development of affordable housing for the people who lived there.

Cross (2001) writes that rural to urban migration should be the focus for thinking about urban planning. The lack of housing in Hangberg was not caused by urban migration however, but rather from the growth of families and the need for people to move out and set up their own households. In the absence of government intervention some of the people of Hangberg decided to build their own houses despite the risk of police action and the spectre of being evicted. Despite the presence of suffering in their ordinary lives, people did not seem to fall into total despair, and they imagined a future and worked towards it. In line with what Banks (2011) argues, I found the people to be active social agents that aspired to shape their lives despite the material and legal constraints which they were faced with. This dissertation is an attempt at delving deeper into the process of how people cope, and how agency might still be present in the face of precarity⁸ and seemingly total despair. In line with what Oldfield (2000) argues, communities and people have the capacity to acquire their own housing, whether by pressuring the state to build it or by building one themselves. I wish to analyse this capacity further in this dissertation.

1.2 Aspiration as a form of smiling

Africa is often seen as a place and, a problem, that needs to be acted upon or solved, rather than one which acts itself (Chabal 2009). Even the increased focus on agency in Africa comes from trying to explain why things have failed (Chabal 2009). The failure of development in Africa is seen as the result of a multitude of different reasons, all of which points to the helplessness of the people affected (Chabal 2009). As a result of this, one only sees those aspects of life, while ignoring the ways in which people cope and sometimes smile. The question that follows from this is: what does it mean to smile? The Free Dictionary⁹ defines smiling as: “A pleasant or favourable disposition or aspect”. Smiling in the sense that I see it

⁸ I will elaborate more on this concept in the second chapter of this dissertation

⁹ <http://www.thefreedictionary.com/smiling>

is not the literal sense of laughing or smiling, but rather “...not to rehearse yet again the fact that Africa is the 'Victim' of history but to honour the day-to-day lives of those who strive to maintain human dignity in the face of overwhelming odds.” (Chabal 2009:16). Examining the ways in which people smile entails a focus on the actions that are taken by people to mitigate and cope with their surroundings, but also the ways in which aspects of ordinary life might be happy or joyful despite the precarity of life. This includes seeing people’s resilience, defiance, coping and aspiring.

I focus on the smiling not to romanticise or underplay the suffering, but to breathe life into the pain that people were experiencing. While Chabal (2009) argues that we as social scientists need to write about the ways in which people smile, he offers few examples himself of people smiling (Kaarsholm 2009), and my work offers to fill this void. In an effort to show how people smile in the face of precarity, I wish to focus on aspirations as a form of smiling. Aspirations are an important part of our agentic ability even as we are not able to act it out. In the face of severe oppression or exploitation, agency might not be visibly present in everyday actions. Over time, however, people still imagine, and sometimes act, towards bettering their lives. If we as academics wish to truly engage with how we can improve the world that we inhabit, it is important that we are guided by the notion that all people have the capacity to aspire to something better. It is a capacity that is deeply entrenched in notions of personhood and respectability.

I use the concept of respectability as an emergent form of personhood to understand how people shaped their everyday experiences. There has been a great deal written about respectability in the South African context (Salo 2004, 2006; Ross 2005, 2009 ; Jensen 2008). For Salo (2004, 2006) respectability is centred on what it is meant to be and to become what was perceived as a respectable mother or daughter in the Township of Manenberg. Jensen (2008) argues that notions of respectability are contested within the communities and within the person themselves. Similarly, I found that in Hangberg there were contested notions of respectability. It therefore became productive for me to understand notions of respectability as they were produced, negotiated and circulated between the people I worked with. One of the commonalities shared was the notion of leaving home as soon as you had your own family – adulthood was marked by physical and social mobility¹⁰. I focus on this as a main

¹⁰ This will be elaborated upon the third chapter of this dissertation

factor in what it means to become an adult in Hangberg, which in turn formed people's aspirations and needs for a house of their own. Ross (2009) argues that respectability can create forms of stability in uncertain lives, but shows how it can at the same time restrict and constrain people. I would argue, however, that respectability as a form of becoming was a building block for people's capacity to aspire to something different and for creating forward motion or "circulation" (Simone 2005) in their lives despite the restrictions of their socio-economic circumstances.

This dissertation is in part an attempt to develop a method and analysis which allows for a way to show and understand the ways people smile. Through Appadurai's (2004) notion of the capacity to aspire which he frames as a cultural capacity, I relate notions of personhood¹¹ and respectability (Salo 2004, 2006; Ross 2005, 2009 ; Jensen 2008) as these inform who we are and what we aspire to be. Looking at Hangberg with the analytical perspective of precarity allowed me to frame the struggles that the people I worked with faced. In this I show how living in precarity shapes a particular kind of political subject that has an ambiguous and often troublesome relationship with state interventions. The people that I worked with were no longer relying on the state to give basic services such as housing, and had rather taken it upon themselves to build the homes they needed. As Thorn and Oldfield (2011:520) argue, people experiencing evictions in South Africa were not experiencing the state as a consistent entity with a single agenda. The state was both an entity from which certain services were expected, but at the same time the entity of violent intrusion into people's lives. Building a house was constantly measured against the threat of state repression and the possibility of being evicted. Evictions had become a part of everyday risk and part of life, and as such it was a backdrop to any aspirations for a home.

In this sense, smiling is not just a form of coping, but also an act of resistance (Bourdieu 1998) against a system of constant neglect. I say act, because they are not necessarily resisting the evictions, although some people tried to do that. The act of resistance is in the way that they refuse to accept that housing is subjected to either development charity or market economics. Land and housing is not accepted as something given or bought, but

¹¹ Personhood is the externally defined opposite of selfhood, although both are socially constructed, personhood is about who we wish to be seen as and how we are seen (Jenkins 2005). In essence personhood is defined by who we wish to be, becoming, and who/what we wish to be seen as connected with, belonging. As Cross (1999:12) argue personhood and community citizenship is often linked with having land in most of Africa.

something that people created or acquired for themselves (Oldfield 2001). This dissertation is thus about reconfiguring our notion of agency to understand it as an active force even when there are seemingly no actions being taken. At the same time, the actions that we take are informed by our aspirations, which in turn are shaped by cultural notions of respectability and personhood.

The people of Hangberg who participated in this research refused certain notions of respectability – such as following the law – if it meant that they could live up to their aspirations of having a house or land. With conflicting notions of what was seen as respectable, respectability had the potential of being a form of counter-narrative to that of the mainstream. For some, the notion that every person had a right to a house was indeed more important than avoiding being arrested or evicted. Even when the local or national government wished to remove people to build new houses, there was strong resistance being put up by a large part of the community. Hence, there was both a protest march (against evictions in general) and a later picket (specifically against the removal of some residents into a temporary relocation camp).

The protests were spurred on both out of distrust in the local government that had often made violent incursions into the community, but also because they knew from experience that they could build houses better themselves. There was a strong sentiment that the government was no longer needed in order for life to improve. People were becoming, what Besteman (2008) calls, “transformers” of their own lives and communities. In this I do not argue for the abdication of positive government interventions into people’s lives, on the contrary people in Hangberg could have used a solid welfare system and government aid in building their houses. I rather try to argue that the interventions of local government so far had often made life more precarious and that any development needs to consider that people have the knowledge of what they need. This implies that any development intervention should be firmly grounded in the needs of the people affected, controlled by local efforts, and seek to empower local people and voices. As Appadurai (2004) argues, the strengthening of people's capacity to aspire is a move in that direction¹².

¹²I will discuss this further in chapter two of this dissertation

1.3 Precarity, aspiration and the house: An outline of the chapters of this dissertation

My chapters are broken down into three main chapters, as well as an introduction and a conclusion. Of the main chapters, the first is mostly a conceptual chapter, while the two which follow are mostly ethnographic. Aspiration as a form of smiling is a thread running through this dissertation and it ties the different chapters together. Chapter two, *Writing Precarity*, is about aspiration as form of method and analysis in the context of precarity. The chapter is an analysis of the ways in which we as anthropologists write about precarity, but also how precarity could be useful as an analytical framework for understanding life in the age that we live in. There is extensive writing about precarity in a large selection of different academic disciplines. The concept of precarity is theorised by people such as Neilson and Rossiter (2008), Wacquant (2009), Butler (2010), Standing (2011), Simone and Rao (2011), Allison (2012) and Stewart (2012). These authors are from a variety of disciplines such as economics, anthropology and political science.

From a political movement to an academic concept (Neilson and Rossiter 2008), precarity highlights the changing face of domination and exploitation and allows us to see similar global processes as they play out in a variety of different spaces. People no longer suffer because they are actively being oppressed, but rather because they are allowed to wither away without any intervention, or interventions, implemented – which further destabilises their lives. I therefore use Butler's (2010) definition of precarity; as the politically saturated distribution of precariousness. This recognises that it is not coincidental who is allowed to suffer and left to wither, and thus precarity is also an empirical and ethnographic tool to understand a concrete material experience. The framework of precarity allows for a similarity which in turn gives meaning to diversity. From social precarity in Japan (Allison 2012), to the criminalisation of poverty in the U.S (Wacquant 2009), and to governance and urban planning in Indonesia (Simone and Rao 2011). The usage of a concept that can be as universally applicable, is a way of using anthropology as more than the theory of ethnography, and a move towards a comparative pursuit which aims to understand the human world that we all inhabit (Ingold 2008). Precarity is thus represented as a different kind of anthropological field, one that is not contained by geographical locations or markers of identity.

This recognises political subjects that at times reject the state as an entity in their lives, but at the same time embrace the rights that the state has set out (Robins 2008). In this context the

poor are seen by the state as a problem to be solved (Simone and Rao 2011:4), but as the case was in Hangberg, the poor are busy everyday with solving their own problems. It is not a lack of action or aspiration that holds back the marginalised of the world, but rather a lack of opportunity, and sometimes even active oppression, when people try to improve their lives. It is here that I argue that looking at aspiration moves the discussion away from seeing people as problems to be solved. The focus shifts towards how people dream about and work towards a better life every day.

The third chapter follows on from this and goes deeper into how aspirations in Hangberg are informed by notions of respectability in the perspective of housing and adulthood. In this chapter I explore aspiration as a cultural capacity deeply entrenched in people's material everyday lives. This chapter also starts to outline how the participants of my research wanted help from the local government to better their lives, but in the absence of it had decided to act on their own. The fourth chapter analyses the role of the house itself and the ways in which people build their own houses. This highlights the temporal nature of agency (Emirbayer and Mische 1998) and aspiration as a form of agency not yet acted out. Embodied in the manner in which people in Hangberg constructed their houses was both the absence of a state that built houses for people and the presence of a state which would evict people who built without permission. The people I worked with would therefore carefully unfold their plans for the future, and constantly consider what risks any action might bring. In the two final chapters it emerges that both the action to build and the house itself were forms of smiling and coping in the face of precarity.

1.4 A shack or a house

I wish to discuss the terminology used for the houses that the people I worked with built. Houses built without the permission and with makeshift material are most commonly described in South Africa as shacks. Shack is, however, a highly politicised word, and while the people I worked with in Hangberg mostly referred to the informally built houses as bungalows the term shack was occasionally used. When the government built houses in the temporary relocation area they were named as shacks, but when people spoke of the houses they had built themselves then they named them bungalows or houses.

The house itself became central in the narrative of the people I worked with, and the notion of

a house instead of a shack was used as a counter-narrative to that which justified evictions. If it was just a shack of driftwood, then what value could it have – people knew these structures as their houses and as their homes. The houses might be unstable and in danger of being demolished, but the notion of home was stable – an ethnographic experience which embodied relations that transcended the physical structures and regulations. As integral as the notion of the house, was the notion of the house as a place where home is. This gives it an immense sense of value as evictions are no longer for the good of people living in slums, but rather the brutal act of kicking someone out of their home.

As Ross (2009) argues, it is not the value of the thing itself, but the relations, hopes and aspirations that are embedded in the thing. The values ascribed to the things with which we surround ourselves are in a constant flux (Appadurai 1986). This was very much the case for the precarious situation of housing in Hangberg. Houses that were proudly built and expanded over years of work could with the touch of the pen be turned back into driftwood again. So the house was in many ways as precarious as other aspects of life in Hangberg. When people talked about the quality of housing or the lack of service delivery they would sometimes refer to their house as a shack. In this dissertation I use the terminology that the people I spoke to used themselves.

1.5 The main participants of this research

Before I go on to the dissertation I wish to present some of the participants of this research so that, as their names appear in the text, the reader will understand who they are. Brent was my guide around Hangberg and the person who gave me a good idea of what was going on. His partner is Donita, and the two of them lived in an apartment, with two of their children. Clint is a friend of Brent's who had built a house for himself some years earlier. Janina is a woman who had recently been threatened with evictions and was refusing to move. Carmelita lives close to Brent and had also built a house for herself. Pamela is Carmelita's mother and she lived in a brick house built by local developers. Brent and Donita's neighbour, Monique, had recently built a bungalow in front of their apartment block. Bronnie is a fisherman and a good friend of Brent. In the next chapter I will expand on the conceptual framework for this dissertation.



Picture of the view from the top of Hangberg, with a typical self built bungalow in the front.

Chapter two: Writing, Researching and Analysing Precarity

2.0 Abstract

This chapter frames the dissertation through the analytical concept of precarity. In it, I argue that precarity and aspiration are dual concepts of understanding human life, and that precarity frames the ways in which life is either constrained or allowed to wither. I use the concept of precarity, as it allows for both the action and the action of inaction as it shapes peoples' lives. At the same time, people are never totally constrained, even if it might seem like it. When there is no possible action in the present, people still aspire towards something different. It is my argument that these aspirations show people's agency in times when acting on it might be impossible. In this, I attempt to show the ways in which people are both constrained and agentic at the same time. In other words, they are neither wholly defined by their suffering nor by their smiling, but by both. This means that we, as intellectuals of human life, need to acknowledge both the ways in which people suffer and the ways in which they smile. This would also entail the inclusion of the multiplicity of forms that precariousness and agency comes in. While this chapter is mostly conceptual and theoretical, I have inserted data from my research to clarify the argument which I am making and to ground the conceptual process in the voices of the people I worked with. At the end of this chapter I present the more technical details and methods of how the data substantiating this dissertation was collected. I include the method section in this chapter, as precarity and aspiration are central to the ethnographic fieldwork.

2.1 Writing, Researching and Analysing Precarity

How and why should we as anthropologists write about precarious lives? Why write about, or do research on, people being evicted or facing threats of eviction? Is this research useful or significant, or am I writing about it so that I can promote my own ambitions for an academic career only? These questions are ones that should be asked about any research, and which gain a particular significance with the recent critiques that anthropologists have an obsession with studying what is sometimes termed as "downwards" (Nyamnjoh 2012). So what is to be gained when I, as a Norwegian, come to South Africa and write about people living in

insecurity and uncertainty, and why would I use precarity to describe the condition in which people live?

Tim Ingold (2008) argues that: “The objective of anthropology, I believe is to seek generous, comparative, but nevertheless critical understanding of human being and knowing in the one world we all inhabit.” (Ingold 2008:69). In line with this, I bring forward the experiences of marginalised lives to add to the way that we understand and know the social world we inhabit. Not only does using the concept of precarity bring forward the universal and comparative aspects of life in Hangberg, but it also allows us to interrogate how power and unequal distribution shaped these and other lives.

In this chapter I will engage with why precarity could be a useful concept in social analysis and how this concept could be used to improve our understanding of our shared human experience. Including the narratives of people living in precarity allows us to both gain an understanding of the processes of power in which human lives are dominated and constrained, and also for making deep connections between places and people that are seemingly disconnected. In line with Foucault's (1982) argument, I see power as defined by the modes in which people become subjects. Power is both enforced by embodiment (Bourdieu 1990) and discipline (Foucault 1977), but - as I will argue further in this dissertation - it is often resisted by our aspirations and desires. In looking at Foucault's (1977, 1982) argument, it is impossible to ignore the ways in which subjectivity is shaped by the desires and wants that people have (Fox 1993), and not just by the structures that constrain and discipline. For the people I worked with in Hangberg, following their aspirations meant breaking away from being a subject of the state (in chapter three I will further engage with the formation of aspirations and the creation of personhood).

Taking forward those narratives that stand diagonally against dominant discourses, means that we are not only gaining a greater understanding of life, but it also allows us to unwrap the inner workings of power and domination (Davis 2012:513). By writing about the precarious lives of people in Hangberg I am attempting to bring forward the stories of people who for different reasons found themselves at odds with the powerful. As one participant, Clint, said: “We don't have rights and the people don't know about our lives. That is why it is good that you go and speak to people here.”¹³ Certain lives are not recognised or considered

¹³ Statement made by Clint during a conversation in June 2013

when academics and media write and document human life. This in turn means that certain forms of domination and exploitation are left hidden and out of the light. If we as anthropologists truly see ourselves as attempting to understand the world that we all inhabit then we must account for both unrecognised forms of power and unrecognised forms of life.

I will expand on the concept of precarity and situate its usefulness as an analytical tool in contemporary anthropological research. I will also look at how this concept facilitates an understanding of life in a world that is fraught with insecurities, and also how writing about these lives is both problematic and gainful. The field of anthropological research has shifted, as the old focus inadequately dealt with the rapidly changing realities of life of a post-colonial world (Mafeje 1976, Mafeje 1998), and an increasingly mobile and globalised reality (Appadurai 1991, Gupta and Ferguson 1997:3). People's lives can no longer be understood as frozen or fixed in geographical boundaries, nor insulated from global political trends and currents. One of these trends is that the world economies are in the process of disentangling themselves from the exception that was a Keynesian styled welfare state (Neilson and Rossiter 2008). In other words, the state is seen as decreasingly responsible for the day-to-day welfare of people's lives. This has, in turn, made the precarious aspects of life an increasingly defining feature of it. Precarity as a concept then forms a different kind of field, no longer bound to notions of culture and identity or to political boundaries such as the nation state. It is, rather, a universal concept that allows us to both explore how marginalisation is as much about allowing certain lives be recognised as precarious (and which were previously unrecognised as such), as it is an active form of exploitation. Kathleen Stewart (2012) argues that precarity is an emergent phenomenon, in composition and decomposition, a way of understanding "...worldings that matter in many ways beyond their status as representations or objects of moralizing." (Stewart 2012:519). Stewart (2012) shows the shifting and emergent nature of precariousness and the presence it has in all human life.

I move towards defining precarity as the politically saturated distribution of precariousness (Butler 2010). Defined as such, it could be useful as a methodical and analytical concept in both uncovering the untold stories and to transcend the limitations of the geographically bounded field. As precariousness is a facet of all human life, some lives are more precarious than others, and people are then connected by their distribution of precariousness rather than

by the boundaries of identifications or geographical locations. Precarity allows for an analysis of the ways in which uncertainty is enabled and distributed by the state. While precariousness is universal and it is part of all human life, I see precarity as creating a particular kind of political subject, one that is allowed by those who rule to wither and die. For this subject, the state is no longer a benefactor nor protector, but often the source of oppression and neglect. These are subjects whose aspirations are diagonally opposed to the state power. In this context, I will expand on anthropological methods, using two concepts in particular: aspiration and precarity.

I see people's aspiration and the acting upon these aspirations as a way of what Chabal (2009) terms as smiling at, or coping with, the struggles that they are faced with. While precarity might have started out as a term for certain social protest movements in Western Europe (Neilson and Rossiter 2005, De Sario 2007, Dowling et al. 2007), it has now become a useful concept for social analysis (Neilson and Rossiter 2008). This concept allows for the local issues to speak to the larger global processes. In this dissertation in particular, precarity features as an analytical frame in which life in Hangberg could be seen. The high level of precariousness present in the lives which I encountered during the research shaped my field, and was a constant backdrop to the joys and sorrows that people expressed. All the people from Hangberg who were part of the research lived vulnerable lives either from the absence or through the intervention of state powers, yet in different ways they coped and sometimes moved forward.

2.2 Precarity as a concept

Allow me first to unpack precarity as a concept used for social analysis and anthropological method. At the base of the concept lies the notion that we as academics are trying to identify marginal and chronically insecure lives as a new type of political subject with their own forms of expression (Neilson and Rossiter 2008:52). This entails a political subject that is experiencing systematic form of marginalisation that is as much about being left to suffer as it is about people being made to suffer. As opposed to Foucault's (1982) notion of the subject, this is one in which suffering is not only a result of the domination by some over others, but also from the absence of interventions. It also accounts for suffering as the unintended consequence of interventions that are meant to aid those affected. This political subject is unrecognised and left (or made) to suffer for its lack of recognition. This leads to an effort to

“fix” or stabilise their lives (Fuh 2012).

Precarity was originally used politically as a term classifying a form of protest to make visible often ignored forms of life (Neilson and Rossiter 2008:53). It is in this way that I see the concept being used in anthropology, as anthropology is often concerned with the marginalised and unrecognised ways forms of living (Davis 2012). As I will argue in this chapter, precarity is a concept that allows for a deeper understanding of the political distribution of marginalisation and precariousness, and especially of how it has become a sometimes defining feature of certain ways of living. With it as a tool for social analysis, the context of understanding is expanded from individual groups to larger contingents stretched across time and space. It includes a multiplicity of identities and ways of living, connected by the severe amount of precariousness in which they live. Different struggles are brought together under an analytical concept and in doing so attempting to attain a critical understanding of a larger world that we all inhabit.

Precarity as a term is derived from the word precarious (Allison 2012) which, according to the Google dictionary, is defined in two ways: “Not securely held or in position; dangerously likely to fall or collapse” and “dependent on chance; uncertain”.¹⁴ Both of these definitions could be used to describe the precarious nature of human life. It is a life that is not securely positioned and is dangerously likely to collapse. As Ola Rotimi (1971) states in his book *The Gods Are Not To Blame*: “The struggles of man begin at birth”.

All human life is, in a sense, precarious from the moment that we are conceived until the day that we die and beyond – there is an element of uncertainty and imminent collapse. For example, by complications in the womb, or by being hit by a car while crossing the road, all life is in itself uncertain, constantly in danger of being affected by events completely outside our control. Death and injury are always possible outcomes, however unlikely, of any moment in our existence. Yet there seems to be in this world an uneven distribution of precariousness, or in other words, some life is more precarious than others (Butler 2010). The life that we understand to be precarious and worth protecting, and the life that we do not recognise as injured or lost is deeply political, and is about recognition (Butler 2010:1).

¹⁴ <https://www.google.co.za/search?client=firefox-a&ahs=Y78&rls=org.mozilla:en-US:official&q=precarious&tbs=dfn:1&tbo=u&andsa=X&de=z7tTUtjuHYO57Ab3pIGgAQ&ved=0CCoQkQ4&biw=1598&bih=824&ddpr=1> (Accessed 15.02.2013)

“[T]he body is linked to politically and socially articulated forces as well as claims to sociality – including language, work and desire – that make possible the body's persisting and flourishing. The more or less existential conception of 'precariousness' is thus linked with a more specifically political notion of 'precarity’” (Butler 2010:3).

Precariousness is a defining and existential feature of life as all life is temporary. While precariousness might be a universal human property, or a fact of life, it is in its distribution that it becomes a political condition. Who will be the recipient of assistance and who will not, or who will be allowed and helped to flourish and who will be forced to wither becomes the essence of precarity as an analytical and political concept. For the people I worked with in Hangberg, the state had both left them to wither and was actively making life increasingly unliveable. Precarity as an analysis could identify life that is not recognised as life worth preserving and protecting. This happens on the one hand by allowing people to suffer, and on the other hand by actively seeking to constrain or dominate them. The state would not build houses or provide for material benefits to help the people living in Hangberg, and was at the same time evicting and arresting people who were trying to improve their lives by building houses of their own. Precarity becomes particularly useful in the South African context as recognition was a central part of state-sponsored distribution both during and after apartheid: first to uplift the poor whites during apartheid, and then to redress apartheid injustices through affirmative action policies such as Black Economic Empowerment. Both are attempts at creating social justice through exclusion.

In particular, the quota system for how much fish a person could catch was often seen as an obstacle to making a living and improving life. One research participant, Carmelita (the wife of a fisherman), told me: “You can't go to the harbour anymore and stand there, if you get a fish it's illegal. That time when we were kids and standing on the harbour our grandparents could throw for each and every one a fish. That was nothing, but today you can't do that. The amount of fish that you can catch is limited. One person can catch ten fish, but what does that mean, you can put nothing on the table.”¹⁵ During the course of the research I found that many people claimed that the quota system was biased in favour of the politically well connected. The fish-processing factories on the Hout Bay harbour which had traditionally been another important source of employment for the people of Hangberg (Froestad 2005)

¹⁵ Reserch participant Carmelita stated in Interview the 19.06.2013

were closing down and decreasing their production.

The quota system was a very blatant and direct example of how precariousness was unequally distributed, making certain lives more marginal and precarious. Although the quota system was not meant to intentionally make people's lives worse, it was a policy for preserving fish stocks. For anthropology, precarity then becomes a concept which allows us to understand marginalised and vulnerable life in a way that transcends identity and geography. Guy Standing (2011) suggests that this constitutes a new social class which should be termed *the precariat*, as it is distinctly different from the proletariat of the previous century. While this might have political merit, to me this would hide how the distribution of precariousness is an element in all human life and could serve to take away from the analytical usefulness of the concept of precarity as an inclusive and accommodating recognition. Precarity gives us a tool to further understand economic exploitation and a political subjugation in a time when the way lives are lived and experienced are in constant change and as part of global processes.

There has been, in the last couple of years, an increasing number of social scientists writing about people living in precarity. This research focuses on people living in unstable social and economic conditions and often marginalised from parts of mainstream society. It is a material precariousness as a result of a diminishing welfare system (Wacquant 2009) or, as Anne Allison (2012:348-349) sees precarity, as not only a material condition but also a social one. She derives the word from the precariat or the precarious proletariat (Allison 2012:349). It is people living in a constant position of irregular income and of unstable or no employment in the face of an increasingly flexible and uncertain labour system (Allison 2012:349) – “flexible” meaning people are easily exchanged for other people in the labour reserve.

Precarity is more than just about labour relations or the availability of a stable income: “Precarity is insecurity in life: material, existential, social.” (Allison 2012:349). In different situations different elements of precarious lives would be more weighted. For Wacquant (2009) it is the removal of welfare systems and then the punishment of the subsequent poverty that is created in its wake. Allison (2012) argues that precarity has deeply affected social relations, and resulted in people feeling disconnected from the way things are supposed to be and the relations which create social security. For both writers precarity could be seen as the erosion of the modalities that created stability and security. Life as it was known by previous generations is no longer possible for an increasing amount of people. In Hangberg,

as opposed to Allison's (2012) description of Japan, social networks had become a way of mitigating the material precarity that people faced.

As an example, Brent would give Monique, who lived in a Bungalow across from his apartment, water from his tap and sometimes electricity with an extension cord through the window. In exchange, Monique's boyfriend would drop by with fish that he had caught at sea (although, after a while, due partly to Brent and Donita struggling financially, they agreed that Monique would pay about fifty rand a week for usage of water and electricity). Through neighbour relations some of the worst aspects of material poverty were kept at bay. As I will explore more in chapter three, the community was more than just your geographical neighbours – they become integral in keeping the precarious aspects of life at bay. Precarity as an analytical concept allows us to understand marginalisation and unstable lives as a political product. Precarity is not, however, only about the failings of the state. It is a state of being in which precariousness is allowed to dominate life, and where it starts to define the ordinary.

The weakness of the concept precarity is that it is similar to other concepts which forward a political economy argument, such as the concept of structural violence (Farmer 2004). Structural violence is aimed at exposing the machinery of power and the way in which exploitation and domination are exerted systematically (Farmer 2004:307). Precarity is a concept that tries to understand the people on whom domination is exerted, as well as unwrapping the ways in which some people are recognised as being allowed to live, while others are left to suffer. It is not only the state or the market which distributes precarity, but it is also distributed by and towards the people of Hangberg. Another weakness is that precarity is never named by the people themselves but, as I stated earlier, I wish to understand Hangberg as part of a larger human world. To compare we have to name what we compare. Precarity as a concept is at least fluid and changing, open and inclusive to a multiplicity of ways of being.

In Hangberg the situation was both a material insecurity and lack of a stable income, and a clash between people's aspirations to move out on their own and the availability of housing. The national and provincial government had not built any affordable houses in Hangberg for decades (Froestad 2005) and for anyone who wished to move out and start up their own family, the only option was to build their own home. Building against the will and wishes of

the state had the effect of putting them at odds with local provincial government and exposing their homes and lives to immediate destruction and disruption. Yet this was not really different from the way that previous generations had experienced life. Many of their parents and grandparents experienced evictions during the apartheid-era forced removals. Most of the people living in Hangberg used to reside closer to what was called the Hout Bay village, but were, as Carmelita's mother, Pamela, termed it, "...asked to move by the government." Although changing in its form, forms of precarity was one of the few things that seemed to be a certainty from generation to generation. It was a constant product of the dual interests of the ruling elites of apartheid and post-apartheid South Africa for cheap labour and at the same time the need for keeping those same people spatially separate from themselves.

Both Wacquant (2009) and Allison (2012) see the increased precariousness that people live in as a result of a changing world which is moving toward less welfare and more flexible labour. For the people that I worked with in Hangberg, precarity seemed more like the historical norm, it had not really increased in general, but had moments of more or less intensity. This intensity varied from individual to individual, and depended upon the time of year. The time during which I was conducting the research was a bad time of the year for fishing, which in turn meant that people could not afford to buy local products like herbs from Brent and Donita, which increased the scarcity for people not sustained by fishing as well. Much like Neilson and Rossiter (2008:58) argues, precarity was the norm rather than the exception, and South Africa never experienced the exception of the Keynesian welfare state of post war Western Europe and North America. During apartheid welfare was deeply entrenched in the racist categorisations that defined all aspects of life at the time. Despite welfare becoming de-racialised, the little that was given was not enough for people to cover basic needs.

By utilising concepts like precarity we relate the multiplicity of ways in which uncertainty and instability are manifested in people's lives. At the same time, when anthropologists or social scientists go out to look for instability and insecurity, that is likely what they are going to find. The people that I met and worked with in Hangberg were all experiencing different kinds of struggles: for some it was evictions or the closing down of the factories on the harbour, for others it was the lack of toilets and plumbing. Others had toilets, but needed work or wanted fishing quotas so that they could go fish. Some had turned to selling drugs or

“informal fishing”¹⁶ as a way of sustaining themselves, and for them the immediate problem was harassment by law officials. Precarity, seen as the politically saturated distribution of precariousness (Butler 2010), then becomes a way of gaining an analytical and methodical perspective that does not create dichotomies between those who have jobs and those who are unemployed, or those who work outside of the law and those who try and stay within it. It is rather to recognise these ways of being as relational and often interdependent on each other. This allows us to gain an analytical perspective that transcends identity, status and locality.

2.3 Writing Precarity

How do we write about the difficult and unstable lives that people live without reducing it to suffering and how can a concept like precarity be transferred without forcing people into boxes in which they do not fit? When going into a field and researching people who are living in precarity it is easy to only see the suffering that one is looking for. Academic writing on Africa, Kaarsholm (2009) argues, has in the past been more focused on how people are suffering rather than how they cope (2009:25). Patrick Chabal (2009) argues that we need to understand politics by seeing the way that people suffer and smile in everyday life. He calls for studies that honour the daily lives of people who face suffering and who sometimes smile at it (Chabal 2009:16).

In this dissertation I wish to show how people smile at the struggles of daily life. This is not just by the physical act of smiling (although sometimes), but how they metaphorically smile through coping, enduring, dreaming and sometimes improving life. Yet, while writing about and honouring the way that people cope with the hardships of everyday life, we must also acknowledge how restricted people are by material restraints and structural violence. I write about smiling not to neglect people’s tears, but to make them more meaningful, by showing life in all its forms.

Sometimes people face such serious restraints that there is seemingly way forward. It would be a misrepresentation of the people that I worked with in Hangberg, to say that their

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Informal fisherman was the name often used by the people I met for describing people who engaged in fishing that was seen as illegal in the eyes of the state.

lives were under complete control of the daily challenges they faced. The people I spoke to were more than the sum of their struggles. In the darkest hours of Janina's imminent eviction, for example, there was little that she could do. The image of our first meeting is burnt into my mind, her with tears in her eyes asking me: "What must I do now? Where must I go? This is my home!"¹⁷ Despite the apparent inevitability of her impending eviction, she stayed and refused to move out, even with the threat of imprisonment, and in this way she endured. When writing about precarity, how do we represent people in a way that both shows their suffering and smiling, and does not blind us to either? There was obviously much more to Janina than the marginality of her living conditions, and it would take away from her humanity and how she experienced life to describe her only as constrained by the difficulties that she faced. I would argue that by looking at people's capacity to aspire we can understand the potential for agency when there might not be a possibility to act.

2.4 Researching Precarity: Our capacities and constraints as analysis and method

How to represent people in anthropological writing and research has long been a topic of much critical discussion. In what way could we as anthropologists write so as to retain the complexity of the people who made up our field sites and research projects? Francis Nyamnjoh (2012, 2013) mentions the need for an anthropology which engages in an epistemological conviviality, or a spirit of togetherness and cooperation (2013:128). Different ways of knowing can come together and produce knowledge that takes into consideration multiple different ways of understanding.

Turnbull (2005) argues that we do not necessarily need to agree on the definitions to have a dialogue between different ways of knowing – all we need is a common paradigm on which engagement can be had. Using concepts such as precarity as a paradigm could facilitate dialogue between different ways of understanding the world. This would be a dialogue that transcends local definitions and speaks to the larger global issues. Writing about evictions in Hangberg and how people experience life in those circumstances could speak to issues of a shrinking welfare state in the United States of America, or to an increased amount of people living socially disconnected lives in Japan. Concepts that define what is universally present in the human world we all inhabit allow for a conviviality of contexts that might seem

¹⁷ Conversation with Janina the 10.06.2013.

inherently different. This would be a framework in which the South could engage in intellectual conversation with academics of the North.

To me this would entail speaking and writing about what is shared, as well as understanding diversity and difference. In fact, I would state that diversity only makes sense in the context of what is universal. It is in this line of thinking that I also wish to apply Appadurai's (2004) notion of the capacity to aspire. I would argue that we all have the capacity to aspire; it is something that drives us all to change and to adapt. It is within universal qualities that cultural diversity is made meaningful in explaining how people experience material and social constraints. As a universally, but also culturally, defined (Appadurai 2004) capacity, aspiration allows us to compare what is similar while being inclusive of difference.

In our efforts as anthropologists to treat different cultures as alternative forms of modernity, we have often evaded the aspirations that people have for bettering their lives (Ferguson 2006:33-34). In our writing we need to include and respect both the alternative ways in which people live their lives and make space for their aspirations and actions to change it. This is the only way in which we can write about the ordinary lives of people and still keep the complexity of how life is constantly negotiated. Appadurai (2004) asks the question of why culture matters in the face of poverty, and argues that culture is often seen as the opposition to improving people's material conditions (2004:60). He asks the question: how do people create a collective horizon for the improvement of their lives? To this question we need to bring the temporal future into the notion of agency or the ability to imagine and think about wants as a capacity defined by the socio-cultural context (Appadurai 2004:63).

Drawing on South African scholars, the question might be: How do notions of personhood and respectability¹⁸ (Salo 2004, Ross 2009) influence the way people construct their aspirations, and how do these aspirations play into the way in which people negotiate a precarious life? The construction of respectability is characterised by the "...manners of living and sharing in the everyday that elicit a sense of belonging through pride and sociability" (Ross 2009:39). It is a way of creating stability and security in lives in which the ordinary has become insecure and unknown. For Salo (2004, 2006) and Ross (2005, 2009), notions of respectability are manifested in the word "ordentlikheid" and it is through notions

¹⁸ I will elaborate further on these two concepts in the third chapter of this dissertation.

of “ordentlikheid” that stability in social relations are created. Discourses on respectability create both stability and constraints (Ross 2009:41), but I would argue that it is also part of what drives people forward. It is part of how we construct the aspirations that we have for how life could move forward. It affects the way we dream and imagine our futures to be. On the other hand, our aspirations are constrained and contained by the material restrictions that we face (Ibrahim 2011).

In situations where people face complete material and social constriction, the capacity to aspire could become a potent analytical and methodical tool. In Mbembe’s (2003) description of the South African township, it is necropolitics that describes domination and power. All human agency is co-opted and material life so restricted that people are no longer people, they have simply become ex-humans. The township is, he argues, a place of intense restriction and control (Mbembe 2003:26). In the face of such control and restriction it might no longer be fruitful to talk about people’s capacity to act, but rather about their capacity to aspire. As seen in the case of Janina in Hangberg, there was no way in which her actions would change the outcome of her evictions, it was just the hope that she would not get arrested and jailed. She could only imagine an alternative future and then endure what might come. Elizabeth Povinelli (2011) describes this as people living unrecognised lives, or what she calls diagonally to the normative horizon, enduring and persevering despite being under constant pressure. I would, however, argue that there is more to a precarious existence than enduring, there is dreaming, hoping and aspiring. And while there was in Hangberg a constant pressure from both government neglect and oppression, the people I worked with all imagined a future different from the present.

Imagining a future is the first step towards acting on that future, and as important as understanding the ability to act on it. In fact, one could say that aspiration is an action in itself. As Appadurai (2004) argues, “...it is through the capacity to aspire that the exercise of voices by the poor will be extended” (2004:83). In this we gain a better understanding of agency as a process, first thought up and imagined and then slowly and sometimes subtly acted upon. Emirbayer and Mische (1998) argue that the conceptualisation of agency in social theory has tended to be flat, “...when it escapes the abstract voluntarism of rational choice theory, tends to remain so tightly bound to structure that one loses sight of the different ways in which agency actually shapes social action” (1998:963). In a situation in which domination and oppression seems total, this could lead one to believe that there is no possibility for

human agency; and in the case of the eviction attempts that I saw in Hangberg, it seemed, at first, that this was the case.

Emirbayer and Mische (1998) argue that human agency could only be understood by theoretically disaggregating agency into different components situated in a temporarily embedded process (1998:963). So, agency can only be understood if situated in the flow of time, and the manner in which actors reflect on the past actions in order to work towards an imagined future (Emirbayer and Mische 1998:963). This allows us to understand agency as not only something that is done in the present, but also as a constant process of working towards the future aspirations. As I argue, the notion that we imagine a future or have a capacity to aspire (Appadurai 2004) is in itself a display of agency. This component of agency is particularly illuminating as we try to understand life in situations where there are seemingly no ways to live. I will, in chapter three and four, further explore the notion of agency as a temporal process through showing both how aspirations are informed by social engagement and through the way in which people I worked with built houses. In this I hope to gain a greater understanding of how we are both shaped by and how we ourselves shape the structural contexts we are embedded in.

To gain insight into how people see their lives projected over a temporal space it is not enough to just do participant observation over about eight weeks (which was the length of this research). I found that a focus on life histories showed not only the social engagements that had shaped people's pasts, but would often lead into people talking about their future aspirations. How do we, however, collect data on someone's imagined future?

2.5 Research Method

The research that I conducted in Hangberg took place over a span of about eight weeks, from the beginning of June to early August. In that period, I spent most of my time having informal conversations with people relevant to my research. This included a range of community activists, people facing evictions from their homes, people who had built homes of their own, and older family members who told me of their history before people came to Hangberg. This time was also spent conducting participant observation, or what Geertz (1998) refers to as "deep hanging out". It is through the active involvement in people's lives that we collect data and ground anthropology as a discipline – particularly through the method of participant

observation. I took part in marches and community meetings, and spent days living with people who were living in precarity. Yet it is not possible for me, having lived a life in relative wealth and security, to truly participate in a life faced with evictions and insecurity. Even if I stayed in Hangberg for years I would always have the option to back out and move back to the security that I knew. With that option in place, there is no true sense of having lived a life where life seems almost impossible.

To gain an understanding of people's aspirations, I found that collecting life stories was a useful tool. Life stories allow research participants to speak for themselves to a larger degree and takes account of people's diverse and contested experiences (Frank 1995:145). When people tell their life story they reflect upon the past, which gives both temporal depth to the conversations that we are having, and opens up for conversations about the future. The focus on life stories also contextualised how precarity is not a moment of instability or an exception in some lives. For some people, precarity becomes a defining feature and moments of security and predictability becomes the exception. Evictions were a central part not just in the lives of the main participants of this research, but also for their parents and for some their grand-parents' lives. Many of the present-day residents of Hangberg were evicted from the Hout Bay village and the area around Beach road in the 1960's and 1970's¹⁹ and, in turn, their children are now facing evictions. This resonated in Brent's statement: "I might be able to fight off the police, but I don't think that my children will manage to stay here"²⁰. Life stories with a focus on the past, and at the same time with the purpose of understanding people's aspirations, gave me a greater understanding of how people's lives sometimes were more defined by, and entrenched in, precarity than was observable in the moment. It was not a period or moment of evictions, but rather a history and a context steeped in insecurity and marginalisation.

Participant observation is not the embodied knowledge of the researcher becoming the researched, but rather an interactive dialogue between the two (Tedlock 1991:82). This to me entails what Green (2008:7) calls an ethics of presence, or for the researcher to engage in dialogue which is "...enabling and hosting, rather than dominant and absent" (Green 2008:7). An ethics of presence allows for the deep understanding and the lived experience of research

¹⁹ Told to me by to older men taking part in an anti-eviction march 17.06.2013

²⁰ Brent told me this during my first research in Hangberg in July 2012.

participants to emerge out of their interaction with the researcher, both as social subjects. This is a move away from the alienating effects of the supposed objective and distant observer. I had a few formal interviews, but relied mostly on informal conversations as this allowed for an open space of engagement. So, as anthropologists, our participation is one of subjective interaction rather than the embodied knowledge of a lived experience. This is, in turn, reflected in the writing through using the direct quotes of the people I encountered, and allowing them to speak for themselves. As I concede that I cannot embody their lives, I have to concede that I cannot truly understand what it means to be them.

In this research I also observed the house and the building of the house as part of my collected data. Appadurai argues that we need to follow the social life of things to understand the human interaction and experience, for their meanings are inscribed in their shapes and their forms (Appadurai 1986:5). In tracing and describing the way that the people I worked with built their houses, I was able to understand aspirations as a factor in the ways that agency was constantly emergent. People dream and aspire to more than they are, and while the possibility is not there, the potentiality for action is. Seeing how people cope with their daily struggles and imagine better lives then becomes a way of understanding that all life is more than just its suffering. Using aspirations as method allows for subjective expressions of how life is shaped by people themselves, and precarity allows for a deeper understanding of what constrains life.

In the last few decades anthropologists have renounced the research field as a bounded unit of study, as it was an inaccurate and objectifying way of understanding people (Ferguson 2005). The research methods of anthropology, which are centred on participant observation and long term study, paradoxically clashes with our renouncing of the notion of a bounded field (Gupta and Ferguson 1997:4). Using the concept of precarity as a new type of field, this is no longer necessarily bounded to the local notion of a field. As stated before, all life is, in essence, precarious; but it is rather in the distribution of this precariousness that we can start to understand the structural violence, or the violence that “...is exerted systematically – that is indirectly – by everyone who belongs to a certain social order.” (Farmer 2004:307). This creates the contextual and structural framework for the struggles which people are facing, and is able to account for how structural violence could be both a result of deliberate action and sometimes by not acting at all. Precarity is, therefore, in itself a universal notion taking anthropology away from its occasional fixation on the local and the specific, and bringing

diversity into how we understand the world in which we are all, as humans, part of.

Using the notion of precarity illuminates the way in which the struggles of the people I worked with are connected to the times in which we live and the struggles that others – globally and nationally – face. It allowed me to focus on the ordinary life of people while still speaking to a bigger picture (Ross 2009:8). Anthropology has historically been critiqued for being complicit in the colonial project by coining the subjects of our research as “a people” or “a culture”, and seeing them in isolation as bounded objects of study (Ferguson 2005). To deal with this legacy it becomes apparent that the field can no longer be seen as a bounded whole study of “a people”. Precarity, and the distribution of precariousness, then offers a new type of field. This would be a field that is not constrained by Geertz’s (1973) thick description or cultural analysis, but at the same time not excluding them.

The site of my research was as much precarity as it was Hangberg. The people of Hangberg and their day to day lives are set in relation to the political and material world that they inhabit. The often-marginalised states that they lived in cannot be disconnected from the global processes which create similar situations all over the world. Not only is what is happening in Hangberg relational to the affluent area of the Hout Bay Village and beyond, but it was happening in relation to many other places where insecurity and marginalisation are becoming increasingly defining features of life. This necessitates concepts that bring the local and, particularly, the unrecognized forms of living into the understanding of human life in the times that we live in.

The subject that we chose to research is often directed by restrictions to the accessibility which we have to the anthropological field site, such as lack of visas or funding options (Gupta and Ferguson 1997:11). While the research field might be presented as a randomly chosen, and then out of it emerged the data, anthropologists often choose their field for the data they suspect it might produce. This means that certain forms of life are often recognised while others are ignored. I choose this field because of the high level of precarity that the participants of the research faced. In other words, more than studying people living in Hangberg or how people there experience evictions, I was trying to explore how people’s lives go on while seemingly being completely constrained and defined by their precarity.

2.6 Conclusion

I propose that precarity and aspirations, and the way in which people act on those aspirations, should be dual concepts of analysis and practice to both account for the ways in which people suffer and in which they smile. By seeing both the ways in which life goes on and people cope, as well as the ways in which their lives are constrained; the people we write about are not represented as the total sum of their suffering, while at the same time their suffering is included and acknowledged. As an analytical model, precarity and aspiration have the aim of transcending the narrow focus on geographical localities or identities, and offer a way of understanding the human world that we *all* inhabit.

I argue for the inclusion of the concepts precarity and aspiration, in part to underline the notion that people have the capacity to improve their own lives if constrictions are removed. The constrictions are various and complex, and come from everything from the market to misguided, or sometimes intentionally harmful, state and NGO interventions. Sometimes it is neighbours and family who might increase the precarity of a life. Precarity should, therefore, be used as a variable in any kind of intervention, or lack of intervention, as it could unearth the potential harm of the most well-meaning effort. Similarly, the inclusion of people's aspirations as another variable could only serve to make any attempt at improving people's lives more dynamically compatible with those lives. Not only will this limit the amount of damage, but it is more likely that the people who are supposed to have their lives improved might take on the project as their own.



Me cutting banana bread for Brent's kids in Brent's apartment. Photo taken by Murray Stanford.

Chapter three: Aspirations and Respectability

3.0 Abstract

In this chapter I analyse the emergence of aspirations and its relation to personhood and respectability. I look at how personhood and aspirations are both shaped by the lack of housing and by evictions. This includes looking at how social relations are part of empowering a person to act on the aspirations they have. Neighbours and friends were often part of mitigating the precarity of people's lives. Part of reaching adulthood in Hangberg was the need to move out on your own when you had your own children. Personhood was therefore strongly related to the housing and eviction issues in Hangberg. I argue that the absence of the state building houses meant that people provided houses for themselves. In the final instance they came to reject a state-sponsored housing project, and preferred to live in the houses they had built themselves. This chapter will focus on how people, in spite of extremely precarious and difficult lives, continue to dream and imagine a future. In particular, this would explore what informed the aspirations of the people I worked with and how these aspirations were a part of the capacity for agency. In this, I expand on Oldfield's (2000) notion that people have the capacity to acquire their own housing. These were imagined futures that inspired actions, or non-actions, that would put people into open opposition against a local government and a police force that had already showed their capacity for brutal action.

3.1 Introduction

Hangberg has historically been a contested space where evictions, of some sort or other, had been a central theme in people's life stories. During the apartheid era it was a dumping ground for what then categorised as the coloured people, who were removed from the Hout Bay valley after the Group Areas Act became law in the 1950's and the valley was declared as a white's-only area (Institute for Justice and reconciliation 2009). In the years after this, the people of Hangberg became a community with strong ties, and residents there claimed a proud adherence to that particular space. It had, as the people that I worked with often stated, become "home" and "the only place that they knew". It was, therefore, with much pride that they defended their community when the City of Cape Town came to violently evict some of the residents of Hangberg in September 2010 (Valley and Kaganof 2011). For some, September 2010 was one tragic moment in what could already be seen as difficult lives; but

for others it was, as activist John Roberts put it, “a great victory for the Hangberg community”²¹. It was seen as the time when they beat the local government and made them sign the peace accord that would allow some people to remain in their homes²². For Janina this was the first time she was evicted and also the time when she witnessed the destruction of her home.

It was almost three years later that I met Janina in May 2013. She had built a new house for herself, one that she showed me without hesitation. Although she had been forced to move once before, she had again built a house that the local government deemed illegal. As she was now facing evictions again, this begs the question: Why did she rebuild and move into a space that she knew was highly contested by the local government? She had experienced, only two years before, the very real nature of government threats and the brutality with which they were carried out. Despite this, she decided to build a home for herself that might put her at risk of facing evictions once again. Still, she aspired to live in Hangberg, in a house that she had built herself.

Aspirations are centred on what we want and need, and how we imagine and work towards our future, which are topics that are explored more in economics than in anthropology. In turn, this has had the effect of excluding the cultural aspects in analyses of people’s wants and aspirations (Appadurai 2004:67). Appadurai (2004:65-70) argues that poverty is a material exclusion, and at the same time it comes with a lack of recognition or, even worse, that the poor – or people living in precarity in my words – are recognised in ways that will bring minimal change to their lives. They are often seen as not able to better their own situations because of a lack of action. Yet it is not recognised that this lack of action does not mean a lack of imagining a future or strategies to attain that future, and that the true hindrance lies in the severe oppression and grinding poverty that people face. “[T]he capacity to aspire is a cultural capacity whose strengthening addresses some of the most peculiar cruelties of economic exclusion.” (Appadurai 2004:82). Focusing on people’s aspirations and strengthening these aspirations allows for interventions that are empowering to the people being uplifted, but it also allows us as anthropologists to understand the agency as a constant

²¹ John Roberts was central to the research I did in Hangberg in 2012. This was said in July 2012.

²² The peace accord was however extremely controversial in the eyes of many of the residents of Hangberg. Particularly those who were members of the community organisation: "The Civic Organisation". Brent, Bronnie and Janina were also often expressing their dissatisfaction with the peace accord. Although John Roberts died in October 2012 he also expressed some scepticism towards the peace accord while he was still alive.

process, working even when no agency seems possible.

This opens up for understanding agency not as the ability to act in the moment, but as a temporally-located process. If agency is seen as such (Emirbayer and Misch 1998), as I have argued in the previous chapter, then we are able to understand agency as more than just an act. The capacity to aspire also accounts for Nyamnjoh's (2002) notion of cultural identity, and agency through relation, rather than something embedded in the individual. At the same time, stating that the future and imaginative aspects of agency is a cultural capacity, we can start to examine how culture could be not only restrictive, but also enables people to improve their lives. By bringing the cultural aspects of aspiration into the analysis, people are empowered by the focus on local needs and solutions. Appadurai (2004:69) argues that the capacity to aspire is a cultural capacity, and for people living in poverty it is a capacity that is both informed by, but also stands in opposition to, mainstream discourses. This includes, as already shown by several other South African scholars such as Elaine Salo (2004, 2006) and Fiona Ross (2006, 2009), how in marginalised and unrecognised lives people construct notions of respectability in an effort to create stability in an otherwise uncertain unstable context. In Hangberg I will argue people's aspirations were in a similar way informed by notions of what was seen as respectable.

To me, the capacity to aspire as a capacity informed by notions of respectability becomes a way of bringing the cultural aspect into an analysis of political economy. Notions of respect and respectability are fluid notions that are in constant change depending on local conditions. These are notions that are constantly fought over and contested, and are therefore reproduced and defined in their performance (Jensen 2008:147). Notions of being an adult and having a family of one's own as connected with living away from one's mother (or family) were contested by being labelled a criminal if people decided to build without permission from the local government. The cultural aspects of home as not just any house – and Hangberg as just any community, but an integral part of the place called home – shaped the aspirations of the people that I worked with. Living in Hangberg was not simply about the necessity of having a roof over their heads, although it was about that too; it was a particular roof in a particular space – one which people called home.

The notion of respectability has been described and analysed as a gendered concept (Salo 2004, 2006). About half the people I worked with were men, and the other half women, and there was little difference in their views of housing as an expression of respectability. I wish

to use it as a concept through which politics and notions of personhood plays itself out in the everyday life. Respectability is a discursive space in which notions of personhood are shaped and people are in the process of being and becoming. Respectability is defined by the material and social circumstances in which it is applied and, in part, forms of what it means to be a person. More than that, as notions of respectability and personhood are formative of our capacity to aspire, it could shape us as political subjects. In Hangberg, and with the people I worked with, notions of respectability and what was proper created modes of coping and aspiring.

I will use the notion of respectability to further understand life in the context of a particular form of insecurity in which the state is neither purely the evil oppressor nor the benign benefactor. People both desired welfare interventions by the state, such as building toilets and houses, but at the same time abhorred the violent interventions often in the form of arrests and evictions. For the people that I worked with in Hangberg to secure for themselves the basic local notion of respectability of setting up a home of their own, they would have to do something illegal, and be seen in the eyes of mainstream society as criminals. However, moving out of your parents' home and into a one of your own was an integral part of being an adult, and showed the importance of "circulation" (Simone 2005). As there was no opportunity for people I worked with to buy or rent low cost housing in the area, they were forced to construct houses that were in danger of being seen as illegal by the local government.

3.2 Not just any house in any space, but a home

Hangberg was a relatively small settlement with less than 6.000 people living there according to the 2001 census (Hartnack 2008). Yet there was, as anywhere, a large variety of different ways in which people understood life as it should be lived – different types of identifications that all would in turn have different notions of respectability. Even between the small number of people whom I worked with there were Rasta's²³ as well as converted people; some defined themselves as Khoisan people, others as Coloured, and still other people referred to themselves as "Brown people" (in rejection of the term coloured). Within the Rasta's there were multiple divisions too. One group followed a local Rasta elder called Isaac and called themselves the House of Isaac; while others had broken with the House of Isaac and saw

²³ As the Rastafarians in Hangberg called themselves

themselves now in opposition. Some, like Brent, Clint and Bronie, believed Haile Selassie was the messiah, while a group of people I met while with Brent called themselves the Nazarite's and rejected the notion that Haile Selassie was the messiah.

Even the smoking of ganja was highly debated between different Rasta's, one group stating that it was fine to smoke ganja with tobacco (often called "smoking a bottle") and one group arguing that it should be smoked without tobacco (which one of the members of the House of Isaac felt so strongly about that this was what he chose to question the President of South Africa, Jacob Zuma, about when he visited Hangberg). There are also, of course, all the people who are not Rasta's at all and who would condemn ganja as a drug and a bad thing. The Rasta's I interacted with did not see ganja as a drug, but condemned, in turn, the use of methamphetamine, or tik as it is locally called. At the same time, Brent and other Rasta's that I met were strongly against the drinking of alcohol, which is commonly consumed by many of the non-Rasta people living in Hangberg. Near Brent's apartment was a small unlicensed bar, or a shebeen, and he would often complain about the drunken people staggering home from there and waking up his kids. At one point, this even led to a small altercation between Brent and one of the patrons of that bar.

With all these different outlooks on life, how can one determine what would constitute general notions of respectability or personhood? As stated in the previous chapter, precarity could here be an analytical perspective that transcends the mass amount of different ways in which life in Hangberg could be understood – a common ground that could illuminate what is shared while not excluding diversity. The people that I worked with all had similar experiences of Hangberg as not just any space, but as their home and as their community. Often people would refer to Hangberg as the ghetto, but it was clear that this was a term of pride over how they mastered life in a difficult situation. For all the participants of the research their housing situation was, or had been, threatened. If they had managed to secure a space for themselves and their family to live in, people would still worry about whether or not their children would have a home in the future. The aspiration of being able to move out of one's parents' home and live on one's own had become problematic with the lack of affordable housing. '

Interestingly enough, there was a more affluent part of Hangberg locally called the "Heights", which was in various narratives accused of instigating the local government to evict people. Clint, who had first tried to build a house where Janina lived at the time of the research, had

petitioned the people living in the “Heights” for permission to build close to them and he told me that two of the residents there had refused him: “when you have two rotten fruits it spoils the whole basket”²⁴. After these rejections he decided that it was safer to build on the other side of the township, away from people who might object to him building. On another occasion we were talking about the same topic and he added: “Those people [the people in the “Heights”] also have children, so what are they going to do when the children need to move out. Then they are also going to have to build illegally. It is too bad that two people can ruin things for everyone else. Why do they have to evict the people? We are all humans and we have to have a place to live, but we just don't have any money”²⁵.

Fadwah, whose son Tony had recently been given an eviction notice and who was strongly involved in the anti-eviction campaign, said: “There are people in the community, the people living in the heights or those in the PMF (Peace and Mediation Forum)²⁶ who tells the police the people who build illegally. They also have children, we all have children, so what will they do when their children are grown-ups and moving out on their own”²⁷. She made a strong connection between a small group of community leaders, the PMF, and the people living in the “Heights”; both of which were seen as instigators of evictions. The PMF was seen as taking this role when they enforced the peace accord which states that no new houses should be built above the “sloot” or the small river that runs above the township. Brent told me, while we were walking through the “Heights”, to get to Janina’s house, and that he did not like walking through the area because they made him feel like they looked down upon him. Carmelita distrusted some of the people who had come to be seen as community leaders: “Here’s some people in Hout Bay, in Hangberg, that the community they don’t look lekker after us man. They said they gonna do this, but they first look after themselves”²⁸.

Personhood and respectability was deeply entrenched in people’s relative socio-economic position, and there was a suspicion towards people who were branded “community leaders”. Yet it was the people who were seen as profiting on their political connections that were seen

²⁴ Conversation with Clint on the 12.06.2013.

²⁵ Conversation with Clint on the 27.06.2013.

²⁶ This is the group that negotiated the peace accord and which saw themselves as community leaders. Although I was told that the group started out with over thirty people representing the whole community and was now only nine or ten people representing a minority of Democratic Alliance supporters.

²⁷ Conversation with Fadwah on the 10.06.2013.

²⁸ Interview with Carmelita on the 19.06.2013.

as the most suspicious. The PMF, often conflated with the people living in the “Heights” were, by several of the people I worked with, seen as the instigators of evictions, and as using their connections to secure fishing quotas. Bronnie and Brent both, at separate times, pointed out to me people from the PMF who were living in the “Heights” and who had used their position to enrich themselves. Bronnie told me one day that some of the leaders of the PMF were living in nice houses despite not having a stable job. He then stated that this was because they had profited from getting fishing quotas through political connections and then selling them on to people who would do the actual fishing. People’s shared precarity gave them a sense of community within Hangberg. Bronnie told me: “Look at the brick houses and apartments; they are all separated, while we who live in the Wendy houses are all together. It is more social to live in a Wendy house. We don’t want money, we think for ourselves and we think of the cycle of the earth [saying this he pointed to the small garden of vegetables below Tony’s house].²⁹” To this, Tony added that: “The love of money is the root of all evil”³⁰.

There was a clear distinction made between the people who were seen as more affluent and those who could be seen as living in a more precarious state, both within Hangberg and between Hangberg and the rest of Hout Bay. There was also a distinction between those who saw it as respectable to move out on your own and those who saw it as illegal. Monique told me that when she had built her house in front of her parents’ apartment block, she had gotten a lot of complaints from the other neighbours. As she was building in front of Brent’s door he had told her “that she should not listen to them and that she must just build her house”³¹. The other neighbours were partly upset because they also had children who wanted to move out and build on the pavement in front of the apartment block, but that they were asking for permission from the local government before they did so, rather than just go out and build.

While the evictions might have had a devastating effect on people’s mental and physical health, it also created an extremely strong sense of community. It was a common cause that created common ground and cooperation. In line with Nyamnjoh's (2002) argument, agency was as much a product of interdependency as individual ability. Many of the residents had been faced with evictions in their lifetime, or had evictions as part of their life histories. It was a personal experience that had become embodied by much of the Hangberg community.

²⁹ Interview with Bronnie and Tony on the 10.06.2013.

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Conversation with Monique on the 09.07.2013.

In a community meeting, Roscoe – the representative from the local ANCYL – started the meeting by telling the story of him as a young boy in school coming home and his mother telling him that they were being forced to move. His mother told me later that they were forced to move because her husband had lost his job from the fish processing factory that owned the house they were living in. It is not difficult to see then how evictions and housing took such a prominent place in notions of respectability and personhood.

In the face of a shortage of housing and lack of employment, the only way to set up a home for one self was to build it. This gave people opportunities to set up a house and a family on their own, but at the same time it restricted people, as they could now be seen as illegal residents by the authorities. This would, in turn, make them vulnerable for police actions. The precarity that at times so strongly defined people's lives became a feature in how their notions of respectability were shaped. Notions of respectability were shaped by different things in different situations, and in the context of evictions and lack of housing, it was the access to land and home that came to shape what was seen as respectable.

In line with what Ross (2009) argues, the creation of local notions of respectability in the face of marginality could both function as restrictive and in bringing hope and stability. There was the notion expressed by the people I worked with that at some point if one wanted to grow up there was a need for them to move out on their own³². Adulthood is about our ability to manage and contest precarity. One day I was meeting Janina to talk and she wanted to show me the top of the mountain where she likes to sit and think. Janina told me as we were walking up the mountain together: “I am a grown up woman and I need to live on my own, I can't live with my mother when I am more than forty years old. I need to live on my own. I don't want to move out to Blikkiesdorp where I don't know the people; my children will get into trouble. Hangberg is my home; it is where I grew up”³³. Her statement shows both the strong sentiment that it was not proper for her to live with her mother at this point in her life, but at the same time the connection she had to Hangberg as her home. After being evicted in 2010, it had taken Janina almost two years to build a new home, but she finally obtained the courage to build it. “After that (the 2010 eviction) I was scared to build again so I waited for a long time to build, until it felt safe again”³⁴, Janina said. As the conversation continued, she

³² Similarly to Simone's (2005) argument about “circulation” in Cameroon.

³³ Conversation with Janina 28.06.2013.

³⁴ Ibid.

told me: “I ask myself every day why things went so bad. I wanted a house of my own so badly. There was a point where I just wanted to give up, but you have to put up a fight. If they destroy my house now again there is too much of a struggle to put it up again.”³⁵

About two weeks before I started the research, Janina had been visited by the police in the middle of the night, at around four o’clock. They had arrested her and taken her to the police station in Stellenbosch where she was given a speedy trial and told to move out by the 20th of July or face a prison sentence. Her then partner had decided that it was too dangerous to stay and had suggested that they should move together to Delft which was far away on the other side of Cape Town. By the time I met Janina, the partner had already cleared out his things and moved, and Janina was expected to follow. Yet she told me, as the 20th of July neared, that she had decided not to move, and that some things were more important than certain relationships. She would stay, despite how terrified she was of being thrown in jail – or worse, that the police would come in shooting, like in 2010, and harm her children. This shows that her house in Hangberg was more than just any house – it was the place that she called home. She told me that when she is on the mountain she feels like she is closer to god and god has meant for her to live on the slope of the mountain.

Janina’s statements shows the notion that Hangberg was the place that she saw as her home, a statement that was strengthened by the fact that she broke off her relationship rather than move. At the same time, she stayed in her home despite the threats of several months in prison, and despite the fear that she expressed over being sent to prison. She told me that even the one day that she spent in prison after her arrest was horrible, and that she had never been in jail and was not the kind of person that could live in jail. It was a small act of resistance or defiance. Refusing to move went beyond just surviving or scraping by, it was about making a home. She could have moved back to her mother’s house if all she wanted was to get by. In her aspiration for a home of her own, in the space which she called home, she defied the authorities that had treated her so brutally in the past.

Another participant in the research, Clint, had dealt with the instability of constructing a house without government permission in a different manner. As I stated before; he had, after talking to some of the people living in the “Heights”, decided to go to the other side of the mountain to build where he could be more hidden from the eyes of authorities and prying

³⁵ Conversation with Janina 28.06.2013.

neighbours (his story will unfold in greater detail in the next chapter). He had recently married and had a five-year-old daughter. The house he had built was small, with one bedroom, and not very spacious for a family of three. He told me that his wife had received an offer to stay with relative who had some available space. He wanted to stay in the house that he built however. Despite his wife going to stay with relatives for a while. When I asked him why he had built his own house he told me: “People will have children so what must they do. The children can't live at home when they have families of their own”³⁶. Since then, his wife had moved back in with him again. During the process of recording his life story, he told me: “My dream is to sit in my house, an old man, and teach all the small kids about what it means to be righteous. Like the I [Isaac, an older Rasta] up there”³⁷. A future and stability was what he imagined, a place where his children could have children.

Getting out of “your mothers house” strongly shaped the people I met in Hangberg and their aspiration for the future. There were, however, other parts which also shaped people’s aspirations to stay in Hangberg as a particular place. The myth of squatters in the province of Western Cape, and one that is particularly propagated by the premier of the Western Cape – Helen Zille³⁸, is that people who erect houses or live in what is deemed as illegal structures are coming from other provinces and moving in. Yet, all of the people I met who had built their own house had grown up, or had spouses, that were from Hangberg. There was a strong intergenerational connection between the people living in the apartments and brick houses, and those who had built their own bungalows. This created a strong community that was enabled by existing social and familiar networks. Helen Macgregor from the Development Action Group (DAG), who was involved in housing upgrades that were supposed to materialise in 2008, suggested that the reliance on existing networks was one of the reasons why people in Hangberg were so successful in constructing houses on their own.

People wished not just to live in any space, but in the particular place which they called their home. Carmelita saw Hangberg as a safer place for her children to grow up, and as place where she could borrow a cup of sugar or some flour from a neighbour when it was needed. After a week of heavy rainfall I went to the top of the township where people are mostly living in bungalows and where there is inadequate irrigation for rainwater. At one house there

³⁶ Conversation with Clint on the 27.06.2013.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ <http://www.news24.com/MyNews24/Eastern-Cape-refugees-in-the-Western-Cape-20120322>

were several people from different families helping one man, Stefan, dig a ditch for the rainwater to be funnelled through. This would prevent the rainwater from flooding into his house. Stefan and Brent told me that Stefan was one of the first people to build that high up on the mountain, and it was Brent and another friend, John, who had helped Stefan build the bungalow. It was through aid from the community that people were able to fulfil their aspirations for a house, and lessen the daily hardship of life.

Respectability is, I would argue, about belonging, becoming and interacting. How we see ourselves, how we are seen, and how we want to be. It is formed by the social relations that we wish to keep, and the ones that don't mind breaking. Belonging is our being-in-the-world (Chabal 2009:48) or where we situate ourselves in the world that we inhabit, and it shapes who's opinions we take into account, and which relations and discourses that shape what we see as respectable. Becoming is an emergent form of personhood, or the type of person that we aspire to be. Both aspects are strongly linked to what we see as our community. Chabal (2009) defines a community as: "...a complex system of authority, deference and participation, which forms the backbone of the intersecting spheres of identity that matter for life in that given society." (2009:48).

Despite the strong relations between the people residing in Hangberg, things were not always smooth sailing – interpersonal violence was common, and often serious. As stated above, people who lived in Hangberg had a tendency to monitor each other's building, and there were several accusations that it was neighbours and other community members that had told the police that someone had built a new bungalow. When someone, like Monique, built without any prior permission, it was suggested by Donita that neighbours were jealous and that she had to live in fear that someone would report her to the police. Monique, however, did not seem that fazed by the neighbours' complaining. She told me that the police came to see her to give her an eviction notice, but she was not at home. "The police have to go through the court proceedings to get me out, so I'm not afraid of being kicked off". Since then she has not heard anything.



“My community my pride” written on the wall of the park in Hangberg

3.3 “We are not criminals”: Rejecting the government narrative of respectability

There are several contesting notions of respectability that surface in the context of housing in Hangberg. It is not as simple as just the notion of moving out on one’s own. Being arrested or taking part in illegal activities is generally seen in South Africa as behaviour unbecoming of a respectable person. Jensen (2008:147) describes how a young man causing the police to show up at a Cape Town household was met with anger over the loss of respectability. If, as Ross (2009) suggests, notions of respectability are about creating stability in lives fraught with uncertainty, then its loss is no small matter. When the people I worked with were forced to build a house that was considered illegal, as there was no other housing available for them, one was exposed to being arrested and treated as a criminal. To fulfil the aspiration of starting a family of your own, in your own house, could be contradicted with the loss of respectability for being arrested or doing something that was seen as illegal.

Living in precarity, as the abandonment of the state in protecting its citizen from the precarious aspects of life, sometimes necessitated actions that might be deemed illegal. This

was shown in Janina's refusal to move despite this carrying the risk of being arrested and branded as a criminal.

After a lengthy interview, one woman told me, only after I had turned off the recording device, that in the last five years her income had decreased and there was no longer work in the factories on the harbour, so she would sometimes steal this special bread she liked from the shop. She told me: "It [the bread] is too expensive for me to afford and sometimes I just want something nice"³⁹. The fact that she made this statement only after I finished recording is a clear indication that she did not want this statement associated with her. It was something that was obviously not a respectable thing to do. Others had to engage in what was locally known as "informal fishing", or fishing without a permit, or plant and sell ganja to survive. For most people, particularly at the time of year when both the fishing and tourist seasons were in a slump, there were few sources of regular income. To mitigate this, people engaged in acts which were seen as illegal by the police. Janina tried anything she could to stay, but was told that she had already been given her final notice to move by the court. She decided, however, to wait and see what would happen on the date she was due to be evicted.

Building your own house, no matter the perceived legality of it or chances of getting arrested, was justified as an act of necessity. In the beginning of the research the big story that people were talking about was the late night arrest of two women and a man. The man, who was arrested, was named Vartil and he told me that he had been abused by the police when they arrested him. He claimed that he had been shocked with an electric Taser and kicked when he had fallen over as a result of this electroshock. The two women, one of whom was Janina, had been taken to the police station in Stellenbosch (a small town a long drive away). This was a story retold to me by several other people, and the story that Janina first told me when I met her. To protests the arrest and the eviction orders that followed, the Civic organisation arranged for a protest march to the police station. The building of supposedly illegal housing and the subsequent arrest did not hold the loss of respect that other criminal acts, such as stealing, held. It was much the same for people engaged in informal fishing, and one man, John Roberts, was proudly declared to have been an "informal fisherman" at his funeral.

The state and the local government were also prone to notions of respectability. This obviously included notions of how it could be justified that in post-apartheid South Africa

³⁹ Interview with anonymous participant

people were still being evicted. One of these justifications was through what was referred to as the ‘fire break’⁴⁰ by the local provincial government. The supposed fire break was a strip of deserted land between the settlement and the national park. The danger of fire spreading from the settlement to the national park was used as reasoning for the September 2010 evictions. Helen from the DAG told me in an interview that they had conducted a risk analysis of the area with the result that there was no need for a fire break, as the settlement had electricity, and a fire from the national park would not burn down the mountain towards the settlement. Furthermore, the initial protests in 2008 were held by some of the people in Hangberg against the city auctioning away the very piece of land that was known as the fire break. At that auction the land was sold to a Greek investor and cleared for development. This shows that there was no reason or real intent on having a fire break where people were now building. Environmental concerns become pretence for doing things that are not seen as respectable in the eyes of the mainstream society – this has been used similarly as a pretext to raze so-called slums in India (Ghertner 2011). The laws are, in these cases, used to distribute precarity.

During the evictions of September 2010, and the massive protests that came in their wake, then-premier of the Western Cape, Helen Zille, referred to the people being evicted as: “...a small group of 'Rastafarian drug lords' who wanted to upset the upgrading process by staking a claim to the land through erecting illegal shelters” (Fieuw 2012:94). Helen Zille even referred to the Rasta community as a “drug and crime syndicate” (Fieuw 2012:94) and at one point claimed that the community was held ransom by “...a few drug-pushing 'Rastas’”⁴¹. This, despite the fact that most of the people who were evicted was not Rasta’s – Janina being one of them. The people that I met rejected the description that Helen Zille had made of them as criminals, and often came with a counter narrative of it being their land so they could not be seen as criminals for building there. Another description Helen Zille used of Hangberg was that it was a so-called fisherman’s village, something which Carmelita rejected angrily: “This is not a ‘so-called’ fisherman village. My grandfather was a fisherman and my husband is a fisherman”⁴². Much like in Wacquant’s (2009) *Punishing the Poor*, people in Hangberg were both feeling the pressure of material uncertainty and a diminishing industrial economy,

⁴⁰ <http://mg.co.za/article/2010-10-07-rights-commission-slams-zilles-wild-claim> (18.11.2013.)

⁴¹ <http://pambazuka.org/en/category/features/67328> (21.02.2013)

⁴² Carmelita in conversation on the 17.06.2013.

and at the same time their precarity was being criminalised.

As opposed to Wacquant's (2009) account, I found that the people that I worked with did not accept the criminalisation of their aspirations and their precarity. What constituted as respectable was highly contested and contextual and for some, being arrested by the police for building without permissions was challenging, but not something they were ashamed of. They saw themselves as having a right to build on the Hangberg mountain, and it was therefore naturally seen as the right thing to do. For Janina it was, as stated above, countered by a claim to a belonging to the land and the mountain that was ordained by god. For others, particularly young Rasta's like Brent, Tony and Clint, it was through the claim they made of being Khoisan, or an indigenous, people of South Africa. For different reasons Hangberg was seen collectively as the possession of the people who lived there. During the march to the police station the participants of the march came up with a song (translated from Afrikaans):

“Hangberg, Hangberg, is our mountain
Hangberg, Hangberg, is our mountain
Hangberg, Hangberg, is our mountain
They can't take that away from us
They sit there and do, “fokall”
They sit there and do, “fokall”
They sit there and do, “fokall”
Sitting there doing nothing”

In the song it is clear that the mountain was seen as belonging to the residents who lived there, at the same time expressing their anger at the government for not making their lives better. One young Rasta named Brett told me: “We don't have ownership of our own land and that is the problem. We can't grow anything or make a little vegetable garden because we might get evicted”⁴³. The arrests and evictions created a narrative of the people I worked with as criminals, and in turn they created a counter-narrative in which they were inherently the owners of the mountain, and that it was the government that stopped this ownership.

The house and the home as a dwelling, is not just a material structure, but a social and cultural place (Kopytoff 1986, Cieraad 1999). The social networks that formed a community in Hangberg were known as “where I grew up”, and the space in which people designated “a

⁴³ Conversation with Brett on the 02.07.2013.

family of my own” were all part of creating the notion of home. This was where people felt a belonging and a deep connection that transcended the notion that a house was just a roof over one’s head. Besides expressing a strong connection to the mountain and the place of Hangberg, the community around them – while fraught with interpersonal violence, was part of mitigating the marginalisation that made life so difficult. Both Janina and Carmelita showed concern over what would happen to their children if they were forced to move from Hangberg to another suburb of Cape Town. Central to their aspirations around the house and the home was the notion that they had a home of their own, but also that this home was in Hangberg.

The contested nature of both Hangberg as a space, but also of notions of respectability and personhood, led to different acts of resistance – some of which were expressed during the march against the police station. One of the marchers, Kristy, wore an outfit made of buckskin with a headdress and a sign on his chest which said “Koranna”. The buckskin was what he saw as his traditional Khoisan clothing and Koranna was the particular group of Khoisan people that he claimed belonging to. As the march passed by some of the more affluent-looking houses behind high walls, there was what was seen as a white family standing on the balcony. A woman left the row of marchers and shouted to the people on the balcony: “If it is war you want, then you will get war”⁴⁴. Others protested more subtly, like Janina and Carmelita stating that this is home and where they belong. Both narratives turned the notion of them as criminals on its head as it was now the government throwing people out of their rightful homes that were the real criminals. This was highlighted by a statement made by Bronnie: “We are not criminals; this is our land so how can we be the criminals. It is them that stole the land from our forefathers”⁴⁵.

3.4 Conclusion

It was easy to see in Hangberg the ways in which the state distributed precarity. Those unrecognised were seen as criminals. Notions of respectability informed and shaped people’s capacity to aspire and what people aspired to. In the contested narratives of who belonged in

⁴⁴ Protestor during the march on the 17.06.2013.

⁴⁵ Conversation with Bronnie on the 10.06.2013.

Hangeberg and what it meant to build a house without permission from the government, a particular kind of political subject was being constructed. They were subjects that had an ambiguous relationship with the state and saw it as much as an intrusion as a benefactor. The near absence of state interventions created a situation in which people had taken control of their own improvement. Their precarity was mitigated by their own aspiration and with the aid of their family and community, rather than by the state. In the next chapter I will look at the ways in which people built houses to understand both how aspirations were acted out and constrained. This will also highlight the capacity people had for improving their own lives.



Me and Brent greeting outside Janina's house. With Janina in the background. Photo taken by Murray Stanford.

Chapter four: Architecture, Aspiration and Agency

4.0 Abstract

In Hangberg the house was a constant source of uncertainty for the people I worked with, but Hangberg seen as the “home” created a notion of stability and continuity. In this chapter I will argue that the house is not just embodied with the structures of society, as Bourdieu ([1973]2003) suggests, but does also embody the agency and aspirations too. I argue that the in looking at how people built houses, agency is revealed as not always being an act in the present, but aspirations towards the future. The building of the house revealed how the people I worked with smiled despite the suffering they faced. This chapter is therefore an ethnographic exploration of the concepts of smiling and suffering (Chabal 2009) in the context of housing and eviction as it is reflected through the construction of the house.

4.1 Architecture, aspiration and agency

The house is not just an inanimate structure in which one lives and takes shelter; it is imbued by the social lives of the people which inhabit it (Appadurai 1986; Kopytoff 1986). As Carsten and Hugh-Jones (1995) argue, a house is an extension of the person, or in other words it is embodied with the life of the person who inhabits it. The construction of a house shows the ways in which the social and material world we live in has been internalised (Waterson 1997:xviii). It is revealing of who we are and the lives that we live, and the world we inhabit is reproduced in how the house is constructed. “If people construct houses and make them in their own image, so also do they use these houses and house-images to construct themselves as individuals and as groups.” (Carsten and Hugh-Jones 1995:3). In Hangberg, the house was a contentious subject and as precarious as most of life was for the people I worked with. At the same time it reflected, as I argued in the previous chapter, the aspirations which people had for their lives. Not only were people’s aspirations invested in living in and having control over a house of their own, but the construction of houses were imbued by both people’s ability to act and the ways in which they were constricted.

Using a social biography of things, as Appadurai (1986) argues, allowed me to see, through studying the house, the ways in which agency slowly unfold –, a process, rather than an act of the moment. All inhabited spaces are cultural constructions of some kind (Waterson 1997:xvi), but in the contested space of evictions and struggle over land, the house embodied

a particular kind of political subject. The precarity of life in Hangberg and the ways in which people smiled were strongly reflected in the way that people imagined and built their houses, and so the house came to embody both the precarity and agency of life. The people I worked with had built houses for themselves that were in a constant state of insecurity as they could be torn down at any time. This insecurity was again reflected in the ways that the participants of my research constructed their houses. Sometimes this was shown in moments of caution or waiting, and in other instances in the location being away from plain sight or amongst other houses, seen as illegal by the local government.

“It is only under exceptional circumstances [...] that we are forcibly reminded of the house’s central role and fundamental significance.” (Carsten and Hugh-Jones 1995:3). As the notion of the house and the home was central in how people defined personhood against the backdrop of precarity, it became clear that I should speak of the houses that people lived in. Evictions had been a facet of life for people in Hangberg on and off since the 1950’s (Froestad 2005; Institue for Justice and Reconciliation 2009), and were still present in people’s lives. It would surface as an issue at different times. I first interacted with people in Hangberg two years after the protests and evictions in September 2010. At the beginning of my research, people were being evicted at the top of the mountain, while other people, in the area known locally as Dallas, were being moved into temporary housing - as part of an upgrading project. Both incidents brought the significance of the house, evictions and land into people’s narratives.

Bourdieu ([1973]2003) argues that the structures of the house is a microcosm of the universe of its inhabitants. He also argues that not only is the house an embodiment of the context in which it is built, but it teaches and shapes the people who inhabit it about and in the image of the world they inhabit (Bourdieu 1977:90). Embodied in the structures of the house are the structures of the universe which the people inhabit, and at the same time the house reproduces these structures within the people (Bourdieu [1973]2003:136). I would argue though, that the house also embodies the agency of its inhabitants as well as their constraints. In this, the house embodied both the smiling and the suffering of its inhabitants. The house was not just the place which people sleep in or a roof over their heads; it is politically, socially and culturally imbued. The notion of the house is in constant flux, as the political and social landscape is changing. As life becomes more precarious, so does the house; and the place itself - or the land - takes on a role of permanency that the house used to have. The house was

not fixed, but constantly changing both in its physical structure and in its social meaning.

In this chapter I will look at architecture and the way people constructed their homes as an example of agency as a process of negotiations between the opportunities and constrictions of the present, experiences of the past, and aspirations for the future (Emirbayer and Misch 1998). This allows an insight into how the people I worked with had the capacity for transforming the circumstances they lived in, despite not always having the possibility to act out this potential. For some people, the building of a house was just a dream or an aspiration (Appadurai 2004) and the only action available was waiting, but in the back of people's minds was an imagined future different from the one they experienced in the moment.

With the lack of affordable housing being built by the South African local and national government, an increasing number of people in Hangberg – along with the rest of the country – have taken to building their own homes. These homes are sometimes made of whatever material that people can find and salvage, while those with more resources might buy the material for a complete structure and put it up themselves. The point is that people do not erect a house as an afterthought, it is rather the result of long term planning, based on how the past and the present are experienced. This chapter will show how the architecture of people's houses reflected the planning and patience that went into the building of a house, showing how people's capacity to aspire was a driving force in the ability to improve life.

The building of houses was one of the ways that the people I worked with acted out their aspirations, and where it took a material shape and certainty. The building of a house was also one of the many ways in which people smiled at the adversity they faced. This chapter also shows how government interventions in building houses were badly received and sometimes increased people's precarity. After years of neglect, people in Hangberg had started building better houses for themselves than the local government could provide. This caused great protests when a housing project was begun and people were told that they had to move into temporary housing.

4.2 The aspiration for a house: Waiting, imagining and sometimes building

Looking at the way in which people constructed their houses gives an insight into how agency is a lengthy process of planning and waiting; and then, sometimes, when there is an opportunity, moving forward. For the people I worked with in Hangberg, the threats of police actions such as evictions and arrests were a constant factor in the planning of building a

house. Yet, as families grew and people had children of their own, there was a need to move out and start your own household. As shown in the previous chapter, it was part of becoming an adult. Taking action into one's own hands and just building your house on an empty piece of land could be met with force. The people I worked with designed and built their own housing with considerations of the social and political context in which they lived. Waterson (1997:xvi) states that much of the housing built around the world, such as the bungalows in Hangberg, is "architecture without architects", but there were certainly architects building the houses. Although not designed by professional architects, the structures that people built were a result of their aspirations for a less precarious life, and for the stability of a home, and was carefully constructed so these aspirations could be reached.

To counter the risk of evictions, some of the people I worked with would take their time building, and try to wait out or strategise around government interventions. Clint wanted to build his house on the top right side of the mountain in an area that is less windy. Before he built, however, he conducted a petition with the neighbours and, after two of them protested, he decided to build his house on the other side of the mountain. As I showed in the previous chapter, he saw the two rejections as a future source of trouble: "when you have two rotten fruits it spoils the whole basket"⁴⁶. Clint showed me his house and I would be there with him as he told me the story of how he had built it and his plans for the future.

Brent had, since I got to know him a year before the master's research began, talked about building on an extra room on his ground floor apartment. He, Donita and their two kids (three with Donita's youngest daughter who sometime lived there) lived in a one room apartment with a kitchen. To try and alleviate the situation he had taken out his kitchen sink and made the kitchen into a bedroom for the children. This had, however, made it difficult to cook, so he wanted to add another room connecting with the back door. However, he told me that after the trouble with Janina being arrested, and talks of evicting people in the area known as Dallas, he wanted to "wait to build until things calm down". Similarly, Janina had waited for almost two years before she rebuilt her house after the evictions of September 2010. Evictions and other state sanctions had become part of ordinary life, and were also ingrained in the way that the house was conceived. The houses and the way that they were built embodied the precarity of the lives of its residents, as houses were built with evictions in

⁴⁶ Conversation with Clint on the 12.06.2013.

mind, and existed in a similar precarious state. Both houses and people were waiting for a moment of perceived stability so that one could build, expand or improve. Appadurai (2004) argues that waiting and patience is one of the few weapons that people facing grinding poverty and oppressions use regularly. Action is tempered and held back, but kept alive by aspirations and dreams, and the knowledge that waiting and moving slowly could allow you to reach what you imagine for the future.

Janina waited out her eventual eviction which was set to be the 20th of July 2013 – the date came and went and nothing happened. She was told that the courts had allowed her to appeal her case and the danger was over for now. Until the next time the police would come knocking on her door in the middle of the night, her house was safe. When I visited her in late September 2013 she told me that she was looking towards building another room on her house. She only had one bedroom now and it was too small for her and her children to all live in. Only one of her children was living with her now, as the rest was living at her mother's apartment, but when she had that extra room they could all stay with her. As the danger was over she was now looking towards the future and again working towards the things that she dreamed of and aspired towards.

The way that Clint built his house resonated in this slow move towards one's aspirations. After having built the foundations for the first house, but deciding to move because of the neighbours, he began building his house on the other side of the mountain. The house that he was building was hidden from plain sight as it was built on the edge of the mountain and down a slope. To get to his house, we had to squeeze past a narrow alley between two other bungalows. From there we walked a steep path downwards and on the left hand side we passed a half-finished concrete house of which half had fallen and was being covered by mud. Clint told me that two women had tried to build there, but they had put in a panorama window before they had put on the roof and the wind had blown the wall over. "That is why it is important that you put on the roof before you put in the windows"⁴⁷, Clint said. On the right side of the path was Clint's house.

It was built of driftwood and bits and pieces of wood that people had given him or which he had collected himself. Since the wood was all in small pieces, they had been meticulously connected by other pieces of small wood. To reinforce the structure and to sustain the roof,

⁴⁷ Conversation with clint on the 27.06.13.

there were thick support beams from the ground to roof placed alongside the wall and in the corners. There was a small stoep (South African word for veranda) in front of the house and fence around the stoep. As we passed over the stoep and into the house, there was a small front room that was used as a kitchen and a sitting area. In the back of the house there was another room that was a bedroom, most of which was occupied by the double bed. When Clint started building he had first put up the one room that is now the bedroom. "If you put up one small building then they won't notice you, and then you can just build more when you can." This room was the starting point, and after that he added a stoep, which he later added a roof to and then a wall around, and put in the two windows. This became the kitchen and he then built another stoep in front of the house. At the back of the house he had begun to build the cement foundation for a new room. He told me that once he has finished this room and put a roof on it he would make that the bedroom. After that he was planning to build brick walls around the whole house and then take down the wooden structure from the inside. This way he would be able to live in the house while he was upgrading it to a brick structure.

Clint told me that he had made the final decision to build a brick house after he contracted tuberculosis (TB). In his view, a brick house would be less damp and would therefore make him less susceptible to diseases like TB. All he had to do was get the money together to buy some bricks. He was working once in a while doing casual jobs for a lady in the Hout Bay village and his wife worked at an ice cream stand on the harbour. This meant that the process to save up for material was another factor slowing down the process of building, but Clint waited with patience for the time when he could buy the bricks. When I came back to Hangberg in early November 2013, a couple of months after the main bulk of my research, Clint told me that he had managed to buy himself enough bricks to build on to his house. By Christmas, he said, the house would be finished with a new bedroom and he wanted me to come and visit him and see it. He would finally be getting another room added to his house and make it warmer by turning it into a brick structure rather than one made out of driftwood.

The construction of Clint's house was a drawn out process, marked by waiting for opportunity or material and then built when those moments came. The waiting and the planning, the imagining and the aspiring were as important a part as the physical actions of building itself. Both the caution from past experiences of eviction and the aspirations of what a home should be like were part of the actions of building. Building a house became a form of moving forward, and to mitigate the precariousness which was such a prominent part of his

life. After Clint had contracted TB he told me that he had to give up working because the medicines made him too tired to work. He had given up any government intervention which could aid him in his troubles, both in his need for a house and in his financial trouble. When I asked him about the evictions that were going on at the time of the research, he said: “I can build a nice place for myself and then I just want to be left alone to live my life”. Building a house for himself was a way of coping with the lack of available and affordable housing, and this was done in spite of the risks of evictions. Clint was proud of the house that he had built. When I asked about the house Clint said: “When they came to put in the electricity the guy was nervous about going up on the roof, but it’s a solid roof. He was crawling around up there and I told him that it’s safe man you can stand up, and he did, and he saw that it was a good roof.”

Carmelita offered another example of the slow and careful way of constructing and the thoughts invested in the building of a house. She had, after she moved out of her family’s house, lived in a caravan for several years, and then about five years ago she was told that if she wanted government services, she needed “a number” (a permanent address for the house). Since she was mobile, she could not get “a number” as she could, in their words, move anywhere. To this she answered: “Where must I go, where must I move to?”⁴⁸. If she did not have a number she would not be in line for receiving a government house when that was built. Carmelita’s house was two stories and was built from wood on the top and cement blocks on the bottom floor. She told me that at first she could only afford to build the wooden structure. To avoid unwanted attention, she built it in an already crowded area which meant that the only open space she had to build her house was on a slope. The front part of the house was thus supported by two poles. After she could afford it, she decided to build the cement part at the bottom part of the house and, in turn added an extra floor.

On the bottom floor she had a washing machine and a small kitchen with a fridge. She told me that the boys sleep on the bottom floor. We went through the front room and through the door was a ladder which went up through a small hatch into the second floor. The second floor had a large curtain in the centre of it, separating it and creating another small room. Inside were a large bed and a TV in front of the bed. Despite it being a cold day, it was reasonably warm inside the top floor. Carmelita told me that the girls slept on the top floor,

⁴⁸ Interview with Carmelita on the 19.06.2013.

and in that way they were safe if there was a break-in. After having built her own house and lived in it for over six years, she no longer wanted a government house.

“But me here I’m staying alright, but the only problem here is sanitation man, we don’t have toilets⁴⁹, Carmelita told me. Both Carmelita and her neighbour Geraldine complained that they did not have proper toilets, only buckets that they then emptied in a hole which leaked when it rained, and they wanted the government to come and sort that out. Geraldine told me: “When we need to use the toilet neh, there is a hole there on top that we throw the bucket in. Now we have to throw our things, our waste there, and it is not nice everybody’s using that. Some of the waste is around the pipe and the children are playing here. All that waste, it’s raining now neh, so that waste runs into the sand. And they told us if we want to put up the toilet we have to make a petition to put up a toilet”⁵⁰. Geraldine and Carmelita agreed, both have given up on waiting for the government to build a toilet for them. Like with the houses, they ended up deciding to build it themselves and were only waiting for the opportunity to do so. The aspirations centred on building changed as the circumstances changed and people learnt from the past that they could no longer trust the government to build. Standing outside Tony’s house Bronnie told me: “People multiply and then I just want to live in my own place. They can build private schools or houses for white people, but not for the brown man”⁵¹. This sentiment moved the people I worked with to rather build for themselves and provide their own housing and services. With the evictions that often followed, the government was exacerbating people’s precariousness by disrupting the actions people took in making their lives more secure. In the face of their precarity, they had decided to move towards their aspirations on their own.

Janina, and the other people above the sloop, were not the only people in Hangberg facing evictions, however. There were a large amount of people who had built in the part of the Township that lies on the lower part of the mountain and closer to the Hout Bay harbour. This area is locally known as the Dallas area. Through an interview with the DAG representative Helen, and with Pamela, a woman living in Dallas, it became clear this was another contested area within Hangberg. The promise of housing for the people living in Dallas was part of a project in which land would be allocated for the building of a block of flats, called the

⁴⁹ Ibid

⁵⁰ Interview with Geraldine on the 19.06.2013.

⁵¹ Conversation with Bronnie on the 09.07.2013.

Panorama Hills, which was to be sold to people from outside Hangberg as commercially developed apartments. In return for clearing that land, a piece of open land – where there used to be a local convenience store – would be used to develop housing for the people living in Dallas. After the Panorama Hills were built (this was before the trouble started in 2008), the houses intended for the local community never followed. Brent described what the developers had given back as: “They put some paint on the school building, but nothing more happened”⁵². A young Rasta called Nolan told me that a considerable amount of the anger during the September 2010 riot was directed towards the Panorama Hills building.



A typical example of the kind of houses people would build for themselves.

4.3 “They are moving us from a shack to another shack”

After Janina and others had been arrested and told to move within a short period of time, the Civic organisation arranged for a meeting to organise a march against evictions and police brutality. In this meeting the public relations representative for the local branch of the African National Congress (ANC) in Ward 77 (the ward which Hangberg is part of) was also present.

⁵² Conversation with Brent on the 17.07.2013.

He announced that they had made a plan for the building of houses for the residents of the Dallas area, and that it involved moving the people affected to a temporary relocation area while houses were being upgraded. This would allow the government to build new houses in the place where the old houses were now. The announced plan was met with heavy protests from the residents of Hangberg that were at the meeting. The accusation was that they were building a “Blikkiesdorp” in Hangberg. Blikkiesdorp is the nickname for several temporary relocation areas built for people removed from other areas because of upgrades and forced removals. The houses are built of corrugated iron and are notoriously bad to live in, as they get scorching hot in the summer and leak in the winter⁵³. People have also been known to be moved to these relocation camps with the promise of housing to be built for them in their previous areas, but some have stayed in the camps for more than five years. The people I met in Hangberg showed much scepticism towards being moved out of their houses. Added to the bad reputation of people being stuck in relocation camps, were also the memories of evictions in years gone by.

When the relocation area was finished and people were about to be moved from Dallas, they protested with the chant (translated from Afrikaans): “They are moving us from a shack to another shack”⁵⁴. As people had built houses for themselves over a prolonged period of time, they would not want to move away from what was seen as good houses. The dissatisfaction with houses built through development programs, from private or government people, were reflected in the difference between Carmelita and her mother Pamela, and the way in which they saw their respective houses. Carmelita told me that she would never live in the house that her mother was staying in, as the people living in those houses was getting sick and dying. They were, in her opinion, damp and cold, which in turn gave people pneumonia. Carmelita had by this point upgraded her self-built house into a two story with two and a half rooms, and she was happy about the size of her house. When I asked Carmelita about her mother’s house she suggested that I should go talk to her.

Carmelita’s mother Pamela lived in the Dallas Area. She told me that she used to have a bungalow that she had built herself, but when they built the Panorama Hills, her house had to be moved and she was, in return, given the house she was currently living in. The day I

⁵³ <http://mg.co.za/article/2009-10-09-dumping-ground-for-unwanted-people> and <http://www.iol.co.za/capetimes/no-respite-from-heat-for-blikkiesdorp-1.1445168#.UoDvpicWpfY> (Accessed 11.11.2013)

⁵⁴ Chant during protest in July.

visited her house was a warm and sunny day. Early July is one of the colder months in Cape Town, with much rain and relatively cold temperatures, so a warm and sunny day felt good. Most of the residents in Hangberg were using this day of sunshine to hang out clothing to dry, so the township was filled with clothing hanging wherever they could be hung. As we reached the Dallas area, which is just below Brent's apartment, we ran into Pamela sitting on a box outside her neighbour's house.

After we had been introduced by Brent I asked her if she could show me her house and if I could ask her some questions about her life. The house was situated in the shadow of Panorama Hills, which is a large grey apartment building three stories tall, so it seemed almost omnipresent. Pamela's back wall was part of the more than three meter tall perimeter wall that surrounded Panorama Hills. As we entered the house it felt damp and cold, even though it was a warm and dry day. Along the top of the walls ran long cracks in the concrete, and in the corners mould was starting to build. Pamela told me that when it rained it leaked through the roof, and she did not have the money to fix any of the things that were wrong with the house.

Pamela was in her sixties and as she spoke mostly Afrikaans, she asked if Brent could translate what she was saying. She told me: "The new structures that they put up are bad and are leaking all over the place. They also don't protect against the cold wind from the sea. This causes many people to die from pneumonia and tuberculosis. So many of the people living in the houses are getting sick and die"⁵⁵. Pamela used to live in a Bungalow, but she moved to this house about eight years ago. The land that she was living on was being developed into what would become Panorama Hills. In return for moving, the developers promised to build houses for the people affected. Pamela said that they did not build proper houses, however. When she, and the other people who had been given houses, lived in the bungalows they built themselves, they were never sick, but after they moved to the new houses they got sick all the time, Pamela claimed. These claims from Pamela showed that people were not satisfied with their new houses, and that the poor quality of housing might be a factor in increasing cases of pneumonia and TB. Govender, Barnes and Pieper (2010) shows the increased health vulnerability of living in low-cost housing in South Africa. It was clear that even when there was development of new houses, people preferred to build their own. They felt that they had

⁵⁵ Interview with Pamela on the 11.07.2013.

the skills to do it better and simply did not trust the government or other forces of “development” to do actually build quality housing.

Like many others in Hangberg, Pamela's experience eight years ago was not the first time she was forced to move. She used to live on Beach road opposite to the popular tourist destination, Mariners Wharf, in the 1970's. Back then there was a lot of low cost housing on Beach road. During the march to the police station, I spoke to an older man who told me, as we passed Beach road, that he used to live there when he was younger. Now it was mostly empty spaces and a small shopping mall, but back then there were rows of houses there, he told me. In the 1980's he was forced, together with his family, to move further away from Hout Bay village and into Hangberg. When Pamela first moved to Hangberg with her parents, it was the fish factory that they worked on which gave them a house to stay in. Pamela also worked at a fish factory until she was 52 years and had to retire because the work was too hard. Now her pension covers just her rates, while food and other expenses were covered by her daughters. This left nothing for repairs on the house that were obviously badly needed – for Pamela, the cost of living was just too high to improve on her house.

When people were protesting that they are being “moved from a shack to another shack”, it was informed by experiences such as Pamela's. She lived close to the people in the Dallas area, so they knew from the experiences of their neighbours that a government-built house is not necessarily a house, but might still be a shack in the negative sense of the word. It also shows why people like Carmelita, Clint, Janina, Tony, and Geraldine wanted to stay in the houses they had built themselves. Once they had gone out and actually managed to build a structure, it was more than likely that that house would be better than the house provided by assorted development projects; government led or otherwise. Not only could one risk that the house was of a lower quality than the one you built for yourself, but on top of that you had to pay rates. The people who had built their own houses only paid for electricity, but not for rates. Other people, like Brent and Donita who lived in an apartment, had the constant pressure of paying rates.

Donita expressed much concern about the fact that they were so far behind on the payments of their rates. She told me on several different occasions that she had to find a job so that she could pay the rates regularly. Brent was more defiant about the rates and when I asked him and Donita if I could see the transcripts of rates owed he told me that it was free toilet paper

that they sent him every month. Paying rates was a difficult expense to cope with when work was often irregular and badly paid. The small amount of money that people made a month was often not enough to cover day-to-day expenses, let alone paying rates. Brent told me that he wanted to paint the inside of his apartment to make it nicer, as I could clearly see the paint was peeling off all around the wall. He also wanted to fix his kitchen sink which was at the moment reduced to a bucket on the floor beneath the tap. Yet, with making a living from selling medicinal herbs, there was little chance of being able to afford these improvements. For people who built their own houses, rates became less of an issue, and they could focus on other issues such as upgrading their homes or adding new sections to them.

Because of the discrepancy between the quality of the self-built and government-built houses, residents had begun to reject government interventions, even when that intervention was building houses. Their precarity was mitigated by their own efforts and not by government efforts and, as such, the house became their way of smiling in the face of precarity. People would rather trust their own capacity to improve life, and were, from experience, sceptical about what the local government had to offer. The housing situation reflected the way in which many people in the community of Hangberg had come to reject government interventions, good or bad. While most were protesting the removal from the Dallas area they all moved into the relocation camp in the end, the only ones who refused to move were two activists. The sentiment was that moving to the relocation camp would increase peoples precarity.

If houses embodied the lives and experiences of the people I worked with, then taking account of the way in which houses were imagined and built gave great insight into how life in Hangeberg was negotiated. Two things became clear through understanding people's housing; there was a strong need for housing in Hangberg, and if the state would not help people build then they would do it themselves; and houses were as precarious and as unstable as other aspects of life. This was a constant effort in creating stability and predictability in their lives. It was how they smiled at the precarity which was so present in their lives. What I experienced in Hangberg was that people had given up on waiting for the government to come and improve their lives. Instead, they had taken it upon themselves, through using existing social networks to improve their lives whenever and however they could. Houses in Hangberg embodied both the rejection of government intervention and the precarity of people's lives.

Conclusion

The high level of precarity that was a constant presence in the lives of the people I met with was most visible in the way that even their houses were constantly at risk of imminent destruction. Following the material house, and the ways in which it evolved, revealed both the aspirations and the constrictions that people in Hangberg faced. Few things were stable in Hangberg, but the notion of the place Hangberg as a home created certain measures of stability. No matter how many times the house might be destroyed, Hangberg would continue to be home. As precarity was felt through evictions and lack of housing, it was mitigated by people building houses of their own. The people I worked with knew their aspirations well, and knew what they wanted and what they needed. If there are to be any more interventions in Hangberg to build houses, it should be grounded in these aspirations.

Chapter five: Conclusion

It is clear that the South African local and national government had, at best, failed at making Hangberg a better place to live or, at worst, made it worse. Both violent evictions and neglect were ways in which precarity was being distributed to the people of Hangberg. As is the case in many places in the world, those most vulnerable are not recognised as such. Seen as a problem to be solved, their agency and opinion are disregarded and their lives are defined by what they don't have. As was the case with the people I worked with, they had the capacity and the knowledge to improve their own lives, but were held back by material poverty, interpersonal violence and government oppression. Both in its absence (lack of proper houses), and presence (evictions and police action), the state was making life in Hangberg more precarious. It is equally clear, however, that people in Hangberg did not just give up and let the suffering of their lives overtake them. In different ways they dreamed, imagined and aspired for a better life for themselves and their children. Sometimes these aspirations were part of the acts of the present, and at other times wishful thinking and dreams for the future.

Sometimes the suffering that I witnessed in Hangberg seemed too much to overcome. Some life stories were so full of pain and violence it was difficult to understand how they endured and moved forward. If listening to the story was exhausting, how must it have been to have lived it? Yet, people did move forward, although not always visibly so. No matter how much the suffering, there always seemed to be more to that life than the suffering. There was always a metaphorical smile in people's lives. I argue this throughout the paper, not to lessen the severity of, or to diminish in any way, the suffering that people felt, but to give meaning to their tears. The focus on the ways in which people smile is an effort to show their lives in the way that they experienced it, and at the same time it is an effort to show the capacity and knowledge people had to improve their own lives.

The people I worked with in Hangberg had begun to reject the interventions of the state, and wanted rather to be left to build their own houses. This is not to say however that they did not want the state, or other actors, to build proper housing for them. From experience they had learnt that there was little chance of this happening, and when it did happen it involved being moved to a temporary relocation camp with the prospects of never moving back. Looking at how people like Clint and Carmelita built their houses offered a new perspective on housing

projects. The careful upgrading of their houses, while they were living in it, gave an insight into how people in a housing project could escape the trap of relocation camps. Given the material and infrastructure people know very well how to utilise it. This dissertation is in some ways a show of how people have both the knowledge and the capacity to improve their lives, but they are hindered by the precarity of daily life. Material poverty, lack of stable jobs, state sponsored evictions, interpersonal violence, and general acceptance of being allowed to wither away, are all facets of the precarity distributed to the people I worked with.

Through their aspirations, the people I worked with smiled at the precarity they faced in their ordinary lives. They built houses they were proud of, houses that they imagined would protect them from the sickness and suffering they experienced. Their houses were both a way of improving their lives, but also an attempt at creating a home in Hangberg, along with a sense of stability. Focusing on smiling and aspiring allows for an understanding of the capacity of people to improve their own lives. It is, in my opinion, a tool for empowering people's voices and agency. Precarity allows us, on the other hand, to understand the multiplicity of ways in which life is constricted and oppressed. Through this ethnographic study of housing and eviction in Hangberg, both precarity and agency, through aspirations, have been brought forward as processes shaping human existence.

These are processes which are universally present. As such, this ethnographic research, conducted in Hangberg, can speak to evictions in Indonesia or to social precarity in Japan. For anthropology as a discipline this entails accounting for that which makes us universally human. It means starting from that which is similar, and in doing so giving meaning to diversity. Anthropology then becomes about understanding the world that all humans inhabit. Bringing forward those that remain unrecognised is only meaningful if they are indeed recognised as part of the world in which we all live. I see precarity and aspiration as a way of bringing out the universal in the specific and local. The experiences of the people living in Hangberg could teach us something about that which goes beyond the boundaries of South Africa.

I would argue that precarity and aspiration are not only analytical frameworks, but should be variables included in any effort to improve human life. Will this effort make life more precarious and is it grounded in the aspirations of the people themselves? By asking these questions, the effort of improvement will not run the risk of increasing suffering and would

have the vitality of being grounded in the lived experiences and aspirations of people's lives.

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