*Colloquy*

# OIKOGRAPHY: Ethnographies of *House-ing* in Critical Times

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**Figure 1. Photo by Torben Eskerod.**

*Oikography* essays explore the reciprocal process of people making houses and houses making people amid ongoing calamity: the 2010 Haitian earthquake and cholera outbreak, racialized police violence in Rio de Janeiro's favelas, malarial control in impoverished Tanzanian communities, the irradiated post-Fukushima Japan, and the displacement of Amazonian communities by a hydroelectric dam.

Taking the *oikos* as at once a built shelter; a collection of relations, affects, and moralities; and a node within neighborhoods, communities, and larger political-economic and environmental regimes, anthropologists in this Colloquy move across a range of landscapes and scales to ask how people's lives and worlds are made and remade in relation to the house and *house-ing* practices when critical times become an everyday predicament.

As we assemble this collection, we are all too aware that the COVID-19 pandemic has thrown the house and its significance to public health and the economy into sharp relief (Castro 2020; Horton 2020). The tensions between mobility and immobility and between protection and risk that traverse the house as a physical, biosocial, and moral space have taken center stage in policy and public debates. These ambiguities take place alongside a re-problematization of what is deemed essential to life (Neiburg 2020), whose lives are paramount to save, and who is destined to die, in hospitals or at home. The pandemic also highlights how homes are not isolated units, but related and relational, integral to shifting forms of governance. Caregiving mechanisms, even if at a distance, delineate the networks and configurations of proximity that constitute peoples and homes themselves.

From the contemporary state of politics, public health, and the environment, as well as from diverse lineages of anthropological thought, we know that the house is never an isolated, bounded, or static unit in physical space. Moreover, characteristics like stability, safety, domesticity, and autonomy make for normative ideals of the bourgeois house (Elias 1983 [1933]) that ethnography has, time and again, proved to be facile and analytically restrictive. Anthropologists have indeed found that living arrangements are molded by the environment and that these material forms shape collective activity (Mauss 2013 [1950]). Entangled in "vicinages" (Pina-Cabral 2019) and key to the politics of infrastructures (Larkin 2013; Fennell 2015), houses are "live forms" (Stewart 2011), malleable and in movement.

Building on these insights, our Colloquy proposes *oikography* as an ethnographic approach that deconstructs ideological premises and statistical assumptions about domiciles and traces the plasticity and relationality of the house across spacetimes. Within an *oikography*, the concept *house-ing* refers to the sensorial process by which peoples and houses co-constitute one another. *House-ing* elicits the house

as a dynamic—always relational—human-nonhuman entity modulated by tensions between stability and instability, borders and fluxes, stillness and movement. Our critical engagement with *house-ing* in critical times asks what prospects remain for the figure of the human under such enduring duress and opens new vistas into the shifting ground of the social, the material, and the politico-economic.

The essays in *Oikography* purposefully engage with *house-ing* in conditions of chronic precariousness (aggravated by emergencies) in the Global South and advance comparative critical work on the anthropology of the house. For our ethnographic subjects, the counterpoint of stability to crisis proves untenable to begin with: they did not inhabit and experience bounded or intact dwellings in contradistinction to breakdowns or critical events. Rather, their *house-ing* efforts speak to the longue durée of critical times and to creative repertoires of material/affective "mediants" (Appadurai 2015). *Oikography* is thus attuned to such multirelational efforts at instantiating provisional dwellings, grounds from which the past is gauged and future horizons are crafted. Designating an emplaced yet embattled and energetic environment, *oikos* subverts and overflows, pushing the boundaries of our abstractions. *House-ing* processes are more confounding, incomplete, and multiplying than hegemonic theoretical schemes account for.

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The ancient Greek *oikos*, with its many senses and significations—house, home, family, estate, patrimony, private space, as well as an economic and moral sphere—opens up our imagination to many possible forms of dwelling and becoming in the worlds people make up (Biehl and Locke 2017). The *oikos* likewise constitutes a set of dynamic relations among bodies, buildings, infrastructures, and other nonhuman elements (be they geophysical, biochemical, building materials, or spiritual entities) and also among intimacy, public space, and the *polis.* Seen from this perspective, the house is a key *nexus* between material, political-economic, affective, and aesthetic forces at work, as well as a *place* where public and private life blur and these very terms become recast. Combined with the suffix of *oikography*—stemming from the Greek *graphia*—matters of the *oikos* are also inseparable from record keeping and regimes of visualization, including the ethnographic account.

The contributors to this collection work in a wide range of languages, each of which has different words for *house*, animated by local senses and significations—*casa*, *maison*, *kay*, *nyumba*, 家, and *home*. Yet, in our efforts to think together and comparatively, we take the Greek *oikos* as a shared point of departure, particularly

because the term and its troubled history conjure the house as a site where domination is legitimized and inscribed in the bodies of enslaved people, women, and children, challenging us to keep patriarchy, racialization, and hierarchy in focus as integral to *house-ing* processes. Moreover, *oikos* serves as the etymological root for many innovative orderings: *oikos + nemein = oikonomia*, referring to the management of the house and of material resources at large; and *oikos + logos = oikologia,* referring to the interactions of organisms and their physical environments. So, with an eye to house-economic-ecological interconnections, we situate our decolonial engagement in anthropology's legacy of theorizing houses/homes.

By decolonial engagement we mean: (1) our unwavering scholarly and political commitment to account for anthropology's colonial legacies (Trouillot 2003; Mbembe 2020); (2) our dialogue with feminist, Indigenous, and African and Afro-diasporic anthropologists that foreground the house as both hierarchical and porous (always relational) (Guyer 1981; Comerford, Carneiro, Dainese 2015; Costa 2017; Carsten 2018); (3) our thinking and writing *with* ordinary subjects, learning how they conceptualize *house-ing* as an eco-bio-social process (always inflected by the plasticity of power and across scales); (4) our situatedness in anthropological institutions of the Global South and in North-South networks that contest dominant frameworks and cross-pollinate different ontologies and epistemologies. Hence, this Colloquy instantiates our various efforts at decolonizing and refiguring the anthropology of the house "in the wake of the plantation" (Thomas 2019)— not against crisis, but within the unfolding and immanence of critical times—and of, in the process, retraining our perceptual capacities and expanding our sense of the political.

In plantation/post-plantation landscapes the house is neither a given nor a stable unit to begin with. Here *house-ing* speaks to the radical experience of being violently *de-housed*, enslaved, and transplanted, as well as to the stubborn human efforts at crafting provisional shelters and envisioning escapes (Gilroy 1995; McKittrick 2013). While marked by physical domination, diasporic houses are also animated by underground networks of relations and escapes that extend geographically and temporally.

This movement is vividly captured by the concept "configuration of houses" articulated by the Haitian anthropologist Louis Herns Marcelin (1999). During his fieldwork among Black families in Haiti and in the Recôncavo region of Bahia, Brazil, Marcelin (1999, 37) found the house as always plural, part of "a set of houses linked by an ideal of family and ancestry" that modulate "sense systems in territories that have been historically and socially constituted." A *configuration of*

*houses* emerges through fluxes of persons, substances, money, objects, and spirits that work as a sensorium and "a memory machine" (Douglas 1991).

In his decolonizing theoretical move, Marcelin both engages with and unsettles Claude Lévi-Strauss's (1991, 435) analytic of the house as an individualized "moral person" that tactically combines principles of consanguinity and affinity. For Marcelin, it is *relationality* that gives the house its plasticity. Configurations of houses "are at the same time structures *and* anti-structures," crisscrossed by the "tension between hierarchy and autonomy, between collectivism and individualism" (Marcelin 1999, 38). Irreducible to the operations of "an immediately localizable grouping" (Marcelin 1999, 37), the house appears as an emplacement of tensions and a relational process, simultaneously open-ended and foreclosing (Carsten and Hugh-Jones 1995).

In this Colloquy, we take the relational and processual perspectives emanating from the diasporic, post-plantation house to guide our ethnographies of *house-ing* in the longue durée of critical times. *Oikography* thus emerges in conversation with this hard-to-pin-down *house-ing* multiplicity that places peoples, worlds, and thinking in motion. Houses are thus treated both in the singular (because peoples operate with the concept of *the house* or *my home*, and ideas of singularity and belonging matter) and in the plural (because lives happen along and among houses and because houses territorialize political collectives). Furthermore, we are attentive to the immanent and always sensorial ways that this manifold *oikos* inhabits peoples. The agency of houses and peoples are intertwined as they continuously make each other and their environs.

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Ethnographically attuning to the granular, sensorial effects of people's *house-ing* practices, and staying close to issues of patriarchy, racialization, and human-nonhuman interdependence, the authors of *Oikography* uncover that new ethics and politics are already budding within protracted conditions of calamity. In so doing, they unsettle the lingering expectations that remain in anthropology for what constitutes viable forms of dwelling, habitation, and belonging in critical times, in the Global South and beyond.

Amid Port-au-Prince's devastating 2010 earthquake, Federico Neiburg finds houses realized at diverse scales, as the homeless and encamped "live-in-movement" and belong to unstable, yet persistent, configurations of houses, against the backdrop of the "plantationocene" (Haraway and Tsing 2019). Analyzing racialized police violence in Rio de Janeiro, Eugênia Motta chronicles how favela residents

mourn "bad deaths" that lead to the demise of entire families and the dying of homes themselves. The materialities of houses are here visually and sensorially alert to the potentiality of death in young Black bodies, indicting systemic racism and advancing a new moralization of space.

Studying mosquito vector control in Tanzania, Ann H. Kelly and Javier Lezaun attend to bodily movements across "peri-domestic" spaces, provoking experimenters to reorient technocratic prevention away from the domestic insecticidal approach toward the design of protective communal atmospheres. Here homes become fluid, interdependent *house-ing* environments inseparable from social relations, material underpinnings, and interspecies actors. Ryo Morimoto, in turn, chronicles the recurring *house-ing* movement of Fukushima nuclear disaster victims between their contaminated homes and new settlements as they seek to reclaim irradiated objects to restore a sense of belonging. *Oikography* here anchors the planetary scale of calamity in material livelihoods yet challenges the stretch of its universalizing logics. Finally, Thiago da Costa Oliveira and Carlos Fausto visualize the creative *house-ing* of Amazonia's residents displaced by development plans. Through intricate usages of leftover materials and plants, homes are "re-Amazonized" and mass-engineering projects subverted.

There is an ethos of unfinishedness and invitational quality to the *oikographic* essays that compose this Colloquy. Combined, they articulate an ethnographic approach to contemporary *house-ing* processes at the generative intersection of five research threads: (1) the anthropology of kinship, patriarchy, care, and violence; (2) the economic dynamics of households, related to the provision of shelter, the circulation of money, and the use of technology; (3) the anthropology of public policies and infrastructures, concerning housing and services, risk and health, security, and rights and citizenship; (4) human-nonhuman alignments and the house as a material entity acting on residents and the environment; and (5) the anthropology of aesthetics and poetics, charting how forms and figures of dwelling constitute the house as a sensorial archiving machine of sorts, shaping affective pasts and the stories and trajectories of tomorrow.

The house, therefore, appears ethnographically both as a material agent and an unstable nexus, where macro politico-economic shifts as well disasters and shocks become woven into ordinary lives and where fugitive fields, desires, belongings, and claim-making are temporarily staged in the face of myriad unknowns. The senses of home assembled here are oriented toward both unsettled pasts and uncertain futures, and they remain key entry points into understanding the ways in which the intimate and the political are refigured in the present day.

Shaped and grounded by material conditions, the turning of house into home simultaneously provokes multitudes of poetic imaginations of what could have been and what might be, enabling new forms of inscribing and visually representing.

**ABSTRACT**

*Houses are at once built shelters; collections of relations, affects, and moralities; and nodes within neighborhoods, communities, and larger political-economic and environmental regimes. This Colloquy proposes* oikography *as an ethnographic approach that deconstructs technocratic assumptions about the house and traces the plasticity of dwelling across multiple space-times, with a focus on the action of* house-ing. *Inspired by critical perspectives emanating from the diasporic, post-plantation house, we explore the reciprocal process of people making houses and houses making people amid ongoing calamity. The processes of* house-ing *reveal houses as unpredictable human-nonhuman entities, modulated by tensions between stability and instability, borders and fluxes, stillness and movement.* Oikography *is thus attuned to multirelational efforts at creating provisional dwellings, grounds from which the past is gauged and future horizons crafted.* [anthropology of the house; materiality and plasticity; mobility; ethnographic sensorium; relationality; inequality; *oikography*; *house-ing*]

**RESUMO**

*As casas são ao mesmo tempo abrigos construídos, coleções de relações, afetos e moralidades, e nodos dentro de bairros, comunidades e regimes político-econômicos e ambientais. Esta coletânea propõe a* oikografia *como uma abordagem etnográfica que desmonta pressupostos tecnocráticos sobre a casa e traça a plasticidade da moradia através de múltiplos espaços e temporalidades, com foco nas ações de* house-ing. *Inspirados por perspectivas críticas que emanam do viver diaspórico e pós-plantação, exploramos o processo recíproco de pessoas fazendo casas e casas fazendo pessoas em meio a calamidades recorrentes. Os processos de* house-ing *mostram as casas como entidades humano-não humanas imprevisíveis, moduladas por tensões entre estabilidade e instabilidade, limites e fluxos, repouso e movimento. A* oikografia *está assim em sintonia com os esforços multi-relacionais de criação de vivendas provisórias, bases a partir das quais o passado é aferido e horizontes futuros são traçados.* [antropologia da casa; materialidade e plasticidade; mobilidade; sensório etnográfico; relacionalidade; desigualdade; *oikografia*; *house-ing*].

**RESUMEN**

*Las casas son a la vez refugios construidos, complejos de relaciones, afectos y moralidades, nodos dentro de barrios, comunidades, regímenes político-económicos y medioambientales. Este dossier propone a la* oikografía *como un enfoque etnográfico que deconstruye los supuestos tecnocráticos sobre la casa y rastrea su plasticidad a*

*través de tiempos y espacios, focalizando las acciones de* house-ing. *Inspirados en las perspectivas críticas que emanan del vivir diaspórico y de la post-plantación, exploramos el proceso recíproco de personas que hacen casas y de casas que hacen personas en medio a las calamidades del mundo contemporáneo. Los procesos de* house-ing *muestran a las casas como entidades humanas-no humanas impredecibles, moduladas por tensiones entre estabilidad e inestabilidad, fronteras y flujos, quietud y movimiento. La* oikografía *está, por lo tanto, en sintonía con los esfuerzos multirrelacionales para crear hogares provisorios, terrenos desde los que se observa el pasado y se elaboran horizontes de futuro.* [antropología de la casa; materialidad y plasticidad; movilidad; sensorio etnográfico; relacionalidad; desigualdad; *oikografía*; *house-ing*].

## NOTES

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