

Title of the special issue:

Across Landscapes of Hierarchy and Belonging - Social Meanings of Spatial Im/Mobility

Introduction

by Martha Lagace and Daniela Atanasova*

Where does spatial mobility take people socially? This question matters in African studies for understanding and explaining the coexistence on the continent of intense diversities (of languages, culture, and social systems, for example) alongside commonalities and shared understandings, all drawing on millennia of moving (Manning 2018: 221). It also matters for attending to social forces bringing people together or accelerating inequality. For mobility and migration do not take place only in geographical space, but invariably carry implications for a person or group's social positioning and identity. This is evidenced in the fact that mobility often continues long after the act of actual physical movement has been completed, especially if moving involved the crossing of borders, as between countries, and boundaries, as between social spaces or social groups (Salazar 2018). This movement reverberates at the level of memory, identities, belonging, social connections, imagination, and imaginaries, as temporalities of past, present, and future intertwine and converge.

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At the same time, mobility takes on a spiritual and moral significance in many African contexts and can often be the expression of dynamic cultures that continue to exert an influence across vast geographical distances including beyond the continent. Sociocultural and religious norms and practices travel (and transform) with mobile subjects (de Bruijn et al. 2001) both literally and through imagination and memory, which are kept alive by lasting ties and interactions. Yet, as some articles in this special issue will demonstrate, the continued impact of cultures across space and time is not self-evident but has to be negotiated and enforced by both mobile and less-mobile people in mutually beneficial relationships. One aspect of such relationships is resources, such as time and economic capital (after Bourdieu 1986), which can be set into motion and exchanged to fulfill social norms and thereby ensure the maintenance of identity, a sense of belonging, and social status. These are all a matter of individual perception and of ascription/recognition by others according to shared values, so that social hierarchies and groupings have both a subjective and an objective dimension (Noret 2020).

Moving along social hierarchies or from one social class into another is what is usually understood under social mobility, in both common parlance and in scholarship. Put differently, Kaufmann et al. (2004: 747) define social mobility as “the transformation in the distribution of resources or social position of individuals, families or groups within a given social structure or network.” Social mobility has a horizontal dimension as well (Sorokin 1927), which is explored by some of the authors in this special issue especially in relation to negotiations of migrants’ collective identities. Spatial mobility can facilitate both horizontal and vertical moves in social space, or combine both directions in complex entanglements, just as it can accompany or signify social immobility.

In a sense, almost all spatial mobility carries social meanings. Kaufmann (2020: 278) has proposed that only movement resulting in modification of a person or group’s social identity should be called mobility, thus attempting to unify within the concept of mobility (the metaphorical) movement through social space and (“socially significant”) physical movement. Yet, we argue that physical movement, or its absence, can have social implications even when it does not result in (permanently) changed identities or social positions. For one, spatial mobility can be a vehicle to maintain, shore up, or perform a certain social identity, or occupation, like in the case of business or trade-related travel. It can equally come to stand for a lack of “progress” in a social sense. More broadly, even the most everyday mobilities, such as leaving the home to go to one’s place of work or to visit relatives and friends, represent forms of social mobility, to the extent that they enable a person to temporarily switch between their different social

roles and identities and to cross the boundary between private and public space. Such switching of roles could occur even if a person does not move between physical spaces but comes into contact with others who do. Other people's mobilities can, for instance, redefine one's private home into a space of sociality and encounter, allowing for the temporary performance of a different social role.¹ Ultimately, as all contributors in this issue bring home, it is through relationships with others—less or more mobile, individuals and groups—that one's spatial and social mobility is conceived of, negotiated, and shaped, via context-specific combinations of encouragement and constraint. All of this is not to say that the distinction between social and spatial mobility should be done away with. It remains necessary and fruitful to keep movement in geographical and social space analytically separate to be able to study the multiple and heterogeneous interactions between the two in different structural and historical contexts.

This special issue sets out to do exactly that. We recognize a broader notion of social mobility that includes the vertical and horizontal dimensions and draws attention to the fundamental relationality of all forms of mobility. Five articles offer anthropological and historical perspectives on the meanings and entanglements of spatial and social im/mobility in pre-colonial, colonial, and postcolonial African settings and beyond through international migration. In countries as different as Ghana, Senegal (tied with Brazil and Europe), Uganda, Tanzania, and Zambia, authors' contributions highlight a wide variety of concerns, coalescing especially at the levels of aspirations, outcomes, and perceptions of social mobility, and in the questions of boundaries, belonging, and social space, and the intertwined nature of mobility and immobility. Several authors also explain subtleties of indigenous vocabulary; future scholars of mobility would benefit from more attention to the nuances of mobility and migration as conveyed in African languages. While this introduction reads the authors' contributions through the thematic prism of socio-spatial mobility, conversing with insights from mobility studies, this does not preclude other possible readings and parallels, which we invite readers to make themselves.

The terms mobility and migration are multifaceted. Most authors of the special issue were generally reluctant to embrace the term migration, although they inevitably engaged with and built on rich existing scholarship that has used migration as a fruitful analytical frame. In this special issue, migration implies spatial mobility that entails a longer-term or more permanent change of main

¹ We are grateful to one of the anonymous reviewers for pointing out this latter possibility which accentuates once again the relational character of im/mobility.

place of settlement, one that involves travelling some geographical distance and a certain degree of “uprooting and regrounding” (Ahmed et al. 2003). At the same time, we share Zachary K. Guthrie’s reservations regarding the methodological choice of studying migration (2018: 5), which can fix attention to certain kinds of migration between a limited set of “sending” and “receiving” locales, sometimes obscuring more complex and contingent realities of movement. Mobility, on the other hand, is better able to account for circuitous migratory careers that may include several destinations and kinds of mobility, intermediate and temporary points of “mooring” (“mooring” used in the temporal sense suggested by Schenck et al. 2021), as well as (potentially recurring or deferred, actual, or imagined) return to place of origin. It can also capture other, shorter-term and shorter-distance forms of mobility. We thus use mobility as the more broadly overarching term. At the same time, the word “migrant” still seems the most readily available descriptor for someone who moves, although we are mindful that it tends to suggest a more permanent kind of migration instead of mobility in the capacious sense we highlight here.

Immobility, in turn, refers to the perceived absence of a certain kind of movement, always in relation to a specific scale and reference point. Im/mobility is a purposely ambiguous expression, suggesting conditions difficult to capture in words or analytically. By employing “im/mobility” in this introduction we try to convey both the indeterminate conditions in which people sometimes find themselves and the awkward, often unpredictable moments of transition between movement and stasis in a lifetime. We also sometimes use it to mean mobility *or* immobility or both.

Several authors in the issue find im/mobility a useful rendering to capture the kinds of movements (or stillness) they explore, some are grounded in migration scholarship and diaspora studies, and most engage with an enriched migration/mobility vocabulary that combines the insights of these “streams” of research that were never that separate in African Studies. The authors’ choice depends on both the empirical phenomena they studied, as well as their particular discipline and sub-field. This juxtaposition of work with shared themes but different disciplinary (anthropology, history, and political science) and theoretical entry points illustrates to what extent the study of mobility and migration in Africanist scholarship is embedded in and provides new insights to different disciplinary and interdisciplinary debates. Furthermore, the bringing together of different kinds of human im/mobilities in the issue creates an opportunity to draw out commonalities, spark conversations, and find potentially unexpected parallels between works that approach mobilities from different angles.

The special issue drew inspiration from the conference “Entangled Im/Mobilities: Perspectives from the Humanities and Social Sciences” held in March 2021 and organized by the Research Platform Mobile Cultures and Societies at the University of Vienna. The conference aimed to encourage discussion on how entangled im/mobilities interact and are co-produced to reveal complex relations of meaning, shaped by geographic, cultural, and historical contexts. Although not all authors in the special issue participated in the conference², all responded to the call to consider mobilities “in relation to each other” (Cresswell 2006: 9) and in relation to immobilities, both spatially and socially, as an entry point into related themes. The remainder of this introduction will place their contributions in dialogue with previous research on spatial and social mobility in African Studies, present the special issue’s key themes, and introduce the individual articles.

Africanist Scholarship: Stasis and Shifts

As elsewhere in the world, many if not most African societies tell an origin story about themselves that involves migration, usually borne from strife and a rupture in social relations (Graeber/ Sahlins 2017). Despite millennia of movements by Africans within and beyond the continent, such as through Islamic trading and religious networks and Bantu migrations from north to south, early trends in anthropological scholarship³ of the colonial era reinforced colonial efforts to make Africa legible through static conceptions of people as rooted by “tradition” to specific villages and places (e.g., Junod 1913; Meek 1925). Scholarship then shifted slightly, examining land survival strategies such as transhumance (e.g., Evans-Pritchard 1940; Stenning 1957). Studies of marriage and bride wealth quests in patrilineal and matrilineal social systems considered patterns of gendered mobility (e.g., p’Bitek 1953; Mudeka 2016). A pivotal work from the early period of anthropology, focusing on the phenomenon of agency at a distance, or moving while standing still, was E.E. Evans-Pritchard’s 1937 *Witchcraft, Oracles, and Magic among the Azande*. It suggested a recognition of the kinds of power, human and super-human, that could be attained through spatial mobility via spiritual forces, posing the idea that social mobility was more

² Martha Lagace and Leander Schneider participated in the conference’s two panel discussions on mobilities in and from Africa, curated by Daniela Atanasova and Immanuel Harisch. In addition, many of the ideas in this introduction have developed through stimulating interdisciplinary discussions within the Research Platform Mobile Cultures and Societies, whose members we also wish to thank for reading and commenting on an earlier version of the introduction.

³ This literature review mostly draws on anthropological, and some historical and sociological scholarship within African Studies. We do not delve into the linguistic and literary branches of the field.

complex than a personal trajectory of “progress.” His insights provide a foundation for a great number of other works of scholarship (e.g., Geschiere 1997; White 2000; Mavhunga 2014).

Scholars especially of the Manchester School of anthropology then moved away from this earlier, mostly rural bias of ethnography to study the impact of colonial capitalism, labor movements, and urbanization on social relations and patterns. Study of the negative impact of spatial displacements in the name of development, for example, gained ground with Elizabeth Colson and Thayer Scudder’s long-term research (Colson 1971, Scudder 2005). Many scholars then followed in the footsteps of these early works, mostly researching migrations in and from Africa in different historical periods from anthropological, historical, and other disciplinary perspectives. While the theoretical focus of research became more diffuse, two contributions of note from the mid-point of anthropology were by Igor Kopytoff (1987) on the theory of the internal African frontier, whereby migrants reproduce norms and values of the places they left, and Liisa Malkki’s observation from studying refugees, identity, and territory, that “identity is always mobile and processual, partly selfconstruction, partly categorization by others, partly a condition, a status, a label, a weapon, a shield, a fund of memories, et cetera” (1992: 37). At the same time, a rich body of literature on labor migration and the migrant labor system in Southern Africa explored both African men and women’s insertion into the colonial capitalist system, either through migration or the lack thereof, of their own accord or “under duress” (Guthrie 2018: 7), and the impacts of this insertion and the associated migration on lifestyles and identities.⁴ While this scholarship overwhelmingly opted for “migration” as the term of choice, some of the earlier works on women already preferred to speak of mobility when surveying colonial states’ changing attitudes towards the movements of women and women’s own use of mobility as a strategy to seek independence from patriarchal controls (as in Barnes 1992).

These works have been supplemented more recently by a wide scholarship about mobilities as intensely multifaceted. Although there are many works to highlight, a few of the most exciting include (from anthropology) Jatin Dua’s 2019 *Captured at Sea: Piracy and Protection in the Indian Ocean*, Daniel Agbiboa’s 2022 *Mobility, Mobilization, and Counter/Insurgency: The Routes of Terror in an African Context*, and Adeline Masquelier’s 2019 nuanced study of immobility among urban young men, *Fada: Boredom and Belonging in Niger*. To these could

⁴ Prominent examples of this scholarship include Burawoy (1976), Murray (1981), Cooper (1987, 1996), Ferguson (1999), Bozzoli/ Nkotsue (1991), Barnes (1997, 1999), Burton (2005), Lee (2009), and many others.

be added historical works that recast the study of migrations within Africa in terms of mobility, such as Zachary K. Guthrie's *Bound for Work: Labor, Mobility, and Colonial Rule in Central Mozambique, 1940–1965* (2018), where labor mobility is both a subject of study and a methodology. Using labor mobility as a method of inquiry enabled Guthrie to offer a more comprehensive account of the lives of labor migrants and a more nuanced picture of how their varied movements and contingent agency interfaced with the uneven practice of colonial power. Iva Peša's chapter on mobility in her *Roads through Mwinilunga: A History of Social Change in Northwest Zambia* (2019) is another example. It explores the multiple meanings of mobility as a cultural strategy for self-realization and a practice for establishing and maintaining social bonds.⁵

A Closer Lens on Mobility

The editors of an early volume in this latest upsurge of research on mobilities in African Studies suggested that mobility is “fundamental to any understanding of African social life” (de Bruijn et al. 2001: 1). According to them, adopting mobility in lieu of “migration” as the lens through which to study geographical movement in Africa has enabled authors to go beyond some persistent dichotomous interpretations in migration studies (rural/urban, tradition/modernity, home/destination) and to give attention to a wider array of movements, including the mobility of social forms, such as initiation rites and religious customs (de Bruijn et al. 2001). It further allows scholars to pivot from a conception of mobility as rupture or exception and see it instead as central to building livelihoods and social continuity. Vigneswaran and Quirk (2015: 3), in a later volume, also emphasized that human mobility, broadly defined as “the short- or long-term movement of people from one place to another,” was the norm rather than the exception in Africa historically, and as such should be considered constitutive of state authority. For them, mobility again represented an umbrella term for a broader spectrum of kinds and scales of movements. In this special issue, mobility is similarly used as a more neutral and capacious expression to capture various temporalities and kinds of movements. Focusing on different eras,

⁵ This selection is necessarily limited and subjective. In his insightful review, Joshua Grace (2014) lists other recent influential works on mobility in African history, which “exemplify an emergent field of African mobility studies that can challenge the association of mobility with Western modernity and economic development” (Grace 2014: 148). Most of the works he cites originate from historical research on the Sahara, namely McDougall and Scheele (2012), Scheele (2012) and Lydon (2009), while Allina (2012) offers a history of forced labor, mobility and power in colonial Mozambique. Grace emphasizes that this interest in the subject of mobility is not new in African history, but has only recently begun to adopt the contours of a “recognizable field” (2014: 143).

Patrick W. Otim and Gana Ndiaye, for example, suggest a continuum of the personal and political that revitalizes these earlier insights.

One important theme in African studies of mobility also prior to the latest, 21st-century wave of research on mobilities has been transport and roads as topics that enlist different kinds of power, social and spiritual, in configurations of spatial mobility. Some anthropologists, for example, have explored the importance of roads and travel in ideas about lifecycles, memory, and spiritual forces. As Rosalind Shaw notes in *Memories of the Slave Trade: Ritual and the Historical Imagination in Sierra Leone*, “the road as a bringer of death and an insatiable consumer of human lives” refers to an “immoral economy” in colonial and postcolonial Africa and is linked in the case of Sierra Leone back to the slave trade (2002: 64). Other road scholarship referenced gender. For example, Mark Auslander’s chapter “Open the Wombs” showed how, in Zambia, roads could be profoundly dangerous and, in common discourse, laden with male anxieties about controlling women’s mobility and thus their fertility (1993: 182). Studying the Haya of Tanzania, Brad Weiss (1996: 201) found that roads as social channels inspired public debate about women’s independence, fertility, and mobility. African drivers themselves, as participants in colonial infrastructures of control, were rumored to interfere with human life and death through mysterious powers. As historian Luise White (2000) found, many people suspected that African drivers were draining the lifeblood of common people in order to benefit colonial Europeans. Without working on topics of roads per se as material pathways, Patrick W. Otim in this issue nonetheless suggests protective measures that royal messengers used when they set out on potentially dangerous journeys.

Another stream of road- and driver- scholarship, however, is about spatial mobility as constituting forms of initiation into new opportunities for social elevation and simultaneous social integration, again suggesting the relational nature of social mobility that is echoed in this special issue. This is true especially but not only in the work of Daniela Atanasova, which in part highlights the social momentum of transport entrepreneurs in colonial Zambia. As Lindsey B. Green-Simms noted in *Postcolonial Automobility: Car Culture in West Africa* (2017), “Cars are important belongings [...] precisely because they allow one to belong” (196). In her history of automobility in Ghana, Jennifer Hart (2016) analyzed how motor vehicles enabled the articulation and pursuit of aspirations to modernity among women and men alike through what she terms entrepreneurial mobility. Even more than private cars, privately owned and shared transportation in the form of minibuses, or “matatus” as they are called in Kenya, have created both the physical and overarching political landscapes of

African cities like Nairobi, providing riders simultaneously with much needed and reviled means to socio-economic integration, as historian Kenda Mutongi (2017) has shown. Martha Lagace (2018) depicted a comparable case in the phenomenon of motorcycle-taxi drivers in northern Uganda, who both internalize the stigma and sense of social stasis associated with their occupation and carve out ambivalent relations to freedom. The conditions under which different kinds of spatial mobility lead to different social “destinations,” producing social im/mobility (Salazar 2018), and the interplay between aspirations, motivations, and outcomes, as well as between perceptions and individual and intersubjective ascriptions of value and identity, are a fertile research field that could use even more attention in African Studies.

Research on mobilities in Africa has further tackled topics such as the impact of digital money and technologies (Parks 2015; Steel 2017; Gwaka 2018). Immobility, forced sedentarization (Awuh 2016), as well as moments and states of waiting as interruptions of movement have also received attention, including in a 2015 issue of this journal edited by Kirsten R  ther and Daniela Waldburger.⁶ This recent literature on mobility in Africa has developed in parallel with interdisciplinary research on mobilities arising from the global North sometimes called “the new mobilities paradigm” (or mobility studies, mobilities research) (Sheller/ Urry 2006, 2016; Sheller 2014). Thomsen, Gf  llner and Englert, in the introduction to their edited volume *Cultural Mobilities Between Africa and the Caribbean*, provide a succinct summary of the main analytical interventions of mobilities scholars. They argue for more dialogue, as mobility studies would benefit from further integrating African perspectives into its debates given that mobilities within the Global South had long been “overlooked” by scholars in the Global North (2021: 4).

While some of the latest works on mobility by Africanist scholars have engaged with ideas and theoretical insights from the fast-growing field of mobility studies (e.g., Peša 2019; Bolt 2020), scholars like Clapperton Chakanetsa Mavhunga (2012; 2014) and Kudzai Matereke (2016) have made a point of emphasizing African perspectives on mobility. They have called not just for a study of diverse kinds of mobilities beyond technologies and transport history, but for taking seriously African rationalities and ways of knowing (and, we would add,

⁶ Our brief overview necessarily leaves out vast swaths of scholarship on mobilities in and from Africa, both more recent and older. Mavhunga (2012) offers a guide into older historical studies dealing with road- and railway-building, diasporas and transoceanic mobilities, the slave trade, Indian Ocean mobilities and African explorations in the Americas before Columbus. The volume *Cultural Mobilities Between Africa and the Caribbean* (2021) showcases contemporary research on human, cultural and linguistic mobilities between the continent and the Caribbean.

African languages). Mavhunga (2014: 27) argued that Africans' mobilities should be understood within their own endogenous theoretical and epistemological framings, i.e., on their own terms, rather than being relegated to the role of empirical material to be ordered and made (un?)intelligible with the help of Western theories, be it from mobility studies or others.⁷

Some of the papers in our special issue have partially answered this call by capturing mobilities and mobile actors within their particular historical settings (Otim; Atanasova) and by starting from or weaving in African terms pertaining to movement into their analysis (Asenso-Agyemang; Ndiaye), as will be discussed later. At the same time, several authors in the issue employ conceptual vocabularies with theoretical underpinnings that could claim a more "Western" provenance, but which have been enriched through their encounters with current African realities. We hope this special issue will contribute to a more nuanced and richer theorizing of mobilities understood as a collaborative project between scholars and schools of thought of different origins and will help mitigate the current imbalance in mobility studies towards perspectives and examples from the Global North. To an extent, the special issue reflects the heterogeneity of research on human mobilities, migrations, and movements in African Studies, in terms of topics, disciplines, and theoretical lenses used. One binding interest of all the articles, however, is uniting, to different degrees and in different ways, the study of migration/mobilities with the study of social mobility. It is to this literature and nexus that we turn next.

Social and Spatial Mobility

Social mobility has been extensively thematized in African Studies. The genesis, composition, and boundaries of social classes, the contentious concept of 'elites' and their formation, the role of schooling as an ambiguous channel of social mobility, and the state as a wellspring of stratification have been major themes in this stream of scholarship, which mostly surveyed them in context of the changes in social organization ushered in by colonialism, and for the postcolonial era (Mitchell 1956; Mitchell/Epstein 1959; Cohen 1972; Bayart 1993; Hansen 2005; and others). A more comprehensive overview of anthropological and sociological research on social mobility in Africa can be found in the introduction to a recent volume edited by Joël Noret (2020). The volume employs a Bourdieusian

⁷ Furthermore, as Julie MacArthur has observed, recognizing African mobilities in their fullness requires debating "what exactly is moving" (2020), given that some of the most innovative works being published consider both human and non-human mobile protagonists (e.g., Fleminger 2017; Mavhunga 2018; Dua 2019).

conceptual framework to approach questions of social space and social im/mobilities, emphasizing the complex nature of social positionality in African contexts, where multiple axes of inequality coexist and intersect. It further insists that the study of social mobility should equally consider matters of political economy and the cultural work involved in maintaining and shifting social positions. Other recent research on social mobility in Africa has explored how movement and mobility have been employed as compelling metaphors for perceived socioeconomic “progress” and social change among township dwellers in Zambia and South Africa (Haynes 2017; Lee 2009; Krige 2015), and how missionary education and church affiliation in Uganda provided launching pads for upward mobility trajectories in the colonial era (Meier zu Selhausen et al. 2018). A wide-ranging debate on the African middle classes (Southall 2018), as well as research on gender and women’s social mobility (Decker 2014; Kihato 2013; Omadjohwoefe 2011) and on perceptions and subjective constructions of social mobility (Bajaj 2010; Telzak 2012; Bolt 2020), further add to a lively field.

A much smaller body of literature zooms in on the nexus between geographical and social mobility, asking questions about how these two kinds of movement (or lack thereof), one actual and the other metaphorical, overlap, underpin, and relate to each other. Gough (2008: 253) found that the residential mobility and limited daily mobility of many young people in Zambia’s capital Lusaka reflected their downward social mobility. Noret’s recent collected volume on social im/mobilities in Africa includes only one chapter that examines social mobility in a context of migration (Bolt 2020). This chapter brings ethnographic findings on the lives of diverse Zimbabwean migrants on a South African farm into conversation with, among others, mobility scholar John Urry’s concept of network capital (2007). Bolt finds that “in places of crisis that are themselves marginal,” social space should be conceptualized as fluid, not uniform (2020: 173). In such places, concepts like network capital have limited application because the terms of recognition that define the basis of social status are contentious and profoundly unstable. Akinyoade and Gewald’s 2015 volume on “roads to prosperity” in liminal situations of transit mobility, where migrants can remain in transit for decades, devotes several chapters to how travel along “the social ladder” occurs in such contexts. Corrie Decker (2014) shows how Zanzibari women transformed the meanings of the Muslim notion of “respect” into a goal of self-reliance pursued through their social and physical mobility. A special issue of this journal, edited by Eric Burton (2018), explored how social mobility aspirations propelled Africans on educational journeys abroad, and followed the different actors and strategies involved in Cold War era transnational educational mobility.

All of this literature shows that the relationship between spatial and social mobility is far from straightforward (Bolt 2020) and benefits from close examination of particular contexts in different times and places, as this special issue offers. While social mobility ambitions, usually expressed through aspirations to a better life/future, prosperity, wellbeing, education, and consumption, often underlie geographical mobility (used as another term for spatial mobility), several articles in the special issue also highlight ambiguity as well as tension and ambivalence, including among those who observe the more-mobile and nurture their own aspirations. Beginning with Patrick W. Otim, who explains the managed process by which a young man could be cultivated into both social and spatial mobility but not without limitations, and Esther Asenso-Agyemang, who explores how Ghanaian emigrants remain bound to social norms championed by their non-migrant parents, one of our contributions is to highlight the complex relationships between mobile and less-mobile people and the ways in which they try to navigate competing realities and discourses. The special issue thus suggests the constraints placed on social and spatial mobility even as both are broadly encouraged and even necessary for sustaining life. The next section delves deeper into our reading of the special issue's contributions, especially with respect to the meeting points of social and spatial mobility.

Social and Spatial Mobility in the Special Issue

The articles in this special issue highlight the embeddedness of processes of mobility and migration in webs of meaning drawing on cultural and religious narratives and extending across social networks. The articles also reveal entanglements between social and spatial im/mobility, and in some cases mobility and immobility, inviting reflections as to the scope and nature of social spaces, as Bolt (2020) recommended. Even when these are not central themes, they illuminate connections to other key concerns, such as morality, boundaries, aspirations, personhood, gender, rootedness, belonging, return, and others.

What binds the articles together in the first instance is their attention to the fundamental relationality of mobility. A precolonial message-carrier, for instance, ventures on exciting and consequential missions to distant chiefdoms but always returns to his chief's compound and the relationships there. Senegalese migrants in Brazil often aspire to return to Africa yet relatives and fellow citizens back in Senegal are increasingly skeptical and unwelcoming. In another, Zambian innovators, transporters, and strivers heralded as role models of "progress" in colonial-era media still carved out their own, socially embedded definitions of meaningful life trajectories. The experiences of women from China

in Tanzania suggest the complex, relational, and dynamic nature of aspirations they cultivate for themselves and their families. In many respects, the life paths of young Ghanaian emigrants usually still adhere to what their parents in Ghana would like for them—and what the emigrants wish for themselves.

Some articles examine the relationship between spatial and social mobility at the level of aspirations and motivations for geographical movement, suggesting along with a lot of previous scholarship that physical movement is often taken for granted as a prerequisite for personal (and, often, national) prosperity. At the same time, they reveal that social-mobility-as-prosperity aspirations far from exhaust the motivations driving spatial mobility. The latter is simultaneously embedded in religious and cultural narratives that emphasize the importance of return or provide a sense of personal destiny that helps migrants take on risks and cope with dangers. In addition, all the authors, implicitly or explicitly, highlight the possibilities of connecting spatial and social-relational mobility at different stages in the human lifecycle, depending whether someone is young but not too young so as to be unmanageable (Asenso-Agyemang, for example), or after death (Ndiaye). Gender is also important. With exceptions, articles tend to illustrate masculine motivations and social-relational circumstances, suggesting how spatial mobility shapes and is shaped by gender roles. Furthermore, the articles dealing with transnational mobility or migration suggest that social mobility aspirations are formed relationally in reference to other migrants. Migrants intersubjectively create a yardstick of success that is specific to their state of mobility and does not necessarily flow from established social hierarchies or achievement standards in their societies of origin or destination (see Schneider's contribution). In addition, migrants' consumption abroad and investments in the homeland often lead their non-migrant compatriots to assume that journeys away from Africa result in upward social mobility, even though an increase in economic resources does not necessarily mean an elevated social position in any of the societies the migrants may be embedded in. This shows furthermore that emigrants are often regarded by non-migrant compatriots as a collective, with little differentiation regarding their varied individual destinies and experiences.

Other articles scrutinize spatial mobility at the level of social outcomes, showing how it sometimes propels pathways up a social ladder, and how in other cases spatial mobility characterized as morally dubious or illegalized leads to stasis or downward social mobility. A prominent connection is made here between education and upward social mobility, and forcefully so, as in the colonial-era magazine analyzed by Atanasova. This case further evokes how oftentimes spatial mobility is constructed as legitimate only when facilitating recognized life

transitions that take place in gender-appropriate ways, conforming to the social expectation that a life will unfold sequentially, from schooling to employment and family caregiving. When movement is undertaken with the aim of exploration and adventure, or out of desperation, and follows unconventional rhythms without a visible change in social outcomes, this ‘transgressive’ mobility carries low symbolic capital (in the sense of Bourdieu, 1986).

The social mobility considered in these examples is mostly of the conventional kind associated with this concept—that of “vertical” movement along social hierarchies to achieve a differently valued social position that is tied to a set of material and symbolic rewards (or challenges). In this sense it is wellknown that geographical mobility can bring people closer to (or farther from) opportunities to amass economic and educational capital or join new social configurations, such as for marriage and other alliances, that can effect a change in social status and in the kind and amount of resources at one’s command. Yet, social mobility can also unfold horizontally (Sorokin 1927; Funjika/Gisselquist 2021), and in other directions. It is not always easy to determine whether a socio-spatial move represents movement on some overarching or society-wide hierarchy when there may be multiple possible metrics involved, including subjective positionings and objective classifications (Noret 2020) and sometimes no agreement as to what constitutes social mobility (Bolt 2020). In a more horizontal direction, people can join new social groups or adopt lifestyles that might add new elements to their identities without significantly changing their positioning with respect to the hierarchical orderings of social constellations. Geographical mobility can facilitate such “horizontal” social moves as well, and mediate or accompany social moves that, over time, unite both dimensions in specific and intricate entanglements.

Thus, social mobility as it emerges in contributors’ work in the special issue is not necessarily tied to social elevation in the esteem of others, although sometimes it can be; but to embarking on transformations and orientations toward different kinds of power, and to forging a sense of social (and sometimes spiritual) membership and identity. This special issue therefore employs a more expansive notion of social mobility that includes the more researched kind of social mobility “up” or “down” social hierarchies, but also pays attention to “horizontal” mobilities across social spaces, highlighting some of their different mechanisms and tempi. Horizontal mobilities are evident in the articles dealing with more collective processes of status negotiation in the context of transnational migration, where migrants situate themselves, and are situated, in relation to their homelands, as well as in more individual versions of such processes. These

articles call forth questions about the boundaries between social spaces and about belonging, which will be tackled in the following section.

Further Themes: Boundaries, Belonging, Im/mobility

Salazar (2018: 2) quotes useful anthropological definitions of boundaries and borders, the first being “socio-spatially constructed differences between cultures or categories” (paraphrased from Barth 1969), and the second lines “demarcated in space” (as per Wilson/ Donnan 2012). If, as he suggests, boundary- or border-crossing is a central feature of mobility (as opposed to Kaufmann’s changes in social identity), it is unsurprising that boundaries emerge as a salient theme in this special issue. In the articles included here, boundaries are physical as well as existential, self-imposed as well as socially established, legal as well as religious, classed as well as gendered.

The contributions focusing on people who have crossed national borders (Schneider, Asenso-Agyemang, and Ndiaye) call forth a question, already expressed by Deborah Reed-Danahay (2020: 130) in her analysis of the place of mobility in Bourdieu’s social theory, as to the scope and boundaries of social space. Is social space “co-terminous” with national geographical space, or do different social spaces extend, intersect, and overlap across and within geographical borders? These articles also raise the related question of belonging: Which social space do migrants belong to, that of the “homeland” or of the countries of emigration, neither or both? Schneider’s analysis suggests, adding to the insights of migration scholars espousing a transnational perspective (e.g., Levitt/ Glick Schiller 2004), that migrants exist in and constitute transnational social spaces that are entangled with (not just floating “above”) the social spaces of their home and countries of current residence, but also with the social spaces of countries they may have been “moored” in for short or more extended periods of time previously. In fact, social spaces and geographical places are relationally constituted through mobility, and do not represent pre-existing, discrete units. The reality of many mobile people’s social existence reaches across borders and boundaries in a multi-layered web of interlaced and continuous social spaces and mobilities of a transnational or translocal nature.

Asenso-Agyemang and Ndiaye similarly show that integration in the country of current residence can co-exist with lasting, albeit transforming, ties with the country (or countries) of origin and other countries to which one may feel a connection (Levitt/ Glick Schiller 2004). However, they also make visible the fraught processes of questioning and occasional crises shaping this co-existence

that can itself take a variety of forms. Ultimately, the articles in this special issue all document the changing and multi-sided face of transnational migration/mobility as new models and patterns of migration and mobility appear over time and different practices proliferate; and as relationships and the relative status of diaspora/immigrants and home country are negotiated and reevaluated.

Furthermore, by introducing African terminologies to make their case, several authors in this issue show how words and concepts in African languages and cultures describing motion, and people who move, communicate multilayered values and nuance about belonging (e.g., Meiu 2020: 231). These ideas may be embedded in the sounds of words themselves, often doubled for emphasis (von Heyking/ Storch 2007). The terminologies suggest as well the disadvantages that Anglophone scholars have trying to understand and express Africans' mobilities only in English. As E. E. Evans-Pritchard once observed, the "difficulty relates not to Nuer words but to our own" (1956: vi). In this issue, for example, Asenso-Agyemang shows how a familiar adage in Ghana about the palm of one's hand carries emotional force within families enduring separation. With the term *móodu-móodu* in Wolof (the French-based spelling is *modou-modou*), Ndiaye describes how the profile of Senegalese who live abroad has changed in the perceptions of those who remain in Senegal. Otim, describing the precolonial role of *lu-or Pa rwodi*, Acholi royal messengers, illustrates how this capacious term situates the values, responsibilities, and movements of young men almost lost to history who traversed difficult physical and social terrain to serve as sociopolitical links.

A final major point of the special issue concerns mobility's relation to immobility. Most authors in the issue suggest different points of acceleration or stagnation on a continuum between mobility and immobility, in which no human being is completely one or the other spatially and socially and in which context matters. As some of the authors demonstrate, mobility and immobility often overlap or nest and cannot be neatly distinguished, especially when categories such as migration and im/mobility apply to the same individuals and denote different, and often simultaneous, spatiotemporal scales of their experiences. For instance, some of Schneider's transnational migrants lead a mostly spatially immobile existence in their city of residence or move within a very small radius. On another note, transnational migration/mobility is often a collective phenomenon, within which people from the same families and villages may be mobile/immobile at different moments in time, but always in relation to each other and in the service of longer-term family social reproduction or social mobility projects. Schneider points, in the last instance, at an interlocking fabric of transnational practices that encompass both mobility and immobility. These examples suggest

a range of possibilities between mobility and immobility, where neither term is absolute, which is in line with the theoretical propositions of mobilities scholars who have also emphasized the relationality of spatial im/mobility (for example in Cresswell 2010; Adey 2010). This special issue expands this observation to socio-spatial im/mobility.

Heterogeneity in Research about Spatial and Social Mobility

This final section provides short introductions of each of the individual articles. **Patrick W. Otim** offers a rare glimpse into the organization of mobility in a preliterate African society through his historical reconstruction of the role of the *la or Pa rwot*, what he translates as a royal messenger, in late precolonial and early colonial Acholiland, Uganda. Otim's account of the multi-stage training, complex skillset, and different mediation and communication roles of the royal messenger reveals the importance of human spatial mobility in ensuring the travel of goods and information across Acholi chiefdoms. The ability to command speed, "collapse space" as Otim puts it (in the absence of transport technologies), represented a rare skill that men could mobilize to achieve a prized social position. However, there was much more to becoming a royal messenger than just the ability to move at speed.

Daniela Atanasova, in the next article in the special issue, takes us to the last years of colonial rule in Northern Rhodesia, present-day Zambia. This article examines the governmentsponsored fortnightly *Nshila* ("The Way") aimed at an African readership as a rich historical source for studying how state-sponsored media promoted a narrative of individual and collective upward social mobility for Africans, with widely modernizing and Westernizing ambitions. The analysis starts by identifying the different strategies for African social mobility (as forward trajectories) that were highlighted by the magazine *Nshila*, and from there arrives to spatial mobility as a ubiquitous but unacknowledged ingredient in the recipe for success the magazine was promoting. This recipe downplayed significant legal, economic, and political inhibitions Northern Rhodesian Africans still had to contend with in this late colonial era.

Leander Schneider's article expands the special issue's focus, which is otherwise directed at mobility of and by Africans, to include mobility experiences of individuals and families from China, the country that has produced the latest major wave of transnational migration to the African continent. Schneider locates the origins of Chinese migrants' mobility in multi-scale (local, regional, national) histories as well as in socially produced individual and family aspirations, resulting in a diverse set of transnational mobility practices. While in the existing

literature Chinese migration to Africa is usually represented as propelled by economic motivations and as following a uniform model where China is the ultimate site of return, social reproduction, and integration, Schneider's depictions of three women emigrants and their families to Dar es Salaam, Tanzania complicate this picture. The lives of these women reveal the changing nature of migration projects, showing that economic and mobility aspirations are inseparable from considerations of social status (social mobility), but also of personhood, self-making, and lifestyles.

Esther Asenso-Agyemang's paper is another in this special issue to employ a transnational lens. It offers insights into the negotiations of young adult Ghanaian emigrants' relationship to the socio-cultural space of their homeland Ghana, and to the norms and practices associated with continued belonging to this space even while living in another country. **Asenso-Agyemang** highlights the active guardianship of Ghanaian socio-cultural norms by parents who are themselves non-migrants but have adult-aged emigrant children. Parents' efforts to maintain bonds with their transnational loved ones and influence them into conforming to Ghanaian social norms of reciprocity indicates that there is nothing inevitable or automatic about such intergenerational transfer of socio-cultural norms and practices, especially across geographical contexts and social spaces. Resources, time, and work need to be invested to ensure continuity, particularly by those "culture keepers" who stand to gain from the emigrants' adherence to these norms. Social mobility is again relational, not only personal.

Gana Ndiaye's article is unique in the special issue because it deals with the question of mobility after death: What happens to the bodies of the deceased after they have lived and died immigrants in a foreign country? The contested posthumous journeys back to their homeland of Senegalese immigrants in Brazil is another illustration of how cultural, and in this case religious, norms and narratives travel with the migrants and continue to exert an influence on the experience of migration, even beyond the end of life. Belonging is a key concern across all the dimensions of the wish to be buried at home: transcendental, political, and social. This article is also an example of how central return often-times is to the storyline of migration. In times of crisis—in this case caused by the Covid-19 pandemic—blocked spatial mobility becomes a trigger for collective and legal mobilization to restore "motility" to the bodies of the deceased (Kaufmann et al. 2004). But the confrontation, Ndiaye perceptively shows us, is about much more than just re-enabling movement.

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