

Bridging African Studies and Mobility Studies – Considerations on Transdisciplinarity and Positionality

Birgit Englert*

Abstract

In this article, I reflect on approaches to African Studies and to Mobility Studies with the intention of elaborating on possible ways to bridge these two transdisciplinary fields. Thereby, I draw on published research in both fields as well as on my own research projects located at the junction of African Studies and Mobility Studies. An earlier version of this text has originally served as part of the introduction to my cumulative habilitation thesis (Englert 2022a). It does not aim at a comprehensive overview of those two fields but rather highlights how subjective trajectories shape the way in which research fields are being approached.¹ Several earlier issues of *Stichproben*, have engaged with notions of mobility and contributed to the increasing literature on Africa-related mobilities research.² This essay aims at raising some more general questions concerning the way these two fields take note of each other. In doing so, I touch upon debates on positionality, knowledge production, representation as well as the possibilities and limits of transdisciplinarity and argue for an approach that centres mobilities in, from and to Africa without separating them from ongoing debates.

*Birgit Englert, Department of African Studies, University of Vienna. Contact: birgit.englert@univie.ac.at

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¹ The older texts gathered in this habilitation thesis titled “Bridging African Studies and Mobility Studies: from Popular Music to Travel Writing” were not written from an explicit “Mobility Studies perspective”, but nevertheless relate to mobilities in one way or another.

² See issue 8/ 2005 on “African migrations” edited by Bilger/ Kraler; issue 28/2015 on “Sojourns along the way” edited by Rütther/ Waldburger, issue 34/2018 on “African mobility in times of decolonization and the Cold War” edited by Burton, issue 36/2019 on “Translocal Popular Culture” by Englert, and issue 44/2023 on “Spatial im/mobility” edited by Atanasova/ Lagace.

Approaching African Studies: from the Personal to the General

In his keynote lecture at the European Conference on African Studies (ECAS) in Basel 2017, Elísio Macamo (2018: 8)¹ noted "We study Africa because we want to know how to study Africa." He added: "That's scholarship. Scholarship is not defined solely by the conclusions we can draw about our study objects. It is also, and perhaps more fundamentally, defined by the ability to reflect on the best way to organize our ways of knowing."

This largely coincides with my own perception of the transdisciplinary field of African Studies, which has developed differently in the respective national contexts and whose history is also told differently depending on the disciplinary perspective.² Considerations of methodological approaches, including reflections on positionality, are crucial in this transdisciplinary field, which draws on disciplines in the humanities, including history, and social sciences. While many scholars within African Studies specialise in a particular field, e.g. linguistics or history, most cross the boundaries of that field in exchanges with other scholars who locate themselves within African Studies (e.g. through shared institutional affiliations, journals, conferences and the like).

Since the 1980s, the study of Africa at the Department of African Studies at the University of Vienna has been based primarily on the pillars of 1) linguistics, 2) literary and cultural studies, and 3) history and society.³ From the 1990s onwards, research relating more specifically to questions of "development" gained importance in Vienna, in particular due to the work by Walter Schicho whose efforts eventually led to the foundation of the Department of International Development at the University of Vienna (Sonderregger 2010: 1ff.; Gomes 2010: 9ff.). My own African Studies perspective that started to emerge from 1995 on when I embarked on my undergraduate studies has therefore developed from engagement with all these sub-disciplines.⁴

In the lecture mentioned above, Macamo (2018: 8) also pointed out that African studies has a privileged opportunity to study Africa. It does indeed make a

¹ Though delivered in 2017, the lecture was published in the journal *Africa* in 2018 from which I cite.

² The special issue of *Africa Spectrum* 40/3 (2005) contains perspectives from different disciplines within the social sciences; yet, all of them are male and by and large represent an Anglophone/Western European perspective (see the editorial by Melber 2005). More recent interrogations of the field from more diverse perspectives have been published in the context of debates on decolonization, e.g. in the special issue "Decolonizing African Studies" by the journal *Critical African Studies* (see the editorial by Kessi/ Marks/ Ramugondo 2020). For a historian's perspective on the development of African Studies and academic knowledge production see Sonderregger (2021: 229 ff.).

³ See e.g. Gütl 2015 for the history of the Viennese Department in longer perspective. See also the online database maintained by Gütl <http://www.afrikanistik.at/> (last accessed 11.7.2022).

⁴ For more on my personal trajectory in academia see Englert 2022c.

difference whether one studies Africa with an Africanist background or within another discipline. In African studies, Africa is not only where research takes place, but Africa is placed at the centre of knowledge production.⁵ This includes taking seriously the history and contemporary processes that are shaping the continent as well as engaging with knowledge created there.⁶ This does not mean studying Africa in isolation; on the contrary, in my view an African Studies perspective involves looking at the continent in conjunction with its various diasporic spaces as well as with other parts of the world.

Putting Africa at the centre also includes studying African languages and the multilingualism that is characteristic of African societies. The ability to communicate with people in their own language undoubtedly impacts on any research and broadens the scope of research questions that can be usefully addressed. Further, language knowledge can also contribute to acceptance in the field and easier 'access' (cf. Englert/ Dannecker 2014: 237). My own beginnings in African studies as a researcher and lecturer were contributions to teaching Swahili.⁷ The ability to research in Swahili informed my dissertation project on land rights in Tanzania, as well as the research on popular cultural phenomena in Tanzania.

Debating Africa

Over the past decade, there have been numerous contributions to the ongoing debates about who can talk about Africa and the importance of African studies (see e.g. Ampofo 2016; Krenčeyová 2014; Mama 2007; Melber 2009, 2016; Wa Ngũgĩ 2021; Ndlovu-Gatsheni/ Seeseman /Vogt-William 2022). The debate touches on a wide range of issues, and different contributors focus on different issues. The need to do something about the lack of representation of Africans in academic and other institutions can be seen as a common point. For example, Akosua Adomako Ampofo (2016: 17)⁸ argues for the US context:

⁵ These differences were frequently discussed within the framework of the Austrian Africa Network, which brings together scholars of African studies as well as scholars of other disciplines dealing with Africa (see Roundtable at the Africa Network Conference 2021 in Innsbruck).

⁶ Africa-centred research should not be confused with Afrocentrist positions, a positioning that has many pitfalls, as Adeleke (2015) points out.

⁷ In a project led by my colleague and mentor Irmi Maral-Hanak, I worked on building an online Swahili dictionary, which also fed into a script to teach beginners a basic vocabulary (Englert/ Hanak 2002). In another script to be used for teaching Swahili, I published interviews with people I had met during an extended stay in Zanzibar in 1998 who kindly took the time to answer the questions of a then ambitious student (Englert 2000). My first experience of academic conferences was at the Swahili Colloquium in Bayreuth in 2001 and I returned repeatedly to this welcoming place, which is characterised by its transdisciplinarity.

⁸ The paper is the printed version of her ASR Distinguished Lecture at the 58th Annual Meeting of the African Studies Association, November 2015, San Diego, California.

“I am not suggesting that only Africans and their descendants should embody knowledge on Africa. But that a series on Africa could not find at least half of the speakers from Africa I find unacceptable, especially given that there are so many Africans in the American academy and also that Yale University has the resources to fly in a speaker from anywhere on the globe.”

The same is certainly true in the European and Austrian context.⁹ As someone who holds a leadership position in our field, I am aware that we still need to do better in terms of diversity and representation.¹⁰ On the other hand, it has been my experience that racist perceptions that persist within academia also manifest themselves when the scholarship of Africans and/or Black scholars is categorised as African Studies, regardless of their disciplinary background, and scholars are told at their own departments to pursue their careers at the Department of African Studies. Equally problematic in my view is that national research structures and funding schemes often compel African scholars to research their own countries, or at least their own continent or diaspora. They may have difficulty obtaining funding to pursue research interests that are not related to Africa.¹¹

Furthermore, I think it is important to distinguish between speaking *for* Africa and speaking *about* Africa. It is certainly not the task of a non-African African scholar to try to speak *for* Africans¹², but to be aware that one is contributing one's knowledge from a particular position, which is shaped by all kinds of intersecting identity markers and access to particular forms of knowledge. Obviously, Africans also speak from a wide variety of positions and there is no single "African" voice.

Awareness of the specific position from which we have created knowledge and from which we speak can occasionally also lead to the realisation that we would be better off not speaking at all - on a certain topic or in a certain place. Such

⁹ Even though resources may be more limited in most contexts compared to Yale (see also Ndlovu-Gatsheni/ Seeseman/ Vogt-William 2022: n.n).

¹⁰ As Deputy Study Director with responsibility for the BA and MA curricula in African Studies (2011-13, ongoing since 2018), I am aware of the limitations of the budget and the limited scope for recruitment.

¹¹ For a critique of the practice of excluding African professionals from the development context, see the thought-provoking contribution by Warne Peters (2013). In my work on popular music in the diasporic context of Marseille, I have made similar arguments (Englert 2020).

¹² Again, obviously, it is equally impossible for Africans to speak for Africa in general, while they can of course advocate certain positions from Africa. All these statements are self-evident, yet they seem important in the context of current debates about positioning in academia and beyond.

awareness, however, is always context-specific and thus stands in sharp contrast to essentialising positions. One can do Africa-centred research without being African or being based in Africa, although of course not all kinds of research questions can be explored equally meaningfully from all locations. Ndlovu-Gatsheni, Seeseman and Vogt-William (2022: n.n.) unerringly call for “a clear epistemological shift, which has to go much deeper than merely increasing the representation of Africans. The epistemic position matters more than the geographic location or origin of the researcher. We should expect all scholars of African Studies, whether White, Black, or People of Color, to be ‘insiders’ engaging with the African archive and thus shaping and transforming their field.”

With my work, I have in most cases aimed to address my own society, i.e. Austria in particular or Europe in general, and this tendency has certainly become stronger in my most recent work on travel writing and solidarity.

Furthermore, I see it as part of the responsibility of an African Studies scholar to contribute to closing the persistent gap in knowledge production and dissemination between scholars from Africa and scholars from the Global North. It needs to be added that this is obviously a simplified dichotomy as there are more diversified positionings and related possibilities available to scholars from Africa or African descent based in the Global North as well as to scholars from the Global North based in universities on the African continent. The need to address these issues is also increasingly reflected in the themes of conferences such as "*Africa Knows! It is time to decolonise minds*" (2020-21, Leiden and online) or the conference of the Association for African Studies in Germany (VAD) "*Africa and Europe: Reciprocal Perspectives*" (2022, Freiburg and online), to name just two recent examples of conferences I have attended myself.

Since the Covid 19 pandemic, more and more conferences are taking place in hybrid formats. Despite the undoubted limitations of online conference participation, I value these innovations for open science and broader participation (see Müller-Mahn/ Kioko 2022). As Mukoma Wa Ngũgĩ (2021: n.n.) points out in his critical analysis of African studies, the problems to be addressed go beyond questions of participation though. In his critique of what he calls the "African Studies Industrial Complex", he laments the lack of relevance of some of the research.

“Covid-19 and the consequent lockdowns made this plain and clear — that the problem with African Studies is one of ideology and relevancy rather than becoming a more efficient and racially equal disciplined

machine. In the US, we went into lock down — no more jetting into convention centers or more accurately, no more hustling for visas, airline tickets, discounted conference fees for Africa-based scholars, etc. Those on the continent quickly created alternative spaces, in addition to all the other initiatives and intellectual projects historically happening on the ground.” (Wa Ngũgĩ 2021: n.n.)

In my opinion, some of the points he rightly raises in his thought-provoking essay are not necessarily specific to African Studies, but problems of academia in general. Of the many other points made by Wa Ngũgĩ, I would like to single out two that I consider particularly relevant in the context of my own work. Firstly, Wa Ngũgĩ argues against a position that "African American and Global Black Studies are separate fields" and secondly against the idea "that scholarship is, can be and should be separate from any form of advocacy." He adds cynically, "Study and write about Nelson Mandela or Wangari Maathai or your favourite icon, but don't bring the disease of political activism into your scholarship." (Wa Ngũgĩ 2021: nn, see Ampofo 2016: 20)

These points resonate with my own shift from studying popular cultural practices on the continent to a diasporic context and increasingly to resistance movements and solidarity relations and how they are perceived in the context of debates about anti-racism in Austria and in German-speaking Europe more broadly (cf. Englert 2022b, 2022c, 2023). I believe that it is important for the field to engage even more in debates that are relevant to a broader public (see also Ndlovu-Gatsheni/ Seeseman/ Vogt-William 2022: n.n).

This might not guarantee that it will continue to receive public funding, it might even prove detrimental to it, depending on the positioning of politicians in power. However, it could help future generations of students, whose future seems more uncertain than that of their predecessors - at least from a Eurocentric perspective - to perceive African Studies as an important field of study.

However, while I represent a certain idea of African Studies, which I have outlined above, I appreciate the many different approaches scholars take within the field. What Alain Ricard (2016: 108) called so beautifully the “*vertus de l’in-discipline*”, is undoubtedly a major strength of the field:

“En somme, le monde nous saute à la figure, à nous de nous débrouiller: l’in-discipline est une nécessité, nous devons parfois bricoler dans les marges, et il est vain de vouloir faire entrer à toute force ce que nous observons et ce que nous entendons dans des cadres préétablis. Or, peut-être est-ce avec la dissonance que commence la connaissance... L’african-

isme n'est pas une discipline, mais l'Afrique pose aux disciplines de multiples questions, elle leur propose des formes de nomadisme, comme le disait naguère Christian Coulon, et leur demande de se faire indisciplinées, d'aller au-delà des cadres tout prêts. Ce n'est pas nouveau, mais il est bon d'y insister.¹³

“In short, the world is thrown in our faces, and it is up to us to cope with it: in-discipline is a necessity, we must sometimes tinker at the margins, and it is futile to try to force what we observe and hear into pre-established frames. Yet perhaps it is with dissonance that knowledge begins... African Studies is not a discipline, but Africa poses multiple questions to the disciplines, it proposes forms of nomadism, as Christian Coulon once said, and asks them to become undisciplined, to go beyond ready-made frameworks. This is not new, but it is worth stressing.” (translated B.E. with *DeepL*)

As I have argued before, personally, I think there is indeed something like an African Studies identity that goes beyond the individual disciplines. For example, there is certainly much agreement among African scholars when it comes to the representation of Africa - in the public sphere and in the media, but also within academia itself. Many scholars are working against the marginalisation of African experiences and against stereotypical representations of African countries and people, seeking to go beyond the "single story" (Adichie 2009) and to offer writings about Africa that counter mainstream narratives (Wainaina 2005).

Representations of Africa in Times of Social Media

In the last two decades, first the rapid development of digitalisation and then the huge increase in the use of social media have undoubtedly had an impact on representations as more and more Africans have been able to create and share their own images of Africa. Akyeampong (2010: 7) noted more than a decade ago that mobile phones were no longer markers of privileged classes. With the proliferation of smartphones, social media also became "an integral part of young people's everyday lives", as (Ndlela/ Mulwo 2017: 277) point out with regard to Kenya, one of the African countries with the highest internet connectivity rates. Research has emerged on how African audiences and media users

¹³ The paper was his opening speech to the 4th "Rencontres des Études Africaines en France" (REAF) in 2016. In a way it was "une sorte de testament intellectuel" as Maeline Le Lay and Sophie Moulard (2016: 210) put it in their tribute to Alain Ricard who sadly died in August 2016.

engage with these developments (Willems and Mano 2017, Ndlela/ Tufte 2017), as well as literature on the implications for processes of social change and politics (Nyabola 2018, Dwyer/ Molony 2019).

The extent to which social platforms like Twitter have contributed to social change is debatable (Nyabola 2017: 115), but it has been shown that African media users can actively “participate in a global media sphere, and they appropriate these tools to speak back to dominant global media narratives, for example when Kenyan social media users took to Twitter with the hashtag #SomeonetellCNN to protest the way the American media network covered an incidence of violence [...]” (Willems/ Mano 2017: 9)

The coverage of post-election violence in Kenya in 2013 was disproportionate and, in some cases, just plain wrong, as it had been in the previous elections in 2007. At the time, however, Kenyans had very few options to counter these images. The huge increase in Kenyan presence on social platforms in 2013 meant that Kenyans could respond this time, and they did so mainly on Twitter under the hashtag "#SomeonetellCNN". Nyabola (2017: 113) therefore sees the response of Kenyans on Twitter in 2013 as a "tremendously positive development" that showed that Kenyans would use social media to write their own stories. In many other cases too, Twitter proved to be an ideal tool for an informed public in an African country to respond to stereotypical and inaccurate coverage of Africa in the global media.¹⁴

Instagram is also used with the aim of influencing the public image. A particularly interesting project for researchers in the context of African studies is *Everyday Africa*, which was founded in 2012 by Peter DiCampo, an American photojournalist, and Austin Merrill, a journalist, after they noticed that the pictures they took with their mobile phones felt much more familiar than those they had shot professionally for the assignment they had been hired for. It is these everyday moments, which are usually left out because they do not seem relevant enough to tell "the stories", that have the potential to show everyday African life that is not dominated by issues deemed newsworthy by agencies that are usually based

¹⁴ A similar immediate and far-reaching reaction was triggered on Twitter after Scottish actress Louise Linton published the article "How my dream gap year in Africa turned into a nightmare" in the Telegraph. She did so with the intention of promoting a book she had written about her experiences as an 18-year-old volunteer in 1999 which displayed numerous 'white saviour' clichés. The article and the book itself triggered an outcry from Zambians and Africans from other countries, most notably on Twitter under the hashtag #LintonLies and the book was ultimately withdrawn from sale. See e.g. Shearlaw (2016).

outside the continent (Jacobs 2016: 96).¹⁵ Besides the *Everyday Africa* project, which features images taken by professional photographers, the images posted on Instagram by "ordinary" users in African countries show an even greater variety of images from the continent. Although the presence of African users on platforms such as Instagram can contribute to the dissemination of diverse images about Africa, the question arises as to who takes note of these images and what impact they actually have. It is certainly too early to give definitive answers in this regard, but I share the cautious optimism of Becker, who concluded that

“visual texts are increasingly able to structure ideologies and as such the ability to circulate images online allows one access to a global discourse and the opportunities to insert one’s own view within it. In this sense the dominance of personal photographs on social media platforms can be seen as *potentially* (italics in the original) contributing to multiple narratives and countering hegemony.” (Becker 2017: 4)

Reflections on social media platforms such as YouTube as mobile archives were at the beginning of my writings on mobility research (see Englert 2016; Englert/Harisch 2020). Through my involvement as key researcher in the research platform "Mobile Cultures and Societies", I have increasingly engaged with this transdisciplinary field, which emerged less than two decades ago and which I would like to briefly introduce on the following pages.

Approaching Mobility Studies

The so-called mobility turn in the social science dates back to the mid-2000s, when Mimi Sheller and John Urry began their seminal text with the observation that “[a]ll the world seems to be on the move” and noted that “it seems that a new paradigm is being formed within the social sciences, the ‘new mobilities’ paradigm” (Sheller/ Urry 2006: 207; see Sheller/ Urry 2016).

Research on mobilities of course existed in various disciplines before the proclamation of the paradigm. Since the 1990s, especially research on transnational/translocal networks and practices had posed a challenge to taking the nation as “natural” framework for analysis (see Wimmer/ Glick Schiller 2002 on “methodological nationalism”). With the emergence of conferences and publications explicitly dedicated to mobility research, the new transdisciplinary field took

¹⁵ While the first photographers involved in the project were mainly American foreign correspondents, there are now numerous African photographers and, in addition to Instagram, the project is also present on Twitter and Facebook.

shape.¹⁶ The focus of mobility research is still very broad, ranging from transport research to migration research to cultural studies, so that even within the field the debate about what exactly constitutes it goes on. In a 2018 editorial in *Transfers*, Peter Merriman asks the question:

“Has a new amorphous multidisciplinary field called “mobility studies” emerged, or do disciplinary debates and imperatives still underscore mobilities scholarship?”

How do ‘mobility studies,’ ‘transport studies,’ ‘mobility history,’ ‘transport history,’ ‘media history,’ ‘migration studies,’ and other fields intersect, differ, or interact with one another? Do the variations among different strands of mobilities research reflect distinct differences in method, approach, and style in the social sciences, arts, and humanities, or do they generate interesting questions that cross disciplines?” (Merriman 2018: v, see also Merriman/ Jones/ Cresswell et al. 2013: 147 ff.)

In the early writings, ‘mobility’ tends to be presented as something new and generally positive, leading to the criticism that more importance should be attached to power relations that shape various aspects of mobility. Already in their seminal article, Sheller and Urry emphasise that mobility is crucially related to power, clarifying that “[I]t is not a question of privileging a ‘mobile subjectivity’, but rather of tracking the power of discourses and practices of mobility in creating both movement and stasis” (Sheller/ Urry 2006: 211). A few years later, Nina Glick Schiller and Noel Salazar (2013) substantiated the point that mobilities are always shaped by power relations when they established the notion of “mobility regimes” that must be considered in any analysis.

With reference to Africa, Francis Nyamnjoh (2013: 659) noted in the same year that “Africans are not expected to be mobile, even though mobility is celebrated”. He went on to explain:

“The impression is given that Africans are mobile only when things go wrong or others so desire that they would ordinarily stay grounded, were it not for rapid population growth, economic stagnation, poverty, unemployment, conflicts and ecological disasters. Nothing African moves unless provoked by forces beyond their control. The literature overly

¹⁶ “The Journal of Transport History” has been around since 1953; in 2006 Sheller and Urry founded “Mobilities” and in 2011 “Transfers. Interdisciplinary Journal of Mobility Studies” followed, expanding the scope of the field even more. The latter “occupies a privileged position at the intersection of the humanities, arts and social sciences.” (Merriman 2018: v)

dramatises the role of external pull and push factors, for Africans daring to leave their otherwise bounded communities, frozen realities and grounded existence. When their mobility is reluctantly tolerated or recognised, this is hardly on their own terms. Those who permit African mobility do so selectively.” (Nyamnjoh 2013: 659)

Nyamnjoh's point is well illustrated for example in a case study by Warne Peters (2013), who writes about mobilities in the development complex, pointing out how what is perceived as “local” is usually associated with stasis, while the “foreign” sphere is conceptualised as mobile - a division that is sometimes internalised by the actors involved. She gives the example of Maximino, a staff member of an NGO who was born and raised in Angola and studied in the UK. However, in his contacts with foreign donors, he played the “immobile local” to emphasise his knowledge of the local context. He did this by speaking in Portuguese, although he was also fluent in English, and hid the fact that he had been in the UK for his studies. As Warne Peters (2013: 284) puts it:

“In the development mobility regime, to be ‘local’ presumes stasis and may in fact require the absence of geographical mobility, though Maximino is in reality no less Angolan, no less knowledgeable and no less ‘local’ for his education and experience.”

A contrasting example is the mobility of the largely inexperienced young people, mostly from Europe or the USA, who come to Africa as “volunteers”. In many contexts, these are ascribed a high status simply because they come from outside¹⁷ - reminding us that not only are the possibilities of travel unequal, but so are the possibilities of making one’s mark on places (Nyamnjoh 2013: 659). A related phenomenon is the increasing number of young travel writers who claim to describe Africa to their readers while mainly focusing on themselves such as Pahnke (2018, 2020), Weber (2019 [2016]), Wendt (2019) or Ehrich (2019) to give some examples from the German-speaking context. Their works differ in several regards from earlier travelogues; especially the combination of easier documentation of one's own journey due to digital cameras and smartphones and the possibility to reach the audience directly, made more young people with little experience publish travelogues (Sennefelder 2020, Englert fthc.). However, despite some diversification in terms of gender and generation, the travelogue

¹⁷ For a recent contribution to the large body of literature from a decolonial perspective, see Higgins-Desbiolles/ Scheyvens/ Bhatia 2022; see Lu Sin/ He 2019 on the representation of “voluntourism” in social media.

genre is still dominated by *white* people, which underlines travel as a predominantly *white* form of mobility. This is changing in recent years, and the success of travelogues and essays by Black writers such as Johny Pitts (2019, 2020) and Nanjala Nyabola (2020) was crucial in this regard. Nyabola, who has an African Studies background, uses unequal mobilities in travel as an entry point to also address broader issues of scholarship and African Studies as a discipline in her *Travelling while Black. Essays inspired by a life on the move*.

The need for awareness of inequalities and disconnection was already put on the agenda by critics of the metaphor of flows which Appadurai (1996) brought into debates on globalisation. As Akyeampong (2010: 6) noted, there are no flows without blockages - a view echoed by Nyamnjuh (2013: 654) when he speaks of closures that accompany flows. In Mobility Studies, attention to moments of immobilisation has become an integral part of most analysis.

While the term mobility has been criticised for carrying a neoliberal connotation in the sense of "everyone/anything can move", the neutrality of the term has its advantages. The broad perspective of mobility research makes it possible to approach phenomena that are all too often studied from different perspectives and disciplines through a common lense which allows for new insights. In my understanding, mobility is the umbrella term¹⁸, which encompasses several subcategories of mobilities that can be specified according to who/what is moving, where, with what intention, at what rhythm, by what means, etc. All these aspects shape mobilities and are relevant to any analysis, but much is gained if their relevance to specific contexts has to be explained rather than taken as a predetermined starting point. For example, the dimensions of power at play might become more visible through a mobility perspective than by taking a specific sub-category such as migration, which refers to a particular form of human mobility, as the starting point of analysis.

'Diaspora' is another example of a term most often used to refer to a "community" perceived as representing the "other" and which is often used in very different senses (Brubaker 2005). While both "migrant" and "diaspora" are terms that are also used in a self-empowering way, they have the effect of contributing to a certain "othering". Further, the question of who is called a "migrant" and who is called an "expatriate" is obviously shaped by factors such as ethnicity and status. Thus Hui (2016), who criticises the existence of a "mi-

¹⁸ In African studies literature, however, the term mobility is not used uniformly, especially in the context of migration. For some authors, for example, migration is the more comprehensive term because it refers to long-term and long-range movements, while mobility is reserved for shorter movements in terms of distance and time (see e.g. Rodet/ Razy 2016: 2).

grant exceptionalism", rightly points to the need for greater cooperation between the fields of Mobility Studies and Migration Studies.

Another advantage of a mobility perspective is "that it allows for analysing human mobility together with other forms of mobility, notably of objects and immaterial items such as ideas, thereby illustrating how these are intertwined" (Thomsen/ Gföllner/ Englert 2021: 3).

While the new mobility paradigm initially emerged in the social sciences, it has also gained importance in the humanities in recent years (see Merriman/ Pearce 2017, Pearce 2020). Historical perspectives were largely lacking in the early years of Mobility Studies, which should certainly be seen in light of Global History, itself a transdisciplinary field with which both Mobility Studies and African History have much in common. Over the years, historical perspectives have broadened although the relationship between Mobility Studies and Global History could certainly be strengthened, as e.g. Harisch (2021: 17-19) rightly notes.¹⁹

Bridging African Studies and Mobility Studies

Africa's history and societies have been and continue to be characterised by mobility, as is the case on all other continents. As Mirjam de Bruijn (2007: 111) puts it, „Mobility, however, is as old as the African continent. The movements of people, and using space to carve out a livelihood, is relevant to all histories. “ From a historian’s perspective, Akyeampong (2010: 1) observes that

“[T]he nature of African mobility has undergone significant shifts in the past five centuries, though still framed by global – more specifically western, capitalist – political economies. The era of Atlantic slave trade witnessed the circulation of African bodies and the creation of an African Diaspora.” (see also Zeleza 2010)

Colonial rule regulated the mobility of Africans in different ways and with different effects. Mobility regimes were also at work in higher education, and many of those educated abroad eventually became leaders of independence movements (see Burton 2018, Burton/ Dietrich/ Harisch/ Schenck 2021). The early postcolonial period was characterised by a relative ease of movement,

¹⁹ A positive example is the volume "Navigating Socialist Encounters. Moorings and (Dis)Entanglements between Africa and East Germany during the Cold War", edited by Burton/ Dietrich/ Harisch/ Schenck (2021), which the editors locate in Global History while drawing also on Mobility Studies, e.g. the concept of "moorings".

though of course, opportunities and experiences varied based on gender, class and other structural categories. This changed with increasing restrictions on mobility such as tightening visa regimes from the mid-1980s onwards (Akyeampong 2010) and generally speaking continues to this day. Current debates on the mobility of Africans mostly revolve around the international migration of Africans. These account for only a small proportion of border crossings by Africans, but since it is mobility that affects Europeans and US-Americans, this cross-continental movement is the focus of attention by the media and politicians, and thus also by the general public (Bakewell 2008).

Scholars of African history have long been concerned with all kinds of mobilities, albeit not from an explicit mobility perspective, but rather within the framework of concepts such as diaspora and, more recently, transnationality and translocality (see Bilger/ Kraler 2005b).

In Mobility Studies, however, little attention was paid to African cases and perspectives initially. In 2016, the Mobility Studies journal "*Transfers*" launched a special portfolio section on "*African Mobilities*", arguing that they have not been adequately considered in Mobility Studies so far.²⁰ Under the title "*Africa, Are We There Yet? Taking African Mobilities Seriously - Concluding Remarks*", Kudzai Matereke explains that he

“[...] attempts a critical analysis of how an African-based perspective of mobility serves to decenter or provincialize the Western-centric discourses of mobility. This undertaking is important in the attempts to fashion *African modes of thought* that serve as a counternarrative to *European thought* and to subvert the misrepresentations of im/mobilities of Africa and things African.” (Matereke 2016: 112, italics by B.E.)

While I agree with the need to "provincialise Western-centred discourses of mobility", I do not find it particularly helpful to conceptualise "African modes of thought" and "European thought" as somehow antagonistic blocs. This is a rather paradoxical claim in the context of Mobility Studies that are supposed to provide a framework for capturing flows, movements and fluidities. I do not see how "African mobilities" as such can be distinguished from European or American mobilities (Thomsen/ Gföllner/ Englert 2021: 5).²¹ However, there are of course im/mobilities that take place in/from/to Africa which take specific forms due to

²⁰ See the introduction by Mavhunga, Cuvelier and Pype (2016). With regard to mobilities in the Asian context, the debates have been very similar (see Steele/ Lin 2014: 43).

²¹ What there could be, of course, are different schools that have developed in certain parts of the world.

the concrete historical, geographical, social, political and cultural environment in which they take place - and it is certainly true that many of these im/mobilities are not sufficiently considered by mainstream Mobility Studies. The new editor of *Transfers*, Schäfer, defends the portfolio concept in 2018 (vii-viii), stating in her editorial:

“The aim is to promote a scholarship that takes Africa seriously not merely as fodder for imported theoretical constructs, as has been historically the case, but as generative of modes of thought and practice that have theoretical value in their own right. The priority of the portfolio, indeed the litmus test for any articles submitted to this special section, will be to ensure that “engaging” scholarship beyond Africa doesn’t come at the expense of locally generated modes of thought.”

Apart from the above criticism, I think it is doubtful whether labelling different forms of mobility according to continents or regions in the context of Mobility Studies helps to pay more attention to these regions, or whether it also leads to them being ignored more, because such a labelled package can also be left aside more easily than studies that are included in the regular issues of a particular journal.

Concluding Remarks

Finally, I would like to argue for a pragmatic approach to linking African studies and mobility studies. Sometimes this may mean bringing African cases into existing theoretical discussions, while sometimes African experiences will form the basis for new theoretical concepts and debates. In this way, discussions will be expanded and reshaped without placing Africa on an additional shelf based on the dubious assumption that the mobilities that shape the continent and its diasporic spaces are per se different from the rest of the world. Used in this sense, Mobility Studies have the potential to reveal the power dimension inherent in any labelling of mobilities, rather than falling into the trap of essentialism.

I am convinced that this will enable meaningful engagement with mobilities to, from and within Africa. This is not another specific approach, but an argument against unnecessary restrictions that I believe run counter to the potential benefits of bringing African Studies perspectives into Mobility Studies, and vice versa. In this article, I have addressed some of the current debates within African Studies and Mobility Studies, which can undoubtedly be approached from many

different angles. Therefore, this text can also be read as a subjective positioning within - and between - these fields.

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