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# A shifting yet grounded transnational social field: Interplays of displacement and emplacement in African migrant trajectories across Central America

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**Abstract**

In this article, we draw on the volatile complexity of African migrant trajectories in Central America to broaden the scope of transnational scholarship. These trajectories are characterised by mobilities as well as immobilities, taking shape in particular local contexts. By focusing on the interplays between displacement and emplacement that are part of these trajectories, we aim to increase our understanding of the extent to which migrants still ‘on the move’ experience both temporal embeddedness and cross-border connectedness, thereby acknowledging and unravelling transnational lives as they ‘touch the ground’ en route. To do so, we build on long-standing scholarly commitments in Central and South America and recent field research in Costa Rica. We go into selected empirical cases to discuss the dynamics of travelling, dwelling and travelling again as part of African migrant trajectories across Central America. We then explore the value of a ‘shifting’ transnational social field perspective and indicate some challenges for future trajectory research.

**KEYWORDS**

Central America, displacement and emplacement, migrant trajectories, mobility and immobility, transit migration, transnational social fields

## 1 | INTRODUCTION<sup>1</sup>

On Monday, December 3, 2017, Heike Drotbohm was woken up early by a WhatsApp message that reached her from Panama. Cedric,<sup>2</sup> whom she had met many months before while conducting research on recent arrivals in São Paulo, Brazil, had sent her an urgent message:

Hello, Heike, how are you? I need your help, please. Can you contact some international organizations for us. UNHCR or [an organization] for refugees here where I am in Panama. We're here in Panama on a small island named La Miel, you will find it on the map.

We are 25 persons with children and women, [we were] confronted with the border police already inside of Panama and we want to claim asylum here in Panama. They don't want to listen. They want to take us by boat back to Colombia and they don't want to bring us to the immigration. We've already been in this situation for one week. We sleep outside, without food and with rain and many children are already sick. We don't have internet to contact [anybody], please do something for resolving our situation. That the government of Panama City does everything to take us from here. There are Angolans, Congolese and Guineans. I put my hope in you.<sup>3</sup>

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Up to only some months ago, Cedric had expressed he did not want to travel (again). Originally from the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), he had lived in Angola for 5 years, before leaving again, heading towards Brazil in 2015 on a visitor's visa, where Heike first met him. For more than a year, he lived in a catholic shelter for homeless men in São Paulo, underwent several steps of vocational training, found a job in a food processing factory, and even managed to find an apartment and then leave the shelter. Cedric had blessed God for taking care of him in his irregular WhatsApp exchanges with Heike and expressed his appreciation for being in Brazil, a country that offered several avenues for a regularised stay. However, he remained unsatisfied with his economic situation, as he could never send large sums of money home to his sisters and brothers still living in the DRC. In his 30s, he was the only one among four who had managed to leave the continent, and all their hopes were now pinned on him. He asked how the situation was for refugees in Germany in some of his messages to Heike, whether Angela (Merkel) was still in a welcoming mood and whether Heike considered France, where he could at least speak the language, to be as easy as Germany. His perspective and plans apparently remained open. While carving out a place for himself in Brazil, he continued to search for a better future elsewhere and, at a certain moment in time, had taken the chance to leave Brazil, heading north.

Recent discussions of migrant trajectories (Schapendonk, 2017) or journeys (Mainwaring & Brigden, 2016) indicate that focusing on circumscribed origins and destination settings is not enough for understanding contemporary forms of transnational lives. The many migrants that are en route for extended periods of time, especially in the so-called Global South, and the recognition that their increasingly complex trajectories cannot be regarded as mere empty transit space, disconnected from place(s) and lives elsewhere, present us with the challenge to broaden the transnational scope. These trajectories are characterised by mobilities as well as immobilities, taking shape in particular local contexts. While en route, migrants maintain cross-border connections, engage in cross-border practices and imagine a future that also lies beyond the border. Although these experiences are characteristic of transnational lives, the multilocality and temporality of these cross-border engagements, which can be transitional, temporary and open-ended (see the introduction to this Special Issue), also push the limits of a transnational perspective.

In order to broaden the transnational scope, this paper addresses the case of African migrants in Central America, a group that has recently grown in numbers and engages in volatile trajectories that add to an already complex migratory landscape (Winters, 2018). The paper explores how a consideration of the simultaneous articulation of displacement and emplacement (Bjarnesen & Vigh, 2016) within these migrant trajectories allows us to acknowledge and unravel transnational lives as they 'touch the ground' en route. Whereas even the more sophisticated notions of displacement often evoke images of passivity and being 'cut off,' recent articulations of emplacement emphasise how 'the displaced' also actively re-embed their cross-border lives locally (Glick Schiller & Çağlar, 2016) and reshape their host localities (Vogt, 2013, p. 765). Even migrants still on the move

but temporarily immobile can become emplaced in numerous ways. Migrants engage with dynamics of smuggling, state surveillance, humanitarian assistance, daily consumption, employment, imagining and planning in the (temporary) host localities along their trajectory (see Brun, 2015). They actively seek information about visas, for example, connect with locally based smugglers and receive funds from family members abroad via money transfer agencies. They may also attend religious services and search for jobs, housing and healthcare. In short, despite being 'in transit' (Collyer, Düvell, & de Haas, 2012), they increasingly interact with and become incorporated in a specific locality and its economies, institutions and networks. At the same time, they may keep in touch with family members and friends 'at home' and reach out to family members and friends at their envisioned destination through cross-border practices, technologies and organisations, thereby imagining and planning their next move.

By focusing on the dynamics between displacement and emplacement that are part of these trajectories, we aim to increase our understanding of the extent to which migrants still 'on the move' experience both temporal embeddedness and cross-border connectedness, culminating in transnational lives en route. In an attempt to unravel such transnational lives, we ask: To what extent are transnational lives made possible, lived and contested in contexts of forced semi-permanence or deliberate temporality? How does a transnational perspective help us understand the experiences of these migrants and the dynamics of these localities? And how does a focus on ever evolving trajectories enrich our understanding of how transnational lives are shaped? In addressing these questions, the paper builds on classic transnational concerns of overcoming methodological nationalism, interpreting the shifting role of the nation state in regulating human mobility and transcending emigration/immigration dichotomies (Faist, 2015; Levitt, DeWind, & Vertovec, 2003). It particularly takes on the possibility of including 'other salient places' (Levitt & de la Dehesa, 2017, p. 1521; see also Guarnizo & Smith, 1998), beyond origin and destination, in transnational scholarship. Current migration regimes and industries that culminate in increasingly drawn out, shifting and complex migrant journeys (Mainwaring & Brigden, 2016) thereby present an opportunity to refine transnational scholarship (Glick Schiller, 2015).

Empirically, the paper is inspired by long-standing, ongoing communication with both migrants and migration experts in Central and South America. It also builds on the use of secondary sources, such as newspaper articles, and fieldwork in San José and La Cruz, Costa Rica, in August 2017 and April–May 2019. The paper intends to do justice to the importance of so-called South–South migration by focusing on the Central American hub of African (transit) migration. According to recent estimates, at least half of all migration takes place between (neighbouring) regions and countries in the Global South (IOM, 2014), and most of the forcibly displaced people under the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees mandate worldwide are hosted in the Global South (UNHCR, 2016). This quantitative and qualitative importance of South–South migration (Drotbohm, 2016; Hujo & Piper, 2010; Mainwaring & Brigden, 2016) calls for a geographical shift in transnational migration studies. Views from North American

and European destination countries and their interests regarding the incorporation and integration of migrants have tended to dominate the debate (Grillo, 2007, p. 200; Olwig, 2003, p. 791), and the transnational perspective has largely been developed based on migration from the so-called Global South to the North. However, an analysis of trajectories helps to move further beyond artificial distinctions between migration in/to the Global South and North.

Before going further into these migrant trajectories, a note on terminology is warranted. As can be seen in the 'mixed migration' debate (Van Hear, Brubaker, & Bessa, 2009), it is extremely difficult to neatly distinguish between different migrant conditions, such as 'voluntary' and 'forcibly displaced' (Mountz, 2011). Considering the mixed motivations and circumstances of people on the move, in this paper, we will speak of migrants instead of refugees. Given the forces of structural inequality that underlie many of their migration stories, we will view these migrants from a displacement angle.

In what follows, we will first discuss the key theoretical notions of this text. In order to move beyond a bipolar focus on origin and destination, we will elaborate the trajectory approach as well as the notion of emplacement, which are both suitable for exploring migrants' changing routes, based on immediate social, economic and political openings and closures at the multiple locations that they come across. Next, we present key findings regarding the Latin American research context, which is increasingly considered a transit zone for African migrants who eventually envisage reaching North America as either asylum seekers or migrants without regular status. In the latter part of this paper, we will go into selected empirical cases to discuss the dynamics of travelling, dwelling and travelling again as part of African migrant trajectories across Central America. We will end the paper by discussing the value of a 'shifting' transnational social field perspective and by indicating some challenges for future trajectory research.

## 2 | THEORETICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Transnational scholarship has greatly enhanced the visibility and the study of sustained cross-border engagements of migrants (Glick Schiller, Basch, & Blanc-Szanton, 1992; Levitt, DeWind, & Vertovec, 2003). At the same time, it has maintained a rather bipolar focus on origin and destination settings (Schapendonk & Steel, 2014) that runs the risk of missing out on cross-border entanglements and experiences across the multiple locations that are part of migration. Neat migration journeys from point A to point B are thwarted by barriers to human movement and the entwined proliferation of cross-border migration industries (Gammeltoft-Hansen & Sørensen, 2013; Schapendonk, 2017; Vogt, 2016). These industries, or the broad array of smuggling, surveillance and solidarity actors and activities that impede as well as facilitate migration, for financial or nonfinancial gain, and the links between these actors and activities (Gammeltoft-Hansen & Sørensen, 2013, p. 6–7; see also Schapendonk, 2017) present migrants with an ever-changing mix of possibilities and impossibilities for movement. While transnational migration studies recognise

migrants' simultaneous positioning in two contexts (origin and destination), it has given less attention to the possibility of their positioning in multiple locations (see Olwig, 2003, for an early exception).

Inspired by studies of highly politicised and commercialised transit migration (Collyer, 2007; Collyer, Düvell, & de Haas, 2012; Marcelino & Farahi, 2011; Phillips & Missbach, 2017), as well as transnational scholarship, a trajectory approach attempts to go beyond the binaries of origin and destination to make sense of the migration journey in-between (Schapendonk, 2017). According to scholars who make use of a trajectory approach, migration is characterised by inequalities of human mobility and a dynamic relationship between mobility and immobility in particular (Glick Schiller & Salazar, 2013): by periods of moving ahead and staying put; by changing routes based on immediate social, economic and political openings and closings; and by the experience of onward or halted movement based on livelihood and family cycles, as well as courage, despair and imagination (Schapendonk & Steel, 2014; see also Vammen, 2017). It is increasingly recognised that these possibilities and impossibilities for migration result in 'turbulent trajectories' (or 'fragmented journeys,' cf. Collyer, 2007; Mainwaring & Brigden, 2016) rather than linear, uninterrupted migration from location A to B.

An analysis of these trajectories not only helps to move beyond emigration/immigration dichotomies (Faist, 2015) but also enables a deeper understanding of migrants' interactions with the places they cross and leave their trace and places that are often marginalised and heavily involved with migration industries (Mainwaring & Brigden, 2016; Marcelino & Farahi, 2011; Vogt, 2016). The call to contextualise and to focus on the constraints and opportunities of place, further 'grounding' transnational migration, has been made by various scholars. Guarnizo and Smith (1998, p. 6), for example, argued early on that despite the fragmentations in transnational scholarship, the focus on (a celebrated) 'unboundedness' had largely gone unquestioned. Yet, transnational lives are enabled and confined by the same asymmetries as 'normal' lives (Grillo, 2007, p. 201) and do not refer to de-territorialized flows but to connections between people situated in time and place (Pratt & Yeoh, 2003).

This focus on places as building blocks of transnational migration fits recent scholarship on displacement, which maintains that when studying migrants that are forcibly displaced, we also need to look at their practices and experiences of emplacement (Bjarnesen & Vigh, 2016; see also Ballinger, 2012; Lems, 2016). Recent interpretations of displacement have largely moved beyond the policy-based, operational term used for formally recognised (war) refugees to include a multiplicity of actors and highly differentiated accounts of dispossession, disruption and dislocation (Hammar, 2014; Lubkemann, 2016; see also Bjarnesen & Vigh, 2016; Gill, Caletrío, & Mason, 2011). They have simultaneously opened up and advanced the notion of emplacement or placemaking. Emplacement can refer to processes of rebuilding and re-embedding migrants' lives in new localities (Glick Schiller & Çağlar, 2016), as well as to migrants' reshaping of local space (Vogt, 2013, p. 765). Castillo (2014, p. 244) provides a useful definition of placemaking as 'a process [that] transforms space into familiar places and generates personal attachments and

commitments – it is often used as a survival strategy and as a tool to unveil opportunities in a new place.’ Everyday placemaking is, thus, both material and affective (Ballinger, 2012, p. 392; Lems, 2016) and results inevitably in migrants leaving traces in the places they cross (Cantor, 2014; Marcelino & Farahi, 2011). Instead of downplaying the migrant journeys of displacement as merely empty transit space (see Bredeloup, 2012), we direct our gaze towards migrants’ engagement in processes of emplacement at the multiple locations they come across.

As emplacement does not refer to fixed positions, but to ongoing struggles for access (Bjarnesen & Vigh, 2016, p. 14; Turton, 2005, p. 265), placemaking while migrating may be fleeting, transient or semi-permanent and may involve different localities (see also Marcelino & Farahi, 2011, p. 884; Phillips & Missbach, 2017, p. 116). To make sense of such ‘transitory emplacement,’ it may help to consider migrants not as individual actors moving between and engaging with separate locations but as part of transnational social fields. According to Levitt and Glick Schiller (2004, p. 1009), a transnational social field can be defined as ‘a set of multiple interlocking networks of social relationships through which ideas, practices, and resources are unequally exchanged, organized, and transformed.’ Such networks are built on both mobility and immobility, connection and emplacement across disparate places (Glick Schiller, 2015, p. 2278).

### 3 | CONTEXTUAL AND METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

#### 3.1 | Recent African migrations towards and through Latin America

Recently intensified, largely understudied African migration across Latin America provides an urgent case for researching evolving trajectories, migrant emplacement and cross-border engagement. It is part of a broader phenomenon of African migration towards a diversity of destinations in the Global South (Şaul & Pelican, 2014). Such transatlantic migration intensified in the 1990s and especially after the mid-2000s due to a number of multilevel factors (ACP Observatory on Migration, 2012; FLACSO, 2011). These include, on the one hand, the tightening of North American and European borders as part of national security agendas after 9/11 and, on the other hand, Latin America’s relatively open migratory policies, its extensive and porous maritime and land borders, its limited state capacity to monitor migrants and its lack of deportation agreements with African countries (Marcelino & Cerrutti, 2011; Vammen, 2017, p. 40).<sup>4</sup> However, it is difficult to quantify the increase in African migration. Measuring difficulties include the initial ‘passing’ of Haitians as Africans<sup>5</sup>; the often (at least partially) irregular and undocumented character of African migration; and the regional differences in bureaucratic and legal categories.

African migration to Latin America has been oriented predominantly towards Brazil and Argentina, however, small but growing numbers of African migrants have also been registered in other countries

of the region, such as Colombia and Mexico (Mora Izaguirre, 2017, p. 191). In line with this, some researchers, journalists and organisations argue that Latin America can increasingly be considered a transit zone for African migrants who eventually envisage reaching North America as either asylum seekers or migrants without regular status (IOM, 2014; Mora Izaguirre, 2017, p. 177). In this context, Central America has emerged as an important (yet highly contested) hub for African migrants from a diversity of countries (Nicolau, 2016; Rocha, 2016), mostly males of productive age with higher levels of schooling and resources (FLACSO, 2011, p. 12–13). Common migration routes originate in West Africa (for example, in Senegal, Ghana, Mali, Nigeria and Burkina Faso) and East Africa (Eritrea, Ethiopia and Somalia) and sometimes include Portugal and Spain, before continuing via the South American countries of Argentina, Brazil, Ecuador, Peru and Colombia to Central America, where mainly Panama, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Honduras and Guatemala provide stepping stones for reaching Mexico and, finally, the Mexico–U.S. border (Lakhani, 2016; Mata, 2016; Savio, 2017).

However, migration routes are far from stable (Andersson, 2014, p. 24). They can change according to political priorities, economic interests and transnational networks, which translate into a complex mix of locally specific migration opportunities and obstacles. For example, although African migrants have been attracted to Brazil because of its relative political stability, economic growth, large afro-descendent population, passion for football and major sports events (Marcelino & Cerrutti, 2011), its recent crises in politics and the labour market may increasingly push migrants to move north (Martínez, 2017). Nicaragua provides another example of change along the route. Migrants of different nationalities, including Cubans, Haitians and a number of African countries, have gotten ‘stuck’ at the Costa Rica–Nicaragua border between late 2015 and early 2019 because Nicaragua’s military blocked their entrance.<sup>6</sup> This position triggered different strategies from both governments and migrants, including an air bridge for a group of Cubans; the instalment of humanitarian shelters; changing itineraries and increasingly dangerous illegalized border-crossings. At the time of finalising this article, the Nicaraguan government employed an informal policy that allowed migrants to move through Nicaragua for a fee, again shifting routes.

Due to its geographical location, the complex Central American region performs a dual function as both the ‘gate’ to and the enclosed ‘backyard’ of coveted North American destinations (FLACSO, 2011, p. 17; Mora Izaguirre, 2017, p. 176; Nicolau, 2016; Vogt, 2013). The countries of the region share a historic importance of migration to the United States, by their own citizens and by other Latin Americans in transit. *La triple frontera* (Sandoval-García, 2015, p. 3) connects Central American countries, Mexico and the United States in an unfolding system of expulsion and transit. At the same time, the United States has invested greatly in the militarisation of its own and other borders in the region since the 1990s, under the banner of a war on drugs and organised crime, but eventually targeting migrants (Galemba, 2013). These efforts culminate in the ‘spectacle’ (De Genova, 2002) of chasing, detaining and deporting migrants not only at the U.S. border but also throughout Mexican and Central

American regions (Vogt, 2016), a spectacle that has recently been exemplified by the formation of and response to the so-called Central American migrant caravan (Winters, 2018).

This intensification and externalisation of border enforcement, coupled with the simultaneous illegalization and commercialisation of border-crossing, further exacerbate persistent multilevel violence in the region and culminate in violent journeys (Brigden, 2017; Martínez, 2014; Vogt, 2013, 2016). Migrants en route often face discrimination and harassment from many sides. Although Mexico, for example, increasingly recognises its role as a country of transit and (temporary) settlement and has recently implemented a law on migrant rights irrespective of their status, it also suffers from institutional weaknesses, impunity and the complicity of state actors in the violent treatment of migrants (Aikin & Anaya Muñoz, 2013; Brigden, 2017). These issues extend to Central America, where there is little consistent governmental attention for transiting migrants beyond national security concerns and temporary humanitarian aid (Cantor, 2014, p. 61). Moreover, at the level of local communities, the latter express ambivalence about the presence of migrants, simultaneously not only acknowledging their plight and the opportunities for local business that they generate but also fearing criminal connections and the depletion of their communities' limited resources (Vogt, 2013, p. 776). This ambivalence is further deepened by racist discourses, for example, about migrants with an Afro-American or indigenous background (De León, 2015, p. 130; Velasco Ortiz & París Pombo, 2014). What happens, then, if suddenly relatively new and visible African migrants show up at this severely challenged junction in Latin America? More specifically, what happens when these migrants cannot approach and cross borders as smoothly as they had hoped, and they get stuck (*varados* in Spanish; Brenes, 2016), becoming increasingly notable in the local public sphere?

### 3.2 | San José and La Cruz, Costa Rica

Some practices and experiences of African migrants engaging with multiple countries simultaneously and temporally emerged during 2 months of fieldwork conducted by Nanneke Winters in Costa Rica in August 2017 and April–May 2019.<sup>7</sup> Of all countries in the Central American region, Costa Rica was initially chosen because of the long-term academic and humanitarian contacts established there. Moreover, Costa Rica has become a key scene of African migration in recent years (Mora Izaguirre, 2017, p. 190), a migration that authorities and humanitarian organisations knew little about and were largely unprepared for (FLACSO, 2011). Although Costa Rica has a relatively humanitarian image compared with other Central American countries (Fouratt, 2014), it is also affected by the current political instabilities in Nicaragua and Venezuela, which generate new refugee dynamics and increase the burden on this relatively small country with limited capacity and resources (UNHCR, 2018).

In the capital San José, Nanneke visited and interviewed representatives of a migrant, refugee and Catholic organisation,<sup>8</sup> as well as three African migrants that were beneficiaries of these organisations.

In La Cruz, located just before Costa Rica's northern border with Nicaragua, she stayed with a local host family who provided unique access to the dynamics and inhabitants of this border locality. During a month of volunteering at the local CATEM migrant centre<sup>9</sup> just outside La Cruz, which allowed for extensive participant observation, Nanneke interviewed migration police, Red Cross employees and other personnel stationed here. Both inside and outside the migrant centre, she also interviewed 10 male migrants from Ghana, Somalia, Eritrea, Nigeria and Haiti and nine female migrants from Haiti, Cuba, Nicaragua, Congo and Angola, in a mix of English, Spanish and French.<sup>10</sup> To maintain an informal and open environment, interviews were not recorded, but detailed notes were taken, which were subsequently elaborated and manually coded. Three migrants elaborated maps to illustrate their journey and the places they crossed. In addition, both authors have remained in touch with some migrants via WhatsApp.

The results of this fieldwork suggest a complex local mix of compassion, control and long-standing clandestine cross-border entrepreneurship, generating a context in which migrants can find both opportunities for rest and recovery to continue their journey, as well as despair and deception. As we will see, both experiences are highly transnational.

## 4 | VOLATILE MIGRANT TRAJECTORIES

### 4.1 | Travelling

In San José, Nanneke met Magan, a Somalian migrant in his 30s, through the refugee organisation ACAI. Magan left Somalia because of 'the insecurity,' which he described as ongoing conflict, lack of government presence and the threat presented by radical Islamists to people who are part of the opposition or who work as a reporter or for a non-governmental organisation. Magan worked as a teacher of internally displaced persons who had fled because of famine, teaching children to write Somali and some mathematics and felt he had become a target. Although Magan is from Mogadishu, he left his wife and four children with her family in the countryside because he considered the security situation in the city too critical.

Talking mostly in the plural, Magan's account of his journey echoes newspaper and humanitarian reports and resonates throughout the fieldwork. He said: 'We come from Africa to Latin America, most via Brazil, Peru, Ecuador, Colombia; then a trip in the jungle; five days without seeing other people. You have to follow the river ... Some die. Most want to continue to the US or Canada. We paid because we don't know the way' (interview August 18, 2017, San José). Magan's comment that 'we don't know the way' illustrates a concern of humanitarian organisations active in the region: African migrants generally seem to have very little knowledge of the different Latin American countries between Brazil and North America, let alone of separate Central American countries. Mewael, an Eritrean migrant in his 30s, had travelled by plane via Panama to Quito, Ecuador. It was not until he saw a map in Quito that he



realised he had to travel back north again (interview August 24, 2017, La Cruz). Aaden, a Somali migrant in his 30s, said that he would take a boat to 'Hondus' (Honduras) (interview August 22, 2017, La Cruz). He mentioned that he did not know the countries that he would still need to cross and talked about the necessity of having a map.<sup>11</sup> Although by 2019, migrants confided they are aware of the route and its dangers via the WhatsApp texts, photos and even YouTube videos shared by fellow travellers, misinformation and simply the changing nature of the political and social landscape exacerbate the risks of this already risky journey.

At the same time, representatives of humanitarian organisations that were part of the fieldwork agreed that many African migrants move with the support of a well-organised, international network that extends beyond Central America and even Latin America. Although Magan started his story with travelling from 'Africa' to Brazil, he and the others had already engaged in other border-crossings (both individual and organised) before embarking on their trip to Latin America. Magan travelled via Kenya to obtain a passport with a visa for Brazil in it. Mewael had already travelled via Djibouti to study in Egypt and then to work in Dubai, before leaving for Latin America via Ethiopia and Turkey. Aaden went from Mogadishu to Addis Ababa in Ethiopia and from there via Lomé, Togo, to São Paulo in Brazil. It is important to consider these previous border-crossings to remember the complexities of migrant trajectories.

If they arrived in Brazil first, African migrants typically work for a couple of weeks or months there to 'try' the country and take on underpaid, informal jobs to gain money for their next move. The amount of time that migrants then spend to get from Brazil to Costa Rica varies, as do their exact routes, means of transportation, and the role of travel companions and migration brokers,<sup>12</sup> but some journey commonalities emerge. They usually travel for a couple of weeks up to several months, mostly by bus and sometimes by boat and foot, guided via local contacts from shelter to shelter or just joining the trail of migrants, familiarising themselves with local contexts along the way.

When Cedric, the Congolese migrant presented in this paper's introduction, got stuck on the peninsula where the settlement of La Miel is located, right at the border dividing Colombia and Panama, he knew how to mobilise external support by means of transmitting the necessary local information: place, conditions, number of people and their national origin. He also added some pictures, underlying his claim with evidence. While it was difficult for Heike to assist from Germany, his group managed to search online for assistance within this country they had just reached. He identified both the *Oficina Nacional para la Atención de los Refugiados* (ONPAR) and the person to be addressed. After Heike sent an email to this organisation, they intervened, and the group was taken to Puerto Obaldía, a small town nearby, where they were able to document their border-crossing and claim asylum. With this documentation of his entry, Cedric was sure he would be able to continue his journey. He had already gained information on how to reach Costa Rica, where he heard many organisations would provide humanitarian assistance, and he had received the name of a smuggler's boat that could be used for crossing the more difficult part,

Nicaragua, supposedly up to the Mexican border. Sooner or later, Cedric was sure he would reach the United States, where two of his friends were living.

The degree of difficulty and the cost of crossing Latin American borders differ, but the migrants, echoing newspaper and humanitarian reports, share similar accounts of the most notorious part of the journey (at least, up to Costa Rica): passing the jungle that stretches out next to La Miel, also known as the Darién Gap, which marks the Colombian–Panamanian border between the Caribbean Sea and the Pacific Ocean. This part of the journey usually takes about 2 weeks of mostly walking and is infamous for its dangers of sickness and injuries, disappearances, wild animals, local gangs and guerrillas. Magan said: 'In the jungle, brave men are crying,' because they are tired or get lost (interview August 18, 2017, San José). He mentioned snakes, mountains they had to climb and rivers they had to swim and people trying to take advantage of migrants by demanding payment to pass. Aaden shared a similar experience and mentioned he had seen dead persons en route. Some migrants get left behind because 'you cannot wait for each other' (interview August 22, 2017, La Cruz). Aaden also described how he sometimes crawled on hands and knees and how there was nothing to eat and nowhere to sleep. On the other hand, migrants also come across acts of kindness and solidarity. In Magan's account, his group was offered plantain and a place to sleep by a local fisherman who, for five dollars, showed them the way to the nearest border police checkpoint, where they received water and food. Elzira, an Angolan migrant in her 50s, said that it was very hard to walk through the jungle, and there were dead people, robberies and rain. However, she also remembered how some of the migrants helped each other, for example, by carrying children and allowing a little rest before continuing when someone got behind (interview August 26, San José). When migrants make it through the jungle, and through the Panamanian control apparatus, the trip to the Costa Rican border and on to San José and La Cruz is relatively straightforward due to a bilateral agreement between Panama and Costa Rica (Winters & Reiffen, 2019, p. 26). Then, in the midst of all this border-crossing, La Cruz is a typical place to get stuck.

## 4.2 | Dwelling

This section focuses on migrants' (temporary) engagement with La Cruz, a relatively poor border locality characterised by flows deemed clandestine, including cattle, liquor and drugs, with the knowledge and involvement of local residents, entrepreneurs and the authorities (Winters & Mora Izaguirre, 2019). To give an example of such entanglements, at the bus terminal of La Cruz, Nanneke observed the police officer whom she interviewed while he worked as a security guard at the migrant centre, in the company of taxi drivers who are said to transport migrants at night, while across the street, some of them were making plans with their local smuggler. These known entanglements are relatively easy to identify in a small place like La Cruz. Still, African migration towards North America has become a prominent

issue here only recently, when an intervention by migration police interrupted a smuggling ring (Castillo, 2015). Such interruptions (temporarily) halt migrants' journeys, and the specific localities in which migrants are halted become places where their presence reshapes the landscape and where some of them re-embed their lives.

We focus on three traces that are indicative of these emplacements: new humanitarian infrastructures; informal humanitarian interactions; and multiple but possibly temporal migrant engagements. In 2016, the Costa Rican government profoundly restructured migrant presence in the town by establishing a CATEM at its edges.<sup>13</sup> The centre replaced the temporary humanitarian shelters and informal reception facilities (in churches, schools and other communal spaces) that no longer sufficed. It provides employment for a number of security guards, cleaning and maintenance staff, government and humanitarian personnel. Although the centre mainly consists of U.S.-donated army tents and is located at a terrain on loan, there are advanced plans to construct a permanent structure on nearby government property. In the meantime, the centre provides an instrument to manage migration as well as a space for humanitarian services, where migrants can rest and cook and receive medical attention and some assistance for their children (Winters & Mora Izaguirre, 2019).

At first sight, this seems to be the extent of African migrants' engagement with this Costa Rican locality along their journey: They benefit from some humanitarian services while contemplating their next move. Although they are free to move around, the majority spend most of their time in the centre. They sometimes go into town, but there seems to be little interaction between them and the local population. Apart from cursory encounters in supermarkets and at the local health clinic, local interlocutors emphasised that they generally keep to themselves. According to these interlocutors, cultural and linguistic barriers may constrain interaction next to what could be interpreted as a certain level of reticence on behalf of the migrants, because of the difficult journey they live through and the temporariness of their presence.

These limits to interaction, however, do not preclude changes in the social landscape. A number of humanitarian grassroots initiatives that preceded the state-run migrant centre have allowed for extensive exchange between local and migrant populations. Celia, a middle-aged woman who works for the La Cruz municipality, was one of the volunteers who mobilised in late 2015 to support her church in providing shelter, food and other care for Cuban migrants (interview May 10, 2019, La Cruz). She narrated in detail the emotionally and physically exhausting, culturally enriching and profoundly frustrating experience of being intensely involved for over 4 months. The dedication of volunteers started to wane, however, due to the government's lack of recognition and support. When African (and Haitian) migrants started to arrive and misunderstandings about food and conduct increased, the few volunteers that remained became increasingly reluctant. Celia insisted that this had nothing to do with racism but with a lack of governmental backing:

El tico es dado a dar [the Costa Rican is prone to give].  
But we don't know their culture, they don't eat our

food, we don't prepare it in the same way. ... Because of the language we didn't understand them, we didn't understand their customs. ... But nobody explained that to us. ... We needed to understand why they [the African migrants] came here. We don't know anything about this other continent. We know about the Cuban regime but not about Africa.

Celia contrasted the collaboration of Cuban cooks, carpenters and information and communications technology (ICT) professionals in providing humanitarian assistance with the lack of mutual understanding that characterised her interactions with African migrants. The sense of *somos latinos* became permanently symbolised through a mural that Cuban and local artists elaborated, depicting cultural scenes and sayings from both countries and the words *muchas gracias Costa Rica*.<sup>14</sup> It illustrates a familiarity in stark contrast to the cultural (and often literal) distance to African migrants. Still, Celia's story indicates traces of their presence. It has initiated personal and social learning processes, not only about cultural differences and the diversity of migrants that cross the continent but also about the functioning of humanitarian and government bodies.

The presence of African migrants also becomes noticeable through those who stay longer and integrate locally. This may happen when they have already tried to cross into Nicaragua and were sent back and either (temporarily) lost motivation or need time to generate new funds for travelling or both. Maduenu, a Nigerian migrant in his 20s, provided an example of such (temporary) 'dwelling.' Nanneke met him while he was bagging groceries in a local supermarket. During a subsequent interview in the central park of La Cruz, Maduenu explained how he had tried to cross into Nicaragua with three friends in May 2016, but Nicaraguan immigration officers took them back to Costa Rica after which he stayed on in La Cruz. Whereas his friends tried again and succeeded, passed other Central American countries and Mexico and applied for asylum in the United States, Maduenu decided not to go forward. He did not want to suffer in 'the bush' again and arrive at the U.S. border only to be deported. He found the job at the supermarket, started living in an apartment building with Costa Ricans, applied for his Costa Rican residency and received documents that allow him to move around freely in the meantime.

Apart from dreading the journey, Maduenu also decided to stay in La Cruz because he considers Costa Rica to be a good, reliable and safe country. This resonates with the humanitarian image of Costa Rica (Fouratt, 2014) established in national and international media outlets and emphasised by representatives of local humanitarian organisations. Costa Rica is generally considered an exceptional case in Central America because of its relatively peaceful history (Sandoval-García, 2004), an image that extends to its humane treatment of migrants. Although newspaper and humanitarian reports also indicate instances of xenophobia, they tend to emphasise Costa Ricans' solidary disposition. The 'exotic experience' of encountering Black migrants adds to this.<sup>15</sup> The Costa Rican population includes a small share of Afro-Caribbeans (mainly in the province of Limón) and Afro-Mestizos (in the Guanacaste province, where La Cruz is located), but

the presence of Black migrants is relatively rare (see FLACSO, 2011, p. 6). They are 'out of place' and, because of their long and difficult journey, easily perceived as *pobrecitos* ('unfortunate, poor souls'). Compared with the often more negative views of other migrants, Central Americans specifically, this image gives African migrants a relative advantage to move around freely in the Costa Rican places of their journey.

This relative freedom enables even the migrants that are just passing through to engage locally: buying groceries, seeking medical attention, attending religious services, receiving international money transfers (in La Cruz, Western Union substantially extended its office hours when migrant presence increased) and doing informal jobs or voluntary work. These engagements impact the host locality through heightened awareness, increased business in foodstuffs, smuggling and money transfers and employment opportunities in the humanitarian and security sectors, but these may be fragile and often temporary implications. The temporality of migrants' presence is particularly felt by humanitarian actors. In the midst of efforts to support migrants with shelter, asylum applications and opportunities for integration, these migrants can leave again. The Red Cross employees in La Cruz were advised by their superiors to 'not get attached.' According to the director of ACAI, for the sake of self-protection, ACAI workers need to adopt the idea that their support is only temporary and that they can only contribute to migrant well-being 'right here and now' (interview August 18, 2017, San José).

There are formal limits to migrants' intensive and enduring local engagement, for example, related to the difficulty of obtaining formal work permits. However, even when such conditions are fulfilled, the volatility of migrant trajectories can still make them leave. An indication of this can be found in the fact that while engaging locally, migrants try to stay connected to family, friends and opportunities abroad. Maduenu in La Cruz, for example, keeps in touch not only with his 5-year-old son, who lives with his sister close to the Nigerian capital Abuja, but also with his friends in the United States, with a sister in Brussels and a brother in South Africa. He keeps open his options of staying in Costa Rica, going back to Nigeria or migrating further.

To give another example of trajectory volatility, although Magan acknowledged the desire of most migrants to continue north, he appeared invested in and content with his life in San José. He had applied for refugee status in Costa Rica, attended Spanish classes offered by a local refugee organisation, and learned to, as he said, 'accept' beans, a local staple. On Fridays, he went to the mosque to pray, and he liked to watch the collective gymnastics in the park. Magan said he was able to adapt because Costa Rica is a free, stable and respectful country. Moreover, according to him, 'a land is a land and a home is a home,' which you can make anywhere.

However, in late 2017, Nanneke received various WhatsApp messages indicating he had left:

September 2017

Because [of a] lack of jobs you will look like retired [in Costa Rica]. Because it is hard to get basic life, something to eat, shelter and your hope. Because the

NGO doesn't work internationally because they gave priority to Latinos only, not immigrants from other places in the world.

October 2017

I will travel to Mexico if Allah says. Pray for me.

November 2017

Nanneke. How is everything. Sorry I didn't let you [know] that I travelled to Mexico. Because it was rapid travel.

Magan got on his way to North America. Cedric reached the United States in February 2018 and currently stays with a cousin in South Carolina.<sup>16</sup>

### 4.3 | And travelling again

Migrants' accounts of their home countries all point to a sense of political and economic insecurity that made them leave. And even while carving out a space for themselves in Costa Rica, their own dreams, their families' situations and expectations and the perceived socio-economic limitations in Central America may push them further north. They imagine jobs and stability, reuniting with family and friends, becoming successful entrepreneurs and circulating freely in North America. They also invest enormously in this journey, so that going back to their home countries prematurely is often not an option. Instead, they strategize for travelling further.

In this context, La Cruz is geared towards the smuggling of migrants, which makes it a place of both opportunity and deceit and danger. Migrants shared accounts of friends who made it past the border with Nicaragua and even past the U.S. border and of their own and others' failed attempts. Sometimes the smugglers deceive them: The migrants pay for their trip beforehand, but the smugglers fail to show up, or they do not take them where they had promised to take them. At other times, the smugglers try to guide them into Nicaragua, but the coast guard or Nicaraguan authorities catch them and return them to Costa Rica. There is also physical danger, especially when travelling by ill-equipped boats. According to Maduenu, the water is dangerous. Boats leave in the middle of the night and are underway for hours. The friends he tried to cross with heard about people falling in the water (interview August 23, 2017, La Cruz). Thirty-one migrants were shipwrecked in the bay of Salinas, La Cruz, on a night in early September 2017, leaving one man (nationality unknown) fatally wounded and a Congolese boy drowned (Fallas, 2017). Most of the migrants on the boats came from the same migrant centre where the fieldwork took place.

Despite these horrific incidents, however, the migrants who were interviewed at the migrant centre tended to focus more on the loss of money that failed crossing attempts represent. Migrants often pay hundreds of dollars to get across, the exact price depending on the type of crossing and the number of migrants wanting to cross at a particular moment. Aaden lost 300 U.S. dollars when he tried to continue his journey by boat with a smuggler who was supposed to take them



to Honduras. He left from the migrant centre at night with a group of other migrants and got into a car that took them to the bay of Salinas. Their driver had collected their money, but when they arrived at the boat, the captain took the money and left. The group of migrants walked back part way and later paid 4 U.S. dollars to a taxi driver who returned them to the migrant centre (interview August 22, 2017, La Cruz). Their relative unfamiliarity with the terrain, their skin colour that betrays this unfamiliarity (see De León, 2015, p. 130)<sup>17</sup> and their need to keep moving make these migrants targets of abuse.

At the same time, the limited capacity of migration authorities, the smugglers who prove to be reliable and the stories of migrants who made it, as well as migrants' own learning process, sustain the trail north. During the first week of fieldwork in La Cruz, at least three groups of migrants left the migrant centre at night. Two of these groups were returned the following day after being left by their smugglers and caught by Nicaraguan authorities. Then, one afternoon, Nanneke saw Mewael and two friends in the centre of town. Walking over to greet him, Mewael subtly mentioned they were talking to their smuggler. After a while, she saw Mewael again at a bakery. As she sat down with his group, they said 15 of them would leave the next night. Mewael was in charge of the group. They would go by boat, he said, but they would not pay until they were in the boat; otherwise, the smugglers could take their money and disappear. According to their smuggler, the journey would take 7 h by boat and then 45 min walking to the Honduran border. Talking about whether they would make it or not, they replied, 'Inshallah.' And if not, they said, 'we go again' (interview August 24, 2017, La Cruz). This way, migrants' sustained efforts to cross borders highlight both the need to familiarise themselves with this locality and the temporal nature of their presence.

## 5 | A SHIFTING YET GROUNDED TRANSNATIONAL SOCIAL FIELD

According to Bjarnesen and Vigh (2016, p. 13), displacement 'entails a disruption of the pursuit of a meaningful everyday life, in the context of movement or involuntary stasis.' The migrants described here might have different and widely diverging reasons for their (continued) sense of displacement. However, the stories of migrant presence also illustrate that such displacement does not preclude experiences and practices of emplacement. Identifying the need for a more nuanced view of displacement, which takes the lived experience of *place* seriously, Lems (2016, p. 321) states that 'even people on the move, whether on the run from war, hunger or destruction, or, perhaps, simply looking for greener pastures elsewhere, do not move through an indifferent space. Rather, they move through places – and in moving through shape them and are in turn shaped by them.' A recognition of material and affective emplacement in specific localities like La Cruz, of the social re-embedding it requires, the new opportunities it generates and the local traces it leaves, opens up our thinking about the complexities of displacement.

The empirical examples also point to emerging sociabilities, which, according to Glick Schiller and Çağlar, include relationships of social

support, help, protection, resources and further social connections (Glick Schiller & Çağlar, 2016, p. 19) and provide a sense of commonality, belonging and 'being-in-place' despite conditions of fragmentation and social exclusion (see also Drotbohm & Lems, 2018). Looking at displacement as an ongoing process, in continuous interplay with emplacement, can thus help us understand how people on the move experience their trajectories. These are volatile, not only in the ways in which they become (temporarily) embedded within local infrastructures of humanitarian organisations, government institutions and smuggling communities but also, and simultaneously, in the chance of sudden onward travel. For the migrants whose trajectories have been illuminated here, carving out space for themselves remains an ongoing struggle, both precarious and enjoyable, but always in the context of an uncertain trip north.

The contours of a transnational social field with flexible boundaries, multiple localities and moving participants emerge from these migrants' stories. What keeps this field together, despite all personal and political volatility, is the inner logic of onward migration that may become interrupted in specific localities but remains connected by migrants, their families and friends and their brokers across borders. Migrants routinely imagine a life elsewhere and negotiate local opportunities and obstacles for getting there; they cross borders with the help of international networks that function through locally specific dynamics; they receive money via international money transfer agencies to pay for daily necessities in the localities where they get stuck and to finance smuggling services to move forward; and they get information and emotional support by linking up with local communities and keeping in touch with family and friends abroad. They thus engage in transnational lives both necessitated by and feeding into a system of African migration along Latin American routes.

Looking at these migrants' experiences through a transnational social field perspective enables a better understanding of the migratory dynamics beyond the specific nation state in which they find themselves, and beyond their destination country, integrating the diverse localities of their trajectories through their transnational practices. We need to maintain a perspective of ever-evolving trajectories to understand how transnational living takes shape in local places, while also being implicated in further travel. Becoming part of a particular locality, by choice or less so, and engaging with its dynamics in the short- or long-term influence migrants' trajectories as well as the localities they cross. We would not be able to see the implications of transitory emplacement, of interconnected local entanglements, if we only consider the stable 'origin' and 'destination' within a transnational social field.

Integrating a transnational social field perspective with a trajectory view enables us to study the cross-border, yet locally specific interlinkages between travelling and dwelling. This also puts into sharp perspective how migrants form the glue of a migration system in which countries become places of both emigration and immigration, while crossing their borders often entails extremely high personal and material costs. These migrants are travelling through areas that are known for their porous borders and are recognised and commercialised as zones of transit but cannot be formalised as such. As a

result, continuous interplays between displacement and emplacement shape the boundaries of African transnational social fields in the region.

## 6 | CONCLUDING REMARKS

This paper has discussed how simultaneous articulation of displacement and emplacement through migrant trajectories allows us to acknowledge and unravel transnational lives as they 'touch the ground' en route. It has argued that we can better understand African migrants' cross-border experiences, the multiple encounters between a fleeting migrant population and local actors and the locally specific implications of these encounters by considering these interactions as part of shifting transnational social fields. The paper has illustrated to what extent migrants can and do engage in localities that are part of their journey, while their presence is often (expected to be) temporary. The paper has also pointed to the ways in which key localities along the route are implicated in and affected by migrant journeys and emplacements.

In conclusion, we would like to indicate specific challenges of studying trajectories to further unravel migrants' cross-border journeys as well as the local articulations of these journeys across the globe. Firstly, we need to employ research strategies that can grasp the attempts and moments of affective, social and material placemaking suitable for highly mobile groups. The particular vulnerabilities of these groups across different localities also require sustained attention for ethical principles. Secondly, we need to be sensitive to the possibility of contradictory humanitarian discourse and practice in key localities, as well as to collaborations and clashes between surveillance and solidarity actors. Studying trajectories and the journeys and emplacements that are part of these requires time to observe and unravel local interaction, cross-border connections and emerging routes. Taking up such empirical challenges of evolving and emplaced trajectories would advance our understanding of transnational social fields that reflect the displacement dynamics of our time (Glick Schiller, 2015, p. 2279), the implications of these dynamics for marginalised, secondary locations and the plight of those who are on the move today.

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## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> This article is a modified version of the following paper: Drotbohm and Winters (2018). Transnational lives en route. African trajectories of displacement and emplacement across Central America. Working Papers of the Department of Anthropology and African Studies, Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz, 175.

<sup>2</sup> All migrant names are pseudonyms.

<sup>3</sup> Translated from Portuguese.

<sup>4</sup> For more information about African migration to Latin American countries, including the different routes, modes of entry, and migration regimes, please see Winters and Reiffen (2019).

<sup>5</sup> Initially, many Haitians appear to have presented themselves to certain authorities as Africans to avoid deportation. Although these authorities gradually became aware of this strategy, Haitians still seem to be able to migrate across the region alongside African migrants.

<sup>6</sup> See Winters and Mora Izaguirre (2019) for more details on this so-called 'muro de contención.'

<sup>7</sup> This fieldwork was part of the research project 'African trajectories across Central America: displacements, transitory emplacements, and ambivalent migration nodes' funded by the German Research Foundation (DFG): DR 738/9-1. Further information can be found here: <https://www.ifeas.uni-mainz.de/african-trajectories-across-central-america/>.

<sup>8</sup> Servicio Jesuita para Migrantes (SJM), Asociación de Consultores y Asesores Internacionales (ACAI) and Asociación Obras del Espíritu Santo (AOES).

<sup>9</sup> Centro de Atención Temporal para Migrantes (CATEM).

<sup>10</sup> Although the research project focuses on African migration, we do not exclude other nationalities from our fieldwork and analysis given the insights that can be drawn from their complementary and contrasting experiences.

<sup>11</sup> Migrant organisation SJM tried to address this geographical gap in knowledge by developing a migrant guide with an introduction to Central America's countries, capitals and currencies; main roads, border checkpoints and shelters; as well as information about the risks of gangs, natural disasters and the Panamanian jungle. This guide was inspired by similar Mexican guides for Central American migrants (interview SJM representative August 17, 2017, San José).

<sup>12</sup> For ethical reasons, we will not go into the logistical details of migrants' journeys.

<sup>13</sup> Increased migrant presence in La Cruz also spurred the establishment of a HIAS office, which is a U.S.-based refugee protection organisation. Along the border with Colombia, the Panamanian government also established temporary reception shelters, among others in Puerto Obaldía, which is close to La Miel, where Cedric and his group got stuck.

<sup>14</sup> It is not our intention to romanticise relationships between Cuban migrants and the local population. Cubans tend to have a marked presence because of their shared cultural and linguistic background and their visible efforts to make money for the next phase of their journey.

<sup>15</sup> Something that remains as of yet unexplored here is the fascinating cross-cutting intersection between race, ethnicity and nationality, which changes throughout transcontinental trajectories.

<sup>16</sup> In addition, at the time of finalising this article, Maduenu was in Tijuana, Mexico.

<sup>17</sup> Personal communication via e-mail on August 23, 2017 with Óscar Martínez (see Martínez, 2014).

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