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**Transnational Lives en Route:**  
African Trajectories of Dis-  
placement and Emplacement  
across Central America

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### Abstract

Recent discussions of migrant trajectories or journeys indicate that focusing on circumscribed origins and destination settings is not enough for understanding contemporary 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 life elsewhere, present us with the challenge to broaden the transnational scope. Drawing inspiration from the recent increase of African migrants in Central America, this paper addresses volatile transnational lives by focusing on the dynamics between displacements and emplacements. Whereas even the more sophisticated notions of displacement often evoke images of passivity and being 'cut off', articulations of emplacement emphasize how 'the displaced' also actively re-embed and reshape their cross-border lives locally. Thus, migrants engage in dynamics of smuggling, state surveillance, humanitarian assistance, daily consumption, employment, imagining and planning in the (temporary) host localities of their trajectory. To what extent are transnational lives made possible, lived and contested in such 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? How does a focus on ever evolving trajectories enrich our understanding of how transnational lives are shaped? This paper introduces a theoretical perspective on the simultaneous articulation of displacement and emplacement through migrant trajectories, which will allow us to acknowledge and unravel transnational lives as they 'touch the ground' *en route*.

### Zusammenfassung

Jüngste Debatten zu den Verläufen von Migrationsrouten machen deutlich, dass ein Fokus auf klar umrissene Herkunfts- und Zielkontexte nicht ausreichend ist, um gegenwärtige transnationale Lebensweisen zu verstehen. Die Erfahrungen vieler MigrantInnen, die sich für eine längere Zeit, vor allem im so genannten Globalen Süden, im Transit befinden, und die Erkenntnis, dass die komplexen Verläufe ihrer Routen nicht als leere, abgeschnittene Erfahrungsräume behandelt werden können, erfordern eine Erweiterung unserer bisherigen Betrachtungsweisen. Inspiriert von der aktuellen Zunahme afrikanischer Migration innerhalb Zentralamerikas, bezieht sich dieses Arbeitspapier auf die Dynamiken zwischen Entortungen (*displacement*) und Neuverortungen (*emplacement*). Während sogar komplexe Forschungsansätze zu Migrationsrouten Bilder der Passivität und einem vom Herkunfts-kontext abgeschnittenen Dasein entwerfen, zeigen Formen der migrantischen Neuverortung, dass MigrantInnen selbst in Transit- und Durchgangsmomenten in der Lage sind, ihr Leben neu zu integrieren und lokal zu gestalten. Auf diese Weise interagieren MigrantInnen mit Dynamiken des Schmuggelns, staatlicher Überwachung, humanitärer Hilfe, des alltäglichen Konsums und von Arbeit, indem sie die (temporären) Orte dieser Routen imaginieren und gestalten. Wie werden diese transnationalen Lebenswelten in Kontexten erzwungen

Übergangs und anhaltender Fragmentiertheit ermöglicht, erlebt und herausgefordert? Inwieweit erleichtert eine transnationale Perspektive, die Erfahrungen dieser MigrantInnen und dieser Orte zu verstehen? Kann ein Fokus auf die emergenten Routen unser Verstehen transnationaler Lebenswelten erweitern? Dieses Arbeitspapier zielt darauf ab, Dynamiken der Ent- und Neuverortung zu theoretisieren, damit transnationale Lebenswelten, die gleichermaßen mobil wie lokalisiert sind, neu auslegt und anerkannt werden können.

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## Introduction

On Monday, December 3<sup>rd</sup> 2017, Heike Drotbohm, just about to start her working day in Mainz, was woken up early by a WhatsApp message that reached her from Panama. Cedric<sup>1</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 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>2</sup>

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 five 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 had 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 which offered several avenues for a regularized 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. 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. 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, 2011, 2017) or journeys (Mainwaring and Brigden, 2016) indicate that focusing on circumscribed origins and destination settings is not enough for understanding contemporary transnational lives. The many migrants that are *en route* for extended periods of time, especially in the so-

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<sup>1</sup> All migrant names are pseudonyms.

<sup>2</sup> Translated from Portuguese.

called Global South, and the recognition that their increasingly complex trajectories cannot be regarded as mere empty transit space, disconnected from life elsewhere, present us with the challenge to broaden the transnational scope. These migrants, while *en route*, maintain cross-border connections, engage in cross-border practices and imagine a future that also lies beyond the border. Although these experiences require transnational thinking, the multilocality and temporality of these cross-border engagements also push the limits of a transnational perspective.

When Cedric got stuck on the peninsula where 'La Miel' is located, right at the border dividing Colombia and Panama, he knew how to mobilize external support by means of transmitting the necessary local information: place, conditions, number of people and national origin. He also added some pictures underlying his claim with more evidence. While it was impossible for Heike to provide assistance from Germany, his group managed to search online for assistance within this country they had just reached. Among other humanitarian organizations they contacted the *Oficina Nacional para la Atención de los Refugiados* (ONPAR), who sent an employee who took them to Puerto Obaldia, a small place 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 organizations would provide humanitarian assistance, and he had received the name of a smuggler's boat which could be used for crossing the more difficult part, Nicaragua, up to the Mexican border. Sooner or later, Cedric was sure he would reach the USA, where two of his friends were living.

This paper attempts to address the tension between processes of displacement and emplacement (Bjarnesen and Vigh, 2016) by focusing on volatile settings that are part of migrant trajectories. Whereas even the more sophisticated notions of displacement often evoke images of passivity and being 'cut off', recent articulations of emplacement emphasize how 'the displaced' also actively re-embed their lives (Glick Schiller and Çağlar, 2016) and reshape their host localities (Vogt, 2013: 765). Even migrants still on the move can become emplaced in numerous ways. Migrants encounter 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 health care. In short, despite being 'in transit' (Collyer et al., 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 technologies and organizations.

This paper discusses 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*. Drawing inspiration from the recent increase in African migration across Latin America, the paper addresses the following questions: 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 et al., 2003). It particularly takes on the possibility of including ‘other salient places’ (Levitt, 2015: 2283; Levitt and de la Dehesa, 2017: 1520; see also Guarnizo and 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 and 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 short explorative research in San José and La Cruz, Costa Rica, in August 2017. 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 and Piper, 2010; Mainwaring and 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: 200; Olwig, 2003: 791; Sørensen and Olwig, 2002: 2) 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.

In what follows, we will first discuss theoretical insights on migrant trajectories, emplacement, and transnational social fields. After some contextual and methodological considerations, we will go into selected cases from fieldwork in Costa Rica to discuss the dynamics of travelling, dwelling and travelling again as part of African migrant trajectories across Latin 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.

## Theoretical considerations

Transnational scholarship has greatly enhanced the visibility and the study of sustained cross-border engagements of migrants (Glick Schiller et al., 1992; Glick Schiller and Levitt, 2006; Levitt and Jaworsky, 2007; Vertovec, 2009). At the same time, it has maintained a rather bipolar focus on origin and destination settings (Schapendonk and 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 and 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 non-financial gain, and the links between these actors and activities (Gammeltoft-Hansen and Sørensen, 2013: 6-7; see also Schapendonk, 2017) present migrants with an ever-changing mix of possibilities and impossibilities for movement. While transnational migration studies recognize migrants' simultaneous positioning in two fields (origin and destination), it has given less attention to the possibility of multiple locations (see Olwig, 2003, for an early exception).

Inspired by studies of highly politicized and commercialized transit migration (Collyer, 2007; Collyer et al., 2012; Hess, 2012; Marcelino and Farahi, 2011; Phillips and 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 2011, 2017). According to scholars who make use of a trajectory approach, migration is characterized by inequalities of human mobility and a dynamic relationship between mobility and immobility in particular (Glick Schiller and Salazar, 2013): by periods of moving ahead and staying put, by changing routes based on immediate social, economic and political openings and closings, by the experience of onward or halted movement based on livelihood and family cycles, as well as courage, despair and imagination (Schapendonk, 2011; Schapendonk and Steel, 2014; see also Vammen, 2017). It is increasingly recognized that these possibilities and impossibilities for migration result in 'turbulent trajectories' (or 'fragmented journeys', cf. Collyer, 2007; Mainwaring and Brigden, 2016) rather than linear, uninterrupted migration from location A to B (Vogt, 2012).

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; places that are often marginalized and heavily involved with migration industries (Mainwaring and Brigden, 2016; Marcelino and Farahi, 2011; Vogt, 2016). The call to contextualize and to focus on the constraints and opportunities of place, further 'grounding' transnational migration, has been made by various scholars. Guarnizo and Smith (1998: 6), for example, argued that despite the fragmentations in transnational scholarship, the focus on (a celebrated)

'unboundedness' has largely gone unquestioned. Yet transnational living is enabled and confined by the same asymmetries as 'normal' lives (Grillo, 2007: 201), and does not refer to deterritorialized flows, but to connections between people situated in time and place (Pratt and 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 and Vigh, 2016; see also Ballinger, 2012; Lems, 2016). Recent interpretations of displacement have largely moved beyond the policy-based, operational term used for formally recognized (war) refugees to include a multiplicity of actors and highly differentiated accounts of dispossession, disruption and dislocation (Hammar, 2014; Lubkemann, 2016; see also Bjarnesen and Vigh, 2016; Gill et al., 2011). They have simultaneously opened up and advanced the notion of emplacement or place-making. Emplacement can refer to processes of rebuilding and re-embedding migrants' lives in new localities (Glick Schiller and Çağlar, 2016), as well as to migrants' reshaping of local space (Pelican, 2014; Vogt, 2013: 765). Castillo (2014: 244) provides a useful definition of place-making 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 place-making is, thus, both material and affective (Ballinger, 2012: 392; Lems, 2016) and results inevitably in migrants leaving traces in the places they cross (Cantor, 2014; Marcelino and Farahi, 2011; Pelican, 2014). 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 and Vigh, 2016: 14; Malkki, 1995: 516; Turton, 2005: 265), place-making while migrating may be fleeting, transient or semi-permanent and may involve different localities (see also Marcelino and Farahi, 2011: 884; Phillips and Missbach, 2017: 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: 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: 2278). Before this specific elaboration of transnational social fields, Olwig (2003) had already indicated the importance of considering multiple migratory moves as part of family livelihood pursuits. Her elaboration pointed to the importance of considering the possibility of multiple interconnected locations to make sense of transnational migration.

## Contextual and methodological considerations

### *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. The increase of African migrants in Central America is part of a broader phenomenon of African migration towards a diversity of destinations in the Global South (Şaul and 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 and Cerrutti, 2011; Vammen, 2017: 40). Bodies such as the International Organization for Migration (IOM) expect 'thousands' of African migrants to be *en route* towards and through Latin America given the persistent dynamics of displacement and ever growing, transatlantic migration industries (Mata, 2016), as well as the relative (or presumed) security of reaching Latin America compared with migration to Europe via the Mediterranean Sea (Savio, 2017).

African migration to Latin America has been oriented predominantly towards Brazil and Argentina, however, small and difficult to estimate, but growing numbers of African migrants have also been registered in other countries of the region, such as Colombia and Mexico (Mora Izaguirre, 2017: 191). In line with this, some researchers, journalists and organizations 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: 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: 12-13). Common migration routes so far detected originate not only in West Africa (Senegal, Ghana, Mali, Nigeria and Burkina Faso) and East Africa (Eritrea, Ethiopia and Somalia), but also in Portugal and Spain, and then continue 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-United States border (El Universal, 2011; Lakhani, 2016; Mata, 2016).

However, migration routes are far from stable (Andersson, 2014: 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. These changes can occur relatively suddenly, as in the case of the so-called Trump effect that seems to have (temporally) slowed down unauthorized migration from Central

America and Mexico to the United States (Isacson, 2017; Partlow, 2017), or more gradually. Although, for example, African migrants have been drawn to Brazil because of its relative political stability, economic growth, large afro-descendent population, passion for football and major sports events (Marcelino and Cerruti, 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. So-called extra-continental migrants who made it to Panama and Costa Rica in 2016 got stuck at the Costa Rica-Nicaragua border because of Nicaragua's employment of the military to keep migrants out (a practice entwined with domestic and identity politics as well as lingering conflicts between Nicaragua and Costa Rica). At the time, Costa Rica had to install additional shelters to accommodate thousands of African, Cuban and Haitian<sup>3</sup> migrants, but then these shelters became much less crowded in 2017. Although it is plausible that many migrants have somehow managed to move on, others now appear to avoid both Costa Rica and Nicaragua altogether and rather, with the help of smugglers, cross the ocean from Panama (or even further south) to the north of Guatemala and the south of Mexico (Mata, 2017). In this case, geopolitics and xenophobia have made crossing Nicaragua much riskier for African migrants and led, thus, to new migration routes.

This paper draws attention to this region of Central America<sup>4</sup>, which, due to its geographical location, has performed a dual function as both the 'gate' to and the enclosed 'backyard' of coveted North American destinations for decades (FLACSO, 2011: 17; Mora Izaguirre, 2017: 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: 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 organized crime, but eventually targeting migrants (Casillas, 2008; Galemba, 2013). These efforts culminate in the 'spectacle' (De Genova, 2002) of chasing, detaining and deporting migrants not only at the US border, but also throughout Mexican and Central American regions (Vogt, 2016).

This intensification and externalization of border enforcement, coupled with the simultaneous illegalization and commercialization of border-crossing, further exacerbates persistent multilevel violence in the region and culminates in violent journeys (Brigden, 2017; Casillas, 2008; FLACSO, 2011: 25; Martínez, 2014; Vogt, 2013, 2016). Migrants *en route* often face discrimination and harassment from many sides. Although Mexico, for example, increasingly recognizes its role as a country of transit and (temporary) settlement and has recently implemented a law on migrant rights

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<sup>3</sup> In 2016, when previously unseen numbers of darker-skinned migrants were detected in Central America, many Haitians (traveling from Brazil) presented themselves as Africans to avoid deportation. Although the authorities gradually became aware of this strategy, Haitians still seem to be able to migrate across the region.

<sup>4</sup> Including Belize, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, and Panama (FLACSO, 2011).

irrespective of their status, it also suffers from institutional weaknesses, impunity and the complicity of state actors in the violent treatment of migrants (Aikin and Anaya Muñoz, 2013; Alba, 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: 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: 776). This ambivalence is further deepened by racial discourses, for example, about migrants with an Afro-American or indigenous background (De León, 2015: 130; Velasco Ortiz and París Pombo, 2014). What happens, then, if, suddenly, relatively new and visible African migrants are showing 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'; Brenes, 2016; Melgoza Vega, 2016), becoming increasingly notable in the public sphere (Nájar, 2016)?

### ***San José and La Cruz, Costa Rica***

African migrants' experience of engaging with multiple countries simultaneously and temporally emerged during two weeks of exploratory fieldwork in Costa Rica in August 2017, a study conducted by Nanneke Winters. Of all countries in the Central American region, Costa Rica was chosen because of the long-term academic and humanitarian contacts established there. Moreover, Costa Rica has become a key scene of increased extra-continental migration in recent years (Mora Izaguirre, 2017: 190), a migration that authorities and humanitarian organizations know little about and are largely unprepared for (FLACSO, 2011). In San José, Nanneke visited and interviewed representatives of a migrant, refugee and Catholic organization<sup>5</sup>, as well as three African migrants that were beneficiaries of these organizations and an academic working at FLACSO.<sup>6</sup> She stayed with a local host family in La Cruz who provided unique access to the dynamics of this border locality. She also visited and interviewed representatives of Costa Rica's Immigration and Naturalization Service (DGME)<sup>7</sup> and the Red Cross, who were stationed at the local CATEM migrant centre<sup>8</sup> just outside La Cruz. Interviewees also included several migrants who were sheltered there, as well as a police officer and a taxi driver. A total of five male migrants from Somalia, Eritrea, Nigeria and Haiti, and three female migrants from Haiti, Congo and Angola were interviewed in a mix of English, Spanish and French.<sup>9</sup> Nanneke has remained in touch with some of these migrants via WhatsApp. Nearly all migrants

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<sup>5</sup> Servicio Jesuita para Migrantes (SJM), Asociación de Consultores y Asesores Internacionales (ACAI) and Asociación Obras del Espíritu Santo (AOES).

<sup>6</sup> Facultad Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales (FLACSO).

<sup>7</sup> Dirección General de Migración y Extranjería (DGME).

<sup>8</sup> Centro de Atención Temporal para Migrantes (CATEM).

<sup>9</sup> We decided to include Haitian migrants in the fieldwork because of their similarity in experience in terms of routes from Brazil and local reception. In addition, many Haitian migrants have tried to pass as Africans along the way to avoid deportation.

shared a narrative of economic and political violence that led them to undertake a journey by bus, boat and foot across Brazil, Peru, Ecuador, Colombia and through the dangerous Panamanian jungle, until they got stuck in Costa Rica, trying to cross into Nicaragua, which keeps its borders closed to African migrants.

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. Both experiences are highly transnational. Before going into a discussion of some of these migrants' accounts, a note on terminology is warranted. As can be seen in the 'mixed migration' debate (Van Hear et al., 2009), it is extremely difficult to distinguish neatly between different migrant conditions, such as 'voluntary' and 'forcibly displaced' (Mountz, 2011; Treiber, 2013). Considering the mixed motivations and circumstances of people on the move, in this paper, we will speak of migrants instead of refugees.<sup>10</sup> Given the forces of structural inequality that underlie many migration stories, we will view these migrants from a displacement angle.

## **Volatile migrant trajectories**

### ***Travelling***

In San José, Nanneke met Magan, a Somalian migrant in his thirties, through the refugee organization 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, work as a reporter or for a non-governmental organization. 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 still too critical.

Talking mostly in the plural, Magan's account of his journey echoes newspaper and humanitarian reports and would resonate throughout the subsequent 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 18 August 2017, San José). Magan's comment that 'we don't know the way' illustrates one of the major concerns of humanitarian organizations active in the region: African migrants generally 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 thirties who was interviewed at the CATEM migrant centre, had travelled all the way to Quito, Ecuador, via Panama by

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<sup>10</sup> For a discussion of the problematic dichotomy, see <https://www.law.ox.ac.uk/research-subject-groups/centre-criminology/centreborder-criminologies/blog/2015/09/refugees-are-also>

plane (which turned out to be a rather unusual route). In Quito, he saw a map and he realised he had already been in Panama, but now had to go back north again (interview 24 August 2017, La Cruz). Aaden, another Somalian migrant in his thirties who was also interviewed at the migrant centre, said that he would take a boat to 'Hondus' [Honduras] (interview 22 August 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. Indeed, this geographical gap in knowledge is what migrant organization SJM is trying to address: a representative told me that they are 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 and the Panamanian jungle (see below), inspired by Mexican colleagues who developed similar guides for Central American migrants (interview 17 August 2017, San José).

Despite the gap in geographical knowledge, the representatives of humanitarian organizations that were part of the fieldwork agreed that these African migrants move with the support of a well-organized, 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 that were part of the fieldwork had already engaged in other border-crossings (both individual and organized) 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.

African migrants typically work for a couple of weeks or months in Brazil initially to 'try' the country, and take on underpaid, informal jobs to gain money for their next move. The amount 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>11</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. Maduenu, for example, a Nigerian migrant in his twenties, said he knew which way to go because a lot of 'black people' were leaving Brazil and they told him how to move forward; he and his friends followed the same route (interview 23 August 2017, La Cruz).

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 marks the Colombian-Panamanian border, also known as the Darién Gap. This part of the journey takes about a week of mostly walking and is infamous for its dangers of sickness and injuries, disappearances, wild animals and guerrillas. Magan said: 'In the jungle, brave

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<sup>11</sup> We will not go into the logistical details of migrants' journeys because of ethical reasons.

men are crying' because they are tired or get lost (interview 18 August 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 told of having seen many other migrants not only from Africa, but also from Asia and Latin America, some of them dead. Migrants get left behind because 'you cannot wait for each other' (interview 22 August 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 and, for five dollars, the latter showed them the way to the nearest immigration checkpoint, where they received water and food. Elzira, an Angolan migrant in her fifties, said that it was very hard to walk through the jungle, and there were dead people, robberies and rain. However, the migrants also helped each other, for example, by carrying children and allowing a little rest before continuing when someone got behind (interview 26 August, San José). When migrants make it through the jungle, the trip via Panama City to the Costa Rican border and on to San José and La Cruz is comparatively straightforward. Then, in the midst of all this border-crossing, La Cruz is a typical place to get stuck.

### ***Dwelling***

This section focuses on migrants' (temporary) engagement with La Cruz, a relatively poor border locality that has, for a long time, been crossed by flows deemed clandestine, including cattle, liquor and drugs, with the knowledge and involvement of local residents, entrepreneurs and the authorities. An example of these entanglements is as follows. At the bus terminal of La Cruz, Nanneke saw the police officer whom she interviewed while he worked as a security guard at the CATEM migrant centre, in the company of taxi drivers who transport migrants at night, while across the street, some of the migrants from the migrant centre were making plans with their smuggler. Despite these known entanglements, easily detectable in a small place like La Cruz, African migration towards North America has become a prominent issue here only recently due to an intervention by migration police that interrupted a smuggling ring and an increasing flow of extra-continental migrants (Castillo, 2015). This illustrates that migrants' journeys can be halted for undefined periods of time, not only because of personal reasons, but also because of political intervention. The specific localities in which migrants are halted need to accommodate these flows. In La Cruz, the DGME established the state-run migrant centre in autumn 2016, after hundreds of African and Haitian migrants got stuck along this border because they kept coming in from Panama while Nicaragua, the next country they need to pass on their way north, kept its borders closed. At this centre, migrants can sleep and cook, receive medical attention and some assistance for their children.

At first sight, this seems to be the extent of migrants' engagement with this Costa Rican locality along their journey: they benefit from some humanitarian services while waiting and strategizing for their next move. Indeed, the local host family emphasized that there

is little interaction between these African migrants and the local population. The hosts mentioned temporary aid provided by local churches, logistic activities by smugglers, and examples of cursory encounters in supermarkets and at the local health clinic, but the migrants generally keep to themselves. The hosts indicated cultural and linguistic barriers that constrain interaction next to what could be interpreted as a certain level of reticence because of the difficult journey they are living and the temporariness of their presence.

Despite the different disposition and image of African migrants, however, and despite those migrants who intend to and manage to move on within a couple of days or weeks, there are others who stay longer and integrate locally. This may happen when they have already tried to cross into Costa Rica and were sent back, and either (temporarily) lost motivation or need time to generate new funds for travelling, or both. Maduenu, the Nigerian migrant mentioned above, provided an example of such (temporary) 'dwelling'. The local host family had got to know him quite well from the time he started bagging groceries in their supermarket. After they had introduced him, he agreed to an 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 took them back to Costa Rica, after which he stayed on in La Cruz. While 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, with the mosquitos, lots of rain and nowhere to hide, and arrive at the US 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 country, where people receive migrants well and care for them. This resonates with the humanitarian image of Costa Rica established in national and international media outlets and emphasized by representatives of local humanitarian organizations. Costa Rica is generally considered an exceptional case in Central America because of its lack of violence, civil war and dictatorship (Sandoval-García, 2004); a peaceful image which extends into its humane treatment of migrants. Although newspaper and humanitarian reports also indicate instances of xenophobia, they tend to emphasize Costa Ricans' disposition to be solidary with human pain. This humanitarian disposition is also linked to the exotic experience of encountering black African migrants. 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 migrants with black skin is rare (see FLACSO, 2011: 6). They are 'out of place' and, because of their long and difficult journey, easily perceived as *pobrecitos* ('unfortunate, poor souls'). Compared to the negative image of other migrants, Central Americans specifically, this exotic and sympathetic image gives them 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, receiving international money transfers, attending religious services, taking Spanish classes and doing informal jobs or voluntary work. These engagements impact the host locality through increased awareness and solidarity, increased business in foodstuffs, smuggling and money transfers, and employment opportunities in the humanitarian and security sectors, but these are fragile and often temporary implications. In La Cruz, for example, local residents were exhausted and more reluctant to support African migrants. Moreover, the local community is aware of the temporality of these migrants' presence, something which is particularly felt by humanitarian actors. All representatives of humanitarian organizations that were visited and interviewed brought up this challenge of temporariness. In the midst of efforts to support migrants with shelter, asylum applications and opportunities for integration, these migrants can leave again. The director of ACAI said that, for the sake of self-protection, ACAI workers needed to adopt the idea that their support is only temporary, and that they can only contribute to migrant wellbeing right here and now (interview 18 August 2017, San José).

There are formal limits to migrants' intensive and enduring local engagement, for example, related to full work permits. However, even when all such conditions are fulfilled, the volatility of migrant trajectories can make them leave again. 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 five-year-old son, who lives with his sister close to the Nigerian capital Abuja, but also to his friends in the US, to a sister in Brussels and a brother in South Africa. When Maduenu gets his Costa Rican residency, he will decide what he will do, stay or go back to Nigeria or to Europe. To give another example: during the fieldwork, Magan was living in San José and taking Spanish classes, and expressed his contentment and wish to stay in Costa Rica, but in autumn 2017, Nanneke received various messages via WhatsApp that indicated otherwise:

September 2017    Because [of] 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    Nan. How is everything. Sorry I didn't let you [know] that I travelled to Mexico. Because it was rapid travel.

Magan is on his way to North America.

### ***And travelling again***

Migrants' accounts of their home countries all point to a sense of political and economic insecurity that made them leave. They imagine jobs and stability, reuniting with family

and friends, becoming successful entrepreneurs and walking around freely in North America. They also invest enormously in this journey, so that going back is not an option: they have nothing to lose and want to be part of 'the American dream' (interview FLACSO academic, 18 August 2017, San José). They often already have some migration experience or experience with an internationally oriented life in other ways. Aaden, for example, said he ran a cinema in Mogadishu, where people would come to enjoy Hollywood movies, until Al-Shabaab entered and killed seven people. They hurt his arm and he fled the country. He left his wife and infant son in Somalia, and is on his way to family members in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Aaden said that if migrating to the US would not work out, he would try to go to Canada (interview 22 August 2017, La Cruz).

Aaden did not speak about trying to flee to Europe, but the representatives of humanitarian organizations and other migrants indicated that the tightening of European borders and the dangerous crossing via the Mediterranean Sea have pushed more migrants towards Latin America. However, as mentioned above, African migrants do not generally know about all the countries they have to cross, much less the challenges this route entails. Magan said: 'I didn't know about this risk. Before, I wanted to cross the Mediterranean. But I preferred this [Latin American] trip. But I didn't know all these countries from Brazil to the US' (interview 18 August 2017, San José). These countries, however, have become linked into a system greased by migrants, smugglers and the localities where they meet.

One of these localities, La Cruz, is geared towards the smuggling of migrants, which makes it a place of both opportunity as well as deceit and danger. The migrants that were part of the fieldwork in this locality shared accounts of friends who made it past the border with Nicaragua and even past the US border, but also 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 23 August 2017, La Cruz). Thirty-one migrants were shipwrecked in the bay of Salinas, La Cruz, on a night in early September 2017, just after the fieldwork had finished (Fallas, 2017). The shipwreck left one male migrant fatally wounded and a Congolese boy drowned. 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 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 US 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 US dollars to a taxi driver who returned them to the migrant centre (interview 22 August 2017, La Cruz). Their relative unfamiliarity with the terrain, their skin colour that betrays this unfamiliarity (see De León, 2015: 130)<sup>12</sup> and their need to keep moving make these migrants targets of abuse.

At the same time, their hope, their families' situations and expectations, the perceived socioeconomic limitations in Costa Rica, the smugglers that prove to be reliable and the stories of migrants who made it, as well as their own learning process keep greasing this system. During the week of fieldwork in La Cruz, at least three groups of migrants left the migrant centre at night, although two of these groups were returned the following day after being left by their smugglers and caught by Nicaraguan authorities. Migrants try to keep moving and avoid deception by learning from others and negotiating. One afternoon, Nanneke saw Mewael and two friends in the centre of town. Walking over to greet him, Mewael indicated they were talking to their smuggler. After a while, she saw Mewael again at a bakery. She sat with his group for a little while and they said that they would leave the next night, in a group of 15. Mewael was in charge of the group. They would go by boat, 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 takes seven hours by boat and then 45 minutes 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 24 August 2017, La Cruz).

The role of Costa Rican Immigration in this determination to cross is ambiguous. While providing a space for humanitarian services through the migrant centre, the DGME is also the authority responsible for managing migration, knows these migrants intend to leave again and that they need smuggling networks to do so. According to its representative, if they want to continue their journey *es cosa suya* ['it's their business'], because the DGME cannot control what happens outside the migrant centre (interview 22 August 2017, La Cruz). The migrant centre's high yet interrupted turnover testifies to the friction between flows and closures, and to the transitory nature of the migrants' presence.

### **A shifting yet grounded transnational social field**

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 can become interrupted in specific localities, but remains connected by migrants, their families and friends, and their brokers across borders. The migrants involved live transnational lives both necessitated by and feeding into the system of African migration

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<sup>12</sup> Personal communication via e-mail on 23 August 2017 with Martínez (2014).

along Latin America routes. They 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 along the route and for 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. 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 diverse localities of their trajectories through their transnational practices, while still recognizing the lived experience of violent borders that divide these localities.

At the same time, living a 'classic', more or less stable transnational life seems impossible because, as humanitarian organizations and migration authorities experience daily, these migrants are on the move. This means we need to maintain a perspective of ever evolving trajectories to understand how transnational lives are lived in local places, while strategizing to travel further. Becoming part of a particular locality, by choice or not, and engaging with its dynamics in the short- or long-term influences 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 is not without its personal and material cost. These migrants are travelling through areas that are known for porous borders and are recognized and commercialized as zones of transit, but cannot be formalized as such. The resulting openings and closures shape the boundaries of African transnational social fields in the region.

### **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 border zones and other 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 place-making suitable for highly mobile groups and volatile social settings. 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 journeys. 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: 2279), the implications of these dynamics for marginalized, secondary locations and the plight of those who are on the move today.

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