

Editorial: Mobilities and Transnationalised Lives

Maheshvari Naidu

The articles in this issue of *Alternation* reveal how fine grained and nuanced research in the area of migration and transnationalism has become. They direct our gaze to scholarship that pays critical attention to both deep theory and rich ethnography. They also attempt to capture the transnationalised lives and mobile experiences of the research participants. Even the most cursory glance reveals that the contemporary global condition is anything but inertial, and produces different articulations of transnational involvements. As the participants involved in the various studies reveal, lives are lived across borders marked by nation state boundaries. The nation state's borders have also become porous and lives are lived 'mobile' and *transnationally*. This heightened and changing nature of movements, flows, and travels through permeable borders and boundaries positions us in various contexts, and to various degrees, as mobile, global subjects.

Likewise, numerous new theories of transnationalism and transnational movements have arisen in an attempt to explain the changing nature of this 'back and forth' travel and human flow as people follow migration circuits (Kearney 1995). These theories allow us to engage with the ways in which people increasingly transcend borders, and forge 'transient-roots' of variable duration with 'place' and 'home' as both 'place' and 'home' are increasingly understood as fluid and shifting. Viewing migrant studies through a 'transnational analytic' allows us to understand that the mobility we speak of in spatial and ideational terms, embraces in a palpable way, both migrants and non-migrants, and cohorts together – those who travel to host spaces and those who remain in home spaces. Notional and spatial understandings of 'host' and 'home' plastically 'stretch out' both the specificities and boundedness of the 'here' and 'there'. When refracted through the lives and experiences of the people in the various circuits of

migration, space itself becomes dispersed with migrants positioned at various points and intersections on those circuits.

As far back as 1995, Glick-Schiller *et al.* (1995:50) put it rather succinctly, when they said that it was the study of ‘migration’, rather than mere abstract cultural flows or representations that allows us to discern that transnational processes are located within the life experiences of individuals and families. Also writing a little over a decade ago, Puar (2001) similarly quite rightly pointed out that while globalization studies directed our attention to transnational economic, political and religious processes, the dominant taxonomies operating here failed to fully capture and hold up the complexity of individual (transnational) subjectivities and practices. This is the point of insertion for this particular special volume which directs our gaze to the lived lives and experiences referred to as ‘transnational lives’ or as Guarnizo (1997) prefers, *transnational livelihoods*.

The valuable article by Peggy Levitt and Nadya Jaworsky (2007) critically unpacks the ‘past developments’ and ‘future trends’ in the conceptual and analytical frameworks and trajectories that inform seminal studies in the interdisciplinary field of transnationalism. Against this conceptual landscape, they suggest that the goal in transnational studies ‘is a thick and empirically rich mapping of how global, macro-level processes interact with local lived experiences that are representative of broader trends’ (Levitt & Jaworsky 2007:143). This issue is an attempt to on some level contribute towards such a mapping, by scrutinising some of the kinds of social spaces that are produced by transnational movements within a more specific Southern African context. Through case studies and narrative analyses, the contributors present us with rich empirical data. They unveil different circuits of transnational flows, and reveal how the host and home spaces at times thoroughly infiltrate one another. Their narratives show how ‘home’ and ‘host’ transcend specificities and actual spatial boundedness of the ‘here’ and ‘there’ compelling us, as Levitt and Jaworsky (2007) put it, to all but ‘rethink our cherished assumptions about belonging’.

Victor Muzvidziwa’s article examines how identity is formed and legitimated in the context of women’s cross border experiences, probing issues of Zimbabwean women’s shifting and multiple identities in the context of their mobility and engagement in cross border trade. Muzvidziwa’s case studies reveal the cross border traders as a gendered, cosmopolitan, footloose

group of cultural and economic entrepreneurs. This transnational perspective shifts the analytical focus from country of origin and country of destination to the mobilities involved in sustaining cross-border livelihoods (Sørensen & Olwig 2002).

Rendered vulnerable by another kind of movement are the transnationalised lives of refugees. The article by *Okeke-Uzodike et al.* leads our gaze to both the corporeality as well as, as they put it, ‘the real time’ experiences of forced physical mobilities in the form of massive refugee flows into Southern Africa and situates the analysis of refugee flows and experiences in the context of Urry’s mobilities paradigm.

In his article, *Detlev Krige* argues for a more ‘historically-sensitive and ethnographically-informed analysis of consumption practices’ which he claims will help recognize the role that consumption plays in mobility, identity construction and social class considerations.

Cognisant of a public health perspective, and shifting our gaze to the socio-medical implications of mobility, *Winfred Ogana* investigates perceptions on how migration is contributing to the rise of overweight and obesity among female staff and students of Zulu ethnicity at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, Durban.

Joseph Ayee’s article provides insight into another migration circuit by examining the movement of foreign academics in seeking ‘greener pastures’ in what is referred to as the ‘brain-influx’ or ‘brain-gain’, rather than the negative ‘brain-drain’ of expertise leaving the country. Ayee locates these movements within the dual typologies of ‘functional’ and ‘dysfunctional’ and asserts that the brain-influx can be construed as beneficial to the economies of the countries of the foreign academics by pointing our gaze to documentation that the brain-influx has boosted the economies of some African countries through their welcoming of the foreign academics.

Staying with the institutional space of UKZN but moving the discussion to (transnational) African scholars and African scholarship, *Monica Otu’s* article highlights the role played by transnational and migrant academics as possible conduits in the expansion of African scholarship within the knowledge production circuit and provides an understanding of some aspects of the role that transnational mobility has played in the current thinking of foreign African academics around issues of African scholarship.

Nicoline Fomunyam's article seeks to understand the experiences of Cameroonian migrants living in Durban. It pays careful attention to their patterns of adjustment, interpretation and adaptation in their attempts to re-define their lifestyles and expectations as they engage with the host space. The migrants are 'followed' from the time of their decision to migrate through their settlement in South Africa, and the article explores the coping mechanisms that migrants create in their attempts to *adjust* to the new space.

Maheshvari Naidu uses social network analysis, as she attempts to draw attention to the cohesive aspects of the structural ecology of small groups of Indian migrants and their nodal ties within the networked community. She claims that the social network perspective starts with the individual (transnational) actors and the opportunistic ties and emerging patterns of arrangements within the group structure.

Christopher Isike and *Efe Isike's* article utilizes *Makwerekwere* as a theoretical framework for explaining *non-belonging* in South Africa within which African immigrants are imagined and treated as 'others'. They ask the critical question as to why South Africans engage in this selective ordering or othering.

Gina Buijs' article is a historical case study of Xhosa women migrants, mainly from the eastern part of the former 'homeland' of Transkei, who had moved to Durban in search of work and who found a refuge at the then only hostel for African women in Durban, Thokoza. She revisits her earlier (1993) ethnographic work which examined the reasons why these women were forced to leave their homes and their negotiation of a Xhosa identity in the context of migration and the apartheid reification of ethnicity in her follow-up work undertaken in 2008.

Keeping our eye on women's experiences within the socio-economic consequences of migrant labour out of rural spaces, *Ndwakhulu Tshishonga's* article examines women's internal migration, and the impact it has on providing socio-economic and educational opportunities for survival among the rural marginalised. The article reveals how faced as they are with the 'triple burden of taking care of the children, the home and the land', the women of Pfananani in the Limpopo Province have become mobile through out-of-home employment.

Janet Muthuki's research shows that as a result of migration, family members are increasingly finding themselves in social arrangements where

they have to conduct relationships across different countries. She points out that the impact of transnational migration on family relationships is however, often underplayed and even overlooked. Her article also examines the changing gender relations and the degree of autonomy, empowerment and/or disempowerment transnational students experience as they engage in the process of transforming the meanings of family relationships to accommodate spatial and temporal separations.

From the perspective of the migrants, *Vivian Ojong* reminds us that whilst in the host country, migrants forge and re-forge all kinds of relations with their new country of abode, with their country of origin, and with migrants from other African countries which sits alongside their symbolic and literal constructions of being ‘at home, *but away from home*’.

The articles in this collection can thus be seen to stretch and ‘play’ with many of our understandings of the operational terms (host/home, here/there, local/global etc.) in transnationalism. These understandings however, while theoretically engaged with, are also placed within the context of the complex corporeal lives and empirical realities of the participants in the various studies. Perhaps the article that most stretches both our understanding of scholarship (more specifically scholarship on transnationals and migrants) and what scholarship and ethnography is meant to be doing, is the article by *Francis Nyamnjoh* who also utilizes the ideologically loaded notion of *Makwerekwere* as a theoretical framework for explaining non-belonging and exclusion in South Africa. However, *Nyamnjoh* connects and bridges fiction and ethnography and asserts that this brings out the polyvocal perspectives perhaps neglected by mainstream scholarship. His position is that ‘African fiction provides an alternative and complementary ethnography of the everyday realities and experiences of Africans and their societies in a world of interconnecting local and global hierarchies’. His point is that quite often these are less than adequately captured by ‘the ethnographic present’ and suggests that fiction as a genre is well adapted to exploring such realities and can perhaps be seen as being complementary to scholarly ethnographic writing.

Thus on many levels, the collection of articles in this special issue bring to the fore the ever expanding intellectual landscape in transnational and migrant studies. The cliché that has received much intellectual mileage is that of the ‘melting pot’, or shall I say in the South African context, the

potjiekos within which different elements meld together to give us a newly combined ‘something’. However, as many articles in this issue make quite obvious, migration has never been a one-way process of assimilation into a melting pot or a multicultural salad bowl but one in which the transnational migrants, to varying degrees, are ‘simultaneously embedded in the multiple sites and layers of the transnational social fields in which they live’ (Levitt & Jaworsky 2007:129). Grewal and Kaplan (1994) tell us that, as an operational idiom within the processes of globalisation and cross-border movement, the term ‘transnational’ has come into vogue in a bid to move beyond the limited binary of local-global. Naming this special issue ‘Mobilities and Transnationalised Lives’ is likewise an attempt to bring to the fore scholarship that is about *both* the conceptual and theoretical landscape of transnationalism as well as about the people and their lives ... this special issue is about the people we refer to as transnationals.

References

- Kearney, M 1995. The Local and the Global: The Anthropology of Globalization and Transnationalism. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 24: 547 - 65.
- Levitt, Peggy, B Nadya Jaworsky 2007. Transnational Migration Studies: Past Developments and Future Trends. *Annual Review of Sociology* 33: 129 - 56.
- Glick-Schiller, N, L Basch & C Szanton-Blanc 1995. From Immigrant to Transmigrant: Theorising Transnational Migration. *Anthropological Quarterly* 68,1: 48 - 63.
- Gardner, K & R Grillo 2002. Transnational Households and Ritual: An Overview. *Global Network* 2: 179 - 90.
- Puar, JK 2001. Global Circuits: Transnational Sexualities and Trinidad. *Signs* 26, 4: 1039 - 1065.
- Sørensen Nyberg, N & K Fog Olwig (eds) 2002. *Work and Migration: Life and Livelihoods in a Globalizing World*. London: Routledge.

Dr Maheshvari Naidu
School of Social Sciences
University of KwaZulu-Natal
naiduu@ukzn.ac.za