

Belonging, Time and Mobility: The Experience of West African Economic Migrants in China

Despite the promises of globalization, African migrants are increasingly limited as to where they can go to seek a better life, a consequence of anti-immigration policies, nativism, and xenophobia closing the borders to many desirable destinations in the ‘West’. Take Patience, for example, a Nigerian shop-owner in her late 30s who, unable to get to America or Europe, traveled instead to China. Three times every year for the past five years, she has visited and stayed adjacent to the “World’s largest small commodities wholesale market” in Yiwu, China, located two hours by bullet train from Shanghai. There, she purchases ‘Made in China’ goods for export to Lagos. Yet, she often speaks of her desires to export American things or live not in China, but in Belgium. Similarly, other West Africans in Yiwu, from short-term visitors to long-term residents, assert that while they dreamed about going to Europe or America, they chose China over waiting. They anticipate China to be a transient stop, necessary to achieve their economic goals, but with a future planned for back home or elsewhere.

Building on the insights above, gathered from my preliminary fieldwork in Fall 2016, my research focuses on the experiences of Ghanaian and Nigerian traders, exporters, and economic migrants for whom China represents a compromise between remaining at ‘home’ or waiting to go to the ‘West’. Shaped by a sense of temporariness out of a desire for elsewhere, my overall ethnographic question asks: how do West African economic migrants actively build lives in China and back home? Specifically, I seek to capture the ethical and affective labour of actively making China a temporary or transitory place while balancing the very fact of living there. Currently, thousands of African migrants are arriving in Chinese cities (Li et al 2009; Lyons et al 2012), with an estimated 500,000 Africans in China (Bodomo 2012). Few intend to stay for long, some even planning their departure upon arrival, challenging the implicit “normative framework of permanent settlement” (Robertson 2014) in the transnational migration literature. Yet, they appear busy building relationships, establishing communities and making new identities (Bodomo 2010; Castillo 2014; Cisse 2015; Mathews 2011). But how and what kinds of relationships, communities and identities manifest when informed by an orientation towards home or elsewhere? My project explores the relationship between belonging, time, and mobility for African migrants in China with the objective of understanding how the practices and experiences of being and becoming a ‘migrant’ is changing in the contemporary world, where destinations are increasingly in the ‘East’ rather than the ‘West’, and settlements are increasingly temporary rather than permanent.

My theoretical framework draws on the anthropological literature on African migration, transnationalism, time, and ethics. West Africans in Yiwu are not a new phenomenon, but part of a historical and cultural tradition of continental and transnational long-distance trade that is well documented in the anthropology of African migration (Akyeampong 2010; Cohen 1969; MacGaffey and Bazenguissa-Ganga Remy 2000; Stoller 2002). My fieldwork questions how frequent trips and temporary stays in China complicate this tradition with its particular configuration of settlement, remittance, and nostalgia for home, and its attendant modes and rules of belonging. I suggest that, by situating the nascent field of Africa in China within a genealogy of African migration, there is the potential for this research to challenge the privileging of certain transnational histories, political economies, and cultural forms of agency and belonging (Koser 2003).

The majority of the anthropology literature on African migration have considered only situations where migrants traveled to their desired destinations in Europe or America, or remained in place, imagining and waiting to go (Gaibazzi 2014; Jackson 2008; Ndjio 2008; Newell 2012; Vigh 2009). Few studies have considered situations where desires are traced to Europe and America, but their *actual* trajectories take them to other places (Haugen 2012; Zuluaga 2013). I explore how this divergence rather than alignment between desire and destination creates not just a geographical or spatial gap, but also a potential space

whereby people cultivate a sense of temporariness, or other modes of time ethics and time reckoning (Bear 2014, 2016; Munn 1992). Giving significance to time and timing, I critically explore how ‘waiting’ has become a central trope to discuss African migration, for example, feeling derailed from a “temporal developmental trajectory” (Ferguson 2006: 190), or longing in the mode of a “nostalgia for the future” (Piot 2010:40). I do so in order to provoke a rethinking of how migration to China might be a way to not only *jump ahead* (Coe 2016) in the narrative structure of development, but instead an opportunity to *jump out of* (Zigon 2014) the narrative entirely. The latter ‘jump’ has the potential to help economic migrants on the move regain agency outside of the linear development framework.

Drawing on the anthropology of ethics, my research pays attention to temporariness and transience as active choices in migration. Informed by a treatment of forced migration as radically decisional (Steinberg 2015), I draw on Michael Lambek’s (2010) framework of “ordinary ethics” to analyze how people recalibrate expectations, establish criteria and change actions towards their relationships, commitments and opportunities in China and back home, with each subsequent journey. In doing so, my project seeks to critically engage with, and move past anthropological perspectives that view transience and temporariness as mere technologies of statecraft for control of racialized bodies and unwanted movements. That is, being attuned to temporality might highlight the possibilities of resistance, or even refusal (McGrانhan 2016) to experience the different intensities of biopower executed through technologies like visa regimes (Salter 2006) or detention centres (Andersson 2014), that constitute much of the ‘Western’ migration landscape for African migrants. For instance, how might a purposeful preference to feel temporary in one place rather than to feel alienated from another (Mbodj-Pouye 2016), change the conditions of how African migrants are presumed to belong - to trade networks, clandestine organizations, and ethnic enclaves (Bodomo 2010; Bredeloup 2012; Li et al 2009; Lyons et al 2012)?

To successfully carry out this project, I employ the same methodology used during my preliminary fieldwork in Yiwu, China. In the Fall of 2016, I lived in Yiwu and worked in the market as a *pro bono* Mandarin translator for English-speaking West Africans. As a translator, I gathered evidence through the method of participant observation as we walked through the market, conducted business, met friends (and foes), shared stories, and ate meals together. I will also use more structured methods of biographical information collection, one-on-one interviews, as well content analysis of relevant media. These methods will allow me to understand the affective, ethical, imaginative and material aspects of migrant life. The tracing of these experiences, practices and encounters across West African traders, exporters and economic migrants is central to understanding how they make sense of their time spent in China. Currently, I am in my third year of my PhD in anthropology, under the joint supervision of Professors Girish Daswani and Michael Lambek at the University of Toronto. I have successfully defended my thesis proposal and will commence 12 months of fieldwork in March/April of 2017.

My project seeks to advance our understanding of the migrant experience in the 21st century. I contend that international immigration restrictions and geopolitical shifts are likely to further constrict and contort traditional migratory circuits around the world, and temporariness will increasingly mark how humans move, settle and live. The findings and implications will provide a platform for future research, and will also be relevant to policy makers. Beyond the study here, this project aims to add a more nuanced voice to the political economy and international development debates on the relationship between China and Africa. Theoretically, it seeks to ‘decolonize’ knowledge of African migration by situating its epistemology within different configurations and interactions of state and individual. My project will build on and extend recent works on the experience of African migrants - of stagnation, suspension and waiting when directionally looking 'West'-ward - by hinting at alternative realities and imaginaries of mobility while looking 'East'. Ultimately, this project informs future debates on cultural pluralism, race dynamics, South-South relations, and the role of agency in contemporary migration.

REFERENCES:

- Akyeampong, Emmanuel. 2010. "Diasporas," mobility and the social imaginary: getting ahead in West Africa. *Journal of Third World Studies* 27(1): 25.
- Andersson, Ruben. 2014. Time and the Migrant Other: European Border Controls and the Temporal Economics of Illegality. *American Anthropologist*, 116(4): 795-809.
- Bear, Laura. 2014. Doubt, conflict, mediation: the anthropology of modern time. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 20(S1): 3-30.
- Bear, Laura. 2016. Time as Technique. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 45(1): 487-502.
- Bodomo, Adams. 2010. The African trading community in Guangzhou: an emerging bridge for Africa-China relations. *The China Quarterly* 203: 693-707.
- Bodomo, Adams. 2012. "Chapter 3: Africans in Yiwu". In Adams Bodomo (Ed.) *Africans in China: A Sociocultural Study and its Implications for Africa-China Relations*. Amherst, New York: Cambria Press.
- Bredeloup, Sylvie. 2012. African Trading Post in Guangzhou: Emergent or Recurrent Commercial Form? *African Diaspora*, 5: 27-50.
- Castillo, Roberto. 2014. Feeling at home in the "Chocolate City": an exploration of place-making practices and structures of belonging amongst Africans in Guangzhou. *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, 15:2, 235-257.
- Cisse, Daouda. 2015. African Traders in Yiwu: Their Trade Networks and Their Role in the Distribution of 'Made in China' Products in Africa. *Journal of Pan African Studies*, 7(10): 44-64.
- Coe, Cati. 2016. Orchestrating care in time: Ghanaian migrant women, family and reciprocity. *American Anthropologist*, 118(1): 37-48.
- Cohen, Abner. 1969. *Custom and Politics in Urban Africa: A Study of Hausa Migrants in Yoruba Towns*. London: Routledge.
- Ferguson, James. 2006. *Global shadows: Africa in the neoliberal world order*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Gaibazzi, Paolo. 2014. Visa Problems: Certification, Kinship, and the Production of 'Ineligibility' in the Gambia. *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 20: 38-55.
- Haugen, Heidi Ostbo. 2012. Nigerians in China: A Second State of Immobility. *International Migration*, 50(2): 65-80.
- Jackson, Michael. 2008. The Shock of the New: On Migrant Imaginaries and Critical Transitions. *Ethnos*, 73(1): 57-72.

Koser, Khalid, ed. 2003. *New African Diasporas*. London: Routledge.

Lambek, Michael, ed. 2010. *Ordinary ethics: Anthropology, Language, and Action*. New York: Fordham University Press.

Li, Zhigang, Ma, Laurence J.C., Xue, Desheng. 2009. An African Enclave in China: The Making of a New Transnational Urban Space. *Eurasian Geography and Economics*, 50(6): 699-719.

Lyons, Michal, Brown, Alison and Zhigang Li. 2012. In the dragon's den: African traders in Guangzhou. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 38(5): 869-888.

Mathews, Gordon. 2011. *Ghetto at the center of the world: Chungking mansions, Hong Kong*. London: University of Chicago Press.

MacGaffey, Janet and Bazenguissa-Ganga, Remy. 2000. *Congo-Paris: Transnational Traders on the Margins of the Law*. Indiana: Indiana University Press.

Mbodj-Pouye, Aissatou. 2016. Fixed Abodes: Urban Emplacement, Bureaucratic requirements, and the politics of belonging among West African migrants in Paris. *American Ethnologist*, 43(2): 295-310.

McGranahan, Carole. 2016. Theorizing Refusal: An Introduction. *Cultural Anthropology*, 31(3): 319-325.

Munn, Nancy. 1992. The cultural anthropology of time: critical essay. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 21: 93-123.

Ndjio, Basile. 2008. "Evolues and Feymen: old and new figures of modernity in Cameroon." In *Genaologies of Modernity in Africa*, edited by Peter Geschierer, Birgit Meyer and Peter Pels, 205-213. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Newell, Sasha. 2012. *The Modernity Bluff: Crime, Consumption, and Citizenship in Cote d'Ivoire*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Piot, Charles. 2010. *Nostalgia for the future: West Africa after the Cold War*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Robertson, Shanthi. 2014. Time and temporary migration: The case of temporary graduate workers and working holiday markers in Australia. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 40(12): 1915-1933.

Salter, Mark. 2006. The global visa regime and the political technologies of the international self: borders, bodies, biopolitics. *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political*, 31: 167-89.

Steinberg, Jonny. 2015. The Vertiginous Power of Decisions: Working through a Paradox about Forced Migration. *Public Culture*, 28(1): 139-160.

Stoller, Paul. 2002. *Money Has No Smell: The Africanization of New York City*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Vigh, Henrik. 2009. Wayward Migration: On Imagined Futures and Technological Voids. *Ethnos*, 74(1): 91-109.

Zigon, Jarrett. 2014. Temporalization and ethical action. *Journal of Religious Ethics*, 42(3): 442-459.

Zuluaga, Jonathan Echeverri. 2015. Errance and Elsewheres among Africans Waiting to Restart their Journeys in Dakar, Senegal. *Cultural Anthropology*. 30(4): 589-610.