Fiction and Reality of Mobility in Africa

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This paper draws on rich ethnographies and ethnographic fiction depicting mobile Africans and their relationships to the places and people they encounter, to argue that mobility is more appropriately studied as an emotional, relational and social phenomenon as reflected in the complexities, contradictions and messiness of the everyday realities of encounters informed by physical and social mobility. The current dominant approach to studying and relating to mobile Africans is problematic. Nationals, citizens and locals in communities targeted by African mobility are instinctively expected to close ranks and fight off the influx of barbarians who do not quite belong and must be "exorcized" so "insiders" do not lose out to this particular breed of "strangers," "outsiders" or "demons," perceived to bode little but inconvenience and savagery. If and when allowed in, emphasis is on the needs, priorities and convenience of their reluctant hosts, who tend to go for the wealthy, the highly professionally skilled, the culturally bleached and Hottentot Venuses of the academy, even at the risk of accusations of capital flight and brain drain. The paper demonstrates how to marry ethnography and fiction to study African mobility not only as a "collection of logical bones and flesh," but also as "emotional beings". It calls for conceptual flexibility and ethnographic empirical substantiation, and challenges social scientists to look beyond academic sources for ethnographies and accounts of how a deep, flexible and nuanced understanding of mobility and interconnections in Africa play out in different communities, states and regions of a world permanently on the move.

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