Miriam Gutekunst, Andreas Hackl, Sabina Leoncini, Julia Sophia Schwarz, Irene Götz (eds.)

Bounded Mobilities
Ethnographic Perspectives on Social Hierarchies and Global Inequalities

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From:

Miriam Gutekunst, Andreas Hackl, Sabina Leoncini, Julya Sophia Schwarz, Irene Götz (eds.)

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Mobility is a keyword of late modernity that suggests an increasingly unrestrained and interconnected world of individual opportunities. However, as privileges enable some to live in a seemingly borderless world, others remain excluded and marginalized. Boundaries are created, modified and consolidated, particularly in times of hypermobility. Evidently, mobility is closely tied to immobility. This volume features ethnographic research that challenges the concept of mobility with regard to social inequalities and global hierarchies.

Miriam Gutekunst is completing her PhD at the Ludwig-Maximilians-University of Munich.
Andreas Hackl is doing his PhD at the School for Social and Political Sciences at the University of Edinburgh.
Sabina Leoncini (Dr.) obtained her PhD in 2014 at Florence University.
Julya Sophia Schwarz works at the DJI (German Youth Institute) in Munich on the topic of family, poverty and gender.
Irene Götz (Prof. Dr.) is a full professor of European Ethnology at the Ludwig-Maximilians-University of Munich.

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Disturbing pictures and reports in the media, difficult to ignore, confront us steadily with one crucial aspect of current forms of im/mobility: the overloaded boats of refugees in the Mediterranean and fleeing families on their way to a hopefully safe place in Europe or elsewhere, queuing up in front of registration centres or crowded into makeshift homes. On a different note, Chinese mobile workers following the tracks of the many striving for better living conditions in the new booming mega cities must often leave family and children behind in their villages. These are pictures often seen, stories often told, dealing with the strategies, practices and metaphors of mobility of the unsettled and uprooted, who are often forced into mobility under precarious and dangerous conditions. The people in these stories are leaving their places of origin, driven by economic shortcomings, political persecution or war, and many times by a lack of perspectives. Despite their difficult situation, or maybe even because of it, they can also be seen as actors of their lives, attempting to get access to a better future, following their “iminations”, in the sense of Arjun Appadurai denoting this powerful force of dreams of a prosperous life elsewhere, as they are being distributed by the globalized media. Migration occurs somewhat “autonomously” (Sabine Hess and Transit Migration) despite the powerful consolidation of borders; migrants have always found their different ways to overcome them, even if they have had to pay a high price for their attempts to reach “the other side”, a wealthier place, where they found themselves, for example, as an illegal non-citizen, respectively one with restricted social rights, under conditions that made them more or less immobile.

Thus, this collection of new ethnographic contributions is on a very crucial and current topic – mobility and its counterpart, immobility. The focus of these papers, however, is relatively new. They are dedicated not only and primarily once more to mobility and the mobiles, but also address forms and practices of immobility and immobilisation which have not been subjected to detailed research very often before. Many contributions investigate the lifeworlds and strategies of those enclosed within multifaceted borders and hindered from moving freely due to the “wrong”
passport or to a wide range of social and economic inequalities and restrictions. While highly skilled expatriates, for instance, are somewhat hypermobilised and often even suffer from the imperative of changing places and from their unlimited and speedy travelling around the globe, others are stuck in poverty, detained in refugee camps or confined to areas badly connected to industrial zones or to transportation systems that could carry them to potential working places. Others – for example, seasonal workers or female caregivers – manage to move and find temporal work abroad, yet they are sent back when no longer needed or they have to leave their wealthy host countries when their tourist visas expire.

Nowadays, the restructured globalized labour market in coalition with neoliberal politics of deregulated national states, and particularly the European Union, make a distinction between those migrants and mobiles welcome due to their qualifications and those who are treated as “scroungers”, even as “parasites”, being superfluous and a burden to the welfare states that they are often supposed to be selfishly exploiting. Border regimes are the powerful agents of the national states keeping up and safeguarding this distinction between those migrants who are welcome and those not admitted.

The papers published in this volume focus on particular interrelations between mobility and the mobile, on the one hand, and immobility and the immobilised, on the other hand. Dealing with different groups, milieus and countries, the contributions show once again how crossing borders is a privilege of the few and an existential problem for the many. However, mobility and immobility are not considered to be at two different ends of the spectrum. In fact, this book makes the argument that people often experience both at the same time: people are somehow mobile and immobilised. Thus, mobility/mobilisation and sedentarism or immobility/immobilisation must be regarded as structurally interwoven states, in many respects. Moreover, they are often only temporary and fluid states: moving and settling alternately and in an interrelated way in the life courses of, for instance, mobile workers, who are, every now and then, forced to become mobile in order to find a new job. This is not only the case in recent times. In the nineteenth century, in the wake of industrialization, mobility and immobility alternated in the biographies of mobilised workers, who already had to cope with border regimes which had only recently been built up and gradually strengthened by the newly established national states.

The common target of all the contributions in this volume is to provide insights into different ongoing (or recently finished) research projects that all rely on an ethnographic approach. The projects presented in this book reveal that the ethnographic approach based on case studies and thick descriptions, including perspectives from the actors’ points of view, provides deeper insights into the interwoven macro- and micro-contexts of mobile practices, their potentials and their restric-
tions, which are shaped and governed by the institutions, politics and policies of several local, national and transnational mobility regimes.

The contributions presented in the following chapters go back to an international conference held at the Institute for European Ethnology of the Ludwig-Maximilian-University (LMU) Munich. The very inspiring interdisciplinary conference brought together social scientists and cultural anthropologists from Italy, Germany, Greece, Israel, Switzerland and Scotland, most of them not having met before. Providing many vivid discussions and new insights into the disciplinary vocabularies and national research traditions, it served to find contacts and potential foci of co-operation within a wide-spread community of experts in the field of migration, border and mobility studies. The conference was successful in building up or strengthening networks – between junior and some senior scholars from different subjects and countries. The discussions benefited very much from keynote speeches given by well-known scholars, such as Sabine Hess from the University of Göttingen, Bruno Riccio from the University of Bologna and Piero Vereni from the Tor Vergata University of Rome.

Finally, it should be mentioned that it was possible to bring this book project to a successful end thanks to the financial support, first of all, of the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) and the Institute of European Ethnology (LMU), which both funded the conference and this volume. The former gave generous financial support within the framework of a special programme called “Higher Education Dialogue with Southern Europe”. This programme aims at connecting scholars from Northern and Southern Europe with one another. A warm thank you on behalf of the editing team also goes to our partner university in this DAAD tandem: to Bergamo, in particular to Elena Bougleux from the local Department of Human and Social Science. Last but not least, we would like to thank Claudia Stahl, our project assistant, Hanna Zeckau, our graphic designer, as well as Philip Saunders, our proofreader, and Tomislav Helebrant for formatting the papers.
When I was invited to open this collaborative research volume on im/mobilities, I was struck by the complex task that the team of young scholars had undertaken. Discourses on mobilities are inscribed within opposite and often contradictory rhetorics; they are driven simultaneously by heterogeneous causes and constraints. Mobility is a state of mind, tied to personal narratives and imaginaries, as well as a juridical state, determined by institutions and power structures; mobilities can be provisional and permanent, metaphorical and material. Mobility is an elusive and fragmented matter to deal with.

In the context of an academic seminar bringing together scholars from different, mostly European countries, the mind runs to the privileged condition of those very mobile subjects travelling on a regular basis to create occasions of discussion and exchange about their research. However, fellowships for travelling scholars are often granted by countries that, at the same time, establish limiting quotas for migrants; and countries that are weaker in attracting moving scholars, so namely the less competitive in an academic perspective, are, at the same time, the strongest at enforcing defensive politics against migration.

The concept of mobility appears to be breaking to pieces and scattering in opposite directions, depending on who is actually moving: the trajectories followed are only occasionally chosen by moving subjects, and their reasons to move can be elective, rather than mandatory. Definitely, an articulated idea of mobility cannot be simply associated with that of freedom, introducing the simple dichotomy free to move/bound to move: rather, such association is mediated by the relation between the individual and the collective dimension, which attributes or denies power to the condition of the moving subjects. In fact, opposite declinations of the concept of freedom are associated with subjects moving along the same trajectories, but in opposite directions, and different degrees of freedom are reversely entrenched in the condition of being in motion, according to the network of power relations among sending and receiving contexts.

Whose immobility we are going to discuss is, therefore, a major issue: mobilities keep unfolding in strict conjunction with fixed standpoints, and a theory of im/mobilities must account for the differential distribution of the capacity to be
mobile between people of different class, identity and origin. Every event of im/mobility also has a material side, as moving bodies mobilise resources and call for practical responses, and a metaphorical side, as moving ideas raise reactions dense with emotional and intimate values. Travelling ideas may seem more silent, less demanding and more fluid than bodies. After all, ideas may cross borders “unseen”. However, the figurations they shape when they are displaced far from their original cultural and emotional scenarios bear major linguistic, epistemic, political and aesthetic implications.

Both the metaphorical and the material dimensions of im/mobility converge in the trope of the nomadic subject, broadly described in the work of Rosi Brajdotti (2011): nomadic subjects happen to walk literally or virtually across separated spaces, creating material connections where there were none through their physical and emotional passage. The action of moving across separated spaces, performed as a state of being, inhabited as a permanent condition, has the power to weave networks of unexpected connections, to link the improbable, to rephrase the speakable, to redefine the primary ideas of presence and distance. However, at the same time, one must acknowledge the continuing primacy of the state in determining and limited such boundary crossings. Thus, even the figure of the nomad is essentially both mobile and immobile. The uneasy positioning of the moving ones, in fact, also demands a broad redefinition of the epistemic categories for those who stay or remain. Social spaces are continuously redrawn and redefined, from the margins to the centre, by their moving, elusive, more dynamic elements.

A mobile, nomadic subject is crucially relevant for the emergence of a critical perspective on society: he/she redefines the fields of legitimacy and normated correctness, as his/her moving condition is difficult to catch up with and to grasp, unpredictable and potentially creative. In its metaphoric representations, nomadism becomes a form of existence: it is an appropriated way of existing, chosen or suffered, in order to resist a hetero-directed norm. The nomadic subject is a social and epistemological activist, subject and object, whose languages, desires and frameworks of thought and action appear to be in constant oscillation between unstable states far from equilibrium. Nomadic subjects belong simultaneously to multiple spaces, to multiple phases, to transitory states and also to multiple times: the previous and the following, separated by the discontinuity represented by the mobility event.

Why associate the condition of mobility to that of activism? Which rhetoric is at stake when we attribute a more intense transformative power to an im/mobile condition? Is there any empowering advantage in performing im/mobilities in either an open or elusive way? Capitalism resists activism and its elusive forms. In the framework of most research presented in this volume, capitalism does not only appear as a powerful political and economic system, it is also the comprehensive concept that includes multiple and very stable categories of power, sets
of norms and mechanisms of control. It is capable of recursively reinforcing its structure, thereby metabolizing the actions of its non-aligned elements, namely its opponents. The same may hold true for the state. A capitalist political economy may be successful and effective in enforcing its norms because it harbours, accepts and copes well with nomadic subjects, elusive or not, incorporating and appropriating them depending on needs and demands. It places and freezes them in ever changing plastic and adaptive categories. Capitalism mutates and devours elusive activism; it is an adapting entity itself, capable of absorbing and shaping desires, transforming deliberate errors, conditions of instability and elusive states into new, modified, adaptive norms.

Im/mobile subjects are, therefore, asked to conform to multiple capitalistic norms, as they have multiple duties to comply with and multiple roles to play. Although multiple spaces of resistance in connection with im/mobility exist, the nomadic condition appears to fail in becoming a form of global resistance precisely because it is utilised and accommodated within it. State power and capitalism are often skilful, as they intercept peripheral fluctuations and fragment opponents, or even scatter and displace them into the landscape of incoherent elements. In order to enhance an effective resistance, to open up the potential that im/mobilities contain, one more concept is needed. Echoing many of the cases presented in this volume, I suggest that this element is: multiplicity. The im/mobile subjects are to be transformed into non-unitarian subjects, with superposition of identities and recombinations of identity patterns. Subjects who are continuously ready to draw their own, singular, unique, nomadic synthesis, their own non hetero-directed norms.

Identities scatter, reassemble and mutate during processes of dislocation and transfer, as scenarios frequently change: their emotions shift, their networks re-connect or are lost. They are flexible and receptive, subjected to the multiple and contextual interferences between the original and the final socio-cultural environments through which they travel. Identities are always nomadic, but they are also contested and utilised. Maybe these are the most relevant traits that hold together figurations of im/mobility: as power structures continue to displace people, these people are also capable of displacing power structures along their paths. As they can try to represent and modify representations of boundaries, they also become spaces of possibility within a limiting structure. Im/mobile subjects, as the contributions to this volume suggest, are capable of challenging the existing norms, able to wander beyond limits, challenging different political, cultural or capitalistic norms. These forms of empowerment are part of the very same relations that also limit and restrict mobility. This is why this volume is titled “Bounded Mobilities”.

REFERENCES

“It was the prospect of immobility that motivated me to become mobile and join this conference”, said Eleni Sideri from Greece at a workshop held in Germany for the purpose of this publication. It was July, 2015, and her home country, Greece, had just held a referendum in which the people had voted with Oxi – no – against another austerity programme dictated by the European Union (which was nevertheless accepted by the government later on). This was also the time when the Greek people could only withdraw 60 Euros of cash a day from the bank. The often praised privilege of academic mobility and international conferencing crumbled and a situation of relative confinement took over in Sideri’s life, a cultural anthropologist with Greek citizenship. Her salary payments had been on hold for three months when she contemplated whether or not she would make it to the workshop in Munich on “Bounded Mobilities” – the idea to look at a world of immobility within processes of mobility. The theme suddenly felt inconveniently familiar. Eventually she attended, despite the insecurities, not least because her friends encouraged her to do so. They said that nobody knew what would happen in the near future.

Immobilisation and privilege do not necessarily exclude each other, particularly in times when such privileges are contested. Social inequalities and global hierarchies in the context of im/mobilities are not only the subject of this edited volume, but also a reality with which many of the contributors struggled, particularly those from Southern European countries such as Sideri. While Greek and Italian academics talked about their increasing immobilities and the fight over funding and positions, the situation for those contributors from Northern European countries, such as Germany, remained comparably good, including the possibilities available for young researchers. Inequality and immobility do not only speak through the research and analysis in this volume, but are also an essential aspect of its making.

Although this volume addresses a variety of contexts beyond Europe and migration, it cannot but acknowledge the particular timing of its production – a time of intensified control and exclusion and one of unprecedented movement despite such exclusion: As this publication came into being, its relevance to the current po-
itical context in Europe and beyond became increasingly apparent too. More than two decades after the fall of the Berlin wall, Europe seemed to be sealing itself off in similar ways through new fences and policing. Therefore, it appeared that much of the enthusiasm about unregulated mobility within the Schengen area has found a sober end. However, at the same time, civil society initiatives and the responsible policies of some states also propelled movement and upheld solidarity temporarily, which, nevertheless, took place within a larger context of unequal mobilities and led to fierce political debates. The seeming ubiquity of borders and immobilisations underpins the growing acceptance of an order in which only the privileged remain mobile, while others are doomed to a world of limitations and control, despite an occasional upsurge of largely humanitarian solidarity. At the same time, however, massive human mobilities are taking place and are propelled within this context of inequality, a realisation that points to the centrality of merging different forms of immobility and mobility into one conceptual framework of bounded mobilities. By August, 2015, it was widely acknowledged that the mass influx of migrants and refugees represented the largest movement of people that Europe has seen since 1945. The policing of borders, train stations and other routes intensified as refugees sought out every possible loophole in the tight border regime, often resulting in tragic incidences and deaths. Having said this, the harrowing accounts of disenfranchised refugees are not the only stories that define this volume, which argues that mobility is always bounded, regulated, mediated and intrinsically connected to forms of immobility and unequal power relations.

**The Background**

This volume and the project behind it were funded by the German Academic Exchange Service through a north-south co-operation fund. It fosters academic and socio-political dialogue between those countries affected by the economic crisis and Germany. It is a form of mobility that seeks to overcome marginalisation, but is also a symptom of the very inequality that motivated it in the first place. This financial support made this publication and the workshop behind it possible, allowing the space and time needed for discussion and exchange. It mobilised the ideas and bodies of researchers. The “north-south dialogue” also stands for the ambivalence of mobility, because movement is not only required and supported, but also symbolises the underlying global hierarchies and inequalities. This is exemplified by the difficult conditions of academics in Southern Europe, for example, and their unequal power relationship with funding resources and their host states in the “north”. Power relations are always part of social situations where mobility operates and it is central to acknowledge the role of privilege within the context of academia. This is particularly true between researchers and their field, but equally
between different researchers with varying degrees of social, physical or linguistic mobility.

This shows that writing im/mobilities at a time when academia itself has been influenced by economic decline and immobilisation is certainly no coincidence. Forms of entrapment have developed here despite, or maybe essentially because of the obligation to be increasingly mobile in today’s transnational political economy. The bounded and unequal nature of most forms of mobility stood clearly revealed as this book went to print.

The contemporary relevance of the issues addressed are also paralleled by the increasing prominence of mobility as a research topic. Indeed, mobility studies has emerged as a highly specialised research area featuring a journal of Mobilities, research networks, such as ANTHROMOB or Cosmobilities, and research centres, such as the Centre for Mobilities Research at Lancaster University or Cultural Mobilities Research at Leuven, thus, providing an ever growing resource of insights and discussion. We hope to contribute to this ongoing discussion by ways of ethnographic research and well-grounded criticism.

**Beyond the Mobilities Paradigm**

Mobility has experienced an evolution from a rather marginal concept in Cultural Anthropology and European Ethnology into a key issue surrounded by vivid debates. One of these debates followed the “new mobilities paradigm” and the idea that “all the world seems to be on the move” (Sheller and Urry 2006, 207). This paradigm took a conceptual turn away from methodological and conceptual “sedenentarism” towards a framework of mobility. Not stasis but movement was heralded as the new norm. Within this context, mobility is conceptualised not only as physical movement, but also in its plural forms, including virtual mobility as an increasingly central channel for the transfer of information and worldwide communication, as well as imaginative mobility as a form of travelling to other places without movement. The different mobilities are strongly interconnected: being mobile is linked to social mobility and “moving between places physically or virtually can be a source of status and power” (Sheller and Urry 2006, 213). Not only the movement of people, but also of objects, capital, ideas, information and images within local, national and global media can be analysed in their relations and interdependencies within the framework of mobility.

While we underline the importance of thinking about mobility in its plural forms and interrelations, we also share criticism of the “mobilities paradigm” mentioned above – there were critiques that followed, and in some cases also preceded the introduction of the paradigm at the beginning of the twenty-first century (e.g. Cunningham and Heyman 2004; Glick-Schiller and Salazar 2013; Shamir 2005;
Torpey 1998). One element in these critiques is that early mobility studies tended to neglect the global power relations and social hierarchies that structure and stabilize the mobility of a certain group of people. Clifford warned long ago that an unreflected “nomadology” is a form of “postmodern primitivism” (Clifford 1997, 38). Metaphors of travelling, transit and mobility can then become blind to power structures as they are used to describe an age of globalisation; there is also a danger of seeing every form of mobility as relevant and equally important (Hess and Tsianos 2010, 243–244). At the same time, a certain distance from the focus on “migration” is also important, because migration scholars tend to stay within the frameworks established by policymakers (Glick-Schiller and Caglar 2010, 2) as migration becomes an unquestioned category for mobility from or in connection with the Global South. Additionally, the limited ways in which migration studies have been framed influenced the possibilities and limits within which this process can be understood (Oboler 2006, 118). Part of this limitation has been a tendency to think on the scale of nation states, studying only movement that crosses national borders and labelling as mobile only those who move to or settle in another state (Glick-Schiller 2010; Glick-Schiller and Salazar 2013, 192; Wimmer and Glick-Schiller 2003). Such methodological nationalism is transcended by concepts of transnationalism (Glick-Schiller, Basch, and Blanc-Szanton 1992; Pries 2008), which represent yet another important shift in the understanding of mobility, albeit with its own shortcomings and limitations. There is, thus, a tendency to look at either flow or restriction, although there is much more to im/mobilities studies than this tension between borders and movements.

In our selection of cases, we prioritized situations where movement and confinement interact in a diverse set of situations. We were also influenced by the idea of “regimes of mobility” within which mobility and immobility define each other (Glick-Schiller and Salazar 2013, 195). Such a perspective challenges a range of analytical terms in mobility studies such as “flows” and “hypermobility”. In a similar vein, Urry and Sheller acknowledged that new places and technologies “enhance the mobility of some peoples and places and heighten the immobility of others, especially as they try to cross borders” (Sheller and Urry 2006, 207). However, the idealisation of mobility the paradigm brought with it remains problematic, not least because its lack of emphasis on unequal power relations can depoliticise highly political phenomena.

**Breaking up the mobility–immobility dichotomy**

This volume seeks to analyse mobility through its relation with the conceptual opposite: immobility. However, this is not a question of “either-or” that poses mobility against immobility. Instead, mobilities and immobilities are entangled with one another, which is why we speak of im/mobilities and, more specifically, of bounded
mobilities. The plural should also express the diversity of *mobilities* and its many different forms, while “bounded” refers to the centrality of limitations and entrapment within rather than outside these mobilities. Mobility may lead to changes in patterns of inequality (Urry 2007, 187), while inequality and immobilisation affect the “patterns” of mobilities. This volume explores this relationship in multiple directions, while emphasis is given to the dynamics by which mobility becomes bounded and interacts with immobility and inequality in a variety of contexts.

Enclosures and mobilities are closely related, yet are often looked at separately: While the first is said to address processes that delimit and restrict the movement of specific goods, people and ideas, the latter is approached as processes that enable and induce such movements (Cunningham and Heyman 2004). However, the enabling and the limiting often go hand in hand and may not always be analytically separable. Shamir (2005, 200) points out that mobility gaps are formed by the very same conditions within which possibilities of movement are determined, and these possibilities are shaped by built-in socioeconomic factors, geographical locations, cultural imperatives and political circumstances. Consequently, constraints always exist within movements and movement often occurs within constraints (Gill, Caletrío, and Mason 2011, 302).

This volume is motivated by the prevalence of widespread immobility and inequality amid simultaneous accelerated global exchange. Movement then also takes place “across” people, as boundaries or opportunities are moved while people stay put. Moreover, there may be shifting pressures or even obligations to move across such boundaries, as in the search for faraway opportunities, while at other moments, a desire to remain immobile prevails for the same people who initially decided to move. These are simple ideas with large conceptual consequences. Mobilities across borders and boundaries do not mean that people necessarily become more similar or equal and often the opposite is true. The movement of people may create or reinforce difference and inequality; mobility may well be the key difference- and otherness-producing machine of our age (Salazar and Smart 2011, iii–v). Barth’s (1998, 9–11) realisation may be more valid then ever: Distinctions do not only depend on the absence of mobility, but are also the product of contact and exchange, as processes of incorporation and exclusion are part of the same relations. Mobility and exchange can normalise differences between people and certainly undermine prejudice, but the unequal nature of bounded mobilities also underlines stark differences in privilege and, by extension, identities, class and citizenship if these markers of difference become the factors that determine how one is allowed to be mobile.

Looking at im/mobilities as a blended concept where the one always operates within the other, breaks with certain powerful normative divisions between the mobile and the immobile, as reflected in the difference, for example, between “mobility” and “migration”. The first, mobility, has been celebrated as the movement of people from the Global North, while the second, migration, has mostly referred
to the movements of people from the Global South, who struggle against exclusive and oppressive systems of confinement. Yet privileged mobility must not be enjoyable or necessarily celebrated for its superiority either. As Redfield (2012) argues in “The Unbearable Lightness of Ex-Pats: Double Binds of Humanitarian Mobility”, anthropology has long been divided between those who travel easily and those who do not. Researchers have focused more commonly on the disadvantaged and the relatively immobile, such as “refugees” and “migrants”, while the mobility of the privileged has largely escaped notice. However, his own research of the non-governmental organisation (NGO) Doctors Without Borders suggests that even the “lightness” of mobility can be something quite difficult to bear, particularly because “expats” must cope with a so-called double bind – a situation that lacks stability and is motivated by a desire to satisfy competing injunctions, often by ways of much moving and straddling different demands of life. Similar insights emerge from some contributions to this volume, as in the case of people who live multi-local lives (Duchêne-Lacroix/Götö/Sontag) or those who become obsessed with movement, despite the impossibility of its realisation (Lems/Moderbacher). The question is then not only who can move and who cannot, but at what cost and with which social and political results. Mobility does not have to be positive and fixation is not necessarily negative, and both interact in myriad ways across and within different contexts.

Looking at im/mobilities, with their simultaneities and interrelations, opens up a new perspective that takes different dimensions within one reality into account. Such a perspective also has political implications: It makes a critical perspective on the governing norms of mobility possible and finds its way into the hidden spots between these norms, thereby challenging the conceptual rift between mobility and immobility, or between the border and the transgressor, and so forth.

There is, thus, a certain critique that speaks through our approach to mobility. In conceptual terms, this criticism is directed particularly towards the idea that movement is free and necessarily positive rather than unequal and mediated by power relations. Secondly, we pose a challenge to approaches that separate mobility from immobility rather than looking at their interrelations. The critique of an approach to mobility that is equated with freedom is very similar to critiques of globalisation, for globalisation “divides as much as it unites – the causes of division being identical with those which promote the uniformity of the globe” (Bauman 1998, 2).

The hype about mobilities and globalisation being a symbol for progress, freedom and change is paralleled by the simultaneous desire to fortify and control these developments. Borders are one form of control through which policies of movement regulation operate. These are highly complex regimes that involve a variety of actors, which is why “wall-like metaphors of the border” must be abandoned in favour of a border “as a highly perforated system or regime, a multifaceted plane of struggle” (Tsianos, Hess, and Karakayali 2009, 2). Seeing borders
and boundaries as planes of struggle and negotiation also reveals simultaneous mobilisation and immobilisation; borders as a site where inequality and the forces that aim to overcome it coincide. Hence, a “mobilities–enclosures continuum” exists at borders which are sites where movement is structured within the context of unequal power relations. Moreover, mobility and immobility, movement and enclosures “join at borders”, exemplified by the many processes of entering, avoiding, detecting, classifying, inspecting, interdicting, facilitating and revaluing that form the everyday routine of such borders (Cunningham and Heyman 2004, 293–295).

Approached from these perspectives, mobilities and borders are essentially not antithetical and people can move without being mobile, or be mobile without moving (Salazar and Smart 2011, vi).

While bringing immobility and inequality back into mobilities is not a new perspective, we believe that the diverse contributions to this volume suggest that bounded mobilities are a conceptual node point for the many different interacting processes that disable and enable movement and the meanings that people attach to them. Mobility is a meeting point for various social and cultural phenomena, as much as it is a phenomenon in itself. Mobility is then both the junction and the traffic that comes through it, as well as the power-related infrastructure that regulates such traffic. Some directions of this junction are blocked, while others remain open; some leading to the past and others into the future. What is an easy passage for some, may well be an impermeable wall for others.

A DIFFERENTIATED ETHNOGRAPHIC APPROACH

The ethnography presented in this volume explores a variety of situations in which forms of mobility and immobility interact across and beyond the limitations of the different subfields. Alongside our conceptual move away from the widespread mobility–immobility dichotomy, a second differentiation is necessary on a methodological level. This begins with the acknowledgment that any ethnography of bounded mobilities should contribute to a better understanding of the entanglements, conditionalities and intersections of different mobilities and immobilities (Lenz 2011, 19). Anthropologists have, of course, always researched mobilities and immobilities, even if they have not always named them as such. Moreover, ethnographers have always had to be concerned with the movements of their informants (Vergunst 2011). However, the quickly changing ways in which mobility is regulated, experienced and practiced also poses new challenges to methodology which are answered by a variety of disciplines, including anthropology, sociology, geography and performance studies (D’Andrea, Ciolfi, and Gray 2011, 151). Ideas and challenges include the role of visual ethnography, of technology more generally and in ethnography in particular, as well as the requirements of multi-sited research in such a context. Paying close ethnographic attention to the parallel
dimensions of offline and online reveals new forms of im/mobility, as becomes evident where contributors accompanied people and gained deep insights into their inter-dimensional mobilities because of proximity and a focus on detail (e.g. Gutekunst, Kunzelmann, Sideri). Ethnography also makes sense of the temporal dimension of bounded mobilities, such as “waiting” or a “loss of time”, as Schwarz explored in her fieldwork in temporal spaces that confine asylum seekers in limbo. The moments and situations within which mobile people suddenly experience en-trapment or stigmatisation only reveal themselves through detailed accounts and the researcher’s presence, which is why Andreas Hackl emphasises the importance of ethnographic research for the understanding of spatial transitions in a context of political conflict and inequality. However, some im/mobilities are no longer accessible through on-site fieldwork, because they lay in the past, which is why Katrin Lehnert’s historical reconstruction of nineteenth century border mobilities has significant methodological implications. It reminds us of the fact that every border has a past, a history and a story. Furthermore, this story often has two sides, which is why Sabina Leoncini made sense of the Israeli Separation Barrier after having lived with families on both “sides”.

Moreover, as is known from insights into multi-sited research (Hannerz 2003; Marcus 1995), multi-locality requires researchers to approach their field of im/mobility from a variety of perspectives and locations: the expats and their lives between “homes” (Duchêne-Lacroix/Götzö/Sontag), members of the Diaspora and their position in the host country (Schwertl), and the role of multiple boundaries in the migration process, among them the symbolic, ethnic, social, geographical and institutional dimension of emi- and immigration (Costantini/Massa). Close ethnographic attention to and a sensitivity for detail is certainly required, but such proximity can also create problems, as Annika Lems and Christine Moderbacher realised with regard to their initial plan of producing a documentary film about and with the Austrian woman Gerti, whose story confronted them “with the very limits of storytelling and collaborative filmmaking”.

Answering these and similar methodological challenges, we emphasise the importance of a differentiated ethnographic perspective complementary to existing approaches. Technology may pose challenges to ethnographies of im/mobilities, but ethnography is still “an excellent way to get at important aspects of human movement, especially in relating its experiential and sensory qualities to social and environmental contexts” (Vergunst 2011, 203). It is precisely because immobility and power speak through mobility that ethnography must go beyond a mere focus on human movement. Instead, ethnography can reveal, through temporal depth and spatial proximity over longer periods of time across different contexts, how and where mobility becomes bounded, propelled or enabled, and how these processes are experienced in their overlaps and interactions within a single junction, an individual or a community.
An ethnography of bounded mobilities should be sensitive to simultaneities, because privileges may allow movement for some in one single place, while they restrict it for others. Take, for instance, a train station, such as Budapest’s Keleti main terminal in the summer of 2015, where privileged travellers with EU passports boarded trains, as refugees and migrants were held up in the thousands, sometimes checked for their IDs and removed from trains despite holding valid tickets. Such a place is also where different stories and living conditions join without actually coming into contact with one another. They coexist as the same set of relations mobilise some people while immobilising others. We learnt from a student in Germany who held Moroccan citizenship that he experienced train stations as places of surveillance and control, a place of threatening confinement, despite being a transport hub. The student adapted by developing his own strategy to escape the techniques of racial profiling: Whenever he entered the train station, he did so with a handbook of political science under his arm, a measure which seemed to successfully evade being checked by the police. People with different social backgrounds, different biographies and, above all, different citizenships have very different experiences, imaginations and expectations of im/mobilities, and such diversity often exists within the same place or the same set of relations. Privilege, mobility and performance are closely connected here, and ethnography has the ability to explore the junction between individual practice and external forces. It is precisely because ethnography creates closeness to individual stories and contextual nuances that it is best equipped to unravel bounded mobilities. Ethnographic methods show what narratives that are commonly used as templates actually mean in each particular case (Götz 2015, 26).

Looking at the interstices of mobility and immobility must not only be grounded in the field, but there is also the need to employ a strong analytical perspective that can illuminate the ambiguities of a world in which the highly mobile travel the same distances as the immobilised, yet along different routes and with different means and privileges in another dimension of the same world.

Bounded mobility and its research is also always a political matter, which becomes evident if similar processes are labelled differently depending on the idealised metaphors of im/mobile people. Some are stigmatised while others are privileged; some have resources and citizenship, while others do not. A North American living in Geneva for reasons of employment may be called an expatriate, while those coming from the Global South are collectively packed together as “migrants”. In contemporary public discourse, the migrant has become a metaphor for a certain kind of people, and the word is employed as a political tool in the construction of nationalism and its others. The news network Al-Jazeera declared in an editorial in 2015 that it will drop the term “migrants” because “it has evolved from its dictionary definitions into a tool that dehumanises and distances, a blunt pejorative” (Malone 2015). Working with the concept of im/mobilities should also
counter the blunt metaphors of mobility that are often featured in public discourse with analytical depth and ethnographic grounding.

**Identities and Boundaries**

One key insight which can be discerned from this volume is the close connection between boundaries, identity and mobility. Movement and stasis influence the social construction of similarity and difference, and vice versa. Sometimes, it is through movement that people learn to see themselves and others in a new light, while at other times, they only find conceptions which are already strengthened because of exchange and cross-boundary movement. As Osvaldo Costantini and Aurora Massa show in the case of Ethiopians with Eritrean claims, the ability to legally realise a certain identity can determine a person’s ability to move and live elsewhere. The micropolitics of identity are key to an understanding of bounded mobilities. Moreover, social and cultural boundaries move and are moved, sometimes in alignment with borders and sometimes in contradiction to them. Micropolitics of identity are key where individuals must adapt to situations of confinement or forced movement as much as they find ways to challenge entrapment. We see, for instance, that Palestinians within Israel come under pressure to position themselves and their identities in a specific way at transition points or during public events, sometimes concealing or reconfiguring the public face of who they are to avoid stigmatisation and immobilisation (Hackl).

Identity and mobilities are also closely related for another reason: just like identity/alterity, mobility/immobility are two dimensions of the same phenomenon, the one bound up with the other, existing simultaneously within and through the other. Bounded mobilities are multidimensional and power-related processes of intersecting fluidities and fixations. Looking at the interplay between identity and mobility, we observed that both movement and confinement may engender processes of boundary-erosion and boundary-maintenance simultaneously or interchangeably. Borders and barriers can then become part of a system within which mobility is distributed unequally, and such differentiation influences how people with differentially mediated mobility capacity then attach varying images and meanings to borders, as Leoncini suggests in the case of the Israeli Separation Barrier. Her research raises questions about the extent to which physical barriers are thought to mirror corresponding social or cultural boundaries, while they are, in fact, imagined from a variety of perspectives in exchange with the physical impact of such a barrier.
Imagination is also a strong force in Eleni Sideri’s research on immobility and “dreaming” mobility in Volos, Greece. Following the stories of several individuals, she shows how the desire to be mobile interacts with the structural conditions and local context within which mobility and immobility are embedded. In the face of entrapment, longing to be elsewhere can not only be a force that leads to mobility, but it can also become an extreme form of nostalgia about the past that leads to new experiences of confinement in the present. Such is the case in Annika Lems and Christine Moderbacher’s ethnography of an Austrian woman, who romanticises her past life in the United States as glamorous and fulfilling and seems to try everything possible to return, albeit without success. Her continuous urge to physically move intensifies the feeling of being stuck existentially.

One of the major thoroughfares of mobility is imagination; another one is time. As Julia Sophia Schwarz’s contribution reveals, temporary confinement and a form of emptiness form part of recurring immobilisation of asylum seekers in reception centres and communal accommodations. As people are held up and wait for further arrangements in their lives, they experience what they named to Schwarz as “lost time”, where the interplay between confinement, displacement and time creates a particular situation of entrapment. People find themselves in a waiting mode as they experience institutionalised immobility and seek self-mobilisation simultaneously. Different practices allow them to remobilise and to create new spaces while other boundaries cannot be overcome.

Time matters in bounded mobilities because boundaries and borders have their own history too. In her historical-anthropological analysis of cross-border mobility between Saxony and Bohemia in the nineteenth century, Katrin Lehnert looks at a particular enclave as a special case of bounded mobilities, a case where boundaries and borders shifted around people and over time, looking at “how people are crossed by borders and how this shifting of boundaries relates to their own border crossing activities”.

Gendered im/mobilities

Borders and the forms of movement and confinement associated with them have a different character for men and women, whereas women employ different resources and have different capacities to social and geographical mobility than most men. In her ethnography, Avital Binah-Pollak explores the lives of mainland Chinese women who marry Hong Kong men “across the border”. Despite attaining residence in Hong Kong and improving their status, these women struggle to retain mobility after marrying into Hong Kong. However, at the same time, they develop
spaces of mutual support in which they achieve situational independence despite and within a wider situation of immobility.

Sara Bonfanti reaches related, yet also different conclusions in her ethnography of gendered im/mobilities among Punjabi women in Italy. Whether they are itinerant or landlocked, Punjabi women experience that the same regimes which had limited their capacity to be mobile before migration are reproduced in different places thereafter. Bonfanti urges us to reassess the promises and perils of family-engineered migration as the women’s capacity to be mobile depends largely on acts of gender-related bargaining over their status, including the “micro-physics of domestic power” usually held by male householders or paterfamilias.

**Virtual im/mobilities**

Under severe limitations to one’s mobility, “travelling” can become virtually a welcome alternative. It is even more interesting when both dimensions are analysed where they intersect. Miriam Gutekunst does this as she explores virtual mobility among people from Morocco who seek to resettle to Germany to be with their partners. She brings a critical research of virtual im/mobilities into the gendered analysis of border regimes. Digital communication technologies do not only make it possible for those excluded by the border regime to get to know people “on the other side”, but they also facilitate the maintaining of a relationship in the face of the distance forced upon them by border regimes and visa procedures. Virtual mobility becomes a substitute for denied physical mobility as it makes cultivating a relationship across border regimes possible. It even increases the chances of successful migration if these virtual/real relationships are acknowledged as proof of “real” partnerships by the authorities.

Making sense of the “virtual” in civil society and political struggles, Daniel Kunzelmann shows that virtual mobility can not only be a source of increased power, inclusion and participation, but also that this requires certain privileges and digital “literacy”. His analysis suggests that borders and barriers continue to exist in today’s digital hypermobile world, sometimes leading to exclusion as a result of virtual immobility. Ultimately, the virtual mobility of power and political ideas remain bound to traditional channels of exercising political power and is, thus, highly dependent on what is not virtual. Ironically, processes of mobility often depend heavily on immobile infrastructures and traditional centres of power.

**Fixations within mobility and multi-locality**

One contradiction appears to be that the mobility and flexibility of some can involve attempts by others to fix and confine these mobile people. People moving to
live in another country are often versatile in different environments, languages and professional contexts, a plurality that is often simplified from the outside. Maria Schwertl explores how development organisations turn migrants’ transnational solidarity activities into precarious, professionalised NGO work that is in need of money, but no longer political. This takes place in what she terms the hype about “Development & Migration”, within which migrants are fixed and classified in relation to their home country, but denied legitimacy as equal professionals within their host country. They are referred back to a simplified essence that remains bound to their origin and the prejudices against it.

A common presumption is that the hypermobile do not need a home; that mobility may become a flexible and rootless home in itself. Opening up a “third perspective” on im/mobilities, Cédric Duchêne-Lacroix, Monika Götzö and Katrin Sontag show that responsibilities and needs towards particular places can also increase with the mobility between them. Such multi-local living co-creates space and combines different types of mobility and immobility. The authors explore the personal stories of internationally highly mobile people who see multi-locality as their regular living condition, arguing that such high mobility can also contribute to an increased sense of fixation despite constant movement. It is particularly in situations of relative immobility that mobilisation strategies seek to counter such fixations and overcome immobility. On the other hand, it is often in situations of high mobility, such as multi-local living, that people experience inflexibility and entrapment in a situation of seeming privilege and empowerment. Hypermobility can also be seen as a burden, the weight of which varies from context to context.

**A public matter?**

The aim of this volume is to answer key questions of im/mobility, while also throwing up new question marks. Because of the timely relevance of many of the issues addressed we also wanted to engage a wider public in the thought processes that puzzled the editors and contributors. Part of this engagement was to throw up a suspicion in public space about privileges and ideas about mobility that are often taken for granted.

One example for such a public presence was that we put up and distributed posters in spaces of bounded mobilities or other places of interest, with the goal of raising awareness and provoking constructive criticism. Each poster featured a question, written in large capitals, such as: “Are you stuck?” Additionally, each version offered a particular insight in relation to the respective question. The digital versions were distributed online and included a reference to our book. The aim was not to simply promote the publication, but to take it as an opportunity to inspire public debate and discussion.
We believe that questions of im/mobilities have become highly political issues debated in the public; issues that dominate discussions ahead of elections and determine families’ futures between borders. Because of the political nature and public relevance of the questions and answers raised by research on im/mobilities, we identified a particular obligation and opportunity to engage with audiences beyond the boundaries of academic readership. Such engagement goes beyond the basic purpose of this volume, which is to provide a new collection of ethnographically informed essays about the interstices of mobility and immobility, which would be read by students interested in the topic and more specialised faculty alike. Rather than being satisfied with this objective, we encourage the reader to think about these issues from the perspective of a wider public relevance and co-operate towards ways of making the debate on bounded mobilities a boundary-crossing enterprise rather than another outpost in the academic “border regime”.

References


