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Do We Still Need Migration Studies as We Share a Common Planet?

Towards Decolonising Migration Research Through New Vernaculars and Theories



Fig.1. *Un/Commoning Migration Research.*

This report summarizes the insights gained from the DGSKA working group on migration meeting on 2 October 2025 in Cologne.

Karim Zafer, one of the panel conveners, introduced the panel's fundamental idea:

using un/commoning as an approach to decolonize migration research, based on Nicholas de Genova's utopian vision of a shared world without borders, which would require research focused solely on mobility. The contributors were then asked how their research relates to the decolonization of migration studies.

Duduzile Sakhelene Ndlovu from the University of the Witwatersrand provided a deeply personal, reflexive account of her research on 'Moving Words,' working with Zimbabwean women in Johannesburg. She reflected on her own position and that of her participants in the city. Embodying the roles of both a researcher and a female migrant, Dudu used the discomfort arising from her experiences to frame research as a power struggle and to recount her discomfort navigating unequal power in research relationships in a poem entitled "Coming Clean." In the Moving Words Project, she engaged in writing poetry and invited participants to write about their ways of navigating life in an urban environment. These accounts highlighted how often being a migrant intersects with being a woman in the city, with concerns about safety becoming more pressing as these migrants moved to Johannesburg.

Elena Habersky from the University of Glasgow focused on reimagining cross-border movements, exemplified by her work on Darfurian refugees in Jordan and Egypt over the last twelve years. She describes how the situation has changed for this community with increasingly repressive migration policies related to externalized European policies, resulting in a rise in deportations that caused protests among the Darfurian community, while major migration organizations, like the UNHRC, remain largely silent. Elena's current research also reveals that many Sudanese in Egypt do not perceive themselves as migrants, largely due to the strong historical connection between the neighboring countries, but they are increasingly politically framed as "Sudanese in Exile."

Melina Götze's (Goethe University Frankfurt) fieldwork in Ghana and Germany focuses on "voluntary return" programs and how they produce the label of "the returnee." The research is based on Melina's previous work as a legal counsellor for

refugees. Her positionality as a German researcher made access difficult and fostered mistrust, as she was perceived as affiliated with the German state. However, Melina engaged in research through collaborative methods, including co-writing and self-recorded videos, and is currently collaborating with a Ghanaian filmmaker on a documentary about her research.

tita Letizia Patriarca (MECILA, São Paulo) is a Brazilian-Italian researcher who migrated to Italy to conduct research on Brazilian trans sex workers. She focuses particularly on bilingual simultaneity in her work, noting that there are words that can hardly be translated between Portuguese and Italian, as they carry entirely different connotations and have been claimed and used as endonyms by the trans sex worker community. For this reason, translation is a political act that highlights the crucial work of multilingual anthropology.

Then, the panelists were asked to elaborate on their take on un/commoning migration research and what their research can reveal in that respect. Elena emphasized the importance of listening, learning, and participating as essential practices, noting that such approaches are more common in Egypt than in Europe. However, the most influential institutions and their decision-making bodies' power and resources are European, and the details of how projects involving collaboration with community-based researchers, both with and without degrees, were rejected. Moreover, colleges could not participate in international conferences or were expected to remain quiet rather than engage in international conversations. Elena stressed that un/commoning research must primarily focus on a world beyond the neoliberal academic system.

tita underlined that questions of un/commoning are not the same as the matter of decolonization, since the latter involves unlike, specific embodied practices and experiences. Hence, un/commoning requires new methodologies, as research often primarily involves practical dilemmas rather than merely theoretical issues. tita urged for simpler and more straightforward research approaches, while cautioning

that collaboration might not always be the answer.

Melina pointed out that it can be helpful to involve people in research that is not merely based on writing but on other forms of joyful collaborations.

Dudu emphasized that it is crucial to examine who determines the research agenda and who writes and navigates the boundaries. In her current research project, she reflects on borders, what they represent, and how people experience them. However, funding in South Africa would primarily focus on movements across national borders, overlooking other boundaries that shape people's lives daily.

In a third round, the panelists were asked more specific questions regarding their own research projects. Melina laid out how the term "homecoming" is politically used to exclude people on the move and to fuel a nationalist project of "belonging" through transnational migration policies that negate mobile ways of homing. She introduced the concept of the "borga" as a hypermobile person with a high social status who moves between Ghana and Germany. Against this backdrop, involuntary returnees are often seen as failures in Ghana and face social stigma, often staying in Accra, the country's capital, while avoiding contact with their families. Critical research necessitates counter-conceptualizations that transcend these national frameworks; moreover, critical translation and deconstruction are crucial for reevaluating research collaborations, and the researcher's authority can serve as a starting point.

The work of Antonio Bispo dos Santos, a Brazilian intellectual and anthropologist, was brought up by tita. Dos Santos addressed what he calls the "war of denominations," working on translating from spoken to written language in colonized Brazilian communities that do not use written language. Hence, not every text can and should be translated, as non-translation can also serve as a form of protection. Referring to her own research, tita exemplified how mobility networks were framed by Brazilian sex workers as networks of support, while the discourse in

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Italy was highly negative and focused on human trafficking.

Elena addressed how the hands-off approach to migration in Egypt changed with the externalization of European borders, involving more police raids regarding migrant communities, and how the research focus of migration scholars has shifted towards a more nationalist agenda. Elena highlighted the importance of supporting feminist, Arabic research and mentioned her current involvement in co-authoring a novel. She emphasized the significance of making conferences accessible by organizing events in the Global South and offering hybrid formats.

Reflexivity in writing, particularly in specific situations, was emphasized by Dudu, who sees challenges in addressing the embeddedness of colonialism in modern societies and views these underlying influences today. This continuing existence of colonial elements implies suffering from epistemic exclusion, in the navigation of being a woman, foreign and Black as a Zimbabwean in South Africa and how she found a way to deal with her discomfort through poetry, as an authentic way of addressing her role as a female researcher. A key concern is also present here, namely, how we, as researchers, perceive and frame the people we engage with. Given the fixed-term nature of the research funding, it constrains commitments to respond to informants' needs.

Tita saw the need to critically consider the differences between research, activism, and collaboration, while at the same time moving beyond the comfort zone of academia towards the utopian vision of a border-free world. Elena raised the question of how migration researchers can engage with policy and why migration studies are not very effective in this regard, and sees the necessity of unsettling the field. For whom we are conducting the research was another key question raised by Dudu; she also reminded us of the arbitrariness of borders and the need to include people in policymaking.

The panel discussion addressed issues of how we can prevent research from

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becoming political in the "wrong way." Melina reported that access of researchers to Germany's Federal Ministry of Migration and Refugees has become extremely restricted, while Elena detailed that the increasingly militarized borders in Egypt allow for no access to them as sites of research and that research in the country requires careful consideration to avoid negative repercussions. Answering questions from the audience, Tita highlighted that more-than-human perspectives can help us think beyond borders and understand how people perceive them by recognizing the roles of trees and birds in borderlands.

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37(2):196-208(2024), *and several articles on changing social identities among Tuareg refugees in Niger.*

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