

Young lives on the move

Citation for published version (APA):

Anschütz, S. (2022). *Young lives on the move: The mobility trajectories and transnational affective engagements of Ghanaian background youth living in Belgium*. [Doctoral Thesis, Maastricht University, University of Antwerp]. ProefschriftMaken. <https://doi.org/10.26481/dis.20220530sa>

Document status and date:

Published: 01/01/2022

DOI:

[10.26481/dis.20220530sa](https://doi.org/10.26481/dis.20220530sa)

Document Version:

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

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YOUNG LIVES ON THE MOVE

The mobility trajectories and transnational affective engagements of Ghanaian-background youth living in Belgium

Sarah Anschutz



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The mobility trajectories and transnational
affective engagements of Ghanaian-background
youth living in Belgium

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ISBN 978-94-6423-832-7

Printing: ProefschriftMaken

Cover, layout and illustrations: Sarah Anschütz

The illustrations in this dissertation are based on photos that I took during fieldwork as well as photos sent to me by participants for the specific purpose of being turned into illustrations for this thesis. The people depicted on the chapter title pages are not necessarily featured in those chapters so that participants cannot be connected to ethnographic descriptions in the text.

Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences
Department of Society Studies

Faculty of Social Sciences

Young lives on the move

The mobility trajectories and transnational affective engagements of Ghanaian-background youth living in Belgium

Dissertation

to obtain the degree of Doctor

at Maastricht University, on the authority of the Rector Magnificus, Prof. dr. Pamela
Habibovic, in accordance with the decision of the Board of Deans, and the degree of doctor in
Social Sciences at the University of Antwerp, on the authority of the Rector Magnificus, Prof.
dr. Herman Van Gothem,

to be defended in public on Monday 30 May 2022, at 13:00 hours

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The research conducted for this dissertation was funded, as part of the MO-TRAYL project, by the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (Consolidator Grant No. 682982).

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This PhD would not have been possible without the help of others. I would like to dedicate these pages to all those who accompanied me on my journey, supported me in any way and helped me to grow – academically and personally. I am truly grateful and would not be where I am today without you.

First of all, I would like to thank my supervisors Valentina Mazzucato and Noel Clycq. Valentina, there are so many things I am thankful for but I will only mention a few here. Thank you for your guidance, empathy and support throughout my whole PhD trajectory. You were always there when I needed it but gave me the room to explore and develop my own interests. I am also grateful that you create space in academia for collaborative projects and put together such a wonderful research team. I doubt that I would have ever started a PhD without the prospect of doing so with a supportive group of people. Thank you for introducing me to the MO-TRAYL team and believing in me from the start. Noel, thank you for your “can-do” attitude that always assured me that, while challenges are part of doing research, everything would work out in the end. You also greatly supported me during my fieldwork period in Antwerp and I am thankful that you were always willing to think along with me, gave me practical advice and encouraged me. I also want to take the opportunity to express my gratitude to the members of the assessment committee who took the time to read my work, provided detailed feedback on my dissertation and shared their kind words and encouragements: Prof. Dr. Sally Wyatt, Dr. Ruth Cheung Judge, Dr. Roy Huijsmans, Prof. Dr. Hildegard Schneider and Prof. Dr. Gert Verschraegen.

This research was only possible due to the generosity of all my research respondents and the kindness of many others I encountered during my fieldwork. Thank you to all the young people who shared their stories with me, indulged my endless questions, invited me to events and let me tag along. I learned a great deal from you and you made this a very enriching experience. I would also like to thank everyone who made my first experiences in Ghana so enjoyable, by opening their homes and showing me around.

Acknowledgements

To the MO-TRAYLers Gladys, Karlijn, Laura and Onallia: I could not have wished for a better research team. Thank you for contributing to an atmosphere that allowed us to share experiences and struggles, engage in academic discussions but also, and importantly, celebrate our big and small successes together (usually involving Prosecco). I truly appreciate that we went on this journey together and were able to share findings and insights, collaborate or simply write alongside each other.

My research has benefitted from the fruitful discussions and generous feedback from the members of the Transnational Migration Group (TMG): Ana, Bilisuma, Cecilia, Christophe, Ester, Floris, Joan, Konjit, Maarten, Maha, Marie, Marloes, Niklas, Pomme, Swantje and Valentina – thank you. I am also grateful for our sessions, colloquia and research retreats in the Globalization, Transnationalism and Development (GTD) research programme: Adam, Elsje, Ilias, Imogen, Lauren, Timo and Wiebe. Thank you all for contributing to a “safe space” within these research groups that encourages the sharing of insecurities and testing out ideas – both of which I found very helpful for exploring other perspectives and developing my thoughts.

These past years were a fun and rewarding experience thanks to the supportive PhD community at the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences (FASoS). I enjoyed the spontaneous lunches and coffee breaks and your help in getting my mind off things. Besides the PhDs already mentioned, I am tremendously grateful to my “pre-fieldwork” office mates Claudia, Gladys and Marith and my “post-fieldwork” office mates Floris, Georgiana and Onallia. Maud, thank you for translating my dissertation summary into Dutch and for being such a great first teaching buddy. Thanks also to the Writing Group members – Andrea, Dani, Karlien, Inge, Manling, Mareike and Sanne – for your feedback and different (disciplinary) perspectives. In this context, I would like to mention the Graduate School at FASoS that brought together PhDs from the different departments and offered guidance throughout our trajectories. Alexandra Supper and Joeri Bruyninckx, you did a splendid job at organizing meetings around practical issues during my PhD, were always ready to help with questions and open to take new suggestions on board. Finally, a big thank you to other member of the FASoS community for your support along the way: Cindy van Montfoort, Eva Durlinger, Harro van Lente, Sabine Kuipers, Vincent Cordewener and Yleen Simonis, among others.

During my fieldwork in Antwerp, I had the pleasure and luxury of having an office space with wonderful colleagues at the Centre of Migration and Intercultural Studies (CeMIS) at the University of Antwerp. Thank you to Anneke Newman, Christiane Timmerman, Hannah Hoechner, Laura Van Raemdonck, Lore van Praag, Loubna Ou-Salah, Marta Salinaro, Michiel

Lippens, Milena Belloni, Noel Clycq, Rilke Mahieu, Rut van Caudenberg and Ward Nouwen for welcoming me in Antwerp and sharing your knowledge on the city and its inhabitants. About half-way through my trajectory, my PhD turned into a joint-PhD with the University of Antwerp. I would like to thank San Verhavert for his help with administrative issues in Antwerp.

A special thank you also goes to my paranymphs Karlien and Lilith who especially helped me in the final stage of this PhD. Thank you for providing feedback on parts of the dissertation – often on short notice –, for helping me with finalizing the Dutch translation of my dissertation summary and sharing thoughts on illustrations and design choices, for helping to organize my PhD defence and everything that comes with it, and for simply cheering me on.

Thank you to all my friends who helped to get through this PhD, were there for me and patient with me. Special thanks go to three women who have accompanied me for most of my life. Frauke, you are an inspiration for living life to the fullest and just having a go at things. Thank you for our weekend get-aways with hiking, talking, baking, bouldering and yoga. Piefi, I appreciate your enthusiasm about the little things. Thank you for your spontaneity, for reminding me to sit back and enjoy life, and for simply being there. Steffi, I value our friendship and admire your positive and humble attitude – your sense of humour always brightens my day. Thank you for our online talks and writing sessions. I also thank Alex, Anna, Chrissi, Christoph, Farina, Geli, Kim, Lilia and Paulina for our mutual coffees, talks over wine, walks, workout sessions, sunbaths on the balcony and board game nights during this period of my life.

Ein großes Dankeschön geht auch an meine Familie, die immer an mich geglaubt und nie daran gezweifelt hat, dass ich meinen Weg finde. Mama, du hast mich immer unterstützt, in jeder Form, die dir möglich war – Worte sind nicht genug, um meine Dankbarkeit auszudrücken. Papa, dein Wissensdurst hat mich immer beeindruckt und ich lerne viel von unseren Unterhaltungen, sei es über meine Forschung oder andere Dinge. An meine Geschwister Miri, David, Ben und Isi: Schön, dass es euch gibt und ihr mich auf die ein oder andere Weise begleitet habt. Danke auch an die erweiterte Familie: Nadine, Ulrike, Yahya, Bassel. Und zu guter Letzt: Habibi, du hast mir gezeigt, was es heißt mutig zu sein und neue Schritte zu wagen. Ohne deinen Zuspruch hätte ich mich wahrscheinlich nie für dieses Doktorat beworben. Danke, dass du immer für mich da bist und mich daran erinnerst, dass wir gemeinsam alles schaffen können.

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1

INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction

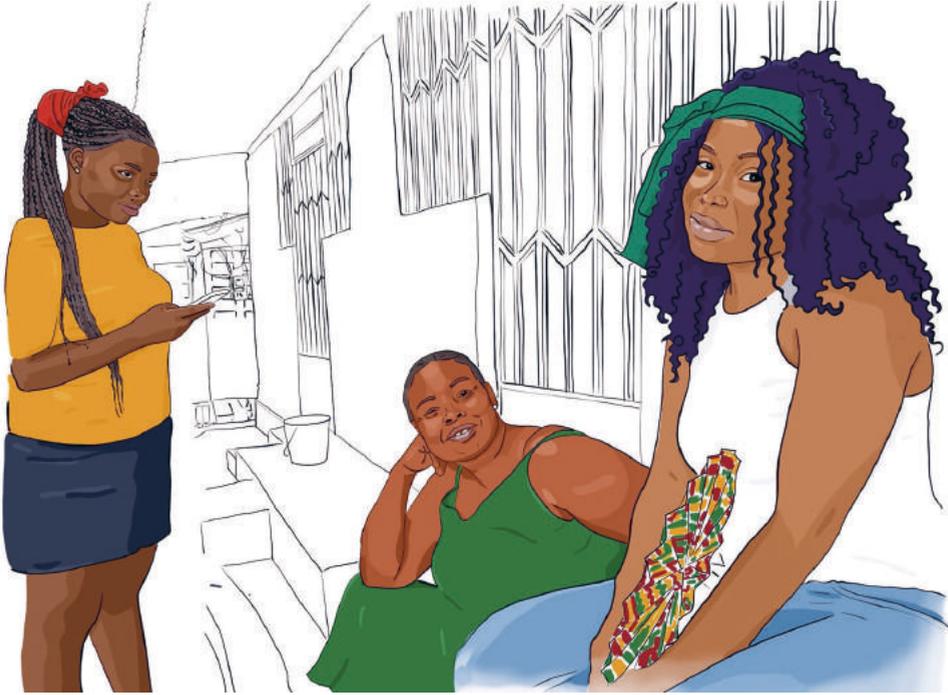


Figure 1.1 Ama (19) meeting “aunty” Victoria and her childhood friend in her old neighbourhood in Ghana. (Drawing by the author.)

Ama (19) and I were on our way to her old neighbourhood in Kumasi, Ghana, where she had spent the first nine years of her life in the care of her maternal grandmother before reuniting with her parents in Belgium. We took a trotro, a minibus share taxi, and Ama followed our current location consulting a map on her phone while also joking and laughing with the woman behind us about how the conductor had tried to charge us too much money. When we got off, Ama had to call the cousin she grew up with for more detailed directions until she finally exclaimed “that’s it!”, pointing towards a tiny passage going off the main road. Her face was glowing in excitement. After following the passage for about 20 meters, Ama turned a corner and I heard her call out “aunty Victoria!”, her voice filled with enthusiasm. Reaching the corner myself, I saw how she hurried over to a woman in front of the first house and gave her a warm hug. They excitedly chatted in Twi before Ama explained with big eyes that she had grown up in the house next door and that Victoria has been living here ever since. Shortly after, Victoria’s daughter arrived who was Ama’s age. The two

had been part of a larger group of girls who grew up in this neighbourhood, always walking around and playing together. “Sarah, we were only girls in this neighbourhood, only girls!”, Ama would repeatedly mention to explain how much fun it was growing up here. Like they did during their childhood, we walked around the neighbourhood, bumped into more acquaintances and childhood friends, and later returned to aunty Victoria, who had cooked delicious yams for us, where we continued the chat until it was starting to get dark. The next day, Ama could not stop talking about this visit, her childhood memories, and the way her life had unfolded into what it was now.

The scenes described above took place in Ghana when I accompanied Ama, one of the participants of this research, on her third visit to Ghana in 2019. At the time, Ama had been living in Belgium for ten years, but had maintained and rekindled contact with significant others in Ghana through digital media and her visits. Her emotions and the events and interactions that took place as she visited her childhood home illustrate how enriching and meaningful such travels to the country of origin can be. Over the course of my fieldwork with young people of Ghanaian background, I witnessed how these travels played an important role for creating and maintaining connections, for cultivating self-confidence and a sense of purpose, and for gaining perspective on their sense of self and potential pathways for the future. Affective interactions with people and places, and the meanings they evoked in young people, were at the heart of their mobility experiences.

Such trips to the country of origin are a common phenomenon among young people with a migration background¹ in Europe. Recent research shows that 81-97% of migrant youth in several European countries have visited their country of origin at least once or twice, and many visit on a regular basis (Mazzucato and Haagsman, 2022; see also Schimmer and Van Tubergen 2014). Considering that migrant youth make up 21% of the overall youth population across the European Union (OECD/EU 2018), travels to the country of origin is part of the reality of millions of young people with a migration background in Europe.

However, even though there is much research on the impact of *migration* on young people, their actual *mobility* is hardly investigated. So much is the focus on migrant youth's

¹ The term 'young people with a migration background' is used in this thesis to refer to young people who have migrated themselves, or whose parents have. For reasons of legibility, I use it interchangeably with 'migrant youth', 'migrant-background youth', and 'youth with a migration background'.

integration into the country of residence that experiences in, connections with, and mobility to contexts outside of the country of residence are often not considered. At the same time, common assumptions prevail that mobility of migrant youth constitutes a problem for their emotional well-being and slows down their educational progress (Lightman 2018; van Geel 2019b). Yet there is no evidence to date that this is indeed the case. In fact, studies on the mobility of young people *without* a migration background, in the context of international student mobility or travel and tourism, repeatedly find that periods spent abroad are conducive to personal growth and improve educational outcomes and school-to-work transitions (Alexander, Bakir, and Wickens 2010; Bachner and Zeuschel 2009; Trower and Lehmann 2017). The assumption that mobility is problematic in the context of migration while beneficial in other contexts is questionable at best and demands further investigation.

Such demands for further investigation are in line with recent research agendas that emphasize the need to adequately address the increasing complexity, diversity, and emotionality of transnational youth mobilities (Cheung Judge, Blazek, and Esson 2020; van Geel and Mazzucato 2018). Youth mobility is not only common (Schimmer and Van Tubergen 2014) and expected to be incorporated into the life plans of the current generation of youth (Skrbiš, Woodward, and Bean 2014). Emerging research further show the significant impact mobility has on migrant youth's lives, such as equipping them with educational resilience (van Geel and Mazzucato 2021) or a renewed sense of purpose (Hoechner 2020). This dissertation builds on this burgeoning work.

The vignette above focused on visits to the country of origin². But migrant youth often also move between different households in the country of origin, and/or migrate to another country. All these different forms of mobility between the country of origin and residence are thus important to understand the lived experiences of young people with a migration background more fully. Although scholarship on transnational mobility of migrant youth has emerged over the past decades, significant theoretical and methodological gaps remain in the academic literature, some of which this study seeks to address, and which are further discussed below.

² Other studies on the mobility of migrant youth often speak of 'return visits' to a 'homeland', 'home country' or 'home'. In this dissertation, I refer instead to 'visits', 'trips', or 'travel' to the 'country of origin', be it theirs or their parents'. This terminology was chosen because migrant-background youth did not necessarily consider their visits a return, particularly those visiting for the first time, nor was the country of origin always perceived as a home.

1.2 Studying the mobility trajectories and transnational affective engagements of Ghanaian-background youth: contributions and research questions

This thesis is concerned with young people's complex mobility patterns and experiences. It provides an analysis of how young people create and maintain affective connections with people and places in the origin country through their mobility and how these connections in turn shape experiences with family, personal development, and relationships with the country of origin. By studying the transnational connections and practices of Ghanaian-background youth who are 'on the move' between Ghana and Belgium, this research is part of a theoretical shift that considers migrant youth to be embedded within multiple contexts and transnational networks, and their lives to be significantly characterized and impacted by mobility. It contributes to the growing body of literature that acknowledges and seeks to further explore the complex, diverse, and emotional nature of transnational youth mobilities (Cheung Judge, Blazek, and Esson 2020; Robertson, Harris, and Baldassar 2018; van Geel and Mazzucato 2018).

This study is innovative in terms of how it looks at youth mobility. Contrary to most research on youth mobility of migrant youth that has only focused on isolated moves (e.g., King and Christou 2011; Reynolds 2010), this thesis instead considers *all* movement a young person engages in. It proposes to use the concept of *youth mobility trajectories*, which refers to "the moves young people make over time and across geographically distinct localities and the changing family constellations that this entails" (van Geel and Mazzucato 2018, 2145), to investigate mobility taking place all along the life course, including before and after the first international move. Such an approach to youth mobility challenges the current conceptualizations of migrant youth as 'clean slate' upon arrival in a new country because it acknowledges experiences that took place prior to migration. It further takes into consideration the continuous transnational engagements that young people create and maintain after their own or their parents' first migration.

Another original contribution of this dissertation is the conceptualization of *transnational affective engagements*, which I define as the complex ways in which young people are bodily, emotionally, and cognitively engaged in the interaction with other people and the environment in the context of transnational mobility. Whereas previous transnational migration studies focused on the circulation of emotions and affect across borders (Cole and Groes 2016; Wilding et al. 2020; Wise and Velayutham 2017), this dissertation highlights young people's embodied

and emotional interactions with people and the environment they encounter because of their mobility. Such affective engagements enhance understandings of young people's lived experience and their meaning-making processes (Hakett, Procter, and Seymour 2015).

Studying young people's mobility trajectories and transnational affective engagements requires several methodological innovations to capture the complexities and nuances of mobility patterns and experiences. Previous research has mostly investigated youth mobility through retrospective interviews of adults reflecting on their youth (e.g., Binaisa 2011; Potter and Phillips 2006). Data collection in these studies is often removed in both time and space from the mobility experiences studied. By contrast, the youth-centric, multi-sited, and mobile research design that is at the heart of this study enabled me to follow the lives of Ghanaian-background youth in Belgium over time and accompany some of them on their visits to Ghana. As the opening vignette illustrates, this allowed me to observe the embodied, emotional, and sensory aspects that mobility experiences entail and that are so crucial for maintaining and establishing transnational affective connections.

Overall, employing the concept of youth mobility trajectories in this dissertation affords the following methodological advantages: mobility trajectory mapping allows me to systematically trace the timing and duration of moves over time and see different moves in relation to each other; accompanying participants on their visits to the origin country contributes to capturing meaning-making and embodied experiences as they happen; and engaging with participants over time – before, during and after visits – enables me to see developments over time. Together, this study provides an in-depth understanding of both mobility over the life course *and* in real time, including the interactions with significant others, fleeting encounters, and the affective experiences in different environments.

To explore youth mobility trajectories and transnational affective engagements, I use the specific case of Ghanaian-background youth³ who are mobile within and between Ghana and Belgium. The Ghanaian case is relevant for the study of mobility for two main reasons. First, mobility is a crucial variable in this study and previous research has shown that Ghanaian migrants engage in a transnational lifestyle with differing degrees of back-and-forth movement (Schans et al. 2013), which allowed for a diversification of the sample in terms of mobility to

³ In this dissertation, Ghanaian-background youth refers to young people who were born in Ghana or whose parents were. Conventionally, this would result in categorizations of 'first-generation' or 'second-generation' young people related to whether a young person was foreign-born or native-born. However, as will become clear over the course of this dissertation, I focus on mobility across the life course, which moves beyond the use of migrant generation categories (van Geel and Mazzucato 2018).

better understand the impact of mobility trajectories on young people's lives. Second, Ghanaians are among the top ten of the largest migrant groups from Africa across OECD countries (OECD/AFD 2019) and constitute one of Europe's 'new' immigrant groups (Grillo and Mazzucato 2008). While more established migrant groups in Belgium, most notably former guestworkers from Morocco and Turkey, have received a lot of attention in research, there is a lack of studies on migrants who arrived in Belgium more recently. This is important because Ghanaians who have been migrating to Belgium since the 1980s face different contextual factors and stricter entry criteria than older migrant groups. As was also the case for Ama introduced in the opening vignette, most Ghanaian-background youth arrive in Belgium through family reunification programmes which, besides asylum, remain the only legal way to enter the country.

Belgium, and particularly the main fieldsite Antwerp, is home to a growing population of Ghanaian migrants. In 2021, almost 4,000 Ghanaians were registered in the city of Antwerp (Stad in Cijfers 2021) and, considering the many cases of undocumented migrants from Sub-Saharan Africa, some estimate this number to be at least twice as high (Minderhedencentrum de8 2009; see also Mazzucato 2008b). However, no studies exist to date on young people of Ghanaian background in Belgium, and both their mobility and the embodied experiences they make on the way remain under researched.

Against this backdrop, this dissertation addresses the following research question: *How does the physical mobility to and within Ghana shape the transnational affective engagements of Ghanaian-background youth living in Belgium?* To do so, this broader question is broken down into the following sub-questions, which are addressed in the three empirical chapters of this thesis (Chapters 5-7):

1. How do the mobility trajectories of Ghanaian-background youth contribute to their understanding of family? And, how does this understanding impact young people's experiences of family separation and reunification across time and space?
2. How do visits to the country of origin affect the self-development of Ghanaian-background youth? Which are the mechanisms that facilitate personal growth, and how do these contribute to young people's self-confidence and educational and career aspirations for the future?
3. How do young people of Ghanaian background use their mobility trajectories and digital media to create connections to people and places in Ghana, and how are these experienced before, during, and after their country-of-origin visits?

To answer these questions, I have conducted 18 months of multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork with 25 young people who were born in various countries to Ghanaian parents and are currently residing in Belgium. Multi-sited research involved following young people's daily lives in Belgium as well as accompanying a sub-set on trips to Ghana. Using semi-structured interviews, informal conversations and observations, and mapping tools with the young research participants has allowed me to gain insights into young people's mobility experiences, their transnational networks and daily lived experiences. The following section gives an overview of how the information presented in the following seven chapters will allow me to formulate answers to the research questions presented above.

1.3 Dissertation outline

This dissertation is article-based, which means that the three empirical chapters (Chapters 5-7) have been written as standalone articles that have all been published in international peer-reviewed journals (see also footnotes at the beginning of each empirical chapter). As a result, the theoretical, methodological and background chapters of this thesis inevitably contain some repetition but are nonetheless necessary to bring together the different pieces into a coherent story. Each empirical chapter has been slightly revised to ensure consistency in formatting and numbering.

Chapter 2 provides the conceptual framework through which youth mobility will be explored. It introduces the concept of 'youth mobility trajectories', which is at the core of this dissertation, and discusses the broader transnationalism and mobilities scholarships on which it is built. Furthermore, the concept of 'transnational affective engagements' is defined and elaborated on. The chapter also identifies the theoretical and methodological gaps in previous research on youth mobility that this thesis seeks to fill. In Chapter 3, I discuss the research design of this study and elaborate on the methods, sample, ethics, my positionality, and particular aspects related to team research. Chapter 4 describes the relevant contexts of the country of origin and residence. The chapter first provides an overview of the historical context of migration and settlement of Ghanaians in Belgium, and explains the increasingly restrictive political climate and migration regimes in Belgium that seek to control and reduce migration, especially family migration. I then describe the Belgian (specifically Flemish) education system, outlining factors that contribute to a disadvantaged position of young people with a migration background in Flemish schools.

Chapters 5-7 present the empirical findings. They zoom into different aspects of young people's mobility trajectories and explore how these shape young people's experiences of growing up between Belgium and Ghana. Each of the chapters further highlights a different aspect of the study's overall methodological approach. Chapter 5 investigates how the mobility trajectories of Ghanaian-background youth shape their experiences of family separation and reunification across time and space. Building on transnational family scholarship, the chapter brings into focus young people's changes between households in Ghana and the concomitant different care arrangements that include (extended) kin and non-kin relations. Whereas policy definitions portray family reunification as something that happens within the nuclear family and within the destination country, the chapter illustrates that young people experience many types of family reunifications. For Ghanaian-background youth, family includes caregivers beyond the biological parents they accumulate over time. As a consequence, family reunification can also entail separation and multiple family reunifications may occur in both origin and destination country. The chapter particularly highlights the importance of mobility trajectory mapping and map visualizations in the overall methodology to make visible patterns, connections and disruptions in young people's mobility trajectories and their relationships with significant others.

Chapter 6 explores how visits to the country of origin affect young people's self-development. I identify a need to investigate the personal impacts of such visits by bringing literature on international student mobility, travel and tourism, and 'homeland' visits into the same analytical framework. The analysis shows how trips to Ghana can strengthen young people's self-confidence and nourish their aspirations for the future. The chapter shows the importance of contextual factors in both Belgium and Ghana in how they contribute to personal growth. Most young people belong to the working class in Belgium, face educational inequalities and experience a lack of African role models in their everyday lives. By contrast, young people experience respectful and encouraging treatment and have access to luxurious spaces in Ghana that strengthen their self-confidence. Further, they can compare different opportunity structures in their countries of origin and residence through visits to Ghana and are exposed to Ghanaian role models that help them develop their aspirations for the future. This chapter demonstrates the methodological advantages of multi-sited long-term ethnography in exploring the interactions with people and the environment in both Ghana and Belgium.

Chapter 7 analyses how young people of Ghanaian background use their mobility trajectories and digital media to shape their own affective engagements with people and places in the country of origin. To do so, I develop the concept of *extraordinary everydayness*, which refers to the extraordinary nature of experiencing an everydayness with previously unknown people in an unfamiliar space, made possible by young people's use of digital media and their transnational mobility to the country of origin. Following young people's mobility trajectories, I investigate the digital labour that goes into establishing transnational peer relationships on social media platforms *before* visits to Ghana, bring out experiences of extraordinary everydayness with people and places *during* their stay Ghana, and demonstrate the lasting impressions of such experiences *after* they return from visits. As such, embodiment, emotions, and temporality are important aspects that emerge in relation to country-of-origin visits. Methodologically, the chapter elaborates on the benefits of mobile methods, which include accompanying young people during trips to Ghana, to capture fleeting, multi-sensory and emotional elements of youth mobility.

In the Conclusion, I summarize the main research findings, discussing the broader theoretical and methodological contributions for the study of transnational youth mobility. The thesis ends with suggestions for further research.



2

CONCEPTUALIZING THE LIVES OF MOBILE YOUTH

2.1 Introduction

Young people are mobile. They move nationally and internationally, at various stages in their lives and for different reasons. Yet previous research oversimplifies youth mobility. Studies on young people affected by migration either assume young people to be immobile, focus on isolated moves, or overemphasize the first international migration of young people or their parents. By contrast, this study centres around the concept of *youth mobility trajectories*, developed by Mazzucato (2015) to refer to young people's geographical moves in time and space and the different concomitant family constellations that result from these moves. The concept captures *all* types of mobility, including first and subsequent migration moves, visits to the country of origin, and changes in residence, and traces their timing and duration across the life course. In this chapter, I will show that the concept of youth mobility trajectories combines insights from two different but complementary approaches, a transnational and a mobilities approach, that together afford new insights into mobile lives.

The 'transnational turn' in migration studies (Section 2.2) highlighted the importance of including both the migrant origin and destination contexts to better understand migrant realities (Glick Schiller, Basch, and Blanc-Szanton 1992; Bryceson and Vuorela 2002). This has two implications for the study of migrant youth. First, it challenges current approaches in research and policy that only focus on young people's lives in the country of destination. A transnational perspective acknowledges that both pre-migration experiences and continuous engagements with the origin country are important to fully understand young people's lives and therefore need to be accounted for. Second, a transnational lens involves considering context-specific norms and practices of family and child rearing (Mazzucato and Schans 2011) that help to explain the everyday realities of young people who are situated in multiple national contexts.

The 'mobilities turn' across the social sciences (Section 2.3) stimulated a processual approach to mobility that is concerned with the "patterning, timing and causation of face-to-face copresence" (Sheller and Urry 2006, 217). Applying a mobilities lens to the study of youth mobility has three implications. First, it allows the researcher to explore the 'turbulence' and non-linear components of migration trajectories (Schapendonk 2012; Schapendonk and Steel 2014; Wissink, Düvell, and Mazzucato 2017) and views young people's migration as embedded within a series of moves that can take place before and after their first international move (van Geel and Mazzucato 2018). Second, it shifts the focus to what transpires *during* mobility of people, objects, and ideas, including the emotional and embodied aspects (Hannam

et al. 2006; Sheller and Urry 2006). Third, it brings to the fore that mobility is currently fragmented into the study of different types of movement – such as tourism, educational mobility, or migration – that are governed and evaluated depending on race, class, and legal status of the mobile subject (Glick Schiller and Salazar 2013). Bringing different types of mobility into the same analytical framework can lead to new insights on lived experiences and prevailing discourses (Salazar 2018; Sheller and Urry 2006).

The concept of youth mobility trajectories (Section 2.4) combines a transnational and mobilities lens and offers an innovative way to study youth mobility. It is sensitive to young people's multi-local and multi-layered embeddedness while also acknowledging the spatio-temporal complexity of their mobility across their life course. After having outlined what the concept of youth mobility trajectories entails, I explain how it relates to the second concept that is central to this dissertation: transnational affective engagements. *Transnational affective engagements* are defined as the complex ways in which youth are bodily, emotionally, and cognitively – hence affectively – engaged in interactions with people and places in the context of their transnational mobility. I then present a brief overview of previous research on young people with a migration background to illustrate how a youth mobility trajectory approach contributes to current knowledge on youth mobility and young people's transnational engagements (Section 2.4.1). The chapter ends with a synthesis of the theoretical framework for this dissertation (Section 2.4.2).

2.2 The transnational turn in migration studies

The concept of transnationalism was first put forward as an alternative to dominant approaches in migration studies in the 1970s. Earlier studies either conceived of migration as a permanent rupture, and focused on assimilation in the reception country, or as a temporary phenomenon that would result in return to the origin country (Mazzucato et al. 2004). Migration was thus investigated from the perspective of the nation-state, splitting migrants' lives into 'here' and 'there', and either investigating what happens in the destination *or* the origin country. Yet such a bipolar and localized approach is no longer suitable for a migrant population that engages in frequent back and forth movements and maintains networks and activities in both countries of origin *and* destination (Glick Schiller, Basch, Blanc-Szanton 1992, 1994; Rouse 1995).

In the early 1990s, the anthropologists Glick Schiller, Basch, and Blanc-Szanton (1992, 1) were the first to extensively theorize transnationalism, which they define as “the processes by which immigrants build social fields that link together their country of origin and their

country of settlement.” Transnational scholars argue that in order to understand migrants’ realities, it is important to consider the multiple and continuous linkages and activities that migrants sustain across nation-state borders and that shape their daily lived experiences in relation to more than one country (Faist 2000; Glick Schiller, Basch, and Blanc-Szanton 1992; Kivisto 2001; Vertovec 2009). Central to the conceptualization of transnationalism is the understanding that people and places are connected *simultaneously* through relationships crossing distant spaces (Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004; Vertovec 1999, 2001).

Transnationalism is not a new phenomenon (Mazzucato et al. 2004; van Amersfoort 2001). Migrants have maintained relationships with home for centuries. But a globalizing economy and international division of labour have significantly contributed to a mobile labour force composed of migrants and to an increase in transnational flows (Glick Schiller, Basch, and Blanc-Szanton 1992). Improved transportation, technology and telecommunications facilitate possibilities for connections, communication and mobility over larger distances and greater speed (Vertovec 1999, 2009). The social, political, cultural, religious and economic ties that migrants maintain produce flows of people, money, goods and ideas that impact both the sending and receiving societies (Levitt 1998; Portes, Guarnizo, and Landolt 1999). Thus, while transnational linkages have characterized migrants’ relationships to the country of origin for a long time, these relationships are now qualitatively different due to the accessibility, frequency and simultaneous nature of interaction today (Foner 1997).

The transnational framework problematizes notions of space because mapping social, cultural, and political processes onto one geographical space is no longer appropriate. Transnationalism acknowledges the importance of the nation-state in creating barriers and opportunities for migrants and recognizes migrants’ situatedness in local contexts (Kearney 1995; Mazzucato et al. 2004; Pries 2005). But at the same time, it implies a transcending of boundaries and thus moves away from ‘methodological nationalism’, the conceptual tendency to take the nation-state as the natural unit of analysis (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002, 2003). Such a decoupling of social, cultural, political and geographical space means that the daily lives of migrants cannot be understood by only investigating what happens within the boundaries of one nation-state. Instead, migrants’ multi-layered and multi-sited embeddedness requires a broader and deeper analytical lens, encompassing the sending and receiving societies, those who move and those who stay behind (Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004).

2.2.1 Transnational families

Since the early 2000s, transnational migration scholars have shown a heightened interest in the impact of migration on family ties, studying the lives of both those who leave and those who are ‘left behind’⁴ (Baldassar and Merla 2014; Bryceson and Vuorela 2002; Dankyi, Mazzucato, and Manuh 2017; Mazzucato and Schans 2011). It has become increasingly more common that families are spread across several nation-states due to stringent migration policies or the preferred choice by family members (Goulbourne, Reynolds, Solomos, and Zontini 2010; Mazzucato 2013). Bryceson and Vuorela (2002, 3) were the first to introduce the concept of *transnational families*, which they define as “families that live some or most of the time separated from each other, yet hold together and create something that can be seen as a feeling of collective welfare and unity, namely ‘familyhood’, even across national borders.”

Transnational family scholars are among the first to draw into question the notion of family as a geographically proximate unit (Bryceson and Vuorela 2002; Mazzucato 2013; Mazzucato and Schans 2011). They show that familyhood and emotional bonds are not conditioned upon living together in the same spatially bounded household and highlight the importance of acknowledging absence and mobility as common aspects of family life (Baldassar and Merla 2014). Parenting and kinship practices can be sustained from a distance by sending remittances to family members abroad (Caarls et al. 2018; Coe 2011; Haagsman and Mazzucato 2014), by visiting regularly, and by maintaining an emotional closeness through information and communication technologies. New media and ubiquitous connectivity have transformed ways of ‘being together’ and enable different forms of ‘co-presence’, ranging from direct communication to a heightened awareness of the everyday lives of significant others because of an ‘always on’ culture (Baldassar 2008, 2016; Madianou 2016; Madianou and Miller 2011).

Such an understanding of migrants’ lives, as extending beyond the nation-state in which they currently reside, is also important in research on the lives of migrant youth. Similar to their parents, young people engage in transnational practices (Haikkola 2011; Levitt 2009; Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004; Levitt and Waters 2002) and use digital media to stay in contact

⁴ The term ‘left-behind’ is commonly used in the literature for family members who stay in the country of origin. It conceptualises those family members as immobile and has negative connotations as it evokes images of abandonment and suffering, particularly when it is children who stay in the origin country. This thesis, particularly Chapter 5, will show that young people are mobile and that they do not necessarily perceive separation from parents due to migration in a negative light. Thus, while I still use ‘left-behind’ in this dissertation to engage with the relevant literature, the inverted commas are meant to signify that it is a problematic term.

with family in countries of origin and to maintain a sense of familyhood from afar (Haikkola 2011; Robertson, Wilding, and Gifford 2016; Zontini and Reynolds 2018). Migrant youth travel to the origin country, together with their parents or on their own, to revive relationships and keep in touch with family, and to learn about the country's history and culture (Gardner and Mand 2012; van Geel and Mazzucato 2021). By considering both the sending and receiving country contexts, transnational studies have thus broadened the focus to include experiences before the first international migration as well as migrants' continuous transnational engagements afterwards.

Transnational family studies further urge scholars to take context-specific norms on family and childcare into account (Mazzucato and Schans 2011; Mazzucato, Schans et al. 2015). Until the transnational turn, migrant families were predominantly studied from a Western perspective, presuming cultural ideals of the nuclear family and prioritizing the mother-child bond. Yet many migrants come from societies where broader definitions of the family prevail, including extended family members and non-kin relations that are crucial for child rearing practices. In sub-Saharan Africa, households are more fluid and therefore result in more complex family structures that change over time and space (Goody 1982; Mazzucato and Schans 2011; Nkosi and Daniels 2007). Parent-child separation and the involvement of other extended family and non-kin caregivers in the context of parental migration is culturally accepted within these societies (Alber, Martin, and Notermans 2013; Bledsoe 1990; Coe et al. 2011; Dankyi, Mazzucato and Manuh 2017; Olwig 1999; Poeze and Mazzucato 2014).

2.3 The mobilities turn in migration studies

In addition to the transnational lens outlined above, this dissertation also employs a mobilities lens, of which the most important insights will be described here. In their seminal paper from the early 2000s, Sheller and Urry (2006, 208) introduce a 'new mobilities paradigm', or 'mobilities turn', and argue that "accounting for mobilities in the fullest sense challenges social science to change both the objects of its inquiries and the methodologies for research." Although migration scholars have always focused on human movement, their analytical approaches are often still characterized by sedentary theories that focus on places of stasis – the countries of origin and destination – rather than the mobilities in-between (Cresswell 2006; Schapendonk and Steel 2014). The mobilities turn contributed to several advancements in migration studies that are also relevant for this study on youth mobility trajectories and transnational affective engagements.

Mobility scholars contend that mobilities are always full of meaning (Cresswell 2006; Schapendonk and Steel 2014) and are consequently interested in all types of mobility undertaken by people, objects, and ideas, ranging from local processes of transportation and everyday mobility to large-scale global movements (Hannam, Sheller, and Urry 2006; Sheller and Urry 2006). Considering *all* movements blurs boundaries between different types of mobility. Migration scholars, for example, criticize the clear division between studies on internal and international migration and identify a considerable potential for integrating them (King and Skeldon 2010). Applying insights from mobilities research to the study of migration thus enables the researcher to shift the focus away from migrants' first international move and consider mobility that happens before and after, irrespective of whether it takes place across national borders. For example, several different movements can together constitute 'migration', which conceptualizes migration as an unfolding process instead of a distinctive point in time (Griffiths, Rogers, and Anderson 2013; Schapendonk 2012). And migrants' transnational engagements can be maintained through continuous return mobilities to the country of origin (e.g., Reynolds and Zontini 2016).

Further, a mobilities perspective recontextualizes migration within the general field of movement (Griffiths, Rogers, and Anderson 2013). This has two implications for the study of mobility and migration. First, it de-exceptionalizes migration. Most academic research approaches human mobility in a fragmented way, focusing either on migration or other forms of movement, such as tourism or international student mobility. But there is overlap in debates, key concepts, and the lived experiences of different people on the move (Salazar 2011). As such, several scholars have argued that there is real analytical value in bringing different types of movement into the same analytical framework and in exploring links across different fields of study (Hannam, Sheller, and Urry 2006; Salazar 2018; Sheller and Urry 2006). Second, because the study of mobilities is concerned with moving bodies, a mobilities approach also aims at recentring "the corporeal body as an affective vehicle through which we sense place and movement, and construct emotional geographies" (Sheller and Urry 2006, 216). Dwelling in and moving through places creates a range of emotional and affective states that inform people's senses of self, making issues of embodiment and affect but also the material contexts within which they are embedded central aspects to the study of international migration (Conradson and McKay 2007).

Finally, research on mobility is concerned with the entanglement of both movement and stasis, which are seen as mutually constitutive rather than opposing (Cresswell 2010; Cresswell

and Merriman 2011; Elliot, Norum, and Salazar 2017; Hannam, Sheller, and Urry 2006; Urry 2007). Mobilities research does not only focus on questions of movements then, but also considers the power discourses, practices and infrastructures that facilitate, impede and forbid movement (Salazar and Smart 2011). Glick Schiller and Salazar (2013) show that different 'regimes of mobility' normalize the movement of some people while criminalizing and entrapping those of others. Legal status and global racializing categories have vastly different impact on the ease of travel, the repercussions of trying to move, and the potential gains or losses in status resulting from movement for different people. In other words, these advancements were useful to shed light on which types of mobility are valued and who benefits from both the discourses and the actual mobile practices because of it.

2.4 Combining a transnational and mobilities lens: youth mobility trajectories and transnational affective engagements

The transnational and mobilities lenses outlined above form the theoretical basis for two concepts that take centre stage throughout the dissertation: youth mobility trajectories and transnational affective engagements. *Youth mobility trajectories* refer to "the moves young people make over time and across geographically distinct localities and the changing family constellations that this entails" (van Geel and Mazzucato 2018, 2145). The concept helps to conceive of migration as an unfolding process over time and space, viewing migration as embedded within a series of moves that take place before and after the first international migration. Several scholars have highlighted the importance of investigating the highly complex and diverse trajectories because it brings "analyses closer to the lived experience of mobile youth" (van Geel and Mazzucato 2018, 2158; see also Schapendonk and Steel 2014; Schapendonk et al. 2018; Wissink, Düvell, and Mazzucato 2017). A processual approach to the study of youth mobility contributes to knowledge on the different types of moves young people engage in, what transpires during these moves, and how this in turn affects their transnational lives (Mazzucato and van Geel 2022). Focusing on what occurs during movement facilitates an investigation of the sensorial, embodied, and emotional aspects as mobility unfolds.

Transnational affective engagements are defined in this dissertation as the complex ways in which humans are bodily, emotionally, and cognitively engaged in the interaction with other people and the environment in the context of transnational mobility. Previous studies in the field of transnational migration aimed to understand how emotions and affect are circulated

across borders through the flow of goods, money or ideas, and how these emotions in turn reproduce and redirect transnational networks and connections (Cole and Groes 2016; Wilding et al. 2020; Wise and Velayutham 2017). The concept of transnational affective engagements contributes to the theorization of ‘transnational affect’ by foregrounding the role of space in both the country of origin and residence that young people encounter through their mobility and that shapes their everyday experiences. It does so by drawing on theories of children’s spatialities and approaches in urban studies that centre on affect. Recognizing the importance of space shifts the focus to examining how young people are entangled with the worlds in which they are situated and offers new perspectives on how young people make meaning and choose to navigate their lives. In other words, young people’s meaning-making unfolds through dynamic exchanges with the spaces and places they inhabit (Hackett, Procter, and Seymour 2015) as well as the social relationships they build over time. Furthermore, the notion of affect – or the body’s ability to affect and be affected (Massumi 2002) – advances understandings of lived experiences because it foregrounds experiential and embodied dimensions of being in the world and encountering others (e.g., Jones and Evans 2012; Koch and Miles 2021).

The concept of transnational affective engagements thus draws attention to young people’s mobility, and the resulting engagement with specific places and people, which provides opportunities for new forms of subjectivity and affective experiences to emerge (Conradson and McKay 2007; Sheller and Urry 2006). A processual approach to mobility, that allows the researcher to capture the emotional, embodied, and sensorial elements of mobility, can therefore help to explore the intimate relationships with people in the country of origin and take into consideration young people’s meaning-making processes as they engage with different environments transnationally.

2.4.1 Previous research on migrant youth: viewing mobility from a distance or not at all

To understand how a youth mobility trajectory perspective contributes to current knowledge on young people’s lives, it is necessary to briefly discuss previous research on youth with a migration background. This section thus introduces the different bodies of literature that will be outlined in further detail in the empirical chapters (Chapters 5-7).

Immigrant youth studies explore various aspects of the lives of migrant-background youth, commonly those of Global South origin living in Global North contexts. The focus is usually on the integration into the country of residence, and the obstacles and opportunities that

young people encounter. There is a particular interest in educational outcomes and young people's well-being after family reunification and the sometimes lengthy periods of separation from their parents (Castañeda and Buck 2011; Feliciano and Rumbaut 2005; Haller, Portes, and Lynch 2011; Mitrani, Santisteban, and Muir 2004; Portes and Rumbaut 2005; Schapiro et al. 2013). Being characterized by methodological nationalism (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002), this literature generally does not consider mobility to, connections with, and experiences in contexts outside of the country of residence.

By contrast, second-generation transnationalism shows that migrant youth are engaged transnationally and grow up in so-called 'transnational social fields' (Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004): young people are raised in households and interact with peers that are in regular contact with people, practices, objects and information from the parents' country of origin. As such, they learn about the norms and values of the parents' country of origin, which continue to play a role in young people's lives while they simultaneously create a complex set of practices on their own (Levitt 2009). Transnational practices include maintaining familial, linguistic, cultural, and religious ties, and participating in political and development initiatives linked to the country of origin (Haikkola 2011; Levitt 2009; Levitt and Waters 2002; Robertson, Wilding, and Gifford 2016; Zontini and Reynolds 2018). Some studies also show that parental transmission of cultural pride and family histories from the origin country positively impact young people's lives in the country of residence (Fernández-Kelly 2008; Franceschelli, Schoon, and Evans 2017; Louie 2012).

Inspired by the 'mobilities turn' (Sheller and Urry 2006), a more recent literature on second-generation returns looks beyond transnational practices and specifically focuses on young people's travels and more permanent relocations to the country of origin. Mazzucato and van Geel (2022) argue that this literature focuses in particular on themes of ethnic identity and belonging. Return migration is often described as a project in search for one's identity (Christou 2006; King and Christou 2008; King, Christou and Ahrens 2011; Wessendorf 2007) that can result in hyphenated identities or ambivalent belonging (King, Christou and Ahrens 2011; McMichael et al. 2017; Phillips and Potter 2006; Potter and Phillips 2006; Potter 2005; Reynolds 2010; Teerling 2011; Vathi and King 2011).

Methodologically, these literatures mostly rely on data collection at one point in time and in one place, commonly the country of residence. If mobility is investigated at all, it is done retrospectively by asking adults to recollect experiences of their youth through narrative

interviews. This means that data collection is removed in both time and space from the actual events studied (see also Mazzucato et al. 2022).

2.4.2 Youth mobility trajectories and transnational affective engagements: theoretical framework

The brief overview above of research on young people with a migration background illustrates that young people's diverse mobility trajectories and transnational affective engagements are not accounted for in current research, neither as an object of study nor in the methodology used. However, recent research agendas emphasize the need to adequately address – theoretically and methodologically – the increasing complexity, diversity, and emotionality of transnational youth mobilities (van Geel and Mazzucato 2018; Robertson et al. 2018; Cheung Judge et al. 2020). Youth mobility is not only an empirically important phenomenon, with more than half of young people with a migration background in Europe travelling to the origin country at least annually (Mazzucato and Haagsman, 2022; Schimmer and Van Tubergen 2014). Several recent studies also show the significant impact mobility trajectories have on young people's lives, such as equipping them with educational resilience (van Geel and Mazzucato 2021) or a renewed sense of purpose (Hoechner 2020). This dissertation builds on this burgeoning work by investigating mobility over the life course and in real time (see Chapter 3 for the methodological implications of such an approach).

From different perspectives, the empirical chapters of this dissertation explore how young people create and maintain affective engagements with people and places in the country of origin through their mobility trajectories and digital media use, and how these connections shape different aspects of their lives. Chapter 5 builds on studies of transnational families and family reunification to demonstrate that policy definitions of family reunification, centred on the nuclear family and the destination country context, are only one way to look at the phenomenon and do not always coincide with young people's experiences. In fact, analysing youth mobility trajectories reveals that, as young people move between different households in Ghana throughout their childhood and youth, they build affective connections to multiple caregivers over time, many of whom remain important later in life. A move can thus signify a separation from the previous caregiver as well as a reunification with the next. Consequently, young people can experience multiple family reunifications and separations with significant others, including kin and non-kin caregivers, in both the country of origin and destination. In

other words, a family *reunification*, as seen from the point of view of the European country laws and policies, might in fact be experienced as *separation* by young people.

The following two chapters then move the focus to young people's visits to the country of origin. In Chapter 6, I bring different types of mobility into the same analytical framework. This helps me to identify different analytical approaches for the mobility of young people with and without a migration background. Whereas country-of-origin visits are investigated in terms of migrant youth's sense of belonging and ethnic identity, the mobility of youth without a migration background – in the context of international student mobility, travel and tourism – is studied through a 'personal growth lens' that highlights the positive personal impacts of mobility. Arguing that such a distinction between analytical approaches is unfounded, the chapter analyses visits to the country of origin in terms of the personal growth experiences young people of Ghanaian background have. Doing so, I highlight how affective experiences with others and the built environment in the origin country cultivate self-confidence and stimulate young people's aspirations for the future.

Finally, Chapter 7 investigates in further detail the affective engagements with people and places during country-of-origin visits using the concept of *extraordinary everydayness*. Extraordinary everydayness refers to the extraordinary nature of experiencing an everydayness with previously unknown people in an unfamiliar space, made possible by young people's mobility trajectories and their use of digital media before, during and after visits. Young people make new transnational peer relationships online before visits, and use digital media during visits to bring these relationships to life and to engage with their surroundings. They move peer relationships from the online to the offline world through face-to-face meetings and navigate an unfamiliar space with apparent ease with the help of their smartphones. These experiences have a lasting impression even after young people return to Belgium.

2.5 Concluding remarks

This chapter has introduced the concept of youth mobility trajectories by discussing the two lenses it encompasses: a transnational and a mobilities lens. The transnational lens broadens the analytical focus and looks beyond the country where young people reside to include both sending and receiving societies. This also involves acknowledging context-specific norms and practices in these places that shape the everyday lives of migrant youth. The mobilities lens entails considering *all* mobility as potentially relevant. This helps to conceptualize young people's migration as embedded within a series of moves before and after the first international

move. A mobilities lens further shifts the focus to bodies in motion, highlighting the emotional and sensory nature of mobility experiences. Finally, foregrounding the movement itself can make visible different perceptions and analytical approaches across disciplines, in practice, and public discourse.

Together, these insights resulted in the conceptualization of *youth mobility trajectories*, defined as the geographical moves in time and space and the concomitant family compositions resulting from these moves. The chapter has shown how such a processual approach to youth mobility and a focus on emotions, the senses, and the body during movement contributes to the study of *transnational affective engagements*, which I define as the ways in which young people are bodily, emotionally, and cognitively engaged with other people and the environment across multiple contexts as a result of their mobility. Finally, the chapter has outlined how employing these concepts helps to address several shortcomings in current research on young people with a migration background.



3

METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

This chapter introduces the methodological and ethical considerations which guided my research. Section 3.2 provides a brief overview of the MO-TRAYL project and explains how my individual study is integrated into the larger research project. Following an illustrative vignette of one of the young research participants, Section 3.3 discusses the research design of my research and explains why a youth-centric, multi-sited and mobile approach was most appropriate for this study on youth mobility trajectories and transnational affective engagements. Section 3.4 gives an overview of the sampling strategies and sample characteristics. Section 3.5 introduces the main methods and relevant analytical aspects, and Section 3.6 discusses the ethical considerations that guided the research. Finally, I reflect on the implications of my positionality and of doing research in a team in Section 3.7.

3.2 The MO-TRAYL project

This research is part of the larger ‘Mobility Trajectory of Young Lives’ project (MO-TRAYL)⁵, which is led by Professor Valentina Mazzucato and aims to develop a better understanding of the relationship between young people’s mobility and their life chance outcomes (Mazzucato 2015). MO-TRAYL consists of five inter-linked projects (one post-doc, four PhDs, one integrative project) across Belgium, Germany, The Netherlands, and Ghana. The post-doc project conducts a longitudinal quantitative school survey among young people of all types of backgrounds in cities in Belgium, Germany, and The Netherlands, to assess the relationship between mobility and life chances as defined by their psychological well-being, educational outcomes, and school-to-work transitions. One PhD project is based in each of the project countries. The three PhD projects in Europe investigate how young people’s mobility trajectories affect their educational experiences, their well-being, and transitions into adulthood. These themes are studied among young people of Ghanaian background living in the research countries and in specific cities therein, namely in Antwerp (Belgium), Hamburg (Germany), and The Hague (The Netherlands). The PhD project in Ghana studies young people who remain in Ghana after one or both of their parents have migrated to the Global North, and investigates how youth mobility trajectories and the use of ICTs shape young people’s experiences with parent-child relationships as well as their educational experiences, well-being, and transitions into adulthood. An integrative project brings together the research

⁵ The MO-TRAYL project is funded by European Research Council under Grant [682982]. For more information on the MO-TRAYL project, visit www.motrayl.com.

findings across cases and integrates the quantitative and qualitative results. Figure 3.1 provides a geographical representation of the different MO-TRAYL sub-projects.

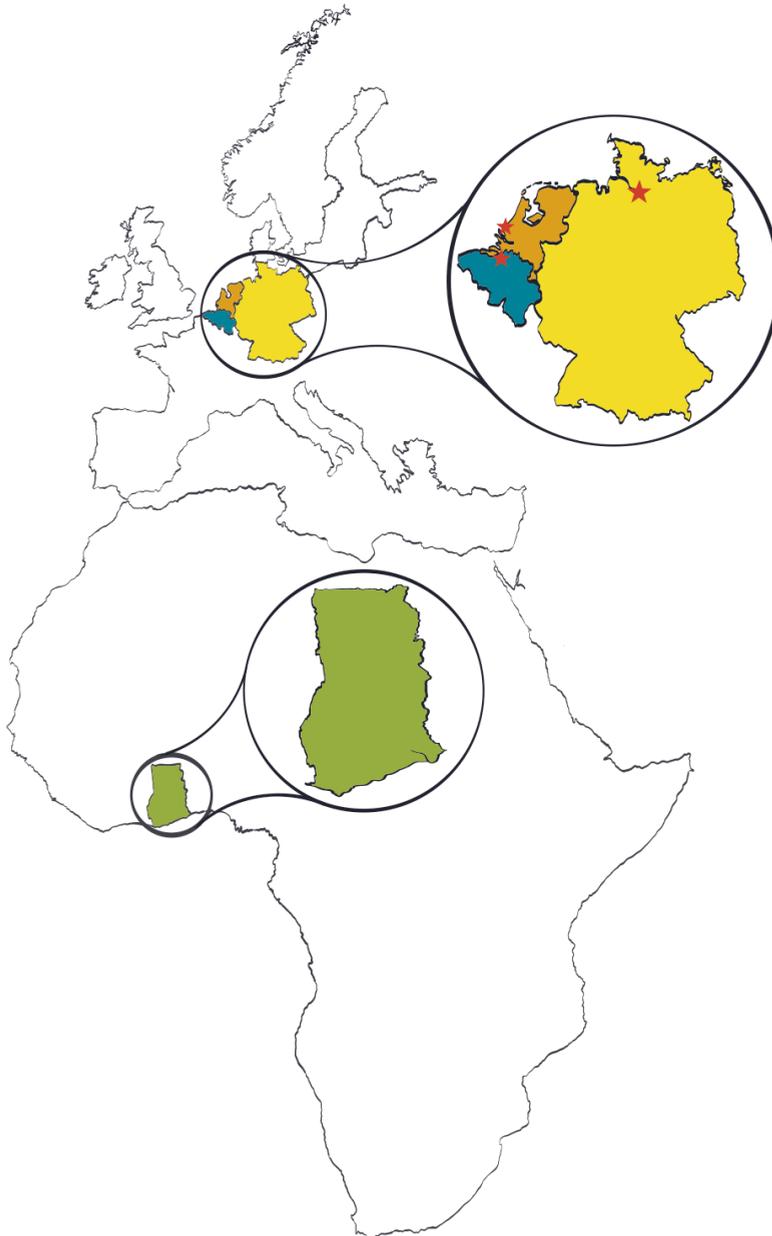


Figure 3.1 Geographical representation of the different MO-TRAYL case studies. (Drawing by the author.)

The MO-TRAYL project was characterized by collaboration between the different members of the interdisciplinary and international research team throughout all phases of the project. The teamwork also benefitted my individual research in various ways, which will be touched upon in the different sections of this chapter and elaborated on in more detail in Section 3.7.

3.3 Research design: how to study youth mobility trajectories and transnational affective engagements

The study of youth mobility trajectories and transnational affective engagements calls for innovative research methodologies. To gain insights into young people's transnational lifestyles and their embodied mobility experiences, I employed several methodological strategies to foreground young people and their voices, to move beyond methodological nationalism by taking into account both sending and receiving communities, to trace the patterning, timing and duration of mobility across a person's lifetime, and to move with the participant to observe the emotional aspects of mobility. Below, I introduce the case of Marilyn, which I will use throughout this chapter to discuss how my methodological choices and ethical considerations guided the research.

In April 2018, a couple of months into my fieldwork, I met Marilyn (24) through a church youth group where I introduced the research project and distributed brochures about the research (see Appendix A for more information on the brochure). One of the other youth group members recommended talking to Marilyn because she was one of the few young people in the church who had made a return trip to Ghana. After seeing each other in church a couple of times, Marilyn and I exchanged phone numbers, messaged via WhatsApp a few times, and agreed to talk about her Ghana trip during a church BBQ that took place that summer. During this first interview, I learned that Marilyn grew up with her mother in the Ashanti region of Ghana and migrated to Belgium at the age of 14 to reunite with her father while her mother stayed behind in Ghana (see Figure 3.2 for a visualization of her mobility trajectory). After all these years, she still considered her mother her best friend, talked to her almost every day, and finally went to visit her in 2015 after finishing her secondary education. Asking Marilyn to describe her experiences during this return trip, she said: "I actually didn't do much because I am someone who does not go out much. So I stayed with my mother a little every day [laughs]. Because when I was a child, it was just us two, and all those times came back...yeah, I actually didn't

do much, really.” Further probing revealed that she felt “good” in Ghana and was happy to see her mother, but beyond general information about her overall mobility trajectory, I was unable to find out more about specific events or other emotions that came up during her Ghana visit.

The months following this initial conversation, it was difficult to connect with Marilyn and we only crossed paths at church where we had brief interactions. When I asked her whether she had time to meet me, she replied a few times that she will let me know but I never heard from her. When I found out that she was working outside of Antwerp, I suggested taking the bus with her early in the morning so that we can catch up a little and was happy that she agreed to it. The 40-minute bus ride allowed us to speak more about her relationship with her mother and I learned that she would visit her again in the summer of 2019. Excitedly, I shared that I was also planning to go to Ghana around that time and casually mentioned that I could maybe come visit her. Marilyn liked the idea, and we discussed the following weeks how we could arrange this.

In June 2019, I visited Marilyn in the Ashanti region in Ghana for several days and could observe what it meant to “not do much”. Marilyn spent much of her day in her mother’s shop, sometimes sitting on her mother’s lap, and usually chatting and laughing with her. But we also went to visit a hairdresser, the market, and a seamstress to buy clothes for Marilyn, her boyfriend and other church members in Antwerp. I met more of Marilyn’s family members who had not surfaced in earlier conversations with her but were very present during the few days I spent with her. Walking around her neighbourhood, Marilyn pointed out several people and landmarks that had played a role in her life, such as a dear childhood friend or her school – which I found out she visited during her first trip to see her teachers and revisit memories. Just accompanying Marilyn gave me the opportunity to see a couple of spontaneous encounters on the street, one of which prompted Marilyn to tell me more about her aspirations to open a restaurant in Ghana. And having been given the space and time to simply spend time together for a prolonged period allowed both of us to feel more at ease, improving our relationship after our return to Belgium and making it easier to meet up.

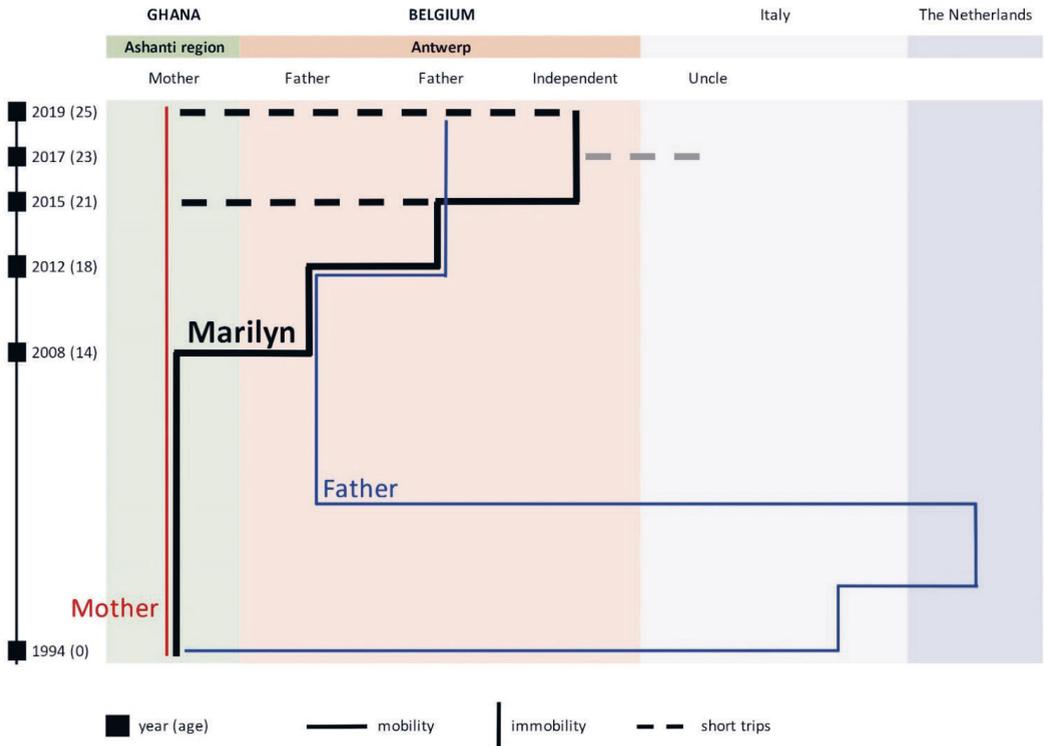


Figure 3.2 Marilyn’s mobility trajectory

3.3.1 A youth-centric approach

Marilyn’s vignette above has introduced different aspects of a youth-centric approach that are helpful to foreground young people’s voices. Young people’s views and experiences are increasingly recognized as valid and valuable on their own, independent of their relationships with adults (Hirschfeld 2002; Sime 2017). Migration research increasingly emphasizes the need to see young people as active agents in migration processes (Dobson 2009; Sime 2017; White et al. 2011). This is because young people are often at the centre of migration, either as the motivating force for their parents or as migrants themselves, and the “experiences, perspectives, and relationships of young people, then, provide an important window onto the changes and continuities entailed by migration” (Coe et al. 2011, 2).

Gaining insights into young people’s own views and actions has methodological implications. First and foremost, it entails engaging with young people directly. This may seem straightforward but to this date much of research on youth involves asking adults – such as

parents, teachers, or health professionals – about how they think young people are faring in terms of their education or well-being (see also Mazzucato 2015). This study, instead, puts young people at the centre of the research design. Throughout this research, I have asked young people about their experiences and opinions directly and followed their lives over time through ethnographic research methods. Marilyn’s vignette illustrates that ethnography is a suitable way to learn about young people’s lives because it gives the researcher the time to build up trust and understand young people’s perspectives, meanings, and subjectivities (James 2001; see also Section 3.5 on methods). Importantly, a youth-centric approach does not mean excluding adult perspectives. In fact, young people are embedded in broader networks and talking to adults who are important to participants can thus be a way to triangulate research data, integrate different perspectives, and help to understand young people’s lifeworlds. As in all research, it is, however, crucial to respect the participant’s wishes and seek their approval (see also Section 3.4.2 on contextualizing young people’s accounts).

Before entering the field, we discussed in the MO-TRAYL team what a youth-centric approach entails. One of our conclusions was that instead of having a clear order for our research activities, we need to be sensitive to young people’s interests and preferences that might change depending on the context and time, the participant’s age, or the researcher’s positionality. We called this a “no-size-fits-all” approach. To accommodate such an approach, we developed a methodological ‘tool kit’ comprising different methods and listing their potentials, limitations, and situations for which these might be useful (see Section 3.5 to find out more about the methods used in this study). Knowing about different methods helped to be more prepared, but it still required intuition and careful probing in the field to decide what would be the best way forward, as can also be seen in my interactions with Marilyn described above.

3.3.2 A multi-sited approach

Studying young people’s movements across borders and their transnational ties further requires to take both the sending and receiving countries into consideration. According to the selection criteria for participants in the MO-TRAYL project (see Section 3.4), all young people who participated in this research had made at least one transnational move – several have been moving back and forth continuously – and engaged in transnational activities to varying degrees. This study operationalized a transnational lens in two ways. First, the research tools and interview guides designed for the MO-TRAYL project consider young people’s

experiences and relationships to people outside of the country in which young people reside. This includes the collection of data on experiences prior to a person's migration to Belgium and their continuous transnational engagements. It further requires a sensitivity to context-specific norms and understandings that shape young people's everyday experiences. For example, the norm of extended families and social parenthood in Ghana should be accounted for in research tools (see Section 3.5.2 for more information on the mapping tools).

Multi-sited fieldwork is another way to study young people's transnational lives and is suitable to investigate social phenomena that cannot be accounted for by focusing on a single site (Falzon 2009). It allowed me to consider and personally observe how experiences, events, and relationships in multiple places contribute to meaning-making processes (see also Mazzucato 2008a; Mazzucato and Wagner 2018). Following the subject of study functioned as a methodological selection device for establishing 'the field' (Marcus 1995). This approach resulted in 16 months of ethnographic fieldwork in Belgium where I followed young people's everyday lives in different settings, two weeks during which I joined trips with a church youth group to other European countries⁶, and six weeks of fieldwork in Ghana when accompanying some participants on their country-of-origin visits. Through a multi-sited methodology, I was able to further situate the lives of transnational migrant youth in both the country of residence and origin, and acknowledge the importance of cross-border links as well as national and local frameworks and practices in shaping young people's everyday experiences (Faist 1998; Levitt 2003; Ryan 2011).

Over the course of my fieldwork, three female respondents went on trips to Ghana at three different points in time. I accompanied them for parts of their journeys and spent between four and 16 days with them. During my fieldwork in Ghana, I accompanied the young women during leisure activities, family visits, and visits to the neighbourhoods where they grew up, and either stayed in the same house, sometimes even the same room, or in a guesthouse close by if there was not enough room for an extra person in the family home.

Besides following the participants who went on country-of-origin visits, the fieldwork in Ghana had several other advantages for this research. It gave me the opportunity to meet several significant others of respondents, see how they live, and – if there was not a language barrier – learn more about their relationship with the participant. For example, my respondent Ama did

⁶ While these trips with church youth groups do not take centre stage in the following chapters, observations and informal conversations during these trips further helped to contextualize young people's experiences, and learn more about their faith and transnational church networks.

not want me to be alone when I arrived in Accra for my first trip and sent her boyfriend to pick me up from the airport and chaperone me for several days, which provided insights into their transnational relationship. She also asked me to visit her grandmother to bring her money and gifts, which allowed me to meet the person she described as being the most important in her life. Furthermore, the fieldwork in Ghana contributed enormously to my understanding of young people's accounts of their lives in Ghana. For example, participants had mentioned the noise and vibrancy that characterizes many places in Ghana, described how they grew up in compound houses and boarding schools, or emphasized that their lives were free of stress and worries in Ghana. Seeing and experiencing these things myself – by living in a compound house and visiting schools in Ghana – helped me to better understand and contextualize their stories. During and after my first trip to Ghana, respondents also related to me differently, more readily shared their excitement about their mobility experiences, and mentioned new aspects of their stay in Ghana.

3.3.3 A mobile approach

The study's focus on the processual nature of mobilities and the affective side of transnational engagements also had methodological implications. First, bringing *all* of a young person's movements into focus, not just the migration move, required me to trace the patterning, timing and duration of mobility across the participants' life course. This was done through mobility trajectory mapping (see also Section 3.5.2), a method that aims to systematically collect the often highly complex data about young people's mobility trajectories (Mazzucato et al. 2022).

Second, an approach that moves with the research participant is particularly suited to explore the embodied, multi-sensory, and material aspects of mobility as it unfolds (Boccagni and Baldassar 2015; Büscher and Urry 2009; Büscher, Urry, and Witchger 2011; Fincham, McGuinness, and Murray 2010; Hein, Evans, and Jones 2008; Mazzucato 2009). As the vignette of Marilyn above also indicates, young people sometimes struggled to express certain experiences in interviews or simply considered them so 'normal' that they would forget to mention them or assumed I already knew. "Not doing much" in Ghana turned out to involve plenty of social interactions and activities in Marilyn's hometown, rendering observation an invaluable tool in addition to young people's verbal accounts (see also Mazzucato 2008a). It allowed me to see spontaneous encounters, observe the nature of their transnational relationships, put previous descriptions into context, and even discover new taken-for-granted aspects of mobility and transnational lifestyles. Chapter 7, for example, analyses the intimate

relationships with transnational peers that young people make online and meet for the first-time during trips in Ghana. Had it not been for the mobile approach that allowed me to accompany youth to Ghana and observe the emotionality of encounters, I would have never learned about this aspect of young people's lives because it was never mentioned to me in interviews or informal conversations.

Furthermore, travelling with participants allowed me to witness how they interact with people and places, experience the atmosphere, sounds and smells of a place, and attuned me to noticing young people's fleeting encounters, emotions, and reactions to the environment (see also Büscher and Urry 2009; Watts and Urry 2008). Affective experiences with people and places in Ghana are crucial to how young people relate to significant others from afar, develop different aspects of personal growth and form their own transnational engagements, as I will show throughout this dissertation.

3.4 Sampling and sample characteristics

Purposeful sampling was used to create a diverse sample based on the characteristics of the population and the purposes of this study (Gentles et al. 2015). The participants of this research were selected based on several criteria agreed upon in the MO-TRAYL project before entering the field. The first criterion was that young people should have a Ghanaian background, meaning that either the young person is born in Ghana or both parents are. Focusing on youth originating from one country allows to investigate within-group variability and eliminate variation due to nationality or culture (Mazzucato 2015). This was important because phenomena investigated in this study – such as aspirations and experiences of family separation – have been shown to be affected by culture-specific norms and relationships to the country of origin (Kelly 2015; Poeze and Mazzucato 2014). Ghana was chosen for two reasons. First, it is one of the Sub-Saharan countries with the largest emigration flows to the Global North (Koser 2003; OECD/AFD 2019), constituting one of the 'new' immigrant groups that remains under-researched to date (Grillo and Mazzucato 2008). Second, mobility is a crucial variable for this research and previous research has indicated that Ghanaian migrants live a transnational lifestyle with differing degrees of back-and-forth movements (Schans et al. 2013) and various reasons for being mobile (Abotsi 2020; Poeze, Dankyi, and Mazzucato 2017; van Geel and Mazzucato 2018).

This leads me to the second selection criterion which was that each participant had to have engaged in at least one international move to or from Ghana. International moves include

both migration from Ghana to Belgium as well as shorter return visits to Ghana. The sample should ideally include different types of mobility trajectories to investigate how the timing, frequency, and types of mobility shape young people's lives. Finally, the third criterion we agreed upon in the MO-TRAYL team was that each young person should be between 15-25 years old at the first involvement in the research. The lower limit of the age range was selected because at 15 years old, young people have developed maturity enough to understand the aims of this research and decide for themselves (Farrimond 2013; Spriggs 2010; Williams 2006), which honours the youth-centric approach of this study. Further, according to regulations of the European Union, parental consent is only required for children under the age of 14 in the European case study countries of the MO-TRAYL project.⁷ Even though children reach majority at the age of 18 and legally become adults, we deliberately chose 25 as the upper age limit to acknowledge that youth and adulthood are not only defined by age but also by cultural views on roles, rights, and responsibilities (De Boeck and Honwana 2005). This age group further roughly correlates with school age and out-of-school transitions which were important for this project as I wanted to investigate young people's educational experiences and their aspirations for the future.

3.4.1 Youth sample characteristics

This research was conducted with 25 youth respondents of Ghanaian background (see Appendix B for a detailed overview of the respondents' characteristics). Twenty participants were born in Ghana, four in Belgium, and one in The Netherlands, and all of them had made at least one international move to or from Ghana. Nine of these participants – that is, the five participants born in Europe and four participants born in Ghana – had made between one and five visits to Ghana for different reasons, including visits to family and/or friends, vacation, and vocational training. Some also organized charity events, attended a family member's funeral, or a friend's wedding. These country-of-origin visits lasted between a single week and six months. Participants displayed diversity in mobility trajectories not only in terms of the number of country-of-origin visits but also regarding their mobility before migrating to Belgium. Some participants stayed with one caregiver in Ghana throughout their childhood, while others' lives were characterized by frequent mobility and changes in caregivers or

⁷ <https://fra.europa.eu/en/publication/2019/child-participation-research>

households. Because I was interested in mobility experiences, I only included young people in the sample who were able to recollect their stay or experiences in Ghana.

Throughout the selection procedure, I furthermore sought a variety of characteristics that could possibly impact young people's mobility and educational experiences as well as their transnational affective engagements – such as age (at migration), gender, socioeconomic background, and educational trajectories (i.e., school types and tracks). Participants of this study were between the ages of 14 and 25. The age range criterion of the MO-TRAYL project was thus slightly adapted for my individual project to include two 14-year-olds because their mobility trajectories were relevant for the purpose of this study: one migrated to Belgium at a younger age than most other respondents, and the second had recently arrived in Belgium, allowing me to observe his transition from reception class to mainstream education (see Section 3.6.1 for more information on informed consent). It further proved useful to include young people up to the age of 25 because most of the participants born in Ghana only engaged in return visits at an older age, once they had completed either secondary or tertiary education. Those who had not yet made a trip to Ghana indicated wanting to do so at some point in the future.

The sample included 13 young women and 12 young men. Participants attended a variety of school tracks (academic, technical, and vocational tracks) or reception classes for recently arrived migrants (see also Chapter 4 for more information in the Belgian education system). Further, as is common for people who live transnational lives, the social class of participants and/or their parents varied depending on geographical context (see also Coe and Pauli 2020; Nieswand 2011). In Belgium, most of the participants were generally of lower socioeconomic background and lived in working-class neighbourhoods, some in social housing units. Their parents were predominantly employed in low-skilled jobs in the agricultural or industrial sectors. These characteristics resemble the broader Ghanaian community in Antwerp (see also Section 4.3.1.2 for more information on the Ghanaian community in Flanders and Antwerp). In Ghana, however, participants' parents had a variety of backgrounds, ranging from not having obtained a secondary school diploma and working blue-collar jobs, to having obtained tertiary education.

3.4.2 Contextualizing young people's accounts: other key informants

Beyond the youth sample described above, I also conducted interviews with key informants who helped me to contextualize the accounts and experiences of the youth respondents.

Interviews were held with different key informants for slightly different purposes. First, throughout fieldwork, I talked to many other young people of Ghanaian background who did not become part of the core sample but helped to understand issues on a broader level. Second, I spoke to older members of the Ghanaian community in Belgium, some of them parents of participants, about their personal migration history to Belgium and their experiences after arrival – a topic that has not received much attention in academic literature yet gave insights into how and why young people make sense of their lives the way they did. Third, during the first months of fieldwork I also conducted in-depth interviews with several women of Ghanaian background who were in their late twenties to early thirties. The women acted as gatekeepers and helped me to reach out to future participants through church youth groups or community projects. Yet their accounts also helped to further triangulate the accounts and experiences of research participants regarding mobility experiences and their lives in Belgium as part of a minority group.

Fourth, with participants' consent, I was able to speak to some of the teachers of reception classes and vocational education in whose classrooms I had observed lessons and youth participants throughout 2019. Other school staff working with newcomers also agreed to be interviewed, such as a language coach, several *leerlingbegeleiders/trajectbegeleiders* (staff who support students with specific educational needs in reception education), *vervolgcoaches* (staff who support and follow-up on students' transition to mainstream education), and socio-emotional support staff. Interviews included questions about specific students but also Ghanaian newcomers more generally, such as typical challenges they were facing, noticeable mobility patterns, or strengths educational staff often observed. Finally, I conducted expert interviews that helped me to better understand the general research context and institutional structures that were part of the everyday lives of young people of Ghanaian background. Experts included the educational staff mentioned above, an educational policy advisor, and a social worker with close ties to the Ghanaian community and Ghanaian youth in particular.

3.5 Methods

Young people of Ghanaian background have complex mobility patterns that unfold over time and space and that involve affective experiences with people and places. These experiences shape their everyday lives – their family life, their personal growth, and their sense of self in relation to their transnational networks and their country of origin. Therefore, a multi-sited ethnographic approach that encompasses several qualitative methods is most suitable for the

study of young people's understandings of their everyday lives as impacted by their mobility. It allowed me to participate in young people's daily lives, interview them, make small talk and observations (see also Hammersley and Atkinson 2019). Data for this research were collected between January 2018 and February 2020⁸, of which I spent 18 months physically in the field. I stayed in contact with participants through digital media over the entire fieldwork period.

Without any prior contacts in the Ghanaian community in Antwerp at the beginning of fieldwork, I had to put in a lot of work to build a network of informants, as is typical for ethnography in the city (Foster and Kemper 2018). Initially, I approached African churches, organizations, and youth associations, usually via the phone. Yet many of the churches I found online either did not have any Ghanaian-background youth members or were unwilling or uncomfortable to invite me after I mentioned the research project. Formal and informal conversations with representatives of the African organizations were helpful in broadening my understanding of the research setting and acquiring contact details of other – yet always older – Ghanaians in the city. Access was a laborious and lengthy process. I was finally able to meet the first youth respondents through the help of a network for young African professionals and through an older Ghanaian man who helped me gain access to a Ghanaian church after a spontaneous encounter on the street.

Schools were another important entry point for this research. Most headmasters I contacted refused my request to visit their schools because they did not want to add more work for their already strained teachers. It was through an expert interview and again a personal introduction that I was able to access two schools which were spread over three campuses due to the common separation according to tracks in Flanders (see also Chapter 4 for more information on the Belgian education system). To get a sense of the field and young people's experiences in schools, I started out with more informal observations in reception classes for recently arrived migrants as well as vocational and technical tracks before introducing myself to individual students of Ghanaian background.⁹ Below, I explain the main methods used for this research – observations and interviews – as well as the supplementary methods of participatory mapping tools and drawing as an ethnographic method.

⁸ This means data collection was completed before the start of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020 and the concomitant mobility restrictions.

⁹ I obtained permission from the headmasters of these schools to make class observations. According to the ethical code of conduct in Belgium, headmasters, assistant headmasters or teachers provide consent in place of the parents when parents themselves are not involved in the research. This consent is often given orally. See also <https://fra.europa.eu/en/publication/2019/child-participation-research>.

3.5.1 Observations and interviews

First interviews with youth respondents often took place either in public settings or in the spaces where I had met young people, that is, in churches or schools. Over time, I was more often invited to respondents' homes for follow-up conversations or sometimes conducted interviews in my own apartment if that was more convenient for them. Moving relationships with respondents to other places and getting to know them in different environments was important for several reasons. First, there were always other young people present at school and church, which meant that some respondents felt shy to talk to me in front of their peers, afraid they would be teased, for example, for their pronunciation of Dutch or English. Second, schools and churches are hierarchical spaces with specific adult-youth dynamics at play. Arranging meetings outside of these spaces often allowed young people to talk more freely, especially if conversations were about these institutions. Third, spending time at young people's homes allowed me to learn more about their daily routines and observe their relationships with family members in Belgium as well as Ghana when they talked to them on the phone. Interactions in various environments thus brought to the fore different aspects and roles of participants – for example, as a student, a child, a sibling, a friend, a migrant, a Ghanaian – and contributed to a more complete picture of these young people.

Topics discussed during interviews were related to young people's migration and mobility, their educational experiences in Ghana and Belgium, and their transnational networks (see also Section 3.5.2 on mapping tools). But I always left room for respondents to discuss issues they deemed important, which allowed me to explore different topics and refine my research questions over time, which is common for ethnography (Hammersley and Atkinson 2019). As fieldwork progressed, it became obvious that most participants in my sample were born in Ghana and migrated to Belgium for family reunification with one or both parents, which prompted me to develop a topic guide specifically addressing experiences around family separation and reunification, and young people's relationships with caregivers throughout their lives.

Depending on participants' preferences, interviews were conducted in Dutch or English, or a mix of the two, and included biographical discussions, photo-elicitation methods, and walking interviews. Photo-elicitation was a useful addition to other methods used in this study because they helped gather more sensory data on country-of-origin visits, brought up memories, and were in line with the youth-centric approach of this research (see also Epstein et al. 2006; Harper 2002). When participants offered rather generic descriptions of their

experiences in Ghana, as also visible in the opening vignette of Marilyn, I asked participants whether they had any photos of their trip they would like to share with me. Some participants then showed me pictures or videos of their trips they had uploaded on Facebook, saved in the app Snapchat, or on their laptop. These graphic probes prompted different responses, additional memories of activities, and more detailed descriptions of people or places. Together with questions that foregrounded sensory experiences, for example questions about tastes or sounds in Ghana, these methods helped to tap into embodied, difficult to articulate or forgotten experiences, and therefore added value to other tools (Guillemin and Harris 2014).

Walking interviews, or conversations, also proved useful in several instances. While ‘walking alongside’ research participants has always been part of ethnography, combining walking and talking methods was useful for the following reasons. First, it is a good technique for respondents who were opposed to or felt uncomfortable in formal interview situations (see also Kinney 2017; Kusenbach 2003). With some participants it was notable that conversations flowed more naturally, and more easily allowed for silences when we walked alongside each other rather than were sitting somewhere and talked face to face. Further, it gives respondents control over where they take the researcher and is thus in line with the youth-centric design of this research. This was for example the case in Ghana when respondents showed me the neighbourhoods in which they grew up. These walks brought up vivid emotional memories of experiences young people had in certain places during their childhood, allowed me to see fleeting encounters with others, and gave insights into everyday lived experience (see also Evans and Jones 2011; Kusenbach 2003). As soon as possible after these interviews, I typed up my notes on both what I had heard and seen.

As relationships of trust developed over time, some respondents and key informants invited me along for other events. Participant-observation took place at young people’s homes, schools, church settings, recreational spaces (e.g., football club), at cultural events (e.g., theatre performances, exhibitions, film screenings, Independence Day celebrations), at information events (e.g., on migration laws in Belgium, the Belgian education system), or parties (e.g., weddings, naming ceremonies, birthdays) as well as during shared activities with young people (e.g., shopping, having lunch or dinner together). In Ghana, observations and informal conversations were also invaluable tools that provided new insights (see also Section 3.3.2 and 3.3.3). Ultimately, the long-term involvement, my physical presence in the field, and the face-to-face contact thus enabled me to study migration as an unfolding process rather than a single

event at one point in time and allowed me to gain insights into the everyday realities of young people as they grow up in transnational social fields (Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004).

3.5.2 Mapping tools

This study further employed two mapping tools that were designed for the MO-TRAYL project and interactively filled in with participants during fieldwork: mobility trajectory mapping and concentric-circle network mapping. These tools aim to systematize the collection of often highly complex data about young people’s mobility trajectories and transnational networks, respectively, and are explained in further detail below.

Mobility trajectory mapping involves the use of a grid to collect data on the time, duration, and location of moves, including both international migration and shorter trips that young participants and their nuclear family members made. The tool was inspired by French and Senegalese demographers (Antoine, Bry, and Diouf 1987)¹⁰, first adapted and applied by van Geel and Mazzucato (2018), and further extended for the purpose of the MO-TRAYL project (Mazzucato 2015; Mazzucato et al. 2022). The adapted mapping tool used for this research also considers data on participants’ main caregivers at any given time as well as their educational trajectories, including where a young person went to school, for how long, and whether any grades were repeated or skipped.

Generally, mobility trajectory mapping involves three steps: asking questions about a participant’s mobility and educational trajectory (see Appendix C for the interview guide), filling in the grid (see Appendix D for an example of a filled in grid), and making a visual representation of the data to be discussed with the respondent (see Appendix E for an example of a mobility map used during fieldwork and Figure 3.2). Adhering to a youth-centric “no-size-fits-all” approach, these steps were applied in different ways throughout fieldwork. Sometimes data collection occurred in a single interview and functioned as an introductory activity that was engaging and allowed young people to gain insights into what it means to be part of a research project. Other times, the systematic mapping exercise was done after having spent some time with participants in different settings to establish rapport. And still other times, it felt more natural to have informal conversations with the participant and fill in the grid alone

¹⁰ While not an inspiration for the MO-TRAYL mapping tool, a notable mention must go to the Swedish human geographer Torsten Hägerstrand who developed ‘time geography’ in the mid-1960s. Time geography includes its own notation system – and a visual language different from that of Antoine, Bry, and Diouf (1987) – to record spatial and temporal processes and events of people. For an overview and applications of Hägerstrand’s work, see for example Ellegård (2019).

afterwards. Irrespective of the format, I made sure to ask all questions on the interview guide to be able to visualize young people's mobility trajectories later on. Such visualizations were useful to check the information, correct or add data, look for patterns, and to elicit more information about the participants' mobility and educational experiences (for more information on and applications of mobility trajectory mapping, see Mazzucato et al. 2022).

Visualizing mobility trajectories was a powerful and versatile analytical tool that helped to make visible new patterns or connections regarding how young people are engaged in and affected by mobility. In this research, I used mobility trajectories to show how young people's trajectories are interlinked with those of significant others, resulting in family separation and reunification (Chapter 5); to capture changes over time in young people's mobility patterns, experiences, relationships, and transnational affective engagements (Chapter 5 and 7); and to make visible resources and benefits gained through mobility trajectories (Chapter 6 and 7). But depending on the research question, other types of information can be added to the trajectory maps. For example, overlapping educational with mobility trajectories can give insights into how educational experiences in Belgium are influenced by pre-migration schooling (see also Mazzucato et al. 2022).

Concentric-circle network mapping, the second mapping tool developed for the MO-TRAYL project, uses a template of concentric circles to gather information on important people in participants' lives, their relationship, and their location in the world. This mapping exercise is based on psychological research on social support networks (Antonucci 1986) and was adapted to gather information not only on people living in close geographical vicinity but also transnational relationships with significant others residing in other countries (Mazzucato 2015; van Geel 2019a). As such, it was a useful tool to find out more about primary caregivers and transnational peer networks of the young participants. Concentric-circle mapping involves three steps: asking participants to write down people important to them and arrange them according to importance (the most important people are placed closest to the centre), indicate people they have a difficult relationship with (see Appendix F for an example of a filled in concentric-circle template), and ask a set of questions about specific areas in their lives (e.g., their aspirations for the future; see Appendix G for the interview guide). Visualizing networks in this way is quite impactful. For example, Appendix F shows that three of the six people placed in the "most important" circle are not in Belgium where the participant resides but in Ghana. This helped to ask more specific questions about these significant others.

Mapping tools were filled in with an iPad and an Apple Pencil through the app GoodNotes. In most cases, participants were unfamiliar with these tools but quickly picked up how to use them and filled in the concentric-circle template by themselves. In one instance, a participant did not feel comfortable and instead asked me to write down the names of people important to her. To still collect accurate information, I asked this participant to point to the place on the template where I should write down her significant others. More generally, the iPad proved useful especially during first interviews because it shifted the attention towards something concrete to engage with and helped to break the ice. See Figure 3.3 for an example of a young man's scribbling on the iPad while he explained the Ghanaian education system to me and gave details on his educational experiences before coming to Belgium. He was initially very tense but loosened up after taking over the iPad.

thereof, also enriching written accounts of events and scenes. Drawings proved especially useful in paying attention to and capturing embodied, sensory, and emotional aspects during research. Further, looking at my drawings later, instantly transported me back to the fieldwork situation and brought back not only what I saw but also the way I felt (see Figure 3.4, 3.5 and 3.6 for examples of drawn fieldnotes).



Figure 3.4 Conversation with two older members of the Ghanaian community, fieldnotes 08 February 2018



Figure 3.5 Observation in a reception class, fieldnotes 07 June 2019



Figure 3.6 Impressions of participants during the MO-TRAYL writing workshop, 01 July 2019

In some instances, drawing helped me to process my own emotions during fieldwork, which I was not (yet) able to put into words. Other times, verbalizing details or brief encounters either felt too exhausting or seemed to render them irrelevant. Sketching these scenes offered an alternative outlet and a strategy to escape written ethnographic descriptions (Causey 2017; Taussig 2011). Drawing thus provided space for self-expression and experimentation.

Drawing was also useful to facilitate the thinking process as “the drawing is not a visible shadow of a mental event; *it is a process of thinking, not the projection of a thought*” (Ingold 2013, 128; see also Hendrickson 2008). As such, the act of drawing was also a powerful sense-making tool, both during fieldwork and data analysis (Ingold 2011; Kuttner, Sousanis, and Weaver-Hightower 2018). Comic-based analysis, or word-picture interactions, helped me to explore emerging ideas, focus on the embodied and sensory aspects of young people’s and my own experiences in different environments, and reorganize the data into a logical order to bring across a story (Galman 2022). See Figures 3.7 and 3.8 for initial analytical drawings that resulted in insights for Chapters 6 and 7, respectively.



Figure 3.7 Analytical drawings on the personal growth benefits of country-of-origin visits

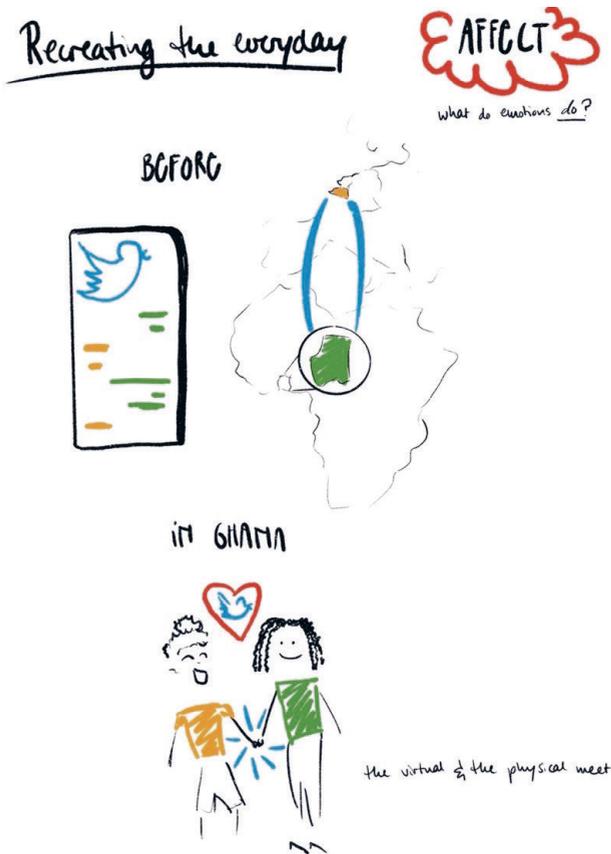


Figure 3.8 Analytical drawings on how digital media and visits shape transnational engagements over time

3.6 Ethical considerations

Before embarking on fieldwork, we received ethical approval for the different MO-TRAYL case studies through the Ethical Review Committee at Maastricht University. Some of the issues addressed in our application dealt with confidentiality, vulnerable research populations, data protection and privacy, and informed consent. The following section offers some reflections on how informed consent was approached during fieldwork and briefly touches upon other issues.

3.6.1 Informed consent

In this study, I asked the young research participants to provide oral consent and approached consent as a process. We had chosen for oral consent in the MO-TRAYL project considering that all participants had a migration background and written consent forms could appear threatening or convey a sense of surveillance or authority of the researcher (Düvell, Triandafyllidou, and Vollmer 2010). Raising suspicion through such formal procedures would have been counterproductive and not contributed to truly informing participants, in which case it is “possible and appropriate [...] to obtain informed verbal consent” (ASA 2011, 2). I always clearly outlined what the research entailed, assured participants’ anonymity and confidentiality, and explained that withdrawal was always possible.

In addition to the initial oral consent, I treated informed consent as a “dynamic and continuous” process (AAA 2009, 3; see also Cutcliffe and Ramcharan 2002). This reflects the processual nature of fieldwork itself, including the changing nature of the relationship between the researcher and the informant which requires to continually negotiate access to the field (Swartz 2011; Venkatesh 2002). This was done by regularly reminding participants about the research – for example by asking to meet for an interview, reiterating the research aims, or commenting that something was interesting for my research – while at the same time trying to protect relationships of trust that I had built over time. The vignette of Marilyn at the beginning of this chapter, for example, showed that I casually suggested to visit her in Ghana rather than asking whether I could accompany her for research purposes because our relationship was still fragile. This way, spending time in Ghana actively contributed to building rapport. I let Marilyn decide how she wanted to introduce me to her family, and while I mentioned my PhD research, it was up to Marilyn whether she wanted to talk about her participation in it. After the Ghana trip, I had another opportunity of reminding her about the research when we met for another interview to discuss her mobility experiences.

There was one instance in which oral consent by research participants was not deemed sufficient by a gatekeeper, requiring some negotiation and flexibility to access the field. The headmaster of one of the schools through which I gained access to several young people of Ghanaian background asked me to obtain written parental consent before engaging in research activities with students who were under the age of 18 years. Where applicable, I explained to young people that, while it was most important to me that *they* expressed wanting to speak about their experiences, unfortunately the school would only let me talk to them after receiving their parents' consent in writing. I then handed out a form in both Dutch and English that outlined what I also discussed with them: the research objective, information about privacy and withdrawal, and my contact details.

Having to formalize consent in this one institution, in fact, led to several ethical challenges. For example, I introduced the research to three friends (all aged 14) who spent a lot of time together at school. They all agreed enthusiastically to participate, preferably through group interviews and activities. Yet, when only two of them brought back the filled in consent form, I had to make sure to only do research activities when the third was not present, which was against their clearly stated preference. Over time, this was no longer an issue because participants felt comfortable enough to invite me to their house and engage with me outside of school. Furthermore, the young man who never returned the consent form started contacting me via WhatsApp to tell me about difficulties at home and to ask for my help, as did his sister from Ghana. This put me in a difficult position because I had clear instructions from the school to only discuss sensitive issues after obtaining parental consent and because I did not think I was in any position, especially as a white researcher, to intervene in the private life of this young man whom I just recently met and hardly knew anything about. In consultation with my supervisor, I decided to listen to the young man's concerns via WhatsApp but suggested that he approach friends or acquaintances from the Ghanaian community for help. I made sure to check-in regularly and learned that others were looking out for him. Further, with careful probing and without revealing anything the young man had told me, I found out from his teacher that the educational staff was aware of his situation and ready to intervene if necessary.

Informed consent was approached differently for secondary informants who participated in an official capacity, such as interviews with experts, social workers, and young people's teachers. I explained the research to them and asked them to sign a written consent form that contained an explanation of the research project and data management protocols. While not all

secondary informants thought it necessary to anonymize their accounts, I still decided to opt for protecting their privacy to the greatest extent possible.

3.7 Reflexivity and positionality

Reflexivity – thinking about how the researcher’s social positions, or positionality, shape entrance and interactions in the field – is considered a core principle in qualitative research that is important at all stages of the research (Burawoy 1998; Lichterman 2017). Depending on the context and the person I was interacting with, different aspects of my identity were more salient than others in shaping field dynamics (see also Flores 2016; Reyes 2020). Some of my characteristics were noticeable for most at first encounter in the field: I am white, female, German, and at 29 years old when entering the field, significantly older than most of the participants of this research. Other characteristics were more subtle, and I had a little more control over when and why to reveal them to negotiate field relationships (see also Reyes 2020): I grew up going to church and attended a Ghanaian church as a child, I had attended higher education in Belgium and the Netherlands and speak Dutch, I have four siblings, I am part of a multi-cultural patchwork family, and I have travelled frequently.

Throughout fieldwork, I approached young people of Ghanaian background through diverse channels and always tried to move relationships to different spaces (see also Section 3.5.1). This made me aware of the different roles that were ascribed to me and how these changed over time and depending on the environment. For example, using schools as an entry point meant that I spent time in the teachers’ room, had the same age as some of the teachers, and sometimes was even introduced by teachers as the “new teacher” when I first came for class observations. Even after explaining to respondents that I was in fact not a teacher, it took time and deliberate efforts – such as tolerating or laughing along with rule-breaking behaviour in class – to change these perceptions and build up relationships of trust.

In other ways, I was seen as quite youthful because I had not reached some of the typical social markers of adulthood. I am neither married nor do I have children and doing a PhD was also perceived in many instances as still going to school and not having found employment yet. Some members of the youth groups in Ghanaian churches were in fact older than me. While there often still were power imbalances due to my age, I tried to break these open in different ways by putting respondents in the expert position, for example, by taking Twi lessons from them or having them take me on a tour through their neighbourhood. My fieldwork in Ghana also contributed to inverting or minimizing hierarchies because participants felt they needed to

take care of me and had the cultural and practical knowledge to navigate everyday life in Ghana.

3.7.1 Implications and benefits of doing team research

At the beginning of this chapter, I mentioned the collaboration between the different members of the MO-TRAYL project. Here, I will share some reflections on how this teamwork has benefitted my individual study throughout all phases of the research. At the start of the project, the different MO-TRAYL researchers spent a whole year working together during which we discussed theory and methodology, developed our common framework, and importantly also became better acquainted and built trust among each other. During data collection, the MO-TRAYL PhD candidates regularly shared fieldnote excerpts and summary sheets updating the other researchers on emerging findings and events in the field, and subsequently discussed these in Skype meetings with all team members. Such discussions alerted us to interesting connections between fieldsites, raised useful questions and enabled us to identify differences and commonalities between young people's lives in the fieldsites, often facilitating further investigation in the field. The collaboration and support continued after returning from the field as we regularly read each other's fieldnotes and writings, provided feedback and engaged in discussions. Below, I give some examples of the nature and benefits of team research in the MO-TRAYL project.

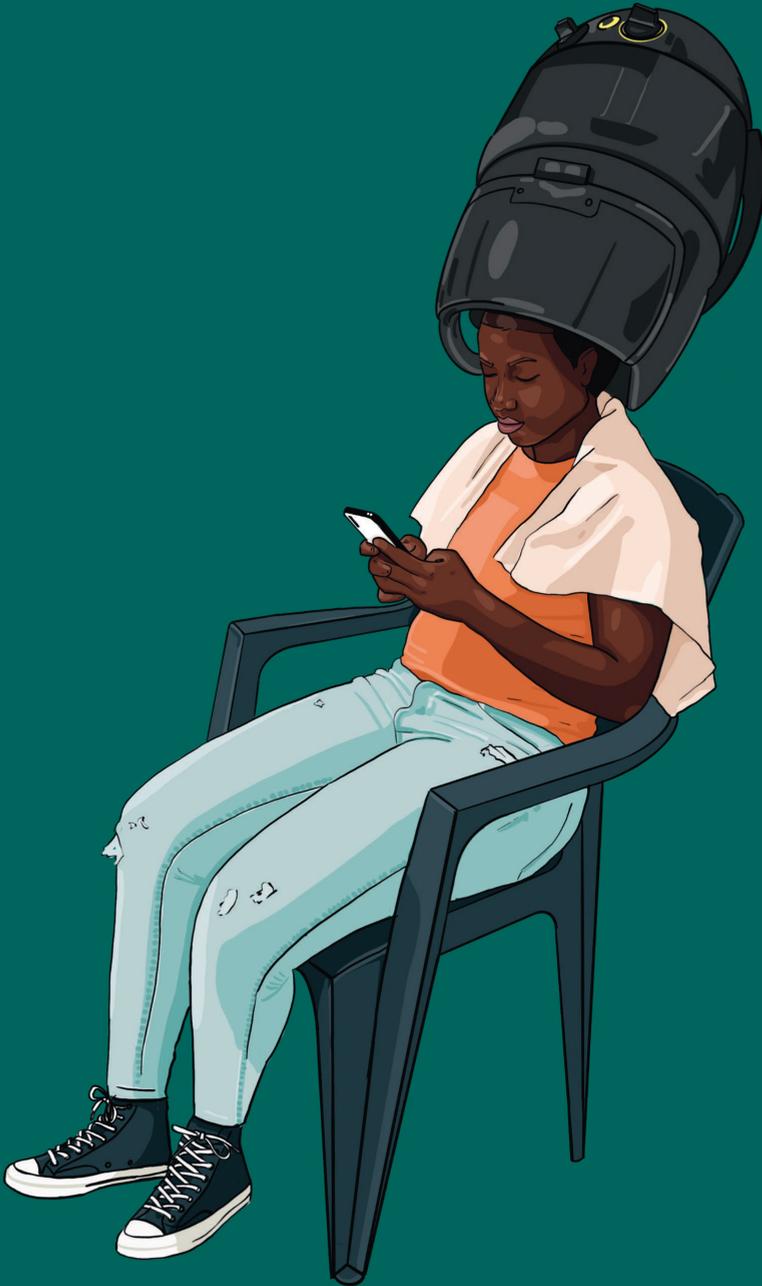
First, Gladys Akom Ankobrey, the MO-TRAYL researcher based in The Hague, built up a network that reached into Belgium and generously shared information on events and brought me in touch with people from the Ghanaian community in Antwerp. Our fieldsites were also connected through churches that had branches in both Antwerp and The Hague so that we attended the same church events on several occasions, shared our fieldnotes afterwards, and discussed and reflected upon our insights and positionalities. For example, these discussions brought out that Gladys was more likely seen as an 'insider' in the church setting due to her Dutch and Ghanaian background, which was noticeable by how the pastor introduced her as a fellow Ghanaian or by the questions she was asked about the Dutch educational system. Yet this did not mean that I was automatically an 'outsider'. In fact, I had been going to that particular church for several months and therefore knew how to act or what was considered appropriate during church services. This insider position in terms of my learned embodied behaviour was in turn useful for Gladys as they functioned as cues for her.

Second, discussions with the Hamburg-based researcher Laura J. Ogden brought to the fore that Ghanaian-background youth have contrasting experiences in schools in Hamburg and Antwerp. While young people in Hamburg were thriving in schools and praised by their teachers, participants in my fieldsite experienced low teacher expectations, were often oriented towards “lower” tracks, and had to be very confident to deal with these obstacles without being discouraged. This guided my attention towards the role of context-specific factors in Belgium (see also Chapter 4 for more information on the Belgian education system) and helped me to evaluate the importance of the resources that young people gain during country-of-origin visits, which equip them with self-confidence and multiply the possible educational and career pathways they could take (see Chapter 6). Third, Onallia Esther Osei, the researcher based in Ghana, always patiently answered my questions related to specificities of the Ghanaian context. Our mutual interest in and discussions of the role of digital media in transnational relationships immensely helped to sharpen the argument of Chapter 7. The multi-sited nature of the MO-TRAYL project and the international and interdisciplinary research team thus provided opportunities to reflect on and learn from each other’s knowledge and position in the field, and ultimately added more complexity and richness to this research.

Moreover, due to MO-TRAYL’s mixed-method design, I was able to evaluate whether observations I made in a small sample were in line with findings from the larger and more systematic data collection of the quantitative sub-project in the final stages of the research. Contrastingly, the quantitative study benefitted from the four ethnographic projects that gave insights into mechanisms of how mobility affects young people’s lives and informed the interpretation of the results.

3.8 Concluding remarks

This chapter discussed the transnational research design and methodological and ethical considerations that guided this research. The youth-centric, multi-sited and mobile approach of this research allowed me to capture young people’s embeddedness in transnational networks as well as their mobility experiences over their life course and in real time. I have further explained how the collaboration in an international and interdisciplinary research team has shaped both data collection and analysis throughout the different phases of the study. After having established both the theoretical and methodological background of this study, the next chapter introduces the relevant contexts in which young people of Ghanaian background are situated.



4

SITUATING YOUTH OF GHANAIAAN BACKGROUND
IN THE MULTI-LOCAL CONTEXTS

4.1 Introduction

This chapter situates Ghanaian-background youth who grow up between Ghana and Belgium within these multi-local contexts. To fully understand how young people's mobility trajectories shape their lives, it is necessary to consider the countries of origin *and* residence. Most participants of this study spent a significant part of their life in Ghana before migrating to Belgium. Also those participants born in European countries engaged in trips to Ghana. As such, it is important to understand what meanings are attached to mobility in the Ghanaian context and how legal frameworks for migration to Belgium affect young people's lives in Belgium. Furthermore, the effects of young people's trips to Ghana can be better understood if contrasted with young people's daily experiences in Belgium that are to a large part shaped by migration regimes and the educational system.

This chapter starts with a historical overview of Ghanaian migration (Section 4.2). This is followed by a description of the Belgian context of reception (Section 4.3), in which I focus on two institutional contexts. First, I outline the Belgian migration policies most relevant for Ghanaian migrants, paying particular attention to family reunification policies, and describe discourses on migration prevalent in Flanders that shape how youth mobility is understood and dealt with (Section 4.3.1). Second, I provide an overview of the Belgian education system and its relationship to mobility (Section 4.3.2). This is important because educational institutions remain one of the driving forces in directing migrant youth towards specific trajectories during and after secondary school in European countries (Crul, Schneider, and Lelie 2012).

4.2 Ghanaian migration: an overview

Migration has been integral to the Ghanaian way of life for centuries, with most migration occurring within Ghana and the West African region as part of labour markets, livelihood strategies, and religious and intellectual exchange (Awumbila 2018; Manuh 2006). From pre-colonial times to the late 1960s, Ghana was an important immigration country due to the country's economic prosperity and demand for labour (Anarfi et al. 2003). Self-employed traders from neighbouring countries brought their commodities to sell on Ghanaian markets (Rouch 1959), and the development of gold mines, cocoa farms and palm oil plantations attracted large numbers of migrants mainly from the West African region (Anarfi et al. 2003; Awumbila 2018). During this time, emigration from Ghana was minimal and mostly occurred

among students and professionals who migrated to the United Kingdom or other Anglophone countries due to colonial ties (Anarfi, Awusabo-Asare, and Nuamah 2000).

After 1965, Ghana's economic situation deteriorated, which manifested in growing unemployment, inflation, and aggravating living conditions (Anarfi et al. 2003; Peil 1995). The emigration that succeeded can be separated into two broader phases¹¹: out-migration to neighbouring countries, followed by an increasing diversification of destinations from the 1980s onward. Because of the economic crisis in Ghana, both Ghanaian citizens and foreigners started to move abroad to seek better economic opportunities in the West African region (Anarfi et al. 2003). Oil-rich Nigeria became one of the main migrant destinations due to its booming economy and high demand for both professionals and low-skilled workers, as a result of the drastic increase in oil prices after 1973 (Adepoju 2005; Awumbila 2018). Flows of emigration from Ghana were further propelled by the formation of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) in 1975 that aimed to facilitate freedom of movement, residence and employment within the 16 West Africa member states (Afolayan 1988). It is estimated that about two million Ghanaians, mainly from the south, left for Nigeria or Côte d'Ivoire between 1974 and 1981 (Rimmer 1992). Migrants who had studied or trained abroad, either stayed behind after their training or returned to those countries for work during the economic crisis in Ghana (Anarfi et al. 2003).

Ghanaian emigration intensified in the early 1980s due to political instability, economic collapse and dwindling food supplies in the country (Peil 1995). The situation further deteriorated when the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund implemented the structural adjustment programme (SAP) in 1983 in response to the economic downturn. This included the removal of subsidies for social services, such as health, transport and education, which contributed to growing unemployment and social malaise and led to further emigration (Clark and Manuh 1991; Peil, 1995). Professionals, but also increasingly more unskilled and semi-skilled Ghanaian workers, moved to neighbouring countries in the search for economic opportunities (Anarfi 1982). Many Ghanaians found employment in Nigeria as teachers, secretaries, skilled artisans and construction workers, as Nigerians left their jobs for more lucrative business in the thriving oil industry (Peil 1995). Yet Ghanaian migration to Nigeria

¹¹ Anarfi et al. (2003) distinguish between four phases of emigration related to the *intensity* of out-migration from Ghana (minimal emigration, initial emigration, large-scale emigration, and intensification and diasporisation of Ghanaians). I instead refer to two phases of emigration here to show the *geographical diversification* of out-migration as represented in the shift from the West African region to the more distant destinations in the Global North.

came to a halt when the Nigerian economy declined in the 1980s due to the collapse of global oil prices and the government's mismanagement of the oil boom. In an attempt to handle the crisis, the Nigerian government ordered the expulsion of about two million ECOWAS nationals in 1983 and 1985, of which at least one million were Ghanaians (Afolayan 1988; Anarfi et al. 2003). The Ghanaian government urged them to return to farm labour in Ghana, yet many went back to Nigeria or other countries that offered higher wages, and increasingly Ghanaians sought greener pastures overseas as well (Peil 1995).

4.2.1 Diversification of destinations: Migration to the Global North

While intra-regional migration is still the principal form of migration in West Africa (Awumbila 2018), Ghanaian migration to overseas destinations increased steadily and diversified over the past decades (Schans et al. 2013). The share of Ghanaian migrations to Europe grew from less than 20% between 1975-1989 to almost 50% in the early 2000s (Schoumaker et al. 2018), making Ghanaians one of the main groups of 'new African diasporas' in the Global North since the 1990s (Koser 2003). These changes are the result of technological enhancements – most notably more affordable airline costs and greater access to long-distance communication – (Peil 1995) and emerging opportunities as well as constraints in several destination countries. While Nigeria used to be the major destination for Ghanaians, the end of the oil boom and the subsequent massive expulsions of Ghanaians in the 1980s, meant that Nigeria ceased to be an option for Ghanaians. Due to a lack of better opportunities in the region, Ghanaian migrants migrated more and more to Europe and North America. Thus, even though many European countries introduced increasingly restrictive policies that made immigration more difficult from the 1980s onward, the lack of opportunities in African destinations and growing labour demands in some European countries still contributed to growing migrations from Ghana to Europe. The profiles of migrants to these 'new' European destinations – in Belgium, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, and Spain – differed from migrants to the more 'traditional' destination countries such as the UK and the US in terms of education and gender (Schoumaker et al. 2018).

Many highly educated and highly skilled professionals, including doctors, nurses, lecturers, and engineers, migrated to Anglophone countries to be able to practise their professions and earn better wages (Awumbila 2018; Schoumaker et al. 2018). A higher representation of less-skilled Ghanaians ended up in countries, such as Germany, the

Netherlands and Belgium (Orozco et al. 2005; Boon and Ahenkan 2012). In terms of gender, research shows that that women are increasingly represented in higher numbers among African migrants in Europe (Adepoju 2004; Schoumaker et al. 2018). Traditionally, migration flows have been male-dominated with women mostly migrating as family dependents, travelling with their husbands or reuniting with them abroad (Awumbila and Torvikeh 2018). Yet since the 1970s, a growing number of women migrate independently as skilled and unskilled workers, entrepreneurs and traders to cope with the deepening poverty in the region. As also mentioned above, highly skilled women, especially health care professionals, such as doctors and nurses, migrate to ‘traditional’ Anglophone destinations in the Global North (Adepoju 2005; Anarfi and Kwankye 2003). The feminization of migration was supported by the fact that many Ghanaian women, especially from the south, customarily have more economic autonomy and are at the same time expected to be self-sufficient, which facilitated independent migration and allowed them to reap the benefits of employment opportunities abroad (Peil 1995). As women are drawn into forms of employment that might be less compatible with childcare and are increasingly required to migrate independently over longer distances and longer periods of time to provide for their families, many leave their children in the care of family members or foster parents in Ghana (Anarfi et al. 2003; Awumbila and Torvikeh 2018).

International migration has been a known and valued phenomenon in Ghana for centuries, first as a survival strategy but by 1980s increasingly as a means to economic mobility and a form of transition into adulthood (Awumbila 2018). Returnees founding successful businesses with the profits of their employment abroad and returned students adopting European lifestyles once back in Ghana encouraged more young people to follow their example (Martin 2007; Peil 1995). The association of migration with success, fuelled by images and discourses in mass media, further strengthened migration aspirations, and most emigrants from Ghana are young adults who leave as soon as they can afford it (Brydon 1979; Peil 1995).

The above-mentioned factors contributed to large-scale intercontinental migration, and a diversification of destinations and migrants, including skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled workers, students, and family migrants (Anarfi et al. 2003; Awumbila, Badasu, and Teye 2018; Peil 1995). Besides African countries in the region and Anglophone destinations, Ghanaians increasingly migrated to non-Anglophone countries in Europe (Awumbila 2018; Schans et al. 2013; Schoumaker et al. 2018). With a population of 30 million Ghanaians resident in Ghana, at least another million lived outside the country in 2019 (IOM 2020). The Ashanti and Greater Accra regions were the main places of origin for Ghanaian migrants living abroad, constituting

half of the total number. African countries accounted for 49% of the Ghanaian immigrant stock, with Nigeria being the top destination country. The top ten OECD countries for Ghanaians in 2018 were the United States, Italy, Germany, Spain, Canada, the Netherlands, Belgium, Japan, the Republic of Korea, and Turkey (OECD 2018). Figure 4.1 illustrates the stock of Ghanaian migrants worldwide by country of destination in 2015.

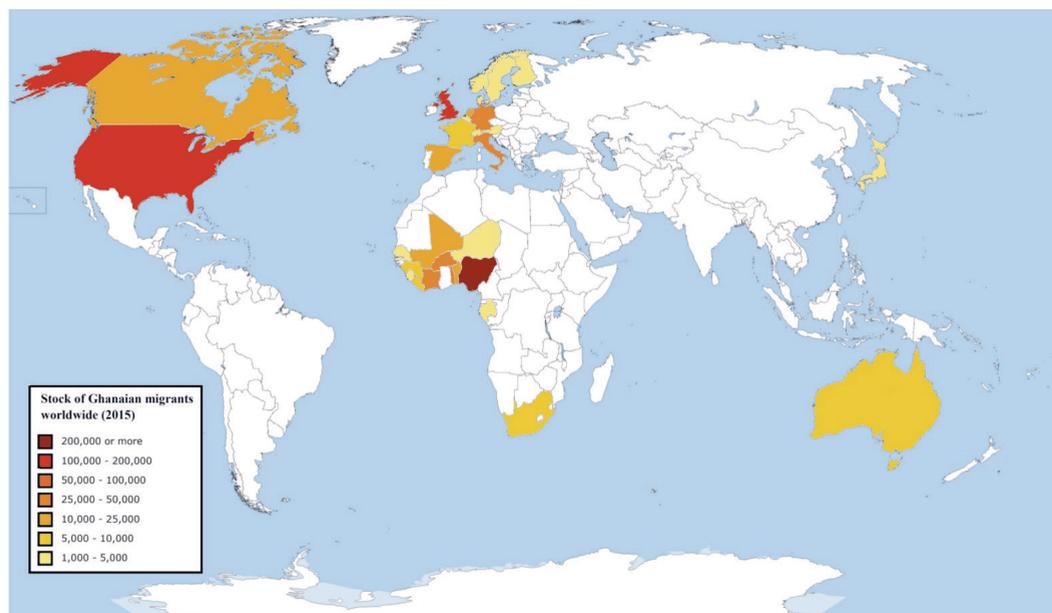


Figure 4.1 Stock of Ghanaian migrants by country of destination in 2015. The figures for South Africa, Burkina Faso, Mali, Niger, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Benin, Guinea, Nigeria, and Togo include the number of refugees, as reported by UNHCR. The figures for the other countries refer to foreign-born Ghanaians or foreign citizens but do not include undocumented migrants. All European countries refer to foreign-born Ghanaians, except for Belgium where figures refer to foreign citizens, a significantly lower number. In 2015, there were 4,573 Ghanaian citizens in all of Belgium (UN-DESA 2015), compared to 3,544 foreign-born Ghanaians in Antwerp alone the same year (Stad in Cijfers 2021). (Map designed by the author.)

There is a notable lack of data on Ghanaian migration to Belgium. While the first Ghanaians were recorded in the Flemish city of Ghent as early as 1968, immigration picked up in the 1980s after the expulsions from Nigeria (COJG 2014). A survey conducted in 2008 with a representative sample of 120 Ghanaian migrants resident in Flanders indicates that two third of the Ghanaian population immigrated in the 1990s and 13,8% in the early 2000s (Boon and Ahenkan 2012). Statistics on these migration flows to Belgium can be found through nationality or recent nationality change, yet Ghanaians who naturalized are difficult to trace.

Accounting for officially registered foreigners, “new Belgians” and natural net migration, Hertogen (2012) calculated that there were 10,080 Ghanaian migrants in Belgium in 2012. Taking into consideration the large numbers of undocumented migrants, the size of the Ghanaian community is likely to be double the “official” size (Mazzucato 2008b; Minderhedencentrum de8 2009).

4.3 The Belgian reception context

Belgium is a small country, yet its complex federal landscape shapes how and where different competences – such as immigration, integration, and education – are managed within the country. It is therefore necessary to briefly explain the complex government structure in order to understand Belgium as a reception context for migrants. As also illustrated in Figure 4.2, the Belgian federal system consists of three territorial regions and three (cultural) linguistic communities. The territorial regions include Flanders in the north, Wallonia in the south, and the Brussels-Capital region. Each region has its own government with its own parliament. The three linguistic communities are Dutch-speaking (in Flanders and Brussels), French-speaking (in Wallonia and Brussels), and German-speaking (in specific areas in Wallonia). Whereas immigration issues are a federal concern handled by the national government, integration and education are managed by the country’s language communities since 1989. Throughout this section, I thus refer to either the national or the community level depending on the matter I am discussing.

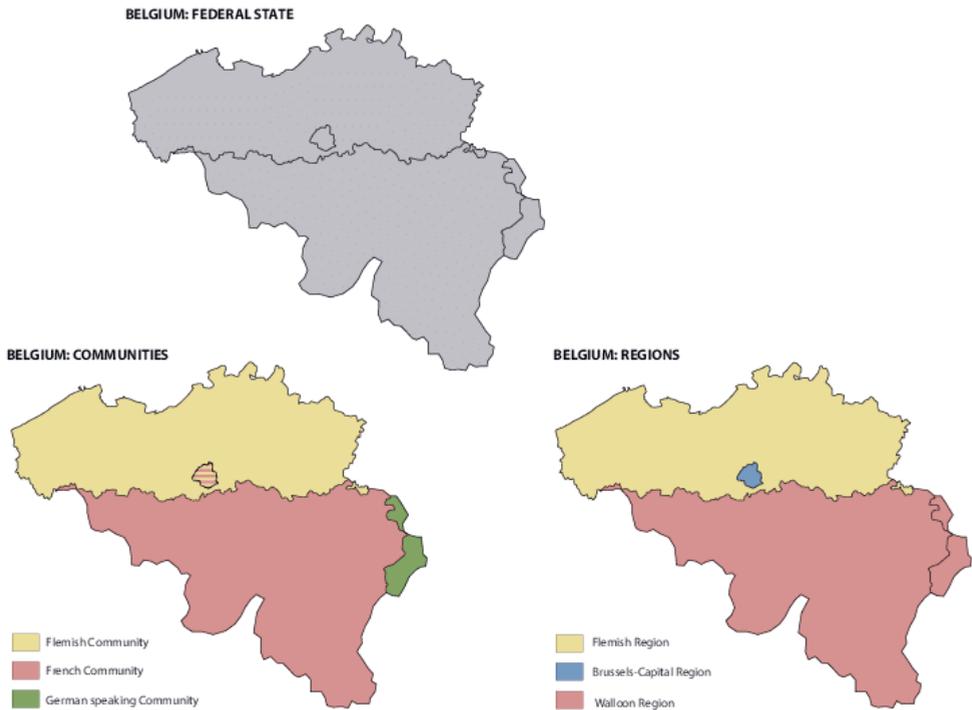


Figure 4.2 The federal landscape of Belgium, copyright Flanders Heritage Agency.

4.3.1 Migration regimes in Belgium: legal framework and political climate

Ghanaian migrants in Belgium are part of Europe’s ‘new’ immigrant population (Grillo and Mazzucato 2008) that has different characteristics and faces different contextual factors than older migrant groups that came to European countries as guest workers (Mazzucato 2008b). ‘New’ economic migrants, like Ghanaians who started coming to Belgium in the 1980s and 1990s, were met with strict entry criteria. The only options to legally enter and stay in the country were through family reunification and asylum (Martiniello 2003) as Belgium had passed its first law in 1981 – the so-called Aliens Act – to regulate entrance, residence, settlement and removal of foreigners (DEMIG 2015). Under this law, foreigners could be deported if they did not have proper documentation or constituted a threat to public order or national security. Many Ghanaians whose asylum applications were rejected in the early years either stayed in Belgium without papers and in precarious conditions, returned to Ghana, or temporarily stayed in other European countries (COJG 2014).

These experiences are significantly different from the experiences of guest workers who, though also facing difficulties and enduring inequality in Belgium, were actively recruited by the Belgian government until the 1970s due to increasing labour demands. In the 1920s, guest workers from neighbouring countries and Central and Southern Europe, mainly from Poland and Italy, migrated to Belgium to work in the metal and mining industries (Phalet and Swyngedouw 2003). In the ‘golden sixties’, Belgium extended the scope of the foreign labour recruitment to other Southern European and non-European nations, most notably Morocco and Turkey (Lesthaeghe 2000). Even though demands for labour dried up in the 1970s and 1980s due to the economic crisis, immigration rates remained high as guest workers decided to settle and reunite with family members in Belgium (Phalet and Swyngedouw 2003). The first family reunification policies were introduced in 1946 as part of bilateral agreements that enabled reunification for all recruited workers (DEMIG 2015). Since the mid-1970s and well into the present, family reunification and family formation are the main channels migrants use to enter the country (EMN 2017; EMN Belgium 2017; Phalet and Swyngedouw 2003). Today, former guest worker families are well-established minority communities in Belgium, some in the fourth generation (Phalet and Swyngedouw 2003). Yet strong socio-economic inequalities persist for some of them. Other minority communities include immigrants from former colonies who came to Belgium mostly in the 1980s and 1990s as part of an increasingly diverse inflow of refugees and asylum seekers (Lesthaeghe 2000; Schoonvaere 2010).

Due to historical and recent migration flows, cities in Belgium have highly diverse populations. Antwerp, the main fieldsite for this study and the biggest city of Flanders with over half a million inhabitants, is home to a diverse population of 171 nationalities (Stad in Cijfers 2021). It is an example of a ‘majority-minority city’ (Crul 2016) where ‘native’ Belgians are no longer the majority: more than half of the population (51.9%) and three quarter of its youth (74.8%) have a migration background (Stad in Cijfers 2021). Yet despite this prevalence of diversity, the Flemish far-right (Vlaams Blok/Vlaams Belang) also gained strength in Flanders during the 1990s and early 2000s with anti-immigrant rhetoric (Arzheimer 2017; Oosterlynck et al. 2017). Antwerp recorded electoral victories of the far-right that grew from 17.7% of the votes in 1988 to 28% in 1994 and 33% in 2000 (Saeys et al. 2019), and as a city, Antwerp played an important role in political debates about diversity in Belgium. Even though populations are diverse in many aspects, diversity policies have been mainly concerned with ethnic and cultural differences. Political debate focused on how integration of ethnic and cultural minorities had failed, with explanations including the late establishment of integration

policies, the flexible citizenship acquisition process until recently, and the lack of control in terms of migration policies, most notably the continued possibility for migration through family reunification (Oosterlynck et al. 2017).

During the 1980s and 1990s, it was largely assumed that the acquisition of Belgian citizenship would automatically lead towards successful integration into Belgian society. This assumption was reflected in the Nationality Code of 1984, which gave foreigners the possibility to gain citizenship after seven years of continuous residence in Belgium. A law implemented in 2000, nicknamed the '*snel-Belg-wet*' ('quickly-Belgian law') by right-wing parties, further shortened this period to three years – and two years for stateless persons and refugees –, meaning that Belgium had one of the most flexible pathways to citizenship in Europe. Other European countries had already introduced formal integration tests, yet Belgium's residence-based citizenship laws neither required proof of willingness to integrate nor knowledge of any official languages spoken in the country (Adam, Martiniello, and Rea 2018; Foblets and Yanasmayan 2010; Oosterlynck et al. 2017). This, however, changed with rising concerns from political parties who feared misuse of these laws, criticized problems with integration, and ultimately implemented stricter procedures for citizenship acquisition and developed state-led integration policies (Oosterlynck et al. 2017).

4.3.1.1 Family migration policies

The majority of Ghanaian immigration to Belgium today happens through family reunification (Heyse et al. 2007) after other means have become less accessible. This is especially true for young people. In 2017, 20,815 young people entered the country for family reunification, almost four times the number of minors who sought asylum the same year (Federaal Migratiecentrum 2019).

Between the 1940s and 1970s, family reunification was promoted to attract foreign labour and was integral to the bilateral agreements Belgium signed with third countries from which guest workers immigrated. Family reunification was seen as a way to contribute to integration of foreigners into the Belgian society. Yet after the recruitment stop of guest workers in 1974, more conditions were put into place for family reunification after 1984 (EMN Belgium 2017), making it more difficult for family members to reunite (see Appendix H for an overview of the most important changes in Belgian family migration policy).

In 2003, the Family Migration Directive (2003/86/EC) was introduced, which led to a restrictive turn in family migration policies in many EU member states (Block and Bonjour

2013). The Directive establishes minimal guidelines, to be implemented by EU member states, as well as optional conditions that leave some flexibility for member states wishing to be less restrictive (Council of the European Union 2003). Contrary to other European countries, Belgium did not implement the Directive in a restrictive way due to domestic politics. Migration is a highly politicized topic in Flanders (Vink, Bonjour, and Adam 2015), and family migration remained a continuous political priority over the years (EMN Belgium 2017). Yet while Flemish parties wanted to put family migration on the agenda and introduce stricter measures, Francophone parties disagreed with this objective. Ultimately, the parties reached a compromise that resulted in the 2006 reform: Belgium implemented the Directive but not all of the optional conditions were implemented, particularly the socio-economic requirements related to housing and income were left out (Mascia 2021).

The second round of reforms in 2011 was considerably more restrictive. Belgian politicians wanted to align Belgian family migration policy with that of other EU member states and Francophone parties shifted towards stricter measures (Mascia 2021). Due to exceptional circumstances, an alternative majority of five Flemish parties and one Francophone party passed the restrictive family migration reform when Belgium was without a federal government for 541 days after the federal election in 2010 (Vink, Bonjour, and Adam 2015). The 2011 reform was a drastic change as it added requirements that were approaching the minimum standards set by the Directive 2003/86/EC, making family reunification for third country nationals significantly harder. It introduced socio-economic requirements, which consisted of an income requirement stipulating that sponsors need to have stable, regular and sufficient means of subsistence, sufficient housing and health insurance (EMN Belgium 2017). These measures prevent the arrival and settlement of family migrants who are not financially self-sufficient (Kofman 2018; Mascia 2021; Saroléa 2012).

Furthermore, while Belgian families previously enjoyed privileged migration rights, the 2011 reform introduced similar requirements for Belgians as for third country nationals. As a consequence, Belgian nationals had to fulfil stricter conditions than other European citizens living in Belgium in order to reunite with a foreign family member (EMN Belgium 2017). This decision was justified by policy-makers by the need to reduce marriage migration of couples comprising a Belgian of migrant descent and a partner from their country of origin, thereby racializing and othering ethnic minority citizens in Belgium (Mascia 2021; Odasso 2017). It was argued that such marriages were proof of the “failed integration” of ethnic minorities and used as a way to bypass migration legislation (Mascia 2021; Saroléa 2012). Family migration

policies in Belgium are thus increasingly classed and racialized when it comes to migrant selection (Bonjour and Chauvin 2018; Bonjour and de Hart 2013; Kofman 2018).

Reflecting the shift towards a more conservative and right-wing government over the years, there was growing concern in political debates and the media that the right to family reunification may be misused as a route to settlement in the EU (de Hart 2017; EMN 2012). Belgium introduced measures to prevent and penalize three instances of fraudulent family reunifications¹²: marriages of convenience, false declarations of parenthood, and adoptions of convenience. Belgian law has sought to combat marriages of convenience since 1999, first through preventive measures but increasingly through punitive means that include fines, imprisonment for up to five years, and removal of residence rights (EMN Belgium 2012; Foblets and Vanheule 2006). Since a new law entered into force in 2018, false declarations of parenthood are treated with similar preventive and repressive actions. UNICEF, NGOs and several civil society organizations have criticized this law for not acting in the best interest of the child and violating the Constitution (EMN 2019). Finally, adoptions of convenience were classified as misuse, referring to instances in which the purpose was to allow the adoptee (a distant family member or person outside the family) to enter Belgium and not to create a new parent-child relationship. Authorities report that instances of abuse, but also adoptions in general, sharply decreased after a reform in 2003 that required applicants to show additional proof before being able to adopt and prevented adoption of adult children (EMN Belgium 2012; Meurens and Van Caeneghem 2016). Several political parties stressed the need for stricter control of (fraudulent) family relations, yet the actual control practices have been severely criticized for perpetuating a normative Western-biased model of what constitutes a ‘genuine’ relationship, for violating human dignity, for shifting the burden of proof to applicants, and for being discriminatory on the grounds of nationality, gender, and religion (de Hart 2017).

The stringent regulations make family reunification more difficult and have implications for those wanting to migrate to Belgium for family reasons (Mazzucato et al. 2018). After the reforms in family migration policy in 2011, there was a significant drop of visa applications for familial reasons, also for Ghanaian applicants (Federaal Migratiecentrum 2015), as can be seen in Figure 4.3. The number of submitted applications started to increase again in 2016

¹² Belgium has an informal cooperation to exchange information with the Netherlands and prevent EU citizens from using the “Belgian route” – a migration route to circumvent the stricter Dutch family reunification rules by first residing in Belgium to facilitate family reunification with a third country national before moving to the Netherlands (EMN 2012).

(Federaal Migratiecentrum 2020). Furthermore, visa applications for family reunification with a Ghanaian abroad are subject to a high rejection rate. Estimates range between a 37-50% rejection rate in 2018 (Federaal Migratiecentrum 2019; Federaal Migratiecentrum, email to author 09 November 2021), which is one of the highest among all nationalities, demonstrating the complexity of the procedure and the tightening conditions for family reunification.

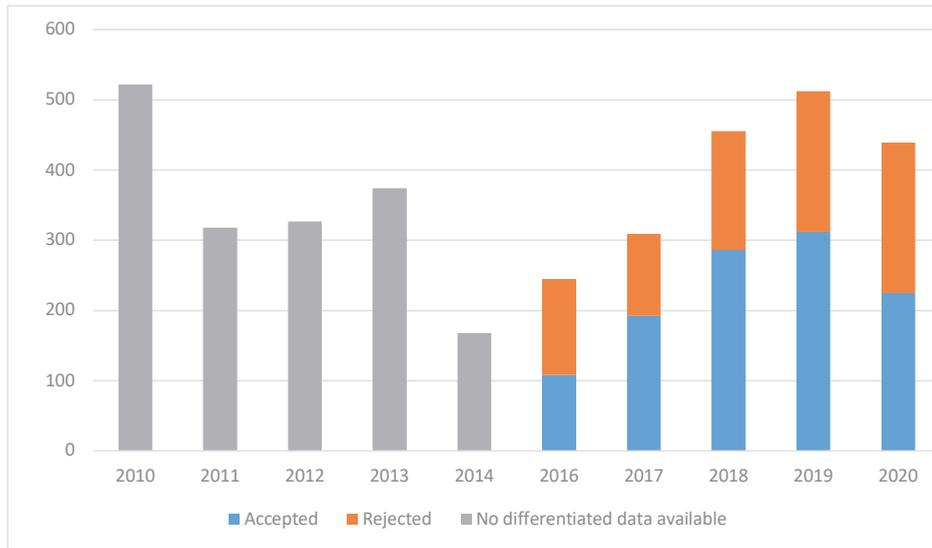


Figure 4.3 Number of applications for family reunification issued by a person with Ghanaian background between 2010-2019. The figure in 2016 only considers visa applications by Belgian or EU citizen, not by third country nationals. (Federaal migratiecentrum 2015, 2017; FOD Buitenlandse Zaken. Statistics not published in the yearly reports by Federaal migratiecentrum were communicated to the author via email in October and November 2021. Graph compiled by the author.)

4.3.1.2 Ghanaian community in Flanders and Antwerp

The Ghanaian community has been growing steadily over the past decades through family reunification and birth. The majority of Ghanaians in Belgium remains part of the so-called ‘first generation’, as I have observed during fieldwork and learned from conversations with Ghanaian community members and a social worker who had been working closely with adults and youth of Ghanaian background. Ghanaian migrants are dispersed throughout Belgium, yet mostly clustered around the bigger cities of Antwerp, Gent and Brussels. The largest Ghanaian community is located in Antwerp, where it forms the biggest migrant group from Sub-Saharan Africa with a size of 3,977 registered Ghanaians in 2021 (Stad in Cijfers 2021). Table 4.1 gives

an overview on the development of the Ghanaian community over the period from 2012 to 2021, comparing statistics of the Ghanaian population by origin and by nationality.

Ghanaian population in Antwerp		2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Based on origin	Youth (12-24)	571	602	633	651	674	686	716	739	792
	Total	3032	3281	3457	3544	3652	3739	3769	3869	3967
Based on nationality	Youth (12-24)	232	241	273	298	291	277	260	257	288
	Total	1322	1349	1407	1414	1384	1300	1193	1163	1182

Table 4.1 Data on Ghanaian population in Antwerp by origin and by nationality. (Stad in Cijfers 2021, table compiled by author.)

The indicated size of the Ghanaian community is likely an underestimation due to a number of undocumented migrants in Belgium. While it is difficult to know the exact size of the undocumented population, common procedures to make estimations include considering the percentage of rejected asylum applications or the number of regularized asylum seekers (Samenlevingsopbouw Brussel 2019). Based on the number of asylum applications submitted by Africans in the context of a regularization campaign in 2000, as many as half of Sub-Saharan African migrants could be undocumented in Antwerp according to the city's integration centre (Minderhedencentrum de8 2009; see also Mazzucato 2008b).

Most Ghanaians migrate to Belgium, and Flanders in particular, for economic reasons, seeking better employment and higher wages. While having a variety of educational backgrounds in Ghana, the vast majority is employed in low-skilled jobs in factories, on farms and in sanitation in Belgium (Boon and Ahenkan 2012). Ghanaian migrants are dispersed throughout the city but tend to live in more disadvantaged neighbourhoods in the outskirts of Antwerp, which is especially the case for young people aged 12-24, the age group most relevant for this research (Stad in Cijfers 2021). These neighbourhoods used to be part of the industrial belt with historically high concentrations of foreigners, and today, are neighbourhoods where the median income is lowest (Oosterlynck et al. 2017). Figure 4.4 shows where young people of Ghanaian background live in the city of Antwerp.

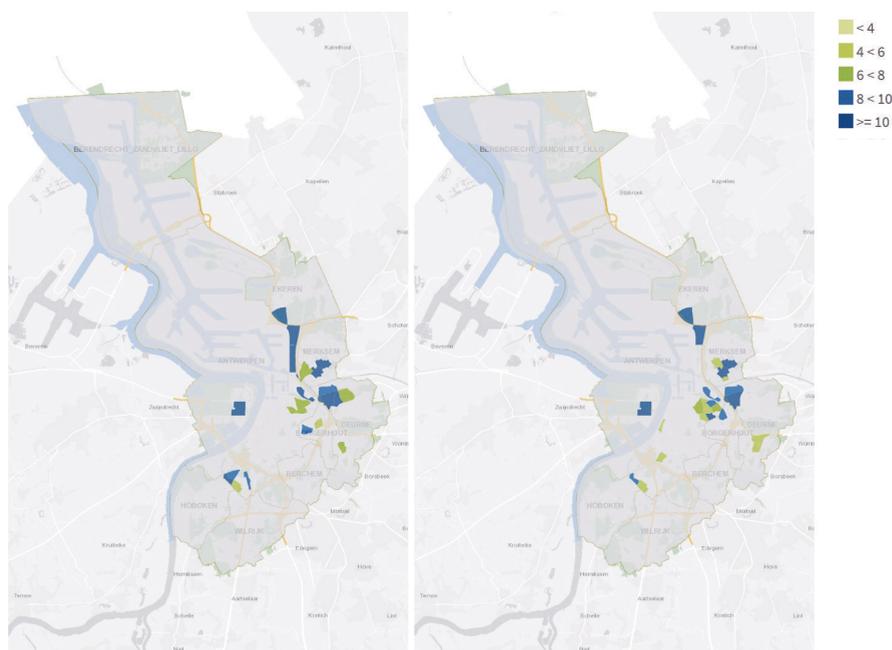


Figure 4.4 Distribution of Ghanaian youth in Antwerp (aged 12-17 and 18-24) in 2019. Ghanaian population by origin. Ghanaian youth aged 12-17 are shown on the left, and Ghanaian youth aged 18-24 are shown on the right. (Stad in Cijfers 2021)

4.3.2 Education system in Belgium

School is an important institutional context that shapes the lives of migrant youth in significant ways (Crul, Schneider and Lelie 2012; Ogbu and Simons 1998). Due to the educational organization in Belgium, almost all educational responsibilities were transferred to the (cultural) linguistic communities in the context of the federal restructuring in 1989 (De Vries 2010). This section therefore only focuses on the Flemish community. I give an overview of the educational system in Flanders, mainly focusing on secondary education and the reception classes for newcomers in Belgium, and briefly discuss how migration and mobility are treated within the system. I pay particular attention to how structural features negatively impact the position of young people of migration background within the educational system in Flanders.

4.3.2.1 Structural and institutional features of Flemish secondary schools

In Flanders, education is compulsory for all children between the ages of five and 18. Children spent one obligatory year in nursery education before entering primary school at the age of

six.¹³ Both primary and secondary school take six years each. While primary school is similar for all children, the secondary school system is divided into three stages of two years each and students are grouped into four different tracks: general or academic (ASO), artistic (KSO), technical (TSO), and vocational (BSO) secondary education. Within each of these tracks, a variety of specific and fixed subjects is offered (Van Praag et al. 2019). Figure 4.5 provides a graphic overview of the Flemish education system.

Schools have different track compositions in Flanders. Categorical schools – the most common school form – provide one track per school (usually academic or technical/vocational) while multilateral schools have more than one track in the same school (Van Houtte and Stevens 2009; Van Praag, Stevens, and Van Houtte 2014). Yet the distinction between tracks persists and there is generally no education in heterogeneous or mixed-ability groups (Van Houtte, Demanet, and Stevens 2012). Although different sectors (private and public) organize education, all schools are funded by the Flemish government and have the same educational objectives in terms of competences, attainment, and development targets (Vlaams Ministerie van Onderwijs en Vorming 2021). The Flemish education system is decentralized, meaning that there is no national curriculum or centralized examination (European Commission 2013). As a result, schools have high autonomy over form and content of instruction, religious or non-denominational philosophies¹⁴, pedagogical ideologies, educational objectives, and school regulations (De Vries 2010). Teachers are responsible for designing, administering, and grading examinations of the students they teach, and congregate at the end of each school year to decide whether students should repeat a school year or pass to the next year, and to which educational track (Van Praag et al. 2019). This decision is based on students' exam results, and the motivational and behavioural characteristics of the students (Stevens 2007).

¹³ At the time of fieldwork, education was compulsory between the ages of six and 18. The obligatory year in nursery education was added on 01 September 2020.

¹⁴ While in theory schools have autonomy over religious philosophies, in practice, it remains more difficult to establish Islamic schools as compared to other denominations.

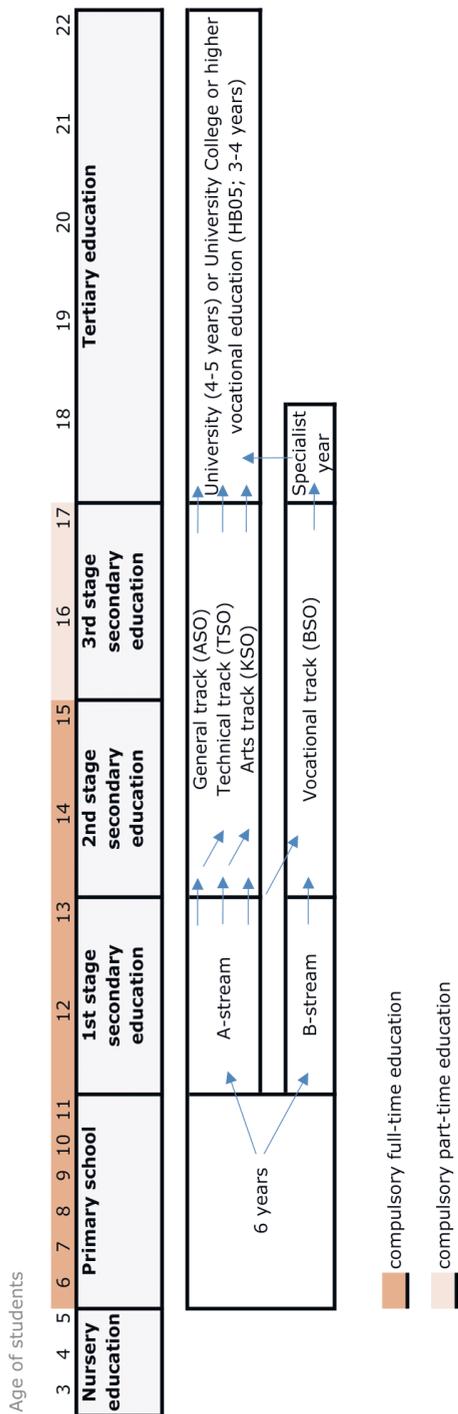


Figure 4.5 Flemish education system. (Eurydice 2014, Van Praag et al. 2019, graph slightly adapted by author.)

In theory, tracking only starts in the third year of secondary education. However, in reality, the supposedly comprehensive first two years of secondary education already initiate an early form of tracking as they sort students in academically or vocationally oriented schools. The full tracking system starts in year three of secondary education and generally steers students of the academic track towards higher education, while the technical track prepares students for either higher education or skilled technical professions, and the vocational track directs students towards lower skilled professions after secondary education (De Vries 2010). There are no centralized tests in the Flemish education system. Schools decide on the methods and criteria to assess a student's performance, both at the end of primary education and throughout secondary education (Boone and Van Houtte 2013; De Vries 2010).

At the end of each school year in secondary education, students receive one of three attestats that determines whether a transition to the next year is possible. A so-called 'A-attest' means a student passes and has free choice of profiles. A 'B-attest' means the student passes but there are one or more tracks and/or profiles that cannot be chosen in the next school year. If the student still chooses to continue with a profile he or she has no access to, the school year needs to be repeated to attain an A-attest. Finally, a 'C-attest' means that a student needs to repeat the school year.¹⁵ Grade retention is a common practice in Flanders, often used by teachers when students do not comply with educational norms, and increases the risk that students stream downwards and leave education or training early, particularly if students have a migration background (Crul 2013; Flemish Ministry of Education and Training 2018; Van Praag et al. 2018).

Educational systems that are characterized by (early) tracking further reflect, explicitly or implicitly, a status hierarchy that is shared by teachers, parents and students alike. The vocational track is the so-called 'lowest track' and is often perceived as functioning like a 'dustbin', collecting those students who are least able or motivated for more academically oriented tracks (Clycq, Nouwen, and Vandenbroucke 2014; Stevens and Vermeersch 2010). In theory, upward mobility between tracks is possible but this rarely happens in practice due to the hierarchical tracking structure. Because this system almost exclusively allows for downward mobility between tracks and schools, it is often referred to as a 'waterfall system' or 'cascade system': students who start in higher academic tracks drop down to lower tracks if they are not successful (Stevens and Vermeersch 2010; Van Praag et al. 2019). The chosen

¹⁵<https://www.vlaanderen.be/onderwijs-en-vorming/diplomas-en-getuigschriften/diploma-secundair-onderwijs/a-attest-b-attest-of-c-attest-in-het-secundair-onderwijs>

track is important because it determines entry into higher education. While students in the academic, art and technical tracks can enter university, students in the vocational track need to follow a specialization year before obtaining their secondary school diploma. In Belgium, higher education is highly subsidized and thus relatively cheap for students, and apart from some exceptions, there are no entry exams for higher education (Van Praag, Stevens, and Van Houtte 2014).

Sorting students into different educational tracks in Flemish secondary education is socially biased, meaning that students with a lower socioeconomic status and an ethnic minority background are more often oriented towards lower tracks even when academic performances are the same (Boone and Van Houtte 2012; Spruyt, Laurijssen, and Van Dorsseleer 2009; Van Houtte 2004). That is, teacher evaluations of migrant youth are often based on the perceived willingness or motivation to succeed rather than their actual ability (Stevens and Görgöz 2010). As a result, students with migration background are overrepresented in vocational tracks in Flemish urban schools and underrepresented in academic tracks and higher education (Baysu, Phalet, and Brown 2011; Van Praag, Stevens, and Van Houtte 2014). This disparity is present at the beginning of secondary education but widens over the course of secondary education (Boone and Van Houtte 2012; Van Praag et al. 2019). Social inequality in the Flemish education system is in fact higher than in other OECD countries (Danhier and Jacobs 2017). The widening achievement gap in Flanders is also due to the so-called ‘double cascade effect’ as lower-status tracks are more often segregated along ethnic lines (Nouwen and Clycq 2019; Van Houtte et al. 2012; Van Praag et al. 2019). Government policies have tried to stimulate heterogeneous schools, but do not always succeed due to parents’ free school choice (Agirdag et al. 2012).

4.3.2.2 Mobility and the education system

Young people who have recently arrived in Belgium and lack Dutch language skills, receive special attention in Flemish schools and are categorized according to their age. Between the ages of five and 12, children are registered in primary schools that receive additional government funding, and between the ages of 12 and 18, they are enrolled in reception education for foreign mother tongue newcomers (OKAN – *onthaalonderwijs voor anderstalige nieuwkomers*). In the school year 2017-2018, Flanders registered 4217 newcomers in primary education, 3759 in full-time secondary education, and 305 newcomers in part-time vocational education (AGODI 2018). The majority of these students, 1426 students making up for 38%

of the total, was enrolled in the province of Antwerp. Due to a larger influx of refugees since 2015, most of these newcomers were from Syria, Afghanistan and Iraq. Yet with 80 newcomers of Ghanaian background in Flanders in the school year 2017-2018, Ghana was still among the top 10 countries for students enrolled in full-time secondary education, comprising 2.1% of the total amount of newcomers. Figure 4.6 gives a graphical overview of the ten most common nationalities of OKAN students in Flemish full-time secondary education between 2013 and 2018.

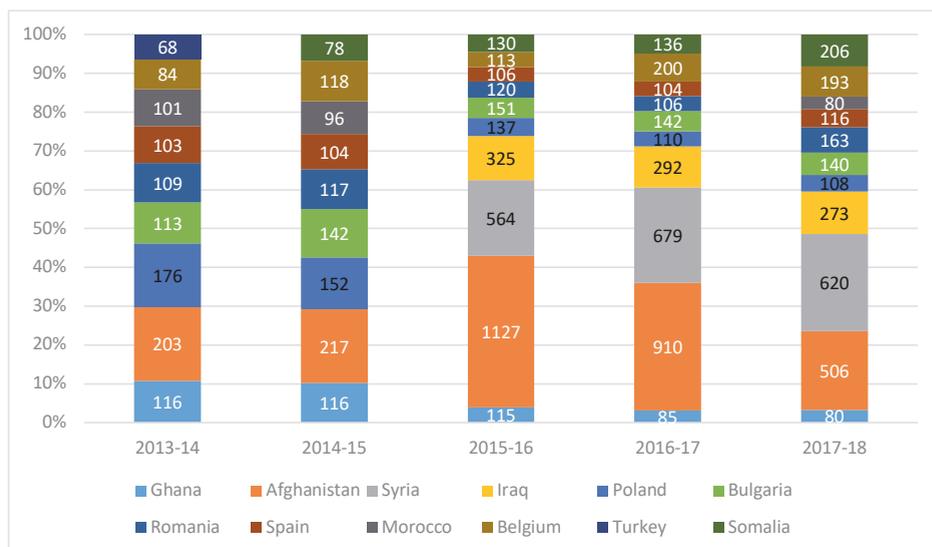


Figure 4.6 Overview of the 10 most common nationalities of foreign language newcomers in Flemish full-time secondary education between 2013-2018. The figures refer to the number of students enrolled on 1st of February of every school year. (AGODI 2018, graph compiled by the author.)

Reception education, launched in 1991, aims at facilitating the transition into regular secondary education by improving the student’s Dutch language skills (AGODI 2018). It has a maximum duration of two full academic years but schools generally try to enable a transition into regular education as soon as possible (Kemper et al. 2020). The weekly schedule in reception classes consists of a minimum of 28-32 slots of 50 minutes each, of which at least 22 slots need to be spent on learning the Dutch language. Other subjects include religion, mathematics, social integration, and ICT (Balci 2012). Parents are free to choose a school for their children but, as I learned during fieldwork, this choice is usually informed by the advice of the integration service of the city, directing parents to the nearest OKAN school. In most cases, reception classes are offered in regular secondary schools, but they are separated from

mainstream classes in daily practice (Kemper et al. 2020). In 2017, the province of Antwerp had 18 schools and a total of 25 locations that offered reception education (AGODI 2018).

Reception education often makes use of ability grouping: OKAN students are divided into different classes based on their level of the Dutch language and their educational background and insight. Such *grouping-before-tracking* (Emery, Spruyt, and Van Avermaet 2021) affects transitions to regular secondary education because the hierarchical nature of ability groups – that ascribes certain educational expectations to students – is aligned with the hierarchical structure of tracks in the Flemish education system. As a result, teachers act on these educational expectations by offering a different curriculum and adjusting the academic rigour that is required. Students in the highest ability group are prepared for the academic track whereas students in lower ability groups are prepared for a more practically oriented future in vocational tracks (Emery, Spruyt, and Van Avermaet 2021).

The rigid tracking structure of the Flemish school system, which requires students to have certain skills and abilities by a certain age in order to follow a particular track, is thus not flexible enough to accommodate for newly arrived migrants in Belgium. For example, teachers in reception classes in Antwerp mentioned during fieldwork that students needed to have a particular level of French and mathematics to be considered for the academic track. As a result, OKAN students are overrepresented in lower tracks and underrepresented in academic tracks after transitioning into regular secondary education. Figure 4.7 compares the track distribution of newcomers with the total population of students in secondary education for the school year 2017-18. The most common study programs chosen by recently arrived migrants are care, trade, mechanics and electricity. Due to the nature of the Flemish educational landscape, only about one-third stays in the same school after the transition to regular education while the majority needs to change schools (AGODI 2018).

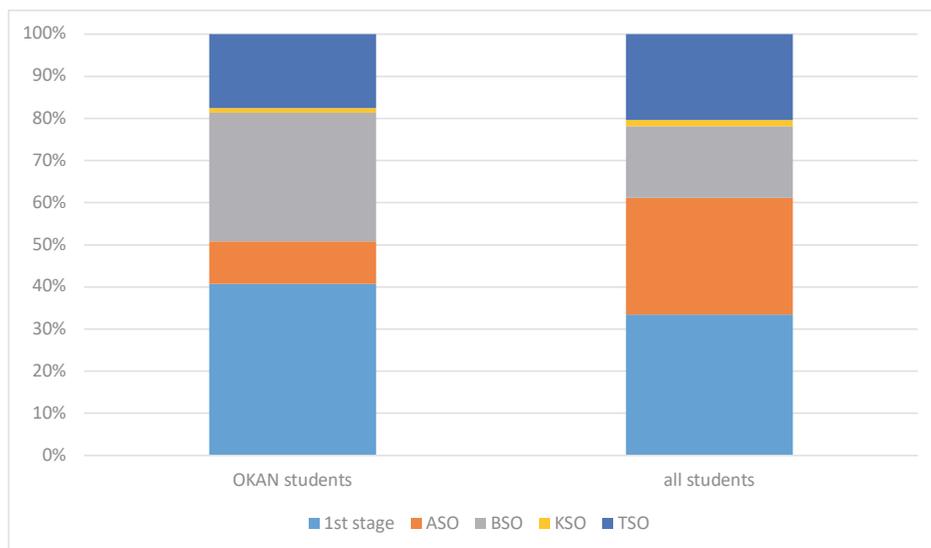


Figure 4.7 Track distribution in secondary education: OKAN students versus all students, school year 2017-18. The figures for OKAN students refer to students who were registered in reception education on 1st of February and in regular secondary education on 1st of October the following school year. Those OKAN students who were still enrolled in reception education the next school year (36.3%) are not considered in this graph. (AGODI 2018, graph compiled by the author.)

Above, I have described how the Flemish education system deals with mobility when it comes to recently arrived migrants. Below, I focus on how students' travels during the school year are treated in the Flemish education system and educational policies. These policies are largely shaped by the common perception of mobility as disruptive (see also van Geel 2019b) and therefore try to prevent or penalize absence due to travel. This section outlines the obstacles that students encounter if they want or have to travel during the school year, and shows that contextual factors of the education system can even impact students' decision to travel during the school vacation.

Like other school systems, the Flemish education system is not designed for mobile students and discourages mobility throughout the school year. According to an educational policy advisor in Flanders I interviewed during fieldwork, one reason for this is that school funding is partly based on the number of students enrolled at two points in time during the school year, meaning that schools are not compensated for any student who enters school after this count. This has historically been an issue with internal mobility of caravan dwellers, skippers, and circus artists, but also applies to international mobility.

Further, as outlined by the educational policy advisor, there are several obstacles for migrant youth who would like to travel to their country of origin both during the summer vacation and during the school year. As described in section 4.3.2.1, migrant youth more often receive a ‘B-attest’ or ‘C-attest’ at the end of a school year, requiring students to repeat a school year or change their profile or track. While these decisions can be contested, this requires physical presence in Belgium during the summer holidays to raise an objection to the school administration and the appeal committee, and respond to any further requests from the school.¹⁶ Migrant youth thus face additional uncertainties that complicate planning travel during the summer holidays and that have potential financial consequences if travel arrangements need to be cancelled or can only be made last-minute.

Travel during the school year is not permitted, as stated on the website of the Flemish Ministry of Education¹⁷. It is categorized as ‘luxury absenteeism’ and therefore counted as problematic absence from school. In a few exceptional cases, the student can ask permission for absence from the school management. One headmaster of a school in Antwerp, whom I interviewed during fieldwork, explained that this decision is not based on standardized criteria but on his personal judgement, and that he would grant travel for cases of emergencies, like a funeral or sick relative, but not for other reasons. If absence is understood as being problematic by the school, this has consequences once it accumulates to more than five half days, even if these are spread throughout the school year. The school then informs the *Centrum voor Leerlingenbegeleiding* (CLB), a service that monitors student non-attendance and collaborates with parents and the student to find a solution. If absenteeism continues or the student declines help from the CLB, the school or the CLB can take further action, like informing the police or Ministry of Education that can initiate further steps and impose sanctions (Vlaams Ministerie van Onderwijs en Vorming, n.d.).

Absence that is understood as problematic by the school can have several negative implications for the student, in addition to any potential backlog the student might have to attend to, as detailed by the educational policy advisor I spoke to. First, it can affect a student’s academic performance because the school can subtract points for the absence, potentially requiring a student to repeat a school year despite having passed all exams. Second, there could

¹⁶ See also the following websites for conditions to appeal an attest and the requirement to reply on short notice: <https://www.vlaanderen.be/onderwijs-en-vorming/diplomas-en-getuigschriften/diploma-secundair-onderwijs/a-attest-b-attest-of-c-attest-in-het-secundair-onderwijs>; <https://www.onderwijsadvocaat.be/middelbaar/#middel2>

¹⁷ <https://onderwijs.vlaanderen.be/nl/ouders/wat-mag-en-moet-op-school/aanwezig-of-afwezig-niet-op-reis-buiten-de-schoolvakanties>

be disciplinary sanctions, like expelling a student from school due to the absence. Third, there could be financial sanctions as parents might lose the right to child allowances and/or might be asked by the Ministry of Education to pay back school allowances received in the past (see also Vlaams Ministerie van Onderwijs en Vorming, n.d.).

4.4 Concluding remarks

This chapter has situated young people of Ghanaian background – who grow up between Ghana and Belgium – within the relevant historical, geographical and institutional contexts. Ghana changed from an immigration to an emigration country after an economic downturn in the 1960s. While Ghanaians initially mostly stayed in the West African region, they increasingly migrated towards the Global North since the 1980s. Ghanaian migration to Belgium also intensified in the 1980s, at a time when migration legislation became more restrictive, attempting to curb different types of immigration. I have shown that even though Antwerp, the main fieldsite for this research, has a highly diverse population, the Flemish far-right gained strength in the 1990s and 2000s with anti-immigrant rhetoric and further shaped the political landscape of Belgium as a whole by implementing more stringent measures in terms of citizenship acquisition and integration policies. Family reunification, the most common way for Ghanaians to enter the country at the time of this research, has seen two rounds of reforms in 2006 and 2011, which made reunification with third country nationals significantly harder.

The chapter also highlighted the most important institutional features of the Flemish education system that put young people with a migration background at a certain disadvantage, namely: early tracking, socioethnic segregation, grade retention, and the status hierarchy between educational tracks. These characteristics contribute to an overrepresentation of migrant youth in lower educational tracks. Further, I discussed the relationship between mobility and the Flemish education system. I have illustrated that due to tracking and the rigidity of the system, newly arrived migrants in Flanders are already grouped according to their abilities in reception classes and prepared for specific tracks, mostly vocational education. Finally, I have shown that the Flemish education system is not designed for mobile students and discourages mobility throughout the school year: travel is seen as problematic, potentially implicating sanctions and/or difficulties in educational trajectories. Contextual factors of the education system that disadvantage students can further introduce new uncertainties and negatively impact (planned) travels during the school vacation.



5

RECONCEPTUALIZING FAMILY REUNIFICATION FROM A YOUTH MOBILITIES PERSPECTIVE: TRANSNATIONAL YOUTH BETWEEN BELGIUM AND GHANA¹⁸

¹⁸ A slightly revised version of this chapter has been published as: Anschütz, Sarah, and Valentina Mazzucato. 2021. "Reconceptualizing Family Reunification from a Youth Mobilities Perspective: Transnational Youth between Ghana and Belgium." *Children's Geographies*. Advance online publication. doi:10.1080/14733285.2021.1919998.

5.1 Introduction

Family reunification has become one of the main reasons young people migrate from the Global South to the Global North (OECD 2017). In Belgium, the main fieldsite for this research, 20,815 young people entered the country for reasons of family reunification in 2017, almost four times the number of minors who sought asylum the same year (Federaal Migratiecentrum 2019). According to family reunification laws and policies in many European countries, migrants are allowed to bring a spouse and any minor children to the destination country (EMN 2017). ‘Family’ refers only to the nuclear family and family reunification is conceptualized as a phenomenon that takes place within the destination country. This policy and legal definition of family reunification also shapes how the phenomenon is researched. Studies are generally conducted in the Global North, as this is where family reunification laws primarily exist. Research focuses on the effects of reunification policies or on how young people cope with family reunification and integration into the destination country (Strik, Hart, and Nissen 2013; Gindling and Poggio 2012; Eremenko and Bennett 2018). Research also highlights parent child separation prior to reunification and the negative consequences of this for parent child relationships, reflecting the legal and policy focus on the nuclear family (e.g. Artico 2003; Suárez-Orozco, Todorova, and Louie 2002; Schapiro et al. 2013).

A legal and policy perspective, however, is only one way to analyse family reunification and its consequences for youth. This paper foregrounds young people’s voices and offers a youth-centric account of family reunification. We combine transnational and mobility perspectives to understand how family reunification is experienced by young people, thereby addressing several shortcomings of a policy perspective in research and practice. First, whereas a policy perspective focuses only on the destination country, a transnational perspective highlights the importance of both migrant origin and destination contexts to better understand migrant realities (Glick Schiller, Basch, and Blanc-Szanton 1992; Bryceson and Vuorela 2002). The implications of a transnational perspective for how we conceptualize family reunification are large. We show that families often continue to be transnational even after a child is reunited with one or both parents in the destination country, whereas research that takes a policy perspective considers only those living in the new country and ignores the potential importance of people who are not located in the same country as the youth. Second, and relatedly, much research on family reunification considers only the nuclear family, while a transnational perspective helps us to see beyond this. Transnational family studies have criticized the bias

toward the Western nuclear family model and urged researchers to reframe ‘the family’ and to take context-specific norms on family and childcare into consideration (Mazzucato and Schans 2011). Transnational family research shows the role of extended family members or non-kin caregivers in making transnational families function (Mazzucato and Schans 2011; Poeze and Mazzucato 2014; Dreby 2007; Schmalzbauer 2004; Coe et al. 2011; Dankyi, Mazzucato, and Manuh 2017). Third, a transnational perspective allows us to redefine family reunification. We define family reunification as the act of reunifying with a person or persons whom the young person perceives as being or having been their primary caregiver. A primary caregiver is someone who makes a young person feel cared for by providing material, emotional, or financial support. Such care might come from both co-resident caregivers and non-co-resident caregivers, such as migrant parents abroad.

While a transnational perspective casts light on cross-border relationships, scholars have pointed to the need to combine it with a mobilities lens (van Geel and Mazzucato 2018; Schapendonk and Steel 2014). Mobility scholars focus on all types of mobilities, not just migration. They explore mundane everyday movements, such as commutes or visits to family and friends, and how these affect people’s lived experiences (Sheller and Urry 2006). By looking at migration through a mobilities lens, we come to see how the continuous mobility that migration may engender, affects cross-border relationships and young people’s perceptions and experiences of separations and reunifications with significant others. Previous work has foregrounded young people’s experiences with the “everyday ruptures” that migration entails (Coe et al. 2011) and emphasized their agency (Dobson 2009; Choi, Yeoh, and Lam 2018). Yet youth mobility is still often overlooked in migration research. By focusing on young people’s mobility, we view their migration as embedded within a series of moves that can take place before and after their first international move, that is as trajectories (Schapendonk and Steel 2014; Schapendonk et al. 2018). We contribute to a reconceptualization of family reunification from a youth-centric perspective by using *youth mobility trajectories* as a point of analysis. Youth mobility trajectories are the geographical moves across time and space that young people engage in and the family compositions that result from these moves (Mazzucato 2015). Such a focus on youth mobility heeds recent calls for the inclusion of spatio-temporal complexity in migration and youth studies (van Geel and Mazzucato 2018; Robertson, Harris, and Baldassar 2018; Cheung Judge, Blazek, and Esson 2020).

We thus combine transnational and mobilities perspectives to investigate the different family constellations and care arrangements young people are part of to better understand what family reunification means to young people. Drawing on 18 months of multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork in Belgium and Ghana with young people of Ghanaian background (aged 14-25), we show that young people's understanding of family goes beyond the nuclear family, including both extended family members and other caregivers, and that young people accumulate caregivers throughout their lifetime. Family reunification – even with parents – can entail a separation from another person who may have played or continue to play a significant role in a young person's life. This implies that a family, from a youth perspective, remains transnational even if the young person moves to live with both biological parents. Another consequence is that young people can experience multiple family reunifications, both in the Global North and their origin country.

Belgium constitutes an interesting site to study family reunification amongst Ghanaian youth. Belgium is among the top eight countries in the EU for issuing visas for family reasons (EMN 2017), and family migration is the single biggest reason migrants enter Belgium (EMN Belgium 2017). In 2017, of all residence permits issued for family reasons, 59% were issued to children born abroad who reunified with a parent already living in Belgium (Federaal Migratiecentrum 2019). The majority of Ghanaian immigration to Belgium happens through family reunification (Heyse et al. 2007). 324 Ghanaians received a long-stay visa for family reunification in 2018, and another 293 applications were rejected (Federaal Migratiecentrum 2019). This corresponds to a rejection rate of almost 50%, one of the highest among all nationalities, demonstrating the complexity of the procedure and the tightening conditions for family reunification.

Because of the prevalence of the phenomenon, family migration has remained a political priority. To manage migration flows, family reunification laws have become more stringent in Belgium since 2011. Belgian laws allow reunification of migrants with minor children and spouses yet, in contrast to some EU countries, migrants cannot reunite with adult parents (EMN 2017). Belgian law means that the Ghanaian young people of this research have no possibility of reuniting with primary caregivers other than biological parents in Belgium. Only children younger than 18 years of age can reunify with a parent who is a third country national (Agentschap integratie & inburgering n.d.).

The regulations on family reunification hold central the ideal of the nuclear family. This stands in stark contrast to Belgian family laws and policies for “sedentary families” that

recognize a wide diversity of family forms (Saroléa and Merla 2020). The reality of family dynamics highlighted in literature on transnational families remains unrecognized in the Belgian family reunification system.

5.2 The literature on transnational families and family reunification

Young people who do not migrate to join their parents in the Global North are often called ‘stay-behind’ or ‘left-behind’ children (Mazzucato 2014). They experience sometimes lengthy periods of separation from one or both parents and sometimes siblings abroad, during which they are cared for either by the second parent or someone else. Studies of such transnational families have explored the situation of these ‘left-behind’ children, the most common themes being the impact of separation on child well-being, parent child relationships across borders, and childcare arrangements (Jordan and Graham 2012; Schmalzbauer 2004). Care arrangements are often organized transnationally with family members in different countries contributing to care in various ways (Baldassar and Merla 2014). The literature shows that child well-being is shaped differently depending on which parent migrates (Graham and Jordan 2011), who the child’s caregiver is (Dreby 2007) and the stability of care arrangements (Mazzucato, Cebotari et al. 2015). Many studies emphasize the negative emotional consequences of separation on both parents (Schmalzbauer 2004) and children (Dreby 2007), and highlight the vulnerability of ‘left-behind’ children (Castañeda and Buck 2011).

Some research acknowledges that the nuclear family cannot be assumed to be the only or best option for children. In the West African context social parenthood and child fostering have long been part of childcare practices (Goody 1982), which can shape how care arrangements in transnational families are organized and experienced by ‘left-behind’ children (Alber, Martin, and Notermans 2013; Poeze and Mazzucato 2014). Consequently, studies have looked at the significance for young people of extended family members or people unrelated by kinship such as teachers, family friends, or fellow church members (Mazzucato and Schans 2011).

The caregivers in the origin country are important for a child’s well-being in various ways. Caregivers can be a direct source of strength and support (Dankyi 2012). The quality of the relationship with a particular caregiver, both in terms of emotional closeness and material resources shared with the child, can mediate parent child relationships across borders and alleviate potential pain children might feel because of parental absence (Schmalzbauer 2004). Caregivers are also important for how they explain parental migration to children, framing it

as an act of love or abandonment (Yarris 2017). The literature mentioned here mainly focuses on one primary caregiver, with a strong emphasis on female relatives (Schmalzbauer 2004; Dreby 2007; Dankyi, Mazzucato, and Manuh 2017). We will show in this paper that young people can accumulate several caregivers throughout their lifetimes, and that past caregivers often continue to be important for a young person even after they move.

Studies of ‘left-behind’ children have predominantly conceptualized young people as immobile, as implied by the term ‘left-behind’, and only investigated the consequences of parental migration for children in the origin country (Poeze and Mazzucato 2014; Mazzucato et al. 2015; Hoang et al. 2015). Researchers have tended to ignore young people’s own mobility because they assume that once the young person moves abroad and reunites with parents, the family stops being transnational. This, however, ignores cases where a child reunites with one parent abroad but remains separated from the other, or where the child joins both parents but leaves behind another caregiver in the origin country. We will show that the family often remains transnational even after a family reunification in the destination country.

In addition to the literature on transnational families, there is a related but separate body of literature on family reunification. Studies in this field are conducted in migrant destination countries in the Global North. These studies rarely employ a transnational perspective and only focus on migrants’ lives after they arrive in the new country. Studies focus on policy frameworks for family reunification and the consequences thereof for migrant families. Scholars investigate what tighter eligibility criteria mean for differential access to family reunification along gender, nationality, family type and class lines (Poeze and Mazzucato 2016; Eremenko and González-Ferrer 2018), for migrants’ integration into the destination country, and for their feelings of belonging (Bragg and Wong 2016; Strik, Hart, and Nissen 2013).

When young people’s experiences with family reunification are investigated, this is often done via clinical or therapeutic studies that highlight the negative consequences of parent child separations on the well-being of reunited children (Mitrani, Santisteban, and Muir 2004; Castañeda and Buck 2011; Smith, Lalonde, and Johnson 2004; Suárez-Orozco, Todorova, and Louie 2002; Schapiro et al. 2013). Studies explore how the timing of migration and the length of separation affect whether reunification is experienced as traumatic and find that longer periods of separation can negatively affect young people’s well-being (Eremenko and Bennett 2018). Fewer disruptions in family life are experienced when children establish a solid relationship with their mother before she departs, when separation remains short (Bonizzoni and Leonini 2013) and when children reunite at a young age (Fresnoza-Flot 2015). All these

studies focus on young people's international move and conceive youth mobility primarily in relation to parents' mobility. Such an adult-centric approach ignores other forms of mobility that young people might engage in, such as moving between households in the origin country.

The mobility and transnational perspective we take in this paper allows us to reconceptualize family reunification from a youth-centric perspective. By focusing on young people's mobility trajectories to investigate the multiple international and national moves young people engage in and how these are experienced in terms of reunifications and concomitant separations from significant others. Our approach allows us to pay attention to migration and reunification as unfolding processes rather than instances in time, heeding recent calls for spatio-temporal complexity in migration and youth studies (Robertson, Harris, and Baldassar 2018; Cheung Judge, Blazek, and Esson 2020; van Geel and Mazzucato 2018). Furthermore, we examine both origin and destination contexts to understand meaningful relationships across borders as well as context-specific understandings of family. Such an approach moves beyond conventional categories, such as 'left-behind' children or 'reunified' youth, and brings into focus different family constellations and care arrangements across time and space to better understand what family reunification means to young people.

5.3 Data and methods

Data for this paper come from the Belgian case study of the "MO-TRAYL" project, led by the second author, which aims to understand youth mobility trajectories and their impact on young people's life outcomes. Multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork, interspersed with communication via social media platforms, was conducted between January 2018 and February 2020. The research participants were based in Belgium and the first author followed their movements over 18 months. Six weeks were spent in Ghana when accompanying young people on trips there, which allowed us to observe interactions with primary caregivers. The close contact in Ghana, usually including co-habitation, and the long-term involvement in the field facilitated relationships of trust between researcher and participants.

Our sample consisted of 25 young people of Ghanaian background who were approached through a snowball technique. All lived in Antwerp or its surroundings, were aged 14-25 at first encounter in the field, and were either born in Ghana or their parents were. Twenty were born in Ghana and came to Belgium for family reunification (four were reunited with both parents, nine with the mother, and seven with the father). Only one of these 20 migrated together with a parent; all others migrated either alone or with siblings. Of the other five, one

was born in The Netherlands and migrated to Belgium with his father, and four were born in Belgium. Several informants, including social workers and Ghanaian community leaders, told us that the vast majority of Ghanaian youth in Antwerp were born in Ghana and migrated to Belgium over the course of their lives. This is also reflected in our sample.

Ethnographic fieldwork consisted of interviews conducted in English or Dutch, informal conversations, and participant-observation in church settings, schools, participants' homes, and at cultural events. Mapping tools were conducted together with participants to identify their networks and mobility trajectories. Concentric-circle network mapping identified important people for the youth and their locations in the world and was used to gather information about young people's current and former caregivers. Mobility mapping employed trajectory grids, based on the 'Ageven grids' (Antoine, Bry, and Diouf 1987), to identify participants' geographical moves in time and space and concomitant family compositions. Information gathered from mobility trajectory interviews was visualized and the resulting mobility trajectory maps used as interview prompts or to check things with participants. It was through these maps that we first gained insight into changing care arrangements, young people's relationships with significant others and understandings of family. We used thematic analysis and map visualization to identify patterns within the data. This was done by reading and re-reading fieldnotes and visualizations, using both inductive and deductive coding, and subsequently generating, reviewing and defining of themes (Boyatzis 1998). Below we present three cases that show the full diversity of elements that constitute what family reunification entails for young people as emerged from the analysis of all 20 cases in which young people had been reunited with caregivers.

5.4 Young people's understandings of family and family reunification

In this section, we present three vignettes that describe young people's internal and international moves throughout their lifetimes. They show how mobility results in young people having different caregivers at different times and how they grow close to significant others within and outside the nuclear family. Furthermore, the cases show that each reunification also entails a separation from a significant other and that young people can experience multiple family reunifications in different national contexts. Our cases call into question how researchers are best to define and analyse family reunification. All names are pseudonyms.

Nana (27) – living with multiple caregivers throughout childhood

Nana's father migrated abroad when she was an infant and because her mother was very young when Nana was born, several caregivers helped raise her. She first stayed with her maternal grandmother who carried Nana on her back every day when she went to work on her field. Nana got very sick at age one, so her mother and maternal aunts took her in. Nana continued to stay with her aunts even after her mother moved in with her second husband shortly thereafter to start a new family. At the age of three or four, Nana moved in with a teacher and lived in the same neighbourhood as her aunts. Staying on the campus of a very prestigious school, she discovered her love for education and spent much of her time studying. Throughout her childhood, Nana stayed close to previous caregivers: her mother, her grandmother and especially her "funny aunt" who was a teenager at the time and very dear to Nana. She had known her father only from her mother's stories, a couple of phone calls, and some letters and postcards that he had sent from different places abroad. When Nana was nine years old, her father came to Ghana for five months. She described this experience as "amazing". He promised a better life for her in Belgium and she was looking forward to finally living with him. Even though the father's stay in Ghana was temporary, it entailed another relocation for Nana who moved to live with his new wife and Nana's half-siblings in a different neighbourhood, leaving her aunts and friends behind. In order to minimize the time with a family she did not know, Nana asked to be enrolled in a boarding school where she stayed for the next two years. At age 11, Nana moved to Belgium, together with her paternal half-siblings, to be reunited with her father. Over the years, Nana stayed in close contact with her mother and maternal half-siblings in Ghana and grew even closer to them than her paternal half-siblings in Belgium. After finishing tertiary education in Belgium in 2016, Nana moved to Ghana for six months, and she made another trip there in 2019 during which she spent time with her mother, siblings and "funny aunt".

Ama (19) – separation from a loved caregiver

Ama grew up with her maternal grandmother, her older sister, and her cousin in Ghana. Her parents had moved to Belgium when she was still an infant, and for much of her life, Ama thought that her grandmother was actually her mother. Even though her biological mother called occasionally and even came to Ghana for visits, Ama had difficulties understanding who her mother was and saw her as a distant family friend. When Ama moved to Belgium with her older sister at the age of nine to be reunited with her parents, it came as a surprise to her. In

Belgium, she lived with her parents for the first time in her life, but she felt shy and uncomfortable in the house of “strangers” and longed to be with her grandmother in Ghana. It took time to build up a relationship with her parents, but having a baby brother in Belgium helped, and Ama grew closer to her parents over the years. All the while, her grandmother continued to be important to Ama. They stayed in contact over the phone after Ama moved to Belgium, and Ama continued to receive support and advice from her grandmother. During our concentric-circle mapping interview, the grandmother was the only person Ama placed in the innermost circle of “most-important people” because Ama felt she owed so much to her. Since 2017, Ama has been on annual trips to Ghana during which she also visits her grandmother.

Samuel (24) – multiple moves

Samuel was born in Accra and lived with his mother as an only child. His father had moved to the United States when he was a baby. When he was three years old, his mother migrated to Europe and Samuel moved in with his maternal grandmother in Kumasi, a city about 250 km away. He had previously visited his grandmother during holidays and the “vibe was there”, as Samuel put it. Samuel’s grandmother always wanted him to have “that kind of mother love”. She pointed out the gifts and money his mother sent him and made sure that Samuel talked to his mother every day. When Samuel was 11, his grandmother fell ill, and Samuel moved back to Accra to live with his father who had returned from the United States. This move and the separation from his grandmother was a “big change” for him. The relationship with his father, and especially communication between the two, was difficult because they had “no vibe” and no relationship prior to living together. Yet, because Samuel was enrolled in boarding school, he was able to avoid the challenging situation at home, as he only saw his father during the holidays. Having a mother abroad, Samuel anticipated moving eventually and was excited once the opportunity presented itself when he was 14 years old: “I was outside having fun and my dad told me to come back early [...] because I would be travelling. ‘Where would I be travelling?’ ‘It’s a surprise, you don’t need to know.’ [...] I just showered, freshened up and he took me straight to the airport.” Samuel flew to Belgium to be reunited with his mother. Looking back on his experience of moving between different households and being cared for by different people, Samuel reflected on the many things he learned in the process: to be independent, responsible and able to cope with difficult times. “My journey [...], it really helps me to be who I am now.”

5.4.1 Accumulating caregivers over time

The vignettes above, which we consider in more detail below, illustrate that young people's understanding of family is not limited to the nuclear family, which looms large in policy definitions of family and research on family reunification (e.g. Smith, Lalonde, and Johnson 2004). In many instances, caregivers were people other than the biological parents and remained important to young people even after the young person stopped living with them. As such, young people 'accumulated' caregivers over time. These multiple caregivers are ignored in most research on 'left-behind' children (e.g. Schmalzbauer 2004; Dreby 2007). While parents, maternal grandmothers, aunts and a teacher were mentioned as taking on caregiving roles in the cases above, other young people in our sample also stayed with a sister, distant family member, or family friend.

Nana's case shows the way care relationships can turn into lasting bonds or have a lasting impact on young people. Nana's mobility trajectory saw her move between various caregivers throughout her childhood: her maternal grandmother, her mother, her maternal aunts, a teacher and fellow church member, her father, her stepmother, and her father again after her migration to Belgium (Figure 5.1). Nana spent her early years with extended family members and foster parents despite her mother's presence in Ghana, attesting to mobile kinship practices that have long existed in West Africa and do not only come into play when parents migrate abroad (Poeze and Mazzucato 2014). Moving between households was nothing out of the ordinary for the participants in our sample, and when talking about her childhood experiences, Nana emphasized the positive memories she cherished and the people she loved. This contrasts with portrayals of 'left-behind' children as vulnerable or suffering because of a separation from a parent abroad (Dreby 2007; Castañeda and Buck 2011). It is, however, important to acknowledge that young people are not always happy with their caregivers. Nana did not feel comfortable with her stepfamily, and asked to be enrolled in a boarding school.

But many of the people Nana lived with became significant for her. The first year of her life, Nana stayed with her maternal grandmother, accompanying her to the cocoa farm every day. This is something Nana only found out about during her trip to Ghana in 2019 when she asked her mother about her place of birth. The connection she felt to her grandmother immediately made sense to her: "This story made me realize why I loved my grandmother so much." Nana and her grandmother remained close until her grandmother passed away when Nana was nine. Similarly, Nana stayed connected to other caregivers even after moving to

different households. Despite her moves, she stayed in the same neighbourhood for most of her childhood, which allowed frequent get-togethers with her mother and maternal aunts.

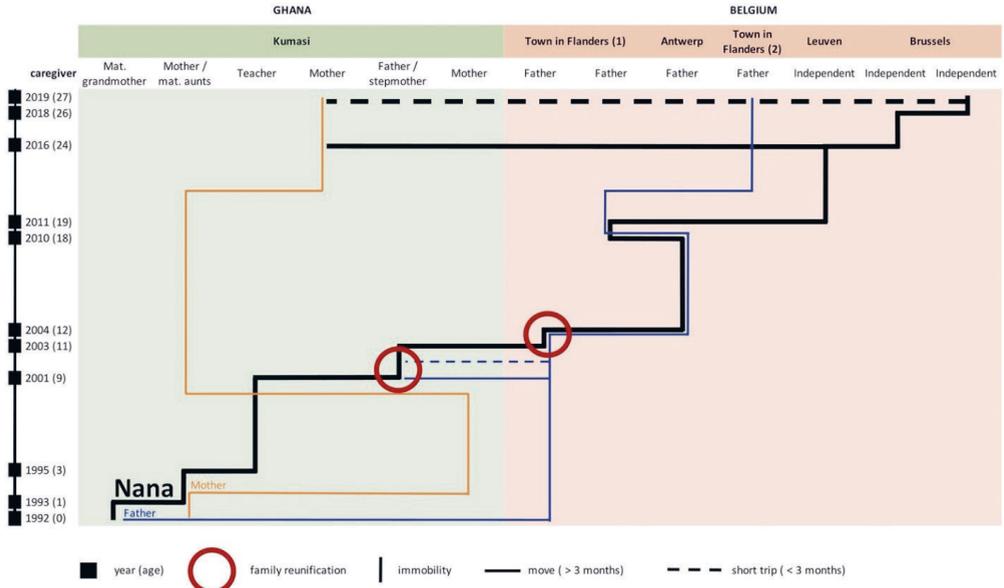


Figure 5.1 Nana’s mobility trajectory

Nana’s father, whom she had no memories of living with, was also significant to her as a child. Being teased by other children in the neighbourhood for not having a father, Nana started asking her mother questions about him and longed to meet him. She was thrilled to finally see her father when he came to Ghana for five months in 2001, and during another shorter visit the following year. Reflecting on learning about her migration to Belgium, Nana said:

And when I learned that I’m going to live with him, that was also like “wow!” [...] he made a lot of promises, like ‘you’re going to have your own room, and you’re going to have your computer’. So I was so happy. [...] I was just looking forward to come to where my dad lives and have my own room and my own computer. That was all I was looking [forward] to.

Nana had not spent much time with her father in Ghana because she moved into a boarding school shortly after his arrival in 2001. Yet she still considered him her primary caregiver when he was in Ghana, and she experienced meeting him as a reunification.

While not all caregiving arrangements involve close emotional bonds, different caregivers can still have benefits for and a lasting impact on young people. At age four, Nana moved in with a teacher who was also the choirmaster of the church Nana and her family attended. Reflecting on this move, Nana said: “This master took me in, I don’t know what type of agreement he had with my mum, but then, I was just part of that family also.” Her relocation to the teacher’s home on the campus of a prestigious school meant that Nana gained access to educational resources and developed skills needed to succeed in school.

I was so much into school, really so much, it’s crazy. You could not separate me from my books or from school. For me, school was the only thing I enjoyed so much growing up. And it’s also because of the environment I was brought in[to]. Everything was surrounded with school and studying.

Caregivers thus provide access to resources and skills which parents might not be able to supply.

5.4.2 Family separation

Having multiple caregivers over time implies that family reunification will also entail a separation from previous caregivers. Separations can be more or less meaningful for young people, depending on their attachment to the former caregiver and their relationship with the parent(s) they are reuniting with.

Ama’s case demonstrates how separation can have strong emotional implications. Ama grew up with her maternal grandmother in Ghana before moving to Belgium at the age of nine to join her biological parents (Figure 5.2). Ama had little understanding that her parents had been living in Belgium and assumed that her grandmother was her mother. She did not understand at the time that her parents were trying to provide a better life for her by moving her to Belgium, nor did she anticipate her own migration. Her separation from her grandmother came as a shock.

I was young, I didn’t even know that I was coming here [Belgium] until I was at the airport and needed to let go of my grandma and I was crying. A day I will never forget. I said to my grandma “come with me”. My grandma was crying “I can’t come with you, I can’t come with you”.

Even though Ama reunified with her nuclear family, which is often assumed in research

and policy to be the best option for children, it was an emotionally difficult experience for Ama. The separation was especially challenging because her grandmother had done such an excellent job in caring for Ama and the two had a close emotional bond. In contrast, Ama did not have a meaningful relationship with her parents.

[My parents] were just strangers to me [...], it was always weird, I was always silent. My sister...she had a bond with them because she was older and she could talk to them. But I was always silent, did not have anything to say. [...] In the beginning, I really wanted to go back to Ghana, I was fed up with here [Belgium], I wanted to see my grandmother. I did not like it here.

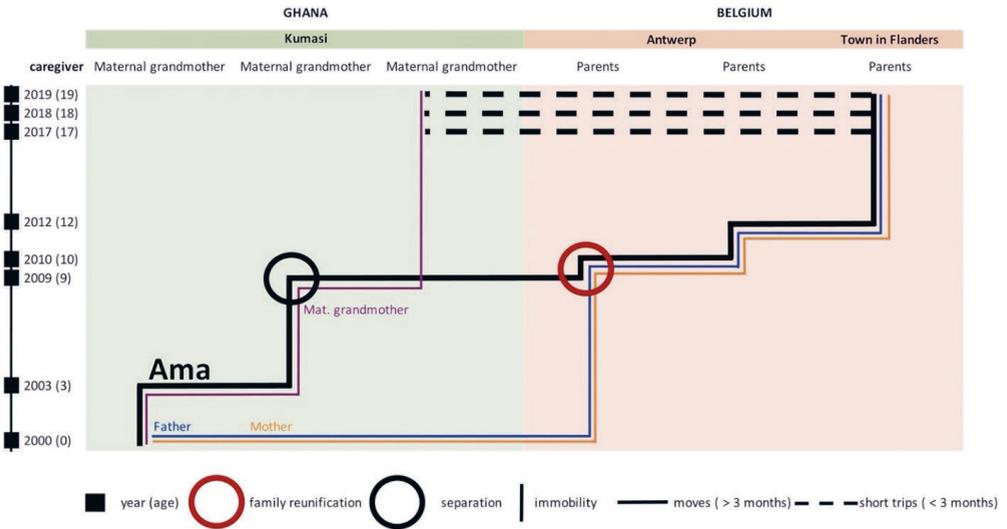


Figure 5.2 Ama’s mobility trajectory

Ama’s case attests to the importance of using a transnational lens in research on family reunification. Ama maintained an active transnational relationship with her grandmother throughout the years, speaking to her on the phone at least twice a week. They discussed everyday affairs as well as Ama’s future, and her grandmother was a great “support” because she “just wants all the best things” for Ama. The grandmother also continued to have an important mediating function in family dynamics. Ama could always ask her for advice when problems arose with her family in Belgium, or Ama’s grandmother would speak directly to her daughter to clear up issues. Others have shown that caregivers in the origin country play important roles mediating transnational parent child relationships (Schmalzbauer 2004; Yarris

2017). Through Ama's case, we see how primary caregivers can continue to mediate parent child relationships even after children reunite with parents in the destination country.

Ama also longed to visit her grandmother in Ghana, and she went on a trip there for the first time at age 17.

At that time, I had been here [Belgium] for 10 years. And I did not see my grandmother. The first time [I went to Ghana] was first and foremost because of my grandmother. I wanted to see her. I really wanted to see her.

The quote above shows that an accumulation of caregivers and the maintenance of transnational relationships can spark mobility and shape young people's mobility trajectories. In 2018 and 2019, Ama went on two more trips to Ghana during which she visited her grandmother in Kumasi. Even though she acknowledged that old age had changed her grandmother and complicated their relationship, Ama continued to see her as the most important person in her life because she owed her so much and her grandmother always had Ama's best interests at heart.

For other young people, separation was less problematic and family reunification proceeded more smoothly. Nana's reunification with her father in Belgium was not as disruptive for her because she had met her father when he came to Ghana for two home visits. Furthermore, she did not have a close emotional attachment to her two previous caregivers, the choirmaster of her church and her stepmother. Similarly, Samuel did not experience problems reunifying with his mother in Belgium even though his father stayed behind in Ghana. Samuel and his mother had maintained a close transnational relationship over the years and had a closer emotional attachment than Samuel and his father, and Samuel was looking forward to living with his mother again.

Studies of family reunification in destination countries show that there are fewer disruptions to family life and child well-being when separation remains short and children reunite at a young age (Eremenko and Bennett 2018; Fresnoza-Flot 2015; Bonizzoni and Leonini 2013). But besides length of separation and time of migration, our research shows the need to also consider how young people experience relationships with primary caregivers in both origin and destination contexts. Taking a transnational and mobility lens to the cases above provides evidence about the importance of the primary caregivers who accumulate over a young person's lifetime and whether a family separation and a subsequent reunification are experienced as meaningful and/or disruptive.

5.4.3 Multiple family reunifications in origin and destination countries

Young people may not only reunite with family once in the destination country, as research and policy often suggest (e.g. Suárez-Orozco, Todorova, and Louie 2002), but can experience multiple family reunifications in both origin and destination countries. Consequently, they can also experience multiple family separations. To illustrate this point, we analyse Samuel's case.

Samuel stayed with his mother in Accra until she migrated to Europe when he was three and Samuel relocated to his maternal grandmother's in Kumasi (Figure 5.3). Talking about his experiences, Samuel said: 'It was really easy to catch up with [my grandmother]. Because she always treated me like my mum treated me but even more pampering.' Samuel felt reunited with part of his family when he moved to his grandmother's house because of his prior relationship with her. He had always seen his grandmother as a caregiver. At the age of 11, Samuel experienced a second family reunification when his grandmother became too sick to take care of him and he moved back to the capital city to live with his father. Even though Samuel had not previously met his father, he understood his father's role as a parent based on the many stories he had heard: "You know when seeing your dad, [...] it's somewhat like...you get to hear so many things about your dad and it's just like, 'oh! So it's him!' So that's what my dad was like." Despite this, Samuel's relationship with his father was strained and he soon went to boarding school.

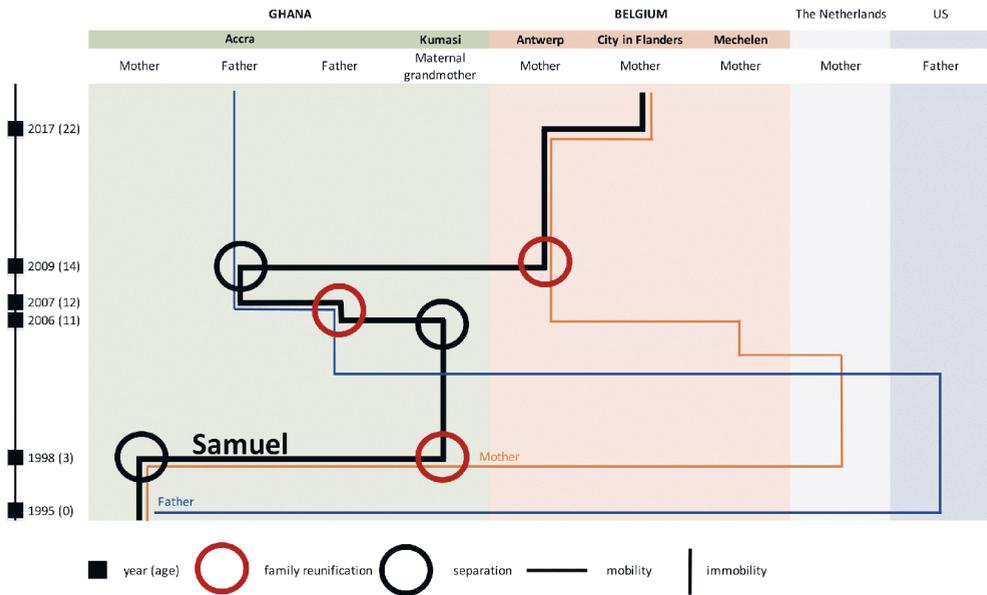


Figure 5.3 Samuel's mobility trajectory

Samuel's first two changes of household described above, to his grandmother's and to his father's, are usually not considered family reunifications in the literature because they do not take place with a nuclear family member and/or not in the destination country. The only move that would normally be considered a family reunification in Samuel's mobility trajectory is his migration to Belgium at age 14 to join his mother, which he was very excited about: "[Reunifying] with my mum it's like, I know her already, I have seen her already. And you really miss her, so you just get to see her, like, 'damn, I really missed you!'" How a young person experiences family reunification can thus vary greatly, depending on the kind of relationship the young person has with the caregivers they both join and leave behind.

Separated from his previous caregivers, Samuel stayed in contact with them through transnational communication. He emphasized the different things he learned from each: his grandmother taught him how to be respectful and "don't talk back", his father taught him how to be "disciplined", and staying in a boarding school helped him become more "independent". Samuel's case highlights the importance of considering both origin and destination contexts if we are to fully understand young people's experiences with family reunification and separation.

5.5 Conclusion

This paper has analysed the mobility trajectories of young people of Ghanaian background in an effort to reconceptualize family reunification from a youth-centric perspective, thereby adding to research on transnational families, ‘left-behind’ children and family reunification. Young people’s reunification with parents, usually in the Global North, is a common phenomenon. Research has adopted definitions of family reunification as used in policy and law, and has consequently focused on the destination country and the nuclear family. Less attention has been paid to family reunification from the perspectives of young people. We acknowledge young people as active agents in migration processes (Dobson 2009), and focus on young people’s own mobility patterns, which often differ from those of their parents.

Combining mobility and transnational perspectives, this paper makes several theoretical contributions. First, our research carries insights on the complexity of transnational families to research on family reunification. We acknowledge significant others beyond the biological parents and context-specific norms on family and child-rearing (Mazzucato and Schans 2011). We have shown that young people can have a diversity of caregivers throughout their lifetimes, including their biological parents, extended family members or non-kin, and that they continue to have meaningful relationships with caregivers even across nation-state borders. We have demonstrated that young people often understand such an accumulation of caregivers as enriching, in contrast to previous research on ‘left-behind’ and reunified youth which is mainly concerned with the negative consequences of parental migration (e.g. Artico 2003; Schapiro et al. 2013; Dreby 2007). Family, as understood by our young respondents, includes people they have lived with and who have cared for them over their lifetimes, even from afar. This is a more encompassing definition of family than that used in family reunification policies in the Global North that only consider children under the age of 18 and their biological parents. Based on a context-specific and youth-centric understanding of family, we redefine family reunification as the act of reuniting with a person or persons whom the young person perceives as a primary caregiver.

Second, we have shown that both destination and origin contexts are important when seeking to understand young people’s experiences with family reunifications. A focus on youth mobility trajectories – defined as a young person’s moves and the family constellations that result from these moves – allows us to recognize that family reunification also entails separation from significant others. If this separation takes place when young people migrate

internationally, from a young person's perspective, the family continues to exist transnationally. This finding only becomes apparent when employing a transnational perspective. Young people often deal with separation from significant others by frequent communication and visits, which further shapes their mobility trajectories. Our research thus helps to correct a bias in transnational family literature, which has focused on children 'left-behind' in the origin country. This focus has an implicit assumption that when children move themselves to reunite with parents, the family is no longer transnational. But young people's mobility trajectories provide clear evidence to the contrary.

Lastly, our transnational and mobility perspective has shown that young people can experience multiple family reunifications both in destination and origin countries. In contrast, current approaches in research and policy only focus on one reunification, that taking place in the destination country, as though a young person's life was a clean slate before arriving to the new country. Several of the young people we interviewed experienced multiple separations and/or reunifications in both countries. It is therefore important to understand how a family reunification that takes place within the context of international migration may be embedded within a broader series of reunifications and separations that take place before or after the international move. This complex mobility and the shifting family constellations that result remain under-researched in both family reunification and transnational family literatures.



6

TRAVEL AND PERSONAL GROWTH: THE VALUE OF VISITS TO THE COUNTRY OF ORIGIN FOR TRANSNATIONAL MIGRANT YOUTH¹⁹

¹⁹ A slightly revised version of this chapter has been published as: Anschütz, Sarah, and Valentina Mazzucato. 2022. "Travel and Personal Growth: The Value of Visits to the Country of Origin for Transnational Migrant Youth." *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education*. Advance online publication. doi:10.1080/03057925.2022.2036593.

6.1 Introduction

A growing number of young people in the Global North have a migrant background, and many engage in travel to the country of their birth or the country their parents came from. But how do such trips to the country of origin affect young people's personal development? These trips are commonly seen by schools as problematic for the educational progression of young people with a migration background. They are considered to interrupt educational continuity, complicate language acquisition, or negatively affect emotional well-being (van Geel 2019b). However, little is known about the actual effects of travel to the country of origin. This is because the mobility of migrant youth has been under-researched. Scholars in migration studies tend to focus on integration into the country of residence and to ignore ties to the origin country (Erdal et al. 2016). The categories of 'first-generation' and 'second-generation' suggest that it is the one-off international move that matters, either young people's or their parents' (Mazzucato 2015). Such conceptualizations conceal the highly diverse mobility trajectories that young people with migration background have (Cheung Judge, Blazek, and Esson 2020; Robertson, Harris, and Baldassar 2018; van Geel and Mazzucato 2018) and the personal growth experiences these might facilitate (but see Hoechner 2020; van Geel and Mazzucato 2021).

By contrast, research on international education and on travel and tourism analyses trips abroad through what we call a 'personal growth lens'. Researchers find that periods spent abroad help young people become better in a personally meaningful way, commonly defined as personal growth (Vittersø 2014). Authors using a personal growth lens typically focus on aspects of individual development, such as self-confidence, independence, adaptability, and the transformation of aspirations (Alexander, Bakir, and Wickens 2010; Tran and Vu 2018). These characteristics, in turn, lead to increased motivation and better academic achievement (Nash 2002; Huang 2011). But despite the potential of travel to facilitate personal growth, research has almost exclusively focused on youth *without* migration background.

These separate yet related bodies of literature, the former based in migration studies and the latter in tourism and international student mobility, reflect a dichotomy in the way that the mobility of youth with and without migration background is analysed. This paper questions this dichotomy. It applies a personal growth lens to investigate the trips that Belgium-based young people of Ghanaian background make to Ghana. Although a personal growth lens is used in studies that foreground the individual, we explore the resources that young people gain during trips by paying special attention to the specific context in Ghana where personal growth happens. Such resources gained in Ghana can be useful for young people's lives and education

in Belgium. We present data from 18 months of ethnographic fieldwork with 25 young people who were born in various countries to Ghanaian parents and are currently residing in Belgium, using a multi-sited methodology which involved following their daily lives in Belgium as well as accompanying a sub-set on trips to Ghana. While literature on the mobility of migrant youth often speaks of ‘return visits’ to a ‘homeland’, ‘home country’ or ‘home’, we refer instead to ‘visits’, ‘trips’ or ‘travel’ to the ‘country of origin’, be it theirs or their parents’. We do so because migrant youth do not necessarily consider their visits a return, especially those visiting for the first time, nor is the country of origin always perceived as a home.

Below we review research in migration studies on visits to the country of origin, identifying a lack of concern with the personal growth consequences of travel for migrant youth, and then turn to literature on the mobility of young people without migration background to elaborate on the personal growth lens. We describe our methods and sample, before analysing data on two opportunities for personal growth that visits to the origin country provide: self-confidence and stimulation for future aspirations. The conclusion addresses implications for research and practice in relation to youth mobility.

6.2 Personal growth through travel: different analytical approaches to youth mobility

Almost half of migrant youth in European secondary schools visit the country of origin at least annually (Schimmer and Van Tubergen 2014). Yet these visits remain under-researched because research on immigrant youth is mainly conducted in the country of residence and predominantly interested in issues of integration. As such, it is characterized by ‘methodological nationalism’ (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002), often neglecting transnational ties and mobility (Erdal et al. 2016; van Geel and Mazzucato 2018). In education, discourses on migrant youth are usually marked by ‘deficit thinking’ whereby students are conceptualized as lacking the normative cultural knowledge and skills to succeed (Clycq, Nouwen, and Vandebroucke 2014). Notions of underachievement and failure, reinforced by teachers’ stereotypes and expectations, further negatively impact migrant youth’s education and career aspirations (Nouwen and Clycq 2019). Travel, in this context, is seen as coming at the expense of academic success (Lightman 2018) rather than as contributing to young people’s personal and educational growth. As van Geel (2019b) shows, educational professionals frame travel and transnational mobility as emotionally and academically disruptive.

Literature exploring the transnational mobility of migrant youth is recent. Second-generation young people maintain connections to the country of origin as they grow up through regular phone calls, e-mails, and visits (Levitt 2009; Reynolds and Zontini 2016; Somerville 2008). Return trips can be a parental strategy to revive or maintain family relationships and to install cultural pride (Clycq 2015; Gardner and Mand 2012; van Geel and Mazzucato 2021; Zontini and Reynolds 2018). Most of the literature investigating travel to origin focuses on how trips shape young people's sense of belonging to and identification with a particular nation or ethnic group, emphasizing the difficulties that arise because of young people's mobility. Scholars find that returning to the country of origin can result in disillusionment or a sense of lost roots (King, Christou, and Ahrens 2011; Wessendorf 2007), and often focus on where migrant youth feel they belong (Vathi and King 2011). Yet focusing only on ambiguities in young people's sense of belonging and identity leaves unexplored the personal impacts of country-of-origin trips.

A small but growing number of studies focus on the opportunities young people enjoy or the personal benefits they gain from trips to the country of origin. Van Geel and Mazzucato (2021) show how such trips can increase educational resilience through (re)connecting to motivational others and facilitating comparison and meaning-making that help Ghanaian youth to overcome educational adversity in the country of residence. Hoechner (2020) finds that stays in Senegal equip young people with confidence and a sense of purpose that help them deal with the challenges of living in the United States as part of a racial and religious minority. Recent scholarship identifies travel to the origin country as providing young people access to luxurious spaces and higher status than in their country of residence (Gardner and Mand 2012; Wagner 2019). More generally, scholars are theorizing how migrants' experience of social class is related to geographical location (Coe and Pauli 2020).

This paper zooms in on visits to the country of origin by young people of migrant background and explores how their experiences create opportunities for personal growth. It contributes to a burgeoning literature by foregrounding *youth mobility trajectories*, a term that refers to young people's moves in time and space, the concomitant family constellations, and what transpires during their mobility (Mazzucato 2015). In exploring the impact of mobility on personal growth, we respond to a call by Arnot, Schneider, and Welply (2013) to consider the complexity of migration and mobility and the resulting consequences for education. To do so, we draw on research on the mobility of youth *without* migration background.

In the literature on international student mobility (ISM), mobility is perceived as an educational strategy students use to accumulate different forms of capital and to gain a competitive advantage. Authors often draw on Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital (Bourdieu 1990) to show that ISM can bring material and symbolic benefits, including foreign language competencies and diplomas from prestigious universities (Findlay et al. 2012; Waters 2012). The ISM literature has parallels with travel and tourism studies on the opportunities for personal growth that travel offers both tourists and international students (e.g. Gu, Schweisfurth, and Day 2009). Studies find that personal growth can occur irrespective of the reasons for travel (Falk et al. 2012) and that both long and short trips can bring significant personal change (Alexander, Bakir, and Wickens 2010; Dwyer 2004).

Much personal growth associated with international education happens outside the classroom (Stone and Petrick 2013). Research on primary and secondary school children of higher socioeconomic background who spend significant parts of their youth outside of their parents' culture, so-called 'third culture kids' (Pollock, Van Reken, and Pollock 2017), shows that cross-cultural interactions offer a wealth of learning opportunities. Contextual and bodily experiences are thus prerequisites for personal growth, which highlights the value of physically being abroad.

A key aspect of personal growth is developing self-confidence. Both ISM and travel and tourism research have shown that experiences abroad increase self-confidence in students (Bachner and Zeuschel 2009; Gmelch 1997; Trower and Lehmann 2017), tourists (Alexander, Bakir, and Wickens 2010), and young people taking a gap year (Inkson and Myers 2003; O'Shea 2014). In an educational context, self-confidence is generally understood as a capacity that is valued and part of a 'scholarly habitus' (Watkins and Noble 2013). Education research has identified the way positive social interactions, encouragement and constructive feedback boost self-confidence (Agirdag, Van Houtte, and Van Avermaet 2012; Guan and Ploner 2020), and several studies recommend that school curricula focus on improving students' self-confidence to improve their educational success (Huang 2011; Norman and Hyland 2003).

Periods spent abroad also shape young people's aspirations (O'Shea 2014; Tran and Vu 2018). Drawing on Bourdieu's notions of habitus and capital (Bourdieu 1990), Tran and Vu (2018) explain how mobility programmes that allow Australian students to spend time in Asia can transform their aspirations for educational, personal, and professional development. Aspirations shape young people's choices and out-of-school transitions (Archer, Hollingworth, and Mendick 2010), and mobility facilitates self-discovery and new 'life possibles' (Tran and

Vu 2018). The new aspirations students develop abroad can have significant impact on their lives, with potential long-term implications for personal and professional life (Brown 2009). Periods abroad help young people become more appreciative of educational opportunities and more enthusiastic about educational or career pathways (O'Shea 2014).

In this article, we adopt a personal growth lens used in ISM and travel and tourism research, yet with two important additions. First, a personal growth lens is normally applied to research on the mobility of relatively privileged young people without a migration background (but see Engel and Gibson 2022). We use this lens to study young people with a migration background to explore what additional insights can be gained by departing from the ethnic identity and belonging lens that is commonly used in research on country-of-origin visits of migrant youth. Second, while the personal growth lens foregrounds the individual, we examine context-specific experiences in both country of residence and origin. This means acknowledging the particularity of country-of-origin visits, and the personal and emotional attachments migrant youth have to the country. We highlight young people's embodied experiences in Ghana and the social and built environment in which they take place, and contrast these with their experiences in Belgium. In doing so, we uncover mechanisms through which self-confidence increases during such trips. We explore how aspirations are contextually produced, shaped by young people's embodied practices, and informed by the social contacts they have access to (Huijsmans, Ansell, and Froerer 2021; Archer, Hollingworth, and Mendick 2010).

To summarize, an emphasis on personal growth allows us to investigate aspects of country-of-origin visits that are not usually addressed in the literature on migrant youth. Further, although we focus on migrant youth, our work aims to make a theoretical and methodological contribution at the intersection of ISM, tourism and migration studies by focusing on the multi-local embeddedness of mobile youth.

6.3 A multi-sited, multi-method research design to study embodied travel experiences

This study is part of the Mobility Trajectories of Young Lives (MO-TRAYL) project, which investigates the effects of transnational mobility on Ghanaian-background youth in cities in Belgium, Germany, The Netherlands, and Ghana, and is led by the second author (Mazzucato 2015). This article relates to the Belgian case study in the greater Antwerp area for which the first author conducted fieldwork.

Antwerp is home to the biggest Ghanaian community in Belgium. With 3,977 people, Ghanaians are the biggest migrant group from Sub-Saharan Africa in a highly diverse city, where almost half of the population and three quarter of its youth have a migration background (Stad in Cijfers 2021). The size of the Ghanaian community is likely an underestimation due to the number of undocumented migrants in Belgium. According to the Antwerp integration centre, as many as half of Sub-Saharan African migrants might be undocumented in the city (Minderhedencentrum de8 2009). Today, most Ghanaians enter Belgium through family reunification (Heyse et al. 2007), which is reflected in our sample.

The sample consisted of 25 young people (12 male/13 female) aged 14-25 at the beginning of fieldwork. Participants were recruited through Ghanaian churches, African youth associations, schools, and snowball sampling. Selection criteria included (1) having a Ghanaian background, meaning both parents were born in Ghana, irrespective of the participant's birth place (20 were born in Ghana, 4 in Belgium, and one in the Netherlands); (2) having made at least one international move to or from Ghana in their lives, including migration and/or short visits; and (3) having attended secondary school in Belgium. Participants born in Ghana migrated to Belgium through family reunification, typically aged 14-17 but four young people entered the country earlier aged 7-11. Most Ghana-born participants had spent numerous years in Belgium (4-15 years), four participants less than a year.

While considering accounts of all 25 participants and some key informants in the Ghanaian community in Antwerp, the paper mainly draws on the experiences of those nine participants (three male, six female) who went on at least one visit to Ghana. Four were born in Ghana, four in Belgium and one in the Netherlands, and they made between one and five trips to Ghana throughout their lives, ranging in length from a single week to six months. Visits were made primarily to see family and friends, but sometimes included touristic activities and vocational training.

Most participants lived on the outskirts of Antwerp, and belonged to the working class in Belgium. Their parents were predominantly employed in low-skilled professions in the industrial, agricultural or service sector. In Ghana, parents' backgrounds ranged from not having obtained secondary school diplomas and working blue-collar jobs, to having completed tertiary education. Yet education was highly valued among all participants and parents we spoke to. Young people faced various challenges and educational inequalities in Belgium: they were overrepresented in lower-status vocational and technical tracks, experienced – usually downward – school and track mobility, and often felt like outsiders (see also Van Caudenberg,

Clycq, and Timmerman 2020). Further, there is a lack of Ghanaian- or African-background role models in high positions in Belgium that young people can look up to. Only 1% of Flemish teachers had a migrant background in 2014, compared to 15-20% of the students in Flanders (Consuegra et al. 2016) and at least 66% of students in Antwerp (Stad in Cijfers, 2021).

Data were collected by the first author during 18 months of multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork between January 2018 and February 2020. Most fieldwork was conducted in Antwerp, yet the first author also accompanied three young women on trips to Ghana (6 weeks in total) to gain insights into their embodied experiences through participant observation and her own corporeal sensations. Spending time with participants in Ghana allowed her to experience the sounds, smells and atmosphere in Ghana, and attuned her to noticing young people's emotions, fleeting encounters and reactions to the environment. She stayed between four and 16 days and accompanied the women during leisure activities, family visits or visits to the neighbourhoods where they grew up. These trips were followed up with interviews in Belgium. Interviews were conducted in Dutch or English and included photo-elicitation methods and walking interviews. In addition to interviews, fieldwork in Belgium consisted of informal conversations and participant-observation in various spaces, including church settings, schools, participants' homes and parties. The first author attended cultural events, such as performances, exhibitions and film screenings organized by young people of African background, and information events on topics such as racial profiling or diversity in the Belgian education system, which provided insights into some of the challenges young people faced. Mapping tools were filled in together with participants to identify their mobility and educational trajectories. The information was used to visualize young people's moves in time and space, the resulting family constellations, and the schools they attended. Whenever possible, these maps were cross-checked with participants for accuracy or used to elicit more about people's mobility and educational experiences (Mazzucato et al. 2022).

Data analysis occurred in stages, using both inductive and deductive coding. In the field, we noticed the personal growth impact of visits to Ghana. Upon return, we consulted ISM and tourism literature for discussions of travel-induced personal growth. Thematic analysis identified patterns within the data. This was done by reading and re-reading fieldnotes and subsequently generating, reviewing and defining themes (Boyatzis 1998). Conceptualizations of personal growth from the literature on student and tourist mobility helped us to generate the codes used in analysis. Data were coded with Nvivo. All names used are pseudonyms.

6.4 Mobility as an opportunity for personal growth

In this section, we analyse the personal growth experiences of Ghanaian-background youth during visits to the country of origin, focusing on (1) developing self-confidence, and (2) acquiring new education and career aspirations. In explaining mechanisms for how these personal growth benefits arise, we highlight the experiences, relationships and context young people encountered during trips to Ghana and contrast these with their lives in Belgium. The complex mosaic of experiences young people have in different contexts challenges simplistic views of migrant youth as belonging (n)either to a country of residence or origin. Our analysis rather shows young people's agency in comparing, evaluating and benefitting from different aspects in the respective countries.

6.4.1 Self-confidence

They [people in Ghana] give you the feeling like, "you are the future", "you can be someone if you want it". – Desmond (19, born in Belgium, three visits to Ghana)

Growing up as young people of migrant background in Belgium entailed various challenges for the participants in this research, such as feeling like the "odd one out", being confronted with racial stereotypes, or facing direct discrimination, also in educational settings. Those few participants who attended academic – instead of technical or vocational – tracks, were usually the only African-background children in class. Stereotypical views of 'Africa' prevailed in the media and surfaced through "ignorant" questions by Belgian classmates. While many young people mentioned teachers who had been supportive in their educational trajectory, we found that especially participants in vocational tracks were stigmatized by their teachers as being academically incapable or unmotivated (cf. Clycq, Nouwen, and Vandebroucke 2014). Esther (18), who was born in Belgium and made four trips to Ghana, was advised after the orientation year to follow vocational education despite her excellent grades. Pursuing her academic aspirations meant she had to be confident in her skills, go against her teacher's advice and change her school as a consequence, but it enabled Esther to obtain her secondary school diploma in the academic track in 2019. Such experiences show the importance of self-confidence in school settings. Trips to Ghana allowed young people to gain self-confidence through two mechanisms: respectful and encouraging treatment, and access to luxurious spaces.

Visits to Ghana provided a break from sometimes harsh Belgian realities. One key informant, Lucy (aged 30), had to deal with anti-immigrant sentiments throughout her childhood and saw trips to Ghana as reminders of her own value: “I need to go back [to Ghana] once in a while, just to remember my self-worth.” Nana (27) was born in Ghana and travelled there twice since she moved to Belgium aged 11. She emphasized that being in Ghana was like taking “a vacation from the world”, which allowed her to disconnect from everyday life in Belgium. Whenever she witnessed racism in Belgium, Nana sought to learn about it because “it’s part of you”. By contrast, Nana did not experience racism in Ghana. This put her visibly at ease, as we observed in her interactions with friends, family and strangers while accompanying her on one of her trips. Her ease could be observed in small, everyday gestures and conversations, such as when we went to a restaurant and the waitress spent time joking around at our table. Nana was laughing and explained that this was one of the “small things” in Ghana: “No one is taking time for you in Belgium.” Participants felt recognized and respected in Ghana.

Desmond (19), whose quote opens this section, also emphasized how favourable treatment in Ghana shaped his self-confidence. He was born in Belgium, where he still lives together with his parents and five siblings, and went to Ghana three times for summer holidays with his family. His favourite trip was the family’s third to Ghana when he was 14. As a Ghanaian from abroad, he received special treatment. People were polite, friendly and gave him access to spaces he seldom had access to in Belgium, due to age or skin colour: “Tourists are kings in Ghana. So if they see that you’re not from there, well, their mindset is like ‘okay that’s a tourist, we can let him in [at a nightclub]’. And they did not ask for my ID.”

The highlight of Desmond’s trip to Ghana was training for five weeks in a prestigious football academy that was run by an ex-World Cup champion of Ghanaian background who had moved back to Ghana from France. Desmond described the atmosphere as distinctly different from Belgium. He felt taken seriously by his coach and fellow players. Encouragement and constructive feedback helped increase his self-confidence (cf. Agirdag, Van Houtte, and Van Avermaet 2012; Guan and Ploner 2020): “They really see a future [in you] and they give [you] a push”. In Belgium, he had often been substituted during matches without explanation, which, he said, had consequences: “Footballers live off their self-confidence. But then you lose your self-confidence. And if you don’t have self-confidence, you cannot achieve anything. You just can’t.” His Belgian coaches expected too much and put him under pressure. Desmond wanted to change football club and planned to train again in the

academy in Ghana because he felt “comfortable” there and it brought out the best in him. “When I come back, I am really strong and confident. My mistake was actually that I did this only once, training five weeks intensively in Ghana, even though I know it can effectively improve me.”

Being in Ghana was also an opportunity for young people to strengthen relationships with supportive family members. Esther was born in Belgium but because most of her family lives in Ghana, her mother took her to Ghana four times during her childhood. Esther enjoyed the “relaxed atmosphere” with family, and used WhatsApp to stay in touch with them while in Belgium. Especially important was her mother’s “insightful” and “sympathetic” niece because her advice and encouragement – also on school related issues – made Esther feel confident in herself.

Participants further emphasized the built environment in Ghana and its role in making them feel special, the second mechanisms we identified for building self-confidence. Trips to Ghana involved leisure activities in luxurious spaces, in stark contrast to days in Belgium filled with school and homework, student or vacation jobs, and church activities. While participants dressed up for church on Sundays and big events such as weddings and birthday parties, these events usually took place in warehouses or community centres or on the industrial outskirts of Antwerp. In Ghana, they had access to 5-star hotels and nightclubs attended by middle to upper class customers, venues that often felt inaccessible in Belgium. Desmond described the football grounds in detail to show that he was taken seriously in Ghana: artificial lawn, beautiful housing, swimming pool. When he talked about his accommodation, he emphasized the barbed-wired fence as a sign of status:

So when you’re [in Ghana], you see a really big villa [...] and you think “oh wow, why don’t we come live here?” You know. That was my first reaction. It was a rented place, but I didn’t know that at the time. It was a vacation home and I thought it was really nice, luxury for once. Because in Belgium, it’s different. But [in Ghana] you have a house surrounded by barbed wire, with a huge gate to be able to park and to enter.

Spending parts of their holidays in luxury apartments or hotels was common for participants. Ama (19), who grew up in Ghana with her grandmother before reuniting with her parents in Belgium at age 9, went to Ghana on three trips from the age of 17 to visit her grandmother and have a vacation. Accompanying her on her trip in 2019, and following via status updates on WhatsApp, we witnessed that she enjoyed dressing up to visit places and

documenting her experiences on social media. Besides visiting the University of Ghana, she spent a day at the pool of a 5-star hotel where she took pictures and videos to share with friends. Bars and restaurants in luxury hotels in Ghana are generally open to the public free of charge and pools can be used for a small fee. In Antwerp, in contrast, young people of migrant background are followed with suspicion, and on several occasions, we observed how the concierge of a 4-star hotel in the city asked migrant-background youth to vacate the hotel's front steps.

Nana went on her first trip to Ghana after finishing tertiary education when she was 24. At the time, she did not have the financial means for visiting Ghana, but her good friend Emmanuella, who lives in Ghana, invited her, paid for the flight and handled all costs whenever they were together during Nana's six-month stay. Emmanuella organized an internship for Nana in her own company, which allowed Nana to gain valuable professional experiences and travel across the country. On Nana's trip in 2019, she and Emmanuella participated in a fine dining event for a few selected people. The event was paid for by Emmanuella's company and took place on the rooftop terrace of a "fancy" apartment in Accra, with a pool and a fantastic view over the city. When we accompanied her, we stayed together in Emmanuella's big house in an up-and-coming neighbourhood in Accra and were taken around the city by a private driver. One day, we went to an expensive Chinese restaurant located in a luxury hotel where the Accra fashion show was taking place next to a pool in the inner courtyard.

Physically being in Ghana offered unique opportunities to learn about one's country of origin and engage with motivational others, and use this knowledge to reflect on and positively reframe negative stereotypes about Ghana. Rebecca (22), Desmond's older sister, was born in Belgium and went to Ghana for the first time when she was 12 years old. This trip marked an important event in her life:

[My parents] are always working from 10 to at least 9 because they are self-employed. [...] When they got home, we saw them about 30 minutes before we had to go to bed. We did not get *that much* from them, so to say. So when we went to Ghana, that was more of a self-study to get to know your country. My father brought us everywhere, all touristic activities that there are. We went from Accra to Kumasi, from Kumasi to the Volta region, we really did a lot.

Together with her family, Rebecca learned about the country's nature and history as well as her family's cultural background. Her visit allowed her to form her own picture of her

parents' origin country that contrasted sharply with representations in the media and stereotypes held by peers in Belgium. The trip made Rebecca feel empowered by sharing photos of her trip with friends and classmates on social media that countered images of a 'poor Africa':

For them it was like “ah, we didn't know all of this”. They received more information and I still remember the very first time [chuckled], I really exaggerated. I posted 500 photos on Facebook! [...] So in the end, they also have a different image about [Ghana]. It changed for everyone in my environment.

Visits to Ghana thus provided a platform for embodied experiences. Young people experienced spaces, sounds, climate, and connections with others, as well as the emotions these interactions with the environment gave rise to. Engaging with encouraging others and spending time in luxurious spaces contributed to young people feeling recognized and valued, and helped to reframe negative stereotypes about Ghana. Such experiences in the country of origin cultivated a sense of self-confidence and contributed to their personal growth.

6.4.2 Travel as stimulation for future aspirations

Just going to Ghana, you will then see what life is about. Because if you remain here [in Belgium], that is just like being in a box. You're just walking in circles without knowing what's outside. – Mufasa (24, born in Ghana, migrated to Belgium aged 14, one visit to Ghana)

Trips to the country of origin also informed young people's educational and career aspirations. In Belgium, participants had to deal with low teacher expectations, which can be detrimental to young people's aspirations (cf. Nouwen and Clycq 2019). Marilyn (24) shared her experience in reception class after arriving in Belgium at the age of 14: “You have to learn Dutch for a year and then choose what you want to do. They give you many options but also suggest what you could do. And they said, '[care work] is good for you, everyone from Africa does it.’” As the opening quote by Mufasa also shows, young people's options sometimes seemed limited in Belgium. Visits to Ghana multiplied potential pathways for the future, not yet fixed in space, through two mechanisms: 'comparative confrontation' (van Geel and Mazzucato 2021) and Ghanaian role models.

Spontaneous encounters and embodied experiences allowed participants to compare different contexts and facilitated meaning-making, also called comparative confrontation (cf. Cheung Judge 2016; Hoechner 2020). Ama (19) had a serendipitous encounter with a childhood friend that made her reflect on what her life could have been had she not migrated to Belgium at age nine. When we visited Ama in Ghana in 2019, we went together to the neighbourhood where she grew up and ran into a former friend of hers. Even though Ama's age, the friend had a young child and was busy with housework when we passed. Later, Ama compared her life with that of peers in Ghana:

I really have a different mentality [...] maybe if I had stayed in Ghana, it would have been different. But maybe because I am here [Belgium], I have this mentality, like, "no, I want something better for myself!" [...] People there, they don't have any motivation to do better. They think to go to school until secondary school and then stop and then work. That's the most important. And then marry, surely the girls. That's the most important for them. Maybe if I was there, it would also be important for me because everyone does it, my cousins do it, so why not? But here, yeah, it's different.

Such confronting experiences in Ghana encouraged young people to compare life in different places. Ama's trips to Ghana acted as reminders of what could have been and strengthened her aspirations to continue with tertiary education.

Chance encounters further gave young people the opportunity to compare contexts, re-evaluate their lives and transform their aspirations. Mufasa (24) saw himself in a unique position because of his mobility. He was different from Belgian-born Ghanaians who had never been to Ghana and were more likely to end up on a "bad path". Being in Ghana allowed him to "see what [he] ha[s] to do to get further in life". At the age of 14, Mufasa joined his mother in Belgium, where he followed the vocational track of secondary school. Vocational training, however, did not prepare him for education at an applied university, and he discontinued his studies in the first few months. Instead, he went on a trip to Ghana with his mother, who had always told him to visit Ghana before getting 'serious' in life. He reported learning many "life lessons" in Ghana, one of which was the realization that he was not making the most of educational opportunities in Belgium. After a spontaneous encounter with an older woman who was unable to pay for meat at a street food stall, he reflected on how little some people have in Ghana, though they still manage to get by. The experience put his own life in Belgium into perspective and made him question whether he was striving for the right things. He thought

about what his aspirations were and whether there was a way he could realize them now. Having just dropped out of tertiary education, some would judge this as an educational failure, but Mufasa perceived the opportunity for a “refresh”. Upon his return to Belgium, he decided to work towards his dream job as a police officer and has been taking small steps to make this dream come true. Despite having had several setbacks, he is now aware of his opportunities in Belgium: “I want to work hard for it and do my best. [...] Although some things are difficult for me, if I just keep trying, I will achieve it at one point. [...] Not everyone gets this opportunity.”

Serendipitous encounters sometimes revealed career opportunities in Ghana. Marilyn got the idea to open a business after a spontaneous encounter with an acquaintance of a friend during her second trip to Ghana at age 24. She grew up in Ghana but graduated from secondary school in Belgium with a specialization in cooking, before completing three more years of cooking school. While she always planned to open her own restaurant in Belgium, the chance encounter in Ghana not only reinforced this aspiration but gave her access to someone who could help her take the initial steps. In her view, opening a restaurant in Ghana was a strategy to get ahead faster because fewer start-up resources were needed than in Belgium. Mufasa also developed business ideas while in Ghana. He valued local Ghanaians who could tell him about demand in the Ghanaian market. He got the idea to start an Uber or taxi business in Ghana after meeting people in a shop who told him that these forms of transport were in high demand. Starting a business in Ghana was also a strategy for dealing with potential discrimination in the future:

Just imagine you live here [Belgium] and you think “okay, Belgium is everything”. You can also found a business in Ghana, which might be good for you. Because imagine, in 10 years or 100 years, the Belgian government just says “okay, all foreigners need to leave, whether you have the Belgian nationality or not, everyone needs to leave”. Then, when you go to Ghana, go back, you always have something to fall back on. [...] So you always need to think on two sides.

Besides spontaneous encounters, experiences with business infrastructure and networks in Ghana can provide young people insights into opportunity structures and inform their aspirations for the future. Attending professional events gave Nana (27) a “feeling” for the industry. She learned about how she could contribute and extended her professional network, further nourishing aspirations of opening her own company in Ghana. Desmond (19), on the

other hand, noticed the success of tourist attractions in Ghana.

I believe in the growth of Ghana. Because for the past 10 years, a lot of tourists came there. There are a lot of lounges, bars, disco's, beach things, nice activities. And I believe that I can contribute to that growth in the future. Really have a hotspot for tourists so that people know "I can come here for nice moments".

Desmond saw building a luxury tourist business in Ghana as a way of countering stereotypical images about Africa. His experiences in Ghana also informed his educational choices, and he aspires to study international business as a consequence of his mobility.

Role models play another important role in shaping youth aspirations as the social contacts young people have access to habitually inform plans for the future (Huijsmans, Ansell, and Froerer 2021; Guan and Ploner 2020). They help show young people that they can achieve whatever they set their mind to. There is a notable lack of Ghanaian role models in high positions in Belgium, but travel to Ghana allowed young people to see, learn about and connect to Ghanaians with influence or in prestigious positions. Our participants felt inspired by historic figures, famous people of Ghanaian background as well as people in their personal network.

Rebecca (22) first learned about Yaa Asantewaa – the queen mother who led the war against British colonialism and is celebrated for this accomplishment – on her first visit to Ghana. Yaa Asantewaa turned into a role model:

It all started with my first trip to Ghana. My father brought us to museums, national parks, etc. In Kumasi, you have a museum that tells you everything about Yaa Asantewaa. And how [the guide] told the story about her was really interesting. [...] I thought 'wow, what a story' [...] and it really stuck with me. So when we were told that we have to represent our regions [for a project], I immediately thought of Yaa Asantewaa, a very strong woman. And I can't imagine that anyone wouldn't want to be like her.

While Rebecca first took notice of Yaa Asantewaa in Ghana, a community education project in Belgium provided the framework for further reflection. Yaa Asantewaa inspired Rebecca to become a role model for the Ghanaian community in Belgium. It was especially important to her to convey to other young people the importance of education, which should be the "highest goal".

For Nana, her good friend Emmanuella was a role model. Nana mentioned Emmanuella several times in interviews and conversations prior to her second trip to Ghana. Both were born

in Ghana, migrated to Belgium at a young age and grew up together. Yet Emmanuella moved back to Ghana in her 20s, became a successful businesswoman and founded her own company. When we spent a day at the beach together in Accra, Emmanuella highly recommended life in Ghana because of the career opportunities and the quality of life. Emmanuella was a real-life example of what was possible and often surfaced in conversations with Nana about starting a business in Ghana. Role models with similar backgrounds as young people can give them a special confidence to succeed in the future.

6.5 Discussion and conclusion

This article has looked at visits to the country of origin through the prism of personal growth, a lens commonly found in the literature on international student mobility (ISM) and in travel and tourism research. ISM and tourism studies have established that travel facilitates personal growth by cultivating self-confidence and by offering space to nourish educational and career aspirations. Our findings are similar. But by using a personal growth lens, we were able to identify elements of country-of-origin visits that have scarcely been highlighted in research on migrant youth. Like young people *without* migration background, young people *with* migration background benefit from trips abroad in terms of their personal development.

Our study highlights the importance of situating the experiences of transnationally mobile youth in both the country of origin *and* residence. Only through focusing on contextual elements and face-to-face interactions in both Ghana and Belgium could we identify mechanisms for how migrant youth cultivate self-confidence and aspirations through travel to the origin country. This acknowledges that migrant youth often have personal connections to the country of origin, resulting in personal growth mechanisms different from those identified for international students and tourists.

We find that self-confidence is strengthened through respectful treatment by people in Ghana and access to luxury spaces, experiences largely missing from young people's lives in Belgium where many face discrimination and belong to the working class. Experiences with people and places in the origin country helped to positively reframe negative stereotypes of Ghana that prevailed in Belgium, further increasing self-confidence. Travel shapes young people's educational and career aspirations through 'comparative confrontation' (van Geel and Mazzucato 2021), a process in which young people compare different opportunity structures in Belgium and Ghana and gain insights into the advantages and disadvantages of life in both countries. Rather than resulting in a sense of non-belonging or in-between identity (e.g., Vathi

and King 2011), we find that country-of-origin visits multiply potential future pathways that are not yet fixed in space. Finally, role models in Ghana serve as inspiration and provide awareness of ‘life possibles’ (Tran and Vu 2018) that shape young people’s aspirations. This is especially important considering the lack of African role models in Belgium, and low teacher expectations that have been shown to negatively impact migrant youth’s education and career aspirations (Nouwen and Clycq 2019). Although transnational studies show that one can develop a transnational identity or sense of belonging even without travelling (Levitt 2009), our findings illustrate the physicality of being in Ghana and the importance of young people’s embodied experiences for personal growth.

The experiences of transnationally mobile youth bear two implications for research and practice. First, visits to the country of origin – just as travel of youth without migration background – should be acknowledged as enriching the lives of youth and equipping them with valuable resources. This is important considering that travel by migrant youth is often perceived detrimental to their educational outcomes, which is also reflected in educational systems that penalize with hefty fines the missing of school due to travel (van Geel 2019b). Second, the experiences transnationally mobile youth have in different contexts, ranging from respectful treatment and luxurious experiences to discrimination, teach them about stereotypes, privilege, and different notions of and possibilities for success. To further solidify personal growth and situate their own experiences within global structures of inequality, young people would benefit from spaces to reflect on these experiences and process them with others (see also Dyrness 2021).

Researching personal growth of mobile youth has important methodological implications. Theoretically, much of the ISM and travel and tourism literature emphasizes the importance of contextual and bodily experiences for personal growth (e.g., Pollock, Van Reken, and Pollock 2017). Methodologically, however, most of these studies consist of survey research or one-off interviews, usually conducted within the country of permanent residence (Stone and Petrick 2013). Our multi-sited, multi-method research design, by contrast, allowed us to observe and, to some extent, experience with our own bodies what transpires during young people’s travels. Rather than only focusing on the individual through retrospective interviews, we were able to see things as they happen in different contexts and research mobility as it unfolds. As such, we heed recent calls for putting mobility central, in theory *and* methodology, when studying young people’s lives (Cheung Judge, Blazek, and Esson 2020; Robertson, Harris and Baldassar 2018; van Geel and Mazzucato 2018).

This paper's limitations suggest promising avenues for future research. First, some participants travelled to locations outside Ghana, to Europe, North America, the Middle East and North Africa. It would be fruitful to explore how international travel to places other than the origin country shape the lives and personal development of increasingly mobile migrant youth. Second, our youth-centric study has captured young people's experiences with country-of-origin visits as they live through them during their teens or early twenties. Longitudinal research could investigate how young people's increased self-confidence and aspirations play out later in life to advance current knowledge about country-of-origin visits that is almost exclusively based on adults' recollection of their youth.

We have sought to 'de-migranticize' research on migrant youth (Dahinden 2016; van Geel and Mazzucato 2021) by bringing different types of mobility – student mobility, tourism and visits to the country of origin – into the same analytical frame (Salazar 2018). Doing so, we have shown that there is no reason to apply different theoretical frameworks to the analysis of trips made by people with and without migration background. For both, travel can foster self-confidence and aspirations, albeit through different mechanisms. Overall, our research findings demonstrate the need to pay attention to the personal growth opportunities of country-of-origin visits, and the potential these have for empowering migrant youth in the country where they reside.



7

EXTRAORDINARY EVERYDAYNESS: YOUNG PEOPLE'S AFFECTIVE ENGAGEMENTS WITH THE COUNTRY OF ORIGIN THROUGH DIGITAL MEDIA AND TRANSNATIONAL MOBILITY²⁰

²⁰ A slightly revised version of this chapter has been published as: Anschutz, Sarah. 2022. "Extraordinary Everydayness: Young People's Affective Engagements with the Country of Origin through Digital Media and Transnational Mobility." *Global Networks*. Advance online publication. doi:10.1111/glob.12364.

7.1 Introduction

“James!”, Ama (19) shrieked in excitement after we had just entered an open-air pub in Accra, the capital of Ghana. She ran towards a young man, flung her arms around him and stayed in his warm embrace for several seconds before introducing him as her friend. Like the friend who brought us to the pub, James and Ama had met on social media. “When was the first time you saw each other in person?” I later asked. Ama sat still and only realized after a few moments that “that was the first time.” It turned out that her relationships with most of the friends she hung out with during this trip in 2019, as well as with her boyfriend, had started out as online relationships.

Emotional encounters with peers like the one described above struck me as curious during my fieldwork on the mobility trajectories of Ghanaian-background youth who grow up between Belgium and Ghana. While I was aware that many young people around the world with a migration background maintain existing transnational relationships through digital media, the situation described above is different. Before young people visit Ghana, digital media play an important role in establishing *new* relationships with transnational peers, which spill over into the offline world during young people’s visits to the country of origin. These peer relationships come alive during visits, as they create an affective space of connection and familiarity in Ghana, but also exist beyond them.

Scholars in transnational migration studies have highlighted migrants’ efforts to build ‘affective circuits’ of emotions, goods and people that allow them to facilitate, block and control emotional connections with kin from a distance (Cole and Groes 2016). Yet face-to-face contact still has significance for the maintenance of transnational relationships (Baldassar 2008), and return visits to the country of origin have been described as emotional events worthy of investigation (Skrbiš 2008). While much research has focused on family reunions and foregrounded adult perspectives, recent research acknowledges that investigations of youth mobility and of young people’s emotions “can serve as a window to their social embeddedness” (Cheung Judge, Blazek, and Esson 2020, 3).

To unpack young people’s sense of self and the emotions that emerge through their mobility, this article focuses on experiences with people and places in the origin country. I argue that through physical and affective experiences in a new environment with previously unknown people, young people create an *extraordinary everydayness*, a concept Valentina

Mazzucato and I developed together in the MO-TRAYL project (www.motrayl.com).²¹ As illustrated in the opening vignette, it is extraordinary that young people can run into a friend on the street in a country where they have either never lived or not in several years. It is extraordinary that they experience an everydayness with peers whom they have never met in real life, and in a space that contains many unfamiliar elements. This sense of extraordinary everydayness is shaped through young people's mobility and their digital media use before, during and after visits. The concept helps to foreground the affective nature of their experiences in the origin country, including embodied and emotional aspects and that are generated through relational encounters with the environment or other people (Massumi 2002; see also Cole and Groes 2016). It also draws attention to young people's transnational mobility, and the resulting engagement with specific places and people, which provides opportunities for new forms of subjectivity and affective experiences to emerge (Conradson and McKay 2007; Sheller and Urry 2006). Rather than using the metaphor of 'affective circuits' (Cole and Groes 2016) which focuses on the emergence of social networks via transnational exchange from a distance, this article explores how young people experience extraordinary everydayness through the affective engagements or connection they create, including both transnational practices and affective aspects of trips themselves.

Previous studies have looked into migrant youth's affective engagements with their or their parents' country of origin and how these are maintained through digital media or shaped by visits. Research on second-generation transnationalism shows that migrant youth use digital media from within the country of residence to sustain relationships with family members in the country of origin (Levitt and Waters 2002; Madianou and Miller 2011). This literature often perceives young people's ties to the country of origin as a continuation of their parental ties and as limited to the family sphere. As such, it has failed to consider young people's agency in creating their own transnational networks with peers in the origin country (but see Akom Ankobrey, Mazzucato, and Wagner 2021). Furthermore, this body of literature commonly conceptualizes migrant youth as sedentary and has ignored their physical mobility, even though almost half of all migrant youth in European secondary schools visit the country of origin at least annually (Mazzucato and Haagsman, 2022; Schimmer and Van Tubergen 2014).

The emotional effects of visits to the country of origin have been shown in emerging research on second-generation returns. Studies demonstrate that visits 'home' impact migrant

²¹ Valentina Mazzucato and I will further expand on the concept of 'extraordinary everydayness' in a forthcoming publication.

youth's sense of belonging and identity (King, Christou, and Ahrens 2011; Vathi and King 2011). Yet since most of these studies are conducted in the country of residence, based mainly on retrospective accounts of adults reflecting on their youth, they often focus on where migrants feel they do or do not belong (Mazzucato and van Geel 2022). We know little of what transpires during visits, which might help to understand what contributes to feelings of connection or disconnection.

By studying young people's transnational mobility in its own right, this article shows how emotion, mobility and the digital are intertwined. It does so by investigating *youth mobility trajectories*, meaning young people's geographic moves in time and space and the concomitant family constellations (Mazzucato 2015). Such an approach enables me to explore mobility as it happens and consider how emotions are "made tangible through practices" (Everts and Wagner 2012, 1) during country-of-origin visits (see also Mazzucato et al. 2022). Following young people's lives before, during and after visits to Ghana, and contextualizing visits within broader mobility trajectories, allows me to study in-depth affective engagements with the origin country across time and space. Drawing on 18 months of multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork in Belgium and Ghana with 25 Ghanaian-background youth aged 14-25, this article shows that young people make new transnational peer relationships online before visiting Ghana, and use digital media during visits that create affective connections to people and places. They move peer relationships from the online to the offline world and navigate an unfamiliar space with apparent ease. Their experiences leave a lasting impression well after young people return to Belgium.

7.2 Transnational youth mobility, affect, and digital media

Migration often separates family members, which can cause feelings of guilt, longing and distress for both migrants and those who stay behind in the country of origin (Baldassar 2008; Dreby 2007; Poeze 2019; Schmalzbauer 2004). While visits and face-to-face contact are still important to maintain transnational relationships (Baldassar 2008), most transnational migration studies focus on the role of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in mediating negative emotions caused by separation, maintaining a sense of 'familyhood' across borders, and facilitating long-distance circulation of care and support (Baldassar 2016; Bryceson and Vuorela 2002; Madianou and Miller 2011; Parreñas 2005).

ICTs are also central to my analysis. ICTs, scholars have argued, enable different forms of virtual 'co-presence' for members of transnational families living in different countries.

‘Mediated co-presence’ – through texting, and audio and video calls – allows family members to “be together” (Baldassar 2016; Madianou and Miller 2011), while ‘ambient co-presence’ implies a peripheral awareness of significant others abroad through an ‘always on’ culture (Madianou 2016). These forms of ICT-based co-presence shape parental caregiving practices across borders (Baldassar 2016; Madianou and Miller 2011), facilitate emotional closeness within families and shape migrant parents’ sense of belonging (Madianou 2016). Much research, however, focuses on adults’ use of ICTs to maintain kin relations from a distance. Methodologically, these studies tend to collect ethnographic data either in the country of residence or origin. This article contributes to this literature but seeks to take it in new directions. I explore ways that ICTs are used to *establish* and not only to maintain connections to the country of origin, I shift the focus away from adults towards migrant youth, and I employ mobile methods to study the emotional and embodied aspects of youth mobility.

While some literature on second-generation transnationalism has explored how young people of migrant background use digital media from within the country of residence to maintain transnational connections, young people’s agency is seldom of central concern. Migrant youth engage in diverse practices that link countries of origin and residence, maintaining religious and ethnic ties, for example, and performing transnational identities online (Leurs 2015; Levitt 2009; Levitt and Waters 2002). Young people use ICTs to stay in touch with family in the country of origin and maintain a sense of familyhood from afar (Haikkola 2011; Robertson, Wilding, and Gifford 2016; Zontini and Reynolds 2018). But studies find that it is the parents who ensure their children’s emotional connection to the country of origin: parents pass on the phone to their children when relatives call from abroad (Haikkola 2011), and they transfer a sense of belonging and nostalgia to the second generation (Wessendorf 2007). Such conceptualizations hide young people’s agency in forging their own transnational engagements and establishing their own social networks in the origin country. Recent research shows that as young people grow older, relationships to family members in the country of origin wane, while peer relations – maintained through ICTs and mobility – become more significant (Akom Ankobrey, Mazzucato, and Wagner 2021) and constitute a source of social capital for migrant youth (Ogden and Mazzucato 2021).

Research exploring what role transnational mobility plays in shaping migrant youth’s emotional engagement with the country of origin is only recent. Second-generation returns literature, which often includes studies on the first and 1.5 generations, finds that mobility to the origin country impacts how migrant youth relate to the country where they or their parents

were born. Mazzucato and van Geel (2022) have argued that this literature is especially interested in how such visits and more permanent returns shape young people's identity and sense of belonging (Gardner and Mand, 2012; King, Christou, and Ahrens 2011; McMichael et al. 2017; Phillips and Potter 2006; Vathi and King 2011; Wessendorf 2007). Their sense of identity and connection can be complex. For example, Gardner and Mand (2012, 976) show that 'home' for British Bangladeshi children "is often situated in two places, because close family members live in both London and Bangladesh". King, Christou, and Ahrens (2011, 499) state that "there is the emotional attachment to Greece and the Greek way of life, often built up continuously over the individual's life-course and deriving from [...] frequent visits to Greece during childhood and beyond". McMichael et al. (2017) find that young refugees feel connected to family in their origin country, yet not to the wider national community, resulting in an ambivalent sense of belonging after visits.

But while emotion is at the centre of these studies, they rarely investigate what transpires during visits to make young people feel as they do. Studies do not give 'real time' insights into everyday emotions and the dynamics of sociality that help explain why young people feel a sense of connection. One important reason for this is methodological: most research on visits to the country of origin has been conducted in the country of residence, based on retrospective accounts by adults of their youth. Data collection has been removed in both space and time from the actual events studied. Yet to fully understand migrant belonging and emotions on the move, it is important to conduct multi-sited research (Boccagni and Baldassar 2015; Mazzucato 2009) and to pay attention to material, embodied and sensorial experiences (Mazzucato et al. 2022; McMichael et al. 2017).

New research agendas do seek to adequately address – theoretically and methodologically – the increasing complexity, diversity and emotionality of transnational youth mobilities (Cheung Judge, Blazek, and Esson 2020; Robertson, Harris, and Baldassar 2018; van Geel and Mazzucato 2018). By putting youth mobility at the centre of the research and by investigating *youth mobility trajectories* (Mazzucato 2015), this article responds to their calls. My aim is to study *all* types of mobility, including initial and subsequent migrations, visits to the country of origin and changes in residence. I study youth mobility over the life course by using mobility trajectory mapping, by interviewing young people before and after visits, and by following them in real time during their visits. Such an approach allows me to research mobility as it unfolds, investigate how it is intertwined with digital practices, and pay attention to its emotional and embodied aspects (Mazzucato et al. 2022).

To analyse young people's affective experiences with people and places during country-of-origin visits, I use the concept of *extraordinary everydayness* developed in the MO-TRAYL project. This concept describes the unique nature of experiencing an everydayness with previously unknown people in an unfamiliar space that is made possible by young people's use of digital media and their physical mobility. The concept combines insights from different fields, especially youth studies and urban studies, to explore the tension between novelty and familiarity. Scholars in youth studies have focused primarily on the online world, while urban studies have shown how ICTs facilitate affective encounters with unknown others in the offline world. Digital media thus make encounters with strangers in urban life a matter of choice rather than chance, and blur distinctions between proximity and distance, connection and disconnection (Koch and Miles 2021). Drawing on these insights, the notion of extraordinary everydayness enables me to study affective encounters with transnational peers during country-of-origin visits that young people meet online prior to visits to the country of origin.

Because these face-to-face encounters with peers happen outside of the country where young people reside, it is essential to recognize the importance of space. Mobilities research has shown that our senses of self are connected to particular places, and these places provide opportunities for affective experiences (Conradson and McKay 2007). When visiting the origin country, young people engage with unfamiliar places they have not been to before, or not for several years. Rather than getting lost or relying on others, young people use digital media to navigate this unfamiliar space. Extraordinary everydayness thus enables me to explore how young people create mundane experiences in a novel environment, and to shift the focus to embodied, emotional and everyday aspects of country-of-origin visits.

7.3 Data and methods

Data for this paper come from the Belgian case study of the 'Mobility Trajectories of Young Lives' project (MO-TRAYL; www.motrayl.com), which aims to understand the impact of youth mobility on young people's life outcomes. The sample consisted of 25 young people (12 male, 13 female) aged 14-25 at the beginning of fieldwork. Participants were recruited through Ghanaian churches, African youth associations, schools, and snowball sampling, and were selected based on the following criteria: (1) having a Ghanaian background, with both parents born in Ghana, regardless of the young person's birth country (20 were born in Ghana, 4 in Belgium, and one in the Netherlands); (2) having attended secondary school in Belgium; and (3) having made at least one international move to or from Ghana. Nine participants (three

male, six female) had made between one and five trips to Ghana ranging in length from one week to six months. Of those, four were born in Ghana, four in Belgium and one in the Netherlands. Visits were made primarily to see family and friends, but encompassed touristic activities and sometimes vocational training. Participants' families were predominantly from Kumasi, Ghana's second largest city, though some also had ties to the capital city Accra, and a few came from other regions.

I conducted multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork, interspersed with communication via social media platforms, between January 2018 and February 2020, of which I spent 18 months physically in the field. Most fieldwork was conducted in the greater Antwerp area, where participants lived, but I also joined three young women on trips to Ghana (six weeks in total). These fieldwork visits to Ghana lasted between four and 16 days and I accompanied the women during leisure activities and family visits, gaining insights into their embodied experiences. The close contact in Ghana, usually including co-habitation, and my long-term involvement in the field facilitated relationships of trust.

In Antwerp, ethnographic fieldwork principally involved participant-observation and informal conversations in young people's homes, schools, church settings and recreational spaces, as well as interviews with participants, teachers and members of the Ghanaian community. Depending on participants' preferences, interviews were conducted in Dutch or English and included biographical discussions, photo-elicitation methods and walking interviews. Several mapping tools were designed for the MO-TRAYL project (Mazzucato 2015; van Geel and Mazzucato 2018), and I filled these in together with participants to identify their mobility trajectories and transnational networks. Trajectory mapping allowed me to systematically track young people's moves in time and space (including short trips and changes of residence), concomitant family constellations, and the schools they attended, ultimately resulting in a visualization of young people's mobility and educational trajectories (Mazzucato et al. 2022). Using concentric-circle network mapping, I identified people who were important for participants and their locations in the world and gathered information on young people's transnational peer relationships. While I discussed transnational relationships with participants in Belgium, the importance and affective nature of peer relationships created through online platforms first became apparent to me in Ghana in an instance similar to the one described in the vignette that opens this paper. My observations in Ghana provided insights into embodied experiences and emotional aspects of young people's lives that participants found difficult to put into words or deemed not to be worthy of mention.

After returning from the field, I used thematic analysis and visualizations of mobility trajectories and transnational networks to identify patterns within the data. I read and re-read fieldnotes, closely examined visualizations, used both inductive and deductive coding, and generated and redefined themes (Boyatzis 1998). Additionally, I used comic-based analysis, or word-picture interactions, to explore emerging ideas and to pay particular attention to embodied, sensory and emotional aspects of the data (Kuttner, Sousanis, and Weaver-Hightower 2018). Drawing significant moments again and again helped to re-story the data into a coherent narrative (Galman 2022).

The analysis for this paper is based on research with the nine people who engaged in at least one visit to Ghana and is informed by encounters with other Belgian-based Ghanaian youth and transnational peers in Ghana. I focus on the cases of Ama, Nana and Rebecca. These three cases provided the richest data and illustrate in-depth how young people invest in affective ties to the country of origin through digital media and visits, while also representing a variety of mobility trajectories (including ‘first’ and ‘second’ generation).

7.4 How digital media and visits shape ‘extraordinary everydayness’ in Ghana

In this section, I present four vignettes that illustrate different aspects of the ‘extraordinary everydayness’ young people experience in Ghana. The first vignette shows how, *prior* to country-of-origin visits, social media allows young people to meet new peers outside of established family or friend networks. The second and third vignettes recount young people’s lived experiences of extraordinary everydayness *during* visits in Ghana – affective experiences that are composed of people and places. The fourth vignette illustrates the lasting impact of affective ties *after* visits to Ghana.

7.4.1 Before going to Ghana: using social media to foster new relationships in the origin country

Ama (19) was born in Ghana and migrated to Belgium at the age of nine. She started to make new connections online at the age of about 14. Especially common at the time was meeting new people through WhatsApp groups with hundreds of members, mostly Ghanaian-background youth across the globe. Ama was sometimes added to groups of no particular interest to her, such as a group around the Champions League, but it still made her part of a large community and visible to others who could now message her privately. She explained: “They would message me sometimes ‘how are you?’ to see how I was doing. And then, we just became

friends, you know? I am no longer in the group, but I still have their number, that's how it goes. We just became friends." A more common way for Ama to meet people today is through Snapchat. Ama will post something on her profile and someone will comment it. While Ama usually does not message new people, she receives reactions on her snaps and is asked for her number so that the chat can continue. In another instance, Ama was on a video call with a Ghana-based friend who added another friend to the call and introduced them to each other.

Nana (27), who was also born in Ghana and migrated to Belgium aged 11, preferred Twitter because it created "community" and was a "chill place" to meet new people and find peers with common interests. She also used LinkedIn and, in the past, had used a personal blog on which she published interviews with Ghanaian artists. This was a deliberate strategy to build up an online presence and ultimately make new connections to peers in Ghana. Less frequently, she also met people through Instagram.

The vignette above illustrates young people's agency in creating their own transnational engagements with people in Ghana. Rather than merely continuing parental ties to family in the origin country (e.g., Haikkola 2011), young people use social media to forge their own relationships. Nana explained:

To be honest, the people I grew up with, when I go back to Ghana, I don't see them. So if it is not thanks to that network that I have been able to build myself, [...] then I don't know anyone. So this new network that I built, I go to Ghana now and I'm like "hey, let's hang out" and I have someone. I am creating new friendships, new networks.

Technology multiplies possibilities for engaging with unknown others and means young people are not limited by existing links or geographic proximity. While both Ama and Nana had family ties and childhood acquaintances in Kumasi, all of their online peers were living elsewhere, mostly in Accra. The potential of social media to make new links was thus reflected in the geographic separation of family and transnational online peer networks in Ghana.

Social media promotes a generative form of encounter because it positions strangers as potential friends or romantic partners, which requires an openness towards the unknown (Koch and Miles 2021). Illustrating this generative potential, Nana and Ama said that they knew most of their friends in Ghana through social media. Meeting others online also often means that people become closer faster. For example, Ama mentioned that people messaging her

immediately made them friends: “I post something on my Snap[chat]. Someone sees it [and thinks] ‘oh, that is nice, I want to be your friend.’ Voila, we are friends.” Such relationships do not necessarily last long but can carry an extraordinary emotional intensity nonetheless, as I will show in more detail below.

Ama and Nana both invested time and effort in the online sphere to establish new contacts. Such ‘digital labour’ involves cultivating one’s online profile, sometimes on several platforms, by uploading pictures or videos and sharing information or tweets. It also includes checking apps frequently and engaging in conversations online that might not always be fruitful in terms of creating friendships. Talking about the blog she maintained to boost her online presence, Nana explained:

It was an online blog where I was promoting upcoming young artists. So that already gave me some sort of credibility and the ability to just go to somebody’s DM [direct message] and say “hey, I see you are doing good work, this and that, I want to interview you,” and they would say, “yes, interview me.” That’s how I made most of my social media connections and it helped me meet really cool, cool, cool people. [...] And then from there, we keep that relationship till now. With all those people, I kept that good relationship.

The multiple online ties that young people build display a variety of relationships to the offline world and are related to their interests and plans for the future. Ama and Nana both used several social media platforms to establish new connections to peers in Ghana, though they differed in which platform they preferred, possibly due to differences in age and life phase. Upon first encounter, most of their online peers were completely separate from any offline networks and they searched for and met online peers through app-specific functions. Nana explained how she would notice someone on her Twitter timeline: “I have seen her appear on my timeline several times, cool. People are retweeting about her, lots of cool stuff. And for me, it felt like ‘ah this is a good contact you want to keep when you go back to Ghana’.” Snapchat has a function that suggests strangers with similar interests as potential friends, which is how Ama’s friends might have first noticed her. Sometimes online friends would introduce new people by, for example, adding them to a video call. My third case, Rebecca (22), shows another relationship to the offline as she met transnational online peers through offline acquaintances. She was born in Belgium and had travelled to Ghana five times. Just before going to Ghana with another Ghanaian-background friend from Belgium at the age of 20, she

had been to London where she met other Ghanaians who connected her to their friends in Ghana via WhatsApp. She reflected on these networks:

If you have connections in Ghana, Ghana is just a lot nicer. It makes everything easier. And because of the people in London, we met other people, [...] so that we thought “ah okay, a network is really important”. [...] I really noticed that you make a lot of connections and it makes everything easier.

In sum, Rebecca, Nana and Ama illustrate that affective engagements with Ghana are neither limited to family ties nor the so-called ‘first generation’. Young people fashion new connections to Ghana through social media and their own mobility. Shared interests, both personal and professional, curiosity, and similar tastes in music or fashion help to facilitate these new connections.

7.4.2 Extraordinary everydayness: affective experiences with people and places in Ghana

The virtual and the physical meet: transnational online peers in Ghana

Nana (27) and I had just arrived in Ghana, unpacked, freshened up and met back at the living room. Abigail was on her way to meet us at the house and take us somewhere for food. “It will be the first time I see her,” Nana mentioned at one point. “What do you mean?” I asked. It turned out they had met over Twitter but never seen each other in person. Abigail had messaged Nana because she thought she was “cool,” and they became friends. It took Abigail some time to get to the house. We followed where the Uber was taking her through the app and watched Nana’s phone intently. The air was filled with suspense. “This is better than watching TV,” I said. Nana laughed, “look at us.”

When Abigail did not arrive even though the Uber app said she had, Nana gave me her phone and went off to look for her. A couple of minutes later, they came walking towards the house and I saw Abigail: shoulder-long locks, black blouse, jeans ripped in a few places, stilettos, bright blue eyes. It was a bumpy dirt road and she had difficulty walking around the potholes. Nana reached out her arm to help her friend and they continued walking towards the house holding hands. “You’re so tiny,” Abigail said and Nana was laughing, her face glowing. This was a theme that continued throughout the evening: they talked about the different expectations they had of each other, but especially related to height and appearance.

“So were you nervous meeting me?” Nana asked during dinner. “No,” Abigail said determined. She looked down and shook her head, “I was excited!” She had tried to cut her

work meeting short because she was so eager to meet Nana. It was a relaxed atmosphere. Afterwards, I asked Nana, “so how was it meeting Abigail?” She said it was exciting. After talking to someone for such a long time, they become “part of you,” and when you finally meet them, you see that they are “real.”

The vignette above illustrates that the peer relationships young people create through social media do not remain virtual (Allison 2013; Helve and Bynner 2007), but become ‘real’ and contribute to a sense of extraordinary everydayness. Even though Nana had not lived in Ghana for ten years, she could meet a close friend just hours after arriving in the country. The first face-to-face meeting with Abigail described above was charged with the excitement of meeting someone new, but at the same time, it was a dinner between two friends who knew each well, laughed intimately and made plans for their time together in Ghana. Nana appreciated just hanging out, “talking nonsense” about boyfriends, current affairs, and activities that she definitely wanted to do.

Contributing to this everydayness in Ghana was the fact that young people could, quite by chance, run into someone they know but had never seen in person, as described in the opening vignette of this article in which Ama (19) had an unplanned but pleasant encounter with her friend James in a nightclub. Nana had a similar chance encounter with a Facebook friend in Accra whom she had never seen in person, and Nana’s Belgian-based friend who we hung out with at the beach one night knew people sitting close by. When we arrived at the beach, she excitedly greeted a young man sitting with his male friends and walked over for a brief chat before joining us at the table to order drinks. Such encounters created a sense of familiarity and social embeddedness in Ghana even though participants were for a short time.

Young people also actively drew on friends, acquaintances, and romantic partners in Ghana to create extraordinary everydayness which entailed experiences of sociality and comfort as well as aspects of leisure and luxury. They could meet peers for dinner, go to the beach, organize BBQs, go to concerts and special events, or just hang out at a swimming pool, their AirBnB or a friend’s house. Ama called upon her boyfriend whenever she needed help, and drew on other male friends in Accra to keep us company, escort us to a nightclub, pay for our rides, or bring food to the house.

Digital media were not only important prior to visits but also while young people were in Ghana. They provided a way to connect to peers at almost any time. Young people could rely on their social media relationships for company or advice on where to eat or what activities

to do. Ama shared on social media when she wanted to attend an event and asked peers to join her. Yet sometimes young people could not rely on their peers – because they were tied up at work or in a different city – and we ended up driving around aimlessly, staying in the house, or doing touristic activities recommended online for want of better ideas.

Besides possibilities for direct communication offered by social media, the sense of being part of a community in Ghana was further reinforced through some app-specific features. An example is the Snap Map provided by the app Snapchat. Ama's Snap Map (Figure 7.1) shows all of her friends as bitmojis, their current location (provided they share their geo-tracking data) and status updates in the form of photos and videos. The map thus provides a visual representation of Ama's peer community in Ghana and creates 'ambient co-presence' (Madianou 2016). While previous research has shown that ambient co-presence is important for the maintenance of transnational relationships and feelings of belonging and community from a distance (Madianou 2016), it is similarly important for creating a sense of community when relationships are formed in a transnational social field and come together within the same geographical space. Not only was Ama constantly aware of her friends' whereabouts and current activities when consulting Snapchat and other social media platforms, she could share status updates that initiated further exchange with her peers in Ghana.

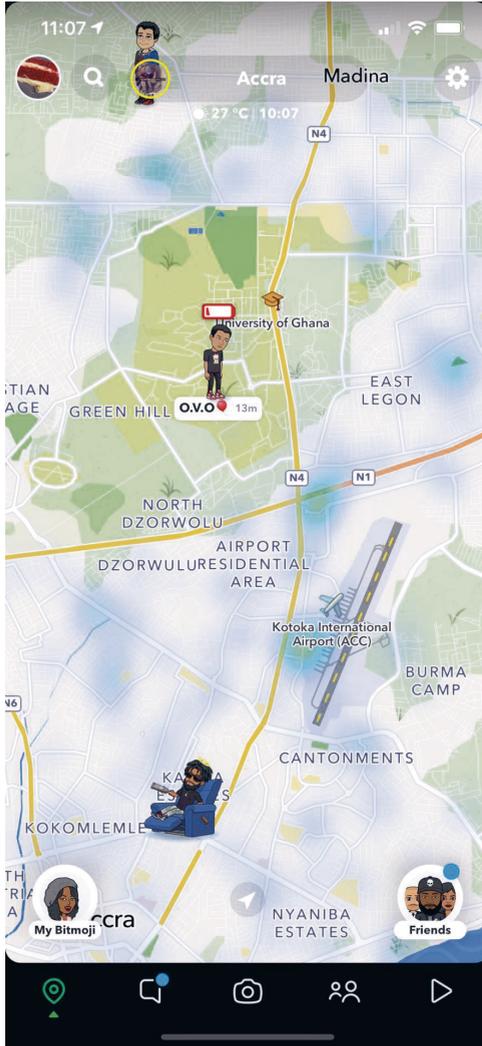


Figure 7.1 Ama's Snap Map, a service by the app Snapchat, showing some of Ama's friends as bitmojis, their whereabouts when they last used the app, and their status updates.

Navigating unfamiliar space with confidence: location-based technologies in Ghana

Ama and I took a trotro, a minivan, to visit her boyfriend Prince in Koforidua and go to a concert on his campus that night. It had taken us a while to leave the city and it was pitch-black outside throughout the two-hour drive on the meandering mountain road. Ama had already been to Koforidua a couple of times during this trip, always making the journey by herself, and I felt relaxed knowing she would get us there safely. Once we were approaching the city, Ama

took out her phone and opened her Snap Map (Figure 7.1). Having enabled geo-tracking, her bitmoji was displayed sitting in a car at our current location. She moved around the map with her finger to get a sense of where we were, then pointed to a spot that was marked on the map and commented, “this is the junction where we have to get off.” Not long after, she called the driver and told him to stop. Since Koforidua is a smaller city, there was no Uber, but we found a taxi a little later that took us to a point on the main road from where we could walk to Prince’s guesthouse.

Young people navigated their way round in Ghana with apparent ease. The situation described above would not have been possible just a few years ago when young people had to rely on others, mostly relatives, for almost everything. While some street names are commonly known in Ghana, the vast majority of streets do not have official names and houses are not marked by numbers. To get around, people refer to landmarks, street vendors, petrol stations, or even noticeable trees or bumps in the road. This makes meeting up difficult for anyone not familiar with the busy urban landscape.

With the rise of smartphones, young people’s independence and freedom of movement increased enormously. It is now easy to know where to get off a minibus by consulting an app. Rebecca here describes how Uber had granted her more freedom during her fourth visit to Ghana as compared to earlier trips with her family:

Previously, I was dependent on my parents. So if I wanted to go somewhere, we all went there together, we had to go there together in a car. But now [...] you have Uber in Ghana and I just downloaded the app, typed in my location and in two minutes, the Uber is there. So I went to many different places, and I went to church alone as well. Because my family wanted to go to *their* church but I wanted to go to the big church. [...] I went there alone. And because of Uber, I was able to take initiative to go there alone. Before it was like “you are young, you can’t go there alone.”

Uber and similar ride-hailing services enable young people to move within Ghana independent of family, meet up with friends and engage in activities that are of interest to them. Or as Rebecca put it, new technologies allowed her to experience “the Ghana that everyone was talking about, but that I wasn’t allowed to see [before].”

Another app that granted independence was Airbnb. Ama rented different rooms in the greater Accra area via this app during the two-and-a-half months that she stayed in Ghana. This

allowed her to stay away from the watching eyes of her family but also to experiment with living by herself before moving out of her parents' home in Belgium. Describing her last visit to Ghana, Ama said:

I did different things, you know. I went to Cape Coast; I have never been to Cape Coast. I went to Koforidua; I had never been to Koforidua. I booked an Airbnb myself; I never done that. I was not independent [before], you know. [Now,] I had to do everything by myself. That was really cool.

Technology also offered protections. Nana depended on Google maps to track our movements whenever we were in a taxi or an Uber to make sure we were moving to our desired location in the fastest way possible. "You have to be careful that they don't take detours," she said explaining that Uber drivers try to make more money this way, especially if they know that you do not live in Ghana. Thus, while it was often evident to locals that Nana was only in Ghana for a visit, smartphones gave her and others the confidence to navigate busy urban landscapes and an assurance that they would not be taken advantage of.

7.4.3 Lasting impressions of visits to Ghana

The very first time I saw Rebecca (22), we met in a café in Antwerp for an interview. Someone had connected us via email, and since the only thing I knew about her was that she had participated in a Ghanaian community education project, I asked whether she would mind saying a few words about herself to start. She replied: "Okay, so I'm Rebecca, I'm 21 years old, and [...] I am a Ghanaian young person. Well, I was born here [Belgium] but I have Ghanaian roots and I find it very important to know your roots. I mean, you are here, you are learning about everything, about the people in this environment. But I think it is more important to have a little bit of everything. [...] So I have been to Ghana regularly. Altogether, I went four times." As the interview went on, and in subsequent interactions, Rebecca shared how trips to Ghana strengthened her pride in being Ghanaian. She emphasized the value of knowing people in Ghana and exploring Ghanaian sites and history, first with her family but increasingly on her own with the help of technology and friends.

Young people's experiences of extraordinary everydayness in Ghana had a lasting effect once they were back in Belgium. Trips to the origin country helped shape their sense of self and their affective engagements to Ghana. Sometimes young people were worried before first visiting

Ghana. They worried, for example, that they might have a different mentality from Ghanaians in Ghana. Nana said: “I was scared when I was going to Ghana. But when I got there, things changed. [...] I just relaxed.” The trip put Nana’s mind at ease and showed her that while people might sometimes “bother you” because you act differently, you still belong: “With family, you feel at home. Places you go, you feel at home.” In other instances, sociality experienced in Ghana offered her the opportunity to re-evaluate how life should be lived:

At least in Ghana, I will live life. Just have fun outside of work. And you can have it in Ghana. There is stuff that happens here [in Belgium] but I think it’s boring, whereas in Ghana you can get into quite a lot of interesting activities. It’s also a different vibe: the sun, enjoying good life, working but then it also it feels like I’m on holiday. [...] That’s the kind of life I want to have.

Trips to Ghana thus reinforced young people’s desires to engage with Ghana in the long term, often shaping their mobility aspirations and contributing to transnational lifestyles. Comparing herself in Ghana and Belgium, Rebecca explained why she enjoys being in Ghana so much and why she will continue to make trips in the future:

I am also more relaxed in Ghana. I don’t know, I just feel at home. I think “I am here to enjoy” and I don’t stress myself over other people. Whereas here [in Belgium] I think “I have to pay attention, otherwise [people] will make a comment.”

Some young people plan to live in Ghana in the future, and ICTs provide an important tool to build up connections over time. Nana commented on the role social media had played in putting her plans into action:

I realized how important it is to have a network. Because if I should move back today, without a network, I would be so alone somehow. It would take me some time to find good people to hang out or share ideas with. But having that opportunity, using social media to tap into that, now I have a lot of people. If I go today, I know that I’m not gonna be alone. That I could ask for advice how to register my company, because they are there and they have this information. And you can trust them more because you built up a good relationship along the years.

Impressions of visits to Ghana can be long lasting even if transnational peer relationships are not. When I was in Ghana for the first time in June 2019, I spent time with Ama’s boyfriend Isaac and witnessed how she broke up with him from Belgium and blocked him on all social

media platforms. Half a year later, I accompanied Ama during one of her visits to Ghana. She had a new boyfriend, Prince, whom she had met through a big WhatsApp group several years earlier. While their relationship also ended not long after Ama returned to Belgium, Ama referred to both Isaac and Prince when reflecting on her favourite moments in Ghana afterwards. For example, after her third trip to Ghana, Ama showed me videos of a BBQ with Prince, some friends and people from the neighbourhood and explained that it had been one of the nicest days.

Longevity of transnational relationships was thus not a prerequisite for experiences to be meaningful. The durability of relationships was in fact irrelevant, as both long lasting and ephemeral contacts contributed to affective experiences in Ghana that made young people feel connected. Brief encounters are meaningful and have a significant effect on migrants' lives (cf. Gladkova and Mazzucato 2017; van Geel and Mazzucato 2021). But they are usually neglected in transnational migration research. Previous research tends to foreground long lasting relationships, such as parent-child relationships and marriage and kinships ties (Cole and Groes 2016), and the way that digital media helps to maintain these relationships across borders (Baldassar 2016). Yet we have seen that even though Ama's romantic relationships ended shortly after her second and third trip to Ghana, they still provided emotionality and connection, security, and independence from her family during her stay in Ghana.

7.5 Conclusion

In this paper, I have explored the affective engagements of Ghanaian-background youth with their country of origin as mediated by their digital media use and physical mobility. In doing so, I have investigated the mobility patterns of migrant youth in their own right and made several contributions to transnational migration studies. Conceptually, I have used the concept of *extraordinary everydayness*, developed in the MO-TRAYL project, to describe experiences of a new environment and previously unknown people that feel simultaneously extraordinary and very much ordinary or everyday. Extraordinary everydayness is made possible through the ubiquity and affordances of ICTs, used by young people to connect to unknown peers and navigate unfamiliar space. Applying this concept to the analysis of young people's country-of-origin visits has enabled me to build on previous work on the intersections of youth mobility, temporality and emotions (Cheung Judge, Blazek, and Esson 2020; Mazzucato 2015; van Geel and Mazzucato 2018), and to make several theoretical contributions.

First, young people use digital media to forge their own ties to the country of origin and do not merely continue parental ties as much literature suggests they do (e.g., Haikkola 2011; Wessendorf 2007). This article has explored transnational relationships beyond the family sphere, such as friendships and romantic relationships, that take centre stage in this phase of young people's lives. I have highlighted how digital media serve as a tool for young people's agency and enable them to form affective connections before and during visits. Social media platforms and location-based apps spark sociality, confidence, and independence.

Second, online peer relationships do not remain virtual but become part of young people's affective offline experiences during visits to the country of origin. Previous research has looked separately at either the emotionality of visits (e.g., Baldassar 2008; Skrbiš 2008) or at how relationships are maintained from a distance through digital media (e.g., Madianou and Miller 2011). This study aimed to show how mobility, the digital and affect become entangled and together contribute to young people's connections to the origin country. The embodied nature of mobility and value of physical co-presence with peers further highlights the importance of country-of-origin visits for young people's affective engagements.

Third, the mobility trajectory approach used in this article advances research on the intersection of temporality and mobility in several ways. By contextualizing visits in relation to earlier trips, I was able to notice changes over time and space (see also Mazzucato 2015). Transnational peer relationships become more prevalent as young people grow older and are linked to themes of exploration, confidence, and independence from family. My trajectory approach also brought to the fore ephemeral encounters through which young people create affective connections. Ephemeral relationships have significant impact on migrants' lives (Gladkova and Mazzucato 2017; van Geel and Mazzucato 2021) in addition to long lasting bonds, such as kinships ties, that have been the focus in transnational migration research. Furthermore, a trajectory approach emphasizes the temporality evident in the practices before, during and after country-of-origin visits through which young people fashion extraordinary everydayness. Finally, foregrounding young people's mobility trajectories, rather than focusing on whether they are first- or second-generation migrants, illustrates how their affective engagement with the origin country is a result of their visits and digital media use rather than their place of birth.

A mobility trajectory approach also has methodological implications for the study of transnational youth. While studies on second-generation returns have shown that visits to the country of origin are emotional events and impact feelings of belonging (e.g., Gardner and

Mand 2012; King, Christou, and Ahrens 2011), the methodology employed by these studies cannot detect everyday emotions because it investigated mobility from a distance by relying on interview data collected in the country of residence. By contrast, a multi-sited ethnographic approach provides real-time insights and enables a focus on embodied experiences (Mazzucato 2009) that contribute to our understanding of young people's social embeddedness. Multi-sited fieldwork enables the researcher "to capture smaller transactions or events which may otherwise have been forgotten, and to establish linkages which respondents themselves may not have been aware of" (Mazzucato 2009, 224). For this article, it allowed me to understand better the taken-for-granted use of technology and social media by participants. Researching how mobility unfolds over time, by accompanying young people on trips and interviewing them afterwards, further allowed me to observe how some relationships rupture and others flourish.

The limitations of this study suggest fruitful avenues for future research. First, all participants who travelled to Ghana during my fieldwork were female, yet research on affect indicates that women are more likely to engage in emotional work across borders (Cole and Groes 2016). It would be instructive to explore how gender shapes young people's affective engagement with the origin country. Second, my focus was on the experiences of young people living in Belgium. Since studies have emphasized the bi-directionality of transnational ties (Mazzucato 2011), future research could look into how relationships created through digital media are experienced by transnational peers in Ghana. Third, this study is, to my knowledge, the first to describe affective experiences with 'strangers' in a transnational social field. Future research could explore what shapes these new forms of sociality, what role transnational power dynamics play, and whether contact with transnational peers intensifies around visits.

Overall, the findings of this study show that young people are active agents in forging their own engagements with the country of origin. By considering their mobility trajectories and their use of technology, this article has helped provide a more detailed understanding of the various forms of affective experience young people build over time and space through extraordinary everydayness experienced in the origin country.



8

CONCLUSION

8.1 Introduction

This dissertation presents an ethnographic account of the mobility trajectories and embodied mobility experiences of Ghanaian-background youth between Ghana and Belgium through a youth-centric, multi-sited and mobile research design. The central research question is: *How does the physical mobility to and within Ghana shape the transnational affective engagements of Ghanaian-background youth living in Belgium?* To answer this question, the dissertation employs the concept of *youth mobility trajectories*, defined as young people's geographic moves in time and across distant localities and the concomitant family constellations (Mazzucato 2015; van Geel and Mazzucato 2018), resulting in an investigation of all movements along a young person's life course. Overall, the dissertation gives a detailed account of how mobility before young people's international migration to Belgium as well as the continuous visits to the country of origin shape their lives in terms of experiences with family, personal growth, and their relationship to the origin country.

This dissertation is innovative in several ways. First, by applying the concept of youth mobility trajectories, this thesis challenges common conceptualizations of migrant youth as 'clean slates' upon arrival in the new country and brings into focus the ongoing transnational connections and mobilities. Second, I observe and highlight the processual, temporal, and embodied aspects of mobility and develop the concept of transnational affective engagements throughout this dissertation. *Transnational affective engagements* refer to the bodily and emotional engagement with specific places and people, made possible by young people's mobility, which provide opportunities for new forms of subjectivity and affective experiences to emerge. Third, the dissertation further develops and employs a set of methodological tools to capture the complex and diverse mobility patterns of migrant youth as well as their embodied and emotional mobility experiences. Ultimately, the dissertation aims to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the different emotional ties that young people build and maintain over time and space through their mobility, and the impact these have on young people's sense of self in various ways. This final chapter discusses these innovations and the main contributions of the study (Sections 8.2 and 8.3), before outlining some of the main limitations and suggesting avenues for future research (Section 8.4).

8.2 Youth mobility trajectories: viewing mobility over the life course and in real time

Migration is not a singular journey resulting in settlement but entails continuous transnational engagements, diverse emotional and social experiences in various contexts, stasis, repetition, and back-and-forth movements (Cheung Judge, Esson, and Blazek 2020). This dissertation contributes to an understanding of youth mobility that is embodied and ongoing, permeating past, present, and future. The different chapters of this thesis show that young people's transnational lives need to be understood in relation to the people, places, and events that they encounter 'on the move' across multiple contexts, which shape meaning-making processes, resources, and future pathways (see also Robertson, Harris, and Baldassar 2018). The concept of youth mobility trajectories (Mazzucato 2015; van Geel and Mazzucato 2018) is employed and further developed to gain a deeper understanding of the temporal and emotional dynamics of transnational mobility and the ways in which these shape young people's lives in dynamic and evolving ways. I will briefly outline the main contributions.

Applying the concept of youth mobility trajectories allows me to envision migration as being embedded within a series of moves that take place before and after the first international move. Thinking of mobility as a process over time brings into focus the experiences young people have outside of the country of residence and enriches our understanding of how migrant youth are faring and what resources support their lives. Such a mobilities lens removes the methodological nationalism that is often applied in studies on migrant youth that only focus on local or national contexts (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2003), and instead broadens our perspective to include experiences young people have before migrating and/or during their continuous mobilities to the country of origin.

Further, a processual approach to youth mobility brings into focus what transpires *during* mobility, including its sensorial, embodied, and emotional aspects. Emotional and affective engagements with both people and places that youth encounter during country-of-origin visits are important to how young people give meaning to their experiences and play a role in shaping relationships, aspirations for the future, connections with the origin country, and their sense of self.

Finally, through a mobilities lens, this dissertation brings to the fore the difference in discourses and analytical approaches for young people with and without migration background. While international student mobility, for example, is understood as enriching young people's lives, visits to the country of origin are often seen as problematic for migrant youth's sense of belonging or overall development (Lightman 2018; Wessendorf 2007). Bringing different

types of mobility into the same analytical framework not only highlights the personal growth benefits of country-of-origin visits but also ‘de-migranticizes’ (Dahinden 2016) research on migrant youth mobility, thereby making visible and aiming to correct a persisting hierarchy in how mobilities are understood depending on who is mobile.

Methodologically, data on youth mobility trajectories were collected by combining an ethnographic approach with three additional mobile methods. First, this dissertation introduces *mobility trajectory mapping* as a tool to systematize the collection of data that, due to its complex nature, can otherwise be difficult to gather (see also Mazzucato et al. 2022). Trajectory mapping involves using a grid to collect information on participants’ compendium of moves, their timing and duration, as well as how these moves shape the family constellations in terms of who lives with the young people. Visualizing these mobility trajectories allowed me to identify patterns, capture changes over time, and make visible interlinkages with the trajectories of significant others.

Second, I *followed mobility in real time* by accompanying a subset of the sample on their visits to the country of origin, which is rarely done in research. This allowed me to gather impressions of and ask questions about these visits as they happened, rather than only relying on memories of mobility experiences. Being there with participants contributed to capturing the meaning-making processes in action and accessing sensorial, embodied, and emotional information. Third, a trajectory approach further enabled me to *trace mobility experiences before, during, and after visits* through interviews, observations, and informal conversations over time (for other methodological considerations see Chapter 3). Such a methodological approach has deep repercussions for how we can understand the transnational lives of migrant-background youth, which is further explained in the next sections.

8.3 Transnational affective engagements: relating to the country of origin through mobility and digital media

To fully account for young people’s transnational affective connections, these connections need to be embedded within their mobility trajectories. As outlined above, making young people’s physical mobility as it unfolds a central focus of research, brings greater understanding of the emotional, embodied, and sensorial elements of mobility experiences, which are at the heart of young people’s affective engagements with people and places in the country of origin. Mobility is imbued with learning, meaning-making, and opportunities for

transnational young people that shape their lives over time and space. Further, young people's multi-sited embeddedness in both Belgium and Ghana functions as a resource that allows them to develop their own pathways in a transnational context. The following three sections give body to the concept of transnational affective engagements that I have developed throughout this dissertation. The concept builds on and contributes to previous research on 'transnational affect' circulated across borders (Cole and Groes 2016; Wilding et al. 2020; Wise and Velayutham 2017) by focusing on the bodily and emotional experiences with people and the environment that are made possible by young people's mobility. The three sections below highlight in particular the transnational relationships with significant others, the role of the digital in fashioning affective connections with people and youth's surroundings during mobility, and the resources their embodied mobility experiences give access to.

8.3.1 Experiencing transnational relationships over time and space

Young people are mobile in the country of origin even before they migrate. This dissertation shows that these movements between households in Ghana might involve changes in caregivers and contribute to the affective connections young people make with multiple caregivers. These experiences with both kin and non-kin caregivers in the country of origin are crucial to interpret young people's experiences with family separation and reunification along their mobility trajectories. In contrast to family reunification laws and policies in receiving country contexts, which are based on Western definitions of the family that only include the nuclear family, the young people of Ghanaian background in this study employ broader conceptions of the family. In Ghana, it is common that extended family and non-kin caregiver help with the upbringing of children (Mazzucato and Schans 2011). Parent-child separation is thus not stigmatized but experienced depending on young people's relationships with current and previous caregivers.

Importantly, young people 'accumulate' caregivers throughout their childhood and in many cases maintain meaningful connections to them over time, via digital media and/or visits to the country of origin. This means that from the perspective of the child, many families remain transnational even after young people reunify with one or sometimes both parents in the country of residence. Their care relationships with primary caregivers in Ghana, thus their pre-migration experiences, shape how young people experience their everyday lives in Belgium. This study shows that young people use digital media to stay in contact with primary caregivers who stay behind in Ghana, explicitly come to Ghana to rekindle these relationships, or visit

significant others when they travel to Ghana for different purposes. Yet primary caregivers are only one reason for young people's continuous transnational engagements, and revitalising relationships only one outcome of country-of-origin visits. The following two sections highlight the importance of transnational peer networks and other effects of travels.

8.3.2 Creating affective engagements beyond the family sphere: the role of the digital

Due to an adult-centric focus in transnational migration research and an oversimplification of mobility, young people's transnational peer relationships have previously largely been absent in the literature – both as important members of young people's transnational networks and as sources for personal growth. However, by mapping and analysing the transnational mobility and networks of migrant youth between Belgium and Ghana, this dissertation has added to a deeper understanding of how migrant youth create, maintain, and benefit from peer relationships (see also Akom Ankobrey, Mazzucato, and Wagner 2021; Ogden and Mazzucato 2021). Mobility constitutes a crucial factor in how peer relationships evolve over time. Since the majority of migrant youth in European countries is mobile, with 81% of the first-generation and 97% of the second-generation having travelled to the country of origin in the past (Mazzucato and Haagsman, 2022), transnational peer relationships are likely a common phenomenon and deserve research attention.

This dissertation foregrounds the role of digital media in creating *new* transnational relationships online with peers in the country of origin and in independently navigating spaces during visits. It introduces and develops the concept of 'extraordinary everydayness' to describe the unique nature of experiencing an everydayness with previously unknown people in an unfamiliar space that is made possible by young people's use of digital media and their physical mobility. I show that the transnational peer relationships young people make online before visiting Ghana, spill over into the offline world during their visits, and have a lasting effect once young people return to Belgium. Peer relationships thus come alive during visits, as they create an affective space of connection and familiarity in Ghana, but also exist beyond them.

The mobility trajectory approach has been particularly useful to make contributions to the intersections of temporality and mobility. Viewing trips to the country of origin in relation to visits earlier in a young person's life, brought out that transnational peer relationships become important at a specific moment in time: during the late teens and early twenties.

Furthermore, it contributed to capturing the beginning, deterioration, and rupture of friendships and romantic relationships as well as the importance of ephemeral relationships which are significant yet under-researched (Gladkova and Mazzucato 2017; van Geel and Mazzucato 2021). Finally, following mobility in real time made possible to detect the presence and significance of transnational online peers in the first place, and allowed me to witness that young people move around Ghana and visit new places outside of the family home. Transnational peer networks in Ghana are often separate from kinship ties and constitute one way young people fashion their own affective engagements (Chapter 7).

8.3.3 Gaining resources through different types of mobility

Contributing to burgeoning literature that looks beyond the lens of belonging and ethnic identity (e.g., Hoechner 2020; van Geel and Mazzucato 2021), this dissertation finds that young people gain access to different resources through their mobility trajectories. The intimate relationships young people build with family members and primary caregivers, either before their migration or as a result of their trips to Ghana, equip young people with different skills, knowledge, motivation, and self-confidence. Young people gain access to educational capital for example, by moving in with a teacher in their early years, or they encounter people with different worldviews, aspirations and abilities depending on whom they are living with (Chapter 5). The different people transnational youth meet through their mobility enrich their lives because of the emotional bonds and opportunities for growth these entail.

This dissertation particularly brings into focus how visits to the country of origin, and the affective experiences with people and places they give rise to, contribute to young people's personal growth. A focus on personal growth is a valuable contribution to existing literature on these visits which to date has mostly focused on the difficulties or experiences of disillusionment (e.g., King, Christou, and Ahrens 2011; Wessendorf 2007). However, as this thesis shows, travel to the country of origin provides experiences through which young people develop self-confidence and aspirations for the future. These effects are possible because migrant youth learn about their roots and have access to new cultural repertoires; feel they are treated in a special way by people in Ghana who express pride in them; have access to luxurious spaces that are often unavailable to them in Belgium; are confronted with sometimes difficult situations that make them reflect on their current context; and interact with role models of a similar background who are almost non-existing in high positions in Belgium (Chapter 6).

Due to recent technological advancements, migrant youth can use digital media and their smartphones to create new affective engagements with peers in Ghana and navigate unfamiliar environments during visits to the country of origin. Technology provides several resources and opportunities for personal development. First, the transnational peers that young people meet can reflect, contribute to, and support current interests and future career pathways between Belgium and Ghana. Staying in Ghana, aided by technology, can further be a ground for experimentation during which young people test out and develop their independence and confidence – for example by living on their own for the first time, navigating large and unfamiliar urban areas without the support of family members, and by being in romantic relationships (Chapter 7).

All the experiences and sources for personal growth described above take place outside of the country where young people reside, though they have potentially important repercussions for how migrant youth are faring in Belgium. Findings from the international student mobility literature, for example, highlight that travel enhances personal development in the longer run by contributing to educational outcomes and a greater variety of options for school-to-work transitions (Bachner and Zeuschel 2009; Trower and Lehmann 2017). Mobility is thus desirable and appears to benefit young people's future pathways. Considering just how frequently young people with a migration background travel internationally (Mazzucato and Haagsman, 2022), albeit in the context of country-of-origin visits, it is important to acknowledge the effects of mobility beyond international student exchange programs. This dissertation contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the mechanisms that facilitate personal growth during such travels to the country of origin.

8.4 Limitations of this research and avenues for future research

This study contributes to burgeoning research that recognizes the spatio-temporal complexity and embodied nature of transnational youth mobility and situates the lives of migrant youth in the origin and destination country contexts. While it addresses several knowledge gaps in the literature, this study is not all-comprehensive. This final section of the dissertation identifies some of the limitations encountered and points out interesting directions for future research.

This dissertation argues for the importance of a transnational perspective in the study of youth mobility that pays attention to relevant institutions and cultural understandings in the multiple contexts in which young people are situated. While the definition of youth mobility trajectories acknowledges context-specific understandings and practices of the extended family

and social parenthood, which is investigated in-depth in Chapter 5, other important contextual factors and institutions are left unexplored. For example, the dissertation only mentions in passing that education plays a crucial role in Ghanaian society at large and specifically among the young people who were part of this study as well as their parents. Yet some participants also favourably mentioned the discipline, confidence, independence, hard-working mindset, and peer support networks they gained because of their pre-migration educational experiences and that also shaped how they fared after arriving in a new education system in Belgium. Future research could investigate the role of the Ghanaian educational culture and educational institutions in further detail and explore how and when such resources acquired in the country of origin can be implemented in a new country.

Longer term research is needed to investigate whether and how the effects of youth mobility found in this thesis develop over time. The different chapters of this dissertation analyse experiences that take place at a particular moment of young people's life course, that is, their teens and early twenties. It would be important to follow up – with interviews and observations – on how their personal development and relationships to significant others and the country of origin change over time. This would be a useful addition to current research on visits to the country of origin which often draws on retrospective interviews with adults who reflect on their youth. Longitudinal research could investigate how young people's mobility trajectories and transnational affective engagements unfold over time.

This dissertation focuses on transnational connections and mobility between the countries of origin and residence. However, the transnational networks of participants involved in this study included peers and family members in various countries, not just Ghana (see also Haikkola 2011; van Liempt 2011). Further, young people's mobility trajectories encompassed holiday trips and family visits to destinations outside of Ghana, including to countries in Europe, North America, the Middle East, and North Africa. Several participants expressed their interest to travel to and explore locations other than Ghana in the coming years before going on another country-of-origin visit. Therefore, an exploration of transnational networks and mobility beyond the countries of origin and residence would be a fruitful avenue for future research.

Further, more research is needed to better understand transnational peer networks and specifically relationships with previously unknown peers in Ghana that young people build through digital media. To date, studies on transnational relationships mostly focus on the role of digital media to maintain existing family links. In Chapter 7, I show that social media offers

platforms to seek out and establish new relationships beyond the family sphere. Future research should acknowledge the generative potential of digital media and could, for example, explore what inspires these new forms of sociality, what role transnational power dynamics play, and whether contact with transnational peers intensifies around visits.

This research makes an original contribution to the study of transnational youth mobility in terms of its theoretical and methodological approaches that a trajectory approach entails. By including both the country of origin and residence, this study provides a deeper understanding of the complexities of youth mobility over the life course and the ways in which different forms of movement impact the lives of young people. Moreover, the multi-sited and mobile research design facilitated the thorough and processual investigation of lived mobility experiences in both Belgium and Ghana that allowed me to capture embodied, sensorial, and emotional elements of mobility.

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Appendix A. Information brochure for research participant

Who can be involved?

I will be doing this research with young people who:

- have a Ghanaian background*.
- are 15-25 years old.
- have some experience traveling between Ghana and Europe.
- are attending or have finished school.

* For this project, 'Ghanaian background' means both your parents were born in Ghana.






MO-TRAYL has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (grant agreement No 862982)

For more information:

If you are you interested in participating in this research or have any questions, please contact me.

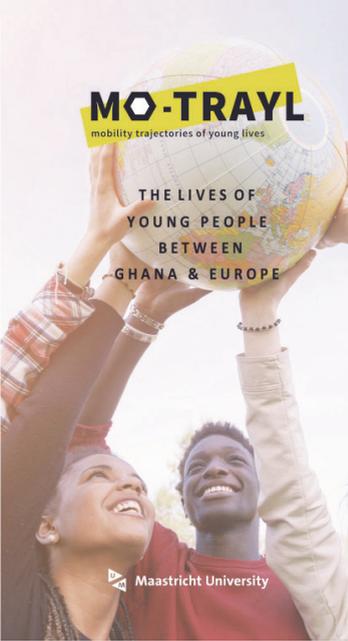
I am a researcher at Maastricht University (the Netherlands) and will be doing the case study in Antwerp, Belgium in 2018-2019.

Sarah Anschutz
+32 487 01 22 23
s.anschutz@maastrichtuniversity.nl



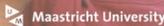
You can also find more information about MO-TRAYL at www.motrayl.com





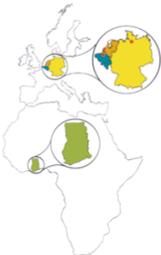
MO-TRAYL
mobility trajectories of young lives

**THE LIVES OF
 YOUNG PEOPLE
 BETWEEN
 GHANA & EUROPE**



MO-TRAYL is a five-year project (2017-2021) that aims to understand how growing up between Ghana and Europe shapes young people's lives.

My research forms part of this project and focuses on young people of Ghanaian background in **Antwerp, Belgium**. I will explore how youth experience growing up with attachments to more than one country. This includes how traveling to and from Ghana affects young people's relationships with family and friends, their schooling and what they choose to do after school. In order to learn more about this, I will listen to young people's views and stories.



Why is your story important?

Many people today are part of families that live across two or more countries, either because they migrated themselves or at least one of their parents did. Some young people travel back to Ghana for study, holidays or family visits. But not much is known about young people's travels and moves between countries. Yet, many educators and policymakers assume that mobility is bad for young people's education. For example, some education policies prohibit traveling throughout the school year.

Alongside my research, other researchers focus on the lives of youth of Ghanaian background in the Netherlands, Germany and Ghana. We hope that our research projects will help schools and policy makers to better understand the effects of international experience on young people's lives.

How will I learn about your story?

I will talk to young people about their travels to and from Ghana, relationships with family and friends, education and what they plan to do after school. I will also spend time with them to learn what their day-to-day life is like.

What about your privacy?

Participation in this research is always voluntary and you can opt out at anytime. Your name and contact information will be kept private and not shared with others.



Appendix B. Overview of participants' characteristics

Pseudonym	Age ^b	Gender	Place of birth	Moves in GH	Caregiver(s) in Ghana	Arrival Belgium (age)	Family re-unification with	Number of trips to Ghana (main reason) ^c	Educational track ^d	Interaction ^e
Nana ^a	25	female	Ghana	3	mother, maternal grandmother, maternal aunt, teacher, father	2003 (11)	father	2 (FAM & OTHER)	working	SI (4) + IC + O (9 in Europe + 7 days in Ghana)
Esther	16	female	Belgium	-	-	-	-	4 (FAM)	ASO	SI (3) + IC + O (23)
Ama	18	female	Ghana	1	maternal grandmother	2009 (9)	parents	3 (FAM & OTHER)	TSO	SI (3) + IC + O (6 in Europe + 16 days in Ghana)
Marilyn	24	female	Ghana	0	mother	2008 (14)	father	2 (FAM)	working	SI (2) + IC + O (18 in Europe + 4 days in Ghana)
Rebecca	21	female	Belgium	-	-	-	-	4 (FAM & OTHER)	Bachelor	SI (4) + IC + O (9)
Mufasa	23	male	Ghana	4	mother, sister, family friend	2009 (14)	mother	1 (VAC)	Bachelor	SI (2) + IC + O (5)
Desmond	19	male	Belgium	-	-	-	-	3 (FAM)	self-study	SI (1) + IC + O (4)
Vivian	22	female	Belgium	-	-	-	-	5 (FAM)	Bachelor	SI (2) + O (2)
Joseph	17	male	NL	-	-	2015 (14)	-	1 (FAM)	BSO	SI (1) + IC + O (5)
Nick	19	male	Ghana	0	mother, independent	2012 (14)	parents	0	BSO	SI (3) + IC + O (24)
Emily	20	female	Ghana	0	parents, mother	2012 (14)	father	0	BSO	SI (2) + IC + O (14)
Kojo	22	male	Ghana	1	maternal grandmother	2011 (16)	mother	0	Bachelor	SI (2) + IC + O (17)
Lily	22	female	Ghana	1	maternal grandmother	2011 (16)	mother	0	BSO	SI (1) + IC + O (16)
Yaw	17	male	Ghana	1	mother, father, maternal grandmother	2015 (14)	father	0	BSO	SI (2) + IC + O (7)
Gifty	19	female	Ghana	3	mother	2016 (16)	father	0	BSO	SI (2) + IC + O (4)

Samuel	22	male	Ghana	3	mother, maternal grandmother, father	2009 (14)	mother	0	working	SI (3) + IC + O (28)
Joycelin	17	female	Ghana	2	mother, cousin, independent	2017 (17)	mother	0	OKAN	SI (1) + IC + O (21)
Ernest	14	male	Ghana	0	mother, maternal aunt	2011 (8)	parents	0	BSO	SI (1) + O (2)
Maya	25	female	Ghana	n.a.	mother	2007 (13)	parents	0	Bachelor	SI (2) + IC + O (10)
Evelyn	20	female	Ghana	2	father, grandmother	2015 (16)	mother	0	BSO	IC + O (7)
Martin	14	male	Ghana	2	mother, stepfather	2018 (14)	mother	0	OKAN	SI (2) + IC + O (12)
David	17	male	Ghana	0	father	2018 (16)	mother	0	OKAN	SI (2) + O (3)
Kwame	18	male	Ghana	1	mother, paternal grandmother	2018 (17)	father	0	OKAN	SI (1) + O (4)
Diana	18	female	Ghana	0	mother	2009 (8)	father	0	TSO	SI (1) + IC + O (2)
Isaac	16	male	Ghana	n.a.	maternal grandparents	2018 (15)	mother	0	OKAN	SI (1) + O (3)

Source: Table compiled by the author based on the data collected.

^a Respondents in bold are those whom I accompanied to or spent time with in Ghana.

^b The age of respondents refers to their age at the first encounter in the field.

^c Main reasons to travel to Ghana: family (FAM); vacation (VAC); other reasons include funeral, wedding, vocational training, or charity event (OTHER).

^d The educational track of respondents refers to the educational track at the first encounter in the field: academic track (ASO), technical track (TSO), vocational track (BSO), reception classes for recently arrived migrants (OKAN).

^e Interaction refers to the type of contact or interaction I as the researcher engaged in with respondents: semi-structured interviews (SI); informal conversations (IC); observations (O). The number in parentheses indicates how many times I met that particular respondent to conduct interview(s) or observation(s). Unless specifically stated otherwise, observations took place in Europe (mainly in Belgium but also in other European countries when accompanying young people on trips). Observations (often participant observation) include chance encounters, hanging out, walking around the neighbourhood, attending concerts or film screenings, going shopping/to the mall, visiting the hairdresser or a seamstress, sitting in on lessons at school, joining young people in church or church youth groups, having dinner or lunch together, visiting them at their internship, attending weddings, naming ceremonies or birthdays, driving around in the car, accompanying young people to an important exam, dropping off or picking up gifts from/for Ghana, hanging out at participants' home, watching football matches, during Twi lessons, having drinks, going to night clubs, taking the same bus or train, visiting touristic or historic sites, and watching TV.

Appendix C. Mobility trajectory interview guide

MO-TRAYL interview topic guide

Make sure to first conduct a mobility and educational trajectory mapping interview in case of one-off interviews. Yet, always keep in mind that 'no-size-fits-all'.

Mobility trajectory

(Moves in time and space, including place, year/age, family composition (e.g. transnational family arrangements) and resulting transnational linkages)

Questions:

Mobility experience (address each move or trip)

- How/ by whom was the decision to move/travel made?
- How did you feel about the decision to move/travel?
- Could you describe how you felt on the day of your move/trip? *Ask for recent or very significant moves*
- What were your expectations of your move/trip? To what extent were they met?
- Did/do you feel at home in the place you moved/travelled to? Why?
- What is your strongest memory of your move/trip?
- How do you look back on your move/trip? *Ask for more distant moves (time)*

In general:

- How do you generally feel about moving/ travelling?
- What is your favourite move or trip? Why?
- Which of the places you have lived in/travelled to would you like to visit again? Why?

Educational trajectory

(Pathway through education system, including place, year level, school type, qualifications, any skipped or repeated grades; grades/performance; interactions/experiences with teachers and peers. Take into account pre-schooling and experiences in different educational systems and schools, both primary and secondary.)

Questions:

School experience (address each school/track attended)

- Who decided what school/track you would attend?
- How was the decision about changing schools/tracks made? How do you feel about how this decision was made?
- How did you feel about changing schools / track?
- Was there someone who made you feel welcome in your new school/class?

School experience (address each phase of schooling)

- How do you feel you're doing in school?
- What are your teachers like? Are all your teachers like this? Which teachers are your favourite and why?
- Who do you (like to) hang out with? Why? Do you have a best friend at school?
- If you have ever experienced disruptions (e.g., repeating a school year), why did that happen?

In general

- How do you generally feel about school?

Resilience

(How participants (have) overcome difficult moments and obstacles (and what role transnational relationships and resources play in this)

Questions:

Specific moments

- Can you tell me about a time recently when you've had to face a challenge / difficulty / hurdle?
 - ➔ What was it about?
 - ➔ Who was involved?
 - ➔ How did you deal with it?
 - ➔ Looking back, would you have handled it the same way?
- Can you tell me about a recent achievement of yours / when you've achieved a goal?
 - ➔ What was the achievement/goal?
 - ➔ How did you achieve it?
 - ➔ Why was/is it important to you?

In general:

- ➔ What do you do in general to achieve your goals?
- ➔ Do you generally feel like you are able to achieve your goals?

Aspirations

(Plans for work/study; plans and hopes for relationships/ family/ place of residence; differentiate between expectations (realistic) and aspirations (ideal); actual choices/ transitions for those who make them during fieldwork. Take into account structural conditions.) [A = aspiration; E = expectation]

Questions:

Education

- What level of education would you like to achieve/complete? [A]
 - o [if university] what would you like to study?
- What level of education would your parents (and your family in Ghana?) like you to achieve/complete? [A]
- What level of school do you think you will achieve/complete? [E]
- What level of education do your parents (and siblings, extended family, including in Ghana?) have?
Tailor this to who has come up in the (Concentric Circle) interview as important.

The future (general)

- (If still in school) what would you like to do when you finish secondary school?
- Do you think about what you would like your life to be like in 5, 10 years? [A]
 - o [If yes] Can you describe it to me? (*prompt for work, family, relationships, location, etc.*)
 - o [If no] Why not?
- What do you think your life will be like in 5, 10 years (or at the age of 30)? [E]
- How would your parents/caregiver feel about this imagined future? *Tailor this to who has come up in the interview as important.*
- Do you feel optimistic and positive or negative and worried about the future? Why?

Role models

- Can you tell me about someone you admire / a role model? What do you admire about them / why?
Refer back to answers from the (Concentric Circle) interview where relevant.
- What do you think makes someone successful?

Appendix D. Example of a filled in mobility trajectory grid, anonymized

Relation to BS	Year	Mother (location)		Father (location)		Sibling 1 (location)		Sibling 2 (location)		Sibling 3 (location)		Sibling 4 (location)	
		Name	Age	Name	Age	Name	Age	Name	Age	Name	Age	Name	Age
2018	18	Priscilla		Justice		Eric	14	Emma	12				
2017	17												
2016	16												
2015	15												
2014	14												
2013	13	Ar											
2012	12												
2011	11												
2010	10												
2009	9												
2008	8												
2007	7												
2006	6												
2005	5												
2004	4												
2003	3												
2002	2												
2001	1												
2000	0	Kia											
1999													
1998													
1997													
1996													
1995													
1994													
1993													

Year	Age	Country	City	Neighbourhood	Caregiver
2018	18	MO-TRAV	mobility and education grid		
2017	17				
2016	16				
2015	15				
2014	14				
2013	13				
2012	12				
2011	11				
2010	10				
2009	9				
2008	8				
2007	7				
2006	6				
2005	5				
2004	4				
2003	3				
2002	2				
2001	1				
2000	0				
1999					
1998					
1997					
1996					
1995					
1994					
1993					

Move	Country	City	Neighbourhood	Caregiver	Place of birth
Move 1	The Netherlands	The Netherlands			
Move 2	The Netherlands	The Netherlands			
Move 3	The Netherlands	The Netherlands			
Move 4	The Netherlands	The Netherlands			
Move 5	The Netherlands	The Netherlands			
Move 6	The Netherlands	The Netherlands			
Move 7	The Netherlands	The Netherlands			
Move 8	The Netherlands	The Netherlands			
Move 9	The Netherlands	The Netherlands			
Move 10	The Netherlands	The Netherlands			

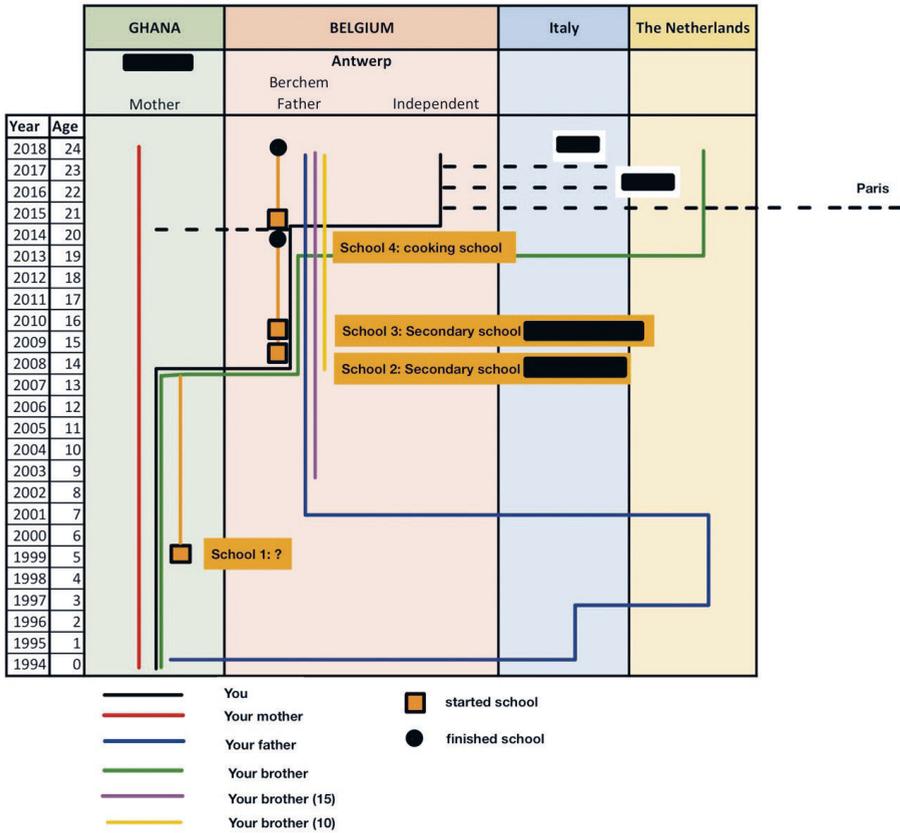
Year	Age	Education
2018	18	
2017	17	
2016	16	
2015	15	
2014	14	
2013	13	
2012	12	
2011	11	
2010	10	
2009	9	
2008	8	
2007	7	
2006	6	
2005	5	
2004	4	
2003	3	
2002	2	
2001	1	
2000	0	
1999		
1998		
1997		
1996		
1995		
1994		
1993		

Year	Age	Education
2018	18	
2017	17	
2016	16	
2015	15	
2014	14	
2013	13	
2012	12	
2011	11	
2010	10	
2009	9	
2008	8	
2007	7	
2006	6	
2005	5	
2004	4	
2003	3	
2002	2	
2001	1	
2000	0	
1999		
1998		
1997		
1996		
1995		
1994		
1993		

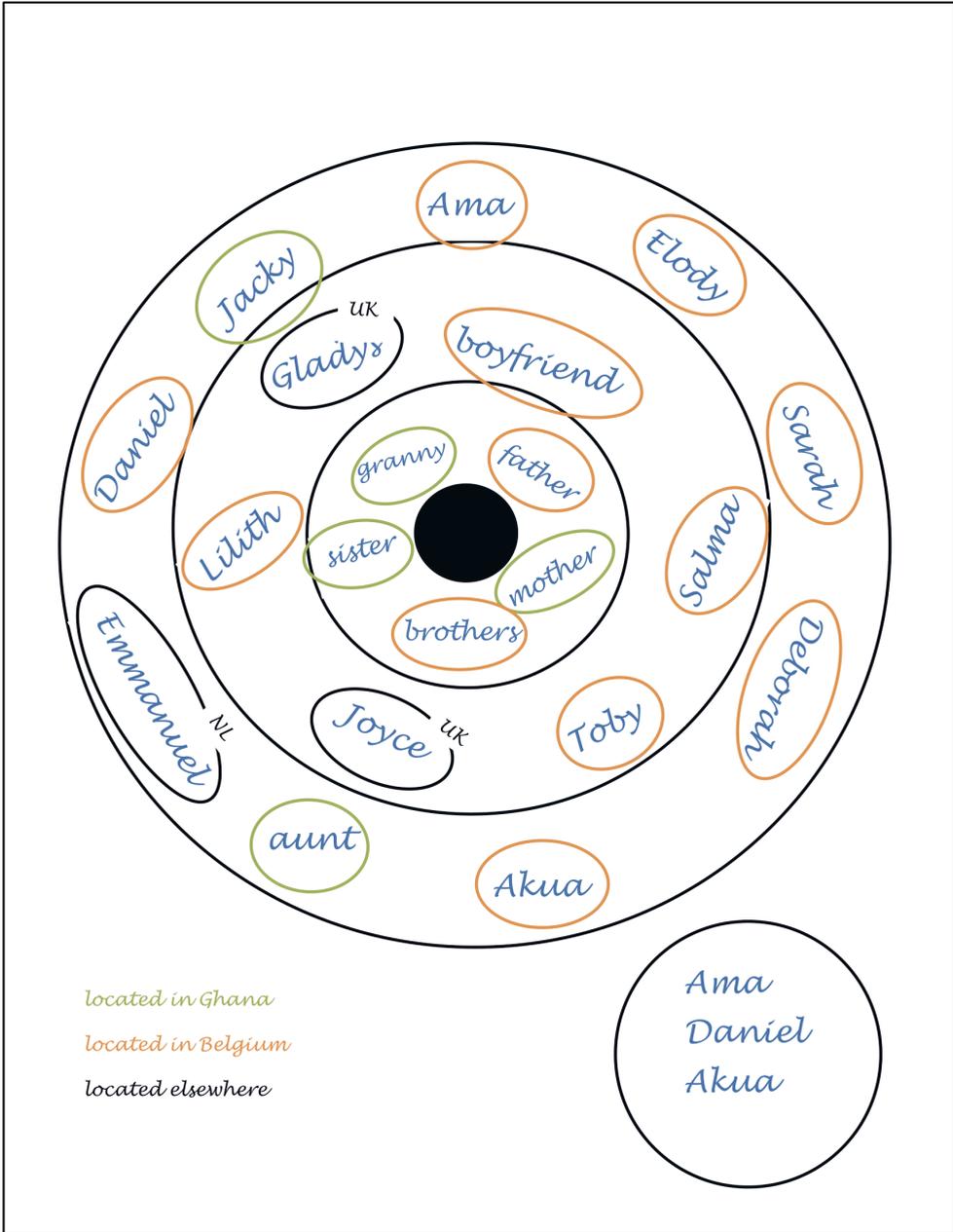
Year	Age	Education
2018	18	
2017	17	
2016	16	
2015	15	
2014	14	
2013	13	
2012	12	
2011	11	
2010	10	
2009	9	
2008	8	
2007	7	
2006	6	
2005	5	
2004	4	
2003	3	
2002	2	
2001	1	
2000	0	
1999		
1998		
1997		
1996		
1995		
1994		
1993		

*BS = boarding school
 **skipped year 3

Appendix E. Example of a mobility map used during fieldwork, anonymized



Appendix F. Example of a filled in concentric-circle template, anonymized



Appendix G. Concentric-circle interview guide

MO-TRAYL instruction sheet: concentric circle interview

The researcher shows the concentric circle (see next page) and explains that **ego** (i.e., the participant) is in the middle. After this, the following steps should be followed:

- 1) Ask the participant to: **“Write down the names of all of the people that are important to you on this sheet, inside these three circles. The more important they are to you, the closer to the centre they should be.”** Don’t define what ‘important’ means and don’t specify a time period. If the participant does not know how to make sense of a (changing) relationship (e.g., when someone used to be important to the participant but suddenly lost contact with this person), he/she will still be encouraged to put the name in one of the three circles. Ask for and write down the location (country/region/city) of each person identified.
- 2) Ask the participant to **“Write down the names of people you have difficulties with or a difficult relationship with in the circle in the bottom right corner of the page.”** Ask for and write down the location (country/region/city) of each person identified.
- 3) After arranging the names according to importance in ego’s life, the researcher uses the following probing questions to gain information about the names in the circle and elicit more names in specific areas of interest:

Mobility trajectory	Resilience	Aspirations	Educational trajectory
1) How do you stay in touch with people who live far away? How often are you in contact? Through what means? <i>(Go in-depth on a few examples)</i>	Who do you go to for support/how do you get support (about school, family, friends, the future, and choices after school)? <i>(Prompt to see if there is more than one. Address these different categories one by one and colour-code them)</i>	Can you tell me about someone you admire/ a role model? What do you admire about them? Why? <i>(Prompt to see if there is more than one.)</i>	1) Who do you go to for help with your homework? <i>(Prompt to see if there is more than one.)</i>
2) How often are you in touch with them?			2) Who gives you advice/provides guidance related to your education/career?
3) Who do you stay in touch with most? Why?			3) Who attends your meetings with your teacher/mentor in school?
4) Have you seen/visited them? If yes, when, and why?			

*Differentiate between names added in the first round (in response to the general question) and those added through probing questions. The researcher should take separate notes about participants’ reasoning/explanations (of placement of names) and responses to probing questions.

- 4) If the participant did not mention the people in the small circle during the interview, ask the following probing questions for each person: **“Why have you placed this person in this circle?”**
 - a. Has your relationship with that person always been like this?
 - If yes, why do you think that is?
 - If no, how was it before? And why do you think it changed?

Appendix H. Overview of the most important changes in Belgian family migration policy, 1946-2017

Year	Regulation (summary)	Description
1946-1970	Bilateral labour agreements	Labour agreements included the right for family reunification for all recruited workers. These agreements were signed with Italy (1946), Spain (1956), Greece (1957), Morocco (1964), Turkey (1964), Tunisia (1969), Algeria (1970), and Yugoslavia (1970).
1965	Financial support for family reunification	The regulation provided reimbursement for half of the travel expenses for the spouse and children who accompanied a worker, providing the family had at least three children under the legal majority age (21 at the time).
1968	Family reunification for European citizens	European citizens have the right to family reunification, regardless of the nationality of family members according to the Council Regulation (EEC) No 492/2011.
1978	Restriction of family reunification for working age children	Working age children can no longer join their father in Belgium while the spouse and younger children remain in the country of origin.
1979	Work permit for family members restricted	Tightening requirements for the granting of an “A” class work permit to family members of immigrant workers under the October 5 Royal Decree. The “A” permit is of a permanent nature and authorizes its holder to obtain employment in any sector of the economy.
1984	Reduction maximum age for reunification with children	Modification to the Aliens Act (15 December 1980) lowers the age of children able to benefit from family reunification from 21 to 18 years.
1993	Restrictions of family formation	Minimum age of 18 years for marriage with third country national. The control period for cohabitation of marriage partners was extended from 6 months to 1 year.
1996	Family members can be required to leave Belgium	Modification to the Aliens Act (15 December 1980) makes it possible that family members may have to leave the territory of income and living conditions are not satisfactory.
1999	Law on prevention of marriages of convenience	Law to detect misuse of family reunification stipulates that the following combination of factors may provide a strong indication that a marriage is of convenience: parties do not understand each other; have never met; long-term cohabitation with someone else; have no knowledge on the other person’s name, nationality, place of work; diverging stories on how they met; one party engages in prostitution; promise of money to contract marriage; intervention of intermediary; significant age difference. (EMN Belgium 2012)
2003	Law to fight “adoptions of convenience”	The Hague Convention on the Protection of Children and Cooperation in respect of Intercountry Adoption of 29 May 1993 has been implemented in Belgium through the law of 24 April 2003. This law reformed adoptions by introducing new requirements, including a certificate of preparation for adoption together with a ruling from the court concerning the suitability to adopt (EMN Belgium 2012; Meurens and Van Caeneghem 2016).
	DNA testing for family reunification partly introduced	Kinship has to be substantiated for family reunification. As a protective measure, authorities began using an experimental DNA testing system to prove family lineage in 12 diplomatic and consular posts located on the African and Asian continent.
2006	Penalisation of marriages of convenience	Marriages that are formed to obtain the right to reside, rather than the intention to for a durable relationship, can be punished with a prison

		term of 8 days to 3 months and a fine of €26 to €100. Any rights secured via the marriage of convenience, such as the right of residence, will be removed. The maximum period of checking whether a marriage of convenience has been contracted is increased from 15 months to 3 years (DEMIG 2015).
	Stricter rules on family reunion and reunification	A number of additional conditions for family reunification are introduced for non-EU nationals according to the Directive 2003/86/EC: sufficient housing conditions; health insurance for all family members; age at which foreigner may come to Belgium through family formation is raised from 18 to 21 years. A control period of 3 years begins after the right to reside is acquired on the basis of family formation or reunification. If it is established during the first two years of this period that the nuclear family no longer exists, the Aliens Office may terminate the right to reside. (Exceptions remain for people eligible for family reunification under bilateral labour agreements signed 1946-1970, and recognized refugees.)
2008	Marriages with foreigner under more control	Modification to Aliens Act (15 December 1980) stipulates that the residence permit can be retrieved if married partners do not comply with the residence conditions specified in the Aliens Act within 3 years: not living together physically in the first two years is enough grounds to withdraw residence permit. In the course of the third year, a negative opinion of the Public Prosecutor with regard to the marriage is sufficient to end the right of stay.
2009	DNA testing for family reunification introduced everywhere	Alleged family relationships have to be proven by a DNA blood test in all diplomatic posts.
2011	Free access to labour market for partners of workers	The concept of spouse was broadened to include registered partners who are now eligible for work permits, facilitating their access to the labour market.
	Socio-economic requirements for family reunification	Sponsor must prove that he or she possesses sufficient and independent income (120% of the living benefit which is below minimum wage), housing and health insurance.
	Eradication of extended family reunification	Only partners and minor children qualify for family reunification. Reunification with ascendants is no longer possible.
	Restriction family migration Belgians	Belgian citizens have to comply with the same rules as third country nationals.
	Increase period for demonstrating stable relationship	The time period for demonstrating a stable relationship doubled from one to two years for family reunification with unmarried partners.
	Integration criteria	Applicants must meet certain integration criteria.
2013	Strengthening of penalties for marriages of convenience	Penalties for marriages of convenience now include a prison sentence between 1 month and 3 years, a fine of up to €500 and an entry ban for 5 years for those involved in such misuses.
2014	Socio-economic conditions apply for sponsors with a residence permit based on a medical stay	Sponsors who have a residence permit for medical reasons are no longer exempt from the socio-economic conditions for family reunification during the first year after obtaining residence status.
	Fee for residence applications	A fee of €169 has to be paid for family reunification asked from abroad, €215 if the application is submitted in Belgium.
2016	Extension of control period for conditions for family reunification	The period to control whether conditions for family reunification are met is extended from 3 to 5 years after granting a temporary residence permit to a third country national. The residence permit can be withdrawn if conditions are not fulfilled. After 5 years, the sponsor

		must show prove that requirements are still fulfilled for the family member to receive an unconditional residence permit.
	Increase maximum decision time	The time limit for processing applications for family reunification with third country national sponsors was lengthened from six to nine months. Complex cases can be further extended by two times three months.
	Integration measures	Foreign nationals need to show evidence of their willingness to integrate into society. If the person does not make “reasonable efforts” to integrate, residence permits can be terminated by the Immigration Office. Applicants need to sign the ‘newcomers declaration’ indicating that he or she “understands the fundamental values and norms of society and will act accordingly” (EMN Belgium 2017).
2017	Increase fee for residence permit	The fee for family migrants applying for residence permit increased to €200 for applications from abroad, and to €215 for applications submitted in Belgium.
	Law against false declarations of parenthood	Law was introduced on 19 September 2017 (entered into force on 1 April 2018) that provided new preventive and repressive actions to false declarations of parenthood (legal possibility to postpone or reject declaration). Further, penalties were introduced for those falsely declaring parenthood, including imprisonment (ranging from up to one year for an attempt to declare false parenthood, to up to 5 years for forcing somebody to be part in such a declaration), and rejection or annulment of the residence permit. The Immigration Office created a special unit for coordinating the fight against false declarations of parenthood, which provides local authorities, judicial authorities and the police with all the information they need for the investigations (EMN 2018, 2019).

IMPACT PARAGRAPH

This dissertation analyses how physical mobility – both migration and shorter trips – between the country of origin and residence shapes the lives of migrant youth. Today, one in five young people across the European Union has a migration background. This number is much higher in many larger cities, such as the fieldsite for this research, the Belgian city of Antwerp, where three of four young people are either born abroad or have parents who are. Many of these young people engage in visits to the country of origin on a regular basis and/or have been mobile before they migrated to Belgium. Even though there is much research on the impact of *migration* on young people, their actual *mobility* is hardly investigated. At the same time, common assumptions prevail that mobility of migrant youth constitutes a problem for their emotional well-being and educational outcomes. Yet there is no evidence to date that this is the case. This dissertation provides a detailed ethnographic account of the mobility of Ghanaian-background youth between Belgium and Ghana, and investigates how mobility shapes their emotional and embodied experiences over time and space. Such a focus on emotions and embodiment is important because it affects young people's relationships to significant others, their personal development, and their sense of self.

Throughout the dissertation, two concepts take centre stage. First, the concept of *youth mobility trajectories* refers to the moves in time and space that young people make, the concomitant family constellations that result from these moves, and what transpires during mobility. Second, this dissertation develops a conceptualization of *transnational affective engagements*, which captures the emotional and bodily interactions between youth and the people and places they encounter during their transnational mobility and can therefore give insights into how young people make sense of their lived experiences.

One important finding of the study is that it is important to consider all moves a young person engages in, not just the migration move, because mobility significantly affects how young people are faring. This dissertation further develops and employs a set of methodological tools to adequately capture the diverse and complex mobility patterns of migrant youth and their embodied mobility experiences: the research combined ethnographic methods of interviews and observations with mobile methods, such as mobility trajectory mapping and physically accompanying young people on country-of-origin visits. Considering that most research to date has either not considered mobility or focused on isolated moves through

retrospective interviews with adults reflecting on their youth, this is a unique contribution to academic research in and of itself. Furthermore, the methodological approach of this research has brought into focus the themes of emotion and embodiment that – because of the methodological challenges involved – have received limited attention in previous studies.

The other research findings relate to what we can learn if we pay attention to migrant youth mobility. Analysing the mobility trajectories of Ghanaian-background youth provides an important alternative account to current policy perspectives on family reunification. The dissertation shows that young people who migrate to Europe may already have moved between different households in Ghana throughout their childhood and youth, whereby they build emotional connections to multiple kin and non-kin caregivers over time, many of whom remain important later in life. Thus, when young people migrate to Belgium to reunify with one or both parents, ‘family reunification’ can still be experienced as a separation by young people because they leave behind significant others in Ghana. These findings are important for people who work with youth, such as teachers and social workers, to be able to better understand young people’s lived experiences as they may continue to be part of transnational families even after reuniting with their parents in Belgium. Furthermore, policymakers should take note that legal and policy definitions of family as the nuclear family and family reunification as taking place only in the country of destination do not necessarily coincide with the lived reality of migrant youth.

Another important finding is that visits to the country of origin provide opportunities for the personal growth of young people with a migration background. Ghanaian-background youth cultivate self-confidence and develop their educational and career aspirations by interacting with role models in Ghana, experiencing respectful treatment, learning about their culture, being able to compare opportunity structures in different contexts, and having access to luxurious spaces that might not be available to them in Belgium. This is a contribution to previous research which more commonly focuses on how trips to the origin country shape young people’s sense of belonging or ethnic identity. However, acknowledging the personal growth benefits of country-of-origin visits has broader implications. School systems and public debates in many European countries consider such trips to disadvantage migrant youth while praising the transformative potential of international student mobility and travel. This dissertation shows that it is important to consider other types of mobility beyond student exchange programs and travel, and contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the mechanisms that facilitate personal growth during such travels to the country of origin.

Finally, young people with a migration background use both digital media and visits to the country of origin to actively shape the embodied and emotional interactions with people and places in the country of origin through which they experience, what I call in the dissertation, a sense of ‘extraordinary everydayness’: the unique nature of experiencing an everydayness with previously unknown people in an unfamiliar space. Young people of Ghanaian background use social media before visits to meet *new* peers online, both friends and romantic partners. During visits to Ghana, these relationships come to life and help to create a sense of connection and familiarity which extends far beyond the visits and leave a lasting impression after young people return to Belgium. Furthermore, smartphones are an important tool to independently move around the country, book accommodation, or navigate the unfamiliar urban landscapes in Ghana. These findings contribute to previous academic research which predominantly focused on how family ties are maintained across borders after migration but have insufficiently investigated other types of relationships or new networks that are created as a result of mobility. These new relationships with peers, but also location-based apps used during country-of-origin visits, help to generate a sense of sociality, confidence, and independence.

As evident from the discussion above, my research findings are relevant for different groups, including fellow academics, migrant youth and their parents, policymakers, and others working with young people, such as teachers, social workers, or church leaders. These target groups were – or will be – involved in and informed about the research in various ways.

My research is part of a larger multi-country project called MO-TRAYL. In June 2019, the MO-TRAYL project held a 3-day creative storytelling workshop called ‘Finding Your Voice’ for several research participants from the three European case study countries (Belgium, Germany, and The Netherlands).²² At the workshop, young people produced stories about growing up transnationally and learned skills, such as creative writing, interviewing and public speaking, which are applicable in various contexts in their lives. The outputs from the workshop – a book in printed and e-book versions in three languages, podcasts, and audio interviews – amplify young people’s own voices by bringing them to a wider public. The book also contains a ‘how to’ guide for other researchers and people working with migrant youth who are interested in this form of creative practice. The main aim of this workshop was to ‘give back’ to research participants both directly – participants gained skills, confidence, community,

²² More information on the ‘Finding Your Voice’ storytelling workshop as well as the workshop outputs can be found on the MO-TRAYL website: <https://www.motrayl.com/stories/youth-workshop>

and pride in the creation and sharing of their powerful personal stories – and by influencing their surroundings, such as their teachers, church members and others working with migrant youth. The printed ‘Finding Your Voice’ book has therefore been distributed to participants, schools, churches, community organisations, and youth associations in the four MO-TRAYL fieldsites (Belgium, Ghana, The Netherlands, and Germany). Through the MO-TRAYL website and social media, the outputs were further shared with an international audience. The ‘Finding Your Voice’ project won the Valorisation Prize of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at Maastricht University for its notable societal impact.²³

Research findings were also shared with an academic audience. All three empirical chapters have been published as open access peer-reviewed articles in well-read academic journals. Based on these articles, I will publish illustrated blogposts to make the research findings accessible to a broader audience. The two last years of my PhD coincided with the COVID-19 pandemic, so that many conferences were cancelled or postponed, but I have still presented findings from my research at five international conferences and workshops. Furthermore, I have used Twitter²⁴ to communicate my research to a wider audience and given presentations about my research project in undergraduate and graduate courses at Maastricht University, the University of Antwerp, and the University of Lausanne.

Together with my MO-TRAYL colleagues, I co-organized one panel and one workshop at two different international conferences to share reflections on the ‘Finding Your Voice’ storytelling workshop mentioned above. Relatedly, based on our experiences with the storytelling workshop, we will organise an interactive session at the Synergy ’22 in June 2022, an event organised by the Dutch Research Council (NWO) that brings together researchers, policy developers and practitioners to explore opportunities for impact and connect science and society. The main objective of our interactive workshop is to collectively reflect on ‘giving back’ with other scholars across the social sciences and humanities. Based on findings from the MO-TRAYL project, we further submitted a project proposal to rethink the categories we use for young people with a migration background, which has been shortlisted for the Synergy Award 2022 as one of four projects.²⁵

²³ The announcement of the Valorisation Prize winner and excerpts from the jury report can be found here: https://fasos.maastrichtuniversity.nl/weekly/fasos-valorisation-prize-winner/?utm_source=weekly_staffsedition&utm_medium=e-mail&utm_content=staffsedition&utm_campaign=03-06-2021

²⁴ My Twitter account is available via https://twitter.com/anschutz_sarah.

²⁵ For more information on the Synergy event and Synergy Award, visit <https://www.synergy22.nl/home/>.

ENGLISH SUMMARY

Introduction

Today, we see a growing youth population with migration background in the Global North, meaning that either young people or their parents were born abroad. One in five young people across the European Union has a migration background, with an even higher share in many larger cities. Many of these young people engage in visits to the country of origin on a regular basis and/or have been mobile before they migrated to Europe. Even though there is much research on the impact of *migration* on young people, their actual *mobility* is hardly investigated. So much is the focus on migrant youth's integration into the country of residence that experiences in, connections with, and mobility to contexts outside of the country of residence are often not considered.

The mobility of migrant youth is not only under researched but common assumptions prevail in policy and practice that it constitutes a problem for young people's emotional well-being and educational outcomes. Yet there is no evidence to date that this is indeed the case. In fact, studies on the mobility of young people *without* a migration background, in the context of international student mobility or travel and tourism, repeatedly find that periods spent abroad are conducive to personal growth and improve educational outcomes and school-to-work transitions. The assumption that mobility is problematic in the context of migration while beneficial in other contexts is questionable at best and demands further investigation. Emerging research on visits to the country of origin actually finds that it has significant impact on migrant youth's lives. It can shape their sense of belonging, help them overcome educational adversity in the country of residence and equip them with a renewed sense of purpose. This study builds on this burgeoning research.

This dissertation is concerned with migrant youth's complex mobility patterns and experiences across the life course, including both moves before migrating as well as continuous travels to the country of origin. It provides an analysis of how young people create and maintain affective connections with people and places in the origin country through their mobility and how these connections in turn shape experiences with family, personal development, and relationships with the country of origin. To address the main enquiry of this research, I choose to focus on the specific case of Ghanaian-background youth who are mobile within and

between Ghana and Belgium. Ghanaian migrants have been shown to engage in a transnational lifestyle with differing degrees of back-and-forth movement, which allowed for a diversification of the sample in terms of mobility to better understand the impact of mobility on young people's lives. Furthermore, Ghanaians are among the top ten of the largest migrant groups from Africa across OECD countries and constitute one of Europe's 'new' immigrant groups that have received limited attention in the literature as compared to more established migrant groups in Belgium, most notably former guestworkers from Morocco and Turkey. This is important because Ghanaians who have been migrating to Belgium since the 1980s face different contextual factors and stricter entry criteria than older migrant groups.

Against this backdrop, this dissertation addresses the following research question: *How does the physical mobility to and within Ghana shape the transnational affective engagements of Ghanaian-background youth living in Belgium?* To answer this question, I conducted 18 months of multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork with 25 young people who were born in various countries to Ghanaian parents, and are currently residing in Belgium. Multi-sited research involved following young people's daily lives in Belgium as well as accompanying a sub-set on trips to Ghana. Using semi-structured interviews, informal conversations, observations, and mapping tools with the young research participants has allowed me to unpack young people's mobility experiences, their transnational networks and daily lived experiences.

Youth mobility trajectories and transnational affective engagements: theoretical framework and research findings

Throughout the dissertation, two concepts take centre stage. First, the concept of *youth mobility trajectories* refer to the moves young people make over time and across geographically distinct localities and the changing family constellations that this entails. The concept helps to conceive of migration as an unfolding process over time and space, viewing migration as embedded within a series of moves that take place before and after the first international migration. A processual approach to the study of youth mobility contributes to knowledge on the different types of moves young people engage in, what transpires during these moves, and how this in turn affects their transnational lives. Focusing on what occurs during movement facilitates an investigation of the sensorial, embodied, and emotional aspects as mobility unfolds. Second, this dissertation develops a conceptualization of *transnational affective engagements*, which captures the emotional and bodily interactions between youth and the specific people and

places they encounter during their transnational mobility and that provide opportunities for new forms of subjectivity and affective experiences to emerge.

To answer the main research question on the relationship of mobility and transnational affective engagements, three sub-questions were identified and addressed in the three empirical chapters, which are based on published research articles. The empirical chapters focus on different aspects of young people's mobility trajectories and explore how these shape young people's experiences of growing up between Belgium and Ghana, particularly focusing on experiences with family, personal growth and relationships to the country of origin.

Chapter 5 investigates *how the mobility trajectories of Ghanaian-background youth affect young people's experiences of family separation and reunification across time and space*. This chapter demonstrates that policy definitions of family reunification, centred on the nuclear family and the destination country context, are only one way to look at the phenomenon of family reunification and do not always coincide with young people's experiences. In fact, analysing youth mobility trajectories reveals that young people who migrate to Europe may already have moved between different households in Ghana throughout their childhood and youth, whereby they build emotional connections to multiple kin and non-kin caregivers over time, many of whom remain important later in life. A move can thus signify a separation from the previous caregiver as well as a reunification with the next. Consequently, young people can experience multiple family reunifications and separations with significant others, including kin and non-kin caregivers, in both the country of origin and destination. In other words, a family *reunification*, as seen from the point of view of the European country laws and policies, might in fact be experienced as *separation* by young people.

The following two chapters then move the focus to young people's visits to the country of origin. **Chapter 6** focuses on *how visits to the country of origin affect the self-development of Ghanaian-background youth*. The chapter brings different types of mobility into the same analytical framework and identifies different analytical approaches for the mobility of young people with and without a migration background. Whereas country-of-origin visits are investigated in terms of migrant youth's sense of belonging and ethnic identity, the mobility of youth without a migration background – in the context of international student mobility, travel and tourism – is studied through a 'personal growth lens' that highlights the positive personal impacts of mobility. Arguing that such a distinction between analytical approaches is unfounded, the chapter analyses visits to the country of origin in terms of the personal growth experiences young people of Ghanaian background have. Doing so, I highlight how affective

experiences with others and the built environment in the origin country can strengthen young people's self-confidence and nourish their aspirations for the future. The chapter shows the importance of contextual factors in both Belgium and Ghana for personal growth experiences. Most young people belong to the working class in Belgium, face educational inequalities and experience a lack of African role models in high positions in their everyday lives. By contrast, young people experience respectful and encouraging treatment and have access to luxurious spaces in Ghana that strengthen their self-confidence. Further, they can compare different opportunity structures in their countries of origin and residence through visits to Ghana and are exposed to Ghanaian role models that help them develop their aspirations for the future.

Chapter 7 investigates *how young people of Ghanaian background use their mobility trajectories and digital media to create connections to people and places in Ghana, and how these are experienced before, during, and after their country-of-origin visits*. To do so, I develop the concept of *extraordinary everydayness*, which refers to the extraordinary nature of experiencing an everydayness with previously unknown people in an unfamiliar space, made possible by young people's use of digital media and their transnational mobility to the country of origin. Following young people's mobility trajectories, I investigate the digital labour that goes into establishing transnational peer relationships on social media platforms *before* visits to Ghana, bring out affective experiences of extraordinary everydayness with these transnational peers and various places *during* their stay Ghana, and show the lasting impressions of such experiences *after* they return from visits. The chapter demonstrates the importance of embodiment, emotions, and temporality in relation to young people's country-of-origin visits.

Conclusion

The different chapters of this thesis show that young people's transnational lives need to be understood in relation to the people, places, and events that they encounter 'on the move' across multiple contexts because these encounters shape meaning-making processes, access to resources, and future pathways. By studying the transnational connections and practices of Ghanaian-background youth who grow up between Ghana and Belgium, this research is part of a theoretical shift that considers migrant youth to be embedded within multiple contexts and transnational networks, and their lives to be significantly characterized and impacted by mobility.

This dissertation is innovative in several ways. It applies and further develops the concept of *youth mobility trajectories*, understood as young people's moves across time and space and the concomitant family constellations, resulting in an investigation of *all* movements across a young person's life course. Such an approach challenges common conceptualizations of migrant youth as 'clean slates' upon arrival in the new country and brings into focus the ongoing transnational connections and mobilities. Further, a processual approach to youth mobility brings into focus what transpires *during* mobility, including its sensorial, embodied, and emotional aspects. The emotional and affective engagements with both people and places that youth encounter during country-of-origin visits are important to how young people give meaning to their experiences and their sense of self. The concept of youth mobility trajectories also brings to the fore the difference in discourses and analytical approaches for young people with and without migration background. While international student mobility, for example, is understood as enriching young people's lives, visits to the country of origin are often seen as problematic for migrant youth's sense of belonging or overall development. Bringing different types of mobility into the same analytical framework not only highlights the personal growth benefits of country-of-origin visits but also 'de-migranticizes' research on migrant youth mobility, thereby making visible and aiming to correct a persisting hierarchy in how mobilities are understood depending on who is mobile.

Methodologically, data on youth mobility trajectories were collected by combining an ethnographic approach with three additional mobile methods. First, this dissertation introduces *mobility trajectory mapping* as a tool to systematize the collection of data that, due to its complex nature, can otherwise be difficult to gather. Trajectory mapping involves collecting information on participants' compendium of moves, their timing and duration, as well as young people's caregivers at any given time. Second, I *followed mobility in real time* by accompanying a subset of the sample on their visits to the country of origin, which is rarely done in research. This allowed me to gather impressions of and ask questions about these visits as they happened, rather than only relying on memories of mobility experiences. Being there with participants contributed to capturing the meaning-making processes in action and accessing embodied information. Third, a trajectory approach further enabled me to *trace mobility experiences before, during, and after visits* through interviews, observations, and informal conversations over time.

Such a methodological approach has deep repercussions for how we can understand the transnational lives of migrant-background youth. Making young people's physical mobility as

it unfolds a central focus of research, brings greater understanding of the emotional, embodied, and sensorial elements of mobility experiences, which are at the heart of young people's affective engagements with the country of origin. Throughout this dissertation, I develop the concept of *transnational affective engagements*, which I define as the ways in which young people are bodily, emotionally, and cognitively engaged with other people and the environment across multiple contexts as a result of their mobility. This thesis shows that, by moving between different households when growing up in Ghana, young people build affective connections to both kin and non-kin caregivers and maintain and/or revitalize these through digital media and ongoing travels to the country of origin. These relationships shape young people's experiences with family separation and reunification and mean that from the perspective of the child, many families remain transnational even after young people reunify with one or sometimes both parents in the country of residence. Migrant youth further use digital media and their own mobility to create *new* transnational relationships online with peers in the country of origin. Due to an adult-centric focus in transnational migration research and an oversimplification of mobility, young people's transnational peer relationships have previously largely been absent in the literature. I show that these peer relationships young people make online before visiting Ghana, spill over into the offline world during their visits, and, even if they were only ephemeral in nature, have a lasting effect once young people return to Belgium.

Finally, this dissertation brings into focus how country-of-origin visits, and the affective experiences with people and places they give rise to, contribute to young people's personal growth. Travel to the country of origin provides experiences through which young people develop self-confidence and aspirations for the future. These effects are possible because migrant youth learn about their roots and have access to new cultural repertoires; feel they are treated in a special way by people in Ghana who express pride in them; have access to luxurious spaces that are often unavailable to them in Belgium; are confronted with sometimes difficult situations that make them reflect on their current context; and interact with role models of a similar background who are almost non-existing in prestigious positions in Belgium. Furthermore, recent technological advancements provide several resources and opportunities for personal development. The transnational peers that young people meet can reflect, contribute to, and support current interests and future career pathways between Belgium and Ghana. Staying in Ghana, aided by technology, can further be a ground for experimentation during which young people test out and develop their independence and confidence – for example by living on their own for the first time, navigating large and unfamiliar urban areas

without the support of family members, and by being in romantic relationships. All these experiences and sources for personal growth take place outside of the country where young people reside, though they have potentially important repercussions for how migrant youth are faring in Belgium.

To conclude, this research makes an original contribution to the study of transnational youth mobility in terms of its theoretical and methodological approaches that a trajectory approach entails. By including both the country of origin and residence, this study provides a deeper understanding of the complexities of youth mobility over the life course and the ways in which different forms of movement impact the lives of young people. Moreover, the multi-sited and mobile research design facilitated the thorough and processual investigation of lived mobility experiences in both Belgium and Ghana that allowed me to capture embodied, sensorial, and emotional elements of mobility.

NEDERLANDSE SAMENVATTING (DUTCH SUMMARY)

Introductie

Vandaag de dag zien we in het Globale Noorden een groeiend aantal jongeren met migratieachtergrond, wat betekent dat ofwel de jongere zelf, ofwel één of beiden ouders in het buitenland geboren zijn. In de Europese Unie heeft één op de vijf jongeren een migratieachtergrond, met een nog hogere ratio in veel grote steden. Veel van deze jongeren keren regelmatig terug naar hun land van herkomst. Naast hun huidige mobiliteit, verplaatsten deze jongeren zich ook al vaak voordat ze naar Europa kwamen. Er is veel onderzoek gedaan naar de impact van *migratie* op jongeren, maar onderzoek naar de *mobilititeit* van jongeren heeft tot nu toe weinig aandacht gekregen. De focus in onderzoek ligt op de integratie van jongeren met migratieachtergrond in het bestemmingsland zodat hun ervaringen, connecties, en mobiliteit *buiten* het bestemmingsland niet in acht worden genomen.

Naast het feit dat mobiliteit van jongeren met een migratieachtergrond onderbelicht is in academisch onderzoek, heerst er bij beleidsmakers de assumptie dat mobiliteit het emotionele welzijn en de onderwijsresultaten van deze jongeren niet ten goede komt. Echter, er is geen bewijs tot nu toe dat dit ook daadwerkelijk het geval is. Het is zelfs zo dat onderzoek naar mobiliteit van jongeren *zonder* migratieachtergrond (in de vorm van studeren in het buitenland, reizen of toerisme) steeds weer laat zien dat het doorbrengen van periodes in het buitenland juist leidt tot positieve gevolgen voor persoonlijke groei, onderwijsresultaten, en de transitie van school naar werk. De overtuiging dat mobiliteit problematisch zou zijn in de context van migratie, terwijl mobiliteit wenselijk is in andere contexten is problematisch en vraagt om meer onderzoek. Opkomend onderzoek naar reizen naar het land van herkomst laat zien dat deze bezoeken een significante impact hebben op het leven van jongeren met een migratieachtergrond. Deze bezoeken kunnen bijdragen aan een gevoel van verbondenheid, het overkomen van schoolproblemen in het land waar ze wonen en een hernieuwd gevoel van doelbewustheid geven. Deze dissertatie bouwt op dit opkomend onderzoek.

Deze dissertatie richt zich op de complexe mobiliteitspatronen van jongeren met een migratieachtergrond en kijkt zowel naar mobiliteit vóór de migratie naar Europa alsook naar terugkerende bezoeken aan het land van herkomst. Dit proefschrift biedt een analyse van de manieren waarop mobiliteit jongeren helpt banden te creëren en onderhouden met mensen en

plekken in het land van herkomst. Daarnaast wordt inzicht geboden in hoe deze connecties de ervaringen van de jongeren vormen in relatie met familie, persoonlijke ontwikkeling en het land van herkomst. Dit onderzoek richt zich specifiek op de casus van jongeren met een Ghanese achtergrond en een mobiliteitspatroon tussen Ghana en België. Onderzoek laat zien dat Ghanese migranten vaak een transnationaal leven leiden, met variërende niveaus van heen en weer reizen. Dit zorgt voor een onderzoeksgroep met een divers scala aan mobiliteitspatronen, waardoor de impact van mobiliteit op het leven van jongeren beter begrepen kan worden. Bovendien behoren Ghanezen tot de top tien van de grootste Afrikaanse migrantengroepen in OECD landen en tot Europa's 'nieuwe' immigrantengroepen die tot nu toe relatief weinig aandacht kregen in vergelijking met de meer gevestigde migrantengroepen in België zoals voormalige gastarbeiders uit Turkije en Marokko. Dit is belangrijk om in acht te nemen, omdat de Ghanezen die sinds de jaren '80 naar België migreren met een andere Belgische context en striktere immigratiewetten te maken krijgen dan oudere migrantengroepen.

Tegen de zojuist geschetste achtergrond behandelt deze dissertatie de volgende onderzoeksvraag: Hoe vormt de fysieke mobiliteit naar en binnen Ghana de transnationale affectieve connecties van jongeren met een Ghanese achtergrond in België? Om deze vraag te beantwoorden heb ik 18 maanden etnografisch veldwerk verricht op meerdere locaties. Tijdens dit veldwerk heb ik 25 jongeren gevolgd die in verschillende landen geboren zijn maar allemaal Ghanese ouders hebben en momenteel in België wonen. Mijn veldwerk hield in dat ik de jongeren volgde in hun dagelijks leven in België en dat ik een aantal jongeren volgde in hun bezoeken aan Ghana. Door middel van semigestructureerde interviews, informele gesprekken, observaties en zogenaamde 'mapping tools' om samen met de jongeren hun mobiliteit in kaart te brengen, kon ik de mobiliteitservaringen, transnationale netwerken en dagelijkse ervaringen van deze jongeren beter begrijpen.

Mobiliteitstrajecten en transnationale affectieve connecties: theoretisch kader en onderzoeksresultaten

Een tweetal concepten staat centraal in dit proefschrift. Allereerst het concept van *mobiliteitstrajecten van jongeren*, dat verwijst naar hoe jongeren zich door de tijd heen en tussen verschillende geografische locaties bewegen en hoe deze mobiliteit zich verhoudt tot veranderende familiesamenstellingen. Dit concept helpt migratie te begrijpen als een proces

dat zich over tijd en over verschillende plaatsen ontvouwt en ontwikkelt. Op die manier wordt migratie begrepen als ingebed in een hele reeks van verplaatsingen die gebeuren zowel voor als na de internationale migratie. Het kijken naar jeugdmobiliteit vanuit een proces-oogpunt draagt bij aan de kennis over de verschillende soorten verplaatsingen die jongeren maken, wat er tijdens deze verplaatsingen gebeurt, en hoe dit hun transnationale leven beïnvloedt. De focus op wat er gebeurt tijdens de internationale verplaatsingen van jongeren biedt de mogelijkheid om de zintuiglijke, belichaamde en emotionele aspecten van mobiliteit te onderzoeken. Ten tweede ontwikkelt dit proefschrift een conceptualisatie van *transnationale affectieve connecties*. Dit concept verwijst naar de emotionele en lichamelijke interacties tussen jongeren en de specifieke personen en plaatsen die ze tegenkomen tijdens hun transnationale verplaatsingen, en hoe deze interacties mogelijkheden bieden voor het ontstaan van nieuwe vormen van subjectiviteit en affectieve ervaringen.

Om de overkoepelende onderzoeksvraag over de relatie tussen mobiliteit en transnationale affectieve connecties te kunnen beantwoorden heb ik drie sub-vragen geformuleerd. Deze sub-vragen zijn geadresseerd in de drie empirische hoofdstukken, die op hun beurt gebaseerd zijn op gepubliceerde onderzoeksartikelen. De empirische hoofdstukken focussen op verschillende aspecten van de mobiliteitstrajecten van jongeren en onderzoeken hoe deze aspecten de ervaringen van jongeren vormen met betrekking tot opgroeien tussen België en Ghana. Hierin focus ik voornamelijk op de ervaringen met familie, persoonlijke groei, en de relatie tot het land van herkomst.

Hoofdstuk 5 onderzoekt *hoe de mobiliteitstrajecten van jongeren met een Ghanese achtergrond ervaringen vormen met betrekking tot familiescheiding en -hereniging door tijd en plaats heen*. Dit hoofdstuk laat zien dat beleidsdefinities van gezinshereniging – met een focus op het nucleaire gezin en op het bestemmingsland – maar één manier zijn om te kijken naar het fenomeen van gezins- of familiehereniging. Deze manier van kijken strookt vaak niet met de ervaringen van jongeren. De analyse van mobiliteitstrajecten van jongeren laat juist zien dat jongeren die naar Europa migreren, tijdens hun kindertijd en jeugd al vaker verplaatsingen hebben meegemaakt tussen verschillende huishoudens binnen Ghana. Tijdens deze verplaatsingen hebben zij emotionele banden opgebouwd met meerdere verzorgers, zowel familieleden als niet-familieleden, die belangrijk blijven in hun latere leven. Een verplaatsing kan dus een scheiding van een verzorger betekenen en tegelijkertijd een hereniging met een andere verzorger. Dit leidt ertoe dat jongeren meerdere familieherenigingen en -scheidingen met belangrijke personen in hun leven kunnen ervaren –met familieleden als met niet-

familieleden, zowel in het land van herkomst als in het bestemmingsland. In andere woorden, een *familiehereniging*, gezien vanuit het wetten en het beleid van het Europese land, kan door jongeren ervaren worden als een *familiescheiding*.

De twee hoofdstukken hierna verleggen de focus naar bezoeken van jongeren aan het land van herkomst. **Hoofdstuk 6** analyseert *hoe bezoeken aan het land van herkomst de zelfontplooiing van jongeren met een Ghanese achtergrond beïnvloedt*. Dit hoofdstuk brengt verschillende soorten mobiliteit samen in hetzelfde theoretische kader en identificeert verschillende analytische invalshoeken in de literatuur voor het begrijpen van mobiliteit van jeugd met en zonder een migratieachtergrond. Onderzoek naar bezoeken aan het land van herkomst over jongeren met een migratieachtergrond zijn gewoonlijk gefocust op het gevoel van erbij horen en op etnische identiteit terwijl onderzoek naar de mobiliteit van jongeren zonder migratieachtergrond – in de context van internationale studie, reizen en toerisme – focust op ‘persoonlijke groei’ en de positieve impact van mobiliteit. Argumenterend dat zulk een tweedeling van analytische invalshoeken ongegrond is, analyseert dit hoofdstuk de bezoeken aan het land van herkomst met betrekking tot de ervaringen van zelfontplooiing die de jongeren met een Ghanese achtergrond hebben. Hierbij benadruk ik hoe affectieve ervaringen met anderen en de gebouwde omgeving in het land van herkomst de zelfverzekerdheid van jongeren kan versterken en hun aspiraties voor de toekomst kunnen voeden. Het hoofdstuk accentueert het belang van contextuele factoren zowel in België als in Ghana voor de ervaringen van zelfontplooiing. De meeste jongeren behoren tot de arbeidersklasse in België, hebben te maken met onderwijsongelijkheid, en ervaren een gebrek aan Afrikaanse rolmodellen in prestigieuze posities in hun dagelijks leven. Daartegenover staat een ervaring van respectvolle en bemoedigende behandeling in Ghana en toegang tot luxueuze plekken, resulterend in groter zelfvertrouwen. Daarbij geven bezoeken aan Ghana jongeren de mogelijkheid om verschillende samenlevingsstructuren en mogelijkheden in Ghana en België te vergelijken en worden ze blootgesteld aan Ghanese rolmodellen die ze kunnen helpen hun aspiraties voor de toekomst te vormen.

Hoofdstuk 7 onderzoekt *hoe jongeren met een Ghanese achtergrond mobiliteitstrajecten en digitale media gebruiken om connecties met mensen en plaatsen in Ghana te creëren, en hoe deze ervaren worden voor, tijdens en na de bezoeken aan het land van herkomst*. Om dit te onderzoeken ontwikkel ik het concept van *uitzonderlijke alledaagsheid*, waarmee ik refereer aan de uitzonderlijke aard van het ervaren van alledaagsheid met voorheen onbekende mensen in een onbekende omgeving. Dit wordt mogelijk gemaakt door het gebruik van digitale media

door jongeren en hun transnationale mobiliteit naar het land van herkomst. Door de mobiliteitstrajecten van jongeren te volgen onderzoek ik het digitale arbeid dat gaat zitten in het ontwikkelen van transnationale relaties met leeftijdsgenoten op sociale media platforms voor bezoeken aan Ghana. Daarnaast belicht ik de affectieve ervaringen van uitzonderlijke alledaagsheid met deze transnationale leeftijdsgenoten en verschillende plekken *tijdens* hun verblijf in Ghana. Als laatste laat ik zien wat de blijvende impressies zijn van zulke ervaringen *nadat* de jongeren terugkeren van hun bezoek aan Ghana. Het hoofdstuk laat het belang zien van belichaming, emoties en temporaliteit in relatie tot de bezoeken van jongeren aan het land van herkomst.

Conclusie

De verschillende hoofdstukken van deze dissertatie laten zien dat de transnationale levens van jongeren begrepen moet worden in relatie tot de mensen, plaatsen en gebeurtenissen die ze tegenkomen terwijl ze *on the move* zijn – onderweg langs verschillende contexten – omdat dit hun zingevingsprocessen vormt, alsook hun toegang tot middelen en vermogen, en de paden die zij in de toekomst kunnen bewandelen. Door de transnationale connecties en praktijken van jongeren met een Ghanese achtergrond die opgroeien tussen Ghana en België te onderzoeken plaatst dit onderzoek zich in een theoretische verschuiving die jongeren met migrantieachtergrond ziet als onderdeel van meerdere contexten en transnationale netwerken, en die erkent dat hun levens significant beïnvloed worden door mobiliteit.

Dit proefschrift is innovatief op meerder manieren. Het past toe en ontwikkelt verder het concept van *mobiliteitstrajecten van jongeren*, hier begrepen als de bewegingen en verplaatsingen van jongeren door tijd en ruimte heen en de daaraan gekoppelde familiesamenstellingen. Dit resulteert in een onderzoek van *alle* mobiliteit in het leven van een jongere. Deze aanpak problematiseert de conceptualisatie van jonge migranten als ‘schone leien’ op het moment waarop ze het land van bestemming binnenkomen en focust juist op de voortdurende transnationale connecties en mobiliteit. Daarbij laat een processuele benadering zien wat er daadwerkelijk gebeurt *tijdens* mobiliteit, inclusief de zintuiglijke, belichaamde en emotionele aspecten van mobiliteit. De emotionele en affectieve verhoudingen met zowel de mensen als de plaatsen die jongeren tegenkomen tijdens hun bezoeken aan het land van herkomst zijn belangrijk om te kunnen begrijpen hoe jongeren zingeven aan hun ervaringen en aan hun zelfbesef. Daarbij belicht het concept van mobiliteitstrajecten van jongeren ook het

verschil in discours en analytische invalshoeken voor jongeren met en zonder migratieachtergrond. Waar de mobiliteit van, bijvoorbeeld, internationale studenten vaak wordt gezien als iets dat de levens van de jongeren verrijkt, worden bezoeken aan een land van herkomst vaak gezien als problematisch voor het gevoel van verbondenheid van de jongeren in het land van bestemming en voor hun algemene ontwikkeling. Het samenbrengen van verschillende soorten mobiliteit in één theoretisch kader belicht niet alleen de voordelen van bezoeken aan het land van herkomst voor de persoonlijke groei en zelfontplooiing van de jongere, maar het ‘ontmigrant’ het onderzoek naar mobiliteit van jongeren met een migratieachtergrond. Het maakt zichtbaar dat er een aanhoudende hiërarchie is in hoe mobiliteit wordt begrepen aan de hand van *wie* mobiel is, en wordt geprobeerd deze hiërarchie te herstellen.

In dit onderzoek is de data over mobiliteitstrajecten van jongeren verzameld door een combinatie van een etnografie en drie aanvullende mobiele methoden. Ten eerste introduceert dit proefschrift het *in kaart brengen van mobiliteitstrajecten* als een instrument om het verzamelen van de (vaak complexe en moeilijk te verkrijgen) data te kunnen systematiseren. Het in kaart brengen van trajecten houdt in dat informatie over de verschillende verplaatsingen van participanten wordt verzameld, inclusief informatie over de timing en de duur van de verplaatsingen, alsook over de verzorgers van de jongeren op dat moment. Ten tweede heb ik *mobiliteit gevolgd in real time* door een subset van mijn onderzoeksparticipanten te volgen op hun bezoek aan het land van herkomst. Dit is een techniek die zelden wordt toegepast in onderzoek. Dit gaf me de mogelijkheid om zelf impressies op te doen van de bezoeken aan het land van herkomst en om mijn participanten vragen de stellen *tijdens* deze bezoeken in plaats van aangewezen te zijn op hun herinneringen. Aanwezig zijn met mijn participanten gaf mij de kans om hun zingevingprocessen in actie te zien en heeft mij toegang verschaft tot belichaamde informatie. Ten derde heeft een traject-gefocusste aanpak mij de mogelijkheid geboden om *mobiliteitservaringen te schetsen voor, tijdens en na bezoeken* door middel van interviews, observaties en informele gesprekken.

Deze methodologische aanpak heeft significante gevolgen voor hoe we de transnationale levens van jongeren met een migratieachtergrond begrijpen. Door de voortdurende fysieke mobiliteit van jongeren de centrale focus te maken, kan onderzoek een beter begrip creëren van de emotionele, belichaamde en zintuiglijke elementen van mobiliteitservaringen – elementen die centraal staan in de affectieve connecties van jongeren met hun land van herkomst. In deze dissertatie ontwikkel ik het concept van *transnationale*

affectieve connecties, gedefinieerd als de manieren waarop jongeren, als resultaat van hun mobiliteit, lichamelijk, emotioneel en cognitief betrokken zijn met andere mensen en de omgeving in verschillende contexten. Dit proefschrift laat zien dat jongeren, door hun bewegingen tussen verschillende huishoudens tijdens hun kindertijd in Ghana, affectieve banden opbouwen met verzorgers die zowel familieleden als niet-familieleden zijn. Daarnaast laat ik zien hoe jongeren affectieve banden onderhouden en nieuw leven inblazen door middel van digitale media en door bezoeken aan het land van herkomst. Deze relaties en connecties vormen de ervaringen die jongeren hebben met familiescheiding en -hereniging. Daarnaast laat dit zien dat vanuit het perspectief van het kind veel families transnationaal blijven, ook nadat jongeren herenigd zijn met één of beide ouders in het land van bestemming. Jongeren met een migratieachtergrond gebruiken daarbij digitale media en hun eigen mobiliteit om (online) *nieuwe* transnationale banden met leeftijdsgenoten in het land van herkomst te creëren. Door de focus op volwassenen in veel onderzoek naar transnationale migratie en door een simplificatie van mobiliteit zijn de transnationale banden van jongeren met leeftijdsgenoten vaak afwezig in de literatuur. Ik laat zien dat connecties die jongeren maken met leeftijdsgenoten in een online setting vóór hun bezoek aan Ghana invloed hebben op de offline wereld tijdens hun bezoeken aan Ghana. Zelfs als deze bezoeken en relaties vluchtig waren hebben ze een blijvende impact op de levens van de jongeren wanneer ze terug in België zijn.

Tenslotte brengt dit proefschrift in beeld hoe bezoeken aan het land van herkomst, met de bijbehorende affectieve ervaringen met mensen en plekken, bijdragen aan de persoonlijke groei en zelfontplooiing van jongeren. Het reizen naar hun land van herkomst biedt jongeren een scala aan ervaringen waardoor ze hun zelfvertrouwen en aspiraties voor de toekomst kunnen ontwikkelen. Dit is mogelijk omdat de jongeren leren over hun afkomst en toegang hebben tot nieuwe culturele repertoires; omdat ze het gevoel hebben dat ze op een speciale manier en met trots behandeld worden door de mensen in Ghana; omdat ze toegang hebben tot luxueuze plekken die vaak niet binnen bereik zijn in België; omdat ze af en toe geconfronteerd worden met moeilijke situaties die een mogelijkheid tot reflectie op hun huidige context bieden; en omdat ze interacties hebben met rolmodellen in prestigieuze posities met een vergelijkbare achtergrond – iets wat lastig te vinden is in België. Daarbij zorgen recente technologische ontwikkelingen voor mogelijkheden tot zelfontplooiing en persoonlijke groei. De transnationale leeftijdsgenoten met wie de jongeren kennis maken kunnen helpen om te reflecteren op huidige aspiraties en bieden ondersteuning aan toekomstige carrièrepaden tussen België en Ghana. Geholpen door technologie kan een verblijf in Ghana mogelijkheden bieden

om te experimenteren met de ontwikkeling van zelfstandigheid en zelfvertrouwen – bijvoorbeeld door voor het eerst op zichzelf te wonen, het navigeren van grote en onbekende stedelijke gebieden zonder hulp van familieleden, en het experimenteren met romantische relaties. Hoewel deze ervaringen en bronnen voor zelfontplooiing plaatsvinden buiten het land waar de jongeren verblijven, kan het potentieel zeer belangrijke consequenties hebben voor hun leven in hun verblijfsland België.

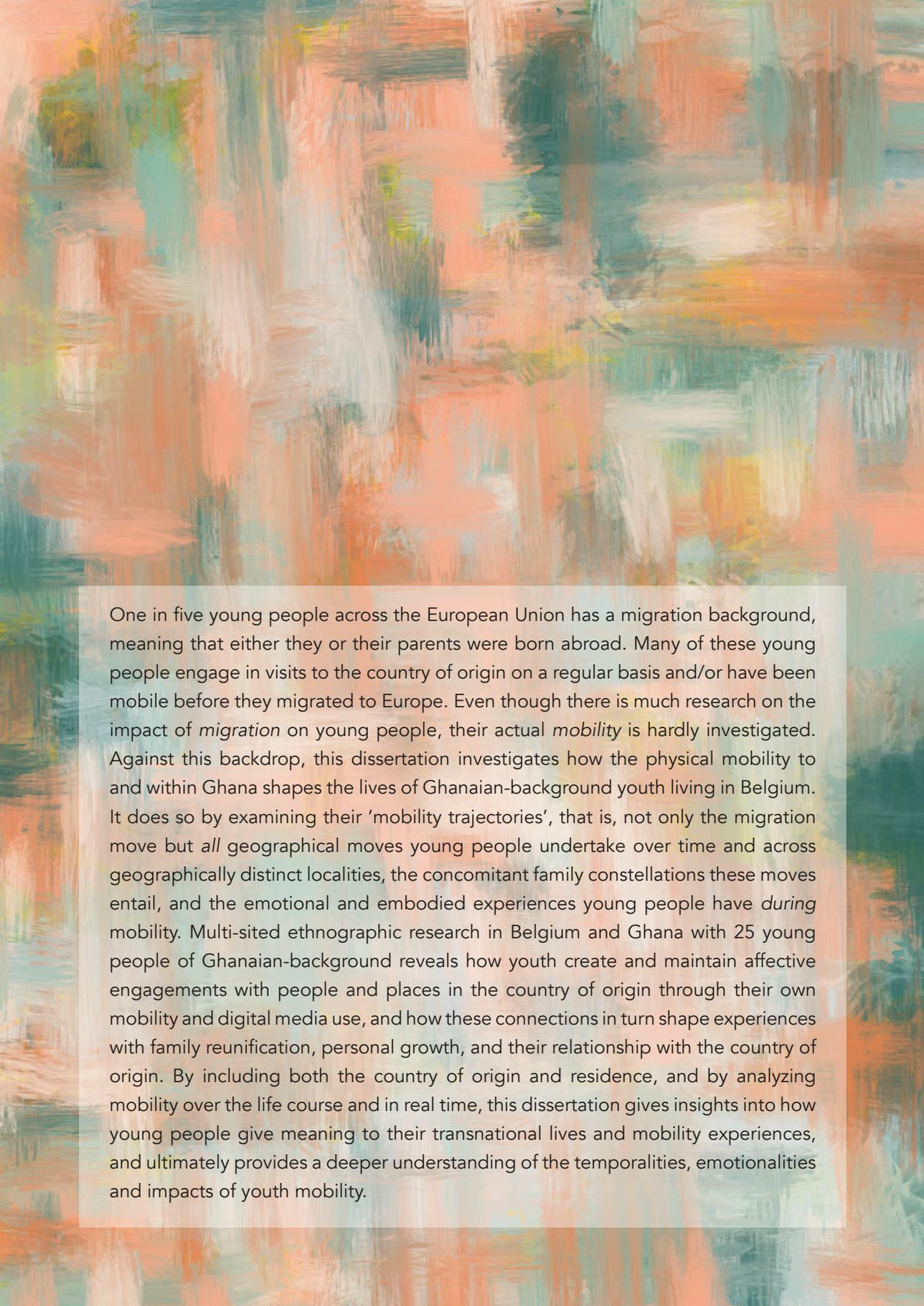
Kortom, dit onderzoek is een originele contributie aan de studie van transnationale jeugdmobiliteit, zowel wat betreft de theoretische alsook de methodologische aanpak inherent in een traject-georiënteerde aanpak. Door te kijken naar zowel het land van herkomst als het land van verblijf biedt dit onderzoek een beter begrip van de complexiteiten van jeugdmobiliteit en de manier waarop verschillende soorten mobiliteit de levens van de jongeren beïnvloeden. Bovendien faciliteert het mobiele onderzoeksdesign en de etnografie op meerdere locaties een grondig en proces-georiënteerd onderzoek van de geleefde mobiliteitservaringen zowel in België als in Ghana, waardoor ik de belichaamde, zintuiglijke en emotionele elementen van mobiliteit heb kunnen vatten.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sarah Anschütz was born in Aachen, Germany, on Thursday 14 July 1988. She obtained a Bachelor of Science in Psychology and Neuroscience at Maastricht University in 2012. Her interest in social and cultural psychology resulted in a Bachelor thesis on the role of stereotypes and empathy in shaping views of others. Sarah went on to complete internships at a non-profit organization in Nepal and an international NGO and minorities' rights organization in Germany, before proceeding with a Master of Science in Social and Cultural Anthropology at KU Leuven, Belgium. She specialized in Migration, Minorities and Multiculturalism and completed the Master *cum laude* in 2016. Her Master's thesis focused on language ideologies and integration, for which she conducted ethnographic fieldwork with refugee youth and volunteers in an education and integration association in Germany.

From 2017 to 2022, Sarah completed her joint-PhD at Maastricht University and the University of Antwerp under the supervision of Prof. Dr. Valentina Mazzucato and Prof. Dr. Noel Clycq. Her PhD research, which explores the relationship between mobility and transnational affective engagements among Ghanaian-background youth living in Belgium, was part of the ERC-funded research project 'Mobility Trajectories of Young Lives' led by Prof. Dr. Valentina Mazzucato. After submitting her dissertation in January 2022, Sarah started a one-year postdoc position in the MO-TRAYL project at Maastricht University.

While she always derived great pleasure from drawing and painting, Sarah had the opportunity to explore this interest in a professional setting as part of the MO-TRAYL project. Throughout the PhD trajectory, Sarah developed an interest in graphic anthropology, experimented with drawing as an ethnographic method and started to use illustrations for research dissemination to engage a broader audience.



One in five young people across the European Union has a migration background, meaning that either they or their parents were born abroad. Many of these young people engage in visits to the country of origin on a regular basis and/or have been mobile before they migrated to Europe. Even though there is much research on the impact of *migration* on young people, their actual *mobility* is hardly investigated. Against this backdrop, this dissertation investigates how the physical mobility to and within Ghana shapes the lives of Ghanaian-background youth living in Belgium. It does so by examining their 'mobility trajectories', that is, not only the migration move but *all* geographical moves young people undertake over time and across geographically distinct localities, the concomitant family constellations these moves entail, and the emotional and embodied experiences young people have *during* mobility. Multi-sited ethnographic research in Belgium and Ghana with 25 young people of Ghanaian-background reveals how youth create and maintain affective engagements with people and places in the country of origin through their own mobility and digital media use, and how these connections in turn shape experiences with family reunification, personal growth, and their relationship with the country of origin. By including both the country of origin and residence, and by analyzing mobility over the life course and in real time, this dissertation gives insights into how young people give meaning to their transnational lives and mobility experiences, and ultimately provides a deeper understanding of the temporalities, emotionalities and impacts of youth mobility.