Conflict (im)mobiles : biographies of mobility along the Ubangi River in Central Africa

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Chapter I. Introduction

1) On rivers and moving people

Figure 4   Panorama of the Ubangi River
separating Bangui in CAR (right), from Zongo in DR Congo (left)

The above photograph (Figure 4) was taken during an early morning hike with Émile on top of the hills of Zongo on 25 August 2013. In the middle of the photograph, the Ubangi River[3] flows between Bangui, the capital of the Central African Republic (CAR), which lies on the right riverbank, and Zongo, a town in the Sud-Ubangi province in the north-western corner of the Democratic Republic of Congo (DR Congo). The monochromatic palette of soft colours and the wide-eye lens perspective produce a sense of peacefulness—but deep waters are troubled waters. At the time the photograph was taken, Bangui had recently undergone its fourth successful coup d'état since independence, and the country was ruled by a short-lived rebel coalition which failed to bring stability. In fact, five days before this photograph was taken, there had been shootings which had been heard on both riverbanks. In 2013, the Ubangi River, which forms the border between CAR and DR Congo, separated a country plunged into a crisis that would grow in unprecedented proportions from a country which had witnessed war in the past but where peace had come to reign, at least partly, at the time of research.

Figure 5   Still taken from a short video of crossing the Ubangi River on a pirogue[4]
from Zongo (DR Congo) to Bangui (CAR), with view on Bangui's Gbazoubangui hill (15 June 2014)

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[3] There are different ways to spell the name of the river; for the purpose of this thesis, I have chosen the English spelling instead of the French one (Oubangui).

[4] Dug-out wooden canoe used to navigate on the rivers and lakes in Central Africa

Taken a year later, the photograph in Figure 5 offers a different perspective of the same river. In addition to being a border between two sovereign countries, the river equally formed a vital mobile bridge, a contact zone.[5] Instead of separating the two shores, the Ubangi brought them together. Even during times of crisis, the crossing from one riverbank to the other, from one country to the other, continued. Even during times of crisis, the Ubangi River continued to be decorated with dozens of paddling pirogues, crossing with goods and people or floating in the middle while fishing or digging out sand to be used in construction, or—as rumour had it—illegally trading cigarettes and marihuana on the rocky river islands after dusk.

It is this very river that the CAR refugee-students, whom I would meet in Kinshasa, crossed when fleeing conflict in their country. For some of them, it was the first crossing; for others it was the second, and they had been refugees more than a decade before; and for yet others (especially the Congolese among them), crossing was part of their routine. Meeting the first CAR refugee-student in May 2014 in Kinshasa, Max, a gentle and inquisitive young man—more than 1,000 km south of the Bangui–Zongo crossing and almost a year after the photograph in Figure 4 was taken—felt like finding the golden needle in a haystack. In a city of over 10 million inhabitants, our paths crossed serendipitously. Soon after we met, Max introduced me to his friends, through whom I would meet many more CAR refugee-students. Thanks to him, and others, I decided to extend the research field from Bangui to Kinshasa. It is these students' journeys, life stories, means of fending for themselves, dreams and frustrations that stand at the core of this thesis. By extension, I came to understand that not only for these students, but for many people in Central Africa, mobility stands at the core of their existence, especially from a historical perspective. I found myself navigating a mobile field in which escaping conflict and calamity was just one out of the many reasons to move and in which mobility meant far more than physically moving from point A to point B.

The goal of this thesis is twofold, and the two aspects are interrelated: On the one hand, it deals with the history of Central Africa through a mobility lens, and by doing so it attempts to defy static and fixed (national) borders. On the other hand, by viewing the mobile lives of young refugees through this mobile historical lens, it investigates how their trajectories give form to the mobility paradigm. Combining these two aspects results in the character of the conflict mobile, and sometimes conflict *im*mobile, whose movements and mobility—and lack hereof—are induced by conflict. The refugee-

student, on which a great part of this thesis is based, forms only one avatar of the conflict mobile, however, and in this thesis I will argue that—in addition to the refugees—there are more avatars of the conflict mobile.

2) Mobility and refugee-ness

The life paths of the individuals discussed in this thesis meander like that of a river between countries. They do not stop at borders but cross them instead, and they often do so on repeated occasions. Together, these paths build the mobile and fluid identity of the region. From a theoretical point of view, this study situates itself first and foremost in the fields of migration, transnationalism, refugee studies and, especially, mobility. In the context of the African continent, migration studies still have a tendency to focus on South–North migration, where African migrants, refugees, and asylum seekers leave their home countries to travel towards the global North. Even though scholars have argued that there cannot be a single explanation for migration, the migratory journeys to the North are, nevertheless, often understood in terms of the so-called push and pull factors that influence potential migrants to undertake audacious journeys, in search for a better future (in economic terms).

However, the push and pull factors cannot solely account for this complex phenomenon. Even if migrating to the Northern hemisphere might feed the aspirations of some of the individuals I describe in this thesis, it is certainly not the case for all. Their physical and social migration takes place, in fact, mostly within the African continent.[6] Not all people who move are desperately looking for more prosperous economic horizons, nor is migration determined only by misery and danger. Personal motivations and ambitions also drive the individual to undertake audacious journeys (Bredeloup 2008; Lucht 2012). Also, within Africa many people move because they want to discover (themselves) and travel (De Bruijn, van Dijk and Foeken 2001; Klute and Hahn 2007). Following this thread, I try to underline throughout this thesis that different people migrate for different reasons and that every path is unique. I do so by way of focusing on individuals in Central Africa, a region that has often been described as being at the margins of the world (Marchal 2009).

Just like other people across the globe, Central Africans travel and migrate—and have travelled and migrated in the past—for different reasons: to merchandise goods across borders, to visit family and

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[6] There are more refugees in Africa than in the global North. It must be added that there are numerous individuals from the North who migrate southwards, albeit temporarily, in order to build up a career—for instance, in the humanitarian agency world.

loved ones, to look for opportunities elsewhere, to study abroad, to escape conflict and calamity, and so on. Mobility touches upon the core of their existence. Movement is thus not an anomaly, nor is sedentarism the norm (Malkki 1992, 31). In Central Africa's 'mobile margins', mobility seems to be the norm rather than the exception (De Bruijn, van Dijk and Foeken 2001; De Bruijn, Brinkman and Nyamnjoh 2013).

Building on migration studies, the study of transnationalism focuses on the multiple relationships migrants construct in the host country as well as the links they maintain with their country of origin. These relationships cross geographical, cultural, and political boundaries and result in the establishment of diasporic communities. Because of these relationships, the migrants are positioned in two places at the same time; their lives are interconnected and dynamic rather than 'rooted' in one place (Schapendonk 2011, 6); hence the importance of networks. This also applies for the CAR community of refugees who find themselves caught between Bangui and Kinshasa. But, while transnationalism scholars have successfully debunked the static notion of migration, they do not go beyond this bipolar reading of migration—that is, country of origin versus country of destination (Schapendonk 2011, 6). Moreover, as the term transnationalism suggests, it limits itself to borders as defined by nation-states and thus falls under the methodological nationalist fallacy, as pointed out by Glick Schiller and Salazar. Methodological nationalism is an ideological orientation that approaches the study of social and historical processes as if they were contained within the borders of individual nation-states (Glick Schiller and Salazar 2013).

The multi-sited field I present in this thesis would not be complete if I were to limit myself to only two sites—that is, if I were to follow an A → B logic, whereby A stands for the place of origin and B the destination. In migration literature, the limited scope of this reading has been criticized too. In fact, migration (including refuge) is a combination of a varied and complex range of movements with in-between stops, pauses, and at times even reverse mobility (Schapendonk 2011; Schapendonk and Steel 2014; Schapendonk et al. 2018). In this transboundary reading, the present study covers an area that, despite its overlaps, is not often discussed as a single area and which, nowadays, falls politically and administratively under more than two countries: Democratic Republic of Congo (Congo-Kinshasa), Central African Republic, and (to a lesser extent) Republic of Congo (Congo-Brazzaville), Chad, and Cameroon. Rather than a dual approach across national borders, in this thesis I propose a transboundary approach, one that does not limit itself to national borders but incorporates more than two countries. This thesis invites the reader to un-border—that is, to engage in an exercise in thinking beyond borders.

Because African migration is often discussed in terms of forced displacement resulting from war or from various types of natural calamities, this thesis also positions itself within refugee studies. In fact, the most notable avatar of the above-mentioned conflict mobile manifests itself in the conflict-displaced refugee. Article 1 of the 1951 Refugee Convention defines the refugee as follows (UNHCR 2010):

> […] the term 'refugee' shall apply to any person who: […] owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country.

In itself this definition of the refugee is broad and includes a variety of people who feel persecuted owing to their race, religion, nationality, or membership of a particular social group or political persuasion. There are, however, a couple of issues to point out. The first is the omission of persecution or threat due to economic (as well as ecological) reasons, meaning that fleeing poverty does not make one an 'official' refugee—even though poverty can be the consequence of political or social exclusion.[7] The second issue relates to the meaning of 'well-founded'; who has the competence to decide whether a fear is well-founded or not? And, consequently, who decides when a well-founded fear should come to an end or not? Certainly not the refugee-to-be.[8] In many countries in Africa, protracted displacement—one that lasts longer than five years (Milner 2014)—seems to have become the rule rather than the exception (Jacobsen 2005; Loescher and Milner 2005; Grayson 2017; Behrends 2018; Ikanda 2018; Jansen 2018). In the context of the CAR refugees in DR Congo, the most deeply felt threats are linked to religion and membership of a social or political persuasion.

Nevertheless, this almost seventy-year-old definition still stands. As a consequence, over time, the refugee has become an almost generic, ideal-typical figure, a generalized type of person with features that can render her or him recognizable (Malkki 1995, 8–9). Even though the diversity of refugees has been acknowledged (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh et al. 2014, 5–6), the plural identities that one refugee can 'juggle' (Malkki 1995, 163) continue to be overshadowed in studies on forced mobility.

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[7] The differentiation between 'real' refugees and cunning economic migrants, so often heard in the Northern hemisphere, is based on this omission.

[8] One should also note that this definition, which is still of use today, does not extend to Internally Displaced People, who are formally similar to refugees except for the fact that they did not cross a border.

Refugees studies have been criticized for viewing refugees as vulnerable (the refugee-victim) or otherwise over-emphasizing the refugee's agency (the refugee-strategist) (Fresia 2007; Clark-Kazak 2011), a distinction that holds for Bakewell's encamped and also the self-settled refugee (Bakewell 2014). There is a discrepancy, for instance, between the stories of the CAR urban refugees, who create opportunities, fend for themselves, and fight to change the established political order, on the one hand, and the rigid definitions into which they are supposed to fit, as 'refugees', on the other. Therefore, in this thesis, I respond to Fresia's invitation to question, deconstruct, and expand this dualistic (and reductive) view of the refugee. In fact, in this thesis I go beyond looking at refugees as merely refugees. I do use the term for practical purposes, but I expand it in order to include conflict (im)mobiles, individuals whose mobility is induced by or linked to conflict. The urban refugee is only one, out of many, avatars of the conflict (im)mobile.[9]

Even though I plead guilty to underlining the refugees' agency and resilience (just as do Jacobsen 2005; Dryden-Peterson 2006; Clark-Kazak 2011, 2014), I do try to nuance this agency. In an attempt to go beyond the agency debate (Emirbayer and Mische 1998), I will first emphasize moments of decision or *vital conjunctures* which tell us something about the social becoming and personal growth of these individuals (Johnson-Hanks 2002). Second, I nuance agency by offering full and detailed descriptions of the conflict mobiles' trajectories, which I have followed over recent years across national borders. Finally, the longitudinal approach and the collection of oral histories, or biographical narratives, allow me to add a historical layer to the conflict mobiles, be they a refugee, a (transnational) migrant, or a humanitarian agent.

One of the things that struck me most when first arriving in the north-western corner of the DR Congo was that, despite the bad roads and other obstacles, people are very mobile. Before going to the area, I naively limited movement to the fleeing of Central African refugees from CAR into DR Congo. Reality is more complex, more layered and multilateral, and movement follows the same pattern; it is neither singular, unilineal, nor merely physical—but complex and plural in a variety of ways (Adey 2009, 18). For one thing, crisis and conflict are not the only reasons that force people to move; there are many others: family ties, commerce, looking for opportunities, studies. In other words, moving is the result of a complex spider web of motives. In addition to describing mobility within Africa, this thesis moves along the lines of the paradigm shift that began to take place in the

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[9] Urban refugees are 'urban' in two ways, first they are urban because they fled from a city (Bangui) and are thus used to an urban life style. Secondly, they are urban refugees in the sense that they chose a city (Kinshasa) as their location of refuge.

early 1990s, when the analysis of the fixed and delimited 'place' made room for an analysis of the more fluid and porous 'space' (Gupta and Ferguson 1992a). This paradigm shift from place to space was reinforced less than a decade later by the mobilities turn, where the focus continued to change towards a study of people on the move (Sheller and Urry 2006; Urry 2007). In the mobility turn, moreover, movement imbued with meaning became mobility (Cresswell 2006; Adey 2009). In order to study these mobilities, fluidity, and borderlands, the methodology followed suit (Hannerz 2003; Büscher and Urry 2009a; Büscher, Urry and Witchger 2010) In order to understand movement, as we will see in Chapter II, the researcher also has to 'move'.

Physical mobility is linked to the promise of social and existential mobility (Hage 2009; Glick Schiller and Salazar 2013). Yet mobility is not equally distributed. Glick Schiller and Salazar define the 'regulatory and surveillance administrations that affect individual mobility' in terms of *regimes of mobility* (2013, 189). These regimes of mobility are highly politicized; and while the movements of some individuals are normalized and even stimulated, the movements of others are easily criminalized and interrupted (Schiller and Salazar 2013, 189). In Central Africa, for instance, the movement of international staff of humanitarian agencies seems to be stimulated; meanwhile, the movement of refugees is extremely regulated, truncated, and even fixated.[10] Not all conflict mobiles move in the same manner, nor with the same velocity—hence the parenthesis in the thesis title— and there are also conflict *im*mobiles. Many African states, including DR Congo, apply a policy of encampment that requires refugees to live in a designated area set aside for the exclusive use of refugees (Bakewell 2014, 129).[11] The present work considers the war in CAR, the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR), and the Kinois[12] lifeworld as regimes of mobility. All three define, sometimes propel, but more often hamper the movement of the refugee-students.

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[10] In this thesis, I use the term 'fixate' as an alternative to 'establish'. The term was coined by Catherine Coquéry-Vidrovitch and is common among Francophone historians dealing with colonial Africa. While establishing supposes there was nothing before the colonial period—as if colonial explorers (read intruders) brought places into being out of nothing—fixating is rather the immobilization of something that did exist before. Even though I am not dealing with the colonial period in this paragraph, I allude to the immobility that this term contains. Hence, the movement of refugees is made immobile in a logic that resembles that of the fixation of borders and colonial posts during the last decades of the nineteenth century.

[11] Even if this policy is also applied in DR Congo, it must be noted that in comparison with Congo-Brazzaville or Tanzania, for instance, there is more room for deviation.

[12] Kinois is a term for the inhabitants of Kinshasa.

Regimes of mobility enforce immobility. The relationship between mobility and immobility resonates with Ferguson's interpretation of globalization, where immobility coincides with the 'ugly' side of globalization translated into the exclusion from desired (global) standards of socio-economic development (Ferguson 2006). By being modern, Ferguson understands having access to the lifestyle people hold up for themselves, in terms of education, housing, commodities, and health care; and I would also add that, in terms of mobility, being modern entails choosing one's directions and destinations, means of transport, and *velocity* of movement (Schapendonk 2011, 15). Just as mimicry is a way to assert rights to a wider, affluent, world society, so being mobile is a claim to membership in modernity in this unequal global society.

The empirical section of this thesis focuses on refugees' journeys. Herein, a journey does not coincide necessarily with the in-between phase of migration, between origin and destination, but should rather be read as a trajectory in Schapendonk's sense—that is, consisting of various movements that reach multiple points and go in several directions (Schapendonk 2011, 8). These refugee journeys will be placed against a historical background of journeys undertaken by other conflict mobiles since the 1970s (see Chapter IV). The student journeys to Kinshasa are only a newer wave of individual trajectories in this Central African region.

In all cases, these journeys, or multiple trajectories , are not merely physical and they do not end—just as my following of the trajectories of the people I met seems to continue. Physical journeys are imbued with meaning. In line with other scholars (e.g. MacGaffey and Bazenguissa-Ganga 2000; Bredeloup 2008; Newell 2012; Innes 2016), I consider these plural trajectories to be not only geographical but also fundamentally social, existential, and transformative in nature. Mobility is a phenomenon that is emotionally, relationally, and socially situated (Nyamnjoh 2013).

3) Duress

To better understand mobility (including violence-induced displacement) in Central Africa, as well as the variety of reasons people move, one needs to look at the context of violence and its socio-political implications. Rather than limiting myself to the analysis of the causes of the current violent eruption in Central Africa, and its deep historical roots (which I deal with in Chapter II and especially in Chapter IV), I am more interested in understanding what violence does with people in Central Africa, how it colours their decisions and their paths and ultimately shapes their lives. Hence, the first important issue to underline is that, like mobility, violence seems to be a 'normal condition of life' (De Bruijn and Both 2018), rather than an exception. This normality seems to be reiterated by Johnny Bissakonou, a CAR journalist and blogger who fled the country in late 2013. He claims that despite his

young age (he fled before turning thirty), he had repeatedly witnessed different forms of political violence in CAR: half a dozen mutinies, three lost school years, four coups d'état—and also the way people close to him were being murdered by man's foolishness (Bissakonou 2015).

In CAR, as elsewhere, peacetime and wartime do not stand against one another as two opposing extremes but form rather a violence continuum (Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois 2004; Richards 2005). This continuum is also expressed in Vigh's *crisis as context*, in which crisis is not placed in context but in which crisis *is* the context (Vigh 2008, 5). Pre-war and war share the same social substratum and need to be placed in the broader social, cultural, political, and economic context. As Vigh emphasizes, wars do not start with the first shot or end with the last (Vigh 2008, 9). In her analysis of the Chadian context, Marielle Debos also questions the limits between war and peace and underlines the diffuse nature of violence (Debos 2016, 5). She introduces the term *interwar*: the spaces and times, between periods of war, affected by violence, even if fighting is suspended and there is no direct or open and visible violence (Debos 2016, 8).

Likewise, and in reference to the 2013 CAR crisis, Lombard and Batianga-Kinzi suggest that attention to wartime violence should not focus solely on armed groups as structures of violent mobilization but must also address the general practices of violence existing in CAR society. Outbreaks of physical violence form an extension of the widely participatory violent vigilantism that exists before and after war (Lombard and Batianga-Kinzi 2015). DR Congo has also been described as a country characterized by 'violent peace' (Larmer, Laudati and Clark 2013; De Goede 2015b; Berwouts 2017). De Goede, for instance, argues that the Congolese hardly use the word 'peace' when referring to the period since the peace agreement was signed in 2002. On the contrary, they feel that peace is illegitimate, exclusive to the elite circles in Kinshasa—or simply a farce (De Goede 2015b, 597). This argument resonates with the analyses by people I encountered during field work, such as Papa Madjelo in Gemena (in Northwest DR Congo), a well-informed and engaged man in his fifties, who claimed: 'Fighting started in 1996. Until today there is still war; it hasn't finished yet … We are not at peace. Where is the peace? Our country is not complete.'[13]

In order to better understand the meaning of violence, in terms of what it does to people in Central Africa, I dissect violence's context-bounded and interconnected layers. In other words, I suggest not to look at violence as a monolithic entity, but rather analyse its different layers through the metaphor of the *palimpsest* (Wilson Janssens 2018b) as contextualized in the CAR and DR Congolese

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[13] Interview with Papa Madjelo, Gemena, July 2018

longue durée perspective.[14] A palimpsest is a manuscript on which later writing has been superimposed on effaced earlier writing, but which still bears visible traces of its earlier writings. By means of the palimpsest, I describe how layer upon layer of violence add up to duress. Consequently, I pay attention to the internalization of these layers, which are expressed in individual duress (De Bruijn and Both 2018).

Outbreaks of physical violence, as well as the social and everyday violence that precede and follow them, find their origins in other layers of historically deep-rooted structural, social, and everyday violence. In my interpretation thereof, I combine Bouju and De Bruijn's 'social violence' (Bouju and De Bruijn 2008), Shepherd-Huges's 'everyday violence' (Scheper-Hughes 1993), and Farmer's 'structural violence' (Farmer 2004a; 2004b). Social violence relates to any intentional action that can subdue another against his or her will, thereby inflicting, on the one who undergoes the violence, any form of physical injury or experience of psychological distress (Bouju and De Bruijn 2008, 5). Everyday violence, on the other hand, is inflicted on the world's marginalized; it is banal and unexceptional—'terror as usual' (Taussig in Scheper-Hughes 1993, 220)—and results in loss of dignity, nullification, the subjugation of opportunities, waiting, and the 'experience of having one's time wasted' (Lucht 2012, 72). It touches upon power hierarchies and feelings of worthlessness, the acceptance that some lives are of more worth than others. Everyday violence stems from a deep-rooted and long-lived history of structural violence, which is shaped by historical and economic processes (Farmer 2004a, 315). Structural violence is not spoken about, but it is tangible, durable, and a determinant of 'the way in which resources—food, medicine, even affection—are allocated and experienced' (Farmer 2004a, 315). Structural violence, moreover, comes close to Bourdieu's symbolic violence, in the sense that it is unrecognized because it is omnipresent (Bourdieu in Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois 2004, 21), and it permeates even the smallest details in an individual's life and turns the lives of those who are forced to undergo it upside down.

In Central Africa, structural violence results in a dearth of economic and social opportunities for youth and older people alike, social uncertainty, and also in the feeling of living under wholly unaccountable government (Lombard and Batianga-Kinzi 2015, 56). Both CAR and DR Congo suffer from lack of infrastructure, not only in terms of roads but also in terms of health care, security, education, and employment (especially in the interior of the country). Nevertheless, the unfulfilled expectations Central Africans nurture turn the state into a painful presence (Lombard 2012a, 240).

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[14] This 'plurality of violence' has also been discussed, albeit differently, by Tim Glawion and Lotje de Vries (Glawion and Vries 2018).

While it fails to provide for even the most basic needs, the state hunts the citizens it is supposed to protect. The state is present through the absence of its welfare. Kinshasa, likewise, is an extremely violent city. Violence here not only refers to physical and criminal violence, both present in the city, but is pervasive, omnipresent, and penetrates all the details of daily life. In this sense, Kinshasa has turned into a jungle where the law of the fittest and strongest rules, and where those who inhabit it see themselves forced to 'survive by adapting to the predatory rule of the street' (De Boeck and Plissart 2004, 89).

The refugee-students described in this thesis grew up in a context of open and structural violence, which, depending on their different social and family situations, they experienced differently. Bangui formed for many of them, to different degrees, a social moratorium, as Vigh would have it, characterized by generalized stagnation, state decline, massive marginalization, abject poverty, and impairment of social being (Vigh 2006b, 45). These hardships only grew worse with the onset of the new cycle of open violence in 2013 and forced many to flee. Yet, the refugees-to-be could not foresee the violence to which they would be exposed in DR Congo, and Kinshasa, which ended up adding another violent layer upon the already existing palimpsest. Like Bangui, Kinshasa also came to be characterized by a social moratorium. Here again students felt socially impaired;[15] in fact, they were confronted by a double moratorium, from which escape in merely spatial terms seemed impossible.

In addition to the layers of open and structural violence, the refugee-students had to deal with a third layer of violence, an institutional layer that superimposed itself on the chronic crisis in CAR and the Kinois urban jungle and which relates to their categorization as refugees and their relationship with humanitarian agencies (as discussed in chapters V, VI, and VII). Institutional violence resulted in frustration and sentiments of being stuck. In combination with the high expectations the refugee-students—and migrants in general—nurture of migration, the frustration felt at the doorstep of the institutions resulted oftentimes in despair. This internal feeling cannot be separated from the other layers of violence—and all together they inform duress. Duress, in its turn, colours how individuals look at their lives, and most importantly it colours their processes of decision-making and thus agency. Someone who spent two years in a refugee camp during his early childhood will, for

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[15] Following Vigh's use of 'impairment of social being', socially impaired means being at a disadvantage or weakened in terms of not being able to count on social relationships. This is especially true of the CAR refugee-students in Kinshasa. Being foreign to the city, they do not know anyone; they do not have the social capital of contacts who can lend them a hand when they are in need.

instance, respond differently to refuge than someone who has never set foot in a refugee camp before. Resourceful individuals are able to find the cracks in the wood of the restrictive institutional categorizations in order to open up spaces and create opportunities (Behrends 2018). While limiting on the one hand, on the other hand (im)mobility (including forced displacement) and duress can also instigate social becoming.

4) Social becoming and vital conjunctures

Next to mobility and violence, this thesis makes use of the notion of social navigation, as introduced by Vigh (2006a, 2006b), and hence contributes to the study of coping strategies of youth in urban Africa (see for instance, Honwana and De Boeck 2005; Simone 2005; Christiansen et al. 2006; Langevang 2008; Esson 2013). Building on social mobility, social navigation requires a continuous assessment of the immediate dangers and possibilities as well as an ability to envision the unfolding of the social terrain, in order to plot and actualize one's movement from the present into the imagined future (Vigh 2006b, 52). Since during navigation not only the actor but also the environment moves and changes—for instance, due to migration—there is 'motion within motion' (Vigh 2009b). Unstable environments, shifting contexts, and shifting institutions characterize the space in which this navigation takes place. The conflict mobiles do not move in vacuums but in (political) spaces that are governed by different regimes of mobility; however, there is room to manoeuvre, to act tactically by employing 'clever tricks' and 'calculated actions' (de Certeau 1988, xix and 37 respectively) . Also, during crisis and uncertainty, opportunities can be created (Iwilade 2013b; S. Turner 2015).

As individuals do not live their lives along one single path or a predefined set of stages, the number of possibilities available to youth varies greatly not only from place to place and region to region (Vigh 2006b, 37), but also from person to person. It is here that I wish to shift the attention from social navigation, in general, to the socially structured zones of possibility that emerge around specific periods of potential transformation—otherwise known as *vital conjunctures* (Johnson-Hanks 2002, 871). Vital conjunctures are characterized by uncertainty, but also by potential and transformation (Johnson-Hanks 2002, 871). In this thesis, vital conjunctures are, moreover, informed by (potential) mobility and duress.

Determining where exactly the 'nexus of potential social futures' (Johnson-Hanks 2002, 871) is found, poses a considerable challenge. Is war a vital conjuncture? Perhaps migration? Or is migration rather the outcome of a conjuncture, an outcome that will lead to further outcomes? Drawing on Vigh and Johnson-Hanks, Thilde Langevang suggests extending vital conjunctures from moments to periods or

sequences of moments. One should not look for a singular conjuncture, but rather for processes of becoming that are fluid and continuous (Langevang 2008). Confronted by crisis, the CAR refugees, for instance, saw themselves confronted by more than one decision: Should they stay in or leave Bangui? Should they go to a refugee camp or look for other self-settlement opportunities elsewhere? Informed by their background and their personalities, each individual made different decisions. Herein, past experiences play an important role in shaping 'new' decisions.

Figure 6   CAR twins
Left: Twins during handball match RCA – Gabon (Kinshasa, 10 August 2014) – Right: (R) Twins in Mpila (Brazzaville, 19 November 2014)

The trajectories of two CAR twins (see Figure 6) I met in 2014, first in Kinshasa and a couple of months later in Brazzaville, are illustrative of the extent to which vital conjunctures and the paths that flow out of these conjunctures are individual, diverging at times, converging at others. The twins have practised sports since childhood and tried to join different clubs, the one in handball, the other in soccer. When the crisis developed in Bangui in early 2013, their paths took different directions. One of the twins was living and training as a handball player in N'Djaména. The other lived in Bangui and, after the Seleka coup, fled southwards to Kinshasa, where he ended up joining one of the local soccer teams. The twins met for the first time after many months in August 2014 in Kinshasa. At that time the one in Kinshasa was a refugee, while the other, who had spent time in Chad, was a member of the official CAR team and played in handball competitions. On his way back to CAR, the handball player decided to abandon his trip in Brazzaville and did not return to Bangui. Meanwhile, the soccer player, tired of Kinshasa, decided to cross the river and look for work in Brazzaville. After being separated for several months, their paths had converged again and I met both in November 2014 in Brazzaville, where they were living together. This thesis is filled with such converging and diverging decision-making moments and periods.

5) Historiography and the biographic method

Without stories we cannot know how migrants experience the world. (Khosravi 2018)

This study is located not only at the intersection of mobility, duress, and the resulting decision-making processes; it also touches upon historiographical practices and methodological choices. Mobility, for instance, has been described mostly in spatial and social terms, yet in Central Africa, mobility is deeply historical. My addition to the mobility turn is partly situated within this historicity. One way of looking at mobility from a historical perspective is by looking at the physicality of the different types of paths: the earthen roads and waterways. Roads and waterways are part of a landscape, they have histories, and they have futures too. Also, in Central Africa, some roads are the descendants of age-old footpaths (Vansina 1990; Giles-Vernick 1996; Freed 2010), while others are the predecessors of future highways (see Figure 10 in Chapter II). Roads expand and contract with the cycles of history. The avenues lined with majestic mango trees (planted during colonial times) in rural DR Congo, as well as the carcasses of old boats and barges along the Congo and Ubangi River shores, are examples of this history. With time, trees and carcasses have become archives to which stories are attached, inviting the researcher to read the landscape (Gewald and Schrikker 2017).

If we were to imagine people as paths (Zipf in Adey 2009, 7–8), their stories, too, can be read as archives. This thesis builds on oral history—more precisely, the individual (parts of) stories people have shared with me over the past six years. The overall approach is subjective rather than objective and deals with micro-histories rather than with macro-historical events (Szijarto 2002; Brewer 2010). Not only the empirical chapters in Part Two are based on these biographies; Chapter IV is equally composed by juxtaposing fragments of conflict mobiles' biographies. There exists an extensive literature about personal narratives, life stories, biographical research, and their value for historical and anthropological research. In the last decade, the historical biography seems to have returned, especially in the descriptions of the shifting fortunes of ordinary people (Perry and Lewis 2010; Renders, Haan and Harmsma 2016). Also, in Central Africa, 'biographies-in-context' have gained in importance (Clark-Kazak 2011; De Bruijn et al. 2017; De Bruijn 2018; Trefon and Kabuyaya 2018)

Among all the terms, I feel most comfortable with the 'life story', as defined by Maynes et al.: 'a retrospective first-person account of the evolution of an individual life over time and in social context' (2012, 4). I do, however, use the different terms (stories, histories, biographies, and narratives) interchangeably; and even if my purpose is not to point out the nuances among the terms, there are some issues that require elucidation. Thus, argue Maynes et al. (2012, 3), 'individual life stories provide unique insights into the connections between individual life trajectories and

collective forces and institutions beyond the individual.' It is not so much the 'distinction' between the levels of macro- and micro-analysis that are the focus, but the link, 'the interconnectedness of the individual and the social', that provides a basis for new understandings (Maynes et al. 2012, 3–4). These interconnectednesses open up, in other words, new avenues to learn about details that pass otherwise unnoticed; and through these details, we are forced to formulate new questions. Banner refers to a 'reciprocal interaction', or a 'dialogic connection' wherein 'the individual not only reflects the context but also influences it'. Therefore, studying the life story of an individual is akin to studying the history of a city, a region, or a state—a way to understand broad social and cultural phenomena (Banner 2009, 582).

This dialogue not only links the individual (micro) to the social (macro); it additionally connects different temporalities to one another: the (remembered) past, the (lived) present, and the (hoped-for) future. It also connects the time in which the life story is set to the time in which it is told. Unlike Rosenthal (2004), I will not stress the difference between life stories and life histories, because from an intersubjective and situated point of view, it is impossible to separate the analysis from the story. Akin to Fabian's memory work (Fabian 2003), the narrator and the researcher are invested in a common goal, that of 'doing' life story research together (Cole and Knowles 2001, 70). Biographical narratives are intersubjective and contextually situated and include a process of reflection on the part of the narrator (Willemse 2014). A recorded account can never be replicable.

In this thesis I use using different parts of different narratives in order to sketch a historical background to the life stories in the empirical chapters, and even in the empirical chapters I cannot claim to be using a total biography. Even if we, as researchers, may ask for 'whole' stories, the whole is never total and we should content ourselves with 'only parts of' the story (Willemse 2014). Perhaps in the omissions lies a challenge for the researcher to dare to be imaginative and creative in her narrative strategies (Chakrabarty 1998, 5), or even an inspiration for her to venture on a path of 'life writing', a genre that seeks to combine literature and academic writing in order to describe the lives of individuals (Veldhuizen and Weelden 2016) . I do not pretend here to replace fact by fiction, but hope to explore other, more artistic, ways of writing and accommodating knowledge.

In this thesis, I share the accounts of resilience of a handful of refugee-students: the difficulties they encountered along the way and the hopes they cherish for the future. Even though writing is a lonely endeavour, insofar as possible I have attempted to work together with the refugee-students. In doing so, they have become more than just informants from whom to extract knowledge. They are rather co-creators—if not of academic output, at least of knowledge production. This is perhaps what is

meant by collecting 'good' data—that is, data that goes beyond the 'public transcript' and takes account of what is not vocalized as well as of what is actually said (Thomson, Ansoms, and Murison 2013, 6). In my opinion, however, 'good' data goes well beyond the subtle and the not-vocalized. Good data should acknowledge the indispensable role of the informant in the research *and* in the production of knowledge.

6) Research questions and chapters

This thesis is divided into three parts. **Part One: A research field in movement** is made up of three chapters (II, III, and IV). These chapters together present the field of study in terms of its multiple geographical locations (Chapter II), its methods and methodological approach (chapters II and III), and its history (Chapter IV). The presentation of the field is followed by Part Two, which is composed of three empirical chapters (V, VI, and VII) dealing mainly, yet not exclusively, with the CAR refugee-students in Kinshasa. Part Two is closed off by a fourth, and shorter, chapter (VIII) that should be read as an empirical conclusion. Part Three comprises Chapter IX, a concluding chapter that encompasses the overall discussion of the thesis and combines Part One and Part Two.

In Part One I try to answer the following question:

How can we, and why should we, understand the region of study through a mobility lens?

In Central Africa, mobility stands centre stage and has shaped the region. Hence, in each chapter, I challenge sedentary and static understandings of the field and invite the reader to look at the field through a mobile lens. I urge the reader to look beyond borders and to un-border. I do so, for instance, by questioning established and 'hard' borders, such as the boundaries between national states, as well as by offering alternative borders. My purpose here is not necessarily to debunk, but rather to complement and to complexify static perspectives. For this purpose, **Chapter II. Conceptualizing a transboundary and multi-sited field** serves first and foremost as a visual introduction to this multi-sitedness. It deals with the multiple geographical field locations throughout Central Africa in its most literal sense. By the use of maps and other images, this chapter invites the reader to look beyond national borders. Chapter II, however, does not limit itself to the geography of the field; it also includes historical, digital, and (mass and social) media perspectives. As the period of fieldwork evolved in parallel to the CAR crisis that erupted in 2013, I have chosen to deal with this recent crisis not in the historical chapter but as part of this chapter—and also because it literally shaped my fieldwork-related practical decisions: where and when to do fieldwork?

Even though I begin introducing some of the employed methods in Chapter II, **Chapter III. Nomadic minds and moving methods** really constitutes the methodological chapter of this thesis. More than an enumeration and description of methods, and building on Chapter II, Chapter III deals with methodology. While 'methods' should be read as the actual building blocks of data collection, how this was physically carried out through interviews, snowballing samples, observations, and the like, 'methodology' refers rather to a philosophical approach towards doing research, as well as the ways in which the chosen approach colours how the researcher 'stands' in the field and relates to other people. Even beyond the field, methodology can illustrate the approach towards academia as a whole. As in the previous chapter, mobility stands at the core of the methodology; and the chapter begins, accordingly, with a description of travelling (i.e. physical moving). Slowly but surely physical mobility makes room for more ethereal types of mobility. Thus, in line with Adey, more than physical movements, 'moving methods' encapsulates being emotionally touched by something (Adey 2009). I was moved by the people I met during fieldwork, I was moved by their stories, and I was moved by the unequal power structures that inevitably underlay our relationships (Jourdan 2013). This emotional reading of mobility opened up alternative ways of thinking about more inclusive research, as well as pursuits of 'moving' in the same direction with others and creating with others.

Chapter IV. A history of mobility in a transborder region presents the history of the region from a mobility-inspired perspective. It deals with the history of Central Africa, mainly between Bangui and Kinshasa, from pre-colonial times up to 2011. The year 2011 was not only the year prior to the last CAR crisis, but it was also the year in which normative—and successful for some, yet not uncontested—elections were held in both CAR and DR Congo. These elections resulted in a supplementary mandate for the two incumbent presidents, respectively François Bozizé in CAR and Joseph Kabila in DR Congo. Looking at the region through a mobility lens, I explore how mobility shaped the region: from the establishment of forest communities during the Bantu expansion, to the different slave-raiding incursions in pre-colonial times, the colonial suppression , the decade of independence marked by crisis, the following decades of dictatorship and military rule, up until the age of so-called liberalization and democratization, which gave rise to different forms of rebellion. In this chapter, arbitrarily established borders are transgressed over and over again by conflict mobiles, so much so that their meaning needs to be questioned—perhaps not so much politically speaking, but certainly on a cultural and individual basis. Chapter IV follows and is constructed around a subjective chronology, one that is based on life stories; hence, I will not begin with pre-colonial history, which will be discussed 'unchronologically' at the end of the chapter instead. In the late nineteenth century, during the race to colonize as much land as possible, the bordering of Africa was

at its peak. My main argument is that even if these, often arbitrary, borders deeply impacted the region, they never managed to completely divide it.

In **Part Two: The CAR refugee-students in Kinshasa**, I bring forward the empirical heart of this thesis. As its name suggests, this part is based on the life stories of CAR refugee-students (their family members, relatives, friends, neighbours) I met, serendipitously, in Kinshasa and whom I followed, later on, to Bangui and Brazzaville. I have chosen the term refugee-students not to reduce their identities, but to accentuate their (im)mobility status, on the one hand, while on the other making an attempt to demarcate the group of youth with whom I worked. Not all were students in the strict sense of the word, however; some were still finishing high school, while others had studied some time before. Nevertheless, the group of youth with whom I worked were urban and educated, and because they moved, due to conflict, across an international border, the adjective 'refugee' describes them best—and, more importantly, they self-identify with this label. The refugee-student is a particular avatar of the conflict (im)mobile.

Part Two is made up of four empirical chapters: three full chapters (V, VI, VII), followed by a shorter 'empirical' concluding chapter (VIII). In a way, all the chapters deal with movement, or the lack thereof. Movement is understood on different levels: physical, symbolic, and existential. The chapters form sister chapters, as they constitute different sides of the same coin. Even though they can be read on their own, that is horizontally, I encourage the reader to read them vertically, wherein each chapter digs deeper and adds a layer of analysis to the previous ones. These chapters focus on the individual lives of these refugee-students by looking, first, at their trajectories from Bangui to Kinshasa (and for some, beyond Kinshasa); second, at their social becoming and entrance into adulthood; third, at the ways in which they find a place within their newly built community; and fourth, by doing so, at how they defy established social norms and explore the limits of their personalities. By following the lives of these students, I can better grasp the layeredness and complexities of both 'stuckedness'[16] and opportunities. The students fled Bangui not only on account of war—although conflict doubtlessly ignited their initial flight, and had there not been a conflict, they would not have left in the first place. Just as the crisis had done, fleeing also turned into an opportunity (Iwilade 2013b), but not one that stemmed from a deliberate choice.

Part Two attempts to answer the following question:

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[16] Throughout this thesis, 'stuckedness' (a term coined by Ghassan Hage) refers to a sense of existential immobility, the feeling that one is going nowhere (Hage 2009).

How do youth find a place in their own communities and beyond—that is, in a world characterized by conflict and mobility?

Taken together, the different chapters examine different layers of the CAR refugee-students' journeys, in the most encompassing sense (journey into becoming and being). On every occasion, I dig deeper; and I do so by adding a layer of individual mobility in each chapter. The mobile focus of each chapter is different. **Chapter V. On moving and being stuck** deals with the physical journey—or rather, the plural geographical trajectories along which the refugee-students travelled. In a way, the point of departure is clear for all: Bangui. The point of arrival, on the other hand, is multiple and different for every individual; and, as time evolves, the destination keeps on changing. In addition to moving, Chapter V takes into consideration the lack of movement, the pauses during journeys, the detours, and the various moments of immobility and of being stuck.

While Chapter V is about physical (im)mobility, **Chapter VI. Quest of becoming: The refugee-student and the school of life** touches upon the quest of becoming—in other words, on the envisaged horizon, to which the journey leads: access to education. In this chapter, education is understood in its broadest sense: in terms of schooling (going to school) but also in terms of upbringing (education outside school, both within the family and the wider society). In a first instance, this chapter goes back in time to Bangui; but it is not to the Bangui the refugee-students left in 2013, but to the Bangui of their childhood in the last decade of the twentieth century. By digging deeper into their pasts, I hope to contextualize, or at least nuance, the decisions they would later take as young adults. Schooling and upbringing, however, are not limited to the CAR students' youth in CAR but also transposed to their growing up in their newly adopted home, the hostile city of Kinshasa and its particular required coping strategies. Kinshasa is transformed into a site of education in terms of survival, a school of life.

Beyond self-growth and tactics of personal survival, in **Chapter VII. Engagement and everyday politics**, the quest of becoming spreads beyond the self to the wider community of CAR refugees. Even if this chapter draws, again, on multiple experiences of the different refugee-students, the story of Euloge—and most importantly, his political engagement and growth and hence social and political mobility—will form its core. A couple of examples, in which he deals with the problems of members of the CAR refugee community in Kinshasa, illustrate how this engagement is rooted. This engagement is not new, however, but the continuation of Euloge's engagement as a student leader in his university years in Bangui prior to the 2013 crisis. It is here where continuity, rather than rupture, in migration must be understood. **Chapter VIII. Freedom, revolution, and creativity**, the last

chapter of Part Two, deals with continuity, not so much in terms of political engagement but certainly in terms of personal and spiritual growth. As I followed the refugees after the period of fieldwork concluded, I have been able to witness, albeit from afar, how some of these youngsters have changed. Chapter VIII, therefore, ends on a slightly transcendental note.

Finally, in **Part Three: Discussion and concluding remarks**, I bring together Part One and Part Two in order to better define the conflict (im)mobile. In this final part, I will incorporate a group that has been discussed throughout the thesis, without necessarily being its focus: the humanitarian agents. Just like the refugee, the humanitarian agent is an avatar of the conflict (im)mobile. Even if the nature of protractedness and stuckedness of the (forced) displacement of the humanitarian agent cannot be equated to that of the refugee, these agents are equally displaced as a consequence of conflict. Considering the different avatars of the conflict mobile leads us to reflect upon the nature of conflict-inflicted displacement: is it really that exceptional? Why is it treated as such? As a final point to this introduction, I want to underline that this thesis should not be read as an ethnography of Kinshasa, nor as an ethnography of Bangui, nor as an ethnography of a rural area in north-west Congo, nor as an ethnography of the connection between Bangui and Kinshasa. This thesis is an ethnography of mobility and of those who move within and beyond a Central African region.