

Migration and the Question of Voice: Africanist Perspectives

Knut Graw¹

¹Catholic University of Leuven, IARA/IMMRC, Leuven, Belgium

knut.graw@soc.kuleuven.be

Biographic and autobiographic approaches are closely related to the question of voice. Countering seemingly neutral, objective and ‘value free’ studies of sociocultural reality perceived as auctorial, one-sided, and somehow distant to lived reality, both autobiographic and biographic approaches aim at reinstalling individual persons and their experiences at the center of understanding and analysis. This shift in direction of representation, writing, and analysis poses complex series of questions as to who speaks in such texts, from where and to whom, and how the hereby generated, more subjective and experience-near accounts relate to sociocultural and sociopolitical analysis more broadly. Drawing on a close reading of a number of biographic and autobiographic works dealing with migration in and from different African contexts, complemented by ethnographic research in different European and West African settings, the paper sets out to examine the epistemological implications of person-centered and subjective (auto)biographic approaches. At the same time and moving back and forth between the question of the significance of direct voice in sociocultural analysis and the question of voice in migratory praxis more generally, the text interrogates the relation between different modes of ethnographic writing and anthropological theory.