

Introduction

Mobilities and Economies at the Edge of Europe

Sitting in the courtyard of a derelict house in Tripoli, Libya's capital, Idiris¹ was optimistic about his future.² Soon, he would make it by boat to Europe. Idiris' unauthorized journey with human smugglers through Sudan and the Sahara Desert to the house in Tripoli had been shaped by several episodes of confinement and detention imposed by state and other actors, which continued during his life at the house and the many repeated attempts at leaving for Europe by boat. Paying money was often the only way out. Idiris, like many other migrants in Libya, was caught in a landscape of forced immobility where state and other actors extracted value from mobile life. And yet he was determined to move on: one day he would make it to Europe.

A few kilometres away, on the other side of Tripoli, Cynthia and Alain, from Cameroon, had no desire to leave by boat to Europe. They preferred staying on in Libya's context of fragmented authority, despite being subjected to everyday violence and informal bordering practices visited upon foreigners. At sea, their lives would be at risk, and they would end up in Europe's strict legal framework where their agency would be curtailed. In Libya, they earned more money than they ever would in Europe. Staying put for Cynthia and Alain was worth it. Theirs was an affective labour of endurance: Cynthia and Alain suspended a difficult present to aspire towards a better future.

Across the sea from Libya, Aziza and Abdikarim, from Somalia, sat outside their container home in a government-run open reception centre on the island of Malta. They had made it to Europe by boat from Libya, but were frustrated. Their attempt to apply for asylum in another EU country had been cut short by being forcibly returned to Malta because

¹ All names in this book have been changed.

² Some of the material in this chapter has been previously published: Marthe Achtnich, 'Immobility and Crisis: Rethinking Migrants' Journeys through Libya to Europe', *Libyan Studies*, (2021), 1–5. Published online by Cambridge University Press. Copyright © The Society for Libyan Studies 2012. Reprinted with permission.

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their fingerprints had been found in the database, indicating that Malta was their first country of arrival and from where their asylum application must begin in the EU. Aziza and Abdikarim found themselves stuck in the legal framework. This was not the Europe they had expected when they left Libya. They felt that their futures were bleak.

This book brings migration, mobility and economy together. It looks at the unauthorized journeys of sub-Saharan migrants along one of the world's most dangerous routes: through the Sahara Desert to Libya and by boat to Malta in Europe. By tracing migrants' lives as they move through spaces of informal confinement, government-run detention centres and private houses in Libya; undertake the turbulent Mediterranean boat crossing; and spend time in institutionalized reception centres in Malta, the book provides a new account of mobile life and its attendant economies. Its focus is on journeys: the ways in which migrants experience and inhabit the context of fragmented authority in Libya and negotiate Europe's state and legal framework, how they navigate bordering practices implemented by state and other actors, and how they shape and participate in diverse economic arrangements that enable and thwart movement. The journey, I argue, provides a new ethnographic and analytical perspective on migration. It fosters a shift from static sites to mobility – the lived experiences of movement that are social and non-linear. It leads to a novel understanding of economic practices – transactions, relations and arrangements emerging from mobility, which form a transnational system of production in the borderlands.

This analytical and ethnographic endeavour brings to the forefront the journey and related economic practices that recast how we think about contemporary migration. Unauthorized migration across the Mediterranean remains among the most mediatized topics in recent years. International migration organizations highlight how the Central Mediterranean Route through Libya to Europe is the world's deadliest (IOM 2017; 2022). Many academic, media and policy reports label unauthorized migration as a 'crisis', positing a linear understanding of displacement and movement (Crawley et al. 2016). The migrant arriving at the shores of Europe is framed as an exceptional figure, whose identity is determined by categories imposed by the state and by law: the unauthorized, illegal, undocumented border crosser. Such categories become the means through which the lives and mobilities of migrants are accessed and articulated. These crisis and security narratives foster specific policy and humanitarian responses (Lindley 2014). Migration

controls have intensified and moved to the EU's peripheral states through measures such as fingerprinting, but also beyond, extending the EU's sovereign reach towards North Africa. By mobilizing ideas of fear, security and crisis, border externalization frames the migrant as 'Other' and pre-emptively aims to stall movements towards Europe (Andersson 2014b; Brachet 2016; Mountz and Hiemstra 2014). Policies criminalizing migration in the Sahel region and Libya, search-and-rescue or push-back missions at sea, as well as investment in immigration detention in Libya are pressing examples. However, such bordering violently produces the very 'irregular' migrants it aims to police (Andersson 2014a; 2014b; Vaughan-Williams 2015). Framing migration 'as an emergency in need of a security response' creates an 'illegality industry' centred 'on the "usage" of migrants for purposes of border control, rescue, prevention or information-gathering' (Andersson 2014a; 2014b; 2015, 24; 2016, 1060). Rather than being a 'solution', such an industry becomes 'part of the problem' at the border (Andersson 2014a; 2016, 1062).

How might we understand these processes that emerge when mobility, migration and related economic practices interweave? The lives of migrants themselves are a crucial starting point, but often remain elusive in existing accounts. The field of migration studies, by mostly fixating on linear journeys and points of entry, misses out on the complexities of mobile life. Such narratives also serve as 'a blunt tool of migration governance' that is ahistorical, elusive of context and often ignorant of the different motivations migrants have (Mountz and Hiemstra 2014, 388). Developing an account of mobile life that takes the perspectives of those undertaking fraught journeys seriously is important to expanding current studies of migration and mobility. This means departing from the narrative of 'crisis' and from macro-level perspectives that inform much work in migration studies to embrace mobility and the set of situated social relations and practices that constitute it. We need to shift focus from abstractions of 'why', 'how' and 'where' people move to how they experience, feel and cope with journeys, just as we need to attend to the relations mobility itself generates. This challenges notions of migration as an uninterrupted movement from A to B, which evacuates all that happens in between, and also unsettles binary migrant categories, including those of illegal, legal, refugee or economic migrant, that reify social relations. As such, the book highlights the fragmentations (Collyer 2007; 2010) of migrants' journeys and extends the work of authors (Andersson 2014a; Belloni 2019; Cabot 2014; De León and Wells 2015; Vogt 2018) who are trying to combine a systemic and subjective approach to migration.

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A focus on migrants' perspectives relocates the migrant body and its mobilities as part of transnational systems of economic production in borderlands. Macro-level political economic analysis of migration often posits a singular image of the 'illegal' migrant on a linear journey to Europe, who is exploited as the 'victim' of the evil smuggler or framed as a 'criminal' and 'threat' to the nation-state, and around whom a whole industry of illegal movement arises. In an analogous vein, narratives of a 'migration crisis' shift attention away from contemporary forms of capitalism that profit from mobile life. A situated, ethnographic evaluation of migrants' experiences, on the other hand, brings a much more complex set of arrangements and intersecting forces to the fore. Journeys are uneven, constituted by various forms of immobility, both forced and voluntary, which emerge through practices that are often aimed at profiting from mobile bodies, whether in the form of rent, indentured labour or migrants as consumers of clandestine mobilities. These practices lead to transactions and negotiations with other actors, who exploit mobile lives but also foster and enable mobility, thus contributing to the wider dynamic of creating a 'reserve army' of workers upon arrival in Europe (cf. Pradella and Cillo 2021). Here, boundaries between the licit and the illicit, the legal and the illegal are blurred, and the roles and identities of actors, whether as enforcers of law or clandestine agents of mobility, shift and become fluid. An ethnographic perspective thus brings into view what I term 'mobility economies', characterized by variegated and intersecting economic practices – clandestine, state-linked or intimate – that shape and are shaped by mobility.

Such a perspective also highlights the racialized hierarchies of mobility that constitute much of the world today (cf. Besteman 2020). Hierarchies of mobility are key for understanding contemporary capitalism, for, as scholars have argued (cf. Pradella and Cillo 2021), surplus populations are generated through the policing of migrant bodies in the borderlands. The violence that migrants are often subjected to in Libya propels them to move on, with many ending up labouring under precarious conditions in Europe (cf. Pradella and Cillo 2021). Racialized hierarchies of mobility and forms of neo-colonialism, including the extraction of oil and resources from countries such as Libya, fuse to form what Ann Laura Stoler calls 'imperial formations', characterized by 'politics of dislocation' involving 'systemic recruitments and "transfers" of colonial agents, on native military, on a redistribution of peoples and resources, on relocations and dispersions, on contiguous and overseas territories' (Stoler 2006, 135–138).

We might push this critique of linear migration and macro-level political economic analysis further. There is a whole body of innovative and

exciting work on the biopolitics of migration that attends to the ways in which migrants are constructed as object-targets of governance through borderwork, legal mechanisms and political discourse (see Cabot 2014; De Genova 2017; Mainwaring 2019; Tazzioli 2019; Tuckett 2018). However, much of this scholarship remains Euro-centric, focused on and seen through the actions of the state. Deflecting the ethnographic and analytical gaze to the borderlands themselves brings to the fore other modes of migration governance. These are not always linked to a formal biopolitics of the state and its practices of securitization. Rather, they have to do with the outside that biopolitics creates: bodies that are regarded as expendable and whose entry into Europe should be policed and thwarted from afar. Furthermore, the externalization of border controls does not follow a linear transfer of mechanisms of securitization to the borderlands, but they are continually worked out anew. We witness the rise of a range of informal bordering practices enacted by the state, militia and other actors, lines between whom are blurred, and which proceed through tacit channels and not always declared codes.

An ethnography that is comparative and attentive to this outside opens up new ways to revisit the relation between biopolitics and economy, a relation that Michel Foucault hinted at in his initial formulations of biopower but which has been somewhat occluded in the Foucault-inspired work on migration. The normalization and disciplining of bodies, Foucault argued, was inexorably linked to their enrolment into capitalist systems of economic production (Foucault 1998). A close, ethnographic, scrutiny of mobile life in the borderlands reveals how informal bordering practices give rise to a set of economic practices that are not so much about abstract supply and demand logics of a labour market or a formal means of incorporating people into the workforce for a capitalist economy. Instead, such economic practices tap into the migrant body. They derive from a rentier and value-generating form constituted by rendering people into unfree, restricted subjects. At the same time, bodily compartments, social ties and affective intimacies – typically seen as ‘extra-economic’ in mainstream political economy – become vital pivots for the reproduction of the mobile body, upon which various informal practices predate. This goes beyond the view of irregular migrants as principally a source of vulnerable labour, and border regulations thus as economically essential (e.g., De Genova 2002; Mezzadra and Neilson 2013).

The wider importance of this argument is that it de-centres both biopolitics and political economy from its Euro-centric or state-centric outlook. It brings mobility and economy into conversation. The migration ‘industry’ or ‘business’ in this context extends beyond markets for

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clandestine mobilities (Andersson 2014a) to include the vitality of mobile life itself. At the same time, mobility economies in the borderlands reveal how contemporary capitalism is more than the biopolitics of profiting from life. It has necropolitical orientations (cf. Mbembe 2003; 2019), where accumulation also proceeds through life's devaluation and disposability (cf. Manjapra 2019; see also Achtnich 2022). This book's ethnographic attention to mobility and economic practices, contexts of different authority, biopolitics and its outside, tells a very different story of how migrants' lives are experienced, governed and economized. By doing so, it furthers a nascent interdisciplinary endeavour that, at its heart, rethinks both mobile life and the political and economic regimes that sustain and reproduce it.

Mobility Economies

The three opening vignettes at the beginning of this book – Idiris' account of moving between different actors and his repeated attempts at taking a boat, Cynthia and Alain's decision to endure fraught conditions in Libya to build their lives, Aziza and Abdikarim's frustrations after having reached Europe – bring forward a number of themes that underline this book's emphasis on the analytic of the journey and what it offers up for rethinking economic practices associated with unauthorized migration. First, they point to some of the limitations of framing mobile lives in binary and typologized terms. 'Borderwork' (Rumford 2008) authenticates access to state territory through legal documents, making citizens and non-citizens legible to the nation-state and its powers (Abarca and Coutin 2018; Cabot 2014; Navaro-Yashin 2012; Scott 1998). Categories such as forced versus voluntary, illegal versus legal, refugee, asylum seeker or economic migrant, upon which the EU's legal and asylum framework is based, provide an impoverished understanding of the complexities of mobile *lives*. They ignore or reify social relations that migrants are enmeshed in, and which play an important role in shaping lives on the move. Second, although scholars have looked at unauthorized migration and pointed to the social constitution of borders and legal status (Abarca and Coutin 2018; De Genova and Peutz 2010; Reeves 2013; Willen 2007), highlighting the need to differentiate between forms of irregular stay in a nation-state through undocumented entry or presence while critiquing typologized migrant categories positing people and their mobilities in binary terms, the focus has been on entry points and sites of arrival. This sometimes ignores all that goes on *in between* and *along* the course of people's journeys. Ethnographies of migrants' lives in transit (Vogt 2018), of places traversed and created as

people move, and events in the wider borderlands, open up new ways of understanding unauthorized migration. What happens in the outside of the strong state and its biopolitical regimes, and how migrants experience and navigate such situations, has deep implications for understanding mobility. It foregrounds a whole other set of social, political and economic relations through which mobility is fostered and mobile lives are led. More precisely, it calls for bringing mobility and economy into the same analytical plane and examining how the two co-constitute one another.

Scholarship on mobility in anthropology has done much to highlight how mobility shapes subjects (Lelièvre and Marshall 2015; Salazar and Smart 2011) and the ways in which mobility emerges from a range of actors and dynamics between sedentariness and movement in situations where power is distributed unequally (Glick Schiller 2018; Glick Schiller and Salazar 2013; Salazar and Smart 2011). At stake here are movements that vary in their 'motive force, speed, rhythm, route, experience, and friction' (Cresswell 2010, 17). Nevertheless, underlying this turn to mobility, including the field of transnationalism (Basch et al. 1994; Glick Schiller 2018), especially in the context of migration, is still a 'conceptual framework centered on locally fixed origins and destinations and the connections between them' (Vogt 2018, 6). Scholars have sought to take into account historical processes that determine decision-making and mobility, but the emphasis has often been on sending or receiving countries, depicting migration as linear from A to B and neglecting everything in between (Collyer and De Haas 2012; De Haas 2014). The notion of connection is an abstraction. It is a line connecting two pre-given points, where the line itself becomes subordinate to the point (Ingold 2011). In other words, what gains primacy is the point of arrival or destination. The journey, its events, social relations formed along the way, the situations and actors that migrants navigate and negotiate, in other words, the line, becomes secondary and even falls into oblivion.

A number of scholars advocate for a closer scrutiny of migrants' journeys, often highlighting their risky and fragmented nature (BenEzer and Zetter 2015; Brigden 2018; Khosravi 2010; Lucht 2012), which moves beyond linear depictions characterizing movement in terms of departure and arrival (Collyer 2007; Crawley and Jones 2020; Schapendonk 2012; Schapendonk et al. 2021; Vogt 2018). While drawing upon this work, this book's comparison of different contexts and its focus on what happens along the journey is unique and forges new terrain. It reveals how mobility is not solely defined by movement. Immobility, characterized by periods of waiting, incarceration in detention centres, or durations of stuckness, becomes a fundamental

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constituent of mobility. Understanding the dynamics of immobility through migrants' experiences, this book argues, becomes vital for uncovering some of the power dynamics underpinning contemporary migration. Immobility is also critical for grasping the relations between mobility and economic practices, particularly contemporary capitalism, where the forced immobilization of people and the creation of racialized hierarchies of mobility (cf. Besteman 2020) generate avenues to profit from mobile life. Immobility also reveals how movement rests on overcoming different barriers to mobility posed by the state and its biopolitical apparatus, whether at the doorsteps of Europe or externalized into the wider borderlands.

Furthermore, an attention to mobility and the journey punctuated by various durations of immobility foregrounds mobility as lived experience that involves the migrant body being immersed in a world shaped by many currents. Such currents are not just social but also atmospheric and phenomenological. Much of the literature on migration and the anthropology of mobility evacuates from the analysis atmospheres and the weather world through which movement happens (cf. Ingold 2011). Yet, as this book shows, migrants travel *through* the world rather than across an already laid-out surface, a world that is at once material and meteorological, and which has bearings on people's journeys. Most notable is the Mediterranean boat crossing, where social and meteorological forces work in conjunction to heighten migrants' vulnerability and together operate to generate what some have called a 'liquid trap' (Heller and Pezzani 2017, 108), where people are subjected to lethal abandon.

This adoption of corporeal dimensions of being-in-the-world and bringing it into conversation with the bio- and necropolitics of governing mobility is a unique intervention of this book. Its salience is further highlighted by the ways in which it retrieves the importance of place. Places are not only traversed by migrants but formed through their mobilities. In much of the established and emerging work on contemporary migration, place becomes 'a mere back-drop to physical journeys' (Crawley and Jones 2020, 3228). As a consequence, *where* social relations are formed, movement is negotiated and economic transactions take place gets relegated to relative anonymity. While scholars have begun to attend to the ways in which spaces are created by migrants' movements (Hinkson 2017; Scott-Smith and Breeze 2020) as much as they are by actions of the state (Black and Collyer 2014; Coutin 2005; Lindley 2014), they tend to be focused on refugee camps and other 'techno-borderscapes' that shape transit zones (Godin and Donà 2021). In this book, I not only look at such exceptional sites but also turn to other spaces that are more mundane but no less important for

understanding the dynamics of migration and migrants' lived experiences, including, for example, private houses in Tripoli through which many migrants move while waiting for the Mediterranean boat crossing.

In doing so, I recover a much richer account of mobility and the economic relations that emerge from and shape it. This speaks closely to earlier calls in anthropology for ethnographies that are multi-sited and which go beyond place-boundedness (Marcus 1995), and for challenging the local as 'a bounded, self-contained, ahistorical unit' (Appadurai 1996; Feldman 2012, 183; Hannerz 1996). While multi-sited in its orientation, the book takes sites to be forged by people's movements. They are 'place-binding' rather than 'place-bound' (Ingold 2011, 148), for it is the trails that people form as their lives and journeys move along that give rise to the very locales that anthropologists study. And it is through the tensions between mobility and immobility, the pauses and stops that intersperse journeys, that sites emerge. These pauses, however, are not gaps, evacuated of life and social relations. Rather, they are the very time-spaces through which some of the most poignant insights into the dynamics of migration and its attendant economies can be gleaned. This book, then, overturns the familiar trope in anthropology where the anthropologist is mobile while the subjects they study stay put and remain bound to place (Hage 2005; Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002, in Andersson 2014a, 284). Both inhabit a world constituted by movement, albeit with uneven durations and possibilities, for the capacity to move is linked to a position of privilege and citizenship.

The conjunction between mobility and economy that lies at the heart of this ethnographic and analytical endeavour operates in many ways and includes the lived experiences and engagements of migrants with economic practices. The phenomenological and the economic, drawn together in this book's analysis, find common ground in the etymology of the word journey. 'Journey' entered Middle English from Old French 'jornee' and French 'journée', which means 'day, day's space, day's travel, work, employment'. 'Journey' in its meaning as 'a day's work' or 'a day's labour' relates to 'in journey', which would have meant 'at work as a day-labourer'. Or it could have also signified 'a day's doings or business'. Thus, to journey meant being mobile but also engaging in economic transactions. Mobility and economy come together in the word 'journey'. Furthermore, the polysemic connotations of the word extend to 'a day's performance in fighting', with 'to keep the journey' being 'to keep the field, to continue the fight',³ not dissimilar to the

³ For all of the above references, see OED online, 'journey, n.', Oxford University Press, December 2020.

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labours of coping and endurance that migrants have to perform as they undertake fraught journeys. As I shall later argue, such labour has important economic consequences.

Journeys, therefore, are much more than just travelling. They are about space and time, about movement and labour, the ability to endure and to reproduce the very conditions encountered in order to move on. The journey is not only the locus of ethnographic work but an analytic that enables specifying what I call 'mobility economies' or the variegated and intersecting economic practices that shape and are shaped by mobility. Along migrants' journeys through Libya to Europe, stretching across contexts of fragmented and strong state authority, the economic is always tethered to mobility. The two form an inseparable dyad. Holding this dyad in sharp focus reveals how formal and informal economic practices intersect in the making of mobilities, and highlights how these intersections are forged through relations between a range of actors, including migrants, smugglers, criminal groups, militia and state authorities. These relations become constitutive of contemporary capitalism beyond the borderlands, in that they are closely linked to the generation of an unemployed and underemployed surplus population that is part of Europe's cheap labour force (cf. Pradella and Cillo 2021).

Mobility economies, especially when gleaned from the wider borderlands, must also take into account a suite of informal practices through which migration is governed. Much existing work that reveals the arbitrariness of bordering practices and the meaning of documents or asylum applications and legal status (Abarca and Coutin 2018; Cabot 2014; Coutin 2003) is concerned with strong state-led bureaucratic and formal legal systems. Although they draw attention to the ways in which migration governance thrives by 'working the space of ambiguity between life and law' (Reeves 2013, 509), not much has been said about lived experiences of documentary uncertainty in contexts of fragmented state authority. Migrants' journeys and related economic practices in Libya pose new questions on what happens to biopolitics in those situations where the law has limited reach and meaning. They shift some of the arguments centred upon the state, borderwork and migration governance – typically focused on securitization and regulation of populations in European biopolitical contexts – to a range of other practices that are hybrid, which straddle the legal and the illegal, and emanate from a blurring of the licit and the illicit, the state and non-state.

This shift also prompts a closer reading of the migrant body and its affective relations, concerns that have largely been neglected by work on the biopolitics and political economies of migration. Mobility, as Wendy Vogt (2018, 7) reminds us, 'is not an abstract process; it is a material and