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A BIGGER PRISON: EGYPTIAN MIGRATIONS AND THE EXPERIENCE OF LIMITED MOVEMENT

ABSTRACT

How does existential mobility—the sense of being able to move forward in one's life—relate to the experience of borders and limitations? Tawfiq is an Egyptian man who once longed to migrate to Europe or the United States, but has since then worked on and off as migrant worker in the Arab Gulf states. He has reflected on this question by using the metaphor of walls: prison walls over which one wants to jump, new walls which one faces next, walls that gently guide you to a certain direction, and the idea that facing and overcoming obstacles is what human life is about. Based on a longitudinal fieldwork with Egyptian labour migrants to the Gulf, this article takes up migrant labourers' reflections about different senses of migration and travel, dreams, money, walls, limits, escape, steps, stability, return, postponement, forward movement and loops. Such ideas are helpful for thinking about the existential pursuits of moving forward in life, the moral shape of social becoming, and the political economy of migrant labour. Taken together, they also contribute to a non-binary understanding of movement and stasis, limits and openings, and the direction and magnitude of steps on the path of social becoming.

PRISON, ESCAPE, BORDERS

Tawfiq, twenty-two years of age, was standing on the roof of his uncles' house in the village of Nazlat al-Rayyis[1] in northern Egypt one afternoon in 2007. He was about to be interviewed for the documentary film Messages from Paradise #1 (Swarowsky and Schielke 2009) about the dream to migrate. In his characteristic way, Tawfiq spoke in few, well-chosen words. He told us about his dream to travel and emigrate, preferably to the United States of America, the possible ways to do so, and what he hoped to realise. One of the questions Daniela Swarowsky and I asked him was: 'If you could leave Egypt, would you come back?' He replied: 'If you were released from a prison, would you go back?'

Tawfiq had dreamed of leaving Egypt since he was young. When I first learned to know him better in 2006, he was already developing plans for migration, or 'escape', as he often

called it. Over time, his plans became more concrete, and eventually he did leave Egypt, but the reality of his migrations fell and still falls short of his dreams. His dreams are of a complex kind—as probably most aspirational dreams are. They combine the desire and need to fulfil social expectations of becoming a grown up, responsible family man, the need for cash that is accentuated by the relative poverty of his family, and a both personal and political desire for freedom, new experiences, and knowledge. His migrations, in contrast, have so far all taken place in the limited and limiting framework of labour contracts in the Arab Gulf states: the first two times as a security guard, and the third time as a customer service employee.

This intertwining of movement and limits is a widely shared global condition, and so are metaphors of imprisonment and escape. Although well-known and subject to much anthropological debate, this intertwining and metaphors that address it remain poorly understood. In this article, aligned with others in the special section, I hope to contribute towards an explanation and understanding of the matter. Building on the insights I have gained in conversations with Tawfiq and other migrants to the Gulf, I argue that vernacular metaphors and theories that circulate among Egyptian migrants are also useful to articulate an anthropological theory of existential mobility—that is, the sense of being able to move forward in one's life (Hage 2005; Jackson 2013)—where the experience of borders and limits is a hindrance as well as a guidance and motivation. I also argue that for Egyptian migrants, existential mobility is not necessarily an aim in its own right, and can also have 'stability' (*istiqrar*) as its ultimate aim. My key proposal is to think of borders, boundaries, and limitations not only as something that hinders and stops people, but also as thresholds one must cross, and as productive limits that

guide movement in a certain direction and away from others, and by doing so may also provide a sense of purpose and security.

This article is based on conversations Tawfiq and I have had over his dreams and experience over the years, combined with encounters I have had with people from his social circles, and my observations of their lives and struggles in Egypt and work sites abroad. The dialogical and longitudinal approach I have followed builds on the knowledge and trajectories of few individuals. And yet the knowledge I pursue is decidedly not individualistic or biographic. Rather, I consider Tawfiq and others my tutors or teachers who have helped me to understand societal contexts and dynamics as they face them and as they participate in them. This is intersubjective knowledge in two senses: in the sense that my process of understanding is the outcome of a shared conversation, and in the sense that I try to understand what it is like to live within specific relations of power and imagination.

Much of Tawfiq's trajectory and experience is common, even typical. He belongs to the vast mainstream of Egyptian population who are relatively young, poor but aspiring, equipped with some formal education, but excluded from the well-paid jobs and mobility of wealthy Egyptians. After completing his two-years higher vocational education, he received a badly paid government job as a health inspector—a job that provides a meagre yet stable salary but no lucrative side income like some other public-sector jobs do. He migrated as a worker to the Gulf, returned, got engaged, migrated again, got married, became a father, migrated again, and has recently began building a new house with his migrant worker's income.

In other ways, Tawfiq is a peculiar, exceptional person. Politically, he is a staunch socialist and admirer of the Cuban

revolution—something not common in rural Egypt. He married the daughter of a senior communist activist from a nearby village. Their marriage was the outcome of a love story which they celebrated publicly—also not an obvious thing in rural Egypt. He comes from an extended family who once were fishermen and who still identify as such. They own little to no land or other material resources, but value education and culture highly. Some of his cousins have made it to reasonably well-paid urban careers in media and education. He is a poet who writes modernist verse in classical Arabic. After a long wait, he published his first collection of poems in a public-sector press in 2016. He is also an excellent observer and analyst of his own society, and has been always very interested to share his knowledge with me. This has made him one of my most long-term interlocutors and friends in Egypt over the years. Tawfiq and other Egyptian migrants whose knowledge and experience inform my argument in this article have expressed to me a sharp and critical understanding of their own condition, the dreams they pursue, and the structural constraints they live with. Remarkably often they have articulated that knowledge and experience through specific vectorial metaphors, that is, metaphors that describe in what direction, how far and how fast one is moving. Among the vectorial metaphors and concepts I have learned from them and which I address in this article are escape, steps, stability, return, postponement, loop, and walls. They have also made use of a nuanced vocabulary that distinguishes experiences and processes, which in English would all be called migration, but for which there are different words in Arabic.

In my attempt to translate their reflections and vocabulary into anthropological theory, I follow in the footsteps of an emerging line of research on migration and movement from an existential perspective (Sayad 1999; Hage 2005; Lucht 2011; Graw and Schielke 2012; Jackson 2013; Jackson and Piette 2015; Gaibazzi 2015b; Elliot 2015; Reeves 2015; Lems 2016; Tošić and Palmberger 2016), focussing on the motivations, experiences, and subjective and intersubjective engagements in a world where migration has become such a powerful source of this-worldly optimism[2] that it has transformed into something like a force of necessity (Alpes 2012; Elliot 2016). This persistent optimism as well as its ambiguous consequences require an existential look at the motivations, the trajectories, and the 'work of fantasy' (Masquelier 2009; see also Sayad 1999; Appadurai 1996: 31; 2013) involved in crafting paths of material improvement.

However, we should not mistake the financial, legal, and political for being distinct from or opposed to the existential, imaginative, and aspirational. Migrants have often told me that money is all that matters in their current condition—and they have told me about migration as an existential pursuit in which money plays a central role. Money is not an aim in its own right: it is needed to realise specific dreams and moral values. In the process, migrants learn to dream in numbers of things that money can buy. How can we give a truthful account of imaginative, moral, and calculative aspects of the migratory experience, without reducing one to another?

The Arab Gulf states are a privileged place to pursue this question, structured as they are by migratory labour, and powerful as they are in structuring the social worlds and imaginaries of the places from where migrants to the Gulf hail. Current research on migration to the Gulf has shown a remarkable sensibility for the lives, paths and networks of migrants to and in the Gulf states, the exploitation of migrant labour in the political economy of oil states, the role

of migrants in Gulf cities and societies, and the making and remaking of livelihoods in the places from which migrant workers hail (Davidson 2014; Elsheshtawy 2010; Andrew Gardner 2010; 2012a; 2012b; Ghannam 2002; Gruntz 2008; 2012; Gruntz and Pagès El-Karoui 2013; Kamrava and Babar 2012; Kanna 2013; Osella and Osella 2007; Pelican 2014; Wippel et al. 2014; Fernandez and de Regt 2014; Jain and Oommen 2016; Stephan-Emmrich and Mirzoev 2016; Hanieh 2011). Some researchers have also developed interesting questions about diasporic lives and informal citizenship that go beyond the reduction of migrants to mere labour force (see, e.g., Vora 2013; Kanna 2010). However, at least with the majority of low-income workers (and this article is about them), labour remains a very relevant category. Rather than thinking of migrants as a mass of exploited labour, however, I try to provide an account of the intersubjective experience of being part of the Gulf's migrant labour force. But more importantly, I try to tell about translocal paths of social becoming in Egypt in a time when life in a Nile Delta village has become inseparable from the political economy of the oil monarchies. An existential approach cannot ignore the political making of the conditions of living.

Thinking about migration and social becoming together, I also relate to wider anthropological explorations about mobility and immobility (also discussed as '(im)mobility', see Salazar and Smart 2012), adding nuance to the dialectic of stasis and movement. I also build on recent critical anthropology of borders that has shown that international borders are not merely lines that divide lands and populations, but rather, regimes that regulate access to and exclusion from citizenship and residence rights and privileges, treat different people according to different logics, and extend deep into the territories on both sides of the formal lines of demarcation (e.g. Dzenovska 2014; Gaibazzi et al. 2017). Most importantly, people I have encountered during fieldwork have taught me to think about the interrelatedness of class boundaries, international borders, labour regimes, and also the productive limitations imposed by societal and moral ideals.

The image of one's own country as a prison evoked by Tawfiq in the 2007 interview is a common figure of frustrated hopes of migration in the face of restrictive border regimes across the Global South (see, e.g. Capello 2008; Menin 2017). It also expresses a sceptical political vision of Egypt as a state that provides imprisonment rather than rights and services to its citizens. As a metaphor, imprisonment in both cases evokes the imagination of an outside where one can live a normal life (Elliot 2015). The specific sites of such imagination are manifold. They include Europe and Northern America as well as the Arab Gulf states. Importantly, they also include the upper classes of Egypt with their ways of living that are at once exclusive for most Egyptians and yet also normalised by the Egyptian media that routinely present an image of life in Egypt that aligns, if at all, only with the living conditions of the wealthy. In previous work (Graw and Schielke 2012; Swarowsky et al. 2013; Schielke 2015), I have reflected more systematically on different other sides and the power of attraction they command. In this article, I try more specifically to provide ethnography-based theoretical directions to understand experiences of limited movement—in both geographic and existential senses.

MIGRATION, TRAVEL, STRANGERHOOD

International and rural-urban migration is close to a total social fact in Egypt, second perhaps to marriage, the military state, and the worship of

God. According to the 2017 national census, one out of eleven Egyptians currently resides abroad. Two thirds of the Egyptians abroad live in other Arab countries, mainly in Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and the United Arab Emirates. Other large Egyptian diasporas can be found in the USA, Canada, and Italy. (*Mada Masr* 2017) In Tawfiq's village, most migrants go to Saudi Arabia and other Arab Gulf states. In the neighbouring town, Italy is a main destination. In Tawfiq's extended family,[3] nine of the ten men born between 1960 and 1990 have been international migrants at some stage of their lives. At the time of writing this in spring 2018, five of them currently live abroad. (In a remarkable gender contrast, Tawfiq's sister is the only woman in the extended family—not counting spouses—who has lived or worked abroad so far.) Numerous Egyptians I personally know have either moved abroad since I met them, or had returned from abroad by the time I learned to know them. Countries where they live or lived include Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Oman, the Sudan, Libya, Spain, Italy, Germany, Austria, Finland, Sweden, Norway, the United States, Brazil, and China. This list does not include those Egyptians whom I first met abroad.

Egypt is a migrant nation, but not with a sense of free-floating movement. For the vast majority of Egyptians, moving across borders is difficult, costly, possibly risky, and therefore extremely loaded with promises and expectations. This in no way unique to Egypt, of course. While increasing migration is met by increasing visa restrictions and border controls, the dream of migration to the north has become only more compelling across the Global South (see, e.g., Elliot 2015; Swarowsky 2014; Alpes 2012).

However, there are different ways to be held back by borders and to cross them, and different

experiences of living abroad. Class makes a big difference, and less class privilege generally means more limited possibilities of movement, and more exploitative and alienating conditions of living abroad—be it as an undocumented migrant or asylum seeker in Europe or as a low-income contract labourer in the Gulf. Different visa and labour regimes also make a difference. The Gulf states offer work visas on all income levels and do not systematically criminalise low-income workers as illegal residents the way European and north American states often do (see Menin 2017), but legal residence is governed by highly exploitative laws, most importantly the labour sponsorship (*kafala*)[4] system (Mednicof 2013). Importantly, Gulf states usually do not allow migrant workers to stay after retirement. Low-income 'migrant' labourers and top-salary 'expat' functionaries alike are subject to a circular logic of temporary work contracts and ultimate return.[5]

Some differences are also due to the specific aims and stages of one's movement. In this regard, vernacular Arabic provides a vocabulary of migration that is helpful to understand some of the specific qualities of moving to and living in a place far from home.[6]

The Arabic word for migration, *hijra*, is not identical in use with English 'migration'. *Hijra* usually implies migration with the intention of settling permanently. It also has a religious connotation due to Prophet Muhammad's and his followers' emigration (*hijra*) from Mecca to Medina that transformed Muslims from a small persecuted group to an expansionist world religion. Egyptians living and working in the Gulf States would not be likely to see themselves as *muhajirin* 'permanent settler-migrants' because they know that they sooner or later will return. In legal terms, they are described in the Gulf states as 'residents' (*muqimin*) or 'arrivals' (*wafidin*) in opposition

to citizens (*muwatinin*). They and their families and friends, however, would more likely say that they are *mughtaribin* 'living away from home' or *musafirin* 'travelling'.

A *mughtarib* is somebody who lives in *ghurba*, which means the sense of being abroad in a strange place among strangers, separated from the familial connections and safety of home. To experience *ghurba* or 'strangerhood' is to live a life that is not full in the relational sense and that lacks the comfort of the familiar. It is a notion that stands in marked contrast to the much more positively connoted concept of *safar*, meaning travel, departure, and migration. *Safar* is associated with the promise and possibility of movement, while *ghurba* is the condition of disconnection from a full life one may have to endure as a consequence of that movement. *Safar* is something one may pursue, *ghurba* something one must endure. Notably, the Arabic translation for the philosophical concept of alienation is *ightirab*—which also means the act of moving away from home to a state of *ghurba*. Neither *ghurba* nor *safar* require the intention of permanence involved in *hijra*. They are open-ended. One can travel (*yisafir*) for a week, or for life. One can live in *ghurba* for decades and never make the place one inhabits a home.[7] A few Egyptians have also told me that they feel *ghurba* in their homeland in the sense that they feel alienated, unwell, and unrecognised in it.

Tawfiq and others in positions similar with his thus did not migrate (*yihajir*) to the Gulf in the sense of aiming to make it their home. Some of them might have dreamed (and Tawfiq indeed did) of becoming a *muhajir*-migrant to America or Western Europe, but the actual path of *safar*-travel they undertook brought them to a highly alienating and exploitative condition of *ghurba*-strangerhood as workers on a temporary contract in the Gulf states, with all their efforts

aimed at saving money to build a life at home that was yet to begin.

Tawfiq's first *safar* took him to Qatar where he worked for two years (2008–2010) as a security guard for an international company. I met him and many of his Egyptian and Nepalese colleagues there on a short fieldwork in October and November 2009. During that time, his job consisted of occupying either the reception desk or the garage entrance of a commercial bank. The pay was bad, and the conditions worse than the men (most of them young and still unmarried) had expected. Most importantly, because of the *kafala* system they were not allowed to get any other job although competing security companies were paying better salaries. Tawfiq had dreamed of learning to know the world, and possibly also using Qatar as a stepping stone on a journey towards Europe or the United States. None of that turned out to be feasible, and he had to settle with trying to save some money for a return to Egypt. With the little money he saved, he bought a mobile phone and a laptop for himself and presents for his family; most importantly, he contributed to the construction of a new floor and the renovation of another in the house in the village where his mother, sister, and he lived. The construction and renovation were a first step among many towards social becoming to follow. It was a precondition for a possible future marriage.

In contrast to permanent settlement-migration (*hijra*) which is about making a home abroad, migration as *ghurba* is characterised by a long-term sense of strangerhood and also a peculiar sense of a less-than-real existence. This was very pronounced among the men working in the security company in Qatar. They described their life as a dull, wearing state of routine, with their attention focussed on

something else than the immediate material spot they are in. *Ghurba*, for them, was about enduring for the sake of something else than the here and now: a better life back at home.

STEPS

Taking walks is a common pastime among men in Tawfiq's home village. It is a gendered pastime, since women are expected to be on their way somewhere while men may stroll aimlessly. On those walks, I have often been reprimanded for my fast pace. As someone who grew up taking hikes in forests where one would need to keep a steady pace to cross distances, I had difficulties to adapt my steps to the intentional slowness of my friends. These walks were not about getting somewhere. Their aim was to be out in the fields for a while in good company, the slower the better. Also when the people I know were walking to work, to run errands, or to meet somebody, they preferred to walk without haste if they could.

When I arrived in Qatar to visit Tawfiq, I encountered a different way of walking. Like other Gulf cities, Doha is built for private cars and has poor public transportation infrastructure. Although cars are very cheap in Qatar, regular guards could not afford to buy them. They depended on company transportation to move between housing and work. For the rest, they walked. Walking to get somewhere comes with a social stigma in Qatar—and is an economical necessity for low-income workers who would count every penny. Buses cost money. We often walked over long distances in the night-time to go to the shopping mall or to visit people in another accommodation. Unlike the walks in the village, these walks always had a hasty pace. Now, I found it difficult to keep pace with the men. They walked fast, as if constantly in a hurry.

I mentioned this difference in a discussion with Tafwiq's roommates. Their explanation was simple: 'Here, the time is not ours.'

Whose is it then? The men's haste while walking was first of all a result of their position in the political economy of migrant labour. Because their income did not allow for other means of movement, they walked. And because they worked 12 hour-shifts seven days a week, they walked fast in order to have more time left for rest. But it was also a result of the specific aims and ends of their being there in the first place. They were not in Qatar to discover, to enjoy, to hang around, to spend. They were there in order to save as much money as they could. And that money was also not for its own sake; it was needed for specific moral aims (see also Maurer 2006). They hastened their material steps on the ground in hurry because they were under pressure to take metaphorical steps in their lives. Metaphorically speaking, they were moving on a path (or a vector, as it were) of social becoming that had a predetermined direction. Their time was owned by their anticipated future lives.

Becoming an adult man in a social and moral sense is not something one can do as one wishes. It is a highly conventional and pre-determined path of specific steps a man must take, and practically all these steps are in one way or another related to marriage. Most men I met did not question the underlying principles and ideals (although some did), but they were often discontent about the specific conditions, the high cost of marriage, and the difficulty of accumulating the necessary means. Because of the cost and difficulty, men would seldom be able to provide the means towards marriage at once, and instead focussed on one 'step' (*khatwa*) at a time: buying an apartment (in the city) or land (in the countryside) was a step. Engagement was a step. Building, renovating, or

furnishing the apartment, buying presents and Dower each were steps that took time, money, and effort. The actual marriage and wedding party were the final step—but only final in a sequence that will be followed by others: having children (strongly expected and demanded in most Egyptian families), providing for one's family (a strictly male task in societal moral imagination although often less so in practice), the children's upbringing and education, and so on.

These steps are often difficult and expensive. Both men and women, *mughtarib*-migrants and those staying at home put much shared effort towards reaching them. They often have to wait long before a desired-for normal life can begin (Elliot 2015). Recent research has shown how young people often remain—and are made—'stuck' when crucial forward steps in life they hope to take are obstructed (Reeves in this issue; Hage 2009). The predicament, which the men I met in Qatar described to me, however, was not stuckedness but slowness. The migratory process did make existential steps possible for them—but at a slower than hoped-for pace. And in contrast to leisure walks in the fields, slowness in the context of social becoming is about pressure, not pleasure.

Steps as a metaphor of the process of temporary migration, aspired marriage, and social becoming clearly links with the idea of existential mobility originally proposed by Ghassan Hage (2005). Hage argues that with Lebanese migrants, 'going places' mattered only when it brought one forward in life; moving from place to place without such 'existential movement' was just another way of being stuck.

The fast, hurried space of the men's steps on the ground while walking are a case in point about the difference between physical and existential movement. Geographical movement is not an end in its own right—at least it wasn't

one among the migrants to the Gulf I met. Rather, it was a way to move forward in life —a way, however, that temporarily put their life on hold, postponed until returning. In the meantime, there was no time for lazy walks for their own sake.

DREAMING OF THE INEVITABLE

And yet also existential movement as progression in one's life trajectory is not necessarily a movement for its own sake. The steps one needs to take in order to become a man in the full social and moral sense are expected to lead one towards an ideal condition of relative non-movement: stability (*istiqrar*). In her ethnography of an Egyptian steel plant, Dina Makram Ebeid (2012) has shown how the public-sector enterprise and its workers relied on two distinct but related senses of stability: first, stability in the political sense of a predictable, controlled condition of affairs; and second, stability as a moral ideal of masculine becoming, whereby a 'stable' or 'settled' (*mustaqirr*) man is able to take care of his family, can fulfill his community obligations, does not depend on help by others, and is able to support relatives and friends in need (for a comparative case, see also Gaibazzi 2015a).

The path towards stability is often long and precarious. The process of taking the steps towards stability includes different senses of either obstructed or involuntary movement. Young men who were dreaming of migration could more easily describe their condition as one of being stuck, bored and waiting for a chance to finally move forward (Schielke 2015: 27–46). In contrast, the men I have met at sites of migration abroad[8] and after their return would reflect about their condition in a less binary fashion. They had already taken a first step or

a number of steps, but they were discontent because they were making slower than expected progress, because the conditions they lived in were alienating and exploitative, and because their success in finding work abroad and earning money was resulting in something else than what many of them may have originally dreamed about.

One evening in Doha during my visit there in 2009, Tawfiq and I walked (fast as usual) from the workers' accommodation where he stayed to another one nearby where some of his colleagues and friends lived. There, a discussion evolved among the men sharing the room about whether coming to work in Qatar had been worth it, and what their preferred destination would be. One of them, Rizq, told that he had wanted to go to Europe rather than the Gulf. He had already boarded a bus to Libya from where he aimed to get to Italy on a boat, when he heard the news that dozens of people trying to cross the Mediterranean had just drowned in a shipwreck. He got out of the bus, returned home, and settled for the Gulf as a safer option; safe but meagre, he pointed out: 'Here we also get just enough to live.' This provoked his roommate Sayf who had worked as a French teacher in Egypt before coming to Qatar:

> Yes, we are alive, praise to God, but do we live? Do we really live here?! This is not a life!

A debate evolved between Sayf and Rizq about how much point there is in going through long times of hardship for the sake of money for the future. Rizq was optimistic that it would be worth it. Sayf was sceptical:

> The problem is that there is no alternative. In Egypt, if you want to realise something, if you want to build a life, you need money

and that compels people to migrate. But it fails here. Here I haven't been able to realise what I wanted, on the contrary I have gone a step back (*ana raga't*). I haven't been able to realise anything on a material plane, but at least I have gained experience.

Sayf told us that his bags were full of books rather than clothes. He came here to find a better work, but here he was now, stuck in a guard's job for two or three years. Rizq disagreed: 'We all knew the work we came here for.' Sayf insisted:

> People don't know what it means to be in the Gulf. All they know is that there is money in the Gulf. So if you come here people expect you to stay for a while and come back with money. But the reality is different. While we are here we miss many better opportunities that we might have seized in Egypt. But you can't return immediately. If you return early people say: You're not a man, you bring bad luck (*fi wishak faqr*). So we try to endure a year, two years, three years. My parents don't know what work I do here. All they know is that I work in a bank, but that the pay is bad.

There is an enormous pressure to believe in the dream of quick wealth through migration, and migrants worldwide stand under equally enormous pressure to confirm that dream (Sayad 1999; Alpes 2012; Andrew Gardner 2012b; Swarowsky and Schielke 2009; Swarowsky 2014; Pelican 2014). Young men who have never migrated but dream of doing so, often experience their present condition as one of boring, frustrating nothingness: an empty state of waiting where migration appears as *the* path out of nothingness into productive being (Graw 2012; and also women have to wait: Elliot

2015). To tell a young man in an Egyptian village not to dream of migration is like telling him to have no hope. And how could one not believe in that dream, facing the undeniable reality of marriages arranged and houses built with migrant money?

The expectations invested in migration are a prime case of the productivity of 'imagination as a social practice' (Appadurai 1996: 31), even as the instituting ground of society (Castoriadis 1987). Aspirational dreams are not simply freely available, however. Some are more available, compelling, and textured than others. And the pursuit of dreams has material consequences.

The limits and borders which prospective and actual migrant workers face are thus not only of a material-economic kind. They are also limits and borders of imagination. The aspirational dream of quick wealth and success through migration is propelled by returning migrants who feel compelled to act according to it, and yet it does not prepare men for the reality of migrant life. In that sense, the range of imagination is limited. But there is more to it. Imagination can also be limiting in the sense that some aspirational dreams become so powerful that they sideline others.

Being a migrant worker teaches one to dream differently than one did before migration. The actual experience of labour migration under exploitative conditions can narrow down the scale of imagined possibilities that one can reasonably pursue. Dreams of quick wealth, travel, interesting life, overcoming the boredom of daily life, often give way to a monotonous and boring existence that is less than real, dominated by the aim of saving some money to return and to get engaged or married. Being a migrant worker teaches one to dream in numbers, to anticipate in a calculative fashion, and to desire things that can be bought with money. It also teaches one to endure in pursuit

of those inevitable dreams that can and must be realised by means of money.

With inevitable dreams, I mean aspirational aims and imaginations that are both socially and morally expected, as well as realisable on a material plane. Migrant labour is a normalisation engine that guides people's dreams and efforts into a self-reinforcing loop of aspiring for that which the loop can provide: cash, marriages, housing, consumer goods. Other dreams that do not have the capacity of being realised and reproduced in such a loop are sidelined. It is not a hermetic loop though, for it also generates some experiences and desires that go beyond the loop—especially among the economically more successful migrants. Furthermore, the circuit of migrant dreams and work can also destabilise the normality which it aims to reproduce.

The dream of migration is not a hoax in the sense that none of it would be true. Most migrant workers do earn more money than they could at home, but the profit is less, the emotional cost higher, and the time longer than they may have expected. Migrant workers learn to give up some of their more fantastic and unconventional dreams, and to put as much of their effort as possible towards accumulating for a future stable life to begin. With the money they earn they build houses, arrange marriages, and transform expectations of a comfortable, decent life in the societies where they hail from and where they hope (or are expected) to return one day. This return to stability can be delayed for a very long while, however.

UNTIL THE END OF OIL

Aspirational projects of becoming and transformation—be they of moral, religious, political, economic, or some other kind—are productive, but in an open-ended way. They often produce

something else than what was promised and expected. This is not simply a matter of either success or failure.

One of the paradoxical outcomes of the pursuit of the dream of a better life through migrant work is that migrants' success in making some money makes it more difficult to return to the stable life one hoped to build.

For some, the wait for a return was relatively short—at least initially. Tawfiq was very disappointed about his job and situation in Qatar and left after exactly two years without extending his contract. It was not an easy decision. He did not return to a good, stable life. He gave up his monthly paycheck from the company and returned to his poorly-paid civil servant's job in Egypt with unclear prospects. But he preferred the chance of finding a better contract elsewhere. Most men I met in Qatar extended their contract at least by a year or two, or considered doing so. Some stayed much longer and were promoted from ordinary guards to supervisors, with housing conditions and salaries that were better but still vastly insufficient to allow their families to join them.

Among those who stayed long were the supervisors Zayd and Antar who were Tawfiq's immediate bosses at the bank. They were both married with children, had their families in Egypt, and had lived and worked in Qatar for years.

On one of my last days in Qatar, I encountered Zayd outside the bank, speaking on the phone with his son in Egypt. After the phone call he was visibly moved. He told me:

> I'm sick and tired here. I'm sick and tired here! I want to go home so much. But I can't return yet, what will I live on? I will have to hold on for one more year.

Zayd had been in Qatar for seven years. He had married with the money he had earned there, and his family now lived on his income. Last time I heard of him in spring 2015, he was still in Qatar. Before him, his late father had lived for decades in Qatar as a migrant worker as well.

The double alienation migrant workers experience—alienated work combined with alienation from the life they work so hard to build—is emotionally very stressful. Therefore, migrant workers usually hope to return home as soon as they can, and many have told me that they will return after just one more year. But after that year, there is usually yet another one more year.

The following day, I met Zayd and the other supervisor Antar again in the bank, and I asked them whether they really were going back soon. They answered: 'We will be here until the last riyal.[9] Until the oil runs out.'

This is a fitting description of the perhaps most tragic outcome of labour migration: the need to postpone the beginning of that good, stable life towards which one works so hard. The attempt to turn one's dreams (be they conventional and realistic, or fantastic and unlikely) into reality through migratory work means, in practice, that one has to endure a less than real life of waiting for real life to begin. And one often has to do so over extended periods of time—for just one more year, until the end of oil.

In 2015, while Tawfiq was urgently looking for a new contract but not finding one, he was getting worried that he soon might get too old for short-term labour contracts. He had just read the first draft of the Arabic translation of my book manuscript about Egyptian migrants where his story took a prominent position. 'It's not an individual condition', he commented on the passage about enduring until the end of oil: 'it's the condition of the entire society'. Sooner or later, Egyptian *mughtarib*-migrants to the

Gulf do return. But their families and societies remain on the move. Villages like Nazlat al-Rayyis, with their houses built and families established with migrant money, are suburbs of the Gulf, as it were, providing a home for people who must travel and endure elsewhere to make that home possible. It is a global condition. Suburbs of the Gulf extend across Egypt, Nepal, India, Sri Lanka, and Philippines—just as there are similar villages and towns that rely on migratory circuits to Western Europe in West Africa, Russia in Central Asia, or the United States in Central America (see, e.g. Weyland 1993; Osella and Osella 2007; Katy Gardner 1995; Reeves in this issue).

In consequence, one cannot understand Egyptian society separately from the Gulf and other sites of Egyptian migration. The remittances of the migrants are crucial for Egypt's economy. Religious currents that resonate with the life experience of migrants and highlight individual responsibility and ritual and sectarian purity, have transformed Muslim Egyptians' sense of spirituality. The motorised lifestyle of wealthy people and the structure of cities in the Gulf have set the standard for urban planning and bourgeois lifestyles in Egypt. Investors from the Gulf own large parts of Egypt's economy and real estate. Last but not least, the Egyptian state is heavily dependent on the Gulf monarchies both economically as well as politically. This is a condition that is unlikely to change as long as the political economy of oil wealth, authoritarian class privilege, and alienated migrant labour persists (see Hanieh 2011; Mitchell 2011).

In 2007, Tafwiq had dreamed of escape. After his return from Qatar in 2010, he left in 2011 for the United Arab Emirates for a contract that was better paid. With the help of the money he earned, he got married in 2013. Immediately after his wedding, he had been of two minds

whether he should stay in the village with his wife or try to save more money by extending his contract in the UAE. In the end, he had no choice. His contract was cancelled because, in a development related to the political turmoil in Egypt and the UAE's fear of it reaching its own territory, the Emirates systematically denied the renewal of security clearances for all Egyptian employees in the security sector. Now he had to find a way to make ends meet at home. He spent three years looking for the next contract abroad. During this time, his first child was born. In spring 2017, he departed for his third contract abroad, this time as a customer service employee in the UAE. The salary was lower than that of a security guard, but it was the best he could get. His wife and daughter stayed behind in the village, waiting for his return.

Back in 2009, he had cited to me a line of poetry by the Egyptian poet Salah Jahin (1930–1986) to describe his and his colleagues' condition. It is based on the image of a traditional Egyptian water wheel which is powered by an animal bound to the wheel and pushing it in an endless loop.

> Bull, shake off your blinders and refuse to
>   walk in circle
> Break the gears of the water wheel…
>   Curse and spit
> The bull: Just one more step… and one
>   more step
> Until I reach the end of the trail, or the
>   well dries up
> How strange! (Jahin 2002: 23, my
>   translation)

The poetic image of the bull and the water wheel does not support a binary ontology of movement and stasis. A loop is both: a movement that keeps one in place. It is a poetic hyperbole of course, for as much as the strivings and struggles

of migrant workers resemble a loop, it is not a loop that brings them back to the exactly same spot. By citing the poem, Tawfiq described his condition, but also wondered what might be done to change it. He questioned the loop and until today has not given up the hope that different paths, even a different world, may be possible. He is critically aware of the loop into which migrant work has put him; yet at the same time, he has become good and experienced in being a productive part of the migrant labour engine. By so doing, he has accomplished much of the conventional markers of adulthood— but it is different in shape and details from the adulthood his father and grandfathers could dream of or accomplish.

CONCLUSION: WALLS BEYOND WALLS, WALLS THAT GUIDE, WALLS TO CROSS

The image of existential mobility in time of labour migration to the Gulf that I have sketched above is a paradoxical one. It is the image of a loop whereby men are encouraged and compelled to pursue steps towards socially expected dreams of masculine becoming and success—dreams which most of them whole-heartedly subscribe to and do not question— but whereby they also constantly face obstacles, limitations, and consequences that trouble their efforts or direct them into shapes and forms that may undermine the socially expected dream of movement for the sake of stability. At first, they have to discover how the open-ended moment of *safar*-travel leads them to the alienating and limiting condition of *ghurba*-strangerhood whereby some of the things they hoped for are unattainable, while others come slower and at a higher emotional cost than hoped for. Later, they have to come to terms with the repeated postponement of the desired-for return to a full life in stability and comfort. The limits and borders of that movement are both external, shaped by visa and labour regimes and global inequalities, as well as inherent to their strivings, shaped by the moral imperatives of social becoming. They are both material as well as imagined—imagined not in the sense of not being real, but in the sense that material resources and obstacles go hand in hand with the anticipation of what is and what is not possible and desirable.

These limits and borders structure a kind of movement that can be well understood by means of vectorial metaphors. In conversations I have had with him over the years, Tawfiq has repeatedly reflected on this condition through the image of walls.
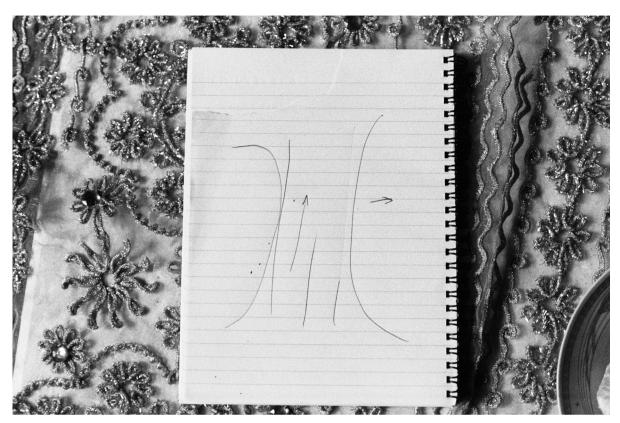
One day in Qatar in 2009, I invited Tawfiq for lunch in a fast food joint near the bank. Afterwards, while we drank tea in a café next door, I asked him:

> 'Remember when we interviewed you on the roof in the village?'
> Tawfiq: 'Yes, it's two years ago but it feels like it was just a moment ago.'
> Samuli: 'You said then that if you would get the chance to migrate you wouldn't return, because if you get a chance get out of prison, would you want to return?'
> Tawfiq: 'It turned out to be a bigger prison. The problem is how to know the borders of your prison. It's a prison of many walls. After crossing one wall you find another wall. It's like you're in the beginning in the innermost circle, and when you jump the wall you find yourself only in the next circle of the prison. You have to know where the borders of your prison are so that you know how to jump all the way over the outermost wall. But how to know which wall is the outermost? That's the problem.'

The map Tawfiq drew

Tawfiq's reply was a philosophical reflection on the condition of people who try to find openings in a world where what presents itself as an opening only leads one to the next prison yard. This was very much what working in Qatar felt like for him and his colleagues. Having finally realised the long-desired chance of migration, they found themselves in a situation where their possibilities of action and movement were very restricted, but in a different way than had been the case before their migration. The image kept me busy over the coming years.

In spring 2014, as we sat in his freshly furnished albeit very small living room and he told me about his experience of the two years and a half he spent in the UAE, I remembered it again. I asked how he saw it now that he was married and had returned from his second contract abroad. This time, he developed a different idea:

In the area where we worked they have laid out plantations where they grow palm trees and keep camels and other animals. The plantations are enclosed in walls. When you go down a road, it is often surrounded by such plantations from both sides, so you move between two walls. The walls are not there so that the animals can't get out. They are there so that you can't get in!

Tawfiq drew a map to clarify: a road, with an arrow showing one's direction of movement, two walled plantations on both sides, another arrow showing the direction of movement that is prevented by the wall. Thinking about walls as a metaphor of limitations, Tawfiq evoked them not just as something that hinders one, but that also guides one on the road that is laid out for one.

But as soon as Tawfiq was done with drawing the image, he came up with another, different thought about walls:

> There is always a wall. Getting married was a wall I needed to jump over, and after I overcame it, I now face the next wall of raising children and building a future for them. Life is made up of a series of walls that one needs to jump over. There is always a wall to jump.

These different metaphors show different aspects of the inherent limitations of what one can imagine, pursue, and realise.

First, there are *walls that hide other walls*, evoking the way all aspirations, plans, and trajectories can only have a certain range and always are limited by greater powers and structural inequalities. Such walls are not only a hindrance. They also motivate one to cross them because one can only see clearly the wall one faces directly, which allows one to focus on the immediate hindrance one faces in the hope that afterwards, everything will be easier. International borders and visa regimes often work in this way: the difficulty of crossing the border makes that which lies beyond the border gain the imaginary contours of a paradise, and only after one has crossed the border will one face and learn the restrictions and troubles that await one there.

Second, there are *walls that guide* one on a path laid out for one, reminding us that limits are also productive: they enable one to take a certain direction while not taking others. This is an apt description of the link between migration, social reproduction, and the political economy of oil. At their most effective, such limitations are successfully normalised and naturalised so that people exposed to such walls would not want to cross them in the first place,

instead focusing all their strivings in progressing along the road laid out ahead of them. And yet the fact that this is only one of three images of walls proposed by Tawfiq reminds us that such naturalisation of available limited paths may not be fully successful.

Finally, there are the *walls that one always needs to jump over*, indicating that struggle and perhaps also transgression are inseparable from living a life. Walls as thresholds are thus not so much a hindrance to social becoming as a necessary part of it, and the ability to cross them is what makes one an adult person. And unlike in the first image, there is no outermost wall. It is an ongoing struggle.

Walls that one always needs to jump over also echo Paola Abenante's (2015) argument that when people experience the limits of discourses that structure their action and aspiration, they may be compelled to search for 'hermeneutic openings', ways to rethink and rearticulate the way their condition and actions are conceived of and constituted. Tafwiq's experience of migration has brought him often to such limits, and he has been at times consciously searching for openings of the kind evoked by Abenante. However, his meditation about walls points out that rather than a binary of limits and openings, what is at hand is an ongoing struggle, structured by limits that direct and guide as well as by openings that are limited. I find Michael Jackson's (2011) idea of 'life within limits' especially good to think with about such struggles, and the way one may take some limits for granted, work to enforce others as ethical guidelines of life, and try to manipulate, cross, or overcome yet others.

To what degree are concepts such as walls, steps, and escape suitable to be used in a comparative or generalising fashion to understand other limited movements? The spatial and vectorial metaphors or contexts

I have encountered in my fieldwork with Tawfiq, his colleagues and relatives, are grounded in trajectories, moral aims, and guiding and hindering limits that are specific to the context and trajectory of my fieldwork: escape, steps, stability, return, postponement, loop; *hijra*-migration, *safar*-travel, *ghurba*-strangerhood; walls that imprison, walls that hide other walls, walls that guide, and walls one always needs to cross. They are helpful to understand some of the dreams, conditions, and experience of migration and movement between poor and wealthy locations in the contemporary world, also beyond Egypt and the Gulf states. A fieldwork in other contexts will very likely come up with other relevant metaphors, just as it will with other trajectories and productive limits. I therefore propose that it is generally useful to pay attention to spatial and vectorial metaphors, but not to presume an established set of such metaphors as heuristic concepts.

Thus rather than arguing for a heuristic concept, I argue for a primacy of ethnography, an attentiveness for emic concepts that are likely to prove useful to understand the directions and trajectories of limited movement in the specific context that we try to understand in fieldwork-based research. We are very well advised to listen to migrants' reflections about the kinds and politics of limited movement they know. Such knowledge is likely to be theoretically more productive, and most importantly, it is likely to produce better analyses of the world than research based on the testing, revision, or confirmation of a pre-defined heuristic inventory.

NOTES

1   This is not the real name of the village. Also the persons mentioned in this article appear with pseudonyms.
2   The people about whom this article tells also share a strong sense of after-worldly optimism about eternal good life in Paradise after death. Migration's object of hope, in contrast, is located in this world, either in one's own lifetime or the lifetime of one's children. Often, these two foci of optimism go hand in hand, and both have become a force of necessity in Egypt recently; but they are understood as distinct by the people I have met.
3   Counting the children and grandchildren of two brothers who were married to two sisters, not counting spouses and in-laws.
4   In most Gulf countries, non-citizen workers are required to have a local sponsor (*kafil*) who is legally their guardian during their stay. A person subject to the *kafala* system is not a full legal person. Without the sponsor's agreement, one cannot buy a car, get married, leave the country, quit one's job, or take another one.
5   This is not true of all migrant groups. For example, well-off people from India have created diasporic communities with generational continuity in the UAE (Vora 2013). But among Egyptians in high income levels there is a characteristic pattern of parents returning by retirement age by latest, and of children returning, as it were, to Egypt for their university education after going to school in the Gulf.
6   The following is inspired by discussions I have had with readers and audiences of a book about Egyptian migration to the Gulf I published in Arabic (Schielke 2017) in Egypt in 2016 and 2017. I'm especially grateful to Ahmed Salem and Mohammed Tabishat.
7   Such 'cultivation of impermanence' (Mbodj-Poye 2016) is not unique to migration to the Gulf. Also in Europe, it is common among first generations of migrants, but tends to become more complicated the longer people stay, and especially if their children stay or migrate as well.
8   Additionally to Doha, Qatar, also in Vienna, Austria. For the latter, see Swarowsky and Schielke 2009.
9   The Qatari currency.

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