CHAPTER
8

# Place Acrobatics

## Re-envisioning Mobility-Place Relations along Migrant Trajectories

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While border crossings have always been inherent aspects of migration scholarship, studies that focus on the "migration journey" are definitely in vogue (e.g., Mainwaring and Bridgen 2016; Schapendonk and Steel 2014; BenEzer and Zetter 2015; Drotbohm and Winters 2021; Snel, Bilgili, and Staring 2021). This subfield of migration journeys and trajectories has enriched our understanding of the migrant condition. Furthermore, as a political project, the scholarly focus on journeys often comes with the agenda of improving protection mechanisms for people on the move. Indeed, the routes of migration have become important sites of governmental interventions (Walters, Heller, and Pezzani 2021). In other words, when we know better the barriers, violence, and experiences related to a migrant's process of moving, we can address the injustices better (Vogt 2018). For this contribution, we particularly value the empirical and analytical arguments pointing to the complexity of migratory processes. Many studies indicate that many migrant pathways are more complex that the linear logic of departure-movement-arrival (Brigden and Mainwaring 2016; Amrith 2021; Schapendonk, Bolay, and Dahinden 2021). While we sympathize with this argument of nonlinearity, we see at the same time that a considerable number of scholars—including ourselves—still struggle to escape the presumed natural beginnings ("departure"), in-betweens ("transit"), and endings ("settlement") of migratory processes, and consequently risk to

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fall into the same logics they point their criticism to (e.g., Lepawsky and Mather 2011). This chapter can best be seen as an attempt to work around this risk. In so doing, we scrutinize the multiple and dynamic relations between "mobility and place" along people's migratory pathways with an approach that does not implicitly position mobility as being inherently in tension with places (e.g., Lems 2018). We thereby start from the relational geography of Doreen Massey and anthropological thought of Tim Ingold. This means that instead of seeing settled lives as the unconnected opposite of mobility or journey, we start from the idea that people's lives never really unfold *inside* the boundaries of single places. Human lives are rather lived as paths of movements; as (nonlinear) life-*lines* from, to, through, and across places (Ingold 2007, 2011). Instead of considering places as existing prior to movement or prior to its relations, places can then be seen as the knotting and assembling of trajectories (Massey 2005)—as the lived geography where forms of movements entangle and people engage with one another.

The insights gained from the dialogue between Ingold and Massey result in an explorative analytical lens that we call "place acrobatics." Place acrobatics can be best approached as the practices by which people stretch, imagine, balance, turn, and reroute *their relations to places* along their paths of movement. Place acrobatics can be individual or collective tactics. They can involve struggles to stay mobile without becoming placeless as well as attempts to stay put without falling into singular and sedentarized forms of belonging (see also Drotbohm and Winters 2021). At any time, place acrobatics are difficult to pin down for at least two reasons. First, through these acrobatics, seemingly opposing dynamics fold into one another, including despair and hope, bordering and transgression, stillness and movement, as well as attachment and expulsion. Second, place acrobatics are not there to be pinned down as places themselves and should not be seen as the stable context *in* which things happen and unfold; places are dynamic entities that may "move on" themselves (Massey 2004).

To substantiate our arguments, this chapter combines insights from very different research projects in very different regions. It includes Schapendonk's ethnographic work on African trajectories to and within Europe as well as Davids's work on Afghan "return" migration and migration across Mexico to the United States. The common ground of these projects is that they all concern people's mobility across highly securitized borders. The empirical entry points may appear to the reader as rather random and confusing, as we jump over geographical settings quickly. However, this jumpy character does not mean that we consider migrants as unsettled and footloose figures. Rather, we sacrifice some of the place histories—that are undoubtedly important to understand how trajectories unfold (Drotbohm

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and Winters, introduction to this volume; Ramsay, in this volume)—to create some analytical space to discuss mobility-place dynamics beyond the straightforward "migration journey" of departure-movement-settlement. However, before we get there, we first outline some reservations over scholarly enthusiasm with the migration journey.

## Migration, Journeys, and Linear Straitjackets

Despite the repeated confirmations that migratory processes across securitized borders are nonlinear processes—full of waiting, onward/return mobility, zig-zag moves and trials-and-errors—they are often analyzed from straightforward analytical frameworks. To deepen this argument, we discuss two models to conceptualize journeys: the in-between model and the stepwise model. The in-between model positions the journey as a phase of movement—which can still be long and fragmented—between two fixed points. With these fixed points, we could argue that this model starts from ontological sedentarism (Malkki 1992), as people are seen as living settled and immobile lives in the place of arrival and destination. While their study has been agenda-setting for the subfield we embrace, BenEzer and Zetter (2015: 299) somehow pinpoint the in-between journey as the stage between uprooting and settlement, as they write:

> Conditions under which refugees are forced to flee, and then their reception and settlement in host countries, and the impact of uprooting over time, are key themes in sociological, political, anthropological, psychological and legal literature in this field. What happens in between—the actual exilic process, the medium that connects the two ends—is largely ignored or forgotten.

Following Crawley and Jones (2021), there are two problems deriving from this in-between model of the journey. First, as it is also widely argued in transit migration literature, the framing of in-betweenness is highly politicized. As Oelgemöller (2011) articulates, the notion of "transit" is mostly related to the regions just outside the borders of "Western" destinations, including Europe (Stock 2019) and the United States (Vogt 2013). Specific populations are then too easily framed as being on the move, and this indeed "misrepresent[s] the scale and direction of migration" (Crawley and Jones 2021: 3227). This counts, for example, for sub-Saharan Africans in Libya and for Syrians in Istanbul. From Eurocentric positions, these populations are often a priori pictured as transiting to Europe, without any further empirical underpinning. Linearity and the "in-between," indeed, have their politics (Crawley and Jones 2021).

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Second, although we are not blind to conditions of precarity for people on the move, as we do not ignore how borders involve temporal techniques of waiting (e.g., Mezzadra 2015), we argue that the in-between logics reduce migrant emplacements along trajectories as *just* an in-between experience until the moment they "settle" somewhere (e.g., Collyer 2007; see also Crawley and Jones 2021; Brigden and Mainwaring 2016). Tellingly, so-called transit experiences are often linked (if not bounded) to particular borderlands (i.e., the Tijuanas, Lesvoses and Melillas of this world). We feel this is a misleading starting point since we know that there is a lot of in-betweenness, limbo, waiting, and feelings of non-belonging in migrant's *presumed* places of destination. This includes studies on "integration" (Arora-Jonsson and Larsson 2021), asylum (Cabot 2014), detention and deportation (Khosravi 2009, 2018b). In a similar way, we might ask ourselves more critically where the limbo starts. In many places, African youth, for example, are confronted with a feeling of global abjection (Ferguson 2006). Many feel that they are affected by globalization, but they don't have a say in how this agenda unfolds (Schapendonk 2020; Pettit 2024). This results in a shared notion of involuntary immobility and a condition of waiting before so-called migratory departures (Prothmann 2018). Again other studies indicate that post-return lives are full of limbo experiences, too, especially when it concerns post-deportation lives (Khosravi 2018b; Schuster and Majidi 2013). In short, "in-betweenness" is as much a characteristic of place as it is of mobility in migrant journeys.

The stepwise journey—which is the second straightforward model of the journey—offers more analytical space for multiple departures/arrivals, fragmentation, and onward movements (e.g., Ramos 2018). At the same time, it starts from a certain ordering of migratory processes in terms of processual stages, such as leaving, the journey, entrance, settlement, return (e.g., Bivand Erdal and Oeppen 2018). Moreover, the stepwise journey reflects a kind of evolutionary geography. In terms of the latter, Paul (2011), for example, stresses the hierarchy of destinations in stepwise migration (see also Zijlstra 2020). The idea is that migrants move gradually from less to more favorable destinations. This is, for instance, reflected in discussions on "secondary movements" in Europe (Schapendonk 2021). For us, however, this explicit hierarchy of destinations is problematic as it derives from a worldview of stringent divides that is similar to the first, second, and third world order of the past. We also feel that this stepwise model of the journey emphasizes gradual progress (Paul 2011), and some relate this progress to an overarching strategy of migrants (Haandrikman and Hassanen 2014) or a migration career (Ramos 2018). From the work of Ingold, we could regard these kinds of movements as forms of *transporting*. Transporting is a movement that leaves its basic features—the body, the object, the pathway—

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unaffected (Ingold 2011: 150). Our point is, however, that in the context of securitized borders, we came across very few pathways that reflect the stepwise notion of gradual progress and smoothly ordered stages. Rather, we found turbulence, fragmentation, back-and-forward movements, unexpected turns, and multiple attempts as well as multiple failures. Indeed, these are very layered processes that are multidimensional, multilocal, affecting people, places, *and* pathways (Lems 2018). In this regard, we embrace Khan's challenge "to find a new social, ontological, and theoretical cartography that can interlace a topographic view with a roadside view" (Khan 2020: 15).

Following Khan, we think it is productive to seek ways to unlearn some of the stringent presumptions around mobility-place relations alongside migratory processes. In so doing, we combine different projects that brought a variety of methodological articulations. For example, Joris's ethnographic work combines a reflexive approach with the idea of following the im/mobility trajectories of people (see Schapendonk and Steel 2014). Tine's insights are based on her research in Mexico involving two migrant shelters in central Mexico and on return migration with, among others, Marieke van Houte. To do so, we move toward a conceptual discussion on trajectories, mobilities, and places.

## Trajectories, Mobilities, and Places

For anthropologist Tim Ingold, lives are not lived inside places but to, through, from, and across them. "It is of the essence of life that it does not begin here or end there, or connect a point of origin with a final destination, but rather that it keeps on going, finding a way through the myriad of things that form, persist and break up in its currents. Life, in short, is a movement of opening, not of closure" (Ingold 2011: 4). Life is in that sense not a matter of *transporting* (as discussed above), but of wayfaring: a form of movement that is open, ongoing, and full of transformation (Ingold 2007). If we relate Ingold's starting point to the field of migration studies, we end up with the provocative standpoint that the distinction between a journey, on the one hand, and the multifold movements that come before and after the journey, on the other, is not so clear-cut (see also Schapendonk, Bolay, and Dahinden 2021). Evidently, when we ask a person clear-cut questions such as, "When did you depart to Mexico?" or, "Where did your journey to Senegal start?" we get clear-cut answers, like: "My bus departed at 10:15 P.M.," or, "I left my home in March 2012." As social scientists working on migration, we tend to highlight these specific beginnings and reproduce a kind of essential beginning from where to draw a line to presumed ends. In other

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words, beginnings and endings are rather methodological artefacts (Lepawsky and Mather 2011)—they are products of our research questions and the preset Q/A interview designs that are dominant in qualitative migration studies.

But for Ingold the point is that lines (and lives) always move well beyond beginnings and endings. This is also how we see im/mobility trajectories. Contrary to the journey in between places, im/mobility trajectories are open spatiotemporal processes that do not unfold in abstract and unattached spaces but across, to, and from places (see Drotbohm and Winters, introduction to this volume). And here we see a clear link with how places are approached from a relational perspective. As mobility is intrinsic to understanding immobility (Bergson 2002: 119), the local cannot be disconnected from the global (Tsing 1994; Massey 1991, 2005; Davids and van Driel 2009). For us, this does not merely mean that places should be connected to mobilities. In fact, a more radical interpretation of relational geography would claim that places actually *are* the multiple trajectories, threads, stories, histories, relations, movements and rhythms that come together (Massey 2005; Aparna et al. 2020). By following this reasoning, we indeed move from a mobility-*versus*-place lens to a mobility-*with*-place lens (see also Cresswell 2002). Nichola Khan translates this argument to migration studies by claiming: "Rather than privileging a model of reality or ontological position where movement as freedom or its converse are seen as opposites in different contexts, or appear as alternately foregrounded or backgrounded in migrants' experiences, holding both together allows two or more positions to be experienced at the same time even if uncertainly" (Khan 2020: 235).

Thus, instead of seeing place and mobility as well as displacement and emplacement as unconnected opposites, we continuously strive to see the relations between them (e.g., Lems 2018). As Ahmed et al. stress, "being grounded is not necessarily about being fixed; being mobile is not necessarily about being detached" (Ahmed et al. 2020: 19). Our term "acrobatics" is not meant to emphasize a sportive or Olympic dimension here. We rather see it as a heuristic device that points to people's diverse capacities in terms of coordination, holding, flexibility, and mobility.

We distinguish three interrelated elements of place acrobatics. First, the inherent relation between place and mobility implies that *multiple "place relations" are forged along paths of movement*. People meet co-travelers in shelters. They create friendships in buses or in camps. They fall in love in nightclubs or while walking. They may break up later on. The carrying capacity of places to hold relations for some time are crucial to understanding how migratory pathways unfold. It is interesting, then, to see how the coming together of relations are navigated by people on the move. In her compel-

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ling ethnography, for example, Kleinman illustrates how some movers refer to Le Gard du Nord as a method—a method to connect to people and "find happiness" (Kleinman 2019). These place relations and the way in which they come together in a place are colored by and constructed through intersecting identities and positionings such as those of class, race, gender, and sexuality (see, among others, Ahmed et al. 2020).

Secondly, *place relations are also forged beyond only the here and now* (Drotbohm and Winters 2021). People's connections, whether stabilized over years or continuously improvised, might work as translocal social platforms that facilitate cross-border mobility (e.g., Wajsberg and Schapendonk 2021). In addition, memory places can be reawakened through the reconstruction of trajectories (Lems 2018), and people forge translocal connections while traveling. This is, for instance, reflected in the role of social networks in these processes, but also in the migration infrastructures that assist migrants, such as the network of shelters in Latin America. In this framework, it is relevant to acknowledge the traces that people leave when they cross specific places (Drotbohm and Winters, introduction to this volume). Regarding the latter, Wendy Vogt spoke of etchings as small but meaningful inscriptions into local landscapes (Vogt in this volume).

Finally, as already addressed above, place acrobatics include the crucial observation that *places themselves move on* (Massey 2005). Following the feminist geographer Doreen Massey, we see places as never really static since they always unfold through its manifold relations and mobilities. It follows that people can return to a particular location, but they cannot return to the same place (as it has moved on). From this, we may de-essentialize any presupposed relation between mobility and place, including the notion of returns and homecoming (Lems 2018). For us, people's relation with places could be best understood from the practices involved.

Below we illustrate different mobility-place relations that help us move away from the straightforward in-between and stepwise models of the journey that we discussed above. We thereby start at the *presumed* end of a migration process (returns); from there we further destabilize *presumed* in-between situations by rethinking *onward* movements. Finally we disclose situations of *grounding* and *settlement* in unsettling conditions people are faced with. To understand our arguments, it is important to note beforehand that we use ethnographic vignettes as analytical intermezzos to stand still with one particular moment of a particular trajectory. While of course place matters in these instances, the particular vignettes are deliberately not taken from one setting only in order to indicate that the turbulence of migratory pathways are certainly not bound to specific places or settings. Furthermore, the different vignettes emphasize and elaborate different place relations and relational positionings. The way in which gender intersects

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with mobility and positionings, is particularly dealt with in the analysis of the vignettes presented by Tine (see, for example, vignette 1), while the vignettes presented by Joris stress geographical relationalities and the politics of mobility that unfold (see for example vignette 2).

## Trajectory Illustrations

### *Returns and Reroutings from Europe*

From the viewpoint of EU policymakers, one of the major bottlenecks of the EU's migration policy is the return of unsuccessful asylum applicants. The European Commission and individual EU member states have drafted return and readmission policies that aim to "close the asylum cycle." The assumption behind this quest for more effective return instruments is, of course, that the return is "sustainable": that the mover is there to stay in the place where one "belongs"—the place of origin. This represents clearly the "sedentarist" metaphysics (Malkki 1992) behind the EU's migration management. However, this policy agenda has a rather dubious idea of return, especially since people are also returned to other places than their presumed places of origin. A recent Swedish report on returns to Afghanistan, for instance, shows that several of the young men investigated and deported from Sweden to Afghanistan, although being Afghan nationals, grew up or were born in Iran and never had set foot in Afghan territory before their deportation (Larrucea, Malm, and Asplund 2021). Thus, in this case, the policy ideal of "rooted belonging," on which this entire return migration agenda is built, is stretched in such a way that people are confronted with another phase of estrangement after "being returned" to a third country (see also Turnbull 2018).

Also in the cases that people are sent back to the places they once departed from, presumed returns are not simple processes of going home (van Houte and Davids 2008). As both the people *and* places involved have changed, returns do not often resemble a cozy and pre-given process of place-belongingness (Antonsich 2010; De Bree, Davids, and de Haas 2010)—they are rather processes of rerouting that involve the renegotiation of social boundaries, struggles over embeddedness, and safety. As such, these new episodes emerge with new uncertainties. Evidently, these processes play out very differently for people with different social backgrounds (e.g., Khosravi 2018a), as we learned from a study on returned migrants (from Europe to Afghanistan) (van Houte and Davids 2017). Gender and mobility turned out to be crucial in understanding how spaces of belonging were negotiated after people's "returns." For example, marriage and marriage practices surfaced as an important relational marker to construct

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feelings of belonging and a sense of home, while they, at the same time, functioned as mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion, as politics of belonging (Yuval-Davis 2011).

As Antonsich (2010: 645) argues, "Belonging should be analyzed both as a personal, intimate, feeling of being "at home" in a place (place-belongingness) and as a discursive resource that constructs, claims, justifies, or resists forms of socio-spatial inclusion/exclusion (politics of belonging)." Yuval-Davis coins the ways in which persons negotiate the discursive resources of belonging as *dialogical constructions of belonging*—a dialogue with "the other," as a need to construct a "self" (Yuval-Davis 2011). In these *dialogical constructions of belonging*, different ideas, norms, and discourses on marriage came to the fore and were negotiated (see also vignette 1). These dynamics between intimate feelings as part of identity construction and belonging as a discursive resource proved not to be confined to the limits of one place, however; rather, they were fundamentally determined by mobility strategies. Most of the returned migrants did construct more permeable boundaries of belonging, forming a transnational space of belonging, identifying in different ways with both European as well as Afghan marriage practices and values. The way in which they did was to a large extent affected by gender norms and their access to mobility, as was the case for example with Fahima.

> *Vignette 1: Negotiating Return through Marriage* . . . (from van Houte and Davids 2017: 15).
> A first performative strategy of reconciling different practices of marriage was displayed by Fahima. She tried to find a "hybrid" solution of marriage for her daughter, who lived in Europe. Being institutionally, economically, and socially tied to two places, she produced an "in-between" narrative that could be accepted in both Europe and Kabul, when she said the following: "My daughter has received a [marriage] proposal [from an Afghan relative]. But I said, she's going to school in [European country] and there she learned that cousins marrying are like brother and sister marrying, so she doesn't want that. . . . It's her choice. Not that she can have a boyfriend. Not at all. She can just say yes or no." (Fahima, voluntary returnee (f), Kabul 2012, original in English)
>
> The narrative of Fahima testified to her agency that simultaneously subverts and complies with the dominant gender norm of supposed submissiveness of women when managing her daughter's choices over relationships and marriage (Davids 2011). Using the school as an authority of the European country to communicate the diversion from the "Afghan" ideal to marry a cousin freed her from taking full responsibility for this diversion. With a hint of free will, she indicated belonging to more individualistic "European" values and practices, while with

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> indicating the impossibility of having a boyfriend, she remained within frameworks of marriage that are acceptable for Afghanistan. Gender norms thus play a central role in constructing permeable boundaries between the two spaces of belonging.

The ways in which the returnees positioned themselves vis-à-vis these discourses varied according to their options for mobility and their negotiation of the gender repertoire. Fahima's negotiation of this gender repertoire is also the result of intersectional positioning along the axes of gender, class, and access to mobility, as she was able to move back and forth between Europe and Afghanistan, while others were not. These other, mainly masculine, returnees often opted for less hybrid strategies of belonging. Some of the men involved, for instance, constructed Afghan arranged marriage, in juxtaposition to "European morals on relations and marriage," as a "safe" space of belonging in relation to their sexual and masculine identities. The experience of a loss of a sense of self(-respect) and agency in being deported, being rejected for asylum, or losing control over children after a divorce seemed to result in renewed search for masculinity. Gender and marriage practices thus figured centrally as part of *the rerouting of the relations* with Afghanistan or Europe or both. Juggling the dynamics between belonging (some sense of feeling at home) and the politics of belonging (the discursive resources such as those on gender and marriage) were part of *place acrobatics* these returnees had to perform. Juggling both the Afghan and European norm of marriage, for example, meant for some men, who were able to move back and forth between Europe and Afghanistan, leading a kind of double life while having relationships in both places. Practicing mobility, is then for some an important tactic in this respect.

Mobility provides explicit room to construct more "permeable boundaries between "European" and "Afghan" spaces of belonging" (van Houte and Davids 2017: 17). In this sense, these cases illustrate that *multiple "place relations" are forged along paths of movement*, in more than one way. Those multiple relations do not only concern movement in the sense of physical traveling but also movement in terms of discursive and translocal place belongingness. Although this was not the case for all men, fewer mobility opportunities mostly meant the creation of more fixed boundaries of place-belonging. Depending on their mobility possibilities, these men moved up and down, as it were, on a continuum between the construction of fixed or more permeable boundaries between "European" and "Afghan" spaces of belonging (see also Pettit 2024 for similar observations in a different context). In doing so, they not only ascribed meaning to places but also transnationalized these to some extent, much like what Appadurai (1990) has coined as "ethnoscapes," referring to people in flux whose connectivity shapes places as

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a constantly changing landscape. In this case maybe even to be described as a marriagescape, a scape constructed through homemaking in which practices, rituals, and responsibilities are shared that are "intimately bound up with the idea of home: the idea of a place (or places) in the past, and of this place in the future" (Ahmed et al. 2020: 28). "Homing," as Ahmed et al. (2020) have coined this process, is an integral part of uprooting and regrounding. As such, mobility formed an integral part of their place relations, always producing itself as "the combined processes of being and becoming, belonging and longing to belong" (Yuval-Davis 2011: 26), illustrating that people's understanding and experience of place are shaped by movement. It also illustrates that *place relations are also forged beyond only the here and now*, as returning did not mean simply going home to a place that had not changed and where one would automatically belong and want to stay for the rest of one's life. It is thus important to avoid assuming that home is fixed or has an essential meaning prior to the experiences of migration (Ahmed et al. 2020: 27). Instead, home and belonging are not naturalized but contested and rerouted (both by boundary-making *and* mobility). The above illustrations indicate that local and international discourses, modernity and tradition, global and local intersect, and also that mobility and gender give meaning to Afghan and transnational space-belonging. Seeing "home" as the place of immobility, tradition, and ethnic homogeneity—hence as a static place one can return to—is in that sense problematic from the very start.

### *Destabilizing the In-Between*

As outlined in our literature review, in-betweenness is in evident ways articulated in discussions on transit and onward migration. As argued, the linearity of migrant journeys is for a large part a methodological artifact, for the ways research questions relate to research locations. In Athens, for instance, we tend to focus on questions of departure and imagined onward mobility. In London and Amsterdam, to mention two other random cities in Europe, we tend to trace back journeys to presumed destinations and ask ourselves why people move onward from "there" and settle down "here." The semantics of onward, backward, returns matter as it indeed reproduces a certain evolutionist geography with preset centers and margins—indeed a geography of central nodes and supposedly out-of-the-way places. With this semantics, we easily equalize *onward* movements with "*northward*" movements. These semantics might reappear in the narratives of people on the move. At the same time, we came across highly dynamic mobility practices that destabilized the evolutionist geographies of migration. One telling ex-

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ample comes from Lamin, an incredibly clever young man raised by the streets of Serekunda (the Gambia) (see Schapendonk 2020).

> *Vignette 2: Onward Mobility as Dizziness*
> When I [Joris] first met Lamin in January 2016, he had just moved from Italy to Switzerland. Compared to other young men, he was generally positive about his Italian life. His first stay in Switzerland was meant to be only brief. For roughly three months, he stayed with a Swiss friend, whom he had known for years, and who supported Lamin also in financial terms. But this travel to Switzerland turned out to be more than "just a short visit." Lamin started a German-language program, and he sought ways to ground in Switzerland, in addition to his Italian life. In the years after, he developed a highly im/mobile lifestyle between the regions of Liguria (Italy) and Bern (Switzerland). I lost count of the number of times he circulated between Italy and Switzerland. His continuous mobility and his groundings in two places diffused the onward/return logics. He counted his blessings in Switzerland and complained about the intense level of racialized control of public space there. Similar ambivalences were expressed regarding his Italian life. He initially stressed that Italy was his home, but he also lively discussed the everyday racism and social isolations involved. At some point, he stated: "It feels like home [in Italy], but in Switzerland I was happier."
>
> Unlike many other Gambians I have met, Lamin was not particularly nostalgic about his life in Africa. Occasionally, mostly during shopping for groceries or cooking (when using the right spices), some snippets of memory-making unfolded. In these moments, he shared, for, instance how his mother has worked as a vendor in Serekunda for decades, selling vegetables and spices that he only found in some shops run by people with a migration background. However, besides these snippets of memories he shared with me, he had no aspirations to return to the Gambia soon. He articulated several times that he did not miss home, and that he focused on his European life. After Lamin lost his job in Italy, his grounding in Italy was affected by doubt and ambivalence, as he said: "Sometimes I think I need to live here [in Italy], but then again I change my mind. Like now. Now my situation has changed because I lost my job. Now I think again about what to do, because my situation was good, but now I don't know any more." This reentering of doubt and ambivalence confuses the temporal logic that a long stay leads to stronger place attachments. That does not mean that Lamin's situation resembles a process of prolonged displacement. One day, he told me how his Swiss friend offered him an opportunity to buy an apartment for him in the Italian town where he was living. Lamin, however, kindly refused the offer. It was not so much financial considerations or a relation of dependency that was at stake. Lamin stressed that this apartment would make him feel restricted in terms of his future mobility,

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> as he said: "Because this house means you must stay and live in Italy, but I don't know if I want to know. Maybe I find a job in Germany or Holland, so how can I live in this house?"

In this example, place-making and mobility melt into a position in which Lamin refuses to be pinned down—either as uprooted mobile nomad or as rooted and place-based immigrant. Consequently, the distinction between a transit place and a destination disappears in confusing ways. In a broader sense, all these places become along-the-way places, and as the mobility of Lamin continued, his wayfaring created a kind of analytical dizziness. Lamin's wayfaring is not a structural form of displacement or a migratory move toward a clearly defined destination, displaying more of a rhizome-like pattern than a linear pattern of onward mobility.

## *Groundings in Unsettling Conditions: Insights from Mexico and Italy*

Migrant pathways are not lines across empty spaces (Drothbohm and Winters 2021). By moving, staying, and being, people relate to, and therefore change, places. To understand these dynamics, it is productive to not blindly stare at migrant practices only but to also include a wider mesh of relations and movements to make sense of place-mobility relations and meaning-making along migratory trajectories. In different sociopolitical settings, and especially during precarious crossings, many migrants move through places where there is a very thin line between facilitation/control and care/discipline (Merlín-Escorza, Davids, and Schapendonk 2020). These forcefields are built on shifting geopolitical grounds (Aparna 2020). For example, in one of the migrant shelters Tine visited, she heard how the community belonging to the parish, along with random citizens, enthusiastically collected food, clothing and blankets when the first *caravana de migrantes* passed through the city. This shared notion of hospitality tempered, however, the second and third times the *caravana* came around. According to some members of the parish, the migrants became too demanding in their need for help. The pastor expressed that he felt he had to balance his effort for charity for the marginalized and people in need in general in the region and the assistance to the migrants. According to the director of another shelter in a neighboring state Tine visited, negative news on migrants being too demanding was also spread on purpose to discredit the migrants and stir xenophobia. These comments of both the pastor and the director point at the intersection of migrant trajectories and neighborhood dynamics, where discourses on othering, racism, charity, humanitarian aid, and liberation theology collide and articulate as part of place-making (see also Merlín-Escorza, Davids, and Schapendonk 2020). This place-making seems

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to exist out of a wavy pattern of construction and deconstruction. We outline two of these different instances below.

> *Vignette 3: Place Attachments through Motherhood*
> We (Tine and a befriended colleague) arrived at the parish in the afternoon. The parish is located in a lower-middle-class neighborhood of the city, and the shelter is part of the territory of the parish and situated within the parish gates. There is no way of missing that this is not just a church, since big banners with photos of the caravans of transmigrants and the rules by which the transmigrants have to live inside of the shelter are hung on the gates, which are closed. We are welcomed by the pastor, an international volunteer and the coordinator of all the charity work the parish executes, including the work for the shelter for transmigrants. It is not our first visit to this shelter, and the welcome is warm and informal. While walking through the hallway, I sense immediately that there is a buzz of positive excitement in the air. The coordinator takes us to a room where workshops are organized and all kinds of handy crafts and clothes are being made, mostly by women from the neighborhood and regular participants of the parish. The women are busy and chatting cheerfully, they invite us to participate. We answer that we are not that good in handicraft but ask what the excitement and cheerfulness is all about. One of the women says, "Come see for yourself," and takes me by the hand to the next room.
>
> In a rather spacious room with a big king-size bed a woman lays on the bed with two little babies next to her. The woman that took me by the hand proudly narrates: "A little miracle has happened here; these twins were born here yesterday. They asked me to be *comadre* (godmother), and I accepted. We already bought some clothes for the little ones and moved the family up to this room, out of the actual space of the shelter where the transmigrants stay overnight. The father has gone to the municipality to register his girls, aren't they cute? They are going to be Mexican citizens now." It was obvious that the birth and the idea that these two little babies were to become Mexican citizens generated much joy among the women in the room. After introducing myself to the mother of the twins, she tells me that she comes from El Salvador and hoped for her babies to be born in the United States, but Mexico is already better than El Salvador. She stayed for two years in the shelter, also working there, then left for Monterey, a Mexican city at the northern border with the United States. The last I know of her is that she and her husband were still trying to get into the United States but had not succeeded so far.

This birth has been a very special occasion for the mother and for the surrounding women. What stood out for me (Tine) was not so much the peculiarity of the situation but rather the way this event articulated a sense of relatedness and care, which was attached to this place but at the same

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time also uprooted. While employing practical assistance to the birth and care of the two babies, a whole set of gendered connotations to giving life, mothering, (social) family, religion, and caring seemed to be set in motion, between the place in El Salvador where they came from, Mexico, and the places they were still to travel to. Indicating that the passing, moving, staying, and dwelling in the shelter—in short, migrant im/mobility—has a lasting bearing on all the participants involved and on this environment. In particular, in this case through the intersection of gender and social family relations practiced in "*compadrazgo*" (godparenting) and the corresponding responsibilities, rituals, and gifts that accompany these, "homing" is constructed as part of place relations (Ahmed et al. 2020). Relations of godparenting are strong lasting relations in many Latin and Central American cultures, and part of networks of social security and social mobility. In this case these social family relations between the Salvadorian mother, who eventually traveled farther, and her *comadre* (literally: co-mother; godmother of the children), who stayed put, became uprooted and regrounded, rendering them both subject and object in and of mobility trajectories. Movement, in other words, leaves traces. Here we see again how *multiple "place relations" are forged along paths of movement* while simultaneously illustrating that places are shaped by these paths of movements.

When we zoom out from this particular moment, we notice how these migrant shelters come into being along the routes migrants tend to follow. These places, although designed and founded by others, are in that sense co-constructed by migrants and their passing through. As the director of the shelter mentioned above indicates, the kind of passing dictates up to a certain degree the place relations between shelters and their surroundings. In shelters of short stay (one or two nights) these dynamics tend to differ substantially from shelters of medium and longer stay. Moreover, the volunteers working there often have their own cross-border mobility trajectories. Hence, shelters can be seen as assemblages of attraction and expulsion, placement and displacement, sociopolitical nodes that connect (or confront) migrants with many other actors, stakeholders, and place histories (see also Merlín-Escorza, Davids, and Schapendonk 2020).

This is not only the case for shelters, as migrant trajectories and the violence that accompanies them in Mexico instigates other, but related, trajectories such as that of the yearly caravan of Madres de Migrantes Desaparecidos y Desaparecidas (Caravan of Mothers of Disappeared Migrants), which consists of mothers and also fathers who have marched since 2006 from countries in Central America to Mexico City, searching for their disappeared loved ones. Every year they arrive on Mother's Day (the tenth of May) in Mexico City. Through their presence, discourse, and the banners they carry, they literally and symbolically inscribe, or to use Vogt's term,

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*etch,* the pain of migration trajectories, but also resistance and protest, into Mexico's political and cultural landscape (Vogt in this volume).

Considering migrant conditions, it is self-evident that place relations do not unfold in a sociopolitical environment that is always welcoming. In the Mexican case, hospitality spaces emerge in a highly violent landscape (e.g., Vogt 2018). Unsurprisingly, Joris also came across many instances whereby migrant relations to places were actually violently contested by the EU's border regime, blunt racism, and other processes of exclusion and expulsion. One particular episode of place-making—or rather place struggle—unfolded in the city center of Rome, where Joris revisited Abdoulah (see Schapendonk 2020: 159–60). Here we see how struggle about national and place boundaries are shaped and negotiated in everyday practices that illustrate the *carrying capacity of places to hold relations* marked by mobility while interfering in the (un)grounding process of, in this case, Abdoulah.

> *Vignette 4: Speaking Back to Territorial Claims*
> I [Joris] saw how one particular waiter of a café at the opposite side of the street fought against Abdoulah's place relations as a street vendor. For Abdoulah it was important to be in the same place every day, around the same time, so that potential customers could find him. For him it was also a relatively secure place because he forged a stable relationship with one of the policemen working in the same neighborhood (and also a regular client of Abdoulah's). It was also a place he cared for; every morning he cleaned his workplace by tidying up some of the cartons, by building little chairs of boxes, and by exposing some of his products in attractive ways. Moreover, this place had its infrastructure. Abdoulah arranged with the management of a nearby hotel that he could use the bathroom there during his short breaks. The same hotel also offered Abdoulah the Wi-Fi codes so that he could change his street vending spot into a truly transnational space, while listening to the latest news broadcasts from Senegal on his mobile phone and making multiple phone calls to his family members elsewhere in the world. These place relations were, however, heavily disturbed by the waiter's loud claims of "mia terra" [my land] and "Questa e l'Europa!" [this is Europe]. The verbal insults soon changed into more territorial acts. I saw this waiter actually putting the café's waste bags at Abdoulah's selling spot just before he would arrive there. It took Abdoulah quite some time to clean up the place. Just upon return after his break, Abdoulah was outraged and ran to the opposite side of the street. He certainly went for a confrontation with the waiter. He stood there tête-à-tête with the waiter, and passersby stopped to see how this situation would unfold. Still mad, he returned to his street-vending spot, and he showed me a plastic bag. He cried: "C'est le kaka des gens" [this is human shit]. This shitty expulsion strategy of the waiter seemed to

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be effective—that day Abdoulah moved out of his sight and tried to make some money elsewhere. However, he returned the next day, and he cleaned the place again to open his shop.

When Abdoulah and I said goodbye that day, I felt in a way impotent, not only for the systemic injustices around me, but also for the fact that I would just return to my hotel, while Abdoulah was perhaps embarking a bus where he was confronted with similar gazes, similar remarks, similar violence, similar Eurospaces that never really reveal themselves to me. This is important since it marks a difference between positionality and place relations. We might indeed strive for ethnographic relatedness, but in so many situations, it was rather impossible to relate to the same place, simply because our positions in mobility regimes are so fundamentally different compared to the position of the people we encounter.

## Conclusion: On Place Acrobatics

The empirical sections of this chapter started with return to discuss departures , destabilized transit logics through circulation, and emphasized social traces in transient conditions, and ended with presumed places of arrival to indicate conditions of expulsion. In all instances, the mobility-place relations under study are difficult, if not impossible, to pin down in terms of the linear logics of migration. We have seen how "place relations" in presumed transit spaces are meaningful and long-lasting—all but loose and in-between. We also outlined how returns should not be considered processes of "coming home," and we have seen how people persist to be *in place* despite the aggressiveness around them.

Based on these observations, it makes little sense to pin down the places or migrant positions we come across as *in-between*. We regard place acrobatics as a fruitful alternative, as it provides analytical space to discuss people's stretching and holding capacities of being in place in conditions of displacement. This refers not only to the translocalities through which people forge relations with distant places (e.g. Abdoulah's connectivity with Senegal; Lamin's im/mobile lifestyle; Fahima's search for hybrid marriage solutions) but also to the ways being in place and out of place are situations that may fold into each other. Moreover, place acrobatics may also do justice to the changing character of the "local," either through migrant movements (e.g., the shelters in Mexico) or because of the capacity of time to bring chance, change, and contingency to this world (Amrith 2021). It follows that we should not associate "place" only with the here, the now, the stable, the local, the sedentary and existing prior to movement or prior

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to its relations. They are the knots of intertwining trajectories. For similar reasons, we should not mistake mobility for ungrounding, transit, and the nonlocal. Or to put it in relation to the wider debate of this book, we could move away from the notion that place attachments are positive and stable anchors in stories of displacements. If we would envision place attachments in such a one-sided way, we ignore how the process of getting embedded—or how the dynamics of *feeling* in place—can coexist with loss, condition of exile, and unbearable pains—that is, processes and positions that are difficult to "know" for people who are not undergoing it. Instead, we think it is more productive to unpack the various ways particular constraints and intersectional positioning lead to new mobilities, how new mobilities unfold with constraints (e.g., Gill, Calentrío, and Mason 2011), and how this then in the end results in multiple and layered meanings. The continuous dialogues of grounding/ungrounding, welcoming/unwelcoming, new movements/new returns, result in what we have called place acrobatics: we have seen how people need to stretch their belongings, invent acrobatic acts to circumvent border regimes, hop and wave between multiple places—sometimes they fly, sometimes they need to stand still. All this relates to acrobatics, not as an individualized performance but as a collective tactics that may emerge from marginalization and subexistence (Samaddar 2020), or from individual instances of creativity and agency.

This notion of place acrobatics, however, is not a mere migrant story. It can also be translated into a plea to not only take into account "the migrant," "the mover," "the refugee" to understand mobility-place dynamics and meaning-making along paths of movement. As the vignettes illustrate, both migrants and non-migrants construct "marriagescapes" and are part and parcel of gendered transnational relations of kinship and motherhood, involving "homing" as a process that is both uprooted as well as grounded. As Khan suggests, this opening up of understanding multiple positions at the same time calls for "epistemological dexterity that can locate mobility and stasis firmly within an ontological space that is increasingly characteristic of twenty-first-century life—namely as a condition that follows on the disaffected promises of global modernity" (Khan 2020: 236). It makes a lot of sense to move away from our intellectual gaze on the isolated and exceptionalized "migrant journey" in order to scrutinize the processes by which the mobility of some is "migranticized" (Dahinden 2016). Or to relate it to the words of Massey and Ingold, we should perhaps not isolate one line of movement of only one prototypical Other but instead see how this "trajectory" is enmeshed with multiple other lines in terms of mobility and meaning-making. These intersections lead to wavy and dynamic patterns of place-making from where people, imaginaries, and meanings move in various directions.

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