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Migration as hope and depression: existential im/mobilities in and beyond Egypt

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ABSTRACT

Recent scholarship has asserted that prolonged periods of ‘waiting’ or ‘stuckedness’ are becoming the condition of modern capitalism for many people. This article complicates this assertion by interrogating the affective life of migration, an act which offers the possibility of overcoming, but also reinforces, existential stuckedness. Using two ethnographies with young aspiring male migrants in Egypt, and older migrant men in the Netherlands, we reveal how migration, both before and after physical movement, is experienced through constant existential oscillation: between ‘amal’ (hope) that the good life is arriving, and ‘ikti’āb’ (an Egyptian understanding of depression) when a new blockage is met. Developing existing understandings of migratory experience and governance, the article argues that oscillation emerges out of ‘cruel’ migratory regimes which perpetually offer up the promise of the good life to aspiring migrants, while inhibiting the means of achieving it for the majority.

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Introduction

In recent years, scholars have documented how people, especially youth, across the world are being thrust into periods of prolonged ‘waiting’ or ‘stuckedness.’ By this, it is meant that people experience a sense of existential immobility, or hopelessness, as they are unable to move forward within normative systems of value – to become adults, obtain what they think their class status deserves, and adhere to the context-specific expectations placed upon men or women. Although not new, the temporal and spatial scale of this phenomenon is rising as a result of the increasing disconnect between conditions and actual possibilities presented by contemporary capitalism. On the one hand, globalization, urbanization, technological advances, and expanding access to education create aspirations for lives previously not envisioned (Appadurai 1996; Weiss 2009), while the entrenchment of meritocratic ideals promote the ‘cruel’ notion that those aspirations are accessible to all (Berlant 2011). Yet, on the other hand, austerity, neoliberal economics, and political instability make those aspirations harder to achieve (Sassen 2014; Standing 2011).

In these circumstances, many people aspire to migrate in order to overcome a sense of being stuck in life. However, as borders intensify and visa regulations become ever stricter, migration is not easily achieved. Moreover, even if achieved, life after migration is still marked by intense experiences of stuckedness as a result of racialised labour and citizenship regimes in destination countries. Contemporary migration therefore embodies the broader contradictions of modern capitalism. In this paper, we want to interrogate and develop existing conceptions of existential immobility/mobility as a contemporary experience, which remain confined by the binary of people

being either stuck, or finding ways to keep hope alive, through examining the affective experience of migration among Egyptian men to Europe.

The paper brings together two ethnographies, one which follows young lower-middle class men in Egypt as they struggle to make successful labour market transitions and thereby develop unrealised aspirations to migrate to Europe, and another which follows older Egyptian men and fathers who have managed to migrate and settle in the Netherlands. Although the two groups are situated in different social locations, they both symbolise a recent historical context within Egypt which has fuelled often unrealisable aspirations to migrate abroad (Schielke 2015), and racialized European labour markets which make it increasingly challenging for migrants to forge livelihoods (Dwyer, Hodkinson, and Waite 2015; Wrench, Rea, and Ouali 2016). As each group chases an Egyptianised middle-class masculine ideal of *istiqrār* (stability), we show how – rather than life being experienced as existential stuckedness as a result of stunted migratory aspirations, or existential mobility after being able to migrate – both before and after migration it is constituted by continuous emotional oscillation between ‘*amal*’ (hope) that the good life is arriving, and ‘*ikti’āb*’ (a term often translated as depression but not carrying the medical connotations it does in Anglo-American contexts).

This oscillation, we argue, arises out of cruel migratory regimes which, both across borders and within host countries, offer up the promise of the good life to prospective migrants, while inhibiting the means of achieving it for the majority. In making this argument, the article seeks to add a sense of fluctuation and ambivalence to existing understandings of ‘waiting’ as an experience of modern capitalism, while also pushing migration studies to reach beyond the spatial frame when considering the im/mobilities that constitute migrant trajectories. Our focus on men should not discount the existential im/mobilities of migrant women. In the Egyptian context, although men are often pushed to pursue a career more so than women, women also experience existential immobilities, not least because of that expectation.

Before analysing the dynamics of oscillating migratory experiences among Egyptian men, the next section explores how the notion of existential mobility might be applied to a mobilities understanding of transnational migration, before setting out how a greater emphasis on oscillation can complicate this further. Section three briefly contextualises Egyptian migration to Europe and elsewhere. Sections four, five, and six introduce and compare the two case studies, before the conclusion fleshes out the paper’s contributions to conceptualisations of migration as an existentially im/mobile practice.

Existential immobility, migration, and oscillation

Various anthropologists in recent years have theorised that a sense of existential mobility, of hope that one is going somewhere in one’s life, is essential for a liveable life (Hage 2003; Jackson 2011). This sense rests on constant motion, what Miyazaki (2004) terms a sense of ‘prospective momentum’ towards a ‘good’ future. There are competing explanations as to why this need for existential mobility exists. It is both fuelled by an inherent sense of insufficiency in the present (Bloch 1995; Jackson 2011), and capitalism’s need for continuous investment and growth (Comaroff and Comaroff 2001). What this ‘good’ future looks like is also highly contingent on one’s socio-cultural position (e.g. age, class, gender, race, sexuality, nationality, and religious belief). The words and phrases used to describe the need for hope and movement vary across cultures. In Egypt, ‘*min ghīr al-‘amal mafīsh ḥayāt*’ (without hope there is no life) is a ubiquitous phrase. Hope, unlike other words geared towards the future, such as optimism, confidence, anticipation, defines a basic sense of having something to live for.

The ability of people to experience movement, to get where they want in life, is highly contingent upon one’s social position (Bourdieu [1997] 2000; 220–236). In recent times, much work has pointed out that, for more and more people, that vital sense of existential mobility is being interrupted and replaced by what has variously been labelled as stuckedness (Hage 2003), waitthood (Honwana 2012),

impasse (Berlant 2011), timepass (Jeffrey 2010), or limbo (Jansen 2015). Focusing on the affective experience of waiting, scholars have revealed how a feeling of hope becomes displaced by boredom, shame, and depression, as a result of what Bruce O'Neil (2017) in his research with homeless men in Bucharest describes as a sense of being 'cast aside' from the possibilities offered by labour and commodity markets (Cvetkovich 2012; Mains 2012; Schielke 2015).

However, ethnographic work has begun to complicate previous theorisations of waiting by showing how people who are pushed into it rarely stand still. Rather they engage in various forms of temporal, spatial, and emotional labour – putting faith in God's rewards (Elliot 2016), watching films (Mains 2012), and consuming drugs (O'Neil 2017) – which invoke a reorientation of consciousness. Miyazaki (2004: 52) terms this a 'temporal reorientation' of knowledge that reopens the possibility of a good future – for class mobility, migration, or finding a job. This approach, labelled by Pedersen (2012) as the 'work of hope,' develops understandings of how people endure the instabilities thrown up by contemporary capitalism in everyday ways.

Migration has been positioned as one dramatic fix to existential stuckness in a particular location (Dzenovska 2018; Ungruhe and Esson 2017; Grill 2012). Hage (2005: 470) wrote that 'we engage in the kind of physical mobility that defines us as migrants because we feel another geographical space is a better launching pad for our existential selves. We move physically so we can feel that we are existentially on the move again or at least moving better.' This focus on existential im/mobility adds an important dimension to a migration studies literature which has been overwhelmingly concerned with spatial im/mobility in recent years. In an attempt to move on from transnational migration research which had previously concentrated on the cultural, economic, and social interconnectivity between migrant origins and destinations (Blunt 2007), scholars have turned attention to the experience of moving between them (Schapendonk and Steel 2014).

Migration scholars have since successfully developed a spatially-orientated 'mobilities' approach to understanding contemporary migration (e.g. Schrooten, Salazar, and Dias 2016), which mirrors the anthropological focus on existential im/mobility. This stems from a broader turn in geographical scholarship which takes the act of mobility – and migration – to be full of meaning and marked by difference – in terms of access, speed, and friction – according social positionality (Cresswell 2006; Hannam, Sheller, and Urry 2006). Structural approaches reveal how transnational mobility regimes work to structure the movement of different kinds of classed, racialized, and gendered subjects (Andersson 2014; Glick Schiller and Salazar 2013). While some experience transnational mobility as a routinized, seamless, and pleasant act, others are exposed to the prolonged waiting, enforced immobility or mobility, and blockages that are produced by border regimes (Kleist and Thorsen 2016; Turner 2015). Taking a more grounded household-level approach, other work has revealed how familial roles can limit the spatial mobility of both those who migrate and those left behind along gendered lines (Hochschild 2000; Yeates 2009).

Schapendonk and Steel (2014) sought to move beyond the binary of mobility/immobility often prevalent in previous studies to reveal how the act of spatial movement within the migration process – among Sudanese and Nigerian migrants trying to reach Europe – is marked by continuous fluctuation between phases of locational immobility and mobility as a result of their precarious positionality within Europe's mobility regime. They demonstrated how, during a migratory trajectory, migrants 'experience different phases of immobility in their processes of movement. Consequently, trajectories could have multiple moments of departure, and destinations are possibly in between and might turn into transit places' (ibid. 267).

This conceptualisation of movement as constant fluctuation between immobility and mobility can also help develop understandings of the existential im/mobilities of migrants. At present, much migration scholarship sustains the implicit assumption that both before spatial movement begins and after movement ends, migration is experienced as a state of fixity. The concept of existential mobility, which is increasingly being applied to migration research, can help complicate this assertion (Jackson 2013; Lucht 2015; Menin 2017). However, understandings of the existential experience of migrants – and conceptualisations of waiting as a condition of modern capitalism more generally –

remain trapped by the dualisms of immobility and mobility. In existing accounts, aspiring migrants are assumed to face existential stuckness as a result of economic and political regimes which stunt their aspirations (Ungruhe and Esson 2017). Furthermore, accounts of the migrant pursuit of existential mobility either describe the reemergent stuckness that overwhelms because of exclusionary labour and citizenship regimes, or how migrants find ways to 'endure' or find movement again (Kleist and Thorsen 2016; McIlwaine 2015). There is little room for oscillation, for the back and forth actually experienced in reality, between what Craig Jeffrey (2018; xiv) calls a 'sense of purposeful waiting to a purposeless inertia and back again,' between fleeting feelings of hope as a new vision for the future arises, or frustration as people hit new blockages.

In this paper, we will show how migration among Egyptian men who are chasing an middle-class masculine ideal of 'istiqrār' (stability), both before and after the process of moving, is experienced as continuous emotional oscillation – understood as the constant shift between different positions or emotions – between 'amal' (hope) for the future, and periods of 'ikti'āb' (translated as depression), with other emotions, doubt and fear, brief joy and distraction, emerging in between. Sustaining a concern for power in the study of mobilities, we adopt Lauren Berlant's (2011) notion of 'cruel optimism' to explain this oscillation, arguing that it is not produced simply through 'resilience' or 'endurance,' but by migratory regimes which encourage people to develop cruel attachments to objects that are embedded with the promise of migratory success, but at the same time inhibit the means of achieving it for many. Before delving into the oscillating migratory experiences of Egyptian men, we first trace the different histories that produced a sense of 'stuckness' among so many (young) Egyptians, and posed spatial mobility as the main, if not the only solution to it, but which also make migration a limited solution to that 'stuckness.' This will help contextualise the existential struggles outlined in the following sections.

Contextualising egyptian migration

Global cairo

After the Egyptian revolution for independence in 1952, President Gamal Abdel Nasser restricted Egyptian emigration to secure sufficient labour for Egypt's economy. When North-Western European countries including the Netherlands were actively recruiting foreign labour from countries like Turkey and Morocco in the 1950s and 1960s, Egyptian migration was by and large an 'internal' or 'domestic' phenomenon (Zohry 2002) with 'rural-to-urban' and 'urban-to-urban' men moving to Cairo, Alexandria and industrializing towns along the Suez Canal and Nile Delta to work and, if their class position permitted, get an education (Abu-Lughod 1961: 23). On the back of domestic migrant labour, Nasser industrialized the country and greatly improved access to affordable housing, education, healthcare, and government jobs, thus turning domestic migration into a pathway towards a middle-class life.

Towards the end of the 1960s, Nasser's ambitious programs no longer seemed tenable due to economic stagnation (Waterbury 1983). After his death in 1970, Egypt's economy was steadily transformed by President Anwar el-Sadat (1970–1981), who opened the country to foreign investment, and eased restrictions on emigration, and President Hosni Mubarak [1981] 2011) who divested from public services under the banner of large scale structural adjustment programs imposed by the IMF and the World Bank (Mitchell 2002; De Koning 2009). These policies were meant to transform Egypt into a liberal free-market economy and contributed to Egypt's GDP growth, averaging around five percent between the 1970s and late 2000s with peaks of well over ten percent.

However, socio-economic reforms entrenched already existing inequalities. Egypt's economy was increasingly geared towards capital-intensive industries while manufacturing and government jobs declined. Public housing, healthcare and education deteriorated, while emerging private alternatives were out of reach for most Egyptians. This more or less split the middle-classes into an upper-middle class residing and consuming in 'cosmopolitan Cairo' (Singerman and Amar 2006), a city of five-star hotels, malls, gated communities, office buildings designed for multinational

companies, and private schools and universities (De Koning 2009), and a 'middle-class poor' (Bayat 2011) dreaming of international private sector employment, modern consumption and global mobility but getting stuck in prolonged periods of un/underemployment and living conditions in which they struggled to distinguish themselves from the poor. By the mid-1990s, roughly a quarter of Egypt's population was poor while another quarter was on the margins of poverty (Assaad and Rouchdy 1999: 11) which remained the case throughout the 2000s. Meanwhile, un/underemployment was on the rise, especially among educated youth. By 2008, at least a quarter of university graduates were unemployed, with many more underemployed (UNDP, 2010).

This widening gap between have and have-nots, and especially disillusion among university graduates, may well have contributed to the wave of protests that erupted in early 2011, ultimately leading to the overthrow of President Hosni Mubarak. Unfortunately, what began as a hopeful revolution unfolded into turmoil, prolonged economic crisis and, eventually the return of authoritarian rule, further aggravating living conditions (Assaad and Krafft 2015). Against this backdrop, the first author conducted 11 months of ethnographic fieldwork with un/underemployed university graduates stretched out over a two-year period starting in the summer of 2014.

The author started fieldwork by observing and participating in one of the many internationally-funded training programs aiming to teach un/underemployed university graduates professional skills in order to kick-start their careers. From there, the author followed 13 men (of whom 8 were graduates from the training program) as they struggled to secure jobs in their fields, attended employment fairs, additional training courses, and entrepreneurship events, engaged in self-study, applied for jobs, and relaxed in cafes, shopping malls, and their homes. For these young male graduates, building a career was part of their struggle to live up to norms of masculinity, by chasing a sense of *'istiqrār'* (stability) which would provide the basis for family life (Pettit 2018). Disillusioned by a prolonged inability to obtain prestigious private sector jobs – which remain restricted to those with private education and *'wasta'* (connections), most turned their attention to *'barra'* (outside), investing time and money in order to migrate, ideally to Euro-America but more commonly to the wealthy Arab countries.

Leaving egypt

When Sadat eased restrictions on emigration in 1975, international migration quickly became an alternative pathway to adulthood and a middle-class life for young Egyptian men for whom such pathways had not been or were no longer available in Egypt (Ibrahim 1982). At the time, European countries, including the Netherlands, had begun to restrict or even halt labour migration. Concurrently, the oil-boom created a seemingly endless demand for migrant labour in the oil-producing Arab countries. Within a few years, more than a million Egyptian men moved to work in countries like Libya, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait (Zohry 2007) to finance marriage (which includes acquiring housing), provide for their wives and children (who often stayed in Egypt), and to enjoy modern comforts back in Egypt (Schielke 2015). The flow of Egyptian workers to Arab countries slowed significantly when the oil-price dropped in the mid-1980s (Zohry 2007) but until today, wealthy Arab countries remain the principal destination for a generation of aspiring young men for whom migration has become the main way to overcome stuckedness (Schielke 2015).

As the demand for migrant labour in the oil-producing Arab countries was drying up, European visa-regulations had become even stricter, culminating in the Schengen agreement which came into effect in 1995 and opened some of Europe's internal borders but intensified its external borders. Nevertheless, aspiring Egyptian men increasingly found their way to Europe from the mid-1980s onwards, initially to Southern Europe and from there to other countries, including the Netherlands (Ibid). In 2017, the second author of this paper conducted 12 months of ethnographic fieldwork among Egyptian men who ended up in Amsterdam in the early and mid-1990s and stayed there because the city induced that sense of existential mobility that they were after.

These men had travelled to Europe unauthorized or on short-term tourist or student visas. In Amsterdam, they thus entered a life of illegality, working as cooks, construction-workers and/or cleaners under straining conditions without much protection. Over time, the men who feature in this research somehow managed to acquire a residency permit or citizenship, for example through arranged marriage to a European citizen, called a 'sham' marriage in Dutch public debates ('schijnhuwelijk') and a business marriage ('gawāz al-biznis') by Egyptians (cf Sportel 2016). After acquiring residency or citizenship, many went to Egypt to get married, eventually bringing over their wives to start a family in the Netherlands. Back in the Netherlands, the men had to endure straining work conditions. By the time the second author started fieldwork, many of these men had retired, due to severe pains in their backs, shoulders, and legs, and instead relied on social security disability benefits ('arbeidsongeschiktheiduitkering'). These conditions contribute to uncongenial marital relations, resulting in high divorce rates among Egyptians in Amsterdam.¹

From the 1970s onwards, the Dutch government facilitated and funded migrant associations, but, from the early 1990s onwards, these 'multicultural' policies were declared a failure. In the years that followed, the presence of a growing migration population – and especially the presence of an allegedly 'unassimilated' 'second-generation' Moroccan youth – was increasingly framed as a threat to the socio-cultural and ethnic reproduction of the nation (De Koning 2016). In response to accusations made against non-white migrants, scholars and activists have documented racism and discrimination in the Netherlands, revealing how non-white Dutch are discriminated against in the education system (Weiner 2016), the labour market (Andriessen et al. 2012), and are subject to ethnic profiling (Amnesty International 2013).

In this context, migrant men struggled to hang on to that sense of *istiqrār*. They framed their own migration as a 'sacrifice' for their children's future, which itself was constantly placed under threat (cf Abrego 2014). The second author started off fieldwork by presenting the research at different Egyptian associations in Amsterdam. From there, the author followed Egyptian fathers as they continued their efforts to create a better future for themselves and their children, even if, as was often the case in the context of divorce, they were no longer in touch with them. The author accompanied Egyptian fathers as they went to welfare offices, healthcare organizations, and their children's schools.

In the following section, we show how the conditions both inside Egypt and in the Netherlands constantly placed hope under threat for these men. Migration represented a means to establish oneself as a respectable man. However, planning for migration, and the actual act of migration renders that difficult. Using two case studies, with a young aspiring migrant in Egypt, and a divorced Egyptian father in Amsterdam, we show how life constituted continuous affective oscillation between phases of existential mobility and immobility, hope and *ikti'āb*, with fear, doubt, and distraction in between. These cases are representative of the experiences of other interlocutors, however we stick to just two cases to allow for the necessary depth that our analytical focus requires.

Longing for movement in Egypt

Mostafa, 27 at the time of writing late 2018, grew up in Mahalla, a city of 500,000 in the Nile Delta. His parents both have relatively low-paid, but secure government jobs obtained on the back of the public-sector expansion that followed Nasser's socialist reform programme. His father also spent a few years earning money in Turkey. This, along with access to free education and subsidised housing, enabled them to label themselves 'middle-class' (Armbrust 1999; Schielke 2012). Yet for Mostafa's generation, this employment pathway was disrupted on the back of 1990s IMF-sponsored economic reforms. What had once been a thriving garment industry in Mahalla was decimated. After obtaining what has become a low-quality public university education in business administration, Mostafa's employment options consisted of either low-level 'boring' government administration, or small-scale poorly paid and insecure accountancy jobs. He described Mahalla as a place 'without a future,' a place of stagnation and disconnection from the global economy, which

could not fulfil his dreams to 'influence the world,' and therefore decided to come to Cairo, because its educational opportunities, international companies, and high-class consumption spaces could provide a 'career' and upscale lifestyle.

Yet in Cairo, Mostafa quickly found himself 'stuck' again. He was rejected from a high-status role in the army because he was deemed to be from a 'sha'by' (low-class) area and because of his father's low-status job.² Instead, he entered a call centre, working for an outsourced Arabic-language mobile phone account. Cairo's burgeoning call centre industry represents a recent government effort to promote graduate employment. It therefore provides a steady stream of jobs, but has become notorious among graduates for being low-paid – Mostafa earned 1400LE (\$175) a month at the time of research – temporary and insecure, and degrading. It does not even provide a basis for men to be accepted for marriage.³

Mostafa initially lived with his aunt, who resided in a gated compound on the outskirts of Cairo on the back of her husband's migration to the Gulf. He travelled three hours each way to and from work. He quickly developed the idea that he had to travel abroad if he were to change his trajectory. He was not keen on the Gulf, owing to its reputation for racial discrimination, and for pushing migrant men, like his uncle, into a lifetime of work. During this time, he heard about possible employment in central Russia, but was warned off going by an acquaintance who suggested his life would be consumed by work. Instead, like many other young educated Egyptians, Mostafa felt that studying abroad would increase his chances of obtaining a high-skilled job in Europe or returning to open a business in Egypt. He began applying for foreign scholarships to do a Master's degree. In the last few years, while living and working in Cairo, Mostafa has applied and been rejected from 18 scholarships. The last was the Chevening Scholarship, a UK government diplomatic effort to help 'young leaders and professionals' across the world undertake a UK Master's degree. Successful candidates possess a very different class profile to Mostafa, belonging to the upper-middle classes who enjoy with international private education.

While preparing applications Mostafa felt hope for a mobile future: migration to Europe, a high-status education, followed by a highly-skilled job. It oriented his whole life outside work. Yet, each new rejection instigated intense feelings of 'ikti'āb', in which he did not speak to anyone for a few days. However, despite incessant rejections, Mostafa did not stop trying. He overcame this by scouring the internet for more scholarships, before focusing his mind on the application and fulfilling its requirements. To keep up motivation, he called on God's power, and utilized self-help quotes and stories which told him not to give up, to keep straining and working hard on his skills. One such story, which the author heard repeatedly from other young men, referenced Thomas Edison's 1000 attempts to invent the lightbulb, which proves that hard work pays off.

After being fired from the call centre because he had spent too long away from work following a broken arm, Mostafa searched hard for a job with regular shifts, which would enable him to take evening courses in HR and English. By late 2018, Mostafa had invested over 10,000LE (equal to \$1250 in 2015) in courses. He also began doing language exchanges with foreigners who were studying Arabic in Cairo, initially establishing a network through the author.⁴ Although Mostafa did take time to relax, spending time with a few friends, watching movies, and heading on occasional trips to the coast, he actively tried not to 'distract' himself too much from his career. He judged other 'lazy' youth who were not doing everything they could to achieve social mobility, spending too much time in cafes, watching football, and smoking hashish.

Courses and self-study all reproduced repetitively a feeling of existential mobility for a good future that enabled Mostafa to cope with his stagnant present in Cairo. This feeling for him was directed towards international educational migration, as a result of Egypt's dilapidated economy and young Egyptians' exposure to a global circulation of knowledge about possible lifestyles abroad (Ferguson 2006). After four years in Cairo, Mostafa has experienced some, albeit fragmented mobility. As of late 2018, he is working in a translation company in HR, earning a salary of 3000LE (\$170) per month. He is also looking after some private investment clients from his previous job as an investment advisor for Saudi business men. But he is still set on migration – he is now managing

a group on Facebook which posts scholarship opportunities to its thousands of members – because he perceives that his earning trajectory in Egypt will inhibit his ability to live the life he desires, to buy a car, live in a compound, or send his children to private school – particularly in an economic context which has halved the value of Egypt's pound against the dollar.

Mostafa is also now engaged to a European woman. Although he met her through language exchange, marriage between Egyptian men and European women has become an increasing phenomenon, particularly in Egypt's tourist resorts (Karkabi 2011). Mostafa though was loath to adhere to the stereotype of 'gawāz al-biznis' (marriage for business). He wanted to feel like he earned it. He was also concerned by the struggles of friends who migrated to Europe through marriage and ended up in low-status, low-paid jobs, and subsequently got divorced. As of late-2018, he was therefore still set on scholarship opportunities. They sustained a precarious sense of mobility towards a good life. Yet, this was beginning to create tensions with his fiancée, who was becoming tired of waiting. Thus, whether he migrates in less fortunate circumstances, like many of my other interlocutors who have now migrated to countries in the Gulf, and as far afield as Malaysia, or whether they break off the engagement and he stays in Egypt, the question will become, again, how he keeps a sense of existential mobility and hope alive.

Sustaining movement in the Netherlands

Mahmoud was born in the mid-1960s in a popular neighbourhood in the heart of Cairo. When he was fifteen years old and about to graduate from high school, his father passed away. As the oldest son, Mahmoud became responsible for providing for his siblings. In Egypt, opportunities for uneducated young middle-class men were few and far between, and so he went to work in Iraq. In 1991, when US sanctions against Saddam Hussein's Iraq were taking their toll, Mahmoud lost his job. By then, his sister, who had joined her husband in Amsterdam, encouraged him to come and try his luck there. He successfully applied for a tourist visa, which he planned to overstay.

In Amsterdam, Mahmoud quickly found work as a painter. His working conditions were harsh but he earned a good enough salary to prepare for marriage within a few years. Initially, he had set his eye on Dutch converts to Islam, or, in his words, 'someone who knows how to carry herself in Dutch culture but also follows the path of Islam' and someone through whom he could obtain a residency permit or even citizenship. This was not an uncommon preference among participants in Amsterdam, for whom converts represent the best of both worlds. Like most other men, Mahmoud eventually had to settle for less, as he put it. In 2002, he married his sister's friend, a Moroccan who had gained citizenship through her previous marriage to a second generation Dutch-Moroccan man. As a result of his marriage, Mahmoud became a Dutch citizen as well, although it took him a few years to do so.

In the years that followed, Mahmoud continued working as a painter, providing for his wife, her daughter, and, after they were born, their two sons. Things were not always harmonious, and there were times that Mahmoud had to stay at his sister's flat, but in general, Mahmoud was happy with how things were working out and felt that he and his sons were moving towards a better future. Then, in 2012, as the global economic crisis decimated Dutch real estate, Mahmoud lost his job. As a prerequisite for receiving benefits, Mahmoud had to enter a labour-market reintegration program run by the government. Mahmoud was sceptical. He was suffering from pain in his shoulders and back and no longer wanted to do physically demanding work. He also expected that other work would not be available for him. His case manager was more optimistic, energetically telling him that there is suitable work for everyone. For a while, Mahmoud applied for work, without any luck. Until today, he depends on welfare benefits. Meanwhile, his sons were struggling in school and had few friends. Mahmoud, who now spent a lot of time at home, blamed his wife and her supposed lack of parenting skills. 'She does not concentrate on the children,' he often said. 'She is just on her phone or watching television.'

Unsurprisingly, tensions surfaced again, and after years of intense fighting, his wife announced her intention to divorce him in the spring of 2017. Mahmoud objected, but she persisted and called the

police, telling them that Mahmoud was abusive and planning to take her and the children to join the Islamic State in Syria. Later, reports found that these claims were unsubstantiated but at the time the police were compelled to take them seriously and urged Mahmoud to leave the house. Mahmoud's Egyptian friends, many of whom had gone through similar breakups advised him to obey, if only to keep some leverage with the police and other state institutions, and to stay on the children's good side. As Mahmoud left the house, his benefits were cut to a homelessness allowance of a few hundred euros a month, not nearly enough to even rent a room in Amsterdam.

Many participants in Amsterdam had gone through a similar divorce, often becoming homeless in the process, and some ended up staying on the street. Mahmoud was lucky enough to have a network of friends and family who were willing to host him, sometimes for months at a time. But, physically removed from his children, he struggled to maintain his position as a father. According to his visitation schedule, he was supposed to see his sons once a week at their mother's sister's place. However, more often than not, they did not show up, according to Mahmoud because their mother was using them as leverage in their on-going divorce negotiations, but according to their mother because they did not always want to spend time with him. Instead, Mahmoud sought to assert himself through the professionals gathered around the family.

For months, Mahmoud tried to convince their case manager at the child protection services to arrange a meeting between him and his sons, but he was repeatedly dismissed. 'Your sons need time to adjust sir. You need to be patient. If you keep your distance now, they will eventually be grateful and take up contact again.' He was similarly dismissed by his sons' teachers when he proposed to spend one hour after school helping them with their homework, like he used to do. 'We arranged additional tuition sir. The only thing they need right now is quiet and peace. We know it is difficult but you better maintain your distance. If you keep on trying, you will only push them away. You do not need to worry, they are in good hands.'

As he was being pushed out of his sons' life, as he experienced it, Mahmoud felt he had nothing left: 'I am exactly where I was when I came thirty years ago, except now I am old and there is not future for me anymore,' he said one day when he was particularly frustrated. He contemplated moving to Egypt and starting over again, like some other divorced Egyptian men do, but could not bear returning under what he perceived as shameful circumstances and, perhaps more importantly, was convinced that his sons would eventually need him to become successful and 'respectable men' ('*rigāla muḥtaramyn*'). So, instead of moving to Egypt, Mahmoud took on the struggle of getting his life back on track in order to be ready for when he could assume his role as a father again.

To do so, Mahmoud felt he needed a place for his own. However, to rent a place, he had to increase his income. Without a permanent address, he could not retrieve his benefits, and so Mahmoud had to start working again. The Dutch economy had recovered and was booming again, so Mahmoud's reintegration case manager was as optimistic as before. 'There are plenty opportunities for you sir', the case manager said. Inspired, Mahmoud applied for a couple of jobs, but he was rejected time and again. Still motivated, he proposed the idea of starting his own business, for which the case manager complimented him. There were no banks willing to provide him a loan, but in the end, Mahmoud was able to secure a loan from his younger brother who was working in Qatar, with which he took over a friend's business. Unfortunately, the business turned out to be in bad shape, and Mahmoud quickly went bankrupt. 'I feel like I am hitting a wall and I don't know how to break it,' he said the day that he had to announce his bankruptcy.

In the aftermath of his divorce, Mahmoud could understand his ex-wife, but he felt outright betrayed by the Dutch state. 'I still remember the day I became Dutch,' he said, many years later. 'I went to the town hall. There was a big ceremony. They told me it was a new start and I believed that from then on, I would get my rights in the Netherlands. I told myself I would have to accept the Dutch law and customs, and I did. I never did anything wrong. I always paid my taxes, and now they just leave me out on the street like that? Take my children away from me? How can they do that?' he asked, in agony. Evoking a classical understanding of citizenship, Mahmoud expected some form of

social security in return for following Dutch law and customs. As a result of becoming homeless and being kept away from his children, he thus felt that the Dutch state was failing him.

After a year of struggling, Mahmoud decided that the only way forward was to marry someone who could provide him with a place to live, just as many of his Egyptian friends in Amsterdam had done. This would also restore his sense of his masculinity: as ‘a man needs a woman and a woman needs a man,’ he often said. He was still interested in Dutch converts, but in April 2018 he married an Egyptian woman who was living in another Dutch city with her eight year old son from her previous husband who had passed away while she was still pregnant. To his regret, his marriage pushed his biological sons to end all contact. Mahmoud hopes his sons will one day realize that he will always be there for them. Thanks to his marriage, he is back on benefits, although he still aims to start his own business. However, at the time of writing in late 2018, he was more focused on developing his second marriage and cultivating his relation to his new wife’s son, who he treats as his own. This means that he helps him with his schoolwork, takes him to football, and occasionally for a fun outing, for example to a theme park, distracting him from the strained relations with his biological sons. He also enjoys the quiet of his new home, and often just sits watching Egyptian television.

Oscillating between hope and depression

The migratory trajectories of Mostafa and Mahmoud are set in different historical contexts and they are at very different stages in their lives. Back in the 1990s, Mahmoud was able to travel to Europe on a tourist visa, in the 2010s, Mostafa’s visa applications are being rejected time and again. Mostafa, who was in his mid-twenties, aspired to migrate as a means to build a career and establish himself as a man. Mahmoud, who was in his early sixties, experienced the relative stability of family life but had to start all over again after an unsettling divorce.

Their experiences were also highly class and gender specific. Mostafa, who was born to a lower-middle class family, moved to Cairo to chase a globalised middle-class lifestyle. As a man, he was encouraged to become financially independent in order to ‘open a house’, get married and start a family. After many stunted attempts in Cairo, he perceived of migration as the only way to achieve these dreams. As the oldest son, Mahmoud, who was also born to a middle-class family, was expected to provide for his siblings after his father passed away. Without a formal education or useful contacts, he could not access the required jobs to do so in Egypt so he went to work in Iraq and the Netherlands. As a migrant man, he could only access low-skilled, physically demanding work, eventually wearing him out. Coming out of his divorce, he found that, as a man, he had to regain his financial independence in order to establish himself again. By contrast, Egyptian women have been more restricted in their ability to chase employment dreams in Cairo and beyond. Instead, they have been encouraged to stay put in place and, predominantly, only consider migration through marriage to a migrant man. This is slightly less so for upper-middle class women, who increasingly move abroad to study or work in more high-end professions.

Despite the differences between them, Mostafa and Mahmoud’s migrant trajectories were both constituted a continuous oscillation between a sense of existential mobility and immobility, between the hope that they were moving towards a better future and the depressing sense of being stuck in life, with moments of fear, doubt, joy and distraction emerging in between. Mostafa was hopeful that taking soft-skills or language courses, or applying for international scholarships or a European university program would bring about a better future, but became ‘mukta’ib’ (depressed) by his stagnant career and the many rejections he received. Mahmoud hoped that taking out a loan to start a company and getting remarried would bring about stability again, but bankruptcy and strained relations with his children depressed him. By comparing their affective migration trajectories we tease out the migratory regimes that produce such emotional oscillation both before and after migratory movement.

Mostafa’s oscillation inside Egypt reflected the affective lives of other interlocutors, who similarly conceived of migration as the key to a career and upscale lifestyle. This oscillation resulted from their lack

of opportunities in Egypt and a European migratory regime that extends a meritocratic terrain of scholarships and self-help into the global south, reproducing the promise that migration, and thus social mobility are possible for anyone who works hard while keeping actual movement restricted to a select group of already highly privileged (Khan 2012). When pressed on why he anxiously held on to his aspiration to migrate, despite encroaching doubts about his chances, Mostafa answered:

'It's like when someone falls into a deep hole and is trying to reach the top to get out. Every time you get near the edge you fall again, so I think what is better for me, to keep trying or stay in the hole? I decided to not stop trying because one time I might succeed to get out. If I stay still I will kill myself. I don't mean kill myself literally, but when you live without a goal or target, or hope, you live like a dead person. I cannot imagine myself to live like an animal, to eat, drink, and sleep, or like most "sha'by" people, that's all they do. So I search for a source every time to find inspiration again. A source means hope, anything that can make me dream and therefore renews the hope inside me'

Mostafa's thus fuelled his existential oscillation consciously. He still held on to the promises, despite the depressing experience of seeing his scholarship and visa applications rejected time and again, actively keeping alive his hope for a better future. This meant ritualistically focusing on what he had done wrong, because, in his words: 'I have to blame myself, because if I just look at the hard circumstances, I would not be able to keep my goal alive.' Responding to fears of friends and family that he would continue to become 'mukta'ib' (depressed), he simply responded: 'I will be depressed anyway if I don't try, I have no other choice.' He even resorted to keeping his activities secret, in order to avoid 'kalam mohbaT' (depressing words), thus creating a privatized affective space of hope. This involved rebuking familial moral pressure to marry.

Some of these young men, Mostafa included, have and will continue to locate opportunities to migrate. However, after leaving Egypt, they are likely to continue to experience oscillation, potentially inspiring them to move on again, as Mahmoud did when he went from Iraq to Amsterdam. More than twenty years after arriving in Amsterdam, Mahmoud and other participants in Amsterdam were still oscillating. Their oscillation resulted from the inherent discrepancies of the Dutch labour market and welfare state. The Dutch labour market continues to boast the capitalist promise that everyone can work, and that hard work will pay off, as Mahmoud's reintegration manager did. Yet, in practice, it pushes migrant men into physically demanding work that breaks their bodies down to the point that they can no longer work. As they come to depend on benefits, they are too easily dismissed as 'lazy migrants' who are unwilling to work and illicitly extort public resources. Meanwhile, the Dutch welfare state promises to take of all children while reproducing inequalities along lines of race, class, and gender (Verkuyten and Thijs 2002). Their oscillation also resulted from marriage as an institution that promises a stability, but often leads to prolonged conflict, culminating in marital breakdown and divorce with unsettling consequences such as homeless, financial insecurity and strained parent-child relations.

Like Mostafa, Mahmoud often kept the details of his dire situation from his friends and family, creating not just a privatized affective space of hope, but also of depression. Yet, like Mostafa, he also held on to the promise of a better future, reproduced by his upbeat reintegration manager and reassuring family manager. 'This is not the first time I face difficulties,' he often stated, matter-of-factly. 'But I will always keep going on, because no matter how hard it gets, I know my children will have a better life. I have to hang on, because in the end I have to be there to motivate them to work hard and focus on school. If I don't do it, than who will?' he asked.

The migratory regimes that structured Mostafa's and Mahmoud's emotional oscillation are 'cruel.' Writing about the post-industrial US, Lauren Berlant (2006, 2011) argues that people living in extended conditions of crisis form a cruelly optimistic attachment to 'objects of desire' which embody a cluster of promises that define liberal-democratic fantasies of the good life – such as intimacy, dieting, voting, or the 'belief that capitalism is a meritocracy that rewards active competence.'⁵ Despite the continual breakdown of these promises in the context of neoliberal restructuring, and the discovery that their realization is either 'impossible, sheer fantasy, or too possible, and toxic,' people maintain an attachment to them because the 'continuity of [the

attachment's] form provides something of the continuity of the subject's sense of what it means to keep on living on and to look forward to being in the world' (Berlant 2011; 24).

These attachments were replicated among Egyptian migrants. Mostafa sustained an attachment to the meritocratic promise that individual hard work could produce success, which is embedded in soft-skills courses, self-help literature, and international scholarships. This attachment also sustained his sense of 'ikti'ab,' and even cruelly impeded his chance to migrate with the help of his fiancée. In Amsterdam, Mahmoud formed an attachment to the promise that he could again become a financially-secure father providing for his children, which was constantly fed to him by welfare professionals and labour-reintegration programs. However, again this attachment proved cruel as he was pushed into debt and further away from his children as a result of his structural position in the Dutch labour market and welfare state. Both were caught by the hope generated by institutional and meritocratic promises of future (migratory) success for all, which also generate enormous frustrations as a result of the structural reproduction of inequality. Despite repeated disappointment, Mostafa and Mahmoud kept returning to the promise of future fulfilment, and the objects in which it was embedded, because they felt they had no other option, it was the only way that they could sustain their 'sense of what it means to keep on living on and to look forward to being in the world' (Ibid: 24).

However, if the migratory regimes that structure Mostafa's and Mahmoud's emotional oscillation are cruel, the fate of their migratory future remains unknown. Migratory structures do allow for productive openings, if not in the way initially anticipated. For example, the option for Mostafa to travel to Europe via his fiancée already provides an opportunity which was not open before. Yet, at the moment of writing in late 2018, Mostafa is planning to start his own business with clients accumulated from the translation company. If that works out, he might wish to stay in Egypt rather than travel in uncertain circumstances. Mahmoud's divorce has inspired him to start a business, even if he is back on benefits for now. If his business works out, it would cultivate his masculine pride of leaving his sons with something tangible. Moreover, if his second marriage works out, it may induce that sense of stability that he has been after. For the moment, it at least allows him to assume his self-ascribed role of a father who provides for a better future.

Conclusion: existential mobility regimes

Recent scholarship has already drawn attention to how prolonged periods of waiting and stuckness have become an important expression of contemporary capitalist regimes (Honwana 2012; Jansen 2015). What we have done in this article is complicate this argument further. Migration has been viewed as both a consequence of existential stuckness in a particular location, and a cause of renewed stuckness in destination countries. Yet, by delving into the lives of Egyptian men who are chasing a masculine ideals of career success, marriage, and fatherhood, both before and after the actual act of migration, we have shown how what might have been labelled or perceived as periods of existential 'stuckness' are actually experienced through a continuous oscillation between existential mobility, felt as transitory hope that the good life is coming through migration, a new job, or the possibility for renewed family stability, and existential immobility, felt as 'ikti'ab' as a result of a new blockage in those pursuits.

In recent years, migration studies have been adept at conceptualising the complexities of the mobility regimes which regulate the spatial movements of migrants (Schapendonk and Steel 2014; Lipphard & Schwarz, 2018). This was in part a response to the limitations presented by a long-established focus on migrant communities in host societies. Yet, by collaboratively bringing together two ethnographic projects and focusing on emotional experience – which remains under-researched in migration scholarship – we have shown how a methodological focus on both would-be migrants in their countries of origin and long-term migrants in a host society can reveal migrant struggles which are more existential in nature. Existing literature explores these stages separately, yet we have shown that it might be productive to bring them together.

By doing this, and moving beyond a pure focus on migrant endurance or persistence, we have shown that migrants at different stages of migrant trajectories are being impacted and governed by mobility

regimes which also operate on an existential level, producing continuous emotional oscillation. Aspiring migrants to Europe are kept tied to a meritocratic terrain of scholarships and self-help which promise the possibility of migration to all, while border regimes in reality restrict it to a privileged few. Migrants who reach Europe are exposed to a promising labour market and welfare state that convince migrant men that they can provide their children with a better future while also marginalizing migrant men and their children. These regimes work to cruelly keep people attached to their legitimacy, particularly as they also sometimes provide the opportunity for limited movement for some, yet their tendency to also produce such unequal access to those promises means they will continue to be productive of periods of immense frustration and depression among so many.

Notes

1. The exact divorce rates among Egyptians are unknown. However, indicators of the Dutch Central Bureau for Statistics suggest that divorce rates are well above the national average, which stood at 40% in 2017. According to some Egyptian interlocutors, divorce rates among Egyptians stand at 80%.
2. The word sha'by has been used since the 1940s, by the media before it came into daily language (Ghannam 2002: 79). It comes from the word sha'b, which means people or folk. In the aftermath of Egypt's infitah, sha'by has been used in a derogatory way to describe 'vulgar' and 'uneducated' lower-classes.
3. Egypt's minimum wage was 1200LE per month in 2014–2016. Jobs in the internationally-orientated economy provide wages on average five times higher than those outside (De Koning 2009). Even international call centre jobs provided salaries up to 3000LE, but they were out of reach for these young men due to their English level.
4. This brings up methodological questions related to the author's influence on Mostafa's journey. However, as the text makes clear, this constituted just one attempt to develop his skills.
5. http://rorotoko.com/interview/20120605_berlant_lauren_on_cruel_optimism/.

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