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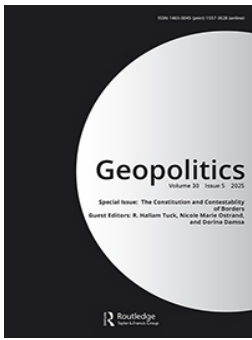
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Ruijtenberg, W.D.; Baerwaldt, N.

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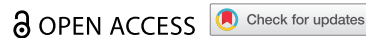


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RESEARCH ARTICLE



I Choose to Live: Mobility Work in and in between Cairo and Amsterdam

Wiebe Ruijtenberg and Neske Baerwaldt

Van Vollenhoven Institute for Law, Governance and Society, Leiden Law School, Leiden, The Netherlands

ABSTRACT

Drawing upon fifteen months of ethnographic fieldwork with Egyptians in Cairo and Amsterdam,¹ along with interviews conducted for our podcast *de Verbranders*, in this paper, we describe the activities in which people engage as they strive to cross borders meant to keep them out and settle in places designed to exclude and subordinate them. We term these activities ‘mobility work’ arguing that wherever borders place obstacles between people and the lives they aspire to lead, there is also the work of overcoming these obstacles. In theorising mobility work, we pay attention to what people do as they encounter and surmount borders, rather than the identities imposed upon them by borders, incorporating insights from feminist scholarship on reproductive labour to grapple with the scope and depth of this work. Empirically, we observe that mobility work is unequally distributed, encompasses both legalised and illegalised activities, and is carried out individually and collectively. It multiplies as borders proliferate, interlocking in intricate ways with nationality, race, gender, class, age, and ability. Nonetheless, even as restrictions on mobility deepen and rearticulate these inequalities and shape self-identifications, our study also sheds light on people’s waywardness as they choose to live.

Introduction

At age 25, Mostafa had already concluded that, for someone like him, trying to make it in Egypt was like trying to push a 100 kg rock through the streets of Cairo: incredibly hard and ultimately futile, because even if you managed to move it a bit, you were still stuck in the same place. Instead, he decided to try to move to Europe where he hoped to find a cart to put his rock on. Evaluating his options, he chose to invest his time, energy, and money in European university applications. He knew there were other routes, but he also knew those routes were dangerous and would not open up the middle-class future he had in mind for himself. But, as he kept on getting rejected, he admitted that trying to become an international student was beginning to feel a lot like pushing that rock again. And so, he began to consider alternatives.

CONTACT Wiebe Ruijtenberg ✉ w.d.ruijtenberg@law.leidenuniv.nl 📮 Van Vollenhoven Institute for Law, Governance and Society, Leiden Law School, Steenschuur 25, Room number A1.57 2311 ES, Leiden, The Netherlands

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Observing, with Mostafa, how laborious moving to and settling in Europe is made to be for people in a similar position to him, and inspired by the feminist project of identifying the invisibilised labour that provides capitalism's background conditions (Fraser 2015), in this article, we theorise people's efforts to move and settle as a form of reproductive labour, which we term 'mobility work'. To lay the groundwork for our theorisation of mobility work, we first bring critical literature on Europe's borders into conversation with literature describing the depletion of life and livelihood in today's post-colonies and the widely shared feeling of being stuck in life that this engenders (Hage 2009; M'charek 2020). In doing so, we show borders as generating and unequally distributing mobility work, and mobility work as valorising us as individuals and communities for, against, and beyond the systems that keep us unequal and divided (Federici 2012).

The analysis we present in this paper is rooted in over a decade of (academic) friendship and a shared commitment to, and practice of, siding with people against the systems that keep them in place or push them to places they do not want to go. In addition, we developed our analysis in the context of our podcast, *de Verbranders*, where we examine the histories and impacts of Europe's borders in conversation with academics, activists, and people who experience illegalisation and/or organise against it.

We also draw on fifteen months of ethnographic fieldwork with Egyptians in Cairo and Amsterdam, conducted between 2016 and 2018 by Wiebe Ruijtenberg. Out of this larger body of material, we present the stories of Mostafa and Anastasia, two people who involved Wiebe in their efforts to relocate and settle where they desired, revealing, in the process, what it took to try and move and settle against the grain, and how their efforts to do so shaped the most intimate parts of their lives.

Bringing together insights we gained through *de Verbranders* with the journeys of Egyptians, we show that mobility work is unevenly distributed, vast, burdensome, often hidden from view, and defies legal categorisations from above. Zooming in on the journeys of Mostafa and Anastasia in particular, we explore how mobility work is shaped by, and also helps to shape, a particular person's disposition, the social relations they are embedded in, and how race, gender, class, age, and (vulner)ability come to matter in a person's life. Drawing on the feminist project of attending to forms of work that keep life going but are often invisibilised and un(der)remunerated (Federici, 2012), we recognise this work as both individual and collective, and (re)productive of emotions, identities, social relations, and indeed, of life itself.

We conclude by observing that, while borders are fixated on classifying, ordering, and segregating humanity, they never fully succeed in doing so. Instead, like reproductive labour more generally, mobility work exists in a complicated relationship with capital, whereby capital feeds off people's stuckedness, rightlessness, and willingness to sustain themselves, while the

very labour of reproducing life in the face of borders also produces new subjectivities and movements against capital accumulation. People engage in mobility work to live, after all, and many take up this work by adjusting to, subverting, or simply surviving the systems that seek to govern them. As a form of reproductive labour, mobility work is generative of life itself, something that can never be fully ordered because it abounds in waywardness (Hartman 2019), spilling beyond categorisations from above.

Borders, or How Moving and Settling is Made into a Form of Unevenly Distributed Reproductive Labour

In this world, moving between Cairo and Amsterdam is not equally easy or difficult for everyone. Instead, legal regimes and bordering practices sort humanity into differently categorised people compelled to move and settle under radically different conditions. The Egyptian journeys to the Netherlands we trace in this study are crucially mediated by the Schengen Visa Code, which differentiates along the lines of nationality and class, and, although less explicitly, race, gender, age, and ability (Spijkerboer 2018). With most Egyptians finding themselves on the unfavourable side of Europe's visa requirements, those who wish to journey anyway are left to either work to meet said requirements or rely on illegalised means of travel, exposing themselves to the dangers of those journeys (Cuttitta and Last 2019; Isakjee et al. 2020; Khosravi 2007; Pallister-Wilkins and Roe 2019).

In recent years, critical border scholars have increasingly situated the emergence of these modern iterations of unequal mobility regimes as intimately bound up in, and constitutive of, histories of colonialism and empire, ecological depletion, and the racialised stratification of human life (Boatcă 2021; Boatcă and Roth 2016; El-Enany 2020; Jones 2014; Sharma 2020). This scholarship explores not only how mobility controls render the experience of moving and settling vastly different for differently situated people, but also understands the governance of human mobility alongside, and in relation to, the extraction of resources and the movement of goods and finance (Koram 2022), and as an important site of state transformation (Mongia 2018) and racial formation (De Noronha 2019). Viewed through this lens, borders emerge not as lines in the sand, but as co-constituting the social and material conditions under which people make their lives (e.g., Anderson, Sharma, and Wright 2009; Walia 2021), that is, as worldmaking.

In her work on the coastal town of Zarzis, Tunisia, Amade M'charek (2020, 2023) attends to such connections ethnographically, weaving a thread between migrant bodies washing ashore, and the chronic depletion of life and livelihood in a world marked by ongoing colonial relations. M'charek (2020, 423–425) recounts feeling anger upon witnessing a truck carrying salt from Zarzis to France for the company Cotusal. In the late nineteenth century, the

French government authorised the extraction of salt from Zarzis' salt plains. Today, a century and a half later, French companies continue to mine salt and other minerals, paying the same price negotiated under colonial rule: 5 Tunisian cents for a tonne of salt. This results in a situation where Cotusal pays only a fraction of what people in Zarzis pay for the same salt. Similarly, olive oil and sea sponges produced in and around Zarzis are shipped to, among other places, European markets, labelled and sold as 'Italian' and 'Cypriot' products. As M'charek points out in *de Verbranders* episode we recorded with her,² unlike most people, consumer goods produced in the post-colonies can easily move and adopt a European identity.

Over the years, unsustainable extraction on an industrial scale and unequal trade have polluted the soil and sea and depleted the water resources in the areas surrounding Zarzis, leading to a pervasive sense of despair among residents, as 'there are no jobs, no prospects; only the fear of things getting worse' (M'charek 2020, 422). This predicament is by no means unique to Tunisia; it resonates deeply throughout the world, particularly, though not exclusively, in regions that were once, or continue to be, colonised, as well as in 'peripheries within the core' (Trauger and Fluri 2021). In Libya (Tjønn and Lemberg-Pedersen 2022), Senegal (Chen-Zion 2022), Ghana (Koram 2022), the Philippines (Lumba 2022), the Congo (Voelcker 2023), and Iran (Khosravi 2019), variations of this dynamic unfold, whereby vital resources and wealth are extracted, environments are polluted, sovereign debt is spiralling, structural adjustment is implemented, pockets of affluence burgeon alongside widespread poverty and ecological depletion, and people face border regimes stacked against them.

In Egypt, similar processes have been at play. After gaining independence in 1952, then-President Gamal Abdel Nasser industrialised the country and built an extensive government apparatus, creating a path towards a middle-class lifestyle for an increasing number of Egyptians by creating (government) jobs and enhancing access to affordable housing, education, and healthcare. Towards the end of the 1960s, Nasser's programme was abandoned by President Anwar el-Sadat, who opened the country to foreign direct investment. Sadat's successor, President Hosni Mubarak, continued to divest from public services under the banner of large-scale structural adjustment programmes imposed by the IMF and the World Bank (Mitchell 2002). These policies split the Egyptian middle-class into a cosmopolitan upper-middle-class with access to visas (De Koning 2009) and a middle-class poor without (Pettit 2023).

In Egypt, as in other national liberation states, promises of betterment, on the one hand, and ongoing precaritisation on the other, have created a discrepancy between people's aspirations and what life offers them. This dissonance produces a widespread sense of what scholars have labelled as 'stuckedness' (Hage 2009), 'impasse' (Berlant 2011), or 'limbo' (Jansen 2015).

In these contexts, leaving for an ‘elsewhere with a future’ (Khosravi 2019, 422) has been scripted as a way out (e.g. Schielke, 2020; Grill 2012). Indeed, as anthropologists have found, people’s struggles to stay put, move, or settle are existential, both in the material sense and in the effort to hold onto hope for a better or at least more liveable future (e.g., Tošić and Lems, 2019). Or, as Ghassan Hage puts it: ‘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’ (Hage 2005, 470).

Meanwhile, on the other side of the Mediterranean, policymakers in Europe have long evoked the racist spectre of uncivilised third-world-looking masses (Hage 2009) coming to benefit from ‘our’ achievements to advocate for more selective migration policies. While often depicted as being about exclusion, as Luke de Noronha writes, ‘immigration restrictions are, in practice, about managing competing interests, rather than actually “expelling all the migrants”’ (2020: 6). The management of these competing interests has resulted in, and continues to produce, a spectacle of exclusion at Europe’s frontiers, alongside a class of legally vulnerable, racialised, and thereby cheap labour residing within (De Genova 2019; De Giorgi 2010), leading a new generation of scholars to engage with the lens of racial capitalism to interrogate the dynamic relation between borders, race, and capitalism (Bhattacharyya 2018; Korvensyrjä 2024; Krivonos 2023; Rexhepi 2022).

And yet, despite – or perhaps because of – these always rigged and ever-shifting rules and regulations, many people simply refuse to settle for the lives granted to them. With the Autonomy of Migration literature, we observe that this refusal speaks to the vitality of people, including people on the move, a vitality that can manifest as (collective) struggle and resistance with the potential to drive material and legal change. At the same time, we also recognise that subverting the rules is not the only strategy people use to survive. As the journeys we present in this paper illustrate, people are inventive in extending their possibilities to live, whether by fitting themselves into legal categories, travelling unauthorised, or both. They overstay tourist visas, get married to acquire spousal visas, produce CVs that make them eligible to become international students, seasonal workers, or expats, and try to cross borders with forged documents or without being noticed by the authorities.

Meanwhile, in a profoundly utopian/dystopian effort to control human mobility and settlement (Anderson, Sharma, and Wright 2009), that is, to control *life* itself, policymakers have delegitimised this ‘sheer incorrigibility’ (De Genova 2017, 5) through labels like ‘sham marriages’, ‘fake passports’, and ‘illegal travellers’, allowing them to fashion themselves as fighting an enemy. The resulting ‘fight against illegal migration’ is circular, whereby people’s efforts to live and thrive despite or against the rules imposed on them are met with the proliferation of evermore bordering infrastructures and practices.

These range from the externalisation of border controls, notably through carrier sanctions and the financing of camps, police forces, and coastguards in so-called ‘third countries’ (FitzGerald 2020; Spijkerboer 2018), to the fortification of borders that mark and make national territories (Brown 2010), and the internalisation of borders, achieved by linking the right to reside to the right to work and access (most) welfare and healthcare services (Van der Leun 2003).

Observing this multiplication of bordering practices, Chris Rumford (2013) introduced the concept of borderwork to redirect our attention from the people and places we traditionally associate with borders – border guards and borderlines – to acts of bordering undertaken by various people in locations such as airports, embassies, schools, trains, stations, and housing. This shift from identity to activity brings into view a much larger field of work, producing the differentiated conditions under which people live their lives.

In this paper, we argue that borderwork generates and unequally distributes its opposite – that is, the work of adjusting to, overcoming, circumventing, or surviving borders. As visa requirements become more selective and intricate, so does the work of obtaining visas; as policing practices at the border intensify to prevent people from accessing territorialised rights, so does the work of circumventing them; and as environments are made hostile due to the linkage of legal status to employment, social services, healthcare, and housing, the ingenuity required to sustain life amidst these forms of exclusion and subordination increase.

We conceive of these practices as mobility work. To theorise this form of work more deeply, we build on the feminist elaboration on the Marxian distinction between productive and reproductive labour. As feminists have long insisted, the development of capitalism relies not only on productive work – that is, the production of commodities and services by people understood as workers – but also on reproductive work, which includes all the labour that goes into sustaining the workforce and nurturing life itself (e.g. Federici 2012; Fraser 2015, 2016; James 2016). Importantly, as Silvia Federici (2012) points out, this work of sustaining life and relationships always carries within it a double character, both making possible systems of domination and valorising us against these systems. Indeed, ‘it is through the day-to-day activities by means of which we produce our existence that we can develop our capacity to cooperate and not only resist our dehumanisation but learn to reconstruct the world as a space of nurturing, creativity, and care’ (p. 3).

While in some instances mobility work may be productive – for example, when companies sell the service of helping people move and settle – we view mobility work as a form of reproductive labour, as the act of moving, settling, and assisting others in doing so is, in essence, about sustaining and expanding the possibilities of life, whether this work is remunerated or not, accumulative or not, made legal or illegal, or made easy or difficult. In conceptualising

mobility work as a form of reproductive labour, we explicitly seek to align ourselves with anti-capitalist, feminist scholarship and organising that has long sought to unveil the naturalisation and invisibilisation that reproductive labour undergoes because of its association with particular populations and its un(der)paid nature (Bhattacharyya 2018, Federici 2012; Fraser 2015). Indeed, while mobility work, like household and care work, is often obscured from view, it is vital for sustaining life, creating both the conditions for capital accumulation and for challenging it, carrying within it the possibility of another world, as we will show.

Methods

The analysis we advance in this paper grows out of our collaboration and friendship over many years, our extra-academic engagements with illegalised people and activists helping them move and settle where they desire, and the twenty-eight episodes we have thus far produced for our podcast *de Verbranders* since 2021. *De Verbranders*, in particular, has left a difficult-to-capture mark on this paper because of how we attempt to work together and with our guests – slowly, carefully, and thoughtfully. Behind each episode are usually many conversations before and after, amongst each other and with our guests, that have deepened our joint understanding of borders and people's many attempts to make life with and beyond them. These sustained engagements have made us sensitive to the enormous but invisible efforts that some people are compelled to undertake to overcome borders – efforts that we slowly came to understand through the lens of reproductive labour and now see as a choice for life under unequal conditions, which we label as mobility work.

We also draw on fifteen months of ethnographic fieldwork conducted by Wiebe Ruijtenberg: three months in Cairo (2016) and twelve months in Amsterdam (2017–2018). In Amsterdam, Wiebe provided support to Egyptians navigating various institutions, including the Immigration and Naturalisation Service, schools, and healthcare and welfare agencies. This involved making phone calls, assisting people with paperwork, and accompanying them to meetings with professionals, during which he translated between Dutch and Arabic, or provided support by simply being present. Additionally, Wiebe met his interlocutors for more informal discussions, which provided insights into the challenges people faced in legalising their stay and establishing a sense of belonging.

Preceding his fieldwork in Amsterdam, Wiebe travelled back and forth between Amsterdam and Cairo for four years, spending a total of eighteen months in Cairo. During this time, he met Mostafa and other young people like him, who sought him out for what he embodied: a point of entry into a future-full elsewhere. In addition to simply hanging out, they

asked Wiebe to practise English and to research and apply for visas, scholarships, and university programmes. By accommodating these requests, Wiebe gained an in-depth understanding of how differently situated Egyptians positioned themselves within the Egyptian context, their aspirations for travel, and the extensive preparations that this travelling entailed.

Out of this larger body of ethnographic material, we present the journeys of Mostafa and Anastasia. We selected their journeys purposefully, not for the shock value of their stories – both of us know many people whose lives are more deeply marked by the violence of borders – but because they were among the people who allowed Wiebe into their lives most intimately. This intimacy enables us to explore how positionality, disposition, and chance intersect as people seek to move and live, shaping both the types of borders they encounter and the forms of mobility work they undertake. Following Schapendonk and Steel (2014), we interpret these journeys as showing the connections between people's expectations and experiences of moving and settling elsewhere and the regimes that facilitate, slow down, and block their movements, while also highlighting how people make life, regardless of and despite it all.

Journeys

Both Mostafa (26) and Anastasia (21) were assigned Egyptian citizenship at birth. As a result, they are required to obtain a visa to travel to all countries neighbouring Egypt, as well as all countries in the Schengen Area, and the vast majorities of countries in the world, for that matter. Beyond this shared fact of life, they come from different class, religious, political, and regional backgrounds. Mostafa grew up in the Nile Delta, is a practising Muslim, and the son of a low-ranking civil servant, while Anastasia grew up in an upper-middle-class, Protestant family in Cairo. In addition to their different backgrounds, when Wiebe met them, they were in different places and points in their lives. Mostafa had recently graduated from university, was working in a call centre in Cairo, and was trying to make himself eligible for a European master's programme, which he saw as a necessary step towards the middle-class future he aspired to. Anastasia was living and working in Amsterdam but legally resided in Italy, where she had run off to at the age of 17, to avoid having to conform to the expectations her family had of her as a Christian girl. Among the people with whom Wiebe did fieldwork, Mostafa and Anastasia were relatively young, and they both desired a middle-class lifestyle that was not available to them in Egypt. While, as a result of their different positions and dispositions, Mostafa and Anastasia engaged in different forms of mobility work, together, their stories illustrate how deeply borders reach into peoples' lives, how devastating they can be, and how much time and energy they steal from people categorised by borders in ways that disadvantage them (see also,

Khosravi 2021). The two stories also illustrate that mobility work is directed at expanding the possibilities of life, whatever that may mean to a particular person, and is collective, whatever the collectivities involved.

Mostafa: Fitting Oneself into Categories

Today, acquiring a Schengen visa is a straightforward task only for the most privileged Egyptians, and even for them, it is work they would not have to undertake if they would not have been visa-required. For the majority of Egyptians, acquiring a Schengen visa is so out of the question that they would not even try. However, in between the absolute elite and the impoverished majority, there is a class of people for whom such visas seem within reach. For them, mobility work is the work of becoming the kind of person who could be validated as a tourist, an international student, or a high-skilled worker. This was the work Mostafa was carrying out when Wiebe met him.

At age 26, Mostafa already narrated his life as a series of disillusionments that taught him how this world really works. After obtaining a bachelor's degree in accounting, he pursued a career in the army, which taught him that the son of a simple civil servant could never become a general, as he was told explicitly. After moving to Cairo, he learned that his degree did not qualify him for the corporate 'entry level jobs' he desired, and that, instead, he would have to start at the bottom of the ladder, as he put it. At the time, this was a job in one of Cairo's call centres. In the call centre, he learned that to get to a more managerial position, he would have to pursue a master's at an international university, potentially in Cairo, but preferably in Europe or the US. He applied for several foreign scholarships, starting with the Chevening scholarship, which is meant to enable young leaders and professionals from across the world to undertake a master's degree in the UK. However, he soon learned that to qualify for such scholarships, he needed to improve his CV. This is what he was working on when he met Wiebe in the summer of 2015, and why he asked him to set up a language exchange.

Mostafa had begun the project of improving his CV by accepting a job at a small-scale accountancy firm. Although this paid significantly less than his call centre job, he felt he was gaining critical experience in the field he wanted to make a career in. Using the money he had saved while working at the call centre, he also enrolled in two post-graduate courses at the American University in Cairo: one on human resource management and one on business development. To Mostafa, these courses further confirmed that he had not learned anything substantial at university. It felt like he was finally learning how to roll that heavy rock instead of trying to carry it around, he said. Meanwhile, he was already applying for scholarships and master's programmes, initially mostly in the UK, but after he met Wiebe, also in the Netherlands. Mostafa knew that his

chances were slim, but upon receiving rejections, it turned out he had been hopeful against his own better judgement. Usually, he notified Wiebe of these rejections with a mere screenshot, after which he would not reply to messages for a few days. Eventually, he would reconnect with Wiebe by sharing a link to another course he could take, or another scholarship he could apply to. And so, the cycle of building up hope to have it crushed again continued.

At the time, Wiebe was teaching at the Cairo Institute for Liberal Arts and Science (CILAS). Unlike Mostafa, his students came from more upper-class backgrounds, mostly went to private international schools and universities, and in some instances already had corporate jobs. After Wiebe got to know them, many of his students found corporate jobs in Europe, for example working for booking.com in Amsterdam, while others were accepted into European master's programmes, won scholarships and/or did not need them because their families were able to cover their student fees and cost of living. It pained Mostafa to learn about Wiebe's students, but he also took note and, in a way, was trying to become like them, at least on paper. He was trying to acquire the same degrees, and the kinds of cultural and social capital they had at their disposal, as indicated by his choice for the American University in Cairo, and his efforts to hang on to Wiebe. Mostafa felt it was unfair that he had to work to acquire the forms of capital others are born with, but acquiring such capital at least felt worth it, unlike the work of applying for visas, which he would take on later on.

In the spring of 2016, when Wiebe was back in the Netherlands, Mostafa continued his effort to learn English by setting up a language exchange with a Dutch woman who was in Cairo to carry out research for her master's dissertation. They fell in love and by the summer they were engaged. In November 2016, Mostafa called Wiebe, as he often did those days. He was audibly nervous. After chitchatting a bit, he said he had a favour to ask. He wanted to travel to the Netherlands to see where his fiancé was from before marrying her, he began, and what better moment than Christmas. He had prepared all the required documents for his visa, including proof of a reservation for a return flight, proof of employment, and proof of sufficient funds for his entire trip. The only thing he still lacked was a formal invitation. He could ask his fiancé, but he did not want her to think that he was only interested in her for her passport.³ Anticipating the question Mostafa was trying to ask, and knowing the procedure, Wiebe offered to file for a formal invitation. Mostafa quietly accepted, and the next day, Wiebe went to the Amsterdam municipality office, paid the required 11,- euros, confirmed that he would take full financial responsibility for Mostafa, and thus received the formal letter of invitation he could send to Mostafa. A month and a half later, when his reservation for the flight had long expired, Mostafa received his rejection. According to the standardised letter, he had not provided sufficient

evidence of his social and economic ties to Egypt, casting doubt over his intention to return to Egypt. Mostafa was baffled. If he was not tied to Egypt, then where was he tied to?

After being denied ‘even’ a tourist visa, Mostafa announced that he was settling for less, as he put it, by first becoming a European resident through his fiancé, and only secondly a student. He did not involve Wiebe in this process, in part because he was embarrassed to end up as a dependent spouse, and in part because his fiancé was taking up much of the required paperwork. Mostafa did update Wiebe. In the summer of 2018, he announced that his fiancé had acquired all the necessary paperwork to get married in Egypt. In the spring of 2019, she moved to Belgium, from where she applied for family reunification as an EU citizen, as EU law is more accommodating regarding family reunification than Dutch law (Staver 2013). In the fall, Mostafa learned that his wife’s application had been approved, and in December 2019, he took a flight to Brussels. A few weeks later, he and Wiebe met, in front of the train station in Amsterdam, but it was not as cathartic as they had both imagined. Mostafa did not feel like he had arrived in Europe yet, he said, and the fact that he was not allowed to study or work yet was hard on him.

At the moment of writing, Mostafa is about to finish a bachelor’s degree in programming. He does feel like he has arrived in Europe, but the process has taught him that, in Europe, he will always stand out as not belonging. Having learned this latest lesson, he is currently trying to convince his wife to move to the United Arab Emirates, where, according to him, they can both live their life in freedom and equality.

Anastasia: Making Life

Mostafa settled for what he saw as a lesser kind of visa, but many Europe-bound Egyptian travellers cannot, simply because no such visa is within their reach. For them, the work of moving across borders is not so much the work of fitting themselves into visa categories, but rather, the work of evading border controls. Once in Europe, mobility work becomes the work of obtaining a legal status, and of surviving in environments made hostile through the linking of the right to reside to the right to work and access social and healthcare services, and the threat, and actual practice of detaining and deporting people illegalised by such linkages. This was the work Anastasia was doing when Wiebe met her in Amsterdam.

As a teenager, Anastasia felt that her future as a Coptic girl in Egypt was set. She was meant to get married, have children, and care for them and her husband. This is not a future, she would say. At the age of 17, she decided to leave and go to Europe. She was from a family of means, so under normal circumstances, she would have probably been able to acquire a tourist visa. However, as a minor, she would have needed her

parents to approve her application, and since she was trying to travel without them knowing, this was out of the question. Having no access to a visa meant that she would have to find an alternative route. There were two basic options available to her. She could acquire a 'fake' passport and try to make it through airport customs, or she could 'illicitly' travel by sea.⁴ At the time, she did not have access to the kind of networks through which you may acquire a 'fake' passport or a spot on a boat leaving for Europe, and having to find the right kind of people made her feel vulnerable. She knew that if she were to be stood up, or worse, she would have no recourse to the law, or even to her social network. Indeed, while mobility work is collective, being dependent on others also makes one vulnerable.

Anastasia never provided much detail on how she travelled, probably because she knew that her means of travel and entry into Europe could negatively impact a future citizenship application. Either way, Anastasia arrived in Italy, where, because of her age, the Italian authorities registered her as an 'unaccompanied' minor. This made her 'unremovable' and thus eligible for a foster care resident permit, and an actual spot in a shelter for unaccompanied minors (Accorintini 2015: 62). She had a right, and duty, to go to school, but like most unaccompanied minors her age, she focused on working, in her case in an Egyptian-owned Italian restaurant, where she made some money, and learned to speak Italian.

When she turned 18, Anastasia's residence permit for minors was converted into a residence permit to study or work. To keep this permit, she had to enrol in a school or university, or work and pay taxes. Unlike most others in her situation, she managed to find formal employment. At the time, she felt like she would never leave, she said. She loved Italian people and felt like one of them. 'They are like us, warm-blooded', she explained, pinching her fingers to make a stereotypical Italian hand gesture. However, her pay was low, and, looking around, she began to realise there was no future for her in Italy either. 'There is not even a future for Italians', she would say. Feeling stuck again, she reached out to the young men she had met in foster care, who, after turning 18, had moved onwards to Northern Europe. She accepted the invitation of one of them invited her to come to Amsterdam. Before she left she set up a company in Italy through which she would continue to pay taxes in Italy, which was the only requirement to keep her Italian residency permit, she explained to me.

As an Italian resident, Anastasia had access to mobility within the Schengen Area. However, unlike Italian citizens, she was not allowed to work or access public welfare and healthcare services in another member state of the European Economic Area. If she registered as a resident in the Netherlands, applied for welfare services, or was caught working without a permit, she could be sent back to Italy, where she could lose her residency permit for violating

the conditions on which it was granted to her. In other words, in the Netherlands, Anastasia became part of an illegalised class of people.

To stay and survive, illegalised people in the Netherlands have to rely on the willingness of others. These may include landlords and employers willing to take the risk of a fine to house or employ them, as well as those who feel compelled to care for the vulnerable, and those who feel compelled to fight for everybody's right to access mobility and their fair share of the world's commons. As a young woman, Anastasia was well-positioned to tap into the existing networks. She found work through her Egyptian acquaintance, in this case, a job at an Egyptian-owned cleaning agency, and her employer connected her to an Egyptian landlord, who found her a place to stay.

We may perceive the practice of housing and employing illegalised people as a form of solidarity, much like we view the work of activists and some humanitarians. However, while taking a serious risk, and making a difference, Anastasia's employers and landlords also exploited her. When she first arrived in the Netherlands, she was made to work seven days a week, ten hours a day, for less than €1000 a month, and to pay €350 for a 12 m² room that she shared with another woman, which, at the time, was still an amount only people who had nowhere else to go would pay. As a young woman, Anastasia was particularly at risk. One time, when Wiebe went to pick her up from her workplace, he saw her being harassed by one of her colleagues. The next day, he asked her about it over a cup of coffee and a cigarette. She explained that it was just a fact of her life. In fact, at one of the many jobs she had after arriving in the Netherlands, her employer sexually abused her. She was waiting for the day when she had legal status, she said, so that she could finally report him and get her revenge.

But Anastasia did not want to focus on these things. Besides, she was in a much better place than she was before, she would always assure Wiebe. After having worked for almost every Egyptian in town, as she used to joke, she had found work as a waitress in a much more upscale Egyptian-run Italian restaurant, where she was expected to perform Italian-ness, which she did with flair. She was well known and loved among the (illegalised) Egyptians working in the city centre. Her life was hard, but, whenever Wiebe asked her about hard things, she would end her story by insisting that she worked and played harder.

Anastasia prioritised fun over sleep. She often called Wiebe late at night to invite him to party. On the rare occasion that he joined her, they always danced the night away. When Wiebe attended her 25th birthday party in the Bulldog, a famous coffee shop on the Leidseplein, she had reserved two tables. On the night of the party, Anastasia was surrounded by her colleagues, all Coptic men from upper Egypt in their late teens and early twenties without a residency or work permit. At 11 pm, Anastasia served a Nutella cake, which had set her back €80, but was worth every penny, she said. Before cutting it,

she poured half a bottle of vodka over it, to give it a bit of kick. She also served two bottles of vodka, which went around from mouth to mouth and were gone long before the cake. After, they danced. Around 2:30 am, Wiebe left together with one of her colleagues, who had a second job as a cleaner, which started at 3 am. Anastasia, of course, was still going strong.

Although illegalised people do not form a uniform group, collectively, they perform labour that not only keeps the country going but reproduces it. They work in food procurement, they cook in snack bars and restaurants, they clean, and they raise children, amongst many other things. On top of that, they carry out the work of evading the police and the Return and Repatriation Services, as the Dutch deportation agency is euphemistically called, and work on legalising their stay. Towards this latter end, Anastasia travelled to Italy to file her taxes every year. In the summer of 2019, after five years of paying a yearly minimum of €2000 in taxes in Italy, the additional fees her accountant was charging, and her travel expenses, she was finally eligible to apply for Italian citizenship. She did, and, a few days later, she received her passport, which she said was unusually quick, something she attributed to her Italian charm. As an Italian citizen, she is now allowed to work in the Netherlands, but per EU law, she is supposed to be self-reliant for another five years, meaning that she is not entitled to access welfare benefits or social housing, amongst other services.

Mobility Work

Mostafa and Anastasia are but two people among millions who spend years of their lives trying to open up their futures by moving and settling across borders designed to push them out and/or keep them in but unequal. The mobility work they carried out by no means provides an overview of all the forms mobility work might take. Still, their stories showcase how borders generate mobility work and what mobility work is re/productive of.

Borders discriminate and segregate. Or, to use Mostafa's metaphor, they place rocks of different weights between differently situated people and the lives they aspire to lead. People who are burdened with the heaviest rocks have less time, energy, and resources for building their wished-for futures compared to people whose movements are facilitated. In pursuit of an academic career, Wiebe was able to travel back and forth between Egypt and Amsterdam because, as a Dutch citizen, he was allowed to acquire a visa upon arrival at Cairo International Airport. Mostafa was applying for visas, university programmes, and scholarships because the combination of visa obligations for Egyptian citizens, carrier sanctions, and university policies made it impossible for him to take a flight in the way that he took buses between his hometown and Cairo. Similarly, Anastasia journeyed without authorisation to Italy because she could not acquire a visa. Once in the Netherlands, she worked hard to find and keep illegalised and

underpaid jobs and illegalised and over-expensive housing. In the meantime, she worked to acquire Italian citizenship and dealt with the vulnerabilities produced by her lack of legal status, with the constant threat of detention and deportation lingering in the background. Indeed, as Shahram Khosravi (2019, 420) notes, 'border practices turn migrants' time into waste time to steal their labour'.

Mobility work also involves the labour of regulating one's emotions. For Mostafa, applying for a visa involved anxiously waiting for the outcomes of his applications, dealing with the disappointment of rejection, and renewing enough hope to try again, because he knew that the discretionary power of admission officers meant his applications could be accepted. In the meantime, being made unequal by borders, both Mostafa and his partner had to carry out the work of building an intimate relationship on unequal terms. For Mostafa, this sometimes took the form of having to close the gap between his experience of being disadvantaged by borders and her lack thereof, as he had to do in relation to Wiebe as well. For Anastasia, avoiding authorities involved refusing to be led by fear, and remaining playful amidst it all, precisely because it felt life-crushing to her to work only to survive.

Meanwhile, both Mostafa and Anastasia worked to make money, which they needed more of than they would have if they had not been disadvantaged by borders. Moving and settling while made unequal by borders is expensive and might involve paying for smugglers, documents, applications, bribes, tickets, and all the extra charges that come with being made vulnerable to exploitation. Mobility work, then, is also the work of gathering enough money to meet the requirements unevenly placed upon people by border bureaucracies or to enable one to pay to avoid these bureaucracies.

Mostafa and Anastasia considered it grossly unfair that they had to carry out this work, whereas others were free, or at least freer, to move and settle as they saw fit. Mostafa, in particular, firmly believed that we should be living in a meritocratic world, not one in which passports work like a 'birthright lottery' (Shachar 2009), or a form of mobility capital inherited by birth. While passports might create a thin veneer of horizontality between nation-states, in practice, they divide humanity into nationalised and territorialised hierarchies of membership that rearticulate colonially produced hierarchies into the present and future. Crucially, this rearticulation is driven by discrimination encoded in law. As Radhika Mongia puts it in *de Verbranders* episode we recorded with her, if the defining characteristic of colonial rule was a set of legal differentiations which enshrined differential entitlements and treatment for different subjects, then today all states embody a historically produced colonial dimension with the citizen – migrant distinction.⁵ And as we discuss in multiple episodes of *de Verbranders*,⁶ passports – and citizenship more broadly – are just one of the technologies that preserve, deepen, and reshape the hierarchies of humanity established through imperialism and colonialism.

Bilateral trade agreements and international institutions further ensure that wealth continues to flow to already enriched countries.

From a more intimate vantage point, Mostafa's and Anastasia's journeys illustrate how borders shape how nationality, race, class, gender, age, and (vulner)ability come to matter in people's lives. While they were both visa-required because of their nationality, Mostafa could not acquire a tourist or high-skilled worker visa because of his lack of financial means and education, while Anastasia could not because of her age. Instead, Mostafa travelled as a dependent spouse, which he could only do because he was recognised as such, in this case, thanks to his marriage, while Anastasia acquired a temporary residency permit based on her supposed vulnerability as an unaccompanied minor.

While reflecting the interlocking systems of borders, racial capitalism, patriarchy, and ableism, their journeys also reveal that mobility work helps constitute these systems. By being compelled to engage in the work of fitting oneself into border categories or moving and settling without authorisation, people are made subject to different kinds of material and social conditions, and, as a result, come to live and embody difference (De Noronha 2019; Khosravi 2019), making legal status, nationality, race, gender, class, and ability mutually constitutive. For example, although usually fuelled by a desire to change one's position in the world, by engaging in mobility work, people often inadvertently fit themselves into a racialised and gendered workforce, as both Mostafa and Anastasia did. In doing so, they helped to provide the background conditions (Fraser 2016) for the systems that keep them unequal.

Mobility work is also a reflection of people's individual disposition. People in the same position respond differently to the obstacles presented by borders. Whereas Mostafa invested in post-graduate courses to become an international student, others in a similar position stayed put or moved to oil-producing countries to perform manual but well-paid labour (Schielke 2020). Whereas Anastasia rejected the life planned out for her by her parents, many girls in a similar position do not, even if they might feel similarly. In fact, through engaging in mobility work, people express and cultivate their identities. Mostafa took great pride in his steadfastness and ambition, while Anastasia carefully curated her Facebook and Instagram posts to showcase the fun she was having, avoiding discussion of hardships as much as possible.

One of the reasons mobility work is shaped by disposition so much is because immigration law individualises, as people are made to apply for visas and legal status individually. At the same time, to move and settle, people rely on ecosystems of people around them, as Gracie Mae Bradley⁷ puts it in our episode with her. This reliance can take on different forms, from revolutionary care to exploitation and violence, and everything in between. Some people labelled as smugglers offer protection and save lives, others exploit, and

most do combinations of both (Khosravi 2007; Mengiste 2018). All operate in a context where this relation of reliance is a product of borders, and, as Nandita Sharma⁸ emphasises, feminists have long known how a small circle of dependency can be an incubator for violence.

Mostafa felt the dangers of this dependency keenly, which is partly why he did not like being dependent on his wife. However, he also did not like it because it ate away at his sense of himself as a man who, to his mind, should not only be independent but also provide for others. Anastasia was acutely aware of it too and had experienced harassment and abuse from those she relied on more than once.

This violence, and the constant possibility thereof, is not only contingent on borders and the dependencies they create. Instead, borders are violent themselves, by keeping people unequal and exploitable and excluding them from resources and services, and, more spectacularly, through brute force, including pushbacks, arrests, surveillance, detentions, and deportations. This violence is both racialised, as it is executed against people interpellated as non-white, and racialising, as it helps constitute groups of people who are made to live, move, work, and settle under radically different conditions.

And yet, in the face of this, many people choose life, and make something of it too, whether that is by travelling unauthorised, establishing businesses in camps, growing vegetables in detention centres,⁹ or pouring vodka on a Nutella cake in the Bulldog in Amsterdam. This acknowledgement is not a naïve celebration of migrant resistance, but rather a recognition of people's will to live in the face of 'the state-sanctioned or extra-legal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death' (Gilmore 2007, 28). We learned this, in part, from Maryama Omar,¹⁰ who explained it to us with the kind of clarity that comes from having lived it. We'd like to close this paper with an excerpt of a speech that she gave in February 2016 during one of the many demonstrations organised at the time by We Are Here, an Amsterdam-based collective of people who organised against their illegalisation.

Because this, this is about my life. It is the fact, a simple fact, that I am supposed to live. I did not choose to be in Somalia, I did not choose to be in the Netherlands. But I chose to live. The thing is, it's not a matter of trying to keep us out. We are already here. Right here in Amsterdam. In every street in the Netherlands. In Belgium. In Germany. In the whole of Europe. What does that tell you? It tells you that where there is a will, there is a way. And I have all the will to live. Nobody is going to stop that.

Conclusion

In this paper, we introduced the notion of mobility work. Building on feminist literature, we theorised mobility work as a form of reproductive labour to make visible the oftentimes invisibilised labour of overcoming the unequally

distributed obstacles imposed by borders between people and the lives they seek to live. Drawing on Mostafa's and Anastasia's experiences, we illustrated how this labour takes shape in relation to one's disposition and position, as well as the ecosystems of people one is embedded within. With Mostafa, we described how, for some – and perhaps especially for those who feel that a visa is within reach – mobility work involves fitting oneself into categories brought into being by Europe's visa regime, as well as the emotional labour of awaiting decisions on one's applications, coping with disappointments, renewing hope, and settling for a life less than once hoped for. With Anastasia, we described how, for people denied access to more privileged modes of travel, moving and settling across nationalised borders involves both illegalised and legalised activities, as well as engaging with and evading (state) authorities. And with her, as well as with Maryama Omar, we demonstrated how, in the face of the racialised and racialising thrust of borders, mobility work is always a choice for life.

We understand our theorisation of mobility work as emerging out of and in between Cairo and Amsterdam, or in the context of moving from a former colony to settling in a former metropole. Of course, former metropolises and their settler colonies do not have a monopoly on borders as technologies of governance, and we suspect that a differently positioned in-depth study would offer additional insights. Without aiming to be exhaustive, our goal in theorising mobility work has been to offer useful starting points for thinking about the worlds re/produced through controls on mobility and people's efforts to overcome them. We are curious how other empirical studies might shape, complement, refine, or contradict what we have presented here.

In this spirit, we conclude this paper by offering mobility work as a method, a concept, and a politics. As a method, mobility work attempts to 'demigranticise' (Dahinden 2016), and 'denationalise' (Scheel and Tazzioli 2022) research, by not taking the identities imposed on us by nationalisms, citizenship and visa regimes as analytical starting points. Instead, it allows us to observe what people do to move and settle, by moving and settling with them. As we have shown, this brings into view not only how borders separate us, but also how, when carried out by people labelled as unauthorised, certain acts of moving and settling are illegalised and criminalised, while, when carried out by people labelled as authorised, those very same acts are facilitated and encouraged.

By conceptualising these practices as work, we draw attention to how borders generate and unequally distribute the work of moving and settling – that is, living – across them, and, importantly, to the ways in which mobility work (re)produces identities, interpersonal relations, and life itself. If choosing to move and settle is a choice for life, as Maryama Omar put it, we have shown that, even if borders kill, moving and settling, and helping others to do so, are generative of life – or that which cannot be fully put into words or tamed.

By further theorising mobility work as a form of reproductive labour, we draw attention to the relationship between borders and racial capitalism. On a global level, borders facilitate mobility for the enriched while immobilising people in impoverished regions of the world and directing those who choose to move to more future-full places into low-waged work. At the same time, borders trap people disadvantaged by them in lengthy and often fruitless bureaucratic procedures, illegalised journeys, and protracted stays in camps, shelters, and detention centres, while exposing some people to neglect, intense violence, and death. Indeed, by erecting borders, we waste human life and energy, to the point where even their capacity to be exploited for capital accumulation is undermined. Or, as Nancy Fraser (2023) has observed regarding reproductive labour more generally, capitalism both requires and undermines the background conditions that make capital accumulation possible, making capitalism a system that cannibalises itself. To this, Bridget Anderson adds that, increasingly, capital feeds off life itself, as surveillance companies blossom on people's immobilisation and securitisation.¹¹ In turn, mobility work, as a form of reproductive labour, sustains life, both for and against capitalism.

Finally, as a politics, we hope our conceptualisation of mobility work is useful for those working to build a less unequal world. As border abolitionists, we believe that this work requires dismantling the mechanisms of legal differentiation that govern unequal mobility and settlement, while also transforming the conditions to which borders are a response (Bradley and de Noronha 2022). By developing ways of thinking that direct attention away from the identities imposed on us by borders we hope to contribute – if modestly – to this politics. The ultimate aim of this politics is to shrink borders into non-existence, but in the meantime, it means helping people move and settle as they see fit, as people all over the world have long been doing.

Notes

1. This research, and its Data Management Plan, were approved by the Ethical Committee of the Radboud University, Nijmegen, the Netherlands, in the fall of 2016. Participants were presented with an information sheet, and asked for consent throughout the research process, up until publication of the dissertation that came out of it. All names are anonymised.
2. <https://soundcloud.com/de-verbranders/grenzen-ecologie-kolonialisme>.
3. See Sportel (2016) on the stigmatisation of what in the Netherlands is referred to as *schijnhuwelijken*, sham marriages, and what in Egypt is referred to as *gawaaz al biznizz*, business marriages.
4. We use single quotation marks here to indicate that, in a sense, all passports are equally fake and real respectively that travelling by sea is not inherently illicit, but made to be. See also Navaro Yashin (2007).

5. <https://soundcloud.com/de-verbranders/ep-9-a-colonial-history-of-the-passport-with-radhika-mongia-english>.
6. See, amongst others, our episode with Nandita Sharma, and Luke de Noronha.
7. <https://soundcloud.com/de-verbranders/ep-21-border-abolition-black-feminism-with-gracie-mae-bradley-english>.
8. <https://soundcloud.com/de-verbranders/ep-24-why-no-borders-with-bridget-anderson-cynthia-wright-and-nandita-sharma>.
9. See our episode with Saïed el Karim: <https://soundcloud.com/de-verbranders/ep-6-inside-immigration-detention-with-saied-al-karim-english>
10. <https://soundcloud.com/de-verbranders/afl2-geen-mens-is-illegaal-met-maryama-omar-van-wij-zijn-hier>.
11. See our episode with Bridget Anderson, Nandita Sharma, and Cynthia Wright.

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