CHAPTER 5

Mobile Lives

Abstract  Unlike the previous phylogenetic and sociogenetic focus, this chapter considers a different timescale: the life-course. By reflecting on how movement and migration define life trajectories, an argument is made that mobile lives are, at once, agentic lives. Even when personal mobility ‘fails’, its role in expanding our horizon remains. Forced and traumatic migration are discussed as extreme cases that illustrate the delicate balance between movement, possibility and impossibility in the life-course.

Keywords  Migration · Forced migration · Life course · Agency · Possibility · Impossibility

After taking up my first academic position, in Denmark, I also attended my very first international conference outside Europe—a qualitative research congress in Champaign, Illinois. There I had the good fortune of meeting Zayda Sierra, a colleague from the University of Antioquia in Colombia. She was familiar with some of my work on the sociocultural theory of creativity and excited to collaborate on issues related to sustainability and community mobilisation among rural and indigenous populations in her country. The topic sounded extremely interesting but, initially, it was hard for me to see how my research and expertise—for instance, the Easter egg decoration study I mentioned in the opening
of the previous chapter—could shed any light or help in any way the processes Zayda was talking about. I guess the main challenge was moving from the sphere of theoretical ideas about culture, creativity and tradition to understanding how they play out in actual, marginalised communities. And, also, how any social and cultural view of creativity necessarily has political implications in the sense of promoting an agentic view of human beings and fostering their creative participation and empowerment.¹

In the end, I had ample opportunities to reflect on these issues,² and took part together with a group of colleagues from Colombia and Canada in running a large project focused on creativity, sustainability and leadership in rural, indigenous and Afro communities primarily located in Antioquia. I got, on this occasion, not only to travel several times to Colombia and discover its amazing beauty, but to understand the many problems a country as beautiful and rich in resources as Colombia has to deal with. The aftermath of colonisation left a living legacy of exploitation and inequality, especially of rural communities, exacerbated by the series of neoliberal policies and new forms of exploitation brought about by globalisation. Meeting community members and leaders and learning, first-hand, how they are getting mobilised and oftentimes creative in organising peaceful protests and defending local rights and territory was more than inspirational.³ It made me see, for the first time, perhaps, the dark sides of globalisation.

As someone who was born behind the Iron Curtain and grew up in a society in transition, desperately wanting to belong to the world of Western democracies, I exercised my right to travel, study and leave abroad the moment I finished my bachelor’s. Mobility, democracy, human rights—these were all things I took for granted as already achieved after a long period of oppression. But this is not the reality of most people around the world, particularly in the Global South. More than this, the wide range of possibilities I and many others enjoy in the rich West are built, to a great extent, on the exploitation of countries like Colombia and the depletion of their natural resources. The human costs of new kinds of colonialism are often hidden, but the climate price we all pay for is visible.

¹ For more on this, see Glăveanu and Clapp (2018).
² For an example see Glăveanu and Sierra (2015).
³ For another example, see Glăveanu (2015).
After all, the right to travel needs to be matched by the one to remain. There is a lot of displacement of population taking place in Colombia due to the ruthless exploitation of both land and labour. Some communities get to lose their ancestral territories in the battle against government and corporations, others gradually disappear because of the lack of opportunities. Young people are driven to move to already overpopulated cities in order to make a living and they often struggle in the process. It is naïve to blame this all on globalisation, of course, as we have to consider the corruption of local and national governments and the illegitimate power international corporations have been given over the past two decades. Mobility itself is not the villain, forced mobilities and inequalities are, and the people and institutions who push for them need to be exposed and stopped.

The project I worked on had many wonderful examples of how community activism and grassroot movements led to social change and successfully defended people’s rights to remain in their land. Creative forms of protest and the writing of manifestos raised awareness and built a strong case for the local community. They involved, in all cases, a wide network of collaboration, including NGOs as well as the University of

4To give an example of a manifesto published in a local journal, El Arriero, by community leader Luis Evelio in defence of the river Dormilón and against the construction of a hydroelectric power plant that would have depleted its waters:

*We are the sons and daughters of the river Dormilón who, by making use of our legitimacy and the rights inscribed into the Constitution, today present ourselves in front of the competent environmental authority, to ask a reconsideration of decisions that affect our community interests in the PCH project (Pequeña Central Hidroeléctrica/Small Hydroelectric Plant) on the river Dormilón.*

The river is a fundamental part of our cultural identity and, as such, without it we would lose our connection to the water, the forest and the earth. At the same time, many of our roots and ancestral values like solidarity, peaceful coexistence and dignity, would risk being harmed through ruptures and processes not well understood. We, the inhabitants of San Luis and of this region, who love our river, are bound today by spiritual and cosmic unity, a superior value that has no comparison with what is intended for our river.

*In addition, today the river Dormilón is a structural axis around which the “social economy” of San Luis is organized. How many people come month after month to San Luis looking for the tranquillity and recreation possibilities offered by the river? Was this benefit taken into account before replacing it with other alternatives and economic interests? We see that the river Dormilón moves a great part of our local economy and will do so even more in the future if we keep our dreams clear and act to offer locals and visitors services of rural tourism in accordance to our values.*
Antioquia and its international partners. In the end, empowerment and new possibilities came out of collaboration and collaboration, in turn, was supported by various forms of mobility.

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Human lives are undoubtedly mobile. Even the most sedentary of us, people whose entire existence is spent in close proximity to the place they were born in, are still defined by movement and exchange of various positions—physical, social and symbolic. In this way, any human life is constituted by its engagement with and exploration of the possible. Highly mobile individuals will necessarily be confronted with an expanded range of positions and possibilities, but this doesn’t mean that they will always be aware of them, enjoy these choices or have the agency to act on them (think, for example, about forced migration). Conversely, people who never move from a given place can still engage with a wide variety of positions, situations and possibilities from within their context. Immanuel Kant, for instance, is said never to have travelled away from his native town of Königsberg. In the end, the relation between mobility and imagination is not one of linear causality. More mobility doesn’t automatically lead to more imaginative exploration. But every form of imaginary exploration depends on enough mobility to allow the person to acquire various experiences, including diverse social relations and cultural resources.\(^5\)

A second important point is that living mobile lives can be very exciting, but it also comes with its own set of challenges. For one, not everyone is encouraged or allowed to exercise their mobility. There are great discrepancies around the world in terms of who can and who should move depending on age, gender, ethnicity and economic status.

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5 Vygotsky’s ‘first law of the imagination’ states in this regard that: ‘the creative activity of the imagination depends directly on the richness and variety of a person’s previous experience because this experience provides the material from which the products of fantasy are constructed. The richer a person’s experience, the richer is the material his imagination has access to’ (Vygotsky 2004, pp. 14–15).
Mobilities researchers focus on this \textit{unevenness} by researching both the movements of the super-rich, or the ‘kinetic elite’, as well as those of people who are silenced and marginalised, including the poor, women, the young and the old.\footnote{See Adey et al. (2014).} Then there are many forms of prejudice and discrimination affecting people who do move, either willingly or unwillingly. Nomadic populations, for example, like some Roma communities, have historically been oppressed partially because of their mobile lifestyle.\footnote{See Fraser (2003).} Those who travel constantly puzzle and even threaten those who don’t. There is an intrinsic difficulty in taking the perspective of migrants and nomads and understanding how they see and experience the world (see also the previous chapter). In many ways, this is because they come to unsettle some of our most basic assumptions about place, identity, citizenship, belonging and our sense of self.

It is interesting to note that, before mobilities come to shape human possibility, they actually constitute the \textit{self} by locating each one of us within the world, vis a vis other people; at the same time, they allow us to relocate and, in doing so, redefine the relation between self and others. I will come back in the next chapter to the importance of symbolic repositioning for the emergence of the self but, for our purpose here, we can agree that mobility is much more than movement from point A to point B\footnote{Jensen (2013, p. 3).}; it is a process through which we get to understand the world we live in and define our own place and role within it. My focus in this chapter is represented by \textit{personal mobilities}. And, as Aharon Kellerman points out, this category is extremely rich in examples and possibilities:

Personal mobilities constitute self-propelled movements, which include, first, the natural corporeal (physical) non-technological self-moving, more simply known as walking, and obviously those physical mobilities extended by technologies (driving automobiles and bicycling and motorcycling). Personal mobilities further include virtual mobilities through fixed and mobile telephones and the Internet. Self-propelled mobilities exclude, by their very nature, the use of public transportation and communications, in which movements are mediated, though comparisons between automobiles, on the one hand, and buses and trains, on the other, as well as
between telephones versus telegraph and postal services, have been made, and some will be made later on.\footnote{Kellerman (2006, p. 2).}

Virtual forms of mobility and communication deserve a bit of reflection. At the moment of writing, the COVID-19 pandemic confined half of the world population in their homes, drastically reducing physical forms of personal mobility\footnote{Although people did get very creative even in this regard with accounts, for instance, of a man who ran an entire marathon on a 7 meters balcony or another one who trekked to Everest base camp by climbing stairs at home, both stories reported in the Guardian.} but making online and virtual mobilities flourish. Many people found ways to take classes or to work online and most managed to connect with family and friends remotely several times a day. This new reality not only confirms our dependence on the Internet and various types of social media—it is expected to lead to their impending upgrade.\footnote{See the article Why the coronavirus lockdown is making the internet stronger than ever by Will Douglas Heaven in Technology Review (7 April 2020).} And then there is also the mass phenomenon of watching movies and shows on multiple streaming channels that transport most of us, even for a little while, to a different universe (funnily enough, many chose actually to watch pandemic inspired content,\footnote{See the article Movies and TV shows about pandemics and disasters are surging in popularity on Netflix by Travis Clark on Business Insider (20 March 2020).} proving that reality can sometimes beat all other cinematic alternatives). But in which way are these forms of mobility?

Inasmuch as movement involves occupying different positions, in time, then online and virtual environments foster plenty of such moves, even when, physically, we almost stand still. For instance, in online (and offline) conversations, we move between different social roles (e.g. speaker and listener, supporter and being supported, accuser and accused, and so on) as well as between symbolic universes (e.g. discussing what happens at home, at work, on holiday, at school, in alternative versions of reality, etc.). These mobilities foster new perspectives and, thus, new possibilities—of understanding something differently, learning a new way of doing things, gaining inspiration from others, etc. This was, after all, the hope associated with information and communication technologies. As a creativity researcher who believes that dialogues of perspective constitute the creative process, it’s easy to see how online participation could favour...
such dialogues and the exchange of perspectives.\textsuperscript{13} However, this ideal often fails in practice. We have at our disposal all sorts of opportunities to reach out to different people who might hold very different perspectives than ours, but often prefer to inhabit more comfortable ‘information bubbles’ online and be surrounded by similarity rather than difference.

And yet, there are some encouraging signs that dwelling in virtual environments and changing one’s position—in terms of avatars, activities, settings or roles, for example—can foster creative expression. Todd Lubart and his colleagues recently completed an ample project called CREATIVENESS that examined, in an experimental manner, the possible uses of virtual worlds such as Second Life to foster creativity and innovation. Their findings generally support the basic premise outlined in this book, that new opportunities to move in online spaces are associated with the discovery of new possibilities for thought or action.\textsuperscript{14} Of course, this is not a linear relationship and it does depend on a variety of factors including personality profiles, task characteristics and situational demands. But, overall, one great opportunity offered by online space is that of ‘inhabiting’ truly new positions in the world (e.g. choosing an avatar that is highly discrepant with who we are, exploring imaginary roles and characters, interacting with others who take up various roles) and moving fast between these positions (e.g. trying to solve creatively a problem related to transportation in the city in a virtual room and then, in the next moment, be in the middle of a traffic jam, within immersive virtual reality). These positions and these moves come with their own range of perspectives, affordances and (im)possibilities.

One of the most paradigmatic forms of personal mobility remains, however, migration. If in the previous chapters the discussion of migration referred to entire populations, inventions, social practices or ideas (including memes and representations), the focus here is on \textit{individual migration} which has, unsurprisingly, a variety of forms.\textsuperscript{15} The scale and complexity of human migration—going much further than the categories

\textsuperscript{13}For some reflections on how the Internet impacts creative expression, see Literat and Glaveanu (2016, 2018), also Glaveanu et al. (2019).

\textsuperscript{14}See, for example, Guegan et al. (2017, 2019).

\textsuperscript{15}As noted by Fortier (2014, p. 64), ‘asylum seekers, refugees, displaced and forced migrants, so called “economic” migrants (which include migrant workers, skilled migrants, migrant investors, migrant professionals), spousal and family migrants, undocumented migrants, retirement migrants, “return” migrants, “trafficked” migrants, “queer” migrants.
of refugees and economic migrants—reveals, especially in today’s globalised world, the need to question old assumptions about citizenship. Authors like Peter Nyers raise, in this context, the notion of migrant citizenship.16 This might sound like an oxymoron given that the whole premise of citizenship is belonging to a certain place, defined in terms of national boundaries. Against the static and oftentimes discriminatory uses of the concept of ‘citizen’, migrant citizenship is a subversive category, “illustrative of how citizenship involves a creative process that is generative of new worlds, identities, and models of belonging”17 While these transformations are yet to fully take place, we also need to acknowledge settled lives and many people’s preference for them. These are typically individuals who have been for a long time in one place and whose house ownership, family commitments, networks of friends and/or permanent employment attach them to it.18

Besides any pragmatic reasons why people either stay or move, we should recognise the fact that migration in particular triggers certain imaginaries. These might include, for some, the prospect of change and adventure, the capacity to leave things behind and start anew, or the romantic vision of a place in which life is better for oneself and for one’s family. These are what I would call bright imaginings. The dark imaginary of migration, on the side of the migrant, includes fears of losing one’s life or that of close family members, of being always treated differently and excluded, or never being able to grow roots, gain an income, or become a ‘citizen’. On the side of the host society, there might be even more anxieties associated with receiving migrants, many of them referred to at the start of Chapter 3. The fact that any act of migration is accompanied by one of imagination has been widely discussed by cultural mobilities scholars like Noel B. Salazar.19 For him, these imaginaries go well beyond individual actors—they are historically laden and socioculturally constructed. Moreover, people don’t only acquire or enact a kind of

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16 See Nyers (2015).
17 Nyers (2015, p. 34).
18 See, for example, Fischer and Malmberg (2001).
19 For example, Salazar (2011). See also a recent special issue on the topic of (im)mobility and imagination that will be published in *Culture & Psychology*, co-edited by Flavia Cangià and Tânia Zittoun.
imagination but appropriate and respond to it, creating co- and counter-
imaginaries (for example, refugees finding creative ways to tell their story
to others or to integrate).

In other words, imagination is both a prerequisite of migration and
is triggered by personal mobility, an important point supporting the
deep connection between mobilities and human possibility. Even in the
harshest conditions of forced migration, and for the most vulnerable
of populations (e.g. women and young children), there is still at least a potential for agency and for re-imagining one’s life in a new place.
Letitia Trifanescu offered such an example with the case of precar-
ious feminine migration paths.20 Despite perilous travel conditions and
facing an uncertain future, the women she studied, all African asylum
seekers in France, made an effort to turn their migration experience
into acts of empowerment. Migration is often, and in particular in these
cases, the site of struggles for power and domination, both ethnic and
gendered, that mark collective and personal histories. Against predestined
trajectories and life-courses, these women are faced with the choice of
submitting to oppressive ideologies or breaking the repetitive logic of
submission.21 Reflective, decision-making processes leading to empow-
erment are involved every step of the way, for as minor as they might
seem, from deciding to leave, choosing a migration path, to arriving in
Europe and projecting into the future. A long-term history of oppression
is often what motivates asylum-seeking women, becoming the incentive
for learning and personal transformation.22 There are many challenges
ahead and the outcomes are uncertain, but Trifanescu proposes an optim-
mistic view of migration as a decision that is the ‘first act of empowerment
for individuals who until then seemed to endure life events helplessly’, a
first step in a continuous “process of resistance”23.

There is considerable literature out there focused on migration stories,
both ‘successful’ and ‘unsuccessful’, concerning not only women but also

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20 For details, see Trifanescu (2015).
21 Trifanescu (2015, p. 91).
22 Trifanescu (2015, p. 92).
23 Trifanescu (2015, p. 93).
In particular in the case of children, migration leads to important issues related to home and belonging set against expectations of ‘residential fixity’. Migration from Africa has also been extensively studied, demonstrating the need to listen to and learn from the testimonies of migrants. These life stories remind us that clashes between cultures, hopes and forms of imagination are common in personal migration, and they can’t always be solved creatively or satisfactorily.

One of the best ways to capture the intricate relationship between possibilities and impossibilities, imagination and its deficit in the experience of migration is to study them using a life course approach. This approach, illustrated also by Trifanescu’s study, is characterised by the imperative to situate acts of migration within the broader context of a person’s life and this, in turn, within the frames offered by the development of society and culture. For as focused as this chapter is on personal mobilities, they can only be made sense of as part of individual and collective histories. After all, the possibilities embedded within these histories (or their absence) emerge out of a system of social relations, cultural norms and material circumstances rather than individual actions alone.

A good example of using the life-course approach to understand how someone is recognised as a refugee is offered by Anja Weiss’s sociological research. For her, seeking refuge is not only a legal status but a defining moment in one’s life trajectory. The ‘move’ from the condition of migrant to that of refugee is exemplified with cases of university educated migrants entering Germany and the complications raised by the institutional implementation of the 1951 Geneva Refugee Convention. Her study shows

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24 See Datta et al. (2008).
25 See Hopkins and Hill (2008).
26 See Ni Laoire et al. (2010).
27 “The living testimonies of these migrants reveal the continued significance and reinterpretation of African cultures and the values and practices between the country of origin and the newly adopted country. It explores the impact of migration on the lives, expectations and agency of people who have migrated and their descendants focusing on citizenship, belonging and intergenerational relations. Importantly, it embeds our understanding of migration firmly within the lived experiences and personal perspectives of African migrants’ (Roos et al. 2012, p. 65).
28 For more arguments and empirical examples see Womersley (2020).
29 Weiss (2018). For another life-course approach see McHugh et al. (1995).
that people who have better resources and a higher degree of autonomy, social and spatial, can find alternative options to claiming refugee status. The fact of being persecuted doesn’t automatically guarantee the success of such claims and their recognition is ultimately based on administrative frameworks in the host country and the socio-economic position of the individual migrant. Not to mention the possible contestation of the validity of this status leading to the further traumatisation of an already vulnerable group. Paradoxically, the label of ‘refugee’ is also used by nationalist groups to exclude other categories of migrants who might be in equally precarious conditions. Weiß calls, in this context, for the need to question the intent and consequences of legal categories and consider the life trajectory and experiences of all categories of vulnerable migrants.30

What we can see from the above is that the types and range of possibilities migration can open depend considerably on the position and resources of the person migrating, as well as on the characteristics of the home and host societies. We should avoid romanticising migration as always leading to more agency, imagination and empowerment since, for many people, moving to another place or country reveals an array of barriers and impossibilities: of being allowed to stay, of integrating, of getting a job, of forming a family, of following one’s passion, of leaving the past behind, and so on. The existence of unequal power relations between immigrants and locals, and even between different categories of migrants, is recognised by what is called ‘critical mobilities’. This orientation examines in particular the intersections between mobility, fixity, ethnicity, gender and class.31 It also interestingly points to how not moving can be of interest as it can also be forced, free, or a mixture of both.32 There is, finally, intrinsic value in telling stories of hardship during

30 Comparative case studies of these migrants under duress confirm that the category of “refugee” is shaped by legal and administrative regimes following hidden agendas of protecting few refugees and excluding most of them. Against this background, we then highlight cases of migrants who shied away from using the refugee category even though they did experience violent persecution and a loss of protection’ (Weiß 2018, p. 115).

31 ‘Critical mobilities studies both focus attention on connections between mobility–fixity and structural inequalities and provide a more nuanced account of individual subjecthood that militates against caricatures and stereotypes that can themselves contribute to experiences of inequality and oppression’ (Rogaly 2015, p. 541).

32 Rogaly (2015, p. 530).
migration beyond capturing possibilities for post-traumatic growth. In fact:

undocumented people and their family members deploy their hardship stories to foster sociality, legitimize their experiences, promote political consciousness, and demand social change. These practices take place along a spectrum of politicization, from stories shared in closed social spaces to foster validation and friendship, to public stories utilized in campaigns for immigration reform. As they share stories, personal experiences of hardship can become a critical resource in movement building, as organizers find possibilities for social and political change within practices of story revelation and exchange. 33

Stories of impossibility, therefore, can help create a space of dialogue and critique from which new possibilities come about. Undocumented migrant experiences can be used to speak truth to power and demand recognition from the state as well as humanising discourses about migration from the host society. These are not primarily acts of individual agency; they are expressions of collective agency and community building. There is an expanding literature today dedicated to creative activism surrounding migration, often engaged in by migrants themselves. The aim is to portray dispossessed migrants and refugees not as passive objects but active agents within their life-course and within society. These possibility-expanding acts of creativity are ‘dangerous in the best sense of the word’, defending more than the cause of migrants—they help us all question the foundations of the state, of citizenship, and the fact that citizen rights are often placed ahead of human rights. 34 And there is more to be done than acknowledging the experience of migrants and refugees and defending their rights. We should also set up the social and professional mechanisms that allow them to use their expertise, express their talents and

33 Gomberg-Muñoz (2016, p. 743).

34 ‘Human creativity that gives voice to the layered experience of a particular displacement is “dangerous in the best sense of the word” as displaced playwrights, artists, theatre troupes, journalists, poets, or groups of refugee-ed women intervene on any report that normalizes displacement (…) They are dangerous in that they challenge unquestioning adherence to official stories; they complicate news media sound bites that pass for authoritative reports. (…) As they articulate and give voice to the nuances of displacement, refugee-ed and internally displaced people subvert, for example, notions on which established laws for immigration are based, which render them invisible, passive, and speechless people’ (Coleman et al. 2012, pp. XXX–XXXI).
innovate. There is some recent concern, in this regard, for refugee innovation[^35] and, more generally, for bottom-up innovation emerging from crisis-affected communities[^36].

All these efforts show that, when we take the notion of mobile lives seriously, we need to be aware of how mobilities impact human possibility and to acknowledge the fact that human dignity is tied up with both. We are not only doing a de-service to migrants when we don’t recognise their potential for creativity and innovation, we are also making our societies poorer, more uniform and more intolerant. The fact that the act of migration itself can and should unleash new possibilities has been widely documented, including by research reported here. The natural consequence of this is that more tolerant and open societies are more innovative and have been so throughout time. And this note from an early modern historian might be the most cheerful thought to end on:

> Throughout the centuries the countries in which intolerance and fanaticism prevailed lost to more tolerant countries the most precious of all possible forms of wealth: good human brains. On the other hand, the qualities that make people tolerant make them also receptive to new ideas. Inflow of good brains and receptiveness to new ideas were among the main sources of the success stories of England, Holland, and Sweden in the sixteenth and seventeenth century. It is gratifying to be able to say that tolerance pays off.[^37]

[^35]: And, in particular, how to avoid the dangers of thinking always in terms of ‘humanitarian assistance’ and develop participatory approaches and pedagogies that empower beneficiaries as co-designers of solutions (see Moser-Mercer et al. 2016).

[^36]: Key elements of a positive enabling environment for bottom-up innovation include: a) a permissive environment with the right to work and freedom of movement; b) access to connectivity including the internet and telecommunications; c) access to education and skills training; d) good infrastructure and transportation links; e) access to banking and credit facilities; f) transnational networks. We need to rethink the humanitarian system in order to provide a better enabling environment for innovation by crisis-affected communities, including refugees’ (Betts et al. 2015, p. 3).

[^37]: Cipolla (1972, p. 52).
creativity involved in both mobile and immobile lives. And that the latter are only seemingly immobile. In fact, the reason some of these community actions succeed is the fact that their leaders know how to build networks of collaboration—local, national and international. They might not themselves travel, but their collaborators do. And they share the concerns and struggle of these communities, giving them voice and presence in many places and on many stages, including in short books on mobilities. There is much more work to do in order to really address their challenges and mobility is not the only or ultimate answer. But, through its connection to human possibility, it does participate in creating solutions and not only problems. The neoliberal drive of globalisation has betrayed these and many other local communities. Can new understandings of what it means to be global, mobile and creative help them?

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