

## ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# Flucht nach vorne (seeking refuge in the future): Trauma, agency, and the fantasy of onward flight among refugees in Berlin

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## Abstract

This article is based on fieldwork we each conducted with refugees in Berlin between 2016 and 2021. We were both puzzled by our interlocutors' repeated professed desires to leave Germany, often when their lives here were improving. We wondered how they could possibly fantasize about repeating the experiences of their initial flight, which were deeply wounding and traumatic. We argue against a reading of trauma and agency as existing in opposition to or in spite of each other. We revisit the moment of trauma to uncover the transformative potential built into it—a crucial step in explaining the puzzling desires of our interlocutors for onward flight. We contrast popular notions of agentive mobility with the German term *Flucht nach vorne* (literally, “onward flight”) to indicate the complex contradictions, and even “unreason,” built into these fantasies.

## KEYWORDS

agency, mobility, refugees, trauma

In November 2021, at least 27 refugees died as their makeshift dinghy sank mere miles from European shores. Although Europe has seemingly become numb to such tragedies through overexposure, this sinking stood out because of where it happened—the English Channel. These refugees were making their journey not across the Mediterranean, from Egypt or Libya to the shores of Greece or Italy, but from France to England. Brexit broadcast anti-immigrant sentiments to the rest of the continent, yet the number of refugees risking their lives in perilous waters is increasing steadily—the drama of the Mediterranean now performs its encore in Western Europe.

Samir, a young man from Sudan and one of Ulrike's closest interlocutors in her fieldwork with refugees in Berlin, could easily have ended up on one of these boats. Indeed, he announced his departure to

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England so often that Ulrike stopped taking him seriously. Three times, however, she thought he would actually leave. The first time was when she visited him at his youth welfare (Jugendhilfe) apartment. He insisted they should say goodbye since he was leaving for England via France in the morning. He showed her the planned route on his phone and asked her to go through his documents to help decide which he should carry. Ulrike insisted that he would soon, after four years in Germany, be able to apply for a residence permit under §25a of German residence law. “What if not? What if the laws change?” Samir asked skeptically. Ulrike pleaded with him, saying she had heard repeatedly of asylum seekers dying on their way to England, suffocating in the trucks they hid in, getting run over, or drowning. “Yeah,” Samir admitted, “but of 100 people, maybe two die, and that’s a good enough chance for me.”

The second time, Samir called Ulrike late in the evening and asked if she could come over. She was just going to bed and said she would come over the next day, but he explained that he was leaving for Belgium the next day and wanted to say goodbye. Ulrike was unconvinced, but when he began swearing by everything she knew he cared about, she headed over. At his apartment, Samir was sitting with a friend in the living room, the coffee table littered with filters, papers, crumbs of tobacco and weed, empty cans of mixed alcoholic drinks, and the IKEA catalog his caseworker had given him as inspiration for his still largely unfurnished room. The three spent the evening reminiscing about Samir’s three years in Berlin and discussing his plans to go to England. He said he wanted to start over, that in Germany he had messed everything up by skipping school, receiving a rejection to his asylum plea, and becoming addicted to drugs. England was going to be a fresh start. “Berlin will always be my true love,” he said, “but she didn’t want me, and so I have to find a new love.”

The third time, Samir left Ulrike a voice message listing the furniture in his room and asking if she knew anyone who wanted it, since he would be leaving the next day. When Ulrike asked another of her interlocutors whether he wanted Samir’s furniture, this young man commented drily on Samir’s plans, “That’s all blah-blah. How many times have I said I’m leaving? And I’m still here.”

Indeed, leaving Germany seemed like a terrible idea, another setback in a life full of them, a deliberate start from zero. And just when things were beginning to look up: after two years of legal back-and-forth, Samir had recently been able to leave the camp and move into a youth welfare facility, his German was gradually improving and he had enrolled in school, he was finally undergoing treatment for his tuberculosis and substance abuse, and in youth welfare he had met sympathetic caseworkers. Ulrike and a caseworker had written an appeal against Samir’s rejected asylum plea they were quite confident he would win. Moreover, given the Dublin III Regulation,<sup>1</sup> Samir would not be able to file for asylum again in England. So, why consider leaving now, when his lifelong dream of a secure existence in Europe was, at last, taking shape?

On a chilly night in March 2021, Khaled, an Egyptian asylum seeker and one of Sohail’s main interlocutors, told Sohail he was going to leave Germany forever. He was not sure where he would go, but England topped his list. He knew no one there, spoke no English, would have no legal right to stay, and no institutional support. The decision to leave now made no sense to Sohail, and despite his attempts to press Khaled for his reasons, Khaled only repeatedly insisted that he had to leave. He needed a fresh start, and the particulars seemed not to concern him. Although Sohail hoped this was empty talk, he was terrified that Khaled would disappear overnight, embarking once again on a journey that would involve serious legal and existential risk.

A couple of days later, on a walk with Ulrike, Sohail worriedly brought up Khaled’s plan to leave. Sohail admitted he thought this was an incredibly self-destructive step to take, after all the progress Khaled had made in his life in Berlin over the previous five years. While both Ulrike and Sohail were reasonably certain that Khaled, like Samir, would stay put, their conversation became an opportunity to discuss a question that neither had any ready answers to: Even if few actually followed through on their declarations of renewed flight, how could the fantasy of leaving be so ubiquitous? Ulrike and Sohail had no illusions about the difficulties inherent in living as refugees with uncertain documentation, but they also believed that Germany now presented the likeliest destination to establish a new, livable life.

This was not the first such conversation Sohail and Ulrike had had. Fantasies of leaving were common in their interlocutors and often came not in the depths of despair but precisely when things seemed to

be looking up. Indeed, an unexpected positive turn of events had preceded Khaled's declaration to Sohail: after a year of jumping between temporary living arrangements, Khaled finally had a permanent, affordable contract for a centrally located apartment in the city. More importantly, where would Samir and Khaled go? Ulrike and Sohail often found themselves talking their interlocutors down from radical departures to destinations they believed would be less welcoming. Besides, everything they had learned about the nature of flight through their interlocutors had taught them that often the real wounds of exile were not what preceded the decision to leave but the experience of flight itself. The days spent in the Mediterranean on a broken boat or packed, barely able to breathe, into the false roof of a truck, being shot at by smugglers or border guards, knowing people who died doing what they themselves were trying to do. The sudden shock of being in a place without language or family, trusting strangers who pulled up in a car to take you to shelter rather than rob you of the few belongings you possessed. Samir could still barely walk past Berlin's canals (harmless, by any measure) without looking away uneasily and recounting what the water had looked, felt, and sounded like on that boat years earlier. Ulrike and Sohail knew these were often the deepest scars—and could not fathom the fantasies of reopening them.

How could Khaled willingly fantasize about reverting to a state of being nobody, knowing nobody, in a new place with nothing, and no frame of reference to anchor him? How could Samir be willing, once again, to flip that coin of the most depressing uncertainty, where one side represented having to do everything again and the other a possible death by drowning?

To be sure, refugees do sometimes repeat their harrowing journeys. Yet, such choices are seen to be made in the in-between places on the migration trail—to leave Turkey for Europe, and then Greece or Italy for a journey farther north. A survey of 1000 refugees across Turkey and Greece in 2015 suggested exactly this: Germany was overwhelmingly the final destination favored by refugees (Kuschminder and Koser 2016). In appraising the choice to move from elsewhere in Europe to Germany, whether on preplanned paths or in response to the untenability of life in Southern or Eastern Europe, scholars have emphasized an agency that makes practical sense and is at worst marred by misinformation. Yet, these were not the decisions Ulrike and Sohail were confronted with. The refugees they were talking to had reached their destination, so to speak. As both Samir and Khaled frequently admitted, Germany had been their top choice after reaching Europe. A decision to leave, especially without a concrete sense of what awaited them, would almost certainly make things worse. Still, instead of encountering resignation or even the desire to return home, what Ulrike and Sohail saw in these situations was a fantasy of flight elsewhere, of flight onward—a *Flucht nach vorne*, as the German phrase goes. But onward to where and to what? Why willingly take on more scars of a risky surgery without even the mitigating possibility of a better life? To Ulrike and Sohail, who cared deeply about Samir and Khaled as friends, this was not the kind of agency that made “sense,” and they found themselves asking what it was instead.

## DESIRE AND AGENCY IN THE POLITICAL CONTESTATION OF FLIGHT

Scholars have addressed the hierarchy of “deserving refugees” and “undeserving migrants” (Crawley and Skleparis 2018; Uniacke 2016) or between voluntary and forced migration more broadly (Bartram 2015; Erdal and Oeppen 2018) with a great deal of skepticism. The push, understandably, has been to recognize these categories as part of a “politics of bounding” (Crawley and Skleparis 2018) that has less to do with how people experience mobility than a historically specific emergence of an international humanitarian consensus concerned with a “strategy of containment pursued by the rich Northern states” (Chimni 1998, 369). In this moral economy, vulnerability and suffering become the currency of legitimacy (Fassin and d'Halluin 2007; Ticktin 2011), and the very act of exerting agency, of being deemed to have migrated instead of fled, constitutes the difference not just between deservingness and undeservingness but even between innocence and criminality (De Genova 2002).

This politics of nomenclature was, for instance, reflected in Al Jazeera's much talked-about refusal to refer to the events of 2015 as a “migrant” crisis, preferring to call it a “refugee” crisis (Malone 2015). The

ideological contrast represented by the two categories at stake is straightforward: “the excess of agency that defines the migrant finds its mirror image in the faceless, powerless refugee” (Uniacke 2016). Indeed, this is the very basis of the Dublin Agreement, which posits that real refugees should be “grateful to be free from persecution and not seek to pick and choose countries of destination” (Watters 2019, 49) based on “geographies of aspiration” (48).

Yet while such scholarly critiques have been essential, the new common sense regarding this nomenclature debate seems to subtly underline the coercion inherent in all agency. The division, we are told, between economic migrants and those granted asylum is false because to not starve is as much of a compulsion as to not die in a civil war. Not only do refugees not have a choice, neither do migrants. Or so the foundation of the discipline of “forced migration studies” reminds us: “what makes migration forced is the fact of a serious threat to life or basic well-being, regardless of whether that threat is labeled political and/or economic” (Bartram 2015, 449). The temptation, in other words, is to expand the notion of “forced” to apply to a wider range of practical behaviors—to turn migrants into refugees. Even for those who avoid this implicit privileging of refugees over migrants, such a hierarchy is often reflected in the way they think of mobility as enacted under structural conditions that cannot help but privilege force. In response to the Al Jazeera position, journalist Hector Uniacke instead insists on using the term migrant rather than refugee, to acknowledge that all those on the move are “unified by a precarity that is enforced against anyone who isn’t white and European” (Uniacke 2016, emphasis added). That is, agency is constituted as a fundamentally reactive mode of engaging with a persecutory “outside.”

While we certainly do not disagree with these conclusions, or their broader critique of global inequality, we still find these appraisals of refugee/migrant agency inadequate in the context of our interlocutors, in certain crucial ways. In particular, we argue that this image of agency leaves little space for desire. Even when addressed, desire seems to be subsumed under aspiration, and aspiration under the vague auspices of a search for the “good life.” Instead, in this article, we use desire to refer to a more ambivalent, self-directed force that—while certainly subject to structural, material conditions—need not respond to them in straightforward ways. This search, we contend, is not only one of the good life but also equally one of the “good self,” a self that might be forged through the transformative crucible of traumatic flight. Here we take up the call, recently expressed through a dedicated special issue in *Ethos*, to pay particular attention to the nature of “transformative experiences” (see Bregnbæk and Gammeltoft 2021). Additionally, we hope to shed light on an ongoing discussion within the anthropology of self and identity that recognizes internal life and the production of selfhood as a contested, fragmented, and often inconsistent terrain (Desjarlais 1999; Ewing 1990).

We opened this article with our puzzlement over why our interlocutors, irrespective of how their lives in Germany were actually unfolding, declared they would leave for another country. Although we observed this phenomenon in many refugees, this article focuses on two: Samir and Khaled. We will first introduce them in more depth—their childhood and family backgrounds, their decision to leave Africa and journey to Europe, and their attempts to make a life for themselves in Germany. A conversation with Khaled about the desire to leave serves as an entry point into our theoretical discussion.

## SAMIR

Samir grew up in an Eritrean refugee settlement in Sudan and had wanted to go to Europe for as long as he could remember. His life in Sudan was marked by poverty and futility, and, as Eritreans, his family faced systematic exclusion from education and work, arbitrary arrests and police brutality, and hostility and discrimination on the streets. Samir first announced that he would go to Europe as a preteen, but his parents forbade it. In 2013, two of his cousins died in one of the deadliest migrant shipwrecks in the Mediterranean, near Lampedusa, making his mother more adamant to keep her son from following the same path. His uncle also warned: “Do you want to end up like your cousins?” To which Samir replied: “I don’t want to end up like you.”

Even as a child, Samir was always running away from home and getting into trouble. His brother was bedridden and unable to walk or talk. As a young boy, Samir had played with fire by his brother's bed, and when the sheets kindled, he got frightened and ran away. His brother was severely burned and died a few months later, which Samir believes was his fault. After the incident, he had hidden outside for two days but eventually returned home, where his father beat him badly. Another time, he threw sticks out the window; one hit his favorite sister, the only other member of his large family whose skin was as dark as his. His father's strokes paled in comparison to the pain of having scarred his most beloved person. From then on, he was convinced that he was fundamentally bad. He began skipping school, stealing, and killing birds, and even as a young adult he would tell Ulrike there was something wrong with him. His dream, he said, was to take the hajj to Mecca and return as a new person. "I need to be reborn. I really do," he said.

When Samir and his best friend Asim left Sudan in 2016, they did not tell anyone. They went to sleep one night, and by the morning their rooms were empty. Samir called his mother from Libya, and she cried and begged him not to get on a boat. But after working and saving money for several months, he did. Asim got on one boat and Samir on another, to minimize the chance that they would both die. Their families were close, and Samir and Asim promised each other that whoever made it would also financially help the other's family.

Although Samir had relatives in other parts of Europe, he went to Germany, which he associated with prosperity, freedom, and the car industry he hoped to one day work in as a mechanic or even an engineer. After his arrival in Hamburg, he was redistributed to Berlin and lived in a gym-turned-refugee-camp. Samir talked frankly to Ulrike throughout the years about many sensitive things: the deaths of friends, his job in a brothel in Libya, his drug addiction, his identity. The one topic he was rarely willing to discuss was how he spent his first year in Germany. The regret of having wasted a year, the awareness of how much better his German could be, how much more manageable his drug addiction, how much less obstructed his future, weighed heavily on him. "I was stupid," he finally blurted out one day:

I did nothing for a year and a half. Time just passed me by. At the gym, I saw all the other people, no one was going to school or doing anything. I looked around and thought: What is this life? I couldn't remember why I had even come to Europe.

Ulrike met Samir about a year after he came to Germany. His teacher had contacted the organization for unaccompanied minors Ulrike was volunteering with, since Samir seemed wholly out of place at his adult camp. In spring 2019, Ulrike had known Samir for almost two years. In her estimation, they had made undeniable progress: on his German, his schooling, his health, his living situation, his asylum prospects. One day, his caseworker and Ulrike met with him to talk about the appeal they had written for his rejected asylum plea. The arguments BAMF (Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge, or Federal Office for Migration and Refugees) used in his rejection had been downright ludicrous and were easy to rebut, so Ulrike and the caseworker had high hopes for a successful appeal. But, to their exasperation, Samir insisted, despondently, that he would try his luck in another country.

As much as Samir talked about leaving, he was also obsessed with the thought of settling down. When he looked for used furniture (see Figure 1), Samir wanted something sturdy that would last for years. He was fixated on making his walls look like red brick. A caseworker purchased wallpaper with a brick pattern for him, and throughout Samir's ten months in youth welfare, he and Ulrike worked on this wall bit by bit. They would remove a few square meters of the old wallpaper and eventually put up one length of wallpaper at a time, transforming his wall first into a raw building surface, then into a construction site with slightly more brick wallpaper done. Progress on the brick wall came to reflect Samir's emotional state. When he insisted he was practically on his way to Belgium or France or England, they made no progress at all, the half-finished brick wall a reminder of the home he was unable to make. When he was more optimistic about his future in Germany, the wall unfurled steadily, every strip bringing him closer to the protective long-term home he envisioned.

Although Samir left Sudan to not repeat the disappointing lives of his older relatives and to escape their watchful eye, in Europe he spent much energy on trying to please his parents from afar. He dealt drugs

**FIGURE 1** Samir working on his brick wall.

[This figure appears in color in the online issue]  
Source: Photo by Ulrike Bialas.



to send his state welfare to them, considering the illicitly earned haram money good enough for himself, while only the halal money from the state was decent enough for his parents. On video calls with his family, Samir wore a baseball hat to hide his un-Islamic hairstyle. He would tell his family he was doing well, going to school, learning German, and would soon start an apprenticeship as a car mechanic. He did not tell them that he had not been to school in months, had given up prayer, and was dealing drugs so he could send his state welfare to them.

Samir eventually began to avoid calling his parents because each call made him feel guilty for lying; he mourned the discrepancy between the life he was inventing and the one he was actually leading. The disappointment and sense of defeat he felt would have been exacerbated if shared with and by his family. He wanted them to believe his years in Germany had been a time of personal transformation, that he was finally living up to his potential with employment, security, and private housing, autonomous and respected. “If my parents knew what I was doing here,” he said, “they would say, ‘Fuck the money, fuck Europe, fuck everything. You’re coming back to Africa.’”

## KHALED

Khaled was a political refugee from Egypt whom Sohail met in a refugee camp in his first summer in Berlin. An extremely captivating storyteller, Khaled’s accounts of his past had a certain extravagant and even mystical flamboyance, so it was not always clear when Khaled was being allegorical and when literal. Khaled’s account of his life before Berlin, and his reasons and routes of exile, were therefore sometimes

contradictory and prioritized impressionistic hues, or even his moral insights and revelations, rather than consistency and repeatability.

What was clear is that he had been born to an ailing mother who died when he was very young. He grew up with his stepsiblings and a stepmother. He spoke often about “not belonging” in his family. Armed with his older stepbrother’s stolen passport and still quite young—the age in different accounts varied between 12 and 14—he ran away from home, using the document to get odd jobs across various countries in the Arab world and improvising his life along the way. His artificial age kept him out of school in this phase. Instead, he found ways to teach himself and would read anything he got his hands on. As a result, despite holes in Khaled’s education, he might move idiosyncratically between Freud, Marx, the Koran, and Ibn Arabi in a conversation about the nature of computers.

About five years after leaving home, Khaled returned to Egypt. The period after this was hard to follow. Khaled enrolled briefly in university, although he did not complete his studies. After spending some time in Egypt he once again grew restless and left for Libya, where he was caught up in the 2011 protests and uprisings. He returned to Egypt and got involved with the Egyptian revolution. He spent time in jail with other activists and fled Egypt upon his release. He got onto a boat without a captain and was stranded in the Mediterranean Sea for days. Passengers tied down the steering wheel with some string and lived off the fish they caught. Finally, Khaled arrived in Europe and made his way to Berlin at the peak of Germany’s 2015 Willkommenskultur (welcome culture), as Germans’ collective volunteer efforts came to be called. Khaled told Sohail that in Berlin, he felt at home in a way he never had in Egypt. Indeed, despite his history of restless mobility, Khaled had not so much as left the city for a day trip.

For Khaled, 2020 was a tumultuous year. He lost his apartment because he had taken in a homeless family without asking his landlord’s permission. This coincided with the first COVID-19 lockdown, which went into effect in Berlin at the end of March. For a while he slept on a friend’s couch while he continued to work as a security guard at his former camp. His three-year residence title (Aufenthaltserlaubnis) was running out in May, but because of the lockdown, the office in charge of renewing his status was closed. As a result, Khaled no longer had the right to work and lost his job. Although upset, he saw this also as a blessing in disguise—he disliked his job and decided to spend time pursuing his other ambitions, such as finally learning English and the programming language C++. Although he moved to a Syrian friend’s flat, which was very comfortable, he resented relying on someone else and never quite felt at home. He started a relationship with a German woman. Khaled told Sohail that it was the first time he had fallen in love. Perhaps because of this inexperience, or perhaps as a mirror of the uncertainties in his everyday life, it was not a good relationship. From Sohail’s perspective, it appeared that Khaled did everything in his power to sabotage himself and the relationship. He would often admit that he did not know why he behaved as he did with her. “She’s the person I love most, but somehow the person I treat the worst,” Khaled once said. The writing had been on the wall, and, at the beginning of 2021, they broke up for the final time. Meanwhile, Khaled fought with the Syrian friend whose flat he was staying in, moving out almost overnight into a flat an hour-and-a-half from the city center. He had also taken, for a third time, his C1 (advanced) German language exam and, having not prepared, failed again. In a moment of despair, unemployed, his relationship in ruins, the proverbial wheels of his life in Berlin seemingly coming off, he told Sohail through tears, “I’ve lost my future.”

A year had gone by since Khaled lost his job, and, not having made any meaningful progress on his other goals, he resigned himself to another security gig. Around the same time, a mutual German friend bought a small flat and asked if Khaled would like to rent it. Walking back from an evening spent together at this friend’s house, Sohail asked Khaled if he would take up the offer. This was when he revealed his plans to leave. Distraught, Sohail tried to argue with him: the flat was just what they had been waiting for, a kernel of stability around which he could start setting up his life here in earnest. Sohail asked Khaled if he even knew anyone in England. Khaled replied that he did not, but he did not care—he had done exactly that in coming to Berlin and he could do it again. Maybe then, he said, he would finally “leave all the shit in Berlin” behind.

Khaled did not leave. To Sohail's immense relief, he agreed to move into the new flat and even began to speak excitedly about how this was a sign of things finally working out for him. Although he still disliked his job, it had given him a certain amount of security and a stable source of income. A few months earlier he had paid his uncle in Egypt to send his educational records, and his high school degree had been recognized. How these records were found, given Khaled's history, was a mystery Sohail did not press him on, but Khaled hoped they would pave the way for a brighter future.

## POSING THE QUESTION

A week after his conversation with Ulrike, Sohail went for a walk with Khaled. He hoped to confront Khaled with some of the questions that had emerged during his conversation with Ulrike. Sohail asked Khaled if he had been serious about leaving. He said he absolutely had been. The only reason he did not go was because his parents called and asked him for money. Khaled's relationship with his family in Egypt was complicated. Although by his own account he did not owe them anything, he desired recognition from them more than from anyone else in his life, often sending back more money than he could afford. It was a strange kind of partial separation that spoke, in some sense, to the past's precise inability to be left behind. And yet, this is exactly what he told Sohail he wanted to do by going to England. "I had all these really shit feelings, and I needed to leave them behind. Start again."

Sohail asked him how this compared to leaving Egypt for Germany. Khaled made a careful distinction between *yahrab* (flight) and *haajir* (emigration). Flight, he said, always involves a necessity, while emigration involves a desire—a distinction that soon fell apart. "So," Sohail asked, "when you came here, was that flight or emigration?" "Both," Khaled responded and laughed, somewhat sheepishly. "There was fear, but also I wanted it. I wanted to be somewhere else. When I wanted to go to England, that wasn't a 'must,' but somehow it also was," he said, laughing again. "I didn't have any good feelings here, and I had to leave . . . something like that."

Perhaps mulling over the contradictions in what he is saying, Khaled asked again, "What do you mean exactly?" Sohail decided to put his question to him in the form that affected him and Ulrike the most. "How can you fantasize about flight when your own experience of it was already so hard?" Khaled took a while to respond, then said,

Yeah, you're right, it's a good question. OK, when this fantasy, when this difficult thing, is something you've actually lived, and you're still alive, then you have always in your head something that says 'Hey, there's still an opportunity to live . . . the opportunity to meet new people, to be a completely new person.' But if I stay here, maybe this opportunity won't remain.

Sohail told him that if he wanted to meet new people he could go to Bremen or Dresden for a while, and Khaled cut in immediately, laughing,

But not to be a completely new person. You'll always remain this older person. I go to Bremen, I stay, and then at some point I come back. You're not open to absolutely changing everything. If I go to England, it means I'll always stay there. OK, yeah, or until at some point if I decide to leave again.

Eventually, in an attempt to explain, as he often did, he picked up a pen and began to scribble. From right to left, he began drawing (see Figure 2) a continuous line of closely packed bumps representing how you change through life. These bumps were all connected together until the moment of emigration. He represented this with a break that looked like - < > - which was followed again by the normal, continuous bumps of change.





FIGURE 2 Khaled's drawing.

Source: Photo by Jagat Sohail.

Khaled maintained two separate Facebook accounts: one for his Arabic self and the other for his German self. Khaled once referred to this split by dividing himself into two—Khaled arabi and Khaled almaani—with the real Khaled being both and yet neither. “If you went to England, would you end up having three Facebook accounts?” Sohail asked. “Yeah I think so,” Khaled replied with a smile. “How many different versions of you can you hold?” Sohail asked. “Many,” Khaled laughed, adding, “if you live long enough.” “But at the end, are you still you?” Sohail asked. Triumphant, as though they have finally arrived at the point, Khaled exclaimed: “That’s exactly the problem! You are always you. You’re you, but not just you.” Sohail pointed at the break in continuity referenced by < > to ask, “And what happens to this part?” Almost dismissively, Khaled responded, “You forget it at some point. At least a part of you forgets it, and then it’s okay. W’Allah I don’t know why one wants to experience this again even though it was so difficult,” he said, pensive and seeming a little unsatisfied with his own answer, “but you have a good question.”

## THE AVENTURE: TRAUMA, REPETITION, AND SELF-TRANSFORMATION

If the experience of flight, of uncertain, unsafe, and unsupported emigration, is so traumatic—which it undoubtedly is—how can refugees fantasize about repeating it? What does exploring this question tell us about the nature of flight and the relationship of the traumas and desires bundled into it?

To begin, we must unpack the first assumption of the premise. Are the two acts—flight to Germany and flight from Germany—really the same? As Khaled points out, the threat to life in the first case certainly established some kind of difference. But it is also clear that simple distinctions between the need and the desire to leave are rarely tenable. Although Khaled tries to separate the two linguistically—and here he follows the dominant state discourse on the matter—when speaking of his own experience, desire and need appear to be co-present. Moreover, in a very practical sense, taking a dinghy across the Mediterranean Sea or the English Channel is equally dangerous, and the false bottom of a truck is no safer in France than in Turkey.

Scholars have long criticized a nation state discourse of legitimation that places migrants into binaries of victim and agent. Anthropologist Heath Cabot (2014), for instance, shows this binary to be inoperable for workers in Greece tasked with discerning vulnerable refugees from undeserving migrants, while anthropologists Miriam Ticktin (2011) and Didier Fassin and Estelle d’Halluin (2007) have shown how this binary virtually forces migrants to decide between a healthy, unviolated body and the right to protection. The idea that refugees are distinct and distinguishable from other migrants, that they are the most vulnerable among migrants, and that they are rare is, according to political scientist Rebecca Hamlin (2021), a dangerous “legal fiction.”

While recognizing these nuances, scholars' overwhelming response has been to take desire out of the picture altogether. Consider the following statement by human geographers Marta Bivand Erdal and Ceri Oeppen:

Whilst acknowledging that some people may migrate out of the “joy” of mobility, for adventure and to see the world, the majority choose to migrate because they believe that physically moving to another place will lead to improvement in their and/or their family's living situation. (2018, 985)

Migrants, in other words, are those who do not experience the “joy of mobility.” They seemingly cannot, and it seems almost as if to suggest so would violate an implicit taboo (Sohail 2020). This “either-or” logic, whereby one cannot speak of suffering and enjoyment in the same breath, seems like a foundation stone on which the study of migration and asylum are built.

Is this not precisely why the question of this article feels so uncomfortable? “If flight is traumatic, how can refugees fantasize about repeating it?” Two politically overdetermined positions are immediately evident. The first, from the right: it must mean that there was no trauma to begin with. The second, from the self-proclaimed side of the refugees: they must have no choice, because why else would someone willingly take on such hardships? This must then be proof that whatever the trauma of flight, the dangers of staying are greater. This assumption indeed underlies the field of transit migration. Both sides agree, fundamentally, that agency and trauma cannot coexist, and if they do, they might at best exist in spite of the other.

In recent years, the mobility turn (Glick Schiller and Salazar 2013) in the social sciences, on the one hand, and the rise of existential anthropology (Hage 2005; Jackson 2012; Lucht 2016), on the other, have done much to enrich our understandings of the reasons people move or stay put and offer one way out of the categorical impasse of migrant/refugee. Challenging a dominant discourse that centers rootedness as a necessary aspect of the good life, scholars locate ideologies of sedentary life and the valorization of autochthonous origin as stemming from a methodological nationalism that legitimates certain forms of (im)mobility in the pursuit of a politically loaded “national order of things” (Malkki 1995, 495). Instead of a forced-voluntary dualism, they emphasize a continuum of practices of mobility and movement—practices interrupted by a regime of border control, securitization, and a political economy of global hierarchies whose authority is established through the enforced immobility of some to the benefit of others.

Anthropologist Ghassan Hage contrasts the physical, geospatial mobility invoked by migration with “existential mobility,” the drive that pushes migrants onwards and elsewhere:

In a sense, we can say that people migrate because they are looking for a space that constitutes a suitable launching pad for their social and existential self. They are looking for a space and a life where they feel they are going somewhere as opposed to nowhere. (2005, 470)

Existential (im)mobility perspectives place migration within a broader human desire for life to be in motion, a drive for existential fulfillment. Periods of stasis might follow times of movement, restlessness might be contrasted with resignation, and migrants oscillate between periods of hope and despair (Lucht 2016) or depression (Pettit and Ruijtenberg 2019).

Maybe, then, the mistake we are making is to suggest that the fantasy of leaving behind Berlin for newer pastures represents anything out of the ordinary. After all, both Khaled and Samir have personal histories that suggest a naturalized presence of mobility. We share, to a large extent, the concerns of both the mobility turn and existential anthropology, not in the least because these allow us to attend to the subjectivities of mobility, rather than becoming entrapped in a politically overdetermined nomenclature debate about refugees and migrants. We also welcome attention to global structures of inequality that shape the imaginaries of travel. And yet, here, too, we find that mobility and immobility become either imposed realities that people must endure, or reactions to unbearable, structural circumstances of global capitalism. Migration/flight through this lens, then, becomes about “the struggle to sustain or augment

[a] being-in-the-world” (Jackson 2012, 162), or a way to “sustain their ‘sense of what it means to keep on living on and to look forward to being in the world’” (Berlant in Pettit and Ruijtenberg 2019, 741). Anthropologist Hans Lucht (2016, 155) vividly uses the image of “running downhill without stumbling . . . to keep moving, both physically and existentially, in spite of the many obstacles on the road” to describe “the kind of human struggle that migration represents in the globalized world.”

Such perspectives are essential in understanding the lived experience of migration. Samir’s wall became the symbolic manifestation of precisely such a back-and-forth between feelings of being in and being out of the world. Perhaps the onward movement he so frequently announced was an attempt to reassert a sense of progress and renewal in a life that seemed cemented. Then again he longed for the kind of stillness and security that would have represented a successful break from the uncertainty and orbiting of his previous life—rather than proof of his inability to leave it behind. Indeed, much of the migrant’s experience, or indeed any marginalized experience, is constituted by holding on to one’s sense of self and purpose in the face of adversity.

Yet, in our view this focus on continuity, endurance, and balance undervalues the ambivalent transformative potential of migration. What we are trying to suggest is that flight—particularly the traumatic kind—might better be thought of as a transformative, destructive experience. Such “transformative experiences . . . involve contradictions between different self-states, and thus they may be partial, incomplete, and ambiguous” (Bregnbæk and Gammeltoft 2021, 242). Fantasies of repetition in this context are not about stability and continuity but precisely about rupture and discontinuity. This is a transformation that can be, but is not necessarily, linked to upward mobility. Samir’s desire to “be reborn” or Khaled’s restless injunction “to be a completely new person!” are certainly also linked to dreams of a better life. But here we have tried to argue that flight is meant to be precisely not banal. Khaled and Samir intend flight to be a moment of rupture that produces, through a kind of explosive shock, paths to new worlds and selves.

What if we were to think not of mobility but, indeed, of adventure? When putting this article together, Ulrike recalled a scene from her fieldwork that offered us some clarity. To get a sense of his family background, the asylum interview counselor had asked Paul, a young man from Guinea, to describe his parents. “Mon père, il était comme moi, un aventurier,” Paul began. Not yet sure where this was going, the translator dutifully translated: “My father was like me, an adventurer.” Later, however, when Paul also described his journey through Mali, Burkina Faso, Niger, and Libya—where he worked for six months to earn his boat fare to Europe—as his *aventure* (adventure), the translator intervened: “Not adventure. I think you mean your flight.” Paul looked at him, confused, unsure why he was being corrected. For the rest of the interview, Paul continued to refer to his leaving Africa and coming to Europe as his *aventure*, which the translator simply translated into German as *Flucht* (flight) or *Weg* (journey). He probably knew that including the word *aventure* in the protocol of Paul’s asylum interview would thwart his already slim chance of receiving protection.

Paul’s term *aventure* refers to an emic Francophone concept with a specific intergenerational meaning in West Africa (Andersson 2014; Kleinman 2019), but we use it here as a more broadly applicable analytic. To *aventure* means to confront hardship, loneliness, estrangement, and bereavement, as much as it does resilience, reward, and the possibility of great fortune. Yet, it is not the promise of fortune alone that defines Paul’s *aventure*. Through it he becomes—the *aventure* makes, transforms, and reshapes. It aims as much inward to qualities in the self as to the material rewards of success. It is almost guaranteed to maim, but it promises, in turn, the excitement of change. Comfortably grasping these two sides of *aventure* can indeed be difficult. Anthropologist Ruben Andersson, for instance, in his first ethnographic encounters with migrants, harbored unreserved admiration for these “real travellers of the twenty-first century” and even felt reminded of the travel adventures of his own youth (2005, 30), but later he found that “the mirror was not just cracked, but the face in it was staring back at me with an inquiring, angry, even accusatory gaze” (2014, 11).

Our use of *aventure* is not a romantic one built on a denial of trauma but on the affirmation of it. Trauma shatters worlds, it creates discontinuities in the experience of self—as Khaled so vividly drew. Precisely this quality of trauma opens room for possibilities, namely that a world shattered can be reassembled anew. Trauma becomes “a process whereby something happens not just to the person but to the world

itself, thereby rendering the victim permeable to new ideas, open to the advent of a new order, in search of new meanings” (Nathan and Grandsard 2006). Politically and historically we know this to be the relationship between crisis, critique, and revolution. Anthropologically, we know this in the language of ritual transformations. Rites of passage are often traumatic precisely because cultures have long recognized the productive potential of trauma to facilitate transformations between states of being. Nowhere perhaps is this more clear than in rites of passage where boys become men, a break made possible with a decisive scarring, whether through a separation from the mother (Godelier 1986), circumcision (Bouhdiba and Khal 2006), mandatory military service (Arkin 1978), or police brutality and imprisonment and torture (Petee 1994). Indeed, scholars have pointed out that migration, too, often becomes this kind of a double rite of passage (Ali 2007).

The study of refugees contains a long history of addressing the “liminal” as a kind of inescapable state of “existential limbo” (Haas 2017), where people are stuck “betwixt and between,” as anthropologist Victor Turner’s (1987) inescapable phrase goes. Such a perspective is entirely justified and, as we have also tried to show, holds true for both Khaled and Samir, who often found themselves trapped in suspended time, indefinitely waiting for change. Yet, locating the liminal exclusively in the time–space of protracted waiting after arrival (Brun 2015) curiously ignores another crucial aspect of Turner’s work. For Turner, and in the anthropology of rites of passage more broadly, the liminal also refers to that space of indeterminate potential, containing within it the possibility for revolutionary change—indeed, Turner himself linked liminality to broader structural transformations in his processual model of social change (1966). While one aspect of liminality certainly refers to being “stuck” in-between places, the other focuses on a kind of traumatic transformation. By locating the traumatic liminal in the moment of flight, we seek to emphasize the transformative potentials built into the moments of shock and rupture that are characteristic of the journeys asylum seekers undertake.

We might be tempted to interpret Samir’s and Khaled’s desires of onward flight as a way “to recover a balance between being an actor and being acted upon” (Jackson 2013, 4). But what if we were to think of these fantasies not as being about taking back control from the structures that act upon us but, instead, of precisely giving up control—sacrificing oneself to forge another? By focusing on flight as a transformative experience we take up anthropologist Michael Jackson’s provocation that

human beings are driven not only by a rational desire to adapt to, improve upon, or consolidate their situations in life but by a transgressive drive to throw caution to the winds, expend surplus energy, interrupt routine, and experiment with consciousness, even at the risk of losing their reason or their lives. (2012, 16)

We contend that not as much room has been granted to precisely this kind of “unreason” in our appraisals of the causes and nature of flight. By “unreason” we do not mean that these impulses cannot be understood or appraised, only that the grounds may not be transparent even to those who experience them, let alone others who are close to them. Both Khaled and Samir seemed to struggle to justify their declarations of flight in material terms. Instead, conversations of leaving evoked a discourse that focused on aspects of internal life.

We may here have something to learn from psychoanalysis’s interest in what psychoanalyst Christopher Bollas (2017) has termed the “unthought known,” the unconscious, and often inaccessible grounds of human action. Freud famously produced his musings on the “death drive” in confronting his patients’ compulsion to repeat traumatic events. He suggested that this compulsion stemmed from the need to “bind” excess excitation brought about by the traumatic event. Following Lacan’s reformulation of the death drive, scholars such as the philosophers Alenka Zupančič (2017) and Slavoj Žižek (2012) have argued against viewing the death drive as a kind of yearning for self-annihilation. Admittedly, as friends deeply enmeshed in the lives of Khaled and Samir, we occasionally found it hard not to view their fantasies as self-destructive. Yet even self-destruction must not necessarily involve a radical return to the moment of flight. Instead, we might tentatively suggest that the world coming undone through the experience of a traumatic event contains within it the possibility of radical transformation. When this promise of transformation

fails, we return, at least in fantasy, to this moment believing that this time we will put it back together in just the right way. Repetition represents the need to bind a symbolic order that has come undone and refuses to put itself back together. Returning to the traumatic moment presents the possibility that this time, Khaled or Samir might actually be successful in reassembling the pieces of their newly reshattered world—to become completely different people.

This potential was always already part of their journey. As Khaled points out, it is precisely the trauma of complete separation, without the possibility of return, that he believes makes it possible to be open to radical change. The transformation sought through this kind of agency is not simply of the material and economic conditions of life. It is directed, fundamentally, inwards. In our understanding it represents a desire precisely to be “someone,” or “someone else.” Or, as Zupančič reframes Samuel Beckett’s injunction in terms of the death drive: “Die again, die better!” (2017, 104).

Yet, if the tumultuous and dangerous journey to Europe was meant to create the conditions for radical self-transformation, for Khaled and Samir this ultimately failed. They cannot be someone else entirely, and their past, as indicated by a continued desire for recognition from their parents, refuses to be altogether left behind. The other half of the anthropological insights regarding male rites of passage addresses precisely this tension. The transition to manhood is made possible through violence and trauma, but men must then live with these wounds. This is also precisely what makes masculinity, in turn, wounding to those it entraps. The past does not disappear, but equally it becomes impossible to return to it. That is the problem, as Khaled so frustratingly put it. “You are always you”—despite the danger, the trauma, the separation, the ordeal, and the adventure. This is precisely what becomes, in the end, unbearable. Revisiting and repeating the traumatic event of flight will only produce more interruptions and discontinuities in an experience of selfhood. More wounds, more scars.

Such interruptions and discontinuities are particularly pernicious in light of the importance of continuity in times of flight. As anthropologist John Borneman argues in his work on the environment provided by the German welfare state to refugees, “to develop a capacity to care for themselves and others . . . [refugees] must be able to maintain a sense of continuity of self while living through discontinuous times” (2020, 40). Working in an ethno-psychiatric clinic in Italy, anthropologist Cristiana Giordano notes that clinicians come to similar conclusions: “What ethno-psychiatrists view as healing is the patient’s ability to hold together different worlds, the one she left behind and the present one in which she is living” (2014, 68).

Here, we must more closely examine the timings of these fantasies. Often, they emerged, as mentioned before, when things seemed to be on the verge of looking up. The thought of renewed hope had itself almost become unbearable. It seemed easier to escape into a kind of fantasy of radical potentiality than to risk the heartbreak of a carefully reconstructed life failing to live up to what might have been found elsewhere. Part of the problem is that a future of infinite possibility is a future that has no room for the past. It represents, simultaneously, the desire to take refuge in the future, and to take refuge from the implications of the past—the lost years, the wasted time, the scars without reward. Or, as the German saying goes, to set off into a *Flucht nach vorne*—a kind of anticipatory flight into the future. It refers to an almost reckless impulse in the face of a problem one might otherwise have to confront. Such initiatives can, for a time, create the illusion of regaining control over a situation. In an attempt to distract from a seemingly protracted and unsolvable problem, someone might rush to create a new one. This might involve sabotaging a relationship to avoid an imminent discussion, or preempting an insult. It could be a final gambit in which a war general might risk everything in the face of defeat. A *Flucht nach vorne* refers thus to a kind of haunted pursuit, equal parts reckless and fearful, of what comes after. We chose the term precisely for its ambivalent, and often ironic, associations. A *Flucht nach vorne* holds together, in a peculiar way, the need to both avoid and simultaneously confront—the hope that a kind of acceleration might hold the banal and arduous work of the everyday at bay.

A *Flucht nach vorne* is a state of mind in which Samir stops working on the brick wall. It sharply contrasts the stillness of its painting and longing for the radical movement promised by onward flight. Khaled finds himself in the same state of mind when offered a new apartment. Does he stay and commit to the daily grind of setting up a life, or does he fast forward to six

months later, into a future where all things are still possible—a future that, in all likelihood, will also disappoint?

## CONCLUSION

Both Samir and Khaled are young, unmarried men without kin in Germany. This subject location undeniably affects their capacity and willingness to fantasize about onwards and elsewhere. The meanings and implications of flight and settling are different for them than they would be for those with partners, parents, or children. The anxiety of settling, of losing “the opportunity to be someone else”—an opportunity that is often felt as age-dependent—is perhaps what Khaled could not reconcile in his relationship. He was being asked not only to settle in Berlin but to settle into a concrete self. We say this to acknowledge that our description of the *Flucht nach vorne* is invariably also inscribed within the locations of our interlocutors.

Nonetheless, we want to be clear that in other ways, Samir and Khaled are two very different people and, notwithstanding certain inevitable similarities in their interactions with German bureaucracy or encounters with *Willkommenskultur*, they have had quite different experiences in Berlin. Samir is functionally illiterate, even in Arabic, and has had a difficult time learning the German language, whereas Khaled has mastered German and easily partakes in intellectual conversations. Samir’s asylum plea was rejected and, at the time of this writing, he is still waiting to hear back about his appeal, whereas Khaled has received asylum, paving the way for him to apply for permanent residence in Germany. Whereas Samir mostly hangs out with other Arabic-speaking teenagers, Khaled has been able to establish a large circle of German friends and acquaintances who have assisted him with apartment searches, applications, language exams, and in other more subtle but consequential ways. Khaled currently works as a security guard, has applied for university, lives in a secure apartment, and spends his free time with his many German friends, whereas Samir lives between the camp and the street, deals drugs to supplement his state welfare, is mostly in contact with other asylum seekers in similarly precarious circumstances as his, and has little hope for a secure existence in Germany. Yet, both share the vision of onward mobility and repeat the announcement of departure, suggesting that these are not the idiosyncratic manifestations of particularly precarious lives or especially hopeless moments.

To be sure, some situations are so dangerous and desperate that to view them primarily through a lens of desire would be cynical and insensitive to the immediacy of material crisis. Yet, “within processes of flight there is always an intermingling of fear and aspirations” (Watters 2019, 57). Those who have survived flight nearly always hold onto and are able to again access their dreams and desires for transformation. These dreams do not solely belong to young men like Samir and Khaled, but to every migrant, even every human being.

In the study of migrants and refugees, it is challenging to appraise desire because agency is a site of perhaps unparalleled political contestation and legitimation. Global migration flows are undoubtedly a result of large-scale transformations in political economy, of coloniality and imperialism. No one, and no desire, lies completely outside these structural forces. Yet frequently, even attempts to speak about the moments in which migrants attempt to actively take control of their own destinies seem to reframe agency as a reaction to these structures. The goal seems to be to provide the context in which their actions can seem reasonable. The reasonable quickly becomes inevitable, and once again fantasies and desires are subsumed under the narrow path of possibility left to us by the material conditions of misery. Rhetorically, this asks the reader: Wouldn’t you do the same if you were in this position?

We have tried to hint instead at a kind of impulse, perhaps even an “unreason,” that is directed inwards—to processes of self and self-transformation—as much as it is oriented toward a materially structured outside. Our interlocutors often find themselves doing things they never imagined, and being people they would never have understood. We do them a disservice by not acknowledging that their actions and fantasies are frequently contradictory and unreasonable. In other words, we are referring to situations in which the grounds of social action are not transparent, and this opacity is a challenge not only to outside observers, but often—as our interlocutors readily admit—even to themselves.

By exploring the impulsive unreason of the *Flucht nach vorne* we want to show that flight is not merely melancholia and trauma, nor simply hope and aspiration. It also always promises a unique self-oriented experience—a promise that we need to understand if we are to grapple with the ambivalence inherent in transformative experiences.

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## ENDNOTE

<sup>1</sup>The Dublin III Regulation stipulates that the European Union country in which a migrant first registers is responsible for handling their asylum application. If the migrant moves to another country, this country has six and in some cases 18 months to return them to their country of first entry. Before Brexit, Samir and Khaled could not have filed for asylum again in England without enduring a long period of deportability and ineligibility for state support. After Brexit, new inadmissibility rules have essentially replaced the function of the Dublin Regulation in the UK.

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