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# Bordering practices:

## Migrants, mobility, and affect in Libya

### ABSTRACT

In Libya's context of fragmented state authority, what does it mean for sub-Saharan migrants to be legible to state and criminal actors through their bodies rather than through the law? How do they experience and navigate precarity? Examining informal bordering practices in Libya reveals a mode of migration governance that is based less on legally restricting mobility and more on allowing uncertainty to proliferate and on exploiting migrants' lives. In this system, certain bodies become targets for policing according to their skin color, documents, and blood tests, which can lead migrants to be extorted for money and detained. Migrants cope with such informal borderwork through affective labor. This plays a vital role in shaping their mobility decisions. By linking informal bordering practices with affect and mobilities, we can recast formal, state-centered ideas about migration governance. [*mobility, migration, bordering practices, affect, Libya*]

**A**re you sure it's here? my Libyan taxi driver asked me. It was 2014, and I was on my way to meet Cynthia and Alain, a couple from Cameroon, in their apartment in the outskirts of Tripoli, Libya's capital.<sup>1</sup> We were driving down a narrow and dusty street lined with hair salons, barbershops, and convenience stores. Nodding assertively, I pointed toward a tall building in front of us. "Yes, it's here," I said. The driver—a nice, kind, and trusted man who had driven me countless times—pulled over but refused to let me out until someone came to meet me. "I just don't understand," the driver sighed, "why you would be interested in speaking to the Black people." He continued explaining that they all "do drugs," can't be trusted, carry "infectious diseases," and are involved in "dodgy business." He always stayed close by whenever he had dropped me off, ready to come back within minutes. His concerns about my safety were linked to Libya's precarious security situation—which in 2014 affected Libyans and foreigners alike, and could erupt in sudden fighting between criminal groups on the street. But his concerns also very specifically centered what he perceived as a danger emanating from sub-Saharan migrants as Other bodies.

Migrants like Cynthia and Alain understood such perceptions very well, for they shaped everyday life in Libya. As Alain said,

If you are in your house, you are scared. You are going outside, you are scared, you are going to work, you are scared. Every time. So you don't have peace of mind. [...] We are just here because [...] we cannot cross that sea.

Navigating everyday life was arduous for the couple, particularly since the breakdown of law and order at the end of Gaddafi's regime. On many occasions they would see young Libyans randomly opening fire as they walked down the street, "without even looking,

AMERICAN ETHNOLOGIST, Vol. 48, No. 3, pp. 314–326, ISSN 0094-0496, online ISSN 1548-1425. © 2021 The Authors. *American Ethnologist* published by Wiley Periodicals LLC on behalf of American Anthropological Association. All rights reserved. DOI: 10.1111/amet.13030

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and everybody laughing.” Faint sounds of fighting often interspersed our early-evening conversation. Such a situation would have been unthinkable under Gaddafi, Alain explained. “Do you know how all this comes?” he asked. “Because we are in the revolution. Don’t think the war is over. The war is not over. We are in a revolution.” Many of the criminals who had been in prison under Gaddafi were now armed on the streets, Alain was convinced. Some, he believed, had taken up positions of power through their role in the war. Life post-2011 was “exceptional” for everyone, including Libyan citizens. Money and personal connections ruled, not the law. As a friend of Alain’s added, “It’s to whom you know. If I know somebody here, or if I have a godfather who is very strong in this regime, he can do whatever I want. [...] All is by money.” Fear shaped the everyday, Cynthia explained. “There is nothing that we do that is safe,” she said. “Nothing. You walk in the road, you are walking with one heart. Anything you are doing, you are scared.” Yet, despite having to navigate this landscape of fear, Cynthia and Alain, like many other migrants, decided to stay in Libya.

Cynthia had left Cameroon with the aim of reaching Europe. She changed her mind when she arrived in Libya a few years before the 2011 uprisings. Cynthia was occasionally working in short-term stints in Libya, but mainly she traded goods between Libya and a country in West Africa, moving back and forth through the Sahara desert. Alain was self-employed and had been granted a residence permit. Cynthia, Alain, and their friends in Tripoli had no intention of taking a boat to Europe. Sitting in a small barber-shop close to their apartment one day, Alain remarked that the term *refugee* was created for the “other people” who had to move onward to Europe, mainly Eritreans and Somalis, because they did not have the necessary “strength” to bear the conditions in Libya. They, however, were different. “We don’t need Europe,” Alain exclaimed. Life there was too restricted by rules and regulations, he said, and while dangerous, Libya offered migrants financial opportunities, provided they were willing to suffer.

Here, Cynthia and Alain point to something—“having strength”—that demands ethnographic analysis. For migrants who decide to stay, what kinds of labor and forms of endurance are needed? They must, after all, navigate bordering practices in a context of fragmented state authority in Libya, at a time when boundaries between the legal and illegal are blurred and laden with ambiguity. Labor, in this context, is not solely “productive” economic work; it also entails modalities of coping and endurance. While such forms of coping are typically seen as “extra-economic” in conventional political economy, feminist scholars have shown their importance in reproducing everyday life and the very capacity to work (Federici 2010; Fortunati 2007). In the case of migrants, affective means of coping are crucial for negotiating precarity and for making their own conscious mobilities.

Migrants’ vulnerabilities are positioned between the affective and the legal, and analyzing them can expand anthropological analysis of bordering and the dynamics of migrants’ mobilities. In particular, specific informal bordering practices are shaped by state and criminal actors, and they are produced through the intersection of local and transnational migration governance. Attending to this might shed light on a wider migration “bioeconomy” (Andersson 2018) in which value is generated and extracted from migrants’ lives, as indicated by Cynthia and Alain’s experiences. Here, value is produced by labor, involving waged as well as unwaged work, but it can extend to the generation and extraction of value “in the broadest sense, reaching from physical features to bodily presence, and from the capacity to move to the psychological experience of lived time” (Andersson 2018, 414). Migrants’ bodies and their vulnerable mobilities become sources of profit and therefore “useful” beyond their capacity to work—beyond, that is, their labor power (424).

Almost every migrant I met in Libya had a story to tell about being stopped on the street by state and criminal actors, being arrested, or being forced to pay money. Such informal bordering practices are implemented by human smugglers, other criminal groups, militias, police, immigration officials, border guards, and Libyan citizens (Campana 2018; Micallef 2017). These actors had multiple identities and potentially shifting allegiances or interests, allowing them to act on their own initiative in harassing, arresting, and detaining migrants. As a result, many migrants understood their vulnerability to result less from their papers—some had passports or residence permits—and more from their darker skin color and easy identification as foreigners. While the situation in Libya was difficult and precarious for everyone, including Libyan citizens, violence had been directed at sub-Saharan migrants for many years. Muammar Gaddafi, who governed Libya from 1969 to 2011, implemented migration policies to further his domestic and foreign policy interests, including framing the “migrant Other” within a discourse of security and fear (Paoletti 2010). Demands for labor in Libya contributed to an increase in migration from the Maghreb throughout the 1970s and 1980s, and starting in the late 1990s Gaddafi began allowing more arrivals from sub-Saharan Africa (Brachet 2012; Paoletti 2010). Often having better education or language skills, migrants from West Africa or from Arabic-speaking countries seemed to have good employment opportunities in construction and the agricultural sector. Since the 2000s, boat migration has increased to Europe, becoming a political concern among African and European governments (Brachet 2018). Under new bilateral agreements, Libya and the EU implemented restrictive migration policies toward sub-Saharan Africans. These included funding immigration detention centers, training and joint sea patrols to monitor borders, sea-rescue missions,

voluntary return programs, and cooperation with embassies to evacuate citizens (Bialasiewicz 2012; Brachet 2015; Paoletti 2010). After the 2011 uprisings, a number of immigration detention centers in Libya fell into the hands of militias and revolutionary brigades. In 2012 their management was taken over by the newly created Department for Combating Illegal Migration, within the Ministry of Interior (Danish Refugee Council 2013), but there remain overlaps between state and criminal groups running these centers (Micallef 2017). Such developments have taken place against a background in which state institutions, the economy, and the rule of law have mostly collapsed (Micallef 2017) and militias compete for control over territory and politics. In the wider region of the Sahel and Libya, the line between state and nonstate actors governing migration is blurred (Brachet 2018; Schapendonk 2018). Many migrants were convinced that the situation in Libya had been better under Gaddafi—for everyone. Alain suggested that many Libyans regretted the war. “There is no money,” he said. Cynthia explained that, before, “the economy was stable, the money was going round. Everybody was feeling the money. But now there are some people [...] who want to grab it all themselves.”

This article draws on multisited ethnographic fieldwork for about six months in 2013 and 2014 in Libya and Malta, together with ethnographic follow-up research. The migrants I engaged with came from eastern and western sub-Saharan countries, having often moved with human smugglers through the Sahara via Sudan or Niger to Libya, either to stay or move onward to Italy or Malta by boat.<sup>2</sup> I conducted participant observation, semistructured interviews, and group discussions with migrants in different spaces in Libya and Malta, including in immigration detention centers throughout the northwest of Libya, private houses where people were waiting to board a boat in Libya, and reception centers and private houses in Malta. The political situation in Libya and the fact that I was a woman conducting independent research on a sensitive topic meant that access to certain places was limited. Our mobilities were asymmetric: my passport and citizenship placed me in a position of privilege compared to many of the people I engaged with.

### Rethinking bordering practices through affect

Unauthorized migration has been a recent focus of attention for anthropologists and migration scholars interested in the social constitution of borders and legal status (Abarca and Coutin 2018; De Genova and Peutz 2010; Reeves 2013; Willen 2007). These analyses have highlighted the need to differentiate between forms of irregular stay in a nation-state through undocumented entry or presence, and they have also criticized typologized migrant categories that posit people and their mobilities in absolute, often

binary terms, such as forced/voluntary, illegal/legal, and refugee/asylum seeker/economic migrant. This normalizing framing emerged in relation to borders, understood as territorially marking the limits of sovereign juridical-political authority (Goodhand 2008). Focusing on the relocation and externalization of borders (Bialasiewicz 2012), recent work argues that ideas of “crisis” and security are used to justify intensified bordering processes, such as the expansion of EU sovereign reach toward North Africa (Andersson 2014a), ignoring different mobility motivations migrants might have (Mountz and Hiemstra 2014). Bordering violently produces irregular migrants (Andersson 2014a, 2014b; Rumford 2008; Vaughan-Williams 2015), reinforcing binary framings of migration. Through legal documents, such “borderwork” (Rumford 2008) authenticates access to state territory, rendering citizens and noncitizens legible to the nation-state and its powers (Abarca and Coutin 2018; Cabot 2014). “Documents are among the primary paraphernalia of modern states and legal systems: They are its material culture” (Navaro-Yashin 2012, 114). Despite growing attention to the arbitrariness of bordering practices and the meaning of documents or asylum applications and legal status (Abarca and Coutin 2018; Cabot 2014; Coutin 2003; Reeves 2013), the underlying premise in much of this work is that migrants’ mobilities are policed by strong, state-led bureaucratic and formal legal systems. Biometric border controls, including fingerprinting, connect borders to migrant bodies (Amoore 2006). Anthropologists have argued that formality is only one part of borderwork and that governance can thrive “less on rendering subjects legible than on working the space of ambiguity between life and law,” a space in which documents—whether “clean” or “fake”—have an uncertain status (Reeves 2013, 509). But how might lived experiences of documentary uncertainty be grasped in contexts of fragmented state authority, in which the law has limited reach and meaning?

In this emerging discussion my analysis develops two interventions. First, I expand the kind of ambiguity described in other strong state contexts (Cabot 2014; Coutin 2003, 2010; Reeves 2013, 2018), an ambiguity that results when migrants must bear the onus of verifying their own documents. In a context of fragmented state authority, documents can make migrants more vulnerable to exploitation. They do so by producing and circulating affect: fear and anxiety, as well as disdain and contempt, which do not emanate from a specific, confined body or as regulatory abstractions. Rather, such affects permeate the landscape. Working in corporeal registers, they are embodied through an “interface with things” (Massumi 2002, 25).

To rethink bordering practices, it helps to look at affect in the context of fragmented state authority, under which life is difficult to predict and the ordinary signifiers of state order, such as the validity of documents, do not always exist. Such a focus on “affective life” shows “how new ways

of living may emerge” (Anderson 2012, 29). While life in Libya is exceptional for everyone, including Libyan citizens and migrants, this exceptionalism is not implemented by a sovereign’s suspension of law (Agamben 1998, 2005). Bordering practices, resulting from the absence of routinized political, economic, and administrative protocol, are affective. Considering the differentiation between emotion as “the subjective experiences of an individual,” and affect as an “intersubjective ... intensity,” bringing affect into political analysis emphasizes “the domain of feeling that comes before or beyond its narration as emotion,” thus opening up “the political beyond objectivism, semiosis, and the world of bounded subjects” (Laszczkowski and Reeves 2018, 4–6). In Libya migrants’ affective experiences can be understood as a form of politics and as a means of asserting claims over their own mobility. Finding the necessary “strength” to navigate life takes place within and outside individual bodies, because affect “is produced neither by materialities nor by the inner world alone; it is produced through their interaction” (Navaro-Yashin 2012, 159). Attending to the dynamics of the affective lives of migrants like Cynthia and Alain enables one to comprehend how coping with quotidian precarities might constitute “the political itself” (Laszczkowski and Reeves 2018, 7). In the following I look at how encounters between migrants and state and criminal actors are affectively charged and how these affects are integral to informal bordering practices. In fragmented state contexts, bordering is reproduced less through routine operations of bureaucracy and more through affective encounters between citizens and noncitizens.

Second, I extend this further by drawing on analyses of affective labor in the cognate analytical field of feminist political economy (Federici 2010; Fortunati 2007). While somewhat marginal to the emerging canon on affect, feminist political economy foregrounds the economic role of care, affection, psychological support, solidarity, and hope—what Cynthia and Alain termed “having courage,” “strength,” or “heart” to stay on despite the odds. If “border operations ... treat vulnerable human mobility as a source of revenue” (Andersson 2018, 424), then affective labor points to how migrants endure, cope, and reproduce lives amid precariousness. There is a further aspect to this argument. In the case of Libya, affective labor is not merely the trading of immediate physical insecurity for long-term social security. It is, as I demonstrate ethnographically, integral to how migrants assert agency and decide what is “right” for their mobility. A blurring of the legal and illegal can also offer opportunities to migrants (Massa 2020). Deciding whether to move on or stay put is a process shaped by situatedness and particular circumstances. Cynthia, Alain, and their friends and family have decided not to go to Europe. It is worth looking more closely at the affective labor that they performed to navigate these circumstances.

## Documents

The evening of my first visit, I called my driver before leaving the apartment, and Cynthia tied a second headscarf around my head, to make me look “more Libyan” and less “foreign,” so I’d be “safer.” During our many encounters, Cynthia and her friends and family—as well as many other migrants I met—suggested that the Libyan mind-set was to blame for the country’s arbitrary and, in their opinion, “crazy” way of policing migrants. Migrants often exclaimed that “they” had “nothing upstairs,” where “they” referred to an elusive category comprising government officials and Libyan citizens in general. Cynthia’s brother Martin summed up his feelings:

Libya people [...] don’t welcome strangers. They don’t welcome strangers. Mostly when you’re black skin. They look at you as slave. They call people black-skin slaves. They call them African. But they forgot that they themselves are African. Because they are light in color, they think maybe they are not African.

While migrants felt “othered,” they stereotyped Libyans, not as individual perpetrators but as a “homogeneous category” (Malkki 1995, 93). Alain and his family were quick to highlight that they did not blame all Libyans directly for their behavior. “There are good and bad people in every country in the world,” Alain explained. But in their view the problem was that, owing to the Gaddafi regime’s restrictions on education and travel, many Libyans had developed parochial views. “Forty-two years without education [...] [Libyans] don’t know anything. [...] They didn’t learn the history of other countries, only their own. They never left [their own country].” In the opinion of many migrants, discrimination toward them had not changed much over the years and had become more rampant since the end of Gaddafi’s regime, in 2011. As Martin described,

How Libya is today, you know, they have fought for revolution and want democracy, they want freedom. The freedom shouldn’t be extended only to them. There should be room for migrant. They don’t have room for migrant. No policy.

Skin color immediately distinguished most sub-Saharan migrants as non-Libyan. Migrants therefore felt that they were treated with contempt. Martin explained that this overrode both documents and dignity, leading to an exploitation of labor:

Even though you have all the legal backing, you are still not safe. [...] After carrying bags of cement and climbing five staircase. They mock you. When you come down, the person you work for tell you that you should go, there is no money, there is no paying you. Can you imagine that? Then, if you want to say “No, [I’m] not

going,” the person [...] remove an AK-47 and say, “Are you going or not?” Once he shot it in the air, you will find your way. You find your way because you don’t want to die.

Even though they have legal documents, migrants are often exposed to the arbitrary will of their employer. They thus navigate a space similar to Giorgio Agamben’s (1998) legal “abandon,” in the sense that they are both subject to and deprived of law (Reeves 2018, 126). But in Libya this space was not established by a strong state. Instead, vulnerability was an “affective state,” enveloped by the ambiguity surrounding the validity of documents. State authorities, as well as criminal groups, performed random, unexpected document checks. In strong state contexts such as Russia, Madeleine Reeves (2018) shows how legal documents can have an ambiguous status, straddling a liminal zone between “clean” and “fake,” and shifting from one category to another as sociopolitical arrangements change (see also Cabot 2014; Coutin 2010). Similarly, there can be a “non-rational underside of apparently rationalized state functions” (Navaro-Yashin 2012, 113), in which documents can be “make-believe,” “not considered legal (and therefore ‘real’) outside the zones of this self-declared polity” (117). In Libya, on the other hand, ambiguity arose because documents could often not be validated with certainty by anyone, which led migrants themselves to doubt their value. Documents incited frustration and contempt. Alain pulled out his residence permit and tossed it on the floor as we spoke in his apartment one day. “It is completely useless,” he said. As Yael Navaro-Yashin (2012, 118) puts it, “When documents do not do what they are supposed to,” people “treat them with ridicule.” Local police frequently arrested Alain despite his valid residence permit. Cynthia was convinced that the motive behind this was not to verify the legality of his stay but to ascertain whether Alain had a stable job and therefore an income:

Can you imagine how many days ago they catch him on our streets here, he has his paper, has his documents. [...] They take him to the station, he was like showing his paper. They did not want to see the paper. All they just need was the residence. And it’s just the residence. OK, they now want to collect money from him.

Alain elaborated, “Because they just believe that all the foreigners they have money.” In fragmented state contexts such as Libya, documents thus play a role they were not originally intended for. They are tools not only to administer the state, if that, but also to ascertain whether people have money to be taken. They heighten vulnerability and expose migrants to other kinds of scrutiny not necessarily witnessed in more “formal” legal contexts. Not only do documents generate feelings of fear and contempt, but also their ambiguous status creates uncertainty about whether

one should possess them. Many migrants didn’t carry their passport, fearing that it would expose them to danger. Explaining why he would enter the country with only a fake passport, even though he had a real one, a man from Nigeria put the situation in simple terms: “When you come to Libya with your real passport, original passport, as a Black man, the police, they can take it.” Not being a signatory, Libya offered no protection under the 1951 Refugee Convention. UN agencies, like the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees and the International Organization for Migration, at times issued specific documents to more vulnerable migrants, stating their marital status, travel companions, and reasons for leaving their country. But a man from Eritrea I met in Tripoli, like Alain, also perceived his paper from the UNHCR as “useless.” “Yeah, UN letter,” he said. “But useless in this country. I don’t have a money. When they see that paper, they will scrap that paper. [...] They don’t have a mind.” Instead, money was needed in these encounters with state or criminal actors. Documents could be reduced to bare materiality. Yet they were not bereft of affective charge. Rather, documents were part of the ambiguous landscape, as law operated and also did not quite operate, through them.

Different state and criminal actors profited from these informal bordering practices. One day, Cynthia described, she was coming back from work with a friend when a group of Libyan men stopped them and forced them into their car at gunpoint. Once inside, they were asked to hand over their passports. “We were scared because the next thing that was coming to their mind is to rape,” Cynthia remembered. The men dropped them off in another corner of Tripoli, demanding 500 Libyan dinars in return for their passports. Cynthia, too, linked this behavior to Libyans’ lack of education and travel:

So the issue in Libya is just [...] the mentality. They don’t have the opportunity to travel, to mingle with other people so that they will [...] understand what life is. [...] They don’t travel, they stay only in Libya. And the mentality they have remains only within them. [...] Why going about raping the Blacks? [...] That is just the problem we have here, they don’t have any human rights.

During another encounter Cynthia recalled, she had not been as lucky. Late one day, on her way back from work with another girl, their taxi was stopped by “Libyan guys” in a jeep. “They say, ‘Where your passport, where your passport, where your passport?’” Cynthia recalled. She was reluctant to hand it over, since she knew they were not the police and would simply steal it for selling on the black market. The men put the girl in their car, stole Cynthia’s bag, and drove off. “So the following morning,” Cynthia said, “what I saw was the body, the dead body of the girl. I saw the dead

body of the girl.” Documents generated uncertainty and fear, as people knew that they offered little protection. Documents also became objects for generating money, whether through ransom payments or trading on the black market.

A Sudanese man I met in Libya recounted many episodes of being stopped on the street. He only ever carried a small amount of money with him, he explained, because you never knew who was the “police” and who were “gangs.” They were not interested in documents, he alleged, but only in money and mobile phones: “to get anything you have in your pocket.” He was convinced that this happened because Libyans did not “like working”: “They believe that they can get their things from us easily.” One of the episodes Cynthia described shows how violent mugging was. Once, while walking on the street with a friend, she received a phone call. As soon as she answered, there were “five guys”: “Their eyes were on my phone. Immediately, I’ve not even finished the call, they just throw the phone like this. This one throw it to this one, this one pass it to this one.” She started shouting, and the attackers then focused on stabbing her friend. “They use knife to spoil his legs, stab him all over,” she said. “Just because of phone.” A man from Eritrea explained that Libyan men would look for SIM cards and money “in arseholes,” using their fingers and guns, and particularly targeting girls, checking their breasts. For many migrants this stark fear in the everyday led to feeling utterly disempowered. “You don’t say anything and never fight back [...] because [you are] without power in Libya,” he said. Lifting his shirt to show a scar on his back, he pointed out that “Libya is very hard. [...] They see you are Black, they shoot you. They never ask you question, they never talk to you, they shoot you directly. Because you are a problem.” The country was “out of control,” said another man from Somalia:

In Libya there is no central government, illegal things, it’s no central government. It’s militia and tribalism there, everybody got a gun. [...] So the country is becoming out of control. Somebody is chasing you, somebody is doing to you bad things. They rape many ladies in Libya. They rape many Somalian ladies, many migrants. They torture you. [...] You cannot talk, you cannot.

Lacking a passport—just like having one—came with its own set of vulnerabilities. Documents, once lost, could not be replaced. There were hardly any embassies in Libya, and passport theft “made” migrants undocumented, preventing them from leaving Libya legally amid increased violence. It resulted in “involuntary immobility” (Carling 2002; Lubkemann 2008), or forced people to move on or return through informal, often risk-laden channels. During these periods, such as in 2011 and 2014, Libya’s neighboring countries established new entry requirements to pre-

vent the conflict from spilling over (Amnesty International 2015). Despite evacuation efforts, migrants without a passport were left stranded in Libya. To escape the violence, they often had only one choice: to leave for Europe by boat (Amnesty International 2015; IOM Libya 2015).

These informal bordering practices in Libya produced vulnerable, racialized bodies. As Sarah Willen (2007, 10) suggests in the context of Israel, migrants’ “embodied experiences of being-in-the-world” were grounded in an existential fear of being arrested or harassed. Elaborating on the power and embodiment of these emotions, and relating to Thomas Csordas’s (1993) work, Willen (2007, 17, 23) refers to a “rooted biopolitics of Otherness” (cf. Fassin 2001). Here, biopolitics, as the administration of life and securitization of populations, is intimately tied to a politics of otherness founded on the migrant body as the site of racial inscription. In Libya, migrants felt dehumanized, and they described their situation as that of a “parasite” or “animal,” considered inhuman but chased like prey, exposed to exploitation. They often perceived their vulnerability as related to their darker skin color, not their legal status. Policing and surveillance mechanisms resulted from the visibility of migrants’ bodies and from their ability to pay money. These bordering practices led migrants to be intercepted on the street, in their houses, at work, or when trying to leave by boat. They were then sometimes sent to government-run immigration detention centers, where they lacked legal recourse. Release was often possible only through paying money (Achnich 2021). For many migrants, like Cynthia and Alain, navigating this landscape meant rarely leaving the house outside of going to work. “Really, it’s really like a prison,” Cynthia said. “From your working place inside the room, from the room to your working place. Just like that, can you imagine?” Living in Libya was “like being in hell,” Martin remarked. “Freedom,” he said, “is all about you being free at heart [...] When you have no fear that means you are free, automatically. But when you’re living in fear, you’re not free, you’re still in bondage.”

Blood tests also heightened fear and vulnerability. Under Gaddafi, foreign nationals seeking a residence permit had to have a valid health certificate, and tests were reintroduced in 2013 to identify diseases such as HIV and hepatitis. These tests sometimes led migrants to be deported (Amnesty International 2013). Cynthia had her blood taken frequently when she was returning from Libya’s south as part of her business. One afternoon at her apartment she pulled a small laminated card out of her pocket, recalling that she was stopped at three checkpoints during her most recent trip to Tripoli. Although the card signified a healthy body, it also signified a body that could be exploited. An HIV-negative test result could save people from possible deportation, but it also put them at immediate risk of being raped. “They just want to have sex with you,” Cynthia said. The Libyan guards at the checkpoint asked her to remove

her clothes when they saw the negative test result. “Unbelievable,” Cynthia said, since either result made her vulnerable. “If you have AIDS,” she suggested, “they will just kill you.” Cynthia’s friend, who sat next to us on the sofa during this conversation, supported this claim, gesturing wildly. “They will just inject you with something,” he said, “and you will die and nobody will ever know why you died. [...] Or they will send you to prison, but maybe also just kill you immediately.” Like documents, blood tests and related encounters with different actors exposed migrants to violence and produced affects of fear as well as contempt. Migrants’ strategy to endure and cope with these informal bordering practices involved generating safe spaces.

### Protection

Many migrants’ lives in Libya seemed shaped by fear and uncertainty. Staying in the country meant becoming resilient and creating new opportunities that would not necessarily exist in a stronger legal framework. In a context in which the state provided almost no safety, order, or protection, and in which legal documents had ambiguous meanings and bordering practices were informal, migrants built safe spaces by establishing networks and learning new skills.

Knowing Arabic, several migrants were convinced, brought feelings of safety amid legal ambiguity. A man from Ivory Coast maintained that it was dangerous for “Black people” in Libya, but particularly so for those who did not speak Arabic. Speaking Arabic meant you had a similar “culture” to the Libyans and were respected more—like people from Sudan or Chad. “But if you don’t speak Arabic,” the man said, “you’re not considered by the Libyans.” Boris from Cameroon, whom I met in Malta with his wife, Carine, after they arrived by boat from Libya, felt fortunate because he spoke Arabic quite well. Libyans didn’t know where he came from and could hold nothing against him. Language skills, Boris contended, provided protection and acceptance at the local level, and they helped one negotiate difficult encounters. Had a Libyan wanted to take him to the police, for example, he would have been able to talk to the authorities. Migrants who did not speak Arabic, Boris explained, could not defend themselves. Trying to “become” Libyan—the perpetrator whom migrants themselves “othered” in such situations—seemed one way of being safe as a foreigner in the country.

Social relations formed along the journey were another way of creating spaces of protection. Boris came to Libya a few years before the 2011 uprisings. Having arrived on the outskirts of a town in the south of Libya, hidden on a truck, he used the five Libyan dinars he had to take a taxi to the town center. The taxi driver, recognizing Boris as distinctly non-Libyan and possibly “illegal,” wanted to hand him over to the police. After much persuasion, he proceeded instead

to take Boris to an area of town where many people from Cameroon lived—a “ghetto,” as people called these specific spaces run by migrant communities from West Africa.

For many West Africans, spaces created through local networks—what they called “foyers” or “ghettos”—provided support along the journey, offering accommodation, work, and food for the payment of a monthly fee (Andersson 2014a; Scheele 2012). As “independent social and spatial arrangements” (Scheele 2012, 23), usually led by a “president” (203) in charge, ghettos stand for “translocal communal accountability, justice, and autonomy, beyond state borders and institutions” (204). These community spaces, with their own rules, regulations, and hierarchies, are particularly relevant in contexts of fragmented state authority, or even outside any state context, “where everybody is only as powerful and protected as their connections” (205). But ghettos were also linked to exploitation and stagnation in life. Staying at the ghetto with other people from West Africa allowed Boris to find regular work through informal networks, in small, unskilled jobs, from selling clothes to washing cars. Properly learning a trade, however, was a way of gaining protection. Boris eventually left the ghetto. He was convinced that only working hard would help him navigate life in Libya and beyond. Learning a trade and becoming self-employed allowed him to rent an apartment. With a good job and Arabic fluency, Boris felt he could not only circumvent everyday discrimination by Libyan nationals, but also become “more Libyan,” a strategy of identification enabling safety.

Starting a family brought some form of stability in precarious circumstances. With Carine sitting next to us one sunny afternoon in Malta, Boris recalled the day she had arrived from the desert. Carine laughed and said an “angel” had come to “rescue” him. New migrant “arrivals” were eagerly anticipated among the ghetto community in Libya, bringing not only news from the desert and back home but also hope. Boris and Carine soon moved in together and got married. Carine fell pregnant. A family provided security amid distressing times, and, more importantly, enabled contemplating the future, a better life beyond Libya. Family formation, itself a classic form of extra-economic labor, worked as a key survival and coping strategy. Nevertheless, this space of protection was fragile. The increase in violence in the years after 2011 led Carine and Boris to leave Libya. They would have stayed had the security situation not deteriorated. Boris’s knowledge of Arabic couldn’t protect him against death or make him invisible as a “foreigner” in an increasingly violent environment. The situation worsened after Carine was kidnapped by criminal groups and Boris had to pay ransom.

They decided to leave for Tripoli, where Boris found work with a Libyan man but made no plans to move onward. One day, his employer asked him why they were not taking a boat when everyone else was leaving. He would like to go, Boris told him, but could not afford the boat trip. “No

problem,” his boss said, and he organized a boat trip in return for Boris’s labor, an act of kindness amid adversity, one of many showing that narratives of Libyans as perpetrators are complex. Not everyone had the courage to take a boat, Carine explained. They themselves would not have done it had they not received the support by the Libyan man combined with the “help of God” and a decent amount of “luck.” Boris decided to trust in God—if it was the plan that he would die at sea, then so be it. If others could make it, why shouldn’t he be able to go? Nevertheless, he was adamant that he would have stayed in Libya had the security situation not suddenly deteriorated. He had, after all, been in a good place in Libya, getting by through small pockets of protection.

Through social relations and language skills, migrants established spaces of safety in Libya. But it was hard work to create these networks and stay in the country; it required affective labor, which had to be performed in addition to precarious economic work. It was also an affective modality that allowed Carine and Boris to take a boat when they no longer felt safe, fleeing physical insecurity in Libya only to encounter another type of risk, that of death at sea. But in choosing to stay, Cynthia and Alain engaged in affective labor that differs in temporal register and duration from that of Carine and Boris. Carine and Boris took a one-off risk at sea, whereas Cynthia and Alain worked on long-term endurance to manage the situation in the everyday. For all of them, however, referring to the “courage” they needed to move on or stay could also be a way of distracting from their fear of doing the opposite—be it staying or moving on.

### Affective labor

Can you imagine that you can work for a Libyan person that [...] [will not] pay you? [...] So some people that will come, they [...] don’t want to stay because of what? The way things are. So I don’t blame some that even have to take the risk to cross that sea. Because if you don’t have the heart, you cannot stay, you cannot.

Cynthia was convinced that only those who had “heart” and “courage” to bear the circumstances could stay in Libya. While she had found employment in Tripoli not long after she arrived, most of her monthly salary was spent commuting to work by trusted taxi—a safety measure necessary for many migrants negotiating the streets and a sign of an informal economy profiting from fear and uncertainty. “They are crazy people,” Cynthia said, describing Libyans. “Anywhere, anything you do is harassment.” She eventually quit her job. Her employer’s racism fueled her decision. “They look at us [as] Black, that we are nobody.” Cynthia was adamant that this was why many people decided to leave by boat. “You cannot stay in this land,” she said. “If you don’t have the hearts, you cannot stay.” One of her friends reinforced

the point: “If you want to know how we are living here in Libya, somehow we are managing. We really are managing. Because we have the hearts to stay.”

Having “heart” could be understood as a form of affective labor that migrants had to perform to cope with informal bordering practices. Labor is not just about earning money and wages to stay or move on; it also involves affective means of coping with violent, precarious situations. This moves beyond economic logics in which migration is explained as the search for work, or a social endeavor in which safe spaces are created through informal networks, learning new skills, and maintaining kinship ties. An affective modality of coping, endurance, and the will to stay on becomes vital for the very activity of work to be performed. It is labor in a corporeal and somatic mode, economic through and through.

The affective labor needed to navigate informal bordering practices is different from the affective labor in economies under late capitalism (Hardt and Negri 2000, 292). In the latter, “immaterial labor is the *affective labor* of human contact and interaction,” typical of service work in the Global North, where affective work is crucial to producing commodities. This is exemplified by the “health services,” which “rely centrally on caring and affective labor, and the entertainment industry [which] is likewise focused on the creation and manipulation of affect” (292). This understanding of affective labor centers on the production of commodities or services that are “intangible” but that generate “well-being, satisfaction, excitement, or passion” (293). In contrast, the affective labor that Cynthia and others engage in pertains to ways of coping, including the willingness to suffer. The affective work of coping does not directly result in the production of commodities, but as feminist political economists have long championed, it becomes crucial to reproducing everyday life and the very capacity to work amid situations of extreme immiseration (Federici 2010; Fortunati 2007). Affective labor is therefore not directly exploited as it is in the service industry. Rather, it forms an important part of the immaterial work performed by migrants, especially women like Carine and Cynthia.

For migrants, mobility entailed exposing oneself to risks, encapsulated in the idea of the *aventurier*, which others refer to in relation to West African migrants crossing the Sahara in French-speaking literature (Bredeloup 2008). This adventurer is not only courageous but also willing to put strength into surviving routine hardships encountered along the way. To describe the strength he needed to get by in Libya, Boris referred to the concept of *se débrouiller*. This term, used by many people in francophone Africa, often refers to the struggle of coping in everyday life, like the concepts of “survival” and “gambling” in anglophone Africa (Waage 2006; Whyte 2008, 97). To survive the Libyan landscape requires dealing with fear and violence in everyday life, coping with prolonged ambiguity over and above the

need to improvise, forming informal networks and earning money. It also entails gambling (Belloni 2019) or taking risks, often fueled by the lucrative wages that migrants believed they would get in Libya. As Martin remarked, “Libyans do not do hard labor,” but migrants do. “If you carry a piece of block in the other part of Africa for half a cent,” he said, “you can carry it here in Libya for two dollars.” Migrants were willing to endure hardship to make it to Libya:

They think, “Instead of putting so much of my strength on that back home, let me take the risk, come here.” [...] When so many of them heard about that, that in Libya, what you could do for half a cent in your country, you could do it here for two dollars, it triggers them. They say, “Ah man, I want to get there, no matter how long it will take, no matter how much it will cost.”

Those unable to put their “strength” to good use back home were hoping to do so in Europe, Martin explained, whereas others managed to do it in Libya. Even uneducated people could use their talent to make money through hard labor, he stressed. Libya was a “platform for people who could use their physical strength [...] to do hard jobs to make money.” Surviving required not only this type of strenuous, manual labor, but also affective, somatic work. And as Cynthia suggested, having strength meant being able to “carry on” every day, producing oneself as an able-bodied laborer capable of strenuous work. While Alain earned much more than he ever would back home, allowing him to support his family, it came at the cost of having to deal with a feeling of being imprisoned. “You are seeing these people,” a friend of his said, “threaten us, showing us a gun, shooting us, imprison us, arresting us.” Going back home was not an option, he explained. “It is not that we are happy with it. Why am I still here? If you didn’t go [to] work, you are indoors. You have nowhere.” The sense of imprisonment was antithetical to “normal” life.

For people like Cynthia, coping was a form of affective work through which they could give up physical security for long-term social security. Like many other West African migrants, who had relatively better education and employment skills, Cynthia had decent prospects for earning money and establishing a career in Libya. Staying in her home country had not been an option. She had worked in a factory earning US\$150 a month, just enough to rent a shared room. In Libya, while coping was difficult, she had money to support her child. Having stopped her studies before she moved to Libya, Cynthia aimed to return eventually. “All my friends from school back home are studying abroad,” she laughed one day while we were sipping coffee, “but look at me, I do my PhD in the desert.” She regularly made trips through the Sahara to buy goods and sell them in Libya, and each trip took at least a couple of months.

They were both dangerous and expensive. Cynthia had to pay several thousands of US dollars to transport the goods through the desert on separate trucks. In Libya’s south, she had to wait weeks until they arrived so she could take them to Tripoli. While this business was doing well and she was earning good money, her frequent absences disengaged her from her family and friends in Libya, and they made it difficult for her to hold permanent employment when she was not traveling. Cynthia’s child was looked after by a friend in her absence. When Cynthia returned, the child always stayed close to her, clinging to her leg as if to keep her from leaving again.

Deciding against onward movement and choosing physical insecurity in Libya, Cynthia and her family engaged in suffering for a better future. Enduring life was dangerous, as Alain pointed out. “Living in Libya is 50-50, no, no, no, is 60-40. [...] The surviving side is 40, while the dead side is 60.” For Cynthia, suffering in the everyday was worth it, since she could provide for her child: “When [...] you’re seeing what you’re suffering for, you’re seeing the result of it, you have joy from it.” A friend of Cynthia’s explained, “[Our children] won’t have to take the same risk that we have taken in life. So we take the risk to make a better future for our kids.” Cynthia was suffering for her child to have a better life and to attend university. “Do you think I like going through the desert?” she asked me one afternoon, not long after returning exhausted from one of her trips. All this would be worthwhile, when, one day, her child would take care of her and tell her, “Mommy, now it’s time to relax.” Cynthia was convinced that this would certainly not be in Libya, where the political situation did not allow much room for growth. Libya was a transit stop, “only [for] those that have the patience, to stay with them and to follow their ways,” she argued. They would not stay for long themselves. “If we work and we will get what we want,” she said, “we leave. Because it’s not a place to live, at all. It’s not a place to live.”

But Cynthia and her family also perceived the sea, rather than the conflict-ridden and fear-laden Libyan soil, as the critical landscape of risk. Migrants were “going for risk” by taking the boat, Cynthia explained, because they were attracted to the “good life” in Europe, where there were “human rights” and migrants would be regarded as “a human being.” Taking a boat was “the highest risk” along the journey, Martin was convinced. Migrants’ decision-making often unfolded in steps, he explained: they left their home countries for different reasons, went to Libya because they heard that they could build a future there, and from there thought about Europe. For many migrants, going to Europe emerged as an option because they found living in Libya so difficult. Or, as a man from Ivory Coast put it, “many people [...] didn’t come to Libya to come to Europe.” For migrants like Cynthia and her family, coping with life in Libya was not a passive act. It allowed them, rather, to govern somewhat

their own mobility. Cynthia, for example, could use Libya's weak legal framework to her advantage, establishing a circular trading business. She was exposed to many dangers during her trips through the desert, but they were easier to bear than possible death by drowning at sea, "because [in] the sea, there is no rescue," she said. "It's a whole risk. Either you live or you die. I don't want to take that risk, no." Cynthia and her family thought they could navigate the landscape in Libya, but not the landscape of fear at sea. As Cynthia put it,

It's better for me to stay here and then bear with them, even though they are beating me, putting my head on the ground, let me just get that thing that I need, because that's what I came out for. [...] It is better than for me to take that sea.

She had her child to take care of, Cynthia explained. Alain added, "You just inform the sharks to get ready because you are coming, anytime. I will hand over myself to you. That's the highest risk. The highest order. Taking that sea." The context of fragmented state authority in Libya offered migrants like Cynthia and her family certain advantages that they would not have in a strongly regulated EU context. Why would they need to go to Europe, they asked, when rules and regulations were oppressive? In Libya they could use their "strength" to make "good money." As one of Cynthia's friends explained, to work in Europe "you have to have [a] permit, this permit, this permit, but in Libya nobody asks you for any permit. Nobody." Their friend who had moved on to Europe, he remarked, had the freedom to move around with his legal documents, but not the freedom of having money. "What I have," he said, "he not even has quarter of it. Money [...] investment, everything. He has his documents, he can fly home and go back. But here, I don't have documents, I don't have anything. But I am getting the money." The very ambiguity that surrounded documents and rendered migrants vulnerable also worked to their benefit. After 10 years in Europe, a person would have made only half the money they earned in three years in Libya, Cynthia was convinced. Nevertheless, there was a "threshold of tolerance" (Jackson 2008, 71) beyond which the situation in Libya was no longer bearable. For Cynthia this was during the 2011 uprisings, when she realized she didn't have "enough heart" to stay. She left Libya for some time, to escape the spiraling violence instead of taking a boat to Europe.

### Conclusion: Informal bordering practices

Cynthia and Alain's experiences powerfully demonstrate the affective labor that is required to navigate informal bordering practices in a context in which there are often no ordinary regulations of state order. The article has highlighted how informal bordering practices coincide with mi-

grants' affect and decision-making, shaping lives and mobility in a context of fragmented state authority. Cynthia and Alain's decision to stay in Libya is not abstract and irrational; rather, it reflects a negotiation with specific circumstances. Informal bordering is happening globally as racial inscriptions repeatedly come back to mark the same vulnerable bodies. Migrants' accounts teach us that the validity of documents also depends on who you are, not just where you are. Racial exclusion has similar consequences in many parts of the world, rendering vulnerable even people who possess documents, regardless of where they are. This article, then, allows us to think more carefully about both contexts of fragmented state authority and the so-called Global North, where unequal and uncertain conditions are far more prevalent than commonly admitted. Rather than resorting to a problematic binary between weak and strong states, it provides an alternative conceptualization of formal and informal political economies and their relation to violence and to migrants' mobilities and survival.

Suffering is affective labor through which migrants in Libya give up immediate physical security for long-term social security. It is the glue between a taxing present and a possible, hopeful future. Affective labor is a way of navigating often violent and informal bordering practices, a means of enduring precarity and of building resilience to deal with calamities, even if only for a certain duration. Affect is not only critical to producing mobile laboring bodies, but it is also a means through which migrants lay claim to, and make, their own mobilities. While racial exclusion is widespread, there is also something distinct about this story, in that a context of precarity, ambiguity, and fear is generated through Libya's political situation, including its fragmented state and law and asylum framework, as well as the EU's migration anxieties. This context enables the emergence of highly politicized but affective informal bordering practices. We see how bordering is linked to migrant bodies at the intersection of transnational regulatory politics of securitization and the localized informal forces that emerge from and shape migrants' movement in fragmented environments. It is a deregulated mode of governance implemented by a group of state and criminal actors whose actions emerge within a landscape of affect and indeterminacy precisely because documents never stand simply for themselves (Kelly 2006).

Life was "exceptional" for citizens and noncitizens in Libya, and this exceptionalism allowed for the emergence of new bordering practices and attendant modes of coping. Many migrants made the most of this situation by focusing on the financial benefits and independence, and they deferred the frailties of the present to a planned future return to the country of origin. This allowed people with certain backgrounds and skills, like Cynthia and Alain, to find the necessary strength needed to stay in Libya. But an

exceptional situation also led others, like Carine and Boris, to move on.

This is, then, a situated story, one that points to the need to develop an ethnographically differentiated analysis of migration regimes and their economic and affective effects, including “bioeconomies” profiting from mobile lives (Andersson 2018). The informal bordering practices that migrants like Cynthia and Alain experience in Libya draw their charge from ambiguity, the uncertainty of legal documents, exposures to blood tests, and the intersections between money and racialized, everyday violence. These informal bordering techniques are affective, and they entail relations not only between individuals but also between individuals and things, such as documents, landscapes, and turbulent forces, including the sea. It is the relationality and mobility of affect that are relevant in this context.

Ultimately, this shows that certain bordering practices cannot be explained solely through formal biopolitical theories of state power, legal exclusion, and binary categorizations of migrants. Rather, they operate through affect and the spaces of ambiguity they spawn, particularly in Libya but also in other countries, including in the so-called Global North. The affective lives of migrants become targets and conditions of bordering practices. The perceived social construction of migrants as dangerous Other bodies contributes to their exclusion, as well as to their desirability as bodies that can be financially exploited. The systematization of violence, forced immobility, and detention imposed on migrants’ bodies in Libya underpins informal bordering practices, wherein the stopping of “Black” bodies often seems to be one central mechanism through which profits are derived. At the same time, migrants’ perceptions of feeling “othered” could lead them to stereotype Libyan citizens, putting them in a homogenized category of the evil perpetrator.

This analysis also points to the need to pay greater attention to informal and racialized political economies in which documents play an ambiguous role and bodies are ethnically marked. Migration management and different modes of surveillance have become defining features of state power, but such techniques rely on informal judgments about whom to police (Reeves 2013). This ambiguity allows not only for the normalization of selective scrutiny (Reeves 2018) but also for certain actors to profit from migrants’ lives. It highlights that migration is a site of deep affective attachments. To understand such attachments, we must bring informal bordering practices and migrants’ affect and mobilities into conversation. Various actors and devices are at work here to produce the informality of these bordering practices, including documents, blood tests, smugglers, other criminal actors, state authorities, and Libyan citizens. Protection is created through means removed from the law, such as community networks or language knowledge. This process is empowering through spe-

cific logics of care, kinship, and suffering that are closely linked to mobilities. In Libya legal documents in themselves do not seem to guarantee that a person will not be stopped, asked to pay money, imprisoned, and deported for (ostensibly) trying to move on to Europe. This system of informal bordering practices indicates a social form in relation not only to space but also to bodily and material practices, not unlike Yael Navaro-Yashin’s (2012, 5) understanding of the “make-believe as a social form, referring not only to space and territory but also to modes of governance and administration and to material practices.” Forgoing everyday physical security for long-term social security, migrants utilized the informal economy and weak rules and regulations in Libya to their advantage. Their chances of doing so would be lower in the EU’s highly regulated legal framework and labor market. Affective ways of coping and engaging in suffering, as Cynthia and her family highlighted, were important to survive and stay in Libya. Migration and mobility are not just about desperation, but about dignity and political acts. Affect in this context allows migrants like Cynthia and Alain to craft space in a world overshadowed by images of shipwrecks, people clinging to fences, and migrant bodies washed up on beaches.

## Notes

*Acknowledgments.* I am indebted to my interlocutors, who shared their experiences with me. I would also like to thank the editors, staff, and anonymous reviewers at *American Ethnologist* for their insightful comments and wonderful editorial support, in particular Pablo Morales for the thoughtful copyediting. I am grateful to the panel participants at a AAA Annual Meeting, who provided comments on a presentation of an earlier version.

1. All names have been pseudonymized.

2. The term *migrant* is used here to refer to third-country nationals from countries in eastern and western sub-Saharan Africa. Many, but not all, were undocumented. Interviews were conducted mainly in English and French. I took great care to ensure that nobody was put at risk through my research.

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