

Colloquy



BIOECONOMY AND MIGRANTS' LIVES IN LIBYA

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I first met Semere and Tigisti, an Eritrean couple, a few days after they had arrived in Libya's capital, Tripoli, from the Sahara Desert.¹ Sitting silently in the derelict house on the city's outskirts, where many undocumented migrants waited to move on to Europe by boat, they gave the impression of feeling trapped and wanting to hide from the world. Semere and Tigisti were tired and emaciated after an arduous journey with human smugglers on overcrowded vehicles through the desert. Fear had etched onto their faces. Their journey had begun when they left Eritrea for Sudan, where they lived for some time to earn the money to continue their journey. "For a better life" they had to leave, Semere remarked.

The journey from Sudan through the desert was so bad that Semere and Tigisti felt unable to recount it. They not only endured extreme weather conditions, but faced violence, harassment, and extortion at the hands of the smugglers and other criminal groups. The feeling of being traded "like a good" or a "commodity" among different actors in this desert landscape shaped migrants' perceptions of such journeys to the south of Libya. These predicaments often continued as people made their way through the country. Many migrants ended up in sites of confinement and detention, sometimes being able to escape, but more often having to pay

their way out by sourcing money through informal channels. Semere and Tigisti appeared unable to shake the feeling of fear that had engulfed their lives ever since the desert crossing. They had learned about the house in Tripoli through a friend. Owned by a Libyan landlord, it was a place where a group of migrants paid rent to stay while waiting to move on to Europe by boat. The house offered a relatively stable place for migrants to prepare for the boat crossing in the turbulent atmosphere of Libya's fragmented state context three years after the 2011 uprisings. In Libya, migrants' lives became enmeshed in predatory economic practices that generated profit from mobile life: they became human "stock" to be traded, were consumers of clandestine journeys and sources of rent for criminal and state actors.

How are economic practices forged in relation to mobility and unauthorized migration in Libya's fragmented state context? Commentators in Europe and North America often frame migration as a "crisis" needing active management. Biopolitical perspectives used to understand the management of migration focus on techniques of securitization and the actions of the state (De Genova 2017; Tazzioli 2019). Yet attempts to securitize, control, and regulate unauthorized migration simultaneously target life economically and at multiple levels, from data to bodies to populations. This has given rise to what Ruben Andersson (2018, 414) calls "a human bioeconomy," an economic arrangement that aims to generate "value from human beings' vitality in the broadest sense, reaching from physical features to bodily presence, and from the capacity to move to the psychological experience of lived time." Going beyond specifications of the bioeconomy rooted in biomedicine and the pharmaceutical industry (Cooper 2008; Rose 2007; Sunder Rajan 2006), a human bioeconomy concerns how migrants' lives become use-values for the state and for capital (see also Achtnich 2022, this issue). It proceeds via border-control technologies, camps (Andersson 2018; Tazzioli 2019), and the creation of conditions that produce cheap labor (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013). But what might economic relations tapping into human vitality look like when we deflect ethnographic and analytical endeavors from familiar European vantage points and strong state regimes to other contexts where migration is not always governed in the same way (see also Lucht 2022, this issue)? What insights can we draw from the lives of those who undertake perilous journeys and show an acute awareness of the economics of their predicament? Semere and Tigisti's journey reveals a set of economic practices that tap into, and even predate on, migrants' vitality. Such practices are not necessarily tethered to a state-led biopolitics or the power to foster life. Rather, they can hinge on a necropolitics, or the power of deciding "who is *disposable* and who is not" (Mbembe 2019, 80). Value-generation can take a

rentier form, buttressed by violence that is no longer the monopoly of the state but exercised by militias and criminal gangs, among others. From this non-European vantage point, we better understand a bioeconomy as a set of practices that overlap and intersect with other economic arrangements crossing legal and illegal, collective and intimate, bio- and necro-economic divides.

New to Tripoli, Semere and Tigisti did not have strong social networks with other migrants in the city. One day, following a misunderstanding about rent, they had to leave the house. Semere felt lost and powerless. Clearly identifiable as foreigners, migrants were targets of violence by criminal and state actors through muggings, beatings, money extortion, or detention. The legibility of people as “migrants” had less to do with them being object-targets of state power and discipline, as described by [Martina Tazzioli \(2019\)](#) in other strong state contexts, and more with being read as “foreigners.” Racial categorization and violence were therefore crucial for rendering migrants’ lives into sources of predation and profit. Criminal groups, often armed, could enter dwellings at any point to steal money migrants had saved for the boat crossing. Taking a taxi, walking in the street, or shopping at the market came with the danger of interception and detention by state authorities—where paying money often offered the only way out. At the house, a network of landlords, taxi drivers, and brokers provided some “security” to those who paid for housing and onward movement by boat. At work was a form of rentier extraction both informal and extra-legal, exploiting vulnerable mobilities at what [Andersson \(2022, this issue\)](#) calls a “granular/human, rather than (just) territorial, level.”

Eventually, through other migrants who had already left for Europe, Semere and Tigisti found another place to stay. Their new room, located in a row of run-down garages behind a rusting metal gate, was rented out by a Libyan man who lived on the premises. The reduced size and visibility of the house allowed them to be a little more relaxed, although Semere and Tigisti did not feel entirely safe in their new surroundings. The landlord drank too much and had begun to harass them. As undocumented migrants, the couple had no power and could not speak up to the landlord. Semere said, “he will kill me, he can kill me.” Once again, they were exposed to a form of profiteering that proceeded by rendering peoples’ lives vulnerable and disposable.

For Semere and Tigisti, life in Libya became defined by waiting to move on ([Achtnich 2021](#)). It was about dreaming of “normal” futures in Europe and departing by boat as soon as they raised enough money to pay for the crossing. Unable to find work, Semere sourced money through friends. Having received more than

US\$1,000, he was still a few hundred dollars short. “Ninety-nine percent, I am sure 99 percent, they will help me,” said Semere, who hoped to reciprocate in the future. The couple left a few weeks later when their broker suddenly informed them that the payment would be complete with only another US\$100, an amount Semere managed to raise quickly through his friends. Migrants never “saw” the smuggler, who was often Libyan or from a West African country. A broker would collect money on his behalf. Semere and his friends felt convinced that smugglers were “rich people,” probably able to earn “at least US\$70,000 per boat crossing,” they assumed.

Migrants were at times “goods” to be traded. Not only did this mark a clear instance of predatory practices exploiting human vitality as “raw material” (Andersson 2022, this issue) but it also constituted profiting in a necropolitical vein, where the treatment of people as goods denied their entry into the very category of “the human” (cf. Manjapra 2019; Mbembe 2019). At other moments, migrants became consumers of surreptitious mobilities, therefore contributing to the realization of value. The intensification of border controls, including the externalization of EU borders to North Africa through investment in immigration detention centers and policies to criminalize migration (Brachet 2016), allowed clandestine economic practices in Libya to flourish. Such clandestine economies emerging in the borderlands not only show resilience and adaptability (Lucht 2022, this issue) but prove competitive. Although predatory, these economies also involve trust and reputation. Migrants could exert some agency by choosing a smuggler who only asked for a money transfer on successful arrival in Europe. Clandestine economies thus operated through tacit rules and practices that exceeded imperatives of the formal state and their punitive biopolitics, while remaining entwined in ordinary market relations through the payment for a specific service. Smuggling, market economies, and economies of life itself thus become increasingly blurred.

The house where I had met Semere and Tigisti soon after their arrival from the desert was also a space where new relations between migrants were forged. These relationships front-stage another crucial dimension of a bioeconomy in the borderlands—what Wendy Vogt (2018, 16), in the context of Mexican-U.S. migration, calls “intimate economies of mobility.” Many people arrived at the house severely injured or ill after prolonged stays in detention or following arduous journeys. Some women were pregnant, at times as a result of rape. Living conditions in the overcrowded house spread and exacerbated illnesses, including scabies and tuberculosis. Sick and contagious bodies meant a threat to the landlord’s business, so the ill sometimes faced expulsion.

Investing every cent in the planned boat crossing meant that migrants often did not have money for necessary medical treatment. Those who needed life-saving injections were, as one doctor remarked, unable to pay. Yet because only somewhat healthy bodies could remain mobile, it was also important to become agile enough to survive the life-threatening boat crossing. Social relations forged in the house became important in this regard. Labors of care provided by other residents—often amid those with no shared history—proved crucial in enabling bodies to heal, even if only partially. They included monetary support, food, and medical care. In contrast to bioeconomies where intimate bodily processes are put on the market to generate exchange value (Reeves 2022, this issue), such intimate economies concerned reproducing the body as a mobile body, especially in the face of abjection and under conditions that rendered life disposable. Although deemed “extra-economic” in conventional analyses focused on the exploitation of wage labor, intimate economies are vital for reproducing “bare life” (Agamben 1998), the “new frontier” on which capitalism predates (Andersson 2022, this issue).

Semere's and Tigisti's lives in Tripoli, like those of many other migrants, provide a compelling entry point for attending to the ways in which bioeconomy and necroeconomy interdigitate. Moving beyond the state-centric biopolitical perspective, on which most studies of migrant exploitation and bordering tend to rest, enables us to re-evaluate how life becomes a source of value and, at the same time, how surplus is extracted by rendering life disposable (cf. Manjapra 2019). Racialized violence and the dehumanization of people into “goods” prepare the ground for extracting rent. Similarly, migrants' journeys reveal how “the economic” in bioeconomy entails overlapping practices, where intimate economies of care intersect and shade into clandestine economies of mobility resting on illicit market relations. This ethnography makes room for other processes glossed over by a focus on securitization and the familiar locales—camps, borders, urban ghettos—from which economic practices and migration have been studied. It shows how value is not just extracted but also generated from mobile life in the borderlands (Andersson 2018). Predatory formations that profit from undocumented migrants do not always administer life or enroll it into further economic processes. A focus on migrants' journeys thus rethinks bioeconomy and reveals how life is economized along multiple, often racialized and violent, pathways.

ABSTRACT

This essay examines how a bioeconomy might be understood in a context of fragmented state authority in Libya, where mobilities are commodified by different actors, but not always tethered to a state-centric biopolitics of managing migration. It focuses on the unauthorized journeys of migrants moving through Libya and onward by boat to Europe. In this context, economies tapping into human vitality can be clandestine, where lines between state and criminal actors, as well as the value and disposability of life, become blurred. They are also contingent on intimate relations between migrants—proximities and labors of care through which mobile lives are reproduced and from which various predatory economic formations profit. Moving beyond the Foucauldian biopolitics that often inform studies of migration, security, and the state, ethnographic attention to value generation and extraction in the borderlands foregrounds economic relations as sets of intersecting practices in which mobile life and its disposability constitute a vital thread. [migration; mobility; bioeconomy; necropolitics; care; bodies; Libya]

NOTES

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1. All names have been changed.

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