REFUGE
IN A
MOVING
WORLD

Tracing refugee
and migrant journeys
across disciplines

Edited by
Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh

UCLPRESS

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With love to Bissan-María Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, to whom this book is dedicated:
bisous *for our Bisou.*

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Mediterranean distinctions: Forced migration, forceful hope and the analytics of desperation

Alice Elliot

This chapter offers a reflection about a peculiar resonance, even familiarity, between forms of movement that are legally and socially defined as distinct. I take as my starting point the striking familiarity between the so-called European 'refugee crisis', with its complex historical, racial and mediatic configurations (New Keywords Collective, 2016), and a form of movement that is generally categorized, and indeed explicitly carved out, as distinct: North African migrations across the Mediterranean. This particular transnational movement, which I have been researching since 2009 (Elliot, forthcoming), is not classified as 'forced', nor are Moroccan or Tunisian migrants legally defined, except in very exceptional cases, as 'asylum seekers' or 'refugees'. However, many elements of the 'refugee-crisis' phenomenon are strikingly familiar to me, as well as to my North African interlocutors: the deaths at sea and the makeshift rescue operations; the rhetoric of invasion and the stories of hope; the defiance of fear; and the race, class and gender politics of exclusion and inclusion. While numbers and historical contingencies may be different, for those who have experience of Mediterranean migrations, the 'refugee crisis' is eerily familiar.[1]

In this chapter I reflect on this complex familiarity by focusing on the 'distinction work' actualized by the idea – and category – of 'forced migration', an idea and category that sustains many of the conceptualizations and practices surrounding the 'refugee crisis'. My reflection is in two, brief, parts. In the first part, I trace how the concept of forced migration brings into 'biopolitical being' (Puar, 2017: xix) different kinds of moving

subjects by distinguishing certain forces (the force of war, for example, or the force of environmental disaster) from others (for example, the force of relative poverty; the force of colonial history; or, what interests me here, the force of hope). I argue that while this work of classification and distinction of the multiple forces that compel people to move is perhaps necessary at times (though necessary for what, and to whom, remain vital questions), it also generates paradoxical hierarchies and artificial distinctions with tangible, indeed deadly, consequences. In the second part of the chapter, I reflect on the critical labour of interrogating and displacing these legal and social distinctions between moving subjects. In doing so, I trace the possible limitations of analytics that, in an effort to reclaim the 'abstract – rather than historical – humanity' (Danewid, 2017, 1675) of migrants, foreground desperation and vulnerability as determining forces of (some) human movement, actualizing once again specific sets of biopolitical distinctions across the Mediterranean.

On being forced to move

With over 10 per cent of its total population living abroad, and a global diaspora estimated at between three and four million, Morocco is today one of the major emigration countries in the world (Berriane *et al.*, 2015). Since 2009, I have been tracing how this phenomenon of huge proportions has come to inhabit people's lives in a rural central area of the country where migration to Europe – particularly to southern Europe – is ubiquitous, and in a sense inescapable. Migration towards Europe gained momentum in the area in the early 1980s and initially had a circular character, with Moroccan nationals being able to travel freely back and forth across the Mediterranean. The introduction of visa requirements by Italy and Spain in 1990–1 had fundamental conse-quences on the routes, patterns and composition of migration from the area, and the Mediterranean passage has become increasingly deadly, and part of what Ruben Andersson (2014) describes as a multi-million 'illegality industry'. Indeed, the area where I work is sometimes referred to locally as 'the triangle of death', a chilling reminder of the ceaseless deaths in the Mediterranean Sea of young *harraga* from the region (*harraga* meaning clandestine crossers – from the verb *haraqa*, 'to burn').

The deadly risks associated with the Mediterranean crossing have not dampened people's desire, or intention, to move. Migration is part and parcel of the very way in which existence, future, and possibility are spoken about and understood, often by younger and older generations

alike. *L-berra* – meaning 'the outside' in Moroccan Arabic, and the concept used in the area to refer to Europe and other desired migrant destinations (Elliot, forthcoming) – has become for many synonymous with a life worth living, and many of the actions, thoughts and routines of daily life are infused with a sense of expectation for migratory futures to come.

The hope for migration is particularly forceful in the lives of young men. This is how Aziz, a young unemployed graduate whom I have known for many years, summarized it for me once:

> My life here is nothing [*walu*]. I wake up and I fall asleep but there is nothing that makes it a life. Ask anyone, they'll tell you the same: I need to go to 'the outside' [*l-berra*] so I can live. Here you work like a dog, you study study and study, you bribe like a rich man even if you have nothing … but still you are stuck, still you are not living, you are not moving anywhere, just going round in circles. I'm not stupid. I don't think there is gold on the street over there, or that people are particularly nice. I know the police beat you up, that even if you have five degrees you'll be in construction, and that some get so lonely they implode. But in 'the outside' there is always something, there is always the hope that, even if today was really bad, tomorrow will be better …

While young people like Aziz often describe migration, and the hope that it embodies and fosters, as a gripping, and irresistible, force, constitutive of the imagination of life itself, Moroccan migration rarely falls in the official, and normative, category of 'forced migration'. The International Association for the Study of Forced Migration (IASFM) defines forced migration as 'a general term that refers to the movements of refugees and internally displaced people (those displaced by conflicts) as well as people displaced by natural or environmental disasters, chemical or nuclear disasters, famine, or development projects'.[2] None of these dramatic forces necessarily apply to my interlocutors in rural Morocco where I conduct research. There is no war currently raging in Aziz's home town, nor has there been any recent environmental, chemical or nuclear disaster in the region that has displaced vast numbers of people. Indeed, Morocco as a whole is often discussed, if not explicitly treated, as a 'safe country of origin' in a number of European states as they tighten refugee policies, and categories, and streamline deportation regimes.[3] For as long as only disastrous forces such as famine or torture are accorded legal (and social) weight in the administration of migration rights to those moving from non-affluent, non-Western contexts, the forces that animate the

movement of people like Aziz remain excluded, and invisible – and so do the moving subjects themselves. And while it may sound logical that someone escaping, say, a civil war should have precedence over someone who feels stuck in an unliveable life, as is always the case with classifications and distinctions (see Douglas, 1966), other problems immediately emerge by thinking this way. Here, I am not solely referring to the racial, historical and social logics that ground the very act of making the right to move and movement of (some) people contingent on classification and distinction in the first place – a point to which I return below. I am also referring, in more immediate terms, to the fact that human movement unavoidably exceeds its formal classification.

While IASFM's definition of forced migration does not seem to apply, at least not obviously so, to the central Moroccan migration with which I am familiar, people from this area aspire to move and sometimes build their lives around moving – and many, denied legal entry by European states, risk and often lose their lives in order to reach the opposite shore. People like Aziz describe their actual or desired migration as something necessary, crucial for their very survival as subjects. The expression '*khassni nemshi*' (I have to go), is often uttered in the area, and life without migration can be described as hollowed out, meaningless. This may not be 'forced migration' according to the IASFM's official definition, but the sense of being *compelled*, indeed forced to move, is palpable. Anthropologists of Morocco have analysed this 'force' in different ways. Francesco Vacchiano (2014) has written of the ways in which Moroccan children and adolescents who travel unaccompanied to Europe speak of 'the burning desire' for migration, so burning that it makes them leave family, friends and home in order to undertake an often deadly journey. They also speak, as many of my own interlocutors do, of the compelling sense of responsibility toward one's parents, a responsibility that fuels (forces?) their migratory plans. Similarly, Stefania Pandolfo (2007) has shown how disenfranchised Moroccan youths discuss migration in terms of a religious duty, something that one is required to do when life becomes so unliveable that it parallels a kind of suicide.

How do we distinguish between the different, powerful forces that compel people to move? And what are the consequences of imposing a legal distinction between, say, the force of hope and the force of war? My suggestion is not that these forces are the same (although they do often intimately overlap) but rather that both forces powerfully compel people to move, incessantly defying the classificatory regimes imposed on them. This will always be the case, my sense is, for as long as the right to move of (some) subjects is conceived as *contingent* on specific qualities and properties of the forces compelling this movement.

Discursive framings of *what causes* movement have always shaped how states and other actors have responded, and classified, moving people. Think, for example, of the historically and politically contingent conceptual boundaries between voluntary versus forced migration, migrant versus refugee, economic versus political migrant. On the conceptual distinction between 'refugee' and 'migrant' in particular, anthropologists Seth Holmes and Heide Castañeda have argued how:

> immigrants or migrants, as opposed to refugees, tend to be portrayed in popular, political, and academic discourse as economic opportunists, *voluntarily* leaving their home communities in search for a better life. Because they are viewed as having made a free and autonomous *choice* to cross borders, they are often positioned as unworthy of social, economic, and political rights. (Holmes and Castañeda, 2016: 17)

Importantly, these conceptual distinctions and classificatory regimes quickly become reified into categories of being, erasing the artificiality of the categories themselves. Think, for example, of the category 'illegal immigrant' – the classification that many of my Moroccan interlocutors are given if they survive the perilous Mediterranean crossing into Europe. 'Illegal immigrant' quickly shifts from a formal description of an individual who does not possess the correct documentation in a specific legal regime, and in a specific time and place, to a description of the very quality – even moral fibre – of a person (see, for example, Quassoli, 2013 and Maneri, 2011 on the concept of *clandestino* in Italy). Many have argued that a similar process of moral classification has been taking place with the so-called European 'refugee crisis'.

Nadine El-Enany (2107), for example, has analysed the distinctions between 'the migrant' and 'the refugee' emerging in the media portrayal and popular perception of people seeking entry into Europe. She points to how easily we forget that the legal categories of migrant, asylum seeker and refugee are 'artificial and historically contingent. They do not represent natural or predefined groups of people, but instead construct them' (2017: 30). She argues that much is to be gained from conflating the categories of refugee and migrant:

> if we are trying to understand not only what these categories signify in actuality, but also their effects. All people moving are migrants: people moving out of a desire to better their existence, whether in flight from extreme poverty or from persecution. It is merely that

the law grants some people rights, at least in theory, and others not … The distinction drawn between migrants and refugees is both false and dangerous in reinforcing the idea that some migrants are worthy of humanisation, while others are not. (El-Enany, 2017: 30)

Holmes and Castañeda make a similar point in their analysis of the idea of 'deservingness' in the contemporary 'refugee crisis'. They argue that because international conventions establish refugees as *involuntarily* displaced by political circumstances (war, famine, violence and so on), they are framed as deserving migrants. This deservingness enables a moral, as much as a legal or social, demarcation between 'people who are understood as worthy of the international community's physical, economic, social and health aid and those who are not' (Holmes and Castañeda, 2016: 17).

Desperate analytics

In a historical, social and political moment in which distinction and categorization can administer life and death, the work of scholars like El-Enany, Holmes and Castañeda – who interrogate and displace the categories superimposed on, and producing of, moving people – is vital (see also, for instance, New Keywords Collective, 2016; Crawley and Skleparis 2018; Saunders *et al.*, 2016; Sigona 2018; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, this volume). We have seen how even an apparently straightforward category such as 'forced migration' is not easily discernible on the ground once we take into account the multiple, complex and irresistible forces involved in human movement.

However, my sense is that we also need to pay close attention to the mode in which we (re)categorize and (re)bound moving people (also see Kelman, this volume). When we advocate a critical re-evaluation of the boundary between, for example, the categories of 'refugee' and 'migrant', we often do so on the grounds that both refugees and migrants are moving in a context of desperation, dispossession and poverty. In her critique of the distinction between migrant and refugee, El-Enany states, for example, that 'all people moving are migrants: people moving out of a desire to better their existence, whether in flight from extreme poverty or from persecution' (El-Enany, 2017: 30). We also find this language of desperation and poverty in other critical work. To keep with another previous example, Holmes and Castañeda, in their critique of the distinction between political and economic migration, argue that:

individuals, families, and communities have been driven out of their homes by economic desperation that is politically produced … Indeed, the idea of the 'voluntary' economic migrant elides the realities of structural violence and post-colonial economic inequalities that push people to migrate in order to survive. (Holmes and Castañeda, 2016:17)

Survival and desperation, poverty and structural violence. The case for critical re-evaluation of classificatory boundaries seems to build on pretty depressing grounds. In many cases, this is indeed the context in which people move. And, even when it is not, in specific sociopolitical climates it does make sense to insist on the humanitarian discourse in order to alleviate the strict, and deadly, migration restrictions in place.

However, focusing solely on the desperation of people on the move – whether categorized as 'refugees', 'political migrants' or 'economic migrants' – has its own analytic and political limitations. As I see it, the risk is that we may end up reiterating the idea that the movement of some takes place only in situations of (desperate) *need*. Why is the Mediterranean crossing of young North Africans so rarely framed as a desire to travel? Why are words such as curiosity, adventure, experience so rarely heard when we speak of North Africans, and so often used when describing the transnational movement of, say, young Europeans?

In making my point about the problematic definition of forced migration, I have evoked stories of deep existential and social frustration in Morocco, and the underlying sense of hope that fuels the migratory projects of my interlocutors. But this is just part of the story, as always. Many list, next to the burning need to begin a life worth living, also a wish to see Paris, a curiosity to hear people speak English, a desire to visit an old aunt in Italy, an interest in experiencing different cultures, and the adventure of travel itself (cf. Bachelet, 2019; Nyamnjoh, 2011; Olwig, 2018). Emphasizing frustration, desperation or the need for help, while sometimes effective and sometimes truthful, also reiterates a specific image that Europe has of 'the Other' and of itself, as well as reiterating specific relations of power, hierarchy and charity. It also reiterates the idea that while in the 'Global North' travel may be about curiosity, indecision about the future or love, others may travel – and indeed only *desire* to travel – out of desperation, poverty, fear.

Ida Danewid (2017) has made a similar observation in her analysis of the analytical and political language of hospitality in the Mediterranean. She traces how, in an attempt to resist the dehumanization of migrants embroiled in the 'refugee-crisis' phenomenon, both

political activism and academic debate have turned to 'an ethics of hospitality that seeks to disrupt nationalist protocols of kinship and that points towards new forms of solidarity beyond borders' (Danewid, 2017: 1675). She argues that the problem with such 'critical humanist intervention' (ibid.) is that it risks reiterating rather than disrupting specific conceptions of Europe and its (racialized) Others – wherein Europe ultimately emerges as ethical and historically innocent, and migrants ultimately emerge as uninvited guests and charitable subjects. Erasing the 'umbilical cord' (Hall, 1992: 12) that links Europe with the places from which migration originates, 'these discourses contribute to an ideological formation that disconnected connected histories and turns questions of responsibility, guilt, restitution, repentance, and structural reform into matters of empathy, generosity, and hospitality' (Danewid, 2017: 1657). The labour of connecting colonial, imperial and slavery pasts with migratory presents in the Mediterranean (for example, Bhambra, 2017; Broeck and Saucier, 2016; Saucier and Woods, 2014) points in powerful ways to the making of migrants into (racialized and de-historicized) 'charitable subjects' whose desperation, poverty and fear might move Europe to hospitality, pity and protection.

It must not be forgotten, in this respect, that borders and their enforcement often directly foster the kind of desperation, poverty and fear commonly associated with the 'refugee crisis' and the moving subjects that it (re)produces. Nicholas De Genova (2018: 1766) has shown, for example, how 'the EU-ropean legal frameworks governing travel visas, migration, and asylum, together with the externalisation of border policing and transportation carrier sanctions, preclude literally the vast majority of humanity from "legitimate" access to the European Union'. De Genova traces the troubling 'global colour line' of European border regimes, which require (and then systematically deny) visas from travellers from all of Africa and most of Asia, as well as many Latin American and Caribbean countries. The 'inordinate majority' (ibid.) of prospective applicants who do not qualify for visas is required to enter Europe by illegalized means, and only if it survives the perilous journey may it petition for (routinely denied) migrant rights:

> a European border regime that systematically generates and multiplies the conditions of possibility for migrant deaths compels us to reckon with the brute fact that the lives of migrants and refuges, required to arrive to European soil by 'irregular' (illegalised) means, have been systematically exposed to lethal risks. (De Genova, 2018: 1767)

This 'brute fact' is exceptionally clear in the case of North African migrations. The near impossibility for a young Moroccan like Aziz to obtain a visa to enter Europe, which would in turn allow him to board a budget flight at Marrakech Menara Airport rather than pay thousands of euros to travel on a rickety boat that may take his life, is intimately, constitutively linked to the images of desperation, poverty and fear associated with Europe's contemporary borderlands. Here, the European border regime is desperation's very condition of possibility.

Crisis?

By means of moving towards the conclusion of this chapter, I should reiterate that my reflection on the analytical and political work of 'desperation' should not be read as an erasure or belittlement of the violent forces that are often involved in human movement. Rather, what I am trying to do here is call attention to the ways in which these forces are evoked, and the work that they do by bringing into 'biopolitical being' (Puar, 2017: xix) specific kinds of moving subjects, and, in turn, specific kinds of European imaginations (and actualizations) of itself. While evoking desperation and vulnerability may be necessary at times – although, as I mention above, necessary for what, and to whom, remain vital questions – I am unsure whether the analytics of desperation is ever the most effective way in which to capture the complexity of contemporary human mobility. It definitely was not during an early intimation of the Mediterranean 'refugee crisis'. When young Tunisians started arriving in southern Italy during the Tunisian Revolution of 2010–11, the Italian and international press swiftly adopted a language of crisis – anticipating the systematic mobilization of the concept of 'crisis' that, from 2015 onwards, would bring into being the discursive formations of 'refugee (or migrant) crisis'.[4] These young men arriving on the Italian island of Lampedusa, we were told, were desperate, vulnerable people escaping from the revolution – and, incidentally, they were going to swamp Europe (on Lampedusa, see Franceschelli and Galipò, this volume).

However, many of the Tunisians with whom I have spoken, who crossed the Mediterranean at the height of the revolution, tell a very different story. Since 2014, I have been collecting narratives of the Jasmine Revolution with young Tunisians living on both sides of the Mediterranean, as part of a wider project on the permanence of political ruptures (Elliot, 2017). My young Tunisian interlocutors, who travelled to Europe during or shortly after the national upheaval, never mention

escaping from a revolution that many of them contributed in precipitating. They never describe their dangerous crossing to Europe as a desperate act. If anything, they speak of a crossing that was made possible by their experience of the revolution, by the courage and defiance that they learnt from it (see also the testimonies collected by the Italian visual project, CrossingTV – CrossingTV, 2011). Indeed, migration writer and journalist Gabriele Del Grande (2011) has put forward the argument that these young Tunisians were instantiating a second rebellion, this time not against the Ben Ali regime but against a border that they considered unjust and against a legal ban on travel to Europe that they experienced as claustrophobic (see also Garelli *et al.*, 2013).

People move for different reasons, compelled by different personal and historical forces, and animated by different desires and expectations. The language of crisis and desperation maybe works, at times – though it is worth remembering that, in the UK for example, this kind of language (alongside that of 'vulnerability' and 'compassion') produced, at the height of the 'refugee crisis', the acceptance of a dismal 20,000 refugees from Syria over a period of five years, hardly a humanitarian revolution.[5] But the analytics of desperation also risks obfuscating what human movement may be about. It also risks reiterating specific categories of existence and relations (for instance, the curious European traveller versus the desperate migrant Other) while at the same time erasing others (for instance, the 'umbilical' ones between migration and empire – cf. Hall 1992) – a work of reiteration and erasure that fosters rather than alleviates what is periodically defined as 'crisis'.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1. On representations of and responses to sea crossings in the Mediterranean, see the chapters by Franceschelli and Galipò, Snow, and Davies, in this volume.
2. http://iasfm.org
3. See the Asylum Information Database (AIDA) for the definition and application of the 'safe country of origin' concept across EU member states: https://www.asylumineurope.org
4. For critical work on the concept, and politics, of 'crisis' in the context of human movement across the Mediterranean, see, for example, Broeck and Saucier, 2016; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh 2019; New Keywords Collective, 2016; Saucier and Woods, 2014.

5. BBC News, 'UK to accept 20,000 refugees from Syria by 2020', 7 September 2015: http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-34171148

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Refuge in a Moving World draws together more than thirty contributions from multiple disciplines and fields of research and practice to discuss different ways of engaging with, and responding to, migration and displacement.

The volume combines critical reflections on the complexities of conceptualizing processes and experiences of (forced) migration, with detailed analyses of these experiences in contemporary and historical settings from around the world. Through interdisciplinary approaches and methodologies – including participatory research, poetic and spatial interventions, ethnography, theatre, discourse analysis and visual methods – the volume documents the complexities of refugees' and migrants' journeys. This includes a particular focus on how people inhabit and negotiate everyday life in cities, towns, camps and informal settlements across the Middle East and North Africa, Southern and Eastern Africa, and Europe.

A key dynamic documented throughout the book is the multiple ways that responses to displacement are enacted by people with personal or family experiences of (forced) migration. These people appear in many roles: researchers, writers and artists, teachers, solidarians, first responders, NGO practitioners, neighbours and/or friends. Through the application of historically and spatially sensitive intersectional and interdisciplinary lenses, the contributors explore the ways that different people – across axes of religion, race, sexuality, gender and age – experience and respond to their own situations and to those of other people, in the context of diverse power structures and structural inequalities on the local, national and international level.

Ultimately *Refuge in a Moving World* argues that working collaboratively through interdisciplinary approaches and methodologies has the potential to develop nuanced understandings of processes of migration and displacement, and, in turn, to encourage more sustainable modes of responding to our moving world.

Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh is Professor of Migration and Refugee Studies and Co-Director of the Migration Research Unit at UCL, where she is also the Director of the Refuge in a Moving World research network. Her current interdisciplinary research, supported by the AHRC-ESRC, European Research Council and Leverhulme Trust, examines experiences of and responses to displacement in the Middle East.

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