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GOOD GUYS, MAD CITY: ETIQUETTES OF MIGRATION AMONG SUDANESE MEN IN BEIRUT²

Abstract

This article explores the relationship between labor precarity, masculinity, and striving among generations of Sudanese male migrant workers in Beirut. Based on fieldwork conducted between 2019 and 2020 with intergenerational, multiethnic Sudanese migrant communities in Beirut and with male migrant returnees in Khartoum, I argue that Sudanese male migrant workers navigate the structures that condition them as precarious labor in Lebanon by forming networks of care and interdependency. How are they gendered through these relations of livelihood and co-survival? I explore how Sudanese male migrants conduct themselves through ideals of masculine propriety and labor discipline in their striving for an ethically and materially sustainable life achieved through marriage and eventual return. Yet in the current context of revolution and accumulating economic crises in Lebanon as well as in Sudan, these goals are foreclosed for young migrants who are caught in a spiral of unemployment and debt. In conversation with migrants who struggle to balance their aspirations of living with the present challenges of surviving, I explore how crisis restructures their relations of codependency, attachments to home, and aspirations for the good life at the end of migration.



OUT OF WORK

“Look at the Lebanese fucking it up for themselves.”

“This country is chaos.”

It is fall 2019 in Beirut and we are sitting in Abdalla’s room with his roommates watching the Lebanese protests unfold on television.³ Lebanese flags and slogans of national unity crowd the screen.

“But don’t the people have a point?” I ask. “If their demands are met, it could benefit everyone in the country – including you?”

Abdalla laughs, shaking his head.

“Sure, they have their right to protest, but it has nothing to do with us. The revolution is not for us.”

“How do you know?” I insist. “Have you gone down there to join them?”

“There’s no point in going. They would kick us out,” his roommate Moussa says.

“They don’t recognize our voice so there’s no point in speaking,” their friend Hamoudi, who is travelling back to Sudan soon, interjects.

Hamoudi has been staying at his friend’s house for months without finding work. He relates his unemployed status to the protests, which began in October 2019 as a popular cross-class uprising against the economic recession and widespread unemployment that has hit Lebanon. For undocumented migrant workers in Beirut, who are routinely threatened with detention and deportation, the popular protests have presented yet another obstacle to their ability to survive in Lebanon. Yet their reasons for not joining the protests, Abdalla and his friends tell me that afternoon, is not the encounter with armed authorities but with a Lebanese public hostile to their presence as black workers. The slogans of solidarity that Lebanese protesters chanted with other revolting cities of the global South – including Khartoum, where a popular revolution shocked the autocracy only a few months prior – had little relation to the reality of migrants in the country. While Lebanese protesters called for a general strike, migrants were reminded of their status as foreigners positioned outside the field of alliances.⁴

“We are workers, not protesters,” Moussa declares.

But workers of what kind? Foreigners make up more than half of the labor force in Lebanon, and yet migrant labor is absent from most analyses of Lebanese labor politics and economy.⁵ As part of the underbelly of Lebanon's vast service economy that is sustained by cheap foreign labor from East Africa and South Asia, Sudanese migrants are the unrecognized working class of Lebanon. They have been servicing Lebanese elite households and popular establishments for most of their adult lives, the eldest among them for half a century. As the economic crisis hits, they are experiencing the precarity of their lives in Lebanon more acutely. Migrant workers report of their employers withholding salaries, cutting working hours to part-time, and firing people by the hour. These practices of labor exploitation were widespread and documented by Lebanese antiracist groups and international human rights organizations long before the present crisis hit, but they have become exacerbated as the urgency of the economic situation in Lebanon worsened in fall 2019.

How might discourses on labor politics and the Lebanese economy shift if undocumented and informally employed migrant workers were counted in the statistics? In this article, I approach this task by asking not how the Lebanese count their migrants, but how migrant workers in Lebanon count themselves. Pace theories of bare life, contemporary research has shed light on how people on the move stay alive through networks of material and affective codependency;⁶ practices through which people endure *and* strive to live.⁷ Contributing to this scholarship with an emphasis on the ethical and affective dimensions of male migration, I explore how Sudanese male migrants have built a world of kin, livelihood, and survival tactics in Beirut. Based on fieldwork with multiethnic Sudanese migrant collectives in Beirut and with migrant returnees in Khartoum conducted between summer 2019 and spring 2020, this article examines the historical and social relations through which generations of Sudanese men learn to labor in Beirut. How do Sudanese male migrants navigate between economies of survival—livelihood, loans, and remittances—and the affective threads of their migration; expectations of returning, desires to live, and aspirations to improve that life?

In what follows, I approach these questions in conversations and scenes from fieldwork in Sudanese community spaces in Beirut, where older and younger men discuss etiquettes of migration involving livelihood, masculine propriety, and fidelity to home. I argue that migrancy has been associated for these Sudanese men with a

striving for the “good life,” embodied by the Sudanese wife as an achievement at the end of labor. However, for the young migrants caught in a spiral of perpetual crisis, unemployment, and debt in Lebanon, the foreclosure of marriage and return has become evidence of how migration fails them. Migration for these men is often expressed as a long journey home, but few of them go back. In contrasting the precarity of migrancy with the comforts of home, they project the city as a symbol of existential and material uncertainty. But Beirut is also where they stay, make kin, and rely on each other to get by. In the current climate of accumulating crises, I explore how relations of codependency, attachments to home, and aspirations of the good life shift in a migrant labor community when labor ends.

OUT OF PLACE

“Everyone, out!” Malek orders as he runs through the Sudanese Club, interrupting men playing cards, praying, cooking food, and cutting each other’s hair. The students in the English language class I teach jump over each other as they hurry to the entrance of the club. A small group of mostly elderly members gather around a young skinny Sudanese man bent over himself in agony. Malek strides through the entrance displaying a dark bottle, presumably containing liquor that the young man had brought in. The man, Baggi, had entered the club moments before and no one recognized him. “Where are you coming from?” they now demand to know.

“I came driving. . . They killed a sheikh right in front of me and I fled. I wanna go home!”

The men exchange notes of disbelief:

“He’s talking nonsense.”

“He’s not well in the head.”

“Must have smoked something.”

“Just kick him out,” one suggests.

But Malek – a leading figure at the club – objects. “Imagine if the police caught him,” he says. “This could be the end of all of us.” Instead, he suggests calling Baggi’s employer to verify his story. Grabbing Baggi’s phone, he manages to locate the employer’s phone number.

“Hello, ya sahib, I’m calling about a friend of mine, Baggi . . . yes. Is he a good worker? Is he reliable?”

After hanging up, Malek reports his findings: the employer confirmed that Baggi had always been a “good guy,” but that the past couple of days he hadn’t been himself. Although Baggi himself insists that he wants to return to Sudan right away, Malek promises the employer on the phone that Baggi will return “well-rested” by the morning. The issue ensues of where to house him for the night. After some further questioning, they manage to identify a relative of his who lives close by in Hamra and convince her to pick him up.

After Baggi leaves, the tension resolves. The men joke around and speculate about his “mad” behavior. Meanwhile, I am left full of questions: Why was Baggi treated as an outsider at the Sudanese Cultural Club, which for decades has hosted Sudanese migrants in Beirut? What was at stake that made the presence of a solitary stranger a threat to the reputation of the collective? When I recounted the incident to Moussa, a Sudanese migrant friend in Beirut, he said: “When meeting a stranger, the first thing you ask is where he came from. By identifying where he’s coming from, you can identify who he is, and what problems he brings with him.”

Accusations of madness are of course effective ways of dishonoring and excluding members from a community in the process of defining itself; especially when, as in the episode with Baggi, the mad lurks inside oneself as much as on the street corner. The stranger is always potentially kin, but in this case, where Baggi failed to act according to certain codes of conduct – etiquettes of self-representation and labor discipline that I elaborate on below – the men established his reputation as a worker before identifying him within a network of kin. What does this signal about the relationship between labor performance and moral status for these men? The threat that Baggi posed was not to a Lebanese public, but to his fellow Sudanese workers’ reputation in a society where their presence is conditioned on being good workers. That they are “workers, not protesters” is even

written in the club's constitution, an official decree signed by Lebanese President Charles Helou at its founding in 1967, which determines that the club members hold work permits and refrain from political activities in Lebanon.

BOYS CLUB

Sudanese men were among the first non-Arab—although Arabic-speaking—workers in independent Lebanon. While unaccounted for in Lebanese statistics and scholarship, Sudanese male migrants in Lebanon have historically and until today been associated with service labor. They are the butlers, cooks, drivers, doormen, and dishwashers keeping Lebanon's well-to-do in comfort. In the 1950s, Sudanese *garcons* and *sufragis* were not an unusual sight in upper-class Lebanese households.⁸ The first generation of Sudanese male servants in Lebanon came from north Sudan, mainly from Nubian tribes. One immediate connection for this migration is that some Lebanese-Syrians who served during the colonial British administration in Sudan and Egypt brought Sudanese Nubian servants from Khartoum and Cairo with them when they returned to Lebanon in the 1940s and 1950s.⁹

The Sudanese workers were later joined by their nephews and sons and founded the Sudanese Cultural Club in 1967 in Clemenceau, next to the American University. The story of the Sudanese Club begins with a racist slur. The Sudanese workers used to frequent a Palestinian-run café in downtown Beirut, which the Lebanese neighbors nicknamed "*maqha al-abiid*" (the slaves' café). At some point, the hostility became too much, and the Sudanese men decided to create a place of their own.

The generational ties of labor movement still characterize the Sudanese Club today, but the demographic structure has changed. Whereas the founders came from northern tribes, since the 1990s young men have arrived displaced by conflict in West Sudan—Darfur, Kordofan, and Nuba mountains. Founding members of the club who came from the north often emphasize that the club did not entertain tribal alliances. "We called it The Sudanese Cultural Club, not the Dongola Club, for a reason," as Ahmad, a founding member, explains, in reference to a dominant tribal identity in northern Sudan. But Sudanese politics have seeped into the club since its founding.

Leadership is elected by members' vote. As club leaders have changed over the years, accusations of ill-guided political loyalty have followed. Some members associate the club with the Sudanese

embassy, which until the 2019 revolution represented the Islamic regime, while others blame it for facilitating various kinds of devious behavior. Explaining why he stopped going to the club, Haytham, an elderly Sudanese butler, told me: “The young members are sloppy and don’t behave according to the rules. They are loud, they smoke nargileh [which was banned by the Islamic regime in Sudan], and they don’t respect the elders.”

With the introduction of female domestic migrant labor from South/Southeast Asia and East Africa in Lebanon since the mid-1980s,¹⁰ Sudanese service labor has increasingly been channeled out of the house. While elderly Sudanese migrants still serve as domestic butlers, cooks, and drivers for wealthy Lebanese families, the younger generation who have arrived since the 2000s, including in recent years, tend to work as dishwashers, cleaners, and cooks in restaurants. The generational hierarchy of labor reverberates in categories of legal and illegal migration. The elderly Sudanese arrived before and during the Lebanese civil war, when border control was minimal, and their employers secured them official work permits. Since the end of the civil war, Lebanon has regulated migrant labor through the Kafala sponsorship system and imposed visa restrictions on foreign labor.¹¹

Following these changes, Sudanese migrants have taken the “Syria-route,” arriving on a tourist visa to Damascus and paying a smuggler to cross into Beirut. Arriving undocumented and working *ad hoc* for shifting employers, they can only obtain work permits by paying high fees as “debt” to the Lebanese General Security; a semilegal process referred to colloquially as “clarifying the situation” (*tazbit el wadā*). The clandestine network of migrant agents and border guards connecting Khartoum, Damascus, and Beirut predates the Syrian conflict and consequent large-scale migration to Lebanon since 2011. That it reportedly expanded as Lebanon militarized the border with Syria serves as a reminder that policing borders often produces new illicit economies and modes of getting by. Lebanon is not a desired migration destination for Sudanese compared to the Gulf and Europe, but thousands still take this route, risking their lives and meager savings. The increase in undocumented migration factors into judgments of immoral migration at the Sudanese club, since members are technically required to hold work permits in Lebanon.

The Arabic concept of *adab*, connoting good manners and moral conduct, reverberates between older and younger Sudanese migrants who accuse one other of “poor manners” (*qalil al adab*). Scholarship of Muslim ethics has conceptualized *adab* as a moral striving involving a

tuning of the mind through embodied practice.¹² But it is the broader meaning of *adab* as a cultured learning¹³ that Sudanese migrants in Beirut evoke when they describe learning to labor as an education necessary to migrant life.

Elderly Sudanese migrants in Beirut often evoke the “guesthouse” that they co-rented in Hamra, where they would host young men freshly arrived from Sudan and teach them the arts of serving, such as how to set a table and bow for the guests. “That house was our school,” Haytham says. He inherited his job as a private cook from his father, who had learned the labor in Cairo before coming to Beirut in the 1950s. “In fact, the work of a *sufragi* is very refined and demanding, not something anyone can do; it requires a million calculations; patience, attention, care, a sense of taste, intuition,” Haytham continues. Standing up, bent over the table where we just ate lunch with his wife and children, he rehearses the steps required to set a table: *Serve from right and bring out from left; stack the plates on the arm; serve the glass with two fingers, not the full hand.* “The young guys lack the skills that we were taught,” he adds, implying perhaps both the skills of refined servitude as well as a certain skill of survival through patient laboring.

Maintaining civility and composure from external conditions of precarity and disrespect through self-fashioning an aesthetic and sensibility of self-composure within the safe space of the community constitutes an act of survival for these men. This was the lesson for the unruly Baggi who was put back in his place as a worker after attempting to escape it. But even though labor discipline is central to performing *adab* among these men, they do not represent themselves as workers *to each other*. “It is an unwritten rule that you don’t ask someone what he does for a living,” Moussa told me, explaining why he doesn’t know what his flatmates do for a living.

Research on male migrant labor often stresses the workplace as a space of masculine self-fashioning, solidarity, and community-building.¹⁴ But since Sudanese men in Beirut work mostly isolated as servants, the social space of the club provides a crucial place for collective self-fashioning. Respectability politics figure centrally in daily life at the Sudanese Cultural Club, as a rare space for Sudanese men in Lebanon. It is intended as an after-work space, but no one ever shows up to the club in their work clothes; instead, they flash ironed shirts and leather shoes. The club offers a range of leisure activities – eating, praying, watching television, playing cards, getting groomed by the barber – that are pertinent to life outside labor. Understood as a

collective moral compass through which they cultivate and order their lives, *adab* signifies a form of *ethical self-formation*,¹⁵ through modes of collective self-disciplining that constitute as well communal *self-preservation*.¹⁶ The care that the men perform for each other to maintain this space and community is part of that practice.

FAMILY MATTERS

In Beirut, Sudanese bachelors and married men whose wives are in Sudan live together in intergenerational male-only households, where they care and cook for one another. “They are my family,” Moussa says of his flatmates. The men build social spaces, like the bachelor guesthouses, the Sudanese club, and the restaurants in south Beirut, where they reproduce themselves as men and as a collective. In this predominantly male migrant lifeworld, women play a central role primarily as aspirations in men’s conversations. The men make kin with other women and with each other in ways not easily mapped on to the heteronuclear constellation, while simultaneously gesturing towards marriage as their desired goal. In making this point, I am not speculating about Sudanese men’s co-living as romantic or sexual. Making kin and “thick” social life implies a broader framework for how to be in the world and relate to one another in ways not reducible to reproductive love.¹⁷

Kin-making in this context of male communal care has material as well as affective significance. In an environment where migrant workers are often out of work and with little access to health care, the Sudanese migrants in Beirut rely on economies of codependency to stay alive. They do so by saving their income in a network of mutual aid and savings, known as *sanduk* (the box). This system is a lifeline in Sudanese society, where *sanduk* creates bonds of support between neighbors in the absence of state welfare.¹⁸ In Beirut, *sanduk* networks are leaderless associations formed between Sudanese migrants whose monthly contributions support a member in need by paying his medical bill, bailing him out of prison, and assisting his family if he is unemployed. As a nonhierarchical network, *sanduk* resonates with current scholarly interest in urban collectives of solidarity beyond the family.¹⁹ However, as studies of migrant survival has argued, kin stretches beyond blood and lives on in structures and terminologies of filiation.²⁰ *Sanduk* members in Beirut often origin from the same region and tribe, and in that way move within generational bonds of trust.

Generational hierarchies are maintained between the Sudanese through elderly members' disciplining of proper manhood and morality, as the encounter between Malek, the club leader, and Baggi, a newcomer, reflect. Yet it is also through these relations of transmission and learning that the young migrants challenge and correct the elderly. The generational shift in labor, from long-term domestic servitude to more precarious labor in the Lebanese service economy, also marks a change in educational status and class aspiration. "The young men are educated, not like us," Haytham tells me; "They didn't arrive young and ready for work, they have already studied and have other ideas."

In his recent reflections on *Secular Translations*, Talal Asad points to the generational aspect of self-disciplining and self-care; "How the self gradually learns to develop its abilities from within a tradition that presupposes *generational collaboration* in the preservation, teaching, and exercise of practical knowledge that is rooted in a vision of the good life."²¹ This speaks to the Sudanese migrant context, where young men move within a tradition of mobility and marriage as a collective striving through which they validate their individual trajectories. If etiquettes of living and laboring is passed on through generations of migrating men, what happens when the young begin to question the practices of those teaching these ideals?

One afternoon after his shift cleaning an office in downtown Beirut, Moussa spoke about the elderly Sudanese who have stayed in Lebanon for decades. "It's as if they enjoy serving the Lebanese," he remarked; "I would never stay here that long." He has only been in Lebanon for two years and doesn't plan on staying much longer. Although Moussa has built strong social ties in Beirut, he considers life there as a temporary phase on his way to brighter shores. While Moussa's labor position marks him as more precarious than those employed as long-term domestic servants, he manages to create a labor distinction between himself as striving for the good life and the elderly migrant as stuck in conditions of permanent servitude. Through this discursive gesture of distancing himself from the older generation, Moussa makes a double judgment of the figure of the elderly migrant-servant, who stayed "too long" and forgot his origin. What the elderly lost, Moussa seems to suggest, is his dignity.

A generation experiences a loss of a particular ideal, as David Scott has phrased it,²² in witnessing their fathers and uncles neglect the ethics they were taught. Moussa's judgment of the elderly servant as lacking dignity and ambition implies a simultaneous refusal and

recovery of the ideals carried on by this migratory labor economy. The logic of his judgment is reversed by Haytham, the elderly servant, who says of the youth: "It is sad to see how the young Sudanese here have become unable to change their fate. We would never accept the salaries and conditions that they do today; we worked for the best families, now the best they can hope for is to guard a building." This suggests that the young generation's rejection of past aspirations and values, such as the value of labor servitude, reveals an underlying loss of certainty of what that labor could provide.

OUT OF BOUNDS

The twinned sense of loss and recovery of a generational migrant tradition undergird conversations about love and marriage as well. Although Sudanese men sometimes describe their migratory act as an individual risk-taking in the pursuit of a better life, what counts as a good life is tied up with a generational economy of labor and marriage. Striving for the good life through the migration-marriage nexus forms a communal *ideology* that structures relations and directs aspirations among these men. Young migrants follow an itinerary of accumulating obligations and debts in their striving to make it abroad and return as men proper, ready to marry and settle down, as has been custom among Sudanese migrants in Beirut.

At the same time, the young Sudanese men speak of marriage in contrast to what their uncles practice. "We move the woman around like a brick in our society," Moussa said. "If I had a wife," he continues, "I would come home to her every day straight from work and stay up all night with her talking. I'd never want to go anywhere but home." The hypothetical mode of Moussa's judgment—"I would never"—circulates among younger Sudanese migrants in their discourse about elderly male relatives' love affairs in Beirut.

One night, a week after Baggi's unwelcomed appearance at the club, I am in a car with two Sudanese men on our way to a restaurant in Jinah, a popular neighborhood in the south of Beirut. Walid, who is driving us, has attended a funeral procession for a young Sudanese guy that same evening. "How did he die?" I ask. "Motorcycle accident. He was on his way home from the nightclub." "He was drunk!" Bashir exclaims, interrupting Walid's account. As if to verify his theory, Bashir tells us about his uncle, who leads a life in Beirut that he considers anything but pious: "He has multiple kids with multiple women; some are in Khartoum, some in Addis Ababa, one kid here. And he never

visits his wife. Every year he postpones going back. It's madness, don't you think?" he asks Walid. "Who would want to stay in this place if you had a wife and family back in Sudan?" he prods Walid, who nods in silence. Walid is twenty years his senior and married to an Ethiopian woman with kids in Beirut; before her, he was married to a woman in Sudan. Walid often jokes that he is on the lookout for a girlfriend.

When we arrive at the restaurant, a smoky joint in a backdoor alley, Walid hugs the Ethiopian waitresses running the place. The place is crowded with Sudanese men, most of them in their forties and fifties, who play cards and watch English football on television. Nobody is eating, and we wait a while to be served the food, microwaved platters of Ethiopian foods. The guys admit that they come here more for the company than for the food, which tastes better when their wives cook it. Karim, Walid's friend, is constantly on the phone with a woman. I ask him if he is talking to his girlfriend. "One of them!" he grins. His wife and children live with his relatives in western Sudan.

Relations of love and family represent stability for migrants, but they also reveal complicated attachments to more than one place. Maxim Bolt, writing on male migrant life in South Africa, reflects on the migrant's dilemma between saving for a future at home and investing in present life abroad; girlfriends figure centrally in this equation. In conditions of precarious livelihood and illegality that define undocumented migrants, "The very rootedness of permanent male residents is *constituted* by transient relationships with women," Bolt argues.²³ Although Sudanese men in Beirut sometimes marry their non-Sudanese "girlfriends," they mostly associate them with the precariousness of migrant bachelor life, contrasted with the permanence achieved through marriage to a Sudanese girl "back home." This hierarchy of wives produces two categories of female: the Sudanese wife, who represents domestic stability, and the non-Sudanese girlfriend, who represents the temptations and dangers of migrant life.

"Sudanese women are not romantic," is a refrain I often hear among Sudanese men, in defense of why they seek out extramarital company with Ethiopian women who are more "skilled in love." Sudanese and Ethiopian migrant wives entertain this distinction as well. When, in conversation with a group of Sudanese migrant wives, I mentioned the men's refrain about Sudanese women lacking romance, they laughed and objected. "Whoever said that must be a village boy; he hasn't met city women!" Um Faeza said, rehearsing the rural/urban distinction as mutually gendered. They are under no

illusion about their husbands' fidelity, as I learned from separate conversations with them. Men are almost expected to cheat, but that doesn't mean that wives accept it. One afternoon at Walid's house, his wife Amira and a female friend of hers engaged Walid in a heated debate on the topic of polygyny, in which Amira teasingly warned Walid that as soon as he married a younger woman, she would find a new lover, too.

While Walid and Karim show me pictures on their phones of prospective and past Ethiopian lovers that night, Bashir sits in the corner watching videos from Sudan on social media. His friends don't come to this restaurant, he tells me. "These men are crazy," he says to me half mockingly as we observe the men playing cards. "They forgot their families back home; they forgot why they came here in the first place." This evokes the way Sudanese men in Beirut judge one another on their ability to marry and return, as the intertwined conditions for a successfully completed migrant life.

Moussa evokes a similar judgment, as he joins our conversation that evening: "Many Sudanese men lose focus in Beirut. The good way to survive migration is to keep focused and remember why you came; to observe and learn from your surroundings, but never adopt to the bad habits of this place." Evoking Beirut as a place that breeds bad habits is a way for Sudanese men like Moussa to distinguish themselves from their current living conditions as temporary. The married men make a similar association of migrancy with their need for extra love. "Is cheating wrong ['aib]?" I ask. "Of course it is," Walid says. "But it's part of man's nature," he offers; "You get lonely in *ghurba*." The association of *ghurba* with urban solitude is common. Rahman, an elderly migrant whose wife and teenage children live in Sudan, while he lives alone in a tiny room in east Beirut, often evokes Sudan as a place "full of life and color" where "you are never lonely." Yet when talk of return comes up, he always postpones the departure to an abstract "next year." When I asked him directly why he doesn't go back, he shrugged and said: "Maybe I got used to the *ghurba*."

LOVE IN THE CITY

While Moussa's judgment about the "bad habits of this place" implies that Beirut is particularly corruptive, the city as metaphor for danger and digression figures centrally in depictions of migration at large.²⁴ Cities of the Global South, such as Beirut and Khartoum, have long been declared in perpetual crisis.²⁵ As cities that "don't work" or are at

best “works in progress,”²⁶ they breed uncertainty, unemployment, failing infrastructures, crime; economies of survival and temptation that “[do] not allow you to be a man”²⁷ or deviate men from the path of doing good.

The contrast of urban fragmentation with family life in the village is a leitmotif in popular Sudanese literature,²⁸ where the noise and temptations of city life are exacerbated by the absence of migrating men without whom things—the household, in particular—fall apart. Sudanese migrants evoke this moral geography in their distinction between urban solitude with the village as a place “full of life.” Most of the young Sudanese migrants in Beirut grew up in rural western Sudan, where conditions of economic starvation and conflict forced many of them to flee to Khartoum early in their adolescence. Their nostalgia for village life reveals a future longing for stability with a stable past that never was.

Additionally, this confusion of past and future longing fuels their ambition of marrying “for love,” which is somewhat at odds with marrying a girl from their extended family, as is custom in rural Sudan and among the migrants in Beirut. “We have no culture of love in Sudan,” men and women tell me, often in context of complaining about married life.

Marriage was a practical constellation in rural Kordofan, where Moussa grew up. His own parents are relatives; they did not “meet,” and love was not a concept they entertained between them. Growing up in rural Kordofan, Moussa penned his life in a diary every day. One day his father asked what he was writing; when Moussa told him hesitantly, “my memories,” his father brought out a notebook of his own and suggested they read aloud for each other. His father’s diary contained detailed accounts of purchases he had made; it had little relation to Moussa’s own account of “private thoughts.” “Why do you think your father wrote his diary like a business account?” I ask Moussa as he tells me this story. “He’s an old man, a village man . . . maybe he doesn’t think that it’s his right to write about life or love like we do in the city.”

Moussa makes a distinction between himself and his father along the twin axes of rural/urban and generational. His father does not think of himself as man who has a “right” to narrate his life; his life account is narrated in numbers, a simple life, whereas Moussa, while still a village boy, already has an idea of himself as an urban man who navigates “life and love.” “It’s true that we have no concept of love in

the village, but I know love," Moussa continues. Writing about the nuclear family dreams of male mine workers in the Zambian Copperbelt, James Ferguson associates their aspirations with class mobility: "Wrapped up in the fascination with a 'decent family life' is a profound ambition [. . .]: the ambition to participate on equal terms in a 'first-class' modernity."²⁹ Moussa knows love, not because he has experienced it, but because he has an ambition for a certain kind of life enabled by love.

The discourse of marriage as romantic love marks a generational shift. During the Islamic regime's rule since the 1990s, Sudanese society experienced a change from an emphasis on the extended family to an elevation of the nuclear household. In a rapid move to marry off the young generation, the regime promoted group marriages and allowed customary marriages that had previously been banned in Sudan, as they bypass the family head's witness to the union.³⁰ This shift was also associated with a changing media culture in the region and increased access to global popular culture such as Bollywood films and Nigerian television shows that dramatize romantic love.³¹ The newfound liberties following the revolution in Sudan in 2019 have furthered the celebration of liberty through love. On Valentine's Day in Khartoum this year, young couples crowded Tuti Island, and events all over town were branded with little hearts.

Modern love is portrayed in popular culture as a private event that happens between two people. As Elizabeth Povinelli has argued, love conceived this way makes a double move by producing the modern, "autological subject" through her ability to relate to another by choice, and at the same time releasing her from the "thickness" of kin; what Povinelli refers to as the "genealogical society."³² This concept of love as something that distinguishes the individual from the family by providing him with a narrative of his own is traceable in Moussa's self-representation as someone who "knows love" and has the right to tell about it.

RUNNING MAD

Not coincidentally, given the connection between marriage and migration, a similar discourse of individual striving emerges when Moussa and his friends speak of migrating. "You are the producer of your own life. You cannot wait for opportunities to come your way. You must be adventurous, and you must strive for the utmost, the preferred," Moussa tells me one evening. This pursuit is a gamble, in

which the adventurer-migrant risks his life. As a spin on the classic tale of male coming-of-age through cutting the umbilical cord to motherland, it reverses the distinction Sudanese migrants often make between migrating towards home and migrating away from obligations of home.

There is a tension between the social labor that the Sudanese men perform for each other in Lebanon and their obligations to maintain and invest in life back home. This is manifest in the distinction between *mughtarib* and *muhajir* as Arabic categories of migrant subjectivity. "A *mughtarib* goes abroad with the intention of returning," Ahmad explained to me one day, "whereas a *muhajir* runs across borders illegally without looking back." *Muhajir* is often translated broadly as "immigrant," but Ahmad's more precise translation resonates with the original meaning of "*hijra*" in Arabic as an "abandoning, severing of ties."³³ The concept of *ghurba*, meanwhile, describes a dual estrangement; the condition of being in a foreign/strange place as well as foreign/estranged to oneself. Derived from *ghurba*, *mughtarib* connotes a journey west, an exile that can estrange you from yourself. *Ghurba* can alter you in ways unintended and unforeseen if you don't pay attention, Sudanese male migrants often tell me. But in Ahmad's emphasis, the *intention* of returning is what guides the *mughtarib* home, even if he never actually makes the journey.

The young Baggi was judged as mad because he failed to cope with the labor and hardship of migration and attempted to flee from his conditions. Whereas Ahmad blamed the youth for "fleeing" by not intending to return, Baggi is blamed for being *too* attached to home and therefore failing in his present condition. Rahman, who stayed so long that home has become an abstract destination, accused Baggi—the young intruder at the club—of the opposite: "He can't handle it. The *ghurba* got to him," Rahman told me after the incident at the club. Contrasted with his own recognition of staying too long, this suggests that *ghurba* occurs in two ways: as a distraction *from* home and the social obligations involved with laboring and living in Beirut, or as a distraction *towards* home, which impedes upon one's ability to perform that labor and remain steadfast in migration. Midway between running and running away, Baggi got lost in the movement.

That migration can drive you mad is a lesson for many. The young North African guys aspiring to migrate in Stefania Pandolfo's ethnography associate transit zones—bus stops, road sites, camps by the water—with spirit encounters. As Pandolfo argues, the fear of

spirits is closely associated with the fear of going mad; states of being “beside oneself” that are activated in the course of migrating.³⁴ In Baggi’s case, the (e)strangeness of migration crept upon him and produced a strangeness within himself.

The narrative of the good life as available at the end of migration has not materialized for the younger generation. As a gamble with life, migration requires optimism in the act of striving. Yet for young migrants who are caught in spirals of debt and foreclosed opportunities, the optimism in striving for “the good life” has become a cruel attachment. Lauren Berlant, who coined this term, defines optimism as “a social relation involving attachments that organize the present. It is an orientation toward the pleasure that is bound up in the activity of world-making.”³⁵ The Sudanese communal world-making in Beirut is grounded in etiquettes of labor discipline and steadfastness that require disciplining or discarding those who fail in their striving, as was the case with Baggi. Attachment to that striving has a cruel effect for young men who migrated at the “wrong” time and are now unemployed, undocumented, indebted, and without a return ticket. When I ask Ahmad where he fits along the axis of *mughtarab* and *muhajir*, he negates its logic. “Neither,” he said; “I came here by mistake.”

The young migrants have lost the direction guaranteed in the narrative of migrancy as a long journey home, yet something else has entered amid this loss. The revolution in Sudan of 2019 represents an unexpected event for which the older generation did not prepare them. It provides them with a narrative of their own, as Abdalla and his friends suggest in the opening scene, where they compare the Lebanese and Sudanese uprisings:

“Theirs is a party revolution. Ours was the real deal.”

“The Lebanese stole our slogans, but they don’t know even know where Sudan is.”

I often heard this distinction between the Lebanese and Sudanese (“our”) revolutions of 2019 emphasized by Sudanese migrants who, notably, were not present for the uprising in Sudan, since they were working in Beirut at the time. They would point at the makeshift businesses that sprung up in downtown Beirut as examples of how

Lebanese people capitalize on and profit from their protest, in contrast to how Sudanese protesters cooked for each other throughout the sit-in in Khartoum last summer. As winter hit Beirut and few protesters made it out, my Sudanese friends recalled the protesters in Khartoum who sat through sweltering heat waves during Ramadan 2019. Of course, Lebanese people also built food kitchens and mutual aid collectives during the protest. Nevertheless, through these stories Sudanese migrants are able to contrast Lebanon as a weak and fragmented society with the Sudanese protest as an example of solidarity and unity.

Yet, what the two protests also reveal is the migrants' dual estrangement, as they remain distant both from home and from Lebanese society. While their families and friends took to the streets across Sudan in 2019, they watched the events on television from their living rooms in Beirut. Now, they follow the protests in Lebanon take place as if from afar. The long-term consequences of the two uprisings and economic crises in Sudan and Lebanon for these men and their familiar routes are yet to be seen. Return has gained new immediacy for many Sudanese migrants who declare their imminent departures. Yet for most, return is costly; for those who lack documentation, it requires paying thousands of US dollars to the Lebanese border authorities before leaving.

Those who make it back face a changed world, beginning with themselves. Bashir's first reaction at his encounter with Khartoum this winter, after ten years abroad, was a shock to his senses. "Khartoum is so dirty! The streets, the air, even this water," he says, pointing to tea we are drinking at a market stall. "Nothing like Beirut, where things are organized. And did you see the mall! Half the stores are closed. It's not right." This was not the sentiment Bashir had expressed in Beirut, where he often complained about the poor manners of his fellow Sudanese, as I have described, and could not wait to get home. On his first evening back home, he got sick from the food his mother had cooked for him and threw up. Back in the embrace of his family village, he feels claustrophobic and is eager to migrate again. "You can't live ten years in the city and return to live with your mother," he tells me on the phone. "In Lebanon, there is no mother; you're on your own."

Having learned to survive abroad, continuous movement presents a safer path for many like Bashir who return to disillusioning conditions. Within a few weeks of returning empty-handed to his village in western Sudan, where regular employment is scarce, Bashir begins smuggling weapons across the border to South Sudan. He had

never held a gun in his life before when he calls me one day, grinning, and displays a stash of Kalashnikovs under his old bed in his mother's house. His youthful appearance, despite ten years of physical labor in Beirut, standing in the room he left while still a child and playing with machine guns as if they were toys, brings to mind how migration rushes men into adulthood. His playful approach masquerades the heavy burdens associated with the journey he has already taken and the one he is about to take.

CONCLUSION: MIGRATING IN CRISIS

The current economic crisis in Lebanon has rendered a generation of migrants as surplus workers; their service, previously on demand, is now superfluous. Surviving civil conflict and precarious labor have been the conditions of life for generations of Sudanese migrants, whose practices of mutual aid have become routine acts of surviving in crisis. Yet every new crisis also ruptures these daily alliances, and demands new "ways of doing," being and knowing.³⁶ The heightened precarity of life in Beirut presents a case for leaving, but it also—more immediately—requires new lessons for how to stay and stay alive.

The Sudanese men in Beirut may have left their mothers in the village, but as I have argued in this article, they are not on their own. On the phone with Abdalla during the Corona lockdown in March 2020, I asked him how he and his flatmates survive now that they are out of work. "There is always someone who has food and he will feed the rest." *And when that runs out?* "Someone else takes over." *But how do you pay back?* "We don't."

A man out of work is a man in crisis, it is often argued.³⁷ Given the correlation between labor, personhood, and dignity that I have identified in this article, one might assume that asking for help would have consequences for one's material and social standing in a hierarchy of fellow kin and workers. Whereas Baggi was told to keep up the work in the face of hardship, Abdalla's response suggests a generational change in perceptions of discipline and obligation. Perhaps the concern with dignity through composure that structures how these men labor as a way to preserve themselves in Lebanon shifts when labor is absent. While labor had guaranteed their ability to form communal lives *beyond* this labor, they now have to carry on without the guarantee of livelihood. Coping with crisis becomes less a question of adapting to whatever Lebanon throws at you than of marking a distance to it, as the men do by mocking the Lebanese protests. Living in the reality of

what they experience as a failed promise of migrancy, communal survival is now centered on the task of finding a home, even if that means staying in place.

NOTES

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² The title of this article is inspired by Kendrick Lamar's album "good kid, m.A.A.d city" from 2012.

³ This article is based on nine months of ethnographic research in Beirut between summer 2019 and spring 2020, as well as six weeks of research in Khartoum in winter 2020. All conversations and observations were conducted in Arabic and have been translated by me. I have altered the names of all research participants to ensure their privacy.

⁴ Migrant workers in Lebanon are not allowed to unionize. Some trade unions, notably FENASOL, have made alliances with domestic migrant workers, but these are not recognized by Lebanese labor law.

⁵ See Elisabeth Longuenesse and Paul Tabar, "Migrant Workers and Class Structure in Lebanon: Class, Race, Nationality and Gender," (2014), halshs-01305367.

⁶ Jennifer Cole and Christian Groes, eds., *Affective Circuits: African Migrations to Europe and the Pursuit of Social Regeneration* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016); AbdouMaliq Simone, *For the City Yet to Come: Changing African Life in Four Cities* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004).

⁷ Elizabeth Povinelli, *Economies of Abandonment: Social Belonging and Endurance in Late Liberalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

⁸ Charif Majdalani, *Nos si brèves années de gloire* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2012).

⁹ Edward Atiyah, *An Arab Tells His Story: A Study in Loyalties* (London: J. Murray, 1946).

¹⁰ Ray Jureidini, "In the Shadows of Family Life: Toward a History of Domestic Service in Lebanon," *Journal of Middle East Women's Studies* 5, no. 3 (2009): 74–101.

¹¹ Bina Fernandez, "Traffickers, Brokers, Employment Agents, and Social Networks: The Regulation of Intermediaries in the Migration of Ethiopian Domestic Workers to the Middle East," *International Migration Review* 47, no. 4 (Winter 2013): 814–43.

- ¹² Charles Hirschkind, *The Ethical Soundscape: Cassette Sermons and Islamic Counterpublics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009); Saba Mahmood, "Feminist Theory, Embodiment, and the Docile Agent: Some Reflections on the Egyptian Islamic Revival," *Cultural Anthropology* 16, no. 2 (May 2001): 202–36.
- ¹³ Brinkley Messick, *The Calligraphic State: Textual Domination and History in a Muslim Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).
- ¹⁴ Naor Ben Yehoyada, *The Mediterranean Incarnate: Region Formation between Sicily and Tunisia since World War II* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017); John Chalcraft, *The Invisible Cage: Syrian Migrant Workers in Lebanon* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008); Nicolas De Genova, *Working the Boundaries: Race, Space, and "Illegality" in Mexican Chicago* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005).
- ¹⁵ Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 10; Michel Foucault, *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault*, eds. Luther H. Martin, Huck Gutman, and Patrick H. Hutton (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988).
- ¹⁶ I am grateful to Martha Mundy and Richard Smith for pointing out this nuance to me between self-representation and self-preservation.
- ¹⁷ Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 21.; Elizabeth Povinelli, *The Empire of Love: Toward a Theory of Intimacy, Genealogy, and Carnality* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 21.
- ¹⁸ Susan Kenyon, "Rotating and Escalating Credit in the Female Domain: The Sudanese Sanduq," (Conference Paper, The Nordic Africa Institute's Conference on *Financial Institutions in the Political Economy: Case Studies from Pre-Colonial, Colonial and Post-Colonial Africa*, Rosendal, Norway, 1998).
- ¹⁹ Simone, *For the City Yet to Come*.
- ²⁰ See Cole and Groes, *Affective Circuits*.
- ²¹ Talal Asad, *Secular Translations: Nation-State, Modern Self, and Calculative Reason* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 109–10.
- ²² David Scott, *Omens of Adversity: Tragedy, Time, Memory, Justice* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 100.
- ²³ Maxim Bolt, *Zimbabwe's Migrants and South Africa's Border Farms: The Roots of Impermanence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 128.
- ²⁴ James Ferguson, "The Country and The City on the Copperbelt," *Cultural Anthropology* 7, no. 1 (1992): 80.
- ²⁵ Achille Mbembe and Janet Roitman, "Figures of the Subject in Times of Crisis," *Public Culture* 7 (1995): 323–52.
- ²⁶ Simone, *For the City Yet to Come*, 1.

²⁷ Henrik Vigh, "Life's Trampoline: On Nullification and Cocaine Migration in Bissau," in *Affective Circuits*, eds. Cole and Groes (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016), 223.

²⁸ Raph Cormack and Max Shmookler, eds., *The Book of Khartoum: A City in Short Fiction* (UK: Comma Press, 2016); Noah Salomon, *For Love of the Prophet: An Ethnography of Sudan's Islamic State* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2016), ch. 4, p. 2.

²⁹ Ferguson, *Expectations of Modernity*, 205.

³⁰ Carolyn Fluehr-Lobban, *Shari'a and Islamism in Sudan: Conflict, Law and Social Transformation* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2012), ch. 6, p. 30.

³¹ Jennifer Cole and Lynn M. Thomas, eds., *Love in Africa* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 14.

³² Povinelli, *The Empire of Love*, 4, 21.

³³ Stefania Pandolfo, "The Burning," *Anthropological Theory* 7, no. 3 (2007): 337.

³⁴ Pandolfo, "The Burning," 352.

³⁵ Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011), 14.

³⁶ Mbembe and Roitman, "Figures of the Subject in Times of Crisis," 340.

³⁷ James Ferguson, "Declarations of Dependence: Labour, Personhood, and Welfare in Southern Africa," *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 19, no. 2 (June 2013): 223–42.