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Perilous Navigation
Knowledge Making with and without Digital Practices during Irregularized Migration to Öresund

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Abstract: This article explores navigation when knowing is intrinsically difficult. It looks at how irregularized migrants know during their perilous trips to and through Europe, focusing particularly on the significance of digital practices on these journeys. Based on retrospective ethnographic fieldwork conducted with Syrian refugees in and around the Danish-Swedish borderland, the article seeks to engage with digital migration studies, arguing that an understanding of irregularized migrants’ navigation, whether with or without digital practices, must involve the emplacement and embodiment of knowledge. Second, the article brings experiences of instability and danger into the anthropological theorization of knowing in order to explore the shifting positions and capabilities of knowing bodies.

Keywords: digital practices, irregularized migration, knowing, navigation, refugees, rights

Being an irregularized migrant entails navigating through unfamiliar places while being stripped of political rights (Khosravi 2010: 3). The lack of rights makes these places dangerous for people to navigate as the threat of robbery, violence, and exploitation is immanent. It also pushes them beyond built and more navigable and hospitable environments, at times with the intended purpose of letting nature be the enforcer of border patrol (De León 2015). The lack of rights makes knowing in and about these places extremely difficult. Nevertheless, when navigating through these unfamiliar places, knowing can at times mean the difference between life and death for irregularized migrants (Borkert et al. 2018; Gillespie et al. 2018). This article explores navigation when knowing is intrinsically difficult by looking at how irregularized migrants know
during their perilous journeys to and through Europe. Recent studies have documented the importance of digital practices for irregularized migrants (see, e.g., Borkert et al. 2018; Dekker et al. 2018; Gillespie et al. 2016, 2018; Leurs and Smets 2018; Zijlstra and van Liempt 2017). This article builds on these studies while heeding the call from Kevin Smets (2018) for a ‘non-media-centric’ perspective. This crucially entails unpacking how irregularized migrants’ digital practices are taking place alongside other practices in ways that cannot be distinguished (cf. Mollerup 2020). I agree, then, with Trimikliniotis et al. (2015: 11) that “digitalities must be fully integrated in the social, not as an ‘add on’ or ‘external’ devices, but as fully interwoven dimensions of existence, praxis and living.” My understanding of digital practices, correspondingly, is broad. Inspired by Mark Hobart’s (2010) proposal of the term ‘media-related practices’, I understand digital practices as “embodied sets of activities that humans perform with varying degrees of regularity, competence and flair” (Postill 2010: 1) and that are related to digital media devices, although not necessarily directly engaging with them.

This article enters into a dialogue with two areas of study. First, it engages with digital migration studies by seeking to nuance understandings of access to information, misinformation, and digital infrastructures during irregularized journeys. Thus, I argue that an understanding of irregularized migrants’ navigation, with or without digital practices, must take a point of departure in the emplacement and embodiment of knowledge that incorporates both the difficulties of knowing in a moving environment and the implications of danger for knowing. Second, the article enters into a conversation with anthropological theories of knowing. By bringing instability and danger into the theorization of knowing, I emphasize the shifting positions and capabilities of knowing bodies. This, then, is also a call for a stronger engagement with psychology and other neighboring fields to understand the complexities of knowing bodies and for taking seriously Ingold’s (2000: 3) cue that “the person is the organism, and not something added on top.”

In order to explore irregularized migrants’ navigation, I draw on anthropological theories of knowledge making (see, e.g., Harris 2007; Marchand 2010b), which have explored knowing through the “indissoluble relation between mind, body, and environment” (Marchand 2010a: 1). My use of the notion ‘knowledge making’ recognizes that this concept “captures the processes and durational qualities of knowledge formation; and rather than being suggestive of hierarchical and methodical transfer, it fosters thinking about knowledge as a dialogical and constructive engagement between people, and between people, things, and environment” (Marchand 2010c: xii). The empirical material, which has supported this theory building, has largely focused on craftsmanship, dance, and other fields where stability and repetition are essential traits. The empirical material I am bringing these theories into a conversation
with is significantly characterized by instability and volatility. While this precarity makes the focus on relations between minds, bodies, and environment particularly important, it also draws attention to the ways that instability and danger can affect knowing, as bodies’ cognitive functioning can be affected by fear and insecurity. This attention serves to advance anthropological theories of knowledge making beyond stability and repetition.

Anthropological work on precarity and volatility has indirectly given attention to knowing through the concept of ‘social navigation’. Henrik Vigh (2009: 420) contends that the notion of social navigation highlights “motion within motion,” in other words, an awareness that we move in moving environments. The concept of navigation further highlights the directionality of movement, which is particularly relevant to irregularized migrants for whom moving is often a quest for life and rights. Irregularized migrants are thus not simply moving in a moving environment; they are also crucially moving toward somewhere or at least away from somewhere. However, the somewhere they are moving toward is not so much a place as it is a state of being, in safety and with rights. For irregularized migrants, moving geographically can potentially entail a change in legal status, leading to safety, which for most could not be obtained without the illegalized movement. The directionality of navigation engenders an attention to knowing, since places are made navigable through knowing one’s immediate surroundings and situating it in relation to what is beyond. By engaging theories of knowing with the concept of (social) navigation, I thus seek to shed light on how unfamiliar places are made familiar and navigable under these perilous circumstances.

In this article, I first describe my methodological framework. Then I give a brief introduction to research on irregularized migrants’ navigation in/of the European border regime. Building on this body of work, I develop a theoretical framework by connecting theories of knowing with the concept of navigation and exploring knowing as emplaced and embodied. In the following two sections, I unfold my empirical material through this framework by exploring how irregularized migrants’ knowledge is implicated by their engagements with their surroundings and by their bodily states. Finally, I conclude that digital migration studies should attend to knowing rather than solely access to information, and that the anthropology of knowing should pay attention to how people know in situations of distress.

**Methodology and Empirical Foundation**

This article is based on retrospective ethnographic fieldwork carried out with Syrian refugees and solidarity workers in and around the Danish-Swedish borderlands, the Öresund region, mainly between November 2018 and April 2019
and in the fall of 2019. The refugees I spoke with had arrived in Denmark and Sweden as irregularized migrants between 2014 and 2016 and have since obtained refugee status, with the exception of one, who arrived in and obtained refugee status in Germany. Mainly using in-depth interviews, I have explored how people navigated on their journeys to Europe, focusing particularly on their digital practices in this process. Some people were interviewed two or three times, and I have also spoken with networks of friends and families. This has given me several accounts of the same journeys as well as insights into the impact these networks have had on knowledge making during journeys. Extended family members would sometimes follow each other after a week’s interval, receiving information and names of smugglers from family members farther along the route. Interviewing several members of the same families and traveling groups have provided a thickness and connectedness in my material, illustrating knowing as intricately relational.

Furthermore, some of my interviews have included what I term ‘device tours’, in which interviewees have shown me old conversations, pictures, and more on phones and computers, allowing these to become focal points in the interviews, both through my wish to see specific conversations and through interviewees deeming that I would find certain conversations interesting. These device tours at times played a role in bringing up memories and emotions and gave me a sense of particularly difficult and important parts of the journey where digital practices had been significant. Even in interviews that did not explicitly entail device tours, phones, often placed in front of the interviewees, were frequently used to support the stories being told, either through including them in body language or by using them to search for forgotten details or to call others who could provide those. Some interviews lasted half an hour; others lasted several hours and were weaved together with meetings and socializing with family members and others. Often, I have followed up on interviews through text and voice conversations and interviewees have at times shared additional images and videos after the interviews. The interviews were carried out in Danish, English, and Arabic.

Studies of Irregularized Migrants’ Navigation with Digital Practices

Knowledge making has been established as a key aspect of irregularized migration (Diminescu 2008; González Martínez 2008; Leurs and Smets 2018; Maitland and Xu 2015; Zijlstra and van Liempt 2017). Recent years have unsurprisingly seen an increase in studies of media and knowledge-making practices of irregularized migrants as digital media devices have become increasingly portable and capable. Pointing to the significance of digital media devices, Borkert et al. (2018) argue that “the outcomes of receiving poor or false information can cause
bodily harm or death, loss of family, or financial ruin.” Smartphones have been heralded as alleviators of information precarity (Wall et al. 2017), potentially increasing irregularized migrants’ mobility and making them less dependent on smugglers (Dekker et al. 2018; Zijlstra and van Liempt 2017). As Latonero and Kift (2018) argue, “in making their way to safe spaces, refugees rely not only on a physical but increasingly also digital infrastructure of movement.” Ponzanesi and Leurs’s (2014) argument—that borders themselves have become destabilized and reconfigured through medium-specific technological affordances—supports this. Social media have further been conceived to “actively transform the nature of [migration] networks and thereby facilitate migration” (Dekker and Engbersen 2014: 401). In this relation, the significance of connections to people farther along the route have particularly been emphasized (Borkert et al. 2018; Dekker et al. 2018). Yet the reservation that more information does not necessarily equal better information (González Martínez 2008) is important to keep in mind and becomes increasingly relevant as information becomes easier to share. Gillespie et al. (2018) show that “disinformation (lies), misinformation (inaccurate information), false rumors, and conspiracy theories via social media networks [make] journeys even more precarious.”

Adding to this information precarity, irregularized migrants move in a ‘moving environment’ (Vigh 2009) in which instability and inconsistency challenge knowing in a different way. The notion of a moving environment emphasizes that information might be unreliable not only because it is false, but also because the environment shifts so quickly that information might be outdated immediately, such as when borders close, the weather shifts, or border police approach a certain area. Chouliaraki and Georgiou (2017: 160) point to the “double moral requirement,” which is performed at Europe’s outer borders “to uphold the humanitarian imperative to care for vulnerable others and, simultaneously, to protect European citizens from potential threats by those same others.” These divergent requirements produce ambiguous and shifting border practices, which add to the uncertainty of irregularized migrants who might sometimes be welcomed with help and at other times be violently attacked and rejected at the very same borders.

Understanding irregularized migrants as moving in a moving environment also points to the importance of the temporality of their journeys. For instance, during the summer and fall of 2015, irregularized migration in Europe was regulated by intensely shifting policies that at times meant authorities would assist irregularized migrants in moving from place to place, while they at other times would arrest them or deport them without the irregularized migrants necessarily knowing when they would be met with which approach. Further, situations might depend on individuals’ practices of enforcing policy. In the stories I was told, at times one irregularized migrant would be allowed to cross a border without a passport while seeing others—at the very same time—being rejected
or withheld at the border. In other words, what is true in one instance might thus not be true in another, and what is true for one person might not be true for another—even at the very same time at the very same border. The danger, lack of rights, and continually shifting circumstances make it crucial that we study not only what irregularized migrants know or can know, but also, increasingly, how they know. While many of the above studies have made crucial contributions to the study of irregularized migrants’ access to information, information precarity, and digital infrastructures, the ways of knowing—with or without digital practices—during these perilous journeys have received less attention. Particularly, the implications of danger for knowing have been largely overlooked.

**Knowing and Navigation**

In order to connect the concept of navigation with theories of knowing, let me unfold navigation as a social practice. Vigh (2009: 419) points out that navigation is used to describe how “people act in difficult or uncertain circumstances.” He directs our attention to the etymological origin of the word ‘navigation’, that is, ‘to sail’, which he uses to emphasize how we move in moving environments, highlighting motion within motion. In other words, the concept brings attention to “the interactivity of practice and the intermorphology of motion,” thus granting us “an analytical optic which allows us to focus on how people move and manage within situations of social flux and change” (ibid.: 420). However, irregularized migrants are not simply moving within a moving environment, in which borders open and close and possibilities for moving shift continuously. They are also crucially moving toward somewhere, although this somewhere is not necessarily or consistently a specific destination. That is, the directionality of navigation, crucially, does not equal a direction.

This is important as the directionality of irregularized migrants’ journeys is influenced by the continuous knowledge making they are engaged in, as a constant calibration between what is possible and what is desirable. Vigh speaks of “moving toward a position in the yet to come” (ibid.: 426); however, irregularized migrants are not only moving toward a social position in the future, but simultaneously and interconnectedly moving in geographical terms. This importantly entails making the place one is in known and situating it in relation to other places. Perceiving one’s immediate surroundings and connecting them to what is beyond make them navigable. In this way, navigating is fundamentally connected to knowledge-making practices, as knowing mediates between one’s immediate surroundings and their connection to other places, or between the possible and the desirable. In other words, the relation between where one is and where one wants to go is established by knowing, which is in turn fundamental to navigation.
In anthropology, there is a recognition that knowledge making “is a dynamic process arising directly from the indissoluble relations that exists between minds, bodies, and environments” (Marchand 2010a: 2). Harris (2007: 4) sees knowing as an ongoing process rather than a certainty, as “an achievement of work, experience and time” (ibid.: 1). Explaining his use of the active form “becoming knowledgeable,” Tim Ingold (2010: 115) holds that “knowledge is grown along the myriad of paths we take as we make our ways through the world in the course of everyday activities, rather than assembled from information obtained from numerous fixed locations” (ibid.). Ingold further contends: “A mindful body that knows and remembers must also live and breathe. A living, breathing body is at once a body-on-the-ground and a body-in-the-air. Earth and sky, then, are not components of an external environment with which the progressively ‘knowledge-up’ (socialized or enculturated) body interacts. They are rather regions of the body’s very existence, without which no knowing or remembering would be possible at all” (ibid.: 116).

This is explicitly an understanding of knowledge as outward reaching; knowing is always bound up with the environment. It is also important that knowing is never permanent because it depends on our relation with the ever-shifting environment, a relation that continually changes as we move and the environment moves. As mentioned, the empirical material that has inspired this theorizing has mainly focused on stability and repetition, in other words, fields where bodies have generally been receptive, relaxed, and in balance.

In order to unfold the significance of knowing for irregularized migrants, whose bodies are often strained and functioning in a state of fear and exhaustion, I will approach knowing through two interlinked but differently directed aspects of knowing, namely, knowing as outward reaching, which I will refer to as ‘emplaced’, and knowing as inward reaching, which I will call ‘embodied’. These somewhat contrived terms, which should not be understood as opposites, allow me to build on the above understanding of knowing while giving specific attention to distinctive aspects of knowing that are crucial for people living through danger and uncertainty. Knowing as emplaced emphasizes the importance of engagement with the environment for knowledge making and gives attention to the significance of motion in motion, the moving environment. Knowing as embodied draws attention to the importance of bodily states for knowing and recognizes that cognitive processes “by which different forms of knowledge are generated are multiple, involve different activating conditions, and produce different outcomes” (Cohen 2010: 183). That is, when working under stress or danger, the body responds differently to sensory perceptions (cf. Meteran et al. 2019), and this affects how irregularized migrants know. These terms allow me to focus on particular aspects of knowing as well as their interconnections, while acknowledging, of course, that knowing is always both emplaced and embodied.
My point in bringing attention to cognitive functions is by no means to “put the ground inside the brain, leaving individuals stranded in an unspecified ‘environment’ which is invoked merely for the purposes of allowing the body to have something material to interact with” to invoke Ingold’s (2010: 116–117) critique of “psychologistic approaches to ‘grounded cognition’” (ibid.: 116). Rather, my point is to explicitly acknowledge the complexities of the world we inhabit as co-constituted by the complexities of bodies. Thus, when irregularized migrants know, whether with or without digital practices, they know in intensely moving environments in which authorities might give them food and shelter or detain them, where the air might allow them to breathe or might freeze their lungs, and where the wind might aid them toward safer shores or might capsize their boat. And they know with bodies, which might breathe with difficulty and see unclearly because of fear, cold, fatigue, and hunger.

**Knowing Language, Branches, and a Hole in a Fence**

I started paying attention to the importance of bodily states for knowing through the stories I was told of ends of journeys. The distress of the journey was often brought out when refugees described how their bodies slowly let go of the strain once they had arrived. Mohammed was 14 years old when he and his brother embarked on a journey that would take months and include several futile attempts at crossing the Serbian mountains in deadly freezing temperatures. He spoke of walking in snow up to his thighs, of weather so cold that a bottle of water quickly turned to solid ice, and of giving up along the way, or at least trying to give up. “When we arrived here in Denmark,” he said, “I stayed home for one week, just sleeping next to the radiator. I didn’t do anything.” He curled his body in foster position as he explained how he lay down next to the radiator at the asylum center. During the journey, Mohammed experienced extremities of weather he did not think he would survive, brutality and dishonesty of smugglers, hunger and thirst, and uncertainty. Eventually, stuck in the snow in the mountains after having been deceived and threatened by several smugglers, he and his brother gave up, convinced that their bodies could not continue. They called the police to turn themselves in, expecting to be picked up, brought to warmth, and given food—and that this would mean they would be forced to apply for asylum in a country they did not expect would grant them safety. But it was New Year’s Eve. The police were drunk, and no one came, so they were forced to continue.

For Mohammed and his brother, then, navigation was not only about knowing their surroundings and connecting them to other places; it was also about knowing their own bodies in this environment and how much they could endure in order to survive. The cold of the environment was not external to
their bodies, but rather folded into them and became part of their bodies. While the environment is a region of the body’s very existence without which no knowing would be possible, it can be hostile and make not only knowing but also breathing difficult.

Bodily strains can also mean that irregularized migrants at times act in a state of perceived bodily detachment. Noor, a Syrian man in his twenties, had fled Syria when he was informed that he would be arrested, once again. Having survived two imprisonments and the torture it entailed, he was certain he would not survive becoming a political prisoner once more. He had already lost friends and family members to torture, and his body was scarred, physically and psychologically, by his previous imprisonments. He had only a brief time to prepare his journey and say goodbye. He fled over the Mediterranean through Libya, hoping to arrive at a destination where he would be allowed family reunification with his wife, who is a stateless Palestinian, and their infant son. Again and again, he told me as we spoke that all he wanted was to go somewhere where he could bring his family out of the war, a purpose that was bigger than anything to him. As he told me of his journey, I kept asking him how he knew what to do in different situations in order to understand how his path had taken shape. He explained to me: “You are not there 100 percent. All my muscles were tense. My head wasn’t working. All I was thinking about was home. I was scared of the water and of what would happen in Italy. It was as if we were drunk. We did things, but I don’t know how we did it. I would rather die than do it again.”

Noor was pointing out to me, in response to my questions about how he knew, that in this state of distress and bodily detachment, knowing is not simply a matter of obtaining information, out there to be grabbed or grasped. His feeling of sensory detachment from his body affected his ability to know and made him act in a state of perceived disconnection from his body. Psychologists find that when people recognize they are facing an emergency, certain hormones are increased in the body. This engenders physiological changes that “may be helpful for enhancing physical responses to threat [although] the associated neurochemical changes could actually reduce survival by negatively impacting on cognitive processes, such as memory or attention” (Robinson and Bridges 2011: 31). On the one hand, Noor was able to do things he thought himself incapable of, as his physiological response to threat potentially enhanced his physical capabilities. Yet at the same time, his cognitive functioning was also affected, making him feel as if his head “wasn’t working,” enabling him to do these things, not knowing how he did it. In this way, Noor moved through his journey with a body that responded to the environment, affecting how he sensed and how he was able to know.

Noor was not alone in experiencing that his head was not working as he was used to. Wael, a young man who traveled on his own from Syria, spoke
good English. After a dangerous and strenuous journey, he arrived at the central train station in Copenhagen. Although he had made it to his destination country safely, he was terrified. His older brother lived in Denmark, and Wael was to contact him once he arrived so his brother could pick him up from the station. But with a Turkish SIM card, he was not able to call even though he had carefully saved his battery, using his phone sparsely on the few occasions he had access to Wi-Fi. At the train station, he heard a family speak Arabic and asked them for help. They gave him directions to an asylum center and a note in Danish, which he could show to people if he needed assistance in finding the center. He did not think of approaching anyone else for help. “I do [speak English]. But I was so scared. I didn’t know, maybe I just didn’t think that everyone speaks English here.” He also did not think of asking the family for help to get Wi-Fi access so he could call his brother. When he finally made it to his brother’s home, after having spent some days in the asylum center, he said he finally started becoming calm again, as his body started letting go of the strain. Under different circumstances, Wael would know that he could speak English with most people in Denmark and that he would be able to access a Wi-Fi connection. Yet during his journey and his stop at Copenhagen Central Station, his bodily state of fear and anxiety affected what he was able to do and thus what he was able to know and how he was able to know. This, in turn, affected his navigation as he first ended up in an asylum center rather than his brother’s home.

For Wael, speaking his mother tongue during a time when his cognitive processes were challenged was manageable. In the same way, decision making can be made manageable by focusing on specific things in times of uncertainty and difficulty. For Noor, quick family reunification was crucial, and this was the only thing he focused on. Having not had much time to prepare for the journey in Syria, it was in Libya—where a smuggler left him in a house with a growing group of irregularized migrants—that he sought to prepare himself for the further journey and find out where to go. The smuggler had provided them with Wi-Fi, so they were able to access the Internet through phones while they waited “until the ship was full and the weather was good.” Noor had a simple non-touchscreen phone that could access the Internet. He sought out information along with the others in the house. The smuggler had warned them about leaving the house, saying they would be arrested if they did so. Therefore, their only source of information was what they were able to find through online searches and communication with others. Noor particularly mentioned the Facebook group karāǧāt almošaŋatān as useful. In this group, he found a table that compared a number of countries in Europe in terms of visa requirements and family reunification processing time. Noor decided to go to one of the two countries with the shortest family reunification time, according to the table. When he later met some other Syrians traveling to one of those countries, the
Netherlands, he joined them. Upon reaching the Netherlands, he was informed by migration authorities that it would take him much longer to achieve family reunification than the time he had expected based on the table. He then decided to continue on to the other country, Denmark. Here, as well, family reunification turned out to take much longer than the table had suggested. However, while the table was based on unreliable information, it was simple and approachable. A very complicated process was thus made manageable and enabled him to make a decision. As I hope to have made clear through these stories, when bodies move through dangerous and uncertain journeys, knowing is crucially entangled in the fear and fatigue they experience.

**Balloons, GPS, and (Not) Knowing**

Having mainly discussed knowing as embodied, I shall now focus more explicitly on the significance of knowing as emplaced, pointing particularly to how the moving environment complicates knowing. In addition to the type of research Noor did in the house in Libya, many irregularized migrants prepared for the journey by contacting friends and family who had already made the journey. Depending on the route and time of the flight, some were able to talk to people they met on the journey and share information, while others such as Noor, who was stuck with the same group of people in the smuggler’s house, had fewer opportunities to talk to people along the route. The situation for Ghada and Ziad was different from that of Noor. They traveled in the late summer of 2015 through Turkey, where Syrians and other irregularized migrants moved somewhat freely in certain areas such as Basmany Square. In these places, information was easier to come by and so was equipment needed for the journey, including life jackets and balloons. Ghada explained to me that they had been told that they should put their phones inside balloons and tie them with a knot when they crossed the sea. That way, their phones would remain dry even if they ended up in the water.

When Noor and the others in the house in Libya were getting ready to leave for the boat, an older man had put his phone in a plastic bag and burned the edges to seal it. He had then tied it to his body and put on two layers of clothing. “We laughed at him. We didn’t know why he did this,” Noor confided to me. He told me that he and the others had cared more about trimming their hair and beards so people would not be afraid of them when they arrived in Italy, as they looked rough from having been on the road for weeks. When they left the house, armed smugglers had taken their bags from them. This is when Noor understood the two layers of clothing. When they got to the water, they were hurried into a small boat and sailed to a larger boat offshore. They had to walk into the water to get on the small boat. One person was overweight and
could not get on the boat, so Noor jumped in to help him. He was in the water up to his chest, and his phone was ruined. Noor recounted: “Some people knew what they were doing. They were totally ready. Others, like me, we had no clue what we were doing.” In Turkey, Ghada and Ziad were familiar with their surroundings and knew where street vendors sold balloons for the purpose of keeping phones dry in the water. Noor knew differently in the house in Libya. The one man who sealed off his phone did not explain or respond when the others laughed. Noor rather knew, with the environment, as his phone was soaked. Putting a phone in a balloon or sealed plastic bag might seem a small and insignificant action, but it can literally mean a world of difference as a functioning phone might facilitate a connection to the right smuggler at another point in the journey. As such, putting a phone in a balloon and jumping into the water are also digital practices that affect knowing in and beyond the situation itself.

Another aspect of knowing as emplaced during irregularized migration pertains to the ways people counter physical obstacles. Traveling without rights often entails traveling away from street signs and other parts of the built environment. Rather than built environments that are intended to facilitate movement, irregularized migrants often encounter built barriers such as fences that are specifically designed to stop their movement. This often forces irregularized migrants to navigate through uninhabited and inhospitable areas in which the relation between where they are and where they seek to go can be even more difficult to establish. Many of the people I spoke with ventured into such areas only when led by smugglers, but some also endeavored to do so on their own, guided by GPS signals ensured through local or international SIM cards and an extra, charged battery. Omar, a young Syrian man who traveled with his younger brother and their cousin to Germany over Turkey in the summer of 2015, did so several times during his journey. At one point, he used GPS to navigate through a desolate area in Macedonia with a larger group of people. It was night, and the light from phones was the only illumination, serving to provide guidance not only on the map but also on the ground. When they reached Serbia, Omar and his companions were rejected at the border. Trying to find an alternative route, Omar used GPS, but they were stopped several times by the military. Finally, they found a way to cross the border that entailed moving over a small creek by climbing on some thin branches functioning as a makeshift bridge in a forest. Omar described the climb as difficult and explained that they had to run after having crossed, as they were met by police. Later, on the border of Hungary, they were unable to find a smuggler to help them cross. They walked on their own for several hours in the borderland and eventually decided to try to cross. On the other side of the border, they were once again faced by police and ran into a forest to hide. There they walked for about 10 hours with no food or water.
They were not simply moving through a physical environment that could be made navigable with a map. They were necessarily conjointly moving through a social environment in which their status as irregularized migrants and their lack of rights significantly affected both their own movement as well as the intensity of the moving environment. The substantial military and police presence was brought on precisely by the presence of irregularized migrants such as themselves—along with restrictive migration policies. With limited knowledge of the place they were in and how it was connected with other places, and with no knowledge of a particular police presence in the surrounding area, it was difficult for them to find a viable path between where they were and where they wanted to go. Further, the physical hardships were draining their energy. When they eventually exited the forest, the police arrested them. This time, they were not able to run. Omar and his group spent a night in a jail in Hungary, where some of their valuables were ‘confiscated’ and they were forced to give their fingerprints. Knowing through digital practices, then, is a bodily act that involves not only looking at a smartphone screen, but also—often simultaneously—walking on dark, unruly surfaces, maintaining balance when crossing a creek, and running from military and police until hunger and fatigue take their toll. It is through the interaction with phone screens, branches, and unruly surfaces as they move through their journeys that irregularized migrants know and thus are able to navigate. And while their navigation might at times benefit from using GPS, it is important to keep in mind that GPS information favors the built environment, which is designed for those with rights. In this process, knowing is not simply a matter of obtaining available information.

While Omar and his group used GPS to get a sense of where they were in relation to where they wanted to go, smartphones also often played a role in connecting irregularized migrants with smugglers. Irregularized migrants did their best to connect with smugglers with whom they could establish some level of trust. This is in accordance with Zijlstra and van Liempt’s (2017: 177) finding that “when smugglers are embedded in migrants’ networks, it is less likely that migrants will be betrayed. When the relationship is more anonymous, things are more likely to go wrong” (see also van Liempt 2007). Some irregularized migrants would pay smugglers to take them by boat, car, or van, but at times smugglers were paid simply for showing the way on foot.

Ghada and Ziad also had trouble crossing the border from Serbia to Hungary. They arrived at the border in mid-September 2015, around the time when Hungary had finished its border fence and the European Union and its member states were in disarray regarding how to handle the growing number of irregularized migrants from Syria and other conflict and disaster zones. The Hungarian border was closed, and several violent episodes took place. Initially, Ghada and Ziad had planned on walking from Greece to Denmark or Sweden, where Ghada has family. They had bought a European SIM card that
worked internationally and therefore had access to the Internet, so they would use Google Maps on the road to find their way. However, it was clear to them that they would not be able to cross this border on their own. Through people who had already made the journey, they were able to contact someone who had a number for someone who had a number for someone else. Finally, they arranged to meet with a smuggler, who walked with them for hours, leading them to a place where there was a hole in the fence at the border. They climbed through the fence and eventually arrived at the side of a big road. Here a car stopped briefly to pick them up and take them to Austria. The role of the first smuggler was not simply to show them to the hole. Being familiar with the local environment and receiving continuous updates from colleagues on his phone about police presence, he at times ordered them to stop walking and hide in the bushes until the coast was clear.

Comparably, Omar and his group did not have knowledge of police movements in the surrounding area and were thus forced to run when they encountered police, unlike Ghada and Ziad who could pre-emptively hide. The digital practices of the smugglers in Ghada and Ziad’s case served to open up the place they were in to the surrounding places. That is, by connecting the movements of police in the surrounding area to the place they were in, Ghada and Ziad were able to make aspects of what was beyond the immediate surroundings knowable and to connect it to the place they were in. Digital practices can thus be significant as they can serve to open up places to other places by making them known and situating them in relation to each other, thus facilitating navigation. The places that irregularized migrants navigate toward are known in ways different from the immediate surroundings, yet this knowledge is also part of the making of the immediate surroundings. When Ghada and Ziad were stuck at the closed border crossing, this crossing remained a closed border as long as their knowledge of the environment constituted it as closed, thus affecting their potential navigation in the given place. When they succeeded in meeting a smuggler, who knew a hole in a fence so many kilometers in a certain direction, the immediate surroundings were no longer an impenetrable border, but became part of a path with a direction that could only be fully known when it was enacted. Knowing changed the way they positioned themselves in the environment. In this case, the knowledge of the smuggler—and their relative trust in him—enabled navigation not only toward a hole in a fence, but also toward a position in the yet to come.

Navigation, then, is never in relation only to the immediate surroundings, but also in relation to their connection to other places—or at least how this is perceived. Ghada and Ziad’s meeting with the smuggler was established through digital practices, which connected them to a chain of people who could endorse the next person in the chain, allowing for a relative trust in a stranger—something that was difficult for them to establish in the volatile and
insecure environment at the border. In this way, certain kinds of knowledge are prioritized, not as definitive knowledge but rather as an ongoing engagement with a moving environment.

Conclusion

When irregularized migrants navigate through environments that are largely designed for those who have rights, they know as they go while the environment is continually moving, with borders opening and closing and police shifting positions—and approaches—around them. Digital practices often play into the knowledge making of irregularized migrants and can particularly help in opening up places to other places, making the place one is in known and situating it in relation to other places. However, knowing is made difficult for irregularized migrants not only by the lack of rights, but also by the moving environment, which makes knowledge particularly slippery as situations continually change. Furthermore, the fear, fatigue, and uncertainty that irregularized migrants experience when navigating in these dangerous and shifting circumstances make knowing even more difficult, as bodily states affect perception. Thus, understanding how irregularized migrants know with digital practices entails looking beyond what can be known and focusing on how things are known. I have sought to do so by engaging with digital migration studies and anthropological theories of knowing. First, I have challenged placing emphasis on information precarity and digital infrastructures during irregularized journeys, advocating instead for a point of departure in the emplacement and embodiment of knowledge that incorporates both the difficulties of knowing in a moving environment and the implications of danger for knowing bodies. Second, by bringing instability and danger into the anthropological theorization of knowing, I have pointed to the shifting capabilities of knowing bodies, suggesting that an anthropology of knowing must also attend to how people know in situations of distress.

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Notes

1. I am indebted to the refugees and solidarity workers who shared their extremely personal and deeply affecting stories with me. I carried out parts of the fieldwork with Marie Sandberg, and I am further indebted to her for her sharp and generous insights through all stages of the research.
2. See Kaufmann (2018) for a similar yet more structured approach to follow-ups.
3. I speak non-native Egyptian Arabic, which is largely mutually intelligible with Syrian Arabic. I recorded all interviews in Arabic, and I am indebted to Alaa Almeiza for translating and transcribing them.
4. The names of research participants have been changed to protect their privacy.
5. The name of this Facebook group is Syrian slang, which is very expressive and difficult to translate. It refers to temporary waiting or transit places of those who have been exiled or are homeless, literally, ‘those carrying bags’.

References


