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Dreaming in the shadow of history: micro-mobilities and belonging in Lucknow

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ABSTRACT

Spatial mobility is often considered on large geographical scales: people move from distant villages to global cities, they migrate from one country to the next, or even to a whole new continent. Such large-scale migration comes with shifts in economic position, social status and cultural exposure, shifts that condition new figurations of belonging – or so the argument goes. In contrast, I ethnographically follow the looping movements of three young men in Lucknow who aspire to migrate but remain stuck, who find a whole new world by crossing the river, whose small steps reflect big dreams. As the world grapples with ‘lockdowns’ and ‘stuckedness’ in the Covid-19 pandemic, I sketch their aspirations, mental maps and the material restraints that condition their trajectories. Through them, I demonstrate how looping micro-mobilities – cruising through the night, dancing on stage, riding one’s bike – can be as effective in fostering new figurations of belonging as the grand movements emphasized in literature on migration. I further explore which spaces enable and contain such micro-mobilities, rediscovering the potency of urban settings to make people feel at home and out of place in small but important ways.

KEYWORDS

Micro-mobilities;
masculinity; youth;
belonging; identity; India;
Muslimness

Argument

Spatial mobility is often considered on large geographical scales involving considerable ‘latitude’ (Ong 2006): people move from distant villages to global cities, they migrate from one country to the next, or even to a whole new continent. Such large-scale migration comes with shifts in economic position, social status and cultural exposure, shifts that condition new individual and collective positioning and may even foster new figurations of belonging – or so the argument goes. Following authors like Bissell (2007, 2013), Chambers (2018), Dyson (2018), Hage (2009) or Kellerman (2012), who all emphasized the role of more mundane, smaller-scale, repetitive movements, I aim to scale this argument down and ask what happens to people who aspire to migrate but remain ‘stuck’, people who find ‘a whole new world’ by crossing the river into another part of town, people whose small steps reflect big dreams.

David Bissell, writing alongside others within the ‘mobilities paradigm’ (Hannam, Sheller, and Urry 2006; Urry 2007), drew attention to the presence of embodied or even imagined micro-movements amidst seeming immobility, suggesting that the practice of ‘waiting is no longer conceptualized as a dead period of stasis or stilling, or even a slower urban rhythm, but is instead alive with the potential of being other than this’ (2007, 227; cf. Hage 2009). Later he clarified the spatial contours of this initially temporal argument by reframing where such potent waiting occurs: in ‘loops of

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neighborhood' (Bissell 2013). Rather than emphasizing mobilities' fixed, normative points of reference – a prominent focus when describing migration from/to certain spaces, inclusion or exclusion in the city, etc. – Bissell's emphasis on looping movements highlights the repetitive, mundane, transgressive modes of mobility itself and asks how it may over time forge a sense of belonging.

Such emphasis on embodied micro-movements and their repetition in seemingly insignificant spaces resonates with South Asian research on mobility and belonging. Jane Dyson (2018) for instance, studying how young men get re-acquainted with their rural 'home' in the Indian Himalayas after returning from seasonal labour migration, describes the spatial practices of sociality of the youth she works with as they repeatedly walk across, touch, transform and preserve their environment in friendship groups. Thomas Chambers draws similar attention to the link between friendship and seasonal or circular migration but adds that often a shared imagination of and aspiration to such movement suffices to form affective bonds, rendering actual migration redundant. Dreaming of and planning mobile futures, he argues,

was often a group pursuit as young men whiled away the time together, during or between work, in day-dreaming of business plans or of making trips out of the city for either recreation or work. Once hatched, such plans could be rapidly enacted with little sense of upheaval or rupture. However, as quickly as they were established, so they could also be abandoned. (Chambers 2018, 1436; cf. Chambers 2020; Ali 2007; Kellerman 2012)

Building on these insights into repetitive, small-scale, looping mobility, I ethnographically follow the movements of Aasim, Ahmad and Ayaz, three young men in Lucknow, the capital of Uttar Pradesh in North India where I conduct fieldwork since 2011. I sketch their masculine aspirations, mental maps of the world and the material restraints that condition their trajectories. Through them, I demonstrate how looping – cruising through the night, dancing on stage, riding one's bike – can be as effective in fostering new figurations of belonging as the grand movements emphasized in so much work on mobility and migration.

The paper starts by outlining the two key concepts of looping micro-mobilities and belonging. I then introduce the context of Lucknow and my methodological and representational choices before I portray each young man in turn. I conclude with three wider implications that flow from their experience: one might not need to migrate in order to transform one's sense of belonging – but one might well need to move; especially when studying those who *do* migrate across larger distance, we should thus not overlook their smaller scale mobile performances; and we should pay more attention to the specific spaces that enable and contain such micro-mobilities, namely rediscover the potency of 'loops of neighborhoods' (Bissell 2013) to make people feel at home and out of place.

The ethnographic fieldwork for this paper was conducted before the global Covid-19 pandemic, and Aasim, Ahmad and Ayaz have met quite different fate through it: we only spoke briefly since, but I know that Ayaz recovered from the illness, Ahmad sheltered down in Delhi, jobless and disillusioned, while Aasim made it out just in time, and now lives in Australia, land of his dreams. However, this paper is not about their pandemic experience. Instead, I propose to look back to pre-pandemic times and see what one can learn from those young men who felt stuck and 'locked down' well before many more privileged people were forced to re-consider where they feel at home and out of place, and reflect on how everyday interactions shape, limit and restrict their mobile aspirations. How did Aasim, Ahmad and Ayaz carve their own paths into a world that severely restricts their mobile aspirations?

Concepts

For some time now, scholars aim to break up dichotomies between mobility and immobility, complementing work on large-scale migration with attention to more subtle, in-between, mundane mobilities across neighbourhoods (Bissell 2013), through imaginary travels (Kellerman 2012; Chambers 2018) and other forms of 'timepass' (Jeffrey 2010a) and 'waiting' (Hage 2009) that take place in between imagined stasis on the one hand and fully global and cosmopolitan 'latitudes'

(Ong 2006) on the other. In a similar vein, I highlight how cruising through the city at night can inspire conversation and reflection, listen to dreams and mental maps of the world, attend to embodied movement through space and on stage.

Through ethnographic exposure and embodied co-presence this emerging literature on micro-mobilities not only shifts scale though but also emphasizes something more: that small-scale or even imagined mobility shape a sense of self and its socio-spatial location through *repetition*. While migration is rarely a mundane, everyday activity except at the very highest latitudes of global exchange and the exceptional, 'once in a lifetime' nature of transnational migration is indeed why many assume it to be transformative – I instead follow Chambers (2018) in 'situat[ing mobility] as an *ongoing* process of "envisioning and becoming" (1421; my emphasis) which derives its potency precisely through its mundane character: looping through space *and* time.

The second central concept for my argument is that of belonging. Again, there has been a burgeoning body of work on this notion over the last decade, largely because it avoids the trappings of more static and essentialist connotations of 'identity' or 'identification' and emphasizes the relations between people and space. Pfaff-Czarnecka (2012) for instance argues that belonging is constituted through experientially grounded assumptions of commonness (encompassing formal categorization as much as substantive self-understanding), established practices of reciprocity (formal arrangements which require substantive qualifications), and feelings of material and/or spatial affinity (substantive in the emphasis on materiality, but also formal in the connotation of 'groupness' in the sense of Brubaker 2012). Importantly, the latter – the honing of affinities – requires repetition and 'normalization' in everyday life. 'Identity' may appear static, but 'belonging' is a quotidian process.

Since belonging might be experienced as deeply ambivalent or ambiguous by those who belong, however, I complement Pfaff-Czarnecka's terms with their negative inversion: difference, exclusion and detachment. This allows for processes and experiences of distancing without necessarily implying non-belonging, capturing 'the utter interdependence, whether in abstract logic or messy everyday practice, of similarity *and* difference' (Jenkins 2008, 21, my emphasis). Indeed, one central longing of Ahmad, Aasim and Ayaz could well be to be someone else, to belong somewhere and/or sometime else. If one were to imply 'lesser' belonging by virtue of exclusion from, for instance, global and larger scale mobilities or migratory aspiration, one would uncritically reinforce precisely those who exert pressure, power and control to enforce group cohesion and stasis. Hence in this paper, I demonstrate how practices of micro-mobilities express and shape Ahmad's, Aasim's and Ayaz's experiences of commonality as much as difference, inclusion as much as exclusion, and detachment as much as attachment. In short: how micro-mobilities foster their sense belonging.

Lucknow

Lucknow, uneasy home to Aasim, Ahmad and Ayaz can be a complicated place: neither market town nor quite metropolis, at once melancholic and vibrant, genteel and abrasive. Graff 1997 and Susewind and Taylor 2015 provide recent comprehensive introductions to the demography, geography, history and political economy of the city; my aim here is more modest: to give the reader a feel for the place and its 'atmospheres' (Schroer and Schmitt 2018). In what follows, I aim to 'characterise' (Bradbury and Sen 2020) the city more than survey it – a more lyrical and experimental rhetoric justified further in the methods section below.

Lucknow is the capital of Uttar Pradesh, India's most populous, politically influential yet economically weak state. As a city of historical format, the spiritual centre for Shiism on the subcontinent also boasts centuries of exchange with the Persian world. Later, its rulers, the Nawabs and Taluqedars of Awadh, lavishly spent whatever they earned from British purses on poets and craftsmen, culinary refinement and erotic pursuit. Self-proclaimed 'proper' Lucknowites still despise paid work and the old town grinds to a halt during Muharram and Safar, two months of Shia ritual mourning: no business can be conducted, no engagement be agreed, no child be named, no party be arranged. Of course, plenty such activities happen under the carpet, contrived over cups of Kashmiri Chai

before or after religious gatherings, when rich and famous *ulema*, religious scholars often doubling as crafty entrepreneurs, stop by for a chat and a deal.

But one can't deny that this Lucknow is in decline – and has been for quite a while. After 1857, the culmination of India's 'first war of independence' or the 'great mutiny' as the British saw it, colonial purses were stowed and traded for imperial canes and carbines (Oldenburg 1984). Later, the exodus of Muslim upper castes and classes during partition and heavy in-migration and urban growth reshaped the face of the city while independent India's land reforms cemented the elite's financial decay, as did the subsequent rise of the majority of non-Muslim lower castes and classes to political power in what Jaffrelot (2003) perceptively termed India's 'silent revolution'. While Lucknow always oscillated between grandeur and melancholy – influenced, no doubt, by popular Shia piety – the latter now became pervasive. What remains is in many ways just another provincial town, with little opportunities, few jobs, and fewer women still (according to the last census figures from 2011, Lucknow district has a sex ratio of 906 female citizens for every 1000 men). Little is happening where everything of relevance already happened in a past long gone, and contemporary Lucknow became a transit space: interesting enough for those who migrate from rural India – but often no option for those who tasted Delhi or Mumbai.

What makes this space so interesting to me are its contradictions, and the 'tension' (Gooptu and Krishnan 2017) that flows from it. The famous Lucknowi melancholy is pronounced by many – but such pronouncements rarely feel melancholic; while claiming heartbreak, most people are in fact busy carving out opportunities in the new order. This often involves a great deal of waiting and intense 'timepass' (Jeffrey 2010a): traditional crafts such as Chikan embroidery (Wilkinson-Weber 1999) are in decline while positions in the state bureaucracy rarely go to Muslims (Alam 2015) and Muslims' 'labor agency' within professional jobs in the growing middle class remains firmly circumscribed by communal prejudice (Williams, Al James, and Vira 2017). Consequently, the old city is buzzing with energy yet barely any project gets realized. Politicians at times promise change through affirmative action and hope to get the 'Muslim vote' in return – but few actually believe them. In fact, as is the case in many capital cities, old Lucknowites maintain a studied distance, proud to host big leaders but quick in pointing out that such 'uncivilized' people don't truly belong. And while Dalits and OBCs profit, many Muslims feel left out and have to look for other means to make a living (Taylor 2015).

In recent years, the return of Hindu majoritarian forces from the more extreme fringe of the movement to political power in Uttar Pradesh led to further deterioration of Muslims' economic and political prospects; indeed, most of my conversations since focus on more immediate concerns for security and safety, as dreams of a middle-class life seem ever more distant. However, the fieldwork for this paper took place at a different moment in time – one where a resurgence of the Congress party both at the centre and the state level seemed possible, where Muslims in Lucknow took some faith in a Samajwadi Party under new leadership. While the election of Ajay Bisht / Yogi Adityanath as Chief Minister in 2017, and the re-election of Narendra Modi at the centre two years later, undoubtedly compound the sense of 'stuckedness' explored here, and give some of the escapist fantasies and aspirations – to other places, to other times – more urgency than ever, they do not fundamentally alter my main argument about micro-mobilities.

Religious change, finally, is not just evident in the growth of Hindu majoritarianism, but as palpable in Lucknow's Muslim spaces. Many of my interlocutors stress that it takes a man with particularly modern (instrumental, perhaps even protestant in the Weberian sense) piety to compete in this new world that Lucknow has become – and a set of aspiring young Ulema indeed propagate a masculine morality for the emerging middle classes (Jones 2014; Susewind 2015b). Many find it hard to adjust to their rigid demands – including Aasim and Ayaz, as discussed below – but others seem to find strength in them, while others still make a fortune from spreading checklists of do's and don'ts in everyday conduct. Indeed: many of my neighbours who want to make money in old Lucknow today either enter the shady scene of builders and developers, parcelling and selling off the impoverished elite's estates in collusion with local goons, politicians and city officials (Susewind 2015a) – or

go work for one of the mushrooming religious cable TV channels or sectarian social media platforms. Frequently, they will in fact do both and more: let a brother contest local elections and ask another to run the declining family workshop. Women, meanwhile, ‘should stay home’ – which many don’t, much to the dismay of their self-styled guardians (Hong Tschalär 2015). Exploring the role of Islamic revivalist self-fashioning is not my focus in this paper (see Osella and Osella 2008; Taylor 2015; Chambers 2020), given how little it figured in the three lives portrayed here – but undoubtedly exploring the role of micro-mobilities, and especially embodied movements, in Islamic reformism is a promising avenue for further research.

Method

In midst of this embroglio, in a *mohalla* or neighbourhood at the border between old and new Lucknow, I conducted almost two years of ethnographic fieldwork, primarily between 2011 and 2013 and intermittently since, with the intention to explore what it means to be Muslim in contemporary North India, to find out what people long for, where they feel at home or out of place, and with whom they belong. Early on, I met Aasim, Ahmad and Ayaz, the three young men on whom I focus in this paper. They are of interest to me because all three experience and express quite distinct figurations of belonging – figurations that are however all fostered through micro-mobilities rather than large-scale migration.

Over the years, I formed bonds of companionship with them, bonds that ultimately enable my research. On the one hand, they found me a highly mobile projection foil for their own desires – both geographically and socially. They witnessed me advancing in my career, utilizing my German passport and relative ‘latitude’ (Ong 2006) in global knowledge production to tour the world and settle ‘abroad’. On the other hand, they saw me facing personal crises, become a father, take time off – and frequently return to Lucknow, to spaces we shared, to them and their lives. I in turn witnessed their own endeavours – some of which I recount below – met their families and girlfriends, saw one of them getting married, obtain odd jobs and lose them again, make a name for themselves as Ayaz did or remain in the shadow of time and space like Aasim and Ahmad. My ethnography with them and next to them oscillates between a search for ‘resonance beyond the words’ (Wikan 2012) on the one hand, utilizing my embodied co-presence and co-movement to make sense of their lives – and a more scripted and constructed relationship, one in which I became the audience to a carefully crafted choreography as the outsider and global citizen to whom they can put their aspirations.

Ayaz gave me explicit permission to use his name, in fact, urged me to tell the world about his success – and I would indeed happily implore my readers to check out his Rocksford Academy, should you make your way to the city. Aasim and Ahmad however are pseudonyms, representative prototypes in some ways of many other young men like them. In writing about them and their ‘micro-mobilities’ I am conscious that, like mine, their lives are in constant flux: by the time this article goes into print and is read, they had quite literally moved on. Nonetheless, I believe the ethnographic method allows me to capture an important decade of their lives, and in the contrasts among them illustrates how distinct figurations of belonging can be fostered in small spaces as much as large ones.

In choosing to privilege their personal stories, I build both on longstanding concerns with ‘writing culture’ differently (Clifford and Marcus 1986) as well as more recent attempts to provide deep social insight by ‘telling lives in India’ (Arnold and Blackburn 2004) and breaking up stereotypical assumptions by painting more nuanced ‘Muslim [or other] portraits’ (Banerjee 2008). This rhetoric choice is both an attempt to value the particular as an end in itself and an experiment in finding wider relevance; such relevance however lays not in these lives’ empirically proven (dis)similarity to other lives, but in the ‘resonance’ (Wikan 2012) that readers may experience; it ‘grows out of the delicacy of [...] distinctions, not the sweep of [...] abstractions’ (Geertz 1973, 25). In the introduction to their recent special issue on ‘Calcutta characters’ in Contemporary South Asia, Bradbury and Sen (2020)

ask whether ‘by rendering the details of everyday life which are often left unspoken or invisible, or taken for granted, [one could] highlight the ways in which these details are crucial to understanding the social, political and economic evolution of urban life’ (430). Readers of their collection of ‘characters’ will respond firmly that such knowledge is possible – and I hope readers of my rendition of the lives of Aasim, Ahmad and Ayaz, and the ‘figurations’ of belonging they embody will concur.

Finally, I am quite conscious that these figurations are distinctly *male* ways of being in the city, especially when it comes to practices of mobilities that are deeply gendered, in urban India as much as elsewhere. Even though some women figure in the narratives below – the foreign wife of Aasim’s dreams, the female leaders detested by Ahmad, and of course the fellow dancers, students, girlfriends, wife and mother of Ayaz – they only figure in relation to the story of these three young men. This paper therefore also aims to contribute to a broader global debate on young (Muslim) men and the ‘geographies of masculinity’ (Gorman-Murray and Hopkins 2014) that they inhabit, highlighting ‘the importance of place and place-based resources in the shaping of young men’s trajectories’ (Ward et al. 799 and 811).

Aasim

The first figuration of belonging that I want to portray is one in which the protagonist – Aasim – primarily dreams of escape, hoping that he will one day be able to leave Lucknow behind and make it to distant, better lands. Since socio-economic realities render actual migration highly improbable, though, he restlessly circles the *mohalla* on his bike and lets off steam online – in a space that enables him to evade the pressure he experiences in India. It is through such practices of micro- and virtual mobility that he forges a distinct figuration of belonging, one in which he, above all, longs not to belong.

In his early twenties when we first met, Aasim hails from an intermediate caste Sunni family, a lanky handsome guy who enjoys to socialize and at some time ran a small but well-frequented restaurant in the *mohalla*’s interior maze. Once in a while, he also doubles as a freelance tourist guide and one of his brothers worked in the Gulf and returned with modest earnings; economically, the family hails from the lower rungs of India’s ill-defined middle class. This shows in how Aasim works: he leaves manual labour to others – for his restaurant, he employs a cook and a kitchen boy – and can afford to sneak out to meet his friends and neighbours; trips for which he always uses his bike, even if the restaurant is barely a hundred metres away – a first hint at the importance of small-scale spatial loops (for the role of ‘show piece’ bikes, in particular, see also Chambers 2020, ch. 6). At first, Aasim seemed to enjoy his life in the *mohalla*; when I once enquired whether he could imagine living in other parts of Lucknow, he replied:

No, there is no life [in such places]. I mean [here] I can get wind of any new opportunities, remain informed about the situation and the progress of my friends, [can ask] ‘you seem troubled today, is all well?’ In [new Lucknow] there are very many colonies, where such life does not happen at all.

Indeed, Aasim keeps truly busy, as he networks incessantly to ensure his success. A typical ‘hole in the wall’ at an alley crossing, his restaurant can seat perhaps fifteen people in the back, but most customers don’t sit down: they are young men like Aasim who can’t afford to spend much time on eating; too few are their opportunities in Lucknow, too long the list of friends and acquaintances whom they need to visit throughout each evening to ensure that they aren’t left out, that they ‘get wind of any new opportunities, remain informed about the situation.’ Such socializing may at first appear as an enjoyable performance of old Lucknow’s distinct culture or *Tehzeeb*, not unlike ‘adda’ in Calcutta (Bradbury and Sen 2020; Chakrabarty 1999) – but the more evenings I spent with Aasim, the more clearly I saw how it also becomes a stressful necessity in the gamble for jobs and futures. ‘Convivial exchanges can embody degrees of instrumentality and conceal relations of power and marginalization’ (Chambers 2019, 776) as much as, and at the same time as, they

provide respite from the pressures of life – and cooperation and competition are often hard to disentangle in young men's entrepreneurial networking (Deuchar and Dyson 2020).

Consequently, the restaurant's atmosphere only ever relaxes in the early morning hours. On one such late-night occasion, Aasim picked me up on his bike and drove to a nearby street crossing, quite symbolically at the brink between old and new Lucknow. There we left the bike behind and changed into the more private space of a distant cousin's parked car – distant in both kinship and class terms (Dickey 2012) – because Aasim had a confession to make: he strongly desires to leave India, he whispered, and he needs my help. India, he claimed, were 'too much crowded and dirty', the infrastructure 'horrible', and society 'full of Hindu nationalists, Naxalites and other terrorists'. Religion is becoming a little too 'tense' for him as well. In short: he sees no future for himself here. It would be much better if he left, preferably for Australia, Switzerland or Romania. In fact, he already concocted a plan.

There are three ways, he pondered, to go abroad: work, study, and marriage. Work was no realistic option for him: one would need a *job* in a *company* for at least five years before one could hope for a transfer to Europe – an unimaginable fantasy for a Muslim from modest roots like himself, he insisted. The next alternative has its own problems. He wasn't a brilliant student so far, and his BCom degree from a local college would not secure his admission to a university in Europe – or indeed be useful in any other sphere of life: a 'degree without freedom' (Jeffrey, Jeffery, and Jeffery 2008).

His studies might have lacked enthusiasm, but Aasim is street smart. With a smirk and a sense of cosmopolitan certainty, he revealed the third option: in Switzerland like anywhere else in the world, he reasoned, there must be parents who find it difficult to arrange a husband for their daughters. Perhaps she is 'a little ugly'? Or 'plump and disabled'? He wouldn't mind. But some doubts remain, and he asked for my advice: would a good family accept him, as an Indian? After all, his skin is a little darker, he reasoned, and his culture so different ... Perhaps it would be smarter to concentrate on marrying a 'negro' girl rightaway, he contemplated, gauging my reaction – wouldn't this in a sense over-compensate the relative shortcomings of his complexion? Surely there must be those, too, even in Switzerland. If I were so kind and ask around?

Flabbergasted, I tried to think of an appropriate reply to his request. Aasim's racism and instrumental attitude embarrassed me, as did his idealization of me, the globally mobile researcher. But I also sensed a much deeper and slow-burning desire, perhaps kindled, but not created by my presence. Indeed, across India, young men like Aasim are under immense pressure: parents and peers alike expect them to perform to the standard of televised metropolitan middleclassness; they face the double brunt of the neoliberal idea that each individual forges his own destiny and the fact that 'middle-class people are held inordinately responsible for performing dominant social mores' (Dickey 2012). They have to work hard and pump iron in the gym, they have to live hard according to the checklists of middle-class morality (which frequently tasks them with keeping 'their' women under control) and they need a *job* – not just employment, but a formal job in an actual *company*, with regulated hours and paid leave. They also need a car, of course, not just a bike – they need to be entrepreneurial and mobile 'in style', as Aasim justified his choice of meeting place that night (cf. McCarthy 2017). More often than not, however, this trajectory into 'Shining India' demands higher education, English skills, sufficient networks and the means to either bribe or impress whoever crosses their way – a performance for which Aasim and many other young men in Lucknow lack both financial and cultural capital, mirroring the predicament of young unemployed men elsewhere: 'left to their illusions, they keep stretching and strengthening them until they can stand as a wall between them and the indifference of the world' (Poonam 2018, 27; cf. Cross 2014; Jeffrey 2010b; Ward et al. 2017).

Consequently, their claim to middleclassness is often virtual and symbolic rather than actual and material. The only future Aasim dares to realistically dream of is to commodify his body, pandering to globally circulating phantasmas of sexually charged Muslim masculinity (Ouzgane 2006). Until this strategy bears fruit, he can only escape online. In the vast space of the Internet, he can play with

the material token of middle-class life, eager to become part of a better, richer, more global – and more mobile! – lifestyle: Aasim's Facebook stream remained full of phone pictures taken in one of the new malls or on the new Agra-Delhi expressway, proudly sporting new sunglasses and the same 'stylish' (McCarthy 2017) car borrowed from his cousin. Offline, though, Aasim's dreams remain unfulfilled:

See, Raphael: I am not satisfied. I am not satisfied in the place where I was born, in fact I was born in the wrong place. Had God asked me to go to India [before my birth], and had he shown me only a few photos of the place, of the street vendors, the crowdedness, the situation of the road, [I would have replied] 'no, please send me to Paris or some such place, not here.' [...] If an Indian once in his life opens his eyes wide enough and sees a bungalow's terraced balcony with a fan and the rain, not in a movie but in real life, he will want to cut his life free from his limitations. [I beg you, my friend] open this balcony for me, there are so many beautiful things ahead! If I look at those people living among me, those I greet every day, with whom I speak every day: their thinking and my thinking are radically different. I simply don't belong here.

In terms of the wider argument of this paper, what we see in Aasim's case is a young man who longs to belong elsewhere – but for the decade in his life featured here found it excruciatingly difficult to achieve this aspiration. Interestingly though are the micro-movements that he engages in instead: his own embodied restlessness in his restaurant and elsewhere, the looping through the neighbourhood on his bike, switching to more 'suitable' (if borrowed) modes of transportation when bridging into the new city. Through these micro-movements, both performative vis-à-vis me, and embodied, he forges a distinct yearning to be elsewhere – a kind of inverted, negative sense of not belonging to Lucknow, not wanting to stay in place, not wanting to remain 'stuck' – and plays this yearning out on distinct borders of the city – social and spatial – which he touches, pierces, but ultimately doesn't manage to cross in a sustainable way.

Ahmad

If Aasim longs to belong elsewhere, Ahmad is caught in a temporal in-between. He hails from a much more affluent family than Aasim and is firmly part of Lucknow's upper-caste and, in his case, upper-class Shi'a elite. His figuration of belonging is thus rather different from Aasim's dreams of escape: he feels attached to the city, but to a distinctly historical, at times even mythological, version of it, shaped by the actions of 'great leaders' – all men – whose crumbling abodes he regularly loops back to, and whose biographies he devours. Both history – be it the more recent Nawabi past or the eternal tragedy of Kerbala – and future – a modernity only ever fully lived elsewhere, perhaps across the Gomti in new Lucknow, and certainly 'abroad' – serve as powerful foils against which Ahmad judges the contemporary city. Given the hagiographic character of both sets of imaginaries – the city's alleged tehzeebi past and modernist futures – the present can only loose out: for Ahmad, 'Lucknow continue[s] to be marked by a sense of loss and a great amount of nostalgia' (Kuldova 2009, 20). As was the case with Aasim, though, this nostalgic figuration of belonging is sustained by practices of mental and micro-mobility – as became clear one evening, when Ahmad offered to initiate me into 'his' Lucknow by touring the places dear to him (a more 'modern' take, he insisted, on the 'walking interview' that I originally suggested; cf. De Leon and Cohen 2005).

To the soundtrack of Green Day, we initially looped through Hazratganj, the central up-market business district, in Ahmad's posh new car – Aasim would have been envious. At the deep end of Hazratganj, we crossed the river into new Lucknow, transformed in recent years by the assertive memorial architecture of Ambedkar Park, commissioned by former Dalit chief minister Mayawati (Belli 2014). Ahmad says he has to pinch himself each time to realize he is still in Uttar Pradesh – but as much as he dislikes Mayawati for her humble origins and 'lack of civilizational refinement' (*badtameez*), as he put it, her architecture nonetheless sparks his favourite pastime: thinking about the worlds' great statesmen. There were no Dalits in his list and few women, but an interesting collection of figures – and 'biggest of them all', he proclaimed, was Subhas Chandra Bose, militant Bengali freedom fighter and organizer of the 'Indian National Army'. It thus pains him that Mulayam

Singh Yadav, then head of the ruling Samajwadi Party and a former wrestler with substantial support among the Muslim lower castes, shares his nickname with Bose: Neta-Ji, 'respected leader'.

Part of his distaste for the politician stems from the fact that his partymen – 'illegal and anti-social elements' as Ahmad calls them – began to lodge themselves in the former gentleman's club at Rifah-e-Aam (Stark 2011; Susewind 2020); what used to be a 'symbol of Muslim pride' at the centre of our shared neighbourhood turned into utter decay under their watch, he complained. Nowadays he thus prefers a proper gym in the city's posher quarters for his workouts, and cannot fully approve of me continuing to play Badminton with small-scale gangsters at the club. Unlike I, the anthropologist, or Aasim, whom he met only once in an awkward encounter in front of my gate, he does not have to grease a local network; his upbringing and outlook, he confidently announced, would be much too international to depend on these kinds of local connection.

Talk of his childhood triggered our next stop: La Martiniere, a boarding school built by the eccentric Frenchman Claude Martin in the late eighteenth century. For decades, La Martiniere was a bastion of Anglo-Indian achievement, the only school ever awarded a medal for bravery by the British Empire. Still listed among the countries' finest private institutions, the schools' alumni include the last king of Nepal as well as Akhilesh Yadav, the Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh at the time and son of wrestler Mulayam Singh Yadav – and of course Ahmad himself. We left the car to sit on the riverbank behind the school grounds for a while; disappointed that neither me nor my friend cared for cold beer, Ahmad lighted a cigarette and began to philosophize about suicide – the school's watchtower, from which more than one student allegedly ended his life, stood right in front of us – leadership (Subhas Chandra Bose again), and history, always history.

History for instance proves, Ahmad was convinced, that religion became redundant in the modern world and only one religious figure truly inspires him: Zakir Nayak, a popular Indian preacher who prescribes a never-ending stream of moral check lists for the emerging middle classes in his 'Peace TV' satellite channel. But him, too, Ahmad appreciates for his seemingly lexical knowledge and apparent leadership qualities – not for his commandments, which he would frankly find too inconvenient to follow in everyday life.

While we drove to our final destination, a tea stall frequented mostly by journalists from closeby English media houses, our conversation turned more pedestrian again. La Martiniere provided Ahmad with a network and first international exposure, he explained, and instilled in him a strong desire to explore the world. Hence his constant schemes to work as an intern at a Swiss bank in London, Singapore or perhaps Honkong – not for money, but for exposure:

I wanted to go to London after my high school, but I just could not get through with it. I want to have a good international experience. One of the few good things Prophet Muhammad said: the extent of your knowledge depends on the amount of places you have visited. It's an eye-opener!

Yet Lucknow remains a place where great plans falter, and none of his ideas came to fruition so far. As Chambers (2018) writes about comparable young men in nearby Saharanpur: 'as quickly as [such plans] were established, so they could also be abandoned. A late train, bad weather, the return of an old friend, or just a change of heart could result in cancellation and even the return of only recently purchased tickets' (1436). Consequently, Ahmad experiences his current life as a drawn-out in-between, a kind of elongated adolescence that has become common across upper-middle-class India, and that is often intertwined with postponed migratory aspirations (Ali 2007). Unlike Aasim, for whom 'timepass' takes the form of incessant networking, however, Ahmad can afford to simply wait for the alumni network of La Martiniere to do its magic, transforming a yet undefined future into assured success.

With him, touring Lucknow and crossing the river into Ambedkar Park, eating at a street-food stall like Aasim's or sipping beer at La Martiniere thus never seemed restless. On the contrary: Ahmad was a rather dreamy figure, like in haze, swaying from history lesson to history lesson, randomly waking up to the disappointing fact that we were still stuck in present-day Lucknow, only to be consumed by

another detour. Unlike Aasim, Ahmad strongly feels at home in Lucknow – but his Lucknow is long gone, and in any case excludes many, particularly from lower economic strata. His loops through the neighbourhood were temporal more than spatial – and his Facebook stream remains full of nostalgia, interspersed with words of wisdom from the world's great leaders – and almost programmatically topped with a cover image, hovering above the timeline, that in 2011 read 'Touch the World 2012'. For Ahmad, the temporal limbo continues, while his international ambitions are, once more, postponed.

For the wider argument of this paper, Ahmad opens a contrast to Aasim: his yearning is not for elsewhere as much as it is for a different time, a time where his inherited entitlement can come to full fruition again. He too, however, plays out this yearning through micro-mobilities in particular spaces of the city – much more firmly crossing borders than Aasim did – and at particular times – the late evening. In addition to repeated micro-mobility however we also see another iteration of projected, fantasized, imagined mobility – and how this shapes Ahmad's unique figuration of belonging.

Ayaz

Ayaz finally, the third young man I'd like to introduce, neither restlessly aspires to migrate to Europe like Aasim, nor dreams of a past long gone like Ahmad, but lives firmly in the spatial here and temporal now. He hails from a family of middle-rank bureaucrats and went on to build Rocksford, Lucknow's most successful modern dance company, and the reason why he asked me to appear under his real name in this paper. Rocksford operates from a large top floor studio right opposite Islamia College at the brink of the old city, where Ayaz himself trains, offers classes to a vast variety of constituents, and organizes fashion shows, beauty pageants and 'afternoon clubbing events' not unlike the ones recently described by Sneha Krishnan for Chennai: a performative space for young, often college-going, boys and girls to explore their bodies through movement, and in the process 'world their city' (Krishnan 2019; cf. McCarthy 2017).

The spatial location of Rocksford between old and new Lucknow not only facilitates his business at the intersection of gendered and communal disadvantage on the one hand and aspirational 'shining India' on the other, though. It is also quite symbolic for Ayaz's own sense of belonging: his being Lucknowi and his being Muslim rests on ambiguous boundaries; he lives life on the edge and combines old and new in a rather idiosyncratic fashion. Again, though, this specific figuration of belonging is reinforced and expressed through practices of micro-mobility – in Ayaz's case through the embodied mobility of the dancer.

While Ayaz was born in Lucknow, the family soon moved to Kolkata and later on to Benares, where his father was posted as a railway officer. He returned to the city of his birth for a Bachelor in Computer Science at Lucknow University. When I asked him to rank his favourite places across town, he was one of the few people who mixed places in the old city and icons of new Lucknow (the list was topped, of course, by the Rocksford studio). In fact, Ayaz quite likes the creative in-between, sees little contradictions in his choices and even describes Mayawati's new architecture across the river as a modern reincarnation of Lucknowi *tehzeeb*, as a tolerant, multicultural and convivial space, where people mix across classes and religions, a place where he feels both less lonely and at ease, both embedded in Lucknow's cultural heritage and part of an emerging modern India:

I go there and sit, at times I sat for one or two hours. I plug my earphones in, hang in day dreams, plan the future, make calls or send text messages. It feels like I am at home [apne ghar me hu], surrounded by a diversity of people [har tarah ke log]: couples, husband and wife, boyfriend and girlfriend, from all kinds of backgrounds, good ones and poor ones. There, my loneliness disappears, and after some time, I am able to return to my studio more satisfied, with peace of mind. [zukun]

If Ayaz felt 'tension' (Gooptu and Krishnan 2017) in his life, they did not play out between the past, present and future (as perhaps for Ahmad) nor between the spaces of old Lucknow and distant lands (as perhaps for Aasim); his tensions rather stem from the fact that he had returned to the city to train

as an IT professional – but had always dreamt of forming his own dance troupe. As he recounted the humble first steps of what was to become Rocksford, he borrowed liberally from the repertoires of filmy self-made-man clichés: for years, he narrated, he used to walk to college on foot at ghastly early hours to save the six Rupees bus fare – again a specific and symbolically potent form of micro-mobility. Later in the day, he would sneak out of classes to practice the newest moves with his friends until the warden tracked them down. His father disapproved of his hobby for financial reasons, his pious mother for moral ones, so he had to keep Rocksford his very personal secret. But a year later, he was already so successful that his story featured on local radio shows and magazines; discovery seemed imminent. When he was invited to perform at the city's premier cultural festival, the story finally reached its climax: he invited his parents to the event, asked them on stage after his show and presented them with abundant flower bouquets; when he returned home late at night, his father stood in the door frame and asked him for his autograph. In Ayaz's memory, it was even raining mildly, though this seems a bit far-fetched given that the Mahotsav takes place in November – but Bollywood would be proud ...

That is not to say that his position on the edge between old and new wouldn't be challenging at times – to the contrary. When I asked Ayaz about religion, for instance, he countered with a play of words: 'Being a *musalman* means to be a *mukammal insan*, an accomplished human being; whoever has perfected his humanity is a Muslim' (on the desire to become 'a person with substance', cf. Dickey 2012). But how does one judge perfection, I pressed further? Ayaz's reply is worth quoting en block:

It's natural that I am Muslim and proud to be a Muslim. But there are some things that have been forbidden in my Islam, such as my work: it's a dance. Dance and any types of performing art – such things have been called forbidden in Islam. [...] The point is if I dance, then this is forbidden in Islam. So why do I do it nonetheless? I think about it this way: [...] If I dance today, if I became a dancer, then because it comes out of my body [which means] that in some way or another, Allah has created me this way. Allah has equipped my body with such energy, has planted such an urge inside me, and such a stubbornness to go my way, that it became my destiny [kismet]. But how can it be wrong then? [...] I am not a thief, I do not deceive people, I earn my bread in legitimate ways. I made a name for myself in this city, am considered an accomplished person [*mukammal insan*]. And if my work were nonetheless sinful, then [I can only say] 'Oh God, I petition you, bend my trajectory, so that I leave this path on which you have put me but that is forbidden according to your rules.'

His embodied intentions were pure, Ayaz argued, his choices the outcome of consideration rather than rush, and almost predestined by God himself – so how could it be un-Islamic that he follows his very nature? God has created him as the dancer that he is, and he merely follows his calling, becoming an accomplished person precisely through bodily movement. In Ayaz, we thus discover a final, and most intimate, instance in which micro-mobility fosters a specific figuration of (Muslim) belonging – and an interesting spiritual contrast to work that primarily emphasize the role of embodied practices in the moulding together of reformist/orthopractical piety and entrepreneurial self (e.g., Chambers 2020; Osella and Osella 2008).

Implications

Aasim wants to leave Lucknow but can't afford to migrate, Ahmad could leave but doesn't get his act together, while Ayaz is happy with his liminal position as the city's leading modern dancer, which he interprets as God-gifted. What do I take from these and similar conversations about work and love, longing and belonging, religion and business in Lucknow – and what do I take from all the small steps that so strongly contrast the big routes dreamt of?

The absence of large-scale migration in these admittedly stylized trajectories allows us to see what I have called micro-mobilities: practices like restlessly cruising through the *mohalla*, crossing the river to enjoy the architecture of Ambedkar park or La Martiniere, dancing on stage. It seems to me that precisely these practices of micro-mobility – the looping through space and time – account for the different figurations of belonging experienced by Aasim, Ahmad and Ayaz: one escapes today's pressures into dreams of distant lands; one whiles away time, identifying with the 'great men' of history; one lives and dances on the edge no matter what, as an expression of

accomplished Muslimness. Rather than just reading their mobilities as lacking of large-scale migration, and hence their lives as lacking the cosmopolitan potential they so much aspire to embody, I join Chambers (2018) in highlighting how ‘imagining departure, going elsewhere, returning, and imagining again form a constant process in which the self is crafted and re-crafted and through which more collective visions are forged and re-forged’ (1424). The belonging of Aasim, Ahmad and Ayaz is never a given, it remains an iterative process in which restless micro-mobilities and aspirational dreams are as instrumental as their (occasional) realization.

Besides the smaller scale, more mundane, less directional – in short: ‘looping’ (Bissell 2013) – nature of their micro-mobilities in Lucknow, I also brought into sharp focus some of the ambivalences of how Aasim, Ahmad and Ayaz belong to the city. As argued in the introduction, literature on belonging often emphasizes a sense of commonality over difference, inclusion over exclusion, attachment over alienation (Pfaff-Czarnecka 2012). If people feel they lack commonality, are excluded, and unattached to the spaces they inhabit we quickly deduct that they don’t belong. But Lucknow, the space and history through which Aasim, Ahmad and Ayaz loop, is where their longing and belonging is forged – even their longing to escape. While dropping the normative and fixed spatial references from mobilities research – as Bissell argued we should – we might thus also reduce some of the stronger normative assumptions in studies of belonging, allowing for more breathing space and ambivalence while still acknowledging the looping *mechanism* through which belonging is forged.

Finally, the potential of micro-mobility to shape belonging also points beyond the immediate context of Lucknow as well – for three reasons. For one, many people are like Aasim, Ahmad and Ayaz in that they largely stay where they are – most people have become more mobile, but still on a small scale (Larsen 2014). Secondly, even the mobility of those who do migrate to far-away places does not end there – and it is worth asking to what extent their sense of belonging might depend on experiences and spatial practices post-arrival rather than on their migration as such (Fauser 2012). Thirdly, micro-mobilities remind us of the specific potency of cities to make people feel at home as well as out of place – Aasim, Ahmad and Ayaz need a river to cross, a stage to dance on, a municipal park to ride through. Hence there is a case for researching how micro-mobilities across urban space influence people’s sense of commonality and difference, reciprocity and discrimination, affinity and detachment – in short: how looping micro-mobilities shape our sense of belonging.

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