



IN THE ERA OF INVOLUNTARY IMMOBILITY...?
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When I ended the preliminary title of my new book project with the phrase “... in the era of involuntary immobility,” I did not know that the phrase would resonate with the kinds of jet-setting academics gathered at Wiko, myself included. Wiko takes pride not only in the multidisciplinary of its intellectual community, but also in its transcontinental and

transoceanic coverage, notwithstanding the limitations imposed by language – i.e., English as a lingua franca. Dealing with the infrastructure of international travels that buttress this carefully manicured diversity is usually left to the backstage work of Wiko's competent staff. To be sure, past Fellows from the Global South or fleeing authoritarian regimes must have been intimately familiar with the anxieties and indignities accompanying international travels. But I suspect that it has not been the talk of the town in most other years.

Not anymore in our year, people! We often started our first hallway and lunch table introductions by recounting the travail of getting out and getting in. Some had to cope with the unprecedented exit ban of their home country that has long boasted solid liberal democratic credentials (a nod to Madeleine and Ben). Others had to grapple with the reputational dive of their home country, which found itself on the receiving end of sweeping travel bans due to its uniquely messed-up response to the pandemic (a nod to many colleagues from the U.S.). As an academic calling the U.S. my second home, I should have been one of them, were it not for my South Korean passport that offered me a temporary refuge in the summer of 2020, where life continued with some semblance of normalcy with the daily case numbers hovering around just two digits. Alas, South Korea's suspension of visa waivers for German passport holders led to the reciprocal measure from the German government and the red tape set up by its embassy in Seoul. Those who could not arrive on time like us due to visa complications and flight cancellations were the colleagues from South Africa, Argentina, and Bangladesh (winks to Shamil, Marcelo, Wasif, and Reetu). The global pandemic offset the privilege they had enjoyed as internationally recognized academics and artists despite their "weak" passports. Many of us had to experience prolonged separation from family and significant others – although the severity of that separation varied, depending on how the global pandemic reshuffled and reinforced entrenched inequality in cross-border mobility.

Involuntary immobility also sharply captures the progressively stringent lockdown that we came to experience throughout the long and dark Berlin winter. Travel plans were cancelled; external engagements took place only on screen; and it was not us but the car carrying our lunch boxes that shuffled between Villa Linde and Villa Walther regularly. To a degree, involuntary immobility brought us together intellectually and socially. The Decameron analogy hit close to home, with the proliferation of various workshops centered on particular disciplines (e.g. biology, sociology, philosophy, early modern Europeanists, etc.), yet welcoming curious outsiders. Looking forward to Tuesday Colloquia

and Three Cultures Forums was expected. But who knew that conversing in my broken German with Marcelo, Reetu, and Wasif in our absolute beginner German class would give me such a joy! Under Ursula's kind guidance, we complained about the sun that failed to shine again ("die Sonne scheint nicht!"), shared the delight of a long "Spaziergang" taken in the middle of Grunewald, and dreamed about the day that we could finally practice our restaurant conversation skills and order legendary "Kartoffelpuffer" (for the record, during my year at Wiko, I ate as much "Kartoffeln" as I would have consumed in three years!).

While the weekly Wiko dinner disappeared, we organized occasional potluck gatherings and movie nights, mostly, if not always (wink wink), adhering to constantly changing Covid restrictions. And of course, there were long walks and bike rides to numerous lakes around Grunewald, various neighborhoods in Berlin and Potsdam, and well-known and little-known memorials and cemeteries dotting the city of Berlin – the journeys that Sung Ho and I documented religiously on the Berlin map we purchased from Bücherbogen at Savignyplatz. Serious conversations about intellectual and political matters at these informal gatherings (most consistently, how to reckon with the politics of race as scientists and citizens of the universities and beyond) generated a string of email exchanges in the following days and, at times, Three Cultures Forum sessions on related themes. But I would as fondly remember more "frivolous" conversations, like Christel's joke about taciturn Finns, Andreas's experience of a poetry class, Hakan and Ugur's story of dancing to "Gangnam Style," Erika's comparison of Korean and Korean-American films, Corinna's aspiration to wear Julia Roberts' *Pretty Woman* hairstyle back in the day, and Magdalena's "agony" about what to wear for her habilitation. Most importantly, without the generous and warm friendship of Alex, Ève, and Shamil – the food, drinks, outings, whining, and laughs we shared throughout the lockdown winter and beyond – my memory of Berlin would have turned out to be a lot bleaker.

That I was able to turn involuntary immobility into the time to hunker down and get some writing done was a rare privilege. Even inside Wiko, colleagues who were the parents of young children, among others, were not allowed this luxury, due to school closure. The thoughtful feedback from Andreas (on Catholic indulgence) and Harel (on ethnographic methods) helped me complete the revision of an article, "Between Sacred Gift and Profane Exchange: Identity Craft and Relational Work in Asylum Claims-Making on Religious Grounds," published in *Theory and Society*. The Wiko Sociologist Workshop offered a platform through which I could develop another article, preliminarily titled

“From Masquerade to Metamorphosis: Law, Self-Making, and Future-Making in Asylum-Seeking on Religious Grounds.” In particular, Bénédicte expanded my understanding of the capability approach; Ève introduced me to the concept of “ethno-accounting”; and Sung Ho and Michel brought Weber’s famous church/sect distinction to bear on my ethnographic findings. Furthermore, Stefan Gellner at the Wiko library helped me identify an amazing list of materials, including those in German, that expanded my theoretical and comparative understanding of my case. These two articles form the core chapters of my new book in progress, preliminarily titled *Logics of Redemption: Migration, Asylum, and Religion in the Era of Involuntary Immobility*. The preparation for my Tuesday Colloquium in late January helped me figure out the book’s basic narrative structure. The engaging discussion that followed further helped me situate my case in multiple comparative contexts. The topics of discussion included the different configurations of Church-State relations between Germany and the U.S. (thanks to Konrad, Michael, and Dieter), different understandings of the authentic religious self between early modern Europe and the contemporary U.S. (Barbara, Nadine, and Konrad), and similarities and differences among various performances of deservingness often required of immigrants (Ella and Robert). My conversation with Jan and Thorsten also pushed me to think more deeply about the question of temporality, law, and religious conversion. While I generally avoided external engagements, the portrait of my work published in *Köpfe und Ideen* (thank you Katharina!) led to an opportunity to give a book talk at Vrije Universiteit in Amsterdam, at the invitation of Prof. Pál Nyiri, a former Wiko Fellow and a renowned anthropologist of Chinese migration.

The last month in Berlin was unbelievably beautiful and memorable. The daily lunches and weekly dinners returned to the patio, which we embraced with a renewed appreciation for the co-presence of fellow human beings. (This may also explain why the farewell party turned into “the night of the nerd dance revenge”...) I also managed to visit many museums, Berlin Phil performances, and operas, alone or together with colleagues whom I can now call friends. Looking back, there is something poetic about the fact that “involuntary immobility” and the intellectual and social life that nonetheless blossomed came to characterize our year in the city of Berlin. As a migration scholar, though, I wonder if the urge to romanticize should be resisted. The global mobility regimes that sustained our privilege while producing discontents and miseries somewhere else are shifting beneath our feet in the aftermath – or are we still very much in the middle of it...? – of the global pandemic.