



University of Iowa

International Writing Program Archive of Residents' Work

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Exodus

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Panel: Right to Remove, Right to Refuge

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Our earliest ancestors, it is said, all left Africa and headed north, Moses, it is said, left Egypt and headed east; Einstein left Europe and headed west, and the ancestors of Borges also abandoned Europe for South America. Even the camels that have come to be identified with the Arabian Desert are believed to have actually originated in the coldest areas of North America. As for the art of the novel, considered quintessentially European, one has only to read Giovanni Boccaccio's "Decameron," written around 1353, to ascertain the influence of Arabic narration techniques. None of this is new to us, and only serves as a reminder that, from the beginning of time, migration has often saved us from perishing of hunger and thirst, or at the hands of other equally pernicious forces.

Wherever they go, humans have taken their creations with them. Seven thousand-year-old tombs discovered in Egypt revealed wares brought over from the Levant and from Ethiopia. Thirteen centuries before Jean de La Fontaine wrote his tales featuring pithy wisdom expressed by animals, some of those same stories had been told in the Hindu *Kalila wa Dimna* and could be found in Ancient Egypt. As people and objects migrate, so do ideas.

Our topic today is that of the emigration of citizens to more developed countries, one that is closely connected to the current, hotly debated refugee crisis. I've written an entire novel (*Noah's Ark*, published in 2009) on the exodus of Egyptians in the recent past, but rather than spend this time doing what I most enjoy—telling you some of those stories—I prefer to discuss a few ideas related to today's topic.

Nothing is more revealing of thought patterns than the terms coined and the language used to express them; a good starting place, therefore, would be some of the terminology commonly employed when discussing immigration.

Illegal immigration (prohibited by the Islamic Law, Sharia):

This pejorative term—ILLEGAL—is closely tied to economically deprived individuals who risk their lives by braving the waters of the Mediterranean in fragile boats.

Migrating birds:

An older term, more commonly used in reference to the educated middle classes. It evokes affection as well as giving the impression that the birds will return once their season of migration has come to an end.

Brain drain migration:

Arab politicians often refer to the danger of losing capable citizens to other countries, which go on to benefit from the skills that their own governments invested time and effort into developing.

Hard currency:

Countries like Egypt, Morocco and Syria heavily rely on the remittances of their workers abroad as a source of hard currency—another way of referring to the dollar and euro, alluding to the difficulty of acquiring the currencies used to pay for imports. In Egypt's case, sources of hard currency are limited to the tourism industry, activities related to the Suez Canal, and foreign remittances, which render the emigration of workers of vital necessity.

More to reflect on:

Population issues:

As the average age in developed countries rises, and dips in those with less auspicious conditions (in 2015 the average age in Germany was 46.5 years, while in Senegal it was 18.5), and as the gap in living conditions continues to grow, new migration movements are expected to eclipse those heading towards the Americas in the nineteenth century. This is opposed to the rhetoric in receiving societies—in fact, the latter cannot survive without immigrants.

Arguments I've recently heard being voiced in Arab countries:

-Governments have failed to generate employment opportunities; over fifty percent of young people in the twenty to thirty-five age group are unemployed. After having spent ten years without a job, what is one expected to do?

-Futile death comes at us from all directions: from train accidents and those taking place on school expeditions, by drowning from Nile barges, and under the effect of stray bullets carelessly shot by the police. How can we live in peace when we are constantly subjected to a futility that surpasses even Eugene Ionesco's?

-Education is in constant decline. How can we form families when we know we won't be able to educate our children? The only solution is to leave.

A final thought:

If migration has lasted as long as mankind, it is most unlikely to cease now. Governments may try to block the arrival of immigrants and to shut refugees out, but the movement of persons shall prevail. It is, rather, national boundaries and the concept of the nation-state that will disappear.