

Immobility Phases

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This paper advances the concept of *immobility phases* to capture the transitory, often precarious conditions experienced by individuals facing constrained mobility. Reframing (im)mobilities experiences through this lens highlights how people endure prolonged displacement, forced stagnation, and layered vulnerabilities, both physical and cognitive, while striving toward their intended destinations or preference. It argues that immobility is not merely the absence of movement but comprises active, temporally embedded phases shaped by structural constraints (such as migration policies and legal statuses), alongside intersectional inequalities, war, insecurities, climate crises, psychological hardship, and material deprivation. Drawing on secondary data, this conceptual paper situates *immobility phases* within the broader migration narratives. The paper moves away from dominant approaches focusing on mobility processes by foregrounding the concept of *immobility phases*, which captures the non-linear, disrupted, or often incomplete trajectories that emerge during attempted movement, en-route, pre-departure, non-departure or return. This paper introduces *immobility phases* as a critical concept that challenges the prevailing ‘mobility bias’ and binary framings of mobility and immobility to suggest a more reflexive understanding of (im)mobility in the context of climate (im)mobilities and violent conflict within migration studies.

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Introduction

Within migration studies, mobility processes have received greater attention from researchers than those related to immobility. A key area of focus has been the decision-making phases that shape migration trajectories. These include the *pre-decisional phase*, when migration is being considered; the *preactional phase*, covering the period of actual planning; and the *actional phase*, when steps are taken to realise migratory goals (Kley 2011 p. 472). Closely related but analytically distinct are the three thresholds that must be reached before mobility occurs. These include the *mental threshold*, when the individual prepares mentally to move; the *locational threshold*, which involves selecting a destination; and the *trajectory threshold*, which entails identifying the routes to reach that destination (Van Naerssen & Van der Velde 2015; van der Velde & van Naerssen 2011).

Though these phases and thresholds may suggest a linear process, structural constraints, such as migration policies, legal statuses, border regimes, and institutional discrimination (Haugen 2012; Iranzo 2021a; Kingston & Ekakitie 2024; Schapendonk 2008), as well as environmental crises and violent conflicts (Farbotko & McMichael 2019; Niemi 2020; Yee et al. 2022) can prevent individuals from actualising their intended or optimal destinations as planned or desired. While many studies have explored the experiences of those affected by such constraints, there has been little attempt to organise these experiences of immobility into categories. Such a classification could help foreground how the *phases* (Kley 2011) and *thresholds* (Van Naerssen & Van der Velde 2015; van der Velde & van Naerssen 2011) do not always lead to movement in a linear or intended manner. Thus, there is no precise classification of immobility experiences comparable to the established phases and thresholds used to explain mobility. This conceptual paper addresses this research opportunity by proposing a typology of ‘immobility phases’, which captures the non-linear, disrupted, or incomplete trajectories that emerge during attempted movement, post-arrival barriers, and return.

Immobility phases can be broadly described as migratory phases that may exist at home or in other locations, where individuals reside under precarious conditions at times, unable to reach their optimal destination or remain in their preferred place of residence permanently, and thus persist in pursuing the actualisation of their migratory aspirations. These stages may be temporary or prolonged and are influenced by migration policies, bordering practices, personal circumstances, and adverse environmental and socio-political conditions (Antwi Bosiakoh 2019; Bamidele 2021; J. Berriane 2020; Düvell 2006; Mallick et al. 2022; Rothe et al. 2024;

Suliman et al. 2019). Such realities and adversities often lead people to engage in crisis migration as a response to crisis, placing them on the path to entering immobility phases. Crisis migration refers to (im)mobility in response to a crisis – not crisis as merely an event but as cumulative pressures (McAdam 2013) viewed through the humanitarian lens (Martin et al. 2013). The ‘immobility phases’ aim to bring together the lived experiences of individuals as they prepare for, strive toward, arrive at, or return from their intended destinations.

This paper contributes to migration studies by introducing immobility phases as a critical concept that challenges the prevailing mobility bias and calls for moving beyond binary divisions between mobility and immobility. This conceptual contribution presents a more reflexive understanding of immobility as comprising non-linear ‘phases’ or ‘thresholds’ that do not always align with the intended expectations of individuals who aim to move or have already embarked on their journey. It foregrounds the experiences of those who have not yet actualised their migratory goals and are ‘stuck’ between their present situation and aspired destinations or immobility preferences. Their situation is framed not as a mere absence of movement but as an active effort that can be shaped by temporally embedded phases, structural constraints, intersectional inequalities, racism, material deprivation, environmental adversities, war, and insecurity.

The subsequent sections will examine the prevailing focus on mobility alongside attempts to characterise phases of immobility, which remain disjointed compared to the greater conceptual clarity given to mobility processes. This discussion will be followed by the conceptualisation of immobility phases, drawing on empirical studies conducted in Libya, China, The Gambia, and elsewhere, within which the three immobility phases will be discussed. The discussion will then advocate moving beyond existing approaches to framing immobility by embracing the cognitive turn, supporting the exploration and understanding of migratory experiences through a more reflexive lens that captures the fluid, contingent, and disrupted patterns of mobility and immobility during crisis migration. And finally, the conclusion.

Disrupted Pathways: Crisis Migration and the Mobility Bias

There is a more focus on movement than on staying put in migration studies. This is referred to as mobility bias in migration studies (Schewel 2020). The bias results in the focus on all aspects of movement and mobility whereas those related to immobility are overlooked (Schewel 2020; Smets 2019; Stockdale & Haartsen 2018). Immobility can be experienced by

those who are already on the move. Haugen (2012 p. 66) notes that individuals who have moved abroad can experience a ‘second state of immobility’.

Haugen’s (2012, p. 66) concept of the ‘second state of immobility’, describes ‘... the situation of people who have managed to emigrate, but end up becoming spatially entrapped in new ways in the destination countries’. The ‘second state of immobility’ (Haugen, 2012), could be described as the immobility experiences of people outside the borders of their country of nativity or usual place of abode, who are yet to reach their optimal destination (see, Ahrens 2013; Antwi Bosiakoh 2019; Gross-Wyrtzen 2020; Iranzo 2021a; Veale & Andres 2014).

Similar to Haugen’s (2012) ‘second state of immobility’, Schapendonk (2008) introduced the concept of immobility phases. Schapendonk used this term to describe the transit phase during which migratory trajectories can be shaped, redefined, or altered, often while individuals are en route to their desired destinations. According to Schapendonk (2008, p.141), ‘... for a considerable group of migrants, the transit phase still means a waiting period in which the next stop of their journey is arranged.’ This immobility phase involves three main dimensions: the length of immobility and its underlying causes, the places where migrants remain and how they survive, and the influence of the transit stage on shaping or altering migration aspirations (Schapendonk, 2008, p.134). Schapendonk also used terms such as ‘transit migration’, ‘stranded migration’ and ‘step-by-step migration’ to describe trajectories shaped by the circumstances migrants’ experience. There have been studies on transit migration and those involved in it (see, Düvell 2006; Icduygu 2005; Ivakhniouk 2004; Papadopoulou 2005), but a detailed discussion of this concept falls beyond the scope of this paper.

Considering the focus on the immobility experiences of those who have crossed the borders or on the move, it could be argued that more studies focus on the immobility experiences of individuals who have crossed the borders. ‘This suggests that the “mobility bias” (Schewel 2020 p. 332) that highlights migration issues over immobility issues is mirrored in immobility studies by a bias favoring “immobility experiences abroad” over those within Nigeria’ (Olumba 2024 p. 484). This focus on immobility experienced abroad, however, reflects a conceptual gap. Thus, despite being coined years ago, Haugen’s term ‘second state of immobility’ is incomplete as it overlooks the preceding processes of immobility that could be experienced at home; where immobility could be a preference or people acquiesce to remain (Olumba 2023a; Schewel 2020).

Drawing on the extant literature, it can be argued that ‘diaspora immobility experiences’ are not the only lived experiences that can be characterised as part of an immobility phase. Immobility can occur across borders and within one’s own home, exemplified by the ‘nerves syndrome’ (Conrad Suso 2022) or active immobility (Robins 2022a), or it can exist entirely within the mind. Although many studies have captured these experiences (see, Carling 2001; Gaibazzi 2012; Jónsson 2012; Mallick et al. 2022; McMichael et al. 2021a; Rothe et al. 2024; Schewel & Fransen 2018; Suliman et al. 2019), a coherent typology remains lacking to integrate the broader range of immobility experiences more systematically.

According to Schapendonk (2008, p.141), ‘... the transit phase is not always a waiting period; it is rather an indefinite period of insecurity’. Therefore, such experiences involves precarious circumstances and exposure to perilous situations (see, Gross-Wyrtzen 2020; Iranzo 2021), which can be understood as occurring within the context of *crisis migration*. Crisis migration can be defined ‘(...) as a response to a complex combination of social, political, economic, and environmental factors, which may (or may not) be *triggered* by an extreme event, but not caused by it’ (McAdam 2013 p. 14 italics in original). This definition recognises the agency of migrants as they respond to environmental and structural contextual realities within their communities.

A definition that adduces a latent but critical aspect of crisis migration states that the term is

(...) intended to encompass the diverse forms of movements and non-movements – situations in which people become trapped – that occur in the context of humanitarian crises, while “crisis migrants” is intended to refer to all those who move or remain trapped in such contexts (Martin et al. 2013 p. 125).

This definition is unique because it explicitly brings into the understanding of crisis migration the notion that not everyone moves during crises; however, unlike contemporary understandings of non-movement or immobility, the definition described those who do not move as ‘trapped’ people and movers were termed ‘crisis migrants’. It is not only those categorised as ‘trapped population’ (Ayeb-Karlsson 2020; Black et al. 2013; McMichael et al. 2021b) that do not move during a crisis, but there are many others who decide and prefers to ‘stay in place’ – adopting voluntary immobility – rather than to move or flee (Carling, 2001; Mata-Codesal, 2018; Schewel, 2020). A recent study corroborated that some individuals persist in their locations during crisis migration, asserting that ‘... not every crisis results in a crisis

migration; in fact, many crises do not result in a large-scale movement of people' (Salas-Wright et al. 2021 p. 594). Consequently, while some persons experience *forced migration* as such may be *forced* to flee during a crisis, others may feel compelled to remain in their current location, while some may choose to remain despite adverse conditions (Olumba 2024; Schewel 2020).

Some scholars have called for migration studies to move beyond the forced–voluntary binary (Bartram 2015; Robins 2022b). The term *crisis migration* could serve as a conceptual framework that helps mitigate the over-reliance on this dichotomy by allowing the migratory process to be analysed without forcing it into either category. Instead, emphasis is placed on the structural constraints people face, as well as people's agency and actions in response to the conditions around them.

This argument aligns with the advocacy for redefining the agency of social actors in crises, including those who do not meet the conventional refugee definition (Bartram, 2015; Robins, 2022). Scholars have even rejected the idea of distinguishing between forced and voluntary migration from empirical and analytical standpoints, as well as for administrative convenience and purposes (Bartram 2015 p. 440; Erdal & Oeppen 2018 p. 982; De Haas 2010 p. 18). Robins (2022 p. 28) questioned the distinction between 'voluntary' and 'involuntary' immobility, arguing that 'freedom of choice' and 'voluntariness' should be treated as separate concepts. Through the lens of crisis migration, immobility can be viewed not as a linear experience but as one shaped by structural constraints, as well as by people's agency and actions in response to those constraints (Olumba 2025a), often resulting in disrupted pathways as they strive toward unrealised migratory goals.

Thus, although attempts have been made to categorise immobility experiences in places of origin and the diaspora, these efforts remain fragmented and lack the conceptual clarity found in mobility models, such as those developed by Van der Velde and van Naerssen (2011, 2015) and Kley (2011), which offer structured analyses of movement. No equivalent framework currently exists for immobility. The introduction of *immobility phases* offers a meaningful counterpart, capturing the disrupted and non-linear realities that shape many migratory trajectories. The concept of immobility phases also helps challenge the mobility bias, especially in the context of climate (im)mobilities and violent conflict, by further illuminating the experiences of those often described in the literature as 'left behind', 'stuck', or 'invisible' (see, Chatty & Marfleet 2013; Regasa & Lietaert 2022; Xiang et al. 2022)

Conceptualising 'Immobility Phases'

Political violence, war, climate change, adverse climatic conditions, deprivations, hardships (Ibáñez & Vélez 2008; Lubkemann 2008; Olumba 2023a; Sheller & Urry 2006; Vélez-Echeverri 2023) widely known as factor that interact with personal conditions to influence mobility as well as immobility (Mata-Codesal 2015; Morse & Mudgett 2018); the structural constraints such as migration policies, legal status, policies, bordering practices (Atar et al. 2023; Flahaux & De Haas 2016; de Haas 2008) could further shapes people's migratory experiences, most often when people cross borders (Haugen 2012). When this occurs, individuals may find themselves in prolonged limbo or *immobility phases*, unable to realise their migratory aspirations.

The *immobility phases* can be defined as a set of ephemeral migratory circumstances and experiences that unfold in distinguishable stages, often characterised by periods of continued residence, either at home or in other locations, with temporary or precarious status, rather than in the intended destination or preferred place of residence. These conditions compel individuals to persist in their efforts to realise their optimal migratory aspirations. Within these phases we can find those who aspire to migrate, those already engaged in the process, those in transit, or those who have reached an alternative destination. The phases are shaped by individual circumstances as well as structural constraints, both at home and abroad. In other words, by the aspirations and capabilities (Schewel 2020) of the individuals involved and, more critically, by structural factors that constrain or enable such processes. One may move from one phase to another or even return to a previous one. These shifts often involve changes in movement, legal status, life conditions, or place of residence and may be marked by hardship, frustration, or moments of progress.

Immobility phases, then, refers to changeable or static migratory situations that unfold in distinguishable stages, often marked by periods of residence, either at home or in other locations, with temporary or precarious status. The phases reflect conditions in which individuals are unable to reach their desired destinations or remain in their preferred place of residence permanently and are therefore compelled to persist in pursuing their migratory aspirations.

Immobility Phases during Crisis

The *first* immobility phase can be described as the type of immobility that people experience at home or within the national borders of their country. It could be immobility at the IDP camps, the host community or home (Conrad Suso 2020; Kamta et al. 2020; Ogbozor 2016; Shehu &

Abba 2020; Yikwab & Tade 2021). What could be described as the *second* immobility phase relates to Haugen's (2012, p. 66) concept of the 'second state of immobility', as previously discussed. Thus, the *second* immobility phase refers to the immobility experiences of those who have moved across international borders, specifically, those whose immobility occurs outside their country of origin or place of habitual residence. The *third* immobility phase involves ephemeral migratory circumstances characterised not by physical stasis but by cognitive dimensions of immobility.

First Immobility Phase

It is important to acknowledge that people can experience immobility at home, either by choice or involuntarily (Carling 2002; Morse & Mudgett 2018). Numerous studies in Pacific Island States, Ethiopia, Cape Verde, Colombia and elsewhere have documented immobility in one's home or primary place of abode (see, Carling 2001; Hermann & Kempf 2017; McNamara et al. 2021; Schewel & Fransen 2020; Vélez-Echeverri 2023). However, Conrad Suso's (2020) concept of *nerves syndrome* stands out as a way to describe the manifestation of immobility within the home, particularly when shaped by aspirations for mobility. A situation of unfulfilled aspirations can lead to *nerves syndrome*, a feeling of entrapment and frustration experienced by youths in The Gambia, marked by constant daydreaming about migrating to Europe and returning as a success story (Conrad Suso 2022). According to Conrad Suso (2022 p. 189), 'One of the common types of representation of the nerves syndrome in the Gambia is a youth 'just sitting' all day, continuously thinking about Europe or North America, and progressively alienating himself from the surrounding environment'. This situation is a classic case of involuntary immobility. Other aspects of immobility at home may be voluntary (Mata-Codesal 2015), even in contexts marked by adverse climatic conditions or violence (Nahin et al. 2022; Olumba 2024), or may involve situations where people acquiesce to staying put (Higazi 2022; de Montclos 2020). These experiences, among others, fall within the first immobility phase.

Some individuals acquiesce to remaining in certain locations due to various constraints or the absence of key capabilities (Schewel 2020), while others actively choose to remain, even in conflict-affected communities, drawing on their agency and resources, such as violent resistance, intangible assets, and cultural tools to sustain their immobility in adversity (Blocq 2014; Jentsch & Masullo 2022; Olumba 2025a), which relates to *active immobility* (Robins 2022a, 2022b).

Individuals can move from one immobility phase to another. For instance, someone who was initially involuntarily immobilised in The Gambia may overcome the *nerves syndrome* by migrating to a new destination. However, if they return – voluntarily or otherwise – with unfulfilled aspirations, they may re-enter the *nerves syndrome*, thus shifting back and forth between the first and second immobility phases.

Second Immobility Phase

Many studies have documented the experiences of people on the move who have crossed international borders and become ‘stuck’, whether en route to their intended destination or in locations outside their country that are not their optimal destination and unable to complete their migratory aspirations. In his study, Haugen (2012 p. 66), described how some Nigerians escaped ‘involuntary immobility’ in Nigeria and migrated to Guangzhou, China, only to become ‘spatially entrapped in new ways in the destination countries’, entering what he termed the ‘second state of immobility’. Thus, after escaping the first immobility phase, those Nigerians moved into the second immobility phase.

Schapendonk’s use of the term, *immobility phases*, refers to only one aspect of immobility as outlined in this paper, what is defined here as the second immobility phase, and does not account for the full range of phases proposed. Unlike Schapendonk (2008), the focus here is not only on the three dimensions he identifies (duration, causes, survival strategies, and shifting aspirations) which may appear across all three immobility phases discussed in this paper, but on developing a typology that organises these phases into analytically distinct categories for clearer understanding and analysis. Schapendonk’s (2008) focus was on migrants crossing the Sahara Desert en route to Europe through Morocco. For decades, the Maghreb region, particularly areas that serve as crossing points into Europe, has been not only a transit zone or a site of the second immobility phase but also a territory of death and hardship for those who dare to enter.

According to several reports, it has been estimated that about 40,000 people have died attempting to cross into Europe through the Mediterranean Sea (Hintjens 2022; Nabil 2022). This figure, cited as the death toll for crossings over more than two decades (see, Di Pascale 2010), likely underestimates the accurate scale, considering subsequent events such as the Syrian migration crisis (Atar et al. 2023) and recent economic crises in West Africa (the primary sending region) and other parts of the world, which have driven more people to use this route

to enter Europe. It is possible that the number of deaths now exceeds 40,000, which is comparable to the entire population of countries like Monaco or Liechtenstein.

According to Düvell (2006 p. 19), transit migration is characterised by a temporary stay in a location other than the intended destination and the continued efforts to actualise migratory goals despite being ‘stuck’. These conditions also resonate with the circumstances experienced by individuals in the second immobility phase. This phase is mostly associated with ‘involuntary immobility’; however, the experiences of many who are ‘stuck’ in various cities across North Africa, especially in Libya, do not fit this description but rather align with modern-day slavery. Many of these individuals are not only entrapped but sold for amounts ranging from \$150 to \$350 or exchanged as commodities (Asongu & Kodila-tedika 2018). This trade in human beings is ongoing in countries like Libya in 2025.

Third Immobility Phase

Immobility does not consist only of physical dimensions. Salazar (2021 p. 11), citing Ouellet & Rush (1992), states that ‘... the concept of immobility—as having not only physical but also important emotional, intellectual, and social aspects ...’. These emotional and intellectual aspects of immobility can be described as relating to the cognitive dimensions of immobility. According to Düvell (2006), there are individuals who experience a ‘mentally transitory process’. These individuals are in transit or positioned between stages of a longer migration project, yet their experiences reflect a mental state of transition rather than physical movement (Düvell 2006 p. 18). This ‘mentally transitory process’ could be seen as relating more to the cognitive dimensions of being in transit than to the physical aspects. It is such individuals who can rightly be understood as fitting into the cognitive dimensions of immobility when their experience moves beyond a ‘mentally transitory process’ and reflects cognitive immobilisation elsewhere, rather than in their present location.

Thus, the third immobility phase relates to aspects of immobility that concern being immobilised within the mind rather than physically. Recent studies have begun to explore this area by introducing the concept of cognitive immobility, which, according to Olumba (2023b p. 772), entails ‘... a stressful feeling of mental entrapment that causes a conscious or unconscious effort to relive past episodes in places one lived or visited in the past to reclaim what one may be missing or left behind’. In this case, the mind is entrapped elsewhere despite physical movement, meaning that the challenge of an unrealised migratory goal and its associated struggles lies within the mind; thus, it reflects a cognitive dimension of immobility.

In another study, Olumba et al. (2024) posit that such immobility can occur through ‘persistent re-experience and reconstruction of past events or life experiences’, ‘mental immobilisation to the past’, and a ‘disrupted sense of identity and home’. Cognitive immobility may result from traumatic, memorable, or enduring life experiences (Olumba et al., 2024) and culminate in stressful psychological conditions that, if left unaddressed, could lead to serious illness (Olumba 2023b; Swaim 2022). These psychological struggles help explain how individuals can enter the third immobility phase.

Those who enter this immobility phase can include individuals who have travelled from one place to another, or whose life transitions involve traumatic experiences such as war, displacement, divorce, bereavement, or the emotional impact of leaving a loved one or a cherished place (Olumba 2022). An example is the story of a U.S. Army major and chaplain who, despite physically leaving the battlefield, felt cognitively entrapped in it. According to Olumba (2025b), the soldier stated, “Even though I was home, I never left the battlefield. I brought the war home, and it took a toll on me, my family, wife, and children”. Thus, the soldier was not physically entrapped in the battlefield but remained mentally tied to it, which created serious challenges for him in moving forward with life.

When it is considered that mobility and immobility are relatable (Mata-Codesal 2015; Salazar 2021), it can be argued that individuals may move from one immobility phase to another, or toward an aspired goal, which could either be a destination that is the ‘second best option’ (Berriane et al. 2015) or the optimal destination, depending on which occurs first. Under certain circumstances, individuals may develop a condition of metaphorical homelessness (Olumba 2023b), which relates to cognitive immobility. Braun & Clarke (2019 p. 592) Braun and Clarke (2019, p.592) argue that qualitative researchers do not reach a point where they stop learning, since ‘we are journeying, not arriving’. Similarly, entering the first immobility phase may resemble ‘journeying, not arriving’, as individuals find themselves in an ongoing, unsettled experience without reaching their intended destinations while moving from one phase to another; thus, ‘journeying, not arriving’.

There has been growing recognition among migration scholars of the need to deploy cross-disciplinary approaches in the study of migratory processes (Koikkalainen & Kyle 2016; Vari-Lavoisier 2019, 2021; Vari-Lavoisier & Fiske 2021). Such calls align with the tenets of the cognitive turn, which involves drawing cross-disciplinary ideas and approaches from culture and cognition to study people’s actions (Cerulo et al. 2021; DiMaggio 1997). In line with this,

there is a need for migration scholars to adopt an interdisciplinary approach to better support individuals who may require assistance with mental health challenges. ‘The absence of cognitive research on mobile minds represents a noticeable knowledge gap...’ (Vari-Lavoisier 2019 p. 6).

Thus, the third immobility phase relates to a stream of research within migration studies that has yet to receive adequate attention. It is important to suggest that adhering to the tenets of the cognitive turn could enable scholars to draw on cross-disciplinary and interdisciplinary approaches to bridge migration studies, climate justice, mental health, and critical border studies to address the complex nature of the experiences found in this immobility phase. Such an interdisciplinary approach could offer a deeper understanding of the complex migratory experiences of individuals by being attuned to the fluid, contingent, and disrupted patterns of mobility and immobility in crisis migration.

Conclusion

This conceptual paper proposes the term *Immobility phases* to describe changeable or static migratory situations that unfold in distinguishable stages, often involving residence at home or other locations under temporary or precarious conditions. It captures the experiences of those who continue to pursue their optimal migratory aspirations despite not yet actualising their intended migratory goals permanently, whether at home or in the diaspora. It outlines three immobility phases that illustrate how complex, fluid and transitory immobility experiences can be and highlight the diversity of experiences as people struggle to realise their migratory aspirations. Of the phases proposed, the second immobility phase has already received attention, particularly in relation to typologies developed by Schapendonk (2008) and Haugen (2012). This paper builds on those contributions by incorporating experiences captured in the first and third immobility phases.

It also foregrounds the concept of *crisis migration*. It suggests that using it to analyse mobility and immobility under conditions of environmental adversity or violent conflict can help mitigate over-reliance on terms such as *forced migration* or *involuntary immobility*. In addition, it advocates adherence to the tenets of the cognitive turn in migration studies, which supports cross-disciplinary and interdisciplinary approaches. This paper has aimed to establish *immobility phases* as a critical concept that can reshape our understanding of diverse immobility experiences and foreground them more effectively within migration studies.

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