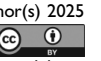
Original research article

The autonomy of migration as travelling theory: Situated principles from Nepal

EPD: Society and Space
1–20



DOI: 10.1177/02637758251365388
journals.sagepub.com/home/epd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Abstract

The autonomy of migration (AOM) theory views mobility as a fundamental force that shapes our world. This theory of migration challenges the state-centric view of migration as a problem to be solved. It emphasises the role of migrant agency in the transformation of social, political and economic structures. Whilst AOM has contributed to understanding migrant struggles in contexts where there are restrictions on the inflow of immigrants, it has also faced criticisms from migration scholars and activists, prompting ongoing engagement, refinement and transformation. In this article, I position AOM as a travelling theory, demonstrating how its core insights travel across geographical, political and academic contexts. I draw on three cases from Nepal, where citizens' outflow is restricted, to outline five situated principles of AOM that build on and expand the theory's original formulations relevant to the context of Nepal. These situated principles not only ground AOM contextually but also demonstrate how a travelling theory of migration evolves through its encounters with struggles, learns from situated practices and remains responsive to shifting regimes of mobility.

Keywords

Autonomy of migration, mobility struggles, mobility control, travelling theory, Nepal

Introduction

The Government of Nepal hosted its fifth National Labour and Employment Conference on 11–12 March 2025, during which it declared 2025 to 2035 as the decade of internal employment promotion. The conference aimed to foster domestic employment opportunities and address Nepal's increasing reliance on foreign labour migration. It brought together key actors, including government officials, trade union members, recruitment agents, business leaders, representatives of international organisations (e.g. ILO, IOM), NGO and media personnel, research consultants and scholars. Whilst several actors expressed a desire to reverse the current foreign labour migration of Nepali citizens by

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promoting initiatives such as skills development, job creation and reintegration measures within domestic labour markets, there was simultaneous recognition of the need to promote 'safe migration' and enforce strong Bilateral Labour Agreements (BLAs) with host countries. This tension between reversing foreign labour migration and promoting safe migration reveals the state's contradictory intent to discipline the mobility of Nepali citizens. However, the ambitious goals discussed at the conference contrast with ground realities, where efforts to domesticate mobility are undermined by the everyday practices of Nepali citizens on the move. For example, despite attempts to restrict and control the mobility of citizens migrating for sex work to India, domestic work in the Gulf countries, and irregular migration to destinations such as the USA and Russia, Nepali citizens continue to migrate to these sites and sectors. Moreover, despite 'strong BLAs', Nepali migrant workers face exploitation and often subvert immigration and labour controls in response to restrictions and abuses. In turn, efforts to discipline labour, mobility and bodies of Nepali citizens have led to a continuous rescaling of control measures like migration restrictions, anti-migration awareness campaigns, anti-trafficking initiatives, and calls for stricter enforcement of BLAs. This continuous rescaling suggests that mobility refuses full domination by control measures.

In this article, I draw on nine years of research in Nepal, during which I documented 81 stories of mobility, to explore the refusal of mobility to be dominated, controlled or managed by Nepal's ever-modulating migration governance. To do so, I draw on the autonomy of migration (AOM) theory, which offers critical insights into the tensions between migration control and migrant agency (Mezzadra, 2010; Papadopoulos et al., 2008; Scheel, 2019). The AOM, which emerged from activist and intellectual movements advocating for freedom of movement in Europe, understands migration as an autonomous force - not only a response to state policies or economic conditions, but with the potential to transform broader social, economic and political structures (Casas-Cortes and Cobarrubias, 2024). Drawing from autonomist Marxist thought, AOM positions the mobility of labour as a key driver of capitalist accumulation and social transformation (Bojadžijev and Karakayali, 2010). It views migration as resistance to the complete domination of labour by the state and capital, framing mobility, as its chief architect, Yann Moulier-Boutang put it, *primum mobile* — the primary engine of historical production and accumulation (Moulier-Boutang, 1998).

By prioritising mobility over control, AOM scholars were able to highlight migrant agency in subverting control regimes. Whilst it provided an understanding of migrant agency in the context of migration, citizenship and borders (De Genova, 2017a; Kaneti, 2015; Nyers, 2015), the theory has faced criticism from both scholars and activists. Key critiques of the AOM include: (a) the romanticisation of migration; (b) the valorisation of migrants; (c) the conceptual ambiguity surrounding 'autonomy'; (d) the homogenisation of all individuals as migrants, which flattens diverse subjectivities (see: Alabi et al., 2004; Omwenyeke, 2004; Sharma, 2009). These critiques led to debates about whether it can explain migrant struggles in different geographical contexts.

I employ AOM's insights to analyse three cases in which Nepalis subvert the migration controls they encounter. First, Nepali 'citizens' – particularly women from lower caste and class backgrounds – continue to subvert government-imposed migration bans intended to protect them, thereby becoming 'illegal migrants' from the perspective of the Nepali state (Sijapati et al., 2019). The government enforces bans by not issuing labour permits, using anti-trafficking actors, applying No Objection Certificate (NOC) rules at Indian airports, and limiting visit visas. Second, Nepali migrant workers in Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries and Malaysia often subvert formal employment after labour exploitation, living as 'undocumented migrants' in these states (Bruslé, 2009; Gurung, 2013; Sunam, 2023). In this case, the government of Nepal relies on its migration training, pre-departure orientations, and BLAs with host countries to reduce labour exploitation. Third, young Nepalis migrate to the USA, Russia and Europe via smuggling routes, subverting both the restrictive borders in Nepal and those of these states, thereby being classified as 'illegal immigrants' (Khadka, 2024; Kharel, 2024; Sapkota and Sah, 2023). Here, the government provides skills training to youth, implements awareness measures,

and works towards anti-smuggling legislation to restrict irregular migration (see: Bhagat and Mainali, 2025). All three cases highlight the relationship between mobility and control, which is central to the AOM theory. However, to grasp these cases from Nepal, AOM must travel, adapt and evolve to account for how migration governance regimes are constructed, resisted and transformed.

I contribute to critical migration scholarship by positioning AOM as a travelling theory (Said, 1983). I mobilise it not only as a radical framework for analysing Nepal's shifting migration regime but also as a flexible approach that learns from migrants struggles across diverse geographical contexts. In doing so, I contribute to the existing AOM literature, which predominantly focuses on autonomy in response to state control of immigrants' inflows, by demonstrating how autonomy and control interact to restrict citizens' outflows. Drawing on the empirical findings from participatory, ethnographic and feminist research, I propose five contextually situated principles of AOM to understand, engage with and critically interrogate migration governance in Nepal. These principles include: (a) the co-constitutive relationship between mobility and control; (b) the co-constitution of mobility and control producing turbulence in political categories and subjectivities; (c) understanding autonomy as relational and agency as constrained; (d) border subversions producing haunted borders; and (e) internal hierarchies shaping migration experiences. These situated principles do not seek to universalise AOM but to ground its theoretical insights in the struggles of Nepali citizens.

Through these principles, I demonstrate that migration theories transform as they travel across geographical boundaries and engage with diverse actors, discourses and practices. In doing so, I position AOM as a radical, flexible and reflexive theory of migration which evolves as it navigates new geographies, shifting contexts and emerging struggles. What follows is a reading of AOM through the lens of Edward Said's travelling theory, in which he identifies four discernible stages in the movement of any theory: a point of origin, a distance traversed, a set of conditions, and an accommodation of transformation (Said, 1983). I then reflect on how my research has travelled over 9 years, before elaborating on three cases of subversion unfolding in Nepal. I analyse these three cases to propose five situated principles of AOM. In conclusion, I reflect on the broader implications of AOM as travelling theory and argue that it must continue to travel, adapt, transform and engage with migrant struggles around the world.

Reading the AOM through Edward Said' travelling theory

Points of origin

The first stage of Edward Said's travelling theory is the point of origin, which is the 'initial circumstances in which the idea came to birth or entered discourse' (Said, 1983: 226–227). It is accepted that the idea of AOM entered discourse through the workerist movement (operaismo) of the 1970s, which gave rise to the autonomist Marxist tradition. This tradition replaced economic laws as the driving force of history with working-class struggles (BerardiF, 2009; Hardt and Negri, 2009; Negri, 1977). Within this tradition, Yann Moulier-Boutang, offered a reading of capitalism through the lens of mobility of living labour in his seminal work, *De l'esclavage au salariat: Économie historique du salariat bride* (Moulier-Boutang, 1998). His reading was informed by the critical historical work of Nigerian scholar Johnson U. J. Asiegbu, South African scholar Susan Newton-King, and Brazilian scholar Ana Lucia Duarte Lanna, who challenged the notion that the abolition of slavery marked a clear shift to 'free labour' (see: Asiegbu, 1969). Moulier-Boutang drew on their insight showing that domination persisted through forms of wage and contract slavery and labour mobility's refusal to be fully subjugated, and conceptualised AOM theory (Moulier-Boutang, 2018; Moulier-Boutang and Garson, 1984).

Since its inception, AOM theory has drawn on diverse struggles and intellectual traditions, some of which developed independently and in parallel to Moulier-Boutang's work. For example, Ranabir

Samaddar's postcolonial analysis of migration across India-Bangladesh borders resonates with AOM theory, representing migrants as transformative social actors whose agency creates turbulence in fixed understandings of borders, nations, and identities (Samaddar, 2025). These examples reveal the multiple genealogies of labour and mobility underpinning this migration theory, which calls for a shift from neoclassical 'push and pull' models to a focus on migrant agency as a transformative force within social structures.

This focus on migrant agency led to the establishment of the AOM Framework, with these core principles: (a) the centrality of migrant agency in actively shaping migration processes and resistance to any depiction of migrants as solely passive victims of circumstance (Otto and Hoffmann, 2022); (b) an understanding of migration as a constitutive force of social change, rather than merely an outcome of push and pull factors (Casas-Cortes and Cobarrubias, 2024); (c) an ethical prioritisation of migratory mobility over all forms of control and suggestion that such movement precedes and instigates changes in border and migration policies that seek to regulate it (Papadopoulos et al., 2008); (d) shifting the understanding of borders from static territorial lines and instead framing borders as sites of struggle and contestation, where migrants' autonomous movements clash with state efforts to control them (Moll, 2023); (e) critiquing state-centric definitions of migration in migration studies (De Genova, 2013) – the tendency to treat territorial states as the primary unit of analysis, prevalent in much of the migration literature; and (f) an understanding of 'autonomy' as the capacity to intervene in structural processes (Scheel, 2019).

Distance traversed

For Said, the distance traversed refers to the spatio-temporal journey of a theory through various contexts (Said, 1983). Whilst multiple genealogies sit behind the AOM theory, it initially gained significant traction within European critical migration research during the 1990s. It was fuelled by the rise of pan-European anti-racist 'no-borders' movements – many of whose slogans were drawn from this theory, such as 'No One is Illegal'. The AOM theory provided a powerful lens for understanding Europe's so-called migration crisis and the ways in which migrants navigate and challenge 'Fortress Europe' (Samsa, 2006; Benoît, 2020). The concept of 'transit migration' emerged within this framework (Bojadžijev and Karakayali, 2010), shifting attention to movement itself and the knowledge and logistics developed en-route. Since its inception, the literature has been applied to the study of migration, citizenship and border regimes across, and beyond, the European continent (Alldred, 2003; Mezzadra, 2022; Nyers, 2015).

Key spaces of analysis include the Schengen regime (Scheel, 2018), the Mediterranean borders (Tazzioli, 2015, 2016), the Western Balkan migration route (Zocchi, 2024), the Spanish-Moroccan border (Gazzotti, 2020), the Polish border (in the context of the Belarus migration crisis) (Koinova, 2025), Italy, Greece (Olga, 2013), Germany (Scheel, 2025), and the Alpine border (Tazzioli, 2021). Beyond Europe, AOM has also informed research in Africa, particularly in Morocco, where it has been used to examine voluntary returns and border control (Maa, 2023), in Nigeria, Libya, El Salvador, and Somalia (De Genova and Peutz, 2010), in Latin America (the US-Mexico border (De Genova, 2017b), Caribbean (Dias and Domenech, 2020), Peru-Chile border, Bolivia-Chile border (Rho, 2021), Middle East (Gardner, 2010), and Asia (Chowdhury, 2021; Lin and Ngai, 2021; Parhusip, 2021), broadening its scope beyond its European origins.

Conditions of acceptance (and resistance)

For Said, when a theory travels to a new environment – whether across geographies, disciplines or other contexts – its core tenets are tested, determining the extent of its acceptance or resistance (Said, 1983). AOM gained global traction due to its radical potential, challenging the passive portrayal

of migrants as either victims or villains. It repositioned migration as a transformative social force and demanded investigation of border regimes and migratory processes from the perspective of migrants. This critical approach has not only inspired anti-imperialist, anti-racist, anti-sexist and anti-capitalist struggles of migrants, but also led to the production of an empirically rich scholarship on migrant struggles, border control, and political subjectivity from critical social science disciplines (Bojadžijev and Karakayali, 2010; De Genova, 2017b; Scheel and Tazzioli, 2022).

One reason behind this wide acceptance was that this radical theory of migration emerged as a corrective to state-centred perspectives that had long dominated border and migration studies, inverting these approaches by centring migrants' agency (Scheel, 2025). This ethically nuanced approach to migration established an 'autonomist gaze' which demanded a reframing of migration beyond a sociological category, creating spaces for examination of the intersections of capitalism, racism and mobility (Mezzadra, 2010). As a result, whether or not scholars directly engage with this framework, autonomous thinking remains present in their work, like precarity (Hastings and Cumbers, 2019; Waite, 2009), logistics (Alimahomed-Wilson and Ness, 2018; Ovetz, 2020), carcerality (Martin, 2021; Martin and Tazzioli, 2023), gentrification and squatting (Mudu and Chattopadhyay, 2017; Vasudevan, 2017), social reproduction (Federici and Austin, 2017; Mezzadri, 2021). Whilst I agree that these concepts have multiple genealogies, autonomous thinking transforms them from technologies of domination into terrains of struggle (conflict, resistance, evasion, escape and appropriation) shaped by the practices of migrants. Hence, the travel of the AOM framework into migration scholarship has reoriented understandings of migrants, shifting them from objects of control to political actors whose movements are generative.

However, as AOM travelled and gained prominence, it also faced significant critiques. The central criticism of this theory is that it overlooks the harsh structural constraints, inequalities, and dangers migrants face, potentially romanticising their agency and valorising the power of their migratory mobilities and their capacity to escape power (Alabi et al., 2004). The framework's emphasis on 'globalisation from below' (Mezzadra, 2004) has been questioned for glorifying migrants hardships and ignorance of social, cultural and economic structures that constrain their agency (Omwenyeke, 2004).

Further, the concept of autonomy has been subject to multiple interpretations and critiques, creating ambiguity within the framework. Critics argue that the term 'autonomy' signifies a quest for self-determination, a possibility of some form of independence or emancipation from all techniques of government (Scheel, 2013). The emancipation, based on the techniques of self-governance, feeds into the liberal discourse of unrestricted freedom of choice and action, thereby downplaying the role of structural forces in constraining such autonomy. Whilst several AOM scholars offered diverse conceptual explanations on the misinterpretation of the term 'autonomy' (Casas-Cortes et al., 2015; Mezzadra, 2010), Scheel (2019) argues that most of the ambiguity related to autonomy is implicitly present in the AOM literature.

Critics have also questioned AOM's tendency to homogenise migrants as a single political unit (Alabi et al., 2004; Omwenyeke, 2004). This homogenisation tendency not only overlooks differences shaped by race, gender, class, and nationality but also underestimates the role of borders, state policies, and socio-economic structures in shaping migration patterns and outcomes.

Accommodation of transformation

Said's final stage of travelling theory is its accommodation of transformation (Said, 1983). This is the stage where a theory evolves and often transforms in response to new contexts. AOM theory has been continuously shaped by internal and external criticisms. This accommodation of transformation allows it to remain receptive to critique and transformation. As a result, it has emerged as one of the most vibrant, reflective, heuristic and critical theories of migration.

AOM theorists have, since the beginning, attempted to engage with and address such criticism (Casas-Cortes and Cobarrubias, 2024; Otto and Hoffmann, 2022; Papadopoulos and Tsianos, 2013). This has not only led to internal disagreements between scholars (on autonomy, escape, power, capitalism, migrants' incorrigibility, migrants' imperceptibility (see: De Genova, 2010; Papadopoulos et al., 2008; Scheel, 2019), but has also led to the rise of a post-autonomist approach (Otto and Hoffmann, 2022), which considers the complexities and power relations inherent in migration, and offers a more context-sensitive analysis of migration (Scheel, 2019). Other scholars offer a compositional analysis attuned to both the recomposition and decomposition of social forces to avoid the pitfalls of a lack of consideration of structural analysis (Gray and Clare, 2022). Increasingly, the literature is engaging with critical border studies, postcolonial theory, and decolonial thought to address critiques and enrich the framework's analytical capacity (Casas-Cortes and Cobarrubias, 2024; Gray and Clare, 2022).

However, to further advance the AOM framework as a highly critical, vibrant, reflexive and flexible theory of migration, it is essential that it is deployed to offer what Scheel (2019) terms 'situated analysis' of migratory movements. This means that the theory needs to travel further, learn from diverse geographies where various forms of mobility struggles are unfolding, and adapt and transform its theoretical principles accordingly. I now highlight how my own research has traversed multiple geographies within Nepal, before examining three cases of subversion currently being carried out by thousands of Nepalis on the move, in order to establish and advance AOM as a travelling theory.

Methodology

My research journey began with dissatisfaction with anti-trafficking interventions that aimed to protect people from 'human trafficking'. Whilst implementing anti-trafficking projects in India, I observed resistance from those impacted, as the interventions often restricted their mobility. This led to my entry into academia, where I conducted Participatory Action Research (PAR) in Nepal between 2016 and 2020 as part of my doctoral thesis. The project aimed to address the risks and challenges people face while navigating international migration. I followed the migratory trajectories of people from a site stigmatised as 'trafficking-prone', a community once classified as an 'enslavable caste' in Nepal's first legal code (Government of Nepal, 1963), to explore their encounters with actors and institutions involved in anti-trafficking interventions.

The PAR involved a scoping study, a general meeting, formation of a steering committee, selection of five research companions and one interpreter, participatory training involving several exercises, negotiation of a safe space within the community, a series of action and reflection meetings, formation of five habitation-level groups, two rounds of focused group discussions led by research companions in their indigenous language. It also included interviews with community members, family members of those living abroad, returnee migrants and those labelled as trafficking victims. I also interviewed several unlicensed agents, registered recruitment agency members, NGOs, government, ministries representatives, trade union members and human rights organisations. Afterwards, I conducted border ethnography along four Indo-Nepal bordering sites – Mahendranagar, Nepalgunj, Sunauli, and Kakarvitta, emigration detention centres, and at International Airports – Kathmandu, New Delhi, Colombo, and Kuwait. As a part of this ethnography, I conducted interviews with multiple actors as part of the border ethnography. In 2022, I returned to the site to present my findings, which informed the development of policy briefs that highlighted their mobility and labour struggles (see: Bhagat, 2024). Since then, we have built and maintained our friendships.

Some of the key findings of the research were: shifting migration patterns among the people; people, especially women, migrating via various illicit channels as a consequence of migration bans in the domestic work sector; and several Nepali workers subverting their employment when they face extreme forms of exploitation (and sometimes for fun or boredom). As a result, several participants,

after subverting restrictive migration controls and exploitative practices, feel abandoned and stranded across diverse geographies. Building on the findings of my previous research, I conducted an ethnography to understand the strandedness of returnee domestic workers between 2023 and 2024, with fieldwork supported by CESLAM. We conducted interviews along the Indo-Nepal border with returnee domestic workers (mostly lower caste and Dalit women) who had experienced abandonment and strandedness within 6 months prior to fieldwork, understanding their migration trajectories and identifying points of intervention. We also carried out participatory mapping to visually document sites of strandedness, points of vulnerability and potential areas for intervention. Guided by questions on migration struggles raised by participants, I interviewed representatives from the government, NGOs, INGOs, Nepali diaspora groups, Trade Unions, and labour rights organisations.

Both studies highlighted that the government and several actors – agents, family members, NGOs, and the embassy – abandon women workers as a result of migration bans. For the government of Nepal, they are illegal workers and therefore excluded from any support infrastructure. For example, when these women return, there is no reintegration support available to them, and when they die, there is no provision for even the repatriation of their bodies, nor is any support made available to their family members. Several participants feel that death is punishment for their desire to secure a better future. This unsettling reality, of participants feeling abandoned to death, led to the development of a pilot research project to investigate the deaths of Nepali migrant domestic workers. I conducted this study in collaboration with Women's Rehabilitation Centre (WOREC), a non-governmental organisation working to promote women's rights in Nepal, between 2024 and 2025. Using a feminist methodology, we examined the deaths of female Nepali migrant domestic workers abroad and their impacts on families (see: Bhagat and WOREC, 2025).

Over the course of nine years, my research has captured 81 stories of mobility and engaged 150 people with lived experience of labour migration through 18+ focused group discussions. These studies involved more than 70+ local, provincial, and state-level actors – including mobility facilitators, community leaders, NGOs, INGOs, government agencies, trade unions, placement associations, immigration officers, lawyers, and dance bar owners – to examine migration governance in Nepal. Beyond formal engagements, hundreds of informal discussions took place in dynamic, everyday spaces, including conversations with Nepal Police, Border Police, anti-trafficking NGOs conducting border surveillance, bus service operators, tea stall owners, airport authorities, shopkeepers, and Indian secret intelligence actors. In all three studies, I encountered subversive cases where the mobility of Nepalis on the move refuses to be fully dominated by policies and practices of control, which I highlight below.

Shifting migration patterns from one site in Nepal

The site where I conducted my first research reveals shifting migration patterns among my research participants. Women from this area initially migrated as concubines, domestic workers, and entertainers in the Nepali royal courts before moving into sex work in India. As opportunities evolved, they engaged in seasonal labour migration to India before transitioning to domestic work in the GCC countries. Today, they are increasingly migrating to European countries and South Korea for the same work. Men, on the other hand, initially engaged in seasonal work within Nepal before moving to India for similar work. As opportunities expanded, they began migrating to the GCC countries and Malaysia (see, Bhagat, 2022, 2023). Now, many are bypassing these traditional routes and moving to countries such as the USA, Romania, and Portugal. This ever-evolving mobility reflects not just economic aspirations but also the ways in which people of Nepal navigate, adapt and sometimes subvert state-imposed migration controls.

Case 1: Citizens subverting emigration controls

The Nepali government prohibits international migration for sex work and domestic work. While sex work is banned, though tolerated in some areas, cross-border mobility for sex work is monitored by

Nepal's anti-trafficking NGOs. These organisations have set up checkpoints at government offices, national highways, the open Indo-Nepal border and airports to restrict movements. Similarly, domestic work has been subject to migration bans since 1988 (ILO, 2015). Over 25 years, the government modified these bans. Since 2017, the government has imposed a total ban on domestic work emigration (Bhagat, 2023). Although the ban was partially lifted in 2020, contingent upon BLAs with host countries and other conditions (ILO, 2021), critics argue these measures strengthen the ban (Bhagat et al., 2024). As a result, the government does not issue labour permits for domestic work unless preconditions are met. The exception is migration to India, where the Indo-Nepal Friendship Treaty allows 'free' movement and employment (Kumar, 2016).

Yet, these restrictions have not halted migration. In my first research site, I was told that nearly every household had at least one woman migrating for domestic work in GCC countries. Although I was informed that migration for sex work still occurs, community members deny it or prefer not to discuss it due to stigma around sex work (Laurie and Richardson, 2020). To control these forms of labour mobility, state and non-state actors have intensified efforts, intervening at sites such as predeparture training, awareness programmes, highway patrols, airport monitoring and border checks at Indo-Nepal crossings.

Despite restrictive measures, Nepali citizens, often with help from brokers, continue to find ways to subvert interventions (Bhagat, 2022). A common strategy is migrating via a third country. Many travel to India without passports, which are then sent to them at their destination. In response, the Nepali government introduced a directive requiring women to obtain a No Objection Certificate (NOC) from the Nepali embassy in India before travel. However, mobility practices have adapted again. In my second study, participants described using visit visas along with vital documents (e.g. return tickets, hotel bookings receipts, cash, etc.) to depart from Kathmandu airport. Several actors noted the government knows these strategies and is reluctant to issue visit visas. Further, the recent exposé of a visit visa scam which involved money exacted from prospective migrants by brokers, travel agencies, airlines, employees, police, government officials and politicians has further tightened the issuance of visit visas (see: Dahal, 2025).

Case 2: Migrant workers subverting immigration and labour control

The government of Nepal regulates international labour migration through labour permits (Choudhary and Devkota, 2021; Government of Nepal, 2020; Paoletti et al., 2014). However, research suggests many Nepalis entering host countries (particularly in Malaysia, Qatar, and the UAE) on labour permits choose to exit their employment (Bruslé, 2009; Gurung, 2013; Sunam, 2023). The reasons for subverting labour employment vary. Interviews show some participants left jobs due to exploitation. Others left because of routine tasks, low wages, or peers who also circumvented migration controls for fun. Many live as overstayers in these countries. Such illicit migration practices are often facilitated by Nepali diaspora networks, including recruitment agents and, in some cases, embassy staff who assist with employment mobility through informal or illicit means. As a result, so-called 'illegal diaspora' networks have emerged in several Nepali labour receiving countries, with workers strategically awaiting 'voluntary return' programmes that enable their return home without penalty.

This strategic waiting means many Nepali migrant workers live without labour protections while living in their host countries, especially in the GCC, where they must often surrender passports to employers under the kafala system. Hence, exiting labour exploitation often leaves them undocumented, and the lack of proper identity documents makes them anxious. However, most migrants said that while they were initially anxious about exploitation and state violence, they became accustomed to this fear over time. They understand that host states often tolerate their undocumented presence as their labour supports the economy. For some, being undocumented is more profitable (and

thrilling) than being documented, so they trade this with the risk of immigration raids and labour exploitation.

To avoid such trade-offs, many participants have recently started pursuing opportunities in alternative destinations. For example, some participants who were exploited in Qatar and Malaysia have now moved to Romania as labour migrants. While they no longer face the abuses of the kafala system, they report widespread wage theft, overwork, abusive labour conditions, exploitation in dormitories, difficulties in accessing healthcare, and in some cases, confiscation of their identity documents (see, also: Gudu, 2024; Lăutaru, 2023). This puts them under financial strain, as they often take out loans to cover the costs of European migration. The lack of Nepali embassy and consulate in Romania leaves them no option but to quit their employment as soon as possible. However, Romania's recent inclusion in the Schengen has sparked hope among many, as they anticipate it may open pathways to travel to other European countries (Raut, 2024).

Case 3: Citizens and migrants subverting both emigration and immigration control

The exploitation faced and narratives of exploitation encountered by Nepali migrants in the GCC countries and Malaysia are slowly causing a shift in the migration patterns, especially among men. Currently, a growing number of people are bypassing traditional labour routes to India, the GCC, and Malaysia in favour of direct migration to the EU, the USA, Israel, and Russia, bypassing formal migration channels (KC, 2024; Khadka, 2024; Kharel, 2024; Sapkota and Sah, 2023). This shift represents the latest trend in illicit migration from Nepal, with many citizens willing to pay over NPR 7 million to migrate to the United States, NPR 4 million for EU countries, andNPR 1 million for Israel and Russia.

Two notable recent migration shifts among Nepali citizens are towards Russia and the USA. While the 'American Dream' has long influenced the aspirations of Nepali youth (KC, 2024), migration to Russia could be linked to Nepal's military tradition, the legacy of the Gurkhas – known as some of the world's most formidable soldiers (Gould, 1999). Migration to the USA is often shaped by cultural imaginaries, aspirations for upward mobility, ability to assemble money, diaspora networks and emerging brokerage infrastructures (Thapa-Oli and Yang, 2024). In contrast, migration to Russia, into the military, can be seen as an extension of Nepal's military ethos (Onta, 1996). Serving in foreign militaries, especially as Gurkhas, has historically conferred wealth and prestige. Although access to formal Gurkha regiments remains limited, the cultural ideal of bravery continues to resonate (Aryal, 2008). As a result, many ex-army personnel and young aspirants are now enlisting in the Russian military or working as mercenaries, often lured by promises of Russian citizenship in exchange for service (Kharel, 2024). Both the Nepali government and grassroots organisations are aware of these migration trends and have been trying to kerb them through intervention programmes. Skill-training initiatives and awareness campaigns have been launched, while public spectacles – such as arrival of deported Nepalis by the Trump administration (Giri, 2025) – have highlighted the risks of these migration routes. Further, international pressure is mounting for the Nepali government to introduce anti-smuggling laws criminalising illicit migration (Bhagat and Mainali, 2025).

Yet, despite these efforts, all such mobility patterns persist. Nepalis continuously adapt, bypass, and reconfigure migration routes in response to ever-increasing restrictive measures, underscoring the refusal of mobility to be fully controlled. These three cases highlight how Nepalis on the move challenge, negotiate, resist and escape forms of control. Whether through illicit border crossings, informal labour networks, smuggling networks or military enlistment in foreign armies, their movements expose ruptures in the configuration of control which continuously reconfigures itself to plug those gaps.

Theorising AOM from Nepal: Five situated principles

Principle 1: The co-constitutive relationship between mobility and control lies at the centre of migration

The AOM is interested in theorising from the ruptures in the configuration of control which allows mobility to escape (Papadopoulos et al., 2008). Forces of control are interested in discovering and plugging every rupture, which positions mobility in a conflictual relationship with mobility control measures. As a result, both mobility practices (of appropriation, see: Scheel, 2019) and mobility control measures (e.g. borderings see: Burridge et al., 2017) multiply. While most of the AOM literature theorises from the vantage point of configurations of immigration control, the focus is typically on mechanisms that restrict mobility from entering certain territories (e.g. Europe, USA, Australia, the UK, etc.). For Papadopoulos et al. (2008), these configurations are described as 'liminal partocratic institutions' forming vertical aggregates of control, while for Scheel (2019), they are conceptualised as 'security dispositifs'. In contrast, the case of Nepal is somewhat different, where the configuration of emigration control does not restrict entry, but rather prevents mobility from escaping its own territory. Yet, both cases share a common denominator – a co-constitutive relationship between mobility and control.

All three cases presented above highlight a co-constitutive dynamic between mobility (capacity to move through space, hierarchy, etc.) – and control (power to discipline, direct, dispose, etc.). To control mobility, the government implements a range of measures including issuing labour permits (Government of Nepal, 2020), shifting migration bans (ILO, 2015, 2021), pressuring host countries to sign BLAs (Kansakar, 2023), and requiring those travelling via India to obtain NOC from Nepali embassy (Namboodiri, 2023). It has also established safe migration centres at the local level, begun considering the reintegration of returnee migrants (Adhikari et al., 2025), and is aiming to enact anti-smuggling laws under pressure from immigration-phobic countries, as well as revise its existing anti-trafficking legislation. These interventions, often supported by anti-trafficking NGOs, seek to govern mobility under the guise of protectionist measures across villages, community spaces, government offices, national highways, Indo-Nepal borders and airports (Bhagat and Yea, 2025).

Yet, despite existing governance mechanisms, emigration control is frequently circumvented by Nepali citizens. Bhagat (2022) details how the mobility of Nepali women has historically adapted to imposed restrictions, leading not only to the expansion of restrictive measures but also to a range of mobility practices that refuse complete domination. This refusal is reflected in the shifting emigration bans on domestic work and the proliferation of anti-trafficking and anti-migrations measures that seek to protect them. Further, the experiences of Nepali migrant workers who quit their jobs and live undocumented in host countries like Qatar and Malaysia highlight the limits of migration governance, which continually revises its provisions to make labour migration safe, dignified and free from exploitation. Similarly, the case of Nepali youth migrating to Europe, the UK, the USA and Russia via illicit routes despite awareness campaigns, skills training, upcoming anti-smuggling legislation, and tightening immigration borders of western countries demonstrates that mobility refuses to be fully subjugated.

These examples demonstrate how mobility and control create feedback loops: the more control practices diversify, the more mobility practices adapt, and vice versa. This illustrates a co-constitutive relationship between the two, which actively shapes migration experiences. This co-constitutive dynamic neither posits mobility as an outcome of control, nor presents mobility as simply reacting to the control. Rather, they highlight how, to fully subjugate mobility, these measures both produce and reproduce one another, resulting in a wide range of consequences.

Principle 2: Constitution of mobility and control as ongoing turbulence in political categories and political subjectivities

Starting with the co-constitution of mobility and control allows us to see turbulence in political categories and political subjectivities. While political categories mean sorting labelling and categorising people on the move based on the geographical, racial, legal, social attributes (Dahinden et al, 2021; Strauss, 2017), political subjectivities mean how people on the move experience and negotiate such political categories (Andrijasevic and Anderson, 2009). In all three cases highlighted above, we can observe how Nepalis on the move rarely fit neatly into fixed political categories such as 'migrant', 'citizen', 'migrant worker', 'illegal migrant', 'trafficked victim' or even 'trafficker', and their perception of these categories, i.e. their political subjectivities, are ever shifting.

For example, participants migrating for domestic work in GCC countries via India never take their passports with them. If they were to cross the open Indo-Nepal border with passports, they would be categorised as 'labour migrants', 'trafficked victims' or 'illegal migrants', thereby risking detention and deportation by anti-trafficking organisations. The passport gives meaning to their mobility and converts them into citizens who could potentially go to the middle east via India in the eyes of anti-trafficking NGOs. However, not carrying identity documents also leads to the perception that they may be involved in sex work in India, transforming them into 'trafficked victims'. To avoid these categories, participants sometimes carry marriage certificates and travel with their husbands, which allows them to subvert the control they encounter along Indo-Nepal borders. These examples show how political subjectivities shape their migration strategies.

Similarly, numerous examples from the stories of mobility suggest that migration is ongoing transformation in political subjectivities. For example, Nepali men who start as seasonal workers in India may later become undocumented migrants in the Gulf before attempting migration to Europe, the United States, or Russia. Similarly, Nepali women legally labelled as 'trafficked victims' often later migrate for domestic work in GCC and other countries. Despite bans that render them 'illegal migrants' from Nepal's perspective, which denies labour permits to them, they are often recognised as 'migrant workers' in host countries from where visas are issued. However, some, upon exploitation, choose to subvert labour relations, becoming 'illegal immigrants' from the host country's perspective, while others become brokers, often framed as 'agents,' 'smugglers,' or 'traffickers,' depending on the legal and political context (Bhagat, 2023).

While their political subjectivities are always in flux, control practices always aim to stabilise political categories. For example, historical sex work-related mobility from one region led to the entire area where I conducted my first research being labelled a 'trafficking-prone' area. This led to the region becoming a focus of scrutiny, surveillance and research. Caste, race, class and gender markers of individuals from the community are used for profiling, shaping anti-trafficking monitoring along borders and highways. Similarly, young people from another region are now migrating to the United States. This contributes to the construction of a geographical imagination of 'smuggling-prone' in need of intervention, turning every young migrant from there into a potential smuggling victim. Hence, attempting to stabilise political categories like 'trafficked victims' or 'smuggled migrants' leads to stigmatisation of place, production of risk profiling, undignified representations and human rights violations.

These examples demonstrate that the co-constitution of mobility and control leads to an ongoing transformation of political categories and subjectivities. This fluidity between political categories reveals how migrants navigate the frameworks that continuously try to categorise them. It also shows that their subjectivity is not static, but produced as a result of negotiation between people on the move and control measures. Migration thus becomes a site of continuous negotiation, where subjectivity is not fixed but produced through engagement with political structures that seek to define it.

Principle 3: Understanding autonomy as relational and agency as constrained

Relational autonomy. Empirical findings suggest that Nepalis on the move do not experience, encounter, escape control practices in a uniform manner. Instead, their encounters are shaped by intersecting positionalities, including caste, class, gender, and nationality. For example, relatively wealthier Nepali men may afford costly routes to Europe, United States or Russia, while poorer migrants – particularly lower caste women – often rely on informal pathways. Caste and social status further stratify mobility, granting privileged groups greater access to secure and diverse migration trajectories. Further, people depend on the support of brokers, agents, diaspora communities and even embassy officials to navigate restrictive systems. These actors supply information, resources, and logistical assistance, making apparent that subversion of migration control (even the immediate configuration they encounter, e.g. Indo-Nepal border surveillance) is rarely a solitary act of direct resistance. Rather, it is a collective and networked process, embedded in situated interactions and negotiations.

These examples offer an understanding of migrant autonomy as relational, which means their autonomy emerges through shared knowledge, informal infrastructures and contested zones of regulation (Moll, 2023; Otto and Hoffmann, 2022). This conceptualisation advances Scheel's (2019) proposal that AOM theorists should consider autonomy as relational to avoid romanticisation of migration. AOM understanding of autonomy as a collective force inherent within the mobility of people which drives social and political transformations (Casas-Cortes and Cobarrubias, 2024), often leads to confusion of homogenisation of migrants as autonomous subjects. This confusion opens the framework to multiple criticisms, like swallowing up migrants' differences and ending up glorifying their misery. Instead, case studies from Nepal suggest that migrant's autonomy can never be exercised in isolation but is co-produced through social relations. It is always enacted in relation to multiple actors, processes and discourses which often defy the immediate logic of migration governance and control. This relational autonomy provokes immediate control mechanisms to reconfigure itself to know, understand, manage, capture or even break this relationality.

Constrained agency. Empirical findings suggest that Nepalis on the move exercise agency within constrained conditions. These conditions are framed as protectionist measures against exploitation, such as emigration bans, anti-trafficking NGO surveillance, community-level anti-migration interventions, NOC requirements and airport monitoring. These measures not only infantilise migrants by reducing them to passive objects in need of protection, but also drive them towards brokers to facilitate irregular migration. However, interviews with brokers suggest that they never approach potential migrants in the first place, and if are caught, they face penalties under Nepal's anti-trafficking legislation. Some suggest that those who facilitate visit visa migration provide citizens with money to present to immigration officials, as part of the visit visa requirements, which they are expected to return to the agents in Gulf countries. However, there are numerous cases in which women do not return the money upon their entrance in the immigration regime.

For most participants, brokers are not viewed as different from those who facilitate migration through formal channels. Rather, they are seen as uniquely positioned within a matrix of power, and must be carefully selected to maximise migration outcomes. Migrants exercise agency by selecting and using brokers to negotiate conditions that allow movement within constrained environments, which may expose them to exploitation or provide routes out of it. Interviews with those labelled as 'trafficking victims', including returnee women, who had been stranded in transit or destination countries, those who subverted their employment conditions with the help of brokers and placement agencies, and others who financed their own rescue by sending money to brokers in their home villages – reveal diverse and complex strategies of navigation, evasion and adaptation throughout their migration journeys. Similarly, returnee men who exited formal labour contracts by abandoning their identity documents in Malaysia and joining undocumented Nepali communities with help from

embassy staff, or those previously trapped in Qatari labour camps, exemplify alternative forms of agency. This agency is not always driven by overt political resistance (though some participants did protest against employers and were deported), but often by necessity and survival.

These strategies reflect participants' capacity to make choices and take action even under severe structural constraints, thereby exemplifying 'constrained agency' (Coe and Jordhus-Lier, 2023; Schwiter et al., 2018). Participants exercise constrained agency even in less visible practices such as quiet compliance (as in Romania, where migrants endure poor conditions to repay debts), strategic silence (domestic workers in Kuwait who delay complaints while learning the local language), betraying brokers (by refusing to return money to them) and collaboration with brokers (such as waiting for voluntary return schemes before exiting employment). In more extreme cases, undocumented migrants have placed themselves in the path of immigration raids, leveraging state deportation as a means of return when alternatives are closed off. These empirical insights offer a situated understanding of migrant agency, shaped by multiple, overlapping structural constraints. Migrant agency reflects the structural and relational environments in which migrants are embedded – encompassing brokers, migrant networks, employers, legal regimes, NGO interventions, and the broader geopolitics of mobility governance. Hence, understanding agency as constrained highlights that migrants do not act in isolation from power: they move through it, with it and, at times, against it.

Principle 4: Border subversions produce haunted borders

Empirical findings from all three cases highlight that Nepalis subvert border controls in Nepal, in their hosting countries such as those in the GCC and Malaysia, as well as in Europe and the USA. However, every single interview highlighted that these acts of border subversion reduce migrants' agency and bargaining power, leaving them vulnerable to systemic abuse both in their destination countries and in Nepal. It often leaves them without adequate legal status, making them easy targets for immigration raids, wage theft, surveillance employer and agents abuse.

For example, several female participants highlight that they are cut off from consular support as a result of their subversion. The lack of documentation, combined with rigid visa sponsorship kafala systems in the GCC countries, reinforces their dependence on employers and heightens their vulnerability to exploitation. In several cases, migrants have to pay recruitment agents to arrange their rescue. These agents sometimes take them to locations where immigration officers are likely to carry out raids, in the hope that the migrants will be deported after serving a short jail term in the host countries. Further, when these women return to Nepal, they feel stigmatised and abandoned as there is no support system available to them, even if they contributed to their state via their remittances for decades. For example, one participant, a lower-caste woman, who migrated via illicit channels to work as a domestic worker in Kuwait, returned home after eight years. During this time, she built a house, educated her daughter, and supported her entire family through remittances. However, upon her return – after being diagnosed with cancer – she received no support from the state, which is typically reserved for those who migrate through formal channels.

Several participants who subverted their labour relations in countries such as Qatar and Malaysia reported that, even when they forged identity documents, they knew immigration officers could raid their homes at any time, leading to detention and deportation. Their stories highlight how borders never leave them as they navigate life as 'undocumented' migrants. For example, one participant described living in Malaysia for five years without documents, during which he was robbed by his girlfriend. Despite this, he felt unable to seek help from authorities, trapped by the risk that exposing himself could lead to deportation. This event manifested an invisible border between him and protection which always existed. Another participant, who subverted his labour employment and joined an organised struggle – protesting against his employer in Malaysia – was immediately detained. He recounts that the language barrier didn't allow him to defend himself during trial and the physical

abuse he could not report. Once he was deported, he was banned from entering the country. He suggested that as a result of the memory of subversion, he decided never to migrate again.

These examples show that borders travel with migrants after their subversions as systems of control that affect their lives and shape their access to rights, protection and freedom. Subverting borders neither equates to escaping them, nor does it shield migrants from border violence. In many cases, such subversion increases their vulnerability to exploitation and oppression, as these practices continue to linger in the lives of migrants. Participants continue to experience the bordering effects of border subversion long after crossing, producing haunted borders. While the AOM theory understands borders as sites of struggle and negotiation (Candiz and Basok, 2024; Casas Cortes and Cobarrubias Baglietto, 2022; Vollmer, 2017), the case of Nepal highlights that border subversion transforms borders into something spectral or ghostly, which continues to haunt those who subvert them.

Principle 5: Internal hierarchy shapes migration experience

Empirical findings suggest that the internal hierarchy inherited at birth shapes participants' migration experience. It is said that upper-caste Nepalis often migrate through formal channels, securing higher-paying and less exploitative jobs. In contrast, lower-caste people often use illicit routes as a means to escape caste-based oppression at home (Thieme, 2006). The disparity in migration pathways reflects the presence of a social hierarchy, where upper-caste migrants have more resources and social capital to navigate migration processes, while lower-caste migrants face greater vulnerability, often relying on informal agents or engaging in undocumented labour. While research from Nepal highlights how international migration helps people break caste hierarchy (Adhikari and Gellner, 2019; Sunam, 2014), my case studies show that mobility control often reinforces the violence of internal social hierarchy. However, even after subverting such mobility control practices, participants struggle to navigate the hierarchy that continues to shape their migration experience.

For example, Nepal's emigration bans on domestic work and sex work disproportionately impact women. A lot of participants equate the restrictive policy with the burden of social reproduction and state-sanctioned immobility, which forces them to remain in spaces of violence they want to escape. These migration restrictions disproportionally affect lower caste women. Nepali anti-trafficking NGOs frame such migration as dangerous and portray lower-caste and lower-class women as victims in need of protection. These organisations tend to police women's movements at borders, profiling them as 'at risk' of trafficking, thereby reducing their autonomy. By framing their migration as a threat that requires the monitoring of women (based on their class, caste, and region-based markers) as needing to be saved, these initiatives strengthen the internal hierarchy that these women are attempting to break.

Further, several anti-trafficking NGOs frame several lower-caste Nepali women as 'slaves' – a term that draws directly from the legacy of transatlantic slavery but fails to account for the historical caste-based slavery in Nepal (Mademba et al., 2024). However, as interviews with several lower-caste, often illiterate, women reveal, labour migration is the only way they can send remittances back to ensure a good education for their children. They highlight that education is the only way they can break the historical positionality in their society, determined by their caste. However, some anti-trafficking organisations frame these women as 'modern slaves' to justify detaining and deporting them along the Indo-Nepal border, while preventing them from escaping caste-based oppression. Therefore, several women must subvert these control mechanisms.

However, interviews also suggest that subverting migration control does not mean subverting social hierarchies. Nepali migrants encounter similar caste and gender based hierarchy in the destination countries (Pariyar, 2019, 2020). Several participants highlight the discrimination they face in the Nepali diaspora while navigating their lives as undocumented workers, and the resources available to them mostly come from people of the same caste, including recruitment agents. Hence, internal

hierarchies of Nepalis – based on the intersection between caste, gender and class – shape not only who can migrate, through what channels, and under what conditions but also the forms of subversion available to them. Failure to consider these internal hierarchies risks reproducing the inequalities that many migrants seek to escape.

Conclusion

In this article, I positioned the autonomy of migration (AOM) as a travelling theory. I argued that understanding AOM as a travelling theory allows us to move beyond its critiques and develop it as a flexible theoretical framework – one that learns from, adapts to, and is transformed by the mobility struggles and migration regimes it encounters. Drawing on participatory and ethnographic research conducted across multiple geographies of Nepal, I highlighted three cases of subversion that are creating turbulence in the migration governance of Nepal: citizens subverting emigration control, migrant workers subverting immigration and labour controls, and migrants and citizens subverting both emigration and immigration controls. Thinking through these three cases, I propose five principles of AOM that emerge from my participants' mobility practices, which refuse to be fully subjected to practices of control.

These situated principles of AOM are: The co-constitutive relationship between mobility and control lies at the centre of migration; This dynamic leads to turbulence in political categories and subjectivities; Autonomy must be understood as relational, and agency as constrained; Border subversions produce haunted borders; Internal hierarchies shape experiences of migration. These principles demonstrate the analytical value of AOM in correcting state-centric views of migration in Nepal – which often depict Nepalis merely as passive victims of push and pull factors – and contribute to addressing key criticisms of the AOM, such as romanticising migration and valorising migrants. Hence, by positioning AOM as a travelling theory, I exposed the theory to the mobility struggles of my participants, allowing it to confront new challenges and address some existing limitations.

The AOM as travelling theory requires more exposure to diverse contexts, geographies and political landscapes. The more this theory travels, the more it will encounter 'conditions of acceptance' and 'resistance', thereby enabling its continuous refinement and transformation into a highly critical and reflexive theory of migration attuned to migrant struggles worldwide. This is important in a world where hostility towards migrants is rising, and migrants bear the effects of colonialism, caste hierarchies, racial capitalism, religious bigotry, and exploitative gendered labour regimes while navigating their lives. Grounded in migrant struggles, AOM has the potential to offer valuable tools for grassroots movements to fight alongside migrants for their rights by prioritising migrant agency and shifting dominant narratives. These struggles include challenging laws, resisting oppression based on class, race, caste, religion, and gender, pushing back against labour and migration regimes, calling out western saviourism and enabling subversions. While scholars continue to mobilise AOM across Europe and North America, the theory must travel, adapt, evolve and transform to offer fresh insights and solidarity to migrant struggles across the world. Invoking Edward Said's call to 'actualise its radical moments and regain its rebellious potential' (Said, 1983: 11), I argue that the autonomy of migration theory must continue to travel in order to remain the most radical theory of migration, grounded in people's mobility struggles.

Acknowledgements

I am sincerely grateful to Lauren Martin for her unwavering encouragement throughout the writing of this piece and to Nicola Ansell for her thoughtful readings of earlier drafts. I also extend my thanks to Sita Mademba and Rajib Neupane of CESLAM and to the entire team of WOREC for their invaluable support during fieldwork.

Above all, I am deeply thankful to the generous reviewers whose insightful feedback and guidance significantly shaped this work.

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Funding

The author disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: This work was supported by Brunel University of London Gerda Henkel Foundation (grant number BRIEF AWARDS 2024/25, AZ 14/FM/23 Grant).

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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