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PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE
‘Voting with their feet’: Senegalese youth, clandestine boat migration, and the gendered politics of protest

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This article explores the political, economic, racialized, and moral dimensions of clandestine boat migration from Senegal to the Canary Islands between 2006 and 2011. I begin with a critical interpretation of clandestine boat migrations as a form of gendered protest and as a strategic response to the perceived lack of economic opportunities for young Senegalese men. I continue with a critique of the overlapping and racialized geographies of the Canary Islands, which simultaneously represent a holiday respite for tourists and the promise of a new life for economic migrants. I conclude with a discussion of the utility of scholarship, such as this, which complicates the tidiness of area studies, illuminates the lived complexities of transnational studies, and paves the way for a more global African Diaspora Studies.

Keywords: youth; gender; clandestine boat migration; Africa; African diaspora; Europe

Introduction

...the reality is that these African migrants are seen as unfortunate intruders, whose graves, when they die on land are marked “unknown immigrant” and if they die at sea, serve as a haunting metaphor for the blue expanse of the island, now occasionally referred to as “watery graves of Africa.” Despite these horrific migration “tales from the Crypt,” African migrants remain undaunted (Falola and Afolabi 2007, 382).

In the twenty-first century, literally and figuratively, Africans are dying to go to Europe. Yet, their bleached bones strewn over the Sahara and buried in the forgiving sea are morbid testaments to the seductive ‘El Dorado’ just beyond their reach (Back 2009; Bini 2010). Part of a broader on-going theoretical and conceptual book project, this article addresses the re-Africanization of Spain by clandestine Senegalese migrants (van Sertima 1992; Stoller 2002; Evers Rosander 2010). Writing about gendered human trafficking and human smuggling processes as they pertain to clandestine land and sea movements from West Africa to Europe, in the book, I am rethinking what constitutes volition, agency, and victimization as a way to address human rights concerns of protection, prevention, and freedom. Rather than treating these particular contemporary African migration processes as separate entities that are positioned outside the grand narrative of the Global African Diaspora, I outline a theoretical formulation, which situates them as the latest geopolitical manifestations along the interconnected historical continuum of transatlantic slavery and mercantile imperialism (Ifekwunigwe 2010).

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Although both are aspirational, I make an important distinction between African migrations that are motivated by survival and those made by the ‘Brain Drain’ elite, who leave to pursue higher education or professional employment opportunities in Europe or North America. In The making of African America: the four great migrations, Ira Berlin situates the latter within the fourth great migration that is gradually transforming African American cultures and politics: ‘these migrations provide a glimpse of the future, for the new history has not one story line but many and has not one direction but several’ (2010, 9). If one looks across the Atlantic from North America to Europe, the political dynamics of ‘race’, ethnicity, gender, class, and belonging for successive generations of Africans, whether undocumented immigrants or legal citizens, are shaped and informed by the similar and different historical circumstances of both slavery and (post)colonialisms (Carter 2010a; Ifekwunigwe 2010). If clandestine West African migrants are able to settle and create families in European destinations (primarily, Spain, Greece, Italy, and the United Kingdom), their children will not be among the scattered ‘Afropolitan’, which is a term that was coined by the writer and novelist Taiye Tuakli-Wosornu to characterize her own (and this author’s) itinerant and complex background.: ‘…not citizens, but Africans of the world…Where our parents sought safety in traditional professions like doctoring, lawyering, banking, engineering, we are branching into fields like media, politics, music, venture capital, design’ (2005). Since Tuakli-Wosornu’s (2005) online essay ‘Bye-Bye Barbar’ went viral, as a mode of identification, Afropolitan has taken on a life of its own. The global positioning of self-described and designated Afropolitans has resulted in a flurry of new literary works of fiction (Cole 2012; Unigwe 2012; Adichie 2013; Selasi 2013), which reflect the same geopolitical conjuncture of Africa, Europe, and/or North America which I explore here and in my book. Yet, I hasten to add that social reinvention and unfettered creative expression, which offset the quest for home, are luxuries afforded Afropolitans with excess cultural capital. Undocumented migrants, without legal citizenship, do find community and create new forms of multi-ethnic and multinational migrant cosmopolitanism (Mbembe 2001). At the same time, as (in)visible strangers, they must labour in the informal and exploitative economies at the opposite end of the socio-economic spectrum (Carter 2010a; Ifekwunigwe 2006, 2010; El-Tayeb 2011).

In his article ‘Rewriting the African Diaspora: Beyond the Black Atlantic’, historian Paul Zeleza provides a useful typology of ‘contemporary diasporas’ as those which began to emerge in the late nineteenth century and distinguishes them on the basis of three waves including ‘African diasporas of structural adjustment’:

...the diasporas of structural adjustment have been formed since the 1980s, out of the migrations engendered by economic, political and social crises and the destabilizations of structural adjustment programmes (2005, 55).

These new transnational/extracolonial African diasporas unsettle the conceptual tidiness of Europe, Africa, and the African Diaspora as discursive, historical, and geopolitical formations (Hamilton 1997; Falola and Afolabi 2007, 2008; Grillo and Mazzucato 2008; Ifekwunigwe 2010). That is, I suggest that there is a new extracolonial logic underpinning these migrations that does not adhere to former colonial and thus geopolitical relations between these sovereign African nations and
their former European colonizers (Ifekwunigwe 2010). With stringent European Union (EU) border controls and immigration restrictions, those who cannot enter Europe legally will do so ‘by any means necessary’.

Spanning more than five centuries and still unfolding, I argue that the unique gendered and racialized history of the Global African Diaspora (Gomez 2005; Berlin 2010), whose cornerstones are resistance, resilience, and innovation, is also in part both a history of continental Africa and Fortress Europe (Manning 2009; Carter 2010a; Gates 2010; Gilroy 2010). (Re)imagining ‘new’ temporal and spatial dimensions of African diasporas in Europe, within which there are even more compound and multiple forms, animates the ways in which, in all their specificity and complexity, the historical ideas, economic processes, and political projects of continental Africa and the Global African Diaspora are (and always have been) mutually constituted (Zeleza 2005; Ifekwunigwe 2006). Addressing undocumented African migration flows to the Western Mediterranean also shifts the traditional [Black] North Atlanticist African diasporic frame (Ifekwunigwe 2010; Zeleza 2010), thereby highlighting older and established trade and migratory routes between North Africa and Southern Europe (van Sertima 1992). In the words of Chinua Achebe: ‘...the shores of northern Africa and southern Europe enclose, like two cupped hands, the waters of the world’s most famous sea, perceived by the ancients as the very heart and centre of the world’ (2009, 77).

With their geographical proximity to continental Africa, mainland southern Spain and more recently the Canary Islands have become stepping stones if not destination points for clandestine African migrants fleeing for their survival to Europe (Melly 2011). As an Autonomous Spanish community, the Canary Islands also known as the Canaries, are a constellation of 13 islands located off the northwest coast of continental Africa. Geopolitically, the Canaries represent the outermost reaches of both the (EU) and Fortress Europe as well as a frontier for those making a bid by boat for Spain (Carling 2007; Poeze 2010). In the past, travelling by land across the Sahara to Tangier in Morocco and then staging boat dashes across the Straits of Gibraltar to southern Spain or attempting to enter the Spanish enclaves on African soil of Ceuta and Melilla were the preferred routes (Harding 2000a; Campbell 2010; Kastner 2010). However, with stepped up border control of the Straits and fortification by electric fences of Ceuta and Melilla, the Senegalese coast became an important transit migration hub for both local Senegalese migrants and migrants from other Central and West African countries, many of whom had never travelled by sea (Carretero-Hernández and Carling 2012). As the next transit or, in certain instances, the terminal destination, the Canary Islands became the newest Spanish route and the first trajectory directly from Sub-Saharan Africa (Arango and Martin 2005; Carling and Carretero-Hernández 2011). In more recent times, Italy eclipsed Spain as the preferred destination for clandestine boat migrants, who frequently departed from the Libyan coast (Albahari 2006; Carter and Merrill 2007; Merrill 2011). In 2013, the preferred route for prospective North and West African clandestine migrants attempting to enter Europe is across the land border between Greece and Turkey:

This area of the external border neighbours Turkey and offers a natural transit bridge with Asia, which includes many source countries for migrants hoping to illegally cross
the border to the EU…migrants from northern and western Africa willing to illegally cross the EU external borders, are expected to increasingly take advantage of the Turkish visa policies, granting visas to a different set of nationalities than the EU, and the expansion of Turkish Airlines, to transit through the Turkish air borders to subsequently attempt to enter the EU illegally, either by air or through the neighbouring land or sea borders (Frontex 2012, 39–40).

Frontex is the European Agency for the Management of Operational Cooperation at the External Borders of the Member States of the EU. As the findings of the Frontex 2012 Risk Analysis reflect, the EU has yet to stem the tide of desperation that contributes to these clandestine migration flows; for, as one border is sealed another border is made porous (Ifekwunigwe 2006).

The temporal frame of my discussion is from 2006, which roughly corresponds to the peak in the surge of clandestine sea migration from Senegal to the Canary Islands of 31,700 migrants (Frontex 2010, 34), to 2011, when the numbers decreased significantly to 340 migrants (Carretero-Hernández and Carling 2012, 409) due to the two-pronged approach of increased patrolling of the Atlantic and enforced repatriation agreements with Senegal. My critical analysis is comprised of four parts that in turn address the political, economic, racialized, and moral dimensions of clandestine boat migration. First, I situate these primarily young and male Senegalese movements within the broader historical context of earlier African ‘protest migrations’ in particular and political protests in general, which are themselves differentially gendered (Asiwaju 1976; Herbst 1990). Second, with European incomes 10–50 times higher than continental African wages and Senegalese unemployment rates of 50%, I reassess the human smuggling process from Senegal and the degree of choice and element of risk involved (Salt 2000; Carling 2007; de Haas 2007; Campbell 2010; Poeze 2010). Third, I offer an alternative reading of clandestine West African migration to Europe through the Mediterranean Basin and now the northern Atlantic than much of the conventional migration literature, which still tends to favour ‘one size fits all’ structural approaches to policy solutions and social change that may be differentiated on the bases of gender, ethnicity, and social class, but still do not address the enduring and relational impact of what I call the popular folk concept of race on the ways in which migrants are perceived and received (Pastore et al. 2006; İçduyû 2007; Manzoni 2007; Bloch and Chimieti 2011; Carling and Carretero-Hernández 2011). The popular folk concept of ‘race’ is a potent dynamic social and cultural imaginary and a Victorian relic, the naturalization of which attaches symbolic meanings to real or manufactured physical differences among people (Ifekwunigwe 2004b). Along with other hierarchically positioned signifiers such as gender, generation, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, and social class, these create, explain, justify, and maintain social inequalities and injustices and perpetuate differential access to privilege, prestige, power, and ultimately citizenship and belonging (Ifekwunigwe 2004b). At Europe’s imagined and real borders, clandestine West African migrants lose their heterogeneous Africanity and gain an essentialized blackness (Ifekwunigwe 2006, 2004a, 2010). Finally, I draw parallels between contemporary clandestine boat migrations and transatlantic slavery in order to explore the moral economies of personhood and death (Gilroy 1993; Mbembe 2003; Albahari 2006).
Senegalese clandestine boat migrations as gendered youth protests

All your beautiful words
All your beautiful promises
We still wait for them
You promised me I would have a job
You promised me that I would never go hungry
You promised me that I would have real work and a future
Actually, so far I still see nothing
That’s why I decided to flee, that’s why I’m clearing out in this canoe
I swear! I cannot stay here one more second
Better to die than live in such conditions, in this hell
Come what may
I prefer to die
(Awadi and Kirikou 2006)
http://www.studiosankara.com/sunugaal.html

The retelling of contemporary histories of victimization and exploitation would be incomplete without the dominant counter-narratives of rebellion, liberation, innovation, survival, and protest such as, ‘Sunugaal’, which means ‘our canoe’ in Wolof, a popular 2006 rallying cry and lament by Senegalese rapper and record producer DJ Awadi (Skelton 2007). Continuing a grand griot tradition (Diop 1995), this track was first posted on the web accompanied by a poignant slideshow depicting young Senegalese men disembarking at the Canary Islands after arduous sea journeys in overcrowded and rickety wooden fishing boats also called pirogues in French. ‘Sunugaal’ is a diatribe against President Wade’s political regime that promised much but delivered very little. The unemployment rate remains at almost 50% and 70% of the population lives on $2 a day. Wade the then 81-year-old incumbent won his 2007 bid for re-election. Now 85, he ran for a third term in February 2012 and was defeated by his former prime minister and political mentee, 50-year-old Macky Sall. The platform on which Sall sailed to victory promised a ‘new era’ for Senegal, West Africa’s most stable democracy (Wittmann 2008). The jury is still out and his constituents are waiting and watching. As such, what I am recounting here is a politics of the recent past that have contributed to Wade’s defeat as well as to the gendered youth protest migrations that are the subject of this essay (Parker 2008).

Wade faced significant opposition from urban youth, including a group of rappers and other disgruntled young citizens, who formed a coalition that calls itself ‘Y’en a marre’ or ‘Enough is Enough’ (Young 2011). With 40 local chapters and the slogan ‘my voting card is my weapon’, their goal was to encourage youth eligible to vote to exercise their democratic rights and unseat Wade, the co-founder of the Senegalese Democratic Party (Lewis and Ba 2011). Writing about the political activism of urban Senegalese youth between 1988 and 1994, Senegalese historian Mamadou Diouf reminds us that these youthful protests in 2011 were neither new in form nor content:

At stake is the relationship between the national memory and local memories. The new urban order is being elaborated through democratic innovation and the crises that today rock African postcolonies. Through protests, clean-up campaigns, murals, and memorials, the imaginary and the conscience of the young and marginal of Dakar, who have become a social movement, mark their possession of urban spaces to oppose the state – its official nationalist history and its economic policies in the era of structural adjustment (1996, 249).
With half the population of 12 million under the age of 18, Senegal is a youthful nation (Focus Migration 2007; Scheid 2007; Melly 2011). Urban youth comprise more than 40% of the 50% who are unemployed (Ralph 2008, 1). The on-going social transformation of urban Senegalese youth from subordinates to local African moral traditions and values to champions of globalization and transnationalism as channelled through the fusion of politics, arts, and popular culture is in direct response to the perceived political and economic failings of the colonial independence project at the level of the family, the state and the nation (McLaughlin 2001; Diouf 2003; Ralph 2008; Perry 2009; Herson 2011). Anthropologist and cultural theorist Michael Ralph’s call for a disaggregation of the ‘youth’ term is worth quoting as it is overwhelmingly the urban, marginal and male that are fleeing in sunugaals or fishing boats:

Instead of acknowledging that “youth” refers to a demographic geographically isolated (in urban areas), gendered (as young men, more socially mobile than their female peers) and classed (as economically marginal) – a demographic produced in conjunction with the economic trials of postcoloniality, the state identifies lawless and idle youth as the source of social problems. In this way, “youth” are permanently disarticulated from civil society (2008, 11).

Social disarticulation breeds social dispossession (Gavin 2007; Ludl 2008). Reaching back into the annals of political economy as well as colonial and (post)colonial African history, I borrow from Tiebout (1956), Asiwaju (1976), and Herbst (1990), respectively, to suggest that rather than being mere economic migrations, these movements are also migrations of protest. These individualized contemporary youthful Senegalese protest migrations are not to be confused with earlier and long-standing collective Murid trade diasporas (Carter 1997; Babou 2002; Stoller 2002; Riccio 2003; Evers Rosander 2010; Buggenhagen 2012). They are both transnational in form and function. However, the specific purpose of Murid trade diasporas was the production of a global African commercial diaspora, which was still steeped in the foundational tenets of the Murid brotherhood (Diouf 2000). Contemporary Senegalese youth protest migrations by boat may have Murid ties, but more stringent immigration restrictions in Europe and the USA have transformed these migration chains: ‘Once considered a matter of exploiting social networks and seeking brotherly aid, migration is increasingly imagined as a matter of chance or luck, and as involving a personal engagement with risk’ (Melly 2011, 368). Asiwaju defines a protest migration as ‘a series of unarmed but effective expressions of resentment’ (1976, 578); in this case against a particular European colonial regime that was perceived to be more austere than another. Migrants moved from one colonized African region to another, such as from French West Africa to neighbouring British colonies on the Gold Coast (Asiwaju 1976). In the case, of Senegalese youth en route to the Canaries, a sort of ‘colonisation in reverse’ (Bennett 1966/2000, 16) takes place. Dissatisfaction with economic and political conditions at home lead them to risk life and limb en route to the imagined paradise of Europe’s southern frontier (Ifekwunigwe 2006; Sy 2006). This utopian imagining, where the streets are paved with gold and replete with opportunities, presents a provocative and paradoxical ‘new’ narrative for Europe (Ifekwunigwe 2006; El-Tayeb 2011). One could argue, as Helff (2008) does, that these aspiring Europeans uphold the foundational ethos of an
‘old’ Europe and in doing so embody a more ‘authentic’ European identity than the subject-citizen Europeans who deny them entry, citizenship, and humanity.

In ‘Titanic Tales of Missing Men’, Melly suggests that it is the very nature of Senegalese society, as it is in constant transformation, that determines the differential role men and women play in these migration protests:

…this new genre of pirogue mythmaking coincided with complex social and political transformation that rendered men’s migration itineraries – considered for decades to be a crucial avenue for realizing masculine adulthood, solidifying brotherly networks, accumulating wealth, and staking claim to social presence in Senegal – simultaneously more unlikely and more urgent. In contrast to men, women frequently played supporting roles in these tales, as they mourned, worried, pleaded and waited (2011, 363).

Carretero-Hernández and Carling’s ethnographic research also supports this claim: ‘notions of manhood, honor, pride, responsibility, and courage intertwine in accounts of the decision to embark on a pirogue to Europe’ (2012, 411). However, the limits of women’s willingness to support these protest migrations is reflected in the activism of Yayi Bayam Diouf, who is the mother of then 26-year-old Alioune Diof. Alioune Diof was among 81 young men, who lost their lives to the sea on an unsuccessful 2006 voyage. Yayi Bayam Diouf formed Association des femmes pour la lutte contre l’émigration clandestine (Collective of Women in the fight against clandestine migration) now called Collectif des Femmes pour Le Développement Intégré (Collective of Women for Integrated Development) and mobilized 374 mourning Senegalese mothers. In an interview with the International Organization for Migration (IOM), Diouf laments: ‘This is all part of our efforts to remind all of those who say “Barca or Barsakh” (Barcelona or death) that we, the women, will have to carry the burden of their untimely deaths, day after day’ (IOM 2006). As counter-narratives of protest migration, this collective maternal activism, rooted in the feminization of poverty that is a direct result of the departures and deaths of sons, brothers, and husbands, is situated at the intersection of feminist discourses on the politics of grief as well as on gender, development, and resistance (Sosa 2011).

The dreams of young Senegalese men are adrift on the Atlantic as they attempt to reach the Canary Islands in order to create employment opportunities that will generate income to send back to their extended families and also enhance their status as potential marriage candidates (Carretero-Hernández and Carling 2012). Venables’ ethnographic study of ‘Senegalese Women and the Cyber Café’, reveals that young Senegalese women also have migration aspirations, which they hope to successfully accomplish by meeting European men online with whom they can form relationships and eventually relocate to Europe:

Whereas men seek temporary stepping-stones to the West through creating social and professional links with tourists or Europeans living in Senegal, women rely upon forming romantic and sexual relationships. Moreover, rather than framing their use of contacts as a search for temporary economic assistance, I argue that women are using the Internet to look for someone on whom they can depend in the long-term (2008, 475).

Young Senegalese men and women are both striving for opportunities in what they imagine to be the economic paradise of Europe. However, as was the case with the
older African diasporic formations of transatlantic slavery and (post)colonialisms, at every stage of this migration process, strategies are highly gendered (Ifekwunigwe 2004a, 2006; Khosravi 2010). That is, Senegalese migrant women and men may share a similar destination, but by virtue of their glocalized structural positions, their destinies will be very different. On International Women’s Day, Ambassador William Lacy Swing, Director General of the IOM, addressed the specific dangers female migrants face: ‘For many women and girls, migration is a way to fulfil their potential, to develop and exercise their human rights. But being both migrant and female also exposes them to risk – the risk of being subjected to violence’ (IOM 2013). Due to their undocumented status, employment options for clandestine migrant women and men are limited to the informal sector and related tourist economies (Hammargren 2013). When the Spanish economy was healthier, men could find work in the agricultural and construction industries while women worked in the Spanish informal service sector as domestics, nannies, on the beach as hair braiders for the tourist trade and in certain instances, as sex workers (Evers Rosander 2010; Kastner 2010). Evers Rosander’s ethnographic research on gender relations and female autonomy among Senegalese migrants in Tenerife, the largest and most populous of the Canary Islands, highlights the ways in which shifts in social status transform gender relations once migrants arrive and settle: ‘In Tenerife, Senegalese men feel more powerless than in Senegal in relation to the migrant women, who sometimes earn a lot more money, more than most men, and moreover have Spanish gender politics on their side’ (2010, 94). This latest (in)voluntary transnational circulation of African peoples, of which Senegalese clandestine migrant men and women are a part, illuminates the complexities and politics of new African diasporic processes in the latest globalizing age and forces a reassessment of the dialectics of structure and agency within which one must be mindful of the sexualized, racialized, and gendered dynamics of migrant labour in informal and clandestine economies.

Journey of no return: the limits of choice

Young people increasingly comb the shores south of Dakar seeking out former fishermen that might captain a tiny wooden canoe with precious little hope of ever making European landfall. This is not just folklore of the diaspora...the migration is inspired by a kind of perfect global storm. In European countries, a quiet search has been going on for some time in an effort to continually replenish a declining and increasingly ageing labor force....Despite official denials, Europe will be dependent on migrant labor for years to come (Carter 2010b, 2).

Extracted from Donald Carter’s insightful book, Navigating the African Diaspora: The Anthropology of Invisibility, this quotation encapsulates the political economy of the informal human smuggling enterprise in Senegal (Carling 2007; Poeze 2010). The brokers are not part of transnational crime syndicates but rather include experienced local fishermen with a deep reverence for the secrets of the sea and an awareness of its dangers (Pastore et al. 2006; Carling 2007; İclişük 2007; Manzoni 2007; Poeze 2010). Global Positioning Systems are frequent navigational tools, which facilitate these journeys but also make it easier for clandestine migrant boats to be apprehended at sea (Carling 2007; Poeze 2010). Other groups of clandestine African sojourners, such as those travelling from Tangier, Morocco across the Straits of
Gibraltar to Tarifa, Spain or from Tripoli, Libya across the Mediterranean to the Italian island of Lampedusa, have been comprised of men, women, and children from every corner of the African continent (Pastore et al. 2006; Carling 2007; Içduyu 2007; Manzoni 2007; Poeze 2010). On the boats bound for the Canary Islands from the Senegalese coast, those with labour to sell are predominantly young unemployed or under-employed local urban Senegalese men between the ages of 15 and 28 (Carling 2007; Campbell 2010; Poeze 2010). Their five to seven day/938 mile voyages costing on average $1311 are often financed by extended family members, suggesting that while these migrations are clandestine in nature, they are collective in their execution (Carling 2007; Campbell 2010; Poeze 2010). As one of the first recent clandestine migration sea routes directly from Sub-Saharan Africa to Europe through Spain and one of the longest, the degree of risk is very high. It is estimated that 40% of these boats capsize and do not reach their desired destination (Poeze 2010). In 2006 alone, it is estimated that more than 30,000 arrived on the shores of the Canary Islands, while 6000 perished en route (Carling 2007; Skelton 2007).

The 2000 UN Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime and its two Protocols on Trafficking and Smuggling make distinctions between coercion and consent, which provide the parameters for differentiating between what are victimized human trafficking and volitional human smuggling, respectively (Bhabha 2005; United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime 2011). On this basis, the fact that these Senegalese young men wittingly paid for their sea passages to the Canary Islands makes them smuggled agents rather than trafficked victims. However, as Bhabha and Zard argue:

There is no question that smugglers are taking advantage of the smuggled person’s desperation or vulnerability but just because the smuggler’s offer is exploitative does not necessarily mean that the smuggled migrant is coerced. However, if the smuggled migrant has no other acceptable options... unless he or she took up the offer, then the exploitative offer might legitimately be considered coercive. Formal consent in these situations (because the migrant sees no other way out) does not alter the coercive nature of the agreement (2006, 8). In other words, if poverty is considered a form of persecution, then the extent of choice involved in the decision to migrate must also be reassessed: ‘Pirogue migrants are not fatalistic, as the “kamikaze” label would imply, but actively engage with the risks and see the perilous journey as a purposeful and justifiable step towards a better future’ Carretero-Hernández and Carling 2012, 415).

Racialized strangers in paradise: overlapping political economic geographies of island tourism and clandestine migration

Some have argued that the branding of Africans as inferior emerged as exploitation of Africa’s natural resources, including African bodies as cheap labor, increased. In other words, in order to legitimize the abuse of another human, colonial masters had to diminish the humanity of their subjects and emphasize the otherness of the place from which they came (Iweala 2012, 72).

Spain is the third most popular vacation destination in the world, and tourism makes up 32% of the Canary Islands’ gross domestic product. The Canaries have become a
particularly desirable holiday refuge for white British tourists escaping gloomy winters (O'Reilly 2000). At the peak of the exodus in 2006, before Spain negotiated a repatriation agreement with Senegal and before Frontex began patrolling the Atlantic waters between Senegal and the Canaries, it was not uncommon for several boats a day loaded with 80–100 migrants to land at the port of Los Cristianos in Tenerife. Boat loads of young black African men frequently suffering from dehydration, exhaustion, heat exposure, hypothermia, and post-traumatic stress, provided ample visual spectacle for holiday-makers and residents, who in documentary footage and newsreels, could be seen videotaping their arrivals or peering at them through binoculars from the comfortable confines of their timeshare and condominium balconies (Poeze 2010). This latest complex African migration narrative is about South-North movements and the desperate attempts of the poor seeking better economic opportunities in the perceived wealthy paradise of Europe. This unfolding (post)colonial narrative is also about racialized transnational encounters and the over-lapping spatial, ‘racial’ and economic geographies of island tourism and clandestine migration. These two entangled worlds have been known to collide, such as when tourists have complained about the dead bodies of unsuccessful boat migrants washing up on the beach while they have been trying to enjoy their Spanish holiday (Ifekwunigwe 2006).

Epitomizing a cruel sort of serendipity, while conducting research for this article, I stumbled upon a website for Zegrahm Expeditions, which is an American travel company that for a starting price of $9000 per person will ferry privileged passengers along exactly the same Atlantic route from Dakar taken by Senegalese clandestine boat migrants; the voyage is billed as ‘Senegal to Spain with Cape Verde, Canary Islands, and Morocco’. Yet, there are significant disparities in the amenities on board the two types of vessels:

The Clipper Odyssey is a 110 passenger luxury expedition vessel... all cabins have [an] ocean view, [a] safe, [a] minibar, [an] individually controlled heat/air conditioner, [an] in-room music system, and [a] sitting area with sofa... all cabins have en suite bathroom[s] complete with [a] shower http://www.zeco.com/expeditions/africa/senegal-spain/itinerary?departure=MATL1201

In contrast, in Miranda Poeze’s postgraduate Anthropology thesis about the decision-making strategies of unsuccessful migrants from Senegal to the Canary Islands, one of her informants described the conditions aboard his boat:

We were on open sea for eight days. The fourth day, water started to enter the boat. At that time, food and water was also finished... the fifth day, we encountered a big European ship that was fishing for tuna. They gave us bread and milk and a little bit of water, but they refused to take us with them. We asked them the way for Nouadhibou (Mauritania), but they didn’t want to tell us... When we continued our trip, some people fell overboard and died. The conditions were hard and we really wanted to reach land as quickly as possible as everybody was afraid to die (2010, 3).

If their sea journey is successful, how Senegalese boat migrants are received by Spanish authorities upon disembarking is directly tied to their undocumented status. Once a boat enters Spanish waters, such as those near the Los Cristianos port of Tenerife, it will be towed into the harbour by the Guardia Civil (The Spanish Coast
Guard). The Cruz Roja (The Red Cross) will be on hand at the port to perform medical assessments and to treat anyone who might be suffering from exposure, exhaustion, or dehydration. Any minors under the age of 18 are separated from the adults and under Spanish law immediately become wards of the State. From the port, the migrants are taken by bus to the local police station, where they are interviewed and during which there are attempts made to establish their nationalities. It is likely that the migrants will be detained in overcrowded, cramped, and unsanitary living conditions for the Canary Islands’ resources are being stretched to breaking point. In the past, the longest clandestine migrants could be detained was 40 days. However, by law, the detention time has been extended to 60 days in order to facilitate cooperation with sending countries and eventual repatriation (Carretero-Hernández and Carling 2012). If the nationality of the migrant cannot be ascertained, then he or she is transported to the Spanish mainland and released into the community, where he or she will join the throngs of clandestine migrants struggling to eke out a living in the informal economies and during one of Spain’s worst economic recessions. In fact, with Spanish youth unemployment rates approximating those in Senegal, there is no doubt that the present dire state of the economy has had an impact on clandestine boat migration.

By 2015, it is estimated that between 15 and 20 million migrants will have made a bid for Western Europe via Spanish territories (Harding 2000a, 2000b). I refer to this as the paradoxical and racialized politics of exigency and exclusion (Ifekwunigwe 2006). In order to cope with labour shortfalls, European countries, such as Spain, distinguish between the ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ sort of immigrant. That is, the gates are thrown wide open for skilled workers, whereas the doors are slammed shut for unskilled workers from developing countries. Unless of course, the latter have cheap labour to sell. Thousands of white British and northern European expatriates retire to Spain every year without difficulty (O’Reilly 2000). Eastern European immigrants are welcomed and in certain instances actively recruited. On the other hand, North African, West African, and Latin American illegals experience racial discrimination and hostility from the indigenous Spanish population who have reinvented themselves as ‘White’ (Ifekwunigwe 2006). According to Kitty Calavita: ‘the legal construction of illegality consigns these immigrants to the margins of the economy…racial ‘otherness,’ exclusion and economic function are mutually exclusive’ (1998, 529).

While not discounting the importance of the traditional asylum and refugee regime and its concomitant human rights agenda of aid and protection, one could argue that asylum and refugee discourses and policies in fact provoke polarized public expressions of either liberal paternalism or right wing xenophobia, particularly regarding social integration and the role of the welfare-state (Geddes 2002; Carling and Carretero-Hernández 2011). Immigration policies are reproduced as popular narratives of nationalism (Hier and Greenberg 2002). As border-crossers, African Boat People or ‘Kamikaze Terrorists’ as they were described by one Spanish official (Carretero-Hernández and Carling 2012), have violated the sanctity of sovereign borders, which are not just territorialized but also gendered and racialized. Floya Anthias defines this transgression as the politics of ‘translocational positionality’…‘the social relations of “othering” on the one hand, and resource struggles on the other’ (2001, 633). The racialized politics of translocational positionality are most evident in the newsreel footages and press photographs that circulate by the Internet and other news media (Carter 2010b).
photographic essay on ‘African Immigration to Europe’ (http://www.boston.com/bigpicture/2009/01/african_immigration_to_europe.html) is an image by Manuel Lerida, who documented a boat load of 76 Senegalese migrants being towed into the Los Cristianos port of Tenerife by Spanish officials decked out in protective gear including contagion masks and gloves. This evocative image, among many, illustrates the biopolitics and the alterity of African diasporic bodies, which, marked as diseased, are then subjected to policing, surveillance, management, and literal containment (Richmond 2002; Carling 2007; Carter and Merrill 2007; Poeze 2010; Iweala 2012).

That psychic stain and the sea’s captive citizens

He’s gone now, resting peacefully, I hope, in the arms of his murderous friend—that sea. But through the window of my memories I still see him, tossing a net toward the sun, watching those trapped silvery codfish-leaping hysterically against captivity (Parks 2005, 38).

This is not the first time Africans have been crammed like sardines into vessels and transported across hostile waters (Smallwood 2007, Brown 2008). The seeds of these contemporary African migrations were sown as part of the same economic imperatives of transatlantic slavery and mercantile imperialism (Ifekwunigwe 2006, 2010). From Garvey’s ‘Back to Africa’ Movement, to Rastafari, to the modern day pilgrimages of middle-class African American and African Caribbean roots tourists, the ‘Mama Africa’ to which so many descendants of slaves yearn to return in spirit if not in body, is not the same Africa that contemporary African migrants are leaving behind (Chabal 1996; Hartman 2007; Holsey 2008). Living Africa is vast, heterogeneous, complex, and contradictory and thus can be partially defined by but not reduced to the lowest common denominators of AIDS, corruption, tribalism, wars, ethnic cleansing, poverty, famine, and political violence (Iweala 2012). Abstract theories and on the ground analyses of contemporary Africa and her most recent diasporas must continue to acknowledge and include the unsettling impact of under-development of which inequalities in the distribution of the fruits of global capitalism are just the latest manifestations.

All this ‘journeying and journeying’ (Bennett 1966/2000, 16), of Africans demands that we must never forget the social injustices nor the inhumanities of transatlantic African slavery (Smallwood 2007; Brown 2008). By juxtaposing the Middle Passage and these more recent clandestine Atlantic boat passages, I am not arguing that clandestine boat migration is synonymous with the inhumanity of transatlantic slavery. For one, African slaves en route to the Americas and the Caribbean were undesired but desirable commodities on whose backs entire plantation economies and industrial empires were built. Clandestine African migrants on their way to Europe are unwanted and ‘officially’ unnecessary; yet they represent an invisible informal workforce literally and figuratively performing the dirty work left behind by European citizen-subjects with spiralling birth rates (McDowell 2008; Merrill 2011). Instead, as a provocation, I am suggesting that we consider the limits of volition, the degree of risk, and the material conditions en route for clandestine African boat migrants in order to think about historical continuities, in particular, the persistent devaluation of African life and the looming
possibility of death (Smallwood 2007; Brown 2008). If in the eyes of the state, you are socially dead, why not risk death itself (Patterson 1985; Gilroy 1993; Mbembe 2003)?

Conclusion

Volition or Imposition, Power or Freedom may yet prove the pervasive question of the twenty-first century. And there, hopefully, Africa [and its Global African Diaspora] will not be content with the role of the perpetual victim of alien binaries. At the moment, the continent is thrust into the limelight as the latest frontier of that conflict in a new Scramble for Africa – this time for her soul, but not yet as potential haven for the howling lost souls of her erstwhile denigrators – that wisdom is yet to come. Even more optimistically, in the process of that scramble, hidden values will also be unveiled, values that will confer on her an unaccustomed status – the vital role of a Global Cultural Resource and – Arbiter (Soyinka 2012, 199).

As an anthropologist, I am excited to see solid multi-sited ethnographic research emerging on these heart breaking and heroic events, which, unfolding on a daily basis and in real time, unsettle simplistic narratives of a complex continent and its diverse peoples (Albahari 2006; Carling 2007; Evers Rosander 2010; Kastner 2010; Khosravi 2010; Poeze 2010; Melly 2011; Carretero-Hernández and Carling 2012). When I began this project in 2000, this burgeoning body of scholarship was almost non-existent. Broader theoretical, comparative and conceptual scholarship that is situated in and engaged with African Diaspora Studies, in all its uneven interdisciplinary forms (Olaniyan and Sweet 2010), must also accompany this critical empirical research (Carter 2010a). By conceptualizing southern Europe, North Africa, and the Mediterranean as geopolitical, transnational, and African diasporic spaces while also still emphasizing the racialized, sexualized, and political economic dynamics of gender, youth, and social class, I intend to provoke dialogue and debate about the constituent historical and political dynamics of other ‘great African migrations’ of the Global African Diaspora (Berlin 2010). In doing so, my goal is to expand the conceptual frame of the Black Atlantic (Gilroy 1993) so that it extends to the fertile geopolitical and intellectual terrain of the African Mediterranean, which is traversed by land and sea by so many contemporary North and West African clandestine migrant men, women, and children, who aspire to better lives in Europe (Ifekwunigwe 2010; Zeleza 2010).

Those of us who are working literally and figuratively across geographical and disciplinary borders and at the interface of Europe, Africa and the African Diaspora must frequently defend our methodological and conceptual approaches, which simultaneously complicate the tidiness of area studies and illuminate the lived complexities of transnational studies (Carter 2010a). Elsewhere (Ifekwunigwe 2010), I have also written about the institutional hegemony of US African Diaspora Studies and how that can relegate to the margins scholarship and narratives of the Global African Diaspora outside of the Americas and the Caribbean. For the rules of engagement for Global African Diaspora Studies to be truly dialogic and for the expanding discipline to be both inclusive and representative, any comparative interrogations must be interdisciplinary, historically grounded, ethnographically situated and mindful of institutional hierarchies and infrastructural deficits that contribute to the perpetuation of hegemonic discourses including those that ignore ‘the danger of a single story’ (Adichie 2009).
References


