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Armelle Choplin, Jérôme Lombard

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STRANDED IN MAURITANIA:
SUB-SAHARAN MIGRANTS IN A POST-TRANSIT CONTEXT

Armelle Choplin and Jérôme Lombard

INTRODUCTION

“Here, it is ‘Nouadhibou-du-monde’, le bout du monde, the end of the world,” said Idrissa looking at the ocean.¹ Stranded in Nouadhibou, the second Mauritanian town. Stranded like all these ships in Nouadhibou bay. Left stranded in Mauritania. This is how one could sum up the situation of Idrissa, a young Senegalese man we met in November 2008. He arrived here in 2007, hoping to cross the Atlantic Ocean and reach the Canary Islands by canoe. Yet, arriving in Nouadhibou, he discovered *‘it was too late’*. The European Union had imposed restrictions on migration and its borders had been “externalized” into “transit countries” like Morocco, Tunisia, Libya, Niger or Mauritania (Bredeloup and Pliez 2005; Collyer 2007; Brachet 2009). Thus, since 2006, the European Union has been supervising the Mauritanian coast with Spanish Guardia Civil agents, a helicopter and two motor launches. Now, the international migratory route that crossed Mauritania seems to be well and truly closed.

Based on several field studies since 2004, our research outlines the reversibility of the migratory phenomenon. A study of recent migration in Mauritania should take into account the different phases and its transformations over time. Three entangled temporalities can be underlined: long standing immigration in Mauritania, the transit period (2004–2008) and the present-day post-transit situation. Historically, in this area, migratory flows are tied to job offers. Since its independence in 1960, Mauritania has offered interesting opportunities in the fishing, trading and mining sectors for the West African workforce. Mauritanian people admit readily *“foreigners have built the country.”* In 2001, the discovery of oil reinforced this historical pull effect. Yet, in 2005 and 2006, the media focused overwhelmingly on the transit phenomenon and emphasized the “illegal flows” towards Europe (Haas 2007). They presented all sub-Saharan

¹ We are grateful to Judith Scheele, post-doctoral research fellow at All Souls College (Oxford), and Mary Pinet for their helpful comments on drafts and the translation.

people in Nouadhibou as “potential illegal migrants,” even before they tried to cross or thought of doing so. Moreover, they ignored the fact that regional migrations played a central role in the national economy and that most of the sub-Saharan people had been living and working there for a long time. Thirdly, as the European Union’s policies are tougher than ever, migrants are getting stuck in Nouadhibou and Nouakchott (the capital city). In these cities, they live with working immigrants who arrived a long time ago.

Obviously, the “transit phenomenon,” that has drawn media attention, is the shortest of the three migratory temporalities (before, during and after the transit). As migrants get stuck in Mauritanian cities, it is currently interesting to pay attention to the spatial and social changes engendered by the arrival of migrants and their long-term settlement, especially in urban contexts. Thus, our chapter also sheds light on the social impacts of this “post-transit situation.”

We will first recall the transit and post-transit phases. Secondly, we will describe and analyse migrants’ everyday life in Nouadhibou and Nouakchott and their interactions with local society, highlighting how spaces and social relations are divided. Thirdly, we will stress the fact that Mauritanian migratory policies lead to the criminalisation of migrants and compound their difficulties. This “post-transit” stage gives rise to a new geopolitical order characterized by a spatial reversal (with the definition of bad places where are living migrants), increasing controls and fuels xenophobic comments from those who define themselves as “autochthons” towards the others who they consider as “foreigners”. Therefore, migration is an important issue for a country characterized by identity conflicts between Arab Africans (the Moors) and black Africans (Halpulaar, Wolof, Soninke).

BECOMING A TRANSIT COUNTRY

The recent focus of European media on illegal migrants in small fishing boats has led to an over-emphasis on illegal migration, neglecting the fact that foreigners have always constituted an important part of the Mauritanian population since independence was declared in 1960. Talking about transit only makes sense if we take into account the role played by Mauritania in West African migration more generally. At independence, 70% of Mauritians were nomads, and the country cruelly lacked skilled labour and clerks. Administrative posts were filled by workers from Western

Africa (Senegal, Mali, Guinea or Benin) who were also employed in the building trade, or in electricity, plumbing and laundry services. From 1957 onwards, the creation from scratch of the new capital, Nouakchott, offered much employment. In the north of the country, the mining of iron ore begun in 1952 with the establishment of the *Mines de fer de Mauritanie* (Miferma),² and a renewed interest in fishing turned Nouadhibou into a centre of attraction: the newly declared 'economic capital' of the country, where fortunes could be made quickly.³ At this time, few Moors showed any interest in the sea and its resources, which were mainly exploited by Senegalese fishermen who settled in the area (Diop and Thiam 1990; Marfaing 2005). Rather than a mere point of transit, Nouadhibou is first and foremost a city of migrants, both national and international, inasmuch as its history and its layout are directly linked to successive waves of migration (table 1). Pablo, a Canarian born in Nouadhibou recalls:

My grandfather left The Canaries in 1938 and arrived here by canoe. He was fleeing from the Spanish civil war. He was poor, poorer than Moorish people. I am not surprised at all to see African people trying to come to The Canaries by dinghy. My grandfather did the same thing but the other way round! (Interview, Nouadhibou, November 2007).

Table 1: Components and origins of the population in Nouadhibou (1958–2007)

	Moors (<i>bîdân, haratîn</i>)	Negro- Mauritians ⁴	Sub-Saharan Africans	Canarians	French	Moroccans	Total inhabitants
1958	1 200		250	315	230		1995
1963	2500	2000	2000	600	2000		9100
1970		11 500	3 000	1 000	1 500		18 000
1977							22 365
1988							59 158
1999							84 000
2007		79–99 000	15–20 000	150	20	5–600	100–120 000

Source: Bonte 2001; Choplin and Lombard 2008.

² Miferma (Mauritanian Iron Mining company) was nationalised in 1974 and renamed SNIM (*Société nationale industrielle et minière*).

³ As early as 1970, the population of Nouadhibou, estimated at 18,000 inhabitants, comprised 11,500 Mauritians, 3,000 sub-Saharan Africans, 1,800 French and 1,000 Spanish, mainly from the Canary Islands (Bonte 2001).

⁴ Since 1965 it has been difficult to distinguish exactly different groups of population in Mauritania. That type of criteria has not been registered anymore in successive national census whose results have not been published. This ethnic criteria and the ethnic proportion are very sensitive.

The Western Sahara has long been marked by regional and trans-regional exchange (Bonte 2001). Labour migration has a long history in the area. Among the African migrants, Senegalese and Malians were most strongly represented. The number of Senegalese resident in Mauritania has greatly fluctuated since national independence; they numbered in the tens of thousands until they were expelled or fled during the ‘events of 1989’,⁵ since when many have returned to Mauritania. Their number has increased over recent years, as, alongside many other sub-Saharanans, they hope to benefit from the economic upturn following the recent discovery of oil. Furthermore, the democratic transition that started in 2005—interrupted in August 2008 by a military putsch led by General ‘Abd al-‘Aziz—led people to expect a political opening, especially with the return of refugees from Senegal and Mali.⁶ In 2006, a report from the Mauritanian Ministry of employment numbered about 100,000 Senegalese (nearly half of the present foreigners in Mauritania). This figure does not take into account the persons who cross the border daily or the fishermen who come from Senegal by sea. In 2009, the Middas survey⁷ that we carried out on 325 Senegalese settled in the three major cities of Mauritania (Nouakchott, Nouadhibou and Rosso), confirmed the regularity of the arrivals from Senegal over more than ten years, whatever the period (before 2000, 2000–2004, 2005–2008, after 2008). Thus, Senegalese and more broadly West African migrants have long been essential to Mauritania’s economic dynamism.

⁵ ‘The events of 1989’ is the term used by Senegalese and Mauritians to refer to the struggles that took place along the Senegal River in April 1989 (Fresia 2009; Ciavolella 2010). Fuelled by the Mauritanian government, and initially opposing Moors to black African populations, the situation degenerated into open conflict between the two countries. Senegalese residents were driven out of Mauritania, and, in retaliation, Mauritians were evicted from Senegal.

⁶ During the events of 1989, ‘black’ Mauritians, especially Haalpulaar’en, were stripped of their nationality and expelled to the other side of the Senegal River (Fresia 2009; Ciavolella 2010). In June 2007, the former president, Sidi Ould Cheikh Abdellahi, encouraged refugees to return, as a step towards national reconciliation. Nearly 15 000 refugees returned.

⁷ This survey project was carried out by DIAL a French research unit from the Institut de Recherche pour le Développement (IRD). It was funded by Agence Nationale de la Recherche (ANR) and the Agence Française de Développement (AFD). The project called MIDDAS, and managed by Flore Gubert, tries to compare the everyday life, links with Senegal and remittances of Senegalese immigrants in France, Italia, Spain, Mauritania and Ivory Coast. We supervised the Mauritanian part of MIDDAS program in November 2009, with Jean-Noël Senne (INSEE-IRD).

The Transit Period and Its Media Coverage

Between August 2005 and May 2006, hundreds of black African migrants arrived in Nouadhibou and tried, on board fishermen's dinghies, to go up the coastline of Western Sahara and land on the Canary Islands, on Spanish and hence European Union territory. That was nothing but the latest stage of a long process. In the early 2000s, African migrants had been attempting to reach Europe via Northern Morocco, crossing the fifteen kilometres of the Strait of Gibraltar boarding tiny fishing vessels. In 2002, increased controls in the Mediterranean forced them to change route. They first tried the ports of Western Sahara, such as Laayoune, Dakhla and especially Tarfaya, situated just opposite the Canary archipelago (Map 1). When, with the events of October 2005 in Ceuta and Melilla,⁸ Moroccan border controls tightened, especially restricting travel to Morocco from Western Sahara and Mauritania, migrants attempting to reach the Canaries had to move their points of departure even further south.

In this new situation, Mauritania, located 800 kilometres south of the Spanish islands, was for a time at the centre of West African migration routes (Ba and Choplin 2005). In 2005, Nouadhibou became the place from which crossing appeared most feasible. First of all, the closure of the border with Western Sahara—which was, moreover, mined—made it impossible for migrants to reach Morocco. Tougher controls on fishing boats from Mauritania bound for the Canaries or Spain made it more difficult to disembark African crews taken on at Nouakchott or who had paid the captain for their sea passage. Finally, the completion of a paved road between Nouakchott and Nouadhibou in 2005 made travel to northern Mauritania easier for those wanting to make the crossing (Antil and Choplin 2003). Thus, in late summer 2005, the first fishing boats left Nouadhibou bound for the European islands, three days' sailing distance from the coast. Listen to Abdoulaye who succeeded in reaching the Canary Islands in 2006 (Map 1):

For five months, I had been waiting for an opportunity to cross from Nouadhibou. The 15th of August, I left the town at midnight and walked as far as La Gouera beach, 6 kilometres from Nouadhibou, located in the Western part of the Levrier Peninsula [See Map 2]. There, we boarded a small canoe, which took us offshore to a larger one. There were 129 of us. We had

⁸ In October 2005, in Morocco, some black African migrants tried to cross barriers and fences of Ceuta and Melilla, the Spanish enclaves. Seventeen of them were killed by Spanish policemen for having sought to enter the European Union.

35 petrol cans, a very good captain and a GPS program. Four days later, and 800 kilometers farther North, we landed alive on the Canary Island beach. It was very easy, we didn't suffer a lot. (Interview, Nouadhibou, January 2007).

Abdoulaye had just been expelled from the Canary Islands when he told us his story. He explained he was waiting for a new opportunity to go to Spain:

Now, it is more difficult. In 2006, people said The Canaries were facing Nouadhibou, almost linked up by a bridge! The canoes were nicknamed "Air Madrid" he added with a smile.

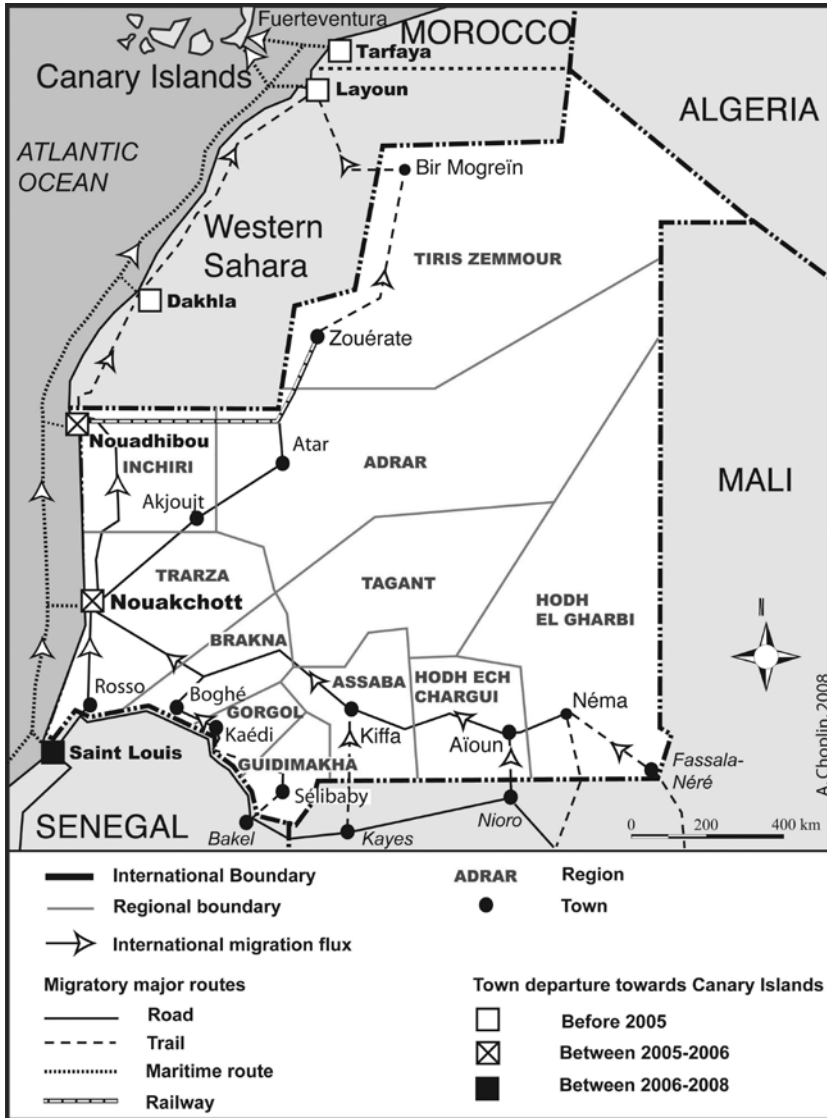
Closing the Sea: Externalisation of Mauritanian Migratory Policies

Departures from Nouadhibou to Europe peaked in winter 2006—as did shipwrecks: although some Africans succeeded in landing on the Canaries, many others lost their lives at sea.⁹ Paul who failed to cross the sea explained the brutal reversal in Nouadhibou:

Since the winter of 2006, the small harbour has been nicknamed "Samba Lakra", which means in Manding: go to one's death. That is the place from where canoes took us towards death. Everybody knew we might die while crossing the sea. But we had no choice. (Interview, Nouadhibou, January 2007)

Forced by public pressure, the European Union started to intervene from April 2006 onwards, by setting up a system of surveillance as part of Frontex, the agency in charge of managing the European Union's external borders: one helicopter and several surveillance crafts were sent out, and 150 men from the Spanish Guardia Civil were dispatched to train Mauritanian police in border control. Four thousand people were arrested and repatriated to Nouadhibou where, in summer 2006, a school was turned into a detention centre. Migrants who were arrested spent two to three days in this centre, nicknamed 'Guantanamo' ('Little Guantanamo'), before being taken by coach to the Senegalese border, with fifty Euros for each person. This vast system of control on the Atlantic shores seems to have paid off, as, at the end of 2009, the Spanish government had registered only 2,300 arrivals on the Canary Islands, as compared to 32,000 in 2006.

⁹ About 20,000 people are said to have attempted to reach Europe from Nouadhibou in 2006. The Catholic mission in Nouadhibou and the Mauritanian Red Crescent, respectively, estimate the deaths in route at 20% and 30% (and up to 40% in the blackest period, in February and March 2006).



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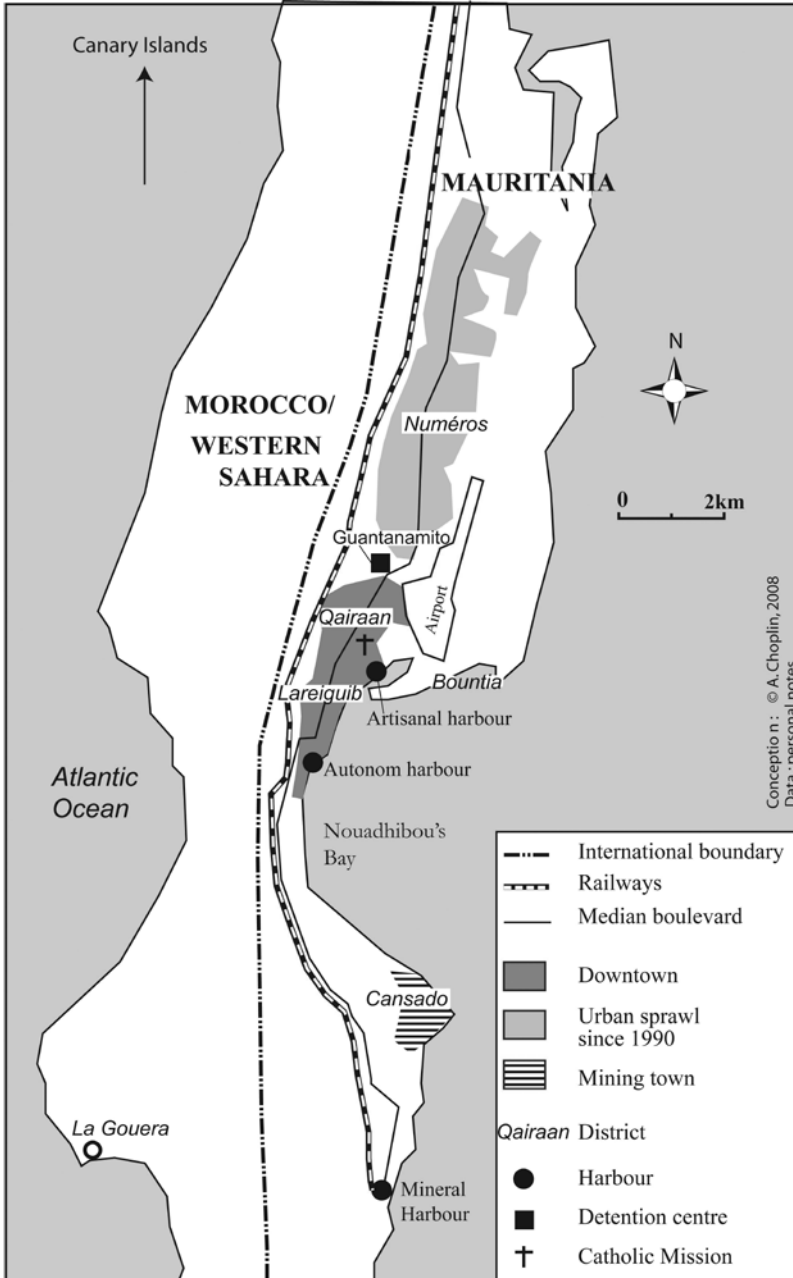
Map 1: Migration routes in Mauritania

The Frontex agency was satisfied with these results and jumped to the conclusion that trans-Saharan migrations towards Europe were finished. These figures mask hundreds of deaths and thousands of migrants who have been arrested, turned back or deported. In Nouadhibou, although stricter controls have not stopped departures altogether, they certainly act as a filter. Although some Mauritians or foreigners boast that they know the route the helicopter will take even before it takes off, and stress that nobody will ever be able to 'close the sea', the number of departures has decreased. As an immediate result of these controls, a large number of migrants find themselves stuck and eventually settle in Nouadhibou or in Nouakchott, where they join the many other immigrants who have come to look for work in Mauritania.

MIGRATIONS AND URBAN CHANGES

Spatial Boundaries, Social Divisions but Local Interactions

Among migrants hoping to reach Europe, only a very few manage to get through as soon as they arrive in Nouadhibou. Many more stay for some time, because they need to look for an opportunity to leave, have to earn enough money to pay for their journey, or because of repeated failures. They invest the city, particularly the downtown area. From the 1990s, Moors started to move away from the centre of the city, *Qairaan*, which they considered rundown and noisy because full of immigrants (Map 2). They decided to live in the North of the city, in a new, airy, less densely settled residential area called *Numerouaat* ('the Numbers'). The richest among them have built villas in 'Dubai' or 'Baghdad', the most recently-built residential quarters. The geographical shift of local inhabitants explains why the city has sprawled towards the North. Transit migrants settle in the centre of the city, left vacant by Moors, and in its various sub-sections with rather eloquent names ('Accra' and 'Ghana-Town'), and in the areas near the old fishing port ('*Lareiguib*', '*SNIM city*') (Choplin and Lombard 2008). Unlike the young vulnerable men waiting for a passage that has by now become illusory, the majority of 'old migrants' in Nouadhibou reside in the *Numerouaat*, especially in the earlier developments (*Socogim*, '*Premier Robinet*' and '*Deuxième robinet*' [First and second water-tap]). Most of them are not here to travel North, but rather to earn money to invest back home. Thus, the city is divided into three distinctive zones: the South of the city (*Qairaan*), where young adventurers are looking for a way to get to Europe and for temporary employment to fund their travels; the North



Conception n : © A. Choplin, 2008
Data : personal notes

© Armelle Choplin, 2008

Map 2: Nouadhibou

(*Numerouaat*) inhabited by Mauritians; and an intermediate zone (the older sections of the *Numerouaat*), home to migrants who have lived here for a while and who can draw on denser local social networks. The vacant space epitomizes the buffer landscape between the three areas. The main road, called “boulevard median” links them.

Because Nouakchott is much larger, migrants are more spread out there. Yet, some “old” popular quarters are known to be “immigrants’ quarters” such as ‘*Médina*’, ‘*Ksar*’, ‘*Cinquième*’, and ‘*Sixième*’ (Map 3). Our Middas survey shows that 25% of Senegalese immigrants have found a place to live thanks to a family, 24% thanks to a person from the same village, and 25% through fellow countrymen. Moreover, rents in these quarters are less expensive. These areas are mainly occupied by black Mauritanian people (Halpulaar, Soninke...). That is why they are often considered as “black areas” (in opposition to “white areas” where Moors live). Furthermore, some Moors call them “quarters of foreigners.” This vision is dangerous because it implies that black Mauritanian are foreigners; of course that is not the case. Although foreigners are numerous in ‘*Cinquième*’ or ‘*Sixième*’, they remain a minority. Migrants do not choose these areas because they are “black areas” but because the presence of long established migrants and strong networks help them to find accommodation easily. In both cities, spatial boundaries reproduce social divisions, linked to the date of arrival and the reasons for migration: if everybody owns his or her place in society, he also has his ‘place’ in the city.

Yet, interactions are strong: the newly arrived migrants rely on long-time settled migrants who act as intermediaries with local society. Networks of solidarity—whose scope should not be overestimated—have developed among nationals of the same country (Streiff-Fénart, Poutignat 2006). Every national community has its own association, more or less well organised and active, led by a representative, who is in charge of receiving and helping newcomers.¹⁰ In addition to these ‘official’ representatives, others act as *jatigi*, ‘referees’ or guarantors, because they are known locally and play an important part in the local economy.¹¹ For

¹⁰ In 2001, several associations of foreign nationals came together in the *Union des associations d'étrangers à Nouadhibou* (UAEN), allowing them to acquire a certain public visibility and local recognition. After some internal problems, the association disappeared. But, since December 2010, the FAMEM (Fédération des associations des migrants d'Afrique de l'Ouest) has been recognized officially by Mauritanian authorities.

¹¹ For a more detailed discussion of the role of the *jatigi* (‘correspondent’ in pulaar, meaning both landlord and trader), see Bredeloup (2007).

example, in Nouakchott in the district of '*Cinquième*', since 1993 the representative of Senegalese taxi drivers has been the correspondent of the powerful National Transport Union. Due to this position, he helps most of his countrymen to work as taxi drivers in this area:

I receive many men from Senegal who only know my name and the quarter I live in. Usually, I accommodate my compatriots for one week. Then, I introduce them to other drivers. I am a mediator. (Interview, Nouakchott, January 2007)

That is also the case of Idrissa, a Senegalese painter in his thirties, living in Nouadhibou:

I have been living in Nouadhibou since 2000. Over the years, Mauritanian and Spanish employers have come to trust me. I am a painter on small building sites. I live in a compound at 'Numeros'. The landlord is a Mauritanian Halpulaar. I supervise his compound. I help people from my region to find a room. I offer them a room in my compound. The landlord offers me a discount on my rent if I find him tenants. I can also propose my compatriots jobs in the building site I am working for. Yes, I am such a *jatigi*. But I have never been involved in the crossing business. (Interview, Nouadhibou, November 2008)

It is the same logic for Mamoudou, a Senegalese tailor who owns several ready-made clothes shops in Nouadhibou and Dakar:

I work with a Moor belonging to an influential tribe. He lets me shops and equipment. In exchange, we share the profits. Sometimes, I welcome and employ some young Senegalese when they arrive. (Interview, Nouadhibou, September 2007)

These examples shed light on the frequent interactions between these foreign businessmen and migrants. They offer a useful framework for understanding hierarchies based on work and employment. In the key sectors that attract large numbers of foreigners (fishing, transport, construction work, etc.), labour is mostly organised along similar lines: a Mauritanian contractor—frequently a Moor—dominates the sector and is backed up by local or foreign intermediaries (mostly black Mauritians or Senegalese from the Senegal valley) who offer insecure and badly-paid jobs to recently arrived migrants. The migrants are thereby made to fit into a society that is already strongly hierarchical and dominated by (white) Moors (*bîdân*), where they find themselves at the bottom of the pile, competing for jobs with *haratîn* (black Moors, descendents of former slaves). It is very difficult to move up to a higher level, especially for those who are newly arrived. Transport is one of the rare sectors in

which foreigners can own their vehicle. But this position is not frequent: most of the taxi drivers start working for a Mauritanian boss, like Abdou in Nouadhibou. They have fragile agreements and usually work on the unprofitable routes left vacant by the Mauritians. As they usually do not have all their papers and licence in order, they have to pay fines or bribes when they are controlled.

I am still on the same taxi route, between downtown and the harbour. I was born in Saint-Louis and arrived for the first time in Nouadhibou in 1986. Up to now, I have been a taxi driver. In 1989, because of “the events”, I went back to Senegal and was a taxi driver in Dakar. In 2001, I came back to Mauritania. I worked for a Mauritanian. In 2004, I helped my brother who owns a taxi car. (Interview, Nouakchott, January 2007).

Parallels can be drawn with fishing (Streiff-Fénart, Poutignat, 2006). In this sector, some foreigners have become essential figures in the local economy because of their detailed knowledge of local constraints and their longstanding presence in the economic and social environment of Nouadhibou:

John is Nigerian. He has been living in Mauritania for ten years. Everyday he goes to Bountia, a shore where trawlers have been stranded. There, fish is dried. Work is distributed between immigrants: Senegalese fish, Malians and Guineans salt and dry, Nigerians and Ghanaians buy and export. “*That’s labour division*” explains John with humour. He exports several containers of fish to Nigeria. He often goes to Lagos to take delivery of the containers. Mauritians tolerate his business because he pays considerable taxes to export the goods (Interview, Nouadhibou, September 2007).

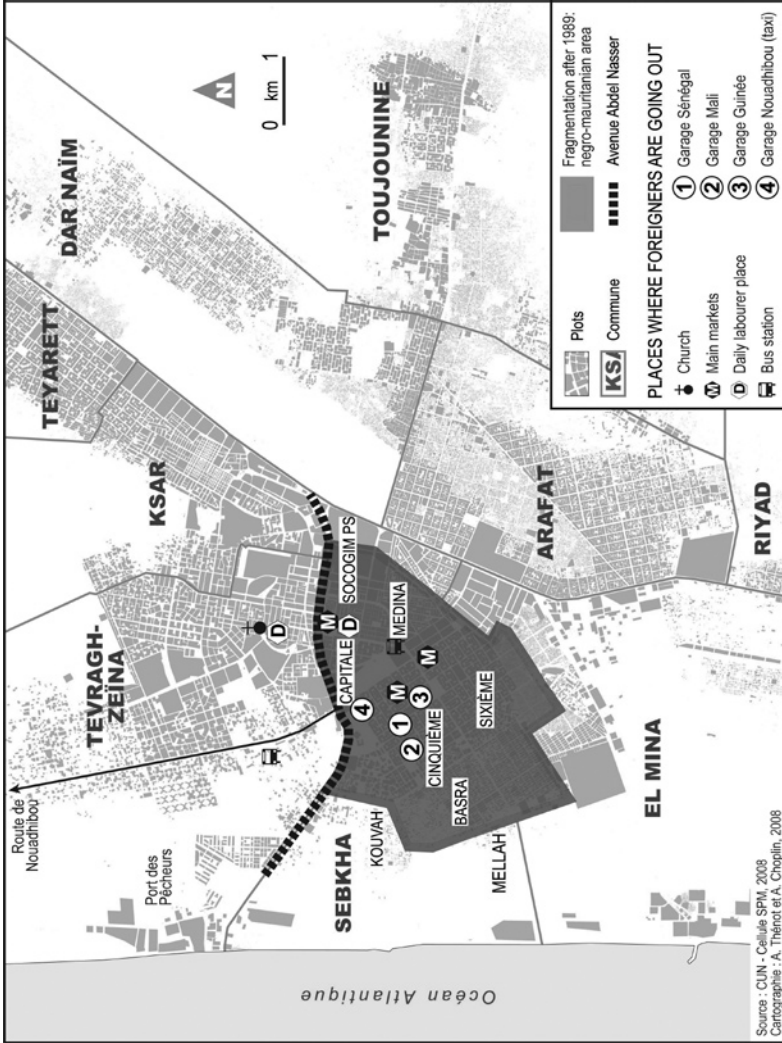
Following the model of small trans-national enterprises (Glick-Schiller, Basch L. & Szanton Blanc 1995; Portes, Guarnizo & Landolt 1999; Waldinger 2010), some foreigners take advantage of national borders, of their ability to cross them and therefore to benefit from price differentials. Such examples of success, based on the ability to claim to belong to two or more places at once, paint an unfamiliar image: one of migrants as active entrepreneurs, rather than as dependent and insecure wage-labourers exploited by rapacious locals. But, if these entrepreneurs want to stay and do their business, they have to share the profit or pay tax to the local society. One former Malian big business man explained to us:

I was one of the most important fish businessmen. I went to Hong Kong to do market prospection. I earned a lot of money. I built a beautiful and big house. Mauritanian people were jealous of my success. As I was not associated to a local guy, they destroyed me. Now I sell fish in the port every evening. Like everybody. (Interview, Nouadhibou, September 2007).

Connecting Places and People

The different routes and rhythms of migration have transformed the appearance of the two main Mauritanian cities and have boosted the local economy. Sub-Saharan migrants, who bring with them their own ways and ideas about urban life, increasingly put their stamp on certain parts of Nouadhibou and Nouakchott. The latter now look rather different from the rest of town, shaped, as they are, by the same type of housing, the same shops and socio-spatial practices as sub-Saharan neighbouring capitals. In *Qairaan*, foreigners manage no fewer than forty shops. The restaurants' names (*Le fleuve*, the *Djolof*) recall the Senegal Valley influence. Fashion shops with the photo of Youssou N'dour are frequent. Engine or wood-work shops (*Touba Boutique*, *Touba Menuiserie*) often refer to the owner's affiliation to the Mouride brotherhood. In Nouakchott, some toponyms (*Mali Garage*, *Senegal Garage*) evoke the presence of foreigners (Map 3). Migrants and immigrants have produced their own urban spaces and points of reference. But, these toponyms are more than a mere reference to the region of origin. It is a way to stress long-established connections between these areas and external places. Through its migrant population, the centre of Nouadhibou is directly linked to *Cinquième* and *Médina* districts in Nouakchott, but also to Dakar, Saint-Louis, Bamako and other towns in Guinea. In *Qairaan*, in *Cinquième* and *Sixième*, colourful shops attract many foreigners. Streets are also places of diversity. Ivorian shopkeepers sell "trendy" clothes and shoes to Mauritanian women. The 'standards', that is to say the CD and DVD shops, blast out high level sound on the street. Further on, a snooker room serves as a meeting point for young people. It looks like a scene from the suburbs of Lagos rather than Mauritania. In these streets, solidarity and exchange, negotiation and conflicts, meeting and shunning take place. Social links are created in this "quotidian co-presence", as underlined by W. Berthomière and M.A. Hily (2006) in Beirut and Tel-Aviv cases. The quoted Middas survey highlights the links between migrants and their native country: 47% of those interviewed declare they go back to Senegal every year, 18% at least twice a year. Only 15% say they never return. In comparison, the Guinean storekeepers settled in Nouadhibou specify that they return home every 12 or 18 months.

Today, the presence of these migrants is changing the image of Nouakchott. Previously, the various 'Arab' governments have tried to create the 'capital of nomads' (implying 'Moorish nomads') (Choplin 2009). The current circulatory migrations enhance the city's historic cultural links



Map 3: Nouakchott

© Armelle Choplin, 2008

with the Senegal Valley. It recalls the Senegalese atmosphere that reigned here when Nouakchott was first founded, an atmosphere that the Arab governments have, over the past three decades, rather clumsily tried to hide. The “concessions” in ‘*Cinquième*’ or ‘*Sixième*’ give relevant evidence of these links. In these quarters, most of the landlords are Mauritanian Soninké who have emigrated to Europe or the United States (Timera 1996; Manchuelle 1997). They have invested their remittances in real estate and now have a virtual monopoly in these areas. These new urban local figures constitute essential go-betweens. They keep strong links with foreigners and transit migrants. Because of the political unrest and sporadic tensions (like in 1989 or 2000 between Mauritania and Senegal), immigrants do not risk investing in real estate. Only 4% of Senegalese say they are owners (Middas Survey, 2010). Faced with the demand for rental accommodation, most of the Soninké landowners rent rooms in their concessions. Thanks to this community, different kinds of migration are embedded in one another. During our fieldwork, we observed several times in the same concession transit migrants and long-term settled migrants. For a long time, the owners of the concessions have not been living there but in France. Clearly, long established and international Soninké networks are connected to nearby work migration and more recently to migration towards Europe. New migratory flows are not independent from pre-existing social networks but are based on them.

Nouakchott and similarly Nouadhibou stand out as ‘cosmopolitan’ Saharan cities (Brachet 2009; Boesen, Marfaing 2007), clearly different from the rather austere towns of the Mauritanian desert. Both share common points with Rosso, the third city of the country, settled on the border between Mauritania and Senegal. In this town, people speak both *wolof* and *hassâniyya*.¹² Everyday, traders come from the other side of the river and buy goods imported from China via Dubai. In these localities, we are witnessing not merely exchanges between Saharans and sub-Saharan migrants, but rather the development of an original and locally specific kind of urbanity. Important changes can be underlined in the context of religion. In the Islamic Republic of Mauritania, Muslim migrants can easily practice their religion. Senegalese migrants rely on strong Sufi brotherhood networks (Tijâniyya and Qadariyya) on both sides of the Senegal Valley (Ould Cheikh 2004). The religious network maintains a place to live and provides refuge for newly arrived migrants (Bava 2005), as is the

¹² Local Arab dialect.

case in the Mouride *dahira* in Nouadhibou. Most amazing is the spread of Christian influence. If the local authorities have tolerated the Catholic mission since French colonisation, it is another matter for the new evangelical churches. The arrival of English-speaking migrants wanting to work in fishing explains the development of such cults. In 2007, in Nouadhibou, we discovered two branches of Nigerian churches, managed by young pastors, sent by their hierarchies and burning supporters of proselytising as observed in all of West Africa (Fourchard, Mary, Otayek 2005). Collins, one of the young Nigerian disciples of the Christ Crusader Ministry, explains:

I went to Nouadhibou because God told me to. Before arriving here, I travelled a lot. I crossed Benin, Burkina, Mali. Then, I flew to Nouakchott. From there, I went to Nouadhibou. Here, I couldn't find my former religion. So, I embraced another one. I am a hairdresser and I work beside the church. Sometimes, I help my church by distributing Christian brochures. I know it is dangerous. Relationships with Mauritanian people are tough. (Interview, Nouadhibou, November 2008)

Collins left Nouadhibou in 2009, after the Christ Crusader Ministry pastor stole the cash box and fled to Spain... Obviously, Nouadhibou is not the place to be any more.

An Economic Boost... Now Finished

The impact of transit migration has provided local society with important economic benefits. It can be seen in the real estate sector. In downtown Nouadhibou, the few compounds still owned by old Moorish families have been redesigned in order to increase rent. The tent (*khayma*) that used to be pitched in the middle of the courtyard has been replaced by newly built rooms, each housing four to five people, thereby reflecting the growing demand for rental accommodation caused by transit migration. In 2000, a rich Moorish businessman and descendent of an influential local tribe decided to build a 'Senegalese housing estate' (*Cité des Sénégalais*). After illegally appropriating a street between *Qairaan* and *Lareiguib*, he built on either side a line of rooms of ten square metres each, rented out on a daily or monthly basis (for about 5,000 UM or 16 €). As rents are high, migrants group together to share rooms. Malians and people from Casamance in Senegal have organised their own collective residences, called "foyers" bearing witness to the efficiency of community networks established by migrants abroad.

Since 2007 however, the almost complete halt to crossings to the Canary Islands caused by stricter controls have slowed down economic activities. Many shops in the centre have closed down, Senegalese restaurants have reduced the daily quantity of rice prepared; rooms hired out by locals stay empty, young men have returned to their home countries. Although, by the end of 2007, many Malians and Senegalese would still arrive hoping to 'make it', successful crossings had become rare, as the representative of the Senegalese in Nouadhibou, interviewed in September 2007, put it: 'Those who were meant to make it have done so. For those who stayed behind, it is too late now.'

Migration to and through Nouadhibou seems to be running out of steam. Indeed, transit migration, which has led to a revival of the city's economy over recent years, appears to be in jeopardy. Nouadhibou no longer experiences urban and economic growth as was the case in the 1980s. It is no longer the place where fortunes are made quickly, nor a bustling harbour on the way to Europe. The city is declining, as indicated by the decrease both in employment offered and in fishing (Choplin, Lombard 2008). The situation is no longer one of transit, but rather one of post-transit and, consequently, the issue of migration is dealt with in new ways. Yet, despite our studies highlight the fact that crossings have considerably slowed down in Nouadhibou, and almost stopped, the "transit situation" is still a subject of debate in Nouakchott. Thus, a temporal discrepancy, and also a spatial discrepancy can be brought to light: the spaces where the migrants are supposed to be (Nouadhibou), and where they are accused of creating problems in the eyes of local and European authorities, are not the spaces where the migration issue is managed and where the money is arriving to do it (Nouakchott). This double spatio-temporal discrepancy is surprising: why is it said in Nouakchott that "illegal migrants" are crossing the sea in great numbers in spite of all the outstanding elements which prove that Nouadhibou's "transit function" is now called into question?

A NEW GEOGRAPHY OF MIGRATORY GOVERNANCE IN POST-TRANSIT CONTEXT

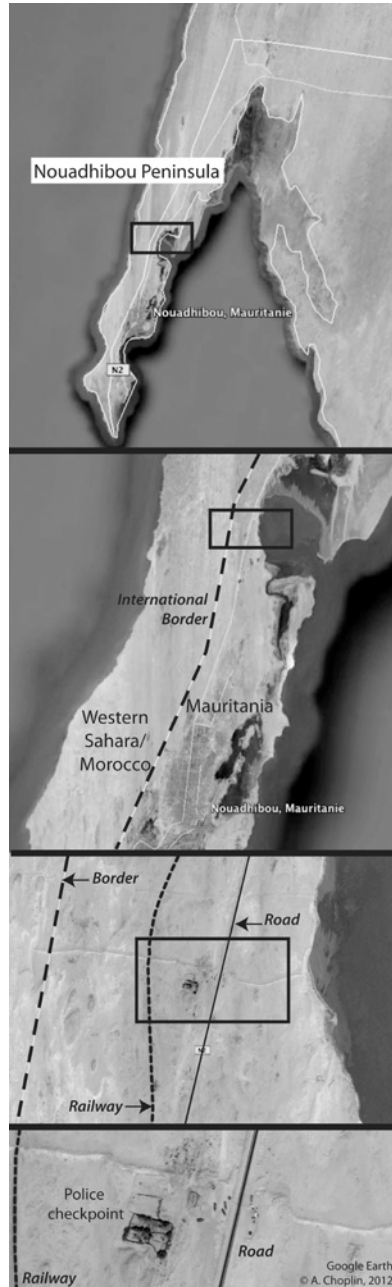
Struggle Against Clandestinity... and Terrorism

With the new "post-transit" context, the issue of migration is no longer at the top of the political agenda. As an employee of the UNHCR explained to us in January 2009, "we have more important problems to deal with.

We are no longer in 2006.” Nonetheless, he continues, “by now, we have 400,000 migrants!” Such numbers are oddly incoherent: in late 2006, a report commissioned by the same UNHCR estimated that there were between 160,000 and 200,000 sub-Saharanans in Mauritania.¹³ Even though the number of migrants probably increased immediately after controls tightened, two years later, our fieldwork research indicated a clear reduction in overall numbers. Yet, at the end of 2009, in the terms of reference for a “technical assistance post in Mauritania for the development of a national strategy in migratory flows management and an aid program in the 10th FED framework” proposed by the European Commission, it was stipulated: “according to the authorities, migrants in Mauritania could be around 500,000 persons (unverifiable figure), i.e. 15% of overall population”. These figures are manipulated all the more easily because of the absence of reliable statistical evidence. Moreover, it is impossible to distinguish between permanently settled migrants and those who are in transit (that is why the figures are unverifiable). Furthermore, numbers vary throughout the year, depending on agricultural and fishing seasons for instance, while also being affected by long-term changes sparked off by the volatile political climate in West Africa.

The toughened controls against illegal immigration engender immediate changes for sub-Saharanans settled in Mauritania. Whereas before, security forces arrested illegal migrants ‘caught in the act’, as they were getting onto the boat, they now arrest them beforehand, at home, in the streets or even while they are making their way into the city. The arrival in the city of Nouadhibou is striking. In the North of the city, there is a compulsory entry point called “Le Bouchon.” This point is in the narrow strip between the sea, the railway and the international border with Western Sahara/Morocco (photo 1). It is precisely at that point that police forces have set up their check-point. As a consequence, they consistently check all vehicles. Migrants are well aware of the “Bouchon,” where they are afraid of being turned back, without any valid reason. Amnesty International (2008) has denounced these arbitrary arrests. Migrants are accused of intending to reach Spain illegally, even if police do not have any proof. Thus, in this post-transit migration situation, all “black foreigners” can be considered as “clandestine migrants”, be taken in for questioning and expelled.

¹³ See IOM, UNHCR & European Union, 2006; FNUAP, 2007 & 2008. These reports emphasise the difficulty of distinguishing transit migrants from those long settled.



© A. Choplin, 2011; Google earth data

Photo 1: Zoom in “Le Bouchon”, the compulsory checkpoint in the North of Nouadhibou

Such arrests are in fact themselves illegal: although Mauritania has, since 2000, withdrawn from ECOWAS (Economic Community of West African States), the concomitant agreements on free movement between its members remain in force. Nationals of the fifteen member states, especially Senegalese and Malians, continue, to varying degrees regulated by bilateral agreements, to have privileged rights of access and residence. According to this legislation, actual 'illegal' entries and departures from Mauritanian territory are rare: to travel around Mauritania is usually neither a crime nor an offence. Yet, controls are carried out "upstream" from Nouadhibou, on the major roads, sometimes faraway from the borders. For example, in the Maghta Lahjar police checkpoint (500 km from the Malian border), officers have decided to control the vaccination certificates of foreign bus passengers. Seydou, a Malian citizen, explains:

There were six of us. They forced us to get off the bus. We could not show our certificates. They stopped us there. They forced us to take the bus in the opposite direction, going back towards the Malian border. We waited in Aioun police station [130 km from the Malian border] for another bus. When we went to the toilets, officers went with us! They sent us to Mali. On the border, we did as everybody does: we bought a vaccination certificate for 2 000 CFA (3€). We were like expelled migrants! (Interview, Malian border, November 2009)

Northern and southern borders seem to be under European Union control whereas arbitrary and one-off checks can take place everywhere within the vast Mauritanian territory. Urban spaces where migrants are living, border towns they visit regularly to do business, roads they take to move around are changed into controlled, frightening spaces. The control stakes have been higher since there has been a "terrorism threat." This issue was debated in the presidential campaign in June 2009. The unlawful ruling government boasted about "struggling at the same time against terrorism and clandestine migration".¹⁴ Because of this dangerous confusion, the Mauritanian government has negotiated financial agreements and 'partnership' with Europe in exchange for the European presence inside its national territory. Since 2003, the United States of America has been interested in the struggle against Al-Qaida au Maghreb Islamique (AQMI), former Groupe Salafiste pour la Prédication et le Combat, and in controlling this "grey zone" and people movements (Keenan 2005; Lecocq & Schrijver

¹⁴ "Immigration clandestine et terrorisme: les Européens louent le rôle du Haut Conseil d'État", *Le Véridique*, 14/06/2009.

2007). Thus, in this “global geography of risks and threats” (Kraxberger 2005), the Mauritanian government takes financial advantages from the struggle against poverty, terrorism and ‘clandestine migration’.

“We are in the path of clandestine immigration, drugs and weapons trafficking,” declared the Mauritanian Defence Minister Hamadi Ould Baba Ould Hamadi in June 2010.¹⁵ In order to enhance national territory security, a dozen additional checkpoints have been created since the summer of 2010 along the Senegalese and Malian borders in order to settle and control people. Twenty-one new mobile police squads and special anti-terrorism intervention groups have been set up. This tight surveillance, which can be observed all over the Sahara, is linked to an increasing “technologization”: all these checkpoints have been kitted out with computer hardware. The aim is to create a foreigner’s entry file. Moreover, the government requires a biometric system and has sold its national registry office to the French group Safran (for € 17 millions).¹⁶ Even if we are sceptical of this biometric interest, we notice that this new security order, based on a technicization of controls (radars, biometry, computerization) (Bigo 2007; Collyer 2007), has an impact on people’s regional mobility. In the context of a terrorist threat, migrants are perceived as a source of insecurity, both potential “illegal migrants” as well as terrorists.

Geopolitical Stakes: Towards a Bipolar Space

In this new context, Mauritania’s geopolitical situation is redefined. International Mauritanian borders, cities, roads, airports, etc., are now places of controls, often imposed by external actors like fund providers. In those places, sometimes far from the city centre, the European Union is visible. It is now obvious that the European Union border has been externalised as a consequence of its tougher migration restrictions. Its rules seem to overwhelm those of ECOWAS. As a consequence of the readmission agreement, migrants arrested at sea or in Nouadhibou are jailed in the ‘Guantanamo’ detention camp (Map 2). But the government appears to be ‘embarrassed’ by this centre (the visible counterpart of the readmission agreement): transfers and expulsions are generally carried out at night, and out of sight of the Mauritanian public. In these peripheral areas, the

¹⁵ Isabelle Mandraud, “Pour contrer Al-Qaida, la Mauritanie érige des postes-frontières”, *Le Monde*, 4 juin 2010.

¹⁶ This biometric shift is also promoted by ECOWAS. An ECOWAS visa (called ECOVISA) is planned for 2012.

European Union keeps a low profile while remaining visible. At the Mali-Mauritanian border, between Nioro and Aïoun, a notice shows the intervention of the Migration Information and Management Centre (CIGEM) located in Bamako, via its PAMIREG program (Welcoming projects for unwilling return migrants and transit migrants in Gogui). Fifty meters behind the police checkpoint, two brand-new little white rooms “welcome” the illegal migrants pushed back from Mauritania (AEM, APDHA 2008). On the Senegalese border, the Spanish Red Cross flag floats in the air. It has set up another “welcome centre.” Migrants are looked after for 48 hours—fed and accommodated—and then invited to go away. This European Union presence on the border hampers even more the population flow between West-African ECOWAS member countries.

Thus, new migratory governance has brought to the fore a bipolar space. “Bad spaces,” stigmatized as “clandestine places,” are emerging in opposition to “good spaces” where the migration issue is managed. Peripheral areas are punctuated with these bad spaces: transit towns like Nouadhibou or Nioro-du-Sahel in Mali; detention camps; migrant quarters in the crossroad-towns (*Qairaan* in Nouadhibou, *Cinquième* and *Sixième* in Nouakchott); turning back areas like on the Malian-Mauritanian border where CIGEM “welcome” migrants; Red Cross aid stations; customs; military and police checkpoints. The nicknames themselves express this stigmatisation and spatial distancing: *Kandahar* (the no man’s land between Morocco and Mauritania), *Le Bouchon* (police checkpoint entry to Nouadhibou), *Guantanamo* (detention camp), *Nouadhibou-du-monde*, a city where migrants are stranded.

A distinction is made between spaces where migrants might go through or settle down and spaces where the migratory issue is managed. It is relevant that the “problem” is taken care of by exogenous actors, and not in the national territory peripheral areas but from urban centres. Nouakchott, Dakar, Bamako, Rabat are the central places where UHCR, IOM, delegations of the European Union have set up their headquarters, where experts’ offices have been opened up, where the headquarters of NGOs involved in “upgrading the living conditions of migrants” have been set up. There, workshop meetings and international panels on this issue take place, drawing up national migratory policies. There is one workshop meeting after another in Nouakchott but not in Nouadhibou or in Rosso. Funds from financial backers and foreign aid arrive and are concentrated and invested in the capital city. Nouadhibou, on the other hand, has suffered a downgrading. Up to the 1980s, it was the economic centre of the country. But it has experienced an economic decline and received bad

press. Most studies have denounced the use of the “transit city” concept (Choplin, Lombard 2008; Streiff-Fénart, Poutignat 2008), largely because it has been used and twisted into “illegal migrants city” by the international media. As a result, institutions, politicians, and Mauritanian citizens are using this expression to belittle the Northern city. Nouadhibou is being marginalized whereas Nouakchott is asserting itself as the political and economic capital city.

A parallel can be drawn between this spatial dichotomy and the “good” and “bad migrants” categories formulated in the North and adopted by the South. Representatives of financial bankers, long-time settled migrants appropriate the rhetoric of illegal migration developed in Europe. The representatives of foreign national communities lobby for the recognition of their rights as ‘honest foreign workers’ and insist on their regular movements spurred on by business. They contribute to freeze categories: they introduce themselves as “transnational entrepreneurs” in opposition to the ‘*adventurers*’, the transit migrants ‘who undercut salaries’ and are seen to be linked to illicit activities (drugs, alcohol, prostitution, etc.) They strongly condemn those who just travel through.

Therefore, the “post-transit” context involves a spatial reversal and a new migratory governance geography: a noble centre where the migration issue is managed (the capital city) and on the contrary, peripheries where the supposed stowaways and smugglers live, with the migration repression instruments (retention centre, check-points, helicopters, etc.) and the trafficking they are usually accused of. This new ‘post-transit’ situation generates a hostile reception from sub-Saharan. But it reflects more general tensions inherent in internal political dynamics in Mauritania. Because for some nationalists black Mauritians and sub-Saharan immigrants are lumped together under the category of ‘black foreigners’, in the migration issue a great deal is at stake.

CONCLUSION

In summary, transit migration—and more broadly various transnational connections established by repeated return travel and by the interplay of different migratory networks—situate Mauritania at the heart of a much larger region. We have attempted to show that there is a discrepancy between the reality of the migratory issue (nowadays stopped because of the European Union rules transposed into Mauritania) and its management. Indeed, trans-Saharan migrations are not managed in peripheral

areas or in the Saharan space but outside of these zones. This new geography of migratory governance marginalizes migrants and migration spaces such as retention centres and border checkpoints. This new situation results from the asymmetrical relations between European countries, which have externalized their migratory system, and the supposed emigration and transit countries.

As a result, some migrants are now stranded in Mauritania. This post-transit situation involves the renewal of some xenophobic attitudes. It makes necessary a more subtle reading of the cosmopolitan aspect of main Mauritanian cities. In Nouadhibou and Nouakchott, foreigners and local society are living side-by-side rather than together. This rampant racism and autochthony echoes back to other African and European situations (Comaroff and Comaroff 2005; Geschiere 2009). The current “Arab revolution” has aroused European people’s suspicion towards migrants coming from Africa. Some politicians do not hesitate to use rhetorical images, most of them irrelevant, such as “*biblical exodus*” as Umberto Bossi (Italian North Lige) said, or they suggest “*putting migrants back on the boats*” as Chantal Brunel said (Former French right wing Member of Parliament). These populist comments hide the fact that migrations are quite well controlled and migrants are stranded on Southern Mediterranean shores. Moreover, they do not explain that not all African migrants want to go to Europe. Let us just remember that main migration flows are intra-African.

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