

ERRANCE AND ELSEWHERE'S AMONG AFRICANS WAITING TO RESTART THEIR JOURNEYS IN DAKAR, SENEGAL

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When I met Jim for the first time, a Venezuelan visa was the main obstacle preventing him from leaving Dakar.¹ Because it was fake, this same visa ended up prolonging his stay in Dakar for about two years. During this time, Jim experienced the difficulties of a moneyless African: he spent his time roaming, idling, and trying various strategies for obtaining money and getting out. After some meetings during which he told me about Dakar, how he had arrived there, and his plans for leaving, I asked Jim why he did not return to Nigeria. He answered:

I can say that before I came out to . . . I lost everything in Nigeria, whatever, everything I had, you know, because I was duped in visa stuff, you know, all I have I sold it to get the money for the visa. As I am here now, I don't have anything, ticket or money. No money to go back. You know, so that's why. But even if I had the money, I have nothing in Nigeria to go for again, except my people. So I don't know where to start. I say let me just see how I cope with stuff for some time so I can have something to do with my life. If I raise money, I can find any other way, you know, any other country, better than where I am. But this place is OK . . . is OK for me? If I find something OK to do here, it is OK for me.

Unlike other Nigerians whose journeys had been interrupted in Dakar, Jim was quiet, introverted, and cautious. Our conversations took place early in the morning because, a few months after I met him, he started working as a jack-of-all-trades at the same hotel where he had stayed just after landing in Dakar, when he was a well-to-do traveler. Jim commonly spoke in parables. He was stubborn, but his hopefulness was his most defining quality.

It surprised me that Jim had chosen as his destination Venezuela, rather than a European country or the United States. After talking to him several times, though, I realized that it might as well have been Brazil, Colombia, or any other place brimming with stories of wealth and fellow compatriots, which in his case could have been a variety of destinations throughout the world. Under the right conditions, this place could have even been Dakar.

For Jim and others, a destination was not the only reference that was hard to pin down; their time of departure was also an ever-postponed moment in the future. They would stay in Dakar for an indeterminate time: while some people's journeys had been interrupted for a few months, others' had been stopped for more than ten years. It was also hard to know if, once they arrived at their destination, new obstacles would appear on the horizon.

Africans I met in Dakar came from neighboring countries and other corners of Africa, as far south as Rwanda or as far east as Sudan, with different nationalities, ethnicities, and religious beliefs. They hailed from both Anglophone and Francophone countries. Most of them were young, but some were older. Most of them were men, but there were women as well. Distinct reasons had made them stop in Dakar: the draw of long-distance kinship ties, the presence of consulates and international organizations, deportation from Europe or North Africa, the promise of an easy gateway, or simply random chance. In Jim's case, an agent in Lagos had told him that it would be cheaper to fly out of Dakar and that it would be simpler to deal with customs officials there than in Nigeria.

Conducting research among these Africans seeking greener pastures away from their countries of origin for me marked the beginning of a long and ongoing reflection on errance. The indeterminacies that surrounded their journeys could not be appropriately grasped through the conceptual lens of migration, bound as it is to ideas of national sovereignty (Papadopoulos, Stephenson, and Tsianos 2008). Such a lens frames movement in terms of discrete trajectories between points divided by national borders: movement starts at point of origin A and ends at destination B; it assumes that cultural differences found at each point come mainly from allegiance to the nation-state; and it designates a "systemic push/

pull market logic” (Andrijasevic 2010, 157) as the main driving force for movement. Errance instead powerfully alludes to the sense of aimless wandering that characterized my interlocutors’ journeys, journeys that get suspended, make loops, and take divergent paths. Errance also makes space for thinking about connections between here and there: current location and desired destination shape one another in creative ways. This mutual shaping also produces an experience of time constituted by uneven rhythms in which solid chances vanish and wishful plans suddenly become reality. As a whole, the experience of moving is pervaded by uncertainty.

The term *errance* is a transliteration from French. It does not exist in English proper, but there are cognates such as *errant* and *errantry*, *err* and *error* that are used with some frequency. These words connote adventure, travel, deviance, mistakes, and a journey without a predetermined end. I first came across the word *errance* in writings by the novelist and poet Alan Mabanckou. In his novel *Bleu-Blanc-Rouge* (Mabanckou 1998), he tells the story of Moki, a young African man, and his attempts to reach France in a world where his compatriots, who travel back and forth between France and their home, nourish Moki’s and his friends’ cravings to travel abroad. The émigrés tell amazing stories of success, wear fancy, brand-name clothing, and display wealth by distributing money among their families and close friends. Once Moki embarks on the journey that leads him to France, and various challenges endanger his chance of staying, he refers to these circumstances as the river of errance: “On ne peut plus regarder derrière soi une fois qu’on se trouve au milieu du fleuve de l’errance. Il faut nager à grandes brasses, nager encore pour atteindre la rive” (“Once you are in the middle of the river of errance, you can’t look back. You have to swim with great strokes, and swim some more to reach the shore”; Mabanckou 1998, 74). My interlocutors gave different reasons for leaving their home countries than Moki, but the journeys on which they embarked, the difficulties they encountered, and the ways in which they sought to restart their interrupted journeys resonate with the image of struggling against the stream to reach the shore.

In this article, I analyze the experience of interrupting one’s journey in Dakar through the lens of errance. I focus on the ways errance shaped my interlocutors’ experience of space: elsewhere not only produced images of future destinations (a there and then) but ways of engaging with the current location (a here and now). I examine how tensions between current location and future destination pervaded my interlocutors’ daily lives with spasmodic rhythms. I look at how finding routes dislocated the common links between people and national

identity documents, namely, passports. Lastly, I examine how everyday life was marked by uncertainty, which was in part the effect of larger social trends prevalent in West and Central Africa, and in part the consequence of my interlocutors' unpredictable circumstances of travel. This state of uncertainty turned choice into practices of trial and error, which sometimes allowed Africans to pierce borders and put an end to their stay in Dakar.

Searching the academic literature, I found formulations of errance in Francophone aesthetics and art. Authors (e.g., [Laumonier 1997](#); [Berthet 2007](#); [Depardon 2003](#)) have defined errance as the quest for the acceptable place (*lieu acceptable*) and take the notion of elsewhere to be a mechanism fueling errance. Following the thread of elsewhere, I came across studies within anthropology and related disciplines that analyze the tension between here and there for would-be travelers at home. Some of these studies resonate with the view of elsewhere as fuel, while others instead emphasize a dimension of suspension and boredom. In what follows, I show that these notions constitute two ends of a spectrum of possibilities for exiting the social site to which one is assigned.

THE TIME OF ERRANCE: Spasmodic Movement

While I conducted fieldwork in Dakar (2008; 2009–2010), immobility emerged as a common topic during my first conversations with people I met. I heard about the harshness of life in Dakar: about exclusion and hopelessness, about no luck finding money, no asylum. “Life in Dakar is hard,” people would say. Most people did not consider Dakar the place they wished to stay, because life conditions were as harsh or even harsher than “at home.” Dakar was safe but bereft of money. My interlocutors engaged with the city and its native dwellers in ways similar to the “strangeness” that [Bruce Whitehouse \(2012\)](#) describes for West Africans in Brazzaville. However, unlike them, my interlocutors were always on the verge of restarting their journeys. Zafiya, whose husband was killed by rebels in her country of origin, had found peace in Dakar, but after living there for two years, she realized that peace alone did not suffice, and that to educate her two daughters and not worry about food and shelter she would need to go to a wealthier country. She had fulfilled all the requirements to receive asylum from the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) except for obtaining official documents or a newspaper obituary confirming her husband's death. She spent a substantial part of her days inquiring about her case and waiting for an answer from the UNCHR and other institutions,

including the Commission National d'Eligibilité and the Bureau d'Orientation Sociale, which deal with procedures regarding asylum in Senegal.

Even those who had lived in Dakar for more than a decade kept making plans for leaving. Doctor William Akroffi, well-known in the Rebeuss neighborhood for his natural plants healing center, a kiosk adjacent to a four-story tenement house that hosted mostly Guineans, complained about how hard it was to earn a living in Dakar. His patients, instead of paying for their treatment, often asked him for money. He had been away from Ghana, his home country, for fourteen years. He had spent time in Mauritania, Guinea, Senegal, and the Gambia trying to get a visa to join his family in Canada. His visa application had been rejected for the second time seven years before, and since then he had been in Dakar trying to save enough money to restart the journey. Every time we met, he had plans brewing to leave Dakar. When the next deadline expired, he came up with new plans. Sometimes he considered returning to Ghana, but he would not do so with empty pockets.

Anthropological literature on economic crisis and migration often emphasizes suspension as an effect of the incitement that globalization spreads among those who lack economic means and legal status for traveling. Suspension can be understood as circumstances that prevent people from crossing social and geographical borders. It refers to the interruption of social ties (at home, on a journey, at a point of destination), as well as to a temporal slowing manifest in the absence of plans in the present, plans deferred to the future, prolonged waiting, and the inability to improve one's life conditions. It is linked to the blurred legal spaces produced by immigration laws, which, in everyday life, mean obstacles to acquiring passports, visas, legalized certificates, and other bureaucratic documents (Navaro-Yashin 2007; Yngvesson 2006; Menjivar 2006; Khosravi 2011). Literatures on suspension come mainly from studies based on ethnographic work in Africa (e.g., Ferguson 2002; Mains 2007). However, ethnographies from other regions (Jeffrey 2010; Xiang 2007; Faier 2008; Chu 2010) suggest similar processes taking place worldwide. Although these works recognize suspension, the concept is not theorized in much depth.

Interestingly, most literature on the topic of suspension focuses on time, a dimension that, according to Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson (2013), studies of globalization and capitalism too often neglect. A common figure of time in these literatures is a crisis of narratives of progress and modernity, where the future—understood as the prospect of a better life—does not actualize. For example, as the possibility of experiencing progress in time becomes implausible,

movement emerges as a powerful alternative in order to achieve a better life (Mains 2007, 2013).

Suspension also appears as narratives of other times and spaces that translate into an emptying of the present: doomsday prophecies among evangelicals that turn the near future into a time in which action to transform current living conditions is not encouraged (Guyer 2007); stories shared among youth about lands with greener pastures located beyond the African continent (Melly 2011); or feelings influenced by religion about ejection from a space of life and a sense of being thrown into an “out-of-this-world” temporality (Pandolfo 2007, 347–48).

Many of these works share two common elements: they come from ethnographies conducted at a place of origin, and they emphasize the alienating dimension of incitement to move. From this perspective, places of origin come to be perceived as stagnant, while destinations become synonymous with realizing a prosperous life.

Other studies analyze suspension at a point of destination. Francis Nyamnjoh (2005) describes how, both in the views of those who stay at home and of those who leave, draining, zombie-like labor and living conditions turn destination into an out-of-this-world temporality. Henrik Vigh (2009) provides another example, in which the feelings of aimlessness that pervade life at home are reproduced after arrival in North Atlantic destinations.

Still other works describe twisting relations between home and destination, movement and stasis. They pay attention to different rhythms that obtain both at points of departure and arrival, which are akin to the ways in which Africans experience the interruption of their journeys in Dakar. For instance, Julie Chu (2010) analyzes how semi-rural Fouzhounese who seek to leave connect to a larger world, mobilizing networks and resources for travel, but also feel displaced and stagnant as they perceive their successful neighbors' changing lifestyles and swift movements between China and the United States or Europe. Tensions between movement and stasis produce different rhythms for those who stay in China yet seek to leave: “For most villagers, time teetered unsteadily between lagging and lurking forward” (Chu 2010, 258). Another example of different rhythms, but this time at a destination point, is the practice of so-called benching (Xiang 2007, 70–80), by which Indian IT workers perform unskilled labor while they wait to be rehired within their area of expertise. Drawing from the work of Xiang Biao (2007) and Rutvica Andrijasevic (2010)—the latter looking at the pace of irregular migrants' flows in E.U. detention centers—Mezzadra and Neilson

(2013) argue that when studies of capitalism and globalization pay attention to time, asynchronous rhythms of detention, transit, prolongation, and acceleration become visible.

Unlike that of other studies I mention here, my own approach focuses on spatial and temporal dynamics as they are experienced in an already-started, but interrupted, journey. Yet the experiences of time that I describe resonate with works that detect uneven rhythms juxtaposed against one another at different stages of the journey. Most of my interlocutors dedicated a good part of their days to waiting: to find a job, to be assisted by NGOs, for friends and contacts to send money, or for papers to be delivered. Dakar was not the place to see their aspirations fulfilled, and in that sense they experienced an emptied present. This dimension of life in Dakar resonates with the postponed aspirations that literatures on suspension describe. However, coming up with destinations and finding strategies that allowed for departure entailed relations to time different from this emptied present. Intense negotiations were required, ones contingent on individuals' abilities to imagine and reimagine themselves. Spasmodic movements—cycles of time contracting and expanding—characterized the lives of Africans-in-errance in Dakar.² People's aspirations to move “proceeded in fits and starts, alternating interminable waiting and short bursts of chaotic rushing” (Chu 2010, 258). Errance conjures up both rash movements and a sense of empty time.

THE SPACE OF ERRANCE: Heading Elsewhere

In principle, my interlocutors' expectations differed from one another as much as their backgrounds and imaginaries; the extent to which these imaginaries became true varied as well. Yet they shared aspirations that they located in their desired destination: achieving wealth, finding a safe haven, and having one's dignity respected.

KC, like Jim, came to Dakar looking for an easy gateway. He lived in Parcelles Assainies among a community of Nigerians, most of them waiting for a chance to leave. Their main point of encounter was the neighborhood Catholic church. Among devout Catholic Nigerians, KC was especially devoted, and he had a contagious, sparkly laugh. KC made a distinction between Whiteman *kontry* and Blackman *kontry*. In Whiteman *kontry*, the minute he landed at the airport, someone would approach him and offer him a place to stay and a job. Bribes would be unnecessary to obtain a job, and he would be willing to humble himself because he would earn a lot of money. In Blackman *kontry*, in turn, he had to have an “upper hand” (powerful acquaintances) to get what he needed.

Unlike KC, the main concern of Peter Dwumfuo, a tall, strong man in his forties, was reaching a Christian country far away from “heathens.” He had escaped religious persecution and hoped to dedicate himself to writing his memoirs at his intended destination. Camara Vamba, a trendy, always well-dressed, short, and energetic young man, expected to have access to the culture and lifestyles to which he had attuned himself as he grew up in his home country. He wrote fiction, had been in a hip-hop group, and owned a small designer clothing shop. However, the materialistic values prevalent in his social milieu back home prevented people from recognizing his abilities. In his destination site, he would find recognition for his skills as a writer, singer, and fashion purveyor.

For only a few people I met Dakar had turned into something other than an ever-prolonged interruption of the journey. They seemed to have found their acceptable place. Peter the Barber, for example, had tried to reach Europe from Dakar with a visa that he had purchased from an agent. For a few years, he tried to leave, and while he waited for the right chance to appear, he started working as a door-to-door barber to survive. One client from the national telephone company, who liked Peter’s work, hooked him up with his colleagues and other civil servants. Working within this network, Peter realized that barbering would allow him to earn enough to pay his daily expenses and save money. When I met Peter, he was expecting to go back to Ghana after a few more years of cutting hair in Dakar. Europe did not lie on his horizon anymore.

Ossondu, too, had stopped dreaming of going to Europe or the United States. He had come from Nigeria, and after different plans for leaving diluted throughout the years, he decided to stay. He owned two different businesses: an all-in-one shoe store and barbershop and a Nigerian restaurant. Unlike Peter, Ossondu had decided to settle in. He had married a Senegalese woman and had two children with her.

These divergent expectations around destination suggest that, as much as it entails an experience of time made up of uneven rhythms, errance refers to particular ways of experiencing space. The notion of elsewhere gathers these expectations. Anthropological literatures have addressed this idea of elsewhere, but they have not theorized it in depth. However, notions such as heterotopia (Foucault 1986) and liminality (Turner 1969) that derive from reflections about social space provide elements to help understand elsewhere.

Building on the concept of heterotopia, I understand elsewheres as linking the actual lived space (here) with other spaces (there), mirroring each other but also transforming or subverting the relations that define that lived space. Trinh

Minh-ha's (2011, 2) idea of elsewhere resembles this perspective. She understands elsewhere as "living in two and many non-opposing worlds—all located in the very same place as where one is." Such a view emphasizes that tensions between here and there or now and then are inherent to any experience of displacement.³ I draw from Victor Turner's concept of liminality to think about how a relation to elsewhere sets one neither here nor there, or at the same time here and there. This situation results from the fact that social ties to a current location (home or a transit point) and to a desired destination are either temporarily put within brackets or not yet set. As Turner (1969, 95) puts it, one is "betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial."

Elsewhere refers then to different ways of exiting the social site to which one is assigned through imagining or actually traveling to other spaces.⁴ A means of exiting one's assigned social site would be linked to the quest characteristic of errance analyzed in Francophone aesthetics and art. There, one finds errance defined as a quest for an acceptable place (*lieu acceptable*) and elsewhere conceived as the fuel that invests the journey with purpose, and allows the possibility of fulfillment (Laumonier 1997; Berthet 2007; Depardon 2003). A dimension of quest is also central to the ethos of adventurers, for whom a desire for elsewhere constitutes a force shaping their journeys. In the African context, Sylvie Bredeloup (2013) has argued, the emergence of adventure is a process simultaneous to the growth of African cities in the second half of the twentieth century. In contemporary times, the figure of the African worker (encouraged to travel because of a demand for labor) fades with staggering economic crises, while the adventurer becomes a more prominent figure. Congolese Sapeurs who want to reach Paris are emblematic examples of African adventurers.⁵ Living in Paris provides them with the impulse to leave the Congo as it shapes the image of a possible life (Thomas 2003; Gondola 1999). According to Dominic Thomas (2003, 963), "the dimension of displacement locates the transportation of the individual in what is a quest for self, for the exploration of the individual—and this is where the journey's impulse is actually enacted."

A second way of relating to elsewheres, adventurous but not predicated on actual physical travel, would be the "imaginary exile" (Fouquet 2007, 114–15) of young Senegalese women who engage in sexual economic transactions with wealthy Senegalese and foreigners. These practices allow them to gain access and appropriate a world of cosmopolitan meanings and practices, while at the same time they estrange themselves from the constraints and realities of the commu-

nities to which they belong without physically traveling to a “global world” (Appadurai 1996, 44).

A third way of relating to elsewhere would be closer to immobility and boredom than to adventure and actual travel.⁶ For instance, Stefania Pandolfo (2007) associates elsewhere with the feeling that young Moroccans experience of being ejected from the space of life at their place of origin. She describes elsewhere as a liminal space in which depression and boredom prevail. For his part, Henrik Vigh (2009, 92) focuses on the effects of elsewhere both at home and at a destination, but he also associates it with suspension. He describes how, among Bissau Guineans that wait for a chance to travel abroad, elsewhere produces the sensation of a “truncated existence.” Technology helps imbue elsewhere with images of progress, just as it renders home a place of exclusion.

In the case of Africans waiting to restart their journeys in Dakar, a relation to elsewhere was built through physical displacement. Among my interlocutors, elsewhere sometimes meant boredom and suspension, but mostly it played the role of fueling movement. When elsewheres seemed distant (that is, when there were no means to enhance departure), the present turned into something empty and boredom crept in. Yet for the most part, my interlocutors had a seemingly endless capacity for seeking new ways of reaching elsewhere. They constantly came up with routes, mobilized resources, and were alert to cracks that opened and potentially allowed them to depart. This made everyday life busy with strategic moves to actualize departure.

Another characteristic of my interlocutors’ relation to elsewhere was malleability: instead of being predetermined and fixed (like the destinations of businesspeople, vacationers, or academics on their way to a conference), destinations proved ever shifting. As I will show, a geography of routes contingent on a history of connections from precolonial times and stretching beyond cosmopolitan centers in Europe and North America forms part of the spatiality of errance.

WHEN THE DESIRABLE IS NOT AVAILABLE

Jim asked me to think with him about options for finding a way out of Dakar. I suggested that we try to get a visa at a consulate. Besides the Venezuelan embassy, the Brazilian embassy was the only South American diplomatic body with a presence in Dakar. At the Brazilian consulate, I knew someone we could at least ask for clarification about the procedures, so one morning we went there. The embassy was located downtown, but we did not know exactly where. We took a cab that left us at the Place de l’Indépendance and walked from there. As

we passed the Marché Kermel looking for the embassy, I asked him why he had decided to go to Venezuela in the first place, rather than another country. He told me he had heard about people he knew who were doing good business there. He said that his top destination was South America. That was the desirable, but if the desirable was not available, then what was available would become desirable. If God gave it to him to do business in Dakar, he would do business there, he told me, but in Dakar things “moved small, small.” He would not make good money there.

The landscape into which Jim and other Africans arrived in Dakar, the interruption of their journeys, and the field of connections that potentially took them elsewhere resulted from the intersection of different forces. In the configuration of these landscapes, encroaching E.U. borders play an obvious role (Mez-zadra and Neilson 2013). The European Union has begun to encourage African countries to increase border surveillance; E.U. member countries have also adopted selective requirements for granting visas. Senegal is strategically located at the fringes of these swollen borders. On a coastal land route toward the Maghreb, it is also the northernmost country of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) free-circulation space.⁷ As such, it receives both Africans going north toward the Maghreb and people being deported back from this region. However, we should not overemphasize the extent to which E.U. migration reforms at the turn of the twenty-first century shape Africans’ ways of moving.

To explain how routes emerge for Africans-in-errance, an analysis of E.U. controls remains insufficient; other elements must be taken into account. Two such examples are ancient kingdoms and the diffusion of Islam dating from pre-colonial times, which established routes for religious pilgrimage and trade. Later on, during the colonial period, division between French and British territories carved corridors and imposed barriers for movement, at times favoring movement within colonies, and at other times movement across them. As a consequence in the present, while Nigerian citizens require a visa for Morocco, Ivoirians—like Moroccans, citizens of a French ex-colony—do not. After independence, the development of diplomatic relations with countries outside former colonial spaces within and beyond the African continent further shaped this landscape by establishing travel requirements (sometimes rigid and sometimes flexible) for particular destinations. Since the 1970s, agreements fostered by regional organizations like ECOWAS have given continuity to forms of movement within West Africa. Economic downturns and the increasing instability of making a livelihood, along

with state inefficiency and the abuse of power (Smith 2007), play important roles in the configuration of these geographies, setting the stage for civil servants to request extra money from certain nationals for services such as issuing travel documents. Through their extra-legal activities, civil servants turn switching nationalities into a versatile business. Finally, the constant recreation of these geographies depends on the knowledge, stubbornness, capacity for mobilizing networks, and culturally rooted spirit of adventure (see Bredeloup 2013) of Africans-in-errance.

The intersection of these multiple forces bring to the fore geographies that transform as people struggle to find better horizons and as forms of controlling movement actualize. As Trinh Minh-ha (2011, 3), reflecting on the strengthening of the U.S.-Mexican border puts it: “You close down, we walk around. You erect, we dig. You dig, we dig and dig further. Bind and soon, you’ll be tearing madly at the wall, and the bonds you’ve created.”

As the borders of the European Union swell, people shoot themselves like darts to pierce it. For a long time Europe, Canada, and the United States have loomed in Africans’ horizons of travel. One of Alain Mabanckou’s childhood memories provides a good example: growing up in the Congo-Brazzaville in the 1960s, the first thing he learned about Europe was that it lay on the other side of the Atlantic, and it replaced South America in the mental cartography of his childhood (Mabanckou and Merlin 2009).

In the twenty-first century, horizons of travel are multiplying. Among Africans stranded in Dakar, routes are forged that lead not only to Europe, the United States, or Canada but also to other unexpected destinations in Asia and South America (Minvielle 2013; Uriarte Bálamo 2009; Monkevicius and Maffia 2010). In the case of South America, some of these new destinations were initially conceived as mere stops on a longer route to North America that would circumvent maritime and air controls. But places like Buenos Aires and Quito are also themselves becoming destinations.

Building on my interlocutors’ expectations, it is possible to outline a geography of elsewhere. Sometimes, elsewheres were imagined centers of cosmopolitan production, as in the case of the Congolese Sapeurs who desire and imagine traveling to France. At other times, elsewhere was back home; in yet other circumstances, elsewhere was anywhere as long as people could find compatriots and prosperity.

Elsewheres, then, can be either wealthy North Atlantic destinations or eccentric destinations in Africa or other continents. Camara Vamba wrote and spoke

French probably better than many Frenchmen; he dreamed mostly of traveling to France. KC wanted to go to some country like Spain or Italy (differences between these countries were irrelevant), but he also wondered about the Bahamas, a neighbor of the United States with easily fulfilled visa requirements. Peter Dwumfuwo was deciding between Cuba and Jamaica. I warned him about the strength of Santeria in Cuba, but he insisted that a Caribbean country would give him enough peace for writing. When Peter had the strength to deal with the refugee aid system, he spent long hours at the Immeuble Ferdinand Colli, the headquarters of the UNCHR in Dakar, and navigated the Internet seeking information on private sponsorship in Canada. Zafiya felt uneasy about going to a country where she did not know anybody. She wondered where her religious beliefs would be respected. As for Doctor William, when home did not lie on his horizon, he wished to go to Costa Rica, where Ala—his online girlfriend and soon-to-be wife—lived. Mohamed wished to continue his studies and researched fellowships in Malaysia and Japan. He also tried to find private sponsorship in Australia and Canada.

Chosen destinations had to fit the stringent reality of visa requirements for most Africans, which were in turn shaped, as mentioned earlier, by the history of routes carved by ancient kingdoms, colonial powers, and postcolonial diplomatic agreements. Visiting the Brazilian embassy in Dakar with Jim made me aware of just how intricate and narrow the routes within this geography are. The embassy was located on the top floor of an old building, more than ten stories tall, dating from the 1970s. We were not allowed to enter the hallway because we did not have identity cards with us. We did, however, manage to obtain instruction guides for student and business visas. When I read the requirements, I understood why Jim had processed his Venezuelan visa with an agent. To apply for a visa directly at the consulate through the official conduit, Jim needed a business card and a bank account if he was traveling as a trader; if he traveled as a student, he would need admission to an educational institution in Brazil. So against the Kafkaesque world that one would need to deal with if one were to follow the official procedures, Jim's Venezuelan visa proved a powerful alternative. Except that it was fake.

Three months after I returned to Colombia, my home country, from Senegal, Jim and I chatted online. He told me that he was seriously planning to leave Senegal. He was looking for a passport of another nationality, since his Nigerian passport had since expired and the fake Venezuelan visa inside it constituted a potentially controversial element. I asked why he did not obtain another Nigerian

passport, to which he answered that it would be hard and expensive to get. At the time, the Nigerian embassy in Dakar did not have the equipment to print passports. The alternative was to apply for a passport in Nigeria, but that would entail traveling back, and because of abuses and inefficiency within the Nigerian state, Jim would have to pay a bribe. Either way, it appeared less expensive and more convenient to “apply” for another foreign official passport than for a Nigerian one. Additionally, sometimes passports from other countries offered a wider spectrum of visa-free destinations. For example, Ghanaians can travel to Singapore without a visa; once there, immigration authorities review their cases and decide to grant or deny the visa. A second example is South Korea, which does not require visas for Liberians for stays of three months or less. Lastly, until 2010, Barbados was one of the few countries outside the African continent for which Nigerians did not need a visa.

According to [Engseng Ho \(2006, 324\)](#), passports allow individuals to borrow the personality of states and remove “ambiguity about where their bearers . . . belong.” In Jim’s case, this act of borrowing is not necessarily contingent on someone’s actual place of birth: Jim’s country of nationality, Nigeria, denied him a passport, and the passport that would allow him passage across states did not correspond with the country to which he belonged.

One crucial element to the logic of the nation-state is the circumscription of the rights of citizens within specific political borders defined in opposition to a foreign other who lacks these rights ([Balibar 2002](#)). Another element entwined with the first is the right to have permission to cross such borders. Migration commonly operates within the same logic, as it establishes conceptual differences between moving within and across national borders and takes for granted the links among people, documents, and national identity. Errance points rather to the dislocation of these elements. It takes into account the importance of states, visa requirements, and the range of visa-free destinations available to each nationality. This is precisely what makes finding elsewhere an intricate task. However, in errance, to borrow from [Julie Chu \(2010, 105\)](#), identity and travel documents are less “natural entitlements of certain state subjects” and, more often, “achievements of personal skill and social networks.”

NAVIGATING UNCERTAIN CHOICES

The day the Venezuelan visa failed to take Jim out of the continent was in September 2008. At a travel agency in downtown Dakar, Jim had booked his flight to Caracas with Transportes Aéreos Portugueses, paying \$1,600 for it. He

arrived at Yoff airport two hours before the flight, crossed the airport's main entrance, found the counter for check-in, and stood in line. While he was waiting, customs officers requested his travel documents and, after a prolonged inspection, told him that his visa was false. He protested but did not achieve much, especially since he knew neither French nor Wolof, Senegal's most commonly spoken languages. After some time arguing, he figured that the only remaining options were either paying for passage through customs or staying in Senegal. Although he was out of money, he could have collected the necessary funds through his friends in Nigeria. However, after having landed in Caracas, how would he manage to enter Venezuela? Most likely authorities there would deport him back to Senegal or Nigeria. Jim was angered and frustrated. He had paid 300,000 naira (roughly \$2,500) for his visa. He contacted a friend at the Independent Corrupt Practices and Other Related Offences Commission (ICPC) in Nigeria, who told him that he could file a petition online against the agent who had brokered the visa, but that the case would not develop if he did not return to Nigeria to follow up with it. Going back meant undoing the trek, so Jim decided to stay in Dakar.

For almost two years, during the dry season he slept in a tent compound next to the Marché Malien. Every rainy season, the compound dispersed because the area flooded. Jim once described this place as "the bush." During that time, he went twice to Banjul hoping that a Gambian passport would take him away. The first time, Jim paid \$350 to an immigration official, but he never got anything back. He ended up being arrested and deported to Senegal. After some weeks, he went back and paid a different immigration official. Seven days later, the passport was delivered, but when he checked its validity at the airport, the passport turned out to be fake. Every time he ran out of money, his horizons shrank. He stopped concocting plans for leaving in the upcoming weeks and had to worry, instead, about finding money for his daily meals.

Constraints that weighed on Africans-in-errance (lack of institutional recognition, frail ties with local Senegalese, scams that translated into economic losses) made what they deemed solid chances likely to disappear, but they also made wishful plans suddenly materialize. As [Sasha Newell \(2012, 5\)](#) puts it in the case of the Ivorian *bluffeurs*, "illusion sometimes participates in the construction of reality." Departure or the prolongation of one's stay in Dakar would depend on such factors as money, airline tickets, identity and travel documents, job opportunities, and people (women, managers, friends, refugee sponsors). Sometimes these resources turned out to be false or unreliable and made plans vanish.

Sometimes, under auspicious circumstances, even if they were forgeries they could take people to their destination.

These kinds of circumstances often surround the journeys of underprivileged travelers. Shahram Khosravi describes a similar situation among Iranians trying to reach wealthier destinations in Europe and North America during the 1980s. During that period, Iranians' networks were marginal compared to those of other larger and more well-established communities living abroad. "For those of us who lacked access to such migration networks," Khosravi (2011, 51) recalled, "decisions were made under conditions of uncertainty and migration more or less followed a trajectory of wandering."

Uncertainty also resonates in academic works that analyze how instability permeates everyday life in contemporary Africa (Mbembe 2001; Simone 2008; Larkin 2008). The decreasing capacity of the state apparatus to ensure health, education, and employment (Mains 2007), as well as the rise in unemployment as an effect of no-longer-competitive industries in globalized markets (Ferguson 2002), rank among the factors that have contributed to a climate of social instability in Africa. Brian Larkin (2008, 193), looking at the aesthetics of Nigerian films, captured the extent to which this climate creeps into everyday life: "Things seem to be one way, and then change utterly for no apparent reason." Uncertainty pervades state institutions. When Jim told me about the ICPC, I looked it up on the Internet. I found the commission's website, which at the time warned the public about scammers who deceived people pretending they were ICPC agents. The warning read:

SCAM ALERT: ICPC DOES NOT COMPENSATE SCAMMED VICTIMS AND ICPC DOES NOT COLLECT MONEY NO MATTER HOW LITTLE TO INVESTIGATE A CASE. If anyone tells you or sent you an email that ICPC is going to compensate you or demands money to investigate your case, please, DO NOT SEND ANY MONEY. Report the person to ICPC via our contact page.

Both deepening inequality in the larger African context and being in *errance* contributed to this sense of uncertainty. Uncertainty evokes two meanings of the word *errance* and its cognates: traveling without a predetermined end and making mistakes. These meanings relate to Africans-in-*errance*'s constant change of destinations and the situations of fraud to which they are constantly exposed. Looking for ways to leave meant submitting to the dynamics of trial and error, in which the chances of making the right gamble were thin.

Mohamed, for example, had gotten a Cuban visa for himself and his wife through one of his in-laws, a powerful politician in Guinea, but he did not have the full amount for the airline ticket. A friend in Conakry put him in touch with a Sierra Leonean man in Dakar who would lend Mohamed the missing amount. Mohamed traveled to Dakar, where the Sierra Leonean man welcomed him. Mohamed trusted the man and gave him his money to buy the ticket. But he never bought it. He duped Mohamed with an airline reservation, telling him that it was the ticket. When I met Mohamed he had been in Dakar for two months with his pregnant wife about to deliver, looking for a job or new possibilities for leaving. After investing his money in the airline ticket to Cuba, Mohamed tried a Dutch electronic visa, which he later realized was counterfeit. Another time, he almost ended up paying a fee for an online job application for a humanitarian NGO.

But even with slim chances, departure sometimes became possible. If Jim had saved up enough money to pay his way through customs in Dakar and Caracas, he might have made it through with his fake Venezuelan visa. My interlocutors learned to gamble within this risky game and to seize opportunities as they presented themselves.

UNTIL A CRACK OPENS

The current system of global mobility is highly unequal. Globalization fosters fascination with goods and lifestyles that generate an incitement to move. One of the consequences of the concentration of wealth and the establishment of a transnational labor system (Xiang 2007) is that for many, economic opportunities can only be achieved through traveling abroad. But the current system assigns different kinds of people to different realms of possibility, producing a hierarchy of travel. It is crucial to create awareness about the flaws of the current global mobility system and the halo of fluidity that it is falsely thought to wear. Over-arching narratives of flow (Appadurai 1996) or acceleration (Harvey 1989) prevent us from seeing the disparate temporal effects of global circulations of goods, people, and capital. Ethnographies of suspension draw attention to those who, in different corners of the world, stay at home or at their destination, excluded from these flows. They show the sense of empty time that pervades their everyday lives as they realize their inability to improve their life conditions.

However, emphasizing suspension blurs another side of the picture: the stubborn capacity to cope with adversity that I found among my interlocutors in Dakar. Errance acknowledges the spasmodic ways in which these travelers ex-

perienced time. In their daily lives, a sense of empty time characteristic of suspension alternated with moments in which they deployed multiple strategies to actualize their aspirations. Although these attempts often resulted in failures, this did not discourage people from trying to leave. Imagining or actually heading elsewhere allowed them to exit the social sites to which they were assigned.

Errance also represents a change of scope with respect to the conceptual lens of migration shaped as it is through the logics of national sovereignty. Errance makes visible potential and actual geographies made up of loops, prolonged waiting, and moments of acceleration beyond linear movement from one nation, point A, to another, point B. It also accounts for disconnections between documents, people, and national identity. Reflecting on the drive to increasingly secure national borders, [Trinh Minh-ha \(2011, 7\)](#) observes: “The incessantly fortified line dividing here from there may turn out in the end to be an ‘optical illusion.’ Always lurking are the cracks and fissures whose invisibility may at any time turn visible with a dice of destiny.” In Jim’s words, divine hands would enhance these dice of destiny. He often says that God is the only one that turns things around.

Cracks open for very brief moments when forces randomly align, but as Trinh Minh-ha underscores, they are always lurking in the background. Most of the people I met in Dakar are still there; some of them have improved their life situations. Once in a while someone pierces the walls, asserting their right to move as they look for a place to fulfill their aspirations. Mohamed, for example, traveled to Morocco, where he managed to enroll in film school. Camara Vamba traveled to Morocco as well, and has since tried unsuccessfully several times to cross the Mediterranean by boat.

As for Jim, one day in April 2011, he called. He told me that he had bought a passport of another nationality. He promised that soon he would be in South America. I was happy for him, but also skeptical. Later on he called announcing a departure date. This date came and went without any further news from him. Two weeks later he called from Quito. Although his passport was official, he had had to pay to get out of Dakar. He has a new name and nationality now, a new date and place of birth. Things are better in Quito than they were in Dakar, but still hard. I guessed he had a new destination in mind for himself, but I did not dare to ask where it was.

ABSTRACT

This article analyzes the experience of Africans stranded in Dakar, Senegal, halfway through their intended journeys out of the continent. A number of forces such as

regimes of border control and visa policies, a culturally rooted sense of adventure, historically established networks, and individual genius shape their itineraries. These forces lead them to Dakar, prevent the continuation of their journeys, and bend their routes and destinations toward the global South. I turn to the notions of errance and elsewhere to describe the spatial and temporal dimensions of this experience, its particular relation to national borders, and the sense of uncertainty pervading it. Errance can be understood as the quest for an acceptable place, while elsewheres describe imagined, distant, malleable destinations that invest a journey with purpose. They not only relate to the there and then of dreams and aspirations but structure relations to the here and now. Academic literatures on migration, economic crises, and border studies generally theorize the experience of being able to leave home in terms of suspension. I extend this literature by examining the ways in which space and time are experienced in an already-begun but interrupted journey. Past and future, actual and potential, destinations, routes, and frail transactions hint at different ways of understanding movement and stasis. [transcontinental mobility; space; time; desire; errance; elsewhere; West Africa]

NOTES

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1. Some of the informants I mention in this article asked to be rendered anonymous, so I have changed their names and omitted their nationalities. Others who have written about their lives, like Peter Dwumfuo and Camara Vamba, invited me to use their names so that readers could seek out their own work.
2. I build on Lieba Faier's (2008) idea of runaway time, but I emphasize different temporal dimensions. As I will show throughout this article, errance entails different rhythms.
3. Shahram Khosravi (2011, 74) also expresses this tension when he refers to the predicament of exile: "My body is physically here and now while my heart is there and then."
4. In the case of errance in Dakar, immigration laws, with their partial and selective forms of recognition, contributed to defining my interlocutors' social site as well as their options.
5. La Sape refers to a movement of young men in Brazzaville and Kinshasa who have adopted French designer clothing and other icons of French culture as a way of countering colonial and postcolonial domination. Sape is an acronym for *Société des Ambicieux et des Personnes Elegantes* (Society for Ambience-Setters and Persons of Elegance) as well as a French slang term for dressing. *Bluffeurs* in Abidjan have similar ways of locating Paris at the center of their cosmologies (Newell 2012).
6. Sylvie Bredeloup (2013) defines adventure in opposition to boredom, two states of mind that correspond with two ends of a spectrum of possibilities for experiencing elsewhere.
7. ECOWAS was created in 1975. Today it is constituted by fifteen member states: Benin, Burkina Faso, Cape Verde, Côte d'Ivoire, the Gambia, Ghana, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Liberia, Mali, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, Sierra Leone, and Togo. A protocol permitting the free movement of people within ECOWAS was signed in 1979. All member states approved stays without a visa for up to ninety days in 1980 (Agyei and Clotney 2007).

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