BARÇA OU BARZAKH: THE SOCIAL ELSEWHERE OF FAILED CLANDESTINE MIGRATION OUT OF SENEGAL [1]


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This dissertation explores the social afterlives of forcibly returned clandestine migrants in Senegal. It takes as its starting point, the phenomenon of clandestine boat migration out of Senegal, which saw its peak in 2006, when 40,000 young predominantly male West African boat migrants landed on the shores of the Canary Islands. That same year, 6,000 migrants were forcibly repatriated by the state. In Senegal, where histories of labor migration to Europe are profound, and where migration is an index of masculinity, success, and spiritual devotion, return is frequently experienced as traumatic and shameful. This dissertation argues that clandestine boat migration out of Senegal between 2005 and 2008 was not simply a response to rising poverty; nor was it an irrational option of last resort for young men. Rather, clandestine migration was an increasingly visible and valued mode of spiritual striving and a means to provide for families. Three temporal lenses—departure, transit, and return—provide the narrative structure through which their experiences are reflected. Departure analyzes why young men decided to depart and what spiritual and financial resources they invested in the migratory project. Transit explores how they experienced passage across the Atlantic as a spiritual, social, and somatic phenomenon, and how they made sense of their encounters with increasingly militarized borders in Africa and Europe. And Return finds them six or seven years after their forced repatriation as they remember the complex host of responses to failure: disappointment and outrage, resistance and faith. Like these temporal lenses, three conceptual frames—hardness, risk, and struggle—are echoed throughout, as these young men struggle against the hardness of life by risking their physical existence to support their families and gain spiritual knowledge through sacrifice. By grounding the analysis in the ethnographic, this dissertation argues that the circulation of bodies and identities is not the result of economic austerity tout court, but is imbricated in systems of social reproduction, religious obedience, and gendered ideologies. It further theorizes “failure” as a productive category, wherein performing suffering, mobilizing politics, and enacting spiritual submission and piety constitute a terrain of potential and help to shape an emergent vernacular of value in Senegal. Rather than sit idly by, refoulés, or failed migrants, create spaces of social, political, and economic possibility, suggesting that failure is not always a zone of negation, where an intended outcome is missing, but one in which novel strategies and flexible modes of self-creation are tested, bargained over, and produced. Likewise, the Senegalese state continues to adopt creative measures to “develop” its migrant youth, outsourcing its human services to international agencies and adopting policy transfers from abroad on matters of migration. Such a scenario of global sovereignty motivates youth to seek alliances “elsewhere,” with other multinational or non-governmental partners, many of which operate in Senegal. By investigating these overlapping phenomena, this dissertation explores how clandestine migration, state-initiated repatriation and border policies, non-state development interventions, and the ability to imagine a future in the face of failure are all part of growing up for many in West Africa today.

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