LABOR AND LIVING AS A BLACK MIGRANT IN SAHARATOWN

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A thesis submitted to the faculty at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Art in the Department of Anthropology in the Graduate School.

Chapel Hill
2017

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ABSTRACT

Ampson Hagan: Labor and Living as a Black Migrant in Saharatown
(Under the direction of Peter Redfield)

This examination of how black African migrants live and work within Arab-Bédouin Saharan cities or “Saharatowns,” amid anti-black violence and adverse working conditions is a call for thorough ethnographic study of life in such towns. I attempt to call attention to the lives of these trans-Saharan migrants, many of whom are stuck in these towns for weeks, months and sometimes years. Central to this study is the concept of compression, the force from the Saharatowns that catches migrants hoping to pass through them only to keep migrants from leaving and pursuing their dreams of another life elsewhere. I describe how black African migrants work and make life in Saharatowns, with a particular focus on how compression across space and time affects Black peoples and allows the socio-juridical institutions of Arab-Bédouin Saharatowns to perpetuate anti-blackness.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

**LIST OF FIGURES**........................................................................................................... vi

**INTRODUCTION**............................................................................................................. 1

  Saharan Discourses in Myth and Misunderstanding....................................................... 4

**CHAPTER 1: Tactics and Trends in Movement Across Sahara and Sea**......................... 8

  Navigations of Destiny................................................................................................... 8

  Counter-Migrancy Tactics.............................................................................................. 10

  Non-Governmental Organizing of Trans-Saharan Migration..................................... 13

**CHAPTER 2: Ignored, Attacked and Compressed**....................................................... 18

  Discursive Effects of the Saharatown on Black African Migrants.............................. 18

  The “Before,” “After” and “Over There” of Anti-Black Compression.......................... 20

  Dreams on Layaway...................................................................................................... 21

  Holding onto Dreams of Elsewhere............................................................................... 24

  Black Migrant Compressions Across Space and Time............................................. 26

  Compression: Living and Working in a Small Box..................................................... 32

**CHAPTER 3: Making of Saharatowns**...................................................................... 35

  Saharatown Dynamics................................................................................................. 35

  People on the Move...................................................................................................... 38

  Niamey to Agadez, Pre-desert to Desert..................................................................... 38

  Agadez and Tamanrasset.............................................................................................. 40
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Trans-Saharan Migration Routes.................................................................3

Figure 2: Percentage Female Among all International Migrants.................................55
INTRODUCTION

“The Sahara desert isn’t in West Africa!” – Lisa Mueller, political science professor in Niamey

Coming in at over 5,000 square miles, the Sahara desert is the largest dry desert on Earth. Many misconceptions about the contemporary Sahara exist, including where it is and where “it isn’t”. One of the most egregious ones is ‘the Sahara is nothing more than a barrier between white (North) and black (sub-Saharan) Africa’. In *Black Morocco*, Chouki El Hamel explains that in the Moroccan system of racial identity, a peculiar inversion of the Western racist model, “one drop” of white blood identifies one as Arab (i.e. privileged). This was important in creating a “nationalist” Moroccan Arab majority while simultaneously cementing a subjugated black ancestry (composed of those without the “one drop” of Arab blood; El Hamel 2014). In the sense of Algerians or other *Maghrebines* immigrating to France, North Africans may not necessarily be viewed as white, and often are all considered Arab (Hargreaves 1995; Lazreg 1994; Silverstein 2004), however, Algerians and other Arab peoples of the Maghreb occupy socio-racial positions of power above blacks (while exerting power over blacks for centuries to the present), I will call them white in the manner of El Hamel from now on. When I pull at the falsehood of the Sahara simply separating white from black, I see two converging

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1 Lisa Mueller in discussion with the author, May 2016.
elements that guide much of the conventional thinking of the Sahara, especially by many North African governments who have embraced nationalist policies over the years: one is that nothing happens in the Sahara, and the other is that it merely separates white Africans from black Africans. Circulation and perpetuation of these ideas in social discourse only obfuscates the realities of the desert and the people within it.

The Sahara desert is a space of dynamic economic and social movement, predicated on the movement of actual bodies into the desert, specifically into Sahara cities, what I call “Saharatowns”. These represent the site of a rapid reconfiguration of the Sahara, in which the spatial territories of the State and the economic and migratory networks of the region come to bear on the cities within the Sahara. This dynamism of shifting demographics amid the introduction of new peoples from various places in West and Central Africa leads to a considerable urbanization, however, social, economic, spatial and racial equilibrium are at stake here as well. The rapid urbanization of the Sahara desert region along with high unemployment among Algerian and Nigérien youth have served as catalysts for much of the increased migration through the region. The Saharatowns of Niger and Algeria are the reflections of two former French colonies with two different racial demographics and two different historical trajectories. Peoples of several nations, ethnic groups engaging in varied forms of labor comprise the Sahara desert, and embrace a distinctive Saharan identity (MacDougall 2012). The introduction of many black Africans into traditionally Bédouin cities creates substantial tensions in the local context with respect to employment, housing and social interaction, and this availability of an unyielding stream of undocumented black migrants, foregrounds the conditions under which migrants are subjected and ultimately exploited.
The journey for most migrants begins far from the large migration hubs of capital cities and sea ports, representing a fragmented journey of stages (Brachet 2012; Collyer 2007). In fact, many migrants find themselves in much smaller towns that dot the migratory path between such hubs, including Saharatowns (Institute Thomas More 2010; Figure 1).

Figure 1 – Trans-Saharan Migration Routes

Researchers and journalists have covered the extensive migration networks and all that are trafficked therein, however the literature does not strongly reflect where migrants spend most of their time on the migration networks and lines of the maps researchers often follow. Scant research exists on migrants living in such places with very little ethnographic investigation of black migrants living and working in Saharatowns. Aside from the global forces dictating where migrants go, what are the personal and social interactions, behaviors, expectations and hopes of migrants? We know their living conditions in Saharatowns are generally deplorable, but we know very little about how
they experience their living conditions and how those internalized feelings translate to their ability and willingness to realize their dreams of leaving the Saharatowns to reach North Africa. How do migrants live in these towns on the day-to-day? How do they make a living, and how do they make life? These towns specifically harm black life by trapping it in racial structures that make life difficult, and by trapping migrants in abject racial-economic conditions that make it difficult for them to leave. However, people do survive and some even escape, but how? Ethnographic study of migrant life in these towns is lacking, yet such ethnographic research is necessary if we are to understand how the lives and labors of migrant life change over space and time along the migration circuit, and how the circuit itself squeezes that migrant life along the way.

**Saharan Discourses in Myth and Misunderstanding**

In response to the first myth, much happens in the desert, including migration through it, from West Africa to North Africa. Trans-Saharan migration in the late 19\(^{th}\) and early 21\(^{st}\) centuries has mirrored ancient trans-Saharan caravan routes. These routes were critical to trade of gold, goods and peoples between West Africa and the Mediterranean (Lydon 2009). The Sahara desert has been conventionally viewed as a dead space where nothing grows and no one lives. With various nations and peoples comprising the Sahara desert and its towns therein, the desert deserves to be treated as a dynamic zone of life and the struggle to live for Saharan peoples for centuries, not a space of nothingness, and concomitant with that consideration, it merits analysis as a space of cosmopolitanism (Claudot-Hawad 2006; Gast 1978; Keenan 1977; Kohl 2015; Rassmussen 1998). This consideration is important, as it legitimates this rapid growth of
the desert via black migration as part and parcel of modernity-making, a striving or aspirational quest for better work opportunities to contribute to the creation of a life one could not experience at home. Trans-Saharan migration has helped transform the region and continues to reshape the social terrain of the desert.

To address the second, it is necessary to state that the Sahara is not a barrier between white and black Africans, but a space where they have historically intermingled for centuries. Moroccans have practiced a refusal to publicly engage in discussions about their long history of slavery of black Africans (Haratin) for decades and the Arab-Islamic hegemony in North Africa has concealed the issue of its of slavery of blacks and racist attitudes towards them (El Hamel 2002). Libya, under the rule of Muammar Gaddafi, violently targeted and murdered hundreds of black Africans in the country around the time of the Libyan Civil War in a nationalist effort to rid itself of “non-Libyans” (emphasis mine; Pelham 2011). Historically, the countries of the Maghreb have exhibited racist, anti-black views and actions, while the Sahara and the rural towns therein are sites of this anti-black legacy at work. Recently, trans-Saharan migration through the region has strained social connections between North African Arab-Bédouins (i.e. whites) and Sub-Saharan black African migrants working in North African Saharatowns. One of the negative effects of the rapid influx of black Africans from West and Central Africa into the Saharatowns is rising racial tensions amid high levels of local unemployment and dim economic outlooks for locals from those Saharatowns. The anti-black violence in the Saharatowns is racism perpetuated by a larger force of the social environment that exerts extreme pressure upon black African migrants. I describe this force that explicitly threatens the existence and the possibility of black Africans, both socially and physically,
as existential compression, a compression located in the Saharatown working on black Africans. The vise grip that a migrant experiences upon living in a Saharatown, that dangerous and real possibility of the foreclosure of her dreams as she works to make dream fulfillment possible, describes the phenomenon of an existential compression. The foreclosure of her desired future follows the threat and pressure of being “stuck” in the Saharatown, the first critical element of compression that acts upon and against her and other black African migrants in that space. If the dynamic jaw of the vise is the crushing threat of a dream deferred, then the static jaw, the second essential element of compression, is the juridical foundation against which migrants are crushed. A quick internet search will turn up dozens of news reports in which migrants reveal that they have been in desert towns for weeks or months on end, struggling to amass the means to leave and continue their journeys. One cannot wait for the best paying job or even for particular jobs, as the need to quickly accrue income is all encompassing. In this sense, migrants are acting against a known, undesirable, crushing future, the failure of their migrant mission. However, their present is also difficult. Their present circumstances may be orienting them toward the distant, desirable future (one outside of Saharatown and presumably north), or towards the immediate, undesirable one (remaining stuck in Saharatown).

Violence against black Africans, discriminatory work arrangements and dangerous housing for blacks within Saharatowns may not be understood through the lens of critical race theory, which centers on the systemic racism inherent in applications of juridical, cultural, and economic American institutions and behaviors of American life. As it is particularly American and invested in the racism against black citizens, it is
insufficient for describing the anti-black deployment of laws in Algeria or any other North African country that ensure order of life for populations assumed to be exclusively Arab-Bédouin. The notion of existential compression may offer an extreme, alternative mode of understanding for analyzing the constrained condition of life for the black Other in the Saharatown. This compression of the Saharatowns specifically punishes black African migrants and the conditions inherent within the Saharatowns facilitate this anti-black African compression. Sites of compression are mobile, created and influenced by the politics, desires and relations of many peoples. For migrants traveling from West Africa to Algeria or Libya via Niger, the looming site of compression is the Sahara desert. Therefore, ethnographic study of the Saharatowns in the context of the colonial histories of the region, including the initial state-making and nationalist peopling of the Sahara desert, are critical to understanding the lives of contemporary black African trans-Saharan migrants.
TACTICS AGAINST MOVEMENT ACROSS SAHARA AND SEA

Navigations of Destiny

The Sahara is interesting because, until recently, it has never been a destination for migrants. However, beginning in the late 1990s to early 2000s, scores of peoples from West and Central Africa migrated to locales in North Africa and in Europe in search of economic opportunities not found in their home countries (Adepoju 2003). During that time frame, the Sahara desert was not the preferred route to Europe. For many West Africans, traveling to Western Sahara (and Morocco) via Mauritania and Senegal was much easier, as the Canary Islands lie less than 100 km off the southernmost coast of Morocco. The Canary Islands, a small archipelago in the Atlantic Ocean, comprise an autonomous community of Spain. Migrants traveled to the southern Morocco and northern Western Sahara in the hopes of taking clandestine boat travel to the Canary Islands, as the islands represent the most distant outpost of “fortress Europe” (; Andersson 2015; Brachet 2015; de Haas 2008). The International Organization for Migration (IOM) in conjunction with Spanish maritime patrol launched humanitarian "interception" campaigns and policed the waters, looking for suspicious vessels that could be harboring undocumented migrants. These efforts were influenced by European interests in securing the borders in order to protect European society and ensure its potential prosperity remains unfettered with the responsibility of supporting unwanted non-citizens.

Now that the Canary Island route is closed off, West African migrants have turned
to the east and to the north, traveling east to Niger and north through southern Algeria and into southwestern Libya. This is the trans-Saharan route, a long and dangerous journey that can encompass two “seas” if Europe is the destination: the “sea” of the Sahara and the turbulent waters of the Mediterranean (Bredeloup and Pliez 2005). Since the 1990s, the European Union (EU) has been trying to extend Europe’s border with Africa southward by pressuring North African countries to tighten their border controls, stop irregular migration into and out of their member states and commit to bilateral anti-migration agreements in exchange for aid (de Haas 2008). To put the force of this anti-migration effort into perspective, in 2014, the IOM estimated of that 63% of the operational part of its 2015 budget (approximately $534 million on a total of $847 million) would be supplied by the USA ($283 million), Canada ($30 million), Australia ($56 million), EU member states ($97 million) and the EU ($68 million) (IOM 2014). Under the influence and pressure of its influential donors, the IOM is policing the Sahara and shaping international efforts to govern this zone. The IOM has, through many bilateral agreements, devoted extensive resources and millions of Euros to police and enforce these new vertical borders of Europe that stretch into the Sahara (Andersson 2014; Brachet 2011; Brachet 2015; Collyer 2010). The EU has funded an outsized portion of IOM activities for years and has supported the implementation of various projects and anti-migration programs throughout North and West Africa and migrants have felt the various European interests and designs within recent IOM actions against their movements:

Everywhere here, Europe spends millions to stop the adventurers. They are afraid
that we all want to go to Europe and now they are making it difficult for us. We are always told that we want to go to France, to Italy. The (local) police just say this to take money from us. Sometimes you are obliged to say that you want to go to Europe, even if that’s not true, but that’s what they want to hear.” - Malian, Faya-Largeau (Brachet 2015).

Counter-Migrancy Tactics

Recent campaigns to discourage this migration use language embedded in western perspectives of health, specifically public health, including 'suicidal risk', 'fatal', 'dangers', 'atrocities', and 'nightmares' hoping to appeal to a presumed universal sense of fear (Brachet 2015). This rationale is assumed by African NGOs operating in certain Sub-Saharan and Sahelian locales, with posters adorning buildings and transit hubs detailing the risky prospect of crossing the Sahara and how death is inevitable (Andersson 2014). It is trying to dissuade Sub-Saharan migrants from attempting to cross the desert, incorrectly assuming that all Black Africans going to North Africa intend to illegally enter Europe (Andersson 2015; Lucht 2011). Europe is not always the destination. A number of school age migrants remain in North African cities such as Tunis or Cairo for more than a decade, having abandoned the idea of continuing their route northward. Others plan to gain legal residency after having obtained a university diploma from a prestigious university (Bredeloup and Pliez 2005). Considering the case of North African migration, Michael Collyer and Hein de Haas challenge the common perceptions of North Africa as a transit zone or a ‘waiting room’ for migrants waiting to cross to Europe, as they speculate that there may be more sub-Saharan Africans living in North Africa
than in Europe (Collyer and de Haas 2012). Increasing trans-Saharan migration and settlement of migrants has played a key role in revitalizing ancient trans-Saharan (caravan) trade routes and desert (oasis) towns in Mali (Gao), Niger (Agadez), Chad (Abéché), Libya (Sebha and Kufra), Algeria (Tamanrasset and Adrar) and Mauritania (Nouadhibou) (Bensaâd, 2003; Boubakri, 2004; Bredeloup and Pliez, 2005; Spiga, 2005). According to Sylvie Bredeloup and Olivier Pliez, 2000 estimates, relayed by Saharan press, put the presence of African migrants in the region at 1-4 million, within a space of 6 million total inhabitants (Bredeloup and Pliez 2005). The extensive migration industry and the vast monies that emanate from it have fueled the rapid population and economic growth of Saharan towns such as Agadez, Dirkou and Tamanrasset (Osili 2012 in Berriane and de Haas 2012). On their way, migrants often settle temporarily in towns located on migration hubs to work and save enough money for their onward journeys, usually in large trucks or pick-ups and some of this temporary staying has contributed to the growth of such Saharan towns (Barros et al. 2002; Brachet 2005; Collyer 2005; Escoffier 2006). In addition to this revitalization of Saharan communities, most major North African cities, including Rabat, Oran, Algiers, Tunis, Tripoli, Benghazi and Cairo, harbor sizeable communities of sub-Saharan migrants as a result of their voluntary and involuntary settlement (Boubakri, 2004, 4; Bredeloup and Pliez, 2005, 11–12). With some migrants remaining in North Africa, achieving a foothold in local economies and establishing livelihoods in towns of the Maghreb, they demonstrate the difficulty of using the term “transit migration” to characterize the experience and process of going through the Sahara to Europe while stopping in North Africa or the Saharan towns. Despite these efforts, migrants are still making the journey to Libya, via the long, difficult trek through
the unforgiving sands of the Sahara. It is the process of migration that constructs these Saharatowns as a spatio-temporal site of compression, a place of waiting and wanting.

Understanding the desert and its Saharatowns is crucial to the analysis of its compression of black African migrants. The increasing urbanization of Saharatowns is expected, as these towns are the only ones in the desert with the infrastructure and capacity to absorb the thousands of migrants moving into and through them, as well as the vast amount of monies pouring in from the illegal migration industry. This industry is a dynamic system of interwoven ambitions and ostensible diametrically opposed goals that actually work symbiotically to make both anti-(illegal)migration security authorities and migrant traffickers tons of money. According to Ruben Andersson in *Illegality, Inc.*, the term illegality industry “simply highlights how the ‘management’ of irregular migration is a particularly expensive—and lucrative—field within the larger migration industry” (Andersson 2014, 14). The instantiation of drones in African airspace, use of anti-migration surveillance networks across international boundaries, deployment of multi-billion dollar investments in new technologies, increased security forces to track migrants across land and sea, and extremely lucrative bilateral agreements all promote the illegality industry; the broader migration industry includes all the political machinery deciding migration policies and the extensive secondary (i.e. domestic) labor markets that undergird European society. Much more emphasis has been placed upon tracking the movement of migrants across the desert, with journalistic coverage focusing on smugglers, deaths on the trans-Saharan roads and migrants drowning at sea.
Non-Governmental Organizing of Trans-Saharan Migration

She told me that the Cinema Caravan would take place tonight at Rimbo on rive droite (Harobanda) and that I could meet her at the International Organization for Migration main office at 21h30 so we could go there together. This was a relief because I doubted I could get to the rive droite bus depot without some help, as I was new in-town. Not knowing what to expect when Linda and I arrived at Rimbo, I sidled off to the far wall. There I had a nice vantage point from which to see both the projector screen and the entrance through which interested people would enter or stand at to curiously peer inside.

As people trickled into the large lot inside the depot walls, attracted by the familiar Naija beats awakening the otherwise sleepy, dull Monday night on rive droite, Linda turned to me to resume her questioning of me. “What do you want to know about IOM?” she asked. Perhaps seeing my nonchalant response about being interested in IOM programming as a bit vague, Linda enthusiastically launched into an IOM advertisement, touting all the goals, objectives and programs of the organization. This is unsurprising coming from an IOM communications official, and I was prepared to have to sift through the deluge of development-speak to find interesting information. During our talk, she would often say that all this information can be found on the organization website, but still offer all the information relevant to my IOM interest and then some. The buzz surrounding this event began to intensify and I could feel that this show would get started soon. Sensing that the opportune time to interview Linda was waning, I pressed her about the actual IOM programs. She promptly listed them in detail, almost verbatim for the website. According to its standard operating procedure, IOM only works with pre-
migrants, migrants, and internally displaced persons. It provides numerous services for these groups, including:

- Crisis kits which include food
- Transit center in Agadez: provides food, a place to stay and some toiletries
- Voluntary Repatriation: IOM flies and buses people back to their countries of origin, and provides some brief skills capacitiation talks, so that repatriating migrants can return home with some useful skills

She went on to state that the sensitization work in Niamey and Agadez was important because it is preventive work that seeks to prevent or dissuade people from embarking upon migration journeys at all. Linda manages the cinema caravan program. She told me that IOM work in Niamey and in Agadez is critical to addressing the migrant situation in the country and this sensitization work (via the Cinema Caravan) is preventative because it seeks to dissuade (read: prevent) potential migrants from engaging in international migration at all. With all this IOM information and IOM/development-speak, I couldn’t help but find all this illusory. IOM is a large, internationally supported and incredibly well funded organization that does a lot of humanitarian and crisis work, but its programming is hardly preventative, despite what Linda says. IOM is not in the business of addressing the structural and global forces that lead people to seek better economic futures and improved realities elsewhere; it spends ample energy influencing actual movement of peoples rather than focusing on intervening in the lives of migrants who have already left their homelands and are in cities in towns along the long desert route.

“We can’t stop you, but we can inform you.” – Linda
Linda spoke with enthusiasm about a three-day program in Agadez. She said it took months to prepare and coordinate and she was up there for seven days, doing mainly pre- and post-program work, without water. I got the heavy impression she stressed this to ensure I understood the conditions for people living there. IOM worked closely with the local community to perform integration efforts in support of the event. This project was no different. IOM collaborated with the Aïr Sultanate (the local regional authority), the local community, and the “ghetto chiefs” to conduct the three-day project that coincided with a local festival in Agadez. Linda led me to believe these ghetto chiefs are smugglers who control the migrant ghettos and facilitate both entry into and egress from these enclaves.

The three-day program had an educational session, a cinema caravan (like in Niamey) and a football match, which pitted Agadez youth vs. international migrants. The ghetto chiefs allowed IOM into the ghettos to talk to the migrants and inform them of their rights and services they can receive.

At first, the officials as well as the ghetto chiefs were apprehensive about IOM activity within their domain. She demurred for a moment, then, to break the tension, I said the hesitation on the part of the Agadez officials might be due to the idea that everyone is getting some compensation for facilitating the migration industry through Agadez. She agreed. When I asked how IOM handled the conversations and arrangements that allowed it to enter into the ghettos, she said it was quite easy. After assuring the ghetto chiefs that it will not stop migration through Agadez, IOM entered the ghettos to prepare for the project. It assured local powers that it was only in Agadez to
teach migrants about the perils of migration, as well as inform and educate migrants about their rights and their options. All this fit well within the scope of the standard operating procedures of the organization.

This relatively indirect approach to dealing with trans-Saharan migration evokes images of Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) and its issues with neutrality. When faced with contradictions in certain settings, MSF proved incredibly nimble in adapting its principles to remain morally good, to remain in the position to practice témoignage (witnessing). Peter Redfield notes that both neutrality and even témoignage might serve strategic ends, driven by a moral effort to raise awareness and stir collective action amongst other actors. He further states that the effectiveness of principles of neutrality or impartiality depend on the perceptions of the actors involved (Redfield 2013). In the case of Linda, IOM and Agadez, the crucial actors are the IOM officials who believe they are doing good, the migrants who IOM claims to serve, and the ghetto bosses who allow IOM entry into the Agadez ghettos.

By limiting its operational scope to passing out crisis kits and facilitating voluntary repatriation, and simultaneously refusing to advocate for fair employment of migrants in Niger, does IOM protect its claims of neutrality? Beyond ensuring that IOM does not antagonize the many players in this Saharatown scene, including the local political officials, the ghetto bosses, and the many middlemen of the migration network running through Agadez, does this neutrality offer IOM anything else, anything more? Redfield adds that neither the position of public silence for organizational access to those in crisis, nor a more aggressive, less compromising set of principles incorporating independence, public speech and intolerance of rights abuses, guarantees universal access
in achieving humanitarian goals (Redfield 2013). So what effects does this IOM inaction have on the opportunities of migrants in Saharatown like Agadez? Extensive, thorough ethnographic research can help respond to these concerns and questions.
Ignored, Attacked and Compressed

Discursive Effects of the Saharatown on Black African Migrants

Certain situations and circumstances in life can be a vise-like grip, squeezing and holding one in a fixed position, which ultimately forces her own breath to escape her. Saharatowns are the embodiment of that vise. Economic and social conditions comprise to make these spaces particularly difficult for black African migrants. The idea of the transit town is not new, however, the Saharatown as transit town is important to examine, because it is growing from concentrated labor (e.g. infrastructural construction and economic growth) of the migrants who stay there and work, much like the growth of the U.S. from the institution of plantation slavery (Genovese 2014). In other words, suffering fuels economic growth.

Arab-Bédouins controlling the Saharatowns through which black African migrants pass is an interesting circumstance because of the spatial-temporal dimensions of this phenomenon. Unlike the compressed black migrants elsewhere who also engage in long, arduous journeys, these migrants may remain in intermediate stages of the migratory journey for long stretches of time, ironically engaging in many exploitative, and racially discriminated jobs/activities similar to the ones to which they may be exposed at their intended destinations. Migrants in other migratory networks may not stay long enough in such intermediate areas to work, however in Saharatowns, the growth of the towns depends on this labor, this undocumented black labor. Because of this, the Saharatowns appear to extract economic benefit via exploitation and labor value
extraction from migrants in much the same way as the northern or Western economies to which many migrants would like to emigrate.

Racial dynamics and economic realities of the landscape collide when the migrants inhabit and cohabit with Arab-Bédouins in the Saharatown. This relationship forms part of the equation that manifests the specific Saharatown compression that migrants may feel. Compression can describe black life and black migrant experiences everywhere throughout the globe. However, Saharatown compression specifically targets black African migrants in two critical ways: 1) race and its attendant interactions with social mechanisms and activities that, together, compress life and social worlds and possibility for black Africans, and 2) inability to leave (being trapped) while working to do so and failing. The pressure of having one’s dream crushed, deferred, when the Saharatown was supposed to be an opportunity to make some quick cash, gear up, regroup and continue on, but it is a trap. Ironically, the desert has been framed as a landscape of passage and movement for many peoples, and understandably so. Some black migrants have characterized the journey through the Sahara as an “adventure” (Andersson 2014; Bredeloup 2008; Whitehouse 2007), a quest for dignity and modernity (Whitehouse 2013) and un rite de passage (Van Gennep 1981) but many see it as a necessary trip to ensuring economic opportunity and ultimately survival (Daniel 2008; Dognon 2013; Kohl 2013; Lucht 2011). However it is the landscape of the Saharatown that also dictates passage. Because the Saharatown does not represent the end goal for most migrants, the failure of not being able to leave (Saharatown), coupled with the fact that one could not reach her true intended destination (i.e. North African metropolises on
the Mediterranean coastline, or Europe) comprise a “double failure”. This is the significance of Saharatown compression.

The “Before,” “After” and “Over There” of Anti-Black Compression

In Octavia Butler’s *Kindred*, a 26-year-old black woman, Dana, is ripped from her comfortable modern life and transported back in time to the slave quarters of the antebellum South. She is repeatedly brought back to the slave quarters and each time she stays in that time and space, the stay grows longer and more dangerous until she can no longer determine if she will live or die in that time and place (Butler 1979). Ultimately, she is caught between the problem of having moved and still not reaching one’s destination (in her case, beginning her life). This intermediate space is, in fact, a space or place that demonstrates this double failure. She is a black woman on a Maryland slave plantation in the mid 19th century, and unable to continue her young life in 1976. The spatio-temporal features of this apocalyptic, bleak fantasy epic differ markedly from the Saharan stories I am telling, but the dystopian present of a double bind of getting trapped and failing to reach the North that migrants face in Saharatowns, is remarkably similar. In both instances, blackness and being stuck in a place that exerts both spatial and temporal pressure specifically against black peoples are at work.

Within that smaller spatio-temporal “space,” she cannot leave the plantation to which she is constantly returning, or the continuum that routinely shuttles her back and forth between her 20th century life and the life of the slave on the plantation. Temporally, Dana is stuck in two temporal registers in which time ostensibly ceases to advance in a conventional, unilinear fashion, with the ghosts of slavery hauntingly interrupting her
present-time as she interrupts the past as well (Bhaba 1991; Trouillot 1995; Kincaid 1996; Hartman 2002). Saidiya Hartman frames this haunting remembrance of slavery for African American tourists visiting Elmina Castle in Cape Coast, Ghana, a large slave castle through which many captured Africans passed on their way to the Atlantic and beyond, as a moment of mourning and possible closure (Hartman 2002). However, the multidimensional transportation of Butler’s protagonist does not provide closure, but demonstrates the power of compression, where one can live in a space that is somehow smaller than herself. If we think of opportunity as a product of both space and time, then Dana is without much opportunity. For her, time moves on as much as it moves between itself. In this understanding of opportunity, she cannot realize dreams of being a free woman because she is a slave, and she simultaneously struggles to realize her dreams in the 20th century present because she fearful of the impending shuttle back to slavery where her dreams of freedom will be deferred. She and her dreams take up less space in the world than before.

**Dreams on Layaway**

Although passing through Saharatowns en route to North Africa and beyond is a new normal in African migration to North Africa and Europe, the threat of remaining in the Saharatown simultaneously makes even one’s presence in the desert oasis dangerous to the viability of that dream of elsewhere. Existential compression describes the forces of one’s social environment and place within a larger social structure squeezing and constricting the possibilities and opportunities available to that person, such that one’s
being, one’s essence, is no longer realized in the larger structure, save for the squeezed, compressed role ascribed to her.

Because of the high financial costs of the migrant journey and especially being stuck in a Saharatown failing to make due, migrants often wait for their families back home to send them money. In Agadez, young Guinean Abdul patiently waits for his family to send money allowing him to continue his trip to Libya, a cost of about 300-500 Euros.

“I’appelle ma famille pour qu’elle m’aide. Mais pour l’instant, rien ne se passe. Je pense qu’ils vont m’envoyer un jour de l’argent, quand ils en auront. Mais tu sais, ils n’ont pas l’argent pour en même temps, nourrir les enfants et pour m’aider. On cherche du travail ici mais il n’y en a pas.”

[I call my family so they can help me. But for right now, nothing is going. I think they will send me money one day, when they will have it. But you now, they don’t have money at the same time to feed the children and to help me. One looks for work but there is none here (my translation; Dufrane and Wavreille 2016)].

These black African migrants are slotted through global racialized schema to: 1) work in certain jobs befitting the predetermined status afford by one’s race; 2) live in substandard housing because one is black and most avenues to finding and securing adequate housing in Saharatowns are foreclosed; 3) fear inciting anti-black violence, which discourages migrants from going to work and engaging in conspicuous consumption. What distinguishes this phenomenon from conditions that impinge upon
black (im)migrants elsewhere is that the orientation of current Africa-Europe migration routes has made the Saharatowns essential to the Trans-Saharan migration system, and that, unlike many other contemporary migration routes, it is often necessary for many migrants to stop and work for months at a time in order to make enough money to continue. Migrants leave their home countries for many reasons. Rapid population growth, economic depression, internal conflicts, political instability, widespread poverty, deepening unemployment and scarce economic opportunity have characterized much of the migration from sub-Saharan African nations (Adepoju 2000) as well as changing security and immigration policies (Kassar and Dourgnon 2014), and climate change (Barrios et al. 2006). The journey to Europe is very expensive costing many individuals hundreds of Euros. In 2003, the Moroccan researcher Mehdi Lahlou estimated that a boat crossing from Morocco to Spain cost from $200 for minors to $500 to $800 for Moroccans, and up to $800 to $1,200 for Francophone and Anglophone sub-Saharan Africans, respectively (Lahlou 2003). However, migrants need to make money to continue the very expensive journey, as well as to live within towns along the route. According to de Haas, in the process of crossing the Sahara to North Africa, migrants spend hundreds of dollars on bribes, smugglers, transportation, and daily necessities (de Haas 2006). Because the sums of money for the long journey are so high, migrants remain in Saharatowns toiling for long periods of time trying to make large sums of money; this condition distinguishes this migration system from others found throughout the world.
**Holding onto Dreams of Elsewhere**

To have no money is one thing, but to be ready and able to engage in wage labor without the possibility of gainful employment in Saharatowns exemplifies another aspect of compression: failure. Migration can be a modality of aspiration, a quest for “the good life,” and ultimately, hope (Chua 2014). When the prospect of work is foreclosed for many and living in town is a constant ordeal for most, aspirations may waver as hope fades. Money is what migrants need, and being without in the Saharatown is perilous for aspirations of actually leaving that place. Migration can also symbolize a failure to realize aspirational dreams. Some migrants, who find their new living situations untenable, return home experiencing a failed migration, characterized by interrupted dreams and massive loss (Chua 2014). The predicament of the undocumented migrant in Saharatown requires an expansion of the idea of failed migration to include the stagnation and stickiness endured in Saharatown living. Being in the Saharatown is not the goal for many migrants, however it is part and parcel of reaching North Africa, a goal for most. Being unable to continue the journey due to lack of funds and returning home for fear of shame, embarrassment or admitting the journey was a failure are all types of failed migration. This failure, conditioned on the process (or lack thereof) of the journey, represents the dynamic jaw of the vise of existential compression. It forces people into situations of yeoman’s work such that they can fulfill the promise they made to their families back home, and so they don’t have to return home as failures. Entangled in this pressure of failure is the, sometimes interminable, wait until all the necessary requirements for departure are met. This temporal aspect cannot be understated. Many migrants remain in Saharatowns and in rural North African towns for years and many of them, after having
invested much time, energy and money in making life in those places, give up their quests to go further northward. They prefer to stay rather than risk indignity and dishonor of going to jail, facing repatriation and returning home empty-handed (Bredeloup and Zongo 2005).

In *Renegade Dreams*, Laurence Ralph supposes that the ordinary, mundane dreams of Eastwood, a black neighborhood in East Chicago struggling with gang violence, economic inopportunity and social and institutional disenfranchisement, are an act of defiance. The Eastwood residents’ dreams of wanting to transform the community into a beloved community, or wanting to leave ganglife to become a writer in order to write from injury, or learning to speak out against the perils of gangs in order to empower youth to avoid a dangerous lifestyle, or even hoping to enjoy the mundane activity of walking home after school without it representing the threat of danger and essence of survival, were in fact *renegade* dreams (Ralph 2014). Nothing much was expected of Eastwood or the people from it, and dreaming of something good out of an Eastwood, or of an activist life out of an injury, is antithetical to the immobilization these circumstances inscribe on black people. Ralph realized, “If injury immobilizes people, like that fatal bullet that fractures the spine, then dreams keep people moving in spite of paralysis.” I invoke Ralph and his wonderful reflection on the power of dreams here, to emphasize the power of the dream of reaching one’s destination, or the hope one has of crossing the fiery desert in order to embark upon a new life with improved economic opportunity. Is the renegade dream of leaving the strictures and compression of the Saharatown enough to keep people going, striving for beyond the desert? With thousands of migrants mortgaging their presents for unguaranteed futures, paying for traffickers and
handlers who make money off their backs, do the traffickers of migrants and the families of migrants and *expect* the travelers to make it to North Africa? Are the migrants’ dreams concurrent with those expectations, or are they renegades?

Ultimately, it is these dreams and hopes, hopes of more prosperous futures, of greater opportunities (e.g. jobs, monies, dreams, material wealth, etc.) and a chance to live in the “land of plenty” that are at stake, and that diminish. When social life is restricted to exploitative labor (or even trying to *find* labor which is also difficult, as Abdul attests), housing (substandard living conditions) concerns, and personal security, all under extreme duress with little else, the environment is compressing the existence of the individual.

**Black Migrant Compressions Across Space and Time**

Striking similarities exist among contemporary black trans-Saharan migration and the Great Migration of black Americans escaping Jim Crow South to other places in the U.S. during the time period of 1950 to 1970. During the mass exodus out of the Jim Crow South, newly mobile blacks had to quickly learn how best to travel through the South to the areas of the country now open to them. They embarked upon trains to Northern cities, or drove themselves in personal automobiles, directly to their destinations, with many driving more than 1,000 miles in just a few days. Isabel Wilkerson documented various firsthand accounts of blacks emigrating from the American South to the North and the difficulties those pioneers faced on their paths. Wilkerson chronicles the exodus story of Robert Joseph Pershing Foster, who in April of 1953 left Monroe, Louisiana, where hundreds of people and thousands more from the rest of the state joined the steady stream
of black folk moving to California. Setting off in his Buick Roadmaster, Foster began the 2,000-mile journey to Oakland passing through East Texas where he stopped because of fatigue. He had a few drinks in a small Mexico town across the Rio Grande and the liquor was swimming in his veins. With more than half of Texas in front of him and 766 miles between Laredo, Texas and a small town of Lordsburg, New Mexico where some friends had promised him safe lodging, Mr. Foster needed a break. He knew, however, that he could not stop at the roadside motels on both sides of the highway to get a room, because “they didn’t take colored people, and it did no good to think about it. They might as well not have existed” (Wilkerson 2010). As Texas was still under the veil of Jim Crow, there was no safe place for lodging in Texas, the midway point of Mr. Foster’s journey. Recalling his trip, Mr. Foster said, “There were no hotels taking blacks then. No. None. So if you had a friend who would take you in, you went there, period, and you were through. And then you worried about the next stop.”

Existence has been impinged and compressed such that the social connections between human and human and human to environment, leisure, relationships and action through entitlements (acting with confidence because one is a citizen and enjoys certain inalienable rights due to assumed citizenship; e.g. housing, healthcare, etc.) are compressed such that they are no longer viable within the social milieu in which the compression occurs (i.e. Saharatown). They are compressed to only focus on labor to acquire enough monies to continue the journey through the desert (a compression emanating from being stuck in the Saharatown), but must endure being paid much less for their work or even have their pay entirely withheld from them; they are constrained to labor and oftentimes actually live on their jobsite.
The influx of Black migrants into the Sahara has sparked racial tensions between Blacks and White North Africans, with numerous attacks by Arab-Bédouins against Black migrants occurring throughout Algeria. In June after the Euro 2016 football championship, 60 Black migrants were injured after an attack by Algerian youth in Tamanrasset (Berkani 2016); they were targeted for no reason other than they were foreign and Black. In another incident in March 2016, “des migrants subsahariens” sustained injuries from a large attack by the inhabitants of Béchar, a town about 1,000km south of Algiers. A few days before the attack, dozens of indigenous residents threw stones at the visible migrant lodgings within an abandoned market (the migrants live there), accusing the migrants of raping a young girl. Without filing a complaint with the local authorities, the indigenous inhabitants took control, attacking the “subsahariens”. So quickly can the ground beneath poor blacks and black migrants crumble and without warning, that life can be lived through this condition of precarity (Das and Randeria 2015). The terms “subsaharien” and “subsahariens” are euphemistic codes for “black” migrants, and such metonyms mouthed by Bédouins highlight the differentials marked by geography, melanin and socioeconomic class. Notable in this account is the conspicuous passivity of the police present during the large assault against the migrants. A migrant at the scene said, “La police était sur place, mais pendant plusieurs heures, elle n’est pas intervue” or, “the police where there, but for several hours, they didn’t intervene” (my translation). This attack came on the heels of anti-migrant violence in the southern Algerian city of Ouergla where Algerians had learned that a Nigérien had stabbed an Algerian (Les Observateurs de France24 2016a). Residents refused to stand down and went to the construction sites where migrants reside in an informal settlement. After a
day of clashes, the authorities expelled migrants from the town, forcing them to go elsewhere. To be clear, migrants are attacked, and the police force the migrants to leave. No, this egregious tale is not an example of unique or even unfamiliar events in the context of the global phenomenon of migration. It is however, indicative of migrants’ need to work in a place that is not their intended destination. People can propel themselves toward their dreams or take up more space that is bigger than themselves, however their launching pad is shaky, fragile even. Compression describes the slow, violent pressure against those dreams, forcing one to exist within a smaller space, and blacks within this could still experience precarity as they try to take advantage of what hope remains. Why would people go through this space, which is not the Algiers, the Tripoli, the Lampedusa, or the Paris they may seek? Did they leave their homes of unacceptable economic and/or social conditions just to be underpaid and discriminated against in some faraway rural town? The fear of failure coupled with the many years migrants often spend in the desert working, persisting and waiting, exposes them to systemic violence and discrimination over the course of years. The dynamic jaw of the vise is tightening, pinning the migrant against the static one, and this is a demonstration of compression at work.

The segregation of Jews in the middle ages was an effort by Christian Italians to ensure Christian purity within Italy, whereas the 20th century segregation of blacks in America was made to ensure white purity (Duneier 2016). The spatial and economic segregation in the Saharatatown and its ghettos shares continuities with the situations of American blacks in the 20th century as well as the 21st century. In post-Reconstruction America, this segregation was demarcated by the color-line. W.E.B. Du Bois pointed to
the physical dwelling of blacks in Southern white towns when he stated, “A Negro slum may be in dangerous proximity to a white residence quarter,” (Du Bois 1903). Drake and Cayton talk about how racial segregation gave rise to the black ghetto, specifically noting how black poverty in Chicago was exacerbated by the shortage of adequate, sanitary housing, leading to overcrowding, and the compounding of unhealthy living conditions (Drake and Cayton 1945). Rural to urban migration flows described much of the movement of American blacks out of the South to the North during the Great Migration, and many black African trans-Saharan travelers have left both rural and urban locales in their homelands in order to make life in the metropolises of North Africa. Migrating from capital cities in West or Central Africa to find opportunity in urban Mediterranean coastal towns is emblematic of structural inequalities of economic opportunity facing many increasingly urbanized African countries; where are the jobs within these cities and are there jobs for everyone (Beauchemin and Bocquier 2004; Cobbinah and Erdiaw-Kwasie 2016; Potts 2006; Watson 2014)?

Many elements of the Béchar episode reflect Drake and Cayton’s analysis of black ghetto housing conditions in 20th century Chicago, including the living “quarters” of the migrants in the town. In Saharatowns, migrants do not enjoy adequate living or working conditions, often making a space to sleep at the jobsite. In many cities, migrants live in old, abandoned construction sites, or “des chantiers de construction” that are rigged to make tenement housing, with many individuals to a small room (Les Observateurs de France24 2016b). These are often found at the outskirts of town. Other common migrant settlement locations are within abandoned commercial markets, often found within town. Because local residents previously abandoned these spaces, everyone
knows where the new migrants live and congregate, as these are the only available spaces left for them to occupy. Therefore, it is not difficult to find them should people feel the urge. Residents allow these migrants to live within their midst, in squalid conditions as long as there is no disruption of the racial-moral order. Because of this racialized slum life, the residentially marginalized spaces for black migrants in Béchar had taken on the characteristics of a colony (Duneier 2016).

Salif, a 17-year-old migrant from Mali, guided a Belgian journalist through a tour of his Agadez ghetto and the difficult conditions of living there, saying "Vous pouvez entrer et venir voir où nous dormons... Regardez, plus de 50-60 personnes dorment ici. C’est notre chambre, on dort à même le sol, on n’a pas de lit" or “You can enter and come look at where we sleep...Look, more than 50-60 people sleep here. This is our room, we even sleep on the ground, we don’t have a bed” (my translation; Dufrane and Wavreille 2016). Algerians tolerate these migrants due to the fact that they bring money to and labor in these modest towns. The influx of black migrants also signifies a value-shift within the local town-economy. The migrant economy extracts thousands of Euros from migrants and the aggregation of migrants in towns where they are merely “passing through” means that monies will keep coming in via new influxes of migrants (and their labor). Most of the migrants work in these towns in the construction sector, primarily working on construction sites. Many of these construction sites are owned and controlled by national companies or are within the holdings of private corporations. Unfortunately, the benefit of tolerance comes with some strings attached. Often, attacks against black migrants followed a singular transgression committed by a migrant to which residents took umbrage. Again, blacks must live and labor very carefully; any mistake by one
could be deadly for all. In these towns, the crime of one outsider authorizes violence towards all outsiders; the full weight of anti-migrant aggression is borne by all migrants living and working in proximity to each other due to the illegal behavior of one migrant.

**Compression: Living and Working in a Small Box**

Future ethnographic study of migrant-employment and their migrant-life in Saharatowns may provide data that demonstrate the importance of earning a lot of income and quickly, to both carry on with the journey and to continue living at the many nodes along the way. Throughout the Sahara, work arrangements to which migrants are subjected are uneven, and unequal and ultimately hierarchical. Working in Nouadhibou, Mauritania, Armelle Choplin documented how labor is organized within the key sectors that attract the largest number of foreigners (fishing, transportation and construction): “a Mauritanian contractor—frequently a Moor—dominates the sector and is backed up by local or foreign intermediaries (mostly Negro Mauritanians 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 (bīdān), where they find themselves at the bottom of the pile, competing for jobs with *Haratin* (black Moors, descendants of former slaves)” (Choplin 2012, 170). In Agadez and Tamanrasset, the labor structures appear to be quite similar, with Bédouin and French contractors controlling business operations and employee pay, along with West African migrant intermediaries providing access to badly paid work and inadequate lodging to newly arrived migrants. According to the Algerian League for Human Rights (la ligue Algérienne pour la défense des droits des l’Homme), migrant

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2 Issa Younoussi in discussion with the author, May 2016.
construction workers are paid two times less than Algerian workers and are often the victim of blackmail by their Algerian employers; the employers threaten to report migrants to the local authorities when migrants question their working conditions (Les Observateurs de France 24 2016b). Saharatowns, since their inception, continue to thrive on agriculture and profits from raw material extraction, including uranium, gold, among other minerals. In recent years, they have been host to various opportunists seeking to take advantage of the globalized inequalities from which some people suffer. Makhulu, Buggenhagen and Jackson state that one opportunist risks her life to reach Europe in search of a better life, and the other focuses on the passage of the first, preferring to make a living through human trafficking. They accurately surmise that these opportunists are responding to the “vagaries of the world system” (Makhulu, Buggenhagen and Jackson 2010). Euro-American modernity has outpaced the tepid growth of these desert oases and has effectively excluded many of the people passing through them. Are these opportunists, these laborers, engaging in “productive activity” leading to a realization of entering or achievement of a modernity? In this sense, modernity or a modernity is the final or intended destination many migrants seek. Modernity is also a phenomenon of the mind, more than a place in which it is merely located. Is the person who is stuck in the desert oasis producing as well?

In their publication, “Theory from the South: Or, how Euro-America is Evolving Toward Africa,” the Comaroffs contend that a dominant Modernity exists, yet the global South, especially Africa, represents the position from which new, more critical insights of the world emerge (Comaroff and Comaroff 2012). I am not implying that migrants are consciously trying to enact some new modernity or world order. What I am suggesting is
through modernity-making migration, people are looking for better work and better work conditions, but also opportunity and purchase of new, uncharted futures. Black Africans on the move are also looking for new ways to be in the world, to make money and to make life outside of their destitute circumstances at home. Whatever the dominant Modernity is, it has proven to be categorically unfair to many Africans. The Comaroffs focused on the South African context, however this offers a reframing of this contemporary Saharan example as a template for what possible futures lay on the horizon for places beyond the Sahara, including Euro-America. The figure of the migrant is the liquid that spills out of the categories of neoliberal capitalism, and the migrant, in being a moving being, actually articulates the contours of subjectivities of alternative modernities, of alternative worlds. What many migrants are doing is trying to find employment to carve out a living in the very world that seeks to subjugate and exploit them. Like migration, modernity-making is a process, and for those biding their time in the Sahara until they can continue on to elsewhere, that process will remain incomplete, the quest unfulfilled. Perhaps the aforementioned opportunists are also engaging in such a process.
MAKING OF SAHARATOWNS

Saharatown Dynamics

The process of urbanization of the Sahara inaugurated the emergence of Saharatowns, and unfolded over the course of the 20th century under the newly independent Maghrebi states initiating and managing this growth. According to Olivier Pliez and Armelle Choplin, Saharatowns are a composition of two contrasting urban models that correspond to very different temporalities: on the one hand, the Saharan city, born of the transnational capitalist exchange networks, that has been part of the trans-Saharan caravan trade for centuries; on the other hand, the city in the Sahara that is the progeny of the young postcolonial states who sought in the 1960-80s to consolidate their national territory by setting up cities on their Saharan frontiers (Choplin 2014; Pliez). Based on these two special conceptions, Pliez disarticulates the socio-spatial dynamics that have disrupted the Sahara since the 1990s. This pivotal period represents a re-equilibration between high (the State) and low (local society), and between logics of physical territory (territory of the state) and territory of network (trade and migratory flows). In order to understand the evolution of the past two decades, Pliez enumerates three major developments: the appropriation of these towns by their inhabitants (“return to the local”) from the State; the transformations of urban spaces by the migrants who traverse the Sahara to work farther north, and; the intense and systematic connection of the Sahara to the rest of the world, via the various networks of globalized transnational trade. These different dynamics offer a view of the Sahara undergoing a reconfiguration,
divided between various territories – those of the State and those of economic and migratory circulations – all in which the city, the Saharatown, is where these dynamics manifest.

In voluntarily implementing development plans in the desert, these newly independent states sought to mark their spatial boundaries, fix their populations and spread the infrastructural elements of the larger, urban towns of the Mediterranean coast (e.g. highways, airports, tertiary hospitals, commercial buildings, etc.) to the ends of the rural zone. In the 1990s, the states of the Maghreb largely withdrew from the Sahara and reduced their levels of development in that zone. These nations engaged in decentralization of their governance of sectors within their economies, while promoting a phase of the “return to the local,” in which more economic determination was granted to local communities, such as southern Algerian towns Tamanrasset and Djanet, the southern Libyan towns Ghat and Al Qatrun, and the northern Nigerien cities Agadez and Dirkou. This decentralization of the state to the localities, including the extremities of the nation posed a challenge to the emergence of local actors in diverse sectors of economic activity. How would the rural, southern communes of the Maghrebi states create economic opportunity from tourism, mineral extraction, etc., without much help from the state? In order for these rural towns to become viable, self-sufficient communities, they decided to urbanize, leveraging their natural resources (e.g. land, agriculture, access to water, etc.) with their urban and population growth to serve as the means of production. This mirroring of the coastal towns of the north, allowed these desert towns to remain stable and economically productive, providing some autonomy from the capital.
There are two ways to read the decolonized Sahara: cities within the Sahara and the desert itself, can be viewed within the prism of a return to the local; the other reading is that this localization of Saharan cities will inaugurate a further distancing of themselves from the urban cores of their nations, making it rather easy to consider them comprising the margins of the state. The centralized State is able to maintain control over the Saharatowns with minimal consideration and effort, unlike the larger towns near the capital that may require strict control due to their political and economic clout. Renewed development of the Sahara has allowed for the erasing of the temporalities and the specificities of the rural Saharan cities that separated them as socially and economically different from the rest of the State. This process invited the Saharatowns into the fold of the State. By inaugurating redevelopment projects and schemes within the Sahara, the State can view and control the Saharatowns through the same prism of sovereignty as the more densely populated and politically dominant regions near the coastal capitals. Before this recent development in the late 20th century, Saharatowns were left to virtual autonomy and obscurity with respect to rule of law, but national development projects in the region came on the heels of the State’s desire to capitalize on the raw materials and agricultural space needed to feed the urban cores of the coast. A strategic move meant to foster goodwill among the rural Saharan communities, the investments in the rural towns by the State served two goals: 1) satisfy the needs of the rural communities so that there will be little contestation against State extraction of local resources and disturbance of regional autonomy and 2) reorganizing the local workforce and regional infrastructure to facilitate and contribute to the extractive economies of intense agriculture reproduction, mineral and raw material extraction and land repurposing (Bisson 1996; Pliez 2011). It is
this tension, between centralization and local power of the rural community that aptly characterizes the condition and function of the Saharan city within the national context.

**People on the Move**

Migration is a practice that connects peoples and worlds, but simultaneously collapses them in the process. Not all migration stories are equally arduous, just as not all boast the same patterns of occupancy of modes of existence. However, many trans-Saharan migrants demonstrate the profound experience of inhabiting and enacting life, compression and survival, more than once. The globalization of international markets and the increasing connectivity of capital flows have benefitted some nations and peoples whereas others have suffered. Niamey and Agadez, Niger are towns central to this long, overland migration route, and many migrants will continue on towards Tamanrasset, Algeria. Because of this pattern, I provide a brief image of these towns on this migratory circuit, which merit further ethnographic investigation.

**Niamey to Agadez, Pre-desert to Desert**

Niamey, a city of approximately 1.09 million people (Central Intelligence Agency 2015) sits in the southwestern corner of the Republic of Niger on the Niger River, in the Sahel of West Africa. Niamey, the capital city of Niger is the last major town on this overland route before crossing into the Sahara desert en route to North Africa [see map detailing route and distances]. Niamey, a sleepy but cosmopolitan town of a poor, landlocked, resource-rich nation, has swelled in recent years at a rate between 4.22% and 4.55% since 1990 (Habitat UN 2010), mostly attributed to rural Nigériens moving to the
city as well as some international migrants stopping there to gear up for the next migratory leg.

During my first time in Niamey, I could not help but think of the cities in the desert afar. Niamey is not a Saharatown and is actually quite different, however, it is on the larger, West Africa to North Africa migration route (Figure 1).

Niamey is not Saharan, but as I thought of the desert, I could feel the Sahara or my imagined taste of it, in the air. The Sahara traveled in the sandstorms against which I occasionally steeled myself with shirt and scarf. It beckoned from the words of folks with whom I met who knew Agadez in some way. That far-flung town has come to evoke the Sahara when uttered at all. In fact, Niamey and Agadez, through the migration flows between them, speak to each other as much as they do people.

If Niamey signifies a “pre-Sahara” because it is just south of the desert and not actually in it, than it may also be a “pre-Saharatown” strictly in the sense that it is the last large town before crossing into the desert. In order for most migrants coming through Niger to reach North Africa, they must go through Niamey, then Agadez and beyond. Niamey is connected to the Saharatown of Agadez by more than a shoddy, intemperate road; because of its order in the migration circuit and its proximity, it holds a vision of Agadez within itself and is a staging ground for those looking to reach North Africa. How time in Niamey “prepares” individuals for life in Saharatowns such as Agadez and Tamanrasset is unknown.
Agadez and Tamanrasset

The Sahara is a sparsely populated region with most of its 2.5 million inhabitants spread across about 3.3 million square miles of desert living near lakes and rivers (Peel and Gritzner 2015). In general, Saharatowns are home to anywhere from 5,000 to 20,000 inhabitants, however there are a few that hold upwards of 120,000 residents, with many people situated outside of towns in the surrounding deserts but traveling to the towns to participate in commercial markets. Increasing trans-Saharan migration and migrant settlement have played a key role in revitalizing ancient trans-Saharan trade routes and desert (oasis) towns such as Agadez, Niger and Tamanrasset, Algeria (Bensaâd, 2003; Spiga, 2005). As of 2012, Agadez had a population of about 118,000 inhabitants, a marked increase from 1995 when it had a population of about 85,000 (Agadez.org 2004). Today, it is estimated to have a population of 140,000 (Hinshaw and Parkinson 2015). Residents are primarily local peoples, indigenous both to the Sahara and to the town.

Some of the increase in size of Agadez is attributable to the influx of peoples from other parts of Niger, but most of the increase is due to the presence of international migrants (overwhelmingly from west and central African countries). Agadez, located in the center of northern Niger, sits at the foot of the Sahara desert and is the largest town in central Niger. An ancient, culturally dynamic city, Agadez is home to several ethnic groups that continue to shape the image of the town. Much of the economic activity within Agadez is related to local commerce, artisanal crafts (both crafting and selling) and agricultural production. The Tuareg, a seminomadic, socially stratified, Islamic people who live in parts of Mali, Algeria and Niger (Rasmussen 1998), are one of the dominant groups in the region. They occupy much of the Saharan routes through which
sub-Saharan migrants travel. For some Tuaregs, especially young men, the Sahara allows a document-less mobility, in which men, women and children can move freely between Niger, Mali, Libya and Algeria without passports or visas. With all the migrants coming into Agadez as part of the illegal migration industry, Agadez and the Tuareg have adopted new economic activities. Many Tuareg have been able to leverage their knowledge of the desert to serve as guides and help navigate smugglers through the desert, for a price (Bensaâd 2007; Serge 2008;). The Tuaregs are considered the protagonists of the migration route through the desert, often facilitating the transport of sub-Saharan migrants through Tuareg lands and often driving the trucks or “Hiluxes” that dart across the Sahara (Kohl 2015). Such fluid boundaries between trade, smuggling and migration, both enable movement and allow for the sustainability of expanded social connections as possibilities for these Tuaregs and other migrants in the Sahara (Kohl 2007).

Located in the Tamanrasset Province in southern Algeria, the oasis city of Tamanrasset is a town of more than 93,000 people nestled in a valley within the Ahaggar Mountains (Nadi 2007). It is considered the capital of Tuareg (ethnic Berber) Algerians. This city serves as way-station for travellers coming from south of Algeria going to North Africa. Tamanrasset has a very diverse demographic, with various Tuareg peoples and Berbers from the north (referred to as “northerners”). Many of the city dwellers also come from the surrounding nations, including Hausa, Songhay, and Zarma peoples as well as Tamasheq and Hassaniya speakers (Badi 2012). Like Agadez, there are many West and Central Africans living in Tamanrasset as well, and like the northerners, they are quite socially different than the indigenous groups of the city. Tamanrasset has no
industry; its economy depends almost exclusively on tourism and trade. It has been able to profit from the migration economy dumping people there, by absorbing their cheap labor in construction, agriculture and mining work. Like Agadez, Tamanrasset is incredibly diverse and cosmopolitan, as many people have different uses for the city, and different temporalities within it.

The Rise of the Saharatown

These Saharatowns reflect a paradox, inasmuch as they are the consequence of recent urbanization and the result of a rupture in the temporalities that mark the desert as useful (because of arable land, mineral wealth and their de facto position as border towns) by the State. Up until recently, there has been little interest in developing these Saharatowns like the major coastal cities along the Mediterranean; that would divide power and render these locales more than simply borderlands cities. Politically, state leaders and their regimes have realized the power and utility of these lands, as they are closely connected to important products (i.e. agriculture and minerals), as well as welcoming and housing large populations of migrants from elsewhere. Governments have considered allocating resources to Saharatowns as an essential part of re-equilibration of the national territories. In providing residents of Saharatowns critical resources to perform agriculture and to green the desert or “verdir le desert,” governments are paying peoples “gifts” so that extraction of minerals and agricultural products go unabated. Urbanization is key to all of this because it will allow the town to sustain these national investments and maximize its material contribution to the state. Jean Bisson stated that “l’urbanization soutend le dynamism agricole” or, urbanization
underlies agricultural dynamism (Bisson 1996). According to Olivier Pliez, the state pursued this idea by deploying a combination of several tactics, including encouraging the concentration of populations, creating or modernizing irrigation systems, opening of markets, allocation of primary education materials and making substantial improvements in local health infrastructures. For the authorities, these rural investments promote a balance between rural commune and the rest of the national territory and provide political justification for exploitation of desert lands for potential economic profit. This also fixes the populations such that they materialize and represent the limits of the national territory and protect the abundance of resources found within its Saharan borders (Pliez 2011, 45). This history of the formation of the Saharatown is necessary to highlight here. It provides some context for the current situation of these growing cities in relation to migrants and the cheap, highly exploitable labor those migrants perform.

**A Filmmaker, Rockstar and Development Worker Walk into a Bar…**

The taxi driver had no idea what I was saying or where exactly I wanted to go, because I had no idea where I was going. “Bobiel! Qarrefour Bobiel!” I kept saying. I offered 2,000 cfa (approx. 4.00 USD) and no doubt that was too much, but I didn’t have much bargaining power because I didn’t actually know where this place was. After about 30 minutes the car stopped and I noticed a tall lanky white man with a slender looking Nigérien man Chris told me he would be with, and I assumed this was my party. I knew of the white man via Twitter. He’s a filmmaker, and I came all this way to finally get a copy of his film, *Akounak Tedalat Taha Tazoughai* in Tamasheq or “Rain the Color of Blue with a Little Red in It.” This is a Tuareg remake of the famous Prince film *Purple
Rain set in Agadez, yet in Tamasheq, there is no translation for the word “purple,” thus the “Blue with a Little Red in It” portion of the film title. I tried to find this movie in North Carolina after missing a film screening of it in Maryland, but could not find a film screening or copy of the film anywhere near me. Luckily, Chris told me via Twitter that he would be in Niamey in May but our time there overlapped for barely an evening. This was my best shot to finally get this film but it was also a chance, during this preliminary research trip, to speak with a foreigner who has come to “know” Agadez. Since I am a foreigner as well, I wanted to gain a sense of what to expect in there. The film shows Agadez in motion, in action, an image I could not get from being in Niamey, of course. It depicts the struggles of a young Tuareg man negotiating the path his culture has placed in front of with his dreams of being a rock musician. It does not, however, capture the despair of a worker, migrant or otherwise, trying to scratch out a living in the sand.

Sitting in a chair across from me and Moussa, with his languid posture and casual demeanor, Chris schooled me on Agadez, specifically about the things he thought a rookie like me should know. He didn’t balk when I mentioned that I want to go to Agadez. He has been to Agadez numerous times to record and produce various films he’s made as well as to work with Tuareg musicians as part of his cultural exploration of West Africa called Sahel Sounds. He said that Agadez “is crazy”. There are lots of drugs (he specifically said “cocaine”), weapons, etc.; everything seedy is there. I had previously heard this from others and read bits of this in bloating, superficial news reports, but hearing Chris ardently tell me about the illicit underbelly of Agadez evoked grimey, gritty images of the city; Agadez began to appear fast, tenuous and very complicated. The drug, weapons and human smuggling add an element of haste and quickness to the town
that I had yet to consider. All of this action must take place as an open secret, but with extreme speed and relative precision so that the delicate international chains stretching all the way into southern Europe is not irrevocably disrupted and no one gets caught. Chris went on. He said there are “lots of ghettos” and lots of “mafias,” the link in speech between the two supporting the assertion that the two realities coincide with one another, at least in Agadez. In such a rendering, Agadez mirrors how hipsters described 1990s-era Washington, DC (or pick your big U.S. city), waxing poetic about the violent crime, rampant drug use and overall poor conditions of the neighborhoods in which they resided. Hipsters embraced this edginess of the city, which demonstrated their bohemian world-views and legitimated their street-cred; they were cool for liking and living in dangerous, black DC. Agadez is more than simply danger and illegality, yet that view was competing with this powerful and contradictory image of the “crazy” but “safe” Agadez.

Continuing his presentation on Agadez, Chris stated that “The mafias are constantly fighting each other,” but “It’s okay to be a foreigner as long as you’re not involved in the mafia” activities. “It’s safe,” he said, but this was a weak gesture that was as convincing as me with blonde hair and blue eyes. Moussa seconded this take on Agadez. Moussa is a Tuareg guitarist who frontlines a popular Tuareg band, and has played throughout Europe and Africa. As a native of Agadez, Moussa’s opinion of the town and his support of Chris’s claims about it are very comforting to me, legitimate even, because I did not want to follow a foreigner’s ideas about Agadez if they differed from that of the locals. I found it ironic, however, that Moussa seconded almost all of Chris’s assertions, as if Chris was from Agadez as much as Moussa. I didn’t know much about people from Agadez, and the presence and qualities of Moussa crystallized this
cosmos of Agadez as well as the theories of its inhabitants. Moussa has traveled the world over and he has a professional relationship with Chris through their music and artistic interests, doing music production, going on tour and making video collaborations, surprised me. Looking at all this on the backdrop of serialized accounts of Agadez and its illicit migration infrastructure, one can see Agadez as kaleidoscopic and multi-layered, such that hardly one single rendering of Agadez prevails over its many other renditions.

Despite an outsized amount of media attention depicting ostentatious and macabre “scenes” of the arduous trans-Saharan journey, many other realities and conditions have escaped the aperture of the journalists’ camera lens. Much of this focus is centered on migrants leaving from Agadez northward to Algeria and Libya, but what about the road to Agadez from Niamey? I framed many of my questions about Agadez from the position of not having yet been there, and Chris and Moussa addressed my questions from the vantage point of knowing Agadez well. “What’s the road like and how long does it take?” I asked.

Chris launched into a story about his last few times going to Agadez. The bus usually leaves for Agadez at around 0400h. He’s taken a few different bus “agences” and has settled on Rimbo as his preferred bus agency. The road leaving Niamey is rather smooth for the first few hundred kilometers. The checkpoints are numerous but Chris said that even as a white, he hasn’t experienced any issues. A few hours into the journey, the bus stops so the many Muslims, often times including the bus driver and the petit chauffeur (a co-worker of the driver, often a young man, who opens the car door to shout out the vehicle’s destination to passersby who may want to board, and to collect fares from passengers; he is also responsible for loading and unloading the vehicle), may
perform their daily prayers in mosques in small villages along the way. After a few hundred kilometers, the road gets choppy and becomes less of a road and more of a path or “piste,” unsuitable for overland travel with 20-30 passengers crammed in a small bus. The bus travels much slower in order to traverse the broken road and brace against the whipping sand, all the while speeding to make time and hopefully escape would-be bandits. One time, the 950km trip was rather quick and Chris arrived after about 16 hours on the road, but he described his last trip as terrible, taking about 22 hours.

After hearing about this arduous overland journey, I wondered aloud about a flight from Niamey to Agadez. Chris wanted to know how I planned to make it to Agadez, but flinched at my ideas of going by plane. He said he trusts the overland route via bus more than a Nigérien plane and he feels safer in the bus; I thought this was remarkable. The strong reaction to the “Nigérien plane” caught me by surprise and I thought there might be some more subtext to that comment but I didn’t want to press him any further. Why did he prefer the overland route, which he said was terrible, over a flight? Perhaps the bus could offer a beautiful view of the approaching city that a plane may not; the bus hurtling towards an Agadez that begins to peak over the otherwise flat, sandy horizon is another important way of “experiencing” Agadez, even before arriving. However, he intimated to me that he did not “trust” the “Nigérien” plane, and I thought it had to do with the presumed capability of Nigériens (i.e. pilots, air control officials, etc.) to conduct a safe flight. Or did the many charges of corruption within this poor nation lead him to this skepticism? We both arrived in Niger via international flights to Niamey, so perhaps planes entering and departing from the capital are not the issue; flights to and from Agadez seem to be the issue. Such an underhanded disavowal of Nigérien faculties
by someone who displayed concern for how I might represent Agadez, Niger, a paradox that highlights the inherent contradictions of life and what is possible within Agadez.

Moussa had his wife serve the three of us beans made with onions, tomatoes and spices, and we casually ate them with bread. Hungry from hardly eating and enduring the torrid heat, I was famished, and tried to eat my fill without putting my face in the bowl. Moussa on the other hand, appeared at ease, regal even, with Chris and I eating the fruits of his wife’s labor while enjoying the serenity of his compound. After having a bit of tea, which Moussa cleverly referred to as “Tuareg whiskey,” Chris ambled off to his bag to grab a USB stick containing the film; he was staying with Moussa that night in order to catch the 4am bus to Agadez in the morning. Excitedly clutching my laptop, I hurriedly copied the film to my hard drive and tucked my computer back into my pack. I finally get to see Agadez in motion. All of this, chilling with Moussa the Tuareg rock star and Chris the filmmaker and music producer, was incredibly cool, but was this an “Agadez” experience, even far away in the small suburb of Niamey? What then, or who rather, is a legitimate representative of Agadez, of a Saharatown? Perhaps the cool, international rock star legitimates an Agadez that does not exist for the migrants, ghetto bosses, mafia members and drug traffickers who comprise the seedy Agadez Chris embraced. Chris and Moussa are not typical folks one would expect to find in a remote location like Agadez. Not only are they musicians and filmmakers, they are removed from the dominant economic activities of the town and the region; namely agricultural production, construction, local trade and illicit migration. They do not work, and therefore probably do not live, in the same conditions as most other people in town. What is the significance of these particular men telling me about Agadez, in which they ostensibly occupy the
cultural (i.e. upper) echelon of society? Were they recruiting me? Did they want me to go into Agadez (Chris referred to it as “Aga”) with good impressions through which I would see everything as rosy, romantic? The Saharatown must be defended, and Chris and Moussa were defending the reputation of Aga from my unwritten future work of the struggle of being in that place. They did not want me to be critical of Agadez, a place they both obviously hold dear. Such a defense of Agadez from the higher classes of society juxtaposed with the offering of Agadez being rife with crime is emblematic of a taste for alterity, a taste for the otherness of Agadez (Newell 2012b). What role does such affectation of disdain for Agadez while simultaneously fetishizing its negative traits precisely because it is perceived as dangerous, dirty, counter-culture, hip or Other (in other words, being a hipster), have for the people living at the lower rungs of the socio-economic hierarchy? Do these bourgeois hipster folks care what happens to the black people comprising the city and its conditions they fetishize, or are they invested in this unequal social arrangement?
MAKING LEMONADE WHERE THERE ARE NO LEMONS

Migrant Response to Compression

Stuffed like sardines in an overcrowded, rickety truck, hurtling across the inscrutably vast, blank desert is not a place for robust sociality or extended social relations. In fact, this is the place where they are tested between all the people who are packed in the back and on the sides of such trucks. With scores being settled between nationalities once the truck moves in to Libyan no-man’s-land territory, sharing too much information about oneself or “misbehaving” may compromise one’s mission, whether that is to travel to Europe or make life in one of the large North African cities along the Mediterranean (Lucht 2011). In fact, much of trans-Saharan migration takes place in stages, with migrants moving to and through migration hubs along the way (de Haas 2006), meaning that individuals may experience compression in such stages as well. In Darkness Before Daybreak, an ethnography of Ghanaian fisherman who traveled to Italy via the trans-Saharan route, Hans Lucht details harrowing tales of desertion in the desert. Deep in the sand dunes of northern Mali, a truck ferrying passengers to Libya lost its way, and the struggle to stay alive and on the truck is very difficult:

“Sometimes the jeep got stuck in the sand, and we had to get down and push it; but if you don’t manage to get back in the car very fast, they would leave you. My brother was very weak at the time; he was sleeping in the car, so I told the ladies—we had six ladies in the car—to take care of him. But when the people
jumped back on the car, they stepped on him. Everybody was fighting to get inside the car. When the car was moving, I tried to separate the people [from the brother], but I could not. They were all weak; I could not. When we came to that last place to share the water, I called on him but no response.” – Michael (Lucht 2011, 166).

Michael and others facing desertion and demise in the desert experience the rupture of sociality and struggle to endure the spatio-temporal conditions. Reaching Libya would provide many people the opportunity to begin expanding their worlds again, but they also attempt to “expand” under duress during travel. Some stranded individuals may work together to find shelter somewhere and to look out for one another. Other times, individuals may bury those who have perished on the truck or while trudging through the Sahara on foot after having been stranded. Echoing’s Vogt’s work, these signify engagements of intimate labors (Vogt 2016), expansion of compressed existence to return to committing acts of a social life. Within compression, one lives in a space that is smaller than herself squeezing her to fit. Social connections become reconfigured around qualities of efficiency and utility. People are forced to eschew relations more about leisure and love in favor of more strategic, self-serving or dream-serving ones. These engagements also demonstrate a refutation of not only the compression of migration, the Saharatown and the anti-black, anti-migrant elements of both, but also the global socio-economic order that positions them, hierarchically, at the bottom. Opportunity and the extra space for socialities not constrained by compression, Saharatowns or migration
exist for some migrants in North African metropolises, in European urbanscapes or even back home. That is to say, they are found outside of compression and the Saharatown.

The ghetto and ghettoized living in these Saharatowns represent an ordered space and call forth a constrained, limited living situation for migrants living in such terrible conditions. The presence of mafias, warring over the town and the squalid ghetto territories, demonstrate the dynamism of Agadez, of a Saharatown, refuting the notion that it is nothing more than a rural transit-town. Louisa Lombard posits that visibility and flexibility are ways that people enable projects of profit and networking, and respond to pervasive instability, respectively (Lombard 2012). Within these societies, permanent flexibility and shifting visibility enacted by the many peoples who inhabit, take advantage of, and remain subject to the Saharatown, are actually responses to the vise, to compression, inasmuch as these peoples make due and make it out of a situation that would no less crush them. Interesting and overlapping layers of society, licit, illicit and gray economies all comprise a dynamic system teetering on the fulcrum of migration, and this is indicative of a cosmopolitan, multi-dimensional world.

**Men’s Consumption and Women’s Absence**

Modernity and modernity-making for the black African migrant may resemble what Sasha Newell refers to as mimesis (Newell 2012). In the Sahara, migrants are not engaging in a consumerist mentality to reproduce ideas of an idyllic cosmopolitan urban subject; on the contrary, this cultural activity is incongruous to the social milieu that is the Saharatown. With no shopping malls, stores selling luxury goods or the like, this is hardly an easy consumerist environment. However, despite being relatively poor, very
rural, and boasting little access to commercial luxury goods, the Saharatown migrants may yet engage in conspicuous consumption, perhaps exclusive to their migrant connections. Newell notes that individual accumulation, the display of transitory wealth and the awareness of living a life where money is not an issue, could all serve to enhance one’s reputation and build stronger social ties. This is not necessarily the case for black migrants in Saharatowns.

More ethnographic research could squarely support this argument. Could conspicuous material accumulation also attract the ire of local residents, especially when violence against migrants is common? Much of the existing literature highlighting migrants in Saharatowns generally offers brief note of migrants working to make some money in order to keep moving. During attacks by residents and raids from gendarmes, migrants lose some of their stuff, including money. Living in abandoned open-air markets or construction sites makes the possibility of collecting and showcases material wares quite difficult. The small Saharatown is not where one wants to show off; one does that in Tripoli, Algiers or Naples and Palermo if the person is lucky to reach across the Mediterranean.

“Les jeunes du quartier nous volent, nous agressent, provoquent nos femmes,” said Dély Ibrahim, a Cameroonian living in the town Cars. The youth of the neighborhood accost blacks and provoke the black women as well. Afraid of being a permanent victim of violence, he said “Les Blacks, ne sortent plus. On n’a pas travaillé depuis trois jours,” or “The blacks no longer go out; we haven’t worked for three days” (my translation; El Watan 2016). Violence against migrants is also violence against laborers who are responsible for building the new growth of the city the residents will
almost exclusively enjoy. Anne-Maria Makhulu discussed this paradox in terms of the apartheid South African state that required black labor but constantly antagonized black peoples. By controlling their numbers within the cities in which they worked, the apartheid regime successfully pushed many black South Africans to live farther out in the margins of the South African metropolises, further embedding them in spatial and economic segregation (Makhulu 2015, 9).

Much of Newell’s work on this individual accumulation and most of the journalism on migrants in the Sahara relies on the experiences and perspectives of young men. There is an almost exclusive focus on men, specifically young men, such that the concept of conspicuous consumption appears to be conspicuously gendered, and the representation of migrancy and migrant labor is equally gendered favoring men. Where are the women? According to Dély Ibrahim, the Algerian youth harass and attack both the men and “their wives”. Other reports of stranded migrants dying of starvation in the desert count women among the dead. For sure, women are there, in the desert and in the Saharatown, but where do they emerge in this scene? Where are their voices, their perspectives, their stories? They are not sitting at home doing nothing, that is certain, so what are they doing and how are they experiencing this existential compression, this vise of the Saharatown?

Media attention and state policy have conspired to perpetuate the notion that most migrants are male, heavily gendering the figure of the migrant to be male. According to UN migration data from 2015, more than 40% of all migrants in the West African countries of Senegal, Niger and Burkina Faso, as well as the Central African countries of Chad and Cameroon were women (UN 2015; Figure 2).
Sarah Zimmerman writes that between 1908 and 1928, West African women accompanied “les tirailleurs sénégalais” and migrated to regional West African training centers and distant North African warzones in support of those infantrymen serving in the French colonial army. The participation of the “mesdames tirailleurs” during World War I military missions against Morocco, was viewed as essential to the campaign to “pacify” of the Morocco (Zimmerman 2011). Women have been apart of trans-Saharan caravan trade for at least since the 19th century. Women organized commercial operations within market towns, traded across the Sahara by proxy, managed the estates of their deceased husbands and sometimes, traveled with the caravans (Lydon 2009); much of scholarship on travel through the Sahara, be it related to trade or migration, overlooks the substantial involvement of women. Where the entire rubric of critical race theory is inadequate, the theoretical perspective of intersectionality, a concept that articulates how different
identities including race and gender interact with each other and with institutions to marginalize people, is critical to the plight of black African life in Saharatown (Crenshaw 1991).

One of the participants at the Cinema Caravan, a woman, asked a question of one of the program facilitators concerning migration laws and visa requirements. This highlighted the dominant presence of woman at this event and the notice relatively small number of men in attendance. Linda noticed this too, and said mostly women attended the Cinema Caravans throughout Niamey. The stress on “throughout Niamey” provoked some thought about the other IOM sites of sensitization west of this southeastern part of the broader West to North Africa journey: Senegal, Mali and Burkina Faso. Why do men not attend these Cinema Caravans in Niger? Is it because Niamey is just south of the foothold of the Nigérien Sahara, and the men coming from farther west within West Africa have already been “sensitized” to the perils of trans-Saharan migration? Inspired by this scene, however, I asked myself why so many women came.

Contemplating their reasons for being at the event, I thought their interest in migration might lie in their social connections to migrants who have already traveled, and those who hope to do so, called pre-migrants in IOM-speak. Of course, perhaps some of the women are migrants themselves. Linda wasn’t really sure if the attendance pattern had to do with the fact that she is a woman and the women like to come to such events because Linda hosts them. Whatever the reasons for women being there, it is important to recognize that women are there. What can conspicuous consumption tell us about the lives of migrants living in squalid encampments in and around desert communities? Literature of the conspicuous consumption patterns of African migrants is heavily
gendered, reflecting the abundance of male individual accumulation studies. Surely the young males featured in such ethnographic accounts are not the only migrants who collect material goods in an effort to be more than just a black migrant, to take up more space in the world? Women also collect things, right?! So again I ask, where are the migrant women and their stories in the 21st century Saharatown, especially with evidence that many women are migrants in this context (see Figure 2)?

**Continuities in (Ordering) Blackness**

In her work “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” Hortense Spillers provides a critically important disarticulation of body and flesh. In addition to being separate from each other, flesh comes before the body. Consequently, the body does not exist without flesh to which it binds, and therefore requires flesh and law of Man in order to come online and perform its two central tasks: 1) imprison and order flesh, and 2) reproduce and reinforce the juridical law and condition of Man. Using Spillers here, the elements of the vise of compression reveal themselves again. However, the body does not explicitly define that flesh. Flesh is much more. Saidiya Hartman describes flesh as the most elemental matter of being (Hartman 2016). It is a “zero degree of social conceptualization” that remains hidden by “the reflexes of iconography”, the conditions of representation and elision of discourse (Spillers 1987, 67). The figure of the migrant is a composite of iconographies, symbols and juridical imprints, a category of flesh out-of-place whose body must be ordered.

The body is ordered by law to remain fixed, firmly keeping flesh in place within the social-juridical, predetermined (by whites) spaces for black peoples. In Black
Metropolis, the extensive sociological study of early 20th century black life in a large American urban city, Horace Cayton and St. Clair Drake thoroughly traced the historical trajectory of blacks moving during the Great Migration out of the South to find work and make life in northern cities. With increasing numbers of blacks moving into previously all-white towns in the North and Midwest (at least nominally, as small numbers of blacks lived in such towns as domestic workers for whites during Reconstruction; Loewen 2005), blacks consolidated into areas of the city that were socially and geographically disadvantaged with respect to the social, institutional and economic resources that were controlled by whites, and situated in white parts of town. According to Cayton and Drake, the use of the “color-line” by whites trying to restrict movement of blacks in Midwestern cities like Chicago and prevent them from using certain amenities was quite common in the mid-20th century. In Chicago, it was quite common for white bartenders to refuse to serve black patrons and for white waitresses to ignore black customers in restaurants; these instances occurred when blacks left the confines of the black belt (a long, densely-populated stretch of black neighborhoods, residences, institutions and businesses around Chicago which emerged from the migration of blacks from the rural plantations of the South to the urban Midwest) and “invaded” (according to some whites) the institutions of other parts of the city (Cayton and Drake 1945). Blacks were told to stay in their place and the implicit application and enforcement of Jim Crow segregation dictates ensured this, or in other words, the racist society ordered their flesh.

We can learn from America’s Great Migration, as to what consequences lie ahead for black migration into non-black lands. The Great Migration differs markedly from this trans-Saharan migration, especially in terms of the modes of travel afforded to black
Americans (e.g. trains and personal automobiles, compared to overland truck travel for black Africans), the duration of time spent in towns or stops on the journey out of the South (i.e. black Americans may have stayed a few hours to one night at a motel or friend’s house before completing their journey the next day, whereas black Africans may toil in Saharatowns for months before gaining enough money to move on) and the relative durations of the migrations for individuals (black many Americans completed their migrations to the North in a manner of days, yet some black Africans make it from their West African homelands to the shores of the Mediterranean after many months). However, the two migrations maintain strong similarities with current trans-Saharan migration of blacks across the desert, most notably the long and physically dangerous routes to promised lands, as well as the necessary stops on the journeys, be they in small towns, or on the sides of the road. Comparison of the American ghetto with the ghettos of Saharatowns is not without limitations. The experiences of American ghetto residents differ across the U.S. and also across countries (Small 2008). Loïc Wacquant highlighted this issue in Urban Outcasts where he concluded the surface commonalities between U.S. ghettos and the banlieues of Paris “conceal deep structural and functional differences… We are in fact comparing sociospatial specimens of different species—urban ‘apples and oranges,’ as it were” (Wacquant 2008). This is not say that a comparison between U.S. ghettos and Saharatown ghettos can not be conducted, but understanding the limitations is essential to undergoing such a comparative study. The phenomenon of black migrants moving into non-black (specifically white) areas is similar to black Africans crossing the Sahara into North Africa, the lands of Bédouins or white Africans. In the Great Migration of the early 20th century and in the current scenario of black Africans traversing the
Sahara to North Africa, blacks were and are some of the largest sources of voluntarily immigrating cheap, exploitable labor for dominant white populations in post-reconstruction America and contemporary Europe respectively, and now, Arab-Bédouin Saharatowns.

**Encoded Anti-Blackness**

Article 21 of the Algerian labor code stipulates that “The employer can carry out the recruitment of immigrant workers under the conditions fixed by the legislation and the regulation in force when there is not a national work force qualified,” however the code does not provide any provision for determining when there is no qualified national work force (my translation; Code du Travail 1990). Following a November announcement by the Algerian government pledging to end illegal immigration to Algeria, authorities have continued to raid several neighborhoods in the capital Algiers, arresting men, women and children in the ghettos throughout the city. Most of these arrested migrants are black Africans and authorities have continued to send them to detention camps in the south of the country, Tamanrasset being one of them. This removal of black African migrants from the coastal cities and subsequent detention in desert towns in southern Algeria have contributed to the glut of black migrants in Saharatowns, exacerbating racial tensions between blacks and Bédouins. Ironically, it is this southward movement, this “detention migration” that buttresses the utility of the Saharatown, as both intermediate stage of a long, northward journey and as dumping grounds for those expelled from the urban areas near the Mediterranean.
"As soon as you open the door, they take you away. I was taken with all my luggage, everything was stolen: the computer, the things in the house, the refrigerator, the money – they took everything," said a migrant who was sent from Algiers to a camp in Tamanrasset. Prior to this crackdown, conditions for migrants in Algiers were already difficult, again, with migrants living in derelict structures and being exploited by employers. "Our life boils down to that. We carry bags of sand [and] stones. We do all the jobs nobody wants to do," one unnamed Guinean migrant told France 24. The Guinean added, "The bosses call us 'comrades', [and] we have the impression that it means 'slaves'. But we have no choice, they are the only ones who accept to give jobs to illegal migrants." The government crackdown against these predominantly black migrants has been described as “the biggest hunt for the black man since independence” (The New Arab 2016). One cannot deny the racial dynamic of this operation and the Saharatown as dumping ground because of its remote and desert location is critical to this operation.

According to Algerian police, approximately 150,000 migrants have fled war and economic difficulties in their home countries to live in Algeria's large cities, yet only about 7,000 people hold refugee status in Algeria. Using Spillers here, the elements of the vise of compression reveal themselves again. The juridical conditions that order and shape black American life for Spillers parallel the set of anti-migration policies and the legal foundation that does not allow undocumented workers to achieve official employment in the Saharatowns. The juridical apparatus of a Saharatown such as Tamanrasset does not protect the rights of undocumented migrants to pursue employment, but actually indemnifies Algerian employers who discriminate against black African
migrant workers, due to the vague wording and lack of enforcement of the law. The approximately 7,000 people with refugee status in Algeria demonstrates how few migrants are given legal documentation that would protect them and allow them to exist within the veil of the law in Algeria. With authorities raiding tenements, confiscating and stealing belongings from migrants, forcibly removing migrants from their domiciles and dumping them in the Sahara, the law does not protect migrants; to the contrary, it actually persecutes them, and the Saharatown is crucial to completing this circle of anti-black movement. It is simultaneously representative of reverse movement (i.e. from northern coastal metropolis to southern, rural, remote desert oasis town) and the cessation of movement (i.e. the place where dreams of moving northward are deferred and sometimes altogether forgotten as hope of leaving becomes increasingly untenable). It is also simulacrum of the large towns of both the Maghreb and of Europe, a cruel twist on colonial mimesis, in which the former French colonies of the Maghreb imitate the former colonial powers of Europe in dehumanizing and exploiting black peoples. Homi Bhabha describes colonial mimicry as one of the most elusive and effective strategies of colonial power and knowledge production (Bhaba 1997). Black migrants are caught in this mirroring of colonial powers and compressed along the way from one to the other.
CONCLUSION

Considerations of Black Life in Future Studies of Saharatowns

Saharatowns offer these features and their associated issues, and such dynamic social spaces merit much more scholarly attention and rigorous investigation. Much journalism coverage and anecdotal evidence point to the Saharatown being a dystopian site of oppression and disillusion, a space where dreams are deferred. However, it may simultaneously represent a space of limited opportunity and ephemeral hope. The Saharatown evokes images of Black African life caught in transit, with the Saharatown simultaneously prefigured as stepping stone to imagined futures and departure gate for waiting passengers to elsewhere. Are they themselves the object or mise en scène of imagined futures for black African migrants? In other words, are the Saharatowns found within aesthetics and realities of Afrofuturistic worlds? What if the Saharatown offers more than expected, a glimpse into “a possible” future for black migrants in the “North”? What if the Saharatown is a coincidental mimetic representation of European towns that may later exploit black Africans migrants, be they documented or otherwise? What other secrets might the Saharatowns hold, and what effects might those revelations have on the lives of migrants, the conditions they may face and how those circumstances translate to conditioned futures? Unlocking and releasing the vice grip could reveal how powerful social systems and can be effectively undermined and upended to the benefit of migrants and the lives of other compressed peoples. Yet, in order to do this, we need to understand how that vice grip is made, precisely how it functions, and under what conditions it
operates. This theoretical exercise was an attempt to offer prescriptive guidance for addressing a glaring gap in the anthropological literature on migration and blackness in Africa. I specifically highlight the need for in depth study of black migrant women and the types of conspicuous consumption and individual accumulation they perform as they make life in anti-black conditions that might also marginalize them as women. Here, I also called attention to the role of non-governmental institutions and the various funding apparatuses that buttress them in perpetuating the transnational circumstances that lead to precarious situations for black Africans.

Scholarship of African migration through the Sahara has focused, and understandably so, on the global reasons, or push-pull factors, motivating migration through that space. Understanding the parameters under which people decide to move through sand and storm to North Africa and Europe, but work needs to be done on how people survive the sand and hate in the many spaces and long stretches of time before reaching the coast. An analysis of Saharatown compression and how it specifically targets black Africans can provide a framework for studying how Africans and blackness bridge incommensurabilities of different worlds and social conditions to make lives for themselves. Black migration and Saharatowns are the elements that combine to set of the conditions of the vice (Saharatown compression) and the black response (either double failure or mobilizing hope to escape). Trans-Saharan migration constitutes more than movement through desert and sand. Within the realities of time and space for black African migrants that I described here persists a strong element of “un-movement” or “non-movement” that also articulates the phenomenon of trans-Saharan migration. That
is, the precarious stuckedness in the Saharatown is very much a part of the “migration” story (Millar 2014; Missbach 2015; Vogt 2016).

How do migrants live in these Saharatowns, for which there are few jobs for them and much discrimination against them? Some migrants receive monies from their families supporting their journeys, but what happens when those funds arrive infrequently and often, come up short? Many journal reports have documented the conditions of life for black Africans in Saharatowns, as they live in squalid ghetto quarters and work in insalubrious, dangerous jobs. I have failed to come across any academic studies that have examined the actual lives of black migrants in these spaces, in these conditions. I believe that the Saharatowns can tell us so much more. How do black migrants modulate their dreams and their objectives in these towns? How do the towns affect how black migrants recalibrate their dreams and hopes? Under a double failure, what happens to the morale and hopes of migrants experiencing it? Within the space of these towns and the double failure they inaugurate may emerge what Nadia El Shaarawi calls liminality. This liminality is a condition of living in transit in which migrants experience a disjunction between their expectations about exile and its realities that contribute to an altered experience of time, in which the future becomes particularly uncertain and life, unstable (El Shaarawi 2015). Is the significance of the double failure, getting stuck in a town unable to leave and failing to reach one’s intended destination, a compounded demoralizing failure, an anti-hope? How do migrants experience this time, or time lost, and what effects does this temporal experience have on their dreams and actions?

These dynamic Saharatowns exert some considerable pressures upon black migrants who happen to inhabit them, and these black peoples fail to realize their dreams
or dream themselves out of the desert. However, they may simultaneously represent for many the best way *out* and a way *forward* towards a more prosperous life. If going to the Saharatowns means one is trying to get to the other side of the desert, then the Saharatowns are critical to the trans-Saharan hope for many black Africans migrating through the desert scape. Only time will tell what happens to people at the end of their journeys, but ethnographic inquiry can provide a picture of what happens in the middle.
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