

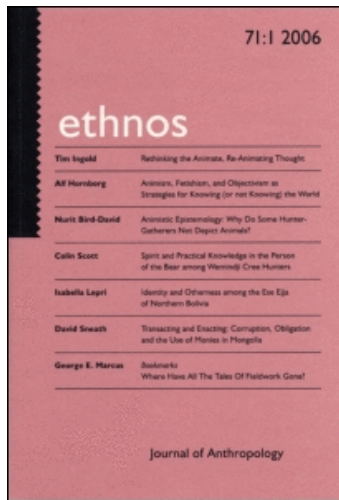
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Wayward Migration: On Imagined Futures and Technological Voids

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ABSTRACT: *This article explores imagined migration and migrant imaginaries. It takes its point of departure in fieldwork among would-be migrants in Bissau and traces the realization of their hopes into Europe. More specifically, it sheds light on the way young men from Bissau, the capital of the small, impoverished West African country of Guinea-Bissau, position the decline and destruction that characterize their city in relation to the peace, prosperity and progress they see elsewhere. In doing so, it illuminates a world that, seen from Bissau, is characterized by very uneven levels of control over socio-political matters. A world that is divided into different zones of mastery over social, political and economic processes. Finally, the article dwells on the consequences of this imagined global order and its effect on the acts and strategies of young migrants.*

KEYWORDS *Migration, globalization, racialization, hope and prospects*

In December 2005, Biaw and 52 other hopeful, young West African men set off on a 1000-mile journey from Cape Verde to the Canary Islands. It was close to Christmas, and they had each paid between 1300 and 1500 Euros to embark on a 20 foot boat supposed to deliver them onto the shores of Europe. Fifty-two men on 20 feet for 1000 miles. The voyage did not, however, go as planned, and instead of sailing toward the Canaries the small boat strayed aimlessly out to sea where, somewhere in the Atlantic, hope died out. A hundred and thirty-five days after his departure, Biaw and ten other remaining passengers drifted into the territorial waters of Barbados; eleven decomposed bodies and a goodbye note.¹ Biaw's disastrous journey caused quite a stir in the group of primarily Guinean and Cape Verdian migrants among whom I have been doing fieldwork. The tragedy sparked off a

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conversation about the things people have to do in order to get to Europe; about the different ways people imagine and make the journey, the risks they have to take and the hardship they have to endure.

In this manner, the case serves as a point of departure for the article, in two ways. First of all, in much the same way as images of bodies washed ashore on the seaside resorts of Portugal, Spain or Italy, the 'ghost ship' shows the dangers involved in crossing into Europe. The death tolls are alarming and, considering that we only find a fraction of those irregular migrants who die at sea, most probably represent only the tip of the iceberg. Secondly, the conversation that the case triggered exemplified that people are aware of the dangers of unauthorized migration in and around the Mediterranean. There are daily casualties, and would-be migrants know it! All the prospective migrants I have talked to in Bissau, and the illegal migrants I have spoken to while doing fieldwork in Lisbon, Paris or Copenhagen recognize that they have embarked – or wish to embark – on an dangerous journey. Yet, despite being aware of the hazards – and often knowing people who have died or are missing after trying to make it into Europe – people embark on the journey, nonetheless.

The absurdity of Biaw's story is, in other words, not intended to be polemic. Rather, it exemplifies the act of irregular migration that people talk about, whether on the streets of Bissau or Dakar, Lisbon or Paris. The case is part of what frames imagined migration (Gardner 1995; Teo 2003): of the extremes that demarcate the boundaries within which people imagine truncated existences into possible lives. Yet, if people are aware of the risk involved and aware of the difficulties that they will face if they actually survive the journey, we need to ask ourselves why they see it as an attractive option at all.

Global Awareness from Below

The easy way of answering the question would be by turning toward the classical push–pull theories developed, initially, by E. S. Lee (1968) as a demographic typology of the factors involved in the process of migration. The theory essentially works through the assumption that migration is driven by the push of deprivation and the pull of provision entailing that migratory flows will move between areas of poverty and areas of affluence.

Yet, pragmatism should not be confused with economism. The simplistic underlying assumption that money is the name of the game for young migrants is unfortunate as it reduces complex social motivations to simple economic logic (Yea 2005). What we need to make clear when focussing on push–pull factors is that migration does often not follow clear-cut economic rationales

but is related to regional differences, historical processes, social ties (cf. Portes & Borocz 1989:607–611; Hollifield 2004) and, not least, imagined places and spaces. The view from within the naked rationality of monetary logic is narrow and instrumentalistic, offering very few possibilities of analytically encompassing the complexity of social action. Although economic gain and social possibilities are often related they are most definitely not identical.

What I will propose instead is a perspective which links the social imaginary of urban youth in Bissau to the praxis of migration. I will investigate how they imagine the social characteristics and possibilities of Bissau and illuminate how this social imaginary is related to a *global awareness from below*: an understanding of a world order consisting of societies with different technological capacities and levels of masteries over physical and social environment, as well as the spaces and social options which are open or closed to persons of different social categories within it. Where the former allows us to see the collective vistas and understandings that underlie the process and desire to migrate, the latter Weberian concept of social options – designating the realm of possibility open to the individual through his position within (global) society (Dahrendorf 1979: 28, 30) – allows us to illuminate the praxis of migration with an eye to social being and becoming. In unison the two make it possible to illuminate migration through a focus that links social contexts and imaginaries to individual motivations and trajectories.

Yet, focussing on social options and imaginaries does not only nuance our understanding of push–pull factors. As we shall see, the perspective also allows us to critically comment on the idea of ‘global connections’, proposed by transnationalism (see Glick-Schiller, Basch & Blanc 1995), revealing instead a pervasive imagined and experienced situation of, what has been termed, ‘the global disconnect’ (Ferguson 1999, 2006, see also Lucht 2008). Though the article illustrates ‘the ongoing and continuous ways in which current-day immigrants construct and constitute their embeddedness in more than one society’ (Glick-Schiller, Basch & Blanc 1995:48) it equally emphasizes the way in which illegal migrants become stuck in a global ‘order’ of peoples and places that does not seem interconnected but stratified,² constituted by what appears as non-traversable strata organized along parameters of colour, race and social position. Contrary to the transnational approach the article thus contributes to an understanding of the global which is less centred on ‘transnational flows and images of unfettered connections’ (Ferguson 2006:23) and more focussed on the restricted character of social and global mobility (cf. Carling 2002; Bauman 2005; Paerregaard 2008). It shows how migration

is seen to provide means of escape from the 'social death' (Hage 2003) that characterizes the lives of young men in Bissau, but equally, as Lucht has termed it, how they in the process of migration 'more often than being agents of change and travel, working both sides of the border, appear to be stuck in a negative zone, recognised neither legally nor socially' (2008:17).

If we want to understand the desperate acts of migration that we see from West Africa, we need to understand both the emigrant and the immigrant (Bourdieu 1998:1). Similarly, the article takes its point of departure in fieldwork among would-be migrants in Bissau and traces the realization of their hopes into Europe. More specifically, it illuminates the way young men from Bissau, the capital of the small, impoverished West African country of Guinea-Bissau, position the decline and destruction that characterizes their city in relation to the peace, prosperity and progress they see elsewhere. In doing so, it reveals a world that, seen from Bissau, is characterized by very uneven levels of control over socio-political matters. A world that is divided into different zones of mastery over social, political and economic processes (see Vigh 2006 [2003]a, 2006c). The article dwells on the consequences of this imagined global order and its effect on the acts and strategies of young migrants (McMurray 2001). It shows how migration becomes a technology of the imagination, as an act through which people come to imagine better lives in other times or places as well as the tragic consequences of this imaginary bridging of severed points.

Life without Sauce

Seen from within, Bissau provides a prime example of what Ferguson has described as a feeling of *abjection* in his work with *Zambian copper miners*. The city is no longer characterized by hope for a better future but by a pervasive sense of 'being thrown down,' 'debased' and 'humiliated' (Ferguson 1999:236). Having experienced a prolonged period of decline, from the collapse of Marxism, to the collapse of free market democracy and the onset of ten years of conflict and warfare, Bissau is seen as a developmental void. 'Here things do not go forward, only backward [*so pa tras*]' the urban youth, I speak to in Bissau, say, as their lives are stuck in a scenario where they have to struggle to survive in a space of continuously diminishing possibilities. This lack of social options available to young men in Bissau has tangible consequences as it leaves them without the possibility of gaining social status through the ability to support households and provide patronage (see Vigh 2006a & b).

I interviewed Ibrahim in 2005 while doing fieldwork in Bissau. We were sitting in a staircase in *Bairro Veilho*, the old quarter, talking about life as a young person in Bissau. After we had talked a bit Ibrahim said:

Being young in Bissau is life without sauce. It is difficult. Very difficult. When you think that you have seen your path someone else comes and sits on you and after him someone else. I am telling you it is life without sauce.

A life without sauce, *vida kuntango*, derives from the phrase, *arroz kuntango* i.e., rice without sauce, the Guinean equivalent of surviving on a diet of plain boiled potatoes; it serves as a metaphor for a life lived without the delicacies of recognition and positive social being (cf. Honneth 2006). It is bare life, mere existence as such (Agamben 1999). As we shall see, the statement echoes the sentiments of other similar statements about the predicament of young people living in Bissau, where the hardness of life and the difficulties in foreseeing a positive future for oneself in a space of incessant turmoil and rampant poverty, affects the entire process of social becoming. According to Bernardino:

There are lots of women in Africa, lots. But money... you must have money. If you have a woman but you do not have money she will go and find it where she can. If you cannot give her [money] for the market,³ she will find someone who can. *So she will leave you if you do not have money?*

If she needs a thing where will he [her boyfriend] see [get] it? If you do not give her, where will she see it? It is the same with marriage... That is why marriage has nearly stopped in Africa. You can know a woman ten years, but you will never have enough money to marry her. To be a respectable man you need to marry. If you are not married you will not have respect in society. It is the same thing with work. If you have work you can organize your life, you can get married, and afterwards you can start a family... But only someone who knows you... Only someone who knows you will give you a job... These days, young people are frustrated. It is this that makes young people want to leave, so you can have a level of life. You go there [abroad] and then you can send money to your family... But it is sad, because you are far from each other. It is difficult. Africans have difficult lives.

Being a young man without proper employment or detectable life chances, Bernardino clearly feels the sting of the present decline. Due to the difficult situation, he is socially stuck, locked into the category of youth without possibilities of attaining social mobility. As the quote illustrates, his incapacity to make a living for himself renders him unable to support a girlfriend and, thus, unable to marry and attain adulthood. Being caught in a seemingly unbridgeable schism between the culturally expected and the socially possible

his life is deeply anomic (Merton 1968). In other words, though he should, ideally, be following the culturally prescribed progression towards recognized social being he is, due to the many years of economic decline and the withering of the post-colonial state, unable to move along the socio-generational trajectory that is expected of him. Instead of being able to provide for and marry his girlfriend, with all the positive consequences it would have, Bernardino is faced with the constant possibility of his girlfriend leaving him for someone who can. And being unable to marry in Bissau leaves a person without the possibility of becoming an *homi di respeito*, a respectable man. It leaves one locked in the position of 'youth' with few options for escape (cf. Hirschman 1970). As he says, 'young people want to leave, so you can find a level of life,' revealing that the possibility of gaining an adequate life is seen as temporally and spatially distant.

Migration is, as such, despite the difficulties it entails, seen by many young men in Bissau as one of the few means – together with seeking inclusion into a patrimonial network (Vigh 2006a, 2006b) – of acquiring a tolerable existence; of finding a way out of the social truncation that shadows their lives in the city. As my friend Arno – one of the few to actually gain legal entry into the EU – said, showing me the newly received visa in his passport: 'Look, is it not beautiful? I am so afraid that I will lose it... You know, [if I lose it and] if someone finds it, it is like a dead who sees life.'⁴

Seeing Life

In fact 'seeing life', *odja si vida*, is a commonly heard description of the action taken in order to move towards better futures. It indicates, together with the terms of *busca si vida*, 'looking for one's life,' and *tene vida*, 'having a life,' both the difficulty of envisaging a future in Bissau and the constant attempt to imagine one's possibilities in another place or time by drawing tentative trajectories through social horizons while beset by both hope and fear (cf. Crapanzano 2003).

However, for urban youth, life in Bissau is practically characterized by an inability to move along a positive social trajectory as the socio-economic environment seems frozen in perpetual motion without progress. Being unable to escape the category of *joven*, 'youth,' has become the predicament of generations of young people in the city, and in the face of continuing decline and instability, this category has come to equal 'social death' (Hage 2003; Vigh 2006b). It is a socio-generational position of expected progress toward fully fledged social being but set in an environment of social, economic and

political regress. One may be able to party, romance and devote time to following styles and trends – all of which are part of what is seen as the positive sides to being young in the North – but the point is that in Bissau that is all one *can* do, as possibilities do not emerge from within the city itself. As described by Septimo:

I am tired of my life; it is shit. A shit life [*vida di merda*], life without progress, without a guaranteed future.⁵ The day I will leave [Guinea-Bissau], that is when I will see my future.

Both Bernardinho's and Septimo's statements make us aware that one of the few possibilities of seeing and gaining a future for youth in Bissau is via migration. In order to escape and transcend his *vida di merda* Septimo needs, he believes, to migrate, a perspective that is equally shared by Carlos, who says:

If you are born here [in Bissau] and you do not have, if your family does not have, [then] you have to look for your life. You must *dubria*. If you do not *dubria* with life you will not see it.

See what?

[Annoyed] Your life! Me... If I do not *dubria*, I will not have... I will stay like this without money, a family, not even anything.

Dubria is the term I have elsewhere translated as 'social navigation' (Vigh 2006b), the action of moving tactically in relation to social forces that confine or seek to move you. Navigation is, I have argued, a valuable term in the analysis of praxis as it refers to *motion within motion* and, thus, provides us with an analytical optic suited to illuminating tactics and action within situations characterized by uncertainty and instability.⁶ To 'look for one's life' and to have to *dubria* in order to 'see it' underlines that Carlos has to construe and navigate a clear passage through a volatile and opaque social environment. His words illustrate how he is engaged in a process of disentanglement from confining structures and relations as well as trying to draw a line of flight into an envisioned future. *Dubriagem*, or social navigation, is to simultaneously keep oneself free of immediate social dangers and direct one's life through an uncertain social environment, towards better possible futures and improved life chances. Or as Adilson, an ex-combatant commented when I asked him why he chose to join a militia during the civil war of 1998–99:

Because I understood that they [the Government forces] would be able to send me my day of change [*dia di seku*]...⁷ After... After the war, if all went well and

we won, there was something [...] If you had a good level you would get money to put in your pocket, or they would find you work.

Did they say what work, or just work?

Just work, abroad, in a place outside.

Okay, in other states. Where did you want to go?

Whatever country they would send me to.

In Africa or Europe?

No, in Europe.

Mobilization offered Adilson a road out of his social moratorium. Importantly, however, his mobilization was not focussed on immediate empowerment or wealth but on the possibility of gaining a tolerable life via migration. As it turned out, the *Aguntas*, which was the name of the militia of youth that he joined, lost miserably and at 34 years of age Adilson was back to square one – without a household of his own, without a job, a wife, without even the ability to take care of himself. Yet, via mobilization Adilson saw a chance of changing his life and increasing his life chances abroad. He saw a chance of repositioning himself socially; of embarking on a process of social becoming by gaining that which is currently most treasured in Bissau, namely *absence*: the empty space left by migration (Pink 2001:103).

Absent Presence

In other words, when in Bissau one quickly becomes aware that the social position which is considered most desirable is the *meta-presence* of the migrant. Young men desire most of all to be socially present through the remittances and possibilities that their physical absence makes possible. Yet, though the life chances of young men are seen as few and meagre in Bissau, the scope of decline reaches further than just this one category of people. It is not just the situation of young people which is seen as characterized by social death and which leaves only the dangers of migration or mobilization as possible routes of escape. In fact, we see in Bissau an idea not just of individual social death. Rather, the whole society is seen as mortally afflicted.

Here progress has already died. These days, things only go from bad to worse...

If God helps us we will all go to Portugal, we will all go. We will be well there

(Yette).

Yvette's dream of mass migration indicates that Bissau is seen as too far gone to be salvaged; the historical processes of decline and conflict are so overwhelming

that the only thing left to do is for its population to jump overboard. However, the quotes also show that instead of being an abnormality, negative social development has become the expected norm in Guinean society; it is written into people's understanding of their society's movement through time and in the possibilities embedded in them as those who constitute society. What we are seeing is an accommodation of disorder in which, as Mbembe has put it, the '[decline becomes] so etched into the urban landscape that it no longer creates a spectacle. It ceases to surprise' and becomes instead inscribed into 'the *everydayness* of life' (1995:330–331, my emphasis). The persistence of decline and conflict in Bissau has, as such, brought about a process of routinization of instability, dilapidation and destruction (see Weber 1965:363–373; 1982:98), which locates the current societal scenario contingently in time and space. In a similar vein Bourdieu argues that the 'experience of the regularities of existence [...] structure the contingencies of life in terms of previous experience and make it possible to anticipate in practice [...] probable futures' (2000:211). However, routinization, in a society as volatile as the Guinean, is a constant process of relating the experienced to the expected, moving us away from the languid character of Bourdieu's notion of habitus.

Saisie du Monde

The prospect of migration becomes, instead, an example of the social imaginary at work; not as an ungraspable, ideational whole but as a very concrete faculty that steps to the fore when encountering social opacity or uncertainty. Our social imaginary oscillates between *presentia* and *potentia* thereby prolonging *being* into possible *becoming*; and when looking at the way people envision themselves as agents and social categories – as groups of people within and among Others in time and space – this imagined community (Anderson 1993) often gains a holistic character, simply because people see themselves as wholes and part of wholes in relation to their historical becoming. What Popper (1972) describes as holistic confusion in his perspective on 'scientific historicism' presents itself, when focussing on constructions of identity, as a holistic necessity, which enables us to see the social entity that we imagine ourselves as belonging to, as more than the units that constitute it and as more than just the present state that confronts us. This brings us close to Gaonkar's understanding of the imaginary as a construction of meaning through which we:

see ourselves as agents who traverse a social space and inhabit a temporal horizon, entertaining certain beliefs and norms, engage in and make sense of our practices in terms of purpose, timing and appropriateness, and exist among other agents. The social imaginary is something more than an immediate practical understanding of how to do particular things [...] It involves a form of understanding that has a wider grasp of our history and social existence (2002:7,10).

Yet it would be a mistake to see the social imaginary merely as the ideational glue that binds our multifaceted lives together as coherent wholes, thereby making the concept another vague substitute for 'culture' (cf. the Introduction to this special issue). That which has already been sedimented, habituated or routinized does logically *not* actualize our imaginary faculty. What does is change, encounters and alterations, as it forces us to position and incorporate the novel into the existing and to ponder its probable future condition. What is missing in the above definition is an eye to the manner in which the social imaginary defines the expected continuations of our horizons (cf. Nordstrom 1997: chapter 6–7; Vigh 2006a: chapter 8), which is exactly what allows us to get a grip on the world – a *saisie du monde* – enabling us to act in it. The social imaginary is the key faculty through which we anticipate the unfolding of the social environments our lives are set in – evolving positively or negatively from the *potentialities* of its current state (cf. Agamben 1999). The concept brings us close to Bourdieu's notion of *illusio* as 'a feel for the game [...] a future in the making' by which 'one positions oneself not where the ball is but where it will be' (ibid.:76). It is the imagined unfolding of social life which orients our movement and positions in the present. In other words, moving away from the game metaphor it is, I hold, the social imaginary that allows us to anticipate, position and act in relation to a world that is constantly approaching and engaging us rather than merely being subject to our command or a solidified surface of enactment.

Mastery and Incompetence

In Bissau the social imaginary has, however, taken a dramatic turn that becomes visible when we look at these envisioned social environments. As the social imaginary is directly related to our perceptions of the conditions and possibilities of action, such a process of interpretative consolidation of instability entails that instead of positioning decline and conflict in relation to the current and historical position of Bissau within the world order – being a major site for the maladies of international capitalism in the wake of the

slave trade, colonization and exploitation – it becomes seen as a constant possibility inherent to the city itself.

I have described this specific process in detail elsewhere (Vigh 2006c), and do not wish to repeat the analysis here, but what is of interest in the current context is that the social imaginary in question is related to, and positions people and prospects in relation to, a perceived acute lack of mastery over the world. The young men I speak to in Bissau perceive themselves, as Bissauian, to be the least capable of all social categories when it comes to creating ordered states and functional societies. In other words, rather than seeing themselves as inhabiting a history of exploitation and degradation my informants describe themselves as the producers and bearers of a history of decline and destruction. The persistence of decline and conflict has, in other words, resulted in an understanding of Bissauians as the bearers of societal incompetence, unable to nurture peace and prosperity into existence simply because they, as a social category, are experienced as negating it. In Septimo's words:

Guinea-Bissau changes from shit to shit. Before a war shit after a war shit... It is because we are black, even if you are born in Europe or America, it does not matter, you still do the same things [as a black], still only misbehaviour.⁸ It is the same mentality.

In other words, Bissau is seen as a place populated by people who lack the ability to contribute positively to society, an understanding Arno echoed during a conversation about colonialism and the influence of the Portuguese in Bissau:

It was no good if the Portuguese had not come. We had to have colonization, but it is not good to use force. If the Portuguese had not come to Guinea-Bissau, if they had not come to Africa, it would have been a delay for all people. If people join together they will grow, because there are those differences between those who are more... those who are better. So you have to join together.

Arno clearly sees the world as divided into peoples imbued with different levels of progress and mastery over the world. In both quotes, ineptitude, which is directly related to the ability to master the complex workings of society – or rather to the inability to master the social and political technologies that produce ordered and functioning societies – can be located geographically and historically. They reveal a territorialization of societal functionality, of technological capacities,⁹ in which Bissau is located at the extreme, dysfunc-

tional end of the continuum between progressive and regressive. From within Bissau, the city is seen as historically proven not to 'work', which is why one can currently find large parts of the population who look back on colonial rule not with indignation or rage but with nostalgia, a sentiment fuelled by dissatisfaction with the present and uncertainty about the future.

Nostalgia is in itself an act of imagination. It is a temporal transposition of being related to a longing for the conditions that were present in the past, are lacking in the present and presumed absent and unattainable in the future; which in the Guinea-Bissauian case seems to be 'order.' However, this negative understanding of Bissau does not mean that people see themselves as being without positive traits or the ability to create positive lives for themselves. On the contrary, though ripe with both nostalgia for colonial times and despondency over the dysfunctional aspects of Bissauian society, people still talk a great deal about being Bissauian or Guinean and name numerous qualities, ranging from strength to resilience, that they see as inherent to this social category. Yet, when talking about politics and society, about creating a space of order for everyone's benefit, what they remark upon is their experience of lack of mastery over the technologies of power and state that characterizes life in the city (cf. Foucault 1978; Hansen & Stepputat 2001) and, not least, the escape that migration would provide.

The Location of Hope

'Look, look how beautiful it is,' Fransisco, my Bissauian friend, said excitedly, pointing at the massive aeroplane easing its way up the runway. We were pressed up against the fence surrounding the airport in Bissau. The political situation was tense and the city had seemed unusually unstable for the last couple of weeks. As rumours of imminent warfare had escalated, the airport represented a place of escape par excellence and was crowded with people either wanting to get on the plane or waiting for something to be taken off it. Having just watched my wife and children board the plane I was in a gloom. Yet my growing self-pity was countered by the thrill of the crowd whose elated murmur turned into cheering as the plane took off. As it departed Fransisco exclaimed, 'Whites are clever. You can build that. A black could never build that, never.'

The racialized idiom, which is so commonly heard in Bissau, is striking. Yet, when faced with crises and calamities we tend to see the world in Manichean dichotomies, as Michael Jackson shows in an illuminating article. 'The language we use in critical and disconcerting situations tends to be the

language of morality,' he says, 'a language of either/or, of black and white, of good and bad' (2002:143). In a similar vein, the dominant social imaginary in Bissau, dividing the world into black and white, adept and inept, is born from despair. Globally spread images of other lives and possibilities cause people to reflect upon differences and similarities (cf. Appadurai 1996) and experienced in contrast the world becomes conceptually purified. Francisco's reaction highlights, as such, an idea of the world as technologically and racially stratified. An idea that is born out of the actual dispersion and concentration of technologies, and their relations to geopolitical formations. The consequence is that every new technological encounter comes to highlight 'progress' as both a fact and lack. The airplane, as a technological feat, is a reminder of the progress that the city is seen as having to do without. Departing from a world of peace and plenty it lands, twice weekly, in the midst of the deeply impoverished and politically unstable city, and becomes a visiting symbol of the socio-political Other. This holds not only for the aeroplane but is a valid comment in relation to most aspects of technology, which become directly related to progress and thus to contra-identificatory mechanisms (cf. Barth 1969).

The technology triggers the imagination, so to speak, and every confrontation with the new – with bigger and bigger planes, smaller and smaller phones, new and better MP3s, laptops, cars, cellphones – makes clear that progress both surrounds and evades Bissau. Mechanical technologies are metonymic articulations of functioning technologies of power and state. Every manifestation of a technology, defined as a *mechanism to master complexity* – social or otherwise – comes to accentuate the fact that mastery over the world resides elsewhere in other places and other people. Technological encounters thus serve as reminders of the existence of better places and times. They illuminate the miseries of Bissau and the possibilities to be found elsewhere. As we experience social death we imagine life elsewhere, insisting that it is an experience of hibernation rather than of demise. And though Bissau, from my informants' point of view, is characterized by hopelessness, as 'crisis leads to a kind of generalized and lasting disorganization of behaviour and thought linked to the disappearance of any coherent vision of the future' (Bourdieu 2000:221), hopes and futures are still seen as factual and desirable, yet positive social being and becoming are imagined as only possible *elsewhere*, making migration a necessity in the pursuit of a worthy existence.

'Same Shit, Different Continent'

The sad fact of the matter is, however, that the experience of migration often seems to be characterized by a continuous distance from a worthy existence. *Memo merda, utro continenti*, 'same shit, different continent,' Toni said as he described his life in Lisbon after his struggles to get to Europe had finally paid off. 'Here they have the metro, they have shops, they have electricity and water, but for us blacks it is the same life... it is the same,' he continued. When I knew him in Bissau, Toni had seen the city as a prison without walls,¹⁰ and migration as his only possibility of gaining a tolerable existence. As with many of the young urban men, I did my fieldwork among, he had spent long periods of time imagining migration, constructing in dialogue the prospects of a better life elsewhere. Yet, the positive prospects of imagined migration often turn into negative migrant imaginaries.

I knew Kadi in Bissau. He was a young man with a drinking problem. Though normally a nice person he was an angry drunk and constantly ended up in trouble for quarrelling or fighting with figures of authority. Kadi blamed Bissau for his misery and was constantly trying to figure out how to get to Europe. He eventually made it on a visa, which he said was 'not fake but just not mine.' As we re-met in Lisbon he seemed, however, even more despondent about his life in Lisbon than he had been in Bissau:

The Portuguese are too racist. If you are black no one will help you, no one will give you a job, just because you are black. It is easier for women. If you are a woman you can work as a cleaner, but if you are a man... It is a stopped life [*vida parado pa*].

Vida parado, 'a stopped life,' and *vida stagnado*, 'a stagnated life,' are common descriptions of the existential impasse encountered by Bissauian migrants in Lisbon. Though imagined migration was directed toward seeing one's life as a metaphor for gaining social being, the reality of migration is a return to social truncation. The abjected category of 'black' reveals itself, to Kadi, as inescapable structuring not just his former position in the world but also his present possibilities and activities in it making his dream of migration a nightmare. In Denilson's words:

Life in Bissau is better than in Lisbon. There I have my family, my friends. If you do not have anything your kin [*parente*] will help you, your friends [*collegas*] will help you. But here... here, if you do not have [anything] not even you uncle will help you.

Denilson is not in a position to go back to Bissau as the shame of going back empty-handed is too much to bear. Yet, rather than having migrated toward a centre of wealth and possibility he has found himself stuck in a marginal stratum, in which he is constantly confronted with the feeling of being 'cast outward and downward' (Ferguson 1999:236). As the difficulty of making a life in Europe takes its toll the experience of lacking control and mastery becomes directed toward individual incompetence, making even life in Bissau seem attractive. Life in Portugal results, as such, not in an escape from social death but in a much denser marginalization, in which the impossibility of gaining a worthy life becomes consolidated and existential uncertainty heightened by a deterioration of established social relations and obligations. Yet, as said, hope in such situations does not necessarily die out but migrates – ahead of the migrants that follow it. It becomes temporally or spatially transposed and related to other places or times. As I asked Denilson what he was going to do, if he did not want to stay and could not go back, he answered, 'I will not stay here. I will go to Germany or Ireland. Portugal is just a *trampoline*.'

The metaphor of the trampoline makes us aware that migration in itself comes to function as a technology of the imagination in which envisioned migratory trajectories open up imagined worlds and possibilities. Yet, it equally shows that migration, for the young Bissauians I have worked with, might be closer to an analogue movement from point to point – jumping from place to place without really going anywhere (cf. Ferguson 2006:47, cf. Pedersen 2007:234) – than the calculated and strategic movement along global flows and networks highlighted by the transnationalist focus. The empirical material on which the article builds demonstrates that migration is seen as a necessity for 'seeing one's life' and gaining social being. In other words, for the migrants embarking on dangerous journeys toward Europe the escape from social death entails risking one's physical existence. Yet, it also demonstrates some of the uncomfortable realities of migratory success. Instead of connecting worlds through migration, gaining social status and recognition in Bissau by sending back remittances, the lives of some illegal migrants in Lisbon illustrate how people may move spatially but still find themselves stuck socially. Rather than leading toward social being and possibilities, migration leads, from the point of view of my informants, to a realization that they do not just come from to a disadvantaged place but belong to a disadvantaged race. Though the world may be connected, social mobility is radically restricted.

Conclusion

In order to illuminate why young migrants embark on difficult and dangerous journeys, this article has showed how their lives are caught in an anomic fracture between the culturally expected and the socially possible. It has dwelled on the experiences of would-be migrants in Bissau and illegal migrants in Lisbon, and illuminated the relationship between a dystopic social imaginary, characterized by a pervading feeling of abjection and socio-political dysfunctionality, and the social tactics of young Bissauian migrants. The article has described how young men in Bissau are supposed to be moving into the position of being providers, yet remain deeply dependent on handouts and favours in order to survive physically and socially. It exemplified a construction of a 'global awareness from below' that located the prolonged decline and uncertainty that has tainted Bissau globally. In so doing, the article showed how technological artefacts and innovations are seen as direct articulations of the mastery and control that are missing in Bissau, and how they, as signs of progress, trigger the imaginary faculty thus constituting progress as both fact and lack; as an 'objective' reality existing in the world, yet a local deficiency existing only outside Bissau.

In this context migration is seen to offer young men one of the only ways out of the social death and developmental vacuum that they encounter in Bissau. It is seen a possibility of gaining social being and fulfilling the social obligation of providing for their family, wives and children. Yet, the price to pay for social presence is absence and the cost of being a *homi garandi*, a big man, in Bissau comes at the expense of having to live as a 'small man' in Europe – as an illegal migrant at the very bottom of society. Furthermore, rather than actually acquiring social being in Bissau, by the provision that migration should ideally make possible, the article has illuminated how young migrants can become stuck in a situation where they are unable to gain recognition and a worthy life in either Bissau or Lisbon. For the young men I have worked with 'looking for life,' by becoming an illegal migrant, often results in exchanging 'social death' for 'a zero life,' a *vida di zero*, as my informants commonly term their existence in Lisbon.

'Here, if you are Black you are nothing. If you are not a musician or football player you are nothing. You will be no-one,' said Neto as we were standing on a small street corner in an inner city area of Lisbon. It was about 1 p.m. and I had spent the evening with a group of, mainly, illegal Guinean and Cape Verdian migrants who sell various kinds of illegal drugs to locals and tourists. Though working hard all evening Neto was barely making ends meet:

Look, I stand here all night, but I only make enough to be able to stand here again tomorrow. The big men that sell us our drugs [that we sell on], they sell them to us expensively. Our [own] kin, they sell it so that we can [only make enough] to survive today ... but tomorrow we have to stand here again, only to be able to stand here again the day after that. What a zero-life [*vida di zero*]. Africans here in Lisbon ... I am telling you, it is a zero-life. There are no possibilities only a zero-life. Here, if you are Black you are nothing [*abo i ka nada*].

Ladino, a fellow pusher and illegal migrant from Bissau interrupted, trying to avoid being categorized as 'nothing', and said: 'I can be somebody; I can. I can get into a football team.' He did a sharp dribble with an imagined ball, his baggy trousers camouflaging the movement of his legs, giving him the appearance of floating across the narrow cobbled street. Satisfied with his move he looked up and restated, 'I can get into a football team ... easily.' Neto looked at him and replied, 'The only thing you can get into is detox.'

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Notes

1. *Guardian*, May 29, 2006; *Times*, June 1, 2006.
2. I use the term 'illegal' migrant, rather than the more politically correct terms 'irregular' and 'undocumented' throughout the article. For those of my informants who have entered the EU either without documents or by manipulating rules and regulations, illegality saturates their migrant experiences. It defines their interaction with their host society and the status comes to shade even attempted licit actions.
3. *Dal pa fera*.
4. *Odja si vida*.
5. *Sin progresso sin vida garantido*.
6. For a further discussion of the concept of 'navigation' see Vigh (2006a).
7. 'They' refers both to the 'big men' on the Government side, as well as to Government recruitment officers who were sent to Papel *bairros*, neighbourhoods, and other areas to convince able-bodied males to join the *Aguntas*.
8. *Rendja malkriadesa*; *malkriadesa* signifies bad behaviour, but to *rendja malkriadesa* is to look for trouble or incite aggressive behaviour.
9. Social or mechanical.
10. Shakespeare, W. 2003. *Hamlet*. Washington: Washington Square Press.

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