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The constitutive outside: EU border externalisation, regional histories, and social dynamics in the Senegal River Valley

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A B S T R A C T

This article situates the EU border externalisation process within the regional history and social dynamics of the Senegal River Valley. It does so by drawing from fieldwork data gathered in the Mauritanian border town of Rosso, a crucial node within the architecture of the EU border regime in West Africa. By ethnographically detailing the workings of the border crossing and the experiences of illegalised migrant workers in the town, the article argues that the externalisation process is conditioned by the histories and socio-spatial dynamics of the regions in which it unfolds. In the case of Rosso, migrants who are elsewhere illegalised by the border regime appear equally marked by a regional history of racialised expulsions and accumulation by dispossession. As regards the border itself, the infrastructure of externalisation serves to uphold the colonial conversion of the Senegal River into a territorial dividing line. At the same time, however, the situated socio-spatial dynamics of this locale force compromises on this infrastructure, thereby acting upon and transforming the externalisation process in its practical unfolding.

1. Introduction

In *hassâniyya,* the Mauritanian dialect of Arabic, the Senegal River Valley town of Rosso is referred to as *lgwârib*. This is the plural of the word *gârib*, meaning 'small fishing canoe' – what is in French called a *pirogue*. The name highlights the importance of the Senegal River and its daily crossings both to the material workings of the town as well as to how it is popularly imagined. On the other hand, within the discourse and aesthetics of the EU "migration crisis" as it has played out on the Atlantic Route, the '*pirogue*' has acted as a watchword. Media depictions of the '*pirogue* phenomenon' evoke images of desperate people washing up on sun-soaked Spanish shores in rickety fishing boats (eg Mayault, 2017), thus ushering in the humanitarian imperative of care and control by which the response to the "crisis" is typically characterised (Andersson, 2017; Gazzotti, 2019; Pallister-Wilkins, 2015; Perkowski, 2016). Crucially, however, this humanitarian response often legitimates and enhances border externalisation as a strategy of EU migration management (Cuttitta, 2018). This strategy, in turn, sustains and depends upon the "colonial erasure of previously existing polities and societies" (Cobarrubias, 2019: 782) that is necessarily built into the border regime's geographic imaginary of the regions beyond its external border.

Within this Eurocentric imaginary, Rosso is reduced to either a node to be traversed on an invariably Europe-bound northward journey, or as a point through which deportations aimed at diminishing the quantity of such journeys can be executed. A rather different conception lingers in the *hassâniyya* name *lgwârib*, recognising as it does the centrality of the crossings that connect social life on the opposing banks of the Senegal River. At the same time, however, the flows of goods and people that traverse the river and bind the two sides of the town are laterally bisected by a national territorial diving line, which situates one half of Rosso in Senegal and the other half in Mauritania (see Fig. 1 and 2). A product of the colonial era, this riparian border is today fortified by the infrastructure of border externalisation. Nonetheless, the socio-spatial dynamics that have emerged from the colonial conversion of the Senegal River into a territorial border act upon and transform the externalisation process in this particular locale. For this reason, the article argues that the form the externalisation process takes is deeply conditioned by the situated socio-spatial dynamics and historical legacies in the regions in which it unfolds. In the case of Rosso, these dynamics force compromises upon the infrastructure of externalisation at the border, while also casting a different light on the migrant illegality that is produced by the border regime beyond its external border (Andersson, 2014 Cobarrubias, 2019).

In this sense, this article draws upon and contributes to a burgeoning literature on EU border externalisation (Casas-Cortes et al., 2014, 2015; Cobarrubias, 2020; Gammeltoft-Hansen, 2012; Oliveira Martins & Strange, 2019; Triandafyllidou, 2014; Vives, 2017; Zaiotti, 2016), and in particular to that which has called for de/post-colonial and non-Eurocentric perspectives on the border regime (Brambilla, 2014; El Qadim, 2014; Korvensyrja, 2017; Lemberg-Pedersen, 2019; Stock et al., 2019). With a heightened level of interest in the EU border regime, the old spectre of methodological nationalism (Wimmer & Glick Schiller, 2002) has re-emerged at the analytical scale of the European Union (De Genova, 2013). For Hub Van Baar (2016), this takes the form of

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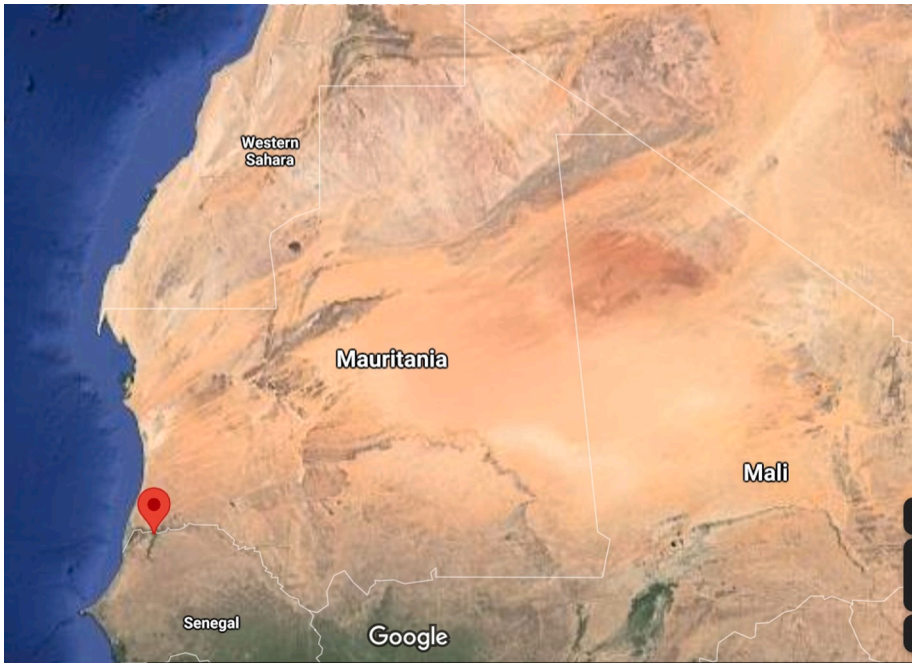


Fig. 1. Map of Mauritania.

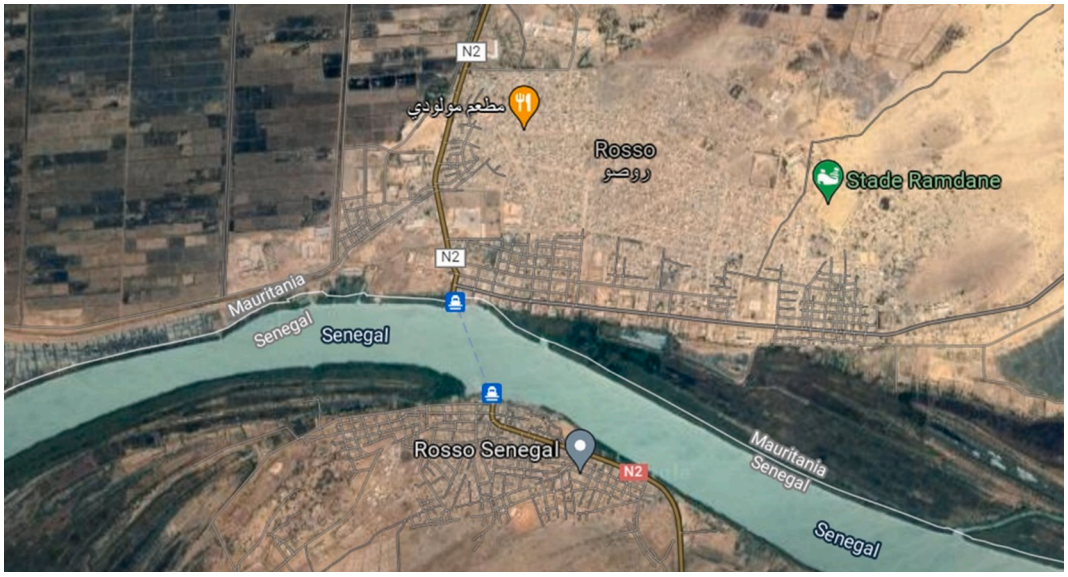


Fig. 2. Map of Rosso.

'methodological Eurocentrism', while Glenda Garelli and Martina Tazzioli (2013: 247) describe a similar phenomenon of 'methodological Europeanism', "which posits Europe as the blueprint for migrations' epistemology, and results in the superimposition of Euro-centred categories and narratives onto any landscape of mobility." It is for these reasons that William Walters (2015: 11) observes that "there needs to be a more concerted effort at provincializing Europe when it comes to the analysis of the international politics of migration" In a similar vein, Nicolas De Genova, Sandro Mezzadra, and John Pickles speak of the need "to disrupt the complacent conventions of a kind of residual Eurocentrism in the critical study of migration and borders" (New Keywords Collective, 2015: 60). By situating aspects of the externalisation process within the regional history and socio-spatial dynamics of the Senegal River Valley, this article addresses such concerns, while also being fully cognisant of the difficulties – and indeed perhaps the impossibility – of avoiding Eurocentrism in the study of EU border externalisation (Cuttitta, 2020: 3).

In doing so, the article nods to a distinct lineage of scholarly discussion concerning the "constitutive outside" of capitalism, and indeed of political modernity itself (Gidwani & Reddy, 2011: 1630; Goldstein, 2018; Mezzadra, 2011a, 2011b; Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013: 72). As Sandro Mezzadra (2011a: 158) suggests in reference to this lineage, the form adopted by capitalist social relations as they penetrate hitherto non-capitalist locales is shaped by the pregiven social relations and structures in these locales. These complex processes of transition and translation lead him to underscore "the strategic role of 'encounters' … in the fabric of modernity" (Mezzadra, 2011a: 158), a reflection that is of no small relevance to the case at hand. Indeed, as we will later see, a crucial element of the relations and structures that the border regime encounters in its outward expansion on the Senegal River Valley is a

1980's re-structuring of property relations in the region along capitalist lines. In other words, capitalism encountered its constitutive outside over the course of the 1980's and 90's on the Senegal River Valley, and the dynamics that have emerged from this encounter shape the form adopted by the externalisation process in the region today.

In order to bring the border regime's interaction with these dynamics into relief, certain methodological choices are required. Firstly, to foreground the situated socio-spatial dynamics encountered by the border regime in Rosso, I take heed from Paolo Novak's (2017: 849) call for "investigating borders' spatial manifestation as a way of discovering how the social is configured in place-specific and embodied settings." This is achieved by drawing on 11 months of fieldwork carried out in Mauritania over the course of 2017–2018, during which two separate field visits to Rosso were carried out. These visits entailed ethnographic investigations of the Rosso border crossing, interviews with members of local migrant community associations and national civil society organisations with branches in Rosso – *l'association Mauritanienne des droits de l'homme* (AMDH) and *le Forum des organisations nationales des droits humains en Mauritanie* (FONADH) – as well as interviews and conversations with migrant workers in the town. This latter detail brings forth a second methodological choice, namely the decision to seek out and speak to people who were *not* on the move to Europe. This choice was premised on a desire to explicitly break with the assumptions of the border regime, which operates on a deeply Eurocentric vision of human mobility beyond its external border (Casas-Cortes & Cobarrubias, 2019). With the Eurocentric assumptions of the border regime discarded, and the situated nature of its encounter with the locale of its manifestation in the foreground, the constitutive relationship of the latter vis-à-vis the former becomes apparent.

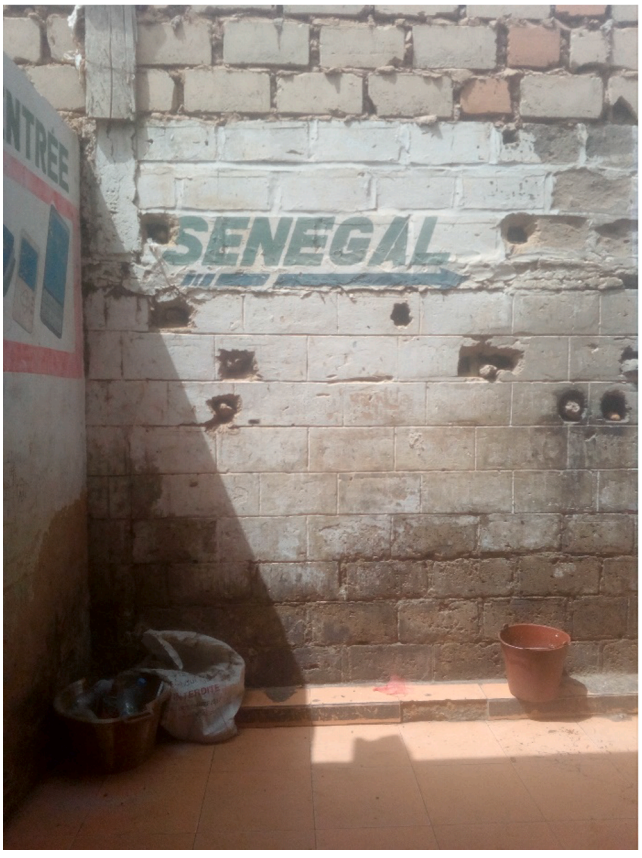
The rest of the article makes this case in two broad sections, one focusing on the infrastructure of externalisation at the Rosso border, and the other on illegalised migrants in the town. In the first part, I examine both the infrastructure of externalisation that has recently been installed at the Rosso border and the socio-spatial dynamics which underlie it. Two facets of these socio-spatial dynamics in particular are examined. One is a product of the contradictions that have sprung from the Senegal River's conversion into a national territorial dividing line during the colonial era, while the other is a consequence of Rosso's structural peripherality in the present. Both, however, act upon and transform the externalisation process in this particular locale. I then turn to the experiences of migrant workers in Rosso whose prior trajectories are marked by the violence of the EU border regime. The overt violence that migrants illegalised by the border regime experience elsewhere in North Africa is less pronounced in Rosso. At the same time, however, this very absence brings into sharper relief the social conditions and histories that are effaced within the geographic imaginary of the EU border regime. In this case, these conditions are those of individuals who were deported from Mauritania during an instance of racialised violence from 1989 to 1991. As we will see, this historic episode and its contemporary resonances structurally undergird the conditions of migrant workers in Rosso.

2. EU border externalisation at the Rosso crossing

The beginnings of the externalisation process in Mauritania might be traced to 2006, when an increase in people leaving the coasts of West Africa for the Canary Islands prompted a series of measures on the part of Spain and the EU aimed at quelling the arrivals (Carrera, 2007; Casas-Cortes et al., 2014; Vives, 2017). In the immediate term, these entailed militarised defensive strategies, such as naval and air deployments, dispatches of security and technical experts to West African states such as Mauritania, and the donation of surveillance equipment and technologies. More long-term preventative measures were also soon implemented, encapsulated in the Mauritanian context in a new national migration strategy (Islamic Republic of Mauritania, 2010). Drawn up in 2010 by EU technical experts, the strategy envisioned a range of projects beneath each of its four "strategic axes." One such project, implemented within the framework of the fourth strategic axis aimed at 'controlling migration flows', had as its objective the upgrading of Mauritania's border infrastructure (Islamic Republic of Mauritania, 2010: 76). The Rosso border crossing is one of forty-seven territorial entry points that have been endowed with material and digital infrastructure as a result of this process (IOM, 2016). While thus an outgrowth of the externalisation process, the Rosso border infrastructure today also sits within the broader set of domestic and international security prerogatives that characterise contemporary border regimes in the region. Moreover, these regimes are not reducible to the sole logic of externalisation (cf Frowd, 2021). But insofar as it continues to facilitate the deportation of Europe-bound migrants, the Rosso border also continues to play a strategic role within this logic, as we will shortly see.

2.1. The infrastructure of externalisation at the Rosso border

The crossing from Mauritania to Senegal at Rosso takes place within a walled off area on the north bank of the Senegal River (Scheme 1 shows the wall cordoning off the border area). In this area are located immigration and customs buildings, a ferry docking point, a shop, and a bank. Small canoes carrying people and goods land and unload regularly throughout the day. The ferry also crosses several times a day, albeit at indeterminate intervals, transporting cars and larger vehicles. For travellers willing to brave the rickety canoes and the negotiating tactics of their drivers, getting across the river can be done relatively quickly. For the less foolhardy, the ferry also lets individual passengers on board. This is nominally for free, but in practice every minute step of this border crossing is liable to be mediated by an informal charge. These water crossings may be rendered obsolete in the near future; a project to build a bridge over the river has been in the wings for several years (Union



Scheme 1. An arrow pointing to Senegal painted on a wall at the end of a market next to the police building at the border. Photo by author.

européenne – Mauritanie, 2020), with the first bricks being laid to much fanfare in December 2021 (Le Quotidien, 2021).

Hamid,[1] a customs officer, showed me around the border area. At the west end is a bank, a shop, and a gate through which larger vehicles such as trucks carrying goods long distance and camper vans pass upon completing the necessary paperwork. In the centre of the border area, in front of the ferry dock, is a larger building where entry/exit stamps are obtained, and visas issued for those obliged to obtain them. At the east end is the formal entry point into Mauritanian state territory for individual travellers. This is a single police building divided into four separate rooms, two by which those leaving Mauritanian national territory must pass, and two for those entering. Here police verify the documents of all those entering and exiting. Small scale random custom checks can also occur at this point. Most travellers are likely to be nationals of ECOWAS member states.[2] While Mauritania withdrew from this regional body in 1999, it has retained bilateral agreements pertaining to its free movement protocol, whose provisions often conflict with EU bordering interests in the region (cf Jegen & Zanker, 2022).

As a crucial node within the architecture of the EU border regime in West Africa, these tensions often manifest at the Rosso border. The crossing is the national territorial endpoint of one of two principal deportation routes in Mauritania, the other leading from Nouakchott to Gogui, on the Malian border. While up-to-date figures are difficult to come by, Hamid claimed that buses deporting people from Nouakchott arrive here every day. A policewoman in Rosso Senegal also told me that they process deportees in the local police station every day. On the other hand, a member of the Red Crescent in Rosso Senegal claimed that the number was only a handful a month, a significant drop compared with the period from 2006 to 2010 (interview, 23/7/2018). This discrepancy could simply reflect the number of deportees to which his association actively cater, as it was also clear that the roles of the Rosso police and the Red Crescent overlap: "we're not police!" he eagerly insisted, before adding; "but the commisaire here at the moment is good. He has the humanitarian spirit" (*ibid*). The affinity expressed here is likely a reflection of the fact that the police and the Red Cross in Rosso have each been contracted by Spain to perform complementary functions (Andersson, 2014: 110). Whatever the exact numbers, then, the very presence here of the more general nexus of humanitarianism and border control (Andersson, 2017; Cuttitta, 2018; Tazzioli, 2016; Walters, 2010; Williams, 2015) is an indication of the Rosso border's instrumentality to the architecture of externalisation in West Africa.

As noted, the border in Rosso has been cemented into this architecture by means of the national migration strategy's border infrastructure project. Hamid described how the architecture of the border had changed greatly over the twenty years that he worked here. "The European Union did all of that", gesturing toward the police and customs buildings that were constructed as part of the infrastructure project. As Philippe M. Frowd (2014: 233) has observed, the form of these built structures corresponds to the particular way their financial benefactors (in this case, the EU) believe a modern border ought to function. This is observable in, for example, the institution of a clear spatial separation between entrance and exit, as the new police building leading out of the border area now ensures. The issuing of visas, entry/exit stamps and other such documentation is also rendered distinct from their verification, through the confinement of each process to separate buildings, the former taking place in the building in the middle of the border and the latter in the police building at the east end. This creates an official division of labour and responsibilities between the two and – in theory – results in a smoother and more rigorous border crossing.

The border is further aligned with international migration and border management standards through the digital infrastructure that has been established here. The Rosso border crossing is one of two territorial entry/exit points at which the IOM's Personal Identification and Registry System (PIRS) has been piloted (the other being Nouakchott Airport). This system serves to enshrine at the Rosso border "two important technological trends: the use of biometric identifiers and the creation and integration of databases" (Frowd, 2014: 235). This combination of operational functions enables the connection of the data recorded at Rosso through PIRS to Interpol databases, thereby inserting it within regional and global security and policing networks. A former European delegation official based in Nouakchott, emphasised the utility of such data integration from the standpoint of wider regional security prerogatives when discussing an information sharing platform operated by the regional G5 Sahel force and supported by the EU:

> The idea is to share all of the information within the G5 Sahel countries. Even the number of migration flows. It's to come up with a bulletin that records everything: immigration, human trafficking, drug trafficking, arms trafficking, terrorism. A structured and complete database (interview, 5/3/2018)

Thanks to the PIRS system, the Rosso border is thus integrated into a regional security apparatus whose logic groups migration beneath a broader umbrella of what are perceived and constructed as national security threats.

As such, the EU-funded digital and built technologies at the Rosso border embody the teleological conceits and conceptual quandaries that characterise infrastructure in general (Appel, 2018; Larkin, 2013). Like all infrastructure, these border technologies are "material forms that allow for the possibility of exchange over space" (Larkin, 2013: 327), material forms in this case being people and goods whose movement national states and their international partners seek to control. In doing so, however, such state actors imbue the Rosso border with infrastructure's general tendency to evince a modernist narrative of linear progress (Nikhil Anand et al., 2018), which manifests in this case in, for instance, the 'before and after' photos of the border posts that invariably come to line the hallways of the European Delegation and IOM offices in the capital of Nouakchott (Frowd, 2014: 232). But at the same time – and, again, much like infrastructure writ large – these border technologies are underwritten from below by less formally recognised but no less constitutive social processes, networks, and relations (cf Anand, 2011). As we will now see, these informal processes force compromises on the infrastructure of externalisation at the Rosso border, thereby shaping its concrete unfolding.

2.2. *beneath the infrastructure of externalisation*

Beneath the more or less linear ordering of the physical queues at the Rosso border there lies an entirely different logic of access, one governed by informal social networks and relations. This vast network of unofficial relationships and practices is oriented exclusively toward extracting an illicit surplus from unsuspecting travellers. For the EU and the IOM, the national security forces stationed at Rosso function to ensure regional stability by managing the international flow of goods and people in an efficient and responsible manner (IOM, 2015; IOM, 2016). But for many police officers, customs officials, and intermediaries on the ground, the formal procedures impelled by migration management discourse simply become sites of informal revenue generation. This transition is encapsulated in the fact that informal charges and bribes are ubiquitously referred to as *les formalités* at border crossings such as Rosso.

The built infrastructure constructed with EU funding contributes to this enterprise. In an observational report on the Rosso border crossing, Boulama et al (2017) emphasise the long lines imposed upon travellers by the narrow pathway leading up to the police building. This makes conditions ripe for the emergence of micro-networks of patronage, given the universal demand for procedures to be expedited. The report describes this informal network as follows:

[1] All names of individuals in this piece are pseudonyms.

[2] The Economic Community of West African States is a fifteen-member regional cooperation and governance body.

> administrative harassment is common currency, nourished by the security and defence forces (police, gendarmerie and customs officials) working with individuals who act as intermediaries for travellers. These intermediaries … take responsibility for administrative procedures alongside the security and defence force, for financial transactions carried out in total opacity (Boulama et al., 2017: 12)

The density of these networks makes the passage extremely time consuming and difficult, if not impossible, in the absence of an intermediary. Tourists, backpackers, and – alas – researchers are particularly vulnerable to this network, given how lucrative a "Western" passport is in the eyes of intermediaries, and how patently out of place their bearers often appear in Rosso.

This informal network of extortion and bribery is a symptom of the peripheral condition in which Rosso finds itself, something suggested in a passing reference made by Hamid. "We know every-one here", he bragged as he showed me around, "the police, the guards, the *tcheb tchaba* running all over the place." The *tcheb-tchab*[3] is something of a modern-day archetype in Mauritania. According to Zekeria Ahmed Salem (2001), the phrase evokes an individual able to make money by any means, usually through informal and perhaps illicit channels. It entails a strategy of "getting by" through improvisation, of making ends meet in a spontaneous and cunning fashion. Akin to the figure of the hustler, in the Mauritanian context it is largely bereft of any negative connotation, being usually viewed as benign. While the *tcheb-tchab* can occupy any social rung, Salem argues the trope to have proliferated within the *ghazra,* the informal urban settlements that have sprung up on the peripheries of Nouakchott over decades characterised by drought and rapid and unwieldy urbanisation. Christian Vium (2016) also highlights this connection in a discussion of "*Tcheb-tchib* strategies at the centre of the urban fringe in Nouakchott." In the absence of any formal urban planning, *thcib-tchab* strategies for acquiring, selling, and consolidating these illegally occupied plots of land have blossomed. Just as this urban peripherality has given rise to informal *tchib-tchaba* networks and strategies within the *ghazra* shantytowns of Nouakchott, so too does the peripheral positioning of Rosso in relation to Nouakchott explain their ubiquity here. This is, moreover, a reflection of a more general relationship between informality and peripherality (Gilbert & De Jong, 2015; Larsont, 2002; Oviedo Hernandez & Titheridge, 2016).

In Rosso, the glacial pace at which development projects such as the Rosso bridge and road construction projects proceed further compound this peripherality and cement the zone of informality that emerges from it. Every person travelling to Nouakchott during the time I spent at the border was accompanied by an intermediary holding cash and papers. The fifty-euro currency requirement for Senegalese nationals also creates long lines at the bank each day, where the requisite foreign exchange currency needs to be purchased, generating further means of extortion for *tchib-tchaba* intermediaries. As a consequence, emotions and tensions unsurprisingly often run high at the Rosso border. In the brief time I spent there, European tourists being extorted by hustlers would occasionally lash out with emotive appeals to figures of authority, whose reactions only exacerbated the frustration. A group of Senegalese nationals on a pilgrimage to a shrine in Mauritania also stormed the visa office and had to be forcibly removed, after their intermediary overstepped his boundaries during their *pirogue* crossing. Such scenes are commonplace, and they are a logical outcome of the insertion of international border management protocols and procedures within the space of informality that arises from structural peripherality.

For these reasons, while the Rosso border is a key technology of externalisation, it is also rather inefficient from the point of view of the formal logic of the border regime. Cheikh, a Guinean migrant worker I met in Nouakchott told me of how he made his way back to the capital a few days after being deported to Rosso Senegal: "If you have money you don't have a problem… The police down there are looking for money. They're men of the law but they do business as well." Numerous testimonials gathered by Migreurop (2010) further affirm this porosity of the Rosso border. In the words of one interviewee, "even the police, they tell you "accept that you'll get deported and then just come back." The people who deport you, they see you two days later and say nothing." The defensive logic of externalisation thus necessarily exists alongside the informal economy at the Rosso border, and what Treasa Galvin (2015) describes as the "normalcy" of deportation that it generates. While Rosso is the terminus of a state deportation route, then, being deported here is often far from the definitive endpoint intended by the logic of the border regime.

There is yet another more general aspect of social life in Rosso that poses problems for the infrastructure of externalisation at the border. This is the fact that the vast majority of border crossings into Mauritanian territory are undertaken by residents of the town who live on the Senegalese side and work on the Mauritanian side. Many are women who work as domestic workers or sell *bissam* and *tejamakht* drinks[4] or bags of rice on the street. "They come here, every day, selling things, and then they go back", Hamid explained, lazily observing the long line of people that snaked out of the entrance of the police building and around the path that leads up to it. These residents of Rosso making the daily crossing are exempt from the requirements imposed upon international travellers. Instead, a *laissez-passer* card is required. Unlike the flashy biometrics of the IOM PIRS system, the *laissez-passer* is an entirely analogue technology. It is a small card that can be obtained at the office of the mayor on either side of the town for a fee 500 CFA and is valid for a month. Upon exiting national territory, the cardholder leaves their ID card at the police building, presents the *laissez-passer* on the other side of the river, and then recuperates the ID when they return. The sphere of mobility created by the *laissez passer* stops at each outer limit of Rosso, however, with police checkpoints at the limits of Rosso Senegal and Rosso Mauritania in place to enforce this delimitation. Here, the checks that are nominally situated at the border itself are effectively re-enacted, in order to ensure that all those leaving the town hold the correct documentation and have carried out the requisite procedure at the border. The *laissez-passer* thus serves to preserve the town of Rosso as a contiguous sphere of mobility and circulation, notwithstanding the international border that bisects it. As such, it functions as a legal compromise between the national territorial division sustained by the infrastructure of externalisation and the socio-spatial life bisected by this line.

As noted above, this territorial division is a product of the colonial era. That the infrastructure of externalisation should be implicated in what is at origin a colonial territorial formation is not at all surprising, and indeed reflects a more general overlap between infrastructure and colonisation (cf Curley, 2021; van der Straeten & Hasenöhrl, 2016). As we turn to the experiences of illegalised migrants in the analysis of the border regime's encounter with social dynamics in Rosso, this colonial territorial division – and in particular its racialised exclusionary effects – becomes yet more pertinent.

3. Illegalised migrants, regional histories, and social dynamics in Rosso

In what follows, I detail the particularities of illegalisation as it is experienced by migrant workers in the situated locale of Rosso town. As mentioned earlier, the externalisation process operates upon a monolithic vision of the regions beyond the EU external border, which are defined exclusively by their capacity as source-points for irregular Europe-bound migration. This involves a blanket cartographic

[3] *Tcheb-tchab* is the singular and *tcheb-tchaba* the plural. The verb is *tcheb-tchib*.

[4] Local iced drinks made respectively from hibiscus leaves and baobab powder.

projection of migrant illegality onto what this Eurocentric imaginary depicts as a vacant space (Cobarrubias, 2019), and a concomitant social injection of illegality into the relations and structures that make up this space on the ground (Andersson, 2014). It is with this latter fact in mind – namely the production of illegality, along with its derivative state of deportability (De Genova, 2002), as a lived social condition – that the term 'illegality' is used here.[5] This production of illegality paradoxically occurs as a result of a concerted effort to prevent Europe-bound migration at source. But despite these efforts to capture Europe-bound migrants in isolation, this production of illegality necessarily occurs within pregiven dynamics, relations and structures. This section accordingly starts from the lived experience of those depicted within the border regime's Eurocentric imaginary as "potential candidates for irregular migration" (2010) as well as the situated social dynamics and historical structures that frame this experience. As we will see, this casts a different light on the migrant illegality produced through externalisation, and thus on the border regime itself.

3.1. The absence of migrant illegality in Rosso

One enters Mauritanian state territory via a police building at the east end of the Rosso border to come upon a narrow dusty road flanked on each side by stocky buildings. Most of these buildings are home to wholesale and retail shops, whose owners typically pass the hours lazing on sacks of rice observing the comings and goings of the entrance to the border, occasionally throwing themselves into the melee by barking orders and brandishing papers. Sandwiched between these storefronts and the flimsy rickshaws and large transport vehicles that often clog up the street, other less formal retail arrangements are in operation. Carts and handmade stalls that sell vegetable produce to those crossing the border throughout the day are also erected in front of the shops. It was here that I met Ali Bakar, who ran one of these stalls, and his companion Soro. Unlike the migrants who typically attract scholarly attention in Rosso, these men had neither been brought here from Nouakchott or Nouadhibou as part of a state deportation operation, nor had they just crossed the border on a determined northward journey. Nonetheless, the trajectories that led each of these men to Rosso are marked by the violence, exploitation, and vulnerability that is characteristic of the illegality produced by the EU border regime. These seemingly atypical trajectories and their situated experiences in Rosso offer unique insight into the externalisation process and its pursuit/production of illegality.

Both men hail from Mali, Ali Bakar from a small village in the Timbuktu region, and Soro from the Mopti region. For each, quite a wide range of places and experiences stood between their initial departure from home and their presence in Rosso. Ali Bakar left Mali in 2005 for Libya, where he spent six years working in a Turkish-owned factory in which his brother also worked. After the fall of Gadaffi in 2011, his brother made the Mediterranean crossing to Italy. Ali Bakar also fled Libya, but in the opposite direction, eventually settling in Mauritania in November 2017. Soro's trajectory was both more scattered and more violent. Having first left Mali in 2006, his narrative encompassed setting out for Europe on a dinghy from the Algeria port city of Oran only to be intercepted and returned to Algeria; attempting to enter Morocco from Algeria and being forced back by security forces and deported to Niger; getting robbed by "bandits" in the Algeria-Niger desert borderlands; and participating on two separate occasions in an IOM "voluntary return" to Mali from Libya. Ali Bakar and Soro have thus each fallen prey to the physical, political, and biophysical violence (Squire, 2017) that is characteristic of the EU border regime's production of illegality in the region.

In Rosso, however, many of the vulnerabilities associated with the condition of deportability (De Genova, 2002) were conspicuous by their absence. At his vegetable stall outside the border, within clear view of the police working at the border post, Ali Bakar sold tomatoes, potatoes, onions, and carrots to cross-border travellers. At no point during any of the hours and days that I spent with him here did any interaction – hostile or otherwise – occur between Soro and Ali Bakar and the numerous police coming to and from the border. Indeed, unlike the cities of Nouadhibou and Nouakchott, there is a distinct lack of deportability as a lived experience of residents of the town. In the words of a member of the Rosso branch of the AMDH (interview, 14/7/2018), "here there aren't deportations, in the sense of them going around the town, carrying out raids, and expelling people. I've never seen that. Never." He contrasted the situation in Rosso with Nouadhibou and Nouakchott, where the infamous *rafles* (raids) against which his organisation campaigns in these cities are commonplace. He furthermore emphasised the distance between local authorities and the deportations that flow through Rosso from Nouadhibou and Nouakchott. "We don't even see them here in Rosso", he said of the deportees who get bussed in from farther afield. "They go straight from the bus to the ferry" (*ibid*).

This distance of local authorities from the practice of raids and deportations was further affirmed by Isaaka, a tradesman and representative of the Senegalese community in Rosso (interview, 23/7/2018). In his view, migrants in the town typically don't fear going to the police because officers don't demand to see residence permits, as they are prone to do in Mauritania's other urban centres. Unless they have committed an offense or a crime, he said, "migrants here go unnoticed." This makes for an overall positive state of relations between the migrant community and local authorities: "the judicial authorities here really help migrants. The law reigns." The cumbersome documentation and prohibitive cost of the residence permit mean it is more than likely that neither Soro nor Ali Bakar is in possession of one. However, in Rosso this state of nominal illegality typically lies dormant, due to the absence of its associated condition of deportability.

It would appear, then, that socio-spatial dynamics in Rosso act upon the illegality produced elsewhere with rigour by the border regime, in such a way as to make it fade from the surface of lived subjective experience. This is not to say, however, that other forms of precarity and vulnerability are also absent from the experiences of migrant workers in Rosso. On the contrary, both Ali Bakar and Soro recounted experiences of violence and exploitation to me. The labour exploitation to which the condition of deportability disposes migrant workers (De Genova, 2002: 439) can thus apparently persist in the formal absence of migrant illegality. Of course, such peculiarities are likely to be of little import to the border regime, whose gaze remains informed by "pre-frontier detection" strategies aimed at pre-empting breaches of the external borderline (New Keywords Collective, 2015: 75). But this discrepancy between the content of the Eurocentric gaze of the border regime and social facts in Rosso underscores the importance of the latter to any critical analytical treatment of the externalisation process and the subjectivities that it weaves.

In order to understand what emerges in the place of illegality in Rosso, we must first take what might appear to be an analytical detour, by briefly turning our attention to examine more directly certain aspects of social dynamics and structures in this particular locale. In practical terms, this means exploring what became of some of those who were expelled from the lands of the Senegal River Valley over the course of what has colloquially come to be termed 'the events' of 1989–91. As we will see, the aftermath of their expulsion, and the demands of those who have returned, together shed light on the structural processes that come to fill in for illegality in Rosso. In this way, the EU border regime's imbrication within this particular regional history comes to light.

3.2. In the absence of illegality: biometric abandonment and racialised dispossession

Beyond the easternmost extremity of Rosso lies a small settlement that is home to around forty people. It consists mainly of a scattering of

[5] As distinct from, say, 'irregularity', which has more direct policy connotations, notwithstanding critical work produced around this term (Squire, 2010).

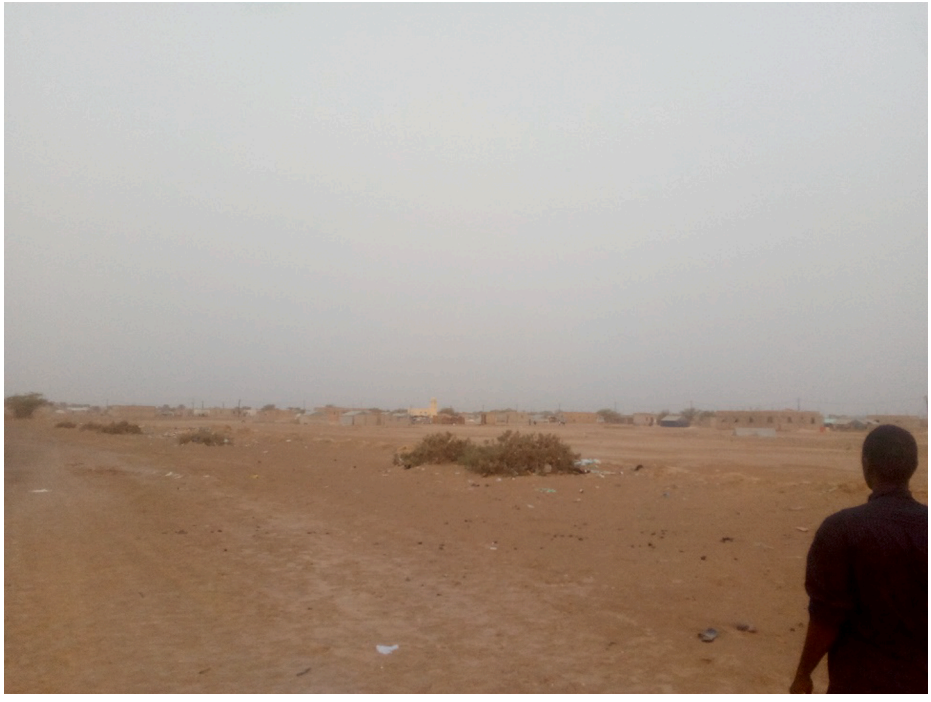
dilapidated tent-like structures made of tarpaulin and corrugated steel, with a handful of concrete buildings located in the centre of the settlement. Having initially been located just on Rosso's periphery, it was later moved farther east and now sits a few kilometres beyond the urban infrastructure of the town. There are thirty-five such settlements located in the Trarza region, with 118 in total dispersed across the Mauritanian side of the Senegal River Valley (interview with Rosso AMDH member, 14/7/2018). These are the homes of those who were deported from Mauritania during 'the events' of 1989 and have since been repatriated. A young Mauritanian Fulani man named Moussa showed me around the Rosso settlement (Scheme 2).

Born in the Trarza region of south Mauritania, Moussa was in secondary school when he and his family were deported from state territory in June 1989. He had grown up in Rosso and was living with his father. According to Moussa, state security forces approached them on the 21st June, accusing his father of being from Senegal. He responded that "he had no idea what Senegal looked like, that he had never been there." Nonetheless, Moussa said, they were brought to the river, and forced to cross in *pirogues*. He was one of tens of thousands of Afro-Mauritanians, the vast majority of them Fulani, deported alongside Senegalese nationals during 'the events' (OECD, 2010). Upon arrival on the opposite bank, Moussa and his family were received by Senegalese officials and United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) workers, who registered them as refugees. He settled in a refugee camp in Dagana, one of many that had been established by the UNHCR along the south bank of the Senegal River to accommodate the Mauritanian deportees.

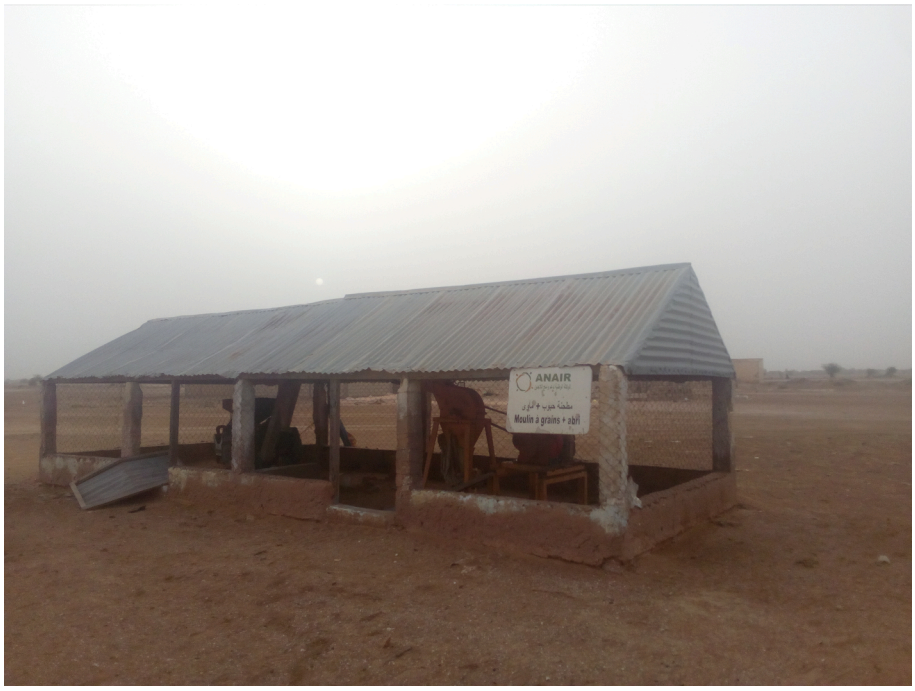
Moussa came back to his hometown of Rosso in 2008, thanks to a return programme implemented through a tripartite agreement between the UNHCR, Senegal and Mauritania. As we will shortly see, the experience of his community in Rosso since their return provides a window into the deeper historically constituted social relations in which border externalisation intervenes. But the fact that he returned in the first place also points to the relevance of the broader framework of EU-Mauritania relations in which externalisation is equally embedded. In August 2005, a military coup ousted longstanding President Moua'ouiya Ould Sidi Taya and resulted in a temporary suspension of aid flows from the EU to Mauritania. The EU provided the interim military junta with a range of undertakings, presented as prerequisites for the normalisation of relations. Included amongst these was "facilitating the return of refugees of proven Mauritanian origin and implementing any measures necessary for the reinstatement of their rights" (European Commission, 2006: 2). This paved the way for the creation of the return programme (Baila, 2016: 266; Fresia, 2009: 50). Consisting of a total of 49 "convoys", the programme allowed for the transfer of between 19,000 and 20,000 returnees across the Senegal River to Mauritania between 2008 and 2009 (UNHCR, 2009).

In the Rosso resettlement camp, Moussa introduced me to Babacar, the head of the Rosso returnee camp, who emphasised two primary grievances of their community. The first concerned a biometric overhaul to the civil registry system that took place in Mauritania in 2012. In order to ensure that returnees had access to necessary identity documentation once settled in Mauritania, the UNHCR issued each returnee with a voluntary return form, which would entitle them to birth certificates and identity cards (Radio France Internationale, 2011). But, according to Babacar, "that was before the arrival of the biometric system." While civil registry centres were provided with specific procedures and registration equipment for the biometric registration of returnees, many have since stopped functioning. In the case of the centre in Rosso, according to a member of the *Association des femmes chefs de famille* (AFCF) "for two years now they've been saying that the machine isn't working" (interview, 17/7/2018).

The biometric overhaul of the civil registry inflamed tensions originally sewn during the colonial era in Mauritania, and in particular the racialisation of territorial belonging that it entailed. While racialised hierarchies were a feature of precolonial social structures in the region (Hall, 2011; Webb, 1995), the French colonial conversion of the Senegal River into a territorial line endowed these hierarchies with a linear territorial quality, with the river now represented a dividing line between "black" colonial subjects to its south and "white Moors" to its north (Antil, 2004: 48; Ould Cheikh, 2004: 114; Ould Saad, 2004). The exclusionary potential of this conception would be realised over the course of 'the events', which saw the Senegal River symbolically transformed into an ethno-national cliff edge, beyond which those deemed racially outside were to be pushed. The biometric overhaul of the civil registry system renewed these tensions associated with the colonial racialisation of territorial belonging. For this reason, it is a determining



Scheme 2. Moussa approaches his resettlement camp on the outskirts of Rosso. Photo by author.



Scheme 3. One of the spaces of accommodation within the camp. Photo by author.

feature of the context into which the border regime's production of illegality manifests in Mauritania, as it informs who is likely to be deemed deportable.

Iksander, a young man born to Malian parents in the Mauritanian capital of Nouakchott, for example, spoke of being harassed and asked for a residence permit by police. Despite having been born on Mauritanian soil, he is thus suspected of being "illegal" by authorities. To complicate matters further, he has never been able to acquire documentation at the civil registry centres. When I asked why this was so, he responded in a matter of fact tone: "here they don't give papers to blacks. You go in and they ask you for the papers of your great, great, great grandfather." Speaking of the similar exclusion faced by the returnee community in Rosso, a member of the AMDH was more measured in his analysis of the situation. In his view, this exclusion is not an intentional policy, but an outcome of the difficulties of the biometric transition: "No, I can't say it's done on purpose, because there was this change. In 2010, there was the new biometric system that was introduced." In any case, the biometric renewal of racialised territorial belonging that underpins the experience of Iksander and the returnee community in Rosso is a key feature of the social dynamics into which the border regime intervenes, as it results in many being undocumented, despite having been born on Mauritanian soil. As is the case in Morocco (Gross-Wyrtzen, this issue), the externalisation process thus sustains and hardens colonially endowed modes of racial differentiation and exclusion.

The second issue to which Babacar drew attention is equally constitutive of the form the externalisation process takes. This grievance concerned land restitution; Babacar described how many who had been expelled in 1989 left behind land that was subsequently acquired by wealthy members of the *bidhân* class.[6] This wave of expropriations was facilitated by a 1983 reform of the land tenure regime aimed at rendering the Senegal River Valley agriculturally productive (Crousse & Hesseling, 1994). The law sought to enhance land productivity in the south through the abolition of customary collective ownership and its replacement with a system of individual private property rights. In the words of an OECD, 2010 report that outlines the context of 'the events': the 1983 "reform ignores customary law and legalises expropriations, predominantly suffered by Mauritanian Fulani." In other words, the land tenure overhaul and the expulsions collectively created a space for capitalist property relations to emerge, with Fulani subsistence farmers falling victim to this process.

By the time Babacar and his compatriots arrived through the return programme, neither the state nor the private owners of large-scale plots of land had any interest in returning it to its previous occupants Instead, as part of the tripartite agreement, the Mauritanian government implemented a range of compensatory measures, such as the donation of livestock,[7] rice, and cooking oil to returnees. In the view of Babacar and the returnee community, these measures have been wholly inadequate: "the issue of land ownership remains to be resolved." Abandoned infrastructural projects scattered around the camp served as further testament to this sense of tepid compensation. As we strolled through the settlements, Moussa pointed out a broken rice mill machine and a disused irrigation plot (Scheme 3). Their abandoned skeletons appeared a sort of taunting caricature of the different components of the rice industry that now fuels Rosso, which has been largely erected on the back of this expropriation.

The local riziculture economy that has grown against this backdrop of displacement and dispossession is a key mediating site of social dynamics in Rosso. Thiam, of the local branch of FONADH, told me that a large portion of their activities concern addressing disparities in ownership between plots of land (interview, 16/7/2018). Also emphasising the role of the 1983 land reform in shaping the aftermath of 'the events', he described how.

> certain agribusinessmen now hold two, three, or four hundred hectares and don't do anything to develop them, while next to them

[6] *Bidhân* is the word used in the *hassâniyya* dialect of Arabic to describe the dominant group within the Arabo-Berber populations of Mauritania. It is often translated in French to "Maure" (Moor). Given that "the Moors" are historically quite an ill-defined group, I use the *hassâniyya* term - *bidhân* - for reasons of analytical clarity.

[7] The quantity of which varied between one and three cows depending on the size of the family.

are certain collectives, such as the returnees, who between them only have twenty hectares. They had land before and now have returned to nothing.

Clearly, then, the emergence of capitalist property relations in the region has reproduced and exacerbated pre-existing social and racial inequalities. As we will now see, the experiences of migrant workers elsewhere illegalised by the border regime are deeply conditioned by this history of accumulation by dispossession and the dynamics that have emerged from it in Rosso.

3.3. Collective subjectivity and constitutive outsides

This riziculture industry in Rosso was a key feature around which the lives of Ali Bakar and Soro revolved in Rosso. They both worked in different components of the Rosso rice industry; Soro in the fields and Ali Bakar in a rice processing factory. For different reasons, they were each on a temporary hiatus from this work and were killing time at the vegetable stall outside the border. As we have seen, the imprint of illegality fades from the surface of subjective experience for many migrants in Rosso. This in itself is not surprising. As Vicki Squire (2010:11) points out, what she refers to as 'irregularity' is not an objective state, but a produced condition. Despite the absence of this produced condition in Rosso, however, the labour exploitation to which it often predisposes its migrant subject (De Genova, 2004; Anderson and Ruhs, 2010; Mezzadra, 2011b) remains stubbornly persistent. When I met him, Soro had just finished a stint in the rice field, where he had had the ancillary task of clearing the field of birds and debris as the combine harvester combed through it. The rice field becomes a temporary home during the harvest period, with tents pitched there for field workers. The field, he said, was 120 ha and belonged to a "white Moor", who reportedly owned several such fields – a typical example of one of the "agribusinessmen" to which Thiam of FONADH refers above. Now that the harvest had been completed, Soro had come back to Rosso and was staying with Ali Bakar while waiting for a call to return to start work for a new sowing season.

Despite the absence of the labour disciplinary mechanism of deportation in Rosso, wage theft and exploitative working conditions are common for migrants working in the rice fields. Isaaka, the Senegalese community representative who lauded the local authorities in their treatment of migrants in the town, spoke less positively of conditions in the rice fields:

> The people in the fields, the seasonal workers, always have problems with the owners of the fields. Always. Because generally they're not paid by month; they're paid after the harvest. Sometimes the guy, he keeps the money, he doesn't pay them (interview, 23/7/2018)

Thiam, of the local branch of FONADH, also referred to such instances, describing how "agribusinessmen" employ recently arrived migrants without a contract and sometimes refuse to pay them at the end of the work term (interview, 16/7/2018).

Similarly, Ali Bakar had been working in a rice processing factory prior to opening the vegetable stall at the border. Like Soro, Ali Bakar's job was ancillary to machinery, and entailed the observation of packaged bags of rice as they passed on the conveyor belt to ensure that none were torn or in otherwise poor condition. According to Thiam, addressing issues of abuse suffered by migrant workers in the factories and fields constitutes a large portion of the work of FONADH in Rosso. They also intervene to mediate in individual cases of wage theft and other such disputes. While migrant labour exploitation thus remains present on the worksite in Rosso, Isaaka also emphasised there is a significant scope for informal community mediation and even recourse to legal authority, thanks to the absence of the threat of raids and deportations in Rosso.

Ali Bakar was on a break from his job in the rice processing factory when I met him. The reason for this involuntary pause highlights another quality of illegality that can be seen in Rosso, namely the violence to which migrants in the EU's Saharan buffer-zone are routinely subject (Bialasiewicz, 2012;Casas-Cortes, Cobarrubias and Pickles, 2014; Brachet, 2016; Stierl, 2016). He told me how one evening, upon noticing that one of the machines had stopped working, he reached in to fix it, only for it to restart suddenly while his hand was still in it. He lost his thumb. Retelling this story, he showed me the awkward angle at which it now stood from the point in his hand where it had been surgically reattached. Such injuries would appear to be commonplace; Thiam spoke of a case of a young worker from Guinea Bissau whom he had recently supported after he lost four fingers in a machine in a rice processing factory (interview, 16/7/2018). He was quick to emphasise that this was "one case among many", and then recounted another example of the body of a migrant worker washing up in one of the irrigation canals by the fields. All of this indicates that while the direct violence that is overtly functional to the border regime is absent from social relations in Rosso, other less purposive but equally brutal forms mark migrant subjectivity here.

While the border regime views nothing but "potential candidates for irregular migration", the experience of migrant workers in Rosso appear structurally wedded to the violence and dispossession of 'the events.' As the returnees remain discarded on the outskirts of Rosso, inadequately compensated for land that they lost, migrants like Ali Bakar and Soro work under dangerous and precarious conditions within the modern agricultural sector that has been erected upon this expropriation. Seemingly distinct processes of racialised displacement, accumulation by dispossession, and border externalisation are thus tied together by what Sandro Mezzadra (2011a: 162) describes as "a deep heterogeneity of subjective positions and experiences within the composition of contemporary living labor." In this case, these experiences encompass violent pushbacks in the Sahara and interceptions in the Mediterranean Sea at the behest of the EU border regime, as well as the experience of being deported from one's country of origin in a process of racialised displacement and accumulation by dispossession. Just as the form adopted by capitalist property relations on the Senegal River Valley has been shaped by the region's history of racialised displacement, so too is the border regime's production of illegality shaped by this very transition to private property relations in the region.

4. Conclusion

This article has situated EU border externalisation in relation to regional histories and associated socio-spatial dynamics in Rosso. When so positioned, these histories and dynamics appear to have a constitutive relationship to the externalisation process, in that they condition the form of illegalised subjectivity pursued and produced through externalisation, as well as the physical infrastructure of the border regime. Regarding the Rosso border, the infrastructure of externalisation sustains the linear territorial function of the Senegal River that was instituted in the colonial era. At the same time, however, both the colonially imported border in Rosso and the infrastructure of externalisation that emboldens it today have to reckon with concrete socio-spatial dynamics in this locale. The formal procedures enacted at the border at the behest of international migration management protocol become, in practice, sites of informal revenue generation. And while the border infrastructure guarantees the Senegal River's function as a constitutive line of the interstate system, this Westphalian function is in practice compromised by the *laissez-passer* system to which Rosso residents are subject. Socio-spatial dynamics and historical processes in Rosso also inflect the illegality produced by the border regime with their own peculiarities. As we have seen, migrants who have been illegalised by the border regime appear equally enmeshed within the regional history of 'the events', as the accumulation by dispossession that followed these expulsions provided the foundations of the precarious and violent employment conditions of many migrant workers in Rosso today.

While capitalism encountered its constitutive outside on the Senegal River Valley in the 1980′s and 90′s, the social dynamics that emerged

from this process today condition the form adopted by the externalisation process in the region. With the Eurocentric vantage point of the border regime discarded, its relationship to the regional history and social dynamics of the Senegal River Valley thus comes into focus. This highlights the pertinence this special issue's call to look beyond the present in the analysis of externalisation, and for tracing connections with imperial and colonial histories. Further inquiries along such lines may involve taking for granted that externalisation does not happen in a vacuum, that it necessarily intersects with regional histories and situated social dynamics, and that interrogating these intersections can act as a safeguard against the necessarily Eurocentric viewpoint of the externalised border regime.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

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