Border Crossings in and out of Europe

CHAPTER 5

ROUTIERS' TRANSFORMATIONAL TRAJECTORIES OF *WASTE*, FROM PORTUGAL TO SENEGAL

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Abstract

Routiers are men of African origin that regularly drive decades-old vehicles from Southern Europe to West Africa. In their vehicles they carry a set of second-hand items which are sold, traded, and/or bartered along the way. This essay offers a collection of images that depict and interrogate some of the symbolic, socioeconomic, and spatiotemporal qualities of *routier* activity while fostering an understanding of the transformational trajectories of the items handled – from discarded, disposable, virtually valueless things into things of/with value, sometimes, reconverted, reemployed, replaced, resettled.

Keywords: West Africa, used-cars, second-hand, visual ethnography

> *If you think I'm taking Europe's waste to Africa, you're wrong! No one would accept others' waste! (…) Africa is not a rubbish bin!* (Mbaye Sow, 07/12/2017).

Mbaye Sow reacted furiously when questioned about the nature of the *routier* activity – *routiers* being African men who live of the road, driving out-dated vehicles loaded with used and broken items from Europe to West Africa. A sense of uneasiness pervaded Mbaye's words as he denied any potential linkage between the idea of waste, the car and other stuff he was taking South, and his territory of origin. We were travelling with this seasoned *routier* in an old Peugeot 504, in one of the two journeys we made together (in 2017 and 2019) as part of the research and shooting of a documentary-film.[1] This is a 10-days-long journey that traverses several peripheral geographies, from Reboleira to Pikine, that is, from the outskirts of Lisbon, Portugal, to the outskirts of Dakar, Senegal, only rarely passing through urban centres. Mbaye Sow is a knowledgeable and well-travelled individual and has made this lonesome and perilous journey almost every month in the last decade. This means he was aware of how discarded stuff regularly floods the continent's dumpsites and street markets (Doyon, 2015; Bredeloup, 2016). He himself has been an agent of that process. However, the perception that the sort things carried by *routiers* were seen as rubbish – from the old vehicles to the myriad of used and broken items – deeply annoyed him because these were not considered waste in the broader context of West Africa.

We are aware that waste is not waste but rather a sociocultural construction driven by a desire of order and classification (Douglas 1966). But disposed items are not immune to (re)emerging cycles of value and interest (see Thompson 1979). What some, at a certain time and place, consider waste, is often seen otherwise by others, elsewhere, in another moment, making its value contingent. The out-dated, used and sometimes broken vehicles, house appliances, toys or clothing carried by *routiers* elude this classificatory drive, especially when these move South. Cultural, political, and economic circumstances reveal the ambiguity of "things" deemed waste, evincing how categorical definitions can be tricky and conflicting (see Millington & Lawhon 2018). In this vein, the framing of waste as things "deemed socially valueless" as proposed by Moore (2012) is encompassing enough to accommodate the sort of items dealt with by *routiers*.

1 The film YOON (dir. Pedro F Neto & Ricardo Falcão; C.R.I.M. productions, 2021) will have its première in the end of October at DocLisboa International Film Festival 2021. "Yoon" [jɒn] is a word in Wolof which can mean "path", "law", "norm", "religion", or simply "journey". The film follows the regular round trip taken by a Senegalese *routier* on old Peugeots 504 along the 4000 Kms that separate the two places he calls home.

In fact, it further allows us to explore its opposite, that is, to understand how certain things become again "socially valuable" – but also culturally and economically. In this regard, the trajectories of waste are central to the understanding of this process of ontological and socio-material transformation in a double, complimentary process. First, a process of metabolization with the identification of things discarded as potentially valuable, things which are then bought and/or found, eventually repaired, transformed, and adapted. Even though metabolization refers to a chemical process occurring in living organisms, we consider this a valid metaphor to describe this process of transformation (cf. Millington & lawhon 2018). This process entails that the things being gleaned exit the system where they have been found. Secondly, in order to fulfil the metabolization dimension, all these things need to be judiciously mobilised, reinserted into other value chains, often elsewhere. This is a process that requires the skill and knowledge necessary to navigate the complexity of the terrains such as those traversed by *routiers*.

Mobilisation, then, works and articulates different levels beyond the mere territorial movement, to include bureaucratic and cultural dimensions. These double transformational trajectories work at different, yet inseparable scales: while the metabolization relates to the inception of sociomaterial and ontological transformations, it is the mobilisation that eventually substantiates and gives meaning to such transformation as it places them elsewhere.

As we will see, the specific case study at hand provides relevant evidence on how these transformational trajectories happen. It impels us to look not only at the points of departure and arrival, nor merely observe the movement in-between (cf. Millington & Lawhon 2018), but rather observe the very trajectories of "things". Value cannot be decoupled from the *routiers*' abilities and skills to navigate such rough terrains with unfolding borders, customs, and other unexpected encounters from the immense risks of failing to do so. Reckless *routiers* can easily be arrested, have their cars blocked and their cargos seized. At the same time, to grasp how value is regained, we need to understand how and where the items carried by *routiers* circulate (Lombard & Ninot 2012, Choplin & Lombard 2014), in light of the differential inclusion and material relationship particularly imposed by borders (Mezzadra & Neilson 2013). We need to focus on the different types of infrastructure that enable the *routier* activity, namely "people" (Simone 2004). We are particularly interested on how the *routier* trade is a "conjunction of heterogenous activities, modes of production and institutional forms" where its actors attempt to "derive maximal outcomes from a minimal set of elements" in what Abdoumaliq Simone calls «people as infrastructure» (Simone, 2004: 410-411).

As *routiers* articulate the movement of myriad objects, goods, ideas, vehicles, and other *people,* collaboration and solidarity permeate this livelihood as much as non-declared forms of competition, strategizing and scheming, with that very infrastructure. As a result, the specific trajectories enacted by *routiers*, from Southern Europe to West Africa, the way in which they articulate and are articulated by other flows and encounters, are what allow us to grasp, depict and inquire how *waste* is transformed and reinscribed with value. However partaking more globalised processes of mobility (Choplin & Pliez 2018) as well as waste and/or second-hand processing dynamics (Millington & Lawhon 2018), *routiers* inform us of a different, individual scale whose socioeconomic and cultural specificities deserve a closer look.

In Wolof, the words *dëgger* (hard, durable) and *oyoff* (light, perishable) are frequently employed to qualify objects and describe their durability. Things coming from Europe are generally seen as *dëgger,* even if in certain parts of the old continent those very 'hard and durable' things were considered unworthy, disposable, discardable. Greater appetite for innovation rather than repair is common (see Martínez & Laviolette 2019). It is also true that the gradual withdrawal of old vehicles from European roads and its inevitable loss of value are the result of emerging regulations concerning CO_2 emissions, security criteria, and broader technological improvements. While most cars reach the end of their life cycle in Europe, others will find a way to an afterlife. Models such as Peugeots 405, 504 and 505, old models of Ford Transit, Toyota Hiace, Hyundai H100, Mitsubishi L200 and L300, Volkswagen Golf, Renault Trafic, Mercedes 190, remain embedded in a complex and highly segmented trade that thrives in many Western Africa countries. Despite its ups and downs, with changing trade routes and actors, the used-cars business remained an important activity in the region in spite of the several existing institutional, political and administrative frictions (Ezehoa et al, 2018). Peugeots 504 and 505 remain on demand in Senegal. The *sept-places* ("seven seats"), as these are locally called, are mostly employed in medium and long-distance transportation of people and goods (Lombard et al 2006). In Guinea-Bissau, models like Mercedes 190 are preferred and are mostly used as street taxis. In Mauritania, Renaults R21 have their niche, and remain in trend for private and public transportation.

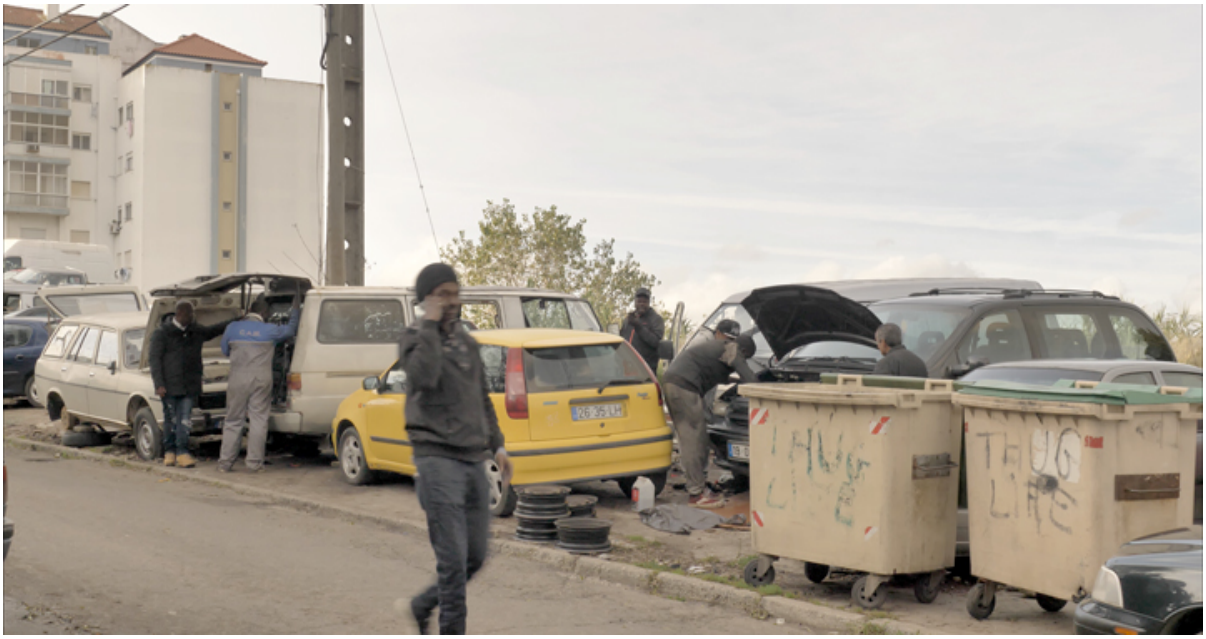
In turn, countless items are carried by *routiers*', then sold, traded, and bartered along the way and upon arrival. House appliances, bicycles, car spare parts, clothing, and toys rank among the top picks. Most of these used items, sometimes broken and in need of repair, are judiciously bought from online services like OLX and Facebook Marketplace, in flea markets, from scrapyards, colleagues and other workshops in greater Lisbon and along the way.

As we will see, these play a key economic role but also a sociocultural one. The resulting earnings help covering travel and mechanical repair costs, sometimes also allowing modest economic gains. Noteworthy however, is how many of these items are used to nurture a whole sociocultural system/practice known as *teraanga.* Though often translated as simply "hospitality", *teraanga* is in fact a culture of "gift" binding people to social relations that become themselves durable and relevant, as opposed to fleecing (for more see Riley 2016). Things offered as *teraanga* to Senegalese peers help consolidate and expand social networks and leave open the possibilities of future assistance. This is also a form of investing in social recognition since someone known for his/her *teraanga* becomes a socially respected individual. Still, beyond recognition, it is, first and foremost, an investment in people (or in social relations), further giving meaning to the idea of people as infrastructure mentioned above.

Few scholarly works aim at depicting the concrete trajectories of items, how they travel and with whom, or the socio-material and ontological transformations that these items undergo (cf. Knowles 2014; Bouhali et al 2018). Moreover, *routiers*' activities posit us with a paradoxical visible invisibility. It is easy to identify *routiers* when you see their obsolete and overloaded vehicles. However, their lives and activities remain largely invisible, shrouded in secrecy and blurriness. We know very little about them, where they move and live, how they navigate borders. This piece aims at making visible that. As William Viney noted, items described as 'waste' can have a peculiarly telescopic effect on our imaginations. They are things that seem to disclose ways of living, permit certain ways of seeing and give access to wider actions, collectives and environments (2014:1)." This is probably even more accurate in the case of *routiers*, for whom what some see as waste, is their primary source of income, as well as for the fact that it is precisely that waste that fosters the depiction, telescopic or otherwise.

Following a chronological and linear geography, this visual-essay offers a collection of images that depict and interrogate some of the symbolic, socioeconomic, and spatiotemporal qualities of *routier* activity while fostering an understanding of the transformational trajectories of items handled – from discarded, disposable, virtually valueless "things" into "things" of/with value, sometimes, reconverted, reemployed, replaced, resettled.

Figure 1



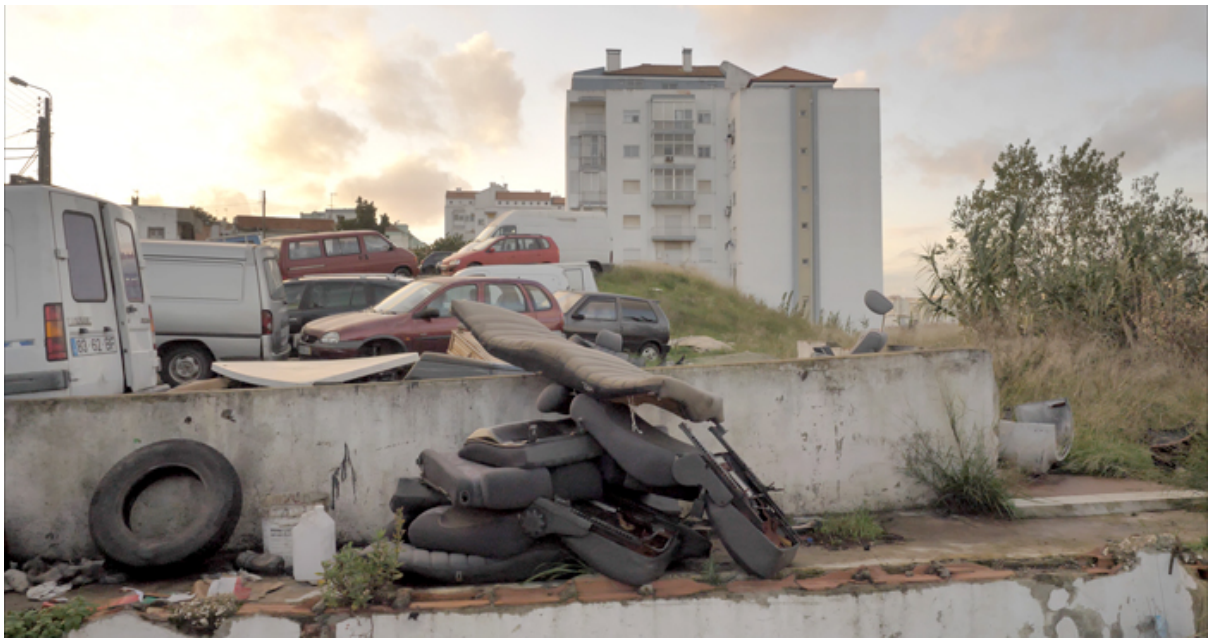
In a seemingly metal scrapyard, the improvised Senegalese car workshops sit along a short segment of a former military road in Reboleira, municipality of Amadora. Some fifty years ago this was a rural landscape. It now integrates the urban continuum of Greater Lisbon.

A Peugeot 504 from 1989 goes through basic mechanical repairs – just enough to arrive in Southern Morocco where further interventions will take place. That is the car in which we will travel for more than 4000 Km.

Reboleira is a central node in a broad network of people and spaces that sustain and articulate routiers' activities. Obsolete vans, camouflaged by the apparently chaotic scenario, protect working mechanics from adverse weather while also storing their tools and the more valuable components. When required, these stranded vehicles also offer the hideout for secretive conversations and negotiations between routiers, the businessmen involved in the used-cars and spare parts trade, and/or the so-called GP's – from the French groupage, these men group other people's goods and organise its transport to and from Senegal. There are also other individuals that regularly drop by to "facilitate" paperwork for these cars to leave the country.

Furthermore, in here, one can obtain relevant information from the road, the situation of friends and colleagues, the permeability of borders and security conditions. It is also here that the metabolization of waste starts as stranded, rundown cars experience revival or are cut for parts, and second-hand and broken items are loaded and get ready to head south.

Figure 2

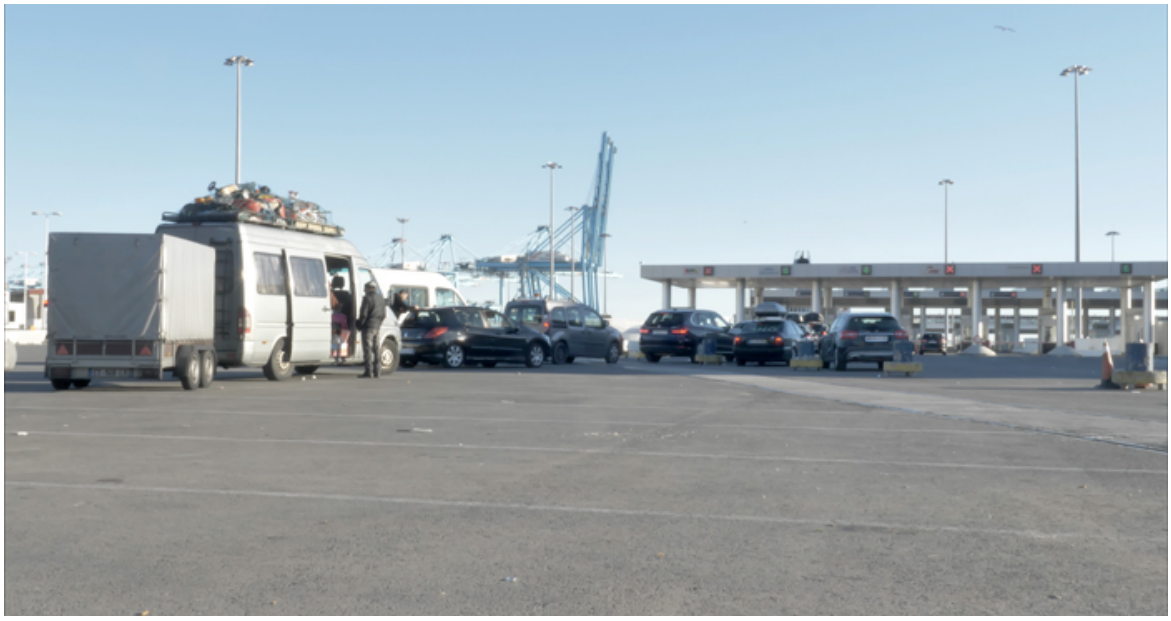


Rusting carcasses and spare parts, disembodied technology and unidentified components pile up in Reboleira. They are not waste. Virtually all these loose items have an owner. Virtually all the Reboleira habitués know to whom these belong to. Amidst the ruderal vegetation, the perennial puddles of mud and oil, loose parts and rusty carcasses, slices of torn down walls and floor tiles recall this place's genealogy of disposability.

This place used to be an informal neighbourhood, which mushroomed in the late 1970s after the influx of Africans from Portuguese former colonies. Houses were initially built with wood stalls discarded from the construction sites in which its dwellers worked, and with scraps of bulky power cable coils from a nearby factory of high voltage cables. Bricks and cement gradually replaced the more ephemeral materials. But that did not avoid the beginning of demolitions and evictions following the beginning of major resettlement programmes from the 1990s onwards (see Cachado, 2013). In mid-2000s, upon the latest clearance of this area, Senegalese individuals seized the opportunity to set up their mobile workshops.

The palimpsestuous postcolonial features (cf. Stoller 2008) of this archeological site inform about the multiple trajectories of people, houses, objects, narratives (cf. Viney 2014), and the moment in which they were deemed socially valueless, perceived as nuisances, and turned into shrapnel. By defying obsolescence and redundancy, *routiers'* activities and presence interrogate the perception onto diverse (capitalist) debris (Yates 2011). While shedding light into the possibilities of restoring waste and wastelands into valuable things, they further challenge the relevance and relative centrality of this place.

Figure 3



Port of Algeciras' (Andalusia, Spain). At the border checkpoint, on a winter day, people traveling with vehicles queue up to take the ferry and cross the Straight of Gibraltar. *Routiers* are easily identifiable by the overloaded vans and hilly roof racks. Their out-dated vans and station wagons contrast with the more recent cars in which individuals and families of both tourists and immigrants travel. The exposure afforded by *routiers'* old vehicles and the myriad of loose items and travel cases contrasts with the invisibility of their secretive navigations and personal strategies. In the background, huge cranes silently await to receive large freighters and unload container cargo.

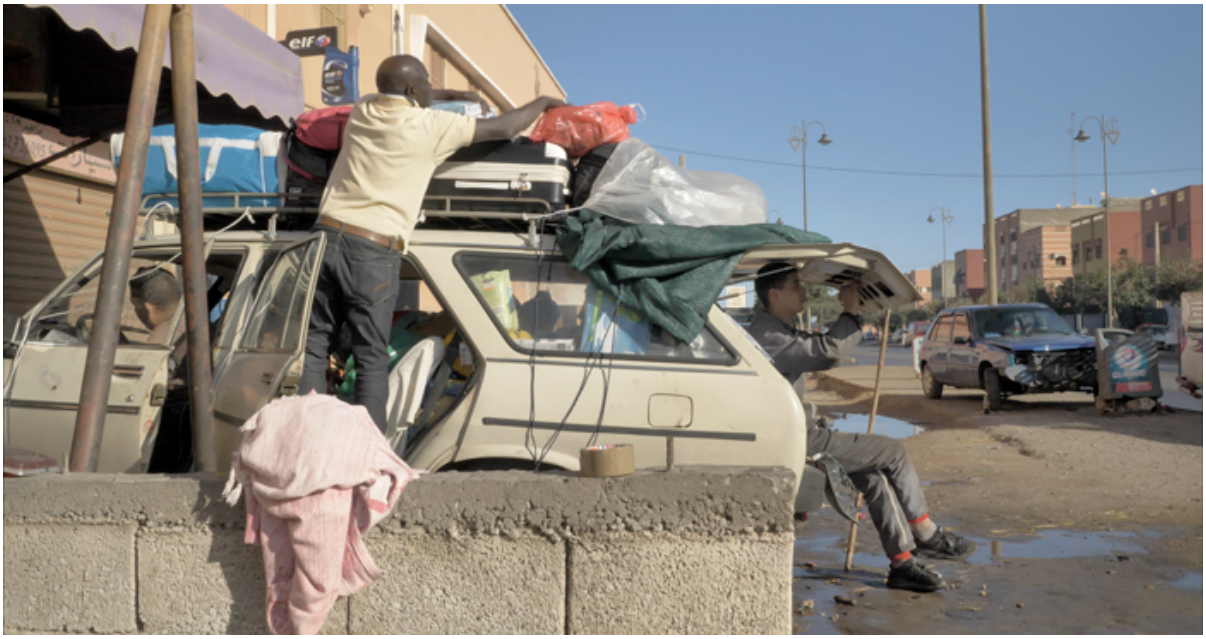
The passage from Algeciras to Tanger Med, Morrocco, is the most convenient and affordable route for the *routiers* based in Portugal, Spain, France or Italy. Packing the vehicles with all kinds of stuff is part of the *routiers'* economic strategies and a way to maximise the meagre margins arising from the eventual selling of the car. The Straight is more than a simple geographic fissure that simultaneously separates and articulates two countries. This geopolitical frontier highlights the material relationship and symbolic differential inclusion-exclusion between Europe and Africa, between the idiosyncrasies of the so-called global North and the global South dynamics (see Mezzadra & Neilson 2013). Once on the other side, the relative value and perception of obsolete vehicles and second-hand cargo is automatically upgraded (reminding us that "coloniality" is also material). However, regardless of the legal situation of vehicles and merchandise, while crossing borders and on the road, *routiers* will inevitably face several attempts of bribes and seizures by the police and the military. This is a missing picture that interferes with and potentially compromises expected profits, but one that carries costs and hindrances to be duly managed by *routiers*.

Figure 4

Under the early morning rain in Casablanca's suburbs, boxes with Moroccan ceramic tiles replace a dozen of 18kg bags of Indian rice brought from Portugal. A few Senegalese immigrants, friends, and business partners of Mbaye, help him loading and unloading his Peugeot 504. He had spent the night at their small and crowded flat. Echoing the unfinished atmosphere of *routiers'* diverse geographies, in this grand ensemble buildings and public space are either under construction or derelict.

Beyond the transport of personal luggage and renting cargo space to third party entrepreneurs, *routiers* themselves often accept direct requests stemming from Senegal, Morocco, Mauritania, Gambia, or Guinea-Bissau and Guinea-Conacry. Furthermore, the trajectories of *routiers* heading south intersect and articulate the trajectories of other migrating people heading north, resulting in a vast constellation of flickering socioeconomic relations, individual and collective strategies, shared routes, and reference points. *Routiers* and migrating individuals are part and parcel of the same fundamental "infrastructure of people" (Simone 2004) that fosters the circulation of people, items, ideas, and information. But each *routier* deploys his personal approach to the road and develops his own "network of trust" (see Scheele, 2011). Networks of trust are often secretive to avoid being tracked, what would be considered incautious from a Senegalese perspective, especially in this activity. These networks need also to be multiple and flexible as the trajectories and relative value of things might suddenly change. Still, unexpected needs and problem resolution requires *routiers* to keep good harbouring "ports" that can allow for longer stays in certain places. The lack of proper social relations makes these men more vulnerable.

Figure 5



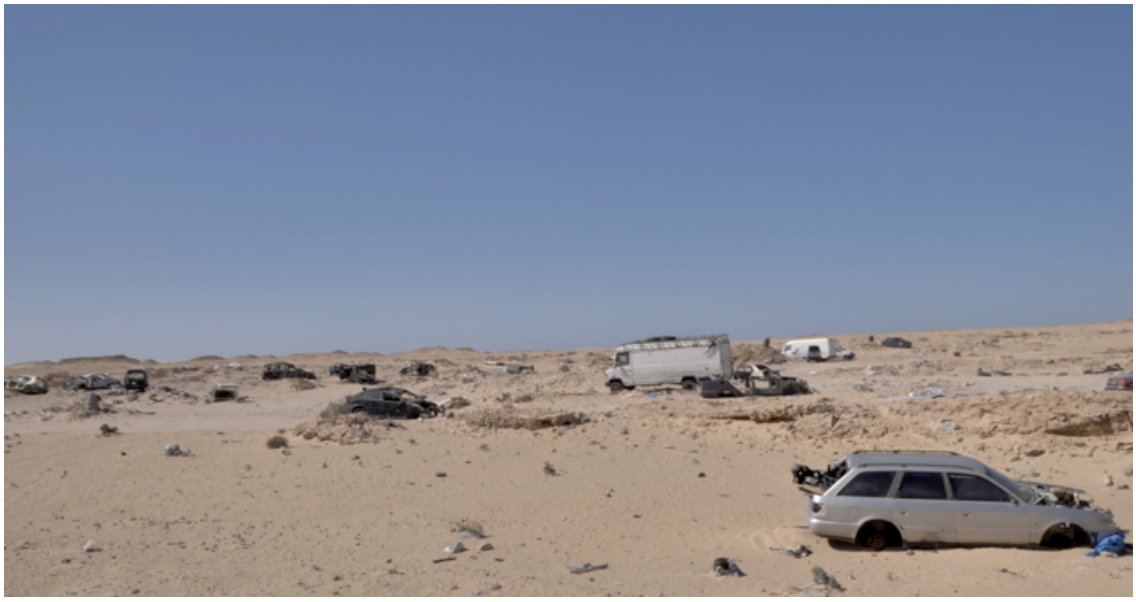
In the town of Belfaa, Southern Morocco, Mbaye Sow checks and reorganises his cargo while two mechanics overhaul the car. Head lights, battery, windows' lifts, door and boot handles are repaired or replaced. The exhaust pipe is welded later. The car's brakes will finally be operational after 2000kms and three attempts by different mechanics to fix them. Quietly, an elderly man will also turn up inquiring Mbaye if he is interested in selling the 504 – though unsuccessfully. It is not uncommon to observe how local people approach *routiers* in search of second-hand stuff or spare parts. Roadside car workshops along the Amazigh towns of Southern Morocco are fundamental in the *routier* activity. Les garages, as these are locally called, not only offer affordable and skilful repairs, but also provide important trade and barter opportunities.

Although the more profound repairs can be costly and consume *routiers* limited resources, part of which earned on the way, such interventions are essential to ensure the vehicles succeed in traversing the more risky and lonesome sections of the road ahead. Still, it is noteworthy to observe how sometimes small interventions are requested simply to strengthen bonds with local mechanics (see Graziano 2019), expanding and consolidating *routiers'* networks of trust.

Only rarely do aesthetic interventions take place, and when they occur are kept to the essential; otherwise, potential buyers might suspect that mechanical issues have been hidden.

The several encounters at the Amazigh garages are informative of the "sociomaterial transformation of waste" (Milington & Lawhon, 2018:11), which is complementary to this movement south.

Figure 6



A cemetery of vehicles grows by the day in the roughly 5 Kms of the Guerguerat buffer zone that separates the border post of Moroccan occupied Western Sahara territories from the Mauritanian border post. Out of the main tracks, this strip of land remains heavily mined. Most of the countless carcasses that pile up account for people that were unable to either (re)enter Morocco or Mauritania and whose cars were eventually dismantled in Guerguerat. Cargo overloading, mechanical issues and/or the bad conditions of this tarless section further dictate the end of the road for many vehicles and individuals. Chopped for the trade of spare parts the remnants of immobilised vehicles are then re-metabolised for those who make a living from the idiosyncrasies of this no man's land (Drury 2019). Some of the material leftovers are also employed by the Sahrawi freedom fighters in their watch-and-shoot improvised cabins. These are key to secure this slice of territory from the Moroccan recurring advancements.

Dumpsites are frequently away from sight. Beyond the vehicle-related waste, the universe of Guerguerat further interrogates the plight of the Saharawi people, whose land has been occupied, whose recognition and right of autonomy was betrayed by trade and political agreements (Kutz 2021; cf. Yates 2011). While the Moroccan Kingdom has the intention of cutting through this strip of land to satisfy their commercial agreements, Saharawi people stand in the way. This standstill reminds us of how the growth of capitalist venture create superfluous populations, human waste, in Bauman's words (2004).

The buffer zone of Guerguerat is a wasteland in many senses. "Kandahar", as it is called by those who dare traverse it and in an allusion to the dangerous and unexpected nature of this geography, is probably the most delicate leg in *routiers'* trajectories.

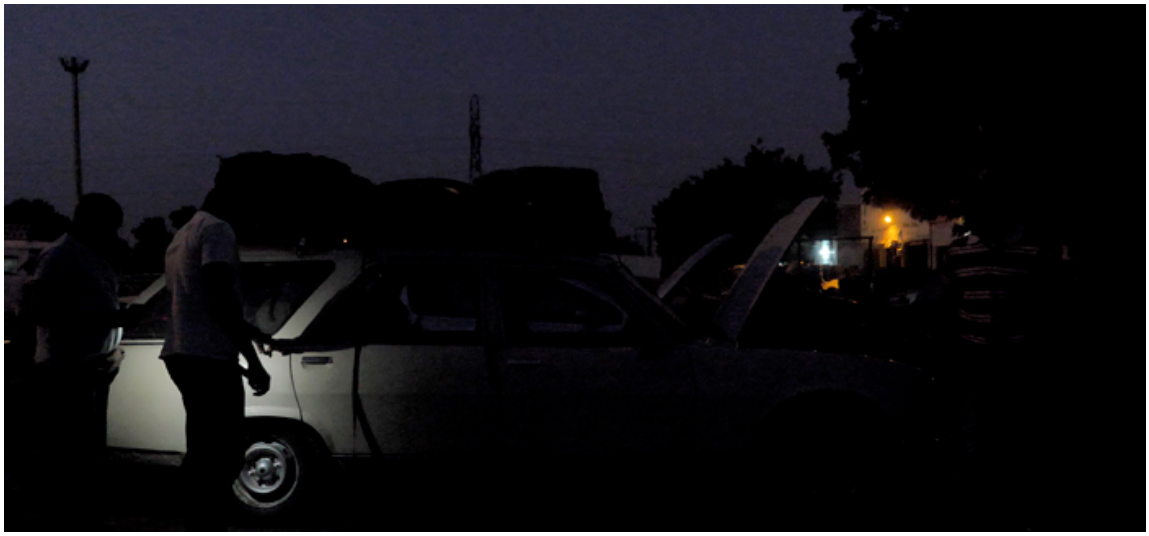
Figure 7

Mbaye Sow dismantles a wooden crate disposed along the Mauritanian desert roadside. The wooden slices will be bundled with other scraps and used as shims to sustain the roof bars set which collapsed with the constant potholes and bumps.

Purchased from a scrapyard in Lisbon outskirts, the roof bars in use were not suited for Peugeots 504. On top these roof bars Mbaye set up a mattress stand thus improvising a stable structure capable of holding cargo. Once the trip is over, roof bars are sold and the mattress stand is taken home, informing of how each piece of the *routier's* trade is based on value and utility.

Setbacks as the above described are not faced as problems but rather perceived as part of the metier. *Routiers* keep a constant state of awareness and seek solutions everywhere. Their eyes scout the road and its vicinities for discarded materials that can come in handy. As Mbaye eventually suggested, "there is no such thing as waste, there are only materials".

Figure 8



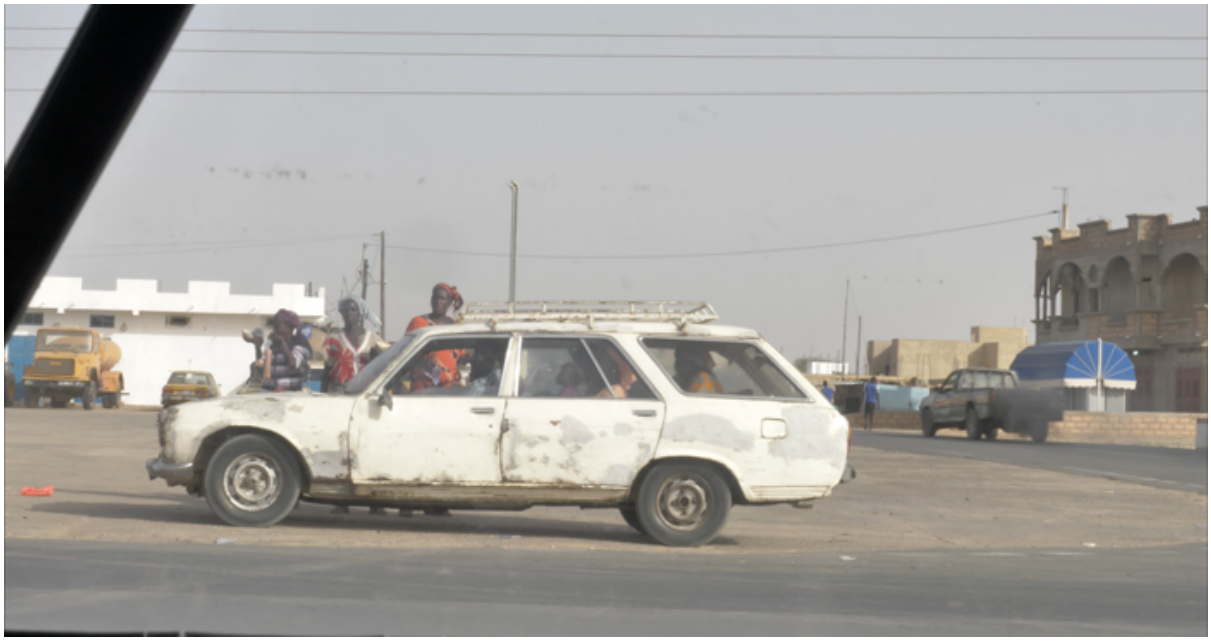
Already in Senegal, parked in the Gare *Routière* of Thiès, Mbaye Sow seduces middlemen and potential buyers. He had been arranging these encounters since his departure from Portugal, sharing photos and audios showing off the "new" car via WhatsApp. While showing the engine and the overall condition of the car, he starts unloading the countless luggage and items. Other sept-places will be in charge of delivering most of the cargo to his home in Pikine, in Dakar suburbs. The Peugeot 504 is expected to leave the country in a couple of hours.

In 2003, the Senegalese Government banned the entering of cars aged more than 5 years old. Abdoulaye Wade, then president, stated that Senegal was not Europe's dumpster. Conceding to mounting social and political pressure, in 2012, the president Macky Sall revised existing regulations, extending the ban to allow the entrance of cars up to 8 years. In 2019, such amendment was repealed, leaving the ban as it was first drafted. Officially, then, once paperwork at the border post is settled, these old vehicles shall immediately proceed in a convoy out of Senegal.

While hassling those involved in the business, particularly the Senegalese *routiers* living abroad, such legislation did not curb the fundamental dynamics of supply and demand of old vehicles. On the contrary, it has only resulted in a more complex process. After crossing the border from Rosso-Mauritania to Rosso-Senegal, negotiations involve the *routiers* and a myriad of middlemen, as well as a growing number of custom officials and authorities, often with political connections, nurturing in a closed web of corruption and cronyism (Dimé 2016). The task of *routiers* ends by the moment cars are delivered to a third country, usually Gambia.

Revival, that is, the legal entrance of these vehicles, is achieved by buying another car's papers (carte grise) with similar features. Before the integration of these cars into the regional transport system, sturdier rear suspensions replace existing ones. This makes vehicles better suited for extra load and endure the country's derelict roads.

Figure 9



At a crossroad in the town of Louga, a rundown Peugeot 504 drops a few passengers.

While mechanical and aesthetical conditions remain decent, sept-places stay in use linking major Senegalese towns and cities (see Lombard & Ninot 2021). However, tougher legislation and control have been increasingly forcing these vehicles out to more peri-urban settings.

As degradation becomes obvious and mechanical repairs get costly, a new process of marginalisation takes place. The "really" old cars then start being used in local fixed routes, from smaller towns to villages. It is not unusual to observe how the further a village is from the main road, the more battered vehicles circulating are. Eventually, the rusty cars, with holes on the ground and whose doors no longer work, end up being exclusively used in the bush, defying once again their expected lifetime.

Figure 10

Mbaye's living room in Pikine. The green caterpillar, a gift to his younger son, was a second-hand toy brought from Portugal. The TV and the fridge were brought from Portugal, later fixed by a bricoleur from the neighbourhood. The fridge was eventually sold despite decay, revelling how appliances keep a certain market value until their very last breath.

Mbaye's flip-flops bordering the carpet suggest he is around, probably resting or praying behind the black curtains that hide his bedroom.

Downstairs lay most of his cargo that which was not delivered, sold, or bartered along the way.

Personal luggage is delivered to the recipients as indicated back in Portugal. The other items, second-hand and broken stuff, are either mobilised as gifts into Mbaye's social networks or sold to businessmen who waited for "new" products. These are often called Fëgg jay, which literally means "shake" and "sell" as to illustrate the Senegalese vendors approach (Bredeloup, 2016).

As usual, Mbaye will stay with his family for a week or so before flying back to Portugal.

Conclusion

In this visual essay we have depicted and discussed some of the strategies employed by West African men working as *routiers* between Portugal and Senegal. We have pointed out how the spaces these men dwell in form a particular geography intimately connected to the transformational trajectories of waste, namely obsolete vehicles and used and broken items. Inseparable from this activity is the network of people that sustains and, until recently, made it thrive.

Without exhausting the interpretative possibilities, visual elements proved to be relevant as elements that constantly remind and confront us with a Southern European aesthetic and materiality of disposability. The view on the excesses of material consumption is what started our conversation on with Mbaye Sow in the first place. His uneasiness concerning what was perceived as waste made us investigate the concrete materiality of things, the transformational trajectories through mobilisation and metabolisation of those very things that somewhere, at some point in time and by someone, was deemed waste.

After our second journey together, in late December 2019, Mbaye still managed to complete another trip to Senegal in the end of January 2020, but not without several setbacks. An accident held him for over three weeks in Boujdour, Morocco, as he was travelling with an overloaded Mitsubishi L300. In the meantime, SARSCOV2 related travel restrictions and lockdowns swept Europe and Africa, dictating the selective closure of land borders and the interruption of *routiers* activity.

Mbaye Sow managed to return to Portugal six months later much due to his double nationality condition. In the meantime, Mbaye, like other *routiers*, has had to find other sources of income. First, he moved to South-western France to work in the greenhouses in fruit and vegetable picking. Contractors were not regularly hiring him, so he decided to return after half a dozen frustrated tries. As we write, Mbaye, 63, works in a construction site of high-rise office blocks. It is the same type of job he performed when he arrived in Portugal back in the 1980s.

While the flow of old cars from Portugal to Senegal came to a halt, and many *routiers* found other activities, used items diverted into alternative trajectories. Entrepreneurs other than *routiers* gather used goods in containers and ship them to the West Africa main ports. As travel restrictions due to the pandemic loosen and *routiers* will likely return to the road, new forms of competition will certainly emerge.

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