



## “The adventure is not easy.” The Discretionary Politics of Social Suffering and Agency in Post-Deportation Narratives in Southern Mali

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### Abstract

Drawing on eight months of ethnographic fieldwork in the West African state of Mali (2014–2016), this article delves into the local, national, and transnational effects of (externalized) European and North African deportation regimes and reactions to them by civil society actors and deportees themselves. This work aims to contribute to a better understanding of how geographical, physical, social, and psychological spaces are reshaped through interactions with bordering practices. Deportation generally takes the form of (il)legal, bureaucratic measures and violent interventions that are perceived as deeply unjust. They generate anger, alienation, and uncertainty among those deported and their families and associates. By seeking patterns in the accounts of social suffering in deportees’ narratives, the article seeks, empirically and analytically, to unravel multilevel bordering practices through examining localized, agentic forms of bordering power. The post-deportation context involves southern Mali, an area subject to dramatic desertification and loss of sustainable livelihoods.

### Keywords

Mali; Migration; (Post-)Deportation Regimes; Social Suffering; European Union; North Africa.

*Please cite this article as:*

Schultz SU (2021) “The adventure is not easy.” The discretionary politics of social suffering and agency in post-deportation narratives in Southern Mali. *International Journal for Crime, Justice and Social Democracy*. 10(3): 101-114. <https://doi.org/10.5204/ijcjsd.2044>

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ISSN: 2202-8005



## Introduction

This article gives an account of the local, national, and transnational effects of the North African and European deportation regimes and of some of the responses to them by civil society actors and deportees themselves. Its focus is on the bordering practices of deportation and externalization and on former deportees' experiences of these processes in post-deportation situations, especially in Mali. Its aim is to contribute to a deeper understanding of how geographical, physical, social, and psychological spaces are reshaped through deportation-related suffering.

Mali serves as a particular case. Here, as elsewhere in sub-Saharan Africa, the discretionary policies of the European Union (EU) operate through the current deportation and externalization regime (De Genova and Peutz 2010). Discretion can be seen as "a positive form of power" that "facilitates the translation of certain social concerns into exclusionary immigration law, policy and practices" (Pratt 1999: 202). The shaping discourse and context of "irregular" migration are dominated by the conception of "desirables" and "undesirables" (Agier 2011). It is important, therefore, to understand how such power of discretion works. The externalization of EU border controls has created everyday realities of death, abuse, trauma, and destruction (Dünnwald 2017: 89). Throughout the last half-century, Mali has been impacted by high numbers of forced returns, starting in the 1960s when many African states gained their independence and, as "new" nation-states, applied this practice as a kind of Western legacy to demonstrate their sovereignty over who belongs in a place and who does not (Sylla and Schultz 2019). From the end of the 1990s, deportations were increasingly implemented by North African countries that, building on their previous deportation practices, became paid guardians of externalized European borders. In 2008, Mali was selected to test EU migratory measures on the African continent. Following the European "refugee crisis" of 2015, this approach intensified. Deportation, generally understood as a legal, political, and socioeconomic measure involving the forceful removal of any person from one national territory to another (Drotbohm and Hasselberg 2015), became a public, highly visible political phenomenon in Mali, occurring seemingly "everywhere," yet being simultaneously contested. Individual deportees, meanwhile, were received "home" with ambivalence by their inner social circle of family and friends.

The article is structured as follows: After a short theoretical discussion of the concept of social suffering and some methodological reflections, I sketch the context in which deportation and externalization practices are embedded and how they affect Mali, examining reactions at national and local levels. The latter part of the article reflects on deportees' narratives of their interactions with state, legal, and bureaucratic practices and the different emotional outcomes in terms of social suffering. This helps shed light on the social organizations supporting former deportees and on reactions among the wider Malian public. The last subsection reflects on the powerful symbolism surrounding the states (EU, North African, and Mali) that initiated or go along with the deportation and externalization regime. Empirically and analytically, therefore, the article unravels the multilevel nature of bordering practices produced by externalization measures, the deportation regimes that run from Europe through North Africa, and the localized and more agentic forms of narrative created around social suffering after deportations in the context of southern Mali.

## On Post-Deportation Social Suffering, Agency, and Discretion

"The adventure is not easy" is a mantra for many former migrants who became deportees. Likewise, for potential migrants and those stuck in transit, there are the omnipresent phrases: "it's always the same suffering" or "it's hard to forget the suffering." To summarize the experiences of the migratory journey and eventual deportation, different forms of suffering can be linked to form the specific ambivalence of the entire "migratory adventure," as this journey is called locally. An intensely rich local and theoretical concept, suffering can be seen as culturally, socially, and historically contingent (Kleinman and Kleinman 1991). The experiences and memories of migration and deportation have often left literal marks on deportees' bodies, and this damage may continue to be part of their everyday experience. Suffering and hardship are most often discussed with respect to structure and agency (Bruijn et al. 2007),<sup>1</sup> subjectivity (Foucault et al. 2005), or concepts such as social navigating (Vigh 2006), the latter being defined as a

“motion within motion” (14), building on De Certeau’s work on strategies and tactics as “the art of the weak.” In this article, social suffering is understood as both structural—being inflicted through multilevel EU-driven deportation regimes and the practices of externalized border controls—and agentic—being part of the subjectivities that people develop within their local spaces to make sense of expressions and experiences of social suffering.

The concept of social suffering, which focuses on the group dimension of suffering across contexts, particularly given the dense web of social relations in the Malian context, “results from what political, economic, and institutional power does to people and, reciprocally, from how these forms of power themselves influence responses to social problems” (Kleinman et al. 1997: ix). In this sense, social suffering is caused by the impersonal forces inherent in deportations and multilevel bordering practices, as people suffer from the implementation of deportation as a political, legal, and administrative instrument of state power (Drotbohm and Hasselberg 2015: 559). At the same time, the social, political, and institutional nature of deportation influences the agentic responses to it, which range from silence and endurance to social navigating (cf. also Kleinman et al. 1997: xiiif). These agentic responses may be highly ambivalent as products of constraints but may, in turn, influence discretionary politics. Kleinman et al. (1997: x) claim that social suffering may even ruin the collective and intersubjective connections of experience and gravely damage subjectivity. In line with Pratt’s (1999) perspective on discretion, it is not about an “unruly shadow of law which allows for the relatively uncomplicated expression of individual agency operating unchecked within boundaries set by legal constraints” (217). Rather, discretionary powers are local and dispersed over governmental and nongovernmental spheres, shaped by their contexts and discourses (Pratt 1999: 218f.).

After deportation, forms of social suffering may continue or even intensify over time through negative administrative or social treatment in the country of return. Deportations not only constrain deportees’ agency but may create or even “enforce” new ways of thinking about how to go on after deportation has happened (cf. Vigh 2006: 113, n.9). In some senses, social suffering may even be a motor for change and new activities, not least since suffering needs to be overcome so that life can go on, as the saying goes.

### **Methodology and Approach**

This article is part of a research project (Schultz in press) on the social dimensions of post-deportation conditions in southern Mali. It draws on eight months of ethnographic fieldwork between 2014 and 2016 aimed at capturing the everyday life and self-representations of former deportees returned by North African countries incited by EU border regimes and from EU countries themselves. The study also explores the deportees’ social embeddedness after deportation. I met with former deportees, potential (re)migrants, their families, and close acquaintances, mainly in the capital city, Bamako, and in the administrative district of Kita in southwest Mali. Additionally, I talked with government representatives, staff members of nongovernmental organizations and embassies, and people active in civil society. The first contacts I made were set up through the Association Malienne des Expulsés (AME), a grassroots organization founded by former deportees. Further contacts were made through a snowball system. The methods used included informal conversations, semi-narrative interviews, group discussions, and ethnographic (participant) observation. In locating the village sites to which many deportees eventually returned, I collaborated with Birama Bagayogo (e.g., 2019), a Malian anthropologist, a collaboration that generated a very fruitful exchange of ideas, interpretation, and analysis. As deportees were almost exclusively men—with little education and from a rural background—having a male Malian coworker created commonality despite what might be seen as the “irreconcilable incompatibilities” (Coutin 2015: 678) between them and myself and made it easier for me as a researcher to connect to the international experiences of deportees in Mali (Lecadet 2011). The deportees met with us openly using the talking space provided. The respondents were those who had remained in Mali: some several years after one-off deportation, others after several successive deportations from North Africa or directly from Europe.

## Deportation Regimes and Externalization Practices in Mali

In Mali, the different social, political, economic, and cultural dimensions and the actors affected by and responding to the global deportation regime and its multiscale bordering practices intersect in very particular ways. Migration and mobility in Mali have grown (historically) and been characterized by circular, often regional migration cultures, nomadism, and ritual journeys (Hahn and Klute 2007) before the migratory adventures and emerging, dynamic transnational spaces of today. Reasons for migration were complex and manifold, dating back to precolonial times and involvements in the trans-Saharan trade. While in most Malian societal groups, male-dominated migration formerly meant pilgrimage into the wilderness, during French colonization, regional (forced) labor and recruitment for the French army were the dominant forms. From the 1930s onward, patterns of Malian emigration became longer-term and more urban, taking in West and Central African countries, with Malians as major actors in, for example, the diamond and business sectors in Congo Kinshasa and Congo Brazzaville or, from the 1960s, in Côte d'Ivoire. Major droughts (1973 and 1984) spurred literal "survival migrations" (Dougnon 2013). However, since the 1990s, in light of the regional economic crisis and increasing globalization, migrations have increasingly meant going to Europe.

Beyond the economic factors, migrants—who are mostly men—are driven by the desire to go "on an adventure" (Bredeloup 2017), catalyzed by a lack of prospects at home and the search for a better life (Jónsson 2007), but also to leave the narrow family space (Koenig 2005: 80). Today, Mali is considered a country of emigration, transit, and immigration. Three to four million Malians (about one-quarter to one-third of the population) are said to live abroad, most in West and Central African countries (about 70% in West Africa alone; Ballo 2009). Remittance inflows constituted 5.9% of gross domestic product in 2019 (Knomad 2021). Immigrants into Mali originate mainly from other West African countries, too. Others pass through and stay temporarily on their way to Europe, many of them also from Central African countries. Overall, only about 25% of West African migrants emigrate to European countries; some also go to North America and, increasingly, to Asia. The number of migrants entering Europe is very small.

Since its independence from France in 1960 and even before, Mali has been affected by deportations from other "new" African (nation-)states, European states, the US, and again and again, massively, from Saudi Arabia (Lecadet 2011: 118). Some countries—Ghana, Côte d'Ivoire, Nigeria, and also Libya—have become literal "deportation champions" most often in situations of economic and social crisis. Mali itself has never officially implemented large-scale deportations until today; along with Tanzania, it remains unique in this respect on the African continent (Sylla and Schultz 2019). Over the last two decades, mobility has been increasingly challenged by the EU's securitization and externalization of migratory control, labeling persons as irregular suspects far beyond European shores. Deportations have risen substantially.

EU instruments, such as the Cotonou Agreement with the African, Caribbean, and Pacific Group of States (2000) and the new Global Approach on Migration and Mobility (2005; European Commission 2011), have systematically introduced the issue of migration (including return) into cooperation agreements, following a clearly restrictive agenda. In the early 2000s, return policies became an integral part of EU policy for combating unauthorized migration (The Council of the European Union 2002), without taking migrants' conditions post-return or post-deportation into account. From the late 1990s, political instruments sought to transform parts of North and West Africa into transit zones to counter the increase in northbound mobility. Libya, Morocco, Tunisia, Algeria, Mauritania, and Senegal were enlisted to prevent unwanted irregular migrants from reaching Europe and eventually to return them. These policies thus built on the previously existing deportation practices of some of these countries.

Libya has been most prominent and active in mass deportations of Malians on the African continent. Malians started being recruited for the Libyan oil industry from 1980 onward (Sylla 2019). With the strengthening of EU borders, Libya increasingly acted as an outpost of EU migratory control. On the basis of agreements with EU member countries, mainly Italy, about 2,670 Malians were deported between 2002 and 2008 (Ballo 2009: 120).

Malian migration statistics estimate that 91.8% of the Malians expelled between 2002 and 2012 came from other African countries; deportations from Europe represented no more than 6.6% of the total (MME 2014: 55). The repatriations and forced returns in the context of the crises in Côte d'Ivoire (2003: 22,676 returnees; 2004: 17,561 returnees) and Libya (2011: 23,042 returnees) stand out dramatically, added to by thousands of returnees from Algeria and Tunisia, also fleeing Libya—though numbers have to be taken with caution (cf. Calenda 2012).

Simultaneously, EU policies of externalizing migration and border controls created a situation in which many of the candidates for emigration toward the north and Europe were kept in a state of “forced” or “involuntary immobility” (Jónsson 2007) in their respective transit zones, after deportation, back in their Malian villages, or before they even left.

Deportations from European countries started in the 1980s from France and at the end of the 1990s from Spain. Even if the numbers were not comparable with intra-African cases, their symbolic relevance was significant, as I will show in the last section. The year 2008 saw a peak in European deportations following a readmission agreement (2007) between Mali and Spain. Altogether, 1,834 Malians were deported in that year, mainly from France and Spain, followed by 765 in 2009 and 335 in 2010 (Calenda 2012: 8). The Center for Information and Migration Management (CIGEM), established by the EU in Bamako in 2008, effectively became a center for managing the arrival and reception of deportees with numerous, sometimes short-lived organizations emerging around the funding offered (field notes, November 18, 2014). Since 2012, Mali has been confronting a political crisis, which brought deportations to a halt. With experts designating CIGEM a “flop” (field interviews, Bamako, 22 and 24 October 2014), the EU decided to marginalize the issue of migration as an area of intervention in Mali.

The European “refugee crisis” in 2015 and its political aftermath turned the tide and have since reshaped the border, migration, and deportation regimes fundamentally. As part of a second wave of externalization, Mali was chosen as a “priority country,” together with Niger, Nigeria, Senegal, and Ethiopia, to establish a Migration Partnership Framework with the EU (European Commission 2016).

Within the accompanying Valletta process,<sup>2</sup> which focuses on the “root causes” of migration without considering its complexity, return has become the paramount paradigm (Castillejo 2017). Migrants forced from Europe or intercepted on their way toward it are preferably returned through “assisted voluntary returns,”<sup>3</sup> which are easier for African governments to accept as they promise a more dignified, if potentially still unwanted, repatriation. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) expanded its role, becoming predominant in the assistance of “illegal” migrants in transit (Adam et al. 2019). Above all, its work consists of facilitating return and supporting economic and social reintegration, not least to prevent people from re-emigrating. In Mali, this is done in collaboration with the EU and the Malian government. Meanwhile, deportations, mainly from North African countries, have risen to a new peak in the last few years; thousands of migrants have been set down in the desert or pushed over borders (Alarme Phone Sahara 2021; European Council of Refugees and Exiles 2019). Returnees who do not come through IOM channels are not eligible for reintegration funding (Sylla 2019). Still, this new orientation of the European agenda is more humane, with more tailor-made, individual measures available to reintegrate returnees.

Today, there are generations of deportees in Mali, and their numbers are increasing every day. Deportations have become an ever more public phenomenon, debated on radio and television, in the newspapers, and at public events. One can now speak of collective experiences of deportation and post-deportation rather than experiences of individual “failure”—as Plambech (2018) similarly finds for Nigeria—and of a certain “normalcy” in deportations (Galvin 2015), too, though deportees may still react with shame and may still easily be stigmatized.

## Reactions to Deportations and Externalization Practices

Mali represents a remarkable case of reactions to forced returns throughout the last few decades. Though lately the situation has become more securitized and complicated, the Malian state follows an ambivalent policy toward European and international actors. Simultaneously, it has developed very specific regimes and institutions for the reception and reintegration of returnees (Dünnwald 2017). The political context of democratization since 1990 has favored the establishment of civil society engagement in social and economic domains but also a withdrawal of the state. In 1996 the AME was founded by former deportees from various African and European countries politically inspired by the *sans-papiers* movement in France (Lecadet 2016, 2011). Particularly since the mid-2000s, the AME and other migrants' and civil rights organizations have substantially influenced the debate on deportations in Mali and beyond and have been responsible for the formal political reception and reintegration of deportees. For instance, deported Malian migrants were previously imprisoned upon their return and accused of "illegal migration," but protests organized by the AME and other associations eventually led to the abolition of this practice. Increasingly, migrants abroad have founded associations as well and also played an important role in mobilizing against deportations.

The high number of deportees in each case incited collective action. The roughly 200,000 Malians returning from Côte d'Ivoire in 2002–2004 were partially organized in a massive repatriation effort by the Malian government, with new organizations formed by returnees pushing the government to take action (Calenda 2012). Even if socioeconomic reintegration was in most cases difficult, if not impossible, and the state was unable to recognize returnees' skills sufficiently, the Malian population proved to possess an outstanding capacity for reintegration. In reaction to the Libyan crisis of 2011, more associations were formed, many of which were political (Sylla 2019). Today, there are associations of former deportees from Spain and, lately, Italy, though these mostly exist by voluntary engagement and tend to be short-lived.

In 2005, massive arrivals of forced returnees from Morocco and incidents involving the shooting of migrants in Ceuta and Melilla finally enabled a new type of political response to the EU by migrant associations (Dünnwald 2017). The unprecedented media coverage of the shooting and the deportations (Stock 2019) generated increased support from European civil-society groups. It was thanks to the pressure of civil society protests, it is said, that the Malian government twice refused to sign readmission agreements: with France in 2009 (Soukouna 2011) and with the EU in 2016–17 (Traoré 2016).

Within the Valletta process, some civil society organizations have also become involved in implementing safe migration campaigns and EU-funded reintegration. The multiplicity of actors and interwoven issues has created new challenges for migrant associations and other organizations around the accompanying EU Trust Fund (EUTF). It legitimizes their presence, enabling agency, though simultaneously influencing their agenda (Sylla and Schultz 2020).

## Deportees Experiencing North African Deportation Regimes

The deportation regimes of North African countries, facilitated and progressively reinforced by the externalization of EU borders, constitute a particular case of creating hazards and suffering in deportation experiences. In our field conversations, deportees described being spat at in the street, harassed, and persecuted (cf. also Stock 2019). This built on the widespread racism of the populations in Maghreb countries, culminating, for instance, in raids on sub-Saharan migrants and their mass deportation on the occasion of the Libyan national holiday to please the population (Sylla 2019).

A coworker of one of the migrant assistance organizations describes his own withdrawal from Ceuta, the Spanish enclave in Morocco, fearing death if apprehended by the police:

When I saw these guys jump, it's really horrible. This barrier is made of wire. It cuts. I could not do Ceuta, I told myself that I had not gone out to die. This is a sentence of death. I went back to Morocco to Casa. That's where I was taken by the immigration services and thrown

out in the desert . . . So yes, it was I who decided to return to Mali after having been thrown into the desert. (Dave, October 21, 2014)

“Throwing out in the desert” is a standard procedure for the authorities deporting migrants from Morocco and very similar to practices reported from other Maghreb countries, especially Libya. People, including many women and children, are apprehended, taken away and detained, crowded into a truck, driven to the Algerian or Nigerien border for days without food and water, and dumped in the desert. Literature on the United States and Latin America talks of deportees as disposable “human rubbish” or refers to “waste removal” (De Genova 2018: 253). What the externalized borders of Europe are producing is comparable. Importantly, however, the respondent describes himself as having decided to step back from a new attempt to cross the Algerian–Moroccan border. He thereby demonstrated some agency, even if this agency was clearly provoked by EU policies and quite ambivalent.

Libya, in particular, became known for its rigorous treatment of sub-Saharan migrants. Since the Libyan civil war in 2011, conditions have become literally anarchic. One former deportee whom I met back in his village five years later recalled the unbearable conditions he ended up in after a failed attempt to cross the Mediterranean to Italy:

Last, I was in Sabha. It was the worst and most dangerous of the prisons. There were hundreds there. Every morning, one loaf of bread for 6–8 persons, no tap water. People’s clothes were destroyed by the salt. Telephones, everything had been taken from us. Every morning the Libyans came in and beat us. Just like this . . . Like animals. That’s what they called us. Everyone was afraid. There were little bugs everywhere, which bit: in the clothes, so dirty because of the salt, in the bedsheets. Many people died there. You did not really know what was going on. Then, the transfer from one prison to the next. Without notice. We were packed into a truck. Like a black barrel. Then all you saw was prison again. (Salif, November 29, 2015)

Salif’s descriptions were very graphic. He touched his body, lowered his head, sighed and stared at me alternately as he spoke. Eventually, he was repatriated with 150 other Malians by plane. He depicted his “returning with empty hands,” often the central aspect of suffering, but also his gratitude for still being alive:

It is disturbing, because when you left, it was with joy, and on your return it’s with shame [*honte*] because you return with empty hands. One entered Bamako without clothes or shoes. In the prison you do not wear anything and they deport you like that. (Salif, January 11, 2015)

Besides having lost money and suffered emotional and physical destitution, Salif had to arrive back without proper clothes, dishonored, and stripped of human dignity. Many, particularly during the Libyan civil war, arrived home wounded, with broken arms, or sick. In such cases, recovery after deportation was not only an emotional and moral process but could require months of medical treatment, causing additional insecurity and trouble for the family and sometimes the payment of large sums of money. Some remain physically impaired; this is particularly visible in villages where the majority of the men returned from Libya. One former deportee could not use his hand for over a year before he was able to help out again on the family farm. Another still had a bullet in his back when we met in 2016. His family was unable to pay for the required surgery. All these became bodily inscribed memories of migration control and war—a “language of the body” (Sayad 2004: 210ff.), which displayed experiences of continued social, physical, and emotional suffering and destitution that were hard to express in words.

Among the Malian population, these violent practices and the large numbers of deportees from Libya were met with widespread anger, even riots, in the 2000s when Libyan deportations increased (Sylla 2019). This needs to be considered against the background of previous close Libyan–Malian (migration) relations and guest worker agreements as described above. It constitutes a collective, though desperate, agentive act against the constraints caused by deportations.

## **In the Externalized Transit Corridor**

Many deportees never progress beyond the vast transit corridor connecting North Africa, the Mediterranean, and the Atlantic, though fragmented and shaped by the EU's externalized borders. The accounts of their turbulent and often reversed journeys express forms of suffering; at the same time, they are what is captured in the notion of the "migratory adventure."

I was struck by a certain restlessness I encountered in deportees shortly after their deportation. These people seemed anxious, delusional, and urgently searching for something in a rather desperate state of "stress, between hyper mobility and waiting" as Streiff-Fénart and Poutignat (2006: 137) aptly describe the situation of being in transit—a mixture of pressure, bewilderment, resignation, commitment, conviction, and consciousness of the horrors one may have seen and expectations that remain unfulfilled. Either directly after being deported or in retrospective narration, such "insanity" was visible as embodied memory, when former deportees stopped talking, stared into space in the middle of a conversation, or touched their heads. "There is something in my head," I heard many times.

Others are deported, sent back, become stuck on the way, are imprisoned, and re-emigrate many times on "fragmented journeys" (Collyer 2007) with "fragmented stays" (Stock 2019) between Mali, the Maghreb states, and Spain, for instance. Using the €50 received from the Spanish authorities on deportation, some immediately make their way north again. One deportee describing his unstoppable commitment recalled, "It was not my idea to return home at this stage . . . I wanted to go to Europe to make a living there! My family back home was poor, I needed to help."

Some deportees may return to their villages; many say their first thought is to leave again directly, being unwilling to confront the people who are socially close to them. Others prefer to remain at the border or in a town on the way. Lucht (2017) depicts deportees stranded in Niger as preferring to die rather than return empty-handed and face potential social death. As long as the "adventurers" keep going and they try to make it, they see value in their lives as they can still achieve something better for themselves and their kin (Bredeloup 2017: 145)—this can be done abroad, but in some cases after returning as a means of overcoming one's suffering. According to one of the AME staff in 2014, "if people find something to do, they will stay; but if not, the deportee always wants to re-emigrate. That's the big problem."

Staring eyes and nervousness can accompany accounts of deportation experiences many years later. The post-deportation condition may be prolonged for individuals, their social circles, and entire communities. Not everything can be expressed in words. From the perspective of trauma theory, silence is fundamentally important to enable one to recover as a self. Afflicted by "deeply painful memories" (Eastmond and Mannergren Selimovic 2012: 524), the shattered self needs to place the cover of silence over all the humiliations experienced and difficulties seen. Hardships and violence obviously do not start with deportation; the journey itself is often depicted as an encounter with tremendous suffering, physical distress, and death, which stand over against learning, getting to know the world, and eventually becoming "a man." And all this is substantially shaped by discretionary administrative control through visa regulations, illegalization, detention practices, and the use of force. Some take increased migratory controls and violations as reason enough to stay after their return, sometimes ending up in social isolation and precarity in the anonymity of the city. Through these violent, physical, and emotional interventions, deportations change people. Some report having been literally driven crazy. But despite all the different stories, there are patterns to aspects of suffering, embodied and memorized, that characterize those who have come back.

## **"Legal Violence" in European Deportation Regimes**

Deportations from Europe seem to constitute a very particular case, causing severe social suffering, principally in the form of incomprehension, loss of control, and anger. This could be called legally produced violence, the term that Menjívar and Abrego (2012) use to capture the "normalized but cumulatively



injurious effects of the [immigration and criminal] law” experienced by migrants with precarious legal status (1380).

Two days after his deportation from France, Lamine appeared in the rooms of the AME clearly disoriented and lost, nervously searching for help and repeating, “I don’t know what’s going on.” He had been picked up in a street control, detained, and deported despite the support of a lawyer in France and many family friends. He returned without any official order—just “something that the police had written”—having been about to sign a contract for an apprenticeship that would have regularized his status. His entire family was in France. He described his deportation flight:

At Charles de Gaulle airport they already put me in handcuffs and I said, “I am not a criminal!” I said, Susanne, “I am not a criminal . . . I never hit anybody I never stole, I just don’t have an identity card . . . I am not a criminal . . . You don’t have the right to keep me like this.” He said, “But we are obliged to, we don’t have any choice, we are obliged.” (Lamine, October 14, 2014)

The deportation regime is materialized in the handcuffs the young man was forced to wear, being treated like a criminal. Lamine vehemently protested against this condemnation, affirming his innocence to me, as if I might have considered him a criminal, too. Face-to-face with the police, he claimed the justice that was due to him. But the police alluded to a higher state authority that obligated them to carry out the deportation: “Well ok, it’s not a problem,” (Lamine, November 3, 2014) he eventually said resignedly.

Lamine’s approach provides an example of what deportees report as blatant legal injustices in deportations—from European countries in particular, as people expect to be treated more justly there. Anger, anxiety, and outrage resurface when the events are recounted. The legal processes themselves may not have been fully understood, or people may not have been informed about them. This lack of knowledge creates additional anxiety and sometimes deep uncertainty (see, for example, Coutin 2015). These, too, are forms of social suffering caused by deportation and potentially the discretionary power behind it.

In the end, instead of opposing the perceived injustice, Lamine was forced to back down, eventually consenting to the exercise of force. He gave in to avoid being imprisoned and banned from French national territory for years (Directorate for Legal and Administrative Information [Prime Minister] 2020). After all that, he was so full of anger and hatred that he thought of murdering a person just because they were French:

I was hog-tied all the time . . . My hands were tied like this, even my feet . . . This was . . . hard, you know . . . That’s why I say, when I find a Frenchman, I will kill him, I will not regret it. That’s it. (Lamine, October 14, 2014)

This expression of hatred was otherwise a deeply agentic act, one might say, produced by and in reaction to the postcolonial deportation regime (De Genova 2018: 256): not giving in but existentially protesting.

### **Self-Organized Groups as Intermediaries**

Self-organized groups of former deportees, such as the AME, serve as intermediaries between the structures that produce violence and suffering and those who experience and narrate deportations. Being themselves products of existing deportation regimes, they have developed procedures to ease the hardships experienced and facilitate arrivals post-deportation. Creating this room for maneuver, they are the ones forming the discretionary character of politics even more. One described the situation upon arrival:

I have to go quickly to see him so that he can wash himself and eat under good conditions to regain confidence. Otherwise, the next day you cannot tell him anything. All of this is done so that he can forget the suffering he has experienced. (interview, October 21, 2014)

The AME has two rooms to receive deportees, providing a space for orientation. Its representatives' own deportation experiences help build connections. "Even if one has no money, one can help them morally" (Dave, October 21, 2014). Some of the professionals maintain a certain distance from the deportees they care for, adopting a rather paternalistic approach. This may be necessary to enable them to do their job in the first place:

Sometimes I call this a trauma; because they come traumatized because of all that they have lived through. That's why we have to leave them time when they arrive before we welcome them. There are some who come without clothes and it is necessary to find clean clothes, to set them up and to give them something to drink and to eat. People are DIRTY! That's it. (Dave, October 21, 2014)

"Traumatism" is not a term necessarily heard from deportees themselves—only if they consciously aim at placing themselves in a political context. It is a common marker and ascription in organizational speech, not least because some organizations have received funding for deportees' psychological counseling. The number of such programs has increased only recently through the renewed assistance approach financed by the more "humanizing" EUTF for Africa.

Deportees' deep anger and the violation caused through perceived unjust administrative treatment and their feeling of powerlessness may endure and quickly becomes apparent when they tell their stories. In European countries, unfortunate incidents often provoke deportations just before a person is regularized: the police do not recognize a person's papers or act arbitrarily in their discretionary space. Many people are arrested in the street and deported straight away. Unexpectedly "thrown" into the post-deportation situation, they are completely unprepared (Cassarino 2004). Such experiences of alienation are a specific form of social suffering that deportees, their close social contacts, and the self-organized associations are confronted with.

Lamine said he felt uncomfortable staying with the family's acquaintances in Bamako. Eventually, he took off again. Nothing had progressed at the French embassy despite his family and the AME's help. Clearly, he was unwilling and unable to continue waiting "powerlessly," being restless to go on—even if clandestinely via the dangerous and deadly desert. Re-emigration is an agentic reaction to continued suffering, though it potentially influences the extension of restrictive policies as well.

### **On the Symbolism of the Departing State**

Despite the apparently ingrained symbolism of the state exercising its sovereignty through deportations, in some deportee narratives, the state's role remains interestingly undefined or is only broadly addressed, while others accuse it quite aggressively. The state is mostly represented by the police officers responsible for carrying out the deportation or the reception afterward—but also by the staff of a prefecture, lawyers, social workers, or employers. Allusions to representatives of the departing state are often pejorative, ranging from accusatory to hate-filled—like Lamine's, who wanted to kill the next French person he met. Anger can sometimes be the only possible form of revolt against the experience of subjection to unjust treatment, violation, and criminalization. State bordering practices are seldom criticized as structural injustices but rather referred to as instances of individual suffering. The social nature of suffering originating from politico-institutional interventions and a state's discretionary politics is not identified. Simultaneously, for the respondents in Mali, especially potential emigrants, European states served as broad screens on which to project a safe haven of security, justice, and economic potential. "Europe is much better than Africa," I was told in a multiplicity of variations. Through the media, transnational (migratory) contacts, and networks, people are well-informed about the world abroad; consequently, harsh conditions are also well-known. Against this background, deportations may be experienced as particularly arbitrary and incomprehensible. In the case of deportations on the African continent, such as from the Maghreb countries, human rights violations are out of official and often mediatized European or international sight, even though, or perhaps because, they are taking place within the framework of the EU's externalized mandate outside the European territory. Legal standards seem to count for less there. Indeed, deportations

from North African countries seem to be valued less by deportees themselves, considered less drastic in terms of global social inequalities and unjust treatment. The externalization of deportation practices from European shores has resulted in a new collectivity of return, which seems to play a role in social and symbolic terms as well, making returns potentially less severe and shameful for the individual.

Even though some hesitate and stay away, many former deportees do eventually return to their villages (often in the absence of any alternative). Many who were deported from European countries were outspoken about preferring to stay in Bamako, as it provides geographical distance, anonymity, and potential autonomy. From many accounts, a return to the village is more difficult after deportation from Europe. The “estrangement” between life in a European city and the Malian hinterland can be particularly enormous: the more so, the longer one has been away. And, several of these men had been living in Bamako before leaving. More importantly, in small villages, the unfulfilled expectations relating to travel to Europe are impossible to hide. Often, people remain oscillating, torn between leaving and staying, representing the dilemma of migratory cultures in a world of constrained mobilities.

These differences in the gravity of deportation from Europe as opposed to North Africa hint at a critical symbolism regarding which state deports. It makes a fundamental difference whether people reached a European country before being deported or if they were forcibly returned en route. The severity of deportation is likely to hit hard, particularly if they were established abroad for a longer period of time. In these cases, re-emigrating is a costly, hazardous, and potentially impossible endeavor.

The symbolic potency of Europe can also become a value for someone who has already been “there.” Brahima, who had stayed only 40 days in Tenerife, was called “the Spaniard” and used to greet me with “Hola, ¿como estas?” It gave him an air of sophistication and what I call “adventure-hood,” a combination of adventure and adulthood related to the particular experience of the migratory adventure. As described in deportation studies, former adventurers can convert their suffering into a new status defined by courage and fearlessness (Schuster and Majidi 2015: 643). Many families might wish the returnees to actively engage with them on the ground after deportation, shameful and unworthy as it may first appear. Trying to overcome the social sufferings they experienced, thus, socially navigating, formed part of the everyday lives of many former deportees.

## **Conclusion**

The article has shown how deportations rupture the sociopolitical realities of migrants’ lives illustrating the damage being inflicted by European as well as North African deportation regimes, which are reinforced by externalized controls. Such controls condition substantial aid payments to countries like Mali and enforce cross-border expulsions there. It has also illustrated what such deportation experiences do, personally and through broader societal responses, to deportees. Repeated deportations, living long years in transit situations, or hiding undocumented in Europe have impacted peoples’ bodies, their very appearance, and their sense of self. These embodied memories of various forms of social suffering remain very much alive for those deported and are often suppressed. The destinations of deportations and specific migratory journeys may differ, but, as the article shows, there are similar patterns in almost all accounts of deportation, and the social suffering that results is collective as well as individualized. Specific emotions noted include alienation, stress, disorientation, fear, and anger, and a deep sense of social injustice. Many former deportees appear restless, disillusioned, and distressed, especially shortly after the deportation experience; they sense that they have failed in their “existential quest” (Hage 2005; Stock 2019). Some feel “estranged” and stigmatized, facing more difficulties “at home” upon their return than they faced before. This article has also highlighted expressions of agency by former deportees in relation to social suffering and discretionary power at many levels. Even in the most destitute and desperate situations, some degree of agency and subjectivity is possible, even if constrained and shaped. When De Genova (2018) speaks of the “autonomy of deportations” (262), for example, I have shown that mere survival can express agency, as can the decision to leave again. Even the decision to stay expresses agency, especially when it is accompanied by protest and demands for more social justice, including “at home.” Organizations of former

deportees help—or at least try—to bridge the space between structures and agency, capacities and desires (van Houte et al. 2016).

The article has developed how all this has become an increasingly collective experience, with memories of the cruel realities of deportation being more widely shared in Malian society. By fleshing out this particular Malian example, it builds a basis for further engagement by deportation studies in how this can have a profoundly transformative effect on the society at large and what shape that transformation will take.

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<sup>1</sup> It is important to emphasize that agency is not equal to action, but rather the “self-reflective beliefs we have about our abilities and capacities (our self-efficacy) to act” (van Houte et al. 2016: 4).

<sup>2</sup> The Valletta process was a direct follow-up to the European “refugee crisis.” Inaugurated by the EU and international organizations, it aims to develop strategies for managing migration with African countries.

<sup>3</sup> Built on the self-initiative and participation of returnees in the (post) return process, this political-administrative measure is most often carried out after an expulsion order or where there is no perceived alternative.

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