

# One journey, multiple lives: Senegalese women in Spain

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## Abstract

*This paper argues that a multi-sited ethnographic approach contributes to the improvement of feminist scholarship in the field of migration studies. To support this argument, I discuss the life (her)stories of four Senegalese women currently living in Spain, and in particular how they and their family members still in Senegal construct the intersections of two categories of their lived experience: migration and womanhood. The findings suggest that multisited research results in a more complete understanding of the circumstances surrounding migration. It allows us to see the ways in which women situate themselves within the existing discourses of migration, and how they engage with them to increase their chances. The multi-sited approach also helps us evaluate specific national migration policies. In the area of feminist theory and research, multi-sited ethnographies can lead to a more balanced relationship between researcher and participants, and contribute to underdeveloped theorisations of intersectionality and the constitution of the subject perspective in feminist scholarship.*

## Introduction

Most migration scholarship begins and ends in the country of destination, something that has not changed despite the increasing degree of sophistication of the migration literature. Gender has been integrated as a constitutive part of the migration process, and not just one more independent variable of it (Mahler and Pessar 2006; Walton-Roberts 2004; Pratt, 2004); more attention is being paid to processes of racialisation of migrant populations in developed countries (Kobayashi, 2003; Kobayashi and Peake, 2000; Pratt, 2005); and scales other than the state (the regional, the local) are being analysed (Hiebert and Ley 2006; Ley, 2004; Kyle, 2001; Sinatti, 2008). Meanwhile, most contemporary research still suffers from something that its authors often criticise: methodological nationalism, “the assumption that the nation / state / society is the natural social and political form of the modern world” (Wimmer and Glick Schiller 2002, p. 301).

According to Wimmer and Glick Schiller (2002), there have been three variants of the caging of migration literature within the framework of the nation-state, each resulting in specific pitfalls. A first variant of methodological nationalism has inhibited 'a true understanding of the nature and limits of the modernity project' (p. 304). A second variant of methodological nationalism 'takes national discourses, agendas, loyalties and histories for granted, without problematising them or making them an object of analysis in its own right' (p. 304). A third and last type has resulted in the 'territorialisation of social science imaginary and the reduction of the analytical focus to the boundaries of the nation-state' (p. 307).

The fixation on the nation-state has had, generally speaking, a negative impact on the quality of social sciences research. In the field of migration studies, particularly in those studies which focus on migrants' lived experiences, this unilateral approach is simply inadequate (Solé, Parella and Calvacanti, 2009). Research done to date has shown that spaces of origin and destination of migrants are interdependent, and that migrant experiences cannot be understood without attending to both (see for example Sinatti 2006, 2008; Bertonecello, 2009).

This paper argues that accounts of migration focused on the experience of the migrant must pay attention to – at least – two spaces: the places of origin and destination of the migrant. Adopting this transnational approach, I will discuss the cleavages in the accounts of four migrant life (her)stories of Senegalese women currently living in Spain. These stories focus on the aspects that these migrants considered anchors of their identity as migrants, women, and members of their family groups. As will become clear, the complexity of migrants' lives can only be properly understood if we take into account their experiences both within and without their current country of residence. At the same time, this kind of research advances underdeveloped theorisations of intersectionality and the constitution of the subject perspective in feminist scholarship (Davies et al, 2006).

## **Intersectionality or the constitution of the subject in migration studies**

Recent feminist scholarship has shown the importance of paying attention to the many things that one person can be at the same time: a woman is not just a woman, but also a person who is racialised in specific ways, who belongs to a certain socio-economic group, who is or is not perceived to have a legitimate claim to be in particular spaces / places. At the same time, this woman is somebody's daughter, an aunt, a sister, maybe a mother. Each facet of her identity is triggered in specific ways depending on

the context. Even if we are not able to examine the links between all these vectors of identity – or even agree on the number of vectors that we should consider – we should keep them in mind as we do research. Otherwise, we risk essentialising the subject. This would mean to assume that

*... there is a single woman's, or Black person's, or any other group's experience that can be described independently from other aspects of the person – that there is an 'essence' to that experience. An essentialist outlook assumes that the experience of being a member of the group under discussion is a stable one, one with a clear meaning, a meaning constant through time, space, and different historical, political, and personal contexts*

(Tina Grillo quoted in Razack, 1998, p. 157).

Much White Anglo feminism has fallen into the trap when trying to unveil the workings of gender oppression: they reduced it to a universal system of patriarchal relations, ignoring the ways it intersects with other axes of social discrimination inside and outside the socio-political context where these theories were produced (Mohanty, 2004). Also, some critical theorists have tended to assume that all discrimination could be explained in the context of racial discrimination (Crenshaw, 1994). To respond to these shortcomings in critical and feminist theory, a group of scholars came about with the idea of intersectionality.

Intersectionality is not a theory, but a perspective, a concept signifying “the complex, irreducible, varied, and variable effects which ensue when multiple axis of differentiation – economic, political, cultural, psychic, subjective and experiential – intersect in historically specific contexts” (Brah and Phoenix, 2004, p. 76). The concept was coined by Crenshaw in the 1970s. In a passage that has often been criticised as simplistic and additive, this author defined intersectionality as:

*... what occurs when a woman from a minority group ... tries to navigate the main crossing in the city .... The main highway is 'racism road'. One cross street can be Colonialism, then Patriarchy Street .... She has to deal not only with one form of oppression but with all forms, those named as road signs, which link together to make a double, a triple, a many layered blanket of oppression.*

(Crenshaw, quoted in Yuval-Davis, 2006, p. 196).

The idea did not receive much attention until the 1990s through, mainly,

the works of Hill Collins and McCall (Hill Collins 1998, 1999; McCall 2005). “Intersectionality” came to encapsulate the need to approach the complexity of our multi-dimensional experience, a frustration beautifully expressed two centuries earlier by Sojourner Truth (woman, mother, and slave) in this now classical speech “Ain’t I a woman” (compiled in McKissack and McKissack, 1992). Her ideas were echoed with particular force by other Afro-American intellectuals such as bell hooks and Toni Morrison. In Canada, White and Aboriginal scholars have also highlighted the complex positionality of women who belong to minority groups (Pratt, 2004; Razack 2002). Their point is clear: trying to explain all forms of oppression through the lenses of one single vector of social differentiation makes no sense. For transnational feminism, the goal is to achieve a kind of situated and partial knowledge of processes happening in specific historical, geographical, and cultural fields within the larger context of capitalist globalisation (Mohanty 2004; Pratt 2004).

However, the intersectional perspective as defined by Crenshaw does not lack its critics. For example, some authors have argued that people’s individual and collective identity emerge in contexts of great fluidity, often hard to grasp through the additive versions of the intersectional approach (McCall, 2005; Razack, 1998; Valentine 2007). This tendency toward a merely additive model has pushed some to argue for a revision of the founding tenets of intersectionality (Yuval-Davies 2006). These authors (often working from a post-structural perspective) have emphasised that the constitution of the subject is a complex and unstable process that can only be grasped through a detailed account of subjects’ daily experiences (Essed, 2002; Young 1995; Rose 1993, Yuval-Davies 2006; Valentine 2007).

The intersectional approach, in this last version and taken from a transnational standpoint, could help shed some light in understanding processes of migrant experience and identity construction, and vice versa. The cleavages that emerge in people’s narrations about their (or their relatives’) migratory experience “here” and “there” are crucial to understand the interactions between different facets of someone’s identity in the context of migration.

In the next section I will sketch four life (her)stories of Senegalese migrant women living in Spain. I will focus on particular fractures that have emerged within these women’s migration narratives when they (in Spain) and their families (in Senegal) were interviewed. My goal is to emphasise how narratives as well as identities are context-dependent, multi-layered, and malleable. We need a sophisticated approach that accounts for this complexity, and for that we must first break loose from the tendency to focus

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only in the context of reception of these migrants.

## Disjointed (her)stories

I met Fatou, Binta, Paulette and Rokhaya in Spain in early 2009. They were part of a larger group of Senegalese men and women whom I interviewed. The fragments that follow are extracts of their life (her)stories, conducted in Spain. With one exception, they all agreed to put me in contact with their families in Senegal, who very generously offered to host me at their home for a period of between one and three days. I have selected some quotes from the in-depth interviews that I conducted with these women's relatives in Senegal to show some of the disjunctures that emerged as different perceptions and presentations of their migratory experiences came into contact.

*Fatou: I think of suicide*

*I often think of suicide. I can't sleep at night, and so I lay down, my eyes wide open, asking myself why I must keep on going. Going to the fields every morning, to find, day after day, that my boss doesn't need me, because I'm a woman and men work faster. It's been like that for four months: I wake up at 6, I go to the fields, he says 'no' and I walk back to this mouldy little room where solitude eats me up. Every day I go, and every day I have to come back with nothing. So why should I keep on going? Then I remind myself that a good Muslim woman cannot commit suicide, and that I am no one to bend God's will. And I also remember that it's because of the little money that I make that my five children can go to a good school in Dakar, and that they'll study in France and succeed where I couldn't. That's why I keep their picture on the wall by the bed, to have their eyes looking at me while I think ... well, of putting an end to so much suffering. Because I've been thinking of suicide ever since I got off the bus (...) three years ago. The life of an immigrant is not easy.*

(Fatou, rural Almería, March 2009)

*I know that life is not easy for my mother in Spain. [Unlike other migrants] she tells me the truth, and I know Europe is not what many people think it is. (...) I know she does it for us. I'm the oldest child, and I do all I can to make her proud. I get up at 5 to clean the house, pray, and prepare*

*the food, then take my brothers to their school, and then go to school. In the afternoon I study until midnight. It's like that everyday. She's not with us, so I have to be a bit of a mother for my brothers, and the best of daughters for my mum. (...) I know it makes her proud when I get good marks. I'm the first of my class and next year, ... you know, they gave me a scholarship: I'm going to a French university!! And I will finally see my mum again.*

(Aminata, Dakar, April 2009)

Fatou lives in a small village in Southern Spain. She arrived in 2005, after her husband lost his job. They realised that they couldn't support a family of seven on her salary as a receptionist at a high end hotel in downtown Dakar, and she decided to test her luck abroad. He was too old for such an adventure. She got off the plane in Madrid with a tourist visa and ended up, a few months later, in a small town near Almería, where she had heard that it was easy to get the residence permit. This was immediately after the 2005 amnesty that helped more than half a million undocumented migrants regularise their situation (OPI 2006 Bulletin no 7). This was the fifth amnesty in 15 years: there had been others in 1986, 1991, 1996, 2001/2002. It was just a matter of time until the next amnesty, she thought, and engaged in several odd jobs to send money to her husband and children in Dakar whenever she had some.

In the beginning finding a job was not much of a challenge: whenever she was not making braids at the beach, she worked at the local supermarket or picking up vegetables in one of the many greenhouses that cover the region. But her gender, age (she could not keep up with younger workers in the fields), and increased government control over employers resulted in an important reduction of her days of work. Last time she had a full day of work was four months before our interview. She lived on the little money that other Senegalese in the community gave her and even managed, every now and then, to send some money to help her family back in Senegal.

As the quote shows above, her daughter, Aminata, is not oblivious to her mother's suffering, although there is little doubt that both do not share all that there is in their lives. Fatou's departure has meant a big sacrifice for everyone, and at 19 Aminata struggles to fulfil the roles of a mother, a sister, and a daughter. She is a strong, determined young woman. Despite all obstacles, she has succeeded at school, and soon she will be going to France to study journalism. Her plan is to come back after she is finished with her studies to help solve the problems of her country. And to take care of Fatou in her old age.

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*Binta: I never told them what happened*

Binta lives in the same village as Fatou. She arrived in Spain a year before our interview with a temporary contract to pick up strawberries in Huelva, one among several thousand Senegalese women. This is a government-run program that recruits foreign workers to work temporarily in sectors where there is a shortage of local workforce (GERM, 2009). The process starts at the level of Parliament, where a tripartite commission brings together representatives of the government, labour unions and private enterprises to decide the sectors in need of foreign workers, the number of workers needed, and their profiles. Once these have been decided, the government publishes the agreement in the Official State Bulletin (BOE in Spanish). The task is then for the Bureau of Labour in the countries of recruitment to inform local authorities, who gather the job applications and conduct a pre-screening of the candidates. The Spanish government has no say until the very last stage of the selection, where a representative of the Spanish Bureau of Labour participates in the final interviews.

Many problems have emerged with these quota systems in Senegal and elsewhere. When asked, workers, representatives of labour unions, and government officials interviewed for this project often considered that the main pitfall was a poor selection of candidates. This was mostly due to the corruption pervasive in the Senegalese political class. As a result, selected workers were insufficiently or inadequately trained for the job, administrative and medical certificates were found to be fake (e.g., a woman gave birth at the Barajas airport, where she landed with a medical certificate saying that she was not pregnant), and there was no support system to protect the rights of the workers once in Spain.

Like many others, Binta bought her visa. Abandoned by her husband and in charge of her five children, she became the main breadwinner of a family of 15 after her father retired, and it was impossible to make ends meet with the little stall her family owned at the local market. So her father got in a car to Fatick, visited some friends, and came back with an appointment to go to an interview in Dakar the week after. Binta had never worked in the fields, but nonetheless the interviewers considered that she was skilled enough to go pick up strawberries in Huelva. They never gave her a contract. She did not know where she was going to work, how many hours, or how much money she was going to be paid. All she knew was that she was going to Spain to earn millions of Francs CFA, and that was enough.

*I have a large family, five children, I never thought about leaving them. (...) I thought I was coming for three months, earn some money and go back. But things didn't happen*

*that way, my employers (...) didn't pay us enough, (...) many days there was no work, and if you don't work you don't get paid. (...) I couldn't talk to our employers, because I didn't speak Spanish and the patrón didn't speak French, so there was no dialogue. (...) I worked there for 18 days, picking strawberries, and there was no work for eight of those 18 days. (...) We were all women, five planes full of women from Senegal to pick up strawberries, and each plane filled up four buses. (...) At night, we slept in large barracks, all the women. The patrón's father came into the barracks at night to touch the women and do things to them without their consent. We could do nothing, who was there to help us? And what would have happened? One night I thought it was my turn. So I just run away, I hid in the trees with five other women and run away on foot. I now live with a family that found me, they're very nice to me, but I haven't had a job since then. I just want to go back. I just want to go back.*

(Binta, rural Almería, March 2009)

Since Binta ran away, she's been staying with a Senegalese family she did not know before who found her crying on the street at the bus depot. She has not been able to work since then (a year ago) but gets by with the help of her friends. Whenever she can she sends money to Senegal, but it is never enough to keep up with the needs of her large family.

Those left at home, in the meanwhile, do not know why Binta had to run away in the middle of the night. They also do not know that she is having serious health problems, including a depression, although they are aware that something is not right. Binta's sister (whose husband is also a migrant who lives in Italy) thinks that she "is an irresponsible wimp who's not cut out for the task:" "if she was strong, she'd just get out there and sell merchandise on the streets to buy the medication for her ailing father. (...) You say that it's risky, you know what: there are more important things in life than being safe."

The rest of the family, including her father, believe that she's doing her best, but they still live in dire poverty partly due to the debts they got in to pay for Binta's trip to Spain. On top of that, the needs of the family just keep on growing: the father was diagnosed with diabetes recently, and Binta's 17-year-old daughter gave birth to a malformed boy with a heart condition. When I took a picture of the family to bring back to Binta, her father asked me to leave the cracks on the walls out of the frame, and avoid showing the holes in the tin roof through which the water runs during raining season. "It will break



her heart if he sees that,” said her father, who was wearing his very special boubou, the one that he wears during religious celebrations. “Come, take a picture of me with my neighbour’s goats, that way she will not worry about us. Tell her we bought them with the money she sends.”

*Paulette: I came by pirogue*

Paulette is doing well. Her daughter was born in Spain five months after her arrival, and the midwife who attended her delivery took it upon herself to make sure that the mother would make it. Thanks to her, Paulette found a job, rented a place of her own and enrolled in different educational programs that have helped her get professional qualifications recognised in the Spanish labour market. Paulette is, by all means, a success story. And yet, she regrets: “[migrating] was the dream of my life. But now I’ve had it. I regret all of it: the way I did it, the opportunities that I lost for doing it, all of it. This is not what I expected.”

From a poor Muslim family, Paulette was forced into marriage with a man she did not love. She was the second wife, and after two years of marriage and now four months pregnant, she thought she had to migrate: it was either then, or never.

*Neither my mum nor my husband would have wanted me to leave. (...) But I knew a man, he was my grandfather’s friend, and he was organising a trip [by boat]. I told him I wanted to go. He said, “you don’t have money, we need money to buy the fuel.” (...) I told him that if I arrived [in Spain] he could go to see my mum and ask her to give [him] the money. (...) He said he would only take me if there was room in the pirogue, and so we left on August 22nd, 2004, at 3 am from Mbour.*

What happened after was a nightmare, the same that many other undocumented migrants have gone through to cross the sea border and enter Spanish territory, often drowning in the way (del Grande, 2008). During the interview Paulette spent 45 minutes describing, in painful detail, the trip from Mbour to the coast of the Canary Islands, some 1,800 kms away, on a wooden fishing boat. This is a fragment of her narrative:

*We were at least 80 people. The boat was very, very large. There were children, women with babies, and men ... there were mostly men. (...) The first days were ok, but then we run out of water and food. (...) Some people got very badly sun burnt. I don’t even want to think about it, because when I do I get a sharp pain here, behind my eyes. The*

*neurologist says that it's the stress, that I'm still hung up on what happened in that trip. (...) I don't even remember how long it took us to arrive in Spain. The days were very long (...) in the end you don't even know who you are or where you are. A man said that he could see a demon that was chasing him. Because when you are hungry and thirsty you see things that aren't real. Others screamed that there was something like a mermaid, but I didn't see it. (...) [But] the worst were the children: when the mother doesn't eat the milk stops flowing, and the children cry all the time.*

(Paulette, Granada, March 2009)

**Two and a half months after our first interview, I met Paulette's family in Kaolack, a city of 150,000 inhabitants South of Dakar. In Kaolack I interviewed Paulette's mother, "sister," and husband, in that order. Their account of the story was radically different from Paulette's:**

*Paulette is my wife. It's me who has prepared her trip, that means that I paid for it. And why did I let her leave when she was my wife, and she was four month pregnant with my child? Because she has to support her own family, and she's always felt the responsibility to do so. I, being her husband, could feel that responsibility but couldn't help her with it. For that, I preferred to arrange her trip so that she would do it safely. (...) She left with a tourist visa to go to Italy, by plane. (...) They recommended that I get in touch with someone. He said he could do it. He asked for a certain amount of money, her passport, two photos, and two weeks later he called me to tell me that Paulette should get ready to go. So, I went to Dakar with the money for the ticket, which I bought there. This person gave her the ticket and the visa, but don't ask me how he got it. (...) Absolutely, I bought the visa. And I paid beautifully for it, but only after I knew she had arrived safely. (...) All together, [I paid] between 2.5 and 3 million FCFA. (...) Once in Italy, she was told that being pregnant it would be easier for her to get her documents in Spain, and she took a bus there.*

(Paulette's husband, Kaolack, interview June 2009).

Both Paulette's mother and her "sister" also told me that Paulette's husband bought both her visa and her plane ticket. He had taken her right to the gate at the airport. Once back in Spain, Paulette confirmed this second

version of the story.

*Rokhaya: refusal.*

Rokhaya was my first interviewee. I hired her to act as an interpreter for the interviews with participants who spoke neither French nor Spanish. She refused to have her interview recorded. Being Spanish and mostly an outsider from the community, this was a common occurrence for the first month of my fieldwork. Later on I learnt that a journalist had videotaped interviews with a number of undocumented foreign workers without their consent, showing the interviews on tv afterwards and identifying the migrants. In the context of growing suspicion towards Black immigrants in Spain, they were afraid that I might get them in trouble. At the end of our three interviews, Rokhaya asked me for my field note book and made me read the notes that I had taken from our interview, marking with a pen the exact point where I was so that she could keep track.

In the interview, Rokhaya described in detail her life growing up in Tivaouanne, a city North of Dakar. She described how she was married by her parents at the local mosque with a cousin without her consent, then got the divorce a few days later, and was married once again with a man who already had several wives. She also said that she had adopted five kids who were now living with her mother, and that she supported from Spain. At all times Rokhaya pointed at her second husband as the trigger for her decision to migrate, although the exact reasons will remain confidential upon her request.

After almost three months working together, I left for Senegal. We were already quite close and the initial plan was that she would come with me as my assistant: I even had a grant to cover her expenses. However, she declined, arguing that she preferred to go home when she had more money to buy presents for her family. She was reluctant to let me meet her family, although in appreciation of our friendship she put me in touch with a Minister with whom she had worked as a secretary years before. This person was crucial in helping me get in touch with government officials all throughout the country for the three months that I was there. However, in our first meeting he stated the limits very clearly: “Rokhaya has asked me not to answer any question about her personal life or her family here. I’m helping you to help her, so don’t expect me to break that promise” (Rokhaya’s friend, Dakar, April 2009). I never met Rokhaya’s family.

*Framged stories, intersecting axes, and transnationalism*

In the previous pages I have briefly presented the stories of four women, as told by them and (in three of the four cases) their families in Senegal. In these stories the subjects talk of themselves as migrants and as women who

are, at the same time, mothers, daughters, and wives. Each one of these facets is experienced by the women themselves and their relatives in Spain differently, although the degree of disjuncture varies for each case.

The “gap” between Fatou and her daughter Aminata’s accounts is not out of the ordinary. As in any other personal story, migrant life (her)stories are fragmented, incomplete, dependent on the observer / narrator. It is natural that Fatou wishes to spare her daughter from the knowledge that she thinks of suicide on a regular basis. She is making a sacrifice for her family, and sharing that thought would just make Aminata feel guilty for what her mother is doing for her.

A similar mechanism (sacrifice – guilt – shame) is at work in Binta’s case. However, here we find secrets on both sides of the story. Binta tries to give herself some time to recover from her experiences and get back on her feet (find a job, become a regular migrant in the country, send money to her family). Her family in Diourbel, and in particular her father, guess that Binta is going through difficulties. To make things easier for her, he finesses his own story: the cracks on the wall are not to appear in the pictures that I will take back to Spain; the neighbour’s borrowed goats will be theirs to help Binta sleep at night. These little strategies (secrecy, finessing) are meant to somehow fix the existing disjuncture between Binta and her family’s expectations of her migration project (which is in reality the family’s migration project) and the reality that they currently face. But, more importantly, they aim at making a stressful situation manageable for all the people involved.

More troubling is Paulette’s story. It is not surprising that she wished to modify some parts of her story, but what were her reasons? And what was her goal when she allowed me to go to her home in Kaolack and asked her relatives to tell me her “real” story? As we will see shortly, she had decided to strategically deploy her image as a Black, Senegalese, migrant woman to increase her chances in Spain.

We may never learn about the disjunctures in Rokhaya’s case. Was her story “true,” or was it not? Why so much secrecy? In fact, I do not think categorising these narrations as true or false will help. What I find interesting about her case is what happens when we only get to know one part of the story, that which is told to us from, in, and for the context of the destination country. In other words, we only get half of the story: that half where migrants become immigrants and stop being anything else, sharing with us only what they want us to see. Given the fragility of their situation in the country of reception, it could be expected that this half of the story will miss some important facts that could impact the conclusions of our research.

In these accounts, the first facet that the women highlighted was their identity as migrants. But migration is interpreted very differently in the context of origin and the country of destination. In Senegal, it is often believed that whoever makes it to Europe will soon succeed economically. Paulette elaborated on this when she explained why she decided to migrate:

*[T]wo of my neighbours were modou-modou (emigrants). Since they had left, their houses had all this fancy furniture, their families ate well everyday, they had several wives and each one of them had the most beautiful boubous. And you should have seen their cars when they came home for holidays! So I thought that once you get to Europe everything's easy, money falls into your pockets, it's easy to find a job. Or maybe you don't make heaps of money, but whatever it is, it's more than enough for your family in Senegal. There were so many things that they had and we didn't. If we needed anything, we knocked on their door. Some bread, a bag of powder milk, things we didn't have. So I thought, those Europeans must be dirty rich: I must go there to become rich as well!! (she laughs).*

(Paulette, Granada, March 2009)

The other three women agreed with Paulette's description. In Senegal, the issue came up over and over in casual conversations and interviews with people who echoed this will to depart for Europe regardless of the price they had to pay. They have heard that things are not easy, but they want to test their own luck: "the youth knows [that it is not easy] (...) [but] they say: 'it can't be worse than what I have right now.'" For them there is plenty to do in European countries: there are industries, the service sector ... [they think] they will find a way" (interview with Thomas Sarr, taken from Bertoncello, 2009, p. 59).

For the women involved, these romanticised accounts of migration bore little resemblance to their own experiences. Their daily life was a constant struggle to find a job, to fulfil the monetary demands of their relatives at home, to achieve a regular status, to avoid the police, to fight homesickness. In other words, migration for them was a constant negotiation of the two spaces: that from which they came from, and that where we were placed at the time of the interview. The lived category "migrant" has many different meanings.

The second facet of their identity that they highlighted (being a woman) intersected with their condition as migrants in interesting ways. Those left

behind often expressed their strong opposition to the migration of women alone, on the basis that women were more vulnerable, more likely to suffer abuse on the part of men, and physically and morally weaker. In their eyes, not only were women less likely to succeed: their migration could also harm the family's reputation. However, it was tolerated as long as it resulted in a higher income for their relatives: "why did I let her leave when she was my wife, and she was four month pregnant with my child? Because she has to support her own family" (Paulette's husband, Kaolack). Of the women whose stories have been discussed, only Binta had the total support of her family prior to her departure. This was because she was going with a temporary contract to work in a typically feminine occupation (picking strawberries) and it was expected that she would return three months later with her pockets full of money.

For the migrant herself, being a woman meant different things, although in all cases their decision to migrate was, in their account, dependent on their being women. Fatou left to provide for her family when her husband could not do it: she left because of her duties as a wife and a mother. Once in Spain, she complained that her gender was the main reason why her boss did not want to give her a job. Being a mother also prevented her from putting an end to her suffering.

Binta left because she was the oldest of a family with no male children, and also a mother. Her family, a very traditional one, had married her to a man who abused her and abandoned her with three infant children. When that happened she had to move back to her father's family home, in part because she had no money to live independently and in part because her reputation required her to do so. Binta's husband did not consider it his responsibility to provide for his children. Binta's father was old, and his health very frail. It was only natural that she would take over responsibility for the family. And so her father arranged for her to migrate in a culturally acceptable way: picking strawberries in Spain, a type of work traditionally reserved for women. But when she arrived in Spain her status as a migrant woman unprotected by the states that had provided for her hiring (Spain and Senegal) triggered a series of unfortunate events. The prophecy of migrant women's vulnerability became true because of the flawed institutional context within which her migration happened. Now, she is unable to find a way out of her current situation.

Paulette's story illuminates the ways certain aspects of one's identity can be deployed to achieve specific goals. When I asked Paulette to explain to me why I had been given two different versions of her trip, and why she had told her family to tell me the "truth," she answered that it was hard to be an immigrant Black woman with a child. In her words, "I had to look for ways to

make my life easier.” After her arrival in Granada she was hosted by a Senegalese family. Without legal status and in the last months of her pregnancy, she was not feeling capable of selling merchandise on the street, an activity that often requires packing up quickly and running away from the police. Instead she stayed at home, watching TV and trying to learn more about Spanish language and culture. In the news Paulette found two recurring themes: the drama of undocumented migration of Black Africans by sea and the government’s fight against domestic violence. She realised that undocumented migration by boat triggered the collective imaginary of former mass migrations led by poverty and, more importantly, a feeling of catholic piety towards “those poor Black people.” Domestic violence, on the other hand, highlighted the need to overcome gender oppression in the way towards a more egalitarian society that Spain wanted to become.

Both discourses are framed within the dialectic relationship between the figures of the victim and the hero. This way, the undocumented migrant is a victim of the unfair distribution of wealth who becomes a hero when trying to help their family by risking their lives at sea; the battered woman is a victim of gender violence who becomes a heroine, and a motor for social change, when she stands up to her husband. Paulette combined the two to create a new persona: the woman who, oppressed by her Muslim polygamous husband, risks her life jumping into a pirogue in the middle of the night to go to Europe, the land of the free and rich. She became the Muslim Black woman saved by White Christian people from poverty and from the Black Muslim man, perceived now as less of a Muslim and more of a (liberated) woman. And, by doing this, she earned the support from those around her host community. In opposition to Fatou and Binta’s experiences, for her being a Black immigrant woman worked to her advantage.

## **Feminist migration scholarship must go transnational**

In this paper I have argued that, since migration processes cut, by definition, across state boundaries, to better understand these processes scholars must situate themselves riding astride these boundaries. To support this argument I have tested the intersectional perspective on both sides of the border (Senegal and Spain) and asked: how do migrant women negotiate the meanings of two main vectors of their identity -- “migrant” and “woman”?

A transnational approach to this question shatters any assumption of stability regarding these two variables: had we limited our interest to the context of reception (Spain) our conclusions would certainly have been different. We would have missed the meaning of the link between Fatou and Aminata, and how they both borrow from it to keep on fighting each in their

own circumstances. We would have had missed how Binta's and her family's limited understanding of the temporary agricultural program led her to have unrealistic expectations, and how this may have triggered the depression that she currently suffers from. Paulette's (her)story would have been drastically different had we not learnt from her family in Kaolack the "real" version of the story.

Multi-sited ethnography is, according to Marcus (1995), one of the two kinds predominant among ethnographers today, the other being the more classical single-sited ethnography. The main characteristics of multi-sited ethnography are its engagement with more than one study site, its interest in circulation and connection, its focus on how the processes under study are embedded in the larger context of globalisation, and its commitment to ethics and political activism (Marcus, 1995). In feminist scholarship, this approach has been at the core of some of the most interesting pieces written to date in the field of migration studies, challenging a number of commonly held assumptions about the relationship between the international migration of women and gender relations. Walton-Roberts (2004), for example, has conducted fascinating research on transnational marriages between India and Vancouver. Her work took her to the schools, neighbourhoods, and families of origin of the future brides in India, as well as to their houses, neighbourhoods, and families of destination in Vancouver. She concluded that gender is an "ideological power structure," changing and malleable, negotiated by those involved in the transnational marriage networks that she studies. Also working from Vancouver, Pratt (forthcoming) has analysed the negotiations that Filipino live-in caregivers engage with to achieve permanent status in Canada while being away from their families. These authors show how for women oppressive gender relations do not necessarily end with migration: the reality is often much more subtle than that, they just mutate in particular ways in the framework of the in-betweenness of these women's lives. These and other authors have highlighted the need to question the assumption that women from the Global South are oppressed victims "liberated" through their migration to the more liberal spaces of the North. To better understand this relationship between both international migration and gender relations we must engage in transnational or multi-sited ethnographies (Pratt and Yeoh, 2003). A multi-sited approach could also contribute to advance in the theorisation of migrant identities, in particular from the perspective of intersectionality of the constitution of the subject.

In this paper, I have engaged with these and other debates on feminist migration research. I have discussed the disjunctures found in the lives of four Senegalese migrant women currently living in Spain to support the case for a transnational approach to migration studies. A multi-sited methodology



has allowed us to, first, better understand the drivers of migration from the country of origin. Only through the combination of the information gathered in Spain and Senegal we are able to understand the backstory to these women's journey, the pressures and perceptions of migration that they bring with them from Senegal, and how they do (not) align with their Spanish experiences. Second, this approach gives us a clearer idea of how women position themselves within Spanish migration discourses. Women stop being subjects carried along by external forces (gender oppression, poverty, and so on) when we listen to the ways in which they actively work with and within existing narratives of migration both in Spain and in Senegal. And third, it allows us to see more completely how international programs (like the temporary agricultural program) function, and where they fail. These findings are a strong argument in favour of multi-sited ethnography as a methodological alternative to traditional single-sited research.

However, many hurdles need to be overcome before engaging in a multi-sited project. Multi-sited research is expensive, and few funding agencies are interested in promoting it. There is an institutional tendency to favour projects that fit into the nationalistic lenses of traditional research, either because that is their mandate or because they are less costly. In most cases multi-sited research requires fluency in more than one language and adaptation to social contexts that may be out of the researcher's comfort zone: it demands important personal sacrifices. Also, in research projects like the one this paper draws from, to gain access to "the other side" the researcher needs to establish strategic alliances and relations of trust with participants, something that is not always required in projects where the distance between researcher and researched is defined prior to the interaction. As a result, multi-sited ethnography can be uncomfortable, because the positionality of the researcher is constantly questioned – and there is no hiding at home when home is so far away, both intellectually and geographically. In short, the advantages of feminist multi-sited ethnographic research come at the expense of actively resisting many of the rules that we have learned at school and getting our hands dirty. Really dirty.

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