“Here, it is ‘Nouadhibou-du-monde’, le bout du monde, the end of the world,” said Idrissa looking at the ocean. Stranded in Nouadhibou, the second Mauritanian town. Stranded like all these ships in Nouadhibou bay. Left stranded in Mauritania. This is how one could sum up the situation of Idrissa, a young Senegalese man we met in November 2008. He arrived here in 2007, hoping to cross the Atlantic Ocean and reach the Canary Islands by canoe. Yet, arriving in Nouadhibou, he discovered “it was too late.” The European Union had imposed restrictions on migration and its borders had been “externalized” into “transit countries” like Morocco, Tunisia, Libya, Niger or Mauritania (Bredeloup and Pliez 2005; Collyer 2007; Brachet 2009). Thus, since 2006, the European Union has been supervising the Mauritanian coast with Spanish Guardia Civil agents, a helicopter and two motor launches. Now, the international migratory route that crossed Mauritania seems to be well and truly closed.

Based on several field studies since 2004, our research outlines the reversibility of the migratory phenomenon. A study of recent migration in Mauritania should take into account the different phases and its transformations over time. Three entangled temporalities can be underlined: long standing immigration in Mauritania, the transit period (2004–2008) and the present-day post-transit situation. Historically, in this area, migratory flows are tied to job offers. Since its independence in 1960, Mauritania has offered interesting opportunities in the fishing, trading and mining sectors for the West African workforce. Mauritanian people admit readily “foreigners have built the country.” In 2001, the discovery of oil reinforced this historical pull effect. Yet, in 2005 and 2006, the media focused overwhelmingly on the transit phenomenon and emphasized the “illegal flows” towards Europe (Haas 2007). They presented all sub-Saharan

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people in Nouadhibou as “potential illegal migrants,” even before they tried to cross or thought of doing so. Moreover, they ignored the fact that regional migrations played a central role in the national economy and that most of the sub-Saharan people had been living and working there for a long time. Thirdly, as the European Union's policies are tougher than ever, migrants are getting stuck in Nouadhibou and Nouakchott (the capital city). In these cities, they live with working immigrants who arrived a long time ago.

Obviously, the “transit phenomenon” that has drawn media attention, is the shortest of the three migratory temporalities (before, during and after the transit). As migrants get stuck in Mauritanian cities, it is currently interesting to pay attention to the spatial and social changes engendered by the arrival of migrants and their long-term settlement, especially in urban contexts. Thus, our chapter also sheds light on the social impacts of this “post-transit situation.”

We will first recall the transit and post-transit phases. Secondly, we will describe and analyse migrants’ everyday life in Nouadhibou and Nouakchott and their interactions with local society, highlighting how spaces and social relations are divided. Thirdly, we will stress the fact that Mauritanian migratory policies lead to the criminalisation of migrants and compound their difficulties. This “post-transit” stage gives rise to a new geopolitical order characterized by a spatial reversal (with the definition of bad places where are living migrants), increasing controls and fuels xenophobic comments from those who define themselves as “autochthons” towards the others who they consider as “foreigners.” Therefore, migration is an important issue for a country characterized by identity conflicts between Arab Africans (the Moors) and black Africans (Halpulaar, Wolof, Soninké).

**Becoming a Transit Country**

The recent focus of European media on illegal migrants in small fishing boats has led to an over-emphasis on illegal migration, neglecting the fact that foreigners have always constituted an important part of the Mauritanian population since independence was declared in 1960. Talking about transit only makes sense if we take into account the role played by Mauritania in West African migration more generally. At independence, 70% of Mauritanians were nomads, and the country cruelly lacked skilled labour and clerks. Administrative posts were filled by workers from Western