



MoLab Inventory of Mobilities and Socioeconomic Changes, August 2021

Short circuit: on the transnational circulation of stolen wealth

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Abstract

This entry proposes the notion of the ‘short circuit’ to grasp the transnational circulation of stolen contemporary objects of wealth. With a focus on electronics theft in South Africa, short circuits are viewed as violent levelling mechanisms between regions of plenty and scarcity, which bypass social, economic, and logistical conventions to instantly satisfy desires for material wealth.

Theme

Linked and Distributed Mobilities

Keywords

Circuitry, redistribution, wealth objects, theft, illicit trade, technology, inequality, migration

To be quoted as:

Huigen, Brandaan. 2021. Short circuit: on the transnational circulation of stolen wealth. *MoLab Inventory of Mobilities and Socioeconomic Changes*. Department ‘Anthropology of Economic Experimentation’. Halle/Saale: Max Planck Institute for Social Anthropology.

Doi: 10.48509/MoLab.3874

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The undercurrents of the global economy are typically associated with illicit trading,² whether in narcotics, harvested organs, weapons, blood diamonds, unregistered therapeutics, endangered wildlife, slaves, counterfeit goods, or stolen goods. In this piece, my focus is specifically on the trade of stolen electronics, objects which are procured through theft. In South Africa and around the globe, this trade has grown in tandem with the production and consumption of novel digital technologies, especially since the mid-1990s. Desires to consume gadgets of famous brands, such as Samsung, Huawei and Apple, have become insatiable. Yet there are regions where people do not have the financial means or access to own these gadgets. Considering its transnational dimensions, the trade in stolen electronics is mainly ignited by the disparity between regions of scarcity, where the demand for modern electronics is located, and regions of plenty, where the desired technologies are in high abundance. After their theft in the latter, therefore, these objects often move from more affluent to less affluent regions.

Analysing the trade in stolen electronics allows us to see how commercial circuits are developed to ensure that modern commodities, such as hi-tech electronics, reach regions of scarcity. Through these circuits, expensive gadgets are made more available to low-income residents for a fraction of their usual retail price. Questions of global inequality may thus be better understood, and in particular, what is collectively and spontaneously done in the hush of everyday life to level wealth disparities between regions – disparities which have become entangled as populations migrate.

Indeed, stolen electronics mainly travel through the invisible networks and mobilities of migrants, who left their home countries for economic opportunities in wealthier locations. In general, migrants become important contributors to economies in these locations, while remaining connected to their home countries through family, friends, and business contacts. Many migrants therefore benefit from this intermediary position: they can harness economic and social opportunities by linking home to newfound home. Transnational trades consequently develop between the two. This is similarly the case with some migrants who see opportunities in the cross-border trade of stolen goods, particularly lucrative electronics. Electronics are contemporary symbols of wealth,³ so their organised movement in particular directions through migrant networks – even if stolen – says much about contemporary mechanisms of wealth reallocation on a transnational scale, rather than obvious law-breaking. While redistributive, these mechanisms are aggressive in nature, with violence in the form of property theft arising in the region of plenty. How might we frame such patterns, which go beyond the visible commodity flows of the global economy?

Circuitry

I will attempt to compare these patterns to the idea of the ‘short circuit’ to improve our grasp of the global economy’s undercurrents, which often run parallel to above ground and legal flows. A short circuit usually refers to an electrical circuit that allows a current to travel along an unintended path with

² Scheper-Hughes, Nancy. 2003. Rotten Trade: Millennial Capitalism, Human Values and Global Justice in Organs Trafficking. *Journal of Human Rights* 2(2): 197-226; Bhagwati, Jagdish. 2002. Deconstructing Rotten Trade: A Dialogue with Jagdish Bhagwati. *SIAS Review of International Affairs* 22(1): 39-44.

³ Huigen, Brandaan. 2021. Beyond Confinement: Cape Gangsters and the Sub-Saharan Trade of Stolen Electronics. *Ethnos* DOI: 10.1080/00141844.2021.1887914. Published ahead of print.

no or very low impedance.⁴ A ‘short’, as it is colloquially referred to, can be caused by improper wiring or conductive objects touching the circuit (like a tool, an animal or human). These connect one part of the circuit to another, bypassing the resistor. Conventionally, resistance is necessary for an electrical circuit to function properly, with circuit-breakers or resistors dampening the current. Since the resistor has, in effect, been avoided through a shortcut, practically all the current is diverted through this alternative route.⁵ The circuit overheats and fuses, with a visible shock or explosion occurring at a given point in the circuit. In applying the term ‘short circuit’, I not only relate it to the consequence of overheating, as a violent outlet of excessive currents, but also engage it to visualise the ‘platform’ through which material and immaterial currents circulate. But before making further comparisons, it is necessary to note that the term ‘circuit’ – without the ‘short’ prefix – has been used outside engineering and in the social sciences.⁶

On the back of classical anthropology on the Kula ring,⁷ the notion of the circuit has been used to loosely describe the commodity flows of globalisation.⁸ This has especially been so since the onset of post-Cold War capitalism, resulting in accelerated flows of people, commodities, and beliefs across regions.⁹ In this regard, a circuit refers to a network of people and infrastructures, between and over which objects circulate as commodities, often across cultural and national boundaries. Circuits consist of specific sets of people, positioned at different sites, who exchange goods with each other out of mutual interest.¹⁰ The metaphor provides a topographical view of a commodity network’s form, and the situated life worlds of specific people who are connected through the network.¹¹ While standard trading circuits are visible, ‘shadow circuits’ have been observed to have patterns which fall into forms of organisational obscurity,¹² typically associated with the informal trade of migrants.¹³ The cross-border commerce of migrants, and the making of transnational marketplaces, reveals a form of globalisation ‘from below’,¹⁴ corresponding and sometimes conflating with the ‘muscular, mainstream, side of globalisation’.¹⁵

Yet, unlike shadow circuits, which do not necessarily have an illicit dimension to them, short circuits are explicitly situated in the clandestine domain of circuitry. Building on the above views of circuitry, I use the notion of the short circuit as an analytical lens to grasp the interrelated phenomena of property

⁴ Bhatia, Aakaar. 2012. Introduction to Short Circuit Analysis. *PDH Centre*. Available online at: <https://pdhonline.com/courses/e204/e204content.pdf>. Last accessed 19 March 2021.

⁵ Schlabbach, Jürgen. 2005. Short-Circuit Currents. Hertfordshire: The Institution of Engineering and Technology.

⁶ In this section I will not focus on psychology, which makes ample conceptual use of ‘neural circuits’, but briefly on anthropology and sociology.

⁷ Malinowski, Bronislaw. 1922. *Argonauts of the Western Pacific*. London: Routledge.

⁸ Appadurai, Arjun. (ed.). 1988. *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

⁹ Eriksen, Thomas Hylland. 2016. Overheating: The World Since 1991. *History and Anthropology* 27(5): 469-487.

¹⁰ Zelizer, Viviana. 2004. Circuits of Commerce. In: Jeffrey Alexander, Gary Marx and Christine Williams (eds.). *Self, social structure, and beliefs: Explorations in sociology*. Berkley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, pp. 122-144.

¹¹ Marcus, George. 1995. Ethnography in/of the World System: The Emergence of Multi-Sited Ethnography. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 24(1): 95-117.

¹² Schmoll, Camille and Giovanni Semi. 2013. Shadow Circuits: Urban Spaces and Mobilities Across the Mediterranean. *Identities* 20(4): 377-392.

¹³ Also see Schapendonk, Joris and Marieke Ekenhorst, M. 2020. From Sectors to Circuits: Re-Describing Senegambian In/Formal Practices in Europe, and Beyond. *Tijdschrift voor Economische en Sociale Geografie* 111(5): 705-717; Simone, Abdoumalik. 2001. Straddling the Divides: Remaking Associational Life in the Informal African City. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 25(1), 102-117; Nyamnjoh, Francis. 2007. From Bounded to Flexible Citizenship: Lessons from Africa. *Citizenship Studies* 11(1): 73-82.

¹⁴ Tarrus, Alain. 2002. *La Mondialisation par le Bas. Les Nouveaux Nomades des l'économies Souterraines*. Paris: Balland.

¹⁵ Zelizer. 2004.

theft, smuggling and stolen goods consumption, which are too often viewed from conceptual silos. Moreover, there has hitherto been little interest in understanding why particular objects are circulated through clandestine networks.

I view short circuits as running parallel to the standard and aboveground trading circuits of migrants. Short circuits specifically circulate stolen wealth objects, which are violently redistributed. They arise from material wealth asymmetries between regions, which have become interlinked, leading to friction and violence at sites. This piece will go into more detail by looking at the form and function of short circuits.

A short

Short circuits may be understood as having a particular circuitry form. In this regard, the metaphor reveals the spatial character of clandestine networks operating inside and between societies. Sets of intermediaries are horizontally spread over vast geographic regions, shaping interconnected spheres of exchange and sociality, through which stolen gadgets circulate. Consumer desires and the actual material objects shape the currents that flow through the circuit at excessive speeds. The high speed of the current is possible owing to the platform using sophisticated infrastructures, which compress time. The platform is in the crevasses where states have retreated, and are easily bypassed. As electrical currents find the quickest route, if bypassing alternatives exist, the currents of a short circuit will do the same. While standard circuits largely follow rules – which could be considered as the circuit-breakers or resistors that dampen the current – a short circuit bypasses the rules. As it happens with an electrical short circuit, with the availability of easier paths, the current becomes excessive and overheats, leading to violent shocks at a given point in the circuit. When a circuit finally ‘shorts’ from these excessive currents, the violence of theft occurs at a specific point in the circuit.

Apart from having an invisible form – which only becomes visible with the violent moment of theft – short circuits have a particular function. Short circuits develop inside and between societies where the distribution of material wealth is critically unbalanced. They are violent levelling mechanisms which spontaneously arise between immediate or distant households. The previous distance between excess and scarcity has shrunk with liberalisation, transnational migration and faster means of transport and information dissemination, which has allowed disparate regions to overlap. While wealth imbalances between regions had already been shaped for centuries through colonial ventures, the shrinking of both geographic and temporal distance has occurred at an ever-faster rate since the 1990s. Objects that are strongly associated with wealth and modernity clearly stand out against their material absence, or commodities which have been devalued, causing intense desires for the former. In the wealthier location, migrants stand as the fulcrums of symbolic and material comparison between regions of plenty and scarcity. Wealth objects – especially modern electronics – are appropriated from people who possess them, to eventually move through the short circuit into the lives of those who do not typically have financial and symbolic access to them.

Consequently, short circuits have a strong redistributive character: mostly impoverished and local theft offenders of the host country are propelled by the currents in the circuit to violently steal contemporary wealth objects. These are subsequently moved by migrant intermediaries, submerged from public sight, to international customers in the low-income bracket. These customers can acquire

fashionable electronics at affordable prices. In this regard, short circuits bypass legal and formal shopping for low-income consumers, who do not have to buy expensive consumer goods new at shops when connected to a short circuit. Instead of saving money for a long time, an affordable fee can be negotiated by the customer with the final seller, usually informal traders, who have a constant supply of stolen goods arriving through the short circuit. The urge to buy these cheaper though quality wealth objects in places where they are rare or too expensive, leads to increased criminal activity in wealthier regions to supply this demand. While the ethicality of these illicit practices is grey, they are often justified through redistribution myths and deprived circumstances – it is acceptable for destitute individuals to steal wealth from the rich ‘oppressors’, to empower themselves and their marginalised communities.¹⁶

The next section seeks particularly to illuminate the repercussions and form of short circuits in everyday life. During my ethnographic fieldwork in and around Cape Town, I interviewed and spent time with multiple actors who had knowledge of short circuits, were immersed in them and/or affected by their violence. The case of Tesfaye, one of my participants, illustrates a transnational short circuit that became visible, particularly how stolen Apple Macbooks circulate through Cape Town before being exported. The case of Lee-Anne’s stolen MacBook will supplement that of Tesfaye, illuminating a transnational location of consumption.¹⁷

The passages of stolen Apple MacBooks

Tesfaye had moved to Cape Town from Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, after securing work at an international development agency. He lived in the northern suburbs of Cape Town. After a few months of work, he bought himself a 13-inch Apple MacBook Pro, which he acquired at an Apple Store in Cape Town. He was proud of this laptop, extensively using it to write feasibility reports on agriculture projects. Apart from being a practical tool, he viewed his laptop as a sign of his professional achievement – he had worked hard to buy such an expensive gadget of a prestigious brand.

One day, Tesfaye went grocery shopping at a local mall after work. After he had parked his car, he put his laptop bag with his laptop, USB stick and passport in the car boot, hoping to conceal it. Upon returning to his car after shopping, the laptop bag was gone. This theft was a gut-wrenching shock, which would put Tesfaye into a lengthy depression, as all of his work files were saved on the laptop and USB stick. But only after he felt obliged to undertake his own desperate investigations in the hope of retrieving his MacBook. He mostly avoided the South African Police Service, as they are notoriously slow to act on property thefts.

In his panic in the car park of the mall, Tesfaye asked around if anyone had witnessed the theft. Fortunately, he was approached by someone who had seen two younger ‘coloured’ men and a woman lurking around his car.¹⁸ They spoke Afrikaans. With this information, Tesfaye drove to his friend, an Ethiopian restaurant owner, who leveraged certain contacts in the Ethiopian diaspora community who

¹⁶ Also see: Roitman, Janet. 2006. Ethics of Illegality in the Chad Basin. In: Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff (eds.). *Law and Disorder in the Postcolony*. Chicago: Chicago University Press, pp. 247-272. Shaw, Mark. 2002. West African Criminal Networks in South and Southern Africa. *African Affairs* 101 (404): 291-316.

¹⁷ Apart from names, some cosmetic details of these cases have been altered or left out (i.e., names of places, exact line of work, etc.) to prevent the identification of participants, thereby ensuring their safety.

¹⁸ Coloured people are a South African population group, who are the majority in greater Cape Town, and are of mixed ancestry.

understood the underworld of Cape Town. In turn, these contacts knew Nigerian figures who operated a brothel near to the site of theft. Tesfaye was taken here by a Nigerian contact prepared to assist, where he came to learn through a sex worker who the culprits likely were, and indeed, that a bag with a MacBook had passed through the brothel a day before. The two offenders worked for the boyfriend of the woman who was present at the theft incident. Her boyfriend was a Nigerian kingpin, active in drug dealing. The two offenders, from a nearby low-income township, stole modern electronics in the wealthier area for him, in exchange for drugs.

Tesfaye further came to learn where the laptop likely was and was given the address of the kingpin and his girlfriend. This time round, he took the police with him. But as they arrived at a lower-middle-class address, nobody was home. Tip-offs by Nigerian associates of the kingpin had revealed that Tesfaye was hunting for his laptop. And so, the laptop was quickly circulated through a horizontally organised network of Nigerian associates, many steps ahead of interception by Tesfaye and the authorities, haphazardly and quickly moving through the northern suburbs of Cape Town. When they could not keep up with this cat-and-mouse chase, an Ethiopian contact suggested that Tesfaye meet a powerful South African gang leader. Tesfaye met him with hopeful information – as it happens, the leader works with the kingpin.

During the meeting, Tesfaye learnt from the leader that his laptop was already in Nigeria, but his passport and USB stick were left behind at the final storage site before laptops board international flights at Cape Town International Airport with designated smugglers. Sensing Tesfaye's desperation, the leader retrieved the USB stick and passport from a Nigerian colleague for an exploitative fee. At least then, Tesfaye thought, he will have his lost work files back. But the work files on the USB stick were corrupted, with music files of famous Nigerian and South African musicians, now the most common files.

As Tesfaye's case shows, within a week of the theft, his MacBook had already reached Nigeria through a transnational short circuit, mainly comprising of South African and Nigerian actors who operate together to export stolen electronics, reaching Nigeria in large volumes by air. Distributors in Nigeria order the stolen electronics from their Cape Town-based Nigerian countrymen. Once a consignment arrives in Nigeria, in multiple cling-wrapped suitcases, it is distributed to various traders, who sell the usually expensive Apple MacBooks to locals for an affordable, negotiated price.

Similarly, in the case of Lee-Anne, who also experienced the theft of her MacBook in a wealthier part of Cape Town, her laptop reached rural Ghana through the networks of Ghanaians based in Cape Town. But she was lucky: the Ghanaian grandfather of the final customer, a young man who acquired the laptop from a trader in the local village, spotted how clearly the screensaver and saved documents did not align to the identity of his grandson. He already had an inkling that the local trader sold stolen goods. He managed to find the contact details of Lee-Anne on the laptop and felt it his moral duty to send the laptop back to Lee-Anne in Cape Town. There were numerous other cases of stolen MacBooks reaching other sub-Saharan countries (see Figure 1), which also exclusively occurred through the networks of respective migrant groups based in Cape Town.

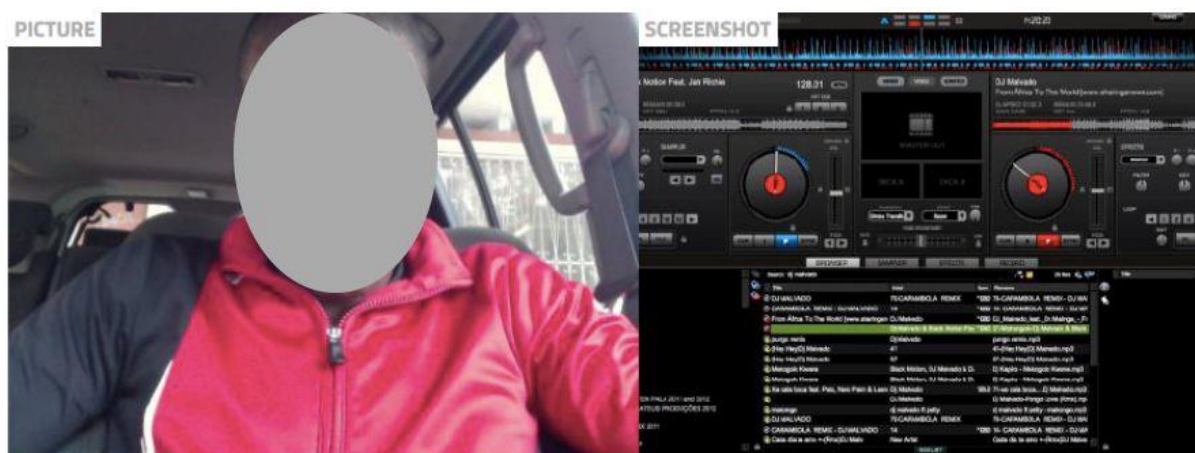


Figure 1. An alleged distributor in Luanda, Angola, of stolen Apple MacBooks originating from theft incidents in greater Cape Town. The above images were recorded by a tracking application, installed on the laptop by the witness, showing the distributor assessing a DJ program that came with the device. (Image supplied by witness.)

Versions

Often short circuits run parallel to standard circuits, to and from Cape Town. While I did not locate many standard circuits stretching to West African countries, they mainly stretch across southern Africa. Also embedded in migrant networks, which stretch between newfound homes, these are organised by migrant traders specialising in accruing used electronics and appliances of global brands. Together these traders of respective nationalities form consortia to export consignments to their home countries over national highways, while adhering to border controls and customs. Yet, because there is not enough bulk supply of used electronics for these consortia, there is intense competition between them at auctions, with established and usually older traders monopolising the best stock. This leads some younger traders to go underground, forming another version of a short circuit, different to that of the kingpins, which is conflated with other illicit trades, especially narcotics. With this conflation, stolen electronics function as a currency in and between migrant and local criminal organisations.¹⁹

Although, both versions of the transnational short circuit rely on specialised and local theft offenders to extract the popular electronics from residents in the urban environment – who happen to possess the latest gadgets, like Tesfaye and Lee-Anne. These stolen devices are often in excellent condition compared to what is found on the local and above ground second-hand market. Both versions also use similar modes of collaboration, avoidance, storage, swift transport, and concealment to reach their final customers.

Coda

In effect, short circuits are intense social contestations, without debate, over material objects which have come to be culturally valued on a global scale yet are not within reach for everyone. Short circuits demonstrate new patterns and behaviours of impatience with the status quo, and instant ways of redistributing valuable resources between groups and regions in the contemporary era, sidestepping

¹⁹ Huigen, Brandaan. 2021. Smartphones for Drugs: Exchange Relations in a South African Gang Since Apartheid. *Journal of Cultural Economy*. DOI:10.1080/17530350.2021.1986111. In Press.

conventional social, economic, and logistical conventions. Essentially, whenever thefts occur to appropriate valuables, the physical and social shocks of inequality are felt, sometimes with deadly consequences. As is in the event with robberies, when the robber accurately steals the device desired by the short circuit, victims may be killed.

Few countries in the world can claim to experience the intensity of violent shocks as South Africa, many of which result from short circuits interlinked with the rest of the continent.²⁰ Migrants like Tesfaye, who achieved success in South Africa – eventually having the means to buy an expensive gadget here – are not spared. However, short circuits form and occur within and across other continents, as inequality is a global problem, especially as disparate regions have become increasingly entangled, and as tangible (commodities) and intangible (desires) currents flow between them. While short circuits may reallocate the material pieces that symbolise progress and prosperity, their currents become excessive, so that they risk electrocuting those who possess wealth.

²⁰ See: World Population Review statistics. 2021. Available online at: <https://worldpopulationreview.com/country-rankings/crime-rate-by-country>. Last accessed 8 August 2021.